EDINBURGH—A STUDENT'S MEMORY

E. E. PRINCE

IT was my privilege to enrol as a student in the great University of Edinburgh, a good many years ago. Later, I became a member of the professorial staff of the University for several terms. My residence in "Auld Reekie" afforded me daily visions of the beautiful Scottish capital. I beheld it under all the changing aspects of winter and summer, of spring and autumn. The varied pictures I got, on my way to classes, or in my wanderings when college duties were over, are clearly imprinted on my memory. They come to me, vividly, even after years of absence.

What is this picture which rises in the mind of the old student, or, indeed, in the mind of anyone, possessed of sentiment and appreciation, who has visited Edinburgh, or sojourned in that fair city? In his imagination he beholds, once again, the castle-crowned rock soaring up into the sky. At the base of its scarred, gloomy, and precipitous sides, he sees green lawns and leafy copses, with shady flower-bordered walks. For a mile, east and west, he sees terraced and gardened Princes Street, with the richly sculptured pinnacle of the famous Scott Monument midway; and, at the eastern end of the street, Calton Hill, studded with memorials of the great—the castellated Nelson tower, the Lysicratic pile to Dugald Stewart, David Hume's plain stone building, like a Martello fort, with, close by, the Hellenic temple to the memory of Burns; and, crowning the highest point, a colonnade of Greek pillars, like a broken Parthenon, commemorating Wellington's immortal victory at Waterloo.

In mental perspective, he traces the course of the long narrow High Street, which makes a unique irregular skyline above the ridged rock, long known as "The Royal Mile", from the grim entrance of the Castle down to the guarded entrance gates of Holyrood Palace on the flat plain of "King's Park" below. Tall historic buildings, six to ten storeys high, frown upon the steep street all the way. First is the pointed roof and lofty spire of the Church of Scotland Assembly Hall; then follows the massive Gothic crown of St. Giles's main tower; next come the projecting gables and

slender chimneys of John Knox's sixteenth-century manse, and further down, the quaint Canongate Tolbooth, with its overhanging clock, and the miniature Court room in which the Baron Bailies sit; but the next building is the ugly Canongate Church, in whose graveyard the tombstone stands erected by Burns over the ill-fated poet Robert Fergusson. To Fergusson, Robert Burns addressed these pathetic lines:

> O thou my elder brother in misfortune,
> By far my elder brother in the Muses:
> With tears I pity thy unhappy fate.

Fergusson died in poverty and misery, when barely 23 years of age; but his "Farmer's Ingle" certainly suggested "The Cottar's Saturday Night", while Fergusson's lines "Seeing a butterfly in the Street "correspond with Burns's exquisite poem "To a Mouse":

> Wee, Sleekit, cow'rin, timrous Beastie,
> Oh, what a panic's in thy Breastie!

A stone's throw away, Moray House overhangs the causeway, and is intimately associated with Mary Queen of Scots, who loved its retired garden. But it has a more tragic association still; for from its windows, on the 21st of May, 1650, the Marquis of Argyll watched the great Montrose slowly pass to die at the City Cross "very richly clad in scarlet, laid over with heavy silver lace; his bands and cuffs exceedingly rich—his stockings of incarnate silk; his shoes, with their bright ribbons, on his feet—more becoming a bridegroom than a criminal going to the gallows."—so an eye-witness tells us. The proud and courtly Cavalier went majestically to his death, and his severed head was exposed on a pole in front of the Tolbooth, for eleven summers and winters, before it was taken down and consigned to the vault of the Grahams in St. Giles Cathedral. But Argyll himself, by the strange irony of fate, paced the same street on May 27th, 1661, looking up remorsefully, it is said, at the mummified head of the Anti-Covenanting Montrose on its pole still staring from the front of the Tolbooth, and himself, cruel Covenanter, suffering death at the same City Cross by the executioner's axe. No less strange a circumstance is it that the bleeding head of Argyll was impaled at the west side of the Tolbooth on the same pole as that from which the head of Montrose was taken down for burial in the tomb of his ancestors. Strange things happened at the Restoration, but surely none stranger than that—the Covenanting warrior Argyll following, to the same place of execution, along the same High Street, the picturesque Cavalier Montrose.

