

**SAMUEL
JOHNSON**

RASSELAS,
PRINCE OF
ABYSSINIA

Samuel Johnson

Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia

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Содержание

INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER I	7
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	11
CHAPTER IV	12
CHAPTER V	14
CHAPTER VI	15
CHAPTER VII	17
CHAPTER VIII	18
CHAPTER IX	20
CHAPTER X	22
CHAPTER XI	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	25

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INTRODUCTION

Rasselas was written by Samuel Johnson in the year 1759, when his age was fifty. He had written his *London* in 1738; his *Vanity of Human Wishes* in 1740; his *Rambler* between March, 1750, and March, 1752. In 1755 his *Dictionary* had appeared, and Dublin, by giving him its honorary LL.D., had enabled his friends to call him “Doctor” Johnson. His friends were many, and his honour among men was great. He owed them to his union of intellectual power with unflinching probity.

But he had worked hard, battling against the wolf without, and the black dog within—poverty and hypochondria. He was still poor, though his personal wants did not exceed a hundred pounds a year.

His wife had been seven years dead, and he missed her sorely. His old mother, who lived to the age of ninety, died poor in January of this year, 1759. In her old age, Johnson had sought to help her from his earnings. At her death there were some little debts, and there were costs of burial. That he might earn enough to pay them he wrote *Rasselas*.

Rasselas was written in the evenings of one week, and sent to press while being written. Johnson earned by it a hundred pounds, with twenty-five pounds more for a second edition. It was published in March or April; Johnson never read it after it had been published until more than twenty years afterwards. Then, finding it in a chaise with Boswell, he took it up and read it eagerly.

This is one of Johnson’s letters to his mother, written after he knew that her last illness had come upon her. It is dated about ten days before her death. The “Miss” referred to in it was a faithful friend. “Miss” was his home name for an affectionate step-daughter, Lucy Porter:—

“Honoured Madam,—

“The account which Miss gives me of your health pierces my heart. God comfort and preserve you, and save you, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

“I would have Miss read to you from time to time the Passion of our Saviour; and sometimes the sentences in the Communion Service beginning—‘Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’

“I have just now read a physical book which inclines me to think that a strong infusion of the bark would do you good. Do, dear mother, try it.

“Pray, send me your blessing, and forgive all that I have done amiss to you.

And whatever you would have done, and what debts you would have paid first, or anything else that you would direct, let Miss put it down; I shall endeavour to obey you.

“I have got twelve guineas to send you” [six were borrowed. There was a note in Johnson’s Diary of six guineas repaid to Allen, the printer, who had lent them when he wanted to send money to his dying mother], “but unhappily am at a loss how to send it to-night. If I cannot send it to-night, it will come by the next post.

“Pray, do not omit anything mentioned in this letter. God bless you for ever and ever.

“I am,

“Your dutiful Son,

“Sam. Johnson.

“Jan. 13, 1759.”

That is the personal side of the tale of *Rasselas*. In that way Johnson suddenly, on urgent pressure, carried out a design that had been in his mind. The success of Eastern tales, written as a form of moral essay, in the *Rambler* and *Adventurer*, upon suggestion, no doubt, of Addison's *Vision of Mirza*, had prompted him to express his view of life more fully than in essay form by way of Oriental apologue; and his early work on Father Lobo's Voyage to Abyssinia, caused him to choose Abyssinia for the land in which to lay his fable.

But Johnson's *Rasselas* has also a close relation to the time when it was written, as Johnson himself had to the time in which he lived. From the beginning of the century—and especially, in England, since the beginning of the reign of George the Second—there had been a growing sense of the ills of life, associated in some minds with doubt whether there could be a just God ruling this unhappy world. Hard problems of humanity pressed more and more on earnest minds. The feeling expressed in Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes* had deepened everywhere by the year 1759. This has intense expression in *Rasselas*, where all the joys of life, without active use of the energies of life, can give no joy; and where all uses of the energies of men are for the attainment of ideals worthless or delusive. This life was to Johnson, and to almost all the earnest thinkers of his time, unhappy in itself—a school-house where the rod was ever active. But in its unhappiness Johnson found no power that could overthrow his faith. To him this world was but a place of education for the happiness that would be to the faithful in the world to come. There was a great dread for him in the question, Who shall be found faithful? But there was no doubt in his mind that the happiness of man is to be found only beyond the grave. This was a feeling spread through Europe in the darkness gathering before the outburst of the storm of the great French Revolution. Even Gray, in his *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, regarded Eton boys at their sports as “little victims,” unconscious of the doom of miseries awaiting them in life. Thus Johnson's *Rasselas* is a book doubly typical. We have in it the spirit of the writer when it best expressed the spirit of his time.

H. M.

CHAPTER I

DESCRIPTION OF A PALACE IN A VALLEY

Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow, attend to the history of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia.

Rasselas was the fourth son of the mighty Emperor in whose dominions the father of waters begins his course—whose bounty pours down the streams of plenty, and scatters over the world the harvests of Egypt.

According to the custom which has descended from age to age among the monarchs of the torrid zone, Rasselas was confined in a private palace, with the other sons and daughters of Abyssinian royalty, till the order of succession should call him to the throne.

