

ROBERT AND WILLIAM FORBES.

THE various publications which Allan Ramsay sent abroad between 1718 and 1730, more especially the old poems contained in "The Evergreen", and the songs of "The Tea-

Table Miscellany", did much to bring about a return of the Scottish Muse to the use of home-speech. After a lapse of many generations, Ramsay rediscovered to his countrymen the worth of the vernacular as a vehicle for poetical expression. The lesson he taught was slowly learned; yet he had laid aside his lyre for barely seventy years, ere Burns put the cope-stone on an edifice of national song, unparalleled in the wide world. Among the few real Scottish poems that remain to us between the dates of Ramsay and Ross of Lochlee, "Ajax' Speech to the Grecian Knabbs" holds a prominent place; and certainly of all the poems which have been written in "the broad Buchan dialect"—and since then their number has been great—very few equal, and none surpass it in pithiness of expression or redolence of home-grown idiom. Of the author, ROBERT FORBES, very little is known. That he was Buchan born and bred; that he was well educated; that he possessed a large fund of the humorous; that he had a thorough command of his "mither tongue", with all its rugged and picturesque force; and that he was established as "a hosier" in a shop at Tower Hill, London, at the sign of "the Book"—is about all we know of him. Besides his translations of Ajax's Speech and Ulysses' Answer, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, he has left a pawkie "Shop Bill", or rhyming advertisement, and a prose account of a journey from London, to Portsmouth—all in his native dialect—valuable as linguistic specimens, and curious for the broad humour which was characteristic of the man, if not of the period. How he came to settle in London, it is impossible to say. A correspondent in *Notes and Queries* infers that he was one of those educated persons, who, designed for trade, did not disdain the initiatory carrying of the pack before settling down; and, being of rather a freer disposition than comported with the usual burghal character, elected the south as the safer field for both his business operations and the play of his wit. In Chalmers' *Life of Ruddiman* we find the following reference to his "Ajax":—"When a translation of the celebrated speech of Ajax to the Grecian chiefs, in Ovid, was read to him [Ruddiman] in the vulgar dialect of Buchan, he declared it the best that had ever been made. It was immediately printed by his desire (Edinburgh,

1754, 8vo.) without the printer's name indeed; but it was undoubtedly printed by Ruddiman's nephew, Walter Ruddiman, who supplied the glossary. . . . This translation was made by Robert Forbes, a learned hosier of London, but a native of Buchan, who had a happy knack of versification in the idiom of his country. He had a brother who was the schoolmaster of Foveran, and who is said to have been *in suo officio nemini secundus*". One would naturally infer from the above that the 1754 edition was the first; but this is not so,—the earliest, and it is believed, the first edition was printed at Aberdeen, in 1742. It has, however, been often reprinted at Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen, &c., Ulysses' answer being added in 1785.

The story connected with the wrangle which Robert Forbes has enshrined in our pithy, pawkie mother tongue, is one of the best known of the many wonderful tales of classic times. Then, as now, the fates had the "knack" of finding out the weak spots in mortals, for though Achilles's mother had dipt her child in the river Styx hoping to make him invulnerable, yet the heel by which she held him remained vulnerable, and this weak point was found out by Paris, who slew him in the temple of Apollo at Thymbra, whither he had come as the lover of Polyxena, one of Priam's daughters. His armour was promised by his mother Thetis to the bravest among the Greeks, which gave rise to the contest between the two heroes who had rescued his body. Ajax, with all the fiery vehemence of a boaster and detractor, urges his claim to possession; but the more subtle and graceful eloquence of Ulysses, coupled with the favour of Athena, obtain for him the mastery, and he is awarded the prize. Ajax, full of grief and envy, became distracted, and killed himself with the sword he had received from Hector. As a sample of the translation of this story into "broad Buchan", we give the following, premising that any one not acquainted with the original may readily see how apt and happy its turns of expression are, by setting it side by side with the literal translation of Mr. Riley, published in Bohn's Classical Series, so:—

"But neither does my talent lie in speaking, nor his in acting, and as great ability as I have in fierce warfare, so much has he in talking". This is rendered—

At threeps I am na' sae perquire,
 Nor auld-farren as he,
 Bat at banes-brakin', it's well kent,
 He has na' maught like me.

For as far as I him excell
 In toulzies fierce an' strong,
 So far in chaft-taak he exceeds
 Me, wi' his sleeked tongue.

* * * * *

“I own that the prize that is sought is great, but the rival of Ajax lessens its value. It is no proud thing, great though it may be, to possess anything which Ulysses has hoped for”, rendered—

The staik indeed is unco great,
 I will confess alway,
 Bat, name Ulysses to it anes,
 The worth quite dwines away.

Great as it is, I needna' voust,
 I'm seer I hae nae neef
 To get fat cou'd be ettl'd at,
 By sic a menseless thief.

Again, “Him (Hector) demanding one with whom he might engage, did I alone withstand; ye prayed that it should fall to me; if you inquire into the issue of the fight, I was not beaten by him”.

Fan he spang'd out, rampag'd an' said
 That nane amon' us a'
 Durst venture out upo' the lone
 Wi' him to shak' a fa';

I dacker'd wi' him by mysel',
 Ye wish't it to my kavel,
 An' gin ye speer fa' got the day,
 We parted on a nevel.

The following are the concluding stanzas of the “Speech” :—

Bat fat use will they be to him,
 Wha in hudge mudge wi' wiles,
 Without a gully in his hand,
 The smeerless fae beguiles?

