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Содержание

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JOHN WILSON

Is it too bold a thing to say that the reputation of 'Christopher North,' the man, has survived that of his works? Third in the great dynasty of Scottish literary sovereigns, he ascended the throne upon the death of Scott, reigned gloriously and held high state in the Northern Capital – whence in earlier days he had waged direst war – and at his death passed on the sceptre to Carlyle, from whom in turn it descended to Stevenson. To us of to-day, he looms on the horizon of the past, the representative of a vanished race of physical and intellectual giants, – the historic legend revealing him as before all things a good man of his inches, a prince of boon-companions and good-fellows, a wit, a hard hitter, the soul and centre of a brilliant circle, and the author of the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*. Many other works he wrote – important in their own day – but now not unjustly forgotten, or all but forgotten. But the man himself was greater than his works; he, more than they, is our enduring possession; his memory it behoves us to preserve.

The story of his life has been told, in terms of affectionate appreciation, by his daughter, Mrs Gordon. Born at Paisley – in

a neighbourhood where that natural beauty to which he was so susceptible was still at that time almost unsullied – on the 18th May 1785, he was the eldest of his parents' sons and their fourth child. His father, a gauze-manufacturer by trade, was possessed of considerable wealth; whilst through his mother, whose maiden name was Sym, and who claimed descent from the great Marquis of Montrose, he had inherited a strain of 'gentle' blood. From the first he was a robust and lively boy, and his childhood, being passed under the most favourable of conditions, was an entirely happy one. His taste for field-sport first declared itself at the early age of three years, when equipped with willow-wand, thread, and crooked pin, he set off, unattended, on an adventurous angling expedition. Meantime the parallel mental activity, which was to be through life his characteristic, was manifested in quaint infantine pulpit-oratory at home. After receiving the rudiments of instruction at Paisley, he was placed as a boarder with the minister of the neighbouring parish of Mearns, with whom he remained until his twelfth year. Here he was not less happy than at home. Without doors – and one thinks of him as a boy whose life was spent chiefly in the open air – he had a wide and beautiful country to range; whilst within, his education proceeded merrily – he was foremost among his young companions at the task as well as in the playground – and he was carefully trained in the paths of wisdom and virtue. In later life his memory reverted fondly to these days, to which his writings contain various references – as when he tells of boyish shooting

experiences, with an antiquated musket, traditionally supposed to have been 'out' in both the Fifteen and the Forty-five, of an adventure in a storm when lost upon the moors, and so forth. In his twelfth year he lost his father, and soon afterwards he was placed at the University of Glasgow, where he continued to attend classes until the year 1803. Here he resided in the house of the Professor of Logic, Professor Jardine, to whom and to the Greek Professor, Young, he in later life gratefully acknowledged his debt. Meantime his mother with her young family had gone to live in Edinburgh.

There and at Glasgow, from January to October 1801, young Wilson kept a diary, which was preserved, and from which his biographer prints some extracts. These are disappointing; but the document itself is remarkable for orderliness and precision, exhibiting the writer as the very pattern of a well-brought-up youth. More interesting, however, as a manifestation of character is the impulse which, in the year following, led the seventeen-year-old young man to address a letter of generous admiration, not, however, untempered with criticism, to the author of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth replied, and thus was begun an intercourse which was afterwards destined to ripen into friendship.

In June 1803, Wilson was transferred from Glasgow to Oxford, where he was entered as a gentleman-commoner of Magdalen College. He began his career there with ambitious views, his course of study, as shown by his commonplace books,

being designed to embrace not only the prescribed curriculum in the Ancient Classics, but studies in Law, History, Philosophy, and Poetry as well. But, if he read hard – as, with occasional intermissions, he undoubtedly did – he also entered with zest into the athletics and other amusements of the place, testing his prowess in wrestling, leaping, boating, and running, and, at the same time, indulging in what to a later age may appear the more questionable sports of pugilism and cock-fighting. Some traditions of the feats then performed by him survive. Among these are stories of his triumphant encounter with a certain redoubtable pugilist who had insulted him; of his coming out one night from a dinner-party in Grosvenor Square, and proceeding then and there to walk back to Oxford – accomplishing the distance of fifty-eight miles in some eight or nine hours; or, of his clearing the river Cherwell at a flying leap – twenty-three feet in breadth on the dead level. Yet, these distractions notwithstanding, he succeeded in passing the examination for his Bachelor's Degree, in a manner which his tutor characterised as 'glorious,' and in producing such an impression of scholarship on the minds of the Examiners as to call forth the rare testimony of a public expression of their thanks. He also carried off the Newdigate Prize, awarded for English verse. In commenting on the amiability of his disposition, his biographer observes that he harboured not an envious thought. But surely to have done so were a very superfluity of naughtiness; for, gifted as he was, by fortune as well as nature, whom was it possible for this admirable

youth to envy?

After taking his degree, he still continued for a time to frequent Oxford, astonishing the younger members of the common-room of his college by his extraordinary conversational powers and by occasional quaint freaks, but at the same time delighting them by his good-humour. It is told of him at this time that he would sometimes indulge his fancy by resorting to the coaching-inns at the hour of the arrival of the mails, presiding at the travellers' supper-table, and hob-nobbing with all and sundry, whom his wit and pleasantry seldom failed to impress. At this era his personal appearance is described as especially striking. It was that of a man of great muscular strength, but lightly built; about five feet ten inches in height, with uncommon breadth of chest; florid, and wearing a profusion of hair, and enormous whiskers – the latter being in those days very unusual. De Quincey says he was not handsome, but against such testimony we may surely set off that of Raeburn's portrait, painted a few years earlier.