The place which the wisdom or policy of antiquity had destined for the residence of the Abyssinian princes was a spacious valley in the kingdom of Amhara, surrounded on every side by mountains, of which the summits overhang the middle part. The only passage by which it could be entered was a cavern that passed under a rock, of which it had long been disputed whether it was the work of nature or of human industry. The outlet of the cavern was concealed by a thick wood, and the mouth which opened into the valley was closed with gates of iron, forged by the artificers of ancient days, so massive that no man, without the help of engines, could open or shut them.

From the mountains on every side rivulets descended that filled all the valley with verdure and fertility, and formed a lake in the middle, inhabited by fish of every species, and frequented by every fowl whom nature has taught to dip the wing in water. This lake discharged its superfluities by a stream, which entered a dark cleft of the mountain on the northern side, and fell with dreadful noise from precipice to precipice till it was heard no more.

The sides of the mountains were covered with trees, the banks of the brooks were diversified with flowers; every blast shook spices from the rocks, and every month dropped fruits upon the ground. All animals that bite the grass or browse the shrubs, whether wild or tame, wandered in this extensive circuit, secured from beasts of prey by the mountains which confined them. On one part were flocks and herds feeding in the pastures, on another all the beasts of chase frisking in the lawns, the sprightly kid was bounding on the rocks, the subtle monkey frolicking in the trees, and the solemn elephant reposing in the shade. All the diversities of the world were brought together, the blessings of nature were collected, and its evils extracted and excluded.

The valley, wide and fruitful, supplied its inhabitants with all the necessaries of life, and all delights and superfluities were added at the annual visit which the Emperor paid his children, when the iron gate was opened to the sound of music, and during eight days every one that resided in the valley was required to propose whatever might contribute to make seclusion pleasant, to fill up the vacancies of attention, and lessen the tediousness of time. Every desire was immediately granted.

All the artificers of pleasure were called to gladden the festivity; the musicians exerted the power of harmony, and the dancers showed their activity before the princes, in hopes that they should pass their lives in blissful captivity, to which those only were admitted whose performance was thought able to add novelty to luxury. Such was the appearance of security and delight which this retirement afforded, that they to whom it was new always desired that it might be perpetual; and as those on whom the iron gate had once closed were never suffered to return, the effect of longer experience could not be known. Thus every year produced new scenes of delight, and new competitors for imprisonment.

The palace stood on an eminence, raised about thirty paces above the surface of the lake. It was divided into many squares or courts, built with greater or less magnificence according to the rank of those for whom they were designed. The roofs were turned into arches of massive stone, joined

by a cement that grew harder by time, and the building stood from century to century, deriding the solstitial rains and equinoctial hurricanes, without need of reparation.

This house, which was so large as to be fully known to none but some ancient officers, who successively inherited the secrets of the place, was built as if Suspicion herself had dictated the plan.

To every room there was an open and secret passage; every square had a communication with the rest, either from the upper storeys by private galleries, or by subterraneous passages from the lower apartments. Many of the columns had unsuspected cavities, in which a long race of monarchs had deposited their treasures. They then closed up the opening with marble, which was never to be removed but in the utmost exigences of the kingdom, and recorded their accumulations in a book, which was itself concealed in a tower, not entered but by the Emperor, attended by the prince who stood next in succession.

CHAPTER II

THE DISCONTENT OF RASSELAS IN THE HAPPY VALLEY

Here the sons and daughters of Abyssinia lived only to know the soft vicissitudes of pleasure and repose, attended by all that were skilful to delight, and gratified with whatever the senses can enjoy. They wandered in gardens of fragrance, and slept in the fortresses of security. Every art was practised to make them pleased with their own condition. The sages who instructed them told them of nothing but the miseries of public life, and described all beyond the mountains as regions of calamity, where discord was always raging, and where man preyed upon man. To heighten their opinion of their own felicity, they were daily entertained with songs, the subject of which was the Happy Valley.

Their appetites were excited by frequent enumerations of different enjoyments, and revelry and merriment were the business of every hour, from the dawn of morning to the close of the evening.

These methods were generally successful; few of the princes had ever wished to enlarge their bounds, but passed their lives in full conviction that they had all within their reach that art or nature could bestow, and pitied those whom nature had excluded from this seat of tranquillity as the sport of chance and the slaves of misery.

Thus they rose in the morning and lay down at night, pleased with each other and with themselves, all but Rasselas, who, in the twenty-sixth year of his age, began to withdraw himself from the pastimes and assemblies, and to delight in solitary walks and silent meditation. He often sat before tables covered with luxury, and forgot to taste the dainties that were placed before him; he rose abruptly in the midst of the song, and hastily retired beyond the sound of music. His attendants observed the change, and endeavoured to renew his love of pleasure. He neglected their officiousness, repulsed their invitations, and spent day after day on the banks of rivulets sheltered with trees, where he sometimes listened to the birds in the branches, sometimes observed the fish playing in the streams, and anon cast his eyes upon the pastures and mountains filled with animals, of which some were biting the herbage, and some sleeping among the bushes. The singularity of his humour made him much observed. One of the sages, in whose conversation he had formerly delighted, followed him secretly, in hope of discovering the cause of his disquiet. Rasselas, who knew not that any one was near him, having for some time fixed his eyes upon the goats that were browsing among the rocks, began to compare their condition with his own.

