

THE LIFE OF
JAMES THOMSON

("B. V.")

HENRY S. SALT

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From a crayon drawing by Rowland Holyoake

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OF
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BY
HENRY S. SALT,
AUTHOR OF "THE LIFE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU,"
"PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY," ETC.

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NOTE TO REVISED EDITION

IN preparing the *Life of James Thomson* for a new edition, I have re-read many of the press-notices and criticisms published during the past twenty-five years, in the hope of correcting my own judgment by the general literary verdict. From the sympathetic comments of a few writers who were personally intimate with Thomson I have indeed learnt much; but, as a rule, the reviewers seem to have been disqualified for forming a just estimate of him by the dislike or timidity with which they regarded what was heretical and unpopular in his career. One thing is evident from the various opinions that have been expressed about him—that his reputation is heavily weighted by his republicanism, his atheism, his pessimism, not to mention the inherited malady of which, like many less unorthodox thinkers, he was a victim.

The tragic side of Thomson's life, it must be

owned, is by no means pleasant reading for a pleasure-loving public. I regret it. I wish it were a less sombre story that has to be told. But what is a conscientious biographer to do? Really, the view that some worthy persons seem to take of the biographical function is rather disquieting; as in the case of a former landlady of the poet on whom I was once rash enough to call—the only instance in which I found an unfriendly recollection of him. He was gone, she said, sourly regarding me, as if she resented any mention of her impecunious lodger; he had “passed away,” and that was all she could tell me. But if I wished to write the life of a truly *good* man, a cheerful Christian, and an earnest teetotaler (here she looked at me dubiously, as if sceptical of my powers), there was—her dear departed husband. Such was the alternative set before me. Appalled at the prospect, I hastily excused myself and fled.

The scanty recognition which Thomson gained as a poet was—and still is—absurdly out of proportion to his merits; but as a set-off to the neglect of the many was the welcome of the few; and among those who warmly praised his poetry were George Eliot, George Meredith, the Rossettis, Herman Melville,

E. C. Stedman, and the earlier Swinburne. I say the earlier Swinburne, because Mr. Swinburne afterwards came to the conclusion that his judgment as expressed to Mr. W. M. Rossetti had been "too favourable," and that a first reading of *Weddah and Om-el-Bonain* had excited in him "a somewhat extravagant and uncritical enthusiasm."¹

But of all estimates of Thomson none is so interesting as George Meredith's. In his opinion Thomson's pessimism was injurious to his poetry, and the writing of *The City of Dreadful Night* did its author no good, inasmuch as he there embodied his "gloomy images" in a permanent form, which in turn affected him and made him more and more despondent.²

However that may be, it cannot be admitted that Thomson's pessimism is, to lovers of great poetry, a bar to the enjoyment of his verse. What is supremely well done must give artistic pleasure, as what is ill done must give pain; and in the "builded desolation" of Thomson's chief work we

¹ So he wrote to me in a letter (July 21, 1888) in which he declined to allow his former letter, addressed to Mr. W. M. Rossetti in 1880, to be published. With regard to his earlier opinion of Thomson's narrative poem, see p. 117 of this book.

² I quote the substance of what Mr. Meredith said to me in conversation. See also what he wrote in a letter dated February 2, 1891, which has lately been reprinted in the *Letters of George Meredith*.

have the most powerful presentment in English poetry of pessimistic thought. "Bright achievement," as Mr. Meredith wrote, "was plucked out of the most tragic life in our literature." Bright achievement perhaps, but not *great* achievement—with *The City of Dreadful Night* to be appraised.

H. S. S.

May, 1914.

PREFACE TO ORIGINAL EDITION

I COULD wish that the duty of writing this biography had been entrusted to one who had enjoyed the advantage of personal acquaintance with James Thomson. As, however, no such biographer was forthcoming, I have done my best to put together the scattered records already published, and to collect such further information as could still be obtained. It has been my object to avoid all fancy portraiture, and to give a clear and reliable narrative of the main facts of Thomson's life, allowing his letters as much as possible to tell their own tale, and quoting in many cases the actual words of those who have recorded their personal reminiscences.

I gratefully acknowledge the cordial help I have received from a large number of Thomson's friends and correspondents. To Mr. Bertram Dobell, in particular, I owe my best thanks for his untiring kindness and good will, and for the loan of numerous

letters and manuscript poems. Mr. Percy Holyoake generously placed at my service his interesting collection of Thomson's papers, including the diaries kept between 1874 and 1881, without which this biography could hardly have been written. I am indebted to Mrs. John Thomson, Mr. J. W. Barrs, Mrs. Pelluet, Mr. W. M. Rossetti, Mrs. Greig, Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner, and Mrs. James Potterton for the use of letters, notebooks, and other documents, and for information about certain points in Thomson's life and character. For further assistance of various kinds I have to thank Mr. John Grant, Mr. and Mrs. T. R. Wright, Mr. George Meredith, Mr. William Sharp, Mr. H. Hood-Barrs, Mrs. George Duncan, Mr. Charles Duncan, Mr. W. Weller, Mr. G. W. Foote, Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, Mr. W. E. Jaques, Mr. G. J. Harney, Mr. Byron Webber, Mr. A. A. Thomson, Mr. Thomas Carson, Mrs. Birkmyre, Mr. C. A. Watts, the Rev. C. M. Barnes, Dr. R. Garnett, and Mr. F. Potterton.

H. S. S.

CHAPTER I

YOUTH

JAMES THOMSON, the second poet of that name—one who, in spite of his present comparative obscurity, is perhaps destined to take rank hereafter among the foremost writers of the age in which he lived—was born at Port Glasgow on November 23, 1834, of Scotch parentage on both sides. His father, James Thomson, who was the son of a Scotch weaver and a native of Pitlochry, is said to have been a clever man in many ways, with a strong talent for mechanics. He was a sailor, and, being devotedly attached to his profession, attained a good position in the merchant service; he is described by those who knew him personally as a delightful companion, bright and cheerful in disposition, reading and reciting well, fond of music, and singing a good song in congenial society. On January 12, 1834, he was married, in London, to Sarah Kennedy, a deeply religious woman of the Irvingite faith, whose nature, unlike that of her husband, seems to have been of a somewhat melancholy cast; though she was a most affectionate wife and mother. Their family consisted of James, the eldest child,¹ a daughter born in 1836, or

¹ Extract verbatim from old parish registers in the Register House, Edinburgh: "James Thomson, mariner in Port Glasgow, and Sarah Kennedy his spouse, had a lawful son, born November 23, 1834, and baptised February 28, 1835, called James." I agree with Mr. Dobell as to the absurdity of the "floating rumour" referred to by Mr. William Sharp in the *Academy* of April 13, 1889, "which attributes Thomson's paternity elsewhere than to the obscure sea-captain"—i.e., to Bulwer Lytton, whom Thomson described as "one of the most thorough and hollow humbugs of the age, false and flashy in everything."

thereabouts, who died three years later; and a second son, John, born in 1842. The religious training which James received in his childhood was of the strictest kind; forty years later he had still a vivid recollection of having to commit to memory what was known as the "Assembly's Shorter Catechism," and of the dismal feelings with which he looked forward to the longer task that was to follow.

In 1840 an accident occurred which had an important influence on the boy's career. His father, who was then chief officer of the ship *Eliza Stewart* of Greenock, was entirely disabled by a paralytic stroke while on a distant voyage, and was rendered helpless for the rest of his life, the family being thus suddenly thrown into distressed circumstances. It has been said that their fall in the social scale was owing to intemperance on the part of the father; this, however, is strongly denied by surviving relatives and friends, and no evidence of such habits is discoverable, except that Thomson once told a friend, in after years, that intemperance ran in the family, and that "nearly all the members of it who 'had brains,' especially a gifted aunt of his, fell victims to its power."¹ However this may have been, the paralytic stroke was the immediate and direct cause of the misfortunes that followed; and in 1842 we find the family residing at various addresses in the east of London, and deprived of their former comfort and internal happiness. Through the kindness of friends, especially a Mr. James Boyd, of Burgess Hill, an old fellow-townsmen of Mrs. Thomson's, an application was made in August, 1842, for the admission of James to the Royal Caledonian Asylum, and on December 1 the boy was elected by

¹ *Progress*, April, 1884.

vote, having been previously certified to be "in every particular in a good state of health." Shortly after his admission to the asylum his mother died—a blow which he undoubtedly felt very severely, though he seldom mentioned it—and his younger brother was taken to Glasgow by an aunt. The father lived till 1853, but, as his health and mental powers were seriously affected by his illness, he could no longer take charge of his sons; and thus it came about that James was left practically without relatives, or at least without any who were willing to help him. But he was not friendless; for during the time he stayed at the Asylum, and some years afterwards, he was a constant visitor at the house of Mr. William Gray, an old friend of his parents, in whose family he regularly spent his holidays, and was treated with great kindness and hospitality. In a letter written to his sister-in-law, Mrs. John Thomson, in the last year of his life, in answer to a request for some information concerning his parents and childhood, Thomson has put on record the following reminiscences, though for the most part he was extremely reticent, even to his closest friends, on the subject of his family relations:—

I was just past eight years old and at the school when mother died, so I can only give you very early impressions. These are, that father and mother were very happy together when he was at home, until, when I was about six, he returned from his last voyage paralyzed in the right side, the result, as I understand, of a week of terrible storm, during which time he was never able to change his drenched clothes. Before then I think he was a good husband and a kind father; her I always remember as a loving mother and wife. He may have been a bit gay, in the sense of liking a social song and glass, being, I believe, much better looking and more attractive in company than either of his sons. She was more serious, and pious too, following Irving from the Kirk when he was driven out. I remember well Irving's portrait under yellow gauze,

and some books of his on the interpretation of prophecy, which I used to read for the imagery. The paralysis at first unhinged father's mind, and he had some fits of violence; more generally his temper was strange, disagreeable, not to be depended upon. I remember him taunting her with being his elder. Mother must have had a sad time of it for a year or so. His mental perturbations settled down into a permanent weakness of mind, not amounting to imbecility, but very, very different, I should say, from his former brightness and decision. Before I went to the school he used to take me to chapels where the members of the congregation ejaculated groaning responses to the minister's prayer, and to small meetings in a private room where the members detailed their spiritual experiences of the week. Good, bad, or indifferent, these were not the sort of things with which he had anything to do in his days of soundness. The right hand remained useless, but the leg had gradually grown strong enough to walk well, though with an awkward dragging pace.

I think mother, who was mystically inclined with Edward Irving, had also a cloud of melancholy overhanging her; first, perhaps, from the death of her favourite brother, John Parker Kennedy, drowned on the Goodwin Sands; then probably deepened by the death of my little sister, of whom I remember being devotedly fond, when she was about three and myself five, of measles caught from me. Had she or someone else lived, I might have been worth something; but, on the whole, I sincerely judge that it was well for both to die when they did, and I would not, for my own selfish comfort, call them back if I could. At first I would doubtless have done so; but not for many years past.

We had also good friends, mother and daughter, named Smith, whom I knew still some years on in my schooldays, and then lost sight of. Speaking generally, you know far more of my family than I do, who have been Ishmael in the desert from my childhood.

It has been generally assumed by those who have written about Thomson that the two most prominent traits of his character were inherited from his parents, the emotional and imaginative temperament being traced to his mother; to his father the constitutional dipsomania which was the cause, or at any rate the aggravation, of the gloom of his closing years. One can only

speculate vaguely on such a subject as this, since where so little is positively known of either parent it would be rash to speak with assurance. This much, however, may be confidently stated at the outset, and will become more and more evident as we follow the story of Thomson's life, that his nature was a compound of two diverse and warring elements—a light-hearted gaiety and rich sensuous capacity for enjoyment being set side by side with a constitutional and ever-deepening melancholia. Much that may seem incongruous and contradictory in the following narrative must be ascribed to this fact, in which, too, may be found the explanation of the different impressions made by Thomson's character on different friends and acquaintances.

At the early period of which I am now speaking the germ of melancholy was wholly imperceptible and unsuspected. We cannot doubt that the sudden break-up of his home life was a heavy grief which left its mark on his character; but there is no ground for regarding Thomson's boyhood as that of a mere neglected orphan and "institution-child," or for supposing that the eight years he spent at the Caledonian Asylum were nothing but a time of solitude or unhappiness. Among his schoolfellows his especial "chum" was Mr. George Duncan,¹ whose elder brother, Mr. Charles Duncan, remembered Thomson, a fine, clever, high-spirited boy, taking the lead among his companions both in the schoolroom and the playground, and thoroughly popular with all who knew him. He was first clarionet in the school band; and it is said that on one occasion, when the boys had performed at an entertainment given at the Chelsea Hospital, Jenny Lind, who was present, was

¹ Late of Madras Educational Department; died 1886.

induced, at Thomson's request, to sing to the boys by way of making them a fair return for their efforts on her behalf.

On August 2, 1850, Thomson left the Caledonian Asylum, and was admitted as a monitor at the "Model School," Royal Military Asylum, Chelsea. Owing to his powerful memory and great natural abilities, he had made unusually rapid progress in his studies; in mathematics especially he showed that he possessed talents of no common order. He was now close upon sixteen years of age, and the question of his future profession had been decided in favour of a schoolmastership in the army, for which it was necessary first to qualify at Chelsea. It had been his own wish to obtain a clerkship in some bank or mercantile office; but as he had no resources he was compelled to take the advice of his teachers at the Caledonian Asylum, and to enter the profession in which he could most quickly earn a livelihood. His schoolfellow, George Duncan, accompanied him to Chelsea, where he soon made other good friends, among whom he was known familiarly as "Jimmy"; the title of "little Thomson" was also applied to him in order to distinguish him from a taller namesake. At Chelsea, as at the Caledonian Asylum, he rapidly proved his superiority as a scholar; and stories were long related by his surviving schoolmates how, when the other members of his class were anxious to throw a veil over their own deficiencies, they would beg Thomson to put forward "something stiff" in the form of a mathematical problem, to which he would opportunely invite the master's attention, and so occupy his time. His literary tastes were also very remarkable, both in their choice and scope, for a boy of his age; for he was already well versed in many of the masterpieces of Swift, Fielding, Smollett, Sterne,

De Foe, De Quincey, and other favourite authors. It was about the time of his admission to the Chelsea military school that he became a reader of Shelley. "I and a chum," he wrote in a letter of 1874, "used to read and hugely admire Byron when I was about fifteen; but a year or so later, when I was about sixteen, I fell under the dominion of Shelley, to whom I have been loyal ever since." This intense love of reading was retained by Thomson to the end of his life, and we shall more than once have occasion to note how eager he was to induce others to take a like pleasure in literature.

The following account of Thomson in his youth is given by Mrs. Greig, who, as Miss Agnes Gray, had known him intimately when he used to spend his holidays at her father's house between 1842 and 1852:—

Being several years younger than James, I cannot recollect much about him as a boy; but I remember we always thought him wonderfully clever, very nice-looking, and very gentle, grave, and kind. He was always most willing to attend to our whims; but my eldest sister was his especial favourite. Her will seemed always law to him. She was gay as he was grave; but whatever Helen said or did won approbation from him.....Previous to going (to Ireland) he earnestly requested that my sister might be allowed to correspond with him, a request which my parents thought it wiser to refuse. I was allowed, however, to do so; and although his letters came few and far between, I always welcomed and appreciated them.¹ He used to endeavour to guide my tastes and give me good advice as to the books I should read, sending me Charlotte Brontë's *Life and Letters*, Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, some poems by Robert Browning, and a few other books.

The departure for Ireland, referred to in the above passage, marks the next stage—and a very important one, as it happened—in Thomson's career. Before a student was enlisted as an army schoolmaster, it was

¹ Some of these letters are given in Chap. II.

customary for him to serve for twelve or eighteen months as an assistant-teacher, in order to gain some practical knowledge of his profession. Thomson was accordingly sent from Chelsea, on August 5, 1851, to the Garrison of Ballincollig, a village lying about five miles from Cork, amid picturesque scenery. His position here was that of a pupil and master in one, and his duties consisted in teaching in the regimental school under the direction and supervision of the regular garrison-master, whose name was Joseph Barnes. Mr. Barnes was a self-educated man, of strong native sense and kindly disposition, with whom Thomson soon became a favourite, and in whose family he was treated, as he has himself recorded, "with great and rare kindness." Both Mr. and Mrs. Barnes felt the warmest affection and admiration for their brilliant and accomplished young assistant, who at the early age of seventeen was already qualified to discharge the duties of a teacher; and "Co" (for "Precocious") was the pet name by which he was known in their house. It is said that at one time, when Mrs. Barnes was ill, and Mr. Barnes happened to be absent from home, Thomson taught in the schoolroom at Ballincollig, holding Mrs. Barnes's child on one arm, and with his disengaged hand writing on the blackboard. As late as 1862, ten years after he left Ballincollig, we find him addressing a series of six sonnets to these friends, and speaking with grateful recollection of Mr. Barnes as "a man of genial heart and liberal mind"; and of Mrs. Barnes as the "second mother of my orphaned youth."

It was at Ballincollig, in 1851, that Thomson first became acquainted with Charles Bradlaugh, and formed a close friendship with him which lasted for more than twenty-three years. Mr. Bradlaugh, who was Thomson's

senior by one or two years, had enlisted in the army about the time when Thomson was sent to Ballincollig ; and the two young men, in spite of their marked diversity of temperament—the iconoclast and the idealist, the man of action and the man of thought—were soon intimately associated. They read together, and talked together ; and sometimes, when Mr. Bradlaugh was on picket duty, Thomson would walk up and down with him on a fine summer's night discussing in a friendly way the various subjects, social, political, or religious, in which they were both interested. Their opinions at this time differed very considerably ; but there was no attempt, on one side or the other, to effect anything in the nature of a conversion ; each was content to state his own views, without any thought of urging them on the acceptance of his companion.

We now come to a most important incident in Thomson's life, about which much has been written, though there is a great lack of detailed information. It was at Mrs. Barnes's house that he first met the beautiful young girl whose love he won, and whose sudden death was the heaviest calamity he ever endured. In the sonnets addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Barnes he thus alludes to his early love and bereavement :—

Indeed you set me in a happy place,
Dear for itself and dearer much for you,
And dearest still for one life-crowning grace—
Dearest, though infinitely saddest too :
For there my own Good Angel took my hand,
And filled my soul with glory of her eyes,
And led me through the love-lit Faërie Land
Which joins our common world to Paradise.
How soon, how soon, God called her from my side,
Back to her own celestial sphere of day !
And ever since she ceased to be my Guide,

I reel and stumble on life's solemn way ;
 Ah, ever since her eyes withdrew their light
 I wander lost in blackest stormy night.

This girl, the object of Thomson's devoted attachment, was the daughter of the armourer-sergeant of a regiment then stationed in the garrison at Ballincollig; her name was Matilda Weller, and she was somewhat younger than Thomson himself, being about fourteen at the time of which I speak.¹ She was afterwards described by Mrs. Barnes as resembling Eva St. Clair in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, so that the following passage from that novel may be taken as giving at least a general idea of her appearance and bearing:—

Her form was the perfection of childish beauty, without its usual chubbiness and squareness of outline. There was about it an undulating and aerial grace, such as one might dream of for some mythic and allegorical being. Her face was remarkable, less for its perfect beauty of feature than for a singular and dreamy earnestness of expression, which made the ideal start when they looked at her, and by which the dullest and most literal were impressed, without knowing why. The shape of her head and the turn of her neck and bust were peculiarly noble, and the long golden-brown hair that floated like a cloud around it, the deep spiritual gravity of her violet-blue eyes, shaded by heavy fringes of golden-brown, all marked her out from other children, and made everyone turn and look after her as she glided hither and thither.....Always dressed in white, she seemed to move like a shadow through all sorts of places without contracting spot or stain.

Such was Matilda Weller, as she lived in Mrs. Barnes's recollection; and a very similar picture is given of her by Thomson himself in the autobiographical poem entitled *Vane's Story*:—

For thought retraced the long sad years
 Of pallid smiles and frozen tears
 Back to a certain festal night,

¹ In a daguerreotype, taken about 1850, she had the appearance almost of a child.

A whirl and blaze of swift delight,
When we together danced, we two !
I live it all again !.....Do you
Remember how I broke down quite
In the mere polka ?.....Dressed in white,
A loose pink sash around your waist,
Low shoes across the instep laced,
Your moon-white shoulders glancing through
Long yellow ringlets dancing too,
You were an Angel then ; as clean
From earthly dust-speck, as serene
And lovely and above my love,
As now in your far world above.

When one considers their extreme youth at the time (Thomson could only have been in his eighteenth year) it may seem strange that there should have been any actual engagement between them ; but it must be remembered, on the other hand, that Thomson's nature was an altogether exceptional one, and that both in feeling and experience he was far in advance of his years. The story has sometimes been regarded as an exaggeration, or even a myth ; but there is no doubt that the facts as above narrated are substantially correct.

On January 16, 1853, Thomson returned from Ballincollig to the "Normal School" at Chelsea, as routine demanded a further course of study before he could be appointed to the post which, as a matter of fact, he was already quite capable of filling. His prospects at this time looked brighter than at any other period of his life, before or after. He had already acquired a considerable stock of knowledge, and no slight experience of the world ; he had made many excellent friends ; he had won the love of a beautiful girl ; and he was about to receive an appointment which would at least enable him to earn a competent living. His rich and genial

nature, no less than his rare intellectual faculties, seemed to mark him out at this opening period of his career as one eminently qualified to be happy, prosperous, and beloved.

A few months later the blow had fallen. In July, 1853, a letter reached him at Chelsea with the news of Matilda's illness; the next day he learned that she was dead.¹ This was a crisis in his fate on which, as far as is known, he uttered no word in his after-life, even to his most intimate associates; but those who knew the depth and intensity of his nature could feel how great his grief must have been. He was not unacquainted with death; for, as we have seen, he had lost his only sister when he was a child of five years, and his mother when he was eight; but this was a still deeper and more fatal wound. It is said that Mr. Barnes received a letter from a friend at Chelsea, asking him what could be amiss with Thomson, as he had not tasted food for three days; another account records that he "lay about in the windows" of the Military Training College in silent grief and solitude. There can be no doubt not only that his sorrow was overwhelming at the time, but that it left its traces on his whole subsequent career. To what extent this early bereavement can be considered the *cause* of his later pessimism and unhappiness is a more subtle question, which it is easier to raise than to decide. Thomson himself seems on rare occasions to have expressed, in confidence, to one or two friends a belief that his calamities were due to this source;² and such is the purport of some pathetic autobiographical stanzas which he wrote in 1878 under the title of *I had a Love*, in which he speculates fondly

¹ She died at Cahir, Tipperary, July 19, 1853.

² Note the reference to this point in the letter quoted on p. 4.

on what might have been, if the hand of death had been averted. The following stanza is expressive of this mood :—

You would have kept me from the desert sands
Bestrewn with bleaching bones,
And led me through the friendly fertile lands,
And changed my weary moans
To hymns of triumph and enraptured love,
And made our earth as rich as Heaven above.

On the other hand, there are equally noticeable passages in which he more philosophically regards his own unhappiness as the inevitable result of his destiny ; and it is contended with great force by some of those who knew him that, being the victim of an inherited melancholia, he would in any case have seen his life grow dark around him as time went on. " I do not agree with Mr. Dobell," says Mr. Foote, " in regarding this bereavement as the *cause* of his life-long misery. She was, I hold, merely the peg on which he hung his raiment of sorrow ; without her, another object might have served the same purpose. He carried with him his proper curse, constitutional melancholia."

But while we fully recognize the force of this reasoning, we are compelled to believe, at the same time, that it was the death of this young girl that, above all other single circumstances, fostered and developed the malady to which Thomson was predisposed, and that in this sense, at least, it was a cause of his subsequent despondency. Nor need we be much surprised at the fact that some of his early friends noticed no change in his outward demeanour, and found him no less gay a comrade than heretofore, for he was by nature extremely reticent on all personal subjects, and on this particular point it was to be expected that he would set a special guard

upon his lips. "His wounds," says Mr. Dobell, speaking of a period later by more than twenty years, "were not the less painful because he did not exhibit them in public, and of their deep and permanent character I once had a striking proof. We were talking together lightly and cheerfully enough, when a casual remark which I made chanced to recall the memory of his lost love. Well do I remember the effect upon him, how his voice changed, and how tears started to his eyes!" It would, I think, be as unfair to Thomson to assume that he was only lightly and transiently affected by the sudden death of the girl he loved as to make the contrary mistake of attributing to him the weakness of allowing his whole life to be wrecked by his bereavement.

So Thomson, burying in his heart the grief which he felt none the less acutely, lived out the rest of his time at the Chelsea Military School; and was still regarded by his comrades as a genial, lovable, thoroughly genuine character, though even now possessed of a certain pride and hauteur, and capable at times of showing strong resentment against any injury or slight. He was a Radical; and his keen, eager intellect was apt to make him impatient of the restraints imposed by authority. He doubtless felt, what indeed was true enough, that his further stay at the Asylum was wholly unnecessary; and he is said to have made the governor of the school indignant by asking to be excused the remainder of his course, though his request seems to have been partly granted by the shortening of the required term. His namesake and fellow-student at Chelsea, Mr. A. A. Thomson, remembered "Jimmy" as a high-spirited, pleasure-loving companion, finding matter for merriment under the most unpromising conditions, and so far from being a pessimist in those days that

he was wont to laugh at the philosophy of "old Schopenhauer."

It must not be supposed from his impatience of the ordinary scholastic routine that he was idle at this time; on the contrary, it is probable that he did much hard reading during this second stay at Chelsea—all the more, perhaps, since his mind needed a distraction from the remembrance of his calamity. "He had," it has been well remarked, "the Scotch square-headedness. He was strong in brain and of well-knit frame, a hard thinker, and a good endurer. His early life was that of stiff head-work (in which he excelled), and none too much luxury."¹ His self-taught mastery of languages remains to be spoken of in the next chapter; but we may feel sure that his literary tastes were pretty well formed before he left Chelsea, and he had already become acquainted with the reading-room at the British Museum, which he frequented so much in later life. Reticent though he was at this time—to such an extent that it was said "you might talk to him for half-an-hour and he would only smile on you"—he was nevertheless a good speaker, and took a prominent part in the School Debating Society and in all literary and social discussion.

His religious views had been considerably modified since the time when he was grounded in Presbyterian theology; for, while still retaining the chief tenets of the faith in which he had been brought up, he had now entered into a dubious and transitional stage of thought, from which he did not altogether emerge till several years later. On August 7, 1854, about the time of the commencement of the Crimean War, he was finally enlisted as an army schoolmaster, being then just under twenty years of age.

¹ *Secular Review*, June 24, 1882.

CHAPTER II

ARMY SCHOOLMASTER

THE first post to which Thomson was appointed was in connection with a South Devon Militia Regiment, at Plymouth—a difficult and trying position among a dull, rough set of men, for which he was hardly suited, his finer qualities being entirely thrown away. From 1855 to 1856 he was at Aldershot¹ with the Rifle Brigade; and here, though successful enough with his educational duties, he was unfortunate in not winning the favour of the commanding officer—not, as it appears, from any fault or failing on his part, beyond the fact that his high spirit was not sufficiently amenable to the imperious and exacting manner of the officer in question. An army schoolmaster, it should here be mentioned, was regarded as a soldier, and not as a civilian; he wore the uniform of the regiment to which he was attached, and was obliged to conform to the regular military discipline; his position, however, was to a certain extent undefined, inasmuch as his treatment depended a good deal on the personal feeling of his superiors, who had it in their power to be either courteous or supercilious as the case might be. The routine of schoolwork consisted in teaching the children in the morning and the soldiers in the afternoon; at times, too, the schoolmaster was liable to be asked to give extra tuition to some more zealous or

¹ Thomson's earliest extant letter is addressed to Mr. Bradlaugh from North Camp, Aldershot, January 29, 1856.

more backward pupil—a service which Thomson was always prompt to perform. That he felt any keen interest in his profession it would be rash to assert; for the daily drudgery of the schoolroom could not have been congenial to his subtle intellect; while, good comrade though he was, there must have been times when he longed for some more sympathetic society than that of the camp and barrack-room. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that he discharged his duties as a schoolmaster successfully and conscientiously; and he certainly possessed two qualities which are of the utmost value to a teacher—a methodical and painstaking habit and the power of simple and lucid expression. A friend, whose daughter received some lessons in modern languages from Thomson many years after he had left the army, was struck by the admirable method in which he conveyed the instruction.

In the summer of 1856 Thomson was removed from Aldershot, and, having been sent to Ireland, was afterwards attached to the 55th Foot, with which regiment he remained as long as he continued to serve in the army. For the next four years he was stationed either in Dublin or the Curragh Camp; and it was while he was at the former place, in 1856, that he made the acquaintance of Mr. John Grant, also an army schoolmaster, with whom he was on terms of intimacy during nearly all the rest of his life. Mr. Grant had been a fellow-student with Thomson at Chelsea in 1854, but, being his junior by some years, had not then been brought into contact with him; he had also heard anecdotes from Mr. Barnes of Thomson's intellectual prowess and originality of character; so that his interest was already awakened before they had actually met. The records of Thomson's army life are very scanty,

like those of his youth ; but by means of the reminiscences of one or two intimate friends, a few letters which have fortunately been preserved, and some of the early poems, we are able to form a fairly clear notion of him as he then was.

The popularity which he had enjoyed among his comrades at Chelsea did not desert him in the army, and he was generally liked and respected by those who knew him. He took considerable interest in various social movements for the recreation or instruction of the soldiers, would give lectures on subjects with which he was familiar, and act as showman during the exhibition of a magic-lantern, a part which he performed to the full satisfaction of his audience. He was also a good athlete, being strong and hardy in frame, and was known as a skilful rower and a powerful walker, often trudging with his friend Grant to and fro between Dublin and the Curragh Camp, and other long distances. Nor was his love of reading diminished by his educational duties, which fortunately left him leisure in the evenings for the self-instruction to which he still devoted himself with characteristic industry. He had dropped the study of mathematics, in spite of his great talent in that direction, after leaving Chelsea ; but, being by nature an excellent linguist, he set to work to acquire a knowledge of modern languages, beginning with German soon after 1854. His method of learning was of the severest and most rigorous kind, with no attempt at gilding the educational pill ; first the grammar as a preparatory step, then one of the authors whom he wished to read, no matter how hard the style and idiom, to be puzzled out with no other assistance than that of a dictionary.¹

¹ "His way of teaching himself Italian was simple: he went to hear an Italian opera, bought a book of the words, and studied each word down to its origin" (Obituary notice by P. B. Marston, *Athenæum*, June 10, 1882).

On this system he taught himself German, French, Italian, and a fair amount of Spanish; also a little Latin and Greek, though he does not seem to have spent much time on the latter. Meantime he was still adding diligently to his knowledge of English literature; and it was about 1856 that he began to be a serious student of Robert Browning, with whose earlier works, as well as those of George Meredith, he had become acquainted—by a sort of unerring literary instinct which always led him to what was most vital and vigorous—even before he left the military school. By this time he had himself felt strongly the instinct towards authorship, and had written many poems; these, however, with one or two exceptions, he subsequently destroyed.

Yet, happy and contented as Thomson might have seemed at this period to a casual observer, or even to those associates who knew him only as the quick-witted and genial comrade, and not as the idealist and bereaved lover, there is ample proof that he was already experiencing a mood of deep dissatisfaction and despondency. In some stanzas written at Dublin on his twenty-third birthday (November 23, 1857) he seems to be divided between the torpor of his grief in the past and the lingering hope of yet effecting something in the future:—

Oh, for the flushed excitement of keen strife!
For mountains, gulfs, and torrents in my way,
With perils, anguish, fear, and strugglings rife!
For friends and foes, for love and hate in fray—
And not this lone base flat of torpid life!

So weary did he feel, at times, of the monotony of his profession, and so eagerly did he crave for a more active life, that he even discussed with his friend John Grant a plan of deserting from the army and going to sea. Reasons that may partly account for this state of

feeling will readily suggest themselves to readers of the foregoing narrative; the loss of love, followed, or perhaps preceded, by the loss of religious faith—without, as yet, the substitution of any philosophic conviction—was in itself a terrible ordeal for a man of Thomson's intense sensibility, who above all things yearned for a rich, full life of domestic love and external action, for some certitude to lean upon, whether in the present or in a future existence. But now a fatal melancholy was beginning little by little to creep over his nature, which had seemed at first, and still seemed to outward observation, to be altogether joyous and light-hearted; already his mind had begun to ponder those pessimistic thoughts which were afterwards summed up in the burden of his greatest and most sombre poem, "Dead Love, dead Faith, dead Hope."

