



FROM VILLAGE TO TOWN



FROM
VILLAGE TO TOWN:

A SERIES OF
RANDOM
REMINISCENCES
OF BATLEY

DURING THE LAST 30 YEARS.

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INTRODUCTORY.



THE following sketches were written to fill up otherwise idle hours. They are in truth "Random Reminiscences," some of them very random; but it is hoped that they will partly describe the Hobbledehoyism of Batley Municipal life, or the period which is best described as the period "From Village to Town."

THE AUTHOR.

Batley, November, 1882.

From Village

to Town.

A Series of Random Reminiscences
of Batley

During the past 30 Years.

CHAPTER I.

Of the many great changes which have taken place in Batley during the last thirty years, there are very few greater than those of our social life. Thirty or forty years ago all the inhabitants of our then overgrown village seemed as members of one great family. Now with the progress of what may be called by some civilisation, we not only are able to boast of our upper ten and our lower orders, but also of that hybrid rank—composed mostly of shopkeepers and small tradesmen who have been designated, for want of a better name, “the middle classes.” As Batley has increased in population and wealth, so also have the differences in rank been made wider, till we can hardly see a similarity in the masters of then and now.

Thirty years ago a master was in speech on an equality with his man; in dress little better than his servant; while in application to work the man was a long way beneath his employer. The life of an employer in those days was an extremely arduous one, whether he was a "little maker" or a prince among his fellows. In the infancy of his mastership, when sometimes the whole of the power he kept employed, was a solitary handloom—upstairs, and the engine was represented by his own strong arms as they pulled away at the shuttle to the merry tune of "Shall alapop, come back"—there was heavy manual labour to personally undergo. Then he would be his own warper, his own weaver, and his own salesman; then no merchant came into the town to look at his stock—for then Mahomet went to the mountain—and the mountain was situate at Leeds, to which place the "little maker" wended his way on foot with the "piece" upon his shoulder, sometimes to return and go a second time the same day.

By and bye, as business increased, other handlooms would be started in neighbours' chambers, till, after a time, the master could find enough to do to find work for his weavers—himself warping, his wife winding bobbins, and two, three, or even four men knocking off their pieces as fast as the looms would allow. Still the master did not forget his "checker" brat, still he did "oceans" of work, fully satisfied with the profit he made and accumulated, till the time when he should be able—not only to go to the wool sales in London, but to take a pair of machines in some mill, and emerge from the lesser to the greater rank of manufacturers of that day.

At that time bills and drafts were not invented for common use, and banks were a luxury — perhaps of a dangerous character. Ready money was the system adopted in all cases; and it has been for a later day and a later age to bring forth the paper money so freely dealt in at the present. “What does ta think?” said an old native a few years ago when referring to the system of payment by bills; “ther’s a man paid cash e Elland for once.” And then, in response to the query that followed, the old native went on to explain. “Tha sees a chap sent a load o’ shoddy ta Elland t’other day and browt brass back for it—and this is summat ’at hezzant been nawn for a deal o’ years—for they generally give a four months’ bill, renew it three times—and then pay pahnd-age!”

To show how payment in ready money was a thing both purchaser and salesman loved to adhere to, I may refer to the fact that one of our (now) largest factories, built about thirty years ago, was paid for straight off in accumulated cash—and, mark it, by one who very few years before was a “little maker”; and who till a few years before had not himself been to the wool sales. I have already shown how the “little maker” grew gently up from being in a small way to being the possessor of three or four handlooms, and then to be the owner of a pair of machines and a “Billy” or a “Tommy,” with money enough beforehand to go and make a journey to London and buy wool direct from the hammer; and this reminds me that there have been some strange adventures recorded affecting those whom we are proud to acknowledge as the pioneers of our present manufacturing gentry; adventures relating to their experience in town.

