

THE STORY OF HIS LIFE.

AN INTERESTING PEN PICTURE OF THE GREAT UNKNOWN.

What Scott Was Like Personally—He Was Homely Yet Sagacious Looking—The Waverley Novels and the Circumstances Under Which They Were Written.

What of the person of Walter Scott? I have before me as I write a print of the portrait painted by Raeburn for Archibald Constable. It shows the poet at the age of thirty-seven, and the boyishness had not vanished from his figure and his features. The shadows had not begun to fall; sorrow, drudgery, with the ruin of his fortunes had not changed him as they so rapidly did in the later years. There is a certain charm of romance in the very setting of the portrait and its accessories. At his back are seen the square-hewn stones of some old castle he has been exploring. The forefinger of his right hand is inserted between the pages of a note book which he holds; white in the left between thumb and forefinger he keeps the ready pencil. His homely, yet sagacious face, with the dark negligent locks, is redeemed by the large, steady eyes, that seem to glow dulkily and tell the story of genius. It fascinates you—this picture! It is the roving minstrel, Scott, seen as he can, perhaps, be nowhere so well seen; but it has this advantage, that the face is in repose, while the glory of Scott's countenance was peculiarly its expression when lighted up from the scul within.

Miss Seward, writing to Cary, the translator of Dante, has given an exceedingly pleasing pen-picture of Scott, who was one of her personal friends: "On Friday last," she says "the poetically great Walter Scott came like a sunbeam to my dwelling. This proudest boast of the Caledonian muse, is tall, and rather robust than slender, but lame in the same manner as Mr. Hayley, and in greater measure. Neither the contour of his face nor yet his features are elegant; his complexion is healthy and somewhat fair, without bloom. We find the singularity of brown hair and eyelashes with flaxen eyebrows, and a countenance open, ingenuous and benevolent. When seriously conversing or earnestly attentive, though his eyes are of a lightish gray, deep thought is on their lids; he contracts his brow, and the rays of genius gleam aslant from the orbs beneath. An upper lip too long, prevents his mouth from being decidedly handsome, but the sweetest emanations of temper and art play at out it when he talks cheerfully or smiles; and in company he is much oftener gay than contemplative. His conversation is an overflowing fountain of brilliant wit, appetite allusion, and playful archness, while on serious themes it is nervous and eloquent, the accent decidedly Scotch, and yet by no means broad. On the whole, no expectation is disappointed which his poetry must excite in all who feel the power and graces of human inspiration."

Ballantyne and Scott—sub rosa—were not a substantial firm. Caution, experience, and general adaptiveness were not in the poet's friend in a degree sufficient to constitute him a rival of the Constables and Murrays of the time. He was enthusiastic and intrepid in the trial; but in the end more "staying" qualities are requisite. July 1809 is the date written on the deed of copartnership, by which Scott was constituted a one-third partner in the concern. But prudence and business tact were conspicuously wanting in their transactions; so that, in 1816 their affairs came to a crisis, and they sold out to Constable and Co., though that firm is said to have lost some 5000 l by the transaction. "My brother," said James Ballantyne, in his last days, "though active and pushing, was not a cautious bookseller, and the large sums received never formed an addition to stock. In fact, they were all expended by the partners, who, being then young and sanguine, not unwillingly adopted my brother's hasty results."

Napoleon seemed at one time to say: I have a star arisen which can never decline. Scott seemed carelessly to affirm,—"Wherever I may please to strike the toe of my boot there opens a golden lode. Such temporarily successful recklessness would otherwise be impossible. On what contrast with the strife of that other prodigious literary laborer Southey, (who just now came in for the Laureateship, after it had been refused by Scott, and who certainly had greater need of the paltry salary attached to that office), was this literary Ixion of his time;—the genius of drudgery,—leaving no task, not to sport, but to take up another. The other, seeming at constant liberty, always ready for friends and entertainments, and races a-field; achieving the marvels at which the world wondered, as if by stealth,—the day's work of another man in the morning before breakfast! Such a man might seem well to say: Why should I burden myself, or take excessive care? Yet, in the end, the plodder succeeds and the taker of pains is justified. What we read of him reminds us of a jovial free-handed companion, once our own, whose purse was as open to his neighbor as himself, but who was not discreet, equal with his generosity. We must admire, even while we blame, his reckless extravagance. "Every man of any note called him friend. The most splendid equipages crowded the way towards his house; the feast was spread continually—

