

# The Old London Merchant

by William Harrison Ainsworth, 1805-1882

**Published: 1850**

George Hutchinson, London



*Flos Mercatorum.*

—Epitaph on Whittington

AT that festive season, when the days are at the shortest, and the nights at the longest, and when, consequently, it is the invariable practice of all sensible people to turn night into day; when the state of the odds between business and pleasure is decidedly in favour of the latter; when high carnival is held in London, and everything betokens the prevalence and influence of good cheer; when pastrycooks are in their glory, and green trays in requisition; when porters groan beneath hampers of game, and huge tubs of Canterbury brawn; when trains arriving from the eastern counties are heavy laden with turkeys and hares; when agents in town send barrels of oysters to correspondents in the country; when Christmas-box claimants disturb one's equanimity by day, and Waits (those licensed nuisances, to which even our reverence for good old customs cannot reconcile us) break one's first slumber at night; when surly Christians „awake,“ and salute the band of little carollers with jugs of cold

water; when their opposite neighbour, who has poked his nightcapped head from his window, retires with a satisfactory chuckle; when the meat at Mr. Giblett's in Bond Street, which, for the last six weeks, has announced the approach of Christmas by its daily-increasing layers of fat, as correctly as the almanack, has reached the ne-plus-ultra of adiposity; when wondering crowds are collected before the aforesaid Giblett's to gaze upon the yellow carcass of that leviathan prize ox—the fat being rendered more intensely yellow by its contrast with the green holly with which it is garnished—as well as to admire the snowy cakes of suet with which the sides of that Leicestershire sheep are loaded; when the grocer's trade is „in request,“ and nothing is heard upon his counter but the jingling of scales and the snapping of twine; when the vendor of sweetmeats, as he deals forth his citron and sultanas in the due minced-meat proportions to that pretty housemaid, whispers something in a soft and sugared tone about the misletoe; when „coming Twelfth Nights cast their shadows before,“ and Mr. Gunter feels doubly important; when pantomimes are about to unfold all their magic charms, and the holidays have fairly commenced; when the meteorological prophet predicts that Thursday the 1<sup>st</sup> will be fair and frosty, and it turns out to be drizzling rain and a sudden thaw; when intelligence is brought that the ice „bears,“ the intelligence being confirmed by the appearance of sundry donkey-carts, containing ice an inch thick, and rendered indisputable by the discharge of their crystal loads upon the pavement before Mr. Grove's, the fishmonger's; when crack performers in paletots, or Mackintoshes, with skates in their hands, cigars in their mouths, and tights and fur-topped boots on their lower limbs, are seen hastening up Baker Street in the direction of the Regent's Park; when a marquee is pitched upon the banks of the Serpentine, and a quadrille executed by the before-mentioned crack skaters in tights and fur-topped boots upon its frozen waters; when the functionaries of the Humane Society begin to find some employment for their ropes and punt; when Old Father Thames, who, for a couple of months, appears to have been undecided about the colours of his livery—now inclining to a cloak of greyish dun, now to a mantle of orange tawny—has finally adopted a white transparent robe with facings of silver; when, as you pass down Harley Street, the lights in the drawing-room windows of every third house, the shadows on the blinds, and, above all, the enlivening sound of the harp and piano, satisfy you that its fair inmate is „at home“; when House-quakes, street-thunders, and door-batteries are heard from „midnight until morn“; when the knocker at No. 22 Park Street responds to the knocker at No. 25; when a barrel-organ and a popular melody salute your ear as you enter Oxford Street; when the doors of the gin-palaces seem to be always opening to let people in, but never to let them out, and the roar of boisterous revelry is heard from the bar; when various vociferations arise from various courts and passages; when policemen are less on the alert, though their interference is more requisite than usual; when uproarious jollity prevails; when „universal London getteth drunk“; and, in short, when Christmas is come, and everybody is disposed to enjoy himself in his own way. At this period of wassail and rejoicing it was that a social party, to which I am now about to introduce the reader, was assembled in a snug little dining-room of a snug little house, situated in that snug little pile of building denominated the Sanctuary in Westminster.

