

"An Early Outset, and a Long Career."

"I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth." 1 Kings xviii. 12.

[UNDER this title, we find in the *Pulpit*, a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr [James] Hamilton, in the National Scotch Church, Regent Square, on occasion of the death of Mr. Nisbet, the eminent London publisher, from which the following passages are extracted. Knowing Mr. Nisbet as we did, as a man of faith and prayer, with a heart overflowing with Christian benevolence, and a hand ready to every good work, we are glad to have a sketch of his career, however brief, from such a pen. We trust, however, that a fuller and more permanent memorial is in contemplation. The following outline does little more than *indicate* the salient points in his character and career.]

Mr. Nisbet was born at Kelso, a neighbourhood which has sent to London some of its best and most patriotic citizens, amongst others, the late venerable and much-loved minister of Wells Street, (Dr. Waugh) and a lamented baronet, who was among the most public-spirited of all our magistrates, and among the most exemplary of our own fellow-worshippers. (Sir John Pirie, Bart.) There, on the banks of the Tweed and the Teviot, our friend spent his boyhood, in happy ignorance of the world's worst ways, and from the exquisite scenery, imbibing influences and impressions which helped to preserve the greenness of his heart amidst the dust and smoke of our noisy Babel. There, too, he got the education, plain but substantial, which is within the reach of every Scotsman, and there were sown, and to some extent developed, the germs of youthful piety.

The time of a young man's arrival in London is a time of trial; and those who have the prudence or the principle to overcome the temptations of the first few months, are usually preserved to the end. It was with a heavy heart that our friend left Kelso on a wintry day in 1803; and I have heard him tell how he stood that evening on the bridge at Berwick, weeping till the tear had almost frozen on his cheek; and on his eighteenth birthday, he found himself a friendless youth in this great labyrinth, in London. One night, soon after his arrival, a young acquaintance, whom he had known in his own country-side, took him out to see some sights, and at last, their walk ended, in a blind alley, and a strange-looking place. Some instinct told him it was the house of the destroyer; and as at a signal made by his companion, the door opened, he started back in horror. He entreated his companion to come away, but he laughed at him, and went in and leaving him to find the rest of the way through the unknown streets. I have heard him tell how desolate he felt as he wandered back by himself that dreary night. It seemed to him as if the city to which he had come, must be a sort of Pandemonium. Already it had transformed into a profligate, the companion whom, ere leaving home, he had known as a virtuous youth; and his fancy was oppressed by a vague fear of evil, mysteries of iniquity and shadowy apprehensions of snares and pitfalls. He felt as if he too, might at last yield to the terrible fatality. The whole

thing was too painful for him, till he went into the sanctuary. But on the next Sabbath, he found his way to Swallow Street. The Scotch psalms were sung, prayer was offered, and a sermon was preached by the venerable and affectionate pastor. The little church soon brightened into a Bethel, and he was assured and comforted to find that even London had spots of which it could be said, "Surely, God is in this place." And when the service ended, and in the vestry, he was introduced to Dr Nicholl, and got a shake of that fatherly hand, he felt himself no longer friendless. He was almost immediately installed as a Sabbath-School teacher, and besides finding Christian companions, he commenced that course of active usefulness which was never to intermit for more than fifty years.

He feared God from his youth; and that godly fear in these first days of his inexperienced novitiate, twice over, preserved him. It made him hurry away from the door of that house of which it is said, "The dead are there, and its guests are in the depths of hell;" and to the unsullied purity of his early days, he doubtless owed much of that elasticity and freshness of feeling, and glad, gushing spirit, which marked him up to life's latest moment. Alas! his fellow-countryman had not the same fear before his eyes. In him, dissipation wrought death. A few more months sufficed to reduce both soul and body to a total wreck, and he returned to gasp out the remains of a blighted existence, amidst the scenes which he had quitted so hale and innocent. And this fear of God, as it made him shrink from evil, so it made him feel at home in the sanctuary. Perhaps he was not then so fully enlightened as afterwards; but he had that sense of God's presence, and those prepossessions for goodness and for the gospel, which made him happy in a spiritual atmosphere and in the midst of a praying people. The first home he found in London was his Sabbath home, and on the Monday morning, he went back to his West Indian counting-house with a lightened heart; for the gladness of the Sabbath lent a glory to the week, and amidst all its drudgery and discomforts, he still could glimpse, never more than six days distant, that sweet retreat with its calm asylum. "He loved the habitation of God's house, and delighted in that place where his honour dwelleth;" and with a grateful feeling of the blessing it had been to himself, he took two places in the pew, so that he might always be able to bring with him an acquaintance, or accommodate a stranger. The love which he then contracted for the house of prayer, became a ruling passion. It led him to spend large amounts of money in building churches at Kelso, Hawick, and [London]. It made him watch with affectionate interest, the laying of every stone and timber in this structure. It induced him to frequent services at the opening of new chapels, and at the settlement of ministers, and at the inauguration of every enterprise which promised to extend to others the privilege for which he felt himself so deep a debtor. I may add that it gave him so much of David's feeling, that whilst, like the royal minstrel, he delighted in its grave, sweet melody, and in other days, frequently conducted the psalmody. He would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord, than be excluded from its courts; and whilst as constant to his place as any fixture, it was his delight to minister to the comfort and convenience of his fellow-worshippers.

