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LIFE OF GODFRED-AUGUSTUS BÜRGER.

THE poet, says Bürger, in one of his prefaces, lays no claim in the scale of being to the rank of a sun; he is content with the humbler, harmless, welcome offices of the zephyr. What, though he neither move the mills of manufacture, nor the ships of commerce, he may unfold the petals of the sweetest flowers, and kindle the flush of ripeness on the most delicious fruits; he may fan the brow of weary toil, or lap in Elytian airs the strolling enthusiast of nature. Well may he expect then at his tomb the sigh of regret, the cypress-wreath of elegy, and the biographic memorial of posthumous admiration.

Godfred-Augustus was the second child and only son of the Lutheran minister John-Godfred Bürger, by his wife Gertrude-Elizabeth, whose maiden name was Baner. He was born in 1748, on new year's day, at Wolmerswende, in the German principality of Halberstadt, and inherited with the indolence of his father the talents of his mother. His early progress was inconsiderable. At ten years of age he could barely read and write. But he had a good memory: he learned by heart, and repeated with ease, many of Luther's hymns, and other pious fragments. He read the bible with delight: the historical books, the prophets, and psalms, and especially the apocalypse, were turned over by him daily with renewed pleasure.

To these hymns of Luther he ascribed, in after-life, the hint of that impressive popularity which characterised his ballads. He had always an ear for rhythm, and, while a boy, would indicate and blame the lines which had a half foot too much, or which were so constructed as to throw on distinct syllables the *ictus* of the scanner and emphasis of the reader. By a kind of instinct he knew already what interfered with effect. He loved to stroll alone about a wild uninclosed heath near his father's home. He was ordered to carry a Latin grammar in his pocket, and to learn his declensions. The first rudiments his mother attempted to teach him.

He was next entrusted to the care of a neighbouring preacher; but

but so averſe was he to this kind of application, that after two years he did not know his grammar, and was forced to withdraw as a dunce incapable of literary culture.

In 1760 his grandfather put him to a boarding-school at Aſcherleben, under the rector Auerbach. Here young Bürger learned ſomething, and exerted his talent for verſification in a poem on the fire that happened in the ſpring of 1764 at Aſcherleben, which advantageouſly diſplays both his metrical and pious turn of mind. An epigram on the uſher's bag-wig, which the poet's ſchool-fellows repeated with troubleſome and ſeditious complacency, ſoon after occaſioned his expulſion as a ringleader in this petty inſurrection againſt authority.

He was next ſent to the univerſity of Hallé, to ſtudy theology. This was not the profeſſion of his choice, but his choice of this profeſſion was the condition of his grandfather's bounty. He accordingly went through the routine of inſtruction, and once preached in a village near Hallé.

But his acquaintance while at this college with a counſellor Klotze, a man of literary attainments and free manners, brought on Bürger a reputation for libertinism, which, in the then ſtate of Proteſtant Germany, was ſuppoſed incompatible with the paſtoral office. Even his grandfather thought it neceſſary he ſhould relinquish the holy profeſſion for the ſtudy of the law, and accordingly conſented to his removal to Göttingen for that purpoſe, in the Eaſter term of 1768. To jurisprudence he applied with aſſiduity, and became well verſed in the Pandects; but experience had taught him no diſcretion in reſpect to his perſonal conduct. The lodgings which Klotze recommended he took at Göttingen, and again made a noiſe by his diſſoluteneſs, which provoked his grandfather to withdraw his patronage. Poor, and a rake, it was difficult not to incur a ſtyle of living repulſive to mere acquaintance, and diſgufing even to the tolerance of friendſhip. Bieller, Sprengel, and Boie, were among thoſe friends who valued in Bürger the good qualities which ſtill remained to him, and who conferred on his adverſity what it admitted of conſolation. For Bieller he was conceived to feel; to Boie he was thought to owe predilection.

A humorous poetical epiſtle to Sprengel, requiring back a
great

great coat left at his rooms, and the drinking song *Herr Bacchus ist ein braver Mann*, were then considered as indicating the natural line of pursuit for his literary talents. Pecuniary distress had made him sensible of the necessity of exertion; for the fear of want is a stronger stimulus than the hope of remote advancement.