But, in addition to these despondent promptings, another and still more fatal tendency was now manifesting itself—a tendency which, in the opinion of those who had the best means of judging, was inherited and constitutional in its origin, though doubtless it was aroused and accentuated by circumstances of grief and disappointment. Intemperance, the bane of Thomson's later career, was unknown to him up to about 1855; but from that date onward he gradually became liable to its power; not in the sense that it became an ordinary habit of his life—his true nature, as witnessed by his friends and expressed in his writings, is a proof to the contrary—but rather a periodic disease, against which he struggled hard, and often for many months successfully, but never so as to shake it off altogether.

Thomson's friendship with his old school-fellow George Duncan had continued unbroken when they both left Chelsea, and after his friend's marriage, in

1855, he regularly spent his holidays at Mr. and Mrs. Duncan's house, until their departure to India in 1860. "It was like coming," writes Mrs. Duncan, in some interesting reminiscences of Thomson, "to a brother and sister, for he was dearer to us than a friend. Often afterwards did we talk of him and his great talents, and how he dreamed away the time, happy and contented with his Shelley. He had also frequent fits of melancholy years ago; these my husband said were caused by his brooding over the death of a young and lovely girl whom he loved most devotedly: in fact, more as a saint than a mortal. A correspondence was kept up, and the friendship also, after we went out to India; and if we wanted anything done in England, 'Jimmy' was always the one to do it."

Another friend with whom Thomson was intimate during his stay in Ireland, and with whom he afterwards corresponded, was Mr. James Potterton, also an army schoolmaster. They had studied German together at the Curragh Camp, and Thomson's letters sometimes enclosed copies of his translations from Heine, on which he invited his friend's criticism and advice; at other times were cast in the form of verse—of a free, familiar, doggerel style—in which the writer opens his heart on the subject of his army life, the gossip of the camp, the drudgery of the school-room, and the philosophy which rendered it all endurable. Here is a specimen which may throw light on the feelings with which Thomson regarded his educational profession:—

And if now and then a curse (too intense for this light verse)
Should be gathering in one's spirit when he thinks of how he lives,
With a constant tug and strain—knowing well it's all in vain—
Pumping muddy information into unretentive sieves:

Let him stifle back the curse, which but makes the matter worse,
 And by tugging on in silence earn his wages if he can ;
 For the blessed eve and night are his own yet, and he might
 Fix sound bottoms in these sieves too, were he not so weak a man.

These lines were written at Dublin in May, 1858, at which time Thomson was just about to move from the Ship Street to the Richmond Barracks. A couple of months later we come to the first of a very interesting series of letters (or, rather, the first of those preserved, for some earlier ones must have been lost) addressed to Miss Agnes Gray, whose reminiscences of Thomson's schooldays have already been quoted. These letters are not only good specimens of Thomson's letter-writing, but also afford us a glimpse into his life as "dominie," and throw light indirectly on many points in his character—his love of literature, and eagerness to encourage other students; his taste for music and dancing; his precise, methodical habit of mind, which shows itself not only in the lucidity of expression, but in the clear, bold penmanship, and his sympathy with the poor and suffering.

To Miss Agnes Gray.

Richmond Barracks, Dublin,

July 16, 1858.

DEAR AGNES,—You are graciously pleased to laugh at me again concerning my many apologies for delay in writing; it seems to me, however, that a young lady who can find no better excuse for a three or four months' silence than chronic laziness should be well occupied in considering and repenting her own deplorable condition. I feared that my evil criticisms on your poetry had given you offence. But I think I may safely promise—should you favour me with any more specimens—to be less stingy of my invaluable praise to each successive one; for you will be writing better and better year by year.

Woe is me! that I could not join your delightful "forest trip," which I trust you enjoyed even beyond your expectations. Pray

let me partake of your pleasure by giving me a long description of it. You will thus, too, increase your own pleasure in the recollection by making that recollection more vivid; not to speak of the excellent exercise which will be afforded your descriptive powers.

By the bye, your humble servant has spent since (six?) weeks in another barracks since he had the honour of writing you last, and is now attached to the 55th Foot. Whither this noble corps will be sent no one just now ventures to guess. Lately, vague rumours were afloat of its speedy transportation to India. Probably, however, a tender Government would preserve the precious dominie at home, even when banishing his regiment.

With regard to the piano, I shall be indeed rejoiced to hear you playing some fine day, but, for myself, I am utterly innocent of the art.

With kind love to Father and Mother and all, I remain your sincere friend,

JAS. THOMSON.

To the Same.

Richmond Barracks, Dublin,

May 14, 1859.

.....I take the liberty of sending you by this post two volumes of verse which fell into my hands some time back. The author, Robert Browning, is about the strongest and manliest of our living poets. His wife (*née* Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, to adopt the style of wedding-cards) is beyond all comparison the greatest of English poetesses—*those whose works are published*, I mean. I happen to have her last book, and will send it to you some day. You will probably not care for these poems at first; but they are worth your study, and you may find, as I did, that they improve much with longer acquaintance. If I might school you a bit, I should order you always to look up in a dictionary what words you don't understand, and always to puzzle over difficult passages until they become either perfectly clear or thoroughly hopeless. No lazy reading will ever master a masterly writer. Should you care enough for Browning to wish thoroughly to comprehend him, I shall of course be happy to render you what little assistance may be in my power towards the clearing up of obscurities. The final poem, you will perceive, is addressed to his wife. To the best of my remembrance he used not to write so large a proportion of

love-poetry aforetime ; his marriage must do its best to excuse the poor fellow for his present extravagance in that article. My notion was that your poets, though always fluttering about Love like moths about a rushlight, generally took good care not to singe seriously their precious selves. This unfortunate Mr. Browning, however, seems to have flung himself headlong into the flame, determined to get burnt up—wings and all.

I have lately heard from John. He is in Manchester now with an Uncle John who is a station-master (railway) there. My brother is a clerk in the service of the same company. He is well, and seems to like well his situation. Cousin Charles from Glasgow has also written, and we have agreed to correspond regularly.

How are all your studies and accomplishments progressing? Have you mastered French, German, and Italian yet? You must play the piano for us some day after the style of Miss Arabella Goddard. Perhaps you have heard that young lady? I heard and saw her some time back, and for two or even three full days continued in love with her pure face and splendid music. She seldom practises any of the modern namby-pamby songs and flashy dances, but is devoted to the great and solid pieces of such masters as Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, etc. There is an excellent example for you! If your gentleman of the magnificent laughter is as riant as ever, you may perhaps be so kind as to send me a few of his jolliest cachinnations in your next for the amusement of a dull evening. As it is now very late, and I am considerably tired, you are now—supposing you to have toiled so far—about to have the pleasure of ending this.

To the Same.

Curragh Camp, Kildare,

June 27, 1859.

DEAR AGNES,—Your kind letter would have been answered ere now, had we not when it arrived been in daily expectation of a move. The move has come, and we are now fairly settled in this Camp. Imagine an undulating sea of grass, here and there rising into hillocks, and spotted with patches of flowerless furze. In the midst, on a slightly elevated ridge, stretches for about a mile the Camp, consisting of ten squares of dingy red huts—each square holding a regiment—with a somewhat irregular accompaniment of canteens, wash-houses, hospitals, huts for the staff, etc. The

squares are lettered from A to K, my much ill-used initial, the J, being considered unworthy of a place. In the centre of a line, chosen probably as about the highest spot, stand the Church, the Chapel (Roman Catholic), and the Clock-tower; at the extremities are the white tents of Artillery and Dragoons. It is a fine place for freedom and expanse, and in itself much pleasanter than Aldershot, though I could wish to be there for the sake of its nearness to London. Aldershot is set amidst dark heath, the Curragh amidst green grass; and the difference is like that between cloudy and sunshiny weather. It is good to get out here from a town. The sky is seen, not in patches, but broad, complete, and sea-like; the distance where low blue hills float in the horizon is also sea-like, and the uncorrupted air sweeps over us broad and free as an ocean. Last night, for instance, it blew a stiffish gale. Well, the gusts came with a broad rush and sway against the broad school-hut as billows come against a ship's side. The rattling of the windows, the creaking of the window-cords, the sound as of sails flapping, might have made a squeamish stomach sea-sick. I almost fancied that my hut had got under weigh; and hoped that if so it would drift down the Irish Sea, through the Channel, and up the Thames to London. What a pity it held its anchor fast! I have very good quarters for the Camp, better probably than most of the officers. Two rooms, one of them papered, forming the end of the school-hut, are something to boast of for an habitation.

The Camp is now about full. Between two and three miles off is the village of Newbridge, a cavalry station. Here and there together the troops must number nearly ten thousand men. So that with the assistance of those in Dublin we ought to be able to get up a good "Field-day" or Review for her Majesty, should she come over, as is expected. Lord Seaton, the Commander-in-Chief for Ireland, is here, with all sorts of generals, staff officers, and aides-de-camp. I wish you could have seen the whole division the other day as they marched past before the great man. The Horse Artillery careering as if their guns were cabs and carriages; the more sober Foot Artillery and Military Train; the Scots Greys with their bearskins like mounted Guardsmen; the Royal Dragoons, brass-helmeted; the 5th or Irish Lancers looking splendid, like the chivalry of old, with lances erect, and each topped with its red-and-white pennon; then regiment after regiment of infantry, including a battalion of the Fusilier Guards; each corps marching past to the

music of its own band, the Fusiliers having their bagpipes. Then there were aides-de-camp and regimental field officers galloping about in all directions, swift and brilliant as butterflies: mere butterflies, perhaps, many of them, but very pleasant and exciting to look at.

What do you mean by that strange description of Helen, with its mocking conclusion, "I rather think it would be strange if true"? If you wrote it to bewilder me, you have almost succeeded. I picture Miss Helen as an extremely fashionable and pretty young lady, accustomed to London Tavern Balls and similar aristocratic assemblies; rather coquettish because she has so many admirers, and loving fun no less than when we used to romp at blind man's buff together. Which is the correct portrait—yours or mine? However, to revenge myself for your mystification in this matter, I am going to ill-use your last epistle. Do you know that, good as it is, it is shamefully careless in spelling and punctuation, and not quite so correct as it ought to be in grammatical construction? Most of these errors are evidently not of ignorance, but of carelessness. Will you pardon my thus assuming the schoolmaster over you; and consider that I am a dried-up, pedantic, finical old dominie, fit for nothing else but school drudgery?

By the bye, I did not lend but send the rhyme books, and trust that you will oblige me by not troubling me with them again. A nomadic soldier can't afford to carry about many books with him; they are more bother than they are worth. Besides, there are large libraries now at almost every military station; each having enough good books (amidst much heavy lumber sacred to the moths) to satisfy a moderate man for the year or so of his probable stay. But you need not fear to try my patience with as many questions as you please.

To the Same.

(Fragment—undated.)

As I, like you, detest crossing, I trench upon another sheet. As I am on the subject of books, it may be worth while to remark that if Mr. Gray still takes in periodicals as of old, he cannot get a better and cheaper one than the *Cornhill Magazine*. It is a monthly, costs only a shilling, is edited by Thackeray, and the writing is first-class.

Our present Regimental Rumour says that we shall soon go to Aldershot (which will be London for me), and then to Australia—

Melbourne. I shall return to England abounding in nuggets in that case. The sooner we go the better. I am eager to be in the position of the Jacobite in the gude old Scotch song :—

“He turned him right and round about
 Upon the Irish shore ;
 He gave his bridle-rein a shake,
 With adieu for evermore,
 My dear,
 Adieu for evermore !”

The difference will be that he was going to, and I shall be escaping from banishment.

Pray write soon and comfort my dolefulness.—Your sincere friend,
 JAMES THOMSON.

Thomson's expectation of being sent to Melbourne was not realized ; but at the beginning of June, 1860, his regiment was transferred from the Curragh Camp to Aldershot.

“We start,” he writes to his friend Mr. Potterton, “on Monday or Tuesday, going in two vessels from Dublin to Portsmouth, thence to Aldershot. Packing up has commenced ; no more school ; no more mess ; no more nothing. Woe unto my friends, for sorely shall I sponge upon them in these days. Have you heard of George Duncan's mishaps ? The ship in which he with his family had secured an uncommonly cheap and comfortable berth, got on to the Arklow sands, and poor George was in considerable danger. This ship is done for, or materially injured. He must go out alone now, and by the overland route.....As I have other letters to write this evening, I let you off with this brief infliction.”

While Thomson was at Aldershot, in 1860, he paid a visit to his old friends the Grays, whom he had not seen for several years. The following is the account given by Mrs. Greig :—

At last he wrote saying that he was to have a fortnight's holiday, and would pay us a visit. We were all excitement at his coming. I had previously informed him in one of my letters that Helen had become a Ragged School teacher, and in reply he said he could not imagine a creature so bright, and in his remembrance so beautiful, being arrayed in sombre habiliments and acting such a character. When he arrived, Helen met him in the most demure manner possible, and kept up the deception, or rather tried to do so, for he was not to be deceived. Two days after his arrival, when he was sitting reading, she suddenly sent something flying at his head, at which he started up, saying, "Ah! I have just been quietly waiting for this! You have been acting a part which does not become you, but you have now resumed your true character, and are the Helen of old." During this visit we thought him much altered in appearance and manners; indeed, we were somewhat disappointed. He was by no means so manly-looking as when he left London, and was painfully silent and depressed. He went from us with the intention of again going to Aldershot; but from that day until Mr. Maccall mentioned him to us we never once heard of him. Ever since we have felt greatly puzzled to account for his singular conduct.

It is difficult to suggest any adequate cause for Thomson's dejection during this visit, or for his failure to keep up a friendship which had long been very dear to him. That he was not ungrateful or forgetful of the kindness which the Grays had shown him is proved by some remarks which he made in a letter to his sister-in-law written in the last year of his life, in which he speaks of their services to him after his mother's death. Mr. William Maccall's essays on Thomson¹ bear witness to the same grateful recollection. "It was at their house," he says, "and as the playmate of their children, that James Thomson spent his happiest days. Those days he seemed in his letters to me never tired of recalling. I often pressed him to renew his relations with the hospitable friends of his childhood,

¹ *James Thomson, Laureate of Pessimism.*

who were as willing as in the past to welcome him. But his constitutional shyness, or some other cause, hindered him from gratifying a desire which evidently stirred his being very deeply." It is possible that Thomson's discontinuance of his visits to Mr. Gray's house after 1860 was due to a revival of his early affection for Miss Helen Gray, with whom, it will be remembered, he had earnestly desired to correspond, and who was now engaged to be married. It is known that he still treasured many years afterwards a purse which she had worked and given to him; and it is noticeable that among his early poems there is one named "Meeting Again," which is dated September, 1860, and may perhaps refer to this occasion. It may be, however, that Thomson's conduct was merely an instance of that eccentric tendency to sudden fancies and changes to which many poets have been prone, and from which he was by no means exempt.

Thomson's regiment, the 55th Foot, remained at Aldershot for about a year. Here are a few extracts from his letters to Mr. James Potterton during this period:—

Aldershot, October 11, 1860.—Why are you not here, O my friend, to partake with me of the German feast, which we prepared so laboriously on the green Curragh? We would plunge headlong into Latin this winter, and emerge Ciceronic next summer. My friends are away, and the heart is taken out of me. What fun in finding some exquisite German sentence, when there is no one whom I can bore with it?.....Do you remember one beautiful day in March, when you, Bob, and I went strolling over the Curragh between eleven and one? The larks we heard that day for the first time; it was the first (and almost the last) fine day this year? The long quiet sheep-studded glen, beginning out by the little police-barrack? The lady and gentleman we saw at archery in the hollow beneath our square? I found the other day some verses [the punning stanzas entitled "Arch Archery"] made that evening,

and have finished them into the trifle which I herewith send you. The day is marked with a white stone in the calendar of my memory. You will understand that I am so poor in letter-worthiness that I have to take refuge in doggerel.....We will try to meet at Christmas. I write in haste, not for want of time, but because of a most restive mood which is leaping, kicking, doing "caprioles, lavoltas, and demivolts," with such infernal agility that the rider, Common-sense, must infallibly soon be thrown.

Aldershot, November 21, 1860.—Lectured last night on English History as showman of certain magic-lantern slides. They were pretty well done, and I knew a little of the subjects; so the speech came rather trippingly from the tongue. With practice of a preliminary hundred or so, I might become able to give a not intolerable lecture. But who would willingly undergo such practice, even if it made perfect? News none. Have just scrawled to Mr. Barnes, and am going to devote a special P.S. to your most affectionate regards.

Aldershot, March 22, 1861.—You know of course that Le Mar has got the Chelsea berth, to the exclusion of unworthy me. Grant has failed to get the Hibernian one, being too late in his application.....I have been reading fairly in my noble Schiller, but have attempted no translation. How are you prospering with yours and the Reineke? I wish I had a fellow-Christian to read with in the evenings; for the mess strongly attracts a poor solitary, and plays the deuce with his studies. Having nothing original to write about, I send you some more Heine, to put you in my debt for something.

In the spring or summer of the following year (1861) Thomson accompanied his regiment to Jersey. Here he seems to have spent a pleasant, uneventful year, and made the acquaintance, among others, of Mr. George Julian Harney, the well-known Chartist, then editor of the *Jersey Independent*, to which journal he contributed some translations from Heine, and of Mr. Byron Webber, who was acting as sub-editor, both of whom remembered him as quiet, cultivated, unassuming, and reticent. The numerous letters written by Thomson to Mr. Bradlaugh

between 1852 and 1862, many of which were from Jersey, have unfortunately been destroyed; and the same fate has overtaken those addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Barnes. While he stayed in Jersey, he wrote a great part of the narrative poem entitled "Ronald and Helen," in which are many fine descriptions of the coast scenery. In a letter to his sister-in-law, written many years later, he thus alludes to Jersey: "You are right in thinking it a very pretty place, with very fine cows (they are all tethered as they graze in the lush valley-bottoms), and with delightful lanes, fringed with rich ferns, whereon the apple-blossom falls in warm flakes like a shower of summer snow. It has also the most wonderful magic-working mists I ever saw anywhere." A small note-book, dated 1861-62, contains similar evidence of Thomson's enjoyment of this sojourn in Jersey. In May, 1862, his regiment returned to Portsmouth.

These years of service in the army, however unsuitable the life may have been in many respects to one who was becoming more and more conscious of his poetic calling, had at least brought him one great advantage which he might otherwise have missed. Had he settled down at once to a city clerkship, he would have seen but little of natural scenery and open-air life; but now, by his wanderings to and fro between Devonshire, Ireland, Aldershot, and the Channel Isles, he had found opportunities for becoming intimate with Nature in many of her wildest aspects—with seas and skies, hills and plains, lakes, rivers, and forests. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this influence on his poetic style; for idealist and dreamer though he was in this early period, he was nevertheless gifted with very keen powers of observation, and was laying by the

material, at this time, for much that is splendid and picturesque in his poetry.

The prevailing characteristics of his early poems are their intense ideality and passionate reverence for beauty and love, together with a chastened tone of pathos and resignation, and belief in the mysterious but over-ruling providence of God. "The Fadeless Bower" (1858), for example, is full of a young man's tender dreams and regretful imaginings. It is a "vision of the long-ago," a reminiscence of that moment when, in a place and scene fixed for ever in his memory, he had confessed his love and learnt that he was loved in return.

I have this moment told my love ;
 Kneeling, I clasp her hands in mine ;
 She does not speak, she does not move ;
 The silent answer is divine.
 The flood of rapture swells till breath
 Is almost tranced in deathless death.

A still more beautiful effort in the same mood is "Bertram to the Lady Geraldine" (1857), a rhapsody instinct with passionate feeling which finds utterance in language of the richest melody. In "The Lord of the Castle of Indolence" (1859) we have a poem written in a strongly optimistic mood, and steeped to the full in that natural tranquillity and sensuous repose with which Thomson was largely endowed ; and here, perhaps, of all his early writings, we find the greatest grasp, concentration, and self-control.

While others fumed and schemed and toiled in vain
 To mould the world according to their mood,
 He did by might of perfect faith refrain
 From any part in such disturbance rude.
 The world, he said, indeed is very good,
 Its Maker surely wiser far than we ;

Feed soul and flesh upon its bounteous food,
 Nor fret because of ill; All-good is He,
 And worketh not in years but in Eternity.

On the other hand, this youthful period is not unmarked by pessimism, as in the "Poe-like verses," as they have rightly been called, of the anguished "Mater Tenebrarum" (1859), and in the maturer thoughts and more solemn harmonies of the stanzas "To our Ladies of Death" (1861), suggestive of the influence of De Quincey. Still earlier (1857) is "The Doom of a City," a sort of first study for "The City of Dreadful Night," which, though not distinguished by the stern power and conciseness of its successor, can claim many striking passages full of imaginative passion, and is nothing less than an extraordinary production for a youth of twenty-three. Few of Thomson's poems, indeed, could surpass for sheer splendour of conception and imagery the strange and pathetic stanzas from which the following are taken:—

As one who in the morning-shine
 Reels homeward, shameful, wan, adust,
 From orgies wild with fiery wine
 And reckless sin and brutish lust;
 And sees a doorway open wide,
 And then the grand Cathedral space;
 And hurries in to crouch and hide
 His trembling frame, his branded face.

He sees the world-wide morning flame
 Through windows where in glory shine
 The saints who fought and overcame,
 The martyrs who made death divine;
 He sees pure women bent in prayer,
 Communing low with God above;—
 Too pure! What right has *he* to share
 Their silent feast of sacred love?

Of the many poems that he wrote before he left the army, some ten or twelve found publication in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* between 1858 and 1860, under the signature "Crepusculus," the first published being "The Fadeless Bower," which appeared in July, 1858. In 1858 and 1859 he also contributed some prose essays to the *London Investigator*, a paper edited by his friend Mr. Bradlaugh, chief among which were his "Notes on Emerson" and "A Few Words about Burns." It was in the *London Investigator* that he first used the signature of "B. V.," by which he was afterwards so well known to the readers of the *National Reformer*. "Bysshe Vanolis" (it was thus appended in full to one or two early contributions) was a *nom de plume* adopted out of reverence for Shelley and Novalis, Vanolis being an anagram of the latter name. From 1860 Thomson became a contributor both in verse and prose to the *National Reformer*, which was established by Mr. Bradlaugh in that year; but this subject may be fittingly reserved for the next chapter. It is sufficient to note here that his attention was now fully turned to literature, and that in no case would he have been likely to remain much longer in the army, though, as it has happened, his departure was accelerated by an unforeseen incident.

In 1862, when his regiment was at Portsmouth, it chanced that Thomson went on a visit to a fellow schoolmaster at Aldershot, and in the course of a stroll in the neighbourhood of the camp one of the party, out of bravado or for a wager, swam out to a boat which was moored on a pond where bathing was prohibited. An officer demanded the names of those present, and, on this being refused, further altercation followed, with the result that a court-martial was held on the recalcitrant

schoolmasters. No real blame seems to have attached to Thomson, but he paid the penalty of being one of the incriminated party, and was discharged from the service on October 30, 1862. His life in the army, as we have seen, had not been altogether a congenial one, but it had also its proportion of pleasure and good companionship; and, looking back on it afterwards through an interval of twelve or fifteen years, he could say to a friend that "it had comprised some of his happiest days."

CHAPTER III

LIFE IN LONDON

WHEN Thomson left the army his position might have been a somewhat precarious one but for the ready assistance and welcome hospitality of his friend Mr. Bradlaugh, who not only obtained him a clerkship in a solicitor's office of which he was then acting as manager, but also offered him a home in his own family—an offer which he willingly accepted. He lived in Mr. Bradlaugh's house at Tottenham for several years, during which time their intimacy was very close and affectionate, Thomson being regarded and treated in every way as one of the family, and beloved by every member of the household. Nor, indeed, was this any exception to the general rule of his life; for one of the most signal proofs of the loveliness of his nature was his power of attracting the interest and friendship of all those with whom he came in contact. Few men or women were insensible to his quick, natural sympathy and delicate tact; with children he was always and instantaneously a favourite. He had soon gained the complete confidence and affection of Mr. Bradlaugh's children, one of whom, in some delightful reminiscences¹ of this friendship, has given us a good insight into the sunnier and brighter aspect of Thomson's character as

¹ "Childish Recollections of James Thomson," by Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner, in *Our Corner*, August and September, 1886. See also the *Life of Charles Bradlaugh*, 1894 (I, 111-13), by the same writer.

he then appeared—"trim and neat, with a smile on eye and lip; a genial, merry friend and companion." The following passage is quoted from her account:—

He lived in our house for some years, and was beloved by every one in it. He came when I was about five or six years old, and my earliest recollection of him is of sitting on his knee and asking him to make an "ugly face" for me. First he refused; and when, after renewed and vehement entreaties, he complied, I was so terrified that I incontinently fled upstairs.

My sister was his "Sunday baby"; on Sunday afternoons she was installed in state on his knee, while my brother and I sat more humbly at his feet, to listen with breathless interest while he told us wonderful tales of brave knights and fair ladies, boundless seas, high mountains, and wide-stretching prairies. Sometimes the summons to tea would break off our story at a vital point, and then the next Sunday afternoon we would clamour for the end. We of course thought he first read his tales out of books, as we did ours, and it was greatly to our surprise when he laughed and said he had forgotten it, he must tell us a new one. As we grew a little older he told us the stories of the operas, whistling or singing some of the airs to us. I have never seen "Fidelio," yet he told us the story of it so dramatically that the scenes could hardly be impressed more vividly upon my memory if I had seen them acted instead of merely listening to his description.

On Sunday mornings he mostly took us for long walks. We lived at Park then, and he would take us to Edmonton to see Charles Lamb's grave—or Enfield, or Chingford, or if—as occasionally happened—my father came too, our walk was across the Tottenham Marshes, to give our old favourite, Bruin, a swim.

Here, too, is a vivid picture of Bradlaugh and his friend:—

The two would sit in my father's little "den" or study, and smoke.....and while the smoke slowly mounted up and by degrees so filled the room that they could scarce see each other's faces across the table, they would talk philosophy, politics, or literature. I can see them now, in some ways a strangely assorted pair, as they sat in that little room lined with books; at the far side of the table the poet and dreamer, with his head thrown back and with the stem of his pipe never far from his lips, his face almost lost in the

blue clouds gently and lazily curling upwards ; and here, near the fireplace, my father, essentially a man to whom to think, to plan, was to *do*, sitting in careless comfort in his big uncushioned oaken chair.¹

But though this happier side of Thomson's nature is well worthy of attention, it must not be forgotten that the gloomy side existed also, however little he might let it appear in his manner or conversation. The very capacity for enjoyment which he possessed in so large a degree implied a corresponding capacity for suffering ; for, as one of his critics has truly remarked, "it is a fallacy to believe that it is men constitutionally sombre, habitually sad, who are the supreme sufferers ; the supreme sufferers are the men who have a profound relish of existence." Such relish Thomson certainly possessed, but it is equally certain that at the commencement of his London life his views had already settled down from a vague mood of alternate despondency and hopefulness into a state of confirmed pessimism, this change in his internal convictions being almost contemporaneous with the change in his profession and manner of living. It was not without a severe struggle and much pain of heart that he had broken away from his early religious belief ; but having once done so, he was far too honest and fearless a thinker to take refuge in any half-way house of intellectual sophistry, however comfortable to his feelings such a sojourn might have been ; he was determined to look what he considered the facts of existence fairly in the face, at whatever cost to his own mental happiness.

But necessitarian and pessimist though he was, he had not lost any of his native energy and power of strenuous application, and the first ten or twelve years

¹ *Life of Charles Bradlaugh*, I, 112.

of his London life were marked by the production of his best, most varied, and most characteristic work. Except for his fits of intemperance, his methodical ways and clearness of mind would have made him an excellent man of business; while his strongly democratic opinions and keen sympathy with every kind of free thought caused him to take a close interest in the secular movement of which the *National Reformer* was the chief organ. His part, however, was more that of a brilliant free-lance than of a recognized leader; for his intense individuality, coupled with his almost cynical disbelief in the possibility of any real progress, must always have prevented his giving himself heart and soul to a "cause." He worked, as he himself avowed, on the side of liberty and freethought, not because he believed in the ultimate triumph of those principles, but simply because he was prompted thereto by a natural instinct and inclination. His hatred of all fuss and sham, and his impatience of the occasional "clap-trap" and false sentiment not wholly separable from any popular movement, made him at times a sarcastic critic of his own party no less than of his adversaries. He was, however, strongly in sympathy with all genuine revolutionary efforts—witness his beautiful and stirring lines on "A Polish Insurgent."¹

Under the signature of "B. V." he now contributed frequently to the *National Reformer*; and a large proportion of his most spirited writings, both in verse and prose, may be found in the columns of that journal between 1862 and 1874. That his chance of literary fame was jeopardized, or at any rate retarded, by his connection with the Freethought party can hardly admit of doubt.

¹ In 1863 Mr. Bradlaugh obtained for him the appointment of Secretary to the Polish Committee, but his inherited curse of intemperance seized him, and at a critical moment he disappeared.—*Life of Charles Bradlaugh*.

But it should be remembered, on the other hand, that, together with the drawback of this position, he secured an important advantage—the opportunity of giving the freest possible play to his own powers, without being compelled to adapt his writings to suit the popular prejudices. “For me,” he says in one of his letters, with reference to the *National Reformer*, “its supreme merit consists in the fact that I can say in it what I like how I like; and I know not another periodical in Britain which would grant me the same liberty or license.” If, therefore, Thomson was a loser as regards literary interests from his Secularist connections, he was intellectually a gainer in being able, though a poor man, to follow unmolested the bent of his own genius; and English literature thus received a valuable addition, in an age when virility of thought was not too common, from the works of a poet who refused to be cramped by any conventional formula, and was not afraid to express the utmost conclusions to which his speculations led him.

It has been said of Thomson that “in time to come the critic of these years will look back wonderingly upon the figure of the somewhat solitary poet who belonged to no special community or brotherhood in art.”¹ Both in his life and literary work there was a remarkable individuality and apartness. He was possessed of none of the advantages usually enjoyed by the poet, artist, and man of letters—a liberal education, cultured ease, and immunity from the petty cares and ever-present anxiety of earning one’s daily bread; on the contrary, his education was wholly self-acquired in the face of constant poverty and the drudgery of an uncongenial profession. He was a poet, endowed with a poet’s wide sympathy and lofty

¹ P. B. Marston, *Athenæum*, June 10, 1882.

aspiration ; but he was at the same time a battler and a struggler with all that is meanest and most harassing in commonplace life ; and indifferent though he was to fame, in the ordinary sense, he could not but repine inwardly at the thralldom of a lot which checked and thwarted his best endeavours. But his soldier's training now stood him in good stead, enabling him to bear with stern and silent endurance whatever fate might have in store :—

Over me pass the days and months and years
Like squadrons and battalions of the foe
Trampling with thoughtless thrusts and alien jeers
Over a wounded soldier lying low ;
He grips his teeth, or flings them words of scorn
To mar their triumph ; but the while, outworn,
Inwardly craves for death to end his woe.¹

Many of the poems and essays written during these years and published in the *National Reformer* are full of autobiographical interest to those who read them aright. Two of them in especial, "Vane's Story" and "A Lady of Sorrow," contain, in poetry and prose respectively, an idealized version of the story of the poet's life and the secret of his pessimistic creed ; while in both of these, as in other writings, he reverts fondly to the memory of his lost love, transfigured now into the guardian spirit with whom, in his great loneliness in the midst of the gloomy city, he holds rapt and sacred communion. In the place of the idealism and richness of tone which marked the earlier writings, we now note the prevalence of a half-serious, half-humorous mood, accompanied by more maturity of thought and more boldness of speculation, but expressed with less verbal ornament and less deliberate elaboration of style—a change in literary

¹ "To our Ladies of Death," 1861.

method which corresponds with the change in the actual circumstances of Thomson's life and in the tendency of his opinions. In "Vane's Story," and other poems of the same class, we see him emancipated from every trace of conventionality, and playing fantastically with his own views of life, now grave, now gay, as the case may be, and sometimes both at once.

"Vane's Story" (1864), which is the earliest of Thomson's three masterpieces, and disputes with "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" for the honour of being second only to the "City of Dreadful Night," is at once fantastic, speculative, and autobiographical, dealing freely with natural and supernatural elements, yet offering at the same time, as Mr. Dobell remarks in his *Memoir*, as candid and complete an autobiography as was ever written, as, for example, in the singularly pathetic and beautiful allegory of the Fountain:—

There was a Fountain long ago,
 A fountain of perpetual flow,
 Whose purest springlets had their birth
 Deep in the bosom of the earth.
 Its joyous wavering silvery shaft
 To all the beams of morning laughed,
 Its steadfast murmurous crystal column
 Was loved by all the moonbeams solemn;
 From morn to eve it fell again
 A singing many-jewelled rain,
 From eve to morn it charmed the hours
 With whispering dew and diamond showers;
 Crown'd many a day with sunbows bright,
 With moonbows halo'd many a night;
 And so kept full its marble urn
 All fringed with fronds of greenest fern,
 O'er which with timeless love intent
 A pure white marble Goddess leant.

