

CHAPTER VII

RETURNS TO ENGLAND—LONDON, SHEFFIELD

I HAD performed my little tour. I had enjoyed my little holiday. It was all very pleasant. I had made many friends while I was abroad. They had been very kind to me. I had learnt something of modern languages : and a good deal of human nature. Now I was about to enter on the active business of life. I desired first to get to London, in order to make inquiries about the NEW WORLD on the other side of the globe. Hence my voyage to the Thames, instead of to the Humber.

Our steamer reached the shores of England on a misty morning in the beginning of September 1838. I was awakened early by the ringing of the bell above-board—indicating a fog. On making my way on deck, I found we were enveloped in mist. The snortings of the steamer ceased for a time, and the sailors heaved the lead to ascertain the depth of water beneath us. We groped our way ; “go on slowly” was shouted by the captain, then “stop her.” And there we lay, hearing many bells about us from adjoining ships, which told us that we were approaching the mouth of the river.

After about an hour, the mist slowly cleared away. It rolled past us in banks of cloud ; and then

we saw where we were. The low shores of the English coast lay on either side, Essex on the north, Kent on the south. "That is the Nore light!" We were now in the mouth of the Thames, nearly opposite Sheerness. We could see the great hulls lying in the mouth of the Medway, and a paddle-wheel steamer, the *Black Eagle* (I think), one of the first used by the Government, throwing out clouds of black smoke. The river became busier. Steamers, wherries, ships—their sails bellied out by the wind—came down the Thames in numbers; some were coasters, some were foreign bound, some were destined for the furthest ends of the earth.

We passed the Hope, and the old fort of Tilbury on one side, and the town of Gravesend on the other. Here many vessels were lying anchored in the stream, awaiting their complements of seamen or passengers. Some of them were three-masted East Indian ships, and loomed large in the distance. Boats were plying between them and the pier; and the whole scene presented a busy appearance. This was the outer boundary of the port of London, where outward-bound vessels received their final clearances. And here the revenue officers came on board to take custody of our luggage, as well as the river pilot to navigate our steamer up the river.

From this point the Thames became busier and busier. We passed numbers of colliers floated up by the tide, and met outward-bound ships sailing down, fishing-boats, yawls, wherries, lighters, smacks, and vessels of all kinds, were seen on every side; while along the banks were workshops and manufactories, the scenes of busy industry. We saw comparatively little of the inland country after passing Greenhithe—the river being shut in by embankments—until we

passed Plumstead Marshes and reached Woolwich. There we observed rows of cannon and cannon-balls piled along the Royal Dockyard wharf, in front of the long range of manufacturing workshops. Above Woolwich, a stretch of low wooded hills was seen extending over the lower ground, the tower of Charlton Church forming a picturesque object.

Now Millwall was reached—the river still alive with craft of every sort. From this point upward, the banks present an almost continuous range of buildings. The noble front of the Greenwich Hospital—more like a palace than a hospital—stood before us in its glory, one of the finest works of Sir Christopher Wren. Behind the hospital I could see the Royal Observatory, situated on the elevated grounds amidst the trees of the park—the Observatory from which British seamen reckon their longitude all over the world. Then we sailed past Deptford Dockyard, and up Limehouse Reach, to the Pool, which was crowded with shipping. We reached the point under which the Thames Tunnel crossed the river, and then the old tumble-down houses of Wapping, almost overhanging the water. Behind were the magnificent docks, with masts shooting up like a forest for miles. Then the venerable Tower! And this was London, the great city which is the centre of so many aspirations.

I was alone in the place, though in the midst of millions. I knew nobody, and nobody knew me. A feeling of melancholy is apt to intrude upon one in the midst of a crowd of the unknown. The only people who regarded me, and seemed to care for me, were the 'bus conductors, who beckoned to me, and wished me to patronise their vehicles. But youth is vigorous, hopeful, and naturally cheerful. I made

my way to a boarding-house in Poland Street, Oxford Street, to which I had been recommended by my brother, who had lodged there the year before. The landlady was willing to accommodate me for a week or two, and I took up my abode there.

