BIOGRAPHIES OF WORKING MEN

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Biographies of Working Men by Grant Allen

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GRANT ALLEN

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OF

WORKING MEN.

BY

GRANT ALLEN, B.A.

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PREFACE.

MY acknowledgments are due to Dr. Smiles's "Lives of the Engineers," "Life of the Stephensons," and "Life of a Scotch Naturalist;" to Lady Eastlake's "Life of Gibson;" to Mr. Holden's "Life of Sir William Herschel;" to M. Seusier's "J. F. Millet, Sa Vie et Ses Œuvres;" and to Mr. Thayer's "Life of President Garfield;" from which most of the facts here narrated have been derived.

G. A.

BIOGRAPHIES OF WORKING MEN.

I.

THOMAS TELFORD, Stonemason.

HIGH up among the heather-clad hills which form the broad dividing barrier between England and Scotland, the little river Esk brawls and bickers over its stony bed through a wild land of barren braesides and brown peat mosses, forming altogether some of the gloomiest and most forbidding scenery in the whole expanse of northern Britain. Almost the entire bulk of the counties of Dumfries, Kirkcudbright, and Ayr is composed of just such solemn desolate upland wolds, with only a few stray farms or solitary cottages sprinkled at wide distances over their bare bleak surface, and with scarcely any sign of life in any part save the little villages which cluster here and

there at long intervals around some stern and simple Scottish church. Yet the hardy people who inhabit this wild and chilly moorland country may well be considered to rank among the best raw material of society in the whole of Britain; for from the peasant homes of these southern Scotch Highlands have come forth, among a host of scarcely less distinguished natives, three men, at least, who deserve to take their place in the very front line of British thinkers or workers—Thomas Telford, Robert Burns, and Thomas Carlyle. By origin, all three alike belonged in the very strictest sense to the working classes; and the story of each is full of lessons or of warnings for every one of us: but that of Telford is perhaps the most encouraging and the most remarkable of all, as showing how much may be accomplished by energy and perseverance, even under the most absolutely adverse and difficult circumstances.

Near the upper end of Eskdale, in the tiny village of Westerkirk, a young shepherd's wife gave birth to a son on the 9th of August, 1757. Her husband, John Telford, was employed in tending sheep on a neighbouring farm, and he and his Janet occupied a small cottage close by, with mud walls and rudely thatched roof, such as in southern England even the humblest agricultural labourer would scarcely consent willingly to inhabit. Before the child was three months old, his father died; and Janet Telford was left alone in the world with her unweaned baby. But in remote country dis-

tricts, neighbours are often more neighbourly than in great towns; and a poor widow can manage to eke out a livelihood for herself with an occasional lift from the helping hands of friendly fellow-villagers. Janet Telford had nothing to live upon save her own ten fingers; but they were handy enough, after the sturdy Scotch fashion, and they earned some sort of livelihood in a humble way for herself and her fatherless boy. The farmers about found her work on their farms at haymaking or milking, and their wives took the child home with them while its mother was busy labouring in the harvest fields. Amid such small beginnings did the greatest of English engineers before the railway era receive his first hard lessons in the art of life.

After her husband's death, the poor widow removed from her old cottage to a still more tiny hut, which she shared with a neighbour—a very small hut, with a single door for both families; and here young Tam Telford spent most of his boyhood in the quiet honourable poverty of the uncomplaining rural poor. As soon as he was big enough to herd sheep, he was turned out upon the hillside in summer like any other ragged country laddie, and in winter he tended cows, receiving for wages only his food and money enough to cover the cost of his scanty clothing. He went to school, too; how, nobody now knows: but he *did* go, to the parish school of Westerkirk, and there he learnt with a will, in the winter months, though he had

to spend the summer on the more profitable task of working in the fields. To a steady earnest boy like young Tam Telford, however, it makes all the difference in the world that he should have been to school, no matter how simply. Those twenty-six letters of the alphabet, once fairly learnt, are the key, after all, to all the book-learning in the whole world. Without them, the shepherd-boy might remain an ignorant, unprogressive shepherd all his life long, even his undeniable native energy using itself up on nothing better than a wattled hurdle or a thatched roof; with them, the path is open before him which led Tam Telford at last to the Menai Bridge and Westminster Abbey.

When Tam had gradually eaten his way through enough thin oatmeal porridge (with very little milk, we fear) to make him into a hearty lad of fifteen, it began to be high time for him to choose himself a final profession in life, such as he was able. And here already the born tastes of the boy began to show themselves: for he had no liking for the homely shepherd's trade; he felt a natural desire for a chisel and a hammer—the engineer was there already in the grain—and he was accordingly apprenticed to a stonemason in the little town of Lochmaben, beyond the purple hills to eastward. But his master was a hard man; he had small mercy for the raw lad; and after trying to manage with him for a few months, Tam gave it up, took the law into his own hands, and ran away. Probably the provocation was severe, for in