

JIM CLICK or THE WONDERFUL INVENTION

NOTICE

In 1810, an English writer, J. H. D. Robertson, issued in Edinburgh, without a named publisher, a curious work entitled *Jim Click, or the Wonderful Invention*. While passing through London I found it in the shop of a second-hand book dealer, who was unable to tell me anything about the author or the book, although he had consulted all possible catalogues and bibliographies and appealed to the critics and men of letters among his clients—for it appears that in London, such gentlemen do read books.

In addition, he assured me that he believed his copy to be unique and that the others must have been pulped, unless just Posterity, represented by grocers and housewives, had destined them for the preservation of jam, butter and mustard. So saying, my bookseller seemed to be suggesting that those destroyers were absolutely justified. I thought I could read in his thoughts that he would have done the same had his profession not obliged him to respect printed matter. I paid a modest price for the book, and the bibliopole received my money with disdain. If I did not fear offending him by what he might judge to be an impertinence, I would dedicate my translation to him.

I have not found that work entirely despicable. Without the satire that it contains, the English bookseller might perhaps have affected less intolerance, but I do not have the same reasons for disapproval as him, and I believe, on the other hand, that it is not necessary to attach overmuch importance to the ravings of a madman. I also think, with J. H. D. Robertson, that something might be gleaned from it. In any case, I shall leave the latter to speak for himself, in the prologue with which he precedes *Jim Click* and the rather singular epilogue that concludes it.

As for myself, I have limited myself to translating very exactly, leaving aside the identity of J. H. D. Robertson, which might not be as impenetrable as the bookseller claims, and without worrying any more about the historical accuracy of the story. I am not familiar with Admiral Gunson, and I have never heard of the Battle of Barajar, but it might, after all, be the case that both are renowned in the world under other names, as that is often the case.

F. F.

PROLOGUE

In the course of a long fatigue caused by study and toil, I was cared for last year in the house of Dr. Vilkind at Danish Camp in Norfolk.¹ It was an establishment that, by virtue of the respect for silence observed there and the solicitude with which you are surrounded, could offer a rest cure to overworked individuals, but most of the patients treated there are afflicted in their reason. To tell the truth, Dr. Vilkind had graciously urged me to stay there for a while, for it would not have occurred to any other physician to send a patient there whose faculties remained sane.

I had made the acquaintance of Dr. Vilkind at the British Library, where I was working on utopian writers of the stripe of Thomas More, Bacon, Campanella, Cyrano de Bergerac and Gabriel de Foigny, and other ancient and modern dreamers, who could fill a bookcase of huge dimensions on their own.

Dr. Vilkind, who had the seat next to mine, took an interest in my studies. In addition to being highly literate, he found that kind of philosophy particularly interesting, not because he was a utopian himself, but because he claimed that many of his patients had a bee in their bonnet of wanting to correct or regenerate the world. He classified their madness in accordance with the situation of their utopian realms.

Men who imagined such realms beyond the sea, like More and Harrington, were afflicted by a particular lesion of the brain, and that lesion was distinct from the lesion of men who placed their chimeras among the stars, like Cyrano the Lunarian and Campanella the Solarian, and different again from those who established it in subterranean depths, like the novelist Ludvig Holberg in *The Voyage of Niels Klim*. Finally, he differentiated from all of the preceding those who dreamed of austral lands, like the Bishop of Exeter, Joseph Hall, who, Vilkind sustained on the basis of his experience, had been afflicted by a chilling of the marrow engendered by a rheumatism of venereal origin.²

I do not know exactly from what Plato was suffering to have dreamed of Atlantis, nor what multiple lesions obfuscated the brain of Jonathan Swift and provoked in him an entirely mental ambulatory mania, all the sharper because it was never satisfied.

“I would have treated Swift,” he said, “firstly by making him walk five miles every morning, and I would have constrained him to dress in wool, in order that an abundant sweat would purge the acidity of his humors.”

When I reached the end of my work—or, at least, nothing more remained than for me to draft it in accordance with my notes—I gave evidence of a need for rest, which, as I have said, Dr. Vilkind offered to satisfy in the best possible conditions. I think that he was counting on indoctrinating me at length and introducing his psychiatric conclusions into my book. I therefore accepted, glad to be able to maintain with him a fire that, thanks to his care, would not consume me.

I found beautiful shade in Dr. Vilkind’s establishment, in which I passed part of the mornings, usually drowsily lying on the mossy at the foot of the trees, sometimes distractedly reading a book from the communal library. That library was the doctor’s pride. Not only did it contain the wherewithal to occupy the leisure hours of a cultivated man but also to fortify the meditations of a scientist like my host. What rendered it even more precious was the relatively large number of manuscripts and drawings due to the pen or pencil of inmates, which had been piling up for some thirty years.

