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# ROBERT BURNS

*by* CATHERINE CARSWELL

Great Lives

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# CHAPTER I

The family of Burnes – migration of William Burnes, the poet's father, from Kincardineshire to Ayrshire – Alloway – Agnes Broun, the poet's mother – rural Scotland in the eighteenth century – birth of Robert Burns – childhood and education.

EARLY in the eighteenth century there was in Kincardineshire a family called Burnes or Burness. They had been established there for many generations as tenant farmers, gardeners, wrights, masons – all peasants of a known stock in their district, who were safe to carry the best recommendations from the gentry should any man of them be driven South in search of a better livelihood. For in the Scotland of that day those that would survive, let alone those that would thrive, had often enough to look to the southern road as the only alternative to the terrifying western way across the ocean. From time to time men of this family had fared south. A hundred years earlier a Burnes seems to have gone as far as London. But mostly they stayed in their place, multiplying and consolidating the family name, so that they came by something of that proud and assured habit which we are too apt to associate exclusively with houses of noble origin. Burneses had long worked for and fought under their feudal lord, the Earl Marischal. But their fighting days

ended when the last Earl Marischal fled across the seas after the 'Fifteen Rebellion. Hitherto they had been Jacobites and Episcopalians, but now they had to conform to the new dispensation of Hanover and Geneva. The 'Forty-five Rebellion found them biding in their houses and attending the Presbyterian place of worship. One, William Burnes, having passed through more than one famine since his birth in 1721, and having worked and schemed in vain against the decline of his father's modest fortune, set out sadly on the southern journey at the age of twenty-seven. He was the third of ten children. With him went the brother next above him in age, who would join the eldest, already established as a wright in Montrose. His own destination was less certain.

After nearly ten years of wandering jobs, including a sojourn in Edinburgh, where, advantaged by the new vogue of landscape gardening, he worked upon the laying out of the public park now known as the Meadows, he was able to come to rest in Ayrshire. With the assistance of a local gentleman he bought seven and a half acres of land two miles to the south of the town of Ayr. This was at Alloway near the river Doon on that side of the river where the country was called Stewart Kyle, while on the other side to the south-west was the country called Carrick. Here with his own hands he built and thatched a one-storey

clay cottage Presently he married a Carrick woman named Agnes Broun. There were seven children of the marriage.

These children united in themselves the two strains of tradition and character that then divided – and in some degree still divide – the Scottish Lowlands. The Lowland boundary line runs irregularly between the Firths of Moray and Clyde. In the extreme north-east quarter, to which William Burnes belonged, the people were traditionally Tory, Jacobite, and Episcopalian, while in the south-west, where Agnes Broun's forbears had been tenant farmers since Bannockburn, they were fanatically Whig and Presbyterian.

So much for root and stock. But environment is largely a matter of parental idiosyncrasy. William Burnes was a grave but nervous, high-principled but tenderly sensitive man. His ambitions on his children's account were strong both regarding this world and the next. He set great store by education and was liberal to the verge of heterodoxy in his religious views, but in matters of conduct he was of the straitest sect of the Puritans. He was respected but remote. Agnes Broun, on the contrary, was quick and fiery, without spiritual or cultural pretensions, a singer of country songs, and a willing, faithful, awestruck woman. Brought up in a hard school – at the age of ten she had borne heavy responsibilities and was

inured to heavy work – she was almost illiterate. But she was brisk and solid, perhaps earthy, the fruit of Covenanting men and women who could die as stoically for their faith as they could carouse cheerfully over the smuggled brandy which helped them to a more prosperous life. As a further contrast, William was tall and lean and very swarthy, whereas Agnes was short with reddish hair, brown eyes, and a fair skin.

But beneath and beyond differences of place and race these two were united by the land. Sleeping in a marriage bed that was set between clay walls and covered with a roof of straw, they looked to the earth for subsistence, and while aware of its harsh fickleness they yet trusted in getting from it the return of their united labours. Agnes was wise about cows and all the work of a dairy, and she could wield a flail. William as a practical nursery gardener rejoiced in the new ideas of agriculture. The only trouble was that these had lately outrun the capacity of such poor men as he. From the rough, wasteful, and superstitious system of the "run-rigg," which gave to farmers a strip of land here and there, bounded by ditches on either side and flanked by alien strips, all of which had to be sowed in the same exhausting triennial rotation while they were held only for short leases, there were proper parcels of land with tenures of six years and more, which were in

process of being drained, limed, and enclosed after the English fashion. The "Society of Improvers of Knowledge of Agriculture," founded two years after William's birth, was a pledge of the agricultural revolution. Wonders had been worked. Further wonders were confidently expected. Men with foresight and capital were investing in the soil. Poor men of intelligence were seeing it with new eyes, and could hardly realise how dependent upon capital the new conditions were. Rents of land and wages of labourers had doubled and were still sharply on the increase. With the introduction of new methods, new roots, and breeds of cattle, a new outlay was required, and a new and intimidating range of implements. Results were still in their early stages, and the dislocation between cause and effect was considerable. In the South things were far ahead of the North. The ground was more fertile and the people less conservative. Yet, although the 1,100 square miles that make up Ayrshire contained many rich acres, there were still more stretches of clay and of stone, of moss and of bog, which for generations to come would defy the progressive spirit while fetching ever higher rents because of it.

Until he built the Alloway cottage William Burnes, though living in Ayrshire, had still looked to Kincardineshire for his idea of home, and had sent his father what he could spare from his wages.

Now his filial responsibility was discharged, and it was to his sons that he would dedicate the experience of his long solitude and the unswerving righteousness of his character. Henceforth Ayrshire was his place. Here, in the west, they heard and spoke his name not as "Burness" but as "Burrens" which, being taken phonetically by the Ayrshire ear, is written down as we now know it – Burns. And although William continued to sign his letters in the Kincardineshire way, his concurrence in the Ayrshire way is recorded for us in the baptismal entry of his first child. This was a boy, born on January 25th, 1759, and in accordance with the Scottish custom named for his paternal grandfather, Robert.

William had at first intended to set up at Alloway as an independent nurseryman. But either finding his savings insufficient, or thinking better of the scheme upon his marriage, he made the place into a small dairy holding that was within the capacity of his wife to manage, while he continued as daily gardener to a gentleman who had recently bought an estate upon the Doon. His employer was a certain Dr. Fergusson, who had made money as a medical practitioner in London and had returned to spend it pleasantly and patriotically in his native place.

Ten days after Robert's birth a wind from the Atlantic blew in one end of the cottage, and

mother and child had to find refuge under a neighbour's roof while the damage was repaired. It held firm then[1] for the births of a second son and two daughters, and was roomy enough to shelter occasional relatives of Agnes, one of whom, an old widow called Betty Davidson, figured in Robert's early years. Betty was less literate even than Agnes (who at least could write her own name and spell out Bible texts) but had an inexhaustible cruse of country lore, chiefly of a supernatural order. William might and did protest against her witches and warlocks and all such trumpery. But young Robert listened and was never tired. He was dark, like his father, and fiery, like his mother—a stubborn, intelligent boy with remarkable powers of attention and an inappeasable appetite for words and music, though he could never learn, even under sore beatings, to sing the psalm tunes that were the Scottish cottager's only official music.

At the age of five he began to attend the parish school, a poor thing even for those days, that presently had to be discontinued owing to paucity of pupils and the weariness of the master. Sooner than send his children daily to the next parish, a long journey, William Burnes, whose own father had been deeply concerned over education,

[1] The present structure, owing to many and loving repairs, is probably superior to that which housed the Burnes family.

persuaded a promising youth named John Murdoch to come from Ayr and set up as the Alloway schoolmaster. He got five families to guarantee support, and, in addition to the usual tiny stipend, not exceeding a shilling a head, Murdoch was to obtain a rotation of lodgings with his pupils' parents during the term. Though only eighteen, the new teacher had studied at Edinburgh. He brought with him a spelling-book, a grammar, and a Bible, which, with his leathern tawse, were the country dominie's regular stock-in-trade. But he brought also a new book of elegant English extracts called Masson's *Collection of Prose and Verse.* It was a priceless treasure. In a cottage where, apart from the Bible, there had been no book more exciting than Thomas Boston's *Fourfold State of Unregenerate Man,* there were now selections from Shakespeare and Milton, Dryden and Thomson, Grey and Shenstone, with examples of prose from the classical essayists to Mrs. Rowe's *Moral Letters.* At school the boys were set to analyse, to paraphrase, and to memorise. Robert and Gilbert were always high in a class which consisted mainly of their seniors. Robert, though less manageable and at the same time less merry than his brother, was soon "remarkable for the fluency and correctness of his expression." He became a reader of all he could lay hands upon, and Addisonian allegories like *The Vision of Mirza*

took their place in his impassioned and retentive mind along with old Betty's fables and his mother's musical repertory. That repertory had been derived first from an infancy on the smuggling coast of Carrick, and later from a faithless ploughman, Agnes's sweetheart for seven years before she met the safe man from Kincardine.

"*Ah! man was made to mourn!*"

she sang, and also –

"*Kissin' is the key o' love*
*An' clippin' is the lock,*
*An' making o't's the best thing*
*That e'er a young thing got,*"

or, perhaps, the irresistible –

"*Wha learnt you to dance, you to dance, you to dance,*
*Wha learnt you to dance, Bab at the Bowster, Brawly,*"

or the gay –

"*Fy let us a' to the briddel*
*For there will be lilting there,*
*For Jockie's to be married to Maggie,*
*The lass with the gauden-hair.*
*And there will be lang-kail and pottage*
*And bannocks of barley-meal,*
*And there will be good salt herring*
*To relish a cog of good ale,*"

or even the sly –

> " *We're a' dry wi' drinkin' o't,*
> *We're a' dry wi' drinkin' o't.*
> *The minister kissed the fiddler's wife*
> *And couldna' preach for thinkin' o't.*"

Her husband, when he overheard, did not favour such diversions. But for the very young they might pass. Soon he would take his sons in hand, both in practical and in abstract matters. As to the former he was resolved that the boys should not go out, after the usual way of labourers' children, to work for other men at the tender age of eight or nine, but that they should work under his eye on a farm of which he was master. Touching the latter, he had already composed a " Manual of Religious Belief," which he was asking Murdoch to transcribe, improve, and enlarge in the light of his better scholarship. By this his sons should presently be instructed and guided as to their vital principles. The manual was orthodox in its dogmas but of considerable emotional latitude. It was, in fact, harmonious with the preaching of the friendly minister at Ayr, mild old Dr. Dalrymple, who always came to the cottage to baptise each newborn child. For Dr. Dalrymple leaned towards the " New Lights," as the more liberal school of the Scottish clergy were designated. That is to say, in spite of the Calvinistic doctrine

of election, to which he was obliged to subscribe in theory, he held in practice that any true penitent might confidently hope for heaven.

## CHAPTER II

Mount Oliphant – "a ruinous bargain" – hardships of the Burnes family – books and reading – early symptoms of ill health – William Burnes's discipline.

TOWARDS the end of 1765, William Burnes realised the more worldly of his two projects. His employer, among other properties, had bought a seventy-acre farm called Mount Oliphant, which lay all unimproved on the bleak upper slopes, two miles above Alloway to the south-east and rather less to the north-east from the other Doonside village of Dalrymple. It was a farm that called for an enlightened tenant. Burnes, a man of proved worth, seemed eminently suitable, but he had no capital except what was represented by his Alloway holding, and that could not be disposed of at a moment's notice. To meet the difficulty Dr. Fergusson offered to lend a hundred pounds at reasonable interest and to give a twelve years' lease with an option to break at six years. On the face of it the offer was good. Besides chiming with Burnes's secret ambition it would afford increased sleeping room for his family, which was outgrowing the clay cottage. For Mount Oliphant had, what most Scottish farms still lacked, a house. As often as not the incoming

tenant had to set up his own too temporary shelter, the rooftree and other more movable parts of which he would carry with him when he went away. On his next holding he might find that his predecessor had left at least a shell of four walls. Hence the aspect, so savage and comfortless, of the Scottish farmer's home, which frequently horrified travellers from the other side of the Border. But Mount Oliphant had its steading, and, though this was only of the traditional two-roomed kind, it was superior to the Alloway cottage in being of stone and in having a loft where the boys could sleep. Up by a ladder into this rat-haunted, unventilated, and unlighted enclosure Robert and Gilbert would nightly climb and be out of the way. Stooping for fear of the rafters, they would throw off their clothes (in summer all, in winter all but their day shirts) and lie together for warmth upon a bag of chaff covered with blankets of their mother's spinning. In Scotland large families overflowed upwards.

On the other hand Fergusson was asking a stiff rent for these mercies – 12*s.* an acre, rising to 13*s.* 5*d.* for the second half of the lease. And the soil was not merely unimproved; it was vile with stones. Thirty years later, with soaring prices for land everywhere and all the work that had been put into this parcel of it, the owner would be glad to get 10*s.* 6*d.* an acre. But empty pockets

may not bargain. The lease was signed in November ; and, although the family would not be in occupation until the following Whitsuntide, work was begun at once.

It was characteristic of William Burnes that, returning from each day's toil, he should cart down surplus stones from Mount Oliphant to repair the walls of Alloway churchyard which had fallen ruinous. Perhaps he did this as a thank-offering for the fields upon which at last he might walk as master. Perhaps it was merely his sense of decency. Old Betty might tell the children devilish tales of the "spunkies, elf-candles, dead-lights," and the rest that were to be seen of a night in "Alloway's auld haunted kirk." William Burnes, free from all such superstitions, would do his pious duty to the dead and to this rich Ayrshire acre in which he willed that his own bones should at last be laid. Helping him in his self-appointed task was a neighbour farmer, John Tennant,[1] who had witnessed Robert's baptism and later had shared in the services of Murdoch on behalf of his own sons.

From the new home the boys still attended Murdoch's school at Alloway, and Murdoch still came to stay with them, besides walking out on a holiday to bring them books and news and

[1] Afterwards Tennant of Glenconner, from whom came the distinguished family of which the present Lady Oxford is a member.

perhaps an intelligent companion from Ayr with whom to share the superior conversation of the head of the house. Robert and Gilbert were his favourite pupils, and for the rest of his life – which was not to be of the happiest – he would protest his veneration of William Burnes as " by far the best of the human race that ever I had the pleasure of being acquainted with."

It was Murdoch who just then brought to Mount Oliphant a work of biography which Robert ever afterwards coupled with the life of the national hero, Sir William Wallace, as the first book of his private reading to affect him in the way of an experience. This was a life of Hannibal, and, with the history of Wallace, it gave Robert " more pleasure than any two books I ever read again."

The Wallace life was a bastard affair of English heroic couplets based upon the old Scots jingle of " Blind Harry." The Hannibal life has never been identified. It was probably of little account as a literary performance, but it has not been invariably the best books that have most deeply influenced the greatest men. A good case might be made out for the opposite contention. The point of interest is that all the influences here were in a sense biographical, and, still more, they were heroical. Apart from the folk-songs and tales that were the breath of life to this boy, what roused

him was the life of a hero. At a hint from history, fiction, or the epic he saw himself in the heroic rôle.

At Mount Oliphant, as life went on there, the heroic vision was more of a torture than an alleviation. Not only were the ages of great and of romantic action past, but this hero saw himself condemned in perpetuity to the life of a slave. Mount Oliphant was a place of prose and crippling poverty. By the end of the first year the birth of a third boy, William, brought the family up to five, and the two elder ones had a shrewd foretaste of their days as unpaid labourers on a soil that was " almost the very poorest . . . in a state of cultivation " under a father-master whose health and, at times, temper were not proof against the " ruinous bargain " he had made out of his very ambition for them. Burnes could afford neither an indoor nor an outdoor servant. He could never give his boys a dish of meat. Had they gone out to work in the usual way they would have had less improving conversation – it was their father's habit to discourse to them daily in the most correct English at his disposal – and they might have been less sensitively considered ; but their boyhood would have come easier to them.

As they were about discovering these things, they lost what most helped to make them bearable. Murdoch announced that he was leaving. Their

chief link with the outer world was thus to be snapped, and for further education they must look to their father in his scanty and harried spare time. That he was ill equipped as a teacher they knew perhaps as well as he. But the best had to be made of it. On Murdoch's advice books were procured – Ray's *Wisdom of God in Creation* (a work which could give a satisfactory account of the Divine Purpose in making the louse), Derham's two works on *Physico-Theology* and *Astro-Theology* (which further provided the children with a God-informed cosmos), and a *Geographical Grammar* (which contained, among other useful items, much current information about Scotland). Also William became a subscriber for Stackhouse's *History of the Bible*, a bulky illustrated work, written thirty years earlier by an English country parson and now re-issued in monthly parts by an Edinburgh printer for the edification of the Scottish intelligence.[1] Except for the Stackhouse it is unlikely that any of these books had to be bought. Burnes was known to his minister and to former employers as one to whom no favour was so acceptable as the loan of a new book or the gift of an old one.

[1] Notwithstanding its title this was so full of various information – much of it strictly profane – that it provided Mount Oliphant with a contemporary Outline of Knowledge. Regarded either as an entertainment or as an example of vigorous prose Stackhouse compares favourably with our modern Outlines.

