

Saintsbury George

Sir Walter Scott



George Saintsbury
Sir Walter Scott

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Содержание

PREFACE	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

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PREFACE

To the very probable remark that 'Another little book about Scott is not wanted,' I can at least reply that apparently it is, inasmuch as the publishers proposed this volume to me, not I to them. And I believe that, as a matter of fact, no 'little book about Scott' has appeared since the *Journal* was completed, since the new and important instalment of *Letters* appeared (in both cases with invaluable editorial apparatus by Mr. David Douglas), and especially since Mr. Lang's *Lockhart* was published. It is true that no one of these, nor any other book that is likely to appear, has altered, or is likely to alter, much in a sane estimate of Sir Walter. His own matchless character and the genius of his first biographer combined to set before the world early an idea, of which it is safe to say that nothing that should lower it need be feared, and hardly anything to heighten it can be reasonably hoped. But as fresh items of illustrative detail are made public, there can be no harm in endeavouring to incorporate something of what they give us in fresh abstracts and *aperçus* from time to time. And for the continued and, as far as space permits, detailed criticism of the work, it may be pleaded that criticism of Scott has for many years been chiefly general, while in criticism, even more than in other things, generalities are deceptive.

CHAPTER I

LIFE TILL MARRIAGE

Scott's own 'autobiographic fragment,' printed in Lockhart's first volume, has made other accounts of his youth mostly superfluous, even to a day which persists in knowing better about everything and everybody than it or they knew about themselves. No one ever recorded his genealogy more minutely, with greater pride, or with a more saving sense of humour than Sir Walter. He was connected, though remotely, with gentle families on both sides. That is to say, his great-grandfather was son of the Laird of Raeburn, who was grandson of Walter Scott of Harden and the 'Flower of Yarrow.' The great-grandson, 'Beardie,' acquired that cognomen by letting his beard grow like General Dalziel, though for the exile of James II., instead of the death of Charles I. – 'whilk was the waur reason,' as Sir Walter himself might have said.

Beardie's second son, being more thoroughly sickened of the sea in his first voyage than Robinson Crusoe, took to farming and Whiggery, and married the daughter of Haliburton of Newmains – there was also Macdougall and Campbell blood on the spindle side of the older generations of the family. Their eldest son Walter, father of Sir Walter, was born in 1729, and, being bred to the law, became the original, according to undisputed tradition, of the 'Saunders Fairford' of *Redgauntlet*, the most autobiographical as well as not the least charming of the novels. He married Anne Rutherford, who, through her mother, brought the blood of the Swintons of Swinton to enrich the joint strain; and from her father, a member of a family distinguished in the annals of the University of Edinburgh, may have transmitted some of the love for books which was not the most prominent feature of the other ingredients.

Walter himself was the third 'permanent child' (to adopt an agreeable phrase of Mr. Traill's about another person) of a family of twelve, only five of whom survived infancy. His three brothers, John, Thomas, and Daniel, and his sister Anne, all figure in the records; but little is heard of John and not much of Anne. Thomas, the second, either had, or was thought by his indulgent brother to have, literary talents, and was at one time put up to father the novels; while Daniel (whose misconduct in money matters, and still more in showing the white feather, brought on him the only display of anything that can be called rancour recorded in Sir Walter's history) concerns us even less. The date of the novelist's birth was 15th August 1771, the place, 'the top of the College Wynd,' a locality now whelmed in the actual Chambers Street face of the present Old University buildings, and near that of Kirk of Field. Escaping the real or supposed dangers of a consumptive wet-nurse, he was at first healthy enough; but teething or something else developed the famous lameness, which at first seemed to threaten loss of all use of the right leg. The child was sent to the house of his grandfather, the Whig farmer of Sandyknowe, where he abode for some years under the shadow of Smailholm Tower, reading a little, listening to Border legends a great deal, and making one long journey to London and Bath. This first blessed period of 'making himself'¹ lasted till his eighth year, and ended with a course of sea-bathing at Prestonpans, where he met the original in name and perhaps in nature of Captain Dalgetty, and the original in character of the Antiquary. Then he returned (*circ.* 1779) to his father's house, now in George Square, to his numerous, if impermanent, family of brothers and sisters, and to the High School. The most memorable incident of this part of his career is the famous episode of 'Greenbreeks.'²

His health, as he grew up, becoming again weak, the boy was sent once more Borderwards – this time to Kelso, where he lived with an aunt, went to the town school, and made the acquaintance

¹ His friend Shortreed's well-known expression for the results of the later Liddesdale 'raids.'

² See General Preface to the Novels, or Lockhart, i. 136.

there, whether for good or ill, who shall say? of the Ballantynes. And he had to return to Kelso for the same cause, at least once during his experiences at College, where he did not take the full usual number of courses, and acquired no name as a scholar. But he always read.

As it had not been decided whether he was to adopt the superior or the inferior branch of the law, he was apprenticed to his father at the age of fifteen, as a useful preparation for either career. He naturally enough did not love 'engrossing,' but he did not cross his father's soul by refusing it, and though returns of illness occurred now and then, his constitution appeared to be gradually strengthening itself, partly, as he thought, owing to the habit of very long walks, in which he took great delight. He tried various accomplishments; but he could neither draw, nor make music, nor (at this time) write. Still he always read – irregularly, uncritically, but enormously, so that to this day Sir Walter's real learning is under-estimated. And he formed a very noteworthy circle of friends – William Clerk, 'Darsie Latimer,' the chief of them all. It must have been just after he entered his father's office that he met Burns, during that poet's famous visit to Edinburgh in 1786-87.

Considerably less is known of his late youth and early manhood than either of his childhood or of his later life. His letters – those invaluable and unparalleled sources of biographical information – do not begin till 1792, the year of his majority, when (on July 11) he was called to the Bar. But it is a universal tradition that, in these years of apprenticeship, in more senses than one, he, partly in gratifying his own love of wandering, and partly in serving his father's business by errands to clients, etc., did more than lay the foundation of that unrivalled knowledge of Scotland, and of all classes in it, which plays so important a part in his literary work. I say 'of all classes in it,' and this point is of the greatest weight. Scott has been accused (for the most part foolishly) of paying an exaggerated respect to rank. If this had been true, it would at least not have been due to late or imperfect acquaintance with persons of rank. Democratic as the Scotland of this century has sometimes been called, it is not uncommon to find a considerable respect for aristocracy in the greatest Scotch Radicals; and Scott was notoriously not a Radical. But his familiarity with all ranks from an early age is undoubted, and only very shallow or prejudiced observers will doubt the beneficial effect which this had on his study of humanity.³ The uneasy caricature which mars Dickens's picture of the upper, and even the upper middle, classes is as much absent from his work as the complete want of familiarity with the lower which appears, for instance, in Bulwer. It is certain that before he had written anything, he was on familiar terms with many persons, both men and women, of the highest rank – the most noteworthy among his feminine correspondents being Lady Louisa Stuart (sister of the Marquis of Bute and grand-daughter of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu) and Lady Abercorn. With the former the correspondence is always on the footing of mere though close friendship, literary and other; in part at least of that with Lady Abercorn, I cannot help suspecting the presence, especially on the lady's side, of that feeling, which undoubtedly sometimes does exist between men and women who cannot, and perhaps who would not if they could, turn love into marriage.

