

**MARJORIE FLEMING: A SKETCH,
BEING THE PAPER ENTITLED
"PET MARJORIE: A STORY OF
CHILD-LIFE FIFTY YEARS AGO"**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649297160

Marjorie Fleming: A Sketch, being the paper entitled "Pet marjorie: a story of child-life fifty years ago" by John Brown

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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JOHN BROWN

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*Charley from
Aunt Kate.*

MARJORIE FLEMING.

A SKETCH.

BEING THE PAPER ENTITLED

*"PET MARJORIE: A STORY OF CHILD-LIFE
FIFTY YEARS AGO."*

By JOHN BROWN, M. D.,
AUTHOR OF "BAB AND HIS FRIENDS."

BOSTON:
JAMES R. OSGOOD AND COMPANY,
LATE TICKNOR & FIELDS, AND FIELDS, OSGOOD, & Co.

1873.

MARJORIE FLEMING.

ONE November afternoon in 1810, — the year in which *Waverley* was resumed and laid aside again, to be finished off, its last two volumes in three weeks, and made immortal in 1814, and when its author, by the death of Lord Melville, narrowly escaped getting a civil appointment in India, — three men, evidently lawyers, might have been seen escaping like school-boys from the Parliament House, and speeding arm in arm down Bank Street and the Mound, in the teeth of a surly blast of sleet.

The three friends sought the *bield* of the low wall old Edinburgh boys remember well, and sometimes miss now, as they struggle with the stout west wind.

The three were curiously unlike each other. One, “a little man of feeble make, who would be unhappy if his pony got beyond a foot pace,” slight, with “small, elegant features, hectic cheek, and soft hazel eyes, the index of the

quick, sensitive spirit within, as if he had the warm heart of a woman, her genuine enthusiasm, and some of her weaknesses." Another, as unlike a woman as a man can be; homely, almost common, in look and figure; his hat and his coat, and indeed his entire covering, worn to the quick, but all of the best material; what redeemed him from vulgarity and meanness were his eyes, deep set, heavily thatched, keen, hungry, shrewd, with a slumbering glow far in, as if they could be dangerous; a man to care nothing for at first glance, but, somehow, to give a second and not-forgetting look at. The third was the biggest of the three, and though lame, nimble, and all rough and alive with power; had you met him anywhere else, you would say he was a Liddesdale store-farmer, come of gentle blood; "a stout, blunt carle," as he says of himself, with the swing and stride and the eye of a man of the hills, — a large, sunny, out-of-door air all about him. On his broad and somewhat stooping shoulders was set that head which, with Shakespeare's and Bonaparte's, is the best known in all the world.

He was in high spirits, keeping his companions and himself in roars of laughter, and every now and then seizing them, and stopping, that

they might take their fill of the fun ; there they stood shaking with laughter, "not an inch of their body free" from its grip. At George Street they parted, one to Rose Court, behind St. Andrew's Church, one to Albany Street, the other, our big and limping friend, to Castle Street.

We need hardly give their names. The first was William Erskine, afterwards Lord Kinnedder, chased out of the world by a calumny, killed by its foul breath,—

'And at the touch of wrong, without a strife,
Slipped in a moment out of life.'

There is nothing in literature more beautiful or more pathetic than Scott's love and sorrow for this friend of his youth.

The second was William Clerk, — the *Darsie Latimer of Redgauntlet* ; "a man," as Scott says, "of the most acute intellects and powerful apprehension," but of more powerful indolence, so as to leave the world with little more than the report of what he might have been, — a humorist as genuine, though not quite so savagely Swiftian as his brother Lord Eldin, neither of whom had much of that commonest and best of all the humors, called good.

The third we all know. What has he not done for every one of us? Who else ever, except Shakespeare, so diverted mankind, entertained and entertains a world so liberally, so wholesomely? We are fain to say, not even Shakespeare, for his is something deeper than diversion, something higher than pleasure, and yet who would care to split this hair?

Had any one watched him closely before and after the parting, what a change he would see! The bright, broad laugh, the shrewd, jovial word, the man of the Parliament House and of the world, and, next step, moody, the light of his eye withdrawn, as if seeing things that were invisible; his shut mouth, like a child's, so impressionable, so innocent, so sad: he was now all within, as before he was all without; hence his brooding look. As the snow blattered in his face, he muttered, "How it raves and drifts! On-ding o' snaw — ay, that's the word — on-ding —." He was now at his own door, "Castle Street, No. 39." He opened the door, and went straight to his den; that wondrous workshop, where, in one year, 1823, when he was fifty-two, he wrote *Peveril of the Peak*, *Quentin Durward*, and *St. Ronan's Well*, besides much else. We once took the foremost

of our novelists, the greatest, we would say, since Scott, into this room, and could not but mark the solemnizing effect of sitting where the great magician sat so often and so long, and looking out upon that little shabby bit of sky, and that back green where faithful Camp lies.*

He sat down in his large, green morocco elbow-chair, drew himself close to his table, and glowered and gloomed at his writing apparatus, "a very handsome old box, richly carved, lined with crimson velvet, and containing ink-bottles, taper-stand, etc., in silver, the whole in such order that it might have come from the silversmith's window half an hour before." He took out his paper, then, starting up angrily, said, "'Go spin, you jade, go spin.' No, d— it, it won't do : —

' My spinnin'-wheel is auld and stiff;
The rock o't wunna stand, sir;
To keep the temper-pin in tiff
Employs ower aft my hand, sir.'

* This favorite dog "died about January, 1809, and was buried, in a fine moonlight night, in the little garden behind the house in Castle Street. My wife tells me she remembers the whole family in tears about the grave, as her father himself smoothed the turf above Camp with the saddest face she had ever seen. He had been engaged to dine abroad that day, but apologized on account of the death of "a dear old friend." — *Lockhart's Life of Scott.*

I am off the fang.* I can make nothing of *Waverley* to-day; I'll awa' to Marjorie. Come wi' me, Maida, you thief." The great creature rose slowly, and the pair were off, Scott taking a *maud* (a plaid) with him. "White as a frosted plum-cake, by jingo!" said he, when he got to the street. Maida gambolled and whisked among the snow; and his master strode across to Young Street, and through it to 1 North Charlotte Street, to the house of his dear friend, Mrs. William Keith of Corstorphine Hill, niece of Mrs. Keith of Ravelston, of whom he said at her death, eight years after, "Much tradition, and that of the best, has died with this excellent old lady, one of the few persons whose spirits and *cleanliness* and freshness of mind and body made old age lovely and desirable."

Sir Walter was in that house almost every day, and had a key, so in he and the hound went, shaking themselves in the lobby. "Marjorie! Marjorie!" shouted her friend, "where are ye, my bonnie wee croodlin doo?" In a moment a bright, eager child of seven was in his arms, and he was kissing her all over. Out came Mrs. Keith. "Come yer ways in, Wat-

* Applied to a pump when it is dry and its valve has lost its "fang"; from the German, *fangen*, to hold.