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978-1-108-05698-4 - Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott: Volume 2

John Gibson Lockhart

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS
OF THE
LIFE OF SIR WALTER SCOTT.

CHAPTER I.

REMOVAL TO ASHESTIEL—DEATH OF CAPTAIN ROBERT SCOTT
—MUNGO PARK—COMPLETION AND PUBLICATION OF THE
LAY OF THE LAST MINSTREL—1804–1805.

It has been mentioned that in the course of the preceding summer, the Lord-Lieutenant of Selkirkshire complained of Scott's military zeal as interfering sometimes with the discharge of his shrieval functions, and took occasion to remind him, that the law, requiring every Sheriff to reside at least four months in the year within his own jurisdiction, had not hitherto been complied with. It appears that Scott received this communication with some displeasure, being conscious that no duty of any importance had ever been neglected by him; well knowing that the law of residence was not enforced in the cases of many of his brother sheriffs; and, in fact, ascribing his Lord-Lieutenant's complaint to nothing but a certain nervous fidget as to all points of form, for which that respectable nobleman was notorious, as well became, perhaps, an old Lord of the Bedchamber, and High

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Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Kirk.* Scott, however, must have been found so clearly in the wrong, had the case been submitted to the Secretary of State, and Lord Napier conducted the correspondence with such courtesy, never failing to allege as a chief argument the pleasure which it would afford himself and the other gentlemen of Selkirkshire to have more of their Sheriff's society, that, while it would have been highly imprudent to persist, there could be no mortification in yielding. He flattered himself that his active habits would enable him to maintain his connexion with the Edinburgh Cavalry as usual; and, perhaps, he also flattered himself, that residing for the summer in Selkirkshire would not interfere more seriously with his business as a barrister, than the occupation of the cottage at Lasswade had hitherto done.

While he was seeking about, accordingly, for some "lodge in the Forest," his kinsman of Harden suggested that the tower of Auld Wat might be refitted, so as to serve his purpose; and he received the proposal with enthusiastic delight. On a more careful inspection of the localities, however, he became sensible that he would be practically at a greater distance from county business of all kinds at Harden, than if he were to continue at Lasswade. Just at this time, the house of

* I remember being much amused with an instance of Lord Napier's precision in small matters, mentioned by the late Lady Stewart of Castlemilk, in Lanarkshire. Lord and Lady Napier had arrived at Castlemilk, with the intention of staying a week; but next morning it was announced that a circumstance had occurred which rendered it indispensable for them to return without delay to their own seat in Selkirkshire. It was impossible for Lady Stewart to extract any further explanation at the moment, but it turned out afterwards that Lord Napier's valet had committed the grievous mistake of packing up a set of neckcloths which did not correspond *in point of date* with the shirts they accompanied!

Ashestiel, situated on the southern bank of the Tweed, a few miles from Selkirk, became vacant by the death of its proprietor, Colonel Russell, who had married a sister of Scott's mother, and the consequent dispersion of the family. The young laird of Ashestiel, his cousin, was then in India; and the Sheriff took a lease of the house and grounds, with a small farm adjoining. On the 4th May, two days after the *Tristrem* had been published, he says to Ellis: "I have been engaged in travelling backwards and forwards to Selkirkshire upon little pieces of business, just important enough to prevent my doing any thing to purpose. One great matter, however, I have achieved, which is, procuring myself a place of residence, which will save me these teasing migrations in future, so that though I part with my sweet little cottage on the banks of the Esk, you will find me this summer in the very centre of the ancient Reged, in a decent farmhouse overhanging the Tweed, and situated in a wild pastoral country." And again, on the 19th, he thus apologizes for not having answered a letter of the 10th:—"For more than a month my head was fairly tenanted by ideas, which, though strictly pastoral and rural, were neither literary nor poetical. *Long sheep*, and *short sheep*, and *tups*, and *gimmers*, and *hogs*, and *dinmonts*, had made a perfect sheepfold of my understanding, which is hardly yet cleared of them.*—I hope Mrs Ellis will clap a bridle on her imagination. Ettrick Forest boasts finely shaped

* Describing his meeting with Scott in the summer of 1801, James Hogg says—"During the sociality of the evening, the discourse ran very much on the different breeds of sheep, that curse of the community of Ettrick Forest. The original black-faced Forest breed being always called *the short sheep*, and the Cheviot breed *the long sheep*, the disputes at that period ran very high about the practicable profits of each. Mr Scott, who had come into that remote district to preserve what fragments remained of its legendary

hills and clear romantic streams; but, alas! they are bare, to wildness, and denuded of the beautiful natural wood with which they were formerly shaded. It is mortifying to see that, though wherever the sheep are excluded, the copse has immediately sprung up in abundance, so that enclosures only are wanting to restore the wood wherever it might be useful or ornamental, yet hardly a proprietor has attempted to give it fair play for a resurrection. . . . You see we reckon positively on you—the more because our arch-critic Jeffrey tells me that he met you in London, and found you still inclined for a northern trip. All our wise men in the north are rejoiced at the prospect of seeing George Ellis. If you delay your journey till July, I shall then be free of the Courts of Law, and will meet you upon the Border, at whatever side you enter.”

