

**AN INCREDIBLE STORY:
ORIGINALLY TOLD IN A LETTER
TO THE RIGHT HON. THE
EARL OF BEACONSFIELD, K. G.**

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An Incredible Story: Originally Told in a Letter to the Right Hon. the Earl of Beaconsfield, K. G.
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THOMAS JAMES NELSON

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AN INCREDIBLE STORY,

ORIGINALLY TOLD IN A

LETTER

TO

The Right Hon. the Earl of Beaconsfield, P. C.,

THEN PRIME MINISTER OF ENGLAND,

RE-WRITTEN AND FURTHER CONTINUED.

"'Tis strange but true, for truth is always strange—
Stranger than fiction."

Don Juan, canto xiv. stan. 101.

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1884.

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AN INCREDIBLE STORY.

Our huge Metropolis, when it was still a small city, was supplied with water from natural springs rising in the hills on its northern side and carefully conveyed to fountains, or conduits, whence the inhabitants fetched it for use in their houses, after the primitive fashion prevailing in many continental towns to this day, and of which at least one example remains in England, the Cathedral City of Wells. King Henry VI., among his other good deeds, enlarged this supply by granting to the City, on the occasion of his marriage, the Conduit Mead, where the pure water welled up in abundance, the locality of which is still marked by the name of Conduit Street.

London grew in size and population, and the conduits in the beginning of the 17th century ceasing to be sufficient for the wants of the population, the public enterprise of Sir Hugh Middleton and other citizens, with the assistance of James I., conducted the springs at Anwell through the aqueduct of the New River, some forty miles in length, to supplement the supply. London, however, still continued to grow; but a subsequent generation, less nice than their ancestors, was content to have its water taken from the Thames at London Bridge, and afterwards from Battersea.

We had, meanwhile, been changing some of the habits of our forefathers, and amongst these changes was the introduction into our houses of the water-closet, a change made possible only by the increased quantity of water obtained by using the River Thames as a source of supply, but which

became its own Nemesis, for it fouled that river to such an extent that an irresistible cry for a remedy made itself heard.

In these circumstances a Royal Commission was issued to inquire into and report upon the Water Supply of the Metropolis, which was presided over by His Grace the Duke of Richmond. That Commission came to the conclusion that the Thames water was a suitable and good water for the use of the four million inhabitants of London, provided the contamination of the water by the passage of sewage into the river was stopped. It would be foreign to the purpose of this story to inquire whether this was a sound conclusion (about which much may be said, as the Thames is, and will always remain, a navigable river), it is sufficient to say that the report was made and acted upon.

Before this report, however, the sewage of the Metropolis itself, flowing and reflowing as it did through London with the ebb and flow of the tide, had become so much a nuisance to the Metropolis, that its outfall into the river had been removed from London by the Metropolitan Board of Works, specially called into existence for the purpose, to a point some few miles lower down the river. This happened none too soon; for one of the London water companies had long pumped this highly flavoured mixture from their works at Battersea for the use of such of the inhabitants of London as had the privilege of being within the area of their supply.

There remained to be dealt with the sewage of the places on the Thames above the Metropolis, from Lechlade to Putney, a distance of 140 miles, and as to these the Metropolis acted with great injustice, not to use any harsher words. Most of these places had been compelled, by the sanitary legislation then existing, to spend large sums of money in laying down a system of sewers, and carrying the outfall into the Thames.

No sooner, however, had the Duke of Richmond's Com-

mission reported in favour of the Thames supply than an Act of Parliament was passed, at the instigation of the Government, to compel these places, under heavy penalties, to discontinue the flow of sewage into the Thames; that is to say, they were to undo by law what the law had made them do. It was a very arbitrary step, and the more arbitrary as they were not told how otherwise the sewage was to be disposed of; but they were helpless. London insisted upon having the Thames as a source of supply for its water, the Thames Conservancy sold the right to take this water to the London water companies for some £6,000 a year (subsequently increased to £10,000), and thus London and the Thames Conservators treated the Thames above London as their property, irrespective of any injustice they dealt out to the towns above London, or the endless trouble they imposed upon the local authorities or the heavy burdens they put upon the ratepayers of those towns. The value of the water when pure might at least have gone in relief of that taxation which was to be spent in making it pure instead of being paid to the Conservators.

It seems almost incredible that this legislation should have passed without sufficient powers being conferred upon these unfortunate places to dispose otherwise of their sewage when it was taken out of the Thames; but they were weak and scattered; the water companies, the Metropolis, and the Thames Conservancy were wealthy, strong, and united, and the weak, as usual, went to the wall. It is true that the Select Committee of the House of Commons, to which the Bill was sent were so struck with the difficulties these places would be placed in, that they made a special report on the subject so far as some of them near London were concerned, but it fell unheeded by any one who could give effect to it. If a Chinaman wandering to the Fiji Islands had had his tail cut off through some humble official of the Government

mistaking his instructions or duties, he would no doubt have found an advocate in Parliament; but the grievous wrongs of the subjects of Her Majesty in England itself are much more difficult of redress, as this story will show.