The whole of the street's extent, with its tall tumble-down houses, many of them once palaces, the city homes of Scottish lords and ladies, recalls the varied events, the darkest tragedies as well as the pleasant comedies of Scotland's kaleidoscopic history. Narrow "closes" and "wynds" pass off at right angles every few yards, very dismal and dirty, the hiding places (it is said) of poverty and crime, and dark with tales of vice and guilt. It was in these noisome places that the Burke and Hare horrors of a hundred years ago were perpetrated. The "Resurrectionists", as these murderous criminals were called, supplied "subjects" for the medical dissecting rooms of the University and Extra-mural Medical Schools; and when the cause of death was demanded by the academic authorities, they were reported uniformly as "casualties." "Those who knew the Old Town of Edinburgh in those days," wrote a well known Scottish surgeon, "its wretched wynds, its hovels, or rather 'styes,' its whiskey-shops and dens of iniquity, could have no difficulty in comprehending the frequency of 'casualties' amid such a frightfully debased population. Life was everywhere surrounded by the contingencies of death. The filth and horrors of Paris, as described by Eugene Sue, had their counterpart in the High Street, the Canongate, the Cowgate, and Grassmarket." When "Daft Jamie", a well-known street character, and pretty Mary Paterson, a girl of low status in the "Old Town", were carried dead to the anatomy rooms in the night, suspicion was at last aroused that foul means were at work, and monstrous crimes and sacrileges were exposed—without parallel in the history of iniquity in Edinburgh, or anywhere else. The civic authorities, by very necessary "Improvement Acts", have cleared away much of the "rack and ruin" of the older parts, as they appeared in Queen Mary's time. Yet, grey with the centuries, the many-storeyed fronts rise tier above tier, the ancient precursors and picturesque rivals of the hideous and prosaic thirty-storey "sky scraper" of the modern architect. Above the forest of black "chimney cans", surmounting the uneven roofs of the High Street, the fine classical dome of the University appears, in the vicinity of the South Bridge, and in a north-westerly direction rises the high tower (16th century semi-Gothic in style) of Fettes College. Many spires, towers, and turrets rise above the business blocks and dwellings, marking the location of Donaldson's Hospital, George Watson's College, Heriot's Hospital, the High School, and many other educational institutions which have added to the fame of Edinburgh. It is all very beautiful. One may surely suppose that the beauty of the city had to do with prompting the notorious Knox, the

anatomist, to write his famous book, *A Critical Enquiry into the Nature of Beauty*—rather than beauty as embodied in man, for, in his *Artistic Anatomy*, published in 1852, he had pronounced the human form, at any rate in its infant stages, to be disproportioned and deformed! There may have been a little bitterness in this judgment; for his friend, Professor William Macdonald, had strongly opposed his views by claiming a divine and angelic beauty for the human frame, and by asserting that he had found in man rudimentary muscles and bones of wings! In his publication, issued in 1841, *On the Physical Structure of Angels*, he described the anatomy of the wing, to quote his own words, as "morphologically termed a limb—always associated with supposed angelic corporeity!"

Away to the east, memory sees lion-like Arthur's Seat, 900 feet in altitude, looking down majestically upon the crowded edifices, the piled up houses, of the city. It was, indeed, no other than Charlotte Brontë, writing to Mrs. Gaskell in 1850, who emphasized this impressive natural feature. "Who that has once seen Edinburgh, with its couchant crag-lion," she says, "but must see it again in dreams, sleeping or waking?" As we mount the summit on the wings of recollection, the view from above the basaltic pillars of Salisbury Crags, or the mighty columns of Samson's Ribs, is one rivalling the renowned prospect of the Bosphorus at the Golden Horn. On the one hand lies the city, wreathed in grey smoke—a filmy haze: on the other hand there stretch the green fields, and the wooded hills of Midlothian—a farming Elysium,—and then the dreamer's vision wanders to the blue waters of the Forth, to rest on the misty shores of the distant Kingdom of Fife. Along those dim shores extends a line of ancient Royal Burghs, from Culross and Aberdour to Kilrenny and Crail, near rocky Fife Ness—"a grey mantle with a golden fringe", as King James VI was wont to style it. The gigantic spans of the Forth Bridge, the greatest engineering feat of our time, some authorities say, arch across the wide Firth to Inverkeithing, directly south of Dunfermline; and fortified islands dot the sea, Incholm, Inchkeith, and Fidra, as far east as the wide outlet of the Firth of Forth to the open ocean, with its twin guards, the Isle of May and the famous Bass Rock. The two Lomond Hills in Fife, with the Sidlaws and the far-away Grampians in the north, form a soft blue background to this unrivalled panorama of land and sea. Hardly less striking is the hilly horizon to the east and south, limited by the melancholy Lammermuir Hills, and by the more cheerful Braids, the Pentlands, and the Moorfoots; but to the west the prospect is less

mountainous. Indeed the picturesque Corstorphine hill, with its multitude of residences, fine mansions, and large public institutions, is really an elevated suburb of the city.

