

The Examiner.

AND SEMI-WEEKLY INTELLIGENCER.

"THIS IS TRUE LIBERTY WHEN FREE-BORN MEN—HAVING TO ADVISE THE PUBLIC—MAY SPEAK FREE."—MILTON'S EURIPIDES.

NEW SERIES.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF EBENEZER ELLIOTT.

[Concluded.]

On my return from the land of the great pan I was again sent to Hollis school; where, as was my wont in all cases, I took the shortest ways to my objects; and the easiest way to get my sums done was to let John Ross do them for me. This practice, in its consequences, added not a little to my reputation for duncery at home. Yet I have an impression that I was looked up to by my schoolfellows—I cannot tell why; for I never fought; and I think they must have suspected me to be rather wanting in certain learned accomplishments. I say I never fought, and yet my brother Giles, when in danger, always took me out to defend him. How all this happened I am at a loss to conceive, for I took no pains to bring it about. But having got into the rule of three, without having first learned numeration, addition, subtraction, and division, I was sent by my despairing parents to Dalton school, two miles from Masbro'; and I see at this moment, as vividly as if nearly fifty years had not since passed over me, the kingfisher shooting along the Don as I passed schoolward through the Aldward meadows, eating my dinner four hours before dinner-time. But, oh! the misery of reading without having learned to spell. The name of the master was Brunskill, —a broken hearted Cumberland man—one of the best of living creatures—a sort of sad looking, half-starved angel without wings; and I have stood for hours beside his desk, with tears running down my face, utterly unable to set down one correct figure. I doubt whether he ever suspected that I had not been taught the preliminary rules. I actually did not know that they were necessary, and looked on a boy who could do a sum in vulgar fractions as a sort of magician. Dreading school, I absented myself from it during the Summer months of the second year—"playing truant" about Dalton, Deign, and Silverwood, or Thrybergh Park, where I stole duck eggs, mistaking them for the eggs of wild birds, and was brought before Madame Finch. She, seeing what a simpleton I was, released me with a reprimand.

Let it not be supposed that these were happy days. I was utterly miserable. I trembled when I drew near home, for I knew not how to answer the questions which I feared my father would put to me. Sometimes I avoided them by slinking to bed without supper—which, to a lad who took care to eat his dinner soon after breakfasting, could not be convenient. It was impossible, however, to prevent my father from discovering that I was learning nothing but vagabondism, or from suspecting that my slow progress was owing more to idleness than to want of ability to learn. He set me to work in the foundry as a punishment. But working in the foundry, so far from being a punishment to me, relieved me from the sense of inferiority which had so long depressed me; for I was not found to be less clever there than other beginners. For this there was a sufficient reason: I had been familiar, from my infancy, with the processes of the manufactory, and possibly a keen though silent observer of them. The result of this experiment vexed the experimenter—and he had good cause for vexation; for it soon appeared that I could play my part at the York-Keelman with the best of his customers. Yet I never thoroughly relished the rude company and coarse enjoyments of the alehouse. My thoughts constantly wandered to the canal banks and my little ships; and—I know not why, but—I always built my fortresses, aye, and my

