

Poverty of the Learned

FORTUNE has rarely condescended to be the companion of genius: others find a hundred by-roads to her palace; there is but one open, and that a very indifferent one, for men of letters. Were we to erect an asylum for venerable genius, as we do for the brave and the helpless part of our citizens, it might be inscribed, a Hospital for Incurables! When even Fame will not protect the man of genius from Famine, Charity ought. Nor should such an act be considered as a debt incurred by the helpless member, but a just tribute we pay in his person to Genius itself. Even in these enlightened times such have lived in obscurity while their reputation was widely spread; and have perished in poverty, while their works were enriching the booksellers.

Of the heroes of modern literature the accounts are as copious as they are melancholy.

Xylander sold his notes on Dion Cassius for a dinner. He tells us, that at the age of eighteen he studied to acquire glory, but at twenty-five he studied to get bread.

Cervantes, the immortal genius of Spain, is supposed to have wanted bread; Camoens, the solitary pride of Portugal, deprived of the necessaries of life, perished in a hospital at Lisbon. This fact has been accidentally preserved in an entry in a copy of the first edition

of the *Lusiad*, in the possession of Lord Holland, in a note written by a friar, who must have been a witness of the dying scene of the poet, and probably the volume which now preserves the sad memorial, and which recalled it to his mind, from the hands of the unhappy poet:—"What a lamentable thing to see so great a genius so ill rewarded! I saw him die in a hospital in Lisbon, without basing a sheet or shroud, *una sauana*, to cover him, after having triumphed in the East Indies, and sailed 5500 leagues! What good advice for those who weary themselves night and day in study without profit." Camoens, when some hidalgo complained that he had not performed his promise in writing some verses for him, replied, "When I wrote verses I was young, had sufficient food, was a lover, and beloved by many friends and by the ladies; then I felt poetical ardour; now I have no spirits, no peace of mind. See there my Javanese who asks me for two pieces to purchase firing, and I have them not to give him." The Portuguese, after his death, bestowed on the man of genius they had starved, the appellation of Great! Vondel, the Dutch Shakespeare, after composing a number of popular tragedies, lived in great poverty, and died at ninety years of age; then he had his coffin carried by fourteen

poets, who without his genius probably partook of his wretchedness.

The great Tasso was reduced to such a dilemma, that he was obliged to borrow a crown from a friend to subsist through the week. He alludes to his distress in a pretty sonnet, which he addresses to his cat, entreating her to assist him, during the night, with the lustre of her eyes—“*Non avendo candele per iscrivere i suoi versi!*” having no candle to see to write his verses!

When the liberality of Alphonso enabled Ariosto to build a small house, it seems that it was but ill furnished. When told that such a building was not fit for one who had raised so many fine Palaces in his writings, he answered, that the structure of *words* and that of *stones* was not the same thing. “*Che porvi le pietre, e porvi le parole, non è il medesimo!*” At Ferrara this house is still shown. “*Parva sed apta*” he calls it, but exults that it was paid with his own money. This was in a moment of good-humour, which he did not always enjoy; for in his Satires he bitterly complains of the bondage of dependence and poverty. Little thought the poet the *commune* would order this small house to be purchased with their own funds, that it might be dedicated to his immortal memory!

The illustrious Cardinal Bentivoglio, the ornament of Italy and of literature, languished, in his old age, in the most distressful poverty; and having sold his palace to satisfy his creditors, left nothing behind him but his reputation. The learned Pomponius Lætus lived in such a state of poverty, that his friend Platina, who wrote the lives of the popes, and also a book of cookery, introduces him into the cookery book by a facetious observation that if Pomponius Lætus should be robbed of a couple of eggs, he would not have wherewithal to purchase two other eggs. The history of Aldrovandus is noble and pathetic; having expended a large fortune in forming his collections of natural history, and employing the first artists in Europe, he was suffered to die in the hospital of that city to whose fame he had eminently contributed.

Du Ryer, a celebrated French poet, was constrained to labour with rapidity, and to live in the cottage of an obscure village. His bookseller bought his heroic verses for one hundred sols the hundred lines, and the smaller ones for fifty sols. What an interesting picture has a contemporary given of his reception by a poor and ingenious author in a visit he paid to Du Ryer! “On a fine summer day we went to him, at some distance

from town. He received us with joy, talked to us of his numerous projects, and showed us several of his works. But what more interested us was, that though dreading to show us his poverty, he contrived to give us some refreshments. We seated ourselves under a wide oak, the tablecloth was spread on the grass, his wife brought us some milk, with fresh water and brown bread, and he picked a basket of cherries. He welcomed us with gaiety, but we could not take leave of this amiable man, now grown old, without tears, to see him so ill treated by fortune, and to have nothing left but literary honour!”

Vaugelas, the most polished writer of the French language, who devoted thirty years to his translation of Quintus Curtius (a circumstance which modern translators call have no conception of), died possessed of nothing valuable but his precious manuscripts. This ingenious scholar left his corpse to the surgeons, for the benefit of his creditors!

