

Literature, &c.

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From Hogg's Instructor.

ROBINSON'S FOLLY.

A TALE OF A MODERN RUIN.

It has happened to me, in the course of my life, to wander pretty extensively through my native country, and to take up a temporary abode in many parts of it far distant from each other. A number of years ago, I was located for a season in the county of W—, where I had considerable difficulty in procuring a residence suitable to my resources and convenient for my worldly calling. During the time of my uncertainty, I was fortunate in finding a home in the habitation of an old friend, who accompanied me in my frequent rambles in search of a more permanent dwelling-place than that of Woodsdale Farm. In the course of these researches, we on one occasion turned our steps towards a house which my friend Hardcastle informed me had been many years uninhabited, which he had once visited in the days of his youth, before its glory was departed, and which he desired once more to see in its premature decay. It was not a dwelling to my taste and purpose, however, and having almost in silence paced through its damp apartments, and taken note of the tattered condition of its internal decorations, and the dilapidations of its exterior, we took our departure. There is nothing in the way of edifices more mournful than a modern ruin. The place we had just left had not been erected sixty years; it had been built with all due regard to stability, and yet its walls were mouldering through sheer neglect, its floors rotting, and an unwholesome atmosphere generating in every part of it from cellar to attic. It had been, my friend informed me, neglected and unrepared for a quarter of a century; a term of neglect sufficiently long to account for all the desolation we had witnessed.

'That house has a history, if it could be known,' I said, as we walked down the grass-grown carriage road.

'It has; and if you have any curiosity to hear it, I will give you the particulars during our walk homewards.' Here is the story.

About seventy years ago, the little town of H— boasted of three tradesmen who from small beginnings had risen step by step to the reputation of some wealth, and, consequently, to considerable local importance. They were named Jones, Brown, and Robinson. Jones was a bachelor of middle age at the time my story commences; Brown was a married man of more mature years, but without a family; and Robinson, a younger man than either of his friends (for friends they were), was a widower, and the father of a little boy. At this time the household of Mr Brown received an accession in the person of a little girl about seven years old. She had arrived in England under the care of the captain of an East Indiaman, and had been forwarded, according to directions, to the town of H— and the house of her future protector. The features and complexion of this child sufficiently proclaimed her origin. India had evidently other claims upon her than such as arose from the mere accident of its being the country of her birth; she was a mulatto. Who her parents were, or rather who was her father—why she had been thus early and solitary banished from her native land—and why, above all things, she had been committed to the charge of a petty drysalter (for such was Mr Brown's calling) in an obscure provincial town—these were questions which every body in H— began to ask of each other, but which no one could answer. In time, however, the mystery came out, and then it was discovered that there was not much mystery in the matter. It was a sort of transaction, perhaps more common in the last century than the present, but which may yet find its parallel.

The girl's name was Blanche Wilson. Why called Blanche it would be hard to say, excepting that parents have strange whims in the naming of their children; but when it was discovered that the name of the young lady was Wilson, it was remembered that the now elderly Mrs Brown (then Mary Arnold) had a far-off cousin whose name was Wilson, who sometimes paid a visit from London to H—, to the no small annoyance of the more sedate Brown. But these occasional visits were discontinued, and Mary Arnold was fain to put up with the drysalter. When inquiries were instituted as to the fate of cousin Wilson, the young lady shook her head, heaved a gentle sigh, and pronounced the awful dissyllable 'India.' The child, then, for Mrs Brown made no scruple of avowing the fact, was the daughter of cousin Wilson; and this accounted for her location under the drysalter's roof.

The history of Blanche's father was a not uncommon one for those days of siccra rapées and nabobism. Sent to India when young to push his fortunes there by the aid of recommendatory letters to one or two persons of influence in Calcutta, he had, first of all, obtained a trifling appointment in the civil government. By his own industry, aided, there is but little doubt, by a certain degree of unscrupulousness, he had rendered himself necessary to the high powers, and was soon on the road to nabobical wealth. Meantime, the few friends whom he left behind him in England died off one by one, until his distant