'Too warm for friendship and too pure for love,'

However this may be, it is, let it be repeated, certain that Scott, in the six years from his fifteenth, when he is said to have first visited the Highlands and seen Rob Roy's country, to his majority, and yet again in the five or six between his call to the Bar and his marriage, visited many, if not all, parts of Scotland; knew high and low, rich and poor, with the amiable interest of his temperament and the keen observation of his genius; took part in business and amusement and conviviality (he accuses himself later of having been not quite free from the prevalent peccadillo

³ He attributes to Lady Balcarres the credit of being his earliest patroness, and of giving him, when a mere shy boy, the run of her drawing-room and of her box at the theatre.

of rather deep drinking); and still and always *read*. He joined the 'Speculative Society' in January 1791, and, besides taking part in the debates on general subjects, read papers on Feudalism, Ossian, and Northern Mythology, in what were to be his more special lines.

His young lawyer friends called him 'Colonel Grogg,' a *sobriquet* not difficult to interpret on one of the hints just given, and 'Duns Scotus,' which concerns the other; while yet a third characteristic, which can surprise nobody, is indicated in the famous introduction of him to a boisterous party of midshipmen of the Marryat type by James Clerk, the brother of Darsie Latimer, who kept a yacht, and was fond of the sea: 'You may take Mr. Scott for a poor *lamiter*, gentlemen, but he is the first to begin a row and the last to end it.'

It appears that it was from a time somewhat before the call that the beginning of Scott's famous, his unfortunate, and (it has been the fashion, rightly or wrongly, to add) his only love affair dates. Some persons have taken the trouble to piece together and eke out the references to 'Green Mantle,' otherwise Miss Stuart of Belches, later Lady Forbes. It is better to respect Scott's own reticence on a subject of which very little is really known, and of which he, like most gentlemen, preferred to say little or nothing. The affection appears to have been mutual; but the lady was probably not very eager to incur family displeasure by making a match decidedly below her in rank, and, at that time, distinctly imprudent in point of fortune. But the courtship, such as it was, appears to have been long, and the effects of the loss indelible. Scott speaks of his heart as 'handsomely pieced' – 'pieced,' it may be observed, not 'healed.' A healed wound sometimes does not show; a pieced garment or article of furniture reminds us of the piecing till the day when it goes to fire or dustbin. But it has been supposed, with some reason, that those heroines of Scott's who show most touch of personal sympathy – Catherine Seyton, Die Vernon, Lillas Redgauntlet – bear features, physical or mental or both, of this Astarte, this

'Lost woman of his youth, yet unpossessed.'

And no one can read the *Diary* without perceiving the strange bitter-sweet, at the moment of his greatest calamity, of the fact that Sir William Forbes, who rendered him invaluable service at his greatest need, was his successful rival thirty years before, and the widower of 'Green Mantle.'

This affair came to an end in October 1796; and it may astonish some wise people, accustomed to regard Scott as a rather humdrum and prosaic person, who escaped the scandals so often associated with the memory of men of letters from sheer want of temptation, to hear that one of his most intimate friends of his own age at the time 'shuddered at the violence of his most irritable and ungovernable mind.' There is no reason to doubt the fidelity of this description. And those who know something of human nature will be disposed to assign the disappearance of the irritableness and ungovernableness precisely to this incident, and to the working of a strong mind, confronted by fate with the question whether it was to be the victim or the master of its own passions, fighting out the battle once for all, and thenceforward keeping its house armed against them, it may be with some loss, but certainly with much gain.

It has been said that he states (with a touch of irony, no doubt) that his heart was 'handsomely pieced'; and it is not against the theory hinted in the foregoing paragraph, but, on the contrary, in favour of it, that the piecing did not take long. In exactly a year Scott became engaged to Miss Charlotte Margaret Carpenter or Charpentier,⁴ and they were married on Christmas Eve, 1797, at St. Mary's, Carlisle. They had met at Gilsland Spa in the previous July, and the courtship had not taken very long. The lady was of French extraction, had an only brother in the service of the East India Company, and, being an orphan, was the ward of the Marquis of Downshire, – circumstances on which gossips like Hogg made impertinent remarks. It is fair, however, to 'the Shepherd' to

⁴ He himself, in his entries of his children's births, always gives the order of the names as Margaret Charlotte.

say that he speaks enthusiastically both of Mrs. Scott's appearance ('one of the most beautiful and handsome creatures I ever saw in my life'; 'a perfect beauty') and of her character ('she is cradled in my remembrance, and ever shall be, as a sweet, kind, and affectionate creature').⁵ She was very dark, small, with hair which the Shepherd calls black, Lockhart dark brown; her features not regular, but her complexion, figure, and so forth 'unusually attractive.' Not very much is said about her in any of the authentic accounts, and traditional tittle-tattle may be neglected. She does not seem to have been extremely wise, and was entirely unliterary; but neither of these defects is a *causa redhibitionis* in marriage; and she was certainly a faithful and affectionate wife. At any rate, Scott made no complaints, if he had any to make, and nearly the most touching passage in the *Diary* is that written after her death.

The minor incidents, not literary, of his life, between his call to the Bar and his marriage, require a little notice, for they had a very great influence on the character of his future work. His success at the Bar was moderate, but his fees increased steadily if slowly. He defended (unsuccessfully) a Galloway minister who was accused among other counts of 'toying with a sweetie-wife,' and it is interesting to find in his defence some casuistry about *ebrius* and *ebriosus*, which reminds one of the Baron of Bradwardine. He took part victoriously in a series of battles with sticks, between Loyalist advocates and writers and Irish Jacobin medical students, in the pit of the Edinburgh theatre during April 1794. In June 1795 he became a curator of the Advocates' Library, and a year later engaged (of course on the loyal side) in another great political 'row,' this time in the streets.

Above all, in the spring and summer between the loss of his love and his marriage, he engaged eagerly in volunteering, becoming quartermaster, paymaster, secretary, and captain in the Edinburgh Light Horse – an occupation which has left at least as much impression on his work as Gibbon's equally famous connection with the Hampshire Militia on his. His friendships continued and multiplied; and he began with the sisters of some of his friends, especially Miss Cranstoun (his chief confidante in the 'Green Mantle' business) and Miss Erskine, the first, or the first known to us, of those interesting correspondences with ladies which show him perhaps at his very best. For in them he plays neither jack-pudding, nor coxcomb, nor sentimentalist, nor any of the involuntary counterparts which men in such cases are too apt to play; and they form not the least of his titles to the great name of gentleman.