The business part of these letters refers to Scott's brother Daniel, who, as he expresses it, “having been bred to the mercantile line, had been obliged, by some untoward circumstances, particularly an imprudent connexion with an artful woman, to leave Edinburgh for

lore, was rather bored with everlasting questions of the long and the short sheep. So at length, putting on his most serious, calculating face, he turned to Mr Walter Bryden, and said, ‘I am rather at a loss regarding the merits of this *very* important question. How long must a sheep actually measure to come under the denomination of a *long sheep*?’ Mr Bryden, who, in the simplicity of his heart, neither perceived the quiz nor the reproof, fell to answer with great sincerity. ‘It's the woo [wool], sir—it's the woo' that makes the difference. The lang sheep ha'e the lang thing, and these are just kind o' names we gi'e them, like.’ Mr Scott could not preserve his grave face of strict calculation; it went gradually awry, and a hearty guffaw “ [*i. e.* horselaugh]” followed. When I saw the very same words repeated near the beginning p. (4) of the ‘Black Dwarf,’ how could I be mistaken of the author?”—*Autobiography* prefixed to Hogg's “*Altrive Tales*,”

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DEATH OF CAPTAIN ROBERT SCOTT.

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Liverpool, and now to be casting his eyes towards Jamaica." Scott requests Ellis to help him if he can, by introducing him to some of his own friends or agents in that island: and Ellis furnishes him accordingly with letters to Mr Blackburne, a friend and brother proprietor, who appears to have paid Daniel Scott every possible attention, and soon provided him with suitable employment on a healthy part of his estates. But the same low tastes and habits which had reduced the unfortunate young man to the necessity of expatriating himself, recurred after a brief season of penitence and order, and continued until he had accumulated great affliction upon all his family.

On the 10th of June, 1804, died, at his seat of Rosebank, Captain Robert Scott, the affectionate uncle whose name has often occurred in this narrative.* "He was," says his nephew to Ellis, on the 18th, "a man of universal benevolence, and great kindness towards his friends, and to me individually. His manners were so much tinged with the habits of celibacy as to render them peculiar, though by no means unpleasingly so, and his profession (that of a seaman) gave a high colouring to the whole. The loss is one which, though the course of nature led me to expect it, did not take place at last without considerable pain to my feelings. The arrangement of his affairs, and the distribution of his small fortune among his relations, will devolve in a great measure upon me. He has distinguished me by leaving me a beautiful little villa on the banks of the Tweed, with every possible convenience annexed to it, and about

* In the obituary of the Scots Magazine for this month I find:—"Universally regretted, Captain Robert Scott of Rosebank, a gentleman whose life afforded an uniform example of unostentatious charity and extensive benevolence."

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thirty acres of the finest land in Scotland. Notwithstanding, however, the temptation that this bequest offers, I continue to pursue my Reged plan, and expect to be settled at Ashestiel in the course of a month. Rosebank is situated so near the village of Kelso as hardly to be sufficiently a country residence; besides, it is hemmed in by hedges and ditches, not to mention Dukes and Lady Dowagers, which are bad things for little people. It is expected to sell to great advantage. I shall buy a mountain farm with the purchase-money, and be quite the Laird of the Cairn and the Scaur."

Scott sold Rosebank in the course of the year for £5000; his share (being a ninth) of his uncle's other property amounted, I believe, to about £500; and he had besides a legacy of £100 in his quality of trustee. This bequest made an important change in his pecuniary position, and influenced accordingly the arrangements of his future life. Independently of practice at the bar, and of literary profits, he was now, with his little patrimony, his Sheriffship, and about £200 per annum arising from the stock ultimately settled on his wife, in possession of a fixed revenue of nearly, if not quite, £1000 a-year.

On the 1st of August he writes to Ellis from Ashestiel—"Having had only about a hundred and fifty things to do, I have scarcely done any thing, and yet could not give myself leave to suppose that I had leisure to write letters. 1st, I had this farm-house to furnish from sales, from broker's shops, and from all manner of hospitals for incurable furniture. 2dly, I had to let my cottage on the banks of the Esk. 3dly, I had to arrange matters for the sale of Rosebank. 4thly, I had to go into quarters with our cavalry, which made a very idle fortnight in the midst of all this business. Last of all, I had to superintend a removal, or what we call a *fit-*

ting, which, of all bores under the cope of Heaven, is bore the most tremendous. After all these storms, we are now most comfortably settled, and have only to regret deeply our disappointment at finding your northern march blown up. We had been projecting about twenty expeditions, and were pleasing ourselves at Mrs Ellis's expected surprise on finding herself so totally built in by mountains, as I am at the present writing hereof. We are seven miles from kirk and market. We rectify the last inconvenience by killing our own mutton and poultry; and as to the former, finding there was some chance of my family turning pagans, I have adopted the goodly practice of reading prayers every Sunday, to the great edification of my household. Think of this, you that have the happiness to be within two steps of the church, and commiserate those who dwell in the wilderness. I showed Charlotte yesterday *the Catrail*, and told her that to inspect that venerable monument was one main object of your intended journey to Scotland. She is of opinion that ditches must be more scarce in the neighbourhood of Windsor Forest than she had hitherto had the least idea of."