cousin, Mrs Brown, was his only living tie to his native country. By all accounts, Wilson was fond enough of the little girl, but her presence was an inconvenience; so, under pretext of a regard for her education, he had shipped her to England, trusting that, when she arrived there, his relation, Mrs Brown, would, for a handsome remuneration in hand, and in consideration of future hopes held out to her, take charge of the child. This was the substance of a letter which Mrs Brown showed to her friends, in which it was also hinted that, ten years hence or thereabout, Mr Wilson himself intended to return to England to enjoy the fortune he should by that time have secured. Mrs Brown was by no means dissatisfied with the charge which was thus somewhat unceremoniously thrust upon her. Neither was the drysalter himself. The girl, it is true, was no great beauty, to English eyes at least, but she was a sweet tempered child. And when it is remembered that Brown had no children, it is not wonderful that such an inmate was rather an agreeable acquisition, especially considering that she did not come (as the little Browns had there been any, must have come) empty handed.

After the arrival of little Blanche the circumstances of the Browns were materially improved. New apartments were added to the rear of their dwelling; new furniture was imported; silks and satins glistered on the portly figure of the drysalter's wife, usurping the reign of modest gingham. People shook their heads at these changes, but the Browns themselves were unmoved by the envy or whatever else it might be of their neighbours. Let them laugh that will,' said the drysalter.

In due time Blanche was sent to a London boarding-school, spending only her vacations at H—. Five years thus passed away, and Blanche had not yet completed her education as it is termed, when the doors of Brown's house opened to another visitor. This was no other than Mr Wilson himself. His intentions and expectations had been frustrated. Very far from having returned to England to enjoy the remainder of his life in ease and luxury, he had evidently come back merely to die. Mr Wilson lived only a few months after his return. During this time the house of Mr Brown was his home, and Blanche was his constant attendant. He formed no new acquaintance, paid and received no visits, shut himself up much in his own apartments, was querulous and exacting with all around him, moody in solitude, and would see neither physician nor minister. Previous to his death he sent for a lawyer, made his will and paid over a large sum of money to the corporation of H— to be given away in charity. The funeral was so sumptuous as to excite the wonder of the whole neighbourhood, though poor Blanche was the only one who really mourned his departure; but the contents of his will were still more to be wondered at. The whole of his accumulated wealth, with the exception of a tolerably handsome bequest to his cousin, Mrs Brown was left to Brown and his two friends, Jones and Robinson, in trust for the orphan Blanche until she came of age. These executors were by the will also constituted the guardians of the poor child; and a clause in that will declared the whole property forfeited to the executors should Blanche marry under age without their joint consent. Should she die before arriving at the age of twenty-one, her guardians were in like manner to inherit her wealth. Why the dying man fixed upon the two men, Jones and Robinson, as joint-executors with Brown, could only be accounted for by his rigid seclusion from society after his return to England, and by the supposed recommendation of the drysalter.

After her father's death, Blanche returned to school, where she remained some four or five years. Meanwhile the proceedings of the three legal guardians had not been altogether unmarked. From industrious tradesmen they had become the magnates of their little town; speculated largely in houses and lands, adding house to house and field to field; projected a manufactory in the neighbourhood, which flourished for a time but is now fallen into decay. In short, the wealth of the young heiress, whether justly employed or not, was evidently not suffered to lie idle; and though there were not wanting some who made ill-natured remarks on the whole, Jones, Brown, and Robinson, were looked upon as men who knew well how to look to the main chance, and were revered accordingly. Shortly after the return of Blanche from school, her only female friend, almost the only female acquaintance in H—, rather suddenly died, and the poor girl was thus left to the sole protection of three worldly-minded men. Whether at this time they deserved any harsher appellation I cannot say. It certainly was broadly stated, years afterwards, that the death of Mrs Brown was occasioned by deep-rooted grief. It was recollected how care-worn and haggard her once broad and laughter-loving countenance had become ere she died; how averse she had shown herself to money-making schemes of her husband; how her dislike had more than once been openly manifested to his inseparable associates Jones and Robinson, and how, when death was rapidly approaching, she had wept and sobbed over poor Blanche, and spoken in mysterious words and agonising tones of some much dreaded evil to come. At the death of Mrs Brown, Blanche, then about eighteen, was invited, or rather required, to take the superintendence of the drysalter's household; and her situation was altogether as undesirable a one as may well be imagined.

