The Fortunes of Nigel: A Fragment From My Common-Place Book

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And then again diffused itself in tears.
With indignation just, he turned his back
Upon the place that, in an evil hour,
Decreed the death of her own wisest son.
He sought the spot where Socrates was laid.
As on he sped, the soft rays of the moon
Stole through the trees, revealing a new grave,
And simple stone, with "Socrates" thereon.
His feelings once again burst forth in tears;
And wailings loud, that echoed through the wood
And vale, declared the sorrow deep that smote
His inmost soul. O'ercome with toil and grief,
He sat beside the grave, and bent him o'er it.
He slept—and as the daydawn streaked the east,
He woke not. The world pursued its daily work,
And all around were seen the signs of life.
The herdsman drove his cattle out to feed
Upon the mountain glades; the shout and laugh
Of merry youth upon the morning air
Rang joyously; the notes of little birds,
That seek a genial clime like that of Greece,
Were wafted on the gentle breeze: but still
He slept—nor did his slumbers cease, until
The sun had risen high in heaven, and thrown
His scorching beams upon his careworn face.
He rose, and though 'twas hard to leave the grave
Of him, the idol of his heart, and thus
The many bright hopes of his youth give up,
With heart depressed, and eyes cast down to earth,
He sighed the sad farewell, and took his leave
For his own home in Lacedemon's land.

THE FORTUNES OF NIGEL.

A FRAGMENT FROM MY COMMON-PLACE BOOK.

"It is now some weeks since I read this novel, and at this distance of
time I consider my mind and feelings in a better condition to express my
opinion of it as a work than immediately after its perusal.

"Sir Walter Scott's Romance manifests one characteristic by which it
will always be distinguished from the fiction of any other author: an
unyielding attachment to feudalism. Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, in his
'Anecdotes,' very gravely endeavors to account for Sir Walter's decease at the time it occurred, by attributing it to sheer mortification at the triumph of the Whig interest in England; and the author of the 'Spirit of the Age' happily hits off this predilection for baronial manners and life by suggesting that were Scott to compose a sketch of the Millennium, he would probably fix the scene and date in Great Britain about five hundred years ago! Both these opinions must be received with a large quantum of abatement—yet, after all, Sir Walter's forte lay in his ability to live and feel the life and feelings of bygone days. It would be interesting to know how he became so fond of this species of composition; and especially to learn how a man 'living, moving, and having his being' amid the arts, manners, and men of the nineteenth century, could so completely identify himself with the past as to look at all practical questions only through that medium. On this question we are not left entirely in the dark. If Watts 'lisped in numbers,' Scott, when quite a stripling, made story-telling a stated recreation. Speaking of himself on this subject, he says:

"I must refer to a very early period of my life were I to point out my first achievements as a tale-teller; but I believe some of my old schoolfellows can still bear witness that I had a distinguished character for that talent at a time when the applause of my companions was my recompense for the disgraces and punishments which the future romance writer incurred for being idle himself, and keeping others idle during the hours that should have been employed in our tasks. The chief enjoyment of my holidays was to escape with a chosen friend, who had the same taste with myself, and alternately to recite to each other such wild adventures as we were able to devise. We told, each in turn, interminable tales of knight-errantry and battles, and enchantments, which were continued from one day to another, without our ever thinking of bringing them to a conclusion. As we observed a strict secrecy on the subject of this intercourse, it acquired all the character of a concealed pleasure, and we used to select, for the scenes of our indulgence, long walks through the solitary and romantic environs of Arthur's Seat, Salisbury Crags, Braid Hill, and similar places in the vicinity of Edinburgh; and the recollection of those holidays still forms an oasis in the pilgrimage which I have to look back upon."—Autobiography, pp. 9, 10.

"When about fifteen, a long illness threw him back from graver cares to the kingdom of fiction; he was allowed to read inordinately; the Circulating Library of Edinburgh was at his command; 'and I believe I read almost all the old romances, plays, and epic poetry in that formidable collection, and no doubt was unconsciously amassing materials for the task in which it has been my lot to be so much employed.'—Ibid., p. 11.

"These extracts powerfully illustrate the value of facts. How much would we give for an equal amount of information in reference to the early experience and thinking of such men as Shakspeare and Bishop Butler!
The Fortunes of Nigel.

"But to the novel, or rather its author, for we are not done with him yet. In depicting feudal manners, no writer can approach him; and the reader finds himself unconsciously carried along with the narration, and even taking part with the actors until the broad Scotch dialect and—I am rather sorry to confess it—the profane exclamations lose much of their harshness.

"Whether it is for the better or worse, few men succeed in more than one line of action; and to this rule Scott did not prove an exception. His Life of Bonaparte was a failure—indeed, he seemed disqualified by the nature of his subject for doing his reputation justice. The French Revolution, in its horrible details, sickened him. Besides, the Emperor was the acknowledged enemy of England, and after his fall the life was hastily written in the flush of victory, when the nicest historian is prone to exultation, and not over scrupulous as to his inferences. Excuse might be found in these facts for defects in a temporary chronicler; but in a work professing to take rank with sober history, they constitute an insufficient atonement. Perhaps Hogg's suggestion may be of service here. Scott saw in the commotions at Paris the utter prostration of his idols, the aristocracy and nobility—and an entirely modern and upstart affair rudely usurping their places. Here his equanimity forsook him. The contempt for ancestral rank, though in a foreign land, ruffled his usually serene temper; it roused the energies of his wounded spirit: but in the extreme to which he allowed his resentment to carry him, he proceeded too far, and injured his own character for truth and justice. No one ever thinks of consulting the 'Life' on a material point. British readers themselves blush at the attempt to justify Captain Maitland's conduct in detaining Napoleon as a prisoner on board the Bellerophon—though they affect to sanction his subsequent arrest and confinement at St. Helena. Many now believe that the remark of Napoleon's brother contained as much of truth as of antithesis: 'The Wizard of the North, in the early part of his life, spent his time in converting romance into history; but the latter, in converting history into romance.'*

"The characteristic already mentioned is readily recognized in the 'Fortunes of Nigel.' Much of the drapery, and some of the features and proportions clearly indicate its affinity with 'Rob Roy' and 'Redgauntlet.' As I do not propose a critique on the whole 'Waverley' tribe, no more may be advanced on this point.

