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NICK OF THE WOODS,

Or the Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky. By the Author of "Calavar," "the Infidel," &c. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard.—1837.

We have been much gratified in the perusal of this work, in which the well-earned reputation of the writer is well sustained. We do not mean to say that it is the most favorable specimen of his powers, but it shows enough of them to serve as a nucleus for some remarks on the distinguishing characteristics of his writings.

We cannot better do this than by instituting a comparison between him and the only other American novelist who has acquired any considerable degree of celebrity. We mean, of course, Mr. Cooper.

In the earlier works of that gentleman (for of his later novels no notice need be taken, as no one reads them) there are many and striking excellencies. His delineations of character are among the most distinct and vivid that we remember to have seen. This indeed is in part owing to the colossal proportions that he assigns them. Were his heroes perfectly in nature, and reduced to the moral dimensions of other men, we are not sure whether his skill would be sufficient to exhibit even their smallest lineaments with such perfect distinctness. But though Mr. Cooper may be thus indebted to one of his greatest faults for one of his greatest excellencies, we are not disposed to withhold our praise. A colossal statue is a good thing in its way, and so are the Pilot and the Red Rover. Although we know the original to be wanting in nature, we stand, no less, in the presence of such creations of fancy, with a sense of awe, which imposes on the mind a deep respect for the powers of the creator.

Another excellence of Mr. Cooper, is the easy grace with which he tells his story. In this respect we know no writer more felicitous. We do not mean to say that he is always so. He has no doubt learned to calculate how far his manuscript will go in print, and therefore sometimes feels the necessity of spinning out, in order to make out his two volumes. But in this respect, even at his worst, he is more tolerable than James or Ritchie, or even than Bulwer; and when free from this embarrassment, he glides along through his narrative in a style of which they seem to have no conception. He is particularly dramatic in his conversations, and happy in the art of making them tell his story. This is the great excellence in novel writing; for dull indeed must be the tale which will not be interesting when developed in sprightly, animated, characteristic dialogue, whether energetic or witty.

This is that excellence in Mr. Cooper which veils all his faults, and with this we must end the list of his good qualities as a writer. No man indeed has more need for something to hide, or to excuse his deficiency of invention, than this gentleman. We have read, both with interest and pleasure, all those works on which his reputation rests, and we are bound to say that in every instance there was some want of fitness in the *denouement*, some disregard of probabilities, and occasionally some defiance of impossibility, or some imbecile tameness, which in the end dissipated the interest and destroyed all the pleasure of the tale.

An attentive perusal of the work before us will con-

vince the reader that the excellencies and defects of Dr. Bird are just the reverse of these. Before we speak of his characters, we must premise, that there is one individual introduced into this work whom we feel rather inclined to assign to the head of *machinery*, than to that of character. It is the same that gives a name to the novel, and is shown up to us under the designations of Nathan Slaughter, alias Wandering Nathan, alias Bloody Nathan, alias Nick of the Woods, alias the *Jibbenainosay*, which, being rendered into English, we are told, means, in some Indian tongue, *the spirit that walks*. Now, this being, who turns out in the end to be a creature of flesh and blood, fortified by some unexplained charm from all the dangers of flood and field, and endued in like manner with powers which belong not to human nature, we are inclined to place in the same category with Meg Merrilies and Nornio of the fitful head. Like them, he has no personal concern of his own in the action of the piece. Like them, however, and like the White Lady of Avenel, and other superhuman beings, though impassive to the motives which influence common mortals, he has some inscrutable motive of his own for taking a deep interest in the welfare of some, and for exerting his powers to the destruction of others, among the *dramatis personæ*. He is a creature of the same sort of poetical license, which makes one of Ariosto's heroes invulnerable, and endues another with the strength of forty men. We think this the most favorable light in which such things can be viewed. The nature of the superhuman endowment is not indeed explained, but its existence is made manifest; and we think it less offensive to the reader to require him to believe this at once, and then let all things follow in order, than to task his credulity to the end of the work, through a long detail of occurrences, incredible on the author's own hypothesis. Dr. Bird will believe that when, in saying this, we couple his name with that of Walter Scott, we mean nothing unkind. We cannot indeed pretend that our words will bear a complimentary meaning, but he on whom nothing worse is charged than the infirmities of great minds, can hardly feel himself offended.

