The Adventures of Roderick Random

T. (Tobias) Smollett

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by Tobias Smollett

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THE AUTHOR’S PREFACE

Of all kinds of satire, there is none so entertaining and universally improving, as that which is introduced, as it were occasionally, in the course of an interesting story, which brings every incident home to life, and by representing familiar scenes in an uncommon and amusing point of view, invests them with all the graces of novelty, while nature is appealed to in every particular. The reader gratifies his

curiosity in pursuing the adventures of a person in whose favour he is prepossessed; he espouses his cause, he sympathises with him in his distress, his indignation is heated against the authors of his calamity: the humane passions are inflamed; the contrast between dejected virtue and insulting vice appears with greater aggravation, and every impression having a double force on the imagination, the memory retains the circumstance, and the heart improves by the example. The attention is not tired with a bare catalogue of characters, but agreeably diverted with all the variety of invention; and the vicissitudes of life appear in their peculiar circumstances, opening an ample field for wit and humour.

Romance, no doubt, owes its origin to ignorance, vanity, and superstition. In the dark ages of the World, when a man had rendered himself famous for wisdom or valour, his family and adherents availed themselves of his superior qualities, magnified his virtues, and represented his character and person as sacred and supernatural. The vulgar easily swallowed the bait, implored his protection, and yielded the tribute of homage and praise, even to adoration; his exploits were handed down to posterity with a thousand exaggerations; they were repeated as incitements to virtue; divine honours were paid, and altars erected to his memory, for the encouragement of those who attempted to imitate his example; and hence arose the heathen mythology, which is no other than a collection of extravagant romances. As learning advanced, and genius received cultivation, these stories were embellished with the graces of poetry, that they might the better recommend themselves to the attention; they were sung in public, at festivals, for the instruction and delight of the audience; and rehearsed before battle, as incentives to

deeds of glory. Thus tragedy and the epic muse were born, and, in the progress of taste, arrived at perfection. It is no wonder that the ancients could not relish a fable in prose, after they had seen so many remarkable events celebrated in verse by their best poets; we therefore find no romance among them during the era of their excellence, unless the _Cyropædia_ of Xenophon may be so called; and it was not till arts and sciences began to revive after the irruption of the barbarians into Europe, that anything of this kind appeared. But when the minds of men were debauched by the imposition of priestcraft to the most absurd pitch of credulity, the authors of romance arose, and losing sight of probability, filled their performances with the most monstrous hyperboles. If they could not equal the ancient poets in point of genius they were resolved to excel them in fiction, and apply to the wonder, rather than the judgment, of their readers. Accordingly, they brought necromancy to their aid, and instead of supporting the character of their heroes by dignity of sentiment and practice, distinguished them by their bodily strength, activity, and extravagance of behaviour. Although nothing could be more ludicrous and unnatural than the figures they drew, they did not want patrons and admirers; and the world actually began to be infected with the spirit of knight-errantry, when Cervantes, by an inimitable piece of ridicule, reformed the taste of mankind, representing chivalry in the right point of view, and converting romance to purposes far more useful and entertaining, by making it assume the sock, and point out the follies of ordinary life.

The same method has been practised by other Spanish and French authors, and by none more successfully than by Monsieur Le Sage, who, in his _Adventures of Gil Blas_, has described the knavery and

foibles of life, with infinite humour and sagacity. The following sheets I have modelled on his plan, taking me liberty, however, to differ from him in the execution, where I thought his particular situations were uncommon, extravagant, or peculiar to the country in which the scene is laid. The disgraces of Gil Blas are, for the most part, such as rather excite mirth than compassion; he himself laughs at them; and his transitions from distress to happiness, or at least ease, are so sudden, that neither the reader has time to pity him, nor himself to be acquainted with affliction. This conduct, in my opinion, not only deviates from probability, but prevents that generous indignation, which ought to animate the reader against the sordid and vicious disposition of the world. I have attempted to represent modest merit struggling with every difficulty to which a friendless orphan is exposed, from his own want of experience, as well as from the selfishness, envy, malice, and base indifference of mankind. To secure a favourable prepossession, I have allowed him the advantages of birth and education, which in the series of his misfortunes will, I hope, engage the ingenuous more warmly in his behalf; and though I foresee, that some people will be offended at the mean scenes in which he is involved, I persuade myself that the judicious will not only perceive the necessity of describing those situations to which he must of course be confined, in his low estate, but also find entertainment in viewing those parts of life, where the humours and passions are undisguised by affectation, ceremony, or education; and the whimsical peculiarities of disposition appear as nature has implanted them. But I believe I need not trouble myself in vindicating a practice authorized by the best writers in this way, some of whom I have already named.

Every intelligent reader will, at first sight, perceive I have not deviated from nature in the facts, which are all true in the main, although the circumstances are altered and disguised, to avoid personal satire.

It now remains to give my reasons for making the chief personage of this work a North Briton, which are chiefly these: I could, at a small expense, bestow on him such education as I thought the dignity of his birth and character required, which could not possibly be obtained in England, by such slender means as the nature of my plan would afford. In the next place, I could represent simplicity of manners in a remote part of the kingdom, with more propriety than in any place near the capital; and lastly, the disposition of the Scots, addicted to travelling, justifies my conduct in deriving an adventurer from that country. That the delicate reader may not be offended at the unmeaning oaths which proceed from the mouths of some persons in these memoirs, I beg leave to promise, that I imagined nothing could more effectually expose the absurdity of such miserable expletives, than a natural and verbal representation of the discourse in which they occur.

APOLOGUE

A young painter, indulging a vein of pleasantry, sketched a kind of conversation piece, representing a bear, an owl, a monkey, and an ass; and to render it more striking, humorous, and moral, distinguished every figure by some emblem of human life. Bruin was exhibited in the garb and attitude of an old, toothless, drunken soldier; the owl perched upon the handle of a coffee-pot, with spectacle on nose,

seemed to contemplate a newspaper; and the ass, ornamented with a huge tie-wig (which, however, could not conceal his long ears), sat for his picture to the monkey, who appeared with the implements of painting. This whimsical group afforded some mirth, and met with general approbation, until some mischievous wag hinted that the whole—was a lampoon upon the friends of the performer; an insinuation which was no sooner circulated than those very people who applauded it before began to be alarmed, and even to fancy themselves signified by the several figures of the piece.

Among others, a worthy personage in years, who had served in the army with reputation, being incensed at the supposed outrage, repaired to the lodging of the painter, and finding him at home, “Hark ye, Mr. Monkey,” said he, “I have a good mind to convince you, that though the bear has lost his teeth, he retains his paws, and that he is not so drunk but he can perceive your impertinence.” “Sblood! sir, that toothless jaw is a d—ned scandalous libel—but don’t you imagine me so chopfallen as not to be able to chew the cud of resentment.” Here he was interrupted by the arrival of a learned physician, who, advancing to the culprit with fury in his aspect, exclaimed, “Suppose the augmentation of the ass’s ears should prove the diminution of the baboon’s—nay, seek not to prevaricate, for, by the beard of Aesculapius! there is not one hair in this periwig that will not stand up in judgment to convict thee of personal abuse. Do but observe, captain, how this pitiful little fellow has copied the very curls—the colour, indeed, is different, but then the form and foretop are quite similar.” While he thus remonstrated in a strain of vociferation, a venerable senator entered, and waddling up to the delinquent, “Jackanapes!” cried he, “I will now let thee see I can read

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