



**THE LIFE OF SIR  
WALTER SCOTT**

**VOL. II: 1804 -- 1812**

**JOHN GIBSON LOCKHART**

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## **Contents:**

[The Life of Sir Walter Scott, Vol. 2: 1804 - 1812](#)

[Chapter I.](#)

[Chapter II.](#)

[Chapter III.](#)

[Chapter IV.](#)

[Chapter V.](#)

[Chapter VI.](#)

[Chapter VII.](#)

[Chapter VIII.](#)

[Chapter IX.](#)

[Chapter X.](#)

[Chapter XI.](#)

[Chapter XII.](#)

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## **The Life of Sir Walter Scott, Vol. 2: 1804 - 1812**

### **Chapter I.**

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

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

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

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

While he was seeking about, accordingly, for some "lodge in the Forest," his kinsman of Harden suggested that the tower of Auld Wat might be refitted, so as to serve his purpose; and he received the proposal with enthusiastic delight. On a more careful inspection of the localities,

however, he became sensible that he would be practically at a greater distance from county business of all kinds at Harden, than if he were to continue at Lasswade. Just at this time, the house of Ashestiel, situated on the southern bank of the Tweed, a few miles from Selkirk, became vacant by the death of its proprietor, Colonel Russell, who had married a sister of Scott's mother, and the consequent dispersion of the family. The young laird of Ashestiel, his cousin, was then in India; and the Sheriff took a lease of the house and grounds, with a small farm adjoining. On the 4th May, two days after the *Tristrem* had been published, he says to Ellis: "I have been engaged in travelling backwards and forwards to Selkirkshire upon little pieces of business, just important enough to prevent my doing any thing to purpose. One great matter, however, I have achieved, which is, procuring myself a place of residence, which will save me these teasing migrations in future, so that though I part with my sweet little cottage on the banks of the Esk, you will find me this summer in the very centre of the ancient Reged, in a decent farmhouse overhanging the Tweed, and situated in a wild pastoral country." And again, on the 19th, he thus apologizes for not having answered a letter of the 10th:—"For more than a month my head was fairly tenanted by ideas, which, though strictly pastoral and rural, were neither literary nor poetical. Long sheep, and short sheep, and tups, and gimmers, and hogs, and dinmons, had made a perfect sheepfold of my understanding, which is hardly yet cleared of them.\*—I hope Mrs. Ellis will clap a bridle on her imagination. Ettrick Forest boasts finely shaped hills and clear romantic streams; but, alas! they are bare, to wildness, and denuded of the beautiful natural wood with which they were formerly shaded. It is mortifying to see that, though wherever the sheep are excluded, the copse has immediately sprung up in abundance, so that enclosures only are wanting to restore the wood wherever it might be

useful or ornamental, yet hardly a proprietor has attempted to give it fair play for a resurrection. . . . You see we reckon positively on you—the more because our arch-critic Jeffrey tells me that he met you in London, and found you still inclined for a northern trip. All our wise men in the north are rejoiced at the prospect of seeing George Ellis. If you delay your journey till July, I shall then be free of the Courts of Law, and will meet you upon the Border, at whatever side you enter.”

*\* Describing his meeting with Scott in the summer of 1801, James Hogg says—“During the sociality of the evening, the discourse ran very much on the different breeds of sheep, that curse of the community of Ettrick Forest. The original black-faced Forest breed being always called the short sheep, and the Cheviot breed the long sheep, the disputes at that period ran very high about the practicable profits of each. Mr. Scott, who had come into that remote district to preserve what fragments remained of its legendary lore, was rather bored with everlasting questions of the long and the short sheep. So at length, putting on his most serious, calculating face, he turned to Mr. Walter Bryden, and said, ‘I am rather at a loss regarding the merits of this very important question. How long must a sheep actually measure to come under the denomination of a long sheep?’ Mr. Bryden, who, in the simplicity of his heart, neither perceived the quiz nor the reproof, fell to answer with great sincerity. ‘It’s the woo [wool], sir it’s the woo’ that makes the difference. The lang sheep ha’e the short woo’, and the short sheep ha’e the lang thing, and these are just kind o’ names we gi’e them, like.’ Mr. Scott could not preserve his grave face of strict calculation; it went gradually awry, and a hearty guffaw “[i. e. horselaugh]” followed. When I saw the very same words repeated near the beginning p. (4) of the ‘Black Dwarf,’ how could I be*