It was a pleasure to me to make the acquaintance of Mazzini, who was then boarding in the house. It was during the period of his first exile in England. I was struck by his noble yet melancholy countenance. He was then suffering from the loss of his young Italian friends, but still more from disappointment and loss of hope in the future of his country. He had sought refuge at first in Switzerland, but his persecutors having tracked him thither, the Swiss Government, terrified by the threats of its despotic neighbours, urged him to leave the country, and he eventually took refuge in England—still, as ever, the land of the free.

“Never shall I forget it while I live,” said Mazzini himself, “nor ever utter without a throb of gratitude the name of the land wherein I now write, which became to me almost as a second country, and in which I found the lasting consolation of affection, in a life embittered by delusions and destitute of all joy.”

And yet he continued devoted to the idea of the united nationality of his country, and still spoke hopefully of the revival of cosmopolitanism, of the brotherhood of all men, and the amelioration of all through the work of all.

I understood that he was then supporting himself as well as some other Italian exiles, by writing articles in the English reviews—for he understood the English language thoroughly—and that he was thus drawing the attention of the English people to

the Italian question. Finding, also, a number of poor Italian boys about the streets of London—mostly playing for their *padres*, who treated them savagely — Mazzini started a school, and endeavoured to teach them something that was good. He himself supplied the greater part of the funds from the proceeds of his literary labours, and took his full share of the teaching of young people, in what was likely to promote their moral and intellectual progress. He also lectured to them, as well as to Italian working men, on Italian history, the outlines of natural philosophy, and the lives of great men, so as to elevate them above subjection and poverty, and fortify their minds in serious thought and earnest purpose.

But to return to my own special business in London. I called upon Mr Rowland Hill at his offices in the Adelphi Terrace, and presented my letter of introduction from his uncle, Provost Lea of Haddington. Mr Hill received me very kindly. The provost had told me all about his history. Rowland Hill had first been a teacher at Hill Top School, Hazelwood, near Birmingham; and a very effective teacher he was. He had there published a work on *Public Education*, and *The Hazelwood Magazine*. In 1826, at the suggestion of Lord Brougham and others, he and his brothers founded a similar school at Bruce Castle, near London. This undertaking proved satisfactory, but the work connected with it broke down Mr Hill's health, and he left it and travelled abroad for a time. But being a man of great activity and ingenuity, he sought for new work on his return home. He was one of the founders of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, the inventor of a Printing Press, the

author of a paper, prepared for Lord Brougham, on "Home Colonies" for the gradual extinction of pauperism and the diminution of crime. He was also devising his great scheme of Postal Reform. But, meanwhile, a project had been formed for the colonisation of the then unoccupied territory of South Australia; an Act for the purpose was obtained; commissioners were appointed, and of this body Mr Rowland Hill was appointed secretary. It was in reference to the position that he held in this project, that I called upon him.

In his usual kindly manner, he gave me much good advice. He did not think that South Australia as yet held out any inducements to professional men. It was capitalists who would invest money in the lands of the Colony—labourers of all kinds, skilled and otherwise—ploughmen, servants, and shepherds who knew something about flocks. I had no pretensions to take rank amongst any of these classes, and I felt it necessary to abandon my idea of emigrating to that part of the world.

"Stay at home," said Rowland Hill; "with an active mind like yours, there is plenty of room for you here. I find that, like myself, you have written about Education. I have read your book—it is very good: my uncle sent it me. Go on in the same direction: there is plenty of room." I thanked him for his encouragement. He concluded by asking me to come and dine with him at 2 Burton Crescent, where he then lived. He would introduce me to Mrs Hill and his family, and I should meet Dr Bowring.