These ought to have been golden days, indeed, but much of their happiness was marred by an unlucky love-affair. At Glasgow, some years before, Wilson had made the acquaintance of a young lady of great charm of person and character, who in the biography figures as 'Margaret,' or The Orphan Maid. The impression which she produced upon him was profound and lasting, and at parting he had inscribed to her a small volume of manuscript poems of his own. From this point the biographer is rather vague in her account of the progress of the attachment; yet

we have abundant evidence that its course was a most troubled one. For instance, in August 1803, we find our hero writing to a friend in the following desperate strain: – 'By heavens! I will, perhaps, some day blow my brains out, and there is an end of the matter.' Later he says: 'The word happy will never again be joined to the name of John Wilson.' And again he speaks of summoning two friends to support him and pass with him the night on which Margaret was to be married to another. This dreaded marriage did not take place, but it is quite evident that the lover long continued in a most unsettled state of mind. Thus we hear of his having swallowed laudanum, lost his powers of study, indulged in 'unbridled dissipation'; of sudden aimless journeys, undertaken on the spur of the moment, and landing him at nightfall at such unlikely places as Coventry or Nottingham; of solitary rambles in Ireland and in Wales. 'Whilst I keep moving,' he writes, in October 1805, 'life goes on well enough; but whenever I pause the fever of the soul begins.' He even entertained an idea of joining the expedition of Mungo Park to Timbuctoo. No doubt in all this he believed himself sincere enough at the time, but it is not necessary for us to take his utterances quite seriously. The blowing out of brains has been alluded to, and it seems more than probable that a point of Wertherism entered into his distemper. At any rate, in giving an order for the works of Rousseau at the time, he is careful to emphasize his desire to have them complete. In dismissing the episode it may be mentioned that, though the various obstacles to a union between himself and Margaret are

not detailed, in his case filial obedience would seem to have been the final deterrent.

During a tour in the English lake country in 1805, Wilson had fallen in love with and purchased the property of Elleray, consisting of a delightful cottage-residence, standing in grounds of its own, and commanding lovely views of mountain, lawn, and forest scenery, rising above the waters of Lake Windermere; and it was there that, on leaving Oxford in 1807, he took up his abode. He was now in the fullest sense his own master, and at this point it may be worth while briefly to take note of his attitude towards life.

The ideal of the sound mind in the sound body has been universally recognised as a good one; but, whether deliberately or instinctively, Wilson seems to have aimed higher still. He aspired to the mind of a philosopher in the body of an athlete; and the word philosopher must here be taken in its highest sense – to signify not the thinker only, but the lover of wisdom for its own sake. A saner or loftier ideal could scarcely be conceived; and Nature, who too often unites the soaring mind with the body which does it previous wrong, had in this case given the means of attaining, or at least approaching it. Thus the Christopher North of this period remains a possession and a standard of manhood to his countrymen. He brings home to them the Hellenic ideal, pure and unvitiated by any taint of Keatsian sensuality, as Goethe had brought it home to Germany. In the process of naturalization that ideal underwent some modification; but the fact that the poetry

which North wrote at this time was of perishable quality does not in reality detract from the service which he rendered to his country.

For poetical composition seems to have been now the serious business of his life. As for his diversions, they remained of the same healthy type as in his Oxford days. The sailing of a fleet of boats on Windermere, and the rearing of game birds were perhaps his special hobbies; but wherever manly exercises were to the fore, there was he to be found. The country in which he was now located being a wrestling country, he became an enthusiastic patron of that excellent exercise, and effected much for its encouragement. And at the same time he was free of the society of Wordsworth, Coleridge, De Quincey, and the other able and gifted men whose presence made the district at that era a centre of intellectual light.

Amid these varied interests, two or three years were passed contentedly enough; but at the end of that time we find Wilson writing to a friend of his need of an anchor in life. 'I do not, I hope, want either ballast, or cargo, or sail,' he writes, 'but I do want an anchor most confoundedly, and, without it, shall keep beating about the great sea of life to very little purpose.' This 'anchor' he was fated to find in the person of Miss Jane Penny, the daughter of a Liverpool merchant, a favourite partner of his own at the local dances, and at that time the 'leading belle of the Lake Country,' to whom he was happily married on the 11th May 1811.

His marriage had the effect of somewhat delaying the publication of a volume of poetry which he had previously been preparing for the press, and it was not until February of the following year that *The Isle of Palms, and Other Poems* made its appearance – having been shortly preceded by an anonymously-published elegy on the death of James Grahame, author of *The Sabbath*.

The Isle of Palms tells in mellifluous numbers the story of a pair of lovers, shipwrecked on an island paradise in tropic seas, who espouse each other in the sight of Nature and Heaven. Of course the idyll irresistibly recalls Bernardin's masterpiece, and, judging between the two, it must be acknowledged that in originality and artistic perfection the Frenchman's prose has greatly the advantage. But it is noticeable and must be counted to Wilson's credit that, whilst profoundly influenced by pre-Revolutionary thought, he never, even at this early period of his life, allows himself to be led away from the paths prescribed by virtue and religion. His healthy instinct, fortified by excellent training, sufficed to show him that anarchy in the moral world is no more a part of nature's scheme than is habitual excess; and thus the worship of Liberty and the State of Nature, which afterwards led to such questionable results in the cases of Byron and of Shelley, left him entirely unharmed. It is true that rigid formalists have been found to object to the 'natural marriage' of the lovers in the poem, deploring the absence of a clergyman on the island. But with these we need not concern ourselves.

The success of the poems was but moderate; yet it sufficed to bring the author into notice in Edinburgh, where he and his wife were spending the season with his mother and sisters, and whence Sir Walter Scott wrote of him, in a letter to Joanna Baillie, as 'an excellent, warm-hearted, and enthusiastic young man,' adding that, 'Something too much, perhaps, of the latter quality' placed him upon the list of originals.

Dividing his time between Edinburgh and Elleray, the young poet now continued to vary his active open-air life by the plotting and composition of new poems, and in these pursuits, had his affairs continued prosperous, it is quite possible that the remainder of his life might have been spent. For it is a truism that any large measure of happiness is unfavourable to enterprise, and what young Wilson now really stood in need of was some stimulus to exertion from without. Such stimulus duly arrived, taking the form of what in a worldly sense is known as ruin. To speak more circumstantially, in the fourth year after his marriage, the unencumbered fortune of £50,000 which he had enjoyed from the time of his father's death, was, through the dishonesty of an uncle who had acted as steward of the estate, entirely lost to him.[1] But, severe as this blow was, his biographers are agreed in pronouncing it to have been a blessing in disguise, and the means of bringing out much that was in the man, which would otherwise in all probability have been lost to the world.

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[1] It is distinctly stated in the *Life*, vol. 1, p. 180, that the loss of fortune was complete; but a subsequent statement is somewhat at variance with this.

