Forest Days: A Romance of Old Times

G. P. R. (George Payne Rainsford) James

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FOREST DAYS
A ROMANCE OF OLD TIMES.

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FOREST DAYS

A ROMANCE OF OLD TIMES.

BY G. P. R. JAMES, AUTHOR OF "MORLEY ERNSTEIN," "THE ROBBER," ETC.

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1843.

TO JAMES MILNES HASKILL, ESQ. M P. ETC.

MY DEAR SIR,

In offering you a book, which I fear is little worthy of your acceptance, and a compliment which has become valueless, I cannot help expressing my regret at having no other means of testifying my esteem and respect for one, who has not only always shown a most kindly feeling towards myself and my works, but has ever advocated the true interests of literature. You will, nevertheless, I am sure, receive the tribute not unwillingly, however inadequate it may be to convey my thanks for many an act of kindness, or to express a feeling of high esteem founded on no light basis.

In the volumes I send, you will find many scenes with which you are familiar, both in history and in nature; but one thing, perhaps, will strike you with some surprise. We have been so much accustomed, in ballad and story, to see the hero of the forest, Robin Hood, placed in the days of Richard I., that it will seem, perhaps, somewhat bold in me to depict him as living and acting in the reign of Henry III. But I

think, if you will turn to those old historians, with whose writings you are not unfamiliar, you will find that he was, as I have represented, an English yeoman, of a very superior mind, living in the times in which I have placed him, outlawed, in all probability, for his adherence to the popular party of the day, and taking a share in the important struggle between the weak and tyrannical, though accomplished, Henry III., and that great and extraordinary leader, Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester.

In regard to the conduct of my story, I have nothing to say, but that I wish it were better. I think, however, that it will be found to contain some striking scenes of those times; and I trust that the struggle of feelings, depicted in the third volume, may afford you matter of some interest.

Believe me to be,

My Dear Sir,

With the highest esteem,

Your most faithful servant,

G. P. R. JAMES.

FOREST DAYS.

CHAPTER I.

Merry England!--Oh, merry England! What a difference has there always been between thee and every other land! What a cheerfulness there seems to hang about thy very name! What yeoman-like hilarity is there in all the thoughts of the past! What a spirit of sylvan cheer

and rustic hardihood in all the tales of thy old times!

When England was altogether an agricultural land--when a rude plough produced an abundant harvest, and a thin, but hardy and generous peasantry, devoted themselves totally to the cultivation of the earth,--when wide forests waved their green boughs over many of the richest manufacturing districts of Great Britain, and the lair of the fawn and the burrow of the coney were found, where now appear the fabric and the mill, there stood, in a small town, or rather, I should call it, village, some fourteen miles from Pontefract, a neat little inn, well known to all the wayfarers on the road as a comfortable resting place, where they could dine on their journey to or from the larger city.

The house was constructed of wood, and was but of two stories; but let it not be supposed on that account that it was devoid of ornament, for manifold were the quaint carvings and rude pieces of sculpture with which it was decorated, and not small had been the pains which had been bestowed upon mouldings and cornices, and lintels and door-posts by the hand of more than one laborious artisan. Indeed, altogether, it was a very elaborate piece of work, and had probably been originally built for other purposes than that which it now served; for many were the changes which had taken place in that part of the country, as well as over the rest of England, between the days I speak of, and those of a century before.

Any one who examined the house closely, would have seen that it must have been constructed before the year 1180, for there was very strong proof, in the forms of the windows, and the cutting across of several of the beams which traversed the front, that at the period of its

erection the use of glazed casements in private houses was not known. At the time I speak of, however, glass had become plentiful in England, and, though cottages were seldom ornamented with anything like a lattice, yet no house with the rank and dignity of an inn, where travellers might stop in rainy and boisterous weather, was now without windows, formed of manifold small lozenge-shaped pieces of glass, like those still frequently employed in churches, only of a smaller size.

The inn was a gay-looking, cheerful place, either in fine weather or in foul; for, as there are some men who, clothe them as you will, have a distinguished and graceful air, so are there some dwellings which look sunshiny and bright, let the aspect of the sky be what it will. The upper story of the house projected beyond the lower, and formed of itself a sort of portico, giving a shelter to two long benches placed beneath it, either from the heat of the summer sun, or the rain of the spring and autumn; and it need not be said that these benches formed the favourite resting place of sundry old men on bright summer evenings; and that many a time, in fine weather, a table would be put out upon the green before the house, the bench offering seats on one side, while settles and stools gave accommodation on the other, to many a merry party round the good roast beef and humming ale.