The gowden helmet will sae glance,
 An' blink wi' skyrin br'nns,
 That a' his wimples they'll find out
 Fan 't the mark he sheens,

Bat his weak head nae farrach has
 That helmet for to bear,
 Nor has he mergh intil his banes,
 To wield Achilles' spear :

Nor his bra' targe, on which is seen
 The yerd, the sun an' lift,
 Can well agree wi' his cair cleuck,
 That cleikit was for thift.

Fat gars you then, mischievous tyke !
 For this propine to prig.
 That your sma' banes wou'd langel sair.
 They are sae unco' big ?

An' if the Greeks sud be sae blind,
 As gi' you sik a gift,
 The Trojan lads right soon wou'd dight
 You like a futtle heft.

An' as you ay by speed o' fit
 Perform ilk' doughty deed,
 Fan laggert wi' this bouksome graith,
 You will tyne haaf your speed.

Besides your targe, in battle keen,
 Bat little danger tholes,
 While mine wi' mony a thud is clowr'd,
 An' thirl'd sair wi' holes.

But now fat need's for a' this din ?
 Lat deeds o' words tak place,
 An' lat your stoutness now be try'd,
 Just here before your face.

Lat th' armour o' Achilles brave
 Amon' our faes be laid,
 An' the first chiel' that brings them back,
 Lat him wi' them be clad.

This "learned hosier" has frequently been confounded with a contemporary versifier of the same name, and belonging to the same locality—to wit, WILLIAM FORBES, author of "The Dominie Depos'd". This eccentric and unfortunate mortal entered on the duties of precentor at Peterculter, on 15th November, 1724, and at the following Whitsunday became parish schoolmaster. Matters ran smoothly enough for some time; but, being fonder of field sports than teaching, and having acquired

a relish for the “smuggery” at the ale-house, keener than that which he should have had for the drudgery of the school-room, he began to gather a reputation not very compatible with his profession. On the 2nd January, 1732, the minister reported to the session that Forbes “had turned his back upon his office”; and they thereupon proceeded to the appointment of “William Morries as his successor”. On the 23rd of the same month, the creditors of the late dominie arrested £10 10s. that was due to him in the hands of the session. A year afterwards, that is, on 7th January, 1733, he acknowledged by letter the paternity of a child born to him by Margaret Forbes, a servant at Brotherton, in the same parish; he was summoned immediately to appear before the session, but it latterly came out that “he had gone off a recruit to Ireland”; so the session was obliged “to sist further procedure as to him”. Nothing further has been learned of the fate of Forbes after he left Deeside, but sometime about 1746 there appeared a poetical account, from his own pen, of the Peterculter intrigue—“The Dominie Depos’d, or some reflections on his Intrigue with a young lass, and what happened thereupon: Interspersed with advice to all Schoolmasters, Precentors, and Dominies on Deeside. By William Forbes, A.M., late schoolmaster at Peterculter”. This piece enjoyed great local popularity for a long time, and was a staple article of trade with the chapbook makers at the end of last century, who sent edition after edition of it broadcast over the north. The breadth of treatment, which was then a main element in the humour of popular rustic verse, and which made it sell, keeps it now among the curiosities of local vagrant literature. It is likely to remain there, for the little merit that is in it (and it has some, in spite of its objectionable story) is not sufficient to justify a resuscitation. The following verses will give a fair indication of the general quality of his rhyming powers:—

For hark I'll tell you what they think,
 Since I left handling pen and ink,
 Wae worth that weary sup of drink
 He lik'd so weel!
 He drank it a' left not a clink
 His throat to sweel.

the author of "The Dominie", and was first printed in the *Scots Weekly Magazine*, July, 1772. In the volume of *Notes and Queries* for 1872, a writer, who, however, mixes up the "Dominie" with the "Hosier", thinks he is also the author of a poem in French, published at Edinburgh in 1750—a supplement to Boileau's satire on the city of Paris. This is, however, by quite another member of the Forbes clan. In 1752, the same author published an éloge on the city of Edinburgh, by the "*Sieur de Forbes*", also in French; and to settle his identity an address to the Prince of Wales is prefixed, signed "*François Forbes*" designated in a subsequent publication "*Mâitre de Langue*".

In his "Introduction to the History of Scottish Poetry", Campbell, speaking of the authorship of "Ajax Speech", mentions three Forbeses—Stephen, Robert, and William—all poets, and says that he is "at a loss which of the three I am to consider as the author". We have spoken of two of them above, but of this Stephen Forbes we know nothing—never heard of him, in fact. To the best of our knowledge the individual Campbell referred to was FORBES STEPHEN, a papermaker at Peterculter, who (according to Peter Buchan) published at Aberdeen in 1781, "Rural Amusements; or a Miscellany of Epistles, Poems, and Songs, written in the Scottish Dialect". Buchan credits him with the authorship of "Johnny's Grey Breeks" and "The Carle he came o'er the Craft", two splendid old songs that would give us immense pleasure to chronicle as the product of our local muse—if we could possibly do so. We know that "Johnny's Grey Breeks", even in its modern dress, appeared in Herd's collection; and of the original, which is *very old*, Whitelaw says, "we cannot give it, as some of it might be considered unfit for ears polite, but we give a modified set of it, which is still of considerable antiquity"—he then gives the four verses as in Herd, with one additional. "The Carle he came o'er the Craft" appears in "The Tea-Table Miscellany", sixty years before the publication of "Rural Amusements", and thirty years before there was a papermaker dreamed of on Deeside.