It was now, of course, necessary for him to put his shoulder to the wheel, and, with the exception of Sir Walter Scott, perhaps no man ever rose more manfully or uncomplainingly to the occasion. But between these parallel cases there was one great difference; for Scott's misfortunes fell upon him when he was advanced in years and worn with toil, whilst Wilson was able to bring the prime of youth and strength to bear upon his troubles. He now took up his abode altogether in Edinburgh, being gladly received into the house of his mother, – a lady who to a fine presence and strong and amiable character added notable house-keeping talents, which enabled her during several successive years to accomplish the somewhat difficult and delicate task of making three separate families comfortable and happy under one roof. In the same year, 1815, Wilson was called to the Scots Bar. But, though for a year or two to come he seems to have made a point of staying in Edinburgh whilst the Courts were sitting, a short experience sufficed to convince him that his vocation did not lie in that direction. It was some time before he succeeded in settling down to congenial work, and, indeed, what we hear most of during the next year or so are pedestrian and fishing excursions to the Highlands. Whilst on these expeditions great would be the distances which he compassed on foot, immense the baskets of fish which he brought home. On one of them, he had his wife as his companion, when the happy Bohemianism of the young couple – or, as some would have it, the poet's eccentricity of conduct – led them into some queer experiences.

Among his adventures we may specify a contest in the four manly arts of running, leaping, wrestling, and drinking, with a local champion nicknamed King of the Drovers, in which Wilson came off victorious.

In March 1816 appeared his second volume of verse, entitled *The City of the Plague*. This poem forms a startling contrast to the *Isle of Palms*, for, in place of nature at its softest and sentiment sweet to the point of cloying, we are now presented with the gloomiest and ghastliest of studies in the charnel-house style. Several of the scenes depicting the madness of the London streets at the period of the great pestilential visitation are by no means without a certain power, which, however, inclines to degenerate into violence. Two young sailors – certainly most unlike to all preconceived notions of the seamen of the age of Blake – help to supply the necessary relief and 'sentiment,' of which there is no lack. But, from beginning to end, there is little or nothing truly poetical in the tragedy. The movement of its blank verse is most frequently harsh and jolting, and serves to confirm one in the opinion that the author was well-inspired when he abandoned poetry, as he was now to do. Nor do the minor poems which make up the remainder of the volume show cause for altering this judgment. Certainly they abound, even to excess, in evidence of the love of nature; but that alone never yet made a poet.

The transition which now lay before the author was an abrupt and violent one. From the world of nature and sentiment in which he had hitherto dwelt undisturbed, he found himself summoned

to pass into the arena of periodical literature, and that in an age when not only was it the misfortune of such literature to be before all things political, but when political feeling ran to a pitch of which at the present day it is difficult even to form a conception, – when the mere designations Whig and Tory, as mutually applied, were regarded less as party distinctions than as terms of abuse or reproach. And, to add to the contrast which lay before Wilson, the place in which he was called to take this step was precisely that in which the war of periodicals was destined to be waged most keenly. In order properly to understand the circumstances which led to this warfare, it is necessary to go back some years.

The horrors of the French Revolution had been followed in Edinburgh by a strong Tory reaction – a reaction of the excesses of which Henry Cockburn, in his Memorials, has left a highly-coloured and perhaps not unprejudiced account. In 1802, as a counterpoise to overwhelming Tory supremacy, and a rallying-point for those thereto opposed, the *Edinburgh Review* had been established. It was supported by a group of remarkably able young men, whose talents soon raised it to a position of unexampled influence in the world of letters. That it performed excellent service in the cause of enlightenment is undeniable; yet it failed to bear itself with all the moderation proper to success, and in time showed signs of becoming in its turn a tyranny. Those who were opposed to it, whilst regarding as dangerous its opinions in politics and religion, also grew tired (in their own words) of its flippancy and conceit. Now it happened that about

this time a certain new magazine, recently founded by a very shrewd and enterprising Edinburgh publisher, after languishing for some months under incompetent editorship, had reached the very point of dissolution. In this periodical the Tory malcontents saw an instrument ready to their hands. New spirit was infused into its nerveless frame, and in October 1817 appeared the first number of Blackwood's remodelled Edinburgh Magazine. And among those who gave the hot fresh blood of youth to revive its languishing existence, one of the foremost was John Wilson. It may be mentioned that before this he had contributed a literary article to the rival organ, with the presiding genius of which he was on terms of friendship. His new departure led to a rupture of that friendship, but to hold that his acts had committed him to the support of the *Edinburgh Review* would be to put an altogether strained construction upon them.

A detailed history of the stormy first years of the new publication, however piquant and racy it might be made, forms no part of our present scheme. Suffice it to remind the reader that the 'success of scandal' which the magazine at once obtained is matter of notoriety; nor can that success be pronounced undeserved. Indeed the very first number of the new issue, besides scathing articles on Coleridge and Leigh Hunt, contained the celebrated 'Translation from an Ancient Chaldee Manuscript' – afterwards suppressed – consisting of a thinly-veiled attack upon a rival magazine, and abounding in gross personalities to the address of leading citizens of Edinburgh. These excesses,

though the cause of much heart-burning at the time, can scarcely be pronounced of enduring interest; and it is more profitable, as well as more pleasing, to turn to the other side of the picture. For it must not by any means be supposed that the new venture relied solely upon objectionable personalities for attracting and holding its readers. 'These,' as Wilson's biographer observes, 'would have excited but a slight and temporary notice, had the bulk of the articles not displayed a rare combination of much higher qualities;' and she goes on to say that whatever subjects were discussed were handled with a masterly vigour and freshness, and developed with a fulness of knowledge and variety of talent that could not fail to command respect even from the least approving critic. Still it is undeniable that for many months to come the series of onslaughts was kept up almost without intermission, whilst even persons locally as highly and as justly respected as Chalmers and Playfair were made to feel the sting of the lash. Consisting as it did of a recrudescence of the discountenanced literary methods of the age of Smollett, all this is regrettable enough, and of much of it there can be little doubt that 'The Leopard' – to give Wilson the name which he bore in the magazine – was art and part. His exact share in productions which were not merely anonymous but of which mystification was an essential feature is impossible to trace; but we are glad at least to have the assurance of his daughter that, amid all the violence of language and extravagance of censure which disfigured his early contributions to the magazine, she

has been unable to bring home to his hand 'any instance of unmanly attack, or one shade of real malignity.' Our knowledge of the man's character makes us ready enough to believe that he did not mean to give pain; whilst there is always this excuse – whatever it may be worth – for Maga's early indiscretions: that they were the work of inexperienced men, carried away by the exuberance of their spirits, and genuinely – if indefensibly – ignorant of the laws of literary good manners, or, as one of themselves has expressed it, of the 'structure and practice of literature' as it existed at that day in Britain. With which reflection, an unthankful subject may be dismissed. For ourselves the real significance of the magazine in its early days consists, not in stories of challenges sent or damages paid, but in the fact that it afforded to John Wilson a first opportunity of giving full and free play to his talents. The characteristic of his genius was not so much *fineness* as abundance, and thus we may believe that his gain from the new stimulus to constant and rapid production more than balanced his loss from absence of opportunities of polishing his work. Certainly from the time of his active and regular employment, he began to throw off those tendencies to affectation and philandering which had characterised his early efforts in the 'Lake' school, and though he never quite lost the habit of as the French say 'caressing his phrase,' he became from henceforth more virile, more himself.

