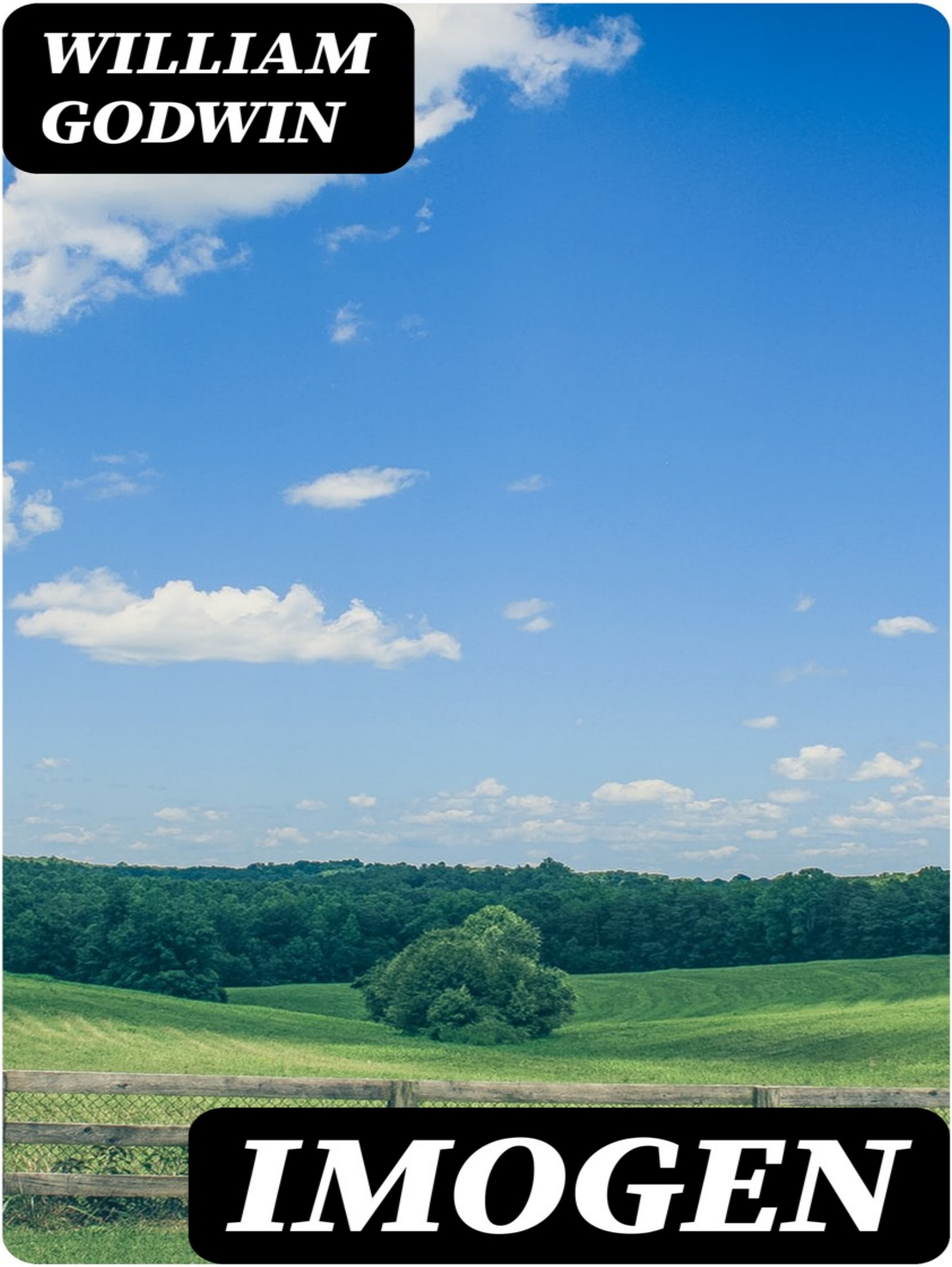
WILLIAM GODWIN



IMOGEN

William Godwin

Imogen

A Pastoral Romance

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Preface

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[*By* WILLIAM GODWIN]

The following performance, as the title imports, was originally composed in the Welch language. Its style is elegant and pure. And if the translator has not, as many of his brethren have done, suffered the spirit of the original totally to evaporate, he apprehends it will be found to contain much novelty of conception, much classical taste, and great spirit and beauty in the execution. It appears under the name of Cadwallo, an ancient bard, who probably lived at least one hundred years before the commencement of our common era. The manners of the primitive times seem to be perfectly understood by the author, and are described with the air of a man who was in the utmost degree familiar with them. It is impossible to discover in any part of it the slightest trace of Christianity. And we believe it will not be disputed, that in a country so pious as that of Wales, it would have been next to impossible for the poet, though ever so much upon his guard, to avoid all allusion to the system of revelation. On the contrary, every thing is Pagan, and in perfect conformity with the theology we are taught to believe prevailed at that time.