Now, subject to this explanation, we bear our cheerful testimony to the fidelity with which the author has drawn his portraits from nature. We give this praise to the work before us, without even excepting from it the character of Ralph Stackpole. He is indeed an *extravagance*, but the original may be found in more than one of the settlements of the western country, where men run wild, and the exuberance of animal spirits and physical strength takes on forms so fantastical as to seem like caricature to the inhabitants of other regions.

But Dr. Bird's great excellence is in the ingenuity and contrivance of his story. This could not be so told as not to be interesting. State the leading facts of the case with the formality of a lawyer; let the parties be A. B. and C.; let no spoken word, no incidental circumstance be introduced to enliven the narrative or to illustrate character, and we shall still listen eagerly to hear the event, and in the end sit down in quiet satisfaction under a result in strict conformity to poetical justice, and brought about by *natural means*. This last expression must indeed be qualified by the admission that the difficulties in the way are gratuitously height-

ened, to afford opportunities for illustrating the super-human endowments of the redoubtable Jibbenainosay. But the reader easily works the equation by extinguishing these superfluous opposing quantities, and feels that all that is essential to the story has happened just as it ought, and, *except as before excepted*, just as it well might happen.

But while we consider Dr. Bird as decidedly superior to Mr. Cooper in these particulars, we think the latter much more successful in the style of his narrative, and in the sprightliness and piquancy of his dialogue. Yet this must be taken with some allowance. Dr. Bird tells his story with less grace, and less dramatic effect, but he tells it with more simplicity and directness. There is no studied mystification, no prosing, no interruption of the narrative, no attempt to excite the interest of the reader by harassing him with purposed delays. He is not brought within a sentence of the close of some stirring episode, and then required to wait patiently for the event, while the writer takes up some other branch of his story. On the contrary, the occurrences of the tale are brought before the reader in the order of time in which they happened; and causes are made to precede their consequences, instead of being so inverted as to make the whole a series of puzzles and enigmas.

As to the dialogue, it is, as we have said, less piquant than Mr. Cooper's, but it is more natural. We have no examples of a clown who in general talks nonsense and murders the King's English, suddenly bursting into a strain of eloquence, when the writer has something pretty to say, and no other mouth to put it into. Dr. Bird rather falls into the opposite extreme, and is so careful to keep the *dramatis personæ* from talking out of character, that he sometimes annoys his hearers with their vulgarity. We recollect nothing witty, nothing striking, nothing to stir the blood from the lips of any speaker, but we are fully requited by the perfect fitness of the language of each to his own proper character. If there were more dialogue than there is, this would be tedious; but there is none but what is necessary to the story, and this moves along with too much rapidity to allow the reader leisure to be weary. But it is time we should give an abridgment of the story.

Major Roland Forrester was a soldier of merit in Braddock's war. He was the eldest son and heir at law, of a man of large fortune, who also left two younger sons. On the breaking out of the Revolution the elder brother sided with the crown, while his portionless younger brothers took the part of the colonies, much to the annoyance of the Major, who, though a childless bachelor, determined to disinherit them. In this mood he made a will leaving his vast estates to his steward and factotum Richard Braxley, in trust, for a natural daughter who had been obscurely placed with foster-parents among the mountains. Not long afterwards, the younger brothers were both killed in battle, the one leaving a son, named after his uncle the Major, and the other a daughter named Edith. These are our hero and heroine.

The death of his brothers softened the old man's heart. He took their children home and made a will in their favor. This he did the more readily, because he had not long before learned that the cottage of Atkinson the peasant, who had the care of his natural daughter, was burned to the ground, and that she (a little girl)

had perished in the flames. But soon after, young Roland, who had attained the age of seventeen, left his uncle's house and took up arms in defence of the colonies. This step renewed the old man's wrath so far as even to abate his kindness to his unoffending niece. But still there was no reason to fear that he would carry his displeasure so far as to disinherit her. But his death, which happened about the close of the war, when Roland was twenty-two years of age and Edith seventeen, threw her abroad upon the world a penniless orphan. It then appeared that his last will had been destroyed, leaving the other in full force. This, indeed, seemed to be of no consequence, as his daughter was supposed to be dead. Braxley, however, entered on the estate as trustee, declaring that it had been lately ascertained that the girl was alive, having been carried off to Kentucky by her foster father. As he was not without the means of convincing young Roland of the truth of this story, his authority over the property was not disputed. In this destitute condition poor Edith was left without a friend in the world, except an aunt who was residing at the falls of Ohio, where Louisville now stands. In her house a refuge was offered to the unfortunate girl, and thither she determined to go, escorted by her cousin, who determined to push his fortune in the same country.