But by far the most important contribution of these six or seven years to his 'making' was the further acquaintance with the scenery, and customs, and traditions, and dialects, and local history of his own country, which his greater independence, enlarged circle of friends, and somewhat increased means enabled him to acquire. It is quite true that to a man with his gifts any microcosm will do for a macrocosm in miniature. I have heard in conversation (I forget whether it is in any of the books) that he picked up the word 'whomled' (= 'bucketed over' – 'turned like a tub'), which adds so much to the description of the nautical misfortune of Claud Halcro and Triptolemus in *The Pirate*, by overhearing it from a scold in the Grassmarket. But still the enlarged experience could not but be of the utmost value. It was during these years that he saw Glamis Castle in its unspoiled state, during these that, in connection with the case of the unfortunate but rather happily named devotee of Bacchus and Venus, M'Naught, he explored Galloway, and obtained the decorations and scenery, if not the story, of *Guy Mannering*. He also repeated his visits to the English side of the Border, not merely on the occasion during which he met Miss Carpenter, but earlier, in a second excursion to Northumberland.

But, above all, these were the years of his famous 'raids' into Liddesdale, then one of the most inaccessible districts of Scotland, under the guidance of Mr. Shortreed of Jedburgh – raids

⁵ The Boar of the Forest seems, not unnaturally, to have had a rather less warm 'cradle' in Lady Scott's feelings. She thought he took liberties; and though he meant no harm, he certainly did.

which completed the information for *Guy Mannering*, which gave him much of the material for the *Minstrelsy*, and the history of which has, I think, delighted every one of his readers and biographers, except one or two who have been scandalised at the exquisite story of the Arrival of the Keg.⁶ Of these let us not speak, but, regarding them with a tender pity not unmixed with wonder, pass to the beginnings of his actual literary life and to the history of his early married years. The literature a little preceded the life; but the life certainly determined the growth of the literature.

⁶ Lockhart, i. 270. I quote, as is usual, the second or ten-volume edition. But, for reading, some may prefer the first, in which the number of the volumes coincides with their real division, which has the memories of the death of Sophia Scott and others connected with its course, and to which the second made fewer positive additions than may be thought. – [It has been pointed out to me in reference to the word 'whomle' on the opposite page that Fergusson has 'whumble' in 'The Rising of the Session.' But if Scott had quoted, would he have altered the spelling? The Grassmarket story, moreover, exactly corresponds to his words, 'as a gudewife would whomle a bowie.']

CHAPTER II

EARLY LITERARY WORK

It is pretty universally known, and must have been perceived even from the foregoing summary, that Scott was by no means a very precocious writer. He takes rank, indeed, neither with those who, according to a famous phrase, 'break out threescore thousand strong' in youth; nor with those who begin original composition betimes, and by degrees arrive at excellence; nor yet with those who do not display any aptitude for letters till late in life. His class – a fourth, which, at least as regards the greater names of literature, is perhaps the smallest of all – comprises those who may almost be said to drift into literary work and literary fame, whose first production is not merely tentative and unoriginal, but, so to speak, accidental, who do not discover their real faculty for literary work till after a pretty long course of casual literary play.

Part of this was no doubt due to the fact – vouched for sufficiently, and sufficiently probable, though not, so far as I know, resting on any distinct and firsthand documentary evidence – that Walter Scott the elder had, even more than his *eidolon* the elder Fairford, that horror of literary employment on the part of his son which was for generations a tradition among persons of business, and which is perhaps not quite extinct yet. For this opposition, as is well known, rather stimulates than checks, even in dutiful offspring, the noble rage. It was due partly, perhaps, to a metaphysical cause – the fact that until Scott was well past his twentieth year, the wind of the spirit was not yet blowing, that the new poetical and literary day had not yet dawned; and partly to a more commonplace reason or set of reasons. About 1790 literary work was extremely badly paid;⁷ and, even if it had been paid better, Scott had no particular need of money. Till his marriage he lived at home, spent his holidays with friends, or on tours where the expenses were little or nothing, and obtained sufficient pocket-money, first by copying while he was still apprenticed to his father, then by his fees when he was called. He could, as he showed later, spend money royally when he had it or thought he had it; but he was a man of no extravagant tastes of the ordinary kind, and Edinburgh was not in his days at all an extravagant place of living. Even when he married, he was by no means badly off. His wife, though not exactly an heiress, had means which had been estimated at five hundred a year, and which seem never to have fallen below two hundred; Scott's fees averaged about another two hundred; he evidently had an allowance from his father (who had been very well off, and was still not poor), and before very long the Sheriffship of Selkirkshire added three hundred more, though he seems to have made this an excuse for giving up practice, which he had never much liked. His father's death in 1799 put him in possession of some property; legacies from relations added more. Before the publication of the *Lay* (when he was barely three-and-thirty), Lockhart estimates his income, leaving fees and literary work out of the question, at nearly if not quite a thousand a year; and a thousand a year at the beginning of the century went as far as fifteen hundred, if not two thousand, at its close.

Thus, with no necessity to live by his pen, with no immediate or extraordinary temptation to use it for gain, and as yet, it would seem, with no overmastering inducement from his genius to do so, while he at no time of his life felt any stimulus from vanity, it is not surprising that it was long before Scott began to write in earnest. A few childish verse translations and exercises of his neither encourage nor forbid any particular expectations of literature from him; they are neither better nor worse than those of hundreds, probably thousands, of boys every year. His first published

⁷ Not many years before, Johnson had denied that it was possible for a working man of letters to earn even *six* guineas a sheet (the *Edinburgh* began at ten and proceeded to a minimum of sixteen), '*communibus sheetibus*,' as he put it jocularly to Boswell. Southey, in the year of Scott's marriage, seems to have thought about ten shillings (certainly not more) 'not amiss' for a morning's work in reviewing.

performance, now of extreme rarity, and not, of course, produced with any literary object, was his Latin call-thesis on the rather curious subject (which has been, not improbably, supposed to be connected with his German studies and the terror-literature of the last decade of the century) of the disposal of the dead bodies of legally executed persons. His first English work was directly the result of the said German studies, to which, like many of his contemporaries, he had been attracted by fashion. It consisted of nothing more than the well-known translations of Bürger's *Lenore* and *Wild Huntsman*, which were issued in a little quarto volume by Manners & Miller of Edinburgh, in October 1796 – a date which has the special interest of suggesting that Scott sought some refuge in literature from the agony of his rejection by Miss Stuart.