as it were the feast of a king"; while on the balcony not ranging along the whole front, stalked to and fro, in his tertians, the wild piper, and made the air quiver with the tempestuous music of the hills. Arms and armor were ranged along the walls and galleries of his hall. There were portraits of some of the most noted persons who had figured in his lays and stories—as of Claver house, Monmouth, the Pretender the several head of the Queen of Scots; with those of brother poets, Dryden, Thomson, Prior, and Gay. There were the escutcheons of all the great clan chieftains blazoned round the ceilings of his hall; and swords, daggers, pistols, and instruments of torture, from the times and scenes he had celebrated. Such was the scene of splendor which had sprung from the pen of one man. If it were wonderful the streams of wealth which continued to pour from the same enchanted gosse-quill were still more astounding. From Lockhart's life we see that, independent of what those works have made since, he had pretty early netted above 13,000 l. by his poems, though he had sold some of them in the first edition.

While Scott was thus flourishing in intellectual and pecuniary splendor—and yet while the pit of ruin into which he subsequently fell was given, now and then, an admonitory vibration, he took residence at Abbotsford. As yet his abode was a cottage, in which he sometimes expressed himself as willing to retire for the remainder of his life, secure from "the bustle, care and fever-strife." But he rejoiced to think he was within his own domain, and that at his touch wizard power, his castle-palace should soon arise, for the administration of still more liberal and princely entertainment. Here commenced the preeminent brilliant period of his literary exertion—successful as his poetic career had been—in the 'production in rapid succession,' of that wonderful list of the "Waverley Novels." "Waverley" was given to the public in July 1814, and was received, it is said, with greater enthusiasm than the "Lady of the Lake." No literary success could have been more decided; while the opening of this new vein, and the coincident decline of his poetic gift, determined his future course, and insured more fabulous rewards. All he had reaped from his poetry is but a fragment of what he earned by his romances, and his other prose writing. Not to burden the reader with details, it may be sufficient to give the estimate for the whole of his writings, that they "must have produced to the author or his trustees, at the very least, half a million of money!" The first part of "Waverley" had been written at Ashiestiel, some years earlier; and had been condemned by the author upon an unfavorable judgment of his friend, James Ballantyne, and thrown aside as valueless. Coming upon it one day, at Abbotsford, in an old cabinet he was searching for some fishing-tackle, he drew the fragment forth. He read it over, and—whether time had reasoned it, or not—it bore the test of repetition so well that he determined to complete it. So, evening after evening, the hand was seen to move, until the talismanic work was complete; when it was offered to Constable, with whom he had re-established friendly relations. The publisher reluctantly undertook the task of ushering it to the public, and was not without his misgivings. His doubts and fears were groundless; he had never gotten himself, so cheaply, such a treasure, nor had he ever offered the public anything they were so eager to buy.

Scott was now on his new 'track and in perfect racing trim. In a few months (Feb. 1815) "Guy Mannering" followed "Waverley," which was taken by the public as a flock of hens take corn. With the smack of "Waverley" on their lips, all the reading public of Britain and America sat at once down to "Guy Mannering," and still they hoped and hungered. The author's blood was up, (that author still unknown), and whole regions of romance and history were opening up in his mind; while in the conviction of his publisher there was as positive assurance. Now Constable can, and must pay him, quoth Scott; now he will build Abbotsford: As a specimen of his rapid production, it is authoritatively stated that his second romance was written in six weeks, while the author was at Abbotsford refreshing the machine! Then the poet is off for a season;—London opens her gates, and he sees lords, dukes, poets, and literature in plenty. He dines with the Prince Regent, and lionizes finely,—albeit, no one knows that he is the author of "Waverley." Well his minstrelsy is enough! Then to Paris, occupied by the albes. But where was the intoxication of all this national glory when next he took his harp? His poem on "Waterloo," which appeared in October, 1815, was as languidly received by the public as its singular lack of merit justified. We have read "The Lay," "Marmion," and "The Lady of the Lake," many times; we have read "Waterloo"

