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POETS AND POETRY

OF

GERMANY.

BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL NOTICES.

BY

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CHAPTER VIII.

BÜRGER.

HIS CHILDHOOD AND HOME.—POETICAL TENDENCIES.—UNIVERSITY LIFE.—FOLLIES.—DISSIPATION.—SUFFERINGS.—REPENTANCE.—CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE "MUSEN-ALMENACH".—APPOINTMENT AS SUPERINTENDANT TO COUNT ULTEN.—POEMS: "LEONORE", "DER WILDE JÄGER".—ACQUAINTANCE WITH DORA AND MOLLY.—MARRIAGE.—PRIVATE LIFE.—UNHOLY PASSION.—SINS.—SORROWS.—DEATH OF DORA.—SECOND MARRIAGE.—REMOVAL TO GÖTTINGEN.—DEATH OF MOLLY.—DESPAIR.—ROMANTIC LOVE-TALE.—ELISA.—THIRD MARRIAGE.—MELANCHOLY RESULTS.—SEPARATION.—ILLNESS.—DEATH.—OBSERVATIONS.

ONE of the most influential members of the Hainbund was John George Bürger whose "Leonore" and "Wild Huntsman", translated by our own great novelist and poet, are almost as well known in England as in Germany, and whose life is scarcely less replete with romance than his verses. Of all the writers we have yet enumerated, Bürger certainly possessed, in the highest degree, many of the elements of the true poet; fervour of imagination, power and passion which carry away the reader, whether he will or no, an ex-

quisite melody of versification and at times a pathos at once solemn and touching. "The best criticism", says Frank Horn, "is that of the German people at large; they know his poems by heart." (1)

In many a cottage indeed on a winter's evening, the traveller may still hear "The Leonore", "The wild Huntsman" or the "Lied vom braven Mann" repeated in solemn tones by some verse-loving peasant, while wife or daughters stop the busy wheel—that wheel still plied in Germany—to listen to the thrilling strain.

But Bürger's mind was deficient in those qualities which alone can give true elevation to poetry. His fancy was incapable of long and sustained flights, and his compositions are generally unequal, and occasionally coarse and vulgar. From this censure we must except his sonnets, which, according to high authority, (2) are superior to any in the German language. "He stands", observes Hildebrandt. "at the very threshold of modern German literature like a star, brilliant indeed, but which, troubled in its course by clouds and mist, was never able to shine forth with perfect lustre. He was a memorable example of the fatal influence ever exercised by dissipated habits and want of principle even over the loftiest genius." (3)

Bürger first saw the light at Halberstadt in Prussia, January 1st 1748 at the very moment when the bells

(1) Horn, *Poesie und Beredsamkeit der Deutschen*. Berlin 1833.

(2) Wilmars, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*, 5. Ausgabe.

(3) Hildebrandt, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von Lessing bis auf die Gegenwart*.

were pouring forth their merry peal to welcome in the New-year. In his childhood he displayed no extraordinary abilities. At school he was noted only as a sad idle boy; for though passionately fond of reading, when he could procure any books to his liking, the study of Latin and arithmetic wearied him beyond all endurance. On reviewing his past life, he himself often expressed astonishment at the varied knowledge he had contrived to accumulate. It seemed, as he said, to have collected itself without giving him any trouble. So admirable, indeed, were his powers of retention that, when any thing pleased him, he required to read it once or twice only to remember it word by word. This very facility was a misfortune rather than an advantage; for it induced him to regard industry and study as absolutely unnecessary. At an early age, his poetical temperament displayed itself in his love of solitude, of the beauties of nature, of the song of birds, of the murmur of the stream, of the whistling of the autumn-wind among the leaves, and all those sights and sounds which have a thousand charms to the poetic soul. He loved to wander forth when school was over, and climb a hill which lay near his father's dwelling, crowned by a few old oaks, where, stretched full-length on the grass, he would watch the rays of the declining sun steal through the branches and gild the leaves with that exquisite light no pencil can pourtray. Often would he linger till the shades of night had fallen around him, although certain of a severe reprimand and perhaps punishment on his return; for his father, an excellent but thoroughly prosaic man, saw in these idle rambles, as

he called them, nothing but sheer waste of time, and could not understand what pleasure there could be in lying for hours beneath the trees gazing upward to the sky. When, in addition to these truant habits, young Bürger actually composed verses at the moment he ought to have been studying grammar, the parental indignation knew no bounds. Seizing the luckless papers, he threw them into the fire, declaring that the boy would be good for nothing hereafter. Unfortunately the course he adopted was but too well calculated to insure the fulfilment of his own prediction. To a character like Bürger's the forbidden fruit was sure to become doubly precious, and the only result of his father's conduct was to render both his studies and his domestic circle hateful to him.

That Bürger's home was not a happy one is tolerably evident. His father was a man of considerable acquirements, upright and honourable; but he loved his pipe and his glass of beer too well to sacrifice one quarter of an hour's enjoyment of these luxuries to the education or instruction of his son. His mother was endowed with no common abilities, but so little cultivated that she could scarcely write intelligibly, and her headstrong and violent temper rendered their domestic life by no means a tranquil one. The serene and humanizing influence of a gentle and affectionate mother was wanting. His parent's resources were likewise extremely limited, and this naturally contributed to embitter his mother's character.

At the age of twelve, Bürger was sent by his maternal grandfather to a school at Aschersleben, where he made some progress in his classical

studies. His love of poetry, far from diminishing, increased to such a degree that it became the engrossing object of all his thoughts to the detriment of more serious studies, and every spare moment was devoted to verse-making. A fragment of one of the productions called the "Fire" has been preserved, and it presents that harmony of versification for which Bürger's poems were always so remarkable. Well would it have been for him had he limited himself to such inoffensive productions; but that love of satire which in later life made him so many enemies had already begun to develop itself, and the peculiar form and shape of the wig of one of the monitors having unluckily attracted his attention, he composed an epigram which soon circulated through the school, and so excited the rage of the individual satirised that a violent quarrel ensued.

The head-master interfered, investigated the matter, and inflicted on the delinquent a punishment so severe and so disproportioned to the offence, that his grand-father not only withdrew him from the school, but brought an action against the master who was compelled to make a sort of apology.

Bürger was now sent to the Gymnasium at Halle where, though he frequently got into disgrace with the superior authorities, his wit, good humour and kind heart made him a general favourite. In 1754 he was entered at the University to study theology, his grand-father having destined him for the church. Any profession less suited to the ardent temperament and fiery character of the youth it is scarcely possible to conceive. But he was entirely dependent on

his grand-father's bounty and was forced to submit to his will. To the University therefore he went. At the very outset of his academical career he made the acquaintance of a man who, by his graceful manners, his cultivated intellect, soon acquired a powerful influence over his mind. Unhappily, the morality of this new friend was of the most lax description, and Bürger, already but too much inclined to sensual enjoyments and utterly destitute of those powers of self-control, so necessary to all, so doubly necessary to one of strong passions and ardent imagination, plunged head-long into the follies and dissipations of college life. His slender means were soon exhausted, and he contracted debts he found it impossible to discharge. Yet, despite the lamentable excesses into which he suffered himself to be beguiled, his time was not utterly wasted. He read much, but without end or aim, and wandered, amid the by-ways of literature without ever fixing on or following any definite path. At length, the manner in which his time was spent reached the ears of his grand-father. The old man's indignation may be conceived. He instantly recalled him home, and for some time treated him with coldness, and even severity, threatening to withdraw altogether his support and protection. But the affection he really felt for the young prodigal, and the charm which Bürger exercised over him, as well as over every one with whom he came in contact, subdued his anger, and he not only consented to his proceeding the following year to continue his studies at Göttingen, but yielded to his entreaties that he might exchange theology for juris-

prudence, convinced probably how very little chance there was of his doing much honour to the cloth. At Göttingen Bürger for awhile appeared, resolved to atone for the past by regular conduct and persevering industry. But the same fatal influence, which had led him into vice and dissipation at Halle, followed him here.

