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978-1-108-00929-4 - Glances Back Through Seventy Years: Autobiographical and Other Reminiscences, Volume 1

Henry Vizetelly

Excerpt

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GLANCES BACK THROUGH SEVENTY YEARS.

—*—

I.

(1820-30.)

WHEN GEORGE IV. WAS KING.

I WAS born within sound of Bow-bells, and certain old lady relatives of mine used to consider I enjoyed an exceptional honour in having been christened by a clergyman who subsequently rose to be a distinguished bishop. This was Dr. Blomfield, rector of the rich living of St. Botolph's, Bishopsgate, the registers of which record the baptism of Edward Alleyn, the actor-manager and founder of Dulwich College, and the marriage of the great Marquis of Argyle of the Scottish Covenant.

The rector of St. Botolph's was noted for his scholarship; and as in those days (private patronage being lacking) the classics were a surer passport than theology to advancement in the Church, Dr. Blomfield, whilst still holding on to his wealthy city benefice, secured first of all promotion to the see of Chester, and eventually to that of London, when he lost no time in well-feathering his comfortable episcopal nest. It was of this aggrandising prelate that Hartley Coleridge once remarked, "There are only two individuals who know what his income is—himself and

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the devil." Bishop Blomfield used to be twitted with having requited the Duke of Wellington, to whom he owed his appointment to the metropolitan see, and who counted upon the customary suit and service being rendered in return, by voting against Catholic Emancipation, when, regardless of the fierce agitation which this measure provoked, and "No Popery!" inscribed on every blank wall, his patron was convinced of the danger of its being any longer withheld, and in favour of Reform when the duke and the rest of the tory peers still offered this their strenuous opposition. The bishop, however, simply went with the mob, who, in its usual illogical way, shouted, "Reform!" and "No Popery!" in the same breath.

Charles Greville tells a story of Bishop Blomfield and a disreputable parson of his diocese—Capel, rector of Watford, and brother of the Earl of Essex—who notoriously neglected his clerical duties. To get rid of the scandal, Capel had been ordered to provide himself with a curate, but flatly refused to do so, whereupon the bishop appointed one himself. Certain informalities having occurred in connection with this proceeding, the refractory rector brought an action against his spiritual superior which cost the latter nearly a thousand pounds. Years afterwards the bishop went to Watford to preach a charity sermon, and to everybody's astonishment was Capel's guest on the occasion. Lord Clarendon, the don of the district, was especially perplexed at the circumstance, and asked Capel, "How was it you managed to get the bishop to come to your house?"

"Why," replied the other, "don't you remember the good licking I formerly gave him? That made him civil, and we are now excellent friends."

There was a tradition in our family that the first Vizzetelli—so the name is understood to have been originally spelt—who settled in this country came from

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Venice, and had to do with introducing the manufacture of plate glass into England. The spelling of the name was changed during the great Continental War—when considerable prejudice against foreigners prevailed—with the view of imparting to it an anglicised appearance. Both my grandfather and father were printers, and my grandfather having died when my father was a boy, the latter served his apprenticeship with Cox & Son, of Great Queen-street, Lincoln's-inn-fields, printers to the then powerful East India Company. I have heard my father say that in his father's time it was the custom for journeymen pressmen—now gradually becoming an extinct class—to wear swords at their sides and silver buckles in their shoes. But this most likely referred to particular instances only, and to the epoch when public lotteries were in full swing, and exceptionally high wages were the rule with the handicraftsmen who worked off the attractive coloured and pictorial broadsides which the more energetic lottery office-keepers kept the town liberally posted with.