These reasons had induced us to admit, for a long time, that it was perfectly genuine, and justly ascribed to the amiable Druid. With respect to the difficulty in regard to the preservation of so long a work for many centuries by the mere force of memory, the translator, together with the rest of the world, had already got over that objection in the case

of the celebrated Poems of Ossian. And if he be not blinded by that partiality, which the midwife is apt to conceive for the productions, that she is the instrument of bringing into the world, the Pastoral Romance contains as much originality, as much poetical beauty, and is as happily calculated to make a deep impression upon the memory, as either Fingal, or Temora.

The first thing that led us to doubt its authenticity, was the striking resemblance that appears between the plan of the work, and Milton's celebrated Masque at Ludlow Castle. We do not mean however to hold forth this circumstance as decisive in its condemnation. The pretensions of Cadwallo, or whoever was the author of the performance, are very high to originality. If the date of the Romance be previous to that of Comus, it may be truly said of the author, that he soared above all imitation, and derived his merits from the inexhaustible source of his own invention. But Milton, it is well known, proposed some classical model to himself in all his productions. The Paradise Lost is almost in every page an imitation of Virgil, or Homer. The Lycidas treads closely in the steps of the Daphnis and Gallus of Virgil. The Sampson Agonistes is formed upon the model of Sophocles. Even the little pieces, L'Allegro and Il Penseroso have their source in a song of Fletcher, and two beautiful little ballads that are ascribed to Shakespeare. But the classical model upon which Comus was formed has not yet been discovered. It is infinitely unlike the Pastoral Comedies both of Italy and England. And if we could allow ourselves in that licence of conjecture, which is become almost inseparable from the character of an editor, we should say: That Milton having

written it upon the borders of Wales, might have had easy recourse to the manuscript whose contents are now first given to the public: And that the singularity of preserving the name of the place where it was first performed in the title of his poem, was intended for an ingenuous and well-bred acknowledgement of the source from whence he drew his choicest materials.

But notwithstanding the plausibility of these conjectures, we are now inclined to give up our original opinion, and to ascribe the performance to a gentleman of Wales, who lived so late as the reign of king William the third. The name of this amiable person was Rice ap Thomas. The romance was certainly at one time in his custody, and was handed down as a valuable legacy to his descendants, among whom the present translator has the honour to rank himself. Rice ap Thomas, Esquire, was a man of a most sweet and inoffensive disposition, beloved and respected by all his neighbours and tenants, and "passing rich with 'sixty' pounds a year." In his domestic he was elegant, hospitable, and even sumptuous, for the time and country in which he lived. He was however naturally of an abstemious and recluse disposition. He abounded in singularities, which were pardoned to his harmlessness and his virtues; and his temper was full of sensibility, seriousness, and melancholy. He devoted the greater part of his time to study; and he boasted that he had almost a complete collection of the manuscript remains of our Welch bards. He was often heard to prefer even to Taliessin, Merlin, and Aneurim, the effusions of the immortal Cadwallo, and indeed this was the only subject upon which he was ever known to dispute with

eagerness and fervour. In the midst of the controversy, he would frequently produce passages from the Pastoral Romance, as decisive of the question. And to confess the truth, I know not how to excuse this piece of jockeyship and ill faith, even in Rice ap Thomas, whom I regard as the father of my family, and the chief ornament of my beloved country.

Some readers will probably however be inclined to apologise for the conduct of Mr. Thomas, and to lay an equivalent blame to my charge. They will tell me, that nothing but the weakest partiality could blind me to the genuine air of antiquity with which the composition is every where impressed, and to ascribe it to a modern writer. But I am conscious to my honesty and defy their malice. So far from being sensible of any improper bias in favour of my ancestor, I am content to strengthen their hands, by acknowledging that the manuscript, which I am not at all desirous of refusing to their inspection, is richly emblazoned with all the discoloration and rust they can possibly desire. I confess that the wording has the purity of Taliessin, and the expressiveness of Aneurim, and is such as I know of no modern Welchman who could write. And yet, in spite as they will probably tell me of evidence and common sense, I still aver my persuasion, that it is the production of Rice ap Thomas.

