

THAT the writer is always greater than his work is a trite saying, but it is a true one. We would vary the statement, and say a poet is always more poetical than his poems:—

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter.

Let him lavish never so much poetical wealth in his written lines, there is always a large reserve which abides with him, beautifying his life, and oozing out occasionally in careless talk with congenial souls, or dropping unwittingly from his pen in the familiar epistle or gossipy essay. The man whose name heads this paper was a striking example of this latent poetical reserve. There is much of sweetness, much of grace, and much of tenderness in the verse of his published volumes, but these volumes are merely samples of a vast fountain of untapped poetry. They gave us hints and droppings of a nature rich in the gentle humour which we admire in Lamb, in the classic spirit of Keats, and in a love of nature equal to that of the chronicler of the denizens of the woods and fields of Selborne. At the same time we get glimpses of a big heart brimful of pity towards those whose life-journey is one of struggle, hardship, and defeat; while towards man's companions in the animal world there is a knowledge and love exhibited which reminds one of the biographer of "Rab and his Friends".

Born in Turriff in 1818, WILLIAM FORSYTH, the son of a fairly well-to-do tradesman, received an excellent elementary education, and became a student at King's College in 1835. Various causes made his stay at the university a short one. His whole heart was not in the work; the writing of verses in his own tongue seems to have brought him more pleasure than the study of the dry grammatical outworks which have to be overcome before one can taste the riches of the literature of the old civilisations. The study of medicine, however, attracted him, and he pursued it with such success at Edinburgh that in 1838 he was acting as assistant to the regular medical practitioner in Turriff. Two voyages were made as surgeon in a Greenland whaler, after which he resumed his medical studies

at Edinburgh. A severe illness sent him back to Turriff, and his medical career came to an end. About this time (1841) he became a contributor to the columns of the *Aberdeen Herald*, and in 1842 he was engaged by Mr. Carruthers to the staff of the *Inverness Courier*. His stay in the Highland capital was not a long one; the sub-editorship of the *Herald* became vacant; the post was offered to, and accepted by, Mr. Forsyth. Thus in the year 1843 began his regular connection with the Aberdeen press—a connection which ended only with his life. In those days the profession of a journalist was very different from what it is in the highly-strung, feverish, high-pressure life of those who guide the newspaper press in the present days of daily and bi-daily papers. Life had more leisure in it, both for readers and writers, and we doubt if either has benefited by the change which has taken place. Journalists in those days knew little of shattered nerves and insomnia; they could smoke an honest pipe without consideration if their peptics would resent the liberty, and would have laughed to scorn the emasculated cigarette. Forsyth's duties on the *Herald* left him ample time for the pursuit of his simple out-of-doors recreations; fishing was a hobby with him; he studied the ways of animal existence with a loving enthusiasm. Insects, birds, and four-footed beasts were his "neighbours", and he loved his neighbour as himself. The flowers in his garden, the trees in the wood, were all familiar preachers; and many a precious sermon from an obscure text he got from them. Meanwhile the spring of poetry bubbled on, and small, neatly polished gems under the signature of "Whiff" from time to time appeared in the Saturday's paper.

In 1848 the late Mr. John Ramsay resigned his post in the *Aberdeen Journal*, and the proprietors secured the services of Mr. Forsyth as literary chief of the venerable organ. His work as a journalist and as a citizen is outside our scope, and has already been well told by a loving friend who knew him well, in the posthumous volume of "Selections" published in 1882. Suffice it to say he was a gentlemanly, broadly liberal guide, both in imperial and ecclesiastical politics, in questions of social reform, and on every local topic which moved the community during his reign in the Adelpi. He was an enthusi-

astic volunteer from the beginning of the movement, retiring, after 18 years' service, with the rank of major; and after contributing several patriotic songs to the service, which ought to make the jingo poets hide their diminished heads in disgust at their own blatant nonsense. After the *Journal* became a daily paper, his health broke down; he suffered severely from a cancerous affection of the tongue; died on the 21st June, 1879, and was buried in the beautiful Allnvaile Cemetery, where a chaste monument has been erected to his memory. He is described in the "Memoir" above referred to as square-built and muscular, of fully average size and height; not highly trained in the knowledge of the schools, but well read in books; with a great knowledge of men and nature; observant, silent, not talkative, distant and shy to strangers, but jovial, witty, and eloquent among his familiar friends, and an unrelenting foe to everything mean.