*mistaken of the author? "Autobiography prefixed to Hogg's "Altrive Tales."*

The business part of these letters refers to Scott's brother Daniel, who, as he expresses it, "having been bred to the mercantile line, had been obliged, by some untoward circumstances, particularly an imprudent connexion with an artful woman, to leave Edinburgh for Liverpool, and now to be casting his eyes towards Jamaica." Scott requests Ellis to help him if he can, by introducing him to some of his own friends or agents in that island: and Ellis furnishes him accordingly with letters to Mr. Blackburne, a friend and brother proprietor, who appears to have paid Daniel Scott every possible attention, and soon provided him with suitable employment on a healthy part of his estates. But the same low tastes and habits which had reduced the unfortunate young man to the necessity of expatriating himself, recurred after a brief season of penitence and order, and continued until he had accumulated great affliction upon all his family.

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

Tweed, with every possible convenience annexed to it, and about thirty acres of the finest land in Scotland.

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

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

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

On the 1st of August he writes to Ellis from Ashestiel —“Having had only about a hundred and fifty things to do, I have scarcely done any thing, and yet could not give myself leave to suppose that I had leisure to write letters. 1st, I had this farm-house to furnish from sales, from broker's



shops, and from all manner of hospitals for incurable furniture. 2dly, I had to let my cottage on the banks of the Esk. 3dly, I had to arrange matters for the sale of Rosebank. 4thly, I had to go into quarters with our cavalry, which made a very idle fortnight in the midst of all this business. Last of all, I had to superintend a removal, or what we call a flitting, which, of all bores under the cope of Heaven, is bore the most tremendous. After all these storms, we are now most comfortably settled, and have only to regret deeply our disappointment at finding your northern march blown up. We had been projecting about twenty expeditions, and were pleasing ourselves at Mrs. Ellis's expected surprise on finding herself so totally built in by mountains, as I am at the present writing hereof. We are seven miles from kirk and market. We rectify the last inconvenience by killing our own mutton and poultry; and as to the former, finding there was some chance of my family turning pagans, I have adopted the goodly practice of reading prayers every Sunday, to the great edification of my household. Think of this, you that have the happiness to be within two steps of the church, and commiserate those who dwell in the wilderness. I showed Charlotte yesterday the Catrail, and told her that to inspect that venerable monument was one main object of your intended journey to Scotland. She is of opinion that ditches must be more scarce in the neighbourhood of Windsor Forest than she had hitherto had the least idea of."

Ashestiel will be visited by many for his sake, as long as Waverley and Marmion are remembered. A more beautiful situation for the residence of a poet could not be conceived. The house was then a small one, but, compared with the cottage at Lasswade, its accommodations were amply sufficient. You approached it through an old-fashioned garden, with holly hedges, and broad, green, terrace walks. On one side, close under the windows, is a deep ravine,

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

When he first examined Ashestiel, with a view to being his cousin's tenant, he thought of taking home James Hogg to

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

rank as a farmer in his own district, that he witnessed the failure of any such negotiations with indifference. As regards the management of Ashestiel, I find no trace of that proposal having ever been renewed.

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

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

During this autumn Scott formed the personal acquaintance of Mungo Park, the celebrated victim of African discovery. On his return from his first expedition,

Park endeavoured to establish himself as a medical practitioner in the town of Hawick, but the drudgeries of that calling in such a district soon exhausted his ardent temper, and he was now living in seclusion in his native cottage at Fowlsheils on the Yarrow, nearly opposite Newark Castle. His brother, Archibald Park, a man remarkable for strength both of mind and body, was the sheriff's-officer of that district, and introduced the traveller to his principal. They soon became much attached to each other; and Scott supplied some interesting anecdotes of their brief intercourse, to the late Mr. Wishaw, the editor of Park's posthumous Journal, with which I shall blend a few minor circumstances which I gathered from him in conversation long afterwards. "On one occasion," he says, "the traveller communicated to him some very remarkable adventures which had befallen him in Africa, but which he had not recorded in his book." On Scott's asking the cause of this silence, Mungo answered, "that in all cases where he had information to communicate, which he thought of importance to the public, he had stated the facts boldly, leaving it to his readers to give such credit to his statements as they might appear justly to deserve; but that he would not shock their faith, or render his travels more marvellous, by introducing circumstances, which, however true, were of little or no moment, as they related solely to his own personal adventures and escapes." This reply struck Scott as highly characteristic of the man; and though strongly tempted to set down some of these marvels for Mr. Wishaw's use, he on reflection abstained from doing so, holding it unfair to record what the adventurer had deliberately chosen to suppress in his own narrative. He confirms the account given by Park's biographer of his cold and reserved manners to strangers; and in particular, of his disgust with the indirect questions which curious visitors would often put to him upon the subject of his travels. "This practice," said Mungo, "exposes me to two risks; either