But enough, and perhaps too much, for the question of its antiquity. It would be unfair to send it into the world without saying something of the nature of its composition. It is unlike the Arcadia of sir Philip Sidney, and unlike, what I have just taken the trouble of running over, the Daphnis of

Gessner. It neither on the one hand leaves behind it the laws of criticism, and mixes together the different stages of civilization; nor on the other will it perhaps be found frigid, uninteresting, and insipid. The prevailing opinion of Pastoral seems to have been, that it is a species of composition admirably fitted for the size of an eclogue, but that either its nature will not be preserved, or its simplicity will become surfeiting in a longer performance. And accordingly, the Pastoral Dramas of Tasso, Guarini, and Fletcher, however they may have been commended by the critics, and admired by that credulous train who clap and stare whenever they are bid, have when the recommendation of novelty has subsided been little attended to and little read. But the great Milton has proved that this objection is not insuperable. His Comus is a master-piece of poetical composition. It is at least equal in its kind even to the Paradise Lost. It is interesting, descriptive and pathetic. Its fame is continually increasing, and it will be admired wherever the name of Britain is repeated, and the language of Britain is understood.

If our hypothesis respecting the date of the present performance is admitted, it must be acknowleged that the ingenious Mr. Thomas has taken the Masque of Milton for a model; and the reader with whom Comus is a favourite, will certainly trace some literal imitations. With respect to any objections that may be made on this score to the Pastoral Romance, we will beg the reader to bear in mind, that the volumes before him are not an original, but a translation. Recollecting this, we may, beside the authority of Milton himself, and others as great poets as ever existed who have

imitated Homer and one another at least as much as our author has done Comus, suggest two very weighty apologies. In the first place, imitation in a certain degree, has ever been considered as lawful when made from a different language: And in the second, these imitations come to the reader exaggerated, by being presented to him in English, and by a person who confesses, that he has long been conversant with our greatest poets. The translator has always admired Comus as much as the Pastoral Romance; he has read them together, and been used to consider them as illustrating each other. Any verbal coincidences into which he may have fallen, are therefore to be ascribed where they are due, to him, and not to the author. And upon the whole, let the imperfections of the Pastoral Romance be what they will, he trusts he shall be regarded as making a valuable present to the connoisseurs and the men of taste, and an agreeable addition to the innocent amusements of the less laborious classes of the polite world.

BOOK THE FIRST

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CHARACTER OF THE SHEPHERDESS AND HER LOVER.—FEAST OF RUTHYN.—SONGS OF THE BARDS.

Listen, O man! to the voice of wisdom. The world thou inhabitest was not intended for a theatre of fruition, nor destined for a scene of repose. False and treacherous is that happiness, which has been preceded by no trial, and is connected with no desert. It is like the gilded poison that undermines the human frame. It is like the hoarse murmur of the winds that announces the brewing tempest. Virtue, for such is the decree of the Most High, is evermore obliged to pass through the ordeal of temptation, and the thorny paths of adversity. If, in this day of her trial, no foul blot obscure her lustre, no irresolution and instability tarnish the clearness of her spirit, then may she rejoice in the view of her approaching reward, and receive with an open heart the crown that shall be bestowed upon her.

The extensive valley of Clwyd once boasted a considerable number of inhabitants, distinguished for primeval innocence and pastoral simplicity. Nature seemed to have prepared it for their reception with all that luxuriant bounty, which characterises her most favoured spots. The inclosure by which it was bounded, of ragged rocks and snow-topt mountains, served but for a foil to the richness and fertility of this happy plain. It was seated in the bosom of North Wales, the whole face of which, with this one exception, was rugged and hilly. As far as the eye could reach, you might see promontory rise above promontory.

The crags of Penmaenmawr were visible to the northwest, and the unequalled steep of Snowden terminated the prospect to the south. In its farthest extent the valley reached almost to the sea, and it was intersected, from one end to the other, by the beautiful and translucent waters of the river from which it receives its name.