In my juvenile days (1823 to 1829) I lived for a little while at Ealing, and then at Kennington, principally with my maternal grandparents, who were Cheshire people, and strongly imbued with those superstitious notions which have been such a long time dying out in the remoter provincial districts. My grandfather after he had been settled for years near London still continued to be a stout believer in Mother Shipton's prophecies, and to place implicit credence in the predictions of Mr. Francis Moore, physician, whose then highly-priced almanack, after a century and a quarter of existence, sold by hundreds of thousands yearly,¹ greatly to the profit of the Stationers' Company, who, so long as almanacks were liable to a

¹ According to Haydn's "Dictionary of Dates," at one time as many as 430,000 copies were sold of this publication annually, and in the first number of the "Atheneum" (1825) it was stated that the Stationers' Company paid the Government £40,000 yearly for stamp duty on the almanacks which they issued.

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heavy stamp, enjoyed almost a monopoly in respect of the production of these essentially useful publications.

This old grandfather of mine boasted possessing what he maintained to be an infallible recipe for getting rid of warts, his plan being to cut as many notches in a small piece of wood as there were warts to be charmed away, and then submitting this to certain incantations. On one occasion I was selected to be the subject of his experiments, and was taken at daybreak, on a raw, misty morning, to some unfrequented common, where after a muttered exorcism the notched stick was mysteriously spirited away, and my warts were absurdly supposed to have been effectually got rid of.

While we lived at Kennington a sedate-looking gentleman, dressed in black, and inclined to be portly, occasionally visited my grandfather, and took a good deal of notice of me. By promises of presents of one kind and another he induced me, I remember, to learn by heart many of Dr. Watts's hymns, and to recite them to him. He was a near neighbour of ours, and a clergyman, with manners so singularly gentle and engaging that everyone who knew him became attached to him. Subsequently he distinguished himself by his missionary zeal, and quitted England to both christianise and civilise the heathen in some remote tropical region; but after a few years' earnest labour, which found its reward in the attachment of those whom he came to rescue, he fell a slow victim to the unhealthy climate, passing sadly away, like many another silent martyr, the record of whose self-sacrifice fails to get trumpeted to the ends of the earth.

In the pre-Reform days Kennington-common was the frequent scene of boisterous political meetings, at which Orator Hunt and others vociferated against current abuses to a hungry and excited crowd—the price of the quartern loaf, it may be mentioned, was then a shilling and up-

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wards. Hunt and his party, with a contingent of drums and trumpets and bespangled banners, the inscriptions on which trenched as closely on the seditious as the political agitators of those dangerous days dared venture upon, used to drive on to the common in Hunt's "Matchless Blacking" vans, after the mob had levelled sufficient of the surrounding railings to give admittance to the cumbrous vehicles. It should be remembered there were then no dictatorial police to interfere with the "sovereign people" at their gatherings. The speeches delivered from the principal van were mostly after one pattern—fierce and well-merited denunciations of pensioners and pluralists, rotten boroughs and rattling placemen, a rapacious Church, a vicious aristocracy, and a venal House of Commons.

These were the days when taxation was scandalously unequal—years previously Pitt had maintained that three-fifths of a poor man's wages passed into the public exchequer—and when distress in the manufacturing districts was chronic. Then the operatives, in their ignorant despair, wrecked factories, and smashed frames and power-looms at the rate of 10,000 a month. A parliamentary committee reported that many families in the disturbed districts had to subsist on sixteenpence per head per week, and that there were some who starved on a weekly pittance of fourpence per head. There was rioting at the ports owing to shipments of corn, at the same time that the famished weavers of Carlisle and Bethnal-green were clamouring loudly for the repeal of the laws which interfered with its free importation. All that was done was to stifle their forlorn cries by calling out the military and passing heavy sentences upon the disaffected at special assize commissions; and this too under the administration of the same statesman whose boast it was twenty years later that he had enabled the toiling masses "to eat their hard-earned bread unleavened by the bitterness of taxation."

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In the latter part of George IV.'s reign the Conyngham family were the especial objects of popular derision, and were vehemently abused by Hunt and his friends—the marchioness for her depravity and rapaciousness, which stuck neither at crown jewels, nor at hot dinners conveyed from his majesty's kitchen to banquet guests bidden to her own home;¹ the marquis for his disgraceful complacency, and the young lord, their son, for the degrading services which he was supposed to render to the king.

