

HABITS AND OPINIONS OF THE POETS.

BURNS.

The story of Burns is as familiar as his poetry; his habits and opinions shine undisguisedly through his verse. The mention of his name brings his manly character and figure at once before us, overtopping the scene like his own fine sketch of Edinburgh Castle—

"There, watching high the least alarms,
The rough rude fortress gleams afar."

We had a long and memorable conversation lately with the poet's eldest surviving son, who was about ten years of age when his father died, and who remembers him distinctly and affectionately. This gentleman was, after Burns' death, placed by some friends of the family at college in Scotland, and from thence was transferred to a situation in the Stamp-office, London, in which situation he continued clerk until within the last few years. He retired with an allowance of £120 per annum, in obtaining which he was aided by the active generosity of Lord Brougham, then chancellor. Mr. Burns now resides in the town of Dumfries, where his illustrious father closed his brief and glorious, but troubled career. This gentleman says that full justice has not been done to the poet's arduous study and intense desire for knowledge. He was an incessant reader—of history, politics, poetry, and whatever else fell in his way. His mind was ever in action, burning, blazing on, in its rapid course, "to that dark inn, the grave." Burns had, by his father's fireside, or in moments snatched from severe toil, mastered the first six books of *Euclid*. He had also taken instructions as a land-surveyor, and his son possesses his measuring-chain, a link or two of which is sometimes begged as a relic of genius. He kept up his acquaintance with the French language, of which he had gathered a scanty knowledge by a fortnight's attendance before harvest on his early and kindly preceptor, John Murdoch, at Ayr. The poet's son seems fond of pointing out the favourite walks and scenes of his father on the banks of the river Nith. The ruined Abbey or College of Lindisden, which stands in a solitary spot, where two waters meet, about a mile and a half from the town, was one of his chosen haunts. It is surrounded with soft swelling green mounds, the remains of a bowling-green and flower garden, and some old ash trees. "On one of these little knolls," says the son, "I have often seen my father stand, while he told me to play about till he wished to return home. On this spot he could command a view of both the Gothic windows of a chapel, through which the sky and trees seem a perfect picture, encased, in a massive frame—and it was here, after a long midnight reverie, that he composed his 'Vision.'"

"As I stood by yon roofless tower,
Where the wa' flower scents the dewy air,
Where the howlet mourns in her ivy bower,
And tells the midnight moon her care;
The winds were laid, the air was still,
The stars they shot along the sky;
The fox was howling on the hill,
And the distant-echoing glens reply."

When we visited the spot, the ash trees were bare, and the winds howled through the old ruins; we forgot the monks and nuns that once tenanted the place, but the poet stood visibly before us in the light of genius, and so he will stand to many a future generation, ennobling the scene with associations unknown before.

Mr. Allan Cunningham has given a graphic description of the poet's death, in the midst of misery and distress. "On the fourth day," says the biographer, "when his attendant held a cordial to his lips, he swallowed it eagerly—rose almost wholly up—spread out his hands—sprang forward nigh the whole length of the bed—fell on his face—and expired." Burns' son, who saw his father expire, says this is a pure romance—Mr. Cunningham must have been egregiously misinformed. The poet was too much crippled by disease, and too much enfeebled, for such a strange exertion. He lay, a helpless wreck, his mind wandering in delirium. His last words were—"That d—d rascal, Mathew Penn"—an incoherent ejaculation, prompted probably by some dread of the law and a gaol—for Mathew Penn was an attorney, and the poet was a few pounds in debt. Alas! we may say with William Roscoe—

"'Tis done, the powerful charm succeeds;
His high reluctant spirit bends;
In bitterness of soul he bleeds,
Nor longer with his fate contends.
An idiot laugh the welkin rends
As genius thus degraded lies;
Till pitying Heaven the veil extends,
That shrouds the poet's ardent eyes."

Burns, a few days before his death, begged five pounds from Mr. George Thomson of Edinburgh, and ten pounds from his cousin, James Burnes, of Montrose. His haughty spirit was crushed and broken—the iron had entered into his soul. Yet let us say, in justice to those friends who saw the poet daily, and

should have ministered to his wants, that Burns' situation, horrible as it was, must have been made yet more gloomy and terrible by his imagination. His family knew nothing of these applications for money till after the poet's death, when two bank drafts—one for five pounds from Thompson, and the other for ten pounds from Mr. Burns of Montrose—were found among his papers. They had never been used.

