

MEMOIR OF JOHN WILSON.

CHAPTER I.

BOYHOOD.

THE epithets “pretty” and “pleasant,” more than once applied in the writings of Professor Wilson to the place of his birth, are not those which the passing traveller would now think most appropriate to the town of Paisley, where the smoke and steam of countless factories incessantly roll over the inky waters of once fair-flowing Cart. And yet it was not the mere partiality of filial affection that made it seem both pretty and pleasant to his eyes, for such it truly was in the days when he first knew it. And has it not still its pleasant walks and pretty gardens, and its grand old Abbey? Do not green Gleniffer and Stanley Shaw still flourish near enough to be enjoyed? Is it not pleasant still to look beyond fields and trees to the sacred spot called Elderslie? And though gauze and cotton be even more than ever the chief concern of Paisley, has it not still its poets and musicians and men of taste, to make it a “pleasant” habitation, in spite of smoke and steam and sluggish waters? No native of that respectable old town need be ashamed of his birthplace, and justly is it proud of him who stands foremost among all its sons.

A somewhat gloomy-looking house in a dingy court at the head of the High Street, now used as a lecture-hall for the artisans of Paisley, is preserved as classic ground, under the name of “Wilson’s Hall.” In that house the poet was born, on the 18th of May, 1785. At no great distance stands the family residence, to which, after the birth of John, their first son but fourth child, Mr. and

Mrs. Wilson removed. It is a stately building, with large gardens, and an imposing entrance. The windows to the back command an extensive view of a beautiful undulating country, with the nearer prospect of a woody vale and rich sloping fields, a landscape sufficiently attractive to have awakened the love of nature in a child's heart, and to have held dominion there in after days, when memory recalled the home of youth, and those delightful pictures of boyhood's life which were immortalized in the "Recreations of Christopher North." Of Mr. Wilson, senior, I know little more than that he was a wealthy man, having realized his fortune in trade as a gauze manufacturer. The integrity of his character and his mercantile successes gave him an important position in society, and he is still remembered in Paisley as having been in his own day one of the richest and most respected of its community; while his house possessed a great attraction in his admirable and beautiful wife, a lady of rare intellect, wit, humor, wisdom, and grace. Her maiden name was Margaret Sym. Her brother Robert is not unknown to fame, as the "Timothy Tickler" of the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*. Her mother, of the Dunlops of Garnkirk, was lineally descended, by the female side, from the great Marquis of Montrose. Whether this gentle blood had any thing to do with the physical characteristics of the family or not, certain it is that Mrs. Wilson, her sons and daughters, were remarkably distinguished by personal beauty, of a refined and dignified type. An aspect so stately as that of the old lady is not often to be seen. Nor was she less gifted with qualities more durable than beauty; for ere long she was called upon, by the death of her husband, to exercise the wisdom and strength of her character in rearing a large family of sons and daughters. How well she performed that duty was best seen in the reverence and love of her children, all of whom, save two sons and a daughter, lived to shed tears over her grave, and to give proof, in their own lives, of that admirable training which had taught them betimes the way that they should go.*

* It will not be out of place here to give the names of the ten children born to Mr. Wilson and his wife:—

1. Grace Wilson, married George Cashel, Esquire, Ireland; died, 1835. 2. Jane Wilson, died unmarried, 1835. 3. Margaret Wilson, married John Ferrier, Esquire, W. S., Edinburgh; died, 1831. 4. John Wilson, married Miss Jane Penny; died, 1854. 5. Andrew Wilson, married Miss Aitken, Glasgow; died, 1812. 6. Henrietta Wilson, died young. 7. William Wilson, died in infancy. 8. Robert Sym Wilson, married Miss Eliza Penny. 9. Elizabeth Wilson, married Sir John McNeill, G. C. B. 10. James Wilson, married Miss Isabella Keith, Edinburgh; died, 1856