“You cannot measure,” Dr. Vilkind said to me one day, “the interest that there would have been for you in riffling through these works instead of applying yourself to reading that can be found anywhere. Some have an appearance of rationality and are not without kinship with the lucubrations of the majority of your utopians. They are also written with more disinterest and conviction—I might even say seriousness—for among professional philosophers and writers it is advisable to look for the element of

¹ South of the village of Warham in north Norfolk is an earthwork hill fort now thought to have been constructed by the Iceni but long known locally as “the Danish Camp.”

² Joseph Hall’s brutal satire *Mundus alter et idem sive Terra Australis antehac semper incognita* (c.1605) was written in Latin for private circulation, and was thus a book condemned to an *Enfer* by its own author, which doubtless endeared it to Fernand Fleuret.

mockery, paradox, rancor or the desire to do someone a bad turn. You are not unaware that the resentment of old misfortunes was resident in Swift's heart, and that it was to lay waste to the optimistic philosophy of Leibniz that Voltaire wrote *Candide*."

My host went on: "Look, here are two works of a so-called inventor. The first is a scientific paper with detailed plans and designs in a hand so masterly that one could believe in the reality of the invention. The second is a long novel that he wrote himself, which relates to an incredible adventure. He pretended, however, that it was a true story, and was bold enough to sustain that to my face. His madness consisted of wanting to identify with reality the fiction that he had conceived while straying into satire. There reigns within it, I tell you, a tone of sincerity apt to render the book dangerous if it were ever published as the brainchild of a writer. Compared with your utopians, it isn't inferior. At least he was locked up, although yours were free to be a danger to society."

I leafed through the first work that Dr. Vilkind handed me. It was indeed a collection of drawings in aquatint, of an artistry so perfect that one might have thought them engraved, and which bore, for the most part, their scale of reduction or enlargement. There were about fifteen hundred items therein, which testified to a dogged patience, and, so far as I could judge, a profound knowledge of mechanics and anatomy, because the levers, cog-wheels and crank shafts were mingled with human articulations, bones, muscles and an entire vascular system. An explanatory text, in perfectly-formed handwriting with no crossings-out, was legible at a glance. That folio treatise was dedicated to His Majesty King George III "by his very humble and very obedient servant, Doctor Click."

"Was he really a doctor?" I asked.

"Yes," my host replied, "And a doctor of almost all the sciences. It is his universal knowledge that is imposed here—but he lacked reason," Vilkind concluded, with a little snigger.

I set aside the treatise in order to take up the pseudo-novel, which interested me more, judging it more within my range and worthy of satisfying my professional curiosity.

"Well," I said, "I'll read it this evening, since I have your permission, Doctor. It appears to me to be written with very good penmanship."

"Huh!" said Vilkind. "An educated man who has forced leisure can, strictly speaking, pass for a writer, even if he has no common sense—that isn't a professional requirement...but I beg your pardon for that."

I laughed at his at his joke, and took my leave, impatient to make the acquaintance of the manuscript, which solicited reading by virtue of the nervous elegance of its calligraphy.

PART ONE

I

I was born at Danish Camp in Norfolk in 1759, the only child of my honorable father William Click, who was reputed to be an excellent clockmaker. By that entitlement, he regulated the clocks at Norwich Observatory. My mother lost her life in bringing me into the world. I was brought up by my nurse until the day I was able to do without her milk. Then my father divided his time between his watches and my little backside.

The cradle was on the left hand side of his work-bench, next to a stove where things were warmed up for my usage; he dried other things on it, the odor of which cannot have been pleasant. When I cried, my father reached out his arm and imprinted me with a few cadences that threw me back into sleep. If the work was not pressing, he took me on his knees. Without taking the horn-rimmed magnifying glass out of his left eye, which was weak, he sang the Mallard song to me in a bucolic falsetto voice.³ It doubtless seemed to him to be appropriate to my young age, at which no one ought to be able to understand anything:

*O, I have avut, O what have I yut?
I've ayut the voot o' my mallard.
A voot voot, a toe toe nippens and all,
O, so goodum it was, my mallard.*

I was less astonished by that than the sound of the watches that my father applied to my ear. He wanted, by that means, to give me a precocious taste for the mechanics that had nourished his life, and which was to be the bane of mine. I was also suspended, eyes haggard and drooling, before various pendulum clocks of his industry, which he made me admire. Among others, there was a cutter navigating in a bowl around a lighthouse with a clock-face; the hour, the quarter and the half were incessantly announced by a mariner in a white waxed cap, who glided around the lantern agitating a hand-bell and applying a loudhailer to his mouth.

