English Men of Letters: Crabbe eBook

English Men of Letters: Crabbe by Alfred Ainger

BOOKRAGS

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EARLY LIFE IN ALDEBURGH

(1754-1780)

Two eminent English poets who must be reckoned moderns though each produced characteristic verse before the end of the eighteenth century, George Crabbe and William Wordsworth, have shared the common fate of those writers who, possessing a very moderate power of self-criticism, are apparently unable to discriminate between their good work and their bad. Both have suffered, and still suffer, in public estimation from this cause. The average reader of poetry does not care to have to search and select for himself, and is prone summarily to dismiss a writer (especially a poet) on the evidence of his inferior productions. Wordsworth, by far the greater of the two poets, has survived the effects of his first offence, and has grown in popularity and influence for half a century past. Crabbe, for many other reasons that I shall have to trace, has declined in public favour during a yet longer period, and the combined bulk and inequality of his poetry have permanently injured him, even as they injured his younger contemporary.

Widely as these two poets differed in subjects and methods, they achieved kindred results and played an equally important part in the revival of the human and emotional virtues of poetry after their long eclipse under the shadow of Pope and his school. Each was primarily made a poet through compassion for what “man had made of man,” and through a concurrent and sympathetic influence of the scenery among which he was brought up. Crabbe was by sixteen years Wordsworth’s senior, and owed nothing to his inspiration. In the form, and at times in the technique of his verse, his controlling master was Pope. For its subjects he was as clearly indebted to Goldsmith and Gray. But for *The Deserted Village* of the one, and *The Elegy* of the other, it is conceivable that Crabbe, though he might have survived as one of the “mob of gentlemen” who imitated Pope “with ease,” would never have learned where his true strength lay, and thus have lived as one of the first and profoundest students of *The Annals of the Poor*. For *The Village*, one of the earliest and not least valuable of his poems, was written (in part, at least) as early as 1781, while Wordsworth was yet a child, and before Cowper had published a volume. In yet another respect Crabbe was to work hand in hand with Wordsworth. He does not seem to have held definite opinions as to necessary reforms in what Wordsworth called “poetic diction.” Indeed he was hampered, as Wordsworth was not, by a lifelong adherence to a metre—the heroic couplet—with which this same poetic diction was most closely bound up. He did not always escape the effects of this contagion, but in the main he was delivered from it by what I have called a first-hand association with man and nature. He was ever describing what he had seen and studied with his own eyes, and the vocabulary of the bards who had for generations borrowed it from one another failed to supply him with the words he needed. The very limitations of the first five-and-twenty years of his life passed in a small and decaying seaport were more than compensated by the intimacy of his acquaintance with its

inhabitants. Like Wordsworth he had early known love and sorrow “in huts where poor men lie.”

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Wordsworth's fame and influence have grown steadily since his death in 1850. Crabbe's reputation was apparently at its height in 1819, for it was then, on occasion of his publishing his *Tales of the Hall*, that Mr. John Murray paid him three thousand pounds for the copyright of this work, and its predecessors. But after that date Crabbe's popularity may be said to have continuously declined. Other poets, with other and more purely poetical gifts, arose to claim men's attention. Besides Wordsworth, as already pointed out, Scott, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley had found their various admirers, and drawn Crabbe's old public from him. It is the purpose of this little volume to inquire into the reasons why he is still justly counted a classic, and whether he has not, as Tennyson said of him, "a world of his own," still rich in interest and in profit for the explorer.

* * * * *

Aldeburgh—or as it came to be more commonly spelled in modern times, Aldborough—-is to-day a pleasant and quiet watering-place on the coast of Suffolk, only a few miles from Saxmundham, with which it is connected by a branch line of the Great Eastern Railway. It began to be known for its fine air and sea-bathing about the middle of the last century, and to-day possesses other attractions for the yachtsman and the golfer. But a hundred years earlier, when Crabbe was born, the town possessed none of these advantages and means of access, to amend the poverty and rough manners of its boating and fishing inhabitants. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Aldeburgh had been a flourishing port with a population able to provide notable aid in the hour of national danger. Successive Royal Charters had accorded to the town markets, with other important rights and privileges. It had returned two members to Parliament since early in the days of Elizabeth, and indeed continued to do so until the Reform Bill of 1831. But, in common with Dunwich, and other once flourishing ports on the same coast, Aldeburgh had for its most fatal enemy, the sea. The gradual encroachments of that irresistible power had in the course of two centuries buried a large portion of the ancient Borough beneath the waves. Two existing maps of the town, one of about 1590, the other about 1790, show how extensive this devastation had been. This cause, and others arising from it, the gradual decay of the shipping and fishing industries, had left the town in the main a poor and squalid place, the scene of much smuggling and other lawlessness. Time and the ocean wave had left only "two parallel and unpaved streets, running between mean and scrambling houses." Nor was there much relief, aesthetic or other, in the adjacent country, which was flat, marshy, and treeless, continually swept by northern and easterly gales. A river, the Ald, from which the place took its name, approached the sea close to the town from the west, and then took a turn, flowing south, till it finally entered the sea at the neighbouring harbour of Orford.

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In Aldeburgh, on Christmas Eve 1754, George Crabbe was born. He came of a family bearing a name widely diffused throughout Norfolk and Suffolk for many generations. His father, after school-teaching in various parishes in the neighbourhood, finally settled down in his native place as collector of the salt duties, a post which his father had filled before him. Here as a very young man he married an estimable and pious widow, named Loddock, some years his senior, and had a family of six children, of whom George was the eldest.

Within the limits of a few miles round, including the towns and villages of Slaughden, Orford, Parham, Beccles, Stowmarket, and Woodbridge, the first five-and-twenty years of the poet's life were spent. He had but slight interest in the pursuits of the inhabitants. His father, brought up among its fishing and boating interests, was something nautical in his ambitions, having a partnership in a fishing-boat, and keeping a yacht on the river. His other sons shared their father's tastes, while George showed no aptitude or liking for the sea, but from his earliest years evinced a fondness for books, and a marked aptitude for learning. He was sent early to the usual dame-school, and developed an insatiable appetite for such stories and ballads as were current among the neighbours. George Crabbe, the elder, possessed a few books, and used to read aloud to his family passages from Milton, Young, and other didactic poets of the eighteenth century. Furthermore he took in a country magazine, which had a "Poet's Corner," always handed over to George for his special benefit. The father, respecting these early signs of a literary bent in the son, sent him to a small boarding-school at Bungay in the same county, and a few years later to one of higher pretensions at Stowmarket, kept by a Mr. Richard Haddon, a mathematical teacher of some repute, where the boy also acquired some mastery of Latin and acquaintance with the Latin classics. In his later years he was given (perhaps a little ostentatiously) to prefixing quotations from Horace, Juvenal, Martial, and oven more recondite authors, to the successive sections of *The Borough* But wherever he found books—especially poetry—he read them and remembered them. He early showed considerable acquaintance with the best English poets, and although Pope controlled his metrical forms, and something more than the forms, to the end of his life, he had somehow acquired a wide knowledge of Shakespeare, and even of such then less known poets as Spenser, Raleigh, and Cowley.

After some three years at Stowmarket—it now being settled that medicine was to be his calling—George was taken from school, and the search began in earnest for some country practitioner to whom he might be apprenticed. An interval of a few months was spent at home, during which he assisted his father at the office on Slaughden Quay, and in the year 1768, when he was still under fourteen years of age, a post was

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found for him in the house of a surgeon at Wickham-Brook, near Bury St. Edmunds. This practitioner combined the practise of agriculture on a small scale with that of physic, and young Crabbe had to take his share in the labours of the farm. The result was not satisfactory, and after three years of this rough and uncongenial life, a more profitable situation was found with a Mr. Page of Woodbridge—the memorable home of Bernard Barton and Edward FitzGerald. Crabbe became Mr. Page's pupil in 1771, and remained with him until 1775.

We have the authority of Crabbe's son and biographer for saying that he never really cared for the profession he had adopted. What proficiency he finally attained in it, before he forsook it for ever, is not quite clear. But it is certain that his residence among the more civilised and educated inhabitants of Woodbridge was of the greatest service to him. He profited notably by joining a little club of young men who met on certain evenings at an inn for discussion and mutual improvement. To this little society Crabbe was to owe one chief happiness of his life. One of its members, Mr. W.S. Levett, a surgeon (one wonders if a relative of Samuel Johnson's protege), was at this time courting a Miss Brereton, of Framlingham, ten miles away. Mr. Levett died young in 1774, and did not live to marry, but during his brief friendship with Crabbe was the means of introducing him to the lady who, after many years of patient waiting, became his wife. In the village of Great Parham, not far from Framlingham, lived a Mr. Tovell, of Parham Hall, a substantial yeoman, farming his own estate. With Mr. and Mrs. Tovell and their only child, a daughter, lived an orphan niece of Mr. Tovell's, a Miss Sarah Elmy, Miss Brereton's bosom-friend, and constant companion. Mr. Levett had in consequence become the friend of the Tovell family, and conceived the desire that his young friend, Crabbe, should be as blessed as himself. "George," he said, "you shall go with me to Parham; there is a young lady there who would just suit you!" Crabbe accepted the invitation, made Mr. Tovell's acquaintance, and promptly fell in love with Mr. Tovell's niece. The poet, at that time, had not yet completed his eighteenth year.

How soon after this first meeting George Crabbe proposed and was accepted, is not made clear, but he was at least welcomed to the house as a friend and an admirer, and his further visits encouraged. His youth and the extreme uncertainty of his prospects could not well have been agreeable to Mr. and Mrs. Tovell, or to Miss Elmy's widowed mother who lived not far away at Beccles, but the young lady herself returned her lover's affection from the first, and never faltered. The three following years, during which Crabbe remained at Woodbridge, gave him the opportunity of occasional visits, and there can be no doubt that apart from the fascinations of his "Mira," by which name he proceeded to celebrate her in occasional

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verse, the experience of country life and scenery, so different from that of his native Aldeburgh, was of great service in enlarging his poetical outlook. Great Parham, distant about five miles from Saxmundham, and about thirteen from Aldeburgh, is at this day a village of great rural charm, although a single-lined branch of the Great Eastern wanders boldly among its streams and cottage gardens through the very heart of the place. The dwelling of the Tovells has many years ago disappeared—an entirely new hall having risen on the old site; but there stands in the parish, a few fields away, an older Parham Hall;—to-day a farm-house, dear to artists, of singular picturesqueness, surrounded and even washed by a deep moat, and shaded by tall trees—a haunt, indeed, "of ancient peace." The neighbourhood of this old Hall, and the luxuriant beauty of the inland village, so refreshing a contrast to the barrenness and ugliness of the country round his native town, enriched Crabbe's mind with many memories that served him well in his later poetry.

In the meantime he was practising verse, though as yet showing little individuality. A Lady's Magazine of the day, bearing the name of its publisher, Mr. Wheble, had offered a prize for the best poem on the subject of *Hope*, which Crabbe was so fortunate as to win, and the same magazine printed other short pieces in the same year, 1772. They were signed "G.C., Woodbridge," and included divers lyrics addressed to Mira. Other extant verses of the period of his residence at Woodbridge show that he was making experiments in stanza-form on the model of earlier English poets, though without showing more than a certain imitative skill. But after he had been three years in the town, he made a more notable experiment and had found a printer in Ipswich to take the risk of publication. In 1775 was printed in that town a didactic satire of some four hundred lines in the Popian couplet, entitled *Inebriety*. Coleridge's friend, who had to write a prize poem on the subject of Dr. Jenner, boldly opened with the invocation—

"Inoculation! Heavenly maid, descend."

As the title of Crabbe's poem stands for the bane and not the antidote, he could not adopt the same method, but he could not resist some other precedents of the epic sort, and begins thus, in close imitation of *The Dunciad*—

"The mighty spirit, and its power which stains
The bloodless cheek and vivifies the brains,
I sing"

The apparent object of the satire was to describe the varied phases of Intemperance, as observed by the writer in different classes of society—the Villager, the Squire, the Farmer, the Parish Clergyman, and even the Nobleman's Chaplain, an official whom Crabbe as yet knew only by imagination. From childhood he had had ample experience

of the vice in the rough and reckless homes of the Aldeburgh poor. His subsequent medical pursuits must have brought

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him into occasional contact with it among the middle classes, and even in the manor-houses and parsonages for which he made up the medicine in his master's surgery. But his treatment of the subject was too palpably imitative of one poetic model, already stale from repetition. Not only did he choose Pope's couplet, with all its familiar antitheses and other mannerisms, but frankly avowed it by parodying whole passages from the *Essay on Man* and *The Dunciad*, the original lines being duly printed at the foot of the page. There is little of Crabbe's later accent of sympathy. Epigram is too obviously pursued, and much of the suggested acquaintance with the habits of the upper classes—

"Champagne the courtier drinks, the spleen to chase,
The colonel Burgundy, and Port his grace"

is borrowed from books and not from life. Nor did the satire gain in lucidity from any editorial care. There are hardly two consecutive lines that do not suffer from a truly perverse theory of punctuation. A copy of the rare original is in the writer's possession, at the head of which the poet has inscribed his own maturer judgment of this youthful effort—"Pray let not this be seen ... there is very little of it that I'm not heartily ashamed of." The little quarto pamphlet—"Ipswich, printed and sold by C. Punchard, Bookseller, in the Butter Market, 1775. Price one shilling and sixpence"—seems to have attracted no attention. And yet a critic of experience would have recognised in it a force as well as a fluency remarkable in a young man of twenty-one, and pointing to quite other possibilities when the age of imitation should have passed away.

In 1775 Crabbe's term of apprenticeship to Mr. Page expired, and he returned to his home at Aldeburgh, hoping soon to repair to London and there continue his medical studies. But he found the domestic situation much changed for the worse. His mother (who, as we have seen, was several years older than her husband) was an invalid, and his father's habits and temper were not improving with time. He was by nature imperious, and had always (it would seem) been liable to intemperance of another kind. Moreover, a contested election for the Borough in 1774 had brought with it its familiar temptations to protracted debauch—and it is significant that in 1775 he vacated the office of churchwarden that he had held for many years. George, to whom his father was not as a rule unkind, did not shrink from once more assisting him among the butter-tubs on Slaughden Quay. Poetry seems to have been for a while laid aside, the failure of his first venture having perhaps discouraged him. Some slight amount of practice in his profession fell to his share. An entry in the Minute Book of the Aldeburgh Board of Guardians of September 17, 1775, orders "that Mr. George Crabbe, Junr., shall be employed to cure the boy Howard of the itch, and that whenever any of the poor shall have occasion for a surgeon, the overseers shall apply

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to him for that purpose." But these very opportunities perhaps only served to show George Crabbe how poorly he was equipped for his calling as surgeon, and after a period not specified means were found for sending him to London, where he lodged with a family from Aldeburgh who were in business in Whitechapel. How and where he then obtained instruction or practice in his calling does not appear, though there is a gruesome story, recorded by his son, how a baby-subject for dissection was one day found in his cupboard by his landlady, who was hardly to be persuaded that it was not a lately lost infant of her own. In any case, within a year Crabbe's scanty means were exhausted, and he was once more in Aldeburgh, and assistant to an apothecary of the name of Maskill. This gentleman seems to have found Aldeburgh hopeless, for in a few months he left the town, and Crabbe set up for himself as his successor. But he was still poorly qualified for his profession, his skill in surgery being notably deficient. He attracted only the poorest class of patients—the fees ware small and uncertain and his prospects of an early marriage, or even of earning his living as a single man, seemed as far off as ever. Moreover, he was again cut off from congenial companionship, with only such relief as was afforded by the occasional presence in the town of various Militia regiments, the officers of which gave him some of their patronage and society.

He had still happily the assurance of the faithful devotion of Miss Elmy. Her father had been a tanner in the Suffolk town of Beccles, where her mother still resided, and where Miss Elmy paid her occasional visits. The long journey from Aldeburgh to Beccles was often taken by Crabbe, and the changing features of the scenery traversed were reproduced, his son tells us, many years afterwards in the beautiful tale of *The Lover's Journey*. The tie between Crabbe and Miss Elmy was further strengthened by a dangerous fever from which Crabbe suffered in 1778-79, while Miss Elmy was a guest under his parents' roof. This was succeeded by an illness of Miss Elmy, when Crabbe was in constant attendance at Parham Hall. His intimacy with the Tovells was moreover to be strengthened by a sad event in that family, the death of their only child, an engaging girl of fourteen. The social position of the Tovells, and in greater degree their fortune, was superior to that of the Crabbes, and the engagement of their niece to one whose prospects were so little brilliant had never been quite to their taste. But henceforth this feeling was to disappear. This crowning sorrow in the family wrought more cordial feelings. Crabbe was one of those who had known and been kind to their child, and such were now,

"Peculiar people—death had made them dear."

And henceforth the engagement between the lovers was frankly accepted. But though the course of this true love was to run more and more smooth, the question of Crabbe's future means of living seemed as hopeless of solution as ever.

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And yet the enforced idleness of these following years was far from unprofitable. The less time occupied in the routine work of his profession, the more leisure he had for his favourite study of natural history, and especially of botany. This latter study had been taken up during his stay at Woodbridge, the neighbourhood of which had a Flora differing from that of the bleak coast country of Aldeburgh, and it was now pursued with the same zeal at home. Herbs then played a larger part than to-day among curative agents of the village doctor, and the fact that Crabbe sought and obtained them so readily was even pleaded by his poorer patients as reason why his fees need not be calculated on any large scale. But this absorbing pursuit did far more than serve to furnish Crabbe's outfit as a healer. It was undoubtedly to the observing eye and retentive memory thus practised in the cottage gardens, and in the lanes, and meadows, and marshes of Suffolk that his descriptions, when once he found where his true strength lay, owed a charm for which readers of poetry had long been hungering. The floral outfit of pastoral poets, when Crabbe began to write, was a *hortus siccus* indeed. Distinctness in painting the common growth of field and hedgerow may be said to have had its origin with Crabbe. Gray and Goldsmith had their own rare and special gifts to which Crabbe could lay no claim. But neither these poets nor even Thomson, whose avowed purpose was to depict nature, are Crabbe's rivals in this respect. Byron in the most hackneyed of all eulogies upon Crabbe defined him as "Nature's sternest painter yet the best." The criticism would have been juster had he written that Crabbe was the truest painter of Nature in her less lovely phases. Crabbe was not stern in his attitude either to his fellow-men, or to the varying aspects of Nature, although for the first years of his life he was in habitual contact with the less alluring side of both.

But it was not only through a closer intimacy with Nature that Crabbe was being unconsciously prepared for high poetic service. Hope deferred and disappointments, poverty and anxiety, were doing their beneficent work. Notwithstanding certain early dissipations and escapades which his fellow-townsmen did not fail to remember against him in the later days of his success, Crabbe was of a genuinely religious temperament, and had been trained by a devout mother. Moreover, through a nearer and more sympathetic contact with the lives and sorrows of the poor suffering, he was storing experience full of value for the future, though he was still and for some time longer under the spell of the dominant poetic fashion, and still hesitated to "look into his heart and write."

But the time was bound to come when he must put his poetic quality to a final test. In London only could he hope to prove whether the verse, of which he was accumulating a store, was of a kind that men would care for. He must discover, and speedily, whether he was to take a modest place in the ranks of literature, or one even more humble in the shop of an apothecary. After weighing his chances and his risks for many a weary day he took the final resolution, and his son has told us the circumstances:—

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“One gloomy day towards the close of the year 1779, he had strolled to a bleak and cheerless part of the cliff above Aldeburgh, called The Marsh Hill, brooding as he went over the humiliating necessities of his condition, and plucking every now and then, I have no doubt, the hundredth specimen of some common weed. He stopped opposite a shallow, muddy piece of water, as desolate and gloomy as his own mind, called the Leech-pond, and ‘it was while I gazed on it,’ he said to my brother and me, one happy morning, ’that I determined to go to London and venture all’”

About thirty years later, Crabbe contributed to a magazine (*The New Monthly*) some particulars of his early life, and referring to this critical moment added that he had not then heard of “another youthful adventurer,” whose fate, had he known of it, might perhaps have deterred him from facing like calamities. Chatterton had “perished in his pride” nearly ten years before. As Crabbe thus recalled the scene of his own resolve, it may have struck him as a touching coincidence that it was by the Leech-pool on “the lonely moor”—though there was no “Leech-gatherer” at hand to lend him fortitude—that he resolved to encounter “Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.” He was, indeed, little better equipped than Chatterton had been for the enterprise. His father was unable to assist him financially, and was disposed to reproach him for forsaking a profession, in the cause of which the family had already made sacrifices. The Crabbes and all their connections were poor, and George scarcely knew any one whom he might appeal to for even a loan. At length Mr. Dudley North, of Little Glemham Hall, near Parham, whose brother had stood for Aldeburgh, was approached, and sent the sum asked for—five pounds. George Crabbe, after paying his debts, set sail for London on board a sloop at Slaughden Quay—“master of a box of clothes, a small case of surgical instruments, and three pounds in money.” This was in April 1780.

CHAPTER II

POVERTY IN LONDON

(1780-1781)

Crabbe had no acquaintances of his own in London, and the only introduction he carried with him was to an old friend of Miss Elmy’s, a Mrs. Burcham, married to a linen-draper in Cornhill. In order to be near these friendly persons he took lodgings, close to the Royal Exchange, in the house of a hairdresser, a Mr. Vickery, at whose suggestion, no doubt, he provided himself with “a fashionable tie-wig”. Crabbe at once began preparations for his literary campaign, by correcting such verse as he had brought with him, completing “two dramas and a variety of prose essays,” and generally improving himself by a course of study and practice in composition. As in the old Woodbridge days, he made some congenial acquaintances at a little club that met at a neighbouring coffee-house, which included a Mr. Bonnycastle and a Mr. Reuben Burrow, both mathematicians of repute, who rose to fill important positions in their day. These

recreations he diversified with country excursions, during which he read Horace and Ovid, or searched the woods around London for plants and insects.

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From his first arrival in town Crabbe kept a diary or journal, addressed to his “Mira” at Parham, and we owe to it a detailed account of his earlier struggles, three months of the journal having survived and fallen into his son’s hands after the poet’s death. Crabbe had arrived in London in April, and by the end of the month we learn from the journal that he was engaged upon a work in prose, “A Plan for the Examination of our Moral and Religious Opinions,” and also on a poetical “Epistle to Prince William Henry,” afterwards William IV., who had only the year before entered the navy as midshipman, but had already seen some service under Rodney. The next day’s entry in the diary tells how he was not neglecting other possible chances of an honest livelihood. He had answered an advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* for “an amanuensis, of grammatical education, and endued with a genius capable of making improvements in the writings of a gentleman not well versed in the English language.” Two days later he called for a reply, only to find that the gentleman was suited. The same day’s entry also records how he had sent his poem (probably the ode to the young Sailor-Prince) to Mr. Dodsley. Only a day later he writes. “Judging it best to have two strings to the bow, and fearing Mr. Dodsley’s will snap, I have finished another little work from that awkward-titled piece, ’The Foes of Mankind’: have run it on to three hundred and fifty lines, and given it a still more odd name, ‘An Epistle from the Devil.’ To-morrow I hope to transcribe it fair, and send it by Monday.”

“Mr. Dodsley’s reply just received: ’Mr. Dodsley presents his compliments to the gentleman who favoured him with the enclosed poem, which he has returned, as he apprehends the sale of it would probably not enable him to give any consideration. He does not mean to insinuate a want of merit in the poem, but rather a want of attention in the public.’”

All this was sufficiently discouraging, and the next day’s record is one of even worse omen. The poet thanks Heaven that his spirits are not affected by Mr. Dodsley’s refusal, and that he is already preparing another poem for another bookseller, Mr. Becket. He adds, however: “I find myself under the disagreeable necessity of vending or pawning some of my more useless articles: accordingly have put into a paper such as cost about two or three guineas, and, being silver, have not greatly lessened in their value. The conscientious pawnbroker allowed me—’he *thought* he *might’*—half a guinea for them. I took it very readily, being determined to call for them very soon, and then, if I afterwards wanted, carry them to some less voracious animal of the kind.”

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The entries during the next six weeks continue of the same tenor. Mr. Becket, for whose approval were sent “Poetical Epistles, with a preface by the learned Martinus Scriblerus” (he was still harping on the string of the Augustans), proved no more responsive than Dodsley, “’Twas a very pretty thing, but, sir, these little pieces the town do not regard.” By May 16th he had “sold his wardrobe, pawned his watch, was in debt to his landlord, and finally at some loss how to eat a week longer.” Two days later he had pawned his surgical instruments—redeemed and repawned his watch on more favourable terms—and was rejoiced to find himself still the possessor of ten shillings. He remained stout of heart—his faith in Providence still his strong comfort—and the Vickery family, though he must have been constantly in their debt, were unfailingly kind and hospitable. He was also appealing to the possible patrons of literature among the leading statesmen of the hour. On May 21 we learn that he was preparing “a book” (which of his many ventures of the hour, is uncertain), and with it a letter for the Prime Minister, Lord North, whose relative, Dudley North, had started him on his journey to London. When, after a fortnight’s suspense, this request for assistance had been refused, he writes yet more urgently to Lord Shelburne (at that time out of office) complaining bitterly of North’s hardness of heart, and appealing on this occasion to his hoped-for patron both in prose and verse—

“Ah! Shelburne, blest with all that’s good or great,
T’ adorn a rich or save a sinking state,
If public Ills engross not all thy care,
Let private Woe assail a patriot’s ear,
Pity confined, but not less warm, impart,
And unresisted win thy noble heart”—

with much more in the same vein of innocent flattery. But once again Crabbe was doomed to disappointment. He had already, it would seem, appealed to Lord Chancellor Thurlow, with no better success. Crabbe felt these successive repulses very keenly, but it is not necessary to tax North, Shelburne, and Thurlow with exceptional hardness of heart. London was as full of needy literary adventurers as it had been in the days of *The Dunciad*, and men holding the position of these ministers and ex-ministers were probably receiving similar applications every week of their lives.

During three days in June, Crabbe’s attention is diverted from his own distresses by the Lord George Gordon Riots, of which his journal from June 8th contains some interesting particulars. He was himself an eye-witness of some of the most disgraceful excesses of the mob, the burning of the governor of Newgate’s house, and the setting at liberty of the prisoners. He also saw Lord George himself, “a lively-looking young man in appearance,” drawn in his coach by the mob towards the residence of Alderman Bull, “bowing as he passed along.”

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At this point the diary ends, or in any case the concluding portion was never seen by the poet's son. And yet at the date when it closed, Crabbe was nearer to at least the semblance of a success than he had yet approached. He had at length found a publisher willing to print, and apparently at his own risk, "*The Candidate*—a Poetical Epistle to the Authors of the *Monthly Review,"* that journal being the chief organ of literary criticism at the time. The idea of this attempt to propitiate the critics in advance, with a view to other poetic efforts in the future, was not felicitous. The publisher, "H. Payne, opposite Marlborough House, Pall Mall," had pledged himself that the author should receive some share of the profits, however small; but even if he had not become bankrupt immediately after its publication, it is unlikely that Crabbe would have profited by a single penny. It was indeed a very ill-advised attempt, even as regards the reviewers addressed. The very tone adopted, that of deprecation of criticism, would be in their view a proof of weakness, and as such they accepted it. Nor had the poem any better chance with the general reader. Its rhetoric and versification were only one more of the interminable echoes of the manner of Pope. It had no organic unity. The wearisome note of plea for indulgence had to be relieved at intervals by such irrelevant episodes as compliments to the absent "Mira," and to Wolfe, who "conquered as he fell"—twenty years or so before. The critics of the *Monthly Review*, far from being mollified by the poet's appeal, received the poem with the cruel but perfectly just remark that it had "that material defect, the want of a proper subject."

An allegorical episode may be cited as a sample of the general style of this effusion. The poet relates how the Genius of Poetry (like, but how unlike, her who was seen by Burns in vision) appeared to him with counsel how best to hit the taste of the town:—

"Be not too eager in the arduous chase;
Who pants for triumph seldom wins the race:
Venture not all, but wisely hoard thy worth,
And let thy labours one by one go forth
Some happier scrap capricious wits may find
On a fair day, and be profusely kind;
Which, buried in the rubbish of a throng,
Had pleased as little as a new-year's song,
Or lover's verse, that cloyed with nauseous sweet,
Or birthday ode, that ran on ill-paired feet.
Merit not always—Fortune Feeds the bard,
And as the whim inclines bestows reward
None without wit, nor with it numbers gain;
To please is hard, but none shall please in vain
As a coy mistress is the humoured town,
Loth every lover with success to crown;
He who would win must every effort try,
Sail in the mode, and to the fashion fly;
Must gay or grave to every humour dress,

And watch the lucky Moment of Success;
That caught, no more his eager hopes are crost;
But vain are Wit and Love, when that is lost”

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Crabbe's son and biographer remarks with justice that the time of his father's arrival in London was "not unfavourable for a new Candidate in Poetry. The giants, Swift and Pope, had passed away, leaving each in his department examples never to be excelled; but the style of each had been so long imitated by inferior persons that the world was not unlikely to welcome some one who should strike into a newer path. The strong and powerful satirist Churchill, the classic Gray, and the inimitable Goldsmith had also departed; and more recently still, Chatterton had paid the bitter penalty of his imprudence under circumstances which must surely have rather disposed the patrons of talent to watch the next opportunity that might offer itself of encouraging genius 'by poverty depressed.' The stupendous Johnson, unrivalled in general literature, had from an early period withdrawn himself from poetry. Cowper, destined to fill so large a space in the public eye somewhat later, had not as yet appeared as an author; and as for Burns, he was still unknown beyond the obscure circle of his fellow-villagers."

All this is quite true, but it was not for such facile cleverness as *The Candidate* that the lovers of poetry were impatient. Up to this point Crabbe shows himself wholly unsuspicious of this fact. It had not occurred to him that it was possible for him safely to trust his own instincts. And yet there is a stray entry in his diary which seems to show how (in obedience to his visionary instructor) he was trying experiments in more hopeful directions. On the twelfth, of May he intimates to his Mira that he has dreams of success in something different, something more human than had yet engaged his thoughts. "For the first time in my life that I recollect," he writes, "I have written three or four stanzas that so far touched me in the reading them as to take off the consideration that they were things of my own fancy." Thus far there was nothing in what he had printed—in *Inebriety* or *The Candidate*—that could possibly have touched his heart or that of his readers. And it may well have been that he was now turning for fresh themes to those real sorrows, those genuine, if homely, human interests of which he had already so intimate an experience.

However that may have been, the combined coldness of his reviewers and failure of his bookseller must have brought Crabbe within as near an approach to despair as his healthy nature allowed. His distress was now extreme; he was incurring debts with little hope of paying them, and creditors wore pressing. Forty years later he told Walter Scott and Lockhart how "during many months when he was toiling in early life in London he hardly over tasted butcher-meat except on a Sunday, when he dined usually with a tradesman's family, and thought their leg of mutton, baked in the pan, the perfection of luxury." And it was only after some more weary months, when at last "want stared him in the face, and a gaol seemed the only immediate refuge for his head," that he resolved, as a last resort, to lay his case once more before some public man of eminence and character. "Impelled" (to use his own words) "by some propitious influence, he fixed in some happy moment upon Edmund Burke—one of the first of Englishmen, and in the capacity and energy of his mind, one of the greatest of human beings."

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It was in one of the early months of 1781 (the exact date seems to be undiscoverable) that Crabbe addressed his letter, with specimens of his poetry, to Burke at his London residence. The letter has been preserved, and runs as follows:—

"Sir,—I am sensible that I need even your talents to apologise for the freedom I now take; but I have a plea which, however simply urged, will, with, a mind like yours, sir, procure me pardon. I am one of those outcasts on the world who are without a friend, without employment, and without bread."Pardon me a short preface. I had a partial father who gave me a better education than his broken fortune would have allowed; and a better than was necessary, as he could give me that only. I was designed for the profession of physic, but not having wherewithal to complete the requisite studies, the design but served to convince me of a parent's affection, and the error it had occasioned. In April last I came to London with three pounds, and flattered myself this would be sufficient to supply me with the common necessaries of life till my abilities should procure me more; of these I had the highest opinion, and a poetical vanity contributed to my delusion. I knew little of the world, and had read books only: I wrote, and fancied perfection in my compositions; when I wanted bread they promised me affluence, and soothed me with dreams of reputation, whilst my appearance subjected me to contempt."Time, reflection, and want have shown me my mistake. I see my trifles in that which I think the true light; and whilst I deem them such, have yet the opinion that holds them superior to the common run of poetical publications."I had some knowledge of the late Mr. Nassau, the brother of Lord Rochford; in consequence of which I asked his Lordship's permission to inscribe my little work to him. Knowing it to be free from all political allusions and personal abuse, it was no very material point to me to whom it was dedicated. His Lordship thought it none to him, and obligingly consented to my request.

> "I was told that a subscription would be the more profitable method for me, and, therefore, endeavoured to circulate copies of the enclosed Proposals.