It was now that he first read with ardour the ancient classics, and that he applied to the modern languages with assiduity. English, French, Italian, Spanish, all yielded to his efforts. With Bürger and his companions Shakespeare became so favourite an author, that they agreed, one April night, to have a frolic in honour of his birth-day, at which all the conversation should be conducted in quotations from the English dramatist. Baron Rielmansegge was their host, and so glibly would his guests repeat with Sir Toby, "Art any thing but a steward? Dost thou think there shall be no more cakes and ale?" that by the hour of separation their turbulence drew the attention of the police, and they had to "rub their chain with crumbs." [Dass sie ihren Rausch auf dem Career ausschlafen müssten.] Bürger delighted also in Spanish literature, and composed in that language an original story, which Boie still possesses.

Gotter, a young man, formed by the study of French models to a love of correct and polished versification, came to Göttingen in 1769, and associated with Bürger and his friends. He had brought with him a Parisian almanack of the muses, and took pleasure in exhibiting these pencil-geraniums, with which the Gressets, the Dorats, and the Pezais, had stocked this annual anthology. To Gotter Bürger attached himself greatly, and in his society certainly acquired considerable taste: in short, his natural tendency to the exorbitant, the extravagant, the eccentric, was somewhat pruned away. They formed in concert a German almanack of the muses. Rästner, the epigrammatist, promised them his assistance; Boie was alert in his solicitations for contributions, and obtained, in a trip to Berlin, the avowed patronage of the German Horace, Ramler, a friend the more important, as he had access to the directories of periodical criticism. Under such auspices the almanack of the muses was
not

not only likely to merit, but to obtain speedy popularity. It accordingly succeeded to admiration, and continued from 1770 to 1775, under the same management, with annually increasing reputation.

Bürger envied, as he says in some of his letters, the correctness and ease of his friend Gotter's versification: to him all he produced was carried for criticism, and was at first sturdily defended against objections, but much was always altered eventually in deference to the judgment of the censor. Flushed with the glow of animation, Bürger would often present his verses with the comic entreaty, for this once not to find any fault; yet he was best pleased with a captious commentary, which put every epithet to the torture. Thus he gradually accomplished himself in the fine art *de faire difficilement des vers*.

Throughout life, he maintained that his reputation as a poet was far less a result of any unusual talent in him, than of the perpetual use of the file, meaning by that, the extraordinary pains he bestowed on all his compositions: his best poems, he said, were precisely those which had cost him most labour. He would alter not merely words and lines, but left scarcely one vestige of his first composition. A translation of the *Hameau of Bernard*, and another most masterly one of the *Pervigilium Veneris*, were among the exertions which Bürger chronicled in the German muses' almanack. The comic ballad *Europa* is also his, although the loose turn of the story occasioned him to suppress his usual signature.

In Germany it is not uncommon for polished families to bespeak a birth-day ode, an epithalamium, or an elegy on those occasions which form a sort of epocha in the history of their existence. To the poet a pecuniary recompence is sent, and a splendid edition of his work is distributed among the friends of the house. The notice which Bürger began to obtain occasioned many applications of this kind: and to him it was convenient, by means like these, to repair his shattered finances. Several heirs of fortune, several happy mothers, have now the pleasure of boasting, "my birth-day was sung," or "my wedding was celebrated, by Bürger."

In 1771 Hölty, the elegiac, and Voss, the bucolick poet, Miller, author of Siegwart and Mariamne, a writer of great sensibility, and the two counts Stolberg, of whom Frederick Leopold is most known by poems, travels, and a romance called "The Island," came to Göttingen, as yet "youths unknown to fame." They were soon attracted by the natural magnetism of genius within the circle which had assembled round Bürger; and after his removal from Göttingen, in the following year, they continued to visit his rustic retreat. It was the influence of Boie which obtained for Bürger, in 1772, a sort of stewardship of the manor of Alten Gleichen, under the noble family of Uslar. The acceptance of the place occasioned a reconciliation between the poet and his grandfather, who was willing to encourage this symptom of economic care and returning prudence, by paying off the debts incurred at Göttingen by his grandson.

