

CHAPTER XII

Numerous have been the people who have pushed open our green gate and walked beside the ferns and blue veronica on the rockery to our door. At one time a chestnut tree shed its soft pink blossoms over the path, but its roots beginning to break down the street wall and small boys threatening to break our windows throwing sticks into the branches for the elusive "conkers", we were sadly forced to order its destruction.

Our greengrocers in the early days came from Peckham, bearing the name of Mr. and Mrs. Kettle. The lady's mother bore the appropriate name of Mrs. Parsley. Mr. Kettle, a Boer War veteran eventually died and a bewildered assistant arrived, dressed in obsolete khaki and a Cockney smile, announcing that "Mrs. Kettle was queer and he didn't know the housen."

Our oilman at that time, a Mr. Laban Crook, drove a horse and cart like a miniature shop, packed inside

and out with brooms and brushes, clothes baskets, soap, bean-sticks, candles, soda, oil, rope, and oddments galore, the whole lit at night by a swinging lantern. Laban himself took amazing weekends, trying to see as much as possible of the world in that limited space of time, spending the whole time travelling, with perhaps only an hour or so at his destination - Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and even farther afield.

Various visitors came to see us, now long passed away. Cousin Zerah used to love to "pop over", unfortunately this "popping" was generally at a most inconvenient time, just as we were spring-cleaning with workmen encamped on the stairs, or on a Bank Holiday when the larder was looking very sorry for itself. In those days no self-respecting housewife offered anything out of a tin to a guest. Father forbade anything of the sort, except pineapple, to be used at any time, which distinctly spoilt all hospitable feelings for unexpected guests on a Bank Holiday. And dear Cousin Zerah used to look really awful, with a sandy beard turning grey, an astonishingly checked tweed suit completed by a flat cloth cap and an alarming capacity for raking up past bits of personal and family history much better left decently dead and buried.

His wife was one of the most lovely women I have ever seen, a real English beauty, whose charming face and figure always seemed to retain their youth. At that time anything but a straw hat in summer for the ladies was considered impossible, yet Cousin May with a black velvet hat against her golden hair appeared like the mixture of an English rose and the Rue de la Paix.

Cousin Zerah bought a car in the early days of their invention and set out on its first journey to make an impression upon us. Unfortunately he made a very different impression on a milk-cart which for the time being prevented ^{the car} ~~it~~ from shedding its lustre upon Wandsworth. It shed many ^{oddments} ~~other things~~ on another journey before it came to a standstill, so that Cousin Zerah's son had to walk back two miles to pick up the various nuts, bolts and other ^{Sundries} ~~oddments~~ with which it ~~had~~ generously strewn the highway.

Even in these later days motoring can be a bit chancey. For example, a Bishop of our acquaintance, living not far from here, ~~who~~ drove to the north of London for a dental appointment. Coming out from the ordeal he jumped in the car and started home, thinking as he drove round Regents Park there was something very

"funny-peculiar" with his brakes. Arrived at the first garage, he made the horrid discovery he was in someone else's car. With much presence of mind and a right-about turn, he drove back to the dentist where his own car was waiting, perfectly smug and respectable. Within a few seconds he had slipped into it and driven off - which shows how even a Bishop can inadvertently trip up.

Cousin Frank, Vicar of several famous London churches, and a man much revered, had a wonderful gift for collecting things, money, books, china, wealthy godparents for his numerous children and a wonderful reputation for himself. He really was an old dear, although prone to admire one's possessions in such a way that one was bound to present them to him.

"Dear Paul", he would say to my father, "why there is the very book I have hunted in shops for years to find. So useful for my sermons! And here it actually is at last in your library. You must let me borrow it and not ask it back too soon."

Or to my Mother, "Ada, my dear, I have been admiring your wonderful collection of old china and I noticed one single cup and saucer. Now we have an old tea set just the same with one cup and saucer missing."

