

Robert Burns, The Poet of the Common Life

Earl Clement Davis

1912

A few years ago Ex-President Eliot of Harvard University edited a select library of fifty volumes which he considered the gleaning in the various fields of human endeavor for all times. Among all the poetical selections five poets were given the space of a volume each in this miniature library. This honor goes to Homer for the Greeks; Virgil for the Romans; Dante for the Italians; Milton for the English, and last but not least, Robert Burns for Scotland and the Modern World. Each one of these in turn writes the song and reveals the spirit of succeeding stages of human development. Homer writes of the romance of arms the fickle play of fortune on the Greeks. Virgil sings of arms, and Heroes, conquest, and fighting, the genius of great Roman civilization. Dante tells the tale of the conflicts of the great universal forces of good and evil, and pictures the genius and the weakness of the Holy Roman Empire. Milton tells the tale of revolution, and the spirit of republicanism. Robert Burns tells the tale of the common life, the conflict of good and evil, not as it is revealed in the life of warriors, and military heroes, not as it might be in the conflicts of angels and demons, archangels and archdemons; not as it might be in the struggles of heavenly politicians, but as it actually is in the common life of common men and women. In him is the song of hope of human spirit for democracy towards which today humanity is groping its way. Burns' life prayer has been fulfilled and more. As he looked back on his all too brief life, he penned these lines as the expression of his hope.

E'en then, a wish, I mind its power,
A wish that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breast,
That I for poor Auld Scotland's Sake
Some useful plan or beuk could make,
Or sing a sang at least.

I can see so clearly in my own mind the place, the work the mission of Robert Burns to this modern world, that I am going to try to illustrate it. Let us forget this modern world of ours for the moment and go back to the time of

Burns. We find ourselves wondering through a dark dismal forest of the seventeenth century. The whole human race trailing along behind a few adventurous spirits. Now we are lost in thick underbrush of a brier bush theology. Tired, hungry and bleeding, we wonder along tearing our human feelings against the thorns and ragged stumps of the most cruel and brutal interpretation of human life that Man has ever imagined. We are all without hope, we are possessed with the ever-present fear that the common human affections, the love of family, the generous impulses towards one another are all evil. We are wholly depraved and destined to the joyless life of an eternal damnation. Our suffering here is but a foretaste. We are in the hands of an angry god. Or again we are lost in the coarse, swampy thicket of excess. Restraint we know not. Desperation in hope gives rise to desperation in conduct. Believing ourselves depraved, we become depraved. With a despair that is almost heroic we throw ourselves to the unrestrained commands of our passions, we plunge into the mire, and the more we thrash about the deeper we sink. All this time we are being whipped by the master of necessity into line for the great industrial army. Remembering the freedom of a former life of romance we chafe and fret under this increasingly strict discipline. Ever and anon we pass by the artificial gardens, and beautiful houses of privilege. Ever and anon we see ornate dress, the shabby respectability of it all. Through all this we feel the pressure of paternalistic efforts of a foreign government to civilize, and commercialize us. Suddenly in the midst of the strain, the poverty, the despair we hear a song ring out loud and clear and joyful, the song of hope, the song of the singing heart. It sings to us of the joy of life, it sings to us of the pain of life, it sings to us of the light that it sees shining through the thicket, it sings to us of the dawning of a new day, a day of freedom, a day of faith, a day of hope, and a day of human brotherhood. We stop, and listen. It is the song of our own heart, it is the song of the human soul.

As I was a-wandering a morning in spring,
I heard a young ploughman sae sweetly to sing;
And as he was singing, their words did he say,
There's nae life like the ploughman's in the month o'
sweet May.
The lav'rock in the morning she'll rise frae her nest,
And mount i' the air wi' the dew on her breast,
And wi' the merry ploughman she'll whistle and sing,

And at night she'll return to her nest back again.

This what I wish to say of Robert Burns. Out of that forest, stained by the mire, scratched by the thorns, bruised by stumps burdened with its burden of poverty, the God-intoxicated heart of Robert Burns burst forth into a wild triumphant song. In his face shone the light of a new day, and he wished not that his face shone. The people heard him gladly, with a new hope, and a new faith they plunged forward towards the new light, forward towards the life under freedom.

