

CHAPTER IX

THE RAID ON LANSDOWN FAIR

AFTER the fiasco at Newport we attended various small fairs and village wakes, and did very well. I was growing fast and was very tall and strong for my age, and had begun to learn to turn somersaults and to do balancing and other little tricks that were to serve me well in my later career as a showman. Father would never allow any of us to be idle, and all who were big enough had to help with the show in some way.

"Those who won't work shan't eat," he used to say, and I have often since blessed his memory for the training of those early days. He was never harsh or unkind, only firm with us. "Learn to work as children," he used to say, "and you will never be afraid of work when you grow up." I can bear witness to the great truth of utterance, for in my life I have had to do all kinds of toil, and could always do it cheerfully, thanks to the wisdom of my father, and the patient, self-sacrificing kindness of my dear mother, when I was a child.

Our caravan, twelve feet long, just over seven feet wide, and about seven feet high, sheltered, despite hardships, a very happy family, as we travelled from place to place. My father, though but a showman, a very despised profession in those days, knew how to make men and women of us, and with mother taught us to be honest and helpful towards our fellows. Nor was education forgotten. Though I never had but one day's proper schooling, and then was taken away because of a master's harshness, no opportunity was neglected by my parents of giving me lessons in writing and reading. They taught me to value knowledge, and as the years have rolled I have gathered it whenever I could. The results are plain to view, and I ask you, dear readers, to kindly humour the old showman if, as now, he occasionally digresses to honour the memory of those parents whose care and training made him what he is to-day.

From place to place we went with our little show, and at length found ourselves at Lansdown, near Bath, for the big cattle, sheep, and pleasure fair that then used to be held annually on August 10th

at the hill village, which is some two miles from the old city.

It was here that I saw an example of the rough justice that the showmen occasionally meted out to their enemies and tormentors, who in those days were legion. Such things could not happen now, for we live in better times, the arm of the law is longer, and life and property have safeguards that in those days were not dreamt of. Men then had to protect themselves and their belongings as best they could, and often to right their own wrongs as I saw the showmen do at Lansdown Fair.

Though it was the resort of all the rank and fashion in the land, who came to seek health from the famous waters, and was the home as now of a multitude of wealthy, stately, and dignified personages, who dwelt beneath the shadow of its ancient cathedral, Bath had at that time a very unenviable reputation regarded its lower classes. I have, by the way, noticed that most cathedral cities – and in Britain I have visited them all – show remarkable contrasts in regard to their populations. At the top you have all that is best in the way of piety and learning, all that is enviable in the way of ease and dignity. At the bottom you will find dirt, degradation, misery, and evil of the most appalling kinds. Why this should be I cannot say, but I have certainly observed it. Anyhow, Bath at this period had in its slums what was considered to be the most brutish and criminal mob in England, and for these people Lansdown Fair was, as they put it, "their night out."

Though it lasted but one day, the fair was always a big one, occupying a great space on a broad hillside. On this booths, shows, and refreshment tents of all descriptions were erected to form an enormous ring, in the centre of which were the droves of sheep, cattle, and horses that formed the staple of the fair to which the country-folk flocked from all the district round.

On this occasion the gathering was a very great one. All the best-known showmen in the country were there, money was plentiful, and throughout the day we did exceedingly well. As dusk came on the regular business people – the farmers, graziers, and others who had been dealing in the horses, cattle, farm produce, and such-like – left the fair to the pleasure-seekers. The drinking booths, gingerbread stalls, and shows began to twinkle with lights. Twinkle is the only word that fits the illumination of fairs in those days.

Recollect it was before the time of the naphtha lamps. We had only candles, the commonest of dips and rushlights, for inside

work, and these kept numbers of people busy the night long doing nothing else but snuffing them. Outside the booths hung flares – horrible, odorous things, consisting of three prongs set in a shallow iron or tin dish. Rags were rolled up and put into these prongs, then round about were packed lumps of rough tallow, that melted and kept the rag-wick supplied with fat after it was lit. These flares were slung up with three chains to the booth poles, and their spluttering, smoky flame was our chief illuminant. Think of it, you who only know the brilliance of gas and electricity, and you may be able to realize something of the disadvantages that night brought to those old-time showmen.

As night advanced the character of the fair crowd gradually changed. It grew rougher and rougher. Fights were frequent. Oaths and screams were mingled with coarse songs from the drinking and dancing booths, which were filled with a motley throng. Business at our peep-show and with our roundabout became slacker and slacker, till at last, about ten o'clock, father gave the word to close up. Even as he did so a terrible row broke out amongst the booths nearest the Bath road, and very soon we got the news that the Bath roughs were out in force, bent on mischief.