About 1809, he commenced business for himself. God greatly prospered him; and through his calling as a bookseller and publisher, he had great opportunities of usefulness. Many good books were introduced to notice through his tact and activity, and many good old books which had gone out of sight, received a second life in his "Christian Traveller's Library." He not only sold, but gave. His pockets were always full of tracts, or little volumes, which in his "walks of usefulness," he distributed to the working people, or to the children of his friends; and many an acceptable volume did he present to students, missionaries, and ministers. . . .

The grace for which our friend was most widely known, was liberality. Indeed, to many minds, the very name James Nisbet suggested some idea of charitable contribution. This too, commenced quite early. In his first employment as a merchant's clerk, and when "expected to be a gentleman on fifty pounds a-year," he contrived to save three sovereigns for benevolent purposes; and as every year made him richer, so at last, there were few evangelical societies, and not many philanthropic institutions, to which he was not a stated or occasional giver; and there have been objects which so stirred his feelings, that he gave them a thousand pounds at once. These gifts involved some sacrifice; and from the first year, when he spent on cordials for a poor consumptive patient, the money which should have procured him a new hat, to the last year of his life, when he rode in parliamentary trains in order to have the more to spare, he was constantly foregoing his own taste for elegant or expensive objects, in order to enjoy the sweeter luxury of doing good. The benefactions of some, are the overflowings of their affluence; but that charity is doubly blessed, and it is the kind which we should chiefly emulate, the charity which, like his, is mainly the savings of self-denial.

And yet, there is a form of Christian kindness quite as precious as alms-giving, and more within the attainment of many; what we might call alms-doing, the giving away to a heavy heart, a little of the joy of your cheerful one, the giving away to a forlorn or friendless person, a little of your large influence, the giving away to a person in perplexity, a little of your experienced counsel. Our late ruling elder was rich in such "alms-deeds which he *did*."

A man of tender feelings, he was ever ready to weep with those that wept; and he was always delighted when his sympathy could take the form of providing for the widow and the orphan. He used hospitality without grudging, and it would have been by this time, a bulky tome, the visitors' book which would have recorded all the messengers of the churches who have passed through his open doors, and been sent on their journey after a godly sort. Scarcely any shorter would have been the list which should have told their names; the young men for whom he found openings in business; the governesses whom he introduced to Christian families; the fatherless children for whom he found homes in orphan schools; and diligent as he was in his own business, we believe that he nearly gave as many hours to the business of the church and of public institutions, as he reserved for his own.

We complete our sketch by saying he was a man of prayer. Some men of action are too precipitate, too impatient to pray; but our friend felt deeply that, "except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it," and even in his earliest journeys, he took time to pray, and always liked when he could collect his household round him. His prayers were full of fervour and were marked by an affectionate precision. They seemed often to sweep the whole living horizon; and from time to time, every object and every friend were a sum of a warm and special mention. Latterly, a constant subject of his intercessions was the case of some friends at present in the Crimea.

He had reached his 70th year, but his eye was not dim, nor was his activity much abated. This day fortnight, he officiated *as* an elder at the communion, and lingered that evening in the church, so that he was all but the last to leave it. On the Tuesday morning, he was out of bed at six o'clock, and at eight o'clock was at his weekly post, the Orphan Working School, on Haverstock Hill. In the evening, he was to attend a meeting of the Young Men's Christian Association, a society in which he greatly rejoiced, contrasting its privileges with the recklessness and irreligion which prevailed in his own outset on life; but he felt slightly indisposed, and lay down. On Wednesday, he was much interested to receive in one of his letters, specimens of penmanship by the inmates of the Idiot Asylum, and he had just been inspecting them with interest, when his medical adviser came in. That friend was speaking to him, when all at once his countenance changed, and from the midst of his family and of his work, his spirit fled in a moment to the vision of its God. The transit could not be swifter. It was passing through the dark valley like a flash: "Absent from the body, and present with the Lord."

We have attempted no mere panegyric. We have not concealed the failings of our brother. Indeed, like his excellencies, they were of that kind which cannot easily be hid. By not being sufficiently slow to wrath, or slow to speak the wrath he felt, he vexed old friends too frequently, and in a moment's caprice, besides throwing away some influence, he often cancelled the recollection of his own past kindness, or undid the work which he had been doing well and doing long. But we need not enlarge on defects which exist no longer, and of which no trace can be found among spirits made perfect. We rather dwell on excellencies which he so strikingly exhibited. We rather recall that piety, which, amidst all other variations and vicissitudes, remained so constant for more than half a century. We rather think of that love to ordinances which found God's tabernacles so amiable, and which so often, on the wings of psalmody, was wafted into the regions of rapture, and which at communion services was so often melted into irrepressible tenderness. We rather fix our regard on that open-handed bounty, of which the channels were nearly as numerous as our religious and social charities, and that sleepless activity of which every day brought the renewal, and to which death itself was not so much the period as the sudden promotion. And whilst we dwell on the instructive past, and whilst we adore the grace which seized on that strong will, and which gave a right direction to that ardent spirit, amidst all our

condolence with his nearest friends and family, our felicitations yet more abound; for if theirs is no common loss, so neither is theirs a common legacy, endowed with the prayers of the pious poor, illustrious in a name which so many pilgrims have carried to distant shores, and endeared, in virtue of that bounteous memory which the coming years will only make kinder and more mellow.

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