

Constable paid Scott 1,500 guineas. If we ask ourselves to what this vast popularity of Scott's poems, and, especially of the earlier of them (for, as often happens, he was better remunerated for his later and much inferior poems than for his earlier and more brilliant productions) is due, I think the answer must be, for the most part, the high romantic glow and extraordinary romantic simplicity of the poetical elements they contained. Take the old harper of "The Lay," a figure which arrested the attention of Pitt during even that last most anxious year of his anxious life, the year of Ulm and Austerlitz. The lines in which Scott describes the old man's embarrassment when first urged to play, produced on Pitt, according to his own account, "an effect which I might have expected in painting, but could never have fancied capable of being given in poetry."*

Everyone knows the lines to which Pitt refers :

"The humble boon was soon obtain'd ;
The aged minstrel audience gain'd.
But, when he reach'd the room of state,
Where she with all her ladies sate,
Perchance he wish'd his boon denied ;
For, when to tune the harp he tried,
His trembling hand had lost the ease
Which marks security to please ;
And scenes long past of joy and pain,
Came wildering o'er his aged brain—
He tried to tune his harp in vain !
The pitying Duchess praised his chime,
And gave him heart and gave him time,
Till every string's according glee
Was blended into harmony.
And then, he said, he would full fain
He could recall an ancient strain
He never thought to sing again.
It was not framed for village churls,
But for high dames and mighty earls ;
He play'd it to King Charles the Good,
When he kept Court at Holyrood ;
And much he wish'd, yet fear'd to try,
The long-forgotten melody.
Amid the strings his fingers play'd,
And an uncertain warbling made,
And oft he shook his hoary head.
But when he caught the measure wild,
The old man raised his face, and smiled,

And lighten'd up his faded eye,
With all a poet's ecstasy !
In varying cadence, soft or strong,
He swept the sounding chords along ;
The present scene, the future lot,
His toils, his wants, were all forgot ;
Cold diffidence and age's frost
In the full tide of song were lost ;
Each blank in faithless memory void
The poet's glowing thought supplied ;
And, while his heart responsive rung,
'Twas thus the latest minstrel sung.

Here paused the harp ; and with its swell
The master's fire and courage fell ;
Dejectedly and low he bow'd,
And gazing timid on the crowd,
He seem'd to seek in every eye
If they approved his minstrelsy ;
And, diffident of present praise,
Somewhat he spoke of former days,
And how old age, and wandering long,
Had done his hand and harp some wrong."

These lines hardly illustrate, I think, the particular form of Mr. Pitt's criticism, for a quick succession of fine shades of feeling of this kind could never have been delineated in a painting, or indeed in a series of paintings, at all, while they are so given in the poem. But the praise itself, if not its exact form, is amply deserved. The singular depth of the romantic glow in this passage, and its equally singular simplicity, a simplicity which makes it intelligible to every one, are conspicuous to every reader. It is not what is called classical poetry, for there is no severe outline, no sculptured completeness and repose, no satisfying wholeness of effect to the eye of the mind, no embodiment of a great action. The poet gives us a breath, a ripple of alternating fear and hope in the heart of an old man, and that is all. He catches an emotion that had its roots deep in the past, and that is striving onward toward something in the future ; he traces the wistfulness and self-distrust with which age seeks to recover the feelings of youth, the delight with which it greets them when they come, the hesitation and diffidence with which it recalls them as they pass away, and

* Lockhart's "Life of Scott," ii. 226.