With culpable weakness Bürger had continued to cultivate the acquaintance of the man who had been the primary cause of all his errors. Unfortunately the stepmother of that very person resided at Göttingen. Bürger of course visited her, became an *habitué* at her house which was frequented by a set of profligates and spend-thrifts. Enticed by their persuasions and example his good resolutions soon began to falter. Little by little, he suffered himself to be drawn into follies and excesses still grosser than those into which he had already fallen and which acted no less fatally on his mental, than on his moral character. True, in moments of remorse, and these moments were many, he would shut himself in his chamber, seize his books, apply himself with feverish energy to his long-neglected studies, and closing the door against his worthless companions, vow henceforth to begin a new and better career. But after a brief period, solitude became utterly insupportable to him, accustomed as he was to excitement of the most baneful description, and he would rush forth in search of the vivid emotions now essential to his very existence. Ere long his conduct again came to the knowledge of his grand-father. He had pardoned him once, a great deal for a man of

his stern and rigid character. This time he was implacable. He withdrew his protection, despite all entreaties and promises of amendment, and Bürger was left to his own resources, in other words, without any resources at all. Shunned by all those of his former friends who had any reputation to lose, his condition seemed almost desperate. "It needed", observes one who afterwards became his best and most intimate friend, "a thorough knowledge of the excellent qualities which lay concealed beneath this mass of faults and follies, to induce any one to seek or rather to prevent their avoiding him at that moment." ⁽¹⁾

To the want of means to obtain even the necessities of life, to the contempt of some and the indignation of others, was added the terrible consciousness that his fate was only too well merited. Many would have sunk beneath such a load of deserved misery and opprobrium; but Bürger, though keenly alive to the general obloquy, and still more to the stings of self-reproach which weighed so heavily on him, had a natural buoyancy of temper, which saved him from despair. He had greatly erred; but he felt within his own soul that he was not lost beyond the power of redemption, and luckily for him there were others who felt it too. Among these was a man who, though himself utterly devoid of real poetic talent, was yet destined to exercise an important influence on the literature of his country. With a highly cultivated mind, thoroughly acquainted with his own and foreign

(1) Lebensbild von Bürger, von seinem Arzt Althoff.

literature, active, ardent and energetic, yet calm, temperate and persevering, Boie seemed formed to animate the exertions of others and to call forth that productive talent in which he was himself deficient. His kindness of heart, his active benevolence we have already had occasion to notice in the biography of Voss. He had assisted struggling virtue, he now stretched forth his hand to save repentant sin. He had known Bürger when he first appeared at the university; like every one else, he had been charmed by his pleasing manners, and with his usual clear-sightedness had discerned beneath a gay and careless exterior the germ of those talents of which the possessor himself perhaps was ignorant. Some lines which, on one occasion, he had sent a friend requesting the restitution of a great-coat, had met the eye of this keen critic, and, trivial as was the subject, had given him a high idea of the capabilities of the writer. Touched by Bürger's youth, moved by his sufferings and his remorse, he generously afforded him the means of rising from the depths of misery into which he had sunk, and of re-instating himself in the opinion of his friends, by offering to admit him as a contributor to the "Musen-Almanach", besides affording him more immediate aid. Bürger most thankfully accepted the proposal, and the well-known song "*Herr Bacchus ist ein braver Mann*", which appeared in 1771, proved that Boie's favourable opinion had not been unfounded. This poem excited considerable attention. Its melody of versification, its sparkling gaiety rendered it popular at every banquet, and it rapidly became the favourite song of the Göttingen students. In 1771, Bürger ac-

quired a new and most valuable friend in the excellent Gleim who visited Göttingen. The indulgent sympathy shown him by one so estimable, so revered, deeply touched his heart, and inspired him with a gratitude and affection which ended only with his life. The dark clouds which had so long hung over his destiny seemed at length to melt away, and better days appeared in store. His poetic talents were acknowledged and admired. He was enabled by the products of his pen, small as they were, to discharge the most pressing of his debts and to provide for his daily wants. The friendship and patronage of Boie had raised him both in his own esteem and that of others. Penetrated with the sense of kindness so un-hoped for and so unmerited, he resolved to abandon at once and for ever those vices and follies which had brought him to the brink of ruin, and this time he kept his vow. Great as were his future errors, profligacy and extravagance in the common sense of the word cannot be reckoned among them.

He now sedulously devoted himself to the study of modern languages, and soon became sufficiently master of French, Italian and Spanish as to read them without the slightest difficulty. The two latter languages were his peculiar favourites, and their ballad-poetry was the model on which he formed his own.

He wrote much, and submitted all his verses to his friend Boie to whose hints and corrections he bowed with grateful docility, a rare quality in an author. It must not be supposed that the exquisite sweetness which forms the great charm of Bürger's compositions, was attained without effort. The natural cor-

rectness of his ear, indeed, would have prevented his writing any thing harsh or unmusical; but the perfect melody of his lines was the result of frequent and careful revision, of which, however, no trace can be discovered.

In 1773 appeared the "Nachtfeier der Venus" and his "Ode to Hope" and several other poems, distinguished more by the charm of their versification and by a certain glow of youthful enthusiasm than by merits of a higher order. His name had now emerged from obscurity; still it was far from being widely known, and he was generally regarded rather as an agreeable verse-maker than as gifted with real poetical genius. He had, however, been admitted a member of the "Bund", and had thus formed intimacies with all the rising talent of the day. Hoelty on his arrival at Göttingen sought his acquaintance, and his friendship was courted by many who, but a little while before, had shunned and disdained him. His pecuniary circumstances indeed were still at a very low ebb when his indefatigable friend Boie procured him the offer of the post of Ober-Intendant to the estates of a certain Count Usler. It was evident, indeed, that such a position, in a little village far from all intercourse with literary society, dependent on a stern and haughty noble who, imbued with all the aristocratic prejudices of his rank and time, looked down with contempt on Bürger, both as a plebeian and a poet, was but little fitted for a man of so ardent an imagination, so enthusiastic a love of social enjoyment. But Bürger's situation did not admit of much fastidiousness. Here he could find at least a refuge from the necessities that still

pressed so heavily on him and leisure to devote himself to the task in which he was now engaged, a translation of Homer—at that time still a desideratum in the German language—that of Voss not appearing till many years afterwards. One difficulty, however, yet remained to be overcome; it was necessary to give a certain sum of money as security for honesty and good behaviour, and where was this to be procured? Here an unexpected aid presented itself.

Bürger's grand-father, who although he had withdrawn his aid from his grand-son, had not been able to banish him completely from his heart, having learnt the amendment in his habits, and that he was on the eve of obtaining a useful and respectable position if the sum above-mentioned could only be obtained, offered to supply it. But here Bürger was destined to endure the inevitable results of a lost reputation. The old man, notwithstanding his nephew's reformation, did not feel sufficient confidence in his powers of self-control to entrust him with so considerable an amount. Boie was absent, and in a fatal moment, he placed the money in the hands of a man who, by his apparent friendly feeling and amiable manners had conciliated his esteem, and who though himself in desperate circumstances, had the skill and cunning to conceal his real condition and maintain an appearance of ease and comfort. He had, at a former period, occupied the very post now sought by Bürger, and enjoyed the Count's favour to a high degree. He resided in the village which was to be Bürger's future home, and he proposed that the young man should lodge in his house, and dine at his table,

for what seemed but a fair remuneration. All this seeming kindness, however, was only a cloak to obtain the money. Once in his hands, far from devoting it to the purpose for which it was intended, he made use of it for his own. It was not till long afterwards that Bürger discovered the treachery of which he had been the victim. The Count satisfied by the information that his grandfather had become surety for him, conferred upon him the desired post.

For a time matters seemed to go on smoothly enough. Bürger's duties, wearisome and uninteresting as they were, left much of his time at his own disposal, and the wild and solitary nature of the country that surrounded him, while fostering those sparks of superstition and melancholy so strangely interwoven with his nature, aided in developing his poetic genius. One fine moon-light night he was taking his accustomed stroll, when he overheard a peasant girl singing a wild old ballad popular enough in those days:

The moon it shines so brightly!
The dead they ride so lightly!
Sweet love, wilt ride with me?

The words, as they lingered on the evening breeze, struck Bürger so much that he could not banish them from his memory. They haunted him day and night, till at length he gave his visions form and shape in the first six verses of "Leonore", which so enchanted his friend Boie, to whom he communicated them, that he gave him no rest till he had completed the poem. This however was not the work of a moment. Bürger composed rapidly, but corrected very slowly; and it

was not till the following year that the "Leonore" appeared in the "Musen-Almanach".

Previously, however, to venturing on the publication of a production, so little in consonance with the established rules of art, Bürger rode over to Göttingen to read it to his friends there and to judge by its effect on them of the impression it would probably produce on the public mind. When he came to the line :

"Hurrah, wilt ride with me",

he struck the door with his whip. At the sound, Stolberg, who had been listening in wrapt attention, started up with every sign of terror. So deep was the impression made by the poem, that this unexpected noise had shaken him with fear, as though it really were the summons of a spectre from another world.

The success of the "Leonore" was as rapid as it was decided. It flew like lightning from one end of the land to the other; it was repeated alike in the palace and the cottage; the high-born lady pored over it at her morning-repast, and the village-gossips listened enchanted, while some peasant, more enlightened than the rest, read it aloud for the benefit of the assembly. Its mingled horror and tenderness, the wild unearthly strain that pervaded it, the rapid action, the sustained interest electrified every heart.

"Leonore", observes Schlegel, would itself insure Bürger an eternal renown had he written nothing else". Even Schiller who, in his rigid and lofty estimate of the qualities essential to a true poet, judged Bürger so severely, awards unhesitating praise to this production.

