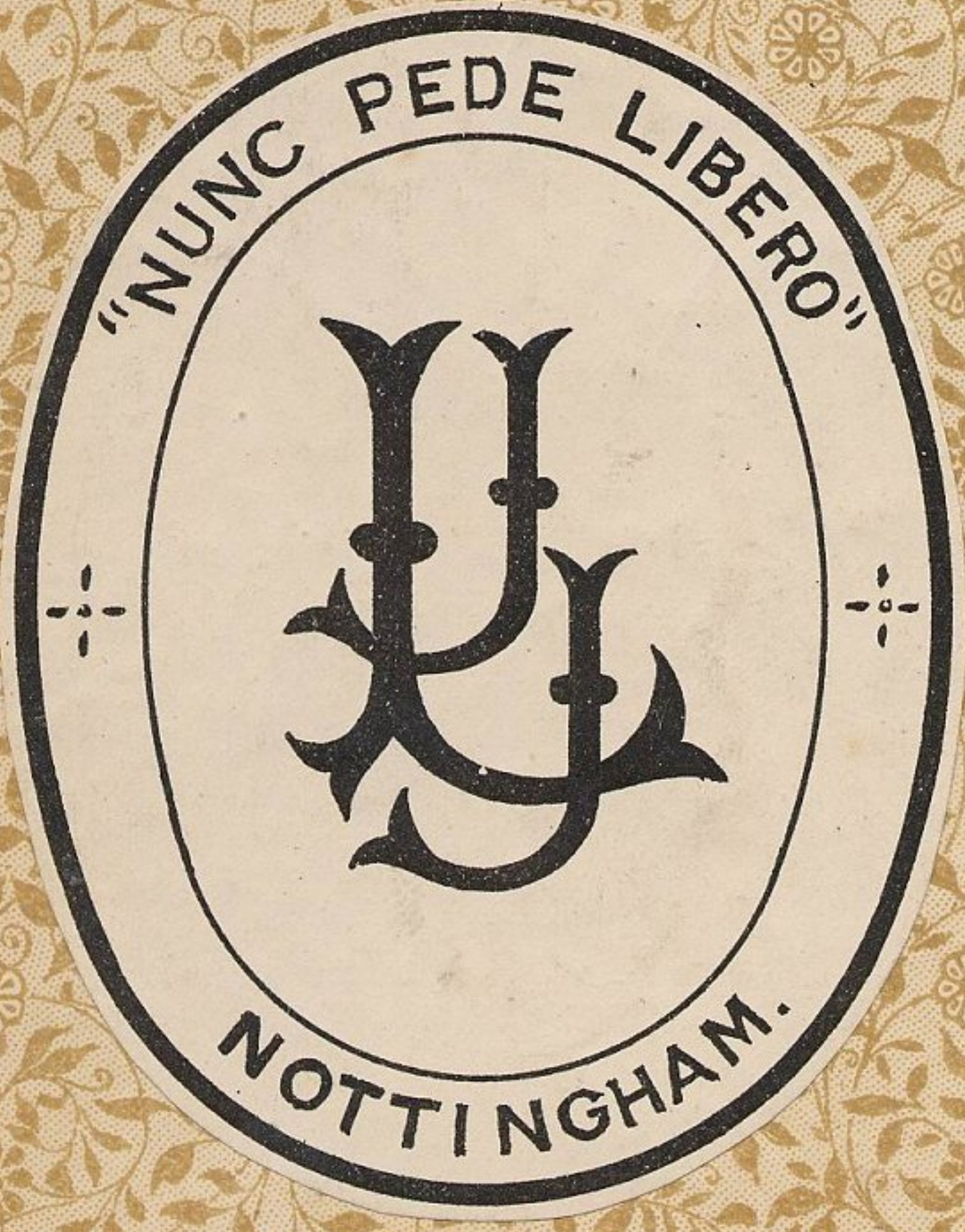


Burns
AT
Mosses Gate



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Burns at Mossiel.

ROBERT BURNS

AT

MOSSGIEL:

WITH REMINISCENCES OF THE POET BY
HIS HERD-BOY.

BY

WILLIAM JOLLY, F.R.S.E., F.G.S.,

H.M. INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS.



PAISLEY: ALEXANDER GARDNER.

1881.

BURNS again !

Can anything new be said on a theme so trite ?

One might reply, with Dyer, "Ever charming, ever new," when will Scotland be tired of speaking and hearing of her great poet ? Some new matters will, however, be found in the work.

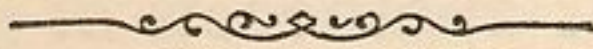
But in such a subject, new presentation is more than mere facts, and this the present volume claims to be. It is a study of the old story in connection with a new and marked personality ; a new crystallization of old particles round a fresh and peculiar nucleus, which influences not only the form but the colouring of the aggregate ; a new looking at the old sun, with a new object glass, which may reveal somewhat more of its character and constituents.

All that the Editor essays, so far as the facts are concerned, is, like Sir Henry Wotton, to be "a gatherer and disposer of other men's stuff."


If this little book help the reader towards a more vivid, thorough, and life-like realization of the conditions under which was produced the brightest burst of true poesy Scotland has ever seen, it will have done good service.

INVERNESS, January, 1881.

BURNS AT MOSSGIEL.



“He asked for bread ; they gave him a stone.”

UCH has often been the short sad story of many of earth's greater sons. Gifted with faculties other than those that win bread and give worldly success, they have been allowed to remain in obscurity and poverty, if not in want ; and, not till bread was no longer needed, has the world awakened to a sense of the loss it has sustained. Then have followed regret, the sculptured stone, and hero-worship. But this after-glorifying of the greater dead is a beautiful

feature in humanity, shewing a true heart, a seeking for the higher and nobler beneath their seeming neglect, in the everyday hard and hardening race for power and pelf that seems the sum of its external history. It has an elevating and regenerating power, this apotheosis of her dead heroes and starved singers, which forms a large element in religion itself ; and it will be a sad day for the world when this sentiment ceases to have the potent spell it has ever wielded over mankind.

This has been abundantly illustrated in Scotland's treatment of her national poet. In his lifetime, first magnified as a rustic phenomenon, then dropped, and half-forgotten, he was allowed to die in debt, deserted by all but a faithful few. But he was scarcely cold in the clay, when the posthumous honours of mingled sorrow, regret, and admiration were heaped on his insensate dust, and his fame has steadily increased with the

gathering years, till now it is an enthusiasm world-wide and wonderful. Everything Burns said has been treasured ; every corner he saw or sung has been visited ; every object he possessed or touched has been cherished like the precious relics of more than saint ; and his utterances have become dear "household words" in many lands. Long may this continue, notwithstanding ineffectual frowns ; for it is an education of the people, powerful and elevating. Who can estimate the influence thus wielded by the poet, in raising national taste in sentiment and poetry, in broadening and refining national feeling, in increasing the national love of nature and appreciation of the beautiful scenery scattered so lavishly over the land, in widening national sympathy, in mellowing the harder features of the national character, in redeeming national life from over-worldliness, and in raising national manhood !

I.—*Willie Patrick, the Mossiel Herd.*

“ A true guid fallow
Wi’ right ingine.”¹

TWENTY years ago and more, in December, 1859, in a kindred spirit of hero-worship, which sent me to every corner where Burns had been, from the birth room at Alloway to the mausoleum at Dumfries, I visited Mauchline and Mossiel, as the scenes and sources of the greatest outburst of his poetic genius,—producing the poetry which then dazzled Scotland, and on which the fame of Burns still mainly rests. While wandering about Mauchline and its

¹ Epistle to John Kennedy, written at Mossiel, in 1786.

famous churchyard, I had the good fortune to meet William Patrick, or as he called himself, Willie Paitrick, who had been one of Burns's herd-boys during his residence at Mossgiel. He was a man of no common type, then in his 84th year, being born in 1776. He was short, and his real height was also hidden by a considerable stoop, due to hard labour and old age. In walking, he used a staff, on which, however, he was not much dependent, only leaning on it while talking, and which he used freely to emphasise his words, point to places he spoke of, and strike sharply anything he wished to mark with his vigorous action. He was singularly energetic in all he did and said, and surprisingly keen in intellect for one so old. He seemed a man of clear mind and good natural ability, possessing great Scotch shrewdness, a good deal of humour, which appeared in his face and speech, high nervous temperament, strong phy-

sique, and good health. In going along the road, his irrepressible vigour showed itself in his short, sharp step, and in a constant use of his staff to illustrate his words. When making any statement of which I wished confirmation, he would turn quickly round, and earnestly answer me that "it was as sure as death," or "as sure as I hit that broomcove," or "knock the heed aff that thistle." He was delightfully bright, cheerful, and full of rapid and interesting talk, which proved good observation, an excellent memory, and no small knowledge of men and things. His natural flow of reminiscence had evidently been increased by frequently traversing the same ground with numerous auditors. Though his speech was fluent, it was not in the least garrulous, and was perfectly free from the glib formalities of professional cicerones to places of note. He spoke excellent Scotch, with the vigorous picturesqueness that characterises

the Ayrshire dialect, now become classical through the Mossgiel farmer. His phraseology was simple and piquant, frequently giving, in a single word or phrase, a volume of meaning, not easily forgotten. His characterisation of persons was peculiarly apt and expressive, and revealed much insight and descriptive power. It is now only in such old men, a class too rapidly passing away, that the singular force and felicity of old Scotch, as an instrument of speech, are seen and felt.

Willie Patrick had been with Burns at Mossgiel for four years, while the poet and his brother were in that farm, between March 1784 and April 1788. He acted chiefly as herd and general outdoor servant, and perhaps occasionally as "gaudsman," accompanying Burns to "goad" or drive the horses, and give him other assistance; and the poet then used to plough with four horses. He

stayed at the farm, sleeping, like the other servants, in the loft above the stables, as was then, and still often is, the custom. He was a boy about eight years of age when he went first to Moss-giel. Naturally observant, liking the family and especially the poet, and being happy in his work, he seems to have taken keen note of the everyday life there, as all young people do regarding persons and places where they make their first start, and gained impressions which his good memory had well preserved. He afterwards became a shoemaker with his father, and then served many years in the army, like an elder brother called George, one of the five surviving contemporaries of Burns in Mauchline at the centenary celebration of the poet's birth. After his discharge from the Scots Greys, he returned once more to the shoes, at which he worked for many years. At one time, he acted as general

servant with his great master's friend, Gavin Hamilton. Latterly, at a small salary, he superintended the farmers' drainage on the Duke of Portland's estates near Mauchline.

He was evidently proud of his connexion with the Burnsese, and prouder still to tell it; and he used often to accompany visitors to the interesting spots associated with the poet.² At the celebration on the memorable 25th of January, 1859, which roused such enthusiasm in all English-speaking countries, Willie Patrick and a Mr. Hamilton, once also servant to Gavin Hamilton when Burns used to visit there, were the heroes of the procession to Mossgiel, being carried thither with great "pomp

² On one occasion, one of the poet's sons, when on a visit to Mauchline, asked Patrick to accompany him to the various scenes connected with his parents, and the old man spent the quarter part of a day doing so,—a pleasure and honour to which he used frequently to refer.

and circumstance," in a triumphal car. He had married early and had eight children, two of whom still survive. One of these, Mrs. Wilson, a widow with a family, who now lives in Mauchline, I visited some time ago. She inherits a good deal of her father's natural vivacity, and much of his keenness of speech when interested, though sadder experiences have given her a mild and quiet demeanour. She can tell much of the old man and his memories of Mauchline and its neighbourhood.³

Patrick lived, when I saw him, in Loudon Street, which runs along by the churchyard, in the second flat of a house opposite the entrance to Gavin Hamilton's. Mrs. Patrick, his wife, was a pleasant old woman, bright-eyed and communicative, fond of her old man, and proud of his

³ To one of her sons, named after his grandfather, I am greatly indebted for assistance in writing this work.

connexion with Mossgiel ; frequently confirming his statements with a decided "as sure's ye live," while she moved about her household duties, and occasionally added to his narrative. Their house was small but neat and tidy, like its interesting inmates, and cheerfully and comfortably furnished. A sword and scabbard, mementoes of Willie's warlike days, I recall as adorning the wall above the bright fireplace.

The old man accompanied me to every point of interest connected with Burns in and around Mauchline, went out with me to Mossgiel, took me through the churchyard, and invited me to his house, where I sat for some time enjoying the happy talk of the two bright old people. Patrick died seventeen years ago, in 1864 ; his wife survived him six years, dying in 1870. Unfortunately, I was unable to revisit Mauchline till long after, and I never saw the old man or his wife again.

