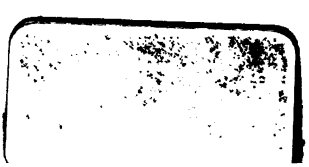

LIFE OF ROBERT NICOLL.

THE LIFE

OF

ROBERT NICOLL,

POET.

With some hitherto Uncollected Pieces.

BY

P. R. DRUMMOND,

AUTHOR OF "PERTHSHIRE IN BYGONE DAYS."

"I ought to give my testimony about this my friend whom I haa known so well, and record clearly what my knowledge of him was. This has ever since seemed a kind of duty I had to do in the world before leaving it."—CARLYLE'S "Life of John Sterling."

ALEX. GARDNER,

PAISLEY, AND 12 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON.

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PREFACE.

A FEW remarks by way of preface to this Memoir seem necessary, or at least desirable, in part to explain the long delay in its reaching the hands of the public, and, further, to show in how far it has been possible to carry out the original plans of the author with regard to it.

When the sudden death of my father occurred, in the early autumn of 1879, he had so far completed the work that he confidently looked forward to its publication before the end of that year. On examining the manuscript, however, I found that, although it was complete in the sense of the first and last pages being written, there was a considerable number of blanks and of unfinished sentences where the author's memory had for the moment failed him, or which he meant to fill in on further reference or inquiry.

The difficulty attending the satisfactory completion of the manuscript—residing at a great distance from the scenes of the story, and with very little time at my command—deterred me for a period of three years from attempting the task. But I could never banish from my mind the strong feeling my father had with regard to the publication of the work, admirably expressed by the motto from

Carlyle which appears on the title page, and which was selected by himself for the purpose.

In the meantime, I had received letters of inquiry from various quarters as to what had become of the book; and one gentleman of very considerable literary experience and a distant relative of the Nicolls, was so kindly persistent in his inquiries, that I promised, if he would look over the manuscript and thought I could satisfactorily complete it, that I would endeavour to do so. The result was that he returned it to me, making light of the blanks, and strongly urging me to publish it.

Before proceeding, however, I resolved to test the public mind on the extent to which the book was wanted, and the response to my appeal for subscribers was so prompt and hearty that I resolved at once to set about the work of completion and revision.

Though the number of subscribers would have justified me in issuing the book to them only, which was my original intention, still, I am sure that, in the interests of the subject, they will think it only matter for congratulation that it is likely, through the enterprise of the publisher, to reach a much larger circle of readers.

I take this opportunity of thanking the subscribers for their encouragement and support, without which it is very doubtful if the book would ever have been issued to the public.

While the work has been passing slowly through the press, the task of correcting the proofs has

been greatly lightened by many kind and encouraging letters from friends both of NICOLL and of my father, from all parts of the world, many of them bearing out in a singular manner the estimate of NICOLL, both as a man and as a poet, which is presented in the following pages. For these, I am truly grateful.

The author's original intention—never, I believe, quite abandoned during the writing of the Memoir—was to issue with it a complete edition of Nicoll's Poems; but before the copyright in the old edition (the property of the publishers) had quite expired, the publisher of the present volume, knowing there was a demand for them and unaware of my father's intention, issued, by arrangement, a reprint of the old edition, with Mrs. Johnstone's Memoir prefixed.

It seemed inadvisable to increase the cost of the present work by the addition of the Poems, which are in the market at a reasonable price. I therefore abandoned that idea, and amended the text, as far as possible, to suit the altered plan.

There was also some sort of intention of rewriting the whole of this Memoir and of incorporating with it a life of the Poet's brother, William, and, at least, a selection from his unpublished Poems, which had been sent to my father by the Poet's sister for the purpose, and of which he thought very highly. But nothing had been done towards this scheme—I only mention it to show how comparatively unfinished were the author's plans.

With regard to my own dealings with the text in revising the sheets for the press, I need scarcely say that, while I have done all in my power to make some obscure passages clear and to verify and correct, where necessary, matters of fact, I have most scrupulously studied to preserve what appeared to be the author's meaning in every matter of opinion.

My father, being an almost self-educated man, made no pretension to style; but in this Memoir, as in all he ever wrote, he had a clear purpose in view, and his wish was to tell the story of his dear friend in a plain and truthful way, believing that with his special knowledge of the subject, he could throw such fresh light on the spirit which animated the Poet when life with him was at high-water mark, as would materially alter the conception of his character existing in the public mind.

In telling the story of a life so comparatively uneventful as that of NICOLL, there was necessarily much that could only be repeated from preceding biographies; and so the author is found frequently quoting from Mrs. Johnstone—whose biography of the Poet was compiled in great measure from material supplied by his brother William, and is in the same measure likely to be authentic—and has made use of much of what he had himself collected many years ago, and partly published in the Scottish newspapers. His position with regard to these matters was exactly that of the minister in Dean Ramsay's Aberdeen story—"Fat better culd the

man dee nir he's dune?—he bud tae big's dyke wi' the feal at fit o't."

It now only remains for me, in deprecation of any severe criticism of occasional repetitions or want of definiteness in the narrative, to remind the reader of the comparatively unfinished state in which it was left, and that it is the work of an old man, full of his subject, but thinking it out through the vista of forty busy years.

With regard to the difficulties of my own position, I would only say to any sceptical reader—let *him* take up the work almost wet from the pen of a father, fondly loved and but lately lost for ever, and set about preparing it for publication, and if the conflict in his heart between reverence for the letter of the work of so dear a hand, and the fear of the cold eye of the critic on the weak points it may contain, does not make him sympathise with me, then I envy him neither his task nor his feelings.

But, now that the work is done, I send it forth with joy into the world, feeling sure that its truthful character will find it a warm welcome from those (and they are still not a few) in whose memory the subject lives perennial in its sweetness, and in the hope that the new generation may find benefit to themselves in the study of so pure and noble a life as that of ROBERT NICOLL.

J. D.

Highgate,
London, N., March, 1884.

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NOTE.

The following pieces by Robert Nicoll, which are printed in this Memoir, do not appear in any of the collected editions of his works:—

The Mottoes of the various Chapters (except Chapter I.) and "A Dirge" are from the Edition of the Poems issued by the present Publisher.

LIFE OF ROBERT NICOLL.

CHAPTER I.

Introductory.

I hate a sham; let bad be bad,
And good be good for evermore:
Who doeth right, let him be glad,
Knowing the good he liveth for;
Who doeth wrong let him too pour—
Unshrinking light upon his ill.

THE following memoir would have been written forty years ago, but has been delayed for reasons which will be made obvious in this introductory chapter.

ROBERT NICOLL was my bosom friend, and I dreaded that the partiality I had conceived for the young poet and his works would lead me to pitch his life in too high a key. Indeed, many who knew us both, gave me cautionings that were often more decided than welcome. But now, when the poet's name has become a nation's boast, and the sneers of the would-be wise are effectually quenched, I may tell my tale and obtain a listener.

ROBERT NICOLL'S earlier years were spent among a class of men who never lost sight of the adage, that he who makes two blades of grass grow where only one grew before is a public benefactor, but could see no merit in moving a latent spring in the human heart, to whom the finer tissues of life yielded no charm, and in whose view the poet singing his madrigal by the wayside was nothing to point a moral compared with the blade of grass that grew alongside of him—singular too, for our whole theory of a created world is consummated in the dignity of man.

Mrs. Johnstone, an accomplished and fluent authoress, has written a life of ROBERT NICOLL, and a gentleman of high literary eminence writing to me in 1852 calls it "the touching story of his life." A touching story it certainly is, but it is too much so to be a characteristic life of ROBERT NICOLL. Those who knew him will fail to recognise in the poor, trampled, spirit-broken lad whom she has set before them, the lively, dashing politician who erewhile filled so large a space in the arena of poetry and politics where Tay runs eastward to the sea. Mrs. Johnstone only knew him during the last year of his life, when the forecast of death was upon him, and was thereby led to write of him in

a grieved and dejected spirit. The biographer is no doubt bound to tell tales of sorrowing and sadness, but pity it is to saturate twelve joyous years with the depressing influence of twelve melancholy months. ROBERT NICOLL with all his manliness and his perfect confidence in the hand which guided his destiny, felt his heart borne down when he saw the portals of death opening before him. He struggled hard to throw off the erratic but insidious disease, and failing in the attempt, he became a changed man. To leave a world where he had been flattered, and where greatness was just dawning on him, tried his ardent soul to the utmost, and when the twenty-three short years of his life, with all their promise, passed in review before him, he became uneasy and querulous, yearning for his mother's voice and the air of his Scottish hills. These together with the strugglings of a vehement liberalism, are the principal materials out of which Mrs. Johnstone has constructed her life of ROBERT NICOLL.

The kindness shown to the poet in his latter days by his Edinburgh friends deserves requital from all his admirers, but the way-worn and jaded state in which he came there to die, has sent forth into the world a note of bitterness little illustrative of ROBERT NICOLL or the times in which he lived.

Mrs. Johnstone institutes a comparison between Robert Burns and NICOLL, quoting Ebenezer Elliot, who styles him "Scotland's second Burns." A flattering opinion certainly, at any rate very harmless in itself, but, following the herd of scribblers who have written of Scotland's first Burns, Elliot cannot avoid decorating his name with the usual garland of foul adjectives which has been fondly handed from one to another for nearly a hundred years. "Unstained and pure"—writes Elliot—"at the age of twenty-three died Scotland's second Burns, happy in this, that without having been a blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious, he chose, like Paul, the right path," &c. &c.

"Unstained and pure" are highly flattering terms to apply to any man, but this Corn Law rhymer cannot sustain them in the case of ROBERT NICOLL without immolating, negatively, a much greater man. Surely the pinnacle of fame to which ROBERT NICOLL had raised himself can be maintained, without having recourse to these disgusting parallelisms. Had any attempt been made, during NICOLL'S life, to place him, by a combination of talent and purity, above Robert Burns, he would have dashed the impudent structure to pieces, and, in the vehemence of his ire, he would not have scrupled to burn every page he

had written. He never spoke of the great Scottish poet but in terms of unmeasured admiration, and with bemoanings over those who from ignorance mistook his character.

The general impression left by Mrs. Johnstone's book, is, that the Nicolls were a suffering, destitute race, oppressed, mercilessly treated, steeped in poverty and cowed in spirit; but such was not the fact. ROBERT NICOLL had a mother whose door real poverty durst not enter, and she had a son whose honest head and hands could never lack bread. It is utter folly to whine over the crosses and trials to which, by stern decree, every life is liable. Any one who knew the Nicoll family must have felt that for them to be in want was a simple impossibility. The honest shifts, the ready hands, the untiring energy, and the proud spirit could not be subjugated. ROBERT'S aunt, Mrs. Paton, long kept a cloth shop in the village of Bankfoot, having always a good stock, a large trade, and many friends. After her husband's death her eyesight began to fail, and latterly she became stone blind; but the shop must not be abandoned, and for three long years did this indomitable daughter of "Elder John" open and shut her shop, buy and sell, pay and be paid, trim her lamp for the outside world, and chaffer about a gown-piece with as much con-

fidence as if the whole had been under sharp visual superintendence. Although she had many transactions, I have only heard of one in which her blindness was taken advantage of. Eventually, however, her house was broken into while she lay in bed, and property to the amount of ninety pounds carried away; she did not succumb to this but opened her shop as usual, and when she died she left her friends the better of her industry.

During the great Reform Bill conflict, politics were more personal than national, and frequently "set folks together by the ears," and, as I had a wish to merge the politician into the poet in ROBERT NICOLL'S case, I made frequent attempts to make good my position, but with little success. Time has rolled on, however, and as the fervour of political animosities has died away, the kindred spirit in some remote nook of the earth takes up the poet's little volume, and sees in the political contention sentiments that are founded on sand, but in the golden verses, copious overflowings of the heart, foretastes of heaven, glimpses of journeyings into an unseen world, and blendings of all the virtues which adorn the human heart. "Poetry," writes ROBERT NICOLL in the very vortex of the reform struggle, "Poetry is one of the greatest earthly blessings that God bestows upon man."

Forty-two years ago I wrote a review of NICOLL'S first book, and sent it to the public press, but it was ignominiously rejected. Twenty-five years ago I wrote of him, "Poet he was by nature, Politician by necessity, but honest and upright by choice," and was publicly rebuked for my "boldness." Seven years ago I asked a party of thirty gentlemen, in the poet's native parish, to join me in drinking his memory with all the honours, but they declined it to a man. And now in the face of all these disheartenings, and in the very eventide of life, I send forth into the world tracings of ROBERT NICOLL and his generation, which I know will be welcome at many a fireside in the poet's native land, in many a log cabin in the Canadian forest, on the banks of the Hudson, and the Sacramento, and to many a home-loving heart now pulsating in the air of our populous antipodes.

The difficulty of arranging with judgment and taste a drama wherein the dramatist was himself a principal actor, must be obvious to every one. That difficulty, combined with the heartless *contre-temps* to which I have referred, has led to the delay of forty years; but every adverse turning of the wheel has given freshness to my cherished recollections of ROBERT NICOLL, and now, at the distance of nearly half a century, I proceed to

record them, utterly indifferent to the charges of egotism, or self importance, or undue partiality with which all personal narratives are liable to be assailed.

CHAPTER II.

Birth and Boyhood, 1814-30.

There's nae hame like the hame o' youth—
  Nae ither spot sae fair :
Nae ither faces look sae kind
  As the smilin' faces there.
An' I ha'e sat by monie streams—
  Ha'e travell'd monie ways ;
But the fairest spot on the earth to me
  Is on bonnie Ordé Braes.

THE cold and protracted winter of 1813-14 was severely felt by all those whose lot was cast under the frigid shadow of the Grampians, and for a time the neighbourly visits and even the venerated church goings were all but suspended. The deep snow, piled in unbroken wreaths, choked up the roads, and happy was the family who had meal, milk and fuel in store. The farm house of Little Tully, as it was familiarly called, stood high on a south-sloping hill, and many a hard contest was urged on its thatched roof between the sun and the frost, and in sympathy, the great yellow icicles pended, like basaltic columns, almost to the ground. In the midst of these wintry surroundings, the gossips observed a mysterious coming and going about

Little Tully as the morning of the 7th of January, 1814, dawned on the eastern slope of Shanwell. Somehow the conjectures were wonderfully correct, for as the day wore on they were confirmed by whisperings that ROBERT NICOLL'S wife had brought him a second son.

We hear of no astrological calculations nor predictions of greatness following the birth of this little urchin, but his mother was glad to see him "like the warld," and while candid visitors could see nothing but a little bundle of pink smothered in muslin, the better tacticians declared that he had his father's eyes and his mother's nose, always taking care to give the father an additional feature, as his case was the weakest.

Time wore on and this youth must be taken to the "pulpit fit." It is not known whether it was in deference to the practice common in Scottish families of naming the eldest son after his paternal grandfather, and the second after his more immediate parent, that Mr. and Mrs. Nicoll fixed on their infant's name, or whether his poetic mother, who had patronised Robert Burns and James Sim, did not say in a joyous moment, "I think we'll ca' him Robin." At any rate to church he was carried by his aunt, and in this, the first movement of his life, was shadowed forth the leading feature of his

entire career, for he murmured at being handed about, and when the cold drops fell on his face, his protest was quite as decided as any that he afterwards tabled against tyranny and toryism, and against Sir George Murray for Perthshire, or Sir John Beckett for Leeds.

The farm of Little Tullybeltane, in the parish of Auchtergaven, lies on the southern slope of the hilly range that divides the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland, and intersects Perthshire from Glengyle to Mount Blair. The soil is a gravelly-bottomed loam of average fertility, but from its light nature and exposure to the burning sun of July, and from incessant cropping, its yield in dry summers was, in ROBERT NICOLL'S time, very limited; now it is more pastured and naturally yields a better return when under crop. The poetic spirit must have had a vigorous hold of young NICOLL'S mind, for with the exception of the picturesque gully through which the Ordé flowed past his father's homestead, there was literally nothing round Tullybeltane to fire the latent tendency, or excite that enthusiastic love of nature which is the supposed inspirer of every poet's song. But NICOLL was not a landscape poet like Wordsworth, but the poet of man in his most amiable form, as Burns was of him in all his forms, and

Bryon was of the universe. The Ordé braes where he herded among the gorse and broom were nothing in themselves, but they served to illustrate how fondly man clings to home, be it ever so humble, and when in after life he visited his now desolated birthplace, he sought no gorgeous images that he might conjure up high regrets, but sang in simple strains of

> An auld aik tree or maybe twa,
> Amang the waving corn.

The amount of work, both mental and physical, which ROBERT NICOLL was destined to perform, within a period of twenty-three years, would brook no delay,—there was no time to waste; so when nine months old, he began the usual infant lispings, and at eighteen months he knew his A B C. His mother, notwithstanding her numerous avocations on the farm, in the dairy, and in the nursery, attended well to the dawnings of her little boy's mind—

> Light is the burden love lays on—

When he went out in his clean pinafore to herd the cows, they would treat him with contempt and *snuff* past him away to the green corn as if he had been nothing; this was tyranny begun, and when

he ran home to his mother in a paroxysm of passion and tears, she would console him by fond prophecies, that when he grew big he would make them *startle*. As the boy's sense of wrong gathered strength and became one of the ruling features of his life, the tyrant man in his more aristocratic form, followed the cold water and the rebellious cows. Come what would, ROBERT'S well-thumbed catechism got little rest, and it was a proud day for the family circle when the mother brought home from Peter Hill of Perth, the New Testament, fragrant of sheep leather, and garnished with a lion and unicorn, and the imprint of Sir David Hunter Blair. It was no doubt at this period of his life that the young poet imbibed those sentiments of true piety, which savoured every movement of his poetical career, and built up that theory of oppression which had really no foundation in fact, but which strengthened with his strength, usurping the place of a loftier philosophy, and neutralizing that goodness of heart which, apart, was the leading characteristic of him who wrote—

We are brethren a' !

Following up the necessary rapidity of work, ROBERT, when he was four years of age, could read the New Testament that had been brought to him.

This seems a simple fact, and the meeting with a barefooted, sunburnt urchin coiled under a hedge with a group of cattle under his charge would awaken little interest, but mankind are quick to discover symptoms of intelligence, and if a book was seen stuck into the pocket of his fustian jacket, the first question would be, "How old are you?"—"Five year old." "Have you been at school?"—"No." "Can you read?"—"Yes, I have read all the books I could get, and most of them twice over." Here is a simple fact sufficient to found a "life" upon. I could tell of men, proud and influential, men high in office and dictatorial, men claiming authority and scattering proverbial wisdom, that do not see the inside of a book once in twelve months. But they are rich, and their riches can be traced to that very fact. A man will trade better on one idea and five hundred pounds, than he will do on a thousand pounds and a mind stored like Adam Smith's. At five years of age this boy never went to herd without a book, and when he came home in the middle of the day he rocked the cradle and read aloud to his mother while she did the work of the kitchen.

Old Robert Nicoll was an industrious, peaceable man, and had struggled through the disasters that fell on Scottish farmers at the close of the great French

war, but, being somewhat facile in disposition, and feeling his means narrowed, he was led into a circle of accommodation bills, that eventually told on all concerned. Robert was uniformly the acceptor, and when the crisis arrived, the drawer—a relation by marriage—absconded, leaving Robert Nicoll—the scape-goat of the financial cabal—a ruined man. The rent could not be paid, and as an inevitable result, the family were sold out and thrown penniless on their own resources. A cottage was leased at the Coates, and the father and mother went to the fields to earn their bread, as they had done heretofore. Much as we have heard of this terrible downfall, it is by no means clear that Robert Nicoll the cottager was a less happy man than Robert Nicoll the farmer. No doubt he cherished fond regret at leaving his youthful home. He had brought his bride there, she had borne him four children, and had stood by his side when troubles thickened around him, and now, on his narrowed pathway, she, with willing hand and heart, bore her portion of the family misfortune, reflecting little on the circumstances that led to their ejection, but summoning up spirit to meet what was to come.

The poet's partiality for his mother has run away with most of his biographers, and led to the strength-

ening of a theory that men of brilliant parts are always maternally endowed. In ROBERT NICOLL'S case I think this feeling overdone. His father was not the passive nonentity which the published memorials of his son negatively indicate, but a shrewd intelligent man, well up to the times in which he lived, and quite as likely to be the father of a talented son as Grizzel Fenwick was to be the mother. True, the poetical element came distinctively from the mother, but it took a combination of elements to form the whole character. A very simple incident illustrated to me, many years ago, the truth of the former assertion. A labouring man of the name of Sim lived at the beginning of the century in the parish of Kinclaven. Sim, right or wrong, considered himself a poet, and at the instigation of his admirers, published a volume of his poems, the price of which was two shillings and sixpence. After exhausting his influence in obtaining subscribers at home, he stepped across the moor to Auchtergaven, and the name that there tops his list is Grizzel Fenwick!

When the Nicoll family had settled in their new home, ROBERT was sent to herd his grandfather's cattle at Drumtrochrie, near Bankfoot, three miles from the parental roof. "Elder John's" library had already been put under contribution, but on his

arrival the indefatigable book-worm began afresh,—every nook and cranny of the house being explored in search of printed matter. Boston's "Fourfold State," and Doddridge's "Rise and Progress," were despatched with ardour during home hours, and volumes of lesser bulk were carried to the field in his *rachan*. This must have been in 1819, for ROBERT states that it was after his father's failure, and before he was six years of age.

A few years ago an estimable lady living in the parish of Auchtergaven, who knew ROBERT NICOLL in his early youth, sent me some intensely interesting recollections of him. Those who read to the end of this memoir will see how truly the child was father to the man. These recollections are irresistibly truthful, and in the following quotation I have not ventured to alter a single word :—

"It was a considerable time afterwards that I learned his name was ROBERT NICOLL. The name of the place they lived at was Drumtrochrie, and he was, along with his aunt Mary and his grandparents, known as, and always called, 'The Drumtrochries.' My chief recollection of him then is the wonderful stories he told us. I cannot remember any whole tale he told, but they were singularly interesting to us as children. The hedge that separated his grandfather's cow's grass and the

park round our house was easily pierced by us in those days, and when our nurserymaid lost sight of us, which she frequently did, the place she searched first was the burnside under the hedge, which she thought the most likely place of retreat,—'Thae bairns 'll be aff to Bobbie Drumtrochrie again.' His stories were the great attraction, but besides he was of a lively, funny disposition, and very good natured, all which qualities children like; Bobby was a good boy too, and a good herd. On one occasion he showed us a new penny his grandfather had given him for being so dutiful."

The Fenwicks of Drumtrochrie were highly intellectual people, they were well educated for their time and station in life, and it was said of them, if that education had been more liberal they would have been heard of before the advent of ROBERT NICOLL; this applied especially to Mary Fenwick, who, though less energetic than Mrs. Nicoll, and not so strong minded as Mrs. Paton, was a model of intelligence and knowledge of the world. They were uncompromising Seceders, ever ready to support their order, and in proportion as that support went to weaken the cause of those opposed to them, the more cordially was it yielded. On one occasion ROBERT NICOLL said to his grandfather, without any previous discourse leading to such a grave

sequence, "I'm thinkin' these established churches will not stand lang," to which Elder John replied, "I do not think I will live to see the end of them." "Humph," said the incipient radical; "ye'll no live lang then." Thus was ROBERT NICOLL'S piety imbibed side by side with an external machinery, little fitted for the broad expanse of life which afterwards opened before him. At the time of which I am writing, he considered the Seceder Kirk of Scotland the most perfect institution the world ever saw; but when he turned his steps outwards he seldom vindicated that early feeling, but, avoiding Kirk controversies, retained in its pristine vigour that simple belief in "the auld ha' Bible," that has ever been the characteristic of the Scottish Seceders. The youthful mind, wrapped up in its immediate surroundings, forms strong yet very narrow conceptions of the vast economy of the universe, but as knowledge extends its domain, the presence of an all-ruling power is brought home with irresistible conviction, and we all indite with ROBERT NICOLL—

God is everywhere.

During the two summers the young poet resided at Drumtrochrie, his aunt, Mary Fenwick, supplied his mother's place as his counsellor and preceptress;

she did what she could for her precocious pupil, who did not spell well because he had been in too great a hurry to learn, and had not yet thought of reproduction except in verbal outpourings. He had hitherto obeyed the impulses of his nature, and it was not till many years afterwards that he became conscious of the fact that in order to obtain a position among men, hard and persevering study was necessary, and that one mis-spelt word would lay waste the most eloquent page that ever was written. But he read fluently and told his marvellous stories without faltering, could repeat a psalm with the air of a priest, and toss over the leaves of a book with as much confidence as if he knew the precise position of every word it contained. These extraordinary acquirements naturally concealed from his mother and aunt his orthographical deficiency, and it is a singular fact that after going through a sharp curriculum with such men as Marshall, Anderson, and Porter, this precocious boy should have reached his fifteenth year unable to write a page without mis-spelling one or more words. He seemed to find that making verses was a faculty intuitive in him, but that spelling involved drudgery. After he went to his apprenticeship, however, he bought Johnson's Dictionary and Cobbett's Grammar, and to use his

own words, said in defiance of both, "read them twishend, twishend," and thereby thoroughly remedied the evil.

I have carefully avoided over-colouring these passages in ROBERT NICOLL'S early life. The fact of a boy under six years of age storing his mind from such books as were likely to be found in a seceder elder's house was of itself singularly indicative of a desire for knowledge, but the difficulty is, from whence come these passages of thrilling romance of which we have heard? My correspondent, who was an attentive listener, says, "his stories were singularly interesting," but she does not say that they were incredible or like the wonders of "The Arabian Nights." That distinction apart, from whence did they come? On asking the question at NICOLL'S Schoolmaster, Mr. Porter of Moneydie, he said, "Do you think that ROBERT NICOLL, who devoured every printed thing that came in his way, never saw a chap-book?" One who knew the Drumtrochries well, sums up a long account of them thus, "No other family I knew, so often reminded me that 'Truth is stranger that fiction,' as that family did."

As these aunts of ROBERT NICOLL will not appear again in our history, it is but right to say of them, that the better class of people, still alive, who

knew them, extol their exemplary conduct and cleverness, which on no occasion deserted them up to the very last day of their lives. On my last visit to Mrs. Paton, I found her, in her old age, and with darkness surrounding her, sedate, uncomplaining and singularly anxious to hear any reminiscences of her talented nephew.

It was during the harvest of 1820, that Bobby Drumtrochrie then in his seventh year, left his grandfather's house, and with his sunburnt face and curling brown hair, wended his way westward to the Coates of Tullybeltane. His spirits were somewhat dashed, but the idea of being at school amongst his old playfellows cheered him a little, though it was indeed little compared with the exhilarating prospect of revelling amongst books. After herding a short time, he was, according to his own account, sent to the parish school, which was three miles from his father's house. Going and coming, with or without companions he never wanted a book, and when *bools* or *duck and drake*, or any other youthful game of the time, was started, he was first in the field, rushing at it as if he would carry everything before him, but after a round or two he was off, and was invariably found under a hedge or the shadow of a tree with a book in his hand. When the game was over and he did

not appear, some friendly young associate would exclaim, "We'll go and look for the minister."

Mrs. NICOLL had unbounded confidence in the good which arises from reading, and did not discourage her son in his earnest pursuit of it. He did not become morose or absent-minded from these constant inhalings of knowledge, but was ever merry and rollicking. A sister of one of his teachers says—"ROBERT NICOLL was a wild laddie, and my brother had often to come across his knuckles with the cane for unruly bursts of fun in school." This is easily accounted for. There is an inherent buoyancy in youth which must and will have its way, and when play hours were dissipated in reading, school hours could not be held sacred to decorum. Another of his schoolfellows says that he "never saw anything particular about him except his desire of being alone with books, and while ostensibly learning his lesson he had always a volume stuck under the table or spread out upon his knees." The state of matters at home would not admit of ROBERT being kept constantly at school, and when the spring came round he left its heated and noisy atmosphere and went away to herd on the green Ordé braes.

During five years these alternations between the school and "the muir o' gorse and broom," filled

his mind with activity, and if at any time he felt compromised by being in the lowly position of a cow-herd, he had always this consolation to fall back upon, that he was thereby earning the means of fitting himself to go out into the world, a world in which, young as he was, he saw it would require all his efforts, both mental and physical, to maintain that figure which he fondly pictured out to himself. Within a few years the time came round when from that outer world he looked back to the home of his childhood and youth, and sang—

In a lanely cot on a muirland wild
My mither nurtured me;
O' the meek wild flowers I playmates made,
An' my hame wi' the wandering bee;
An' O! if I were far awa'
Frae your grandeur an' your gloom,
Wi' them again an' the bladdin gale,
On the muir o' gorse and broom!