It may be gathered, even from these few opening lines,

that the Fountain is typical of Thomson's own life-course—at first flowing freely and joyously under the influences of love; then, by a sudden change, left silent and stagnant for years of loneliness and desolation, yet ever ready to leap forth afresh to the light in moments of rapturous resurrection and renewed vitality. The history of his life and poetry is faithfully rendered under this simple yet effective poetical figure, perhaps even more faithfully than the poet himself could at that time have realized or intended.

The experiences of London life (it should be remembered that Thomson had known London from childhood, and had learnt its lessons well) contributed largely to the construction and imagery of these poems and prose-phantasies, so profoundly gloomy in tone and so intensely pessimistic in doctrine; while insomnia, a curse from which he suffered acutely at times, was an aggravation of his suffering. The references in his poems to sleepless hours should by no means be overlooked by those who would understand his pessimism; for such lines as the following, from the "City of Dreadful Night," were founded on the experience of many previous years:—

The City is of Night, but not of Sleep;
There sweet sleep is not for the weary brain;
The pitiless hours like years and ages creep,
A night seems termless hell.....

Yet, during these very years, this same pessimist, in some rare moment of rapturous joy and spiritual exaltation, could sing strains of such pure unalloyed happiness as has been felt and expressed by few other poets:—

Let my voice ring out and over the earth,
Through all the grief and strife,
With a golden joy in a silver mirth:
Thank God for Life!

Let my voice swell out through the great abyss
 To the azure dome above,
 With a chord of faith in the harp of bliss :
 Thank God for Love !

The two Idylls of Cockaigne, "Sunday at Hampstead" and "Sunday up the River" (1865), consist of a series of idyllic pictures, by "a very humble member of the great and noble London mob." They indicate the high tide of Thomson's spirits in holiday season ; yet it would be a mistake to regard the descriptions as autobiographical, since they are in the main dramatic. Their charm lies not only in the beauty of the poems themselves, which, with their varying metres, admirably portray the varying moods and humours of the holiday-maker's mind, but also in their conjunction of the most boisterous Bohemian humour with an undertone of true and deep feeling, which redeems them from the danger of lapsing into mere badinage and vulgarity. Of the lyrical pieces that are scattered through both these idylls, none, perhaps, is more beautiful than the following from the "Sunday at Hampstead":—

As we rush, as we rush in the Train,
 The trees and the houses go wheeling back,
 But the starry heavens above the plain
 Come flying on our track.

All the beautiful stars of the sky,
 The silver doves of the forest of Night,
 Over the dull earth swarm and fly,
 Companions of our flight.

We will rush ever on without fear ;
 Let the goal be far, the flight be fleet !
 For we carry the Heavens with us, Dear,
 While the Earth slips from our feet !

On the whole, however, "Sunday up the River" is distinctly the finer of the two poems, both in delicacy of

thought and completeness of workmanship. "“Sunday up the River,”” wrote Herman Melville, “contrasting with the ‘City of Dreadful Night,’ is like a Cuban humming bird, beautiful in fairy tints, flying against the tropic thunderstorm.”

From 1862 to 1869 there is little actual record of Thomson's doings. In October, 1866, he ceased to be an inmate of Mr. Bradlaugh's house, and took lodgings for himself in the Pimlico district, first in Denbigh Street, then at 69 Warwick Street, a house occupied by two maiden ladies named Spurway, and afterwards at 240 Vauxhall Bridge Road, where he stayed from 1869 till 1872. In November, 1869, there is an entry in a fragmentary diary with reference to “Sunday up the River,” which appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* for October of that year. This was one of the few occasions on which Thomson's poetry gained admission into any but Secularist periodicals—his “only production in reputable society,” as he called it—the acceptance in this case being partly due to the favourable judgment of Charles Kingsley. Thomson thus recorded the event in his diary:—

October, 1869.—“Up the River; an Idyll of Cockaigne,” accepted by Froude for *Fraser's Magazine*, appears.

November 19.—Breakfasted with Froude, who has just returned from Ireland, and is alone at present. Found him very cordial and homely, so that I was quite at my ease. Found an early opportunity to tell him about my having written a good deal for the *N. R.* Had thought this might shock him, but he took this quite as a matter of course. Lent me Spinoza in French (Emile Saisset's trans., with Introduction and Life) and four vols. of Tieck's *Phantasms*. Spent more than two hours with him in quite frank chat.

That this year, 1869, had been, for some reason or other which cannot now be conjectured, a more than

usually unhappy one for Thomson, may be gathered from the following entry :—

Sunday, November 4, 1869.—Burned all my old papers, manuscripts, and letters, save the book MSS, which have been already in great part printed. It took me five hours to burn them, guarding against chimney on fire, and keeping them thoroughly burning. I was sad and stupid—scarcely looked into any; had I begun reading them, I might never have finished their destruction. All the letters; those which I had kept for twenty years, those which I had kept for more than sixteen. I felt myself like one who, having climbed half-way up a long rope (35 on the 23rd inst.), cuts off all beneath his feet; he must climb on, and can never touch the old earth again without a fatal fall. The memories treasured in the letters can never, at least in great part, be revived in my life again, nor in the lives of the friends yet living who wrote them. But after this terrible year, I could do no less than consume the past. I can now better face the future, come in what guise it may.

It is a relief to turn from these despondent musings and forebodings to Thomson's correspondence with the Bradlaughs, with whom he still maintained most cordial relations, though not living in their family.

To Mrs. Bradlaugh.

240 Vauxhall Bridge Road, Pimlico, S.W.,

November 16, 1869.

DEAR MRS. BRADLAUGH,—As Grant tells me you want a copy of last month's *Fraser*, I have great pleasure in forwarding you one. You will find the article, "Suggestions on Academical Organisation," very interesting, as also Bonamy Price's reply to the article on "Currency," July, 1869; I would also commend as worthy the most careful study the paper on Professor Tyndall's "Theory of Comets."

I was surprised to find in the magazine a lot of verses which I remember being offered to Mr. B. three or four years ago for the *N. R.*, and which he wisely refused. The editor of *Fraser* must have been very soft when he accepted them. He was having his holiday in Ireland at the time, and perhaps had taken too much punch when he happened to read them.

Having at last had my noble portrait taken, I enclose the least bad copy I can pick out. With love to all, yours faithfully,

JAMES THOMSON.

P.S.—The portrait would have doubtless had a much more benevolent expression but for the fact that I had to wait a full hour while a lady was having her beautiful baby taken. Baby had four expositions (I think they call them), Mamma making wonderful efforts to secure its steadfastness, and the photographic artist making the most comical whistlings and chirpings with the notion that these would conduce to the same great end. I am happy to believe that baby winked or started or spoiled the business somehow through all four expositions. The artist at length, ashamed to keep me waiting any longer, told Mamma that the gentleman below must be done before they had another try at triumphant baby. You will doubtless discover all the amiability of that hour in my expression.

240 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, S.W.,

October 28, 1871.

DEAR MRS. BRADLAUGH,—This morning I sent by book-post Thalberg's arrangement of "Home, sweet Home," as desired by Alice. The price is only one-half what appears marked. I had my sister-in-law in town for three or four days the week before last. She is a quaint little creature, whom I feel inclined to like. Unfortunately I couldn't have any quiet chat with her, as she had come to meet her mother and friends, who had been having a month in the Isle of Wight, and the said friends consisted of one widow, two old maids, and one young maid. Fancy me going to Drury Lane with five of them under my charge! I did it with the utmost coolness and self-possession, I can assure you. Sister-in-law is not very strong, and I think brother is not very strong either.

I spent an evening at Turner Street last week with Hypatia. Mr. B. came in before I left, looking better, I think, than I had ever seen him since I came to London. He appeared as though he could have supped off a creature the size of me, and not have been troubled with indigestion if he had eaten it all.

I saw Austin [Holyoake] last evening. His wife has a regular engagement now at Sadler's Wells, and has been very well spoken of in the London daily papers under the name of Miss Alice Austin.¹ Curiously enough, the manager's wife acts in her maiden name,

¹ Mrs. Austin Holyoake, afterwards Mrs. Theodore Wright.

and this is Emma Austin. I thought this was Mrs. Bayston at first.

Yesterday I got a letter from Grant. He says that he has written twice to you without an answer. A pretty creature you are to grumble about people not writing to you, when you never reply if they do. And you have no writing at all to do except in the way of letters, while some persons I know have to write morning, noon, and night, till pen and ink make them feel sea-sick.

Hoping you are all well, with love and best wishes,—Yours truly,
JAMES THOMSON.

The above letters contain references to several of Thomson's best friends. There is also mention, in some of the letters addressed to Mrs. Bradlaugh, of Mr. W. E. Jaques, who had made Thomson's acquaintance through being engaged in the same office; his name often occurs in the diaries of a later date, and Thomson frequently spent Sundays at his house. Mr. Austin Holyoake was a sub-editor of the *National Reformer*, which was printed at his offices in Johnson's Court, and, being thus associated with Thomson in journalistic work, he soon became one of his dearest and most valued friends. Of his younger brother, John, who was now married, Thomson saw but little, their only meetings being on such occasions as that referred to above, when his brother and sister-in-law paid short visits to London. The two brothers had been parted early in life through the sudden breaking-up of their home, and while the one had lived chiefly in Ireland or London, the other had been engaged in business in Scotland and the north of England, so that their paths lay far apart. To his sister-in-law, whom he first saw in 1867, Thomson took a strong liking, and was inclined to open his heart about his own concerns more than he usually did to his correspondents. Here are some extracts from two letters written to her in 1872:—

To Mrs. John Thomson.

240 Vauxhall Bridge Road, S.W.,

January 1, 1872.

I hadn't time to write more to you the other day, and since then I have been so stupid (even much more stupid than usual) with a thick cold in the head that I have been afraid to write, lest you should be forced to judge that either I had gone out of my mind or my mind had gone out of me—the one case being about as bad as the other, I suppose. As an additional pleasantness I have had a sore throat, which indeed suffered me to eat (with suffering), but would not allow me to smoke. This deprivation proved so heavy a calamity that I have sometimes caught myself pondering whether life is really worth having when one cannot smoke in the long dull evenings. If you are not a smoker yourself, you can scarcely imagine the anguish; but try to think how you would feel if you were not permitted for a whole twelvemonth to go shopping, or even to peep into the windows where dresses and bonnets are enshrined for the ardent adoration of the fair sex. However, having been able to smoke this evening, I feel bound to write, although still (as you will have discovered long before reaching this line) prodigiously stupid.

What made you, O wilful little woman, send unto me gold-rimmed eyeglasses? Did you think they would give my nose and the rest of my countenance an air of respectability and dignity, and even perhaps make me look rather venerable? But it was kind of you to write on Christmas Day itself, though how you could compose your mind to the task, if you dined at home, and were burthened with the anxiety of how the sacred pudding would turn out, baffles my comprehension. I hope it turned out better than the similar work of a friend of mine, who told me that when a young private soldier it came to his turn to be cook for the company on Christmas Day. He managed to make the precious thing pretty well, he asserts; but forgetting that puddings are in the habit of swelling with monstrous self-importance as they approach the state of perfection which fits them for the festive board, he did tie up that poor creature in its cloth as if he wanted to strangle it in its very infancy. The consequence was that the pudding, after short struggles, succeeded in bursting its bonds asunder, and my friend, to his great astonishment, found that he had succeeded in producing a sort of rich plum-pudding broth. When his comrades came to

cast eyes on this wonderful mess, they looked much more ready to devour him than it, and I believe they never trusted to his uncontrolled genius for a pudding again.

You think I have left Mr. B., and wonder what I am about, and I often wonder myself. Mr. B. gave up city business altogether more than eighteen months ago, in order to devote himself solely to the great business of illuminating the benighted intellect of this nation on social, political, and religious matters. For some time after he left I did nothing, an occupation which would suit me exceedingly well, and for which I have fine natural talents that I have taken care to cultivate to the best of my abilities. That is, would suit me extremely well on a fortune, or in a semi-tropical climate, but here, without money, it is a luxury too ethereal for my taste. Afterwards, I did some work in a printing office, reading proofs, revising, etc.; and as to this I will only say that if ever you have the misfortune to be condemned to penal servitude, and they offer to commute the sentence for such work in a printing office, you had far better stick to the penal servitude. I then became secretary *pro tem.* to one of the thousand companies which came into being last year, and in some very hard commercial campaigning have already had two companies killed under me. I am at present astride a third, which may carry me out safely or may not; it has received three or four shot and sabre wounds already, but seems tough and tenacious of life. By the bye, our slain companies brought no one down but the riders; our friendly foes the shareholding public having received all their money back. As I was nearly thirty when I came to London, I could not go through the regular course in any business, and have had to seize whatever honest chance offered. Perhaps some fine day I shall turn up a trump and win a good stake; it is much more probable that I shan't. In the meantime, having no one to look to but myself, I quietly take things as they come, and quietly let things go as they go, fortifying myself with that saying of the philosopher that it matters not in this vale of tears whether we wipe our eyes with a silk or cotton handkerchief, or blink through tortoiseshell or gold-rimmed eyeglasses. Perhaps the said philosopher had himself the silk handkerchief and gold-rimmed glasses, or perhaps he did not use a handkerchief nor wear eyeglasses, and was thus enabled to be so philosophical on the subject. Not that I need to wipe my eyes in this vale of tears, for I always find the prospect either much too sad or much too comical for weeping.

To the Same.

● 240 Vauxhall Bridge Road,

March 13, 1872.

What has kept me so long from answering your last kind letter I really don't know. Very likely my intense sympathy with the Prince of Wales in his illness, and my frantic joy at his recovery, made me incapable of thinking of anything else. Now that he is safe and on the Continent, I can attend a little to the ordinary affairs of life.

Were you dazzled by the blazing descriptions of our Metropolitan Thanksgiving, you other poor provincials? As for me, I kept out of it all as well as I could. It drove me from the Strand and Fleet Street to the Embankment for a week or so in going to and coming from the City; for time was lost, clothes were in danger, and even limbs were not safe, with carpenters, painters, roughs, *badauds*, noise, hurry, and confusion in full possession of the route. On the solemn and sublime day itself I went to a concert far away from the multitude, and in the evening stopped at home reading a moral French novel. So much for my part in the Thanksgiving. But I promise you that when I hear that yourself and John are quite well and hearty, he about half as stout as the Tichborne claimant, and you devouring chops and beefsteaks with alacrity, I will have private rejoicings and an illumination of my own lamp and fire in celebration of the happy news.

So you are rather glad that I am no longer with B., exposed to the contagion of his dreadful heresies. To tell you the truth, I don't think that there's a pin to choose between his opinions as to things in general and my own; only while he considers his opinions of the utmost importance, and is unwearied in the profitable task of trying to convert the world to them, I care very little for mine, and don't believe the world capable of being benefited much by having any opinion whatever preached to it. But you must not blame him or anybody for my wicked opinions, which I have arrived at by the mere force of my own evil nature, influenced very little by the opinions of others. The Sunday-school views of this life and dissolving views of a life hereafter proved quite unsatisfactory to this philosopher many years ago.

It may occur to the reader to inquire why, if Thomson was so often in pecuniary straits, he did not turn his

literary talent to account as a journalist. As a matter of fact, a chance of this sort had been offered him a few years earlier, for in 1864 he had written two or three articles for the *Daily Telegraph*.¹ But his spirit was too uncompromising, and his individuality too distinct, to allow him any chance of permanent success on the ordinary lines of journalism; he could not, and would not, write "to order"; and poor though he was, he valued his own intellectual liberty above any prize the world could offer him. "Hackwork of a certain kind," says Mr. Theodore Wright, "he was glad enough to do to keep body and soul together; but no amount of money would have induced him to write contrary to his convictions." So unwilling was he to accommodate his writings to the temper of his readers that one of his articles was found to be too audacious even for the *National Reformer*. At a later period (to be mentioned in due course) he was able to get remunerative literary work more on his own terms; but at that time he was hampered by other and less creditable disqualifications.

In 1872 began Thomson's correspondence with Mr. W. M. Rossetti, to whom, as a well-known critic holding liberal views, he had sent a copy of his narrative poem, "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain." The following is Mr. Rossetti's account of their first meeting and his impressions of Thomson:—

Towards February, 1872, I received by post the numbers of the *National Reformer* containing the poem of "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain," signed "B. V." I knew at the time nothing of any sort about B. V. I read the poem, and thought it excellent. I remember that same evening my brother called upon me and

¹ It is said that the editor was so pleased with one of these articles that he offered Thomson a retaining fee to write occasionally "like that." "When the proprietor and the contributor were separating," says Mr. Foote (*National Reformer*), "the man of business said with a serious air, 'By the way, Mr. Thomson, can you write pathos?' That was enough."

saw the poem lying about, and asked me about it. I replied that it was certainly a work of very unusual value. My brother looked at it, and said, "Yes, I see you are right. One ought to know something about the author." I wrote to "B. V." at the office of the *National Reformer*, expressing my high opinion of the poem, and referring to my brother's as well, and Thomson then replied to me. Soon afterwards I called at his lodgings (in Vauxhall Bridge Road) to leave him a copy of my edition of Shelley, but did not find him in.

In April, 1873, I asked him to call on me if his convenience allowed. He came one evening, when the only person at home with me was my elder sister (authoress of "A Shadow of Dante"). I saw him partly alone and partly in my sister's company. Thomson was a rather small man—say hardly five feet six in height—with sufficiently regular features, bright eyes, and at that time a cheerful, pleasant manner. There was (but only, I think, in later years) a rather peculiar expression in his mouth; something of a permanently pained expression, along with a settled half-smile, caustic but not cynical, not "put on," but adopted as part of his attitude towards the world. I had expected to find him rather of the type of the intellectual working-man, but did not find this to be the fact; he seemed to me more of the "city clerk," or minor man of business with literary tastes. His manners were good, free from nervousness, pretension, or self-assertion. He talked extremely well, and without, I think, any symptom of defective education, except that his *h*'s were sometimes less aspirated than they should be. Not that he *dropped* his *h*'s, and he certainly never inserted them when they ought not to come. There was no trace of the Scotchman in his pronunciation. We passed a pleasant evening, and I can recollect that my sister, who was a religious devotee, received an agreeable impression from his conversation—which shows that he knew when to keep his strong opinions to himself.

As Thomson's opinions on religious, political, and other subjects did not, in essentials, differ much from mine, he was under no restriction in saying what he liked. However, he never said in my presence anything against religion which could be considered offensive in manner or tending to ribaldry. His talks with me may have been principally on literary matters: he was quite as ready to listen as to talk, and his conversation was in no degree pragmatic or controversial. I never saw him out of temper, vehement, or noticeably gloomy; his demeanour mostly (so far

as I saw it) was that of a man of habitually low spirits, who did not allow these to affect his manner in society or the tone of his conversation.

The whole of my personal acquaintance with Thomson may have amounted to some half-dozen interviews. I don't remember what may have been the last date when I met him; probably not later than 1878. He and I were always on the best terms; and we had occasion to correspond every now and then up to, I daresay, a couple of years preceding his death.

His correspondence with Mr. W. M. Rossetti, which deals largely with the subject of the text of Shelley, contains some of Thomson's best and most characteristic letters, the first two of which may bring this chapter to a conclusion:—

240 Vauxhall Bridge Road, S.W.,

February 8, 1872.

DEAR SIR,—Mr. Bradlaugh has forwarded me your letter of the 4th inst., and I know not how to thank you for your very generous expression of approval of the "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain." In sending you this piece I had indeed some slight hope of obtaining the verdict of so distinguished and competent a judge, but I chiefly intended it as a sort of apology for my very inadequate notice in the *National Reformer* last March of your popular edition of Shelley, written at the request of my friend Mr. Bradlaugh when I had no leisure for anything like a fair attempt to examine and discuss that work properly. Feeling not at all contented with such treatment of Shelley and yourself, I was anxious to show that your too offhand critic was nevertheless a genuine lover of the poet to whom you have devoted so much worthy labour, and a serious student of poetry.

To clear up your doubt, permit me to state that no living writer can have much less reputation than myself, who am simply known to some readers of the *National Reformer* as "B. V.," the author of many pieces and scraps in prose and verse which have appeared in that periodical during the last seven years or so. And I am bound in honesty to confess that some of those pieces were among the most wicked and blasphemous which even Mr. Bradlaugh ever published. The only production in reputable society which I can cite in my favour is "Sunday up the River; an Idyll of Cockaigne,"

which Mr. Froude inserted in *Fraser's Magazine* for October, 1869, and which he and Mr. Kingsley thought very good. The "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain" Mr. Froude rejected, finding the story beautiful, and the treatment excellent in arrangement and conception, but deficient in melody of versification, in smoothness and sweetness, much less finished in style than the "Idyll." Both pieces have been refused by four or five of our chief magazines to which they were sent.

I hope you will pardon me for saying so much about myself, as I have only done so because your letter seemed to indicate a desire to know something on the subject.

The praise of two such men as yourself and your brother, however much kindness may have tempered your judgment, is very valuable to me, and I am truly grateful for the generous promptitude and cordiality with which you have rendered it to an obscure stranger.

While to the public I wish to remain anonymous as a writer, I have no wish to shroud myself from persons I esteem, and am happy to sign myself your obliged and faithful servant,

JAMES THOMSON.

240 Vauxhall Bridge Road, S.W.,

March 2, 1872.

DEAR SIR,—I have to thank you for your very kind letter of the 25th ult., and for your too liberal offer of a copy of your complete edition of Shelley. While I do not like to refuse the honour of this gift from you, I must really protest against your attacking me suddenly with so valuable a present on such insignificant and unintentional provocation. It is one among the works of our higher literature, which during the last three or four years I have put off reading, waiting for more settled leisure to study them as they ought to be studied. I will do my best to profit by it, and should any notes occur to me which I can think worth your attention, will submit them to you frankly.

I regret that you have been put to the trouble of procuring the number of *Fraser*, which I could not offer to send you, having no copy left. Your judgment on the relative merits of the "Idyll" and "Weddah" confirms my own. I was aware that the former as a piece of pure pleasantness was more smooth and easy in style than the latter, but I knew also that the latter in its style as dictated by the nature of the story was honestly wrought out to

the best of my ability, and was comparatively a serious bit of work. By the bye, the "Idyll," as I wrote it, had two more joints to its tail, ending thus after some points to mark the transition :—

What time is it, dear, now?

We are in the year now

Of the New Creation One million, two or three.

But where are we now, Love?

We are, as I trow, Love,

In the Heaven of Heavens upon the Crystal Sea.

And may mortal sinners

Care for carnal dinners

In your Heaven of Heavens, New Era millions three?

Oh, if their boat gets stranding

Upon some Richmond landing,

They're thirsty as the desert and hungry as the sea!

These two stanzas, though of little worth in themselves, had the merit in my eyes of bringing back the piece at last to the sober realities of pleasant Cockaigne; but Mr. Froude and (as he informed me) Mr. Kingsley were so strongly in favour of its evanishing in the sentimental infinite that I submitted to them, not without reluctance. Whether you will agree with those gentlemen or with myself on this point, I, of course, cannot divine.

I have a parcel of leaves of the *National Reformer* containing most of my contributions to that paper, kept by me for the purpose of reference, which I shall, of course, be happy to send you if you care to turn them over, glancing into any that may seem not without interest. They would give you a much more ample and accurate knowledge of me than you can have gathered from two select poems, and would probably enough considerably lower me in your opinion; but I have not the slightest wish to seem to you at all better than I am, and would, indeed (if I know myself), rather be under than over estimated. You will also, I trust, understand that I have not the least desire to abuse your kindness by asking you, or expecting you, to read a single line of my writing, or express any opinion thereon, except as your own good pleasure may move you. Your criticism, whether favourable or adverse, would be very highly valued by me, but I cannot doubt that you have literary matters much more important than anything of mine to occupy your leisure.

Hoping that you will find in the nature of our correspondence an excuse for my again writing to you so much about myself,—I am,
 dear Sir, yours very respectfully,

JAMES THOMSON.

CHAPTER IV

VISITS TO AMERICA AND SPAIN

IN the spring of 1872 Thomson's residence in London was interrupted by a visit to America, undertaken in the service of the "Champion Gold and Silver Mines Company," of which he was then Secretary. Towards the end of April he received instructions from the directors to proceed at once to Colorado, in order to undertake the correspondence at the mines, and send home weekly reports on the condition and prospects of the Company's property. He accordingly started from London on April 27, and arrived at Central City, Colorado, on May 15. During the seven months that he stayed among the Rocky Mountains—"the big vertebræ of this longish backbone of America," as he calls them—he kept two diaries, in one of which are entered the details of his business transactions, in the other his private jottings, descriptions of scenery, records of expeditions, and notes of racy American anecdotes heard during his travels. After ten years spent in London, this recurrence to a free, healthy, open-air life, with long walks and rides across mountain-tracks—"rough jaunts," to quote his own phrase—and plenty of bathing, fishing, and out-door recreation, must have been a welcome experience; while the insight, now for the first time obtained, into the grandest natural scenery of mid-ocean and snow-mountains was not lost on the observant eye of the poet.

How keenly he appreciated the grandeur of the mountain scenery, and how minutely he observed what he saw, is shown by many entries in his diary, of which the following may be taken as specimens:—

Tuesday, June 11, 1872.—Walked as far as head of Virginia Cañon. Near the Divide, with a snow-covered triple mountain right opposite, found a little unenclosed cemetery on the stony slope, not unpathetic in the solitude. Thin grass and weeds are the only growth just there. To the S.W., under the afternoon sun, a gentle hill shining green with the cottonwood aspens and darker firs, ridging eastward into promontory brown and sombre with thin firs. In front, down the cañon, beyond Idaho, the ridges of hills and mountains swelling obliquely from left to right, the right being S.W. They were dark green with brown patches, and the highest bore some thin sprinkling of snow. Immense cloud-shadows, black and irregular, lay upon them. They swell obliquely through one rounded mountain into two high sharp scalped peaks, with many foldings and dells. Behind were white clouds massed and in round islets, and the blue sky.....Turning back towards Central, green slopes and gulch with shanties and mills. Right and left firs and cottonwoods. These are the small bright green firs which turn yellow and russet in needle and apple, and then, seen with sun behind them, look like withered ferns similarly seen, burning gold and red. Beyond, a long massy hill-wall, brown and dark green with pines. Beyond still, a high sharp mountain on right, brown and dark green. Leftwards, a keen steep range, accentuated and abrupt in outline, with white gleaming precipices on the highest left.

Thursday, June 13, 1872.—Heavyish rain last night. Clouds this morning; no dust. Started for Idaho soon after nine. Half-way from Missouri City to Divide, front and rear saw white clouds seething over the crests of the hills and overlapping far down. The right-hand hills from Central clear with strange pale-green stony gleams. Some rain and hail-drops, then the sun breaking out in blue, high overhead. Two or three kinds pretty yellow flowers by the wayside. White convolvulus-like flowers, but with dull brownish centre-boss, on wrinkle-leaved bush, so inter-wreathed with a bush of smooth light-green finely-serrated leaves, that it was difficult at first to know which owned the flowers.....At Idaho between eleven and twelve. Very wet afternoon.

Friday, June 14, 1872.—Lovely bright morning. Everything so green after the rain. Idaho, with its hills and booming brown creek under the large sky, about as beautiful a place as I ever saw. Walked up the cañon, catching up coach, keeping behind it, and then up a long way ahead. Fine piney bluff on right soon after leaving Idaho. The hills and mountains never the same for five minutes together in form, colour, or expression; the shadows shifting, the forms varying, the lights changing, the colours running through a hundred different shades. Enjoyed my walk very much, and thought with a certain vigour as I used to think.

During the week ending July 20 Thomson had a short but sharp attack of "mountain fever," which he describes as "a kind of crisis in the process of acclimatization out here, which the doctor and others tell me most persons pass through who stay for any length of time." "Felt at death's door," he writes, "Wednesday and Thursday: down and up with a steep run, for I managed (though with great difficulty) to dress and walk about a little on Sunday. Illness very expensive out here, besides the lonesomeness, every little common service and thing having to be paid for. Some fellows kind in calling and watching."

The fullest and most graphic account of the place of Thomson's sojourn is that given in a long letter to Mr. W. M. Rossetti:—

Central City, Colorado, U.S.A.,

August 5, 1872.

DEAR SIR,—Your letter of the 28th April reached me here about a fortnight since, having been forwarded by a friend. I cannot say anything about the Shelley notes now, as the only books I could find room for in my portmanteau were the Globe Shakespeare and Pickering's diamond Dante (with Cary's version squeezed in for the notes and general assistance). But I hope on my return to resume the attentive reading of your Shelley, and to send you any remarks upon it which may occur to me and seem worth sending. Your liberal reception of the few already sent would encourage me to proceed even were I not impelled by so strong an interest in the subject.

Mr. Bradlaugh promised to forward you a copy of the *National Reformer* containing a piece of verse called "In the Room," which I left behind me. I learn that it appeared in the issue for May 19th, but don't know whether you received a copy or not.

From the close of your letter I gather that you somewhat misapprehended what I said about my business trip. When I wrote to the effect that I was going in search of the heathen Chinese in the Rocky Mountains, I did not mean to convey that I was about to start for China. I believed that John Chinaman had already swarmed thus far east from California, and was alluding to the popular poem by Bret Harte, a writer who seems to me capable of doing really excellent work, and some of whose poems and sketches I am very fond of. As to the Chinese, they have not got here yet, with the exception of four or five who are male laundresses (the proper masculine for this feminine noun I am quite ignorant of), and whom I never see.

I have been out here since the 12th May, having left London on the 27th April, but have seen very little of the country as yet, business confining me to this place. I am hoping to have some trips around shortly. Every village out here is termed a city; this Central with Blackhawk and Nevada, the three virtually forming one straggling town, numbers between four and five thousand people. Of these the great majority are miners, perhaps a thousand being Cornishmen, who earn from \$3 to \$4 a day wages, and much more when they take leases or work by contract. The stores are well stocked, but nearly everything is very dear. The working miner can get most of the mere necessaries of life almost as cheap as at home; the comforts and little luxuries are so priced that I find living here twice or three times as expensive. A small glass of English beer costs twenty-five cents, or say a shilling currency. To get your boots blacked (I always clean my own) you pay twenty-five cents; but then they get a "Dolly Varden shine," and are wrought upon by a "Boot Artist." A "tonorialist" very naturally charges seventy-five cents, or three shillings, for cutting your hair; etc., etc., etc. We have churches, chapels, schools, and a new large hotel, in which a very polite dancing party assembled the other evening. This week we are to have a concert, and also a lecture on the Darwinian Theory, admission one dollar. We have a theatre, in which we now and then have actors. The old rough days, with their perils and excitement, are quite over; the "City" is civilized enough to be dull and commonplace, while not yet civilized enough

to be sociable and pleasant. There are no beggars, and petty larceny is almost unknown; storekeepers extort your money blandly and quietly, and the large larceny of selling mines at preposterous prices makes the people despise all larceny that is petty. You might as well carry a revolver between Euston Square and Somerset House as here. I brought one, under persuasion, and have never taken it out of the bag.

This Central City is the headquarters of gold-mining in Colorado Territory; but it has been very dull for some time past, the working of most of the large mines having been suspended, in some cases through want of capital, in others through litigation (mines are wonderful breeders of lawsuits), and in others because the ores are not rich enough to pay the enormous charges for haulage and reduction and smelting out here, though they would be of immense value in an old country. However, a railroad connecting with the whole east is now within ten miles of us, and is being pushed on rapidly, so things are likely to improve ere long.

The houses, chiefly of wood, and some of them pretty enough in themselves, though spoiled by their surroundings, are huddled and scattered along the bottom and slopes of a winding ravine, intermingled with prospect-holes, primitive log-huts, mill-sheds, of which many are idle, fragments of machinery that proved useless from the first, heaps of stones and poor ores, and all sorts of rubbish. No one has ever cleared up anything here; the streets and roads are usually many inches deep in dust, which the rare heavy rains and the more frequent turning on of some foul sluice make mud which is very abominable unto one who cleaneth his own boots. Men dig a shaft shallow or deep, and leave it gaping for anyone to tumble into. Trees are cut down, and the stumps all left to make night-wandering safe and agreeable. The hills surrounding us have been flayed of their grass and scalped of their timber; and they are scarred and gashed and ulcerated all over from past mining operations; so ferociously does little man scratch at the breasts of his great calm mother when he thinks that jewels are there hidden. The streams running down the ravines, or, as they say here, the creeks running down the gulches, are thick with pollution from the washing of dirt and ores.

