

## CHAPTER IV.

## A CHARGE OF PLAGIARISM.

ON the death, in 1839, of the ill-fated and maligned Lady Flora Hastings, Lady of Honour in attendance upon the Queen, a copy of a juvenile poem written by me in 1834, entitled the "Enquiry," was found in her own handwriting among the papers in her private desk. The poem appeared originally, with my name as the author, in the *Sun* evening newspaper, then edited by my highly-esteemed friend Mr. Murdo Young, and was afterwards included in a collection of my early poems, published two or three years later. The lamented lady had literary tastes and poetical pretensions; and her friends and relatives, not knowing my name, at that time almost wholly unknown or but very partially known to the public, came to the conclusion that, being found in her own handwriting, the poem was her own composition. It was re-published after her death,

and when the melancholy circumstances of her history—mortally smitten as she was by foul calumny, and by the venomous shafts of idle tongues—were fresh in the public mind, with her name appended as the author, in several newspapers and literary journals, more than one of which, on its reappearance in a volume published for me by Mr. Richard Bentley, accused me of having stolen it from her. I vindicated myself, as I could well do, from the accusation. But accusations and calumnies run faster than, and obtain readier and wider credence than, refutations, and my claim to my own composition failed to reach the ears of all who had been taught to believe that the poem was Lady Flora's.

The charge of plagiarism would not have been a very heinous one, if only an idea, a line, or a phrase had been implicated, but was serious indeed when applied to a poem of four stanzas of ten lines each, word for word, couplet for couplet, stanza for stanza.

Notwithstanding my demolition of the baseless accusation which had been brought against me, from ignorance rather than from malice in the first instance, the lines still appear occasionally with Lady Flora's name appended to them in the so-called "Poet's Corners" of English and American journals. They are also to be found occasionally in obscure books of poetical extracts, issued by

irresponsible and catch-penny publishers, who manufacture books with paste and scissors, without literary knowledge or judgment.

Another poem of a later date, entitled "A Defiance to Time," which appeared in the "Poet's Corner" of a Yorkshire newspaper, had been found in the handwriting of a poor old man who had recently died in the workhouse. The manuscript was submitted to the Chaplain on the supposition that it was the pauper's own, as he had signed it with the addendum, "These are exactly my sentiments." The reverend gentleman had either written or caused to be written to the local journal a communication making "honourable mention" of the "remarkable poetical talent" displayed by the poor man, and suggesting that something should be done for the relief of the helpless family he had left behind him. The letter and poem attracted the notice of Mr. Leitch Ritchie, the acting editor or sub-editor of *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, who, not knowing it to be mine, copied it into that popular and influential publication, with some more highly eulogistic remarks on the merits of the poem and the genius of the supposed author, than had been indulged in by the Workhouse Chaplain.

I wrote to Mr. Robert Chambers, directing his attention to the page in my published volume, where the poem had originally appeared. He,

of course, saw the error into which his sub-editor and the Chaplain of the workhouse had both been led. Mr. Chambers informed me without delay that, as far as *Chambers' Journal* was concerned, the mistake should be rectified and acknowledged. He kept his word, no doubt through the agency of the sub-editor who had committed the error; but, as is natural to detected culprits, the *amende* was made to the real author in a somewhat niggardly and grudging spirit.

“Omniscient editors”—popes in their own little hierarchy—do not like to be convicted of fallibility any more than other popes do, and his sub-editor went as far as his literary pride would allow him to go in acknowledgment of the mistake he had inadvertently made. The supposed pauper's poem had been inserted with a flourish of trumpets in a prominent page, as befitted its estimated value as a literary curiosity. The real author's name was inserted, with a bald and curt apology, in an obscure corner in small type, about a month afterwards, when the poem and the pauper were alike forgotten.

Accusations of plagiarism are easily made, often maliciously, but still oftener ignorantly or thoughtlessly, by critical parrots who repeat what they have heard from others, without taking the trouble to investigate for themselves. And even in cases where the charge seems to be fully proved, the accused author may be wholly innocent of any

design of larcenous misappropriation, and the idea or phrase alleged to have been stolen may be of such little intrinsic value as to render it not worth the while of any writer of the smallest intellectual worth or reputation to steal it. To accuse a really great author, who has proved his greatness by works of acknowledged genius and originality, of appropriating the thoughts of others in their own words, knowing that he has done so, is like accusing a Vander Bilt or a Rothschild, having millions at command, of stealing half-a-crown from a chance wayfarer against whom he has rubbed shoulders in the street. The people who indulge so freely in these accusations forget, as Coleridge finely says, in one of his prefaces, "that there are such things as fountains in the human mind, and imagine that every stream which they see flowing comes from a perforation made in some other man's tank."

