

A POET'S EARLY YEARS.

THE BOYHOOD HAUNTS OF A GREAT SCOTTISH MINSTREL.

Pastor Felix Tells of the Early Life of Sir Walter Scott—How his Boyhood was Spent and the Surroundings Which Helped to Form his Character.

"His value I tell you, It never crossed his brain."

Whoever visits Edinburgh cannot get rid of Walter Scott, for his monument is there—itself a creation of genius,—and his grave is not very far away. It is his "own romantic town," where he "came unto his own" on the 15th of August, 1771. The house wherein he was born, he tells us, belongs to his father, and was "at the head of the college Wynd. It was pulled down to make room for the northern part of the new college." As you go up the Wynd, it once stood on the left hand corner, about at the top, projecting into what has since been called North College street; but it was destroyed many years ago. His father—whose name was also Walter,—a lawyer of the higher grade, known in Scotland as a writer to the signet, lived on the site, as says, Robert Chambers, "according to the simple fashion of our fathers, the flat which he occupied being accessible by a stair leading up from the little court behind. It was a house of what would now be considered humble aspect, but at that time neither humble from its individual appearance nor from its vicinage. When required to be destroyed for the public convenience, Mr. Scott received a good price for it; he had some time before removed to a house on the west side of George's square, where Sir Walter spent all his school boy days. At the same time that Mr. Scott lived in the third flat, the two lower floors were occupied as one house by Mr. Keith, W. S., grandfather to the late Sir Alexander Keith, knight-marshal of Scotland." What a pity these old homes of great men must be pulled down! But their value as memorials is not then perceived. For what new structure would we surrender the little mud-walled cottage near the Doon, or the bare crumbling walls of Alloway Kirk?

One day Scott was walking through "Auld Reekie," with a literary visitor, and pointed out this site, part of which was a wood-yard, and divided from North College street, by a wooden fence. Upon Scott's mention of the good round price his father got for his share in the building, the remark was made, that "more money might have been made of it, and the public much more gratified, if it had remained to be shown as the birth-place of a man who had written so many popular books." "Ay, ay," rejoined Sir Walter, "that is very well; but I am afraid it would have been necessary for me to die first, and that, you know, would not have been so comfortable."

Scott descended from ancient and well-known Scottish families, on both sides of the house, and he was proud of it. An ambition like that of Hastings, to restore his lost prestige with the estate of Daylesford, was inspired in some degree by this feeling, to found a noble family that should occupy as prominent a place as the Scotts and Hardens of old. His mother was a Ruthven, a name fragrant with saintly memories—and the daughter of Dr. Ruthven, a physician of standing in the city, and medical professor in the University. A steady-going, prudent, thrifty man was his father, a thorough Presbyterian of the old school. Some of the poet's early verses bear witness that the catechism was not omitted; and indeed a deeply religious and serious strain may frequently be discovered in his writings. It may be interesting to learn that the author of the translation of the "Dies Iree" in "Melay," and of the fine hymn in "Invanoeh," wrote as one of his earliest essays in verse, in 1783,—

We often praise the evening clouds,
And tints so gay and bold,
But seldom think upon our God,
Who tinges these clouds with gold."

My dear little school fellow, can you not do as well?

But the home of Scott's boyhood in Edinburgh is still to be found at No. 25 George's Square; though it is not now as it was when his father removed to it, in a fashionable quarter of the city. In old days the gentry of the place were content with their flats in the tall "tin storied houses" of the old city—indeed there was then no new city. But gradually, as Mr. Robert Chambers informs us—who is to Edinburgh what Mr. LeMoine is to our

*Scott's father was one of these rare marvels of Divine Providence, being thoroughly honest. He was a man of somewhat distant, formal manners, but of singular kindness of heart, of sterling worth, and of deep toned piety after the Calvinistic mode. He had a noble presence, handsome features, a sweet expression of countenance; and, as Sir Walter says, "he looked the mourner to well" that he was often invited to funerals, and seems to have positively enjoyed those formalities, monotonous and melancholy, connected with Scottish interments for which his son has expressed in his Journal such disgust, and which he has termed in his "Guy Mannering" with such ludicrous fidelity. Old Fairford, in "Redgauntlet" is unquestionably a graphic though highly colored sketch of the elder Scott.—Memories of Distinguished Authors.

