

ROBERT FORD.



Robert Ford

POET AND LITTERATEUR.

XXXVIII.

ROBERT FORD,

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The subject of our present sketch is so well known, personally or by his writings, to all lovers of Scottish literature, that any introduction to our friend the "general reader" would seem unnecessary. It might appear as though we should stop there—but that is mere theory. The real fact is that it is precisely those people we know a lot about of whom we like to learn more, while people we know little or nothing about we are only too willing, as a rule, to let severely alone. Besides, we are aware that our friend has written about nearly everybody else; and as there is no hint of any forthcoming autobiography "which he is the author of"—to quote the inimitable Sir William Topaz of the White Elephant—it is only to be supposed that he should be put on the operating table himself occasionally. And certainly the man who has managed, out of the scanty leisure at his disposal after the demands of a busy commercial life have been met, to write

OVER A SCORE OF VOLUMES

of prose and verse, all good acceptable matter, and done more to quicken the national sentiment for everything Scottish—song, story, and scenery; men and women—than, probably, any

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other living writer, is a very promising subject. He was born on the 18th July 1846, in the little village of Wolfhill, in the parish of Cargill, less than a mile from the birthplace of the late Dr Croll, whose career was sketched in a previous article. His father, Joseph Ford, an honest, industrious, sterling son of the soil, was a pit sawyer in his early days, and, in addition to the cottage in which our friend and most of the family—five sons and one daughter—were born and brought up, possessed a bit of land on the Stobhall estate. His mother was one of the sweetest, most patient, and most lovable women that ever breathed—the tenderest and most devoted of mothers. Her son will remain his mother's boy till his own last breath. She and that other dear one, his departed wife—another gentle creature—are but “white celestial thoughts” now in the secret sessions of his heart; but in these twin souls, sainted and sacred for ever more, his

Faith in womankind beats with his blood.
And trust in all things high comes easy to him.

His father was noted as having been a sturdy, straightforward fellow. He officiated as precentor for several years in Cargill Parish Church before the Disruption, and his son, in his “Thistledown,” tells a story illustrative of these traits. One morning he had just raised the Psalm tune, when he discovered he had chosen a wrong metre. There was no make-believe in him; so he stopped short, looked round upon the congregation, and announced in a clear, firm voice—“I am wrong!”—gathered himself together, and almost immediately after, recalling the right tune, sailed off into the empyrean of melody in grand style. On coming out of the church, the factor's wife

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complimented him in these words: "Now, Joseph, I see that a well-corrected mistake looks first-rate!" He "came out" with his minister, the Rev. Michael Stirling, at the Disrupton, and subsequently filled the "lettern" in the Free Church of Cargill under Messrs Stirling, Irvine, and Yule.

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attended the Parish School, and recalls with equal pride and gratitude that he is one of a couple of thousand or so scholars whom his greatly-esteemed old master, Mr Alexander Fergusson—now at the Mains of Cargill, and known far and near for his historical and antiquarian researches—passed through his hands. School was available during the winter months only, however. Summer generally saw him herding, or at other healthy outdoor work—greatly to his own benefit and that of everybody else, considering the knowledge and love of nature thus generated and fostered within him. By and by he went to Dundee, and served in the employment of Messrs Baxter Bros. for ten years, leaving for Glasgow in 1878. Arrived there, he became clerk in the warehouse of Messrs J. & W. Campbell & Co., and there he is still. Such is a brief outline of the "business" aspect of our friend's activities, but although no more faithful servant could be found anywhere—a fact of which his employers have shown their appreciation in a marked manner more than once—who, it may be asked, except his employers, cares one farthing whether it is jute, or iron, or treacle, valued at £1 or a million, that he is busy invoicing and corresponding about day after day? His real business in life has been done when he was doing nothing whatever—only idling away his leisure time after

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hours writing things like "The Cankert Bairn," or "The Braes Abune Stobha'," or "A Summer Song," or "The Banks o' Tay," or perhaps it might be a screed o' prose such as "The Depotation," or "Patie Pirnie's Woin'," or "The Pottingerdraucht," or "Johnnie Norrie's Bamboozlement," or an appreciatory sketch of some brother poet, or a descriptive article dealing with some historic spot or event, or the history of some old sturdy, fail-me-never ballad, or indeed anything else of the

HUNDREDS OF PRODUCTIONS

which have come from his pen. His "Tayside Songs" (1895), just to name something at random, is worth more to humanity than all the rich cargoes of merchandise that have passed through the establishment since he set foot within its walls. How many bales of cloth for this?—

There's nae spot on earth like the hame o' ane's youth,
Where the first sparks o' love leapt into flame;
Where heart-strings were hankit and sealed sae wi' truth,
That, live we forever, they're hale and the same.

Or, how many gross pairs of boots for this?—

Hurrah for auld Scotland, hurrah
Her heather-capp'd mountains sae hie,
Her hills and her dells,
Her lochs and her fells,
Her rivers that row to the sea,
Her burnies that dance in their glee;
An', lauchin', owre ilka linn fa';
Aff bonnets, ilk' ane,
An' wave the refrain—
Hurrah for auld Scotland, hurrah!

