

The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom

By

Tobias Smollett

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Introduction

The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom, Smollett's third novel, was given to the world in 1753. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, writing to her daughter, the Countess of Bute, over a year later [January 1st, 1755], remarked that "my friend Smollett . . . has certainly a talent for invention, though I think it flags a little in his last work." Lady Mary was both right and wrong. The inventive power which we commonly think of as Smollett's was the ability to work over his own experience into realistic fiction. Of this, Ferdinand Count Fathom shows comparatively little. It shows relatively little, too, of Smollett's vigorous personality, which in his earlier works was present to give life and interest to almost every chapter, were it to describe a street brawl, a ludicrous situation, a whimsical character, or with venomous prejudice to gibbet some enemy. This individuality--the peculiar spirit of the author which can be felt rather than described--is present in the dedication of Fathom to Doctor -----, who is no other than Smollett himself, and a candid revelation of his character, by the way, this dedication contains. It is present, too, in the opening chapters, which show, likewise, in the picture of Fathom's mother, something of the author's peculiar "talent for invention." Subsequently, however, there is no denying that the Smollett invention and the Smollett spirit both flag. And yet, in a way, Fathom displays more invention than any of the author's novels; it is based far less than any other on personal experience. Unfortunately such thorough-going invention was not suited to Smollett's genius. The result is, that while uninteresting as a novel of contemporary manners, Fathom has an interest of its own in that it reveals a new side of its author. We think of Smollett, generally, as a rambling storyteller, a rational, unromantic man of the world, who fills his pages with his own oddly-metamorphosed acquaintances and experiences. The Smollett of Count Fathom, on the contrary, is rather a forerunner of the romantic school, who has created a tolerably organic tale of adventure out of his own brain. Though this is notably less readable than the author's earlier works, still the wonder is that when the man is so far "off his beat," he should yet know so well how to meet the strange conditions which confront him. To one whose idea of Smollett's genius is formed entirely by Random and Pickle and Humphry Clinker, Ferdinand Count Fathom will offer many surprises.

The first of these is the comparative lifelessness of the book. True, here again are action and incident galore, but generally unaccompanied by that rough Georgian hurly-burly, common in Smollett, which is so interesting to contemplate from a comfortable distance, and which goes so far towards making his fiction seem real. Nor are the characters, for the most part, life-like enough to be interesting. There is an apparent exception, to be sure, in the hero's mother, already mentioned, the hardened camp-follower, whom we confidently expect to become vitalised after the savage fashion of Smollett's characters. But, alas! we have no chance to learn the lady's style of conversation, for the few words that come from her lips are but partially characteristic; we have only too little chance to learn her manners and customs. In the fourth chapter, while she is making sure with her dagger that all those on the field of battle whom she wishes to rifle

are really dead, an officer of the hussars, who has been watching her lucrative progress, unfeelingly puts a brace of bullets into the lady's brain, just as she raises her hand to smite him to the heart. Perhaps it is as well that she is thus removed before our disappointment at the non-fulfilment of her promise becomes poignant. So far as we may judge from the other personages of *Count Fathom*, even this interesting Amazon would sooner or later have turned into a wooden figure, with a label giving the necessary information as to her character.

Such certainly is her son, Fathom, the hero of the book. Because he is placarded, "Shrewd villain of monstrous inhumanity," we are fain to accept him for what his creator intended; but seldom in word or deed is he a convincingly real villain. His friend and foil, the noble young Count de Melvil, is no more alive than he; and equally wooden are Joshua, the high-minded, saint-like Jew, and that tedious, foolish Don Diego. Neither is the heroine alive, the peerless Monimia, but then, in her case, want of vitality is not surprising; the presence of it would amaze us. If she were a woman throbbing with life, she would be different from Smollett's other heroines. The "second lady" of the melodrama, Mademoiselle de Melvil, though by no means vivified, is yet more real than her sister-in-law.

