

REMINISCENCES,

§c. §c. §c.

CHAPTER I.

PARENTAL HISTORY.

“ My boast is not that I deduce my birth
 From loins enthroned, and rulers of the earth ;
 But higher far my proud pretensions rise—
 The son of parents pass'd into the skies !”

COWPER : *Verses on his Mother's Portrait.*

AFTER a good deal of anxious consideration, I have resolved to begin quite at the beginning. I have resolved, from a conscientious impulse which it were as difficult to describe as I find it to be impossible to resist,—to start, on these REMINISCENCES, with a tribute of affectionate respect to the memory of my *Parents*. And yet, I have not the slightest remembrance of them. They both died when I had scarcely attained my fourth year ; but not without leaving behind those testimonies or memorials, of worth and excellence, mingled with too many evidences of misfortune and affliction, which render such memorials too permanently engraven on the mind of their offspring.

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My father, Thomas Dibdin, was the TOM BOWLING of his younger brother, Charles Dibdin: a name, synonymous with all that is incomparable in the nautical ballad-poetry of our country. Charles Dibdin, my paternal uncle, made the Ocean the principal element of his muse. No poet before him had ever dwelt so much, and almost so exclusively, upon its characteristics and attributes. He peopled it with a set of human beings peculiarly his own. Whether its surface were rippled with the breeze, or its depths agitated by the storm, the sailor that was borne upon that surface was always the genuine Tar of Great Britain. Whether directing his course “under easy sail *” into the harbour where parent, wife, or former messmate might dwell—whether rushing into the shock of battle, or braving the wild uproar of the elements †—still, the love of kindred

* “ Sweet is the ship, that, under sail,
 Spreads her white bosom to the gale,
 Sweet, oh! sweet, the flowing can;
 Sweet to poise the labouring oar,
 That tugs us to our native shore.
 When the boatswain pipes the barge to man,
 Sweet sailing in the favouring breeze;
 But oh, much sweeter than all these,
 Is Jack’s delight—his LOVELY NAN.”

† “ Blow high, blow low,
 Let tempests tear the mainmast by the board!—”

In this wild ballad, which has ever struck me as one of the most spirited and tender of its class, and which was also the author’s *first sea-song*, the sailor solaces himself, in the very phrensy of the elements,

“ In hopes, on shore
 To be once more ”

with *Her*, who divides with him the empire of his heart. The following

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and of country was ever uppermost in that sailor's bosom. And how admirably was the ocean itself, under every varying breeze and climate, under every

is singularly sweet and tranquil, after the violence and bluster of the preceding.

“ And on that night, when all the crew
The memory of their former lives,
O'er flowing cans of flip renew,
And drink their sweathearts and their wives,
I'll heave a sigh, and think on thee:
And as the ship rolls through the sea,
The burden of my song shall be,
Blow high, blow low!” &c.

The sentiment of Dibdin's Sailor is peculiarly his own. It is never degraded by vulgarity, nor enervated by that sort of mawkish sensibility which might be construed into cowardice. So felicitously, sometimes, is the tender passion described, that, in ordinary life, one would think it to be the sole inmate of a sailor's bosom. The Corydons and Damons, which cut such a figure in the days of “good Queen Anne,” seem, comparatively, to have been mere mechanical puppets—the vehicles of whining exclamation and artificial rapture. Let—but among thousands of beauties the task of selection is at once unnecessary and endless—only let the reader select *that* which begins

’Twas post meridian, half-past four,—

where, at the conclusion of each stanza, our honest tar solaces himself with “looking on the moon and thinking of his Nancy.” Can any thing exceed the natural tenderness of the conclusion of the second and third stanzas? The other sailors are indulging themselves in the clamorous mirth of the “grog,” when our tar is little disposed to sympathise with their merriment.

“ I, little to their mirth inclined,
While tender thoughts rushed on my fancy;
And my warm sighs increased the wind—
Looked on the moon, and thought of Nancy.

“ Round went the can, the jest, the glee,
While tender wishes filled each fancy;
And when, in turn, it came to me,
I heaved a sigh, and toasted Nancy.”

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dark shadow and golden gleam, depicted by the same felicitous pencil!

I have said that my father was the Tom Bowling described in the well-known and justly-celebrated ballad of Charles Dibdin's beginning thus :

“ Here, a sheer hulk, lies poor TOM BOWLING,
The darling of our crew :” &c.

From what I have been able to learn, his figure was tall, robust, and proportionate ; in strict accordance with the words of the same ballad—

“ His form was of the manliest beauty *,
His heart was kind and soft.”