The reception of "Leonore" encouraged Bürger to new efforts, and the "Wilde Jäger" raised

him, for the moment at least, to the pinnacle of poetic fame. It would be difficult, indeed, to find in any language verses more thrilling, more impressed with deep and solemn meaning, than many portions of this really magnificent ballad. In the spirit-world Bürger was in his element. Nor was the fascination the "Wild Huntsman" exercised over all who read it the result of that love of the horrible inherent in the human mind. The poetic beauties are of the highest order. The conception is grand and original, the language picturesque and lofty, the verse exquisitely melodious, the moral admirable. It unites human interests with the ideal and fantastic. Once perused, it can never be forgotten; but Sir Walter Scott's masterly translation (in which however the last few stanzas are omitted) will be still too familiar to every reader to allow of our venturing to present another version.

Despite his poetic labours Bürger felt sad and lonely. The vision of domestic happiness and fire-side joys would often present themselves to his mind, decked in all the glowing colours which a vivid imagination lends to every object. The daughter of a village-official had for some time pleased and attracted him by her sweetness of character, her gentleness of manner and her household virtues. True he had little enough to support the expenses of a wife and family; but his rising fame seemed to promise better days, and his sanguine temper would not permit him to doubt of the future. Dora — such was the name of his intended bride — was about two-and-twenty. To be the wife of Bürger, of him whose name was at that

moment on every lip, seemed to her the very acmé of earthly happiness. His past follies and vices were probably unknown to her, or, if they had reached her ear, she regarded them only as youthful excesses long since past and forgotten. If at times a doubt would arise in her mind, whether a temperament so ardent, so thirsting for excitement, could be long happy in the lowly and secluded life to which, with his narrow means the additional burden of a wife and family would, for a lengthened period at least, condemn him, she cast it aside as vain and unthankful. With the fond credulity of a loving heart, she flattered herself that her tenderness, her devotion would supply the place of rank, wealth and society. Probably Bürger thought so too; at all events having resolved on this important step, he was anxious it should not be delayed, and the marriage was fixed for the ensuing summer.

We are now approaching a period of Bürger's life which it is impossible to contemplate without mingled regret, pity and indignation. We have followed him through the various stages of his chequered career, we have seen him in his wayward boy-hood, in his passionate youth; we have beheld him yielding to temptation, plunging into the wildest excesses, shunned by almost all his former friends, abandoned even by the protector of his infancy, on the very verge of destruction — held back by one helping hand alone, yet rising once more by the aid of that principle of good which yet remained intact within his soul, and by the innate force of his genius — and coming forth from the fiery ordeal apparently redeemed and puri-

fied. Since that period, he had renounced all his profligate acquaintances, all his dissipated habits, and had led a life as regular and virtuous as the most severe moralist could desire. He regarded his past follies with horror, and most sincerely desired to avoid them for the future.

But in Bürger's character the principle of self-control was utterly wanting. He was safe only when removed from seduction, and unhappily that very event which seemed to promise him security from perils such as had beset his earlier years, was destined to plunge him into new and more terrible temptation. Dora had a sister, several years younger than herself, who happened to be absent at the moment when Bürger was first introduced to his intended bride. She returned home only a day or two before the wedding, and flew to congratulate her sister and her future brother-in-law. She was but just fifteen, on the threshold of womanhood,

"Standing with reluctant feet
Where the brook and river meet —
Womanhood and childhood sweet,"

mingling with the innocent mirthfulness of the child, the softer graces of the maiden. With a heart overflowing with passionate tenderness, an imagination ardent and romantic, Molly was the very incarnation of that loveliness which had so often floated before Bürger's fancy, but which he had never even hoped to behold realized in a living and breathing form. He beheld her, and his fate, as he himself declared many long years afterward was decided. He felt that he loved as he had never loved before, that his inclination for

Dora—at no time very passionate — had faded like a baseless vision before a single glance of those too seducing eyes. “When”, he says in the letter alluded to, “I stood beside Dora at the altar, I bore already within my heart the most ardent love for the sister who was still a child. I felt that well; but from unacquaintance with my own heart, I held it as a mere passing fancy which would soon disappear. Could I but have cast one glance upon the fearful future, it would have been a duty to step back even at the altar ere the final blessing was pronounced.”

It would indeed; but he did not step back. In a fatal hour he accepted the fond young heart which had bestowed itself in all the confiding love of woman to his care, and swore before the altar of God to cherish and protect it. His friends, Stolberg, Hahn and Hoelty, who had been present at the ceremony surrounded him with congratulations and good wishes; and in the hurry and excitement of the wedding-feast and the departure which ensued, the wild emotions, the secret dark foreboding of that eventful moment were forgotten.⁽¹⁾

Bürger fixed his residence in the little village of Wilmershausen, which was conveniently situated for the discharge of his duties as superintendant of the Count's estates. All his leisure moments were devoted to his version of Homer. The necessity of keeping his imagination within strict bounds while following in the footsteps of his great original, exercised a beneficial influence on his troubled spirit. Translations, especially

(1) *Leben von Bürger*, von Dr. Althoff.

from the classic tongues, were then looked on in a very different light from that in which they are now regarded, and Bürger hoped by this work to obtain, if not an independence, at least a more suitable position; but the appearance of Voss's version at once put an end to his labours. He felt that his was now useless and threw it aside in disgust, unjust in this to himself; for the portion that has been preserved is superior, as might naturally be expected to Voss's in ease, vigour and melody, although in verbal strictness the latter is to be preferred.

The first year of Bürger's married life passed, if not in perfect happiness, at least in peace and content. Molly was residing beneath her father's roof. He had not seen her since his marriage. His wife had presented him with a daughter, and the mother was naturally rendered dearer by the child. All seemed to promise well for the future, when his father-in-law's sudden death compelled him to offer the friendless Molly an asylum beneath his roof. Young, innocent, utterly unsuspecting the fatal passion she had inspired, the maiden gladly accepted the proffered home, and Dora, fully confiding in her husband's affection, never even dreamt that, in opening her arms to her orphan sister, she was destroying her own peace for ever. Bürger's principal biographer⁽¹⁾ gives but few details respecting the domestic life of his hero. With the tender consideration natural to a friend, he touches but lightly on a theme which must so deeply affect his reputation

(1) Dr. Althoff.

both as a man and a Christian. He does not tell us by what insensible gradations his love, never wholly eradicated, acquired fresh strength and violence; how gradually all the ties that bound him to the wife he had sworn to cherish lost their holy character in his sight; how at last, carried away by the breath of passion, he trampled on all that the heart of man should hold most sacred, and became a seducer and an adulterer. Almost equally silent is the friendly biographer as to the sentiments and conduct of the unhappy object of his guilty love. More than once, it would appear, her better angel had come to her aid, urging her to leave a roof which threatened to be fatal alike to her peace and her honour. But passion triumphed alike over conscience and reason, and she sank at last into an abyss of guilt, at the very thought of which she would once have shuddered. What must have been the feelings of the injured wife when she beheld the man on whom she doated, for whom she had rejected many a more favourable proposal not only abandon her, but offer up his devotions at her sister's shrine, that sister whom she had educated, watched over, cared for from her infancy, with all a mother's tenderness, for whom she had never shunned any sacrifice, any suffering. ⁽¹⁾

That Dora early became sensible of her husband's baneful passion is generally allowed; that under these circumstances she should have not only permitted her sister to remain beneath her roof, but even yielded

(1) *Leben von Bürger, von Döring.*

up all her own conjugal rights, seems scarcely credible: yet so convincing is the evidence that doubt is impossible. In any other woman, this inexplicable conduct might be ascribed to coldness or indifference. Bürger himself not unnaturally—for how could *he* comprehend such deep though mistaken self-devotion—gave it this interpretation. ⁽¹⁾ It is evidently a false one—Dora's whole existence was bound up in her husband.

But whatever the motive, there can be but one opinion as to the morality of the proceeding and its probable result. This sacrifice, like all which trench upon the sacred claims of duty, failed in its intent. It saved one pang to inflict a thousand. Dora's position, was, it is true, the most painful that imagination can conceive. She knew—too late—her husband's nature. She dreaded lest, deprived of the being he so madly adored, he should either die of despair or end his life by suicide. She had no friend, no counsellor—none to whom she could turn for aid or for advice. At one time she resolved to consult the pastor of the village; but she naturally shrunk from giving shape and form in words to a secret so horrible. There was but one being to whom she could confide it—to Him who knows the inmost depths of every heart. His Word—had she consulted it, could have pointed out the course which, painful and thorny as it was, might yet have rescued her and those she loved from sin and shame, and His Word alone. The purest precepts of morality were insufficient here, as

(1) Brief an Elisa. *Alfons's Leben von Bürger.*

they always will be when doubts and difficulties and contending passions assail the human heart. But Dora had not been sufficiently impressed with the great lesson that every human affection, every human consideration, must yield before the strict unalterable law of duty and of God. She saw only her husband's grief; she dreaded only her husband's sufferings, perhaps his hatred, and with mistaken, but still touching resignation, she bowed down before what seemed to her an inevitable fate.

