

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

R.S. SURTEES

MR. SPONGE'S
SPORTING TOUR



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Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour

With an Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

THE special quality of Surtees seems to be quite ignored. I dare say this is because people think of him as a writer only for hunting fanatics, and, in fact, *Handley Cross*, with all the adventures of John Jorrocks, is a boring work. It was Surtees's *Pickwick*, thrown together without any conception of form and with not a trace of Dickens's genius for humorous character.

Dickens's wildest grotesques live in their own right; we do not feel that Dickens has invented them; we shouldn't be surprised to meet them anywhere. Jorrocks is a mere invention and in a vein of humour completely dead; that mid-Victorian humour which astonishes us in mid-Victorian *Punch*. Who now could read *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures*, so famous in those days? Jorrocks is in the same style. Even that episode, so often quoted, where he is carousing with Pigg, the huntsman, and, fearing a frost, asks him what the weather is like, has gone flat. Pigg opens the cupboard door in mistake for the shutter and answers, 'Hellish dark, and smells of cheese'. It won't really bear repetition, as you see.

But Surtees after Jorrocks, like Dickens after *Pickwick*, did acquire a form, and *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour* is a masterpiece in its own way. It is the story of a crook. Sponge has an arrangement with a horse-coper to take from him two thoroughly dangerous horses and hunt them as his own in the hope of selling them. He relies on his horsemanship to make them behave. What is remarkable is the portrait not only of Sponge, but of the whole society in which he moves.

It is an extraordinarily tough society, without any of that self-consciousness which belongs to Hemingway's heroes. The men are tough as a matter of course, yet they are by no means cut to pattern. Look at that sporting nobleman Lord Scamperdale, Master of the Flat Hat Hunt, and his toady Jack Spraggon. Scamperdale is exceedingly tough. One realizes in him one puzzling feature of the Regency—how men of fine manner and classical education could also be thugs, going out to beat up aged watchmen for a joke.

Surtees was born in 1805, and so wrote some time after the Regency, but its manner of thought survived in the country among squires and especially in hard hunting circles for half

a century after the Regent. A nation does not grow up in one piece. There are witches in Devonshire, and in many a farmhouse still when a man is dying they open the windows to let his spirit out.

Surtees's England is a century away from us; its peasantry are real peasantry and he describes them with the same fearless honesty that he brings to all his writing. He called them usually 'Chaw-bacons'. They are a poverty-stricken and brutalized race; he had no idea of romanticizing his moujiks. You see them as Goncharov saw his Zahar and Gogol his Petrushka, those two valet-serfs.

I don't know anybody except Surtees who gives this picture, or makes us feel so strongly what a good thing it is that in England we don't any more have a peasantry. Surtees does this without any political motive; he is not a propagandist; we trust him absolutely. Of course, he gives his own picture; he can't do anything else. 'Mr. Sponge' is contemporary with Trollope's *The Warden*, and what different pictures it gives of a different England; all authentic to a feeling of the time and all complementary when we allow for the writer's purpose and preoccupation.

Surtees is brilliant not only with touts, lags, and shysters, he is a master at the snob and the climber. His social parasites are inferior only to Thackeray's. In one respect he can be better than Thackeray. Thackeray's Lord Steyne in *Vanity Fair* is a common cad; compare him with Disraeli's Monmouth in *Coningsby*. Steyne and Monmouth are both founded on the real Lord Hertford, of that Hertford House where we now see the Wallace Collection. Monmouth, in *Coningsby*, is as arrogant and selfish as you like, a complete egotist, but he has the grand style; he is not a vulgarian, and Surtees's Lord Scamperdale in his quite different surroundings has the same quality. He is a simple country squire without any of Monmouth's magnificence, but he is still as different from Steyne as that authentic nobleman. He is a tough, but he does not smell of the gutter.