When a man has any peculiarity of character, his house is sure to partake of it. The room which he constantly inhabits reflects his image as faithfully as a mirror; nay, more so, for it reflects his mind as well as his person. A glance at No. 22 St. James's Place would satisfy you its owner was a poet. We can judge of the human, as of the brute lion, by the aspect of his den. The room marks the man. Visit it in his absence, and you may paint his portrait better than the limner who has placed his „breathing canvas“ on the walls. From that well-worn elbow-chair and the slippers at its feet (the slippers of an old man are never to be mistaken), you can compute his age; from that faded brocade dressing-gown and green velvet cap, you can shape out his figure; from the multiplicity of looking-glasses you at once infer that he has not entirely lost his vanity or his good looks; that gold-headed cane gives you his carriage—it is not a crutch-handled stick, but a cane to flourish jauntily; that shagreen spectacle-case, that chased silver snuffbox with the Jupiter and Leda richly and somewhat luxuriously wrought upon its lid, that fine Sèvres porcelain, that gorgeous Berlin-ware, those rare bronzes half consumed by the true hoary green ærugo, those little Egyptian images, that lachrymatory, that cinerary urn, that brick from the Colosseum, that tessellated pavement from Pompeii, looking like a heap of various-coloured dice, and a world of other rarities, furnish unerring indications of his tastes and habits, and proclaim him a member of the Archæological Society; while that open volume of Sir Thomas Urquharts *Rabelais* (published by the Abbotsford Club) gives you his course of study; the *Morning Post* his politics; that flute and those musical notes attest the state of his lungs; and that well-blotted copy of verses, of which the ink is scarcely dry, proclaims his train of thought. The door opens, and an old gentleman enters exactly corresponding to your preconceived notions. You require no introduction. You have made his acquaintance half-an-hour ago.

The apartment to which we are about to repair was a complete index to the mind and character of its possessor, Sir Lionel Flamstead. I have called it a dining-room, from its ordinary application to the purposes of refecton and festivity; but it had much more the air of a library, or study. It was a small comfortable chamber, just large enough to contain half-a-dozen people, though by management double that number had been occasionally squeezed into its narrow limits. The walls were decorated with curious old prints, maps and plans, set in old black worm-eaten frames, and representing divers personages, places, and structures connected with London and its history.

Over the mantelpiece was stretched Vertue's copy of Ralph Aggas's famous survey of our „great metropolis,“ made about the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, or perhaps a little earlier, when it was scarcely so great a metropolis as at the present time, and when novelists, gentlemen of the press, cabmen, omnibus cads, and other illustrious personages were unborn and undreamed of; when St. Giles's, in lieu of its mysterious and Dædalian Seven Dials (which should have for their motto Wordsworth's title, „*We are Seven*“, consisted of a little cluster of country houses, surrounded by a grove of elms; when a turreted wall girded in the City, from Aldgate to Grey Friars; when a pack of staghounds was kept in Finsbury Fields, and archers and cross-bowmen haunted the purlieus of the Spital; when he who strolled westward from Charing Cross (then no misnomer) beheld neither Opera House nor club-house, but a rustic lane, with a barn at one end, and a goodly assortment of hay-carts and hay-stacks at the other; when the Thames was crossed by a single bridge, and that bridge looked

like a street, and the street itself like a row of palaces. On the right of this plan hung a sketch of Will Somers, jester to Henry VIII., after the picture by Holbein; on the left an engraving of Geoffrey Hudson, the diminutive attendant of Henrietta Maria. This niche was devoted to portraits of the bluff king before mentioned, and his six spouses; that to the melancholy Charles and his family. Here, the Great Fire of 1666, with its black profiles of houses, relieved by a sheet of „bloody and malicious“ flame, formed a pleasant contrast to the icy wonders of the Frost Fair, held on the Thames in 1684, when carriages were driven through the lines of tents, and an ox was roasted on the water, to the infinite delectation of the citizens. There Old Saint Paul’s (in the words of Victor Hugo, „one of those Gothic monuments so admirable and so irreparable“), and which is but ill replaced by the modern „bastard counterpart“ of the glorious fane of St. Peter at Rome, reared its venerable tower (not dome) and lofty spire to the sky. Next to St. Paul’s came the reverend Abbey of Westminster, taken before it had been disfigured by the towers added by Wren; and next to the abbey opened the long and raftered vista of its magnificent neighbouring hall. Several plans and prospects of the Tower of London, as it appeared at different epochs, occupied a corner to themselves: then came a long array of taverns, from the Tabard in Southwark, the Boar’s Head in Eastcheap, and the Devil near Temple Bar, embalmed in the odour of poesy, to the Nag’s Head in Cheapside, notorious for its legend of the consecration of the Protestant bishops in 1559; there also might you see—

—in Billingsgate the Salutation.

And the Boar’s Head near London Stone,  
The Swan at Dowgate, a tavern well known;  
The Mitre in Cheap, and then the Bull’s Head,  
And many like places that make noses red;  
The Boar’s Head in Old Fish Street;  
Three Crowns in the Vintry;  
And, now, of late, Saint Martin’s in the Seutree;  
The Windmill in Lothbury; the Ship at th’ Exchange;  
King’s Head in New Fish Street, where roysters do range;  
The Mermaid in Cornhill; Red Lion in the Strand;  
Three Tuns in Newgate Market; in Old Fish Street the Swan.<sup>(1)</sup>