Mary has tried everywhere to try to match it and to think you have one exactly like it. Dear me! What a coincidence! Such lovely colouring too - not perhaps quite in harmony with the other pieces in your cabinet."

Small wonder that Cousin Frank raised the money to build a beautiful church in one of London's slums. For he was a faithful, well-loved priest with only the one little failing. And much of his begging was for other people! One of his organists was the celebrated Dr. Monk, author of many well-loved hymn tunes including "Abide with me". His playing of the Passion music often brought people to tears.

Cousin Frank's stock of stories was prodigious, until one had heard them all and he started again. We came into this category, as he used to take two hours over a meal, laying down knife and fork for long intervals to recount episodes from his clerical life. It was an amazing assortment, concerning rogues and saints, people who had seen far, far better days and those who rarely in their lives had had enough to eat, brawling by night and day, dead dogs and cats, stale fish and other unsavoury oddments in his tiny strip of garden, the one pear on his tree stolen year after year. Thirteen

families, including thirty-five children, were found in one house, five people in a bed and a corpse lying night after night in the same place.

Grim stories very often, laced with humour and pathos, such as the dying costermonger who asked for his donkey to be brought to the window that he might have a last fond look at him.

A night School effort for little ruffians off the street began with an enormous tea, where the visitors were so ravenous they drank the contents of the slop-basins. Some of them hoped to do a little business on the side with umbrellas, walking-sticks, hats and coats. And one teacher, merely turning his head, found his gold tiepin gone for ever. A favourite sport was to pelt Cousin Frank and his helpers with pease pudding, extremely unpleasant when nicely wedged into the luxuriant whiskers or beards of the period.

Unfortunately Cousin Frank's lengthy mealtimes caused much disorganisation in our household, with downright mutiny in the kitchen.

A major catastrophe happened to Mother when a very fastidious uncle came to tea and the home-made cake being cut, a whole family of ants ran out in all

directions. Poor Mother! That particular uncle had no sense of humour.

Another visitor, "Uncle Moses", an uncle by "adoption", had a wife who strongly objected to be known as "Aunt Moses". She was the possessor of various very smelly poodles, one particularly oderiferous ~~one~~^{object} she claimed was desired by everyone who saw him. Mother, overcome by his close proximity, was rash enough to say she did not want him, which offended Auntie Moses for life. She died some years later of a strange illness, whereby she was covered with black blisters, which Mother always thought were caused by her habit of smothering her malodorous pets with kisses.

Some of our most pathetic visitors were Belgian soldiers on leave from defending their sad, heroic little country, in the neighbourhood of Dixmude. It was a little disconcerting when they passed up their cups minus the saucers for extra helpings of tea. One was the batman of an officer friend of ours, an amusing fellow with an excellent excuse for every lack of service, exclaiming when the buttons he was supposed to have sewn on, fell off in shoals,

"Tiens, Monsieur, the cotton must have been rotten."

Dassy, an older man, spoke nothing but Flemish, but in his dark eyes was surprising gratitude for the little we were able to do for him, mingled with the pathos of one who has lost his home and all dear to him in the unknown horrors on the other side of No-Man's-Land.

Among our many clerical visitors was one of the celebrated priest-workmen. For some time he worked on weekdays in a munition factory, leaving the Vicarage in his blue boiler suit and doing a full week's work with the other factory hands. Whether on day or night shift he never missed his daily Communion at the altar, his weekend duties of assisting in the parish as a priest and often other bits of parochial work in his so-called hours of rest and recreation. Few people, if any, guessed the mental and physical strain he must have undergone.

Miss Ayscough Smith, an earlier visitor, came with us on various Continental tours, accompanied with an assortment of umbrellas for various occasions, including one for use on the Calais boat to prevent her seeing the unpleasant and unfortunate incidents which happened to her fellow travellers. Quite a useful idea, for what the ear hears is not as bad as what is seen by the eye.

Norman Campbell, my childhood's Vicar, was adored and worthy of a working man's epitaph, spoken many years later, "He were the best man wot ever stepped in shoe leather."

