

CHAPTER XII.

INTRODUCTION TO SIR WALTER SCOTT—SCOTT SITTING FOR HIS BUST TO CHANTREY—EQUIPMENT TO RECEIVE HIS BARONETCY AT THE KING'S LEVEE—ON HIS RETURN HOME RECEIVES THE MANUSCRIPT OF "SIR MARMADUKE MAXWELL," A TRAGEDY—LETTERS FROM SIR WALTER SCOTT—MEMORANDA.

IT will be recollected that on the appearance of "Marmion," by Sir Walter Scott, Cunningham travelled on foot from Dalswinton to Edinburgh, upwards of seventy miles, to get a glimpse of the author, which he fortuitously did, though he was not successful in obtaining an introduction, which, perhaps, he did not then desire. A time, however, has now come when he is to be gratified to his heart's fullest wish, and under circumstances which he could scarcely, even in his most sanguine moments, anticipate. When Scott went up to London to receive his baronetcy, in 1820, Chantrey was exceedingly desirous to execute a marble bust of the great novelist, and present it to him as a mark of admiration and esteem. For this purpose he commissioned Cunningham to call and make the request. This was the more gladly complied with, as Cunningham himself was anxious to call and express his acknowledgments for "some kind message he had received, through a common friend, on the subject of those 'Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song,' which first made his poetical talents known to the public."

Cunningham thus describes the introduction:—"It was about nine in the morning that I sent in my card to him at Miss Dumergue's, in Piccadilly. It had not been gone a minute when I heard a quick heavy step coming, and in he came, holding out both hands, as was his custom, and saying, as he pressed mine—'Allan Cunningham, I am glad to see you.' I said something about the pleasure I felt in touching the hand that had charmed me so much. He moved his hand, and with one of his comic smiles said, 'Ay, and a big brown hand it is.' I was a little abashed at first; Scott saw it, and soon put me at my ease; he had the power—I had almost called it the art, but art it was not—of winning one's heart, and restoring one's confidence, beyond any man I ever met." He then complimented him upon his lyric powers, and urged upon him to try some higher flight than the "Remains;" and as he was engaged to breakfast in a distant part of the city the interview abruptly ended. He agreed most cheerfully to Chantrey's request with regard to the bust, and promised to call early at the studio on the following morning, which he did. The sitting was so interesting that we quote the description of it given by Lockhart, in his "Life of Sir Walter Scott," from memoranda furnished by Cunningham:—

"Chantrey's purpose had been the same as Lawrence's—to seize a poetical phasis of Scott's countenance; and he proceeded to model the head as looking upwards, gravely and solemnly. The talk that passed, meantime, had equally amused and gratified both, and, fortunately at parting,

Chantrey requested that Scott would come and breakfast with him next morning before he recommenced operations in the studio. Scott accepted the invitation, and, when he arrived again in Eccleston Street, found two or three acquaintances assembled to meet him—among others, his old friend, Richard Heber. The breakfast was, as any party in Sir Francis Chantrey's house is sure to be, a gay and joyous one; and not having seen Heber in particular for several years, Scott's spirits were unusually excited by the presence of an intimate associate of his youthful days."

Then follow Cunningham's Memoranda:—

"Heber made many inquiries about old friends in Edinburgh, and old books, and old houses, and reminded the other of their early socialities. 'Ay,' said Mr. Scott, 'I remember we once dined out together, and sat so late that when we came away the night and day were so neatly balanced that we resolved to walk about till sunrise. The moon was not down, however, and we took advantage of her ladyship's lantern, and climbed to the top of Arthur's Seat; when we came down we had a rare appetite for breakfast.' 'I remember it well,' said Heber, 'Edinburgh was a wild place in those days,—it abounded in clubs—convivial clubs.' 'Yes,' replied Mr. Scott, 'and abounds still; but the conversation is calmer, and there are no such sallies now as might be heard in other times. One club, I remember, was infested with two Kemps, father and son. When the old man had done speaking the young one began, and before he grew weary the father was refreshed, and took up the song. John Clerk, during a pause, was called on for a stave. He immediately struck up, in a psalm-singing

tone, and electrified the club with a verse which sticks like a burr to my memory—

‘Now, God Almighty judge James Kemp,
And likewise his son John,
And hang them over Hell in hemp,
And burn them in brimstone.’

