

SOME HUMOROUS ASPECTS OF LIFE
IN SOUTHAMPTON DURING THE
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

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In the course of my searchings among the documents of the Southampton Corporation I have discovered a number of entries, some of which could not very well be utilised in ordinary historical work, but which seemed to suggest situations of a humorous nature in which certain of the inhabitants of Southampton found themselves.

The extracts revealing humorous situations do not readily link themselves up into a harmonious scheme, so that I must crave indulgence for any lack of adequate arrangement which may be evident.

No one who dips into the Southampton records, even casually, can fail to be impressed by the extreme suspicion with which men of long ago regarded freedom of speech. The magistrates seem to have been so fearful of disturbances and so keenly sensitive to the reputations of the respectable, that they lent a listening ear to every babblers who had caught his neighbour uttering indiscretions. Tale-bearers came, not infrequently, with ungenerous stories of the remarks which they had heard others make. Men seemed so naïve, so childlike in many respects. For instance, take the following:—"Mary Hodgkins, the wife of William Hodgkins, saith that on Wednesday, the second day of this present moneth, one Rebecca Wickham of the said towne, spinster, seeing Mr. Plomer, the parson of All Saints, coming from church in the forenoone, this relator, the said Rebecca, Elizabeth, the wyfe of John Smith, alias Smither, and others being then together, the said Elizabeth Smith presently said

unto the said Rebecca 'What is Mr. Plomer better than another man; he hath done many good deeds, sure, he had a good calf of mine worth xiiii. or xv. good shillings. I would he would pay me for yt, they call him Master Plomer, but we may well be master, for I am sure we pay him, he gets more by his tongue than we by our labour.'" A disrespectful remark, undoubtedly, but surely the provocation was very great.

Another incident, no less childish, may be adduced. Edward Downer, a Southampton dignitary, had been elected mayor of the town. The next day a certain William Higgins made oath "that he heard Robert Gulliford, gent, in discourse about eleccion of Mr. Downer, Mayor, yesterday, say that the Mayor and Aldermen chose a Mayor in the Auditehouse and p^resented him to a company of fooles at y^e Hall and they elected him." A note at the end of the deposition runs as follows: "Robert Gulliford was bound over in £40 in his owne name and two sureties of £20 to appeare at next assizes and in mean time to be of good behaviour." A salutary lesson to those who were tempted to speak of the municipal fathers in terms irreverent!

One further illustration is even more astonishing. "W^m Oviatt informeth that about fortnight or three weeks ago, one Martyn Peale of this towne beinge talkinge wth Mr. John Bachelor of this towne, marchant the sayd Martyn Peale did speake something in a violent and passionate manner touchinge the pullinge Mr. Maior's gowne over his eares (but the p^rticular words he doth not now remember) if he and the rest meaninge the Aldermen did doe something w^{ch} they were then speakinge of but what it was this informant knoweth not."

A somewhat diverting incident which illustrates the point is connected with a Southampton magnate—Alderman George Gollop. This man was one of Southampton's merchant princes in the seventeenth century, became mayor in 1632 and sat as a representative of the town in the memorable Long Parliament. A fencer named Jacob Thring was summoned before the Common Council on May 10th, 1632, and questioned for "infamous words and lyes by him reported about the Towne concerning Mr. Gollop." This

fencer fenced verbally with the municipal fathers until he was utterly discomfited, when "he was comited to the bargate prison, there to remaine till hee shall finde sufficient sureties for his apparence at the next Sessions there to be ordered for his lewd carriage." The confession which was finally wrung from this iniquitous fencer is narrated as follows:—"he reported that hee had putt a tricke upon Mr. Gollop by way of scoffe and derision saying that Mr. Gollop mett him in the streete and called him Syrrah, askeing how often his servant had beene in the said Things schoole; and that hee the said Thring disdayning to be called syrrah presently clapt on his hatt and strucke it up before Mr. Gollop; and that Mr. Gollop asked him whether hee knew to whome hee spake, and that the said Thring answered him scoffingly that hee did not ride a gallop but he knew that hee spake to Alderman Gollop; and that thereupon Mr. Gollop bid him meete him at the Audithouse next friday; and that hee the said Thring answered that hee would meete him there, but told Mr. Gollop that hee had rather meete him in the field; and that thereupon Mr. Gollop bid him remember that hee the said Thring had challenged the field of the said Mr. Gollop. All w^{ch} are notorious lyes."

