

MEMOIRS
OF THE
LIFE OF SIR WALTER SCOTT.

CHAPTER I.

AUTUMN AT ABBOTSFORD—SCOTT'S HOSPITALITY—VISIT OF
SIR HUMPHRY DAVY—HENRY MACKENZIE—DR WOLLASTON
AND WILLIAM STEWART ROSE—COURSING ON NEWARK
HILL—SALMON-FISHING—THE FESTIVAL AT BOLDSIDE—
THE ABBOTSFORD HUNT—THE KIRN, ETC.

1820.

ABOUT the middle of August (1820), my wife and I went to Abbotsford; and we remained there for several weeks, during which I became familiarized to Sir Walter Scott's mode of existence in the country. It was necessary to observe it, day after day, for a considerable period, before one could believe that such was, during nearly half the year, the routine of life with the most productive author of his age. The humblest person who stayed merely for a short visit, must have departed with the impression, that what he witnessed was an occasional variety; that Scott's courtesy prompted him to break in upon his habits when he had a stranger to amuse; but

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that it was physically impossible, that the man who was writing the *Waverley* romances at the rate of nearly twelve volumes in the year, could continue, week after week, and month after month, to devote all but a hardly perceptible fraction of his mornings to out of doors' occupations, and the whole of his evenings to the entertainment of a constantly varying circle of guests.

The hospitality of his afternoons must alone have been enough to exhaust the energies of almost any man; for his visitors did not mean, like those of country houses in general, to enjoy the landlord's good cheer and amuse each other; but the far greater proportion arrived from a distance, for the sole sake of the Poet and Novelist himself, whose person they had never before seen, and whose voice they might never again have any opportunity of hearing. No other villa in Europe was ever resorted to from the same motives, and to any thing like the same extent, except Ferney; and Voltaire never dreamt of being visible to his *hunters*, except for a brief space of the day; few of them even dined with him, and none of them seem to have slept under his roof. Scott's establishment, on the contrary, resembled in every particular that of the affluent idler, who, because he has inherited, or would fain transmit, political influence in some province, keeps open house—receives as many as he has room for, and sees their apartments occupied, as soon as they vacate them, by another troop of the same description. Even on gentlemen guiltless of inkshed, the exercise of hospitality upon this sort of scale is found to impose a heavy tax; few of them, nowadays, think of maintaining it for any large portion of the year: very few indeed below the highest rank of the nobility—in whose case there is usually a staff of led-captains, led-chaplains, servile dandies, and semi-professional talkers

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and jokers from London, to take the chief part of the burden. Now, Scott had often in his mouth the pithy verses—

“ Conversation is but carving,—
Give no more to every guest,
Than he's able to digest ;
Give him always of the prime,
And but a little at a time ;
Carve to all but just enough,
Let them neither starve nor stuff ;
*And that you may have your due,
Let your neighbours carve for you :”—*

and he, in his own familiar circle always, and in other circles where it was possible, furnished a happy exemplification of these rules and regulations of the Dean of St Patrick's. But the same sense and benevolence which dictated adhesion to them among his old friends and acquaintance, rendered it necessary to break them, when he was receiving strangers of the class I have described above at Abbotsford: he felt that their coming was the best homage they could pay to his celebrity, and that it would have been as uncourteous in him not to give them their fill of his talk, as it would be in your every-day lord of manors to make his casual guests welcome indeed to his venison, but keep his grouse-shooting for his immediate allies and dependants.

Every now and then he received some stranger who was not indisposed to take his part in the *carving*; and how good-humouredly he surrendered the lion's share to any one that seemed to covet it—with what perfect placidity he submitted to be bored even by bores of the first water, must have excited the admiration of many besides the daily observers of his proceedings. I have heard a spruce Senior Wrangler lecture him for half an evening on the niceties of the Greek epigram;

I have heard the poorest of all parliamentary blunderers try to detail to him the *pros* and *cons* of what he called the *Truck System*; and in either case the same bland eye watched the lips of the tormentor. But, with such ludicrous exceptions, Scott was the one object of the Abbotsford pilgrims; and evening followed evening only to show him exerting, for their amusement, more of animal spirits, to say nothing of intellectual vigour, than would have been considered by any other man in the company as sufficient for the whole expenditure of a week's existence. Yet this was not the chief marvel; he talked of things that interested himself, because he knew that by doing so he should give most pleasure to his guests; but how vast was the range of subjects on which he could talk with unaffected zeal; and with what admirable delicacy of instinctive politeness did he select his topic according to the peculiar history, study, pursuits or social habits of the stranger! How beautifully he varied his style of letter-writing, according to the character and situation of his multifarious correspondents, the reader has already been enabled to judge; but to carry the same system into practice *at sight*—to manage utter strangers, of many and widely different classes, in the same fashion, and with the same effect—called for a quickness of observation and fertility of resource such as no description can convey the slightest notion of to those who never witnessed the thing for themselves. And all this was done without approach to the unmanly trickery of what is called *catching the tone* of the person one converses with. Scott took the subject on which he thought such a man or woman would like best to hear him speak—but not to handle it in their way, or in any way but what was completely, and most simply his own;—not to flatter them by embellishing, with the illustration of his genius, the views and

opinions which they were supposed to entertain,—but to let his genius play out its own variations, for his own delight and theirs, as freely and easily, and with as endless a multiplicity of delicious novelties, as ever the magic of Beethoven or Mozart could fling over the few primitive notes of a village air.

