The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club

The Twenty-fourth Annual Dinner

The Annual Dinner of the Club was held in the North British Station Hotel, on Friday, 7th December 1923, when ***Colonel John Buchan*** *presided over a company of about 250.*

THE CHAIRMAN, in proposing the toast of the evening, "The Memory of Sir Walter Scott," said:-

My Lord Provost, Ladies, and Gentlemen, -We are met tonight to honour the memory of one who, I think, as the years pass is coming to be recognised more and more as the greatest of Scotsmen. Fashions change in literature as in other things; and among the minor deities of the Pantheon of letters there are many displacements. But for Sir Walter Scott there is no need of the hectic revivals which befall lesser man. Others abide our question, but he is free. Receptive and balanced minds have adjudged him his place ever since Byron told him, in a famous letter, that there was no one among the living of whom he need be jealous, or, all things considered, among the dead. The world forgets him and returns to him ; we quarry in his work as in Shakespeare and find new treasures; that rich and spontaneous genius of his endures through all the vagaries of literary mode, because he possesses what Emerson has called the "stellar and indiminishable something" which is greatness.

A Scotsman-at any rate, a Lowland Scotsman-must feel that it is impossible for him to judge Sir Walter in the cold-blooded aloof way that he can judge other masters of letters. Though he has been dead nearly a century, he is still too close to us, and we are too much under the glamour of the man. For myself, the task is hopeless. Though I do not belong to the "rough clan" of the Scotts, I am a Borderer, and much of my life has been spent among the scenes which he has consecrated. If we were given the power of recalling to the present and beholding in the flesh a great writer of the past, what would our choice be? With many it would be Dr Johnson; with many it would be Sir Walter; but I think that these two would carry most of the suffrages, simply because they are personalities as real to us as our own contemporaries, people of whom we think as we think of famous men of action, living and breathing human beings, and not dim shades from a library. We know them both so well that we can picture for ourselves every detail of their figure and dress, we are familiar with the tones of their voice, we are aware of their foibles and imperfections as we are aware of their transcendent qualities, and we feel for them almost the affection of personal friendship. There is a pleasant fancy that the good and just return to earth now and then to revisit the scenes which they have loved. If such a shadow is found on some green drove-road in Ettrick Forest we know what shape it will take. It will be a tallish, broadish man, with a ruddy face, mounted on a rough Highland pony, with a tangle of dogs at his heels. His head will be uncovered and the wind will be blowing his thin silvery hair, while his keen eyes are roving the hills. He will hail us cheerfully in soft Border Scots, and bid us marls the light on Ettrick Pen, and warn us to go cannily, for the herd at the Cross Shiels is gathering his sheep. We might puzzle for a moment at such a figure, and then something in the face, and the green shooting-coat, and the deerhound by his side would suddenly be familiar, and we would know that we were looking at the Last of the Minstrels. We would not be afraid, I think, to greet that kindly ghost.

The honour which you have done me in electing me your President for the year carries with it the obligation to speak to you of Sir Walter. It is not an easy task, since for a Border Scot to speak on that subject must be a kind of confession of faith. Moreover, so much has been said already, so much that is wise and true, that a speaker must find himself traversing well-trodden ground. So I do not propose to discourse to you on the obvious and familiar features of his greatness as a writer and a man. I would ask you to permit me to deal with one aspect, one predominant quality, which may explain what have been considered to be his imperfections, and which I think is also organically linked to his supreme merits. Here we have a man of soaring imagination, whose feet are solidly planted on the earth, an adventurer and a dreamer who never forgets the standards of ordinary humanity, a great romantic who is also a great realist. I propose to speak to

you for a little of Sir Walter's "common sense," and what I mean by that trite phrase I hope to make clear.

I am going to deal principally with his writings, but as my text I want to take an episode in his career, which reveals the character of the man. It is one of the best known episodes in the history of literature. Scott, you remember, woke up one morning at the close of 1825, when he was fifty-four years of age, to find himself ruined - saddled with an enormous burden of debt, for the most part the result of his own carelessness and grandiose ambitions. He refused to seek the refuge of bankruptcy; he set himself to pay off his creditors in full; for the rest of his days he toiled unceasingly at the task; he succeeded, but he died of it. To you and me that seems a noble and splendid action, not quixotic or fantastic, but simply the carrying out faithfully of the highest standards of plain human honour.

Now listen to Thomas Carlyle on the subject:- "It was a hard trial. He met it proudly, bravely - like a brave, proud man of the world. Perhaps there had been a prouder way still; to have owned honestly that he *was* unsuccessful then, all bankrupt, broken, in the world's goods and repute; and to have turned elsewhere for some refuge. Refuge did lie elsewhere; but it was not Scott's course or fashion of mind to seek it there."