But his reminiscences of the great poet, as gathered in the short time I was with him, are, I venture to think, worth recording; as the humble, but none the less interesting, contributions of one closely associated with him in the most productive period of his life, who had formed a member of the remarkable circle that then gathered round the hearth of Near Mossgiel.⁴

⁴ A story is preserved in the family, of George, the brother already mentioned, which is interesting as illustrative of the kindly geniality of the poet. George had become a soldier, and, after the birth of his first-born, a girl, met his wife at Dumfries to have the child baptised. He knew no one there, however, and how was it to be done? Remembering that Burns was then settled in Dumfries, he called on him and was received with the utmost cordiality, for "auld lang syne." After hearing his difficulty, the poet replied that it would not be a hard job to get the child christened, as he knew a good fellow of a minister, as fond of a dram as himself, who would be ready to do it. Burns at once arranged

the matter, and the ceremony was duly performed, the grateful parents naming the infant Jean, after the famous bearer of that name. She was the first of six, and she died in 1876, aged 82 ; only one of the rest now survives, at the age of 79.



II.—The Burns Household at Mossgiel.

“From scenes like these
Old Scotia’s grandeur springs.”⁵

MOSSGIEL, as all the world knows, is a small farm situated about a mile from Mauchline in Ayrshire, on the road to Tarbolton and Irvine. It stands on an elevated ridge of trap between the valleys of the Ayr and the Cessnock, into both of which it looks, and which are celebrated in the songs of its famous tenant. The prospect from it is broad and beautiful, commanding a wide expanse of mingled wood-

⁵ “Cottar’s Saturday Night,” written at Mossgiel, in 1875.

land and upland country, arable and pastoral. In front, you look down along the pleasant valley of the Water of Ayr, which is enclosed by undulating well wooded hills, cultivated to their summits. The town of Ayr itself is hidden to the right by intervening eminences, but, on a clear day, the distant sea and the blue peaks of Arran are visible, beyond the long-withdrawn vale. Straight opposite, your eye rests on the green heights of Dalmellington ; to the left, you gaze across the beautiful Ballochmyle, to the more distant uplands of Cumnock and Muirkirk, the scenes of the old Covenanting days. Over this splendid landscape, from his front door, the poet could witness the glories of the dying day bathe in beauty the "bonny banks of Ayr." Behind the house, to the east, across the hollow of the Cessnock, you look on the Galston Muirs, as he looked on them that "simmer morn" when

“The rising sun o’er Galston Muirs
Wi’ glorious light was glintin’,
The hares were hirplin’ down the furs,
The lav’rocks they were chantin’
Fu’ sweet that day.”

Here also the valley of the Irvine, seen through a depression to the left, discloses a fine glimpse of retreating hills beyond. Altogether, it is a glorious place to dwell in, commanding on every side a varied panorama of the soothing and picturesque scenery of the Southern Highlands, the centre of the inspiring struggles for religious and political liberty of our gallant forefathers; hiding a hundred nooks full of nature’s sweetest glimpses, and embosoming numerous happy homes of rustic seclusion and lowly worth.

The present farm house consists of two stories, the original cottage occupied by Burns having been renovated a short time before I met Patrick,

and a storey added to it. A tall hedge, some twelve feet high, now stands right in front of it, and almost hides it from the passer-by. This hedge was quite low when the poet stayed there, so Patrick said, and is believed to have been planted by him or in his time. As the tall trees below the highway were then also very young, there was an uninterrupted view of the country beyond, from the front door. Patrick told me that, when the old house occupied by Burns was pulled down, great crowds came from all quarters to see it, carrying off relics of its worm-eaten timber and broken stones; and that portions of the wood were manufactured into keepsakes, at the Mauchline wood factory,—one volume of the poet's works, bound in the same, being presented to the present tenant,⁶ who is only

⁶ Mr. Wylie, an enthusiastic Burnsite, fully informed regarding the life of the poet in Mossgiel. At the Centenary

the second since Burns's time. Nothing, therefore, now exists of the memorable dwelling but the shell of old walls, which reach half-way up the present, as can easily be detected by the eye. All the existing outhouses are new.

There are three farms enjoying the name of Mossgiel, that is, the waste or fallow ridge,⁷ known, in the poet's day, according to Patrick, as, "Near,"

in 1859, a bust of Burns crowned with holly, presented by Mr. Andrew Smith of Mauchline, was also left in Mr. Wylie's care, but it has since come to grief.

⁷ Such is the derivation of the name suggested to me by the Rev. Alex. M^cGregor of Inverness, a superior Gaelic scholar; from the Celtic *Màs-geal*, pronounced *Maos-gheul*, derived from *Màs*, the thigh or flank, applied also to a ridge, and *geal*, white, waste, bleak, fallow. Land is said to be *geal* or *ban* or white, when not fully cultivated, with a bare bleak appearance. Most parts of the body are used in Gaelic as descriptive of localities. The English word *Moss* is not Gaelic, being from the German *Moos*, or Scandinavian *Mos*, mossy ground.

“Far,” and “Nether” Mossgiel, but now designated, East, West, and South Mossgiel. Burns occupied “Near,” or East Mossgiel, “Nether” being on the slope of the Ayr below it, and “Far” standing farther along the Irvine road.

The house, in the poet's day, as described by Patrick, consisted of a one-storied cottage, and though called “the auld clay biggin’,” in the “Vision,” was well built, having been erected as a country residence for Gavin Hamilton of Mauchline, who sub-let it to Burns. It had only a “but and ben,”⁸ or a kitchen and parlour, with a garret above, to which a movable “trap” or wooden steps led up, in the lobby behind the door. This garret consisted of three small apartments, the two nearest to Mauchline being used as bedrooms, and the

⁸ The words are derived from *be-out* and *be-in*, the better room being counted the inner or sanctuary.

third as a lumber closet, reached from the kitchen. The end room had a single small window of four panes, in the gable.⁹ The small middle apartment was lighted by a larger four-paned window or skylight placed in the sloping roof, and formed the bedroom and private chamber of the two brothers, Robert and Gilbert; containing their joint bed, and a small table under the window used for writing on, with a drawer in which the poet kept his papers.¹⁰ The best room, or "ben

⁹ This room was the bedroom of Burns's sons, on one of their visits to Mossgiel; so Mr. Wylie informs me.

¹⁰ The vignette on the title page, is a sketch of the cottage, by Mr. W. H. J. Boot, of London, taken from the well known picture of Mossgiel, by D. O. Hill.

The arrangements of the garret, which I have from Willie Patrick and Mr. Wylie, it is important to note, as they have not always been correctly stated, even by good authorities such as Chambers, whose edition of the poet is invaluable, and will never be superseded. In "The

house," was at the end next to Mauchline, and was the celebrated "spence" of the "Vision," the scene of the Muse's visit to the future Laureate of Scotland. The roof was so low that it could easily be touched when standing. The door was

Land of Burns," edited by Christopher North and Robert Chambers, (Vol. i., p. 101,) the poet's bedroom is incorrectly called a "stable-loft," evidently for rhetorical effect, in contrast with the genius it sheltered.

There, it is also said that John Blane, one of Burns's "gaudsmen," used to occupy the same bed with his master. This would appear to be a mistake, corrected by Chambers in his edition of the poet; for Blane, who afterwards drove the mail-coach between Glasgow and Carlisle for many years, and used to talk freely of his connexion with Mossgiel, never mentioned this to even the oldest inhabitants. Willie Patrick and Mr. Wylie agree on the point. That the middle room in the garret was the bedroom of the brothers, Mr. Wylie was distinctly told by Mrs. Begg, when she visited Mossgiel. The window in the roof that lighted it was to the back of the cottage, and thus does not appear in the picture.

opened by a string on the outside, hanging through a hole in the wood, which lifted the "sneck" or latch, as told in the poem. This room contained "fixed" beds along the back wall for some of the women of the house, the rest sleeping in the kitchen.

Patrick gave a pleasing picture of the hard-working household. The Burnses lived chiefly in the busy kitchen, at the other end. Mrs. Burns, the good old mother, then between fifty and sixty,¹ a "wee boo'd body" he said, generally occupied a chair close by the fire; the worthy father having died at Lochlea, in the February before they came to Mossgiel, in 1784. The house was

¹ She was named Agnes Brown, and was born on the 17th of March, 1732. William Burnes and she were "married together," as his entry on the family Bible states, on the 15th of December, 1757. He was born on the 11th of November, 1721, and died on the 13th of February, 1784.

kept by the youngest daughter, Isobel,² called "Bell" by Patrick, in the usual plain Scotch style, afterwards the well-known Mrs. Begg, for whom he retained the warmest regard, and who was only thirteen years old on their taking the farm. The other members of the family were the eldest and head, the poet himself; his brother Gilbert, who, though younger, took principal charge; another sister, a female friend who assisted in the kitchen, the "bonny sweet wee lady," his "sonsie smirking dear-bought Bess,"³ an infant child of the

² So her name is spelled by her father, in the register in the family Bible; not Isabella, as it is generally written.

³ See the "Inventory," which gives a free and humorous catalogue of his possessions at Mossgiel. To Bess was addressed the lines, "Thou's welcome wean," when she first came to the house. She is also mentioned in his "Farewell, Old Scotia." She afterwards married John Bishop, manager at Polkemmet, near Bathgate.

poet, and latterly, his eldest son, Robert, by Jean Armour.

During their whole residence at Mossgiel, there were no female servants,—as Burns says, he had “nane in female servin’ station,”—the whole household and dairy work being carried on by the women of the family, as was customary in Scotland in those hard-working days. Besides these, there were men-servants required for the rougher work of the farm,—Robert Allan, a relation of the family, John Blane, the “gaudsman” who was driving the horses when the mouse was unearthed, which created the exquisite lyric, and to whom he afterwards read it, Davie Hutchison, generally known as “girnin’ Davie,” and Willie Patrick, having all served in this capacity, three being required at one time—

“ Three mischievous boys,
Run deils for rantin’ and for noise,”

All the household slept in the house except the three male servants, who had their beds in the stable loft.

Burns has himself completed the account of his farming possessions, in the "Inventory."

Patrick used chiefly to be employed about the kitchen and farm-yard, doing little jobs, feeding and herding the cattle, mucking the byre, acting on occasions as "gaudsman," running to town with letters and on other errands, and making himself generally useful. He remembered, when the family were employed during the long winter nights in the kitchen, to have sat on the other side of the great fireplace, opposite Mrs. Burns, peeling potatoes for supper and next day's dinner, or being otherwise engaged; while the "women folk" were working and chatting at their various occupations. The boys were accustomed to retire to the stable loft early in the evening, so that, he

said, they were never present at "the reading," or family worship, which was held nightly in the house, conducted by the poet, or by his douce brother in his absence. The whole of this numerous household were accustomed to take their food in the kitchen, and Patrick mentioned that he never saw the poet at any meal except when he was reading, spoon in the one hand, book in the other.

What a beautiful simplicity is revealed in this home of the Burnses ; universal in those patriarchal days, when the master and his family did not think, or *dream* of thinking, it beneath them to mingle with their servants, not only in the daily work of the field, but in familiar intercourse in the house, sitting at the same table, nay, partaking of the same dish ! Are our grander ways and growing separatism morally healthier or happier ?

Of the various members of the Mossgiel circle,

Patrick spoke in his clever off-hand fashion. Gilbert Burns he thought greatly of, as "a douce sensible man;" but his quiet demeanour and retiring style would seem not to have stamped any special impressions on the memory of the boy, naturally more attracted by outward picturesque-ness than by inward unobtrusive worth. Gilbert remained in Mossgiel for ten years, that is, for six years after his brother went to Ellisland in 1788. But, next to the poet himself, Patrick had most to tell of that "fine lassie Bell," who was his special favourite. Mrs. Begg seems to have retained a sincere regard for the herd-boy, and was always glad to see him, when she became known and courted. Three years before I met him, she sought out Patrick, when visiting Mauchline after many years' absence, warmly shook hands with him, and asked him to accompany her over the dear scenes of earlier days. Two years before

his death, along with his daughter, Mrs. Wilson, Patrick made a special visit to see her, after she had returned in her latter years to Ayr, where she died. At the time of Patrick's visit, being then very old and frail, she was obliged to deny herself to the countless callers who desired to see the only surviving sister of the national poet. When Willie went to the house, he was told that she could not see anyone, being then in bed. The old man, learning that she was not seriously ill, then sent a message by the servant—"Tell her that it's Will Paitrick that wishes to see her!" The good lady at once eagerly consented, and rose from bed, and, though taking a whole hour to dress, came down stairs. And the two only survivors of the old Mossgiel days, the one ninety and the other close upon it, sat talking, long and late, of the dear old time when she used to steal upstairs to the garret after meals, to read, in the

papers in the table drawer under the skylight there, the poems of her clever brother, with wonderment and worship in her silent heart ; of the sadness and poverty that only ushered in the glorious dawn of his visit to Edinburgh, then like a tale of ancient days to the loved ones at home, and his return to them as the Laureate of his country ; and of like deathless memories of what both had witnessed —till they could hardly be got to part, as his daughter delights to tell.



