

tobacco smoke) when smoking commenced, after supper; and a strange appearance we made in them!

“His pedestrian feats were marvellous. On one occasion, having been absent a day or two, we asked him, on his return to the common room, where he had been? He said, in London. When did you return? This morning. How did you come? On foot. As we all expressed surprise, he said: ‘Why, the fact is, I dined yesterday with a friend in Grosvenor (I think it was) Square, and as I quitted the house, a fellow who was passing was impertinent and insulted me, upon which I knocked him down; and as I did not choose to have myself called in question for a street row, I at once started, as I was, in my dinner dress, and never stopped until I got to the College gate this morning, as it was being opened.’ Now this was a walk of fifty-eight miles at least, which he must have got over in eight or nine hours at most, supposing him to have left the dinner-party at nine in the evening.*

“He had often spoken to me when at Oxford of a protracted foot-tour which he had made in Ireland some years previous, and about which there appeared to me a sort of mystery, which he did not explain.

“R. H. S.”†

CHAPTER IV.

THE ORPHAN MAID.—UNIVERSITY CAREER.

1803-'08.

THE course of true love, whether calm or troubled, whether issuing in sunshine or in storm, is “an old, old story;” but it is one that sums up the chiefest joys and sorrows of men and women, and

* Mr. Southwell's statement may seem an exaggeration; but a reference to Mr. Findlay's account, at p. 24, will show that my father had easily performed six miles an hour in what I take for granted to be a more difficult mode of progression than the ordinary, viz., “toe and heel.”

† As a tail-piece to Mr. Southwell's letter, I take the liberty of inserting here one of Mr. Lockhart's Hogarthian sketches, containing, I have no doubt, correct if not very flattering portraits of some of the Oxford dignitaries of that day. The “strictures of the *Edinburgh Review*,” which appear to have excited so much dissatisfaction, were contained in two articles in the *Review* of July, 1809, and of April, 1810, in which some of the weak points of the contemporary system of education at Oxford were handled with a roughness characteristic of the criticism of that period.

can only be regarded with indifference by those who are dead to the influence of all deep and worthy emotions. The best and brightest spirits have shown how their lives were ennobled by the passion of love, the faith and purity of which in one heart were the spring of the finest song that ever immortalized genius, and the highest compliment that ever was paid to woman. Should it sometimes happen, when the heart is overburdened with its weight of sorrow, that comfort and forgetfulness are sought in the tumultuous excitements of life, it does not always follow that nature becomes lowered, any more than that love is quenched; for nothing in reality can soothe an unfeigned grief but resolution to bear it. Those who can endure a sorrow, whatever its cause, elevate thereby their moral being, experiencing soon that all comfort from outward sources is but vanity. A strong and uncorrupted soul rises ere long above the aid of idle pleasures, and gratefully turns to the wisdom that teaches submission, believing,

"Tal pose in pace uno ed altro disio."

So was it with John Wilson, to the story of whose early love we now again turn. The reader may have ere this imagined that it was to be heard of no more; that Oxford and its varied excitements had deadened the recollection of Dychmont and Bothwell Banks. So little was it thus, that from all the evidence which letters supply, there seems to have been no portion of his time, during the seven years preceding his permanent settlement at Elleray, in which his love for Margaret did not influence the tenor of his existence, inspiring him at one time with ardent hope, oftener sinking him into the deepest anguish, from which he at times sought escape in assumed indifference or reckless dissipation. It shows how little the outward life of such a man can reveal of his whole nature and actual history, that but for these letters we could not have had even a glimpse of what was in reality the dominant thought of his life at Oxford, nor ever known of the trial which brought out so strongly the nobleness of his nature and the depth of his filial love. Had it not been that so many years of his life were spent in the indulgence of a fond hope and engrossing passion, ending in a sacrifice to duty such as few men of spirit so impetuous have ever made, this tale had not been told. It may well move the admiration of all who reverence the power of self-control in tutoring the

heart, while its brightest dreams are still objects of faith. It will be seen from these letters how hard it must have been for him to bend before obstructions, of whose reality and strength he was long in utter ignorance.

Of all his letters to Margaret, the only one that survives of what must have been an extensive correspondence, is one written soon after his arrival at Oxford. Of hers to him there is, I regret to say, none to be found. The pensive simplicity that pervades it is in entire harmony with the strain of the "Poems," and, like the portrait by Raeburn, will perhaps surprise those who may have expected to find young Christopher North addressing the lady of his love in the impassioned and eloquent style of a troubadour. The thing was much too genuine for that:—

"MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD, *June 12, 1803.*

"Next to seeing yourself, my dear Margaret, and the greatest pleasure I know upon this earth, is that of seeing your writing; and I cannot describe what I felt when I read your letter, even although it contained some little censure for not having written you ere this. When I knew by the direction who it was from, my heart leaped within my breast, and I read it over and over again without intermission, so rejoiced was I to hear from one so dear to me as you are. Indeed I must confess that I was always afraid you would not write me, although this was more an unaccountable presentiment than an apprehension for which, after your promise, I could assign any reason. But where the strongest wishes are, there also are the strongest fears. I see now, however, that you really will write me, and that, I trust, often. What a wretch, therefore, would I be, were I to deprive myself of such a blessing by my own foolishness! When I read your letters, I will be with you in spirit, notwithstanding the distance between this place and Dychmont. My silence was far from proceeding out of forgetfulness of my promise to write you. Before I could have forgot that, I must have forgot you, which never will be to my dying moment; and should it ever happen, may my God forget me. The truth is, I had several reasons for not writing you sooner. I wished first to have seen your picture, which has not yet arrived, and indeed has scarcely had sufficient time yet. But I should have written you notwithstanding that, had I been able, but believe me when I tell you, that hitherto I was not.