But though their guilty flame was unopposed, who can believe that Bürger or Molly were happy? His letter to Boie, written so many years later, sufficiently proves the contrary. He speaks of his "life withered in its bloom", of her "blighted youth", of their mutual anguish, of his deep and constant remorse; nor could it be otherwise. Keenly alive to all that was good and great, with a mind peculiarly sensitive to the stings of reproach, though too weak to pursue the path by which he could have escaped them, what must have been his sufferings during those ten long years! As to Molly, we scarcely dare to think of her. She is pictured, not only by Bürger, but by all who knew her, as the ideal of every grace and virtue.⁽¹⁾ When such a being could sink into this abyss of sin who shall venture to deem themselves secure in their unaided strength? How terrible must have been her struggles ere she yielded, how fearful her remorse when she had fallen. What must have been her feelings, when gazing on the drooping form

(1) Döring, *Leben von Bürger*. Dasselbe von Dr. Althoff.

of her too confiding sister, who had welcomed her with a mother's tenderness to her lowly roof, and whom she beheld fading beneath the weight of hopeless sorrow, sorrow not the less deep, because endured with the patience of a martyr. At moments, overwhelmed with repentant anguish, she would fling herself into Dora's arms and weep upon her bosom the burning tears of a guilty but contrite heart; then rush wildly from the chamber to bury herself in solitude, and make vows of penitence and self-sacrifice, to be broken at the first look or word of her lover. At one time summoning up all her strength, she determined to tear herself away; but his prayers, his anguish over-came her faltering courage—She remained and fell. The well-known elegy "to Molly when she would have torn herself from me" expresses all the depths of Bürger's despair at the prospect of losing her. Generally speaking, we are apt to fancy that flowing numbers are not the real out-pourings of a broken heart, and to suspect the truth and fervour of those emotions, which instead of seeking the shade, court the light of day and parade themselves to public view. But there are some, to whom verse is as natural a language as the song to the nightingale; who from childhood "have lisped in numbers for the numbers came", and we know too well how often, minds of a certain cast find relief in making their sufferings known, and satisfaction in feeling that they are the objects of general interest. Nor is this to be wondered at when, like Bürger, their own domestic circle is narrow and confined, their lot uncongenial, and

their genius little appreciated by those to whom their daily intercourse is confined. His anguish, at all events, was neither feigned nor exaggerated, and his verses were the effusions of an ill-guided, but warm and passionate heart, as a few extracts will sufficiently prove.

Molly

Dare I breathe a word of sadness,
Dare I let a single tear
Fall in this dark hour of madness
To retain thy footsteps here!

.

Shall I blame, shall I upbraid thee,
In thy purpose high and brave?
Let my lay sustain and aid thee
Though it drag me to the grave.

.

At the thought my conscience thrilling
Tells me truly thou must go;
Yes! my better self is willing;
But my strength is faint and low.

.

As the wretched captive, groaning
In his dungeon's gloomy night,
Thus my soul is darkly moaning,
Vainly seeking hope or light.

.

Conscious of my guilt, despairing,
Torn with anguish, all too late
Nor complaint nor murmur daring,
Yet I cannot yield to fate.

.

Art thou really lost for ever?
 Power nor human nor divine
 Shall those links so precious sever,
 Which unite thy being to mine.

.

One evening the sisters were sitting together in their little sitting-room, engaged in some domestic duties. It was evening, and twilight was slowly creeping over the scene. Both felt embarrassed, yet neither liked to quit the apartment, when Molly, to break the silence, placed herself at the piano and began to pour forth some of those "wood-notes wild" which Bürger so loved to hear. Gradually it grew dark, so that she did not perceive Bürger who had crept in, listening delightedly to her strain. Silently approaching the instrument, he clasped the singer in his arms and imprinted a fervent kiss on her cheek. "That is our last kiss", said a sad broken voice as the form he had embraced quitted the room. It was Dora, who as her sister rose had, unobserved by her husband, taken her place. It was their last kiss.⁽¹⁾

How such a state of things could continue so long, at least among individuals not wholly lost to all sense of decency and morality, without bringing about some fearful catastrophe, it is difficult to conceive. During the latter years of her sad existence Dora, indeed, seems to have sunk into a kind of apathy which rendered her almost insensible to all that was going on around her. But the most extraordinary part of the

(1) Nachlaß aus Bürger's Leben. Leipzig 1791.

affair is that, although his unhallowed connexion with Molly, if not exactly known, was at all events pretty generally suspected, it excited little comment. No one seems to have shunned or reproached him. His friends appear to have regarded it as completely a domestic affair. If his wife was satisfied, what did it matter to the rest of the world? Such a view of the subject is incomprehensible, especially in a land celebrated, and at one time at least not undeservedly, for its domestic virtues. There were moments when, roused to the consciousness of the abyss that lay before him, Bürger resolved to fly the peril; at least so we should judge from the following sonnet written about this period.

Sonnet

To wean my heart from that beloved maid
 To whom it clings, 'mid anguish, grief and pain,
 I try each art; but try alas! in vain,
 And summon dreams of beauty to my aid.

At length the hues by fervid fancy wove
 Evoke a form of loveliness and light;
 Smiling in pity, as an angel bright;
 To her in Molly's stead I turn my love.

I clasp the phantom to my glowing breast,
 Devote my every thought to her alone,
 And fancy Molly's image thence has flown.
 Oh! vain delusion! little space of rest!
 For, as I gaze, that form is all her own,
 'Tis hers! my heart's first, last, and only guest.

But these good resolutions were but transitory, while in general he scarcely attempted to conceal his pas-

sion. The well-known sonnet "*für Sie mein Alles!*" breathes a passionate devotion which would be touching, were it not desecrated by the unhallowed nature of the sentiment which inspired it.

FOR HER MY ALL.

Heaven has not made me either Prince or King
Or Baron high, or proud and noble Lord;
I have no heritage, nor wealth, nor sword,
Nor have I quaff'd from fortune's golden spring.

No monarch e'er has cast a favouring eye
And stoop'd to raise me from my low estate.
Against me have conspir'd both man and fate;
Repuls'd is every wish, and every sigh.

Yes! from my cradle even to my grave
One trophy only can I claim as mine,
A wreath of laurel o'er my tomb to wave;
Yet e'en this single boon would I resign,
This sacrifice—the mightiest—would I brave,
For one brief hour, beloved, to call thee mine!

Meanwhile Bürger's worldly affairs far from prospering became more and more hopelessly entangled. An increasing family, the declining health of his unhappy wife, all combined to render his position painfully embarrassing. He had endeavoured to obtain the post his father-in-law had filled and which was more lucrative than his own, but in vain. In 1778, he published his "Collected Poems"; they added to his fame, but did little to better his pecuniary condition, and at length in despair he resolved to turn for preferment

to another quarter and addressed a petition to Frederick the Great, representing his condition and entreating some employment suited to his abilities. Of all the monarchs of Germany, none had certainly exhibited less inclination to patronize her literature than Frederick. He regarded it, in general, both ancient and modern with sovereign scorn, as his absolute refusal to admit the "Nibelungen" into the royal library and his contemptuous question to Gellert "why have we no authors in Germany?" sufficiently prove. All the writers of that period, even Gleim, so enthusiastic in his admiration for Frederick, as a king and a warrior, united, as we have seen, in lamenting the low estimation in which he held the intellect of his native land. Here therefore there seemed very little hope. Yet, for an instant it appeared as though Bürger had not been mistaken. Frederick, little as he liked German poetry in general, was still alive to the inspiration of real genius in whatever form it might display itself, so long as (to use his own expression) he could make it out. The "Leonore", the "Wild Huntsman", had probably thrilled the Monarch's soul, as well as that of his subjects; he read Bürger's petition and directed his chancellor to reply in favourable terms, promising he should be remembered at the first opportunity; but more pressing and more powerful suitors soon effaced the poet from Frederick's memory, and here as elsewhere, his hopes were doomed to disappointment. Finding no chance of assistance from others, Bürger determined to try what he could do for himself; he took a farm, commenced cultivating, draining, ploughing, with his

usual ardour; but utterly ignorant of the first principles of agriculture, and frequently too much engrossed with his poetical pursuits to devote that minute attention to the business which it required, it soon became a desperate speculation, and he found himself obliged to abandon it after losing several thousand thalers. Scarcely had he recovered the immediate effects of this calamity which consumed all the little sum he had inherited from his father-in-law, when an event occurred alike injurious to his prospects and inexpressibly painful to all his better feelings.