In November, Murdoch came out to say good-bye. Agnes, nursing the four-months-old baby, gave him of Mount Oliphant's best, which was simple enough and did not include fermented liquor. She sat respectfully by as the young dominie read aloud a scene from a play called *Titus Andronicus*, which he proposed to leave behind him as a parting token. But Robert, attentive to the horrible fate of the heroine, raised such a furious outcry against it, that a substitute of a lighter nature had to be found.

The next five years were the dreariest in the boy's life, and it has been credibly stated that during this period the seeds of his lifelong constitutional weakness were sown. Of the precise nature of this weakness we cannot be certain. At different times he alluded to it himself as "hypochondria," and as "my nervous ailment." A distinguished medical writer,[1] who has drawn a careful clinical picture, holds that a rheumatic tendency, aggravated by over-work and underfeeding at a tender age, was the cause of a recurrent affliction of nerves and heart which resulted in early collapse. Certainly this poet, from the age of ten, was forced to engage in physical labours that over-exhausted him. His parents were troubled by his fits of gloom and by his habit of crying out at night. With the coming of his

[1] Sir James Crichton-Browne in *Burns from a New Point of View*.

teens he suffered from dull headaches. It may be thought that the staple diet of such a household – skim milk and porridge of oats or barley – was not the most desirable for a highly strung child with rheumatic tendencies in a severe climate. On the other hand, his obscure constitutional weakness was perhaps no more than one of the too familiar penalties of genius. The other children throve on the same regimen. Gilbert had no night terrors. And the fact remains, that, in spite of all, Robert himself grew up thick-set and muscular, though with rounded shoulders from his toil.

He accepted discipline, took a pride in his growing dexterity with the plough and the beasts, and showed a good sowing hand. It was part of his work to educate the younger children, and he did it in such a way that they adored him. But from the age of nine to the age of thirteen he was denied the outlet of school or social contacts and was thrown upon his father both for instruction and companionship. The situation was not lightened by the father's early realisation that of this eldest born "something extraordinary would come." Besides conveying moral instruction daily William set himself to nip in the bud any hint of wildness or exaggeration even by way of mirth. If a harvester – some relative of his wife's, come to lend a hand from Carrick in the south

or from Cunninghame away in the north of the county – dared to utter ribaldry in William's presence, the rebuke came sharp and the offence was not repeated. Mount Oliphant was physically bare and open, but it was morally hemmed in. Books were the only distraction and the only solace, and in a book Robert's nose was buried at every chance moment, even during meal-times. As he grew out of childhood, his mother naturally failed him. He knew her songs now, and with the years and the contemplation of her husband's unsuccess her temper shortened. A fourth boy, John, was born in the summer of 1769, and a third girl, Isabella, two years later. Mrs. Burnes had no help inside the house and until Robert reached his teens she was Mount Oliphant's only adult labourer outside. Her hands were full. "We lived," wrote Robert later, "very poorly."

## CHAPTER III

Lessons in French and Latin – first love and first poem – sojourn at Kirkoswald – Peggy Thomson – essays in polite letter-writing – William Burnes's removal from Mount Oliphant to Lochlie – dancing – William Burnes's displeasure – "the Tarbolton Bachelors" – Ellison Begbie.

Not the least oppressive element was the father's unselfishness, which made anything like rebellion seem monstrous to the rebel. His righteousness was of the constricting kind : yet when he could ill spare the two elder boys, now that they were in their sturdy teens, he sent them week about to Dalrymple school to correct their faulty writing. Here they learned to write a small and neat if characterless hand, which, some fourteen years later, Robert was to develop into one of the fairest poetic hands we know.

These lessons were in the summer of 1772. And again during the following summer, Murdoch having returned to Ayr as teacher in the English school, Robert was sent down to stay in the burgh for three weeks. We have it from Murdoch that this was "for the purpose of revising English grammar, etc.," that the boy "might be better qualified to instruct his brothers and sisters at home." But the presence of a less diffused motive may be conjectured. It was probably

because Robert himself was a good advertisement that Murdoch undertook at the same time to teach him some Latin and French. French, at the moment, was having quite a vogue among the studious in Ayr. And the judicious display of such elegant extras – which were communicated on the way to and from school, or at night in the bed shared by teacher and pupil – brought Robert acquainted for the first time with the gentry. As a lad who was smart at French he was enabled to meet the sons of schoolmasters and doctors on something like an equal footing. They asked him to their houses, and he knew how to conduct himself there. He was told that if he mastered Latin there were chances in the great world even for such as he.

But the vaunted democracy of Scotland was ideal rather than actual. Already this boy had been shaken with rage upon seeing a pretty servant-girl rudely jostled as one of her young masters pushed by her in the very House of God. And in Ayr, although his particular democratic idea was fortified by a secret consciousness of power and a patent superiority of wits, these made him only the more aware of his bare feet, rough clothes, and poor prospects. He had always aimed to excel, and now he found that he could do so even in superior company. But he questioned if such new and flattering comparisons brought more of

pleasure than of chagrin. Those companions with whom he could masterfully play and learn had an outlook on life from which he – " destined to drudge behind the scenes " – felt himself to be for ever debarred. His disgust with their " decent, unnoticing disregard," became a rooted neurosis. It plagued and weakened him. Yet such is genius that much of the power and poignancy of his work comes from just this, and it is part of his achievement. At the time it made him turn with a different envy to the sons of tinkers and such-like who wandered homeless on the moors above Mount Oliphant. Here too he must suffer. Lacking the wildness in obscurity of these, yet forbidden a distinguished " appearance upon the stage of life " with those others, he found his own existence lacking in style and savour. And his appetite for savour was as keen as his sense of style was impassioned. To one with the longings of a Wallace and the heart of a Hannibal, what had the fields of Mount Oliphant to offer ?

In fact they had a marvel. For Robert, returning thither from his exciting but wounding experiences at Ayr to take his part in the harvest, fell in love and wrote his first song. What to another might have been simply a further experience was to him a dazzling and lasting revelation. From that moment music, poetry, and love formed the trinity that redeemed his life. He had

always known that music and poetry were the most potent of alleviations, each a little miracle in itself. Now, with the addition of love, they were fused into a constellation of joy – and it must be added, of *fun* – where envy could not enter and poverty was of no account.

To Gilbert all Robert's swans were geese, and Nelly Kilpatrick, the fair-haired country girl of fourteen who was Robert's partner in the gleaning, was merely a fair-haired country girl. But to Robert she was and remained for ever the " bewitching creature " who initiated him " into a certain delicious passion which, in spite of acid disappointment, gin-horse prudence, and book-worm philosophy," he held to the hour of his death " to be the first of human joys, our chiefest pleasure here below." That is to say, Nelly, standing on Ayrshire earth, was a sign from universal heaven that came to lighten the baffling problems of class and of fate, of savour and of style, and of a father's righteousness. A girl's a girl for a' that : and a song's a song. Here was the sole foundation on which a man might be truly a man, whatever his worldly lot. Here was not merely illumination but escape – an avenue simple as the way of the air to the lark from his lowly nest. And not merely an escape but a philosophy, a creed to be uttered, even a religion.

With all his ability Robert made small headway with the French language,[1] and in Latin he got hopelessly stuck. But Nelly's lesson, given in all innocence as she lingered behind the others with him among the sheaves and got him to pull the thorns from her palms, he learned for good and all. In this subject he would persevere and graduate. To the delight that was woman and the profound fun that was love, he would be faithful as man and as singer. *Amor vincit omnia* should be enough of the unknown tongues for him. We recognise readily in a great saint like Paul the capacity so to receive a single intimation of life that henceforth it dominates his existence. We do not so easily perceive in a poet like Robert Burns the same capacity for an all-confiding gesture. To himself, when he came to survey his own life, the incident was explicit. His love-songs and his love proclaimed it abroad. Yet it is seldom noted for the astonishing thing it was that an Ayrshire farm lad with a Presbyterian upbringing should once and for all have subscribed himself as the champion of earthly love.

That earliest love-song, composed "in a wild enthusiasm of passion" to a dance-tune that was a favourite with the girl who inspired it, was in itself a naïve performance, though it bore about it

[1] Burns seems to have learned to read simple French, but later in Edinburgh he was quite unable to communicate with a Frenchwoman to whom he was introduced.

signs of a lyric gift and never ceased to move its author. Its chief interest to the outside reader is the importance Burns attached to it as the authentic beginning of his career as a poet. A youth, a girl, and a melody are met in a Scottish harvest field. Variations on this theme and complications attendant upon it ; the endless flourish of grace notes, as of a bird singing ; the defiance of the satisfied heart and the despair of the heart bereft ; castigation of a world that scorned or crushed or degraded the lovely thing ; fury with the hypocrisy that punished it – these would follow.

Soon after this *éclaircissement* of an obscure youth in a rude corner Dr. Fergusson died, and his place was taken, so far as the Burns family were concerned, by a factor impatient to get in all arrears of rent. The children never forgot the effect upon their father of the threatening letters. " A novel-writer might perhaps have viewed these scenes with some satisfaction," wrote Robert twelve years later, " but so did not I." He now performed a full-grown man's work on the farm. His father, nevertheless, still desperately evolving schemes for improvement, managed in 1775 to send him away again, this time for the whole summer, that he might take a course of land-surveying at Kirkoswald, where the schoolmaster, Hugh Rodger, specialised in this subject. One

mercy was that the boy could board there with relatives of his mother.

At Kirkoswald, which was thirteen miles off, near the lively little town of Maybole and in the heart of the smuggling district, Robert studied diligently (though the subject did not interest him), learned something of the less righteous world outside of Mount Oliphant, enlarged his reading considerably, made some friends of his own age, fell in love again, and wrote at least some stanzas of another song. This time the girl was "a charming Fillette" (if the French language was never to be mastered, at least it was to enrich the vocabulary of this Scottish youth to his dying day) named Peggy Thomson. She lived next door to the school, and it was lucky for Robert and his father that he did not catch sight of her till very near the end of his stay, for once he saw her – out cutting the vegetables for dinner – she took his mind wholly off his other lessons. He seems to have lost no time in making her acquaintance, and, by the account of an eye-witness, could not be got to sleep for several nights on end, but wandered in the woods and fields like one possessed. It was an innocent boy-and-girl affair, but Peggy must have been sweet and kind, and even after she married another he regarded her with tender friendship.

Back at Mount Oliphant he enlivened himself

by writing letters to his Kirkoswald friends, whom he was determined to impress and excel. By an accident, which has not always seemed to posterity to be as lucky as Burns thought it himself, Mount Oliphant had acquired instead of a ready reckoner a collection of specimen letters " by the most Eminent Writers " of the time of Queen Anne. These served the boy as models and he diligently kept a copy of every letter he wrote, gloating over the superiority of his epistolary style. To the end of his life he was apt to be florid, over-allusive and sometimes stilted. Yet at the worst his self-tuition in letter-writing was a remarkable achievement. At the best, when his own virility and common sense were uppermost, it made him an admirable letter-writer.

Home was the drearier because Murdoch had gone once more – this time in a shocking manner and for good. Carousing in an Ayr tavern, he had spoken with facetious contempt of old Dr. Dalrymple ; the magistrates got wind of his wild words ; and, being relieved of his charge with obloquy, he had taken the road to London.[1]

By Whitsuntide in 1777 came the end of the weary twelve years' lease of Mount Oliphant, and after a last eighteen months of struggle the family managed somehow to transfer itself to a farm some

[1] In London, besides teaching, he set up as a stationer in Hart Street. Talleyrand is said to have taken English lessons from him. But his career was unsuccessful.

ten miles away to the north-east and three miles from the weaving village of Tarbolton. How they succeeded in moving with their gear, and whether they went free of debt, are still questions to which there is no clear answer. Possibly the harsh economies, of which both the memory and results remained with Robert to the end of his life, bore that much of good fruit. Some help too may have been afforded by the mortgaging of the Alloway holding, which was still unsold, in favour of Dr. Fergusson's eldest daughter. In any case we have the surprising facts that the new farm comprised a hundred and thirty instead of seventy acres, that the rent was a pound an acre instead of eleven shillings odd, that the new landlord – David McLure, an Ayr merchant – asked for no written agreement, and that "the nature of the bargain was such as to throw a little ready money in [the tenant's] hand at the commencement; otherwise the affair would have been impracticable."

It is fair to conclude that William Burns's credit still stood high, and that, with his likely looking sons, he was regarded as a safe tenant. From his own side of the matter, in doing the boldest he was no doubt also doing the wisest thing. The more the land, the greater the hope of ultimate profit. And if Lochlie – as the new farm was called – was partly swampy and largely sour, it

could be drained to serve for the new crop, flax, which just then was talked very high. Robert's surveying would be useful here. Later, the boy could go to work as a heckler at Irvine, which was the centre of the flax industry. If William Burns could grow the flax Robert could heckle it, and there were spinners and weavers enough in their near neighbourhood to buy it from them. Within three years of their entry they had " three acres of pretty good flax " under cultivation, and the following summer Robert left home for the third time. The seaport of Irvine was about as far from Lochlie to the north, as Kirkoswald had been from Mount Oliphant to the south.

In the interval, growing from boyhood to manhood, Robert had rebelled at least once openly against his father's ruling, had made friends and enemies in the parish of Tarbolton, had flirted with girls here and there, had formed a Bachelors' Club for discussions of an improving and amusing nature, had decided to join the Freemasons, and had proposed himself in marriage to a local servant-girl without success.

His open rebellion had concerned dancing. He was " distractedly fond " of it, but his father disapproved and had even forbidden his joining, at his own expense, a country class of the kind where a hired fiddler played for the young people at a penny a time in a barn. Up till then it would

seem that absolute obedience had been observed. Now the eldest son went his way "in absolute defiance." And although not long afterwards the parental ban was withdrawn, so that younger members of the family were able to join in the dancing without need of defiance, the first to break the circle of obedience felt that he would never be wholly forgiven. Narrating the incident as a crucial one years after his father's death Burns uses some remarkable phrases. "My father . . ." he says, "was the sport of strong passions; from that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which I believe was one cause of that dissipation which marked my future years." In spite of the declaration of repentance that went with this and the explanation that the "dissipation" could be considered so only by strict Presbyterian standards, the quality of the expressions used and the evident painfulness of the memory may not be disregarded. There must have been unforgettable words between father and son, or a still more cruel silence, or possibly an unwarrantable punishment that failed and so caused humiliation to all concerned. By the time of the dancing-class both the elder sons were receiving £7 a year in wages from the head of the house. It was somewhat in excess of the usual ploughman's wage. They were men in working capacity and in their own eyes. Yet their father

strove to retain over them the power of their actions. It was Robert who broke this power. The breaking, the rebellion, had, of course, to be; and, as often happens, it was in its nature and occasion more pregnant than it appeared at the time.

Though Robert was a poor singer he was compact of music that clamoured for an outlet. He had a splendid as well as a subtle sense of rhythm which made him excel in the dance. Dance he must and would. In addition to the liberation of the body from the daily farm round, he needed the social aspect of the dancing school to "give his manners a brush." But there was something beyond even these natural desires. The dance barn was Robert's only concert hall and his only academy of the music he needed as he needed bread. Where else could he hear the folk-tunes that were a prime necessity to his art as a poet? The travelling fiddler knew by heart a repertory of airs, many of them never written down, some of them with old refrains attached, others with no more than a name which in itself told of a lost poem. Robert listened with "a peculiar pleasure" and a growing discrimination. Probably there has never before or since been so poor an executant with so musicianly an ear for native music. As he could not sing he tried the fiddle. A friend and fellow rhymester, David Sillar, could

play it well enough, and Robert worked hard to emulate him. But to his chagrin his accomplishment was small. He could not "learn music," but he did learn tunes, humming them to himself continually as he went about the fields, taking them now slow and now fast, gauging their capacity for emotion or fun as a vehicle for his own words from the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, which contained Scottish metres and, once it came into his hands, went everywhere with him.

It is likely that the father gave his approval to the formation of the Tarbolton Bachelors. These selected for debate such proper subjects as: "Whether is the savage man or the peasant of a civilised country in the most happy situation?"; or "Which is the strongest passion, Love or Ambition?"; or "Whether do we derive more happiness from Love or Friendship?"; and welcomed as an eligible member any "cheerful, honest-hearted lad, who, if he has a friend that is true, and a mistress that is kind, and as much wealth as genteelly to make both ends meet – is just as happy as this world can make him."

As for the flirtations, they consisted in dalliance of the most innocent rustic kind. But as rustic wooing was conducted, like duels, by couples on both sides, each party having a helper and standby of the same sex, Robert learned something of

lovers and their ways, and of girls and theirs. He was in demand as a writer of love-letters. Five specimens written on his own account, of which he kept the copies, have come down to us. The originals were sent soon after he came of age to Ellison Begbie, whose lack of response badly hurt his pride. She kept him dangling for a time and then – by letter – politely refused his offer.

"Once you are convinced I am sincere I am perfectly certain you have too much goodness and humanity to allow an honest man to languish in suspense only because he loves you too well. And I am certain that in such a state of anxiety as I myself at present feel, an absolute denial would be a much preferable state."