The fact that they are mostly inanimate figures is not the only surprise given us by the personages of *Count Fathom*. It is a surprise to find few of them strikingly whimsical; it is a surprise to find them in some cases far more distinctly conceived than any of the people in *Roderick Random* or *Peregrine Pickle*. In the second of these, we saw Smollett beginning to understand the use of incident to indicate consistent development of character. In *Count Fathom*, he seems fully to understand this principle of art, though he has not learned to apply it successfully. And so, in spite of an excellent conception, *Fathom*, as I have said, is unreal. After all his villainies, which he perpetrates without any apparent qualms of conscience, it is incredible that he should honestly repent of his crimes. We are much inclined to doubt when we read that "his vice and ambition was now quite mortified within him," the subsequent testimony of Matthew Bramble, Esq., in *Humphry Clinker*, to the contrary, notwithstanding. Yet *Fathom* up to this point is consistently drawn, and drawn for a purpose:--to show that cold-blooded roguery, though successful for a while, will come to grief in the end. To heighten the effect of his scoundrel, Smollett develops parallel with him the virtuous Count de Melvil. The author's scheme of thus using one character as the foil of another, though not conspicuous for its originality, shows a decided advance in the theory of constructive technique. Only, as I have said, Smollett's execution is now defective.

"But," one will naturally ask, "if *Fathom* lacks the amusing, and not infrequently stimulating, hurly-burly of Smollett's former novels; if its characters, though well-conceived, are seldom divertingly fantastic and never thoroughly animate; what makes the book interesting?" The surprise will be greater than ever when the answer is given that, to a large extent, the plot makes *Fathom* interesting. Yes, Smollett, hitherto indifferent to structure, has here written a story in which the plot itself, often clumsy though it may be, engages a reader's attention. One actually

wants to know whether the young Count is ever going to receive consolation for his sorrows and inflict justice on his basely ungrateful pensioner. And when, finally, all turns out as it should, one is amazed to find how many of the people in the book have helped towards the designed conclusion. Not all of them, indeed, nor all of the adventures, are indispensable, but it is manifest at the end that much, which, for the time, most readers think irrelevant--such as Don Diego's history--is, after all, essential.

It has already been said that in *Count Fathom* Smollett appears to some extent as a romanticist, and this is another fact which lends interest to the book. That he had a powerful imagination is not a surprise. Any one versed in Smollett has already seen it in the remarkable situations which he has put before us in his earlier works. These do not indicate, however, that Smollett possessed the imagination which could excite romantic interest; for in *Roderick Random* and in *Peregrine Pickle*, the wonderful situations serve chiefly to amuse. In *Fathom*, however, there are some designed to excite horror; and one, at least, is eminently successful. The hero's night in the wood between *Bar-le-duc* and *Chalons* was no doubt more blood-curdling to our eighteenth-century ancestors than it is to us, who have become acquainted with scores of similar situations in the small number of exciting romances which belong to literature, and in the greater number which do not. Still, even to-day, a reader, with his taste jaded by trashy novels, will be conscious of Smollett's power, and of several thrills, likewise, as he reads about *Fathom's* experience in the loft in which the beldame locks him to pass the night.

This situation is melodramatic rather than romantic, as the word is used technically in application to eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature. There is no little in *Fathom*, however, which is genuinely romantic in the latter sense. Such is the imprisonment of the Countess in the castle-tower, whence she waves her handkerchief to the young Count, her son and would-be rescuer. And especially so is the scene in the church, when *Renaldo* (the very name is romantic) visits at midnight the supposed grave of his lady-love. While he was waiting for the sexton to open the door, his "soul . . . was wound up to the highest pitch of enthusiastic sorrow. The uncommon darkness, . . . the solemn silence, and lonely situation of the place, conspired with the occasion of his coming, and the dismal images of his fancy, to produce a real rapture of gloomy expectation, which the whole world could not have persuaded him to disappoint. The clock struck twelve, the owl screeched from the ruined battlement, the door was opened by the sexton, who, by the light of a glimmering taper, conducted the despairing lover to a dreary aisle, and stamped upon the ground with his foot, saying, 'Here the young lady lies interred.'"