"I am afraid, sir, I disgust you with this very dull narration, but believe me punished in the misery that occasions it. You will conclude that during this time I must have been at more expense than I could afford. Indeed the most parsimonious could not have avoided it. The printer deceived me, and my little business has had every delay. The people with whom I live perceive my situation, and find me to be indigent and without friends. About ten days since I was compelled to give a note for seven pounds, to avoid an arrest for about double that sum which I owe. I wrote to every friend I had, but my friends are poor likewise: the time

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of payment approached, and I ventured to represent my case to Lord Rochford. I begged to be credited for this sum till I received it of my subscribers, which I believe will be within one month: but to this letter I had no reply, and I have probably offended by my importunity. Having used every honest means in vain, I yesterday confessed my inability, and obtained with much entreaty and as the greatest favour a week's forbearance, when I am positively told that I must, pay the money or prepare for a prison."You will guess the purpose of so long an introduction. I appeal to you, sir, as a good and, let me add, a great man. I have no other pretensions to your favour than that I am an unhappy one. It is not easy to support the thoughts of confinement; and I am coward enough to dread such an end to my suspense. Can you, sir, in any degree aid me with propriety? Will you ask any demonstrations of my veracity? I have imposed upon myself, but I have been guilty of no other imposition Let me, if possible, interest your compassion. I know those of rank and fortune are teased with frequent petitions, and are compelled to refuse the requests even of those whom they know to be in distress; it is, therefore, with a distant hope I ventured to solicit such favour: but you will forgive me, sir, if you do not think proper to relieve. It is impossible that sentiments like yours can proceed from any but a humane and generous heart.

> "I will call upon you, sir, to-morrow, and if I have not the happiness to obtain credit with you, I must submit to my fate. My existence is a pain to myself, and every one near and dear to me are distressed in my distresses. My connections, once the source of happiness, now embitter the reverse of my fortune, and I have only to hope a speedy end to a life so unpromisingly begun: in which (though it ought not to be boasted of) I can reap some consolation from looking to the end of it. I am, sir, with, the greatest respect, your obedient and most humble servant,
>
> GEORGE CRABBE."

The letter is undated, but, as we shall see, must have been written in February or March of 1781. Crabbe delivered it with his own hands at Burke's house in Charles Street, St. James's, and (as he long after told Walter Scott) paced up and down Westminster Bridge all night in an agony of suspense.

This suspense was not of long duration Crabbe made his threatened call, and anxiety was speedily at an end. He had sent with his letter specimens of his verse still in manuscript. Whether Burke had had time to do more than glance at them—for they had been in his hands but a few hours—is uncertain. But it may well have been that the tone as well as the substance of Crabbe's letter struck the great statesman as something apart from the usual strain of the literary pretender. During Burke's first years in London, when he himself

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lived by literature and saw much of the lives and ways of poets and pamphleteers, he must have gained some experience that served him later in good stead. There was a flavour of truthfulness in Crabbe's story that could hardly be delusive, and a strain of modesty blended with courage that would at once appeal to Burke's generous nature. Again, Burke was not a poet (save in the glowing periods of his prose), but he had read widely in the poets, and had himself been possessed at one stage of his youth "with the *furor poeticus*." At this special juncture he had indeed little leisure for such matters. He had lost his seat for Bristol in the preceding year, but had speedily found another at Malton—a pocket-borough of Lord Rockingham's,—and, at the moment of Crabbe's appeal, was again actively opposing the policy of the King and Lord North. But he yet found time for an act of kindness that was to have no inconsiderable influence on English literature. The result of the interview was that Crabbe's immediate necessities were relieved by a gift of money, and by the assurance that Burke would do all in his power to further Crabbe's literary aims. What particular poems or fragments of poetry had been first sent to Burke is uncertain; but among those submitted to his judgment were specimens of the poems to be henceforth known as the *The Library* and *The Village.* Crabbe afterwards learned that the lines which first convinced Burke that a new and genuine poet had arisen were the following from *The Village,* in which the author told of his resolution to leave the home of his birth and try his fortune in the city of wits and scholars—

"As on their neighbouring beach yon swallows stand
And wait for favouring winds to leave the land;
While still for flight the ready wing is spread:
So waited I the favouring hour, and fled;
Fled from those shores where guilt and famine reign,
And cried, 'Ah! hapless they who still remain—
Who still remain to hear the ocean roar;
Whose greedy waves devour the lessening shore;
Till some fierce tide, with more imperious sway,
Sweeps the low hut and all it holds away;
When the sad tenant weeps from door to door,
And begs a poor protection from the poor!"

Burke might well have been impressed by such a passage. In some other specimens of Crabbe's verse, submitted at the same time to his judgment, the note of a very different school was dominant. But here for the moment appears a fresher key and a later model. In the lines just quoted the feeling and the cadence of *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village* are unmistakable. But if they suggest comparison with the exquisite passage in the latter beginning—

> “And as the hare, whom hounds and horns pursue,
> Pants to the place from which it first she flew,”

they also suggest a contrast. Burke’s experienced eye would detect that if there was something in Crabbe’s more Pope-like couplets that was not found in Pope, so there was something here more poignant than even in Goldsmith.

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Crabbe's son reflected with just pride that there must have been something in his father's manners and bearing that at the outset invited Burke's confidence and made intimacy at once possible, although Crabbe's previous associates had been so different from the educated gentry of London. In telling of his now-found poet a few days afterwards to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Burke said that he had "the mind and feelings of a gentleman." And he acted boldly on this assurance by at once placing Crabbe on the footing of a friend, and admitting him to his family circle. "He was invited to Beaconsfield," Crabbe wrote in his short autobiographical sketch, "the seat of his protector, and was there placed in a convenient apartment, supplied with books for his information and amusement, and made a member of a family whom it was honour as well as pleasure to become in any degree associated with." The time thus spent was profitable to Crabbe in other ways than by enlarging his knowledge and ideas, and laying the foundation of many valued friendships. He devoted himself in earnest to complete his unfinished poems and revise others under Burke's judicious criticism. The poem he first published, *The Library*, he himself tells us, was written partly in his presence and submitted as a whole to his judgment. Crabbe elsewhere indicates clearly what were the weak points of his art, and what tendencies Burke found it most necessary he should counteract. Writing his reminiscences in the third person years later, he naively admitted that "Mr. Crabbe had sometimes the satisfaction of hearing, when the verses were bad, that the thoughts deserved better; and that if he had the common faults of inexperienced writers, he had frequently the merit of thinking for himself." The first clause of this sentence might be applied to Crabbe's poetry to the very end of his days. Of his later and far maturer poems, when he had ceased to polish, it is too true that the thoughts are often better than their treatment. His latest publisher, John Murray, used to say that in conversation Crabbe often "said uncommon things in so common a way" that they passed unnoticed. The remark applies equally to much of Crabbe's poetry. But at least, if this incongruity is to exist, it is on the more hopeful side. The characteristic of so much poetry of our own day is that the manner is uncommon, and the commonness resides in the matter.

When Crabbe had completed his revisions to his own satisfaction and his adviser's, Burke suggested the publication of *The Library* and *The Village*, and the former poem was laid before Mr. Dodsley, who only a few months before had refused a poem from the same hand. But circumstances were now changed, and Burke's recommendation and support were all-sufficient. Dodsley was all politeness, and though he declined to incur any risk—this was doubtless borne by Burke—he promised his best endeavours to make the poem a success. *The Library* was published, anonymously, in June 1781. The *Monthly* and the *Critical Reviews* awarded it a certain amount of faint praise, but the success with the general public seems only to have been slight.

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When Burke selected this poem to lay before Dodsley, he had already read portions of *The Village,* and it seems strange that he should have given *The Library* precedence, for the other was in every respect the more remarkable. But Burke, a conservative in this as in other matters, probably thought that a new poet desiring to be heard would be wiser in not at once quitting the old paths. The readers of poetry still had a taste for didactic epigram varied by a certain amount of florid rhetoric. And there was little beyond this in Crabbe's moralisings on the respective functions of theology, history, poetry, and the rest, as represented on the shelves of a library, and on the blessings of literature to the heart when wearied with business and the cares of life. Crabbe's verses on such topics are by no means ineffective. He had caught perfectly the trick of the school so soon to pass away. He is as fluent and copious—as skilful in spreading a truism over a dozen well-sounding lines—as any of his predecessors. There is little new in the way of ideas. Crabbe had as yet no wide insight into books and authors, and he was forced to deal largely in generalities. But he showed that he had already some idea of style; and if, when he had so little to say, he could say it with so much semblance of power, it was certain that when he had observed and thought for himself he would go further and make a deeper mark. The heroic couplet controlled him to the end of his life, and there is no doubt that it was not merely timidity that made him confine himself to the old beaten track. Crabbe's thoughts ran very much in antithesis, and the couplet suited this tendency. But it had its serious limitations. Southey's touching stanzas—

"My days among the dead are passed,"

though the ideas embodied are no more novel than Crabbe's, are worth scores of such lines as these—

"With awe, around these silent walks I tread;
These are the lasting mansions of the dead:
'The dead!' methinks a thousand tongues reply;
'These are the tombs of such as cannot die!
Crowned with eternal fame, they sit sublime,
And laugh at all the little strife of Time'"

CHAPTER III

FRIENDSHIP WITH BURKE

(1781-1783)

Thus far I have followed the guidance of Crabbe's son and biographer, but there is much that is confused and incomplete in his narrative. The story of Crabbe's life, as told by the son, leaves us in much doubt as to the order of events in 1780-1781. The

memorable letter to Burke was, as we have seen, without a date. The omission is not strange, for the letter was written by Crabbe in great anguish of mind, and was left by his own hand at Burke's door. The son, though he evidently obtained from his father most of the information he was afterwards to use, never extracted this date from him. He

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tells us that up to the time of his undertaking the Biography, he did not even know that the original of the letter was in existence. He also tells us that until he and his brother saw the letter they had little idea of the extreme poverty and anxiety which their father had experienced during his time in London. Obviously Crabbe himself had been reticent on the subject even with his own family. From the midsummer of 1780, when the "Journal to Mira" comes to an end, to the February or March of the following year, there is a blank in the Biography which the son was unable to fill. At the time the fragment of Diary closes, Crabbe was apparently at the very end of his resources. He had pawned all his personal property, his books and his surgical implements, and was still in debt. He had begged assistance from many of the leading statesmen of the hour without success. How did he contrive to exist between June 1780 and the early months of 1781?

The problem might never have been solved for us had it not been for the accidental publication, four years after the Biography appeared, of a second letter from Crabbe to Burke. In 1838, Sir Henry Bunbury, in an appendix to the *Memoir and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Hanmer* (Speaker of the House of Commons, and Shakspearian editor), printed a collection of miscellaneous letters from distinguished men in the possession of the Bunbury family. Among these is a letter of Crabbe to Burke, undated save as to the month, which is given as June 26th. The year, however, is obviously 1781, for the letter consists of further details of Crabbe's early life, not supplied in the earlier effusion. At the date of this second letter, Crabbe had been known to Burke three or four months. During that time Crabbe had been constantly seeing Burke, and with his help had been revising for the press the poem of *The Library*, which was published by Dodsley in this very month, June 1781. The first impression, accordingly, produced on us by the letter, is one of surprise that after so long a period of intimate association with Burke, Crabbe should still be writing in a tone of profound anxiety and discouragement as to his future prospects. According to the son's account of the situation, when Crabbe left Burke's house after their first meeting, "he was, in the common phrase, 'a made man'—from that hour." That short interview "entirely, and for ever, changed the nature of his worldly fortunes." This, in a sense, was undoubtedly true, though not perhaps as the writer meant. It is clear from the letter first printed by Sir Henry Bunbury, that up to the end of June 1781, Crabbe's future occupation in life was still unfixed, and that he was full of misgivings as to the means of earning a livelihood.

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The letter is of great interest in many respects, but is too long to print as a whole in the text[1]. It throws light upon the blank space in Crabbe's history just now referred to. It tells the story of a period of humiliation and distress, concerning which it is easy to understand that even in the days of his fame and prosperity Crabbe may well have refrained from speaking with his children. After relating in full his early struggles as an imperfectly qualified country doctor, and his subsequent fortunes in London up to the day of his appeal to Burke, Crabbe proceeds—"It will perhaps be asked how I could live near twelve months a stranger in London; and coming without money, it is not to be supposed I was immediately credited. It is not; my support arose from another source. In the very early part of my life I contracted some acquaintance, which afterwards became a serious connection, with the niece of a Suffolk gentleman of large fortune. Her mother lives with her three daughters at Beccles; her income is but the interest of fifteen hundred pounds, which at her decease is to be divided betwixt her children. The brother makes her annual income about a hundred pounds; he is a rigid economist, and though I have the pleasure of his approbation, I have not the good fortune to obtain more, nor from a prudent man could I perhaps expect so much. But from the family at Beccles I have every mark of their attention, and every proof of their disinterested regard. They have from time to time supplied me with such sums as they could possibly spare, and that they have not done more arose from my concealing the severity of my situation, for I would not involve in my errors or misfortunes a very generous and very happy family by which I am received with unaffected sincerity, and where I am treated as a son by a mother who can have no prudential reason to rejoice that her daughter has formed such a connection. It is this family I lately visited, and by which I am pressed to return, for they know the necessity there is for me to live with the utmost frugality, and hopeless of my succeeding in town, they invite me to partake of their little fortune, and as I cannot mend my prospects, to avoid making them worse." The letter ends with an earnest appeal to Burke to help him to any honest occupation that may enable him to live without being a burden on the slender resources of Miss Elmy's family. Crabbe is full of gratitude for all that Burke has thus far done for him. He has helped him to complete and publish his poem, but Crabbe is evidently aware that poetry does not mean a livelihood, and that his future is as dark as ever. The letter is dated from Crabbe's old lodging with the Vickerys in Bishopsgate Street, and he had been lately staying with the Elmys at Beccles. He was not therefore as yet a visitor under Burke's roof. This was yet to come, with all the happy results that were to follow. It may still seem strange that all these details remained to be told to Burke four months

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after their acquaintance had begun. An explanation of this may be found in the autobiographical matter that Crabbe late in life supplied to the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1816. He there intimates that after Burke had generously assisted him in other ways, besides enabling him to publish *The Library*, the question had been discussed of Crabbe's future calling. "Mr. Crabbe was encouraged to lay open his views, past and present; to display whatever reading and acquirements he possessed, to explain the causes of his disappointments, and the cloudiness of his prospects; in short he concealed nothing from a friend so able to guide inexperience, and so willing to pardon inadvertency." Obviously it was in answer to such invitations from Burke that the letter of the 26th of June 1781 was written.

It was probably soon after the publication of *The Library* that Crabbe paid his first visit to Beaconsfield, and was welcomed as a guest by Burke's wife and her niece as cordially as by the statesman himself. Here he first met Charles James Fox and Sir Joshua Reynolds, and through the latter soon became acquainted with Samuel Johnson, on whom he called in Bolt Court. Later in the year, when in London, Crabbe had lodgings hard by the Burkes in St. James's Place, and continued to be a frequent guest at their table, where he met other of Burke's distinguished friends, political and literary. Among these was Lord Chancellor Thurlow to whom Crabbe had appealed, without success, in his less fortunate days. On that occasion Thurlow had simply replied, in regard to the poems which Crabbe had enclosed, "that his avocations did not leave him leisure to read verses." To this Crabbe had been so unwise as to reply that it was one of a Lord Chancellor's functions to relieve merit in distress. But the good-natured Chancellor had not resented the impertinence, and now hearing afresh from Burke of his old petitioner, invited Crabbe to breakfast, and made him a generous apology. "The first poem you sent me, Sir," he said, "I ought to have noticed,—and I heartily forgive the second." At parting, Thurlow pressed a sealed packet containing a hundred pounds into Crabbe's hand, and assured him of further help when Crabbe should have taken Holy Orders.

For already, as the result of Burke's unceasing interest in his new friend, Crabbe's future calling had been decided. In the course of conversations at Beaconsfield Burke had discovered that his tastes and gifts pointed much more clearly towards divinity than to medicine. His special training for the office of a clergyman was of course deficient. He probably had no Greek, but he had mastered enough of Latin to read and quote the Latin poets. Moreover, his chief passion from early youth had been for botany, and the treatises on that subject were, in Crabbe's day, written in the language adopted in all scientific works. "It is most fortunate," said Burke, "that your father exerted himself to send

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you to that second school; without a little Latin we should have made nothing of you: now, I think we shall succeed." Moreover Crabbe had been a wide and discursive reader. "Mr. Crabbe," Burke told Reynolds, "appears to know something of every thing." As to his more serious qualifications for the profession, his natural piety, as shown in the diaries kept in his days of trial, was beyond doubt. He was well read in the Scriptures, and the example of a religious and much-tried mother had not been without its influence. There had been some dissipations of his earlier manhood, as his son admits, to repent of and to put away; but the growth of his character in all that was excellent was unimpeachable, and Burke was amply justified in recommending Crabbe as a candidate for orders to the Bishop of Norwich. He was ordained on the 21st of December 1781 to the curacy of his native town.

On arriving in Aldeburgh Crabbe once more set up housekeeping with a sister, as he had done in his less prosperous days as parish doctor. Sad changes had occurred in his old home during the two years of his absence. His mother had passed away after her many years of patient suffering, and his father's temper and habits were not the better for losing the wholesome restraints of her presence. But his attitude to his clergyman son was at once changed. He was proud of his reputation and his new-formed friends, and of the proofs he had given that the money spent on his education had not been thrown away. But, apart from the family pride in him, and that of Miss Elmy and other friends at Parham, Crabbe's reception by his former friends and neighbours in Aldeburgh was not of the kind he might have hoped to receive. He had left the place less than three years before, a half-trained and unappreciated practitioner in physic, to seek his fortune among strangers in London, with the forlornest hopes of success. Jealousy of his elevated position and improved fortunes set in with much severity. On the other hand, it was more than many could tolerate that the hedge-apothecary of old should be empowered to hold forth in a pulpit. Crabbe himself in later life admitted to his children that his treatment at the hands of his fellow-townsmen was markedly unkind. Even though he was happy in the improved relations with his own family, and in the renewed opportunities of frequent intercourse with Miss Elmy and the Tovells, Crabbe's position during the few months at Aldeburgh was far from agreeable. The religious influence, moreover, which he would naturally have wished to exercise in his new sphere would obviously suffer in consequence. The result was that in accordance with the assurances given him by Thurlow at their last meeting, Crabbe again laid his difficulties before the Chancellor. Thurlow quite reasonably replied that he could not form any opinion as to Crabbe's present situation—"still less upon the agreeableness of it"; and hinted that a somewhat longer period of probation was advisable before he selected Crabbe for preferment in the Church.

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Other relief was however at hand, and once more through the watchful care of Burke. Crabbe received a letter from his faithful friend to the effect that he had mentioned his case to the Duke of Rutland, and that the Duke had offered him the post of domestic chaplain at Belvoir Castle, when he might be free from his engagements at Aldeburgh. That Burke should have ventured on this step is significant, both as regards the Duke and Duchess, and Crabbe. Crabbe's son remarks with truth that an appointment of the kind was unusual, "such situations in the mansions of that rank being commonly filled either by relations of the family itself, or by college acquaintances, or dependents recommended by political service and local attachment." Now Burke would certainly not have recommended Crabbe for the post if he had found in his *protege* any such defects of breeding or social tact as would have made his society distasteful to the Duke and Duchess. Burke, as we have seen, described him on their first acquaintance as having "the mind and feelings of a gentleman." Thurlow, it is true, after one of Crabbe's earlier interviews, had declared with an oath (*more suo*) that he was "as like Parson Adams as twelve to a dozen." But Thurlow was not merely jesting. He knew that Fielding's immortal clergyman had also the "mind and feelings of a gentleman," although his simplicity and ignorance of the world put him at many social disadvantages. It was probably the same obvious difference in Crabbe from the common type of nobleman's chaplain of that day which made Crabbe's position at Belvoir, as his son admits, full of difficulties. It is quite possible and even natural that the guests and visitors at the Castle did not always accept Crabbe's talents as making up for a certain want of polish—or even perhaps for a want of deference to their opinions in conversation. The "pampered menials" moreover would probably resent having "to say Amen" to a newly-discovered literary adventurer from the great metropolis.

In any case Crabbe's experience of a chaplain's life at Belvoir was not, by his son's admission, a happy one. "The numberless allusions," he writes, "to the nature of a literary dependent's existence in a great lord's house, which occur in my father's writings, and especially in the tale of *The Patron*, are, however, quite enough, to lead any one who knew his character and feelings to the conclusion that notwithstanding the kindness and condescension of the Duke and Duchess themselves—which were, I believe, uniform, and of which he always spoke with gratitude—the situation he filled at Belvoir was attended with many painful circumstances, and productive in his mind of some of the acutest sensations of wounded pride that have ever been traced by any pen." It is not necessary to hold Crabbe himself entirely irresponsible for this result. His son, with a frankness that marks the Biography throughout, does not conceal that his father's

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temper, even in later life, was intolerant of contradiction, and he probably expressed his opinions before the guests at Belvoir with more vehemence than prudence. But if the rebuffs he met with were long remembered, they taught him something of value, and enlarged that stock of worldly wisdom so prominent in his later writings. In the story of *The Patron*, the young student living as the rich man's guest is advised by his father as to his behaviour with a fulness of detail obviously derived from Crabbe's own recollections of his early deficiencies:—

"Thou art Religion's advocate—take heed.
Hurt not the cause thy pleasure 'tis to plead;
With wine before thee, and with wits beside,
Do not in strength of reasoning powers confide;
What seems to thee convincing, certain, plain,
They will deny and dare thee to maintain;
And thus will triumph o'er thy eager youth,
While thou wilt grieve for so disgracing truth.
With pain I've seen, these wrangling wits among,
Faith's weak defenders, passionate and young;
Weak thou art not, yet not enough on guard
Where wit and humour keep their watch and ward.
Men gay and noisy will o'erwhelm thy sense,
Then loudly laugh at Truth's and thy expense:
While the kind ladies will do all they can
To check their mirth, and cry '*The good young man!*'"

Meantime there were alleviations of the poet's lot. If the guests of the house were not always convinced by his arguments and the servants did not disguise their contempt, the Duke and Duchess were kind, and made him their friend. Nor was the Duke without an intelligent interest in Crabbe's own subjects. Moreover, among the visitors at Belvoir were many who shared that interest to the full, such as the Duke of Queensberry, Lord Lothian, Bishop Watson, and the eccentric Dr. Robert Glynn. Again, it was during Crabbe's residence at Belvoir that the Duke's brother, Lord Robert Manners, died of wounds received while leading his ship, *Resolution*, against the French in the West Indies, in the April of 1782. Crabbe's sympathy with the family, shown in his tribute to the sailor-brother appended to the poem he was then bringing to completion, still further strengthened the tie between them. Crabbe accompanied the Duke to London soon after, to assist him in arranging with Stothard for a picture to be painted of the incident of Lord Robert's death. It was during this visit that Crabbe received the following letter from Burke. The letter is undated, but belongs to the month of May, for *The Village* was published in that month, and Burke clearly refers to that poem as just received, but as yet unread. Crabbe seems to have been for the time off duty, and to have proposed a short visit to the Burkes;—

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“Dear Sir,—I do not know by what unlucky accident you missed the note I left for you at my house. I wrote besides to you at Belvoir. If you had received these two short letters you could not want an invitation to a place where every one considers himself as infinitely honoured and pleased by your presence. Mrs. Burke desires her best compliments, and trusts that you will not let the holidays pass over without a visit from you I have got the poem; but I have not yet opened it. I don’t like the unhappy language you use about these matters. You do not easily please such a judgment as your own—-that is natural; but where you are difficult every one else will be charmed. I am, my dear sir, ever most affectionately yours,

EDMUND BURKE.”

The “unhappy language” seems to point to Crabbe having expressed some diffidence or forebodings concerning his new venture. Yet Crabbe had less to fear on this head than with most of his early poems. *The Village* had been schemed and composed in parts before Crabbe knew Burke. One passage in it indeed, as we have seen, had first convinced Burke that the writer was a poet. And in the interval that followed the poem had been completed and matured with a care that Crabbe seldom afterwards bestowed upon his productions. Burke himself had suggested and criticised much during its progress, and the manuscript had further been submitted through Sir Joshua Reynolds to Johnson, who not only revised it in detail but re-wrote half a dozen of the opening lines. Johnson’s opinion of the poem was conveyed to Reynolds in the following letter, and here at last we get a date:—

March 4, 1783.

“Sir,—I have sent you back Mr. Crabbe’s poem, which I read with great delight. It is original, vigorous, and elegant. The alterations which I have made I do not require him to adopt; for my lines are perhaps not often better than his own: but he may take mine and his own together, and perhaps between them produce something better than either. He is not to think his copy wantonly defaced: a wet sponge will wash all the red lines away and leave the pages clean. His dedication will be least liked: it were better to contract it into a short, sprightly address. I do not doubt of Mr. Crabbe’s success. I am, Sir, your most humble servant,

SAMUEL JOHNSON.”

Boswell’s comment on this incident is as follows:—“The sentiments of Mr. Crabbe’s admirable poem as to the false notions of rustic happiness and rustic virtue were quite congenial with Dr. Johnson’s own: and he took the trouble not only to suggest slight corrections and variations, but to furnish some lines when he thought he could give the writer’s meaning better than in the words of the manuscript.” Boswell went on to observe that “the aid given by Johnson to the poem, as to *The Traveller* and *Deserted Village* of Goldsmith, were so small as by no means to impair the distinguished merit of

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the author." There were unfriendly critics, however, in Crabbe's native county who professed to think otherwise, and "whispered that the manuscript had been so *cobbled* by Burke and Johnson that its author did not know it again when returned to him." On which Crabbe's son rejoins that "if these kind persons survived to read *The Parish Register* their amiable conjectures must have received a sufficient rebuke."

This confident retort is not wholly just. There can be no doubt that some special mannerisms and defects of Crabbe's later style had been kept in check by the wise revision of his friends. And again, when after more than twenty years Crabbe produced *The Parish Register*, that poem, as we shall see, had received from Charles James Fox something of the same friendly revision and suggestion as *The Village* had received from Burke and Johnson.

The Village, in quarto, published by J. Dodsley, Pall Mall, appeared in May 1783, and at once attracted attention by novel qualities. Among these was the bold realism of the village-life described, and the minute painting of the scenery among which it was led. Cowper had published his first volume a year before, but thus far it had failed to excite general interest, and had met with no sale. Burns had as yet published nothing. But two poetic masterpieces, dealing with the joys and sorrows of village folk, were fresh in Englishmen's memory. One was *The Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, the other was *The Deserted Village*. Both had left a deep impression upon their readers—and with reason—for two poems, more certain of immortality, because certain of giving a pleasure that cannot grow old-fashioned, do not exist in our literature. Each indeed marked an advance upon all that English descriptive or didactic poets had thus far contributed towards making humble life and rural scenery attractive—unless we except the *Allegro* of Milton and some passages in Thomson's *Seasons*. Nor was it merely the consummate workmanship of Gray and Goldsmith that had made their popularity. The genuineness of the pathos in the two poems was beyond suspicion, although with Gray it was blended with a melancholy that was native to himself. Although their authors had not been brought into close personal relations with the joys and sorrows dealt with, there was nothing of sentiment, in any unworthy sense, in either poet's treatment of his theme. But the result of their studies of humble village life was to produce something quite distinct from the treatment of the realist. What they saw and remembered had passed through the transfiguring medium of a poet's imagination before it reached the reader. The finished product, like the honey of the bee, was due to the poet as well as to the flower from which he had derived the raw material.

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It seems to have been generally assumed when Crabbe's *Village* appeared, that it was of the nature of a rejoinder to Goldsmith's poem, and the fact that Crabbe quotes a line from *The Deserted Village*, "Passing rich on forty pounds a year," in his own description of the village parson, might seem to confirm that impression. But the opening lines of *The Village* point to a different origin. It was rather during those early years when George's father read aloud to his family the pastorals of the so-called Augustan age of English poetry, that the boy was first struck with the unreality and consequent worthlessness of the conventional pictures of rural life. And in the opening lines of *The Village* he boldly challenges the judgment of his readers on this head. The "pleasant land" of the pastoral poets was one of which George Crabbe, not unjustly, "thought scorn."

"The village life, and every care that reigns
O'er youthful peasants and declining swains,
What labour yields, and what, that labour past,
Age, in its hour of languor, finds at last;
What form the real picture of the poor,
Demand a song—the Muse can give no more.
  Fled are those times when in harmonious strains
The rustic poet praised his native plains:
No shepherds now, in smooth alternate verse,
Their country's beauty or their nymphs' rehearse;
Yet still for these we frame the tender strain,
Still in our lays fond Corydons complain,
And shepherds' boys their amorous pains reveal,
The only pains, alas! they never feel."

At this point follow the six lines which Johnson had substituted for the author's. Crabbe had written:—

"In fairer scenes, where peaceful pleasures spring,
Tityrus, the pride of Mantuan swains, might sing.
But charmed by him, or smitten with his views,
Shall modern poets court the Mantuan muse?
From Truth and Nature shall we widely stray,
Where Fancy leads, or Virgil led the way?"

Johnson substituted the following, and Crabbe accepted the revised version:—

"On Mincio's banks, in Caesar's bounteous reign,
If Tityrus found the Golden Age again,
Must sleepy bards the flattering dream prolong,
Mechanic echoes of the Mantuan song?

From Truth and Nature shall we widely stray,
Where Virgil, not where Fancy, leads the way?”

The first four lines of Johnson are beyond question an improvement, and it is worth remark in passing how in the fourth line he has anticipated Cowper’s “made poetry a mere mechanic art.”

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But in the concluding couplet, Crabbe's meaning seems to lose in clearness through the change. Crabbe intended to ask whether it was safe to desert truth and nature for one's own self-pleasing fancies, even though Virgil had set the example. Johnson's version seems to obscure rather than to make clearer this interpretation. Crabbe, after this protest against the conventional, which, if unreal at the outset, had become a thousand times more wearisome by repetition, passes on to a daring presentation of real life lived among all the squalor of actual poverty, not unskilfully interspersed with descriptions equally faithful of the barren coast-scenery among which he had been brought up. It has been already remarked how Crabbe's eye for rural nature had been quickened and made more exact by his studies in botany. There was little in the poetry then popular that reproduced an actual scene as perfectly as do the following lines:—

"Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er,
Lends the light turf that warms the neighbouring poor;
From thence a length of burning sand appears,
Where the thin harvest waves its withered ears;
Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,
Reign o'er the land, and rob the blighted rye:
There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,
And to the ragged infant threaten war;
There poppies nodding, mock the hope of toil;
There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil;
Hardy and high above the slender sheaf
The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf;
O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade,
And clasping tares cling round the sickly blade;
With mingled tints the rocky coasts abound,
And a sad splendour vainly shines around."

Crabbe here perceives the value, as Goldsmith had done before him, of village scenery as a background to his picture of village life. It suited Goldsmith's purpose to describe the ideal rural community, happy, prosperous, and innocent, as contrast with that depopulation of villages and corruption of peasant life which he predicted from the growing luxury and selfishness of the rich. But notwithstanding the title of the poem, it is Auburn in its pristine condition that remains in our memories. The dominant thought expressed is the virtue and the happiness that belong by nature to village life. Crabbe saw that this was no less idyllic and unreal, or at least incomplete, than the pictures of shepherd life presented in the faded copies of Theocritus and Virgil that had so long satisfied the English readers of poetry. There was no unreality in Goldsmith's design. They were not fictitious and "lucrative" tears that he shed. For his object was to portray an English rural village in its ideality—rural loveliness—enshrining rural innocence and joy—and to show how man's vices, invading it from the outside, might bring all to ruin. Crabbe's purpose was different. He aimed to awaken pity and sympathy for rural sins and sorrows with which he had himself been in closest touch, and which sprang from

causes always in operation within the heart of the community itself, and not to be attributed to the insidious attacks from without. Goldsmith, for example, drew an immortal picture of the village pastor, closely modelled upon Chaucer's "poor parson of a town," his piety, humility, and never failing goodness to his flock.—

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"Thus to relieve the wretched was his pride,
And even his failings leaned to virtue's side;
But in his duty prompt at every call
He watched and wept; he prayed and felt for all.
And as a bird each fond endearment tries
To tempt its new-fledged offspring to the skies,
He tried each art, reproved each dull delay,
Allured to brighter worlds, and led the way."

Crabbe remembered a different type of parish priest in his boyhood, and this is how he introduces him. He has been describing, with an unmitigated realism, the village poorhouse, in all its squalor and dilapidation:—

"There children dwell who know no parents' care:
Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there.
Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,
Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed"

The dying pauper needs some spiritual consolation ere he passes into the unseen world,

"But ere his death some pious doubts arise,
Some simple fears which bold, bad men despise;
Fain would he ask the parish priest to prove
His title certain to the joys above:
For this he sends the murmuring nurse, who calls
The holy stranger to these dismal walls;
And doth not he, the pious man, appear,
He, 'passing rich with forty pounds a year'?
Ah! no: a shepherd of a different stock.
And far unlike him, feeds this little flock:
A jovial youth, who thinks his Sunday's task
As much as God or man can fairly ask;
The rest he gives to loves and labours light,
To fields the morning, and to feasts the night;
None better skilled the noisy pack to guide,
To urge their chase, to cheer them, or to chide;
A sportsman keen, he shoots through half the day,
And, skilled at whist, devotes the night to play:
Then, while such honours bloom around his head,
Shall he sit sadly by the sick man's bed,
To raise the hope he feels not, or with zeal
To combat fears that e'en the pious feel?"