So he had written, and it was not ill done. But compared with its poetic version it is as walking across a new-ploughed field to dancing on a smooth sward :

*O Mary, canst thou wreck his peace*
*Wha for thy sake would gladly dee,*
*Or canst thou break that heart of his*
*Wha's only fault is loving thee ?*

*If love for love thou wiltna' gie,*
*At least be pity on me shown ;*
*A thocht ungentle canna be*
*The thocht of Mary Morison !*

Ellison Begbie was an awkward name for rhyme, but she would seem to have been the inspiration of the Mary Morison poems of which the one quoted is deservedly the most famous. It is interesting to notice the English character of the language. Scottish words and pronunciations are very sparingly, if also skilfully, introduced. In the same poem[1] Burns puts into a four-line verse all the ecstasy of the dance, and young, uncertain love :

*Yestreen when to the trembling string*
*The dance ga'ed through the lighted ha',*
*To thee my fancy took its wing –*
*I sat, but neither heard nor saw.*

[1] It was probably polished into its familiar state some time after it was first written.

## CHAPTER IV

Flax-dressing at Irvine – a Hogmanay disaster – serious illness – Templeton's bookshop – poetic development – Richard Brown – return to Lochlie – litigation with the landlord – illness and death of William Burnes – outwitting the landlord.

THE rejected suitor who set out for Irvine in the summer of 1781 must have been a personable young man. He had a large, dark head and a dark but fresh complexion, arched glowing eyes, an upturned nose, and a curly mouth. It was a face that easily changed from a sombre and even forbidding thoughtfulness to a sparkling impudence or a persuasive ardour. The voice too was uncommonly resonant, with a remarkable range of tone. In spite of his round shoulders he moved well and could sit or stand with entire repose. He was one of those persons who, inveterately careless and untidy in their habit, yet give thought to dress and deportment because of their love for style. At home his incapacity to find the possession wanted at the moment was notorious, but he liked things to be seemly and well done, and he had his father's quick rage for scamped or stupid work.

So he came to the seaport of Irvine, a pretendant to the dirty and difficult art of flax-dressing,

full-grown and proud, but still innocent, and not greatly experienced either in love or in business. And Irvine was full of smuggling sharks and pretty, light-minded girls.

Again, though only for part of his time here, he lodged with a relative of his mother, a man called Peacock. Whether this was also the "partner" in heckling whom later he wrote down as "a scoundrel of the first water, who made money by the mystery of thieving," is not certainly known. But such there was, and with him and his wife, who seems to have been as bad, Burns remained until, while indulging with them in the Scottish Saturnalia of "bringing in the New Year" (or Hogmanay), the heckling shop, which was also his sleeping apartment, was burned. The company being well in liquor, a candle was upset. The flax blazed up, and in a short time there was nothing left but the stone walls of the place. The young man's possessions, such as they were, went up in the fire. So he was left "like a true poet, not worth a sixpence." Yet he did not return home, although the news from the farm was bad, and his father being far from well may be thought to have needed his help there. He stayed on till March : but where he worked or how he lived during these two months has never been made clear.

That the seven months at Irvine were crucial

in his development he has admitted without recording more than a few circumstances, but these are such that we must believe he did not exaggerate. Though he worked hard and honestly at heckling, he found the labour distasteful ; and, after suffering from low health and spirits, he fell definitely ill. With an attack of pleurisy there went a disorder of the nerves which threw him into a state of dreadful melancholy. Once at least, his father visited him and had the satisfaction of knowing that his son had composed several poems of the gloomiest, most devotional sort. But Robert was not recalled to Lochlie, or perhaps he would not go.

After the New Year disaster he made notable progress as a poet, and he had made friends who were ready to initiate him further into both poesy and manhood. Templeton, the local bookseller, struck by the dark youth's intelligence and by the inimitable way in which he could read aloud anything in the nature of a ballad, gave him the run of his shop, and in this way opened new doors into the world of letters. It was there probably that he first read Smollett and Sterne and *The Man of Feeling*. Above all he discovered Robert Fergusson, who was a veritable revelation, while such other stray pieces in the vernacular as Gilbertfield's " Bonny Heck " served yet further to light up the potentialities of the Scottish dialect for a

Scottish poet who was also a ploughman and heckler. His first love, the native song with its careless sweetness, now entered the realm of conscious art, which, before, had been a kingdom exclusive to English literature and to be taken by storm only by the highly educated and the classical scholar.

Additional stimulation was given by his friend Richard Brown, to whom Robert recited some of his compositions with the intoxicating result that Brown thought them good enough to send to the magazines. If Robert had ever hoped as much, he had not dared to define the hope even to himself. But here was Brown calmly making the suggestion. And, if there was anything in it, it made all the difference in life. Brown gave other than poetic encouragement. He was a much travelled sailor and several years older than his new bosom friend, and he plumed himself on his knowledge of the world with special reference to women. A "wild, bold, generous fellow," who loved women but was all for lightness in love, he found Robert "all attention to learn." And if Robert partly attributed to Brown's levity – as to his father's strictness – some of his own later lapses, he yet retained a lifelong affection for him and never forgot his poetic encouragement. Meanwhile, at Irvine he "loved and admired" Brown "to a degree of enthusiasm," and "strove to

imitate him." And with a characteristic understatement he adds, "I in some measure succeeded." We may take it that at Irvine, under Brown's guidance, he had love-affairs that were not wholly innocent.

Upon his return to Lochlie in March 1782 he had need of all the worldly wisdom, amorous refreshment, and poetic sustenance he had come by when away from home. Things were in a bad way at the farm. They could hardly have been worse. Already in the foregoing year McLure had taken action against his tenant for the payment of arrears of rent which he alleged were of two years' standing. William Burnes made a counter-claim. The loch or marsh which gave the place its name had not been drained, and Burnes held that it was the landlord's part to do so. The affair, rendered worse by the absence of a written agreement, was being wearily fought out. Perhaps it is fortunate that the records, though they may still be in existence, have never been disclosed. The descendants of McLure, some of whom still live in the neighbourhood, maintain firmly that the tenant of Lochlie had lamentably failed to fulfil his part of the contract, and that if all were known the name of William Burnes would seriously suffer. Local comment at the time[1] points, it must be confessed, in the same direction. But

[1] Poems by Saunders Tait, a Tarbolton man.

biographers have been united in giving the poet's father the benefit of every doubt.

Whatever the legal rights of the case, it came hard on those at Lochlie. They had every excuse that misfortune can put forward, and naturally Robert stood by the side of his hard-pressed father. The rent was exorbitant. The American Revolution had sent up the prices of food while seriously menacing the market for Ayrshire farmers and weavers. Since the collapse of the Ayr Bank ten years before, money had become ever tighter and scarcer. And now a shockingly stormy summer, followed by an unprecedented frost early in October, ruined most of the crops – both root and standing grain. Even the cessation of the American War did not immediately mend matters. Illness, particularly consumption, became rife in Ayrshire, and those who were spared actual illness contracted, we are told,[1] " a dull and melancholy look, which continued for several years after." It was in short a famine with all the attendant evils, but McLure, who seems to have been in the hands of his own creditors, continued to press for his legal rights.

Under the combination of strains William Burnes's health broke. He was not long turned sixty, but he had laboured hard all his life and

[1] Sir John Sinclair's *Analysis of the Statistical Account of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1825, Part II., Appendix No. III.

from his youth had too much laboured in vain. Under the new calamity and exposed to widespread infection, he became unfit for work. By the spring of 1783 it was evident that he could not recover.

Sensible that his case was desperate, he was preparing to sell what stock he could and get out of Lochlie when, on May 17th, the Sheriff's officer arrived at the farm with a warrant for sequestration. The inventory was taken, and the town crier warned the inhabitants of the parish as they left church that they must not buy the sequestrated goods. These events made a deep impression upon Robert. He conceived a horror of the situation of the debtor and equally a furious contempt for "the rapacious hell-hounds that grovel in the kennel of justice." His nature being what it was, this combination would not suffice to keep him from being himself a debtor or a lender. But it implanted an associated fear of the most painful kind that came to life at a hint, while it precipitated him into a whole-hearted repudiation of the pecuniary standard where human life is concerned.

During the autumn, when Robert was in Irvine, a purchaser had at last been found for the Alloway property. The Ayr Guild of Shoemakers had bought it for £160 and turned it into an alehouse. Either the mortgage or M'Lure, or both, must easily have accounted for most of this money;

but with what was left the father fee'd all his children as his servants, and so saved what he could from the impending bankruptcy. Whether he had recourse to this stratagem on his own initiative or on outside advice does not appear. When it became known, though it helped to save his children from utter ruin, it cannot have helped his credit. Only his death on February 13th, 1784, saved him from being arrested and imprisoned for debt. The medical description of his ailment indicates a tubercular condition, but if ever a man died of a broken heart it was William Burnes in Lochlie. A credible story has been handed down that on the last day of his life he expressed agitated concern about Robert. Perhaps he had observed that since the young man's return from Irvine his wooings had been neither lightly flirtatious nor conducted with matrimonial intent. Isabella, the youngest child, then thirteen, said later that, when she was in the room with them, Robert was made to weep bitterly under his dying father's questioning. Perhaps it was some consolation that they could fulfil the old man's wish for burial in Alloway churchyard. His old friend, John Tennant, lent a pony, and, slinging the coffin between it and the one farm horse that was left, the cortege walked the twelve winter miles and back. In the late autumn of the following year there was to be another death in

the family. John, the youngest son, at the age of fifteen then followed his father, whose complaint he had probably contracted. But the only record of his death is that a "second quality mort-cloth" was used at his funeral. For the head of the house a first quality mort-cloth must have been used, and honour was done by way of a headstone for which Robert composed the epitaph beginning, "O ye whose cheek the tear of pity stains," and ending with the quotation "'ev'n his failings lean'd to virtue's side.'" The same hand entered the death in the family Bible.

# CHAPTER V

Freemasonry – Gavin Hamilton – the removal to Mossgiel – Mauchline – Burns at twenty-five – the Lizzie Paton scandal – Burns publicly reprimanded – birth of Lizzie Paton's daughter.

As the eldest son, during his father's protracted illness Burns had had to shoulder heavy responsibility. He had not only the work of carrying on an insolvent concern from day to day, but the worry – shared, it is true, with Gilbert – of planning for the events that were bound to follow on his father's death ; for when that occurred they would be bankrupt and homeless both.

The fact that the young man was a Freemason is important. His membership of the Tarbolton Lodge, which he attended with enthusiasm and regularity, had almost certainly some bearing upon the useful connection he made soon after his return from Irvine with a fellow Mason of a higher degree and station – Gavin Hamilton, a prosperous country lawyer, who lived at the village of Mauchline in the neighbouring parish of that name. Hamilton was a jovial, generous, warm-hearted, broad-minded, free-spoken and free-living young married man. He saw at once that his youthful Craft Brother was no ordinary farmer's son. When he heard of the

situation at Lochlie he came forward with a practical scheme and an actual asylum. "In case of the worst," as Gilbert put it, all the family wages, savings, and possessions that were available were diverted from M'Lure before his tenant became a corpse for legal spoliation and were quietly invested in the farm of Mossgiel, two miles away, near Mauchline village, which was Hamilton's property.

The actual move to Mossgiel was made in the early spring of 1784, as soon after the funeral as could be. In spite of the ignominy attached to their departure the young people made the new start hopefully. They mourned sincerely for their father, but a load of gloom had gone with him. Thanks to their conspiracy with Hamilton they had enough money and stock for immediate needs, and in spite of it they brought with them the needful "certificates of character" from Tarbolton kirk session to present to the Rev. William Auld, minister of Mauchline. Already they knew Mauchline, for, though it was in the next parish, the village lay actually a little nearer to Lochlie than did the village of Tarbolton. But whereas Lochlie had been comparatively isolated from both places, Mossgiel was within a mile of the far livelier village, a fact that must have recommended it to Robert with his growing need of society and his emancipation from his father's hand.

In a small way there was a fair amount of money in the place, and the girls, or "belles," though they might go barefoot on week-days in the old Scottish fashion, were fine on Sabbath and other high days and holidays with silk gowns and laces and neat shoes and stockings. They were, moreover, noted for their cheerful good looks.

Mossgiel, for which the Burneses were to pay £90 a year, was a farm of 118 acres. The house was comfortable and genteel above the ordinary of Ayrshire farm-houses, for Hamilton had once had the idea of using the place as a summer residence and had spent some money on improvements. Robert found it convenient for the visits of friends, even at times for meetings of the Tarbolton Freemasons, at which he was increasingly considered. It lay on the breast of a fallow ridge facing south-west over the wooded valley of the Ayr, a river Robert passionately loved and knew in all its windings, as indeed he knew every river and stream of the district. Old trees overhung the roof, and a high, ragged hedge of hawthorn sheltered it at the back from the north-east winter winds. There were little windows in the attic gables (rare luxury in a farm of the sort), and in the attic room where Robert slept he was able to set his writing-table beneath a sloping skylight. The single drawer was stuffed with his youthful verses, which he had begun to write down shortly

before leaving Lochlie, and there was a Commonplace Book – also begun at Lochlie – in which he noted down scraps of his own and other people's poems together with any observations that interested him. Once he had climbed up the ladder that led to the attic through a trap-door from the little entrance between the two lower rooms, he was secure with his growing passion. At first, after his father's death, he had determined to put versifying behind him. What good could come of it to a struggling farmer? But the impulse proved too strong for his sincerest resolutions, and in the new book which was to be for the farm accounts his first entry was a poem!

He was now twenty-five. At Lochlie he had been something of a figure. He was the only man in the parish to tie his hair in a queue with a ribbon, and he wore an unusual plaid of autumn colour in an unusual fashion. As the master of Mossgiel he had more scope, and his rapid flowering there is one of the wonders of poetry and human life. Even the failure of the first harvest, owing to the purchase of bad seed, and an interval of depression in the summer of 1784 marked by a return of the nervous symptoms associated with his illness at Irvine, did not stay the uprush of the sap which circumstances and genius had decreed. It was an uprush and a glow that could neither be refused nor hidden. At the same time he

continued to work very hard on the farm, ploughing the heavy uplands, sowing and reaping and minding the beasts. He also conducted family prayers, gave lessons and taught the Shorter Catechism to his younger brothers and sisters and the youthful herd-boys. Irresponsible he never was.

In his Commonplace Book he had described himself carefully and as if with the eye of an outside reader in mind. He was " but little indebted to scholastic education, and bred at a plough-tail," therefore " his performances must be strongly tinctured with his unpolished, rustic way of life " ; but as these performances are " really his own, it may be some entertainment to a curious observer of human nature to see how a ploughman thinks, and feels, under the pressure of Love, Ambition, Anxiety, Grief, with the like cares and passions, which, however diversified by the Modes, and Manners of life, operate pretty much alike I believe, in all the Species."

The description is characteristic in its obvious honesty, which is yet not innocent of either pose or caution. It is the attempted summing up of a young man, naturally arrogant and conscious of power, who yet struggles with a sense of inferiority that he will never quite transcend except in moments of passion or of solitary logic. He is not wholly unsophisticated, yet his excuses

are touching and manly. It is clear that he feels the need to protect himself against the criticism which he dreads by first disarming his critics. He will make use of the only inferiority which he admits – the inferiority of circumstance. Although this is natural there is something painful in the wording of his admission. It is at once bold, adroit and shrinking.

Nothing of shrinking, however, marked his comings and goings at Mossgiel. In Gavin Hamilton he had a powerful patron and a staunch friend through whom he quickly came to mix with men of superior social standing, including several local clerics of the liberal or " New Light " school. Here he could hold his own with ease and dignity : but he was a different man, and a relieved one, when spending a convivial evening with some graceless young cronies, all his juniors, whom he formed into a " club " very different from the serious and improving " Tarbolton Bachelors " ; and he found intense delight in the company of the tinkers, beggars, fiddlers, and wandering trollops who frequented the lower sort of Mauchline alehouses. Mauchline Cross was the centre of the six busiest highways in Ayrshire. In April there were races to and fro from the Cross along the road just below Mossgiel. In July there was a famous cattle market. In August the vast open-air Communion services – the

"Occasion" or "Holy Fair" – crammed the place with fourteen thousand inhabitants instead of its usual one thousand. Soon Burns was known as a critic of men, manners, and metaphysics. When returning from a funeral, he held the men with his remarkably articulate opinions. Hanging about the churchyard after the Sabbath services he put the girls into fits of laughter with his cutting analyses and cruel mimicry of "Daddy Auld's" sermons. Not that he was a gabbler. As often as not a scornful or a brooding silence had to be broken through before he came forth as a conversationalist. But once he got started there was no holding him. He was naturally gifted as a talker and much practice in his clubs and with the Freemasons had made him a good performer in public. The staider neighbours found that he "had a great deal to say for himself." The godly saw in him a scoffer. When it got about, as it did in the spring of 1785, that Lizzie Paton of Largieside was with child and that Robert Burns in Mossgiel was admittedly the father, such wiseacres feathered their caps.

It was indeed too true. In due course he and Lizzie had to submit to the discipline ordained by the Kirk for the punishment of unchastity – that is, they had to sit upon the sinner's seat, or "cutty stool," before the assembled congregation throughout the service on three successive Sabbaths

and at one point to rise and face the minister as penitents under a reprimand which might be as lengthy as was thought fit.[1]

But this was not the sort of emergency that found a weak spot in the young man. His father was not there to be shamed, and he minded his mother as little as he did the gossips.