Such extracts as these will show with what severity those guilty of offensive remarks were treated. Of course it is not astonishing that the municipal fathers should take serious notice of acts and words of insolence which were addressed directly to themselves. For instance, it was not remarkable that Edward Downer, Mayor of the town, should take serious offence at the "scandalous and opprobrious language" which a certain Anthony Clapshawe addressed to him on one occasion. "You a Mayor—you a horse," said Clapshawe mockingly. And when the latter "proceeded prophanely to sweare at the least tenne oathes," it is not to be wondered at that trouble ensued.

Upon another occasion a certain John James was summoned before the magistrates for an alleged assault upon a Mr. William Clungeon; and "the sayd John James in a very rude manner abused the sayd Justices, called Mr. Maior and Mr. Walleston blockheads and Mr. Seale old fool, and Mr.

Pitt foole with most uncivil behaviour sayinge he would not obey Mr. Maior and other words and deeds of contempt whereupon he was comitted to the prison of the barre gate—he also abused the constables and bidells that went for him and struck the beedles.” It certainly cannot be wondered at that the magistrates should deal serionsly with those who called them such impudent names as these.

Nor can we marvel that men in those days attempted to suppress those who spoke words which might end in disaffection to the ruling powers. The seventeenth century was a deeply serious century—a century fraught with issues decisive for perhaps the entire world. An age in which Lord Falkland, the apostle of a wider outlook, was crushed in the conflict between ideals he could neither oppose nor share was hardly likely to be a tolerant age. “My lord Falkland more gallantly than advisedly rode forward to a gap in the hedge and was instantly killed”—wrote Sir John Byron in an account of the first battle of Newbury. “More gallantly than advisedly”—that depends upon the view-point. There could be no room for such as Falkland until it had been settled whose ideals should prevail—those of Strafford or those of Cromwell. Two or three extracts from the borough documents will illustrate the way in which the political and religious questions which arose affected the man in the street; and their insertion among the records shows the spirit in which the authorities regarded the free expression of opinion. For instance, in 1642, James Warton was reported for asserting about the prayer book “that the book of comon prayer was most parte of it Póperie and that he would maintaine it.” And in July of the same year a weaver named Thomas Seaborne and a widow named Flower Skeele deposed that they heard “one Robert Coop say that two sermons were preached that afternoon for Mrs. Babb and her drabs and said they were a company of cheating rogues and wished that the papists would rise for hee would be the first that would helpe cutt their throates.” A worse because a personal remark was made, so the magistrates were informed, by one John Cheapman, a pewterer, who came from Sussex. This man was heard to speak “these ensuing words against Mr.

Pim being now one of the members of the house of Comons in Parliam^t vizt that hee was a traitor and a knave and hee would maintaine it and that he would bee hanged or did hope to see him hanged within some shorte time." During the Protectorate a certain William Brathwaite was reported to the magistrates for disrespectful remarks uttered against Cromwell. The inform^r told his story as follows: "The said Inform^t saith that hee being drinking att old Kingstons (whoe sells ale in the Towne) together with ffrancis Windover, Andrew Broman, Lewis Kingston, and Thomas Pitt and William Brathwaite, hee this Informant saith that hee heard the said Brathwaite being much in drinke speake these words unto him this Informant. Thou art a Cheater and more than that my Lord Protector is a Cheater and I will prove him a cheater."

