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DOUGHT VICTORIANS TO SPEAK OF THE "GOOD OLD DAYS"?

By H. E. BATES

IT is now the custom to become moist-eyed over vanished or vanishing London, as over most things of the immediate past. Dear old London. Memories of the 'nineties. Shades of Lily Langtry. Echoes of the thunder of Spurgeon. Irving in *The Bells*. The days when ladies were ladies, when eating was eating, when the theatre was something more than a breeding ground for lounge lizards. Shades of Maclaren and Ranjitsinhji. Still farther back: the Great Exhibition, Mrs. Siddons, Paganini, Mr. Wordsworth. The thunder of Gladstone in the House. Good manners, good breeding, good almost anything. The great Queen. The long vista down the Victorian aisle enchants those who were born at the right end of it. If it does not enchant, it amuses. What fun! How amusing! What comic days to have lived in, what an era of unintentional buffoonery.

The more it changes . . .

What was it really like? In *The London Miscellany*, by Mr. Robert Harling (Heinemann, 8s. 6d.), you can, by reading between the lines, get something of the low-down on this great era of our history. The book is not to be confused with *Our Fathers*, which, when it appeared, I showed to the most unconventional Victorian I knew, pointing out to him the comicality of his time, the pomposity, bad taste, general frowziness, the mass-hysteria of the Boer War crowds, etc. He said simply: "It seems to me no different now. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." Mr. Harling's book is more serious than *Our Fathers*, but the motto is the same. The more it changes, the more it remains the same. And Mr. Harling has been well-advised not to make his book "a bright effort to laugh at Victorians," nor a picture of a golden age. His sources of information are clearly chosen to give a full but fair picture. Here are "its conceits and contradictions, its pageants and personalities, its foibles and furbelows. . . . The London Visitor and the London Vista to the London Sportsman and the London Reformer."

Gin and Paganini

To me the prospect of life in Victorian England is appalling. Guess at the authorship of this: "The mind sickens in recalling the odious particulars of the immediate neighbourhood of the bridges. The hucksters and furniture-shops, the enormous tawdry gin-palaces, and those awful little by-lanes of two-storied tenements, where patent mangles are to let, where the street is encumbered by oyster-shells and black puddles . . . and asylums innumerable." The answer is not Dickens, but *Punch*.

Was it worth enduring that to hear Paganini? Turn to page 229. "I heard Paganini. The furore there has been about 'this man has bordered on fatuity.'" Or to see Mr. Wordsworth? Back a page: "Wordsworth's attention was arrested by the prepossessing looks of a little girl, who was sitting on the grass alone. He stopped and talked to her . . . and drew forth a little copy of his minor poems, telling her to look at him well, and note his person; to be sure also to observe well the time of day, and the spot; and to recollect that that little book had been given to her by the author, the celebrated William Wordsworth!"

Two hundred eating-houses

Each further, to page 181: "New Pie-Street, Westminster.—This school for the destitute

was opened in January, 1840. It is designed for the children of persons inhabiting the most wretched part of Westminster, many of whom are prepossessing beggars . . . three-fourths of them probably deeply engaged in crime." At the same time, in one of the "two hundred places in London which can fittingly come under the denomination of eating-houses" you could get a plate of roast beef for 4d. You could buy your steak at the butcher's, take it into your favourite grill, and have it cooked. Charge, id.; potatoes with it, id.

At the same time, page 174: "We have two schools in prison; one for children. . . ." A little later, page 178: "What is education? is a question we may not unfitly pause a moment to ask." Later, page 216, date 1862: "The evil has now attained the limits which raise the fact of street robberies to the importance of a state question." Still later, 1888: "One fall of snow, a single fog reduces London to chaos. . . . The gas companies and the water companies, the market monopolists—all find in the Londoner a helpless victim."

A world of money-getting

Earlier, page 209, date 1844: "London is a world of money-getting; we have long since scouted the romance of naked tors, the ideality of empty bellies, and the dignity of the philosopher without twopence . . . we have great men, good men, impossible men."

It remains for William Cobbett to put the tin-hat on it: "Now, my good fellows, do see this matter in its true light." (He is addressing himself to "those of you who have been making hedges and ditches," date 1831.) "Nineteen-twentieths, and perhaps ninety-nine hundredths of all this dazzling finery has been taken out of your labour."

Take a jump of seventy years, and what is this? England and Australia, second Test Match, Lord's, June 15, 16, and 17. *The golden age of English cricket*. "Mr. C. B. Fry, c. Trumble, b. Jones, 13; Mr. A. C. Maclaren, b. Jones, 4; K. S. Ranjitsinhji, c. and b. Jones, 8; T. Hayward, b. Noble, 1." So they were human after all.

Then and now

Was it a just age? I have always doubted it. But are we so much better? It produced Dickens, but unless I am mistaken Dickens did not think it a just age either. It produced Irving, but not Mickey Mouse, and I would argue for one against the other. It produced Spurgeon, but if you had a watch in your pocket it was not safe to walk across Hyde Park at night. Is it safe now? Victoria was on the throne, but (page 167) "I could fill volumes with stories of the war against vermin." The war still goes on. Suicide, we read, was everywhere rampant. But open your morning paper in this year of grace 1938, and what do you see?

I leave it to you. Fight it out with Mr. Harling, who, perhaps intentionally, perhaps unintentionally, has produced a social document in the guise of a sampler.

AGE in a virtuous person, of either sex, carries in it an authority which makes it preferable to all the pleasures of youth.—SIR RICHARD STEELE.

If a man look sharply and attentively, he shall see Fortune; for though she is blind, she is not invisible.—BACON.