We have here such an amount of the usual romantic machinery of the "grave-yard" school of poets--that school of which Professor W. L. Phelps calls Young, in his *Night Thoughts*, the most "conspicuous exemplar"-- that one is at first inclined to think Smollett poking fun at it. The context, however, seems to prove that he was perfectly serious. It is interesting, then, as well as surprising, to find traces of the romantic spirit in his fiction over ten years before *Walpole's Castle of Otranto*. It is also interesting to find so much melodramatic feeling in him,

because it makes stronger the connection between him and his nineteenth-century disciple, Dickens.

From all that I have said, it must not be thought that the usual Smollett is always, or almost always, absent from Count Fathom. I have spoken of the dedication and of the opening chapters as what we might expect from his pen. There are, besides, true Smollett strokes in the scenes in the prison from which Melvil rescues Fathom, and there is a good deal of the satirical Smollett fun in the description of Fathom's ups and downs, first as the petted beau, and then as the fashionable doctor. In chronicling the latter meteoric career, Smollett had already observed the peculiarity of his countrymen which Thackeray was fond of harping on in the next century--"the maxim which universally prevails among the English people . . . to overlook, . . . on their return to the metropolis, all the connexions they may have chanced to acquire during their residence at any of the medical wells. And this social disposition is so scrupulously maintained, that two persons who live in the most intimate correspondence at Bath or Tunbridge, shall, in four-and-twenty hours . . . meet in St. James's Park, without betraying the least token of recognition." And good, too, is the way in which, as Dr. Fathom goes rapidly down the social hill, he makes excuses for his declining splendour. His chariot was overturned "with a hideous crash" at such danger to himself, "that he did not believe he should ever hazard himself again in any sort of wheel carriage." He turned off his men for maids, because "men servants are generally impudent, lazy, debauched, or dishonest." To avoid the din of the street, he shifted his lodgings into a quiet, obscure court. And so forth and so on, in the true Smollett vein.

But, after all, such of the old sparks are struck only occasionally. Apart from its plot, which not a few nineteenth-century writers of detective-stories might have improved, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* is less interesting for itself than any other piece of fiction from Smollett's pen. For a student of Smollett, however, it is highly interesting as showing the author's romantic, melodramatic tendencies, and the growth of his constructive technique.

G. H. MAYNADIER

The Adventures Of Ferdinand Count Fathom

TO DOCTOR -----

You and I, my good friend, have often deliberated on the difficulty of writing such a dedication as might gratify the self-complacency of a patron, without exposing the author to the ridicule or censure of the public; and I think we generally agreed that the task was altogether impracticable.--Indeed, this was one of the few subjects on which we have always thought in the same manner. For, notwithstanding that deference and regard which we mutually pay to each other, certain it is, we have often differed, according to the predominancy of those different passions, which frequently warp the opinion, and perplex the understanding of the most judicious.

In dedication, as in poetry, there is no medium; for, if any one of the human virtues be omitted in the enumeration of the patron's good qualities, the whole address is construed into an affront, and the writer has the mortification to find his praise prostituted to very little purpose.

On the other hand, should he yield to the transports of gratitude or affection, which is always apt to exaggerate, and produce no more than the genuine effusions of his heart, the world will make no allowance for the warmth of his passion, but ascribe the praise he bestows to interested views and sordid adulation.

Sometimes too, dazzled by the tinsel of a character which he has no opportunity to investigate, he pours forth the homage of his admiration upon some false Maecenas, whose future conduct gives the lie to his eulogium, and involves him in shame and confusion of face. Such was the fate of a late ingenious author [the Author of the "Seasons"], who was so often put to the blush for the undeserved incense he had offered in the heat of an enthusiastic disposition, misled by popular applause, that he had resolved to retract, in his last will, all the encomiums which he had thus prematurely bestowed, and stigmatise the unworthy by name--a laudable scheme of poetical justice, the execution of which was fatally prevented by untimely death.

Whatever may have been the fate of other dedicators, I, for my own part, sit down to write this address, without any apprehension of disgrace or disappointment; because I know you are too well convinced of my affection and sincerity to repine at what I shall say touching your character and conduct. And you will do me the justice to believe, that this public distinction is a testimony of my particular friendship and esteem.