But, with reference to the “ battle”—as alluded to in the text—what is there of ballad-composition that approaches, within many degrees, the “ *Poor Jack*” of Charles Dibdin? How thoroughly wise, good, brave, gentle, and considerate, are the sentiments there uttered—and yet the whole ballad is so mixed up with frequent and quaint technical phrases, or expressions, as to render it perfectly characteristic and inimitable. I remember when this ballad was heard upon almost every hand-organ in the street ; as often with, as without, the words. From the town it quickly circulated into the country. In the uplands and lowlands—by plough-boy, or waggoner—among “ hewers of wood and drawers of water,”—its cheering burden

“ There's a sweet little cherub that sits up aloft
To keep watch for the life of *Poor Jack*,”

seemed to smooth the brow of care and to soften the severity of toil. The religious complexion of the whole ballad is obviously striking and instructive. The author parted with his share or property in it too soon ; and the purchaser is said to have realised *five hundred pounds* by this INDIVIDUAL BALLAD !

* The reader will probably smile at the following anecdote. So singularly were the days of my youth past, that I had never seen any one who had had personal knowledge of my father. But, towards my twenty-

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It should seem that, from early youth the ruling passion in each brother quickly and powerfully developed itself. My father took to the sea; and with such zeal and success, that, at the age of twenty-five (1756) he commanded the “Eagle Gally,” a sloop-of-war—in the chops of the Bristol Channel—carrying twenty-eight guns, with a complement of two hundred and twenty men. My uncle, after an education for the church, at Winchester school, became a candidate, at the age of fourteen, for the situation of organist to the cathedral. His youth alone, is said to have stood in the way of his success. At the precocious age of sixteen, he wrote and composed an opera, in two acts, called the *Shepherd’s Artifice* *.”

first year, being in company with an elderly gentleman who knew him well, some one asked “if I resembled my parent?” “Not at all,—says the gentleman, “Captain Dibdin was a fine-looking fellow!” That “his heart was kind and soft,” there are too powerful, and at the same time, too melancholy, evidences to prove. One, who knew him well, described him to me as “among the kindest-hearted men alive.”

* I have given but a brief and an unworthy outline of the talents of Charles Dibdin. He is supposed to have written about twelve hundred lyrical and dramatical pieces in the course of his career. His intellectual fecundity seems to have been inexhaustible. Of these pieces, the opera and farce of *Lionel and Clarissa*, and *The Padlock* will place him amongst the most successful contributors to the stage. The music is peculiarly his own; and his performance of *Mungo*, in the *Padlock*, has, I understand, been rarely equalled—and never surpassed. It received the warmest eulogies of Garrick. I had but a very slight knowledge of him—never having conversed with him but once; just before my coming of age. He was then in the plenitude of fame and wealth. The unrivalled excellence of his *Sans Souci* brought crowds to his theatre; and the publication and copyright of his Songs (which he seems to have

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Of my father's subsequent destiny, up to the period of his union with my mother (his second wife), the slenderest possible materials survive. Whether, during Lord Chatham's glorious administration, he led these two hundred and twenty men into action—victory or defeat—is mere matter of idle conjecture: it is certain that he never could have continued inactive. Enough of the short history of him, after his union with my mother, proves that *his* was a mind which neither courted nor could endure mere animal repose. Within three years after his command of the *Eagle*, my father married his first wife, of whose maiden name I am wholly ignorant. He seems to have been at this time in pretty easy circumstances, for I find a letter from his sister Penelope to Mrs. Dibdin, in which the latter is at once congratulated and envied on account of her good fortune. This letter is in part so racy and characteristic, that I scruple not to assign a portion of it to a place in the subjoined note *. A daughter and son were the fruits of this marriage.

composed by inspiration) were a source of yet greater income. He lived, however, as many distinguished men have lived before him, to see public admiration abate, and the streams of prosperity to flow in contracted channels. He died in 1814, in his sixty-ninth year.

Southton, [Southampton], Jan. 1759.

* DEAR SISTER,—I received your letter. A kind one, I won't call it: for I had prided myself on receiving a long letter from you—and at last comes a few lines, with hardly an account of your health, or of that of one of my friends. But, however, I must forgive you now, and flatter

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There is too good reason to believe that this marriage was soon clouded by sinister events, totally unconnected with incompatibility of temper or disunion of principle. In the year 1772 he became a widower, his wife dying while he was abroad. What directed his views to India, is altogether undiscoverable; but finding no employment during the peace, he became a "Rover" upon the Indian Ocean, and in the year 1775, at Calcutta, married ELIZABETH COMPTON, my mother.

myself with that pleasure in answer to this. Dear sister, oh how I envy your happiness!—Yes, let me say I envy you—because I can't partake of it: but, at the same time, I am sure you don't think I wish you less. No, may you abound in all the happiness this life can afford, till I wish it less—and then you will be completely happy! For my part, I am quite a dull stupid creature: know nothing of what's done in the world—or hardly partake of the social joys of company or conversation. I live in as much obscurity as if I lived in the remotest corner of the earth: as much a recluse as if I were a nun. My dear mother is all the company I have: who, to be sure, is the most indulgent mother that ever a child had. But you know, my dearest sister, that it is no good for a child to be always under a mother's wing: and I have lived one-and-twenty years under (I wont use so harsh an expression to say a tyrannical father, but) one, whose commands are a little too severe; and I don't know but I may turn out this summer and seek my fortune: so if you know ever an old lady who wants a companion (but not an old man who wants a nurse) or a young lady that wants a confidante; I am at their service. And now I have told you my mind, you will excuse me when I say, that I envy you, or any body, that lives in so much gaiety," &c.