Adjoining these places of entertainment were others of a different description, to wit, the Globe, as it stood when Shakspeare (how insufferable is Mr. Knight’s orthography of this reverend name—Shakspere!) trod the stage; the king’s play-house in Charles the Second’s time; the Bear Garden, with its flag streaming to the wind; and the Folly, as it once floated in the river, opposite old Somerset House. Then came the Halls, beginning with Guildhall and ending with Old Skinner’s. Next, the Crosses, from Paul’s to Charing; then, the churches, gateways, hospitals, colleges, prisons, asylums, inns of court,—in short, for it is needless to particularise further, London and its thousand recollections rose before you, as you gazed around. Scarcely an old edifice, to which an historical tradition could be attached (and what old London edifice is destitute of such traditions?), was wanting. Nor were the great of old—the spirits, who gave interest and endurance to these decayed, or decaying structures, wanting. But I shall not pause to enumerate their portraits, or make out a catalogue as long as

the list of Homer's ships, or the gallery of Mr. Lodge. Sufficient has been said, I trust, to give the reader an idea of the physiology of the room. Yet stay! I must not omit to point out the contents of those groaning shelves. In the goodly folios crowded there are contained the chronicles of Holinshed and Hall; of Grafton, Fabian, and Stow; of Matthew of Paris, and his namesake of Westminster. Let him not be terrified at the ponderous size of these admirable old historians, nor be deterred by the black letter, if he should chance to open a volume. Their freshness and picturesque details will surprise as much as they will delight him. From this wealthy mine Shakspeare drew some of his purest ore. The shelves are crowned by a solitary bust. It is that of a modern. It is that of a lover of London, and a character of London. It is Doctor Johnson.

Having completed the survey of the apartment, I shall now proceed to its occupants. These were five in number—jolly fellows all—seated round a circular dining-table covered with glasses and decanters, amidst which a portly magnum of claret, and a deep and capacious china punch-bowl, must not pass unmentioned. They were in the full flow of fun and conviviality; enjoying themselves as good fellows always enjoy themselves at "the season of the year." The port was delectable—old as Saint Paul's, I was going to say—not quite, however—but just „old enough“; the claret was nectar, or what is better, it was Lafitte; the punch was drink for the gods. The jokes of this party would have split your sides—their laughter would have had the same effect on your ears. Never were heard peals of merriment so hearty and prolonged. You only wondered how they found time to drink, so quick did each roar follow on the heels of its predecessor. That they did drink, however, was clear; that they had drunk was equally certain; and that they intended to continue drinking seemed to come within the limits of probability.

Sir Lionel Flamstead was a retired merchant—one of those high-souled, high-principled traders, of whom our City was once so justly proud, and of whom so few, in these days of railway bubbles, and other harebrained speculations, can be found. His word was his bond—once passed, it was sufficient; his acceptances were accounted safe as the Bank of England. Had Sir Thomas Gresham descended from his niche he could not have been treated with greater consideration than attended Sir Lionel's appearance on 'Change. All eyes followed the movements of his tall and stately figure—all hats were raised to his courteous but ceremonious salutation. Affable, yet precise, and tinctured with something of the punctiliousness of the old school, his manners won him universal respect and regard, even from those unknown to him. By his intimates he was revered. His habits were as regular as clockwork, and the glass of cold punch at Tom's, or the basin of soup at Birch's, wound him up for the day. His attire was as formal as his manners, being a slight modification of the prevalent costume of some five-and-thirty years ago. He had consented, not without extreme reluctance, to clothe his nether limbs in the unmentionable garment of recent introduction; but he resolutely adhered to the pigtail. There is something, by-the-bye, in a pigtail, to which old gentlemen cling in spite of all remonstrance, with lover-like pertinacity. Only hint the propriety of cutting it off to your great-uncle or your grandfather, and you may rely on being cut off with a shilling yourself. Be this as it may, Sir Lionel gathered his locks, once sable as the riband that bound them, but now thickly strewn with the silver „blossoms of the grave,“ into a knot, and suffered them to dangle a few inches below his collar. His shoes shone with a lustre beyond French polish, and his

hat was brushed till not a wind dared to approach it. Sir Lionel wore a white, unstarched cravat, with a thick pad in it, sported a frill over his waistcoat, carried a black ebony cane in his hand, and was generally followed by a pet pug-dog, one of the most sagacious and disagreeable specimens of his species. Sir Lionel Flamstead, I have said, was tall—I might have said he was very tall—somewhat narrower across the shoulders than about the hips—a circumstance which did not materially conduce to his symmetry—with grey, benevolent eyes, shaded by bushy, intelligent brows—a lofty, expansive forehead, in which, in the jargon of phrenology, the organs of locality and ideality were strongly developed, and which was rendered the more remarkable from the flesh having fallen in on either side of the temples—with a nose which had been considered handsome and well proportioned in his youth, but to which good living had imparted a bottle form and a bottle tint—and cheeks from which all encroachment of whiskers was sedulously removed, in order, we conclude, that his rosy complexion might be traced from its point of concentration, upon the prominent feature before mentioned, to its final disappearance behind his ears. Such was Sir Lionel Flamstead.

---

---

<sup>(1)</sup> News from Bartholomew Faire.