castles in the air, too, where the flowers were the finest. At this time I had strong religious impressions; and (when there was service) I seldom missed attending the Chapel of Parson Allard—a character who might have sate for Scott's picture of Dominic Sampson. But I sometimes went to the Masbro' Chapel (Walker's, it was then called), to hear Mr. Groves, one of the most eloquent and dignified of men, but hated by my father (who was a capital hater) for some nothing or other of discipline or of doctrine. I was on my way, I believe, to hear him, when I called, one Sunday, on my aunt Robinson—a widow, left with three children and about £30 a year, on which (God knows how!) she contrived to live respectably, and to give her two sons an education which ultimately made them both gentlemen. I thought she received me coldly. She did not, I think, know that I had been tipsy a night or two before; but I was conscience-stricken. After a minute's silence, she rose, and laid before me a number of "Sowerby's English Botany," which her son Benjamin, then apprenticed to Doctor Stainforth, of Sheffield, was purchasing monthly. Never shall I forget the impression made on me by the beautiful plates. I actually touched the figure of the primrose, half convinced that the mealiness on the leaves was real. I felt hurt when she removed the book from me; but she removed it only to show me how to draw the figures, by holding them to the light, with a thin piece of paper before them. On finding that I could so draw them correctly, I was lifted at once above the inmates of the alehouse at least a foot in mental stature. My first effort was a copy from the primrose; under which (always fond of fine words) I wrote its Latin name, *Primula veris vulgaris*. So, thenceforward, when I happened to have a spare hour, I went to my aunt's to draw. But she had not yet shewn me all the wealth of her Benjamin. The next revealed marvel was his book of dried plants. Columbus when he discovered the New World was not a greater man than I at that moment; for no misgiving crossed my mind that the discovery was not my own, and no Americo Vesputius disputed the honour of it with me. But (alas, for the strength of my religious impressions!) thenceforth often did Parson Allard inquire why Eb. was not at Chapel?—for I passed my Sundays in gathering flowers, that I might make pictures of them. I had then, as now, no taste for the science of botany, the classification of which seemed to me to be like preparations for sending flowers to prison. I began, however, to feel manish. There was a mystery about me. People stopped me with my plants, and asked me what diseases I was going to cure? But I was not in the least aware that I was learning the art of poetry, which I then hated—especially Pope's, which gave me the headache if I heard it read aloud. My wanderings, however, soon made me acquainted with the nightingales in Basingthorpe Spring, where, I am told, they still sing sweetly; and with a beautiful green snake, about a yard long, which on the fine Sabbath mornings, about ten o'clock, seemed to expect me at the top of Primrose lane. It became so familiar that it ceased to uncurl at my approach. I have sate on the stile beside it till it seemed unconscious of my presence; and when I rose to go, it would only lift the scales behind its head or the skin beneath them—and they shone in the sun like fire. I know not how often this beautiful and harmless child of God may have "sate for his picture" in my writings—a dozen, at least; but, wherever I might happen to meet with any of its brethren or sisters, whatever the scene might be, the portrait,

if drawn, was sure to be that of my first snake-love.

I had now become a person of some note; and if I let my wondering adorers suppose that I copied my figures of plants, not at second hand, but from the plants which they saw I was in the habit of collecting—pardon me, outraged spirit of Truth! for I had been so long a stranger to the voice of praise, and it sounded so sweetly to my unaccustomed ears, that I could not refuse to welcome it when it came. But my dried plants were undeniably my own; and so obvious was their merit, that even my all praised and all able brother sometimes condescended to look at and admire my "Hortus Siccus"—as I pompously named my book of specimens. It was about this time that I first heard him read the first book of Thomson's Seasons; and he was a capital reader—well aware, too, of that fact. When he came to the description of the polyanthus and auricula, I waited impatiently till he laid down the book; I then took it into the garden, where I compared the description with the living flowers. Here was another new idea—botany in verse!—a prophecy that the days of scribbling were at hand. "But my earliest taste in poetry was like that of Bottom, the weaver, who of all things liked best "a scene to tear a cat in." Accordingly, my first poetical attempt was an imitation in rhyme of Thomson's blank verse thunderstorm. I knew perfectly well that sheep could not take to flight after having been killed, but the "rhyme" seemed to be of opinion that they should be so described; and as it doggedly abided by this perversity, there was nothing for it but to describe my flock "scudding away" after the lightning had slain them. I read the marvel to my cousin Benjamin, from whom I received infliction the first of merciless criticism. God forgive him!—I never could. Neither could I help perceiving the superiority which his learning gave him over me; and never was I so happy as when listening to his recitations of Homer's Greek, of which I did not understand a word.—and yet, after the elapse of nearly half a century, its music has not departed from my soul.