“In the midst of the mirth which this specimen of psalmody raised, John (commonly called Jack) Fuller, the member for Surrey, and standing jester of the House of Commons, came in. Heber, who was well acquainted with the free and joyous character of that worthy, began to lead him out by relating some festive anecdotes. Fuller growled approbation, and indulged us with some of his odd sallies; things which he assured us ‘were damned good, and true too, which was better.’ Mr. Scott, who was standing when Fuller came in, eyed him at first with a look, grave and considerate; but as the stream of conversation flowed, his keen eye twinkled brighter and brighter, his stature increased, for he drew himself up, and seemed to take the measure of the hoary joker, body and soul. An hour or two of social chat had meanwhile induced Mr. Chantrey to alter his views as to the bust, and when Mr. Scott left us, he said to me privately, ‘This will never do—I shall never be able to please myself with a perfectly serene expression. I must try his conversational look, take him when about to break out into some sly funny old story.’ As Chantrey said this, he took a string, cut off the head of the bust, put it into its present position, touched the eyes and the mouth slightly, and wrought such a transformation upon it, that when Scott came to his third sitting, he smiled and said—‘Ay, ye’re mair like yoursel now! Why, Mr. Chantrey, no witch of old ever performed such cantrips with clay as this.’

“These sittings were seven in number ; but when Scott revisited London a year afterwards, he gave Chantrey several more, the bust being by that time in marble. Allan Cunningham, when he called to bid him farewell, as he was about to leave town on the present occasion, found him in Court dress, preparing to kiss hands at the Levee, on being gazetted as Baronet. ‘He seemed anything but at his ease,’ says Cunningham, ‘in that strange attire ; he was like one in armour—the stiff cut of the coat—the large shining buttons and buckles—the lace ruffles—the queue—the sword—and the cocked hat, formed a picture at which I could not forbear smiling. He surveyed himself in the glass for a moment, and burst into a hearty laugh. ‘O Allan,’ he said, ‘O Allan, what creatures we must make of ourselves in obedience to Madam Etiquette ! See’st thou not, I say, what a deformed thief this fashion is ?—how giddily she turns about all the hotbloods between fourteen and five-and-thirty ?’ (‘Much Ado About Nothing,’ Act iii., Scene 3.)”

Sir Walter returned home to Edinburgh highly elated with his newly received dignity, which was the more valuable as being the King’s personal desire, and from the kind words with which he conferred the honour—“I shall always reflect with pleasure on Sir Walter Scott’s having been the first creation of my reign.” Shortly after his return, Cunningham transmitted to him the manuscript of a long historical drama or tragedy, requesting his opinion of it, and whether he thought it suitable for the stage. He did this the more confidently from the intimacy he had contracted with Sir Walter while sitting for his bust in Chantrey’s studio. That opinion was frankly given in a long and friendly letter,

of which the following sentences are the kernel:—"I have perused twice your curious and interesting manuscript. Many parts of the poetry are eminently beautiful, though I fear the great length of the piece, and some obscurity of the plot, would render it unfit for dramatic representation. There is a fine tone of supernatural impulse spread over the whole action, which I think a common audience would not be likely to adopt or comprehend—though I own that to me it has a very powerful effect." This was criticism kind, and at the same time explicit, although it was not the opinion which the author expected. But the letter is deserving of being given at length, and therefore we insert it:—

"Edinburgh, 14th November, 1820.

"My dear Allan,—I have been meditating a long letter to you for many weeks past; but company, and rural business, and rural sports, are very unfavourable to writing letters. I have now a double reason for writing, for I have to thank you for sending me in safety a beautiful specimen of our English Michael's talents in the cast of my venerable friend Mr. Watt. It is a most striking resemblance, with all that living character which we are apt to think life itself alone can exhibit. I hope Mr. Chantrey does not permit his distinguished skill either to remain unexercised, or to be lavished exclusively on subjects of little interest. I would like to see him engaged on some subject of importance, completely adapted to the purpose of his chisel, and demanding its highest powers. Pray remember me to him most kindly.

"I have perused twice your curious and interesting manuscript. Many parts of the poetry are eminently beautiful,

though I fear the great length of the piece, and some obscurity of the plot, would render it unfit for dramatic representation. There is also a fine tone of supernatural impulse spread over the whole action, which I think a common audience would not be likely to adopt or comprehend—though I own that to me it has a very powerful effect. Speaking of dramatic composition in general, I think it is almost essential (though the rule may be most difficult in practice) that the plot, or business of the piece, should advance with every line that is spoken. The fact is, the drama is addressed chiefly to the eyes, and as much as can be, by any possibility, represented on the stage, should neither be told nor described. Of the miscellaneous part of a large audience, many do not understand, nay, many cannot hear, either narrative or description, but are solely intent upon the action exhibited. It is, I conceive, for this reason that very bad plays, written by performers themselves, often contrive to get through, and not without applause; while others, immeasurably superior in point of poetical merit, fail, merely because the author is not sufficiently possessed of the trick of the scene, or enough aware of the importance of a maxim pronounced by no less a performer than Punch himself (at least he was the last authority from whom I heard it)—*Push on, keep moving!* Now, in your ingenious dramatic effort, the interest not only stands still, but sometimes retrogrades. It contains, notwithstanding, many passages of eminent beauty—many specimens of most interesting dialogue; and, on the whole, if it is not fitted for the modern stage, I am not sure that its very imperfections do not render it more fit for the closet, for we certainly do not always read with the greatest pleasure those plays which act best.