Once upon a time one of our wealthy men, seated in his London hotel, felt as if he could like his fire mending, for it had gone low. Ringing the bell, the waiter appeared, to hear the sturdy West Riding man asking him to bring a "coblin" up. The waiter disappeared with a "Yes, sir," reported the matter to the master, only to find that neither of them knew what the Northerner could mean. "Tell him," said the hotel proprietor, "that we haven't any in the house." The waiter went back with his message, and when he had delivered it the Yorkshireman replied, "Well, bring two or three rahnd uns." But "rahnd uns" equally puzzled both the proprietor and the waiter, and a second time the latter had to report to the customer "We haven't any in the house." "Wah, bring us a bit o'sleck then, am not a prahd chap," said the visitor, as the waiter disappeared for the third time, only to return with the same answer, "We haven't any in the house." There is an old saying affecting the third time—it is said to pay off for all—and so it did in this case. The Batley man could not conceal his feelings longer. "Well," he said, "its a bonny do this 'at yoh hevant a bit o'coil e all t'haase." "Coil, coal, coal! Do you mean coal, sir?" replied the waiter, as the idea came to him—"do you want coal?" A gruff "Aye" was the reply, and directly afterwards the Yorkshireman had his fire replenished—the waiter leaving him muttering to himself what a set of ignoramuses they were in London, when they didn't know "what a coblin, or rahnd uns, or sleck were at all."

This little digression is but one of scores that could be told of London adventure in which the hero was a West Riding man, and a native of

Batley—no doubt to the amusement of the Batley man equally with the cockney.

But to-day the master is another man altogether—two generations of evolution have changed him; he is no longer his own time-keeper, book-keeper, and yardman. Now-a-days his hours are short in comparison with what his father or grandfather worked. A carriage takes him from his palatial house and leaves him at his office door; the stock has grown from one piece to sometimes a thousand. Merchants save him the trouble of taking his goods to the little freehold stall in the coloured cloth hall at Leeds. Merchants come daily to see what is fresh, or what can be supplied; and heavily-laden wherries go to the great towns around daily, with the finished cloths—or the railway is requisitioned for those goods which are directly exported.

Fine machinery—never perfect—always improving, keeps pace with the social differences of years, and if the checker “brat” is replaced by broad cloth, the handloom is replaced by one moved by steam power. “Billies” and “Tom-mies” have become forgotten, as were their predecessors the “Jenny’s” and “wooden laddies” are nearly as ancient now as the old original distaff, as far as use is concerned. If this generation is a tear-away generation, we must also add that things are in keeping with it—and living, dress, and other etceteras which make up our social life are fully as advanced as is the machinery which has given them being.

There is, however, the same steadiness of character which has always been a trait of the real West Riding man; and if the man of to-day is quicker in decision than he of thirty or

forty years ago, you have but to look carelessly back to find that the resolution is just as strong as of old; even if it was made promptly to order. It would have been an impossibility to have made a Batley man—even when Batley was a mere village—into a servile slave, or even the resemblance of one. No squire ever drove through our town demanding and receiving the homage of staid old men or matrons, or even shock-headed truants, and this independence lingers in our midst yet. It would be “unmanly” to take off the hat to a superior, so think the young men of to-day, and the strong teachings of our fathers still impress us with the thought that we are as good as our neighbouring fellow men, even if not slightly better.

To-day, man and master are at their best, in dress not easily distinguished from one another. The differences between now and thirty or forty years ago are very little. Then it was hard to distinguish which—of master and man—had the most homely suit, now the task is to find which of master and man is dressed in the most gaudy.

While the young working woman of to-day would look upon the quaint and homely dress of the lady of two score years ago with disdain; the old and rich lady of the former period would think the world going to the “dogs” at a quickish pace, could she but see a young weaver walking out in her Sunday clothes of to-day.

I recollect a friend’s story bearing on the dressy age of our younger females of to-day. He had come into the town on business: it was Saturday afternoon and showery. Before him walked two ladies, so far as dress was concerned.

Their clothes were rich, their colours not badly arranged, graceful feathers drooped from hats of the latest fashion, and overhead they each carried ivory handled umbrellas. Alas! his ideas received speedy annihilation. The dress of one of them hung low and near to the wet pavement—her friend saw the mischief about to be committed, in time to prevent it. "Sitha Betty, lift thy frock a bit heigher, ar else it'al be drabblin."