The action of the story commences on their arrival at a place called Bruce's Station, on the waters of Salt River, and not far south of Kentucky River. Here the caravan which they accompanied, and especially Roland and his cousin, were received with great kindness by the commandant of the post, who had been a soldier in Braddock's war under the old Major. Their purpose was to continue their journey next morning to the falls of Ohio, but this was prevented by an accident which detained the young people until noon, and several hours after their party had gone. They then set out and fall into the hands of a party of Indians, by whom, after a hard fight, they are taken prisoners and carried off. But pursuit is made, and they are on the point of being rescued, when the whites, seized with a sudden panic, take to their heels, and leave them to their fate. A partition of the spoil and prisoners now takes place, and the young man is allotted to an old Piankeshaw chief, who with two followers make a part of the hostile band. By these, he is carried off in one direction, while his cousin is borne away in another by a party of Shawnees. Roland is rescued the same night by the Jibbenainosay, and the two set out in pursuit of the other party. They trace them to an Indian village beyond the Ohio, where they find the whole population engaged in a debauch to celebrate the return of the war-party. Taking advantage of this circumstance, our adventurers attempt to steal away the girl, and, when nearly successful, are baffled, and taken prisoners. Their doom now appears to be sealed, and all things are made ready for burning them at the stake, when a strong party, under the command of George Rogers Clarke, storms the village, rescues the captives, and destroys the inhabitants. The lovers rush into each other's arms, and all is well.

While this is going on, Roland discovers that his misfortune had been brought about by the machinations of Braxley. It appears that Atkinson, who was his creature and tool, had been, by his means, involved

in criminal causes in Virginia, had fled the country, and taken refuge among the Indians, among whom he had become a chief. Having changed his name, his whereabouts was known only to his old accomplice Braxley. This worthy had sought him out, with a view of making him the instrument of a deep laid scheme, in which he had already been his agent without knowing his purposes. The daughter of the Major had not been burned with Atkinson's cottage. The conflagration and his disappearance had been so managed by Braxley, as to induce his patron to suspect that both had been the work of his brothers. By this means he had no doubt of preventing any reconciliation, and procuring a will in his own favor, as the only other person in whom the old gentleman seemed to take the least interest. Should he fail in this, he was determined to turn to account the will which he still kept in his possession. The girl had been brought up as the child of Atkinson, and could be identified by him at any time. To place her in the wilderness in obscurity and poverty, was to make himself sure of her hand after her father's death, so that by marrying her he might make the estate his own.

But this scheme had been baffled by the death of the girl, who did not long survive her removal to the western country. The old gentleman too, though much incensed with his nephew, had never been totally estranged, and did not revoke the will made in favor of him and Edith. This determined Braxley to change his battery and offer his hand to that young lady. In case of success he had nothing to do but to produce Atkinson, establish the death of the Major's daughter, and divide the estate with Roland. But here again he was baffled, having been forestalled by that gentleman in the affections of the lady. Now again he turns to Atkinson, who has a daughter of the same age with the lost child of his patron, for whom he proposes to substitute her, and make her his wife. But Atkinson is a man possessing many fine points of character. Originally generous and upright, as well as brave and manly, he had been partly led and partly driven into courses which had, in the end, sent him forth a proscribed outlaw, to seek a place of comparative security among savages. Here, brooding over his misfortunes and crimes, he had learned to curse the author of both, and to find his chief solace in a resolution that his only child should be brought up in the paths of virtue. So far he had been successful, having managed to get her into the family of Colonel Bruce, the kind-hearted commander of the station that bore his name. Here she had grown up, distinguished for her amiable qualities, and displaying an intellect worthy of more improvement than the rude society around her afforded. Of her, her father was devotedly fond and enthusiastically proud. He had seen her in the pauses of war, and learned to love her, and to reanimate his love for virtue by the contemplation of it as exhibited in her. But his own doom was sealed. He was marked and proscribed, and from these occasional glimpses of the happiness he had forfeited, he returned to his savage associates, more and more embittered against the society from which he had been banished. In this mood Braxley found him, hating every thing that wore a white skin, and, most of all, hating his seducer and betrayer, and loving nothing but his daughter. The villain's proposal was