And what is the exact value in fire-irons or pick-axes for these lines?—

The bonniest bairn in a' the warl'
Has skin like the drifted snaw,
An' rosy wee cheeks, sae saft an' sleek,
There never was ither sic twa;

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It's een are just bonnie wee wandered stars,
Its leggies are plump like a farl,
An' ilk' ane maun see't, an' a' maun declare't
The cleverest bairn,
The daintiest bairn,
The rosiest, cosiest, cantiest bairn,
The dearest, queerest,
Rarest, fairest,
Bonniest bairn in a' the warl'!

But space will run out too fast at this rate. Here is a list of Mr Ford's principal achievements:—"Hame-Spun Lays and Lyrics" (1878), "Humorous Scotch Readings" (1881), "Auld Scots Ballants" (edited 1889), "Thistledown" (1891), "The Harp of Perthshire" (edited 1893), "Ballads of Bairnhood" (edited 1894), "Tayside Songs" (1895), "American Humorists" (1897), "Poems and Songs of Alexander Rodger" (edited 1897), "Vagabond Songs and Ballads of Scotland" (edited 1899), "Song Histories" (1900), "Vagabond Songs and Ballads of Scotland" (2d series, edited 1901), "Poems of Burns" (edited 1902), "Willie Winkie, and Other Pocms" (edited 1902). Every one of the foregoing has been well received, not only by the Scottish press, but English as well, and many of them have run into several editions. His "Vagabond Songs" (1st series) is out of print—probably the 2d series also. His "Burns" is one of the most popular editions in the market. "Ballads of Bairnhood" is

INCOMPARABLY THE FINEST COLLECTION

of the kind in existencē. Of it Alexander Anderson ("Surfaceman") predicts that "it will be precious to the heart of many a mother yet who at the present moment is nursing her doll in the innocent joy of infancy." J. M. Barrie also praises it. "Thistledown" is far and away the best all-round book of Scottish humour we

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have. It has gone through many editions, and both it and the "Auld Scots Ballants" have been pirated in America in a very flattering manner. A more respectable and acceptable form of flattery was that of a prosperous Scot in Klerksdorp, South Africa, who named his villa after "Thistledown" in honour of the most pleasurable book he had ever read since leaving the land of "Nemo me impune" associations. Of the "Harp of Perthshire" one critic asserts that the author has "produced a volume of which any county in Scotland might justly feel proud." But that is not all. Innumerable articles, poems, &c., scattered about the periodicals have still to be taken into consideration, many of which will never be collected. Our author has even done some clever pen-and-ink sketches for the enhancement of some of his books. He just wants to set all his lyrics to music to round off his "infinite variety." Yet, even when all this is put down to his credit, we are only at the threshold of the matter. There is

THE MAN HIMSELF

behind everything. Is it necessary to tell the uttermost stranger that the author of "Thistledown" is a first class story-teller? Or that he is the very life of every party he finds himself among, and is "sair ta'en oot," like the man from the neighbouring parish to his own? One would imagine from the Ballad and Burns's Clubs and other Associations to which he belongs, the number of lectures, &c., he is inveigled to deliver in a season—not to mention other functions—that he had absolutely nothing else whatever to bother his head about; but he is a splendid illustration of the saying, "If one wants a thing well done give it to a busy man." And by that word we are back once more to the

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real business of our friend's life, which is to utilise his leisure hours in making his fellow-countrymen and women know and love the men and women who have made our country what it is, our literature what it is; to know and love the country which has been the inspiration and reward of so much that is glorious in word and deed of past times; best of all, to know and to love each other. All this he does, chiefly by the gospel of cheerfulness; honest, hearty mirth; and if tears are not far off in places, and the verse trembles on the balance of doubtful issue, he knows and we feel the cause. And his reward for it all is the exceeding great reward, not of admiration or mere esteem, but of gratitude and affection from countless human hearts here and elsewhere, now and for long years to come.

With so much to "wyle amang," it is difficult to choose something thoroughly representative of Mr Ford's style; but the following is one of the most admired of his lyrics:—

THE BRAES ABUNE STOBHA'.

The summer sun shines bonnilie on mountain, loch, an' lea,

An' life, an' love, an' beauty thrive whaur'er the e'e may fa';

Ilk' livin' thing is happy like, an' heart-content but me,

But I am wae wi' thinkin' o' the braes abune Stobha'.

We've bonnie braes around us here, I view them a' day lang,

An' aft an' sair I'm blamed because I fret for else ava;

But, ah, oor feet still wander gaets oor hearts will hardly gang,

An' mine, I fear, has never quat the braes abune Stobha'.

'Twas yonder I was born an' bred, an' ilka whinny knowe
Is hallowed by some tale o' love that happened lang awa';

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Yon roadside cot ayont the kirk held happy hearts, I
trow—

An', oh, they'll aye be dear to me, the braes abune
Stobha'!

Hech-wow; but it's a thrawart fate that workin' bodies
dree,

Sin' maistly a' to win their bread maun wander far
awa';

The family nests get herried sune by dour necessitie—

'Twas him, the loon, that twyned me frae the braes
abune Stobha'.

Yet ower yon hills abune Dunblane, an' by the banks o'
Tay,

An', oh, gin I could waft me there but for an 'oor or
twa,

I'd come again wi' pith anew to bide the hoped-for day,

When I'll return, nae mair to lea' the braes abune
Stobha'.

They're bonnie in the mornin', they're bonnier at noon,

An' oh, they're ever glorious just e'er the gloamin' fa';

The flowers that hae the sweetest scent, the birds the
sweetest tune,

Are those that bloom an' sing among the braes abune
Stobha'!