

The Line of Robert Burns.

By J. MONRO.



FOITERING one day in the Burns Monument on the Calton Hill at Edinburgh, and gazing with a proud and loving interest on the faded tress of the "Lassie wi' the lint-white locks," the Bible of "Highland Mary," the manuscript songs, and other relics of the poet who is dearest to the hearts of all true Scotsmen, I chanced to hear that his great-grandson, bearing his name, was now living in obscurity at the village of Blackhall, a few miles distant. The news was a surprise to me, for, like most admirers of Burns, I was under the impression that he had no male descendants alive, at least in Scotland, and I took an early opportunity of verifying the report.

Blackhall lies "within a mile o' sweet Edinboro' town" on the Queensferry Road, over which the "Hawes Fly" of other days whirled the immortal "Antiquary" to the Hawes Inn, where "David Balfour" was kidnapped in the story of Mr. Stevenson. It is mainly a double row of stone houses, with the shops of small dealers, built along the turnpike. Here, at the head of a blind alley on the north side of the street—a secluded corner to which few of the many travellers on

the road ever cast a glance—I found a grey-stone cottage behind a gateway, bearing the legend: "City of Edinburgh Gunpowder Magazine." It was the residence of Mr. Burns, the man I had come to see.

The bell was answered by Mrs. Burns, who informed me that her husband was just getting up. "Ye ken he's not very strong," said she, with a kindly Scots accent, that sounded home-like to my ears. Promising to call back in half an hour, I passed the time in strolling towards the richly-wooded hill of Corstorphine, and meditating on the inscrutable turns of life which had brought a descendant of the national poet of Scot-

land to keep a gunpowder magazine, and me to visit him that day.

On returning to the house, Mrs. Burns showed me into a bright and comfortable kitchen-parlour, where I found the invalid resting on a stuffed settee betwixt the bow window and the fire, where a black kitten was basking on the hearth. I was greatly struck with his appearance as he rose to welcome me. A man about fifty years of age, or little more, he was still handsome, although his black beard had been touched with grey and his fine features wasted by sickness.

The Tennysonian cast of his head was noble, not to say kingly, and might have become a bard of the Ancient Druids. The pensive melancholy of his hazel eyes, deep sunken and dark under his bushy brows; the waxen pallor of his skin, and the masses of his sable hair streaked with grey, recalled the descriptions of Burns during his last illness, and I felt that something of the adverse destiny which had made the poet an exciseman had clung to his descendant.

He told me that he was indeed the great-grandson of Robert Burns in the male line, and I could well believe it. The fact, however, was known

to but a few admirers of his great-grandfather, amongst them Mr. Bruce Wallace, formerly American Consul at Edinburgh, and Mr. J. D. Ross, author of "Burnsiana," who had been out to see him. Hitherto he had kept it a secret, because he was afraid his privacy might be disturbed by visitors, and probably not one of the hundreds of tourists who passed through Blackhall day after day in the summer season, on their way to and from the Forth Bridge, was aware of his existence.

Portraits of his ancestors hung over the mantelpiece, flanked by an illustrated calendar and the Christmas picture of a London



ROBERT BURNS.
From a Painting by Nasmyth.

journal, a Little Red Riding Hood in a snow sled with a bunch of hollies. A view of the Kilmarnock Monument to the poet, and bronzed statuettes of Tam o' Shanter and Souter Johnnie, standing on the mantelshelf between two American clocks, completed the little gallery.

The founder of the family, Robert Burns I., was represented by Cooke's engraving of the Nasmyth portrait, which is considered the best likeness. A photograph of Robert Burns II., his eldest son, by Jean Armour, shows a marked resemblance to him if we allow for difference in age. Burns had great hopes of this boy, and shortly before he died spoke to Mrs. Riddell, of Glenriddell, with seeming pride and satisfaction of his growing genius and the approbation of his teachers. As a matter of fact, Burns was a good father to his children, and gave them the best schooling that his small means would permit. At his death sufficient money was raised to support Mrs. Burns and enable her to continue their education. Robert was then about ten years old, having been born on September 3rd, 1786. On leaving the Dumfries Grammar School, he spent two sessions at Edinburgh Academy, and one at Glasgow University. Appointed to a clerkship in the Stamp Office, London, he married Anne Sherwood, at the age of twenty-two, and retired in 1833 on a modest pension of £120 or £150 a year. Returning to Dumfries, he dwelt there until his death, on May 14th, 1857, and was buried in the Burns mausoleum beside his wife, whom he survived about twenty-two years.