I went accordingly, and had the pleasure of making Mrs Hill's acquaintance, and that of her two charming little girls. I also met Dr Bowring. He

was then distinguished as a philologist, political writer, and statistician. He had been editor of the *Westminster Review*, and for some time member of Parliament for the Kilmarnock Burghs. Much of the conversation was new to me, and very interesting, ranging over a wide field of topics. While I had been abroad in Germany, the queen had been crowned, a rebellion had broken out in Canada, stormy proceedings had taken place in Parliament, and the agitation for the Charter had begun at Birmingham. The conversation turned upon the scheme of Postal Reform, about which Mr Rowland Hill had already published his pamphlet. Indeed, on the 13th of August, the preceding month, the select committee had reported in favour of the scheme. I could not fail to spend a pleasant and most instructive evening in such society.

A few days later I went to the public meeting held in New Palace Yard, on the 17th of September. The object was to petition Parliament in favour of the People's Charter, the movement in favour of which had been initiated at Birmingham a few days before. The chief speaker was Feargus O'Connor, who was loud and mouthy. Richardson, his disciple, also spoke. Hetherington, Lovett, Fraser of Edinburgh, and Ebenezer Elliott of Sheffield, were there. The proceedings were marred by the physical force swagger of some of the speakers. I did not much admire the London crowd. They seemed loafers and idlers, not working men. Palace Yard then formed a square. Opposite the platform in front of the hotel, from which the orators spoke, was the entrance to Westminster Hall, towards which the speakers often pointed. I kept clear of the crowd, and looked after my pockets. Of course, everything

passed off with "loud cheers." The movement was fairly begun.

The next visit I paid was to a dear and estimable lady, whose contributions to the *Monthly Repository* I had read and re-read—I mean Mrs M. Leman Gillies. Before leaving Haddington, I had received the following letter from her :—

"43 ALLSOP TERRACE, REGENT PARK,
"LONDON, 4th January 1838.

"DEAR SIR,—A few days ago, I was gratified by the receipt of your excellent little work on Physical Education, and the very flattering letter by which it was accompanied. My first impulse was to write to you immediately, for I feared that I might already lie justly open to the charge of ingratitude or negligence, your letter being dated as far back as the twelfth of last month. But it was suggested to me that I had better first read the work, and that so doing would enable me to reply with more pleasure and satisfaction both to the author and myself. This advice (which you will not think the worse of me for taking so readily, as it was given by my husband—the brother of an oftentimes near neighbour of yours, Lord Gillies), I acted upon; and I have read your book with great pleasure and advantage, for the advice and instruction which it contains admit of application beyond the beautiful little atoms of humanity for whom it is designed. I shall send the work immediately to a sister of mine, now staying at Jersey, who has a large and lovely family of children, and also to another married sister, yet more remote, who, like myself, has become a graft upon a Scottish family. Your name is a fit harbinger of your useful and benevolent work, and it will be welcomed everywhere with that mute but bright language which your name expresses.

"I am delighted that you say so much on these important and much neglected matters—Ventilation and the Skin. No building should be erected without immediate reference to the first—no being

exist without great regard to the latter. Well-constructed dwellings and an easy access to warm baths would, I am persuaded, beyond anything else, improve the useful classes of these kingdoms, and form essential auxiliaries to the Schools and Institutes, which, from the depths of my heart, I rejoice to see rising everywhere. Free lungs and pure skin would introduce that cheerfulness and suavity of manner in which the working people of England, at least, are so deficient. That universal instrument of Divine Benevolence—the Air, which no set of Exclusionists have yet been able to appropriate—awakens, when it is permitted to permeate the frame, feelings analogous to itself—activity, the handmaid of industry, springs up, and cheerfulness, the inspirer of sociality, goes forth.

“Greatly, also, is the human family indebted to you for your advocacy of Singing as a means of health and branch of education. Ignorantly and ungratefully have we neglected one of the most beautiful gifts of a bountiful God. How many hundred years have the birds on every bough breathed to us admonition and example—yet all that has been effected in this country has been to make Music a sickly exotic in the homes of luxury, and even there ministering more to vanity than anything else.