III.—The Farmer-Poet himself at Mossgiel.

“ Though he was bred to kintra wark,
And counted was baith wight and stark,
Yet that was never Robin’s mark.”⁴



THE old herd’s reminiscences of the poet himself give vivid glimpses of the man. He described him as smart, manly, and good-looking ; liked by every body, except by a few of the “stricter sort,” who feared his reputed “wildness.” He *never once* saw him “the worse o’ liquor,” and on this he laid special emphasis, repeating it strongly several times ; Burns’s drink-

⁴ “Elegy on the Death of Robert Ruisseaux” a French form of his own name, written at Mossgiel, in 1784.

ing, throughout life, being never done merely for the sake of indulgence, but only in company when warmed by congenial or witty friends. As he says of himself then—

“ It’s no I like to sit and swallow,
But gie me just a true guid fallow
Wi’ right ingine,
And spunkie ance to make us mellow,
And then we’ll shine.”⁵

The above might seem inconsistent with the abundant references to indulgence in liquor to be found in his poems; but these poetical, not practical, licences will be found on examination to be quite compatible with real sobriety. On this point, his judicious brother is equally emphatic, declaring that “his temperance and frugality were every-

⁵ “Epistle to Mr. John Kennedy,” written from Moss-giel in 1786.

thing that could be desired” and that he “did not recollect, during these seven years, to have ever seen him intoxicated, nor was he at all given to drinking.” And he gives sufficient evidence of this by stating that “his expenses never in any one year exceeded his slender income,” though this was only £7, during his whole residence at Mossiel!⁶

He was, Willie said, “a guid kind maister,” being liked, if not beloved, for his good nature and kindly helpfulness by all his servants, who have all given the same testimony. Willie Ronald, his “gaudsman” at Lochlea, afterwards farmer at Maulside, near Beith, in the north of Ayrshire, who had the high opinion of the style of his

⁶ See Christopher North's Essay on “the Genius and Character of Burns,” in “Land of Burns,” Vol. ii. pp. xvi., iv., and lxvii., on this point.

master's prayers, quoted by Chambers,⁷ was alive when I resided in that district above twenty years ago. He used to speak of him in the warmest terms as the most indulgent of masters, saying that "he never received from him a cross word" all the time he was with him, when he drove the horses, "whether he drave them richt or wrang." Ronald also used to add that, "though he was the kindest o' maisters, he was then sometimes an an ill guide o' himsel'." In kindness of disposition, Robert surpassed Gilbert, who had a certain severity of manner, necessary, no doubt, for the management of a farm. The female friend who resided with them, as mentioned above, told Mr. Carruthers of Inverness, that Robert "was always

⁷ See R. Chambers's "Life and Works of Burns," vol. i. p. 160. All references here to this work are made from the edition of 1853.

anxious to solace and cheer and assist the younger labourers," and "was ready with a helping hand and a look of encouragement."⁸ His reading some of his pieces to his ploughman Blane, is a proof of the same kindly unassuming sympathy with those he employed.

Patrick gave abundant evidence of Burns's habits of close and constant observation. "He was aye pickin' up things and thinkin' ower them for a lang time." He was constantly reading, he said, and, as already remarked, could not even take his meals without an accompanying volume, his laborious life leaving him little leisure for satisfying his large intellectual appetite. He kept up with the newspaper literature of the day, Willie having to go into Mauchline regularly for the

⁸ "Highland Note Book" by Dr. Robert Carruthers, late of the *Inverness Courier*.

“paipers ;” as the very full references to contemporary occurrences, literary, theological, and political, which abound in the poems, amply prove. “He had a lairge leebrary,” said Willie, as we know he had, for the age and his means, “and he read ony books that cam’ in his way ; in fac’, he was aye readin’.” Patrick never, however, heard him read or recite any of his own poetry, though it was then well known that he had written a great deal, before he published the Kilmarnock volume which made him famous. Willie used to carry his letters into town to post, and these were much more numerous than was at all common in those days.

The poet’s own family, he remarked, were “prood o’ ’im ; and weel they micht,” he continued with emphasis.

His favourite walk, he recalled, was down below the farm, along the banks of the Ayr, where

he had often seen him wandering, as the poet himself has so exquisitely told.

Patrick remembered Burns's favourite Rosinante with cropped ears, which he had named "Jenny Geddes," after the famous heroine of the stool. Being thus a safe and vigorous Covenanter, she was his usual riding horse, always in request when he had any distance to go. The poet himself describes her as

"A weel-gaun filly
That aft has borne me hame frae Killie." ⁹

Though the good mare became, as he says, "a' bedevil'd with the spavie" through his reckless riding, he stuck to her; for she carried her master "through many a shire," as he tells, in his wander-

⁹ That is Kilmarnock, eight miles from Mossgiel. See the Inventory.

ings to and from Edinburgh. She also accompanied him to Ellisland, at his first going there in June, 1788, before Mrs. Burns came in December; "Jenny, his Pegasean pride" being then his only companion—

"Wi' nae converse but Gallowa' bodies
Wi' nae kent face but Jenny Geddes."¹⁰

Patrick said he was greatly "taken oot" into society in Mauchline and the country round about, the "Castle," Gavin Hamilton's hospitable house, being a favourite haunt; and that "he was the life o' a company." He delighted, he said, in becoming acquainted with all the "characters" of a place wherever he went; and modern poor-law arrangements had not then swept these into workhouses.

¹⁰ See Epistle to Hugh Parker, written from Ellisland, of which Jenny was chief subject.

If he met any one possessing some peculiarity, "he was sure to mak' freends o' him and draw him oot," chiefly in that direction, but all in a kindly way. Like all keen students and lovers of human nature, Burns knew that the human heart was beating even under rags and vice, and he wished to see it in all its phases. He therefore became friendly with many whose habits were scarcely "respectable" but whose talents or peculiarities attracted him, a practice which often led him into strange company, but which rewarded him with new poetic themes and deeper human sympathy.

According to Patrick, the poet "soon made up to the lasses," with whom he was, he said, "a special favourite," being good-looking, smart and attractive. "He cu'd aye speak up to them;" not over-bashful, he could always address them in a fresh, open, cheerful manner, with smart "daffin'" and banter. He certainly possessed, we all know, a

wonderful power of charming women, whether on the "hairst rig" or in the gay circles of the metropolis, where he was soon to shine, from the simple "Nanie" to the brilliant and beautiful Duchess of Gordon, who declared that he was the only man that ever "carried her off her feet."

Patrick was "herd-callant" at Mossgiel during the whole time the poet was connected with that farm, joining the family in March, 1784, when they arrived from Lochlea after their father's death, and leaving it in 1788, the year Burns settled in Dumfries. And what a time was that, of the workings of the highest genius and the most wonderful experiences, amidst the lowliest and narrowest surroundings! Into these four years of the poet's life, from the age of twenty-six to thirty, were crowded more joy and anguish, beauty and terror, debasement and inspiration, fear and friendship, prose and poetry, gloom and glory, it may be

confidently asserted, than were ever passed through by almost any other human being in the same space. Of this, the slightest glance at this eventful epoch, the greatest and the least in his career, will furnish abundant proof.

Before coming to Mossgiel, Burns had been the mere poetic child, feeling his feet, as the old saying has it; or, to vary the figure, the young eagle, preening his wings before his sunward flight. He had as yet produced no piece that would have brought him more than the merest local notice. But in the winter of that first year by the banks of the Ayr, besides a few earnest religious pieces, he wrote one of his finest poems, the first "Epistle to Davie," an elevated expression of high sentiment, and "Death and Dr. Hornbook," the first coruscation of his sarcastic, humorous, gruesome and radiant wit. But it was not till a happy family gathering in the following spring of 1785,

the "rockin'"¹ so piquantly described in his first "Epistle to Lapraik," that the slumbering volcano burst into fiery glory, pouring forth, in little more than a year, the greatest flood of burning and brilliant poetry Scotland has ever seen. Happily, many of its sweetest strains were the bright fruit of his better and deeper moments, while working on the farm, wandering by the Ayr and Cessnock, or quietly meditating at home; in such lyrics as "The Mouse," "The Cottar's Saturday Night," "The Vision," "The Mare," "The Daisy," the "Epistle to a Young Friend," and "The Twa Dogs." Much of it was evoked by his friendly, social and humorous relations to his fellows; such as his many admirable Epistles, his pasquinades.

¹ So called from the old practice, at friendly meetings, of the women bringing with them their spinning materials, the distaff, or "rock, and the wee pickle tow," or wool.

and satirical verses, and the "Jolly Beggars."

But most of it was the utterance of the internal and external commotion and tempest through which he then passed. Externally, there were the religious and ecclesiastical controversies of the time, the persecutions by the rigid then in power, and other public concerns into which he threw himself with all his constitutional ardour and scathing sarcasm; in such poems as "The Holy Fair," "The Ordination," "The Unco Guid," and "Holy Willie." Domestically, there came the utter failure of the farm, despite the combined toil of the whole home circle, and the consequent poverty and depression there, misfortunes sufficient to drown the most buoyant spirit. Internally, there accompanied these the sweep of tornado passion, with its disastrous effects on himself, his family and his friends, his distressing relations to Jean Armour and her worldly parents, and the

pathetic interlude of Highland Mary,—all finding saddest utterance in his letters and Commonplace Book, and in such verses as “Man was made to Mourn,” “A Winter Night,” “Despondency,” and “Ruin,”—subjects altogether foreign to his true sunny spirit.

Then followed, in tumultuous succession, the events of his darkest hour,—the painful separation from Jean Armour, the birth of his children during the abandonment of their mother by her parents, hateful Church censures, hiding for debt, taking out his passage to Jamaica, the broken farewells, the publication of his poems to raise the requisite funds—all combined with the pleasures of true and tried friendship, and surprising and incongruous outbreaks of jovial hilarity, sparkling wit and glorious fun; and then the bursting sunrise of brighter days and undying fame, the wonderful visit to Edinburgh in 1786, and the

dazzlement produced in the highest circles of the capital by the rustic prodigy, whom the world would scarce believe to have been "bred between the stilts."²

To this succeeded, the romantic correspondence with Clarinda; his tours throughout the country, courted and petted by all; his return to the dear home and his old mother at Mossgiel in his new blaze of fame, the present of nearly £200 to his brother and of silk cloaks to his mother and sisters, from the late penniless man, that they might share in his success; his marriage with his sore-tried Jean in the autumn of 1788, a happy consummation, to which Patrick referred with real pleasure;


² "The Guidwife of Wauchope House to Burns," a clever expression of the general wonderment caused by the new poet; replied to by him in a brilliant piece of the autobiography of a poet's mind.

and his final settlement that winter in Ellisland, as farmer and exciseman, to enter on another brilliant phase of his poetic career, that of his imperishable Songs, till the sad, sad end of all, in darkness and delirium, on the 21st of July, 1796, only in his thirty-eighth year.