Probably Surtees owes this success to that observant eye and candour of speech which is his chief force as a writer. He has no cant of any kind; he is sucking up to nobody and no class. He has his moral standards, but he is not trying to preach them; there is none of that sense that we have, even in Trollope, of the moralizer. Trollope's world and Trollope's moralizing were also typical of the time, but Surtees has in pre-eminence that quality—which belongs also to Michael Scott, the author of *Tom Cringle's Log* and another neglected

master, not to speak of Gogol—of the *describer*. He writes of what he sees and knows, with a reckless sincerity especially refreshing in these self-conscious times.

I should think it would be almost impossible to read *Sponge* aloud; every second sentence has a broken back or tail, and the grammar is a mine of howlers. Neither does the man get on with the work. He stops at every corner, looks over every hedge. He will take half a page to tell you what some minor character is wearing, what he ate for breakfast. But this is just the charm of the work. Even in the great masterpieces of formal art, like *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina*, where the characters are really alive, and we deeply feel for them, they have the inescapable defect of their perfection as parts of a whole. They are made to measure. They are part of a grand drama and become, as representative of fundamental passions and dilemmas, a good deal larger than life; but they pay the penalty in a loss of immediacy.

That's why Gogol's people come through so much more vigorously than Tolstoy's, and why the diary writer, as a recorder of life, real living life, can beat any novelist out of the field. Pepys, Creevey, Greville, Kilvert after Tolstoy are like street and farm noises after a symphony. No novelist can get Kilvert's effects, where every detail is reported and we are looking at actual life.

But there are two kinds of novelists whose lack of form allows them a great deal of detail which is very close to reporting—which often, if we knew it, is almost certainly from direct observation. One is the slack novelist, filling out a chapter when he has run short of invention. Sergeant Bumptious in *Handley Cross* is such a piece of observation, and, for me at least, he is better than Dickens's Buzfuz, founded on the same real person, a certain Sergeant Bompas, renowned for bombast. Bumptious is a rougher sketch of a cruder man, but he jumps out of the page and the scene, while Buzfuz stays where he is put, as a comic character.

The other kind of novelist who achieves real life is the picaresque—Le Sage, Gogol, *Gil Blas* and *Dead Souls* are full of people so real that if you put them into a novel of formal construction it would have to be built round them. As secondary characters, if you fitted them in at all, they would steal the stage.

Surtees is not only a slack novelist, in *Sponge* he is also picaresque. He's licensed to stop anywhere and describe anything, or anyone, from a country house bedroom about 1850, with half a dozen different kinds of bath, to a spa

dandy and his waistcoats. I defy any writer to beat Surtees on clothes. He gives us not only cut and colour, but fabric and quality, the very sewing. He takes a page to give us Sponge's hunting coat, with lapped seams on the outside, and it's not a word too much. That coat is more real to us than our own for the good reason that it is not only an historic coat, but a moral coat. It expresses Surtees's moral idea, his hatred of sham, pretension, the shoddy in man or clothes, with a force all the more telling in that he is probably quite unaware of it. His eye is on the coat, which certainly existed, and even the fact that he likes it has to be inferred.

Like the true picaresque, he does not deal much in admiration. Sponge is a swindler without a single redeeming virtue except perhaps his clothes and his nerve. Surtees gave him the clothes as the proper equipment of a swell mobster and also a superb horseman. He could not bear to dress such a horseman in anything but the best. But the clothes are almost the only virtue he allows him and only Surtees would think of clothes as a virtue. Even Sponge's courage is the worst of its kind, the desperate gamble of a con-man. He is not only a crook but a mean crook who will cheat a servant. Among Surtees's gallery of lags, touts and shysters he is surpassed only by Facey Romford in *Mr. Facey Romford's Hounds*, who is an oaf as well as a crook and does not wash.