‘ If, however, you should at any time wish to become a candidate for dramatic laurels, I would advise you, in the

first place, to consult some professional person of judgment and taste. I should regard friend Terry as an excellent mentor, and I believe he would concur with me in recommending that at least one-third of the drama be retrenched, that the plot should be rendered simpler, and the motives more obvious; and I think the powerful language and many of the situations might then have their full effect upon the audience. I am uncertain if I have made myself sufficiently understood; but I would say, for example, that it is ill explained by what means Comyn and his gang, who land as shipwrecked men, become at once possessed of the old lord's domains merely by killing and taking possession. I am aware of what you mean—namely, that being attached to the then rulers, he is supported in his ill-acquired power by their authority. But this is imperfectly brought out, and escaped me at the first reading. The superstitious motives, also, which induced the shepherds to delay their vengeance, are not likely to be intelligible to the generality of the hearers. It would seem more probable that the young Baron should have led his faithful vassals to avenge the death of his parents; and it has escaped me what prevents him from taking this direct and natural course. Besides, it is, I believe, a rule (and it seems a good one) that one single interest, to which every other is subordinate, should occupy the whole play,—each separate object having just the effect of a mill-dam, sluicing off a certain portion of the sympathy, which should move on with increasing force and rapidity to the catastrophe. Now, in your work there are several divided points of interest. There is the murder of the old Baron—the escape of his wife—that of his son—the loss of his bride—the villanous artifices of Comyn to possess himself of her person—and, finally, the fall of Comyn, and acceleration of the vengeance due to his crimes. I am sure your own

excellent sense, which I admire as much as I do your genius, will give me credit for my frankness in these matters. I only know, that I do not know many persons on whose performances I would venture to offer so much criticism.

“I will return the manuscript under Mr. Freeland’s Post-office cover, and I hope it will reach you safe.—Adieu, my leal and esteemed friend—Yours truly,

“WALTER SCOTT.

“To Mr. Allan Cunningham

“(Care of F. Chantrey, Esq., R.A., London).”

When Cunningham wrote for his manuscript, which had been retained by Sir Walter for a considerable time, and which he was afraid had been mislaid or forgotten, he intimated that he was about to undertake a “Collection of the Songs of Scotland, with Notes,”—a proposal which Sir Walter approved of in the most complimentary terms, promising to give him all the assistance in his power :—

“My dear Allan,—It was as you supposed—I detained your manuscript to read it over with Terry. The plot appears to Terry, as to me, ill-combined, which is a great defect in a drama, though less perceptible in the closet than on the stage. Still, if the mind can be kept upon one unbroken course of interest, the effect even in perusal is more gratifying. I have always considered this as the great secret in dramatic poetry, and conceive it one of the most difficult exercises of the invention possible, to conduct a story through five acts, developing it gradually in every scene, so as to keep up the attention, yet never till the very conclusion permitting the nature of the catastrophe to become

visible,—and all the while to accompany this by the necessary delineation of character and beauty of language. I am glad, however, that you mean to preserve in some permanent form your very curious drama, which, if not altogether fitted for the stage, cannot be read without very much and very deep interest.

“I am glad you are about *Scottish Song*. No man—not Robert Burns himself—has contributed more beautiful effusions to enrich it. Here and there I would pluck a flower from your *Posey* to give what remains an effect of greater simplicity; but luxuriance can only be the fault of genius, and many of your songs are, I think, unmatched. I would instance, ‘*It’s Hame and it’s Hame*,’ which my daughter, Mrs. Lockhart, sings with such uncommon effect. You cannot do anything either in the way of original composition, or collection, or criticism, that will not be highly acceptable to all who are worth pleasing in the Scottish public—and I pray you to proceed with it.

“Remember me kindly to Chantrey. I am happy my effigy is to go with that of Wordsworth, for (differing from him in very many points of taste) I do not know a man more to be venerated for uprightness of heart and loftiness of genius. Why he will sometimes choose to crawl upon all-fours, when God has given him so noble a countenance to lift to heaven, I am as little able to account for as for his quarrelling (as you tell me) with the wrinkles which time and meditation have stamped his brow withal.