The Count Ulten, who had never shown much goodwill towards his superintendant, was induced by the representations of one of his enemies to accuse him not only of gross neglect and mismanagement, but of misdemeanours of a still more serious character, namely the appropriation to his own purposes of rents paid into his hands, as well as of the retention of the sum his grandfather had laid down as his security. To prove the falsehood of the latter charge, Bürger appealed to the individual with whom the funds had been lodged. What was his horror on receiving for reply, that they had long since been remitted into his own hands, and that he and he alone knew what had become of them. The grandfather was dead; no witness was forthcoming. The count refused to listen to his assertions and brought the matter before a court of justice. That Bürger had not always exhibited the strict attention and regularity essential to the due performance of his duties, and that the Count's affairs had suffered in conse-

quence is more than probable; but of malversation he was undoubtedly innocent and he triumphantly proved the falseness of the accusations, to the satisfaction of the court and the confusion of his enemies. The Count, as an atonement for his past injustice, would have retained him in his employment; but Bürger indignantly threw up the post notwithstanding the representations of his friends and family. He was now free—but almost a ruined man. Small as had been the remuneration he received from the Count, it had still sufficed for the daily wants of existence. But the remembrance of the humiliations to which he had been subjected was too keen to allow of his listening to reason.

Another circumstance likewise influenced his determination. A short time previous to the events just recorded, his wife, who for the last two years had been gradually sinking beneath the weight of declining health and domestic affliction, died. True to the part she had imposed upon herself through the whole of her married life, she did not utter one single reproach either to the husband who had betrayed, or to the sister who had injured her. Bürger's biographers give us no details as to her last moments; but, if we are to believe a work entitled "Bürger a poet's life", in which according to the authority of an able critic,⁽¹⁾ all the principal incidents are drawn from undeniable sources, the dying martyr called her erring husband and sister to her bed-side and placed their hands in each other. Still,

(1) *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* von Dr. Geßler. Vol. 2nd.

as neither the author himself, nor Dr. Gelzer indicate the authorities from which he draws these facts, we must accept it with caution.

However this may be, the sequel was such as may be supposed. It is true that for a while the stings of remorse and self-accusation re-awakened by the spectacle of a death occasioned more by the weight of concealed anguish, than of bodily illness, inspired both Bürger and Molly with thoughts of self-sacrifice and abnegation which, if carried out, might have gone far to redeem their past sin. But the effort was too mighty.

Bürger's love was too passionate to listen long to the voice of conscience which he had already so often stifled. Molly indeed quitted his roof for a time; but absence only seemed to increase their deep, though unholy love, and at the end of a twelve-month they were united in the ties of wedlock 1784. Bürger removed to Göttingen where by public lectures, private tuition, translations from foreign tongues &c. he hoped to obtain a provision for his family, and in time the appointment of professor of belles-lettres at the University with a fitting salary. The realization of the bliss for which he had so long vainly sighed, the undisputed possession of the being he had for ten long years adored with a passion, most criminal indeed, but most intense and unchanging, seemed to exercise a salutary influence on his mind, to re-animate his flagging genius and to lend it new life and vigour. The past, with its errors and its sufferings, seemed forgotten, and in the domestic happiness he now enjoyed, his life glided away without a care, almost

without a thought. Lapped in a delicious day-dream of bliss, he fancied Heaven itself had forgiven his sin. His biographer, indeed, ⁽¹⁾ has urged the depth, the truth, the enduring devotion of this passion as some palliation of its guilt. It was, as he tells us, his soul itself. In that one object every hope and thought and wish were centred. With her, privation, suffering were delight--without her, Paradise would have been a Hell. Her mere presence sufficed to give light and life to his existence. Endowed with that passionate temperament, so often the companion and when, as here unrestrained by religion or morality, the curse of genius, bound to a woman, gentle and amiable indeed, but incapable of sympathising with those loftier aspirations which form so large a portion of the poet's existence, thrown into daily, hourly intercourse with a being so lovely, so seducing, condemned to the narrowest circumstances, the most incessant toil--may there not be some mercy extended to him if he sank beneath a temptation it would have needed the virtue of a Cato to resist? It must be owned that while reading Bürger's memoirs, while witnessing his sufferings, we are inclined to yield to these arguments. But a few minutes' reflection will prove the weakness of the plea. To betray the trust of a fond devoted wife, to seduce an innocent inexperienced girl scarcely sixteen confided to his care and that girl his sister-in-law, are actions which no force of passion can palliate. When he took Molly as an inmate of his home, when he placed her beneath the humble

(1) *Leben von Bürger*, von Dr. Althoff.

thatch that sheltered his wife and child, he could not plead ignorance of the peril that menaced him; he had loved from the first moment he had beheld her. Though difficult, it was not impossible to procure her another home. Yet Bürger neither fled, nor resisted the temptation, and his remorse, though poignant enough to embitter his existence, could not induce him even to seek to subdue his guilty love. That his position was melancholy must be at once acknowledged; that his wife was not in all respects a meet companion for his highly-wrought imaginative mind may also be conceded; but if restricted means, or incompatibility of character are to be admitted as excuses for vice, where shall we place the limits? Nor must Bürger's genius be pleaded as an apology. It is in proportion to the extent of our powers, that our responsibility will be reckoned. Far from claiming special immunity from common duties, Genius must expect to be measured by a loftier and severer standard than that applied to ordinary men. Yet we would not judge Bürger severely—We pity while we condemn. We know how difficult it is judge the extent of passions and temptations we have never experienced. We are like men standing calmly on the sea-shore and wondering at the madness of some poor wretch whose bark has stranded on the breakers.—There *are* excuses for Bürger, though not such as his defenders have brought forward. In his ill-directed childhood, in his unhappy home, in his absolute want of all religious or moral culture may be traced the cause of his errors and the only palliation we dare offer for sin like his.

Nor must we allow the glowing pictures drawn of her by her lover and her friends to blind us to Molly's guilt. In vain they plead, in extenuation, her excessive youth, her childish ignorance. In vain they bid us remember that, perpetually by Bürger's side — beguiled by the charm of his genius — the confidante of every thought and every feeling, she became so identified with his very existence that to tear herself away was beyond her strength. She was the sister of the injured wife; she owed her more than a sister's common love. She knew, if Bürger did not, how intense was that sister's sufferings, and she sinned alike against maiden-virtue, and fraternal affection, against the laws of God and man. But the hour of retribution was approaching. Even on earth, how often does the finger of the avenger overtake us when we expect it least. A year after their marriage Molly died in giving birth to a son. Bürger's grief was wild and passionate as his love, and for awhile he was in a state bordering on madness. "The partner of my soul", he writes, "she in whose existence were bound up my life, my strength, my all, she too, after an apparently happy confinement has died of a violent fever. Oh! brief possession of my highest earthly bliss! Words can express neither my deep and passionate love, nor the nameless agony in which my for ever widowed heart is plunged. God preserve every feeling soul from an anguish such as mine!"

Another letter to his friend Boie exhibits still more touchingly the depth of his love and his affliction:

To B.

10th March 1786.

"Many thanks, dearest B—, for your kind and sympathising letter. Real sympathy is ever a draught in which, if not healing, at least sweet refreshment for a wounded heart may be found, particularly when offered by so dear a hand as yours. I have hitherto been a poor, helpless man. I am so still and must ever remain so, till the grave, that grave I hope soon to share with my unforgotten one shall open for me. A man broken in health and spirits, unfit for every thing, weary of everything. Oh! you will say, with a hundred other consolers, that will yield to the influence of time. True amid all comforters time is the best; but all the consolation time can afford, it has already afforded me. When will the throng of recollections cease to surround my soul? When will they so fade away as no longer to pierce my heart with agony? Deep as was my love, even so deep is my despair. How can I forget her! Her for whom, during ten long weary years, full of constraint and suffering, I sighed with a longing to which every day only added new strength, for whom the youthful bloom of my mind and body have prematurely faded, who promised to restore that faded bloom, who at last was mine, mine own—word of bliss ineffable to me; who called me back from the night of death, and had begun to raise me to a heaven of light and love. And for what? So soon to vanish, to leave me on the threshold of a new and better existence, only to sink back more deeply than ever to my former darkness. Oh! I loved her so devotedly, so boundlessly, so inexpressibly, that my love to her

was not only the sole engrossing object of my heart, but my heart itself. How utterly am I now widowed, and for ever! Ah! Dear *Bess*, it is not I alone who say it, she was one of the most charming of her sex. Could you but hear the united suffrage, even of the indifferent, you would find that not one word can be uttered to her prejudice. If ever the purest womanly soul displayed itself in the fairest of human forms, it was in her's. The sweet, if not brilliant beauty of her features, the graceful movement of her form, even the flute-like tones of her musical voice, everything about her in short, betrayed to all who were not utterly destitute of the sense of the beautiful, that she was indeed a child of heaven. If ever human being was originally sinless, it was she, and if, in the course of her whole life, she did one wrong action, the blame lay with me, with my ardent all-devouring passion. How would it have been possible to withstand this passion aided by a love as deep on her own side? And still she did resist — resist for years amid the strongest temptations, and at length yielded only in a way which left not a stain on the purest womanly innocence and chastity. In my madness, I would rather have renounced heaven itself than the bliss of her possession. I declare before God that gratification of the senses had the very smallest share in my boundless love. The Almighty will pardon for the sake of this, his darling, the sin I have committed in the vortex of passion. But what am I saying? Things that perhaps I ought not to have said, even to you. But you are the oldest, dearest of all my friends. And what, if I said it aloud to

the whole world? what is over is over, what is lost is lost. If I still wish or hope any thing on this side of the grave, it is only for the sake of my children. Weak and exhausted as I am, I still struggle on from morning till night for them alone. But for them, my only wish would be to sleep beside my lost one; the sooner the better. What avails it that the bare, black, melancholy stick should remain standing, when the grapes that once clustered round it are withered and gone?

