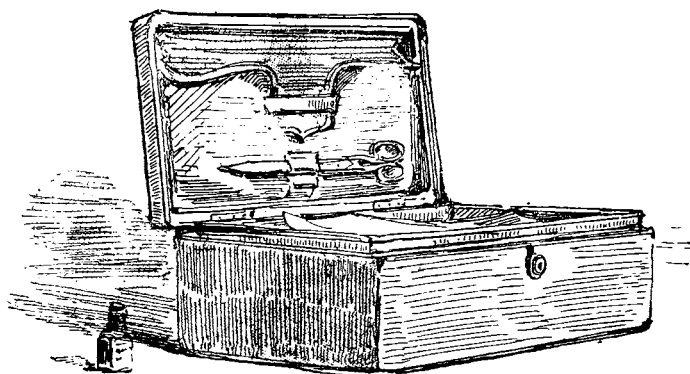


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THE EMBLEM OF OFFICE

WITH THACKERAY IN AMERICA

CHAPTER I

“Esmond”—Lectures at Liverpool and Manchester—Savile Morton—Voyage across the Atlantic—Boston—Custom House—Shandrydan—Tremont—A Rapid Repast—Bunker’s Hill—MM. Prescott and Ticknor—In the Cars—“Thackeray’s Works”—Arrival in New York—Mr. Bancroft—Spirit-Rapping—The Rev. Theodore Parker and Horace Greeley.

“Six months’ tumbling about the world will do you no harm,” was the inducing phrase which Thackeray used when he kindly asked me to accompany him as his factotum and amanuensis on his forthcoming journeyings in the United States. When he noticed my hesitation as to acceptance of the post, arising in a great measure from my doubts as to my having

the proper capacity—or “spryness,” as he expressed it—for organising and arranging the business part of the lecturing, he pointed out that another half-year would elapse before his departure, and that I could try my ’prentice-hand, first, during these months, in the same capacity. ’Twas thus I found myself installed in doing secretarial work at his pleasant Kensingtonian home in Young Street. The emblem of office, a knowing-looking green dispatch-box, of which the outer leather case bore many traces of long and honourable use in Continental travel, was presented to me by the owner, then possessor of a more splendid desk. I retain it now—not only as a valued memento and gift of the owner, but as reminding me of the many pleasant epistolary, documentary, and sketching fragments it contained during my subsequent stay in America. A selection of these sketches has been made, upon which the following text may be taken as merely a running commentary.

Two scraps of paper lying for two-score years dormant in this receptacle, in pocket-books, will serve to show the sort of mingled preoccupations engaging the author at that time, and will illustrate the easy duties involved in secretaryship. The first is a memorandum directing me to make inquiries at the British Museum.

When my new indoctrination as amanuensis

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A SCRAP OF PAPER

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began, the first portion of "Esmond" was completed, written upon small slips of note-paper kept in the firm grip of an elastic band. They were not written, as was the case with the calligraphy of his great prototype the novel-writer Balzac, in crabbed handwriting, bristling with after-thought emendations, but, on the contrary, in the beautiful penmanship so well known, and of which the annexed slip is another example,

*Find out
 Names of ~~the~~ 6 or 8 English
 and Imperial Officers present at the
 Siege of Lille. -*

*(the wrong)
 The ~~is~~ date of the first account
 of the battle of Wagnendale in
 the London Gazette. 1708.*

*The date of the Gazette containing
 the acct. of Oudenarde.*

and with scarcely any interpolations or marginal *repentirs*. The person who stated that all the writing of "Esmond" MS. was dictated was, therefore, to that extent inexact. The passage to which the note refers

is in the second book of "Esmond," and contained, I think, in about the fifteenth chapter. I went to the great and unique source of all English trustworthy information, the British Museum, and I asked for the *Gazettes* as printed in 1708 by the great Jacob Tonson, in Gray's Inn Gate, and I ferreted out the items to be incorporated in the narrative. But this last became so complex, as the author went on with his story, that he had to trust not alone to vicarious excerpts, but used to charter a cab and to come along with me to the British Museum. An appeal to an obliging attendant brought us through the non-public portion of the Library, where, I remember, on his touching a hidden spring in what seemed to be beautifully bound folios, but which were in reality only the sham backs of these, a door flew open, and we were 'in the presence of Sir Antonio Panizzi, whose life Mr. Fagan has so pleasantly unfolded in after-years. He readily granted permission to write in one of the secluded galleries, at a table placed in the midst of the volumes to be consulted. I sat down and wrote to dictation the scathing sentences about the great Marlborough, the denouncing of Cadogan, etc., etc. As a curious instance of literary contagion, it may be here stated that I got quite bitten with the expressed anger at their misdeeds against General Webb, Thackeray's kinsman and ancestor; and that I

then looked upon Secretary Cardonnell's conduct with perfect loathing. I was quite delighted to find his meannesses justly pilloried in “*Esmond's*” pages.

It was not without peculiar piquancy that this was done upon the site of old Montague House and its gardens, famous in those Queen Anne days; as “*Prue*,” Steele's wife, exclaimed: “This is where you wretches go and fight duels.” To save ears polite, the irascible expletive applied to Cardonnell, printed in full in the first edition, was mitigated to the more presentable “d——d” form in after-issues.

Equally complaisant were the secretary and committee of the Athenæum Club, where the same method of dictation was pursued in one of the side rooms off the large library there. I do not recollect that these utterances, not at all delivered *sotto voce*, disturbed the equanimity of either Church, law, or science dignitaries frequenting that luxuriously seated library.

