

SIR RICHARD STEELE
THE TATLER

EDITED BY
LEWIS GIBBS

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INTRODUCTION

Having recommended the *Tatler* to the world in the opening number, and drawn attention to the benefits to be derived from this new publication, Steele continues as follows: 'I therefore earnestly desire all persons, without distinction, to take it for the present gratis. . . .'

This method of advertising has a curiously modern ring, and suggests that Steele, evidently a shrewd man of business, ought to have made a fortune. And in fact he had many of the qualities which are generally supposed to lead to that kind of success. He was energetic, self-assured, endlessly resourceful, and unfailingly sanguine. In his time he was a trooper in the Life Guards, a captain in Lord Lucas's regiment of foot, a dramatist, a gentleman-waiter to Prince George of Denmark, gazetteer, commissioner of stamps, the founder (and largely the writer) of numerous periodicals, a member of parliament, a patentee of Drury Lane Theatre, and one of the commission for inquiring into the estates forfeited by the rebels in 1715. And if this list—which is by no means complete—fails to give an adequate idea of the variety of his activities, it may be added that he once lost money in an attempt to find the Philosopher's Stone, and in his later life was concerned with an original, but unsuccessful, project for bringing live fish to the London market.

Instead of making a fortune, however, Steele was never out of debt. His case bears a certain resemblance to that of Sheridan, and more than one stock anecdote (such as that of the dinner-party at which the numerous servants were all bailiff's men) is told of both of them with equal force and probability. There is also an engaging likeness between him and Fielding. It was noticed by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who knew the former well and was related to the latter. They were both perpetually in difficulties over money, she observed, 'yet each of them

was so formed for happiness it is a pity he was not immortal.'

Steele brought out the *Tatler* because he wanted money, and the result was something new in literature. Not that a periodical publication was in itself a new thing, but this one had unusual qualities. In accordance with its motto it took the whole range of social activity—*quicquid agunt homines*—for its province. Women were not overlooked. Mr. Bickerstaff (Steele borrowed the name from Swift) paid a remarkable amount of attention to them in his 'lucubrations'; and what he had to say on that subject was eagerly read. 'I resolve also,' he announced shrewdly, 'to have something which may be of entertainment to the fair sex, in honour of whom I have invented the title of this paper.' The entertainment thus provided was something of a novelty then, and even to-day much of it remains curiously fresh and attractive.

Macaulay, who regarded Steele chiefly as a foil for the impeccable Addison, was obliged to admit, though grudgingly, that he was 'not ill qualified' for the task he had undertaken. He was a man of the world, a wit, and as good a scholar as he had any need to be. Whoever bought the *Tatler* could rely on being amused, edified, and improved, in return for his penny. If the idea of Steele as a moralist seems at first a little surprising, it should be remembered that eight years earlier, when he was Captain Steele, he had written *The Christian Hero*. It is true that his knowledge of the town, which he now placed at the service of his readers, had been acquired at first hand and not without some damage to his virtue; but his heart was in the right place. He was warm-blooded and generous—a cheerful, though not unrepentant, sinner—and entirely free from smugness and hypocrisy. His moralizings are to the point and rarely dull, and they can frequently be found within hailing distance of a tolerably broad jest. His comedies, three of which were written before he began the *Tatler*, show the same tendency. 'They were the first,' said Hazlitt, 'that were written expressly with a view, not to imitate the manners, but to reform the morals of the age.'

At the outset Steele thought it prudent to provide for various tastes and interests in his readers, and therefore grouped his material under five headings: Pleasure (including Gallantry and Entertainment), Poetry, Learning, Foreign and Domestic News, and whatever he found himself able 'to offer on any other subject.' However, he did not adhere rigidly to this scheme, some departments of which proved comparatively sterile. As gazetteer, for instance, he had earlier and better foreign intelligence than could be got by *Dyer's Letter* or the *Daily Courant*; but after the failure of the peace negotiations and the costly victory of Malplaquet, foreign intelligence lost much of its attraction. The domestic news likewise took an awkward turn for the Whigs before Mr. Bickerstaff laid down his pen. As time went on it was the somewhat vague final item of the list which tended to swallow up the rest; but there was always something improvised about the make-up of the *Tatler*, and this gave (as it still gives) a pleasant sense of informality and unexpectedness. It also largely accounts for the nature of the present selection, in which complete numbers are rarely reproduced. For a while Steele's touch was uncertain: indeed, in the sixth number he was reduced to the miserable expedient of summarizing part of the story of the *Iliad*—for which he had the grace to apologize in No. 7. However, it was not long before the success of the paper was assured. The separate numbers were brought out in economical style on inferior paper and in 'scurvy letter,' but the bound volumes were handsomely produced, and sold at the stiff price of a guinea apiece. The publication ran from 12 April 1709 to 2nd January 1710/11, making 271 numbers in all. It was still in the full tide of popularity when it was brought to an end.