In his childish years, John Wilson was as beautiful and animated a creature as ever played in the sunshine. That passion for sports, and especially angling, in which his strong nature found such characteristic vent in after years, was developed at an age when most little boys are still hardly safe beyond the nurse's apron-strings. He was but three years old when he rambled off one day, armed with a willow wand, duly furnished with a thread line and crooked pin, to fish in a "wee burnie," of which he had taken note, away a good mile from home. Unknown to any one, already appreciating the fascination of an undisturbed and solitary "cast," the blue-eyed and golden-haired adventurer sallied forth to the water-side, to spend a day of unforgotten delight, lashing away at the rippling stream, with what success we may perhaps find recorded in Fytte First of "Christopher in his Sporting Jacket:"—

"A tug—a tug! With face ten times flushed and pale by turns ere you could count ten, he at last has strength, in the agitation of his fear and joy, to pull away at the monster; and there he lies in his beauty among the gowans and the greensward, for he has whapped him right over his head and far away, a fish a quarter of an ounce in weight, and, at the very least, two inches long! Off he flies, on wings of wind, to his father, mother, and sisters, and brothers and cousins, and all the neighborhood, holding the fish aloft in both hands, still fearful of its escape; and, like a genuine child of corruption, his eyes brighten at the first blush of cold blood on his small fummy fingers. He carries about with him, up-stairs and down-stairs, his prey upon a plate; he will not wash his hands before dinner, for he exults in the silver scales adhering to the thumb-nail that scooped the pin out of the baggy's maw; and at night, 'cabined, cribbed, confined,' he is overheard murmuring in his sleep—a thief, a robber, and a murderer, in his yet infant dreams!"

While the future Christopher was thus early asserting himself out of doors, the "Professor" also was displaying his capacity in the nursery. There his activity and animation kept the little circle alive from morning to night. With his sisters he was a great favorite; they looked up to his superior intelligence, and wondered at all he did. Of in-door amusements, the most exciting to their youthful minds and his precocious genius was that of pulpit oratory. One sermon he used himself to speak of as being a *chef-*

d'œuvre. So much was it appreciated, that he was continually called on to repeat it. Standing upon a chair, arranged to look as like a pulpit as possible, he would address his juvenile congregation, along with the more mature audience of nurses and other servants assembled to listen to his warning voice. The text chosen was one from his own fertile brain, drawn from that field of experience in which he was already becoming an adept, and handled not without shrewd application to moral duties. These were the words: "There was a fish, and it was a deil o' a fish, and it was ill to its young anes." In this allegory of life he displayed both pathos and humor, drawing a contrast between good and evil parents that excited sympathy and laughter, while the sermon was delivered with a vehemence of natural eloquence that, in a boy of five years old, may well have entitled him to be looked upon as a genius.

One other anecdote may here be given, which he used to tell with much humor. As a child, he was very fond of drawing, an accomplishment he regretted in after life having laid aside, before he had acquired sufficient skill to enable him to sketch from nature. One day he had copied a tiger, and, no doubt, having given to the animal considerable characteristic vigor, his mother—with natural mother's pride—treasured the specimen highly. He was not aware of the sensation this juvenile success in art had created, till one morning a visitor was announced when he was present, and was scarcely seated, ere, to his surprise, she was accosted by Mrs. Wilson with the words, pronounced in broad Scotch, as was the manner in those days with many well-educated people, "Have ye seen oure John's teegar?" when forthwith the "teegar" was exhibited to the admiring eyes of her guest. It was not long before "oure John's teegar" was well known in Paisley.*

The time had now come when the training of the nursery was to be followed by regular education at school, and John was committed to the tuition of Mr. James Peddie, English teacher, Paisley. To a child who loved to learn, the drudgery of a first apprenticeship at school would never be irksome. A year or two with Mr.

* In Flight First of "The Moors," I find an allusion to this work of art. "Strange that, with all our love of nature and of art, we never were a painter. True that in boyhood we were no contemptible hand at a lion or a tiger—and sketches by us of such cats springing or preparing to spring in keelivine, dashed off some fifty or sixty years ago, might well make Edwin Landseer stare."