“I am obliged to conclude hastily, having long letters to write, God wot, upon very different subjects. I pray my kind respects to Mrs. Chantrey.—Believe me, dear Allan, very truly yours, &c.,

“WALTER SCOTT.

“To Mr. Allan Cunningham.”

The reference here made to Wordsworth arose from an intimation to Sir Walter by Cunningham that his bust was to be sent to the Royal Academy's Exhibition, along with that of Wordsworth.

Cunningham gives the following interesting memoranda of his meeting with Sir Walter in the following year, when he went up to London to attend the Coronation:—

“I saw Sir Walter again, when he attended the Coronation in 1821. In the meantime his bust had been wrought in marble, and the sculptor desired to take the advantage of his visit to communicate such touches of expression or lineament as the new material rendered necessary. This was done with a happiness of eye and hand almost magical; for five hours did the poet sit, or stand, or walk, while Chantrey's chisel was passed again and again over the marble, adding something at every touch.

“‘Well, Allan,’ he said, when he saw me at this last sitting, ‘were you at the Coronation? it was a splendid sight.’ ‘No, Sir Walter,’ I answered; ‘places were dear and ill to get. I am told it was a magnificent scene; but having seen the procession of King Crispin at Dumfries, I was satisfied.’ I said this with a smile. Scott took it as I meant it, and laughed heartily. ‘That's not a bit better than Hogg,’ he said. ‘He stood balancing the matter whether to go to the Coronation or the Fair of Saint Boswell—and the Fair carried it.’

“During this conversation, Mr. Bolton, the engineer, came in. Something like a cold acknowledgment passed between the poet and him. On his passing into an inner room, Scott said, ‘I am afraid Mr. Bolton has not forgot a little passage that once took place between us. We met in a public

company, and in reply to the remark of some one he said, 'That's like the old saying,—in every quarter, of the world you will find a Scot, a rat, and a Newcastle grindstone.' This touched my Scotch spirit, and I said, 'Mr. Bolton, you should have added—and a *Brummagem* button.' There was a laugh at this, and Mr. Bolton replied, 'We make something better in Birmingham than buttons—we make steam-engines, Sir.'

"'I like Bolton,' thus continued Sir Walter; 'he is a brave man—and who can dislike the brave? He showed this on a remarkable occasion. He had engaged to coin for some foreign prince a large quantity of gold. This was found out by some desperadoes, who resolved to rob the premises, and as a preliminary step tried to bribe the porter. The porter was an honest fellow,—he told Bolton that he was offered a hundred pounds to be blind and deaf next night. 'Take the money,' was the answer, 'and I shall protect the place.' Midnight came—the gates opened as if by magic—the interior doors, secured with patent locks, opened as of their own accord—and three men with dark lanterns entered and went straight to the gold. Bolton had prepared some flax steeped in turpentine—he dropt fire upon it, a sudden light filled all the place, and with his assistance he rushed forward on the robbers. The leader saw in a moment he was betrayed, turned on the porter, and shooting him dead, burst through all obstruction, and with an ingot of gold in his hand, scaled the wall and escaped.'

"'That is quite a romance in robbing,' I said; and I had nearly said more, for the cavern scene and death of Meg Merrilees rose in my mind. Perhaps the mind of Sir Walter was taking the direction of the Solway too, for he said, 'How long have you been from Nithsdale?'—'A dozen years.' 'Then you will remember it well. I was a visitor there in

my youth. My brother was at Closeburn school, and there I found Creehope Linn, a scene ever present to my fancy. It is at once fearful and beautiful. The stream jumps down from the moorlands, saws its way into the freestone rock of a hundred feet deep, and, in escaping to the plain, performs a thousand vagaries. In one part it has actually shaped out a little chapel,—the peasants call it the Sutor's Chair. There are sculptures on the sides of the Linn too, not such as Mr. Chantrey casts, but etchings scraped in with a knife perhaps, or a harrow-tooth.—'Did you ever hear,' said Sir Walter, 'of Patrick Maxwell, who, taken prisoner by the King's troops, escaped from them on his way to Edinburgh, by flinging himself into that dreadful Linn on Moffat water, called the Douglases Beef-tub?'—'Frequently,' I answered; 'the country abounds with anecdotes of those days: the popular feeling sympathizes with the poor Jacobites, and has recorded its sentiments in many a tale and many a verse.'—'The Ettrick Shepherd has collected not a few of those things,' said Scott, and I suppose many snatches of song may yet be found.'—*C.*—'I have gathered many such things myself, Sir Walter, and as I still propose to make a collection of all Scottish songs of poetic merit, I shall work up many of my stray verses and curious anecdotes in the notes.' *S.*—I am glad that you are about such a thing. Any help which I can give you, you may command. Ask me any questions, no matter how many, I shall answer them if I can. Don't be timid in your selection. Our ancestors fought boldly, spoke boldly, and sang boldly too. I can help you to an old characteristic ditty not yet in print:—