My most poignant recollection was of his holding on to the great brass eagle in the church, endeavouring to read the lesson and coughing, choking with the terrible disease which eventually forced him to resign the living.

St. Anne's, the "Pepper Pot Church", so named from her tall round tower, which looks as though it only needs to be turned upside down to shake that sneezy condiment far and near, was filled to capacity in his days and on festivals even its 1350 seats had to be complemented by chairs down the nave.

At Harvest Thanksgiving the chancel wall was packed solidly with flowers and fruit, all intervening spaces being filled with pot ferns laid sideways, so that the congregation when seated could see neither altar nor choir. Great sheaves of corn, vast loaves with huge plaits of dough across their backs, formed an earthly Paradise for Mr. and Mrs. Mickey Mouse and family.

"The Spread Eagle", an ancient coaching inn, still flourishes at the corner of one of the five cross roads

in Wandsworth High Street, from which a three-horse bus, owned by "Tubby Wells" of the former "Antelope" inn nearly opposite, who acted as the conveyance's conductor, used to start precisely at 9 a.m. with his familiar cry, "Now for the City! Bank! Bank! All the way to the City, gents!"

The "Spread Eagle" Tavern contained apparently the only room in the district suitable for public meetings and also conveniently situated for "Quick Ones" or other light refreshment when business was terminated. In 1851 a meeting was called to discuss the contemplated erection of a Turnpike Gate at the cross roads outside, now one of the easiest spots in the Borough to stage a sudden and sticky death. The proposal for the gate was turned down, partly by the remembrance that any persons living in All Saints parish on the one side, wishing to attend St. Anne's church on the other side and vice versa would have to pay a toll, a truly shocking state of affairs!

The "Battle of Wandsworth", happily a bloodless affair, was inaugurated at the "Spread Eagle". The combatants were the inhabitants who strove to preserve the Common against the Lord of the Manor, Lord Spencer;

parts of Spencer Park, the L.S.W. Railway, the Patriotic School and various private personages having encroached upon it, as well as helping themselves freely to the existing gravel pits. The battle was triumphantly won by the people, when on April 24th 1871, a Bill was passed in Parliament, receiving the Royal Assent in July, declaring the Common "free and open forever".

How the pre-fabs which now appear on large portions of its surface agree with this "eternal" free and open clause is a mystery!

On the other side of the High Street from the "Spread Eagle" a Mr. Crook in 1840 established a small wholesale and retail Beaver Hat Factory, afterwards becoming one of the first makers of the silk topper, which seems nowadays only to be used as the badge of undertakers and the uniform of bridegrooms and their unhappy "best men". But in the good old days even builders' men, with tool-bags on their backs and newspaper boys wore toppers. The gentlemen of the neighbourhood when they played cricket on Wandsworth Common were in the inevitable topper and frock coats. How this ^{headgear} ~~topper~~ remained in position is another mystery!

An ancient advertisement of the period, showing the

amenities of an establishment known as the Wandsworth Cricketers' Cigar Stores, offers snuff among its other commodities and pictures a negro gentleman in a kilt swearing horribly at a black cat on the top of a barrel marked "Best Tobacco". The cat is returning the unseemly language in good measure and the whole thing appears to be the firm's signature tune.

Down Lodge Hall, farther up the High Street, built on the site of ^{one of} the four Ancient Manors of Wandsworth, is celebrated for visits from the famous American Revivalists Moody and Sankey, said to be responsible for such outstanding hymnology as

" Take this pil ...
And take this pil ...
And take this pilgrim home."

with its companion lyric

" Come down Sal ...
Come down Sal ...
Come down Salvation, Come! "

The Wagner Festival at Bayreuth seems far removed from this Borough, yet Mr. Richard Keene, of Wandsworth was commissioned to make the huge dragon for the performance of "The Ring", Mr. Keene being said to be the only man in Europe capable of making the monster with its three sections of body, its jaws that really

opened and eyes which actually rolled. The contract also included a large snake, a bear, a magpie, various sacrificial beasts and a pair of ravens, the whole to be completed in a few weeks for a payment of £500. Alas! All did not go according to plan and while Wagner tore his hair, urgent telegrams were despatched between Bayreuth and London.