We are 8,300 feet above the level of the sea, and 3,000 feet above Denver, which lies about forty miles eastward. The highest peaks of the Rocky Mountains hereabout are 14,000 feet; we are among the foothills. To get out of the city in any direction one must

climb for a considerable distance. These foothills are distributed remarkably amongst the snowy ranges of the mountains, curtain beyond curtain, fold within fold, twisting and heaving inextricably. Those immediately around the city are of flat, tame curves, as if crouching to their abject mercenary doom; but beyond there are keen crests and daring serrated contours, green with firs and cottonwood-aspens or nobly dark with pines; and one massy range ends in a promontory whose scarped, precipitous upper flank gleams grand and savage in its stony nakedness, like the gleaming of set white teeth in some swart Titanic barbarian. Some of the loftier hillsides are as smooth meadows; but their grass at this season can scarcely be distinguished through the multitudinous flames and broad blaze of countless species of wild flowers, nearly all of the most positive intense colours—scarlet, crimson, purple, azure, yellow, white. Few of them remind me of English flowers, and the people here (if I may judge by the few I have asked) don't seem to know their names. From these higher hills one gets magnificent views—vast billowy land-seas, with dense woods and deep ravines and exquisite emerald dells, whereon and whereover sleep and sweep immense shadows, and of all shades, even at noonday, from bright green to solid black; beyond, a crescent of the mountains, some with broad fields or deep furrows of snow, some sheathed wholly with this white splendour; eastwards towards the plains, what the keenest eye cannot distinguish from a distant sea-line, faint or dark-blue, level to the horizon, with pale streaks like the shadows of clouds and long shoals and the haze of evaporation. The sky is wonderfully pure—azure, or deep, burning blue; the clouds are large and white; however hot the sun, there are cool, fresh breezes on these hills. There are few birds, and they scarcely sing. Butterflies abound, some of them almost as brilliant as the flowers. Crickets keep up a continual song like the whistling of the wind through reeds; and one species take long jumps and short, rapid flights, making such a rattle with some bodily machinery that one can scarcely believe it comes from so small a creature.

The nights are always cool, and mosquitoes there are none. Snakes or any other vermin I have not heard of. One would have to go some distance now to find any wild animals such as bears and cougars.

I don't think that I have been out a single night, however cool and clear, with moon and stars, without seeing frequent lightnings

play up from behind the surrounding hills. Almost every day we have a slight shower. On the day of my arrival we had a hailstorm with thunder as we drove up the cañon, the largest stones being quite as big as good-sized walnuts. Our horses were so nervous that we had to unhitch and hold them. A few days after they had snow, thunder, and lightning all together among the same hills. Occasional waterspouts sweep away bridges and destroy roads for miles. I have seen from here a terrible storm raging over the plains, dead-silent through remoteness; white lightnings momentarily surging up, veiling the stars, making the lower clouds ghostly, striking pale reflections from clouds at the zenith; and these broad sheets of white light were seamed and riven by intense darting lines of forked lightning, zigzag, vertical, transverse, oblique.

We have no dew here at night; one can lie out in a blanket between earth and sky with perfect safety and comfort.

Six miles from us is Idaho, the pleasantest place I have yet seen in the mountains. Going to it you ascend about a thousand feet in three miles to the Divide (and climbing on foot tests your wind in this thin, pure air), and then descend about 1,800 feet in three miles, winding down Virginia Cañon, whose hill-walls range from six to twelve hundred feet in height, and are still well-wooded with firs and pines. The roadway is good, wild-flowers abound, and a clear rill runs down with you all the way.

Idaho, which its boldly prophetic inhabitants call the Saratoga of the West, and which is just now full of visitors, lies comfortably at large on the level floor of a broad and long valley. The houses are of wood, shingle-roofed, most of them neat, many of them pretty. The hills around rise to the height of a thousand feet, and, as little mining has been attempted on them, they are delightfully green, and their timber has not been felled. Between them, southwards, you see the scalped heads of two mountains (until lately covered with snow) reckoned about 11,000 feet high, with a lower rounded height between; these are the Old Chief, the Squaw, and the Pappoose. Westwards also you glimpse snowy mountains. A stream, rapid and broad in summer after the rains and melting of the snows, runs from west to east through the midst of the village the whole length of the valley. Excellent trout have been caught in it. Two creeks join it from the south in this valley. There is a hot-water spring impregnated with soda and sulphur, which feeds private and swimming baths. There is a cold spring chemically allied to it, which people drink with faith

or hope, and which to me tastes like seltzer-water bewitched. There are beautiful walks and rides in all directions. I reckon that this village of Idaho or Idaho Springs will indeed ere long be one of the fashionable holiday resorts of America. Gray's Peak, over 14,000 feet, is within twenty-four miles of it. A good horse-trail goes right up to the scalped crest of Old Chief, a distance of about eight miles.

I have chatted with the man who first struck Virginia Cañon and found the Idaho Creek (South Clear Creek) through the dense woods which filled the valley, and caught fine trout for himself and fellow-prospectors. This was in '59. Men used to make marvellous sums by mining and gold-washing then, and pay marvellous prices for the necessaries of life. For some years existence was pretty rough, though never perhaps half so wild as in California during the early days of its gold-fever.

I was told in Idaho (by a Justice of the Peace, too) of a couple of men who were on terms of shoot at sight, of whom one tried to avoid and the other sought a meeting. At length the latter attained his desire, and in the "difficulty" which ensued was shot by the other; who was tried, but got off clear, as the evidence was not considered perfect. The dead man had \$64 odd in his pockets; so it was resolved to give him a decent burial. They stopped the funeral procession at a store, drank to his salvation out of his own money, and also took a bottle of whisky with them to the burial-place, that they might be not altogether without comfort when they had finally deposited him in the earth. Both deserved shooting, said the Justice of the Peace, philosophically; and himself was one of the funeral party.

In a tobacconist's here, among specimens of ore, is an object labelled "Burr from the pine-tree on which Pennsylvtuck was hanged." Pennsylvtuck was so called because Pennsylvania and Kentucky somehow shared the honour of raising him. He was a bad lot, so bad that the citizens at length determined to promptly relieve him and themselves of his noxious existence. Accordingly, without any tedious legal preliminaries, they took him forth and hanged him on a pine-tree, and there left him. As the night was very cold, someone suggested that it was doubtful whether Pennsylvtuck met his death by strangulation or freezing. As the citizens, on cool reflection, thought it wise to discourage Lynch-law, they generally agreed to consider that he had been frozen to death.

As to the drinking, one anecdote (true or not) will suffice. An officer sent out to cater for some division of the army in the West returned with six waggon-loads of whisky and one of provisions. The commanding officer, having overhauled the stock, cried out : "What the hell shall we do with all these provisions?"

I did not intend to inflict all this nonsense upon you ; but, having begun to write, it seemed queer to send a mere note five or six thousand miles and not say something about this country ; so, having leisure, I let my pen run away with me. Fortunately, you are not in any way called upon to read what I was not called upon to write.

I may be here for two or three months yet, for all I know.—I am,
dear Sir, yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

"First snow here of the season" is the entry in the diary for September 24th. "Felt it drifting in on me in bed, with rough flaws of wind. Up at 7.30 ; bath. Snow over hills and houses in patches. Walked top of our hill before breakfast. Keen N.W. wind. Afterwards bright mid-day, but keen." At this time Thomson had no information as to the intended date of his return, though he had already convinced himself, and informed the directors, of the unsoundness of the Company's speculations and the uselessness of his making a prolonged stay. The negotiations he had been carrying on as the Company's representative had not been concluded without much discussion and the exhibition of some hostility by the parties with whom he had to deal ; mention is made in the diary, for instance, of a person bearing the ominous name of Stalker, who "had been to the bank drunk, swearing that he would not give way an inch, and saying that he only wanted a shot-gun and the other parties in reach, and he would soon find the best way of settling the matter." The matter, however, was finally settled without bloodshed ; and on December 28th Thomson started for Denver and

Chicago on his way home, arriving in London towards the end of January, 1873. The expenses incurred during his journey and stay at Central City were of course defrayed by the Company; but of a considerable sum of money, which he contended was due to him as salary, only a small part was paid, the engagement having apparently been made by word of mouth, and without the formal sanction of the directors. In spite of this disappointment—a serious one for a poor man—Thomson's American trip was one of his most satisfactory and agreeable experiences, and one which he always remembered with pleasure. The following passages of a letter¹ written to a friend in England sum up his opinion of the Americans as a nation, and bear testimony to his own enjoyment of travelling:—

I think we must forgive the Americans a good deal of vulgarity and arrogance for some generations yet. They are intoxicated with their vast country and its vaster prospects. Besides, we of the old country have sent them for years past, and are still sending them, our half-starved and ignorant millions. The Americans of the War of Independence were really a British race, and related to the old country as a Greek colony to its mother city or state. But the Americans of to-day are only a nation in that they instinctively adore their Union. All the heterogeneous ingredients are seething in the cauldron with plenty of scum and air-bubbles atop. In a century or two they may get stewed down into homogeneity—a really wholesome and dainty dish, not to be set before a king though, I fancy. I resisted the impression of the mere material vastitude as long as possible, but found its influence growing on me week by week; for it implies such vast possibilities of moral and intellectual expansion. They are starting over here with all our experience and culture at their command, without any of the obsolete burdens and impediments which in the course of a thousand years have become inseparable from our institutions, and with a country which will want more labour and more people for many generations to come.

¹ Published in the *Secular Review*, July 15, 1882.

I am quite well again. Though never, perhaps, very strong, and rarely so well as to feel mere existence a delight (as to a really healthy person it must be; no inferior condition, in my opinion, deserves the name of health), I am seldom what we call unwell. When travelling about I always find myself immensely better than when confined to one place. With money, I believe I should never have a home, but be always going to and fro on the earth, and walking up and down in it, like him of whom I am one of the children.

After Thomson's return to London from Colorado he again stayed in the Vauxhall Bridge Road, at No. 230, a few doors from his former lodgings. The following letters were written at this time:—

To Mr. W. M. Rossetti.

April 2, 1873.

DEAR SIR,—Although I returned from my American trip about two months since, I have been so unsettled and occupied with a thousand nothings that I have scarcely looked at a book since my return.

I have at length managed to go pretty carefully through *The Witch of Atlas* and *Epipsychidion*, and herewith I send you a few notes thereon, which you must take for what they are worth. Although they are naturally very much like the notes of a reader for the press, whose special business it is to hunt out faults and ignore merits, you may be assured that I duly appreciate the great improvements you have made in the text.

While agreeing with you in ranking *The Witch of Atlas* very high, I cannot agree with you in preferring it to the *Epipsychidion*. It has always seemed to me that Shelley never soared higher than in this poem, which I find full of supreme inspiration. It is his *Vita Nuova*, tender and fervid and noble as Dante's; and his premature death has deprived us of the befitting *Divina Commedia* which should have followed.

I am considerably ashamed to speak of anything of my own in this connection; but as I believe my little piece *In the Room* was sent to you, I take the liberty of forwarding a corrected copy, that, having it at all, you may have it as I wrote it.—Yours very respectfully,

JAMES THOMSON.

April 22, 1873.

DEAR SIR,—Please accept my thanks for the kind invitation with which you have honoured me. I shall be very glad to make your personal acquaintance, and will call upon you at Euston Square next Friday evening about eight o'clock, unless you inform me in the meanwhile that that time will not suit you.

As we are likely to meet soon, I will not here discuss one or two matters mentioned in your letter, which can be much more easily settled by word of mouth than by writing.

Permit me, however, to take this opportunity of making a few remarks by way of apology, which I feel may be needed for such notes as I am sending you on Shelley.

1. I never until reading your edition saw any notes on the text, save those of Mr. Garnett in the *Relics*, and am still quite ignorant of whatever critical comments and discussions have been published, except such as are indicated in your notes. Nor have I ever known personally any reader of Shelley with whom to compare notions on the subject; in fact, I have only come across two people in my life who gave signs of real intelligent interest in the poetry of Shelley, or, indeed, in any really great poetry, as poetry. I am thus only too likely to vex you with discussion of points long since settled, and with such wrongheaded notions as are the *fungi* of seclusion.

2. Having been used for many years to read his works in editions obviously corrupt, I have naturally taken many more and much greater liberties in guessing at true readings than I should have dreamed of doing had the editions been decently correct. The certainty of numerous errors made the text throughout uncertain.

3. On the other hand, I have naturally come to love, by usage and old association, certain readings in which I divined no error, in which there was nothing manifestly wrong; and am thus reluctant to yield them for others, which I might have recognized as decidedly superior had the opportunity been offered at first of choosing between these and those.

4. Knowing that you intend the utmost attainable accuracy, I make notes on many points, and some of these very minute, merely to indicate faint doubts, or shadows of doubts, and not with the least idea of shaking the text where authoritative—I, irresponsible, challenge and challenge freely; with you (as I never forget) rests the responsibility of vigilantly guarding intact all that can be guarded.

Explanations too large for notes so small! Let me conclude by cordially congratulating you that your good work must save generations of students of Shelley from countless perplexities and errors into which so many of us have hitherto inevitably fallen.—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

Thomson's stay in London was a very short one, for in the following July he obtained, through Mr. Bradlaugh's assistance, the post of special correspondent to the *New York World* in Spain, where the Carlists were then in insurrection against a Republican Government. In a letter of July 20 he thus refers to his new engagement: "I am called on suddenly to start for Spain as correspondent of the *New York World* by the representative of that journal here. It is rather-sharp irony of fate that one like me should be attached to Carlist headquarters, full of clericalism and legitimacy. It is my first experiment as a correspondent for a journal." Thomson started from London on July 22, and his Carlist passport is dated July 30, 1873. Our knowledge of his adventures in Spain is chiefly derived from the account which he published two and a half years later in the pages of the *Secularist* (March and April, 1876) under the title of "Carlist Reminiscences."

Having crossed the French and Spanish frontier on August 1, about twenty miles from Bayonne, at which place—the scene of the Carlist junta—he had already passed some days, he made his way with a party of volunteers and correspondents through the mountains of Navarre, until they joined the royal army at Lacunza on August 6. After this he was nearly a month at headquarters, with many opportunities of seeing and some of conversing with Don Carlos and his staff. "I cannot say," he writes, "that he shone in conversation, except by his frank kindliness. His utterance was thick

and slow, and he did not give sign of either ability or energy. On the whole, he seemed to me an amiable man of somewhat phlegmatic temperament, who would be much happier as a country gentleman with his wife and three children, than leading the advance-guard or forlorn-hope of the Restoration." It had been expected that the Carlists would make a bold, and perhaps a successful, dash on Madrid; but there was a long and disappointing delay, and for a long time, as Thomson remarks, it was chiefly "*Vivas* and bell-ringing," as they loitered in the friendly district of the Basques.

In the meanwhile our business appeared to be rather a military promenade than serious warfare.....The common routine for some days was healthy if unexciting. Your *assistente* or attendant, a young fellow waiting for a rifle, called you early in the morning with the concise "*Tocau*" (equal to *Tocado*!—"It has sounded!"), and you jumped up in the dawn, dusk, or dark. You washed and dressed as you would, and ere you had finished he brought you a cup of very thick chocolate, with two or three fingers of bread, and a glass of water to drink after as a preventive of bile. We marched till about noon, with a halt of some minutes about ten for a bite and a sup, for which we reserved from the previous evening's meal. As we approached our noonday halting place, the *assistantes* (bat-men or bow-men, as they would be called in the English service) were hurried off to buy up anything to be got in the way of eggs, milk, vegetables, fruit; it was a race organized by keenly competitive stomachs.....The assistants prepared the midday meal, which we called breakfast, as best they might, generally with what utensils they could seize and secure amidst a fierce scramble, and with a strictly limited share of a fire of wood on a stone floor.....Two of us who had been in the States used to plead for some Maize, but our masterful servants shook their heads and said it was only good for the beasts.....Breakfast over, came a smoke, with a cup of coffee and a glass of *anisau* (spirit tinctured with anise) or *agua ardiente* (an inferior white brandy), if we were in luck. Then we all disposed ourselves for the siesta; on a bed on the floor, or in the open air if we could find grass and shade, or even if we could find shade without grass.

At about four or five we resumed our march, reaching our resting-place at nightfall. Then came the bother about billets; one attendant looked to the horses, and the other set about the solemn and sacred work of preparing dinner.....After dinner, if not very late, we went to some neighbouring quarters, or other men came to ours, for a chat and smoke, and perchance a glass. If the resting-place was largish, we had decent beds in curtained alcoves; if not, we had mattresses on the floor, and in either case we slept the sleep of the just.

On August 14 the Carlist army entered Puente de la Reyna, where they were entertained with a bullfight and other performances. On the 19th and following days Thomson was a witness of some desultory fighting in and about Estella, resulting in the capture of the town by the Carlists; and on the 30th he was at Viana, on the Ebro, where, with his fellow correspondents, he saw and enjoyed a contest "more like a frolic of schoolboys than a serious fight." Here his "Reminiscences" break off rather abruptly, with a warm tribute of admiration to the gallantry and loyal devotion of the Carlists in general and of the Basque nation in particular.

Early in September, as we learn from a pencilled notebook, Thomson was prostrated by a sunstroke, being laid up for three days at Alasua, and again for ten days at San Esteban. During this prostration, as he afterwards told a friend, he worked out in his mind a portion of the *City of Dreadful Night*. In the meanwhile the London agent of the *New York World*, from whom he had received his appointment and instructions, had already written him a letter, dated August 4, requesting him to make arrangements for returning to London in about ten days' time, and to correspond during those ten days with greater frequency than he had hitherto done. On September 3 Thomson received the expected letter of recall, from which it appears that he had only

contributed three letters to the *New York World* during the month he had then spent in Spain, with which the agents of that journal were naturally dissatisfied. He arrived in London on September 23, after an absence of two months; and, in consequence of his failure to supply a larger amount of information, the salary of £5 per week, which had been guaranteed him when he started, was withheld by the proprietors of the *New York World*. Thomson, on his part, declared that he wrote to the best of his opportunities and abilities, "in circumstances which (especially at first) were very disadvantageous." "I sent word," he adds, "of every event of even the slightest importance which came to my knowledge; and it was not my fault that during my stay the important combats and movements which had been expected did not take place." Thus Thomson's journey in Spain, like his journey to America, resulted in considerable pecuniary disappointment. In the second case, however, it certainly seems that the loss was mainly due to his own remissness, and not, as on the former occasion, to the fault of others. His disgrace was a cause of much annoyance to Mr. Bradlaugh, on whose recommendation he had been sent out.

On the day after his arrival in London, Thomson addressed the following letter to his sister-in-law:—

230 Vauxhall Bridge Road,

September 24, 1873.

MY DEAR JULIA,—This is to inform you that I arrived home, or at least *chez moi*, last night. You will be a little sorry, perhaps, to learn that in that dreadful war in Spain I have got wounded with a cold in the left eye. It is not yet extracted, but the doctors hope that it will not prove fatal. I have to wear a green shade or blinker, which scarcely sets off to advantage my great personal beauty; in fact, I doubt whether the features of Apollo himself could struggle successfully with a green eye-shade. The funniest

thing is, that my right eye, being unaccustomed to independent action, continually wants to shut itself up in sympathy with the left (just as a young piano-player finds that his two hands want to do the same thing, while he wants them to do things which are very different), so that in the streets I am in constant danger of becoming an inverted sleep-walker—eyes shut awake instead of eyes open asleep.

I have another fearful wound, but this also the faculty do not consider fatal. My horse and I used to have a daily contest as to whether he should be bridled or not. Although every morning the result proved to him that he must bear the bridle, he had such a bad memory, or was so incurably stubborn, that he always renewed the struggle on the next. In one of these ever-recurring battles he managed, or I mismanaged, to knock my thumb against something which cut and flayed it a little. Such are my war-wounds—worse than fell to the lot of most warriors in Spain. You must therefore imagine your poor brother with a white linen bandage round his right thumb, and a verdant shade over his left eye—an affecting picture. You must be hard-hearted indeed if you do not weep and mourn for him.

CHAPTER V

“THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT”

TOWARDS the close of 1873 Thomson's position and prospects were far from satisfactory. Not only had he made no profit by his journey to Spain, but he returned from that country in extremely depressed spirits and in a wretched state of health, with a severe cold in his left eye which for some weeks incapacitated him for reading and writing or any sort of business; while, to add to his troubles, he was unable to get the promise of any employment at home. He thus wrote on November 24 to Miss Alice Bradlaugh, from his old address in the Vauxhall Bridge Road: “My eye is quite well again, thank you. I only want now some good employment for it and its fellow. The time was very tedious during the weeks it remained bad, as I could hardly read, write, smoke, or do anything but lounge indoors unoccupied. Mr. Girard (of the *New York World*) has now no work for an assistant, and I have not managed to get hold of anything in the City yet, though of course I have been making every effort.” After some time Thomson succeeded in obtaining a secretaryship to another commercial company, but this also collapsed after a few months. His old friend and schoolmate, George Duncan, who had returned from Madras on a visit in 1873, and had met Thomson in London after an absence of thirteen years, was much concerned by the change he observed in him towards the end of this year and the beginning of the

next. We find him, however, in November able to interest himself once more in literary matters, and resuming his Shelley correspondence with Mr. W. M. Rossetti:—

230 Vauxhall Bridge Road, S.W.,

November 12, 1873.

DEAR SIR,—Towards the end of July last I sent you rough notes on the “Minor Poems and Fragments,” excepting the *Triumph of Life*. On this I herewith enclose some remarks. It is a poem which has always been a particular favourite of mine, and suggests questions which nothing less than an essay could indicate. Here I touch only on the text. It has been pure pleasure to follow again the unique *terza rima*; liquid, sinuous, continuous, a full-flowing river of music and light.

I think with a piece left unfinished like this you might venture upon obvious metrical rectifications, which do not affect the sense, just as you have ventured upon obvious grammatical ditto.

I hope you enjoyed your Italian holiday. I thoroughly enjoyed Navarre, but was recalled too soon, because Republicans and Monarchists wouldn't kill each other wholesale, the unfeeling wretches!—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

The New Year—the first two weeks of which were spent with the Bradlaughs at Midhurst, “a pleasant fortnight,” as he records in his diary—was destined to be in many ways an important one to Thomson, and especially by the publication of *The City of Dreadful Night*. The diaries which, with the occasional omission of a few weeks, he kept from this time to within eight months of his death, have fortunately been preserved, with the single exception of that for 1875. They are very characteristic of his observant nature and methodical habits, containing, amid a variety of matter, concise daily notes of his literary work as projected or completed; books read; letters received and answered; friends visited, or seen at his own lodgings; the direction of his afternoon stroll; the place and nature of his meals; and

the manner of spending the evening. An account is kept of the sums received in payment of literary work (after 1875), and of the expense incurred for lodging, clothes, etc. A special feature of the diaries is the regularity with which the state of the weather is recorded, no aspects of sky-scenery, bright or gloomy, being lost upon the senses and spirits of this dweller in his own city of darkness.

The ordinary routine of Thomson's London life has been thus described by Mr. Dobell:—"In London he lodged in one narrow room, which was bedroom and sitting-room in one, and where he could hardly help feeling a sense of poverty and isolation. A morning spent at the British Museum, an afternoon walk through the streets, and an evening passed in reading or writing: such was the usual course of his daily life in London. Visits to or from his few London friends sometimes varied the monotony of his existence; and now and then he would go to a concert, or to the Italian Opera, for he was passionately fond of music." On the whole, the impression conveyed by the diaries is that Thomson, as regards outward circumstances, led a far less solitary and friendless life than has usually been supposed; for in London, as in the army, his genial and gentle disposition never failed to win him good and faithful friends. At the time of which I am now writing, his Sundays were usually spent at the house of his friend Mr. Jaques; he was fond of going to the Monday Popular Concerts with his old comrade John Grant; he would sometimes, but more rarely, go for a day's expedition into the country; and there were few days on which he was left altogether without some friendly society, one of his most frequent visitors in 1874 and thereabouts being Fred Hollett, a former fellow-lodger, whose name often occurs in the

diaries of this date. The statements subsequently made, to the effect that it was during “a period of friendlessness and suffering, and while actually trudging through London at night, that he wrote his *City of Dreadful Night*,” are decidedly exaggerated and misleading; though the mental suffering which he endured was grievous enough.

At the beginning of 1874 he was putting the finishing touches to his great poem, previous to its appearance in the *National Reformer*. The following letter addressed to Mr. W. M. Rossetti at this time is an instance of how Thomson could jest grimly on the humorous side of very serious subjects:—

230 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
January 30, 1874.

DEAR SIR,—I am much obliged to you for your generous determination to bring my work into notice, but, should you refer to me at all, would prefer to be mentioned simply as B.V.

I write just now principally to ask a favour. Though knowing about nothing of art, I have long been profoundly impressed by the “Melancholy” of Dürer, and my sole engraving is a copy of that work signed Johan Wiricx, 1602, which, I am glad to find, Scott describes as admirable. Wishing to bring this great figure into a poem, and rapidly enumerating the accessories which help to identify it, I find myself bothered by the animal prone at her feet. Ruskin in one place terms this a wolf, and in another a sleeping wolf-hound. Scott does not characterize it, I think.

For myself, I have been used to consider it probably a sheep, and as dead, not sleeping; in fact, a creature awaiting dissection, and suggesting anatomy as among the pursuits of the labouring and studious Titaness.

Can you, who are an art-adept, resolve the question, and tranquilize my agitated mind?

Hoping that your Blake and all other work is proceeding well,—
I remain, yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

My animal stanza runs thus:—

Words cannot picture her; but all men know
That solemn sketch the pure sad artist wrought

Three centuries and three score years ago,
 With phantasies of his peculiar thought :
 The instruments of carpentry and science
 Scattered about her feet, in strange alliance
 With the poor creature for dissection brought.

Must I, as Ruskin dictates, change this last into,
 With the keen wolf-hound sleeping undistraught—
 (a villainous makeshift) ?

"Wet, coldish morning," writes Thomson in his diary for April 4. "Not up till past one o'clock. Wet all day. Then wrote away at Whitman, finishing in a fashion draught of biographical sketch, as well as going through last two parts of *City of Night*. Walked with Fred before and after dinner. Walked self after tea. Imagination deeply stirred."

The City of Dreadful Night, the poem referred to in the above letter and extract, was, as Thomson has himself described it, "the outcome of a good deal of sleepless hypochondria suffered at various periods." "About half of it," he says, "not the first half as it now stands, was written in 1870; and then it was not touched till 1873, when I roughly finished it, licking the whole into shape at the beginning of the present year." It was the crown and consummation of his pessimistic poetry; the fullest and most powerful expression of that gloomy mood which for many weary years had been gradually gaining the ascendancy in his mind. The seeds of pessimistic thought, at first latent in his nature, had been quickened and ripened by a long course of calamity and error, and the fruit was now apparent in the spirit of deliberate, measured, relentless despondency which inspired *The City of Dreadful Night*. It has been called an opium poem, and on the strength of this assertion some writers have spoken of Thomson as an habitual opium-eater.

This, I believe, is a mistake; for, though there is some evidence that he had now and then taken opium,¹ it seems certain that he did this only by way of an occasional experiment, and that the practice never obtained a hold on him. There is, moreover, a solidity of grasp and firmness of outline about *The City of Dreadful Night* which does not seem to warrant the idea that it owed any part of its origin to the use of opium.

The City of Dreadful Night has been generally accepted as the masterpiece of its author, and rightly; for if this poem does not take its place amidst the permanent works of English literature, it is difficult to believe that any of Thomson's writings will do so. It has not the rapturous idealism of the early poems, nor the brilliant fancy of *Vane's Story*; but it has, in far greater measure, the massive strength and reality of a great allegorical work; we feel in reading it that we are in the presence of one who has not only been profoundly moved by the mysteries of existence, but has *seen* what he has felt, as only a great poet can see it; and who, moreover, is gifted with the rare poetical faculty of translating his visions into words which impress themselves on the mind of the reader with all the vividness and intensity of a picture. Much of the imagery and even phraseology of *The City of Dreadful Night* may be found in the prose phantasy *A Lady of Sorrow*, written as early as 1864, the third part of which, entitled *The Shadow*, is in fact scarcely less than a prose counterpart of the poem. How clearly Thomson had already realized the conception of the gloomy city and its doleful inhabitants may be seen from the following passage: “And I wandered about the city,

¹ Mr. Bradlaugh told me this. On the other hand, Mr. Foote is confident that Thomson did not take opium during the period of their friendship.

the vast metropolis, which was become as a vast necropolis.....Desolate indeed I was, although ever and anon, here and there, in wan, haggard faces, in wrinkled brows, in thin, compressed lips, in drooping frames, in tremulous gestures, in glassy, hopeless eyes, I detected the tokens of brotherhood, I recognized my brethren in the great Freemasonry of Sorrow."

The street-lamps burn amidst the baleful glooms,
Amidst the soundless solitudes immense
Of rangèd mansions dark and still as tombs.

The silence which benumbs or strains the sense
Fulfil with awe the soul's despair unweeping :
Myriads of habitants are ever sleeping,
Or dead, or fled from nameless pestilence !

Yet as in some necropolis you find

Perchance one mourner to a thousand dead,
So there ; worn faces that look deaf and blind
Like tragic masks of stone. With weary tread,
Each wrapt in his own doom, they wander, wander,
Or sit foredone and desolately ponder

Through sleepless hours with heavy drooping head.

In March, 1874, *The City of Dreadful Night* began to appear in the *National Reformer*, and ran through four numbers.¹ It at once attracted more attention than any of Thomson's other writings, was recognized as a very remarkable work, not only by Secularists, but in wider literary circles, and received notices from the *Spectator* and the *Academy*. The latter article, which was very favourable, caused quite a series of applications to be made at the office of the *National Reformer* for the numbers containing the poem by the unknown "B. V."; these, however, were already out of print, so that for the six years that elapsed before *The City of Dreadful Night* was published in book form, persons who wished to read

¹ The dates of these were March 22, April 12 and 26, May 17, 1874.

it had to take a good deal of preliminary trouble. Emerson and Longfellow, among others, expressed a desire to see it, when its fame had reached America a few months later. Several critics praised the poem very highly; among these were Mr. W. M. Rossetti, to whom Thomson had sent a copy, and the blind poet, Philip Bourke Marston. “I hope”—thus the latter wrote to Thomson in 1875—“when your poems come out, I may have an opportunity of expressing publicly the deep admiration I have for your work, which seems to me powerful, beautiful, and masterly, and full of deep and beautiful sympathy with the sad race of men. Few poems in these days have more impressed me.” But the most gratifying encouragement which Thomson received was the letter addressed to him by George Eliot, to whom he had sent a copy of *The City of Dreadful Night* :—

George Eliot to B.V.

The Priory, 21 North Bank, Regent’s Park,

May 30, 1874.

DEAR POET,—I cannot rest satisfied without telling you that my mind responds with admiration to the distinct vision and grand utterance in the poem which you have been so good as to send me.

Also, I trust that an intellect formed by so much passionate energy as yours will soon give us more heroic strains with a wider embrace of human fellowship in them—such as will be to the labourers of the world what the odes of Tyrtaeus were to the Spartans, thrilling them with the sublimity of the social order and the courage of resistance to all that would dissolve it. To accept life and write much fine poetry is to take a very large share in the quantum of human good, and seems to draw with it necessarily some recognition, affectionate and even joyful, of the manifold willing labours which have made such a lot possible.—Yours sincerely,

M. E. LEWES.

The following letter was written by Thomson in reply :—

60 Tachbrook Street, S.W.,

June 18, 1874.

DEAR MADAM,—Having been absent for several days, I am only now able to thank you for your very kind letter, for your generous expression of praise, and for your yet more generous trust, though this, I fear, will prove to be misplaced.

I have no Byronic quarrel with my fellows, whom I find all alike crushed under the iron yoke of Fate, and few of whom I can deem worse than myself, while so many are far better, and I certainly have an affectionate and even joyful recognition of the willing labours of those who have striven to alleviate our lot, though I cannot see that all their efforts have availed much against the primal curse of our existence. Has the world been the better or the worse for the life of even such a man as Jesus? I cannot judge; but I fear on the whole considerably the worse. None the less I can love and revere his memory. A physician saves a life, and he does well; yet perchance it were better for the patient himself and for others that he now died. But it is not for me to introduce such thoughts to you.

I ventured to send you a copy of the verses (as I ventured to send another to Mr. Carlyle) because I have always read, whether rightly or wrongly, through all the manifold beauty and delightfulness of your works, a character and an intellectual destiny akin to that grand and awful Melancholy of Albrecht Dürer which dominates the City of my poem.

I cannot conclude without expressing to you my gratitude for many hours of exquisite enjoyment.—I am, Madam, with profound respect, yours sincerely,

JAMES THOMSON (B. V.).

60 Tachbrook Street, S.W.,

June 20, 1874.

DEAR MADAM,—In my note of Thursday I omitted to qualify, as I intended, the general statements by the distinct admission of what, however, is in all likelihood quite obvious—that the poem in question was the outcome of much sleepless hypochondria. I am aware that the truth of midnight does not exclude the truth of noonday, though one's nature may lead him to dwell in the former rather than the latter. Pray pardon me for troubling you on so small a matter.—Yours very respectfully,

JAMES THOMSON.