Ashestiel will be visited by many for his sake, as long as Waverley and Marmion are remembered. A more beautiful situation for the residence of a poet could not be conceived. The house was then a small one, but, compared with the cottage at Lasswade, its accommodations were amply sufficient. You approached it through an old-fashioned garden, with holly hedges, and broad, green, terrace walks. On one side, close under the windows, is a deep ravine, clothed with venerable trees, down which a mountain rivulet is heard, more than seen, in its progress to the Tweed. The river itself is separated from the high bank on which the

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house stands only by a narrow meadow of the richest verdure. Opposite, and all around, are the green hills. The valley there is narrow, and the aspect in every direction is that of perfect pastoral repose. The heights immediately behind are those which divide the Tweed from the Yarrow; and the latter celebrated stream lies within an easy ride, in the course of which the traveller passes through a variety of the finest mountain scenery in the south of Scotland. No town is within seven miles, but Selkirk, which was then still smaller and quieter than it is now; there was hardly even a gentleman's family within visiting distance, except at Yair, a few miles lower on the Tweed, the ancient seat of the Pringles of Whytbank, and at Bowhill, between the Yarrow and the Ettrick, where the Earl of Dalkeith used occasionally to inhabit a small shooting lodge, which has since grown to be a magnificent ducal residence. The country all around, with here and there an insignificant exception, belongs to the Buccleuch estate; so that, whichever way he chose to turn, the bard of the clan had ample room and verge enough, and all appliances to boot, for every variety of field sport that might happen to please his fancy; and being then in the prime vigour of manhood, he was not slow to profit by these advantages. Mean time, the concerns of his own little farm, and the care of his absent relation's woods, gave him healthful occupation in the intervals of the chase; and he had long, solitary evenings for the uninterrupted exercise of his pen; perhaps, on the whole, better opportunities of study than he had ever enjoyed before, or was to meet with elsewhere in later days.

When he first examined Ashestiel, with a view to being his cousin's tenant, he thought of taking home James Hogg to superintend the sheep-farm, and keep watch over the house also during the winter. I am not

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able to tell exactly in what manner this proposal fell to the ground. In January 1804, the Shepherd writes to him :—" I have no intention of waiting for so distant a prospect as that of being manager of your farm, though I have no doubt of our joint endeavour proving successful, nor yet of your willingness to employ me in that capacity. His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch hath at present a farm vacant in Eskdale, and I have been importuned by friends to get a letter from you and apply for it. You can hardly be conscious what importance your protection hath given me already, not only in mine own eyes, but even in those of others. You might write to him, or to any of the family you are best acquainted with, stating that such and such a character was about leaving his native country for want of a residence in the farming line." I am very doubtful if Scott—however willing to encounter the risk of employing Hogg as his own *grieve*, or bailiff—would have felt himself justified at this, or, indeed, at any time, in recommending him as the tenant of a considerable farm on the Duke of Buccleuch's estate. But I am also quite at a loss to comprehend how Hogg should have conceived it possible, at this period, when he certainly had no capital whatever, that the Duke's Chamberlain should agree to accept him for a tenant, on any attestation, however strong, as to the excellence of his character and intentions. Be that as it may, if Scott made the application which the Shepherd suggested, it failed. So did a negotiation which he certainly did enter upon about the same time with the late Earl of Caernarvon (then Lord Porchester), through that nobleman's aunt, Mrs Scott of Harden, with the view of obtaining for Hogg the situation of bailiff on one of his Lordship's estates in the west of England; and such, I believe, was the result of several other attempts of the same kind with landed

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proprietors nearer home. Perhaps the Shepherd had already set his heart so much on taking rank as a farmer in his own district, that he witnessed the failure of any such negotiations with indifference. As regards the management of Ashestiel, I find no trace of that proposal having ever been renewed.

In truth Scott had hardly been a week in possession of his new domains, before he made acquaintance with a character much better suited to his purpose than James Hogg ever could have been. I mean honest Thomas Purdie, his faithful servant—his affectionately devoted humble friend from this time until death parted them. Tom was first brought before him, in his capacity of Sheriff, on a charge of poaching, when the poor fellow gave such a touching account of his circumstances,—a wife, and I know not how many children depending on his exertions—work scarce and grouse abundant,—and all this with a mixture of odd sly humour,—that the Sheriff's heart was moved. Tom escaped the penalty of the law—was taken into employment as shepherd, and showed such zeal, activity, and shrewdness in that capacity, that Scott never had any occasion to repent of the step he soon afterwards took, in promoting him to the position which had been originally offered to James Hogg.

It was also about the same time that he took into his service as coachman Peter Mathieson, brother-in-law to Thomas Purdie, another faithful servant, who never afterwards left him, and still survives his kind master. Scott's awkward conduct of the little phaeton had exposed his wife to more than one perilous overturn, before he agreed to set up a close carriage, and call in the assistance of this steady charioteer.

During this autumn Scott formed the personal acquaintance of Mungo Park, the celebrated victim of