“Whenever I thought of writing to you, I thought of the distance I was from you, of the sadness I suffered when I bade you farewell, and the loss of almost all the happiness I enjoy in this world by no longer seeing you. All this quite overpowered me, and I could no more have written to you than I could tell you that forenoon I last saw you not to forget me when I was away. Your letter has revived me; and if you have any regard for me, which I believe you have, oh, write often, often! You know I am unhappy; comfort me, comfort me! A few lines will delight me, and you are too kind to refuse me such a gratification. It will also serve to keep you in remembrance of me, when perhaps you might otherwise forget me, which, should it ever happen, would complete my sum of wretchedness. If hearing from me will afford you any pleasure, I will write as often as you choose—a small mark of affection surely to one, to serve whom I would endure any thing on the face of the earth. It will also afford myself greater pleasure than you. When I left you, my dear Margaret, you know that I was afraid that Oxford would be to me a dull, unhappy place. You seemed to think not yourself, and believed that the change of situation and novelty of company would make me forget any thing that distressed me, and even make me think less on those friends I had left.

“Perhaps though you said this, you did not exactly think it, and wished only to comfort me, which you have so often and so sweetly done. All my suspicions have been verified, and how indeed could it be otherwise? Oxford is a gay place most certainly, and, I dare say, to people whose minds are at ease, a pleasant one; but to me it appears very different. It is true, that when I was in Glasgow I endeavored to dissipate my melancholy by company, for which I could often feel nothing but contempt, and by pursuits which I heartily despised. I imagined such a course of life might have moderated the violence of what my mind suffered, and I had certainly acquired such a portion of self-command as frequently to appear the happiest and most indifferent person in company. But this conduct did not do. When alone I was worse than ever, and, added to my other distress, had the idea of being guilty of deception, and following conduct unworthy of myself. Accordingly here I follow another plan. I do not dissipate; I live retired. I have no need to follow a course of deception, which, if long persevered

in, I could imagine capable in some measure of deadening the sense of right and wrong, and which is at all events grating to the soul. I now try to read, and have, since I came here, read a great deal; but all won't do; my mind is ill at ease. Once, when I was unhappy, I had only to step across the street, hear your voice, see your face, and take hold of your hand, and for a time I forgot all my sorrow. This now I cannot do. At night I sit in a lonely room, nobody within many miles of me I love, left to my own meditations and the power of darkness, which I have long detested.

“I think of sad things, and weep the more, because I have no hope of relief. In such moments what a treasure will your picture be to me! How it will delight me; make me forget every thing on earth but you, and you looking like what you were when you agreed at last to give it to me. Would to God it were here! When, Margaret, you see how happy it will make me, how could you refuse it? And yet to give it me was goodness I had no title to expect, and for which I will often thank you in moments of stillness and solitude. Oh, what a treasure is a friend like you! How little is real friendship understood! Who could ever conceive the happiness I have felt when with you, or so much as dream the misery I endured when I left you for a long, long time! As long as there is a moon or stars in the firmament will I remember you; and when I look on either, the recollection of Dychmont Hill, the house, the trees, the wooden seat, which I am grieved is away, will enter my mind, and make me live over again the happiest period of my existence. Last night I was in heaven. I dreamed that I was sitting in the drawing-room at College Buildings with you alone, as I have often done. The room was dark, the window-shutters close; the fire was little and just twinkling. I had my feet upon the fender; you were sitting in the arm-chair; I was beside you; your hand was in mine; we were speaking of my going to Oxford; you were promising to write me; I was sad, but happy; somebody opened the door, and I awoke alone and miserable.

“I have given you my promise not to think of a plan you dissuaded me from carrying into execution. Be assured that I never will change my mind. I consider you as my better angel, for using your simple eloquence to make me abandon the project. It would have been cruel to my dearest friends, and perhaps useless to myself.

“Let none, not even Miss W., see this. Heaven protect you, my dear Margaret, and love you as well as your affectionate friend,
“JOHN WILSON.”

The plan here referred to was a romantic project which he had entertained of going with the expedition of 1804, being Park's second journey to the interior of Africa. Apparently, the hostile influences which ultimately prevailed in dividing him and Margaret had begun, before he left Glasgow, to disturb the current of his felicity. However extravagant the idea of a journey to Timbuctoo may appear as a medicine for disappointed love, he unquestionably meant it; and with all the hardships and dangers connected with such an enterprise, it was one highly calculated to excite his imagination and love of adventure. A very old friend thus writes regarding it:—“He had certainly a wild project of going there, and used to talk of it in his usual enthusiastic way. But I did not imagine it had taken any hold of him till one day he astonished me by appearing in a complete sailor's dress, and told me he was going to join the expedition to Africa. I used all my influence to dissuade him from such a foolish proceeding. You may suppose what dismay he would have occasioned in his own family, who almost worshipped him.” To them he never communicated his intentions in the matter, which only became known long after the project had been abandoned.

The next letter from which I shall quote is addressed to his dear friend, Findlay. The post-mark bears the date of “August 16, 1803.” What had occurred between that and the month of June to give rise to expressions of despondency so unmeasured, can only be conjectured to have been a further development of the cause of distress alluded to in the letter to Margaret.

