

JOHN BURNES.

IS THERE in or "furth" of Scotland a man-child, born on its north-eastern rock-bound or sandy-bented shores, and who has attained to years of discretion, that knows not the wonderful story of "Thrummy Cap"—whose boyish eyes have not opened to a preternatural "glower", as, sitting eerie by the ingle cheek, his ears have heard, and his crude imagination bodied forth the awful experiences of that "winter's nicht far in the north"? We wot not. For well-nigh a hundred years (it was first printed in 1796) the jingle of its hamely rhyme has been familiar in almost every cot and clachan of rural Scotland, and generation after generation of our sturdy, hard-headed countrymen have as boys wondered and laughed over the doings of the doughty "Thrummy" and the mishaps of "cowardly John". It may be called one of the chap-book classics, for, although more modern than many of the items which belong to that curious repertory of a popular literature now no more, it will almost invariably be found in some well-thumbed, smoke-dried volume side by side with "Simple John", "Falkirk's Cariches", "Leper the Tailor", "The Dying Groans of Sir John Barleycorn", and similar old-world productions. Its author, JOHN BURNES, was a curious original of no mean parts, who, during his life as a baker, soldier, and book-canvasser, played now and again the subordinate parts of poet, dramatist, and actor, but whose

writings, apart from "Thrummy Cap", have dropped very much out of public notice. He was born at Bogjorgan, a farm in the parish of Glenbervie, on 23rd May, 1771, and was the youngest of eleven children which his father (a cousin of William Burnes, the father of the immortal Robert Burns) had by his spouse, Helen Thomson. In 1787, Burns while on his northern tour, visited at Stonehaven Robert Burnes, an elder brother of John's, whom he evidently found to be a man after his own heart. He describes him in his diary, recently fully published, as "one of those who love fun, a gill, a punning joke, and have not a bad heart,—his wife a sweet, hospitable body, without any affectation of what is called town-breeding". In his boyhood John for a time assisted his father in the farm, but having the misfortune to lose both parents before his 13th year, it was deemed advisable to send him to learn some trade. Accordingly he was sent to Brechin, and there apprenticed to a baker. Starting life with only one year's schooling, he must have been pretty diligent during the time of his apprenticeship before he could have equipped himself so well as we find him shortly after his release. Between 1790 and 1793 he wrought at his trade in Arbroath and Aberdeen, and returning to the former place in 1794, enlisted into the Angusshire Fencible Volunteers, then being raised. It was now, while the regiment was moving from place to place—Stranraer, Dumfries, Leith, Shetland, &c.,—that he produced most of his plays, some of them being performed in the provincial theatres, and all of them at theatrical representations given by his fellow-soldiers. While at Dumfries he made acquaintance with his relative Burns, and has recorded that, having written "Thrummy Cap" while there, he had the satisfaction of showing it to his illustrious kinsman a short time before his death. There is a story to the effect that Burns touched it up here and there, and when returning the MS. pronounced it to be the best ghaist story in the language. Whatever truth there may be in this we cannot say; John himself certainly does not say more than we have stated above, and he was not a likely man to forget such a fine compliment coming from such a quarter. While in Leith, in 1797, he had seen Shirrefs' "Jamie and Bess", and forthwith introduced himself at 7 Shakespeare Square, where the genial Andy was ever ready to discuss

plays, pastorals, and punch, with a sympathetic brother bard. His regiment was disbanded at Peterhead in 1799, and having saved a little money while in the Fencibles, he betook himself to Stonehaven, where he started business as a baker. Trade promised well for a time; he got married, and seemed fairly in the way of settling down in life. But no; the fates had decreed otherwise. Whatever the reason, business did not come up to his expectations; he struggled with it for four years to no avail, and the outlook was anything but promising. He shut shop, wound up the whole concern, and once more betook himself to the musket, entering the Forfar Militia as a substitute. In that corps he remained for ten years, and after being discharged at Naas, in Ireland, he again returned to Stonehaven to renew his experiment at the bakery business. Success again evaded him; he removed to Aberdeen, and finally took refuge in that occupation which has so frequently proved an asylum for unfortunate genius—book-canvassing. In that capacity he spent the remaining years of his life, and was long a well-known and welcome visitor in the country district between Aberdeen and Stonehaven, and perished in the pursuit of his calling in a snow storm on the night of the 12th January, 1824, near “the red kirk o’ Portlethen”. His body was found on the 16th while some servants from a neighbouring farm were casting the road—it was removed to his house at Hardgate, Aberdeen, and was buried in the Spital Cemetery.