Louis the Fourteenth honoured Racine and Boileau with a private monthly audience. One day, the king asked what there was new in the literary world? Racine answered, that he had seen a melancholy spectacle in the house of Corneille, whom he found dying, deprived

even of a little broth! The king preserved a profound silence; and sent the dying poet a sum of money.

Dryden, for less than three hundred pounds, sold Tonson ten thousand verses, as may be seen by the agreement which has been published.

Purchas, who, in the reign of our first James, had spent his life in travels and study to form his *Relation of the World*, when he gave it to the public, for the reward of his labours was thrown into prison, at the suit of his printer. Yet this was the book which, he informs us in his dedication to Charles the First, his father read every night with great profit and satisfaction.

The Marquis of Worcester, in a petition to parliament, in the reign of Charles II., offered to publish the hundred processes and machines, enumerated in his very curious “Centenary of Inventions,” on condition that money should be granted to extricate him from the *difficulties in which he had involved himself, by the prosecution of useful discoveries*. The petition does not appear to have been attended to! Many of these admirable inventions were lost. The *steam engine*, and the *telegraph* may be traced among them.

It appears by the Harleian mss. 7524 that Rushworth, the author of “Historical Collections,” passed the last

years of his life in jail, where indeed he died. After the Restoration, when he presented to the king several of the privy council's books, which he had preserved from ruin, he received for his only reward the *thanks of his majesty*.

Rymer, the collector of the *Fœdera* must have been sadly reduced, by the following letter, I found addressed to Peter le Neve, Norroy, to the Earl of Oxford:—

“I am desired by Mr. Rymer, historiographer, to lay before your lordship the circumstances of his affairs. He was forced some years back to part with all his choice printed books to subsist himself; and now, he says, he must be forced, for subsistence, to sell all his MS. collections to the best bidder, without your lordship will be pleased to buy them for the queen's library. They are fifty volumes, in folio, of public affairs, which he hath collected, but not printed. The price he asks is five hundred pounds.”

Simon Ockley, a learned student in Oriental literature, addresses a letter to the same earl, in which he paints his distresses in glowing colours. After having devoted his life to Asiatic researches, then very uncommon, he had the mortification of dating his preface to his great work from Cambridge Castle, where he was confined for debt and, with an air of triumph, feels a

martyr's enthusiasm in the cause for which he perishes.

He published his first volume of the *History of the Saracens* in 1708; and ardently pursuing his Oriental studies, published his second volume ten years afterwards, without any patronage. Alluding to the encouragement necessary to bestow on youth, to remove the obstacles to such studies, he observes, that “young men will hardly come in on the prospect of finding leisure, in a prison, to transcribe those papers for the press, which they have collected with indefatigable labour, and oftentimes at the expense of their rest, and all the other conveniences of life, for the service of the public. No, though I were to assure them from my own experience, that *I have enjoyed more true liberty, more happy leisure, and more solid repose, in six months* HERE, than in thrice the same number of years before. *Evil is the condition of that historian who undertakes to write the lives of others, before he knows how to live himself.*—Not that I speak thus as if I thought I had any just cause to be angry with the world—I did always in my judgment give the possession of *wisdom* the preference to that of *riches!*”

Spenser, the child of Fancy, languished out his life in misery. “Lord Burleigh,” says Granger, “who it is said prevented the queen giving him a hundred pounds,

seems to have thought the lowest clerk at his office a more deserving person." Mr. Malone attempts to show that Spenser had a small pension; hut the poet's querulous verses must not be forgotten—

“Full little knowest thou, that hast not try'd
What Hell it is, in suing long to bide.”

To lose good days—to waste long nights—and as he feelingly exclaims,

“To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,
To speed, to give, to want, to be undone!”

How affecting is the death of Sydenham, who had devoted his life to a laborious version of Plato! He died in a spunging-house, and it was his death which appears to have given rise to the Literary Fund “for the relief of distressed authors.”

Who shall pursue important labours when they read these anecdotes? Dr. Edmund Castell spent a great part of his life in compiling his *Lexicon Heptaglotton*, on which he bestowed incredible pains, and expended on it no less than 12,000*l.* and broke his constitution, and exhausted his fortune. At length it was printed, but the copies remained *unsold* on his hands. He exhibits a curious picture of literary labour in his preface. “As for myself, I have been unceasingly occupied for such a

number of years in this mass,” *Molendino* he calls them, “that that day seemed, as it were, a holiday in which I have not laboured so much as sixteen or eighteen hours, in these enlarging lexicons and Polyglot Bibles.”

Le Sage resided in a little cottage while he supplied the world with their most agreeable novels, and appears to have derived the sources of his existence in his old age from the filial exertions of an excellent son, who was an actor of some genius. I wish, however, that every man of letters could apply to himself the epitaph of this delightful writer:

Sous ce tombeau git LE SAGE abattu
Par le ciseau de la Parque importune;
S'il ne fut pas ami de la fortune,
II fut toujours ami de la vertu.

Many years after this article had been written, I published “Calamities of Authors,” confining myself to those of our own country; the catalogue is very incomplete, but far too numerous.