CHAPTER LXXII

BURNS – THE PLOUGHMAN POET

SHOULD auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to min'?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And days o' lang syne ?

For auld Lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

We twa hae run about the braes,
And pu'd the gowans fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary foot.
Sin auld Lang syne.

For auld lang syne, etc.

We twa hae paidl't i the burn,
Frae mornin' sun till dine:[1]
But seas between us braid hae roar'd,
Sin auld lang syne.

For auld Lang syne, etc.

And here's a hand, my trusty fiere,[2]
And gie's a hand o' thine;
And we'll tak a right guid-willie waught[3]
For auld lang syne.

For auld lang syne, etc.

And surely ye'll be your pint-stowp,[4]
And surely I'll be mine;
And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld Lang syne,

For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

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1 Dinner.
2 Companion.
3 Drink.
4 Measure.

No song, perhaps, is so familiar to English-speaking people as that with which this chapter begins. In the back woods of Canada, in far Australia, on the wide South African veldt, wherever English-speaking people meet and gather, they join hands to sing that song. To the merriest gathering it comes as a fitting close. It is the hymn of home, of treasured friendships, and of old memories, just as 'God save the King' is the hymn of loyalty, and yet it is written in Scots, which English tongues can hardly pronounce, and many words of which to English ears hardly carry a meaning. But the plaintive melody and the pathetic force of the rhythm grip the heart. There is no need to understand every word of this 'glad kind greeting'[5] any more than there is need to understand what some great musician means by every note which his violin sings forth.

The writer of that song was, like Caedmon long ago, a son of the soil, he, too, was a 'heaven-taught ploughman.'[6]

While Goldsmith lay a-dying in London, in the breezy Scottish Lowlands a big rough lad of fifteen called Robert Burns was following his father's plough by day, poring over Shakespeare, the *Spectator,* and Pope's *Homer,* of nights, not knowing that in years to come he was to be remembered as our greatest song writer. Robert was the son of a small farmer. The Burns had been farmer folk for generations, but William Burns had fallen on evil days. From his northern home he drifted to Ayrshire, and settled down in the village of Alloway as a gardener. Here with his own hands he built himself a mud cottage. It consisted only of a 'room' and a kitchen, whitewashed within and without. In the kitchen there was a fireplace, a bed, and a small cupboard, and little else beyond the table and chairs.

And in this poor cottage, in the wild January weather of 1759, wee Robert was born. Scarcely a week later, one windy night, a gable of his frail home was blown in. So fierce was the gale that it seemed as if the whole wall might fall, so, through the darkness, and the storm, the baby and his mother were carried to a neighbour's house. There they remained for a week until their own cottage was again made fit to live in. It was a rough entry into the world for the wee lad.

For some time William Burns went on working as a gardener, then when Robert was about seven he took a small farm called Mount Oliphant, and removed there with his wife and family.

He had a hard struggle to make his farm pay, to feed and clothe little Robert and his brothers and sisters, who were growing up fast about him. But, poor though he was, William Burns made up his mind that his children should be well taught. At six Robert went daily to school, and when the master was sent away somewhere else, and the village of Alloway was left without any teacher, William Burns and four neighbours joined together to pay for one. But as they could not pay enough to give him a house in which to live, he used to stay with each family in turn for a few weeks at a time.

Robert in those days was a grave-faced, serious, small boy, and he and his brother Gilbert were the cleverest scholars in the little school. Chief among their school books was the Bible and a collection of English prose and verse. It was from the last that Burns first came to know Addison's works, for in this book he found the 'Vision of Mirza ' and other *Spectator* tales, and loved them.

Robert had a splendid memory. In school hours he stored his mind with the grand grave tales of the Bible, and with the stately English of Addison; out of school hours he listened to the tales and songs of an old woman who sang to him, or told him stories of fairies and brownies, of witches and warlocks, of giants, enchanted towns, dragons, and what not. The first books he read out of school were *a Life of Hannibal,* the great Carthagenian general, and a *Life of Wallace,*

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5 Carlyle.

6 Henry Mackenzie.

the great Scottish hero; this last being lent him by the blacksmith. These books excited little Robert so much that if ever a recruiting sergeant came to his village, he would strut up and down in raptures after the drum and bagpipe, and long to be tall enough to be a soldier. The story of Wallace, too, awoke in his heart a love of Scotland and all things Scottish, which remained with him his whole life through. At times he would steal away by himself to read the brave, sad story, and weep over the hard fate of his hero. And as he was in the Wallace country he wandered near and far exploring every spot where his hero might have been.