The story-telling propensity was assiduously maintained, and although it never came under my own observation, I find it occasionally welling up during the whole portion of his after life that remained moderately taxed and healthful. No traces of the tales themselves remain, but if stones could sermonise, and running brooks retain their echoes, there is a large pavement under the Red-brae at Moneydie school, within a hundred yards of old

Robert Nicoll's grave, and overhanging the gurgling Shochie, that could whisper utterances a thousand times more characteristic of the young poet than anything I can write. In the very zenith of his short life I find him escorting two clever and amiable young ladies on a sportive ramble from Dundee to Broughty Ferry. At one time running down a sand-bank to drown himself, but held back by the clinging efforts of the half-dreading timid maidens, at another time opening his budget of stories to a fisherman whom they found mending his nets in a corner of Broughty Castle, and paralysing the man so thoroughly, that he dropped his work and gazed at the narrator with as much open-mouthed eagerness as if he and his two sylph-like companions had been chattering spirits philandering from the "vasty deep."

If there is anything singular in this romancing tendency, it is its striking resemblance to the same tendency in a far greater man. Sir Walter Scott writes of himself that, when he was six years of age, Dr. Duncan, while on a visit to his father, felt offended at the rapid movements of his tongue, and said, with some bitterness, "One may as well speak in the mouth of a cannon as where that child is." Again, "My own enthusiasm, however, was chiefly awakened by the wonderful and the terrible—the

common taste of children, but in which I have remained a child even unto this day"—and again, "Among my companions, my good-nature and a flow of ready imagination, rendered me very popular. Boys are uncommonly just in their feelings, and at least equally generous. My lameness, and the efforts which I made to supply that disadvantage by making up in address what I wanted in activity, engaged the latter principle in my favour, and in the winter play-hours, when hard exercise was impossible, my tales used to assemble an admiring audience round Lucky Brown's fireside, and happy was he that could sit next the inexhaustible narrator."

ROBERT NICOLL'S second public teacher was Mr. James Anderson, a man of considerable note, and a poet. His school was at Tullybeltane village, and quite near the home of the Nicoll family. It is a curious fact that two out of ROBERT'S four teachers, appeared in print as poets, and thus brought the muses to his very door—in somewhat humble guise, it must be admitted, but then, what a great fire a small spark sometimes kindleth. I have known four great Scottish Academicians who had their genius kindled by colouring halfpenny pictures in the juvenile atelier of James Lumsden of Glasgow. Mr. Anderson

was busily engaged on a poem, which he afterwards published under the title of "Nairn," quite unconscious that the little boy in fustian jacket and trousers, who sat at a remote corner of one of his tables, was, during his hillside summerings, composing an apostrophe from his constant attendants — the winds of heaven — to himself, so full of grasp, so full of poetic imagery, so noble in conception, and so exquisite in composition that few odes of modern times could stand the fiery ordeal of being printed alongside of it. Mr. Anderson's poem "Nairn" is founded on an old legend "The Bandit of Dalcrue." This bandit had for years, according to tradition, infested the woods of Methven, plunging his victims over the red sandstone cliffs into the Almond. Once on a time Lord Nairn had prolonged a visit to Strathallan Castle until far into the night, and disregarding all warnings rode to his grand mansion on the Ordé, through the very heart of the ogre's domain. They met, a fierce fight ensued, and Lord Nairn decapitated fierce Callum Dhu. The ballad, although inconsistent like most legendary tales, is not destitute of merit, and the recital of fragments of it, by its author, in the hearing of ROBERT NICOLL, no doubt tended to fire the poetic talent slumbering in his bosom. When

summer came round again, he was despatched to the herding, and a very slight glance at the index to his "Poems and Lyrics" will show that even now in his ninth year the scenes that were in after life rendered classic by his felicitous pen, were making a lasting impression upon him ; the great Birnam hill covered with blooming heather, the Ordé gurgling onward to the sea, the far away *hush* of the Almond as it rolled through the woods of Logie, and past the Dronagh haugh where repose the ashes of Bessie Bell and Mary Gray, presented to his imagination idealisms which, when woven into a thousand tender shapes, form a great portion of all that is left to us of ROBERT NICOLL.

He never became a deep thinker, the thing was simply impossible, his lease of life was too short ; and being so, the incessant demands which his good nature entailed upon him, filled it up nook and cranny, so that when he came to work his way in the world, he had to avail himself of the thinkings of his boyhood ; hence the tender simplicity of his poems, which contrasts strangely with the boisterous vehemence of his political career. His heart was full of poetry, his head full of politics ; but his pocket was empty, and however much he longed to follow the former, the latter offered him bread. Thus left without an alternative, he threw

himself body and soul into the political controversies of his time, and before a breathing time came, he was fast journeying towards that bourn from whence no traveller returns.

The increase of his father's family necessitated greater exertion on ROBERT'S part, he being the eldest alive. The school seasons were shortened, and the herdings extended. The desire for books abated nothing, on he went, borrowing every volume he saw or heard of, until on the dawning of his twelfth year, the glad tidings reached him that a library was about to be established at the village of Bankfoot. Henceforward every penny was a prisoner, at every visit his mother paid to the village she was strictly questioned as to the time when the library was to be opened. The sad year 1826 went on its scorching way, the earth became cracked and wizened, the cattle were starving, and the duties of the herd increased fourfold, yet ROBERT managed to collect 1s. 6d., and pay Mr. David Peat of Perth for a quarter's reading, and during that quarter he read the Waverley Novels. To shelter himself from the sun and the hot arid breeze, he shrank into a wood which bordered his lea-field, and few of his associates, who in after life went with him to visit his native home, but were shown the cool nook where he had read

Ivanhoe and Kenilworth. This was the last year of his herding, and when the disastrous season came to a close, and the hungry winter followed, he came into the ownership of some shillings, which were at once laid aside for the opening of the great Bankfoot Library.

On the morning of the 23rd of January, 1827, the snow fell heavily, and was blown fiercely about by heavy gusts of wind, blocking up the roads, and keeping timid people in-doors, but regardless of these obstacles, ROBERT NICOLL, with his hard earned silver in his pocket, plunged down the northern bank of the Ordé, and away on his trackless path to the village. Delightful visions of turning pages of "backwoods" and "leather stockings" floated before him. When he presented himself at the library door, his brown visage and auburn locks tangled with snowdrift, and his large deep dark-blue eyes glowing like mountain tarns, his first question was, "What is to pay?" which he put rather hesitatingly. The quarter's fees were quickly tabled, and having made his selection, he strode home through the storm a proud and happy man. His connection with the Bankfoot library continued for a very limited period, during which he read no less than 249 volumes. In after life he told this tale of his thirst after knowledge

with fond enthusiasm, and on referring to the books of the library, still extant, I find it corroborated in every particular.

This ravenous desire for books rendered the young poet's studies more varied than select. Three years previous to the time of which I am writing he became owner of Brooke's "Fool of Quality," and an admiring contemporary has the book in his possession, with NICOLL'S autograph, and the date May 7th, 1824. This, combined with the fact that he had already read Scott's novels, exhibits a tendency to light reading, which may not assort well with some people's notions of youthful propriety. But I unhesitatingly record it as my opinion that young people will never acquire a taste for reading unless they are freely admitted to the use of popular literature, whether in fiction or fact. Mrs. Nicoll in her early days, was, we are told by her son, an ardent book-woman, and it cannot be supposed that she confined herself to Blair's Sermons and Hervey's Meditations. An esteemed correspondent who knew Mrs. Nicoll writes me in the following terms: "Reading had been *so* much to her and her sons, she believed she could not over-estimate its power."

Mrs. Johnstone states in error that ROBERT had been under two teachers after he had left Mr. Mar-

shall, and another of his admirers says, also in error, that Mr. Marshall was his last teacher. I have not succeeded in tracing him to the parish school where he says he went in his seventh year. I find him first under Mr. Young at Tullybeltane, then under Mr. Anderson at the same place. Now he had turned to gardening instead of herding, and the higher wages he was earning enabled him to get lessons from Mr. Marshall, who taught in a public hall at Bankfoot, in the year 1828, when NICOLL was fourteen years of age. Marshall was an amiable and talented lad, a student aiming to get himself an education by eking out his income with school-fees. The two became very intimate, and NICOLL'S somewhat raw acquirements got polish from Marshall, who opened his eyes to his overwhelming deficiencies; yet they were so carried away by mutual appreciation, that lessons in spelling were never thought of, and the most vulgarising of all imperfections was left in its primitive fertility. Mr. Marshall left Bankfoot and went to a distant part of the country, where he died of fever in 1829. Pleasant recollections of him still hover about Auchtergaven, not only as a young man of promise, but as the first literary companion of ROBERT NICOLL.

When Mr. Marshall's death became known to his

favourite pupil, he felt all his sympathies awakened, and as his first attempt at letter-writing, sent one to his mother, garnished with lofty characteristics, and exalted predictions, and extraordinary as the production of a youth utterly unaccustomed either to epistolary matters or to the formation of rounded periods. The letter is, unfortunately, not dated, and as ROBERT had not yet gone to his apprenticeship I am at a loss to guess how he came to write to his mother. But the genuineness of the letter is undoubted.

"Mr. Marshall was a man who, if he had lived, was destined to rise to an exalted station in the world. His genius was of the first order; his integrity was unimpeachable; he possessed a singular command over his temper; his mind was stored with the best learning of Greece and Rome, and with the sublime commands of Christianity. In fine, he was a young man who has left few equals. I myself owe more to him than years can repay. I could read before I knew him, but he taught me to think."—ROBERT NICOLL.

Before NICOLL met Mr. Marshall he had begun to "write his thoughts," but now visions of his future destiny began to pass before him. These were ever varied as the combinations of the kaleidoscope. If a dreamy lyric threw its fascinations

around him he beheld the glades of Parnassus in endless vista, and saw his name inscribed in golden letters on the lyre of Apollo. The woods alone, with their feathery tenants, were his auditory, but mutterings of incipient verses that were destined to reach the antipodes were gently uttered within their silent domain. Then, when at the kirk on Sunday, he heard the never-resting sputter of Sectarianism, his strong dislike to established domination rose up fiercely, and in after discussion his clenching periods would not only astonish his hearers, but in proud moments suggest to himself far away apparitions of the platform or the bar. When at night he read aloud before the peat fire some congenial leader in "The Scotsman," his appreciative nature would enjoy it amazingly, and he would say in an undertone, "I think I could do this." But if any piece of Toryism from the "Edinburgh Weekly Journal" came in his way he would look round to his brother William and say, with his lip under his teeth, "I could take his head off." Then when his penniless, prospectless situation came home to him in full force, all his grand imaginings melted into thin air, and there was nothing left but the humbling alternatives of the spade, the grocer's, or the draper's counter.

During the years 1829 and 1830 we get occasional

glimpses of him working in the fields alongside his parents, or delving in the garden of the Rev. Mr. Paterson, the Seceder minister of Bankfoot. These alternations did not afford him the same time for contemplation as his herding days had done, but he went on perseveringly, and his whole story bears record that it was during his three last years at Tullybeltane that his open and kindly nature received those tender impressions of home, which, in moments of lyrical indulgence, he ever and anon fell back upon, and under whose influence the very instincts of his life were gathered into one melting focus, and he sang with David—

> If thee, Jerusalem, I forget,
> Skill part from my right hand.

In the winter of 1829 ROBERT went for six weeks to Mr. Porter's school at Moneydie. This was his last academic effort, and for twenty years after NICOLL'S death Mr. Porter made it his boast that he had ROBERT NICOLL, the poet, as one of his pupils. The teacher knew that his pupil was disposed to versicles, but he had little idea of the length he had gone in them. It was principally for writing and arithmetic that he attended at Moneydie, but he had occasional English lessons, which were sometimes rather crudely digested.

On one occasion an urchin whom ROBERT had chastised, hearing Mr. Porter say, "You have not studied that well, ROBERT," and NICOLL making no reply, said tauntingly, "He's aye readin'." "Oh!" said Mr. Porter, "but I have not seen him with any books lately." "Oo, no!" said the incorrigible persecutor, "but there's ane hidden the noo aneath a muckle stane ayont the Tinkler's tavern."

If Mr. Porter had known at the time what sort of a youth was passing through his hands, there was no one who would have given him a heartier reception or opened his mind to a more thorough communion of feeling. Porter was an open-hearted, cordial, most enjoyable companion, full of fun, full of poetry, full of laughter, and full of tears. He was the author of a song beginning—

> Twa bumbees sat on a twig,
> Twig a leerie, bum bizz;
> Says "whaur will we gang our bykes to big?"
> Twig a leerie, bum bizz.

which seems to be irrecoverable. He was the relative and admirer of Charles Spence, and a night spent with these two men made the third forget that ROBERT NICOLL was dead. "The bumbee's song" was a smart composition, and original in conception. The characteristic evolutions and chorded hums of the noisy insects gave it irresist-

ible drollery, and carried the listener into successive bursts of involuntary laughter, in which Porter, regardless of Chesterfield, always joined, buzzing, droning, *crowding*, and laughing till the whole man became, soul and body, one quivering mass of merriment and tears.

Many of the lyrics, which afterwards became so popular, were grounded during these latter years of country life. True, he tells us in his autobiographical letter to Mr. Johnstone that he "made a bonfire of his papers." But there is not much in that. A poet may sing his song to the inconstant breeze and it is swept away, but the poet remains and he can sing it again.

One lyric, written at this time but consigned in manuscript to the conflagration, accidentally spurted out years afterwards. NICOLL rewrote it with protestations of reluctance, and although it was contributed to "Johnstone's Magazine," he would not allow it a place in the first edition of his poems. No amount of argument would gain his consent. No accusations of obstinacy, no honest flatterings of the thing itself, no comparisons of it with his other poems would move him. Eventually he wrote me from Dundee—"I shall insert none of the trash I sent to 'Johnstone's Magazine.'" Something, of which I could form no conception, had

warped his judgment and led him to taboo an ode that would have done honour to any collection. After forty years I have no court of appeal left, and without, by intention at least, making light of the poet's opinion, I restore the exquisite verses to their proper place, not in the place which pertains to them in his collected works, but here in the era to which they belong,—in the midst of his early life, as evidences of a powerful and discursive mind in a youth of fifteen, and a knowledge of human affairs that is more characteristic of the deeply-read student under his cloistered roof, than of a stripling who was bounding over dykes like a roe, and setting at naught every recognised principle of incipient greatness. The beautiful green pastures and the rivulets wimpling under the braes did not engage ROBERT'S attention more than the grander phenomena of nature. The trees, bending under the south-west blast, and waving to the top of Tully-beagles, the thunder as it rumbled up the valley of the Almond, and the lightning as it coruscated through Strathmore, excited every feeling of his youthful bosom, and generated conceptions of active nature which followed him through life.

THE WINDS.

AWAY ! Away ! we've flown afar,
O'er wide-spread land and sea—
Since last we breath'd where blue-bells are,
In Scotland's glens with thee.

Our paths have been the mountains old ;
We've skimmed across the brine,
And kiss'd the morning's locks of gold
Within the burning line.

Over the icebergs of the north,
Half frozen we have gone ;
Then with Ind's summer have come forth,
Through jungles drear and lone,

And we have fann'd with downy wings
The fever'd aching head ;
And on our blasts have rode the things
That wander o'er the dead.

Around the bower where lovers were,
On tip-toe we have gone ;
We've heard the words were whisper'd there—
We've caught their passion'd tone.

We have brought death on Afric's sands,
To the rich caravan ;
We've roam'd free through the tropic lands
Where nought is slave but man.

We've flitted o'er the Indian Isles,
And caught their spicy breath—
Seen their eternal summer's smiles—
Their beauty, and their death.

We've vex'd the broad Pacific sea,
Till up its billows rose,

And flung themselves as far and free,
As water ebbs and flows.

We've made the goodly-laden ship
Reel madly to and fro;
We've lashed the mighty waters up,
Till they swept from stern to prow.

We've gather'd the sighs of dying men,
That from her breast uprose,
And borne them onward still since then,
Where'er our current blows.

On Andes' tops we've placed our feet,
On Chili's vales we've breathed—
Till maids have called our zephyrs sweet,
In woods with flowers enweav'd.

We've seen earth red with human blood,
Each drop a human tear;
Men, happiness, are but the food,
War's iron jaws do share.

O'er scenes of joy and scenes of wo,
Of madness and of mirth:
O'er scenes that tongue can never show—
We've passed—upon the earth.

Now! now! on Scotland's hills again
And in her vales we blow;—
We're passing by;—and o'er the main—
Away! Away! we go.

ROBERT has here taken a poetical liberty with the wind, for we are told that "it bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it

goeth," yet this dreaming stripling conceived the idea that while he was "herding kye" on Ordé braes these mysterious visitants stooped to tell him their tale of travel, and such a tale they told! Bounding over earth, sea, and sky, driving old ocean mad, cracking the great forests and filling the air with sand instead of water—anon, breathing on the sick-bed, wafting perfumes of spices, and "kissing the morning's locks of gold." The very measure the poet has adopted is in sympathy with his impetuous subject,—"Away! away! we go." The knowledge of nature, in her ever-diversified moods, displayed in these lines, to say nothing of the sentiment and pathetic versification, are, in a youth of fifteen, indicative of something great to come, and in conning them over, the first wish that arises is, O! if he had dashed aside the demon of politics, and given us seven years of such poetry as this. The same marked complacency in appropriating to himself the great movements of nature occurs in "Youth's Dreams,"

I thocht the little burnies ran,
  An' sang the while to me!
To glad me, flowers cam' on the earth
  And leaves upo' the tree—
An' heather on the muirland grew,
  An' tarns in glens did lie,—
O' beauteous things like these I dream'd
  When I was herdin' kye!

The young poet persevered with his gardening in spring, and worked in the fields during the rest of the open year, thereby earning money for his winter schooling; but the family at the Coates was increasing, and he saw the necessity, not only of relieving them of his presence, but of furthering his own progress in life. The last we hear of him in this connection is his working in Mr. Alexander's garden at Bankfoot, and making a bonfire of his papers, because he despaired of ever being able to write the English language correctly, a feeling singularly at variance with the composition of "The winds," already in manuscript.

The aspirations after independence so strongly expressed in NICOLL'S autobiographical epistle to Mr. Johnstone, are not peculiar in themselves, but coming from a youth of sixteen, whose position in life rendered independence a moral impossibility, they seem rather misplaced. His idea of independence was circumscribed, however, for he tells us that he had registered a vow in heaven that he should be independent, though on a crust and water, meaning, no doubt, that he would only eat what he earned. This gratuitous vow was more manly than laudable, and was as much honoured in the breach as in the observance. It is curiously placed in the letter, being followed by this prostrat-

ing announcement, "To further my prospects in life I bound myself apprentice," etc., etc. Of all men in the world, the poet is the least fitted for independence. He may be rich as Crœsus, or he may be able to live on a crust and water; but the world's neglect will harrow up his soul—no possessions will reconcile him to a life apart—he cannot live on bread alone—he is nervously alive to every whisper that is breathed on the air. Clod-hopping, grinding, pauperism may be semi-independent, but

> Stringin' blethers up in rhyme,
> For fools to sing,

is the act of dependence seven times refined, the self-reliance of the mariner's compass.

The Nicolls had been for generations residenters in Auchtergaven, but now the name is there extinct. Old Robert's grandmother was a tenant on the Nairne estate, immediately before "the '45." The property was formerly held by Lord William Murray, brother to the Duke of Atholl, in right of his wife, The Hon. Margaret Nairne, but after his death, in 1725, the management of the fine estate devolved on the lady, and notwithstanding her son's attainder, she laid out great sums of money in

extending and decorating her mansion in Strathorde. Amongst other proud appendages she had a chapel erected to suit the Episcopalian form of worship, and in person she strenuously urged her tenants to attend it. Calling one day on this sturdy presbyterian ancestress of the Nicolls, she told her to come to chapel on Sunday. On receiving a flat refusal, the lady threatened, and pointing to the large meal chest, which stood in a corner, and which, in those days, formed an important item of the farmer's possessions, said pettishly, "If ye'll no come I'll tak your girnal out o' its neuk," meaning that the tenant must flit. Mrs. Nicoll nothing daunted, however, replied, "The land we have is your ain, and ye may do as ye like wi't, but I'll no gang to your chapel." The sequel was sad, but retributive. Before the flitting time came round, the haughty baroness became landless and an exile.

A youth so fond of letters as ROBERT NICOLL would naturally grasp at any connection with the press, and he afterwards told with chagrin that being appointed correspondent to the *Perth Courier* when he was thirteen years of age, he was ignominously bereft of that lucrative appointment, which had yielded him a copy of the paper every fourth week! Some more sage and less poetical savant had

probably succeeded to the enviable office, and ROBERT lost, for a time, the much cherished pleasure of seeing himself in print. Thus shorn of what he thought might turn out a benefit in the end, his mind fell back on emigration to the United States of America, a vision which for three years had haunted his imagination. "That home of liberty; that glorious republic, where men were estimated according to their worth, and not trampled under foot by lordlings who had neither brains nor hands," was his frequent exclamation. But his purse was empty, and the Atlantic was in those days very broad, two facts which damped the ardour of many aspirants after liberty, and prevented them realising in person the visionary phantom that was dazzling, and had so long dazzled, their sense of right and wrong. It is obvious from all that ROBERT NICOLL has written, that while the notions of liberty which he formed during his last three years at Tullybeltane, adhered to him through life, yet year by year as he went on in his versatile career, that very period of incubation stood out in strong relief before him as the happiest epoch of his existence, and Ordé braes as the veritable land of liberty. He found afterwards that political rights were not recognised behind the counter, that platform wrangling, however much it aggravated the feeling

of oppression, brought no relief, and that thundering anathemas against the Tories, through the columns of the *Leeds Times*, tended little to ameliorate his own condition, however much it may have forwarded the object that was ever nearest to his heart, the vow that he had made, "The world *shall* be better yet." While we applaud his devotion and singleness of heart, we lament the turmoil that they led him into, and its baneful effects upon his too susceptible nature. Rest he could not, and however Quixotic his aspirations may seem, in him they were earnest and to be pursued at any sacrifice.

CHAPTER III.

Perth, 1830-34.

Though some fouk think that a' thing gude
In palaces doth dwell—
An' though the puir, to tempt and vex,
Ha'e mair than I may tell—
There's ae thing yet—there's twa things yet—
To brag o' that we ha'e—
We never, never failed a friend,
An' never fear'd a fae!

WE have now left Tullybeltane with its broad fringe of hills and far-stretching landscape, and are on our journey to Perth. This is the year of grace, 1830, the harvest is nearly over, the rich, yellow-coloured stacks are rearing their conical heads at every homestead, and the lads and lasses are making assignations for the approaching round of harvest homes. ROBERT NICOLL, in his seventeenth year, is about to enter that apprenticeship which is to absorb the half of what remains to him of life. He is trudging down the Dunkeld Road eager for the great world, and ready for its battles. He does not positively stoop, but his whole figure has a leaning tendency forward. He has only three little manuscript poems in his pocket, but his head

and heart are brimful of song, waiting for tongue or pen to give it utterance. He is in his Sunday's best, a blue, short-tailed coat with gilt buttons, drab trousers, and a cloth cap. Round his throat is tied a black silk handkerchief, the ends of which join issue with his brown locks in holding breezy communion with his old friends the winds. His complexion is ruddy, and his whole aspect full of buoyancy. Ah! the short, ardent struggle that awaited these southward steps. The spirit was now merging into life that in poetry was ever placid as an inland lake, but in politics fierce as Cape Wrath. The physical and mental powers that were never allowed to rest were now fairly on the wing. This youth left his native Auchtergaven determined to "make the world better," and when the muses were taken into his council he succeeded marvellously, but in aiming at political regeneration his grasp was much too wide. He struck but forgot to parry. He anathematised the polity of the ruling section, but forgot to husband his own life, and any calm observer who knew his temperament, and took into account the necessity of mental and physical rest to every man, could not fail to see that whether victory ensued or not, the battle would be short.

The young poet was regularly indentured for four years to Mrs. James Hay Robertson, grocer, an

estimable widow lady whose shop, still in possession of the family, was on the south side of the High Street, a little below the Cross. She had one son —recently one of the magistrates of Perth—and several daughters. This companionable family treated him kindly, and I here protest against the language used by Mr. Smiles in his essays on ROBERT NICOLL. He says, "At the same time he was living on the poorest possible diet; on porridge, bread and cheese, and water." Mr. Smiles does wrong in first characterising NICOLL'S diet as "the poorest possible," and then telling us what it was, because he enables us to convict him of two errors, first in the adjectives "poorest possible," and second in the abstract fact. With all deference to roast-beef and its eaters, porridge and bread and cheese are not to be sneered at. How much roast-beef went to the composition of "Tam o' Shanter," and how much to that of the Scottish army who sent Edward the Second scampering over the Border? But Mr. Smiles is not content with merely deprecating porridge and bread and cheese, but proceeds to dilute them with water. Now water is a blessed commodity, and essential to every life, but what a miserable theory a man sets up who restricts a youth to it, one-third of whose working hours was spent in bottling ale and porter. Scotchmen are generally

economical in business, but they do not "muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn;" neither are they so very facile as to believe that in a respectable Scottish grocer's family forty years ago the delicious fresh broth and beef did not form a leading refection. But ROBERT NICOLL was the soberest of lads, as he became of men. He neither smoked, snuffed, nor chewed tobacco. He neither fished, shot, nor played at games of chance. He drank neither wines, spirits, nor ales; and although his life was highly excited, that excitement never arose from stimulants. It was the turmoil of strong consciousness that made him ever ready to back his friends in any cause that involved mental or physical exertion.

The duties of a grocer's apprentice were much more arduous then than they have since become—seven o'clock in the morning to nine, and sometimes ten, at night, left our newly-fledged shopman little time even for reflection. The incessant recurrence of selling, packing, and despatching, fretted his impatient spirit, and he longed for the freedom of his Tullybeltane hills. But the free intercourse with a superior class of people led him, day by day, to see more clearly his own shortcomings, and when he had occasion to make entries in the business books, his deficient grammar and orthography humbled his

pride, and, in his own words, "gnawed his very life out." The first money that came into his hands was invested in pocket editions of Johnson's Dictionary and Cobbett's English Grammar. These were henceforward his never-absent companions. His reading was suspended, and when his youthful associates went on their devious ways, ROBERT slid up to his garret with his two authorities, and in a very short time he showed unmistakeable symptoms of his improvement. The feeling that he was enabling himself to take his position as a fair English scholar, fired his literary propensities, and he began to write both in prose and verse. The margins of Cobbett and Johnson were scribbled to the back-thread. A few years ago a friend of mine possessed the Grammar, but he unfortunately lent it, and as commonly results, lost it. He remembers the following :—

> Man is a vapour full of woes,
> He cuts a caper, and off he goes.

Some years before ROBERT NICOLL went to his apprenticeship Mr. Robertson had been appointed agent for an Insurance Company, and in order to give the business a good start there was forwarded to him a whole bale of large street advertisements. These he used as far as he considered necessary, and the

remainder was sent up to a lumber garret contiguous to the one where the apprentices slept. No attention was paid to them till long after NICOLL left, but when the time came round that the garret had to be overhauled, these bills were found covered in every available corner of front and back with poetry and prose in every possible state. Fragments of Epics, halting Odes, Songs, Essays, and Tales, all in NICOLL'S hand-writing. It is thought that these were afterwards delivered to his friends, but they have disappeared. An essay which belongs to this period has been preserved, and shows his onward progress. There is no indication in it of the impetuous self-asserting youth that he afterwards became, but there is a quiet undercurrent of piety, a deep knowledge of nature, and a tender familiar mode of expression, which are eminently indicative of the future poet. Hervey and Sturm were at this time much read and admired, and a youth so much disposed to all that was amiable as ROBERT NICOLL, could not fail to imbibe a portion of their spirit.

On the feelings excited by a contemplation of the Seasons.

No. I. WINTER.

I love the winter well.—SOUTHEY.

"A true taste for the contemplation of nature refines and purifies the mind. I pity that man who loves not to look upon the face of nature—who wishes not to learn the secrets of the woods and fields; for he loses one half of man's earthly enjoyments. Nothing can so well raise the mind from nature up to nature's God as a contemplation of the works of his hand—the hand that made the smallest flower put forth its blossoms, and the tallest mountain lift its head.

"Winter! thy name to the ears of many sounds harsh and rugged as thine own storms. Many can feel no pleasure in thy keen and invigorating gales, can see no beauty in thy snowy mantle, but to the lover of nature and nature's scenes thou art a source of pleasure, pure and unalloyed. He exults in the health and strength which thou bringest to him; he loves to wander over glen and fell, to mark thy wondrous ways, to mark the mimic castles and cities formed by thy frosts—the skaters on the bosom of the waters which thou hast turned to glass, the rural sights and rural sounds that accompany thy days; mingling with thy frosts and colds the voices of living things. And to the lover of nature there is no scene so full of beauty, so full of

God's power as that displayed by the heavens when the frosts have sent away the vapours that clouded them. Then is the time to breathe the air of the difficult mountain tops, to gaze upon the face of heaven so deeply, darkly, beautifully blue, and upon those glorious orbs,—those suns of other systems—those incomparable works of God which tell of his almighty power. The lover of nature can never be irreligious; every moment of his life gives him some new proof of the being, power, and wisdom of God. There is an enjoyment too—enjoyment I have often felt—when the clear cold night of winter returns. It is to gaze upon the beasts and birds which hunger has rendered tame, making them leave the glen and brake in which they were nurtured and fed while summer was green, and approach the habitation of man, as if beseeching him to share with them the bounties which God has given! Would that man less often abused their confidence and shed their blood.