It has struck me that men who were given to the use of strong language in those days seemed somewhat limited in their vocabulary. Fool, blockhead, rogue, knave, traitor, cheater, seem somewhat tame words when compared with the fluent and felicitous diction of present-day gutter-sniping. The men of the seventeenth century appear to have taken refuge from their want of imagination in wearisome repetition. Of course, a few gifted spirits were not limited to one or two epithets. Mention has been made already of Anthony Clapshawe, who, when under the stimulating influence of liquor profanely swore "at the least ten oathes"; and a sergeant-at-mace, in the year 1655, lost his place for swearing "15 greate oathes." It is evident that the borough authorities always attempted to nip disaffection in the bud, lest it should develop into serious disorder.

One or two stories of brawls which took place are interesting and somewhat amusing. A vintner of Southampton, named John French, appeared one morning before the Southampton magistrates with a doleful tale. He stated that he had received a visit from George Latus, a chamberlain at the Dolphin Hotel. George Latus unceremoniously walked into the kitchen and sent for John French to come to him. "And shortly after, some discourse happening betweene them about one Greene a seaman that had beene at this examinee's house

not long before and was then gone to sea, the said Latus with many oathes affirmed the said Greene to be a better man than this examinee and therewithall sodainly caught upp a wine pott in his hand and strake this examinee upon the forehead and brake his forehead so that the blood ran downe with w^{ch} blowe this examinee was astonied and presently the said Latus strucke upp this examinee's heeles and threw him downe, and fell upon him whereupon this examinee caught the said Latus by the haire of the head and held him fast. And presently after, Andrew Sharkeley this examinee's sonne-in-law Chideeck Newby and Thomas Heath of Southton aforesaid came into the roome and parted them."

Another account of a brawl was told by Abraham Malyard, before Mr. Delamotte, Mayor. He stated that "Edward Mitchell came into his house and did beate and kicke his this Informant's wife and did then and there in ye hearing and p^{re}sence of this Inform^{ant} swears by the Lords wounds that he would beate them both, meaninge him this Inform^{ant} and his wife." A note at the end informs us that Edward Mitchell "was comitted to the Bargate there to remaine till he find sureties for ye peace and pay ten groates for his oath."

One of the most fruitful causes of disturbance is unjust and oppressive taxation. Perhaps the tax which produced the greatest number of brawls was the chimney or hearth tax, an impost which yielded about £200,000 of the £14,000,000 that made up the national revenue towards the end of the Stuart régime. Lord Macaulay, in his famous "Social Chapter," says: "The poorer householders were frequently unable to pay their hearth money to the day. When this happened their furniture was distrained without mercy; for the tax was farmed, and the farmer of taxes is, of all creditors, proverbially, the most rapacious. The collectors were loudly accused of performing their unpopular duty with harshness and insolence. It was said that as soon as they appeared on the threshold of a cottage the children began to wail and the old women ran to hide their earthenware." A Southampton collector of the hearth dues who visited the house of a certain Henry Trodd on the morning of June 12th, 1667, for the purpose of receiving the tax, met with more

substantial opposition than the wailing of children or the artfulness of old women. Trodd's wife absolutely refused to make the payment demanded of her, and consequently the collector, with the assistance of a petty officer, began to make preparations for distraining the goods in her house. The rest of the story may best be told in the collector's own words. He was "by the said Trodd stopped and assaulted who having a large shovell in his right hand with his left hand did violently lay hold on this examinee and with the other did hold up the said shovell offering to strike, and expressed these words that hee would loose his life before hee would suffer any distresse to goe or words to that effect; upon which the examinee and also the said officer did severall tymes require him to keepe the king's peace which hee refuseing to doe this examinee was enforced to sett downe his distresse and imediately the said Trodd did take hold of this examinee by his neckcloth or curvett that was about his necke and furiously pulled him therewith w^o enforced this examinee to lay hold of the said Trodd's haire, still requiring him to keep the peace as aforesaid; but notwithstanding he did violently teare the s^d neckcloth from his necke." The poor collector seems to have been a man of mettle, for, upon seeing Trodd's wife take up the "distress" and carry it back towards the house, he ran forward and closed the door in her face: "whereupon the said Trodd fell againe upon this examinee and by violence did hale him from the doore having alsoe with him two servants who with a long ax or adds did endeavour to assault and threaten to kill this examinee soe that thereby the distresse was forcibly taken from him and afterwards the said Trodd did still persist in assaulting this examinee who againe required him to keepe the peace and stand of him, which he refuseing to doe this examinee with a sticke which hee had in his hand strucke the s^t Trodd about twice or thrice who with his said shovell endeavoured severall tymes to strike this examinee but missed him, upon which the said Petty Constable comeing in betweene parted them soe that this examinee was enforced to leave the said house without any distresse and further sayth not." This most graphic