In this respect Gil Blas, even Gogol's Chichikov, is inferior to Sponge. He is done, in Henry James's phrase, to a turn. And this is Surtees's great virtue as a novelist. He never softens to a man; he never tries to catch a reader's sympathy for his worst, his meanest hero. He is objective to the last, like Flaubert, like Proust, and very unlike the later Thackeray.

It is again typical of the picaresque writer that his dialogue is so good. He is in no hurry to make it serve any purpose except the revelation of character. All Surtees is full of good dialogue in its special kind, like reported talk. Scamperdale and Spraggon are at their best in their smallest talk; it is as though we overheard them. We feel the very stuffiness of Scamperdale's den in their yawns and starts.

Surtees was himself a country squire from the deep North, the M.F.H. of a scratch pack. He had all the prejudices of his kind. He hated the fashionable places and people and smart society, he was suspicious of any kind of cleverness. He was prickly and hard, he had little compassion except for dogs and horses. He is pitiless to his victims. When Sponge and Spraggon unite to swindle and bully a wretched youth called Pacey, he records every detail of the latter's humiliation with

the zest of loathing. Pacey was silly and weak and so despicable to him. Surtees prefers crooks to fools, because they are hard, because, as he thinks, they have no illusions.

Sponge is not a book for the sentimentalist, but for the man who likes to understand something of human nature in both its strength and weakness, especially in its power of creating, each man for himself, a complete ideal world, social and moral, and living in it.

Of Surtees's other novels *Mr. Facey Romford's Hounds* is not much inferior to *Sponge*, and *Sponge* reappears in it. The rest are tedious and flat to the general reader. To the social historian, on the other hand, they are of unique value. *Ask Mamma* and *Plain or Ringlets?* record mid-Victorian life as seen by a highly critical contemporary eye at a time when all the other novelists, even Thackeray, were sentimentalizing it.

Surtees lived through the biggest social revolution in this country between 1066 and 1938. He was born into the Regency, Pierce Egan's London and the horse age; he describes the three days' journey from his home in Durham to London. He lived to see the railways everywhere, to travel as fast and easily as we do now, and to know a society for whom the Regency buck was not only a brute, but, more significantly, an aberration, a monster.

In Surtees's eyes probably the most striking change was the beginning of the family holiday for the middle class; tens of thousands on the move instead of the few hundred who alone, before the railway age and the excursion train, had been able to afford to travel farther than the county town or the village fair. He records the more superficial consequences: spas crowded with husband-hunting girls and city fops, town-bred rich men playing squire and sportsman, usually, he tells us, with a typical twist of prejudice, in the wrong clothes.

What struck him was not only the complete change in the character of fashionable seaside places like Brighton, but in the manners of the visitors. The place set out to cater for the crowd, and the visitors had quite other notions of amusement than the Regency bucks and their Harriet Wilsons, for whom the seaside was simply an Alsatia in which they could live openly with mistresses who had to be more discreetly entertained in London.

Surtees had not loved the bucks, but he still more detested the mobs, which seemed to him all that was vulgar. No doubt they were. Newly prosperous and newly emancipated people

usually are so. They keep the competitive habit of mind which has brought them up in the world and think of society in terms of rivalry. Especially on holiday among strangers they set out to impress. In these mid-century years leading up to the Great Exhibition all industry was booming and the whole country was full of new rich. Surtees describes them, in mass and in detail, with the particularity of his disgust. But he also jibes at the smart gentry, and in their despite makes a hero of the grocer Jorrocks.

He was the typical provincial Tory magistrate who values himself as a plain country man and is, in fact, a much more complex and involuted, thin-skinned and incalculable person than his compeer in general society who hunts with a smart pack: some genial snob like Apperley.

Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour is solid Surtees; he comes through in every line. The reason is that he has no idea of striking any kind of attitude. He has no self-consciousness, as man or writer. He is not afraid of anybody and rolls no logs. To read him is to escape for an hour or two from eye-wash and cant into an atmosphere as brisk as one of his hunting mornings, sharp and raw, highly unflattering to everything in sight, faces, hedges, trees, nibbled pasture and greasy plough, but thoroughly bracing.

