THE

LITERARY LIFE AND CORRESPONDENCE

OF THE

COUNTESS OF BLESSINGTON.

INTRODUCTION.

THE task of Biography is not comprised in a mere attempt to make a word-picture of a person that can be identified by its resemblance to the original; to narrate a series of striking passages in the life of an individual, whose career it is intended to illustrate; to record dates of remarkable events, and particulars of important occurrences; to give a faithful account even of signal failures and successes; to delineate the features of the person described, and to make peculiarities of mind or form clearly perceptible to those for whom we write or paint in words. These are essential things to be done, but they are not all that are essential in human life-history, which should be descriptive not only of external appearances, and accidental circumstances, but of the interior being, and actual peace of mind of those of whom it treats. The great aim to be accomplished is to make the truthful

portraiture of the person we describe and present to the public, stand out in a distinct shape and form, distinguishable from all other surrounding objects, an instructive, encouraging, or admonitory representation of a character and career, as the case may be. The legitimate aim and end of that representation of a life will be gained, if the biographer, in accomplishing his task, makes the portraiture of the individual described advantageous to the public; renews old recollections agreeably, as well as usefully; looks to the future in all his dealings with the past; draws away attention from the predominant materialism of the present time; violates no duty to the dead, of whom he treats; no obligation to the living, for whose benefit he is supposed to write; if, without prejudice to truth or morals, he indulges his own feelings of kindness, and tenderness of regard for the memory of those who may have been his friends, and who have become the subjects of his inquiries and researches; if he turn his theme to the account of society at large, of literature also and of its living votaries; if he places worth and genius in their true position, and, when the occasion calls for it, if he manfully puts forward his strength to pull down unworthy and ignoble pretensions, to unmask selfishness, to give all due honour to noble deeds and generous aims and efforts; if he sympathises sincerely with struggling merit, and seeks earnestly for truth, and speaks it boldly. And if he has to deal with the career of one who has played an important part in public life, or in an exalted station, and would obtain the object I have referred to, he will have to speak freely and fearlessly of the miseries and vexations of a false position, however splendid it may be; miseries which may not be escaped from, by any efforts to keep them out of sight or hearing, either in the turmoil of a fashionable life, in the tumult of its pleasures, or in the solitude of the dressing-room, the stillness of which is often more intolerable than the desert

gloom and desolation of Mar Saba, or the silence of La Trappe.

All this can be done without composing homilies on the chequered life of man, or pouring forth lamentations on its vicissitudes, and pronouncing anathemas on the failings of those, on whose conduct we may perhaps be wholly incompetent or unqualified to sit in judgment. There is often matter for deep reflection, though requiring no comment from the biographer, to be found in a single fact seasonably noticed, in a passage of a letter, a sentence in conversation, nay, even at times in a gesture, indicative of weariness of mind in the midst of pomp and pleasure, of sickness of spirit at the real aspect of society, wreathed though it may be with smiles and blandishments, at the hollowness of its friendships, and the futility of all efforts to secure happiness by dependence on them. I am much mistaken if this work can be perused without exciting feelings of strong conviction, that no amount of luxury, no *entourage* of wit and learning, no distinction in fashionable or literary life, no absorbing pursuits of authorship, or ephemeral enjoyments in exclusive circles of *haut ton*, constitute happiness, or afford a substitute for it, on which any reliance can be placed, for the peace and quiet of one's life.

An intimate acquaintance and uninterrupted friendship with the late Countess of Blessington during a period of twenty-seven years, and the advantage of possessing the entire confidence of that lady, are the circumstances which induced the friends of Lady Blessington to commit to me the task of editing an account of her Literary Life and Correspondence. To many other persons familiarly acquainted with her Ladyship, eminent in different walks of literature and art, distinguished for abilities and acquirements, and well known in the world of letters, this task might have been confided with far more service to the execution of it in every

literary point of view. But, in other respects, it was considered I might bring some advantages to this undertaking, one of no ordinary difficulty, and requiring no common care and circumspection to surmount. The facilities I refer to, are those arising from peculiar opportunities of knowing Lady Blessington at an early period of that literary career which it is intended to illustrate, and becoming acquainted with the antecedents of that position in literature which she occupied in London.

The correspondence and other papers of Lady Blessington that have been made use of in these volumes, are connected by a slender thread of biographical illustration, which may serve to give some idea of the characters and position, and prominent traits or peculiarities of those who are addressed, or referred to in this correspondence, or by whom letters were written which are noticed in it.

In doing this, I trust it will be found I am not unmindful of the obligations I am under to truth and charity, as well as to friendship, obligations to the living as well as to the dead; but, on the contrary, that I am very sensible, that literature is never more profaned, than when such claims being forgotten, sentiments expressed in confidence to private persons that are calculated to hurt the feelings, or to injure the character of individuals, are wantonly, malevolently, or inconsiderately disclosed.