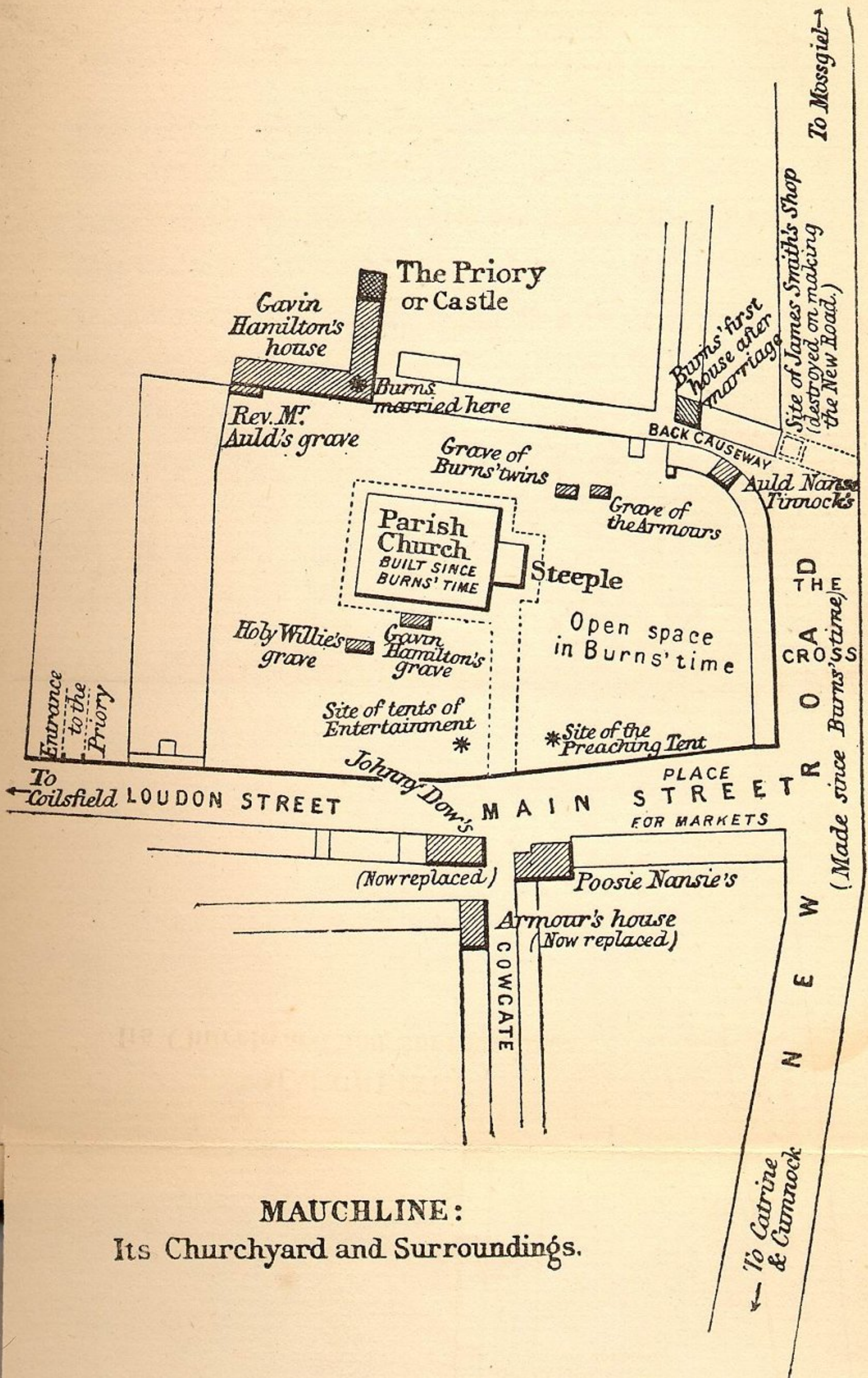


IV.—*Mauchline in the Time of Burns.*

“ But other prospects made me melt
That village near ;
There Nature, Friendship, Love, I felt
Fond-mingling dear.”³

LD Patrick was fully conversant with Burns's haunts and friends in Mauchline, and I talked over most of them with him in considerable detail. From his descriptions, I made the accompanying rough ground plan of the localities chiefly mentioned in the poet's works, which may help to elucidate references to them there, and render clearer certain points in his history. They all centre round the parish church and

³ In the full edition of the “*Vision*,” of 1786.



MAUCLINE:
Its Churchyard and Surroundings.

its enclosing graveyard. The church then occupied the middle of the village more than at present. The sketch will show at a glance much that could not well be conveyed by any description. It is interesting, as giving the position of places by one so well acquainted with them, all the more so that some of these have already changed since he pointed them out. It requires no apology to lovers of Burns to contribute anything to illustrate the poet's connexion with "that village," which coloured so deeply his life and poetry, his Stratford, whose everyday aspects he has "married to immortal verse."

The chief road from the south through Mauchline then passed down the Cowgate,⁴ in front of

⁴ So called from its being then the chief approach to the Cattle Market, for which Mauchline was long famous. The street is mentioned by Burns as "the Gate," in the

the entrance to the church-yard, the present broad highway, called New Road, having been formed since Burns's time. At the foot of the Cowgate, one branch went to the left, to Coilsfield and the banks of the Ayr. The other, called Main Street from its importance, turned to the right along the church-yard, and, passing by the Cross,⁵ and curving to the left down the Back Causeway, led to Mossgiel, Tarbolton and Kilmarnock; the roads to these towns separating at a spot not far from the farm.

The present church and steeple have been built since the days of Burns, but occupy the

Epistle to John Kennedy, where reference is evidently made to Jean Armour; and in the "Holy Fair," as leading from the churchyard.

⁵ The "Mauchline Corse" of the Epistle to John Kennedy, written in 1786.

same site as the former old barn-like building, removed in 1827,—the scene of several poems,⁶ and of more trying personal experiences of the poet connected with his first unhappy relations to his future wife. The churchyard is little changed, except that it has been levelled and much extended. The now enclosed space at its east end was then free and open, without graves, and was used as a sort of public recreation ground, where the boys might be seen of an afternoon, as Patrick said, playing at shinty and similar games.

In the narrow Cowgate, the main highway through the village, some of the residences of the principal

⁶ Such as "The Louse," and "The Calf." It shows Burns's good taste and true religious feeling, that the solemn scenes enacted *inside* the church form no part of the poem of the "Holy Fair."

inhabitants were situated,—that of old Armour, the father of “Bonnie Jean,” amongst the rest, and also the chief houses of public entertainment. At the foot of the street, just opposite the churchyard gate, stood at one corner “Poosie Nansie’s” inn, the scene of the “Jolly Beggars,” then a low public-house, the haunt of all vagrants. At the other corner, was the two-storied “Whitefoord Arms,” chief hotel of the place, then kept by John Dow, popularly known as “Johnny Pigeon.”⁷ “Poosie Nansie’s” tavern still remains; Johnny Dow’s has been replaced, since my first visit, by a large co-operative store, bearing a rhyming inscription on its central chimney to record the fact. It was immediately behind Dow’s inn that Armour’s house stood, in the Cowgate, with a

⁷ Dow being pronounced, in Scotch, as Doo, which is also the Scotch for the dove or pigeon.

narrow lane between. This house has also been replaced by a modern stone and lime erection since Patrick's time.

The street in front of the houses of entertainment communicated with the vacant space already mentioned as now enclosed in the church-yard, and formed a sort of public square, in which markets were also held. Nanse Tinnock's change-house stood on the opposite side of the same space, with a back door from the churchyard ; all the houses of call being naturally set round the place of public, social, and religious resort.

The narrow street on the north side of the churchyard, called the Back Causeway, was then the chief thoroughfare from the market-place to the north, and therefore of much more consequence than now. Here was the front entrance to Nanse Tinnock's, then known as "The Sma' Inn," occasionally a resting-place of Burns. Here,

also, in the corner house on the opposite side, with a small chimney at the angle, in the two upper rooms, Burns and his "darling Jean" first made their home after their final public union, in 1788, following years of anguish. To this humble dwelling, Patrick told, with no small pride, how he carried the bridal bed from old Armour's house in the Cowgate. They lived here only a few months, however, from August to December, going hence to Ellisland, Burns passing between both places until their removal. Here he was within easy access of his stanch friend Hamilton, whose office opened on the same street.

The line of houses in which Burns's was, continued at that time unbroken to the other side of what is now called New Road, which, as well as the present Earl Grey Street, was made in 1820. To form it, some of the houses at the east end of Back Causeway had to be demolished. In one of

those thus destroyed, facing the Cross, were the shop and house of Burns's intimate friend, James Smith,⁸ a kind of general store, into which the poet used to drop more frequently than anywhere else, not excepting "the Castle."

The church-yard was the scene of that cleverest but most personal of satires, the "Holy Fair,"⁹ not at all an unfair description of the doings then common on that solemn occasion, helping much more perhaps than any other single cause to discredit and abolish such profanities. Patrick described what he had witnessed for the greater part of his life, and bore testimony to the truth and accuracy of the delineations of the poet; which he

⁸ See Plan at beginning of this Chapter.

⁹ The title was not of Burns's making, for, as he tells us himself, "'Holy Fair' is a common phrase in the West of Scotland for a Sacramental occasion."

said were in no way overdrawn, but which he assured me might have been painted in stronger colours. The plate for the donations of the worshippers was placed at the churchyard gate, superintended by one of the elders.¹⁰ Close by the gate, on the right, was erected the "preaching tent" or pulpit, whence those who could not be accommodated inside the church were addressed by a succession of clergymen, as they sat on the grave-stones among the grass, or on the forms and benches brought out that day for their use. On the opposite side of the gateway, stood the tents of entertainment, which provided meat and drink for those not wishing to go to the public houses. The sacred rite of the Lord's Supper was dispensed inside the church, to successive relays of communi-

¹⁰ The "black bonnet" of the "Holy Fair," a common name for an elder with Burns.

cants, addressed at each "diet" or sitting, by some minister; those who had partaken moving outside the church, to have their places occupied by succeeding crowds the whole day long, till the vast assembly was served.¹

Patrick described, as a strange sight, the immense crowds, amounting in Burns's time to above fifteen hundred, congregated from all the country round, far and near, at these yearly dispensations of the Sacrament; each one engaged according to his own inclination, as then frequently satirised in prose and verse for an abuse of holy things.² He

¹ Some idea of the time this would take and the number of changes, with all their stir, required, may be formed from the fact that the number of communicants then to be served was between 1200 and 1400, as shown by the Session books, and that the tables inside the church could accommodate only 105 persons. Thus, from 12 to 14 successive tables had to be served that day, in the heat of August!

² Burns was not the first or only exposé of these abuses.

dwelt on the strange and motley appearance of the numberless groups when "eatin' time" arrived. The whole church-yard and neighbouring space, forms, benches and gravestones were covered at every available point with men, women and children, in all possible attitudes, eating their "cheese and breed," "dealt out in lunches and in dauds that day;" with the "big napkins" in which they had brought their food spread out before them, the vast number of these parti-coloured cloths, adorned with substantial fare, forming one of the most striking features of the gathering. These open air luncheons were the most innocent part of the proceedings, for large numbers, male and female, adjourned to the neighbouring public-

The same was then done by others in no measured terms. See Chambers, i. 262, and other annotated editions of the poet.

houses, which stood, like Moloch's fane, "right against the temple of God," and drove "a roarin' trade."

On the other side of the church-yard, rise the ruins of an old priory, called in Mauchline "The Old Castle," or "The Castle," and giving name also to the house attached to it. This was the hospitable mansion of Gavin Hamilton, "writer," or lawyer, in Mauchline, clerk to some of the county courts, hence shortly called "the Clerk ;"³³ wealthy

³³ As in the "Dedication" to him by Burns.

and generous, beloved by all except the very rigid, especially by the poor, whom he helped ; and one of Burns's very best friends. His house was a special resort of the poet's. At that time, it had, like Nanse Tinnock's, a back entrance into the churchyard from Mr. Hamilton's business room, into which Burns used to drop on Sundays after church.

V.—Burns in Mauchline with his Friends.