"I think the characters sufficiently distinct and consistent with themselves throughout. Few as they are (and this in a novel is certainly a merit), there are probably more than enough. For example, I see no pressing demand for Vincent and Dunstan—their parts might have been omitted, or assigned without difficulty to somebody else. Vincent, I think, never seriously insinuated anything like the tender feeling towards Margaret,
and for the best reason—he must have seen, as the reader can easily see, that a different person is to be the successful suitor.

"But while I admit consistency in regard to the characters, it must be evident that some are over drawn. The portrait of James I., as it is professedly sketched in some two or three pages, may as a picture be a fair display of that monarch's mental and moral endowments; but his conduct does not fully correspond with it. In his intercourse with others, his shrewdness degenerates into passive acquiescence with advice which a child would consider an insult to his understanding. The amiable Sir Mungo Malagrowther (who could be unamiable, when rejoicing in a name so euphonious?) figures as a wit—adding the character of buffoon gratuitously; but, according to my unsophisticated way of thinking, it is not easy to understand how, even in Scott's Millennium, a man could sustain his position as a courtier, and yet never spare the feelings of a friend or be sensible of a kindness; how his coarse sarcasms could fail to deprive him of those services which, nevertheless, he always commanded; how, finally, the irascible courtier, wit, and buffoon, dependent upon charity, and with an interest in the cabinet just equal to zero, could use his superiors, without resistance, on any business he chose to select them for.

"An author should indicate, in writing fiction, who shall be the hero of his story, and he generally does so either in the preface, or by making one of his characters prominent through the work. It does not seem evident on the surface who is to aspire to that distinction in 'The Fortunes of Nigel.' Some pitch upon the 'variable quantity,' James; others select Nigel; for myself I think Master George Heriot has as fair a claim as any with whom his name is connected. Let us glance at the three individuals, and see.

"Nigel Oliphant is the son of a Scotch nobleman. In assisting to place James on the throne, his father greatly damaged his fortune; and after the accession, and the settlement of the crown, Nigel first appears in London as a petitioner to his majesty for the payment of what was so justly due him, and which would enable him to arrest the sale of his estate, then within very little distance of the auctioneer's hammer. His small stock of worldly wisdom seems oddly at fault with his highly finished education at a university on the continent; and his entire passivity to circumstances, combined with a burning desire of success, does not come up to my simple and unsophisticated ideas aforesaid. True, forbearance would seem necessary in treating with a monarch so capricious as James, (for James anticipated Paley—having no conscience but expediency,) but Nigel on many occasions goes off into the most reckless disregard for consequences. All this, however, by the way; the question still remains, who is the hero? If it is Nigel, how happens it that with his whole soul enlisted in his own cause, he embarrasses it by his blundering awkwardness, and involves in
distress everybody connected with his schemes? He has not even the merit of sincerity: for he gambles without compunction or object, and deliberately lies when detection is inevitable, and when the successful concealment of the fraud would be unimportant to himself or anybody else. And when at last his adversary is prostrated, his estate secured, and himself rescued from degradation and punishment, he marries a watchmaker's daughter, whose virtues consist in claiming kindred by the tenth generation with a decayed limb of nobility, and in sparing his modesty by opening, conducting, and finishing their matrimonial negotiations herself.

"The king's claims will be considered in connection with those of Master George Heriot. This worthy citizen is goldsmith to the royal family, and being very wealthy, renders himself useful to James, whose treasury, after enriching court favorites, could bear replenishing. Master George fully comprehends the king's weakness—he abounds in that sensus communis which through endless details jumps intuitively to correct conclusions. Accordingly he encourages his master at the proper time, and when the king was in the proper mood, in the exercise of those generous sentiments which, through all his folly and king-craft, would often well up fresh from his heart. And now following the narrative from the time Master George is introduced, he is never found to leave it a moment. His cool sagacity comprehends the designs of Buckingham; his acquaintance with Lady Hermione prepares him to turn the tide against Dalgarno; his wealth gives him the reins over the king, while his blunt and honest counsels to the monarch enlist him upon the side of right, and keep him there until the 'Fortunes of Nigel' are established, and the catastrophe leaves all parties in a proper state of rewards and punishments. Such are the facts—the inference is easy.

"As regards the continuation of interest, the work offers nothing peculiar. The author aimed not so much at instruction as amusement; and accordingly we have no long dialogues not strictly connected with the plot. While, therefore, the reader does not weary in the perusal, he finds but little to invite him over the track again.

"The modern rules of criticism require two things: 1, that the critic shall read no more than the title-page of the work to be criticised; and 2, that the reviewer shall show his vast superiority over his author, by patronizing him with sundry flat compliments, and dismissing him as he would a verdant schoolboy, with encouragements to persevere, as he may be something yet—who knows. I have gone out of the usual track this time, having actually read through the two volumes of 'Nigel.' Besides, Walter is gathered to his fathers, and heeds not blame or praise."