deposition affords a valuable illustration of the disaffection which was produced by the detested hearth tax.

Violence and disorder are very frequently the results of ignorance; and a great number of people in the seventeenth century were exceeding ignorant—unable indeed to read or write. It is surprising how many of the people who made depositions and gave information before the Southampton magistrates could not sign their names, but were obliged to affix certain barbaric devices called their marks. One poor lady found herself in trouble through her inability to write. She received a letter from her husband who was at Portsmouth, which contained the request that she should come to him. This was not convenient for her; and accordingly she betook herself to a certain George Hellier and requested him to write a “kind letter” of excuse to her husband purporting to come from herself. He acceded to her request, but having a grudge against the lady’s husband, seized his opportunity to abuse him roundly. The husband upon receiving the letter was greatly incensed with his wife on account of the insolence, for which he deemed her responsible. The poor lady betook herself to the Southampton magistrates and laid her grievance before them, with the result that the real culprit was committed to the Bargate Prison.

Whilst I am speaking of letter-writing, I may, perhaps, be allowed to make reference to a remarkable and amusing letter which the Common Council was constrained to write to a Mr. Toldervey, whose wife had unfortunately lost her reason. Two years previous to the date of this letter the authorities had been obliged to deal with this delicate matter. They had passed the following resolution: “This day ordered that whereas it hath pleased Almighty God to vysite Mrs. Toldervey, wife of Mr. Phillip Toldervey, Alderman, with a lunacy and great distemperature of minde, as too nctoriously appeareth: The like whereof he may (if so it be his pleasure) lay upon any one of us; from the which we humblie beseech his Majestie to preserve us and all others, and for his mercies sake to restore her to her former sence and understanding: In the meane time seeing that her speeches are manie times most idle, odious and scandalous against His Majestie and the

state, and that also her walking abroad appereth to be verie dangerous, bothe in regard of her owne percon and also of others her neighbours whoe stand in great feare of her : It is thought fitt and so ordered by the Assembly of this house this day, that the said Mr. Toldervey be required to take course that she may not henceforth walke abroad out of his house ; but be close kept upp until it shall please God to give her a feeling of His Grace." Mr. Toldervey apparently did not comply with the request of the Council, and according a letter was sent to him, which is so interesting that I give it *in extenso*. It runs as follows : " Mr. Toldervey whereas of late your wife hath many wayes misdemeaned herself both in the Church, Towne haule, and open streetes against his Majesty, and the Queene his wife, against me the Mayor of this Towne and others of us and our wieves, wee have thought as heretofore so nowe againe to give you notice of it. And for that it is a great disgrace and disparagement to the government and state of this Towne to suffer such disorders in any person whatsoever, and the rather for that the meaner sort doe generally give out that if she were of meaner place we would not suffer it, which to saie the truth is most certeyne, wee doe most earnestlie desier you and in his Majesty's name also require you to take some course to keepe her in, for whereas heretofore you complayned that you had noe fittinge place to keepe her in and by your mocon wee have geven Bordes and nayles and paid for all the worckmanshipp to fitt a roome to your content in your owne howse which hath not cost you one penny and have cost some of us many, otherwise wee thought we should have been freed of this scandall, which nowe wee find to break out in as high a measuer as at any tyme heretofore. Wherefore if you shall not take such order as is fitting (which wee hartlie desier you to doe) wee shall be constraigned upon her next disorder to comitt her to prison untill we shall have sureties for her good behaviour." Whether Mr. Toldervey obeyed the command laid upon him, or whether his wife recovered her mental equilibrium we are not told.