These well-known translations, or rather imitations, the first published under the title of *William and Helen*, which it retains, the other as *The Chase*, which was subsequently altered to the better and more literal rendering, show unmistakably the result of the study of ballads, both in the printed forms and as orally delivered. Some crudities of rhyme and expression are said to have been corrected at the instance of one of Scott's (at this time rather numerous) Egerias, the beautiful wife of his kinsman, Scott of Harden, a young lady partly of German extraction, but of the best English breeding. Slight books of the kind, even translations, made a great deal more mark sometimes in those days than they would in these; but there were a great many translations of *Lenore* about, and except by Scott's friends, little notice was taken of the volume. There were some excuses for the neglect, the best perhaps being that English criticism at the time was at nearly as low an ebb as English poetry. A really acute critic could hardly have mistaken the difference between Scott's verse and the fustian or tinsel of the Della Cruscans, the frigid rhetoric of Darwin, or the drivel of Hayley. Only Southey had as yet written ballad verses with equal vigour and facility; and, I think, he had not yet published any of them. It is Scott who tells us that he borrowed

'Tramp, tramp, along the land they rode,
Splash, splash, along the sea,'

from Taylor of Norwich; but Taylor himself had the good taste to see how much it was improved by the completion —

'The scourge is red, the spur drops blood,
The fashing pebbles flee' —

which last line, indeed, Coleridge himself hardly bettered in the not yet written *Ancient Mariner*, the *ne plus ultra* of the style. It must be mainly a question of individual taste whether the sixes and eights of the *Lenore* version or the continued eights of the *Huntsman* please most. But any one who knows what the present state of British poetry was in October 1796 will be more than indifferently well satisfied with either.

It was never Scott's way to be cast down at the failure or the neglect of any of his work; nor does he seem to have been ever actuated by the more masculine but perhaps equally childish determination to 'do it again' and 'shame the fools.' It seems quite on the cards that he might have calmly acquiesced in want of notoriety, and have continued a mere literary lawyer, with a pretty turn or verse and a great amount of reading, if his most intimate friend, William Erskine, had not met 'Monk' Lewis in London, and found him anxious for contributions to his *Tales of Wonder*. Lewis was a coxcomb, a fribble, and the least bit in the world of a snob: his *Monk* is not very clean fustian, and most of his other work rubbish. But he was, though not according to knowledge, a sincere Romantic; he had no petty jealousy in matters literary; and, above all, he had, as Scott recognised, but as has not been always recognised since, a really remarkable and then novel command of flowing but fairly strict lyrical measures, the very things needed to thaw the frost of the eighteenth-

century couplet. Erskine offered, and Lewis gladly accepted, contributions from Scott, and though *Tales of Wonder* were much delayed, and did not appear till 1801, the project directly caused the production of Scott's first original work in ballad, *Glenfinlas* and *The Eve of St. John*, as well as the less important pieces of the *Fire King*, *Frederick and Alice*, etc.

In *Glenfinlas* and *The Eve* the real Scott first shows, and the better of the two is the second. It is not merely that, though Scott had a great liking for and much proficiency in 'eights,' that metre is never so effective for ballad purposes as eights and sixes; nor that, as Lockhart admits, *Glenfinlas* exhibits a Germanisation which is at the same time an adulteration; nor even that, well as Scott knew the Perthshire Highlands, they could not appeal to him with the same subtle intimacy of touch as that possessed by the ruined tower where, as a half-paralysed infant, he had been herded with the lambs. But all these causes together, and others, join to produce a freer effect in *The Eve*. The eighteenth century is farther off; the genuine mediæval inspiration is nearer. And it is especially noticeable that, as in most of the early performances of the great poetical periods, an alteration of metrical etiquette (as we may call it) plays a great part. Scott had not yet heard that recitation of *Christabel* which had so great an effect on his work, and through it on the work of others. But he had mastered for himself, and by study of the originals, the secret of the *Christabel* metre, that is to say, the wide licence of equivalence in trisyllabic and dissyllabic feet,⁸ of metre catalectic or not, as need was, of anacrusis and the rest. As is natural to a novice, he rather exaggerates his liberties, especially in the cases where the internal rhyme seduces him. It is necessary not merely to slur, but to gabble, in order to get some of these into proper rhythm, while in other places the mistake is made of using so many anapæsts that the metre becomes, not as it should be, iambic, with anapæsts for variation, but anapæstic without even a single iamb. But these are 'sma' sums, sma' sums,' as saith his own Bailie Jarvie, and on the whole the required effect of vigour and variety, of narrative giving place to terror and terror to narrative is capitally achieved. Above all, in neither piece, in the less no more than in the more successful, do we find anything of what the poet has so well characterised in one of his early reviews as the 'spurious style of tawdry and affected simplicity which trickles through the legendary ditties' of the eighteenth century. 'The hunt is up' in earnest; and we are chasing the tall deer in the open hills, not coursing rabbits with toy terriers on a bowling-green.

The writing of these pieces had, however, been preceded by the publication of Scott's second volume, the translation of *Goetz von Berlichingen*, for which Lewis had arranged with a London bookseller, so that this time the author was not defrauded of his hire. He received twenty-five guineas, and was to have as much more for a second edition, which the short date of copyright forestalled. The book appeared in February 1799, and received more attention than the ballads, though, as Lockhart saw, it was in fact belated, the brief English interest in German *Sturm und Drang* having ceased directly, though indirectly it gave Byron much of his hold on the public a dozen years later. At about the same time Scott executed, but did not publish, an original, or partly original, dramatic work of the same kind, *The House of Aspen*, which he contributed thirty years later to *The Keepsake*. Few good words have ever been said for this, and perhaps not many persons have ever cared much for the *Goetz*, either in the original or in the translation. Goethe did not, in drama at least, understand adventurous matter, and Scott had no grasp of dramatic form.⁹

It has been said that there was considerable delay in the publication of the *Tales of Wonder*; and some have discussed what direct influence this delay had on Scott's further and further advance

⁸ For an interesting passage showing how slow contemporary ears were to admit this, see Southey's excellent defence of his own practice to Wynn (*Letters*, i. 69).

⁹ His attempts at the kind may best be despatched in a note here. Their want of merit contrasts strangely with the admirable quality of the 'Old Play' fragments scattered about the novels. *Halidon Hill* (1822), in the subject of which Scott had an ancestral interest from his Swinton blood, reminds one much more of Joanna Baillie than of its author. *Macduff's Cross* (1823), a very brief thing, is still more like Joanna, was dedicated to her, and appeared in a miscellany which she edited for a charitable purpose. *The Doom of Devorgoil*, written for Terry in the first 'cramp' attack of 1817, but not published till 1830, has a fine supernatural subject, but hardly any other merit. *Auchindrane*, the last, is by far the best.

into the waters of literature. It is certain that he at one time thought of publishing his contributions independently, and that he did actually print a few copies of them privately; and it is extremely probable that his little experiments in publication, mere *hors-d'œuvre* as they were, had whetted his appetite. Even the accident of his friend Ballantyne's having taken to publishing a newspaper, and having room at his press for what I believe printers profanely call 'job-work,' may not have been without influence. What is certain is that the project of editing a few Border ballads – a selection of his collection which might make 'a neat little volume of four or five shillings' – was formed roughly in the late autumn of 1799, and had taken very definite shape by April 1800. Heber, the great bibliophile and brother of the Bishop, introduced Scott to that curious person Leyden, whose gifts, both original and erudite, are undoubted, although perhaps his exile and early death have not hurt their fame. And it so happened that Leyden was both an amateur of old ballads and (for the two things went together then, though they are sternly kept apart now) a skilful fabricator of new. The impetuous Borderer pooh-poohed a 'thin thing' such as a four or five shilling book, and Scott, nothing loath, extended his project. Most of his spare time during 1800 and 1801 was spent on it; and besides corresponding with the man who 'fished this murex up,' Bishop Percy, he entered into literary relations with Joseph Ritson. Even Ritson's waspish character seems to have been softened by Scott's courtesy, and perhaps even more by the joint facts that he had as yet attained no literary reputation, and neither at this nor at any other time gave himself literary airs. He also made the acquaintance of George Ellis, who became a warm and intimate friend. These were the three men of the day who, since Warton's death, knew most of early English poetry, and though Percy was too old to help, the others were not.

