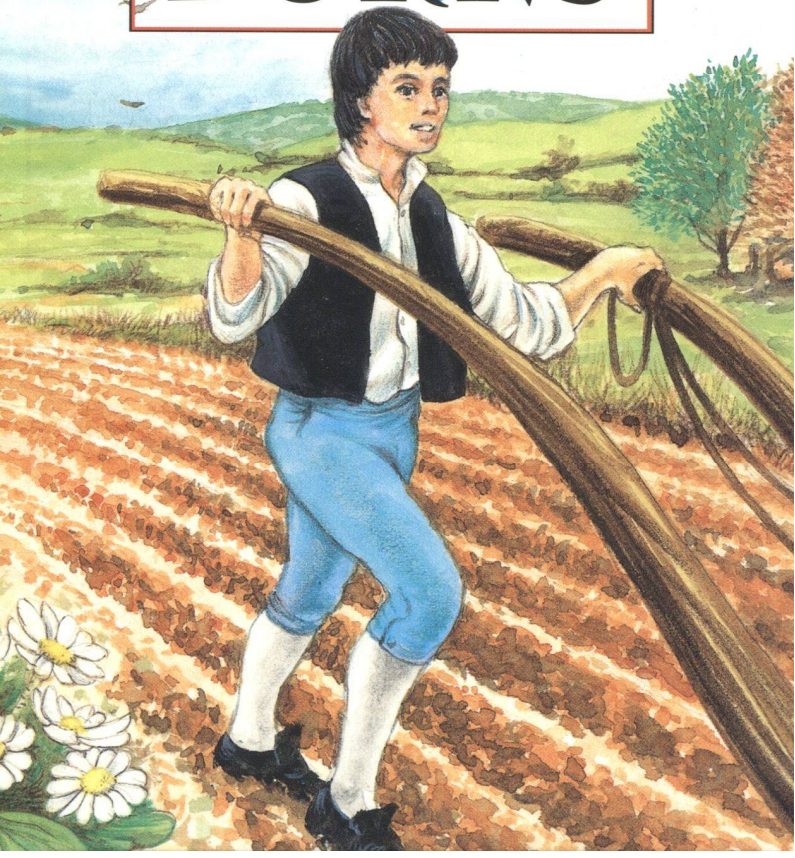


YOUNG  
*Robert*  
BURNS





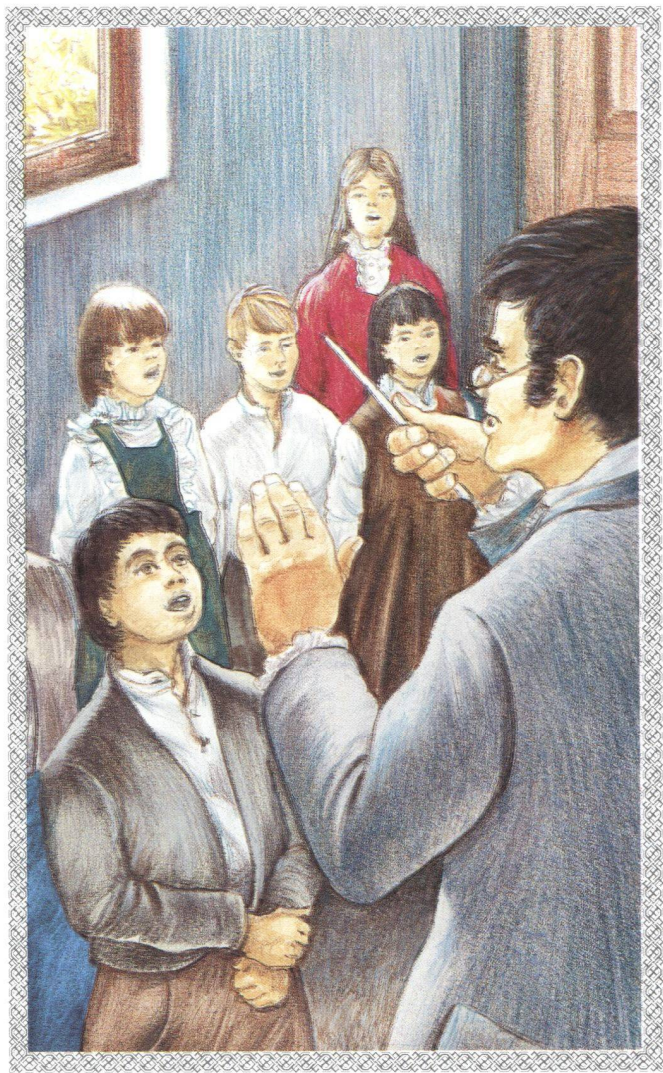
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## CHAPTER ONE