These words were written, it is true, before Scott's "Journal" was published and the spiritual history of those tragic years given to the world. But, as they stand, what do they mean? No doubt such a renunciation and retirement would have been what is called in the jargon of to-day, a striking "gesture," and we can imagine the eulogies which later sentimentalists would have expended on this *gran rifiuto*. But it would have meant that his creditors would- not have been paid, that innocent people would have suffered for the consequences of his own folly. I am the last man to underrate Thomas Carlyle, but of all great Scotsmen he was the one who lived most exclusively in the world of books, He praised the man of action, but his own days were spent in a library, and he was curiously remote from the rough-and-tumble of life, The course he would have had Scott follow would have been picturesque from a literary standpoint, but it would have been a shirking of a plain duty and repugnant to Sir Walter's manly good sense. He had made a blunder, and his business was to atone for it; had he robed himself in his literary mantle and retired to a sheiling among the hills to meditate on the transience of human glory, there would have been no atonement.

That is an extreme instance of the fundamental quality of his character which I call common sense. It is a mistake, I think, to assume that he had any snobbish contempt for the profession of letters; his whole life showed that he held it in the highest esteem, and he gave to it the best interests and powers of his mind. But he saw that an art is degraded if its practitioners demand privileges in matters of conduct beyond other men. He himself had no vanity or peevishness. He thought that most of his contemporaries wrote better than he did, and that the simplest soldier who carried a gun for his country was a sounder fellow than he was, He refused to indulge in false heroics about his craft or to think that the possession of great gifts released him from the humblest human obligation. He could not see that rules of morality which held in the case of the soldier, the merchant, and the country labourer should be slackened for the artist, or that an imaginative temperament and a creative mind gave a plenary indulgence to transgress. He ranked himself with the plain man, and because he ranked himself with him he understood him.

I have dwelt on this side of his character because it is the key to what I want to say about a certain quality in his work. We may call it common sense, the sense of the commonalty; or we might call it realism, if the word were not so grossly misused. Let us say that he is always "of the centre," as Homer and Shakespeare were of the centre, or, in the immortal words of Davie Deans, that he keeps "the middle and straight path, on the ridge of a hill, where wind and water shears, avoiding right-hand snares and extremes, and left-hand way-slidings, like Johnny Dods of Farthings Acre, and ae man mair that shall be nameless."

Scott, like other great novelists, took for his subject matter a large tract of human life with all its complexities, and his business was to shape it to the purposes of art by drawing out its beauty and drama. But since he was not a novellist of manners, like Richardson or Miss Austen, he selected a particular kind of subject matter - the rougher and stranger and more coloured aspects of life - the subjects which we call romantic. The word, when he began to write, was getting a bad name, for it was associated with the feebly-fantastic in the writings of Mrs Radcliffe and Horace Walpole and "Monk" Lewis. Scott gave it a new definition. He showed that beauty and terror could be made credible, because he made them the natural outcome, as in a Greek tragedy, of the clash of character. But to do this he had to develop his characters so that they stood out four-square and vital in his narrative, and he had to keep that narrative always in touch with ordinary life. Of the success of this purpose there can be no doubt, and that success is the foundation of his greatness. To a soaring imagination and profound emotions he married common sense - the vision of the plain man. I want to suggest to you some of the means he used.

One was what is generally regarded as his worst fault, his padding, his long discursive passages, and the flat monotony

of most of his heroes and heroines. It may be advancing age, but I confess that I have come to have a great regard for most of these prosaic ladies and gentlemen, and for what people call his *longueurs*. As a boy I accepted them gladly; as a young man I found them intolerable; and now I begin to feel that they serve a real artistic purpose. It may seem a paradox to say this, and I readily admit that he often overdoes the stockishness of his protagonists so that they become ridiculous. I am not prepared to defend always the polite English of their conversation. He speaks of "the superb monarch of the feathered tribes" when he means an eagle, he allows Helen MacGregor in "Rob Roy" and Norna in "The Pirate" to talk like governesses from Miss Pinkerton's Academy, and -unpardonable crime- he makes the ever delightful Di Vernon thus address Rashleigh Osbaldistone: " Dismiss from your company the false archimage Dissimulation, and it will better ensure your free access to our classical consultations." But on the main point I believe that there is a sound defence for his padding, a defence which Scott makes himself in his review of Miss Austen - which is, that in a novel, surplusage, up to a point, has a value for art. His discursiveness, antiquarian and otherwise, is intended as a relief, to provide a rest for the mind in the midst of exciting action. Something of the same kind may be said about his dull heroes and heroines. They are for the most part passive people, creatures of the average world, not majestic men and women of destiny. But they are not unreal, the earth is full of them; they are all the more natural for being undistinguished. They form a solid background, a kind of Greek chorus, repeating all the accepted platitudes, and keeping the drama, which might otherwise become fantastic, within reach of our prosaic life.