“What,” said he, “makes the difference between man and all the rest of the animal creation?”

Every beast that strays beside me has the same corporal necessities with myself: he is hungry, and crops the grass; he is thirsty, and drinks the stream; his thirst and hunger are appeased; he is satisfied, and sleeps; he rises again, and is hungry; he is again fed, and is at rest. I am hungry and thirsty, like him, but when thirst and hunger cease, I am not at rest. I am, like him, pained with want, but am not, like him, satisfied with fulness. The intermediate hours are tedious and gloomy; I long again to be hungry that I may again quicken the attention. The birds peck the berries or the corn, and fly away to the groves, where they sit in seeming happiness on the branches, and waste their lives in tuning one unvaried series of sounds. I likewise can call the lutist and the singer; but the sounds that pleased me yesterday weary me to-day, and will grow yet more wearisome to-morrow. I can discover in me no power of perception which is not glutted with its proper pleasure, yet I do not feel myself delighted.

Man surely has some latent sense for which this place affords no gratification; or he has some desire distinct from sense, which must be satisfied before he can be happy.”

After this he lifted up his head, and seeing the moon rising, walked towards the palace. As he passed through the fields, and saw the animals around him, “Ye,” said he, “are happy, and need not envy me that walk thus among you, burdened with myself; nor do I, ye gentle beings, envy your

felicity; for it is not the felicity of man. I have many distresses from which you are free; I fear pain when I do not feel it; I sometimes shrink at evils recollected, and sometimes start at evils anticipated: surely the equity of Providence has balanced peculiar sufferings with peculiar enjoyments.”

With observations like these the Prince amused himself as he returned, uttering them with a plaintive voice, yet with a look that discovered him to feel some complacence in his own perspicacity, and to receive some solace of the miseries of life from consciousness of the delicacy with which he felt and the eloquence with which he bewailed them. He mingled cheerfully in the diversions of the evening, and all rejoiced to find that his heart was lightened.

CHAPTER III

THE WANTS OF HIM THAT WANTS NOTHING

On the next day, his old instructor, imagining that he had now made himself acquainted with his disease of mind, was in hope of curing it by counsel, and officiously sought an opportunity of conference, which the Prince, having long considered him as one whose intellects were exhausted, was not very willing to afford. “Why,” said he, “does this man thus intrude upon me? Shall I never be suffered to forget these lectures, which pleased only while they were new, and to become new again must be forgotten?” He then walked into the wood, and composed himself to his usual meditations; when, before his thoughts had taken any settled form, he perceived his pursuer at his side, and was at first prompted by his impatience to go hastily away; but being unwilling to offend a man whom he had once revered and still loved, he invited him to sit down with him on the bank.

The old man, thus encouraged, began to lament the change which had been lately observed in the Prince, and to inquire why he so often retired from the pleasures of the palace to loneliness and silence. “I fly from pleasure,” said the Prince, “because pleasure has ceased to please: I am lonely because I am miserable, and am unwilling to cloud with my presence the happiness of others.”

“You, sir,” said the sage, “are the first who has complained of misery in the Happy Valley. I hope to convince you that your complaints have no real cause. You are here in full possession of all the Emperor of Abyssinia can bestow; here is neither labour to be endured nor danger to be dreaded, yet here is all that labour or danger can procure or purchase. Look round and tell me which of your wants is without supply: if you want nothing, how are you unhappy?”

“That I want nothing,” said the Prince, “or that I know not what I want, is the cause of my complaint: if I had any known want, I should have a certain wish; that wish would excite endeavour, and I should not then repine to see the sun move so slowly towards the western mountains, or to lament when the day breaks, and sleep will no longer hide me from myself. When I see the kids and the lambs chasing one another, I fancy that I should be happy if I had something to pursue. But, possessing all that I can want, I find one day and one hour exactly like another, except that the latter is still more tedious than the former. Let your experience inform me how the day may now seem as short as in my childhood, while nature was yet fresh, and every moment showed me what I never had observed before. I have already enjoyed too much: give me something to desire.” The old man was surprised at this new species of affliction, and knew not what to reply, yet was unwilling to be silent. “Sir,” said he, “if you had seen the miseries of the world, you would know how to value your present state.” “Now,” said the Prince, “you have given me something to desire. I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness.”

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCE CONTINUES TO GRIEVE AND MUSE

At this time the sound of music proclaimed the hour of repast, and the conversation was concluded. The old man went away sufficiently discontented to find that his reasonings had produced the only conclusion which they were intended to prevent. But in the decline of life, shame and grief are of short duration: whether it be that we bear easily what we have borne long; or that, finding ourselves in age less regarded, we less regard others; or that we look with slight regard upon afflictions to which we know that the hand of death is about to put an end.