That masterpiece, mounted on a mobile pedestal, was placed in the shop window. Several times a day, the scapegraces going to school or coming back pressed their noses—as ill-wiped as mine—against the window in order to admire the mysterious evolution of the little ship on veritable water and look out for the emergence of the lighthouse-keeper, whom my father had nicknamed Jack Tar.

However inconvenient the presence in the shop of an infant of my age might seem, it attracted the housewives of the neighborhood, with the result that my father received assistance and benefit from it. The natural consideration that he already had was increased thereby, and it even brought him some good opportunities for remarriage. In addition to the fact that he was no longer young, however, he preferred to spend his evenings playing the sonatas of Boyce⁴ on his *viola da gamba*, or philosophizing in front of a pint of ale with a churchwarden pipe in his lips, rather than get to grips with a new wife, in the ineluctable disputes that are the ransom of matrimonial pleasures, if it is true that they exist.

³ In England, “the Mallard Song” usually refers to an ancient tradition of All Souls’ College, Oxford, sung at the Bursar’s dinner and Gaudy Night. The words recorded by Dr. Click (in mock-English of a sort, which I have reproduced precisely) are, however, entirely different from the words sung at All Souls, and Fleuret might not have been aware of the existence of that Mallard song.

⁴ The composer William Boyce (1711-1779) was best known for his church music, but he also composed the tune for the naval anthem “Heart of Oak,” provided with a lyric by David Garrick in 1759.

However, in order to display their aptitude as housekeepers, each of them did her best, as I have said, to make herself useful. One of them taught me to walk, another to talk, a third to eat without splattering the surroundings with the spoon, which I was obliged to raise to the level of my lips and not my ear or my eye. A fourth, finally, taught me to read the Bible, which is why I know so little of it and have such a mediocre grasp thereof.

I ought to add that, in truth, neither my father, who was not a handsome man, nor his situation, which was no more elevated than those of his suitors, was sufficient to earn so many precious attentions. It was known that his brother, who was devoid of marital burdens and notoriously intemperate, had accumulated a considerable fortune in India. Thus, our neighbors never failed to ask for news of his establishment and his health when the post brought some from time to time.

I shall pass over the details of my early childhood; they do not seem to me to be worthy of interest. I am, in any case, in haste to arrive at the amity that linked me, once again to my detriment, to one of the guttersnipes who watched the cutter turn in its eternal circle.

I had just completed my eighth year. I had spent them in the shop and the back room, at first doing nothing, and then applying myself to reading, writing and arithmetic with a docility and punctiliousness worthy of remark in the midst of the exemplary noise of half a dozen pendulum clocks and an incalculable number of watches. I shall not talk about the odor of Virginia tobacco and smoked fish, which I would have regretted not finding elsewhere, and which formed my domestic atmosphere. I ran errands in the neighborhood, and also helped my father, who was often gout-stricken, to prepare meals—by which I mean that I peeled vegetables, as parsimoniously as possible, and drew beer without spilling any. With regard to the latter operation my father would not have compromised, because beer, along with its brother tobacco, constituted his treasure, his pleasure and his recompense, the means by which he proved, several times a day and long before dusk, that William Click was a free man and England the foremost nation in the world.

When, while reading the paper, he said to me: “By God, lad, pull me another pint!” I was sure that the majority of the watches in the neighborhood had not been stopped by a providential magnet; that my fatherland was not in danger of displacement, that our enemies were held at the coast; and that the Whigs were holding sway over the Tories—for we were liberals. I admired, as if I had been his wife, my father’s fine self-confidence, which took the place of authority, and I had no other to admire.

Another was encountered, however, in the epoch that I have just cited, in the person of a boy of my own age, or very nearly. I saw him for the first time through the window contemplating the hydraulic clock with the marks of an interest that I shall describe as intense, so much attention and desire did his features manifest. Braced against the window, his fists clenched in his armpits and his little German pigtail overflowing the collar of his dark blue coat, he did not miss a single one of the evolutions of the cutter, not a single detail of its rigging.

When the ship went around the lighthouse and its rocky jetty, he watched for its reappearance like a cat lying in wait for a mouse, frantically agitating the hat he was holding in his hand as soon as the object of his desire triumphantly doubled the obstacle that hid it from his view. He would have uttered three cheers for the emergence of Jack Tar if he had not thought that it would distract him from his contemplation.

The kind of energy he put into his desire and his mime reached me in a fluid fashion, constraining me to similar gestures and making me wish, in a intense fashion, that he might be able to acquire or steal the paternal masterpiece. Finally, he tore himself away from that examination, which had seemed to me to be interminable, although it had only lasted two minutes, and he came into the shop with a red face, in which two steely eyes were shining, which spoke for his mouth; nevertheless, the latter opened and simply said: “How much?”

“What?” said my father, who was tormenting a watch and seemed offended that anyone who come into his establishment unexpectedly.