“Let me not forget to tell you that ‘C’* is the daughter of Dr Southwood Smith, and is now Mrs Hill, of Wisbeach, near Cambridge. I have given you this information without consulting her, but I cannot imagine that I do wrong.

“I hope, my dear sir, that your book will meet all the success which it merits—your *best* reward is certain; of *that* it is impossible you should be defrauded.

“Pray accept my thanks, and believe me respectfully yours,

“M. LEMAN GILLIES.”

* I may mention that a series of very interesting articles appeared in the *Monthly Repository* entitled, “Memoranda of Observations and Experiments in Education.” They were signed “C,” and were afterwards republished collectively by “Caroline Southwood Hill.” My interest in the articles led me to inquire of Mrs L. Gillies as to the author.

It was the least I could do, while in London, to visit the lady who had been so polite to me. I did so, and had much pleasant conversation with her.

At the house of her relative, Miss Margaret Gillies, in Millfield Lane, Highgate, besides Mrs Lemam Gillies, I had the pleasure of meeting Dr Southwood Smith, who lived near at hand, author of the *Philosophy of Health*, and the friend of Jeremy Bentham; Edwin Chadwick, already becoming distinguished in connection with the Sanitary movement; Miss Mary Gillies, an amiable and most accomplished lady; and a charming girl, very much made of by everybody. I thought she was precocious, but she was merely quick and cultivated, from mixing much in the best society. She was Dr Smith's granddaughter, and the daughter of "C," referred to in Mrs Lemam Gillies's letter to me. She became afterwards extensively known and beloved; and many now bless the name of Miss Octavia Hill.

I need not go through the sights I saw during my first visit to London. But it was not the "sights" I saw, but the enormous size of London, that impressed me. I had been brought up in a country town where I knew everybody, even the cocks and hens running about the streets. Now I was in a great city of some three millions of people, where I was only a stray unit, knowing nobody. The busy throng of the streets, the rush of life through the thoroughfares, the tide of human necessity which rolled along from day to day, could not fail to excite my sense of wonder. London was a new world, unlike everything I had before seen, or even imagined. It filled my mind, and took possession of my being.

Such is the bulk of London; it is impossible for

any one to see it all, to know it all, to understand it all, outgrowing, as it daily does, all possible means of seeing and knowing it. Londoners themselves, who spend their daily life in it, often know as little about it as country people do. The inhabitant of the West End knows as little of those of the East End, as the latter do of Wales or the Highlands. To most men, London may be an utter solitude, if they wish it. They may live there unknowing and unknown. In the midst of millions they may be alone, far more than they can possibly be in the country town, where every man's life and concerns become the business of everybody. In London, there is an entire emancipation from tattlers and busy-bodies. Hazlitt says that you can enjoy the greatest personal freedom in the world there; and that "personal merit is at a prodigious discount in the provinces." That may be; but at the same time in London there is a want of personal sympathy. Though there is no scandal, there is no help. The people are strangers to each other; each is intent upon his own business, knowing nothing, and caring less about what his neighbours are doing, or feeling, or suffering. Jostling each other in the streets, they press forward eagerly in pursuit of their special object. The country big man feels himself nobody in London. There is, indeed, no such remedy for provincial vanity and self-importance as a visit to London. When the Highland chief paid his first visit, his retainers thought that London would be thrown into commotion by the event. But London took no notice. To account for it, the chief explained that "London was quite in a state of confusion when I was there!" It was, however, only its ordinary state of confusion.

There is one thing that Londoners may boast of—extreme mental liberty. A man may think and speak as he likes—within the law. No man is muzzled or shouted down on account of his opinions, or exposed to the petty persecutions he has sometimes to endure in the provinces. He need not be a hypocrite; he has no pretence for being a hypocrite. Public opinion in London may be inactive and slow to manifest itself; but private opinion is active, free, and independent. This, to my mind, forms one of the chief attractions of London life, for it is one of the greatest privileges which free-minded men can desire.