In this valley all was rectitude and guileless truth. The hoarse din of war had never reached its happy bosom; its river had never been impurpled with the stain of human blood. Its willows had not wept over the crimes of its inhabitants, nor had the iron hand of tyranny taught care and apprehension to seat themselves upon the brow of its shepherds. They were strangers to riches, and to ambition, for they all lived in a happy equality. He was the richest man among them, that could boast of the greatest store of yellow apples and mellow pears. And their only objects of rivalship were the skill of the pipe and the favour of beauty. From morn to eve they tended their fleecy possessions. Their reward was the blazing hearth, the nut-brown beer, and the merry tale. But as they sought only the enjoyment of a humble station, and the pleasures of society, their labours were often relaxed. Often did the setting sun see the young men and the maidens of contiguous villages, assembled round the venerable oak, or the wide-spreading beech. The bells rung in the upland hamlets; the rebecs sounded with rude harmony; they danced with twinkling feet upon the level green or listened to the voice of the song, which was now gay and exhilarating, and now soothed them into pleasing melancholy.

Of all the sons of the plain, the bravest, and the most comely, was Edwin. His forehead was open and ingenuous, his hair was auburn, and flowed about his shoulders in wavy ringlets. His person was not less athletic than it was beautiful. With a firm hand he grasped the boar-spear, and in pursuit he outstripped the flying fawn. His voice was strong and melodious, and whether upon the pipe or in the song, there was no shepherd daring enough to enter the lists with Edwin. But though he excelled all his competitors, in strength of body, and the accomplishments of skill, yet was not his mind rough and boisterous. Success had not taught him a despotic and untractable temper, applause had not made him insolent and vain. He was gentle as the dove. He listened with eager docility to the voice of hoary wisdom. He had always a tear ready to drop over the simple narrative of pastoral distress. Victor as he continually was in wrestling, in the race, and in the song, the shout of triumph never escaped his lips, the exultation of insult he was never heard to utter. On the contrary, with mild and unfictitious friendship, he soothed the breast of disappointment, and cheered the spirits of his adversary with honest praise.

But Edwin was not more distinguished among his brother shepherds, than was Imogen among the fair. Her skin was clear and pellucid. The fall of her shoulders was graceful beyond expression. Her eye-brows were arched, and from her eyes shot forth the grateful rays of the rising sun. Her waist was slender; and as she ran, she outstripped the winds, and her footsteps were printless on the tender herb. Her mind, though soft, was firm; and though yielding as wax to the precepts of wisdom, and the persuasion of innocence,

it was resolute and inflexible to the blandishments of folly, and the sternness of despotism. Her ruling passion was the love of virtue. Chastity was the first feature in her character. It gave substance to her accents, and dignity to her gestures. Conscious innocence ennobled all her reflexions, and gave to her sentiments and manner of thinking, I know not what of celestial and divine.

Edwin and Imogen had been united in the sports of earliest infancy. They had been mutual witnesses to the opening blossoms of understanding and benevolence in each others breasts. While yet a boy, Edwin had often rescued his mistress from the rude vivacity of his playmates, and had bestowed upon her many of those little distinctions which were calculated to excite the flame of envy among the infant daughters of the plain. For her he gathered the vermeil-tinctured pearmain, and the walnut with an unsavoury rind; for her he hoarded the brown filberd, and the much prized earth-nut. When she was near, the quoit flew from his arm with a stronger whirl, and his steps approached more swiftly to the destined goal. With her he delighted to retire from the heat of the sun to the centre of the glade, and to sooth her ear with the gaiety of innocence, long before he taught her to hearken to the language of love. For her sake he listened with greater eagerness to the mirthful relation, to the moral fiction, and to the song of the bards. His store of little narratives was in a manner inexhaustible. With them he beguiled the hour of retirement, and with them he hastened the sun to sink behind the western hill.

But as he grew to manly stature, and the down of years had begun to clothe his blushing cheek, he felt a new sensation in his breast hitherto unexperienced. He could not now behold his favourite companion without emotion; his eye sparkled when he approached her; he watched her gestures; he hung upon her accents; he was interested in all her motions. Sometimes he would catch the eye of prudent age or of sharp-sighted rivalry observing him, and he instantly became embarrassed and confused, and blushed he knew not why. He repaired to the neighbouring wake, in order to exchange his young lambs and his hoard of cheeses. Imogen was not there, and in the midst of traffic, and in the midst of frolic merriment he was conscious to a vacancy and a listlessness for which he could not account. When he tended his flocks, and played upon his slender pipe, he would sink in reverie, and form to himself a thousand schemes of imaginary happiness. Erewhile they had been vague and general. His spirit was too gentle for him not to represent to himself a fancied associate; his heart was not narrow enough to know so much as the meaning of a solitary happiness. But Imogen now formed the principal figure in these waking dreams. It was Imogen with whom he wandered beside the brawling rill. It was Imogen with whom he sat beneath the straw-built shed, and listened to the pealing rain, and the hollow roaring of the northern blast. If a moment of forlornness and despair fell to his lot, he wandered upon the heath without his Imogen, and he climbed the upright precipice without her harmonious voice to cheer and to animate him. In a word, passion had taken up her abode in his guileless heart before

he was aware of her approach. Imogen was fair; and the eye of Edwin was enchanted. Imogen was gentle; and Edwin loved.