The point is worth developing further, for it is bound up with the meaning of romance. It is one of Scott's characteristics that, though sympathising in every fibre with the coloured side of life and with men's exaltations and agonies, he feels bound to let common sense put in its word now and then, to let the voice be heard of the normal pedestrian world. It has often been pointed out that in a great painting there is always some prosaic object which provides a point of rest for the eye, and without which the whole tone of the picture would be altered. This duty is performed in literature by the ordinary man, by Kent in "Lear," by Horatio in "Hamlet," by Banquo in "Macbeth." They are, so to speak, the "eye" of the storm which rages about them, and, serve to measure the departure of the others from sanity, moderation, virtue, or merely normal conduct. This point of rest, which some critics have called the *punctum indifferens* or the *punctum immobile*, is the quiet anchorage of good sense from which we are able to watch with a balanced mind the storm without. I am inclined to think that no great art is without it, and that the absence of it prevents a writer like Dostoievsky from being in the highest class. Scott never loses his head. The fantastic and the grotesque are heightened in their effect by being shown against this quiet background. Moreover, they are made credible by being thus linked to our ordinary world. Behind all the extravagance we hear a voice like Dr Johnson's, reminding us that somewhere order reigns, that Prometheus may be a fine fellow, but that Zeus is still king of gods and men. Compare Scott with Victor Hugo and you will understand the difference which the lack of this quality makes. In the great Frenchman there is no slackening of the rein, no lowering of the top note, until the steed faints from exhaustion and the strident voice ceases to impress our dulled ears.

This close touch with earth is seen again in his use of the supernatural. With that he is admittedly not, always successful, and I am not prepared to defend the White Lady of Avenel, or even to be enthusiastic about the Bodach Glas. But at his best he uses it as Shakespeare used it, to trouble the mind with a sense of powers beyond our understanding, as if the monitors of another world whispered in our ear. He was a master of the eccentric and the uncanny, just because his outlook was so sane and central, for only a mind solidly founded on fact can bring mystery out of cloudland into our common life. As his greatest achievement I would rank those scenes in "The Bride of Lammermoor" when Ailsie Gourlay predicts the Master's fate in the rhyme about the Kelpie's Flow, and when the witch-wives talk in the churchyard - a scene which for unearthly tension is not far behind the knocking at the door in "Macbeth." With this I would set the vision of the tavern-board in Hell in "Wandering Willie's Tale." In both you will find the prosaic most subtly interwoven with the tremendous, so that because the earthly is made so completely credible we are drawn to extend our belief to the unearthly. Even when he is a seer, dreaming strange dreams, he is also a Scots lawyer considering his case. In "Wandering Willie's "tale" there is an instance of this, which I commend to your attention. That, you remember, is a story where the explanation seems to be supernatural, and the narrator, Steenie Steenson, believes this. But Scott knew so profoundly the average man and his incapacity for exact evidence that he makes Steenie, in telling the tale, give two different versions of the crucial incident - first, one which is consistent with a prosaic explanation, and a second in flat contradiction and full of excited detail, which transports the whole affair into the realm of the occult. It is not only a masterpiece of insight into character, but also surely one of the most ;astonishing of literary feats, to write a tale of *diablerie*, which is overwhelming in its impression, and at the same time incidentally and most artfully to provide its refutation.

A third aspect of this quality is found in Scott's skill in cunning anti-climax, which, like the "falling close" of a lyric, does

not weaken but increases the effect. Like the Gifted Gilfillan in "Waverley," he can pass easily and naturally from the New Jerusalem of the Saints to the price of beasts at Mauchline Fair. You will remember many instances. The grave-digger, Mortsheugh, in "The Bride of Lammermoor," has his petty grumble amid the shadows of high tragedy Mouse Headrigg, caught up in religious ecstasy, begs her son not to "sully the marriage garment," and Cuddy replies, "Awa, awa, mither, never fear me …. ye're bleezing awa about marriage and the job is how we're to win by hanging," Alick Polwarth, after the fine tragic scene of Fergus MacIvor's death, brings us to earth with information about which gate his head is to be fixed on. And old Haagen, in "The Pirate," dashes Minna's sentiment about Montrose by expounding, with unanswerable logic, the superior wisdom of running away. It is the breaking in upon romance of a voice from the common world; it does not weaken the heroic, but brings it home. The great instance, of course, is the end of " Redgauntlet," and may I say how rejoiced I am to hear that, through the generosity of my friend, Mr Hugh Macmillan, the MS. of the novel is now among the treasures of the Advocates' Library, the future National Library of Scotland. That is a story of the tragic irony of a forlorn loyalty surviving in a world of prose. It is high tragedy when we see Redgauntlet watching the Cause, which has been entwined with the arrogance of his decaying house, shattered on the Solway beach. But the drama does not end with that. It ends as all great drama must end, in peace - in an anti-climax, which is more moving than any climax, when a stranger - a Hanoverian and a Campbell-speaks over the dead Jacobitism a noble and chivalrous farewell - the epitaph of common sense.