JOYCE CARY

A CHRONOLOGY OF R. S. SURTEES

- 1805 May. Robert Smith Surtees (R.S.S.) is born at The Riding, Northumberland. His father, Anthony, was the Squire of Hamsterley, Co. Durham, and—according to Nimrod—‘a true sample of the old English squire, and as good a judge of a horse, a hound, a bottle of port-wine and an oak tree as any man in England’.
- n.d. Educated at Ovingham School. The headmaster, the Revd James Birkett, ‘had the most ludicrous propensity for making and hoarding up walking sticks that ever was heard of. He could not see or hear of a promising sapling but he would be at it, and having converted it into a walking stick, would add it to his redundant collection.’ (cf. Jogglebury Crowdey in *Mr. Sponge’s Sporting Tour*.)
- 1818–19 Attends Durham Grammar School.
- 1822 Articled to a solicitor in Newcastle.
- 1825 ‘Further articled’ to a Mr. William Bell, of Bow Churchyard in London.
- 1825–8 Hunts with the Old Surrey, the headquarters of which was Croydon. The hunt was much favoured by City tradesmen like Mr. Jorrocks, the Cockney grocer.
- 1828 Admitted in Chancery, but shortly thereafter abandons the law as a profession.
- 1829 Pays the first of many visits to Brighton. Visits Paris. In Boulogne he is presented with—and hunts—a pack of hounds after its English owner has been imprisoned for debt; and is granted permission to hunt the royal forest at Samer, where ‘a very harmonious evening closed with so grand a debauch of *Eau de Vie* that towards midnight Monsieur Saurange was carried home on a shutter’. Begins to indulge his ‘taste for scribbling’: shows his first attempt at a novel to two friends who ‘so laughed it to scorn that I put it on the fire and half

- resolved to abandon the pursuit of letters for the future'.
- 1830 Feb. Replaces the celebrated Nimrod as Hunting Correspondent of the *Sporting Magazine*, signing his contributions 'Nim South' or 'A Durham Sportsman'.
- 1831 His brother Anthony dies of smallpox: R.S.S. becomes heir to Hamsterley Hall.
Publishes *The Horseman's Manual*, the only one of his books he allows to be published under his name. Dedicates the book to his Durham neighbour, Ralph Lambton, a celebrated huntsman and 'a perfect specimen of a highly polished English gentleman'.
Feb. R.S.S. breaks with the *Sporting Magazine*. May. Found the *New Sporting Magazine (NSM)* in partnership with Rudolf Ackermann: Ackermann is the printer and publisher, R.S.S. the editor and Hunting Correspondent. Persuades Nimrod to contribute.
July. 'John Jorrocks of Great Coram Street, Grocer and Tea Dealer of St. Botolph's Lane in the City of London' makes his first appearance in the third issue of the *NSM*, and appears there regularly until Sept 1834.
- 1836 Dec. R.S.S. gives up the editorship of the *NSM*: he may have had some differences of opinion with Ackermann, and needs to spend more time at Hamsterley. But he retains his interest in the magazine, and continues to contribute to it.
- 1837 March. Is persuaded to stand as Tory candidate for Gateshead ('I am a decided friend to Improvement in every shape and way'), but withdraws before polling day.
R.S.S.'s mother dies.
- 1838 R.S.S.'s father dies, and he succeeds to Hamsterley Hall: in addition to hunting—he acquires a pack of hounds, but disbands it in 1840—he appears to have been a fair and conscientious landlord and a firm advocate of agricultural improvement.
Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities published in book

form by Walter Spiers, with 12 uncoloured illustrations by 'Phiz'. 2nd edn. 1839.

March. *Handley Cross*—the second part of the Jorrocks trilogy—begins its serialization in the *NSM*.

