

ROBINSON CRUSOE



DANIEL DEFOE

AMAZON CLASSICS

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CONTENTS

THE LIFE OF DEFOE

THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF ROBINSON CRUSOE

THE JOURNAL

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THE LIFE OF DEFOE

Daniel Defoe was descended from a respectable family in the county of Northampton, and born in London, about the year 1663. His father, James Foe, was a butcher, in the parish of St. Giles's, Cripplegate, and a protestant dissenter. Why the subject of this memoir prefixed the *De* to his family name cannot now be ascertained, nor did he at any period of his life think it necessary to give his reasons to the public. The political scribblers of the day, however, thought proper to remedy this lack of information, and accused him of possessing so little of the *amor patriae*, as to make the addition in order that he might not be taken for an Englishman; though this idea could have had no other foundation than the circumstance of his having, in consequence of his zeal for King William, attacked the prejudices of his countrymen in his "True-born Englishman."

After receiving a good education at an academy at Newington, young Defoe, before he had attained his twenty-first year, commenced his career as an author, by writing a pamphlet against a very prevailing sentiment in favour of the Turks who were at that time laying siege to Vienna. This production, being very inferior to those of his maturer years, was very little read, and the indignant author, despairing of success with his pen, had recourse to the sword; or, as he termed it, when boasting of the exploit in his latter years, "displayed his attachment to liberty, and protestantism," by joining the ill-advised insurrection under the Duke of Monmouth, in the west. On the failure of that unfortunate enterprise, he returned again to the metropolis; and it is not improbable, but that the circumstance of his being a native of London, and his person not much known in that part of the kingdom where the rebellion took

place, might facilitate his escape, and be the means of preventing his being brought to trial for his share in the transaction. With the professions of a writer and a soldier, Mr. Defoe, in the year 1685, joined that of a trader; he was first engaged as a hosier, in Cornhill, and afterwards as a maker of bricks and pantiles, near Tilbury Fort, in Essex; but in consequence of spending those hours in the hilarity of the tavern which he ought to have employed in the calculations of the counting-house, his commercial schemes proved unsuccessful; and in 1694 he was obliged to abscond from his creditors, not failing to attribute those misfortunes to the war and the severity of the times, which were doubtless owing to his own misconduct. It is much to his credit however, that after having been freed from his debts by composition, and being in prosperous circumstances from King William's favour, he voluntarily paid most of his creditors both the principal and interest of their claims. This is such an example of honesty as it would be unjust to Defoe and to the world to conceal. The amount of the sums thus paid must have been very considerable, as he afterwards feelingly mentions to Lord Haversham, who had reproached him with covetousness; "With a numerous family, and no helps but my own industry, I have forced my way through a sea of misfortunes, and reduced my debts, exclusive of composition, from seventeen thousand to less than five thousand pounds."

At the beginning of the year 1700, Mr. Defoe published a satire in verse, which excited very considerable attention, called the "True-born Englishman." Its purpose was to furnish a reply to those who were continually abusing King William and some of his friends as *foreigners*, by shewing that the present race of Englishmen was a mixed and heterogeneous brood, scarcely any of which could lay claim to native purity of blood. The satire was in many parts very severe; and though it gave high offence, it claimed a considerable share of the public attention. The reader will perhaps be gratified by a specimen of this production, wherein he endeavours to account for—

What makes this discontented land appear
Less happy now in times of peace, than war;
Why civil feuds disturb the nation more,
Than all our bloody wars had done before:

Fools out of favour grudge at knaves in place,
And men are always honest in disgrace:
The court preferments make men knaves in course,
But they, who would be in them, would be worse.
'Tis not at foreigners that we repine,
Would foreigners their perquisites resign:
The grand contention's plainly to be seen,
To get some men put out, and some put in.

It will be immediately perceived that Defoe could have no pretensions to the character of a *poet* ; but he has, notwithstanding, some nervous and well-versified lines, and in choice of subject and moral he is in general excellent. The "True-born Englishman" concludes thus:

Could but our ancestors retrieve their fate,
And see their offspring thus degenerate;
How we contend for birth and names unknown,
And build on their past actions, not our own;
They'd cancel records, and their tombs deface,
And openly disown the vile, degenerate race.
For fame of families is all a cheat;
'TIS PERSONAL VIRTUE ONLY MAKES US
GREAT.