Standing now to all appearance committed to literature as his vocation, in the year 1819 he left his mother's hospitable

roof, and removed with his wife and family to a small house of his own, situated in Ann Street, on the outskirts of the town, where, besides having Watson Gordon, the portrait-painter, for his immediate neighbour, he enjoyed the society of Raeburn and Allan among artists, and of Lockhart, Galt, Hogg, and the Hamiltons among literary men.

In April of the year following, by the death of Dr Thomas Brown, the Chair of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh became vacant. Wilson thereupon resolved to present himself as a candidate for it, as did Sir William Hamilton, and though the names of other aspirants are mentioned, from the first the real contest lay between these two. They had both been brilliant students at Oxford, but in almost every other respect their qualifications for the coveted post were about as different as could be; for since his college days Hamilton had devoted himself exclusively to the study of philosophy, and had now substantial results of his labours to exhibit, whilst Wilson – though we are expressly told that the study in question had always had a powerful attraction for him – was yet known to the world only as a daring and brilliant littérateur, and a genial and somewhat Bohemian personality. There is no need to say with which of the two, in such a competition, the advantage at first sight seemed to lie. But it is necessary to explain that the election was fought on political grounds, that Hamilton was a Whig, and that the electing body was the Town Council of Edinburgh. It is gratifying to be able to record that the candidates themselves remained upon

friendly terms. But never had party-feeling been known to run so high as between their respective adherents, – so that, before the election was over, Wilson had been called on to face charges of being a 'reveller,' which he probably was, a blasphemer, which we cannot think him ever to have been, and a bad husband and father, which he certainly was not. In the end he secured a majority of twelve out of thirty votes; whilst an attempt to set aside his election, which was made at a subsequent meeting of the Council, ignominiously collapsed.

Keenly alive to the responsibilities of a position which he cannot long have looked forward to occupying, the newly-made Professor at once devoted himself to preparation for the discharge of his duties. Whilst thus engaged, his application was intense, – as well it might be, for it was stipulated that he was to deliver some hundred-and-fifty lectures during the forthcoming Session, and he had but four months in which to prepare them. Native genius, pluck and perseverance, however, carried him triumphantly over every obstacle. His first lecture has thus been described by one who was present on the occasion.[2]

> 'There was a furious bitterness of feeling against him among the classes of which probably most of his pupils would consist, and although I had no prospect of being among them, I went to his first lecture prepared to join in a cabal, which I understood was formed to put him down. The lecture-room was crowded to the ceiling. Such

[2] Letter quoted by Mrs Gordon.

> a collection of hard-browed, scowling Scotsmen, muttering over their knobsticks, I never saw. The Professor entered with a bold step, amid profound silence. Everyone expected some deprecatory or propitiatory introduction of himself, and his subject, upon which the mass was to decide against him, reason or no reason; but he began in a voice of thunder right into the *matter* of his lecture, kept up unflinchingly and unhesitatingly, without a pause, a flow of rhetoric such as Dugald Stewart or Thomas Brown, his predecessors, never delivered in the same place. Not a word, not a murmur escaped his captivated, I ought to say his conquered, audience, and at the end they gave him a right-down unanimous burst of applause. Those who came to scoff remained to praise.'

And from henceforth the Professor's enemies were silenced.

It can scarcely fail to strike the reader that into Wilson's election to the professorship there had entered not a little of what was casual, or the result of impulse; still his lucky star must have ruled at the moment, for the sequel far more than justified his rashness. As poet he had been mediocre, and as lawyer 'out of his element,' but there exists abundant testimony to prove that as lecturer and instructor of youth he was the right man in the right place. As was the way of his spirited and generous nature, he threw himself heart and soul into his new work; but though we are assured that his attainments in that department left nothing to be desired, it was far less to these than to character and personality that he owed the success which

he undoubtedly won. Certainly philosophers more profound, and probably men of greater general attainments have occupied his Chair, but assuredly never one who united his happy powers of breathing life into the instruction which he imparted and inspiring his scholars with a keen and quickening enthusiasm for himself. And that he succeeded so well in this was perhaps due to the fact that, in addition to his wide and general humanity, there was about him a certain boyishness, which, when joined with the dignity and character of manhood, seldom fails in its appeal to youth.

From among the multitude of pupils who cherished grateful and happy recollections of his class, his biographer has presented us with the testimony of three. The first of these is Hill Burton, the historian of Scotland, who warmly acknowledges his kindness, and whose future eminence the Professor would seem to have divined; for, though at all times accessible to his pupils and conscientious in the discharge of his duties, he appears to have made a friend of Burton almost at the first meeting. Another of his students, Mr Alexander Taylor Innes, has left a picture of North in his lecture-room, from which, though it belongs by rights to a later date, I make no apology for quoting here.

> 'His appearance in his class-room,' says that gentleman, 'it is far easier to remember than to forget. He strode into it with the professor's gown hanging loosely on his arms, took a comprehensive look over the mob of young faces, laid down his watch so as to be out of the reach of his

sledge-hammer fist, glanced at the notes of his lecture, and then, to the bewilderment of those who had never heard him before, looked long and earnestly out of the north window towards the spire of the old Tron Kirk; until, having at last got his idea, he faced round and uttered it with eye and hand, and voice and soul and spirit, and bore the class along with him. As he spoke the bright blue eye looked with a strange gaze into vacancy, sometimes sparkling with a coming joke, sometimes darkening before a rush of indignant eloquence; the tremulous upper lip curving with every wave of thought or hint of passion, and the golden-grey hair floating on the old man's mighty shoulders – if, indeed, that could be called age which seemed but the immortality of a more majestic youth. And occasionally, in the finer frenzy of his more imaginative passages – as when he spoke of Alexander, clay-cold at Babylon, with the world lying conquered around his tomb, or of the Highland hills, that pour the rage of cataracts adown their riven cliffs, or even of the human mind, with its "primeval granitic truths," the grand old face flushed with the proud thought, and the eyes grew dim with tears and the magnificent frame quivered with a universal emotion.'