However, so it was, and in 1867 all passage of sewage into the river, except that of London itself, was forbidden, at the instance of London, under a penalty of £100 a day on the offender.

No time was lost by those affected in rendering obedience. Kingston led off. Before the Act had passed even, that town had been attacked in Chancery by the Conservators; and expecting little mercy at their hands, the authorities looked about them and found a spot admirably adapted, as they believed, to deal with their sewage and that of their immediate neighbours, by passing it over and through a porous soil at Ham, within their own parish.

Application was made to the Government to sanction this, and the official inquiry was duly held in March, 1869. Kingston, however, had not before tasted of the pleasures of sewage questions: a host of objectors, neighbouring residents, appeared, and after spending nearly £900 in the cost of the inquiry, the Government refused to allow the scheme to be proceeded with. Many influential persons resided in the neighbourhood, and it has always been said that back-stairs influence prevailed against the sanitary claims of Kingston. All the good Kingston took from their attempt to comply with the law was, that a special rate had to be made on the inhabitants to pay the £900 thus absolutely thrown away.

Next Richmond appeared upon the scene. Richmond before it took its sewage into the Thames, in obedience to the law, had desired to utilise it on some land belonging to the Crown called the Old Deer Park, but had been refused permission; it had now to take it out of the Thames after spending £20,000 to put it in! For this purpose it turned its attention to some

land between Wimbledon and Malden; an official inquiry was held in January, 1871, again a host of objectors appeared, and the Government refused permission. Thus all the advance that Richmond had made was to incur a perfectly useless expenditure of £200 in the cost of the inquiry, which had, as usual, to be borne by the unfortunate ratepayers.

Kingston then made another attempt. Determined this time not to be defeated by landowners' opposition, it purchased a hundred acres of land between Walton and Moulsey, and arranged for the neighbouring local authorities at Surbiton and Hampton Wick to join with it in taking their sewage there. This time it had only to obtain the permission of the Local Government Board to borrow the necessary money to construct the sewers.

Again the official inquiry was held in May, 1872, again objectors appeared, again the Government refused the application, again the unfortunate ratepayers had to pay the costs of the inquiry, but this time with an additional burden, for they had to pay for the land where the sewage was to be purified, and which remains on their hands to this day!

Next Richmond was summoned by the Conservators of the Thames for the penalties they had incurred in breaking the law by allowing their sewage still to flow into the river. It was to no purpose they pleaded that the sewage from some thousands of inhabitants would not stop flowing day by day into the river, that they had tried in vain to get land upon which to divert it, and that it would not evaporate into the air; the magistrates fined them, of course according to law, and the Court of Queen's Bench upheld the conviction, of course according to law. The unfortunate ratepayers had to pay the penalty and costs, but the Richmond sewage flows into the Thames to this day, for there are some things which even an Act of Parliament cannot do.

Richmond next applied to Mr. Gore, the official in charge

of the Crown Lands, and said to him, We are surrounded on all sides by Her Majesty's property; the Government will not let us have land away from our town on which to put our sewage, let us have a part of the Old Deer Park on which to purify it; but Mr. Gore turned a deaf ear to the appeal. Richmond then applied for and obtained—of course after an expensive fight and at the expense of the ratepayers—a special Act of Parliament relieving them for a given time from further penalties, and by way of diversity, they had an expensive arbitration with the Thames Conservancy for further time, which the Board of Trade gave them; but at the expiration of the time the sewage still flowed into the Thames.

Nor were Kingston and Richmond the only bodies desirous of complying with the law. Barnes, Mortlake, and Kew made an application to take land dealing with their sewage at a spot within their own limits. The inquiry was held in July, 1874, and the application as usual was refused with a charge exceeding £500 for the ratepayers to pay.

Hampton Wick also applied to be allowed to join the scheme of the Office of Works providing in their parish for the sewage of Hampton Court Palace, but in vain.

Kew in January, 1877, enjoyed the luxury of a separate application of its own for another spot of land which was refused, and the useless cost of £110 paid by the ratepayers.

In 1877 Barnes and Mortlake tried again for some land by the Soap Works at Barnes, this time without Kew; the application was refused, and the cost, £600, again paid by the helpless inhabitants.

In the same year Esher made an application, also refused, leaving as its only result £665 to be paid by the ratepayers.

In that same year also the large Local Government district of Heston and Isleworth, which embraces Hounslow and includes 6,000 acres, made application for a system of their own, and met with the universal fate—refusal, at a cost to the