that I may not understand the questions meant to be put, or that my answers to them may be misconstrued;" and he contrasted such conduct with the frankness of Scott's revered friend, Dr Adam Ferguson, who, the very first day the traveller dined with him at Hallyards, spread a large map of Africa on the table, and made him trace out his progress thereupon, inch by inch, questioning him minutely as to every step he had taken. "Here, however," says Scott, "Dr F. was using a privilege to which he was well entitled by his venerable age and high literary character, but which could not have been exercised with propriety by any common stranger."

Calling one day at Fowlsheils, and not finding Park at home, Scott walked in search of him along the banks of the Yarrow, which in that neighbourhood passes over various ledges of rock, forming deep pools and eddies between them. Presently he discovered his friend standing alone on the bank, plunging one stone after another into the water, and watching anxiously the bubbles as they rose to the surface. "This," said Scott, "appears but an idle amusement for one who has seen so much stirring adventure." "Not so idle, perhaps, as you suppose," answered Mungo. "This was the manner in which I used to ascertain the depth of a river in Africa before I ventured to cross it—judging whether the attempt would be safe, by the time the bubbles of air took to ascend." At this time Park's intention of a second expedition had never been revealed to Scott; but he instantly formed the opinion that these experiments on Yarrow were connected with some such purpose.

His thoughts had always continued to be haunted with Africa. He told Scott that whenever he awoke suddenly in the night, owing to a nervous disorder with which he was troubled, he fancied himself still a prisoner in the tent of Ali; but when the poet expressed some surprise that he

should design again to revisit those scenes, he answered, that he would rather brave Africa and all its horrors, than wear out his life in long and toilsome rides over the hills of Scotland, for which the remuneration was hardly enough to keep soul and body together.

Towards the end of the autumn, when about to quit his country for the last time, Park paid Scott a farewell visit, and slept at Ashestiel. Next morning his host accompanied him homewards over the wild chain of hills between the Tweed and the Yarrow. Park talked much of his new scheme, and mentioned his determination to tell his family that he had some business for a day or two in Edinburgh, and send them his blessing from thence without returning to take leave. He had married, not long before, a pretty and amiable woman; and when they reached the Williamhope Ridge, "the autumnal mist floating heavily and slowly down the valley of the Yarrow," presented to Scott's imagination "a striking emblem of the troubled and uncertain prospect which his undertaking afforded." He remained, however, unshaken, and at length they reached the spot at which they had agreed to separate. A small ditch divided the moor from the road, and, in going over it, Park's horse stumbled, and nearly fell. "I am afraid, Mungo," said the Sheriff, "that is a bad omen." To which he answered, smiling, "Freits (omens) follow those who look to them." With this expression Mungo struck the spurs into his horse, and Scott never saw him again. His parting proverb, by the way, was probably suggested by one of the Border ballads, in which species of lore he was almost as great a proficient as the Sheriff himself; for we read in "Edom o' Gordon,"—

*Them look to freits, my master dear,  
Then freits will follow them."*

I must not omit that George Scott, the unfortunate companion of Park's second journey, was the son of a tenant on the Buccleuch estate, whose skill in drawing having casually attracted the Sheriff's attention, he was recommended by him to the protection of the family, and by this means established in a respectable situation in the Ordnance department of the Tower of London; but the stories of his old acquaintance Mungo Park's discoveries, had made such an impression on his fancy, that nothing could prevent his accompanying him on the fatal expedition of 1805.

The brother of Mungo Park remained in Scott's employment for many years, and was frequently his companion in his mountain rides. Though a man of the most dauntless temperament, he was often alarmed at Scott's reckless horsemanship. "The de'il's in ye, Sherra," he would say, "ye'll never halt till they bring you hame with your feet foremost." He rose greatly in favour, in consequence of the gallantry with which he seized a gipsy, accused of murder, from amidst a group of similar desperadoes, on whom the Sheriff and he had come unexpectedly in a desolate part of the country.

