

Britain and France broke out, in 1793, Burns joined a volunteer company that was formed in Dumfries; and, according to the testimony of his commanding officer, Colonel de Peyster, he faithfully discharged his soldierly duties, and was the pride of the corps, whom he made immortal by his verse, especially by the vigorous address beginning—

“Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?”

Burns was the laureate of the company, “and in that capacity,” says Lockhart, “did more good service to the government of the country, at a crisis of the darkest alarm and danger, than perhaps any one person of his rank and station, with the exception of Diddin, had the power or the inclination to render.”

His “Poor and Honest Soger,” says Allan Cunningham, “laid hold at once on the public feeling; and it was everywhere sung with an enthusiasm which only began to abate when Campbell’s ‘Exile of Erin’ and ‘Wounded Hussar,’ were published. Dumfries, which sent so many of her sons to the wars, rung with it from port to port; and the poet, wherever he went heard it echoing from house and hall. I wish this exquisite and useful song, with ‘Scots wha hae wi’ Wallace bled,’ the ‘Song of Death,’ and ‘Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat!’—all lyrics which enforce a love of country, and a martial enthusiasm into men’s breasts—had obtained some reward for the poet. His perishable conversation was remembered by the rich to his prejudice: his imperishable lyrics were rewarded only by the admiration and tears of his fellow peasants.”

In the spring of 1793 Burns addressed the following letter “To the Hon. the Provost, Bailies, and Town Council of Dumfries.”

“Gentlemen,—The literary taste and liberal spirit of your good town has so ably filled the various departments of your schools, as to make it a very great object for a parent to have his children educated in them. Still to me, a stranger, to give my young ones that education I wish, at the High School, fees which a stranger pays will bear hard upon me. Some years ago your good town did me the honour of making me an honorary burghess. Will you allow me to request that this mark of distinction may extend so far as to put me on the footing of a real freeman of the town in the schools? If you are so very kind as to grant my request, it will certainly be a constant incentive to me to strain every nerve where I can officially serve; and will, if possible, increase that grateful respect with which I have the honour to be, gentlemen, &c.,—ROBERT BURNS.”

The request was at once complied with, to the great gratification of the poet, who was devotedly attached to his children, and desirous above all things to give them a liberal education. “In the bosom of his family,” says Mr. Gray, one of the teachers in the Academy, “he spent many a delightful hour in directing the studies of his eldest son, a boy of uncommon talents. I have frequently found him explaining to this youth, then not more than nine years of age, the English poets from Shakspeare to Gray, or storing his mind with examples of heroic virtue, as they live in the pages of our most celebrated English historians. I would ask any person of common candour if employments like these are consistent with habitual drunkenness.”

But though not systematically intemperate, his habits were too lax and irregular for the community in which he lived, convivial, though it was; and many who disliked him on other grounds magnified his excesses, and made these a pretext for “sending him to Coventry.” On one well-known occasion our errant poet received the cut direct from some of the patrician citizens. During an autumnal evening in 1794, High Street was gay with fashionable groups of ladies and gentlemen, all passing down to a county ball in the Assembly Rooms. One man, well fitted to be the cynosure of the party, passed up on the shady side of the thoroughfare, and soon found himself to be doubly in the shade. It was Burns. Nearly all knew him, but none seemed willing to recognize him; till Mr. David McCulloch of Ardwell, noticing the circumstance, dismounted from the horse on which he rode, politely accosted the poet, and proposed that he should cross the street. “Nay, nay, my young friend,” said the bard pathetically; “that’s all over now!” and after a slight pause he quoted two verses of Lady Grizel Bailie’s touching ballad:—

“His bonnet stood aince fu’ fair on his brow,
His auld ane looked better than mony ane’s new;
But now he let’s wear any way it will hing,
And casts himsel’ dowie upon the corn-bing.

“O! were we young, as we aince hae been,
We sud hae been galloping down on you green;
And linking it over the lily-white lea;
And werena my heart light I would dee.”

This incident has been adduced as a proof that Burns at this period (admittedly the darkest in his career) had become an object of “universal rejection.” Never was there a greater mistake; and it would be even wrong to suppose that the dejection that he felt, and expressed in Lady Grizel’s verse, was more than momentary, or otherwise than semi-dramatic. One who is overcome by real heart distress does not seek to give it vent by measured poetical quotations. Half an hour after the rencontre, Burns and Mr. McCulloch had some cheerful chit-chat over a glass of punch in the bard’s own house, the latter having thoroughly recovered his spirits; and so charming was his discourse, and so sweetly did Bonnie Jean sing some of his recent effusions, that the Laird of Ardwell left the couple with reluctance to join his fashionable friends in Irish Street.

Mr. Gray, referring to the poet about this time, states that though malicious stories were circulated freely against him, his early friends gave them no credit, and clung to him through good and bad report. “To the last day of his life,” he says, “his judgment, his memory, his imagination, were fresh and vigorous as when he composed the ‘Cottar’s Saturday Night.’ The truth is, that Burns was seldom intoxicated. The drunkard soon becomes besotted, and is shunned even by the convivial. Had he been so, he would not long have continued the idol of every party.” We have the testimony of the poet’s widow that her husband “never drank by himself at home,” and that he still continued to attend church—two facts which, apart from other more decided evidence, tell against the stigma that he had become recklessly dissipated in his latest years.

Burns’s circumstances whilst in Dumfries were humble, but not poverty-stricken. His official income was £50, extra allowances usually bringing it up to £70; and his share in fines averaged an additional £10. “Add to all this,” says Chambers, “the solid perquisites which he derived from seizures of contraband spirits, tea, and other articles, which it was then the custom to divide among the officers, and we shall see that Burns could scarcely be considered as enjoying less than £90 a year.”

If the poet would have accepted money payment for the glorious coinage of his fancy, he might easily have doubled this income or more; but, with a magnanimity which, however mistaken, illustrates the unselfishness of his nature, he steadily refused all offers of pecuniary reward for his lyrical productions. Of George Thomson’s *Musical Miscellany*, Burns was the chief minstrel, but he scorned to barter his melodious contributions for worldly gear, even when “one pound one he sairly wanted.” Thomson having ventured to send some cash to the bard on one occasion, drew down upon himself this rebuke, dated July, 1793:—“I assure you, my dear sir, that you truly hurt me with your pecuniary parcel. It degrades me in my own eyes. However, to return it would savour of affectation; but as to any more traffic of that debtor and creditor kind, I swear by that HONOUR which crowns the upright statue of ROBERT BURNS’S INTEGRITY, on the least motion of it, I will indignantly spurn the bypas transactions, and from that moment commence entire stranger to you.”

According to the testimony of the bard’s eldest son, given to Mr. Chambers, and amply corroborated by others, the house in Mill Street was of a good order, such as was occupied at that time by the better class of burghesses; and his father and mother led a life that was comparatively genteel. “They always had a maid-servant, and sat in their parlour. That apartment, together with two bedrooms, was well furnished and carpeted; and when good company assembled, which was often the case, the hospitable board which they surrounded was of a patrician mahogany. There was much rough comfort in the house, not to have been found in those of ordinary citizens; for, besides the spoils of smugglers, as above mentioned, the poet received many presents of game and country produce from the rural gentlefolk, besides occasional barrels of oysters from Hill, Cunningham; and other friends in town; so that he possibly was as much envied by some of his neighbours, as he has since been pitied by the general body of his countrymen.—William MacDowall.