For many years Forsyth was a frequent contributor to *The Dublin University Magazine*, *Blackwood*, the *Cornhill*, *Good Words*, *Punch*, &c., and many of the poems in his "Idylls and Lyrics" appeared in one or other of these periodicals. Before touching, however, on his poetry, we would shortly refer to his delightful prose sketches which are preserved in the posthumous volume of 1882. The papers entitled "Neighbours" are delightful. Whether he is discoursing on John Ray's collies or Sandy Marr's retrievers (Fraoch and Cæsar ought to be as immortal as Rab); on birds or bees; on John Connel's donkey, Jamie; on the curiosities of John Mortlach's attic (John, himself, being the greatest curiosity of all); or on Sandy Baillie's cuckoo clock, and his waif of a brother in whom Sandy had so much faith; we are equally charmed, and regret that the man who could do so much word painting did not give a few larger canvases. The last named sketch is a bit of as fine pathos as we know, and to our mind is a proof of what we hinted at the beginning of this paper, that the author was capable of better work than he has left us, excellent though that work be. His papers "From the Roof of a Tramway Car" are fine specimens of witty wisdom and keen observation.

His longest poem, "The Martyrdom of Kelavane," pub-



lished in 1861, is a touching tale of the sufferings of a Christian princess of Georgia, abounding in great felicity of expression and force of imagination. It was very favourably received by the literary journals, and is highly prized by all lovers of good poetry. The use of a variety of metres in the various sections of the poem gives it a kind of patchwork effect which perhaps was inimical to its greater popularity. He did not write many purely local poems, but the few we have are all masterpieces.

The present generation will have some difficulty in realising the bitterness which for years characterised the discussion of the question of the fusion of the two Universities. The paper war of the "fusionists" and "anti-fusionists" raged for years—the brisk musketry rattle of newspaper correspondence was varied by big booms from the editorial ordnance, and the frequent rushing hiss of the pamphleteer's shell, but, like every other battle, it ended in a victory and a defeat. The boast could no longer be made, "England has two Universities: so has Aberdeen"—the two became one, and the "anti-fusionists" had to grin and bear it. Of the many literary productions of that squabble, the only one which will probably go down to posterity is "The Midnight Meetin' in Defence o' Marischal College. This Report whair of is dedicat' to the Committee o' Citizens for that Ilk. Aberdien: Robert Walker, 92 Braidgate". This small 20 page pamphlet—now a rarity among local book-hunters—stands alone as to form and matter among all the mass of literature in prose or verse ever called into existence by any question or incident connected with Aberdeen—in form, by its inimitable antique phraseology; and in matter, by the numerous poetical flashes which brighten up the weird, eery, moonlighty atmosphere of the whole piece. The reporter of the "meeting" tells how--

My lanely attic window luiks  
 On auld Yerl Marschal's honor'd biggin',  
 An' though I'm scant o' lear o' buiks,  
 I've blest it o'er frae foon' to riggin'.

I've blest the callants, oot an' in,  
 Wha chase the winter frae its wa's,  
 An' thocht upo' their merry din,  
 When simmer fills its silent ha's.

My heart, half fu' o' kindly wunder,  
 Wundrin' whar the lads micht be,  
 Has socht them mony a mile asunder,  
 O'er the lan' an' o'er the sea—

In hamely hooses, puir and prudent,  
 Socht my kind auld neighbors' cheer,  
 An' followed mony a pale-faced student,  
 Workin' for his winter's lear.