We must now turn back for a while to the brighter and more playful side of Thomson's character, as shown

in his letters to his two friends, Alice and Hypatia Bradlaugh, to whom, during his recent visit to Midhurst, he had given the nicknames of Fatima and Lina. “After all your Parisian experience,” he wrote in November, 1873, “I think you ought to write me in French. It would be good practice. I was obliged to talk French (in my terrible fashion) while in Spain. You would have laughed to hear me sometimes; still more at my Spanish.” It was accordingly agreed that the correspondence should henceforth be carried on in French.

230 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
Février 21, 1874.

MES CHÈRES PETITES FILLES,—Je vous dois mille remerciements pour vos bonnes lettres, et je vous aurais écrit plus tôt si je n’aurais pas été très affairé depuis l’Election. Je vous remercie pour les fleurs cueillés par Mlle. Fatima et envoyées par Mlle. Lina; la senteur des violettes était charmante. Mais pourquoi donc Lina, n’écrit elle pas en français? Elle le peut faire assez bien, pourtant. Peut-être parcequ’elle ne se portait pas bien ce jour-là. J’espère que cette méchante migraine ne la tourmente pas encore.

M. Austin Holyoake reste chez lui, et je suis occupé tous les jours en lui aidant comme je le puis, à faire ses comptes, etc. Il est très faible, mais je ne crois pas que sa santé est pis, quoique elle n’est guère mieux, à cause de son séjour en ville. L’autre jour un médecin éminent est venu le voir et l’a très soigneusement examiné. Vous apprendrez avec regrette qu’il ne donna pas d’espoir de guérison. On ne peut pas faire pour lui, a-t-il dit, que de procurer qu’il meure le plus lentement et avec le moins de souffrance possible. C’est un mot triste pour sa famille et ses amis.

Dimanche dernier j’ai diné chez M. J——. Le soir on a fait de la musique et nous avons dansé gaiment, Madame J—— et moi; elle portait les pantoufles de Monsieur, parce que ses bottines la gênaient. Elle n’est point bête, cette bonne dame là.

Je crains beaucoup que vous ne sortez pas pour fumer tous les soirs, comme vous avez fait jadis, quand j’étais aussi heureux d’être chez vous. Moi, je garde toujours mon brûle-gueule, et je fume avec une régularité religieuse; mais c’est tout autre chose, et infiniment moins gai, que de fumer seul chez soi au lieu de fumer en se

promenant avec deux jeunes filles, bonnes, jolies, spirituelles et charmantes.

Comme vous rirez de mon pauvre baragouinage français ! détestable, misérable, atroce, honteux, etc ! (Voilà que je fais comme Fatima quand elle écrivait des exercices, en y mettant tous les adjectifs possibles.) Moi, je m'en ris, et sans gêne, moi-même. Ecrivez-moi bientôt, je vous prie.—Votre très-humble et très-respectueux serviteur,

JACQUES THOMSON.

230 Vauxhall Bridge Road,

Mars 10, 1874.

MA CHÈRE FATIMA,—Je serai enchanté d'aller avec vous et Mlle. Lina chez tante Eliza dimanche prochain, et je ferai un grand effort sur moi-même—mais un effort vraiment effroyable et héroïque—à fin d'arriver à la grande Salle dans la Vieille Rue à onze heures le matin (s'il fait beau temps ce jour-là, bien entendu) ; quelle heure matinale pour le dimanche !

Si j'ai montré votre lettre à M. Grant, c'était parce qu'elle était si bonne et si spirituelle. Je ne crois pas que vous en êtes vraiment fâchée, quoique vous dites. Mais ne vous avisez pas de montrer la mienne à personne ; ça serait cruel.

Je ne puis pas écrire plus loin, je suis tout gelé de froid. Je vous baise la main, à vous et à votre confrère (c'est à dire, votre con-sœur) dans le secrétariat. Adieu !

JACQUES THOMSON.

The illness of his dear friend Austin Holyoake, mentioned in the above letters, was a constant grief and anxiety to Thomson during the first three months of this year ; "Austin's, in and out," and "Austin's, all week," being frequent entries in his diary. The death of his friend on April 10 was a severe blow to him, though the loss had long been foreseen. The funeral took place on the 17th, at Highgate Cemetery, Thomson being one of those who stood round the grave—the very grave which he himself was destined afterwards to share. On the day after Austin Holyoake's death Thomson had said farewell to another of his most intimate companions. "With Grant," he notes in his diary, "to see George Duncan for last time, he starting for Madras on

Monday.” Five years later Mr. Duncan was again in London for a short visit, but owing to an error as to Thomson’s whereabouts the friends did not then meet, and never afterwards found another opportunity.

These losses were in some measure mitigated by the acquisition of new friends, mostly owing to the publication of *The City of Dreadful Night*. Thomson’s correspondence with Mr. Bertram Dobell began in this manner, and resulted in a friendship which continued to the end of his life.

James Thomson to Bertram Dobell.

17 Johnson’s Court, Fleet Street, E.C.,

April 9, 1874.

DEAR SIR,—I have just received from Mr. Bradlaugh your note about myself, and hasten to thank you heartily for your very generous expression of approval of my writings. While I have neither tried nor cared to win any popular applause, the occasional approbation of an intelligent and sympathetic reader cheers me on a somewhat lonely path.

You must not blame Mr. Bradlaugh for the delay in continuing my current contribution to his paper. He is my very dear friend, and always anxious to strain a point in my favour; but as an editor he must try to suit his public, and the great majority of these care nothing for most of what I write. As for this *City of Dreadful Night*, it is so alien from common thought and feeling that I knew well (as stated in the Proem) that scarcely any readers would care for it, and Mr. B. tells me that he has received three or four letters energetically protesting against its publication in the *N. R.*, yours, I think, being the only one praising it. Moreover, we must not forget that there is probably no other periodical in the kingdom which would accept such writings, even were their literary merits far greater than they are.

I address from the office of the *N. R.*, because I am just now rather unsettled, and not sure what will be my private address for some time to come. While preferring to remain anonymous for the public, I have no reason to hide my name from such correspondents as yourself.—I am, dear Sir, yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON (B. V.).

To the Same.

60 Tachbrook Street,

June 24, 1874.

DEAR SIR,—I have found out what set some people calling for my "City." I had a letter from Rossetti the day before yesterday in which he asked me whether I had seen a notice in the *Academy*, treating my poem with distinguished respect. He himself writes in that paper, but had nothing to do with the notice in question, nor does he know who wrote it.¹ Yesterday I got the number (that for June 6). The paragraph leads off the notes on magazine articles, coming under the head of "Notes and News," and certainly does me more than justice, especially as compared with Leopardi. They also quote complete the twentieth section about the Sphinx and the Angel. But I daresay you are in the way of getting to see the paper.....

I have just written to the editor of the *Academy*, thanking him and his critic, and saying that it seems to me a very brave act, on the part of a respectable English periodical, to spontaneously call attention to an atheistical writing (less remote than, say, Lucretius), treating it simply and fairly on its literary merits, without obloquy or protesting cant.—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

On asking Thomson why he did not bring out his poems in book form, and on learning that he was unable to do so because he had not the means of paying for the publication, Mr. Dobell, who for more than ten years had been a reader and admirer of "B.V.'s" writings in the *National Reformer*, and was fully convinced of the writer's genius, generously determined to take the risk on himself. The following extracts from Thomson's letters have reference to this proposal, and to its enforced abandonment; after which there ensued a long and disappointing search for a publisher who should be willing to accept the responsibility of bringing out such heterodox works:—

May 18, 1874.—I duly received your letter with estimate for printing and binding, and yesterday I had the opportunity of

¹ Miss Edith Simecox is understood to have been the writer.

talking over the matter with Mr. Bradlaugh. He thinks with you that the experiment is worth trying. I still fear that you will be disappointed in your expectation of even a very moderate success. However, if you wish to make a venture, and would prefer to make it with something of mine, I am quite willing, so far as I am concerned, though if you suffer any loss through your association with me I shall much regret it.

Your proposed terms of profits, if any, after repayment of your expenses, to be divided equally between us, I accept as fair; in fact, as you may remember, I suggested the same in our conversation. All I ask in addition is, that a few copies shall be reserved for me, as there are friends to whom I should like to present them.

October 17, 1874.—I say again, as I have said from the first, that it will be more than imprudent on your part, and will certainly cause regret to me, if you at all strain your resources in order to publish the poems. I regret much that business has not gone so well with you of late as you expected, and I do hope you will take good heed ere risking funds on a venture which is not at all necessary, and which it seems to me is at least as likely to fail as succeed.

On April 13 Thomson had left his lodgings in Vauxhall Bridge Road and moved to a Mrs. Baxter's, at 60 Tachbrook Street, Pimlico, where he remained for the next eighteen months. The following extracts are from his letters to his sister-in-law:—

April 18, 1874.—Please note that I have changed my address, moving, however, but a very short distance, as this neighbourhood suits me. I do not yet know whether I shall stay here long; but the house is nice and clean, and the landlady seems a very decent body. As inscrutable destiny decides that I am to lodge with married women and old maids alternately, I am with a family woman this time, though I have really not yet learnt whether the husband is dead or living.

Friendly regards to your parents; much love to their lazy little daughter and their son-in-law who is so assiduous, being of the race of the Thomsons. I guess that *we* are all lineally descended from my namesake, the childless architect of the Castle of Indolence. As for *you*, your ancestor must have been a Bruce, who, having

watched the spider make a couple of attempts, yawned and thought the animal very stupid to exert itself so much, and fell fast asleep before it could make a third, and never awoke until all the wars were over, and Bannockburn was an ancient tradition.

July 27, 1874.—You cruel little women, to call longing for holidays "insane"! As for me, I am always "insanely" longing for holidays in hot weather. As soon as the glass reaches 70° in the shade, my pure conscience finds work of any kind very sinful, and thorough *idlesse* the only way to sanctification and beatification. And yet I have to work; this is a wicked world, and also "a mad world, my masters," as the old playwright has it.

As to Lilian in Bulwer Lytton's "Strange Story," I know nothing at all of that lay-figure. When I was even younger than you are still, I read some of that book-wright's romances, and became enduringly convinced that he was one of the most thorough and hollow humbugs of the age; false and flashy in everything; with pinchbeck poetry, pinchbeck philosophy, pinchbeck learning, pinchbeck sentiment; stealing whatever good thing he could lay his hands on, and making it a bad thing as he uttered it. So you won't persuade me to think of you in connection with his Lilian of "A Strange Story." No; but if you keep very very good, and write me many many nice letters, I may think of you in connection with the lady of Shelley's "Sensitive Plant," or her to whom he sent "Lines with a Guitar." Read these poems (if you haven't them, may I send them to you?), and then you will see how you are thought of by—Your lazy brother,
JAMES THOMSON.

A visit of his brother and sister-in-law to London is recorded in the diary for September, 1874. During this same summer he had begun to correspond with Mr. William Maccall, to whom he had once been introduced at Mr. Bradlaugh's office. The correspondence originated in Thomson's discovery that Mr. Maccall was an old friend of the Grays, with whom he had himself been so intimate in his youth, though he had not visited them since 1860. Mr. Charles Watts, who acted as sub-editor of the *National Reformer*, and Mr. G. W. Foote, another friend whose acquaintance Thomson made about this time, are referred to in the following letter:—

To Mrs. Bradlaugh.

60 Tachbrook Street, S.W.,

November 29, 1874.

MY DEAR MRS. BRADLAUGH,—I have rather less than more news to send you than you have to send me. Grant and I go to the concerts on Monday evenings, and that is my only dissipation just now, except that I have had a couple of suburban strolls with young Foote. Grant, as you say, does not look well, and I fear that he is not so. The redoubtable Kenneth I haven't yet seen, not having called at the barracks since that tall grenadier returned to town.

I am sorry indeed for poor Hypatia with her teeth and headaches. She must be very careful in pronouncing the most Germanic of the Germanic words, else they will certainly twist and tug out what sound teeth she has left. As for the German round-about sentences, as they give people who are well the headache, they ought, on the homœopathic system, to cure those who have it. We shall see how they affect her. By the bye, it seems that I frightened *les chères petites enfants* by saying that the grammar would do for the first year or two of their studies. I meant to speak, not of the grammar, but of the dictionary: when they get on a certain way in the language, they will want one with more idioms in it. If they want full directions for acquiring German, they had better refer to Hans Breitmann (whose book, I believe, their papa gave them), who has an excellent poem on the subject:—

“Whilst dou learn die Deutsche Sprache?
Denn set it on your card,
Dat all the nouns have shenders,
Und de shenders all are hard.”

There is to be an amateur performance for the benefit of the Secular or some such club at the King's Cross Theatre on the 15th December, Tuesday. Mr. and Mrs. Watts, Othello and Desdemona; Mr. Foote and Mrs. Holyoake, Iago and Emilia. I saw a sort of first rehearsal the other evening, but only a few persons were there, and they had different acting editions of the drama; so I soon came away.

I should be very glad to come to see you all at Christmas, but I fear that I must put off my visit until after B.'s return from America. Besides the writing, there is a good deal to do at the office. The responsibility of the acting editorship weigheth heavily

on Watts' shoulders as yet; Atlas with the world on his back was nothing to him.

With love to all, and hoping you are well,—Yours truly,
JAMES THOMSON.

To Mr. Bertram Dobell.

60 Tachbrook Street, S.W.,

November 16, 1874.

DEAR SIR,—Many thanks for the books, which I shall look through as I have leisure. I should have called on you ere this had I been less occupied. Now that the weather is cold, I do my writing and reading more in the evenings, and two of these are taken up by Johnson's Court, while a third (the Monday) I dedicate to St. James's Hall. Let me know freely when you want any or all of your books back, and I will send them at once.

If you like chamber music, and can spare the time, I shall be happy to meet you any Monday at St. James's Hall. I usually go with a friend [Mr. Grant], another melomaniac. You get Orchestra ticket, Piccadilly entrance, and get to Orchestra from Piccadilly Place, a narrow passage a few steps farther on. Be careful not to fall into the abomination of the Christy Minstrels, who are in the Minor Hall! Concert commences at eight. I usually get there about seven, as the doors are open, and one can sit and read or chat while waiting. In the Orchestra you can easily see whether a friend is present, and get beside him.—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

On Thomson's birthday, November 23, 1874, there is the following significant and pathetic entry: "Forty years old to-day. Cold; third day of fog. Congenial natal weather. No marvel one is obscure, dismal, bewildered, and melancholy." The year which was just drawing to its close had been a memorable one in Thomson's lifetime, as having witnessed the publication of his most characteristic poem; but it had also deprived him of two of his most valued friends, while to himself it was the beginning of a downward course of deepening poverty, diminishing vigour, ill-health, despondency, and disappointment.

The diary for 1875 is unfortunately lost, the chief available record for this period being the letters to Mr. Dobell, which are in great measure concerned with Thomson's vain attempts to secure the publication of a volume of his poems. In the early months of this year he was in severe pecuniary straits, and his troubles were increased in the summer by the severance of his long connection with the *National Reformer*, in which so many of his best writings, both in verse and prose, had been published during the preceding twelve or fourteen years. The following extracts, taken from his letters to Mr. Dobell, will explain the course of events:—

January 18, 1875.—I'm still on the staff of the noble *N. R.*, but have been crowded out of late. C. B. and Ajax [Mrs. Besant] take up much room, and we wanted to bring in other things. I'm always willing to give way, especially when doing so saves me from writing nonsense. I resume in next week's number.

April 17, 1875.—Your former note came too late for me to let you know that I am always late on Wednesdays. On that night the *N. R.* goes to press; I am not done with it till about nine, Watts till about eleven; so he and I, with a few others, generally spend an hour or two together after nine, waiting for the first proof.

May 18, 1875.—You may tell anyone you like my name, as the *N. R.* people and B. haven't in the least respected the anonymity. I shall put my name to the volume if published. As to my position, I don't want strangers to know that I am somewhat hard up; it's none of their business. They may know that I help and contribute in the *N. R.* for aught I care. I don't do any more “Jottings,”¹ simply two or three columns on one or two topics of the day, a sermon or religious meeting, or any nonsense of the sort. Philip Bourke Marston has been at the office wanting a copy of the “City,” and Miss Mathilde Blind has been asking B. for loan of all my pieces, in order to draw attention to them in some German periodical.

¹ The “Jottings,” occasional notes in the *National Reformer*, were written by Thomson, under the signature “X.,” from the middle of 1874 to the date of this extract. They are full of characteristic humour and pungency.

July 9, 1875.—I have since been reflecting on the matter [a conditional offer of publication], and am inclined to take a reasonable number of copies, should they make this an essential condition, as it is so important to me to procure publication. I believe that a good many would be disposed of through advertisement in the *N. R.* I am quite off this now, B. having taken the first opportunity of terminating our connection, which I myself had only submitted to for some time past because it afforded me mere subsistence. So I must get other engagements at once, and a published volume would be of immense service to me. Of course B. could not refuse my advertisement, nor do I suppose that he would charge for it even now, seeing that he had all the verses for nothing; but I should send it to the office in the ordinary way of business.

August 24, 1875.—Foote and George Jacob Holyoake hope to start a good Secular weekly, price twopence, soon, with a guarantee fund to secure its existence for three years. Mr. H. will not be able to do much work on it, but his name is very influential with many old Secularists who don't like B.'s hammer-and-tongs style. Some good writers would contribute *gratis* at first; it being understood that all shall be paid as early as possible. I go in for this new paper thoroughly, of course, not caring to be gagged at the pleasure of Mr. B.

This rupture of an intimate friendship of more than twenty years' standing is a subject on which it would be profitless and painful to dwell. The striking dissimilarity of character between the two friends would in itself be sufficient to account for their final disagreement, when each had gradually settled down to a separate course of his own, and when new interests were arising to accentuate their differences. Mr. Bradlaugh, who had certainly shown much kindness and forbearance to Thomson for a long period, was naturally annoyed at the increasing irregularities and want of self-government which marked the conduct of his friend; while Thomson, on his part, strongly resented certain features of Mr. Bradlaugh's later policy; so that the breach which ensued, deplorable as it was between two such old

comrades, was probably inevitable, and was hastened by the influence now exercised by Mrs. Besant's personality. After their parting in 1875, Thomson never met Mr. Bradlaugh again, except once or twice for the formal discussion of some details of business; and there is no doubt that the cessation of his friendship and correspondence with Mr. Bradlaugh's family was a great grief to him. “Evening party at Hall of Science,” he enters in his diary for January 27, 1876. “Alice and Hypatia there with C. B. First time of seeing the girls that I could not speak.”¹

It is pleasant, however, to note that on the occasion of Mr. Bradlaugh's expulsion from the House of Commons, more than five years later (August 3, 1881), Thomson was among the crowd, and was so moved by the sight that his companions had to restrain him by force from rushing to his old friend's assistance. “Men of all kinds were present in the crowd of Mr. Bradlaugh's supporters that day,” says Mr. J. H. MacCarthy in his *England under Gladstone*. “One man at least deserves special consideration—James Thomson, true poet and brilliant writer; author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, a poem whose profound pessimism is illumined by a melancholy beauty, and of some even more valuable songs of the joys and pleasures of the poor. Thomson had been of old a friend and follower of Mr. Bradlaugh; their ways of thought had varied of late, and their paths had separated; but here, in the moment of difficulty, Thomson came to do all he could for the cause which he believed to be just—the cause of his old friend.”

¹ See the *Life of Charles Bradlaugh*, by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner: I, 113; II, 237.

CHAPTER VI

“SEVEN SONGLESS YEARS”

FOR seven years after the publication of *The City of Dreadful Night*—“seven songless years,” as he himself described them—Thomson ceased to produce poetry, his writing, with the rare exception of an occasional lyric or political piece, being now altogether critical and journalistic. As he had no longer any secretaryship in the City from which he could gain a livelihood, he was henceforth dependent altogether on his literary work, and, the *National Reformer* having now failed him, he was forced to look afield for fresh employment. It was for this reason he was so anxious to issue a volume of his poems, hoping that a wider reputation would bring him more opportunities of obtaining work. In this attempt he was for several years unsuccessful, but he was fortunate in finding two journals to which he could contribute freely, and from one of which he received most substantial remuneration. The establishment of the *Secularist*, a weekly paper, which commenced on January 1, 1876, has already been alluded to, and is further mentioned in a letter to Mr. W. M. Rossetti:—

12 Gower Street, W.C.,
December 21, 1875.

DEAR SIR,—I believe a prospectus was sent you some time ago of the *Secularist*, a Liberal weekly Review, price twopence, edited by G. J. Holyoake and G. W. Foote, of which the first number will appear on the 1st January. I shall be one of the regular contributors. Would it be troubling you too much to ask you to send

a note of this for insertion in the *Academy*? The *Secularist* will be advertised in that paper next Saturday.

Mr. Holyoake has always differed from Mr. Bradlaugh in maintaining that Secularism is a practical rule of life, and as such quite distinct from Atheism and all other merely speculative systems; and many of us are at one with Mr. Holyoake on this matter.—
Yours truly,
JAMES THOMSON.

The joint-editorship of the *Secularist* continued only for a few weeks, for differences soon arose between the two editors, and on February 26 Mr. G. J. Holyoake's withdrawal was announced, and the paper was thenceforth conducted by Mr. Foote, until, in June, 1877, it was merged in the *Secular Review*. During the eighteen months that it lasted Thomson contributed largely to the pages of the *Secularist* under the old signature of “B. V.” His writings ranged over a wide variety of subjects, religious, social, and literary; a few of his poems, written at an earlier date, were also included, and many of his translations from Heine, as well as a series of essays on that author, to whom he was devotedly attached. He also took a prominent part in the warfare which raged for some time between the adherents of the *National Reformer* and the *Secularist*.

The other journal to which Thomson became a contributor was *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, a monthly periodical, edited, on behalf of a well-known firm of Liverpool tobacco merchants, by Mr. John Fraser, to whom Thomson had obtained an introduction through Mr. William Maccall. The fact of *Cope's Tobacco Plant* being primarily a trade-advertising sheet is apt to give a wrong impression as to its literary value, for in reality it contained many articles of a high order, being, as Thomson himself described it, “one of the most daring and original publications of the day,” a periodical

"which actually loves literature, though it has to make this subordinate to the Herb Divine." To one whose love of literature was almost equalled by his love of smoking, the task of writing for the *Tobacco Plant* was a congenial one; it moreover offered him two great advantages, both of which he could hardly have obtained elsewhere—a regular source of income, and a medium by which he could give independent form to his views, for he was allowed by Mr. Fraser to have almost his own way with the purely literary matter of the *Tobacco Plant*. "My work on it," he wrote a few years later, "is chiefly of the hack order; the 'Tobacco Legislation, signed 'Sigvat,' the last two or three 'Mixtures'¹ (former Mixer having lately died); sometimes a literary article signed 'J. T.,' the 'Smoke-Room Table' notices of *English Men of Letters*. The editor is an admirable one to have dealings with; payment is fair and regular; I have not to violate my conscience by writing what I don't believe, for I *do* believe in Tobacco, the sole article necessary to salvation in the Cope creed. On the whole, one earns a little money in this way not more wearisomely and rather more honourably than in any other just now open to me." From his first contribution in September, 1875, until the discontinuance of the *Tobacco Plant* in 1881, Thomson wrote for it pretty regularly, and always spoke of the connection with pleasure and gratitude.

At the beginning of 1876 we thus find Thomson entering on a fresh period of his life; and in addition to being engaged on new work, he was now settled in new lodgings in another quarter of London.

¹ "Cope's Mixture" was the name given to a column or so of miscellaneous notes in each number of the *Tobacco Plant*.

To Mr. Bertram Dobell.

35 Alfred Street, Gower Street, W.C.,

December 15, 1875.

DEAR SIR,—I have delayed answering your letter partly because I have been busy and unsettled, partly because I wished to consult about the publication by subscription suggested by Mr. Bullen and yourself. All things considered, I would rather wait unpublished than adopt this mode; but I thank you none the less for your kind offer in connection with it.

You will note changed address at top. I only moved on Monday, and don't know that I shall stay here, but at any rate I shall settle in this neighbourhood for a time, as I want to be near Foote for the *Secularist* business, and also near the British Museum for the Reading Room.—I am, yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

In these lodgings at 35 Alfred Street (or 7 Huntley Street, as the house was afterwards re-named) Thomson stayed till a few weeks before his death, and was treated with much kindness and consideration by the house-keeper, Miss Scott, who did all that was in her power for his health and comfort. Mr. Foote, with whom Thomson was closely associated at this time, was living at 12 Gower Street, the house of Mr. T. R. Wright, who had married the widow of Mr. Austin Holyoake. Thomson was thus within reach of his most intimate friends; indeed, during the last six years of his life he was less a visitor than an inmate of the Wrights' house, being regarded with the deepest esteem and affection by Mr. and Mrs. Wright and their family. The course of his life for the next few years was quiet and uneventful, the entries in the diary relating chiefly to his work for the *Tobacco Plant*; frequent walks with Mr. Foote or Mr. Percy Holyoake, the son of his old friend Austin; and pleasant evenings with the Wrights, when the time was spent in music, billiards, or conversation. On Sundays he was usually with the Wrights, or with his old friend

Mr. Jaques; but he had now lost sight to a great extent of his earlier set of friends and old army comrades. For several years he seems to have been only twice out of London, these occasions being his attendance at a stormy Conference of the Secular Society at Leeds, on June 4, 1876, and a four days' visit on Secular affairs to Leicester in the following September, when he was accompanied by Mr. Foote. Few letters written at this period have been preserved, except some to Mr. Dobell concerning literary matters and the proposed publication of a volume.

To Mr. Bertram Dobell.

35 Alfred Street, Gower Street, W.C.,
Sunday, January 9, 1876.

DEAR SIR,—I have been half-a-dozen times on the point of replying to your last, but something or other has hitherto prevented me. First, accept my sincere thanks for your kind offer, which fortunately I need not take advantage of. I have, of course, still ground to make, but the *Secularist* and *Tobacco Plant* keep me going for the present.

With regard to Mr. Bullen's criticisms on "Our Ladies of Death"—criticisms which really flatter me, as any man's work is really praised by such examination—I must hold myself right. The only English Dictionary I have by me is a school one, but as such little likely to venture on neologisms; moreover, it is very good of its kind, being Reid's of Edinburgh. This gives Sombre, Sombrous, dark, gloomy; Tenēbrous, Tenēbrious, dark, gloomy, obscure (and, of course, Tenebrious implies Tenebriously); Ruth, pity, sorrow; Ruthful, merciful, sorrowful; Ruthfully, sadly, sorrowfully. The huge Worcester Webster, into which I looked a day or two after your letter came, agrees as to tenebrious and ruth; I forgot to look in it for sombrous. But as to ruth, I used it in the common sense of pity, not that of sadness and sorrow. When I wrote—

"My life but bold
In jest and laugh to parry hateful ruth,"

I meant to parry the pity of others, not to parry my own sadness, which, indeed, jest and laugh must intensify instead of parrying.

My thought was much like that of Beatrice, “The Cenci,” Act v, sc. 3:—

“ Shall the light multitude
Fling at their choice curses *or faded pity*,
Sad funeral flowers to deck a living corpse,
Upon us as we pass, to pass away?”

And from the light, indifferent multitude, as you must know, curses even are less unwelcome than pity when we are profoundly suffering. I looked into the Dictionaries, not knowing whether their authority would sustain or condemn me, as I am used to trust in careful writing to my own sense of what is right; this, naturally, having been modified and formed by reading of good authors. Even had the Dictionaries condemned me, I should in these cases have been apt to assert my own correctness; in many others I should be ready to yield without contest. In *The City of Dreadful Night* I used tenebrous instead of tenebrious; just as good writers use, as it happens to suit them, either funeral or funereal, sulphurous or sulphureous (Shelley often in “Hellas”), etc. You will think that I have troubled you with very many words on a very little matter. As it is now just 11 p.m., and I have much to do to-morrow, I will conclude in pity for myself if not in ruth for you.—With best wishes, yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

The following extracts are from the same correspondence:—

June 21, 1877.—I find it hopeless to attempt publishing before, at earliest, winter coming on. I hope to stir in the matter September or October.

I will call on you one of these evenings with your two books. Will you forward by book post a copy of Garth Wilkinson’s “Human Body and its Connection with Man” to Mr. John Fraser? He writes that he will be glad of it. I will settle for book and postage when I see you, and he will settle with me.

I shall probably do an article or two for Watts and Foote on your “Alger’s Eastern Poetry”: it would form a good introduction to a series on Omar Kháyýám which I have in my heart to accomplish some day. Note my new address (7 Huntley Street). It is the same house as before, only they have renamed and renumbered the street.

February 12, 1878.—I expected to give you a call long ere this; but Fraser put off answering my inquiries as to the Christmas or New Year card—the Pilgrimage after Chaucer, as misinterpreted by Stothard—and other matters, and when at length he did write seemed so urgent about the Pilgrimage that I put on full steam, spinning out from seventy to a hundred lines a day, for the thing had to be done in rhyme (a long way) after Chaucer too. I have called at ——'s about poems. He told me that trade was so depressed that they are withholding several works ready for publication. If the damned Dizzy suspense be over, and trade improved, will be happy to see me on the subject in June, when they make their arrangements for works or chief works to be brought out in the following season, which, as you doubtless know, begins with November. There would be no fair chance for a volume now. So I must wait once more.

November 18, 1878.—I am very sorry but scarcely surprised that things are not very flourishing with you just now. You are correct in supposing that it is ditto with me. With the natural depression of trade infinitely aggravated during the past two years by the infernal impolicy of our Jewish-Jingo misgovernment, it cannot be well with anybody but arm-manufacturers, Exchange speculators, and Hebrew adventurers; and things seem likely to grow much worse before they grow better.....The "Improvisations"¹ I shall be delighted to see. It is so scarce that I have never yet been able to come across it, and have never seen any mention of it save that by Rossetti in his supplementary chapter (a very fine one) to the "Life of Blake." It is not even in the British Museum, having been printed for private circulation only, if I remember aright. I should think it would be a real treasure to any of Wilkinson's few admirers; for, as you know, the fewer devotees of any man or thing, the more enthusiastic.

December 23, 1878.—Just lately, and in these days, I am pretty busy for Fraser; and well for me that it is so, for I have not earned a penny save from him the whole year. There is more work to do on the Tobacco Duties; and also verse and prose for the Christmas card, but not so much as last year, nor offering such genial opportunities and associations as "Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims." The subject this time is the "Pursuit of Diva Nicotina," in imitation of Sir Noel Paton's "Pursuit of Pleasure." Paton is a good

¹ *Improvisations from the Spirit*, by Dr. Garth Wilkinson.

painter and poet too, but of the ascetic-pietistic school, or with strong leanings to it.

The indefinite postponement of the publication of his poems was a very serious misfortune to Thomson for more than one reason; for it interposed a ruinous delay in the realization of his literary prospects, at a time when a little encouragement and lightening of the load of his poverty would have been an inestimable boon, and thus disheartened him for all further creative effort. That most of the publishers to whom he applied should have candidly told him that they were not disposed to become responsible for his volume was indeed no matter for surprise; for, as he himself wrote in reference to this subject, "verse by an unknown man is always a drug in the market, and when it is atheistic it is a virulently poisonous drug, with which respectable publishers would rather have nothing to do." But he had good reason to complain of other and less justifiable delays, caused by the inconsiderate vacillation of certain publishers who held out promises which they afterwards declined to perform. "This is bad treatment; four months and more lost," he writes in his diary in February, 1877, when he found himself once again cut adrift.

In July, 1879, through Mr. Foote's introduction, Thomson became engaged in a correspondence with Mr. George Meredith, for whose genius he had long felt and expressed the utmost admiration; and he had now the great satisfaction of learning that his own writings were held in high esteem by one whose good opinion he probably valued above that of any living critic. "I am glad," wrote Mr. Meredith, "to be in personal communication with you. The pleasant things you have written of me could not be other than agreeable to a writer. I saw

that you had the rare deep love of literature ; rare at all times, and in our present congestion of matter almost extinguished ; which led you to recognize any effort to produce the worthiest. But when a friend unmasked your initials, I was flattered. For I had read *The City of Dreadful Night*, and to be praised by the author of that poem would strike all men able to form a judgment upon eminent work as a distinction."

It was apparently about this same time, or perhaps a little earlier, that Thomson became personally acquainted with Philip Bourke Marston, with whom he had already corresponded from 1875 ; and the acquaintance soon ripened into a warm friendship. There was a natural bond of union between the two poets in the similarity of their destiny, each of them being gifted with an extreme sensibility and strong aspirations ; while each had been bereaved in early manhood, and was spending the remainder of a disappointed life in a "city of darkness" of his own.