As to my poems, I should scarcely ever touch them again, if I had not to interest myself for something more than my own wretched person. B— will inform you of the new edition I propose issuing. If you can do anything for me, I know you will without my asking. You may regard this edition as my last, as my will. My strength is gone. What yet remains, I will collect to honour the memory of my forgotten one. In no other way can I atone for the sorrow which my unhappy love caused her so many years in the spring-tide of existence. My pecuniary circumstances are endurable, though I have had heavy expenses this winter. They would once more have flourished, had I preserved my idolized wife, adorned as she was with every house-hold virtue, and with her my strength and courage. Now, on however humble a footing I have placed my domestic economy, I must still confide it to the hands of strangers. My eldest-born, the only girl by my first marriage, I have placed under the care of a very worthy woman to whom I am to pay so much a year for maintenance and education. The babe, the legacy of

my departed one, together with its nurse I have confided to the care of a kind sister-in-law. It is sad, indeed thus to be forced to separate my little flock from me. When shall I be able once more to gather them around me? I have just received letters from England, proposing that I shall take a young Englishman into my house and under my care. I am to fetch him from Brussels whither his father himself will conduct him, in about three weeks from this time. I trust the change will be of service to me. Farewell, my best friend. God bless you and your dear wife, and grant you all that happiness which I once so fervently implored for myself".

It is impossible to peruse this letter without feelings of the deepest pity for the unhappy writer; but it must be owned that the father who could confide a son to Bürger's care, must have been singularly ignorant of his history. The following Sonnets written when his anguish had become somewhat less poignant attest its depth and sincerity:

LOVE WITHOUT A NAME.

My wearied heart, e'en like the tender dove
By cruel falcons chased from nest to nest,
Dreamt it had found at length a place of rest
Amid the embow'ring leaves, wov'n by the hands of love.

Alas! poor bird! Alas! mistaken trust!
Was there e'er fate so cruel and so drear?
Scarce hadst thou reach'd that haven calm and dear,
When lo! the lightning's bolt has hurled thee to the dust.

And now once more in lowliness and woe,
Without an aim to tempt thy wings to soar,
'Twixt heaven and earth thou wanderest to and fro;
For such a heart as once throbb'd warm and pure
And loved thee with a love most fond, most sure,
On this sad earth will beat for thee no more.

SUN-RISE.

When morning tints with rosy hues the skies
I turn in anguish from the glorious sight;
For there, amid those realms so pure, so bright,
Dwells she for whom my aching bosom sighs.

Soon as the dews of evening gem the plain,
Thy bride, Tythonius, at thy side will stand;
But only in the dark and shadowy land
Shall I embrace my best-belov'd again.

Thy bride, Tythonius, can thy youth renew,
Shed o'er thy waning years the radiance bright
Of her young beauty and its rosy hue;
But unto me the stars lost all their light,
The day itself became o'ercast with gloom,
When Molly left me for the silent tomb.

These were not empty words; his health rapidly declined, till he became incapable of exertion either bodily or mental. "Constant suffering", he writes, "too often weighs down the natural activity of my mind with heavy fetters, and lames the impulse of head and heart, so that I feel as if I had neither life nor energy for anything on earth, nor any longing, save that, of all the worn and weary, to exchange this sad and melancholy existence for the quiet of the tomb."

But, like so many other sufferers whom death passes by, heedless of their prayers, while, in the inscrutable decrees of Providence, it strikes the happy and the healthy, Bürger continued to live on, though life had lost every charm. That mysterious consoler, time, effected something even for his worn and broken spirit. The kindness and sympathy of his many friends, who gathered anew around him, soothed and touched his heart. The attentive and crowded audiences who assembled to hear his lectures on critical philosophy, the praises every-where awarded to his poems—the title of Doctor, and about two years afterwards that of Professor-Extraordinary, granted him by the university, gratified the love of fame, which all his sorrows and sufferings had not wholly extinguished.

Five years had elapsed since the death of Molly. He had now a profession and an income, narrow indeed, but still sufficient, with care and economy, to provide for the simple wants of his family, and he became unspeakably anxious to have his children once more around him. Most did he long to clasp to his heart his last-born darling—the infant image of its hapless mother. Yet how was this to be effected without a third marriage? and from this thought he long recoiled with dismay. Its necessity however pressed itself upon him with daily augmenting force, and a circumstance which occurred at this period decided him to a step which seemed the only one to reunite his family beneath his roof.

Bürger's poems were peculiar favourites among the fair sex, and one of their warmest admirers was

a Suabian maiden, called Elisa H—. Young, ardent and romantic to excess, she had hung with rapture over Bürger's poems; she had listened with pitying sympathy to the recital of his love and his sorrows, and her imagination had pictured him under the most attractive form. Wayward and passionate, thoughtless and reflective, now gladsome as a child, now plunged into the depths of sadness—"every thing by turns and nothing long", Elisa was the most charming and the most provoking of her sex. Though far from wealthy, her position was at least independent, and her wit and beauty attracted numerous admirers. As none of her adorers had yet found favour in her eyes, probably because they fell short of the standard of excellence her imagination had formed, she was still unmarried and fancy-free, when the tidings of Molly's death reached her and awakened feelings which, at first, she herself scarcely dared to analyze. Bürger, he whose poems had been so long the delight of her heart, now thrilling her with terror, now moving her to tears, was free! That being whom he had so passionately loved was torn from him by the cruel hand of death, and as Elisa pictured his wild despair, his hopeless anguish, his utter loneliness, her enthusiastic soul warmed with mingled tenderness and pity. To see him—to know him—to console him, this was at first the sole end and aim of all her wishes. Gradually others arose—Might she not by her love and care reconcile him to that world which was now become a desert to him and replace his lost Molly in his heart? She did not pause to consider whether a union with a man double

her age, who had already twice entered the bonds of matrimony, would be likely to insure her happiness. She trusted to her charms, to her influence, to efface all remembrance of his beloved Molly and to mould him to her wishes, a delusion which has blasted the peace of many a fond heart. That the questionable nature of his moral character should not have made her hesitate, is but another proof of the fatal indulgence with which young and inexperienced women are apt to regard the faults and follies of the other sex.

For a considerable time Elisa kept her sentiments a profound secret, and Bürger, still absorbed in his regrets little dreamt how profound an impression he had made on the heart of the too susceptible girl. At length, one morning, about five years after Molly's death, a Suabian news-paper called the "Examiner" happened to fall beneath his eye, and to his amazement he beheld a copy of verses addressed to himself commencing thus:

"O Bürger, Bürger! noble man,
Who pours forth lays as no one can
Save thee, replete with fire
And passion, lend me, to impart
The thoughts that fill my glowing heart
Thy poet's lyre."

The verses continued in the same strain and thus concluded:

"For if a thousand suitors came
Laden with gold—to press their flame,
And Bürger too were there,

I'd give him modestly my hand
And gladly change my fatherland
For thee! no matter where.

Then if again inclined to woo,
Seek thee a Suabian maiden true,
And choose me, I implore.
With German soul and Suabian truth
And all the generous warmth of youth
I'll love thee evermore!

However small the poetical merit of this composition, it was too flattering not to command Bürger's attention and curiosity. At first indeed he only laughed at it, and called the writer a pretty enthusiast; but the incident made a deep impression on his ever susceptible heart, and once more awakened it to dreams of earthly happiness. Insensibly the image of the unknown writer blended itself with that which had hitherto engrossed his thoughts, and, almost unconsciously, he found himself mingling the two in his reveries till, at length, he resolved to learn something of his fair admirer, and for that purpose wrote to the Editor of the news-paper with whom he was personally acquainted, soliciting her portrait. This gentleman or his wife communicated the request to Elisa, and in a few days the wished-for portrait was in Bürger's hands. Nothing could be more opposed to Molly's soft and seraphic loveliness than the face now before him, with its rich lines, its raven locks, its dark sparkling eyes, every feature breathing fervour and passion. But Bürger was too sensible to female charms in all their forms not to be filled with admira-

tion at the sight of this bright and glowing countenance. Yet ere he sealed a union which must determine the happiness or misery of his future life, and that of the too-confiding being who offered him her hand, he explained in a letter the circumstances in which he was placed, and with deep humility and repentance acknowledged the errors of his past life.