An' sae I sat the ither nicht,  
 Within my little lanely attic;  
 The win' aman' the chimneys sicht,  
 Till wi' the frost it grew asthmatic,

An' wheezy itsel' asleep, an' gae  
 An angry snore atween its snoozes,  
 An' waukin' frae a wink or sae,  
 Came hostin' through atween the hooses.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mune shone doon on auld Greyfreers,  
 Whan raise a weird-like licht within,  
 That never cam' frae chandaliers—  
 Ower saft for earth, ower pure for sin.

Within the kirk had convened a gathering of “ghaists”—old worthies which the threatened sacrilege to their beloved college had roused from their widely-scattered resting places, and who now filled the pews to protest against it as sturdily as “strange, dim shadows” could.

I couldna hear; of course, to hear,  
 Beyont my poo'r the distance pat it,  
 But, like Salvator's picturs drear,  
 Ilk face cam' oot wi' lookin' at it.

According to “auld use and wont”, the proceedings began with the singing of a psalm, the music of which in sweetness

Micht hae saffened airn;  
 Yet sadder still than sweet it raise,  
 As when a widow soothes her bairn,  
 An' stills her heart wi' hymns o' praise.

The fine pathos of the picture suggested by the last two lines would dilute down to several verses in the hands of a less cunning craftsman. The kirk being found too small for the congregation of spirits, who evidently required as much space

as they filled when bodily complete, a move was made to the College quadrangle, when the chairman, the Earl Marischal, was accommodated on a "sugar bowie". Speeches were made and resolutions passed condemnatory of the proposed change—the proceedings being diversified by a tulzie between a Covenanter and "the deil", who appeared as the inevitable disturbing element which turns up at all public meetings, even the best regulated of them. After the business on hand was finished, the strange meeting broke up after singing a parting song:—

Bonailie, O! Bonailie;  
 My hert is in this cup o' wine,  
 An' I wad pledge them baith richt leallie,  
 Dear love, to thee an' thine.  
 The bugles blaw,  
 We maun awa',  
 The foremost rank is thro' the Green—  
 Bonailie, O! Bonailie, O!  
 Adieu, dear hert o' Aberdeen.

Rich flashes of wit, sarcasm, and poetry occur constantly throughout the poem, and tempt quotation, but we must content ourselves with the following picture of Aberdeen and its vicinity in the "auld days":—

The toon had then but ten short streets;  
 To ilka hoose there wis a yaird;  
 But these auld yairds grew sturdy reets,  
 An' ilka gate had aye its gaird.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Don doon by the Braid Hill ran,  
 The tide weish up the Castle Brae;  
 An' whare lang miles o' pier-wark stan',  
 A half a score o' birlins lay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Whare flow'd the tide by Tarnty mill,  
 The iron horse has noo his sta';  
 Frae Justice Port to Windmill hill  
 Wis wavin' green wi' yairdins a'.

The Woo'manhill wis ae green knowe,  
 An' up the Denburn's bonny bank,  
 The playgrun' lay in Gilcom's howe,  
 The scene o' mony a merry prank.

\* \* \* \* \*

An' then-o'-days the quintra side  
 To Brimman an' the Loch o' Skene,  
 Wis ae bleak muir, o' sax miles wide,  
 Wi' scarce a single patch o' green.

Ae patch o' corn, ae rig o' girse,  
 Excep' aside some cottar's biel';  
 Whan riev'in' caterans came frae Birse,  
 They scarcely saw a cow to steal.

Thae Hielan' rogues war honest sae far,  
 Mair than some wham I micht mention,  
 They toom't a byre wi' nae palaver  
 On the score o' gweed intention.