"Nature in all its scenes, in all its seasons, is a source of pleasure to the enquiring mind, by illustrating the wonderful wisdom and benevolence of God. The scenes of winter are as well fitted to charm by their rough harmony as the more effeminate days of summer, or the drooping and plenteous autumn. God's goodness is well seen in the covering he provides for the brute creation during the rigours of winter. Within the tropics whereclothing would be useless, nay, hurtful, he has covered animals with hair. In the temperate

parts of the earth he has covered them with the finest fleeces, formed of a wonderful combination of a substance called carbon with atmospheric air; and in the frigid zones, where almost continual winter reigns, he has covered the beasts of the earth in furs, the warmest covering which man is acquainted with, and well fitted to confine the heat generated by the body to nourish the animal. The warm blooded animals that dwell amid the ice of the arctic circle, and are accustomed to dive in the water, such as the walrus and the polar bear, to whom furs would have been but an inefficient covering, he has formed with a substance between the skin and the flesh, known by the name of blubber, which will resist the most intense cold. Such is the most wonderful foresight and wisdom of God that he has not left one animal or one plant but in its proper element, and with its proper food and clothing. Well may we exclaim, 'O! the unsearchable wisdom of God.'

"In the arctic circle where winter makes her home, nature disports herself in many a form. The sailor in those regions sees the accumulated ice of ages of winters floating around him in all the varied forms that nature can take or art imitate. A new and fairy world of molten silver is spread before the eyes of the astonished beholder, showing that nature, guided by the great first cause, easily overcomes man in all his puny, though boasted works.

"Some may be inclined to suppose that the

people of those coasts must be supremely miserable, but on examination we find that every people under heaven loves its own land best; providence having wisely decreed that every part of the earth should be equal:—

> The shivering tenant of the frigid zone,
> Boldly proclaims the happiest spot his own.

"Providence hath wisely ordered, that in the winter, when the heat of the sun is faint and low, snow should fall to cover the plants and herbs of the field from the frosts and colds, and it is found by actual experiment that the temperature below snow is always above the freezing point, showing that God hath wisely ordered that the frosts of winter should have a counteracting principle in themselves.

"Thus we see that winter in all its scenes is formed to excite the most exalted notions of the goodness, the wisdom, and the benevolence of God. Though in it the voice of nature is hushed, though the birds are silent, though the trees are without a leaf, yet the Almighty 'glasses himself in tempests,' that all times and all seasons may give glory to God in the highest."

William Nicoll, ROBERT'S younger brother, being now promoted to be his parents' chief care, was receiving an education that in those times was thought superior for a peasant's son. The brothers

had opened a correspondence, and from its first beginning to its final ending, William held his own, and from his quiet home, with his cooler temperament, he saw that ROBERT was somewhat impetuous in his movements and opinions, and on more than one occasion he sent him a manly remonstrance. The younger brother had no American yearnings. Up to this time at least he did not look upon his home-land as so sunk in thraldom and hopeless in resources as ROBERT did. His mind took a more limited range, and to be able to make his own way in life was his narrower aim, "to make the *world* better" was a mission that he feared would never come in his way; and however much he admired the courage and felt the talent of his elder brother, the regeneration of the race seemed to him an aspiration for young men more influentially situated. One thing comes out clearly in the correspondence, that the brothers found there was no royal road to fame; that nothing but labour could gain great ends, and that the force of genius was the mere raw material of success. The interesting point of their case is, that two mere boys should not only correspond, but in terms so lofty, and so far away from the usual style of apprentices and schoolboys, as to engage the atten-

tion of men who for years had struggled without success to make themselves heard.

In 1831, William wrote to ROBERT, reporting his own progress at school, and asking ROBERT to let him know what he was achieving by his self-teaching and known perseverance. ROBERT answered promptly and at great length. "I received your learned epistle, and I must confess I was agreeably surprised by its contents, inasmuch as you have this week discovered that nothing can be accomplished without labour. For in your former letter you seemed to think you could work Bonnycastle as you would a cart-horse. But why despair my pretty fellow? Commence with practical surveying and read on to the end, and think attentively as you read, and I will bet you two to one, that in a month you will have it all in your head like a horn. Think! and engrave the principle on the tables of your heart from which nothing can ever again efface it! That is the manner of proceeding I have taken, and I every day feel the good effects of it; and if life and strength be spared me, there is something that whispers that I may yet, at some future period, distinguish myself in the republic of letters either by prose or verse.

"Perhaps you won't believe me, but I declare to

you that I am grown very industrious. After this fashion, I read a good deal in the morning while sluggards are snoring; all day I attend to my business; and in the forenights I learn my grammar; while the morning of Sunday is spent in writing hymns or other suitable poetical pieces. Would you have thought it—I, even I, am reckoned in Perth a very early riser? Tell it not in the Coates—proclaim it not in the gates of Tullybeltane! I hope you will pardon the inaccuracies of this letter, as I have never given it a second reading. By-the-by, I will send you one of my darling MS. poems one of those days. Now, don't laugh."

Again, in May of the year after:—"I have little to say; but no one who looks upon his brethren of mankind, and the beauties of the earth, with an enquiring eye, can ever be at a loss for a subject. To look upon mankind—to observe the various airs they give themselves, is indeed calculated to make a person a misanthrope. The chief of an Indian tribe daily goes to his tent door and points out to the sun the path he is to travel for the day; and the despots of Europe wish to point out to mankind the road till time shall be no longer. The head prince of a village, or the lord of a few acres, equally with those, rule, in mind as well as in body, the crouch-

ing wretches who labour unseen ; and all combine to keep themselves uppermost at the expense of their fellow creatures, unheeding though misery may follow their path—that is nothing compared to self-aggrandisement. And those who submit to be thus tyrannised over, what are they? we are tempted to ask. Are they *men* who listen to every word as if it proceeded from God, who obey every motion as if it were one from the Deity? They are not men ; they are slaves in every sense of the word, because they have made themselves so when God created them freemen. To see the power of riches—to see how their possessor is adored, is followed and caressed ; to see him indulge in every vice, in every folly, and followed and caressed still ; and to see the same man—still the same—stripped by fortune of the riches he bestowed upon his vices. Where, then, are the crowds who followed in his train? Where are those who followed and applauded his very blasphemies? Why, they are gone to follow others like in manners ; and to laugh at him whom they have ruined for this world and the next. To look on such a picture is enough to make one curse the name of man who turns God's moral world into a wilderness, *his* image into a devil, and *his* word into a cloak for their practices!

But no, we will not curse; we look on men as brothers, and leave them to their God."

Again, in reply to one of William's quiet remonstrating letters, he says:—"In your last letter you seem to think that I have given up all thoughts of America; but I must tell you such is not the case. My mother used to say I was very fickle; but if I were not still in the thoughts of going there, I would deserve the name of fickleness indeed. Its advantages over this country are many. If a person is clever and behaves himself, he is as sure of a competence as I am sure of being a *poet*, and that is sure enough, in all conscience! You may laugh in your sleeve at my poetry, but wait a wee and may-hap you may laugh on the wrong side of your mouth, as Cobbett says of his political enemies. Poetry is one of the greatest earthly blessings that God bestows upon man. Poets are generally poor men; but none of them would give up their fancy, imagination, or whatever it is that forms a poet, for all the riches of Golconda's mines. You have heard of Coleridge. He is a scholar than whom there are few better; but by devoting his time to the muses, he has never yet been, as I may say, independent. Yet this unfortunate son of genius says—'Poetry has soothed my afflictions, heightened my joys, and

thrown a broad and beautiful halo over the best and worst scenes of my life.

"But you must not suppose for all that, that I will not work while I write; for as Thomas Moore says in the midst of a sentimental love song, 'We must all dine,' so say I; and though Moore has often been laughed at for the ridiculous expression, I am almost tempted to think it the most sensible thing he has ever written.

"I get on trippingly with my grammar; and always as I proceed, I feel myself understanding it better; and I hope I may yet be a good grammarian. If once learned and practised, I will not be afraid, if health be spared me, to fight my way through the world. By the way, I think it would be the best policy for you to write a little better and a little closer. As to America, my plan is this:—I will try and get a good engagement for a year or two, and then, when I get as much cash as will carry me, go to it; and when I can get myself comfortably settled, you and the rest may come out also without fear, as you would have a home awaiting you. But this is always supposing, we get no encouragement at home."

At this stage of his life the reader will naturally enquire what it was that brought home to ROBERT NICOLL the conviction that he was, to all

intents and purposes, a *poet*. Little had yet reached the public ear to justify the complacent and daring conclusion. But even to his brother, a mere stripling, he would not have ventured to make the assertion, without the strongest inward consciousness of its truth. Poems and lyrics had long been floating in his imagination, many of them had been in manuscript and destroyed, but by no means forgotten. He became so fluent in political disquisition, and so impatient of the many ills that encircled life, especially amidst the powerless and poor, that by far the noblest feature of his character, was cast into abeyance. But when these times of temporary excitement had wrought their own cure, he "soothed his afflictions and heightened his joys" by visiting the temple where he was always welcome, and courting the muses, who, although nine in number, were never jealous, nor to him coy or reluctant. When in these calm moments he glanced over the two leading passions of his life, he became sensible of the fact, that afterwards presented itself in such strong terms to his more experienced mind, and led him to say, "I have espoused with earnestness the cause of my fellow men, but, I have written my heart in my poems."

"The Winds" and the following fragment

on "Bessy Bell and Mary Gray" are the only poetical pieces which NICOLL allowed to drift into print before the publication of his "Poems and Lyrics," in 1835. The traditionary lines on the two ill-fated maidens that have come down to us, are most difficult to deal with, and should, like the vaguely finished picture of a great artist, be left for filling up by the imagination. This feeling is amply demonstrated by the tawdry lines of Allan Ramsay, and these tender but juvenile verses by ROBERT NICOLL :—

BESSIE BELL AND MARY GRAY.

"Bessie Bell and Mary Gray,
They were twa bonnie lasses,
They biggit a bower on yon burn brae,
An' theekit it ower wi' rashes."—OLD SONG.

O ! THERE are moments when the heart is mov'd,
By old remembrances arising bright,—
When beings, things, and thoughts, we once have lov'd,
Spring clearly out before the mental sight.
So is it now with me. In this still hour,
The half-lost songs my mother used to sing,
At eventide,—and which had then the power
To lull me—I now hear again. They bring
Some sad, some grief-fraught thoughts, as well they may,
Of bonnie Bessie Bell and blithesome Mary Gray.

To sing of them it was my great delight
In youthful days, and still the self-same way
I love to churm their ditty morn and night—
The tale of Bessy Bell and Mary Gray.

When death was strong and mighty in the land—
  When hundreds fell where one had fall'n before—
When father far away from son did stand—
  When fear of death kept man from sorrow's door—
They left their wo-girt homes, and far away,
To dens and mountains wild, they bent their lonely way.

There with their ladye-hands they built a bower,
  And cover'd it with rushes and with leaves;
A shelter from the heat and from the shower,
  And from the shapes that midnight fancy weaves.
In summer days they wander'd through their glen—
  On berries liv'd and drank clear Almond's floods:
They were self-happy far away from men,
  And deep with nature in the lofty woods.
Acquaintanceship they made with all her things,
Song birds, sweet flowers, and all that in her hand she brings.

But though they thus did pass their hermit-days,
  They yet remembered man, nor were forgot;
One still was seeking them through many ways,
  In many a grassy holm and rocky grot.
Ill was the fate that led him to their door,
  Ill was the thought that bade him enter in,—
For plague had follow'd, while he did explore
  The solitary glens where he had been.
And death clung to him, though his hopes were high;
Though light, and life, and love, shone in his clear blue eye.

Within their bower the maidens sleeping were,
  And the fond lover bless'd his God, that He
Had led his wand'ring feet, to that spot where
  He most had wished, and sighed, and prayed to be.
The maidens waken'd from their last sweet sleep,
  And gaz'd—in fear—in wonder on the boy;
But quickly Mary knew—and flew to meet
  His warm embrace—her only love and joy.
That night peace watch'd above their leafy couch,
But ere to-morrow's morn, had flown beyond their touch.

To-morrow's sun arose in summer pride,
But grief he brought to these two damsels fair—
Ere next he vanish'd, that young boy had died
Who yester-even sought their cottage there.
They made his grave beneath an oak's broad shade,—
There laid him low within his mother earth,
And wrapp'd him in the dust as in a bed,
To wait the moment of his second birth.
On their clear brows the spot too soon appear'd;
And plague had hold on them who had it fled and fear'd.

Died they in peace? In sleep pass'd they away?
Or died they on the rack of mortal pain?
Man knoweth not—he cannot know—for they
Were never seen by human eye again.
In loveliness they vanish'd from the sight—
With their young beauties fresh and early blown;
They who were look'd upon with such delight—
Had to another, happier world flown.
Heaven grudg'd the sight of them to sinful eyes,
So won them from the earth—to dwell above the skies.

Men dared not go within their ruin'd cot;
But there as in a tomb their bodies lay—
Till nature with her leaves had fill'd the spot—
Till nature's hand had given clay to clay.
And nature's work by man was ne'er disturbed—
He felt that she had mark'd them for her own;
Their grave by nature's mantle is enrob'd,
And her best flowers their monument have grown.
The twain do sleep—the peerless, beauteous twain—
Where they did live and die—far from the haunts of men.

Oft when the moon was out with many a star,
When winds were low and all the woods were still,
I've wandered from my home though it was far,
To stand beside their grave and by their rill.
And I have thought, it suited best with those
Who liv'd and died apart from human kind,

To sleep at last where the bright evening's close
Upon their grave a resting-place might find.
Far better 'tis to sleep in such a scene,
Than in a dark church-yard, however old and green.

Their grave, a pilgrim's shrine to men hath grown,
And o'er them oft hath woman shed a tear;
And love-tales too from pouting lips have flown,
Inspir'd with truth by those who slept so near.
Great men have vanish'd, and have been forgot,
Nations have fallen since their tale was new;
Yet men where'er they go forget *them* not,
By Indus' streams or western mountains blue,
Their names are household words, and many a lay
Is tuned for Bessy Bell and sung for Mary Gray.

The spirit of story telling, which, as we have seen, became almost a necessity of NICOLL'S early life, began now to assume a wider but less romantic character. During the winter months he wrote short tales, but kept them entirely to himself, not having courage to send them to the press. That press which bulked so largely in his mind as an engine of power, had not yet opened its arms to receive him, and it was well that it had not, because, instead of writing the beautiful poems and lyrics which perpetuate his name, he would doubtless at once have plunged into politics, and been hindered, as he afterwards regretted being "from feeling the soul of poetry amidst woods and fields, and from those pursuits which I love so well." But bread was not to be

earned by writing verses, and bread he must have. Thus, overwhelmed by a love of letters, yet hedged in by the exigencies of a common humanity, his mind was continually on the rack. Had he been a little less ardent in temperament, and a little less at the caprice of fortune, Scotland would probably have received from his hand "things of beauty," that to her would have been "joys for ever." But poetry and calm deliberation do not dwell together in the youthful mind. Had ROBERT NICOLL lived to see even the fated thirty-seven, so fatal to the votaries of the muses, his mind would have been chastened, and the love of nature, which in him could not abate, would have gained strength; and while he would have been less a spendthrift of his own life, the spirit that was ever ready would never have failed a friend, but instead of the much cherished theory of immediate human regeneration, he would have been contented with the constantly recurring opportunities of doing good in a quiet way to himself and his fellow-men.

As the young poet's ideas began to expand, his radical proclivities were strengthened, and Republican America became the object of his worship. "The most glorious country on earth," was his devotional sentiment. In the early summer mornings, whilst others slept, he would be seen brushing

the dew by his hasty steps northward. When he approached the river where it rolls in silent majesty past the North Inch, he was forced to sing its praises, but there was always a difficulty if a rival appeared, then it would be—"It is nothing compared to the Mississippi, or the St. Lawrence, or the Susquehanna." Still, "the green and bonny banks of Tay" got from his undisturbed heart their due meed of worship. He would steal away up the North Inch again after shop hours, throw himself down on one of the benches, and gaze away into the clear azure sky, where the harvest moon was urging her journey amid a thousand white clouds that were careering past, and still farther away into the infinite distance where myriads of stars were twinkling and dazzling, and thence in a moment of excited imagination, into the very bosom of his God, for in those days confiding Scottish lads like ROBERT NICOLL were taught to believe that heaven was up there, and that the true God dwelt in that heaven, however much, in the wisdom of more recent times, that somewhat concentrated belief may be deprecated. After one of these heavenward musings the summons home rang from St. John's bell, and springing to his feet he put this grave question to himself, and hurrying home wrote it down, "Can it be possible that while we

see and know so much, we are to know and see no more?"

During the early years of his apprenticeship NICOLL formed a close friendship with two young men who were of very great service to him, Mr. David Craigie, drawing master, and Mr. William Runciman, afterwards assistant to Dr. Miller, Rector of the Perth Academy. They polished the angles of the rough diamond wherever they thought a latent sparkle lurked, carefully avoiding all tendency to excite or aggravate those strong feelings of class-dislike, which were rapidly overruling every other feeling of the young poet's bosom. It was unfortunate that his first step in life was taken during the agonies of the great Reform Bill, when the country was boiling with every adverse dogma like the witches' cauldron. His mind, young and susceptible, with a long cherished leaning to the poor man and his party, yielded to the fierce undercurrent, and he was carried along by imperceptible degrees until the contentious element within him was as much a part and parcel of his existence as it was of that of Lord Sidmouth or Earl Grey. No great harm in all this we are apt to conclude. Sugar loaves and bottled ale were little likely to be affected by radical groanings or denunciations of

Gatton and Old Sarum; but the poems and lyrics were on the anvil, and when on a summer morning on his way to Tullybeltane, accompanied by Craigie, he recited one of these touching little narratives, the two wished and prayed that politics were buried in the depths of the ocean. But with the new day came the southern air impregnated with Schedule A, and visions of an incipient franchise that kept the eager people surging on, and chilled and subverted every tender feeling of man's bosom. How it was that ROBERT NICOLL, the most uncompromising of all politicians, softened the asperities of his ardent nature, and during the very whirlpool of the reform agitation composed the greater portion of the poems and lyrics he has left us, I can explain in no other way than that he possessed in great force strength of mind as well as youthful elasticity.

The Perth Debating Society was instituted in the beginning of 1833. Its meetings were held in Mr. Shain's school room at the foot of the High Street. NICOLL, together with the two gentlemen I have just named, and Mr. James Buist, reporter for, and afterwards editor and proprietor of, the *Perthshire Advertiser*, were the moving spirits. Amongst its more prominent members was Mr. John Reid, now manager of the Edinburgh and Leith Gas

Company. On the 22nd April, 1833, Mr. Reid was pitted in an important discussion against the eloquent young poet, and after a lapse of nearly half-a-century, NICOLL'S speech on the occasion came, in the following singular way, into his opponent's possession. Mr. Reid had occasion to correspond with Mrs. Allan, the poet's sister,—then, as now, resident with her husband and family in New Zealand, and with whom the poet's mother (since dead) then lived—with reference to the memorial lately placed in North Leith churchyard; and the grateful mother, rummaging through her papers to find something that she might send as a memorial to her son's old friend, fell upon one that must be highly valued by the recipient. Unfortunately, Mr. Reid has no recollection of any portion of his reply or the result of the debate. "But," he says, "I retain a lively recollection of the eloquent sparkle of his eye, and the fervid fluency with which he always delivered himself of his opinions." I insert the whole of this speech, except the small portions which the mutilation of years has rendered unintelligible. It not only illustrates his political feelings, and opinions of public men at the time, but is a characteristic inauguration of a creed, hitherto implicitly believed in, but now, and to the end of his life, vehemently

urged. Whatever my readers think of his doctrines or subdivisions of mind, they may have misgivings as to his prophetic conclusions.

Speech delivered on the Question—"Whether have Riches or Knowledge the greater influence on Society. Robert Nicoll, orator; John Reid, respondent.

PERTH UNION DEBATING SOCIETY—MONDAY, 22nd April, 1833.

"Mr. Chairman,—No man denies that knowledge *ought* to be the sovereign of the world. The old and abominable cant of riches and high station being the natural governors of men, will not now be tolerated—men in our day are not to be frightened from their propriety by names, but cling to that which is best, through good report and through bad report.

"This debate, sir, is confined in area to our own island, and my assertion is, that knowledge for the last thirty years has been waging war against riches—mind against money. My opponents, of course, deny—to use the question of our debate—that knowledge has the greater influence on the minds of men.

"I need not enlarge upon the state of this country when riches held sway; you know enough of that by experience. We know enough of the utter heartlessness and inanity of all connected with the rich and noble; they were selfishness personified.

"My argument divides itself into two parts: general and particular instances. In every age of the world some men have arisen so prominent above their fellows, that the voices of all men have been united to do them honour—whose thoughts are wise, whose words are oracles, who speak and think, not for a nation or time, but for all mankind and to all ages. Their names pass into household words, and their sayings into proverbs. These attributes belong exclusively to those who by their sufferings, lives, or discoveries, have benefited mankind. In almost every age in which such men have arisen they have been treated with neglect during their own lives—but in ours their influence has been felt and acknowledged from their first appearance in public till the grave closed over them.

"The name, 'the first and greatest' in this body of men indisputably belongs to Jeremy Bentham, a man who has done more good than any other mere man since the creation of the world. A man who found jurisprudence and legislation a chaos of contradiction, and left them in admired order, a man who changed the face of morals, the arena in which Locke and Bacon, Hume, Paley and Harley had shown their strength. After these men came Bentham, a greater than all, and instead of a jargon substituted a science, formed to benefit mankind; even his enemies allow that he may be placed in the rank of Locke and Bacon. If ever a man exemplified the all-conquering power of

knowledge it was Bentham; he lived in obscurity—almost in poverty—in the city of Westminster, yet men came from the furthest corners of the earth, from distant and almost uncivilized nations, from the republics of South America to see and converse with him. When one of the nations of our own continent, one of the most Americanised of them, shook off the load of despotism which enthralled it, it selected not the rich and the great to be its lawgivers, but its best and wisest sons left their native land to seek out the philosopher of Westminster, that he might be their judge and lawgiver. When Alexander of Russia was in this country in 1814 he sent Bentham a medal as an expression of his sense of the good the philosopher had conferred on mankind. Bentham was not to be cheated by a gew-gaw, and returned it with this noble answer, 'When Alexander becomes the friend of man he will be the friend of Bentham.' However much the assertion may move contempt or anger, to Bentham is to be awarded the honour of giving the public mind the first impulse in the right way, which has gained the Reform Bill, that impulse which is now breaking up the old conformations of society and substituting better in their stead. No man has left behind him such a name as Bentham. No man has left such disciples. When I name Bowring, Thompson, and Mill, M'Culloch, Fonblanque, and Roebuck, I name men who have not their equals in the kingdom of mind; and now, sir,

I will say, and all here will, I hope, say, that knowledge in this case did what riches never did, and never can do.

"I will name another name in this branch of my subject, a name worthy to be associated with Bentham, alike—but ah! how different—Sir Walter Scott. Of him I need say little. The triumph of mind over all things in his person is too well known to need to be illustrated. He was one of those whose thoughts became the thoughts of mankind. The pre-eminence of knowledge in his person was never better illustrated than when, exhausted by exertions made to retrieve his fallen fortunes, he was compelled to leave his native shore for a warmer clime, from which alas! he returned but to die. When he was carried on board the boat that was to bear him to the destined vessel, immense crowds had collected, composed of all the different grades of London society, from the richest and the wisest, to the poorest and most ignorant; yet in that motley assemblage not a murmur was to be heard, not a head but was uncovered; and when he was safely in the boat the crowd cried as with the voice of one man, 'God bless you, Sir Walter Scott, and send you health and happiness!' I need not pursue the subject farther—of his death and the sensation caused by it you all know as well as I. You all know that kings aspire to do him honour, and the rich and the great kiss the ground whereon he stood.

"These two names may suffice in this branch of my subject, though I could give many more, to shew men cling to those who have knowledge, rather than to those who have riches. I might tell you of Elliot. Is not the Corn-law Rhymer already a king?

"As to the second branch of my subject, it is so closely conjoined to the first that they might have been treated as one. I will first instance the choosing of Joseph Hume and Harry Brougham: the one as M.P. for Middlesex and the other for Yorkshire, in preference to the rich aristocracy, ay, in opposition to them, in the year 1830. Sir, did not the last year's elections furnish instances enough without wandering farther to prove my case? Roebuck, a lawyer, having nothing but his profession to depend upon, was chosen in opposition to the wealth of the whole Hobhouse family and the whole influence of the Government. Look at the election of Cobbett, the farmer, for Oldham. How the aristocracy of England hate that man! The people elected Cobbett the patriot, the soldier, the political writer. . . . Look at O'Connell, who, notwithstanding . . . and other acts, is the actual sovereign of Ireland, whether for good or evil I do not say,—the fact is enough for me. What has given him the power—a power the aristocracy would give millions to possess, but which riches cannot buy? What, but because the people of Ireland, poor and miserable as they are, have trust in his knowledge and the concomitant

goodness of his mind; and I from my soul believe that their confidence is not misplaced.

"I might tell you of J. S. Buckingham's election for Sheffield, a man who in gold and silver is poor enough—I might tell you of the Bulwers—but will not particularise further. I will only say, look at the elections in the gross, and you will see full and sufficient proof of my premises. No man can deny that the Tory party were the richer by far, but they were most completely defeated wherever they tried the contest. The reason of their defeat was because mind had overcome money. The people chose men of rich mind and poor purse, rather than of rich purse and poor mind.

"But, sir, there is another point to which I may turn your attention for a moment; namely, the respect paid to the names of some of those men, who in their own day were hooted out of society. For instance, Priestley and Paine (so far as his political works are concerned), and Muir and Gerald. This is another proof that mind is uppermost.

"Mind, then, I am entitled to say, has not only given laws to external nature, but has exerted its transmuting influence on the great heart of human society. The spirit of the age is of its begetting; the march of intellect is its going forth. When it first appeared in the unformed days of childhood it startled men by its novelty, as well as by the excesses of some of its first votaries. But the appointed time rolled on. It had silently grown

from childhood to youth, from youth to manhood, and it now exults in its strength and its freedom. The opposers of the march of mind, I ask where are they? And echo answers 'Where?' Mind is more glorious and free in its bearing; is not to be cowed. It is like the new-born sun, about to begin its course, which brightens more and more unto the perfect day. But some may say, 'Will its day, like the sun, never set?' Nay, what hath mind to do with rising or setting? Time is but the motion of its thoughts; space but the arena of its feelings. Men die, nations cease to exist, but mind lives for ever.—ROBERT NICOLL."

The time had now arrived when one of those changes of life which are necessarily fertile of new associations, led me into intimate communion with ROBERT NICOLL, a communion which took a closer form from mutual sympathies than from the mere circumstance of being accidentally thrown together. I was ten years his senior, and had seen a good deal of the world, which was new to him. ROBERT had declared that the fact of his being a poet was "true enough in all conscience." His political creed was better studied, oftener repeated, and more vehement than mine, and to poetry I made no pretensions. But I knew the Bible as well as he did, and I knew Shakespeare and Burns better. He adored the heroes of the Covenant, scouted "Old

Mortality," threw in his lot with Ebenezer Erskine, was "a Radical in every sense of the word, and stood by his order." I had nothing to set against all this. I was no politician, knew little about the Covenanters, and less about Ebenezer Erskine; had neither studied Jeremy Bentham nor Ebenezer Elliot; but I had heard Dr. Chalmers preach his commercial and astronomical discourses and many more; knew Andrew Thomson and Edward Irving and Ralph Wardlaw well as preachers; had seen the elder Kean in *Shylock*, and *Richard the Third*, and in *The Mad Actor of Dunstable*; had seen Macready in *Romeo* and in *Virginius*, Miss O'Neil in *Juliet*, Kitty Stephens in *Marian*, and Charles Kemble in *Coriolanus*. "Do not laugh," as NICOLL says, because if I made nothing of all that I must have been a greater fool than he took me for, for he often said, "These facts entitle your antiquated Tory notions to some forbearance, if nothing more." It will be seen from these statements that two opposing spirits had met by the way, and it will be seen in the sequel how easy it is to commingle opposing elements where there is a pervading sentiment ever ready to moderate conflicting opinions, and eventually to overtop the whole.

