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Содержание

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THE OLD HOUSE IN CRANE COURT

The roaring pell-mell of the principal thoroughfares of London is curiously contrasted with the calm seclusion which is often found at no great distance in certain lanes, courts, and passages, and the effect is not a little heightened when in these by-places we light upon some old building speaking of antique institutions or bygone habits of society. We lately had this idea brought strikingly before us on plunging abruptly out of Fleet Street into Crane Court, in search of the establishment known as the Scottish Hospital. We were all at once transferred into a quiet narrow street, as it might be called, full of printing and lithographic offices, tall, dark, and rusty, while closing up the further end stood a dingy building of narrow front, presenting an ornamental porch. A few minutes served to introduce us to a moderate-sized hall, having a long table in the centre, and an arm-chair at the upper end, while several old portraits graced the walls. It was not without a mental elevation of feeling, as well as some surprise, that we learned that this was a hall in which Newton had spent many an evening. It was, to be quite explicit, the meeting-place of the Royal Society from 1710 till 1782, and, consequently, during not much less than twenty years of the latter life of the illustrious author of the *Principia*, who, as an office-bearer in the institution, must have often taken an eminent place here. We were not, however, immediately in quest of the antiquities of the Royal Society. Our object was to form some acquaintance with the valuable institution which has succeeded to it in the possession of this house.

We must advert to a peculiarity of our Scottish countrymen, which can be set down only on the credit side of their character—their sympathy with each other when they meet as wanderers in foreign countries. Scotland is just a small enough country to cause a certain unity of feeling amongst the people. Wherever they are, they feel that Scotsmen should stand, as their proverb has it, *shoulder to shoulder*. The more distant the clime in which they meet, they remember with the more intensity their common land of mountain and flood, their historical and poetical associations, the various national institutions which ages have endeared to them; and the more disposed are they to take an interest in each other's welfare. This is a feeling in which time and modern innovations work no change, and it is one of old-standing.

When James VI. acceded to the throne of Elizabeth, he was followed southward by some of his favourite nobles, and there was of course an end put to that exclusive system of the late monarch which had kept down the number of Scotsmen in London, to what must now appear the astonishingly small one of fifty-eight. Perhaps some exaggerations have been indulged in with regard to the host of traders and craftsmen who went southward in the train of King James, but there can be no doubt, that it was considerable in point of numbers. But where wealth is sought for, there also, by an inevitable law of nature, is poverty. The better class of Scotchmen settled in London, soon found their feelings of compassion excited in behalf of a set of miserable fellow-countrymen who had failed to obtain employment or fix themselves in a mercantile position, and for whom the stated charities of the country were not available. Hence seems to have arisen, so early as 1613, the necessity for some system of mutual charity among the natives of Scotland in London. So far as can be ascertained, it was a handful of journeymen or hired artisans, who in that year associated to aid each other, and prevent themselves from becoming burdensome to strangers—an interesting fact, as evincing in a remote period the predominance of that spirit of independence for which the modern Scottish peasantry has been famed, and which even yet survives in some degree of vigour, notwithstanding the fatally

counteractive influence of poor-laws. The funds contributed by these worthy men were put into a box, and kept there—for in those days there were no banks to take a fruitful charge of money—and at certain periods the contributors would meet, and see what they could spare for the relief of such poor fellow-countrymen as had in the interval applied to them. We have still a faint living image of this simple plan in the *boxes* belonging to certain trades in our Scottish towns, or rather the survivance of the phrase, for the money, we must presume, is now everywhere relegated to the keeping of the banks. The institution in those days was known as the Scottish Box, just as a money-dealing company came to be called a bank, from the table (*banco*) which it employed in transacting its business. From a very early period in its history, it seems to have taken the form of what is now called a Friendly Society, each person contributing an entrance-fee of 5s., and 6d. per quarter thereafter, so as to be entitled to certain benefits in the event of poverty or sickness. Small sums were also lent to the poorer members, without interest, and burial expenses were paid. We find from the records that, in 1638, when the company was twenty in number, and met in Lamb's Conduit Street, it allowed 20s. for a certain class of those of its members who had died of the plague, and 30s. for others. The whole affair, however, was then on a limited scale—the quarterly disbursements in 1661 amounting only to L.9, 4s. Nevertheless, upwards of 300 poor Scotsmen, swept off by the pestilence of 1665-6, were buried at the expense of the Box, while numbers more were nourished during their sickness, without subjecting the parishes in which they resided to the smallest expense. We have not the slightest doubt, that not one of these people felt the bitterness of a dependence on alms. If not actually entitled to relief in consideration of previous payments of their own, they would feel that they were beholden only to their kindly countrymen. It would be like the members of a family helping each other. Humiliation could have been felt only, if they had had to accept of alms from those amongst whom they sojourned as strangers. Such is the way, at least, in which we read the character of our countrymen.