Not that I am either insensible of your infirmities, or disposed to conceal them from the notice of mankind. There are certain foibles which can only be cured by shame and mortification; and whether or not yours be of that species, I shall have the comfort to think my best endeavours were used for your reformation.

Know then, I can despise your pride, while I honour your integrity, and applaud your taste, while I am shocked at your ostentation.--I have known you trifling, superficial, and obstinate in dispute; meanly jealous and awkwardly reserved; rash and haughty in your resentments; and coarse and lowly in your connexions. I have blushed at the weakness of your conversation, and trembled at the errors

of your conduct--yet, as I own you possess certain good qualities, which overbalance these defects, and distinguish you on this occasion as a person for whom I have the most perfect attachment and esteem, you have no cause to complain of the indelicacy with which your faults are reprehended. And as they are chiefly the excesses of a sanguine disposition and looseness of thought, impatient of caution or control, you may, thus stimulated, watch over your own intemperance and infirmity with redoubled vigilance and consideration, and for the future profit by the severity of my reproof.

These, however, are not the only motives that induce me to trouble you with this public application. I must not only perform my duty to my friends, but also discharge the debt I owe to my own interest. We live in a censorious age; and an author cannot take too much precaution to anticipate the prejudice, misapprehension, and temerity of malice, ignorance, and presumption.

I therefore think it incumbent upon me to give some previous intimation of the plan which I have executed in the subsequent performance, that I may not be condemned upon partial evidence; and to whom can I with more propriety appeal in my explanation than to you, who are so well acquainted with all the sentiments and emotions of my breast?

A novel is a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups, and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purposes of an uniform plan, and general occurrence, to which every individual figure is subservient. But this plan cannot be executed with propriety, probability, or success, without a principal personage to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene, by virtue of his own importance.

Almost all the heroes of this kind, who have hitherto succeeded on the English stage, are characters of transcendent worth, conducted through the vicissitudes of fortune, to that goal of happiness, which ever ought to be the repose of extraordinary desert.--Yet the same principle by which we rejoice at the remuneration of merit, will teach us to relish the disgrace and discomfiture of vice, which is always an example of extensive use and influence, because it leaves a deep impression of terror upon the minds of those who were not confirmed in the pursuit of morality and virtue, and, while the balance wavers, enables the right scale to preponderate.

In the drama, which is a more limited field of invention, the chief personage is often the object of our detestation and abhorrence; and we are as well pleased to see the wicked schemes of a Richard blasted, and the perfidy of a Maskwell exposed, as to behold a Bevil happy, and an Edward victorious.

The impulses of fear, which is the most violent and interesting of all the passions, remain longer than any other upon the memory; and for one that is allured to virtue, by the contemplation of that peace and happiness which it bestows, a hundred are deterred from the practice of vice, by that infamy and punishment to which it is liable, from the laws and regulations of mankind.

Let me not, therefore, be condemned for having chosen my principal character from the purlieus of treachery and fraud, when I declare my purpose is to set him

up as a beacon for the benefit of the unexperienced and unwary, who, from the perusal of these memoirs, may learn to avoid the manifold snares with which they are continually surrounded in the paths of life; while those who hesitate on the brink of iniquity may be terrified from plunging into that irremediable gulf, by surveying the deplorable fate of Ferdinand Count Fathom.

That the mind might not be fatigued, nor the imagination disgusted, by a succession of vicious objects, I have endeavoured to refresh the attention with occasional incidents of a different nature; and raised up a virtuous character, in opposition to the adventurer, with a view to amuse the fancy, engage the affection, and form a striking contrast which might heighten the expression, and give a relief to the moral of the whole.

If I have not succeeded in my endeavours to unfold the mysteries of fraud, to instruct the ignorant, and entertain the vacant; if I have failed in my attempts to subject folly to ridicule, and vice to indignation; to rouse the spirit of mirth, wake the soul of compassion, and touch the secret springs that move the heart; I have, at least, adorned virtue with honour and applause, branded iniquity with reproach and shame, and carefully avoided every hint or expression which could give umbrage to the most delicate reader--circumstances which (whatever may be my fate with the public) will with you always operate in favour of,

Dear sir, your very affectionate friend and servant,
THE AUTHOR

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