“ Fate still has blest me with a friend,
 In every care and ill ;
 And oft a more endearing band,
 A tie more tender still.”⁴

WHILE living at Mossgiel, Burns spent a great part of his leisure in Mauchline, forming there, on the one hand, many friendships deep and true, and rousing, on the other, fear and suspicion in the minds of those who misunderstood him, whose opinions and ways he subjected to his keen satire, and who were opposed to his easy social habits, and broader religious and ecclesiastical sympathies. Burns be-

⁴ From the “ Epistle to Davie, a brither-poet, lover, ploughman, and fiddler,” written at Mossgiel in 1785.

longed by natural disposition and intellectual strength, as his father^s had done, to the small but growing band of the broad church, then represented by the "New Light," or, as he called them, the "Common Sense" party. The narrower conservative party, known as the "Old Lights," who opposed all innovation and progress and often retained the husk of the grand puritanism of the old Covenanting days, when the kernel had greatly gone, feared and frowned on, if they did not hate, the poet; their feelings being intensified when his

^s The old man had composed for the use of his family, in dialogue form, a small Manual of Religious Belief, which sweetened the severities of the Calvinism of the time, and which remains as a proof of his own intelligence and ability. It was published in 1875 as a small volume, by Mr. M'Kie, of Kilmarnock. It is a remarkable production for an unlettered man; valuable also as presenting greatly the creed of his famous son—a striking proof of parental influence even over so pronounced an individuality as that of Burns.

genius shed its scathing fire on them or on things they held sacred. The friends he selected were all of the broader sort, who were freer in habit and full of more generous, if not jovial, impulses, and who had a wider intellectual and social development, without the seriousness and sanctity of the reputed religious persons of the time. His chief friend, Gavin Hamilton, a man of very good social position and irreproachable morals, belonged to this broader party, and used his own discretion in regard to regularity of church attendance and the puritanic observance of the Sabbath. He had been under the censure of the Kirk-Session, which, however, he had beaten in the church-courts, in certain paltry actions they had instituted against him.⁶

⁶ Such as that he was sometimes absent from church, travelled once, and once lifted new potatoes on Sunday, and deserved church censure, from which he was exonerated by Presbytery and Synod.

Burns could be no passive spectator of such persecutions where his dearest friends were involved, and uttered himself in burning satires against the opposition.⁷ His own religious feelings were deep and real; but, like all true men, his fiercest indignation was roused by what he considered want of honesty in religious profession and by over-righteousness, especially when these were combined with censorious condemnation of others. The inevitable result was, while he was merely the farmer and local satirist and had not yet been summoned to the capital to begin his career as national bard, that, as he tells us—

⁷ For example, his Epistles to Goudie, Simpson, and M'Math, the Twa Herds, and Holy Willie's Prayer, written in 1785; the Address to the Unco Guid, and the Holy Fair, in 1786,—all at Mossgiel. The Kirk's Alarm was not written till 1789, when at Ellisland.

“ Friends and folks that wished him well
They sometimes roosed him ;
Though he maun own, as monie still
As far abused him.”⁸

Let us hear Willie Patrick's opinion of some of these friends and acquaintances in this little country town, where everybody knew everybody, and where every incident, however insignificant or innocent, was canvassed and magnified by the village Grundies of both sexes.

Of all those with whom Burns was connected in Mauchline, the most important to him in his history and happiness was Mr. Armour, master-mason and property-owner, whose daughter was “bonny Jean.” Jean herself has been presented to all the world in the brilliant and glowing lan-

⁸ The first Epistle to Lapraik, written from Mossgiel in 1785.

guage of her lover and husband, from his first mention of her as "the jewel" of "the six proper young belles" of the village, to the intenser fire of later lyrics. Patrick said she was "a decent, weel-doin' lass," full of sprightliness and fun. She was a good-looking brunette, or as Patrick's father (a shoemaker, next door to her father's, in the Cowgate) used to say, "Jean, you're a ticht jaud, but a dun one!" a compliment which she always took in good part, with her usual bright laugh or smile, accompanied by a smart retort. Willie also described her as "ticht i' the legs"—most expressive Scotch, meaning, at once, handsome, sprightly, and well-knit, from the idea of being firmly bound. The poet himself uses the same word regarding her; and regarding no less a personage than the Muse, Coila, when she appeared to him in "the spence" at Mossgiel, portraying her as

"A ticht outlandish hizzie braw ;"

and continuing the picture thus--

“ Down flowed her robe, a tartan sheen,
 Till half a leg was scrimply seen ;
 And such a leg ! my bonny Jean
 Could only peer it ;
 Sae straught, sae taper, tight and clean, 9
 Nane else cam' near it.” 10

Jean's father was a kind of contractor or master-builder, employing other masons, he and his sons being, as Patrick said, “as guid workmen as ever liftit mell.”¹¹ He owned his own house and sev-

9 *Clean* here means clean-cut or well-shaped, as in his burning song in her praise, “Oh, were I on Parnassus Hill,” in which he speaks of her “limbs sae clean.” In a letter to Smith, of April 28, 1788, he describes her as “clean-limbed, handsome and bewitching.”

10 “The Vision,” written at Mossgiel, before he was known to fame.

11 The maul or wooden hammer used by masons to drive the iron chisel.

eral others near it in the Cowgate, had a good business, thought himself of the well-to-do class, and held no small opinion of his own consequence.² He was, moreover, of the stricter or "Auld Licht" sort, and, therefore, both by instinct and by profession, disliked and feared all freer ways, especially when combined with cleverness and sarcastic power. He would seem, however, not to have been perfectly correct in his own habits, though hard on others. It is certain that he had little liking for the poet when he came courting his daughter; and he behaved towards both of them in the harshest manner, even at the expense of his daughter's character, destroying the "lines"

² A good indication of his social standing is given by the fact of his renting one of the highest priced pews in the parish church—then costing 10s 8d—as I am informed by Mr. John Thomson, Session-Clerk of Mauchline.

or certificates of the first marriage of the unhappy lovers,³ banishing her his house, and not withdrawing his opposition till the poet had made some noise in the world and seemed likely to do the family credit.⁴

“What kind of man was old Armour?” I asked Patrick; “surely a person of consequence in Mauchline, judging from his treatment of Burns?” “Ow, he was only a bit mason body, wha used to snuff a guid deal and gae af’en tak’ a bit dram!” “Proud was he? or why did he object to Burns so strongly?” “The thing was, he hated him,” he said, “and would raither hae seen the deil himsel’ comin’ to the hoose to coort his dochter

3 In 1786, vainly thinking thus to annul it.

4 In a letter to James Smith, of 11th June, 1787, Burns speaks with “with disgust” of old Armour’s “mean, servile compliance” at that time.

than him ! He cu'dna bear the sicht o'm, and that was the way he did it !” The lovers were forbidden to hold intercourse, and Burns was prohibited the house. “How, then,” I asked, “did they manage to court ?” “God !” said he, and this was the only expletive I heard the old man use, though he did so frequently, “as easy as ye like !” And then he gave an explanation which will be readily intelligible on reference to the plan at the head of the fourth chapter. Armour's house, as will be seen, stood immediately behind Johnnie Dow's inn, “The Whitefoord Arms,” with only a narrow lane between them. Burns, it seems, used to go often to an upper room at the back of the inn opposite Armour's, and in sight of the small window of an upper room in the mason's, facing the one Burns occupied. To this window, Jean used to come, Patrick said ; and there the two communicated by signs and arranged meetings, like Romeo

and Juliet. This room was long preserved and shown to tourists in its original state, and it was in existence when I met the old man; the chief point of interest in it being some sarcastic lines on the innkeeper, engraved by Burns on one of the panes, as published in his works.⁵ It was, of course, destroyed along with the inn itself. All these harsh experiences of the unhappy lovers were by and by overcome, and they afterwards settled down in interior sunshine and happiness, whatever the external clouds that darkened their fortunes, at Ellisland and Dumfries.

Burns had no truer well-wisher and admirer to the end of his life than Gavin Hamilton, whose friendship was specially valuable to him, when unknown to fame, during his severer trials in

5 "Here lies Johnny Pigeon," &c.

Mauchline. There existed a deep and cordial community of thought and feeling between these two men, both so feared by the "unco guid." This Burns has admirably expressed in his Dedication of the famous Kilmarnock edition of his poems to his friend, the sublime of praise being exquisitely given in the line of delicate double-sense—

“He’s just nae better than he should be !”

summarising his character in the pithy couplet—

“He’s the poor man’s friend in need,
The gentleman in word and deed.”⁶

Patrick spoke in the highest terms of Hamilton, always designating him, like his master, “the

⁶ Dedication to Gavin Hamilton, written at Mossgiel in 1786 ; these lines being also previously used regarding him in the private Epistle to the Rev. John M’Math, in 1785.

puir man's freend," which, he said, was the usual epithet accompanying the mention of his name in Mauchline—a kind of honorary degree in the academy of human worth. He pointed out his grave to me with much feeling, saying, "That's Gavin Hamilton's grave, sir, the puir man's freend, ye ken!" "How did he get that name?" I asked, for the sake of getting his answer. "He was aye kind to the puir man, and aye took his pairt"—socially, and professionally as a lawyer, it would seem; "a guid man was Gavin Hamilton!"

At Hamilton's hospitable table,—for his friend was of good family, while Mrs. Hamilton was very well connected,—Burns saw more of the higher classes of society than anywhere else, while yet he was but the humble farmer of Mossgiel; and there he met some of his best and earliest friends and patrons, such as Robert Aiken, of Ayr. Of the pleasant home circle there, he gives some glimpses

in the "Dedication," where we are introduced to the eldest son, "wee curlie John," and to his mother, who bore "Kennedy's far-honoured name."⁷

On occasions, Burns had the opportunity of seeing, at "the Castle," persons of still higher social rank. It was there that, in the autumn of 1785, he met, for the first time in private life, a representative of those upper classes whom he was soon to electrify, and amongst whom he was shortly to count some of his most appreciative admirers. This was Miss Margaret Kennedy, the daughter of a landed proprietor by the banks of the Doon, and relative of Mrs. Hamilton. She was a bright, beautiful, and unusually attractive girl of sweet seventeen, and at once captivated the poet, who

⁷ See this picture filled in more fully by the poet in a dashing letter to Hamilton, written from Stirling, on August 28, 1787, after visiting Harvieston.

had frequent opportunities of studying this star from a higher sphere, while she stayed with her friends. His admiration sparkled out into the singularly fresh and fragrant song of "Young Peggy,"—the name being a familiar contraction of Margaret in Scotland—one of his earliest efforts in pure English. He accompanied the song with a remarkably well-turned letter, concluding with the wish that "Innocence might hand her by the path of Honour to the dwelling of Peace." There, alas! she never arrived till she entered it above. In a few years, she was betrayed, even while happiness seemed to smile on her future, and died of a broken heart—the tender-hearted bard immortalising her tragic end in that sweetest and best-known of elegies, "Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonny Doon." Amongst Hamilton's relatives, also, Burns formed several of his more intimate friendships in after years, such as the bright family

at Harvieston on the Devon, presided over by Gavin's step-mother. One of these was his correspondent Miss Chalmers, the charming, accomplished, and good; and another, the beautiful Charlotte Hamilton, Gavin's step-sister,—both of whom had lived in their early days near Mauchline. To Charlotte he addressed the song, "How pleasant the banks of the clear-winding Devon," in which he prettily tells us that "the bonniest flower on the banks of the Devon was once a sweet bud by the banks of the Ayr."⁸

In Hamilton's business room, already mentioned as being next the churchyard, the poet wrote, so Willie told me, the rough satire, "The Calf," one Sunday in 1786, after having heard a clerical orator of the "Old Light" order, for whom he had no great admiration—an extempore production

⁸ See Chambers, Vol. ii. 117-8, and 146.

written against time, but of small merit. In this same room, also, he was formally married to his Jean, on the 3rd of August, 1788, after his return from Edinburgh; going that evening, Patrick said, to the small house in the Back Causeway, which was their home till their removal in December to the banks of the Nith.

Other personal friends of Burns, Patrick also characterised. John Richmond, his early friend and correspondent, was a clerk in Hamilton's office in "the Castle," and his very frequent companion on social and other occasions. He accompanied Burns and James Smith to "Poosie Nansie's," when the poet got the materials for his remarkable cantata there, and it was to Richmond he first read it. Patrick said he was "a great crony o' Burns," but "a rough chap," and reputed "wild," on account of his fun, energy, and free ways; though all they could say against him was that "he was

fond o' company." Burns occupied Richmond's humble room (rented at three shillings a week) in Baxter's Close in the Lawn-Market, in Edinburgh, on the occasion of his sudden call to the capital after the publication of his poems, Richmond having removed there in prosecution of his profession as a lawyer. To that little nest, the poet returned nightly, after being admired and petted in the brilliant *salons* of the great literary city, little elated by his magical success, and knowing, as he then said himself, that he made there only a "meteor appearance" and a "tangent flight," soon to "return to his rural shades, in all likelihood never more to quit them."⁹

Another friend and correspondent, James Smith, had a good shop on the opposite side of the lane in which Nanse Tinnock's inn was, called the

⁹ Letter to Dr. Moore, from Edinburgh, in 1787.

Back Causeway, then the chief street leading to the north.¹⁰ For him Burns seems to have cherished a special regard, mentioning with great humour, in his excellent Epistle to him, written from Moss-giel, in 1785, that he had

“ Cost him twenty pair o’ shoon
Just gaun to see him ;
And every ither pair that’s done
Mair ta’en he’s wi’ him.”