In the year 1665, the Box was exalted into the character of a corporation by a royal charter, the expenses attendant on which were disbursed by gentlemen named Kinnear, Allen, Ewing, Donaldson, &c. When they met at the Cross Keys in 'Coven Garden,' they found their receipts to be L.116, 8s. 5d. The character of the times is seen in one of their regulations, which imposed a fine of 2s. 6d. for every oath used in the course of their quarterly business. The institution was now becoming venerable, and, as usual, members began to exhibit their affection for it by presents. The Mr Kinnear just mentioned, conferred upon it an elegant silver cup. James Donaldson presented an ivory mallet or hammer, to be used by the chairman in calling order. Among the contributors, we find the name of Gilbert Burnet (afterwards Bishop) as giving L.1 half-yearly. They had an hospital erected in Blackfriars Street; but experience soon proved that confinement to a charity workhouse was altogether uncongenial to the feelings and habits of the Scottish poor, and they speedily returned to the plan of assisting them by small outdoor pensions, which has ever since been adhered to. In those days, no effort was made to secure permanency by a sunk fund. They distributed each quarter-day all that had been collected during the preceding interval. The consequence of this not very Scotsman-like proceeding was that, in one of those periods of decay which are apt to befall all charitable institutions, the Scottish Hospital was threatened with extinction; and this would undoubtedly have been its fate, but for the efforts of a few patriotic Scotsmen who came to its aid.

Through the help of these gentlemen, a new charter was obtained (1775), putting the institution upon a new and more liberal footing, and at the same time providing for the establishment of a permanent fund. Since then, through the virtue of the national spirit, considerable sums have been obtained from the wealthier Scotch living in London, and by the bequests of charitable individuals of the nation; so that the hospital now distributes about L.2200 per annum, chiefly in L.10 pensions to old people.[1] At the same time, a special bequest of large amount (L.76,495) from William Kinloch,

[1] *Note by an Englishman.*—It is not one of the least curious particulars in the history of the Scottish Hospital, that it substantiates by documentary evidence the fact, that Scotsmen, who have gone to England, occasionally find their way back to their own country.

Esq., a native of Kincardineshire, who had realised a fortune in India, allows of a further distribution through the same channel of about L.1800, most of it in pensions of L.4 to disabled soldiers and sailors. Thus many hundreds of the Scotch poor of the metropolis may be said to be kept by their fellow-countrymen from falling upon the parochial funds, on which they would have a claim—a fact, we humbly think, on which the nation at large may justifiably feel some little pride. As part of the means of collecting this money, there is a festival twice a year, usually presided over by some Scottish nobleman, and attended by a great number of gentlemen connected with Scotland by birth or otherwise. A committee of governors meets on the second Wednesday of every month, to distribute the benefactions to the regular pensioners and casual applicants; and, in accordance with the national habits of feeling, this ceremony is always prefaced by divine service in the chapel, according to the simple practice of the Presbyterian Church. Since 1782, these transactions, as well as the general concerns of the institution, have taken place in the old building in Crane Court, where also the secretary has a permanent residence.