After a year or two the second schoolmaster went away as the other had done. Then all the schooling the Burns children had was from their father in the long winter evenings after the farm work for the day was over.

And so the years went on, the family at Mount Oliphant living a hard and sparing life. For years they never knew what it was to have meat for dinner, yet when Robert was thirteen his father managed to send him and Gilbert week about to a school two or three miles away.

He could not send them both together, for he could neither afford to pay two fees, nor could he spare both boys at once, as already the children helped with the farm work.

At fifteen Robert was his father's chief labourer. He was a very good ploughman, and no one in all the countryside could wield the scythe or the threshing – flail with so much skill and vigour. He worked hard, yet he found time to read, borrowing books from whoever would lend them. Thus, before he was fifteen, he had read Shakespeare, and Pope, and the *Spectator,* besides a good many other books which would seem to most boys of to-day very dull indeed. But the book he liked best was a collection of songs. He carried it about with him. 'I pored over them,' he says, ' driving my cart, or walking to labour, song by song, verse by verse.'

Thus the years passed, as Burns himself says, in the 'cheerless gloom of a hermit, with the unceasing toil of a galley-slave.' Then when Robert was about nineteen his father made another move to the farm of Lochlea, about ten miles off. It was a larger and better farm, and for three or four years the family lived in comfort. In one of Burns's own poems, *The Cotter's Saturday Night,* we get some idea of the simple home life these kindly God-fearing peasants led –

'November chill blaws loud wi' angry sugh;[7]
    The short'ning winter-day is near a close;
The miry beasts retreating frae the pleugh;
    The black'ning trains o' craws to their repose;
    The toil-worn Cotter frae his labour goes,
This night his weekly moil is at an end,
    Collects his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes,
Hoping the morn in ease and rest to spend,
    And weary, o'er the moor, his course does hameward bend.

' At length his lonely cot appears in view,
    Beneath the shelter of an aged tree;
Th' expectant wee-things, toddlin, stacher[8] through

7 Whistling sound.
8 Stagger.

To meet their dad, wi' flichterin[9] noise and glee.
His wee bit ingle, blinkin bonnily,
His clean hearth-stane, his thriftie wifie's smile,
The lisping infant prattling on his knee,
Does a' his weary carking cares beguile,
An' makes him quite forget his labour and his toil.

Belyve,[10] the elder bairns come drapping in,
At service out, amang the farmers roun';
Some ca' the pleugh, some herd, some tentie[11] rin
A cannie[12] errand to a neebor town:
Their eldest hope, their Jenny, woman grown,
In youthfu' bloom, love sparkling in her e'e,
Comes hame, perhaps, to show a braw new gown,
Or deposite her sair-won penny-fee,[13]
To help her parents dear, if they in hardship be.

'With joy unfeign'd, brothers and sisters meet,
An' each for other's weelfare kindly spiers:[14]
The social hours, swift-wing'd, unnotic'd, fleet;
Each tells the uncos[15] that he sees or hears;
The parents, partial, eye their hopeful years;
Anticipation forward points the view.
The mother, wi' her needle and her sheers,
Gars auld claw look amaist as weel's the new:[16]
The father mixes a' wi' admonition due.

'The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face,
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;
The sire turns o'er, wi' patriarchal grace,
The big ha'-Bible, ance his father's pride
His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,
His lyart haffets[17] wearing thin an' bare;
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,
He wales[18] a portion with judicious care;
And "Let us worship God!" he says, with solemn air.

Then homeward all take off their sev'ral way;
The youngling cottagers retire to rest
The parent-pair their secret homage pay,
And proffer up to Heaven the warm request,
That He who stills the raven's clam'rous nest,
And decks the lily fair in flow'ry pride,

9 To run with outspread arms.
10 In a little.
11 Carefully.
12 Not difficult.
13 Wages paid in money.
14 Asks after.
15 Strange things.
16 Makes old clothes look almost as good as new.
17 The grey hair on his temples.
18 Chooses

Would, in the way His wisdom sees the best,
For them and for their little ones provide;
But, chiefly, in their hearts with grace divine preside.'

