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John Gibson Lockhart

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS
OF THE
LIFE OF SIR WALTER SCOTT.

CHAPTER I.

LIFE OF NAPOLEON, AND CHRONICLES OF THE CANONGATE
IN PROGRESS—REVIEWALS OF MACKENZIE'S EDITION OF
HOME, AND OF HOFFMAN'S TALES—RHEUMATIC ATTACKS—
THEATRICAL FUND DINNER—AVOWAL OF THE SOLE AU-
THORSHIP OF THE WAVERLEY NOVELS—LETTER FROM
GOETHE—DEATHS OF THE DUKE OF YORK—MR GIFFORD
—SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT, ETC.—MR CANNING MINISTER
—COMPLETION OF THE LIFE OF BUONAPARTE—REMINI-
SCENCES OF AN AMANUENSIS—GOETHE'S REMARKS ON THE
WORK—ITS PECUNIARY RESULTS—DECEMBER, 1826—
JUNE, 1827.

DURING the winter of 1826-7, Sir Walter suffered great pain (enough to have disturbed effectually any other man's labours, whether official or literary) from successive attacks of rheumatism, which seems to have been fixed on him by the wet sheets of one of his French inns; and his Diary contains, besides, various indications that his constitution was already shaking under the

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fatigue to which he had subjected it. Formerly, however great the quantity of work he put through his hands, his evenings were almost always reserved for the light reading of an elbow-chair, or the enjoyment of his family and friends. Now he seemed to grudge every minute that was not spent at the desk. The little that he read of new books, or for mere amusement, was done by snatches in the course of his meals; and to walk, when he could walk at all, to the Parliament House, and back again through the Prince's Street Gardens, was his only exercise and his only relaxation. Every ailment, of whatever sort, ended in aggravating his lameness; and, perhaps, the severest test his philosophy encountered was the feeling of bodily helplessness that from week to week crept upon him. The winter, to make bad worse, was a very cold and stormy one. The growing sluggishness of his blood showed itself in chilblains, not only on the feet but the fingers, and his hand-writing becomes more and more cramped and confused. I shall not pain the reader by extracting merely medical entries from his Diary; but the following give characteristic sketches of his temperament and reflections:—

“*December 16.*—Another bad night. I remember I used to think a slight illness was a luxurious thing. My pillow was then softened by the hand of affection, and the little cares put in exercise to soothe the languor or pain, were more flattering and pleasing than the consequences of the illness were disagreeable. It was a new scene to be watched and attended, and I used to think that the *malade imaginaire* gained something by his humour. It is different in the latter stages—the old post-chaise gets more shattered and out of order at every turn; windows will not be pulled up, doors refuse to

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open, or being open will not shut again—which last is rather my case. There is some new subject of complaint every moment—your sicknesses come thicker and thicker—your comforting and sympathizing friends fewer and fewer—for why should they sorrow for the course of nature? The recollection of youth, health, and uninterrupted powers of activity, neither improved nor enjoyed, is a poor strain of comfort. The best is, the long halt will arrive at last, and cure all. This was a day of labour, agreeably varied by a pain which rendered it scarce possible to sit upright. My journal is getting a vile chirurgical aspect. I begin to be afraid of the odd consequences complaints in the *post equitem* are said to produce. I shall tire of my journal. In my better days I had stories to tell; but death has closed the long dark avenue upon loves and friendships, and I look at them as through the grated door of a burial-place filled with monuments of those who were once dear to me, with no insincere wish that it may open for me at no distant period, provided such be the will of God. My pains were those of the heart, and had something flattering in their character; if in the head, it was from the blow of a bludgeon gallantly received, and well paid back. I think I shall not live to the usual verge of human existence; I shall never see the threescore and ten, and shall be summed up at a discount. No help for it, and no matter either.

“*December 18.*—Sir Adam Ferguson breakfasted—one of the few old friends left out of the number of my youthful companions. In youth we have many companions, few friends perhaps; in age companionship is ended, except rarely, and by appointment. Old men, by a kind of instinct, seek younger associates, who listen to their stories, honour their grey hairs while present, and mimic and laugh at them when their backs are turned. At least

that was the way in our day, and I warrant our chicks of the present brood crow to the same tune. Of all the friends that I have left here, there is none who has any decided attachment to literature. So either I must talk on that subject to young people—in other words, turn proser—or I must turn tea-table talker and converse with ladies. I am too old and too proud for either character, so I'll live alone and be contented. Lockhart's departure for London was a loss to me in this way."