In September, 1832, a friend leased for me the shop No. 15 High Street, nearly opposite that

wherein ROBERT NICOLL was then serving his term of apprenticeship. At Christmas I came to fit up the premises as a circulating library on a large scale, and as a bookseller and stationer's shop. No one, I afterwards learned, hailed my coming with more ardour than ROBERT NICOLL. He heard the announcement of my poor books as the hungry lion hears the timid footsteps of his prey, and prepared to devour them. The two months taken in fitting up was too long a term of probation, ROBERT must be *in*. Every forenoon about ten o'clock I observed a fresh-looking, fair-haired young man, with a bundle of keys in his hand, come to the window, and after scanning the books scattered about, flatten his nose against the glass and peer into the inmost corner, turning his head awry to enable him to decipher the back titles, and after a despairing look for the expected signboard move away up the street. This went on for some time; but one snowy day in February, as I was pushing my way up the Old Ship Close, I found my young friend sitting on a form corking bottles, and singing with unrestrained glee. "Hillo," said I, "what ails ye at the bottles?" "I'm no meddlin wi' the bottles, I'm only bangin' the corks," was his answer. I felt there was something here, and as I had seen the young man go out and in about

Mrs. Robertson's shop, I asked, "Are you Mrs. Robertson's son?" "Oh no," he said, "I'm only the apprentice, my name is ROBERT NICOLL, and that red-haired fellow in the corner there is Tam M'Glashan, the journeyman. When are you going to open your shop?" This characteristic rapidity amused me, and I enquired, "Do you want a book?" "Yes, I want Stuart's 'America' particularly," he said. "Very well," I rejoined, "come in." That night after all the shops were shut, ROBERT knocked at my door, and remained with me as long as prudence would permit. The scene in the bottling-cellar led me to enquire of an intelligent neighbour about this young grocer, and I learned sufficient of him to awaken in me that interest which every step of our companionship tended to increase. Thus on his first visit I was so far prepared to observe the various traits of his character as they developed themselves, and I did not fall short of my object. His knowledge of books appeared to me in one so young and so uncongenially situated, to be something marvellous—there seemed to be no limit to his reading. Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin, Jeremy Bentham, Scott, Byron, Bulwer, Cooper, Fonblanque, he spoke of as his familiar studies. His politics he did not mince, and not only at that

first meeting, but ever after, I did not make much of them, because it became obvious at first sight, that if it was little likely that he would carry me along with him, it was still less likely that such a concentration of political fire should be cooled down by me. Before leaving he showed me a song he had just written, one verse of which took firm hold of my mind, and kept its place till the appearance of "Poems and Lyrics" three years afterwards—

A flowrie grew in yonder wood,
Bloomin' sae cheery cheerily,
An' the licht o' day did round it flood,
Till brichtest among the bricht it stood;
But it faded an' wither'd leaf an' bud,—
My sang sings dreary drearily.

ROBERT had just completed his eighteenth year. He was rather tall and sinewy, without the slightest indication of the fatal malady which cut short his career. His figure at that age was somewhat ungainly, but he had a fine open countenance, with large blue eyes, through which the heart could always be read: every emotion, every passing thought shone out from those luminous eyes,—first smiles, then fire, then water. His most prominent physical peculiarity was an abhorrence of restraint—he could not endure pinching.

His dark-brown hair was allowed to hang about his ears in luxuriant, though not ungraceful, negligence. His necktie, the famous black silk handkerchief, showed the knot here and there and everywhere. He had an equal abhorrence of intellectual control. In his calm moments, when soothed by family attachments, poetry, love, or close friendship, a child might have led him with a silken band, but when excited by anything like decided opposition, he vented his feelings in a perfect whirlwind of invective; he knew of no compromise, he did nothing by halves; his attachments even were demonstrated by the most violent antitheses, "My love of my country is only surpassed by my hatred of its oppressors," was the "I believe in God" of his political creed.

Writing of NICOLL'S personal appearance, I shall leave the order of my narrative and go forward a year, to tell of him at a soirée of the Perth Debating Society, held in the large hall at the Kirkside, lately occupied as the *Constitutional* Office. The toast or speech assigned to him was "The Memory of Robert Burns." He was well dressed, and when he rose to his feet amidst breathless silence I never beheld, either in the pulpit, at the bar, or on the stage, a young face that so beamed with intellect. He went on for a little calmly and eloquently, but when he came

to speak of the apathy with which the great poet was treated by his countrymen, his impassioned temperament burst restraint; his utterance became rapid, his action violent, and his voice, which in calm moments he knew so well how to modulate, became loud and exclamatory. In the midst of this burst of generous, but too animated feeling, he sat down, and a co-debater, expecting to raise a laugh at NICOLL'S expense, cried across the room, "Wha are ye angry at, Bob?" NICOLL, without lowering the pitch of his voice, or in any way attempting to deny the impeachment, retorted bitterly—"The poet's oppressors, you blockhead."

People are not born into the world with their faculties in full development; they have everything to learn. The sovereign has to learn to rule, and the subject to obey. If the period when a young man is merging into life is tranquil, his political feeling will naturally be less stirred, and his curriculum less active; but I am writing of times of terrible excitement. The infant reform act was "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms." Those who had urged its progress were the larger portion of the community, and they exulted in set terms over their achievement. But they felt that although the battle was fought the wounded were not dead, nor the dead all buried. The defeated party were struggling for reprisals, and were joined

by many who thought that the new state of affairs should be deliberately tested. This raised an alarm amongst those who considered the Reform Act the mere prelude to a series of measures that were to destroy the aristocracy, establish the People's Charter, pull down the Church, and set up the rule of mind in place of the rule of means. Lord Ormelie represented Perthshire in the House of Commons, and it was dreaded that he would not hold the office long, which, together with the disappointment felt with the effects of the Reform Act itself, tended to keep up the excitement. At the end of sixteen short months the costly fabric fell to pieces. Lord Ormelie, by the death of his father, was called to the Upper House, and Perthshire plunged into an election that was little else than a continuation of the vehement struggle that was nominally past.

It was between the first and second acts of this political drama that I first met the young poet. Subordinate as his situation was, he had a high opinion of his destiny as a man; and inexperienced though he no doubt was, he yet felt that to hold his own in the battle of life, as every lover of his country should, he must fight for the people. In one of his letters to his mother he says, "To me has been given talent; and that talent was given to make it useful to man." My arguments with

NICOLL were never political arguments, but quiet reasonings that any improvement in man's social condition must, from its complication, be necessarily a slow process—not a mere escalade where a man can throw himself into a breach, and allow his fellow-soldiers to trample him to death on their way to victory. I would have had more chance with him if I could have unequivocally urged a closer cultivation of the muses; but although I had seen enough to convince me that he was singularly gifted, the public feeling was so carried away that poetry was little read, and poets ill-fed. If I pressed him to be less demonstrative he would answer, "Why not speak out?" and if I suggested the propriety of his continuing his reading instead of chopping politics, his answer was, "That smells of the shop!" This grocer's apprentice of eighteen was not to be superseded, there was no weak point about him, not a breach in his armour; yet he was intensely humane and kind-hearted; and honest and upright as youth could be.

In the midst of this political frenzy many literary episodes arose. "The best expressed sentiment in the poems of Robert Burns," became a subject of thought, and occasional discussion. I do not remember any passage, except the one brought forward by myself. I would not name it here, because I was mercilessly laughed at for my

eccentricity, but that ROBERT NICOLL threw aside his own selected passage, and fought for me like a lion, treating every aspect of the poet's lines in a way not to be forgotten.

> "Altho' thou maun never be mine,
> Altho' even hope is denied;
> 'Tis sweeter for thee despairing
> Than aught in the world beside—Jessy!"

Any one who knows Burns, and will study carefully the circumstances in which he was placed when these extraordinary lines were written, cannot fail to realise in them much impassioned feeling regulated by the rules of reason and experience, and expressed in terms which were familiar to him, and to him alone.

These pleasant moments were harshly broken in upon by the issuing of the new writ for Perthshire. This awakened in NICOLL all the asperities of his nature, and when Sir George Murray, whom he thought shelved for ever, was announced as a candidate, his patience forsook him, and the Tories were recklessly denounced root and branch. Robert Graham of Redgorton came forward in the Whig interest, and although not at all moulded to the Radical taste, nice discriminators thought him a step nearer it, and once committed to him, they

got fierce in his cause, and a contest ensued which swallowed up all the better feelings of men's nature, and set the dearest friends in antagonism. No one, young or old, rich or poor, influential or stakeless, took a deeper interest in that election than ROBERT NICOLL. His wife told Mrs. Johnstone that "if Sir William Molesworth had failed at Leeds, ROBERT would have died on the instant." He did not long survive its successful issue, and if that final contest at Leeds so deeply affected his susceptible frame, who can tell how far this first contest at Perth tended to the same unhappy consummation. When the result of the poll was announced, the excited rabble became furious, the military were called out, and the Riot Act read in front of the George Hotel. ROBERT and I pushed our way, arm in arm, through the crowd towards the post-office, and although his young Radical blood was up, he behaved manfully, ordered some of his uproarious friends home, and refused to join in three groans for the Tories.

This election was the beginning of NICOLL'S active political career. Hitherto, spurts of dissent and unsparing and frequent revilings of the upper classes, had shown the tendency of his feelings; but from this time to the end of his short life, politics became his leading characteristic; he

studied national economics, breathed and perspired crude notions of patriotism. Dreams of Hampden and Washington filled his mind, and his imagination was fired by glimpses of an improved future for the working-man. He says in one of his letters, "I could tell the world of many a deep, deep tragedy enacted in the heart of a poor forgotten uncared-for boy," and his biographer explains this by stating that, "When a herd-boy or a little assistant-worker in a neighbouring gentleman's garden, he had at times suffered silently and bitterly the proud man's scorn." Few sensible people will sympathise with this nonsense. "Herds" and "little assistant workers" do not generally obtain the "proud man's" deference, and it is not too much to say, that in the greater number of cases, they do not deserve it. But if Mrs. Johnstone had gone on a few lines further in the same letter, she would have found a more genuine reason for the tragic feeling so much made of. "Is it to be borne, that while the selfish, mean-souled, grovelling multitude toil and win, the true soul and the brave heart shall faint and fail? Never!" ROBERT NICOLL was one of a thousand types of a class who feel themselves superior to the "grovelling multitude," yet by some cause existing in themselves, or in a non-emotional public, their success in the world is

generally in proportion to the measure in which they conform to the ordinary rules of struggling life. The world is full of "uncared-for boys," each of whom no doubt enacts the tragedy of a subordinate existence, and encounters "the proud man's scorn," but as he goes on he learns to meet those inevitable ills with stoicism, as ROBERT NICOLL would have done, for it cannot be supposed that his precocious intellect involved him in "deeper tragedy" than falls to the lot of every boy similarly situated, whether he be wise or simple, and no boy was ever better cared for by his parents. We have only to go forward to a letter which he wrote from Dundee, to Charles Hooten, to find this verified by his own pen. "I have lately been reading the Recollections of Coleridge. What a mighty intellect was lost in that man for want of a little energy—a little determination! He was ruined as thousands have been by the accursed aristocracy. I almost cried when I found him saying, that instead of completing, or rather beginning his projected great work, he was obliged to write twaddle for . . . and compose MS. sermons to support his station in society! Alas! that a man with an intellect so noble should have been a slave to conventionalities. *(This had better been written opium).* Had he dared to be poor—had

he known that bread and cheese and water could nourish the body as well as the choicest viands—that coarse woollens would cover it as well as the finest silks—and had he dared to act on that knowledge, how little of his time would it have taken to have sufficed his wants, and how much leisure would he have had for giving shape and utterance to his immortal thoughts! He could not say with Jean Paul, 'What matters, if God's heaven be within a man's head, whether its outside covering be a silk cowl or a greasy nightcap?' And through fear of losing caste in the world—this speck and point of time merely—he consented to forego his 'station' in the world of mind. Oh for an hour of John Milton, to teach such men to act and comprehend!"

Although only published in *Tait's Magazine* in 1836, to the year 1833 belongs the poem of "Auld Andrew Gray," one of the most felicitous descriptions of character that came from NICOLL'S pen. No doubt it is somewhat mannered, and perhaps that fact may have led to its exclusion from the various editions of his works; but the time was when every rural parish in Scotland had its Andrew Gray, and his portrait, as here drawn, is so graphic and lifelike, that it ought to be cherished instead of ignored. "The minister,"

and "the provost," "the dominie," and "the smith," are well companioned by the man who says the grace at burials.

AULD ANDREW GRAY.

A braid blue bannet on a pow
As white as faem or driven snaw—
A cosie coat o' hame-spun claith,
To keep the winter cauld awa—
A rauchan, and a sturdy staff,
O' hazel, frae yon fair burn-brae—
A wee, wee man o' meikle wit:—
And there stands honest Andrew Gray!

A laigh cot-house in yonder toun,
Is douce auld-farrant Andrew's hame;
Nae barn, nae byre, nae nowt has he,
Nor whinging bairns, nor flytin' dame;
Baith tight and right his house and hauld
Auld girnin' Grizzy keeps, they say—
A skilly woman, kent fu' weel,
As sister to auld Andrew Gray!

He's ilk ane's cronie, and a smile
Sae couthie, Andrew likes to see,
And wi' the laird and minister,
I trow baith hand and glove is he;
Yet fient a hair is Andrew proud,
But, in a hamely kind o' way,
He's frien's and mair wi' young and auld—
A' body's body 's Andrew Gray!

Ca' ilka Hansel Monday's feast,
And Andrew fills the arm-chair;
Of ilka kirn the parish ower,
Auld gash blue bonnet aye maun share.

To marriage ploys maun Andrew trudge—
Or wha the sax-ell grace would say?
At screeds o' prayers there's now-a-days
Few hands like decent Andrew Gray!

The BEUK is at his finger ends,
He never text or passage tynes;
And he can sing King Dauvit's Psalms,—
And never read the prentit lines!
When laigh aneath the kirkyard mools,
Some weary death-healed head they lay,—
Sic words o' comfort he can speak!
A leal true heart has Andrew Gray!

Indeed, my auntie Janet says,
(An', 'tween oursel's, she kens fu' weel,)
That, had he, in his learning days,
Been keepit lang aneugh at schule,
To twine his mou', and, gasping speak
Auld unkent words in some strange way,
Few heads wad in the poopit wag,
Like that o' honest Andrew Gray!

Of Wallace wight and Bruce the bauld,
He'll tell ye mony an awfu' story;
And Peden's words, and Cameron's death
'Mang Scotland's muirlands, wild and hoary,
The doings o' the langsyne kings,
That wonned at hame for mony a day
Afore Macbeth and Duncan rang,
Are like his loof to Andrew Gray!

Leal man! when Sabbath comes, he sits,
Like baudrons on the poopit stairs,
Wi' spectacles on 's nose to watch
For slips in preachin and in prayers;
And weel on Monday skelps he those
Wha' mang erastian errors stray—
The neebors ither nudge, and think
John Knox was like *oor* Andrew Gray!

The parish right, frae year to year,
In faith and practice Andrew hauds—
Auld Clootie's back—puir chield!—frae him
Gets in his prayers some fearfu' blaud :—
Whan he amang the yird is laid,
Let it be tauld aboon his clay—
The warld has fewer honest men,
For gane at last is Andrew Gray!

The correspondent named above and referred to so often in Mrs. Johnstone's memoir of ROBERT NICOLL, was Charles Hooten, the author of "Bilberry Thurland," a very clever tale of low life. When it appeared in 1834 NICOLL denounced it as vulgar and formless; but after he went to Dundee a correspondence was opened between him and the author, which continued during NICOLL'S life, and although they never met, they seem to have had a communion of political feeling, a mutual grudge at the men who ruled the country, and the callous public who overlooked the claims of literary aspirants. When "Godolphin, or the Oath," appeared, I had seen a copy in the postmaster's hands, but had misgivings about investing the three half-guineas, and consulted ROBERT NICOLL. He subjected me to the following examination:—"Is it funny?" "No!" "Then it is not Marryat's. Is it vulgar?" "No!" "Then it is not Charles Hooten's. Is it eloquent?"

"Yes! one of the chapters is headed, 'The crisis of a life.'" "Buy it," said ROBERT. He had afterwards seen occasion to change his opinion of Hooten, for he addresses him with the most open cordiality, as not only a Radical in politics, but as a man of cultivated taste and high literary attainments.

The three closing months of 1833 formed an important era in the life of ROBERT NICOLL. Without consulting any of his relatives or friends, he selected what he considered the best of his manuscript tales, and with a trembling hand addressed it to the editor of *Johnstone's Magazine*. After waiting impatiently for a month, down came the October number with "Il Zingaro" in full blaze. He had many misgivings about the tale itself, and about the lofty myrmidons of the press; but when he saw his composition in print, his confidence waxed strong, and the "press-gang" became less dreaded. The opinion of a friend might have gone a considerable way with him, because he thought himself that his tale was good; but to pass muster with the editor of a popular magazine was

"Confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ."

An ardent admirer of NICOLL wrote of this tale many years ago, "Great power and beauty were

felt to pervade this first eventful literary achievement of ROBERT NICOLL,—like all efforts of true genius, however slight and comparatively unimportant they may sometimes appear to the parties themselves, or to others, yet bearing a stamp of power and beauty about them, such as is never seen in the efforts of more ordinary minds."

This tale was followed in November by "Thomas Myddleton, a Legend of the Covenanters," a story full of that cruelty which ever adheres to narratives of violence and conflicting opinion. NICOLL'S legend is wound up with the usual appeal in favour of the oppressed.

"No long time had elapsed after the events above narrated, when Mr. Myddleton fell into the hands of his persecutors, and sealed his belief in the truths he taught with his blood. May their deeds and their example not be lost upon their descendants! They have likewise a battle to fight, though not with the sword. Socially as well as politically society must be remodelled in accordance with the dictates of a stern morality; and if they be not true to themselves, they will deserve and suffer punishment. As we look on our covenanting forefathers, so will our descendants look upon us, *if we enact our parts with equal honour.*"

In January of 1834 appeared "Jessie Ogilvie," a

story which exhibits NICOLL as a young novelist abounding in narrative, but deficient in constructive power. It contains a murder, a suicide, a robbery, a breach of trust, and a case of love disappointed by death; too many incidents for a tale of four pages; but it is written in feeling language, and in design is calculated to show vice and crime as odious, and virtue as the foundation of all earthly success.

These stories were well received by the public, especially that portion of it who knew them to be the production of an apprentice lad, not yet out of his teens. Their author obtained confidence in his own abilities, and although timidity had hitherto prevented him taking any stand as a literary man, he felt now that he was really somebody. On the appearance of "Il Zingaro" he wrote to his brother William in the following courageous terms:—

"DEAR WILLIAM,—I have great news to tell you! About the beginning of last month I wrote a tale for one of my exercises in composition, and as I had bestowed some pains upon it, I was loath to lose it, accordingly I sent it addressed to Mr. Johnstone, for insertion in *Johnstone's Magazine*, and to my surprise it has been inserted in last number,—you will find it on page 106. It is a Radical story; for I wished to tell truth in the

guise of fiction. I have told no person of it but Mr.—— and my aunties, Mary and Christian, who observed,—'Dinna be an author; they are aye puir.' In this world's goods they may be, but they have better riches than these, at least my works will not hinder my riches; for I sit down to write when others go to sleep, or to amuse themselves; and I find myself fitter to do my work after half-a-night's writing, than others after half-a-night's idiotical amusement, or worse debauchery. You must forgive my bad writing, for the sake of a bad pen."

Within six months after the appearance of "Il Zingaro," NICOLL had so gained upon his publisher, that he became in his mind a necessity to the Magazine, and thus flattered, he contributed two papers to the number for May, 1834—one, an essay on John Milton, and the other a lengthy domestic ballad, entitled, "The Beggar's Tale." The latter does not appear in any edition of his poems, because he had resolved that none of "the trash" he contributed to *Johnstone's Magazine* should appear in the edition published under his own superintendence; his editors, although they inserted many pieces which they found in pencil manuscript, conscientiously ignored what he had only negatively condemned himself. But my object being to illustrate the young man's literary

progress, I cannot conform to this very deferential feeling ; besides, there may be indiscretion in publishing what is found in a man's repositories after his death, but there can be none in publishing at this late day, in a narrative of his life, whatever he has himself sent to press, and it is difficult to understand why Mrs. Johnstone, in the absence of the condemnatory letter which lay in my desk, should, as editor of the poet's works, have omitted poems, that she cordially greeted as editor of her husband's magazine.

Milton was one of NICOLL'S favourite authors, not only because he had produced the greatest poem in the English language, but on account of the formidable part he took in politics during the reigns of the first and second Charles. Many will decline to sympathise with him in all he says about these much vexed matters. But Milton was the victim of that tyranny which always wells up in times of trouble, and that was enough for ROBERT. He finishes two of his letters by a prayer—"For an hour of John Milton to teach such men to act and comprehend," and in Dundee he gave a lecture on the great poet, but being carried away by his fervent admiration of the man, his feelings over-ran all that he had written, and though eloquent and convincing at first, he sank

into a labyrinth of conflicting assertions that overwhelmed him and rendered his lecture a failure. He could not reason calmly of Milton, Burns, or Keats. He had studied them deeply and thoroughly, and convinced as he was of the entire justice of the position he had taken up in regard to them, he opened his eyes wide at anything like opposition. Not to be full of devotion to these men, irrespective altogether of any backslidings of which some are disposed to accuse them, was a state of mind which he could not comprehend, and in his speeches respecting them, if he found that he had not the full sympathies of his auditors, he generally ended in a burst of passionate invective. The reason of all this is not far to seek, an exuberance of talent and a great command of language fell to his share, but however much he complained of tyranny, he had not yet been through the world's training school.

In writing or speaking of a great poet there is no necessity for calling up his errors except in so far as they may be found to affect his poetry. This was NICOLL'S feeling in respect to the three poets named above, and he blamed, not unjustly, all those who acted toward them in a different manner. But when he came to write of Coleridge, he says in great narrowness of spirit, "He was

ruined, as thousands have been, by the accursed aristocracy," which was an abuse of his own theory. Coleridge's moral conduct affected every movement of his life; what he thought, what he said, what he wrote, and what he did. And it is exceedingly probable that the very fact upon which NICOLL founded his indignation, may be traced to some mere fiction of Coleridge's brain, for he had entirely lost the faculty of discriminating between truth and falsehood. A man endowed beyond heaven's usual generosity, yet indolent, debauched, false, dishonest, and extravagant, establishes little claim to have his misfortunes attributed by coming generations to any portion of a community, the whole of which could not keep him right.

In the month of June, 1834, immediately after the close of the Perthshire election, NICOLL felt indications of coming illness. His mother attributed these to a struggle he had had with his fellow-lodger, who, either in sleep or drink, attempted to throw himself over the window of their garret room; and she was possibly right. But although he told me of many a merry escapade in that upper region, he never once attributed his illness to anything that had occurred there. Indeed, he said very little to me about feeling ill, and I always thought for the following reason. The

great change from the fresh air of his native Ordé braes to the confinement of the Perth shop, had probably suggested itself, to his mind, as the primary cause of his feeling unwell, while I had lately proposed to him a change, where the confinement would necessarily be greater, and he dreaded anything arising that might be a barrier to his success in life. About this time he learned that Mr. John Johnstone, the Edinburgh bookseller, and proprietor of the magazine to which he had contributed, had been making enquiries about him. This gave his mind a turn towards literature, and, for the time, cooled the political strife that was agitating it too much. To be connected in some way with the Press became his darling object, and, founding on Mr. Johnstone's enquiries, he wrote that gentleman a long autobiographical letter, thinking it might forward his purpose, which it eventually did. The following are the portions of it published by Mrs. Johnstone :—

"As nearly as I can remember, I began to write my thoughts when I was thirteen years of age, and continued to do so at intervals until I was sixteen, when, despairing of ever being able to write the English language correctly, I made a bonfire of my papers, and wrote no more till I was eighteen.

"My excursive course of reading, among both

poetry and prose, gave me many pleasures of which my fellows knew nothing; but it likewise made me more sensitive to the insults and degradations that a dependent must suffer. You cannot know the horrors of dependence; but I have felt them, and have registered a vow in heaven, that I shall be independent, though it be but on a crust and water.

"To further my progress in life, I bound myself apprentice to Mrs. J. H. Robertson, wine merchant and grocer in Perth. When I came to Perth I bought Cobbett's English Grammar, and by constant study soon made myself master of it, and then commenced writing as before; and you know the result.

"When I first came to Perth, a gentleman lent me his right to the Perth Library, and thus I procured many works I could not get before,—Milton's prose works, Locke's works, and, what I prized more than all, a few of Bentham's, with many other works in various departments of literature and science which I had not the good fortune to read before. I was twenty years of age in the month of January last, and my apprenticeship expires in September next. By that time I hope, by close study, to have made myself a good French scholar; and I intend, if I can raise the monies, to emigrate to the United States of North America.

"I do not rate my literary productions too highly; but they have all a definite purpose—that of trying to raise the many. I am a Radical in

every sense of the term, and must stand by my Order. I am employed in working for my mistress from seven o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock at night; and I must therefore write when others are asleep. During winter, to sit without a fire is a hard task. But summer is now coming, and then!

"It may perhaps appear ridiculous to fill a letter with babblings of one's self; but when a person who has never known anyone interest themselves in him, who has existed as a cipher in society, is kindly asked to tell his own story, how he will gossip! To Mrs. Johnstone and yourself what can I say in return for your kindness? Nothing; but if ever I can return you good for good, I will do it."

As the summer wore on, ROBERT did not find his health improving; but, after being some time confined to bed in his employer's house, where he was nursed by his mother, he partially recovered. To confirm his health, Mrs. Robertson granted him leave of absence for a short time, and he turned his face towards his native Ordé braes and his father's cosy fireside. Before many days went round, symptoms of improvement began to manifest themselves, and in loitering amongst the scenes of his early life he gained physical strength and a better tone of feeling; besides, the pastoral life had kept a strong hold of his youthful mind, and this

visit tended much to strengthen it. Go where he would in his short earthly pilgrimage, his heart, in moments of poetical emotion, bounded back to his own hillside. There his tenderness loved to nestle: all his ideal forms, all his conceptions of the amiable in human life, all his impressions of the grand and of the lowly, of the beautiful and of the picturesque in nature, were fashioned in the homes and familiar haunts of his much-loved Tulliebeltane. He studied politics in Dundee and in Leeds, but his poetry was all of Perthshire born.

Although he pursued his present business with honest energy, I felt that his heart was not in it; and in a moment of hearty communion of feeling, I suggested to him that, from his knowledge of books and his business experience, he was well fitted to conduct a bookselling trade. The idea did not seem new to him; but his apprenticeship and want of capital were insurmountable obstacles to his starting any business, and the young grocer did not see his way to get behind a bookseller's counter. Still, the matter was not lost sight of, and, in the heat of the Perthshire election, I said to him, after one of his bursts of indignation against the Tories—"You should go to Dundee: the folks there are of your own kidney." All this resolved itself into a proposal on my part, that if he thought

of starting business as a bookseller in Dundee, I would aid him as far as I could, and introduce him to the principal houses in the trade. His answer was, "I never thought of it, but if I had money I would try it." Before he went home to rusticate for the sake of his health, I made a more definite proposal to him, a part of which was, "Try to raise a little money, and with your knowledge of books you will do very well." Thus we parted, and a week or two afterwards ROBERT came in upon me, luminous as the morning sun, his health restored, his complexion clear and ruddy, his spirits verging to zenith, and the many-pointed Charter apparently buried in Logiebride kirkyard. He at once announced to me that a friend had agreed to advance him £40, and, if I would adhere to the proposals I had made, he would begin business in Dundee. In first talking of this, to him, important step, I offered, amongst other things, to pay his first half-year's rent, if the business did not bring in money fast enough to meet his obligations. This I afterwards regretted, and for a time altogether ceased to urge the matter, because I felt that, if ROBERT agreed and was unsuccessful, I would likely come in for the blame. But this announcement gave me entire relief, as his mother and this friend would not only share in the responsibility of

advising the step, but encourage me in going on to my full purpose.

Mrs. Johnstone states that NICOLL'S apprenticeship "was abruptly terminated by his kind and indulgent mistress sending him home to be nursed by his mother"; but this is not quite correct, as he returned to the business after his sick-leave, and afterwards became very active as a member of the Perth Debating Society, and its greatest ornament. He also composed several of the *Poems and Lyrics*, and read a great deal, but did not contribute any more, during his stay in Perth, either to *Johnstone's Magazine* or to *Tait's*, into which *Johnstone's* had merged. The public now began to speak of him as a poet and advanced politician, but they were slow, very slow, to recognise anything very remarkable in the unassuming grocer's apprentice. One Perth young lady, with more discrimination than her neighbours, asked him to contribute to her album. If a taste for music and powers as a pianist, not easily competed with, can claim affinity with the muses, this young lady's request was natural and fair. The young poet felt it so, and presented her with the following beautiful verses. Simple they are certainly, but their charm lies in that very simplicity. The prayer offered up in

them was genuine, I have no doubt, as words can make thoughts :—

VERSES FOR A LADY'S ALBUM.

"Why write my name 'mid songs and flowers
To please the eye of Lady gay?
No voice have I for Ladies bowers—
For page like this no fitting lay."

Oh ! there is joy in looking on the sky,
When all its stars are out, and earth is dim—
When our wild thoughts are wandering far on high—
When the lone hermit chants his evening hymn.

