

# Scaramouche: Rogue of the French Revolution

A good historical novel—as Rafael Sabatini's [\*Scaramouche\*](#) is—resembles a bridge game, where the hands and strategies are revealed only gradually. History itself unfolds irregularly, with disruptions, false starts, and surprises. Against the backdrop of complicated, vicious, and corrosive events in France in the late 1780s and early 1790s, Sabatini draws his characters from smallscale lives into the great dramas underway. That these historic events were in part unintended consequences of bungling efforts at social reform, exploited by tyrants and madmen, may suggest parallels to the mid-20th century and later.

Sabatini (1875-1950), half-Italian, half-British, had published a dozen novels without any great success before *Scaramouche*, composed in English with a slight foreign flavor, became a best seller. It inspired two motion pictures of the same name, one in 1923, starring Ramón Novarro, and the other in 1952, starring Stewart Granger.

The generic label “romance” in the book's subtitle recalls *roman*, the French word for novel, as well as features of French Romantic fiction, illustrated by Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas *père*. Conventions such as disguises, mysterious birth, and Hugo's cherished exploitation of antitheses—in characters, in conduct—are called into service, making the work particularly suited to the taste of moviegoers. For instance, when the hero, André-Louis Moreau, a lawyer by profession, the godson of a titled man but with uncertain parentage, finds himself pursued by royal justice, he drops out of sight by joining a troupe of itinerant *commedia dell'arte* actors.

There, he takes on the role of Scaramouche, a rascally figure.

His acting talent sees him through various scrapes. He takes up fencing, then dueling—a useful skill in times of class struggle. As for those clichéd features of Romantic literature such as *la voix du sang* (“the voice of blood”—a recognition of kinship) and *coup de théâtre* (a sudden, dramatic disclosure), they are utilized subtly.

Love interests have their place likewise, and the rivalry between Moreau and his antagonist, an arrogant nobleman, is crucial. The female characters are mostly not cardboard but lively, interesting, and well delineated. But they do not ride a feminist hobby-horse. For that reason alone, the book is a pleasure. The author does not perform a sociologist’s dissection of class antagonisms, nor tell readers what to think. Plunged into the thick of things, his hero observes, reasons, and draws conclusions. Readers can draw theirs alongside him.

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