Such, then, is the institution which has succeeded to the possession of the dusky hall in which the Royal Society at one time assembled. It was with a mingled interest that we looked round it, reflecting on the presence of such men as Newton and Bradley of old, and on the many worthy deeds which had since been done in it by men of a different stamp, but surely not unworthy to be mentioned in the same sentence. A portrait of Queen Mary by Zucchero, and one of the Duke of Lauderdale by Lely—though felt as reminiscences of Scotland—were scarcely fitted of themselves to ornament the walls; but this, of course, is as the accidents of gifts and bequests might determine. We felt it to be more right and fitting, that the secretary should be our old friend Major Adair, the son of that Dr Adair who accompanied Robert Burns on his visit to Glendevon in 1787. He is one of those men of activity, method, and detail, joined to unfailing good-humour, who are invaluable to such an institution. He is also, as might be expected, entirely a Scotsman, and evidently regards the hospital with feelings akin to veneration. Nor could we refrain from sympathising in his views, when we thought of the honourable national principle from which the institution took its rise, and by which it continues to be supported, as well as the practical good which it must be continually achieving. To quote his own words: 'From a view of the numbers relieved, it is evident, that while this institution is a real blessing to the aged, the helpless, the diseased, and the unemployed poor of Scotland, resident in London, Westminster, and the neighbourhood, extending to a circle of ten miles radius from the hall of the corporation, it is of incalculable benefit to the community at large, who, by means of this charity, are spared the pain of beholding so great an addition, as otherwise there would be, of our destitute fellow-creatures seeking their wretched pittance in the streets, liable to be taken up as vagrants and sent to the house of correction, and probably subjected to greater evils and disgrace.' The major has a pet scheme for extending the usefulness of the institution. It implies that individuals should make foundations of from L.300 to L.400 each, in order to produce pensions of L.10 a year; these to be in the care and dispensation of the hospital, and each to bear for ever the name of its founder; thus permanently connecting his memory with the institution, and insuring that once a year, at least, some humble fellow-countryman shall have occasion to rejoice that such a person as he once existed. The idea involves the gratification of a fine natural feeling, and we sincerely hope that it will be realised. And why, since we have said so much, should we hesitate to add the more general wish, that the Scottish Hospital may continue to enjoy an undiminished measure of the patronage of our countrymen? May it flourish for ever!

It appears from the books of the corporation, that in the year ending 30th November 1850, the sum of L.30, 16s. 6d. was spent in 'passages' from London to Leith; and there is actually a corresponding society in Edinburgh to receive the *revenants*, and pass them on to their respective districts.

THE HUNCHBACK OF STRASBOURG

In the department of the Bas-Rhin, France, and not more than about two leagues north of Strasbourg, lived Antoine Delessert, who farmed, or intended farming, his own land—about a ten-acre slice of 'national' property, which had fallen to him, nobody very well knew how, during the hurly-burly of the great Revolution. He was about five-and-thirty, a widower, and had one child, likewise named Antoine, but familiarly known as Le Bossu (hunchback)—a designation derived, like his father's acres, from the Revolution, somebody having, during one of the earlier and livelier episodes of that exciting drama, thrown the poor little fellow out of a window in Strasbourg, and broken his back. When this happened, Antoine, *père*, was a journeyman *ferblantier* (tinman) of that city. Subsequently, he became an active, though subordinate member of the local Salut Public; in virtue of which patriotic function he obtained Les Près, the name of his magnificent estate. Working at his trade was now, of course, out of the question. Farming, as everybody knows, is a gentlemanly occupation, skill in which comes by nature; and Citizen Delessert forthwith betook himself, with his son, to Les Près, in the full belief that he had stepped at once into the dignified and delightful position of the ousted aristocrat, to whom Les Près had once belonged, and whose haughty head he had seen fall into the basket. But envious clouds will darken the brightest sky, and the new proprietor found, on taking possession of his quiet, unencumbered domain, that property has its plagues as well as pleasures. True, there was the land; but not a plant, or a seed thereon or therein, nor an agricultural implement of any kind to work it with. The walls of the old rambling house were standing, and the roof, except in about a dozen places, kept out the rain with some success; but the nimble, unrespecting fingers of preceding patriots had carried off not only every vestige of furniture, usually so called, but coppers, cistern, pump, locks, hinges—nay, some of the very doors and window-frames! Delessert was profoundly discontented. He remarked to Le Bossu, now a sharp lad of some twelve years of age, that he was at last convinced of the entire truth of his cousin Boisdet's frequent observation—that the Revolution, glorious as it might be, had been stained and dishonoured by many shameful excesses; an admission which the son, with keen remembrance of his compulsory flight from the window, savagely endorsed.