Forsyth's "Idylls and Lyrics", published in 1872, is largely made up from contributions to the various magazines already referred to, and contains some of his best work. In the opening piece, the feelings and emotions excited by the sound of an old church bell are wrought into a poem, every stanza of which goes with an imitative swing of phrase, which, apart from poetry, soothes the soul like the song of birds on a summer Sabbath morning. It is the "jow" of the bell harmonised and set to words.

And still and well  
 The old kirk bell  
 Rings out, to tell us ever  
 The truth it told  
 The men of old,  
 Ere it tolled them o'er the river.

The sweet old bell that rang them home—  
 The faithful hearts that throb no more—  
 Will welcome in the years to come,  
 Will toll them down the silent shore.

It brings with it  
 Old memories,  
 Old presences, old voices,  
 Like some sweet song  
 Remembered long,  
 That saddens, yet rejoices.

God's acre bears a greener sward  
 As we grow old, and live to say,—  
 I have more friends in yon kirkyard  
 Than in the whole wide world this day.



The same magic of rhythm and music of cadence are discernible even in a greater degree in "The River", which, in spite of a certain suggestiveness of Poe, and of Southey's "How the waters come down at Lodore", is a wonderful poem. The music of the lines forms an effective tone picture. We hear the dancing little rill at its source, gradually gaining strength as it skips along, becoming boisterous in progress, tumbling noisily over its rocky impediments—then, wearied of its noise, rolling quietly but swiftly through a silent woodland. Then, having attained its maturity, it flows with the dignity of full growth past rich meadows and smiling homesteads, a blessing to all. There the picture ends, leaving us, in imagination, to follow it till it merges in a watery eternity.

His "Children in the Woods" is an idyllic picture of joyfulness and sunshine, the keynote of which is struck in the opening stanza, thus:—

Go gather sunbeams where they lie  
 On every hillside sleeping;  
 And put them where they will not die,  
 Within your young heart's keeping.

They paint with light, with loving hand, the blossom while it's blowing,  
 They tune the lays of every land, and bless where'er they fall;  
 Keep every day, like Summer gay, for yellow Autumns glowing,  
 For happy hearts have summer aye, and sunshine over all.

His "classic" poems, "Isis", "Hephaestus", "Daphne", and "The Conquest of Bacchus", are not so much to our mind as others in the volume. This may be owing to an unconscious comparison, which would not have interfered with our study of them had Keats never lived. The best to our mind is the first—that beautiful myth which is at once a picture of the daily life of the sun combating darkness, yet at last succumbing to it, to appear again in renewed splendour; and also of human life in its perpetual struggle, seeming destruction, and ultimate restoration. The following is part of the lament of Isis:—

And down amid the darkness she has gone,  
 With silent steps, majestic and slow,  
 And the wan glimmer of her silver horn,  
 And her pale child of sorrow newly born;  
 Amid the trouble of the waters wild;  
 And sat her down beside the vacant throne  
 Alone



With desolation and her child.  
 And there arose a long dread cry of Woe!  
     Woe unto Typhon the abhorred,  
 The unblessed spirit of the hungry deep,  
 That rose from the abyss and slew my lord  
     In the confiding glory of his sleep!  
     Whither shall Isis go,  
 Amid the pathless wastes of night and crime?  
 The beautiful Osiris is no more!  
 The day is dead! the night doth know no sleep!  
 And Typhon's scaly folds all curl and creep  
 About the darkness of the tomb of time  
     By sea and slimy shore.

Legendary and romantic poems like "The Rose-a-Lynn", "King Sigurd", and "The Flight of the Abencerrage" must be passed over, not for their inferiority to others, but, where all are excellent and deserve notice, we must make a selection, and we have still a few bits of local interest, which we cannot pass over. In passing, however, the ballad "The Rose-a-Lyndsaye" has a history which is of some interest. An intimate friend of Forsyth's—now one of our best known poets, and whose knowledge of the subject warranted the assertion—declared that he believed he could at once detect a genuine ancient ballad from the best modern imitation. In Forsyth's house one night he was handed a copy of a supposed ancient ballad, beginning:—

There are seven fair flowers in yon green wood,  
     On a bush in the woods o' Lyndsaye;  
 There are sax braw flowers an' ae bonny bud,  
     Oh! the bonniest flower in Lyndsaye.  
 An' weel I luve the bonny rathe rose—  
     The bonny, bonny Rose-a-Lyndsaye;  
 An' I'll big my bower o' the forest-boughs,  
     An' I'll dee in the green woods o' Lyndsaye.