once. 'The Lord of the Isles,' issued in the same year, showed also a decline in his poetical reputation, much to his disappointment. But it was not so barren as his "Waterloo." Where were the martial force and fire, the verve, the rapidity, of the minstrel who sang of Flodden, when dealing with this quick and blood-red subject? Yet, how the lines lag and halt: how cold and ineffectual they seem! With what different result did Byron approach the scene of that 'king making' and king-marring victory;—that p'ain,—haunted with the ghosts of heroes, and bedewed with blood,—from which the stains and scars had scarcely been worn away! But Scott's favorite flavor of antiquity was not there. Beside, his poetical nerve was evidently relaxed. All his poems, subsequent to "The Lady of the Lake," while rising to his old-time height in a few passages, betray, on the whole, a departure of his old-time strength and spirit. We would not underrate them; as the work of an inferior they might be highly noticeable compositions, but as the work of Scott, are disappointing. We have read "Rokely" and "The Lord of the Isles," again and again, trying to make them seem as good as the earlier poems;—we cannot. The form and sound may appear the same; but, in truth, they give the impression more of clever imitations than the works of an original master. Fertile in all lines, as he was, Scott, in his immense industry, never failed to write himself out; and like the true lover of his work, never seemed to know when he was done.

That Scott should have kept the authorship of his novels a secret for so long, seems in these divining newspapers days incomprehensible. The Scotch are proverbially a canny race, and can hardly be exceeded by the yankees in their inquisitiveness. The magnitude of his income and of his outlay must have excited suspicion, to say nothing of the marvellous authorship to which no name could be found. However the secret was most carefully kept, and only a few intimates, with the shrewdness and familiarity of the Ettrick Shepherd would presume to be certain that the Great Unknown was Scott. The astounding failure of the Ballantynes finally made the disclosure necessary, and the magician showed his hand, admitting at a public dinner, that he was the sole author. Scott's go between in the maintenance of this privacy, was his life-long friend John Ballantyne, to whom he in playful mood, gave the humorous name of "Kigdom Funnidos,"—a choice of agents not well approved by his kinsman and biographer. Lockhart thinks it unwise in Scott, and unfortunate for him, that he trusted so implicitly in Ballantyne. He "had his own axe to grind, and was always jealous of the influence of constable, who looked down with quiet scorn upon the mercenary little man as an interloper in the trade, but who, nevertheless, induced Scott to place the first series of the "Tales of my Landlord" in the hands of John Murray and his Edinburgh agent, William Blackwood. It is evident from his letters that, while the negotiations for this change of publishers were in progress, Scott himself had serious misgivings as to the wisdom of the course his partner was pursuing; and Blackwood, being kept in total ignorance of the author of the work he was about to publish, and, moreover, being a plain, blunt man of business, deeply offended Scott by some strictures—and very just they were—on the conclusion of the "Black Dwarf," concluding his letter to John Ballantyne, with the suggestion of an outline of what would in his judgment be a better unwinding of the plot. This letter appears to have been sent to Scott by James Ballantyne, for to the printer was this sharp rejoinder addressed:

"DEAR JAMES,—I have received Blackwood's impudent letter. . . . Tell him and his confederate that I belong to the Black Hussars of literature, who neither give nor receive criticism. I'll be cursed but this is the most impudent proposal that ever was made. W. S."

Blackwood did not long continue to be his publisher. One edition only of the "Tales" was issued by the firm of Murray and his associate; then Scott returned to Archibald Constable & Co., and they or their successors in the trade put forth all his subsequent works. Authors in the rapture of creating, have not been scrupulous about their material or the morale of their treatment. To become the subject of vulgar indignation, and to be tasked by the unliberal but respectable citizen, who regards a masterpiece in character drawing as an unmitigated libel, is a frequent experience among poets and romancers. So was it with Hawthorne, when he wrote "The Scarlet Letter"; so was it with Dickens, when he wrote "Bleak House," and so was it with Scott, when "Old Mortality" was given to the public. A storm of indignation, which he doubtless never dreamed, broke suddenly about his head, from a multitude who believed that he had outraged the covenanter's memory, lo! he had done an infamous thing! He had committed the crimes of treason, sacrilege and blasphemy, in one act! Good Dr. McCreie did not spare the novelist in the Edinburgh Christian Instructor; and after the head at which that Phillipic was aimed that had been laid low in honor, it was issued as a tract under the patronage of the General Assembly of the Free Church. It must be owned Scott drew no flattering picture; nor did

he handle the heroes of martyrology precisely as Fote would have done; yet we may well be believed that in his kindly heart Scott cherished all just and generous purposes, and he, as he says "would not wish to offend any good soul who had a real scruple." But it is long before Scott will be wholly exonerate and forgiven by the strictest of Scottish presbyterians, "who taught and trained in unbounded reverence for their forefathers, were prepared to fasten on every word and syllable that told against them—to find the blame outrageous and the praise null.