*To
Elisa* — “Dearest maiden”, he writes, “fondly as I hope that you are the being destined to cheer the evening of my days, the being whom I so long despaired of finding upon earth, still duty admonishes me, by this true confession of my faults and foibles, to urge you to the strictest examination of your own feelings, ere you suffer your enthusiasm to lead you to a step which may involve us both in the deepest sorrow. I will endeavour so to depict both my inner and outer man, that, if possible, you may know me as well as I know myself. As to what regards my heart and mind, you may fancy you know them sufficiently already from my works; but you must not conclude that my soul is noble and stainless. It would be as if you were to suppose from the beauty of a few flowers that the tree that produces them is in a state of perfect healthiness. Even a worm-eaten and half-rotten stem, if originally of a good description, may bring forth some fair blossom. Now I fear much, that you and all who know me more intimately, will be compelled to regard me as such a withered tree. The storms and tempests of life have made sad havoc among my branches, leaves and blossoms. Oh! I am not what nature destined me to become, what I really should have become, if, in the

spring of life, a milder heaven had smiled on me, Through many and continued griefs and trials, I have become completely out of tune in mind and body. But as I naturally was more inclined to mirth than melancholy, I should certainly have glided back to my original character, had I retained the society of my adored Molly; for in the possession of her hand and heart I felt myself bloom and flourish anew, no less in wealth of mind, than in warmth and gladness of soul. Then these moods of sadness rarely oppressed me, and I believe the wife of my bosom never suffered from them. But after her departure how could I recover? Love indeed, but no common love, might perhaps give me completely new birth. But is such a love possible? A love so deep that it would consider it worth its while to re-tune and re-string an instrument so long disused and out of tune? And would the instrument reward the toil and trouble? Ah! in all that regards health of mind and body, what am I but a poor every-day being like thousands under God's heaven! I am often amazed how on account of a few good verses, an enlightened public can regard me as something extraordinary!

My compositions, both in prose and verse, flow slowly from their source. It is only a little taste and judgement that render what I write endurable. To the gift of gay, lively, witty conversation I have no pretensions except in my happiest and rarest moments, and then only to those who love me and find pleasure in my peculiar manner. To many my character and my sentiments may be worth more than my genius; still I am even less satisfied with the latter than with the former; for here I not only perceive

all in which I am wanting, all that is nobler and purer than myself; but I likewise feel that I might once have attained that perfection, if idleness, weakness and sensuality had not prevented my reaching it. Even in those points in which I am really better than others, I still cannot hold any very high opinion of myself; for as I am too little master of my inclinations to overcome them when it is necessary and to follow that course of virtue I so highly prize and admire, I am compelled to regard my really good qualities only as the result of temperament. For example, I do not think I am harsh, offensive, vindictive, quarrelsome or implacable. But why not? Because I consider all these things wrong and the contrary right? Ah! I really do so consider them; still that is not the reason why I practise one and avoid the other. It is only because my soft and idle nature loves quiet and repose. How many of my virtues may arise from vanity, egotism and the love of fame!

To my habits and manners there is, I feel, still more to object. I am not a good house-keeper; not that I am inclined to extravagance, but because I am somewhat idle, thoughtless, and cannot take particular care of my money, or of my other worldly goods and chattels. Hence no one is more easily deceived than I am; for even if I perceive the deceit, it must be gross indeed ere I take any notice of it. Of pride and haughtiness, indeed, I have a tolerable share; at least when I meet with it in others. This would be well enough if I did not myself too often sin against the claims of society by neglecting to

acknowledge letters, pay visits, &c. As to what regards my manners and daily habits, a woman I loved would, I think, easily lead me to adopt any which were agreeable to her. Love would govern me as much or more than I can govern myself. I know not if it is to my credit, or not, to acknowledge that I should hardly resist slavery itself to the woman I loved. And now I come to the most fatal part of my confession; were I ten times as amiable in mind and manners, I am still neither young, handsome nor in good circumstances. Indeed I have nothing, absolutely nothing. I live by the product of my brain. It is true, a brighter prospect is opening to my view, and what with lectures and private lessons &c., I gain about five hundred thalers (or sixty pounds), per annum. But what, if illness render me incapable of exertion?

In addition to all these considerations I must mention one still more important. I have no less than three children, a daughter of eleven, one of seven and a son of four. At present, it is true, they are not with me; but if I married again, it would be at least partly from the hope of assembling my little flock once more around me. Now, as these children are inexpressibly dear to me, and it is my firm opinion that one can never be too kind to children, it would pain me most deeply if a step-mother were to treat them harshly

It is now my duty, and a most painful one, to enter into some details of my former life".

Bürger then narrates those events already quoted. "My fever did not calm itself", he continues; "but during ten

years became every day mere and more inextinguishable. I was beloved even as I loved. Yes I could fill a volume were I to narrate the martyrdom of those years, the struggle between love and duty. Had my wife been a woman of common mind, had she been less noble, less generous, in which indeed she was aided by a certain coldness towards myself, I should long since have perished and should not now write these lines".

"In 1784 my first wife died of consumption which was hereditary in her family. In 1785 I married the beloved of my soul; but after a short and blissful union I lost her likewise from a fever which followed the birth of her child. The bliss of her possession, the anguish of her loss no words can declare. Since then I live alone, with a sad and aching heart. Can the man who thus stands before Elisa yet charm her? True, I have not flattered my portrait, and it may be allowed to him who has not concealed his worst foibles to say something to his own advantage. To the wife who is capable of loving me such as I am, and whom I love with all the strength of my affection, I could at least promise no unhappy existence. If it is dear to her to be idolized, to be cherished on my bosom, that at least would never fail her; for when I really love, my affection is sure and unchangeable, and however common the observation that satiety is the grave of love, it is only false love, love unworthy of that holy name which it can affect. Even the wife whom, after our union, I should be unhappy enough not to care for, need not fear any unworthy treatment from me. Witness her with whom I dwelt ten years without one harsh or unkind word. I should

rather be inclined to quarrel, with the being I adored; but only if her affection were not mine in an equal degree. God protect me from the woman who cannot return me heart for heart. As yet I have never found myself in such a position; but of all others it must be the most insupportable. I might then easily become inconsolable; for I fancy I am capable of violent jealousy; not indeed according to the common fashion, in following or watching the steps and actions of my wife, nor in restraining her freedom in any particular; but secret despair would rend my heart, and I should wander before her eyes like a tormented spirit. Now, Elisa, weigh well yourself and me; make further inquiries, if possible, about me and my circumstances from others; but believe nothing till I have myself confirmed it; for though scarcely any one can paint me in darker colours than I have painted myself, another might delineate me less truly. You have a mother and, as I am informed, a truly excellent mother, wise and upright: if ever the counsel of such a mother was dear and precious to you, in this juncture listen to her voice”.

“She will probably read this description with a calmer and more impartial spirit than you, sweet and fair enthusiast, and the counsel of the mother’s head will be more to be depended on than that of the daughter’s heart. If she thinks that the man whom I have here drawn with the pencil of truth, without omitting one blemish which can in any way concern you, could still make a good husband, then surrender yourself to the full impulse of your generous nature. But no, not even then till you have seen

me. I too must see you to judge whether in soul and spirit I really deeply love you. Again I adjure you by your own weal and woe, by the weal and woe of a man to whom your happiness is dearer than his own, do not become my wife, unless you can throw yourself with entire love and confidence into my arms. I will observe the same rule with regard to you, and thus I trust that the Almighty will consecrate our union".⁽¹⁾

After such a letter in which the writer not only makes no attempt to extenuate past errors, but even seems anxious to paint them in the darkest colours possible, the woman who accepted him as the partner of her life could not plead ignorance of his faults as any excuse for her own. Elisa, however, was too romantic, too inexperienced, too confiding in her own powers of attraction, to be either alarmed or discouraged by this not very flattering picture. She bade him come to her in person. He came, they were united, and Bürger brought back his third bride to Göttingen.

For awhile all seemed to promise well; but this bright sun-shine was of brief duration. The married pair resembled each other too much in the defects of their character to live long happily together. Bürger's own letters which appeared after his death under the title of "Bürgers Ehegeschichte" or "marriage history" and which probably he would never himself have made public serve in some degree to elucidate the mystery. Many of these, however, are

(1) *Leben von Bürger*. Althoff.

written in a tone which would offend the moral feeling of our readers; we shall therefore content ourselves with extracting a few passages in which Bürger accuses his wife, not only of extravagance, hypocrisy and neglect of all domestic duties, but of sins of a still darker nature. "I perhaps" he writes to her mother, "am the last in the whole town who, convinced by irrefragable proofs, have recognised her for what she is. 'She summoned thee to her,' I said to myself, 'from afar; she became thy wife without any outward pressure, of her own free-will. How then could she ever reward thee by infidelity, even if the first flame of her love should be extinguished? How much less when she sees that she is treated with the warmest affection, the most boundless confidence'".