Oh ! there is joy in looking on the earth,
When decked by summer's hands in robes of flowers ;
A simple joy that always giveth birth—
To peaceful thoughts—to pleasant happy hours.

Oh ! there is joy in looking on the sea,
When with rude vexing storms it hath grown wild ;
And there is joy in looking on it free
From tempests, sleeping calmly as a child.

Oh ! it is joy to hear the summer birds
Sing out their little songs of love and praise ;
Oh ! it is joy to listen to the words
Of one we love—to treasure all he says.

Joy still doth dwell beside a father's fire—
While young and happy faces round are seen ;
Joy, peace ! what greater bliss can heart desire,
Than to repose from toil in such a scene.

Oh ! there is joy in friendship's golden bands—
Oh ! there is joy in pleasure's mirthful hall,
'Twere joy to roam through the south's sunny lands—
But there's a joy far dearer than them all.

There is a joy still deeper far than these—
A joy God's holiest gift to sinful men,

A joy which high and low alike doth please ;
It is to love, and, be beloved again.

It is to live upon the loved one's breath—
It is to dwell within the loved one's breast—
It is to trust, yea, even unto death—
This is a joy that maketh truly bless'd.

These are the joys of earth—these are the joys,
Dear lady I would bid good angels twine
For thee, and far from world's woe and noise—
May heaven, lady, make these pleasures thine.

In these verses ROBERT has gone the world o'er for objects to illustrate the happy life which falls in occasional glimpses on all of us, but when as in the following ballad he turns his thoughts on the utterly-stricken soul, it is all gloom, without the most transitory glimmer to cheer the forlorn spirit. He had schooled his mind into the belief that certain positions in life were necessarily miserable, but in this his colours are too dark ; the most ragged mendicant, the veriest waif that crawls across the face of the earth, has his times of sunshine and shadow, as well as the loftiest aristocrat. The man who gets one bite of the large loaf, shares poorly with him who eats the remainder, still, the quality is the same, it is simply a question of quantity. NICOLL illustrates this in his own case, for he says in one of his letters to his "young correspondent," "I wonder how I bore the burden

—how I did not end the evil day at once and for ever? Pride saved me then, and it encourages me now." Pride saved him from suicide; so his life was not entire shadow, and his "young correspondent" had written volumes to prove that there is often greater happiness enjoyed mending a kettle under a hedge, than sitting in a gilded chariot.

THE BEGGAR'S TALE.

"Oh! do not proudly turn away;
But list my tale of misery:—
Though now my aged head is grey,
I once was young and fair as thee;
But now, alas! I'm poor and old,
A beggar, knowing want and cold.

"Though bent and withered is my form,
It once was straight and beautiful;
This cheek that soon will feed the worm,
Was like that wild red rose you pull;
My foot was light upon the green,
I was the rustic village queen.

"How many nights of dreariness!—
Nights filled with wo, and grief, and care,—
How many days of weariness,
Since then, it has been mine to bear!
What sights those age-dimmed eyes have seen!
What paths those weary feet have been!

"My William loved me tenderly,
With all a young heart's gushing love;
I knew not in that day of glee,
What ills that love for us had wove;
I knew not that wo's clouds would lower,
Because he was both proud and poor.

"He could not cringe, he could not bow,
As lowly men were wont to do;
Manhood was written on his brow—
Man's dignity he better knew.
He scorned the mean, he scorned the slave—
He cursed the tyrant and the knave.

"He was too proud—his speech too free—
For finding favour among those
Who love a lowly man to see,
When lack of wealth his garment shows.
My father hated poverty,
And cursed my William's love for me.

"Oh! he was young—his heart was high,—
Youth's airy hopes are bright and strong,—
He could not bear the scornful eye
That met him all my friends among.
His liberty my William sold,
Through hope of fame, through hope of gold.

"I left my pleasant youthful home;
I left my father's warm fireside;
With William far away to roam:—
I was a youthful soldier's bride!
My father cursed me o'er and o'er,
And on me shut his heart and door.

"A father's curse—a father's curse—
Oh! lady, it is death to hear!
That evil thing wild thought doth nurse—
Thought covered o'er with dread and fear;—
Through circling years of good and ill,
My father's curse has followed still.

"How different were the scenes I saw,
From those my native village showed,
In camps, where force was ever law,
Without the fear of man or God!
Oh! horrid sights mine eyes did see—
Sights full of sin and misery!

" And much of hardship did we bear ;
Both hunger, toil, and cold were ours ;
The waving winds us did not spare,
Nor yet the winter's sleety showers.
It was a harsh and bitter life,
Filled up with wo, blood, pain, and strife.

" Oh ! I have heard the fluent tongue
Tell of war's glories, of its joys,—
Tell of the charms that ever hung
Around its murders and its noise ;
But, lady, ne'er believe again
That joy can dwell 'mong millions slain.

" My William's hopes were withered :
He did not flatter—did not lie ;
And blasted is his hand—his head—
Who pays not these unto the high.
Each day our state grew worse and worse—
Our honesty was made our curse.

" It came at last—the dreadful hour,—
My William on the field was slain ;
I know not how my loss I bore ;
My head is strangely dark since then.
My good ! my beautiful ! my brave !
Upon the red field found a grave !

" Again I saw the village trees :
Again I saw my father's home ;
And he refused me peace and ease,
And told me near him not to come ;
He heeded not my children three,
But bade us houseless beggars be.

" I cared not—I desperate grew ;
And with my babes away I went ;
Alas ! I soon had only two,—
God for the yonngest one had sent.
I wept not for him ; for my heart
Said, 'twas far better we should part.

"The other two—nay, do not weep—
Soon followed him into the grave;
The little darlings calmly sleep,
The sleep that I shall shortly have.
Why weep for them? they are away
From many a weary, woful day.

"Oh! lady, thou canst never know
The hardships that the beggar bears—
The tugging thoughts that burn and glow
Within his heart, far worse than tears;
To live upon another's dole
Is death—is hell—within the soul.

"Oh! lady, by the road I've lain,
With hunger and its weakness sunk;
And those who passed me in my pain
Have said, 'The beggar quean is drunk.'
This is man's boasted charity
To old deserted things like me!

"But now my toil is almost o'er,—
My weary flight is almost done;
I would that I had died before
My thread of life was well begun.
But God is good; at heaven's door
Is asked not, 'Were you rich or poor?'

"Come lady, sit upon this bank,
My eyes are dark, the sun is set,
Bread, did you say? I will you thank—
Perhaps I may grow better yet.
Better! ah, no! feel, feel, my brow,
The hand of death is on me now!"

The lady held the beggar's head,
And looked into her withered face,
And there the colours of the dead,
With fear her tearful eye did trace.
The village queen—the soldier's bride,
The father's victim—there had died!

During the short time that elapsed between NICOLL'S return from the country and the close of his apprenticeship, the Dundee business was often talked over, but never finally arranged. He still hankered after a more immediate association with the press, and entertained confident hopes that his connection with Mr. Johnstone would result in some literary engagement in Edinburgh. But Mrs. Johnstone, notwithstanding the flattering encomiums she lavishes on the poet, tells us, with marked self-complacency, that his *youthful* story of Il Zingaro, had, at her hands, received "honourable and unlooked for acceptance," and that when he had resolved to leave Dundee in search of literary employment in Edinburgh or London, "his scheme appeared to those most deeply interested in his well-being—those who had ever regretted his early abandonment of his own business, and exclusive devotion to literature, as hazardous and hopeless." So that from that quarter little encouragement was likely to come, especially to the scheme he had most at heart. It is very easy, when a drama is acted out, to name the incident that if reversed, would have changed its whole character. But they knew little of ROBERT NICOLL who thought that keeping him behind the grocer's counter would tame his

impetuous spirit. His "exclusive devotion to literature," had little direct influence, either on his circumstances or his health. It was the demon of politics that kept him in constant trouble, and eventually submerged his whole life. His "sage Edinburgh friends" recommended him to the Editorship of the *Leeds Times*, and his wife says, "If Sir William Molesworth had not succeeded, ROBERT would have died on the instant." This was manifestly very kind on the part of the poet's Edinburgh friends, but it was glaringly inconsistent. If the natural tendency of ROBERT NICOLL'S constitution was in any way affected by his connection with literature, it was the literature of politics. The flattering of honest, well-meaning friends, and the serpentine wiles of reckless demagogues led him away from the softer tendencies of his ardent nature, into the arms of a despotic multitude, whose aim was, not so much to obtain the rights to which they might be fairly entitled as to subvert order, and trample on the neck of every man whom they found opposed to them, however conscientiously and temperately his opposition was urged. The last chapter of this memoir will throw some light on the kind of literature that ROBERT NICOLL'S Edinburgh friends

put into his hands, after deprecating the keeping of a bookseller's shop in Dundee.

Unconscious of all this ROBERT went to Edinburgh at the close of his apprenticeship in September 1834, and was received by the Johnstones with unaffected kindness. He was introduced by them to Robert Chambers, Robert Gilfillan, and other literary men of the time, whose society he was the very man to enjoy. But it is a remarkable fact and conclusive of NICOLL'S leaning to politics, that in writing to his parents he takes no notice of "mine own romantic town," although it was his first visit. The towering Castle hill, Arthur's seat, with its craggy Salisbury fringe; the Calton hill, with its monuments and endless vistas; the rugged old town and the placid, rectangular new, were evidently nothing to this northern politician, for he begins, "Edinburgh was a sight worth seeing on Monday last." And why? Because Earl Grey, the Earl of Durham, and Lord Brougham were there. If he had lived to read the book lately published by Mr. Grenville, clerk to the privy council at the time, he would perhaps have modified his opinion of some of these political grandees.

The following is a portion of his letter home :—
"Edinburgh was a sight worth seeing on Monday

last. The streets from Newington along the South and North Bridges, and Princes Street, were crowded, or rather wedged. The whole side of the Calton Hill was paved with people. There must have been 40,000 on the line of Earl Grey's march. I saw him at the Waterloo Hotel. He is a fresh-looking, bald-headed man, with a most determined curled lip. He is not old looking. I thought the crowd would have shaken his hand off. He is a most beautiful speaker. I saw Lord Brougham at the college, and he looks far younger than I thought him. . . . Lord Durham is a handsome man, dark coloured and clever looking. . . . .

"I paid sixpence to see the place that they had the dinner in (the Grey Pavilion); and truly it was more like one of the enchanted halls in the Arabian Nights than anything else.

"If I get a situation I shall write you; but if not, I shall be home on Saturday. Had I been a cloth merchant I might have got a dozen situations.

"I have visited Mr. Johnstone, who has been remarkably kind. I was at tea with him on Saturday. I saw his steam press going, printing *Tait's Magazine*. It is a strange machine; a sheet of paper of the proper size is put in, and comes out at the other end, printed on both sides."

Mrs. Johnstone says, "He returned home it will

scarcely be too much to say—not greatly disappointed in not finding employment. His heart was already placed on a vocation very different from that to which he had been bred; and he might speedily have found what he did not in fact anxiously seek. The pursuit of literature—to be connected in some way with books and the press, were it but to breathe in the atmosphere of knowledge, was his secret and ardent desire. His friends in Edinburgh were, on the other hand, more desirous to repress his literary ardour, and anxious that he should stick to his trade," &c., &c.

But his friends in Edinburgh did not succeed in changing the bent of the young man's mind. Mrs. Johnstone states a great truth when she says he earnestly desired to be connected in some way with books; but this had limitations. As a writer of books, as a reader or buyer and seller of them; but certainly not as a collector. The book collector is a being of a distinct genus. Many men have a pride in amassing books, which they never read. ROBERT NICOLL'S pride lay in reading without amassing.

He came back to Perth, and the Dundee business was finally arranged. All this time I got no hint who the friend with the forty pounds was, and it was not till after I had gone to Dundee and

leased a shop that I was let into that secret. Immediately after I had taken the shop, ROBERT called upon me, and said a friend wanted to see us together. I had not gone twenty steps with him when it occurred to me who the friend was, and as a joke I took the lead of him to his friend's door, up three flights of stairs at 47 George Street. There we found Mr. Thomas Robertson, late draper in Perth, a wealthy, but somewhat eccentric man. Mr. Robertson received us kindly, and after two or three hours conversation and liberal entertainment, he put forty pounds into my hands, which I was to use as in the sequel. What sort of document ROBERT NICOLL gave for that money I know not. I saw none asked or given at the time, and the Nicolls were sufficiently reticent to keep their own secret.

A day or two after the above meeting I went to Glasgow, bought forty pounds' worth of books, paid twenty pounds cash, and had the other twenty charged in account to ROBERT NICOLL, bookseller, Dundee. I also went to Francis Orr & Sons and purchased forty pounds' worth of stationery, arranging the settlement in the same way. These goods were to be invoiced to NICOLL at Perth, and forwarded to Dundee, when notice was sent that the shop was ready.

To A. K. Newman & Co. of London an order for 500 volumes of library books was sent, accompanied by a letter of introduction, and with these houses NICOLL continued to do business while he remained in Dundee. He got 1000 volumes of library books from myself, and as they were of varied character we got a mutual friend to value them, who fixed their price at two shillings per volume, £100 in all. For this I drew upon him at six and twelve months, both of which drafts were duly honoured. We had many subsequent transactions, but of these I shall say nothing. Indeed, I would not have gone so far into detail as I have done already, had it not been that his biographer, who does not scruple to extol the interest taken in ROBERT by his friends in the south, dismisses these transactions in this summary way, "With very slender means—the help of his mother, and some friendly aid and encouragement from acquaintances in Perth, he was induced to open a circulating library in Dundee, a shop was taken in that town, and on this new plan of life NICOLL entered with all the ardour and energy belonging to his character."

"You're the besht man in Perth," arose as a bye-word between ROBERT and me from the following

amusing circumstance. One evening we were passing a whisky shop in the High Street, immediately below the north end of the Watergate, the door of which was a few steps above the the pavement-level, when two gentlemen deep in discussion and deeper in drink, presented themselves on the uppermost step. One of them I recognised as a neighbour who sold Morrison's pills, and was commonly called "Pill Leckie." Before descending they tried to balance themselves, both individually and collectively, and were about as successful as a crow is in trying to balance itself on a telegraph wire. Down they came at last rather lumpishly, but to some extent, still erect. It appeared Mr. Leckie had paid the bill, and his boon companion was grateful to overflowing, and when they had gathered themselves up a little, he thurst his arm up to the shoulder into Mr. Leckie's, exclaiming in tender accents, "Oh! Mr. Leckie, ye're the besht man in Perth!" Mr. Leckie, worthy man, saw no occasion to disown the soft impeachment; but he felt called upon to offer some handsome acknowledgment, and turning round to his crony, with faces almost touching, he exclaimed with grateful cordiality, "Yesh!———and ye're the next besht!" The pair went away about as steadily as we did, for NICOLL threatened to go into convulsions.

"The Perth Union Debating Society," either from ROBERT NICOLL'S frequent absence, or that abating vitality which frequently attends such institutions, began to decay, and before he had finally left Perth, ceased to exist. The members, however, still retained their admiration and respect for their champion, and asked him to an entertainment before he left. An admirer, who was present, still speaks with enthusiasm of his appearance on that occasion. There being no prescribed debate ROBERT'S open nature led him into the depths of his voluminous reading, and he literally deluged them with anecdotes, scraps of epigrammatic poetry, and marvellous tales of flood and field. It mattered little whether he actually joined in the laughter at his own jokes or not, because on these occasions his face was so luminous, and his action so incessant, that by the time he had done, his auditors could not tell whether he had laughed or sobbed, so much were they carried away by the continuous stream of lore which came from his lips, and by the fact that he who was the fiercest in political contention, became in friendship's literary encounter, the best-tempered and most genial of them all.

Whatever may have been the amount of intellect with which NICOLL was by nature endowed, and

however great his self-culture, now that he was going away to Dundee with his books, it was feared that those accomplishments might not stand him in great stead. He was sober and civil, and accustomed to meet the public; but a little more of the spirit of Lackington or Hutton would have been of greater service to him, in his present position, than the eloquence of Sheridan or the patriotism of Hampden or the learning of Samuel Johnson. He seemed to set great store by his liberal sentiments acting favourably upon the politicians of Dundee; but he was warned not to place any confidence whatever in that, but rather, if such a thing were possible with him, to avoid politics altogether. I must not be held as decrying his politics; abstractly, I took little interest in them, but I could not help seeing that they were not only injuring his health, but absorbing the time which he could employ so well otherwise, and which was really all he had. During his stay in Perth I had ample opportunity of studying his character, and remote as the time is, I remember well how the pleasure of hearing him of a morning recite one of his beautiful lyrics, would be dashed in the evening, when I learned that he had been haranguing a batch of Radicals in the Guildhall. Not that I cared a straw who were his auditors,

but so young and so fit for better things, I thought he should not have been there. On parting with him, at the Dundee coach, I ventured a final remonstrative hint, by saying, "I had no hesitation in recommending you to commence business in Dundee; only I regretted this, that you would soon have exhausted the politics of Perth, and we would have got peace of ye; but those of Dundee will last for ever." Nothing daunted, he replied, "Down with the Tories," then from the top of the coach, "Ye're the besht man in Perth."

CHAPTER IV.

Arouse thee, soul!
God made not thee to sleep
Thy hour of earth, in doing nought, away,
He gave thee power to keep.
O! use it for His glory while you may.
Arouse thee, soul!

Dundee, 1834-36.

MAN'S movements in life resemble those of the diver. He disappears in pursuit of his object, and the water bubbles and surges for a short time round the place he has left; but he appears again without moving the tiniest wavelet. ROBERT NICOLL'S associates in Perth made much ado about his departure, but when he went to Dundee no one offered him the right hand of fellowship. Within two months, however, his presence began to be felt, and the little shop in Castle Street became the scene of lively political and literary discussion. Three hundred volumes had been put into circulation, yielding a return of twenty-five shillings per week, and occasional purchases of stationery followed. A new town and a new trade were at first sufficiently puzzling, but as time wore

on he began to get familiarised with both. For some time the business got his whole attention, but when the mental calibre of the man began to ooze out he was asked to Radical meetings and to contribute to the Liberal papers. This brought him into contact with the more intellectual of his own class; but it effectually shut his door against the more aristocratic portion of the community, and this was the rock upon which the Dundee business eventually split. However little, in fairness, a man's politics should affect his business, yet they invariably do so, and in no case was this ever more apparent than in that of ROBERT NICOLL. He was so demonstrative, so straightforward, and so reckless of his own interest, that, come what would, he would mince nothing; and whatever political battle was being fought he was ever forward as a soldier on the people's side—writing, speaking, struggling—all which endeared him to his own friends, but alienated from him, as a business man, a large and influential portion of the book-buying community.

If these memorials tend in any degree to dispel some illusive conceptions of ROBERT NICOLL'S character as a poet, a politician, and a man, they may also in the same degree exhibit him as less amiable, especially to the class of readers who have

been fascinated by the down-trodden, lachrymose, petulant spirit inaugurated by Mrs. Johnstone, and naturally enough, kept up by subsequent writers, who, in the absence of all personal knowledge, have taken their cue from her. This may be matter of regret to the reader, and of reproach to the writer, but in the interest of truth we dare every sacrifice. The poet himself was not only truthful as gold, but despised pretension, and any memoir of him deviating from these first principles cannot be characteristic. If ROBERT NICOLL had been visited by forebodings that at a far distant day the world would be told of his morsels of porridge, and cheese, and bread, and water, of his mother's shearing for £2 to carry her to Leeds to see him in his final illness, it would have hurt his proud spirit, and such vapourings applied to himself would have awakened poignant regrets. So far as the writer of this memoir has known of his own knowledge, and so far as he has learned from others the Nicolls were never in a position so far reduced that they could not command a ten pound note upon an emergency, and at all times keep a table like their neighbours. The wail of regret which has been raised over the poet's early death has been joined in by all who knew him; but these grumblings about misfortune and poverty should

never have been applied either to him or to his family. The traits of character hitherto given of him in this memoir may be set aside as mere matters of opinion; but now we have arrived at the period when his character will be taken from his own pen. His letters to his mother and others during his last illness are full of tenderness; but every sentence of them, though written with extreme caution, shows a lurking suspicion that the end was approaching quickly. Under these depressing circumstances he wrote in a subdued tone, but in a spirit which does him infinite honour as a son, as a friend, and as a man. Still there were bygone times, when the young blood was careering, and the pen dashing on, and when portions of the outer world were scourged with "whips of scorpions." These times claim our present attention, and when we come to the end it will be found that "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

During the winter of 1834-5, and the following spring, many letters passed between ROBERT NICOLL and myself on business and other matters, and in June, 1835, he came to Perth to consult me about the publication of his poems by subscription. His friends in Edinburgh had advised him against publishing, and after his death they exult in that

advice. With me it was very different, for although quite alive to the depressed state of the poetry market, I knew what was in many of the poems, and I also knew what I could do for the book. My encouragings were backed by an order for fifty copies. Without exulting, as the non-contents have done, the subscribers to that first edition may congratulate themselves on their four shilling adventure; for, in the absence of the encouragement they gave to the young poet, many beautiful verses which have delighted all readers would probably never have appeared in print.

The advent of the *Poems and Lyrics* was a busy time with NICOLL. His business, somewhat teasing of itself, must go on. His connection with the Liberal press of Dundee must be kept up, and the political meetings which still hovered on the trail of the Reform Bill must be attended, and speeches made. These pressing matters, little congenial to the writing of verses simple and calm as "incense breathing morn," harassed him, made him write to his friends in curt terms, and deal round about him with pugilistic energy. I had written to him enquiring about the forthcoming book, and referring to a Perth teacher who had been throwing cold water on it. The following is his answer :—

"Have you seen the 'Laird of Logan'? Is it not good? 'Saint Mungo' is exquisite.

"Dundee, Thursday.
(Post-mark, July 16th, 1835.)

"Most witty of Booksellers
and Literary of Librarians!*

"I have received the letter of your high mightiness, and, in answer thereto, I have to say:—Firstly: Damn† all dominies! Secondly: Bless‡ the trade! Fourthly *(sic)*: The prospectuses were horrid. Fifthly: It is to be printed with a new fount of type—never before used—at the *Advertiser* Office. Sixthly: It will be published by W. Tait or Blackwood. Seventhly: It will be done up in Edinburgh in cloth green-waved, with gilt title. Eighthly: I avoid all possible plagiarisms and insert none of the trash I wrote for *Johnstone's Magazine*. All are almost new; some of the songs I think very§ good. The book will be something of the same getting up as 'Modern Voyages,' but neater. Do what you can, my boy, and, if I make five or ten pounds, I will give you a jaunt as far as it will carry us. Shall I dedicate to you? What dedication fee can you allow? I will send you a number of proofs in a day or two.

Go to the Devil!

R. NICOLL.

"Notes critical and explanatory.—* Is it right spelt? †This is swearing. ‡This is not praying. §I am really a modest young fellow.

THE BANKS O' TAY.

"The ship is on its seaward path,
And frae the shore the breezes blaw,
Noo Scotland's cliffs, sae dear to me,
Aneath the wavin' waters fa'.
My hame is growin' far awa',
It lies aneath yon hilltap grey,
Yon last-seen spot o' Scottish soil
That rises on the Banks o' Tay.

"Farewell, ye mossy fountains wild,
That I hae lo'ed sae weel an' lang;
Ye simmer birdies, ye maun sing
To ithers noo your cheerfu' sang.

"And so on.

"Now for a specimen of humour* :—

"I'm either gaun daft or I'm donnert wi' drink,
My head a' is singin', I'm deein' I think.
Whane'er I see Mysie I grane and I grue,
I maybe hae fa'en in love! What shall I do?

"There's joy to the lave, but there's sadness to me——

"The muse has departed, and no longer I can rhyme. Oh dear! Faith, the first verse is not so bad; I'll complete it.

"* Really Mr. ROBERT NICOLL thou art a pleasant gotish."

Mr. James Sprunt, long editor of the *Perthshire Advertiser*, was an early and intimate friend of ROBERT NICOLL; they were born within a few yards and within a few years of each other, and, singularly enough, these two lads who spent their early days on the slopes of the same Perthshire hills, were, each in his turn, promoted to the edi-

torial chair of the *Leeds Times*. Liberalism and literature must be plants of indomitable growth, or they could not survive such violent transmutations. The fuchsia, which grows to a tree in Devonshire, refuses to winter in our northern climate; but the tree of liberty grows everywhere, under very moderate cultivation, and the guild of literature looks for men of mind in every nook and cranny of the earth. The poet writes to Mr. Sprunt, during the progress of the subscription-list, in the following hopeful terms :—

"Dundee, Thursday.

"Dear James,—I have not a single moment of time to spare; but I could not allow the bearer of your letter to go without thanking you and W. M'Gregor, individually and together, for your exertions to forward the subscription. It is doing well in Perth, and, considering all circumstances, I shall have a fair field for my first effort.

"I will not halloo till I be out of the wood, nor sell the bear's skin till I kill him; but I have good hopes that my volume will be a *hit*. I am promised a notice in *Blackwood*, and Mr. and Mrs. Johnstone will do all they can, which is a great deal. Through them I will secure favourable notices from Leigh Hunt and Allan Cunningham in the London periodicals, and from Mr. Elliot in the Sheffield papers. Are not Elliot's poems glorious?—'The Ranter,' and in fact the whole of them. I shall send the

second, third, and fourth numbers of *The Cabinet Library* as soon as possible.

"There will be much in my volume anent auld langsyne and Tulliebelton. I am not one likely to forget such a green spot in memory's waste. There will be one poem or song entitled 'The Toon whar' I was Born,' which I intend to preface as follows :—

'THE TOON WHAR' I WAS BORN.

Inscribed to my first and firmest friend: James Sprunt.'

Another song of mine, entitled 'Orde Braes,' commences thus :—

There's nae hame like the hame o' youth,
Nae ither spot sae fair.
&c., &c., &c.

Again I thank you for your kindness, and thank W. M'G. likewise.—I am, Dear Sir, in great haste,

ROBT. NICOLL."

Those who are accustomed to large transactions will be amused by the solicitude which the poet felt about the fate of his four-shilling volume. The category of favourable reviewers was pleasant to contemplate; but when the time for action came, the impulse went off, and the notices of the unknown poet were in most of these cases either very stinted or altogether overlooked.

The following letter opens up a new phase of the poet's life. Love is understood to be the inspirer of every poet's song. If so, ROBERT NICOLL'S sources of inspiration have been very much restricted by all those who have written of him. Mrs. Johnstone's assertion has been echoed to repletion. The poet was no gay Lothario certainly, but these negative statements should always be made with caution. She says:—"He had also, shortly after coming to Dundee, formed an ardent attachment to a very pretty and amiable girl, who eventually became his wife. This young person, NICOLL'S first and only love, was Miss Alice Suter, the only child of a widow, and the niece of the editor of one of the newspapers to which NICOLL contributed." I am not able to say that Alice Suter was really not ROBERT NICOLL'S "first and only love," because the thing is an unknown quantity; but one thing is clear, she, of all his lady friends, played her cards best.

"Here is the chorus of one of my songs:—

Wi' lairds and lords and sic like,
I'll be nae intermeddler,
Sae lang as a sang I can sing
About Sawney M'Nab the fiddler.

"Dundee, Tuesday,
(Post-mark, July 24th, 1835.)

"Mr. P. R. Drummond.

"Dear Sir,—I send you 'The Banks o' Tay,' and 'What shall I do.' If you please you can say sundry 'auld farrant' words anent them in the *C*, or, if possible, both there and in *the Courier*, or *Strathmore*. Make a job of it now.

"Your journey on the five pounds is devilish good, you should write it out. How would it look, titled, 'Confessions of a man who found a five pound note'?

"I shall send you proof-sheets some of these days. In the meantime I 'opes you are filling your subscription paper. Tom Saunders should have died before he went away to render himself more interesting. A black day it was for Perth which saw him and the illustrious Jabez depart in one vessel. The North Inch groaned and Kinnoull hill held its sides in pain. The water-works wept 'soft tears,' and St. Paul's steeple tied its handkerchief about its waist! That is poetry, a'nt it?

"I'll tell you a story—A countryman passing an Irishman yesterday, who was working at the new Catholic chapel, asked him what building it was. A Catholic chaipel' was the answer. 'Sic a pity,' growled forth the querist. 'A pity!' answered the astonished Irishman, and then recollecting himself he rejoined, 'By my sowle honey, but you and the devil are just of the same opinion!'

"Now I'll tell you a personal adventure, yea a confession, though not a last speech. Like a precious fool as I am, I encumbered myself with two fair maidens in Midsummer market in Perth, and as when the devil finds idle men he sets them to work, he put it into my stupid head to swear to one of them, that I was up to the gullet in love with her. Turn up the 'Holy Fair,' and you will find a description of how I was sitting in the boat after leaving Perth, pouring forth such a flood of nonsense as perfectly astonished even myself. Conscience whispered, 'Take care of yourself, Bob, my fine fellow.' 'Many thanks to you,' says I, 'but I think I can do it without being told—d'ye think I'm drunk?' 'Oh! don't be angry,' says he in a huff, and so left me to my fate. Talking most lovingly as I was, I felt somebody sit down beside me, but never heeded till I heard a smothered laughing going on, after a very high-flown compliment to my fair *inamorata*. Turning round, holy Moses! who should be there but a country sweetheart of mine, who had heard all my fine speeches before. Oh dear! oh dear! I wonder I did not jump into the water. I'll never make love in a steam-boat again as long as I live.