The Edinburgh Pen and Pencil Club propose to mark with memorial tablets several of the capital's notable houses connected with literature and art. Among those to be so distinguished are Scott's house, 39, Castle street ("Dear 39" as he called it), and the earlier residence at 25, George square, the house where Burns resided while seeing the first Edinburgh edition of his poems through the press; and the house in which David Hume began his "History of England." The house in which De Quincey died has already been marked by a tablet. London Literary World, Jan. 26th, 1894.

own Canadian city of Quebec, the historian of the place, and a listener, as it were, to the legend of every stone in the walls,—the men of trade and the nobility got tired of their stairways and closes, and sought "quite and more airy residences in the suburbs." With the extension of the city, St. George's was one of the first squares, and it lies near Heriot's and Watson's hospitals, and at the left of the Meadows-Walk. It is now half-ancient, and with the insignia of a decayed gentility about it, in the presence here and there of a door-plate still bearing some aristocratic title. In the neighborhood lived Lord Duncan, hero of the naval battle of Camperdown; Dr. Blacklock the blind poet, and genial friend of Burns; Anderson, the publisher, and others. Howitt says, that when he visited it, "a quieter square could not, perhaps be found. The grass was growing greenly amongst the stones." The houses he describes as "capacious and good, and from the upper windows many of them look out over the green fields, and have a full view of the Pentland hills."

There was in this house a back room on the ground floor where the name Scott had with a diamond been inscribed upon a window-pane, and also verses, undoubtedly his own. These panes were afterward removed and bestowed upon some London admirers of the great author. The school-boy hand indicates their early date and the dreams and hopes that then inspired his breast who should one day set his name so high on the walls of Fame's temple. This little chamber was then his own, and here his youth-time fancies rose, and his treasures were deposited. The Autobiography has some reference to it, and Jeffrey relates that coming for the first time to call on young Walter, "he found him in a small den, on the sunk floor of his father's house, in George's Square, surrounded with dingy books." Lockhart completes the picture, with materials which he says, were furnished him by a lady of the Scott family. "Walter had soon begun to collect out of the way things of all sorts. He had more books than shelves; a small painted cabinet, with Scotch and Roman coins in it, and so forth. A claymore and Lochaber axe, given him by Mr. Invernahyle, mounted guard on a little print of Prince Charlie; and Broughton's Sauer was hooked up against the wall below it. Such was the germ of the magnificent library at Abbotsford; and such were the 'new realms' in which he, on taking possession, had arranged his little paraphernalia about him, 'with all the feelings of novelty and liberty.' . . . Since those days the habits of life in Edinburgh, as elsewhere, have undergone many changes; and 'the convenient parlor,' in which Scott first showed Jeffrey his collection of minstrelsy, is now in all probability, thought hardly good enough for a menial's sleeping room.

"This," says Howitt, who visited it after the above words were written, "is very much the fact; such a poor little damp den did this appear, being evidently used by the cook, as it was behind the kitchen, for a sort of little lumber-room of her own, that my companion contended that Scott's room must have been the one over this. The evidence here is, however, too strong as to its identity, and, indeed, who does not know what little dingy nooks children, and even youths, with ardent imaginations can convert into palaces?"

Number 25, St. George Square may become a memory, but a sunny enticing memory it will ever be, as "one of the most interesting spots connected with Scott's history. It was here that he lived, from a very child to his marriage. Here passed all that happy boyhood and youth which are described with so much beautiful detail in his life . . . These show in his case how truly and entirely:

"The child was father of the man;
or as Milton had it long before,
"The childhood shows the man
As morning shows the day."

Here it was that he led his happy boyhood, in the midst of that beautiful family life which he has so attractively described; the grave, careful but kind father; the sweet, sensible, lady-like, and religious mother; the three brothers, various in their fortunes as in their dispositions; and that one unfortunate sister, Anne Scott, whom he terms from her cradle the butt for mischance to shoot arrows at . . . Here, as school boy college student, and law student, he made his early friendships, often to continue for life,—with John Irvine; George Abercrombie son of the famous general, and afterwards Lord Abercrombie; William Clerk, afterwards of Eldin, son of Sir John Clerk, of Pennyquick House; Adam Ferguson, son of the celebrated professor; the Earl of Selkirk, David Boyle, Lord Justice Clerk, Lord Jeffrey, Mr. Claude Russell, Sir William Rae, David Monypenny, afterwards Lord Pittmill; Sir Archibald Campbell of Succoth, Bart. the Earl of Dalhousie, George Cranston (Lord Corehouse) John James Edmonstone, of Newton; Patrick Murray, of Simprim; Sir Patrick Murray, of Ochertyre; David Douglas (Lord Preston); Thomas Thompson, the celebrated antiquary; William Erskine (Lord Kinnedder) Alexander Frazer Tytler (Lord Woodhouselee), and other celebrated men with many of whom he was connected in a literary club.