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**L**et us join young Robert Burns at his lessons. He is a very clever boy and he likes his lessons, most of the time. Two days a week the teacher comes to the little farmhouse where he and his young brothers and sisters live. Half a dozen children from the farms round about also squeeze into the small room. There are no desks, no blackboard. The teacher is a strong young man of eighteen, down from Glasgow University. With him they read, they write, they do counting. All this is fine for Robert, especially the reading and writing. He is better at these than any of the other children, and he is very good at remembering. His friends mostly prefer what comes next, the singing lesson. Their teacher, John Murdoch, has a fine voice and enjoys singing. He knows new songs from England, but Robert's father, who pays him, does not approve of modern songs and prefers him to teach the children to sing the old Scottish psalms.

At singing time, the other children relax. But Robert cannot sing. The tunes ring clearly in his head and tease him. He can hear them in his mind, but when he opens his mouth, only a dull flat drone comes out. And Robert is such a lively boy that John Murdoch does not





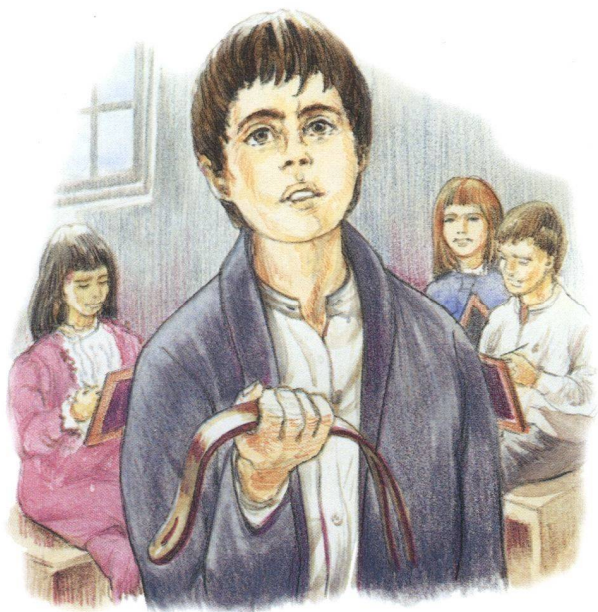
believe he can't sing. When it is Robert's turn to show that he has learned the words and tune, John quickly grows angry.

"The tune, sir," he calls. "You have the words but not the tune. Sing properly."

But it's no good. Robert can't sing.

"Very well," says his teacher, frowning heavily. "You know where the tawse is kept, I believe?"

All eyes watch Robert as he goes to where his father keeps the strap. Every house has one, and every house uses it. He hands it to his teacher.



“Now hold out your hand.”

John Murdoch is a strong young man, and by the time he is finished Robert’s hands are sore and swollen.

“Go and sit at the back. I have no patience for you.”

His hands tenderly placed under his armpits, Robert retreats to the back row. Another pupil stands up to sing the verses.

At the end of the lessons, John Murdoch says goodbye before he walks the two miles back to Ayr, where he lives. His big hand ruffles the boy’s dark hair.

“You’re a good lad, Robin,” he says. “You’re quick at everything, bar one. But I’ll make you a singer yet.”

