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978-1-108-07423-0 - Passages of a Working Life During Half a Century: With a Prelude
of Early Reminiscences: Volume 2

Charles Knight

Excerpt

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PASSAGES OF A WORKING LIFE.

—
The Second Epoch.

VOL. II.

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PASSAGES OF A WORKING LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

N 1824, I am settled as a Publisher in a newly-built house in Pall Mall East, the next house to the College of Physicians. I had occupied for a year a much smaller place of business on the opposite side of the way. This was altogether a new neighbourhood. The “neglected open space, on the north of which stands the King’s Mews” (vol. i. p. 117), was still open and still neglected. On the west side of what is now called Trafalgar Square, houses had grown up, which were terminated towards Charing Cross by the Union Club. But there was as yet no Nelson’s column; no fountains in the centre, to be ridiculed as dumb-waiters. In the open space, there was an exhibition of the skeleton of a whale. The King’s Mews was still there—a building of higher architectural pretensions than the National Gallery; for the architect, Kent, has left his mark upon his age as the professor of an Art with higher capabilities than consist in copying ancient models. The Mews was silent and desolate till a year or two later, when it was occupied, not by the Royal Hawks, as of old, but by Mr. Cross’s Menagerie, removed from Exeter Change.

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The lions and tigers were not very agreeable neighbours—for they began to roar before day-break, and on Sundays they roared from morning till night, that being their fast-day. The wild beasts went their way to more appropriate quarters, when the Zoological Gardens sprang into existence. Part of the Mews was then given up to the Public Records, which seem to have been always in a state of migration; like the Lord Sandwich, who was compared to a man hung in chains who wanted to be hanged somewhere else. An upper floor of the Mews was next devoted to an exhibition of Manufactures and Machinery—the acorn from which sprang the great tree beneath whose shade all nations were to repose in a commercial millennium. The “neglected open space” has been growing into something like shape during these forty years, after the fashion in which England carries on her improvements, bit by bit, and not a bit that can be deferred to a more convenient season.

During the first years of my residence in Pall Mall East, Saint James’s Park was getting rid of its old squalidness. The unenclosed ground about the Canal was railed in and made ornamental. Shrubberies were planted. The road after night-fall had ceased to be a place of danger and licentiousness. “There is gas in the Park.” At the time of the Stuarts the Mall had been the lounging place of the highest—the favourite ground of assignation of the Comedies in which Wit and Profligacy long maintained a flourishing co-partnership. Forty years ago the fashionable idlers had given place to happy children and smart nursery-maids. Mechanics out of work, and street vagabonds, always formed a

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crowd to see the relief of the Guard. Gapers from the country stood wonderingly upon the Parade, watching the working of the Telegraph at the top of the Admiralty. The old machine, which told its story by the opening and closing of shutters, was superseded by a greater wonder, the Semaphore, which threw out an arm, first on one side and then on another, and at varying heights. Very tedious was the transmission of the message, even by this improved instrument; sometimes impossible from the state of the atmosphere. About 1824 I was summoned as a witness upon a trial in which Mr. Croker was also required to give his testimony. I walked with him for an hour or more up and down Westminster Hall. So full of anecdote was his talk, that I could scarcely agree with him when he said, "The French are right in calling the vestibule to their Palace of Justice *la salle des pas perdus*." My steps with him were neither lost nor wearisome. At last, looking at his watch, he exclaimed, "Go I must. There is a frigate waiting at Portsmouth for orders to sail, and it will be dark before I can set the Telegraph in motion if I stay longer." The Secretary of the Admiralty writes a few words now, regardless of dark or light, and the faithful wire conveys his orders from port to port, and from sea to sea, far quicker than the flight of Ariel.

The neighbourhood in which I am seated is not as yet a very busy or a very lively one. It is gradually growing into a region dedicated to the Fine Arts. The Society of Painters in Water Colours have fixed their Gallery opposite me. The Society of British Artists have their Exhibition close at hand in Suffolk Street. My next-door neighbour is Mr. Colnaghi,

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the printseller. From him, and from his excellent son Dominick, I had some lessons in taste, as they would occasionally show me a few of their choice importations. Their connection was amongst the rich *cognoscenti*, and they cared little for the chance purchasers that are attracted by the furniture prints of later times of diffused art. Messrs. Colnaghi and I then dwelt in a corner. Not many pedestrians passed our doors. But in a few minutes I could be amongst the crowd in the busy world of Charing Cross and the Haymarket. The great thoroughfare where “the Little Theatre” had stood for a century still retained its ancient market for hay, which had been a nuisance in the heart of the town for a much longer period. There I very often found myself staring into a window, if I could possibly get a nook amidst the multitude which daily crowded about the shop of “T. McLean, 26, Haymarket, where Political and other Caricatures are daily publishing.” Thus runs the imprint of one who was the chief patron of humourists for the age who were famous before “Punch.” A daily Caricature? Yes; and a wilderness of Caricatures, issuing in endless succession out of shops round which crowds gathered from Piccadilly to Cheapside. Let me refresh my recollections of some of these notable productions, by referring to a small collection rescued from heaps of rubbish.