Crabbe's son, after his father's death, cited in a note on these lines what he hold to be a parallel passage from Cowper's *Progress of Error*, beginning:—

"Oh, laugh or mourn with me the rueful jest,
A cassocked huntsman, and a fiddling priest."

Cowper's first volume, containing *Table-Talk* and its companion satires, appeared some months before Crabbe's *Village*. The shortcomings of the clergy are a favourite topic with him, and a varied gallery of the existing types of clerical inefficiency may be formed from his pages. Many of Cowper's strictures were amply justified by the condition of the English Church. But Cowper's method is not Crabbe's. The note of the satirist is seldom absent, blended at times with just a suspicion of that of the Pharisee. The humorist and the Puritan contend for predominance in the breast of this polished gentleman and scholar. Cowper's

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friend, Newton, in the Preface he wrote for his first volume, claimed for the poet that his satire was “benevolent.” But it was not always discriminating or just. The satirist’s keen love of antithesis often weakens the moral virtue of Cowper’s strictures. In this earliest volume anger was more conspicuous than sorrow, and contempt perhaps more obvious than either. The callousness of public opinion on many subjects needed other medicine than this. Hence was it perhaps that Cowper’s volume, which appeared in May 1782, failed to awaken interest. Crabbe’s *Village* appeared just a year later (it had been completed a year or two earlier), and at once made its mark. “It was praised,” writes his son, “in the leading journals; the sale was rapid and extensive; and my father’s reputation was by universal consent greatly raised, and permanently established, by this poem,” The number of anonymous letters it brought the author, some of gratitude, and some of resentment (for it had laid its finger on many sores in the body-politic), showed how deeply his touch had been felt. Further publicity for the poem was obtained by Burke, who inserted the description of the Parish Workhouse and the Village Apothecary in *The Annual Register,* which he controlled. The same pieces were included a few years later by Vicesimus Knox in that excellent Miscellany *Elegant Extracts*. And Crabbe was to learn in later life from Walter Scott how, when a youth of eighteen, spending a snowy winter in a lonely country-house, he fell in with the volume of *The Annual Register* containing the passages from *The Village;* how deeply they had sunk into his heart; and that (writing then to Crabbe in the year 1809) he could repeat them still from memory.

Edmund Burke’s friend, Edward Shackleton, meeting Crabbe at Burke’s house soon after the publication of the poem, paid him an elegant tribute. Goldsmith’s, he said, would now be the “deserted” village. Crabbe modestly disclaimed the compliment, and assuredly with reason Goldsmith’s delightful poem will never be deserted. For it is no loss good and wise to dwell on village life as it might be, than to reflect on what it has suffered from man’s inhumanity to man. What made Crabbe a now force in English poetry, was that in his verse Pity appears, after a long oblivion, as the true antidote to Sentimentalism. The reader is not put off with pretty imaginings, but is led up to the object which the poet would show him, and made to feel its horror. If Crabbe is our first great realist in verse, he uses his realism in the cause of a true humanity. *Facit indignatio versum.*

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote 1: I cannot deny myself the pleasure of here acknowledging my indebtedness to a French scholar, M. Huchon of the University of Nancy. M. Huchon is himself engaged upon a study of the Life and Poetry of Crabbe, and in the course of a conversation with me in London, first called my attention to the volume containing this

letter. I agree with him in thinking that no previous biographer of Crabbe has been aware of its existence.]

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CHAPTER IV

LIFE AT BELVOIR CASTLE AND AT MUSTON

(1783-1792)

"The sudden popularity of *The Village*" writes Crabbe's son and biographer, "must have produced, after the numberless slights and disappointments already mentioned, and even after the tolerable success of *The Library*, about as strong a revulsion in my father's mind as a ducal chaplaincy in his circumstances; but there was no change in his temper or manners. The successful author continued as modest as the rejected candidate for publication had been patient and long-suffering." The biographer might have remarked as no less strange that the success of *The Village* failed, for the moment at least, to convince Crabbe where his true strength lay. When he again published a poem, two years later, he reverted to the old Popian topics and methods in a by no means successful didactic satire on newspapers. Meantime the occasional visits of the Duke of Rutland and his family to London brought the chaplain again in touch with the Burkes and the friends he had first made through them, notably with Sir Joshua Reynolds. He was also able to visit the theatre occasionally, and fell under the spell, not only of Mrs. Siddons, but of Mrs. Jordan (in the character of Sir Harry Wildair). It was now decided that as a nobleman's chaplain it would be well for him to have a university degree, and to this end his name was entered on the boards of Trinity College, Cambridge, through the good offices of Bishop Watson of Llandaff, with a view to his obtaining a degree without residence. This was in 1783, but almost immediately afterwards he received an LL.B. degree from the Archbishop of Canterbury. This was obtained for Crabbe in order that he might hold two small livings in Dorsetshire, Frome St. Quintin and Evershot, to which he had just been presented by Thurlow. It was on this occasion that the Chancellor made his memorable comparison of Crabbe to Parson Adams, no doubt pointing to a certain rusticity, and possibly provincial accent, from which Crabbe seems never to have been wholly free. This promotion seems to have interfered very little with Crabbe's residence at Belvoir or in London. A curate was doubtless placed in one or other of the parsonage-houses in Dorsetshire at such modest stipend as was then usual—often not more than thirty pounds a year—and the rector would content himself with a periodical flying visit to receive tithe, or inquire into any parish grievances that may have reached his ear. As incidents of this kind will be not infrequent during the twenty years that follow in Crabbe's clerical career, it may be well to intimate at once that no peculiar blame attaches to him in the matter. He but "partook of the frailty of his times." During these latter years of the eighteenth century, as for long before and after, pluralism in the Church was rather the rule than the exception, and in consequence non-residence was recognised as inevitable, and hardly matter for comment. The two Dorsetshire livings were of small value, and as Crabbe was now looking forward to his marriage with the faithful Miss Elmy, he could not have

afforded to reside. He may not, however, have thought it politic to decline the first preferment offered by so important a dispenser of patronage as the Lord Chancellor.

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Events, however, were at hand, which helped to determine Crabbe's immediate future. Early in 1784 the Duke of Rutland became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. The appointment had been made some time before, and it had been decided that Crabbe was not to be on the Castle staff. His son expresses no surprise at this decision, and makes of it no grievance. The duke and the chaplain parted excellent friends. Crabbe and his wife were to remain at Belvoir as long as it suited their convenience, and the duke undertook that he would not forget him as regarded future preferment. On the strength of these offers, Crabbe and Miss Elmy wore married in December 1783, in the parish church of Beccles, where Miss Elmy's mother resided, and a few weeks later took up their abode in the rooms assigned them at Belvoir Castle.

As Miss Elmy had lived for many years with her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. John Tovell, at Parham, and moreover as this rural inland village played a considerable part in the development of Crabbe's poetical faculty, it may be well to quote his son's graphic account of the domestic circumstances of Miss Elmy's relatives. Mr. Tovell was, like Mr. Hathaway, "a substantial yeoman," for he owned an estate of some eight hundred a year, to some share of which, as the Tovells had lost their only child, Miss Elmy would certainly in due course succeed. The Tovells' house at Parham, which has been long ago pulled down, and rebuilt as Paritam Lodge, on very different lines, was of ample size, with its moat, so common a feature of the homestead in the eastern counties, "rookery, dove-cot, and fish-ponds"; but the surroundings were those of the ordinary farmhouse, for Mr. Tovell himself cultivated part of his estate.

"The drawing-room, a corresponding dining-parlour, and a handsome sleeping apartment upstairs, were all *tabooed* ground, and made use of on great and solemn occasions only—such as rent-days, and an occasional visit with which Mr. Tovell was honoured by a neighbouring peer. At all other times the family and their visitors lived entirely in the old-fashioned kitchen along with the servants. My great-uncle occupied an armchair, or, in attacks of gout, a couch on one side of a large open chimney.... At a very early hour in the morning the alarum called the maids, and their mistress also; and if the former were tardy, a louder alarum, and more formidable, was heard chiding their delay—not that scolding was peculiar to any occasion; it regularly ran on through all the day, like bells on harness, inspiriting the work, whether it were done well or ill." In the annotated volume of the son's memoir which belonged to Edward FitzGerald, the writer added the following detail as to his great-aunt's temper and methods:—"A wench whom Mrs. Tovell had pursued with something weightier than invective—a ladle, I think—-whimpered out 'If an angel from Hiv'n were to come mawther'" (Suffolk for *girl*) "'to missus, she wouldn't give no satisfaction.'"

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George Crabbe the younger, who gives this graphic account of the *menage* at Parham, was naturally anxious to claim for his mother, who so long formed one of this queer household, a degree of refinement superior to that of her surroundings. After describing the daily dinner-party in the kitchen—master, mistress, servants, with an occasional "travelling rat-catcher or tinker"—he skilfully points out that his mother's feelings must have resembled those of the boarding-school miss in his father's "Widow's Tale" when subjected to a like experience:—

"But when the men beside their station took,
The maidens with them, and with these the cook;
When one huge wooden bowl before them stood,
Filled with huge balls of farinaceous food;
With bacon, mass saline! where never lean
Beneath the brown and bristly rind was seen:
When from a single horn the party drew
Their copious draughts of heavy ale and new;
When the coarse cloth she saw, with many a stain,
Soiled by rude hands who cut and came again—
She could not breathe, but with a heavy sigh,
Reined the fair neck, and shut th' offended eye;
She minced the sanguine flesh in frustums fine,
And wondered much to see the creatures dine!"

The home of the Tovells has long disappeared, and it must not therefore be confused with the more remarkable "moated grange" in Parham, originally the mansion of the Willoughbys, though now a farmhouse, boasting a fine Tudor gateway and other fragments of fifteenth and sixteenth century work. An engraving of the Hall and moat, after Stanfield, forms an illustration to the third volume of the 1834 edition of Crabbe.

When Crabbe began *The Village*, it was clearly intended to be, like *The Borough* later, a picture of Aldeburgh and its inhabitants. Yet not only Parham, but the country about Belvoir crept in before the poem was completed. If the passage in Book I. beginning:—

"Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er,"

describes pure Aldeburgh, the opening lines of Book II., taking a more roseate view of rural happiness:—

"I, too, must yield, that oft amid those woes
Are gleams of transient mirth and hours of sweet repose,
Such as you find on yonder sportive Green,
The squire's tall gate, and churchway-walk between,
Where loitering stray a little tribe of friends
On a fair Sunday when the sermon ends,"

are drawn from the pleasant villages in the Midlands (perhaps Allington, where he was afterwards to minister), whither he rambled on his botanising excursions from Belvoir Castle.

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George Crabbe and his bride settled down in their apartments at Belvoir Castle, but difficulties soon arose. Crabbe was without definite clerical occupation, unless he read prayers to the few servants left in charge; and was simply waiting for whatever might turn up in the way of preferment from the Manners family, or from the Lord Chancellor. The young couple soon found the position intolerable, and after less than eighteen months Crabbe wisely accepted a vacant curacy in the neighbourhood, that of Stathern in Leicestershire, to the humble parsonage of which parish Crabbe and his wife removed in 1785. A child had been born to them at Belvoir, who survived its birth only a few hours. During the following four years at Stathern were born three other children—-the two sons, George and John, in 1785 and 1787, and a daughter in 1789, who died in infancy.

Stathern is a village about four miles from Belvoir Castle, and the drive or walk from one to the other lies through the far-spreading woods and gardens surrounding the ducal mansion. Crabbe entered these woods almost at his very door, and found there ample opportunity for his botanical studies, which were still his hobby. As usual his post was that of *locum tenens*, the rector, Dr. Thomas Parke, then residing at his other living at Stamford. My friend, the Rev. J.W. Taylor, the present rector of Stathern, who entered on his duties in 1866, tells me of one or two of the village traditions concerning Crabbe. One of these is to the effect that he spoke “through his nose,” which I take to have been the local explanation of a marked Suffolk accent which accompanied the poet through life. Another, that he was peppery of temper, and that an exceedingly youthful couple having presented themselves for holy matrimony, Crabbe drove them with scorn from the altar, with the remark that he had come there to marry “men and women, and not lads and wenches!”

Crabbe used to tell his children that the four years at Stathern were, on the whole, the happiest in his life. He and his wife were in humble quarters, but they were their own masters, and they were quit of “the pampered menial” for ever. “My mother and he,” the son writes, “could now ramble together at their ease amidst the rich woods of Belvoir without any of the painful feelings which had before chequered his enjoyment of the place: at home a garden afforded him healthful exercise and unfailing amusement; and his situation as a curate prevented him from being drawn into any sort of unpleasant disputes with the villagers about him”—an ambiguous statement which probably, however, means that the absent rector had to settle difficulties as to tithe, and other parochial grievances. Crabbe now again brought his old medical attainments, such as they were, to the aid of his poor parishioners, “and had often great difficulty in confining his practice strictly within the limits of the poor, for the farmers would willingly have been attended

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gratis also." His literary labours subsequent to *The Village* seem to have been slight, with the exception of a brief memoir of Lord Robert Manners contributed to *The Annual Register* in 1784, for the poem of *The Newspaper,* published in 1785, was probably "old stock." It is unlikely that Crabbe, after the success of *The Village,* should have willingly turned again to the old and unprofitable vein of didactic satire. But, the poem being in his desk, he perhaps thought that it might bring in a few pounds to a household which certainly needed them. "*The Newspaper*, a Poem, by the Rev. George Crabbe, Chaplain to his Grace the Duke of Rutland, printed for J. Dodsley, in Pall Mall," appeared as a quarto pamphlet (price 2s.) in 1785, with a felicitous motto from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on the title-page, and a politic dedication to Lord Thurlow, evincing a gratitude for past favours, and (unexpressed) a lively sense of favours to come.

The Newspaper is, to say truth, of little value, either as throwing light on the journalism of Crabbe's day, or as a step in his poetic career. The topics are commonplace, such as the strange admixture of news, the interference of the newspaper with more useful reading, and the development of the advertiser's art. It is written in the fluent and copious vein of mild satire and milder moralising which Crabbe from earliest youth had so assiduously practised. If a few lines are needed as a sample, the following will show that the methods of literary puffing are not so original to-day as might be supposed. After indicating the tradesman's ingenuity in this respect, the poet adds.—

"These are the arts by which a thousand live,
Where Truth may smile, and Justice may forgive.
But when, amid this rabble-rout, we find
A puffing poet, to his honour blind:
Who slily drops quotations all about
Packet or Post, and points their merit out;
Who advertises what reviewers say,
With sham editions every second day;
Who dares not trust his praises out of sight,
But hurries into fame with all his might;
Although the verse some transient praise obtains,
Contempt is all the anxious poet gains"

The Newspaper seems to have been coldly received by the critics, who had perhaps been led by *The Village* to expect something very different, and Crabbe never returned to the satirical-didactic line. Indeed, for twenty-two years he published nothing more, although he wrote continuously, and as regularly committed the bulk of his manuscript to the domestic fire-place. Meantime he lived a happy country life at Stathern, studying botany, reading aloud to his wife, and by no means forgetting the wants of his poor parishioners. He visited periodically his Dorsetshire livings, introducing his wife on one such occasion, as he passed through London, to the Burkes. And one day, seized with an acute attack of the *mal du pays*, he rode sixty miles to the coast of Lincolnshire that

he might once more “dip,” as his son expresses it, “in the waves that washed the beach of Aldeburgh.”

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In October 1787, Crabbe's household were startled by the news of the death of his friend and patron the Duke of Rutland, who died at the Vice-regal Lodge at Dublin, after a short illness, at the early age of thirty-three. The duke, an open-handed man and renowned for his extravagant hospitalities, had lived "not wisely but too well." Crabbe assisted at the funeral at Belvoir, and duly published his discourse then delivered in handsome quarto. Shortly after, the duchess, anxious to retain their former chaplain in the neighbourhood, gave Crabbe a letter to Thurlow, asking him to exchange the two livings in Dorsetshire for two other, of more value, in the Vale of Belvoir. Crabbe waited on the Chancellor with the letter, but Thurlow was, or affected to be, annoyed by the request. It was a thing, he exclaimed with an oath, that he would not do "for any man in England." However, when the young and beautiful duchess later appealed to him in person, he relented, and presented Crabbe to the two livings of Muston in Leicestershire, and Allington in Lincolnshire, both, within sight of Belvoir Castle, and (as the crow flies) not much more than a mile apart. To the rectory house of Muston, Crabbe brought his family in February 1789. His connection with the two livings was to extend over five and twenty years, but during thirteen of those years, as will be seen, he was a non-resident. For the present he remained three years at the small and very retired village of Muston, about five miles from Grantham. "The house in which Crabbe lived at Muston," writes Mr. Hutton,[2] "is now pulled down. It is replaced by one built higher up a slight hill, in a position intended, says scandal, to prevent any view of Belvoir. Crabbe with all his ironies had no such resentful feelings; indeed more modern successors of his have opened what he would have called a 'vista,' and the castle again crowns the distance as you look southward from the pretty garden."

Crabbe's first three years of residence at Muston were marked by few incidents. Another son, Edmund, was horn in the autumn of 1790, and a few weeks later a series of visits were paid by Crabbe, his wife and elder boy, to their relations at Aldeburgh, Parham, and Beccles, from which latter town, according to Crabbe's son, they visited Lowestoft, and were so fortunate as to hear the aged John Wesley preach, on a memorable occasion when he quoted Anacreon:—

"Oft am I by women told, Poor Anacreon! thou grow'st old . . . . . But this I need not to be told, 'Tis time to *live*, if I grow old."

In 1792 Crabbe preached at the bishop's visitation at Grantham, and his sermon was so much admired that he was invited to receive into his house as pupils the sons of the Earl of Bute. This task, however, Crabbe rightly declined, being diffident as to his scholarship.

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In October of this year Crabbe was again working hard at his botany—for like the Friar in *Romeo and Juliet* his time was always much divided between the counselling of young couples and the "culling of simples"—when his household received the tidings of the death of John Tovell of Parham, after a brief illness. It was momentous news to Crabbe's family, for it involved "good gifts," and many "possibilities." Crabbe was left executor, and as Mr. Tovell had died without children, the estate fell to his two sisters, Mrs. Elmy and an elderly spinster sister residing in Parham. As Mrs. Elmy's share of the estate would come to her children, and as the unmarried sister died not long after, leaving her portion in the same direction, Crabbe's anxiety for the pecuniary future of his family was at an end. He visited Parham on executor's business, and on his return found that he had made up his mind "to place a curate at Muston, and to go and reside at Parham, taking the charge of some church in that neighbourhood."

Crabbe's son, with the admirable frankness that marks his memoir throughout, does not conceal that this step in his father's life was a mistake, and that he recognised and regretted it as such on cooler reflection. The comfortable home of the Tovells at Parham fell somehow, whether by the will, or by arrangement with Mrs. Elmy, to the disposal of Crabbe, and he was obviously tempted by its ampler room and pleasant surroundings. He would be once more among relatives and acquaintances, and a social circle congenial to himself and his wife. Muston must have been very dull and lonely, except for those on visiting terms with the duke and other county magnates. Moreover it is likely that the relations of Crabbe with his village flock were already—as we know they were at a later date—somewhat strained. Let it be said once for all that judged by the standards of clerical obligation current in 1792, Crabbe was then, and remained all his life, in many important respects, a diligent parish-priest. Mr. Hutton justly remarks that "the intimate knowledge of the life of the poor which his poems show proves how constantly he must have visited, no less than how closely he must have observed." But the fact remains that though he was kind and helpful to his flock while among them in sickness and in trouble—their physician as well as their spiritual adviser—his ideas as to clerical absenteeism were those of his age, and moreover his preaching to the end of his life was not of a kind to arouse much interest or zeal. I have had access to a large packet of his manuscript sermons, preached during his residence in Suffolk and later, as proved by the endorsements on the cover, at his various incumbencies in Leicestershire and Wiltshire. They consist of plain and formal explanations of his text, reinforced by other texts, entirely orthodox but unrelieved by any resource in the way of illustration, or by any of those poetic touches which his published

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verse shows he had at his command. A sermon lies before me, preached first at Great Glemham in 1801, and afterwards at Little Glemham, Sweffling, Muston, and Allington; at Trowbridge in 1820, and again at Trowbridge in 1830. The preacher probably held his discourses quite as profitable at one stage in the Church's development as at another. In this estimate of clerical responsibilities Crabbe seems to have remained stationary. But meantime the laity had been aroused to expect better things. The ferment of the Wesley and Whitefield Revival was spreading slowly but surely even among the remote villages of England. What Crabbe and the bulk of the parochial clergy called "a sober and rational conversion" seemed to those who had fallen under the fervid influence of the great Methodist a savourless and ineffectual formality. The extravagances of the Movement had indeed travelled everywhere in company with its worthier fruits. Enthusiasm,—"an excellent good word until it was ill-sorted,"—found vent in various shapes that were justly feared and suspected by many of the clergy, even by those to whom "a reasonable religion" was far from being "so very reasonable as to have nothing to do with the heart and affections." It was not only the Moderates who saw its danger. Wesley himself had found it necessary to caution his more impetuous followers against its eccentricities. And Joseph Butler preaching at the Rolls Chapel on "the Love of God" thought it well to explain that in his use of the phrase there was nothing "enthusiastical." But as one mischievous extreme generates another, the influence of the prejudice against enthusiasm became disastrous, and the word came too often to be confounded with any and every form of religious fervency and earnestness. To the end of his days Crabbe, like many another, regarded sobriety and moderation in the expression of religious feeling as not only its chief safeguard but its chief ornament. It may seem strange that the poetic temperament which Crabbe certainly possessed never seemed to affect his views of life and human nature outside the fields of poetic composition. He was notably indifferent, his son tells us, "to almost all the proper objects of taste. He had no real love for painting, or music, or architecture, or for what a painter's eye considers as the beauties of landscape. But he had a passion for science—the science of the human mind, first; then, that of nature in general; and lastly that of abstract qualities."

If the defects here indicated help to explain some of those in his poetry, they may also throw light on a certain lack of imagination in Crabbe's dealings with his fellow-men in general and with his parishioners in particular. His temperament was somewhat tactless and masterful, and he could never easily place himself at the stand-point of those who differed from him. The use of his imagination was mainly confined to the hours in his study; and while there, if he had his "*beaux moments*," he had also his "*mauvais quarts d'heure*."

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Perhaps if he had brought a little imagination to bear upon his relations with Muston and Allington, Crabbe would not have deserted his people so soon after coming among them. The stop made him many enemies. For here was no case of a poor curate accepting, for his family's sake, a more lucrative post. Crabbe was leaving the Vale of Belvoir because an accession of fortune had befallen the family, and it was pleasanter to live in his native county and in a better house. So, at least, his action was interpreted at the time, and Crabbe's son takes no very different view. "Though tastes and affections, as well as worldly interests, prompted this return to native scenes and early acquaintances, it was a step reluctantly taken, and I believe, sincerely repented of. The beginning was ominous. As we were slowly quitting the place preceded by our furniture, a stranger, though one who knew my father's circumstances, called out in an impressive tone, 'You are wrong, you are wrong!'" The sound, he afterwards admitted, found an echo in his own conscience, and during the whole journey seemed to ring in his ears "like a supernatural voice."

FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote 2: See a pleasant paper on Crabbe at Muston and Allington by the Rev. W.H. Hutton of St John's College, Oxford, in the *Cornhill Magazine* for June 1901.]

CHAPTER V

IN SUFFOLK AGAIN

(1792-1805)

On the arrival of the family at Parham, poor Crabbe discovered that even an accession of fortune had its attendant drawbacks. His son, George, records his own recollections (he was then a child of seven years) of the scene that met their view on their alighting at Parham Lodge. "As I got out of the chaise, I remember jumping for very joy, and exclaiming, 'Here we are, here we are—little Willy and all!'"—(his parents' seventh and youngest child, then only a few weeks old)—"but my spirits sunk into dismay when, on entering the well-known kitchen, all there seemed desolate, dreary, and silent. Mrs. Tovell and her sister-in-law, sitting by the fireside weeping, did not even rise up to welcome my parents, but uttered a few chilling words and wept again. All this appeared to me as inexplicable as forbidding. How little do children dream of the alterations that older people's feelings towards each other undergo, when death has caused a transfer of property! Our arrival in Suffolk was by no means palatable to all my mother's relations."

Mr. Tovell's widow had doubtless her suitable jointure, and probably a modest dower-residence to retire to; but Parham Hall had to be vacated, and Crabbe, having

purchased its furniture, at once entered on possession. The mere re-arrangement of the contents caused many heartburnings to the spinster-sister, who had known them under the old *regime*, and the alteration of the hanging of a picture would have

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made “Jacky,” she averred, to turn in his grave. Crabbe seems, however, to have shown so much good-feeling and forbearance in the matter that the old lady, after grimly boasting that she could “screw Crabbe up and down like a fiddle,” was ultimately friendly, and her share of her brother’s estate came in due course to Crabbe and his wife. Moreover, the change of tenancy at the Hall was anything but satisfactory to the village generally. Mr. Tovell had been much given to hospitality, and that of a convivial sort. Such of the neighbours as were of kindred tastes had been in the habit of “dropping in” of an evening two or three times a week, when, if a *quorum* was present, a bowl of punch would be brewed, and sometimes a second and a third. The substitution for all this of the quiet and decorous family life of the Crabbes was naturally a hoary blow and grave discouragement to the village reveller, and contributed to make Crabbe’s life at starting far from happy. His pursuits and inclinations, literary as well as clerical, made such company distasteful; and his wife, who had borne him seven children in nine years, and of these had lost four in infancy, had little strength or heart for miscellaneous company. But there was compensation for her husband among the county gentry of the neighbourhood, and notably in the constant kindness of Dudley North, of Little Glemham Hall, the same friend who had helped him with money when twelve years before he had left Aldeburgh, an almost penniless adventurer, to try his fortune in London. At Mr. North’s table Crabbe had once more the opportunity of meeting members of the Whig party, whom he had known through Burke. On one such occasion Fox expressed his regret that Crabbe had ceased to write, and offered his help in revising any future poem that he might produce. The promise was not forgotten when ten years later *The Parish Register* was in preparation.

During his first year at Parham, Crabbe does not appear to have undertaken any fixed clerical duties, and this interval of leisure allowed him to pay a long visit to his sister at Aldeburgh, and here he placed his two elder boys, George and John, at a dame school. On returning to Parham, he accepted the office of curate-in-charge at Sweffling, the rector, Rev. Richard Turner, being resident at his other living of Great Yarmouth. The curacy of Great Glemham, also within easy reach, was shortly added. Crabbe was still residing at Parham Lodge, but the incidents of such residence remained far from pleasant, and, after four years there, Crabbe joyfully accepted the offer of a good house at Great Glemham, placed at his disposal by his friend Dudley North. Here the family remained for a further period of four or five years.

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A fresh bereavement in his family had made Crabbe additionally anxious for change of scene and associations for his wife. In 1796, another child died—their third son, Edmund—in his sixth year. Two children, out of a family of seven, alone remained; and this final blow proved more than the poor mother could bear uninjured. From this time dated "a nervous disorder," which indeed meant a gradual decay of mental power, from which she never recovered; and Crabbe, an ever-devoted husband, tended her with exemplary care till her death in 1813. Southey, writing about Crabbe to his friend, Neville White, in 1808, adds: "It was not long before his wife became deranged, and when all this was told me by one who knew him well, five years ago, he was still almost confined in his own house, anxiously waiting upon this wife in her long and hopeless malady. A sad history! It is no wonder that he gives so melancholy a picture of human life."

Save for Mrs. Crabbe's broken health and increasing melancholy, the four years at Glemham were among the most peaceful and happiest of Crabbe's life. His son grows eloquent over the elegance of the house and the natural beauties of its situation. "A small well-wooded park occupied the whole mouth of the glen, whence, doubtless, the name of the village was derived. In the lowest ground stood the commodious mansion; the approach wound down through a plantation on the eminence in front. The opposite hill rose at the back of it, rich and varied with trees and shrubs scattered irregularly; under this southern hill ran a brook, and on the banks above it were spots of great natural beauty, crowned by whitethorn and oak. Here the purple scented violet perfumed the air, and in one place coloured the ground. On the left of the front in the narrower portion of the glen was the village; on the right, a confined view of richly wooded fields. In fact, the whole parish and neighbourhood resemble a combination of groves, interspersed with fields cultivated like gardens, and intersected with those green dry lanes which tempt the walker in all weathers, especially in the evenings, when in the short grass of the dry sandy banks lies every few yards a glowworm, and the nightingales are pouring forth their melody in every direction."

It was not, therefore, for lack of acquaintance with the more idyllic side of English country-life that Crabbe, when he once more addressed the public in verse, turned to the less sunny memories of his youth for inspiration. It was not till some years after the appearance of *The Parish Register* and *The Borough* that the pleasant paths of inland Suffolk and of the Vale of Belvoir formed the background to his studies in human character.

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Meantime Crabbe was perpetually writing, and as constantly destroying what he wrote. His small flock at Great and Little Glemham employed part of his time; the education of his two sons, who were now withdrawn from school, occupied some more; and a wife in failing health was certainly not neglected. But the busy husband and father found time to teach himself something of French and Italian, and read aloud to his family of an evening as many books of travel and of fiction as his friends would keep him supplied with. He was preparing at the same time a treatise on botany, which was never to see the light; and during "one or two of his winters in Suffolk," his son relates, "he gave most of his evening hours to the writing of novels, and he brought not less than three such works to a conclusion. The first was entitled 'The Widow Grey,' but I recollect nothing of it except that the principal character was a benevolent humorist, a Dr. Allison. The next was called 'Reginald Glanshaw, or the Man who commanded Success,' a portrait of an assuming, over-bearing, ambitious mind, rendered interesting by some generous virtues, and gradually wearing down into idiotism. I cannot help thinking that this Glanshaw was drawn with very extraordinary power; but the story was not well managed in the details I forget the title of his third novel; but I clearly remember that it opened with a description of a wretched room, similar to some that are presented in his poetry, and that on my mother's telling him frankly that she thought the effect very inferior to that of the corresponding pieces in verse, he paused in his reading, and after some reflection, said, 'Your remark is just.'"

Mrs. Crabbe's remark was probably very just. Although her husband had many qualifications for writing prose fiction—insight into and appreciation of character, combined with much tragic force and a real gift for description—there is reason to think that he would have been stilted and artificial in dialogue, and altogether wanting in lightness of hand. Crabbe acquiesced in his wife's decision, and the novels were cremated without a murmur. A somewhat similar fate attended a set of Tales in Verse which, in the year 1799, Crabbe was about to offer to Mr. Hatchard, the publisher, when he wisely took the opinion of his rector at Sweffling, then resident at Yarmouth, the Rev. Richard Turner[3]. This gentleman, whose opinion Crabbe greatly valued, advised *revision*, and Crabbe accepted the verdict as the reverse of encouraging. The Tales were never published, and Crabbe again deferred his reappearance in print for a period of eight years. Meantime he applied himself to the leisurely composition of the *Parish Register*, which extended, together with that of some shorter poems, over the period just named.

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In the last years of the eighteenth century there was a sudden awakening among the bishops to the growing abuse of non-residence and pluralities on the part of the clergy. One prelate of distinction devoted his triennial charge to the subject, and a general "stiffening" of episcopal good nature set in all round. The Bishop of Lincoln addressed Crabbe, with others of his delinquent clergy, and intimated to him very distinctly the duty of returning to those few sheep in the wilderness at Muston and Allington. Crabbe, in much distress, applied to his friend Dudley North to use influence on his behalf to obtain extension of leave. But the bishop, Dr. Pretyman (Pitt's tutor and friend—better known by the name he afterwards adopted of Tomlins) would not yield, and it was probably owing to pressure from some different quarter that Crabbe succeeded in obtaining leave of absence for four years longer. Dudley North would fain have solved the problem by giving Crabbe one or more of the livings in his own gift in Suffolk, but none of adequate value was vacant at the time. Meanwhile, the house rented by Crabbe, Great Glemham Hall, was sold over Crabbe's head, by family arrangements in the North family, and he made his last move while in Suffolk, by taking a house in the neighbouring village of Rendham, where he remained during his last four years. Crabbe was looking forward to his elder son's going up to Cambridge in 1803, and this formed an additional reason for wishing to remain as long as might be in the eastern counties.

The writing of poetry seems to have gone on apace. *The Parish Register* was all but completed while at Rendham, and *The Borough* was also begun. After so long an abstinence from the glory of print, Crabbe at last found the required stimulus to ambition in the need of some further income for his two sons' education. But during the last winter of his residence at Rendham (1804-1805), Crabbe produced a poem, in stanzas, of very different character and calibre from anything he had yet written, and as to the origin of which one must go back to some previous incidents in Crabbe's history. His son is always lax as to dates, and often just at those periods when they would be the most welcome. It may be inferred, however, that at some date between 1790 and 1792 Crabbe suffered from serious derangements of his digestion, attended by sudden and acute attacks of vertigo. The passage in the memoir as to the exact period is more than usually vague. The writer is dealing with the year 1800, and he proceeds:

"My father, now about his forty-sixth year, was much more stout and healthy than when I first remember him. Soon after that early period he became subject to vertigoes, which he thought indicative of a tendency to apoplexy; and was occasionally bled rather profusely, which only increased the symptoms. When he preached his first sermon at Muston in the year 1789 my mother foreboded, as she afterwards told us, that he would

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preach very few more: but it was on one of his early journeys into Suffolk, in passing through Ipswich, that he had the most alarming attack."