The scheme grew and grew, especially by the inclusion in it of the publication not merely of ballads, but of the romance of *Sir Tristrem* (of the authorship of which by someone else than Thomas the Rhymer, Scott never would be convinced), till the neat four or five shilling volume was quite out of the question. When at last the two volumes of the first (Kelso) edition appeared in 1802, not merely was *Sir Tristrem* omitted, but much else which, still without 'the knight who fought for England,' subsequently appeared in a third. The earliest form of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* is a very pretty book; it deservedly established the fame of Ballantyne as a printer, and as it was not printed in the huge numbers which have reduced the money value of Sir Walter's later books, it is rather surprising that it is not more sought after than it is at present. My copy – I do not know whether by exception or not – wears the rather unusual livery of pink boards instead of the common blue, grey, or drab. The paper and type are excellent; the printing (with a few slips in the Latin quotations such as *concedunt* for *comedunt*) is very accurate, and the frontispiece, a view of Hermitage Castle in the rain, has the interest of presenting what is said to have been a very faithful view of the actual state of Lord Soulis' stronghold and the place of the martyrdom of Ramsay, attained by the curious stages of (1) a drawing by Scott, who could not draw at all; (2) a rifacimento by Clerk, who had never seen the place; and (3) an engraving by an artist who was equally innocent of local knowledge.

The book, however, which brought in the modest profit of rather less than eighty pounds, would have been of equal moment under whatever guise it had pleased to assume. The shock of Percy's *Reliques* was renewed, and in a far more favourable atmosphere, before a far better prepared audience. The public indeed had not yet been 'ground-baited' up to the consummation of thousands of copies of poetry as they were later by Scott himself and Byron; but an edition of eight hundred copies went off in the course of the year, and a second, with the additional volume, was at once called for. It contained, indeed, not much original verse, though 'Glenfinlas' and 'The Eve,' with Leyden's 'Cout of Keeldar,' 'Lord Soulis,' etc., appeared in it after a fashion which Percy had set and Evans had continued. But the ballads, familiar as they have become since, not merely in the *Minstrelsy* itself, but in a hundred fresh collections, selections, and what not, could never be mistaken by anyone fitted to appreciate them. 'The Outlaw Murray,' with its rub-a-dub of *e* rhymes

throughout, opens the book very cunningly, with something not of the best, but good enough to excite expectation, – an expectation surely not to be disappointed by the immortal agony (dashed with one stroke of magnificent wrath) of 'Helen of Kirkconnell,' the bustle, frolic, and battle-joy of the Border pieces proper, the solemn notes of 'The Lyke-Wake Dirge,' the eeriness of 'Clerk Saunders' and 'The Wife of Usher's Well.'

Even Percy had not been lucky enough to hit upon anything so characteristic of the *average* ballad style at its best as the opening stanza of 'Fause Foodrage' —

'King Easter courted her for her lands,
King Wester for her fee,
King Honour for her comely face
And for her fair bodie';

and Percy would no doubt have been tempted to 'polish' such more than average touches as Margaret's 'turning,' without waking, in the arms of her lover as he receives his deathblow, or as the incomparable stanza in 'The Wife of Usher's Well' which tells how —

'By the gates of Paradise
That birk grew fair enough.'

Those who study literature in what they are pleased to call a scientific manner have, as was to be expected, found fault (mildly or not, according to their degree of sense and taste) with Scott, for the manner in which he edited these ballads. It may be admitted that the practice of mixing imitations with originals is a questionable one; and that in some other cases, Scott, though he was far from the illegitimate and tasteless fashion of alteration, of which in their different ways Allan Ramsay and Percy himself had set the example, was not always up to the highest lights on this subject of editorial faithfulness. It must, for instance, seem odd to the least pedantic nowadays that he should have thought proper to print Dryden's *Virgil* with Dr. Somebody's pedantic improvements instead of Dryden's own text. But the case of the ballads is very different. Here, it must be remembered, there is no authentic original at all. Even in the rare cases, where very early printed or MS. copies exist, we not only do not know that these are the originals, we have every reasonable reason for being pretty certain that they are not. In the case of ballads taken down from repetition, we know as a matter of certainty that, according to the ordinary laws of human nature, the reciter has altered the text which he or she heard, that that text was in its day and way altered by someone else, and so on almost *ad infinitum*. 'Mrs. Brown's version,' therefore, or Mr. Smith's, or Mr. Anybody's, has absolutely no claims to sacrosanctity. It is well, no doubt, that all such versions should be collected by someone (as in this case by Professor Child) who has the means, the time, and the patience. But for the purposes of reading, for the purposes of poetic enjoyment, such a collection is nearly valueless. We must have it for reference, of course; nobody grudges the guineas he has spent for the best part of the last twenty years on Professor Child's stately, if rather cumbrous, volumes. But who can *read* a dozen versions, say, of 'The Queen's Marie' with any pleasure? What is exquisite in one is watered, messed, spoiled by the others.

Therefore I shall maintain that though the most excellent way of all might have been to record his alterations, and the original, in an appendix-dustbin of *apparatus criticus*, Scott was right, and trebly right, in such dealing as that with the first stanza of 'Fause Foodrage,' which I have quoted and praised. That stanza, as it stands above, does not occur in any of the extant quasi-originals. 'Mrs. Brown's MS.,' from which, as Professor Child says, with almost silent reproach, Scott took his text, 'with some forty small changes,' reads —

'King Easter has courted her for her gowd,
 King Wester for her fee,
 King Honour for her lands sae braid,
 And for her fair bodie.'

Now this is clearly wrong. Either 'gowd' or 'lands' is a mere repetition of 'fee,' and if not,¹⁰ the reading does not point any ethical antithesis between Kings Easter and Wester and their more chivalrous rival. As it happens, there are two other versions, shorter and less dramatic, but one of them distinctly giving, the other implying, the sense of Scott's alteration. Therefore I say that Scott was fully justified in adjusting the one text that he did print, especially as he did it in his own right way, and not in the wrong one of Percy and Mickle. There is here no Bentleian impertinence, no gratuitous meddling with the at least possibly genuine text of a known and definite author. The editor simply picks out of the mud, and wipes clean, something precious, which has been defaced by bad usage, and has become masterless.