The Prince, whose views were extended to a wider space, could not speedily quiet his emotions. He had been before terrified at the length of life which nature promised him, because he considered that in a long time much must be endured: he now rejoiced in his youth, because in many years much might be done. The first beam of hope that had been ever darted into his mind rekindled youth in his cheeks, and doubled the lustre of his eyes. He was fired with the desire of doing something, though he knew not yet, with distinctness, either end or means. He was now no longer gloomy and unsocial; but considering himself as master of a secret stock of happiness, which he could only enjoy by concealing it, he affected to be busy in all the schemes of diversion, and endeavoured to make others pleased with the state of which he himself was weary. But pleasures can never be so multiplied or continued as not to leave much of life unemployed; there were many hours, both of the night and day, which he could spend without suspicion in solitary thought. The load of life was much lightened; he went eagerly into the assemblies, because he supposed the frequency of his presence necessary to the success of his purposes; he retired gladly to privacy, because he had now a subject of thought.

His chief amusement was to picture to himself that world which he had never seen, to place himself in various conditions, to be entangled in imaginary difficulties, and to be engaged in wild adventures; but, his benevolence always terminated his projects in the relief of distress, the detection of fraud, the defeat of oppression, and the diffusion of happiness.

Thus passed twenty months of the life of Rasselas. He busied himself so intensely in visionary bustle that he forgot his real solitude; and amidst hourly preparations for the various incidents of human affairs, neglected to consider by what means he should mingle with mankind.

One day, as he was sitting on a bank, he feigned to himself an orphan virgin robbed of her little portion by a treacherous lover, and crying after him for restitution. So strongly was the image impressed upon his mind that he started up in the maid's defence, and ran forward to seize the plunderer with all the eagerness of real pursuit. Fear naturally quickens the flight of guilt. Rasselas could not catch the fugitive with his utmost efforts; but, resolving to weary by perseverance him whom he could not surpass in speed, he pressed on till the foot of the mountain stopped his course.

Here he recollected himself, and smiled at his own useless impetuosity. Then raising his eyes to the mountain, "This," said he, "is the fatal obstacle that hinders at once the enjoyment of pleasure and the exercise of virtue. How long is it that my hopes and wishes have flown beyond this boundary of my life, which yet I never have attempted to surmount?"

Struck with this reflection, he sat down to muse, and remembered that since he first resolved to escape from his confinement, the sun had passed twice over him in his annual course. He now felt a degree of regret with which he had never been before acquainted. He considered how much might have been done in the time which had passed, and left nothing real behind it. He compared twenty months with the life of man. "In life," said he, "is not to be counted the ignorance of infancy or imbecility of age. We are long before we are able to think, and we soon cease from the power of acting. The true period of human existence may be reasonably estimated at forty years, of which

I have mused away the four-and-twentieth part. What I have lost was certain, for I have certainly possessed it; but of twenty months to come, who can assure me?"

The consciousness of his own folly pierced him deeply, and he was long before he could be reconciled to himself. "The rest of my time," said he, "has been lost by the crime or folly of my ancestors, and the absurd institutions of my country; I remember it with disgust, yet without remorse: but the months that have passed since new light darted into my soul, since I formed a scheme of reasonable felicity, have been squandered by my own fault. I have lost that which can never be restored; I have seen the sun rise and set for twenty months, an idle gazer on the light of heaven; in this time the birds have left the nest of their mother, and committed themselves to the woods and to the skies; the kid has forsaken the teat, and learned by degrees to climb the rocks in quest of independent sustenance. I only have made no advances, but am still helpless and ignorant. The moon, by more than twenty changes, admonished me of the flux of life; the stream that rolled before my feet upbraided my inactivity. I sat feasting on intellectual luxury, regardless alike of the examples of the earth and the instructions of the planets. Twenty months are passed: who shall restore them?"

These sorrowful meditations fastened upon his mind; he passed four months in resolving to lose no more time in idle resolves, and was awakened to more vigorous exertion by hearing a maid, who had broken a porcelain cup, remark that what cannot be repaired is not to be regretted.

This was obvious; and Rasselas reproached himself that he had not discovered it—having not known, or not considered, how many useful hints are obtained by chance, and how often the mind, hurried by her own ardour to distant views, neglects the truths that lie open before her. He for a few hours regretted his regret, and from that time bent his whole mind upon the means of escaping from the Valley of Happiness.

CHAPTER V

THE PRINCE MEDITATES HIS ESCAPE

He now found that it would be very difficult to effect that which it was very easy to suppose effected. When he looked round about him, he saw himself confined by the bars of nature, which had never yet been broken, and by the gate through which none that had once passed it were ever able to return. He was now impatient as an eagle in a grate. He passed week after week in clambering the mountains to see if there was any aperture which the bushes might conceal, but found all the summits inaccessible by their prominence. The iron gate he despaired to open for it was not only secured with all the power of art, but was always watched by successive sentinels, and was, by its position, exposed to the perpetual observation of all the inhabitants.

He then examined the cavern through which the waters of the lake were discharged; and, looking down at a time when the sun shone strongly upon its mouth, he discovered it to be full of broken rocks, which, though they permitted the stream to flow through many narrow passages, would stop any body of solid bulk. He returned discouraged and dejected; but having now known the blessing of hope, resolved never to despair.