Though of “scrimpit stature,” as the poet says, he was clever, bright, and good, with high social and intellectual powers, nature having on “every feature” written “the man.” Of him Patrick spoke very highly, saying that he was “a different man from Richmond,” bearing “a high character,” and “worth knowing.” Before the time, however, that

¹⁰ See the plan at head of Chapter IV.

Burns settled down, in 1788, in the same street in which his friend lived, Smith had left Mauchline for a calico print-work on the Avon, near Linlithgow, in which he was unsuccessful. To him there the poet sent several characteristic letters, in one of which, written in April, 1788, he ordered a printed shawl for his reconciled Jean, in prospect of their marriage in the following August; in "a kind of whimsical wish," as he says, "to get the first said present from an old and much-valued friend of hers and mine—a trusty Trojan, whose friendship I count myself possessed of as a liferent lease," adding that he will write him till his eyes ache reading nonsense. With this worthy man, Burns seems to have been more confidential than with any other of his correspondents. It is somewhat curious that Smith closed his days where Burns once thought he would end his own—in the

West Indies—before his genius called him to a brighter future.

Of the other friends of Burns in and round Mauchline, time failed me to talk very much with Patrick.

Mauchline has the honour of being connected with the touching and romantic episode of Mary Campbell, consigned to immortality under the name of "Highland Mary." For this sweet, simple, bright, blue-eyed girl, Burns seems to have cherished the purest affection he ever felt for any woman, drawn more by the charms of manner and heart than by beauty. The more her little-known story is examined, the more does it become evident that she was of a superior type, training, and education to most of the women of her station at that time; possessed of a winning, self-contained, self-protective, purely modest disposition, which seems to have won from the poet an unusually

tender, deep, and lasting love. He saw her first in Gavin Hamilton's house, in July, 1785, when she was nurse to one of his sons. The poet seems to have been taken with her at once, all the more readily on account of his painful experiences with the Cowgate family, and to have sought and won her heart. With firm modesty, however, she refused to meet him alone one evening in the old tower of the Priory, which is attached to Hamilton's house. Her retiring nature prevented her being much known in the village, though cruel gossip has not spared even her name there. She remained with this family about half a year, removing in 1786 to Coilsfield, or "the Castle o' Montgomery," a few miles farther down the Ayr, to take charge of the dairy, for which her early training among her native hills and in the manse of her relative in Arran had specially fitted her.

Here Burns continued his attentions, and the

attachment deepened on both sides. When Armour discarded him, expelled his daughter from her home, and, to the best of his ability, divorced the pair; and when Jean, "poor, ill-advised and ungrateful," as he felt her then to be, yielded at least a passive assent to their final separation—at this time of wretchedness and desertion, when he was, he confesses, "completely miserable,"¹ his heart turned, with rebounding passionate relief, to the pure-minded affectionate milk-maid at Coilsfield, with a true determination to make her his own for ever. Though he kept his love for Mary hidden from even his dearest friends, it breathed itself in secret in unusually earnest, faultless verse. It was eventually arranged between them that Mary should give up her situ-

¹ In a letter to David Brice, from Mossgiel, of January 12, 1786.

ation and retire for a time to her mother's house, before their union, either in the old country or on a foreign strand. Their parting is now sacred to poesy and love, cherished by the wide world, though then concealed from all but their own silent hearts. Through the woods of Coilsfield flows the Water of Fail, which enters the Ayr a little below the mansion. It was there, at the spot where the two streams join in inseparable union, under the embowering trees of budding May, that these two hearts melted into each other, with clasped hands dipped in the pure brook that flowed between them, on that Sabbath of the scene and the time, May 14th, 1786. Then they parted for ever, after exchanging Bibles—she, happily, to die of fever, in a few months, and to be laid in the cold earth in the corner of the West Churchyard at Greenock, now a spot for the pilgrim; he, to mourn his loss and preserve “her

dear idea" deep in his heart's core, hidden from all human gaze, as a sealed spring, to burst forth in after years into an undying appeal to her spirit, by the banks of the Nith.

There lived in Mauchline his "very warm and worthy friend,"² as the poet calls him, Dr. John Mackenzie, surgeon, a man of excellent character, broad sympathies, and good social position. Like Gavin Hamilton, Robert Aiken of Ayr, and some others, he was one of those friends possessing literary taste to whom he submitted his poems at an early date, and whose discerning appreciation of their genius was of the highest encouragement to the unknown poet, and of eminent service in developing his muse and making it known to the world. He was a warm admirer of Burns from

² In a letter to Sir John Whitefoord of Ballochmyle, written from Edinburgh, on Dec. 1st, 1789.

the first, and believed in his integrity and high character, when these were assailed in his darker days. The two seem to have been very intimate, and their friendship was increased by the fact that they were both ardent brethren of the mystic craft and fellow-masons in Tarbolton Lodge, to the anniversary of which the poet, then Depute-Master, addressed a rhyming invitation to his friend, before setting out, as he thought, for Jamaica. Dr. Mackenzie was himself somewhat of a *littérateur*, having written pamphlets on some of the religious controversies of the time, under the *nom de plume* of "Common Sense," and on the Origin of Morals, referred to in the above versicles as "Johnnie's Morals." It would appear that he is also mentioned under the same cognomen in the "Holy Fair," as having left the assembly and "set aff and up the Cowgate."

He has the honour of having introduced or

accompanied Burns to one of the *dei majores* of Edinburgh literary and philosophic society, Dugald Stewart, a meeting then of great moment to the struggling poet, soon to be ushered into its critical circles. The great Professor lived in vacation at his picturesque mansion of Catrine³ on the Ayr, not far from Mossgiel, and invited the two friends to dinner on the 23rd of October, 1786, about a month before the advent in Edinburgh on the 28th of November. They met at table the young Lord Daer, son of the Earl of Selkirk, the first member of the nobility Burns had yet seen in company. Both patron and poet have furnished characteristic

3 Mentioned, with honour, as the seat of "the learned sire and son," in the "First Duan," of the "Vision," and in "Farewell the Braes o' Ballochmyle." It is now in the village of Catrine, two and a-half miles above Mauchline, and has been converted into a farm-house.

narratives of the party, with mutual criticisms,⁴ the latter giving a highly humorous description of his feelings and manners on the occasion, in his dashing "Lines on meeting Basil, Lord Daer." Stewart's account of the poet is of the highest value in picturing him for ever as he then appeared, the simple farmer just bursting into his country's Bard, to the eyes of an eminent critic, neither prejudiced on the one hand nor over-enthusiastic on the other. "His manners," he tells us, "were then, as they continued ever afterwards, simple, manly, and independent; strongly expressive of conscious genius and worth, but without anything that indicated frowardness, arrogance, or vanity. He took his share in conversation, but not more than belonged to him; and listened with apparent

⁴ See letter to Dr. Mackenzie, enclosing the "Lines on Lord Daer."

attention and deference on subjects where his want of education deprived him of the means of information. . . . Nothing perhaps, was more remarkable, among his various attainments than the fluency and precision and originality of his language, when he spoke in company." Here we have the young eagle as he looked just before he left the narrow eyrie in which he had been cribbed, to soar alone into the empyrean. Burns, writing to his companion of the evening, says that he "never spent an afternoon among great folks with half so much pleasure," and, criticising his amiable entertainer, analyses his character decimally, making "four parts, Socrates ; four parts, Nathaniel ; and two parts, Shakspeare's Brutus."⁵ And this was by a plain-looking farmer of twenty-seven, of one of the literary and learned lights of the country !

⁵ See Chambers, Vol. I., 321.

Dr. Mackenzie, than whom there could be no better authority, has also the merit of directing attention to an important distinction in regard to Burns's expression, as it appeared at different times, which accounts greatly for the wide differences between the existing portraits of him—his aspect in his ordinary moments, when his countenance looked "heavy and unpromising," and at those times when, under animation by congenial society, it "glowed," as Sir Walter Scott puts it. Burns was in this respect, as Mackenzie, remarks, "more of *two men* than any man he ever knew."⁶ These two friends continued to correspond, Burns writing him after his *debut* in Edinburgh. Dr. Mackenzie married the first of the "six proper young belles" of Mauchline, the "fine" Miss Millar.

⁶ See "Land of Burns," Vol. I., p. 2, where a striking proof of these diverse aspects is given by Mackenzie.

While staying in the village, he occupied the house which now stands at the corner, between the Back Causeway and New Road, next door to James Smith's shop, since destroyed, both houses belonging to the Doctor, who was well-to-do. He was the esteemed family physician of the Montgomeries of Coilsfield, and when Sir Hugh Montgomery (one of Burns's early patrons), became Earl of Eglinton, he removed to Irvine to attend on his friend there, receiving from him a salary of £100 a year. He also carried on general practice in Irvine, becoming Provost of that burgh, and retired in 1827 to Edinburgh, where he died, above four score.

There was another early appreciator of the yet nameless poet, a young man possessing some poetical tastes, who, having heard privately of the advent of the "Cottar's Saturday Night," wrote to its author for a reading. This was John Kennedy,

then a poor clerk at Dumfries House, the seat of the Earl of Dumfries, not far from Mauchline. Burns readily complied with the request, accompanying the poem with one of his racy rhyming letters, written at Mossgiel on March 3, 1786, inviting Kennedy to Dow's, as a man who

“Hates as ill's the very deil
The flinty heart that canna feel.”

He was one of the earliest subscribers to the forthcoming volume, for twenty copies, which Burns acknowledged, with his usual gratitude, in a letter in which was first made known the beautiful lyric on “the Daisy,” called in that draft “the Gowan,” a sweeter designation than even the pretty poetical English term, now always used as its title. Kennedy seems to have had no little ability and humour, and could write what his great correspondent could call “a truly facetious epistle.” When

about to leave for the other side of the Atlantic, as he thought, Burns wrote his friend a letter from Kilmarnock, whence the new volume was issued, bidding him "probably a last adieu," and containing a rhymed wish "that guid-luck might hit him." Mr. Kennedy's talents had by-and-by wider scope, when he became factor, or land agent, to the Marquis of Breadalbane.

During the greater part of Burns's residence at Mossgiel, the beautiful estate of Ballochmyle on the Ayr, close by Mauchline, was in the possession of Sir John Whitefoord, the representative of an old Ayrshire family. Sir John became an early patron of Burns, discerning the poet beneath the "hodden gray" of the farmer, and understanding and respecting the man in spite of his erratic ways, magnified as these were by popular gossip. A notable letter of the poet's to this worthy gentleman exists, thanking him, with his accustomed

independent gratitude, for his interest in his circumstances and poetic fame, and his respect for his character in the face of calumny. Early in 1786, shortly before Burns visited the capital, Sir John had to part with Ballochmyle, on account of heavy losses connected with the failure at that time of the Ayr Bank, which brought many to ruin. The departure of this "amiable and excellent family" from their ancestral acres was celebrated by the poet in the pathetic elegy, "Fareweel, fareweel! sweet Ballochmyle," the Maria mentioned being the eldest daughter. They settled in Edinburgh, where Burns soon afterwards met Sir John, as he tells us in a letter to Dr. Mackenzie. The poet preserved his patron's friendship during life, and it was in a poetical letter to him, as a friend of the dead, that he first made known his celebrated "Lament for the Earl of Glencairn."

This kind appreciation of Burns by the Whitefoords contrasted favourably with his early relations to their successors on the estate—the family of Claud Alexander, Esq., who, influenced by floating rumours, were long shy of the farmer-poet of Mossgiel. It was while wandering along the Ayr, one July evening in 1786, that Burns met the sister of the proprietor, the celebrated beauty, Wilhelmina Alexander, whom he has immortalised as “the bonny lass o’ Ballochmyle.” He enclosed the exquisite song in a letter to the lady, who never replied; though ample atonement was made in after years, by fullest appreciation of the genius that had flashed her into fame, and by her nephew’s erection of a grotto on the spot where they had met in silence, which is now one of the shrines of the poet’s worshippers.

This concludes the list of Burns’s more intimate friends in Mauchline—of varied type, but all un-

common, true, and worthy. Of these, we also know those nearest and dearest to him, from their being mentioned in his adieu, "Farewell, old Scotia," penned in immediate prospect of his banishment to "torrid plains." These were—the members of the dear home circle at Mossgiel, his mother, brother, sisters, and little Bess; his Jean; his friends in Mauchline, Smith and Hamilton; and his warm-hearted admirer in Ayr, Robert Aiken, who, as Burns gratefully confessed, "read him into fame," subscribing for, and, in a few days, disposing of no fewer than one hundred and forty-five copies, or one fourth of the whole of the first edition of his poems, and to whom he dedicated his "Cottar's Saturday Night."