He spent a few days at Abbotsford at Christmas, and several weeks during the spring vacation; but the frequent Saturday excursions were now out of the question—if for no other reason, on account of the quantity of books which he must have by him while working at his Napoleon. He says on the 30th of December—"Wrote hard. Last day of an eventful year; much evil—and some good, but especially the courage to endure what Fortune sends without becoming a pipe for her fingers.* It is *not* the last day of the year; but to-morrow being Sunday, we hold our festival to-day.—The Fergusons came, and we had the usual appliances of mirth and good cheer. Yet our party, like the chariot-wheels of Pharaoh in the Red Sea, dragged heavily.—It must be allowed that the regular recurrence of annual festivals among the same individuals has, as life advances, something in it that is melancholy. We meet like the survivors of some perilous expedition, wounded and weakened ourselves, and looking through diminished ranks to think of those who are no more. Or they are like the feasts of the Caribs, in which they held that the pale and speechless phantoms of the deceased appeared and mingled with the living. Yet where shall we fly from vain repin-

* *Hamlet*, Act III. Scene 2.

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WORDSWORTH AND CRABBE.

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ing?—or why should we give up the comfort of seeing our friends, because they can no longer be to us, or we to them, what we once were to each other?

“*January 1, 1827.*—God make this a happy new year to the King and country, and to all honest men.

“I went to dine as usual at the kind house of Huntly-Burn; but the cloud still had its influence. The effect of grief upon persons who, like myself and Sir Adam, are highly susceptible of humour, has, I think, been finely touched by Wordsworth in the character of the merry village teacher Matthew, whom Jeffrey profanely calls “a half crazy sentimental person.”* But, with my friend Jeffrey’s pardon, I think he loves to see imagination best when it is bitted and managed, and ridden upon the *grand pas*. He does not make allowance for starts and sallies, and bounds, when Pegasus is beautiful to behold, though sometimes perilous to his rider. Not that I think the amiable bard of Rydale shows judgment in choosing such subjects as the popular mind cannot sympathize in. It is unwise and unjust to himself. I do not compare myself, in point of imagination, with Wordsworth, far from it; for his is naturally exquisite, and highly cultivated from constant exercise. But I can see as many castles in the clouds as any man, as many genii in the curling smoke of a steam-engine, as perfect a Persepolis in the embers of a sea-coal fire. My life has been spent in such day-dreams. But I cry no roast-meat. There are times a man should remember what Rousseau used to say, *Tait-toi, Jean Jacques, car on ne t’entend pas!*

“Talking of Wordsworth, he told Anne a story, the object of which, as she understood it, was to show that Crabbe

* See *Edinburgh Review*, No. xxiii., p. 135.

had no imagination. Crabbe, Sir George Beaumont, and Wordsworth were sitting together in Murray's room in Albemarle Street. Sir George, after sealing a letter, blew out the candle which had enabled him to do so, and exchanging a look with Wordsworth, began to admire in silence the undulating thread of smoke which slowly arose from the expiring wick, when Crabbe put on the extinguisher. Anne laughed at the instance, and enquired if the taper was wax, and being answered in the negative, seemed to think that there was no call on Mr Crabbe to sacrifice his sense of smell to their admiration of beautiful and evanescent forms. In two other men I should have said 'Why, it is affectations,' with Sir Hugh Evans;* but Sir George is the man in the world most void of affectation; and then he is an exquisite painter, and no doubt saw where the *incident* would have succeeded in painting. The error is not in you yourself receiving deep impressions from slight hints, but in supposing that precisely the same sort of impression must arise in the mind of men, otherwise of kindred feeling, or that the common-place folk of the world can derive such inductions at any time or under any circumstances.

"*January 13.* The Fergusons, with my neighbours Mr Scrope and Mr Bainbridge, eat a haunch of venison from Drummond Castle, and seemed happy. We had music and a little dancing, and enjoyed in others the buoyancy of spirit that we no longer possess ourselves. Yet I do not think the young people of this age so gay as we were. There is a turn for persiflage, a fear of ridicule among them, which stifles the honest emotions of gaiety and lightness of spirit; and people, when they

* *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act I. Scene 1.

give in the least to the expansion of their natural feelings, are always kept under by the fear of becoming ludicrous. To restrain your feelings and check your enthusiasm in the cause even of pleasure, is now a rule among people of fashion, as much as it used to be among philosophers.

“ *Edinburgh, January 15.*—Off we came, and in despite of rheumatism I got through the journey tolerably. Coming through Galashiels, we met the Laird of Torwoodlee, who, on hearing how long I had been confined, asked how I bore it, observing that he had *once* in his life—Torwoodlee must be between 60 and 70—been confined for five days to the house, and was like to hang himself. I regret God’s free air as much as any man, but I could amuse myself were it in the Bastile.

“ *February 19.*—Very cold weather. What says Dean Swift?—

‘ When frost and snow come both together,
Then sit by the fire and save shoe leather.’