The list of Scott's calamities was begun, when in 1817, a painful disease of the stomach came upon him. Not since the illness recorded, while yet a clerk in his father's law-office, had he suffered an hour from pain or weakness; but now he was frequently incapacitated for work of any kind. Nevertheless, under this serious disadvantage, one of his most powerful and popular novels was written. The title affixed to "Rob Roy" was the happy suggestion of his publisher, who rescued it from the meditated but dubious misnomer, "The Clachan of Aberfoyle." Scott's illness necessitated an amanuensis; William Laidlaw—who acted as first and only in this capacity—taking most of it down from the author's dictation. It is said that James Ballantyne called on him one day for copy. There sat Scott, as if dazed, with pen undipt, and a blank sheet before him. Ballantyne was surprised and expressed it. "Ay, ay, Jemmy," replied Scott, "it is easy for you to tell me to get on; but how the mischief can I make Rob Roy's wife speak, with such a murmuring in my g—ts?"

"This illness lasted long and did serious work upon the frame of Scott; for we read that, during all the close of 1818 and the beginning of 1819 he continued to be assaulted by cramp, and was reduced to a skeleton. His hair became white as snow, his cheek faded, and the last days of the "Last Mins reel" seemed to have arrived! During his intervals of surcease from pain he continued his work of dictation; sometimes interrupting the strain of romantic discourse by exclamations, or even by "sighs of agony." And so, "The heart of Midlothian," "The Bride of Lammer Moor," "The Legend of Montrose," and the greater part of "Ivanhoe" were written. Little will the reader at his ease with one of these fascinating works consider the pang which perhaps gave a stimulus to even while they temporarily interrupted, the operations of genius. The disease eventually yielded to calomel, taken in small doses.

Another of Scott's misfortunes was the death of his old long-loved ad trusted friend, John Ballantyne. After a lingering, wearisome illness, his life closed in June, 1821. The passing of early friends, seems to us a foreboding on our own fate, and the beginning of many sorrows. It made a great blank in the world for Scott. "While committing the remains of poor "Kigdom Funnidos to the Calton burying ground, the heavens which had been dark, cleared up, and the mid-day sun shone forth. Scott glanced his eye along the gleaming Calton Hill, and then, turning to the grave, said, in a whisper to Lockhart,—"I feel as if there would be less sunshine for me from this day forth." Garrick's death is said to have eclipsed the gaiety of nations. Ballantyne's, in shading that of Scott, shaded that of Scotland and the world." Yet the Minstrel's honors continued to increase, and his hopes continued to flower. In the early part of 1820 he is away at London, and when he returns again, he is Sir Walter, and he has the marriage of his eldest daughter Sophia, in a manner more elate, that George the Fourth has created him a Baronet of the United Kingdom. He has had audience with the king; he has kissed the hand of the first gentleman in Europe; he, who has written of knights, is now a knight himself. Should he not be a happy Minstrel! Had he been other than royal, Scott must have despised his miserable patron; but titles and trappings cover a multitude of sins, and it was after this that "Sartor Resartus" was written. PASTOR FELIX.

"This tallies well with Dr. John Brown's account in his story of 'Marjorie Fleming,' of Scott's humor in writing and sometime disinclination: 'I am off the bang. I can make nothing of Waverley today.'