Yet another pupil, the Reverend Dr William Smith, of North Leith, has thus recorded his impressions: —

'Of Professor Wilson as a lecturer on Moral Philosophy, it is not easy to convey any adequate idea to strangers, – to those who never saw his grand and noble form excited into bold and passionate action behind that strange, old-fashioned desk, nor heard his manly and eloquent voice

sounding forth its stirring utterances with all the strange and fitful cadence of a music quite peculiar to itself. The many-sidedness of the man, and the unconventional character of his prelections, combine to make it exceedingly difficult to define the nature and grounds of his wonderful power as a lecturer. I am certain that if every student who ever attended his class were to place on record his impressions of these, the impressions of each student would be widely different, and yet they would not, taken all together, exhaust the subject, or supply a complete representation either of his matter or his manner… The roll of papers on which each lecture was written, which he carried into the class-room firmly grasped in his hand, and suddenly unrolled and spread out on the desk before him, commencing to read the same moment, could not fail to attract the notice of any stranger in his class-room. It was composed in large measure of portions of old letters – the addresses and postage-marks on which could be easily seen as he turned the leaf, yet it was equally evident that the writing was neat, careful and distinct; and, except in a more than usually dark and murk day, it was read with perfect ease and fluency.'

And, in reference to a certain specific lecture, the same gentleman adds, 'The whole soul of the man seemed infused into his subject, and to be rushing forth with resistless force in the torrent of his rapidly-rolling words. As he spoke, his whole frame quivered with emotion. He evidently saw the scene he described, and such was the sympathetic force of his strong poetic imagination, that he made us, whether we would or not,

see it too. Now dead silence held the class captive. In the interval of his words you would have heard a pin fall. Again, at some point, the applause could not be restrained, and was vociferous.' The writer concludes by stating that he has heard some of the greatest orators of the day, naming Lords Derby, Brougham, Lyndhurst; Peel, O'Connell, Sheil, Follett, Chalmers, Caird, Guthrie, M'Neile; and has heard them 'in their very best styles make some of their most celebrated appearances; but for popular eloquence, for resistless force, for the seeming inspiration that swayed the soul, and the glowing sympathy that entranced the hearts of his entire audience, that lecture by Professor Wilson far excelled the best of these I ever listened to.'

This, within its proper limits, is the strongest praise. And, on the other hand, we must guard against the supposition that these lectures – highly-coloured and emotional as they undoubtedly were – consisted solely, or even mainly, of oratorical, or conscious or unconscious dramatic display. We are assured that this was by no means the case; that the Professor scorned to sacrifice the serviceable to the ornamental, never for a moment hesitating to grapple with the central difficulties of his subject, or shirking the irksome duty of 'hammering' at them during the greater part of a Session.

Increased financial resources now enabled him to resume occupation of his beloved Elleray, where a new and larger dwelling-house, suitable to the accommodation of a family, had by this time been built. There, many of the intervals of his

busy University life were spent in happy domesticity, and there, in 1825, he was visited by Sir Walter Scott, whom he fêted with a brilliant regatta on Windermere. It is to these years of professional duties varied by vacations in the country that his novels and tales belong. They comprise three volumes, and, as their characteristics are identical, may be considered side by side. They consist uniformly of tales of pastoral or humble life, and the author has recorded that his object in writing them was to speak of the 'elementary feelings of the human soul in isolation, under the light of a veil of poetry.' The impression which they produce upon a reader of the present day is that this programme has been but too systematically adhered to. The stories themselves do not lack interest, and their motives are at all times human; but they are deliberately localized in some other world than ours, and if there thence ensues a certain æsthetic gain, it is accompanied by a more than proportionate loss in vraisemblance and in moral force. To speak more plainly, if the world of Wilson's tales is a better world than ours, it yet remains an artificial one, his stories develope in accordance with the rules of a preconceived ideal, and a weakening of their interest is the result. For though many a writer has seen life in a way of his own, Wilson seems to have deliberately set himself to see it in a way belonging to somebody else. In fact, throughout this series of little books, he aspires to appear in the character of a prose Wordsworth; but he is a Wordsworth who has lost the noble plainness of his original, and though his actual style is less marred by floridness

and redundancy here than elsewhere, still the vices of prettiness, self-consciousness, artificiality, and sentiment suffice to stamp his work as an imitation, decadent from the lofty source of its inspiration.

Of the *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life*, a volume of short tales published in 1822, the not impartial author of the biography, writing in the early sixties, remarks that it has acquired a popularity of the most enduring kind – a statement which to-day one would hesitate to endorse. She adds that the stories are 'poems in prose, in which, amid fanciful scenes and characters, the struggles of humanity are depicted with pathetic fidelity, and the noblest lessons of virtue and religion are interwoven, in no imaginary harmony, with the homely realities of Scottish peasant life.' And subject to the not inconsiderable abatements noted above, this may no doubt be accepted.

The Foresters (1825) is the history of the family of one Michael Forester, who is exhibited in turn in his relation as a dutiful son, a kind self-sacrificing brother, a loving and faithful husband, and a wise affectionate father; whilst from time to time we are also enabled to trace his beneficent influence in the affairs of other members of the small community in which he lives. The tone of the book is peaceful and soothing; it inculcates cheerfulness and resignation, and holds up for our edification a picture of that contentment which springs from the practice of virtue. A group of faultless creatures – for none but the subordinate characters have any faults – pursue the tenor of their

lives amid fair scenes of nature, and, when sorrow or misfortune falls to their lot, meet it with an inspiring fortitude. To scoff at such a book were to supply proof of incompetence in criticism – of which the very soul consists in sympathy with all that is sincere in spirit and not inadequate in execution. Yet equally uncritical were it to fail to mark how far short this story falls of the exquisite spontaneity of such work as Goldsmith's immortal essay in the same style.

