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BURNS.

More than a hundred years ago, in the western Lowlands of Scotland, there lived a poor, hard-working farmer, struggling to make a living from his small and impoverished farm. His life was one unbroken strife with destiny. Toil as he might at the plough or in the harvest, plan and manage as best he could, he found himself growing deeper and deeper in debt, becoming year by year more wretched. The day of his life seems to us gloomy with almost unbroken clouds, amid whose folds the sun sank down while yet it seemed but noon;—a simple, toilworn, unsuccessful ploughman, whose life-story might be contained in these words: "He lived, sorrowed, died." That is all! But within the heart of this rude peasant, untutored as it might be, burned all the fire of genius, throbbled all the harmonies of song! Poesy reached out her snowy fingers and clasped his horny hand, and art and science owned themselves captives before he sought their overthrow. But thirty-six short years of life, and yet before his death the learned and great acknowledged his power, and learned from him lessons of truth and beauty. A simple, toil-worn peasant—king of immortal song—Robert Burns!

Can we, in treating of the life work of such a man, view it calmly and impartially? It seems almost a cold-blooded thing to do, to reason out the *why* of his life; to say that such a man must have lived under the circumstances of his time. So intensely human is his life that it seems rather an examination of one's own individual being.

The history of the poetry of a race or nation, like that of the whole universe, is a history of fluctuations. Nature presents to us nothing immutable. Everything lives through a world of opposites. The ocean tides that ebb and flow, sun and shade, winter and summer, are but the more visible symbols of a universal truth, universal because it applies not only to the world of matter, but also to the realm of mind. Not only does peace follow war because it has to, but war of necessity follows peace; and so reform is the result of conservatism, and conservatism again the result of reform. Looking over the past of our country, *i.e.*, England, the whole panorama of history seems to us now like one great checker-board—alternate periods of virtue and vice, agitation and contentment, poverty and opulence, learning and ignorance. Now apply this to poetry.

After the time of Spencer and Shakespeare, it is some fifty years before we have any great addition to the British muse, then comes the second brilliant era of Milton and Dryden. Another fifty years elapse before the silent harp of England is again awakened by Pope, Young and Thomson. After an interval of half a century more came Burns and Cowper. Then Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson. This is the summary of our poetical history. Burns, we see, came in on the fourth great flood of song. Now, as to where the highest water-mark has been reached, it is almost impossible to judge; for, to use the same metaphor, the shores over which these different tides have poured have been those of different lands. No two have ever

washed the same reefs; each one beat out its music on a different and unlike shore. Some are sombre with the weight of thought, others glitter with sunlit fancy. What need then to fathom their depths, since those the most profound often but swell along a rocky shore, while those more shallow fill wider-spreading and more pleasant strands.

After Dryden had passed away, his rich, sparkling verse had been finding a slow-fading reflection in Prior and Parnell. Of the next group, by far the most noteworthy in accomplishment and influence is Pope, whose combination of Dryden's showiness with the philosophy that was drifting deeply into the mind of the day was a triumph of skilful workmanship. His success for the moment was marvellous. But life itself is its own great central interest; and although the world applauded, it grew sick at heart; and for the man who was to rise in stern rebellion to the artificial in poetry there was sure to be waiting a wreath of unfading laurel. It was not an easy thing to do, for the ideas of poetic art as then understood had impregnated every line of thought, and had the homage of men like Johnson and Goldsmith. But two men undertook the task and won—these were William Cowper and Robert Burns; and according as they accomplished the task, let their laurels be given.

Then is Cowper to be classed with Burns? Only in this particular, that it was through them Pope was dethroned. Their methods were different; their lives, and, therefore, their whole lives' works, were at variance. Cowper took up, to a degree, the same subjects, the same ideals, and only changed the colouring; painted what before was unreal in natural hues, and bound the real and the ideal with firm and unyielding bands. Burns, while all the brazen harmonies were sounding, took up his simple, rustic lute; and down beside his native glens he tuned it with the songs of love and beauty, until not only did the vale and woodland thrill with the delicious music, but it stole into the universal heart, till life was not a joy without his accompanying song. The symphonies of stately Pope were forgotten, and again the world rejoiced in its sincerity and freedom.

But was it through the mere mechanical result of circumstances that Burns arose? Was the passion and peculiar strength of the Scottish life of his time a sort of volcanic force, which sent out through Burns its manifestation in the white heat of song? There is no need here of elaborating on this theory as to the reason of a poet's being. It is hard to believe that poets are, that Burns was, the mere result of circumstances. Rather is it not the *life within* that goes out with a vivifying touch, and finds in things always existing the theme of poetry; and, as the beauty of the world is eternal, so the theme for song is always at the same arm's length of any generation or time, or any individual. And the reason Burns was and is the wonder of the world to-day, is that he perceived it lay in his power to see into the heart of things and the centre of truth, although with a vision unbroadened by knowledge of the experience of a classic past. He knew that, if he could not see through the mist at either side, he could see clear to the far-off object. And so, with a mind