R. N."

NICOLL here pawkily deprecates the fact of his being encumbered with two fair maidens as if he had gone far out of his way, but if I could conjure him up, and present his well-remembered face to these

encumberers, where they are now living, after a lapse of forty years, the meeting could neither be imagined nor described. It is quite impossible that the enthusiastic admiration which these ladies entertain towards the talents and memory of ROBERT NICOLL, could have been inspired without the presence of much mutual affection, aye! that affection which would stultify the assertion, that Alice Suter was his "first and only love." If these averments were calculated to injure the poet's memory, they would never have been made; but so far from that, I hold that he is no poet at all who does not fall in love with every clever, pretty girl he meets, and a poet's "first love" would require to date her attachment from his twelfth year instead of the twenty-first, as in this case.

The following letter, addressed to Mr. Sprunt, unveils, to some extent, the fourth character in this amusing drama :—

"Dundee, 3rd August, 1835.

"Dear Jas.,—Received yours—Book will be out in six weeks more or less. Can't depend to a week on printers however—shall send you proof-sheets shortly. Mean to have a song entitled 'The Fouk o' Ochtergaen!' Och by the powers! Did not think I should have got so many subscribers as you

and W. M'G. have got for me. Tullybeagles and my relations for ever! Oh dear! Kiss the three Margarets for me, and you can pay me when we meet.

The lasses yet! the lasses yet!
Rise up ye loons, ye daurna sit
Around me join ilk voice to mine
The lasses yet! the lasses yet!

"Mean to make the 'Library' (*at Bankfoot*) a present of some books shortly for the purpose of backing your Republicanism and Political Economy. Bought Nelson's pamphlet for the purpose of cutting it up in the *Advertiser*, but it is such horrid stuff, that I could only laugh at it. It was not worth anger.

"You will see a specimen of my reviewing in the *Advertiser* next week, in the notice of the *London* and the *British* Reviews. Some of my songs are to be there too. The third centenary of the Reformation is to be held here in a month. I have written an anthem to be sung at it. It is set to music.

ROBERT NICOLL.

Private and confidential.

"I am to get the offer of the Editorship of an English newspaper in September through Mr. Tait. I don't know if I shall come to terms, but tell you no man whatever till I see.

R. N.

"I have just written out 'The Toun whar' I was Born,' and dedicated to you."

These letters show clearly the hurried and excited life NICOLL was leading. They are, by no means fair specimens of his composition. Robert Burns' letters were written under the impression, that they would at some future time appear in print, but these of ROBERT NICOLL are the mere hurried communings of spirit between him and his bosom friends, infinitely more characteristic and valuable on that account. The last epistle is somewhat involved, but it contains the first suggestion of his occupation of the editorial desk of the *Leeds Times*, and a business-like allusion to his little parochial gallantries. Every admirer of the poet will be glad to see him lifted, by his own pen, out of the lackadaisical accusation, that he, a gifted poet, an affectionate, open-hearted, intelligent young man, should have gone on to his majority, without once falling in love!

About the middle of August I wrote to him that I intended coming to see him on a certain day. The following is his answer :—

"Dundee, 31st August, 1835.

"Dear Sir,—Received yours. Don't come down till Wednesday next, as I am over head and ears

with my 'boke.' It will be finished on this day eight days, and I have 30 pages to write, so you *must not* come till that day, and *must* come on that day, when I will have time to tell you all about it, and everything else. I send a few pages proofs; but *now* I don't wish you to notice as forthcoming, but to try your hand at a review. I shall send you a copy early, and you can have it written by the time the volume comes. I am more obliged to Mr. D. Ross than I can well express; tell him so.

I was over in Edinburgh last week, and passed a day with Mrs. Johnstone, the most glorious woman ever was made! Tait is to publish,—a fine, frank, noble fellow. I have agreed with Henderson & Bisset, Edinr., to do them up neatly, with gilt titles and glazed linings. It will be very neat. I have no time to say more. Doing a little, but somewhat dull. See about 'monish' when you come down. Down with the Lords! I mean to be a general if it comes to fighting. Have you seen a Glasgow publication entitled *The Saut-Water Gazette?* It is edited by Hedderwick and Tom Davidson. I have got a puff therein—Heaven help me! What do you think of my article on the songs of Scotland in last *Advertiser?* Is your respectability greatly enhanced yet? My future signature is to be 'Who?'

R. NICOLL.

"What do you think of matrimony? Are you going to be married? How I shall dance—for of course I am to be there—ye gods!

"I have written an article this week on the radicalism of painting and engraving!

"Bailie Christie is going to be kicked to the devil to-morrow by The Political Union.

"Am selling off Roebuck's pamphlets like *wud*."

The second passage in the above letter has always appeared to me utterly incomprehensible. Thirty pages of lyrics, that are an honour to our Scottish language, written in a week, bespeak a facility of conception and execution that is seldom attained by the most practised writers. The allusion to Mr. (afterwards Sir David) Ross is in reply to a note in which I had stated that he was greatly aiding the subscription.

The review I tried my hand at, but the editor of the *Perthshire Advertiser* (Mr. Alexander Gregor) did not give it a place. Strong remonstrance followed on my part, which led to circumstances that gave NICOLL sincere vexation. The review is too lengthy for insertion here, but the following is its conclusion:—

"We have always been at a loss to guess what Burns meant in the passage in one of his letters, in which he says, 'We have never had one Scottish poet of eminence to make the fertile banks of the Irvine emulate the Tay, Forth, Ettrick, or Tweed,' for, with the exception of 'St. Johnstone's Bells ring bonnie, O,' a ditty of small merit, we have

never seen the Tay even mentioned in song. The minstrelsy of Ettrick and Tweed extends to fifty volumes. The Doon and Ayr are immortalised; the banks of the Clyde are the birth-places of the authors of 'The Flower of Dunblane,' of 'Jeanie Morrison,' of 'Ye Mariners of England,' of 'Tibbie Fowler' and 'Kate o' Gowrie'; while the Tay, the majestic, rolling Tay, has never inspired a single soul or been the theme of one native poet's song.

"The author of the poems under review, who, we understand, is a native of the parish of Auchtergaven, bids fair to give the Tay 'a lift aboon,' and make it known in song.

> 'In youth I love, in age I'll mind,
> The green and bonny banks o' Tay.'"

In compliance with the poet's request, I went to Dundee on the appointed Wednesday. I found him behind the counter; there of necessity, but much too large for the place. "Come away, my old Perth Tory," cried he. "We will teach you a lesson before you get home: you Perthies judge a man as Bonnel Thornton did his puddings, by the quality of the blood, but here we put something to account of the brains!" "What length is the book, Bob?" "Not ready yet, and my muse is worn to the bones, but we'll doctor her up to-night." "Is 'Peter Simple' in," said an old woman. "Indeed it is not," said NICOLL. "If I could turn

all my books into 'Peter Simple,' I would lend them out to-night and shut my shop for a week." "It's a fine book 'Tom Cringle's Log,'" said another. "Aye is it," quoth NICOLL. "Were you not frightened out of your wits when Tom stuck the burning candle into the barrel of gunpowder?"

This cogent style of doing business was suddenly interrupted by a stout gentleman, who had obviously been dining out, walking majestically into the shop. This visitor appeared to consider himself a remarkable man. He took little notice of NICOLL, but made free with some of the customers. The poet seemed rather to suffer than enjoy his presence, and, after several withering glances, he said, with affected coolness, "Mr. Vedder, I am surprised that you should come into a man's shop and annoy his customers." This smote Vedder like a thunderbolt, and, walking up to the back of a little writing-desk which stood at the top of the counter, he viewed NICOLL from head to foot, and, drawing a long breath, pronounced with great bitterness the following pithy reply, "It's your only chance of immortality." NICOLL absolutely roared with merriment, and while the delinquent prophet scoured across Castle Street, he shouted after him, "Come back, Vedder, come back!" but Vedder did not come back. "Immortality reflected from

David Vedder!" said NICOLL, "Capital! It beats blackey who sang, 'You neber get to heben till you jump "Jim Crow"!'"

Attached to the shop in Castle Street was a back room in which the poet usually slept, and there we resolved to spend the night together. After the shop was closed, we betook ourselves to the proof-sheets of the "Lyrics." Many alterations had been made on the margins by NICOLL from time to time, and he expressed very ardent wishes to have the book out of his hands. I still put in a claim for "The Winds," but to no purpose.

About one o'clock in the morning, the books were dismissed. NICOLL seemed, for an instant, relieved, and proceeded to make the bed. That useful piece of furniture consisted of four boards nailed to an equal number of posts, about two feet in height, over which was fixed a piece of an old sail by way of bottom. This piece of sail suggested to me an idea that afforded the poet an endless amount of fun. I drew his attention to it as the source of his inspiration, and that it must have belonged to "The Winklereid" or the "Jenny Diver." I had just turned in, and while ROBERT went to the library with an armful of the books which we had been consulting and discussing, I shouted after him, quoting a favourite author, "NICOLL! 'when

I was on board the Tremendous.'" The books were dashed on the floor, and the poet came rushing into the room, leaping over chairs and stools like a harlequin. Then, fixing his streaming eyes on the bed, he apostrophised it thus—"The Tremendous! Ye gods! My poor bed! I shall date my next letter to David Craigie, 'On board the Tremendous!' I shall write a sea song, and head it 'Written on board the Tremendous!'"

The bed was not made for two, and we had to improvise an alteration, but after all it was terribly uncomfortable. Sleep seemed out of the question, and in fact NICOLL did not appear to wish for it. He would lie perfectly still for a few minutes, affecting to desire sleep, and then throwing his long arms in the air, would exclaim, "Yankee land for me; man, he's a glorious chield old Colonel Crockit—a ripstaver—all brimstone but the head and ears, and these are aquafortis! What a beauty!" I wanted a little rest, and said rather tartly, "These are your old American yearnings, ROBERT. You had better drop them now, and settle down as a contented citizen of Dundee." "Oh, no!" he replied. "I shall be off yet. Have I not written my parting song?" He then repeated with great pathos the following lines:—

Farewell, ye hames o' pure delight,
That I hae lo'ed sae weel an' lang!
Ye simmer birdies! ye maun sing
To ithers noo your cheerin' sang!
Farewell, ye holms—where luvers gang
Upo' the peacefu' Sabbath-day;
In youth I love, in age I'll mind,
The green an' bonnie Banks o' Tay.

The soothing influence of the poet's voice sent me fast asleep, in which he soon joined me, and at seven in the morning I was off to Perth.

A very short time after this NICOLL removed to lodgings in the Overgate.

The little service which I had rendered him at the commencement of his Dundee business, together with the personal attention I had paid him, produced an overwhelming amount of gratitude,—not a blink of sunshine fell on poor ROBERT, but I must share in it. A jaunt together, at his cost, was the form it generally took, after I had forbidden the dedication of his poems to me. At one time the jaunt was to come off, if the poems yielded a profit of ten pounds. At another, in passing through a lane in Dundee he found a five pound note, which he had advertised twice, but no owner had turned up. "You will therefore," says he, "let me know immediately how far it will carry us on horseback, and off we go!" I fortunately temporised, and wrote the poet by next post, suggest-

ing certain physical infirmities which might arise from such a mode of journeying, and enquiring whether it was to form any part of my calculation, that we were to come back. Before I could get an answer a worse difficulty arose, in the shape—not of a saddle-horse—but of a man, claiming the five pound note. NICOLL'S answer was short, "Why did not the ass come sooner? If we had been away I should have been ruined."

We come now to what is by far the most interesting episode in the life of NICOLL. There are few men who, on looking back over the joyous days of their youth, will not find cropping up, shades of agreeable companions, who have long gone to their last account, but whose actions are fresh as the doings of yesterday, because they are the theme of many an oft-repeated tale. This happens to the untutored clown as well as to the man of finished intellect. The halo of fame that surrounds the name of our poet, naturally leads the memory of those who knew him, to every little incident, every characteristic trait, that gave form to his life at the time, and at the end of forty years make up the whole man. ROBERT was so lovable, so clever, so merry, and so affectionate, that to know him was to become attached to him. He attained by his accomplishments, what was worth living for, the

embalming of his memory in many human hearts for forty years, apart altogether from what he has written. Some men of repulsive character have written well, and we enjoy their writings while we forget them as individuals, but in ROBERT NICOLL'S case we cherish every trait. No good feature of his character was neutralised by an evil one. His politics, though somewhat wild and visionary, when closely examined were always found on the side of justice, whatever may be thought of the road he took to reach it. His prevailing error as a world-regenerator lay in his struggling to bring down the great in order that he might raise the lowly, instead of raising the lowly in order that he might humble the great. He wished to destroy one order of the community, before he had fitted another to take its place. The equalising of classes of society by such influences as education was too slow a process for ROBERT'S impetuous will ; he wanted things put right, and at once.

During the printing of the "Poems and Lyrics" at the *Dundee Advertiser* office, NICOLL was introduced to the Reverend Henry Clark, and to him he inscribed his noble lines, "The Bursting of the Chain." Mr. Clark held a temporary appointment as clergyman of a Unitarian congregation in

Dundee, and lived in lodgings with his two daughters. He was a sensible and liberal-minded man, devoted to his family and friends. He had the same political tendencies and aims as his youthful friend, but instead of exhibiting fiery impetuosity such as his, he preferred calmly biding his time. His daughters were not only young, lively, and accomplished, but sensible and discreet, and NICOLL'S introduction to this intellectual family, was the prelude to many happy hours and days. He discussed politics with the father, and poetry with the daughters, occasionally, as he states himself, "pouring forth floods of nonsense" in the shape of love-making. These girls came romping along to Castle Street, and joined the poet in many pleasant scamperings amidst the rocks and wild flowers, that, in those days, were the chief ornaments of the northern bank of the Tay. The only matter in which they had occasional remonstrances with him, was about the decoration of his outer man. A certain bottle-green, swallow-tailed coat, which the poet mounted in Perth, had undergone many vicissitudes, and by the time Mr. Sprunt paid him a visit in 1835, one of the sleeves had separated itself from the main integument, except a very slender connecting portion which still adhered on the top of the shoulder. No chaffing, no gentle reasonings, would persuade

him to have it repaired. He accompanied his friends and visited these young ladies, morning, noon, and night, in this half-winged state, and met all chidings by saying as a deep-meaning joke, "Am not I going to my laird with my *rent* under my arm." The needle was often threaded to mend that rent, but to no purpose; he would break out—

> "Folk shoudna mind the ragged coat, nor yet the horny han',
> 'Tis by the heart the breast doth hap,
> That they should judge the man."

This coat had its day, however, and its successor was introduced by NICOLL to his two lady friends in the following characteristic way. They had got new cloth cloaks of a rich claret colour, and when he saw the tint, it so took his fancy, that he declared, "When I get a new coat, the colour will be like yon," and sure enough he ere long appeared before them in all the consciousness of a new garment, made in the fashion of a surtout, without any back pockets, and of the identical shade of colour he had so much admired. The young ladies affected not to see it, until with childlike simplicity, he turned about, and putting his hands behind him, palm outwards, said, blushing painfully, "See, there's nae pouches in't." The ice was broken, and of course, the coat was duly admired. NICOLL'S friends of

that period will no doubt all remember the claret surtout.

Mr. Clark, like many more of NICOLL'S friends, tried to cool his impetuous spirit, and kept his part stiffly in many royal debates. On one occasion he tried to tone NICOLL down a little by a somewhat lengthy argument against some of his extreme views. NICOLL'S blood flamed up, and, with his teeth firmly set and his eyes sparkling, he commenced a tirade of vehement denunciations,—his body bending forward and still more forward, till at last he slipped from his seat and went down on his knees, all the while emphasising his reply with vigorous blows of his closed hand. Mr. Clark quietly reminded him of his gratuitous eagerness by saying, "What you say may be all very well, but as I am not one of the 'bloody Tories,' you need not thump quite so hard."

A singular feature in NICOLL'S character, and one that has been frequently illustrated during the progress of these memoirs, was his simplicity in everything but politics. The above escapade contrasts strongly with the following circumstance, which occurred in the same family. Mr. Clark had occasion to exchange pulpits for a day with an Edinburgh clergyman, and it was an understood thing that ROBERT was to go on the Sunday to

help the young ladies to entertain the great man. On the Saturday night the girls found difficulty in keeping up their share of the conversation. So they placed the volume of poems, then on the eve of publication, before him, and they were instantly relieved from further talk. But reprisals came, and that speedily. The poems had taken hold of the reverend gentleman, and in the pulpit a passage *apropos* to his discourse occurred to him, and, quite unconscious that the poet was sitting immediately opposite to him, listening eagerly, he pronounced with great pathos the following exquisite verse :—

Arouse thee Soul !
Shake off thy sluggishness,
As shakes the lark the dew-drop from its wing ;
Make but *one* error less,—
One truth—thine offering to MIND's altar bring !
Arouse thee Soul !

All through the first two lines NICOLL had no mental perception of the authorship, but drank in each well-delivered line. Then a faint recollection dawned on him, and, as the preacher proceeded, the scarlet blush mounted to the very roots of his hair. After the service, NICOLL disappeared without going to help the young ladies to entertain their guest, and on the Monday he did not appear until he felt certain that the reverend gentleman had taken his leave. When he came he was gently

upbraided, and asked why he did not come. His answer was short but perfectly satisfactory, "How could I, after yon?"

In narrating the story of the courtship on board the steamer on Midsummer evening, NICOLL acts upon the principle inculcated by Robert Burns:

> "But still keep something to yoursel'
> Ye scarcely tell to ony."

The steamer ran aground a little way down the river, and had to remain there all night, waiting for the returning tide. This gave time for profuse love-making, and the young poet, by his own showing, did not let the opportunity slip. His funning, story-telling, and joking were incessant. He showed great anxiety to ameliorate the stagnating spirits of the gentler portion of the groundlings. One anxious miss enquired of him, "Do you think we shall all be drowned?" He replied, "O, we'll a' be at the bottom soon!" and, turning to his fair companion, whispered, "Deed we're there already." One of our greatest poets says that "the loud laugh" bespeaks "the vacant mind," but this aphorism must be taken with modifications. There is a species of loud laugh which is suggestive of idiocy, but there is another species which shows an appreciative feeling, and is the grateful reward of those who desire

to entertain. A fellow who, after you have told a story worthy of Sydney Smith, looks in your face and says "Is that a'?" should be instantly knocked down. ROBERT NICOLL'S laugh was cordial and unsparingly loud. He wore no "vinegar aspect." The only truly great and good man I ever knew who could not laugh was Dr. Chalmers—who could not even smile. Often have I watched him coming down St. John's pulpit stairs, to see if, in shaking hands with the groups of ladies that uniformly waited to greet him, a smile mantled on his singular countenance. Oh, no! grave as a death's-head, yet the real "human face divine." I once asked his friend, the late Mr. Edie of Eliothead, if he ever saw Dr. Chalmers laugh. I got my answer and a little more—"He was not good at it." In Dr. Chalmers this was an attractive feature, but in any ordinary man it would be simply insufferable. Laughter is an involuntary expression of immediate pleasure or contempt; and if ROBERT NICOLL indulged in it freely, it was never in the latter sense. He censured his fellow-men, but never laughed at them. If his laugh was loud, it was never misplaced.

Through his reckless activity, he frequently let a loop down and then laughed at his own stupidity. When his father and mother went to pay him a

visit in Dundee, he suddenly became possessed of a watch, which, it was thought, had belonged to his grandfather. He was very proud of it, and removed it to and from its well-sheltered fob with as much tenderness as a bird removes her fledgling. ROBERT took his father to a meeting of the Kinloch Monument committee. Mr. Clark was also at the meeting, and an arrangement was made that the father and mother should occupy the son's lodgings for the night, and that ROBERT should share Mr. Clark's couch. Neither of the old people told the girls of this arrangement, but, as they were sitting at supper, in stalked the poet. They felt a little surprised, but not astonished, because his measurement of time expanded when good company and a shut shop supervened. Supper over, and half-an-hour's chat, Mr. Clark conducted family worship, and NICOLL joined in it as if it had been a matter of course. The young ladies were now really astonished, and began to look one to the other; but when the poet drew forth the pet watch and began to wind it up, the climax came. The usually placid faces were filled with amazement. What could it all mean? The truth at last flashed on the unconscious offender, and he endeavoured to explain, amidst roars of laughter like peals of thunder, with interjected exclamations of "You must have thought I

was mad, or drunk at least. Oh! what an ass you must have thought me, to come back here and go on like this." He retired, but echoes of renewed laughter lingered long around his apartment. On occasions like these, poor ROBERT was sometimes observed placing his spread palm on his chest, and his friends were, naturally, solicitous about his health; but he made light of their cautionings. One winter evening he went away home late from Mr. Clark's, the family regretting that his fire would no doubt be out. On enquiring of him next day if he had not got cold by last night's exposure, "Oh, no," he said, lightly. "Was your fire out?" "Oh, yes; I had to take a candle to look for it."

The shop in Castle Street was not forgotten during these outside movements, but correcting and preparing the "Poems and Lyrics" for public approval, absorbed a great deal of time, and thereby greatly lessened the chances of ordinary business. The volume completed, it was sent out quietly into the world, and the edition nearly exhausted; but although the subscription list rendered the publication a safe venture, it did not give the book so great a chance of being known to the public; besides it was rather a tiny morsel to command the attention of the great reviewers. Thus it depended

on its merit alone, and that merit was subjugated by the stiflings of indifference. The author was an unknown youth, and after the death of Byron and Scott, the patrons of verse thought it prudent to rest for a time until the plethora was exhausted.

A poet standing behind his own counter selling his own verses, was abundantly Homeric, but the days of minstrelsy were gone, and the seller of lyrics, however genuine his ware, had no chance with the seller of sail-cloth or calico. Betimes, however, the author became known through his book, and his shop became the resort of the *literati* of Dundee. This was congenial to NICOLL'S tastes, but did not improve the revenue. He was carried, shoulder-high, away into the vortex of radical politics and municipal worry, leaving him little time and less taste for the drudgery of shop-keeping. In this emergency Mr. Thomas M'Cosh, a Dundee tradesman with £300 at command, presented himself, and NICOLL took him into partnership. M'Cosh was an honest, worthy little man, but the business in Castle Street was not susceptible of division, and as the winter wore on it became obvious that some change must be effected or "the ship would have to go into dock." The partners worked well together; the new-comer paying great deference to the head of the firm, in business trans-

actions. He said of NICOLL, "In buying and selling he was like other people, but when any matter of feeling arose, I never saw a young man with so much nobility of disposition." This was finely illustrated in the case of a young customer at the outset of the business. Simple as the story is, it went from Dundee to London, where it slumbered twenty years; thence to Liverpool, where it slumbered another twenty years; thence it has come to me. A young man to whom a book was a precious boon, waited with anxiety the opening of the library at No. 6 Castle Street. Out of deference he allowed a day to pass, then walked in, and having selected a book he laid it down before NICOLL for entry. The youth being unknown to him, the young librarian hesitated for a moment before casting his bread upon the waters, and then he said, "It is customary to leave a pledge for the first volume taken out." "Oh!" said his customer, "I didn't know," then rummaging his pockets he found them empty. Explaining this he handed back the book until he went for funds. "There," said NICOLL, handing him the volume, "take it with you and enjoy it."

M'Cosh attended closely to the shop, and NICOLL finding more time at his command, started a small periodical, but it did not succeed. This

periodical was printed at the *Advertiser* office, to which journal he was a regular contributor, and, as already stated, from that press came the first edition of his "Poems and Lyrics." He was thus a little too much mixed up with it for prospering as an independent business man. All that might have been got over, but from one of the outer ramifications of this printing office, peeped forth a pair of blue eyes that were not so easily dealt with. Mr. Peter Brown was at this time editor and manager of the *Advertiser*. Now this same Peter—who was one of the vainest of men—had a widowed sister, whose name was Suter, and she had a daughter whose name was Alice. To this fair Alice, ROBERT NICOLL was introduced. He did not fall over head and ears in love with her at first sight, but somehow or other he did so eventually, and she became his wife. When he wrote to me on the 31st of August, Alice Suter was not the lady of his heart. Her advent had not yet dawned; but within six months the die was cast. The question put to me in that August letter, "Is your respectability greatly enhanced yet?" is a sneer at Mr. Brown which NICOLL would certainly not have indulged in, if Peter's niece had been his *fiancée*. The question refers to a remark of Mr. Brown's applied to myself.

I was agent in Perth for his paper, and wrote to him that I wished to give up the agency. He remonstrated by saying, "It enhances your respectability to be connected with our paper." The worthy man could not say that it enhanced my income. I resented his nonsense, and our connection ended. Not much in this, if the desire for vengeance had also ended, but Mr. Brown nursed his wrath, and as Alice Suter's courtship progressed, my position in ROBERT NICOLL'S esteem visibly diminished. On the 2nd of March, 1836, he wrote me in querulous terms asking explanations of some accounts that were to be handed over to M'Cosh, but saying little about the approaching dissolution of co-partnery, and nothing of the impending alliance.

I have recorded in explicit and simple terms the starting of the Dundee business, and now the less pleasing task of stating the terms of its abandonment at the end of sixteen months, forms the order of our narrative. The change became so inevitable that little advice was needed, and none of the poet's distant friends were consulted; but his duty to his mother was ever paramount, and he wrote her an explanatory letter. If all the circumstances connected with this letter are taken into account, and especially its being addressed by a Dundee stripling to a humble cottager vegetating at the

foot of the Grampian hills, its extraordinary character will become apparent. It would be absurd to suppose that the writer contemplated its being published at some future day. Yet its deferential tone and set phraseology, its schedule of noble resolves, the conscious feeling of man's great destiny which it discovers, the dauntless spirit in which the writer says he is prepared to meet every emergency of life, render it one of the most remarkable epistles ever addressed by a son to a mother—only surpassed in modern times, by William Cowper's noble lines, beginning, "O that those lips had language!"

"Dundee, February 6th, 1836.

"Dear Mother,—I have just received the box with the articles, and your letter. I entirely forgot to send you a book, but you may be sure of one next time. I send this letter by D. Craigie, and would have sent a book likewise, but do not like to trouble him. Enclosed you will find a number of letters, which I thought you would like to see. Be sure to keep them clean, and return them soon. I shall write you again before going to Edinburgh; and you may depend I shall not give up my shop till I have something certain to compensate for it.

"That money of R.'s hangs like a mill-stone about my neck. If I had it paid, I would never borrow again from mortal man. But do not mistake me, mother; I am not one of those men

who faint and falter in the great battle of life. God has given me too strong a heart for that. I look upon earth as a place where every man is set to struggle and to work, that he may be made humble and pure-hearted, and fit for that better land for which earth is a preparation—to which earth is the gate. Cowardly is that man who bows before the storm of life—who runs not the needful race manfully and with a cheerful heart. If men would but consider how little of real evil there is in all the ills of which they are so much afraid—poverty included—there would be more virtue and happiness, and less world and mammon-worship on earth than there is. I think, mother, that to me has been given talent; and if so, that talent has been given to make it useful to man. To man it cannot be made a source of happiness unless it be cultivated; and cultivated it cannot be unless I think little of labour, and much and well of enlightening and purifying the soul. This is my philosophy, and its motto is—

> 'Despair, thy name is written on
> The roll of common men.'

Half the unhappiness of this life springs from looking back to griefs which are past, and forward with fear to the future. That is not my way. I am determined never to bend to the storm that is coming, and never to look back on it after it is past. Fear not for me, dear mother, for I feel myself daily growing firmer, and more hopeful in

spirit. The more I think and reflect—and thinking, instead of reading, is now my occupation—I feel that, whether I be growing richer or not, I am growing a wiser man, which is far better. Pain, poverty, and all the other wild beasts of life which so affright others, I am so bold as to think I could look in the face without shrinking, without losing respect for myself, faith in man's high destinies, and trust in God. There is a point which it costs much mental toil and struggling to gain, but which, when once gained, a man can look down from, as a traveller from a lofty mountain, on storms raging below, while he is walking in sunshine. That I have yet gained this point in life I will not say, but I feel myself daily nearer it. I would write longer, but have no more time, and must stop short in the middle of my letter. We are in the shop much as usual. Hoping my father will get better soon, I am, dear mother, your son,

ROBERT NICOLL."