In the meantime, on January 1, 1879, there had been started, under Mr. Foote's editorship, a monthly magazine named *The Liberal*, to which Thomson was an occasional contributor, one of his papers being a series of articles on Dr. Garth Wilkinson's *Improvisations from the Spirit*, under the title of "A Strange Book." Towards the end of the year, however, disagreements which had gradually been arising between Thomson and Mr. Foote became so acute as to prevent their further intimacy ; after which rupture the *Tobacco Plant* was for some time the only paper for which Thomson wrote, and the sole quarter to which he could look for the earning of his livelihood. Thus ended his connection with Secularist journalism, a connection that had extended over a period of some fifteen or sixteen years.

To Mr. Bertram Dobell.

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, W.C.,

Sunday, October 19, 1879.

DEAR SIR,—I can still but barely manage to keep head over water—sometimes sinking under for a bit. You see what I do for Cope. I have not succeeded in getting any other work except on *The Liberal*, and this is of small value. I thank you for keeping the Whitman for me: I sold it with other books when hard up. In the meantime I have the latest 2 vol. edition in hand from Fraser, who has requested some articles on him, when Tobacco Legislation, &c., will allow. I mean to begin him now in the evenings at home, as the Legislation can be done only in the Museum. He may occupy such intervals in the paper as did the Wilson and Hogg, both done by request: the "Richard Feverel" was on my own suggestion. George Meredith, to whom I sent a copy, wrote me a very flattering, because very high-minded, letter. He has seen the "City," and, though by no means sanguine with such a public as ours, he thinks it should float a volume. The admiration of so many excellent literary judges really surprises me.

All this about myself because I have nothing else to write about, going nowhere and seeing no one.—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

The following extracts are taken from Thomson's diary for 1879:—

Wednesday, Jan. 1.—Morning dull and mild. Aftn. wet & mild. Night, sharp sleety hail or icy sleet. Mornng. Letter from Fraser. Cigars, P.O.O. and Proofs. Mornng. & evg. (till 10.15), Proofs. Aftn. posted Proofs, Ire. & formal receipt, with thanks, &c. Not a bad beginning of the year. Wrote all mornng. without fire, so mild.

Wednesday, Jan. 8.—Bitter easterly. Some sun. Mornng. & evg. fair copy *Memorial*: then Blue Book & Financ. Refm. Almk., 1879. Aftn., Walk about Soho. (Coal scuttle; after three years!) Moon keen as crystal, sky pale & cloudless, stars few and dim, ground like iron, wind like a razor.

Sat., Jan. 11.—(To Wm. Maccall.) How is one to discover or invent a *phrenometer* or *psychometer* by which to regulate one's writings to the capacities of the average "intelligent reader"!

Monday, Feb. 17.—Fog Mornng. Some sun mid-day. Wet evg.

Cool. N.W. Morn'g., Up late, dawdled. (Poor strange cat in back coal-cellar and under kitchen since Saty. morn'g.) Aftn., Stroll Oxford St.; also before dinner. Evg., Reading Erasme: *Eloge de la Folie* (Biblio: Nationale). Slight bilious indigestion. Listless & sleepy. Beer early for early bed.

Ash Wednesday, Feb. 26.—Cold. N.E. wind; glum; snow in the air, slight powder falling. Morn'g., To B. M. Shut. Did my Commination Service alone; cursing the idiots who close such a place on such a day. Stroll before dinner. Aftn., Gower St. Evg., Writing bit *Men of Letters*. Reading Goldsmith. Coals (1) full.

Friday, Feb. 28.—The dull rheumatic pains shoulders & right arm continue; slight, but I rather fear after father.

Sunday, March 2.—Queer dream morn'g. Condemned to death for sort of manslaughter on one who deserved it for wronging another. No remorse, no fear, some perplexity as to chance of commutn. to imprisonment for life. Some trouble on awaking to make sure it had been a dream.

Thursday, June 19.—Trousselle handed me old silver tankard (which I left with poor Mrs. B.), & a note from Alice.¹

Tuesday, July 1.—Heavy rain with gale, almost incessant till 4 p.m. Brief clear up, then shower, then clear. At 9 (dusk) great ragged rack to N. sweeping from W., across very pale blue skimmed-milk sky, & beneath it the brickdust-yellow rift ominous of storm. 1st of July, & no summer yet!

Thursday, Aug. 14.—Have got into bad way of waking two or three hours before I want to get up (before 5 or 6), & being unable to sleep afterwards. Hence I arise weary at last; and am very drowsy after tea, when I want to read or write. This morn'g. awoke at 5.40; this evg. had to lie down, & slept from 6.30 to 8.30, losing two good hours.

Saturday, Sept. 6.—Dim, dreamy, misty, brooding day. Red beamless sun. Very languid. Morn'g., B.M. After, stroll with G. W. F.; met in coffee-house. Evg., dawdled and strolled.

Saturday, Nov. 1.—*Athenæum*; openg. article on Egoist. The first critique on any of George Meredith's books I have ever come across, in which the writer showed thorough knowledge of his works, and anything like an adequate apprec. of his wonderful genius.

¹ See *Life of Charles Bradlaugh*, by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, I, 113.

Saturday, Nov. 8.—*Athenæum*, advt. of Egoist: cordial praise from *Athenm.*, *Pall Mall*, *Spectr.*, *Examr.* At length! Encourg.! A man of wonderful genius, and a splendid writer, may hope to obtn. something like recogn. after working hard for thirty years, dating from his majority!

Thursday, Nov. 27.—Cold but fine; 10 P.M. thaw yet cold; moon high in orange halo of immense high thin pale or dim grey cloud, drifting from east.

Friday, Nov. 28.—Pretty fair day, cold, Moon thick yellow halo; immense rack of pale grey cloud, united, but with large curves, sailing from east.

Saturday, Nov. 29.—Fair, cold, N.E. Moon clear in deep azure or turquoise, not transparent.

Friday, Dec. 5.—Cold, slight snow; fine mornng., livid day. Snowing pretty heavily at night (9 P.M.). Mornng. B. M. Readg. for *Raleigh*. Aftn., Adeline (French). Evg. Thackeray (Trollope's). (Picked just twenty-one sticks out of my grate—fire laid by charewoman Lizzie; the rest being quite enough to light the fire! The prodigal poor!)

Sunday, Dec. 14.—Mr. R—— yesterday; lre. from mother to live with his cousin, a lonely widow & religious. He in consternation; I won't stop; I'll be back in a fortnight. And to-morrow is Sunday! (despair).

Christmas Day.—Black fog mid-day, and until night. Mornng. (late) answg. Fraser's with receipt. Dined Gower St. Billiards, &c. Evg. Home 12.20 or so. Bed past one.

Wednesday, Dec. 31.—Saw Old Year out and New Year in at Mitchell's; with Wrights, &c. Cards, whist, and Vingt-un.

Mention of ill-health occurs rather frequently in the diaries of this period, and it is certain that a decided change for the worse was taking place in Thomson's condition, and that his constitution, strong and hardy though it was at the outset, was gradually giving way under the terrible strain to which it had so long been subjected. If a decline of this sort, which under the circumstances must sooner or later have been inevitable, is to be traced back to any particular time, we

should probably be justified in regarding the visit to Spain in 1873 as the date of the commencement of disquieting symptoms. In February, 1876, when he already had reason to be concerned about his health, he was further shaken by a very severe fall, which kept him indoors for some days, and threatened rather serious consequences. In the autumn of the following year he was troubled a good deal by insomnia; "my old friend" he calls it in the diary. In 1879 the signs of failing health were still more frequent; for, in addition to the symptoms recorded in the above extracts (it will be seen from the entry for February 28 that he was apprehensive of a paralytic stroke as in the case of his father), we find him suffering from a "queer catching pain" in the back and a painful constriction at the chest, "over and about the heart," and other similar ailments. With this decrease of physical strength he had lost somewhat of his mental nerve, promptitude, and vigour—even the handwriting, once so characteristic in its extreme regularity and firmness of outline, had now begun to show traces of increasing debility.

That this change was due in great measure to his fits of intemperance is beyond doubt; at the same time it must in justice be noted that these excesses were periodic, not habitual—a recurrent disease against which his true nature struggled, albeit unsuccessfully, with loathing and detestation. "He was not," writes one who knew him intimately during these very years, "a toper; on the contrary, he was a remarkably temperate man, both in eating and drinking. His intemperate fits came on periodically, like other forms of madness; and naturally as he grew older and weaker they lasted longer, and the lucid intervals became shorter. The fits were invariably preceded by several

days of melancholy, which deepened and deepened until intolerable. Then he flew to the alcohol, so naturally and unconsciously that when he returned to sanity he could seldom remember the circumstances of his collapse."¹

"After the fit had spent itself," says another friend,² "would come a dreary week of feebleness and self-aborrence, then returning health would bring back the normal Thomson, and a few months of work would be the prelude to another attack. No mortal ever strove against an overpowering disease more grimly than Thomson, and when friends were to be pained by his succumbing to the mania it was always combated and repulsed to the last moment. His absolute abandonment during these attacks was sufficient to attest their nature, and no more pregnant illustration of the metamorphosis he underwent could well be found than the remark made by his landlord's children on one such occasion. Thomson was naturally very loving with children, and children invariably returned his affection. Once, when he came back to his rooms in Huntley Street in the fulness of the change wrought by his excesses, the children went to the door to admit him, but closed it again and went to their father, telling him that 'Mr. Thomson's wicked brother was at the door'; and for some time they could not recognise 'our Mr. Thomson' in the figure of the dipsomaniac claiming his name."

During the years that followed the publication of *The City of Dreadful Night* Thomson's pessimistic creed remained unaltered—darker it could hardly have become than in that poem.

"Thomson's life," says Mr. Foote, "inclined him to a pessimistic view of nature, yet it must not be supposed that his philosophy was merely a matter of temperament. He was little of a cynic and less of a misanthrope, and you could not have inferred his philosophy from his ordinary conversation. He was naturally chary of talking about his ideas, even to his intimate friends, but when he broke through his customary reticence he spoke with the quiet gravity of intense conviction. I well remember the first time

¹ Mr. G. W. Foote's article in *Progress*, April, 1884.

² Mr. J. W. Barrs.

he ever conversed with me on the subject. It was a still summer's evening, and we sat together on the Thames Embankment at Chelsea. We smoked and chatted for a long time, and, growing more and more communicative under the influence of that tender sunset, we gradually sank into the depths. I found his pessimism as stubborn as adamant. It was not a mood, but a philosophy, the settled conviction of a keen spectator of the great drama of life. He admitted that he had no special reason to scorn his fellows; on the contrary, he had met many good friends, who had treated him 'better than he deserved.' But all that was beside the question. He denied the reality of progress in the world; there was revolution, but no forward movement; the balance of good and evil remained through all changes unchanged; and eventually the human race, with all its hopes and fears, its virtues and crimes, its triumphs and failures, would be swept into oblivion. In conclusion he quoted Shakespeare, a very rare thing with him; and he rose from his seat with Prospero's matchless words upon his lips."

We can well believe that these pessimistic convictions were in great part the result of some constitutional tendency to melancholia; though in studying the development of Thomson's unhappiness it is impossible to distinguish with any certainty between consequence and cause. "What," asks the writer of the passage just quoted, "could the fulfilment of one dream have availed against this curse? It haunted him like a fiend. It stayed for no invitation and consulted no convenience. It often left him free and happy in untoward circumstances, and beckoned him forth to bondage and misery as he sat at the feast or glowed with pleasure in the revel." Yet there were many hours when his mind recurred fondly to this "one dream," in the belief that its realization might have averted his subsequent misfortunes and errors. On three consecutive evenings in September, 1878, he was engaged in writing the autobiographical stanzas already alluded to, commencing

“I had a Love.” “Actually got writing verses again!” he notes in his diary; “but hard and harsh; more truth than poetry.” It was one of Thomson’s last injunctions that these verses should not be published, since he considered them to be merely a rough draft, though written with all the solemnity of one who was “like a man making his will at the gates of Death.” But while penning these lines he felt that the fresh creative impulse arisen within him might be the throes, not of death, but of “some new birth that gives the lethal illusion”—from which we see that even at this date the spark of hope was not wholly and utterly extinguished. And if his pessimism had failed to obliterate the memory of his own love, as little had it affected his intense sympathy and pity for all suffering humanity.

“He sympathized,” says Mr. Foote, “with all self-sacrifice, all lofty aspiration, and in particular with all suffering. This last emotion was often betrayed by a look rather than expressed in words. I vividly remember being with him once on a popular holiday at the Alexandra Palace. We were seated on the grass, watching the shifting groups of happy forms, and exchanging appreciative or satirical remarks. Suddenly I observed my companion’s gaze fixed on a youth who limped by with a pleasant smile on his face, but too obviously beyond hope of ever sharing in the full enjoyment of life. Thomson’s eye followed him until he passed out of sight, and the next moment our eyes met. I shall never forget the gentle sadness of that look, its beautiful sympathy that transcended speech and made all words poor.”

Meanwhile Thomson still continued to exhibit all his old gaiety and sprightliness in congenial society, and his powers of conversation are described by all who knew him as being singularly brilliant. Here is a graphic account of his appearance and manner at the period with which we are now concerned:—

His personal appearance told in his favour. He was of the

medium height, well built, and active. He possessed that striking characteristic sometimes found in mixed races—black hair and beard, and grey-blue eyes. The eyes were fine and wonderfully expressive. They were full of shifting light, soft grey in some moods, and deep blue in others. They contained depth within depth; and when he was moved by strong passion they widened and flashed with magnetic power. When not suffering from depression he was the life of the company. He was the most brilliant talker I ever met, and at home in all societies; a fine companion in a day's walk, and a shining figure at the festive table or in the social drawing-room. But you enjoyed his conversation most when you sat with him alone, taking occasional draughts of our national beverage, and constantly burning the divine weed.¹

Thomson remained to the last an inveterate smoker, a constant worshipper at the shrine of the tobacco-saint whose martyrdom and apotheosis he so humorously described in verse.² It was his habit, as he has told us in his "Stray Whiffs from an Old Smoker" (the first article he contributed to the *Tobacco Plant*), to smoke during the intervals of his literary work, but not when actually writing. "There are some," he says, "who can smoke with enjoyment and profit *when* writing: this I cannot do, when the writing requires reflection; for either the thought is distracted by the smoke, or the fire goes out in the interest of the thought. But how delightful and inspiring are a few whiffs in the pausing spaces, when the brain teems with new ideas gradually assuming form, and the palate yearns for the tobacco savour with a thirst as keen as the water-thirst of the desert."

But a higher charm in which Thomson found the purest consolation for the sorrow and trials of his life was the charm of music. In one of his "Jottings" in

¹ G. W. Foote, in *Progress*, April, 1882.

² "Pilgrimage to St. Nicotine of the Holy Herb."

the *National Reformer* in 1874 he had declared that the Monday Popular Concerts at St. James's Hall had for some years yielded him more pure delight than all the other public entertainments of London put together. "There Beethoven," he added, "is King of Kings and Lord of Lords; on his forehead broods the frown of thunder, but his smile is so ravishing and sweet that naught can compare with it save the tenderness in sternness of Dante the Divine; with Handel and Bach, Mozart and Haydn, Weber and Mendelssohn, throned high but less loftily around him; with Hummel and Dussek, Tartini and Scarlatti, Spohr, Chopin, Hiller, and their peers, as satraps of provinces; and lastly, at his very feet, that notable and but recently discovered pair of shoes, Schubert and Schumann—whereof the former is indeed lovely, but too large and lax; while the latter, with its stiff embroidery, is of such shape and size that I for one cannot yet wear it with pleasure." The same worship of Beethoven as the supreme musician is expressed in "He Heard Her Sing," a poem full of sustained melody which gives proof in every line of a passionate love of music.

Such was the course of Thomson's life during the period of his journalistic and critical work for the *Secularist*, *Liberal*, and *Tobacco Plant*. The "seven songless years" did not reach their full termination till the autumn of 1881; but the publication of the long-projected volumes, which took place before that date, is an event that demands the commencement of a new chapter.

CHAPTER VII

BETWEEN LEICESTER AND LONDON

IT was in 1880, after six years of disappointment and delay, that Thomson had the satisfaction of seeing the issue of his first volume of poems. The publication, thus at last secured, was due to the untiring zeal and energy of his friend Mr. Dobell, who, by a fortunate application to Messrs. Reeves and Turner, succeeded in making the arrangement that the book should be forthwith published at his and their joint expense. The following is the note in Thomson's diary for March 4: "Dobell having arranged with Mr. Reeves for publication of a small tentative volume (six full sheets=192 pages; exclusive of Title-pages, Dedication, and Contents), Reeves put it at once to press with Messrs. Ballantyne, Hanson, & Co., Edinbro'. On Thursday, 4th March, 1880, I got first proof of 16 pp. Volume to be entitled *The City of Dreadful Night, and other Poems.*"

To Mr. W. M. Rossetti.

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, W.C.,

March 6, 1880.

DEAR SIR,—I enclose a very brief Shelley article, not because it has any intrinsic worth (which it has not), but because you are interested in anything, however minute, relating to him. Also, as a bit of fun, another on the *Burns* of Principal Shairp, with which you may sympathize, as you have no doubt seen that extraordinary Professor of Poetry's lecture on Shelley in *Fraser*. What a shameless nudity he would have discerned in Adam and Eve in Paradise!

At length I have actually in the press a small tentative volume, "The City of Dreadful Night, and other Poems. By James Thomson (B. V.)." "Weddah" I reserve to lead off another, should the success of the present be sufficient to encourage another. I was bound to start with the "City," it being already better known than any other, and having been noticed in the *Academy* and *Spectator* (hostile) as well as by yourself, and also mentioned in the *Athenæum* and *Notes and Queries*. Before I sent you (and you alone) the "Weddah," none of my pieces had been sent to anyone: I allowed them to drift away in the obscure unpoetical world of the *National Reformer*, pretty careless as to their fate, for I did not then look forward to literature as a profession.

The *Tobacco Plant* has requested some articles on Walt Whitman, and I have already sent on the first. When the publication (which is sometimes long delayed) is far enough advanced I shall take the liberty of asking you for the latest news of him—his health and general condition. I will send you the articles when they appear.

Hoping that yourself and family are well,—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

To the Same.

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, W.C.,

Wednesday, April 7, 1880.

DEAR SIR,—Herewith a copy of my first little book, which you must please accept as having done more both in public and in private than anyone else to prepare the way for it. If it fails, the failure will have to be charged to its own demerits, not to the default of excellent introductions.

The first batch of copies came yesterday (from Edinburgh), and Reeves advertises in Saturday's papers, as the electoral storm will have pretty nearly blown itself out by the end of this week.

I was not aware that you get the *Tobacco Plant*; would have sent it to you myself had I thought you would care for it.

I had proof of first Whitman article, but it is not in this month's number, of which a copy reached me this morning. Thank you for the details as to health and condition; I will write again for information when the articles are near the end. You saw Ruskin's order for five sets of W.'s volumes, with the characteristic note?—
Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

Whitman wrote to Fraser of the *Plant* that he never smokes; but added that he likes to carry good cigars for his friends.

This volume, which, as may be seen from the above letter, was published early in April, gained on the whole a very encouraging reception, the most notable feature of which was an article headed "A New Poet," which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*.

That considerable hostility should be manifested in some quarters against a writer of such unpopular connections and unorthodox opinions was, of course, to be expected, and Thomson was not a man who would allow himself to be greatly troubled by such adverse criticism. "The reviewers"—so George Meredith had written to him in 1879—"are not likely to give you satisfaction. But read them, nevertheless, if they come in your way. The humour of a situation that allots the pulpit to them, and (for having presumed to make an appearance) the part of Devil to you, will not fail of consolation. My inclination is to believe that you will find free-thoughted men enough to support you." This forecast was fully verified by the result; for many of Thomson's critics recognized that his volume, in spite of its novelty of tone, was the work of a true poet. George Meredith himself wrote as follows:—

Box Hill, Dorking,

April 27, 1880.

DEAR SIR,—I will not delay any longer to write to you on the subject of your book, though I am not yet in a condition to do justice either to the critic or the poet, for, owing to the attack I suffered under last year, I have been pensioned off all work of any worth of late; and in writing to you about this admirable and priceless book of verse I have wished to be competent to express my feeling for your merit, and as much as possible the praise of such rarely equalled good work. My friends could tell you that I am a critic hard to please. They say that irony lurks in my eulogy. I am not in truth frequently satisfied by verse. Well, I have gone through your volume, and partly a second time, and I have not found the line I would propose to recast. I have found many pages

that no other English poet could have written. Nowhere is the verse feeble, nowhere is the expression insufficient; the majesty of the line has always its full colouring, and marches under a banner. And you accomplish this effect with the utmost sobriety, with absolute self-mastery. I have not time at present to speak of the *City of Melencolia*. There is a massive impressiveness in it that goes beyond Dürer, and takes it into upper regions where poetry is the sublimation of the mind of man, the voice of our highest. What might have been said *contra poet*, I am glad that you should have forestalled and answered in "Philosophy"—very wise writing. I am in love with the dear London lass who helped you to the "Idyll of Cockaigne." You give a zest and new attraction to Hampstead Heath.—Yours very faithfully,

GEORGE MEREDITH.

Nor was it only in a literary sense that the book was well received; for its financial success was sufficient to warrant the preparation of a second volume. "Arranging and preparing materials," writes Thomson in the diary on August 17, "for another vol. as requested by Dobell and Reeves. R., unasked, handed me cheque for £10 on a/c of first vol., which he reckons has already paid its expenses, & of whose profitable success both he and D. feel sure. Other publishers all firm that *no* vol. of verse, however good, can now pay its expenses, unless bearing one of three or four famous or popular names. Yet this vol. by an unknown writer, & burdened with the heavy dead weight of the sombre and atheistical & generally incomprehensible '*City of Dreadful Night*,' has paid its expenses." Thomson might well feel gratified at this prosperous result, after the mortification of so many disappointments and rebuffs; but it is sad to think what invaluable poetical work he may have been prevented from accomplishing owing to the long discouragement of this six years' delay. Already a more hopeful tone is observable in the diary for 1880, though he did not actually recommence the writing of poetry until the following year.

On June 29 he had his first meeting with Mr. George Meredith, who had invited him to spend a day with him at Dorking. "Last Tuesday," writes Thomson in a letter dated July 1, "I spent with Meredith: a real red-letter day in all respects. He is one of those personalities who need fear no comparisons with their best writings." Thomson's friendship and correspondence with Philip Marston were also fully maintained during this period; while through the kindness of such friends as Mr. W. M. Rossetti and Miss Mathilde Blind he had made many other literary acquaintances. Meantime his intimacy with the Wrights continued as close as ever, and it was at their house that he still spent most of his spare hours; he also walked frequently with Mr. Percy Holyoake, who, during the last few years of Thomson's life, was one of his most constant companions. "Splendid weather all week since Sunday" is the entry on August 14. "Several times to Regent's Park; never before found it so beautiful." In the autumn, however, we again find mention of ill-health, as in the following letter to Mr. Dobell:—

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, W.C.,
Saturday, October 9, 1880.

DEAR SIR,—Yours with *Westminster Review* notice to hand. I have been going through the notices, marking what shall be printed on fly-leaf. I am engaged to dine with Mr. Reeves to-morrow, but have written not to wait or alter his hours for me, because if it is as wet as to-day I shall scarcely venture. The bitter nor'-easter of Saturday night gave me a chill that kept me in all Sunday (this is why I didn't give you a call). Since then we have had but one decent day, and I have had hints of rheumatism. As an agreeable addition, I have now a slight cold in the left eye, the eye which kept me from reading, writing, and smoking, five long weeks some years ago. So I must be careful.

I hope to be at Museum all the mornings next week (you can always see me there by inquiring), but at home all the evenings

from tea-time, say 4.30 or 5—unless I cannot go to Mr. Reeves' to-morrow, and so call one evening in the Strand.—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

In October, 1880, appeared Thomson's second volume of verse, entitled *Vane's Story, Weddah and Om-el-Bonain, and other Poems*, which was also well received in literary circles. High praise was specially awarded to the narrative poem "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain," for which Mr. W. M. Rossetti had expressed his admiration eight years before—a judgment which was now endorsed by the opinions of Mr. Meredith and Mr. Swinburne, the latter of whom characterized the poem as marked by "forthright triumphant power." It is founded on an Arabic story given in the "De l'Amour" of De Stendhal; but Thomson's modest remark that the French original merits a better English "version" than his own is likely to be somewhat misleading, as it suggests the idea that he merely transcribed De Stendhal's narrative, whereas the latter is comprised within two pages of the "De l'Amour," and gives merely the briefest outline of the events recorded. The full development of the story, with the addition of many new and important touches, is therefore entirely the work of Thomson himself. "The 'Weddah and Om-el-Bonain,'" wrote Herman Melville to an English friend, "gave me more pleasure than anything of modern poetry that I have seen a long while. The fable and the verse are alike supremely beautiful. It is exactly the kind of gem which some of Keats's poems are."

To Mr. W. M. Rossetti.

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, W.C.,
Wednesday, December 15, 1880.

DEAR SIR,—I am much obliged to you for sending me Mr. Swinburne's remarks on the "Weddah." When you next write to

him will you please say that I count the value of such generous praise from such a poet simply inestimable? It immensely surpasses the most sanguine expectations I could have cherished had I known that he was going to give out any opinion at all on the poem.

I am also very much gratified by Mrs. Rossetti's sympathy with "Vane's Story," a piece too wild and capricious for most minds to follow. It is in fact a piece of pure phantasy, wherein I threw the reins on the neck of Pegasus and let him go whither he would. Hence I purposely made the title equivocal to the ear. Writing simply for my own pleasure, I enjoyed the writing.

My own intention, as you will readily believe, was to start the volume with "Weddah." But the publishers represented that many would be deterred by such an out-of-the-way title, that there would be all sorts of blundering and confusion in the orders, and that people in general are shy of asking for a book whose title they don't exactly know how to pronounce. As these appeared valid business arguments, I reluctantly yielded the first place to the fantastic "Vane," keeping, however, "Weddah" on the title-page.

I have been very unwell for a considerable time, and have only just now been able to resume and finish what was nearly completed before my illness, the preparation of a volume of prose requested by the publishers. It contains merely reprints, mostly from the *National Reformer*; but careful revision was required, and there was, and still is, some difficulty in the selection. However, I hope the first half of the matter will be in the hands of the printers by about Monday, and the other within a week after. But you need not mention the subject until we are further advanced.

Pray tender my respects to Mrs. Rossetti, and kiss for me the miraculous little lady who at four and a half could listen to several pages of the "City of Dreadful Night."—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

Thomson spent Christmas at the house of Mr. Wright, with whom, a few days later, he attended the funeral of George Eliot at Highgate Cemetery. It was agreed, early in 1881, that he should produce a critical study of George Eliot's writings, to be published by Messrs. Reeves and Turner; but the work proceeded very slowly, and was abandoned after two or three months in favour of a book on Heine—a project which also fell through.

These matters are referred to in the following extracts from the letters to Mr. Dobell:—

January 5, 1881.—With Mr. Wright and Percy I went to George Eliot's funeral. It was wretched tramping through the slush, and then standing in the rain for about threequarters of an hour, with nothing to see but dripping umbrellas. I was disappointed by there being any chapel service at all. At the grave old Dr. Sadler mumbled something, of which only two or three words could be distinguished by us only a couple of yards behind him.

January 10, 1881.—As you mean to call to-morrow with the *N. R.* volume for 1865, I will keep in all the morning for you. We can talk more to the purpose about your proposals as to Geo. Eliot and Heine in half an hour than we could write in half a month. I may say at once that I am willing to attempt both; the former, as you suggest, without my usual signature (unless such a hurried essay to catch the moment as it flies contents me better and much better than it is likely to do), and for a stated sum; the latter to be done more deliberately, with my name and on such terms as may best suit us both.

February 2, 1881.—"Geo. Eliot" is starting slowly; I shall doubtless get on better, as to speed, when I have fairly plunged into it. I have been interrupted by an Address in colloquial rhyme for the opening of the New Hall of the Leicester Secular Society Club and Institute, on Sunday, March 6. Mrs. Theodore Wright is to deliver it. The Committee is very pleased with it. There are good men in Leicester who have done liberal service, and I was most hospitably entertained there in the *Secularist* time, so I could not refuse their invitation to furnish an Address and be present on the occasion.

On Saturday, March 5, Thomson travelled with Mr. and Mrs. Wright to Leicester, in which neighbourhood he stayed till Wednesday of the following week, being present on the Sunday at the opening of the Secular Hall, and enjoying the hospitality of several Leicester friends.

Saturday, March 5.—Aftn. with Mr. and Mrs. T. R. W., to Leicester by 3.30 train. Mr. Michael Wright met us and took us home.

Sunday, March 6.—Three services. Heavy crush after. Over-

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flow service in Club Room, evg. Mrs. W., after quadruple recitn. Address (very nicely printed, and not sold until after her mornng. delivery), was repeatg. it and listeng. to speeches all night. I slept the sleep of the just.

Monday.—M. Wright drove us to Quorn, with Miss Holyoake. Factories—Floods—Remains Abbey—Woodhouse—Beacon Hill and Budden Wood. Evg. *soirée*.

Tuesday.—To Gimson's House and Factory. Dinner party at M. W.'s. Prosperity to New Hall in champagne. Mr. Barrs drove us to his place, round by Braunstone Wood (nightingales in summer) and ruins Kirby Castle. His sister. Nice place & grounds.

Wedy.—Train at 12.20 to London. Very pleasant visit. All of us *plus* Adeline and Percy *must* go in summer.

After his return to London from this short holiday he was occupied some time in correcting the proof-sheets of the volume of his prose essays, which was published in the spring of this year. The monotony, however, of his London life was soon again broken by another and longer visit to Leicester, where he was the guest of Mr. J. W. Barrs, whose acquaintance he had recently made, and who quickly became one of his trustiest and most intimate friends. "To Leicester," he writes on June 4, "with the Wrights and Adeline. Myself kept out of town seven weeks—one week at Quorndon with Phil Wright and brothers; three days in Leicester with Mr. Michael Wright; one day with Mr. Gimson; all the other five and a half weeks with the Barrs at Forest Edge, Kirby Muxloe, four miles out of Leicester. Unbounded hospitality; splendid holiday." There are several letters written during this visit, and dated from Leicester or Quorndon.

To Mr. Bertram Dobell.

C/o Mr. J. W. Barrs, Forest Edge, Kirby Muxloe,
near Leicester, Monday, June 21, 1881.

DEAR SIR,—When you called at my place last Tuesday, they

might have told you that I was not only out, but out of town. I came down to Leicester with the Wrights and Adeline the Saturday before Whit-Sunday. Percy was already down, and had been a fortnight, so I thought I would return soon, and did not bother about letters. But he found this place so pleasant that he prolonged his stay till last Friday. I had a note from him yesterday, enclosing yours and another, in which he tells me that he called in passing, as arranged, on Mr. Reeves in the Strand and told him of my whereabouts.

We are here four miles from Leicester, with railway station a few minutes off, in a pleasant villa, surrounded by shrubbery, lawn, meadow, and kitchen garden. Host and hostess (sister) are kindness itself, as are all other Leicester friends. We lead the most healthy of lives, save for strong temptations to over-feeding on excellent fare, and host's evil and powerfully contagious habit of sitting up till about 2 a.m. smoking and reading or chatting. I now leave him to his own wicked devices at midnight or as soon after as possible. Despite the showery weather we have had good drives and walks (country all green and well-wooded), jolly little picnics, and lawn-tennis *ad infinitum* (N.B.—Lawn-tennis even more than lady's fine pen responsible for the uncouthness of this scrawl). In brief, we have been so busy with enjoyment that this is the first note I have accomplished (or begun) in the seventeen days. I say *we*, because Adeline is still here. She leaves about end of week, and I shall then spend a week at Quorndon, where three of Mr. Wright's sons live managing the factories there. Thence I return here for two or three days, and perhaps shall have two or three with old Mr. Wright in Leicester before homing. You see I mean to have a good holiday before setting to work again.....

Hoping that yourself and family are all well, and with friendly regards to Mr. Reeves and his,—Yours truly,

JAMES THOMSON.

To Mr. Percy Holyoake.

Forest Edge,

Wednesday, July 6, 1881.

DEAR PERCY,—Thanks for forwarding the book. I have written this morning to say why it was not sent by myself. This morning is wet and gusty, after three splendid blazing days. Saturday we drove *via* Melton to Belvoir; Sunday and morning of Monday in grounds and Castle, Monday afternoon drove back. Cousin Dick

can tell you all about the shady alleys and arbours, and all the sunny terraces and slopes, from the pit of despair to declaration covert and fix-the-day secret bower. The subject is too young and tender for my rusty old pen.