This account of matters is rather mixed. The "early period" pointed to by young Crabbe is that at which he himself first had distinct recollection of his father, and his doings. Putting that age at six years old, the year would be 1791; and it may be inferred that as the whole family paid a visit of many months to Suffolk in the year 1790, it was during that visit that he had the decisive attack in the streets of Ipswich. The account may be continued in the son's own words:—

"Having left my mother at the inn, he walked into the town alone, and suddenly staggered in the street, and fell. He was lifted up by the passengers" (probably from the stagecoach from which they had just alighted), "and overheard some one say significantly, 'Let the gentleman alone, he will be better by and by'; for his fall was attributed to the bottle. He was assisted to his room, and the late Dr. Clubbe was sent for, who, after a little examination, saw through the case with great judgment. 'There is nothing the matter with your head,' he observed, 'nor any apoplectic tendency; let the digestive organs bear the whole blame: you must take opiates.' From that time his health began to amend rapidly, and his constitution was renovated; a rare effect of opium, for that drug almost always inflicts some partial injury, even when it is necessary; but to him it was only salutary—and to a constant but slightly increasing dose of it may be attributed his long and generally healthy life."

The son makes no reference to any possible effects of this "slightly increasing dose" upon his father's intellect or imagination. And the ordinary reader who knows the poet mainly through his sober couplets may well be surprised to hear that their author was ever addicted to the opium-habit; still more, that his imagination ever owed anything to its stimulus. But in FitzGerald's copy there is a MS. note, not signed "G.C.," and therefore FitzGerald's own. It runs thus: "It" (the opium) "probably influenced his dreams, for better or worse" To this FitzGerald significantly adds, "see also the *World of Dreams*, and *Sir Eustace Grey*."

As Crabbe is practically unknown to the readers of the present day, *Sir Eustace Grey* will be hardly even a name to them. For it lies, with two or three other noticeable poems, quite out of the familiar track of his narrative verse. In the first place it is in stanzas, and what Browning would have classed as a "Dramatic Lyric." The subject is as follows: The scene "a Madhouse," and the persons a Visitor, a Physician, and a Patient. The visitor has been shown over the establishment, and is on the point of departing weary and depressed at the sight of so much misery, when the physician begs him to stay as they come in sight of the "cell" of a specially interesting patient, Sir Eustace Grey, late of Greyling Hall. Sir Eustace greets them as they approach, plunges at once into monologue, and relates (with occasional warnings from the doctor against

over-excitement) the sad story of his misfortunes and consequent loss of reason. He begins with a description of his happier days:—

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“Some twenty years, I think, are gone
  (Time flies, I know not how, away),
The sun upon no happier shone
  Nor prouder man, than Eustace Grey.
Ask where you would, and all would say,
  The man admired and praised of all,
By rich and poor, by grave and gay,
  Was the young lord of Greyling Hall.

“Yes! I had youth and rosy health,
Was nobly formed, as man might be;
For sickness, then, of all my wealth,
  I never gave a single fee:
The ladies fair, the maidens free.
  Were all accustomed then to say,
Who would a handsome figure see,
  Should look upon Sir Eustace Grey.

“My lady I—She was all we love;
  All praise, to speak her worth, is faint;
Her manners show’d the yielding dove,
  Her morals, the seraphic saint:
She never breathed nor looked complaint;
  No equal upon earth had she:
Now, what is this fair thing I paint?
  Alas! as all that live shall be.

“There were two cherub-things beside,
  A gracious girl, a glorious boy;
Yet more to swell my fall-blown pride,
  To varnish higher my fading joy,
Pleasures were ours without alloy,
  Nay, Paradise,—till my frail Eve
Our bliss was tempted to destroy—
  Deceived, and fated to deceive.

“But I deserved;—for all that time
  When I was loved, admired, caressed,
There was within each secret crime,
  Unfelt, uncancelled, unconfessed:
I never then my God addressed,
  In grateful praise or humble prayer;
And if His Word was not my jest—
  (Dread thought!) it never was my care.”

The misfortunes of the unhappy man proceed apace, and blow follows blow. He is unthankful for his blessings, and Heaven's vengeance descends on him. His wife proves faithless, and he kills her betrayer, once his trusted friend. The wretched woman pines and dies, and the two children take some infectious disease and quickly follow. The sufferer turns to his wealth and his ambitions to drug his memory. But "walking in pride," he is to be still further "abased." The "Watcher and the Holy One" that visited Nebuchadnezzar come to Sir Eustace in vision and pronounce his fate:

"Full be his cup, with evil fraught—
Demons his guides, and death his doom."

Two fiends of darkness are told off to tempt him. One, presumably the Spirit of Gambling, robs him of his wealth, while the Spirit of Mania takes from him his reason, and drags him through a hell of horriblest imaginings. And it is at this point that what has been called the "dream-scenery" of the opium-eater is reproduced in a series of very remarkable stanzas:

Upon that boundless plain, below,
The setting sun's last rays were shed,
And gave a mild and sober glow,
Where all were still, asleep, or dead;
Vast ruins in the midst were spread,
Pillars and pediments sublime,
Where the grey moss had form'd a bed,
And clothed the crumbling spoils of time.

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“There was I fix’d, I know not how,
  Condemn’d for untold years to stay:
Yet years were not;—one dreadful *Now*
  Endured no change of night or day;
The same mild evening’s sleepy ray
  Shone softly-solemn and serene,
And all that time I gazed away,
 The setting sun’s sad rays were seen.

“At length a moment’s sleep stole on,—
  Again came my commission’d foes;
Again through sea and land we’re gone,
  No peace, no respite, no repose:
Above the dark broad sea we rose,
  We ran through bleak and frozen land;
I had no strength their strength t’ oppose,
  An infant in a giant’s hand.

“They placed me where those streamers play,
  Those nimble beams of brilliant light;
It would the stoutest heart dismay,
  To see, to feel, that dreadful sight:
So swift, so pure, so cold, so bright,
  They pierced my frame with icy wound;
And all that half-year’s polar night,
  Those dancing streamers wrapp’d me round

“Slowly that darkness pass’d away,
  When down, upon the earth I fell,—
Some hurried sleep was mine by day;
 But, soon as toll’d the evening bell,
They forced me on, where ever dwell
  Far-distant men in cities fair,
Cities of whom no travellers tell,
  Nor feet but mine were wanderers there

“Their watchmen stare, and stand aghast,
  As on we hurry through the dark;
The watch-light blinks as we go past,
 The watch-dog shrinks and fears to bark;
The watch-tower’s bell sounds shrill; and, hark!
  The free wind blows—we’ve left the town—
A wide sepulchral ground I mark,
  And on a tombstone place me down.

“What monuments of mighty dead!
  What tombs of various kind are found!
And stones erect their shadows shed
  On humble graves, with wickers bound;
Some risen fresh, above the ground,
  Some level with the native clay:
What sleeping millions wait the sound,
  ‘Arise, ye dead, and come away!’

Alas! they stay not for that call;
  Spare me this woe! ye demons, spare!—
They come! the shrouded shadows all,—
  ’Tis more than mortal brain can bear;
Rustling they rise, they sternly glare
  At man upheld by vital breath;
Who, led by wicked fiends, should dare
  To join the shadowy troops of death!”

For about fifteen stanzas this power of wild imaginings is sustained, and, it must be admitted, at a high level as regards diction. The reader will note first how the impetuous flow of those visionary recollections generates a style in the main so lofty and so strong. The poetic diction of the eighteenth century, against which Wordsworth made his famous protest, is entirely absent. Then again, the eight-line stanza is something quite different from a mere aggregate of quatrains arranged in pairs. The lines are knit together; sonnet-fashion, by the device of interlacing the rhymes, the second, fourth, fifth, and seventh lines rhyming. And it is singularly effective for its purpose, that of avoiding the suggestion of a mere ballad-measure, and carrying on the descriptive action with as little interruption as might be.

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The similarity of the illusions, here attributed to insanity, to those described by De Quincey as the result of opium, is too marked to be accidental. In the concluding pages of his *Confessions*, De Quincey writes: "The sense of space, and in the end the sense of time, were both powerfully affected. Buildings, landscapes, *etc*., were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive ... This disturbed me very much less than the vast expansion of time. Sometimes I seemed to have lived for seventy or a hundred years in one night."

Compare Crabbe's sufferer:—

"There was I fix'd, I know not how,
Condemn'd for untold years to stay
Yet years were not;—one dreadful *Now*
Endured no change of night or day."

Again, the rapid transition from one distant land to another, from the Pole to the Tropics, is common to both experiences. The "ill-favoured ones" who are charged with Sir Eustace's expiation fix him at one moment

"—on the trembling ball
That crowns the steeple's quiv'ring spire"

just as the Opium-Fiend fixes De Quincey for centuries at the summit of Pagodas. Sir Eustace is accused of sins he had never committed:—

"Harmless I was: yet hunted down
For treasons to my soul unfit;
I've been pursued through many a town
For crimes that petty knaves commit."

Even so the opium-eater imagines himself flying from the wrath of Oriental Deities. "I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the Ibis and the Crocodile trembled at." The morbid inspiration is clearly the same in both cases, and there can be little doubt that Crabbe's poem owes its inception to opium, and that the frame work was devised by him for the utilisation of his dreams.

But a curious and unexpected *denouement* awaits the reader. When Sir Eustace's condition, as he describes it, seems most hopeless, its alleviation arrives through a religious conversion. There has been throughout present to him the conscience of "a soul defiled with every stain." And at the same moment, under circumstances unexplained, his spiritual ear is purged to hear a "Heavenly Teacher." The voice takes the form of the touching and effective hymn, which has doubtless found a place since in many an evangelical hymn-book, beginning

“Pilgrim, burthen’d with thy sin,
Come the way to Zion’s gate;
There, till Mercy let thee in,
Knock and weep, and watch and wait.
  Knock!—He knows the sinner’s cry.
  Weep!—He loves the mourner’s tears.
  Watch!—for saving grace is nigh
  Wait,—till heavenly light appears.”

And the hymn is followed by the pathetic confession on the sufferer’s part that this blessed experience, though it has brought him the assurance of heavenly forgiveness, still leaves him, “though elect,” looking sadly back on his old prosperity, and bearing, but unresigned, the prospect of an old ago spent amid his present gloomy surroundings. And yet Crabbe, with a touch of real imaginative insight, represents him in his final utterance as relapsing into a vague hope of some day being restored to his old prosperity:

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"Must you, my friends, no longer stay?
Thus quickly all my pleasures end;
But I'll remember, when I pray,
My kind physician and his friend:

And those sad hours you deign to spend
With me, I shall requite them all.
Sir Eustace for his friends shall send,
And thank their love at Greyling Hall."[4]

The kind physician and his friend then proceed to diagnose the patient's condition—-which they agree is that of "a frenzied child of grace," and so the poem ends. To one of its last stanzas Crabbe attached an apologetic note, one of the most remarkable ever penned. It exhibits the struggle that at that period must have been proceeding in many a thoughtful breast as to how the new wine of religion could be somehow accommodated to the old bottles:—

"It has been suggested to me that this change from restlessness to repose in the mind of Sir Eustace is wrought by a methodistic call; and it is admitted to be such: a sober and rational conversion could not have happened while the disorder of the brain continued; yet the verses which follow, in a different measure," (Crabbe refers to the hymn) "are not intended to make any religious persuasion appear ridiculous; they are to be supposed as the effect of memory in the disordered mind of the speaker, and though evidently enthusiastic in respect to language, are not meant to convey any impropriety of sentiment."

The implied suggestion (for it comes to this) that the sentiments of this devotional hymn, written by Crabbe himself, could only have brought comfort to the soul of a lunatic, is surely as good a proof as the period could produce of the bewilderment in the Anglican mind caused by the revival of personal religion under Wesley and his followers.

According to Crabbe's son *Sir Eustace Grey* was written at Muston in the winter of 1804-1805. This is scarcely possible, for Crabbe did not return to his Leicestershire living until the autumn of the latter year. Probably the poem was begun in Suffolk, and the final touches were added later. Crabbe seems to have told his family that it was written during a severe snow-storm, and at one sitting. As the poem consists of fifty-five eight-lined stanzas, of somewhat complex construction, the accuracy of Crabbe's account is doubtful. If its inspiration was in some degree due to opium, we know from the example of S.T. Coleridge that the opium-habit is not favourable to certainty of memory or the accurate presentation of facts. After Crabbe's death, there was found in one of his many manuscript note-books a copy of verses, undated, entitled *The World of Dreams*, which his son printed in subsequent editions of the poems. The verses are in the same metre and rhyme-system as *Sir Eustace*, and treat of precisely the same class of visions as recorded by the inmate of the asylum. The rapid and continuous

transition from scene to scene, and period to period, is the same in both. Foreign kings and other potentates reappear, as with De Quincey, in ghostly and repellent forms:—

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"I know not how, but I am brought
  Into a large and Gothic hall,
Seated with those I never sought—
  Kings, Caliphs, Kaisers—silent all;
Pale as the dead; enrobed and tall,
  Majestic, frozen, solemn, still;
They make my fears, my wits appal,
  And with both scorn and terror fill."

This, again, may be compared, or rather contrasted, with Coleridge's *Pains of Sleep*, and it can hardly be doubted that the two poems had a common origin.

The year 1805 was the last of Crabbe's sojourn in Suffolk, and it was made memorable in the annals of literature by the appearance of the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Crabbe first met with it in a bookseller's shop in Ipswich, read it nearly through while standing at the counter, and pronounced that a new and great poet had appeared.

This was Crabbe's first introduction to one who was before long to prove himself one of his warmest admirers and friends. It was one of Crabbe's virtues that he was quick to recognise the worth of his poetical contemporaries. He had been repelled, with many others, by the weak side of the *Lyrical Ballads*, but he lived to revere Wordsworth's genius. His admiration for Burns was unstinted. But amid all the signs of a poetical *renaissance* in progress, and under a natural temptation to tread the fresh woods and pictures new that were opening before him, it showed a true judgment in Crabbe that he never faltered in the conviction that his own opportunity and his own strength lay elsewhere. Not in the romantic or the mystical—not in perfection of form or melody of lyric verse, were his own humbler triumphs to be won. Like Wordsworth, he was to find a sufficiency in the "common growth of mother-earth," though indeed less in her "mirth" than in her "tears," Notwithstanding his *Eustace Grey*, and *World of Dreams*, and the really powerful story of Aaron the Gipsy (afterwards to appear as the *The Hall of Justice*), Crabbe was returning to the themes and the methods of *The Village*. He had already completed *The Parish Register*, and had *The Borough* in contemplation, when he returned to his Leicestershire parish. The woods of Belvoir, and the rural charms of Parham and Glemham, had not dimmed the memory of the sordid little fishing-town, where the spirit of poetry had first met him, and thrown her mantle round him.

And now the day had come when the mandate of the bishop could no longer be ignored. In October 1805, Crabbe with his wife and two sons returned to the Parsonage at Muston. He had been absent from his joint livings about thirteen years, of which four had been spent at Parham, five at Great Glemham, and four at Rendham, all three places lying within a small area, and within reach of the same old friends and relations. No wonder that he left the neighbourhood with a reluctance that was probably too well guessed by his parishioners in the Vale of Belvoir.

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FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote 3: Richard Turner of Yarmouth was a man of considerable culture, and belonged to a family of scholars. His eldest brother was Master of Pembroke, Cambridge, and Dean of Norwich: his youngest son was Sir Charles Turner, a Lord Justice of Appeal; and Dawson Turner was his nephew. Richard Turner was the intimate friend of Dr. Parr, Paley, and Canning.]

[Footnote 4: Readers of Lockhart's Biography will remember that in one of Scott's latest letters to his son-in-law, before he left England for Naples, he quoted and applied to himself this stanza of *Sir Eustace Grey*. The incident is the more pathetic that Scott, as he wrote the words, was quite aware that his own mind was failing.]

CHAPTER VI

THE PARISH REGISTER

(1805-1809)

"When in October, 1805, Mr. Crabbe resumed the charge of his own parish of Muston, he found some changes to vex him, and not the less because he had too much reason to suspect that his long absence from his incumbency had been, partly at least, the cause of them. His cure had been served by respectable and diligent clergymen, but they had been often changed, and some of them had never resided within the parish; and he felt that the binding influence of a settled and permanent minister had not been withdrawn for twelve years with impunity. A Wesleyan missionary had formed a thriving establishment in Muston, and the congregations at the parish church were no longer such as they had been of old. This much annoyed my father; and the warmth with which he began to preach against dissent only irritated himself and others, without bringing back disciples to the fold."

So writes Crabbe's son with his wonted frankness and good judgment. Moreover, besides the Wesleyan secession, the mischievous extravagances of William Huntington (S.S.) had found their way into the parish. To make matters worse, a former gardener of Crabbe's had set up as a preacher of the doctrines of this fanatic, who was still attracting crowds in London. Then, too, as another fruit of the rector's long absence, strange stories of his political opinions had become current. Owing, doubtless, to his renewed acquaintance with Dudley North at Glemham, and occasional association with the Whig leaders at his house, he had exposed himself to the terrible charge that he was a Jacobin!

Altogether Crabbe's clerical position in Leicestershire, during the next nine years, could not have been very comfortable. But he was evidently still, as always, the devout and

kindly pastor of his flock, and happily for himself, he was now to receive new and unexpected tributes to his popularity in other fields. His younger son, John, now eighteen years of age, was shortly to go up to Cambridge, and this fresh expense had to be provided for. To this end, a volume

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of poems, partly old and partly new, had been for some time in preparation, and in September 1807, it appeared from the publishing house of John Hatchard in Piccadilly. In it were included *The Library*, *The Newspaper*, and *The Village*. The principal new poem was *The Parish Register*, to which were added *Sir Eustace Grey* and *The Hall of Justice*. The volume was prefaced by a Dedication to Henry Richard Fox, third Lord Holland, nephew and sometime ward of Charles James Fox, and the reason for such dedication is told at greater length in the long autobiographical introduction that follows.

Twenty-two years had elapsed since Crabbe's last appearance as an author, and he seems to have thought it due to his readers to give some reason for his long abstention from the poet's 'idle trade.' He pleads a higher 'calling,' that of his professional duties, as sufficient excuse. Moreover, he offers the same excuse for his 'progress in the art of versification' being less marked than his readers might otherwise expect. He then proceeds to tell the story of the kindness he had received from Burke (who had died in 1797); the introduction by him to Sir Joshua Reynolds, and through him again to Samuel Johnson. He gives in full Johnson's note approving *The Village*, and after a further laborious apology for the shortcomings of his present literary venture, goes on to tell the one really relevant incident of its appearance. Crabbe had determined, he says, now that his old valued advisers had passed away, not to publish anything more—

"unless I could first obtain the sanction of such an opinion as I might with some confidence rely upon. I looked for a friend who, having the discerning taste of Mr. Burke and the critical sagacity of Doctor Johnson, would bestow upon my MS. the attention requisite to form his opinion, and would then favour me with the result of his observations; and it was my singular good fortune to obtain such assistance—the opinion of a critic so qualified, and a friend so disposed to favour me. I had been honoured by an introduction to the Right Hon. Charles James Fox, some years before, at the seat of Mr. Burke; and being again with him, I received a promise that he would peruse any work I might send to him previous to its publication, and would give me his opinion. At that time I did not think myself sufficiently prepared; and when afterwards I had collected some poems for his inspection, I found my right honourable friend engaged by the affairs of a great empire, and struggling with the inveteracy of a fatal disease. At such time, upon such mind, ever disposed to oblige as that mind was, I could not obtrude the petty business of criticising verses; but he remembered the promise he had kindly given, and repeated an offer which though I had not presumed to expect, I was happy to receive. A copy of the poems, now first published, was sent to him, and (as I have

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the information from Lord Holland, and his Lordship's permission to inform my readers) the poem which I have named *The Parish Register* was heard by Mr. Fox, and it excited interest enough by some of its parts to gain for me the benefit of his judgment upon the whole. Whatever he approved, the reader will readily believe, I have carefully retained: the parts he disliked are totally expunged, and others are substituted, which I hope resemble those more conformable to the taste of so admirable a judge. Nor can I deny myself the melancholy satisfaction of adding that this poem (and more especially the history of Phoebe Dawson, with some parts of the second book) were the last compositions of their kind that engaged and amused the capacious, the candid, the benevolent mind of this great man."

It was, as we have seen, at Dudley North's residence in Suffolk that Crabbe had renewed his acquaintance with Fox, and received from him fresh offers of criticism and advice. And now the great statesman had passed beyond reach of Crabbe's gratitude. He had died in the autumn of 1806, at the Duke of Devonshire's, at Chiswick. His last months wore of great suffering, and the tedium of his latter days was relieved by being read aloud to—the Latin poets taking their turn with Crabbe's pathetic stories of humble life. In the same preface, Crabbe further expresses similar obligations to his friend, Richard Turner of Yarmouth. The result of this double criticism is the more discernible when we compare *The Parish Register* with, its successor, *The Borough*, in the composition of which Crabbe admits, in the preface to that poem, that he had trusted more entirely to his own judgment.

In *The Parish Register*, Crabbe returns to the theme which he had treated twenty years before in *The Village,* but on a larger and more elaborate scale. The scheme is simple and not ineffective. A village clergyman is the narrator, and with his registers of baptisms, marriages, and burials open before him, looks through the various entries for the year just completed. As name after name recalls interesting particulars of character and incident in their history, he relates them as if to an imaginary friend at his side. The precedent of *The Deserted Village* is still obviously near to the writer's mind, and he is alternately attracted and repelled by Goldsmith's ideals. For instance, the poem opens with an introduction of some length in which the general aspects of village life are described. Crabbe begins by repudiating any idea of such life as had been described by his predecessor:—

"Is there a place, save one the poet sees,
A land of love, of liberty, and ease;
Where labour wearies not, nor cares suppress
Th' eternal flow of rustic happiness:
Where no proud mansion frowns in awful state,
Or keeps the sunshine from the cottage-gate;
Where young and old, intent on pleasure,

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throng,
And half man's life is holiday and song?
Vain search for scenes like these! no view appears,
By sighs unruffled, or unstain'd by tears;
Since vice the world subdued and waters drown'd,
Auburn and Eden can no more be found."

And yet the poet at once proceeds to describe his village in much the same tone, and with much of the same detail as Goldsmith had done:—

"Behold the Cot! where thrives th' industrious swain,
Source of his pride, his pleasure, and his gain,
Screen'd from the winter's-wind, the sun's last ray
Smiles on the window and prolongs the day;
Projecting thatch the woodbine's branches stop,
And turn their blossoms to the casement's top;
All need requires is in that cot contain'd,
And much that taste untaught and unrestrain'd
Surveys delighted: there she loves to trace,
In one gay picture, all the royal race;
Around the walls are heroes, lovers, kings;
The print that shows them and the verse that sings."

Then follow, as in *The Deserted Village*, the coloured prints, and ballads, and even *The Twelve Good Rules*, that decorate the walls: the humble library that fills the deal shelf "beside the cuckoo clock"; the few devotional works, including the illustrated Bible, bought in parts with the weekly sixpence; the choice notes by learned editors that raise more doubts than they close. "Rather," exclaims Crabbe:

"Oh! rather give me commentators plain
Who with no deep researches vex the brain;
Who from the dark and doubtful love to run,
And hold their glimmering tapers to the sun."

The last line of which he conveyed, no doubt unconsciously, from Young. Nothing can be more winning than the picture of the village home thus presented. And outside it, the plot of carefully-tended ground, with not only fruits and herbs but space reserved for a few choice flowers, the rich carnation and the "pounced auricula":—

"Here, on a Sunday eve, when service ends,
Meet and rejoice a family of friends:
All speak aloud, are happy and are free,

And glad they seem, and gaily they agree.
What, though fastidious ears may shun the speech,
Where all are talkers, and where none can teach;
Where still the welcome and the words are old,
And the same stories are for ever told;
Yet theirs is joy that, bursting from the heart,
Prompts the glad tongue these nothings to impart;
That forms these tones of gladness we despise,
That lifts their steps, that sparkles in their eyes;
That talks or laughs or runs or shouts or plays,
And speaks in all there looks and all their ways."

This charming passage is thoroughly in Goldsmith's vein, and even shows markedly the influence of his manner, and yet it is no mere echo of another poet. The scenes described are those which had become dear and familiar to Crabbe during years of residence in Leicestershire and inland Suffolk. And yet at this very juncture, Crabbe's poetic conscience smites him. It is not for him, he remembers, to deal only with the sweeter aspects, though he knows them to exist, of village life. He must return to its sterner side:—

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"Fair scenes of peace! ye might detain us long,
But vice and misery now demand the song;
And turn our view from dwellings simply neat,
To this infected Row we term our Street."

For even the village of trim gardens and cherished Bibles has its "slums," and on these slums Crabbe proceeds to enlarge with almost ferocious realism:—

"Here, in cabal, a disputatious crew
Each evening meet; the sot, the cheat, the shrew;
Riots are nightly heard:—the curse, the cries
Of beaten wife, perverse in her replies,
While shrieking children hold each threat'ning hand,
And sometimes life, and sometimes food demand;
Boys, in their first-stol'n rags, to swear begin;
And girls, who heed not dress, are skill'd in gin."

It is obvious, I think, that Crabbe's representations of country life here, as in *The Village* and *The Borough*, are often eclectic, and that for the sake of telling contrast, he was at times content to blend scenes that he had witnessed under very opposite conditions.

The section entitled "Baptisms" deals accordingly with many sad instances of "base-born" children, and the section on "Marriages" also has its full share of kindred instances in which the union in Church has only been brought about by pressure from the parish authorities. The marriage of one such "compelled bridegroom" is related with a force and minuteness of detail throughout which not a word is thrown away:—

"Next at our altar stood a luckless pair,
Brought by strong passions and a warrant there;
By long rent cloak, hung loosely, strove the bride
From every eye, what all perceived, to hide.
While the boy-bridegroom, shuffling in his pace,
Now hid awhile, and then exposed his face;
As shame alternately with anger strove
The brain, confused with muddy ale, to move,
In haste and stammering he perform'd his part,
And look'd the rage that rankled in his heart:
(So will each lover inly curse his fate,
Too soon made happy, and made wise too late:)
I saw his features take a savage gloom,
And deeply threaten for the days to come.
Low spake the lass, and lisp'd and minced the while,
Look'd on the lad, and faintly tried to smile;
With soften'd speech and humbled tone she strove

To stir the embers of departed love:
While he, a tyrant, frowning walk'd before,
Felt the poor purse, and sought the public door,
She sadly following in submission went
And saw the final shilling foully spent;
Then to her father's hut the pair withdrew,
And bade to love and comfort long adieu!
  Ah! fly temptation, youth, refrain! refrain!
  I preach for ever; but I preach in vain!"

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There is no “mealy-mouthed philanthropy” here. No one can doubt the earnestness and truth of the poet’s mingled anger and sorrow. The misery of irregular unions had never been “bitten in” with more convincing force. The verse, moreover, in the passage is freer than usual from many of Crabbe’s eccentricities. It is marked here and there by his fondness for verbal antithesis, almost amounting to the pun, which his parodists have not overlooked. The second line indeed is hardly more allowable in serious verse than Dickens’s mention of the lady who went home “in a flood of tears and a sedan-chair.” But Crabbe’s indulgence in this habit is never a mere concession to the reader’s flippant taste. His epigrams often strike deeply home, as in this instance or in the line:—

“Too soon made happy, and made wise too late.”

The story that follows of Phoebe Dawson, which helped to soothe Fox in the last stage of his long disease, is no less powerful. The gradual steps by which the village beauty is led to her ruin are told in a hundred lines with a fidelity not surpassed in the case of the story of Hetty Sorrel. The verse, alternately recalling Pope and Goldsmith, is yet impelled by a moral intention, which gives it absolute individuality. The picture presented is as poignantly pathetic as Frederick Walker’s *Lost Path*, or Langhorne’s “Child of misery, baptized in tears.” That it will ever again be ranked with such may be doubtful, for *technique* is the first quality demanded of an artist in our day, and Crabbe’s *technique* is too often defective in the extreme.

These more tragic incidents of village life are, however, relieved at proper intervals by some of lighter complexion. There is the gentleman’s gardener who has his successive children christened by the Latin names of his plants,—Lonicera, Hyacinthus and Senecio. Then we have the gallant, gay Lothario, who not only fails to lead astray the lovely Fanny Price, but is converted by her to worthier aims, and ends by becoming the best friend and benefactor of her and her rustic suitor. There is an impressive sketch of the elderly prude:—

“—wise, austere, and nice,
Who showed her virtue by her scorn of vice”;

and another of the selfish and worldly life of the Lady at the Great House who prefers to spend her fortune in London, and leaves her tenants to the tender mercies of her steward. Her forsaken mansion is described in lines curiously anticipating Hood’s *Haunted House*:—

“—forsaken stood the Hall:
Worms ate the floors, the tap’stry fled the wall:
No fire the kitchen’s cheerless grate display’d;
No cheerful light the long-closed sash convey’d;
The crawling worm that turns a summer fly,

Here spun his shroud, and laid him up to die
The winter-death:—upon the bed of state,
The bat shrill shrieking woo'd his flickering mate."

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In the end her splendid funeral is solemnised:—

“Dark but not awful, dismal but yet mean,
With anxious bustle moves the cumbrous scene;
Presents no objects tender or profound
But spreads its cold unmeaning gloom around.”

And the sarcastic village-father, after hearing “some scholar” read the list of her titles and her virtues, “looked disdain and said":—

“Away, my friends! why take such pains to know
What some brave marble soon in Church shall show?
Where not alone her gracious name shall stand,
But how she lived—the blessing of the land;
How much we all deplored the noble dead,
What groans we uttered and what tears we shed;
Tears, true as those which in the sleepy eyes
Of weeping cherubs on the stone shall rise;
Tears, true as those which, ere she found her grave,
The noble Lady to our sorrows gave!”

These portraits of the ignoble rich are balanced by one of the “noble peasant” Isaac Ashford, drawn, as Crabbe’s son tells us, from a former parish-clerk of his father’s at North Glemham. Coming to be past work through infirmities of age, the old man has to face the probability of the parish poorhouse, and reconciling himself to his lot is happily spared the sore trial:—

“Daily he placed the Workhouse in his view!
But came not there, for sudden was his fate,
He dropp’d, expiring, at his cottage-gate.
  I feel his absence in the hours of prayer,
And view his seat, and sigh for Isaac there:
I see no more those white locks thinly spread
Round the bald polish of that honour’d head;
No more that awful glance on playful wight,
Compell’d to kneel and tremble at the sight,
To fold his fingers, all in dread the while,
Till Mister Ashford soften’d to a smile;
No more that meek and suppliant look in prayer,
Nor the pure faith (to give it force), are there:—
But he is blest, and I lament no more
A wise, good man, contented to be poor.”

Where Crabbe is represented, not unfairly, as dwelling mainly on the seamy side of peasant and village life, such passages as the above are not to be overlooked.

This final section ("Burials") is brought to a close by an ingenious incident which changes the current of the vicar's thoughts. He is in the midst of the recollections of his departed flock when the tones of the passing-bell fall upon his ear. On sending to inquire he finds that they tell of a new death, that of his own aged parish-sexton, "old Dibble" (the name, it may be presumed, an imperfect reminiscence of Justice Shallow's friend). The speaker's thoughts are now directed to his old parish servant, and to the old man's favourite stories of previous vicars under whom he has served. Thus the poem ends with sketches of Parson Addle, Parson Peele, Dr. Grandspear and others—among them the "Author-Rector," intended (the younger Crabbe thought) as a portrait of the poet himself. Finally Crabbe could not resist the temptation to include a young parson, "a youth from Cambridge," who has imbibed some extreme notions of the school of Simeon, and who is shown as fearful on his death-bed lest he should have been guilty of too many good works. He appeals to his old clerk on the subject:—

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"'My alms-deeds all, and every deed I've done,
My moral-rags defile me every one;
It should not be:—what say'st thou! Tell me, Ralph.'
'Quoth I, your Reverence, I believe you're safe;
Your faith's your prop, nor have you pass'd such time
In life's good works as swell them to a crime.
If I of pardon for my sins were sure,
About my goodness I would rest secure.'"

The volume containing *The Parish Register, The Village*, and others, appeared in the autumn of 1807; and Crabbe's general acceptance as a poet of mark dates from that year. Four editions were issued by Mr. Hatchard during the following year and a half—-the fourth appearing in March 1809. The reviews were unanimous in approval, headed by Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh*, and within two days of the appearance of this article, according to Crabbe's son, the whole of the first edition was sold off.