Probably his career did not fulfil the anticipations of his father, whose weakness in matters of finance and lack of self-control he seems to have inherited, if we can trust the statement of Dr. Rogers; but he was a useful citizen, and his education was not entirely thrown away, for he added to his income by giving private lessons in classics and mathematics both in London and Dumfries.

His brothers, with a less expensive educa-

tion, did better in the world. William Nicol Burns, on leaving the Dumfries Grammar School, sailed as a midshipman to India, and entering the Madras Infantry of "John Company," attained to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. Retiring in 1843, he lived at Cheltenham until his death in 1872, and was buried in the family mausoleum.

His younger brother, James Glencairn Burns, named after his father's noble friend the Earl of Glencairn, was a scholar of Christ's Hospital, London, as well as the Dumfries Grammar School, and joined the Bengal Native Infantry. He also officiated as a judge and collector at Cahar, and ultimately attained to the brevet rank of lieutenant-colonel. In 1839 he retired, and lived in London till 1843, then took up house with his brother at Cheltenham. He died in 1865, and was also buried in the mausoleum at Dumfries. Both brothers enjoyed considerable pensions, £1,000 or £1,100 a year. Both were married, but only Colonel James left children behind him, namely, two daughters by his first and second wives. Colonel William, like his brother Robert, resembled the poet a good deal, and he alone seems to have written verses, some of which have been read in manuscript by Mr. Burns, of Blackhall. Apparently the sons of the poet



ROBERT BURNS III.

walked after the eloquent advice tendered them by Wordsworth:—

Let no mean hope your souls enslave;
Be independent, generous, brave;
Your father such example gave,
And such revere;
But be admonished by his grave,
And think and fear.

Robert Burns III., the eldest son of Robert Burns II., married Mary Campbell, and taught a private school in Dumfries for over thirty years, until the new School Board obliged him to give it up, and died in 1879 in that town.

His eldest son, Robert Burns IV., the last of the dynasty, and my host at Blackhall, was born in Dumfries, and educated in his father's



ROBERT BURNS III.

school. He enlisted in the Household Brigade of the Scots Fusilier Guards, and was quartered with his regiment in London for seven years, in Dublin for thirteen months, at Shorncliffe and elsewhere. Three times he volunteered for active service, but without success. On quitting the army he fell back on "labouring work," as the Scotch say, and eventually obtained the keepership of the City of Edinburgh Gunpowder Magazine at Blackhall. For the last thirteen years he has lived there, serving out the gunpowder required by the Edinburgh merchants and the miners in the neighbouring quarry of Craigleith. It is a post of some responsibility, and if the duties are light, they require strict care and attention. A free house, a bit of garden, and £45 a year are not to be despised; and if he had enjoyed a small pension from the army, he might have been very comfortable. As it is, 17s. 3½d. per week may enable him and Mrs. Burns to exist, but is certainly not enough to save money upon, or indulge in any luxury and recreation.

He and his good wife, Jane Palmer, the daughter of a farmer of Mouswald, near Dumfries, make the best of their circumstances, and probably the enlightened and worthy magistrates of Edinburgh will allow him to retain his post as long as he lives. Since he cannot "lay by" anything, however, it is a serious outlook for Mrs. Burns, should

she survive him, unless the magistrates can see their way to continue her in the appointment.