Peddie prepared him to enter upon more arduous studies. He left the teacher of his childhood with regret.

The kindness and partiality with which he loved to speak of his friends in Paisley, may be seen in the words he made use of in reference to this old friend, as he was taking leave of duties he had followed for upwards of half a century. They are honorable alike to master and pupil:—

“It was his method rather to persuade than enforce, and they all saw, even amidst the thoughtlessness of boyhood, that their teacher was a good man; and therefore it was their delight and pride to please him. Sometimes a cloud would overshadow his brow, but it was succeeded by a smile of pleasure as gracious and benign as the summer sky. In his seminary, children of all ranks sat on the same form. In that school there was no distinction, except what was created by superior merit and industry, by the love of truth, and by ability. The son of the poor man was there on the same form with the sons of the rich, and nothing could ever drive him from his rightful *status* but misconduct or disobedience. No person would deny that the office of a teacher of youth was one of the most important in this world’s affairs. A surly or ignorant master might scathe those blossoms, which a man of sense and reflection, by his fostering care, would rear up till they became bright consummate flowers of knowledge and virtue.”

The Manse of the neighboring parish of Mearns was the next place fixed upon by Mr. Wilson to continue the education of his son; and there he found a *dolce pedagogo* fitted in every way to carry on the instruction in knowledge and virtue so well begun under the good Mr. Peddie. The Rev. George M’Latchie won no less a share of his pupil’s veneration—“the minister in whose house he passed many of his sweetest youthful days, and who regarded him with a paternal, as he always looked up to *him* with a filial regard.” That warm heart was ever ready with its tribute of affection to the memory of good men; and amid the tender recollections of the past, hallowed by sentiments of gratitude, no place is more touchingly alluded to than “the dear parish of Mearns.” Whoever wishes to find a perfect description of its physical features, as well as most exquisite pictures of the youthful pleasures on which memory cast back a glory, must turn to the pages of the *Recreations*, particularly to the papers entitled “Our Parish,” “Christo-

pher in his *Sporting Jacket*," and "*May Day*." From the latter I cannot resist the quotation of the opening paragraph, perhaps the most beautiful of his many apostrophes to that beloved region:—

"Art thou beautiful, as of old, O wild, moorland, sylvan, and pastoral Parish! the Paradise in which our spirit dwelt beneath the glorious dawning of life—can it be, beloved world of boyhood, that thou art indeed beautiful as of old? Though round and round thy boundaries in half an hour could fly the flapping dove—though the martins, wheeling to and fro that ivied and wall-flowered ruin of a castle, central in its own domain, seem in their more distant flight to glance their crescent wings over a vale rejoicing apart in another kirk-spire, yet how rich in streams, and rivulets, and rills, each with its own peculiar murmur, art thou, with thy bold bleak exposure, sloping upwards in ever lustrous undulations to the portals of the East! How endless the interchange of woods and meadows, glens, dells, and broomy nooks, without number, among thy banks and braes! And then of human dwellings!—how rises the smoke, ever and anon, into the sky, all neighboring on each other, so that the cock-crow is heard from homestead to homestead; while, as you wander onwards, each roof still rises unexpectedly, and as solitary as if it had been far remote. Fairest of Scotland's thousand parishes—neither Highland nor Lowland—but undulating—let us again use the descriptive word—like the sea in sunset after a day of storms—yes, Heaven's blessing be upon thee! Thou art indeed beautiful as of old!"