. . . “Since I saw you, my mental anguish has been as great as ever. I feel that I am doomed to be eternally wretched, and that I am cut out from all the most amiable and celestial feelings of human nature. . . . At particular times I am perfectly distracted, and hope that at last the torment my mind suffers may waste a frame that is by nature too strong easily to be destroyed. I dare say few would leave life with fewer lingering looks cast behind. My abilities, understanding, and affections are all going to destruction. I can do nothing; I can't, by Heavens! even assume that appearance

of indifference and gayety I once did, without a struggle that I cannot support. I started in the career of early life as fair as that of any of my companions, and had, I confess, many hopes of being something in the world. But all these are blasted; I cannot understand any thing that I read, and nothing in the world gives, or ever will give me pleasure. I see others enjoying the world, and likely to become respectable and useful members of society; for myself, I expect to be looked at as a being who wants a mind, and to feel inwardly all the torments of hell. By Heavens! I will, perhaps, some day blow my brains out, and there is an end of the matter. If you will take the trouble, when you have nothing else to do, of writing now and then to me, I know it will be one of those few things that keep my heart from dying in my breast, and depend upon it, that every word coming from one whom I regard so dearly as you, will be interesting to me. What the happiness is which you so pleasantly allude to, I cannot understand, unless it be that J. S., yourself, Blair, and I are soon to meet. I will be glad to see you, but the word happy will never again be joined to the name of

“JOHN WILSON.”

The next letter, marked “September, 1803,” shows an improvement in spirits:—

“Your former letters, my dear Bob, so far from offending, or giving me an idea that you are addicted to frivolous levity, relieved in a great measure the burden of my heart. Although few, perhaps, ever suffered more from mental anguish in a short time than I have done, this suffering has not had the effect of making me look gloomy disapprobation upon the happiness of others. I feel, if all went well with me, I would be one of the happiest of beings that ever saw the light of heaven, and that nothing would be too insignificant to delight me. This conviction has never quitted my heart even in its darkest moments, and has been the means of making me look with complacency upon every kind of innocent and reasonable enjoyment.

“The little girl who brings the newspaper into the room, and trips smilingly along the floor, gives me something like happiness; for, wherever I see joy and peace, I take a sad delight in looking at it. When your letters showed me how pleased you were with your new situation, and that nothing disturbed you there, it gave

me much pleasure, therefore I hope you will not leave off that light and happy strain which pervaded them.

“I know that you and I are sworn friends, and that you are interested in every thing that concerns me. Nothing, therefore, in your behavior towards me, will ever appear unfeeling; and what you are afraid I might have mistaken for indifference, I know to be the hallowed voice of friendship. Were you here, I would have an opportunity of pouring out my whole soul to you, and in that I would find much relief.

“But a letter is such a short thing, and to me, sorrow is when written so unintelligible, that in cases of absence I am convinced it is best to say little upon such mournful topics.

“If writing to you, and hearing from you, can divert my attention from my own mind, much is accomplished; and I assure you that your letters, with the minute superscription, effected this end. Before I go further, your resolution to be sorrowful because I might be happier is very injudicious, upon this principle, that while it hurts yourself, so likewise does it him whom you mean to benefit.”

To divert his thoughts, he went off in these autumnal days on one of those long solitary rambles which often landed him unpremeditatedly at night in an unknown region, some fifty miles from his starting-point. A glimpse of one of these excursions is afforded in the next letter, the greater portion of which, however, is occupied with an outpouring of his woes. These seem to have received fresh stimulus from an ungrounded alarm that a rival had come between him and the dear object of his anxieties.

“I have been expecting to hear from you for some time past; that is to say, I would not have been greatly astonished though I had heard from you, neither am I in the least surprised that you have not written. As I feel, however, what Wordsworth and other gentlemen of his stamp would think proper to call ‘impulse to write ’mid deepest solitude,’ I have disregarded entirely the great advance upon the price of writing materials, and will add to the revenue of the Post-Office by the postage of one letter, which you will never grudge to pay, when you have discovered the hidden soul which pervades these effusions. I have lately returned from a walk over a pretty wide extent of country, during which, if at particular times blistered soles and stiff joints did not vastly increase the pleasures

of reflection, other moments amply recompensed me, and gave me enjoyment, though not unalloyed, of as perfect a kind as the general nature of frail humanity, assisted by the workings of particular melancholy, could possibly admit. Without being able to assign any reason for my conduct, though I entered into many philosophical inquiries concerning all the possible combinations of motives, I arrived at Coventry, distant from Oxford fifty miles. The days of riding naked upon horseback being gone, I beheld no elegant nude bestriding a prancing courser, therefore I met with no gratification in the assumed character of peeping Tom. From this foolish place I went to Nottingham, distant fifty-one miles, and stayed there three days."

Here he abruptly dismisses his pedestrian adventures, and enters on the subject more near his heart.

. . . "What will time do to such love as mine? It is not passion founded on whim and fancy; it is not a feeling of her excellent disposition resembling friendship; it is not a regard that intimacy preserved, but whose force absence may diminish. Such feelings constitute the common love of common souls. But with me the case is different. No holy throb ever agitates my heart; no idea of future happiness ever elevates my spirit; no rush of tenderness ever warms every fibre of my frame, that Margaret is not the cause and object of such emotions. If such a being were to confess she loved me; if she were to sink upon my breast with love and fondness, I would be the happiest being that ever lived among men. I feel I have a mind that could then exert itself, and a heart that would love all the human race. But if this union is denied me; if she I love reposes on the bosom of another,—then is the chain broke which bound me to the world; I have nothing to live for; all is dark, solitary, cold, wild, and fearful. When Margaret is married, on that night that gives her to another, if I am in any part of this island, you must pass that night with me. Blair will do the same. I don't expect, indeed I won't suffer either of you to soothe the agony of my soul, for that surely were a vain attempt. But you will sit with me. I know I could never pass that night alone. I would crush to death this cursed heart which has so long tormented me, and bless with my latest breath my own Margaret; for she is mine in the secret dwellings of the soul, and not a power in the universe shall tear her from that hospitable home. When I

consider the ways of Providence I am astonished. Whoever marries her, let his virtues be what they may, I know he never could make her as happy as I could. He would not love her with so vast and yet so tender a love."