In these fruitless researches he spent ten months. The time, however, passed cheerfully away—in the morning he rose with new hope; in the evening applauded his own diligence; and in the night slept soundly after his fatigue. He met a thousand amusements, which beguiled his labour and diversified his thoughts. He discerned the various instincts of animals and properties of plants, and found the place replete with wonders, of which he proposed to solace himself with the contemplation if he should never be able to accomplish his flight—rejoicing that his endeavours, though yet unsuccessful, had supplied him with a source of inexhaustible inquiry. But his original curiosity was not yet abated; he resolved to obtain some knowledge of the ways of men. His wish still continued, but his hope grew less. He ceased to survey any longer the walls of his prison, and spared to search by new toils for interstices which he knew could not be found, yet determined to keep his design always in view, and lay hold on any expedient that time should offer.

CHAPTER VI

A DISSERTATION ON THE ART OF FLYING

Among the artists that had been allured into the Happy Valley, to labour for the accommodation and pleasure of its inhabitants, was a man eminent for his knowledge of the mechanic powers, who had contrived many engines both of use and recreation. By a wheel which the stream turned he forced the water into a tower, whence it was distributed to all the apartments of the palace. He erected a pavilion in the garden, around which he kept the air always cool by artificial showers. One of the groves, appropriated to the ladies, was ventilated by fans, to which the rivulets that ran through it gave a constant motion; and instruments of soft music were played at proper distances, of which some played by the impulse of the wind, and some by the power of the stream.

This artist was sometimes visited by Rasselas who was pleased with every kind of knowledge, imagining that the time would come when all his acquisitions should be of use to him in the open world. He came one day to amuse himself in his usual manner, and found the master busy in building a sailing chariot. He saw that the design was practicable upon a level surface, and with expressions of great esteem solicited its completion. The workman was pleased to find himself so much regarded by the Prince, and resolved to gain yet higher honours. “Sir,” said he, “you have seen but a small part of what the mechanic sciences can perform. I have been long of opinion that, instead of the tardy conveyance of ships and chariots, man might use the swifter migration of wings, that the fields of air are open to knowledge, and that only ignorance and idleness need crawl upon the ground.”

This hint rekindled the Prince’s desire of passing the mountains. Having seen what the mechanist had already performed, he was willing to fancy that he could do more, yet resolved to inquire further before he suffered hope to afflict him by disappointment. “I am afraid,” said he to the artist, “that your imagination prevails over your skill, and that you now tell me rather what you wish than what you know. Every animal has his element assigned him; the birds have the air, and man and beasts the earth.” “So,” replied the mechanist, “fishes have the water, in which yet beasts can swim by nature and man by art. He that can swim needs not despair to fly; to swim is to fly in a grosser fluid, and to fly is to swim in a subtler. We are only to proportion our power of resistance to the different density of matter through which we are to pass. You will be necessarily up-borne by the air if you can renew any impulse upon it faster than the air can recede from the pressure.”

“But the exercise of swimming,” said the Prince, “is very laborious; the strongest limbs are soon wearied. I am afraid the act of flying will be yet more violent; and wings will be of no great use unless we can fly further than we can swim.”

“The labour of rising from the ground,” said the artist, “will be great, as we see it in the heavier domestic fowls; but as we mount higher the earth’s attraction and the body’s gravity will be gradually diminished, till we shall arrive at a region where the man shall float in the air without any tendency to fall; no care will then be necessary but to move forward, which the gentlest impulse will effect. You, sir, whose curiosity is so extensive, will easily conceive with what pleasure a philosopher, furnished with wings and hovering in the sky, would see the earth and all its inhabitants rolling beneath him, and presenting to him successively, by its diurnal motion, all the countries within the same parallel.

How must it amuse the pendent spectator to see the moving scene of land and ocean, cities and deserts; to survey with equal security the marts of trade and the fields of battle; mountains infested by barbarians, and fruitful regions gladdened by plenty and lulled by peace. How easily shall we then trace the Nile through all his passages, pass over to distant regions, and examine the face of nature from one extremity of the earth to the other.”

“All this,” said the Prince, “is much to be desired, but I am afraid that no man will be able to breathe in these regions of speculation and tranquillity. I have been told that respiration is difficult

upon lofty mountains, yet from these precipices, though so high as to produce great tenuity of air, it is very easy to fall; therefore I suspect that from any height where life can be supported, there may be danger of too quick descent.”

“Nothing,” replied the artist, “will ever be attempted if all possible objections must be first overcome. If you will favour my project, I will try the first flight at my own hazard. I have considered the structure of all volant animals, and find the folding continuity of the bat’s wings most easily accommodated to the human form. Upon this model I shall begin my task to-morrow, and in a year expect to tower into the air beyond the malice and pursuit of man. But I will work only on this condition, that the art shall not be divulged, and that you shall not require me to make wings for any but ourselves.”

“Why,” said Rasselas, “should you envy others so great an advantage? All skill ought to be exerted for universal good; every man has owed much to others, and ought to repay the kindness that he has received.”