For this defence of foreigners Defoe was amply rewarded by King William, who not only ordered him a pension, but as his opponents denominated it, appointed him *pamphlet-writer general to the court* ; an office for which he was peculiarly well calculated, possessing, with a strong mind and a ready wit, that kind of yielding conscience which allowed him to support the measures of his benefactors though convinced they were injurious to his country. Defoe now retired to Newington with his family, and for a short time lived at ease; but the death of his royal patron deprived him of a generous protector, and opened a scene of sorrow which probably embittered his future life.

He had always discovered a great inclination to engage in religious controversy, and the furious contest, civil and ecclesiastical, which ensued on the accession of Queen Anne, gave him an opportunity of

gratifying his favourite passion. He therefore published a tract entitled “The shortest Way with the Dissenters, or Proposals for the Establishment of the Church,” which contained an ironical recommendation of persecution, but written in so serious a strain, that many persons, particularly Dissenters, at first mistook its real intention. The high church party however saw, and felt the ridicule, and, by their influence, a prosecution was commenced against him, and a proclamation published in the Gazette, offering a reward for his apprehension ¹. When Defoe found with how much rigour himself and his pamphlet were about to be treated, he at first secreted himself; but his printer and bookseller being taken into custody, he surrendered, being resolved, as he expresses it, “to throw himself upon the favour of government, rather than that others should be ruined for his mistakes.” In July, 1703, he was brought to trial, found guilty, and sentenced to be imprisoned, to stand in the pillory, and to pay a fine of two hundred marks. He underwent the infamous part of the punishment with great fortitude, and it seems to have been generally thought that he was treated with unreasonable severity. So far was he from being ashamed of his fate himself, that he wrote a hymn to the pillory, which thus ends, alluding to his accusers:

Tell them, the men that plac’d him here
Are scandals to the times;
Are at a loss to find his guilt,
And can’t commit his crimes.

Pope, who has thought fit to introduce him in his *Dunciad* (probably from no other reason than party difference) characterises him in the following line:

Earless on high stood unabash’d Defoe.

This is one of those instances of injustice and malignity which so frequently occur in the *Dunciad*, and which reflect more dishonour on the author than on the parties traduced. Defoe lay friendless and distressed in Newgate, his family ruined, and himself without hopes of deliverance, till Sir Robert Harley, who approved of his principles, and

foresaw that during a factious age such a genius could be converted to many uses, represented his unmerited sufferings to the Queen, and at length procured his release. The treasurer, Lord Godolphin, also sent a considerable sum to his wife and family, and to him money to pay his fine and the expense of his discharge. Gratitude and fidelity are inseparable from an honest man; and it was this benevolent act that prompted Defoe to support Harley, with his able and ingenious pen, when Anne lay lifeless, and his benefactor in the vicissitude of party was persecuted by faction, and overpowered, though not conquered, by violence.

The talents and perseverance of Defoe began now to be properly estimated, and as a firm supporter of the administration, he was sent by Lord Godolphin to Scotland, on an errand which, as he says, was far from being unfit for a sovereign to direct, or an honest man to perform. His knowledge of commerce and revenue, his powers of insinuation, and above all, his readiness of pen, were deemed of no small utility, in promoting the union of the two kingdoms; of which he wrote an able history, in 1709, with two dedications, one to the Queen, and another to the Duke of Queensbury. Soon afterwards he unhappily, by some equivocal writings, rendered himself suspected by both parties, so that he once more retired to Newington in hopes of spending the remainder of his days in peace. His pension being withdrawn, and wearied with politics, he began to compose works of a different kind.—The year 1715 may therefore be regarded as the period of Defoe's political life. Faction henceforth found other advocates, and parties procured other writers to disseminate their suggestions, and to propagate their falsehoods.