The boy gives him a rueful grin. At least there won’t be any singing for another week.



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## C H A P T E R   T W O

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**T**he boy who could not sing grew up to give the world some of the most beautiful songs it has. Robert Burns, son of the poor farmer, was to become a great poet. But no one in his family expected this to happen. They expected Robin, as they called him, to grow up and become a farmer like his father.

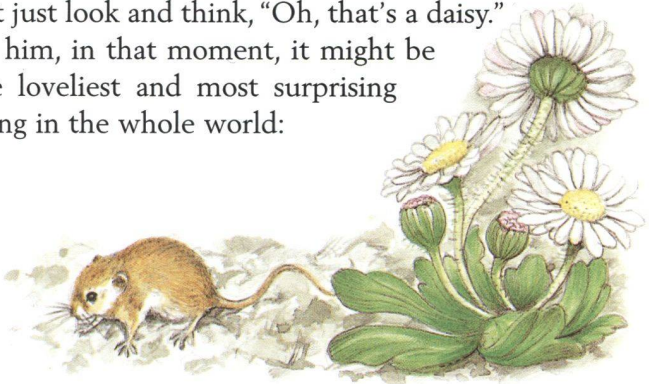
Schooling took up only a little of young Robert's time. There was always plenty of work to be done about the farm. His father could not afford to pay anyone to help him. As the eldest son, Robert was expected to help, not just by doing a few odd jobs but by hard work every day. Between the ages of seven and eighteen, he lived on the farm at Mount Oliphant, two miles from Ayr. The soil was poor and did not produce good crops.

In springtime, when it was often cold, wet and windy, Robert helped with ploughing, walking behind the horse-drawn plough as it turned up the heavy ground. After ploughing, they harrowed to make the ground level and then sowed the seed. This meant carrying the seeds in a bag or on a tray and scattering it in handfuls, trying to spread it as evenly as possible. Hungry seagulls and crows would fly behind. Robert's brother



Gilbert, two years younger, would shout and wave his arms to scare them off the precious seed.

Sometimes Robert dreamed while he was at the plough. His strong arms held it steady, and his clumsy shoes tramped through the mud, but his mind was far away. He was telling himself stories or pretending he was someone else. But at other times his eyes were wide open and he saw everything around him very clearly. He saw the green hills and the trees and the cloudy skies. He had a sharp eye for little things. When a tiny mouse scrambled away as the plough pushed through its nest, he noticed it. He saw how the daisies came up and admired their beauty. His mind was open to wonder at the miracle of life in every form. He did not just look and think, "Oh, that's a daisy." To him, in that moment, it might be the loveliest and most surprising thing in the whole world:





*"Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flow'r,  
Thou's met me in an evil hour;  
For I maun crush amang the stour  
Thy slender stem:  
To spare thee now is past my pow'r,  
Thou bonnie gem."*



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## C H A P T E R   T H R E E