To return to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*:—Ellis, understanding it to be now nearly ready for the press, writes to Scott, urging him to set it forth with some engraved illustrations—if possible, after Flaxman, whose splendid designs from Homer had shortly before made their appearance. He answers, August 21—"I should have liked very much to have had appropriate embellishments. Indeed, we made some attempts of the kind, but they did not succeed. I should fear Flaxman's genius is too classic to stoop to body forth my Gothic Borderers. Would there not be some risk of their resembling the antique of Homer's heroes rather than the iron race of Salvator? After all,



perhaps, nothing is more difficult than for a painter to adopt the author's ideas of an imaginary character, especially when it is founded on traditions to which the artist is a stranger. I should like at least to be at his elbow when at work. I wish very much I could have sent you the Lay while in MS., to have had the advantage of your opinion and corrections. But Ballantyne galled my kibes so severely during an unusual fit of activity, that I gave him the whole story in a sort of pet both with him and with it. . . . I have lighted upon a very good amanuensis for copying such matters as the Lay le Frain, &c. He was sent down here by some of the London booksellers in a half-starved state, but begins to pick up a little. . . I am just about to set out on a grand expedition of great importance to my comfort in this place. You must know that Mr. Plummer, my predecessor in this county, was a good antiquary, and left a valuable collection of books, which he entailed with the estate, the first successors being three of his sisters, at least as old and musty as any Caxton or Wynkyn de Worde in his library. Now I must contrive to coax those watchful dragons to give me admittance into this garden of the Hesperides. I suppose they trouble the volumes as little as the dragon did the golden pippins; but they may not be the more easily soothed on that account. However, I set out on my quest, like a preux chevalier, taking care to leave Camp, for dirtying the carpet, and to carry the greyhounds with me, whose appearance will indicate that hare soup may be forthcoming in due season. By the way, did I tell you that Fitz-Camp is dead, and another on the stocks? As our stupid postman might mistake Reged, address, as per date, Ashestiel, Selkirk, by Berwick."

I believe the spinsters of Sunderland hall proved very generous dragons; and Scott lived to see them succeeded in the guardianship of Mr. Plummer's literary treasures by an amiable young gentleman of his own name and family.

The half-starved amanuensis of this letter was Henry Weber, a laborious German, of whom we shall hear more hereafter. With regard to the pictorial embellishments contemplated for the first edition of the Lay of the Last Minstrel, I believe the artist in whose designs the poet took the greatest interest was Mr. Masquerier, now of Brighton, with whom he corresponded at some length on the subject; but his distance from that ingenious gentleman's residence was inconvenient, and the booksellers were probably impatient of delay, when the MS. was once known to be in the hands of the printer.

There is a circumstance which must already have struck such of my readers as knew the author in his latter days, namely, the readiness with which he seems to have communicated this poem, in its progress, not only to his own familiar friends, but to new and casual acquaintances. We shall find him following the same course with his Marmion—but not, I think, with any of his subsequent works. His determination to consult the movements of his own mind alone in the conduct of his pieces was probably taken before he began the Lay; and he soon resolved to trust for the detection of minor inaccuracies to two persons only—James Ballantyne and William Erskine. The printer was himself a man of considerable literary talents; his own style had the incurable faults of pomposity and affectation, but his eye for more venial errors in the writings of others was quick, and, though his personal address was apt to give a stranger the impression of insincerity, he was in reality an honest man, and conveyed his mind on such matters with equal candour and delicacy during the whole of Scott's brilliant career. In the vast majority of instances he found his friend acquiesce at once in the propriety of his suggestions; nay, there certainly were cases, though rare, in which his advice to alter things of much more consequence than a word or a rhyme, was frankly

tendered, and on deliberation adopted by Scott. Mr. Erskine was the referee whenever the poet hesitated about taking the hints of the zealous typographer, and his refined taste and gentle manners rendered his critical alliance highly valuable. With two such faithful friends within his reach, the author of the Lay might safely dispense with sending his MS. to be revised even by George Ellis.