Simple as was the character of the inhabitants of this happy valley, it is not to be supposed that Edwin found many obstacles to the enjoyment of the society of his mistress. Though strait as the pine, and beautiful as the gold-skirted clouds of a summer morning, the parents of Imogen had not learned to make a traffic of the future happiness of their care. They sought not to decide who should be the fortunate shepherd that should carry her from the sons of the plain. They left the choice to her penetrating wit, and her tried discretion. They erected no rampart to defend her chastity; they planted no spies to watch over her reputation. They entrusted her honour to her own keeping. They were convinced, that the spotless dictates of conscious innocence, and that divinity that dwells in virtue and awes the shaggy satyr into mute admiration, were her sufficient defence. They left to her the direction of her conduct. The shepherdess, unsuspicious by nature, and untaught to view mankind with a wary and a jealous eye, was a stranger to severity and caprice. She was all gentleness and humanity. The sweetness of her temper led her to regard with an eye of candour, and her benevolence to gratify all the innocent wishes, of those about her. The character of a woman undistinguishing in her favours, and whose darling employment is to increase the number of her admirers, is in the highest degree unnatural. Such was not the character of Imogen. She was artless and sincere. Her tongue evermore expressed the sentiments of her heart. She drew the

attention of no swain from a rival; she employed no stratagems to inveigle the affections; she mocked not the respect of the simple shepherd with delusive encouragement. No man charged her with broken vows; no man could justly accuse her of being cruel and unkind.

It may therefore readily be supposed, that the subject of love rather glided into the conversation of Edwin and Imogen, than was regularly and designedly introduced. They were unknowing in the art of disguising their feelings. When the tale spoke of peril and bravery, the eyes of Edwin sparkled with congenial sentiments, and he was evermore ready to start from the grassy hilloc upon which they sat. When the little narrative told of the lovers pangs, and the tragic catastrophe of two gentle hearts whom nature seemed to have formed for mildness and tranquility, Imogen was melted into the softest distress. The breast of her Edwin would heave with a sympathetic sigh, and he would even sometimes venture, from mingled pity and approbation, to kiss away the tear that impearled her cheek. Intrepid and adventurous with the hero, he began also to take a new interest in the misfortunes of love. He could not describe the passionate complaints, the ingenuous tenderness of another, without insensibly making the case his own. "Had the lover known my Imogen, he would no longer have sighed for one, who could not have been so fair, so gentle, and so lovely." Such were the thoughts of Edwin; and till now Edwin had always expressed his thoughts. But now the words fell half-formed from his trembling lips, and the sounds died away before they were uttered. "Were I to speak, Imogen, who has always beheld me with an aspect of

benignity, might be offended. I should say no more than the truth; but Imogen is modest. She does not suspect that she possesses half the superiority over such as are called fair, which I see in her. And who could bear to incur the resentment of Imogen? Who would irritate a temper so amiable and mild? I should say no more than the truth; but Imogen would think it flattery. Let Edwin be charged with all other follies, but let that vice never find a harbour in his bosom; let the imputation of that detested crime never blot his untarnished name."

Edwin had received from nature the gift of an honest and artless eloquence. His words were like the snow that falls beneath the beams of the sun; *they melted as they fell*. Had it been his business to have pleaded the cause of injured innocence or unmerited distress, his generous sympathy and his manly persuasion must have won all hearts. Had he solicited the pursuit of rectitude and happiness, his ingenuous importunity could not have failed of success. But where the mind is too deeply interested, there it is that the faculties are most treacherous. Ardent were the sighs of Edwin, but his voice refused its assistance, and his tongue faultered under the attempts that he made. Fluent and voluble upon all other subjects, upon this he hesitated. For the first time he was dissatisfied with the expressions that nature dictated. For the first time he dreaded to utter the honest wishes of his heart, apprehensive that he might do violence to the native delicacy of Imogen.

But he needed not have feared. Imogen was not blind to those perfections which every mouth conspired to praise. Her heart was not cold and unimpassioned; she could not