*An auld wife's tongue's a feckless matter*
*To gie ane fash.*[2]

It is likely that he felt remorse on Lizzie's behalf. But one of the few benefits a sinner reaps from a public reprimand is that he pays for his sin in the eyes of all the world and so may the more easily exorcise his private pain. There can be no disregarding the mood of reckless elation in which Burns hailed the proof of his potency, which we find expressed in "A Poet's Welcome to his Bastart Wean," in the "Reply to an Announcement," and in the "Epistle to John Rankine." In the first he is tender: in the other two he is Rabelaisian: in neither is he repentant.

As for Lizzie, he refused to marry her for all his mother's pleading. Agnes liked the girl, with her fine strong figure and her plain face, who

[1] There is no record of this event in the Mauchline parish books, but Burns himself says that he endured it on this occasion.

[2] Those lines, which he wrote at about this time, are an interesting parallel to the lines of the poet who would have been his favourite had he ever sufficiently mastered the Latin language:

*rumoresque senum severiorum*
*omnes unius æstimemus assis*

had helped her at Lochlie with the house and dairy ; and she held that the least her son could do was to make Lizzie as honest a woman in the eyes of the two parishes as she was in her own nature. But the others – Gilbert and the elder girls – were united in opposing such a measure and no doubt they were right. How was a young man of their brother's parts – a young man who had read largely in Shenstone, Mackenzie, Thomson, Sterne, " Ossian," Richardson, Locke, Hume and Robertson – to mate satisfactorily with one who owned openly to " a thorough (tho' unwomanly) contempt for every sort of refinement " ? The question was less snobbish than truly realistic and countrified. By uniting himself with Lizzie the young man would act with ideal chivalry and in accordance with Presbyterian tenets, and he would add a sturdy servant to his mother's household. But that was all. Just then he had neither the inclination nor the circumstances for marriage. The girl admitted, with characteristic frankness, that there had been no suggestion of marriage at any stage of the affair and that, although she was devoted to him, he was not and never had been in love with her. He would for ever be grateful to her. He would prefer her against any prideful Miss who looked down her nose at a man because she thought herself above him –

*There lives a lass in yonder park*
*I wadna gie her in her sark*
*For thee, an' all thy thousan' mark!*
*Ye need na look sae high.*

So, not for the last time, he dealt with the opposing claims of the ideal and the real, hurling out his defiant pain with Lizzie warmly in his mind. If he would not be her husband, and could not even continue as her lover, he would anyhow be her everlasting champion and so the champion of any woman who sweetly kissed a man. He must have rejoiced that his father's compulsion was gone. With a kind of gaiety that bespoke a growing strength he would accept his public shame, pay his church fine of a guinea for the poor, and provide for and love the child. But he would do no more. A little dark-eyed girl, whom they named after her mother, was born on May 22nd; and Robert must have stood by Lizzie and taken his fatherly vows upon him when the infant was baptised two days later in Tarbolton parish. It was the sort of ceremony that affected him deeply.

# CHAPTER VI

The First Commonplace Book – character of the poems of the Mauchline period – early satires – "Death and Doctor Hornbook" – "The Twa Herds" – champion of the "New Lights" – Jean Armour.

HAD Burns died in the summer of 1786 instead of ten years after, we should be without "Tam o' Shanter" and without the host of songs which he later made or brilliantly enhanced and which account both for his world-wide fame and for his unexampled hold upon the imagination of his countrymen. "Ae Fond Kiss," for instance, would never have been, nor "My Luve is Like a Red, Red Rose!" At the same time what may equally be called the body and the soul of his work falls well within the first two years he lived at Mossgiel, and during that brief period he produced poetry of a kind and quantity that would have established his greatness although he had never written another line. Actually two of the very finest and most original pieces he then wrote were never to see print during his life-time. "The Jolly Beggars" lay in unacknowledged hiding till a posthumous biographer rifled the poet's desk, and of "Holy Willie" only a pirated edition appeared in 1789. Others, and among

them some of his most powerful satires – "Death and Doctor Hornbook," "The Twa Herds," the "Address to the Unco Guid," "The Ordination," and the "Address to Beelzebub" – as well as some of his sweetest songs, his pithiest poetic "epistles" and his most entertaining essays in bawdry were not to find a place in the collection that first brought him an enraptured recognition. Yet all these were in existence and so give breadth to the base of the pedestal upon which he now stands. To realise to the full how amazing was the output of his productive period we must read, as it were at a breath, all the poems belonging to it. As we do this we receive, apart from all separate impressions, that intoxicating sense of energy released, of careless power, of rejoicing certainty and laughing ease, which place him once and for all in the enviable situation of being a people's poet of full stature. Here, we say, there must have been a conscious and practised artist at work. Yet we cannot surely declare when his art begins or ends and where nature speaks untutored, using him as her astonished mouthpiece. We feel that, while nobody but Burns could have written these poems, these poems surprised nobody more than Burns himself. In the last resort – as indeed with all true poetry, but here in a peculiar degree – we conclude that there is no accounting for them.

We can only note and ponder the circumstances in which they came into being.

We have seen that his earliest verses – those which he composed assiduously but more or less furtively at Mount Oliphant, Kirkoswald, Lochlie, and Irvine – were either simple love-lyrics, imitative and of variable distinction, or melancholy pieces of a religious or moral cast. Some were mere paraphrases, others mere echoes, and not too good at that. True, with Burns, beyond a certain date one cannot declare definitely what poems were in an existence of some sort. Few, at the time of their composition, were written down, and when they did come to be transcribed they may have been greatly transformed. He did not begin to write down his verses, and so presumably did not think them worth writing down, until he started his Lochlie Commonplace Book eight or nine months before his father's death. By that time he was clearly an accomplished artist.

A list of the later and more finished Lochlie works would include "The Tarbolton Lasses," "Ah, Woe is me!" "Montgomerie's Peggy," "The Ploughman's Life," the "Mary Morison" and "Peggy Alison" songs, "Winter: A Dirge," "A Prayer under the Pressure of Violent Anguish," "My Father was a Farmer," "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie" and "Poor Mailie's Elegy," "John Barleycorn,"

"The Rigs o' Barley," "Now Westlin' Winds," "My Nanie, O," and "The Ronalds of the Bennals." There is not here much to excite more than our measured admiration, the sort of admiration that finds work highly creditable under the circumstances of the worker who makes no higher claim for it. But there is something. The Mailie poems have a note of warm newness with an underlying vigour that lift them above their model of "Bonny Heck"; and, unless "The Rigs o' Barley" and "Mary Morison" acquired their magic from subsequent revision, these poems would make us pause and hope to hear more of the authentic voice which here breaks forth in apparent unconsciousness of its own authenticity. In "Corn Rigs" especially one pictures the young wooer as he strides home across the glinting stubble, and the heart itself seems to dance with deep yet merry satisfaction to the brimming melody.

The Lochlie Commonplace Book meant that from being a clever impromptu rhymester Burns had begun to take himself seriously as a poet, if only as a rustic one with the apology of his rusticity ever to the fore. The new practice of writing out his verses instead of merely trusting them to his memory was not to affect their initial composition which still went forward, and always would, without paper and pen. But writing down, being

a great step further toward print, forced him out of a dilettante rusticity, and he now worked closely and consciously at hammering into a finished state those stray beginnings, middles, and endings which came to him unbidden as he went about his work, made social contacts, faced crises or made secret observations in the company of his fellows. For more than ten years he had been acquiring facility in the ready-made technique to hand. He had crooned and pondered over hundreds of songs – English and Scottish, new and old, sacred and profane, polite and rude, and had perseveringly mimicked the models that most appealed to him. He knew the pages of Ramsay and of Fergusson like the inside of his own mouth. To this he added the forgotten factor of folk-music, which in itself was an addition of sheer genius. The merest scrap of a good refrain, singing itself or saying itself in his blood, would conjure out of him a complete song. Or two imperfect or doubtful songs would in his hands become one. He became an imitative song maker and a diligent cobbler of fragments ; and, if the process and the results were sometimes thrilling in their freshness, he could still shelter modestly behind the borrowed nature of all his beginnings. Such was the ardour of his perception, however, and such the vigour of his appreciation that he could enhance what he admired

and add a lasting fragrance to what would otherwise have been fugitive. We have only to compare the old English "Turtle Dove" or "True Love's Farewell" with its Scottish descendant "My Luve is Like a Red, Red, Rose," to see that where Burns is concerned all charges of plagiarism are the heartiest tributes.

Towards his decision to become a professed poet Burns was helped by the roar of village laughter that had greeted his maiden appearance as local satirist. The victim was John Wilson, the parish schoolmaster of Tarbolton, who, to eke out his little stipend, kept a general shop that had for speciality the sale of pills and potions. The poor dominie's attempts to play the leech gave Burns the occasion for the verses entitled "Death and Doctor Hornbook." It was not until their recital to Gilbert and others had elicited gratifying laughter that these verses were copied out and circulated among readers who became eager for more of the same laughter-compelling quality. And more there was. Besides encouragement the satiric gift of Burns found plenty of food at Mauchline for its exercise. A feud was raging in the Kirk between the "New Light" and the "Old Light" clergy. Gavin Hamilton, an enthusiastic supporter of the "New Lights," lost no time in enlisting Burn's willing pen in support of the cause. The first-fruits were the

verses, " The Twa Herds," a squib on an incident in local ecclesiastical politics. The manuscript copies (all in the poet's hand) that were circulated made Burns the darling of all the " New Light " ministers in the Presbytery of Ayr.

The " New Lights " had gained a majority in the presbytery, but there was a strong minority of " Old Lights " or " high-flyers," as they were derisively called, who would not abate a jot or tittle from the ultra-Calvinistic doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the minister of Mauchline was one of these. Mr. Auld himself, despite his narrow creed, seems to have been a man of amiable temper, but most of the elders who sat with him in the kirk session, and were of the same theological persuasion were not so. In particular there was one, William Fisher, a noisy Pharisee, whose private life was notoriously at odds with his public professions ; but the discrepancy did not prevent him from initiating a " morality " campaign in Mauchline, of which the first victim was Gavin Hamilton, who was put under sentence of excommunication for desecrating the Sabbath, in that on the Lord's Day he had allowed his gardener to pay some necessary attention to his potato patch. Mr. Hamilton appealed to the Presbytery of Ayr, which summarily quashed the sentence and added contumelious remarks upon those who had presumed

to pass it. Burns celebrated his patron's triumph with "Holy Willie's Prayer" – a satire so deadly and daring that even the "New Lights" were scared by it. But its circulation was not the less influential for having to be surreptitious. Passing from hand to hand it made a wider and more declamatory fame for its author than "Death and Doctor Hornbook."

Having found patrons for the more masculine sort of his efforts Burns inevitably sought a female muse. It has already been said that Mauchline was noted for its "belles" as Tarbolton was for its "proper young men" – anyhow in the estimation of one of the last described. Prominent among the "belles" of Mauchline was Jean Armour, one of the eleven children of William Armour, mason and builder. She was a well-grown, handsome, girl, honest of heart, and airy of speech. She was attracted by the strange young farmer, who was six years her senior, and, from the account which has been handed down, she took the first opportunity, after having seen him at a dance during the race week in April 1784, of scraping an acquaintance with him. The popular picture of her hailing him as he crossed the green, and bidding him call his dog off her newly washed linen, is probably near the truth. Burns readily responded to her advances, and presently they were lovers.

## CHAPTER VII

The " marriage " with Jean – " The Vision " and its significance – thoughts of publishing – the Armours' repudiation of Burns – Jean's " desertion " – ecclesiastical discipline again – first hints of emigration – success of Burns's publication proposals – preparations for departure to Jamaica – the poems published – departure postponed – decision to visit Edinburgh.

Such a lyric as the address " To a Mouse " is not produced but under severe pressure of circumstances. In reading it, we are no less overwhelmed by the writer's freshness of sympathy with a minute fellow-being than by his shivering participation in the event of ruin. If winter dreariness was behind him, he was faced by something worse – something about which he could only " guess and fear."

We know, further, that in this case the pressure was the heavier or being much of the poet's own making. At the same time, even taking into account the sensibility of a poet and a Burns, we cannot examine the familiar narrative side by side with the chief actor's own agitated and confusing phrases concerning this period of his life, without feeling that there is some discrepancy. The facts, as commonly told, do not fully account for the phrases. They do not perfectly fit with

other undoubted facts which have since been brought to light. Moreover they do not in themselves explain Burns's known actions at the time.

Admittedly the entanglement with Jean could hardly have come at a worse moment for her lover. Everybody knew that the first two harvests at Mossgiel had been a failure and that yet again the Burnses must be owing money to their landlord. The Lizzie Paton affair, too, was still fresh in the mouth of gossip. That Burns, so soon afterwards, should bring shame upon a respectable Mauchline family was a serious aggravation. The Armour affair could not be brazened out, even among his intimates, by his calling himself "a poor rakish rascal" who (in a phrase more suitable to one of Queen Anne's reign than to an Ayrshire farmer) had been "cursedly taken in with an affair of gallantry." Also Jean in herself did not harmonise with such a description. To strong physical charms and a good singing voice she added looks and qualities that had provided him with a personification of his rustic muse. She had small hands and feet, handsome legs, an endearing figure, a square, pleasant face, a racy tongue, and an honest, affectionate heart. She had been carelessly generous of herself (a great point, this, in any woman's favour with Burns), and he "lov'd, or rather ador'd" her

" to distraction." Having given her – no doubt upon the first hint of trouble – her " marriage paper," he was ready, probably eager, to " own her conjugally " as soon as might be.

His financial position was reason enough for his not doing so at once. Just then he could not have set up any married establishment beyond that of a common labourer. Jean's father also, though a fellow Mason, was a man of illiberal views, and was known to have a violent prejudice against Burns. Tradition has it that Agnes Burns regarded Jean with disfavour as she regarded Lizzie with favour. If this was so, it made it difficult for her son to bring the new wife to share Mossgiel. What is more important, when Jean put her signature (which was the extent of her powers in writing), to the irregular marriage she was still under age. Here was enough to impose delay. We know that Burns remained in a husbandly as well as a loving frame of heart, meeting his girl secretly, until the end of March, and that all this time poems flowed from him – lyrics, narratives, satires, " epistles " – all derivative in form, but of a power and pith that marked them out as something new in Scottish verse, and indeed in world literature. One mid-winter midnight, sitting up in the little " spence " at Mossgiel, having written " The Vision," he had dedicated himself to Coila's Muse. Thereafter

he had taken the decision to challenge his world by appearing in print. By April 2nd, the " holy beagles," as he called them, of the Kirk Session, had got word that Jean had left Mauchline alone and under suspicion of being with child. " Holy Willie " (in his natural shape of William Fisher) was deputed with another elder to " speak to the parents." These, or at least the mother, denied any knowledge of the girl's condition and merely said that she was gone to stay with friends at Paisley, whence she would " return soon." Whether Jean had fled, or had been sent from home, to an uncle who lived at Paisley, is not known.

Had the old Armours been ignorant of her state, they would shortly have been enlightened by Burns's offer of himself as their son-in-law. But he found them fully and surprisingly prepared. Jean, before she left, had handed her marriage paper over to them to be dealt with as they thought fit. And they scorned it and him. So he learned to his disgust and fury. In a strange letter written that month,[1] he describes himself as lunatic with rage. He has " lost a wife." Well, he will revenge himself upon her and the world in general by getting forthwith " another wife."

The Armours were no doubt persuaded that they were doing the best thing for their daughter.

[1] To John Arnot (*Letters*, I., 29).

It was whispered that she had the chance of marrying a young Paisley weaver who would overlook her slip. But their procedure was also calculated to humiliate Burns. And it was in itself peculiar, or so it seems to-day. They had taken the "unlucky paper" to lawyer Aiken in Ayr, a man who was one of Burns's most enthusiastic patrons, and with Aiken's consent had mutilated it by cutting out the names of the parties. That such a mutilation could not affect the legal merits of the "marriage," whatever these might be,[1] is neither here nor there. It is clear from the subsequent action of the Mauchline kirk session under Mr. Auld, that if Jean (now of age) repudiated the marriage at this stage Burns was free to do the same. She repudiated it doubly – first by giving its record into her parents' hands and then, on June 18th, by signing the common form confession of the unmarried mother in full knowledge of all that this entailed. Her parents could better contemplate her public punishment than her marriage to Mossgiel. They even wished that she should endure the utmost penalty by standing out in church by Burns's side for the

[1] These have been the subject of much hazy debate and irrelevant learning on the part of Scots lawyers, who in giving their opinions have overlooked the material fact that Jean was under age. According to Scots Law an irregular marriage is merely a contract *consensu*, valid only if the parties have contractual capacity, and Jean's contractual capacity was imperfect without the concurrence of her parents.

three rebukes. Burns had only to accept these rebukes, so his minister informed him, "complying with the rules of the Church" and professing contrition, to obtain for himself "a certificate as a single man."

Presumably he might have refused to do this and so have remained a protestant husband. But at a certain date in April he became anxious to ensure his freedom. If this was due at first merely to pique, it increased in a remarkable manner with the passing of the weeks; and it reached its greatest intensity when, with Jean's return from Paisley early in June, he found her forgivable and himself fond. True, she had been "ungrateful" and "ill-advised." But, as he now realised, she had been as clay in the hands of the purse-proud tradesman who was her father and the "old harridan" who was her mother. And her suffering was great and her future black. And she loved him and he longed for her. And friend Smith seems to have urged marriage as a thing still feasible.