Hunt, who had been a country squire before starting as a political agitator and blacking manufacturer, was a very tall stout man, with a fat face and a ruddy complexion, which was invariably set off by a white beaver hat. This led, after a while, to the white hat being regarded as symbolical of radicalism, as the *bonnet rouge* was of republicanism at the time of "the Terror." While playing the part of a political agitator, Hunt always kept up the appearance of a country gentleman, sporting the orthodox blue coat, light waistcoat, knee breeches, and top-boots—polished, of course, to perfection with his own matchless blacking. He was undoubtedly a typical demagogue of the "thump it and stump it, and blow his own trumpet" order—blustering and passionate in speech, and vain, like leaders of the democracy usually are.² His jovial manner, however, made him a great favourite with the multitude, and what largely added to his popularity was the imprisonment he had undergone for presiding at the famous Peterloo meeting, when the raw yokels of the Cheshire yeomanry

¹ Greville recounts that when the Conynghams gave a dinner party, the dinner was cooked at St. James's-palace, and conveyed in heated receptacles constructed for the purpose in hackney coaches to their family residence in Hamilton-place. All their servants, too, held sinecure appointments in the king's household in order that their wages might be charged on the royal establishment.

² While Hunt was railing against the aristocracy his son was hanging on to the fringe of that exclusive order. Young Hunt's sporting propensities brought him into contact with men of rank, with one of whom he made a bet during the severe frost of 1826 that he would drive his father's blacking van with four blood horses across the frozen Serpentine at its broadest part without accident, a feat he successfully accomplished.

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flushed their maiden sabres, slashing right and left at the crowd, killing a dozen persons and wounding, it was said, six hundred others.

Ten or twelve years afterwards (1830) Hunt managed to get elected to the unreformed parliament for the pot-walloping borough of Preston, beating the future Rupert of debate, then Irish secretary, who accused the timorous returning officer of having permitted Hunt's supporters to vote over and over again at different polling booths.

Parenthetically it may here be noted that the expenses of contested elections at this period were usually enormous. A few years before Lord Althorpe stated in the House of Commons that a recent election for Yorkshire had cost the candidates £120,000, although it never came to a poll, and had it gone to a poll the cost would have been at least half a million! When it was proposed to prohibit the use of bands, flags, and ribbons, one member pathetically pleaded that if this were done, the electors would not know whose heads they were breaking, and added that it was downright folly to attempt to make an English election as demure and orderly as a Methodist love-feast.

The traditions of the executions that had taken place on Kennington-common, first of the unfortunate adherents of the pretender, implicated in the rising of '45, and then of highwaymen and others at a later date, still survived in the neighbourhood. Many had heard their fathers tell of the former, and of the appalling barbarities perpetrated on these unhappy enthusiasts in a worthless cause; and plenty, in their youthful days, had themselves been witnesses of the latter.¹ Since the removal of the gallows the locality had been completely transformed, the common being enclosed and built round, and a new church, St. Mark's, erected on the very spot where the gibbet, on which the

¹ Ten years before, Townsend, the Bow-street runner, told a committee of the House of Commons of eight men being hanged on Kennington-common on the same morning.

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Surrey highwaymen used to swing, formerly reared its head. A favourite hunting-ground of these gentry was the then lonely neighbouring St. George's-fields, where Bedlam and the Surrey theatre now stand. The locality seems to have been an equivocal one even in Shakespeare's time, for we find mad Master Shallow reminding his old boon companion, Falstaff, of the "merry night they had when they lay in the windmill in St. George's-fields."

My grandfather, who had been part owner of several stage coaches, and who occasionally drove one of his own vehicles, had no end of stories about the highwaymen's daring in his younger days. One of these, I remember, referred to a couple of confederates, who, got up to look like a young squire and his tutor, secured two of the back seats on the coach, and managed to have the guard in their grip, as well as his blunderbuss, at the critical moment when their accomplice rode up in the darkness, pistol in hand, and called on the driver to stop, a summons at once obeyed in order to save the horses from being shot. When the occupants of the vehicle had been duly despoiled of their valuables the coach was allowed to proceed with two passengers the less, and the discomfited guard minus, of course, his blunderbuss.