With a true poet's mind, he fears the change an unworthy helpmate would bring to her refined and enlightened spirit:—

"If my rival in her affections were a being superior to myself, I would not repine; at least, not so much as I now do, when I am afraid he is unworthy of her and inferior to me. Does Margaret prefer this man to me? That she does I am afraid is too true. Will he make her as happy as I could? Can he like her as well as I do? Both suppositions are impossible. The wife of a soldier seldom sees intellectual scenes; and, in progress of time, that angel Margaret, for whom I would sacrifice every thing on earth, may become—oh, I shudder to think of it!—a person of common feelings,* and laugh at all I have said to her, at my misery, my love, and my delusions. Such are often the transmigrations of spirit; or, rather, the transformations which Providence permits to humble the hopes and destroy the happiness of those it made capable of prodigious enjoyment. May I never live to see that day!"

After relieving his breast by this outburst, he returns to his walking:—

"I had almost forgot our walking match. I went from Nottingham to Birmingham. There I met Blair. . . . He intends visiting me, perhaps at Christmas; but I will tell you, however, when I expect him, and you must try to spare a few days from that eternal copying of letters, and see what an appearance an old friend cuts in purgatory.

"I have sent—at least, am going to send—you a small parcel, containing the sermon I wrote, and a letter to Margaret. You may open the parcel, and read the sermon, if you choose. Pack them up in your best manner, and direct them to Miss M., College Buildings, Glasgow. I suppose you have safe communication with Glasgow, for I would not for the world the parcel was lost, as the letter is not for every eye, and contains secret feelings.

* This reminds one of *Locksley Hall*:—

"Is it well to wish thee happy?—having known me, to decline
On a range of lower feelings, and a narrower heart than mine!
Yet it shall be: thou shalt lower to his level day by day,
What is fine within thee growing coarse to sympathize with clay."

“Isabella S., I understand, is married. I wish her all possible joy. For God’s sake, take care who thou fallest in love with! I wish I had done so, faith!

“The sooner you send Margaret the parcel the better, for I should have written her before now, and she will be wondering at my silence. And let it be safe. Write me when convenient, and don’t be interrupted by your mercenary concerns and employments. I would have given you another sheet, from which you are saved by the entrance of the drill-sergeant, who has come to teach me how to fight the French, if they come. I am their man. ‘God save the king!’

“Yours,

“J. WILSON.

“OXFORD, 12th October, 1803.”

The next letter in the series is from Blair to Findlay, showing how deeply these two friends entered into the feelings of one whose trust in them was as that of a brother. It is dated

“HILL TOP, January 19, 1804.

“The vacation is over next Tuesday week. I left him on Monday morning last; but one of the gentlemen-commoners came to Oxford for two or three days, and breakfasted, dined, and supped with us on Sunday, so that I had no opportunity of speaking to him on many things of which I wished to have talked to him. From this, it happened that I said nothing to him of what we talked over that Wednesday night. If I had not thought we should have had all Sunday night to ourselves, I would certainly have spoken of it before; but it is a subject on which I dare not speak to him, except at those moments when he seems happier than usual from my presence. If he is gloomy and dejected, as he is sometimes with me, I know that his mind will be shut to all reasonings favorable to his happiness; and that to touch on that subject would be merely to give him occasion to overwhelm me with one of those long bursts of passion and misery to which I can make no answer. He was out of spirits the first two days I was there; and I thought it most probable that in the last evening he would, from the idea of my going so soon, feel a greater degree of kindness and affection for me, which would keep his mind in a state of gentle feeling, and dispose it more easily to think happily of himself. If we had been alone that night, I should have talked

it all over with him. I am doubtful whether I ought to write to him about it."

This affectionate friend did write to him on the subject, and a few days later he again addresses Findlay:—

"HILL TOP, *Sunset, Tuesday, 1804.*

"I am writing to Wilson, and shall send the letter to-morrow, so that he will get it on Thursday morning. I tell him why I am convinced that he is loved; and what I fear she may be induced to do, both from her delicacy and just pride, which must shrink from the idea of the disapprobation of relations, and from her scrupulous sense of right, which makes her refuse to separate him from those relations. I will say, that she is now guided in every thing she does by the resolution she has formed since he left her, of sacrificing her happiness to her sense of right (she may perhaps think) to his happiness; and I will, on that account, caution him against writing to her on that subject, because she might have strength of mind to write a refusal, that would blast all his hopes, and make him never dare to speak of it to her again. My wish is that he should see her next summer, and force from her a confession of her feelings.

"See what he thinks about P—. He has talked to me as if he feared she was attached to him. P— left his country when she knew nothing more of Wilson than that he was a fine boy, and I think it very probable at that time she might feel a grateful attachment to him for his love to her, and what she might think his generosity. Does Wilson know so little of her and of himself as to dream for a moment that, after knowing him as she has done for these last three years, her heart can still hold by one wish to such a man as P—? If she has formed any engagement to such a man as P—, God help us! I cannot think it possible. If it had been, she must have acted differently. Her love might overpower in her for a time her sense of what she thinks she owes to the order of society; while her only restraint was the idea that she ought not to separate Wilson from all his family connections. I can conceive her doing all that she has done with the purest and most virtuous mind, for she acted under a great degree of delusion; I am convinced she did not suspect the consequences to her own heart or to Wilson's. But if she could in the slightest degree look on herself as the property of another, every thing becomes utterly incomprehensible; a positive engagement leaves no room for delusion, and in that situa-

tion a woman of delicate feelings has but one way of acting. I have not time for more.