The third volume of the *Minstrelsy* was pretty speedily got ready, with more matter; and *Sir Tristrem* (which is in a way a fourth) was not very long in following. This last part contained a *tour de force* in the shape of a completion of the missing part by Scott himself, a completion which, of course, shocks philologists, but which was certainly never written for them, and possesses its own value for others.

Not the least part of the interest of the *Minstrelsy* itself was the editor's appearance as a prose-writer. Percy had started, and others down to Ritson had continued, the practice of interspersing verse collections with dissertations in prose; and while the first volume of the *Minstrelsy* contained a long general introduction of more than a hundred pages, and most of the ballads had separate prefaces of more or less length, the preface to 'Young Tamlane' turned itself into a disquisition on fairy lore, which, being printed in small type, is probably not much shorter than the general introduction. In these pieces (the Fairy essay is said to be based on information partly furnished by Leyden) all the well-known characteristics of Scott's prose style appear – its occasional incorrectness, from the strictly scholastic point of view, as well as its far more than counterbalancing merits of vivid presentation, of arrangement, not orderly in appearance but curiously effective in result, of multifarious facts and reading, of the bold pictorial vigour of its narrative, of its pleasant humour, and its incessant variety.

Nor was this the only opportunity for exercising himself in the medium which, even more than verse, was to be his, that the earliest years of the century afforded to Scott. The *Edinburgh Review*, as everybody knows, was started in 1802. Although its politics were not Scott's, they were for some years much less violently put forward and exclusively enforced than was the case later; indeed, the Whig Review started with much the same ostensible policy as the Whig Deliverer a century before, the policy, at least in declared intention, of using both parties as far as might be for the public good. The attempt, if made *bona fide*, was not more successful in one case than in the other; but it at least permitted Tories to enlist under the blue-and-yellow banner. The standard-bearer, Jeffrey, moreover, was a very old, an intimate, and a never-quite-to-be-divorced friend of Scott's. At a later period, Scott's contributions to periodicals attained an excellence which has been obscured by the fame of the poems and novels together, even more unjustly than the poems have been obscured by the novels alone. His reviews at this time on Southey's *Amadis*, on Godwin's *Chaucer*, on Ellis's *Specimens*, etc., are a little crude and amateurish, especially in the direction (well known, to those who have ever had to do with editing, as a besetting sin of novices) of substituting a mere account of the book, with a few expressions of like and dislike, for a grasped and reasoned criticism of it. But this is far less peculiar to them than those who have not read the

¹⁰ It is quite possible that Mrs. Brown's illiterate authority, or one of his predecessors in title, took 'fee' in the *third* sense of 'cattle.'

early numbers of the great reviews may suppose. The fact is that Jeffrey himself, Sydney Smith, Scott, and others were only feeling for the principles and practice of reviewing, as they themselves later, and the brilliant second generation of Carlyle and Macaulay, De Quincey and Lockhart, were to carry it out. Perhaps the very best specimens of Scott's powers in this direction are the prefaces which he contributed much later and gratuitously to John Ballantyne's *Novelists' Library*— things which hardly yield to Johnson's *Lives* as examples of the combined arts of criticism and biography. At the time of which we speak he was 'making himself' in this direction as in others. I hope that Jeffrey and not he was responsible for a fling at Mary Woollstonecraft in the Godwin article, which would have been ungenerous in any case, and which in this was unpardonable. But there is nothing else to object to, and the *Amadis* review in particular is a very interesting one.

We must now look back a little, so as to give a brief sketch of Scott's domestic life, from his marriage until the publication of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, which, with that of *Waverley* and the crash of 1825-26, supplies the three turning-points of his career. After a very brief sojourn in lodgings (where the landlady was shocked at Mrs. Scott's habit of sitting constantly in her drawing-room), the young couple took up their abode in South Castle Street. Hence, not very long afterwards, they moved to the house – the famous No. 39 – in the northern division of the same street, which continued to be her home for the rest of her Edinburgh life, and Scott's so long as he could afford a house in Edinburgh. Their first child was born on the 14th of October 1798, but did not live many hours. As was (and for the matter of that is) much more customary with Edinburgh residents, even of moderate means, than it has been for at least a century with Londoners, Scott, while his own income was still very modest, took a cottage at Lasswade in the neighbourhood. Here he lived during the summer for years; and in March 1799 he and his wife went to London, for the first time in his case since he had been almost a baby. His father died during this visit, after a painful breakdown, which is said to have suggested the touching particulars of the deathbed of Chrystal Croftangry's benefactor (not 'the elder Croftangry,' as is said in a letter quoted by Lockhart), and was repeated to some extent in Scott's own case.

His appointment to the Sheriff[depute]ship of Selkirkshire was made in December 1799, and gave, for light work, three hundred a year. It need not have interfered with even an active practice at the Bar had such fallen to him, and at first did not impose on him even a partial residence. The Lord-Lieutenant, however, Lord Napier of Ettrick, insisted on this, and though Scott rather resented a strictness which seems not to have been universal, he had to comply. He did not, however, do so at once, and during the last year of the century and its two successors, Lasswade and Castle Street were Scott's habitats, with various radiations; while in the spring of 1803 he and Mrs. Scott repeated their visit to London and extended it to Oxford. It is not surprising to read his confession in sad days, a quarter of a century later, of the 'ecstatic feeling' with which he first saw this, the place in all the island which was his spiritual home. The same year saw the alarm of invasion which followed the resumption of hostilities after the armistice of Amiens; and Scott's attention to his quartermastership, which he still held, seems to have given Lord Napier the idea that he was devoting himself, not only *tam Marti quam Mercurio*, but to Mars rather at Mercury's expense.¹¹ Scott, however, was never fond of being dictated to, and he and his wife were still at Lasswade when the Wordsworths visited them in the autumn, though Scott accompanied them to his sheriffdom on their way back to Westmoreland. He had not yet wholly given up practice, and though its rewards were not munificent, they reached about this time, it would seem, their maximum sum of £218, which, in the days of his fairy-money, he must often have earned by a single morning's work.