It is the custom in some, perhaps in many country houses, to keep a register of the guests, and I have often regretted that nothing of the sort was ever attempted at Abbotsford. It would have been a curious record—especially if so contrived—(as I have seen done)—that the names of each day should, by their arrangement on the page, indicate the exact order in which the company sat at dinner. It would hardly, I believe, be too much to affirm, that Sir Walter Scott entertained, under his roof, in the course of the seven or eight brilliant seasons when his prosperity was at its height, as many persons of distinction in rank, in politics, in art, in literature, and in science, as the most princely nobleman of his age ever did in the like space of time.—I turned over, since I wrote the preceding sentence, Mr Lodge's compendium of the British Peerage, and on summing up the titles which suggested *to myself* some reminiscence of this kind, I found them nearly as one out of six.—I fancy it is not beyond the mark to add, that of the eminent foreigners who visited our island within this period, a moiety crossed the Channel mainly in consequence of the interest with which his writings had invested Scotland—and that the hope of beholding the man under his own roof was the crowning motive with half that moiety. As for countrymen of his own, like him ennobled, in the higher sense of that word, by the display of their intellectual energies, if any one such contemporary can be pointed out as having crossed the Tweed, and yet not spent a day at Abbotsford, I shall be surprised.

It is needless to add, that Sir Walter was familiarly known, long before the days I am speaking of, to almost all the nobility and higher gentry of Scotland; and consequently, that there seldom wanted a fair proportion of them to assist him in doing the honours of his country. It is still more superfluous to say so respecting the heads of his own profession at Edinburgh: *Sibi et amicis*—Abbotsford was their villa whenever they pleased to resort to it, and few of them were ever absent from it long. He lived meanwhile in a constant interchange of easy visits with the gentlemen's families of Teviotdale and the Forest; so that, mixed up with his superfine admirers of the Mayfair breed, his staring worshippers from foreign parts, and his quick-witted coevals of the Parliament-House—there was found generally some hearty homespun laird, with his dame—the young laird—a bashful bumpkin, perhaps, whose ideas did not soar beyond his gun and pointer—or perhaps a little pseudo-dandy, for whom the Kelso race-course and the Jedburgh ball were “Life,” and “the World;” and not forgetting a brace of “Miss Rawbones,” in whom, as their mamma prognosticated, some of Sir Walter's young Waverleys or Osbaldistones might peradventure discover a Flora Mac-Ivor or a Die Vernon. To complete the *olla podrida*, we must remember that no old acquaintance, or family connexions, however remote their actual station or style of manners from his own, were forgotten or lost sight of. He had some, even near relations who, except when they visited him, rarely, if ever, found admittance to what the haughty dialect of the upper world is pleased to designate exclusively as *society*. These were welcome guests, let who might be under that roof; and it was the same with many a worthy citizen of Edinburgh, habitually moving in the obscurest of circles, who had been in the same class with Scott at the High School, or his

fellow-apprentice when he was proud of earning three-pence a-page by the use of his pen. To dwell on nothing else, it was surely a beautiful perfection of real universal humanity and politeness, that could enable this great and good man to blend guests so multifarious in one group, and contrive to make them all equally happy with him, with themselves, and with each other.

I remember saying to William Allan one morning as the whole party mustered before the porch after breakfast, “a faithful sketch of what you at this moment see would be more interesting a hundred years hence, than the grandest so-called historical picture that you will ever exhibit in Somerset-House;” and my friend agreed with me so cordially, that I often wondered afterwards he had not attempted to realize the suggestion. The subject ought, however, to have been treated conjointly by him (or Wilkie) and Edwin Landseer. It was a clear, bright, September morning, with a sharpness in the air that doubled the animating influence of the sunshine, and all was in readiness for a grand coursing match on Newark Hill. The only guest who had chalked out other sport for himself was the stanchest of anglers, Mr Rose; but he, too, was there on his *shelty*, armed with his salmon-rod and landing-net, and attended by his humorous squire Hives, and Charlie Purdie, a brother of Tom, in those days the most celebrated fisherman of the district. This little group of Waltonians, bound for Lord Somerville’s preserve, remained lounging about to witness the start of the main cavalcade. Sir Walter, mounted on Sibyl, was marshalling the order of procession with a huge hunting-whip; and among a dozen frolicsome youths and maidens, who seemed disposed to laugh at all discipline, appeared, each on horseback, each as eager as the youngest sportsman in the troop, Sir Humphry Davy, Dr Wollaston, and the patriarch of Scottish belles-lettres, Henry Mac-