Possibly, however, of the three volumes, the *Trials of Margaret Lyndsay* (1823) is that which most forcibly conveys the lessons common to all – the teaching of Wordsworth, that is to say, as made plain by a sympathetic disciple. It is the story of a beautiful and virtuous maiden, the daughter of a printer who, having become imbued with the doctrines of Tom Paine, falls into evil courses and is imprisoned on a charge of sedition. His family – consisting of Margaret, her ailing mother, aged grandmother, and two sisters, one of whom is mentally afflicted and the other blind – are in consequence reduced to great poverty, which, supported by their piety, they endure without complaint. Removing from their country home to a dark and narrow street in Edinburgh, they open a small school, and for a time with fair success make head against their troubles. But misfortune follows relentlessly upon their traces. Lyndsay dies in disgrace, Margaret's sailor sweetheart perishes by drowning, and one after the other she sees the members of the little group which surrounds her removed by death. Still she does not lose

heart. Left alone in the world, she is received into the house of a benevolent young lady, and, there, is happy enough, until the undesired attentions of the young lady's brother compel her to seek another home. Journeying alone and on foot, she seeks a refuge with a distant and estranged relation; by whom she is coldly received, but upon whose withered heart her gentle influence in time works the most happy change. And now, at length, it seems that her hardly-won happiness is to be crowned by marriage to the man of her choice. But what has seemed her good fortune turns out to be in reality the worst of all her woes; for the brave but dissolute soldier who has won her heart is discovered to possess a wife already. Thus from trial to trial do we follow her, until at last she is left in possession of a very modest share of felicity, whilst from her story we learn the lesson of the duties of courage and cheerfulness, the consolations of virtue, and the healing power of nature.

But of course it is not to the department of fiction that Wilson's most conspicuous literary achievements belong. When once he had settled down into the swing of his professorial duties, his connexion with Blackwood's Magazine was resumed, and his biographer truly remarks that probably no periodical was ever more indebted to one individual than was 'Maga' to Christopher North. And, in passing, it may be stated that this name, which had at first been assumed by various of the contributors, was soon exclusively associated with himself. As to the number, variety, and extent of his contributions, Mrs Gordon has furnished some

curious information. During many years these were never fewer than on an average two to each number; whilst on more than one occasion he produced, within the month, almost the entire contents of an issue. In the year 1830, he contributed in the month of January two articles; in February four; three in March; one each in April and May; four in June; three in July; seven (or 116 pages) in August; one in September; two in October; and one each in November and December – being thirty articles, or one thousand two hundred columns in the year. (Against this, however, there must be set off his extremely liberal quotations from books under review.) The subjects dealt with in the month of August were the following: – 'The Great Moray Floods'; 'The Lay of the Desert'; 'The Wild Garland, and Sacred Melodies'; 'Wild Fowl Shooting'; 'Colman's Random Records'; 'Clark on Climate'; 'Noctes, No. 51.' In the year following, by the month of September he had already contributed twenty articles, five of which were in the August number. And, finally, in 1833, he wrote no fewer than fifty-four articles, or upwards of two thousand four hundred closely-printed columns, on politics, and general literature! Nor, when the extraordinary influence and popularity enjoyed by Blackwood's Magazine at that period, and the fact that these were mainly due to Christopher North are borne in mind, will these labours run any risk of being confounded with those of the ordinary literary hack. At the same time it may be necessary to caution the reader against the oft-repeated error that Wilson was at any time editor of the

Magazine.

Of his habits of composition at this the most brilliant and prolific period of his career, his daughter furnishes the following account, from which it will be seen that his literary procedure was ordered with complete disregard to comfort. He was now living in a house which he had built for himself in Gloucester Place, which was to be his home for the remainder of his life.

> 'The amazing rapidity with which he wrote, caused him too often to delay his work to the very last moment, so that he almost always wrote under compulsion, and every second of time was of consequence. Under such a mode of labour there was no hour left for relaxation. When regularly in for an article for Blackwood, his whole strength was put forth, and it may be said he struck into life what he had to do at a blow. He at these times began to write immediately after breakfast, that meal being despatched with a swiftness commensurate with the necessity of the case before him. He then shut himself into his study, with an express command that no one was to disturb him, and he never stirred from his writing-table until perhaps the greater part of a *Noctes* was written, or some paper of equal brilliancy and interest completed. The idea of breaking his labour by taking a constitutional walk never entered his thoughts for a moment. Whatever he had to write, even though a day or two were to keep him close at work, he never interrupted his pen, saving to take his night's rest, and a late dinner served to him in his study. The hour for that meal was on these occasions nine o'clock; his dinner then consisted

> invariably of a boiled fowl, potatoes, and a glass of water – he allowed himself no wine. After dinner he resumed his pen till midnight, when he retired to bed, not unfrequently to be disturbed by an early printer's boy.'

His rapidly turned-out 'copy' would soon cover the table at which he wrote, after which the floor about his feet would be strewn with pages of his MS. 'thick as autumnal leaves in Vallombrosa.' Nor did he, even in the depth of winter, indulge in a fire in his study, or in any other illumination than that afforded by a tallow candle set in a kitchen candlestick.

In the meantime he had not lost his love of the country and of country pursuits, and we hear of holidays spent at Innerleithen, in Ettrick Forest – where he rented Thirlestane – near Langholm, where his son John was established in a farm, in the Highlands, and in a cruise with an 'Experimental Squadron' of the Navy, during which he was accommodated with a swinging cot in the cockpit of H.M.S. *Vernon*. As is the case in the lives of so many celebrated men, these years, though the most fruitful, were not the most eventful of his life, and therefore call for less detailed examination than those which had preceded them. His character was formed, he was in the full swing of his labours, and the best key to the history of this period is to be found in the study of the *Noctes*, the *Recreations*, and the other works which it produced.

His heroic literary activity was continued down to 1840, in which year he was attacked by a paralytic affection of the right hand, which made writing irksome to him, so that for the next

five years he contributed but two papers to the magazine. This ailment was the first warning he received that his wonderful constitution and great physical strength were subject to the universal law. But already the hand of death had been busy among his circle. In 1834 he had lost his esteemed friend Blackwood, in 1835 the Ettrick Shepherd had followed the publisher, whilst in 1837 he sustained the supreme bereavement by losing his beloved and devoted wife. His grief on this occasion was profound and lasting, and a touching picture of its uncontrollable outbursts in the presence of his class has been preserved. There, if anything occurred to renew the memory of his sorrow, he would pause for a moment or two in his lecture, 'fling himself forward on the desk, bury his face in his hands, and while his whole frame heaved with visible emotion, would weep and sob like a very child.' So, in his work and his play, his joy and his sorrow, the whole man was cast in an heroic mould. And, with that singular but sincere, though oft misunderstood, fantasticness, which in imaginative natures demands the outward visible sign, as long as he lived he continued with scrupulous care the habit of wearing white cambric weepers on the sleeves of his coat or gown, out of respect for the memory of his faithful partner.