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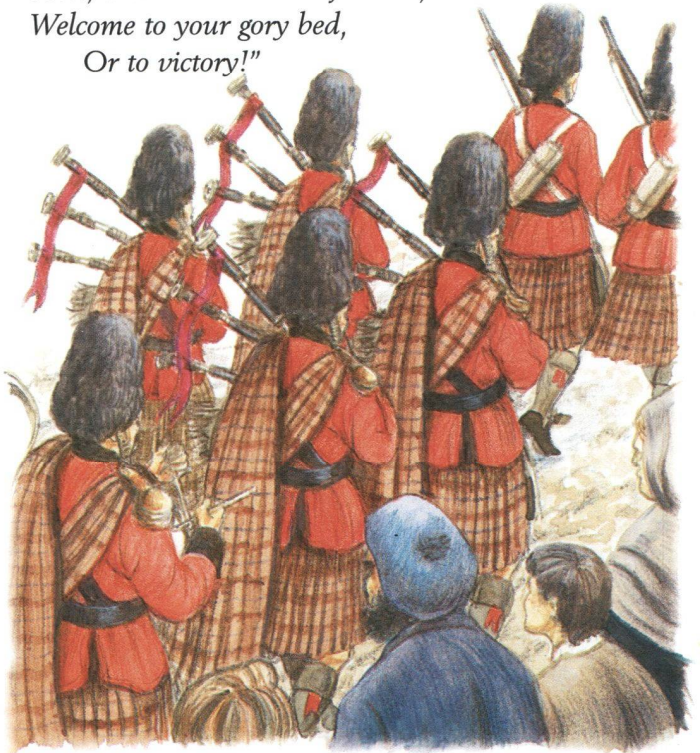
**A**lthough they lived on a farm, the Burns family did not have a lot to eat. They could not afford beef or mutton. They mostly ate oatmeal, cheese and cabbage, and drank water, milk or weak beer. It was not a good diet for a growing boy, especially one who had to work as hard as Robert. At the end of the day there was no hot bath. There was no bathroom. The house had no taps or running water. All water was brought in a bucket from a well. There was no electric light – electric lighting was not yet known. The Burns family could only afford candles, one at a time. But as the evening darkened into night, Robert would sit reading by that single candle. There was no money to buy books, but they were able to borrow books from wealthier friends. The two books that excited young Robert most were the story of Hannibal and the story of William Wallace.

Hannibal was a great soldier of ancient times. During his life, Rome ruled the world, but Hannibal fought against Rome. His most famous deed was to lead his army, including elephants, across the snow-covered Alps into Italy. William Wallace was one of the greatest heroes of Robert's own country, Scotland. He had fought against the English King Edward the First to



keep Scotland a separate country with its own king. The story of Wallace made the boy fiercely proud that he too was Scottish. He read as much as he could about Scotland's history. In later years he wrote the famous song that begins:

*"Scots, wha ha'e wi' Wallace bled,  
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,  
Welcome to your gory bed,  
Or to victory!"*

