Book Review of Nick of the Woods, or the Jibbenainosay

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NICK OF THE WOODS,
Or the Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky. By the Author of "Calavar," "the In...
ended, to afford opportunities for illustrating the super-human endowments of the redoubtable Jibbenainosay. But the reader easily works the equation by extinguishing those superhuman opposites, and feels that all that is essential to the story has happened just as it ought, and, except as before excepted, just as it would have happened.

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 purpose 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 is more natural. We have no examples of a clown who in general talks nonsense 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 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 commodot 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 fell into the hands of a party of Indians, by whom, after a hard fight, they were 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 division of the spoil and prisoners now takes place, and the young man is allotted to an old Piankeshaw chief, who with two followers makes 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 next 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 dance 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, storm 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 did not come to the knowledge of 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 with-out knowing his purposes. The daughter of the Major had received letters from Atkinson's cottage. The configuration 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 hoped to prevent any reconciliation, and procure a will in his own favor, the only other valuable Kimluey. He has made himself acquainted with their movements, ascertained the commencement of his designs, and did not volunteer the will made in favor of into the hands of his enemies.

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 his father's death, so that by marrying her he might make the estate his own. This scheme had been hatched 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 enraged, and did not resolve 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 again he was baffled, having been forestalled by that gentleman in the affection 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 himself; why does Braxley

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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 “nothing 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 combat of a different character.

But we think the reader will agree with us that the merit of this tale is in its morals. 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 unfinished sketch. It does not abate 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 Retch’s outlines, in which distinctness and accuracy of drawing stimulate the imagination to supply all that is wanting of relief and coloring. The remorseless villany of Braxley, and the more than Indian savageness of his renegade accomplices, blended with the recollection of virtuous principles, and the remnant 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 is Adkinson 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 lounging, the real gentleman, the drapery miss, the humble friend, the stanch old maid, the good aunt, or even the lady berate 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 wishful, 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, recording 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 “howsoever.” 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 183, 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 named with fantastical language.