The Last Day of Windsor Forest

Thomas Love Peacock

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MANY of my younger, and some of my maturer years, were passed on the borders of Windsor Forest. I was early given to long walks and rural explorations, and there was scarcely a spot of the Park or the Forest, with which I was not intimately acquainted. There were two very different scenes, to which I was especially attached: Virginia Water, and a dell near Winkfield plain.

The bank of Virginia Water, on which the public enter from the Wheatsheaf Inn, is bordered, between the cascade to the left and the iron gates to the right, by groves of trees, which, with the exception of a few old ones near the water, have grown up within my memory. They were planted by George the Third, and the entire space was called the King's Plantation. Perhaps they were more beautiful in an earlier age than they are now: or I may so think and feel, through the general preference of the past to the present, which seems inseparable from old age. In my first acquaintance with the place, and for some years subsequently, sitting in the large upper room of the Inn, I could look on the cascade and the expanse of the lake, which have long been masked by trees.

Virginia Water was always open to the public, through the Wheatsheaf Inn, except during the Regency and Reign of George the Fourth, who not only shut up the grounds, but enclosed them, where they were open to a road, with higher fences than even the outside passengers of stage−coaches could look over, that he might be invisible in his punt, while fishing on the lake. William the Fourth lowered the fences, and re−opened the old access.

While George the Third was king, Virginia Water was a very solitary place. I have been there day after day, without seeing another visitor. Now it has many visitors. It is a source of great enjoyment to many, though no longer suitable to *Les R veries d'un Promeneur Solitaire.*

A still more solitary spot, which had especial charms for me, was the deep forest dell already mentioned, on the borders of Winkfield Plain. This dell, I think, had the name of the Bourne, but I always called it the Dingle. In the bottom was a watercourse, which was a stream only in times of continuous rain. Old trees clothed it on both sides to the summit, and it was a favourite resort of deer. I was a witness of their banishment from their forest−haunts. The dell itself remained some time unchanged: but I have not seen it since 1815, when I frequently visited it in company with Shelley, during his residence at Bishopgate, on the eastern side of the Park. I do not know what changes it may have since undergone. Not much, perhaps, being now a portion of the Park. But many portions of the Park and its vicinity, as well as of the immediate neighbourhood of Windsor, which were then open to the public, have ceased to be so, and such may be the case with this. I have never ventured to acertain the point. In all the portions of the old forest, which were distributed in private allotments, I know what to expect. I shrink from the ghosts of my old associations in scenery, and never, if I can help it, revisit an enclosed locality, with which I have been familiar in its openness.

Wordsworth would not visit Yarrow, because he feared to disappoint his imagination:

> Be Yarrow stream unseen, unknown!

It must, or we shall rue it:

We have a vision of our own,

Ah! why should we undo it?

The treasured dreams of times long past,

We'll keep them, winsome Marrow!

For then we're there, although 'tis fair,

'Twill be another Yarrow. Yet, when he afterwards visited it, though it was not what he had dreamed, he still found it beautiful, and rejoiced in having seen it:

The vapours linger round the heights:

They melt, and soon must vanish:

One hour is theirs, nor more is mine:

Sad thought which I would banish,

But that I know, where'er I go,

Thy genuine image Yarrow!

Will dwell with me, to heighten joy,

And cheer my mind in sorrow.

He found compensation in the reality, for the difference of the imagined scene: but there is no such compensation for the disappointments of memory: and when −in the place of scenes of youth, where we have wandered under antique trees, through groves and glades, through bushes and underwood, among fern, and foxglove, and bounding deer; where, perhaps, every "minutest circumstance of place" has been not only "as a friend" in itself, but has recalled some association of early friendship, or youthful love −we can only pass between high fences along dusty roads, I think it best to avoid the sight of the reality, and to make the best of cherishing at a distance

The memory of what has been,

And never more will be.

I do not express, or imply, any opinion on the general utility of enclosures. For the most part, they illustrate the scriptural maxim: "To him that hath much, much shall be given; and from him that hath little, shall be taken away even the little he hath." They are, like most events in this world, "Good to some, bad to others, and indifferent to the majority." They are good to the landowner, who gets an addition to his land: they are bad to the poor parishioner, who loses his rights of common: they are bad to the lover of rural walks, for whom footpaths are annihilated: they are bad to those, fro whom the scenes of their youth are blotted from the face of the world. These last are of no account in ledger balances, which profess to demonstrate that the loss of the poor is more than counterbalanced by the gain of the rich; that the aggregate gain is the gain of the community; and that all matters

of taste and feeling are fitly represented by a cypher. So be it.

George the Fourth's exclusions and high fences had not, however, effectually secured to him the secrecy he desired. On an eminence outside of the royal grounds, stood, and still stands, in the midst of a pine−grove, a tower, which from its form was commonly called the Clock−case. This tower, and the land round it, had been sold for a small sum, as a lot in a sale of Crown Lands. The tower was in two or three stories, and was inhabited by a poor family, who had a telescope, supplied, most probably, by the new proprietor, on the platform of the roof, which rose high above the trees, and commanded an extensive view of the lake. This tower and its grounds became a place of great resort for pic−nic parties, and visitors of all kinds, who kept up a perpetual succession at the telescope, while the Royal Angler and his fair companion were fishing. This became an intolerable nuisance to the would−be−recluse. He set on foot a negociation for re−purchasing the Clock−case. The sum demanded was many times the multiple of the purchase−money. The demand was for some time resisted, but the proprietor was inflexible. The sum required was paid, the property reverted to the Crown, and the public were shut out from the Clock−case and its territory. When William the Fourth succeeded, this story was told to him, and he said: "A good place for a view, is it? I will put an old couple into it, and give them a telescope:" which was done without loss of time. I saw and conversed with this old couple, and looked through their telescope.