It is now one hundred and fifty three years since Agnes Burns the wife of William Burns, an Ayreshire nurseryman on the banks on the Doon, gave birth to the poet of the modern world. We are now far enough removed from the times so that we can see things in a more just perspective. We can begin to understand what in the life of Burns was the natural product of his times and what was the prophetic contribution from him. Great effort has been expended in trying to account for the appearance of so great a poet from such obscure surroundings, and from among the common people. That is but a survival of the cant of aristocracy. The truth is that Burns was the child of his times, and the child of the people of whose life he sang a song. He was just a plain natural man. From his father he received the [text crossed out]. All the beauty and charm of his personality are to be found in the home life and the life about him. All his weaknesses and excesses are but the rather common place of the times. We pass them by for they are distinctive in Burns except that the genius of Burns cast a romantic glow over all that he did, whether it were good or evil. What we are interested in are the distinctive characteristics of Burns which were prophetic, and which came from his rich Human heart.

In the first place it must be understood that in the very deepest sense of the word, Robert Burns was the most religious man of his times. The world he lived in was a world pulsating with human values. We say that he was a man of sympathy, man of understanding. Even so he was, but that was because he saw and felt in everything those great human values of life, those finer sentiments that are the flowering of the human race. In his lines to "Mountain Daisy" he was addressing not merely a flower as the botanist would call it, but he is addressing the daisy almost as a human being, to which he himself in origin,

life and destiny was linked. It's a human companion to him for in the daisy he sees the self-same power that he finds in himself. Everything that he sees and touches has, not a passing momentary significance, but a universal, and eternal significance.

Ev'n thou who mourn'st the daisey's fate,
That fate is thine, no distant date
Stern Ruin's plough-shere drives elate,
Full on thy bloom,
Till crushed beneath the furrow's weight,
Shall be thy doom.

"To a Mouse." shows the same deep, human understanding. For the moment the soul of Burns leaves his body, and dwells in the body of the tiny frightened little beastie. All that he cherishes himself, "Thy wee bit mousie, too, in ruin and all the fields laid bare and waste, and the bleak December awaiting thee." All this he sees in the wee bit mousie. Yet it is not mere sentimentality. He knows the difference. There is a deep note of human tragedy in the last lines.

Still thou art blest, compared wi' me
The present only toucheth thee:
But och, I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear.

In a "Song—In the Character of a Ruined Farmer" this deep sympathetic understanding again appears to advantage. The farmer wearied with his toil, and almost broken by his misfortune is sitting in the eventide, "all sore beset with sorrow, grief, and woe." His wife, the dear partner of his breast, has thrown aside for a moment the burden by dropping into an evening nap. The children sleep peacefully, oblivious of the woe. The farmer, that Burns sees here, is not a man disappointed at worldly failure, cast down at the loss of things, but rather one who is deep in the bottom of anguish for the love, the fatherly affection, the deep far-reaching insight of all that means. Most of us, as we read of a man who has met misfortune, who has lost a position, who is forced out of work, let the thing pass as the commonplace. But in this common place incident Burns saw the great tragedy of human life.

Perhaps the poem that has had the most influence, and one in which this power of seeing the commonplace people, and commonplace incidents of life, the dignity, and the sanctity of the universal, is "The Cotter's Saturday Night." No one can read the poem without feeling that Burns has portrayed there the very utmost conception of the spiritual power of human life. It may be but a poor laboring man, as the world looks upon it, but in reality it is the spirit of the very God of very God, that walks home from the field at the end of the week's work, enters the cottage, and becomes the tender, loving, strong and just father. At the touch of his hand the common place things, the frugal meal, the simple family worship, the play of the children, the purity of the lover's joy, the fond parental interest and satisfaction, the plain homily everyday incidents of the family life, how they tower into the very heavens of grandeur, and transcend in Godly spirit the pomp of conventional religiosity, as the grandeur of the mountain transcends the littleness of the ant hill. In that poem the pride of priestcraft, the complacency of culture, the sordidness of privilege crumble before the power of the living God as it is in the life of the poor Cotter. It is pure natural religion undefiled.

But perhaps a more severe test of this power of the understanding heart is seen in the Cantata of "The Jolly Beggars." Most of us draw our skirts away when we come near the dregs and the out-casts. But Burns, bless his great soul, takes right into the midst of their revelry, portrays it as it is, but somehow, when you go to scoff, you come away to pray. We find there people, not so different from ourselves. Here and there from the midst of their ribaldry, and coarseness their flashes forth a light of the pure spirit of life, as from the lighthouse on a dark night there flashes across the expanse of darkness a ray of warning purity. It is an easy thing to detect a little evil in a great amount of goodness, but to bring the flash of goodness from the great mass of sordidness, that is genius, and the Jolly Beggars is a tribute to the understanding heart of Burns.