Willingly, too, would I have shared the praises showered on my brother Giles—but, alas, how was that to be accomplished? Hitherto, I had been as fat and round as a ball—I now became pale and lean. My health visibly suffered; but I had inly resolved to undertake the great task of self-instruction. I purchased a grammar; but proved unable to remember a single rule, however laboriously committed to memory. About a year afterwards I added the "Key" to my grammar, and read it through and through a hundred times. I found at last, that by reflection, and by supplying elisions, &c., I could detect and correct grammatical errors. The pronouns bothered me most—as they still do. At this moment, I do not know a single rule of grammar; and yet, I can now, I flatter myself, write English as correctly as Samuel Johnson could, and detect errors in a greater author—Samuel Bailey. Flashed with success, my enthusiasm knew no bounds. To the great joy of my father, I resolved to learn French. But, though I could, with ease, get and say my lessons, I could not remember a word of them; I, therefore, at the end of a few weeks, gave up the attempt. For once, however, I was lucky in calamity, for my French teacher, not understanding the language himself, I was allowed to throw the blame on him—which I did gloriously.

It would seem, that my poetical propensities are traceable to certain accidents; but, that about the end of my fourteenth year, my mind began to make

efforts for itself. Those efforts, however, were favoured by an accident of importance in the history of my education. A Clergyman, called Firth, who held a poor Curacy at a desolate place, called Middlemoor, bequeathed to my father his library, containing, besides scores of Greek and Latin books, Barrow's "Sermons," Ray's "Wisdom of God," Derham's "Physico-Theology," Young's "Night Thoughts," Hervey's "Meditations," Henepin's "Travels," and three volumes of the "Royal Magazine," embellished with views of Bombay, Madras, the Falls of Niagara, Pope's Villa at Twickenham, and fine coloured representations of foreign birds. My writings owe something to all these books; particularly to Henepin, who carried me with him from Niagara to the Mississippi. I was never weary of Barrow; he and Young taught me how to condense. Ray, also, was a favourite. The picture of Pope's Villa induced me to buy his "Essay on Man," but could not enable me to like it. In the "Royal Magazine" I found the narrative of a shipwreck on a South Sea Island; on which I made a romance, in blank verse, twenty years before Scott printed his "Lay of the Last Minstrel." My next treasure was Shennstone; I could repeat all the mottos, translated from the Greek and Latin, which he has prefixed to his poems. I think he is now undervalued. Then followed Milton, who held me captive long. I have said, I always took the shortest road to an object: this tendency led me into some errors, but is the principal cause of my ultimate success as an author. I never could read a feeble book through; it follows that I read masterpieces only—the best thoughts of the highest minds—after Milton, Shakespeare—then Ossian—then Junius, with my father's Jacobinism for a commentary—Paine's "Common sense"—Swift's "Tale of a Tub"—"Joan of Arc"—Schiller's "Robbers"—Burger's "Leonora"—Gibbon's "Decline and Fall"—and, long afterwards, Tasso, Dante, De Staël, Schlegel, Hazlitt, and *The Westminster Review*. But I have a strange memory. Sometimes it fails me altogether; yet, when I was twelve years old, I almost knew the Bible by heart; and in my sixteenth year I could repeat, without missing a word, the first, second, and sixth books of "Paradise Lost." If, then, I possess that power which is called genius, how great must be my moral demerits, for what have I written that will bear any comparison with the least of my glorious models? But I possess not that glorious power. Time has developed in me, not genius, but powers which exist in all men, and lie dormant in most. I cannot, like Byron and Montgomery, pour poetry from my heart like an unfailing fountain; and of my inability to identify myself, like Shakespeare and Scott, with the characters of other men, my abortive "Kerhobeh," "Taurepedes," and similar rejected failures, are melancholy instances. My thoughts are all exterior—my mind is the mind of my own eyes. A primrose is to me a primrose, and nothing more—I love it because it is nothing more. There is not in my writings one good idea that has not been suggested to me by some real occurrence, or by some object actually before my eyes, or by some remembered object or occurrence, or by the thoughts of other men, heard or read. If I possess any power at all allied to genius, it is that of making other men's thoughts suggest thoughts to me which, whether original or not, are to me new. Some years ago my late excellent neighbour, John Heppenstel, after shewing me the plates of Audubon's "Birds of America," requested me to address a few verses to the author.