Such opinions seem to have been acted on by a late eminent statesman, and were well expressed, in a codicil to his will, wherein he bequeathed to Lord Mahon and E. Cardwell, Esq., M.P., "all the unpublished papers and documents of a public or a private nature, whether in print or in manuscript, of which he should, at the time of his decease, be possessed, &c." "Considering that the collection of letters and papers, referred to in this codicil, included the whole of his confidential correspondence for a period extending from the

year 1817 to the time of his decease, that during a considerable portion of that period he was employed in the service of the crown, and that when not so employed, he had taken an active part in parliamentary business, it was highly probable that much of that correspondence would be interesting, and calculated to throw light upon the conduct and character of public men, and upon the political events of the times." This was done in the full assurance that his trustees would so exercise the discretion given to them, that no honourable confidence should be betrayed, no private feelings be unnecessarily wounded, and no public interests injuriously affected.

I think it is Sir Egerton Brydges who observes—"It is not possible to love literature and to be uncharitable or unkind to those who follow its pursuits." Nothing would certainly be more uncharitable and unkind to literary people than to publish what they may occasionally say in private of one another in the way of raillery, banter, or *persiflage*, as if such *badinage* on paper, and escapades of sarcastic drollery in conversation, were deliberate expressions of opinion; and not the smartness of the sayings, but the sharpness of the sting in them, was to be taken into account in judging of the motives of those who gave utterance to things spoken in levity and not in malice.

There is no necessity, indeed, with such materials as I have in my hands, to encumber my pages with any trivialities of this kind, or the mere worthless tittle-tattle of epistolary conversation.

There is an abundance of thought-treasure in letters of people of exalted intellect, in this collection; ample merits in their accounts of passing events, their references to current literature—the works of art of the day, the chances and changes of political life, the caprices of fashion of the time, and the vicissitudes in the fortune of the celebrities of all

grades in a great city—to furnish matter well worthy of selection and preservation; matter that would perish if not thus collected, and published in some such form as the present.

I have no sympathies with the tastes and pursuits of the hangers-on of men of genius in literary society, who crawl into the confidence of people of exalted intellect, to turn their acquaintance with it to a profitable account; to drag into notice failings that may have hitherto escaped attention, or were only suspected to exist, and to immortalize the errors of gifted individuals, whose credulity has been taken advantage of, with a deliberate purpose of speculating on those failings that have been diligently observed and drawn out.

Censure, it is said, is the tax which eminence of every kind pays for distinction. The tendency of our times especially, is to pander to a morbid taste, that craves continually for signal spectacles of failings and imperfections of persons in exalted stations, for exhibitions of eminent people depreciated or defamed. The readiness of men to minister to the prevailing appetite for literary gossip, by violating the sanctity of private life, and even the sacred ties of friendship, is not only to be lamented, but the crime is to be denounced. I have given expressions to such opinions on those subjects at the onset of my career in literature, and they have undergone no change since the publication of them, upwards of twenty years ago.*

We naturally desire to know every thing that concerns the character, or the general conduct of those, whose productions have entertained or instructed us; and we gratify a laudable curiosity, when, for purposes of good, we inquire into their history, and seek to illustrate their writings, by the general tenor of their lives and actions. But when biography is made the vehicle of private scandal, the means of promoting

* The Infirmities of Genius, &c., in 2 vols. 8vo., London, 1833.

sordid interests, when it looks into every infirmity of human nature through a medium, which magnifies small imperfections, and exaggerates large ones;—it ceases to be a legitimate inquiry into private character or conduct, and no infamy is greater than the baseness of revealing faults that possibly had never been discovered, had no friendship been violated, and no confidence abused.

"Consider," says a learned German, "under how many aspects greatness is scrutinized; in how many categories curiosity may be traced, from the highest grade of inquisitiveness down to the most impertinent, concerning great men! How the world never wearies striving to represent to itself their whole structure, conformation outward and inward. Blame not the world for such curiosity about its great ones: this comes of the world's old-established necessity to worship. Blame it not, pity it rather with a certain loving respect. Nevertheless, the last stage of human perversion, it has been said, is, when sympathy corrupts itself into envy, and the indestructible interest we take in men's doings has become a joy over their faults and misfortunes; this is the last and lowest stage—lower than this we cannot go."

"Lower than this we cannot go!" says the German moralist. But suppose we do more than exult in these failings and misfortunes; that we not only sit in judgment on them, but judge not justly, using false weights and measures of justice, having one scale and standard of judicial opinion for the strong and the unscrupulous, in evil doing, and another for the weak and ill-directed and unfortunately circumstanced; lower then I say men can go in the downward path of hypocrisy, when those most deserving of pity have more to fear from pretenders to virtue, than from religion itself. We are told by a great writer, that at the tribunal of public opinion, there are some failings for which there must be an acquittal on every count of the indictment, or a condemnation on all.