“The boat.”

“My young gentleman,” my father replied, with tranquil irony, “I don’t know whether I’ll ever part with that clock. I constructed it under the gaze of my dear wife, Mrs. Dorothy Click, who is no more. That

clock is my presage, you see, of the fatal boat of the river Acheron, which will take me to her shade. I don't know whether I'm making myself understood...and anyway, my young gentleman, the few shillings of which you perhaps dispose would not be sufficient to pay for such a whim. It is appropriate, furthermore, that you take the advice of your father, whom I do not have the honor of knowing."

"My father," said the child, with a proud impatience and a clarity of elocution that could not help but astonish, "is the Reverend Edmund Gunson, Rector of Danish Camp. My mother is the daughter of the Reverend Maurice Buckling, prebendary of Westminster. Sir Robert Walpole,⁵ the minister, is my cousin..."

"My young friend," retorted my father, who plunged his horn-rimmed lens into his watch this time, "I won't ask you to bring so many persons of quality into this humble dwelling. If the Reverend Edmund Gunson cares to visit me, I shall have the honor and pleasure of seeing him."

"Well then, he'll come tomorrow. Good day, you bloody old blockhead."⁶

An instant before, I would have liked to appease my father and retain Reverend Gunson's son, who had just expressed himself in such an irreverent manner. But the one had disappeared as he had entered, and the other, after having made as if to chase him and box his ears, had fallen back into his chair with a cry of pain. My father had forgotten his gout, but his gout had not forgotten him.

"Bloody old blockhead! Bloody old blockhead!" repeated my father. That's how the son of a rector expresses himself! Bloody old blockhead—me, the clockmaster of Norwich Observatory! By God! Let him come tomorrow, this Reverend Edmund Gunson. I shall say to him, just like his blasphemous son: 'Good day, you bloody old blockhead!' But you, Jim, standing there like a useless lump? At your age, I'd already have run after that bad lot and thumped him until the blood ran from his nostrils. However, something tells me, Master Jim, that in spite of that insult of 'bloody old blockhead,' you'd have been satisfied if I'd sold for five shillings, and perhaps less, the clock that is the honor of my life, and which I've destined for you if I don't make a gift of it one day to the great Englishman who destroys the fleet of the French dogs. Doubtless you'd run after that little guttersnipe to give it to him? Go on, you're less than a simpleton, you're a girl!"

So saying, my dear father gratified me with a clout, with which, unfortunately, his gout did not intervene, and I went, impelled by his imperious strength as much as chagrin, to take refuge in the back room. There I shed abundant tears.

It's true, I confessed to myself. I would have given it to him, and I'd give it to him again!

That my father had been called a bloody old blockhead did not change my sentiment at all. However, I took the full measure of that insult, whose expression was so new to me. That measure, however, I regretted less for my father than with regard to the difficulty that Reverend Gunson's son would find on coming back the next day.

What temerity! I thought. *What spirit of decision!* Exactly what my books had made me admire most in our great men. I was still subject, with a kind of delight, but nevertheless without taking account of it, to the authority of the tone, the ascendancy of the gaze and the manners of the "bad lot," the "little guttersnipe." How glad I would have been to have him as a friend, to love and fear him! As happy as the girls whose hair young boors pull from behind and pinch their arms until they bleed. "Go on, you're a girl!" my father had said. I did not think that shameful. I was only sorry to have been divined.

That evening, I peeled the onions and carrots like a valet in a big house—which is to say that I spoiled half of them. I forgot to close the tap of the barrel, as is recommended in the *Directions to*

⁵ This pedigree is, of course, fictitious, but it is worth noting that the maiden name of the mother of Horatio Nelson, born in Norfolk in 1858, was Suckling, and that she was the great-niece of Robert Walpole the prime minister. Nelson's father was the Reverend Edmund Nelson, and he was named after Baron Horatio Walpole, his godfather. Nelson's maternal uncle, also Maurice Suckling, was a naval captain, whose example formed his character and who patronage assisted his early naval career.

⁶ The first adjective is rendered in the original as *damnée* [damned] but the author subsequently inserts a footnote explaining that the English word he is translating thus is "bloody." I have, in consequence, followed suit, and have taken the liberty of translating his "*sacré*" [sacred] as "damned," that being the nearest equivalent among English expletives with regard to the intended effect.

Servants of my dear Jonathan Swift,⁷ and went to bed without supper, after having received a second clout on the head. That night, however, I dreamed that I was a girl, that the Pastor's son beat me more forcefully than my father, and that I gave him the marvelous clock.

⁷ The scathingly satirical guide-book in question, published in 1731, was one of Swift's last completed works, and presumably reflects a long and bitter disenchantment with his domestic staff.