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FLASHMAN AND RICHARD HANNAY

Among the most entertaining of recent British novels are three by George MacDonald Fraser: *Flashman* (1969), *Royal Flash* (1970), and *Flash for Freedom!* (1971). Part of the fun is Fraser's pretense that he is not the inventive novelist that, fortunately for us, he happens to be, but merely the editor of what he calls the *Flashman Papers*. Flashman, of course, is the bully in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, long regarded with disapproval and at last expelled for drunkenness by Doctor Arnold. And the *Flashman Papers*, of which the three volumes are a part, "clearly identify" the school bully with a celebrated Victorian soldier of the same name. Written in the early years of the twentieth century, when Flashman was in his eighties, the *Papers* are Flashman's memoirs from the time of his expulsion from Rugby.

The *Flashman Papers* may be read as rough-and-ready historical novels, as witty satires on nineteenth-century piety and posturing, as mock-heroic extravaganzas, as rattling good adventure stories, as picaresque novels in which the rogue never reforms. In spite of his reputation (which is summed up by twenty lines in the format of *Who's Who*, included in the preliminary pages of the first volume), Flashman is no military hero and in no way a great man. But he moves, like a kind of raffish Lanny Budd, among the great as well as the merely famous and the notorious. The people with whom he has been involved so far include Disraeli, Lincoln, Bismarck, the incredible Lord Cardigan (who will later lead the disastrous charge of the Light Brigade), and the adventuress Lola Montez. Flashman's name-dropping asides indicate that in future volumes he will encounter (among others) Grant, Lee, Wild Bill Hickok, and Rajah Brooke.

Flashman, covering the years 1839-1842, recounts the hero's brief service under Cardigan in England, his marriage to Elspeth Morrison, and his adventures in the First Afghan War, where a series of flukes and his own ingenuity make him look dauntless. He returns to England a hero, and the Queen decorates him. Meanwhile, his wife has decorated him with cuckold's horns, a fact of which he is obliged to profess ignorance, since he is financially dependent on his father-in-law. *Royal Flash* (1842-1843 and 1847-1848) is a narrative of Flashman's adventures with Bismarck and Lola Montez, his involvement in the Schleswig-Holstein business, and his considerable part in a mock-Ruritanian escapade.

Flash for Freedom! (the latter part of 1848 and the first months of 1849) is the most extravagant of the three novels. Flashman is compelled to join the crew of a slave ship, the *Balliol College*, in which old Morrison has an interest. The captain, John Charity Spring, is madder than Ahab, as one can tell from a look at his eyes: ". . . as pale as water in a china dish, bright and yet empty, and as cold as an ice floe". Not long out of port, Spring flogs a seaman half to death and immediately afterwards takes Flashman to tea in his cabin with a wife almost as crazy as himself. Flashman helps to enslave Negroes, helps them to escape, and is for a short time enslaved himself. In the end, he is forced to return to Spring and make a bargain: passage from the United States back to England in exchange for papers (given to Flashman by a dying British Naval officer) which document Spring's slaving activities.

Flashman is a great character, with a Dickensian richness and vitality. His voice (fluent and witty, allusive and picturesque, coarse and cynical) gives a brisk tempo to the adventures and brings dozens of characters alive. A hero for our time, that is to say an anti-hero, Flashman has one major virtue, honesty. On the first page he says, "This story will be completely truthful; I am breaking the habit of eighty years. Why shouldn't I? When a man is as old as I am, and knows himself thoroughly for what he was and is, he doesn't care much".

The main truth is that Flashman has always been as big a coward in fact as he has been a hero by reputation. He gets wound up in dangerous situations, not because he likes them, but because he has been thrust into them by various people (Arnold, Cardigan, his father-in-law, his own father) who wish to get rid of him. Before leaving England, he fakes one duel and evades another. As for the Afghan War, "The fact that I had gone through

the campaign in a state of abject terror—lying, deceiving, bluffing, and running for dear life whenever possible—was known to no one but myself". But Flashman's candor and his idiom make his cowardice (like that of the untruthful Falstaff) amusing. Even a remote risk of catastrophe, he says, "is enough to keep me hopping to the water closet and reaching for the brandy bottle".

