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William Tinsley

Excerpt

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RANDOM RECOLLECTIONS

CHAPTER I

ON HIGHGATE HILL IN 1852

READERS of the following random recollections and now and then, I hope, not obtrusive reflections, will not, I am afraid, find them as interesting as the somewhat mythical but capital little story of Dick Whittington and his cat. I venture to refer to young Whittington, because by a curious coincidence I found myself on Highgate Hill early one morning in 1852, walking into London. Whittington, when he lay sleeping on the London side of the old northern height, had run away from his employer and, as pictured in some of the accounts of his life, from a stout, greasy-looking cook-maid, who was apt to drub him with a large wooden spoon or ladle. In his sleep, Master Whittington thought he heard church bells ring, "Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London." If our dear old household fairy story does refer to the Sir Richard Whittington who lived in part of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the old bells might have told him to turn again and be three

times Lord Mayor of London, for the Sir Richard Whittington of that time was Lord Mayor in 1397, again in 1406, and again in 1419. So it would seem that there was a smaller number of candidates for the Mayoralty chair in the old days than in our own. To be three times Mayor of London was no great event, for it seems that one of the first, if not the first, Mayor of London, was Henry Fitzalwyn, who in about Henry the Second's time held the office of Mayor for twenty-four consecutive years. But perhaps some of our stage Whittingtons have a much better record than Fitzalwyn's, for they have been made Lord Mayor every night for weeks and months; in fact, many of our best Dick Whittingtons have been made Lord Mayor of London thousands of times, but alas! have not had the semblance of a taste of the good things down Guildhall way on great occasions. In fact, many stage Lord Mayors have been content with a banquet of bread and cheese, and malt liquor out of the pewter. I had some years ago seen so many stage Whittingtons, and read so much fanciful matter about them, that I grew a little curious about the origin of the story and especially the cat portion of it; but I found no facts to warrant anyone believing that Sir Richard Whittington ever held a menial position or was ever at the mercy of a cook-maid. The most reasonable theory about the cat is given by Doctor Brewer, who says that centuries ago, French merchants and traders of any importance were termed "achats," or "acats," and

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that Chaucer spells the word “acater,” and from him and doubtless other sources came the word “caterer.” And it is believed that the populariser of the story of Dick Whittington, not being versed in nautical lore, accordingly imagined him to have been a trader in cats, instead of owner of one or more of the old Norwegian ships of the “cat” or “catch” kind.

However, how and in what way Dick got his cat into the story perhaps matters little at this date. Time nor custom will not blot it out of childhood’s dreams and merry-makings.

Whittington’s experience on the old northern height was much more pleasant and encouraging than mine. It was a bleak cold morning when I was there, and as I trudged along I heard no cheery or welcome sounds of any kind. I had walked over twelve miles that morning, and the sun had not yet risen. The myriads of stars and gaslights in the distance seemed to meet, and from the old height it was hardly possible to distinguish where the lamps left off and the stars began. However, that illusion did not last long, for as soon as I was off the hill and in the Holloway Road it needed no speculation on my part to distinguish the bright stars above from the murky lamps below.

I had not even dreamed that London streets were paved with gold, and I was not surprised to find them paved with very hard stones. I remember I soon tired of the long roads and streets I had to travel, not from the weight of clothes I had to carry,

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for my bundle was not much larger than the ordinary stage Whittington's small property *ore*. I remember that I had more than the one fortune-hunting shilling, but certainly not more than about two of these always useful coins of the realm. I was wending my way to Notting Hill, where I hoped to obtain some employment, and as I dragged my weary limbs through street after street London seemed indeed a wilderness to me. I stared at most of the passers-by, but none of them took the slightest notice of me. In country villages, and even towns of some importance, many of the inhabitants know each other by name or sight, and cheery "good mornings" and "good nights" are often heard and commonly exchanged. But busy London knows little of such civilities.

I was fortunate in obtaining employment the day after I arrived at Notting Hill. How I succeeded at that time and in after years the kindly reader will, I hope, discover in these very random recollections.

I did not keep a diary of any kind. I shall, therefore, have to rely upon my memory, a fairly good one, for only the happiest and most pleasing incidents in my life. But I am afraid those of my readers who justly consider that every man or woman who lives a fairly long life should strive to leave this world better than they found it, will not praise me for my poor efforts in that direction.

Still, I cannot help being a little proud of having known and been friends with many distinguished men and women in the noble professions of literature,

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science, art, and the drama, and during my many years as a publisher, of having published the first books of many noted authors.

I have several times been a favoured guest of different Lord Mayors at the Mansion House, and at other gatherings memorable in the history of literature, science, art, and the drama. I well remember when our grand old actor, Samuel Phelps, first shook hands with me. I was very proud of the event, and of knowing that excellent man and actor. I knew my excellent friend, Mr., now Sir, Henry Irving, when he was quite a young man, and even then a most earnest student in the great profession of which he is now the acknowledged head, and perhaps as much admired as any Englishman and actor that has ever lived.

I remember one evening at my house, a good many years ago, we were a merry romping family party, and for some time Henry Irving was foremost in the fun, but towards the small hours of the morning we missed him from our circle. We subsequently found him in a quiet room, digging deep into his favourite Shakesperian mine, in which he has since found wealth and fame.

I will venture to refer to banquets and entertainments given by the great actor and other friends, which put our little family parties and such boyish games as "more sacks to the mill" into the shade. Lionel Brough will perhaps remember the evening when he and Henry Liston would not let Irving have his quiet read in any corner. My old and

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esteemed friend, Mr. J. L. Toole, will perhaps remember some of the merry meetings I shall venture to mention in these rambling notes. But alas! merry meetings and companions soon pass away in this busy, anxious world. Old Death has robbed me of scores of excellent friends and companions; and I am afraid some few who knew me when I seemed to hold a sort of position in life, must have forgotten my existence by now.