Before he left Ashestiel for the winter session, the printing of the poem had made considerable progress. Ellis writes to him on the 10th November, complaining of bad health, and adds, "Tu quid agis? I suppose you are still an inhabitant of Reged, and being there it is impossible that your head should have been solely occupied by the ten thousand cares which you are likely to have in common with other mortals, or even by the Lay, which must have been long since completed, but must have started during the summer new projects sufficient to employ the lives of half-a-dozen patriarchs. Pray tell me all about it, for as the present state of my frame precludes me from much activity, I want to enjoy that of my friends." Scott answers from Edinburgh: "I fear you fall too much into the sedentary habits incident to a literary life, like my poor friend Plummer, who used to say that a walk from the parlour to the garden once a day was sufficient exercise for any rational being, and that no one but a fool or a fox-hunter would take more. I wish you could have had a seat on Hassan's tapestry to have brought Mrs. Ellis and you soft and fair to Ashestiel, where with farm mutton at four p.m., and goats whey at 6 a.m., I think we could have re-established as much embonpoint as ought to satisfy a poetical antiquary. As for my country amusements, I have finished the Lay, with which and its accompanying notes the press now groans; but I have started nothing except some scores of hares, many of which my gallant greyhounds brought to the ground."

Ellis had also touched upon a literary feud then raging between Scott's allies of the Edinburgh Review, and the late Dr Thomas Young, illustrious for inventive genius, displayed equally in physical science and in philological literature. A northern critic, whoever he was, had treated with merry contempt certain discoveries in natural philosophy and the mechanical arts, more especially that of the undulating theory of light, which ultimately conferred on Young's name one of its highest distinctions. "He had been for some time," says Ellis, "lecturer at the Royal Institution; and having determined to publish his lectures, he had received from one of the booksellers the offer of £1000 for the copyright. He was actually preparing for the press, when the bookseller came to him, and told him that the ridicule thrown by the Edinburgh Review, on some papers of his in the Philosophical Transactions, had so frightened the whole trade that he must request to be released from his bargain. This consequence, it is true, could not have been foreseen by the reviewer, who, however, appears to have written from feelings of private animosity; and I still continue to think, though I greatly admire the good taste of the literary essays, and the perspicuity of the dissertations on political economy, that an apparent want of candour is too generally the character of a work which, from its independence on the interests of booksellers, might have been expected to be particularly free from this defect." Scott rejoins: "I am sorry for the very pitiful catastrophe of Dr Young's publication, because, although I am altogether unacquainted with the merits of the controversy, one must always regret so very serious a consequence of a diatribe. The truth is, that these gentlemen reviewers ought often to read over the fable of the boys and frogs, and should also remember it is much more easy to destroy than to build, to criticise than to compose. While on this subject, I kiss the rod of my critic in

the Edinburgh, on the subject of the price of Sir Tristrem; it was not my fault, however, that the public had it not cheap enough, as I declined taking any copy-money, or share in the profits, and nothing surely was as reasonable a charge as I could make.”

On the 30th December he resumes: “The Lay is now ready, and will probably be in Longman and Rees’s hands shortly after this comes to yours. I have charged them to send you a copy by the first conveyance, and shall be impatient to know whether you think the entire piece corresponds to that which you have already seen. I would also fain send a copy to Gifford, by way of introduction.—My reason is that I understand he is about to publish an edition of Beaumont and Fletcher, and I think I could offer him the use of some miscellaneous notes, which I made long since on the margin of their works.\* Besides I have a good esteem of Mr. Gifford as a manly English poet, very different from most of our modern versifiers.—We are so fond of Reged that we are just going to set out for our farm in the middle of a snow-storm; all that we have to comfort ourselves with is, that our march has been ordered with great military talent—a detachment of minced pies and brandy having preceded us. In case we are not buried in a snow-wreath, our stay will be but short. Should that event happen we must wait the thaw.”

*\* It was his Massinger that Gifford had at this time in hand. His Ben Jonson followed, and then his Ford. Some time later, he projected editions, both of Beaumont and Fletcher, and of Shakspeare: but, to the grievous misfortune of literature, died without having completed either of them. We shall see presently what became of Scott’s Notes on Beaumont and Fletcher.*