Boie was absent. A less faithful friend undertook the liquidation; nearly seven hundred dollars of this advance passed into the hands, not of Bürger's creditors, but of a spendthrift associate. The student could not refund; the grandfather was inexorable; and Bürger migrated to his new residence, still encumbered with college debts, which for years disturbed his repose, but which his sloth could never summon the means of discharging.

Here it was that Bürger first met with Herder's dissertation on the songs of rude nations, which drew his attention to the ballads of England, and with Percy's Reliques, which immediately became his manual. These books decided for ever the character of his excellence. From a free translation of "The Friar of Orders Gray" (*Bruder Graurock*), and "The Child of Elle" (*Die Entführung*), and from an imitation of Dryden's Guiscardo and Sigismunda (*Lenardo and Blandine*), he rapidly passed on to the production of "The Wild Huntsman," "The Parson's Daughter," and "Lenore." The two latter are probably the finest ballads extant. No other minstrel communicates to the reader an equal degree of interest and agitation; it is difficult to peruse them in the closet without breaking loose into pantomime. Nor is he less master of the more difficultly arousable, rapid, and

and impetuous movements of the soul, than of the tenderer feelings of the heart. His extraordinary powers of language are founded on a rejection of the conventional phraseology of regular poetry, in favour of popular forms of expression, caught by the listening artist from the voice of agitated nature. Imitative harmony he pursues almost to excess: the *onomatopæia* is his prevailing figure; the interjection his favourite part of speech: arrangement, rhyme, sound, time, are always with him an echo to the sense. The hurrying vigour of his diction is unrivalled, yet is so natural, even in its sublimity, that his poetry is singularly fitted to become a national and popular song. The *Lenore* was first communicated to Boie, who eagerly induced several of the Göttingen party to ride with him to Alten Gleichen, and hear it. The effect was peculiarly great on the younger count Stolberg, at the stanza,

“ Anon an iron-grated door

“ Fast biggins on their view:

“ He crack'd his whip, and smash! in twain

“ Bolt, bar, and portal flew.”

Frederic Leopold, on hearing these lines, started from his seat in an agony of rapturous terror.

Near two years were passed lonesomely by Bürger in his rural station, but they were the two years of his life the most valuable to the public. He married, in September 1774, a farmer's daughter of the neighbourhood, by name Niedeck, whose devoted, whose heroic attachment to him was never more conspicuous than in moments of the most untoward adversity. In the village Wollmershausen he hired the snug cottage to which he conducted his bride. An old schoolfellow, Gockingk, went to visit him there on his marriage, and renewed an intimacy which suffered no subsequent interruption.

Financial difficulties were probably the cause which, in 1776, aroused Bürger to publish in the *German Museum*, then a magazine of some celebrity, proposals for an Iambic version of the *Iliad*. The annexed specimens were distinguished for a more than Homeric rapidity of diction, and for an absence of statelyness, less unfaithful than the euphemism of Pope, and more attaching

attaching than the solemnity of Cowper. But as the younger count Stolberg had also made some progress in the same enterprise; as his specimens, more dexterously chosen, divided at least the suffrage of critics, and possessed the advantage of copying the hexametrical lines of the original; as his industry speedily outstripped the short fits of Bürger's application, and soon completed the publication of the Iliad; this enterprise was abandoned without advantage to his fortune or his fame, after having extended beyond six books. The Epistle of Defiance, addressed on the occasion to Stolberg, is one of the most spirited of Bürger's smaller poems.

His next literary undertaking was a translation of Macbeth, brought out at Hamburg for the benefit of Schroder, an artist-actor who excelled in personating the heroes of Shakspeare. This translation, although too much abridged, and in the witch scenes too low, is in some respects superior to the original. The character of Banquo has acquired more consequence, by the introduction of a good soliloquy at the beginning of the second act. Of the third act the third scene is omitted; the murder of Banquo being made known from the narration of the murderer in the next. In like manner the second scene of the fourth act is curtailed; the disgusting butchery of Macduff's child being far more pathetically stated by Rosse afterwards. The fourth scene of the fifth act is also with propriety omitted; as the removal of Birnam wood is sufficiently explained by the narrative of the scout.