About the same time, William the Fourth was sitting one Sunday evening in a window of Windsor Castle, when the terrace was thronged with people.

A heavy rain came on, and the people ran in all directions. He said to one near him: "This is the strangest thing I ever saw: so many English people, without an umbrella among them." He was told that, by order of his late Majesty, umbrellas were prohibited on the terrace. "Then," he said, "let the prohibition be immediately withdrawn."

In the early days of his reign, he was fond of walking about, not only in Windsor, but in London. It pleased him to be among the people. In one of his walks, he noticed, in Windsor Little Park, a board with an inscription, by which all persons were "ordered" to keep the footpath. He desired that "requested" might be substituted. He was told that "requested" would not be attended to. He said: "If they will not attend to 'requested' that is their affair: I will not have 'ordered.'"

A most good−natured, kind−hearted gentleman was William the Fourth: but to record the many instances of good feeling in his sayings and doings, which came within my knowledge, would be foreign to the purpose of the present paper.

The Act for the enclosure of Windsor Forest contained the following clause: −

WINDSOR FOREST.

53rd George III. Cap. 158.

LXIV. −And be it further enacted, That from and after the first day of July one thousand eight hundred and fourteen, all and singular the Lands, Tenements and Heridaments within the said respective Parishes and Liberties (save and except such Parts thereof respectively as are now or shall or may become vested in His Majesty, or any Person or Persons in Trust for Him by virtue hereof) shall be, and the same is and are hereby disafforested to all Intents and Purposes whatsoever; and that from thenceforth no Person or Persons shall be questioned or liable to any Pain, Penalty or Punishment for hunting, coursing, killing, destroying or taking any Deer whatsoever within the same, save and except within such Part or Parts thereof (if any) as shall be enclosed within Pales and kept for a Park or Parks by the Owners, Lesees, or Tenants thereof.

There can be little doubt, that the exception in favour of the Crown was intended to apply to all the provisions of the lause: but it was held by Counsel learned in law, that it applied to the first half only, and that, after the specified day, it was lawful to kill deer in any portion of the old forest, not enclosed with pales, whether such portion had, or had not, been vested in the Crown. The Crown allotment had been left as it was. Armed with this opinion, a farmer of Water Oakley, whose real name I have forgotten in his assumed name, calling himself Robin Hood, and taking with him two of his men, whom he called Scarlet and Little John, sallied forth daily into the forest to kill the king's deer, and returned home every evening, loaded with spoil.

Lord Harcourt, who was then Deputy Ranger of the Forest, and discharged all the duties of superintendence (for the Ranger, who was a Royal Highness, of course did nothing), went forth also, as the representative of Majesty, to put down these audacious trespassers. In my forest rambles, I was a witness to some of their altercations: Lord Harcourt threatening to ruin Robin Hood by process in the Court of Exchequer; Robin Hood setting him at defiance, flourishing the Act of Parliament, and saying: "My Lord, if you don't know how to make Acts of Parliament, I'll teach you."

One day, I was walking towards the Dingle, when I met a man with a gun, who asked me, if I had seen Robin Hood? I said, I had just seen him at a little distance, in discussion with Lord Harcourt, who was on horseback, Robin Hood being on foot. He asked me to point out the direction, which I did; and in return I asked him, Who he might be? He told me, he was Scarlet. He was a pleasant−looking man, and seemed as merry as his original: like one in high enjoyment of sport.

This went on some time. The law was not brought to bear on Robin Hood, and it was finally determined to settle the matter, by driving the deer out of the forest into the Park. Two regiments of cavalry were employed for this purpose, which was kept as secret as possibe, for a concourse of people would have been a serious impediment to the operation. I received intelligence of it from a friend at court, who pointed out to me a good position, from which to view the close of the proceedings.

My position was on rising ground, covered with trees, and overlooking an extensive glade. The park was on my left hand: the main part of the forest on the right and before me. A wide extent of the park paling had been removed, and rope fencing had been carried to a great length, at oblique angles from the opening. It was a clear calm sunny day, and for a time there was a profound silence. This was first broken by the faint sound of bugles, answering each other's signals from remote points in the distance: drawing nearer by degrees, and groing progressively loud. The came two or three straggling deer, bounding from the trees, and flying through the opening of the park pales. Then came greater numbers, and ultimately congregated herds: the beatings of their multitudinous feet mingled with the trampling of the yet unseen horses, and the full sounds of the bugles. Last appeared the cavalry, issuing from the woods, and ranging themselves in a semi−circle, from horn to horn of the rope fencing. The open space was filled with deer, terrified by the chace, confused by their own numbers, and rushing in all directions: the greater part through the park opening: many trying to leap the rope fencing, in which a few were hurt; and one or two succeeded: escaping to their old haunts, most probably to furnish Robin Hood with his last venison feast. By degrees, the mass grew thinner: at last, all had disappeared: the rope fencing shut up the park for the night: the cavalry rode off towards Windsor: and all again was silent.

This was, without any exception, the most beautiful sight I ever witnessed: but I saw it with deep regret: for, with the expulsion of the deer, the life of the old scenes was gone, and I have always looked back on that day, as the last day of Windsor Forest.