

“I was acquainted with old William Burns,” said my companion, “when he was gardener at Denholm, an’ got intimate wi’ his son Robert when he lived wi’ us at Irvine a twalmonth syne. The faither died shortly ago, sairly straitened in his means, I’m fear’d, an’ no very square wi’ the laird; an’ ill wad he hae liked that, for an honest man never breathed. Robert, puir chield, is no very easy either.”

“In his circumstances?” I said.

“Ay, an waur. He gat entangled wi’ the kirk on an unlucky sculdudery business, an’ has been writing bitter wicked ballads on a’ the gude ministers in the country ever sinsyne. I’m vexed it’s on them he suld hae fallen; an’ yet they hae been to blame too.”

“Robert Burns so entangled, so occupied!” I exclaimed; “you grieve and astonish me.”

“We are puir creatures, Matthew,” said the old man; “strength an’ weakness are often next-door neighbors in the best o’ us; nay, what is our vera strength ta’en on the a’e side, may be our vera weakness ta’en on the ither. Never was there a stancher, firmer fallow than Robert Burns; an’, now that he has ta’en a wrang step, puir chield, that vera stanchness seems just a weak want o’ ability to yield. He has planted his foot where it lighted by mishanter, and a’ the gude an’ ill in Scotland wadna budge him frae the spot.”

“Dear me! that so powerful a mind should be so frivolously engaged! Making ballads, you say? With what success?”

“Ah, Matthew, lad, when the strong man puts out his strength,” said my companion, “there’s naething frivolous in the matter, be his object what it may. Robert’s ballads are far, far aboon the best things ever seen in Scotland