Let us also correct a trifling error of Mr. Cunningham, in justice to Mrs. Burns, who had a native taste and delicacy of feeling on many subjects, far above her station and opportunities. "Though Burns now knew he was dying," remarks Mr. C., "his good-humour was unruined, and his wit never forsook him. When he looked up and saw Dr. Maxwell at his bedside—'Alas!' he said, 'what has brought you here? I am but a poor crow and not worth plucking. He pointed to his pistols, and took them in his hand, and gave them to Maxwell, saying they could not be in worthier keeping, and he should never more need of them. This relieved his proud heart from a sense of obligation.'" Burns did not present his pistols to the physician; but a few weeks after his death, his widow, knowing that the relic would be appreciated, sent them to Maxwell as a memorial of the poet, and a token of her gratitude.

It is in the country of Ayr that we must look for the chief localities of Burns, and for traces of his early musings. The most imperishable of his lyrics consecrate the banks of his native stream. We have followed his steps from the cottage in which he was born, to Tarbolton, where he became a freemason and a poet. The books of the mason lodge yet remain, and no man could be more devoted to the mystic craft than brother Burns. He is recorded as having been present at almost every meeting; he often presided, and the minutes are signed by him as chairman. Near the lodge is a thatched, one-story cottage, in which Burns established a debating club, and where he shone as "a bright particular star" among a few wandering rustics. His mind was now developing itself, and his genius found a vent in these humble scenes of distinction. But close by was the abode of Highland Mary, and Burns' soul was touched with new and deeper emotions. Mary was but a poor dairymaid, in the proud castle of Montgomery. She was, however, eminently lovely and virtuous, and the young poet met her daily among scenery of the most beautiful description. The castle stands on a high bank, wooded and precipitous, and at the foot of it murmurs a stream, half hid by foliage, near which the lovers used to meet at gloaming, or twilight. A thorn tree is still pointed out as the trysting-place—

"Who that has melted o'er his lay,
To Mary's soul in Heaven above,
But pictured sees, in fancy strong,
The landscape and the livelong day
That smiled upon their mutual love?"

This was the day on which Burns and Mary parted. They stood on each side of a small brook; they laved their hands in the stream, and holding a Bible between them, pronounced their vows, to be faithful to each other. The lovers never met again; Mary fell a prey to disease while her vow was yet fresh upon her: the poet mixed in many scenes; he burst into distipation; mingled with the high-born and the illustrious, and removed, with other ties, to scenes far removed from the wooded banks of the burn of Faillee and the river Ayr. Yet never was the day of the scene forgotten. Years afterwards, when he resided in the vale of Nith, Burns' wife watched him, one evening in September, striding up and down slowly, contemplating the starry sky. He fixed his eyes on a beautiful planet, "that shone like another moon," and he poured out his soul in impassioned verse.

"Thou lingering star, with lessening ray,
That lovest to greet the early morn,
Again thou usherest in the day
My Mary from my soul was torn.
O Mary! dear departed shade,
Where is thy place of blissful rest;
Seest thou thy lover lowly laid,
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast?"

This is the most beautiful and touching passage in all Burns' life. His after-loves were of the earth, earthly, but his passion for Highland Mary was as pure as it was fervent and lasting. It dawned upon him at the most susceptible period of life; it let in enchantment upon those scenes and objects which he had previously looked upon with coldness or aversion; it gave a finer tone of humanity to his whole moral being. Let us not admit the dictum of Byron, that "the cold in climate are cold in blood," since in peasant life, among the woods of Ayr, was nursed in solitude and obscurity a passion as deep and thrilling and romantic as the loves of Tasso or Tetrarch, and immeasurably beyond those of Sidney and Waller. Sacharissa and the fair ones of Arcadia must yield to the dairymaid of Montgomery Castle!