The great enthusiasm of Flashman's life is women, whatever their ages, shapes, and colors. He has had them "in beds, haylofts, thickets, drawing rooms, palaces, hovels, snowdrifts (that was in Russia, in the cold spell), baths, billiard rooms, cellars, camps, covered wagons, and even in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge". But in all of Flashman's accounts of his sexual adventures there is nothing pornographic, because he does not take sex too seriously. His girl Fetnab in India knows "the ninety-seven ways of making love that the Hindus are supposed to set much store by—though mind you, it is all nonsense, for the seventy-fourth position turns out to be the same as the seventy-third, but with your fingers crossed".

All three of the Flashman novels reject the romantic attitude, but *Royal Flash* mocks it particularly by translating a famous romance, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, by Anthony Hope [Hawkins], into the language of Flashman. Fraser, however, pretends that Hope has translated Flashman's true story into the language of romance. "Only once", says Flashman, "did I tell the tale, and that was privately some years ago, to young Hawkins, the lawyer—and he has used it for the stuff of one of his romances, which sells very well, I'm told". It is characteristic that in Fraser's version Flashman should be told that Prince Carl Gustaf cannot marry Duchess Irma on the appointed date because he has contracted a "social disease". Actually, the Prince's pox is one of Bismarck's lies to trick Flashman, who is to be killed and found with papers to prove his true identity and expose him as an agent of Palmerston. King becomes Prince, and Princess becomes Duchess in *Royal Flash*, but most of Bismarck's henchmen have the same names as Black Michael's (though Rupert of Hentzau becomes Rudi von Starnberg), and some place names and titles are retained. Fraser runs Flashman through the adventures of Rudolf Ras-sendyll—impersonating the sovereign, fighting in and around the castle, swimming the moat—all the derring-do transformed into farce and the hero trembling in every limb.

Though *Royal Flash*, turning *the Prisoner of Zenda* inside out, makes a contrast with the work of Anthony Hope, the *Flashman Papers* in their entirety make a closer contrast with the romances of John Buchan. And Flashman

himself makes a very close contrast at a number of points with Richard Hannay, the hero of five of Buchan's adventure and spy novels. Buchan (a Scotsman educated partly in England) creates a character who moves in the highlands of heroism. Fraser (an Englishman educated partly in Scotland) creates one who moves in the bogs of cowardice. Hannay has a Puritan conscience and a deep sense of civic duty. *Pilgrim's Progress* is not only a code book in *Mr. Standfast* (1919) and a kind of parallel to the novel; it is also a guide and inspiration for Hannay and his friends (as it was to Buchan, who knew much of it by heart). Flashman, on the other hand, is a hedonist with no more religious or civic sense than a cat. For him, Bunyan is represented by the illustrations in a copy of *The Holy War* which frightened him for a time in his childhood.

In Buchan's world there are few women and no sexual adventures. People who know *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) only through Alfred Hitchcock's film may be surprised to discover that the woman played by the beautiful Madeline Carroll does not exist in the novel, and that the Continental secret agent played by the lovely Lucie Mannheim, who appears briefly in the beginning, is Hitchcock's switch on a male American. Fraser's world, as I have already noted, is full of women, and Flashman's main purpose is to get as many of them as possible into the hay.

The striking thing, however, is not the number of differences between Flashman and his world and Hannay and his, but the number and nature of the resemblances. Both Buchan's and Fraser's novels are boys' books of a superior sort, adventure stories in the tradition of Stevenson. By comparison with the typical thrillers of the present, they have (in spite of Flashman's obvious vices) a sort of innocence. The three Flashman novels have far more in common with the five Hannay novels than with those of Ian Fleming, Len Deighton, or John le Carré, with their extravagant gadgets, moral ambiguities, and world-weariness.

