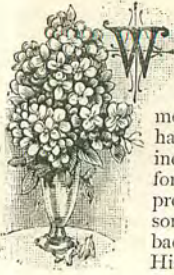


OUR "POETS' CORNER."

JAMES THOMSON (1700).



WHEN a boy has a spark of true poetic genius, it frequently begins to appear at an early age—a mere glimmer at first, perhaps, but gradually it will increase, and by-and-by shine forth above the dulness of prosaic level. James Thomson's attempts at rhyme date back to his very childhood. His father was minister of the parish of Ednam, near Kelso, and not very far distant from Melrose Abbey, where the heart of the famous Bruce is buried. His mother was daughter and co-heiress of Mr. Trotter of Berwickshire. But it was at Southdean, a lonely and remote parish situated on the very slope of the breezy Cheviot Hills, the poet spent his boyhood; and there he began interpreting the book of nature, learning the music of the waving leaves, the running streams, the joyous birds, and setting them all to rhyme.

The boy does not seem to have been shy at showing his crude MSS. Mr. Riccaltoun, the minister of an adjoining parish, read some of them, lent him books, and encouraged him to persevere; also, some men of note in the county gave him their approbation. We can imagine the boy bringing his poems to these patrons, and listening with glowing cheeks to their praise and good-natured criticisms; but we can hardly trace the motives that made him every New Year's Day burn all the pile of manuscripts he had written during the past twelve months. Perhaps his own heart was not satisfied, and he was ever longing to attain to yet higher things; for in some lines written at the age of fourteen, he says:—

"Gladly I would declare in lofty strains
The power of Godhead to the sons of men;
But thought is lost in its immensity:
Imagination wastes its strength in vain,
And fancy tires, and turns within itself,
Struck with the amazing depths of Deity."

Thomson was intended for the ministry, and was sent to Edinburgh College in his eighteenth year; and while there great troubles fell on his once happy home. His father died suddenly, his mother was compelled to sell the estate of which she was co-heiress, and with the scanty sum of money she could gather up, she removed, with her large family of orphan children, to Edinburgh. Here she was near her poet son, who was already publishing his verses in a periodical, and gaining some fame, if not profit, thereby.

Four years afterwards, when Thomson had gone through the usual course of theological study, he wrote a very florid and flowery paraphrase of Psalm civ., and this was so severely criticised by Mr. Hamilton, Professor of Divinity, that the sensitive poet was stung to the quick. He determined Edinburgh should have no more of himself or of his

poems, and he afterwards set off for London, to push his fortunes there.

He soon found out a college friend, Mallet, who was himself a poet, and sort of adventurer in the literary world, and through his interest he obtained the situation of tutor to a son of Lord Binning. At this time Thomson had already written the first part of his work, "The Seasons:" when he showed some of his descriptions of Winter to Mallet, he advised him to make a complete poem of the part, and to publish it. Who does not realise a picture of a snow-shower when reading—

"Through the hushed air the whitening
shower descends,
At first thin-wavering, till at last the flakes
Fall broad, and wide, and fast, dimming
the day
With a continual flow; the cherished fields
Put on their winter robe of purest white:
'Tis brightness all, save where the new snow
melts

Along the mazy current."

For "Winter" Thomson only received three guineas for the copyright, and several editions ran out the first year; but afterwards, when the "Four Seasons" was published by subscription at a guinea a copy, he realised about £400.

It is said Thomson experienced some vicissitudes during his career in London; that at one time he had to borrow a few pounds from a friend, when, after his mother's death, the little property left to him at Roxburghshire had not yet been realised. Again, it is said some time afterwards his friend Quin paid a sum of money to release him from a spunging-house, into which he had been thrust for debt.

It is pleasant to find brighter days dawned for Thomson at last. He became tutor, a travelling companion, to the son of Sir Charles Talbot, and together they visited Switzerland, France, and Italy. How charmed the poet must have been to sojourn amongst the snow-capped mountains, and to roam amidst the classic scenes of Rome, endeared to him already by the voice of fame!