'Peste!' exclaimed the new proprietor, after a lengthened and painful examination of the dilapidations, and general nakedness of his estate—'this is embarrassing. Citizen Destouches was right. I must raise money upon the property, to replace what those brigands have carried off. I shall require three thousand francs at the very least.'

The calculation was dispiriting; and after a night's lodging on the bare floor, damply enveloped in a few old sacks, the financial horizon did not look one whit less gloomy in the eyes of Citizen Delessert. Destouches, he sadly reflected, was an iron-fisted notary-public, who lent money, at exorbitant interest, to distressed landowners, and was driving, people said, a thriving trade in that way just now. His pulse must, however, be felt, and money be obtained, however hard the terms. This was unmistakably evident; and with the conviction tugging at his heart, Citizen Delessert took his pensive way towards Strasbourg.

'You guess my errand, Citizen Destouches?' said Delessert, addressing a flinty-faced man of about his own age, in a small room of Numéro 9, Rue Béchard.

'Yes—money: how much?'

'Three thousand francs is my calculation.'

'Three thousand francs! You are not afraid of opening your mouth, I see. Three thousand francs! —humph! Security, ten acres of middling land, uncultivated, and a tumble-down house; title, *droit de guillotine*. It is a risk, but I think I may venture. Pierre Nadaud,' he continued, addressing a black-browed, sly, sinister-eyed clerk, 'draw a bond, secured upon Les Près, and the appurtenances, for three thousand francs, with interest at ten per cent.'–

'Morbleu! but that is famous interest!' interjected Delessert, though timidly.

'Payable quarterly, if demanded,' the notary continued, without heeding his client's observation; 'with power, of course, to the lender to sell, if necessary, to reimburse his capital, as well as all accruing *dommages-intérêts*!'

The borrower drew a long breath, but only muttered: 'Ah, well; no matter! We shall work hard, Antoine and I.'

The legal document was soon formally drawn: Citizen Delessert signed and sealed, and he had only now to pouch the cash, which the notary placed upon the table.

'Ah ça!' he cried, eyeing the roll of paper proffered to his acceptance with extreme disgust. 'It is not in those *chiffons* of assignats, is it, that I am to receive three thousand francs, at ten per cent.?'

'My friend,' rejoined the notary, in a tone of great severity, 'take care what you say. The offence of depreciating the credit or money of the Republic is a grave one.'

'Who should know that better than I?' promptly replied Delessert. 'The paper-money of our glorious Republic is of inestimable value; but the fact is, Citizen Destouches, I have a weakness, I confess it, for coined money—*argent métallique*. In case of fire, for instance, it'–

'It is very remarkable,' interrupted the notary with increasing sternness—'it is very remarkable, Pierre' (Pierre was an influential member of the Salut Public), 'that the instant a man becomes a landed proprietor, he betrays symptoms of *incivisme*: is discovered to be, in fact, an *aristocq* at heart.'

'I an *aristocq*!' exclaimed Delessert, turning very pale; 'you are jesting, surely. See, I take these admirable assignats—three thousand francs' worth at ten per cent.—with the greatest pleasure. Oh, never mind counting among friends.'

'Pardon!' replied Destouches, with rigid scrupulosity. 'It is necessary to be extremely cautious in matters of business. Deducting thirty francs for the bond, you will, I think, find your money correct; but count yourself.'

Delessert pretended to do so, but the rage in his heart so caused his eyes to dance and dazzle, and his hands to shake, that he could scarcely see the figures on the assignats, or separate one from the other. He bundled them up at last, crammed them into his pocket, and hurried off, with a sickly smile upon his face, and maledictions, which found fierce utterance as soon as he had reached a safe distance, trembling on his tongue.