It is not for the world to make any inquiries into the antecedents of such failings, whether they included the results of an unhappy home, the tyranny, profligacy, profusion and embarrassments of an unworthy father, the constant spectacle of the griefs and wrongs of an injured mother, mournful scenes of domestic strife, of violence and outrage, riotous displays of revelry and carousing in the same abode; everyday morning gloom and wrangling, temporary shifts to meet inordinate expenses, tending to eventual ruin; meannesses to be witnessed to postpone an inevitable catastrophe, and miserable shifts to be had recourse to in order to provide for the carousing of another night; the feasting of military friends, of condescending lords and squireen gentlemen of high rank and influence, justices of the peace of fiery zeal in provincial politics, men of mark in a country town, ever ready to partake of hospitality, and to enjoy society, set off with such advantages as beauty, and mirth, and gaiety unrestricted can lend to it.

It is not for the world to inquire into the circumstance that may have led to an unhappy union, or its unfortunate result; whether the home was happy, the society that frequented the parental abode was safe and suitable for its young inmates; whether the father's example was edifying in his family—the care of his children was sufficient for their security—whether he watched over his daughters, as an anxious father should do, and treated them with kindness and affection, bearing himself quietly and amiably towards their mother and themselves; whether their youth and innocence were surrounded with religious influences, and the moral atmosphere in which they lived from childhood and grew up to womanhood, was pure and wholesome?

It matters not, in such a worldly point of view, in the consideration of such results, whether their peace and happiness were made things of sale and barter by a worthless father!

Whether in forcing them to give their hands where they could not give their hearts, they had been sold for a price, and purchased for a consideration in which they had no share or interest.

But there are persons whose opinions are of the first importance, who will think the interests of religion, of truth and morality, do not require that we should throw aside all considerations of this sort, and come to a conclusion on a single fact, without any reference to the influences of surrounding circumstances.

The grave has never long closed over those who have been much admired and highly extolled, in their day, who have been in society formidable competitors for distinction, or in common opinion very fortunate in life and successful in society, or some particular pursuit, before the ashes of those dead celebrities are raked for error. Such tombs, indeed, are seldom ransacked unsuccessfully; but those who sit in judgment on the failings of their fellow-creatures, are never more likely to be erroneous in their opinions, than when they are most harsh and uncharitable in their judgments. Those persons who stand highest in the opinion of their fellow-men, may rank very low in the estimation of the Supreme Judge of all; and those for whose errors there is here no mercy, may have fewer advantages of instruction and example, of position, and of favourable circumstances that have been thrown away, to account for, than the most spiritually proud of the complacent self-satisfied, self-constituted judges and arraigners of their fellow-creatures.

It has been said, that "a great deal has been told of Goldsmith (in the early and incidental notices of his career), which a friendly biographer would have concealed, or at least silently passed over; that he would have felt bound in duty to respect the character which he took on himself to delineate; and while he withheld nothing that could have enabled the public to form

a right estimate of the subject, he would not have drawn aside the curtain that concealed the privacy of domestic intercourse, and exposed to view the weakness and inconsistency of the thoughtless and confidential hours of a chequered and too fortuitous life. The skilful painter can preserve the fidelity of the resemblance, while he knows how to develop all becoming embellishments. In heightening what is naturally beautiful, in throwing a shade over the less attractive parts, he presents us with a work that is at once pleasing and instructive. The biographer must form his narrative by selection. All things belonging to a subject are not worth the telling; when the circle of information is once completed, it is often the wisest part to rest satisfied with the effect produced. Such, evidently, was the rule which guided Mason in the very elegant and judicious account which he gave of his illustrious friend Gray; and though later inquirers have explored and unlocked some channels which he did not wish to open, they have left the original sketch very little altered, and hardly at all improved. In this he followed, though with a more liberal allowance to rational curiosity than had before been granted, the general practice of all biographers; but Boswell's Life of Johnson opened at once the floodgates of public desire on this subject, and set up an example, too faithfully imitated, of an indiscriminate development of facts, gratifying a not very honourable or healthy curiosity, with the minutest details of personal history, the eccentricities of social intercourse, and all the singularities of private life. The original work, however defective we may think it in its plan, derived a lustre from the greatness of its subject: but it has been the cause of overwhelming literature with a mass of the most heavy and tiresome biographies of very moderate and obscure men; with cumbersome details of a life without interest, and character without talent, and a correspondence neither illuminated with spirit nor enriched with fact. 'Vous me parlez,' says