“If men were all virtuous,” returned the artist, “I should with great alacrity teach them to fly. But what would be the security of the good if the bad could at pleasure invade them from the sky? Against an army sailing through the clouds neither walls, mountains, nor seas could afford security. A flight of northern savages might hover in the wind and light with irresistible violence upon the capital of a fruitful region. Even this valley, the retreat of princes, the abode of happiness, might be violated by the sudden descent of some of the naked nations that swarm on the coast of the southern sea!”

The Prince promised secrecy, and waited for the performance, not wholly hopeless of success.

He visited the work from time to time, observed its progress, and remarked many ingenious contrivances to facilitate motion and unite levity with strength. The artist was every day more certain that he should leave vultures and eagles behind him, and the contagion of his confidence seized upon the Prince. In a year the wings were finished; and on a morning appointed the maker appeared, furnished for flight, on a little promontory; he waved his pinions awhile to gather air, then leaped from his stand, and in an instant dropped into the lake. His wings, which were of no use in the air, sustained him in the water; and the Prince drew him to land half dead with terror and vexation.

CHAPTER VII

THE PRINCE FINDS A MAN OF LEARNING

The Prince was not much afflicted by this disaster, having suffered himself to hope for a happier event only because he had no other means of escape in view. He still persisted in his design to leave the Happy Valley by the first opportunity.

His imagination was now at a stand; he had no prospect of entering into the world, and, notwithstanding all his endeavours to support himself, discontent by degrees preyed upon him, and he began again to lose his thoughts in sadness when the rainy season, which in these countries is periodical, made it inconvenient to wander in the woods.

The rain continued longer and with more violence than had ever been known; the clouds broke on the surrounding mountains, and the torrents streamed into the plain on every side, till the cavern was too narrow to discharge the water. The lake overflowed its banks, and all the level of the valley was covered with the inundation. The eminence on which the palace was built, and some other spots of rising ground, were all that the eye could now discover. The herds and flocks left the pasture, and both the wild beasts and the tame retreated to the mountains.

This inundation confined all the princes to domestic amusements, and the attention of Rasselas was particularly seized by a poem (which Imlac rehearsed) upon the various conditions of humanity.

He commanded the poet to attend him in his apartment, and recite his verses a second time; then entering into familiar talk, he thought himself happy in having found a man who knew the world so well, and could so skilfully paint the scenes of life. He asked a thousand questions about things to which, though common to all other mortals, his confinement from childhood had kept him a stranger.

The poet pitied his ignorance, and loved his curiosity, and entertained him from day to day with novelty and instruction so that the Prince regretted the necessity of sleep, and longed till the morning should renew his pleasure.

As they were sitting together, the Prince commanded Imlac to relate his history, and to tell by what accident he was forced, or by what motive induced, to close his life in the Happy Valley.

As he was going to begin his narrative, Rasselas was called to a concert, and obliged to restrain his curiosity till the evening.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HISTORY OF IMLAC

The close of the day is, in the regions of the torrid zone, the only season of diversion and entertainment, and it was therefore midnight before the music ceased and the princesses retired.

Rasselas then called for his companion, and required him to begin the story of his life.

“Sir,” said Imlac, “my history will not be long: the life that is devoted to knowledge passes silently away, and is very little diversified by events. To talk in public, to think in solitude, to read and to hear, to inquire and answer inquiries, is the business of a scholar. He wanders about the world without pomp or terror, and is neither known nor valued but by men like himself.

“I was born in the kingdom of Goiama, at no great distance from the fountain of the Nile. My father was a wealthy merchant, who traded between the inland countries of Africa and the ports of the Red Sea. He was honest, frugal, and diligent, but of mean sentiments and narrow comprehension; he desired only to be rich, and to conceal his riches, lest he should be spoiled by the governors of the province.”

“Surely,” said the Prince, “my father must be negligent of his charge if any man in his dominions dares take that which belongs to another. Does he not know that kings are accountable for injustice permitted as well as done? If I were Emperor, not the meanest of my subjects should be oppressed with impunity. My blood boils when I am told that a merchant durst not enjoy his honest gains for fear of losing them by the rapacity of power. Name the governor who robbed the people that I may declare his crimes to the Emperor!”

“Sir,” said Imlac, “your ardour is the natural effect of virtue animated by youth. The time will come when you will acquit your father, and perhaps hear with less impatience of the governor. Oppression is, in the Abyssinian dominions, neither frequent nor tolerated; but no form of government has been yet discovered by which cruelty can be wholly prevented. Subordination supposes power on one part and subjection on the other; and if power be in the hands of men it will sometimes be abused. The vigilance of the supreme magistrate may do much, but much will still remain undone. He can never know all the crimes that are committed, and can seldom punish all that he knows.”

“This,” said the Prince, “I do not understand; but I had rather hear thee than dispute. Continue thy narration.”

“My father,” proceeded Imlac, “originally intended that I should have no other education than such as might qualify me for commerce; and discovering in me great strength of memory and quickness of apprehension, often declared his hope that I should be some time the richest man in Abyssinia.”

“Why,” said the Prince, “did thy father desire the increase of his wealth when it was already greater than he durst discover or enjoy? I am unwilling to doubt thy veracity, yet inconsistencies cannot both be true.”

