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James Grant

Excerpt

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TRAVELS IN TOWN.

CHAPTER I.

THE STREETS.

Leading entrances to London—Streets near St. Katherine's Docks—Cheapside—Streets in the vicinity of the Elephant and Castle—Piccadilly—Oxford Street—Gower Street—Mile-end Road—Whitechapel—The People in the streets—Difference in the appearance of different streets—Interesting associations connected with particular streets—The streets as they appear by day, and as they appear by night—General remarks.

THERE is nothing that so forcibly strikes a stranger, on entering London, as the state of its leading streets. When I use the term street, I shall not, I am sure, be understood as meaning the pavement or causeway of our principle thoroughfares. I refer, if the expression be a

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proper one, to their animated condition, as illustrative of the character, habits, and pursuits of the inhabitants of our compact metropolitan world; for London must be regarded as a little world of itself.

There may be said to be, just now, seven great openings into London, through which the vast majority of visitors make their entrance into it. The first is through Gracechurch Street or King William Street, into the city. Through one or other of these streets, most of those who come by sea to London, whether from some part of the United Kingdom, or from some more distant part of the world, enter this all-absorbing place.

Another road is that which, passing the Elephant and Castle, extends itself to the High Street of the Borough, and thence along London Bridge to Gracechurch Street. A third, is that which comes past Hyde Park Corner, and loses itself in Piccadilly. These roads connect the metropolis with various parts of the South of England.

A fourth great opening into London, is through

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Oxford Street, the longest, and perhaps the finest street, all things considered, in the world. This is the inlet to the metropolis from the Western parts of England, as may be inferred from the fact, that on the passengers arriving at Paddington, from the Great Western Railway, they, with very few exceptions, proceed to Oxford Street, and then are swallowed up in this mighty metropolis.

The fifth great entrance into London, is at Euston Square, the terminus of the London and Birmingham Railway. This is one which is of recent origin. Twelve months have not elapsed since this opening was made, and yet it has already become one through which immense numbers of people daily thrust themselves into the heart of this metropolis.

The sixth is through the great North Road, which may be said to terminate at the Angel Inn, Islington; for from that place large and commodious thoroughfares branch off in every direction; so that not only the stranger, but even the person who has been many years resident in London, feels himself in some measure

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lost when in that particular spot. To be sure, the number of persons entering London from the great North Road has of late very considerably diminished, owing to the partial opening of the London and Birmingham Railway; and when the work has been completed, and the trains shall run all the way, the number of persons who will come to the metropolis through Islington will be still further reduced.* There is no doubt, however, that the great North Road must continue for many years to be one of the principal entrances into London, as it leads directly to various towns of considerable population and importance.

The seventh, and last, of the principal openings into the metropolis, is by Mile-end Road. This is the thoroughfare through which nearly all persons, coming from the East of England, make their entrance into London, and as none of the railways have yet interfered with it, it continues to pour a constant stream of human beings into the all-absorbing vortex of this vast place.

* Since this was written, the railroad has been opened all the way.

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Reverting to the opening into the metropolis, first mentioned, as that through which almost every person who travels by sea, is obliged to pass; it is one which is perhaps more calculated to make an impression on the mind of the visitor than any of the other six. On the river after he has reached Blackwall, all is bustle and confusion. The vessels which are stationary, coupled with those which are sailing to or from a part of the river nearer the heart of the great city, are objects of intense interest to him. His attention is diverted from them by the innumerable shoals of skiffs and other boats which are plying all around him. Nothing could so much rivet the attention, and excite the astonishment of the stranger, on his first voyage up the river, than the innumerable boats and vessels of every kind, which meet his eye in all directions. He is amazed at the rapidity with which some of the lighter craft skim along the water, and wonders that, with their number, and the celerity with which they are propelled, accidents so rarely occur. All is animation, and bustle, and business; the river

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is a place of extensive traffic ; on a fine day it has all the appearance of a fair.