Of the precocity of this boy there is evidence enough; but, unlike most precocious children, he was foremost in the play-ground as well as at the task. With him both work and play were equally enjoyed, and he threw his whole energy into the one or other in its turn. In school he was every inch the scholar; but when the books were laid aside, and the fresh air played on his bright cheeks, he was king of all sports, the foremost and the maddest in every jocund enterprise. A pleasant idea of the relation in which the kind minister of the Mearns stood to his pupils, is given in a note from Sir John Maxwell of Pollok, who was a schoolfellow of my father:

"He was above me in the ranks of the school, in stature, and mental acquirements. I may mention, as an illustration of the energy, activity, and vivacity of his character, that one morning, I

having been permitted to go and fish in the burn near the kirk, and having caught a fine trout, was so pleased, that I repaired to the minister's study to exhibit my prize to Dr. M'Latchie, who was then reading Greek with him. He, seeing my trout, started up; and, addressing his reverend teacher, said, 'I *must* go now to fish.' Leave was granted, and I willingly resigned to him my rod and line; and before dinner he re-appeared with a large dish of fish, on which he and his companions feasted, not without that admiration of his achievement which youth delights to express and always feels."

This simple relation, to those who knew the man in after life, and have heard him speak of the happy hours which gave, in his eyes, so great a charm to "Our Parish," suggests one of those bright days he loved to wander to in memory, long after the sunny visions of youth had glided into the silent past. "Such days," says he, "seem now to us—as memory and imagination half restore and half create the past into such weather as may have shone over the bridal morn of our first parents in Paradise—to have been frequent—nay, to have lasted all the summer long—when our boyhood was bright from the hands of God. Each of those days was in itself a life!"*

It is impossible to overrate the influence of such a training as young Wilson had, during these happy years, in forming that singular character, in virtue of which he stands out as unique and inimitable among British men of genius, as Jean Paul, *Der Einzige*, among his countrymen. In no other writings do we find so inexhaustible and vivid a reminiscence of the feelings of boyhood. There was in that heart of his a perpetual well-spring of youthful emotion. In contact with him, we are made to feel as if this man were in himself the type, never to grow old, of all the glorious bright-eyed youths that we have known in the world; capable of entering, with perfect luxury of abandonment, into their wildest frolics, but also of transfiguring their pastimes into mirrors of things more sublime—of rising, without strain or artifice, from the level of common and material objects into the serene heights of poetic, philosophic, and religious contemplation. Not in vain was this brilliant youth, with his capacity for every form of activity, bodily and mental, his passionate love of nature, and his deep rev-

* "Soliloquy on the Seasons," Wilson's *Works*.

erence for all things high and pure, placed in the springtime of his days amid the manifold wholesome influences of a Scottish manse and school in the "wild, moorland, sylvan, pastoral parish" of Mearns. For truly has he himself remarked of the importance of this period of life, "Some men, it is sarcastically said, are boys all life long, and carry with them their puerility to the grave. 'Twould be well for the world were there in it more such men. By way of proving their manhood, we have heard grown-up people abuse their own boyhood, forgetting what our great philosophical poet—after Milton and Dryden—has told them, that

‘The boy is father of the man,’

and thus libelling the author of their existence. . . . Not only are the foundations dug and laid in boyhood, of all the knowledge and the feelings of our prime, but the ground-flat too built, and often the entire second story of the superstructure, from the windows of which, the soul, looking out, beholds nature in her state, and leaps down, unafraid of a fall on the green or white bosom of earth, to join with hymns the front of the procession. The soul afterwards perfects her palace—building up tier after tier of all imaginable orders of architecture—till the shadowy roof, gleaming with golden cupolas, like the cloud-region of the setting sun, set the heavens ablaze.”*

It were a vain task to attempt, in any words but his own, to recall some of those boyish experiences, which made that life in the Mearns so rich a seed-field of bright memories and imaginations. I must, therefore, draw upon the pages of the *Recreations* for a few pictures of "Young Kit," as he appeared to himself looked at through the vista of half a life. After describing how his youthful passion for the observation of nature impelled him, when a mere child, to wander away among the moors and woods, he goes on:—

“Once it was feared that poor wee Kit was lost; for having set off all by himself, at sunrise, to draw a night-line from the distant Black Loch, and look at a trap set for a glède, a mist overtook him on the moor on his homeward way, with an eel as long as himself hanging over his shoulder, and held him prisoner for many hours within its shifting walls, frail indeed, and opposing no resistance to the hand, yet impenetrable to the feet of fear as the stone dungeon’s