Another explanation of the involuntary repetitions of other people's thoughts, which seem to the envious or ill-natured to resolve themselves into plagiarisms, may be found in the fact that many thoughtful men, whose minds are eminently receptive, but whose memories are not retentive in an equal degree, are liable, in the hurry and fervour of composition, when the "divine afflatus" is strong upon them, to accept the ideas as well as the phraseology that comes at their call, as born of the moment, and as spontaneous as the lilt of

the skylark, singing in the sunshine on the edge of the cloud. The little bird inherits its song, but does not borrow it from, its tuneful predecessors that sang hundreds or thousands of years ago.

There are plagiarisms—which I prefer to call borrowings—which so far from being reprehensible are praiseworthy. Robert Burns found two old songs in Allan Ramsay's Collection, that had floated on the popular breath for a century or centuries before he was born, entitled "Old Lang Syne" and "A man's a man for a' that, and twice as meikle as a' that." The idea of each found favour with the newer and better bard; but the execution of both seemed utterly unworthy of the sentiment. He appropriated the titles and the ideas to his own use, without acknowledgment of the sources from which he borrowed, as, indeed, he had no necessity for doing. The results were the two immortal songs of "Auld Lang Syne" and "A man's a man for a' that"—as superior to the originals as a bright new guinea to a damaged farthing, and sufficient of themselves to enshrine the name of Robert Burns in the hearts of the people and of all lovers of true poetry, if he had written nothing else.

There are plagiarisms, either voluntary or involuntary, which merit no toleration, even though no moral blame be attributed to the plagiarist. It has been well said of some of these offenders

against the amenities and the proprieties of literature that they may not unjustly be compared to gipsies who steal children, and disfigure them, and stain their faces to conceal the theft. One of the most glaring of these offences—perhaps, however, they are only accidents—which the history of English literature supplies was that afforded by the fine poet, my excellent friend Thomas Campbell, in his often-quoted line—

Like angel visits, *few* and far between.

Campbell borrowed this, perhaps unconsciously, from a previous poet, Blair, the author of "The Grave," who wrote—

Its visits,  
Like those of angels, *short* and far between.

Blair himself seems to have taken the idea from John Norris, commonly called the Platonic Philosopher, who flourished between the years 1657 and 1711 who wrote in a poem "To the Memory of his Niece"—

Angels, as 'tis but seldom they appear,  
So neither do they make long stay ;  
They do but visit, and away !

Campbell's verse is somewhat pleonastic, for visits that are "far between" are necessarily *few*. Visits that are "far between" may be of long duration, and their brevity may add a regret to that occasioned by their rarity. But owing to the

parrot-like repetition of common-place expressions by the half-educated and wholly thoughtless portions of the public, the corrupt version has taken its place in the popular mind, and the correct and far more beautiful version is unregarded and unquoted, even if it be not utterly unknown.

But the accusation of plagiarism in this case against Campbell lies lightly upon his reputation as a poet and a man, inasmuch as it may be pleaded on his behalf that the borrowing or stealing was done unconsciously; and that if he had known that the much-admired phrase was not really his own, he would not have employed it.

The same excuse of unconsciousness cannot be pleaded on behalf of those who, knowing better, wilfully accuse that eminent, and in many respects great, poet of stealing, not alone a line or a phrase, but a whole poem from another author, and palming it off upon the public as his own. The over-zealous and injudicious friends of an Irish gentleman named George Nugent Reynolds, obstinately—and, I think, malignantly—assert, for what they are eager to consider patriotic reasons, and in vindication of the so-called honour of their country, that Mr. Reynolds, a very mediocre versifier, was the author of the beautiful poem “The Exile of Erin,” and that Campbell did not write a line of it. The only foundation for the claim set up for Reynolds—not by himself, however, but by his foolish



friends, who were doubtless prepared to assert in like manner that the sceptre of the British monarchy was made of an Irish shillelagh, stolen from an Irish bog-trotter—was that a copy of the poem was found after his death among Mr. Reynolds's papers, in his own handwriting, with his name at the foot of it. A cat is proverbially said to have nine lives; an eminent falsehood, literary, political, or historical, has at least a thousand, and, though slain nine hundred and ninety times, still manages to survive. But truth prevails in the long run; and even if it do not, there is this consolation to be found in the longevity of the falsehood, that the lapse of time renders it impotent and innoxious.

