

Notches on The Stick

"Bonnie Jean; A Collection of Papers and Poems relating to the Wife of Robert Burns," [The Raeburn Book Co., New York] is perhaps the most interesting of the entire series of books on the principal heroine of the above mentioned poet, edited by Dr. John D. Ross of Brooklyn, N. Y., and published in this country and in Scotland. This is the case because of the amount of literature produced on the subject, because the woman described is well and definitely known, and because she sustained a real and intimate relation to one of the best known of modern poets. Besides such articles written expressly for the work, as the "Preface," by Pater Ross, L. L. P., "By Way of Epilogue," by Hon. Charles H. Collins, and "The Poet and His Wife," by Rev. A. J. Lockhart; we meet with familiar excerpts from such writers as Dr. Robert Chambers, Robert Burns Begg, Allan Cunningham, John Gibson Lockhart, and Mrs. Jameson. Her tribute to "Jean" we had read before, in her "Loves of the Poets," and nothing worthier has here been reproduced.

Other prose articles are by J. M. Murdoch, James Gillan, Archibald Munro, Alan Scott, Thomas C. Latta, George Dobie, Robert Ford, William Lowestoft, and George Gebbie, while several are anonymous. There are poems by Angus Ross, Dr. Benjamin F. Leggett, Wallace Bruce, Thomas C. Latta, Hunter MacCulloch and others. The book includes a cluster of well known songs of Burns, which the editor has entitled, "The Poet's Immortal Wreath for Bonnie Jean." The book contains a portrait of Mrs. Burns, presenting a matronly face, bright and kindly attractive without being beautiful. The book, though the proof-reader might have done his work more perfectly is on the whole a very readable and presentable one, and should find a place in the library of many a lover of our favourite poet who may be desirous of a better knowledge of the woman he has lifted to fame. We subjoin to the above notice a few paragraphs of biography.

"As we ask again for the singing of some old song, which has gathered to its perfect heart the loves and joys and sorrows of a hundred generations; or, as we listen again to the telling of some sweet story that makes its unchanging appeal to our affections, though rehearsed a thousand times, while the familiar recital 'wears out ever,'—so we are never tired of listening to the romantic, yet deeply human, history of Robert Burns, who, in the heart's matter, is 'all mankind's epitome.' Currie may tell it, and we are no less ready to listen to Cunningham; Lockhart's recital but whets our appetite for Carlyle; we rise up from Professor Nichol, or Robert Chambers, or Principal Sharpe, to sit down expectant and eager when the next one is ready to tell the story in his own way. The spirits of envy and disapprobation seem half disarmed; and we grudge our praise no more than we do our smiles when some lovely child has come within the sphere of our vision.

Burns was more than a poet potentially, but one by actual and noble accomplishment before he had met the woman of whom he could say, 'my Jean'—the companion of his few bitter years—the drop of wine and honey in his gall; but Scotland and the world did not know it,—only the lit le world of his intimates at Mossiel, at Mauchline and Tarbolton. The buds of song had been folded in the babe at Alloway, but they were now buds no longer. The wild rose hedges on Doon's green banks are not more full of birds and blossoms in their time than was his heart with broad-blown melodies; and

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some of the sweetest the world will not let die had already been scrawled by that heavy hand, furtively and hastily, in that rough garret at Lochlea, and hidden in the deal desk. He was not like some of us, who have to sit on a green bank by a running stream dreaming we are poets,—never ceasing to wish we could be, and trying again and again to persuade ourselves that we are; while the world will not heed us, and, for the next part, we doubt ourselves. He rose up, half in a maze of wonder, shook his locks and, without speculation, put forth power. The Harp of Scotland was not hung up out of his reach; and when he took it down he did not pick a random chord with haphazard fingers, but swept them all like the master he was. The listeners were thrilled as he plucked a living soul from every wire. With whatever grace Raphael painted and Mozart composed, with the like grace Burns gave us his memorable poetry. Long ago he had tasted love, and knew its sweetness and its sharpness, its power to "wreck his peace," and to renew its enchantment, as charmer after charmer passed before him. Love and music consented together with him, and the genius of his life appeared in company with "Lovely Nell," and setting suns, and autumnal moonlight in the barley-field.