Lord Napier, by no means improperly (for it was a legal requirement, though often evaded, that four months' residence per annum should be observed), persisted; and Scott, after a pleasing

¹¹ He wrote for his corps the 'War Song of the Edinburgh Light Dragoons,' which appeared in the *Scots Magazine* for 1802, but was written earlier. It is good, but not so good as it would have been a few years later.

but impracticable dream of taking up his summer residence in the Tower of Harden itself, which was offered to him, took a lease of Ashestiel, a pleasant country house, – 'a decent farmhouse,' he calls it, in his usual way, – the owner of which was his relation, and absent in India. The place was not far from Selkirk, on the banks of the Tweed and in the centre of the Buccleuch country. He seems to have settled there by the end of July 1804. The family, after leaving it for the late autumn session in Edinburgh, returned at Christmas, by which time *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, though not actually published, was printed and ready. It was issued in the first week of the new year 1805, being, except Wordsworth's and Coleridge's, the first book published, which was distinctly and originally characteristic of the new poetry of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER III

THE VERSE ROMANCES

Although Scott was hard upon his thirty-fifth year when the *Lay* appeared, and although he had already a considerable literary reputation in Edinburgh, and some in London, the amount of his original publications was then but small. Indeed, on the austere principles of those who deny 'originality' to such things as reviews, or as the essays in the *Minstrelsy*, it must be limited to a mere handful, though of very pleasant delights, the half-dozen of ballads made up by 'Glenfinlas,' 'The Eve of St. John,' the rather inferior 'Fire King,' the beautiful 'Cadzow Castle' (not yet mentioned, but containing some of its author's most charming *topic* lines), the fragment of 'The Grey Brother,' and a few minor pieces.

With the *Lay* he took an entirely different position. The mere bulk of the poem was considerable; and, putting for the instant entirely out of question its peculiarities of subject, metre, and general treatment, it was a daring innovation in point of class. The eighteenth century had, even under its own laws and conditions, distinctly eschewed long narrative poems, the unreadable epics of Glover, for instance, belonging to that class of exception which really does prove the rule. Pope's *Rape* had been burlesque, and his *Dunciad*, satire; hardly the ghost of a narrative had appeared in Thomson and Young; Shenstone, Collins, Gray, had nothing *de longue haleine*; the entire poetical works of Goldsmith probably do not exceed in length a canto of the *Lay*; Cowper had never attempted narrative; Crabbe was resting on the early laurels of his brief *Village*, etc., and had not begun his tales. *Thalaba*, indeed, had been published, and no doubt was not without effect on Scott himself; but it was not popular, and the author was still under the sway of the craze against rhyme. To all intents and purposes the poet was addressing the public, in a work combining the attractions of fiction with the attractions of verse at considerable length, for the first time since Dryden had done so in his *Fables*, a hundred and five years before. And though the mastery of the method might be less, the stories were original, they were continuous, and they displayed an entirely new gust and seasoning both of subject and of style.

There can be no doubt at all, for those who put metre in its proper place, that a very large, perhaps the much larger, part of the appeal of the *Lay* was metrical. The public was sick of the couplet – had indeed been sickened twice over, if the abortive revolt of Gray and Collins be counted. It did not take, and was quite right in not taking, to the rhymeless, shortened Pindaric of Sayers and Southey, as to anything but an eccentric 'sport' of poetry. What Scott had to offer was practically new, or at least novel. It is universally known – and Scott, who was only too careless of his own claims, and the very last of men to steal or conceal those of others, made no secret of it – that the suggestion of the *Lay* in metre came from a private recitation or reading of Coleridge's *Christabel*, written in the year of Scott's marriage, but not published till twenty years later, and more than ten after the appearance of the *Lay*. Coleridge seems to have regarded Scott's priority with an irritability less suitable to his philosophic than to his poetical character.¹² But he had, in the first place, only himself, if anybody, to blame; in the second, Scott more than made the loan his own property by the variations executed on its motive; and in the third, Coleridge's original right was far less than he seems to have honestly thought, and than most people have guilelessly assumed since.

¹² It is fair to him to say that he made no public complaints, and that when some gutter-scribbler in 1810 made charges of plagiarism from him against Scott, he furnished Southey with the means of clearing him from all share in the matter (*Lockhart*, iii. 293; *Southey's Life and Correspondence*, iii. 291). But there is a suspicion of fretfulness even in the Preface to *Christabel*; and the references to Scott's poetry (not to himself) in the *Table Talk*, etc., are almost uniformly disparaging. It is true that these last are not strictly evidence.

For the iambic dimeter, freely altered by the licences of equivalence, anacrusis, and catalexis, though not recently practised in English when *Christabel* and the *Lay* set the example, is an inevitable result of the clash between accented, alliterative, asyllabic rhythm and quantitative, exactly syllabic metre, which accompanied the transformation of Anglo-Saxon into English. We have distinct approaches to it in the thirteenth century *Genesis*; it attains considerable development in Spenser's *The Oak and the Brere*; anybody can see that the latter part of Milton's *Comus* was written under the breath of its spirit. But it had not hitherto been applied on any great scale, and the delusions under which the eighteenth century laboured as to the syllabic restrictions of English poetry had made it almost impossible that it should be. At the same time, that century, by its lighter practice on the one hand in the octosyllable, on the other in the four-footed anapaestic, was making the way easier for those who dared a little: and Coleridge first, then Scott, did the rest.

We have seen that in some of his early ballad work Scott had a little overdone the licence of equivalence, but this had probably been one of the formal points on which, as we know, the advice of Lewis, no poet but a remarkably good metrist, had been of use to him. And he acquitted himself now in a manner which, if it never quite attains the weird charm of *Christabel* itself at its best, is more varied, better sustained, and, above all, better suited to the story-telling which was, of course, Scott's supremest gift. It is very curious to compare Coleridge's remarks on Scott's verse with those of Wordsworth, in reference to the *White Doe of Rylstone*. Neither in *Christabel*, nor in the *White Doe*, is there a real *story* really told. Coleridge, but for his fatal weaknesses, undoubtedly could have told such a story; it is pretty certain that Wordsworth could not. But Scott could tell a story as few other men who have ever drawn breath on the earth could tell it. He had been distinguished in the conversational branch of the art from his youth up, and though it was to be long before he could write a story in prose, he showed now, at the first attempt, how he could write one in verse.

Construction, of course, was not his forte; it never was. The plot of the *Lay*, if not exactly non-existent, is of the simplest and loosest description; the whole being in effect a series of episodes strung together by the loves of Margaret and Cranstoun and the misdeeds of the Goblin Page. Even the Book supplies no real or necessary *nexus*. But the romance proper has never required elaborate construction, and has very rarely, if ever, received it. A succession of engaging or exciting episodes, each plausibly joined to each, contents its easy wants; and such a succession is liberally provided here. So, too, it does not require strict character-drawing – a gift with which Scott was indeed amply provided, but which he did not exhibit, and had no call to exhibit, here. If the personages will play their parts, that is enough. And they all play them very well here, though the hero and heroine do certainly exhibit something of that curious nullity which has been objected to the heroes nearly always, the heroines too frequently, of the later prose novels.