* Wilson's *Works*.

thralldom. If the mist had remained, that would have been nothing ; only a still cold wet seat on a stone ; but as ' a trot becomes a gallop soon, in spite of curb and rein,' so a Scotch mist becomes a shower—and a shower a flood—and a flood a storm—and a storm a tempest—and a tempest thunder and lightning—and thunder and lightning heavenquake and earthquake—till the heart of poor wee Kit quaked, and almost died within him in the desert. In this age of Confessions, need we be ashamed to own, in the face of the whole world, that we sat us down and cried ! The small brown moorland bird, as dry as a toast, hopped out of his heather-hole, and cheerfully cheeped comfort. With crest just a thought lowered by the rain the green-backed, white-breasted peaseweep, walked close by us in the mist ; and, sight of wonder, that made even in that quandary by the quagmire our heart beat with joy—lo ! never seen before, and seldom since, three wee peaseweeps, not three days old, little bigger than shrew-mice, all covered with blackish down, interspersed with long white hair, running after their mother ! But the large hazel eye of the she peaseweep, restless even in the most utter solitude, soon spied us glowering at her, and her young ones, through our tears ; and not for a moment doubting (Heaven forgive her for the shrewd but cruel suspicion !) that we were Lord Eglinton's gamekeeper, with a sudden shrill cry that thrilled to the marrow in our cold backbone, flapped and fluttered herself away into the mist, while the little black bits of down disappeared, like devils, into the moss. The croaking of the frogs grew terrible. And worse and worse, close at hand, seeking his lost cows through the mist, the bellow of the notorious red bull ! We began saying our prayers ; and just then the sun forced himself out into the open day, and, like the sudden opening of the shutters of a room, the whole world was filled with light. The frogs seemed to sink among the powheads ; as for the red bull who had tossed the tinker, he was cantering away, with his tail towards us, to a lot of cows on the hill ; and hark—a long, a loud, an oft-repeated halloo ! Rab Roger, honest fellow, and Leezy Muir, honest lass, from the manse, in search of our dead body ! Rab pulls our ears lightly, and Leezy kisses us from the one to the other, wrings the rain out of our long yellow hair (a pretty contrast to the small gray sprig now on the crown of our pericranium, and the thin tail acock behind) ; and by-and-by stepping into Hazel-Deanhead for a drap and a ' chitterin' piece,' by the

time we reach the manse we are as dry as a whistle—take our scold and our pawmies from the minister—and, by way of punishment and penance, after a little hot whiskey-toddy, with brown sugar and a bit of bun, are bundled off to bed in the daytime!”

Could any thing be more deliciously vivid than that picture of little Kit and the maternal peaseweep “glowering” at each other in the midst of the Scotch mist?

Let us see him now a few years older, and some inches taller, armed with that remarkable piece of artillery, “Muckle-mou’d Meg,” of which he has himself given this most inimitable description, or one only equalled by Hood’s glorious schoolboy epistles:—

“There had been from time immemorial, it was understood, in the Manse, a duck-gun of very great length, and a musket that, according to an old tradition, had been out both in the Fifteen and Forty-five. There were ten boys of us, and we succeeded by rotation to gun or musket, each boy retaining possession for a single day only; but then the shooting season continued all the year. They must have been of admirable materials and workmanship; for neither of them so much as once burst during the Seven Years’ War. The musket, who, we have often since thought, must surely rather have been a blunderbuss in disguise, was a perfect devil for kicking when she received her discharge; so much so, indeed, that it was reckoned creditable for the smaller boys not to be knocked down by the recoil. She had a very wide mouth—and was thought by us ‘an awfu’ scatterer;’ a qualification which we considered of the very highest merit. She carried any thing we chose to put into her—there still being of all her performances a loud and favorable report—balls, buttons, chuckystanes, slugs, or hail. She had but two faults: she had got addicted, probably in early life, to one habit of burning priming, and to another of hanging fire; habits of which it was impossible, for us at least, to break her by the most assiduous hammering of many a new series of flints; but such was the high place she justly occupied in the affection and admiration of us all, that faults like these did not in the least detract from her general character. Our delight, when she did absolutely and positively and *bonâ fide* ‘go off;’ was in proportion to the comparative rarity of that occurrence; and as to hanging fire—why, we used to let her take her own time, contriving to keep her at the level as long