But Edinburgh's intellectual greatness, it must be remembered, is in keeping with her scenic and historic pre-eminence. Edinburgh can boast great names. Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Lord Lister, Sir James Young Simpson, Carlyle, Raeburn, Wilkie, Christopher North, Allan Ramsay, De Quincey, Sydney Smith, Sir William Hamilton, the Playfairs, the Monros, (*primus*, *secundus*, and *tertius*,) Tytler, Lord Jeffrey, P. G. Tait, J. G. McGregor, James Seth, Andrew Seth, (Andrew Pringle-Pattison), David Masson, William and Robert Chambers,—these are names picked at random, but of what a great galaxy of genius do they form merely a part! Worthy sons of a city that men call "The Modern Athens!"

When George the Fourth visited Edinburgh in 1822, Sir Walter Scott attended the Royal Levee. "Well, Sir Walter," said Mr. Glassford to the "Wizard of the North", when he returned from Holyrood, "What does the King say of his good town of Edinburgh?" "Say?" was Sir Walter's reply, "His Majesty declares that he always heard of the Scots as being a proud people —and verily they do live in a city of palaces." It is plain that Burns must have been similarly impressed when he addressed the city:

> Edina, Scotia's darling seat!
> All hail thy palaces and towers,
> Where once beneath a monarch's feet
> Sat legislation's sov'reign powers!
> Here, wealth still swells the golden tide,
> There, architecture's noble pride
> Bids elegance and splendour rise;
> Here, justice from her native skies
> High wields her balance and her rod;
> There, learning, with his eagle eyes,
> Seeks science in her coy abode.

A Harvard Professor, Professor Andrew P. Peabody, confessed, after his visit to Edinburgh in 1866, that the city "has a weird unreal look, like a city in cloudland or dreamland." "It is made up," he continues, "of two distinct portions, the Old City and the New City, separated by a bold and deep ravine. In the New City are wide streets, fashionable hotels, genteel houses, handsome stores, spacious squares, monuments many in bronze and marble." Across the ravine, on the north side, is the massive and very lofty North Bridge, always crowded with traffic; and, across the south ravine passes the many-arched South Bridge, which is practically invisible,

being hidden by what an old writer describes as "beautiful rows of elegant buildings" "And were it not that an opening is left at the central arch over the Cowgate, where that street is seen at a distance below, it would present nothing but the appearance of a handsome continuous street." "In digging the foundation of the central pier, which was no less than 22 feet deep," the same old chronicler adds, "many coins of Edward I, II and III were found. The old buildings taken away to make room for this public work, the erection of this South Bridge, were purchased at a comparatively small value; while the vacant areas on which they stood were sold by the city for no less than thirty thousand pounds ($150,000). Never was building ground known to bring so high a price as on this occasion!"—he concludes with a glow of truly Scottish enthusiasm at the arrangement of so profitable a business transaction! It was Lord Provost Hunter who drove this bargain about 1785, and who also was a main instrument in completing the "Mound" always called, in old days, by its full name "The Earthen Mound"—a prominent feature still in the centre of the city, and a chief way of communication, like the North Bridge, between the Old and the New Town. It was called "Earthen", for it was formed from rubbish dug out from the foundations of the new houses when the New Town was being built. Again we see a fine example of Scottish civic economy, a century and a half ago, for to-day a city near the sea would find it easier to dump such "rubbish" into the nearest bay. One shrewd observer calculated the amount of Edinburgh rubbish thus turned to useful account, and he tells us: "The earth dug up from the New City foundations, and from rubbish, dug from every quarter of the city, amounted by 1797 to 1,305,780 cartloads of earth; but since then (he is writing in 1815) it may be readily supposed that as much more has been added." The New City elicited admiration universally, and even to-day an authoritative architect speaks of "its dignity and beauty". "The long rows of handsome houses are a proof of the wealth of Edinburgh citizens," he declares, and he praises "the highly skilled masons that Scotland has produced in the past, working on the splendid freestone of the district, under the guidance of a series of greatly gifted architects, of whom the best known are Adam, Playfair, Hamilton, Dow, and Bryce." The New Town is elegant and impressive; but there are not a few who applaud the old patriotic antiquary when he obstinately maintains that: "The ancient High Street is not equalled in grandeur by any street in Europe!"