Jean Armour rose, a star above the cloudy days of Mossiel; and, though she disappeared again for a season, she emerged low on the horizon of home, where she lingered; and only by the wrack of death that enveloped him was he ever bereaved of her presence. Let us recur to the pleasant story of their first meeting. A Scottish merry making, as the poet tells us, was often the scene where that soft flame, which may burn well or ill, has its beginning. It was at such a one when Mauchline fair was held, that the day was cast for him. On the race day the house of entertainment became an open court of pleasure, and he who would freely came with his favorite lass, without cost or penalty, unless it be the cost of his heart, and a penny contribution to the fiddler. Burns came that day with his companion, who hung not upon his arm but ran at his heels. When I read Joanna Baillie's song,—

"Saw ye Jeanie come?" said she
Saw ye Jeanie come?
Wi' his blue bonnet on his head
And his doggie rinnin'—

I think of lonesome Robin, with his dumb and overlord companion. But Jean was there, with eyes already bent upon him, and ears quickened at his words. Though old father Armour will listen unmoved to the songs petition—

"Fee him, father, fee him."

yet the heart of a woman goeth whither it will, and, while her lips protest, her looks surrenders. Robert's dog at his heels through the round of every dance, became the occasion of some mirthful glances and some poking of fun at the poet, to whose proud spirit even such light banter was never very agreeable. But he, who was rarely behindhand with his rejoinder, expressed a wish that he could find in some lassie his dog's peer in affectionate fidelity,—a wish Jean overheard, and which in his heart, perhaps at a later time, she determined to gratify.

If there is a romantic attractiveness in the story of the poet's meeting with Highland Mary on that blistful day in Montgomerie's woods,—an attractiveness like that of the old ballad, made we know not by whom.

"When Shaws beens sheene, and shrad's full layre,
And leaves both large and longe;—"
there is also a beguiling touch of homely poetry, befitting Jean Armour's character, in his next meeting with her, only a day or two after the evening at the inn at Mauchline, where—

"To the trembling string
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha'."

and where, though we are told she did not join with him, we would not dare to pronounce her averse to it. It is a scene worthy the muse of Ramsay. The summer air breathed on her sweet cheek as she stood on the green where her linen lay bleaching, and the summer sunshine fell on her fair brow and fair locks, when along came Robin from the riverside, gun in hand,—to find game no such weapon could bring down. The hare and the mouse, and the water-fowl on Loch Turit, having nothing to fear, the lassies that may be slain by arrows from his eyes should beware accordingly. If Robert is in dowie mood he suddenly gladdens at the sight of the sonsie brude, and thanks his dog for a confab and a chance to stand at gaze. Jean is not inclined to allow dirty tracks on her clean linen, and is petulant as any nice housekeeper might be at the prospect of such defilement. So doggie gets a stone hurled at his head, and his owner hears a peremptory summons to call him off. But when the poet draws near, and she comes under the spell of that tongue so like a "silver lute," her look and tone soften, and she slyly asks him if yet he has found a lass to love him. Then, I can think, these words

had pathos: "Lassie, if ye thocht ocht o' me ye wadna hurt my dog." Jean's unspoken comment,—"I wadna think much o' you, at any rate,"—must have belied her heart. It was the hasty defiance from the commander of a poorly garrisoned fortress on the evening before a surrender.

Now soon can that hopeful and gratified lover break into song over the daughter of the master mason of Mauchline,—

"A dancin', sweet, young handsome queen
Of guileless heart."

The fire of love and friendship enkindled, they burn brightly together in his Epistle to Davie Sillar:

"Ye hae your Meg, your dearest part,
And I my darling Jean!"

