

MERTON
IN THE DAYS OF
MY GRANDMOTHER

AN oddly shaped parish it was, as parishes often were in those times, a sort of very irregular triangle having for its base the village street, more than three miles long, fairly straight for a while, and then making sharp twists and sudden turns. It joined Wimbledon and Mitcham right in the middle of the bridge over the Wandle in the High Street. Here, one side followed the Wandle, passed by the Old Priory Grounds, then right on to Morden Hall, its line going through the mansion there and from that point turning until it met once more the long village street ending at Coombe Lane, or rather Coombe Bridge. Such a quaintly pretty village it was, and the odd thing is that the part nearest London was in Mitcham and Wimbledon and not Merton proper at all. Here the cottages were most thickly clustered, and here in the long room behind the inn, the Funny Club had its meetings, the village balls took place, and the Dramatic Society gave its performances, for at

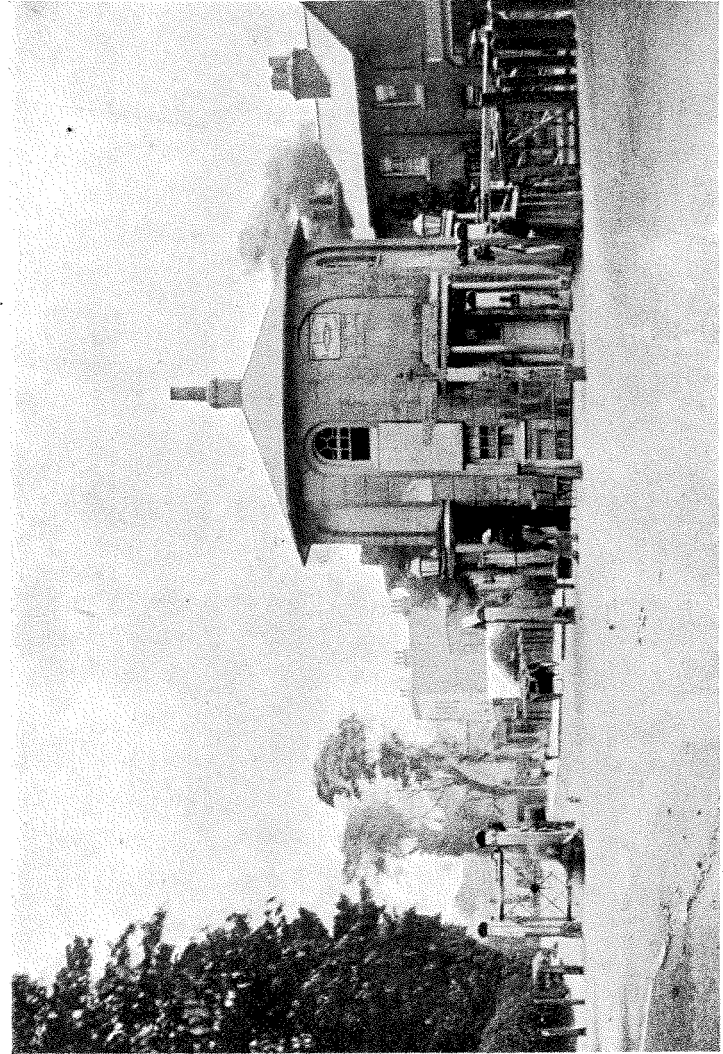
this end of Merton were the cotton and silk factories, and the copper mills, and managing men and operatives were the doers and the talkers. Besides, it was only a walk from London, and friends would come out and sing to them, as Russell Grover did later, and the factory vans would bring over the pretty girls from other villages.

Perhaps the best way to make the acquaintance of the village would be to take a walk with my grandmother, and she will point out to us the houses as we pass. Let me introduce you to her. She is dressed something after the style of the wax figure of Madame Tussaud in the famous exhibition, with a fine white neckerchief carefully folded under the low cut corsage of her gown; sheltering her face is a Quaker-looking bonnet with a soft silk crown; she wears mittens, and carries a basket. She is returning to her home near the church from an important errand. Her brother has promised to write some family news, and at the little post office in the village shop near the 'White Hart,' the old postmistress tells her that the postman, who only passes once a week, has not left her any letter, and if she wants it quickly she must go all the way to Tooting. It will probably cost her 7d., for before me is one of the quaint love letters she sometimes received, with its long, closely written sheet,

even the tiniest corner covered. Its outer folds are small—there is no envelope—and a big 7d. is seen where the stamp would be now.