“Yours ever,

“ALEX. BLAIR.”

The next letter in my possession is dated March 7, 1804,* and may be inserted below for the sake of chronological order, as showing the kind of studies which were meantime engaging his attention.

From this date down to September of the same year there is no record of his doings. Blair writing to Findlay, September 30th, says:—“I imagine Wilson should be in London about this time to meet his mother. I have not seen him this summer.” It may be inferred that he was occupied during the spring with his studies, and struggling as best he could to overcome the dejection of spirits, which, judging from the next letter, did not for a time pass away. During the summer, he went off on a long excursion through Wales, to which he subsequently alludes in no very agreeable terms. It could not fail, however, to arouse his poetic sensibilities, and in one of the commonplace-books I find a sketch of an intended poem on this subject, entitled “Hints for the Pedestrian.”

The next glimpse of him from correspondence is in a letter from Blair to Findlay, of date November 24, 1804:—

“Wilson has been walking about in Wales all this summer, and is now at Oxford again. I have not once seen him. He says he is going to Scotland in about five weeks. I believe he had better not.

* It is little more than a mere catalogue of books, but the playful tone in which the commission is rendered, gives interest and not a little character to the document.

“Bob, you scoundrel, did you get my last letter? If you can get any bookseller to trust me under my own name, or me under your name, for the following books, until this time twelve-months, buy them, and send them down as soon as possible. I think that, with proper management, you may manage to get it done.

1. Ferguson's Roman Republic, in octavo; don't buy it unless in octavo. 2. Mitford's Greece, in octavo; don't buy it unless in octavo. 3. Stewart's edition of Reid's Philosophy. This book is only in octavo, therefore don't buy it unless in octavo. 4. Malthus's Essay on Population—an excellent book—read part of it; most acute thing of the present day. 5. Godwin's Political Justice; don't buy it unless in octavo. 6. Gillies' Greece in octavo; don't buy it unless in octavo. 7. Pinkerton's Ancient Scottish Poems; recollect this is not his Ancient Comic Ballads. 8. All Ritson's publications, except English Romances, and Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food. 9. Hartley on Man; last edition in three vols. octavo, with notes by some foreigner or another. 10. Rousseau's Works, if cheap and complete; thirty-four volumes, or perhaps less; but complete, certainly complete. 11. Regnier's History, if tolerably cheap. 12. Turner's History of the Anglo-Saxons, three vols. 13. Any good edition of Gilbert Stuart's Works; also, Mallet's Northern Antiquities, translated. 14. Bisset's History of this Country. 15. All Pinkerton's works indeed you may buy, except his Geography. If possible, let them all be *in boards*.

“J. WILSON.

“MAGDALEN COLLEGE, March, 1804,
“Tuesday Evening.”

John Finlay* is to come back with him. I expect to be in London about the middle or end of January, and I suppose Finlay will come while I am there, and we may settle him comfortably. Wilson says, in speaking of some prize he means to undertake, that he feels the vigor of his mind returning. God grant it! If he will promise to return happy, which I think he may do, from Scotland, his going will be a blessed event; but if he is to come away again in the same miserable uncertainty, it will destroy the little calm he has gained, and repeat the same sufferings with less strength to bear them. I shall see him before he goes."

Soon after this he was seized with a fit of illness, which caused much concern to his affectionate correspondents, Blair and Findlay. He quickly recovered, however; and his brother Andrew, then serving at Chatham, on board H. M. S. "Magicienne," writes to Robert on the 7th of December, "that he had found him in very good health, but in very bad spirits." His own account of the matter in a letter to Findlay, of December 10, 1804, is sufficiently plain, and needs no comment:—

"Though well when Andrew came here, as bad luck would have it, I was taken ill before he left me, but not dangerously, and I am rather better. I believe my complaint is nervous, and mortally affects my spirits. I have a constant beating at my heart, and a wavering of thought resembling a sort of derangement; but I have been bled and feel better.

"This wretched complaint has been brought on by my late attempt to bury in unbridled dissipation the recollection of blasted hopes. But God's will be done."

Between this date and the next letter, there is a gap of ten months. Of what passed in the interval, there is no memorial beyond the allusions in his letter, from which we gather that he travelled during the summer in the north of England and in Ireland; that a considerable portion of the holidays was spent among the Lakes; and that there and then he seized the opportunity offered of becoming the proprietor of Elleray, one of the loveliest spots in which a poet ever fixed his home. This letter is dated London, October 3, 1805, and is written in a cheerful strain, yet betraying

* John Finlay, a young poet of great promise, author of *Wallace, or the Vale of Ellerslie; Historical and Romantic Ballads*, etc. etc., was born in 1782, and died at Moffat in 1810. Wilson wrote an account of his life and writings in *Blackwood* for November, 1817.

the overhanging of the clouds, which were deepening over his love-prospects, though for a brief space breaking into delusive sunshine: *—

"LONDON, *October 3, 1805.*

"MY DEAR BOB:—I received your letter in a wonderfully short time after it was written, considering the extensive tour of his Majesty's dominion it had judged it expedient to take before condescending to pay me a visit. It spent the greatest part of the summer in visiting Oxford, London, Scarborough, Harrowgate, Edinburgh, and the various post-towns of Westmoreland, Cumberland, and Lancashire. When it finally reached me, its visage was wofully begrimed with dirt, and its sides squeezed into a shape far from epistolary. It truly cut a most ridiculous appearance, and, indeed, was ashamed of itself, for it made its escape from my possession the day after I first cast salt upon its tail; and as I have never seen it since, I am led to suppose that it may have once more set out on its travels, in which case you probably will meet with it soon in Glasgow.