This manly letter is valuable in many points, as illustrative of the character of the young poet, political economist, and theologian. The current of underlying faith in the indefeasible immortality of man, as the inciting motive of hopeful progression, and the deep sense of dutiful fidelity displayed, where display could have no object beyond his parent's eye and heart, added to gifts that shone more illustriously in the eyes of the outer world,

show the writer to have been no ordinary man. From the date of this letter ROBERT NICOLL became a changed man. All the lively *rollick* went out of him. The merry, fond, companionable, young poet, merged at once into the grave, abstracted philosopher. This will be obvious to the readers of this memoir. The change must probably be attributed to one of three causes, either to the prospect of leaving all his youthful associates, or to his engagement to a fragile young woman, whose mother was to become a burden to him, or to the ever-recurring pain and lassitude which he felt in the region of the chest. To one or other of these causes, or perhaps to them all combined, must be imputed the great change which will henceforward appear in the character of ROBERT NICOLL.

This change in the poet's bearing is little to be regretted by the outer world, because his correspondence assumed a much higher tone, and the poems he afterwards wrote went farther to establish his fame than those he had previously written. He was on the eve of venturing a great stake in the world, and he felt that his sayings and doings must now be wary and circumspect. Charles Hooten, to whom I have already referred, was at this time living in London, engaged in literary work. By

some chance, a copy of NICOLL'S poems came into his hands, and they so fascinated him that he eagerly desired a knowledge of the author. He wrote to a mutual friend, making enquiries respecting NICOLL'S character, and whether he was steady and in a fair position. This came to NICOLL'S ears, and his admirer was not long kept in suspense. He wrote the following highly characteristic letter to him at once, and thereby opened a correspondence that continued as long as NICOLL lived. Confident in his own powers, and always daring in literary matters, he thus dashed at once into a correspondence with a young man who had been three years before the world, as the author of a popular and clever novel. Every letter which he received in answer from Hooten, before leaving Dundee, was carefully preserved, and it is to be regretted that they seem now to be for ever lost. In the absence of these replies I give without break or comment, a series of excerpts from NICOLL'S letters, written during the last three months of his residence in Dundee.

"You are right in thinking that I would honour you for being anxious to know whether I was steady or not; and I am happier than I can well express to find that in you I have not only met with a man of undoubted genius, but with a man

who likewise knows what is due to that genius, who knows how to respect himself, and disdains to sully the light which God has kindled in his soul by the unholy and accursed fumes of vice and immorality. I fervently hope that the time has for ever gone by, when genius was considered an excuse for evil, when the man who could appreciate and express the beautiful and true, was supposed to be at liberty to scorn all truth, and all beauty, mental and moral. Our influence on mankind may be small, but it will ever be exerted to purify, and better, and enlighten. The time has come, the day of human improvement is growing to noon, and henceforth men with free and disenthralled souls will strive to make them, in very truth, 'a temple where a god might dwell.' If the men of mind would but join to intellectual power more single-mindedness and purity of heart—if they would but strive to be morally as well as intellectually great, there would be fewer complaints against man's proneness to mammon worship. The only legitimate power in sublunary things, *Mind*, would, as it should—aye, and as it will, if men be true to themselves—have its due influence and honour. Literary men, too, now begin to see the power and glory of their own mission; and this is both an omen and an earnest of much good. Oh, for a man like old John Milton to lead the way in moral and intellectual improvement, to moral and intellectual light and glory!"

"Of the butterflies who have degraded literature

by their evil ways, until it has become something almost to be scorned, and who have made one branch of it—namely, poetry—to be regarded *not* in the light of a God-given gift for blessing and hallowing earth, and man, and nature, but as something for the amusement of fools and the eulogy of knaves,—of those creatures who lie below contempt were their doings not so mischievous, you need entertain no fear."

"Time has made my heart firmer, adversity has knit me to endurance, and prepared me to meet all fortunes, if not smilingly, at least carelessly. You cannot feel thus, but I do. What makes the difference? I will tell you, Charles. I am a younger man than you, but my struggle began earlier. From seven years of age to this hour, I have been dependent only on my own head and hands for everything—for very bread. Long years ago—aye, even in childhood—adversity made me think, and feel, and suffer; and would pride allow me, I could tell the world of many a deep, deep tragedy enacted in the heart of a poor, forgotten uncared-for boy. Have you ever known those

> 'Tortures the poor alone can know,
> The proud alone can feel?'

I hope not; for callousness to the world and its ways is too dearly bought by such suffering. I have known it, aye, to my heart's core; and while the breath of life is in my body, I can never forget. But I thank God that, though I felt and suffered,

the scathing blast neither blunted my perceptions of natural and moral beauty, nor, by withering the affections of my heart, made me a selfish man. Often when I look back, I wonder how I bore the burden—how I did not end the evil day at once and for ever. Pride saved me then; and it encourages me now. Is it to be borne, that while the selfish, mean-souled, grovelling multitude toil and win, the true soul and the brave heart shall faint and fail? Never! Though disdaining to use the arts and subterfuges by which others conquer, the time comes for work, and, if the man be ready, he takes his place where he ought. Of myself and the little I find time to do, truly I can say—

> 'One boon from human being I ne'er had,
> Save life and the frail flesh covering
> With which 'tis clad.'"

"What you say of newspaper-writing is true—true as truth itself; but you forget one part. It would, indeed, be hangman's work to write articles one day to be forgotten to-morrow, if this were all; but you forget the comfort—the repayment. If one prejudice is overthrown—one error rendered untenable; if but one step in advance be the consequence of your articles and mine—the consequence of the labours of all true men, are we not well repaid? Whenever I feel despondency creeping upon me—whenever the thought rises in my mind that I am wasting the 'two talents' on the passing instead of the durable, I think of the

glorious mission which all have who struggle for truth and the right cause; and then I can say—'What am I that I should repine? am not I an instrument, however unworthy, in the great work of human redemption?' Would to God, dear Hooten, we had a press totally free; for then men would dare to speak the truth, not only in politics but in literature. Is truth never to have fair-play in the fields of literature, where all should be her own?"

"Amid all this world's woe, and sorrow, and evil, great is my faith in human goodness and truth; and an entire love of humanity is my religion. Whether I am worthy of becoming the object of such a friendship as I would wish to inspire, it becomes not me to say; but this much I may hazard, that in my short course through life—for as yet one-and-twenty is the sum of my years—I have never feared an enemy nor failed a friend; and I live in the hope that I never shall. For the rest, I have written my heart in my poems; and rude, unfinished, and hasty as they are, it can be read there. Your sentiments on literature—the literature of the present day—are mine. I have long felt the falsehood, or rather the want of truth, which pervades it; and save when, like Falstaff, seduced by evil company, I have been a worshipper in Nature's temple, and intend to be so. But I must tell you what sort of an animal bears the name of ROBERT NICOLL. Don't be alarmed; I mean not to 'take my own life,' just now. I was

born in a rural parish of the Scottish Lowlands. I commenced hard work at eight years of age ; and from that day to this I have struggled onward through every phase of rural life, gathering knowledge as I best could. Here I am, then, at twenty-one, drunk with the poetry of life, though my own lot has been something of the hardest ; having poured from a full heart a few rough, rude lilts, and living in the hope of writing more and better. A Radical in all things, I am entering into literary life, ready and willing to take what fortune may send—

'For gude be thankit, I can plough.'

I do not rate my published volume too highly, for I know its defects ; but I think that by keeping to Nature—to what Wordsworth has called the 'great sympathies'—I shall yet do better. If I do not, it shall not be for want of close, strict, untiring perseverance, or single-minded devotion to literature."

The troublous spirit in which these passages are written, demonstrates clearly the irritated state of the poet's feelings at this particular time ; and it was, no doubt, more for the purpose of ventilating that irritation, than of laying before his friend a candid summary of his early experiences, that they were written. This fact would be of little moment, but unfortunately it is upon these passages that Mrs. Johnstone has founded her theory of his early

life, and these, together with what she knew personally of his two last melancholy years, have led her into the sorrowful vein in which her memoir of NICOLL is written. No amount of enquiry, no carefully graduated comparisons, which I have been able to institute, would satisfy any unprepossessed mind that ROBERT NICOLL was either serious or justified in framing the mysterious catalogue of evils which he here says beset his early days. Those that he does name, such as being self-dependent from boyhood, and neither petted nor regarded as a phenomenon, are the common fate of nineteen-twentieths of the human family. Many noble sentiments are expressed in these letters, but the writer fell into the common error of allowing what was present to tincture what was retrospective.

As the spring of 1836 wore on, ROBERT found that in domestic matters he was gradually becoming less able to bear the pressure from without. The business was not equal to the drainings of two partners, even in the busy season of the book trade; and now that the summer was approaching, when people read less, the prospect was very disheartening. This, added to the precarious state of his health, filled his mind with anxiety, and made him exclaim, "I wish the world were at the devil altogether!" His Dundee

friends urged a trial of the outer world, and thus beset, the poet announced to his partner his resolution to leave the business altogether, and to cede his interest in it to him.

The remaining member of this not over-rich firm carried on the business for a few years under the style of "Nicoll & Co.," but he was little qualified for it, and did not prosper. He was bred a tailor, and had made a little money, which he contrived to lose among the books. His connection with ROBERT NICOLL induces me to give the following characteristic particulars of his connubial and financial affairs. He lived away up behind the Dundee Academy, in a place called "Paradise." His wife died there in 1837, and in writing me of her death, he winds up thus—"But she died in Paradise, and I couldna help it." During Mrs. M'Cosh's illness she was attended by her aunt, who, as sometimes happens, was the younger of the two. Early in 1838, Thomas gave me to understand that he was, once more, about to enter the bonds of holy wedlock, and that he desired my presence at his marriage. The following was my invitation :—

"Dundee, 2nd May, 1838.

"Dear Sir,—If I had nobody more troublesome than you, I might move on without much cause of

complaint. However, for the present, I am resolved to be a little troublesome in return. If you have no further word from me before Monday first, then I will expect you in Dundee on that day as early as you like, but not later than three o'clock P.M. And remember the office of best man is reserved for you, so you must not disappoint us. If anything of importance should detain you, please send us word in time.—Yours most respectfully,

"THOMAS M'COSH."

On the evening of Saturday, the 6th of May, after I had gone to bed, my door bell was rung, and a message delivered that a gentleman wanted to see me immediately at the George Hotel. I made all despatch, and bundled across the street; when who presented himself to my astonished vision but the illustrious bridegroom! "Hillo, Thomas! how are you here?" "Oh, I'm in great trouble, and have just come to get your advice!" "What is wrong?" "I canna get a minister in a' Dundee to marry us." "How is that; are you regularly proclaimed?" "Oh aye, but the bride is my last wife's auntie, and they say that according to Scripture a man and his wife are one flesh, and that a man cannot marry his auntie!"

M'Cosh found there was nothing for it but to submit, which he did with a bad grace. He held on to the business for another year, but an accumu-

lation of evils beset him, and he sent a peremptory message for me to come to Dundee at once. On overhauling matters, it appeared to me that there was nothing to prevent him going on ; and he promised to take courage, and meet his difficulties manfully. When lo! next morning's coach brought me a packet of large dimensions and portentous look. This turned out to be a trust disposition of his effects in my favour, accompanied by an announcement that he had "left Dundee for ever." The estate paid 12s. 6d. per pound ; and, after an absence of four years, Thomas returned to Dundee with his *auntie* as his wedded wife. He came to ask me to help him to start a lodging-house, but I did not see my way to do it ; and so I lost sight of the inexplicable, but honest, good-hearted, little man.

Ever since the time that ROBERT NICOLL whispered to his friend James Sprunt, that he was arranging for the editorship of a newspaper, his steps were eagerly bent towards that office, not so much as a desirable position, but as a means of earning an honest livelihood. It therefore became obvious to him that he must go south, as there appeared no opening for him in Scotland. He wrote to Mr. Tait of Edinburgh, seeking his counsel, and proposing to go at once to London in search of

literary employment. Mr. Tait, knowing as he did the state of NICOLL'S health, strenuously opposed such a hazardous step, and with characteristic kindness offered him employment in his own business until something more suitable offered itself. Two months after he left Dundee, he wrote to his correspondent Hooten, giving a full explanation of his movements:—

"Parkside, Edinburgh, June 11th, 1836.

"The last time I wrote I expected to have by this time been with you at Nottingham. But when I came to Edinburgh on my way to Hull, I found Tait and all my other friends decidedly against my going to London without some certain employment before me. At last, to keep me here, Tait offered me some employment in the meantime until I can get an editorship of some newspaper, which I have no doubt will be shortly. The moment I get a newspaper, I mean to take a fortnight of leave of absence, and bend my way to Nottingham. Perhaps staying here was the better way after all. I have present employment at least; and my prospects of succeeding shortly are good; while London was all chance. Succeed or fail, sink or swim, I wish the world were at the devil altogether; 'tis nought but toil and trouble, — all weariness to the flesh, and double weariness to the spirit. Nevertheless, it would be cowardly not to fight our hour; and we must therefore do our best

till the tale be told—the song ended—the bond sealed—the game, which men call life, played: so be it!

"The sentence I liked best in your last letter was that which closed it; and I liked it, *not* because it contained your approbation of something of mine, but because it told me you had found a woman to love and to be loved by. You must be happy. I ask not, I care not, if she be beautiful, accomplished, or wealthy—for these I care not; but I *know* that she must have a noble heart or you had never loved her."

If NICOLL'S own position is set against the logic of this letter, it will appear somewhat anomalous. He was under an engagement to be married, and the natural conclusion is, that he had himself "found a woman to love and to be loved by," yet he is cursing the world, as the result of his own experience, while he tells his friend, "You must be happy." There is obviously something wrong, either in the position or in the logic.

A glimpse of sunshine broke over NICOLL'S jaded spirits during this probationary stay in Edinburgh: he was introduced to the Howitts. This he had anxiously desired, but little expected so near home. When his tale "Jessie Ogilvie" appeared in *Johnstone's Magazine* for January, 1834, it was followed by Mary Howitt's exquisite ballad,

'Bonnie Tibbie Inglis"; and even to appear in juxtaposition to such a simple yet highly-finished and beautiful lyric, and one so much in accordance with his own taste and feelings, gave him much real satisfaction; and now, to be introduced to its veritable, living authoress, was an event in his life as a poet. Three verses chosen from this charming ballad will show to those who have not read it how likely it was to captivate ROBERT NICOLL:—

Bonnie Tibbie Inglis!
Through sun and stormy weather,
She kept upon the broomy hills
Her father's flocks together.

Bright and witty shepherd girl!
Beside a mountain water,
I found her, whom the King himself
Would proudly call his daughter.

And many hours we talked in joy,
Yet too much blessed for laughter;—
I was a happy man that day,
And happy ever after!

NICOLL enjoyed much of the society of the talented and amiable pair during their short summer visit to Edinburgh. Towards the end of July, Mr. Tait obtained for NICOLL the editorship of the *Leeds Times*, with a salary of £100 a-year, which, though only a minimum of encouragement, was considered a maximum where hope was deferred. ROBERT'S

spirits mounted, and he set off forthwith to Tulliebeltane. Every movement of his life must be fully laid before his parents; and now that he was able to justify his leaving Dundee, he hastened to do it to those whom he held in imperishable esteem. This was his last visit to his native parish, and although it was paid under cheering circumstances, the poet felt depressed as he gazed on the scenes of his boyhood, now so much changed. "Our Auld Hearthstane," "My Grandfather," and "Home Thoughts," had their origin in this visit, and many more home yearnings, which cannot now be traced. He also visited Dundee, and laid the prospect of his amended fortune before his affianced bride. Returning to Edinburgh, he took farewell of his friends there, and within a week was off to Leeds. His services to Mr. Tait enabled that gentleman to furnish means for superseding the claret *surtout*, which now, imperceptibly to its wearer, had decayed both in texture and fashion; and with a fresh outfit, and in good spirits, the Scottish poet and English politician started on his last onward journey.

CHAPTER V.

Leeds—1836-37.

The braw fouk crush the puir fouk doon,
An' bluid an' tears are rinnin' het;
An' muckle ill an' muckle wae
We a' upo' the earth hae met.
An' Falsehood aft comes bauldly forth,
An' on the throne o' Truth doth sit;
But true hearts a'—gae work awa'—
We'll mak' the warld better yet!

"THE LEEDS TIMES" was in 1836 a weekly paper of large dimensions. It circulated among the Radicals of the West Riding, and had an issue approaching two thousand. During NICOLL'S short editorial career it reached upwards of three thousand, and now, in 1877, I understand it claims a circulation of thirty thousand. ROBERT NICOLL was no stranger to the feelings of the working classes; and when he sent abroad his determination to work in their cause, they rallied round him, and before he had been three months in Leeds, his presence was felt as an available power, ready for any emergency,—either to support with willing hand the ever-

clamorous masses, or to unveil and denounce that class of society which, rightly or wrongly, they considered their natural enemies. Before these three months were quite over, however, the young editor's besetting weakness began to manifest itself, and he wrote to his friend Mr. Johnstone that he was suffering from a severe cold.

It were very easy to say that the poet's friends in Edinburgh, who had, by their own showing, studied his idiosyncrasy so deeply, ought not to have sent him into the very vortex of ultra-Radicalism, where they knew his vehement spirit, and conscious feeling of right, would throw him head-foremost into the arms of a democracy, who in their demands are reckless and never-sparing. But what were they to do? He must be allowed to earn his bread. The way he was doing it was of his own choosing, and he made it no secret that he was not to be controlled. *The Times* was prospering apace, and its editor was no stranger to the golden opinions he was coining for himself. His temperance in what he ate and drank was of the most stringent character, but he seemed to overlook the fact that excitement caused by what a man says, tells on the constitution with far greater force than that caused by what he eats and drinks. To be continually in the face of a battle of opinion during

the day, leads to feverish nights and sleepless mornings, and ROBERT NICOLL felt the truth of this. What is still more surprising, he was fully aware of the state of the constitution with which he was tampering. He told his mother in one of his letters that to him had been given talent, and that he could not serve God better than by making that talent useful to his suffering fellowmen. This is true under obvious restrictions. A man is called upon to save his friend from drowning, but he is not called upon to plunge recklessly into the sea for that purpose.

In October NICOLL wrote to his brother William, who was an apprentice with Mr. Robertson, whose money had been the cause of so much trouble :—

"You see I am speaking boldly out, and the people here like it ; and the proprietor of *The Leeds Times* is aware that it is to my exertions he owes the wonderful success of the paper. We are near 3000, and increasing at the rate of 200 a week. We are beating both Whigs and Tories in Yorkshire rarely. I am engaged on a long poem just now, which will be by far the best thing I have ever written. It is founded on the story of Arnold of Brescia, which you will find in Gibbon, about the year 1150. Read it ; you will see what a glorious subject it is. Was not yon a glorious dinner at Halifax? It made the souls of the aristocracy

quake. The Howitts, William and Mary, are living in London. H. was at their house with a great company of literary people, among whom the conversation fell on myself. After praising my poetry as first rate, what think you was the compliment Mary Howitt paid me?—why, that I had 'the finest eyes (ye gods and little fishes!) she had ever seen'! Now, she had seen the eyes of Southey, Moore, Campbell, Wordsworth, in short, she has seen the eyes of all the prosers and poets of the age—and mine the finest! But, as Solomon says, 'all is vanity.' Cunning chap, that Solomon!

"P.S.—I like Hobson very much. He never sees the paper till it is printed. I mean to have a higher salary, though. *The Perth Chronicle* won't do unless they speak up. What's the use of mumbling?"

The poem on Arnold of Brescia above referred to has never been recovered, not even a fragment of it. I think it likely that, although it had been preserved, it would have added little to the poet's fame; for it is utterly impossible that a mind so strained with ever recurring political contentions, could so far forget current events as to be able successfully to grasp such a wide-spread and lofty subject. The bustle of active life is rather favourable to the composition of short lyrical pieces like those produced by ROBERT NICOLL; but a poem on the subject of Arnold of Brescia,

required a concentration of dramatic power, and an unbroken current of thought that no man engaged on a public newspaper could possibly command. Some of the very best of NICOLL'S minor pieces, were composed about the date of the above letter, and as evidence of haste, were written in pencil.

His correspondent, Charles Hooten, had been appointed editor of a Whig agricultural paper in one of the eastern counties, which increased the friendly feeling that had so long existed between them. NICOLL writes him on the occasion, and tenders some friendly advice :—

"I see you are beginning to tell me that I now see the truth of what you told me of the world's unworthiness; but stop a little, I am not sad as yet, though a little tired in spirit at being, as it were, bound to the wheel, and hindered in a great degree from those pursuits that I love so well; and with which I hoped to have entwined my name. But if I am hindered from feeling the soul of poetry amid woods and fields, I yet trust I am struggling for something worth prizing—something of which I am not ashamed, and need not be. If there be aught on earth worthy of aspiring to, it is the lot of him who is enabled to do something for his miserable and suffering fellow men; and this you and I will try to do at least. Let us not complain.

"Your first number is excellent. You are sure

of success; but a word in your ear, give fewer extracts from the papers and more news—you will find this advice worth attending to. You will get *The Times* regularly. It is succeeding gloriously. The circulation is now at 3000 a week, and it is still rising rapidly. Don't I give the pure doctrine? The truth makes people stare, and buy likewise; so 'tis both pleasant and profitable.

"How do you get on with Tait? Did he not pay me a compliment last month by dubbing me the Ultra-Radical, and writing up the mongrel Tory-Whig *Mercury* as the Radical? However, it is all fair; but had *The Times* been in need of a puff, it would have been *darned*. How is E.? I trust well and happy. And now for a secret: I am going down to Dundee next week to be married! Ye gods and little fishes!"

Hooten took office under restriction. The paper had hitherto been in the interest of the Whigs, and the proprietors had no intention of making any change, and cautioned their new editor. He had strong Radical tendencies, however, and was gradually running the paper into more extreme politics. His proprietors remonstrated, and the proud-spirited editor threw up his appointment. Who but such headstrong politicians as these would deny to the proprietor of a newspaper the right of protecting the character of his paper? Yet NICOLL'S friend had his conduct

approved of by him, in terms that are little calculated to raise either of them in any man's esteem. A man who wants in fairness to protect his own property is not necessarily a "brute." ROBERT wrote Hooten in the emergency in the following flattering terms, and this letter, so far as is now known, ended their correspondence :—

"You have done right. Whatever may be the consequences, you ought not to have submitted for an hour. There are always plenty of slavish souls in the world, without breaking into the harness such a spirit as yours. Had you asked me for my advice, I would have bidden you do as you have done. The brutes among whom you were placed would soon have broken your spirit, or, by constant iteration, swayed you from the right. Keep up your spirits. You are higher at this moment in my estimation, in your own, and in that of every honest man, than ever you were before. I trust it is not in the power of disappointment and vexation to bend such a soul as yours. Tait's advice was just such as I would have expected from him —honest as honesty itself. You must never again accept a paper but in a manufacturing town, where you can tell the truth without fear or favour, and that you will not be long in finding a paper suitable to you, I am certain. You are now known, and I defy the world to keep down one like you. Tell E. from me to estimate, as she ought, the nobility and determination of the man who dared

to act as you have done. Prudent men may say that you are hasty, but you have done right, whatever may be the consequences."

The winter of 1836-7 set in severely, and as ROBERT NICOLL had not yet quite thrown off the severe cold of September, he was counselled to keep within doors as much as possible, until the spring of the year, when he might venture on a change of air. This was little suited to his impetuous spirit, and in lone hours his heart bounded back to the land of his birth, and his happy hours among the broom on "bonnie Ordé braes." Many cheerful and many despondent verses came from his pen during these quiet hours; but the business of the paper, as it extended in circulation, absorbed the more valuable of them. When he came to his still, peaceful lodgings from the noisy office, he felt relieved, but jaded and careworn, and anything requiring either mental or physical exertion had to be reluctantly postponed. In spite of all these cautionings, and regardless of the severe cough which harassed him, he made an appointment with his intended bride to be with her in Dundee on a fixed day, in the heart of a snowy December. Outside of the mail-coach to Hull, thence by steamer and stage-coach to his destination, did this devoted lover and overtasked poli-

tician go to perform a duty which he had undertaken, and longed to discharge. His parents were waiting, and saw the marriage ceremony performed. Whether NICOLL'S mother had any misgivings as to the propriety of this union I am not prepared to say, but to me and many more it bore a conflicting aspect.

In telling the truth, I may incur blame for dispelling, in some degree, the romance with which Mrs. Johnstone has festooned the poet's marriage. But there were circumstances connected with it that told unfavourably on his feelings, and gave colour to his latter days, which must be explained. I have been asked how NICOLL could be consistent in his bewailings about "R.'s" money, when, before attempting to pay it, or to relieve his mother of her responsibility, he set up an establishment in Leeds, and carried two ladies to it from Dundee, one of whom had shown habits little consonant with his limited resources. We have already seen that when he left Dundee himself, he was quite unable to discharge the debt that troubled him so much; but it is not so easily seen how a man of his probity, sound feeling, and independent mind should lose sight of a bemoaned responsibility and rush into another. That his feelings went with the marriage cannot be doubted; but they had been

nursed in such a way as few men, poetic or prosaic, are proof against. Mr. Peter Brown and Mrs. Peter Brown thought it expedient that their sister, Mrs. Suter, and their niece, Alice Suter, should be in some way provided for, and there is more than one person alive who can tell of the soft strategy employed by the four to gain for Alice Suter the affections of the young and susceptible poet. They succeeded, and the result is seen. He was the last man to flinch a responsibility, and when he undertook one by marrying Alice Suter, his sense of duty as well as his affections made him the best of husbands, and secured for him the devoted attention and fond sympathy of her he had made his wife. If these statements require corroboration, it will be found in the fact that Mr. Brown, who was editor and manager of a respectable newspaper, allowed his sister to go to Leeds, a burden on ROBERT NICOLL; and when the poet came to Laverockbank to die, we hear of the kindness of the Johnstones and the Taits, and the generosity of Sir William Molesworth, but nothing whatever of the Browns of Dundee, in either form. The tale of NICOLL'S few months of married life remains to be told; and although there may have been indiscretion in the match, his wife and her mother did everything in their power to ameliorate his suffer-

ings, and sustain his sinking spirit. Apart from the pride which they are said to have felt in their connection with the highly-celebrated editor of *The Leeds Times*, there was little in the destiny they had shaped for themselves to render them happy, or to yield them any confidence in happiness ensuing, when he, on whom they were then dependent, had slept the "sleep that knows no waking."

On the evening of the marriage, the bride and bridegroom left Dundee for their new *menage* at Leeds, the latter never to return. The old couple found their way back to Tulliebeltane, and for some time the correspondence between mother and son gave way to more urgent matters. ROBERT'S vehement leading articles, and merciless abuse of Whigs and Tories, brought round him the whole host of West Riding Radicals, and the circulation of *The Times* went on increasing at the rate of twenty per cent. weekly. Mrs. Nicoll's health was very precarious, and her mother, who it was arranged was to become one of their household in spring, was sent for, that ROBERT might be less interrupted in office business. To enable him to meet the necessities of his increased establishment, he wrote letters for a newly-established paper at Sheffield, but although this increased his labour

we do not learn that it had much effect on his income.

NICOLL'S eager desire to raise the character and circulation of his own paper, coupled with these extraneous efforts, and the incessant demands made upon his time and talents by the restless politicians with whom he had cast in his lot, began to tell on his already weakened constitution; and as the cold spring of 1837 merged into the early summer, he felt prostrated and quite unfit for his manifold harassing duties. His letters to his Perthshire friends, always so welcome, so much made of, and so punctually replied to, became short and less frequent, not that his feelings toward them had in any way changed, but because of the way in which he had, heart and soul, thrown himself into the arena of politics. With the exception of occasional pieces of poetry, written at his own fireside, every effort of his mind, every movement of his pen, was required for achieving the great purpose on which his mind was set. All other matters sank out of sight, distant friends were neglected, and the common charities of life suspended. No man of this generation can conceive the raging violence which politics assumed during the cradling of the great Reform Act. Matters had taken a downward tendency, and

there arose a class of politicians who resolved not to rest content until the millions of money forming the currency, and the millions of acres forming the property, of this country, should be equally divided amongst its millions of population. ROBERT NICOLL did not belong to that class of levellers, but he found them necessary to his purpose, and had to flatter and conciliate them. This was more especially the case, as the prospect of a general election rendered every man's vote, whether Tory or Chartist, of great value.

As the session wore to a close, the short-lived Parliament of 1835 was suddenly dissolved by the death of William IV. The Tories prepared themselves for a great effort to recover what had been wrested from them by the widened franchise. The Whigs prepared to hold fast what they had got. The Radicals prepared themselves to carry *universal suffrage;* and the Chartists buckled on their armour, without knowing exactly what they were going to battle for. The Radicals of Leeds prepared themselves for turning their representative, Sir John Beckett, out of the House of Commons, and electing Sir William Molesworth in his place. ROBERT NICOLL seemed to think that this election came opportunely for him, as it afforded him a chance of wielding the power

he had in his hands, and of inaugurating the great scheme of human regeneration which had so long floated, in indistinct form, before his enamoured vision.