Another member of the family whose portrait Mr. Burns showed me is "Aunt Jane" of Dumfries, or Jean Armour Burns, with her daughter, Jane Armour Burns Brown, who, as will be seen from our illustration, is remarkably like the poet as he appears in David Allan's water-colour of "The Cottars' Saturday Night," recently given in the *Magazine of Art*. In the refined face of Mr. Burns himself we may also discern traits of his great-grandfather, especially the full and open brow, the serious and thoughtful eyes, and the swarthy complexion; but his high and aquiline nose is rather a feature of his great-grand-uncle, Gilbert Burns. He has never written any poetry, and neither his father nor his mother were literary, but he is a warm admirer of his gifted ancestor. One of his favourite poems is the "Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn."

"I like yon last lines best," said he to me, reading them aloud to refresh his memory:—

The bridegroom may forget the bride
Was made his wedded wife yestreen;
The monarch may forget the crown
That on his head an hour hath been;
The mother may forget the child
That smiles sae sweetly on her knee;
But I'll remember thee, Glencairn,
And a' that thou hast done for me!

"Man—that's a grand verse!" he exclaimed, with a sympathetic thrill in his



AUNT JANE AND HER DAUGHTER.

deep, musical voice. "That's a very good one, too, the 'Epistle to Davie,'" he went on:—

The winds frae aff Benlomond blaw,
And bar the doors wi' driving snaw.

Lines that have gone to the hearts of Scotsmen with a magical power in every clime under the sun, and called up visions of their home and kindred in the sad, sweet days "of auld lang syne."

I found Mr. and Mrs. Burns so kind and hospitable, and their conversation so interesting, that I was fain to linger in their company. When I came away, Mr. Burns, accompanied by his old brown retriever, took me into the grounds of the magazine, beside the house, and showed me the "Maiden Craig," a deserted quarry-hole, now filled with stagnant water and surrounded by a waste of grass overgrown with bushes. When the poet was in the springtide of his glory, and the lion of Edinburgh, that uncanny pit was in full blast, and the mansions in which he figured as an honoured guest were built of its stone.

To-day, it is affording an asylum to the last of his name. A quiet retreat, pleasant enough in summer when the grass is green and the birds are singing in the trees, but mournful and dreary in winter, when the dark pool is swollen with the rains, and

Fearfu' sighs the boortree
bank.

On the way back Mr. Burns had to stop twice and bend over his staff from sheer weakness. "My head just goes round and round like that," said he, describing a whirl in the air with his hand—a frail, thin hand, as I could feel, too well, in bidding him good-bye.

He suffers from chronic rheumatism, and, perhaps, his outlook and isolation prey upon a delicate nature. When once the spirits are low, it is not so easy to raise them again. A change of air and scene, if only for a day now and then, would, I am sure, work wonders in him, but he

is tied to his post through illness and want of means. "Had Burns been ennobled," thought I, on the road to Edinburgh, "how different might have been this man's lot!" And yet, what nobleman has done so much for Scotland as the beloved bard who has moulded the spirit of her sons? The Scotch have been blamed for making their poet a gauger and leaving him to struggle on fifty pounds a year; but since his death they have amply redeemed their fault, if it were a fault. Provision was made even for his illegitimate children. The cottage in which he was born has been preserved to the nation. A number of splendid monuments have been erected to his memory. Innumerable books and celebrations in all parts of the world attest his growing fame.

A lively interest is taken in everything that concerns him, and persons in whom his blood still flows are marked like the descendants of the Prophet. When the little daughter of Colonel James Glencairn Burns was buried at sea on the way home from India, the officers and men of the ship were drawn up on the deck in mourning array, and while the coffin was lowered into the deep, every eye was moist, and some of the sailors, natives of Scotland, wept outright. The tomb of

"Highland Mary" at Greenock is a place of pilgrimage, and steps are now being taken to raise a stone over the grave of Chloris, the "Lassie wi' the lint-white locks," which was recently discovered under a drooping birch in the old burying-ground at Newington.

Could the Poet himself re-visit "Edina's Darling Seat" he would be received with honours and acclamation little short of idolatry. Doubtless the affection and enthusiasm of his countrymen would melt his heart, and yet amidst all their homage and admiration I fancy he would turn an anxious eye on that forsaken quarry at Blackhall, and say to them: "Guid freends, canna we bring some hope and gladness there?"



ROBERT BURNS IV. (STILL LIVING).