The ballad was read, and the hue and flavour of the antique were so well managed that the critic declared it a genuine old ballad, and a perfect gem. The playful fraud was of course confessed, and few will wonder at the critic falling into the trap. The late Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, in a letter to the author, says, regarding this ballad—"I had never previously heard who was the author of the 'Rose o' Lyndsaye', which has always been a great favourite of mine and of my

daughters ; and if ever the 'Lives of the Lindsays' are reprinted, I need not say I shall endeavour to do justice to the author's name".

In the year 1872 a series of sketches entitled "How we manage at our Board", written by a well-known and respected citizen, appeared in the columns of the *Daily Free Press*. These sketches, drawn with pre-Raphaelite fidelity, showed the foolish and wicked absurdity of Parochial Boards treating all cases according to hard and fast fixed rules, instead of considering every case on its own merits. Forsyth was much pleased and interested with them, and as a contribution on the rational side wrote "The Hoose", which, however, was not published till ten years after. The pathetic, almost tragic, figure of the old woman pleading, with a certain remanent air of honest pride, for "auchteen pence a-week to pay my rent", but who is offered instead the cold comfort of "the hoose", excites a keen and intolerant reprobation of the system, and a severely implied censure of those whom it may concern. How true the picture of the poor old supplicant, having at last determined to face "the board", putting on her poor best, "for a' my folk were decent aye an' douce" :—

When I set oot on that sair earan' bent,  
I took the back streets, fu' I cu'd na tell,  
For few kent me, but I thocht ilk ane kent  
Me an' my earan' just as weel's mysel'.

I wis like ane half dazed or waur o' drink,  
I turn'd again four times ere I set oot,  
Like some bit bairnie shiverin' o' the brink  
O' the wan water, fley't to weet a fute.

It's weel we kenna what's afore us here,  
Or folk's herts wad gi'e way—we're a' sae weak,  
Aye till the push come. Though to seek wis sair,  
To be refused what wis sae sair to seek

Made me just fauld my hands an' think a wee  
On them that's gane, an' winner what comes neist,  
I thocht what my gudeman wad say, for he  
Paid scot an' lot fu' thretty year at least.

How little would make her contentment blossom into happiness! Her neighbours are kind, and her "wee bit room" is all

that links her to the past, and guides her eye to a reunited future with her loved and lost :—

I had a gude gudeman an' twa braw lads,  
 An' ae bit lassie bairn, as white as sna',  
 An' aye I think the tie o' natur' hauds  
 Wi' them as weel as me though they're awa'.

For when the winter nichts are lang an' caul'  
 There comes a saft warm air thro' my wee room,  
 Nae frae the deein' aimers, nor the faul'  
 O' my thin gown, but breaths o' balm an' bloom,

The summer sweets o' the lang 'Leventh o' June,  
 An' fans me like the wavin' o' a wing ;  
 I ken they're there, although I hear nae soun',  
 I feel there presence like a nat'ral thing.

An' what-for-no? Death isna king o'er a,  
 Love conquered ance, an' till the great doom's crack  
 Will conquer aye—the michtier o' the twa,  
 An' keep the heart ties hael that death wad brak.

