

The London Visitor

Mary Russell Mitford



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THE LONDON VISITOR

By Mary Russell Mitford

Being in a state of utter mystification, (a very disagreeable state, by-the-bye,) I hold it advisable to lay my unhappy case, in strict confidence, in the lowest possible whisper, and quite in a corner, before my kind friend, patron, and protector, the public, through whose means—for now-a-days every body knows everything, and there is no riddle so dark but shall find an OEdipus to solve it—I may possibly be able to discover whether the bewilderment under which I have been labouring for the last three days be the result of natural causes, like the delusions recorded in Dr. Brewster's book, or whether there be in this little south of England county of ours, year 1836, a revival of the old science of Gramarye, the glamour art, which, according to that veracious minstrel, Sir Walter Scott, was exercised with such singular success in the sixteenth century by the Ladye of Branksome upon the good knight, William of Deloraine, and others his peers. In short, I want to know—— But the best way to make my readers understand my story, will be to begin at the beginning.

I am a wretched visitor. There is not a person in all Berkshire who has so often occasion to appeal to the indulgence of her acquaintance to pardon her sins of omission upon this score. I cannot tell how it happens; nobody likes society better when in it, or is more delighted to see her friends; but it is almost as easy to pull a tree of my age and size up by the roots, as it is to dislodge me in summer from my flowery garden, or in the winter from my sunny parlour, for the purpose of accepting a dinner invitation, or making a morning call. Perhaps the great accumulation of my debts in this way, the very despair of ever paying them all, may be one reason (as is often the case, I believe, in pecuniary obligations) why I so seldom pay any; then, whether I do much or not, I have generally plenty to do; then again, I so dearly love to do nothing; then, summer or winter, the weather is commonly too cold for an open carriage, and I am eminently a catch-cold person; so that between wind and rain, business and idleness, no lady in the county with so many places that she ought to go to, goes to so few: and yet it was from the extraordinary event of my happening to leave home three days following, that my present mystification took its rise. Thus the case stands.

Last Thursday morning, being the 23rd day of this present month of June, I received a note from my kind friend and neighbour, Mrs. Dunbar, requesting very earnestly that my father and myself would dine that evening at the Hall, apologising for the short notice, as

arising out of the unexpected arrival of a guest from London, and the equally unexpected absence of the General, which threw her (she was pleased to say) upon our kindness to assist in entertaining her visitor. At seven o'clock, accordingly, we repaired to General Dunbar's, and found our hostess surrounded by her fine boys and girls, conversing with a gentleman, whom she immediately introduced to us as Mr. Thompson.

Mr. Thompson was a gentleman of about——

Pshaw! nothing is so unpolite as to go guessing how many years a man may have lived in this most excellent world, especially when it is perfectly clear, from his dress and demeanour, that the register of his birth is the last document relating to himself which he would care to see produced.

Mr. Thompson, then, was a gentleman of no particular age; not quite so young as he had been, but still in very tolerable preservation, being pretty exactly that which is understood by the phrase an old beau. He was of middle size and middle height, with a slight stoop in the shoulders; a skin of the true London complexion, between brown and yellow, and slightly wrinkled: eyes of no very distinct colour; a nose which, belonging to none of the recognised classes of that many-named feature, may fairly be called anonymous; and a mouth, whose habitual mechanical smile (a smile which, by the way, conveyed no impression either of gaiety or of sweetness) displayed a set of teeth which did great honour to his dentist. His whiskers and his wig were a capital match as to colour; and altogether it was a head calculated to convey a very favourable impression of the different artists employed in getting it up.

His dress was equally creditable to his tailor and his valet, "rather rich than gaudy," (as Miss Byron said of Sir Charles Grandison,) except in the grand article of the waistcoat, a brocade brodé of resplendent lustre, which combined both qualities. His shoes were bright with the new French blacking, and his jewellery, rings, studs, brooches, and chains (for he wore two, that belonging to his watch, and one from which depended a pair of spectacles, folded so as to resemble an eye-glass,) were of the finest material and the latest fashion.