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WORK AND RECREATION AT THE "MORNING  
CHRONICLE."

During the nine years that I was chained to the desk at the *Morning Chronicle* office, a willing slave to the toil by which I earned my daily bread, I managed to find or to make time for other literary work, which might or might not provide me with butter for my bread, or put money in my purse, but which I loved for its own sake, independent of pecuniary rewards. I published in the interval three volumes of Poems, *The Hope of the World*, *The Salamandrine*, or *Love and Immortality*, and the *Legends of the Isles*, for all of which I received much praise from many critics and condemnatory disparagement from a few, unaccompanied, however, by either gold or silver from publishers or the public. I also published four works in prose—a *History of London*, in one volume, for which I received £50; *Longbeard, Lord of London*, or *the Revolt of the Saxons*, an historical romance in three volumes, for which I received a preliminary payment of £40, and the promise of one half of the ultimate profits, which remained a promise never destined to fulfilment; *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions*, and *the Madness of Crowds*, in three volumes, for which Mr. Richard Bentley paid me £300; and *The Thames and its Tributaries*, for

which he paid me £200. I also contributed to *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, *The New Quarterly Review*, and other periodicals, leading a busy and, on the whole, a prosperous and happy life. I also tried my hand at dramatic composition, and wrote two plays, which I submitted to Mr. Frederick Yates, of the Adelphi Theatre, but from whom I never succeeded in getting a decision or an opinion, or even a return of the manuscripts after my patience had become exhausted. Mr. Charles E. Horn, the popular composer of "Cherry Ripe" and other well-known favourites of the musical public of the day, was so favourably impressed with the capabilities of the *Salamandrine*—founded upon the Rosicrucian fancy of a fire spirit, in the shape of a beautiful woman, like the Undine of La Motte Fouqué, and, like her, unendowed with a soul, which she could only hope to attain through the true love of a man—that he applied to me for permission to convert it into a fairy opera. As I gave my consent willingly, he asked me to undertake the task myself, and to write half-a-dozen songs, to be sung by the hero and heroine, informing me at the same time that he had already composed a few melodies to some of the descriptive passages, and inviting me to come to his rooms in Great Russell Street, where he would play them over to me. I accepted the invitation, was hospitably received, and very much pleased with

the beauty of the music with which my verses had inspired the famous composer. Mr. Horn, however, did not live to complete the opera; and I have never since been able to learn what became of the unfinished work.

Annually during the last five years of my connection with the *Morning Chronicle* I took a holiday of a month in Scotland, partly in Edinburgh, among friends and relatives, and partly in the Hebrides and the Highlands of Argyllshire, Inverness-shire, and Ross-shire. My ascent of Goatfell in Arran, in 1839, and the keen pleasure and delight with which it had filled my mind, had inspired me with what I may truly call a passionate love for moorland scenery. To breathe the pure, invigorating air of the hills, to clamber over the rugged mountain and up and around the beetling crags, to the very topmost summits of the hoary Bens, was both physical and mental joy. I could quite understand the animal pleasure of the angler, the grouse-shooter, and the deer-stalker, during a month's relaxation from business or politics, amid the magnificent solitudes of glen and mountain to which their "sport" impelled them; but I had as great, or even greater physical delight than theirs, and a mental satisfaction besides in reflecting that the infliction of pain and death to the meanest living creature—unless it were a gnat or a gad-fly—was neither a necessity

nor an amusement to me. I found more true pleasure in tracing a Highland burn upwards, from the glen where it flowed into the river to its upland source far upon the heathery hill-side, on the very shoulder of the mountain, than I could possibly have found in stalking the deer.

The literary outcome of these annual recreations and wanderings, and their effects upon my mind, were the series of Ballads entitled, *Legends of the Isles* and *Highland Gatherings*, first published in 1845. "Wherever I went, I could not but remember," as Samuel Rogers, in the introduction to his *Italy*, said, in imitation of Samuel Johnson, in the introduction to his *Tour in the Hebrides* with Boswell; nor "could I sleep over any ground that had been dignified by wisdom, bravery, or virtue." Almost every mile of the Highlands, every stream, every lake, is rich in historical or traditionary lore, and sanctified by poetry and song.