His works, many of which had appeared separately from time to time, had been collected and issued in a volume, entitled “Plays, Poems, Tales, and other pieces, by John Burness. Montrose. Printed by Smith & Hill, 1819”.

On opening his volume, the first thing that strikes a reader is the variety of forms, lyrical and dramatic, in which “honest John” elected his muse to exhibit herself. We have plays in blank verse, plays in prose, songs, odes, descriptive pieces, epistles, tales and dialogues, some serious, some humorous, and frequently some nondescript; but, one and all, very creditable productions to the baker-soldier. His first love seems to have been the drama; at least, in the absence of any positive knowledge to the contrary, we have inferred so, as his crudest work appears in his essays in that line. As a general rule these plays, tragic

and comic alike, are better adapted for representation on the stage than for perusal in the closet; for, though they read fairly well, one can readily see that as acted plays they would appear to much better advantage. The plots are simple, the characters broadly marked, the dialogue, except in those long inflated speeches which he now and again sticks into the mouths of his heroes and heroines, decently mediocre, and the *dénouement*, if occasionally strained, is nevertheless fully effective. Most of his plays, such as “Rosmond and Isabella”, “Sir James the Rose”, and “Charles Montgomery”, turn upon the same hinge, namely, love in conflict with filial duty. Indeed, these three tragedies have been constructed on the same framework—an old gentleman having a lovely daughter who has fallen in love with somebody he will not allow her to marry, but insists (usually for avaricious ends) that she will marry some one else whom she personally abhors. There is the customary garnishing of a little villainy—a general squaring of things more or less tragic at the end—and then the moral—John rarely forgets the moral—as:—

All parents from this warning, may beware
Of avarice, and have a special care,
Never to do a wicked thing for gain,
Or else Lord Walcot's blood is shed in vain—

or—

Now may all parents warning take by me,
Your children never treat with cruelty,
Lest such examples should to you befall,
May this a warning therefore be to all.

As samples of his blank verse, we give Lord Buchan's speech on hearing the results of Flodden Field:—

Alas! why do I live to see this day,
This day of double woe?—Flow, flow my tears,
And drop like rain from the most teeming clouds.
Alas! alas! thou poor and helpless country;
Though once the glory of the neighbouring states,
Thou now art the most abject and forlorn,
Bereft of all thy liberties and rights,
And all thy youthful warriors laid in dust:
Oh! fatal Flodden:—why, O fate! hast thou
Permitted me to see this evil day?

Why should I live to see the Southron boast,
 And wave their bloody banners o'er this land,
 Whilst all the flower of ancient Scotia's sons
 Are basely murder'd by their butch'ring hands ;
 I cannot bear it longer :—let me die,
 Why should I live to see my country's ruin !

Rosmond on the influence of foresight on happiness—

Oh ! what a foolish, selfish thing is man,
 Thus to perplex himself with the event
 Of things to come. The birds upon the trees,
 Sheep on the hills, or cattle on the fields,
 Or any other animal that knows
 No other situation but its own,
 Is happier far than any mortal man.
 They place their minds on nothing but to-day ;
 If they have daily food they are contented.
 While man, fantastic man, with hopes and fears,
 Torments himself with what is yet to come ;
 The smallest hope doth raise him to the skies,
 The smallest fear doth hurl him from that height,
 And sink him in the gloomy gulph of darkness.

Rosmond's resolve—

The sun is almost down, the wind is calm,
 Nor stirs the trees, nor moves the rustling leaves ;
 The pearly dew drops gently on the flowers,
 That spread abroad their leaves to drink it up ;
 The blushing rose, and lily in the garden,
 That intermixing with each other grow,
 Remind me of my Isabella's face.
 Ah ! lovely maid—this evening see the weather
 Is all unruffled as her gentle bosom.
 Throughout the year, there often is a time
 When even the jarring elements will cease
 Their raging, and be lulled as if asleep.
 But oh ! my busy breast is never calm,
 'Tis more unsettled than the raging sea,
 When boist'rous winds do sweep along its surface.
 As they do raise the billows, so doth passion
 Raise my tumultuous breast, and make it burn.
 But fears, adieu ! this night I'll keep my courage
 Undaunted as a lion.—Resolution
 And steady firmness still, shall be my guide,
 And shall accompany my steps, till I
 Make proof of happiness—or of despair.