In short, our new acquaintance was an old beau. He was not, however, that which an old beau so frequently is, an old bachelor. On the contrary, he spoke of Mrs. Thompson and her parties, and her box at the opera (he did not say on what tier) with some unction, and mentioned with considerable pride a certain Mr. Browne, who had lately married his eldest daughter; Browne, be it observed, with an *e*, as his name (I beg his pardon for having misspelt it) was Thomson without the *p*; there being I know not what of dignity in the absence of the consonant, and the presence of the vowel, though mute. We soon found that both he and Mr. Browne lent these illustrious names to half a score of clubs, from the Athenaeum downward. We also gathered from his conversation that he resided somewhere in Gloucester Place or Devonshire Place, in Wimpole Street or Harley Street, (I could not quite make out in which of those respectable double rows of houses his

domicile was situate,) and that he contemplated with considerable jealousy the manner in which the tide of fashion had set in to the south-west, rolling its changeful current round the splendid mansions of Belgrave Square, and threatening to leave this once distinguished quartier as bare and open to the jesters of the silver-fork school as the ignoble precincts of Bloomsbury. It was a strange mixture of feeling. He was evidently upon the point of becoming ashamed of a neighbourhood of which he had once been not a little proud. He spoke slightly of the Regent's Park, and eschewed as much as possible all mention of the Diorama and the Zoological, and yet seemed pleased and flattered, and to take it as a sort of personal compliment, when Mrs. Dunbar professed her fidelity to the scene of her youthful gaiety, Cavendish Square and its environs.

He had been, it seemed, an old friend of the General's, and had come down partly to see him, and partly for the purpose of a day's fishing, although, by some mistake in the wording of his letter, his host, who did not expect him until the next week, happened to be absent. This, however, had troubled him little. He saw the General often enough in town. Angling was his first object in the country; and as the fine piece of water in the park (famous for its enormous pike) remained *in statu quo*, and Edward Dunbar was ready to accompany and assist him, he had talked the night before of nothing but his flies and his rods, and boasted, in speaking of Ireland, the classic land of modern fishermen, of what he meant to do, and what he had done—of salmon caught in the wilds of Connemara, and trout drawn out amid the beauties of Killarney. Fishing exploits, past and future, formed the only theme of his conversation during his first evening at the Hall. On that which we spent in his company, nothing could be farther from his inclination than any allusion, however remote, to his beloved sport. He had been out in the morning, and we at last extorted from Edward Dunbar, upon a promise not to hint at the story until the hero of the adventure should be fairly off, that, after trying with exemplary patience all parts of the mere for several hours without so much as a nibble, a huge pike, as Mr. Thompson asserted, or, as Edward suspected, the root of a tree, had caught fast hold of the hook. If pike it were, the fish had the best of the battle, for, in a mighty jerk on one side or the other (the famous Dublin tackle maintaining its reputation, and holding as firm as the cordage of a man-of-war,) the unlucky angler had been fairly pulled into the water, and soused over head and ears. How his valet contrived to reinstate his coëffure, unless, indeed, he travelled with a change of wigs, is one of those mysteries of an old beau's toilet which pass female comprehension.

Of course there was no further mention of angling. Our new acquaintance had quite subjects enough without touching upon that. In eating, for instance, he might fairly be called learned. Mrs. Dunbar's cuisine was excellent, and he not only praised the different dishes in a most scientific and edifying manner, but volunteered a recipe for certain little mutton pies, the fashion of the season. In drinking he was equally at home. Edward had produced his father's choicest hermitage and lachryma, and he seemed to me to know

literally by heart all the most celebrated vintages, and to have made pilgrimages to the most famous vineyards all over Europe. He talked to Helen Dunbar, a musical young lady, of Grisi and Malibran; to her sister Caroline, a literary enthusiast, of the poems of the year, "Ion," and "Paracelsus;" to me he spoke of geraniums; and to my father of politics—contriving to conciliate both parties, (for there were Whigs and Tories in the room,) by dubbing himself a liberal Conservative. In short, he played his part of Man of the World perfectly to his own satisfaction, and would have passed with the whole family for the very model of all London visitors, had he not unfortunately nodded over certain verses which he had flattered Miss Caroline into producing, and fallen fast asleep during her sister's cavatina; and if his conversation, however easy and smooth, had not been felt to be upon the whole rather vapid and prosy. "Just exactly," said young Edward Dunbar, who, in the migration transit between Eton, which he had left at Easter, and Oxford, which he was to enter at Michaelmas, was plentifully imbued with the aristocratic prejudices common to each of those venerable seats of learning "just exactly what in the fitness of things the talk of a Mr. Thompson ought to be."