"Thus did I speak to myself, and God is my witness how carefully I avoided the slightest appearance of jealousy. With true and hearty love I clasped her to my bosom as my wife, and led her here. Soon after our arrival, I know not why, she burst into violent complaints that I did not love her as I had loved Molly. I sought at first jestingly, tenderly, to reassure her. Not succeeding in this, in the consciousness of my innocence, I grew impatient, and finding my protestations of no avail, struck my forehead and rushed out of the room. Soon after, I received a letter breathing the most passionate love, and regretting having so excited me by her foolish reproaches. In a few moments I had clasped her in my arms and I imagined all was right again. It seemed only a shower such as often falls on the soil of love and renders it only more fruitful and more charming". He goes on to

say that gradually her tenderness visibly diminished, her manners grew colder and colder, she every day became fonder of general society and more indifferent to that of her husband, inviting all the young students to her house "by dozens; not a day passed without their coming to pay their court to her". Every Thursday she gave soirées, where, in addition to blind-man's buff, forfeits and such-like games, proverbs and ultimately dramatic representations were introduced, in which of course Elisa played a prominent part, and by her biting wit, her coquetry and love of conquest, excited no little jealousy and enmity, especially among her own sex. Bürger's hopes that the birth of a child would sober this immoderate love of pleasure were disappointed. In vain did he address her the most affectionate letters, imploring her to remember the vows she had sworn at the altar, reminding her that their humble means were totally inadequate to supply her extravagant habits, that her neglect of every household duty drew on her the animadversion of all right-minded persons &c. Her reply was cold and heartless, and although she some time after, seemed to repent her conduct and promised amendment, the favourable change was but temporary. Reports of her infidelity met Bürger's ear; at first he refused to give them credit; but they created so painful an impression that he sank into a state of mental and bodily suffering which attracted the attention even of his thoughtless and neglectful partner. An explanation ensued; Elisa, while confessing that her heart had not remained untouched by the homage of one of her admirers solemnly protested

she had never, even in thought, been faithless to her duty as a wife, that she was pure and unstained as when she first gave her hand to her husband at the altar. "I clasped her in my arms"; continues Bürger, "with the most passionate tenderness, and vowed in my secret heart to restore her all my confidence, all my love".

Brief was this sweet delusion. Elisa's assurances were false. Proofs — too certain proofs of her guilt — at length compelled her husband to insist on a separation. ⁽¹⁾ The erring wife returned to Suabia where having soon expended her little fortune she dragged on a miserable existence, and was ultimately forced to gain a livelihood by singing Bürger's ballads; and the unhappy poet was once more left in solitude and desolation. Retribution indeed had fallen upon him — in the shape of the very sin he had himself committed. Now he could judge of the agonies he had inflicted on the unrepining Dora. He felt this, and remorse increased his sufferings. Sick in mind and body, he shunned the society of his dearest friends, and shutting himself up in his study refused all sympathy and consolation. Shortly before his separation he had caught a severe cold which had settled on his chest. His duties as lecturer compelled him to speak aloud several hours daily, and the exertion so injured the already-weakened organ that his voice failed him entirely, nor did he ever recover it. Forced

(1) Bürger's *Lebensgeschichte*, p. 157, So strong was the general belief in Elisa's guilt that she was compelled to leave Göttingen privately, to avoid being insulted by the students.

to give up those private lessons from which he derived his principal means of subsistence, he was thankful to accept from the booksellers occasional employment as translator. He was but too happy when the Editor of some provincial journal condescended to employ him. How sad a picture! What profound gloom had settled on that existence which once offered such bright promise! Gradually his failing health rendered him incapable of any exertion whatever, and he would have been reduced to absolute starvation but for the aid of his friends and ultimately of a small pension settled on him by the Prussian government. Gratified by this proof of interest, the sufferer appeared for a brief period to revive; but the improvement was delusive. The fatal symptoms soon returned with redoubled violence, and at length his medical adviser confessed that all earthly hope was vain. "Far from evincing terror or disquiet at this intelligence", says his physician, "he expressed only one desire, that of a speedy and easy death. Towards the evening of the 8th of June his speech failed him. He endeavoured to address some observations to his long-tried friend Dr. Jäger, but in vain. We requested him to write his wishes; but although we surrounded him with lights, he was unable to distinguish anything. And as he unclosed his lips to endeavour to answer our questions, he breathed his last, at the age of forty-six."

Thus, at least, his last prayer was granted; his end was peaceful and painless. Let us hope that sincere penitence for the great sin of his early life had won his pardon from Him who judges not as man judges, who reads the inmost depths of the

soul, and often perhaps absolves, where we, in our short-sightedness, condemn. Despite all his faults, Bürger had many and ardent friends, and his physician, the author of the biography from which we have principally drawn the details of his life, speaks of him in terms of the warmest affection. "He was ever ready", he observes, "to assist all those in distress, often depriving himself of the necessaries of life to aid the wretched. One individual fact in particular I must not omit, as it evinces the nobility of his heart, which was a stranger to vindictiveness or hatred. The man who had most deeply injured him, the man who had cheated him of the caution-money committed to his charge by his grand-father, the man who had grossly slandered him to his employers, and who was the author of that memorial to the Hanoverian government in which he was so falsely and so vilely accused, that very man, by a singular chance, on finding himself in the depths of misery, applied for aid to him whom he had so shamelessly calumniated; and implored him to assist him and his sick wife in their wretched condition. Bürger instantly forgot the past. Touched to the heart, he deeply regretted that his circumstances allowed of his giving a few thalers only; but he did that which to him, who detested every appearance of intrusiveness, was infinitely more difficult than even the sacrifice of a considerable sum from his own narrow means. He sent a petition to the principal inhabitants of Göttingen begging them to spare something from their own wealth for the assistance of a family plunged in the depths of misery. The man, he said, had no great claims to

respect, and his present condition might not be altogether undeserved; but he was unfortunate, and compassion might sometimes be allowed to weigh heavier in the scale than justice. The result of this enterprise exceeded Bürger's hopes. He collected above a hundred thalers, which with his own mite he joyfully forwarded to the unhappy man.

Nor were sympathy and compassion the only amiable traits in his character. However often he may have been led astray by passion from strict duty and morality, he never lost the sense of the truly good and great. The recital of a noble action would fill his eyes with tears, and he would exclaim that it was indeed delightful to find some whose heads and hearts were in the right place. Generous and disinterested amid all his failings, he often confessed with the deepest regret that he would not himself have been capable of such a sacrifice. Utterly free from meanness or deception, he could scarcely believe their existence in others, even when he himself became their victim. Modest and unpretending, far from exaggerating his own merits as a poet he seems scarcely to have estimated them at their proper worth. He was always ready to listen to the observations of his friends; and far from being offended by their criticisms, if kindly given, was grateful for the interest they evinced in his fame".⁽¹⁾

All Bürger's principal poems have been so frequently translated that we have refrained from offering any version except those sonnets which seem the natural out-pourings of his heart. We

(1) *Leben von Bürger* by E. G. Althoff.

will, however, venture to present our readers with one specimen less known "Our village", which in the charm of its descriptions of simple rural scenes reminds us of a landscape of our own Wilson or Gainsborough.

MY VILLAGE.

I claim a name
For my hamlet's fame;
For meads so green
Are no-where seen
As charm us here;
Here rocks arise,
A pasture there,
While yonder lies
The meadow fair.
Here groves extend
Their shadowy gloom,
And lime-trees lend
Their sweet perfume.
The sheep-cotes stand
On yonder height,
A mead at hand,
My "calm delight";
For thus I call
That lowly spot
Where stands my all,
My own sweet cot.
Where elm and vine
Their leaves entwine
And form above
The shade I love.

A silver brook
With murmuring sound
From yonder nook

Its way has found,
And flows on singing
Its joyous hymn,
Mid tall trees flinging
Their shadows dim.
In its clear fountain
Reflecting still
The grove, the mountain,
The lambs, the hill,
The sunlight dancing
Across the stream,
The fishes glancing
With silvery gleam,
Now upwards dashing
Now diving low,
Their gay fins flashing
With radiant glow.
Oh! all is fair;
But loveliest, thou,
Givest it the air
Of heaven below.

The earliest dawn
Of rosy morn,
Awakes us both,
While, nothing loth,
My steps she leads
Where morning's queen
The flowery meads
And pastures green
With dew is sprinkling,
Where pearls are glittering,
And dew-drops twinkling
And birds are twittering.
The bud uncloses
Its hidden bloom,
And blushing roses

Shed sweet perfume.
They blossom bright love,
But not more bright
Than thy sweet form, love,
My life, my light!
And now we spread
Our frugal meal,
Where o'er our head
The sunbeams steal
Through leaves embowering
And branches flowering.
Thus in full measure
Still abound
Mirth and pleasure
In joyful sound.
Oh! blissful lot!
If time be kind
And blight thee not,
But leave my mind
Untainted still
And firm my will,
Nor change the form
And heart so warm,
Then fortune go
To East or West,
Thy gifts bestow
As thou deems't best,
I still shall gaze
From envy clear,
And sing thy praise,
My village dear!