My last example is Sir Walter's treatment of his Scottish peasants. His kinship to the soil was so close that in their portraiture he never fumbles. They are not figures of a stage Arcadia, they are not gargoyles mouthing a grotesque dialect, they are the central and imperishable Scot, the Scot of Dunbar and Henryson and the Ballads, as much as the Scot of Burns and Galt and Stevenson. He gives us every variety of peasant life - the sordid, as in the conclaves of Mrs Mailsetter and Mrs Heukbane; the meanly humorous, as in Andrew Fairservice; the greatly humorous, as in Meg Dods; the austere in Davie Deans; the heroic in Bessie McClure. It is this last aspect that I want you to note. Because he made his plain folk so robustly alive, because his comprehension was so complete, he could raise them at the great moment to the heroic without straining our belief in them. No professed prophet of democracy ever did so much for the plain man as this Tory Border laird. Others might make the peasant a pathetic or a humorous or a lovable figure, but Scott could make him also sublime, without departing from the strictest faithfulness in portraying him; nay, it is because of his strict faithfulness that he achieves sublimity where others only produce melodrama. We are familiar enough with laudations of lowly virtue, but they are apt to be a little patronising in tone; the writers are inclined to enter "the huts where poor men lie" with the condescension of a district visitor. Scott is quite incapable of patronage or condescension; he exalts his characters at the fitting moment because he knows the capacity for greatness in ordinary Human nature. It is to his peasants that he gives nearly all the most moving speeches in the novels• It is not a princess or a great lady who lays down the profoundest laws of conduct; it is Jeanie Deans. It is not the kings and captains who most eloquently preach love of country, but Edie Ochiltree, the beggar, who has no belongings but a blue gown and a wallet; and it is the same Edie who, in the famous scene of the storm, speaks words which, while wholly and exquisitely in character, are yet part of the world's poetry.

I have given you these illustrations of Sir Walter's close intact with the plain man and with common life. He transforms it, indeed, as is the duty of a great artist. He enlarges our view and makes the world at once more solemn and more sunlit, but it remains a recognisable world with all the old familiar landmarks. He domesticates the heroic and sublimates the domestic, and both achievements are due to his insight into the common soul of man and his robust, unpedantic good sense. He had that touch of the pedestrian in him without which romance becomes only a fairy tale and tragedy a high-heeled strutting. The kernel of romance is contrast, beauty and valour flowering in unlikely places, the heavenly rubbing shoulders with the earthly. The true romantic is not the Byronic hero : he is the British soldier whose idea of a *beau geste* is to dribble a football into the enemy's trenches ; he is some such type as the Georgian sea-captains who wore woollen underclothing and loved food and wine and the solid comforts of the hearth when they were not about their business of fighting; or some warrior like old Sir Andrew Agnew who, at the Battle of Dettingen, thus exhorted his regiment : "My lads, ye see thae loons on yon hill there? Weel, if ye dinna kill them, they'll kill you." Prosaic, you will say: nay, the true, the essential romantic. All romance, all tragedy, must be within hailing distance of our humdrum lives, and anti-climax is a necessary adjunct to climax. You will find it in the Ballads, this startling common sense linking fact and dream. You will find it in Shakespeare, who can make Cleopatra pass from banter with a peasant to the loftiest of human soliloquies- "Hast thou the pretty worm of Nilus there? ... Those that do die of it do seldom or never recover. . .. I wish you joy o' the worm: " And then-

"Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me."

You will find it in Scott, whose broad, sane vision saw that tragedy and comedy are sisters, and that, like

Antaeus, neither can live without the touch of her mother, the earth.

I will conclude as I started, not with the writer, but with the man. On an occasion like this we do more than pay a tribute to the creator, we salute the memory of a departed friend. Had Sir Walter Scott never written a line beyond the " Journal," some of us would still revere him as one of the rare possessors of that tenderness which keeps watch over man's mortality and neither quails nor complains, and speaks to the generations a language as universal as the gospel of St John. We discuss sometimes who is the typical Scotsman. I have never met a typical Scotsman; we are too rich a people to run to types. But I know very well who seems to me in our Valhalla of great men the most enviable and beloved of Scotsmen. To few indeed in any age has it been given to leave such a heritage of warmth and light. Of him we can say, as the historian has said of another Scot, as great in the world of action as Sir Walter in the world of letters - "He was perfectly gentle, perfectly honest, perfectly fearless, and perfectly true."

I give you the toast of the undying memory of Walter Scott.

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