But with oaths and cries of despair Burns refused. Never will he "own her conjugally." If he would, he could not now. For the first time we hear that he is going to leave his country. Something has happened. Her "desertion" of him has set in motion events that neither he nor she can control. Though his Jeany, "weeping,

answerest, 'No!'"[1] still he must go to the Indies. "For her sake" he must go. Grimly he hints that the marriage she first spurned and now desires, will soon be, if indeed it is not already, "beyond her power." All that summer, until some time in October, panic sounds in his words, and grimaces in the shadow of his actions – panic alternating with painful bravado.

Now Burns, although he lived at the beginning of the romantic period and was affected by the new sentimentalism of *The Man of Feeling* (a copy of which he had read to shreds), was by race, by class, by time and by nature a realist. His work is great and persists in greatness largely by its realism. The author of "The Jolly Beggars" had his feet squarely set on Ayrshire earth. We have seen how he behaved over the Lizzie Paton trouble. Both his bosom cronies – John Richmond, who had gone from Hamilton's office to be a law clerk in Edinburgh, and James Smith, who kept the haberdasher's shop in the Mauchline Backcauseway – had been constrained to appear before the session for unwedded fruitfulness. It is of interest to know that Burns used all his eloquence to get Richmond to marry his "fault."[2] But, even failing marriage, he knew that such things had a way of settling themselves and that even a scandal like the Armour one was no matter

[1] "The Farewell." [2] Later Richmond did so.

for compulsory exile. With the success of his book, when his prospects seemed brighter than they had seemed for years past, respectable patrons pulled strings to keep him at home. These knew all about Paton and Armour and the farm. Jean herself saw no need for him to emigrate; did not want him to emigrate. She was otherwise all amenity. They met in secret and understood each other. He was afraid for her and for her child-bed. He hated the thought of leaving her. Paternity and the prospect of paternity always found him at his best. He found passionate delight in his black-eyed "dear-bought" Bess, his daughter by Lizzie Paton, who was added about this time to the Mossgiel household. Yet sooner than be "reconciled" with Jean he would do something that came under the same category as suicide or enlisting in the Army.

A wild, unfriended harum-scarum might take such a step lightly. But not so Burns, who was consciously wedded to his country – to its "trotting burns," its bird-sheltering trees and homely ways, all of which he was vowed to celebrate – and who, for all his too expressive recklessness, feared the foreign and shrank from the unknown. The salt, rolling sea, with its promise of adventure, had always repelled, as the safe runnels of sweet land-locked waters had satisfied him. At every mention of the Indies horror afflicts him. He sees

only the fever-haunted "Plantations" with the dread waves between. And the growing circle of his friends were almost equally horrified. Some of them dissuaded him at least from sailing, as he at first intended, in the most suicidal way, which would have involved a long, cross-country journey through swamps at the worst time of year when he should reach the other side.

There is no trace of design in the fact that his fare to Jamaica was paid out of the first money that came in from his book. Rather does everything point to accident in the connection. We must believe his assurance that when he planned to print he did so with no expectation of making money. The money came as a surprise. Besides, the need for print came long before the need for flight. It was, however, a fortunate coincidence that by his unexpected profits he should be spared the unpleasant alternative between borrowing for his passage and shipping as an indentured passenger. He had been promised £30 a year at Port Antonio as book-keeper on an Ayrshire planter's estate. But this would not go far if he had to pay off by extortionate degrees a considerably larger sum as the price of his banishment.

Before the book was out the success of the subscriptions led him to a further prudent step. Guessing that while Mr. Armour scorned his

person he would certainly have designs upon anything that might be in his purse, he executed a will instructing that all moneys which might accrue from his poems should be devoted under Gilbert as his trustee to the proper maintenance of the young Elizabeth. This was on Saturday, July 22nd. Next day he and Jean stood for their second rebuke in church.[1] It was now his intention to sail in October.

The next move came from Armour. Hearing, perhaps for the first time, of the proposed emigration, or getting wind of the will (which according to custom must have been proclaimed at Ayr Cross), he obtained a process *in meditatione fugæ* to lodge Burns in gaol until he should find ample and immediate security for the maintenance of Jean's expected child.

How the news of the process reached Burns is not known, but he knew by July 30th, the day before his book was out; and from a hint he drops in a letter to Richmond we may guess that Jean herself was the bearer. Immediately he went into hiding with relatives near Irvine, and put forward his date of sailing to August.

[1] Mr. Auld, either because he was too gentle for the full old-fashioned rigours of the "faulter's stool," or because, under the circumstances, he judged the couple over-interesting to his congregation, ruled that in this case each should stand up merely in the family pew.

From his own deliberately unhelpful account we may feel sure of one thing at least. Some time during that late summer his trunk was packed and corded and actually on its way to Greenock. But who conveyed the trunk, whether it went all the way, or where, when, how, and why it was recalled, we are unlikely ever to discover. What we do know is that he himself did not get to Greenock. On August 6th he and Jean made their third and last church appearance without mishap to him. And by the end of the month, though the process was still in force, with patrons "among the first gentlemen of the county" he was "under little apprehension" about it. With Jean's faithful promise that she would never again, without first consulting him, put her hand to anything that concerned him, he was doubly secure. Instead of going to Greenock he returned to Mossgiel. There, on September 3rd, he received word that she had been safely delivered of twins. "Wish me luck, dear Richmond!" he wrote that same night. "Armour has just brought me a fine boy and girl at one throw. God bless the little dears!"

*Green grow the rashes, O;*
*Green grow the rashes, O;*
*A feather bed is no sae saft,*
*As the bosoms o' the lasses, O!"*

It was arranged that the boy, Robert, should be brought up at Mossgiel, and the girl, Jean, by the Armours.

Yet Jamaica is only postponed "till after harvest," or perhaps only till "the end of this month." On September 8th, Burns believes that "all hopes of staying at home will be abortive." On the 27th he is only "detained a little longer" by the hope of a second edition. Early in October, while he responds with suitable expressions of gratitude to those who would find means to keep a remarkable poet at home, he fears that "the consequences of his follies may perhaps make it impossible for him to stay." Work in the Excise Service would solve his paternal cares and fit well with his bardic vocation. The suggestion is made with influence behind it. Yet there are "inimical circumstances" and "a secret wretchedness" which to others cannot be more than "pretty well known." Such a boon might merely "entail a farther misery." He still sees a "storm of mischief thickening over his folly-devoted head." When he seems to others at his liveliest he is feeling like "an intoxicated criminal under the hands of the executioner." Even the strong possibility of obtaining a second edition can but "detain him a little longer in the country." Then, after a noticeable gap in his correspondence from

October 8th to November 13th, the shrill sound of panic dies. On November 15th, in a letter to a lady of local importance, he is writing calmly: "I am thinking to go to Edinburgh in a week or two at farthest, to throw off a second impression of my book; but on my return . . ."

# CHAPTER VIII

The Jamaica mystery explained – Burns's secret – the history of "Highland Mary" *alias* Mary Campbell – Burns's lifelong remorse.

THE key to Burns's panic and to that panic's end is simple, indeed pitifully so. It lies, and can lie only in the dead hand of the heroine of his famous "Mary poems," her who is now celebrated throughout the world as "Highland Mary."[1] As soon as we know what there is to be known of this servant-girl and her brief love-affair with Burns, everything becomes clear. The authenticated facts, the tissue of report (which has antecedents not to be despised and has grown firmer with the years), Burns's own commentary in prose and verse, and a knowledge of his temper and time, all combine perfectly to round off a story so natural and so appropriate that the burden of proof must remain with those who would put in its place something fine-spun and far-fetched.

[1] This term was first employed by Burns's musical editor, George Thomson, when acknowledging the poem "Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary?" at the end of 1792. Burns never used it himself, and for obvious reasons. Pronounced, as in Ayrshire, "Hielan' Mary," it signified a familiarity no more complimentary than might be "Black Sam" or "Indian Joe." The Highland immigrant generally was regarded as an inferior. We may be almost certain that while Mary would feel constrained to address Jean as "Miss Armour," the reverse was not the case.

Before recalling the particulars, we may remind ourselves that when, as an innocent youth bent chiefly on self-improvement, Burns founded the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, he laid it down that a proper young man " must be a professed lover of *one or more* of the female sex." And later, when he was a husband and the father of a growing family, his wife would say of him, laughingly but truly, that " oor Robin should hae had twa wives." True, his heart was of that kind that enthrones a woman and can enthrone but one at a time. But he could quickly turn from the woman enthroned, did he judge that she had scorned or failed him, to find joy in the arms of another. Again, within days, he could find the dethroned one eligible for an impassioned restoration. And always, reigning or no, any woman who had ever attracted him, above all any woman who had ever accepted him as her lover, might count on him for more than kindness. To the author of " O wha my babie-clouts will buy ? " " once fondly loved " was invariably " remembered dear." Such a lover, subject neither to prevailing morality nor sentimental idealism, was bound to make trouble, and might at any time find himself involved in tragedy.

In the summer of 1786 Burns, at the height of his creative powers, had a variety of girl friends. He felt impelled to take a fond farewell in verse

(not very good verse) of one, Eliza. And although Peggy Thomson, his early Kirkoswald love, was affianced to another, he could not meet her without reminiscent tenderness. When he puts his love of Mary Campbell into his " very early life," he may be misleading us only in part and by the sort of half-lie which is the most misleading of all. If Mary came from the Firth of Clyde at the age of eighteen to be a milkmaid at Coilsfield, and by 1786 had moved to be nursemaid at Gavin Hamilton's, Burns must have had some acquaintance with her before he left Lochlie. But if there had been strong emotion on his part as early as that, we should know of it. About such a thing at such a time Burns was incapable of silence. In any case Mary's early history, like her golden hair, is a matter of tradition. All we know for certain is that in the early summer of 1786 the poet, turning from the " ill-advised, ungrateful " Jean, found favour in her sight.

It is to Burns himself[1] that we owe our knowledge of the race, the Christian name and the

[1] The most important source – Burns's note to the song, " My Highland Lassie," which he wrote for Robert Riddell's interleaved copy of *The Scots Musical Museum*, Vol. II. – was first made public by Cromek in 1808. In 1908 its authenticity was questioned by J. C. Dick in his *Notes on Scottish Song by Robert Burns*. But it has since been established by Davidson Cook (" Annotations of Scottish Songs," *Burns Chronicle* 1922) and by Professor De Lancey Ferguson (" Defence of R. H. Cromek," *Philological Quarterly*, July 1930).

kind nature of the girl, as also of the place, the day and the nature of their leave-taking. She was " a warm-hearted, charming young creature as ever blessed a man with generous love." " Her bosom was fraught with Truth, Honor, Constancy and Love." And " after a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment " in Ayrshire, she was obliged to " cross the sea " to " arrange matters among her friends " for her and his " projected change of life."

That is, it was because of him that she was obliged to give up her place that term-day, at Gavin Hamilton's or elsewhere, and to leave Ayrshire ; and it was because of her that he was obliged to contemplate emigrating from Scotland before long. She it was, and she alone, that he asked to " go to the Indies " with him. No other name is linked with the notion of going abroad or of the life abroad. Her hand should wave him from the quay and should receive what wealth he might win in the plantations. It may well be seen that two such lovers needed " the day " for their parting vows, when they met " by appointment, on the second Sunday of May, in a sequestered spot by the banks of Ayr." And it was while the woman was at Greenock, " at the close of autumn following," looking for the man to honour these vows, that she died and was buried before he so much as learned of her illness.

That he did afterwards learn of her illness is clear[1] since he adds that it was "a malignant fever," and that she had "scarce landed in Greenock when it attacked and carried her off."

When we know, as beyond doubt we now do, that the farewell between these two people, accompanied by a solemn promise of marriage on Burns's part, took place on May 12th, 1786[2]; the implications are imperative. We see why, by the middle of that month, Burns could not acknowledge Jean and why he was so set upon obtaining his certificate as a single man. We understand, all too well, his evasiveness concerning the incident. Here was something to cause not merely a knitting of moral brows (he was used to that and had his own ways of meeting it) but a painful raising of romantic ones. Besides, he had both his personal and his absolute right to secrecy. The feelings of living people were involved. His official biographer, who

[1] The story told later by Burns's youngest sister, Isabella Begg, and perpetuated by Chambers and Wallace, who had it directly from her, fits well with the supposition that Mary's relatives wrote to Burns immediately after the girl died. Mrs. Begg recalled that Burns that autumn at Mossgiel received a letter which conveyed an agonising blow. His face betrayed it but he "went out without uttering a word."

[2] William Scott Douglas was the first to declare it, but he refrained from considering it in its full bearings. Mr. F. B. Snyder, Burns's latest and most minute biographer, accepts it with consideration of its full bearings, but he refrains from the summing up.

evidently knew – as did several people in 1797 – the outline of the story, found it "improper to reveal."[1]

We enter also into Burns's remorse, which was acute and lasting if also fitful. That remorse has brought Burns close, as few poets are close, to the heart of the common man. It has made him in a special way dear and has given enduring value to some of the worst lines he ever wrote. "You always seem inspired when you write of her," said the genteel George Thomson. The opposite might be said with more truth. Burns had his own suspicions of this. "Perhaps, after all, 'tis the still glowing prejudice of my heart, that throws a borrowed lustre over the merits of the composition." He never spoke so of his best songs. If all the verses about Mary were bound up together they would form no inspired collection. The world has hundreds of better love-poems, and, had the author of these never written better ones, the world could let them slide into oblivion. But Burns wrote them, and they are eloquent of his intense consciousness of folly and of strength of feeling. They are rightly therefore held sacred. Set in their place and backed by ejaculations like those uttered in the letter of December 13th, 1789, to Mrs.

[1] Dr. James Currie's first edition did not appear till 1800, but Burns's papers and other information came into his hands within a year of the poet's death in 1796.

Dunlop,[1] they help to keep this singer's place warm in the hearts of many who are ignorant of his major works.

Burns's testimony apart, there are several things which bear upon the episode. Most important of these is the famous Bible with its odd but authentic history and its binding inscriptions in the poet's hand. An entry in the *Gentlemen's Magazine* for October 1827, while recording the death of Mary Campbell's mother at Greenock, gave full particulars of the Bible, then in her keeping, thirteen years before it came into the hands of Burns collectors. Then there is the unhesitating identification by the Greenock Burns Club, within twenty years of Burns's death, of a grave at Greenock in which was buried that same Mary Campbell who had loved him. And there is the curious, though not by itself conclusive, fact that upon the opening in November 1920, of this same grave, "at the foot of the grave the bottom of an infant's coffin was found."

For the rest, we have the local report given without sources by Chambers and Wallace, that "Mary's parents and other near relatives who afterwards settled in Greenock, shrank for many

[1] ". . . If there is another life, it must be only for the just, the benevolent, the amiable, and the humane ; what a flattering idea, then, is a World to come ! Would to God I as firmly believed it, as I ardently wish it ! . . . There should I, with speechless agony of rapture, again recognize my lost, my ever dear Mary ! . . . "

years from all acknowledgment of Burns as her lover. Her father is believed to have burned the poet's letters to her and to have forbidden his name to be mentioned." A similar report says that Mary's mother was once persuaded to receive Burns and was melted by his evident pain.

This is all, but it is enough. Living woman for living woman, Jean was the one he longer desired, would more have wished to marry, and, in the spring of 1786, would have done better for himself by marrying. But this only emphasises Mary's tragedy in our eyes as it did in Burns's. Mary was sweet and solacing. She confided in him, and he would have married her, no matter how unsuitable for a rising poet such a marriage might be. But she died, and there was that in her death which made her parents blame him and he yet more himself.[1] It was because of her death that her lover was "lowly laid" and she for ever exalted. Only those who would grudge a monument to such a one would deny this gentle girl her poet's defiant title of "Mary in Heaven."

[1] The "malignant fever" suggests typhus, typhoid, cholera, or smallpox, but was most likely the first-named, which was only too common in Scotland. In any case of high fever, however, if the girl was some months gone with child, she would be practically certain – according to medical opinion – to give birth to a premature infant.

## CHAPTER IX

The Kilmarnock edition – Burns's sudden leap into fame – arrival in Edinburgh – the poems reviewed by James Sibbald and Henry Mackenzie – new edition undertaken by Creech – Patrick Miller – offer of a farm at Dalswinton – social life in Edinburgh.

In remarkable parallel with such confusion and disgrace there is, as we have seen, Burns's orderly emergence as a poet. It came like a flower, and with it his support by persons of standing in the county increased. An unsuccessful farmer, a confessed fornicator whose ways and words rendered him undesirable to a Mauchline builder as son-in-law, he was yet making his mark with truly superior persons. The demand for transcriptions of his pieces, especially of those which were rich in local allusions and powerful in their exposure of local absurdities and hypocrisies, had become increasingly formidable. Few poets can have covered more paper by request. Soon after the middle of April, when the subscription blanks were ready for the proposed book, he found solid men in Ayr and Kilmarnock, in Irvine, Kirkoswald, Tarbolton and Mauchline, who were keen to help with the distribution. Quickly there were three hundred and fifty subscribers, which was enough

to ensure Wilson, the Kilmarnock printer, against loss. When the book appeared on July 31st, it sold close upon six hundred copies, leaving but thirteen of the edition on Wilson's hands – to be fought for.