It warms me, it charms me,
To mention but her name;
It heats me, it beats me,
And sets me a' on flame.

O, all ye powers that rule above!
O Thou, whose very self art love!
Thou know'st my words sincere!
The life-blood streaming thro' my heart,
Or my more dear immortal part

Is not more fondly dear:
When heart-corroding care and grief
Deprive my soul of rest,
Her dear idea brings relief
And solace to my breast.

Thou Being, All-seeing,
O hear my fervent prayer!
Still take her, and make her
Thy most peculiar care!

"O hail ye tender feelings dear!
The smile of love, the friendly tear
The sympathetic glow;
Long since, this world's thorny ways
Had numbered out my weary days
Had it not been for you!

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

It lightens, it brightens,
The tenebrous scene,
To meet with, and greet with,
My Davie or my Jean."

For a season the course of true love runs smooth, though secretly; for how will Jean dare to acquaint her family with the true state of affairs! Meanwhile the poet celebrates his "Mauchline lady" as the "wale o' hearts" in her locality, for he declares:

Miss Miller is fine, Miss Merkland's divine,
Miss Smith she has wit, and Miss Betty is braw;
There's beauty and fortune to get wi' Miss Morton,
But Armour's the Jewel for me o' them a'."

But need had he to offer for her a prayer to whom he was soon to deal so great an injury. Alas, for Jean! who surrendered too easily and returned the poet's love with too complete abandon; better had she been frugal, where he was so lavish, to reserve her gifts. Too soon for both of them did "sweet affection prove the spring of woe." In brief time the lassie lets tears fall upon her pillow, and Robin has a secret in his breast he "daurna tell to ony"—nay, wif scarcely venture to whisper to his muse, so ready to condone our sins and compassionate our sorrows. But the day of revelation must come, and blushes burn the cheek of mother and sister over at Mossiel. He thinks of the woe that waits on Jean, of the dismy of her family, of the wrath of a proud father who doted on his favorite daughter, and of the scornful world's pointed finger. Poor bard!—with uneasy days and nights, hardly beset by the nemesis of his own seven-times-heated passions, and with loving pity for the trusting lassie,—he makes the best reparation he can. He is not base to desert her who is still dear to him, nor to cast of the babe whose coming must bring dishonor; but he is ready with a written testimonial that she is his wedded wife, though the marriage be "secret and irregular." Whether the blessing or banning of church and society be his, he is ready to claim her as his own, and shield her from scorn and malediction. Indeed, had he in like manner wronged no other

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woman, his relation with Jean might be more easily defended.

But a sad surprise awaits him. He had not expected complacency from the austere father to whom Jean was as the apple of his eye; but he hoped the storm might soon blow over. He was mistaken. The intelligence that came upon James Armour with such force as to cause him to swoon, stealed his heart to the spoiler of his house. The sturdy mason of Mauchline, who is not highly gifted with pity or magnanimity and who cannot make excuses for vagabondage, peremptorily excludes him. He will accept the shame he has entailed upon himself, if that must be, but he will by no means have Burns for his son-in-law. The canny, prudent man, who looks well to the honor of the family, is roused at last. There is a stormy scene in the house, and he is white with rage. In his fury he denounced "the rake-belly Burns,"—of whom he wanted nothing but the chance to lay hands on him. He demanded that his daughter relinquish him forever. Poor Jean! It was a sorrowful time for her. She was sent from home to be out of the way. As for the poet, scorn, contempt, and indignation made the sorrowing man their target. Why was such a villain permitted to cumber the earth! So was he pursued,—"skulking," as he declares, day after day, "from covert to covert, under the terrors of a jail," while

"Hungry ruin had him in the wind."