Before the door of the inn, spread out one of those pleasant open pieces of ground, which generally found room for themselves in every country village in England; on which the sports of the place were held; to which the jockey brought his horse for sale, and tried his paces up and down; on which many a wrestler took a fall, and cudgel-player got a broken head. There too, in their season, were the merry maypole and the dance, the tabor and the pipe. There was

many a maiden wooed and won; and there passed along all the three processions of life--the infant to the font, the bride to the altar, the corpse to the grave.

Various were the memories attached to that village green in the hearts of all the neighbourhood; various were the associations which it called up in every bosom and various were the romances, probably much better worth listening to than this that we are going to tell, which that village green could have related. It had all the things pertaining to its character and profession: it had a dry, clear, sandy horse-road running at one side, it had two foot-paths crossing each other in the middle, it had a tall clump of elms on the south side, with a well, and an iron ladle underneath. It had a pond, which was kept clear by a spring at the bottom, welling constantly over at the side next the road, and forming a little rivulet, full of pricklebacks, flowing on towards a small river at some distance. It had its row of trees on the side next to the church, with the priest's house at the corner. The surface was irregular, just sufficiently so to let some of the young people, in any of their merry meetings, get out of sight of their elders for a minute or two; and the whole was covered with that short, dry, green turf, which is only to be found upon a healthy sandy soil. In short, dear reader, it was as perfect a village green as ever was seen, and I should like very much, if such a thing were possible, to transport you and me to the bench before the inn door on some fine afternoon in the end of the month of June, and there, with a white jug of clear Nottingham ale before us, while the sun sunk down behind the forest, and the sky began to glow with his slant rays, to tell you the tale which is about to follow, marking in your face the signs of interest which you would doubtless show--the hope, the fear, the

expectation, perhaps the smile of surprise, perhaps the glistening drop of sympathy--suffering you to interrupt and ask a question here and there, but not too often--forgiving a moment's impatience when the tale was dull, and thanking you in the end for your friendship towards the good and noble who lived and died more than five centuries ago.

In truth, reader, you know not what a pleasure there is--when the mind is clear from care or sorrow, the heart well attuned, the object a good one, and the tale interesting--you know not what a pleasure there is, to sit down and tell a long story to those who are worthy of hearing one.

And now, having made a somewhat wide excursion, and finding it difficult to get back again to the tale by any easy and gradual process, I will even in this place, close the first chapter, which, by your leave, shall serve for a Preface and Introduction both.

CHAPTER II.

It was in the spring of the year, somewhere about the period which good old Chaucer describes in the beginning of his Canterbury Tales,

"Whanne that April with his shoures sote,
The droughte of March hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veine in swiche licour,
Of whiche vertue engendred is the flow'r:"

it was also towards the decline of the day, and the greater part of the travellers who visited the inn for an hour, on their way homeward from the neighbouring towns, had betaken themselves to the road, in order to get under the shelter of their own roof ere the night fell,

when, at one of the tables in the low-pitched parlour--the beams of which must have caused any wayfarer of six feet high to bend his head--might still be seen a man in the garb of a countryman, sitting with a great, black leathern jug before him, and one or two horns round about, besides the one out of which he himself was drinking.

A slice of a brown loaf toasted at the embers, and which he dipped from time to time in his cup, was the only solid food that he seemed inclined to take; and, to say sooth, it probably might not have been very convenient for him to call for any very costly viands--at least, if one might judge by his dress, which, though good, and not very old, was of the poorest and the homeliest kind--plain hodden-grey cloth, of a coarse fabric, with leathern leggings and wooden-soled shoes.

The garb of the countryman, however, was not the only thing worthy of remark in his appearance. His form had that peculiarity which is not usually considered a perfection, and is termed a hump; not that there was exactly, upon either shoulder, one of those large knobs which is sometimes so designated, but there was a general roundness above his bladebones--a sort of domineering effort of his neck to keep down his head--which gave him a clear title to the appellation of hunchback.

In other respects he was not an unseemly man--his legs were stout and well turned, his arms brawny and long, his chest singularly wide for a deformed person, and his grey eyes large, bright and sparkling. His nose was somewhat long and pointed, and was not only a prominent feature, but a very distinguished one in his countenance. It was one of those noses which have a great deal of expression in them. There was a good deal of fun and sly merriment about the corners of

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