My grandmother was born in the latter part of the century, when Nelson and 'Bony' were names to conjure with, and she had left a famous south country smuggling village with all its excitements to come to quiet Merton. But we must not delay our walk too long, although my grandmother has stopped for a moment to speak to a shepherd in a smock frock. As he is a native not of Merton but of Malden, she finds it very difficult to understand him, for Malden folk have a dialect of their own. On the left hand side as she returns from Tooting is Collier's Wood House, belonging to Mitcham it is true, but all the same the home of a Lady Bountiful of the village, Mrs. Miller, who found places for all the cottage girls at that end, and looked after the morals of the boys. Further down, and nearly opposite, is Bye Grove, belonging to Merton College, Oxford, which can still be seen, though much of its once lovely grounds has been built over.

We have arrived at the first toll gate (single gate) with its queer little toll house, and the village inn opposite, and are still properly in Mitcham. Just here a pretty lane branches off, shaded by big trees, up the trunks of which the



MERTON. THE DOUBLE GATES

From a photograph

squirrels run. Perhaps, as my grandmother passes, she remembers how, not so long ago, the great Abernethy came, and, after taking the big fee drawn almost from the life-blood of a village wife, said to her, as he hurriedly passed to get into his carriage, and turning from the eager pleading in her face: 'Better, woman? How can he be when he's got no lights?' Why, see! here is the poor woman, she has just come to her cottage door in her mournful widow's garments.

Close by on the right hand side is the cottage called the Miller's Mead, where all the folk have to go and get their water at a halfpenny a pail. True, a man comes along with a cart sometimes, but his water does not seem quite as fresh as that drawn from the well direct.

Now we cross over the Wandle, and are in Merton proper. On the left hand, that is, for the right hand side is in Wimbledon, and here, facing the beautiful stream (where if you have a little time to spare you may see a trout rise, with its beautiful scales glistening) is the 'King's Head,' and this is the spot of the daily village excitement, for the Dorking coach changes horses here, and the coachman's home is in the village, and the guard takes care to blow his horn well. Possibly even Nelson may have been a passenger in the coach. Higher up on the same side a fine old house used to stand back from the road, and

opposite was Mr. Alchin's silk-weaving factory, hidden amongst its trees, and with the beautiful piece of water, which all know who have been to see Mr. Morris's wonderful work at the same place. Next door is Abbey House, supposed to have been the Guest House for those visitors to the Priory who were not admitted within its gates. Just now Captain Cook's widow is staying here with her cousin, Mr. Smith, and his brother, the Admiral, who was the first to put his foot on the shores of New South Wales. Now we come to the rather desolate-looking grounds where Merton Place, the former home of Nelson and Lady Hamilton, is in the last stage of dreariness, before being finally pulled down about 1840. Nelson and Lady Hamilton have both passed away, the little Horatia is wandering, and even Mr. Goldschmid, who had bought the house, has lost his all and is dead.

Right behind the Abbey House there is still, my grandmother will tell you, a part of the old Abbey to be seen; but it is out of our way, and we must go on, passing on the right Mr. Bennett's house and Nelson's stables (demolished now). Just outside Nelson's fruit garden is the 'dipping hole' with its bucket and sweet clear water.

Here we arrive at the Double Gates, and to the left the road goes straight away to Morden

Hall and its farm, where Mr. White's College boys play high jinks occasionally and get into disgrace over pillow fights. On the Wimbledon side of the road (to-day covered up by other houses) is still a little white house, which at that time was surrounded by magnificent trees, and which, for so small a house, had very large grounds. Here then lived, I think, Sir Frederick Hotham, and later, Mr. Ducros. Turning round its outer edge my grandmother goes with me a little way up the road to Wimbledon, for there is a lovely avenue of trees, and the nightingales are often to be heard. From this point the road spreads away right to Wimbledon, where the railway line from London to Southampton is just being made, and of which my grandmother speaks with great disdain—'Steam, indeed, when horses can be had!' Not a single house is there all along; each side of the wide road are lengths of grass where the sheep graze. But we have not time to go far, and we must turn back and go straight along the high road. After the Double Gates there is no house except Judge Park's (also pulled down), until we come to the little old Almshouses standing back, with their gardens in front. The pound is empty and so are the stocks and the cage—not even a drunken man is to be heard within. It seems very odd to have put these places of punishment close to

the old Almshouses. They were done away with long before my grandmother died, the last occupant being an old ne'er do well, of whom the villagers would tell many a tale, and who breaking a hole in the cage ran away.