'Scélérat! coquin!' he savagely muttered. 'Ten per cent. for this moonshine money! I only wish– But never mind, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. I must try and buy in the same way that I have been so charmingly sold.'

Earnestly meditating this equitable process, Citizen Delessert sought his friend Jean Souday, who lived close by the Fossé des Tanneurs (Tanners' Ditch.) Jean had a somewhat ancient mare to dispose of, which our landed proprietor thought might answer his purpose. Cocotte was a slight waif, sheared off by the sharp axe of the Place de la Révolution, and Souday could therefore afford to sell her cheap. Fifty francs *argent métallique* would, Delessert knew, purchase her; but with assignats, it was quite another affair. But, courage! He might surely play the notary's game with his friend Souday: that could not be so difficult.

'You have no use for Cocotte,' suggested Delessert modestly, after exchanging fraternal salutations with his friend.

'Such an animal is always useful,' promptly answered Madame Souday, a sharp, notable little woman, with a vinegar aspect.

'To be sure—to be sure! And what price do you put upon this useful animal?'

'Cela dépend'– replied Jean, with an interrogative glance at his helpmate.

'Yes, as Jean says, that depends—entirely depends'– responded the wife.

'Upon what, citoyenne?'

'Upon what is offered, parbleu! We are in no hurry to part with Cocotte; but money is tempting.'

'Well, then, suppose we say, between friends, fifty francs?'

'Fifty francs! That is very little; besides, I do not know that I shall part with Cocotte at all.'

'Come, come; be reasonable. Sixty francs! Is it a bargain?'

Jean still shook his head. 'Tempt him with the actual sight of the money,' confidentially suggested Madame Souday; 'that is the only way to strike a bargain with my husband.'

Delessert preferred increasing his offer to this advice, and gradually advanced to 100 francs, without in the least softening Jean Souday's obduracy. The possessor of the assignats was fain, at last, to adopt Madame Souday's iterated counsel, and placed 120 paper francs before the owner of Cocotte. The husband and wife instantly, as silently, exchanged with each other, by the only electric telegraph then in use, the words: 'I thought so.'

'This is charming money, friend Delessert,' said Jean Souday; 'far more precious to an enlightened mind than the barbarous coin stamped with effigies of kings and queens of the *ancien régime*. It is very tempting; still, I do not think I can part with Cocotte at any price.'

Poor Delessert ground his teeth with rage, but the expression of his anger would avail nothing; and, yielding to hard necessity, he at length, after much wrangling, became the purchaser of the old mare for 250 francs—in assignats. We give this as a specimen of the bargains effected by the owner of Les Près with his borrowed capital, and as affording a key to the bitter hatred he from that day cherished towards the notary, by whom he had, as he conceived, been so egregiously duped. Towards evening, he entered a wine-shop in the suburb of Robertsau, drank freely, and talked still more so, fatigue and vexation having rendered him both thirsty and bold. Destouches, he assured everybody that would listen to him, was a robber—a villain—a vampire blood-sucker, and he, Delessert, would be amply revenged on him some fine day. Had the loquacious orator been eulogising some one's extraordinary virtues, it is very probable that all he said would have been forgotten by the morrow, but the memories of men are more tenacious of slander and evil-speaking; and thus it happened that Delessert's vituperative and menacing eloquence on this occasion was thereafter reproduced against him with fatal power.

Albeit, the now nominal proprietor of Les Près, assisted by his son and Cocotte, set to work manfully at his new vocation; and by dint of working twice as hard, and faring much worse than he did as a journeyman *ferblantier*, contrived to keep the wolf, if not far from the door, at least from entering in. His son, Le Bossu, was a cheerful, willing lad, with large, dark, inquisitive eyes, lit up with much clearer intelligence than frequently falls to the share of persons of his age and opportunities. The father and son were greatly attached to each other; and it was chiefly the hope of bequeathing Les Près, free from the usurious gripe of Destouches, to his boy, that encouraged the elder Delessert to persevere in his well-nigh hopeless husbandry. Two years thus passed, and matters were beginning to assume a less dreary aspect, thanks chiefly to the notary's not having made any demand in the interim for the interest of his mortgage.