The righteousness of men in Scotland once sent them to "the munitions of the rocks," with the sword of Claverhouse behind them; but now Caledon's sweetest singer, who, like another hill hunted minstrel, had reason to cry,—"I am a sinful man O Lord!"—is driven in the tracks of the Cameronians, and seeks refuge in Grampian glens from the pursuing sheriff. Truly he has done ill; but is it to hunt him from the face of the earth that will teach him to do better? As for Armour, he can care for his own daughter. He bids her burn to ashes the precious paper that might show Burns to have any legal claim upon her. So, easy-hearted Jean, awed by authority submits, is withdrawn within the required privacy, while the poet has reason to suppose that gate so firmly barred he could come to her no more.

The bitterest ingredient in his cup was this temporary infidelity of Jean. That she could give him up was enough to provoke him to madness; and he confesses that for a season he dwelt on the boundary line that separates reason from insanity. He sings a sweet reproach in one of the saddest plaints of disappointed love ever uttered by poet:

"The plighted faith, the mutual flame,
The oft-attested powers above;
The promise'd Father's tender name;
These were the pledges of my love.

And must I think it! Is she gone,
My secret heart's exulting boast?
And does she heedless hear my groan?
And is she ever, ever lost?"

After this, (noting all Burns has to say and sing of Jean,) says Mrs. Jameson, in her "Loves of the Poets," "what becomes of the insinuation that Burns made an unhappy marriage,—that he was compelled to invest her with the control of his life, whom he seems at first to have selected only for a temporary inclination; and 'that to this circumstance most of his misconduct is to be attributed?' Yet this I believe, is a prevalent impression. Those whose hearts have glowed, and whose eyes have filled with delicious tears over the songs, of Burns, have reason to be grateful to Mr. Lockhart, and two a kindred spirit, Allen Cunningham for a generous feeling with which they have vindicated Burns and his Jean. Such aspirations are not only injurious to the dead and cruel to the living, (Mrs. Burns was then alive in 1844,) but they do incalculable mischief,—they are food for the flippant scoffer at all that makes the 'poetry of life.' They unsettle in gentler bosoms all faith in love, in truth in goodness,—(alas, such

disbelief comes soon enough!) (they revolt the heart, and 'take the rose from the fair forehead of an innocent love to set a blister there.'

Here, was it a ray of heavenly light, or a flame of earthly passion, that shot across the background of this accumulated shadow and disorder, in the romantic episode of Highland Mary? We cannot pause to trace the event, to delineate her features vaguely seen, or to reconcile what is perhaps the irreconcilable, so as, on the moral basis of society, to justify her or her lover. Enough there are those who feel like trusting to exonerate her, and much has been written of her innocence and beauty. It suffices to affirm that it was an event out of which poetry could be made; and, whatever she was in sober fact, we see her only through the misty gold of song; for, in the haunted region where the poets' fancy has placed her, consecrated by his yearning, adoring, affectionate regret, she is forever beautiful and fair, beyond earth and time and the touch of contamination.

But Jean is returned again, and somehow the poet is drifted round to her again. He hears her singing, and the old tides of love and longing surge back on his heart. They meet in secret and are reconciled. Of these meetings he sings:

"I'll aye ca' in by yon town,
And by yon garden green, again;
I'll aye ca' in by yon town,
And see my bonnie Jean, again.
There's nae sail ken, there's nae sail guess
What brings me back the gate again,
But she, my fairest, faithfu' lass!
And stowies we sail meet again."

She'll wander by the aiken tree,
When trystin-time draws near again;
And when her lovely form I see,
Oh, faith, she's doubly dear again!
I'll aye ca' in by yon town,
And by yon garden green again;
I'll aye ca' in by yon town,
And see my bonnie Jean, again."

They had their signs and signals arranged, and their hours and scenes for a stolen interview. No doubt Jean's escapades suggested the song, and she may have given the words in substance,—

"O whistle, and I'll come to my lad;
O whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad;
Tho' father and mither should a' go mad,
O whistle, and I'll come to you, my lad."

Leaving from an inn adjoining the Armour house,—the Whiteford Arms,—he could talk with Jean in her room. But at last their secret was out; the father and mother rose in wrath, the door was doubly barred, and once more the lovers were put asunder.

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