This is the first thing that I want to say about Burns, as the poet of the common life. He is the poet prophet, the revealer of the new dispensation towards which with travail and pain we are making our way. He [sic] [With] a wave of his hands he brushed aside the coverings of forms, institutions, and distinctions, of society, in Church and

state, in commerce, and industry, and revealed to us the real heart of humanity, and let us look upon the things that the human heart cherishes, and that it is trying amid all its mistakes and blunders to bear witness to. He calls every single finite function and value of human life to its universal consecration. He himself is a God-filled man, and he lives in a God-filled world.

Exalting as he did the commonplace, seeing in the common life of man, in its natural spontaneous outpourings of life, the real essence and sanctity of human life, Burns made that the measure of all things. The song of the singing ploughman, the home life in the Cotter's cottage, the fellowship of congenial souls, the joy of the abounding life, that is the measuring rod of Robert Burns. Cant, hypocrisy, formalism, and all the other devices of man to cover the skeleton life, Burns abhorred. Not commercial, not industrial, not spectacular achievement, not wealth, not social position, was the end of all, but just life, just bearing witness to the abounding life, and contributing to its richness in depth and in fineness, that was [the] purpose he had in wanting to sing a song for poor auld Scotland. This purpose which was his own he read into all the world.

One of his great contributions given especially in the Cotter's Saturday Night scene, and in his deep spiritual love for Highland Mary, is his exhalation of love as the basis of the family tie. Men often wonder why Burns could have so mixed the ideal and gross in his life. As we look back upon the times in which he lived, we are surprised that he could have gleaned from the general commercial tone of the family life, so exhaled an ideal of the love of man and a woman as we find in "To Mary in Heaven." That was the real soul of Burns speaking in that poem. For a moment then, as he had frequently before, he freed himself from the bondage of his times, and sings the song of a pure sacred human love. The commercial arrangement of marriage by the family council, the barter in human affection, the sordid alliances for social standing and economic advantage so common in the times of Burns and all too common now, are slowly slinking away into the annals of history. As this one great ideal of the essential and sanctity of the love of man and woman, forces its way through the hardened crust of our inherited superstitions, the love of Robert Burns for Highland Mary, the simple, holy tale of their betrothal, and the tragedy of her death, and the song to

Mary in Heaven will go far in pointing the way from the romance of the love of youth, to the deeper, richer, and more soul satisfying love of mature life, as it is in the home of the Cotter, on a Saturday night when the work is done, and human life has paid the price for its hour of quiet holy bliss. Highland Mary and Cotter's Saturday Night go together. The time is coming when they will be as common as they are divine.

There is one more clear note of prophecy that Burns struck. Through the forest of the eighteenth century he saw the light of a new freedom. Upon the theological distinctions of his time which divided the world into the elect and the damned; upon the economic distinctions which divided the world into the rich and the poor; upon the social distinctions which divided the world into the genteel and the common herd, Robert Burns turned the full power of his satire, and wit, backed by his sound common sense. Holy Wille's prayer was one of the hardest blows that saints and the goats notion ever had. Burns never struck the real heroic cord of human relationships more truly than in the four lines which make the Epitaph for Gavin Hamilton, Esq.:

The poor man Weeps—here Gavin sleeps
Whom canting wretches blamed,
But with such as he, where'er he be,
May I be saved or damned.

The essence of it is that all these artificial barriers, all the rewards and punishments of heaven and hell, wealth and poverty have no real meaning to a real man. The heaven and hell of life is not in the things, but in the human relations. No compensations of heaven could make up for the loss of fellowship with a man like Hamilton. He is not absurd enough to think that men must live in poverty in order to be humanly acceptable, nor is he absurd enough to hold it as a dogmatic position that a man's wealth may entirely destroy his real human values. The point of Burns' song is that there are values in human life infinitely greater than the shoddy of social climbings, and wanton greed, can ever suppress. In "Twa Dogs" this comes out. Poverty crushes some real values, also does wealth crush the spirit. Both the man who is poor and the man who is rich loses in the richness and worth of life, by the silly, life-destroying ravages of class distinctions. He saw and felt in human life a presence of a power that would one day

rise up in its might and destroy the sham fences that
divide people into these inhuman classes.