The shadows were already falling thick about the lion-like head of the old Professor, and we have now to acknowledge that between his last years and the rest of his life there exists a discrepancy as regrettable as it is unexpected. The highest of

animal spirits had been his through the brilliant promise of youth and the happy activity and domesticity of maturity, and when we remember his robust constitution and mellow philosophy, we naturally look forward to see him enjoy a green and peaceful old age. But such prognostications are apt to be fallacious, and the fact stands that his old age was a melancholy one. Nor was its melancholy of that kind, by no means incompatible with a large measure of serenity, which is directly traceable to evils common to all men whose years are prolonged; it was a peculiar despondency, profound and unexplained. Indeed the last pages of the *Life* are sad reading, and we pass hastily over them to the end.

The first symptom of the alteration in his character of which we hear is his sense of loneliness. There was no occasion for him to be lonely, for he was rich in affectionate children and grand-children, yet in spite of these his habits insensibly became solitary, he grew to dislike being intruded upon, and at last was seldom seen in public. Still for a time his broad-brimmed hat with its deep crape band, his flowing locks, and his stately figure buttoned in its black coat, continued to be welcome sights in the streets of Edinburgh, and still he continued, without intermission, his labours among his class, until, in the winter of 1850, an alarming seizure which occurred in his retiring-room at the University compelled him to absent himself from his duties. In the following year he finally retired from the Professorship, which he had held for thirty years, his services being recognized by Government with a pension of £300 a year.

He now felt that his usefulness in life was over, and from henceforth his despondency deepened. We read that 'something of a settled melancholy rested on his spirit, and for days he would scarcely utter a word or allow a smile to lighten up his face;' and, again, that 'long and mournful meditation took possession of him; days of silence revealed the depth of his suffering, and it was only by fits and starts that anything like composure visited his heart.' He himself speaks of his 'hopeless misery.' 'Nothing,' he said to his daughter, 'can give you an idea of how utterly wretched I am; my mind is going, I feel it.' And, indeed, it seems that a gradual mental decline had set in. But he was spared its progress. On the 1st April 1854, at his house in Gloucester Place, he was attacked by paralysis, and there two days later, mourned by an almost patriarchal family of descendants, he breathed his last.

In the details of his daily life, Wilson was accustomed to follow his own inclinations more than 'tis given to most men to do, his robust individuality disdaining the minor fashions and conventions of the day, whilst his native independence, and still more his love of home, made him completely indifferent to what is known as social success. It is not in the 'great world,' therefore, that we must seek for the traits which characterize him. But a man is what he is at home, and within his own sphere Wilson's sympathies were of the widest and deepest. He was adored by every member of his large family, whilst his own large-hearted affection embraced all, down to – or, as perhaps I should say, remembering his special love for young children, up to the

youngest babe in the household. Such anecdotes, too, as those told by his daughter of his generous treatment of his defaulting uncle, of his relations with his superannuated henchman, Billy Balmer, or of his sitting up all night at the bedside of an old female servant who was dying, 'arranging with gentle but awkward hand the pillow beneath her head,' or cheering her with encouraging words, – these speak more for the genuine humanity of the man than a thousand triumphs gained in an artificial world.

He also shared with Sir Walter Scott the love of birds and animals of all kinds, from the dog, Rover – one of many dogs – who, crawling upstairs in its last moments, died with its paw in its master's hand, to the sparrow which inhabited his study for eleven years, and which, boldly perching on his shoulder, would sometimes carry off a hair from his shaggy head to build its nest. In these matters animals have an instinct which rarely misleads them, and that they had good grounds for recognizing a friend in the Professor is proved by the following incident. One afternoon Wilson, then far advanced in life, was observed remonstrating with a carter who was driving an overladen horse through the streets of Edinburgh —

> 'The carter, exasperated at this interference, took up his whip in a threatening way, as if with intent to strike the Professor. In an instant that well-nerved hand twisted it from the coarse fist of the man, as if it had been a straw, and walking quietly up to the cart he unfastened its *trams*, and hurled the whole weight of coals into the street. The

> rapidity with which this was done left the driver of the cart speechless. Meanwhile, poor Rosinante, freed from his burden, crept slowly away, and the Professor, still clutching the whip in one hand, and leading the horse in the other, proceeded through Moray Place to deposit the wretched animal in better keeping than that of his driver.'

'This little episode,' adds the writer, 'is delightfully characteristic of his impulsive nature, and the benevolence of his heart.'

Whilst human nature remains what it is, traits of such broad and genial humanity as this are never out of date; but when we turn from the writer to the writings, it is to find the case altered, and ourselves brought face to face with the devastations of time. In the sense of great and immediate effect produced by his work, Wilson was unquestionably the most brilliant, as – excepting the too-fertile Galt – he was the most prolific, of the group of distinguished authors who are here associated with the publishing-house of Blackwood; yet in vitality, in enduring freshness, such a novel as *The Inheritance*, such a sea-piece as *Tom Cringle's Log*, not to speak of such a character-study as *The Provost*, to-day leaves his work far behind. Of course this is in large measure due to the nature, not to the defects, of that work. North's most distinctive writings were not creative, and in general it is only creative work that lives. The critic's reputation is transitory; Time's revenge deals swiftly, hardly by it; it has none of the phœnix-property of the creator's. Of all our distinguished

critical reputations of the last hundred years or so, how many now survive? To-day the critic Johnson is remembered chiefly for blindness, the critic Jeffrey for overweening self-confidence when he was wrong, the critic Macaulay for idle rhetoric and for consistent failure to strike the mark. The appreciator Lamb is almost alone in holding his own. And there is not one reader in a thousand who has time, or cares, for the purely historical task of looking closer, of studying these eminent writers in relation to the age in which they lived, and of estimating accordingly the services which they performed. Christopher North, in so far as he was a critic, has not escaped the common doom. Scattered over the pages of the *Noctes*, there are no doubt some shrewd and pregnant observations upon writers and upon literature. But these sparse grains of salt are not enough to preserve the general fabric from decay; whilst the more numerous errors of judgment in which his work abounds require no pointing out. As a reviewer North was not lacking in discrimination, as may be seen in the historical though generally misconceived essay on Tennyson; and, granted a really good opportunity – as in the case of that completion of *Christabel* which was to Martin Tupper the pastime of some idle days – no man knew better how to avail himself of it. The pages signed by him also afford abundant evidence of the gentleness, generosity, and enthusiasm of his spirit. But when so much has been said, what remains to be added? Of stimulus to the reader, of conspicuous insight into the subject discussed, we find but little.