therefore promptly and fiercely rejected. But Braxley was not a man to be baffled in the pursuit of his object as long as any road to it was open. Fertile in expedient, and ingenious in wickedness, he now suggests a new scheme more congenial to the character and temper of his old associate, over whom, detested as he was, he still retained much of his power. Such is the effect of habit and intellectual superiority.

By a large bribe, partly paid and partly promised, he engages Atkinson to raise a war party of the most ferocious and restless among the several tribes of savages, and at the head of a band of outlaws even from barbarism, to attack the party of Roland on their arrival in Kentucky. He has made himself acquainted with their movements, ascertained the commencement of their journey, calculated their passage through the wilderness, and at the time of their arrival has his band in readiness on the south side of Ohio, skulking in the unsettled parts of the country, scouting for intelligence, but carefully refraining from any thing that might betray their presence. The season indeed was one when something like peace prevailed, and at the moment when Roland and his cousin left Bruce's station, the commandant had no idea of any enemy in his neighborhood. But they were near enough to know precisely all that passed, so that, in a few hours after the departure of the young people from the fort, they fell into the hands of their enemies.

It is hardly necessary to tell the reader that Braxley's plan was to destroy Roland, to get Edith into his power, to force her to become his wife, and in her right, as heir at law to her uncle and cousin, to secure to himself the object on which his wishes had centred for so many years. The rescue of Roland defeated one part of the plan, and the obstinacy of Edith baffled the other, until the inroad of General Clarke put an end at once to them and him.

We must here note a blemish, the more striking, because we find it in a work so remarkably free from any thing of the sort. If at any time the reader shall ask himself, "why does Braxley or Roland, or any body else, but the inscrutable Jibbenainosay, act in such, or such a way?" the answer is generally at hand. But if he asks, "what could induce Braxley to carry with him into the Indian country the suppressed will, and there to show it to Atkinson?" he must be more acute than we profess to be, if he can find an answer to the question. Doctor Bird himself seems sensible of this difficulty, and endeavors, as we think, lamely, to account for it.

So it is, the document is there. Atkinson luckily gets possession of it. His detestation of Braxley, his love for his daughter, and his respect for Roland, who had so conducted himself as to awaken the admiration even of his savage foes, suggest to him a new plan. He hies away to the young man, whom he finds bound and awaiting the return of that day which was to be his last. To him he shows the paper, and promises to save him, if he in turn will agree to marry his daughter. To his amazement, the proposal is rejected, and the savage rage of the "white Indian" is awakened by the supposed insult. He accordingly leaves the captive to his fate, which is averted, as we have said, by the unexpected attack of the Kentucky volunteers. In the meleé Atkinson is struck down, and an attempt to save

him is made by Roland, which is so far successful that the assaults of his enemies are arrested. But it is too late. The fatal blow had been struck, but the unfortunate renegade had retained sufficient consciousness to be aware of the generous interference of his late victim, and finds comfort, in his last moments, in doing him an act of justice, and giving up the suppressed will.

In our abstract of this story, we find that we have unconsciously divided it into two parts, which may be distinguished as the *physical* and the *moral* action of the piece.

The first, of course, has the usual and indispensable accompaniments of war and blood and slaughter,—enough, from the nature of the case, to satisfy a taste which we have outlived by some twenty years or more. But as it was once our own, we know that it exists, and can make no objection to its indulgence by others. The writer who spreads a feast for the public, is bound to supply something palatable to all his guests, and, so long as we find what we like, we have no right to complain that others are accommodated too. We are bound too to admit, that his desire to gratify that class of readers has not led him (always excepting the exploits of his “*walking spirit*”) into any of the extravagances, which so often catch the applause of the vulgar. The battle between the Indians and their pursuers on the bank of Salt River, which ends in the defeat of the latter, is more graphic, more distinct, more true to the life, than any thing of the sort that we remember to have seen. Other occurrences of the same sort are not so well managed, but still much better than is common. If the work is in this respect less amusing to those who delight in “gun, drum, trumpet, blunderbuss, and thunder;” we can assure them it is far more instructive, than those pictures of savage warfare which are garnished with more of the “circumstance”—which properly belongs to combats of a different character.