'There dwalt a man into the wast,
 And O gin he was cruel,
 For on his bridal night at e'en
 He gat up and grat for gruel.

They brought to him a gude sheep's head,
 A bason, and a towel;
 Gar take thae whim-whams far frae me,
 I winna want my gruel.'

"*C.*—'I never heard that verse before. The hero seems related to the bridegroom of Nithsdale:—

'The bridegroom grat as the sun gade down;
 The bridegroom grat as the sun gade down;
 To ouy man I'll gie a hunder marks sae free,
 This night that will bed wi' a bride for me.'

"*S.*—'A cowardly loon enough. I know of many crumbs and fragments of verse which will be useful to your work. The Border was once peopled with poets, for every one that could fight could make ballads, some of them of great power and pathos. Some such people as the minstrels were living less than a century ago.' *C.*—'I knew a man, the last of a race of district tale-tellers, who used to boast of the golden days of his youth, and say, that the world, with all its knowledge, was grown sixpence a-day worse for him.' *S.*—'How was that? How did he make his living? By telling tales, or singing ballads?' *C.*—'By both. He had a devout tale for the old, and a merry song for the young. He was a sort of beggar.' *S.*—'Out upon thee, Allan. Dost thou call that begging? Why, man, we make our bread by story-telling, and honest bread it is.'"

It would be impertinent to say that Sir Walter's friendship and esteem for Cunningham was sincere. The very fact of his writing him at such length on the merits and defects of his tragedy, giving him the best

of counsel, and at the same time encouragement, is an evidence of this, as he himself expressly states; and when in 1826 he again went up to London, he breakfasted one morning with "Honest Allan," of which he makes the following jotting in his diary:—"We breakfasted at honest Allan Cunningham's—honest Allan—a leal and true Scotchman of the old cast. A man of genius, besides, who only requires the tact of knowing when and where to stop to attain the universal praise which ought to follow it. I look upon the alteration of 'It's Hame and it's Hame,' and 'A wet sheet and a flowing sea,' as among the best songs going. His prose has often admirable passages; but he is obscure, and overlays his meaning, which will not do now-a-days, when he who runs must read." Future instances of friendship from the same source will meet us as we proceed.

He had now ceased contributing to *Blackwood*, for reasons not necessary to be here stated in full. He acknowledged that he had received considerable kindness from the publisher, but at last he "became weary," especially as he was required to limit his pen to that work alone. As he received more liberal terms from the *London Magazine*, he resolved to devote himself entirely to its columns, the more especially as he was a favourite with the publishers, and had obtained much kindness at their hands. Writing to his brother James at this time, he says—"I am proceeding rapidly with my Collection of Songs, and shall spare no pains to render it creditable to me. I have had several liberal offers for the work, and as it will extend to four volumes with a preface—with characters of our best lyric poets,

and notes, together with many hitherto unpublished songs, I have no doubt I will make something handsome by it. I have many good offers for other works—a Novel particularly, for which my friends seem to think me very fit, and for which I have this morning been offered Two Hundred Pounds; but my songs devour up all lesser things at present, except the communications with the *Magazine*." In the same letter he says—"I still work as hard as I ever did—rise at six and work to six. I shall amend this presently, for it prevents me profiting by literary pursuits; and I think I could live handsomely by my pen alone, and perhaps obtain a little fame too. But I have no wish to leave Mr. Chantrey, who is a man of genius and a gentleman, and treats me with abundance of kindness and distinction." "Rise at six and work to six!" He wrought till far on in the morning, when the wearied body often refused to countenance and support the busy brain.

He here speaks of living by his pen alone; but though he had this ambition, he very prudently did not carry out the suggestion, and in this respect he shines admirably above many of his predecessors, by making literature a staff and not a crutch, by engaging in it rather as a relaxation and a pleasure than as a profession, and so avoiding the chasm into which many have fallen, poverty and misfortune. One of his great characteristics was the exemplification of one of his nation's proverbs, "Look before ye leap," and hence he attained a distinguished reputation and position in the world.