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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MR. JOSEPH HANSON, THE HABERDASHER \*\*\*

# MR. JOSEPH HANSON, THE HABERDASHER

By Mary Russell Mitford

These are good days for great heroes; so far at least as regards the general spread and universal diffusion of celebrity. In the matter of fame, indeed, that grand bill upon posterity which is to be found written in the page of history, and the changes of empires, Alexander may, for aught I know, be nearly on a par with the Duke of Wellington; but in point of local and temporary tributes to reputation, the great ancient, king though he were, must have been far behind the great modern. Even that comparatively recent warrior, the Duke of Marlborough, made but a slight approach to the popular honours paid to the conqueror of Napoleon. A few alehouse signs and the ballad of "Marlbrook s'en va't en guerre," (for we are not talking now of the titles, and pensions, and palaces, granted to him by the Sovereign and the Parliament,) seem to have been the chief if not the only popular demonstrations vouchsafed by friends and enemies to the hero of Blenheim.

The name of Wellington, on the other hand, is necessarily in every man's mouth at every hour of every day. He is the universal godfather of every novelty, whether in art, in literature, or in science. Streets, bridges, places, crescents, terraces, and railways, on the land; steam-boats on the water; balloons in the air, are all distinguished by that honoured appellation. We live in Wellington squares, we travel in Wellington coaches, we dine in Wellington hotels, we are educated in Wellington establishments, and are clothed from top to toe (that is to say the male half of the nation) in Wellington boots, Wellington cloaks, Wellington hats, each of which shall have been severally purchased at a warehouse bearing the same distinguished title.

Since every market town and almost every village in the kingdom, could boast a Wellington house, or a Waterloo house, emulous to catch some gilded ray from the blaze of their great namesake's glory, it would have been strange indeed if the linendrapers and haberdashers of our good town of Belford Regis had been so much in the rear of fashion as to neglect this easy method of puffing off their wares. On the contrary, so much did our shopkeepers rely upon the influence of an illustrious appellation, that they seemed to despair of success unless sheltered by the laurels of the great commander, and would press his name into the service, even after its accustomed and legitimate forms of use seemed exhausted. Accordingly we had not only a Wellington house and a Waterloo house, but a new Waterloo establishment, and a genuine and original Duke of Wellington warehouse.

The new Waterloo establishment, a flashy dashy shop in the market-place, occupying a considerable extent of frontage, and "conducted (as the advertisements have it) by Mr. Joseph Hanson, late of London," put forth by far the boldest pretensions of any magazine of finery and frippery in the town; and it is with that magnificent *store*, and with that only, that I intend to deal in the present story.

If the celebrated Mr. Puff, he of the Critic, who, although Sheridan probably borrowed the idea of that most

amusing personage from the auctioneers and picture-dealers of Foote's admirable farces, first reduced to system the art of profitable lying, setting forth methodically (scientifically it would be called in these days) the different genera and species of that flourishing craft—if Mr. Puff himself were to revisit this mortal stage, he would lift up his hands and eyes in admiration and astonishment at the improvements which have taken place in the art from whence he took, or to which he gave, a name (for the fact is doubtful) the renowned art of Puffing!

Talk of the progress of society, indeed! of the march of intellect, and the diffusion of knowledge, of infant schools and adult colleges, of gas-lights and rail-roads, of steam-boats and steam-coaches, of literature for nothing, and science for less! What are they and fifty other such nick-nacks compared with the vast strides made by this improving age in the grand art of puffing? Nay, are they not for the most part mere implements and accessories of that mighty engine of trade? What is half the march of intellect, but puffery? Why do little children learn their letters at school, but that they may come hereafter to read puffs at college? Why but for the propagation of puffs do honorary lecturers hold forth upon science, and gratuitous editors circulate literature? Are not gas-lights chiefly used for their illumination, and steamboats for their spread? And shall not history, which has given to one era the name of the age of gold, and has entitled another the age of silver, call this present nineteenth century the age of puffs?

Take up the first thing upon your table, the newspaper for instance, or the magazine, the decorated drawing-box, the Bramah pen, and twenty to one but a puff more or less direct shall lurk in the patent of the one, while a whole congeries of puffs shall swarm in bare and undisguised effrontery between the pages of the other.

Walk into the streets;—and what meet you there? Puffs! puffs! puffs! From the dead walls, chalked over with recommendations to purchase Mr. Such-an-one's blacking, to the walking placard insinuating the excellences of Mr. What-d'ye-call-him's Cream Gin\*—from the bright resplendent brass-knob, garnished with the significant words "Office Bell," beside the door of an obscure surveyor, to the spruce carriage of a newly arrived physician driving empty up and down the street, everything whether movable or stationary is a puff.