But we think the reader will agree with us that the merit of this tale is in its *morale*. We venture to remind him of our expressed belief, that this cannot be so told as not to be deeply interesting, and we are willing that this opinion shall be judged by the impression made by the perusal of our hasty and inartificial sketch. If it does not abide this test, we stand condemned. But there is a merit in this part of the work, of which that sketch conveys no idea. The characters are true to nature, and, although not elaborately wrought, are exhibited with that distinctness and individuality which is the most indispensable merit of all painting, whether to the eye or mind. Roland and Edith are but given in outline, but they remind us of Retchs’s outlines, in which distinctness and accuracy of drawing stimulate the imagination to supply all that is wanting of relief and coloring. The remorseless villainy of Braxley, and the more than Indian savageness of his renegade accomplice, blended with the recollection of virtuous principles, and the remains of good feelings in the latter, are so displayed as to fill the reader with embittered animosity against the one, and to awaken a strange sort of sympathy and good will for the other. We breathe more freely when we hear of the death of Braxley. That of Atkinson is witnessed with sorrow and pain.

The great excellence of Doctor Bird’s sketches of

character is displayed in his representation of the wild Indian, and the frontier settler, hardly less wild. Fiction has invested these with a sort of poetry, which has been harped upon, until it is stale and disgusting. At first there was something quite imposing in the wild forms of rude virtue and savage dignity, which were exhibited as pictures drawn from the life. But they were copied, and the copies of copies have been so multiplied, that we are as familiar with them as with the picture of the dandy, the exquisite, the loungeur, the real gentleman, the drapery miss, the humble friend, the starched old maid, the good aunt, or even the *lady heroine* herself. We are tired of them, and turn with pleasure to the more sober and truthful painting of Doctor Bird, in which these characters are exhibited with little of the picturesque, and nothing of the grand or beautiful. He gives them credit for courage, address, resource, sagacity and craft. But they are neither wits, philosophers, nor orators. When kind, they are not polite withal, and when resentful, they are fierce and savage. They make no sage speeches, and utter no sentiments; and upon the whole, they are dull company, as any body will find who tries them. Doctor Bird, accordingly, instead of making them the vehicles for the expression of his own opinions on all sorts of subjects, gives us no more of their conversation than is necessary to his story. For this forbearance he has our approbation and our thanks.

Upon the whole, we think well of this work, and highly of the writer’s powers. But we cannot leave him without a slight admonition, which we trust he will take as from a friend. We speak unwillingly of faults which time and his own good sense must mend. We make no doubt that he will soon decide for himself that “remorseless” is a stronger and more euphonious word than “unremorseful;” besides being English, which the other is not. We mention this word as an example. It will point his attention to others of the same class.

The next time Dr. Bird visits the western country, he will probably discover that he has somewhat mistaken the dialect of the inhabitants. We doubt if he ever heard, or will hear any man there, say “howsomever.” Common as this is said to be in England, it has no place among the Buckskins. “Howsoever” is their word. In general too, their dialect is rather caricatured, than truly represented by Doctor Bird; and as this is the only point in which there is any exaggeration about the picture, we should wish to see it corrected in any sketches of the same people which he may hereafter present to the public.

We think too that there are some incongruities in the narrative, which the author will himself detect when he sees them in print. At page 185, of the second volume, near the bottom, he will see a curious instance of this. These are faults of haste, which the change of a word would often correct.

We have but one word to add. We never can consent that any writer of prose, who has got over his first love fit, by marriage or otherwise, shall call water “the liquid element!” This again, we give as a specimen; and respectfully pray that Doctor Bird will leave all such “nick-naming of God’s creatures,” to men, whose ideas are so common-place as to require to be sauced with fantastical language.