The mountain-tops and the water-falls were my favourite haunts, sometimes alone and sometimes in the congenial company of my dear and accomplished friends, Patrick Park, the sculptor, and Alexander Mackay, author of a book of travels in the United States, entitled, *The Western World*. We three climbed together, not only Goatfell, but Ben Lomond and Ben Nevis, each of them twice or thrice, each time with new pleasure and profit; and once, Skiddaw and the Langdale Pikes, in

Westmoreland, on our way to Scotland, returning each time to London to our several avocations "like giants refreshed."

In Edinburgh I made the acquaintance of a blind cousin, John Mackay, of Rockfield, who claimed to be a lineal descendant of the famous General Hugh Mackay, of Scoury, who commanded the forces of King William III. at the battle of Killicrankie, where the gallant Viscount Dundee—better known as Claverhouse—lost his life, and his equally gallant opponent lost the battle. Mr. Mackay had, before the great affliction of blindness came upon him, written the life of his celebrated ancestor, and I agreed to see through the press a new and cheaper edition, and otherwise give such service as I was able to afford in the revision and completion of the work. On my first personal introduction to him, he passed his hands over my head, brow, and face, which having done, he paid me a very great compliment—at least, I thought so—when he said: "Cousin Charles, I am very glad indeed to see you. You remind me of my dear old friend, Sir Walter Scott; not only in your head and face, but in the tones of your voice."

In the preface to the new edition of his *Life of the General*—which had been for eight years a labour of love to him, although commenced in blindness, in his seventy-second year, and carried on amid difficulties that might have well proved insur-

mountable to a man of less mental energy—he stated that, in consequence of the pressure of age and infirmities, he had applied for assistance in the task of the original work to the Rev. Dr. McCrie, so advantageously known to the public by his learned historical and biographical researches, and to Mr. Thomas Thompson, the Deputy Keeper of the Records, but that both, though highly approving of the object, had reluctantly declined their aid in consequence of the multiplicity of their other avocations. He added that, under the circumstances, and deeply impressed with the imperfections of a first edition, issued under such all but overwhelming difficulties, he had applied, “for the preparation of a second, to his friend and relative, Charles Mackay, who frankly and kindly undertook to carry through this object, and, in thus becoming eyes and a staff to a blind and aged relative, would, he trusted, add another laurel to those which his talents and genius had already won.”

Mr. John Mackay had not the satisfaction of living until the issue of the new edition, but died in 1841, while the last sheet was in the press, in the eightieth year of his age, followed to the grave by the regrets of all the prominent members of Edinburgh society, and of the people to whom the venerable form and placid, intellectual face of the sage and philosopher had for many years

been a familiar object in the streets.\* Mr. Mackay was intended by his family, in his early manhood, for a public career in India, from which, however, he was debarred by the calamity of blindness which afflicted him in his twenty-ninth year. The influence that would have been exerted for him was

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\* I sent an early copy of the *Life of General Mackay* to the then Duke of Sutherland. The Duke acknowledged its receipt by the following letter:—

“Lilleshall, Aug. 7th, 1841.

“SIR,—I am very much obliged to you for the *Life of General Mackay*, a work which cannot fail to be interesting to me. I first became acquainted with Mr. J. Mackay of Rockfield when I was very young, and it gave me much satisfaction to have occasion to make a communication to him, regarding one of his family in whom he took much interest, and which I heard gave him pleasure, not very long before his death. The Mackays in former times evinced military ardour equal to that of any of the Clans; and my conviction of the same spirit still existing and animating them, when proper occasions require it, has occasioned my very lately desiring a copy of the *Duke of Wellington's Dispatches* to be sent as my present to a Library which has been established at Tongue for the use of the district. The place of Scoury is very interesting, surrounded with magnificent scenery, and with improvements carried on, such as the nature of the country allows; but poverty represses necessarily, and chills the genial current, where exist the many disadvantages which, I fear, must be a condition of existence in a remote, bare corner of the land with an uncertain climate.

