



OUR "POETS' CORNER."

HENRY KIRKE WHITE (1785).

"So virtue blooms, brought forth amid the storms

Of chill adversity; in some lone walk
Of life, she rears her head
Obscure and unobserved.

While every bleaching breeze that on her blows,

Chastens her spotless purity of breast,
And hardens her to bear
Serene the ills of life."

Had Henry Kirke White penned a portrait of himself, he could hardly have given us a truer one than the above lines. But his lay was sung to "An Early Primrose," of which delicate blossom it may be supposed he had but rare and occasional glimpses. His early days were not a "long leisure," passed amidst flower-sprinkled banks, or adown the "low vale" where the birds sing in the spring-time.

In fact, one can hardly imagine a more prosaic scene than that in which the poet first saw the light, in the month of March, 1785. His father kept a butcher's shop, situated in a close street in the town of Nottingham. It was an old-fashioned house near the marketplace, where the sounds of noise and busy traffic went on from morning to night. Henry's father was a prosaic, eminently practical man, a hard worker, not above his business, and whose chief aim was to make a good price of his meat and bring up his family respectably. But his mother was a refined gentlewoman, who had married beneath her; and as years rolled on she began to understand and sympathise with the tastes and ambitions of her son. None knew better than she did why the pale-faced boy grew so weary of the heavy basketful of joints with which he daily went the rounds, and supplied his father's customers. He had already begun to write tales and verses and themes on a small scale, and panted to attain a higher culture, to dive deeper into the stores of knowledge. When his father discovered he could not make a good butcher of his son, he apprenticed him to a stocking-weaver. Henry was then fourteen years of age, and the thought of spending seven years handling heavy machinery and folding up stockings drove him half-distracted. While his hands were busy, his restless brain, dissatisfied and unfed, pined in bitterness, and he entreated his mother to have him removed to more congenial work. At length he was placed in an attorney's office, giving two years of his services in lieu of paying a premium, and afterwards he became an articled clerk. During this time he gave himself no leisure, no recreation; every hour that could be snatched from office work and from sleep was occupied. He studied Greek, Latin, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, dived deeply into science, and wrote verses. One shudders to think of all the "midnight oil" the poor youth must have burnt in his insatiable endeavours to educate himself.

At this time the editor of a London magazine offered prizes for themes to be written by young people, and Kirke White, after he had only been a year in his office, won a silver

medal for a clever translation from Horace. The next year he again won a prize for a fictitious history of a journey between London and Scotland.

Not contented with these triumphs, nay, rather from having gained a glimpse of success, he wished for more, and he began to write articles for the *Monthly Mirror*, and thus brought himself under the notice of Mr. Hill, the owner of the magazine. He and another patron, Mr. Capel Lofft, persuaded him to publish his poems, which he had been adding to at intervals ever since he was thirteen years of age. Altogether they formed a small volume, which in the preface Kirke White stated were only the first productions of a youth of seventeen, published with the hope of enabling him to continue his studies, and to fit him for "an honourable station in the scale of society."

Ambitious, certainly! but then it was a laudable ambition, a praiseworthy desire, that might have been expected to enlist the approval of thinking men; that might even have won them to hold forth a helping hand to the aspiring youth. But no; down came the thunders of criticism on his book, stern, contemptuous, severe, and bitter, and the unfortunate boy writhed under the blow, every nerve quivering with keen pain. But out of evil arose good. The poet Southey happened to see the book of poems, also to read the criticisms; and perhaps knowing something of the sting caused by an unkind critique, he wrote to the boy kind, encouraging words, urging him to persevere. Some other friends also took the matter in hand, and in the end Kirke White gained his wish, and was admitted to St. John's College, Cambridge, as a sizar.

Already he had known pretty much of disappointment in his young life; but he had come forth better and braver, and could write of it in words like these:—

"Come, disappointment, come!

Not in thy terrors clad;
Come in thy meekest, saddest guise;
Thy chastening rod but terrifies
The restless and the bad.

But I recline
Beneath thy shrine,

And round my brow resigned thy peaceful
cypress twine.

Come, disappointment, come!
Thou art not stern to me;
Sad monitress! I own thy sway;
A votary sad in early day
I bend my knee to thee.

From sun to sun

My race is run,

I only bow and say, 'My God, Thy will
be done!'"

To defray his expenses in passing through college, his patron, the Rev. Mr. Simeon, arranged to supply £30 a year; his relatives were to make up the remainder. Kirke White was now fairly launched on the stream that might lead to fame, and he took a

practical view of his position. First, he shut up his poetry books, then went in for a university scholarship, and had the great honour of proving himself the best man for the year. Not contented with this distinction, he worked on, and the next term again held his place as first; also, he won a name for himself as one of the most clever theme writers in the college. During the Long Vacation he studied mathematics with a tutor allowed him from the college funds, and ere long had procured exhibitions that brought him nearly £70 a year. At once his noble feeling of independence asserted itself, and now he found there was a chance of winning his own way, he declined receiving any further pecuniary assistance from his friends. He was ambitious, as has been said; but his was no mere sordid aspiration—the desire of gaining wealth had never formed any part of his plans. But now comes a sad part of his history. Honours were crowding on him; everyone set him down to become Senior Wrangler at Cambridge, when it was, alas! all too plain the frail bodily casket that held so bright, so brave a mind, was fast crumbling away. He has given a slight sketch of his feelings at being called so soon from a career that was widening and brightening for him, in some lines written not long before he died.

"And must the harp of Judah sleep again?
Shall I no more reanimate the lay?"

Oh! Thou, who visitest the sons of men,
Thou who dost listen when the humble
pray,

One little space prolong my mournful day,
One little lapse suspend Thy last decree!

I am a youthful traveller in the way,
And this slight boon would consecrate to
Thee

Ere I with Death shake hands, and smile
that I am free."

But the end was not far off. He tried change of scene and air, rest and quiet; went to Lincolnshire and London; finally returned to college, made a desperate effort to resume his studies, and then gave way, feeling there was no more work for him on earth. His nerves were altogether unstrung. There came a period of restless days and sleepless nights; then delirium and stupor shrouded his mind until death. Southey, in his memoirs of the young poet, called his death a loss to English literature; others mourned for him as a loss to the Church, where he hoped by-and-by to preach the gospel of salvation; but he was at last perfectly resigned to leave all in the hands of the Lord he trusted. Formerly he had written some lines on the "Star of Bethlehem," and they shadowed forth his hopes.

"It was my guide, my light, my all,

It bade my dark forebodings cease;

And through the storm and danger's thrall
It led me to the port of peace.

Now safely moored, my perils o'er,
I'll sing first in night's diadem

For ever, and for evermore,

The Star—the Star of Bethlehem!"