Fitted by superior education for society of a different class than that in which she was placed, she was little inclined to form friendships

those around her. On the other hand, the stigma of her birth, and her domestication in the house of a tradesman, effectually barred any intercourse with the few families of good birth and property in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the report of her wealth and expectations was not without effect. Suitors made proposals of marriage, but they were summarily dismissed either by herself or her guardians. One only appeared to have made any impression upon the young lady herself, or to threaten to the watchful guardians anything like pertinacity in his advances. This was a young tradesman of H—. Whether the money of Blanche was the attraction in this instance I cannot say, but it is certain he contrived to win her over in his favour, and for some months to carry on a correspondence with her, unsuspected by the drysalter. At length the discovery was made, and, contrary to their expectations, Mr Brown smiled graciously upon the abashed lovers. Gently chiding them for their attempted secrecy, he gave his full permission to the young man to visit his ward, and encouraged Blanche to receive him as her recognised future husband. These were pleasant days to the hitherto solitary young lady, and for a few weeks the course of love seemed to run smooth. In due time the lover demanded his affianced bride in marriage, and preparations were made even to the ordering of the wedding-cake and the fixing of the marriage-day. At this juncture the bridegroom expectant received one evening a visit from an old schoolfellow and fellow-townsmen. I may as well say, continued Hardcastle, that this friend was my father, from whom I heard much of this story.

'So you are going to be married, Sam?' said my father.

'I am,' replied Sam; 'but I wonder you should have heard of it. It was to be kept a profound secret till it was over.'

'Oh!' continued the visitor; 'and pray whose wise scheme was this? Yours, or Blanche's, or Mr Brown's?'

'Not mine,' answered the young fellow, laughing; 'of course I do not care if all the world knows it; but Blanche tells me that her uncle (as she calls Mr Brown) does not want a fuss made about it.'

'I dare say not,' said my father.

'Why, you know, I and Robinson are not exactly on good terms, and so—'

'And so continued my father, interrupting him, 'you are to be married without his knowledge. I see. But do you know what you are about? Have you ever seen old Wilson's will? Has Blanche?'

'No,' replied the interrogated lover; 'I believe she has not; and I know I never have. But what then! Brown has told us all about it.'

'Has he! Is it anything like this? said my father, taking a copy of the will from his pocket and putting it into Sam's hands.

Poor fellow, I have often heard my father describe what a picture of indignation and desperation he looked when he came to the fatal clause; how he rushed out of the room, out of the house, without speaking a word. My father waited a full half hour for the return of his friend; and then somewhat alarmed at his prolonged absence, hastened in search of him. He proceeded towards the house of the drysalter, and was about to knock at the door when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps from within. The door opened and his friend appeared, Brown standing by with a light in hand. They were evidently both flushed with recent dispute, but Sam was making strong efforts to be calm.

'Good night, Mr Brown My father heard him say. 'You have used me badly, sir, and poor Blanche too; but you will not gain your purpose. We can wait. We can wait two years, and then look to yourself.'

The door closed, and my father was recognised by his friend. 'Thank you, Hardcastle,' he said; 'you have saved poor Blanche and me from ruin. Brown is a villain, but we'll circumvent him yet.'

It was certainly a bold game that Brown and his co-executors had played; but, except for my father, it would have been successful. There is no doubt whatever that the marriage was to have been solemnised without their joint consent, and then, and not till then, the will was to have been produced and enforced to its very letter.

As it was the whole scheme was disconcerted, and the dishonourable plotters were put to their shifts. It was true for their peace and security that, in little more than two years, their control over the heiress would cease, and that then they would be required to render up an account of their stewardship. It is equally true that they could not have given a satisfactory account of it. Many of their latter speculations had been worse than unproductive, and, in the best of them, a large amount of capital was locked up, which could not, for many years, be withdrawn without a fearful sacrifice. Of course, the premature discovery of the base plot, which was to rob poor Blanche of her birthright, put an end to the wedding negotiations; for Jones and Robinson, pretending ignorance of previous connection, and a downright disapproval of it refused their consent, and neither Blanche nor her lover were so desperately set upon the immediate consummation of their engagement as to throw up all their worldly expectations. The wily guardians of the young orphan coolly sat themselves to work—not, indeed, to repair the web which had been ruthlessly broken through, but to weave a new one. To carry out their plans successfully, it was necessary for Blanche to be withdrawn from the near neighbourhood of her lover, and desir-

able that he should sink in her estimation. Accordingly, a very few days after the exposure, Mr Brown and his ward were reported as absent from H—. Whether they had departed no one could guess. Sam's ruin was determined on, and unfortunately it was in the power of his enemy Robinson to work it. Those were the glorious days of imprisonment for debt, and within three months of his disappointment, poor Sam was incarcerated in the county jail at the suit of Robinson, who held a mortgage to which the name of the victim was attached; and such was the fury of his persecutors, that he shortly afterwards committed suicide.