At this date, there was room for Crabbe as a poet, and there was still more room for him as an innovator in the art of fiction. Macaulay, in his essay on Addison, has pointed out how the Roger de Coverley papers gave the public of his day the first taste of a new and exquisite pleasure. At the time "when Fielding was birds-nesting, and Smollett was unborn," he was laying the foundations of the English novel of real life. After nearly a hundred years, Crabbe was conferring a similar benefit. The novel had in the interim risen to its full height, and then sunk. When Crabbe published his *Parish Register*, the novels of the day were largely the vapid productions of the Minerva Press, without atmosphere, colour, or truth. Miss Edgeworth alone had already struck the note of a new development in her *Castle Rackrent*, not to mention the delightful stories in *The Parents' Assistant, Simple Susan, Lazy Lawrence*, or *The Basket-Woman*. Galt's masterpiece, *The Annals of the Parish*, was not yet even lying unfinished in his desk. The Mucklebackits and the Headriggs were still further distant. Miss Mitford's sketches in *Our Village*—the nearest in form to Crabbe's pictures of country life—were to come later still. Crabbe, though he adhered, with a wise knowledge of his own powers, to the heroic couplet, is really a chief founder of the rural novel—the *Silas Marner* and the *Adam Bede* of fifty years later. Of course (for no man is original) he had developed his methods out of that of his predecessors. Pope was his earliest master in his art. And what Pope had done in his telling couplets for the man and woman of fashion—the Chloes and Narcissas of his day—Crabbe hoped that he might do for the poor and squalid inhabitants of the Suffolk seaport. Then, too, Thomson's "lovely young Lavinia," and Goldsmith's village-parson and poor widow gathering her cresses from the brook, had been before him and contributed their share of influence. But Crabbe's achievement was practically a new thing. The success of *The Parish Register* was largely that of a new adventure in the world of fiction. Whatever defects the critic of pure poetry might discover in its workmanship, the poem was read for its stories—for a truth of realism that could not be doubted, and for a pity that could not be unshared.

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In 1809 Crabbe forwarded a copy of his poems (now reduced by the publisher to the form of two small volumes, and in their fourth edition) to Walter Scott, who acknowledged them and Crabbe's accompanying letter in a friendly reply, to which reference has already been made. After mentioning how for more than twenty years he had desired the pleasure of a personal introduction to Crabbe, and how, as a lad of eighteen, he had met with selections from *The Village* and *The Library* in *The Annual Register*, he continues:—

"You may therefore guess my sincere delight when I saw your poems at a late period assume the rank in the public consideration which they so well deserve. It was a triumph to my own immature taste to find I had anticipated the applause of the learned and the critical, and I became very desirous to offer my *gratulor* among the more important plaudits which you have had from every quarter. I should certainly have availed myself of the freemasonry of authorship (for our trade may claim to be a mystery as well as Abhorson's) to address to you a copy of a new poetical attempt, which I have now upon the anvil, and I esteem myself particularly obliged to Mr. Hatchard, and to your goodness acting upon his information, for giving me the opportunity of paving the way for such a freedom. I am too proud of the compliments you honour me with to affect to decline them; and with respect to the comparative view I have of my own labours and yours, I can only assure you that none of my little folks, about the formation of whose tastes and principles I may be supposed naturally solicitous, have ever read any of my own poems—while yours have been our regular evening's amusement My eldest girl begins to read well, and enters as well into the humour as into the sentiment of your admirable descriptions of human life. As for rivalry, I think it has seldom existed among those who know by experience that there are much better things in the world than literary reputation, and that one of the best of those good things is the regard and friendship of those deservedly and generally esteemed for their worth or their talents. I believe many dilettante authors do cocker themselves up into a great jealousy of anything that interferes with what they are pleased to call their fame: but I should as soon think of nursing one of my own fingers into a whitlow for my private amusement as encouraging such a feeling. I am truly sorry to observe you mention bad health: those who contribute so much to the improvement as well as the delight of society should escape this evil. I hope, however, that one day your state of health may permit you to view this country."

This interchange of letters was the beginning of a friendship that was to endure and strengthen through the lives of both poets, for they died in the self-same year. The "new poetical attempt" that was "on the anvil" must have been *The Lady of the Lake*, completed and published

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in the following year. But already Scott had uneasy misgivings that the style would not bear unlimited repetition. Even before Byron burst upon the world with the two first cantos of *Childe Harold*, and drew on him the eyes of all readers of poetry, Scott had made the unwelcome discovery that his own matter and manner was imitable, and that others were borrowing it. Many could now "grow the flower" (or something like it), for "all had got the seed." It was this persuasion that set him thinking whether he might not change his topics and his metre, and still retain his public. To this end he threw up a few tiny *ballons d'essai*—experiments in the manner of some of his popular contemporaries, and printed them in the columns of the *Edinburgh Annual Register*. One of these was a grim story of village crime called *The Poacher*, and written in avowed imitation of Crabbe. Scott was earnest in assuring Lockhart that he had written in no spirit of travesty, but only to test whether he would be likely to succeed in narrative verse of the same pattern. He had adopted Crabbe's metre, and as far as he could compass it, his spirit also. The result is noteworthy, and shows once again how a really original imagination cannot pour itself into another's mould. A few lines may suffice, in evidence. The couplet about the vicar's sermons makes one sure that for the moment Scott was good-humouredly copying one foible at least of his original:—

"Approach and through the unlatticed window peep.
Nay, shrink not back, the inmate is asleep;
Sunk 'mid yon sordid blankets, till the sun
Stoop to the west, the plunderer's toils are done.
Loaded and primed, and prompt for desperate hand,
Rifle and fowling-piece beside him stand,
While round the hut are in disorder laid
The tools and booty of his lawless trade;
For force or fraud, resistance or escape
The crow, the saw, the bludgeon, and the crape;
His pilfered powder in yon nook he hoards,
And the filched lead the church's roof affords—
(Hence shall the rector's congregation fret,
That while his sermon's dry, his walls are wet.)
The fish-spear barbed, the sweeping net are there,
Dog-hides, and pheasant plumes, and skins of hare,
Cordage for toils, and wiring for the snare.
Bartered for game from chase or warren won,
Yon cask holds moonlight,[5] seen when moon was none;
And late-snatched spoils lie stowed in hutch apart,
To wait the associate higgler's evening cart."

Happily for Scott's fame, and for the world's delight, he did not long pursue the unprofitable task of copying other men. *Rokeby* appeared, was coldly received, and

then Scott turned his thoughts to fiction in prose, came upon his long-lost fragment of *Waverley* and the need of conciliating the poetic taste of the day was at an end for ever. But his affection for Crabbe never waned. In his earlier novels there was no contemporary poet he more often quoted as headings for his chapters—and it was Crabbe's *Borough* to which he listened with unfailing delight twenty years later, in the last sad hours of his decay.

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FOOTNOTES:

[Footnote 5: A cant term for smuggled spirits.]

CHAPTER VII

THE BOROUGH

(1809-1812)

The immediate success of *The Parish Register* in 1807 encouraged Crabbe to proceed at once with a far longer poem, which had been some years in hand. *The Borough* was begun at Rendham in Suffolk in 1801, continued at Muston after the return thither in 1805, and finally completed during a long visit to Aldeburgh in the autumn of 1809. That the Poem should have been “in the making” during at least eight years is quite what might be inferred from the finished work. It proved, on appearance, to be of portentous length—at least ten thousand lines. Its versification included every degree of finish of which Crabbe was capable, from his very best to his very worst. Parts of it were evidently written when the theme stirred and moved the writer: others, again, when he was merely bent on reproducing scenes that lived in his singularly retentive memory, with needless minuteness of detail, and in any kind of couplet that might pass muster in respect of scansion and rhyme. In the preface to the poem, on its appearance in 1810, Crabbe displays an uneasy consciousness that his poem was open to objection in this respect. In his previous ventures he had had Edmund Burke, Johnson, and Fox, besides his friend Turner at Yarmouth, to restrain or to revise. On the present occasion, the three first-named friends had passed away, and Crabbe took his MS. with him to Yarmouth, on the occasion of his visit to the Eastern Counties, for Mr. Richard Turner’s opinion. The scholarly rector of Great Yarmouth may well have shrunk from advising on a poem of ten thousand lines in which, as the result was to show, the pruning-knife and other trenchant remedies would have seemed to him urgently needed. As it proved, Mr. Turner’s opinion was on the whole “highly favourable; but he intimated that there were portions of the new work which might be liable to rough treatment from the critics.”

The Borough is an extension—a very elaborate extension—of the topics already treated in *The Village* and *The Parish Register*. The place indicated is undisguisedly Aldeburgh; but as Crabbe had now chosen a far larger canvas for his picture, he ventured to enlarge the scope of his observation, and while retaining the scenery and general character of the little seaport of his youth, to introduce any incidents of town life and experiences of human character that he had met with subsequently. *The Borough* is Aldeburgh extended and magnified. Besides church officials it exhibits every shade of nonconformist creed and practice, notably those of which the writer was now having

unpleasant experience at Muston. It has, of course, like its prototype, a mayor and corporation, and frequent parliamentary elections.

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It supports many professors of the law; physicians of high repute, and medical quacks of very low. Social life and pleasure is abundant, with clubs, card-parties, and theatres. It boasts an almshouse, hospital, prisons, and schools for all classes. The poem is divided into twenty-four cantos or sections, written as “Letters” to an imaginary correspondent who had bidden the writer “describe the borough,” each dealing with its separate topic—professions, trades, sects in religion, inns, strolling players, almshouse inhabitants, and so forth. These descriptions are relieved at intervals by elaborate sketches of character, as in *The Parish Register*—the vicar, the curate, the parish clerk, or by some notably pathetic incident in the life of a tenant of the almshouse, or a prisoner in the gaol. Some of these reach the highest level of Crabbe’s previous studies in the same kind, and it was to these that the new work was mainly to owe its success. Despite of frequent defects of workmanship, they cling to the memory through their truth and intensity, though to many a reader to-day such, episodes may be chiefly known to exist through a parenthesis in one of Macaulay’s *Essays*, where he speaks of “that pathetic passage in Crabbe’s *Borough* which has made many a rough and cynical reader cry like a child.”

The passage referred to is the once-famous description of the condemned Felon in the “Letter” on *Prisons*. Macaulay had, as we know, his “heightened way of putting things,” but the narrative which he cites, as foil to one of Robert Montgomery’s borrowings, deserves the praise. It shows Crabbe’s descriptive power at its best, and his rare power and insight into the workings of the heart and mind. He has to trace the sequence of thoughts and feelings in the condemned criminal during the days between his sentence and its execution; the dreams of happier days that haunt his pillow—days when he wandered with his sweetheart or his sister through their village meadows:—

“Yes! all are with him now, and all the while
Life’s early prospects and his Fanny’s smile.
Then come his sister and his village friend,
And he will now the sweetest moments spend
Life has to yield,—No! never will he find
Again on earth such pleasure in his mind
He goes through shrubby walks these friends among,
Love in their looks and honour on the tongue.
Nay, there’s a charm beyond what nature shows,
The bloom is softer and more sweetly glows;
Pierced by no crime and urged by no desire
For more than true and honest hearts require,
They feel the calm delight, and thus proceed
Through the green lane,—then linger in the mead,—
Stray o’er the heath in all its purple bloom,—
And pluck the blossom where the wild bees hum;

Then through the broomy bound with ease they pass,
And press the sandy sheep-walk’s slender grass,
Whore dwarfish flowers among the grass

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are spread,
  And the lamb browses by the linnet's bed;
  Then 'cross the bounding brook they make their way
  O'er its rough bridge—'and there behold the bay!—
  The ocean smiling to the fervid sun—
  The waves that faintly fall and slowly run—
  The ships at distance and the boats at hand,
  And now they walk upon the sea-side sand,
  Counting the number, and what kind they be,
  Ships softly sinking in the sleepy sea:
  Now arm in arm, now parted, they behold
  The glittering waters on the shingles rolled;
  The timid girls, half dreading their design,
  Dip the small foot in the retarded brine,
  And search for crimson weeds, which spreading flow,
  Or lie like pictures on the sand below:
  With all those bright red pebbles, that the sun,
  Through the small waves so softly shines upon;
  And those live lucid jellies which the eye
  Delights to trace as they swim glittering by:
  Pearl-shells and rubied star-fish they admire,
  And will arrange above the parlour fire,—
  Tokens of bliss!—'Oh! horrible! a wave
  Roars as it rises—save me, Edward! save!'
  She cries:—Alas! the watchman on his way
  Calls and lets in—truth, terror, and the day!"

Allowing for a certain melodramatic climax here led up to, we cannot deny the impressiveness of this picture—the first-hand quality of its observation, and an eye for beauty, which his critics are rarely disposed to allow to Crabbe. A narrative of equal pathos, and once equally celebrated, is that of the village-girl who receives back her sailor-lover from his last voyage, only to watch over his dying hours. It is in an earlier section (No. ii. *The Church*), beginning:

  "Yes! there are real mourners—I have seen
  A fair sad girl, mild, suffering, and serene,"

too long to quote in full, and, as with Crabbe's method generally, not admitting of being fairly represented by extracts. Then there are sketches of character in quite a different vein, such as the vicar, evidently drawn from life. He is the good easy man, popular with the ladies for a kind of *fade* complimentary style in which he excels; the man of "mild benevolence," strongly opposed to every thing new:

"Habit with him was all the test of truth:
'It must be right: I've done it from my youth,'
Questions he answered in as brief a way:
'It must be wrong—it was of yesterday.'"

Feeble good-nature, and selfish unwillingness to disturb any existing habits or conventions, make up his character:

"In him his flock found nothing to condemn;
Him sectaries liked—he never troubled them:
No trifles failed his yielding mind to please,
And all his passions sunk in early ease;
Nor one so old has left this world of sin,
More like the being that he entered in."

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An excellent companion sketch to that of the dilettante vicar is provided in that of the poor curate—the scholar, gentleman, and devout Christian, struggling against abject poverty to support his large family. The picture drawn by Crabbe has a separate and interesting origin. A year before the appearance of *The Borough*, one of the managers of the Literary Fund, an institution then of some twenty years' standing, and as yet without its charter, applied to Crabbe for a copy of verses that might be appropriate for recitation at the annual dinner of the Society, held at the Freemasons' Tavern. It was the custom of the society to admit such literary diversions as part of the entertainment. The notorious William Thomas Fitzgerald had been for many years the regular contributor of the poem, and his efforts on the occasion are remembered, if only through the opening couplet of Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, where Fitzgerald is gibbeted as the *Codrus* of Juvenal's satire:

"Still must I hear? shall hoarse Fitzgerald bawl
His creaking couplets in a Tavern-Hall?"

His poem for this year, 1809, is printed at length in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for April —and also Crabbe's, recited at the same dinner. Crabbe seems to have composed it for the occasion, but with the intention of ultimately weaving it into the poem on which he was then engaged. A paragraph prefixed to the lines also shows that Crabbe had a further object in view. "The Founder of this Society having intimated a hope that, on a plan which he has already communicated to his particular Friends, its Funds may be sufficiently ample to afford assistance and relief to learned officiating Clergymen in distress, though they may not have actually commenced Authors—the Author, in allusion to this hope, has introduced into a Poem which he is preparing for the Press the following character of a learned Divine in distress."

Crabbe's lines bearing on the proposed scheme (which seems for a time at least to have been adopted by the administrators of the Fund) were left standing when *The Borough* was published, with, an explanatory note. They are effective for their purpose, the pathos of them is genuine, and worthy of attention even in these latter days of the "Queen Victoria Clergy Fund." The speaker is the curate himself:

"Long may these founts of Charity remain,
And never shrink, but to be filled again;
True! to the Author they are now confined,
To him who gave the treasure of his mind,
His time, his health,—and thankless found mankind:
But there is hope that from these founts may flow
A side-way stream, and equal good bestow;
Good that may reach us, whom the day's distress
Keeps from the fame and perils of the Press;
Whom Study beckons from the Ills of Life,

And they from Study; melancholy strife!
Who then can say, but bounty now so free,

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And so diffused, may find its way to me?
Yes! I may see my decent table yet
Cheered with the meal that adds not to my debt;
May talk of those to whom so much we owe,
And guess their names whom yet we may not know;
Blest, we shall say, are those who thus can give,
And next, who thus upon the bounty live;
Then shall I close with thanks my humble meal,
And feel so well—Oh! God! how shall I feel!”

Crabbe is known to most readers to-day by the delightful parody of his style in the *Rejected Addresses,* which appeared in the autumn of 1812, and it was certainly on *The Borough* that James Smith based his imitation. We all remember the incident of Pat Jennings’s adventure in the gallery of the theatre. The manner of the narrative is borrowed from Crabbe’s lighter and more colloquial style. Every little foible of the poet, when in this vein, is copied with great skill. The superfluity of information, as in the case of—

“John Richard William Alexander Dwyer,”

whose only place in the narrative is that he preceded Pat Jennings’s father in the situation as

“Footman to Justinian Stubbs, Esquire”;

or again in the detail that,

“Emanuel Jennings brought his youngest boy
Up as a corn-cutter—a safe employ”

(a perfect Crabbian couplet), is imitated throughout, Crabbe’s habit of frequent verbal antithesis, and even of something like punning, is exactly caught in such a couplet as:

“Big-worded bullies who by quarrels live—
Who give the lie, and tell the lie they give.”

Much of the parody, no doubt, exhibits the fanciful humour of the brothers Smith, rather than of Crabbe, as is the case with many parodies. Of course there are couplets here and there in Crabbe’s narratives which justify the burlesque. We have:

"What is the truth? Old Jacob married thrice;
He dealt in coals, and avarice was his vice,"

or the lines which the parodists themselves quote in their justification,

"Something had happened wrong about a Bill
Which was not drawn with true mercantile skill,
So to amend it I was told to go,
And seek the firm of Clutterbuck and Co."

But lines such as these in fact occur only at long intervals. Crabbe's couplets are more often pedestrian rather than grotesque.

The poet himself, as the witty brothers relate with some pride, was by no means displeased or offended by the liberty taken. When they met in later years at William Spencer's, Crabbe hurried to meet James Smith with outstretched hand, "Ah! my old enemy, how do you do?" Again, writing to a friend who had expressed some indignation at the parody, Crabbe complained only of the preface. "There is a little ill-nature—and I take the liberty of adding, undeserved ill-nature—in their prefatory address; but in their versification they have done me admirably." Here Crabbe shows a slight lack of self-knowledge. For when to the Letter on *Trades* the following extenuating postscript is found necessary, there would seem to be hardly any room for the parodist:

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“If I have in this Letter praised the good-humour of a man confessedly too inattentive to business, and if in the one on *Amusements*, I have written somewhat sarcastically of ’the brick-floored parlour which the butcher lets,’ be credit given to me that in the one case I had no intention to apologise for idleness, nor any design in the other to treat with contempt the resources of the poor. The good-humour is considered as the consolation of disappointment, and the room is so mentioned because the lodger is vain. Most of my readers will perceive this; but I shall be sorry if by any I am supposed to make pleas for the vices of men, or treat their wants and infirmities with derision or with disdain.”

After this, Crabbe himself might have admitted that the descent is not very far to the parodist’s delightful apology for the change from “one hautboy” to “one fiddle” in the description of the band. The subsequent explanation, how the poet had purposely intertwined the various handkerchiefs which rescued Pat Jennings’s hat from the pit, lest the real owner should be detected, and the reason for it, is a not less exquisite piece of fooling:—“For, in the statistical view of life and manners which I occasionally present, my clerical profession has taught me how extremely improper it would be by any allusion, however slight, to give any uneasiness, however trivial, to any individual, however foolish or wicked.” It might perhaps be inferred from such effusions as are here parodied that Crabbe was lacking in a sense of humour. This would certainly be too sweeping an inference, for in many of his sketches of human character he gives unmistakable proof to the contrary. But the talent in question—often so recklessly awarded or denied to us by our fellow-creatures—is very variable in the spheres of its operation. The sense of humour is in its essence, as we have often been told, largely a sense of proportion, and in this sense Crabbe was certainly deficient. The want of it accounts for much more in his writings than for his prose notes and prefaces. It explains much of the diffuseness and formlessness of his poetry, and his inability to grasp the great truth how much the half may be greater than the whole.

In spite, however, of these defects, and of the inequalities of the workmanship, *The Borough* was from the first a success. The poem appeared in February 1810, and went through six editions in the next six years. It does not indeed present an alluring picture of life in the provinces. It even reminds us of a saying of Tennyson’s, that if God made the country, and man made the city, then it was the devil who made the country-town. To travel through the borough from end to end is to pass through much ignoble scenery, human and other, and under a cloudy heaven, with only rare gleams of sunshine, and patches of blue sky. These, when they occur, are proportionally welcome. They include some exquisite descriptions of nature, though with Crabbe it will be noticed that it is always the nature close about his feet, the hedge-row, the meadow, the cottage-garden: as his son has noted, his outlook never extends to the landscape beyond.

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In the respects just mentioned, the qualities exhibited in the new poem have been noticed before in *The Village* and *The Parish Register*. In *The Borough*, however, appear some maturer specimens of this power, showing how Crabbe's art was perfecting by practice. Very noticeable are the sections devoted to the almshouse of the borough and its inhabitants. Its founder, an eccentric and philanthropic merchant of the place, as well as the tenants of the almshouse whose descriptions follow, are all avowedly, like most other characters in Crabbe, drawn from life. The pious founder, being left without wife or children, lives in apparent penury, but while driving all beggars from his door, devotes his wealth to secret acts of helpfulness to all his poorer neighbours in distress:—

"A twofold taste he had; to give and spare,
Both were his duties, and had equal care;
It was his joy to sit alone and fast,
Then send a widow and her boys repast:
Tears in his eyes would, spite of him, appear,
But he from other eyes has kept the tear:
All in a wintry night from far he came
To soothe the sorrows of a suffering dame,
Whose husband robbed him, and to whom he meant
A lingering, but reforming punishment:
Home then he walked, and found his anger rise
When fire and rushlight met his troubled eyes;
But these extinguished, and his prayer addressed
To Heaven in hope, he calmly sank to rest."

The good man lived on, until, when his seventieth year was past, a building was seen rising on the green north of the village—an almshouse for old men and women of the borough, who had struggled in life and failed. Having built and endowed this harbour of refuge, and placed its government in the hands of six trustees, the modest donor and the pious lady-relative who had shared in his good works passed quietly out of life.

This prelude is followed by an account of the trustees who succeeded to the management after the founder's death, among them a Sir Denys Brand, a lavish donor to the town, but as vulgar and ostentatious as the founder had been humble and modest. This man defeats the intentions of the founder by admitting to the almshouses persons of the shadiest antecedents, on the ground that they at least had been conspicuous in their day:

"Not men in trade by various loss brought down,
But those whose glory once amazed the town;
Who their last guinea in their pleasure spent,
Yet never fell so low as to repent:

To these his pity he could largely deal,
Wealth they had known, and therefore want could feel.”

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From this unfit class of pensioner Crabbe selects three for his minute analysis of character. They are, as usual, of a very sordid type. The first, a man named “Blaney,” had his prototype in a half-pay major known to Crabbe in his Aldeburgh days, and even the tolerant Jeffrey held that the character was rather too shameless for poetical treatment. The next inmate in order, a woman also drawn from the living model, and disguised under the title of *Clelia*, is a study of character and career, drawn with consummate skill. Certain abortive attempts of Crabbe to write prose fiction have been already mentioned. But this narrative of the gradual degradation of a coquette of the lower middle class shows that Crabbe possessed at least some of the best qualities of a great novelist. Clelia is, in fact, a kind of country-town Becky Sharp, whose wiles and schemes are not destined to end in a white-washed reputation at a fashionable watering-place. On the contrary she falls from one ignominy to another until, by a gross abuse of a public charity, she ends her days in the almshouse!

One further instance may be cited of Crabbe’s persistent effort to awaken attention to the problem of poor-law relief. In his day the question, both as to policy and humanity, between indoor and outdoor relief, was still unsettled. In *The Borough*, as described, many of the helpless poor were relieved at their own homes. But a new scheme, “The maintenance of the poor in a common mansion erected by the Hundred,” seems to have been in force in Suffolk, and up to that time confined to that county. It differed from the workhouse of to-day apparently in this respect, that there was not even an attempt to separate the young and old, the sick and the healthy, the criminal and vicious from the respectable and honest. Yet Crabbe’s powerful picture of the misery thus caused to the deserving class of inmate is not without its lesson even after nearly a century during which thought and humanity have been continually at work upon such problems. The loneliness and weariness of workhouse existence passed by the aged poor, separated from kinsfolk and friends, in “the day-room of a London workhouse,” have been lately set forth by Miss Edith Sellers, in the pages of the *Nineteenth Century*, with a pathetic incisiveness not less striking than that of the following passage from the Eighteenth Letter of Crabbe’s *Borough*:—

“Who can, when here, the social neighbour meet?
Who learn the story current in the street?
Who to the long-known intimate impart
Facts they have learned, or feelings of the heart?
They talk indeed, but who can choose a friend,
Or seek companions at their journey’s end?
Here are not those whom they when infants knew;
Who, with like fortune, up to manhood grew;
Who, with like troubles, at old age arrived;
Who, like themselves, the joy of life survived;
Whom time and custom so familiar made,

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That looks the meaning in the mind conveyed:
But here to strangers, words nor looks impart
The various movements of the suffering heart;
Nor will that heart with those alliance own,
To whom its views and hopes are all unknown
What, if no grievous fears their lives annoy,
Is it not worse no prospects to enjoy?
'Tis cheerless living in such bounded view,
With nothing dreadful, but with nothing new;
Nothing to bring them joy, to make them weep;
The day itself is, like the night, asleep."

The essence of workhouse monotony has surely never been better indicated than here.

The Borough did much to spread Crabbe's reputation while he remained, doing his duty to the best of his ability and knowledge, in the quiet loneliness of the Vale of Belvoir, but his growing fame lay far outside the boundaries of his parish. When, a few years later, he visited London and was received with general welcome by the distinguished world of literature and the arts, he was much surprised. "In my own village," he told James Smith, "they think nothing of me." The three years following the publication of *The Borough* were specially lonely. He had, indeed, his two sons, George and John, with him. They had both passed through Cambridge—one at Trinity and the other at Caius, and were now in holy orders. Each held a curacy in the near neighbourhood, enabling them to live under the parental roof. But Mrs. Crabbe's condition was now increasingly sad, her mind being almost gone. There was no daughter, and we hear of no other female relative at hand to assist Crabbe in the constant watching of the patient. This circumstance alone limited his opportunities of accepting the hospitalities of the neighbourhood, though with the Welbys and other county families, as well as with the surrounding clergy, he was a welcome guest.

The Borough appeared in February 1810, and the reviewers were prompt in their attention. The *Edinburgh* reviewed the poem in April of the same year, and the *Quarterly* followed in October. Jeffrey had already noticed *The Parish Register* in 1808. The critic's admiration of Crabbe had been, and remained to the end, cordial and sincere. But now, in reviewing the new volume, a note of warning appears. The critic finds himself obliged to admit that the current objections to Crabbe's treatment of country life are well founded. "His chief fault," he says, "is his frequent lapse into disgusting representations." All powerful and pathetic poetry, Jeffrey admits, abounds in "images of distress," but these images must never excite "disgust," for that is fatal to the ends which poetry was meant to produce. A few months later the *Quarterly* followed in

the same strain, but went on to preach a more questionable doctrine. The critic in fact lays down the extraordinary canon that the function of Poetry is not to present any truth, if it happens to be unpleasant, but to substitute an agreeable illusion in its place. “We turn to poetry,” he says, “not that we may see and feel what we see and feel in our daily experience, but that we may be refreshed by other emotions, and fairer prospects, that we may take shelter from the realities of life in the paradise of Fancy.”

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The appearance of these two prominent reviews to a certain extent influenced the direction of Crabbe's genius for the remainder of his life. He evidently had given them earnest consideration, and in the preface to the *Tales*, his next production, he attempted something like an answer to each. Without mentioning any names he replies to Jeffrey in the first part of his preface, and to the *Quarterly* reviewer in the second. Jeffrey had expressed a hope that Crabbe would in future concentrate his powers upon some interesting and connected story. "At present it is impossible not to regret that so much genius should be wasted in making us perfectly acquainted with individuals of whom we are to know nothing but their characters." Crabbe in reply makes what was really the best apology for not accepting this advice. He intimates that he had already made the experiment, but without success. His peculiar gifts did not fit him for it. As he wrote the words, he doubtless had in mind the many prose romances that he had written, and then consigned to the flames. The short story, or rather the exhibition of a single character developed through a few incidents, he felt to be the method that fitted his talent best.

Crabbe then proceeds to deal with the question, evidently implied by the *Quarterly* reviewer, how far many passages in *The Borough*, when concerned with low life, were really poetry at all. Crabbe pleads in reply the example of other English poets, whose claim to the title had never been disputed. He cites Chaucer, who had depicted very low life indeed, and in the same rhymed metre. "If all that kind of satire wherein character is skilfully delineated, must no longer be esteemed as genuine poetry," then what becomes of the author of *The Canterbury Tales*? Crabbe could not supply, or be expected to supply, the answer to this question. He could not discern that the treatment is everything, and that Chaucer was endowed with many qualities denied to himself—-the spirit of joyousness and the love of sunshine, and together with these, gifts of humour and pathos to which Crabbe could make no pretension. From Chaucer, Crabbe passes to the great but very different master, on whom he had first built his style. Was Pope, then, not a poet? seeing that he too has "no small portion of this actuality of relation, this nudity of description, and poetry without an atmosphere"? Here again, of course, Crabbe overlooks one essential difference between himself and his model. Both were keen-sighted students of character, and both described sordid and worldly ambitions. But Pope was strongest exactly where Crabbe was weak. He had achieved absolute mastery of form, and could condense into a couplet some truth which Crabbe expanded, often excellently, in a hundred lines of very unequal workmanship. The *Quarterly* reviewer quotes, as admirable of its kind, the description in *The Borough* of the card-club, with the bickerings and ill-nature of the old ladies and gentlemen who frequented it. It is in truth very graphic, and no doubt absolutely faithful to life; but it is rather metrical fiction than poetry. There is more of the essence of poetry in a single couplet of Pope's:

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"See how the world its veterans rewards—
A youth of frolics, an old age of cards."

For here the expression is faultless, and Pope has educed an eternally pathetic truth, of universal application.

Even had the gentle remonstrances of the two reviewers never been expressed, it would seem as if Crabbe had already arrived at somewhat similar conclusions on his own account. At the time the reviews appeared, the whole of the twenty-one *Tales* to be published in August 1812 were already written. Crabbe had perceived that if he was to retain the admiring public he had won, he must break fresh ground. Aldeburgh was played out. It had provided abundant material and been an excellent training-ground for Crabbe's powers. But he had discovered that there were other fields worth cultivating besides that of the hard lots of the very poor. He had associated in his later years with a class above these—not indeed with the "upper ten," save when he dined at Belvoir Castle, but with classes lying between these two extremes. He had come to feel more and more the fascination of analysing human character and motives among his equals. He had a singularly retentive memory, and the habit of noting and brooding over incidents—specially of "life's little ironies"—wherever he encountered them. He does not seem to have possessed much originating power. When, a few years later, his friend Mrs. Leadbeater inquired of him whether the characters in his various poems were drawn from life, he replied:—"Yes, I will tell you readily about my ventures, whom I endeavour to paint as nearly as I could, and *dare*—for in some cases I dared not.... Thus far you are correct: there is not one of whom I had not in my mind the original, but I was obliged in most cases to take them from their real situations, and in one or two instances even to change their sex, and in many, the circumstances.... Indeed I do not know that I could paint merely from my own fancy, and there is no cause why I should. Is there not diversity enough in society?"

CHAPTER VIII

TALES

(1812)

Crabbe's new volume—"Tales. By the Rev. George Crabbe, LL.B."—was published by Mr. Hatchard of Piccadilly in the summer of 1812. It received a warm welcome from the poet's admirers, and was reviewed, most appreciatively, by Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh* for November. The *Tales* were twenty-one in number, and to each was prefixed a series, often four or five, of quotations from Shakespeare, illustrating the incidents in the Tales, or the character there depicted. Crabbe's knowledge of Shakespeare must have been in those days, when concordances were not, very remarkable, for he quotes by no

means always from the best known plays, and he was not a frequenter of the theatre. Crabbe had of late studied human nature in books as well as in life.

As already remarked, the Tales are often built upon events in his own family, or else occurring within their knowledge. The second in order of publication, *The Parting Hour*, arose out of an incident in the life of the poet's own brother, which is thus related in the notes to the edition of 1834:

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“Mr. Crabbe’s fourth brother, William, taking to a sea-faring life, was made prisoner by the Spaniards. He was carried to Mexico, where he became a silversmith, married, and prospered, until his increasing riches attracted a charge of Protestantism; the consequence of which was much persecution. He at last was obliged to abandon Mexico, his property, and his family; and was discovered in the year 1803 by an Aldeburgh sailor on the coast of Honduras, where again he seems to have found some success in business. This sailor was the only person he had seen for many a year who could tell him anything about Aldeburgh and his family, and great was his perplexity when he was informed that his eldest brother, George, was a clergyman. ’This cannot be *our* George,’ said the wanderer, ’he was a *Doctor*! This was the first, and it was also the last, tidings that ever reached Mr. Crabbe of his brother William; and upon the Aldeburgh sailor’s story of his casual interview, it is obvious that he built this tale.”

The story as developed by Crabbe is pathetic and picturesque, reminding us in its central interest of *Enoch Arden*. Allen Booth, the youngest son of his parents dwelling in a small seaport, falls early in love with a child schoolfellow, for whom his affection never falters. When grown up the young man accepts an offer from a prosperous kinsman in the West Indies to join him in his business. His beloved sees him depart with many misgivings, though their mutual devotion was never to fade. She does not see him again for forty years, when he returns, like Arden, to his “native bay,”

> “A worn-out man with wither’d limbs and lame,
> His mind oppress’d with woes, and bent with age his frame.”