kenzie. The Man of Feeling, however, was persuaded with some difficulty to resign his steed for the present to his faithful negro follower, and to join Lady Scott in the sociable, until we should reach the ground of our *battue*. Laidlaw, on a long-tailed wiry Highlander, yclept *Hoddin Grey*, which carried him nimbly and stoutly, although his feet almost touched the ground as he sat, was the adjutant. But the most picturesque figure was the illustrious inventor of the safety-lamp. He had come for his favourite sport of angling, and had been practising it successfully with Rose, his travelling companion, for two or three days preceding this, but he had not prepared for coursing fields, or had left Charlie Purdie's troop for Sir Walter's on a sudden thought, and his fisherman's costume—a brown hat with flexible brims, surrounded with line upon line of catgut, and innumerable fly-hooks—jack-boots worthy of a Dutch smuggler, and a fustian surtout dabbled with the blood of salmon, made a fine contrast with the smart jackets, white-cord breeches, and well polished jockey-boots of the less distinguished cavaliers about him. Dr Wollaston was in black, and with his noble serene dignity of countenance, might have passed for a sporting archbishop. Mr Mackenzie, at this time in the 76th year of his age, with a white hat turned up with green, green spectacles, green jacket, and long brown leathern gaiters buttoned upon his nether anatomy, wore a dog-whistle round his neck, and had all over the air of as resolute a devotee as the gay captain of Huntly Burn. Tom Purdie and his subalterns had preceded us by a few hours with all the greyhounds that could be collected at Abbotsford, Darnick, and Melrose; but the giant Maida had remained as his master's orderly, and now gambolled about Sibyl Grey, barking for mere joy like a spaniel puppy.

The order of march had been all settled, and the sociable

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was just getting under weigh, when *the Lady Anne* broke from the line, screaming with laughter, and exclaimed, “Papa, papa, I knew you could never think of going without your pet.” Scott looked round, and I rather think there was a blush as well as a smile upon his face, when he perceived a little black pig frisking about his pony, and evidently a self-elected addition to the party of the day. He tried to look stern, and cracked his whip at the creature, but was in a moment obliged to join in the general cheers. Poor piggy soon found a strap round its neck, and was dragged into the background:—Scott, watching the retreat, repeated with mock pathos the first verse of an old pastoral song—

“ What will I do gin my hoggie* die?
 My joy, my pride, my hoggie!
 My only beast, I had nae mae,
 And wow! but I was vogie!”

—the cheers were redoubled—and the squadron moved on.

This pig had taken, nobody could tell how, a most sentimental attachment to Scott, and was constantly urging its pretensions to be admitted a regular member of his *tail* along with the greyhounds and terriers; but, indeed, I remember him suffering another summer-under the same sort of pertinacity on the part of an affectionate hen. I leave the explanation for philosophers—but such were the facts. I have too much respect for the vulgarly calumniated donkey to name him in the same category of pets with the pig and the hen; but a year or two af-

* *Hog* signifies in the Scotch dialect a young sheep that has never been shorn. Hence, no doubt, the name of the Poet of Ettrick—derived from a long line of shepherds. Mr Charles Lamb, however, in one of his sonnets, suggests this pretty origin of *his* “Family Name:”—

“ Perhaps some shepherd on Lincolnian plains,
 In manners guileless as his own sweet flocks,
 Received it first amid the merry mocks,
 And arch allusions of his fellow swains.”

ter this time, my wife used to drive a couple of these animals in a little garden chair, and whenever her father appeared at the door of our cottage, we were sure to see Hannah More and Lady Morgan (as Anne Scott had wickedly christened them) trotting from their pasture to lay their noses over the paling, and, as Washington Irving says of the old whitehaired hedger with the Parisian snuff-box, “to have a pleasant crack wi’ the laird.”

But to return to our *chasse*. On reaching Newark Castle, we found Lady Scott, her eldest daughter, and the venerable Mackenzie, all busily engaged in unpacking a basket that had been placed in their carriage, and arranging the luncheon it contained upon the mossy rocks overhanging the bed of the Yarrow. When such of the company as chose had partaken of this refec-tion, the Man of Feeling resumed his pony, and all ascended the mountain, duly marshalled at proper distances, so as to beat in a broad line over the heather, Sir Walter directing the movement from the right wing—towards Blackandro. Davy, next to whom I chanced to be riding, laid his whip about the fern like an experienced hand, but cracked many a joke, too, upon his own jack-boots, and surveying the long eager battalion of bush-rangers, exclaimed “Good heavens! is it thus that I visit the scenery of the Lay of the Last Minstrel?” He then kept muttering to himself, as his glowing eye—(the finest and brightest that I ever saw)—ran over the land-scape, some of those beautiful lines from the *Conclusion* of the Lay—

———“ But still,
When summer smiled on sweet Bowhill,
And July’s eve, with balmy breath,
Waved the blue-bells on Newark heath,
When throstles sung in Hareheadshaw,
And corn was green on Carterhaugh,
And flourished, broad, Blackandro’s oak,
The aged harper’s soul awoke,” &c.