I read and wrote at the bitter account of the French retreat from Moscow, in 1812, till the little room and coal fire seemed snug by comparison. I felt cold in its rigour in my childhood and boyhood, but not since. In youth and middle life I was yet less sensible to it than now—but I remember thinking it worse than hunger. Uninterrupted to-day, and did eight leaves.*

“ *March 3.*—Very severe weather, and home covered with snow. White as a frosted plum-cake, by jingo. No matter; I am not sorry to find I can stand a brush of weather yet. I like to see Arthur’s Seat and the stern

* One page of his MS. answers to from four to five of the close-printed pages of the original edition of his Buonaparte.

old Castle with their white watch-cloaks on. But, as Byron said to Moore, d——n it, Tom, don't be poetical. I settled to Boney, and wrote right long and well.

“ *Abbotsford, March 12.*—Away we set, and came safely to Abbotsford amid all the dulness of a great thaw, which has set the rivers a streaming in full tide. The wind is high, but for my part

‘ I like this rocking of the battlements.

I was received by old Tom and the dogs with the unsophisticated feelings of good-will. I have been trying to read a new novel which I had heard praised. It is called *Almacks*, and the author has so well succeeded in describing the cold selfish fopperies of the time, that the copy is almost as dull as the original. I think I shall take up my bundle of Sheriff-Court processes instead of *Almacks*, as the more entertaining avocation of the two.

“ *March 13.*—Before breakfast, prepared and forwarded the processes to Selkirk. Had a pleasant walk to the thicket, though my ideas were olla-podrida-ish. I expect this will not be a day of work but of idleness, for my books are not come. Would to God I could make it light, thoughtless idleness, such as I used to have when the silly smart fancies ran in my brain like the bubbles in a glass of champagne,—as brilliant to my thinking, as intoxicating, as evanescent. But the wine is somewhat on the lees. Perhaps it was but indifferent cyder after all. Yet I am happy in this place, where every thing looks friendly, from old Tom to young Nym.† After all, he has little to complain of who has left so many things that like him.

* Zanga, in “ *The Revenge.*”

† Nimrod—a stag-hound.

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“ *March 21.*—Wrote till twelve, then out upon the heights, though the day was stormy, and faced the gale bravely. Tom Purdie was not with me. He would have obliged me to keep the sheltered ground. There is a touch of the old spirit in me yet, that bids me brave the tempest,—the spirit that, in spite of manifold infirmities, made me a roaring boy in my youth, a desperate climber, a bold rider, a deep drinker, and a stout player at single-stick, of all which valuable qualities there are now but slender remains. I worked hard when I came in, and finished five pages.

“ *March 26.*—Despatched packets. Colonel and Captain Ferguson arrived to breakfast. I had previously determined to give myself a day to write letters; and this day will do as well as another. I cannot keep up with the world without shying a letter now and then. It is true the greatest happiness I could think of would be to be rid of the world entirely. Excepting my own family, I have little pleasure in the world, less business in it, and am heartily careless about all its concerns.

“ *April 24.*—Still deep snow—a foot thick in the court-yard, I dare say. Severe welcome for the poor lambs now coming into the world. But what signifies whether they die just now, or a little while after to be united with sallad at luncheon time? It signifies a good deal too. There is a period, though a short one, when they dance among the gowans, and seem happy. As for your aged sheep or wether, the sooner they pass to the *Norman* side of the vocabulary, the better. They are like some old dowager ladies and gentlemen of my acquaintance—no one cares about them till they come to be *cut up*, and then we see how the tallow lies on the kidneys and the chine.

“ *May 13.*—A most idle and dissipated day. I did not rise till half-past eight o’clock. Col. and Capt. Ferguson came to breakfast. I walked half-way home with them, then turned back and spent the day, which was delightful, wandering from place to place in the woods, sometimes reading the new and interesting volumes of *Cyril Thornton*, sometimes ‘chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancies’ which alternated in my mind, idly stirred by the succession of a thousand vague thoughts and fears, the gay strangely mingled with those of dismal melancholy; tears which seemed ready to flow unbidden; smiles which approached to those of insanity; all that wild variety of mood which solitude engenders. I scribbled some verses, or rather composed them in my memory. The contrast at leaving Abbotsford to former departures, is of an agitating and violent description. Assorting papers, and so forth. I never could help admiring the concatenation between Ahithophel’s setting his house in order and hanging himself.* The one seems to follow the other as a matter of course. But what frightens and disgusts me is those fearful letters from those who have been long dead, to those who linger on their wayfare through the valley of tears. Those fine lines of Spencer came into my head—

“ The shade of youthful hope is there,
That lingered long, and latest died;
Ambition all dissolved to air,
With phantom honours by his side.

“ What empty shadows glimmer nigh?
They once were Friendship, Truth, and Love!
Oh die to thought, to Memory die,
Since lifeless to my heart ye prove.” †

* 2d Sam. xvii. 23.

† Poems by the late Honourable W. R. Spencer, London, 1835, 45. See *ante*, vol. vi. p. 373, *note*.