- 1841 May. Marries Elizabeth Jane Fenwick.
- 1842 Appointed JP, and Deputy Lieutenant for Co. Durham.
Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities reissued by Ackermann, with 15 coloured plates by Henry Alken.
- 1843 *Handley Cross* published in book form by Colburn; no illustrations.
 Feb.–June 1844; *Hillingdon Hall*—the concluding volume of the trilogy—is serialized in the *NSM*: illustrations by Wildrake and Henry Heath.
 Death of Nimrod, only months after R.S.S. had derided him as 'Pomponius Ego' in *Handley Cross*.
- 1844 Joins a committee established in Durham to combat agitation to repeal the Corn Laws.
- 1845–6 Contributes a series of articles on hunting to *Bell's Life in London*: published in 1846 as *Analysis of the Hunting Field*.
- 1845 *Hillingdon Hall* published in book form by Colburn; no illustrations.
- 1846 Oct. *Hawbuck Grange* serialized in *Bell's Life in London* under the title 'Sporting Sketches'; concluded June 1847. No illustrations.
- 1847 Son, Anthony, born.
Hawbuck Grange published in volume form by Longmans; illustrations by 'Phiz'.
- 1849 Jan. *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour*—R.S.S.'s first popular success—begins its serialization in Harrison Ainsworth's *New Monthly Magazine*; concludes April 1851.
- 1851 Ackermann reissues Nimrod's *Life of John Mytton*, together with R.S.S.'s 'Memoir of Nimrod'.
Young Tom Hall begins its serialization in the *New Monthly Magazine*: R.S.S. never completes this novel after breaking with Harrison Ainsworth, who

- had made use of his name in an advertisement, and so broken his rule of anonymity (Jan. 1852).
- 1852 *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour* is reissued in 13 parts by Bradbury and Evans; and, for the first time, one of R.S.S.'s novels is illustrated by John Leech. R.S.S. originally asked Thackeray if he would provide the illustrations: Thackeray replied that 'I have not the slightest idea how to draw a horse, a dog, or a sporting scene of any sort', but went on to say that 'My friend Leech, I should think, would be your man—he is of a sporting turn, and to my mind draws a horse excellently.'
- 1853 March. *Handley Cross* is reissued in 17 monthly parts, with illustrations by Leech.
- 1856 R.S.S. is appointed High Sheriff for Co. Durham.
- 1857–8 *Ask Mama* is issued in 13 monthly parts by Bradbury and Evans, with illustrations by Leech; published in one volume 1858.
- 1858–60 *Plain or Ringlets* is similarly published in 13 parts by Bradbury and Evans, with Leech's illustrations; published in one volume 1860.
- 1863–4 R.S.S. works on his 'Social and Sporting Recollections'—fragments of autobiography which were eventually published in E. D. Cumings's *Robert Smith Surtees (Creator of Jorrocks) 1805–64* (Edinburgh, 1923).
- R.S.S. writes *Facey Romford's Hounds*, in which several characters from *Sponge*—Romford himself, Soapey Sponge, Lucy Glitters, Robert Foozle—make a welcome reappearance. Unfortunately, both R.S.S. and Leech died before Bradbury and Evans began publication in 1864: Leech completed 14 of the 24 plates, and—appropriately enough—'Phiz' completed the series. *Facey Romford's Hounds* was issued in one volume in 1865.
- 1864 March. R.S.S., who had taken to wintering in Brighton with his wife, dies on the night of 16 March, in Mutton's Hotel.

MR. SPONGE'S SPORTING TOUR

PREFACE

THE author gladly avails himself of the convenience of a Preface for stating, that it will be seen at the close of the work why he makes such a characterless character as Mr. Sponge the hero of his tale.

He will be glad if it serves to put the rising generation on their guard against specious, promiscuous acquaintance, and trains them on to the noble sport of hunting, to the exclusion of its mercenary, illegitimate off-shoots.

November, 1852

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