If our author appears rather stilted and stiff in his blank verse, we find him thoroughly at home, easy, natural, and far more effective when using his mother tongue, and chronicling in pithy rhyme some fireside story of Scottish life in the olden time. Three of these—"The Northern Laird and his Tenant", founded on an incident connected with the Jacobite rising of 1745; "Gregor and Flora", a story of thwarted love; and the immortal "Thrummy Cap"—are among the most enjoyable items of his volume. The following, from his introduction to the first mentioned tale, describes very happily the political attitude of an old Jacobite:—

In se'enteen hunder forty-five,
 When heads o' clans wi' vir did strive
 To place young Charlie on the throne,
 An' gart their vassals a' tak' on,
 Whether they willin' were or no,
 They had sic power they gard them go;
 Whilk wrought their fam'lies mickle wae,
 'Tis scarce recover'd at this day.
 In shire o' Banff, near to Spey-side,
 A country Laird did then reside,
 Whose father being lately dead,
 An' while he liv'd he was the head
 O' a sma' clan that lived there,
 And lang afore he took a share
 In the same cause, an' joined Lord Marr,
 Till Shirra-Muir did end the war.
 I watna how it cam' about
 For they ne'er fan the carl out,
 When ithers lost their lan's an' heads
 A forfeiture for sic misdeeds,
 He had the guid luck to be spar'd
 An' still continued a Laird;
 Yet in his heart he lo'ed the cause.
 The Union, and the new made laws
 He hated as the very devil,
 An' said they wou'd produce much evil:
 That Scotsmen now a' slaves would be,
 Although for lang they had been free;
 He said, it was a gryte disgrace
 That e'er the Hanoverian race
 Should now the British sceptre sway;
 And hoped to see anither day

When Scotia's ancient royal race
 Wad ance mair sit i' their ain place.
 Sic principles he taught his son,
 An' said he hop'd to see some fun,
 If e'er King Jamie su'd come back,
 An' Scotsmen brave, his part wad tak,
 They'd soon drive Geordie o'er the sea,
 An' set their ancient country free
 Frae a' outlandish German whelpies,
 An' send them down to dwell wi' kelpies.

Wi' thoughts like thae, he pleas'd himsel
 For mony a year, an' last he fell
 A prey to death's all conquering hand,
 When Charles Edward reach'd this land,
 An' luckily for the auld blade,
 He'd just got three skelps wi' a spade
 I' the Kirk yard, when word came there,
 That a' weel-wishers might repair
 To join the Prince an' great Lochiel,
 An' daily did their numbers swell.

Among the smaller pieces in the volume we find a humorous description of a country Christmas, after the manner of Burns' "Halloween", and a poem called "The Despairing Lover Eased, a poem, written in imitation of The Cherry and the Slae". The former has little to recommend it, except its breadth of treatment—true enough no doubt as a picture of the times, but presented without any art—a bald imitation indeed. The latter, happier both in conception and execution, has one fairly good verse:—

The ploughman drudge has loos'd his team,
 The weary steers were a' drove hame,
 To spend the night in rest.
 The setting sun hill-heads did gild;
 The dews were falling o'er the field,
 That was with gowans drest:
 But I could there no pleasure find,
 Nor rest I could not take;
 While Peggy still is sae unkind,
 Alas, my heart she'll break.
 She slights me, affrights me,
 With constant scorn an' pride,
 Tho' pining, and dwining,
 Her scoffs I still maun bide.

Those who recollect John Burness describe him as tall and

handsome in personal appearance, dark complexioned, with a very thoughtful, saddish kind of face. His manners were retiring—he liked better to listen than to talk in company; but with a crony over a social glass the fine genial qualities of the man shone out in a manner that showed at once a mind richly stored through wide reading and varied experience—and a heart simple in its love and artless in its sincerity.