One word more, before I leave London. Dr Epps had so strongly eulogised my little book on Physical Education, in his published lectures on Physiology, that I thought it right to call upon him and thank him for his good services. He received me kindly; and, amongst other things, he told me that he had a great many applications from the country for homeopathic practitioners. "I recommend you to study the subject," he said; "and I can send you down to Leeds, where there is a splendid opening." He spoke with absolute confidence of the truth of the new views, as if not a word could be said on the opposite side. Dr Epps was always a man to be "cock-sure." And yet, homeopathy, as first presented, never seemed to me entirely acceptable. I was told in Germany that if a grain of opium in solution were dropped into the Rhine at Schaffhausen, it could only have reached sufficient dilution to be administered in the millionth-grain dose by the time it reached Coblenz. No doubt small doses of poisons as well as medicines often produce powerful effects. But I had been

accustomed to very appreciable doses of most things, and I could not, for mere personal interest, give up my views. I promised, however, to look further into the matter, but meanwhile declined the kind invitation. I parted with Dr Epps, the best of friends.

I then proceeded to Sheffield, to see my friend Carstairs, whom I had known and assisted at North Berwick. There was no railway then through the Midlands. The London and Birmingham railway had been opened throughout on the 17th of September, the day on which the Chartist meeting had been held in Palace Yard. I preferred, however, to go round by sea; and accordingly proceeded to Hull. I had a pleasant voyage, and went to the boarding-house overlooking the Humber, where I had been well accommodated some five months before.

From Hull, I went by steamer up the Humber to Thorne, on the river Don. Here a coach was waiting to take us on to Sheffield. We went by Doncaster—a bright little town. The day was fine and sunny. The trees were tipped with gold, and already assuming their autumnal look. We passed Coningsburgh Castle, the famous place described in *Ivanhoe*, supposed to have been the home of Athelstan the Unready. It stands on a wooded hill close by the road. Its round towers and flying buttresses had a romantic effect, and the scenery around was most charming. It was true English scenery.

The coach took us through Rotherham to Sheffield, over which hung a pall of dark smoke. We went along the banks of the Don, which became filthy and black as we proceeded upwards. Collieries,

quarries, and iron works, were on every side. The houses became continuous, until we reached the great teeming centre of the cutlery manufacture. Tilt hammers were beating, grinding mills were turning, and chimneys were vomiting forth their smoke.

My friend was ready to receive me. He made me welcome, and I soon felt at home. He was working his way into a good practice, and in his leisure hours he was writing articles for the *Sheffield Iris*, which he found to be a pleasant as well as a profitable employment. One of the first persons to whom I was introduced was John Bridgeford, the proprietor of that journal—a genial, honest man, whose friendship I then made. Through him I got to know his friends, who were large-hearted like himself, among others James Montgomery, the poet, who looked thin and old. He still continued to write, though not for the *Iris*, of which he had at one time been editor. But perhaps still more interesting was my introduction to Ebenezer Elliott, the Corn-law Rhymer, with whom I afterwards became much better acquainted. I had seen him before at the meeting in Palace Yard; but now I saw him in his own warehouse.

I was taken up a flight of wooden stairs to his office in Gibraltar Street, and there I found him standing behind the counter. The place was somewhat dingy—fit enough for iron and steel dealing, but scarcely giving one the indication of a poet's study. I was introduced; and though quiet at first, he soon opened up, and, pacing up and down, talked bitterly of "those dirt-kings—the tax-gorged lords of land." He was rather slightly formed; his features were somewhat marked by the smallpox;

his very shaggy eyebrows overhung his blue eyes; and his head was covered with thick grey hair. The thing uppermost in his mind was "The Bread Tax." He had already been publishing vehement poetry on the subject; and he soon became well known as "The Corn-law Rhymer."

I mentioned the fact of his appearance on the platform in Palace Yard.