as our strength sufficed, eyes shut perhaps, teeth clenched, face ginning, and head slightly averted over the right shoulder, till Muckle-mou'd Meg, who, like most other Scottish females, took things leisurely, went off at last with an explosion like the blowing up of a rock."

If we would see him, at a further stage of boyhood, engaged in still more exciting and boisterous sport, we would need to go back into the *mêlée* of the "Snowball Bicker of Pedmount,"* a quiet Homeric episode, to which it is impossible to do justice by an extract. Those who care, in short, to obtain as complete a picture of that boyish life as it is possible now to have, will find it for themselves in the pages of the *Recreations*, few of which are without some tender and graphic reminiscences of his early days. They are not, of course, to be always taken as literal descriptions of things that happened exactly as there painted; for, as he himself acutely observes, giving the *rationale* of such reminiscence:—"You must know that, unless it be accompanied with imagination, memory is cold and lifeless. . . . All minds, even the dullest, remember the days of their youth; but all cannot bring back the indescribable brightness of that blessed season. They who would know what they once were, must not merely recollect, but they must imagine the hills and valleys, if any such there were, in which their childhood played. . . . To imagine what he then heard and saw, he must imagine his own nature. He must collect from many vanished hours the power of his untamed heart, and he must, perhaps, transfuse also something of his own maturer mind into these dreams of his former being, thus linking the past with the present by a continuous chain, which, though often invisible, is never broken." That my father, in these pictures of his youth, did transfuse something of his maturer mind into the vision is manifest enough, and therein lies their peculiar charm and beauty. But of the general fidelity of the impression they convey there can be no doubt. As regards in particular that surpassing excellence in all physical sports which might sometimes appear to be the exaggeration of poetic fancy, there is sufficient testimony from contemporaries. Thus a school-fellow of his writes: "There were other boys five or six years his senior; but in all games, in running, in jumping, in hockey, he was the first and fastest; and he could run faster, and walk longer than

* Wilsons' *Works*.

any of us." Another says: "He excited our admiration by his excellence in fishing;" while, in regard to "mental superiority," he adds, "he was a capital scholar, and further in advance of the generality of the boys at Mearns than he outshone his competitors in after life."

That, with all this many-sided ability, and the undoubted consciousness of superior power, he was a prime favorite among his fellows, is not difficult to believe, when we find how affectionate and magnanimous was his nature; a nature in which the development of soul and body, of intellect and feeling, attained a harmony so rare. The combination of these gifts in such goodly proportion enabled him to enter, with a sympathy destitute of all affectation, into the feelings and pursuits of persons of the most diverse character; and throughout all the exuberance of his literary activity, much as there is in its earlier stages of impetuosity, and sometimes even *sansculottism*, there is nowhere, from beginning to end, one trace of malignity or envy. Even such was he in those happy boyish days, when he "bathed his feet in beauty" by the banks of the Yearn, and nourished "a youth sublime" in the pure and healthful atmosphere of the dear old Manse.

I pass with reluctance from this happy period, to which my father's heart ever turned with a freshness of delight which years and sorrows seemed only to increase. The chapter may fitly close with his own account of the feelings with which he bade farewell to that beloved parish, never mentioned without benediction and eulogium.

