

Roman History

ROOKWOOD.

A Romance,
BY

W^m Harrison Ainsworth Esq^r.



George Cruikshank fecit

LONDON

JOHN MACRONE ST JAMES'S SQUARE

WILLIAM HARRISON AINSWORTH (1805 - 1882)

He was born in Manchester, well educated, and started to follow his father in the legal profession. He was a brilliant, handsome youth with a taste for drama and romance and great enthusiasm for literature. Before the age of twenty he was contributing to some of the magazines which were published regularly at that time. On the death of his father in 1824 Ainsworth went to London to finish his legal studies, but became involved with the literary circles there and in 1826 married Anne (Fanny) Ebers, daughter of the manager of the Opera House who was also a publisher. Ainsworth began publishing himself and met Sir Walter Scott. In 1831 he started to write "Rookwood" which was published in 1834 and was an immediate success. His ability to write descriptively, with his love of the history of his native land, and its scenery coming through his narrative was his chief asset. Other books with a historical background include ^{stories about} the Dunmow Flicht, The South Sea Bubble, Guy Fawkes, Jack Sheppard, a story about the Plague and the Great Fire of London plus many more. (approx 39)

In 1881, the year before his death, a special banquet was held in his honour at Manchester and it was said that twenty volumes of his works were on loan from the free public library every day of the year. He was acquainted with Dickens and other leading literary figures and some of his books were translated into other languages,

Rookwood was written in the years just leading up to the Great Reform Act and the Poor Law Reforms, before Queen Victoria had succeeded to the throne.

Jane Austen in "Northanger Abbey" pokes fun at the public's love of romantic intrigue amid ruined abbeys, as portrayed by Mrs. Radcliffe (1764-1823) one of the leading popular writers of her day. "Rookwood" is aimed at the same audience. It is spiced with numerous poems, ballads or rhymes and every chapter is prefaced with a quotation from other works of that time. Parts of the book particularly with the gypsies or the lower classes are in very colloquial words with the need for explanatory notes in editions published even by the turn of the century. It might also be worth mentioning the similarity, in parts, to the writings of Tom Hood, with double-meanings, just like in Hood's poem of "The Epping Hunt" which was written in 1829.

The story is extremely complicated and has so many twists and turns, with a wicked lord of the manor, the innocent maid, the gipsy band, ruined abbey, ghostly apparition, murder, adultery, love potions, the headstrong young lovers, the wicked mother, not to mention the odd highwayman or two. It would make a good television mini series.

THE STORY OF "ROOKWOOD"

* Vault

"Within a sepulchral vault, and at midnight, two persons were seated."... One was old Peter Bradley, the sexton, and the other was his grandson Luke who was "dressed in a rough forester's costume of the mode of 1737". (and was living with a group of gipsys) As they sit in the vault of the church attached to the house of Rookwood, ^{surrounded by coffins} old Peter tells Luke that every male master of Rookwood has been suspected of the murder of his ^{first} wife, and that the line is cursed. They also confirm that Luke's mother, Peter's daughter Susan Bradley, had been secretly married to Sir Piers Rookwood, by finding her corpse with a wedding ring on the finger. This is proof that Luke is the rightful heir of Rookwood, as on the morrow they must bring the dead body of Sir Piers _{his father} to the vault for internment.

Luke has been brought up by a tribe of gipsies and is known locally as a poacher, so he is not able to claim his inheritance easily.

* Rookwood House

Heir to Sir Piers is his son Ranulph who is travelling abroad after a quarrel with his father. He is quite unaware that he has a step-brother and, unlike the rest of the Rookwoods, seems a very nice young man. The family has a history of adultery and murder, only Sir Piers wife, the widowed Lady Rookwood seems to have been able to outwit her husband - and she is an evil piece of work too. *Strangely, a ghostly apparition directs Ranulph homeward, just in time for his father's interment.*

* Break-in

Other characters in the story are various hangers-on to Sir Piers including the clerk, the attorney and a hunting friend called Jack Palmer. He is a good-humoured, good-looking man, around thirty, well dressed and self-assured. He had been accepted into the Rookwood circle as an intimate friend. However, after the burial of Sir Piers body, he robbed the house (in disguise) and made a point of throwing off his disguise in a boastful gesture before making his escape, and admitting he was Dick Turpin.