Next we get to the old Manor House (occupied in this present day by Mr. Wood). A little farther on we come to a cluster of wooden cottages, where is the baker's shop with its tiny little window, on one pane of which is scratched with a diamond the name Keatch and the date 1785. Grandmother steps in to discuss the price of bread, and tell Mrs. Skelton some little bit of news. So we will saunter on past the 'White Hart' Inn, and pass the time of day with its landlord, who is standing in the fine old bowling green. No railway crossing is here yet, but a quaint little cottage stands close by; then, again, more hedges and trees, and now both sides of the road belong to Merton Parish. On the left is Dorset Hall, where Mr. Orme, the churchwarden and famous fox-hunter lives, and on the right is Spring House. Mr. Mandeville is there, I think, but do not quite remember.

Now we must turn up the lane to our left a little while, and go and see the church where Mr. Bond is vicar. In the churchyard we notice a few tombstones, not so very many, for the parish is a very little one, the rate-

payers numbering little more than ninety. Just inside the doors the long bell-rope is hanging with its frayed end. Nelson's hatchment is still quite fresh, and Mrs. Cook's prayer book is in her seat. Opposite the church is the building known as Church House, then used by the parish of Bermondsey as a kind of work-house, that house in which Sheridan is said to have lived, and which later was de Chastelaine's school. Bowen, the master, is very busy with some of the bigger boys in the workshops, and every room in the queer old house, with its bedrooms at different levels, is crammed to the full. Keeping down this narrow lane, and passing the cottages which still remain, to give us some idea of what they were then, we get out to the old farm-house, long since improved into a mansion by Mr. Innes. Stepping out into the high road again, we can still see the little old house, dated 1797, where my grandmother's friend, Ann Beckitt, lived, and which, by the kindness of Mr. Innes, is now a home for four poor widows. Continuing our way we admire the beautiful creepers at Long Lodge, (now Morayfields), as we pass, and farther on reach the little roadside 'Leather Bottle' beer-house, the end of his walk for many a Merton man. I am afraid we have no time to go up to Cannon Hill, where Moses

Sherwood's horse is turned out to graze in the park by the fine old house; it had left its master behind at Waterloo. Soon another old Manor House arrests our attention, now Broadwater Farm, with its fine trees and the wide pond the other side of the road. The farmer is Mr. Overton, and grandmother has business with him, for he is the overseer. She wants to see Mr. Rayne too, but Blagdon Farm is too far off (the cyclists of to-day know it well), it is farther than the Blue House farm, and even if we go by the footpath from Cannon Hill Lane it will be too far, although we skirt Mr. Rayne's land all the way to Coombe Lane.

My grandmother—she is but forty, by the way—is impatient to get home; it will not do to be out late, for there are no lamps along the road, and no policemen to protect us, until the horse patrol starts on his midnight journey, and he may not come our way until the small hours. Ask my grandmother if she is tired, and she will laugh at you indeed. Why, consider, if she wants to go to London she must walk there, unless some farmer may be going her way and will give her a lift. For Dicky Thornton, the hermit millionaire, has not yet come to Merton with his little four-wheeled chaise, and his ready offer to 'pick one up.'

Just one more look at my grandmother.

She is older, and her house is now a new one, on the road to Epsom, between the two toll-gates. Such a houseful of nephews and nieces and grandchildren. For two days before there has been, and is every year, a great boiling and baking. A cold collation must be ready for every one who comes in, for it is the great Merton carnival, the Derby Day. The toll-gates are supreme. Carriages can only pass them singly, and as there is not a mile between the two, it is one long procession; only at grandmother's we do not pay for our seats to view it. 'Look,' cries Rosie, 'oh! look, auntie, at those jockeys, what a lovely blue their coats are,'—and then another shout as four beautifully-matched horses pass, the jockey in amber and black, the ladies inside the carriage wearing the same colours. The girls study the fashions, the boys get their pea-shooters, and everyone is happy and good-tempered. All are not so coming back, but when a pretty doll or a beautiful packet of sweets comes flying our way and is deftly caught, we know the occupiers of that carriage are not among the losers, and a pea from the boys' shooters will only bring a laugh or a joke. Stop! the carriages have stopped altogether, and are ranging in line. Why, of course, here comes the Prince of Wales, and he is just going to change horses here at the 'Six Bells,' But whom have

we coming now, this drag full of tall muscular black men? Do you not know? They are the aboriginees from Australia. They have come over to play cricket against our men,—and of course must be taken to see the Derby. They all turn to look at the pretty girls in grandmother's garden, but these are staring too eagerly to notice; for Australia was a new and far-off country in those days, and these natives they had never seen the like of.