How we toiled and hurried to make our belongings as safe as possible! Everything that could be broken or stolen was hastily packed in or under the living-wagon, and made secure with chains and bolts. At last we finished, and then with every light out so as not to attract attention, we sat and listened to the turmoil that was now raging all round us.

The roughs were led by a red-headed virago, a dreadful giantess of a woman, known as "Carrotty Kate". She was an awful creature, strong as a navvy, a big brutal animal, caring nothing for magistrates or gaol, and had long been the terror of every respectable person in Bath and its neighbourhood. With the majority of her followers, she hailed from Bull Paunch Alley, the lowest slum in the cathedral city, where no policeman ever dared to penetrate, and innumerable horrors were committed nightly.

Half stripped, with her red hair flying wildly behind her, she incited the gang of ruffians with her to wreck the fair. The drinking booths were the first to suffer. The mob took possession of them, half killed some of the unfortunate owners, and then set to work to drink themselves into a state of frenzy even more acute than before. The scenes that followed are almost indescribable. Not content with drinking all they could, the ruffians turned on the

taps, staved in barrels, smashed up bottles, and let the liquor run to waste. Then they started to wreck the booths. Canvas was torn to shreds, platforms were smashed up and made bonfires of, wagons were battered and overturned, show-fronts that had cost some of their poor owners small fortunes were battered to fragments. Everywhere was riot, ruin, and destruction.



CHAPTER X

SHOWMEN'S LYNCH LAW

THE few police that were about were utterly helpless, and the show-folk had to protect themselves as best they could, some of them making a very manful fight against overpowering numbers. Assistance, it was said, had been sent for by the authorities, but if that was so it did not arrive until the mischief was complete. We children and poor mother were in a state of fear that can well be imagined. Father had told us to get ready to run away up the hillside and to lie down on the grass if the mob came towards our caravan, so that we might escape in jury. For himself, he had no fear; he put an extra handful of slugs into the old blunderbuss, meaning to have at least one good shot at the wreckers if they touched the bit of property that was his living.

But the ruffians did not touch us. The mischief was confined chiefly to the lower end of the fair, where everything was practically destroyed, and more than one poor traveller brought close to ruin. As dawn broke the riot died down, and the drunken mob, glutted with the wanton destruction of the belongings of poor people who had never done them any harm, began to straggle, shouting, swearing, and singing, back towards Bath.

Then, by ones and twos, the showmen came together, pale with anger, some of them bruised and bleeding from the fray, and all resolved on vengeance. They had marked one or two of the ringleaders of the riot, and meant to give them a taste of showmen's law. The scene is before me now as I saw it when I stood with my brother William, still pale with fear, but full of childish curiosity, on the steps of our caravan, in the dawnlight, and watched some thirty stalwart showmen, my father amongst them, armed with stout cudgels, mount the hastily collected wagon horses, and, bare-backed, ride after the retreating mob.

Presently the riders returned, dragging with them as prisoners about a dozen men and the terrible woman "Carrotty Kate", with their hands tied behind them. They who had been the bold leaders of the attack on the booths now shook with fear, as the drink

evaporated, and they found themselves in the hands of the men they had so wantonly injured.

All the show-folk, young and old, turned out to see the punishment of the rioters, which was carried out with a precision and thoroughness that deeply impressed me. First of all, the woman was securely fastened to the wheel of a heavy wagon, and was left cursing us as we followed the male prisoners down the hill. At the foot there was a deep, wide pond, and there the punishment commenced.

With long tent ropes the showmen linked the wreckers together by their bound hands. Then a stout rope was thrown across the pond and fastened to the living chain, some twenty stalwart showmen holding the line on the farther bank. On the near side father quickly attached another line to the prisoners, which was similarly manned by showmen. All was now ready, and an old van-dweller stepped out and told our prisoners that as it was no use looking to the law to revenge the injuries they had caused the showmen the latter were going to give them a lesson that should be a lasting one. His address was very brief and very emphatic, and when it was finished he threw up his hand and shouted "Go!"

In a moment the prisoners were dragged into the pond. Right across the showmen pulled them with hearty good will. Then back again they were lugged, spluttering and howling for mercy. No notice was taken of their cries, but backwards and forwards through the muddy water they were pulled until no breath was left in their bodies. One or two, indeed, were so still that some of the showmen cried out in alarm that they were drowned.

"No fear," shouted my father, in tones that I can hear even yet. "That sort doesn't die from drowning. Fetch 'em out!"

Out they were dragged and laid on the grass for a few minutes, "to drain," as someone remarked, then they were brought to their feet and forced once more towards the wagons on the hill-side. I shall never forget the picture they presented as, dripping wet, with ghastly faces, and literally quaking with fear, they were driven onwards by the showmen, and the crowd that followed behind jeered and taunted them. One of the fellows turned and said, "Are you a-going to kill us? Ain't you done enough to us?"