But this is a digression. My present subject is the streets, not the river. If the stranger land at St. Katherine's Docks, his first impressions of London, after he has got into the nearest streets, must be exceedingly unfavourable. The houses are high, and dark, and dingy ; the streets are narrow, and it is a hundred to one if they be not wet and dirty ; for a clean and dry street in the immediate neighbourhood of St. Katherine's Docks, is indeed a rare circumstance. There are no signs of commerce, except it be here and there a solitary cart loaded with merchandise, lazily wending its way towards the city. The streets are nearly deserted, and the stranger not only wonders that people could be induced to live there, but he begins to be incredulous as to all he has heard of the bustle, and business, and fine appearance of the streets of London.

The route, after landing at these Docks, will most probably be through the Minories, where he will see a pleasant, open, respectable-looking

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street ; but still there is nothing in it which at all approaches his ideas of London. He enters Aldgate, and proceeds in the direction of Cornhill, and then he begins to think with himself, that this is the metropolis of which he has heard so much. If he land in the vicinity of London Bridge, he wends his way, under the direction of some cabman or porter, until he reaches Gracechurch Street, or King William Street, and then, all at once, a new scene bursts on his gaze. There he is confounded by the signs of life, and activity, and business which meet his eye, and which also appeal to his ear.

At whatever part the visitor may have landed, he is sure, if his place of destination be in the centre of the metropolis, to pass through Cheap-side. And then what a scene opens to his view ! Not more astonished could he feel, had he been suddenly transported into another planet. Every thing is new and surprising to him. He is overpowered with the sight. The pavement on either side is crowded with pedestrians, not walking leisurely, but *hurrying* onwards on their respective errands, and to their respective

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destinations. On the pavement on the right hand, you see one great and continuous stream of human beings, rushing, if I may use the expression, in a westward direction; another stream of men and women is running in an eastward course. On the pavement on the other side, you also see two similar streams—perhaps, torrents would be a more expressive word—of human beings, running in an opposite direction, and yet the one stream never interfering or coming in collision with the other. The stranger cannot fail to be much struck at the entire absorption of every one he sees, with his own matters.

The teeming population on the pavement all pass each other with as much indifference as if they had not eyes in their heads, or were so many inanimate objects moved by machinery. They seem as if they did not belong to the same species, or as if it were a crime to take cognisance, in any way, of each other, as they pass along. The middle of the street again is so crowded with vehicles of every description, that Cheapside often appears one

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vast coach-stand. So closely are the vehicles here sometimes pressed together, that you have to walk a considerable distance before you can cross to the opposite side.

In an article on the vehicles of London, which I wrote some time ago for a popular periodical, I mentioned what every one acquainted with the metropolis knows to be a fact, that so great is the number of vehicles sometimes to be seen at one time in Cheapside, that could a person scramble along horses' backs as well as over the tops of coaches, cabs, carts, omnibuses, &c., he might almost pass from one end of that street to the other, though more than a third of a mile in length, without once putting his foot on the ground. What the astonishment of the stranger must be when he sees so great a number of vehicles of every class, and almost all containing persons proceeding from one part of London to the other,—will be better imagined than it were possible for me to describe it. Once through Cheapside, it is unnecessary to follow the stranger further. Nothing he sees in the city will strike him as

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wonderful, after he has passed along that crowded and ever-active thoroughfare.

The entrance to London in the Elephant and Castle direction, is one which has its objects of interest to the stranger, though such interest is not so great as that which attaches to the entrance just referred to. The "huge town" comes more gradually on him. He is prepared for a place of great population, and great traffic by the crowded state of the suburbs, and the immense number of vehicles of every description which are flying about him in all directions. He reaches the Elephant and Castle, and is confounded by the number of stage-coaches, all full of passengers, which are either resting for a moment to put down or take up customers, or are being driven with an alarming rapidity along all the great roads which branch off from that particular point. He is astonished that, where there is so much furious driving in thoroughfares so densely crowded as are all the leading streets in that immediate neighbourhood, there should be so few accidents, either through vehicles coming in collision, or through