Ellis, not having as yet received the new poem, answers on the 9th January, 1805, "I look daily and with the greatest anxiety for the Last Minstrel—of which I still hope to see a future edition decorated with designs à la Flaxman, as the Lays of Homer have already been. I think you told me that Sir Tristrem had not excited much sensation in Edinburgh. As I have not been in London this age, I can't produce the contrary testimony of our metropolis. But I can produce one person, and that one worth a considerable number, who speaks of it with rapture, and says, 'I am only sorry that Scott has not (and I am sure he has not) told us the whole of his creed on the subject of Tomas, and the other early Scotch minstrels, I suppose he was afraid of the critics, and determined to say very little more than he was able to establish by incontestable proofs. I feel infinitely obliged to him for what he has told us, and I have no hesitation in saying, that I consider Sir T. as by far the most interesting work that has as yet been published on the subject of our earliest poets, and, indeed, such a piece of literary antiquity as no one could have, a priori, supposed to exist.' This is Frere—our ex-ambassador for Spain, whom you would delight to know, and who would delight to know you. It is remarkable that you were, I believe, the most ardent of all the admirers of his old English version of the Saxon Ode;\* and he is, per contra, the warmest panegyrist of your Conclusion, which he can repeat by heart, and affirms to be the very best imitation of old English at present existing. I think I can trust you for having concluded the Last Minstrel with as much spirit as it was begun—if you have been capable of any thing unworthy of your fame amidst the highest mountains of Reged, there is an end of all inspiration."

*\* "I have only met, in my researches into these matters," says Scott in 1830, "with one poem, which, if it had been produced as ancient, could not have been detected on*

*internal evidence. It is the War Song upon the Victory at Brunnanburgh, translated from the Anglo-Saxon into Anglo-Norman, by the Right Hon. John Hookham Frere. See Ellis's Specimens of Ancient English Poetry, vol. i. p. 32. The accomplished editor tells us, that this very singular poem was intended as an imitation of the style and language of the fourteenth century, and was written during the controversy occasioned by the poems attributed to Rowley. Mr. Ellis adds, 'the reader will probably hear with some surprise that this singular instance of critical ingenuity was the composition of an Eton schoolboy.'"*—*Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad, p. 19.*

Scott answers—"Frere is so perfect a master of the ancient style of composition, that I would rather have his suffrage than that of a whole synod of your vulgar antiquaries. The more I think on our system of the origin of romance, the more simplicity and uniformity it seems to possess; and though I adopted it late and with hesitation, I believe I shall never see cause to abandon it. Yet I am aware of the danger of attempting to prove, where proofs are but scanty, and probable suppositions must be placed in lieu of them. I think the Welsh antiquaries have considerably injured their claims to confidence, by attempting to detail very remote events with all the accuracy belonging to the facts of yesterday. You will hear one of them describe you the cut of Llywarch Hen's beard, or the whittle of Urien Reged, as if he had trimmed the one, or cut his cheese with the other. These high pretensions weaken greatly our belief in the Welsh poems, which probably contain real treasures. 'Tis a pity some sober-minded man will not take the trouble to sift the wheat from the chaff, and give us a good account of their MSS. and traditions. Pray, what is become of the Mabinogion? It is a proverb, that children and fools talk truth, and am mistaken if even the same valuable quality may not sometimes be extracted out of the tales made to

entertain both. I presume, while we talk of childish and foolish tales, that the Lay is already with you, although, in these points, Long-manum est errare. Pray enquire for your copy.”

In the first week of January, 1805, “The Lay” was published; and its success at once decided that literature should form the main business of Scott’s life.

In his modest Introduction of 1830, he had himself told us all that he thought the world would ever desire to know of the origin and progress of this his first great original production. The present Memoir, however, has already included many minor particulars, for which I believe no student of literature will reproach the compiler. I shall not mock the reader with many words as to the merits of a poem which has now kept its place for nearly a third of a century; but one or two additional remarks on the history of the composition may be pardoned.

It is curious to trace the small beginnings and gradual developement of his design. The lovely Countess of Dalkeith hears a wild rude legend of Border diablerie, and sportively asks him to make it the subject of a ballad. He had been already labouring in the elucidation of the “quaint Inglis” ascribed to an ancient seer and bard of the same district, and perhaps completed his own sequel, intending the whole to be included in the third volume of the Minstrelsy. He assents to Lady Dalkeith’s request, and casts about for some new variety of diction and rhyme, which might be adopted without impropriety in a closing strain for the same collection. Sir John Stoddort’s casual recitation, a year or two before, of Coleridge’s unpublished Christabel, had fixed the music of that noble fragment in his memory; and it occurs to him, that by throwing the story of Gilpin Horner into somewhat of a similar cadence,