"I was not a little provoked to find, that during my solitary rambles in Ireland, you were improving yourself in polite accomplishments among the mountains of Wales. The rapidity with which you travelled seems to have been astonishing and praiseworthy.

"I do not feel myself in a mood just now to give you any account of my Irish expedition, which afforded me all the possible varieties of pain, and a good many modifications of pleasure. It was prolific in adventure and scrape, and made me acquainted with strange bed-fellows. Had you been with me, I am sure we would have enjoyed it more than you can well imagine. I have spent this summer at Scarborough, Harrowgate, and the Lakes. The weather has been sufficiently bad to provoke an old sow to commit suicide—a fact which actually took place near Ambleside. The creature cut its throat with a hand-saw.

". . . . I have bought some ground on Windermere Lake, but whether in future years I may live there, I know not. I think that a settled life will never do for me; and I often lament that I did

* As he in after life said, "Sometimes, my dear Shepherd, my life from eighteen to twenty-four is an utter blank, like a moonless midnight; at other times, oh! what a refulgent day!"—*Noctes*, xxxv.

not enter the army or navy, a thing which is now entirely impossible. While I keep moving, life goes on well enough, but whenever I pause, the fever of the soul begins.

“JOHN WILSON.”

There is no letter again for a period of six months; and we are left to imagine that the interval was filled up with alternations of gloom and gayety, of hard study and hard living. He was giving himself, like the royal preacher, not only “to know wisdom,” but to know also “madness and folly.” The mention of Margaret is briefer than hitherto, even slightly suggestive of constraint, and one begins to see some shadowing of the truth in that sentence of the Essay on “Streams:”—“For two years of absence and of distance brought a strange, dim, misty haze over the fires—supposed unquenchable—of our hearts; then came suspicion, distrust, wrathful jealousy, and stone-eyed despair!” It had not come to that yet, for, before the curtain closes on this love-drama, there is one glimpse of ecstatic happiness, followed only by deeper gloom and unbroken silence.

The next letter is addressed to Findlay, and dated

“OXFORD, *April* 13, 1806.

“MY DEAREST ROBERT:—If I have not answered your letter so soon as perhaps I should have done, it was neither from being indifferent to the very agreeable contents of it, nor careless of that happiness which I see awaits you in life, and which no soul on earth better deserves than you. Most genuine satisfaction it did give me to hear of the kindness which your father’s memory has procured you.

“In your case it may justly be said that a good man’s righteousness is an inheritance to his children. That happiness, prosperity, and peace may ever attend you, is a wish I need not express to one who knows me so well as you do. As to myself, I have not a very great deal to say. I am going on pretty much in the old way, sometimes unhappy enough, God knows! and at other times tolerably comfortable.

“I believe that I live rather too hard, and I have formed a very determined resolution to change my ways; but it is one thing to make a resolution, and another to keep it. I have certainly led a dissipated life for some time, but,

“ ‘ Wine, they say, drives off despair,
 And bids even hope remain,
 And that is sure a reason fair
 To fill my glass again.’ ”

“ I expected to have heard something from D., informing me of your intention relative to our summer tour to the Lakes. I wrote him how I was situated at present ; but I would like to hear how your intentions are, as I might perhaps accommodate myself in a great measure to them. I am uncertain whether I shall be in Scotland again for some years. If you could meet me at the Lakes in July early, even without our other friends, I think we might pass the time most happily. But I expect to hear from you very soon at great length. By the by, I know not what excuse to make for not having visited Torrance. If ever you see Margaret, I wish you would tell how happy you know I would have been to see her, but that it could have been only for an hour or two, and that I therefore put off the happiness till I could stay a day or two with her in a few months. Perhaps she may attribute to coldness what arose from the deepness of love. It will give me sincere happiness to hear often and soon from you. Every thing interesting to you will interest me, so omit nothing of that kind.

“ Remember me kindly to Finlay and Smith, and to all you love, mother and sisters. Blair is with me, and wishes you well.

“ Yours ever,

“ JOHN WILSON.”

It would appear from the following letter, written from his mother’s house in Edinburgh, that the tour to the Lakes was changed for one in the Highlands of Scotland, which, during the space of six weeks’ time, was agreeably spent by the aforesaid friends :

“ 53 QUEEN STREET, EDINBURGH,
July 29, 1806.

“ MY DEAR BOB :—I have long been conjecturing the reason of your un conjecturable silence. What in the name of wonder are you about ? I had a letter from Dunlop, telling me you proposed accompanying us to the Highlands. I hope you will do so. Both Dunlop and myself are good fellows, but we should get d—ly tiresome without a third. I think the best way will be to meet at

Stirling. I shall be there on Saturday, the 9th, by five o'clock, and whoever arrives first can order dinner for the others. You can let me know of the inn we had best go to. It would be a foolish waste of time for you and Dunlop to come to Edinburgh, except in the case of going to St. Andrews, which I strongly give my vote against.

“I am thine ever,

“JOHN WILSON.”

There are no more letters dated from Oxford or elsewhere for some months. The next to which we come is, however, of deep interest. It is from Blair to Findlay, of date March 19, 1807, giving an account of Wilson's examination for his Bachelor Degree:—

“MY DEAR ROBERT:—About a fortnight ago, Wilson wrote to me to desire I would go to him immediately, and he would tell me what had happened with regard to *her*. I went, of course, and found him very much distressed, with a degree of anxiety that I could not have conceived, about his examination, which was to come on in a few days. If his mind had had its former strength, this, he said, would not have affected him, but after what had happened to him, he had no strength left. The terror of this examination preyed so on his mind, that for ten days before I saw him he had scarcely slept any night more than an hour or two. I wish to know from you what it is that has happened in Scotland, that has shaken his mind to this degree, for he has not spoken a word on the subject to me; and I could not begin to speak of it, after having seen, as I have seen, the state into which it threw him, to give way to his feelings. I could not begin a conversation that was to terminate in such bursts of anguish as I have witnessed.