"For heaven's sake have the bear sent off before the last part of the dragon. Siegfried is to be rehearsed again next week. The King will be here and Wagner will be in despair if the bear is wanting. Car has arrived. Rams still missing, body of Fafner (dragon) ditto."

Telegram from London to Bayreuth:

"Case with Fafner's (dragon's) legs left last Saturday; case with remainder of body to go tonight or tomorrow; bear tomorrow or Friday; Fafner's head Saturday or Monday."

Hundreds of telegrams were despatched to station-masters requesting them to search for the crate containing Fafner's head, which was found at the eleventh hour, so that the stage carpenters put the monster's oddments together just before the dress rehearsal, only to find

his concertina-like neck was missing. With marvellous ingenuity the stage manager introduced some lathes and canvas by which he fitted the great head on to the body, but Fafner was unable to prance and corvett according to orders. Nor did the neck arrive in time for any performance that summer, having journeyed in the hold of a packet boat bound for Beirut in Syria. No doubt our worthy Wandsworthian, Mr. Keene, badgered by his customers with their snakes and sacrificial beasts, had spelt the Bavarian "Bayreuth" by the name of its Syrian sister "Beirut". His shop, derelict and unused, where he hung up his snakes and dragons to dry, still stands.

The Green Coat School of Wandsworth was founded in 1720 "for the maintaining of a free school for the education of twenty-five children at the least of the poorest people of the said Parish of Wandsworth for ever."

"Ever" is a very long term and the school was pulled down in 1812 and its green-clothed children transferred to the Auxiliary National Schools upon the same site, All Saints, the school of Wandsworth Parish Church. The endowments were shared with my own Church school of St. Anne's whose scholars wear green in their uniform in honour of their predecessors. A lady living in

Wimbledon Park Road in 1928 dug up in her garden one of the brass buttons the original scholars wore on their "stout suits of green serge". It is inscribed "Wandsworth Free School, 1720." The Rules of the School, twenty-three in number, were inscribed on a parchment roll ten feet long which still exists in excellent preservation.

One of these rules directs the parents "to submit the children at the proper times to be reasonably chastised for their faults, and to forbear coming to the school on such occasions", that "the children might not be countenanced in their Faults nor the Master Interrupted or Discouraged in the performance of his Duty for their good." Poor little sinners! It was evidently no case of "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

In 1752, thirty-two years after the founding of the Greencoat School, complaint was made that the road in which it stood was so "ruinous, miry, deep and broken," that "the King's subjects cannot drive or ride along it without great danger to their lives and the loss of their goods."

Danger of another character seems to have threatened Father Warren, one of St. Anne's well-loved Vicars,

when he received the following communication written on a postcard.

"To Warren

Place two pounds under the mat outside your door, otherwise your life will be in danger.

Signed The Hand.

P.S. Have it there by 10.30 tonight."

An interesting drawing of a hammer and sickle was displayed beside the anonymous signature. Father Warren did not put any money under the Vicarage doormat, nor did any untoward vengeance fall upon him.

The good ship "Wandle", one of the transport vessels belonging to the Wandsworth Gas Company, bringing coal from the Tyne in 1916 and armed only with a gun on a swivel astern, was attacked by a submarine, twelve shots being exchanged during an engagement lasting an unpleasant half-hour. But so skilful was Captain Mastin, the "Wandle's" chief, that he saved his brave little ship and after his last few shots the submarine entirely disappeared, apparently into Davy Jones' Locker.