As a sample of his lightness of touch and lyric grace we may quote a couple of stanzas of his lament for the removal of the old stone seat “ that eased the Stocket Brae ”, and which we believe will revive some lang-syne tender thoughts in the breasts of not a few who are now on the downward slope of life :—

Through summer sun and winter's win'  
 It aye had shiel' and shade,  
 An' hield, whan drift wis blawin' blin',  
 Twa lovers in ae plaid.  
 The cauldest nicht o' frost an' snaw,  
 It keepit aye its heat ;  
 I never passed it but I saw  
 'Twas aye the Lovers' Seat—  
 Auld Lovers' Seat.

Their faces, a' the simmer, they  
 Had aye a happy smirk ;  
 Their een, when nichts grew dimmer, they  
 Made moonlicht i' the mirk.  
 The road that wad been eerie, where  
 The ancient tree-taps meet,  
 Sweet whispers aye made cheerie there  
 Roun' that auld Lovers' Seat—  
 Auld Lovers' Seat.



Whatever may be our feeling regarding the Highland clearances—where deer and sheep were thought to be fitter inhabitants of the straths and glens than the men who, though they could not supply sport to wealthy Britons, gave plenty of grim sport to our country's enemies—we can almost feel thankful for them, inasmuch as they supplied the *motif* for "The Piobrach of Kinreen", the finest "lament" we know:—

The auld hoose is bare noo,  
 A cauld house to me;  
 The hearth is nae mair noo  
 The centre o' glee;  
 Nae mair for the bairnies the bield it has been:  
 Och, hey! for bonny Kinreen.  
 The auld folk, the young folk, the wee anes an' a',  
 A hunder years' hame birds are harried awa—  
 Are harried an' hameless whatever winds blaw.  
 Och, hey! Kinreen o' the Dee.

Fareweel my auld plew-lan'!  
 I'll never mair plew it;  
 Farewell my auld plew, an'  
 The auld yaud that drew it!  
 Fareweel my auld kail-yard, ilk bush an' ilk tree!  
 Och, hey! Kinreen o' the Dee;  
 Fareweel the auld braes that my han' keepit green;  
 Fareweel the auld ways where we wandered unseen,  
 Ere the licht o' my hearth cam' to bonny Kinreen.  
 Och, hey! Kinreen o' the Dee.

The auld kirk looks up o'er  
 The dreesome auld dead,  
 Like a saint speaking hope o'er  
 Some sorrowfu' bed.  
 Fareweel the auld kirk, and fareweel the kirk-green!  
 They speak o' a far better hame than Kinreen;  
 The place we wa'd cling to, puir simple auld fules,  
 O' oor births an' oor bridals, oor blisses an' dools,  
 Where the wee bits o' bairnies lie cauld i' the mools.  
 Och, hey! Kinreen o' the Dee.

\* \* \* \*

Though little the thing be  
 Oor ain we can ca',  
 That little we cling be  
 The mair that it's sma'.

Though pair was oor hame, and though wild was the scene,  
'Twas the hame o' oor hearts, it was bonny Kinreen;  
And noo we maun leave it, baith grey head and bairn;  
Maun leave it to fatten the deer o' Knock Cairn,  
An' a' frae Lochlee to o' Morvan o' Gairn.

Och, hey! Kinreen o' the Dee,  
Kinreen o' the Dee,  
Kinreen o' the Dee—

Sae fareweel for ever, Kinreen o' the Dee!

Forsyth's ear was finely tuned to the varied melodies of the language, and his moods were very various. The study of life—buoyant, breezy life in plant, lower animal, or man—was an inexhaustible joy to him. Death, that grey eve between two shining days, was a mystery the contemplation of which saddened him, but which had also its beautiful aspects. He could versify a sermon with the ease and piquancy of phrase of George Macdonald; he could enter into the spirit of the soldier who rejoices in the fight without being cruel; he could sing soft rhymes fit for lady's bower; or treat us to a harmonious dance of words upon the very brink of nonsense. The pieces we have noticed are mostly in the minor key, and homely in style, but we have only to say in conclusion that in the volumes he has left are numerous poems in other veins—humorous, pathetic, and heroic—of such an excellence as few, if any, of our native poets have touched.