

RANDOM THOUGHTS.

No. IV.

CARLYLE.

I HAVE just finished Thomas Carlyle's last book, entitled, "Past and Present," and it has so filled my mind, that I must try to give my impressions of it. My admiration of this book is disinterested, for I am not of those who make Carlyle the god of their idolatry; yet, I trust, I am not insensible to the merits of so original a thinker, and so profound a critic. I have read all his productions—many of them with unmingled delight—and none of them, without appreciation of his extraordinary powers. To make allusion only to a few:—His biography of Schiller; his comments on the life and writings of Richter; his analysis of Goëthe, are so fraught themselves with inventive genius, as to be creations rather than criticisms, such as almost place the writer on a level with the great authors whom he reviews. With these I need hardly specify his most pathetic and eloquent Essay on Burns—a genuine and manly estimate of a most genuine and most manly poet. A position of Carlyle's own is, that to judge truly of faults, you must have entered fully into the excellence of your author, and this position he has nobly himself exemplified in his estimate of big-hearted Burns, the bard that "walked the mountain side in glory and in joy." But Carlyle has peculiarities which no admiration can render pleasing to me. If some will call me conventional for such repugnance, I cannot help it. So it is in me, and I only shew my improvement by Carlyle's lessons, by honest expression. It seems to me that Carlyle deifies sheer force, and that he is intolerant, not merely to pretension, but to weakness. His views of man often appear to me exceedingly limited, and so also his ideas of good and evil. With most eloquent eulogies on genuineness, he does not much respect individual independence. The genuineness that he approves is one which makes impression by some strong peculiarity; one which can maintain its right by power. Other than this he does not praise; nay, on humble men, who do the best they can in common ways, he pours out most scalding sarcasm, and most bitter ridicule. Carlyle would have the lower minds not merely *subjects*, but *worshippers*, and heroes should be their gods. To this worship I never can bend: I admire great souls, but I will not forsake my own—in my adoration I would

vain aspire directly to the Creator of great souls. From a great many points in Carlyle's philosophy I sincerely dissent—but, within limits, desire to be a learner from Carlyle's teaching. That he is a man of a vigorous and earnest mind, I believe; that he is a man of a tranquil and catholic one, I doubt. His later style is not to be praised; enough, if it be borne: and nothing can more evince the value which is set on Carlyle's thoughts than the endurance of his style. It is not English, and I know not what else it is. His terms, singly, to be sure, are Anglo-Saxon; but to what dialect his sentences belong let philosophers determine. But still, let no one turn away from his odd and grotesque expression: let no one on this account cast aside a book of Carlyle's, or he will throw away a husk which contains a very precious kernel. I have mastered his vocabulary, and find a wisdom in his words which would repay twenty times the labour. These exceptions are made in perfectly cordial temper; and now I will proceed to tell you all I can in a short space about the work I have already mentioned. As a literary composition, it has Carlyle's power and his defects; but its aim is directly practical, and its tone is impressively serious.

It is divided into four books. The first is entitled the "Proem." It is a picture of English society in its present ominous condition, and is the deepest voice of advice and warning, which has come forth from the groaning heart of that sick and struggling country. There is a prophetic depth in its tone of complaint, and a prophet-like energy in its indignant denunciation; whilst, it has modulations of sweetness and pity. Book the second, is designated, "The Ancient Monk." It resuscitates a fragment of the middle ages, with that picturesque vitality in which Carlyle has no equal and no rival. This book is founded on an old MS., some time since discovered in England by the "Camden Society," containing a memoir of one Samson, abbot of the Monastery of St. Edmundshury in the twelfth century. Edmund was a generous Saxon Englishman, who, beloved by his people, and murdered by the Danes, became a saint. Three centuries after his death, his shrine was hung with riches, and a monastery existed under his patronage, with one of the broadest estates in the nation. Car-