VI.—Burns in Mauchline among its People.

“I taught thy manners-painting strains.”⁷

DURING this his most active poetic period, next to Mossgiel, Mauchline supplied the poet with most of the *materielle* for his muse in the painting of manners, which, along with singing of “the dignity of man,” “the loves and wants of simple swains,” and the aspects of nature, he himself then accepted as the true mis-

⁷ The “Vision,” written at Mossgiel in 1785. This great poem is valuable in this connexion, not only as being an autobiographical sketch, and uttering his feelings on various subjects then interesting him, but also as giving his ideas of the functions and subjects of poetry, like Wordsworth’s Prelude.

sion of "a rustic bard." Of the village life of the time, he gives the most vivid glimpses, and depicts not a few of its more notable personalities.

The Rev. William Auld, then parish minister of Mauchline, called by the poet "Daddy Auld,"⁸ was a rigorous "Auld Licht," opposed to Hamilton and Burns, and all those with the "new-fangled notions." He seems to have been a very worthy though narrow man, sincere but rigid, having nevertheless much regard for the "scape-grace"

⁸ In "The Kirk's Alarm," and elsewhere. I cannot discover if this was a common name then given to the minister, though he was known by it after the publication of Burns's poems. The poet, who greatly respected Mr. Auld, though wounded by his rigidity, does not seem to have used it in contempt, but as a translation, suitable to the verse, of "Father Auld," which he calls him in a letter to Gavin Hamilton, of Dec., 1787. Thus also he speaks of "Daddy Care," in the "Jolly Beggars." He also calls him "Apostle Auld," in the "Twa Herds."

poet. He was well spoken of by Patrick, who said he was "much respeckit."⁹ Taking me to his last resting-place, he pointed out on his tombstone the last text that he preached from, there engraved. He died, 12th December, 1791, aged eighty-three, having preached for half a century. Mr. Auld's house, now called the "Old Manse," is no longer used as the parish manse.

Of the "characters" of the place, Patrick described several whose names are embalmed in Burns's poetry, like flies in amber.

He pointed out the decent hostelry of "Auld Nanse Tinnock,"¹⁰ close by the church-yard, from which it could be entered by a back door opening on the second story. The house with this back

⁹ A contemporary notice of his death says, "universally beloved and regretted."

¹⁰ Also written Tannock.

entry then existed, but it has since been railed off from the church-yard. He described her as "auld, douce, and pawky," the real type of a "discreet," silent ale-wife, who would tell no tales out of doors.¹ If a child came to her house inquiring for a too-long-absent father or brother, Nanse would meet him, Patrick said, in the doorway to prevent further entrance. When asked if the absentee was within, she would stretch down her hand to "the big pooch," or pocket then used in Scotland, which hung apart from the dress like a modern lady's *aumônière*; and, playing with its hem between her fingers, she would coolly say, with a sly look at the wee urchin, "No, my mannie, he's no *here!*" Burns, though promis-

¹ Burns seems to have had a high opinion of her, his "worthy old hostess." See note to his "Earnest Cry and Prayer," written in 1786.

ing to drink the Premier's health there, on certain conditions, "nine times a week,"² would seem to have frequented Nanse's inn very little, as she herself always honestly averred, in opposition to her own obvious interests; generally calling him, in her motherly way, when speaking of him afterwards, "the lad," as if he had remained the youthful farmer he was when she knew him.

Johnnie Dow, whose name being locally pronounced "Doo" (the Scotch for a dove or pigeon), had no other designation in Mauchline and neighbourhood than "Johnnie Pigeon," or "Pigeon Johnnie;" though he was no pigeon to be rooked or cheated. As already said, he kept "the Whitefoord Arms" Inn³ at the foot of the Cowgate, then

² In the vigorous "Earnest Cry and Prayer," written in 1786, at Mossgiel.

³ The beautiful estate of Ballochmyle, close to Mauchline, was then possessed by the family of the Whitefoords.

the chief "hotel" in the place, and from its proximity to the market stance, the resort of the better class of farmers and others, and more frequented by Burns than any other. Patrick described him as a "rough, swearin' character, muckle gi'en to the bottle." Burns stayed in his house on his first return from Edinburgh, in his blaze of fame, to visit his old friends, whom he had left—a nameless man—a few months before; and from thence he re-opened negotiations with the Armours, which they now received with obsequious gladness.⁴

"Poosie Nansie's" real name was Agnes Gibson, this village cognomen being probably conferred on her, with the happy descriptive knack of school-boys and villagers, from her sleeky, cat-like ways, or her feline tendencies with her wild customers.

⁴ See letter to James Smith of 11th June, 1787, written after his visit to Armour, in which he speaks with highest contempt of this over-welcome.

“Racer Jess,” who was so called from her unusual swiftness of foot, for which she was employed to carry messages, as well as to race with experts, and who figures in the “Holy Fair” in no good company at the foot of the Cowgate, was her reputed daughter. She became, Willie said, “drunken and worthless,” as was natural in that houf of the abandoned.

The unfortunate man, William Fisher, known as “Holy Willie,” both Patrick and his wife were little inclined to speak of. When they did so, it was only as a man “neither very bad nor very guid, to ootward appearance.” Mrs. Patrick said he must have drawn attention to himself, in his earlier days, as at least a good professor, “to be made an elder o’.”⁵ Seeing that I knew that the satires

⁵ He seems to have held a more or less prominent place in the eldership, being named in the Session Records, along

of Burns were only too well founded, for he was subsequently dismissed the eldership and died in a ditch after a debauch, they admitted that "he was blaim'd for takin' the kirk bawbees. When standin' at the plate on Sabbath, fowk said, he would boo doon to pat his boots richt, as it were, and slip in a bawbee or so!" Poor man, his punishment has been greater than Burns, with all his indignation against his character, I am sure, meant it to be; for the poet had little anticipation that his fiery words would reach so far and wide when he wrote them, and be so long remembered against their luckless object. Happily, however, in such world-wide pages, the man himself becomes a myth, a mere ideal representative

with another, James Lamie, to confer with Jean Armour and her parents at the beginning of her unhappy experiences before marriage, but leaving that duty, it would appear, to his colleague.

of certain thoughts and actions, which alone remain as the theme of the poem.

On the general everyday life of the village, Burns has thrown electric flashes.

We visit with him the various gatherings, "the public haunts, and fairs and rants," that took place about Mauchline, at which he enjoyed himself more fully than most, through his exuberant spirits, and from which he obtained abundant materials for his muse.

The fairs, of which there were several during the year, were held in the open space at the end of the churchyard, as already noted; at the market cross, "Mauchline Corse," where the ancient cross was then represented only by a prosaic pump, the position of which is still apparent in a hollow on the street; and onwards some three hundred yards from this, over what was then greatly a free space, called "the Loan Green," stretching on both sides

of the road to Muirkirk, which runs north-east from the Cross, opposite the end of the Cross Causeway. The lower portion of the Green is now much built on, but part, remaining open, is still so named; and in the north-west corner of the old space stands the Martyrs' Monument.

Mauchline had also its yearly horse races, an amusement to which Ayrshire has long been devoted, local meetings being still held in various parts of the county. The Mauchline races took place close by Mossgiel, near the junction of the roads from Tarbolton and Kilmarnock, on the ground where still are shown "The Drucken Steps" and "The Lousy Bush," by the roadside, their very names being evidences of old times. Burns seems to have regularly frequented and exceedingly enjoyed this entertainment, characterizing it as "that much expected scene of revelry and mirth," but adding that it brings no joy equal

to meeting with a friend. To the Fair and the Races, he invites Lapraik and Kennedy, promising to retire with them, however, to friendly joys and "rhyming ware."⁶ He also paints to us the conclusion of such scenes, when some "began to tak' the gate," and others retired to "the bleezing ingle" of the too attractive publics, to enjoy "the nappy" with their bosom cronies, not thinking

"On the lang Scots miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps, and stiles
That lay between them and their hame."⁷

It was in the evening after these Races in April, 1784, that the young Mossgiel farmer, then recently settled there, first saw Jean Armour, without, how-

⁶ "First Epistle to Lapraik," April 1, 1785, and "Epistles to Kennedy," of March 3 and April 20, 1785.

⁷ "Tam o' Shanter," which pictures such market evenings in inimitable style.

ever, speaking to her, at a dancing party, such as frequently wound up the day. His dog, which followed him to the assembly, became the means of introducing them to each other next day,⁸ a meeting to which he refers in the fragment from his Commonplace Book, "When first I came by Stewart Kyle."

We can also join the poet at Mossgiel, and accompany the crowds with which the "roads were clad from side to side" on their way to the yearly Preachings, can gaze at the wonderful scenes there enacted, and return with the picturesque groups that wended their way homewards in various guise, after the religious and social excitements of the day.⁹

⁸ See Chambers, vol. i., 98.

⁹ See the "Holy Fair."

We can be present with him at the gleeful and innocent reunions on "bleak-faced Hallowmas,"

"When rural life o' every station
Unite in common recreation ;
Love blinks, Wit slaps, an' social Mirth,
Forgets there's Care upo' the earth."¹⁰

We can also go with him to the merry-making of "the Rockin',"

"To ca' the crack and weave our stockin'
Where there is muckle fun and jokin' ;"

especially to that memorable one held at Mossgiel in March, 1785, which roused his muse to glorious activity, and laid the basis of his fame.¹¹

We can join him, if we like, in a "random splore," along with Smith and Richmond, to the

¹⁰ "The Twa Dogs," written at Mossgiel in 1786.

¹¹ "First Epistle to Lapraik," April 1, 1785, in which the scene is brilliantly described.

“rag castle” of “Poosie Nansie,” and witness a real “Kirk Alloway in a bleeze,” a more powerful reality than even that Walpurgis Night, because carried on by human beings and not by witches; gaining insight into the human heart, deep, strange and suggestive, and returning, it is to be hoped, not in self-righteous condemnation, but with at least a new conviction that happiness is much more widely diffused by the Great Father of all, and on different conditions, than, in our narrow thinking, we are sometimes apt to deem it.

We can refresh ourselves next day by a walk to the ice-bound loch, there to join in “the roaring game”¹ with Burns or Tam Samson as “king o’ a’ the core;”² or we can accompany the pair to the

¹ See “The Vision.”

² See “Tam Samson’s Elegy,” in which curling terminology is cleverly incorporated, the end of life being appropriately called “death’s hog-score.”

river side to fish, or to the heathery muirland to shoot,³ though to this sport our poet was no friend, characterizing it as a "barbarous art," his love of nature requiring no such cruel and questionable attraction to draw him thither.⁴

We can jump on one of his horses, the "Highland Donald hastie," while he rides Jenny Geddes, to get them shod at the smiddy in the Cowgate, the only one then in Mauchline, "where ploughmen gather wi' their graith,"⁵ and where we can see

See the same "Elegy" where Tam's death is mentioned in singularly varied and felicitous phrase, according to the employment described; as Tom Bowling's by Dibdin.

⁴ See his indignant poem, "Inhuman Man," etc., and his views on sport in the letter to Mr. Cunningham of 4th May, 1789, in which it was first enclosed.

⁵ Apparatus of any kind; hence used for the implements required for farming, and for house, horse, riding, shooting, wearing, etc. It is perhaps connected with *gear*. It is a common word with Burns, as *graith* or *graithing*.

“ The brawnie, bainie, ploughman chiel,
Bring hard owerhip, wi’ sturdy wheel,
The strong forehammer,
Till block and studdie ring and reel
Wi’ dinsome clamour.”⁶

We can hear through him, also, a good deal of the gossip that floats like foul air through all small communities, especially in those Ayrshire days of narrow life and little travel—of practices that bring church censures, and evil rumours that taint the fairest fame ; of hen-pecked husbands, like Campbell of Netherplace, a fine property close by Gavin Hamilton’s, which still exists under the same name, but belonging to a different family ; and of his wife, known as “Queen Netherplace,” notorious for greed of money and domestic domination, to whom he has devoted three of his pasquinades ;

⁶ “Scotch Drink,” written at Mossgiel in 1785.

and of a not uncommon human specimen, in which avarice conquered honesty, Laird M'Gaun, nicknamed "Master Tootie,"⁷ probably from his "tooting" or winding the horn for his cows to return home in the evening, as was then, and still is, the custom in some places—for he was a dealer in cows, who used to scrape the ring marks off their horns to disguise their age, and from whose service Burns wished to save one of his own herd-boys, asking Hamilton to take the lad instead.⁸

While thus witnessing abundance of the joyous

⁷ "Tootie" was the usual old Scotch name for the common cow-herd of a community; and there is a corner in Arbroath called Tootie's Nook, from his winding his horn there, to assemble or disperse the herd. Such common cow-herds still exist in some parts of the country, as at Lauder, where this and other bits of the olden time still survive.