While on his travels abroad young Ranulph had met with the Mowbray family and fallen in love with young Eleanor, a delightful creature, charming, intellegent, and now that he is to become Sir Ranulph Rookwood, and inherit the estates, it seems that nothing will prevent their marriage. And then along comes Luke and puts in his claim. In fact the marriage certificate of Susan Bradley and Sir Piers Rookwood has been stolen by Dick Turpin, who is well acquainted with Luke and his gipsy friends. All is lost ^{to Ranulph} - Luke can now marry his gipsy sweetheart and they can become the lord and lady of Rookwood.

^{Sybil} While journey in the vicinity of Rookwood house the Mowbrays coach is held up by Dick Turpin, the carriage overturns and Eleanor faints. The party is

Sybil & Barbara Lovell *

taken to a nearby ruined abbey, which just happens to be the home of the gipsy tribe. Luke is very taken by Eleanor Mowbray and plays into the hands of the gipsy queen. She wants her daughter, Luke's sweetheart sybil, to become his wife but knows the curse which says that the head of the Rookwoods will murder his ^{first} wife. She therefore uses love potions to arrange the marriage of Luke to Eleanor, thinking that once Eleanor is dead, her daughter and Luke can be happily united.

The Wedding *

Meanwhile, the story takes a further twist as it is revealed that Mrs.Mowbray is in fact the daughter of Sir Piers father by his first (murdered) wife. She is intent on revenge against the Rookwood family; it also transpires that Eleanor is thus the true heir to the Rookwood estates. Amid great drama, in a dark chamber of the ruined abbey Luke and Eleanor are married - except that it is Sybil's hand on which Luke places the ring and she then kills herself to rid the family of the curse, and heartbroken by the fact that Luke has been captivated by Eleanors charms.

At this point Eleanor's brother come to rescue her from the gipsys while some of the Rookwood inmates are after the outlaw, Dick Turpin. There is a fierce battle in which Black Bess helps Dick to escape. Eleanor is rescued and taken to the Rookwood house to her intended - Luke's step-brother Ranulph. Dick goes to London with his ill-gotten gains but is pursued by some of the Rookwood mob. He meets up with his friend Tom King who is as fond of women as Dick is of his horse. They sing a merry ditty:

As the highway^{men}'s life is the fullest of zest
So the highwayman's death is the briefest and best
He dies not as other men die, by degrees,
But at once! without flinching - and quite at his ease!

The two men are great friends, although Tom tells that the stars predict he will die by the hand of his best friend. In fact, it is his girl-friend who betrays him, Tom King is caught in an ambush and calls on Dick Turpin to shoot his assailant, even though he himself might be hit. Dick holds back but is urged by King to shoot - and he is ^{hit and} dies by the hand of his friend.

Dick is now in a tight corner and decides on his ride to York - not to secure an alibi as too many people are witness to his presence in London, but simply as an act of showmanship. He leaves Kilburn at seven, passing Hampstead, Highgate, Edmonton, and along the Enfield highway. Dick is exhilarated by the ride and this is conveyed to Black Bess who is an outstanding horse ..

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Thought Edmonton

From the west was her dam, from the east was her sire
From the one came her swiftness, the other her fire
No peer of the realm better blood can possess
Than flows in the veins of my bonny Black Bess

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Over highway and bye-way, in rough and smooth weather
 Some thousands of miles have we journeyed together;
 Our couch the same straw, and our meal the same mess
 No couple more constant than I and Black Bess
 By moonlight, in darkness, by night or by day
 Her headlong career there is nothing can stay
 She cares not for distance, she knows not distress
 Can you show me a courser to match with Black Bess ?