On his return to England, he published a poem called "Liberty," and also various tragedies, with more or less success. One of his pieces, called "Alfred," was written in conjunction with his old friend Mallet, and in it appears the well-known song which will live as long as British liberty lives—"Rule, Britannia":—

"When Britain first, at Heaven's command,
Arose from out the azure main,
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sung the strain;
Rule, Britannia, Britannia rules the waves!
Britons never shall be slaves."

Soon afterwards, the Prince of Wales granted Thomson a pension of £100 a year, and he was made Surveyor-General of the Leeward Islands, which was a mere sinecure, and brought him £300 a year more.

He retired to Kew Lane, near Richmond; and here, in comparative opulence, passed his time in the way he most preferred. Though many friends of like mind with himself gathered around him, his highest enjoyment was yet drawn from the study of nature, which became more and more his passion. He said of himself:—

"I care not, Fortune, what you me deny;
You cannot rob me of free Nature's grace;
You cannot shut the windows of the sky,
Through which Aurora shows her brightening face;
You cannot bar my constant feet to trace
The woods and lawns."

In the shades of Richmond he wandered about enjoying his pleasant retirement, and writing at intervals his last poem, called "The Castle of Indolence," which in style and art and exquisite taste surpasses his other works. For this he studied the poems of Tasso, and the "Faerie Queene" of Spenser, and caught the "poetic glow" from them both. It is said "The Castle of Indolence" occupied him fully fifteen years ere it was completed in the highly-finished style in which it appeared before the world. One day in August he walked from London to Hammersmith, and there hired a boat to take him to Kew, on his way home. But he caught a severe chill on the river, which turned to fever, and after a few days' illness he died, universally lamented and mourned. He was only then in his forty-eighth year, and like so many more of our poets, died comparatively young.

There is a monument to his memory in Westminster Abbey, which, it may be said, sprang from the fruits of his own genius, for his friend Mr. Millar, the bookseller, devoted to the purpose the profits of an edition of his poems.

James Thomson holds a high rank both as a poet and a man; his sentiments are pure and elevating, and his life was *sans reproche*. Some critics have called him a little "indolent;" and one can reply, "He has left more lasting work behind him than many have left who were far more busy in the world's ways." Others have said he was a little careless about money; and here the reply comes also, "At any rate, he was unselfish, affectionate, and liberal to his relations, and benevolent to the poor."

Lord Lyttelton remarked of his poems that they contain—

"No line which, dying, he would wish to blot."

Well would it be for all writers of poetry or prose that the same commendation could be pronounced on them!

Contemporary with Thomson was Edward Young, a celebrated poet, whose chief work, "Night Thoughts," is noted for fertile imagination and sound sense, united to magnificent imagery. It is still much read and appreciated.

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS.

MISCELLANEOUS.

SKIP-JACK.—We have no prescription for "making girls grow tall," and we do not understand your query, "What is the meaning of brown eyes?" What is the meaning of your nose? We can tell you, if you have not found it out, that the former are to provide you with sight, and the latter is a ventilator for your lungs, and provide you with the sense of smell.

A VERY TROUBLED ONE.—Your position is somewhat peculiar and difficult. But one thing in extenuation of the "second price," to which you refer, is this: Articles purchased with ready-money are often reduced somewhat in price, and what are sent out and entered in a book for future settlement are charged higher. We can only hope that this is so in the case you name. At the same time, it would be more honest and straightforward to put up a notice to this effect in the shop.

ELLEN MAUD RAY.—1. The word "suite" (of rooms) is pronounced as if written "sweet."—2. Your handwriting is not yet formed. You have not written too (not "to") much, and we shall be happy to hear from you again.

JOAN.—1. You should make a reasonable bow, slightly inclining the shoulders with the head, in recognition of the approval of your audience after a pianoforte solo played in public.—2. Enquire for the piece for recital at a shop where such are sold.