“Write to me as soon as you can to tell me this, though you should have time to write nothing more. When he walked from this college to the schools, he went along in full conviction that he was to be plucked. His examination was, as might naturally be expected, the most illustrious within the memory of man. Sotheby was there, and declared it was worth coming from London to hear him translate a Greek chorus. I was exceedingly pleased with Shepherd, his examiner, who seemed highly delighted at having got hold of him, and took much pains to show him off. Indeed he is given to show people off; and those who know little are said

not to relish the operation, so that his name is a name of terror, but nothing could be luckier for John than his strict, close style of examination.

“The mere riddance of that burden, which had sat so long on his thoughts, was enough to make him dance; but he was also elated with success and applause, and was in very high spirits after it. I left him last night.”

The examination was truly, to use his private tutor’s expression, a “glorious” one. “*It marked the scholar,*” is the measured but emphatic phrase of the formidable Mr. Shepherd, in referring to it. “I can never forget,” said another of the examiners, the Rev. Richard Dixon, Fellow and Tutor of Queen’s, “the very splendid examination which you passed in this University; an examination which afforded the strongest proofs of very great application, and genius, and scholarship, and which produced such an impression on the minds of the Examiners, as to call forth (a distinction very rarely conferred) the public expression of our approbation and thanks.”*

* From subsequent testimonies regarding his Oxford studies and reputation, a few may in this place be inserted. The Rev. Benjamin Cheese, who was his private tutor during the last two years of his University course, thus referred to that period:—“Among all my pupils I never met with one who read with greater zest the sublime pages of the Greek tragedians, or penetrated with the same rapid acuteness into the abstruse difficulties of Aristotle. The analyses which you then made for me of the Ethics, Rhetoric, and Poetics of that great philosopher. I still preserve as a memorial of you. I never refer to them without regretting that your Oxford examination for a degree took place previously to the introduction of the new system, under which men are now arranged in distinct classes, according to their real merits, as I am well assured that the public appearance which you *then* made (for I was myself present on the glorious occasion) would *now* fully entitle you to the very highest honors which our University can bestow.”

“He was always considered by me,” writes the Rev. William Russell, Fellow of Magdalen College, “and by other members of the College in which we were educated, to be a man of strong powers of mind, great industry and zeal for learning, and no ordinary degree of taste. His college exercises and compositions invariably displayed much genius and skill in argument; and the small poem on Sculpture, Architecture, and Painting, which gained the University Prize, given by the late Sir Roger Newdigate, on the first year of its establishment, was esteemed on all hands to be a superior specimen of talent. And I can truly say, that the reputation he acquired during his residence in Oxford, not only in our own Society, but in the University at large, remains fresh amongst us, though many years have elapsed since he left us, and many others of high talent have arisen during that period to attract our admiration.”

The venerable President of his College, Dr. Routh, bore similar testimony:—“I can safely say, that amongst the non-foundations of Magdalen College, who are generally about twelve in number, I do not recollect any one, during my long residence in it, who has had an equal share of reputation with yourself for great natural abilities, united with extensive literary acquirements. I remember the satisfaction I generally felt at the appearance you made at the examinations in classical authors, held thrice in the year within the College, and have often perused with delight that elegant composition which obtained a University prize, and whose only fault seemed to be that it was too short.”

The Rev. Charles Thorp, formerly a Fellow of University College, Oxford, says, “Your char-

Little did these Examiners and admiring friends imagine with what feelings John Wilson had walked into the schools that morning, "in the full conviction that he was to be plucked." Little did they know, as they propounded difficulties in Greek choruses and the *Ethics*, of the more oppressing thought that had made the last ten nights so dreadful,—“what had happened with regard to *her*!” Compared with that, what to him was Hecuba, or Antigone either? On this subject, let it be noted, he did not open his lips to the beloved friend whom he had expressly summoned, that he might tell him “what had happened.” And that sympathizing friend, who had hastened to hear and to console, religiously held his peace, and “could not begin to speak of it, after having seen the state into which it threw him;” and had to go elsewhere for information. It is altogether a singular exhibition of character on both sides, reminding one of those old Easterns who sat seven days speechless before their friend, “for they saw that his grief was very great.”

What it was that had “happened with regard to *her*,” to bring him to this state of wretchedness, may be gathered from his own letter, apparently written about the same time, to Findlay:—

“October 19, 1807.

“MY DEAREST ROBERT:—I have often wished to write to you, but to such an intimate friend as you I know not how to speak. There is not one ray of hope that I shall ever be able to make my mother listen for a moment to the subject nearest my heart. I know her violent feelings too well; I even know this, that if I were to acquaint her with my love for Margaret, we never could again be on the footing of mother and son.

actor and talents were known to me when I was a tutor at Oxford, and yourself a student there, before I had the pleasure of a personal acquaintance with you; an acquaintance I sought and prized, and have always wished to improve.” “Those who, like myself,” says Archdeacon Burney, “loved and admired you at Oxford, would, I am sure, feel pleasure in bearing a just testimony to your acuteness of discrimination, your keen spirit of inquiry, your extended reading, your copiousness in illustration, which even then rendered you eminent above your fellows.” “The course of studies at Oxford,” says Sir Charles E. Grey (formerly of Oriel College, Oxford, afterwards Chief-Justice of Bengal), “had shortly before been placed upon a new and excellent footing; and I shall always consider it a fortunate incident in my life that I fell on that period when all members of the University were full of zeal for the new improvements, and were engaging in the course that was opened for them with an ardor which it was not to be hoped could be sustained for many years. With what eagerness and assiduity were the writings of the moral philosophers, orators, historians, and tragedians of Greece and Rome read, and almost learned by heart. The distinguished examination which you passed, the prize which you obtained, and the general reputation which you acquired, are proofs that you were amongst the most successful students of the day.”