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 in Pursuer
 They gallop through woods, across plains, flash through sleepy villages, on cobbled streets, clearing any obstacle without stopping. They reach Huntingdon by eleven and Dick is becoming obsessed with the immortality his ride to York will give. Meanwhile his pursuers are stopping to change horses and are not far behind... The night has been clear and warm but as they journey through the Fen country the dank atmosphere lowers Dick's spirits. He meets with the York stagecoach and both he and the coach driver are stopped in surprise, Dick is recognised and Major Mowbray, Eleanor's brother is found to be among the passengers and he inadvertently tells Dick that Eleanor is at Rookwood house and as yet, unmarried to Ranulph. Luke is in hiding. At its next stopping point the coach party meets the entourage chasing Dick and Major Mowbray hires a horse to return to Rookwood.

Dick and Bess have now travelled 80 miles and are near Burleigh House. Dick has friends here who give refreshment to both horse and rider and stall off the pursuers while Bess negotiates a dangerous hill to ensure their escape.

On they gallop until, by a very strange coincidence, they came upon the gipsy queen, who gives Dick a package which ~~was~~ to be opened to Luke, once he has Eleanor in his power. He is to think of his sweetheart, Sybil, as he opens it. Dick journeys on, and nears Selby when Bess stumbles and Dick is thrown. The poor horse is tiring, but our dauntless hero is so intent on his Ride to York that he urges her on again. By yet another strange coincidence, Luke is riding along the same road and the two converse, Dick gives Luke the package. The journey is resumed, the towers and pinnacles of York burst upon him in all the freshness and glory of a bright autumnal morning, Dick cries hurrah, a mile further on Bess totters and falls - the journey has killed her and Dick is devastated. At that moment the clock strikes the hour of six. Dick makes his escape before the pursuers arrive on the scene and comes back to bury Bess later.

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 Seat of Black Bess
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 Rookwood House
 Meanwhile Luke and his father, who turns out to be the wronged brother-in-law of Eleanor Mowbray's grandmother (i.e. Alan Rookwood. So Luke's mother married her cousin which might explain why they are all mad !) are gathering help to make an entry into Rookwood house and carry off Eleanor to be Luke's bride. Back at the

house she is preparing to marry Ranulph. She is now the lady of Rookwood, but being the sweet maid that she is, she is content to let the widowed Lady of Sir Piers, Ranulph's mother stay - but she is too evil to accept Eleanor's charity, drives herself into a frenzy of temper and runs out into the night chasing the ghost of her husband. Luke, assisted by Dick Turpin, force an entry into the house and manage to locate Eleanor alone but for her gipsy maid. The gipsy was previously maid to Sybil and is acting the part of meekness to her new mistress as a means of getting her own revenge for Sybil's death. There is a dramatic scene with Luke trying to carry off Eleanor while Ranulph is trying to break down the door. Suddenly Ranulph appears at the entrance to a secret ^{passage} ~~panel~~ - desperate to save the honour of his betrothed. Luke takes her as his hostage and Dick joins in ^{the fight} when the package falls to the floor and Luke, now he has Eleanor in his power, agrees to open it. Inside is a lock of Sybil's hair - he kisses it, and falls dead from the poison in which it has been soaked. Eleanor rushes to the protection of her true love while Dick makes his escape. The lovers are married amid the rejoicing of the local peasants and the curse is annuled - they live happily ever after.

The Vault
 Back in the vault, at midnight, two persons were seated ... Alan (alias the sexton Peter Bradley) and the mad Lady Rookwood. They both died a terrible death, Lady Rookwood is accidently buried alive in a stone sarcophagus while Alan/Peter finds himself locked inside the vault and dies a slow death, going mad surrounded by the coffins of his ancestors.

The book is 481 pages of which about 50 are devoted to Turpin's ride to York. (p.377 - 424)

However, Dauntless Dick is quite a secondary character to the story, he could have been omitted altogether without loss to the main story line.

Ainsworth claims to have written the ride to York in one day and one night, he claims this to be 100 pages, and he identified with the horseman so thoroughly that he just could not stop his pen from flowing, until he had reached York.