As Robert grew to be a man the changes in his sombre life were few. But once he spent a summer on the coast learning how to measure and survey land. In this he made good progress. 'But,' he says, 'I made a greater progress in the knowledge of mankind.' For it was a smuggling district. Robert came to know the men who carried on the unlawful trade, and so was present at many a wild and riotous scene, and saw men in new lights. He had already begun to write poetry, now he began to write letters too. He did not write with the idea alone of giving his friends news of him. He wrote to improve his power of language. He came across a book of letters of the wits of Queen Anne's reign, and these he pored over, eager to make his own style as good.

When Robert was twenty-two he again left home. This time he went to the little seaport town of Irvine to learn flax dressing. For on the farm the father and brothers had begun to grow flax, and it was thought well that one of them should know how to prepare it for spinning.

Here Robert got into evil company and trouble. He sinned and repented and sinned again. We find him writing to his father, 'As for this world, I despair of ever making a figure in it. I am not formed for the bustle of the busy, nor the flutter of the gay. I shall never again be capable of entering into such scenes.' Burns knew himself to be a man of faults. The knowledge of his own weakness, perhaps, made him kindly to others. In one of his poems he wrote –

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Tho' they may gang a kennin wrang,[19]
To step aside is human
One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving *why* they do it;
And just as lamely can ye mark
How far perhaps they rue it.

'Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring, its various bias
Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.'

Bad fortune, too, followed Burns. The shop in which he was engaged was set on fire, and he was left 'like a true poet, not worth a sixpence.'

So leaving the troubles and temptations of Irvine behind, he carried home a smirched name to his father's house.

Here, too, troubles were gathering. Bad harvests were followed by money difficulties, and, weighed down with all his cares, William Burns died. The brothers had already taken another farm named Mossgiel. Soon after the father's death the whole family went to live there.

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19 A very little wrong.

Robert meant to settle down and be a regular farmer. 'Come, go to, I will be wise,' he said. He read farming books and bought a little diary in which he meant to write down farming notes. But the farming notes often turned out to be scraps of poetry.

The next four years of Burns's life were eventful years, for though he worked hard as he guided the plough or swung the scythe, he wove songs in his head. And as he followed his trade year in year out, from summer to winter, from winter to summer, he learned all the secrets of the earth and sky, of the hedgerow and the field.

How everything that was beautiful and tender and helpless in nature appealed to him we know from his poems. There is the field mouse – the 'wee sleekit,[20] cow'rin', tim'rous beastie,' whose nest he turned up and destroyed in his November ploughing. 'Poor little mouse, I would not hurt you,' he says –

'Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin;
Its silly wa's the win's are strewin'!'

And thou poor mousie art turned out into the cold, bleak, winter weather!–

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men,
Gang aft agley,[21]
An' lea'e us nought but grief and pain
For promis'd joy.'

It goes to his heart to destroy the early daisies with the plough –

'Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flow'r,
Thou 'a met me in an evil hour;
For I maun crush amang the stoure
Thy slender stem,
To spare thee now is past my powr,
Thou bonnie gem.

'Alas! it's no thy neebor sweet,
The bonnie lark, companion meet,
Bending thee 'mang the dewy week
Wi' spreckl'd breast,
When upward springing, blythe, to greet
The purpling east.

'Cauld blew the bitter-biting North
Upon thy early, humble birth;
Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth
Amid the storm,
Scarce rear 'd above the parent earth
Thy tender form.

20 Smooth.
21 Go often wrong.

'The flaunting flow'rs our gardens yield,
High shelt'ring woods and wa's mean shield;
But thou, beneath the random bield[22]
O' clod or stane,
Adorns the histie stibble-field,[23]
Unseen, alane.

'There, in thy scanty mantle clad,
Thy snawie bosom sunward spread,
Thou lifts thy unassuming head
In humble guise;
But now the share uptears thy bed,
And low thou lies!'

Burns wrote love songs too, for he was constantly in love – often to his discredit, and at length he married Jean Armour, Scots fashion, by writing a paper saying that they were man and wife and giving it to her. This was enough in those days to make a marriage. But Burns had no money; the brothers' farm had not prospered, and Jean's father, a stern old Scotsman, would have nothing to say to Robert, who was in his opinion a bad man, and a wild, unstable, penniless rhymster. He made his daughter burn her 'lines,' thus in his idea putting an end to the marriage.

Robert at this was both hurt and angry, and made up his mind to leave Scotland for ever and never see his wife and children more. He got a post as overseer on an estate in Jamaica, but money to pay for his passage he had none. In order to get money some friends proposed that he should publish his poems. This he did, and the book was such a success that instead of going to Jamaica as an unknown exile Burns went to Edinburgh to be entertained, feted, and flattered by the greatest men of the day.