But, in the chambers of memory, there is still one figure—one fair figure, told of in some of the most pathetic pages of history—

the figure of Mary, Queen of Scots. Sir Walter Scott, it has been well said, "dominates the city as his monument dominates Princes Street". But he has, in Edinburgh, one rival—Mary Stuart, the fairest and most fascinating of the historical shadows of the Scotland of the past. She came back, as a young and charming widow, to her native land, from France. In Edinburgh she took her cousin Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, for her second husband in 1565. The wedding took place in the Chapel Royal of Holyrood. Next year, barely seven months after her marriage, the bloody assassination of her foreign secretary, David Rizzio, was accomplished as he sat at supper with the Queen in the Palace of Holyrood. The body, bearing fifty-seven dagger wounds, lay all night outside her boudoir door, and dark stains on the floor are still shown to visitors—the stains of Rizzio's blood. In June following, while Mary was in residence in the Castle, a son was born to her, James the Sixth—First of England. James, like his mother, was heir to both crowns, the English and the Scottish. But the great tragedy—the murder of Darnley—was to follow in February next year (1567), at the house in Kirk o' Field (the Church of our Lady in the Fields) on the very site now occupied by the University buildings. A few weeks later, Mary married Darnley's supposed murderer, James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. There are many who cannot sigh for the death of the arrogant, though handsome, the weak, perfidious, though attractive Darnley, and are at one with the Scottish poet who said of the murder:

> God will forgive it soon,
> But of a truth, the sooth to say,
> Although the loon be well away,
> The deed was foully done.

Truly the very air in the streets of Edinburgh seems to be heavy with historic memories, and on every hand are courts, and old houses, and strange by-ways, where deeds were done not always foul, although tragedy does at times seem to loom large.

Edinburgh was stigmatised, rather ungraciously, as a city "very east-windy and very west-endy" by "Johnnie Blackie" —Professor John Stewart Blackie. When the raw winter gales blow from the North Sea, they do sweep cruelly through the narrow thoroughfares and the crooked wynds and ways; but let a "haar" from the ocean creep in, like a freezing mountain mist, and every passer-by is chilled to the bone. Yet Edinburgh can smile as well as frown. Memory, indeed, loves to dream of her, when, in the transparent light of a summer's day, she is a vision of gold, and

pearl, and turquoise; while across the azure vault, overhead, wisps of cloud are wildly tossed, like the flaxen tresses of a fair maid of the north waving in the breeze. As evening comes on, the filmy pall of smoke, which "Auld Reekie" wears as a constant mantle, assumes a delicate saffron hue, and Edinburgh puts on an aspect of almost celestial beauty. See her again when the shadows of night fall, and the full moon lights with silver the sea of high roofs, and gables, and spires, and domes, and a horrid blackness stealthily creeps into arches and winding passages, and along massive ruined walls. Then every gloomy nook and narrow wynd becomes a place of fear. High above the silent sleeping city the sullen castle, with its far-off twinkling lights, grimly keeps guard, but sudden flashes of moonlight, and dark obscure objects, moving or still, in the noiseless streets make Edinburgh a place so mysterious and unreal that to the timid heart it may become, at the midnight hour, a city of dread.

Yes! Edinburgh has her moods—her many moods, grave and gay, dark and bright; but the memory of her never loses its strange fascination, and she grasps the soul of the ardent Scot as no other city has power to do, while she wins every wayfarer, of whatever nationality, by the rare panorama she presents to his astonished gaze. She is fairest of all when the tender light of early morning, with rose and amber tints, makes her a miracle of beauty. It was London that Wordsworth had in his mind, but his famous sonnet is just as true of "Auld Reekie":

> Earth has not anything to show more fair:
> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
> A sight so touching in its majesty;
> The city now doth, like a garment, wear
> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
> Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
> Open unto the fields, and to the sky:
> All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
> .....Never did sun more beautifully steep,
> In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill.