



The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground

James Fenimore Cooper

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The Spy: a Tale of the Neutral Ground was James Fenimore Cooper's second novel, published in 1821. This was the earliest United States novel to win wide and permanent fame and may be said to have begun the type of romance which dominated U.S. fiction for 30 years. The action takes place during the American Revolution. The share of historical fact in the story is not large, but the action takes place so near to great events that the characters are all invested with something of the dusky light of heroes, while George Washington moves among them like an unsuspected god. The book is full of swelling rhetoric and the ardent national piety of Cooper's generation. The plot ranges back and forth over the neutral ground between the Continental and British armies with great haste and sweep. To rapid movement Cooper adds the merit of a very real setting. He knew Westchester County, New York, where he was then living, and its sparse legends as Walter Scott knew the Anglo-Scottish border. Thus, the topography of The Spy is drawn with a firm hand. Accepting for women the romantic ideals of the day, the heroines of the novel are cast in the conventional mold of helplessness and decorum. The less sheltered Betty Flanagan, no heroine at all in the elegant sense, is amusing and truthful. The gentlemen are little more than mere heroes, whatever the plain fellows may be. But Harvey Birch, peddler and patriot, his character remotely founded upon that of a real spy who had helped John Jay, is essentially memorable and arresting.

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