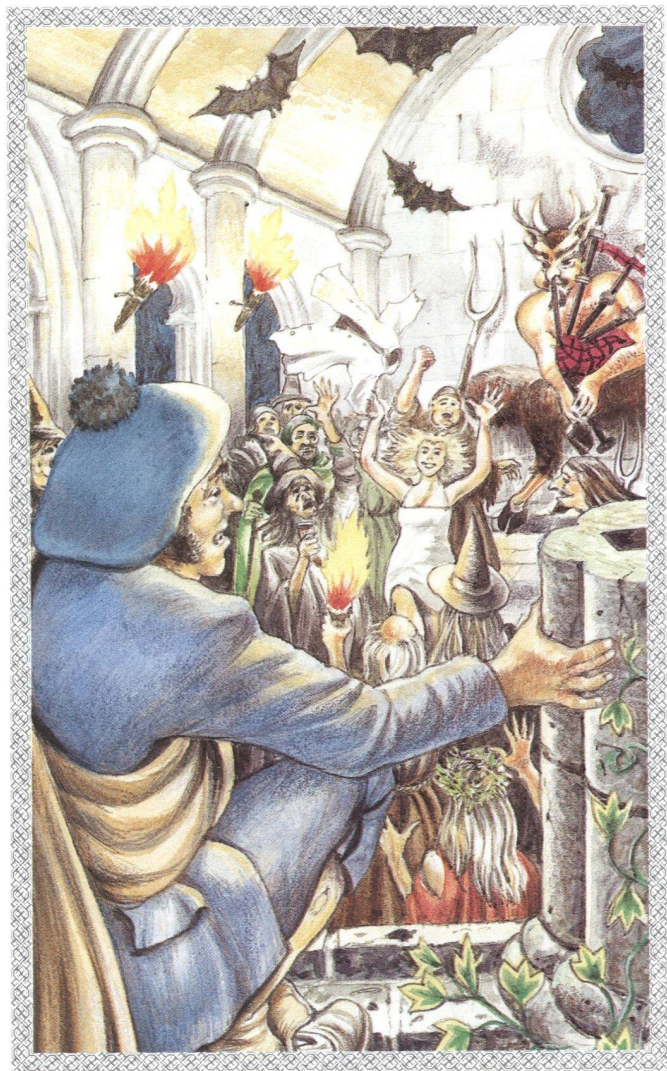




Robert dreamed of being a soldier. When the pipers and drummers came marching through, looking for young men to join the army, the little boy ran after them, wishing he was old enough to join. Perhaps, as he worked, the hills of Mount Oliphant became the mountainous Alps and his father's skinny horses became mighty elephants. Later in his life, when Britain was at war with France, he did indeed become a soldier. Like many others, he joined the Volunteers and was ready to defend his part of Scotland against the French.

Robert's father, William, was a quiet, gruff man. His mother, Agnes, was a busy farmer's wife, practical and thorough. She always had something to do, like milking the cows, making bread, mending clothes that were already worn-out, looking after her children – Robert was the eldest of seven. She was a good singer. She often sang as she worked, and he loved to hear her. His parents never knew what to make of this boy with the dark, sparkling eyes and ready laugh. Sometimes he would caper about like a lamb in the spring breeze, at other times it was impossible to get his attention away from a book. They did not have much time to spare for him. The person who did have time to spare was an old woman, a relation of his mother's, who sometimes came to help about the house and farmyard. Her name was Betty Davidson.

Betty was full of stories – the kind that children love



to hear. As Robert said later, her tales and songs were all about "devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths," and so on. At night there were no lights outside but the moon and the stars, and no sound but the crying of the wind in trees and bushes. It was easy to believe that strange creatures moved in the dark. Tales that were pleasantly shivery in daytime could be terrifying at night. It may have been old Betty who first told him the story of Tam o' Shanter.

Tam o' Shanter was an Ayrshire farmer, like Robert's father, William. Unlike Robert's father, he enjoyed drinking and talking. One night he set off on his old grey mare, Meg, to return home from the inn. It was dark and late and his little farm was a long way off. The path led by the half-ruined church of Alloway, which was supposed to be haunted. As he approached the church, Tam was surprised to find it brightly lit. The ale he had drunk made him feel brave, and he crept up to take a closer look. What did he see?

Witches and warlocks in a dance! At one end sat the Devil himself, a great horned beast, playing the bagpipes so loudly that the walls shook. Most of the witches were ugly old women whom Tam could hardly bear to look at. But one was young and beautiful, and she danced more wildly than any of the others. At last she got so hot that she threw off all her clothes except a short smock, and she danced in that.

Tam could not restrain himself from calling out: "Weel done, Cutty Sark!"

And, in an instant, all was dark. Tam spurred his horse away, just in time. The whole band of demon revellers came pouring out in chase of him. Now it was time for his good grey mare to show how she could run. With the witches close behind him, Cutty Sark at their head, the terrified Tam galloped across the countryside. He was racing for a bridge. He knew that the witches could not cross running water and that he would be safe if he reached the other side. But even as Meg reached the centre of the bridge, Cutty Sark came racing up behind, stretched out her arm and snatched at Tam. But all she got was the old grey horse's tail. Tam had escaped!

How the boy's eyes shone when Betty told him such tales. He repeated them in a whisper to his brother, huddled in the narrow bed they shared, or silently to himself when his father shouted for silence, hugging himself with the excitement of the chase and the terror of the demon dancers. He knew his parents did not like Betty telling him her stories and that made him listen all the more, storing them up in his mind.







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## CHAPTER FOUR

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**J**ohn Murdoch, their teacher, got a new job teaching in the grammar school at Ayr and no longer tramped out to teach the country children. He did not forget Robert, however, and invited the boy to come to him for lessons. Robert walked to the town, and home again, and learned all he could.