But it is time to say good-bye to my grandmother and her village. Would we could have back again the trees and streamlets and soft grassy paths, and the woods with cover enough for foxes, instead of our ugly blocks of houses and crowded streets, where the air is never as fresh as it was in my grandmother's days!

ANNIE LAWRENCE.

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MISCELLANEA

THE SIMONS' CHARITIES

OUR attention has been drawn by Mr. W. Whitmore to a slight inaccuracy in the article by Miss Annie Lawrence, on 'Merton in the Days of my Grandmother,' which appeared in last year's Annual. On page 157 it is stated that 'the little old house, dated 1797, where my grandmother's friend, Ann Beckitt, lived . . . by the kindness of Mr. Innes, is now a home for four poor widows.' The house in question, at the corner of Mostyn Road, is part of a bequest to the parish under the will of Mrs. Elizabeth Simons (1789), the particulars being as follows, viz.:

1.—£600 New Consols. Proceeds to be applied to such charitable uses as the Vicar shall in his discretion think proper.

2.—Quarter Acre of Land at Fairlawn, Kingston Road, and Cottage thereon, also £500 new Consols. For benefit of Four Poor Women, inhabitants, or having been inhabitants of the Parish.

LIST OF THE FLOWERING PLANTS AND VASCULAR CRYPTOGAMS RECORDED FOR WIMBLEDON

The letters following the names refer to the districts in which the plants occur, viz. :—C = The Common, with adjoining elevated ground and cultivated fields; P = The Park, extending to the main line of the South Western

Railway; M = Merton and other ground to the south of the South Western Railway. When no letters appear, the plants are supposed to be generally distributed. I have myself gathered those distinguished with an asterisk.

H. W. PUGSLEY.

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|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Clematis Vitalba.</i> M. | * <i>Barbarea vulgaris.</i> |
| * <i>Anemone apennina.</i> P. | * <i>B. præcox.</i> C. |
| <i>Myosurus minimus.</i> C. | <i>Arabis hirsuta.</i> C. |
| <i>Ranunculus fluitans.</i> M. | <i>A. perfoliata.</i> C. |
| <i>R. circinatus.</i> P. | * <i>Cardamine pratensis.</i> |
| * <i>R. tricophyllus.</i> P. | * <i>C. hirsuta.</i> |
| * <i>R. peltatus.</i> C. P. | * <i>C. flexuosa.</i> P. |
| * <i>R. Baudotii.</i> P. | * <i>Sisymbrium Thalianum.</i> C. |
| * <i>R. hederaceus.</i> C. | * <i>S. officinale.</i> |
| * <i>R. sceleratus.</i> C. P. | * <i>S. Alliaria.</i> |
| * <i>R. Flammula.</i> C. | * <i>Erysimum cheiranthoides.</i> C. |
| <i>R. Lingua.</i> C. | <i>Camelina sativa.</i> C. |
| * <i>R. auricomus.</i> P. | * <i>Brassica Sinapistrum.</i> |
| * <i>R. acris.</i> | * <i>B. alba.</i> P. |
| * <i>R. repens.</i> | * <i>Bursa Bursa-pastoris.</i> |
| * <i>R. bulbosus.</i> | * <i>Coronopus didymus.</i> P. |
| <i>R. sardous.</i> C. | * <i>C. Ruellii.</i> C. P. |
| * <i>R. Ficaria.</i> | <i>Lepidium latifolium.</i> P. |
| * <i>Caltha palustris.</i> C. P. | * <i>L. campestre.</i> C. |
| * <i>Eranthis hiemalis.</i> P. | * <i>Thlaspi arvense.</i> C. |
| * <i>Berberis vulgaris.</i> P. | <i>Teesdalia nudicaulis.</i> C. |
| * <i>Castalia speciosa.</i> P. | * <i>Raphanus Raphanistrum.</i> |
| * <i>Papaver Rhœas.</i> P. | * <i>Viola odorata.</i> P. |
| <i>P. Argemone.</i> M.? | * <i>V. Riviniana.</i> C. P. |
| * <i>Chelidonium majus.</i> C. | * <i>V. ericetorum.</i> C. |
| <i>and v. laciniatum.</i> | * <i>Polygala serpyllacea.</i> C. |
| <i>Neckeria lutea.</i> C. | <i>Silene anglica.</i> C. |
| * <i>N. claviculata.</i> C. | * <i>Lychnis alba.</i> P. |
| * <i>Fumaria officinalis.</i> C. | * <i>L. Flos-cuculi.</i> C. P. |
| * <i>Nasturtium officinale.</i> | * <i>L. Githago.</i> C. |
| * <i>N. sylvestre.</i> C. | * <i>Cerastium quaternellum.</i> C. |