It is impossible to think of Steele without also thinking of Addison, and this is often unfortunate for Steele's reputation. It is true, of course, that Addison's genius was of a higher order than Steele's, but the latter had valuable qualities of his own, such as a robust inventiveness, good humour, and a warm, impulsive humanity.

The difference is not unlike that between the thoroughly human, but not infallible, Mr. Bickerstaff, and the aloof and somewhat bloodless Mr. Spectator. The finest things in the *Tatler* may be Addison's, but the *Tatler* itself is Steele's creation, and so, for that matter, is the *Spectator*. It is Steele's chief title to fame that he can fairly be described as the only begetter of both of them. He owed much to Addison and acknowledged the debt with an emphatic and generous gratitude which has been remembered and quoted against him ever since. But it was Steele himself who said, and truly, that whatever Addison had given him, it was he who had given Addison to the world.

As far as the *Tatler* is concerned it is worth while to point out that Addison left London for Ireland two days before the paper appeared, and that his first contribution was printed in No. 18. Altogether he was responsible for just over forty numbers, while Steele wrote more than four times as many, besides doing the editorial work. The pair were also jointly concerned in upwards of thirty other numbers. In his preface, Steele, after mentioning contributions from Swift, acknowledges, in a well-known passage, the help received from a gentleman 'who will be nameless,' and who, of course, is Addison. Steele observes that he has no one else to thank 'for any frequent assistance'; and, in fact, the help he got from others, such as Congreve, Hughes, Harrison, Fuller, and Greenwood, was trifling.

The fact that the *Tatler* was the forerunner of the *Spectator* should not be allowed to mislead our judgment. The truth is, the former is best considered independently: it differs in many ways from its successor and has virtues peculiar to itself. The question whether it is, or is not, inferior, is beside the point. Everyone knows something about the *Spectator*. People who have never heard of the 'Case of the Petticoat' or the 'Court of Honour,' are familiar, by name, at any rate, with Sir Roger de Coverley. The *Tatler* has been comparatively and unduly neglected. It is not pure gold throughout, but, after all, this is no more than one would have to say of the collected numbers

of any periodical whatever. It is in the *Tatler*, however, that Steele is at his happiest, and it is here that we find examples of Addison's ironic wit, as exquisite as anything he wrote afterwards. Moreover, Steele's idea of dividing his paper into separate sections, often results in a delightful variety of length, subject-matter, and tone.

Besides its well understood significance in the history of literature, the *Tatler* has the special interest which is bound to belong to a work dealing familiarly with the social life of a bygone age. But whatever value we attach to these things, the present volume has been prepared in the full confidence that, quite apart from any such considerations, the reader will find it richly rewarding.

LEWIS GIBBS.

NOTE

For the sake of clearness and consistency, modern usage has been followed, as far as possible, in such matters as spelling and punctuation. The extracts have been supplied with headings, and are numbered for the purpose of reference. The corresponding numbers of the original issues will be found in the table of contents.

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1. *Mr. Bickerstaff issues his proposals*

Though the other papers, which are published for the use of the good people of England, have certainly very wholesome effects, and are laudable in their particular kinds, they do not seem to come up to the main design of such narrations, which, I humbly presume, should be principally intended for the use of politic persons who are so public-spirited as to neglect their own affairs to look into transactions of state. Now these gentlemen for the most part being persons of strong zeal and weak intellects, it is both a charitable and necessary work to offer something whereby such worthy and well-affected members of the commonwealth may be instructed, after their reading, what to think; which shall be the end and purpose of this my paper, wherein I shall, from time to time, report and consider all matters of what kind soever that shall occur to me, and publish such my advices and reflections every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday in the week, for the convenience of the post. I resolve also to have something which may be of entertainment to the fair sex, in honour of whom I have invented the title of this paper. I therefore earnestly desire all persons, without distinction, to take it in for the present gratis, and hereafter at the price of one penny, forbidding all hawkers to take more for it at their peril.¹ And I desire all persons to consider that I am at a very great charge for proper materials for this work, as well as that before I resolved upon it, I had settled a correspondence in all parts of the known and knowing world. And forasmuch as this globe is not trodden upon by mere drudges of business only, but that men of spirit and genius are justly to be esteemed as considerable agents in it, we shall not, upon a dearth of news, present you with musty foreign edicts or dull proclamations, but shall divide our relation of the passages which occur in action or discourse throughout this town,