"Not half enough," was the reply. Thereupon the fellow set up a shout of "Murder! Murder!" "Shut it!" said one of the showmen roughly; "save your breath for the next scene. You'll want it then!" So we came up again to the wagons.

One of the latter had extra large wheels, and very quickly two of the prisoners had their clothes torn off them to the waists, and were triced up each to a wheel with arms and legs stretched out. Then four muscular showmen, smocks and vests off, shirt-sleeves rolled up, and carrying new whalebone riding-whips, took their places by the bound men.

"What is it to be?" asked one of the men, as he drew his whip through his fingers and balanced it. "Two dozen!" said my father, who had been addressed. "Make it three dozen! Make it three dozen for all my beautiful chaney ornaments they smashed, the vagabonds!" shrieked an old woman, whose caravan had been wrecked. "Very well, mother," said father curtly, "three dozen it shall be; three dozen for every man jack of 'em. Lay on, boys!"

There was a sudden swish and flash as the whips curled in the air, then two such yells as I had never heard before from human throats. They seemed to paralyse me, and I could not turn my eyes from the scene, though it frightened me. Swish! swish went the merciless whips, rising and falling regularly, the yells of the suffering wretches, echoed by the other prisoners in anticipation of their own: turn, being punctuated by the sound of someone counting the strokes.

At last "thirty-six" was called. Then the two fellows, with their backs purple-striped and bleeding, were cast loose, their wet rags of clothes were thrown at them, and they were told to "Hook it, sharp!" They needed no second bidding, and scurried, staggering, moaning, and cursing, down the hill-side to the road. "Thank yer stars ye've got off as light as 'ee 'ave!" shouted an old man as they went. "Next time you tries such tricks we'll 'ang 'ee! D'ye hear me? We'll 'ang 'ee, sure!"

Six times this scene was repeated, and when the last of the men had disappeared, with smarting back and oath-laden tongue, down the hill, the woman's turn came.

"Carrotty Kate" flung many foul words at us as she was unfastened from the wagon wheel and dragged forward, but her face was white – ay, I can see it in my mind even now, after all these years – chalky white, against the tousled mass of red hair that framed it, and she was evidently badly frightened.

"What are you going to do to me?" she raved.

"Give you a lesson same as the men," replied one of the showmen. He was proprietor of a little waxwork booth, I recollect, and his property had suffered badly in the roughs' onslaught. "We're not

a-going to drag 'ee through the pond," he continued, "bad as you wants washin', nor use the horse-whips to 'ee, but you're a goin' to be made to smart all the same." And she *was* made to smart.

Some penny canes were brought out, such as were sold in the fair, the virago was forced over a trestle, and two strong young women administered a sound thrashing.

She screamed and swore horribly, and writhed about, so that the half-dozen stout show-women who were holding her had a difficult task. But the young women flogged on till they were tired, and then the red-haired wretch was allowed to limp away, cursing us as she went in the most dreadful fashion. Some others of the fair-wrecking mob also got punished, though not by the showmen. They fell in with a party of police near Bath, and a desperate fight ensued, the officers using the heavy staves with deadly effect on the drink-soddened rioters. Many of the latter, besides being badly mauled, were arrested, and several were transported for breaking the King's peace. I heard in after years, though we knew nothing of it at the time, that one man who maimed a policeman with an iron bar, so that the poor fellow was crippled for life, was sentenced to death, and executed, for "wounding, with intent to kill".

At any rate, an amazing amount of mischief was wrought by the Bath roughs on that occasion at Lansdown Fair, and the night of awful fear they caused us, with the rough justice their leaders met at the hands of my father and his companions, are things that burned into my memory, to remain with every detail fresh and vivid through the whole of my life.

Such scenes are impossible in England now, and for that fact no one is more sincerely thankful than myself. At the same time, looking back upon them, I cannot but feel that the showmen were justified in taking the law into their own hands, and in dealing with those old-time hooligans as they did.

I remember my mother saying as we left Lansdown on that memorable August day for another fair, "Oh, James! It was a terrible beating those Bath people got. I shall never forget it."

They'll remember it longer than you will, my lass, I'll warrant," was father's reply. "Those chaps wanted a lesson written in for 'em so as to keep it in their memories. There's nothing a rough is so careless about as the skin of other people, nothing he is so careful about as his own. Touch his skin and you touch his conscience, and there's no other way of doing it."

Such were my father's sentiments in regard to dealing with that

worst of all brutes, the human one, and I have heard him express them many a time. I still appreciate their wisdom, though I have lived on into a softer age in which the ordering of corporal punishment even for the most violent robber would arouse a storm of indignation. But it is not for the showman to moralize. I must proceed with my story and leave you to judge the differences existing between my early days and the present ones for yourselves.