"Ah!" he said, "were you there? that fellow Feargus O'Connor will ruin that cause. The threat of physical force will never do: we want the power of public opinion. In the long run, it must prevail."

I referred to his poems on the Bread Tax.

"People think me ferocious," he said, "but I cannot write gently on that great crime. And yet I could not hurt a fly, even if it stung me."

Elliott was the Burns of his time. He lived in a manufacturing town, instead of in the country; and he saw industry hampered, and working people distressed, by what he thought to be a law against nature and humanity. Hence the vehemence of his songs against the Corn Laws. The more beautiful side of the poet's nature is revealed when he takes to the Green Lawn, the Open Heath, or the Wild Mountain, and writes about "The Wonders of the Lawn," "The Excursion," "The Dying Boy to the Sloe-blossom," or "Don and Rother." Then his anger is disarmed, and he takes nature to his bosom. Yet there is reason to believe that he gained little reputation by his tender and gentler effusions; for it was only when he became in a manner notorious as "The Corn-law Rhymer" that his merits as a true poet began to be discovered.

Before leaving Sheffield, my friends Carstairs and Bridgeford strongly recommended me to settle down at Doncaster, where there was then a good opening for a general practitioner. I was disposed to take their advice, and returned home for the purpose of making the necessary arrangements. Bridgeford accompanied me on the top of the coach as far as Hathersage, on my way to Manchester. I knew nobody in Manchester, and proceeded to Liverpool by the railway, which had been opened a few years before. The ride was something surprising; and the speed was then thought unrivalled. I little thought that in a future year I should write the life of the engineer of that railway.

After staying for a few days with a relative in Liverpool, I took steamer for Glasgow. From Glasgow, I returned home to Haddington, for it was still home; but only for a month. I collected all my "things" about me—my clothes, my instruments, my books (such as I wished to preserve), and set out again for Doncaster, for the purpose of settling down there.

I had desired any letters that might arrive for me after I left, to be sent to me, care of Mr Scott, architect (of Gilbert and Scott), who was then living at Doncaster. On calling there, a letter was presented to me, the perusal of which had an important influence on my future career. It was from Mr Bingley, reporter for the *Leeds Times*, and was written on behalf of Mr Hobson, the proprietor of that newspaper.

The letter was to this effect: that the prosperity of the *Leeds Times* had not continued since the death of Robert Nicoll; that its circulation had fallen off, partly through the competition of the Chartist

organ, the *Northern Star*, conducted by Feargus O'Connor; and that, though Mr Hooton was a most able man, of great literary finish, he had somehow not entered freely into the political movements of the neighbourhood, and that, in short, he was about to leave, and Mr Hobson wished to supply his place with another Scotsman.

This was certainly a great move. Dr Epps had proposed to send me down to Leeds as a homeopathic doctor. That offer I could not accept; as I had no faith in homeopathy. But now came another proposal that I should go to Leeds. It seemed as if Leeds were to be my fate. I could not come to a conclusion on the moment. But I would go over to Sheffield again, and consult my friends Carstairs and Bridgeford. When I mentioned the matter to them, they were delighted. They recommended me at once to accept the proposal: "it was a fine field," they said, "and even if you do not succeed as an editor, the trial will afford you an opportunity of looking about you and finding some other opening where you can eventually succeed."

I certainly hesitated, before stepping into the shoes of Robert Nicoll and Charles Hooton, the one an enthusiastic poet and able editor, the other an accomplished literary man; but, as Bridgeford said, "You can but try," and Carstairs added, "I know you can do it, if you use your full mind and vigour," I came to the conclusion to abide by their recommendation, and accordingly wrote to the proprietor of the *Leeds Times* accepting his proposal.

I went over to Leeds by coach, passing through Barnsby and Wakefield, and duly arrived at the great manufacturing town, overhung by clouds of

smoke. There I was to remain for nearly twenty years ; there I married, there all my children were born ; and there I spent about the happiest and most fruitful period of my life.

And now for the life of the provincial editor.