This accomplished, other plans were ripening for destroying the happiness and securing the property of the orphan girl. Robinson had a son who was nearly of an age with Blanche. The guardians now tried to bring about a match between them, but, more honourable than his father, the young man refused to participate in the scheme and, to avoid the reproaches to which he thus subjected himself, withdrew from his father's house, and was not heard of in H— for many years. Thus again frustrated, the unworthy guardians had recourse to a last effort, which proved too successful. Under the pretence of amusing his ward by change of scene, Brown had taken her from one gay place to another—from London to Cheltenham, from Cheltenham to Bath, and from Bath back again to Brighton—keeping up, at the same time, a constant correspondence with his two fellow-townsmen, and carefully guarding against any chance of communication between the young betrothed. Thus Blanche began to suspect her lover of mercenary indifference—an idea which Mr Brown took care to encourage; and poor Sam, in the midst of his pecuniary distresses, was deprived of the consolation of knowing, and at length believing, that Blanche was faithful and firm. Firm and faithful, however, Blanche, was while her confidence remained unshaken. But her credulity was imposed upon; and with constitutional rapidity her love changed almost to hatred. The opportunity was not lost; the train had, indeed, been long and carefully laid: before the paroxysm of jealous rage was over which succeeded the positive certainty, as she imagined, of her lover's infidelity, the elder Robinson made his appearance. How far the succeeding part of the drama—I should rather say the tragedy—was compulsory, can never be known. I is enough to say, that in less than six months after the commencement of her wanderings from H—, the unfortunate Blanche Wilson returned the wife of her youngest guardian. It was the sudden news of this, that finding its way to the debtor side of the county prison, overturned the reason of poor Sam and closed his life.

It is needless to say that each of the villainous guardians had, in this transaction taken care of himself. As far as was ever known, they made an equal division of the poor girl's property, and settled down in their old quarters, and to their old pursuits.

But the tragedy was not yet ended. The miserable fate of her former lover reached poor Blanche's ear and she perceived, too late, the plots by which she had been hopelessly entangled. The effect was fearful. Madness of the most desperate character claimed her as its own. It became absolutely necessary to remove her to an asylum, where she remained for years a confirmed and violent maniac, until death released her from her sufferings.

Brown and Jones now disposed of their business, and removed to a town in the next county while Robinson, whose trade was a builder, with his share of the plunder, busied himself in planing and building the mansion we have just visited. Having completed it, he also finally left H—; and the only connection kept up with that town hereafter, by either of the three men, was through the medium of an agent, who it was generally supposed, eventually fleeced his clients to a large amount. But retribution of a far different character was shortly to overtake the miserable sinners. A few years after their removal from H—, Jones who throughout the whole affair had been the tool of his more active associates, though he shared their crime and their reward was taken ill, and evidently lay on his bed of death. Then his conscience, which he hitherto managed to stifle, began to affright him with horrible remembrances of the past and anticipations of the future. His mental sufferings, by all accounts, were most poignant. On one occasion, when life was apparently at almost the last gasp, he dispatched a messenger for his old companion Brown. The messenger returned, charged with an excuse.

'I must see him,' shrieked the despairing wretch; 'go again; drag him to me if he will not come. I cannot die—I will not die till I have seen him.'

Thus invoked, the former prompter of the dying man unwillingly returned with the messenger, and slowly entered the chamber.

'Are we alone?' asked Jones, rousing himself from his approaching stupor, and rolling his glassy eyes around him. 'Leave the room,' he shouted to his nurse who was standing by; 'leave the room; I must see Mr Brown alone.'

The nurse obeyed. . . . A quarter of an hour—half-an-hour—an hour elapsed; and muttered tones, deep groanings, hysterical shrieks, by turns were heard from that awful chamber. At length the door was burst open from within, and Brown, his gray hairs almost erect, and his eyes glaring with terror, rushed forth, descended the stairs by frantic leaps, and hurried fearfully from the house. When the attendants ventured to enter, all was so-