It was a rare and satisfying success. Scarcely literate readers scrambled with the *élite* for copies. Farmers and factors, ministers and merchants, small tradesmen and small country gentry had been among the first to respond. Lower and higher people – from plough-hands and dairymaids to the greatest of local lords and ladies – soon followed. Some, who had roared with private laughter over " Holy Willie's Prayer " in manuscript, may have been dashed to find in this neatly printed three-shilling volume nothing but the most innocuous examples of Mr. Burns's humour. But it was Mr. Burns's caution that won him his wide audience. And he gave them enough of exciting excellence not merely to have himself courted as an acquaintance by some of the local ladies, but to have his work recommended by some of the local gentlemen for judgment by the *cognoscenti* in Edinburgh. Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop and Mrs. Stewart of Stair asked him to dine at mansions where before he had known only the kitchen premises and the lasses who worked there. Professor Dugald Stewart of Catrine bade him to sit at table with young Lord Daer, an ardent

republican just returned from Paris. The poet's behaviour and conversation were alike pronounced to be admirable. Possibly his known failing lent him a piquancy in the eyes of patrons whose station absolved them from fears for their own daughters' frailty.

Against any vulgar unbalancing by success Burns was well provided. Besides his self-knowledge, which was unflinching, and his philosophy, which was sound, there was his incorrigibly reckless nature, always liable to create situations for which complacency was less appropriate than consternation. At this juncture, haunted night and day by "the consequences of his follies," fame found him possessed of an unenviable sobriety. When death in the autumn freed him alike from Mary and from panic, he obeyed his Ayrshire well-wishers and turned his eyes toward Edinburgh. The Kilmarnock printer, holding enough to be better than a feast, had refused to finance a second edition. Burns dared not finance it himself and would not accept a loan that was offered. In Edinburgh, he was advised, he would find patrons for it and perhaps provision for a suitable manner of livelihood. Not that he was confident. He was careful to ascertain first that a ship called the *Roselle* was advertised to leave Leith for Jamaica early in December. The desperate remedy must never be far from a man

so liable as he was to folly and failure. With Mary's burial the Indies for him were joined with Atlantis. But Burns, a melancholic who was swung by love, by drink, by congenial converse, or by poetic composition into a brief glory of defiant optimism, looked normally upon life as a harsh master whose few favours must inevitably be overpaid. Being his father's son, he was schooled to meet and endure the worst without shrinking. But it was the worst he looked for, and the giddier the joy of the moment the more certain was a deeper grief to follow. Knowing himself, he would summon his caution to cope beforehand with the fruits of fresh carelessness. Hence his forethought regarding the *Roselle*.

On November 27th, having borrowed a nag from a neighbour, he took the Edinburgh road. His entertainment *en route* was encouraging. Admirers of his book had got wind of his journey, and at one Lanark farmhouse where he supped, and another where he stayed the night, they gathered to talk and wish him well. As usual he gave good measure of himself and carried all before him in talk, both jesting and serious. But when, toward the end of the next day, he urged his pony up the steep hill of Edinburgh, he was so tired that the following day was spent in the bed he shared with Richmond in Baxter's Close, Lawnmarket.

One of his first concerns was to seek out the grave of Robert Fergusson, and finding it unmarked, he made it a charge upon himself to remedy this with stone and verse. There is a story, less well-authenticated, that he approached a printer in the High Street of his own account, and, finding himself unknown and cavalierly treated, flung off after some arrogant words.

If this be true, the printer must have been an ignorant fellow. For the Ayrshire ploughman-poet had not only been a topic of conversation at certain well-informed tables for some weeks past, but on November 3rd had been brought before the literary public by James Sibbald in the pages of the *Edinburgh Magazine*. Sibbald's article had been long, laudatory, and well-furnished with illustrative extracts. A second large instalment of these appeared in the next number a few days after Burns's arrival in town.

This was good enough, but better was to come. Dugald Stewart had got the ear of one whose pronouncements on matters of literary taste were final for Edinburgh. Within a week of Sibbald's second article came an issue of Henry Mackenzie's *Lounger* – devoted to the new poet. Mackenzie was not only cordial and appreciative ; he was practical. He told the public that money was needed as well as praise. The effect was

immediate. The tongues of the "literati" wagged. Burns was emboldened to make full use of the introductions he had brought from Ayrshire. Within a very short time invitations and callers of the most genteel kind arrived at Baxter's Close. Certain young women who lodged noisily upstairs, and were a thorn in the flesh of Richmond's landlady, must have wondered when they saw the liveries of Gordon and Glencairn awaiting replies from the young farmer, who had attired himself for town in new buckskins, a coat of good blue cloth, a waistcoat of blue and canary stripes,[1] and a pair of top-boots. By December 7th, he had been taken under the wings of James, fourteenth Earl of Glencairn, and the Hon. Harry Erskine, the Dean of Faculty. Before the middle of the month William Creech, leading bookseller of Edinburgh and a city magistrate, was advertising a new edition "for the sole benefit of the author," with subscription bills already distributed. Straightway the members of the Royal Caledonian Hunt came forward *en masse* as subscribers. If anything were wanting to assure Burns's position it was provided before the year was out by the news that, if the *Monthly Review* were any guide, even London recognised his genius. To signalise the occasion Professor

[1] By this choice of colours he proclaimed himself a Whig and a Foxite.

Dugald Stewart presented the poet on his twenty-eighth birthday with a portable writing-desk suitably inscribed. The *Roselle* had been an unnecessary precaution, and towards the end of December she sailed unnoticed.

The Edinburgh edition promised to bring Burns a substantial sum of ready money ; and in view of his vogue and his influential acquaintance he not unreasonably supposed he would be able to send immediate cash to quarters in Ayrshire, where it was needed, and at the same time obtain for himself some suitable employment without undue delay. More and more he fancied a post in the Excise. But before he could do much in that way he had an unexpected offer of help of another kind. He had early got into the habit of frequenting Sibbald's circulating library. One day he found awaiting him there a gift of ten guineas from an admirer who desired for the moment to remain anonymous, but who in a week or two disclosed himself by inviting the poet to dine at his house. He was Mr. Patrick Miller of Dalswinton.

Mr. Miller was of a respectable Ayrshire family. His elder brother Thomas was the Lord Justice Clerk of Scotland, Lord Glenlee. He himself, comparatively early in life, had amassed in business a considerable fortune, which he was now engaged in spending upon a comprehensive

variety of projects that he had conceived for the benefit of humanity. True, his most successful device was a peculiarly destructive naval gun, the carronade or "smasher"[1]; but in general his notions were benevolent. The improvement of navigation was one of them: he was to build a practicable steamboat some years before Fulton. He shared the fashionable enthusiasm of the Scottish gentry for agricultural improvements, and was one of the most active in carrying out experiments (not all of them happy) at Dalswinton, the estate he had lately bought in Dumfriesshire. He was a well-informed and patriotic Whig, and in a small way fancied himself as a patron of the arts. Pictures and portraits by the best living Scottish artists hung upon his walls. He thought to do Mr. Burns a good turn by offering him, on very liberal terms, one of three farms he had at Dalswinton. At the mere mention of farms Mr. Burns's heart had a tendency to sink. Nevertheless, Mr. Burns could do no less than thank Mr. Miller, and promise to visit and inspect his proposed acres as soon as possible.

But the new edition of the poems had to be seen through the press, and it was a slow job. Bailie Creech might be, as Burns said of him, "a little

[1] Miller's title to the invention is denied by the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but has now been established by the recent discovery of his own account of it. See my *Life of Robert Burns*, pp. 265–266, note.

upright, pert, tart tripping wight," but he was neither business-like nor quick. For the best part of five months Burns was kept hanging about Edinburgh, fretting somewhat, but consoled by his popularity and the variety of entertainment it offered him. The aplomb of the Ayrshire ploughman amazed everybody. No matter where one met him, in a great lady's drawing-room, or at the smartest Masonic lodge in town, in a relaxed bawdy-boozy group of gentlemen, dubbed the Crochallans, who assembled at Dawney Douglas's in the Anchor Close, or in some common alehouse among caddies and drovers in the Cowgate – he was always apt to the occasion. If he had a fault it was an occasional arrogant frankness and an inability to suffer even highly-placed fools with a gladness becoming his station. But he appreciated the society of the "great folk" and he enjoyed that of the "little," so long as there was wit and worth to be had. His own particular cronies in Edinburgh were of the middle sort. Three of these deserve mention – William Nicol, a clever, cantankerous middle-aged man, who was a master at the High School; William Smellie, who was Creech's printer and a wise Crochallan wag; and Robert Ainslie, a young law-clerk who was still full of lustful light-minded youth. These were in Burns's special confidence and became his very intimate correspondents.

The surviving letters to Ainslie are among the most enlightening we have.[1]

At last, on April 21st, 1787, the new edition of Robert Burns's poems appeared, and Scotland was given a further glimpse of the poet, who now boldly claimed to be her laureate. It was a further glimpse, but no more. If the laureate had been given his way the view would have been very considerably wider. But his admirers insisted that some of the pieces he had proposed were offensive to "elegance" as to "taste"; and they were accordingly excluded. Burns, however, was lucky as a poet if in no other respect, and he has it both ways. Posterity ranks some of these inelegant and tasteless pieces as of his best work. Meanwhile, his contemporaries found enough of good, of second-best, and of downright bad to rave over indiscriminately.

[1] Unhappily a grandson of Smellie's, finding the poet's outpourings too Rabelaisian for nineteenth-century taste, burned the large bundle of letters to which he fell heir.

# CHAPTER X

Tour of the Border country – a triumphal progress – return to Mauchline – the Armours' changed attitude – visit to the West Highlands – Edinburgh again – Creech's dilatoriness – tour in the north – Margaret Chalmers.

EXCEPT for the road from Mauchline to Edinburgh and walks that he took with pleasure in the Edinburgh neighbourhood, Burns had seen nothing of his country outside Ayrshire. The chance of time and money now offering, he determined to seize it, and, his book being launched, he set off on May 5th, with Bob Ainslie for laughter-loving company, upon a tour of the Border country. The young men went mounted – Burns on a mare he had bought and christened "Jenny Geddes" – and they travelled about the South of Scotland and the North of England, paying calls and doubling on their tracks as the spirit moved them,[1] until the 24th, when Ainslie returned to work leaving Burns with his people near Duns. Feeling lost and lonely – although for him, with fame running ahead, the tour had been something of a triumphal progress – Burns crossed a second time into England and visited Newcastle

[1] Burns kept a journal which reveals that, while he had a farmer's eye for land, a poet's for places celebrated in song, and a critic's for human character, he was neither interested in history nor romantic about "scenery."

and Carlisle. He then returned by way of Dumfries, where he was given the freedom of the burgh (as earlier at Jedburgh), inspected the Dalswinton farm, and received a vexing letter from Edinburgh begging his help for a servant-girl, named May Cameron, "in trouble" because of him. Ainslie, who was saddled with a like vexing matter of his own, was the man to lend a hand here. Burns sent him urgent instructions to call with money and advice – "lest the poor soul be starving." On June 9th he walked unannounced into Mossgiel, and, after greeting his family there, went down to knock at the Armours' door.

Scotia's darling though he now was, we find Burns on his "*éclatant* return to Mauchline" hardly happier than when he left it six months earlier. He was the laureate of his country, courted by lords and ladies in the capital, and encouraged by the most eminent professors of learning and ministers of the Gospel. He was able to save Mossgiel by the prompt loan of a substantial sum to Gilbert, and the Edinburgh poems promised to bring him several hundred pounds. The Kilmarnock poems had secured the future of Lizzie Paton's child. Jean's children need not fear for theirs. He had made new friends, obtained powerful patrons, and had ridden carefree about Scotland for five weeks on his own nag.

But his heart was in his boots. What he had seen of humanity in Edinburgh had shaken him; and the fawning reception he met with at home – especially from the Armours – "nearly put me out of conceit altogether with my species." The Armours were now as anxious for Jean to please as before they had been for her to spurn him. Their "servility," together with the "stateliness" of the Edinburgh gentry, sickened his soul. At the same time his conscience was burdened, as his purse would soon be, by May Cameron, and his memory was besieged by Mary Campbell.

His gloomy prescience found the new uncertainty of his future the more disquieting for what lay between. He regarded his vogue as a whim of fashion that would pass, and he foresaw that, with the many claims upon it while he himself remained unsettled, his "little fortune" would as quickly melt. In spite of what had been said and done he still lacked a nomination to the Excise. His visit to Dalswinton had not reconciled him to the farmer's life – why exchange one unprofitable farm in Ayrshire for another unprofitable farm in Dumfriesshire? After all, he wondered, would it not be best to go to Jamaica? In this condition of puzzled depression he renewed his intimacy with the willing Jean (while making it clear to her that he was in no case for marriage); and within two weeks of his return he was

off again, this time to make a solitary excursion to the West Highlands.

If he kept any journal of this trip it has not survived, and the letters he wrote, although to his intimates, are not informative. The tradition that he visited Mary Campbell's grave and saw her mother has likelihood upon its face. Certainly he went to Arrochar and Inveraray, did business in connexion with his book in Glasgow and elsewhere, was made a burgess at Dumbarton, and, when engaged in a frolic by Loch Lomondside, came down with "Jenny Geddes" and was severely shaken. Within ten days he was back nursing his "bruises and wounds" at Mossgiel, and whiling away the tedium by writing a long autobiographical letter for the benefit of a London *littérateur*.[1]

But he hated such inaction. He must settle to some practicable way of life. And before doing so he must clear up accounts with Creech. By August 7th, he was once more treading the uncleanly cobblestones of the Old Town.

This second sojourn in Edinburgh, though less spectacular, was not less important than the first. Burns was no longer a rustic adventurer, a prodigy

[1] A Scot, however, viz. Dr. John Moore, author of *Zeluco* and father of the victor of Corunna. He is thought to have reviewed the Kilmarnock book in Feb. 1787 for the *English Review*. Mrs. Dunlop had sent him a copy, and so put him in touch with Burns. A solid correspondence followed, but Moore and Burns never met.

to be gaped at like the learned pig, but a proved member of good society. After sharing Richmond's poor mattress in the Lawnmarket for a first night or two, he went to lodge with Nicol in Buccleuch Square, and this was preparatory to moving into even more genteel quarters with Nicol's colleague, Cruickshank, who lived in the New Town and possessed a harpsichord. The harpsichord, as we shall see, was a consideration.

Burns's first business was to settle with Creech. But settlements were that gentleman's pet aversion, and after three futile weeks his customer was setting out without one to see the Northern Highlands in Will Nicol's company. May Cameron, who had served the poet with a writ, had been easier to deal with, and by accepting his responsibility Burns was discharged from this menace by August 15th. On the 25th, bearing introductions to the best families of the north, he and Nicol rolled out of Edinburgh by way of Queensferry in a hired chaise ("Nicol thinks it more comfortable than horseback, to which I say, Amen"). Beginning with Linlithgow, they made Falkirk, Stirling, Crieff, Taymouth, and Dunkeld, drove through the Pass of Killiecrankie, visited Culloden Moor, called on the Gordons at Gordon Castle and the Atholls at Blair, looked up Burness relatives at Stonehaven and Montrose, and penetrated ten miles north of Inverness, covering

600 miles in 22 days. At times the amenities of the trip were marred by the uncertain and jealous temper of Nicol ; but Burns was amused by this friend and long-suffering toward him. In the journal he kept he utters no word of complaint, and on the whole he seems to have enjoyed the undertaking.

On his return to town he renewed his siege of Creech and his correspondence with Mr. Miller. He was willing to re-visit Dalswinton. At the same time he made fresh efforts after nomination in the Excise. In this regard he was now more favourably placed. At Blair Castle he had made the acquaintance of a member of the Scottish Board of Excise, Mr. Robert Graham of Fintry.

Besides such matters Burns had a matrimonial preoccupation in Edinburgh which in some degree seems to have involved his emotions. For him, if he could afford it and persuade the right woman, marriage was inevitable as part of a good life. In spite of a genuine fondness for Jean and that physical attraction which reasserted itself on each meeting, he had come to regard her as definitely not the right woman. The fact had to be faced, and no doubt it stared Burns in the face upon his first return from Edinburgh, that Jean was less suitable as a wife to him now than Lizzie Paton had been to what he was when he left

Lochlie. She had indeed ceased to be suitable with the coming of his Ayrshire success. Perfectly he knew that if he married her he would have a mate who could neither go with him to the houses where he was an easy guest nor enjoy the society of the friends he wished to welcome to his home. She was a dear girl, but beyond remedy she was unadaptable and rough.

Soon after his first arrival in Edinburgh he had paid, or meditated paying, honourable addresses to the daughter of a substantial farmer unnamed. Either these addresses failed, and he bore their failure with stoicism; or they were postponed, and this was the identical girl with whom he now envisaged a happy marriage. In any case, Miss Margaret Chalmers – a farmer's daughter of the higher sort, cousin to Gavin Hamilton, attractive, sympathetic, and well-educated – stands as a testimonial to Burns's taste and judgment. Of all the young women he had met in Edinburgh drawing-rooms "Peggy" was the best calculated to fill the part of Mrs. Robert Burns. If she was somewhat above him in social status, this was not so marked as not to be outbalanced by his talent and fame. The two had become good friends. In everything – or almost everything – Burns sought her counsel. And he had fallen, or at least imagined that he had fallen, in love with her. On his way north with Nicol

he had called at her home near Stirling only to find her absent. Again, a fortnight after his return, he went from Edinburgh to visit her, this time accompanied by a young doctor who had been introduced by Ayrshire friends.