He finds his old love, who had been faithful to her engagement for ten years, and then (believing Allen to be dead) had married. She is now a widow, with grown-up children scattered through the world, and is alone. Allen then tells his sad story. The ship in which he sailed from England had been taken by the Spaniards, and he had been carried a slave to the West Indies, where he worked in a silver mine, improved his position under a kind master, and finally married a Spanish girl, hopeless of ever returning to England though still unforgetful of his old love. He accumulates money, and, like Crabbe’s brother, incurs the envy of his Roman Catholic neighbours. He is denounced as a heretic, who would doubtless bring up his children in the accursed English faith. On his refusal to become a Catholic he is expelled the country, as the condition of his life being spared:

> “His wife, his children, weeping in his sight,
> All urging him to flee, he fled, and cursed his flight.”

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After many adventures he falls in with a ship bound for England, but again his return is delayed. He is impressed (it was war-time), and fights for his country; loses a limb, is again left upon a foreign shore where his education finds him occupation as a clerk; and finally, broken with age and toil, finds his way back to England, where the faithful friend of his youth takes care of him and nurses him to the end. The situation at the close is very touching—for the joy of re-union is clouded by the real love he feels for the Spanish wife and children from whom he had been torn, and who are continually present to him in his dreams.

Nor is the treatment inadequate. It is at once discernible how much Crabbe had already gained by the necessity for concentration upon the development of a story instead of on the mere analysis of character. The style, moreover, has clarified and gained in dignity: there are few, if any, relapses into the homelier style on which the parodist could try his hand. Had the author of *Enoch Arden* treated the same theme in blank-verse, the workmanship would have been finer, but he could hardly have sounded a truer note of unexaggerated pathos.

The same may be said of the beautiful tale of *The Lover's Journey*. Here again is the product of an experience belonging to Crabbe's personal history. In his early Aldeburgh days, when he was engaged to Sarah Elmy with but faint hope of ever being able to marry, it was one of the rare alleviations of his distressed condition to walk over from Aldeburgh to Beccles (some twenty miles distant), where his betrothed was occasionally a visitor to her mother and sisters. "It was in his walks," writes the son, "between Aldeburgh and Beccles that Mr. Crabbe passed through the very scenery described in the first part of *The Lover's Journey*; while near Beccles, in another direction, he found the contrast of rich vegetation introduced in the latter part of that tale; nor have I any doubt that the *disappointment* of the story figures out something that, on one of these visits, befell himself, and the feelings with which he received it.

"Gone to a friend, she tells me;—I commend
Her purpose: means she to a female friend?"

"For truth compels me to say, that he was by no means free from the less amiable sign of a strong attachment—jealousy." The story is of the slightest—an incident rather than a story. The lover, joyous and buoyant, traverses the dreary coast scenery of Suffolk, and because he is happy, finds beauty and charm in the commonest and most familiar sights and sounds of nature: every single hedge-row blossom, every group of children at their play. The poem is indeed an illustration of Coleridge's lines in his ode *Dejection*:

"O Lady, we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live,—
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud."

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All along the road to his beloved's house, nature wears this "wedding-garment." On his arrival, however, the sun fades suddenly from the landscape. The lady is from home: gone to visit a friend a few miles distant, not so far but that her lover can follow,—but the slight, real or imaginary, probably the latter, comes as such a rebuff, that during the "little more—how far away!" that he travels, the country, though now richer and lovelier, seems to him (as once to Hamlet) a mere "pestilent congregation of vapours." But in the end he finds his mistress and learns that she had gone on duty, not for pleasure,—-and they return happy again, and so happy indeed, that he has neither eyes nor thoughts for any of nature's fertilities or barrennesses—only for the dear one at his side.

I have already had occasion to quote a few lines from this beautiful poem, to show Crabbe's minute observation—in his time so rare—of flowers and birds and all that makes the charm of rural scenery—but I must quote some more:

"'Various as beauteous, Nature, is thy face,'
Exclaim'd Orlando: 'all that grows has grace:
All are appropriate—bog, and marsh, and fen,
Are only poor to undiscerning men;
Here may the nice and curious eye explore
How Nature's hand adorns the rushy moor,
Here the rare moss in secret shade is found,
Here the sweet myrtle of the shaking ground;
Beauties are these that from the view retire,
But well repay th' attention they require;
For these my Laura will her home forsake,
And all the pleasures they afford, partake.'"

And then follows a masterly description of a gipsy encampment on which the lover suddenly comes in his travels. Crabbe's treatment of peasant life has often been compared to that of divers painters—the Dutch school, Hogarth, Wilkie, and others—-and the following curiously suggests Frederick Walker's fine drawing, *The Vagrants*:

"Again, the country was enclosed, a wide
And sandy road has banks on either side;
Where, lo! a hollow on the left appear'd,
And there a gipsy tribe their tent had rear'd;
'Twas open spread, to catch the morning sun,
And they had now their early meal begun,
When two brown boys just left their grassy seat,
The early Trav'ller with their prayers to greet:
While yet Orlando held his pence in hand,
He saw their sister on her duty stand;
Some twelve years old, demure, affected, sly,
Prepared the force of early powers to try;

Sudden a look of languor he descries,
And well-feigned apprehension in her eyes;
Train’d but yet savage in her speaking face,
He mark’d the features of her vagrant race;
When a light laugh and roguish leer express’d
The vice implanted in her youthful breast:
Forth from the tent her elder brother came,
Who seem’d offended, yet forbore to blame
The young designer, but could only trace

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The looks of pity in the Trav’ller’s face:
Within, the Father, who from fences nigh
Had brought the fuel for the fire’s supply,
Watch’d now the feeble blaze, and stood dejected by.
On ragged rug, just borrowed from the bed,
And by the hand of coarse indulgence fed,
In dirty patchwork negligently dress’d,
Reclined the Wife, an infant at her breast;
In her wild face some touch of grace remain’d,
Of vigour palsied and of beauty stain’d;
Her bloodshot eyes on her unheeding mate
Were wrathful turn’d, and seem’d her wants to state,
Cursing his tardy aid—her Mother there
With gipsy-state engross’d the only chair;
Solemn and dull her look; with such she stands,
And reads the milk-maid’s fortune in her hands,
Tracing the lines of life; assumed through years,
Each feature now the steady falsehood wears.
With hard and savage eye she views the food,
And grudging pinches their intruding brood;
Last in the group, the worn-out Grandsire sits
Neglected, lost, and living but by fits:
Useless, despised, his worthless labours done,
And half protected by the vicious Son,
Who half supports him; he with heavy glance
Views the young ruffians who around him dance;
And, by the sadness in his face, appears
To trace the progress of their future years:
Through what strange course of misery, vice, deceit,
Must wildly wander each unpractised cheat!
What shame and grief, what punishment and pain,
Sport of fierce passions, must each child sustain—
Ere they like him approach their latter end,
Without a hope, a comfort, or a friend!

But this Orlando felt not; ‘Rogues,’ said he,
’Doubtless they are, but merry rogues they be;
They wander round the land, and be it true
They break the laws—then let the laws pursue
The wanton idlers; for the life they live,

Acquit I cannot, but I can forgive.’
This said, a portion from his purse was thrown,
And every heart seem’d happy like his own.”

The Patron, one of the most carefully elaborated of the Tales, is on an old and familiar theme. The scorn that “patient merit of the unworthy takes”; the misery of the courtier doomed “in suing long to bide";—the ills that assail the scholar’s life,

“Toil, envy, want, the Patron and the jail,”

are standing subjects for the moralist and the satirist. In Crabbe’s poem we have the story of a young man, the son of a “Borough-burgess,” who, showing some real promise as a poet, and having been able to render the local Squire some service by his verses at election time, is invited in return to pay a visit of some weeks at the Squire’s country-seat. The Squire has vaguely undertaken to find some congenial post for the young scholar, whose ideas and ambitions are much in advance of those entertained for him in

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his home. The young man has a most agreeable time with his new friends. He lives for the while with every refinement about him, and the Squire's daughter, a young lady of the type of Lady Clara Vere de Vere, evidently enjoys the opportunity of breaking a country heart for pastime, "ere she goes to town." For after a while the family leave for their mansion in London, the Squire at parting once more impressing on his young guest that he will not forget him. After waiting a reasonable time, the young poet repairs to London and seeks to obtain an interview with his Patron. After many unsuccessful trials, and rebuffs at the door from the servants, a letter is at last sent out to him from their master, coolly advising him to abjure all dreams of a literary life and offering him a humble post in the Custom House. The young man, in bitterness of heart, tries the work for a short time; and then, his health and spirits having utterly failed, he returns to his parents' home to die, the father thanking God, as he moves away from his son's grave, that no other of his children has tastes and talents above his position:

"'There lies my Boy,' he cried, 'of care bereft,
And, Heaven be praised, I've not a genius left:
No one among ye, sons! is doomed to live
On high-raised hopes of what the Great may give.'"

Crabbe, who is nothing if not incisive in the drawing of his moral, and lays on his colours with no sparing hand, represents the heartless Patron and his family as hearing the sad tidings with quite amazing *sang-froid*:

"Meantime the news through various channels spread,
The youth, once favour'd with such praise, was dead:
'Emma,' the Lady cried, 'my words attend,
Your siren-smiles have kill'd your humble friend;
The hope you raised can now delude no more,
Nor charms, that once inspired, can now restore'

Faint was the flush of anger and of shame,
That o'er the cheek of conscious beauty came:
'You censure not,' said she, 'the sun's bright rays,
When fools imprudent dare the dangerous gaze;
And should a stripling look till he were blind,
You would not justly call the light unkind;
But is he dead? and am I to suppose
The power of poison in such looks as those?'
She spoke, and pointing to the mirror, cast
A pleased gay glance, and curtsied as she pass'd.

My Lord, to whom the poet's fate was told,
Was much affected, for a man so cold:
'Dead!' said his lordship, 'run distracted, mad!
Upon my soul I'm sorry for the lad;
And now, no doubt, th' obliging world will say
That my harsh usage help'd him on his way:
What! I suppose, I should have nursed his muse,
And with champagne have brighten'd up his views,
Then had he made me famed my whole life long,
And stunn'd my ears with gratitude and song.
Still should the father hear that I regret
Our joint misfortune—Yes! I'll not forget.'"

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The story, though it has no precise prototype in Crabbe's own history, is clearly the fruit of his experience of life at Belvoir Castle, combined with the sad recollection of his sufferings when only a few years before he, a young man with the consciousness of talent, was rolling butter-tubs on Slaughden Quay.

Much of the Tale is admirably and forcibly written, but again it may be said that it is powerful fiction rather than poetry—and indeed into such matters poetry can hardly enter. It displays the fine observation of Miss Austen, clothed in effective couplets of the school of Johnson and Churchill. Yet every now and then the true poet comes to the surface. The essence of a dank and misty day in late autumn has never been seized with more perfect truth than in these lines:

"Cold grew the foggy morn, the day was brief,
Loose on the cherry hung the crimson leaf;
The dew dwelt ever on the herb; the woods
Roar'd with strong blasts, with mighty showers the floods:
All green was vanish'd, save of pine and yew,
That still displayed their melancholy hue;
Save the green holly with its berries red,
And the green moss that o'er the gravel spread."

The scheme of these detached Tales had served to develop one special side of Crabbe's talent. The analysis of human character, with its strength and weakness (but specially the latter), finds fuller exercise as the poet has to trace its effects upon the earthly fortunes of the persons portrayed. The Tale entitled *The Gentleman Farmer* is a striking illustration in point. Jeffrey in his review of the *Tales* in the *Edinburgh* supplies, as usual, a short abstract of the story, not without due insight into its moral. But a profounder student of human nature than Jeffrey has, in our own day, cited the Tale as worthy even to illustrate a memorable teaching of St. Paul. The Bishop of Worcester, better known as Canon Gore to the thousands who listened to the discourse in Westminster Abbey, finds in this story a perfect illustration of what moral freedom is, and what it is often erroneously supposed to be:

"It is of great practical importance that we should get a just idea of what our freedom consists in. There are men who, under the impulse of a purely materialist science, declare the sense of moral freedom to be an illusion. This is of course a gross error. But what has largely played into the hands of this error is the exaggerated idea of human freedom which is ordinarily current, an idea which can only be held by ignoring our true and necessary dependence and limitation. It is this that we need to have brought home to us. There is an admirable story among George Crabbe's *Tales* called 'The Gentleman Farmer.' The hero starts in life resolved that he will not put up with any bondage. The orthodox clergyman, the orthodox physician, and orthodox matrimony—-all these alike represent social bondage in different forms, and he will have none of them So he starts on a career of 'unchartered freedom'

‘To prove that *he alone was king of him,*’

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and the last scene of all represents him the weak slave of
his mistress, a quack doctor, and a revivalist—'which things
are an allegory.'"

The quotation shows that Crabbe, neglected by the readers of poetry to-day, is still cherished by the psychologist and divine. It is to the "graver mind" rather than to the "lighter heart" that he oftenest appeals. Newman, to mention no small names, found Crabbe's pathos and fidelity to Human Nature even more attractive to him in advanced years than in youth. There is indeed much in common between Crabbe's treatment of life and its problems, and Newman's. Both may be called "stern" portrayers of human nature, not only as intended in Byron's famous line, but in Wordsworth's use of the epithet when he invoked Duty as the "stern Daughter of the voice of God." A kindred lesson to that drawn by Canon Gore from *The Gentleman Farmer* is taught in the yet grimmer Tale of *Edward Shore*. The story, as summarised by Jeffrey, is as follows:

"The hero is a young man of aspiring genius and enthusiastic temper with an ardent love of virtue, but no settled principles either of conduct or opinion. He first conceives an attachment for an amiable girl, who is captivated with his conversation; but, being too poor to marry, soon comes to spend more of his time in the family of an elderly sceptic of his acquaintance, who had recently married a young wife, and placed unbounded confidence in her virtue, and the honour of his friend. In a moment of temptation they abuse this confidence. The husband renounces him with dignified composure; and he falls at once from the romantic pride of his virtue. He then seeks the company of the dissipated and gay, and ruins his health and fortune without regaining his tranquillity. When in gaol and miserable, he is relieved by an unknown hand, and traces the benefaction to the friend whose former kindness he had so ill repaid. This humiliation falls upon his proud spirit and shattered nerves with an overwhelming force, and his reason fails beneath it. He is for some time a raving maniac, and then falls into a state of gay and compassionable imbecility, which is described with inimitable beauty in the close of this story."

Jeffrey's abstract is fairly accurate, save in one particular. Edward Shore can hardly be said to feel an "ardent love of virtue." Rather is he perfectly confident of his respectability, and bitterly contemptuous of those who maintain the necessity of religion to control men's unruly passions. His own lofty conceptions of the dignity of human nature are sufficient for himself:

"'While reason guides me, I shall walk aright,
Nor need a steadier hand, or stronger light;
Nor this in dread of awful threats, design'd
For the weak spirit and the grov'ling mind;
But that, engaged by thoughts and views sublime,
I wage free war with grossness and with crime.'

Thus looked he proudly on the vulgar crew,
Whom statutes govern, and whom fears subdue.”

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As motto for this story Crabbe quotes the fine speech of Henry V. on discovering the treachery of Lord Scrope, whose character had hitherto seemed so immaculate. The comparison thus suggested is not as felicitous as in many of Crabbe's citations. Had *In Memoriam* been then written, a more exact parallel might have been found in Tennyson's warning to the young enthusiast:

"See thou, that countest reason ripe
In holding by the law within,
Thou fail not in a world of sin,
And ev'n for want of such a type."

The story is for the most part admirably told. The unhappy man, reduced to idiocy of a harmless kind, and the common playmate of the village children, is encountered now and then by the once loved maid, who might have made him happy:

"Kindly she chides his boyish flights, while he
Will for a moment fix'd and pensive be;
And as she trembling speaks, his lively eyes
Explore her looks; he listens to her sighs;
Charm'd by her voice, th' harmonious sounds invade
His clouded mind, and for a time persuade:
Like a pleased infant, who has newly caught
From the maternal glance a gleam of thought,
He stands enrapt, the half-known voice to hear,
And starts, half conscious, at the falling tear.

Rarely from town, nor then unwatch'd, he goes,
In darker mood, as if to hide his woes;
Returning soon, he with impatience seeks
His youthful friends, and shouts, and sings, and speaks;
Speaks a wild speech with action all as wild—
The children's leader, and himself a child;
He spins their top, or at their bidding bends
His back, while o'er it leap his laughing friends;
Simple and weak, he acts the boy once more,
And heedless children call him *Silly Shore*."

In striking contrast to the prevailing tone of the other Tales is the charming story, conceived in a vein of purest comedy, called *The Frank Courtship*. This Tale alone should be a decisive answer to those who have doubted Crabbe's possession of the gift of humour, and on this occasion he has refrained from letting one dark shadow fall across his picture. It tells of one Jonas Kindred, a wealthy puritanic Dissenter of narrowest creed and masterful temper. He has an only daughter, the pride of her parents, and brought up by them in the strictest tenets of the sect. Her father has a

widowed and childless sister, with a comfortable fortune, living in some distant town; and in pity of her solitary condition he allows his naturally vivacious daughter to spend the greater part of the year with her aunt. The aunt does not share the prejudices of her brother's household. She likes her game of cards and other social joys, and is quite a leader of fashion in her little town. To this life and its enjoyments the beautiful and clever Sybil takes very kindly, and unfolds many attractive graces. Once a year the aunt and niece by arrangement

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spend a few weeks in Sybil's old home. The aunt, with much serpentine wisdom, arranges that she and her niece shall adapt themselves to this very different atmosphere—eschew cards, attend regularly at chapel, and comply with the tone and habits of the family. The niece, however, is really as good as she is pretty, and her conscience smites her for deceiving her father, of whom she is genuinely fond. She stands before him "pure, pensive, simple, sad,"—yet

> "the damsel's heart,
> When Jonas praised, reproved her for the part;
> For Sybil, fond of pleasure, gay and light,
> Had still a secret bias to the right;
> Vain as she was—and flattery made her vain—
> Her simulation gave her bosom pain."

As time wears on, however, this state of things must come to a close. Jonas is anxious that his daughter shall marry suitably, and he finds among his neighbours an admirable young man, a staunch member of the "persuasion," and well furnished in this world's goods. He calls his daughter home, that she may be at once introduced to her future husband, for the father is as certain as Sir Anthony Absolute himself that daughters should accept what is offered them and ask no questions. Sybil is by no means unwilling to enter the holy state, if the right man can be found. Indeed, she is wearying of the aimless life she lives with her worldly aunt, and the gradual change in her thoughts and hopes is indicated in a passage of much delicacy and insight:

> "Jonas now ask'd his daughter—and the Aunt,
> Though loth to lose her, was obliged to grant.—
> But would not Sybil to the matron cling,
> And fear to leave the shelter of her wing?
> No! in the young there lives a love of change,
> And to the easy they prefer the strange!
> Then, too, the joys she once pursued with zeal,
> From whist and visits sprung, she ceased to feel:
> When with, the matrons Sybil first sat down,
> To cut for partners and to stake her crown,
> This to the youthful maid preferment seem'd,
> Who thought what woman she was then esteem'd;
> But in few years, when she perceived indeed
> The real woman to the girl succeed,
> No longer tricks and honours fill'd her mind,
> But other feelings, not so well defined;
> She then reluctant grew, and thought it hard
> To sit and ponder o'er an ugly card;

Rather the nut-tree shade the nymph preferr'd,
Pleased with the pensive gloom and evening bird;
Thither, from company retired, she took
The silent walk, or read the fav'rite book."

The interview between Sybil and the young man is conceived with real skill and humour. The young lady receives her lover, prepared to treat him with gentle mockery and to keep him at a convenient distance. The young lover is not daunted, and plainly warns her against the consequences of such levity. But as the little duel proceeds, each gradually detects the real good that underlies the surface qualities of the other. In spite of his formalism, Sybil discerns that her lover is full of good sense and feeling; and he makes the same discovery with regard to the young lady's *badinage.* And then, after a conflict of wits that seems to terminate without any actual result, the anxious father approaches his child with a final appeal to her sense of filial duty:

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"With anger fraught, but willing to persuade,
The wrathful father met the smiling maid:
'Sybil,' said he, 'I long, and yet I dread
To know thy conduct—hath Josiah fled?
And, grieved and fretted by thy scornful air,
For his lost peace, betaken him to prayer?
Couldst then his pure and modest mind distress
By vile remarks upon his speech, address,
Attire, and voice?'—'All this I must confess.'
'Unhappy child! what labour will it cost
To win him back!'—'I do not think him lost.'
'Courts he then (trifler!) insult and disdain?'—
'No; but from these he courts me to refrain.'
'Then hear me, Sybil: should Josiah leave
Thy father's house?'—'My father's child would grieve.'
'That is of grace, and if he come again
To speak of love?'—'I might from grief refrain.'
'Then wilt thou, daughter, our design embrace?'—
Can I resist it, if it be of grace?'
'Dear child! in three plain words thy mind express:
Wilt thou have this good youth?'—'Dear father! yes.'"

All the characters in the story—the martinet father and his poor crushed wife, as well as the pair of lovers—are indicated with an appreciation of the value of dramatic contrast that might make the little story effective on the stage. One of the Tales in this collection, *The Confidant*, was actually turned into a little drama in blank verse by Charles Lamb, under the changed title of *The Wife's Trial: or the Intruding Widow*. The story of Crabbe's *Confidant* is not pleasant; and Lamb thought well to modify it, so as to diminish the gravity of the secret of which the malicious friend was possessed. There is nothing but what is sweet and attractive in the little comedy of *The Frank Courtship*, and it might well be commended to the dexterous and sympathetic hand of Mr. J.M. Barrie.

CHAPTER IX

VISITING IN LONDON

(1812-1819)

In the margin of FitzGerald's copy of the *Memoir* an extract is quoted from Crabbe's Diary: "1810, Nov. 7.—Finish Tales. Not happy hour." The poet's comment may have meant something more than that so many of his Tales dealt with sad instances of human frailty. At that moment, and for three years longer, there hung over Crabbe's family life a cloud that never lifted—the hopeless illness of his wife. Two years before,

Southey, in answer to a friend who had made some reference to Crabbe and his poetry, writes:

"With Crabbe's poems I have been acquainted for about twenty years, having read them when a schoolboy on their first publication, and, by the help of *Elegant Extracts*, remembered from that time what was best worth remembering. You rightly compare him to Goldsmith. He is an imitator, or rather an *antithesizer* of Goldsmith, if such a word may be coined for the occasion. His merit is precisely the same as

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Goldsmith's—that of describing things clearly and strikingly; but there is a wide difference between the colouring of the two poets. Goldsmith threw a sunshine over all his pictures, like that of one of our water-colour artists when he paints for ladies—a light and a beauty not to be found in Nature, though not more brilliant or beautiful than what Nature really affords; Crabbe's have a gloom which is also not in Nature—not the shade of a heavy day, of mist, or of clouds, but the dark and overcharged shadows of one who paints by lamplight—whose very lights have a gloominess. In part this is explained by his history."

Southey's letter was written in September 1808, before either *The Borough* or the *Tales* was published, which may account for the inadequacy of his criticism on Crabbe's poetry. But the above passage throws light upon a period in Crabbe's history to which his son naturally does little more than refer in general and guarded terms. In a subsequent passage of the letter already quoted, we are reminded that as early as the year 1803 Mrs. Crabbe's mental derangement was familiarly known to her friends.

But now, when his latest book was at last in print, and attracting general attention, the end of Crabbe's long watching was not far off. In the summer of 1813 Mrs. Crabbe had rallied so far as to express a wish to see London again, and the father and mother and two sons spent nearly three months in rooms in a hotel. Crabbe was able to visit Dudley North, and other of his old friends, and to enter to some extent into the gaieties of the town, but also, as always, taking advantage of the return to London to visit and help the poor and distressed, not unmindful of his own want and misery in the great city thirty years before. The family returned to Muston in September, and towards the close of the month Mrs. Crabbe was released from her long disease. On the north wall of the chancel of Muston Church, close to the altar, is a plain marble slab recording that not far away lie the remains of "Sarah, wife of the Rev. George Crabbe, late Rector of this Parish."

Within *two* days of the wife's death Crabbe fell ill of a serious malady, worn out as he was with long anxiety and grief. He was for a few days in danger of his life, and so well aware of his condition that he desired that his wife's grave "might not be closed till it was seen whether he should recover." He rallied, however, and returned to the duties of his parish, and to a life of still deeper loneliness. But his old friends at Belvoir Castle once more came to his deliverance. Within a short time the Duke offered him the living of Trowbridge in Wiltshire, a small manufacturing town, on the line (as we should describe it today) between Bath and Salisbury. The value of the preferment was not as great as that of the joint livings of Muston and Allington, so that poor Crabbe was once more doomed to be a pluralist, and to accept, also at the Duke's hands, the vicarage of Croxton Kerrial, near Belvoir Castle, where, however, he never resided.

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And now the time came for Crabbe's final move, and rector of Trowbridge he was to remain for the rest of his life. He was glad to leave Muston, which now had for him the saddest of associations. He had never been happy there, for reasons we have seen. What Crabbe's son calls "diversity of religious sentiment" had produced "a coolness in some of his parishioners, which he felt the more painfully because, whatever might be their difference of opinion, he was ever ready to help and oblige them all by medical and other aid to the utmost extent of his power." So that in leaving Muston he was not, as was evident, leaving many to lament his departure. Indeed, malignity was so active in one quarter that the bells of the parish church were rung to welcome Crabbe's successor before Crabbe and his sons had quitted the house!

For other reasons, perhaps, Crabbe prepared to leave his two livings with a sense of relief. His wife's death had cast a permanent shadow over the landscape. The neighbouring gentry were kindly disposed, but probably not wholly sympathetic. It is clear that there was a certain rusticity about Crabbe; and his politics, such as they were, had been formed in a different school from that of the county families. A busy country town was likely to furnish interests and distractions of a different kind. But before finally quitting the neighbourhood he visited a sister at Aldeburgh, and, his son writes, 'one day was given to a solitary ramble among the scenery of bygone years—Parham and the woods of Glemham, then in the first blossom of May. He did not return until night; and in his note-book I find the following brief record of this mournful visit:

"Yes, I behold again the place,
The seat of joy, the source of pain;
It brings in view the form and face
That I must never see again.

The night-bird's song that sweetly floats
On this soft gloom—this balmy air—
Brings to the mind her sweeter notes
That I again must never hear.

Lo! yonder shines that window's light,
My guide, my token, heretofore;
And now again it shines as bright,
When those dear eyes can shine no more.

Then hurry from this place away!
It gives not now the bliss it gave;
For Death has made its charm his prey,
And joy is buried in her grave."

In family relationships, and indeed all others, Crabbe's tenderness was never wanting, and the verse that follows was found long afterwards written on a paper in which his wife's wedding-ring, nearly worn through before she died, was wrapped:

"The ring so worn, as you behold,
So thin, so pale, is yet of gold:
The passion such it was to prove;
Worn with life's cares, love yet was love."

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Crabbe was inducted to the living of Trowbridge on the 3rd of June 1814, and preached his first sermon two days later. His two sons followed him, as soon as their existing engagements allowed them to leave Leicestershire. The younger, John, who married in 1816, became his father's curate, and the elder, who married a year later, became curate at Pucklechurch, not many miles distant. As Crabbe's old cheerfulness gradually returned he found much congenial society in the better educated classes about him. His reputation as a poet was daily spreading. The *Tales* passed from edition to edition, and brought him many admirers and sympathisers. The "busy, populous clothing town," as he described Trowbridge to a friend, provided him with intelligent neighbours of a class different from any he had yet been thrown with. And yet once more, as his son has to admit, he failed to secure the allegiance of the church-going parishioners. His immediate predecessor, a curate in charge, had been one of those in whom a more passionate missionary zeal had been stirred by the Methodist movement—"endeared to the more serious inhabitants by warm zeal and a powerful talent for preaching extempore." The parishioners had made urgent appeal to the noble patron to appoint this man to the benefice, and the Duke's disregard of their petition had produced much bitterness in the parish. Then, again, in Crabbe there was a "lay" element, which had probably not been found in his predecessor, and he might occasionally be seen "at a concert, a ball, or even a play." And finally, not long after his arrival, he took the unpopular side in an election for the representation of the county. The candidate he supported was strongly opposed by the "manufacturing interest," and Crabbe became the object of intense dislike at the time of the election, so much so that a violent mob attempted to prevent his leaving his house to go to the poll. However, Crabbe showed the utmost courage during the excitement, and his other fine qualities of sterling worth and kindness of heart ultimately made their way; and in the sixteen years that followed, Crabbe took still firmer hold of the affection of the worthier part of his parishioners.

Crabbe's son thought good to devote several pages of his *Memoir* to the question why his father, having now no unmarried son to be his companion, should not have taken such a sensible step as to marry again. For the old man, if he deserved to be so called at the age of sixty-two, was still very susceptible to the charms of female society, and indeed not wholly free from the habit of philandering—a habit which occasionally "inspired feelings of no ordinary warmth" in the fair objects of "his vain devotion." One such incident all but ended in a permanent engagement. A MS. quotation from the poet's Diary, copied in the margin of FitzGerald's volume, may possibly refer to this occasion. Under date of September 22 occurs this entry: "Sidmouth. Miss

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Ridout. Declaration. Acceptance." But under October 5 is written the ominous word, "Mr. Ridout." And later: "Dec. 12. Charlotte's picture returned." A tragedy (or was it a comedy?) seems written in these few words. Edward FitzGerald adds to this his own note: "Miss Ridout I remember—an elegant spinster; friend of my mother's. About 1825 she had been at Sidmouth, and known Crabbe." The son quotes some very ardent verses belonging to this period, but not assignable to any particular charmer, such as one set beginning:

"And wilt thou never smile again;
Thy cruel purpose never shaken?
Hast thou no feeling for my pain,
Refused, disdain'd, despised, forsaken?"

The son indicates these amiable foibles in a filial tone and in apologetic terms, but the "liberal shepherds" sometimes spoke more frankly. An old squire remarked to a friend in reference to this subject, "D—mme, sir! the very first time Crabbe dined at my house he made love to my sister!" And a lady is known to have complained that on a similar occasion Crabbe had exhibited so much warmth of manner that she "felt quite frightened." His son entirely supports the same view as to his father's almost demonstratively affectionate manner towards ladies who interested him, and who, perhaps owing to his rising repute as an author, showed a corresponding interest in the elderly poet. Crabbe himself admits "the soft impeachment." In a letter to his newly found correspondent, Mrs. Leadbeater (granddaughter of Burke's old schoolmaster, Richard Shackleton), he confesses that women were more to him than men:

"I'm alone now; and since my removing into a busy town among the multitude, the loneliness is but more apparent and more melancholy. But this is only at certain times; and then I have, though at considerable distances, six female friends, unknown to each other, but all dear, very dear, to me. With them I do not much associate; not as deserting, and much less disliking, the male part of society, but as being unfit for it; not hardy nor grave, not knowing enough, nor sufficiently acquainted with the everyday concerns of men. But my beloved creatures have minds with which I can better assimilate. Think of you, I must; and of me, I must entreat that you would not be unmindful."

Nothing, however, was destined to come of these various flirtations or *tendresses*. The new duties at Trowbridge, with their multiplying calls upon his attention and sympathies, must soon have filled his time and attention when at work in his market town, with its flourishing woollen manufactures. And Crabbe was now to have opened to him new sources of interest in the neighbourhood. His growing reputation soon made him a welcome guest in many houses to which his mere position as vicar of Trowbridge might

not have admitted him. Trowbridge was only a score or so of miles from Bath, and there were many noblemen’s and gentlemen’s seats in the country round.

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In this same county of Wilts, and not very far away, at his vicarage of Bremhill, was William Lisle Bowles, the graceful poet whose sonnets five-and-twenty years before had first roused to poetic utterance the young Coleridge and Charles Lamb when at Christ's Hospital. Through Bowles, Crabbe was introduced to the noble family at Bowood, where the third Marquis of Lansdowne delighted to welcome those distinguished in literature and the arts. Within these splendid walls Crabbe first made the acquaintance of Rogers, which soon ripened into an intimacy not without effect, I think, upon the remaining efforts of Crabbe as a poet. One immediate result was that Crabbe yielded to Rogers's strong advice to him to visit London, and take his place among the literary society of the day. This visit was paid in the summer of 1817, when Crabbe stayed in London from the middle of June to the end of July.

Crabbe's son rightly included in his *Memoir* several extracts from his father's Diary kept during this visit. They are little more than briefest entries of engagements, but serve to show the new and brilliant life to which the poet was suddenly introduced. He constantly dined and breakfasted with Rogers, where he met and was welcomed by Rogers's friends. His old acquaintance with Fox gave him the *entree* of Holland House. Thomas Campbell was specially polite to him, and really attracted by him. Crabbe visited the theatres, and was present at the farewell banquet given to John Kemble. Through Rogers and Campbell he was introduced to John Murray of Albemarle Street, who later became his publisher. He sat for his portrait to Pickersgill and Phillips, and saw the painting by the latter hanging on the Academy walls when dining at their annual banquet. Again, through an introduction at Bath to Samuel Hoare of Hampstead, Crabbe formed a friendship with him and his family of the most affectionate nature. During the first and all later visits to London Crabbe was most often their guest at the mansion on the summit of the famous "Northern Height," with which, after Crabbe's death, Wordsworth so touchingly associated his name, in the lines written on the death of the Ettrick Shepherd and his brother-poets:

"Our haughty life is crowned with darkness,
Like London with its own black wreath,
On which with thee, O Crabbe, forth looking,
I gazed from Hampstead's breezy heath."