he might produce such an echo of the later metrical romance, as would serve to connect his Conclusion of the primitive Sir Tristrem with his imitations of the common popular ballad in the Grey Brother and Eve of St John. A single scene of feudal festivity in the hall of Branksome, disturbed by some pranks of a nondescript goblin, was probably all that he contemplated; but his accidental confinement in the midst of a volunteer camp gave him leisure to meditate his theme to the sound of the bugle;— and suddenly there flashes on him the idea of extending his simple outline, so as to embrace a vivid panorama of that old Border life of war and tumult, and all earnest passions, with which his researches on the “Minstrelsy” had by degrees fed his imagination, until every the minutest feature had been taken home and realized with unconscious intenseness of sympathy; so that he had won for himself in the past another world, hardly less complete or familiar than the present. Erskine or Cranstoun suggests that he would do well to divide the poem into cantos, and prefix to each of them a motto explanatory of the action, after the fashion of Spenser in the Faery Queen. He pauses for a moment—and the happiest conception of the framework of a picturesque narrative that ever occurred to any poet—one that Homer might have envied—the creation of the ancient harper starts to life. By such steps did the “Lay of the Last Minstrel” grow out of the “Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border.”

A word more of its felicitous machinery. It was at Bowhill that the Countess of Dalkeith requested a ballad on Gilpin Horner. The ruined castle of Newark closely adjoins that seat, and is now indeed included within its pleasance. Newark had been the chosen residence of the first Duchess of Buccleuch, and he accordingly shadows out his own beautiful friend in the person of her lord’s ancestress, the last of the original stock of that great house; himself the

favoured inmate of Bowhill, introduced certainly to the familiarity of its circle in consequence of his devotion to the poetry of a by-past age, in that of an aged minstrel, "the last of all the race," seeking shelter at the gate of Newark, in days when many an adherent of the fallen cause of Stuart,—his own bearded ancestor, who had fought at Killiecrankie, among the rest,—owed their safety to her who

*In pride of power, in beauty's bloom,  
Had wept o'er Monmouth's bloody tomb."*

The arch allusions which run through all these Introductions, without in the least interrupting the truth and graceful pathos of their main impression, seem to me exquisitely characteristic of Scott, whose delight and pride was to play with the genius which nevertheless mastered him at will. For, in truth, what is it that gives to all his works their unique and marking charm, except the matchless effect which sudden effusions of the purest heart blood of nature derive from their being poured out, to all appearance involuntarily, amidst diction and sentiment cast equally in the mould of the busy world, and the seemingly habitual desire to dwell on nothing but what might be likely to excite curiosity, without too much disturbing deeper feelings, in the saloons of polished life? Such outbursts come forth dramatically in all his writings; but in the interludes and passionate parentheses of the "Lay of the Last Minstrel" we have the poet's own inner soul and temperament laid bare and throbbing before us: even here, indeed, he has a mask, and he trusts it—but fortunately it is a transparent one.

Many minor personal allusions have been explained in the notes to the last edition of the "Lay." It was hardly necessary even then to say that the choice of the hero had

been dictated by the poet's affection for the living descendants of the Baron of Cranstoun; and now none who have perused the preceding pages can doubt, that he had dressed out his Margaret of Branksome in the form and features of his own first love. This poem may be considered as the "bright consummate flower" in which all the dearest dreams of his youthful fancy had at length found expansion for their strength, spirit, tenderness, and beauty.

In the closing lines—

*"Hush'd is the harp the Minstrel gene;  
And did he wander forth alone?  
Alone, in indigence and age,  
To linger out his pilgrimage?  
No! close beneath proud Newark's tower  
Arose the Minstrel's humble bower," &c.—*

—in these charming lines he has embodied what was, at the time when he penned them, the chief day-dream of Ashestiel. From the moment that his uncle's death placed a considerable sum of ready money at his command, he pleased himself, as we have seen, with the idea of buying a mountain farm, and becoming not only the "sheriff" (as he had in former days delighted to call himself), but "the laird of the cairn and the scaur." While he was labouring doucement at the Lay" (as in one of his letters he expresses it), during the recess of 1804, circumstances rendered it next to certain that the small estate of Broadmeadows, situated just over against the rums of Newark on the northern bank of the Yarrow, would soon be exposed to sale; and many a time did he ride round it in company with Lord and Lady Dalkeith,