Adeline and yourself will be glad to learn that the tennis-court is being beaten flat after the rain. With a good rolling it will be in first-rate condition. Certain terrible omens this morning make us think that the duel has been fought with happily fatal result to the man who hasn't written as he was bound to do if able. Before midnight, lightnings; afterwards, myself locked out of the house by a base conspiracy; after midnight, storms of rain; at 1.30 Jack wet through, ringing for admission after an hour in the spinney, not listening to the nightingale, but vainly waiting for the rain to cease; at breakfast, as already recorded, no letter for Dick; then the brass tray in the hall fell down, knocking over candlestick and candle (meaning Dick's hopes extinguished); then a heap of books fell down in breakfast-room without apparent cause (meaning that Dick is quite flooded). These last ominous incidents painfully remind me of my father's sword in our ancestral hall falling with a clash to the ground when any fearful catastrophe is about to happen to our ancient House.

J. T.

The visit to Belvoir Castle alluded to in this letter was afterwards celebrated by Thomson in the stanzas headed "At Belvoir," which were published among his posthumous poems. It will be noted that even at this late period of his life he still retained, under favourable conditions, his natural vivacity, high spirits, and brilliant conversational powers. "Whatever," says Mr. Barrs, "has been said or written of his charm of manner and conversation has not and cannot give a just representation of them. Few men have known so delightful a friend, and his hilarity could equal his sombreness when in congenial company. One could hardly say more to anyone who knows *The City of Dreadful Night*. The poem, 'At Belvoir,' recalls three days of incessant mirth and midsummer pleasure, Thomson being chief jester."

"Home at length from Forest Edge," writes Thomson

in his diary on July 23. "Seven weeks' holiday, most of it thoroughly enjoyable. Made fair progress in lawn-tennis. Man could not have kinder hosts." The following letters were written from his old lodgings in Huntley Street to his hostess at Forest Edge:—

To Miss Barrs.

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, W.C.,

Saturday, August 6, 1881.

DEAR MISS BARRS,—Thanks for h'chief, and more for note. You will think me, not unjustly, a bore for writing so soon; but I happen to be at home to-day with nothing particular to do, and rather unwell inside. I had to run about a good deal yesterday, and find that temperature was registered 84° in shade. My real Museum work recommences Monday.

I have been clearing off some arrears of correspondence. Finding when I called at Reeves' (my publisher) that George Meredith had been there lately and enquiring after me, I took occasion to write him a note on Thursday about a little matter I had before lazily thought of writing about. My conscience, which, as you have doubtless perceived already, is always my only law, forbade me conclude without putting in some lines to the following effect (words pretty exact):

"I found a man in Leicester who has all the works of yourself and Browning, and appreciates them. Need I say that I gave him the grasp of friendship? I preached you to the dearest little Lady [What impudence! you cry], and fairly fascinated her with Lucy and Mrs. Berry. Richard she heartily admired in the headlong imperiousness of his love, and you will be as grieved as I was to learn that she could not be brought to even the faintest moral reprobation of his unscrupulous fibbing (as in the cases of going to hear the popular preacher, and introducing to his uncle 'Miss Lætitia Thomson'); while she exulted heartlessly in the tremendous threshing of poor faithful Benson. Such are women, even the best! But neither she nor any other woman, and scarcely any man, will ever forgive you the cruel cruel ending."

Such is the judgment your own wicked judgment has brought upon you. As I have no reply this morning, Mr. M. may be off holiday-making (people have the queerest infatuation for holidays in these times: they ought to know that work is much pleasanter

as well as nobler than idleness—see my moral essays on “Indolence” and “A National Reformer in the Dog-days”); but even if he is now in vacation (*i.e.*, emptiness!) your punishment can be delayed only for a month or two. Therefore tremble in the meantime. Should he demand your name in order to publicly denounce you, of course I shall feel conscientiously bound to give it. And if he has not yet gone off, or having been off has returned, I may have to spend a day with him;—and then what a terrible tale I shall have to tell by word of mouth!

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, London, W.C.,

Thursday, September 15, 1881.

DEAR MISS BARRS,—Pray thank brother Jack for letter received this morning.....Jack kindly asks me to come down to pay a last tribute of respect to Mr. W.’s memory. I shall certainly do so if I can manage it, when I learn that the end is come. I would promise it absolutely, but I have a lot of work to do between now and Christmas; too much already, I fear, and I may have some more. Last night I received proof of Part I. of certain notes on the structure of Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound,” which I had sent to the *Athenæum* by way of an introduction, in the hope of getting some occasional employment on that paper. Ask Jack whether he read the “Reminiscences of George Borrow,” by Theodore Watts, in the last two numbers of the *Athenæum*. I found the second part very interesting, Borrow being an old special favourite of mine.

Tuesday I spent with George Meredith at Box Hill; a quiet, pleasant day, cloudy but rainless, with some sunshine and blue sky in the afternoon. We had a fine stroll over Mickleham Downs, really parklike, with noble yew-trees and many a mountain-ash (*rowan*, we Scots call it) glowing with thick clusters of red berries—but you have some at Forest Edge.....We had some good long chat, in which you may be sure that Forest Edge and its inmates, as well as certain Leicester people, figured. M. read me an unpublished poem of considerable length, which, so far as I can judge by a single hearing (not like reading at one’s leisure), is very fine, and ought to be understood even by that laziest and haziest of animals, the general reader. He says that having suspended work on a novel, poems began to spring up in his mind, and I am glad that he thinks of bringing out a new collection.

Jack tells me that he has all “Omar Kháyyám,” four hundred lines, by heart. Tell him from me that he is a prodigy, and

profoundly impresses me with a sense of my own ineptitude. For, long as I have read "Omar," I don't think I could repeat half-a-dozen verses without book.

Friendly regards to all friends there from all friends here. With best wishes, yours truly,
 JAMES THOMSON.

Thomson's prose volume, entitled *Essays and Phantasies*, which had been issued in April of this year, had not achieved the same measure of success as the preceding volumes of poetry, though here and there a critic recognized that his prose style bore the marks of genius no less surely than his verse. On the whole he had certainly no reason to be dissatisfied with the reception accorded to the three volumes he had published; but the necessity of obtaining some regular literary occupation was now becoming more urgent, as *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, which for over five years had been his pecuniary mainstay, was discontinued early in 1881, a loss which he felt very severely. Through Mr. Meredith's introduction he had an interview in October with Mr. John Morley, who was then editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Fortnightly Review*, and an excellent chance of journalistic and literary work seemed to be thus opened to him. But, unfortunately, by this time, when he was at length offered the sort of writing which he had for years been vainly desiring, he had passed the point when he could be depended on for the punctual and regular execution of any given piece of work, so that his hopes of forming a connection with a daily journal were of necessity doomed to disappointment. He was therefore compelled to turn his attention to magazine articles and other branches of literature, in which, being able to choose his own time and manner of writing, he met with more success. He was a good deal occupied this summer with two essays on Robert Browning's poems, one of

which was printed by the Browning Society, the other in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. "As my longish Heine work is just now interrupted by a bit of shortish Browning"—so he wrote in August to Forest Edge—"I have half a mind to punish you by the infliction of my presence for a fortnight. But then you are too careless, I fear, to have sets of Cardinal Newman, Carlyle, and Ruskin, which may be needed for comparison or contrast."

To Mrs. John Thomson.

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street,
October 18, 1881.

I enjoyed myself immensely at Forest Edge, near Leicester, and came back several years younger than I went down. They kept me there and in the neighbourhood seven weeks, and then I could only get away with extreme difficulty, and on a pledge to go again at Christmas; and they began urging me to come down before I was back three weeks, saying that I could get all the books I wanted down there, which was nearly true, and could work there as well as here, which was very far from true, the society and recreations being much too tempting. I have very rarely met with such liberal kindness even from old friends, and I have had three or four as good as a man could wish; and the Leicester people knew very little of me personally, welcoming me for the sake of my beautiful and pious books and articles.

These books have brought me a little money directly, which I scarcely hoped for, as two of them are in verse and all three of them are full of the most unpopular heresies. What I did hope for they now seem about bringing me; that is, enough reputation to secure work which was denied to the mere anonymous heterodox journalist. We shall soon see.

I enclose prospectus new Browning Society. They, or rather Furnivall, not only made me a member, but put me on the Committee, and set me down for a paper on January 27, without my consent or knowledge. True, they sent me a proof of the first issue, in which I might have cancelled my name for Committee and paper, but I was then at Leicester, and my people, taking it for an ordinary circular, did not think it worth sending on. So my protest when

I returned was too late, and behold me engaged. Miss Hickey, the Hon. Sec., told me on Sunday that they have now fifty-nine members; all doubtless highly respectable people barring myself, so I shall be in good company.

Behold full measure, pressed down, heaped up, and over-flowing, in magnanimous contrast to your stingy scribbles.

SAINT JAMES.

There is no entry in Thomson's diary later than October, 1881, the few remaining months of his life being spent chiefly at Leicester. After his return to London in July he had received more than one pressing invitation to pay a second visit to Forest Edge; but for some time he was detained by stress of work. In November, however, we find him again among his hospitable Leicester friends.

To Mr. Percy Holyoake.

Forest Edge, Leicester,

Wednesday, November 16, 1881.

DEAR PERCY,—Here begin the Chronicles of the Edge of the Forest.

First and foremost, the Princess not only graciously deigned to accept your chivalric portrait, which I tendered with all due obeisance on the morning of the holy Sabbath, but was pleased to declare that she would have considered your conduct quite unworthy of the noble names you inherit, in the vernacular decidedly mean, had you not sent it. Her Highness went so far as to announce that in so sad a case of dereliction of duty she would no longer have regarded you as De Rohan of the Silver Tankard, but as Holyhock of the Pewter Pot—a doom too dreadful to contemplate. So you see that, as usual, I was right.

As for my poor self, although I had another sleepless night on Saturday, I was already rather better on Sunday, and could eat and drink, and even smoke a little. The wicked T—— and B—— played lawn-tennis all the day, which was wonderfully bright and warm. We others walked a little and palavered immeasurably. We surveyed the grievous ravage wrought in the Royal demesnes by the late gale. Two trees blown down, a full pear-tree stripped, &c., &c.

On Monday, after a good night, consequent on the pious and jolly manner in which we had spent the Lord's Day, *I was first down*. This annoyed Her Royal Highness, who on the following morning directed Lizzie not to ring the bell; so I slept on in sweet security, and H.R.H. stole the victory she could not fairly win. But as she was not down until twenty minutes after the hour I should have been ready at had the bell been rung, the real triumph clearly rested with me. This morning I was first down again, despite the fact that Jack, that unholy Pilgrim of the Night, kept me up till half-past one in company with the naughty French *Nana*.

The poor Princess is suffering sorely, but not continuously, from a certain side tooth. When it is very bad she resolves to have it out; when it relents, she postpones the dreaded operation. The present decision is to undergo it shortly after to-morrow, whose evening brings a festive dance. How long this decision will hold who can tell? for it hath been written or sung by some veracious royalty or other, *souvent femme varie*.

Our farm now comprises two cows and a calf and four little pigs. The mother sow lieth dead, to our great sorrow. Perhaps my arrival was too much for her, for she took cold and inflammation the very day thereof.

Here endeth the first chapter of these Chronicles of small beer.—
Yours truly, JAMES THOMSON.

To Mr. Bertram Dobell.

Forest Edge, Kirby Muxloe, nr. Leicester,

Thursday, December 1, 1881.

DEAR SIR,—You see I am down here, drawn by urgent invitations, and glad of the change, as I was not feeling well in London, although of course the country here is very different in November and December from what it was in June and July. The home comfort itself.

You asked about the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Morley don't find an opening for me there at present, but he has accepted a piece of two hundred lines blank verse, "A Voice from the Nile," which I did down here and sent for the *Fortnightly*. He says that he likes it very much; can't promise positively for January number, but will try. The "Deliverer" duly appeared in November. I am doing now another which I shall offer him, and have planned yet another.

As the *Gentleman's* proof of the "Ring and the Book" came and was returned yesterday fortnight, I presume it is in this month. My host found that it had not arrived last evening.

Please remember me to Mr. Reeves, and tell him my little literary news, and say that I will write him soon.

As the *Athenæum* printed the fifth and last instalment of my Shelley notes on the 19th November, I am about writing to offer articles on any books in my scope.

My photos reached me (*i.e.*, six of them) on Wednesday, November 23rd, which made me forty-seven, a month after the sitting. Percy Holyoake has one for you, and one for Mr. Reeves. They are very poorly done though they took so long, but friends say a good likeness.—Yours truly,
JAMES THOMSON.

Early in 1882 Thomson was back at his lodgings in Huntley Street; but after three weeks of ill-health and wretchedness he was only too glad to return once more to Forest Edge. The following letter, a pencilled note, was evidently written after a period of great depression:—

To Mr. Percy Holyoake.

7 Huntley Street,

Monday, February 6, 1882.

DEAR PERCY,—Will you let me know whether the arrangement for Leicester holds? A really pious Sabbath has restored to me my mind, such as it is. Of course I am still weak and nervous in body, and if I am to go will be grateful for help in packing, &c. I write because my clothes are so fluffy that I don't think I shall have the courage to enter No. 12.

I will ask all the news when I see you.—Yours truly,

B. V.

If anything could have permanently restored Thomson's failing health and energies at this time, the kindness of his friends in Leicester and London would have done so. Mr. Barrs's house, like Mr. Wright's, was scarcely less than a home to him, and, in addition to the encouragement of pleasant society, every facility was given him at Forest Edge for the pursuance of his work. His prospects

were in some ways more reassuring than they had been for some years past, for he had lately obtained an entry to the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Cornhill*, and other magazines, and was also contributing occasionally to the *Athenæum* and the *Weekly Dispatch*. He still entertained the idea of writing a book on Heine, and was also meditating the possibility of issuing a third volume of poems. But his great need was that of some definite occupation on which he might reckon as a reliable source of income; and this, owing to his recent failure in journalism, he was unable to command. The following extracts from letters to Mr. Dobell give an insight into his literary plans and difficulties in this the last year of his life:—

Forest Edge, near Leicester, December 31, 1881.—I wrote to Mr. Reeves a few days before Christmas, telling him about all my doings, and I daresay he has told you. Since then the time has been chiefly spent in distractions with guests here, so that I have even yet about half a day's work on the fair copy Browning Notes to do. I still hold to the Heine booklet, and hope to set hard to work on it when I come back.

March 10, 1882.—Your March catalogue coming to hand this morning reminds me that I ought to let you and Mr. Reeves know how I am getting on, though I have very little to tell. You are no doubt aware that one small sketch, "The Sleeper," has appeared in this month's *Cornhill*. Leslie Stephen writes in very friendly fashion, which encourages me to send him with fair hope any other piece not over long, and of the proper tone, that may come into my head.

Kegan Paul wrote me a fortnight ago for permission to include one or two short bits in a volume of extracts from living English poets, "in which only those really worth the name, and whose writings appear to be of permanent value, will be incorporated." The choice of extracts naturally to be with his editors. Of course I gave willing permission, and I assumed that yourself and Reeves would agree.

The Rev. — has also written, wanting to include extracts in a collection of Social and Domestic Poems! Again assuming your

concurrence, I have given permission. He will name books, author, and publishers. There are some queer clergymen in these latter days.

Altogether, before and since Christmas, I have done about sixteen hundred lines down here, fit, I think, for inclusion in a volume, when opportunity offers. Just now I want to do, if I can, two or three pieces of about one hundred lines or fewer, as bait for *Cornhill* or other magazines. So much for my news.

March 28, 1882.—I have been taking poetical stock with result set forth on other leaf. There seems to be enough in hand, half old and half new, for another volume. I understood from Mr. Reeves that, with Forman's Keats, and half-a-dozen other works, his hands are quite full for this season. Being, as usual, since the *Tobacco Plant* was cut down and uprooted, in sad want of cash, I should be very glad to sell the whole copyright right out, but suppose it would be impossible to get anything for it. You may have noticed a little skit of mine, "Law v. Gospel," in this week's *Dispatch*. Yesterday I sent another on the Prince Leopold grant. If the *Dispatch* will take such things, it will help a little.

CHAPTER VIII

LAST DAYS

WE have seen that after the writing of *The City of Dreadful Night*, and its publication in 1874, there was a break of seven years in Thomson's poetical activity. Yet it was evident that his imaginative powers were only slumbering during this silent period, for we have a glimpse of the true poet in a beautiful lyric, "The Nightingale and the Rose," written in 1877. The music lying dormant within him was still destined to be called forth, as the bird's song is called forth by the fragrance of the flower.

"The Nightingale was not yet heard,
For the Rose was not yet blown."
His heart was quiet as a bird
Asleep in the night alone,
And never were its pulses stirred
To breathe or joy or moan :
The Nightingale was not yet heard,
For the Rose was not yet blown.

Towards the close of 1881 Thomson had resumed the writing of poetry. The cause of this revival of the poetic instinct must be sought in the success achieved by his two volumes of verse ; still more, perhaps, in the cheering influence of the society of his Leicester friends. To his friendship with host and hostess of Forest Edge is to be ascribed the fact that his later poems were mostly written in a tone of unwonted hopefulness, as if there had at last dawned on this weary dweller in the city of darkness a new and unexpected light. "When,

at the end of February," writes Mr. William Maccall,¹ "I received my last letter from him, he appeared to have escaped for a time from the dungeons and despairs of the Inquisition, and to be gladdened for an instant by the sun. He was living at some hospitable abode in Leicestershire, and seemed to be almost hopeful and happy, and half ashamed to be, for the first time since boyhood, happy and hopeful."

In several poems we find him actually reverting to the ideal and rapturous melodies of his youthful period, striking much the same note as that which he had struck more than twenty years before in the poems contributed to *Tait*. "He Heard her Sing," especially, with its sustained intensity of passion, its splendour of poetic wealth and subtle recurrence of certain words and cadences which form the keynote of the melody, must be placed in the first rank of Thomson's shorter poems. To those who love the man and his work, there is something very pathetic in this sudden and unlooked-for outburst of beautiful song, from one who was already nearing the end of a life in which he had found little but sorrow and disappointment. The stanzas, "At Belvoir," written in January, 1882, are specially remarkable as indicating traces of a reviving happiness in Thomson's mind only a few months before the date of his death.

A maiden like a budding rose,
 Unconscious of the golden
 And fragrant bliss of love that glows
 Deep in her heart infolden ;
 A Poet old in years and thought,
 Yet not too old for pleasance,
 Made young again and fancy-fraught
 By such a sweet friend's presence.

¹ "A Nirvana Trilogy; Three Essays on the Career of James Thomson."

Yes, now and then a quiet word
 Of seriousness dissembling
 In smiles would touch some hidden chord
 And set it all a-trembling :
 I trembled too, and felt it strange ;—
 Could I be in possession
 Of music richer in its range
 Than yet had found expression ?

Yet, looking at these lines with the knowledge of after events, we can see that the warmth he then felt within him was nothing more than that "Indian summer" which may at times be observed in the life of man as in the life of Nature—that "last brief resurrection of summer," as a great writer has called it, "a resurrection that has no root in the past, nor steady hold upon the future, like the lambent and fitful gleams from an expiring lamp." That Thomson himself in his heart felt his new hopes to be as illusory as those which had preceded might be gathered from those terribly pessimistic poems, "Insomnia" and "The Poet to his Muse," which were composed about this same time. He also left a more explicit record of his own feelings in the stanzas "To H. A. B." dated on his forty-seventh birthday.

When one is forty years and seven,
 Is seven and forty sad years old,
 He looks not onward for his heaven,
 The future is too blank and cold,
 Its pale flowers smell of graveyard mould ;
 He looks back to his life's past ;
 If age is silver, youth is gold ;—
 Could youth but last, could youth but last !

Too late was, in fact, the fatal word which was to be written against the brighter prospects and happier circumstances that seemed to be arising on Thomson's path. And the end which he himself felt to be at

hand was foreboded by his more intimate friends and acquaintances, who could read in his changed appearance the story of broken health and failing vitality.

"He looked," writes one who knew him at this time,¹ "like a veteran scarred in the fierce affrays of life's war and worn by the strain of its forced marches. His close-knit form, short and sturdy, might have endured any amount of mere roughings, if its owner had thought it worth a care. It is rare to find so squarely massive a head, combining mathematical power with high imagination in so marked a degree. Hence the grim logic of fact that gives such weird force to all his poetry. You could see the shadow that 'tremendous fate' had cast over that naturally buoyant nature. It had eaten great furrows into his broad brow, and cut tear-tracks downwards from his wistful eyes, so plaintive and brimful of unspeakable tenderness as they opened wide, when in serious talk.....I am far from saying that Thomson did not find any happiness in life. His wit and broad fun vied with his varied information and gift of happy talk in making him a prince of good fellows; and he least of all would be suspected of harbouring the worm in his jovial heart. But these were the glints of sunshine that made life tolerable; the ever-smouldering fire of unassuageable grief and inextinguishable despair burned the core out of that great heart when the curtain of night hid the play-acting scenes of the day."

"Insomnia" is in some respects the very darkest and most terrible of all Thomson's writings. Its expression of personal suffering is more poignant and direct than anything in *The City of Dreadful Night*; nor has it any of the comfort, if comfort it can be called, which is there derived from a calm and passionless system of philosophical resignation. I have already remarked how important a part sleeplessness played in Thomson's sufferings, and how much of his despondency and morbid prostration may be traced to that origin; in this poem the curse of insomnia is depicted with a ghastly and startling vividness which finds no counterpart in English

¹ G. G. Flaws in *Secular Review*, July 1, 1882.

literature, even in the work of the opium-eating brotherhood of De Quincey, Coleridge, and Poe.

I paced the silent and deserted streets
 In cold dark shade and chillier moonlight grey ;
 Pondering a dolorous series of defeats
 And black disasters from life's opening day,
 Invested with the shadow of a doom
 That filled the Spring and Summer with a gloom
 Most wintry bleak and drear ;
 Gloom from within as from a sulphurous censer
 Making the glooms without for ever denser,
 To blight the buds and flowers and fruitage of my year.

How far this tragedy of a lifetime, which was now drawing to an end, was due to innate constitutional tendencies, and how far to the stress of external circumstances which might conceivably have been averted, is a question which scarcely admits of any confident conclusion, and which each reader of Thomson's life and writings will settle for himself. The following is the opinion of Mr. George Meredith, who was probably better qualified than any other man to understand the subtle complexities of such a character as Thomson's:—

“I had full admiration of his nature and his powers. Few men have been endowed with so brave a heart. He did me the honour to visit me twice, when I was unaware of the extent of the tragic affliction overclouding him, but could see that he was badly weighted. I have now the conviction that the taking away of poverty from his burdens would in all likelihood have saved him to enrich our literature; for his verse was a pure well. He had, almost past example in my experience, the thrill of the worship of moral valiancy as well as of sensuous beauty; his narrative poem ‘Weddah and Om-el-Bonain’ stands to witness what great things he would have done in the exhibition of nobility at war with evil conditions.

“He probably had, as most of us have had, his heavy suffering on the soft side. But he inherited the tendency to the thing which slew him. And it is my opinion that, in consideration of his high

and singularly elective mind, he might have worked clear of it to throw it off, if circumstances had been smoother and brighter about him. For thus he would have been saved from drudgery, have had time to labour at conceptions that needed time for the maturing and definition even before the evolvment of them. He would have had what was also much needed in his case, a more spacious home, a more companioned life, more than merely visiting friends, good and true to him though they were. A domestic centre of any gracious kind would have sheathed his over-active, sensational imaginativeness, to give it rest, and enable him to feel the delight of drawing it forth bright and keen of edge."

The story of the close of Thomson's life is that of a man who had lost all desire to live. "Let it not be misread as a harshness," says one who did his best to help him at this time, "or as a lightly tripped-off phrase, when I give out that, in all verity to me, his later life was a slow suicide, perceived and acquiesced in deliberately by himself."¹ This suicidal recklessness was due to the fact that in the spring of 1882 his visit to Leicester had ended in a fit of intemperance, and he had returned to London in bitter remorse and despondency. It was the death-blow to his last chance of happiness. The following pathetic letter tells its own tale:—

To Mr. J. W. Barrs.

7 Huntley Street, Gower Street, W.C.,

Friday, April 22, 1882.

DEAR MR. BARRS,—I scarcely know how to write to you after my atrocious and disgusting return for the wonderful hospitality and kindness of yourself and Miss Barrs. I can only say that I was mad. In one fit of frenzy I have not only lost more than I yet know, and half murdered myself (were it not for my debts I sincerely wish it had been wholly), but justly alienated my best and firmest friends, old and new, both in London and Leicester.

As, unfortunately for myself at least, I am left alive, it only remains for me to endeavour my utmost by hard and persistent

¹ G. Gordon Flaws, *Secular Review*, July 1, 1882.

struggling to repay my mere money debts, for my debts of kindness can never be repaid. If I fail, as very probably I shall fail, the failure will but irresistibly prove what I have long thoroughly believed, that for myself and others I am much better dead than alive.

As apologies would be worse than useless, I will conclude by simply expressing my deep gratitude for your astonishing undeserved goodness to myself, and my best wishes for the welfare of you and yours.—In all sincerity,

JAMES THOMSON.

On his return to London there ensued two terrible months of desperation and homelessness. The patience of his long-suffering landlord was now exhausted, and the door of his lodging was closed to him—though with a strange and dogged persistence he several times forced an entry into the house, to be again thrust forth into the streets. A plan was on foot among his friends to place him in a “retreat” at Liverpool; but they had of course no legal control over his movements, and were often for days together ignorant of his whereabouts; nor does it seem probable that at this period he could by any means have been reclaimed. The darkness of his record is broken only by a few lurid incidents, such as that described by Mr. W. Stewart Ross in the *Agnostic Review*.¹

“I shall never forget the last time I met Thomson. I met him at the office of this journal accompanied by one of his last remaining friends (G. Gordon Flaws, ‘Gegeëf’). This was in May, 1882, after his return from Leicester. The hand of death was on the poet’s shoulder, not solemn and stately death—only the mournful abjectness of dissolution, met by a calm and suffering rather than a fierce and defiant despair.....The glance of a moment sufficed to show Gegeëf and myself that our companion was in the sodden state which succeeds a prolonged debauch.....Gegeëf advanced a small loan, and in spite of his remonstrances the bar at the Holborn Restaurant was the only mart in the world where Thomson would

¹ April 6, 1880.

consent to have the little sum disbursed.....He stands before me now as distinctly as he did nearly seven years ago among the well-dressed people at that glittering bar—he, the abject, the shabby, the waif.....His figure, which had always been diminutive, had lost all dignity of carriage, all gracefulness of gait. When the miserable hat was raised from the ruined but still noble head, it revealed the thinning away of the ragged and unkempt hair, deeply threaded with grey. His raiment had the worn, soiled, and deeply-creased aspect that suggested that, for some time back, it had been worn day and night, and had been brought in contact with brick walls and straw pallets, and even the mud of the street. The day, for May, was a raw and cold one, with a drizzle which ever and anon merged into a downpour of rain; and the feet of the author of the 'City of Dreadful Night' were protected from the slushy streets only by a pair of thin old carpet-slippers, so worn and defective that, in one part, they displayed his bare skin."

To dwell further on the sordid details of this crowning tragedy would be worse than useless. It suffices to say that, owing to his landlord's just complaints of the annoyance caused him, Thomson was on several occasions in the hands of the police, and once (May 12) was sentenced, under an assumed name, to fourteen days' imprisonment, which he spent in hospital. It was the opinion of the magistrate, who, when informed of the circumstances of the case, showed great consideration, that the effect of this sharp check might be beneficial, and such, too, was the hope of Thomson's friends; but this hope, like the others, was doomed to prove illusory.

It was at Philip Marston's rooms in the Euston Road, at the very time when Percy Holyoake was searching for Thomson in vain, that the final catastrophe took place. A vivid and moving account of the scene has been written by Mr. Herbert Clarke¹:—

¹ I have to thank Mr. Clarke for kindly allowing me to make use of this record, now printed for the first time (1898)

"On the 1st of June, 1882, I went by appointment to meet James Thomson, at Philip Marston's rooms in Euston Road. When I arrived, between seven and eight o'clock in the evening, I found three persons there—Marston himself, Mr. William Sharp, and a third whom I did not know; a man with a careworn, tragic face, a remarkably furrowed forehead, and a leaden complexion; a ghastly figure. He was half-lying, half-sitting on the sofa, and it was clear that something was very wrong; in fact, I had not been long in the room before he sank back on the sofa, with some incoherent muttering, and relapsed into total unconsciousness."

"It was explained to me that Thomson, for this was the author of the 'City of Dreadful Night,' had arrived at Marston's rooms early in the day, and had spent the morning with his host. They had read poetry, they had talked, doubtless there had been whiskey. Towards afternoon Thomson had asked if he might lie on Marston's bed, and there he had spent the rest of the day until shortly before my arrival, when he had made his appearance in the lamentable state I have described. I was taken into the bedroom, and found some marks of blood on the sheets.

"What was to be done? Thomson could not be left on Marston's sofa; so much was clear. Marston was blind and helpless; he occupied the second floor of the house; his father had the first floor. But Dr. Marston was quite useless in an emergency. His ceremonious, old-world courtesy never forsook him, but his faculties did; he was every whit as helpless as his son. Somebody asked where Thomson lived, and somebody else, Philip Marston I think, was able to produce an address that had once been his. Here was a gleam of hope. We left Mr. Sharp to watch the sick man, and Philip and I went off to find his lodgings. The usual things happened; we were misdirected by others; we lost the way for ourselves; we got the right number in the wrong street, and the wrong number in the right one, but we found the place at last.

"A shaggy-browed man in his shirt-sleeves answered my ring, holding a candle above his head and scowling at us from the dark doorway.

"'Live here? Mr. Thomson? No, he don't,' he snapped rudely.

"'We were told he used to lodge here,' I ventured to suggest.

"'He tried to burn this here house down one night,' retorted the man, more rudely than before, 'and he don't come here again if I know it.'

“ ‘He’s been taken very ill,’ I urged. ‘He can do no harm now. Won’t you take him in if we bring him?’

“The man emphasised his refusal with an oath, and slammed the door.

“ ‘That’s cheerful,’ remarked Marston, after a short pause of astonishment. ‘Now what are we to do?’ A question to which I had no answer ready.

“However, we could not go back exactly as we had started; so we called upon a doctor, and took him with us to Marston’s rooms, where nothing had happened in our absence.

“Thomson could not be roused, and the doctor, after examining the pupils of his eyes and feeling his pulse, recommended his immediate removal to a hospital. Mr. Sharp and I carried him downstairs, put him in a cab, and took him to University College.

“The house-surgeon was sewing up a yawning gash in a man’s head, and could not attend to him; so he lay huddled upon a bench until the house-physician could be fetched. We had to wait some time. The wounded man chattered cheerfully; his companion, who had inflicted the gash, endeavoured to persuade him that it was done out of pure friendship; the inevitable woman who was at the bottom of the quarrel agreed with both; the surgeon went on with his work, paying little attention to either.

“At last the house-physician arrived, and Thomson was taken away to the wards, without recovering consciousness, and I never saw him again.

“Next day Philip Marston wrote to me as follows: ‘A thousand thanks for all you did last night. Yesterday has rather shaken me. Sharp and I called upon Thomson to-day, and found him collected, but very ill. He asked for a shilling in case he should want to write any letters. What an awful revelation of things, is it not? I don’t think he could have had sixpence in the world. We tried, but all in vain, to obtain any information about his recent residences.’

“Months afterwards I was told by one of Thomson’s best friends that he had spent hours in searching for the poet on that very evening of the 1st of June, 1882.”

From the moment of Thomson’s admission to the hospital the physicians gave no hope of saving his life; but the next day, when Mr. Sharp, accompanied by Philip Marston, visited him in the ward, he was not

only conscious, but expectant of a speedy recovery. At the moment when his friends were going away he sat up in his bed, with a look of great animation on his features, and expressed his fixed resolve to leave the hospital on the following Monday, even if he left it in his coffin—a conviction which was strangely verified by the result. He died on the evening of Saturday, June 3, 1882, from utter exhaustion consequent on internal bleeding, and his body was removed from the hospital on the day he had mentioned. The similarity of scene and circumstance between Thomson's death and that of Edgar Poe has not escaped observation.

He was buried on June 8 at Highgate Cemetery, in the very grave where, eight years before, his friend Austin Holyoake had been laid to rest; and with him were buried a small purse and locket containing a tress of yellow hair—his one memento of his lost love. Among those present at the funeral were his brother Mr. John Thomson, Mr. T. R. Wright, Mr. Percy Holyoake, Mr. Bertram Dobell, Mr. J. W. Barrs and Miss Barrs, Philip Marston, and other friends. An adaptation of the Secularist Burial Service written by Austin Holyoake was read by Mr. Wright, who afterwards paid a just and faithful tribute to Thomson's memory.