as well as elsewhere, under such dates of places as may prepare you for the matter you are to expect, in the following manner.

All accounts of gallantry, pleasure, and entertainment shall be under the article of White's chocolate-house; poetry, under that of Will's coffee-house; learning, under the title of the Grecian; foreign and domestic news, you will have from Saint James's coffee-house; and what else I have to offer on any other subject shall be dated from my own apartment.

I once more desire my reader to consider that as I cannot keep an ingenious man to go daily to Will's under twopence each day, merely for his charges; to White's under sixpence; nor to the Grecian, without allowing him some plain Spanish,² to be as able as others at the learned table; and that a good observer cannot speak with even Kidney³ at Saint James's without clean linen; I say, these considerations will, I hope, make all persons willing to comply with my humble request (when my gratis stock is exhausted) of a penny apiece; especially since they are sure of some proper amusement, and that it is impossible for me to want means to entertain them.

2. *Clarissa and Chloe*

All hearts at present pant for two ladies only, who have for some time engrossed the dominion of the town. They are indeed both exceeding charming, but differ very much in their excellences. The beauty of Clarissa is soft, that of Chloe piercing. When you look at Clarissa, you see the most exact harmony of feature, complexion, and shape; you find in Chloe nothing extraordinary in any one of those particulars, but the whole woman irresistible. Clarissa looks languishing; Chloe killing; Clarissa never fails of gaining admiration; Chloe of moving desire. The gazers at Clarissa are at first unconcerned, as if they were observing a fine picture. They who behold Chloe, at the

first glance discover transport, as if they met with their dearest friend. These different perfections are suitably represented by the last great painter Italy has sent us, Mr. Jervase.¹ Clarissa is by that skilful hand placed in a manner that looks artless, and innocent of the torments she gives; Chloe is drawn with a liveliness that shows she is conscious of, but not affected with, her perfections. Clarissa is a shepherdess, Chloe a country girl. I must own, the design of Chloe's picture shows to me great mastery in the painter; for nothing could be better imagined than the dress he has given her of a straw hat and a ribbon, to represent that sort of beauty which enters the heart with a certain familiarity and cheats it into a belief that it has received a lover as well as an object of love. The force of their different beauties is seen also in the effects it makes on their lovers. The admirers of Chloe are eternally gay and well pleased: those of Clarissa melancholy and thoughtful. And as this passion always changes the natural man into a quite different creature from what he was before, the love of Chloe makes coxcombs; that of Clarissa, madmen. There were of each kind just now in this room. Here was one that whistles, laughs, sings, and cuts capers, for love of Chloe. Another has just now writ three lines to Clarissa, then taken a turn in the garden, then came back again, then tore his fragment, then called for some chocolate, then went away without it.

3. *Theatrical intelligence*

Letters from the Haymarket¹ inform us that on Saturday night last the opera of *Pyrrhus and Demetrius*² was performed with great applause. This intelligence is not very acceptable to us friends of the theatre; for the stage being an entertainment of the reason and all our faculties, this way of being pleased with the suspense of them for three hours together, and being given up to the shallow satisfaction of the eyes and ears only, seems to arise rather

from the degeneracy of our understanding than an improvement of our diversions. That the understanding has no part in the pleasure is evident, from what these letters very positively assert, to wit, that a great part of the performance was done in Italian; and a great critic³ fell into fits in the gallery at seeing, not only time and place, but languages and nations confused in the most incorrigible manner. His spleen is so extremely moved on this occasion, that he is going to publish a treatise against operas, which he thinks have already inclined us to thoughts of peace, and if tolerated must infallibly dispirit us from carrying on the war. He has communicated his scheme to the whole room, and declared in what manner things of this kind were first introduced. He has upon this occasion considered the nature of sounds in general, and made a very elaborate digression upon the London cries, wherein he had shown from reason and philosophy, why oysters are cried, card-matches sung, and turnips and all other vegetables neither cried, sung, nor said, but sold, with an accent and tone neither natural to man or beast. This piece seems to be taken from the model of that excellent discourse of Mrs. Manly the school-mistress, concerning samplers.⁴