The latter six or seven years of “the first gentleman in Europe” seem to have been the golden age of Caricaturists—some destined to historical fame like George Cruikshank and H. B.;—many, even in their vulgarity, presenting curious traits of manners that might otherwise have had no record. There is, of course, a ludicrous aspect of all human affairs; and

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thus Cruikshank's "Mornings at Bow Street" are wondrous excitors of mirth in 1824-5, although the people are still shuddering with horror at the story of Mr. John Thurtell's murder of Mr. William Weare; many, nevertheless, having calmed their spirits by the enjoyment of a dramatic representation of the tragedy of Gill's Hill, with the real horse and gig that drew the victim to his slaughtering-place. But there is higher game to shoot flying than Old Bailey ruffians. Marvellous are the portraits of H. B. What R.A. has so faithfully depicted the Eldon and Lyndhurst and Brougham—the Wellington and Peel and Cumberland—of the later years of George IV. as he has? The picture of Mr. Brougham's *back*, as he moves along the passage of the Common Pleas, is a triumph of art. The highest personage of the realm is left to the mercy of inferior hands. He is, "Mr. George King, the Parish Overseer"—fat and cadaverous, with a padded and tightly-buttoned blue coat and silk stockings; or he is "The slap-up Swell, wat drives when hever he likes;" or he is writhing in an easy-chair, his gouty leg on a cushion, with a bottle and a cheval-glass at his side. As for costume—what can be more trustworthy than these gaudily-coloured extravagancies? The bonnet stretching over the *manches à gigot* like a vast umbrella—the waist compressed into stays that sever the fair one's body into two portions wasp-like—the mountains of ribbon at top, and the acres of flounces below—these were the decorations that made the prettiest Englishwoman as hideous as a Hottentot Venus. The gentleman, on whose arm hangs the expansive lady, is reduced to the smallest possible dimensions by his own stays, over

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which the closely-fitting coat is buttoned with the utmost exertion of the valet's strength—nothing loose about him but the enormous shirt frill, which flutters on the breeze, despite the massive brooch. How these creatures move is not easy to comprehend. When the surtout was slowly superseding the swallow-tailed coat, it was equally close-fitting over the compressed ribs; but the exquisite sometimes condescended to veil his beautiful proportions in a vast cloak with a gorgeous fur cape, somewhat out of harmony with his tiny hat, but quite in keeping with his iron-heeled boot which clanked on the pavement like the obsolete patten. These were the days when whiskers came in—timid precursors of the ample beard. Cigar-smoking in the streets was then a novelty; and the caricaturist shows us how the fashion was extending from the made-up dandy to the slovenly dustman.

Amidst these palpable hits at passing follies, we have glimpses of what had begun to be called "The March of Intellect." The "Breakfast and Reading-Room" has on its door-post a list of works within, including "all the Classics;" the bricklayer's labourer sits on his turned-down hod holding a book on which is labelled "St. Giles's Reading Society;" a coach is announced by placard to go from London to York in four hours; and the coming reign of Equality is typified by the sweep carrying a pink umbrella. When the caricaturist exhibited the Duke of Wellington in a stage coachman's garb, as "The Man wot drives the Sovereign," there was a *pendant* to the picture, in a walking monster with the sturdy legs of the conventional John Bull, and the body of a Stanhope printing-press, surmounted with the cap

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of Liberty: "This is the Man wot's got the whip hand of 'em all." The shadowy era of Steam is typified by all sorts of chimeras, representing "Walking by Steam, Riding by Steam, and Flying by Steam," with a prophetic warning of some machine blown up, and limbs and trunks of hapless adventurers scattered in the air. Amidst the March of Intellect we have glimpses of the old reign of uncivilisation. "Crowding to the Pit" exhibits "Theatrical Pleasures,"—women trodden under foot; men fighting; and the pickpocket easing the struggling countryman of his watch. At every place where crowds assemble to be amused, ill-humour, incivility, pushing for the best seats, oaths, and fistycuffs, are the rule, in the common want of the social refinement produced by education, and in the absence of all police control. The burglar still prowls about London, and having robbed a jeweller's shop divides his spoil with the watchman. The interior of the parish watch-house still shows the constable of the night dozing over his pipe and his pot of porter. There are still street sights, such as were somewhat more numerous in the earlier part of the century, but which are far from obsolete, even though cocked hats and wigs are exploded. The ragged jade is crying "the last dying speech and confession of six unfortunate malefactors executed this morning," while the London-bred urchin is picking the fat citizen's ample pocket. I hope we have no longer to doubt which is the better teacher, the schoolmaster or the hangman.

It is forty years ago since the Londoners began seriously to think that their traffic was becoming too large for their streets. And yet, what had they to endure in 1824 compared with the obstructions of

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1864? The ponderous brewer's dray often blocked up the Strand; but there were no mighty vans, threatening destruction to all the smaller craft that impeded their swift sailing. The broad-wheeled waggon generally crept in and out at nightfall, as it had crept since the days of Fielding and Hogarth. The hackney-coach, never in a hurry, went on "melancholy, slow," patient under every stoppage. No meddling policeman yet presumed to regulate the movements of the driver with a dozen capes, who pulled up when he pleased, unheeding his silk-stockinged fare who was too late for dinner, and sat in the damp straw, shouting and cursing. The omnibus appeared not in our streets till 1831, and when it came, the genteel remained faithful to the foul and stinking hackney-coach, mounting its exclusive iron steps with the true English satisfaction at not being in mixed company. Altogether, the streets were passable, except when the pavement was up for the repair of gas and water pipes—which it was at all seasons. There were schemes of sub-ways, but they met no encouragement. Colonel Trench obtained an audience at the Mansion House, to listen to his proposal of a terrace, eighty feet wide, from London Bridge to Westminster Bridge. Some thought the scheme a good one, but far too grand. Most sneered at such projects of Laputa. The sneerers and doubters kept their ground through a generation; and now we are thinking in reality about such an obvious improvement.

In the semi-thoroughfare of Pall Mall East we had few passing sights. But on the 12th of July, 1824, I stand with my family on our balcony, looking out for a grand funeral procession that is to come from