In the days, however, when George IV. was king, the regular highwayman may be said to have been extinct; but the sneaking foot-pad, undeterred by a death penalty never enforced, still lingered in the more lonely London suburbs, and on dark evenings would lie in wait and relieve timid pedestrians of their purses and watches. It was the custom in a few suburban places for a horn to be blown at stated intervals as a signal for people to cross some particularly dangerous spot in a body for mutual protection. The more general use of gas, combined with Peel's new police, however, speedily rid the suburbs of these depredators. Culprits guilty of petty thefts from

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shopkeepers, which a few years previously had ranked as capital offences, were then frequently punished with the lash, and I recollect seeing one of these delinquents whipped at a cart's tail, under a broiling sun, along the dusty road between Kennington-turnpike and the Elephant and Castle at Newington, the perspiration streaming down the parish constable's face as he administered the regulation stripes. These public floggings were of frequent occurrence in the London suburbs, and were only abandoned after the newspapers had protested energetically against such brutalising exhibitions.

In the early part of George IV.'s reign society was accustomed to revenge itself upon suicides by burying them at cross roads at night time, with a stake driven vindictively through their bodies; and for several years subsequently the favourite discipline for bringing about the reformation of drunkards and rogues and vagabonds generally were the stocks. A disused example of this once familiar instrument of correction, and the last specimen remaining in the metropolis, used to exist, I remember, in Portugal-street, Lincoln's-inn-fields, famous for that accommodating tribunal to which insolvent spend-thrifts resorted from the spunging houses in the neighbourhood to purge themselves of their loads of liabilities.

During my midsummer holidays, and only a day or two before George IV. died, I recollect seeing, one hot summer's afternoon, a terrified-looking individual standing in the pillory, put up for the occasion, immediately facing Newgate. He had been convicted of perjury, and quite as great a crowd as the execution of some remarkable criminal usually got together was attracted by this novel exhibition. The pillory, mounted on a raised platform, comprised simply an upright pole, with a cross board pierced with holes for the culprit's arms and head. This board moved on a pivot, and when the poor terrified

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delinquent had been placed in position by the Jack Ketch of the period, he was required to perambulate round and round, like a horse in a mill, for the space of an hour. The authorities had mercifully forbidden missiles being thrown, and as the crowd was more curious than vindictive, the victim of this almost obsolete mode of punishment escaped the rough handling that usually befel pilloried culprits.

One of my earliest recollections extends back to a tranquil autumn evening in 1823, when our quiet neighbourhood was suddenly disturbed by the sonorous shouting of several of Mr. Catnach's gruff-voiced hawkers, but the only words one could distinctly catch were, "'orrible murder of Mr. William Weare!"¹ The excitement over this brutal affair was immense. People were almost as much horrified at the idea of the murderers sitting down to a supper of hot pork chops, as soon as Mr. William Weare's brains had been effectually battered in, as they were at the atrocity of the crime itself. Before the trial of Thurtell and his accomplices, the incidents of the murder had been worked up into a sensational and realistic melodrama for the Surrey theatre, when there figured on the stage the hired gig in which Thurtell had given the first murderous blow to his victim, the "iron grey horse with white face and legs," the table round which the murderers had feasted, and the sofa whereon Thurtell had snatched a brief repose after the fatigues of this terrible night. The theatre was crowded from floor to ceiling for the few nights the piece was played; and then a promising long run was suddenly cut short by the Court of King's-bench interdicting any further performance.

¹ In Hindley's "Life and Times of James Catnach," it is stated that a quarter of a million copies of the broadside giving particulars of Weare's murder were sold during the first week of its issue, and that double that number were sold of the sheet giving an account of the trial. Catnach seems to have netted £500 by the affair.