All the fine ladies and gentlemen were eager to see the ploughman poet. The fuss they made over him was enough to turn the head of a lesser man. But in spite of all the flattery, Burns, though pleased and glad, remained as simple as before. He moved among the grand people in their silks and velvets clad in homespun clothes 'like a farmer dressed in his best to dine with the laird' as easily as he had moved among his humble friends. He held himself with that proud independence which later made him write –

Is there for honest poverty
That hangs his head, and a' that?
The coward slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, and a' that,
Our toils obscure, and a' that,
The rank is but the guinea stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that.
What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hodden grey, and a' that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,
A man's a man for a' that
For a' that and a' that,

22 Shelter.
23 Bare stubble field.

Their tinsel show, and a’ that;
The honest man, though e’er sae poor,
Is king o’ men for a’ that.’

After spending a brilliant winter in Edinburgh, Burns set off on several tours through his native land, visiting many of the places famous in Scottish history. But, as the months went on, he began to be restless in his seeming idleness. The smiles of the great world would not keep hunger from the door; he feared that his fame might be only a nine days’ wonder, so he decided to return to his farming. He took a farm a few miles from Dumfries, and although since he had been parted from his Jean he had forgotten her time and again and made love to many another, he and she were now married, this time in good truth. From now onward it was that Burns wrote some of his most beautiful songs, and it is for his songs that we remember him. Some of them are his own entirely, and some are founded upon old songs that had been handed on for generations by the people from father to son, but had never been written down until Burns heard them and saved them from being forgotten. But in every case he left the song a far more beautiful thing than he found it. None of them perhaps is more beautiful than that he now wrote to his Jean –

’Of a’ the airts[24] the wind can blaw,
I dearly like the west,
For there the bonnie lassie lives,
The lassie I lo’e best:
The wild-woods grow and rivers row,[25]
And mony a hill between;
But day and night my fancy’s flight
Is ever wi’ my Jean.

I see her in the dewy flowers,
I see her sweet and fair:
I hear her in the tunefu’ birds,
I hear her charm the air;
There’s not a bonnie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw,[26] or green,
There’s not a bonnie bird that sings
But minds me o’ my Jean.’

But farming and song-making did not seem to go together, and on his new farm Burns succeeded little better than on any that he had tried before. He thought to add to his livelihood by turning an excise man, that is, an officer whose work is to put down smuggling, to collect the duty on whisky, and to see that none upon which duty has not been paid is sold. One of his fine Edinburgh friends got an appointment for him, and he began his duties, and it would seem fulfilled them well. But this mode of life was for Burns a failure. In discharge of his duties he had to ride hundreds of miles in all kinds of weathers. He became worn out by the fatigue of it, and it brought him into the temptation of drinking too much. Things went with him from bad to worse, and at length he died at the age of thirty-six, worn out by toil and sin and suffering.

24 Directions.
25 Roll.
26 Wood.

In many ways his was a misspent life 'at once unfinished and a ruin.'[27] His was the poet's soul bound in the body of clay. He was an unhappy man, and we cannot but pity him, and yet remember him with gratitude for the beautiful songs he gave us. In his own words we may

> 'Is there a man, whose judgment clear,
> Can others teach the course to steer,
> Yet runs, himself, life's mad career,
> Wild as the wave?
> Here pause – and, through the starting tear,
> Survey this grave.'

Burns was a true son of the soil. There is no art in his songs but only nature. Apart from his melody what strikes us most is his truth; he sang of what he saw, of what he felt and knew. He knew the Scottish peasant through and through. Grave and humorous, simple and cunning, honest and hypocritical, proud and independent–every phase of him is to be found in Burns's poems. He knew love too; and in every phase – happy and unhappy, worthy and unworthy he sings of it. But it is of love in truth that he sings. Here we have no more the make-believe of the Elizabethan age, no longer the stilted measure of the Georgian. The day of the heroic couplet is done; with Burns we come back to nature.

BOOK TO READ
Selected Works of Robert Burns, edited by R. Sutherland, price 5s. (Alexander Gardner)

Note. – This is probably the best selection for juvenile readers.

27 Carlyle.

'WEE, MODEST, CRIMSON-TIPPED FLOW'R,
THOU'S MET ME IN AN EVIL HOUR;
FOR I MAUN CRUSH AMANG THE STOUR
THY SLENDER STEM:
TO SPARE THEE NOW IS PAST MY POW'R,
THOU BONNIE GEM.'