The little "Wandle"'s injuries consisted of damage to the port lifeboat and davits and the reception of some shrapnel unfortunately "stopped" by Selby Robson,

a fireman from South Shields. The ship put back into the Tyne for repairs to itself and Mr. Robson before returning home in triumph on May 4th. All up the Thames, from Gravesend to Wandsworth, a super blowing of sirens greeted the brave little vessel. Captain Mastin and his crew were carried shoulder high to a waggon, where the Captain was presented with a cheque on behalf of the Gas Company to share with himself and his crew.

St. Anne's church was one of the first buildings to be lit by gas, so that in 1829 it was possible to say Evensong after dark instead of during Sunday afternoon. The marvellous gaslight was then a distinctly chancey and alarming infant, being very blue and emitting sundry peculiar bubbling noises. It is to be feared that even with its assistance large type prayer books were a necessity.

In 1834 the Wandsworth and Putney Gas Light and Coke Company was formed, with a capital of £5.000. Two men were employed as a whole time job to make the gas, one at the munificent sum of 25/- per week, the other, presumably the mate, receiving the lesser sum of one pound.

For two hundreds years a couple of gunpowder ware-

houses stood near the present Wandsworth gasworks, but local inhabitants considering there was a nasty tone about them, they were removed.

Not far away, in my own parish, Iron-Mill Place and Iron Mill Road keep evergreen the memory of the Munition factory which operated on that site, happily removed long years before the Second World War, when several bombs fell in the neighbourhood.

Nearby in Garratt Lane during the 1914-18 war, shells were made at a factory near our St. Mary's Mission Church and it was a treat for the children to hear them tried out ... "Pop! Pop! Pop!"

Airships were manufactured at the "Veritas" Gas Mantle factory and when finished came through the big gates mounted on tractors looking like a sausage lover's nightmare. They were made by women, seated on the polished floors of the factory, covering the framework and attaching the ropes.

Wandsworth Bridge, which connects that noble Borough with Fulham, consisted at one time of a suspension bridge, over which frail structure rival bus drivers, related to Sam Weller, Senior, used to race two abreast, causing the whole thing to shake like a jelly, as probably did

the nerves of the unfortunate passengers.

Five times during last century the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race was rowed from Wandsworth to Putney instead of from Putney to Mortlake. In January 1881 the river was frozen over and blocked with ice, an unpleasant occurrence which Nature happily has not seen fit to repeat.

Wandsworth's first effort at protection against fire resulted in a building entitled the Fire Engine House, erected in 1752. Workmen started to dig on the west side of the church, but found so many rather newly buried corpses that the Vicar hastily stopped their efforts and Viscount Bolingbroke gave a site in the Plain, not far from the church.

Four hundred and twenty-five years before in 1327 during the reign of Edward II, who came to a distinctly sticky and unpleasant end in Berkeley Castle the same year, Wandsworth was destroyed by fire.

Yet even with the Fire Engine House's amenities it is doubtful whether Wandsworth would have been spared the same fate in a violent conflagration, for the keys were held by the Vicar and Wardens, which would have made things distinctly awkward should those gentlemen

prove to be "not at home".

W.S. Penley, the originator of that evergreen character, "Charley's Aunt", lived in Eglantine Road and attended St. Anne's church. Penley as a boy, was a chorister at Westminster Abbey and later became, as well as a comedian, the proprietor of a Church Family newspaper. He evidently loved to shed the mantle of the burlesque, so that on one occasion at a party of distinguished and exalted guests, on being pressed to amuse the company, he gave not the expected comic turn, but sang in a rich bass voice one of Handel's sacred solos.

A tablet on No 172 Trinity Road records that Thomas Hardy, the novelist, once lived there; No. 195 almost exactly opposite was once the residence of a former Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, whose Welsh characteristics and shock of thick white hair were a familiar feature of activities under the shadow of "Big Ben" in the earlier part of the century. The Ministry of Health now pursues its mysterious beneficial ceremonies in his Wandsworth home.

On the other side of the Borough at Holly Lodge,

Wimbledon Park Road, George Eliot resided, the lady who took a man's name, probably thinking no one would read her books if it were known they were written by a woman. I have always hoped for the best for myself in this respect.

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