But even those critics who, as too many critics are wont to do, forgot and forget that 'the prettiest girl in the world' not only cannot give, but ought not to be asked to give, more than she has, must have been, and must be, very unreasonable if they find fault with the subject and stuff of the *Lay*. Jeffrey's remark about 'the present age not enduring' the Border and mosstrooping details was contradicted by the fact, and was, as a matter of taste, one of those strange blunders which diversified his often admirably acute critical utterances. When he feared their effects on '*English* readers,' he showed himself, as was not common with him, actually ignorant of one of the simplest general principles of the poetic appeal, that is to say, the element of *strangeness*. But we must not criticise criticism here, and must only add that another great appeal, that of variety, is amply given, as well as that of unfamiliarity. The graceful and touching, if a little conventional, overture of the Minstrel introduces with the truest art the vigorous sketch of Branksome Tower. The spirits of flood and fell are allowed to impress and not allowed to bore us; for the quickest of changes is made to Deloraine's ride – a kind of thing in which Scott never failed, even in his latest and saddest days. The splendid Melrose opening of the Second Canto supports itself through the discovery of the Book, and finds due contrast in the description (or no-description) of the lovers' meeting; the fight

and the Goblin Page's misbehaviour and punishment (to all, at least, but those, surely few now, who are troubled by the Jeffreyan sense of 'dignity'), the decoying and capture of young Buccleuch, and the warning of the clans are certainly no ungenerous provision for the Third; nor the clan anecdotes (especially the capital episode of the Beattisons), the parley, the quarrel of Howard and Dacre, and the challenge, for the Fourth. There is perhaps less in the Fifth, for Scott seems to have been afraid of another fight in detail; but the description of the night before, and the famous couplet —

'T'd give the lands of Deloraine
Dark Musgrave were alive again' —

would save it if there were nothing else, as there is much. And if the actual conclusion has no great interest (Scott was never good at conclusions, as we shall find Lady Louisa Stuart telling him frankly later), the Sixth Canto is full, and more than full, of brilliant things — the feast, the Goblin's tricks, his carrying-off, the pilgrimage, and, above all, the songs, especially 'Rosabelle' and the version of the 'Dies Iræ.'

The mention of these last may fairly introduce a few words on the formal and metrical characteristics of the poem, remarks which perhaps some readers resent, but which must nevertheless be made, inasmuch as they are to my mind by far the most important part of poetical criticism. Scott evidently arranged his scheme of metre with extreme care here, though it is possible that after this severe exercise he let it take care of itself to some extent later. His introduction is in the strict octosyllable, with only such licences of slur or elision —

'The pi | *tying* *Duch* | ess praised its chime,'
'*He had played* | it to King Charles the Good' —

as the greatest precisians might have allowed themselves. But the First Canto breaks at once into the full licence, not merely of equivalence, — that is to say, of substituting an anapæst or a trochee for an iamb, — but of shifting the base and rhythm of any particular verse, or of set batches of verses, between the three ground-feet, and, further, of occasionally introducing sixes, as in the ballad metre, and even fours —

'Bards long | shall tell
How Lord Wal | ter fell,'

instead of the usual eights.

In similar fashion he varies the rhymes, passing as the subject or the accompaniment of the word-music may require, from the couplet to the quatrain, and from the quatrain to the irregularly rhymed 'Pindaric'; always, however, taking care that, except in the set lyric, the quatrain shall not fall too much into definite stanza, but be interlaced in sense or sound sufficiently to carry on the narrative. The result, to some tastes, is a medium quite unsurpassed for the particular purpose. The only objection to it at all capable of being maintained, that I can think of, is that the total effect is rather lyrical than epic. And so much of this must be perhaps allowed as comes to granting that Scott's verse-romance is rather a long and cunningly sustained and varied ballad than an epic proper.

The *Lay*, though not received with quite that eager appetite for poetry which Scott was 'born to introduce,' and of which he lived long enough to see the glutting, had a large and immediate sale. The author, not yet aware what a gold mine his copyrights were, parted with this after the first edition, and received in all rather less than £770, a sum trifling in comparison with his after gains; but probably the largest that had as yet been received by any English poet for a single volume not published by subscription. It is curious that, at the estimated rate of three for one in comparing the

value of money at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the sum almost exactly equals that paid by Tonson for Dryden's *Fables*, the last book, before the *Lay* itself, which had united popularity, merit, and bulk in English verse. But Dryden was the acknowledged head of English literature at the time, and Scott was a mere beginner. He was probably even better pleased with the quality of the praise than with the quantity of the pudding. For though professional criticism, then in no very vigorous state, said some silly things, it was generally favourable; and a saying of Pitt (most indifferent, as a rule, of all Prime Ministers to English literature) is memorable not merely as summing up the general impression, but as defining what that impression was in a fashion quite invaluable to the student of literary history. The Pilot that Weathered the Storm, it seems, said of the description of the Minstrel's hesitation before playing, 'This is a sort of thing I might have expected in painting, but could never have fancied capable of being given by poetry.' To the present generation and the last, the reverse expression would probably seem more natural. We say, of Mr. Watts or of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, that they have put, in 'Love and Death' or in 'Love among the Ruins,' what we might have expected from poetry, but could hardly have thought possible in painting. But a hundred years of studious convention and generality, of deliberate avoidance of the poignant, and the vivid, and the detailed, and the coloured in poetry had made Pitt's confession as natural as another hundred years of contrary practice from Coleridge to Rossetti have made ours.

The publication of the *Lay* immediately preceded, and perhaps its success had no small share in deciding, the most momentous and unfortunate step of Scott's life, his entry into partnership with James Ballantyne. The discussion of the whole of this business will best be postponed till the date of its catastrophe is reached, but a few words may be said on the probable reasons for it. Much, no doubt, was the result of that combination of incalculable things which foolish persons of one kind call mere chance, of which foolish persons of another kind deny the existence, and which wise men term, from different but not irreconcilable points of view, Providence, or Luck, or Fate. But a little can be cleared up. Scott had evidently made up his mind that he should not succeed at the Bar, and had also persuaded himself that the very success of the *Lay* had made failure certain. The ill success of his brother Thomas, with the writer's business inherited from their father, perhaps inconvenienced and no doubt frightened him. In fact, though his harsher judges are wrong in attributing to him any undue haste to be rich, he certainly does seem to have been under a dread of being poor; a dread no doubt not wholly intelligible and partly morbid in a young man still under thirty-five, with brilliant literary and some legal prospects, who had, independently of fees, literary or legal, a secured income of about a thousand a year. He probably thought, and was right in thinking, that the book trade was going to 'look up' to a degree previously unknown; he seems throughout to have been under one of those inexplicable attractions towards the Ballantynes which now and then exist, as Hobbes says, 'in the greater towards the meaner, but not contrary'; and perhaps there was another cause which has not been usually allowed for enough. Good Christian and good-natured man as he was, Scott was exceedingly proud; and though joining himself with persons of dubious social position in mercantile operations seems an odd way of pride, it had its temptations. I do not doubt but that from the first Scott intended, more or less vaguely and dimly, to extend the printing business into a publishing one, and so to free himself from any necessity of going cap-in-hand to publishers.

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