"Then this was to be our last year in the parish—now dear to us as our birthplace; nay, itself our very birthplace—for in it from the darkness of infancy had our soul been born. Once gone and away from the region of cloud and mountain, we felt that most probably never more should we return. For others, who thought they knew us better than we did ourselves, had chalked out a future life for young Christopher North—a life that was sure to lead to honor, and riches, and a splendid name. Therefore we determined, with a strong, resolute, insatiate spirit of passion, to make the most—the best—of the few months that remained to us of that, our wild, free, and romantic existence, as yet untrammelled by those inexorable laws, which, once launched into the world, all alike—young and old—must obey. Our books were flung aside—nor did our old

master and minister frown, for he grudged not to the boy he loved the remnant of the dream about to be rolled away like the dawn's rosy clouds. We demanded with our eye—not with our voice—one long holiday throughout that our last autumn, on to the pale farewell blossoms of the Christmas rose. With our rod we went earlier to the loch or river; but we had not known thoroughly our own soul—for now we angled less passionately, less perseveringly, than was our wont of yore, sitting in a pensive, a melancholy, a miserable dream, by the dashing waterfall or the murmuring wave. With our gun we plunged earlier in the morning into the forest, and we returned later at eve; but less earnest, less eager, were we to hear the cushat's moan from his yew-tree—to see the hawk's shadow on the glade, as he hung aloft on the sky. A thousand dead thoughts came to life again in the gloom of the woods, and we sometimes did wring our hands in an agony of grief, to know that our eyes should not behold the birch-tree brightening there with another spring.

“Then every visit we paid to cottage or to shieling was felt to be a farewell; there was something mournful in the smiles on the sweet faces of the ruddy rustics, with their silken snoods, to whom we used to whisper harmless love-meanings, in which there was no guile. We regarded the solemn toil-and-care-worn countenances of the old with a profounder emotion than had ever touched our hearts in the hour of our more thoughtless joy; and the whole life of those dwellers among the woods, and the moors, and the mountains, seemed to us far more affecting now that we saw deeper into it, in the light of a melancholy sprung from the conviction that the time was close at hand when we should mingle with it no more. The thoughts that possessed our most secret bosom failed not by the least observant to be discovered in our open eyes. They who had liked us before, now loved us; our faults, our follies, the insolences of our reckless boyhood, were all forgotten; whatever had been our sins, pride towards the poor was never among the number; we had shunned not stooping our head beneath the humblest lintel; our mite had been given to the widow who had lost her own; quarrelsome with the young we might sometimes have been, for boyhood is soon heated, and boils before a defying eye; but in one thing at least we were Spartans—we revered the head of old age.

“And many at last were the kind—some the sad—farewells, ere long whispered by us at gloaming among the glens. Let them rest for ever silent amidst that music in the memory which is felt, not heard—its blessing mute though breathing, like an inarticulate prayer!”

CHAPTER II.

GLASGOW COLLEGE.

1797–1803.

“LONG, long, long ago, the time when we danced hand in hand with our golden-haired sister! Long, long, long ago, the day on which she died; the hour, so far more dismal than any hour that can now darken us on this earth, when her coffin descended slowly, slowly into the horrid clay, and we were borne, deathlike and wishing to die, out of the churchyard, that from that moment we thought we could never enter more.” That touching reminiscence of his golden-haired sister, which came back among the visions of a merry Christmas long after,* points to what was probably John Wilson’s first deep experience of sorrow; and it is no imaginary picture of the scene it recalled. For even in those early years, and still more as life advanced, he was intensely susceptible to emotions of grief, as well as of gladness. A heavier trial awaited him at the threshold of the new life on which he was to enter after leaving the manse of Mearns in his twelfth year. He had seen the yellow leaves fall, on to the close of that last memorable autumn which finished his happy school-time, and now he was summoned home to see his father die. As he stood at the head of the grave, chief mourner, and heard the dull earth rattling over the coffin, his emotions so overcame him that he fell to the ground in a swoon, and had to be carried away. Such an effect, on a frame more than commonly robust, indicated a depth of feeling and passion not often seen in our clime among boys, or, in its outer manifestations

* “Christmas Dreams,” Wilson’s *Works*.