

DEFOE AND *MOLL FLANDERS*

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The automobile, I thought, has carried us back into an earlier stratum of time. Where the traveller by rail substantiated the name of a country town, not important enough to stop at, by a view of the gasworks, a laundry that also keeps hens, a yellow brick institute or a blue brick bethel, and the semi-detached houses all along the Station Road, the motorist pierces this integument and is for a few minutes in the world of people who travelled by stage coach. The narrow streets, so narrow that one can look into the houses on either side, catch a glimpse of the cornchandler's cat asleep in a bin, or recognize through the drawn blinds the silhouette of a pot of geraniums, decant one into the wide market square, over which the rival inns hold out their signs. The market still holds, groups move conversationally over the cobbles, the cheapjack postures under his flare, and countrywomen sit on the pavement-edge with plucked and trussed chickens, ornamented with epaulettes of liver and giblets, laid on the stones besides them.

Or perhaps the traveller may find himself skirting the village green; on one side of it are the gentry houses, conscious but not self-conscious, officially protected by a chain looping from low posts, and raised in the social scale by a flight of steps to the front door. The inn has red blinds, and standing a little apart is the church, being everything one could expect of it. It is all traditional and unremarkable, the alphabet and daily bread of the English nightingale area - south of the Trent and east of the Severn. One might live here, in any of these unnumbered and passingly-seen heres, very respectably, very cosily and prosily;

and yet the mind experiences a faint impression of romance, as from viewing the parthenon or the Alhambra, places in the present once but now in the *passe defini*; for one is not cosy or prosy nowadays, barely respectable.

These sights, these thoughts, still possessed me when I reached home, and, too sleepy for a new book, pulled an old one from the shelf. There are some books, as there are some personalities, which one can open anywhere and be sure of an interest, This, I knew, was one of them. I read:-

‘With this stock I had the world to begin again; but you are to consider that I was not now the same woman as when I lived at Rotherhithe; for, first of all, I was near twenty years older, and did not look the better for my age, nor for my rambles to Virginia and back again; and though I omitted nothing that might set me out to advantage, except painting, for that I have never stooped to . . . ’

Roxana, with her Frenchified name, might paint; famous Moll Flanders never fell so low as that. ‘Born in Newgate, twelve years a whore, five times a wife, twelve years a thief,’ she yet kept her face honest, used no whitelead or ceruse. Cosy, prosy, respectable. All that small, remote, stage-coach world I had been prying into rose up perfect from the page before me, from the cornchandler’s cat - faithful, for all her rapscaillionly midnight matings, to the fireside, the cushioned chair, the creamjug, and an admirable mouser and mother - to the church, standing a little apart and being everything that one could expect of it; for Moll, despite her handling of two of the Commandments, received all the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, and always married if possible. She visited a gaming-house but once, she did not run into debt, the probity of her budgets is beyond reproach.

Balzac has been praised by no less a critic than Mr. Strachey for the proper insistence he lays upon money matters in his novels. I daresay *La Comedie Humaine* could be audited; I have no doubt that *Moll Flanders* could be, though perhaps its heroine was mistaken in supposing that she ‘might board very handsomely at a town called Manchester for about £6 a year.’ But this information she had from a north-country gentlewoman, ‘and nothing was more frequent in her discourse than her

account of the cheapness of provisions, and the easy way of living in her country; how plentiful and cheap everything was, what good company they kept, and the like'; others of us may have heard similar pious brags from that part of the world.

It is noteworthy that the most highly wrought emotional scene in this book hinges on £.s.d. Moll, beginning the world again at two and forty, allows a match to be made by this same north-country gentlewoman between herself and a man who passes as a man of fortune. But the go-between has lied to both parties; he is as much of a fortune-hunter as she, as, a little after their marriage, they discover. Ruefully, for they have been happy together, but sensibly, they agree to separate and go on their several dubious ways.

'I pulled out a bank-bill of £20 and eleven guineas, which I told him I had saved out of my little income; that if it was taken from me, I was left destitute, and he knew what the condition of a woman must be if she had no money in her pocket; however, I told him, if he would take it, there it was.'

It is true that on the next page we hear of another bank-bill, not disclosed. At two and forty one has learned a little hard sense - hard sense which can run concurrently with the pain of a last passion. But when, rejecting the thirty-one pounds - no, let me follow Defoe's example and be accurate: £31.11.; - Moll's fortune-hunter sets out alone, passion route hard sense, and Moll, endowed with the pathetic, school-boyish, parting, amends of 'ten guineas, his gold watch, and two little rings, one a small diamond ring worth only about £6, and the other a plain gold ring', is as genuinely in love, as genuinely distracted, as any woman need be.

This is the fourth husband. He is succeeded by a worthy bank clerk with whom poor Moll is as cosy, prosy, and respectable as her true heart could desire. But he dies, ruined by the failure of a fellow-clerk, and Moll, too old now for marriage or keeping, is forced to thieve for a living.

All this book is golden, but there is no doubt that the thieving part is the best. From the moment of yielding to temptation - "twas like a voice spoken over my shoulder, "Take the bundle; be quick; do it this moment," to the arrival in Newgate, Defoe's narrative sweeps on with the force and

circumstantial thoroughness of a river in flood. Each successive larceny is invented with such art and described with such relish that one might almost suppose that the moral purpose of the book had been a little lost sight of, and that its author was saying to himself: 'Now what shall I steal next?' Be it a child's necklace, a parcel of Flanders lace, a horse, or the periwig of a gentleman overcome by love and liquor, he snaps it up so perfectly that the reader must feel a naughty delight in such accomplishment; and I defy the best regulated mind not to applaud when the lady at the country opera house 'who was not only intolerably merry but a little fuddled,' is lightened of her gold watch, or the bullying mercer brought to his bearings, or when Moll, grown a great lady at her trade, speaks of 'mere picking of pockets'.

For even as a thief Moll's estimable qualities are, so to speak, too much for her. Shrewd, industrious, reliable, steadfastly ambitious, she can no more help thieving successfully than she can help not thieving; it might be said of her as was said of the virtuous woman in the Book of Proverbs: 'She seeketh wool and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.' So trudging further and further into the morass of crime, while all the time her native integrity and her stout heart delude her on, she reaches Newgate, where the hardened wretches that are there before her give her an envious and merry welcome.

It is with a shock - so time abolishing is true art - that one realizes that this is the small, remote, stage-coach world where a woman was hanged for stealing a porringer or two ells of linen. Fortunately the scheme of this work precluded hanging - for no sentimental cause, but for the sound practical reason that a woman with a broken neck cannot write her autobiography. Morality, too, must receive her dividends; and it would be a mistake to suppose that Defoe did not pay them in good faith, though a two-century shift of perspective does for us rather dim 'the beauty of the penitent part'. So, abjuring the past, Moll is transported to the New World, there to 'grow rich, live honest, and die a penitent'. The order of the first four words is significant.