“I am, Sir, very truly yours,

“SUTHERLAND.”



afterwards employed in favour of his nephew, Mr. James Matheson, afterwards a partner in the well-known house of Jardine, Matheson and Company. Mr. Matheson returned home in 1842 with a large fortune, and became Member of Parliament for Ashburton, and afterwards for Ross-shire, in the Liberal interest, and purchased from Mrs. Stewart Mackenzie, of Seaforth, as I have stated in a previous page, the large island of the Lewes. Here he was monarch of all he surveyed; acted the part of a benevolent despot in the interests of the long-neglected people, and spent large sums in public improvements, to the advantage of the whole island and, in a minor degree, to his own. He received a baronetcy—not so much for his political services and wealth as for the beneficial use he made of it, more especially in alleviating to a large extent the famine that afflicted the Lewes and other islands of the Hebrides in the doleful years of 1848 and 1849.

The widow of John Mackay of Rockfield was a great pillar of the Free Church of Scotland, and contributed largely of her means to support the movement. The disruption, under the leadership of Dr. Chalmers, known to his foes as the Pope of Scotland, created a vast amount of unfriendly and indeed unchristian feeling in all classes of society, especially among the “free” seceders from the Established Church, not on a point of faith and

doctrine, but entirely on a point of discipline and patronage, or of ultra-democracy in Church affairs; and Mrs. Mackay was conspicuous for her zeal, her liberality, and, it must be added, her intolerance in support of the cause, on which, in default of any claims on her domestic affections, she had set her whole heart. She quarrelled with all her former friends, acquaintances, and gossips who remained faithful in their allegiance to the old Church of her fathers, declined to shake hands with them, or to know them, and proved her zeal not only in this negative fashion, but in the positive fashion of subscribing five hundred pounds at a time, sometimes publicly with her name, and still more often by anonymous gifts, of whom none knew the donor but her favourite ministers. One of her principal favourites, guides, and teachers was the Rev. Dr. Candlish, whom she invited me to meet at her house to partake of tea. I accepted the invitation, and found from eight to a dozen persons, of whom the majority were women, assembled to meet the eminent preacher, who requested us all to kneel while he asked a blessing. We all knelt accordingly. After remaining in this reverential position for five minutes, that seemed to me to be half-an-hour, I put my hand unobserved into my waistcoat pocket and drew out my watch. The "blessing," or rather the "sermon" continued for another five minutes without the slightest symptoms of coming

to an end. Keeping the watch in my hand, and taking furtive glances at it every now and then, I timed the length of the Reverend Doctor's unconscionable grace at exactly twenty-one minutes, nor more nor less, and arose with aching knees and a ruffled spirit, to partake of the Bohea and the cake that were provided. I resolved, as the result of this wearisome experience, to accept no further hospitalities in Edinburgh from any hostess or host whatever, unless I ascertained beforehand that Dr. Candlish was not to be among the guests, fearing that if grace before tea demanded twenty-one minutes from that portentous divine, grace before dinner might in his estimation require an hour at the least.

The first circulating library ever established within the British dominions was established in Edinburgh early in the eighteenth century by a Scotsman, who was originally a barber and a wig-maker, afterwards a poet and a bookseller. His name was Allan Ramsay—written large in the History of Scottish literature. The successor to Allan Ramsay, towards the close of the century, after one, perhaps two removes, I am not certain which, was Mr. Alexander Mackay, publisher of the *Scots' Magazine*, a monthly publication of some influence and authority in its day, who, during one of my early visits to Edinburgh, claimed cousinship with me and sought my acquaintance. He had long retired from business, and bought a small estate

that once belonged to Mary Queen of Scots. He was known to the world as Alexander Mackay, Esq., of Blackcastle, and to his immediate neighbours, according to the Scottish custom, as "Blackcastle," just as Mr. Gladstone's father, who possessed the estate of "Fasque," was known and addressed as Fasque. "Blackcastle" lived in good style in George's Square in the old town of Edinburgh, in the next house to that in which Sir Walter Scott was born. His daughter-in-law kept house for him in his widowhood, and with her husband did the honours of his hospitable establishment. The old gentleman had the hearthstone of Allan Ramsay's house removed from Allan's shop in the High Street, near St. Giles's Cathedral, and placed in his drawing-room in George's Square, where it still remains and is likely to remain, treasured by the new generation of the Mackays that have since arisen, to keep up the old traditions both of Blackcastle and of Allan Ramsay.

My connection with the *Morning Chronicle* lasted a little more than nine years, from the spring of 1835 to the autumn of 1844. I left London with the good wishes of all my colleagues and the proprietors of the paper, and was entertained at a farewell dinner at Blackwall under the presidency of my old and eminent political and legal friend Mr. Joseph Parkes, the wire-puller and Nestor of the Reform party.

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