*"When summer smiled on sweet Bowhill,"*

*surveying the beautiful little domain with wistful eyes, and  
anticipating that  
"There would he sing achievement high  
And circumstance of chivalry,  
Till the 'rapt traveller would stay,  
Forgetful of the closing day;  
And noble youths, the strain to hear,  
Forget the hunting of the deer;  
And Yarrow, as he rolled along,  
Bear burden to the Minstrel's song."*

I consider it as, in one point of view, the greatest misfortune of his life that this vision was not realized; but the success of the poem itself changed "the spirit of his dream." The favour which it at once attained had not been equalled in the case of any one poem of considerable length during at least two generations: it certainly had not been approached in the case of any narrative poem since the days of Dryden. Before it was sent to the press it had received warm commendation from the ablest and most influential critic of the time; but when Mr. Jeffrey's review appeared, a month after publication, laudatory as its language was, it scarcely came up to the opinion which had already taken root in the public mind. It, however, quite satisfied the author, and were I at liberty to insert some letters which passed between them in the course of the summer of 1805, it would be seen that their feelings towards each other were those of mutual confidence and gratitude. Indeed, a severe domestic affliction which about this time befell Mr. Jeffrey, called out the expression of such sentiments on both sides in a very touching manner.

I abstain from transcribing the letters which conveyed to Scott the private opinions of persons themselves eminently distinguished in poetry; but I think it just to state, that I have not discovered in any of them—no, not even in those

of Wordsworth or Campbell—a strain of approbation higher on the whole than that of the chief professional reviewer of the period. When the happy days of youth are over, even the most genial and generous of minds are seldom able to enter into the strains of a new poet with that full and open delight which he awakens in the bosoms of the rising generation about him. Their deep and eager sympathies have already been drawn upon to an extent of which the prosaic part of the species can never have any conception; and when the fit of creative inspiration has subsided, they are apt to be rather cold critics even of their own noblest appeals to the simple primary feelings of their kind. Miss Seward's letter, on this occasion, has been since included in the printed collection of her correspondence; but perhaps the reader may form a sufficient notion of its tenor from the poet's answer which, at all events, he will be amused to compare with the Introduction of 1830:—

To Miss Seward, Lichfield.  
Edinburgh, 21st March, 1805.  
“My dear Miss Seward,

“I am truly happy that you found any amusement in the Lay of the Last Minstrel. It has great faults, of which no one can be more sensible than I am myself. Above all, it is deficient in that sort of continuity which a story ought to have, and which, were it to write again, I would endeavour to give it. But I began and wandered forward, like one in a pleasant country, getting to the top of one hill to see a prospect, and to the bottom of another to enjoy a shade, and what wonder if my course has been devious and desultory, and many of my excursions altogether unprofitable to the advance of my journey. The Dwarf Page is also an excrescence, and I plead guilty to all the censures concerning him. The truth is, he has a history, and it is this: The story of Gilpin Horner was told by an old gentleman to Lady Dalkeith, and she, much

diverted with his actually believing so grotesque a tale, insisted that I should make it into a Border ballad. I don't know if ever you saw my lovely chieftainess—if you have, you must be aware that it is impossible for any one to refuse her request, as she has more of the angel in face and temper than any one alive; so that if she had asked me to write a ballad on a broomstick I must have attempted it. I began a few verses, to be called the Goblin Page; and they lay long by me, till the applause of some friends whose judgment I valued induced me to resume the poem; so on I wrote, knowing no more than the man in the moon how I was to end. At length the story appeared so uncouth, that I was fain to put it into the mouth of my old minstrel—lest the nature of it should be misunderstood, and I should be suspected of setting up a new school of poetry, instead of a feeble attempt to imitate the old. In the process of the romance the page, intended to be a principal person in the work, contrived (from the baseness of his natural propensities I suppose) to slink down stairs into the kitchen, and now he must e'en abide there.

I mention these circumstances to you, and to any one whose applause I value, because I am unwilling you should suspect me of trifling with the public in malice prepense. As to the herd of critics, it is impossible for me to pay much attention to them; for, as they do not understand what I call poetry, we talk in a foreign language to each other. Indeed, many of these gentlemen appear to me to be a sort of tinkers, who, unable to make pots and pans, set up for menders of them, and, God knows, often make two holes in patching one. The sixth canto is altogether redundant; for the poem should certainly have closed with the union of the lovers, when the interest, if any, was at an end. But what could I do? I had my book and my page still on my hands, and must get rid of them at all events. Manage them as I would, their catastrophe must have been insufficient to