For the next eight or ten days he and Dr. Adair were much in the company of young Peggy and her pretty cousin, Charlotte Hamilton, with whom she lived. But, while Charlotte in little more than a year was to become Adair's lady, Peggy refused to be Burns's. Her affections, it seems, were already engaged elsewhere, and in any case she had all the prudence for which Burns gave her credit. When he told her, as no doubt he did, of his obligations in Edinburgh and Ayrshire (by then he must have known that Jean was going to make him yet again a father in five months), she showed no disposition to prefer this "rantin', rovin' Robin" – accomplished wooer though he was[1] – to the worthy young banker whom she ultimately married.

Love apart, as has been said, Burns had a great opinion of Miss Chalmers's judgment. As she had coupled with her refusal of his person an admonition, equally firm and friendly, to accept Mr. Miller's farm, the advice weighed heavily with him. In the last week of November he went

[1] Margaret Chalmers destroyed all Burns's more intimate letters to her.

again to Dalswinton, was shown round by Miller's factor, and returned no more hopeful than on his last visit. Mr. Miller himself does not seem to have been at home. Nor had he come to an absolute decision either as to the particular farm or the terms he wished to offer to the poet. A farm called Ellisland, however, seemed the likeliest.

# CHAPTER XI

Scottish folk-song – James Johnson and Stephen Clarke – *The Scots Musical Museum* – Burns as editor – Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose – " Clarinda and Sylvander " – nomination to the Excise service – Miller's offer of Ellisland accepted – Burns marries Jean Armour – quarrel with Mrs. M'Lehose.

NEITHER social, business, nor matrimonial undertakings had interrupted the work to which Burns had dedicated his life – the making of poetry. He not only continued his output of original poetry, but also took in hand the preservation and reanimation of Scottish folk-song. This, his earliest passion, was to last his life out, and it has endowed the tree of his fame with its evergreen boughs.

Among his convivial acquaintance in Edinburgh were James Johnson,[1] a music engraver and dealer in musical instruments, and Stephen Clarke, organist of the Episcopal Church. Finding these men engaged upon a modest scheme for publishing a collection of native folk-songs, Burns offered his help – immediately, freely, and with both hands. He would have no payment but a few copies of each volume as it appeared. Naturally Johnson and Clarke were delighted. The former was a poor man without much education.

[1] Johnson was a member of the famous Crochallan Club.

The latter was dilatory and indolent. When Burns fell in with them, their first volume was nearing completion, so upon its publication (when he was on his Border tour) it contained only two songs by him, with possibly a very few which owed their preservation to him. But from the start he was "absolutely crazed about it," and the scheme broadened and blossomed under his hand. He enlisted the interest of the big-wigs, Beattie and Blacklock, ransacked his own magnificent memory and never travelled without beating up local singers, old and new. He would not only collect "old stanzas and every information remaining respecting their origins, authors, etc.," but he would save living bards from the old sad anonymity. It was Burns who made the six volumes of *The Scots Musical Museum* what it remains to this day – the standard collection of Scottish songs and music. Between the spring of 1787 and the autumn of 1792 he contributed over 200 songs set to appropriate airs, besides writing prefaces and doing a vast amount of other editorial work.

It is to be observed that, although Clarke remained musical editor, Burns's task included the collection of tunes as well as words. Indeed it was tunes rather than words that he was anxious to preserve ; for as often as not the words were not suitable for his purpose, being poor, fragmentary, or indecent. Although Burns never

learned to sing properly he had a true ear, and seems to have made shift, by some system of notation of his own devising, to record tunes as he heard them up and down the country. And, of course, there were many tunes available in print or in MS., especially among the old dance music. These he got Cruickshank's schoolgirl daughter to play over to him on the harpsichord. Thus he worked with a will at supplying new words to good old tunes that he found unworthily wedded or widowed except for the tag of a refrain. When Johnson at length, with flagging energy, handed over the general editorship Burns remained ever tactful and kind. It is always " your publication " and " your fourth volume." And with Clarke the same. When words were funny as well as vulgar Burns copied them apart into a note-book which he kept (probably under the general heading of " The Merry Muses ") and would produce for the delectation of the Crochallan brotherhood. For himself he avowed that, if bawdry were the sin against the Holy Ghost, he had no hope of salvation.

As we have Burns's own word for it that love and song were the very warp and woof of his being, it is not surprising that this period of intense lyrical activity should have been marked by an equally intense love-affair. It was impossible for him to keep clear of entanglements

with women of one kind or another. To May Cameron one Jenny Clow had succeeded. Such humble amours, though they might add to his embarrassments, did not involve either his heart or his imagination. Had Peggy Chalmers taken him she might have held both. But she had put him away with those firm, capable little hands – she was a brown-eyed sprite – and it remained for another, whom he chanced to meet through Peggy's acquaintance, to precipitate him into a lasting passion.

Miss Nimmo, a spinster friend of Peggy's, had some time since been solicited for an introduction to Mr. Burns by a younger female admirer of his works. Towards the end of the year the meeting took place. The young female in question was Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose, a grass widow of the most distressful sort. The daughter of a Glasgow physician, she had eloped in her teens with a personable and ingratiating young attorney of her own town, whose protestations as lover were far from being borne out by his behaviour as husband. He was in fact a bad lot, and, after a flight from Scotland and a stay in London (a considerable part of which was spent in the King's Bench prison), he was now settled in the last resort of broken Scotsmen, Jamaica. His wife fortunately had inherited a little money from her father, and on this, eked out by pittances from

the Glasgow Faculties of Procurators and of Physicians, and some help from a relative who was a judge of the Court of Session, she contrived to keep herself and her two small children. Her home was in the Potterrow, now a sad slum of the Old Town, but then a genteel, though decaying, neighbourhood. Her age was twenty-eight.

Mrs. M'Lehose was attractive, anxious and amorous. Her evangelical soul was at odds with an opulent body, and, having failed of love, she was reconciling these two as best she could with the aid of maternity and literature. Herself the author of verses which were here and there admired, she had read Mr. Burns's poems and had been subjugated by them. It was not in Burns's nature to be unresponsive to such a one. Very early in 1788, after an accident which kept him indoors and a correspondence which began pretty warm and mounted rapidly in temperature, he became a frequent visitor at the house in the Potterrow, and between meetings there were frequent love-letters. In writing it was their humour to adopt pastoral names. The poet was "Sylvander" and the lady "Clarinda." This and the lady's evident predilections indulged Burns to the full in his weakness for a high-falutin epistolary style. The correspondence, most of which has been preserved, makes curious reading owing to its elements of absurdity and

exaggeration. But it would be a mistake on that account to regard the affair as mere froth and silliness. Beginning as a flirtation it developed into something much more serious. How much more is a matter for conjecture. But we know that these two came to desire each other madly ; that they would have married if the woman had been free ; that for a time they indulged hopes of such a freedom ; and that when the moment of parting came, the love-song, " Ae fond kiss," was wrung from something very like despair.

But before that parting, which took place almost precisely four years after their first meeting, much was to happen, including recriminations between them of the bitterest kind.

When Burns tore himself from Edinburgh on February 18th, 1788, he took with him his long-awaited nomination to the Excise. Glencairn had helped him to this, and he had not hesitated to make use of his lucky meeting with Graham of Fintry. He was to undergo forthwith a course of instruction in revenue work, after which he might hope for an appointment as gauger at an early date. This practically decided him to refuse Mr. Miller's offer of a farm ; but he would be cautious as well as courteous, and, while fulfilling the promise he had made to inspect Dalswinton yet once more, he would take with him for expert advice his father's sagacious old friend, John

Tennant of Glenconner. He made little doubt but that Tennant's advice would be adverse. Meanwhile, he must first return to Mauchline, where various affairs had to be settled. Of these the most urgent was that of Jean Armour, whose parents, furious that Burns had taken the bait while avoiding the hook, had turned their daughter out of the house.

Arriving on the morning of February 23rd, by way of Glasgow, Paisley, Kilmarnock, and Dunlop House, he found Jean in a refuge he had got for her with friends of his own near Tarbolton. She was in a sad case. He wished to help her, but at the same time was determined to show that marriage was further than ever from his intention. Such endeavours engage the purse, not to mention pride and pain. But Burns was, anyhow, prompt. Next day, having interviewed the old Armours, persuaded Mrs. Armour to play a mother's part, cheered up Jean by an embrace, and set her up with bed and board in a room of her own in the Backcauseway, he was well on his way for the third time to Dalswinton. The letter he had written to Mrs. M'Lehose on the afternoon of the 23rd is a shocking one. But its caddishness – for there is no other word for it – is of that natural sort which the Clarindas of this world seem born to elicit.

It is a striking comment on the futility of human resolves that when Burns returned to Edinburgh little more than a fortnight later, he had, on Tennant's advice (which turned out to be anything but adverse), accepted Miller's offer of the farm called Ellisland and had almost decided to accept Jean. He told his Excise promoters nothing of the first decision. As for the second, perhaps he came prepared for Clarinda to make it once more as impossible as it had seemed three weeks earlier.

But in this Clarinda failed. In the interval Jean's need had stalked into the foreground, while hers had demanded above all the withdrawal of a lover who could bring nothing but calamity into her life. In Mauchline girl twins had been born to Jean, and almost as soon had died. In Edinburgh the tongues of the "unco guid" had wagged, and Mrs. M'Lehose's good fame and poor income were both threatened. A disastrous element of gentility in her, which had always hindered the honesty of her relations with Burns must further have tipped the scale against her.[1] He saw that there was only one practical and honourable course for him to take. And, more in love with Clarinda than ever, in a state "positively crazed" and "fevered," staggering

[1] Much as he adored Mrs. M'Lehose, Burns was aware of a boarding-school missishness in her which he deplored and feared.

" under a load of Care almost too heavy for his shoulders," he took it.

At least he had the rueful satisfaction of having restrained himself in highly provocative circumstances. In the technical sense of the term their love had been " innocent." But as the moment of parting approached it became more and more invested with passion. He could not bring himself to tell her plainly that he was going home to make a wife of the girl who, by comparison with her, had " disgusted " him only a short time before. All he could do was to give his farewell all the circumstances of a lasting one, and, having done " the right thing " at Mauchline some time in April – declaring to all with the best face he could muster that Jean Armour and Mrs. Robert Burns were one and the same[1] – he charged Ainslie with the duty of breaking the news to Clarinda. Clarinda was very angry.

[1] Neither the exact date nor the procedure is known. But a mere acknowledgment of the former irregular marriage was enough in the unceremonious way of Scots Law to establish them as husband and wife, after which the stigma of " irregularity " was removed by the signing of a document before a Justice of the Peace and the submission of the parties to a formal reprimand *in facie ecclesiæ*.

## CHAPTER XII

Settlement at Ellisland – farmer and gauger – failure of the Ellisland plan – literary activity – removal to Dumfries – Anna Park – reconciliation and last meeting with Mrs. M'Lehose.

DURING the summer Burns completed his course of instruction for the Excise. He saw no reason why he should not be gauger as well as farmer, provided he could have a Dumfriesshire district. He put in an application to the Excise Board accordingly. Although his entry upon his farm remained his first consideration for some months to come, the delays and dismays were such that by the time he and Jean actually slept in their new home (at least twelve months after he had obtained formal possession) he was looking to the laws of Revenue rather than to the land for his living.

Ellisland consisted of 170 acres romantically (but also rheumatically) situated on the west bank of the Nith, in Dunscore parish, six miles north-west of Dumfries. A house had to be built, and while Burns was necessarily often on the road between Mauchline and Dumfries (45 miles), and between Dumfries and Edinburgh (60 miles), it was nobody's business to press on with the building. Jean was learning dairy work from his

mother at Mossgiel. He, dossing in a rickety hovel a mile up-stream from his still uninhabitable house and getting in the first harvest in a flurry of bad weather, fell a prey to influenza and gloom. But he was set on making the best of things – including Jean, to whom he wrote gay, practical, affectionate letters, and one of his sweetest songs – and the new roof was scarcely on before it sheltered various needy relatives of the house of Burns. Even before the roof was on he was planning and paying to launch his youngest brother William,[1] a youth without much stamina, in a hard world.

Over and above his generosity to dependants and friends, Burns felt that he could afford to live in a style superior to the neighbour farmers; and so, in spite of a bit of capital and an indulgent landlord, he soon justified his instinct that farming was no life for a poet. More than that, it was no life for a gauger[2] who had to cover 200 miles on horseback every week and deliver exact and complicated accounts to exigent superiors. Either the farm or the Excise must be given up. Burns had no doubt which to choose. After two and a half years of Ellisland his capital was gone and

[1] William was equipped and sent to England in February 1789. That July he died of fever in London, the news being sent north by Murdoch, Burns's old teacher.

[2] On October 17th, 1789, he was sworn in for active duty on the Dumfries first Itinerancy.

no return might be looked for except by subletting or, at worst, by a well-timed "roup" of movables. On the other hand, the Excise had promoted him in July 1790 to "Dumfries third division" at a salary of £70 instead of £50, and with fines and perquisites this might be brought up to £90 or even £100. Although irksome in certain ways, the responsibilities of a gauger suited him better than those of a farmer, just as they offered better prospects. A port division would serve him well while he awaited the much to be desired seniority appointment of supervisor.[1] Towards the end of January 1791, his name appeared on the list of "Persons Recommended for Examiner and Supervisor."

He applied to Mr. Miller for permission to sublet the farm – or perhaps to assign the lease to a "near relation" – but Mr. Miller refused. He had given Burns £300 for building and fencing, and was charging the reasonable rent of £50, rising after three years to £70. And he had his own difficulties. What with the expensive tastes of his family and the many inventions and experiments that cost even more, he now grudged himself the price of a new coat. If Burns wanted to get out, Ellisland would be sold. A neighbour presently made a good offer for it.

[1] In the ordinary way Burns would have to wait for six years, but he hoped by influence to obviate this rule.

Burns resented what he regarded as Miller's lack of consideration. In any case by then the relations between landlord and tenant are thought to have become somewhat strained. Possibly the fact that Burns, instead of supporting his patron's son as the Whig candidate in a Parliamentary by-election for the Dumfries Burghs, had used his tongue and pen with violence in favour of the Tory candidate, may have helped to create a certain friction. Although a Left Wing Whig, young Miller for intricate political reasons had been the protégé of the Duke of Queensberry, and to the poet the notorious "Old Q." was much worse than the Devil.

However these things might be, there was no help for Ellisland, and in the late autumn of 1791, two months after a fairly successful and extremely convivial sale of crops and stock, Burns's last adventure in farming came to an end. At Ellisland he had been busy and productive. He had written his longest and greatest narrative poem, "Tam o'Shanter," as well as "The Kirk's Alarm," "Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Maut," and a host of songs, amorous and mirthful. He had taught his elder boy, extended his own reading greatly, and founded a successful country library.[1] He had followed home and foreign politics with

[1] The Monkland Friendly Society, which was the first thing of its kind in Scotland.

fervour, written letters to the newspapers, been alert to remedy local injustices and individual misfortunes. He had helped poets less fortunate than himself, and had made some good friends, especially Robert Riddell of Friar's Carse, half a mile along the river bank, and recently he had become acquainted with Riddell's charming sister-in-law, Maria. If he had failed to make farming pay, and if he had suffered at times from nervous exhaustion, chills and accidents to arms and legs, still it was rather an angry than a desperate man who followed his plenishings one mid-November afternoon to a dark little three-room-and-kitchen tenement house in the Wee Vennel, Dumfries.

The history of Burns's heart at Ellisland had not been entirely uneventful. It never was. But Clarinda's place there had remained essentially unchallenged and unchallengeable. Shortly before he left he was once more exchanging with her the sort of letters which call for a face-to-face parley.

Jean, while working with and for him in kindness and bearing his children in cheerfulness, was no more than a loyal house-mate. She could not come near the things and the people that held his interest and evoked his spark ; and he was too wise to ask of her more than she could give.

Placidly he bore her grumbling over the failure of the farm and her scolding when she was forced with her brood into a narrow dwelling in a town street. Jean's marriage bed was no bed of roses, and he knew it. As the summer of 1789 wore on he experienced with a bout of ill health a fit of passionate remorse for Mary Campbell. The following summer he danced into a headlong love-affair with the yellow-haired niece of the proprietor of the Globe tavern at Dumfries. Anne Park was her name and Burns gloried in her embraces, wrote what he considered his best love-song[1] (as it was certainly his most defiant) in celebration, and never uttered a syllable of regret even when, on March 31st of the following year, she presented him with a little girl. With that Anne disappears from the scene. She is said to have married a soldier. But Burns had the child brought home, and Jean nursed it tenderly with her own three boys, the youngest of whom – William Nicol – was born but a few days later. It is even said that she suckled Anne's baby with her own. Jean was so used to twins !

Then in November he heard from Ainslie that Clarinda was going to join her husband in Jamaica. Twice since his marriage he had been in Edinburgh, but so hot was her anger against him that he had not been permitted to see her.

[1] "The Gowden Locks of Anna."