The terrible distraction of the political contest of June and July laid prostrate the remaining energies of the too demonstrative editor, and when the re-action came in August, it told in manifest form, and in plain language, that the evil was consummated, and that there remained no more for him to do, but to turn his face to the wall and bid adieu to a world for which he intended to do so much, but had been able to do so little. He had drunk deeply of Abana and Pharpar, because he thought them better than all the waters of Israel; but when the excitement wore off, he felt that he had spoken in bitterness of spirit. His creed, "I do not know how I could better serve my God, than by serving my fellow-men," was his guide to the last hour of his life; and he took credit to himself for every effort he made to gain this end, forgetting that in serving those he called his fellow-men, he was doing the work of a mere section, and rather damaging what quieter men thought the natural progress of events. He called himself a "soldier on the people's side," and he fell in battle; but the benefits he was able to confer on those for

whom he fought and died were dearly purchased at the cost of a life of such brilliant promise. There are two circumstances however which must not be lost sight of. NICOLL acted under his own convictions in an earnest and honest spirit, and he had forty years less experience of the world than those who lived then, and live now.

ROBERT NICOLL and his party did not exult unreasonably over their great triumph. They had achieved political life where they thought political death was imminent, and they were naturally proud of themselves, and of their energetic champion and guide. But in the pride of their hearts they lost sight of the fact that they were remorselessly immolating an existence so precious, that neither power, nor influence, nor gold could, for a moment, be set against it. They had scattered amongst the froth of a contested election, talents and energy, that in a better cause might have adorned the book of human life, and been a lasting memorial to the young man himself, instead of the adjuncts to a contemptible struggle for power. Of all the paltry subjects on which an intelligent man can engage himself, that of writing up the pretensions of the casual aspirant after parliamentary honours is, unquestionably, the most paltry. To "serve God by

serving his fellow-men" was a noble sentiment, but plainly absurd as applied to a mere local squabble.

Dislike of the upper ten thousand was the leading characteristic of the Chartists, but in NICOLL'S case it was more a fashion than a feeling, his sympathies were too broad for settled dislike; but when he put his hand to the plough nothing would stay his progress. Personal condition had little influence on his actions. From first to last, in fair and in foul weather, politics loaded the breeze. The interest of the masses floated above every storm. On the surface of the wildest ocean the barque of an intense Liberalism kept on her way; her sails white as the dove's wing, and her banner bearing the device "Forward!" The success at Leeds carried NICOLL'S name into every corner of political England, and notwithstanding that each district had its own work to do, the successful struggle maintained in the heart of the West Riding excited wide attention, and when the battle was over a thousand congratulations poured in on the devoted editor of *The Times;* but they brought no relief to his sinking spirit. Many called at his house personally to acknowledge the services he had rendered their party, but could not see him. This extreme state of matters would not bear con-

cealment, and ROBERT'S constant friend Hooten heard of it in London, and instantly wrote to Mr. Tait of Edinburgh ; but the evil tidings had not yet reached Perthshire.

During the period NICOLL was editor of *The Times*, the paper was regularly forwarded to his mother, and by her circulated amongst their relatives in Auchtergaven, so that although he seldom wrote to them, they were quite aware of the part he was taking in the violent struggle at Leeds. Some of them feared that in his political earnestness he might be losing sight of matters of greater importance, and his brother William, at their instigation, wrote him in gentle remonstrance.

Perth, 26th August, 1837.

DEAR BROTHER,—There are few employments more agreeable to the human mind than that of praising one's self ; to be, as it were, the hero of your own story. And not to be behind hand in so pleasing a vocation, I was on the point of commencing my letter with a list of my own good qualities,—charity, placability, and so forth,—but as I suspect you would not feel much interest in the narrative, I shall endeavour to control my egotistical propensities. However, the sober truth is that I am a good natured fellow when I would write you again, after having done so already three different times, without your high mightiness even

condescending to notice that a biped existed in this pretty world of ours, who goes under the cuphonious cognomen of Willie Nicoll, a piece of conduct, on your part, which I beg leave to characterise as absurd, ungentlemanly, and unbrotherly, and all the other *abs* and *uns* which can be conveniently attached to the foregoing.

Aunt Mary, at the instigation of grandfather, has, with laudable anxiety for your religious improvement, desired the Rev. D. Young to write you an evangelical letter—I can't get a better expression—and which, on my seeing him yesterday, he said he would write very shortly. Of course you will send him a becoming answer, more especially as David is a very particular admirer of yours. Apropos of religion, you do not seem to have the organ of veneration, in which phrenologists, I think, place all religious feeling, so fully developed as might be wished. In some of your articles you seem to delight in getting hold of a Scripture text by the ear and wrenching it as remorselessly to your purpose, as I would a Scotch proverb. Take my word for it, it is an ugly habit, which I would recommend you to get rid of as quickly as possible.

There is very little news, either personal or political, worth sending you at present. All your friends that I know of are well. Little M'Cosh was here yesterday as large as life, and when I asked for news, he told me "*the boy* was as well as possible, just beginning to cut his teeth." Margaret Baxter is to be cried Sunday three weeks; mother

told me of somebody that was dead, and somebody that had gone daft, but I forget who they were. R. D., of Bellston, was in yesterday astonishing the natives, *alias* me, with a purchase of "Childe Harold." Bob's turning a clever fellow, and, as O'C. would say, is a very good patriot, which leads me on to politics. Now I will ask you, did not your blood boil at the thought of Stormont getting in for Perthshire. Bad as Maule was, he is worse, the means by which he got in are horrible in the extreme. . . . . If you love me, write soon, very soon.

Dear brother, yours,

WILLIAM NICOLL.

ROBERT did not reply to this letter, except in a few words contained in his last, sad letter to his mother. He could not write to William without going into particulars about his own health, and bad as it was, he felt the utmost reluctance to let the truth be known at home. But it would not hide any longer: the hand of death was upon him, and his wife felt it her duty to inform his mother. This she did in a roundabout way, dreading the effect that the knowledge of her having done so might have on her weak and fast decaying husband. In replying his mother was desired to allege that her information came from some casual visitor to his house at Leeds. When his mother's

letter came it had a marked effect upon him. Still he was so far relieved by feeling that the sad intelligence had been broken to her, and mustering courage, he wrote her an immediate reply.

Hitherto it has been my constant endeavour to show NICOLL as the lively youth that he really was so long as he enjoyed any moderate degree of health ; but now the time of sadness has come, and I must yield at last to the despondent tone which characterises all former biographies of him. I am sorry that the original of the answer to his mother's letter has not found its way into my possession. A former biographer in giving it to the public omits what would have been highly interesting to all the poet's admirers, namely, the account of the commencement and progress of his malady.

"Leeds, Wednesday, Sept. 13th, 1837.

"MY OWN DEAR MOTHER,—This morning I received your letter. The 'kind' friend who was so particularly kind as to alarm you all out of your senses, need not come to my house again. Before, I did not write you all about my illness, because I did not wish to make you uneasy ; but it shall be no longer so. I will tell you how it began, when it began—its progress and its present state."

After describing all these minutely, he goes on, and in allusion to his brother's statement about his

grandfather and the Rev. Mr. Young of Perth, he says—

"My love to aunt and grandfather; tell both that I do not know how I could better serve my God than by serving my fellow-men. He gave me a mission, and I have done my best to fulfil it. As for you, dear mother, dear father, I bid you be of good cheer; I shall recover yet, though it will take a while; and if I do not, I trust I am prepared calmly to meet the worst. My life has not been a long one, but I have borne much sickness—sickness such as opens the grave before men's eyes, and leads them to think of death; and I trust I have not borne this, and suffered, and thought in vain.

"I have told you the whole truth—every word of it; and you will see how exaggerated the account you have received must have been. I am sorry for Willie's illness. My love to him—to my own dear father, to Joe, Margaret, and Charlie. We have had much rain here; I hope the harvest is progressing fast. I was dreaming last night about grandfather; I thought he and I were making hay on the green. My love to grandfather—tell him not to be alarmed. Write soon, and tell Willie to write. How we long for letters from home."

Nothing that he has written conveys in more forcible terms the affectionate conditions on which the Nicoll family lived, their boundless respect for each other, and their earnest solicitude

about the well-being of the connection, than this sad letter. The poet's mother, no doubt, felt that rest and change of air were the first requisites in her son's case; but she was far away, and greatly bewildered by the conflicting tidings of despondency and hope, of a prosperous career and an enfeebled hand. To have had her son under her own roof would have mitigated her solicitude and lessened the agonising suspense, under which his family and relations at Tulliebeltane lay, but there were grievous difficulties in the way.

The necessity for rest and change of air was patent to all, and homes in England and in Scotland, for the languishing poet and his family, were speedily placed at their disposal. Mr. Tait, of Edinburgh, and Mr. and Mrs. Johnstone urged him to come at once to them; while his friend and correspondent, Mr. Charles Hooten, wrote to him pressing the necessity of repose, and asking him to come to his house with his wife, and they would do what they could for him. Amongst others, Mr. Whitehead, of Leeds, tendered a summer lodging he had at Knaresborough, and that being the nearest, and, in all likelihood, the quietest of the many places offered, they moved to it at the end of September.

Knaresborough is a picturesque old town,

romantically situated on the river Nidd, eighteen miles from Leeds, and two from Harrogate. The place teems with interesting associations, but NICOLL beheld it with indifference. He rode listlessly on a donkey over the ground that a few short years before would have rivetted his soul at every turning. The capricious river, and the wind-haunted wood that absolutely refused to conceal the body of Clarke, thrown into them by the extraordinary schoolmaster and murderer, Eugene Aram — the meadow to which Tom Hood says Aram's scholars

> ——— sped with gamesome minds,
> And souls untouched by sin;
> To a level mead they came, and there
> They drave the wickets in.
> . . . . . .
> But the Usher sat remote from all,
> A melancholy man!

had now no attractions for him.

Distress and sunken hopes had weaned him from objects which, in his better days, were his eager study. Man's character, its moral development, its broad or circumscribed tendencies, its humane or tyrannous feeling, were ever present with him, and formed the text of all he has written both in poetry and prose.

He moved about in the way I have described for

fourteen days, apparently taking little interest in what was occurring in the great outer world which he had just left, when a letter from his brother William upset his weakened feelings, and drew from him a reply which, coming from the hand of a dying man, stands out in bold relief against all the letters I have ever read. It is written on sack-cloth—a perfect pool of Marah. Two more, and the scene closes.

"Knaresborough, October 10th, 1837.

"MY OWN DEAR KIND BROTHER,—Both your letters have been received, and I would have answered them long ago had I been able. I came to this place, which is near Harrogate and eighteen miles from Leeds, about a fortnight ago; but I feel very little better for the change. My bowels are better, but I am miserably weak, and can eat little. My arm is as thin as that of a child a month old. Yet it is strange that, with all this illness and weakness I feel, as it were, no pain. My breast, cough and all, have not been so well for years. I feel no sickness, but as sound and wholesome as ever I did. The length of time I have been ill and my weakness alone frighten me; but whether I am to die or live is in a wiser hand. I have been so long ill, I grow peevish and discontented sometimes; but on the whole I keep up my spirits wonderfully. Alice bears up and hopes for the best, as she ought to

do. Oh, Willie! I wish I had you here for one day—so much, much I have to say about them all, in case it should end for the worst. It may not, but we should be prepared. I go home to Leeds again on Friday. Thank you for your kind dear letter; it brought sunshine to my sick weariness. I cried over it like a child. . . . Sickness has its pains, but it has likewise its pleasures. From —— and others I have received such kind, kind letters; and the London Working Men's Association, to whom I am known but by my efforts in the cause, have written me a letter of condolence, filled with the kindest hopes and wishes.

"I have just received another letter from Tait, which made me weep with joy, and which will have the same effect upon you. He bids me send to him for money, if I need it; and urges me to leave Leeds and the paper instantly, and come to Edinburgh, where there is a house ready for me; and there to live, and attend to nothing but my health, till I get better. He urges me to this with a father's kindness—should I do this? I know not. . . . You admire my articles; they are written almost in torment.

"You will go to Tullybeltane on Sunday, and read this letter to them. Tell them all this. I wish my mother to come here immediately to consult with her. I wish to see her. I think a sight of her would cure me. I am sure a breath of Scottish air would. Whenever I get well I could

get a dozen editorships in a week, for I have now a name and a reputation.

"My mother must come immediately. Yet I feel regret at leaving the paper, even for a season. Think on all that you and I and millions more have suffered by the system I live to war against, and then you will join with me in thinking every hour mis-spent which is not devoted to the good work. Dear, dear Willie, give my love to them all —to my parents—to Joe—to Maggie—to Charlie —to aunt—to grandfather. Write to say when my mother comes. Write often, often, and never mind postage. I have filled my paper and not said half of what I wished. . . . . I can do nothing until I see my mother. I cannot find words to say how I feel Tait's kindness. Write soon. I have much more to say, but I am tired writing. This is the most beautiful country you ever saw; but I have no heart to enjoy it. God bless you.

"ROBERT NICOLL."

A few days after the date of this letter, the poet left Knaresborough and returned to Leeds. The journey had a depressing effect upon both body and spirit; yet he still hesitated about abandoning the paper; but when his mother presented herself, the matter was at once decided, and the next issue contained the following announcement:—

"TO THE RADICALS OF THE WEST RIDING.

"Brethren!—Ill health compels me to leave your

locality, where I have laboured earnestly and sincerely, and I trust not altogether without effect, in the holy work of human regeneration. I go to try the effect of my native air, as a last chance for life; and after the last number I am not responsible for anything which may appear in *The Leeds Times*, having ceased to be editor of that paper from that date.

"I could not leave you without saying this much, without bidding you, one and all, farewell, at least for a season. If I am spared, you may yet hear of me as a soldier on the people's side; if not, thank God! there are millions of honest and noble men ready to help in the great work. Your cause emphatically is

> 'The holiest cause that pen or sword,
> Of mortal ever lost or gained.'

"And that you may fight in that cause in an earnest, truthful, and manly spirit, is the earnest prayer of one who never yet despaired of the ultimate triumph of truth.

"ROBERT NICOLL."

This encouraging benediction was the last instalment of NICOLL'S good offices to the Yorkshire Radicals. He had laboured for them "earnestly and sincerely," yet they made no inquiry whatever into the state of his finances when he left. A journey of two hundred miles, with three female attendants, on the fag end of a salary of one hun-

dred pounds a year, undertaken without a complaining word, evinced the NICOLL character in very distinct terms. Independence and pride of spirit are all very well, but the fares must be paid, the money must be had. The occasion was solemn and sad, otherwise the minutes of the committee of ways and means into which that family resolved themselves, at this trying juncture, would probably be both interesting and amusing.

CHAPTER VI.

Laverock Bank, Trinity—1837.

Oh ! I am weary of this grief-fraught life,
With all its burdens of down-crushing care—
Its joyless peace—its ever-shouting strife—
Its day dark-clouded, even when most fair :
. . . . . .
Cold earth ! I'll lay me down upon thy breast,
And dying, go to God, and be at rest !

TO the house of his friend Mr. Tait, on the southern bank of the Forth, the poet of nature and the people's politician had now come to die. His languid eye beheld, once more, the snow-clad Grampians ; and the green Ochils, which had so often greeted his eager vision, as he rambled—crooning fond domestic verses—about the braes of Tullybeltane, lay stretched out before him. The cold estuary, with its fringe of active life and its teeming surface, seemed to his sinking heart the vision of another world. A glimpse of that attenuated figure and blanched cheek forbade all prospect that he could ever be moved from his present abode, yet he entertained fond hopes of reaching his father's house. For a week or two his disease seemed to

abate. His mother, who had come to see him went away home indulging a vague belief that her affectionate and talented son would yet be spared to do himself and her still greater honour. His brother William and his only sister Margaret also came to see him, and although it is hard to conceive how they believed in the reanimation of these dry bones, yet they were led, by the medical opinions and their brother's amended spirits, to anticipate a permanent change for the better in his condition. Under the impulse of these enlivening prospects he wrote the following letter to Mr. Johnstone :—

"Laverock Bank, Saturday.

"DEAR SIR,—I am sorry to hear of your illness, and the more so as I am afraid it has been aggravated by the untimely rousing I gave you last week. However, I trust you will get better soon, as the weather has grown fine, for I long much to see both you and Mrs. Johnstone. Mr. Tait was here on Saturday last, and Mr. Vedder looks in for a few minutes now and then.

"Dr. Combe seems afraid about my chest, but he is altogether wrong. I have not been so free from ailments in the breast these ten years as I am at this moment. I have lost my faith in doctors, for in every case, both as to diet and medicine, where my Leeds attendant said 'Yes,' Combe says 'No,' and *vice versa*. Which am I to believe? He has given me no medicine except an infusion of quassia.

"The cold stormy weather has not affected me much. The pure air and peace and quietness have revived me, and I feel my appetite a little better; but that debility still crushes me to the earth, and I cannot get refreshing sleep. However, thank God, I am better than I have been for months, and the rest must be left to time and care. Thanks to your kindness, I am as comfortable as can be, and want for nothing except a few books. If you are not using your library ticket, may I do so? Mr. and Mrs. Roberts have been kind indeed. My mother went home on Tuesday. I have received from Yorkshire some addresses of thanks and good wishes, agreed on at public meetings in Bradford and other towns, which gratified me not a little. Hobson has got for editor a Mr. Symons, formerly of the *Cheltenham Free Press*.

"Hoping to see you soon, and with Mrs. Nicoll's and my warmest respects to self and Mrs. Johnstone,—I am, dear sir, yours truly,

"ROBERT NICOLL."

The above sets aside all guessing about the nature and first dating of NICOLL'S illness. So far as I know this was his last letter, and he was certainly not in a state to make hap-hazard statements. It appears that from his thirteenth year he had been more or less troubled with disease of the chest, and his case is a singular illustration of how pulmonary consumption works. That deceptive, insidious enemy of human life had, in ROBERT NICOLL'S

case, as in most others, gradually but surely done its work, and now he felt better, in the region of the disease, than he had done for ten years, although death was at hand. "But that terrible debility still crushes me to the earth." The wearings of the disease had ceased, and the spirit, left to itself, bounded up "like a languishing lamp that just flashes to die." One of the addresses referred to above was sent to *The Leeds Times*, and after being inserted was forwarded to Laverock Bank on the 5th of November, 1837. It is as follows:—

"Sunderland, Oct. 31st, 1837.

"SIR,—We, the members of the Sunderland Democratic Association, have heard with the deepest sorrow of your illness. How nobly and how well you have struggled for the oppressed there are thousands now bear witness, and millions more shall yet discover. Your loss at any time would be great; at the present crisis it is almost irreparable. We feel assured that consciousness of having promoted your country's welfare will, under your present affliction, afford you much consolation. That you may soon be restored to health and vigour, and again be labouring in the field of philanthropy, is the earnest prayer of your affectionate friends.

"Signed on behalf of the Society,

"GEORGE GAMSLEY, Secretary.

"To Mr. ROBERT NICOLL."

When the above was sent to ROBERT NICOLL from *The Leeds Times* office, it was accompanied by the following note from the proprietor, which shows the good feeling still existing between them, and the difficulty of getting any one to succeed NICOLL as editor :—

"DEAR NICOLL,—Send me word how you are. I am still editorless. Mr. Tait has never replied to my letter. Perhaps he thinks me not worth it. Give my respects to Mrs. Nicoll and Mrs. Suter, and accept the same yourself, from yours very respectfully,

"T. HOBSON."

"ROBERT NICOLL, Esq."

Mr. Tait, the poet's constant friend, wrote at this juncture to Sir William Molesworth, representing his hopeless condition, and other relevant matters. Sir William immediately sent fifty pounds to Mr. Tait for the poet's use. Far too much has been made of this fifty pounds; but as William Nicoll has expressed his opinion freely respecting it in a letter written shortly after ROBERT'S death, I prefer giving his account of the transaction to my own, which might not be so unprejudiced.

"I had read the critique (*by the Rev. Charles Kingsley*) in the *North British* which you have prefixed to the *Life*. The spirit in which it is written is so kind and cordial, that I noticed with reluct-

ance a few trifling errors as to fact into which the writer has inadvertently fallen. I shall give two instances of what I mean. He allows my brother credit for magnanimity in accepting the fifty pounds from Sir William Molesworth without 'any bluster of independence.' In the circumstances this is a little cruel. To the best of my recollection, Sir William's remittance was received the day before ROBERT'S death, and when, consequently, he was in no condition to receive or to reject Sir William's kindness. Not knowing my brother's address, the money was sent to Mr. Tait, who received it and spent it no doubt properly, at his own will and pleasure.

"The reviewer, from not being personally acquainted with my brother, in my opinion, while over-rating him in some points, under-rates him in others. Sir William's letter distinctly says that he considered he owed his election to my brother's exertions,—he brought him forward, wrote him up, spoke at public meetings, and personally canvassed the constituency in his favour. Few agents could have done the work he did, and none would have done it for ten times £50. In consequence of my brother's disinterested exertions, Sir William's election expenses were under £500; while those of his opponent, Sir John Beckett, were estimated as high as £10,000—an exaggeration in all likelihood, but showing that the real sum was very great. It was therefore with some truth as well as delicacy that Sir William represented the sum he sent my brother as an acknowledgment of services rendered

and not as a charitable donation. Personally I have some right to speak, as I was at the time most strongly opposed to any use being made of Sir William's kindness."

November crept on, and the poet's condition was little ameliorated; still, he appeared to hold his own against the oppressing languor and weakness incident to the final stage of his disease. Dr. (afterwards Sir James) Cox was his assiduous medical attendant, and everything that man could do he did for his patient. Glimpses of relief shone out now and again, and he sometimes half expressed solicitude about the fate of his unpublished poems. Those about him deprecated the tendency as much as possible, as they were cautioned to avoid all matters likely to lead to excitement. During this time of agonising suspense, his sunken cheek wore that delicate flush so terribly indicative, and his deep, blue eyes waxed larger and more tender in expression. The winter day shortened and the snow came down over the Fife shore, but he could no longer look at or think of these changes. Restless and irritable, but complaining little, he moved about his comfortable but, to him, far away home. When his mother was beside him he seemed to forget her presence, but when she was away his soul yearned for her. Mere boy as he was, his

affections centred round her, and nothing but death would either weaken or sever the tie. But the outward duties of life were now finally suspended, and to him, who had been ever active in their performance, the feeling of being thrown entirely on himself was hard to bear. He felt his life trembling on the confines of the two worlds, and he was ready to go forward yet willing to turn back. He had measured out to himself a brilliant and philanthropic career in this world, while he had laid fast hold of all that is promised in another. He was young and fain would work, but was ready to die. It was well; for early in December an access of the final symptoms of his disease ensued, and shook his weak frame beyond recovery. His father and mother were sent for, and after travelling fifty miles through frost and snow, during a long night and a short day, they came to his bedside. Within two hours the fond parents saw their much-prized son breathe his last breath.

This untimely event occurred on the 7th of December, 1837, within a few days of his completing his twenty-third year.

Twenty-two years and eleven months was much too short a space of time for a man to be first nursed, then bred, and schooled and apprenticed, and to start in the world, and in the end to build

himself a name that would excite wide public regret at his death ; yet, in a considerable circle, ROBERT NICOLL had in that short lapse of years so engaged attention, that his death was greatly deplored, and as I stated at the outset of this narrative, his fame, as a poet of high merit, has become wider spread year by year. When his Edinburgh literary friends heard of his death, they came to Laverock Bank and offered to carry him, shoulder-high, to his grave. His immediate relations were much grieved that while on his journey he had not been taken at once to his father's house, and even now that he was dead, they had a great desire that his remains should repose beside his kindred in Moneydie churchyard ; but the friends in Edinburgh who had been so very kind and attentive, did not encourage them in this, and they dreaded laying themselves open to a charge of ostentation : so the matter dropped, and the Perthshire poet was buried in North Leith church-yard.

The place of sepulture became afterwards the subject of a poetical protest from William Nicoll. These remarkable elegaic verses give every indication of the possession of a poetic faculty of a high order, and they of themselves are sufficient, in my opinion, to place the writer high in rank among the poets of his time, although he had never written

another line. The tale of his brother's life and death, and how he buckled on his helmet and went to battle against oppression and pain, is better told in these few stanzas than many men's lives have been in volumes. How any young man living on the very outer edge of the world of letters could, at one sitting, produce such a noble tribute to the memory of his deceased brother, and such a finished piece of versification, is difficult to understand.

THE POET'S GRAVE.

(*Written in North-Leith Churchyard.*)

Is the poet's grave in some lonely spot,
Is his requiem heard in the wild birds' note,
Where the forest flowers are first in bloom,
Is this the place of the poet's tomb?

Do his bones repose on his native hills,
Is his spirit soothed by their dashing rills,
Where the heather waves and the free winds come,
Is this the place of the poet's tomb?

Is his last long sleep made in hallowed mould,
Where the bones of his fathers rest of old,
Doth the same grey stone record his doom,
Is this the place of the poet's tomb?

No! alas, bright thoughts of a deathless name
With o'ermastering power on his spirit came;
And his childhood's home, and his father's hearth,
He forsook for the busy haunts of earth!

He had dreamed a dream in the moorland glen
Of oppression and pain 'mongst his fellow men;
And he buckled his helmet with clasps of gold,
But fell ere half his tale was told.

Nor tree nor flower o'er his lowly bed
Their bright spring tears, or sere leaves, shed,
For 'mid countless graves and a city's gloom,
Sleeps nature's child in a nameless tomb.

The current of thought disclosed in these pathetic verses is easily perceived. Now that the end has come and his brother is laid in a "nameless tomb," William Nicoll deprecates "the bright thought of a deathless name" that carried him into the vortex of Southern politics. More congenial to the feelings of his surviving relatives would have been a quiet life nearer home and a grave on the sylvan banks of Tay—instead of the heart-breaking struggle at Leeds, and a nameless tomb on the margin of the polluted Water of Leith, surrounded by the haunts of wrangling and noisy men. But "it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps"; how much less is it in him who is shrouded in his last robes and is the mere passive remains in the hands of dejected survivors. Within a few short years, the protesting brother was laid in the same grave; and at this day, if ever question merited an affirmative answer, it is the one here put, "Is this the place of the poet's tomb?" for in that narrow

grave and under that single turf, lie all that is earthly of two young Scotchmen unequivocally and to all intents and purposes poets,—ROBERT by the united voices of all who have studied him and are capable of judging, and William by the exquisite verses given above. It is no man's province to tell his fellow-men who are poets and who are rhymsters; but it is no violation of modest feeling or good taste to hazard a strong opinion when the evidence upon which that opinion is founded is placed alongside.

The destiny which ROBERT NICOLL fondly shadowed forth to himself, of becoming along with his adopted coadjutors the regenerators of mankind, was, no doubt, flattering to themselves; but it lacked the elements of fruition. If he had lived to be an old man, he would have struggled with his characteristic ardour to make "the world better"; but he would have learned to moderate his views, and to be less a spendthrift of his own life. No amount of physical strength could bear up against the incessant drainings of body and mind to which he subjected himself. His sympathies and energies were ever at the command of his friends, and the knowledge of that fact increased the number of those friends beyond a reasonable limit; but he started in life a long way from

the winning post, and ten years of disease in the chest may have whispered to him "Now is the time." An occasional irritating cough made him pause for a moment; but he rallied his strength and said to the insidious malady, "Get thou behind me," and in the action of his impetuous nature, concealing every weakness from himself, he struggled on, like a bark in a head-wind, but the disease followed its mission until it carried to the grave one of the best hearts the great Creator ever framed. It would be wrong to say that he had not fulfilled the purpose for which he was designed, but we cannot help regretting that one so well fitted to the gentler avocations of life should have sunk before the more rigorous. He had in his nature strong human sympathies, energy, perseverance, versatility, poetry, and marked political bias; but he had only one life, and it was hard for him to apportion it amongst so many claimants. Besides, it has ever been found that no domestic government can long withhold from its people any political privilege which they have fitted themselves to claim and to enjoy, and that frenzied action is not necessary to the gaining of desirable political ends. Such action may be both necessary and patriotic where freedom both civil and religious has been banned, and where the simplest breathings of

liberty involve vagabondage; but not in this land of liberty, and in this nineteenth century, where men do not condescend to be tyrants in power, where the ermine and the lawn protect the small as well as the great, and where every mother may sing her child asleep with a lullaby in praise of the redemption of Jesus Christ.

A DIRGE.

Sleep on, sleep on: ye resting dead;
The grass is o'er ye growing
In dewy greenness. Ever fled
From you hath care; and, in its stead,
Peace hath with you its dwelling made,
Where tears do cease from flowing.
Sleep on!

Sleep on, sleep on: ye do not feel
Life's ever-burning fever—
Nor scorn that sears, nor pains that steel
And blanch the loving heart, until
'Tis like the bed of mountain-rill
Which waves have left for ever!
Sleep on!

Sleep on, sleep on: your couch is made
Upon your mother's bosom;
Yea, and your peaceful lonely bed
Is all with sweet wild-flowers inlaid;
And over each earth-pillowed head
The hand of Nature strews them.
Sleep on!

Sleep on, sleep on : I would I were
At rest within your dwelling,—
No more to feel, no more to bear
The world's falsehood and its care—
The arrows it doth never spare
On him whose feet are failing.
Sleep on

THE END.