Advices from the upper end of Piccadilly say that May-fair is utterly abolished⁵; and we hear Mr. Pinkethman⁶ has removed his ingenious company of strollers to Greenwich. But other letters from Deptford say the company is only making thither and not yet settled; but that several heathen gods and goddesses, which are to descend in machines, landed at the King's Head stairs last Saturday. Venus and Cupid went on foot from thence to Greenwich; Mars got drunk in the town, and broke his landlord's head, for which he sat in the stocks the whole evening; but Mr. Pinkethman giving security that he should do nothing this ensuing summer, he was set at liberty. The most melancholy part of all was that Diana was taken in the act of fornication with a boatman, and committed by Justice Wrathful, which has, it seems, put a stop to the diversions of the theatre of Blackheath.

But there goes down another Diana and a Patient Grizzel next tide from Billingsgate.

4. *Mr. Bickerstaff's wit declining, he makes his last will and testament*

If any gentleman or lady sends to Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq., at Mr. Morphew's, near Stationers' Hall,¹ by the penny post, the grief or joy of their soul, what they think fit of the matter shall be related in colours as much to their advantage as those in which Jervase has drawn the agreeable Chloe. But since, without such assistance, I frankly confess and am sensible that I have not a month's wit more, I think I ought, while I am in my sound health and senses, to make my will and testament; which I do in manner and form following:

'Imprimis, I give to the stock-jobbers about the Exchange of London, as a security for the trusts daily reposed in them, all my real estate; which I do hereby vest in the said body of worthy citizens for ever.

'Item, Forasmuch as it is very hard to keep land in repair without ready cash, I do, out of my personal estate, bestow the bear-skin,² which I have frequently lent to several societies about this town, to supply their necessities; I say, I give also the said bear-skin as an immediate fund to the said citizens for ever.

'Item, I do hereby appoint a certain number of the said citizens to take all the custom-house or customary oaths concerning all goods imported by the whole city, strictly directing that some select members, and not the whole number of a body corporate, should be perjured.

'Item, I forbid all n——s and persons of q——ty to watch bargains near and about the Exchange, to the diminution and wrong of the said stock-jobbers.'

Thus far, in as brief and intelligible a manner as any will can appear, until it is explained by the learned, I have disposed of my real and personal estate. But as I am an

adept, I have by birth an equal right to give also an indefeasible title to my endowments and qualifications, which I do in the following manner:

'Item, I give my chastity to all virgins who have withstood their market.

'Item, I give my courage among all who are ashamed of their distressed friends, all sneakers in assemblies, and men who show valour in common conversation.

'Item, I give my wit (as rich men give to the rich) among such as think they have enough already. And in case they shall not accept of the legacy, I give it to Bentivolio,³ to defend his Works, from time to time, as he shall think fit to publish them.

'Item, I bestow my learning upon the honorary members of the Royal Society.'

Now for the disposal of this body:

'As these eyes must one day cease to gaze on Teraminta, and this heart shall one day pant no more for her indignation: that is to say, since this body must be earth, I shall commit it to the dust in a manner suitable to my character. Therefore, as there are those who dispute whether there is any such real person as Isaac Bickerstaff, or not, I shall excuse all persons who appear what they really are, from coming to my funeral. But all those who are, in their way of life, *personae*, as the Latins have it, persons assumed,⁴ and who appear what they really are not, are hereby invited to that solemnity.

'The body shall be carried by six watchmen, who are never seen in the day.

'Item, The pall shall be held up by the six most known pretenders to honesty, wealth, and power, who are not possessed of any of them. The two first, a half-lawyer, a complete justice. The two next, a chemist, a projector.⁵ The third couple, a treasury-solicitor, and a small courtier.

'To make my funeral (what that solemnity, when done to common men, really is in itself) a very farce, and since all mourners are mere actors on these occasions, I shall desire those who are professedly such to attend mine.