Winter evening tales, collected among the cottagers in the south of Scotland

Hogg James
WINTER EVENING TALES,

COLLECTED AMONG

THE COTTAGERS

IN

THE SOUTH OF SCOTLAND.

BY JAMES HOGG,

AUTHOR OF THE QUEEN'S WAKE, &c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

"In rangles round afore the ingle's lowe,
Fraw Gudame's mouth auld-warld Tales they hear,
O' Warlocks looin' round the Wirrikow,
O' Ghaists that won in glen and kirk-yard dreear,
Whilk toulzes a' their tap, an' gars them shake wi' fear."

Fergusson.

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WINTER EVENING TALES.

THE

RENOWNED ADVENTURES

OF

BASIL LEE.*

I have for these twenty years been convinced of the truth of the proverb, that a fool can best teach a wise man wit; and that it is, in fact, on the egregious misconduct of the thoughtless and foolish part of mankind that the wise and prudent calculate for their success; and from these that they take their lessons of perseverance and good management. It is on this principle that the following sheets are indited, that others may be warned from the rock on which I have split; I therefore conceal nothing, but relate uniformly the simple truth, though manifestly to my disadvantage. I have not written my life as a model to be copied, but as one to be avoided, and may those who laugh at my inconsistencies learn from them to steer a different course.

There is one great evil under the sun, from which, if youth is not warned, their success in life will be frustrated, and their old age without comfort and without respect. From it my misfortunes are all to be traced, and from it I am suffering at this day. I look back on the days that are past, and am grieved. I can now see all my incongruities, and wonder at my inadvertency in not being able to correct them.

* The original of this extraordinary journal was lodged in my hands in the summer of 1810, by an old man, having the appearance of a decayed gentleman. It was when I commenced publishing The Spy, that it was given to me, for the purpose of being revised and published in that paper. A small portion of it was published, but, owing to the freedom with which the writer expressed himself, it gave offence, and was therefore cut short and discontinued. The writer, it is probable, had been offended at this, for I never saw him again; but I have since been informed, that his name is Basil Lee, and that he was alive in 1817. He never, in all these memoirs, mentions his family name, and it is evident that he wishes to conceal it. His friends will therefore excuse me for having subjoined it, for the sake of giving interest to the narrative; and if he himself is still in life, I shall be glad to hear from him. The large portion that I have been obliged to cancel, it was surely better not to appear.
The evil that I complain of, by which all my views in life have been frustrated, and by which thousands as well as myself have suffered, without attributing their disappointments to it, is neither more nor less that instability of mind—that youthful impatience, so notorious in every young and aspiring breast, which impels the possessor to fly from one study to another, and from one calling to another, without the chance of succeeding in any. This propensity to change, so inherent in young and volatile minds, I have often seen encouraged by parents, who would as frequently apply the sage remark, that “when one trade failed, they could, when they pleased, take up another.” It is the worst principle on which any man can act, and I will prove it to all the world, first from reason, and afterwards from experience.

The mind of man, survey it from what point of view you please, bears a strong resemblance to a stream of water. I hate similes in general, but the fitness of this pleases me so much at first sight, that I must follow it out. The river, when it first issues from its parent spring, is a trifling insignificant rill, and easily dammed or turned aside, either to the right hand or the left; but still as it advances, it gathers strength and power, and, unless by means the most elaborate, becomes irresistible. When it approaches the latter end of its course, it becomes steady and still, and at last moves heavily and laggingly along, till it mixes with the boundless ocean. The stream is human life, and the ocean is eternity; but the similarity betwixt these is so apparent, that the most simple can be at no loss to trace it.

If this stream, in any part of its course, is divided into two, each of these come far short of having half the strength and force of the original current; and if parted again, they still lose in endless gradation. The consequence of this is, that the oftener a stream is divided, it becomes the more easily subdivided again and again. A shoal, or any trivial impediment, that never could once have withstood its accumulated force, stops its diminished currents, and turns them whithersoever chance may direct—a smaller obstacle does it the next time, until the noble river ends in becoming a stagnant lake, or a cumberer of the adjacent grounds. So will it prove with man, if the energies of his soul are enfeebled by a variety of unconnected pursuits.