The father-in-law of Bürger died in 1777. In consequence of this event, an intricate and inconvenient executorship devolved on the poet. A law-suit, which it obliged him to conduct, displayed, indeed, his professional qualifications, but absorbed his leisure in vexatious frivolities. The inheritance, to which he acceded, did not much improve his circumstances; which an increasing family rendered daily more insufficient.

In 1778 he undertook the exclusive compilation of the Göttingen almanack of the muses (while Goeckingk and Voss established a new one at Hamburg), and assisted also in other periodical publications. The wages of authorship nowhere
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form an adequate resource, if a liberal maintenance be the object. There is, however, a pleasure in composition, there is a pleasure in praise, there is a pleasure, even when unknown, in contributing to tincture the general flow of opinion; these constitute the chief rewards, for, as a necessary division of human labour, it is certainly underpaid. Bürger found it so; and, in 1780, forsook the Muses for Pan, and applied to the rural gods for a maintenance refused him by the Nine. The farm he hired was situate in Appenrode. An additional motive to this determination was, perhaps, that the accounts of his stewardship were negligently managed; and that something, very like a formal charge of peculation, had been made against him to the lords of Uslar. This accusation, indeed, Bürger repelled; but his carelessness made his resignation a duty, and it was accepted with readiness.

In 1784 his wife died. His farm appeared unproductive, probably because it was abandoned to the management of servants; and he once more removed, with his children, to Göttingen, where he subsisted partly by writing, and partly by private tuition. He read lectures there on the German style and the theory of taste; and after five years residence obtained a professorship.

As soon, or, perhaps, rather sooner than his circumstances properly permitted, he became united to his former wife's younger sister, the so often celebrated "Molly" of his love-songs. During her short stay with him she was the darling of his affections; but she died in child-bed of her first daughter, the very year in which she married. His children, after this catastrophe, were dispersed among different relatives.

Bürger undertook, in 1787, to lecture on the critical philosophy of Kant, and his course was much attended. In this year the jubilee of the foundation of the Göttingen university was celebrated: two poems were dedicated by him to the occasion, and the grateful college conferred, in return, a doctor's degree. In November 1789 he became professor of philosophy.

About

About this time an anonymous poem arrived from Stutgard, in which the author, who was a female, professed to have attached herself to Bürger, from the perusal of his heart-felt poems; and with a liberal zeal, by way of recompence, offered him her hand in marriage. The verses were well turned, and highly complimentary; and there was an interesting singularity in their heroic cast of sentiment. Bürger drew up a very gallant reply, and printed both the poems in the almanack of the muses. Intimations now came in whispers, that the lines were intended for the individual, not for the public. Bürger set off for Stutgard. The syren pleased not only when she sang; and Bürger married her immediately.

It is melancholy to relate, that this truly poetical union afforded no source of happiness to the husband; and that, in 1792, after little more than three years cohabitation, a separation was accomplished by application to a court of justice. During this unfortunate connexion Bürger was assailed with a deep hoarseness, which he never overcame, and which unfitted him for lecturing. This reduced him once more to dependence on the booksellers for subsistence. A pulmonary disease was, in the mean time, making a rapid progress; it affected his spirits less than his health; but it snatched him, in June 1794, from a country which he had illustrated, at the age of forty-six years and five months.

His physician Dr. Jäger, and his friend the benevolent Reinhard, the attendants of his last moments, accepted the care of his four surviving children. His property was found insufficient for the payment of his debts. A monument has been erected to his memory, by voluntary subscription, in a garden at Göttingen where he commonly walked.

His works consist of

Anthia and Abrokomas, translated from Xenophon of Ephesus.

Poems. Vol. I. 1778. Vol. II. 1789.

Macbeth, altered from Shakspeare.

Munchausen's Travels.

Miscellaneous works, two volumes, containing the six first books of the Iliad, some prose versions from Ossian, and the papers inserted in various magazines, of which the philological (*Hübnerus redivivus*), and the political (*Die Republic England*), are calculated to excite some curiosity.
