



HOME JOURNAL



Life, Literature and Education

THE IMMORTAL "ROBBIE."

It seems almost impossible to realize that nearly 150 years have passed since the birth of Robert Burns, and nearly 110 since his death. So truly has he become, especially to the Scottish, the people's own poet, that "Robbie"



Burns seems to belong of right to our own day, to our own circumstance, a fact which of itself would place him among all true poets, who, no less than Shakespeare (if, granted, of inferior ability), are of "no age" because of all.

Robert Burns was born January 25, 1759, in an "auld clay biggin," a little two-roomed clay cottage in the village of Alloway. His father is described as a man of rare strength of character and striking individuality, and from what we know of him we may judge him to have been one of those "mute inglorious Miltons," whom circumstance, rather than ability, had harnessed to the "common round." Nevertheless, it was from his mother that the poet inherited his talent for rhyming, and from "an old servant of his mother's, who was remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition, but who had the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, etc.," that he received the first impetu- of that vivid imagination which afterwards stood him in good stead.

Upon the earlier part of Burn's life, few rose leaves fell. Misfortune seemed to follow the family, which moved from farm to farm without seeming to better its fortunes ever. Burns himself speaks of having had to toil "like a galley's slave," and we are told that at no time during his farming did his income amount to more than seven pounds a year in cash.

As may be imagined under such circumstances, his chances of a liberal school education were few. He attended school, in fact, very little more than for two and a half years in Alloway, and later for a term on the smuggling coast, Kirkoswald. But his studies at home were constantly directed and encouraged by his father, and such was his precocity that he was described as being "a critic in substantives, verbs and particles" (does this mean that he could parse well?) at ten or eleven, and had begun the study of French and Latin a year later.

But, though he never shone greatly in these last, he was being continually educated in a school still more effective in view of his future work, the school of life itself. He had attended dancing school, spent some time in learning dialing, and later had gone to Irvine to

learn wool-combing. Moreover, he had fallen in love at fifteen, from which time, as he tells us, he was "constantly the victim of some fair enslaver," and he had mingled in all sorts of rural gatherings, and among all sorts of rural people. All this in the case of a more ordinary type of man, might, it is true, have had but a poor showing, and, it has to be confessed, in that of Burns, many and many a time, it had a most lamentable one. Yet, who can say that some of the very best of his poetry was not an outcome of much of this same haphazard knocking about. All the time his knowledge of human nature and of the world was extending, and, as has been remarked, "to-day the market price of this article (knowledge) just stands at about the same figure as it did to our two first naked progenitors in the Garden of Eden." Burns made mistakes, it is true, and he paid the fee in the bitter upbraidings of conscience, which so often appear in his poems. He learned, too, to know men and things, and had courage enough to denounce that which he deemed worthy of denunciation, e. g., the Ultra-Calvinistic doctrines of his day. Where, for instance, is there a more telling bit of sarcasm, or a more deserved one, than "Holy Willie's Prayer"? Yet he never lost hold of the warm, throbbing sympathy that bound him not only to his kind, but to all things weak or suffering even to the wee field mouse that his plowshare turned out of its warm nest; nor did he ever lose reverence for what he deemed the truly good. We must not forget that the same hand that penned "Holy Willie's Prayer," penned also the "Cotter's Saturday Night." His lash was all for cant, but he is ever

willing to bare his head to sincerity.

Burns sang as the birds sing, because he could not help it. Into his poems he threw himself, faults and all, with that impetuosity which marked all his doings. He did not at first write for publication, and when the celebrated Kilmarnock edition was issued, it was only under stress of circumstances which made him contemplate a voyage to Jamaica, and, in this way, attempt to provide himself with passage money. The poems, however, took so well, that, instead of going to Jamaica, the poet went up to Edinburgh, where he was for a time feted as a nine days' wonder among the aristocracy, only to be afterwards forgotten by these same lions, who are now themselves scarcely known even by name. That troubled him little, however. He returned to Mauchline, married Jean Armour, and received a position as exciseman, in which he was thenceforth enabled to earn an easier living, and to devote more time to his writing. His work was, however, cut off in July, 1796, when he succumbed to an attack of rheumatic fever.

It seems almost a pity to leave off with Burns here. Yet to go on with a detailed criticism of even a few of his poems, or to talk of his pathos, his keen sense of humor, and the reason of his strong hold on the human heart everywhere, would require a thesis. Suffice it to say that, among poets themselves, Burns has been considered a poet. Goethe has called him the first of lyrists, and Carlyle, who surely writes poetry in prose, has recognized in him those elements of strength which must have been positive indeed to win Carlyle's approbation. There has been much discussion as to which is his best poem, and popular opinion will divide between "Cotter's Saturday Night," some of his lyrics, and his more philosophical work, such as "Epistle to a Young Friend," or "A Man's a Man for a' That." Burns himself considered his masterpiece "Tam o' Shanter," one of the most rollickingly, racily fanciful bits of description in the language.

FISHERMEN'S HOMES, PITTEN- WEEN FIFE, SCOTLAND.

Our group of Scotch fisher homes is by one of our best known Canadian artists, and is a type of many such in the fishing villages of the Old Country, from the most northern points of Scotland to those on the coast of Devon and Cornwall. The hour is evidently after mid-day, for the children, before going to school are playing between the puddles, whilst the mothers are busy within doors. A slight breeze lazily stirs the few articles upon the lines, and the tide is at its lowest. Later on, there will be life enough when the waves flow back and beat against the wall, and when the tongues of the gudewives are set free for the neighborly "crack"—their soul's love—and which makes a pleasant and let us hope always a kindly break in the monotony of their busy lives. H. A. B.

THE FIRST AMERICAN.

On the twelfth of February the citizens of the United States will celebrate the ninety-seventh anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, to whom the passing generations are giving the title of "The First American." Perhaps America has not yet produced the equal of this truly great man. Other men have come, and have been accorded public recognition for their great services in social life, in commerce, in politics, in the army or navy, or in philanthropy, or in religion. Faithfully have these men served their generation, and gratefully have their good deeds been acknowledged; yet their work seemed done at their death, and others have followed in their steps who have excelled them in their good offices. But, with Lincoln, the passing years only bring his name more prominently before his countrymen.

His whole life is a wonder. Born in a Kentucky cabin, on the frontier of civilization, and passing his early days amid the crude work that backwoods



FISHERMEN'S HOMES, PITTENWEEN, SCOTLAND.

—By W. St. T. Smith, St. Thomas, Ont.