Again, let it be noted, that it is of little moment into what channel you turn this stream at first, provided you can confine it to that channel alone, for it will continue to deepen, and bank itself in by degrees, until that channel appear to the
eyes of all the world as its natural course. So it is with the human mind, even in a more extensive degree; for if its course is bent toward any one object, it is ten to one that it obtains it. I hope this plausible theory is perfectly understood, for it is a pity it should be lost; but I think he must have a very thick head who does not comprehend it. And now, having finished the reasoning and reasonable part of my work, I will next prove my theory, by a history of my life, up to the day in which I finish the last page of this manuscript.

I was third son to a reputable farmer in the upper parts of Berwickshire, who occupied an extensive track of land, partly arable and partly pasture. At the parish school I received such an education as was generally bestowed on the sons of farmers in those days. I could read the Shorter Catechism, and even the Bible, with great fluency, though with a broad and uncouth pronunciation. I could write a fair and legible hand, and cast up accounts tolerably well, having gone through Cocker's Arithmetic as far as the Rule of Three. But when I came into Vulgar Fractions, the trick of dividing a single number into so many minute parts quite disgusted me; as I judged that thereby I was confusing myself with a multiplicity of figures, of which there was no end; so I gave it up.

At fourteen years of age, I was, by my own choice, bound apprentice to a joiner in the neighbourhood, with whom I was obliged to serve out my time, much against my will; for I deemed myself master of the craft, and much superior to my teacher, before half my time was expired. After I had struggled through it, I went home. My father hinted to me, that I ought to take the wages my late master offered me to continue with him, until something better should be found. But this I slighted with high disdain, declaring that I would go to London or America, before I accepted of less than double the sum proposed: and that, at any rate, was I never to learn any thing better than making a plough or cart-wheel?

No master could be found who would come up to my conditions, while the ease and indulgence that I experienced about my father's house, made me heartily wish that no such might ever be found; and this sentiment made me contrive some strong and unanswerable objections to every proposal of the kind, until the prospect of getting me advantageously engaged as a journeyman died somewhat away; and, that it might not too abruptly be renewed, I proposed to my father to hold one of his ploughs, a task to which I assured him I was completely adequate, and gave him some wise hints of keeping forward the work of the farm, by the influence which my
presence would have upon the servants. My father, who was a good-natured worthy man, acquiesced, and I fell to work; and certainly for some weeks wrought with unusual vigilance. I had one principal motive for staying at home, which my father did not advert to; I was in love with Jessy, one of the servant maids, a little blooming arrogant gypsy, out of whose sight I could not be happy. I quarrelled with her daily, and agreed with her again, begging her pardon before night. I looked, simpered, and sighed; but all these delightful signals of love she received with seeming disdain. I was jealous of her beyond all bounds, and if I saw her smile upon any other young man, or talking apart with one, my bosom burnt with rage and revenge. I haunted her as if I had been her shadow, and though I did not know of any thing that I wanted with her, yet I neither could be happy out of her presence, nor contented when in it.

Though I believe my performance as a ploughman was of a very inferior species, I remember I soon became superciliously vain of it, which provoked my neighbour ploughmen to treat me with very little deference. I was not slack in telling them, that it arose all from envy, at seeing themselves so much outdone by me, in a business which they had practised all their lives, but had never understood. There was no standing of this from a novice, for the border hinds are an independent and high-spirited race of men, and matters went on any way but cordially between us. My partial father came over to my side, which made the breach still the wider; and at length they told him to my face, that they would no longer work along with me, for, that besides not keeping up my part, and leaving them all the drudgery, I took it upon me to direct them, while, at the same time, I knew no more of farm labour than a cat.

I said it was impossible for me to work longer with such boors; that I wrought nearly as much as them all put together; but that they wanted to be idle, and wished not for any such pattern. Poor shiftily shally shurf! exclaimed one of them, in great indignation, “you haud a plough! ye maun eat a bowe o’ meal an’ lick a peck o’ ashes first! deil hae’t e’er I saw ye gude for yet, but rinnin’ snipiltin’ after the bits o’ wenchens.” Knowing who was present, I threw off my coat in order to give the scoundrel a threshing, but my father ordered him to hold his peace and go about his business; and, taking hold of me, he led me by force into the house, and there was no more of the matter.

Thus was I taken from the plough’s tail, and sent to herd