To this sister of my father, my mother, immediately on her marriage, wrote an affectionate letter; disclosing the event, and challenging her to a correspondence which might be beneficial as well as comforting to both parties. On this letter, my father has endorsed, "No answer ever returned." In all probability it never reached her.

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A word, with the reader's leave, respecting that same mother. To me, she lives only by report and in her letters: letters, so tender and touching, so characteristic of a pious, cheerful, active, resigned, and happy disposition, developing, at the same time, no uncultivated talents or disputable taste, that, had the casket which contained them, and in which I found them on taking possession of my trifling inheritance, been "rifled of its sweets—" and thousands of *pagodas* substituted in their place—I should have considered the exchange as a *robbery* of the cruellest description. The inimitable Cowper seems to have wrought his fancy to the most painful, and yet natural, pitch of ecstasy, on a contemplation of his mother's portrait by the hand of *Art*. His was a representation of the external features. The portrait which it is *my* good fortune to possess, of a parent "pass'd into the skies," is wholly of the features of the *mind* and *heart*; and it is a portrait of which the colours are perennial*. It is also a

* And yet I am not wholly destitute of a notion of her form and face. She was of middle stature, with a clear complexion, hazel eyes, and light brown hair; possessed of a colour so bright and blooming, that my maternal uncle and guardian, Mr. William Compton, used to tell me that there was no countenance on which he gazed with such thorough delight. He accompanied her to India, and returned in the vessel which took her over. Her cousin, Miss Boone, afterwards Mrs. Duke—wishing to make the description of her as epigrammatic as possible—has often said that she had "the colour of a milk-maid!" I never heard of her portrait having been executed by any artist.

I might perhaps be here indulged in the venial vanity of family

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speaking portrait. It describes incidents as vividly, as naturally; overshadowed, however, occasionally with that "pale and sickly cast of thought," which is too often the result of frustrated schemes and blighted hopes. It is, however, more than negative consolation to know, that the period of her sufferings, as a widow, was short; indeed, the career of her wedded life scarcely reached beyond its fifth year.

Never was a union more warm and cordial; although, perhaps, little anticipated by either party on quitting their native shores. My mother had arrived in India in 1770*, having been taken out by her brother, Captain Compton, in his own vessel,

relationship by my mother's side; but, without wishing to push the point with heraldic pertinacity (what will not heralds accomplish?) or feeling the least disappointment if the conclusion be drawn from false premises, it may be permitted me to say, that she was not only a COMPTON, but her family bore, in crest and shield, precisely the same form and motto as those of the illustrious family of NORTHAMPTON.

* Her chief employment on her voyage was the making of housewives (then a fashionable exercise of the needle), and copying copiously from the works of Milton and Pope: occasionally, however, "invoking the muse—" as I find some verses by her, "On seeing a Man buried at Sea, on board the Verelst, Captain Compton, when the Author was going to India," beginning thus:

"A fine large ship, in weather fair,
Glidés on the sea as if in air."

I also find the following verses, descriptive of her passage, written shortly after her arrival, and beginning thus:

"From India's bright and burning climes,
I send apologies for rhymes.
* * * * *
'Twas fate commanded I should come,
A wanderer from my native home;

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the “Verelst;” a vessel, doomed to be wrecked* on its return. Of her situation, employment, or course

God bless'd our ship in wind and weather,
And all was favourable together:
Our passage short, &c.

* * * * *

My first arrival, much surprised;
Could not have such a sight devised.
Blacks without clothes, a numerous crew,
My first attention blushing drew,
I look'd with wonder all around,
To find myself on steady ground.
In palanquins we stately ride,
With slaves attending by our side.”

* * * * *

Her affectionate disposition thus develops itself at the conclusion of this poetical epistle:

“Then blame me not, my friends most dear,
But let me often from you hear.
I'll kiss the lines with heart-felt glee,
When first your letter blesses me.”

It seems that this voyage was undertaken in a state of extreme mental agony, which arose from her determination *not* to marry a husband selected for her by her uncle, Captain Frognall, and to whom she had the most decided personal objection. She missed her “coach and four,” but she maintained her independence. Sir Charles Raymond (whom I can just remember when a little boy, from his mulberry-coloured suit covered with snuff, and his giving me several gentle pats on the head, with a large diamond flaming on his little finger) was particularly kind and considerate to her on her departure: acting quite the part of a guardian. It is evident, from some part of the poetical address above quoted, that she quitted England with a heavy heart, and with a deeply-fixed presage that she should return to it no more.

* This shipwreck took place off the island of Mauritius. At midnight the vessel struck upon a reef of hidden rocks, and broke her back right in two. My uncle, Mr. William Compton, who accompanied his brother, the Captain, told me, that so tremendous was the concussion, he was thrown bolt upright in his berth. A melancholy yet instructive lesson is to be learned from the conduct of one individual on board.