"Here it was that, with one intimate or another, and sometimes in a jovial troop, he set out on those country excursions

which were to render him so affluent in knowledge of life and varied character; commencing with their almost daily strolls about Arthur's seat and Salisbury crags, repeating poetry and ballads; then to Preston-Pans, Pennyquick, and so extending their rambles to Roslyn, Lasswadd, the Pentlands, down into Roxburghshire, into Fife, to Floddin, Chevy Chase, Otterburn, and many another scene or border renown, Liddesdale being, as we have stated, one of the most fascinating; and finally away into the Highlands, where as the attorney's clerk, his business led him amongst those old Highland chiefs who had been out in '15 and '45, and where the veteran Invernahyle set him on fire with his stories of Rob Roy, Mac, and Prince Charlie; and where the Baron of Bradwardine and Tullyveolan, and all the scenes of Waverley, and others of his Scotch romances, were impressed on his soul forever. Here it was, too, that he had for tutor that good-hearted, but formal clergyman, Mr. Mitchell, who was afterwards so startled when Sir Walter, calling on him at his manse in Montrose, told him he was 'collecting stories of fairies, witches, and ghosts.' 'Intelligence,' said the pious old Presbyterian minister, 'which proved to me an electric shock; adding, that moreover, 'these ideal beings, the subjects of his inquiry,' were not objects on which he had himself wasted his time." And here, finally, it was that, in the ballads he read,—as in that of Cumnor Hall, the germ of Kenilworth, of which he used as a boy to be continually repeating the best verse,—

"The dews of summer night did fall—
The moon, sweet regent of the sky,
Silvered the walls of Cumnor Hall.
And many an oak that grew thereby;—

in the lays of Tasso, Ariosto, etc., he laid up so much of the food for future romance, and where Edie Ochiltree and Dugald Dalgetties were crossing his everyday path.

"It was here that occurred that singular scene, in which his mother bringing in a cup of coffee to a gentleman who was transacting business with her husband, when the stranger was gone, Mr. Scott told his wife that this man was Murry of Broughton, who had been a traitor to Prince Charles Stuart; and saying that his lip should never touch the cup which a traitor had drank out of, flung it out of the window. The saucer, however being preserved, was secured by Scott, and became a conspicuous object in his juvenile museum. Such to Scott was No. 25, George Square. Is it not the secret charm of these old and precious associations which led his old and most intimate friend, Sir Adam Ferguson, to take a house in this square, and within, I believe, one door of Scott's old residence."

The city had its part, but it had not the first and determinate influence in moulding this poet. He almost awoke from the half-consciousness of infancy, to find himself in the arms of mother Nature. To heal the wound she made she sent him to the fountains of his intellectual life, and he drank deep as the gods drink when they get hold of the ambrosial liquor. A fever, consequent upon difficult teething, settled in one of his feet, producing a permanent lameness, and his parents sent him to Sandy Knowe, near Kelso,—the home of his paternal grandfather. The old man, Robert Scott, (a descendant from the border knight, and the descendant from a race of yeomen, always resident in the country), was still living, though at an advanced age. A grandfather's house has more than once become the nursery of a poet, and here he was, at large, in the selectest region and ranging ground of romance. A slightly place it is, and in the time of Scott's boyhood wild enough for painter or poets choice; with brown moorlands stretching wildly around. The farmers plough has since altered the aspect of this waste; but still the general appearance of the country "is open, naked and solitary." But to the boy there was one point of interest he never wearied in inspecting, and around which he has woven such legends as are found in his "Eve of St. John;" the mouldering, but still mighty tower of Smalholm, whose dark bulk lifted aloft on the summit of the Knowe, still seemed to threaten with challenge and defiance, and speak of the changing fortunes of the feudal border times. This square old keep, stern as the men who once defended it "built of the iron-like whinstone rock" of the crag, and which "seemed as if it were a solid and time proof portion of the crag on which it stands," has been described by Scott himself: "The circuit of the outer court being defended on three sides by a precipice and a morass, is accessible only from the west by a steep and rocky path. The apartments as usual in a border keep or fortress, are placed one above another, and communicate by a narrow stair. On the roof are two bartizans or platforms, for defence or pleasure. The inner door of the tower is wood, the outer an iron grate; the distance between them being nine feet, the thickness, namely, of the walls. Among the crags by which it is surrounded, one eminence is called the Watchfold; and it is said to have been the station of a beacon in the time of war with England."

What dreams and fancies thronged the boys mind as he lingered amid these bare and sterile scenes, wild as the deeds of blood and rawine that had been transacted there. As he lay on the Knowe, his head popped by his hand; or as he clambered to "the bartizan seat," where the Baron of Smalholm found his faithless lady, and from which he

Looked over hill and vale,
Over Tweed's fair flood, and Merion's wood,
And all down Teviotdale;

what visions of mailed-warriors, and spectre-knights, and dames high-blooded as their lords, passed in retinue before him! Thus he imbibed the first inspiration, prompting his poetic teils. Turn to one of those free-handed delightful introductions to Marmion—the third—and hear from his own lips how these things affected him:—