Thus ended the life of one who, whatever his failings, impressed all those who knew him intimately, and many who only knew him in part, as not only the most brilliantly gifted, but the noblest, gentlest, most lovable man with whom they had ever come in contact. The charm of his manner and conversation is attested by the united record of many independent witnesses—there was a grace, a glamour, an attractiveness about his personality which has been possessed in equal measure by few poets

of his century. We see in him the high, heroic spirit, filled with intense natural love of all physical and moral beauty, but thwarted and hampered by the development of inherited infirmities and the weight of external misfortunes, until he is involved in a Nessus-robe of doubt and failure and despair; yet all the while by sheer strength and courage of intellect looking his destiny in the face, and maintaining to the last his gentleness towards others and his constancy to himself.

CHAPTER IX

PESSIMIST AND POET

THOMSON had been brought up, as we have seen, in the strictest Presbyterian doctrines, and in the opening period of his authorship he had not altogether lost belief in the tenets of Christianity, though his keen and trenchant intellect, sharpened by early misfortunes, had cut him adrift from much to which he had previously clung. Two distinct phases of religious opinion are observable in his writings. We see him, at the outset of his literary career, in that painful state of hesitation and doubt through which so many powerful thinkers have had to pass, with labour and misgiving of mind, before emerging into conviction. In some lines written in 1855, "suggested by Matthew Arnold's stanzas from the 'Grande Chartreuse,'" he gives expression to the regret which he still felt at the parting, inevitable though he saw it to be, from the central doctrine of Christianity; while in the "Doom of a City," written two years later, and even in the gloomy "Mater Tenebrarum" of 1859, there are still signs of a belief, or half-belief, in the immortality of the soul and the benevolence of an overruling deity. Apparently connected with this change of religious faith was that period of hesitation between alternate moods of self-reproach and self-confidence of which, and of his final deliverance, he has left a record in "Vane's Story":—

I half remember, years ago,
 Fits of despair that maddened woe,
 Frantic remorse, intense self-scorn,
 And yearnings harder to be borne
 Of utter loneliness forlorn ;
 What passionate secret prayers I prayed !
 What futile firm resolves I made !
 As well a thorn might pray to be
 Transformed into an olive-tree.

My penitence was honest guile ;
 My inmost being all the while
 Was laughing in a patient mood
 At this externe solicitude,
 Was waiting laughing till once more
 I should be sane as heretofore.

The second phase, which, roughly speaking, covers the period of his life in London—that is, the greater and more important part of his career—was one of mature conviction. He became a declared atheist, disbelieving the doctrine of personal immortality, and looking to death as the final comfort and recompense for the misery of life.

This little life is all we must endure,
 The grave's most holy peace is ever sure,
 We fall asleep and never wake again ;
 Nothing is of us but the mouldering flesh,
 Whose elements dissolve and merge afresh
 In earth, air, water, plants, and other men.

In the introductory note to his "Lady of Sorrow" (1864) he thus alludes to himself under the title of "my friend Vane": "He was at that time wont to declare that he believed in the soul's immortality as a materialist believes in the immortality of matter: he believed that the universal soul subsists for ever, just as a materialist believes that universal matter subsists for ever, without increase or decrease, growth or decay: he

no more believed in the immortality of any particular soul than the materialist believes in the immortality of any particular body. The one substance is eternal, the various forms are ever varying."

He had also adopted the doctrine of Necessity:—

I find no hint throughout the Universe
Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse ;
I find alone Necessity Supreme.

So he wrote in a notable section of *The City of Dreadful Night*. He admitted, it is true, that this theory is not, and cannot be, consistently carried out in the ordinary conduct of life, since he saw that necessitarians were no better able than other people to avoid expressions implying moral praise or blame. Yet he was so far true to his belief as to accept the conclusion that it is useless and irrational to confide in any schemes for the improvement of the human race; and he laughs at the inconsistency of those who, after premising that man is the creature of circumstances, proceed to lay down the corollary that circumstances may in their turn be improved by man. He himself was a disbeliever in all human progress, and, ardent admirer though he was of Shelley's character and writings, he could not subscribe to the cardinal doctrine of his faith—the perfectibility of man—since it seemed to him that, if there is any advance in intellectual well-being, it is an advance in a circle, with the result that after centuries of earnest labour, and seemingly forward movement, the latest condition of the civilized race is much the same as the earliest.

Take, for example, the following passage from his satirical "Proposals for the Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery":—

This great river of human Time, which comes flowing down thick with filth and blood from the immemorial past, surely cannot be

thoroughly cleansed by any purifying process applied to it here in the present ; for the pollution, if not at its very source (supposing it has a source) or deriving from unimaginable remotenesses of eternity indefinitely beyond its source, at any rate interfused with it countless ages back, and is perennial as the river itself. This immense poison-tree of Life, with its leaves of illusion, blossoms of delirium, apples of destruction, surely cannot be made wholesome and sweet by anything we may do to the branchlets and twigs on which, poor insects, we find ourselves crawling, or to the leaves and fruit on which we must fain feed ; for the venom is drawn up in the sap by the tap-roots plunged in abysmal depths of the past. This toppling and sinking house wherein we dwell cannot be firmly re-established, save by re-establishing from its lowest foundation upwards. In fine, *to thoroughly reform the present and the future we must thoroughly reform the past.*

It is evident that one who held this belief could not but be convinced at heart of the futility of all social reform ; and, though by natural sympathy and predilection he was led to range himself among the reformers, he always looked with suspicion and dislike on anything approaching to propagandism. "Were I required," he says, "to draw a practical moral, I should say that all proselytism is useless and absurd. Every human being belongs naturally, organically, unalterably, to a certain species or society ; and by no amount of repeating strange formulas, ejaculations, or syllogisms, can he really apostatize from himself so as to become a genuine member of a society to which these are not strange but natural." In a similar vein he defines *sin* as being the violation of one's own nature, the striving after some forbidden object, not through natural desire, but through mere vanity or fashion. "The iniquity which a man draws and tugs painfully to him, that is the abomination ; not the iniquity which itself draws him." The notion of *repentance* finds no place in his doctrine, which may be summed up in three lines of "Vane's Story":—

Oh what can Saadi have to do
With penitence? And what can you?
Are Shiraz roses wreathed with rue?

In politics Thomson's sympathies were entirely with the popular cause, his keen pity for the downtrodden victims of social injustice being attested by several indignant passages, especially in the "Doom of a City," written in 1857, and the prose essay "In our Forest of the Past," which is dated twenty years later. In the satirical essay on "Bumbleism" it is pointed out that, though there is more liberty in England than on the Continent in matters affecting political discussion and private life, the reverse is true as regards questions of morals and sociology, for here the power of Bumble's purse rules our so-called free press and free institutions with a hand heavier than that of any Continental despot. Thomson saw clearly that true democracy must be rid of other things besides political inequalities; since religious intolerance, backed up by plutocratic influence, is absolutely fatal to the existence of a free community. "Imperialism imposes fines, imprisonment, banishment; Bumble simply imposes death by starvation."

Equally firm was his sympathy with all struggling nationalities, such as the Italy and Poland of that day. He could also be just (a rarer gift) to those national aspirations or prejudices which ran counter to the policy which he personally approved; we find him, for instance, speaking favourably of the Basques, who had supported the Carlist cause in 1873. "Such was the loyalty of these people; far more noble than ours; for they were giving freely of their substance and their lives, whereas we give chiefly snobbish cringing and insincere adulation, and our rich give the money of the nation, in large part wrung from the poor." It hardly needs to be said that

he heartily despised and detested the bellicose spirit of certain modern statesmanship. He graphically describes the Crimean war as "a mere selfish haggle for the adjustment of the balance of power, badly begun and meanly finished," and refers to the more recent exploits of Jingoism as "brutally iniquitous battue-wars against tribes of ill-armed savages."

Yet, unswerving as was his devotion to the cause of the people, and strong as was his indignation against every form of privilege and self-aggrandizement, he was devoid, in politics as in other matters, of hopefulness and confidence. For, in addition to his general disbelief in the possibility of progress, he had little or no trust in political combinations as a means of attaining an end; so uncompromising was his individualism that he considered a society to be "a maimed, mutilated, semi-vital compromise," and a meeting to be "always less wise than a man." In the prose piece entitled "The Sayings of Sigvat" he imagines an interlocutor asking him why, if he has no faith in the improvability of man by man, he himself works hard in that very direction. The answer given is that he is simply following the dictates of his own nature; "one works, and cannot but work, as his being ordains." "Though no word of mine," he says, "will ever convert anyone from being himself into being another me, my word may bring cheer and comfort and self-knowledge to others who are more or less like myself, and who may have thought themselves peculiar and outcast."

Yes, here and there some weary wanderer
In that same city of tremendous night
Will understand the speech, and feel a stir
Of fellowship in all-disastrous fight;
"I suffer mute and lonely, yet another

Uplifts his voice to let me know a brother
Travels the same wild paths though out of sight."

His views on art and literature were pervaded by the same tinge of melancholy and despondence. His strong natural yearning for action in preference to thought led him to regard art as a mere substitute and makeshift for the fuller and truer life of reality that is so often denied us; art was to him the outcome of want rather than fruition, of disappointment rather than success. Shakespeare is instanced by him as the supreme and typical example of the wise man who will practise art only so long as he is compelled to do so by circumstances, and will return to actual life from the mere study of life on the earliest opportunity; since no man "of opulent vitality" will deliberately and finally commit himself to the "imprisonment with hard labour of a great work." This pessimistic view of literature is further illustrated by another passage, much in the style and sentiment of Poe, in which Thomson speaks of *despair* as a valuable auxiliary of art, admitting that it is a sign of "interior death and mouldering," but adding that this "mouldering has manured some of the fairest flowers of Art and Literature." His whole position on this subject is briefly summed up in some introductory remarks prefixed to "A Lady of Sorrow." "The night-side of nature," he says, "has been the theme of literature more often than the day-side, simply because literature, as a rule, is the refuge of the miserable; I mean genuine, thoughtful, earnest literature; literature as an end in and for itself, not merely as a weapon to fight with, a ware to sell, a luxury to enjoy. The happy seldom write for writing's sake; they are fully employed in living."

Thomson's pessimism is the expression of a dominant mood, amounting to a personal conviction—a mood with

which all thinking men must be acquainted at times, but which is felt by some far more often and more strongly than by others.¹ "I wish," he says, in his essay on Sympathy, "to draw into clear light the facts that, in two moods of two several hours not a day asunder, a man's relations to the most serious problems of life may be, and often are, essentially opposite; that the one may burn with hope and faith, and the other lour black with doubt and despair; and that there is no possibility of conciliating (philosophically) this antagonism, since the two are mutually unintelligible." In the same essay he asserts that there are cases, though not frequent ones, in which "a dark mood has dominated a whole life." But though the dark mood was the one with which he was specially familiar, and though in *The City of Dreadful Night* and similar writings he dilated and insisted on this mood to the exclusion of the other, yet he was himself well aware that it was a half-truth and not the whole truth to which he was then giving expression. "Is it true," he asks of his own pessimistic doctrine in the introduction to "A Lady of Sorrow"—"is it true in relation to the world and general life? I think true, but not the whole truth. There is truth of winter and black night, there is truth of summer and dazzling noon-day. On the one side of the great medal are stamped the glory and triumph of life, on the other side are stamped the glory and triumph of death; but which is the obverse and which the reverse none of us surely knows. It is certain that both are inseparably united in every coin doled out to us from the universal mintage."

¹ "As to pessimism," wrote Herman Melville, with reference to Thomson's poetry, "although neither pessimist nor optimist myself, nevertheless I relish it in the verse, if for nothing else than as a counterpoise to the exorbitant hopefulness, juvenile and shallow, that makes such a muster in these days."

The sense of "sanctitude and piety," finding action in services of gentleness and tenderness to suffering fellow-beings, is a most important and characteristic feature of Thomson's pessimism, relieving it altogether from any suspicion of misanthropic churlishness, and allying it not only with the most valuable part of Schopenhauer's philosophy, in which compassion is made the principle of moral action, but also with the tender and benevolent sadness of Buddha. In an essay on Schopenhauer he expresses a strong dislike for the tinge of sullenness and vanity that disturbed the philosophic composure of the great German pessimist, while he refers to Buddhism as "the venerable, the august, the benign, so tender, so mystic, so profound, so solemnly supernal." This frank human sympathy is the one ray of light that relieves the deepening gloom of Thomson's despondency. If we regard Leopardi as the source of his most pessimistic inspiration, so in like manner must we attribute to Shelley's example much of the gentleness and humanity that pervade even his most sombre productions; and we note that while *The City of Dreadful Night* was appropriately dedicated to Leopardi, the "younger brother of Dante," *Vane's Story*, which is conceived in a somewhat more tender spirit, was dedicated to Shelley, the "poet of poets and purest of men." Next to these two literary sponsors, Heine and Novalis must not be overlooked as having strongly affected his imagination and line of thought; Novalis perhaps in a minor degree, and more by a sense of spiritual relationship and the similarity between their lives than by direct force of teaching, whereas Heine's influence is very noticeable in all his mature thoughts and writings.

"In all moods," he wrote of Heine, in words that are to a singular

degree applicable also to himself, "tender, imaginative, fantastic, humorous, ironical, cynical; in anguish and horror, in weariness and revulsion, longing backward to enjoyment, and longing forward to painless rest; through the doleful days, and the dreadful immeasurable sleepless nights, this intense and luminous spirit was enchained and constrained to look down into the vast black void which undermines our seemingly solid existence.....And the power of the spell on him, as the power of his spell on us, is increased by the fact that he, thus in Death-in-Life brooding on Death and Life, was no ascetic spiritualist, no self-torturing eremite or hypochondriac monk, but by nature a joyous heathen of richest blood, a Greek, a Persian, as he often proudly proclaimed, a lusty lover of this world and life, an enthusiastic apostle of the rehabilitation of the flesh."

But if Thomson owed much to Leopardi and Shelley and Heine—a debt which he himself openly and gratefully avowed—he was none the less perfectly independent and original in his methods of thought and in the conclusions at which he arrived. Both by nature and conviction he was far too jealous an upholder of the freedom of private judgment to be in danger of blindly following any intellectual lead; indeed, he was more likely, if he erred at all, to err in the opposite direction, "obstinately individual" being the description applied to him by one of his friends. Nor does he betray the least tendency to preach his pessimistic gospel in an over-positive or dogmatic spirit, exhibiting it, as I have already said, simply as that side of the great medal of life which most men would gladly overlook, but which had presented itself to him as the more important and significant one. The insolubility of the mystery of existence is the chief point in Thomson's pessimistic creed, from which he deduces the entire worthlessness of all metaphysical systems, and mercilessly satirizes those theologians and philosophers who expatiate on the origin of the universe. He compares such metaphysicians to a colony of mice

in a great cathedral getting "a poor livelihood out of communion-crumbs and taper-droppings," and speculating confidently on "the meaning of the altar, the significance of the ritual, the clashing of the bells, the ringing of the chants, and the thunderous trepidations of the organ."

Some of Thomson's critics have raised the question, in rather a casuistical spirit, why, if he found life so bitter and looked forward so longingly to death, he did not himself cut the knot of his perplexity by having recourse to suicide, which he several times mentions with approbation as a means of escape from the sorrows of existence, as in the following lines taken from "In the Room," a poem devoted specially to the subject:—

The drear path crawls on drearier still
 To wounded feet and hopeless breast?
 Well, he can lie down when he will,
 And straight all ends in endless rest.

It may be observed that in one or two of his poems Thomson himself anticipates the personal application of this argument, and gives reasons to account for his own continuance in living, as when he refers to the poet's passion for creative art as the one prop of life:—

So potent is the Word, the Lord of Life,
 And so tenacious Art,
 Whose instinct urges to perpetual strife
 With Death, Love's counterpart;
 The magic of their music, might, and light,
 Can keep one living in his own despite.

Speaking of the poems as a whole, we may say that they all, more or less, bear evidence of Thomson's capacity for full, rich life; of his oriental love of repose, coupled with an ever-present sense of the mystery of existence; and, finally, of his growing conviction that

all labour is useless, and all progress impossible, in face of the stony and impenetrable destiny by which mortals are confronted. The metaphors in which he most delights are those of wine and the wine-cup; of the raptures of the dance, of the rose's rich scents, and the nightingale's sweetness of voice; of sunshine warmth and moonlight purity; of the sea, the sky, and all the opulence that nature seems to lavish on man; but side by side with these is the strong, stern, mathematical grasp of facts, which, in its determined and deliberate realism, does not scruple to borrow a simile from a piece of mechanism, or even from an algebraic formula. Then, again, there is the strange contrast, yet no sense of discord, between Thomson's allegorical, visionary, and symbolic tendencies and his logical, practical habit of thought; in the highest heaven of his most spiritual flights he is still the keen, calm reasoner, while in his coldest speculations he retains something of the impassioned poet. Like De Quincey, he possesses the gift of distinct mental vision finding utterance in sublime imagery; those who read *The City of Dreadful Night*, or "Insomnia," cannot doubt that the forms there described were actually existent to the eye of the poet. He himself tells us how, during his sojourn in London with his "Lady of Sorrow"—the life-long grief that is thus allegorically represented—he lived in a spiritual world of his own, not less real than the actual world around him:—

She annihilated from me the huge city, and all its inhabitants; they, with their thoughts, passions, labours, struggles, victories, defeats, were nothing to me; I was nothing to them. As I passed daily through the streets, my eyes must have pictured the buildings and the people, my ear must have vibrated to the roar of the vehicles; but my inward vision was fixed the while on her, my inward ear was attentive to her voice alone. She annihilated so

utterly from me the dark metropolis, whose citizens are counted by millions, that the whole did not even form a dark background for the spiritual scenes and personages her spells continually evoked.

Yet this same visionary was also one of the shrewdest logicians, one of the keenest critics, and one of the most trenchant satirists of the age in which he lived.

At the time when Thomson first entered on his literary career the most prominent representatives of English poetry were Tennyson, Arnold, and the Brownings, Landor's star having already practically set, and the names of Swinburne, Morris, and Rossetti being as yet unknown. The influence most discernible in Thomson's early writings is that of Shelley; but as his style matured it became Dantesque rather than Shelleyan in the gravity and conciseness of its expression, and it is evident that Dante, whom Thomson had studied till he knew him almost by heart, had made a profound impression on his mind. Heine, too, became before long a very potent influence, as is proved by the affinity of thought and tone, the numerous references to his writings that are scattered through his works, and what he modestly called the "attempts at translations."

But such receptivity is perfectly compatible with independence; and original Thomson undoubtedly was, if ever poet was so. The strong, clear impression of his very marked personality is stamped on the thought, style, and diction of every poem he wrote. He has, of course, something in common with those contemporary writers who rose to fame and celebrity while he was still condemned to struggle with obscurity and neglect; but the similarity, where any similarity exists, is only such as must necessarily be found between all poets of the same social and political epoch. The dates, moreover, which are in most cases prefixed to Thomson's poems,

often show that, though published later, they were in reality written earlier than those to which a resemblance may be traced.¹

This mention of dates leads naturally to the subject of Thomson's method of composition and publication. It was not his habit to write down anything, either in the form of verse or prose, until it had been to some extent shaped and perfected in his mind, and the work once written underwent but few corrections, some of the original manuscripts being almost untouched. Thus the "Voice from the Nile," which was published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1882, was projected ten years before that date; while in the case of other poems there elapsed a considerable interval of time between the writing and the publication. I have already noticed the striking resemblance between *The City of Dreadful Night* and the prose piece entitled "A Lady of Sorrow," which had been written ten years earlier. During all that time the writer was carrying in his mind the sombre imagery, and even actual phrases, which he afterwards converted with such effect into a poetical form. In this patient workmanship, and conscientious elaboration of the details of his art, we see the secret of much of his success in the creation of vivid word-pictures which fix themselves indelibly on the mind.

Many of Thomson's writings, whether belonging to his early or his late period of authorship, are subjective in a high degree, being full of a marked and easily discernible individuality. Through the medium of his poems, grave or gay, we see him as he was actually seen in his lifetime; now overshadowed by the profound

¹ See the high opinion of Thomson expressed by J. A. Symonds (*Memoir*, II, pp. 229, 230): "There is no English poet now living, except Tennyson Browning, Swinburne, and Morris, who comes near him."

gloom of pessimistic thought, now forgetting his sorrows for a time, in some interval of hearty and almost boisterous merriment; and now in the intermediate mood, half pensive, half playful—the mood of “Vane’s Story”—in which he was most familiar to his friends. Yet the scope of his genius was perhaps wider than would be supposed by those who know him only by his published volumes of poems, for his prose works and scattered pieces show that he was also gifted with a very keen power as satirist, critic, and journalist—a power which would certainly have brought him to the fore if it had been enlisted in a more popular cause, and exerted under less depressing circumstances.

His masterpiece in prolonged narrative is “Weddah and Om-el-Bonain,” which is a model throughout of severe concentration and artistic finish; but his power of strong, vivid description is made evident in many scattered passages, of which one of the most notable is the poetical reproduction, in the closing section of *The City of Dreadful Night*, of Albert Dürer’s “Melencolia”—a piece of writing certainly not surpassed by anything of its kind in contemporary literature:—

Anear the centre of that northern crest
 Stands out a level upland bleak and bare,
 From which the city east and south and west
 Sinks gently in long waves; and thronèd there
 An Image sits, stupendous, superhuman,
 The bronze colossus of a wingèd Woman,
 Upon a graded granite base foursquare.

.
 Titanic from her high throne in the north,
 That City’s sombre Patroness and Queen,
 In bronze sublimity she gazes forth
 Over her capital of teen and threne,
 Over the river with its isles and bridges,

The marsh and moorland, to the stern rock-ridges,
Confronting them with a ceveal mien.
The moving moon and stars from east to west
Circle before her in the sea of air ;
Shadows and gleams glide round her solemn rest.
Her subjects often gaze up to her there :
The strong to drink new strength of iron endurance,
The weak new terrors ; all, renewed assurance
And confirmation of the old despair.

In addition to this quality of picturesque vision, Thomson was gifted with a remarkable faculty of clear and lucid expression. His love of allegory may occasionally lead him in a few of his earlier writings into something approaching to mysticism, but otherwise I doubt if there is a single passage in his works which is not perfectly plain, intelligible, and perspicuous. His pure, racy, idiomatic English is free from any trace of fastidiousness ; yet at the same time he possessed the cultured taste of a man who is a master of several languages. But the main power which underlay all his literary powers, and enabled him to use them with real and lasting effect, was the genuineness of feeling which lends to his word-pictures an intensity which could not have been supplied by any external culture. Poe has been accused not infrequently of indulging in exaggeration and darkening the shadow of his gloomy imagining for the sake of artistic effect ; the accusation may be a just or an unjust one, but there is at least some ground for the suspicion. With Thomson it is quite different ; his sincerity of conviction is writ very plainly for those who give his writings the attention they demand. In the record of the extraordinary errors into which critics have fallen when estimating the qualities of new poets, a place should certainly be reserved for the discovery made by one of Thomson's reviewers, that "he has

simply written dreadful poetry just because now it is the fashion to be dreadful."¹

Concerning his lyrical genius little need be said except that his best lyrics, many of which are to be found scattered among the *Fantasias*, are informed by very true and deep feeling, which finds fit expression in words of consummate grace and tenderness. Nothing is more indicative of his right to be numbered among real poets than his faculty of swift and certain selection of the subjects most suited to his pen.

As surely as a very precious stone
Finds out that jeweller who doth excel,
So surely to the bard becometh known
The tale which only he can fitly tell.

So he wrote in "Weddah and Om-el-Bonain"; and his words are true not only of the origin of that narrative, but also of the keen instinctive insight which guided him in the choice of his lyrics. In the notes of Fitzgerald's "Omar Kháyyám" he lights on a chance sentence quoted from the diary of a traveller in Persia, concerning the date of the commencement of the nightingale's song; and this is forthwith adapted to be the keynote of that beautiful piece of lyrical harmony, "The Nightingale and the Rose." Again, in a list of the titles of some old Scottish songs, he chances to see this "most pathetic" one, "Allace! that samyn sweit face!" and to this chance we owe the production of some exquisite and moving lines.

It remains to say a few words about the translations. Many of Thomson's versions from Heine's "Buch der Lieder" appeared originally in the *Secularist*, and several of these were collected and reprinted, under the title of

¹ *Athenæum*, May 1, 1880.

“Attempts at Translation from Heine,” in the volume which contained the “City of Dreadful Night”; while a few more may be found scattered among the other writings. As a translator of poems of which the essential charm and grace must be regarded as well-nigh untranslatable, Thomson has fared better than others who have attempted the same task; though his translations, viewed solely as English poems, cannot be compared for brilliancy and power with his original productions. In a letter addressed to Thomson, shortly after the publication of his first volume, Dr. Karl Marx expressed his delight at the versions from Heine, which he described as “no translation, but a reproduction of the original, such as Heine himself, if master of the English language, would have given.”

In addition to his poetical versions from Heine, Thomson translated Novalis’s “Hymns to Night” (still in MS.), and most of the “Dialogues” of Leopardi, some of which appeared in the *National Reformer* during 1867 and 1868. A well-known critic and accomplished Italian scholar has spoken of the published translations from Leopardi as executed “with extraordinary felicity.”¹

Thomson’s prose writings are scarcely less excellent than his poems, though they have attracted far less attention in the literary world. Here, too, the juxtaposition of the imaginative and logical faculties is seen to stand him in good stead, and we might say of his best essays what he himself has said of Shelley’s, that, “with the enthusiasm and ornate beauty of an ode, they preserve throughout the logical precision and directness of an elegant mathematical demonstration.” His style is strong, simple, and perspicuous, yet inspired by the

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*; art. “Leopardi.”

same intensity of feeling that has been noted in his poetry. In the prose "Phantasies," which are in reality prose-poems, and closely akin to the dream-fugues of De Quincey, there is a certain amount of deliberate word-structure and carefully balanced melody; but even here his sentences are quite free from unnecessary ornament, his manner being that of a writer who knows exactly what is to be said and the most effective way of saying it. Owing to his affinity to De Quincey, some critics have been over hasty in accusing Thomson of plagiarism; but in reality there is as much distinction in his prose as in his poems, the same strong-minded thinker speaking unmistakably through both.

Take, for example, the following passage from "In our Forest of the Past," a brief picture of the Elysium of happy souls:—

And we turned to the right and went down through the wood, leaving the moanings behind us; and we came to a broad valley through which a calm stream rippled toward the moon, now risen on our left hand large and golden in a dim emerald sky, dim with transfusion of splendour; and her light fell and overflowed a level underledge of softest yellow cloud, and filled all the valley with a luminous mist, warm as mild sunshine, and quivered golden on the far river-reaches; and elsewhere above us the immense sweep of pale azure sky throbbled with golden stars; and a wonderful mystical peace as of trance and enchantment possessed all the place. And in the meadows of deep grass, where the perfume of violets mingled with the magical moonlight, by the river, whose slow sway and lapse might lull their repose, we found tranquil sleepers, all with a light on their faces, all with a smile on their lips. And my leader said: "Their wine was pure, and the goblet full; they drank it and were content;.....and therefore they now sleep placidly the sleep that is eternal; and the smile upon their lips, and the light in shadow from beneath their eyelids, tell that they dream for ever some calm, happy dream; they enjoy unremembering the fruit of their perfect lives."

As an essayist pure and simple, he is seen at his best

in such pieces as those on "Indolence," "Sympathy," and "Open Secret Societies." It has been well remarked that a really fine essayist is one of the rarest of literary phenomena, because the mere suspicion of any didactic tendency is often sufficient to destroy the peculiar charm and indefinable aroma of the essay. Thomson, though too much of a metaphysician and revolutionist to be a model essayist, was endowed nevertheless with a considerable portion of the genuine Addisonian faculty of lambent humour and gentle raillery of human foibles, as appears to a marked extent in the essays just mentioned. In letter-writing, where somewhat similar qualities are indispensable to success, he also excelled; his letters, as may be judged from the examples given in this volume, being remarkable for their ease, directness, versatility of style, and incisive vigour of expression. Serious or humorous, descriptive or critical, these letters seldom fail to wield the charm of high artistic finish united with perfect freshness and spontaneity; even in Shelley's famous "Letters from Abroad" it would be difficult, I think, to find many finer pieces of descriptive writing than the long letter to Mr. W. M. Rossetti from Central City, Colorado.

Thomson's critical writings give evidence of his wide literary sympathies, catholicity of taste, and natural insight into what is best in contemporary literature, as well as in that of past periods. For Dante he is said to have expressed unbounded reverence in private talk, accepting Mr. Ruskin's statement that Dante is "the central intellect" of the world. His love of the Elizabethan poets is shown in his delightful essay entitled "An Evening with Spenser," where he declares Spenser and his fellows to be "peers of the noblest men that have existed since the human race was born"; for Milton

he seems to have felt a less hearty admiration, if it is fair to judge by a few scattered references to parts of "Lycidas" and "Paradise Lost." His most notable criticisms of the modern school are those which deal with Burns, Blake, Browning, Garth Wilkinson, Whitman, Meredith, and Shelley. He was the first writer who, recognizing in Shelley the teacher as well as the singer, ventured to drop the tone of timid apology which even the most favourable reviewers had previously considered necessary. Here is a suggestive and striking piece of criticism, written, be it remembered, long before the time when Shelley's poems became in any sense popular:—

In musicalness, in free and, as it were, living melody, the poems of Shelley are unsurpassed, and on the whole, I think, unequalled by any others in our literature. Compared with that of most others, his language is as a river to a canal,—a river ever flowing "at its own sweet will," and whose music is the unpurposed result of its flowing. So subtly sweet and rich are the tones, so wonderfully are developed the perfect cadences, that the meaning of the words of the singing is lost and dissolved in the overwhelming rapture of the impression. I have often fancied, while reading them, that his words were really transparent, or that they throbbed with living lustres. Meaning is therein, firm and distinct, but "scarce visible through extreme loveliness"; so that the mind is often dazzled from the perception of the surpassing grandeur and power of his creations. I doubt not that Apollo was mightier than Hercules, though his divine strength was veiled in the splendour of his symmetry and beauty more divine.

The "Note on George Meredith" is one of his finest pieces of criticism, a splendid testimony to the high qualities of a great novelist whose name at that time was comparatively unknown. The leading features of Meredith's genius are caught and reproduced with rare insight:—

He loves to suggest by flying touches rather than slowly elaborate. To those who are quick to follow his suggestions he gives in a few

winged words the very spirit of a scene, the inmost secret of a mood or passion, as no other living writer I am acquainted with can. His name and various passages in his works reveal Welsh blood, more swift and fiery and imaginative than the English.....So with his conversations. The speeches do not follow one another mechanically adjusted like a smooth pavement for easy walking; they leap and break, resilient and resurgent, like running foam-crested sea-waves, impelled and repelled and crossed by under-currents and great tides and broad breezes; in their restless agitations you must divine the immense life abounding beneath and around and above them; and the Mudie novice, accustomed to saunter the level pavements, finds that the heaving and falling are sea-sickness to a queasy stomach. Moreover, he delights in the elaborate analysis of abstruse problems, whose solutions when reached are scarcely less difficult to ordinary apprehension than are the problems themselves; discriminating countless shades where the common eye sees but one gloom or glare; pursuing countless distinct movements where the common eye sees only a whirling perplexity.

Meredith is further described as "the Robert Browning of our novelists," whose day is bound to come at last. Elsewhere, also, Thomson declares himself "a most devout admirer, who had been watching through a quarter of a century for the dayspring, confounded by its prodigious delay."

On the other hand, how severe he could be in his literary judgment and polemical satires is shown by one or two scathing reviews of books which he felt to be aggressively pretentious and slovenly, and by his Lucianic burlesques on certain theological tenets which seemed to him to be so superstitious and degrading as to deserve no quarter.¹

When we take into consideration Thomson's whole body of work, poetry and prose together, it must in justice be said that he possesses the two prime qualities

¹ See the posthumous volume, *Satires and Profanities*, published in 1884.

that are essential to the making of a great writer. In the first place, he has that strong sense of humanity which lies at the back of all really memorable literature ; pessimist though he may be, his sympathies are entirely human ; the subject, in one shape or another, of all his writings is that great struggle between Love and Death, the pessimistic view of which must present itself, in certain moods and at certain times, to the mind of every thoughtful person. Secondly, he is gifted with the not less indispensable faculty of poetic and artistic expression—the rich tone, the massive strength, the subtle melody of his language will scarcely be denied by those who have made it their study. Popular he perhaps can never be, in the ordinary sense, since his doctrines all point to a conclusion disagreeable to the popular taste ; but when once his claim to immortality is impartially considered, it will be impossible to deny that his position in English literature is unique ; a special niche will have to be set apart for him in the gallery of poets.

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