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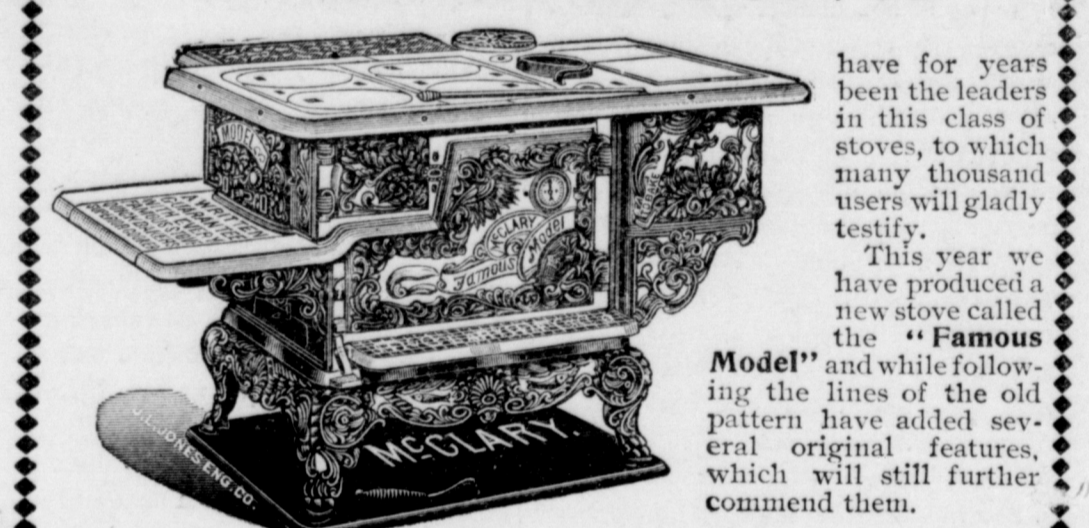
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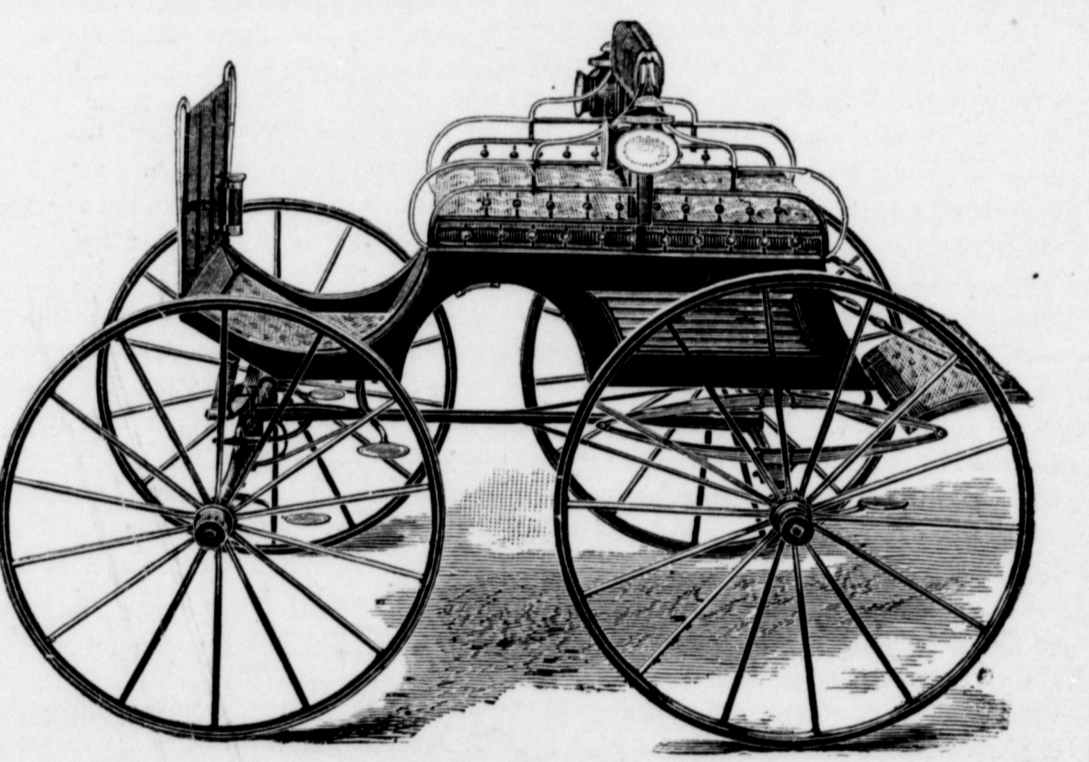
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