The ignorance previously alluded to found ready credence for tales of the marvellous ; and one of the grossest superstitions, the most firmly implanted in the popular mind, was the

belief in witchcraft. Certainly it was not only the ignorant who believed it possible to ally themselves for sinister purposes with demonic activity. James I., with all his pedant lore, Lord Bacon, the great father of inductive science, were as firmly convinced of the reality of witchcraft as the most unlettered of the common people. Still it is correct to attribute the belief in witchcraft to ignorance. It is significant that towards the latter part of the seventeenth century, when latitudinarianism was beginning to flourish, the witch-hunt was prosecuted far less zealously than at the beginning of that age; and the cold, sceptical and extremely intellectual eighteenth century absolutely extirpated belief in witchcraft. Fortunately the superstition was defunct before the rise of Methodism, for John Wesley regarded its disappearance as a melancholy instance of the triumph of unbelief. There is more of tragedy than of comedy in the melancholy credulity of all classes of men upon this matter. Between the years 1603 and 1680 no less than seventy thousand people were done to death under a law passed against witchcraft. This law did not seem to recognise a distinction held in mediæval times between white and black magic. It was death to remove or conjure an evil spirit, to consult, covenant with, or feed one; to take up the body of a dead person for use in magic; to hurt life or limb; to seek for treasure or lost or stolen goods; to procure love or to injure cattle by means of charms. It is fearful to think of the cruelty inspired by this debasing superstition. But in many a tragedy there is surely something of comedy; Carlyle found something to laugh over in the practice of duelling: "Deuce on't, the little spit-fires. How God must laugh (if such a thing be possible) to see His little mannikins here below"; and there is preserved in the Southampton documents a most diverting story connected with the belief in witchcraft, which recalls a certain vivid scene in Charles Read's "The Cloister and the Hearth."

A man named John Primmer had, in the year 1635, the misfortune to find himself lodged in the Bargate Prison. He told the magistrates that as soon as he came into the prison a certain Robert Keyes began to talk to him in a distinctly uncanny manner about weird and ghostly sights which

appeared in the prison at night, sights which it appeared, he (Keyes) could summon "Betweene the houres of XI. and XII. at midnight the said Keyes bléw out his candle and spake certaine words which this examinee understood not, and that thereupon presently appeared (as it seemed to this examinee) five strange things in sundrye shapes, one like a bull, another in the forme of a white beare, and the others like little puppie dogs without heeds tumbling on the ground before him; whereat this examinee being affrighted, began to rise up where hee lay, and the said Keyes willed him not to be afraid for they should doe him noe harme. And that all the tyme theis apparitions were in the prison (being about the spacé of a quarter-of-an-hour) the said Keyes spake certaine words to them which this examinee understood not, and that there was a greate light in the prison all that tyme. And that upon the suddaine they all vanished away, but how this examinee knoweth not. And further hee saith that when these things appeared hee, this examinee, was awaked and in his perfect sences and remembrance; and that the said Keyes asked him the next morning whether hee was not afraid at the sights hee sawe overnight."

I have attempted briefly to indicate a few of the more entertaining of the records contained in the Borough documents of the seventeenth century. Their number could easily have been increased. This imperfect sketch will not have entirely failed in its object if it gives some slight insight into certain aspects of the lives of ordinary men and women who lived in that interesting age, and if it in any degree illustrates the large human interest which many of the documents contain.