⁸ See "I hold it, sir, my bounden duty," written from Mossgiel in May, 1786.

life of the village, the young poet's true element, we are also sufficiently introduced to the stricter set, male and female, the "venerable core," of

"Douce folk that live by rule,
Grave, tideless-blooded, calm and cool."⁹

Of these, there was then, it would seem, not a few marked examples in Mauchline, as everywhere else, who counted themselves the "real judges" of doctrine, and, "wi' screwed-up grace-proud faces,"¹⁰ had

"Nought to do but mark and tell
Their neebours' fauts and folly."

These he has satirised with unsparing pen in many a verse; pleading, at the same time, in admirable sympathetic strains, full of kindly wisdom,

⁹ "Epistle to Smith," from Mossgiel in 1785.

¹⁰ "Jolly Beggars."

the cause of the more thoughtless that “gang a kennin’ wrang”¹ through impulse and temptation more than through evil.

With him as Depute-Master, we can go to the door of the lodge of his “dear brothers of the mystic tie,” and though stopped there by the tyler’s sword, can join with the poet in his wish for the rule of “Freedom, Harmony and Love”² within. He gives us, on occasions, peeps of the joviality that lights up the forbidden precincts, and we can sympathize with them when they drink his health “wi’ a tear in their e’e,” as Patrick told me was yearly done, with due solemnity, in his old lodge at Tarbolton. We are, however, not to be imposed on when he seems to lift the veil from

¹ “Address to the Unco Guid,” written in 1786.

² “Fareweel to the Mason Lodge of Tarbolton,” in 1786.

the hidden mysteries by picturing them as raising the Deil, in his "Address to his Majesty."

Burns was a very keen mason, the ideal philanthropy and brotherhood of the system being irresistible to such a mind, and he used to go to Masonic meetings all the way to Tarbolton and Kilmarnock. He extended "the noble vocation" in Mauchline, where he often held lodges, probably in Dow's, to initiate new brothers. Since Burns's time, Mauchline has had a lodge of its own, dedicated to St. Mungo, the patron saint of Glasgow, which still flourishes.

To the ladies of the village, he also introduces us shortly after he settles at Mossgiel, six of whom he racily hits off in a few dashing strokes. Of "the jewel for him o' them a'," the mason's daughter, all the world knows. Of the others, some were afterwards more or less notable—the fine Miss Miller becoming the wife of his friend,

Dr. Mackenzie of Mauchline; the witty Miss Smith marrying Burns's "earliest friend, except his only brother," James Candlish,³ and being, in time, the mother of the celebrated churchman, Dr. Candlish; and Miss Elizabeth Miller, "Miss Betty," who had a penchant for the attractive poet, and afterwards received the honour of the farewell, "From thee, Eliza, I must go." Nor are we to fancy that the damsels of this country village, even a hundred years ago, were mere rustic hoydens! Quite the reverse; for their poetic friend tells that their fashions vied with those of London and Paris—don't we recal "Miss's fine Lunardi" in the church?—and that they were

³ One of Burns's correspondents, who rose from humble life to a good position, a worthy man with "superabundant modesty," and "one of the worthiest fellows," the poet says, "that ever any man called by the name of friend." See letter to Peter Hill, of 1789.

addicted to novel-reading even in that tight-laced rural community!⁴

From what we have seen, it is evident that the poet, poor farmer only though he was, had the entrée to the best of the middle-class society of the neighbourhood, always, of course, those of the broader sort, who, in general, held then the best positions in Mauchline.

We can also listen to the clamour of ecclesiastical and religious controversy as carried on in church courts and pulpits, and echoed, with at least equal energy and fierceness, to the clatter of the tankard, by various "yill caup commentators." One of these he has impaled as "the noisy polemic," Jamie Humphrey, a mason in the town, a sharp-witted, long-tongued character, who on

⁴ See "The Belles of Mauchline" and "O leave novels, ye Mauchline Belles," written in 1784.

occasions feared not to banter even Burns himself. Poor man, he got into doubtful ways, depending latterly on the doles given him on account of being mentioned by the poet, and died in the poor-house of Failford. We also meet in his pages with the solemn-looking elders, the "black-bonnets" of the "Holy Fair," who superintended the plate. And we must not forget that universal appendage of the church, the beadle himself, who, being bellman, was known as "Auld Clinkum" and "Clinkumbell,"⁵ and who had to attend on the minister and session, his ungracious offices there being described by Burns when summoned before that severe and then omnipotent court.

All these things were but the common everyday elements of Mauchline life as it then existed, cer-

⁵ In the "Holy Fair," and in his reply to an epistle from Thomas Walker of Ochiltree, in 1786.

tainly stronger and more piquant than they are now, with our modern uniformitarianism which tends to kill individuality. They were not, however, superior to those of other villages scattered all over the country then. But how admirably utilised and blended into a wondrous whole, and preserved as a striking picture of men and manners for all time! Not our own Scott, nor even Shakspeare himself, has surpassed the Mossgiel farmer in dramatic delineations of the daily life around them, in vividness, power, brilliancy and vitality. As was said by the "Man of Feeling," anticipating, with remarkable foresight, the judgment of posterity, when criticising these astonishing poems immediately on their appearance, "considered abstractedly, and without the apologies arising from his situation;" no one can fail to "perceive with what uncommon penetration and sagacity this heaven-taught ploughman, from his humble

and unlettered station, has looked upon men and manners :”⁶ a remarkable critique, which then sounded the trumpet-note of his fame, and which is destined to echo through the ages.

A good example may be here added of Burns’s unique and intuitive power of transforming the most trivial circumstances into poetic successes, in “Tam o’ Shanter.”

Of the origin, in actual fact, of this immortal poem, various accounts have been furnished.⁷ But the following used to be given as the true tale, by Mr. John Smith, farmer, of Swindrige-muir, near Dalry in Ayrshire, who was living when I resided in that neighbourhood twenty years ago ; an account which Mr. Smith said he

⁶ In the “Lounger” of 1786, of which Henry Mackenzie was editor.

⁷ See, amongst others, Chambers, vol. iii., p. 161.

had from Burns's own lips, for he was a personal acquaintance of the poet.

The farmer of Shanter, which lies south of the "bonny Doon," used to visit Ayr at the weekly markets, bent, like his neighbours, on business, though accustomed to unite with it no little pleasure. As was his wont when marketing was done, he went to the inn where he was sure to meet with his "drouthy crony, the souter." "His gray mare, Meg," who was left tied by the bridle to the door of the hostelry to bide the weather till her master was ready to ride, had the honour and advantage of a handsome, well-cropped tail. The fisher-boys of Ayr (for the good town has its fisher population), observing this fine appendage, first coveted the long hair for their sea-lines; and knowing that "Tam" would be in no hurry to mount, finally helped themselves to the same, till eventually "the fient a tail Meg had to shake."

“Tam,” at length issuing from the tavern and seeing his mare’s luckless plight, was mightily exercised how he should excuse himself to his wife. She, good woman, it seems, was given, rather more than usual, to the prevalent superstitions of the time, and had often warned him of the danger he ran of

“ Being caught by warlocks in the mirk,
By Alloway’s auld haunted kirk.”

After consideration, on his way homewards, the canny farmer determined to trade on her credulity, and concocted the story that he had been pursued by witches at Alloway, hardly escaping with his life, while Maggie had lost her tail in the chase! This story, getting wind through “Tam’s” garrulous boasting, became, along with his own character, the groundwork of the glamorie of the famous tale.

VII.—Burns as the Poet of Common Things.

“ Let’s sing about our noble sel’s ;
We’ll cry nae jauds frae heathen hills,
To help or roose us.”⁸

THE pleasure and profit of my visit to Mossgiel, to which I had long looked forward, were vastly increased by my fortunate meeting with the bright and blithe old herdboy and his wife. I purposed returning more than once to glean further memories of the poet and the place, but circumstances never permitted this till both had passed away. Patrick

⁸ From “Third Epistle to Lapraik,” written at Mossgiel, in September, 1785.

accompanied me some distance on my road along the banks of the Ayr. After cordially bidding each other farewell, we parted, in sight of the “bonny braes of Ballochmyle.”

Filled with all I had seen and heard, I pursued my journey through other scenes glorified by the genius of the bard—visiting the ever-memorable spot at the mouth of the Water of Fail, where Highland Mary and he plighted dear troth over the rippling stream; past Coilsfield, famous for ever, for the dairymaid’s sake, as “the castle o’ Montgomery,” near which lies the reputed grave of old King Coil, “a sceptred British shade, stalking round his ashes lowly laid,” as the poet tells;⁹

⁹ This grave gives name to the place, Coilsfield, the more common name in Burns’s time. From his kingship comes perhaps the name of Kyle, one of the “ridings” of Ayr, and Coila, used by Burns both as the name of the district and

down to Tarbolton, and the scenes round his father's farm of Lochlea; and so onwards to Irvine, where he essayed to leave the plough for the heckle, happily for the world's sake, however, being recalled by fortune from trade to husbandry, and where I went, like a devout pilgrim, to see the little room in which he lodged and inscribed his well-known initials in 1782.

Nothing more impresses a student of Burns, as he moves about amidst the scenery of his life, than his constant fulfilment of the great function of the true poet, in using the materials immediately round about him—common though they were counted—as the subjects of his song. Few have equalled him in thus utilising their own haunts,—not even Wordsworth and Cowper. You cannot

of the Muse herself. See the unabridged form of the "Vision," written in 1786, at Mossgiel.

wander anywhere through the scenery amidst which Burns lived, from Alloway to Dumfries, without feeling at every step how he has left his bright touch on everything; so that the landscape, however fair in itself, as it truly is, has received from him a super-added glory. It was by virtue of his wisely acting on this true instinct, that he was able so splendidly to redeem the youthful resolve made to his brother poet of Ochiltree :—

“ We’ll gar our streams and burnies shine
Up wi’ the best !
We’ll sing auld Coila’s plains and fells,
Her moors, red-brown wi’ heather bells,
Her banks and braes, her dens and dells.”¹⁰

But this is true not only of the scenery of his life ; it is still more true of the varied experiences

¹⁰ Epistle to William Simpson, written from Mossgiel in May, 1785, at the very beginning of his greatest poetic period.

through which he passed. Very few have given more poetic expression to the everyday incidents and feelings of their lives—the quiet life of home, the common labours by which he won his daily bread, the every-day friends he knew, the social circle he met, the plain but parti-coloured life of the countryside in which he lived, the simplest country tale, the commonest country tradition, the flow of common events, and the thousand little things that make up the daily life of our common humanity. Few also have surpassed him in uttering the varied emotions, “the moods of the mind,” the sunshine and the shower, the dreams and aspirations of his deeper heart,—experiences common in their kind to all men, which it only requires the soul and tongue of genius to interpret and to utter.

It is here that our poet has done vital and lasting service to the race, in expressing the idealism that

underlies the commonest of things, the most common-place of lives, the most ordinary of incidents. It is here that Burns has shed the highest glory on Scotland, and the Scotch people, and on mankind. Go where we may, look where we will, in any place in which he has sojourned during his short but pregnant life, we are constantly reminded of the man, his life, his wonderful words, and their ever-widening influence. It is here that his genius most conspicuously appears, in utterances that will speed the time when the world will act on the conviction that the elements of happiness and poetry are more within our reach, here and now, than we have yet dreamt of, and not in some far-off Utopia, in the skies, in dreamland, or in the future, where we have foolishly too much located them ; and that

“ A man’s best things are nearest him ;
Lie close about his feet.”

It is here that Burns takes a permanent and paramount place amongst the true poets of nature and humanity, who have increased our power of

“Clothing the palpable and familiar
With golden exhalations of the dawn.”



I mourned with thousands, but as one
More deeply grieved, for He was gone
Whose light I hailed when first it shone,
 And showed my youth
How verse may build a princely throne
 On humble truth.

Wordsworth
of Burns.