“All this may be to you inexplicable; that I cannot help; that it is the fact, I know to my sorrow. Blair is with me, and unless he had been so, I must have died. Before my examination, my state of mind got dreadful. He sat up several nights with me, and at last I was examined and got my degree ‘cum laude,’ a matter certainly of indifference to me. I do not wish you to come to London if you could, for I shall not be there. The only reason I have for writing is to show you how perfectly I am your friend, and ever will be so, for by your last I saw my silence had surprised you. If I feel more at home to-morrow, I will write you again, but unless I saw yourself I could not tell you my feelings and future plans of existence, which must be joyless and unendeared. Thine eternally,
“J. WILSON.”

“OXFORD, 1807.

“MY DEAR BOB:—I received your letter this morning, and it has confirmed me in what I feared, that I have written some infernal thing or another to Margaret: the truth is, that about the time I wrote her I was in a curious way, as indeed I am now, from having taken laudanum, not exactly with a view to annihilation, but spirits. That blessed beverage played the devil with my intellects, and absolutely destroyed my capacity of distinguishing right from wrong, or what was serious from ludicrous. At times I was in the same state as if I were as drunk as Chloe; and at others, sober, sad, and sunk in despair and misery. If this be any excuse to you for what I may have said, of which I do not recollect one word, you can employ it as such; if not, you are a severer judge than I have ever yet found you. As to saying any thing savage to Margaret, I scarcely think that possible, for why should even a madman do that? I have since written her, and hope whatever offences I have committed, I have her forgiveness. If you regard my soul, go again to her and try to explain my conduct as best you can, for I am unable to justify myself, my thoughts are so dreadful when I wish to write to her. This love of mine has been a fine thing; first kept me many years in misery, and now perhaps alienated from me the friendship and good opinion of those I love and regard; however, I need not expatiate much on that. As to the other parts of your letter, I can say nothing to them. Do you really imagine that I would easily give up the prospect of eternal felicity? I have corresponded with

—— often upon the subject, and know too well how it is. I shall not injure them so far as to let you know all they have said on the subject; the enclosed letter may give you some faint idea of it, as it is the mildest and most fitted to inspire hope of them all.

“J. W.”

We are now approaching the close of this tender episode. That summer the lovers met, and the obstructing clouds for a brief space clear away in the light of mutual confidence and utter joy. But the obstacles remain, nevertheless; and as soon as he is left alone, he becomes a prey to the most distracting fears and perplexities. Thus he writes to his dear Robert from “Bowness,” some time, as I conjecture, in the autumn of 1807:—

“MY DEAREST ROBERT:—I have often said that I would write you a long letter, and as often have I tried it; but such a crowd of feelings of all different kinds comes across my heart, that I sit for hours with a paper before me, and never write a single word. Indeed, even if we were together, I know not if I could say much to you, for with me all is strange and inextricable perplexity. I love, and am beloved to distraction, and often the gleams of hope illumine the path of futurity with a glory hardly to be looked at; while, again, extravagance of love seems only extravagance of folly, and excess of fondness excess of despair. I am betimes the most miserable and the happiest of created beings. So far I am better than during former years, when I had no hope, no wish to live. Now, indeed, my sadness almost wholly regards Margaret. For myself, I have been inured to wretchedness, and though, in some respects, or as far as it made me a man of worse conduct than of principles, I have yielded to the common effect of misery, in future I could look forward to dreary solitude of spirit with some tolerable degree of composure. But for her, whose peace is far dearer to me than my own, I have many dreadful anticipations. Should our union be rendered impracticable, and Miss W. to die, an event which, I trust in God, is far, far distant, God only knows what would become of her.”

In anticipation of these obstacles being removed, he turns his thoughts to home, and addresses a beautiful short poem (“My Cottage”) to Margaret. His spirit then did

“Travel like a summer sun,
Itself all glory, and its path all joy;”*

but this bright change was of brief duration. The curious would doubtless desire to know something more of why this “love never found its earthly close,” while others will rest satisfied with such conclusions as may be drawn from the following expressions, met with in letters addressed to his dear friend, Robert Findlay: “I feel myself in a great measure an alien in my own family, and all this is the consequence of that my most unfortunate attachment.” And once more, in allusion to this subject, he says: “I know enough now to know that my mother would die if this happened.”

The following fragment will terminate this story:—

“I have made up my mind not to visit Torrance at present, in which case I must not come to Glasgow. This resolution, I hope, is right. It has been made after many an hour of (painful) reflection. This I know, that were I to go, I could not bear to look on my mother’s face, a feeling which must not be mine. Enclosed is a letter to Margaret. If you could take it yourself, and see how it is received, it would please me much; yet there may be people there, in which case that would be useless.

“Thine till death in joy or sorrow.

“BOWNESS, *December 22.*”

We know not how they parted, but this we may imagine, that “they caught up the whole of love, and uttered it,” and bade adieu forever.

CHAPTER V.

LIFE AT ELLERAY.

1807–1811.

IN 1807, John Wilson concluded his University career, the brilliancy of which, for many years, gave his name a prestige worthy of long remembrance within the academic walls of Oxford. He loved the beautiful fields of England, and, with all the world before him where to choose a place of rest, he turned his steps from his

* *Miscellaneous Poems.*