The next afternoon I happened to be engaged to the Lady Margaret Gore, another pleasant neighbour, to drink tea; a convenient fashion, which saves time and trouble, and is much followed in these parts during the summer months. A little after eight I made my appearance in her saloon, which, contrary to her usual polite attention, I found empty. In the course of a few minutes she entered, and apologised for her momentary absence, as having been caused by a London gentleman on a visit at the house, who arriving the evening before, had spent all that morning at the side of Loddon fishing, (where, by the way, observed her ladyship, he had caught nothing,) and had kept them waiting dinner. "He is a very old friend of ours," added Lady Margaret; "Mr. Thompson, of Harley Street, whose daughter lately married Mr. Browne of Gloucester Place," and, with the word, entered Mr. Thompson in his own proper person.

Was it or was it not the Mr. Thompson of the day before? Yes! no!—— No! yes! It would have been, only that it could not be. The alibi was too clearly proved: Lady Margaret had spent the preceding evening with *her* Mr. Thompson in one place, and I myself with *my* Mr. Thompson in another. Different they must be, but oh, how alike! I am too short-sighted to be cognizant of each separate feature. But there it was, the same common height and common size, and common physiognomy, wigged, whiskered, and perfumed to a hair! The self-same sober magnificence of dress, the same cut and colour of coat, the same waistcoat of brocade brodé—of a surety they must have employed one identical tailor, and one measure had served for both! Chains, studs, brooches, rings—even the eye-glass spectacles were there. Had he (this he) stolen them? Or did the Thompsons use them alternately, upon the principle of ride and tie?

In conversation the similarity was even more striking—safe, civil, prosy, dosy, and yet not without a certain small pretension. The Mr. Thompson of Friday talked as his

predecessor of Thursday had done, of Malibran and Grisi, "Paracelsus" and "Ion," politics and geraniums. He alluded to a recipe (doubtless the famous recipe for mutton pies) which he had promised to write out for the benefit of the housekeeper, and would beyond all question have dosed over one young lady's verses, and fallen asleep to another's singing, if there had happened to be such narcotics as music and poetry in dear Lady Margaret's drawing-room. Mind and body, the two Mr. Thompsons were as alike as two peas, as two drops of water, as two Emperor-of-Morocco butterflies, as two death's-head moths. Could they have been twin brothers, like the Dromios of the old drama? or was the vicinity of the Regent's Park peopled with Cockney anglers—Thompsons whose daughters had married Brownes?

The resemblance haunted me all night. I dreamt of Brownes and Thompsons, and to freshen my fancy and sweep away the shapes by which I was beset, I resolved to take a drive. Accordingly, I ordered my little phaeton, and, perplexed and silent, bent my way to call upon my fair friend, Miss Mortimer. Arriving at Queen's-bridge Cottage, I was met in the rose-covered porch by the fair Frances. "Come this way, if you please," said she, advancing towards the dining-room; "we are late at luncheon to-day. My friend, Mrs. Browne, and her father, Mr. Thompson, our old neighbours when we lived in Welbeck Street, have been here for this week past, and he is so fond of fishing that he will scarcely leave the river even to take his meals, although for aught I can hear he never gets so much as a bite."

As she ceased to speak, we entered: and another Mr. Thompson—another, yet the same, stood before me. It was not yet four o'clock in the day, therefore of course the dress-coat and the brocade waistcoat were wanting; but there was the man himself, Thompson the third, wigged, whiskered, and eye-glassed, just as Thompson the first might have tumbled into the water at General Dunbar's, or Thompson the second have stood waiting for a nibble at Lady Margaret's. There he sat evidently preparing to do the agreeable, to talk of music and of poetry, of Grisi and Malibran, of "Ion" and "Paracelsus," to profess himself a liberal Conservative, to give recipes for pates, and to fall asleep over albums. It was quite clear that he was about to make this display of his conversational abilities; but I could not stand it. Nervous and mystified as the poor Frenchman in the memorable story of "Monsieur Tonson," I instinctively followed his example, and fairly fled the field.

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