Even the sex in Fraser's novels does not so much bring him close to the modern thriller as it separates him from it. Beside the detached and tolerant views of most current heroes, Flashman's attitudes look old-fashioned and unsophisticated. Indeed, compared with those of the *real* Victorian rebel Sir Richard Burton, they are extremely conservative. In several other respects Burton might well be one of the models for Flashman. He was born the year before Flashman, was thrown out of a school (Oxford), married into a conventional family, turned a drumfire of denunciation on Victorian hypoc-

ris, and even sported particularly formidable mustaches. (Most of the time Flashman keeps those which he first grew in the cavalry and refers to them fondly as his "tart-catchers".) But Burton never would have said what Flashman says about perversion among Afghan men: that it would make you sick to see them mooning over painted boys as if they were girls.

Though the narrative style of Flashman could hardly be mistaken for that of Hannay, both men make considerable use of schoolboy slang. They speak for instance, of developments which put a lid (or stopper) on things, of giving something a miss, of getting crocked (by which they mean injured, not drunk). They talk, that is, the language of the British public school story and of Wodehouses's heroes, however different the context in which they talk it. (When you get a man beaten up by a British prize fighter, as Flashman has got Bismarck beaten up, you "bar" renewing his acquaintance.) The slang puts the two heroes in the same class and reveals some of the same class attitudes. Thus Flashman, though anything but an exemplary middle-class man, uses a middle-class term of contempt to describe a solicitor of his acquaintance. Grieg is a *bargee*, "an oily, rather sporting-looking bargee . . . not at all the City lawyer type".

To be sure, Flashman's slang is mixed with plenty of blasphemy. When he tells Birmarck that he will impersonate Prince Carl Gustaf (actually, he has no choice: his plight is that of Bertie Wooster being forced into some dreadful scheme by his Aunt Dahlia), he reflects: ". . . oh, Jesus, in the soup again; how in God's name shall I get out this time?" But however profane he may be, Flashman is always grammatical (not "how will I?" but "how shall I?"). And though it is his habit to speak very plainly indeed, he uses, evidently because it is the current term among people of his class, the euphemism "Cyprian" to refer to a whore in a London gambling club.

Since their adventures take them to many a foreign country, it is lucky that both Hannay and Flashman have the gift of tongues. Hannay knows not only French and German, but also Dutch, and in a new country he quickly picks up enough of the language to get along. Flashman acquires a working knowledge of a European language in a few days of intense concentration, and he learns a couple of languages during his service in India and Afghanistan. Like Sir Richard Burton, he learns best in bed with a native girl (a Greek wench, he says, would have taught him more Greek than Arnold did); still, his interest in languages is a serious one, perhaps his chief intellectual pursuit. In the fabricated *Who's Who* entry the reader finds, under "Recreation",

together with "angling" (incidentally a passion of Buchan and his heroes), "Oriental studies".

Disguise and impersonation are of major significance in the careers of both Flashman and Hannay. Equal to each other in this regard, they are also equal to Sherlock Holmes, so that they seem to be contemporaries instead of men two generations apart. Like Holmes, Hannay puts a lot of stock in make up ("My make up must have been good, for she accepted me before I introduced myself"). Flashman can impersonate a lieutenant of the Royal Navy well enough to deceive everyone but Abraham Lincoln, and, his skin tanned or dyed (Sir Richard Burton again), he can pass for an Oriental. By assuming memories, preferences, etc., he becomes a particular man, and so well does he turn himself into Prince Carl Gustaf for a short time that for fifty years afterward he whistles the Prince's favorite air from *Fra Diavolo*.

Expertise and success are as important to the anti-hero as they are to the hero. Hannay and his friends are so able that many readers grow weary of hearing about their accomplishments in business and law, government and science; and Buchan's books are full of accounts of skills such as fishing, falconry, stalking, shooting, rock-climbing. Aside from chasing women, Flashman likes nothing better than watching or talking to men who do something especially well. ". . . I've learned that no time is wasted which is spent listening to men who really know their work". One of his most gratifying experiences in Amercia is watching the great Bixby get a river boat off a Mississippi mud bank. He even admires Spring and his dreadful crew for the skillful seamanship which enables them to escape a fast British sloop. And he notes in the idiot Cardigan one talent to save him from being a total loss: the remarkable, if pointless, exactness with which he puts his troops through cavalry drill.

