

**RANDOM
RECOLLECTIONS
OF AN OLD ACTOR**

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Random recollections of an old actor by Fred Belton

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FRED BELTON

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AN OLD ACTOR

BY

FRED BELTON

LONDON

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND

1880

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RANDOM RECOLLECTIONS

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AN OLD ACTOR.

CHAPTER I.

1815 to 1822.

IT is my purpose to write of days gone by, and to call up from the past recollections of things, beings, and events long vanished from our gaze, and buried in the mists of the past. Dandy-horses have given way to bicycles, stage coaches, to trains, and couriers to telegrams; still those early days were merry days, and ladies of the past, leaving the ball-room, theatre, or tea party—"drum" or "conversazione"—though tossed and tumbled in their sedan chairs by drunken "bearers," and pestered in foggy weather by importunate linkmen with "Light, yer honour," had as much to tell on reaching home as your modern belle—in her carriage or brougham. To be

sure, you can travel or sleep now in more security than in the days when footpads and highwaymen plied their trade in broad daylight. It certainly is a comfort to know that a stalwart policeman, with military step, treads round your premises and the adjacent streets, instead of an infirm potterer, who rarely left his box, except to bawl, in tremulous accents, "Past one o'clock, and a cloudy morning."

What changes I have seen in my day in all things! With gas came a wonderful transmutation. Where Regent Street now stands, we passed through wretchedly-constructed shops, covered with tarpaulin, and barely habitable; while off the pavement, and nearly to the middle of the street, hawkers carried on a brisk trade. In fact, small markets existed where stalls, laden with meat, vegetables, fried fish, pastry, and other edibles, rendered the roadway, on foot or in vehicle, almost impassable. The steady march of improvement swept away these rat-holes, and few that pass in these days Holborn Bars—the Strand, near Northumberland House then; now non-existent—have any idea of what its appearance was in those times.

Thence could, at the time I speak of, be obtained no view of the Thames, which is now slowly, but surely,

recovering from its once black pool of muddy impurity, as I then remember it. Your loungers, too, in Regent Street, little think that those spots were, within my memory, the haunts of the lawless and lowest of the low. St. Giles, where now stands New Oxford Street, was second only to Westminster in sheltering depravity. By the way, that same Westminster is now the patrician quarter; there the noblest in the land reside and give entertainments, out-topping all that Lucullus ever dreamed of. Your dainty lady would faint if told that, where she now eats, sleeps, rides, and recreates, the vilest crimes have been concocted and committed. The dens of Westminster stood ever prominent in criminality; for though St. Giles might abound in filth, the deeper stains of crime found its hottest and most congenial bed where now the conservatory plants of our aristocracy bud and bloom in refinement. And then, again, the city proper of London. Why, bless me, we hardly know it. Vast improvements have taken place since the time when Holborn Hill and Fleet Ditch were covered with abominable thievish dens. There marriages by candle-light were boldly performed for a guinea, and as unblushingly "touted" for as stolen handkerchiefs;

there, heavy lumbering chariots, swinging high in the air, once plied, driven by some drunken and discharged coachman who paraded his lumbering and faded finery for hire in the streets. These vehicles, however, gave place in course of time to the cabriolet, a French invention, in which the filthy cabman sat side by side with his fare, in a little box over the wheel; so that if Jehu had been indulging in liquor, onions, tobacco, &c., you had the full benefit of these luxuries, enhanced perchance by the fogs that somehow in those days were thicker than they are now. Closed hackney cabs, hansoms, and omnibuses, drove these vehicles off the roads.

Talking of cabs puts me in mind of coaches, waggons, &c. When first railways were started, great was the outcry and condemnation. We were to be hurried through the air so hastily that, at the termination of our journey, we should all be found suffocated; indeed, by the comic journals of the period, starving horses were depicted dying on the roadside, or peering out of stable doors, skeletons of misery. And the belief universally entertained was, that horses would be at a complete discount; instead of which never have they been so valued, or so much