Life was not quite all farm work, school and reading. There was time in the long summer evenings to play. Everybody knew everybody else, and children ran far and wide across the countryside. Robert's friends might include the children of the minister, or of a farmer with a bigger farm than Mount Oliphant, but as he grew older Robert found there was a difference between some of these children and himself.

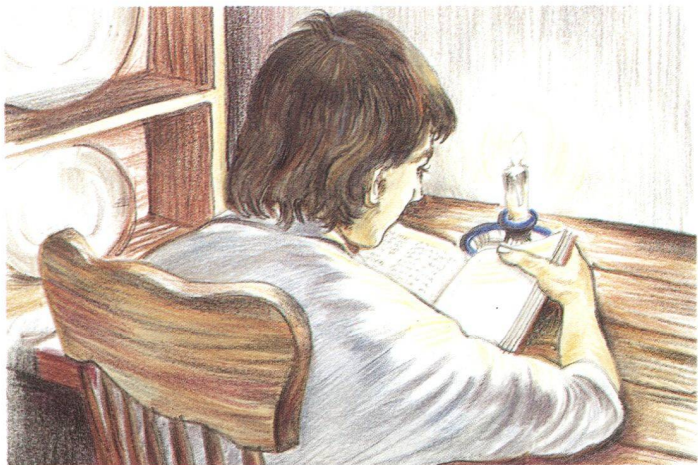
"When you're a man, what will you be?"

"A soldier!" used to be young Robert's reply, but now his friends were old enough to think of a real career.

"I'm going to Edinburgh to learn how to be a doctor."

"I'm going to the university in Glasgow. My daddy wants me to be a lawyer."

Now Robert Burns had nothing to say. He was not going anywhere. When these boys went off to university, he knew he would still be at home. His

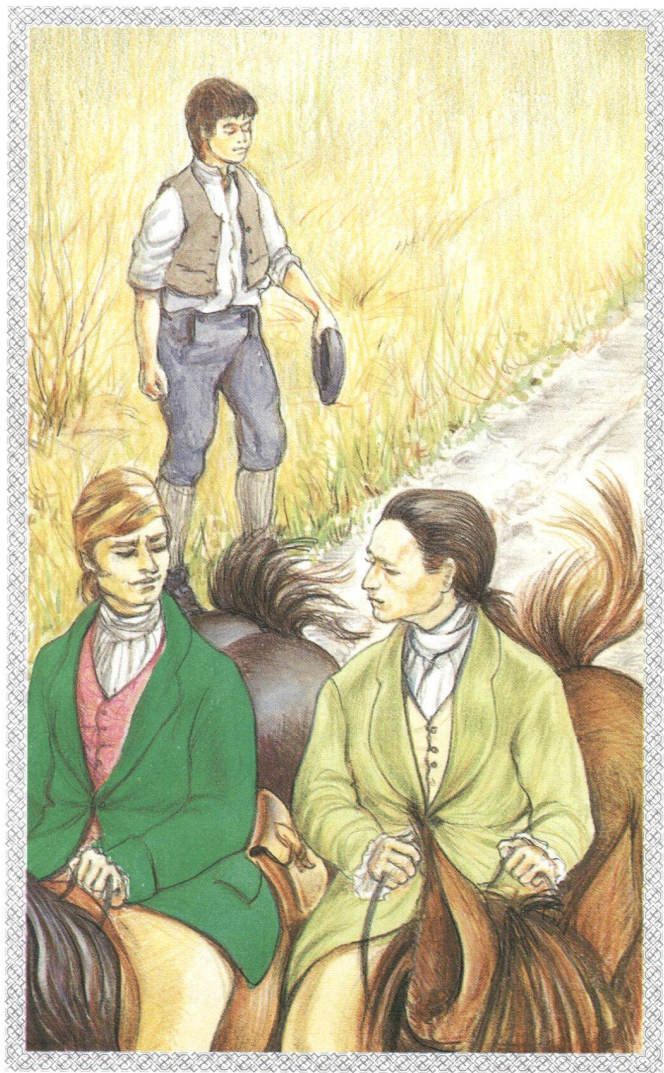


father had no money. He needed Robert's help with the farm. When these boys were doctors and lawyers, with big houses of their own and plenty of money, Robert Burns would still be a poor farmer, following the plough.