Between Samuel Hoare's hospitable roof and the *Hummums* in Covent Garden Crabbe seems to have alternated, according as his engagements in town required.

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But although living, as the Diary shows, in daily intercourse with the literary and artistic world, tasting delights which were absolutely new to him, Crabbe never forgot either his humble friends in Wiltshire, or the claims of his own art. He kept in touch with Trowbridge, where his son John was in charge, and sends instructions from time to time as to poor pensioners and others who were not to be neglected in the weekly ministrations. At the same time, he seems rarely to have omitted the self-imposed task of adding daily to the pile of manuscript on which he was at work—the collection of stories to be subsequently issued as *Tales of the Hall*. Crabbe had resolved, in the face of whatever distractions, to write if possible a fixed amount every day. More than once in the Diary occur such entries as: "My thirty lines done; but not well, I fear." "Thirty lines to-day, but not yesterday—must work up." This anticipation of a method made famous later in the century by Anthony Trollope may account (as also in Trollope's case) for certain marked inequalities in the merit of the work thus turned out. At odd times and in odd places were these verses sometimes composed. On a certain Sunday morning in July 1817, after going to church at St. James's, Piccadilly (or was it the Chapel Royal?), Crabbe wandered eastward and found inspiration in the most unexpected quarter: "Write some lines in the solitude of Somerset House, not fifty yards from the Thames on one side, and the Strand on the other; but as quiet as the sands of Arabia. I am not quite in good humour with this day; but, happily, I cannot say why."

The last mysterious sentence is one of many scattered through, the Diary, which, aided by dashes and omission-marks by the editorial son, point to certain sentimentalisms in which Crabbe was still indulging, even in the vortex of fashionable gaieties. We gather throughout that the ladies he met interested him quite as much, or even more, than the distinguished men of letters, and there are allusions besides to other charmers at a distance. The following entry immediately precedes that of the Sunday just quoted:—

"14th.—Some more intimate conversation this morning with Mr. and Mrs. Moore. They mean to go to Trowbridge. He is going to Paris, but will not stay long. Mrs. Spencer's album. Agree to dine at Curzon Street. A welcome letter from ——. This makes the day more cheerful. Suppose it were so. Well, 'tis not! Go to Mr. Rogers, and take a farewell visit to Highbury. Miss Rogers. Promise to go when ——. Return early. Dine there, and purpose to see Mr. Moore and Mr. Rogers in the morning when they set out for Calais."

On the whole, however, Crabbe may have found, when these fascinating experiences were over, that there had been safety in a multitude. For he seems to have been equally charmed with Rogers's sister, and William Spencer's daughter, and the Countess of Bessborough, and a certain Mrs. Wilson,—and, like Miss Snevellicci's papa, to have "loved them every one."

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Meanwhile Crabbe was working steadily, while in London, at his new poems. Though his minimum output was thirty lines a day, he often produced more, and on one occasion he records eighty lines as the fruit of a day's labour. During the year 1818 he was still at work, and in September of that year he writes to Mary Leadbeater that his verses "are not yet entirely ready, but do not want much that he can give them." He was evidently correcting and perfecting to the best of his ability, and (as I believe) profiting by the intellectual stimulus of his visit to London, as well as by the higher standards of versification that he had met with, even in writers inferior to himself. The six weeks in London had given him advantages he had never enjoyed before. In his early days under Burke's roof he had learned much from Burke himself, and from Johnson and Fox, but he was then only a promising beginner. Now, thirty-five years later, he met Rogers, Wordsworth, Campbell, Moore, as social equals, and having, like them, won a public for himself. When his next volumes appeared, the workmanship proved, as of old, unequal, but here and there Crabbe showed a musical ear, and an individuality of touch of a different order from anything he had achieved before. Mr. Courthope and other critics hold that there are passages in Crabbe's earliest poems, such as *The Village*, which have a metrical charm he never afterwards attained. But I strongly suspect that in such passages Crabbe had owed much to the revising hand of Burke, Johnson, and Fox.

In the spring of 1819 Crabbe was again in town, visiting at Holland House, and dining at the Thatched House with the "Literary Society," of which he had been elected a member, and which to-day still dines and prospers. He was then preparing for the publication of his new Tales, from the famous house in Albemarle Street. Two years before, in 1817, on the strength doubtless of Rogers's strong recommendation, Murray had made a very liberal offer for the new poems, and the copyright of all Crabbe's previous works. For these, together, Murray had offered three thousand pounds. Strangely enough, Rogers was at first dissatisfied with the offer, holding that the sum should be paid for the new volumes alone. He and a friend (possibly Campbell), who had conducted the negotiation, accordingly went off to the house of Longman to see if they could not get better terms. To their great discomfiture the Longmans only offered L1000 for the privilege that Murray had valued at three times the amount; and Crabbe and his friends were placed in a difficult position. A letter of Moore to John Murray many years afterwards, when Crabbe's *Memoir* was in preparation, tells the sequel of the story, and it may well be given in his words:

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“In this crisis it was that Mr. Rogers and myself, anxious to relieve our poor friend from his suspense, called upon you, as you must well remember, in Albemarle Street; and seldom have I watched a countenance with more solicitude, or heard words that gave me much more pleasure than when, on the subject being mentioned, you said ’Oh! yes. I have heard from Mr. Crabbe, and look upon the matter as all settled.’ I was rather pressed, I remember, for time that morning, having an appointment on some business of my own, but Mr. Rogers insisted that I should accompany him to Crabbe’s lodgings, and enjoy the pleasure of seeing him relieved from his suspense. We found him sitting in his room, alone, and expecting the worst; but soon dissipated all his fears by the agreeable intelligence which we brought.“When he received the bills for L3000, we earnestly advised that he should, without delay, deposit them in some safe hands; but no—he must take them with him to Trowbridge, and show them to his son John. They would hardly believe in his good luck, at home, if they did not see the bills. On his way down to Trowbridge, a friend at Salisbury, at whose house he rested (Mr. Everett, the banker), seeing that he carried these bills loosely in his waistcoat pocket, requested to be allowed to take charge of them for him: but with equal ill success. ‘There was no fear,’ he said, ’of his losing them, and he must show them to his son John.’”

It was matter of common knowledge in the literary world of Crabbe’s day that John Murray did not on this occasion make a very prudent bargain, and that in fact he lost heavily by his venture. No doubt his offer was based upon the remarkable success of Crabbe’s two preceding poems. *The Borough* had passed through six editions in the same number of years, and the *Tales* reached a fifth edition within two years of publication. But for changes in progress in the poetic taste of the time, Murray might safely have anticipated a continuance of Crabbe’s popularity. But seven years had elapsed since the appearance of the *Tales*, and in these seven years much had happened. Byron had given to the world one by one the four cantos of *Childe Harold*, as well as other poems rich in splendid rhetoric and a lyric versatility far beyond Crabbe’s reach. Wordsworth’s two volumes in 1815 contained by far the most important and representative of his poems, and these were slowly but surely winning him a public of his own, intellectual and thoughtful if not as yet numerous. John Keats had made two appearances, in 1817 and 1818, and the year following the publication of Crabbe’s *Tales of the Hall* was to add to them the Odes and other poems constituting the priceless volume of 1820—*Lamia and other Poems*. Again, for the lovers of fiction—-whom, as I have said, Crabbe had attracted quite as strongly as the lovers of verse—-Walter Scott had produced five or six of his finest novels, and was

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adding to the circle of his admirers daily. By the side of this fascinating prose, and still more fascinating metrical versatility, Crabbe's resolute and plodding couplets might often seem tame and wearisome. Indeed, at this juncture, the rhymed heroic couplet, as a vehicle for the poetry of imagination, was tottering to its fall, though it lingered for many years as the orthodox form for university prize poems, and for occasional didactic or satirical effusions. Crabbe, very wisely, remained faithful to the metre. For his purpose, and with his subjects and special gifts, none probably would have served him better. For narrative largely blended with the analytical and the epigrammatic method neither the stanza nor blank-verse (had he ever mastered it) would have sufficed. But in Crabbe's last published volumes it was not only the metre that was to seem flat and monotonous in the presence of new proofs of the boundless capabilities of verse. The reader would not make much progress in these volumes without discovering that the depressing incidents of life, its disasters and distresses, were still Crabbe's prevailing theme. John Murray in the same season published Rogers's *Human Life* and Crabbe's *Tales of the Hall*. The publisher sent Crabbe a copy of the former, and he acknowledged it in a few lines as follows:
"I am anxious that Mr. Rogers should have all the success he can desire. I am more indebted to him than I could bear to think of, if I had not the highest esteem. It will give me great satisfaction to find him cordially admired. His is a favourable picture, and such he loves so do I, but men's vices and follies come into my mind, and spoil my drawing."

Assuredly no more striking antithesis to Crabbe's habitual impressions of human life can be found than in the touching and often beautiful couplets of Rogers, a poet as neglected today as Crabbe. Rogers's picture of wedded happiness finds no parallel, I think, anywhere in the pages of his brother-poet:—

"Across the threshold led,
And every tear kissed off as soon as shed,
His house she enters, there to be a light
Shining within, when all without is night;
A guardian angel o'er his life presiding,
Doubling his pleasures, and his cares dividing!
How oft her eyes read his; her gentle mind
To all his wishes, all his thoughts, inclined;
Still subject—ever on the watch to borrow
Mirth of his mirth, and sorrow of his sorrow.
The soul of music slumbers in the shell,
Till waked to rapture by the master's spell;
And feeling hearts—touch them but rightly—pour
A thousand melodies unheard before."

It may be urged that Rogers exceeds in one direction as unjustifiably as Crabbe in the opposite. But there is room in poetry for both points of view, though the absolute—the

Shakespearian—grasp of Human Life may be truer and more eternally convincing than either.

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CHAPTER X

THE TALES OF THE HALL

(1819)

The *Tales of the Hall* were published by John Murray in June 1819, in two handsome octavo volumes, with every advantage of type, paper, and margin. In a letter of Crabbe to Mrs. Leadbeater, in October 1817, he makes reference to these Tales, already in preparation. He tells his correspondent that “Remembrances” was the title for them proposed by his friends. We learn from another source that a second title had been suggested, “Forty Days—a Series of Tales told at Binning Hall.” Finally Mr. Murray recommended *Tales of the Hall*, and this was adopted.

In the same letter to Mrs. Leadbeater, Crabbe writes: “I know not how to describe the new, and probably (most probably) the last work I shall publish. Though a village is the scene of meeting between my two principal characters, and gives occasion to other characters and relations in general, yet I no more describe the manners of village inhabitants. My people are of superior classes, though not the most elevated; and, with a few exceptions, are of educated and cultivated minds and habits.” In making this change Crabbe was also aware that some kind of unity must be given to those new studies of human life. And he found at least a semblance of this unity in ties of family or friendship uniting the tellers of them. Moreover Crabbe, who had a wide and even intimate knowledge of English, poetry, was well acquainted with the *Canterbury Tales*, and he bethought him that he would devise a framework. And the plan he worked out was as follows:

“The Hall” under whose roof the stories and conversations arise is a gentleman’s house, apparently in the eastern counties, inhabited by the elder of two brothers, George and Richard. George, an elderly bachelor, who had made a sufficient fortune in business, has retired to this country seat, which stands upon the site of a humbler dwelling where George had been born and spent his earliest years. The old home of his youth had subsequently passed into the hands of a man of means, who had added to it, improved the surroundings, and turned it into a modern and elegant villa. It was again in the market when George was seeking a retreat for his old age, and he purchased it—glad, even under the altered conditions, to live again among the loved surroundings of his childhood.

George has a half-brother, Richard, much younger than himself. They are the children of the same mother who, some years after her first widowhood, had married an Irish gentleman, of mercurial habit, by whom she had this second child. George had already left home to earn his living, with the consequence that the two brothers had scarcely ever met until the occasion upon which the story opens. Richard, after first trying the

sea as a profession, had entered the army during the war with Napoleon; distinguished himself

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in the Peninsula; and finally returned to his native country, covered with glory and enjoying a modest pension. He woos and wins the daughter of a country clergyman, marries, and finds a young family growing up around him. He is filled with a desire to resume friendly relations with his half-brother George, but is deterred from making the first advances. George, hearing of this through a common friend, cordially responds, and Richard is invited to spend a few weeks at Binning Hall. The two brothers, whose bringing up had been so different, and whose ideas and politics were far removed, nevertheless find their mutual companionship very pleasant, and every evening over their port wine relate their respective adventures and experiences, while George has also much to tell of his friends and neighbours around him. The clergyman of the parish, a former fellow of his college, often makes a third at these meetings; and thus a sufficient variety of topic is insured. The tales that these three tell, with the conversations arising out of them, form the subject matter of these *Tales of the Hall*. Crabbe devised a very pleasant means of bringing the brother's visit to a close. When the time originally proposed for the younger brother's stay is nearing its end, the brothers prepare to part. At first, the younger is somewhat disconcerted that his elder brother seemed to take his departure so little to heart. But this display of indifference proves to be only an amiable *ruse* on the part of George. On occasion of a final ride together through the neighbouring country, George asks for his brother's opinion about a purchase he has recently made, of a pleasant house and garden adjoining his own property. It then turns out that the generous George has bought the place as a home for his brother, who will in future act as George's agent or steward. On approaching and entering the house, Richard finds his wife and children, who have been privately informed of the arrangement, already installed, and eagerly waiting to welcome husband and father to this new and delightful home.

Throughout the development of this story with its incidental narratives, Crabbe has managed, as in previous poems, to make large use of his own personal experience. The Hall proves to be a modern gentleman's residence constructed out of a humbler farmhouse by additions and alterations in the building and its surroundings, which was precisely the fate which had befallen Mr. Tovell's old house which had come to the Crabbe family, and had been parted with by them to one of the Suffolk county families. "Moated Granges" were common in Norfolk and Suffolk. Mr. Tovel's house had had a moat, and this too had been a feature of George's paternal home:

> "It was an ancient, venerable Hall,
> And once surrounded by a moat and wall;
> A part was added by a squire of taste
> Who, while unvalued acres ran to waste,
> Made spacious rooms, whence he could look about,
> And mark improvements as they rose without;

He fill’d the moat, he took the wall away,
He thinn’d the park and bade the view be gay.”

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In this instance, the squire who had thus altered the property had been forced to sell it, and George was thus able to return to the old surroundings of his boyhood. In the third book, *Boys at School*, George relates some of his recollections, which include the story of a school-fellow, who having some liking for art but not much talent, finds his ambitions defeated, and dies of chagrin in consequence. This was in fact the true story of a brother of Crabbe's wife, Mr. James Elmy. Later, again, in the work the rector of the parish is described, and the portrait drawn is obviously that of Crabbe himself, as he appeared to his Dissenting parishioners at Muston:

"'A moral teacher!' some, contemptuous, cried;
He smiled, but nothing of the fact denied,
Nor, save by his fair life, to charge so strong replied.
Still, though he bade them not on aught rely
That was their own, but all their worth deny,
They called his pure advice his cold morality.

* * * * *

He either did not, or he would not see,
That if he meant a favourite priest to be,
He must not show, but learn of them, the way
To truth—he must not dictate, but obey;
They wish'd him not to bring them further light,
But to convince them that they now were right
And to assert that justice will condemn
All who presumed to disagree with them:
In this he fail'd, and his the greater blame,
For he persisted, void of fear or shame."

There is a touch of bitterness in these lines that is unmistakably that of a personal grievance, even if the poet's son had not confirmed the inference in a foot-note.

Book IV. is devoted to the *Adventures of Richard*, which begin with his residence with his mother near a small sea-port (evidently Aldeburgh); and here we once more read of the boy, George Crabbe, watching and remembering every aspect of the storms, and making friends with the wives and children of the sailors and the smugglers:

"I loved to walk where none had walk'd before,
About the rocks that ran along the shore;
Or far beyond the sight of men to stray,
And take my pleasure when I lost my way;
For then 'twas mine to trace the hilly heath,
And all the mossy moor that lies beneath:
Here had I favourite stations, where I stood

And heard the murmurs of the ocean-flood,
With not a sound beside except when flew
Aloft the lapwing, or the grey curlew,
Who with wild notes my fancied power defied,
And mock’d the dreams of solitary pride.”

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And as Crabbe evidently resorts gladly to personal experiences to make out the material for his work, the same also holds with regard to the incidental Tales. Crabbe refers in his Preface to two of these as not of his own invention, and his son, in the Notes, admits the same of others. One, as we have seen, happened in the Elmy family; another was sent him by a friend in Wiltshire, to which county the story belonged; while the last in the series, and perhaps the most painful of all, *Smugglers, and Poachers* was told to Crabbe by Sir Samuel Romilly, whom he had met at Hampstead, only a few weeks before Romilly's own tragic death. Probably other tales, not referred to by Crabbe or his son, were also encountered by the poet in his intercourse with his parishioners, or submitted to him by his friends. We might infer this from the singular inequality, in interest and poetical opportunity, of the various plots of these stories. Some of them are assuredly not such as any poet would have sat down and elaborated for himself, and it is strange how little sense Crabbe seems to have possessed as to which were worth treating, or could even admit of artistic treatment at all. A striking instance is afforded by the strange and most unpleasing history, entitled *Lady Barbara: or, The Ghost*.

The story is as follows: A young and beautiful lady marries early a gentleman of good family who dies within a year of their marriage. In spite of many proposals she resolves to remain a widow; and for the sake of congenial society and occupation, she finds a home in the family of a pious clergyman, where she devotes herself to his young children, and makes herself useful in the parish. Her favourite among the children is a boy, George, still in the schoolroom. The boy grows apace; goes to boarding-school and college; and is on the point of entering the army, when he discovers that he is madly in love with the lady, still an inmate of the house, who had "mothered him" when a child. No ages are mentioned, but we may infer that the young man is then about two and twenty, and the lady something short of forty. The position is not unimaginable, though it may be uncommon. The idea of marrying one who had been to her as a favourite child, seems to the widow in the first instance repulsive and almost criminal. But it turns out that there is another reason in the background for her not re-entering the marriage state, which she discloses to the ardent youth. It appears that the widow had once had a beloved brother who had died early. Those two had been brought up by an infidel father, who had impressed on his children the absurdity of all such ideas as immortality. The children had often discussed and pondered over this subject together, and had made a compact that whichever of them died first should, if possible, appear to the survivor, and thus solve the awful problem of a future life. The brother not long after died in foreign parts. Immediately after his

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death, before the sister heard the news, the brother's ghost appeared in a dream, or vision, to the sister, and warned her in solemn tones against ever marrying a second time. The spirit does not appear to have given any reasons, but his manner was so impressive and so unmistakable that the lady had thus far regarded it as an injunction never to be disobeyed. On hearing this remarkable story, the young man, George, argues impatiently against the trustworthiness of dreams, and is hardly silenced by the widow showing him on her wrist the mark still remaining where the spirit had seized and pressed her hand. In fine, the impassioned suitor prevails over these superstitious terrors, as he reckons them, of the lady—and they become man and wife.

The reader is here placed in a condition of great perplexity, and his curiosity becomes breathless. The sequel is melancholy indeed. After a few months' union, the young man, whose plausible eloquence had so moved the widow, tires of his wife, ill-treats her, and breaks her heart. The Psychical Society is avenged, and the ghost's word was worth at least "a thousand pounds." It is difficult for us to take such a story seriously, but it must have interested Crabbe deeply, for he has expended upon it much of his finest power of analysis, and his most careful writing. As we have seen, the subject of dreams had always had a fascination for him, of a kind not unconnected perhaps with the opium-habit. The story, however it was to be treated, was unpromising; but as the *denouement* was what it proved to be, the astonishing thing is that Crabbe should not have felt the dramatic impropriety of putting into the young man's mouth passages of an impressive, and almost Shakespearian, beauty such as are rare indeed in his poetry. The following lines are not indeed placed within inverted commas, but the pronoun "I" is retained, and they are apparently intended for something passing in the young suitor's mind:

"O! tell me not of years,—can she be old?
Those eyes, those lips, can man unmoved behold?
Has time that bosom chill'd? are cheeks so rosy cold?
No, she is young, or I her love t'engage
Will grow discreet, and that will seem like age:
But speak it not; Death's equalising age
Levels not surer than Love's stronger charm,
That bids all inequalities be gone,
That laughs at rank, that mocks comparison.
There is not young or old, if Love decrees;
He levels orders, he confounds degrees:
There is not fair, or dark, or short, or tall,
Or grave, or sprightly—Love reduces all;
He makes unite the pensive and the gay,
Gives something here, takes something there away;
From each abundant good a portion takes,

And for each want a compensation makes;
Then tell me not of years—Love, power divine,
Takes, as he wills, from hers, and gives to mine."

In those fine lines it is no doubt Crabbe himself that speaks, and not the young lover, who was to turn out in the sequel an unparalleled "cad." But then, what becomes of dramatic consistency, and the imperative claims of art?

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In the letter to Mrs. Leadbeater already cited Crabbe writes as to his forthcoming collection of Tales: "I do not know, on a general view, whether my tragic or lighter Tales, *etc*., are most in number. Of those equally well executed the tragic will, I suppose, make the greater impression." Crabbe was right in this forecast. Whether more or less in number, the "tragic" Tales far surpass the "lighter" in their effect on the reader, in the intensity of their gloom. Such stories as that of *Lady Barbara, Delay has Danger, The Sisters, Ellen, Smugglers and Poachers*, Richard's story of *Ruth*, and the elder brother's account of his own early attachment, with its miserable sequel—all these are of a poignant painfulness. Human crime, error, or selfishness working life-long misery to others—this is the theme to which Crabbe turns again and again, and on which he bestows a really marvellous power of analysis. There is never wanting, side by side with these, what Crabbe doubtless believed to be the compensating presence of much that is lovable in human character, patience, resignation, forgiveness. But the resultant effect, it must be confessed, is often the reverse of cheering. The fine lines of Wordsworth as to

"Sorrow that is not sorrow, but delight;
And miserable love, that is not pain
To hear of, for the glory that redounds
Therefrom to human kind, and what we are,"

fail to console us as we read these later stories of Crabbe. We part from too many of them not, on the whole, with a livelier faith in human nature. We are crushed by the exhibition of so much that is abnormally base and sordid.

The *Tales of the Hall* are full of surprises even to those familiar with Crabbe's earlier poems. He can still allow couplets to stand which are perilously near to doggerel; and, on the other hand, when his deepest interest in the fortunes of his characters is aroused, he rises at times to real eloquence, if never to poetry's supremest heights. Moreover, the poems contain passages of description which, for truth to Nature, touched by real imagination, are finer than anything he had yet achieved. The story entitled *Delay has Danger* contains the fine picture of an autumn landscape seen through the eyes of the miserable lover—the picture which dwelt so firmly in the memory of Tennyson:

"That evening all in fond discourse was spent,
When the sad lover to his chamber went,
To think on what had pass'd, to grieve, and to repent:
Early he rose, and looked with many a sigh
On the red light that fill'd the eastern sky:
Oft had he stood before, alert and gay,
To hail the glories of the new-born day;
But now dejected, languid, listless, low,
He saw the wind upon the water blow,

And the cold stream curl’d onward as the gale
From the pine-hill blew harshly down the dale;
On the right side the youth a wood survey’d,

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With all its dark intensity of shade;
Where the rough wind alone was heard to move,
In this, the pause of nature and of love,
When now the young are rear'd, and when the old,
Lost to the tie, grow negligent and cold—
Far to the left he saw the huts of men,
Half hid in mist that hung upon the fen;
Before him swallows, gathering for the sea,
Took their short flights, and twitter'd on the lea;
And near the bean-sheaf stood, the harvest done,
And slowly blacken'd in the sickly sun;
All these were sad in nature, or they took
Sadness from him, the likeness of his look,
And of his mind—he ponder'd for a while,
Then met his Fanny with a borrow'd smile."

The entire story, from which this is an extract, is finely told, and the fitness of the passage is beyond dispute. At other times the description is either so much above the level of the narrative, or below it, as to be almost startling. In the very first pages of *Tales of the Hall*, in the account of the elder brother's early retirement from business, occur the following musical lines:

"He chose his native village, and the hill
He climb'd a boy had its attraction still;
With that small brook beneath, where he would stand
And stooping fill the hollow of his hand
To quench th' impatient thirst—then stop awhile
To see the sun upon the waters smile,
In that sweet weariness, when, long denied,
We drink and view the fountain that supplied
The sparkling bliss—and feel, if not express,
Our perfect ease in that sweet weariness."

Yet it is only a hundred lines further on that, to indicate the elder brother's increasing interest in the graver concerns of human thought, Crabbe can write:

"He then proceeded, not so much intent,
But still in earnest, and to church he went
Although they found some difference in their creed,
He and his pastor cordially agreed;

Convinced that they who would the truth obtain
By disputation, find their efforts vain;
The church he view'd as liberal minds will view,
And there he fix'd his principles and pew."

Among those surprises to which I have referred is the apparently recent development in the poet of a lyrical gift, the like of which he had not exhibited before. Crabbe had already written two notable poems in stanzas, *Sir Eustace Grey* and that other painful but exceedingly powerful drama in monologue, *The Hall of Justice*. But since the appearance of his last volumes, Crabbe had formed some quite novel poetical friendships, and it would seem likely that association with Rogers, though he saw and felt that elegant poet's deficiencies as a painter of human life, had encouraged him to try an experiment in his friend's special vein. One of the most depressing stories in the series is that of the elder brother's ill-fated passion for a beautiful

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girl, to whom he had been the accidental means of rendering a vital service in rescuing her and a companion from the “rude uncivil kine” in a meadow. To the image of this girl, though he never set eyes on her again for many years, he had remained faithful. The next meeting, when at last it came, brought the most terrible of disillusions. Sent by his chief to transact certain business with a wealthy banker ("Clutterbuck & Co."), the young merchant calls at a villa where the banker at times resided, and finds that the object of his old love and his fondest dreams is there installed as the banker’s mistress. She is greatly moved at the sight of the youthful lover of old days, who, with more chivalry than prudence, offers forgiveness if she will break off this degrading alliance. She cannot resolve to take the step. She has become used to luxury and continuous amusement, and she cannot face the return to a duller domesticity. Finally, however, she dies penitent, and it is the contemplation of her life and death that works a life-long change in the ambitions and aims of the old lover. He wearies of money-making, and retires to lead a country life, where he may be of some good to his neighbours, and turn to some worthy use the time that may be still allowed him. The story is told with real pathos and impressive force. But the picture is spoiled by the tasteless interpolation of a song which the unhappy girl sings to her lover, at the very moment apparently when she has resolved that she can never be his:

“My Damon was the first to wake
  The gentle flame that cannot die;
My Damon is the last to take
  The faithful bosom’s softest sigh;
The life between is nothing worth,
  O! cast it from thy thought away;
Think of the day that gave it birth,
  And this its sweet returning day.

“Buried be all that has been done,
  Or say that nought is done amiss;
For who the dangerous path can shun
  In such bewildering world as this?
But love can every fault forgive,
  Or with a tender look reprove;
And now let nought in memory live,
  But that we meet, and that we love.”

The lines are pretty enough, and may be described as a blend of Tom Moore and Rogers. A similar lyric, in the story called *The Sisters*, might have come straight from the pen which has given us “Mine be a cot beside a hill,” and is not so wholly irrelevant to its context as the one just cited.

Since Crabbe's death in 1832, though he has never been without a small and loyal band of admirers, no single influence has probably had so much effect in reviving interest in his poetry as that of Edward FitzGerald, the translator of Omar Khayyam. FitzGerald was born and lived the greater part of his life in Suffolk, and Crabbe was a native of Aldeburgh, and lived in the neighbourhood till he was grown to manhood. This circumstance alone might not have specially interested

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FitzGerald in the poet, but for the fact that the temperament of the two men was somewhat the same, and that both dwelt naturally on the depressing sides of human life. But there were other coincidences to create a strong tie between FitzGerald and the poet's family. When FitzGerald's father went to live at Boulge Hall, near Woodbridge, in 1835, Crabbe's son George had recently been presented to the vicarage of the adjoining parish of Bredfield (FitzGerald's native village), which he continued to hold until his death in 1857. During these two and twenty years, FitzGerald and George Crabbe remained on the closest terms of friendship, which was continued with George Crabbe's son (a third George), who became ultimately rector of Merton in Norfolk. It was at his house, it will be remembered, that FitzGerald died suddenly in the summer of 1883. Through this long association with the family FitzGerald was gradually acquiring information concerning the poet, which even the son's *Biography* had not supplied. Readers of FitzGerald's delightful *Letters* will remember that there is no name more constantly referred to than that of Crabbe. Whether writing to Fanny Kemble, or Frederick Tennyson, or Lowell, he is constantly quoting him, and recommending him. During the thirty years that followed Crabbe's death his fame had been on the decline, and poets of different and greater gifts had taken his place. FitzGerald had noted this fact with ever-increasing regret, and longed to revive the taste for a poet of whose merits he had himself no doubt. He discerned moreover that even those who had read in their youth *The Village* and *The Borough* had been repelled by the length, and perhaps by the monotonous sadness, of the *Tales of the Hall*. It was for this reason apparently (and not because he assigned a higher place to the later poetry than to the earlier) that he was led, after some years of misgiving, to prepare a volume of selections from this latest work of Crabbe's which might have the effect of tempting the reader to master it as a whole. Owing to the length and uniformity of Crabbe's verse, what was ordinarily called an "anthology" was out of the question. FitzGerald was restricted to a single method. He found that readers were impatient of Crabbe's *longueurs*. It occurred to him that while making large omissions he might preserve the story in each case, by substituting brief prose abstracts of the portions omitted. This process he applied to the Tales that pleased him most, leaving what he considered Crabbe's best passages untouched. As early as 1876 he refers to the selection as already made, and he printed it for private circulation in 1879. Finally, in 1882, he added a preface of his own, and published it with Quaritch in Piccadilly.

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In his preface FitzGerald claims for Crabbe's latest work that the net impression left by it upon the reader is less sombre and painful than that left by his earlier poems. "It contains," he urges, "scarce anything of that brutal or sordid villainy of which one has more than enough in the poet's earlier work." Perhaps there is not so much of the "brutal or sordid," but then in *The Parish Register* or *The Borough*, the reader is in a way prepared for that ingredient, because the personages are the lawless and neglected poor of a lonely seaport. It is because, when he moves no longer among these, he yet finds vice and misery quite as abundant in "a village with its tidy homestead, and well-to-do tenants, within easy reach of a thriving country-town," that a certain shock is given to the reader. He discovers that all the evil passions intrude (like pale Death) into the comfortable villa as impartially as into the hovels at Aldeburgh. But FitzGerald had found a sufficient alleviation of the gloom in the framework of the Tales. The growing affection of the two brothers, as they come to know and understand each other better, is one of the consistently pleasant passages in Crabbe's writings. The concluding words of FitzGerald's preface, as the little volume is out of print and very scarce, I may be allowed to quote:—

"Is Crabbe then, whatever shape he may take, worth making room for in our over-crowded heads and libraries? If the verdict of such critics as Jeffrey and Wilson be set down to contemporary partiality or inferior 'culture,' there is Miss Austen, who is now so great an authority in the representation of genteel humanity, so unaccountably smitten with Crabbe in his worsted hose that she is said to have pleasantly declared he was the only man whom she would care to marry. If Sir Walter Scott and Byron are but unaesthetic judges of the poet, there is Wordsworth who was sufficiently exclusive in admitting any to the sacred brotherhood in which he still reigns, and far too honest to make any exception out of compliment to any one on any occasion—he did nevertheless thus write to the poet's son and biographer in 1834: 'Any testimony to the merit of your revered father's works would, I feel, be superfluous, if not impertinent. They will last from their combined merits as poetry and truth, full as long as anything that has been expressed in verse since they first made their appearance'—a period which, be it noted, includes all Wordsworth's own volumes except *Yarrow Revisited*, *The Prelude*, and *The Borderers*. And Wordsworth's living successor to the laurel no less participates with him in his appreciation of their forgotten brother. Almost the last time I met him he was quoting from memory that fine passage in *Delay has Danger*, where the late autumn landscape seems to borrow from the conscience-stricken lover who gazes on it the gloom which it reflects upon him; and in the course of further conversation on the

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subject Mr. Tennyson added, 'Crabbe has a world of his own'; by virtue of that original genius, I suppose, which is said to entitle and carry the possessor to what we call immortality."

Besides the stories selected for abridgment in the volume there were passages, from Tales not there included, which FitzGerald was never weary of citing in his letters, to show his friends how true a poet was lying neglected of men. One he specially loved is the description of an autumn day in *The Maid's Story*:—

"There was a day, ere yet the autumn closed,
When, ere her wintry wars, the earth reposed;
When from the yellow weed the feathery crown,
Light as the curling smoke, fell slowly down;
When the winged insect settled in our sight,
And waited wind to recommence her flight;
When the wide river was a silver sheet,
And on the ocean slept th' unanchor'd fleet,
When from our garden, as we looked above,
There was no cloud, and nothing seemed to move."