"It was a barren scene and wild,
Where naked cliffs were rudely piled;
But ever and anon between
Lay violet tufts of loveliest green;
And well the lonely infant knew
Recesses where the wall-flower grew,
And honeysuckle loved to crawl.
Up the low crag and ruined wall
I deemed such nooks the sweetest shade
The sun in all his rounds surveyed;
And still I thought the shattered tower
The mightiest work of human power;
And marvelled as the aged hind
With some strange tale bewitched my mind—
Of foragers who, with headlong force,
Down that same strength had spurred their horse,
Their southern rapine to renew,
Far in the distant Cheviots blue;
And home returning filled the hall
With revel, wassail rout, and brawl.
Methought that still with trump and clang
The gate-ways broken arches rang;
Methought grim features, seamed with scars,
Glanced through the windows rusty bars.
And even, by the winter hearth
Old tales I heard of war and mirth,
Of hero's slights, of lady's charms;
Of witches spells, of warriors arms;
Of patriot battles won of old
By Wallace Wight and Bruce the bold;
Of later fields of feud and fight,
When, pouring from their Highland height,
The Scotch clans in headlong sway,
Had swept the reeling ranks away.
While stretched at length upon the floor,
Again I fought each battle o'er;
Robbie and shells in order laid,
And mimic works of war displayed;
And onward still the Scottish host bore,
And still the scattered Southern host before."

A genial English writer filled with the spirit of the scene, which he visited long after Scott slept in his haunted shade at Dryburgh, says of the tower, and the view surrounding it: "The windows are small holes, and the feeling of grim strength which it gives you is intense. Since Scott's day, the inner door and the outer iron grate are gone. The place is open, and the cattle and the winds make it their resort. All around the black crags start out of the ground; it is an iron wilderness. There are a few laborious cotters just below it, and not far off is the spot where stood the old house of Scott's grandfather, a good modern farm-house and its buildings. This savage and solitary monument of the ages of feud and bloodshed, stands no longer part of a waste where—

"The bitter clamored from the moss,
The wind blew loud and shrill,"

but in the midst of a well-cultivated corn farm, where the farmer looks with a jealous eye on visitors, wondering what they can want with the naked old keep, and complaining that they leave their gates open. He had been thus venting his chagrin to the driver of my chaise, and wishing the tower were down—a stiff business to accomplish—but withdrew into his house at my approach." The picture of the surliest of the old warriors must have been in him, rather than that of the hospitable and romance-weaving Knight of Abbotsford.

PASTOR FELIX.

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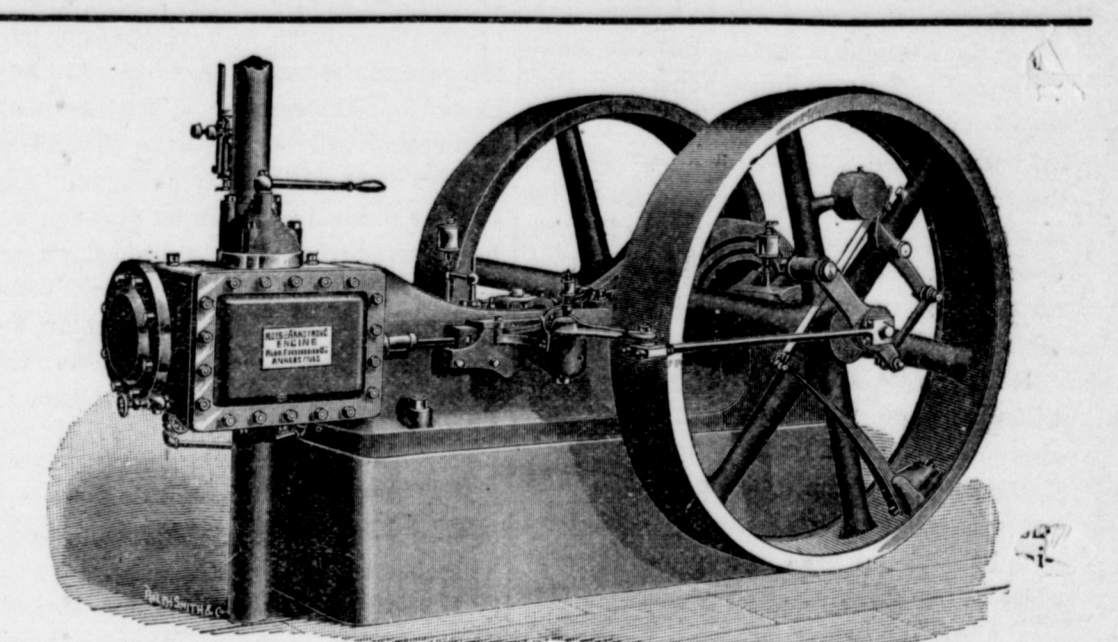
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