Turning to the essays, collected under the title of 'Recreations of Christopher North,' we sometimes see the author to better advantage, as, for instance, when he dons his 'Sporting Jacket,' and recounts in mock-heroic style the Sportsman's Progress. The subject was one which keenly appealed to him, rousing all the enthusiasm of his perfervid nature, and some very bright and characteristic pages are the result.

His hero is fishing, and has hooked a fish.

> 'But the salmon has grown sulky, and must be made to spring to the plunging stone. There, suddenly, instinct with new passion, she shoots out of the foam like a bar of silver bullion; and, relapsing into the flood, is in another moment at the very head of the waterfall! Give her the butt – give her the butt – or she is gone for ever with the thunder into ten fathom deep! – Now comes the trial of your tackle – and when was Phin ever known to fail at the edge of cliff or cataract? Her snout is southwards – right up the middle of the main current of the hill-born river, as if she would seek its very source where she was spawned! She still swims swift, and strong, and deep – and the line goes steady, boys, steady – stiff and steady as a Tory in the roar of Opposition. There is yet an hour's play in her dorsal fin – danger in the flap of her tail – and yet may her silver shoulder shatter the gut against a rock. Why, the river was yesterday in spate, and she is fresh run from the sea. All the lesser waterfalls are now level with the flood, and she meets with no impediment or obstruction – the coast is clear – no tree-roots here – no floating branches – for during the night

they have all been swept down to the salt loch. *In medio tutissimus ibis*– ay, now you feel she begins to fail – the butt tells now every time you deliver your right. What! another mad leap! yet another sullen plunge! She seems absolutely to have discovered, or rather to be an impersonation of, the Perpetual Motion. Stand back out of the way, you son of a sea-cook! – you in the tattered blue breeches, with the tail of your shirt hanging out. Who the devil sent you all here, ye vagabonds? – Ha! Watty Ritchie, my man, is that you? God bless your honest laughing phiz! What, Watty, would you think of a Fish like that about Peebles? Tam Grieve never gruppit sae heavy a ane since first he belanged to the Council. – Curse that collie! Ay! well done, Watty! Stone him to Stobbo. Confound these stirks – if that white one, with caving horns, kicking heels, and straight-up tail, come bellowing by between us and the river, then "Madam! all is lost, except honour!" If we lose this Fish at six o'clock, then suicide at seven. Our will is made – ten thousand to the Foundling – ditto to the Thames Tunnel – ha – ha – my Beauty! Methinks we could fain and fond kiss thy silver side, languidly lying afloat on the foam as if all further resistance now were vain, and gracefully thou wert surrendering thyself to death! No faith in female – she trusts to the last trial of her tail – sweetly workest thou, O Reel of Reels! and on thy smooth axle spinning sleep'st, even, as Milton describes her, like our own worthy planet. Scrope – Bainbridge – Maule – princes among Anglers – oh! that you were here! Where the devil is Sir Humphrey? At his retort? By mysterious sympathy – far off at his own Trows, the

Kerss feels that we are killing the noblest Fish whose back ever rippled the surface of deep or shallow in the Tweed. Tom Purdy stands like a seer, entranced in glorious vision, beside turreted Abbotsford. Shade of Sandy Govan! Alas! alas! Poor Sandy – why on thy pale face that melancholy smile! – Peter! The Gaff! The Gaff! Into the eddy she sails, sick and slow, and almost with a swirl – whitening as she nears the sand – there she has it – struck right into the shoulder, fairer than that of Juno, Diana, Minerva, or Venus – and lies at last in all her glorious length and breadth of beaming beauty, fit prey for giant or demigod angling before the Flood!'

Nor are his pictures of Coursing and of Fox-Hunting less good. But anon his overladen style crops out again, as in this passage, where he has just discharged his gun into the midst of a flock of wild-duck afloat upon a loch: —

'Now is the time for the snow-white, here and there ebon-spotted Fro – who with burning eyes has lain couched like a spaniel, his quick breath ever and anon trembling on a passionate whine, to bounce up, as if discharged by a catapulta, and first with immense and enormous high-and-far leaps, and then, fleet as any greyhound, with a breast-brushing brattle down the brae, to dash, all-fours, like a flying squirrel fearlessly from his tree, many yards into the bay with one splashing and momentarily disappearing spang, and then, head and shoulders and broad line of back and rudder tail, all elevated above or level with the wavy water-line, to mouth first that murdered mawsey

of a mallard, lying as still as if she had been dead for years, with her round, fat, brown bosom towards heaven – then that old Drake, in a somewhat similar posture, but in more gorgeous apparel, his belly being of a pale grey, and his back delicately pencilled and crossed with numberless waved dusky lines – precious prize to one skilled like us in the angling art – next – nobly done, glorious Fro – that cream-colour-crowned widgeon, with bright rufus chestnut breast, separated from the neck by loveliest waved ash-brown and white lines, while our mind's eye feasteth on the indescribable and changeable green beauty-spot of his wings – and now, if we mistake not, a Golden Eye, best described by his name – finally, that exquisite little duck the Teal; yes, poetical in its delicately pencilled spots as an Indian shell, and when kept to an hour, roasted to a minute, gravied in its own wild richness, with some few other means and appliances to boot, carved finely – most finely – by razor-like knife, in a hand skilful to dissect and cunning to divide – tasted by a tongue and palate both healthily pure as the dewy petal of a morning rose – swallowed by a gullet felt gradually to be extending itself in its intense delight – and received into a stomach yawning with greed and gratitude, – Oh! surely the thrice-blessed of all web-footed birds; the apex of Apician luxury; and able, were anything on the face of this feeble earth able, to detain a soul, on the very brink of fate, a short quarter of an hour from an inferior Elysium!'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.