When Burns' fortune assumed a darker complexion, and his temper was soured by disappointment and neglect, the constitutional melancholy to which he had been ever prone gathered force, and he delighted in stern and desolate scenery. Amidst the gaieties and splendour of Edinburgh, he had dark forebodings and dis-

mal thoughts. We have heard old John Richmond at Mauchline (with whom the poet lodged and slept in a garret room in the Lawnmarket) state that, on returning from the routs of the nobility, the poet would throw himself gloomily on his bed, and beg his friend to read him asleep. In later years he sought the woods, delighted, in a cloudy winter day, to hear the stormy wind howling among the trees, and raving over the plain. "It is my best season for devotion," he writes; "my mind is wrapt up in a kind of enthusiasm to Him, who, in the pompous language of the Hebrew 'bard, walks on the wings of the wind.'" In another letter he says that the first of January, or New Year's day, the great carnival of Presbyterian Scotland, where Christmas is little celebrated—the first Sunday in May, a breezy, blue-skied noon some time about the beginning, and a hoary morning and calm sunny day about the end of autumn, these had been, time out of mind, a kind of holiday with him. What follows, has been repeatedly quoted, but we cannot resist transcribing the passage. What would we not give for a similar declaration from Shakespeare?

"I have some favourite flowers in spring, among which are the mountain-daisy, the harebell, the foxglove, the wild brier-rose, the budding birch, and the hoary hawthorn, that I never view and hang over without particular delight. I never hear the loud, solitary whistle of the curlew in a summer noon, or the wild mixing cadence of a troop of gray plovers in an autumnal morning, without feeling an elevation of soul like the enthusiasm of devotion, or poetry. Tell me my dear friend, to what can this be owing? Are we a piece of machinery, which, like the Eolian harp, passive, takes the impression of the passing accident? or do these workings argue something within us above the trodden clod? I own myself partial to such proofs, of those awful and important realities—a God that made all things—man's immaterial and immortal nature—and a world of weal or woe beyond death and the grave."

This noble passage is conceived in a spirit of poetry which Burns seldom reached, and never excelled, in the fetters of rhyme. Something of the same meditative and philosophical spirit is found in his tender lines on scaring wild-fowl on Loch Turit, and in his verses written in Friars Carse Hermitage. The religious opinions of Burns were early tinged with Socinianism, if not Unitarianism. His father had written a little manual of devotion for the use of his family, (which we believe still exists in manuscript with Mr. Gilbert Burns' descendants,) in which he inclined to the Arminian doctrine. The poet was thus led from infancy to look with some distrust on the rigid Calvinism of the Scottish church. Afterwards he associated with some heterodox ministers of Ayrshire, at a time when "polemical divinity was putting the country half mad," and his feelings, prejudices, and predilections all tended to fix upon him the peculiar heresy or belief to which we have alluded. It continued with him through life. When in his latter days he praised Cowper's "Task," he expected its "scraps of Calvinistic divinity." The opinion of the country people was, that the whole Burns family were believers in the unpopular creed of Socinus. There still lives an old man named Humphrey, who has found refuge in a poor's house in Ayrshire, on whom Burns wrote a coarse epigram—

"ON A NOISY POLEMIC.

"Below thir stanes lie Jamie's banes:
O Death, it's my opinion,
Thou ne'er took such a bletherin' b—ch
Into thy dark dominion!"

The aged polemic was a stone-mason, and built Burns' out-houses at the farm of Mossiel. He is now in his eighty-second year, but lively and acute, and still ready for a theological argument. The occasion of the above lines he describes in terms like the following. "I saw Burns one day coming towards me on the road from Mossiel, and I began to consider what I should say to him, for there was nobody in the whole country side was a match for him at an argument. I had been reading Quevedo's 'Visions of Hell,' and so when the poet came up to me with his usual question, 'Weel, Jamie, what news?' I said there was strange intelligence from the lower regions—that there was a controversy among the condemned spirits, whether they should keep on the *auld deil*, or prefer, in his place, a certain wild poet of Ayrshire: the elderly part of the assembly were for keeping on the 'auld deil,' but the younger ones, who knew the poet's writings, were keen for appointing him to the command! Burns laughed at this; he called me a bletherin' b—ch, and soon after wrote the verse." We tried to confine this old man to Burns' history, but he wandered into polemics, and could only speak vaguely as to the poet's wildness, his Unitarianism, and his unrivalled powers of conversation and debate.

We need not say much of Burns' politics. He was at first a Jacobite, and afterwards a Jacobin—two very dissimilar characters. The first was a boyish whim, that had its seat in national partialities, and in the poetical feeling of sympathy for departed power and greatness. "A stranger filled the throne," and Burns did not inquire whether the will of the people and the cause of good government had placed him there, or whether it was acquired by usurpation. When the French Revolution burst upon the world, many generous spirits were touched by the spectacle of a great nation throwing off the manacles of ages, and vindicating the native