

CHAPTER LXII
DEFOE – ROBINSON CRUSOE

FOR more than a year and a half Defoe remained in prison; then he was set free.

A new Government had come into power. It was pointed out to the Queen that it was a mistake to make an enemy of so clever an author as Defoe. Then he was set at liberty, but on condition that he should use his pen to support the Government. So although Defoe was now free to all seeming, this was really the beginning of bondage. He was no longer free in mind, and by degrees he became a mere hanger-on of Government, selling the support of his pen to whichever party was in power.

We cannot follow him through all the twists and turns of his politics, nor through all his ups and downs in life, nor mention all the two hundred and fifty books and pamphlets that he wrote. It was an adventurous life he led, full of dark and shadowy passages which we cannot understand and so perhaps cannot pardon. But whether he sold his pen or no we are bound to confess that Defoe's desire was towards the good, towards peace, union, and justice.

One thing he fought for with all his buoyant strength was the Union between England and Scotland. It had been the desire of William III. ere he died, it had now become the still stronger desire of Queen Anne and her ministers. So Defoe took 'a long winter, a chargeable, and, as it proved, hazardous journey' to Scotland. There he threw himself into the struggle, doing all he could for the Union. He has left for us a history of that struggle, which perhaps better than any other makes us realise the unrest of the Scottish people, the anger, the fear, the indecision, with which they were filled. 'People went up and down wondering and amazed, expecting every day strange events, afraid of peace, afraid of war. Many knew not which way to fix their resolutions. They could not be clear for the Union, yet they saw death at the door in its breaking off – Death to their liberty, to their religion, and to their country.' Better than any other he gives a picture of the 'infinite struggles, clamour, railing, and tumult of party.' Let me give, in his own words, a description of a riot in the streets of Edinburgh:—

'The rabble by shouting and noise having increased their numbers to several thousands, they began with Sir Patrick Johnston, who was one of the treaters, and the year before had been Lord Provost. First they assaulted his lodgings with stones and sticks, and curses not a few. But his windows being too high they came up the stairs to his door, and fell to work at it with sledges or great hammers. And had they broke it open in their first fury, he had, without doubt, been torn to pieces without mercy; and this only because he was a treater in the Commission to England, for, before that, no man was so well beloved as he, over the whole city.

'His lady, in the utmost despair with this fright, came to the window, with two candles in her hand, that she might be known; and cried out, for God's sake to call the guards. An honest Apothecary in the town, who knew her voice, and saw the distress she was in, and to whom the family, under God, is obliged for their deliverance, ran immediately down to the town guard. But they would not stir without the Lord Provost's order. But that being soon obtained, one Captain Richardson, who commanded, taking about thirty men with him, marched bravely up to them; and making his way with great resolution through the crowd, they flying, but throwing stones, and hallooing at him, and his men. He seized the foot of the staircase; and then boldly went up, cleared the stair, and took six of the rabble in the very act, and so delivered the gentleman and his family.