In 1715 Defoe published the "Family Instructor;" a work inculcating the domestic duties in a lively manner, by narration and dialogue, and displaying much knowledge of life in the middle ranks of society. "Religious Courtship" also appeared soon after, which, like the "Family Instructor," is eminently religious and moral in its tendency, and strongly impresses on the mind that spirit of sobriety and private devotion for which the dissenters have generally been distinguished. The most celebrated of all his works, "The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe," appeared in 1719. This work has passed through numerous editions, and been translated into almost all modern languages. The great invention which is displayed in it, the variety of incidents and

circumstances which it contains, related in the most easy and natural manner, together with the excellency of the moral and religious reflections, render it a performance of very superior and uncommon merit, and one of the most interesting works that ever appeared. It is strongly recommended by Rosseau as a book admirably calculated to promote the purposes of natural education; and Dr. Blair says, "No fiction, in any language, was ever better supported than the 'Adventures of Robinson Crusoe.' While it is carried on with that appearance of truth and simplicity, which takes a strong hold of the imagination of all readers, it suggests, at the same time, very useful instruction; by shewing how much the native powers of man may be exerted for surmounting the difficulties of any external situation." It has been pretended, that Defoe surreptitiously appropriated the papers of Alexander Selkirk, a Scotch mariner, who lived four years alone on the island of Juan Fernandez, and a sketch of whose story had before appeared in the voyage of Captain Woodes Rogers. But this charge, though repeatedly and confidently brought, appears to be totally destitute of any foundation. Defoe probably took some general hints for his work from the story of Selkirk, but there exists no proof whatever, nor is it reasonable to suppose that he possessed any of his papers or memoirs, which had been published seven years before the appearance of Robinson Crusoe. As a farther proof of Defoe's innocence, Captain Rogers's Account of Selkirk may be produced, in which it is said that the latter had neither preserved pen, ink, or paper, and had, in a great measure, lost his language; consequently Defoe could not have received any written assistance, and we have only the assertion of his enemies to prove that he had any verbal.

The great success of Robinson Crusoe induced its author to write a number of other lives and adventures, some of which were popular in their times, though at present nearly forgotten. One of his latest publications was "A Tour through the Island of Great Britain," a performance of very inferior merit; but Defoe was now the garrulous old man, and his spirit (to use the words of an ingenious biographer) "like a candle struggling in the socket, blazed and sunk, blazed and sunk, till it disappeared at length in total darkness." His laborious and unfortunate life was finished on the 26th of April, 1731, in the parish of St. Giles's, Cripplegate.

Daniel Defoe possessed very extraordinary talents; as a commercial writer, he is fairly entitled to stand in the foremost rank among his contemporaries, whatever may be their performances or their fame. His distinguishing characteristics are originality, spirit, and a profound knowledge of his subject, and in these particulars he has seldom been surpassed. As the author of Robinson Crusoe he has a claim, not only to the admiration, but to the gratitude of his countrymen; and so long as we have a regard for supereminent merit, and take an interest in the welfare of the rising generation, that gratitude will not cease to exist. But the opinion of the learned and ingenious Dr. Beattie will be the best eulogium that can be pronounced on that celebrated romance: "Robinson Crusoe," says the Doctor, "must be allowed by the most rigid moralist, to be one of those novels which one may read, not only with pleasure, but also with profit. It breathes throughout a spirit of piety and benevolence; it sets in a very striking light the importance of the mechanic arts, which they, who know not what it is to be without them, are so apt to undervalue; it fixes in the mind a lively idea of the horrors of solitude, and, consequently, of the sweets of social life, and of the blessings we derive from conversation and mutual aid; and it shews, how, by labouring with one's own hands, one may secure independence, and open for one's self many sources of health and amusement. I agree, therefore, with Rosseau, that it is one of the best books that can be put into the hands of children."

G.D.

¹ St. James's, January 10, 1702-3. "Whereas Daniel Defoe, alias Defoe, is charged with writing a scandalous and seditious pamphlet, entitled 'The shortest Way with the Dissenters:' he is a middle-sized spare man, about 40 years old, of a brown complexion, and dark-brown coloured hair, but wears a wig, a hooked nose, a sharp chin, grey eyes, and a large mole near his mouth, was born in London, and for many years was a hose-factor, in Freeman's Yard, in Cornhill, and now is owner of the brick and pantile works near Tilbury Fort, in Essex; whoever shall discover the said Daniel Defoe, to one of her

Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State, or any of her Majesty's Justices of Peace, so as he may be apprehended, shall have a reward of £50. which her Majesty has ordered immediately to be paid upon such discovery." London Gaz. No. 3679.