“Inconsistencies,” answered Imlac, “cannot both be right; but, imputed to man, they may both be true. Yet diversity is not inconsistency. My father might expect a time of greater security.

However, some desire is necessary to keep life in motion; and he whose real wants are supplied must admit those of fancy.”

“This,” said the Prince, “I can in some measure conceive. I repent that I interrupted thee.”

“With this hope,” proceeded Imlac, “he sent me to school. But when I had once found the delight of knowledge, and felt the pleasure of intelligence and the pride of invention, I began silently to despise riches, and determined to disappoint the purposes of my father, whose grossness of conception raised my pity. I was twenty years old before his tenderness would expose me to the

fatigue of travel; in which time I had been instructed, by successive masters, in all the literature of my native country. As every hour taught me something new, I lived in a continual course of gratification; but as I advanced towards manhood, I lost much of the reverence with which I had been used to look on my instructors; because when the lessons were ended I did not find them wiser or better than common men.

“At length my father resolved to initiate me in commerce; and, opening one of his subterranean treasuries, counted out ten thousand pieces of gold. ‘This, young man,’ said he, ‘is the stock with which you must negotiate. I began with less than a fifth part, and you see how diligence and parsimony have increased it. This is your own, to waste or improve. If you squander it by negligence or caprice, you must wait for my death before you will be rich; if in four years you double your stock, we will thenceforward let subordination cease, and live together as friends and partners, for he shall be always equal with me who is equally skilled in the art of growing rich.’

“We laid out our money upon camels, concealed in bales of cheap goods, and travelled to the shore of the Red Sea. When I cast my eye on the expanse of waters, my heart bounded like that of a prisoner escaped. I felt an inextinguishable curiosity kindle in my mind, and resolved to snatch this opportunity of seeing the manners of other nations, and of learning sciences unknown in Abyssinia.

“I remembered that my father had obliged me to the improvement of my stock, not by a promise, which I ought not to violate, but by a penalty, which I was at liberty to incur; and therefore determined to gratify my predominant desire, and, by drinking at the fountain of knowledge, to quench the thirst of curiosity.

“As I was supposed to trade without connection with my father, it was easy for me to become acquainted with the master of a ship, and procure a passage to some other country. I had no motives of choice to regulate my voyage. It was sufficient for me that, wherever I wandered, I should see a country which I had not seen before. I therefore entered a ship bound for Surat, having left a letter for my father declaring my intention.”

CHAPTER IX

THE HISTORY OF IMLAC (*continued*)

“When I first entered upon the world of waters, and lost sight of land, I looked round about me in pleasing terror, and thinking my soul enlarged by the boundless prospect, imagined that I could gaze around me for ever without satiety; but in a short time I grew weary of looking on barren uniformity, where I could only see again what I had already seen. I then descended into the ship, and doubted for awhile whether all my future pleasures would not end, like this, in disgust and disappointment. ‘Yet surely,’ said I, ‘the ocean and the land are very different. The only variety of water is rest and motion.

But the earth has mountains and valleys, deserts and cities; it is inhabited by men of different customs and contrary opinions; and I may hope to find variety in life, though I should miss it in nature.’

“With this thought I quieted my mind, and amused myself during the voyage, sometimes by learning from the sailors the art of navigation, which I have never practised, and sometimes by forming schemes for my conduct in different situations, in not one of which I have been ever placed.

“I was almost weary of my naval amusements when we safely landed at Surat. I secured my money and, purchasing some commodities for show, joined myself to a caravan that was passing into the inland country. My companions, for some reason or other, conjecturing that I was rich, and, by my inquiries and admiration, finding that I was ignorant, considered me as a novice whom they had a right to cheat, and who was to learn, at the usual expense, the art of fraud. They exposed me to the theft of servants and the exaction of officers, and saw me plundered upon false pretences, without any advantage to themselves but that of rejoicing in the superiority of their own knowledge.”

“Stop a moment,” said the Prince; “is there such depravity in man as that he should injure another without benefit to himself? I can easily conceive that all are pleased with superiority; but your ignorance was merely accidental, which, being neither your crime nor your folly, could afford them no reason to applaud themselves; and the knowledge which they had, and which you wanted, they might as effectually have shown by warning as betraying you.”

“Pride,” said Imlac, “is seldom delicate; it will please itself with very mean advantages, and envy feels not its own happiness but when it may be compared with the misery of others. They were my enemies because they grieved to think me rich, and my oppressors because they delighted to find me weak.”

“Proceed,” said the Prince; “I doubt not of the facts which you relate, but imagine that you impute them to mistaken motives.”

“In this company,” said Imlac, “I arrived at Agra, the capital of Hindostan, the city in which the Great Mogul commonly resides. I applied myself to the language of the country, and in a few months was able to converse with the learned men; some of whom I found morose and reserved, and others easy and communicative; some were unwilling to teach another what they had with difficulty learned themselves; and some showed that the end of their studies was to gain the dignity of instructing.

“To the tutor of the young princes I recommended myself so much that I was presented to the Emperor as a man of uncommon knowledge. The Emperor asked me many questions concerning my country and my travels, and though I cannot now recollect anything that he uttered above the power of a common man, he dismissed me astonished at his wisdom and enamoured of his goodness.