Another passage, also in Crabbe's sweeter vein, forms the conclusion of the whole poem. It is where the elder brother hands over to the younger the country house that is to form the future home of his wife and children:—

"It is thy wife's, and will thy children's be,
Earth, wood, and water! all for thine and thee.
* * * * *
There wilt thou soon thy own Matilda view,
She knows our deed, and she approves it too;
Before her all our views and plans were laid,
And Jacques was there to explain and to persuade.
Here on this lawn thy boys and girls shall run,
And play their gambols when their tasks are done,
There, from that window shall their mother view
The happy tribe, and smile at all they do;
While thou, more gravely, hiding thy delight
Shalt cry, 'O! childish!' and enjoy the sight."

FitzGerald's selections are made with the skill and judgment we should expect from a critic of so fine a taste, but it may be doubted whether any degree of skill could have quite atoned for one radical flaw in his method. He seems to have had his own misgivings as to whether he was not, by that method, giving up one real secret of Crabbe's power. After quoting Sir Leslie Stephen's most true remark that "with all its

short-and long-comings Crabbe's better work leaves its mark on the reader's mind and memory as only the work of genius can, while so many a more splendid vision of the fancy slips away, leaving scarce a mark behind." FitzGerald adds: "If this abiding impression result (as perhaps in the case of Richardson or Wordsworth) from being, as it were, soaked in through the longer process by which the man's peculiar genius works, any abridgement, whether of omission or epitome, will diminish from the effect of the whole." FitzGerald is unquestionably in sight of a truth here. The parallel with Wordsworth is indeed not exact, for

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the best of Wordsworth's poetry neither requires nor admits of condensation. *The Excursion* might benefit by omission and compression, but not *The Solitary Reaper*, nor *The Daffodils*. But the example of Richardson is fairly in point. Abridgments of *Clarissa Harlowe* have been attempted, but probably without any effect on the number of its readers. The power of Richardson's method does actually lie in the "soaking process" to which FitzGerald refers. Nor is it otherwise with Crabbe. The fascination which his readers find in him—readers not perhaps found in the ranks of those who prefer their poetry on "hand-made paper"—is really the result of the slow and patient dissection of motive and temptation, the workings of conscience, the gradual development of character. These processes are slow, and Crabbe's method of presenting them is slow, but he attains his end. A distinction has lately been drawn between "literary Poetry," and "Poetry which is Literature." Crabbe's is rarely indeed that of the former class. It cannot be denied that it has taken its place in the latter.

The apology for Crabbe's lengthiness might almost be extended to the singular inequalities of his verse. FitzGerald joins all other critics in regretting his carelessness, and indeed the charge can hardly be called harsh. A poet who habitually insists on producing thirty lines a day, whether or no the muse is willing, can hardly escape temptations to carelessness. Crabbe's friends and other contemporaries noted it, and expressed surprise at the absence in Crabbe of the artistic conscience. Wordsworth spoke to him on the subject, and ventured to express regret that he did not take more pains with the workmanship of his verse, and reports that Crabbe's only answer was "it does not matter." Samuel Rogers had related to Wordsworth a similar experience. "Mr. Rogers once told me that he expressed his regret to Crabbe that he wrote in his later works so much less correctly than in his earlier. 'Yes,' replied he, 'but then I had a reputation to make; now I can afford to relax.'" This is of course very sad, and, as has already been urged, Crabbe's earlier works had the advantage of much criticism, and even correction from his friends. But however this may be, it may fairly be urged that in a "downright" painter of human life, with that passion for realism which Crabbe was one of the first to bring back into our literature, mere "polish" would have hindered, not helped, the effects he was bent on producing. It is difficult in polishing the heroic couplet not to produce the impression of seeking epigrammatic point. In Crabbe's strenuous and merciless analyses of human character his power would have been often weakened, had attention been diverted from the whole to the parts, and from the matter to the manner. The "finish" of Gray, Goldsmith, and Rogers suited exquisitely with their pensive musings on Human Life. It was otherwise with the stern presentment of such stories of human sin and misery as *Edward Shore* or *Delay has Danger.*

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CHAPTER XI

LAST YEARS AT TROWBRIDGE

(1819-1832)

The last thirteen years of Crabbe's life were spent at Trowbridge, varied by occasional absences among hiss friends at Bath, and in the neighbourhood, and by annual visits of greater length to the family of Samuel Hoare at Hampstead. Meantime his son John was resident with him at Trowbridge, and the parish and parishioners were not neglected. From Mrs. Hoare's house on Hampstead Heath it was not difficult to visit his literary friends in London; and Wordsworth, Southey, and others, occasionally stayed with the family. But as early as 1820, Crabbe became subject to frequent severe attacks of neuralgia (then called *tic douloureux*), and this malady, together with the gradual approach of old age, made him less and less able to face the fatigue of London hospitalities.

Notwithstanding his failing health, and not infrequent absence from his parish—for he occasionally visited the Isle of Wight, Hastings, and other watering-places with his Hampstead friends—Crabbe was living down at Trowbridge much of the unpopularity with which he had started. The people were beginning to discover what sterling qualities of heart existed side by side with defects of tact and temper, and the lack of sympathy with certain sides of evangelical teaching. His son tells us, and may be trusted, that his father's personal piety deepened in his declining years, an influence which could not be ineffectual. Children, moreover, were growing up in the family, and proved a new source of interest and happiness. Pucklechurch. was not far away, and his son George's eldest girl, Caroline, as she approached her fourth birthday, began to receive from him the tenderest of letters.

The most important incident in Crabbe's life during this period was his visit to Walter Scott in Edinburgh in the early autumn of 1822. In the spring of that year, Crabbe had for the first time met Scott in London, and Scott had obtained from him a promise that he would visit him in Scotland in the autumn. It so fell out that George the Fourth, who had been crowned in the previous year, and was paying a series of Coronation progresses through his dominions, had arranged to visit Edinburgh in the August of this year. Whether Crabbe deliberately chose the same period for his own visit, or stumbled on it accidentally, and Scott did not care to disappoint his proposed guest, is not made quite clear by Crabbe's biographer. Scott had to move with all his family to his house in Edinburgh for the great occasion, and he would no doubt have much preferred to receive Crabbe at Abbotsford. Moreover, it fell to Scott, as the most distinguished man of letters and archaeologist in Edinburgh, to organise all the ceremonies and the festivities necessary for the King's reception. In Lockhart's phrase, Scott stage-managed the whole business. And it was on Scott's return from receiving the King on

board the Royal yacht on the 14th of August that he found awaiting him in Castle Street one who must have been an inconvenient guest. The incidents of this first meeting are so charmingly related by Lockhart that I cannot resist repeating them in his words, well known though they may be:—

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“On receiving the poet on the quarter-deck, his Majesty called for a bottle of Highland whisky, and having drunk his health in this national liquor, desired a glass to be filled for him. Sir Walter, after draining his own bumper, made a request that the king would condescend to bestow on him the glass out of which his Majesty had just drunk his health: and this being granted, the precious vessel was immediately wrapped up and carefully deposited in what he conceived to be the safest part of his dress. So he returned with it to Castle Street; but—to say nothing at this moment of graver distractions—on reading his house he found a guest established there of a sort rather different from the usual visitors of the time. The Poet Crabbe, to whom he had been introduced when last in London by Mr. Murray of Albemarle Street, after repeatedly promising to follow up the acquaintance by an excursion to the North, had at last arrived in the midst of these tumultuous preparations for the royal advent. Notwithstanding all such impediments, he found his quarters ready for him, and Scott entering, wet and hurried, embraced the venerable man with brotherly affection. The royal gift was forgotten—the ample skirt of the coat within which it had been packed, and which he had hitherto held cautiously in front of his person, slipped back to its more usual position—he sat down beside Crabbe, and the glass was crushed to atoms. His scream and gesture made his wife conclude that he had sat down on a pair of scissors, or the like: but very little harm had been done except the breaking of the glass, of which alone he had been thinking. This was a damage not to be repaired: as for the scratch that accompanied it, its scar was of no great consequence, as even when mounting the ‘cat-dath, or battle-garment’ of the Celtic Club, he adhered, like his hero, Waverley, to *the trews*.”

What follows in Lockhart’s pages is also too interesting, as regards Scott’s visitor himself, to be omitted. The Highland clans, or what remained of them, were represented on the occasion, and added greatly to the picturesqueness of the procession and other pageantry. And this is what occurred on the morning after the meeting of Scott and his guest:—

“By six o’clock next morning Sir Walter, arrayed in the ‘Garb of old Gaul,’ (which he had of the Campbell tartan, in memory of one of his great-grandmothers) was attending a muster of these gallant Celts in the Queen Street Gardens, where he had the honour of presenting them with it set of colours, and delivered a suitable exhortation, crowned with their rapturous applause. Some members of the Club, all of course in their full costume, were invited to breakfast with him. He had previously retired for a little to his library, and when he entered the parlour, Mr. Crabbe, dressed in the highest style of professional neatness and decorum, with buckles in his shoes, and whatever was then befitting an English clergyman of his years

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and station, was standing in the midst of half-a-dozen stalwart Highlanders, exchanging elaborate civilities with them in what was at least meant to be French. He had come into the room shortly before, without having been warned about such company, and hearing the party conversing together in an unknown tongue, the polite old man had adopted, in his first salutation, what he considered as the universal language. Some of the Celts, on their part, took him for some foreign Abbe or Bishop, and were doing their best to explain to him that they were not the wild savages for which, from the startled glance he had thrown on their hirsute proportions, there seemed but too much reason to suspect he had taken them; others, more perspicacious, gave in to the thing for the joke's sake; and there was high fun when Scott dissolved the charm of their stammering, by grasping Crabbe with one hand, and the nearest of these figures with the other, and greeted the whole group with the same hearty *good-morning*."

In spite, however, of banquets (at one of which Crabbe was present) and other constant calls upon his host's time and labour, the southern poet contrived to enjoy himself. He wandered into the oldest parts of Edinburgh, and Scott obtained for him the services of a friendly caddie to accompany him on some of these occasions lest the old parson should come to any harm. Lockhart, who was of the party in Castle Street, was very attentive to Scott's visitor, Crabbe had but few opportunities of seeing Scott alone. "They had," writes Lockhart, "but one quiet walk together, and it was to the ruins of St. Anthony's Chapel and Mushat's Cairn, which the deep impression made on Crabbe by *The Heart of Midlothian* had given him an earnest wish to see. I accompanied them; and the hour so spent—in the course of which the fine old man gave us some most touching anecdotes of his early struggles—was a truly delightful contrast to the bustle and worry of miscellaneous society which consumed so many of his few hours in Scotland. Scott's family were more fortunate than himself in this respect. They had from infancy been taught to reverence Crabbe's genius, and they now saw enough of him to make them think of him ever afterwards with tender affection."

Yet one more trait of Scott's interest in his guest should not be omitted. The strain upon Scott's strength of the King's visit was made more severe by the death during that fortnight of Scott's old and dear friend, William Erskine, only a few months before elevated to the bench, with the title of Lord Kinedder. Erskine had been irrecoverably wounded by the circulation of a cruel and unfounded slander upon his moral character. It so preyed on his mind that its effect was, in Scott's words, to "torture to death one of the most soft-hearted and sensitive of God's creatures." On the very day of the King's arrival he died, after high fever and delirium had set in, and his funeral, which Scott attended, followed in due course.

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“I am not aware,” says Lockhart, “that I ever saw Scott in such a state of dejection as he was when I accompanied him and his friend Mr. Thomas Thomson from Edinburgh to Queensferry in attendance upon Lord Kinedder’s funeral. Yet that was one of the noisiest days of the royal festival, and he had to plunge into some scene of high gaiety the moment after we returned. As we halted in Castle Street, Mr. Crabbe’s mild, thoughtful face appeared at the window, and Scott said, on leaving me, ’Now for what our old friend there puts down as the crowning curse of his poor player in *The Borough*: —

“To hide in rant the heart-ache of the night.'"”

There is pathos in the recollection that just ten years later when Scott lay in his study at Abbotsford—the strength of that noble mind slowly ebbing away—the very passage in *The Borough* just quoted was one of those he asked to have read to him. It is the graphic and touching account in Letter XII. of the “Strolling Players,” and as the description of their struggles and their squalor fell afresh upon his ear, his own excursions into matters theatrical recurred to him, and he murmured smiling, “Ah! Terry won’t like that! Terry won’t like that!!”

The same year Crabbe was invited to spend Christmas at his old home, Belvoir Castle, but felt unable to face the fatigue in wintry weather. Meantime, among other occupations at home, he was finding time to write verse copiously. Twenty-one manuscript volumes were left behind him at his death. He seems to have said little about it at home, for his son tells us that in the last year of his father’s life he learned for the first time that another volume of Tales was all but ready for the press. “There are in my recess at home,” he writes to George, “where they have been long undisturbed, another series of such stories, in number and quantity sufficient for another octavo volume; and as I suppose they are much like the former in execution, and sufficiently different in events and characters, they may hereafter, in peaceable times, be worth something to you.” A selection from those formed the *Posthumous Poems*, first given to the world in the edition of 1834. The *Tales of the Hall*, it may be supposed, had not quite justified the publisher’s expectations. John Murray had sought to revive interest in the whole bulk of Crabbe’s poetry, of which he now possessed the copyright, by commissioning Richard Westall, R.A., to produce a series of illustrations of the poems, thirty-one in number, engravings of which were sold in sets at two guineas. The original drawings, in delicate water-colour, in the present Mr. John Murray’s possession, are sufficiently grim. The engravings, lacking the relief of colour, are even more so, and a rapid survey of the entire series amply shows how largely in Crabbe’s subjects bulks the element of human misery. Crabbe was much flattered by this new tribute to his reputation, and dwells on it in one of his letters to Mrs. Leadbeater.

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A letter written from Mrs. Hoare's house at Hampstead in June 1825 presents an agreeable picture of his holiday enjoyments:—

"My time passes I cannot tell how pleasantly when the pain leaves me. To-day I read one of my long stories to my friends and Mrs. Joanna Baillie and her sister. It was a task; but they encouraged me, and were, or seemed, gratified. I rhyme at Hampstead with a great deal of facility, for nothing interrupts me but kind calls to something pleasant; and though all this makes parting painful, it will, I hope, make me resolute to enter upon my duties diligently when I return. I am too much indulged. Except a return of pain, and that not severe, I have good health; and if my walks are not so long, they are more frequent. I have seen many things and many people; have seen Mr. Southey and Mr. Wordsworth; have been some days with Mr. Rogers, and at last have been at the Athenaeum, and purpose to visit the Royal Institution. I have been to Richmond in a steamboat; seen also the picture-galleries and some other exhibitions; but I passed one Sunday in London with discontent, doing no duty myself, nor listening to another; and I hope my uneasiness proceeded not merely from breaking a habit. We had a dinner social and pleasant, if the hours before it had been rightly spent; but I would not willingly pass another Sunday in the same manner. I have my home with my friends here (Mrs. Hoare's), and exchange it with reluctance for the Hummums occasionally. Such is the state of the garden here, in which I walk and read, that, in a morning like this, the smell of the flowers is fragrant beyond anything I ever perceived before. It is what I can suppose may be in Persia or other oriental countries—a Paradisiacal sweetness. I am told that I or my verses, or perhaps both, have abuse in a boot of Mr. Colburn's publishing, called *The Spirit of the Times*. I believe I felt something indignant; but my engraved seal dropped out of the socket and was lost, and I perceived this moved me much more than the *Spirit* of Mr. Hazlitt."

The reference is, of course, to Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age*, then lately published In reviewing the poetry of his day Hazlitt has a chapter devoted to Campbell and Crabbe. The criticism on the latter is little more than a greatly over-drawn picture of Crabbe's choice of vice and misery for his subjects, and ignores entirely any other side of his genius, ending with the remark that he would long be "a thorn in the side of English poetry." Crabbe was wise in not attaching too much importance to Hazlitt's attack.

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Joanna Baillie and her sister Agnes, mentioned in the letter just cited, saw much of Crabbe during his visits to Hampstead. A letter from Joanna to the younger George speaks, as do all his friends, of his growing kindliness and courtesy, but notes how often, in the matter of judging his fellow-creatures, his head and his heart were in antagonism. While at times Joanna was surprised and provoked by the charitable allowances the old parson made for the unworthy, at other times she noted also that she would hear him, when acts of others were the subject of praise, suggesting, “in a low voice as to himself,” the possible mixture of less generous motives. The analytical method was clearly dominant in Crabbe always, and not merely when he wrote his poetry, and is itself the clue to much in his treatment of human nature.

Of Crabbe’s simplicity and unworldliness in other matters Miss Baillie furnishes an amusing instance. She writes:—

“While he was staying with Mrs. Hoare a few years since I sent him one day the present of a blackcock, and a message with it that Mr. Crabbe should look at the bird before it was delivered to the cook, or something to that purpose. He looked at the bird as desired, and then went to Mrs. Hoare in some perplexity to ask whether he ought not to have it stuffed, instead of eating it. She could not, in her own house, tell him that it was simply intended for the larder, and he was at the trouble and expense of having it stuffed, lest I should think proper respect had not been put upon my present.”

Altogether the picture presented in these last years of Crabbe’s personality is that of a pious and benevolent old man, endearing himself to old and new friends, and with manners somewhat formal and overdone, representing perhaps what in his humbler Aldeburgh days he had imagined to be those of the upper circles, rather than what he had found them to be in his prosperous later days in London.

In the autumn of 1831 he was visiting his faithful and devoted friends, the Samuel Hoares, at their residence in Clifton. The house was apparently in Princes Buildings, or in the Paragon, for the poet describes accurately the scene that meets the eye from the back-windows of those pleasant streets:—

“I have to thank my friends for one of the most beautiful as well as comfortable rooms you could desire. I look from my window upon the Avon and its wooded and rocky bounds—the trees yet green. A vessel is sailing down, and here comes a steamer (Irish, I suppose). I have in view the end of the Cliff to the right, and on my left a wide and varied prospect over Bristol, as far as the eye can reach, and at present the novelty makes it very interesting. Clifton was always a favourite place with me. I have more strength and more spirits since my arrival at this place, and do not despair of giving a good account of my excursion on my return.”

It is noteworthy that Crabbe, who as a young man witnessed the Lord George Gordon Riots of 1780, should, fifty years later, have been in Bristol during the disgraceful

Reform Bill Rising of 1831, which, through the cowardice or connivance of the government of the day, went on unchecked to work such disastrous results to life and property. On October the 26th he writes to his son:—

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“I have been with Mrs. Hoare at Bristol, where all appears still. Should anything arise to alarm, you may rely upon our care to avoid danger. Sir Charles Wetherell, to be sure, is not popular, nor is the Bishop, but I trust that both will be safe from violence—abuse they will not mind. The Bishop seems a good-humoured man, and, except by the populace, is greatly admired.”

A few days later, however, he has to record that his views of the situation were not to be fulfilled. He writes:—

“Bristol, I suppose, never in the most turbulent times of old, witnessed such outrage. Queen’s Square is but half standing; half is a smoking ruin. As you may be apprehensive for my safety, it is right to let you know that my friends and I are undisturbed, except by our fears for the progress of this mob-government, which is already somewhat broken into parties, who wander stupidly about, or sleep wherever they fall wearied with their work and their indulgence. The military are now in considerable force, and many men are sworn in as constables; many volunteers are met in Clifton Churchyard, with white round one arm to distinguish them, some with guns and the rest with bludgeons. The Mayor’s house has been destroyed; the Bishop’s palace plundered, but whether burned or not I do not know. This morning a party of soldiers attacked the crowd in the Square; some lives were lost, and the mob dispersed, whether to meet again is doubtful. It has been a dreadful time, but we may reasonably hope it is now over. People are frightened certainly, and no wonder, for it is evident these poor wretches would plunder to the extent of their power. Attempts were made to burn the Cathedral, but failed. Many lives were lost. To attempt any other subject now would be fruitless. We can think, speak, and write only of our fears, hopes, or troubles. I would have gone to Bristol to-day, but Mrs. Hoare was unwilling that I should. She thought, and perhaps rightly, that clergymen were marked objects. I therefore only went half-way, and of course could learn but little. All now is quiet and well.”

In the former of these last quoted letters Crabbe refers sadly to the pain of parting from his old Hampstead friends,—a parting which he felt might well be the last. His anticipation was to be fulfilled. He left Clifton in November, and went direct to his son George, at Pucklechurch. He was able to preach twice for his son, who congratulated the old man on the power of his voice, and other encouraging signs of vigour. “I will venture a good sum, sir,” he said “that you will be assisting me ten years hence.” “Ten weeks” was Crabbe’s answer, and the implied prediction was fulfilled almost to the day. After a fortnight at Pucklechurch, Crabbe returned to his own home at Trowbridge. Early in January he reported himself as more and more subject to drowsiness, which he accepted as sign of increasing weakness. Later in the month

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he was prostrated by a severe cold. Other complications supervened, and it soon became apparent that he could not rally. After a few days of much suffering, and pious resignation, he passed away on the third of February 1832, with his two sons and his faithful nurse by his side. The death of the rector was followed by every token of general affection and esteem. The past asperities of religious and political controversy had long ceased, and it was felt that the whole parish had lost a devout teacher and a generous friend. All he had written in *The Borough* and elsewhere as to the eccentricities of certain forms of dissent was forgotten, and all the Nonconformist ministers of the place and neighbourhood followed him to the grave. A committee was speedily formed to erect a monument over his grave in the chancel. The sculptor chosen produced a group of a type then common. "A figure representing the dying poet, casting his eyes on the sacred volume; two celestial beings, one looking on as if awaiting his departure." Underneath was inscribed, after the usual words telling his age, and period of his work at Trowbridge, the following not exaggerated tribute:—

"Born in humble life, he made himself what he was.
By the force of his genius,
He broke through the obscurity of his birth
Yet never ceased to feel for the
Less fortunate;
Entering (as his work can testify) into
The sorrows and deprivations
Of the poorest of his parishioners;
And so discharging the duties of his station as a
Minister and a magistrate,
As to acquire the respect and esteem
Of all his neighbours.
As a writer, he is well described by a great
Contemporary, as
'Nature's sternest painter yet her best.'"

A fresh edition of Crabbe's complete works was at once arranged for by John Murray, to be edited by George Crabbe, the son, who was also to furnish the prefatory memoir. The edition appeared in 1834, in eight volumes. An engraving by Finden from Phillips's portrait of the poet was prefixed to the last volume, and each volume contained frontispieces and vignettes from drawings by Clarkson Stanfield of scenery or buildings connected with Crabbe's various residences in Suffolk and the Yale of Belvoir. The volumes were ably edited; the editor's notes, together with, quotations from Crabbe's earliest critics in the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*, were interesting and informing, and the illustrations happily chosen. But it is not so easy to acquiesce in an editorial decision on a more important matter. The eighth volume is occupied by a selection from the Tales left in manuscript by Crabbe, to which reference has already been made. The

son, whose criticisms of his father are generally sound, evidently had misgivings concerning these from the first. In a prefatory note to this volume, the brothers (writing as executors) confess these misgivings. They were startled on

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reading the new poems in print at the manifest need of revision and correction before they could be given to the world. They delicately hint that the meaning is often obscure, and the “images left imperfect.” This criticism is absolutely just, but unfortunately some less well-judging persons though “of the highest eminence in literature” had advised the contrary. So “second thoughts prevailed,” instead of those “third thoughts which are a riper first,” and the Tales, or a selection from them, were printed. They have certainly not added to Crabbe’s reputation. There are occasional touches of his old and best pathos, as in the story of Rachel; and in *The Ancient Mansion* there are brief descriptions of rural nature under the varying aspects of the seasons, which exhibit all Crabbe’s old and close observation of detail, such as:—

“And then the wintry winds begin to blow,
Then fall the flaky stars of gathering snow,
When on the thorn the ripening sloe, yet blue,
Takes the bright varnish of the morning dew;
The aged moss grows brittle on the pale,
The dry boughs splinter in the windy gale.”

But there is much in these last Tales that is trivial and tedious, and it must be said that their publication has chiefly served to deter many readers from the pursuit of what is best and most rewardful in the study of Crabbe. To what extent the new edition served to revive any flagging interest in the poet cannot perhaps be estimated. The edition must have been large, for during many years past no book of the kind has been more prominent in second-hand catalogues. As we have seen, the popularity of Crabbe was already on the wane, and the appearance of the two volumes of Tennyson, in 1842, must farther have served to divert attention from poetry so widely different. Workmanship so casual and imperfect as Crabbe’s had now to contend with such consummate art and diction as that of *The Miller’s Daughter* and *Dora*.

As has been more than once remarked, these stories belong to the category of fiction as well as of poetry, and the duration of their power to attract was affected not only by the appearance of greater poets, but of prose story-tellers with equal knowledge of the human heart, and with other gifts to which Crabbe could make no claim. His knowledge and observation of human nature were not perhaps inferior to Jane Austen’s, but he could never have matched her in prose fiction. He certainly was not deficient in humour, but it was not his dominant gift, as it was hers. Again, his knowledge of the life and social ways of the class to which he nominally belonged, does not seem to have been intimate. Crabbe could not have written prose fiction with any approximation to the manners of real life. His characters would have certainly *thou’ed* and *thee’ed* one another as they do in his verse, and a clergyman would always have been addressed as “Reverend Sir!”

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Surely, it will be argued, all this is sufficient to account for the entire disappearance of Crabbe from the list of poets whom every educated lover of poetry is expected to appreciate. Yet the fact remains, as FitzGerald quotes from Sir Leslie Stephen, that "with all its short-and long-comings, Crabbe's better work leaves its mark on the reader's mind and memory as only the work of genius can," and almost all English poets and critics of mark, during his time and after it, have agreed in recognising the same fact. We know what was thought of him by Walter Scott, Wordsworth, Byron, and Tennyson. Critics differing as widely in other matters as Macaulay, John Henry Newman, Mr. Swinburne, and Dr. Gore, have found in Crabbe an insight into the springs of character, and a tragic power of dealing with them, of a rare kind. No doubt Crabbe demands something of his readers. He asks from them a corresponding interest in human nature. He asks for a kindred habit of observation, and a kindred patience. The present generation of poetry-readers cares mainly for style. While this remains the habit of the town, Crabbe will have to wait for any popular revival. But he is not so dead as the world thinks. He has his constant readers still, but they talk little of their poet. "They give Heaven thanks, and make no boast of it." These are they to whom the "unruly wills and affections" of their kind are eternally interesting, even when studied through the medium of a uniform and monotonous metre.

A Trowbridge friend wrote to Crabbe's son, after his father's death, "When I called on him, soon after his arrival, I remarked that his house and garden were pleasant and secluded: he replied that he preferred walking in the streets, and observing the faces of the passers-by, to the finest natural scenes." There is a poignant line in *Maud*, where the distracted lover dwells on "the faces that one meets." It was not by the "sweet records, promises as sweet," that these two observers of life were impressed, but rather by vicious records and hopeless outlooks. It was such countenances that Crabbe looked for, and speculated on, for in such, he found food for that pity and terror he most loved to awaken. The starting-point of Crabbe's desire to portray village-life truly was a certain indignation he felt at the then still-surviving conventions of the Pastoral Poets. We have lately watched, in the literature of our own day, a somewhat similar reaction against sentimental pictures of country-life. The feebler members of a family of novelists, which some one wittily labelled as the "kail-yard school," so irritated a young Scottish journalist, the late Mr. George Douglas, that he resolved to provide what he conceived might be a useful corrective for the public mind. To counteract the half-truths of the opposite school, he wrote a tale of singular power and promise, *The House with the Green Shutters*. Like all reactions, it erred in the violence of its

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colouring. If intended as a true picture of the normal state of a small Scottish provincial town and its society, it may have been as false in its own direction as the kail-yarders had been in theirs. But for Mr. Douglas's untimely death—a real loss to literature—he would doubtless have shown in future fictions that the pendulum had ceased to swing, and would have given us more artistic, because completer, pictures of human life. With Crabbe the force of his primal bias never ceased to act until his life's end. The leaven of protest against the sentimentalists never quite worked itself out in him, although, no doubt, in some of the later tales and portrayals of character, the sun was oftener allowed to shine out from behind the clouds

We must not forget this when we are inclined to accept without question Byron's famous eulogium. A poet is not the "best" painter of Nature, merely because he chooses one aspect of human character and human fortunes rather than another. If he must not conceal the sterner side, equally is he bound to remember the sunnier and more serene. If a poet is to deal justly with the life of the rich or poor, he must take into fullest account, and give equal prominence to, the homes where happiness abides. He must remember that though there is a skeleton in every cupboard, it must not be dragged out for a purpose, nor treated as if it were the sole inhabitant. He must deal with the happinesses of life and not only with its miseries; with its harmonies and not only its dislocations. He must remember the thousand homes in which is to be found the quiet and faithful discharge of duty, inspired at once and illumined by the family affections, and not forget that in such as these the strength of a country lies. Crabbe is often spoken of as our first great realist in the poetry and fiction of the last century, and the word is often used as if it meant chiefly plain-speaking as to the sordid aspects of life. But he is the truest realist who does not suppress any side of that which may be seen, if looked for. Although Murillo threw into fullest relief the grimy feet of his beggar-boys which so offended Mr. Ruskin, still what eternally attracts us to his canvas is not the soiled feet but the "sweet boy-faces" that "laugh amid the Seville grapes." It was because Crabbe too often laid greater stress on the ugliness than on the beauty of things, that he fails to that extent to be the full and adequate painter and poet of humble life.

He was a dispeller of many illusions. He could not give us the joy that Goldsmith, Cowper, and William Barnes have given, but he discharged a function no less valuable than theirs, and with an individuality that has given him a high and enduring place in the poetry of the nineteenth century.

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There can be no question that within the last twenty or thirty years there has been a marked revival of interest in the poetry of Crabbe. To the influence of Edward FitzGerald's fascinating personality this revival may be partly, but is not wholly, due. It may be of the nature of a reaction against certain canons of taste too long blindly followed. It may be that, like the Queen in *Hamlet*, we are beginning to crave for "more matter and less art"; or that, like the Lady of Shalott, we are growing "half-sick of shadows," and long for a closer touch with the real joys and sorrows of common people. Whatever be the cause, there can be no reason to regret the fact, or to doubt that in these days of "art for art's sake," the influence of Crabbe's verse is at once of a bracing and a sobering kind.

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meetings with prominent men;
takes Holy Orders;
returns to Aldeburgh as curate;
coldly received by his fellow-townsmen;
becomes domestic chaplain to the Duke of Rutland;
life at Belvoir Castle;
The Village;
receives LL.B. degree;
presented to two livings;
marriage;
curate of Stathern;

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his children;
village traditions concerning him;
The Newspaper;
life at Stathern;
moves to Muston;
revisits his native place;
goes to Parham;
lives at Great Glemham Hall;
moves to Rendham;
ill-health;
use of opium;
returns to Muston;
publishes a new volume of poems;
The Parish Register;
his great popularity;
friendship with Sir Walter Scott;
The Borough;
Tales;
visit to London;
returns to Muston;
death of his wife;
serious illness;
rector of Trowbridge;
departure from Muston;
intercourse with literary men in London;
a member of the “Literary Society”;
receives L3000 from John Murray;
returns to Trowbridge;
Tales of the Hall;
visits Scott in Edinburgh;
Posthumous Poems;
last years at Trowbridge;
illness and death;
his religious temperament;
rusticity and lack of polish;
indifference to art;
want of tact;
love of female society;
acquaintance and sympathy with the poor;
his preaching;

inequality of his work;
influence of preceding poets;
his reputation at its height;
knowledge of botany;
his descriptions of nature;
first great realist in verse;
fondness for verbal antithesis;
his epigrams;
defective *technique*;
his influence on subsequent novelists;
parodies of his style;
his sense of humour;
defects of his poetry;
his retentive memory;
his characters drawn from life;
his treatment of peasant life;
power of analysing character;
choice of sordid and gloomy subjects;
his lyric verses;
Edward FitzGerald's great admiration of his poetry;
contemporary and other estimates of his work;
revival of interest in him;
Crabbe, George (father of the poet)
—Mrs. (mother)
—George (son)
—Mrs. (wife)
—John
—Edmund
—William
—(brother)
—George (grandson)
—Caroline
Critical Review

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E

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Felon, the condemned, Description of
Fielding
Finden (artist)
FitzGerald, Edward
  —William Thomas
Fox, Charles James
  —Henry Richard. *See* Holland, Lord
Frank Courtship, The
Fund, The Literary

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H

Hall of Justice, The Hampstead *Hanmer, Sir Thomas Memoir and Correspondence of* Hatchard, John (publisher) *Haunted House, The* (Hood) Hazlitt *Heart of Midlothian, The* (Scott) *Henry V* (Shakespeare) "Hetty Sorrel" Highlanders Hoare family Hogarth Holland, Lord *House with the Green Shutters, The* (George Douglas) Huchon, M. (University of Nancy) *Human Life* (Rogers) Huntingdon, William Hutton, Rev. W.H.

I

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In Memoriam (Tennyson)
"Isaac Ashford"

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Johnson, Samuel
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"Kailyard school"
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—John

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Lady Barbara Lady of the Lake, The (Scott) Lamb, Charles *Lamia and other Poems* (Keats) Lansdowne, Third Marquis of Langborne (painter) *Lay of the Last Minstrel, The* (Scott) *Lazy Lawrence* (Edgeworth) Leadbeater, Mrs. *Library, The* Literary Society, The Lockhart Longmans (publisher) Lothian, Lord Lowell *Lover's Journey, The Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth)

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Newman, Cardinal
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Opium eating
Our Village (Miss Mitford)

P

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