My friend overheard the remark given in the broadest vernacular. Disgust turned his steps to the opposite side of the street, and he since then has given up his belief in the old proverb "Fine feathers make fine birds."

It is but very few years ago that some of our gentry left their homely double cottages, near to work, for one or other of the villas scattered round the town—discarding, after a severe struggle, perhaps—their twelve pound house, for one of larger dimensions; because the wife, touched with the ambition of her peers, thought they might perhaps be able to afford "t'rent" when they were worth the nice round sum of fifty thousand, a state of innocence seldom seen now, when the house is in some ranks often enough a luxury that the stomach must suffer for.

The days of slow but steady progress are gone—the man with money makes money quickly now—and, moreover, the manufacturer can afford to come out and purchase the best dinner the town affords when business calls him away to one of the neighbouring towns. A vast deal of difference—as you will admit, from the ways of his father—when the only feed partaken of

on a Leeds or Huddersfield market day, would be a half-pound of chop, bought by himself at the butchers, and cooked as Pudsey men are said even to get theirs cooked in the kitchen of some homely "pub" in Mill Hill or Call Lane or elsewhere; and which, with bread and beer, made up a good substantial luncheon.

In those good old days, the manufacturer met his workmen in the village "public" when work was over, and midst the beer and tobacco there would be discussed the political question of that day's moment. This was the chief relaxation—now it is different, and the business man severed from the man he employs, seeks relaxation in frequent runs to Harrogate or Scarbro' during the summer—while the younger end fill up their leisure in the winter by a run after hounds or a game at billiards, or a night a week at the theatre at Leeds—or all three. The spending money of the unmarried son amounts now to a deal more annually than did the household expenses of his father's house and family a generation ago.

The "older end" are fast dying away, there are few of them left, but they cannot be forgotten for many years to come for the part they played in making Batley as great as it at present is in the markets of the world. When the volunteer movement was established in our midst and playing at soldiers was made a weekly pastime, these "old stagers" looked upon the movement with a smile of contempt. "Joe, what is a lieutenant?" said a certain bank director one day to a clerk in the bank, who happened to be one of these "muffin shooiters"—"Ah naw what an ensign is, cos it explains it sen, its simply a fine name for insane."

And when pupil teachers were a necessity, and much learning had made the "coming schoolmaster or schoolmistress" proud and "maungy," there was the same abhorrence expressed amongst these plain old people of our infancy, who believed they were calling a spade a spade, when they kept to the old dialect speech, "So-and-so is bringing his family up in a queer way!" the exclamation would be when referring to a man who turned his son or daughter into teacher—and at the same time into a groove which taught them to use "clipt words." "Ah reckon nowt o' fowks at want ta be so forrad an aboon ther position." An instance of this comes to my mind now. A young woman, fresh from college, called into the kitchen of her father's old and well-to-do employer, to see the old dame, whose familiar title was that of Aunt Mary. Along with her was an old school companion, the daughter of one of Batley's most wealthy and successful manufacturers, as plain and homely in speech herself as was "Aunt Mary," "I've brought a lady to see you, Aunt Mary," said the schoolmistress in embryo. "Aye a cah lady like thisen, ah expect" was the rough expression which Aunt Mary, in reply, gave to the complete discomfiture, no doubt, of the introducer.

There is, however, one thing to be said of our upper ten, and that is, though they are wealthy, they are not thoroughly spoiled. Their daughters may use the carriage pretty freely, may carry a pug dog along with them, and in other ways do as the highest born; but they themselves are Batleyites yet—they possess a love for their native town, which has as yet shown no sign of being diminished—they are as clannish as ever they were, if not

more so, and the interests of the town will never be allowed to suffer if they can help it. This has been exemplified by such things as the construction of the new hospital, and in many other ways. True, they do not care for such honours as a public life brings. As a rule they are not men anxious to prefix Councillor or Alderman to their name; perhaps it would be better if they were to care, for the interests of a manufacturing town like this of ours necessitates that not only individually, but collectively, should they strive to make the one time village in detail as well as in the whole.

Yet we are proud of our gentry, even those who have not discarded, nor cannot discard, the plain home-spun speech of the district.