Three times, at long intervals, she had written stinging letters which had elicited replies equally stinging if also notably crafty. Now, on November 1st, she wrote again taunting him with her knowledge that Jenny Clow, the mother of a boy by him in his Edinburgh days, was ill and in need. What was Mr. Burns going to do about this? Into the recriminations there had crept an undertone of intimate longing. Early in the autumn Burns had planned on various accounts a visit to Edinburgh. Now, immediately after the removal to Dumfries, we find him posting there with Clarinda in the forefront of his intentions.

He stayed for a week – long enough for the reconciliation that was achieved breast to breast.[1] Sylvander and Clarinda had come to a new parting of their ways, but the parting was tender – from the tone of all their later references to it, more than tender. For the first and the last time they knew each other quite simply. She became "his Nancy." She was going to an unloved husband who would yet demand all his rights. He would never see her again. "Ae Fond Kiss" is no more a platonic song than "The Gowden Locks of Anna." Of the letters which Burns and Mrs. M'Lehose exchanged immediately following

[1] Long enough, too, to settle the business of Jenny Clow, so far as settlement was in his power.

upon their parting five or six were destroyed by their recipients, neither did Burns keep copies of his own, although such was his habit. This forms the only considerable gap in the correspondence, and so is the more to be remarked.

The story of Sylvander and Clarinda really ends here, but there is an epilogue – which may as well be told at once. When Burns took the Dumfries road again he expected the Atlantic to roll between him and Nancy M'Lehose for the rest of their joint lives. But it was not the sea that was to divide them. For within six months of her departure Nancy was back in Edinburgh ! Her expedition to Jamaica had been a mournful fiasco. Bad as her husband had been before, he was now brutalised past bearing. She left him to his black concubine and coffee-coloured piccaninnies, and returned by the same ship that had brought her – the *Roselle*. But, remembering the nature of her farewell with Burns, she was terrified at the idea of resuming any correspondence with the blazing-eyed poet,[1] and it was months before he so much as knew of her return. He then wrote to her. His letter vibrates, as no other surviving letter does, with possessive reproach. (In vain did he try to deceive posterity by calling it " the fustian rant of enthusiastic

[1] Sir Walter Scott's description of Burns's eyes is well-known. John Syme of Ryedale at a later date said that in " animated moments " they were " actually like coals of living fire."

youth.") She replied, pleading tremulously that surely friendship might serve them without anything more. To this Burns gave a resigned answer, and the correspondence seems to have closed. Nor did they ever meet again.[1] For us the most interesting element in this love-affair is that it clearly inspired not only the famous "Ae Fond Kiss," but equally the infamous and ludicrous "I'll tell ye a Tale o' a Wife."

[1] The late Mr. Philip Sulley, a well-known Burns student, and himself a Revenue official at Dumfries for many years, told me by word of mouth a story which he said was credibly handed down in Dumfries. When Burns lay dead, the tale goes, Jean was distressed to find him wearing under his shirt a wax profile of Mrs. M'Lehose which he had long since discarded. In her vexation she first snapped the wax across, then, regretting her action, put the pieces away in a little box. Certainly the wax profile which Mrs. M'Lehose gave Burns, and which is now in the Cottage Museum, has at one time been snapped across.

# CHAPTER XIII

Last years – Burns's popularity at Dumfries – a capable and diligent Government servant – the French Revolution – Burns's political indiscretion – official inquiry – reprimanded after humble apology – Thomson's *Select Collection of Scotish Airs* – attack of rheumatic fever – Maria Riddell – the affair at Friar's Carse – Burns ostracised by the gentry – the Dumfries Volunteers – second attack of rheumatic fever – failing health – treatment at the Brow Well – return to Dumfries – death.

WHEN the fateful year 1792 opened, Burns was more truly happy than he had ever been in his life. His Hippocrene – his "Muses' stank" – was as fluent and crystal as ever. He was constantly producing new lyrics of all sorts, which it was his humour when sending them to Johnson to pretend were not "his ain bairns" but only "bairns of his fathering." He was averse from any more formal publication, but the importunities of Creech finally prevailed with him to despatch some fifty pages of new poems – a proportion of which had seen separate print – to be added to a third edition of his work. This appeared early the next year, on the strict understanding that the author would accept no remuneration other than twenty copies for distribution among friends. It was an arrogance in him that he would make of song a free gift.

At Ellisland Burns had made many new and

valued friends without as yet losing any of the old ones[1] – at any rate not permanently, for he soon made up his quarrel, if there was one, with Patrick Miller. In Dumfries itself he enlarged the circle of his intimates and became a popular and respected figure. With 7,000 inhabitants within its parish boundaries, a theatre, libraries, a weekly newspaper, and a daily mail-coach to Edinburgh and to London, the burgh was second only to the capital in liveliness. Burns's fellow civil servants rejoiced in his company, and he was welcomed by lawyers, bankers, schoolmasters and doctors as well as by the country gentry, who, in the phrase of a contemporary statistician, were "people as genteel and fashionable as are to be seen in any provincial town whatever." He was given a free pass to the theatre[2] and – at his own request – free schooling for his sons. He was elected a member of the governing committee of the chief library, and early in the year Edinburgh conferred upon him a signal honour by enrolling him among the Royal Archers of Scotland. Within eighteen months of his arrival he moved to a

[1] A possible exception is Gavin Hamilton. In the spring of 1788 Hamilton had asked Burns to become Gilbert's guarantor for a substantial sum. Burns refused ; and the incident seems, as Professor Ferguson puts it, "to have lowered the temperature of their friendship."

[2] He wrote occasional, spirited prologues and "addresses" that were spoken with success from the stage, liked the society of the players, and, wishing to write drama, read all the plays, French and English, he could lay hands on.

better house – roomier and detached – in Mill Vennel, where he could entertain chosen guests to simple cheer, give Jean a servant, and insist upon her wearing gowns of the latest novelty stuff, which was called gingham.

In the Excise his competence and energy had been apparent from the start, and his promotion from a scattered country district to a "footwalk" in town, while it brought more responsibility, left him also more time and strength for poetry. The official reports upon his service were uniformly favourable. He was at once punctilious and tactful, and showed a distinct talent for administration.

It must be said that his popularity among the country gentry had one serious drawback. The courtesy of the day required that he should drink level with his hosts, and he did his best, for he never could resist good company. But, by reason of a delicate stomach and a naturally nervous constitution that had been impaired by early hardship, he was not of the average country gentleman's "drinking weight." He suffered in consequence. Yet there is no evidence that in his lifetime his convivialities were regarded as out of the ordinary by those who saw much of him. It was only by people at a distance, and by gossips after his death, that the legend was invented of a gifted but unstable rustic who was

corrupted by his "betters" and drank himself into an early grave. Had Burns's habits at Dumfries been of that sort, he could not, even in those easy-going days, have escaped official censure; but, if anything is clear, it is that Burns never allowed anything to interfere with the most punctual discharge of his duties. There was never any complaint against him on that score. It was in quite another connexion that, early in 1793, he received a sharp reprimand and narrowly (or so many thought besides himself) escaped being dismissed from the service.

Allusion has already been made to his erratic political sympathies. Nowadays civil servants are debarred from publicly taking sides in politics, but in the eighteenth century there was no such rule, though naturally it was unwise to take sides against the party in office – unless of course it was on the verge of going out, in which case judicious support of the Opposition might be good business. Burns's nature, however, was too impulsive and straightforward for such considerations. After the Dumfries election – for his part in which he neither expected nor received gratitude from the Tories – he became more ardent than ever for Fox and the French Revolution. He bought the works of Burke, Delolme, and Tom Paine; subscribed to that notorious reform journal, the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*; rejoiced in a little group of

talkers of which the leading spirit was a Dr. Maxwell, who in the uniform of the *Garde Républicaine* had witnessed the execution of Louis XVI, and thought that monarch better dead ; in fact Burns entered on a reckless course of indiscretion, parading his opposition to the war in every way and in especial losing no opportunity of proposing disloyal toasts. And among other things Dumfries was a centre of the military ! There could be only one result. Towards the end of 1792 the authorities ordered an official inquiry into his conduct.

The news came upon Burns like a thunderclap. Strange to say, he had never dreamed of such a thing, and it unnerved him. The birth of a delicate girl baby the month before, the facts that the war gravely affected his perquisites in the Revenue service and that he had backed a bill for an improvident man and lent money to an unfortunate one – so that he was himself behind with his rent – helped to precipitate him into panic. He hastened to make grovelling apologies. These were accepted, and he was let off with a severe reprimand.

The incident was the last and fatal turning-point in his life. In the past he had been guilty of many follies in the world's eye, but he had always been ready to pay the price and preserve his soul's integrity. He could hold up his head

and meet society's frown with a haughty stare. But now, to his despair, his head was bowed under the accumulated burdens of life. Burns's last years were a tragedy, not of a degenerated nature but of a great spirit and a passionate body broken. The change that set in was noticed, and the rumours of it that reached Edinburgh were interpreted with the usual charity. Be-wigged gentlemen over their claret shook their heads and said how sad it was that poor Burns should be drinking so much. Most deplorable after all they had done for him, they said, and filled another bumper.

It was not true. Sorely wounded as it was, Burns's self-respect never deserted him. And there was always the salvation of song. In the autumn of 1792, when four volumes of the *Museum* had appeared, George Thomson, a Government clerk in Edinburgh had an idea for a rival work on somewhat different and would-be vastly superior lines. It was to be primarily a collection of Scottish melodies; and as Mr. Thomson regarded the vernacular as ungenteel, a feature was to be made of alternative "English" words. Money was to be spent on it. To ensure that the collection should be "select" the fashionable hack Pleyel was engaged as musical editor. Burns was invited to contribute twenty to twenty-five items on his own terms. He agreed, making

the usual stipulation that he would take no money, and the further one that his directions as to tunes were to be strictly followed. Thomson gave both undertakings. But later he pressed five pounds upon Burns in return for sixty or so contributions, and always he disregarded, and allowed Pleyel to disregard, Burns's guidance. As a result *A Select Collection of Scotish Airs* stands as a monument of fine printing and binding and execrable taste. Its chief merits are that it contains " Scots Wha Hae " and " Auld Lang Syne," and that it elicited in correspondence the most diffuse and delicate comments from its gifted contributor.

The year 1793, in spite of a summer when Burns was well " in song,"[1] began, continued, and ended in misfortune. Its early days saw his humilation before the Excise Board, and in April he had an attack of rheumatic fever that sensibly aged him. This illness, combined with the necessity he was now under of keeping a strict guard upon his Jacobin tongue in public, frayed his nerves and made him increasingly miserable. Even Mrs. Walter Riddell seems at times to have found him a difficult friend.

There had not been a breath of scandal in the intimacy that had grown up between the poet and this young, handsome, and sprightly matron,

[1] His ease and eagerness suggested that he might write words for Thomson to Irish airs, collected by himself.

but it evidently meant much to them both, and her home, four miles from Dumfries, was a place he often sought. Though only nineteen, Maria had already seen a good deal of the world, for her father was Governor of the Leeward Islands and she had moved in the best London society. In culture and cleverness it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Maria was as far above Clarinda as Clarinda was above Jean Armour. She had a soldier husband of no great worth. Burns was open in his admiration of her, and she made no secret of her regard for him. She had never come across his like. He would not have been himself if their friendship had not been spiced with flirtation and sugared with tenderness ; but circumstances, and perhaps temperaments, had kept these elements within a comfortable moderation.

The passing of the year, however, brought disaster. At a New Year party at Friar's Carse[1] Burns was encouraged by his host to get very drunk, and in his cups he was guilty of some misbehaviour of which nothing definite is known except that it was a gross effront upon his hostess. Penitence and apologies were of no avail. Burns's offence was deemed one that could not be purged,

[1] This is the view now taken by the best authorities and must be accepted until rebutting evidence is brought forward. Formerly it was supposed that the scene of the incident was Maria Riddell's house, Woodley Park, and that she was the injured lady.

and thenceforth the doors of the country-houses, even of Woodley Park, were closed against him. That Maria should join in the ostracism enraged him beyond measure, provoking him to a shrill and unworthy lampoon on her. Their estrangement happily was not permanent.[1] While it lasted Burns got such consolation as he could – so his friend John Syme hints – from sometimes exhibiting his social gifts in company with fellows of the baser sort and in taverns less austere than the Globe. And he solaced his tenderer feelings in the society of "Chloris" *alias* Jean Lorimer, a farmer's daughter. She was pretty, with flaxen hair, and, like Clarinda, had had an unlucky matrimonial adventure. That is about all that can be said of the "lassie wi' the lint-white locks." Her end was dismal, and she was the least interesting of the poet's loves.

A different sort of relief to Burns's distressed spirit was given by the turn in international affairs that took place in the summer of 1794. The French launched against Great Britain a new offensive of unprecedented bitterness, which even contemplated an invasion. Under the threat Volunteer corps were raised throughout the kingdom, and among the first to enrol in the

[1] Unfortunately Robert Riddell of Friar's Carse died before Burns could be reconciled to him, which effected lasting pain and deprivation.

Dumfries corps was Burns. Though he was still with the French in the fight for human freedom he saw nothing here to justify an attack on British shores. As well as being a hard-working recruit, he played the laureate's part by writing patriotic verses which aroused great enthusiasm. The cloud that hung over him seemed to be passing. In May he refused a lucrative offer from the *Morning Chronicle* that would have taken him to London.[1] In June he rode out with Syme on a six-day jaunt about Galloway, and was made to feel at home by people high in the land. In November Maria's friendship was restored to him. Before the year was out he was serving, if only temporarily, as Acting Supervisor in the Excise. His spirits rose.

But since his attack of rheumatic fever his bodily strength had waned, and the daily round became increasingly burdensome. During the summer of 1795 he was attentive to his Volunteer and other duties, and he was singing strongly for Thomson and the rest. But the illness and death of his youngest daughter, who was a great pet with him, dealt him a blow he could not well withstand, and in November a second rheumatic fever brought him lower than he had yet been. He survived, but his convalescence was slow, and it would now appear that the membranes of his

[1] The Millers were instrumental in procuring this offer.

heart were severely affected. At all times satisfied with the plainest of food – bread and cheese and porridge – he could muster no appetite at all. One who had known him in his Mauchline days was appalled when she saw him again in Dumfries in the spring of 1796 – "a tall, gaunt, rather slovenly-looking person of sickly aspect." By June his condition was alarming ; but the only treatment his doctors could suggest was that he should go for some weeks to the Brow Well – a miserable little place on the Solway that in virtue of a chalybeate spring was dignified by the name of "spa" – and there take a "cure" that included, besides the waters, daily sea-bathing, horse exercise and port wine.

To the rigours of this regimen, which he less hopefully than punctiliously observed, were added some financial worries that were not in fact serious but to one in his reduced state assumed terrifying proportions. Owing to the pinch of the war his salary had recently been barely sufficient for his needs. Now that he was on sick-leave he knew that he was subject to the usual reduction of salary, or rather deduction of increment, which in his case would amount to £15 per annum. In fact, by the kindness of two individuals in the service, this loss was to be made good to him. But he was not told of it, and, after four days of solitary palpitations at Brow, he wrote frantically to

an Edinburgh friend pleading for his intercession with the Excise Commissioners.

In these circumstances a lawyer's letter dunning him for £7 4*s*., the price of his Volunteer's uniform, drove him into a fit of hysteria. He wrote two frantic letters – one to Thomson begging for an advance of £5 on account of future contributions to *Scotish Airs*, and another to James Burness, his lawyer cousin at Montrose, requesting a loan of £10. It was in the same condition that he wrote to ask Mrs. Dunlop, not for money but for a kind word, and failing that to bid her what he knew to be a last farewell. Eighteen months had passed since she had ceased to answer his letters. A Tory and a Royalist, she had been offended by her former protégé's political views (which were duly repeated to her), and the offence had been augmented by frivolous reports and by his occasional neglect of that advice, literary, and moral, which she showered unremittingly upon him. But pompous and tiresome as she was, Mrs. Dunlop had done him many kindnesses ; he had given her his affection ; and her persistent silence was like salt in his wounds.

Before he left Brow Maria Riddell, who had been ill too and was recuperating not far away, sent her carriage for him, and the two friends met. She was struck alike by the " air of great kindness," with which he searched her face for traces

of illness, his "spirit of pleasantry," the fact that his mind had seldom seemed "greater or more collected," and "the stamp of death" that was "imprinted on his features." He knew that he was dying, but he spoke with unaffected vivacity of matters attendant upon his death.

On July 18th he climbed from a borrowed gig at Dumfries, bowed and scarcely able to stand. His last little love, Jessy Lewars, who was the sister of a gauger, helped him home, and, with poor Jean, did what she could to nurse him. Jessy was eighteen and played the piano, and it was to her that Burns addressed his latest song of genius, "O Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast." Three days later, on July 21st, 1796, he died. He never knew that the succours he had so desperately appealed for had been promptly forthcoming, or that arrangements were already well advanced for his early transfer to a lucrative and leisured post in the Excise Office in Edinburgh. A "kind letter" from Mrs. Dunlop, however – "the last thing he was capable of perusing or understanding" – gave him "great ease and satisfaction." On July 25th he was buried at Dumfries with full military and Masonic honours. At the same time as his body was lowered into the grave Jean gave birth to yet another boy.

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The early Lives of Burns – Heron, Currie, Lockhart, and Allan Cunningham – were rendered obsolete by Robert Chambers's *Life and Works* (1851–52), and are now of interest only as sources.