And he was so hungry to learn. He wanted to go to university and read more books. He wanted to learn French and Latin. His mind was itching with questions to which nobody around had an answer. Nobody even wanted to discuss them.

And then, one day, his playmates were gone, but when they came back it was worse. He saw his friend, just back from Edinburgh University, come riding along the track with another youth, a visitor from Edinburgh.





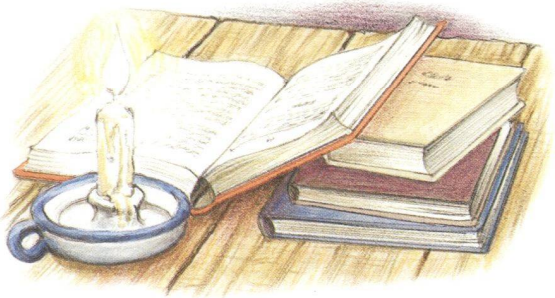


“Hello there!” called Robert, taking off his bonnet and waving it. They rode by, hardly even looking at him.

“Who’s that?” asked the visitor.

“Oh, no one. One of the peasants from hereabouts. He probably wanted a penny.”

Robert Burns felt that life was very unfair, not just to him but to many others like him, but there was nothing a teenage boy could do about it. He did not give up reading and trying to learn. Sometimes, at the dinner table, the whole family, father and children, sat reading books, hardly noticing what they were eating. The only exception was Robert’s mother. She had never learned to read.





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## CHAPTER FIVE

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**W**hen he was fifteen, Robert found he could write rhymes. At harvest time the farmers all helped one another, moving from one little farm to the next to cut the oats and barley. All the country children worked in the fields all day long. It was the usual thing to put a boy and a girl working together, the girl supposed to bundle the stems after they had been cut with the scythe, the boy supposed to do the heavier lifting. That summer, Robert's work partner was Nelly Kirkpatrick, a blacksmith's daughter. She was his first love. Later he wrote that she was "a bonnie, sweet, sonsie lass." To Nelly he wrote his first poem. It was the first of many that he wrote, to many different girls. Nelly was succeeded by Alison, Jean, Sophy, Bessy, Peggy, Nancy and others. In one of his songs, Robert wrote:

*"The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,  
Are spent among the lasses, O."*

Young Robert Burns had to stay at home, working on the farm. He still read books. But now, when he sat up late by candlelight, he was writing poems on whatever scraps of paper he could find. He wrote poems that



make us laugh, that make us cry, that make us sit down and think about ourselves and the sort of people we are. Above all, when he was still a very young man he wrote about love. One of his best-known love poems is this one:

*“My love is like a red, red rose,  
That’s newly sprung in June;  
My love is like a melody,  
That’s sweetly played in tune.*

*As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,  
So deep in love am I;  
And I will love thee still, my dear,  
Till a’ the seas gang dry.*

*Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear,  
And the rocks melt wi’ the sun!  
O I will love thee still, my dear,  
While the sands o’ life shall run.*

Soon his poems were read and recited by people round about. He was able to have them printed in a book, and he became famous in Scotland. After his death he became one of the most famous poets in the world, but he never became rich. His life had many ups and downs; he always had to work hard, and he was always short of money. Sometimes this made him feel sad and downcast, but usually he was cheerful, and he



was always one of the kindest and most generous of men. He understood himself and once wrote:

*"When sometimes by my labour I earn a little money, O,  
Some unforeseen misfortune comes gen'rally upon me, O:  
Mischance, mistake, or by neglect, or my good-natur'd  
folly, O —*

*But come what will, I've sworn it still, I'll ne'er be  
melancholy, O."*