“My credit was now so high that the merchants with whom I had travelled applied to me for recommendations to the ladies of the Court. I was surprised at their confidence of solicitation and greatly reproached them with their practices on the road. They heard me with cold indifference, and showed no tokens of shame or sorrow.

“They then urged their request with the offer of a bribe, but what I would not do for kindness I would not do for money, and refused them, not because they had injured me, but because I would

not enable them to injure others; for I knew they would have made use of my credit to cheat those who should buy their wares.

“Having resided at Agra till there was no more to be learned, I travelled into Persia, where I saw many remains of ancient magnificence and observed many new accommodations of life. The Persians are a nation eminently social, and their assemblies afforded me daily opportunities of remarking characters and manners, and of tracing human nature through all its variations.

“From Persia I passed into Arabia, where I saw a nation pastoral and warlike, who lived without any settled habitation, whose wealth is their flocks and herds, and who have carried on through ages an hereditary war with mankind, though they neither covet nor envy their possessions.”

CHAPTER X

IMLAC'S HISTORY (*continued*)—

A DISSERTATION UPON POETRY

“Wherever I went I found that poetry was considered as the highest learning, and regarded with a veneration somewhat approaching to that which man would pay to angelic nature. And yet it fills me with wonder that in almost all countries the most ancient poets are considered as the best; whether it be that every other kind of knowledge is an acquisition greatly attained, and poetry is a gift conferred at once; or that the first poetry of every nation surprised them as a novelty, and retained the credit by consent which it received by accident at first; or whether, as the province of poetry is to describe nature and passion, which are always the same, the first writers took possession of the most striking objects for description and the most probable occurrences for fiction, and left nothing to those that followed them but transcription of the same events and new combinations of the same images. Whatever be the reason, it is commonly observed that the early writers are in possession of nature, and their followers of art; that the first excel in strength and invention, and the latter in elegance and refinement.

“I was desirous to add my name to this illustrious fraternity. I read all the poets of Persia and Arabia, and was able to repeat by memory the volumes that are suspended in the mosque of Mecca.

But I soon found that no man was ever great by imitations. My desire of excellence impelled me to transfer my attention to nature and to life. Nature was to be my subject, and men to be my auditors.

I could never describe what I had not seen. I could not hope to move those with delight or terror whose interests and opinions I did not understand.

“Being now resolved to be a poet, I saw everything with a new purpose; my sphere of attention was suddenly magnified; no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked. I ranged mountains and deserts for images and resemblances, and pictured upon my mind every tree of the forest and flower of the valley. I observed with equal care the crags of the rock and the pinnacles of the palace. Sometimes I wandered along the mazes of the rivulet, and sometimes watched the changes of the summer clouds.

To a poet nothing can be useless. Whatever is beautiful and whatever is dreadful must be familiar to his imagination; he must be conversant with all that is awfully vast or elegantly little. The plants of the garden, the animals of the wood, the minerals of the earth, and meteors of the sky, must all concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety; for every idea is useful for the enforcement or decoration of moral or religious truth, and he who knows most will have most power of diversifying his scenes and of gratifying his reader with remote allusions and unexpected instruction.

“All the appearances of nature I was therefore careful to study, and every country which I have surveyed has contributed something to my poetical powers.”

“In so wide a survey,” said the Prince, “you must surely have left much unobserved. I have lived till now within the circuit of the mountains, and yet cannot walk abroad without the sight of something which I had never beheld before, or never heeded.”

“This business of a poet,” said Imlac, “is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances. He does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades of the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind, and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness.

“But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet; he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition, observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of

the human mind, as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom, from the sprightliness of infancy to the despondence of decrepitude. He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age and country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same. He must, therefore, content himself with the slow progress of his name, condemn the praise of his own time, and commit his claims to the justice of posterity.

He must write as the interpreter of nature and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations, as a being superior to time and place.

“His labour is not yet at an end. He must know many languages and many sciences, and, that his style may be worthy of his thoughts, must by incessant practice familiarise to himself every delicacy of speech and grace of harmony.”

CHAPTER XI

IMLAC'S NARRATIVE (*continued*)

—A HINT OF PILGRIMAGE

Imlac now felt the enthusiastic fit, and was proceeding to aggrandise his own profession, when then Prince cried out: "Enough! thou hast convinced me that no human being can ever be a poet. Proceed with thy narration."

"To be a poet," said Imlac, "is indeed very difficult."

"So difficult," returned the Prince, "that I will at present hear no more of his labours. Tell me whither you went when you had seen Persia."

"From Persia," said the poet, "I travelled through Syria, and for three years resided in Palestine, where I conversed with great numbers of the northern and western nations of Europe, the nations which are now in possession of all power and all knowledge, whose armies are irresistible, and whose fleets command the remotest parts of the globe. When I compared these men with the natives of our own kingdom and those that surround us, they appeared almost another order of beings. In their countries it is difficult to wish for anything that may not be obtained; a thousand arts, of which we never heard, are continually labouring for their convenience and pleasure, and whatever their own climate has denied them is supplied by their commerce."

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