'I have often wondered,' said Le Bossu one day, as he and his father were eating their dinner of *soupe aux choux* and black bread, 'that Destouches has not called before. He may now as soon as he pleases, thanks to our having sold that lot of damaged wheat at such a capital price: corn must be getting up tremendously in the market. However, you are ready for Destouches' demand of six hundred francs, which it is now.'

'Parbleu! quite ready; all ready counted in those charming assignats; and that is the joke of it. I wish the old villain may call or send soon'–

A gentle tap at the door interrupted the speaker. The son opened it, and the notary, accompanied by his familiar, Pierre Nadaud, quietly glided in.

'Talk of the devil,' growled Delessert audibly, 'and you are sure to get a whisk of his tail. Well, messieurs,' he added more loudly, 'your business?'

'Money—interest now due on the mortgage for three thousand francs,' replied M. Destouches with much suavity.

'Interest for two years,' continued the sourly-sardonic accents of Pierre Nadaud; 'six hundred francs precisely.'

'Very good, you shall have the money directly.' Delessert left the room; the notary took out and unclasped a note-book; and Pierre Nadaud placed a slip of *papier timbré* on the dinner-table, preparatory to writing a receipt.

'Here,' said Delessert, re-entering with a roll of soiled paper in his hand, 'here are your six hundred francs, well counted.'

The notary reclasped his note-book, and returned it to his pocket; Pierre Nadaud resumed possession of the receipt paper.

'You are not aware, then, friend Delessert,' said the notary, 'that creditors are no longer compelled to receive assignats in payment?'

'How? What do you say?'

'Pierre,' continued M. Destouches, 'read the extract from *Le bulletin des Lois*, published last week.' Pierre did so with a ringing emphasis, which would have rendered it intelligible to a child; and the unhappy debtor fully comprehended that his paper-money was comparatively worthless! It is needless to dwell upon the fury manifested by Delessert, the cool obduracy of the notary, or the cynical comments of the clerk. Enough to say, that M. Destouches departed without his money, after civilly intimating that legal proceedings would be taken forthwith. The son strove to soothe his father's passionate despair, but his words fell upon unheeding ears; and after several hours passed in alternate paroxysms of stormy rage and gloomy reverie, the elder Delessert hastily left the house, taking the direction of Strasbourg. Le Bossu watched his father's retreating figure from the door until it was lost in the clouds of blinding snow that was rapidly falling, and then sadly resumed some indoor employment. It was late when he retired to bed, and his father had not then returned. He would probably remain, the son thought, at Strasbourg for the night.

The chill, lead-coloured dawn was faintly struggling on the horizon with the black, gloomy night, when Le Bossu rose. Ten minutes afterwards, his father strode hastily into the house, and threw himself, without a word, upon a seat. His eyes, the son observed, were blood-shot, either with rage or drink—perhaps both; and his entire aspect wild, haggard, and fierce. Le Bossu silently presented him with a measure of *vin ordinaire*. It was eagerly swallowed, though Delessert's hand shook so that he could scarcely hold the pewter flagon to his lips.

'Something has happened,' said Le Bossu presently.

'Morbleu!—yes. That is,' added the father, checking himself, 'something *might* have happened, if– Who's there?'

'Only the wind shaking the door. What *might* have happened?' persisted the son.

'I will tell you, Antoine. I set off for Strasbourg yesterday, to see Destouches once again, and entreat him to accept the assignats in part-payment at least. He was not at home. Marguérite, the old servant, said he was gone to the cathedral, not long since reopened. Well, I found the usurer just coming out of the great western entrance, heathen as he is, looking as pious as a pilgrim. I accosted him, told my errand, begged, prayed, stormed! It was all to no purpose, except to attract the notice and comments of the passers-by. Destouches went his way, and I, with fury in my heart, betook myself to a wine-shop—Le Brun's. He would not even change an assignat to take for what I drank, which was not a little; and I therefore owe him for it. When the gendarmes cleared the house at last, I was nearly crazed with rage and drink. I must have been so, or I should never have gone to the Rue Béchard, forced myself once more into the notary's presence, and—and'–

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.