But I feel sure my old friend, John Lawrence Toole, will not be offended when later on in these pages I mention some of the merry days and times we have had together. I had almost written nights instead of times, but times seems to sound better.

But those were the days when a good deal more than the ordinary load of this world's sorrows had not come upon the great and genial comedian, his home had not then been bereft of an excellent wife and loving children; and I am afraid Mr. Brough is not so ready now to stand on his head, or even on very high wooden stilts, as he was when he was young, and could then play Tony Lumpkin as well, if not better, than any other young actor of his time.

But, unlike a good storyteller, I anticipate events and matters I want to scribble more fully about further on in these pages. Memory seems to serve me fairly well, for I remember many of the scenes and doings of my boyhood days, when as a poor farmer's boy I ate my dinner under a hedge, got my drink from the nearest stream or pond, and did not dream of being proud in after years of having done so.

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Before entering upon an account of my life ventures and adventures in London, I should like to recall some of the memories of my old home and boyhood's days in our old village sixty years ago, where life in nearly all its phases was very primitive. School boards were not then dreamed of, and national schools had not been established long enough to displace the spectacled old fogies and dames who passed as learned schoolmasters and mistresses, and whose learning did not go much beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic. In fact, some of them were not more learned than the Irish schoolmistress, who, when her pupils tried to spell some rather hard geographical words, told them to pass them over, because they were names of foreign countries where they would never go.

Goldsmith's schoolmaster in "The Deserted Village" would seem to have been rather above the general class of teachers of his time, but the fact does not show him to have been a very great scholar, even though

"The village all declared how much he knew.
'Twas certain he could write and cypher too;
Lands he could measure, terms and tides presage,
And even the story ran that he could gauge."

I seem to have a glimmering remembrance of being seated on a form in an old dame's school when I was about four or five years old. And I certainly remember going to our national school for a little time when it was first opened. I think that was in 1836; but my father took no great interest in the education of his children, and certainly before

I was nine years of age I had to do different kinds of day work. Some of it consisted in trying to scare rooks away from newly-sown fields of corn, and when the corn was getting ripe, to frighten small birds and rooks from stealing it. But those artful devils of rooks often didn't care for me a bit, for when I drove them off one part of the field, they would coolly wing their way to another portion of it not far off, and there plough up the newly-sown seed, and wait until I was almost close to them, and then they would away again to the other side of the field, and again wait for me. And then, worse than all, they would divide their forces, and one portion go to one part of the field, and the other to another part, and in that way would play the double upon me, until they had gorged themselves with their ill-gotten food. Often, too, when the black armies had beaten me in their tactics, my worthy taskmaster, who paid me the large sum of two shillings and sixpence for my seven days' work, would appear upon the scene and bully me for not driving the artful birds away.

My excellent mother had had a fair education—at all events she could read and write fairly well—and she was often asked to read and write letters for neighbours who could not read or write them for themselves. It frequently happened that letters came from soldiers in different parts of the world to their parents, written by comrades or superior officers, and these letters were, as a rule, read to parents who could neither read nor write. In

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fact, letters from soldiers on active service were often of much interest, not only to parents, but to most villagers who knew the senders, and were anxious to hear them read; but, as a rule, the clergyman, the doctor, or the old school master, was asked to read letters of any importance, and often to answer them.

I think I am right in saying that none but the poorest hovels were without the Bible, the Testament, and the Book of Common Prayer; for about that time the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge had begun to distribute the holy books almost broadcast, and well-intentioned old ladies made no little merit of distributing Bibles and Prayer Books to people who could not even read them. In fact, scores of the old villagers knew part of the Church service by heart, and certainly many of the psalms and hymns, and yet could not write or read a line of them from the books, but being good church-goers, had mastered them from memory. When the grand old hymns, "Rock of Ages," "Day of Judgment, Day of Wonders," and, of course, the morning and evening hymns were sung, almost every man, woman, and child, joined in, and if they were not always of one accord in words and tune, there was a divine sound and feeling that even Michael Costa would not have despised. I remember that "Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress" and Hervey's "Meditations Amongst the Tombs" were very favourite books with people of religious tendencies. I got my first peep into "Robinson

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Crusoe" and the "Arabian Nights" at the home of an old uncle of mine. But even though these two wonderful books have been read and enjoyed by millions, I am afraid I was never thoroughly master of the contents of either of them.

My old uncle kept the village toll-gate, and I was somewhat a favourite of his, and, I think, of his children. I well remember the toll-house was a regular haunt and place for gossip. My uncle and some others were subscribers to *The Weekly Dispatch*, each of the subscribers agreeing as to the time and days they were to have the paper to read, and I also remember that *The Times* newspaper was subscribed to by some of the better-off families in and near our village. The bearer of *The Times* and *Dispatch* to their several destinations during the week was James Harvey, who was totally blind, but, fortunately, what he had lost in sight he had, to some extent, gained in memory, and before the end of the week, "Blind Jim," as he was called, had, from hearing, mastered most of the contents of these two important papers, and then made some capital out of having done so, by repeating the news from his favourite corner in one or more of the old inns, always to a number of interested listeners and village politicians. Harvey's serious affliction made him many good friends, and being a very reliable man, he was often sent on important missions and errands in the village and to distant villages within a few miles around, and often for the parish doctor, who lived some three miles off.