Though Hannay is an amateur and part-time spy and Flashman is a reluctant one, each has the instincts of the professional secret agent, the curiosity about the new country in which he moves. The following passage might have come from Hannay, but in fact it comes from Flashman. In Afghanistan he learns "where the best horses could be obtained, how millet was grown and harvested, all the trivial information which is the small change of a country's life. I don't pretend that I became an expert in a few weeks, or that I ever 'knew' Afghanistan, but I . . . began to realize that those who studied the country only from the cantonment at Kabul knew no more about it than you would learn about a strange house if you stayed in one room of it all the time".

Flashman is guilty of the racialism for which Buchan and his heroes have been criticized and which can be extenuated only on the grounds that it is a comparatively mild form and constitutes the other side of their patriotism. If it is surprising to find that Flashman is a patriot in any way, it is also surprising to find that Hannay is no unmitigated imperialist. Hannay says that the worst thing about his dull weeks in London (when the adventures of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* have not yet started) after his years in Africa is getting invited to tea by "Imperialist ladies". As for Flashman, when the slave girl Cassy quotes, "Whoever stands on British soil, forever shall be free", he feels a sudden pride. "Not that I care a damn, but—well, it's nice when you're far away and don't expect it, to hear the old place well spoken of". Though Flashman and Hannay are conservatives politically and otherwise (another way in which they differ from the heroes of Ambler, John le Carré, etc.), Flashman turns out to be the more conservative of the two. He evidently regards the Liberal Party as a bunch of officious and power-hungry scoundrels, and his faked-up *Who's Who* entry lists among his publications a book against Army reform.

In their riper years Hannay and Flashman acquire money, country houses, knighthoods, honors of all sorts. They become members of fashionable clubs, though gradually, it appears, most of Flashman's refuse to admit him, his style being too salty and irreverent. It is the neatest coincidence of all that the hero and the anti-hero reach the same military rank, that of general.

Now, some of the above similarities partly explain why both Buchan and Fraser should be widely read today. (It ought not to be thought that Buchan's books, after a period of popularity that brought their royalty rates as high as thirty-three and a third percent, have sunk without a trace. In England alone a dozen novels are still in print in nearly fifty editions. On this side of the Atlantic the figures are more modest, but impressive to say the least of it. Furthermore, in the spring of 1972 one of the biggest book clubs in the United States distributed a set of novels which included, together with works by such writers as Graham Greene and Raymond Chandler, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. In recent years there has been a remake of the film, unfortunately inferior to Hitchcock's, and a motion picture of the last Hannay novel, *The Island of Sheep* [1936], has probably been finished by now.) Journeys to distant places, meetings with celebrated persons, accounts of marvelous skills, flights and pursuits, disguises and impersonations obviously have a profound attraction for the human spirit. For they are not only perennially popular in fiction, but also archetypal in epic and myth.

The fact remains that Buchan's approach to all such matters is romantic and Fraser's anti-romantic, but it is a fact over which one need not scratch his head. Readers do not want either romance or anti-romance; they want both. They need real heroes, men much better than themselves, so that they may be exhilarated. But they need false heroes, men much worse than themselves, so that they may be reassured. Buchan's novels satisfy one need and Fraser's the other. To be exact, Fraser satisfies both the need for romance and the need for its opposite. Flashman is a coward and a scoundrel, but the situations in which he is involved willy-nilly are precisely the sort in which romantic heroes are involved wholeheartedly. The paces through which he is put are precisely the kind through which the heroes of Stevenson, Anthony Hope, and John Buchan are put. Laughing at romance but attracted to it all the same, Fraser makes the best of both worlds. Besides dedicating *Royal Flash* to his wife, he dedicates it to the motion picture actors who have played the grand romantic roles: ". . . and for Ronald Colman, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Errol Flynn, Basil Rathbone, Louis Hayward, Tyrone Power, and all the rest of them".