A red-letter day was Saturday, May 28th, when Thackeray was able to write the word “*End*,” thus concluding the “*History of Esmond*.” It was, I recollect, on a pleasant balmy day, and the work had proceeded in accordance with that atmosphere to its close. A friendly party had been invited to dinner, and he expressed a wish that I should join the

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circle. The temptation was great—with the prospect of drinking a bumper to success. My habiliments, however, were not of the festive, but of the workaday sort, and I could not readily get another suit; so I lost the chance of celebrating the event in proper trim.

The visit to America then came uppermost.

A week before this date, as may be seen from the following letter addressed by Thackeray to Mr. Felt, the formal proposal had reached London.

13, *Young Street, Kensington.*

May 21st, 1852.

SIR,—

His Excellency the American Minister [The Hon. Abbott Lawrence, Min. Plen.] has forwarded to me your kind letter and proposal, for which I return my best thanks to the directors of the Mercantile Library at New York.

My wish is to deliver in that city and elsewhere in the United States the six lectures [on the English humorous writers of Queen Anne's reign] that have been received with great favour in this country. I have no agent in America, and purposed to enter into no arrangements until I arrived myself at New York or Boston, and could determine personally what would be the best course to pursue.

If, as your kind letter suggests, arrangements could be made by which I could deliver my lectures in several cities of the Union, and proposals to that effect were made to me, I should very thankfully entertain them—promising always that no objection would be made to my giving lectures to other public societies, and at such charges as my friends at New York and elsewhere might think advisable.

MILLARD L. FELT, ESQ.,

Etc. Etc.

Corresponding Secretary, Mercantile Library.

THE "FIELDING"

This was the beginning of a somewhat lengthened correspondence. The Boston author and publisher Mr. Fields had already made suggestions as to lecturing there. Questions of priority soon cropped up, ultimately left for final solution till the arrival in the States.

The summer months glided by, chiefly employed in revising the "Esmond" proof-sheets, a slower process than is usually the case, owing to a comparatively small supply of the not-much-used type of the reign of Queen Anne, which was one of the features of the first edition.

A new club had at this time sprung into life, called by Thackeray the "Fielding," which met in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden. His contribution to its comfort was an illustrated screen, print-covered for the most part, but made more valuable by the addition of two of his own gold-pen-and-ink studies. The subjects were two street Arabs caught in the law's meshes. The first was in the grip of a Bow Street runner of Fielding's time; in the next a tattered son of St. Giles was being "run in" by the modern Bobby, who hauls him before the Beak, with a view to his improvement in a reformatory.

Mrs. Ritchie has, in her pleasant "Chapters from some Unwritten Memoirs," told her numerous readers of her father's genuine relish of Carlyle's "enchanted

screen," to which he had also contributed. And, years ago, I recollect his amused scanning of the motley prints upon the *paravent* of the "Trafalgar" at Greenwich—before the advent of "souchet" and whitebait—to which he had invited us. But as the "Trafalgar" has closed its doors, so has the once hospitable Fielding Club—to which I recollect also being invited as a guest—made way for more modern brick-work. Many guests have vanished thence. I wonder where these pleasant screen-appurtenances have gone to?

I often have wished for the stenographic power, which enables many chroniclers to give the charm of the random talk of gifted men. Far pleasanter are these rapid utterances than the more poised sentences of public speaking. In this latter vein is on record the speech made at the "Freemasons' Tavern" this year by Thackeray as he presided at the Literary Fund Dinner.

At the end of September we went down to Liverpool, celebrating the inauguration of the lecturing tour by testing the famous "clear turtle" of the "Adelphi" there, ere we went into more homely quarters during our fortnight's stay. A veil is drawn here over this "memorial of gormandising," which, in truth, was sober enough.

The twin courses of lectures given in the two first

A PRELIMINARY LECTURING TOUR

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October weeks were thus dove-tailed as to time and delivery—

MANCHESTER		LIVERPOOL	
<i>Tuesdays.</i>	<i>Thursdays.</i>	<i>Wednesdays.</i>	<i>Fridays.</i>
28th Sept.	30th Sept.	29th Sept.	1st Oct.
5th Oct.	7th Oct.	6th Oct.	8th “
12th “	14th “	13th “	15th “

This arrangement necessitated see-sawing by train from one place to the other.

There was a curious contrast in the initial reception of the lectures in these Lancashire centres, the rooms of the Manchester Athenæum being well filled, but at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, on the contrary, the audience was so small as to call forth from one signing himself “Dickey Sam” (in the *Liverpool Mercury* of October 1st) the statement “that a more heart-depressing sight than that which presented itself to Mr. Thackeray, I think I have never witnessed, to hear the Fielding of the nineteenth century.” The subsequent lectures, however, made amends; and the whole course, in both places, went off with great *éclat*.

At Liverpool cheery lodgings in Renshaw Street, over Parry’s Library, were found for us; and free use was made of its stock of books—the Public Library, which only opened a few days after

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we left, being then unavailable—Steele's Letters and Bozzy's Life of Johnson coming in for reperusal as old friends and ever-fresh companions. I only recollect that here Thackeray, in the interval of awaiting the lecture hour in the little side room of the Philharmonic, either translated or amended his version of Béranger's beautiful lines in "Ma Vocation"—

"Jeté sur cette boule,
Laid, chétif, et souffrant," etc.

I forget whether, as first given in his Goldsmith lecture, the lines were read in French or not.

During his stay at Liverpool occurred a tragical event, which happened on the 4th, but which was only reported the next day, the 5th of October. On opening a paper Thackeray read a brief telegram announcing that his friend Savile Morton, the Paris correspondent of the *Daily News*, had been stabbed—dying of his wounds—by a brother-journalist, seized with a fit of frenzied rage against him. It caused a great shock of surprise to us both, whose friend he had been. Thackeray mournfully recapitulated his many charming qualities; his artistic early education, merged, like his own, into more bread-winning literature; and finally alluded to his many Bohemian adventures, summing up his life as having been