*\* He was a genius in his line (I had almost written an evil genius) who invented that rare epithet, that singular combination of the sweetest and purest of all luxuries, the most healthful and innocent of dainties, redolent of association so rural and poetical, with the vilest abominations of great cities, the impure and disgusting source of misery and crime. Cream Gin! The union of such words is really a desecration of one of nature's most genial gifts, as well as a burlesque on the charming old pastoral poets; a flagrant offence against morals, and against that which in its highest sense may almost be considered a branch of morality-taste.*

But shops form, of course, the chief locality of the craft of puffing. The getting off of goods is its grand aim and object. And of all shops those which are devoted to the thousand and one articles of female decoration, the few things which women do, and the many which they do not want, stand pre-eminent in this great art of the nineteenth century.

Not to enter upon the grand manoeuvres of the London establishments, the doors for carriages to set down and the doors for carriages to take up, indicating an affluence of customers, a degree of crowd and inconvenience equal to the King's Theatre, on a Saturday night, or the queen's drawing-room on a birthday, and attracting the whole female world by that which in a fashionable cause the whole female world loves so dearly, confusion, pressure, heat and noise;—to say nothing of those bold schemes which require the multitudes of the metropolis to afford them the slightest chance of success, we in our good borough of Belford Regis, simple as it stands, had, as I have said, as pretty a show of speculating haberdashers as any country town of its inches could well desire; the most eminent of whom was beyond all question or competition, the proprietor of the New Waterloo Establishment, Mr. Joseph Hanson, late of London.

His shop displayed, as I have already intimated, one of the largest and showiest frontages in the market-place, and had been distinguished by a greater number of occupants and a more rapid succession of failures in the same line than any other in the town.

The last tenant, save one, of that celebrated warehouse—the penultimate bankrupt—had followed the beaten road of puffing, and announced his goods as the cheapest ever manufactured. According to himself, his handbills, and his advertisements, everything contained in that shop was so very much under prime cost, that the more he sold the sooner he must be ruined. To hear him, you would expect not only that he should give his ribbons and muslins for nothing, but that he should offer you a premium for consenting to accept of them. Gloves, handkerchiefs, nightcaps, gown-pieces, every article at the door and in the window was covered with tickets, each nearly as large as itself, tickets that might be read across the market-place; and townspeople and country-people came flocking round about, some to stare and some to buy. The starers were, however, it is to be presumed, more numerous than the buyers, for notwithstanding his tickets, his handbills, and his advertisements, in less than six months the advertiser had failed, and that stock never, as it's luckless owner used to say, approached for cheapness, was sold off at half its original price.

Warned by his predecessor's fate, the next comer adopted a newer and a nobler style of attracting public attention. He called himself a steady trader of the old school, abjured cheapness as synonymous with cheating, disclaimed everything that savoured of a puff, denounced handbills and advertisements, and had not a ticket in his whole shop. He cited the high price of his articles as proofs of their goodness, and would have held himself disgraced for ever if he had been detected in selling a reasonable piece of goods. "He could not," he observed, "expect to attract the rabble by such a mode of transacting business; his aim was to secure a select body of customers amongst the nobility and gentry, persons who looked to quality and durability in their purchases, and were capable of estimating the solid advantages of dealing with a tradesman who despised the trumpety artifices of the day."

So high-minded a declaration, enforced too by much solemnity of utterance and appearance—the speaker

being a solid, substantial, middle-aged man, equipped in a full suit of black, with a head nicely powdered, and a pen stuck behind his ear—such a declaration from so important a personage ought to have succeeded; but somehow or other it did not. His customers, gentle and simple, were more select than numerous, and in another six months the high-price man failed just as the low-price man had failed before him.

Their successor, Mr. Joseph Hanson, claimed to unite in his own person the several merits of both his antecedents. Cheaper than the cheapest, better, finer, more durable, than the best, nothing at all approaching his assortment of linendrapery had, as he swore, and his head shopman, Mr. Thomas Long, asseverated, ever been seen before in the streets of Belford Regis; and the oaths of the master and the asseverations of the man, together with a very grand display of fashions and finery, did really seem, in the first instance at least, to attract more customers than had of late visited those unfortunate premises.

Mr. Joseph Hanson and Mr. Thomas Long were a pair admirably suited to the concern, and to one another. Each possessed pre-eminently the various requisites and qualifications in which the other happened to be deficient. Tall, slender, elderly, with a fine bald head, a mild countenance, a most insinuating address, and a general air of faded gentility, Mr. Thomas Long was exactly the foreman to give respectability to his employer; whilst bold, fluent, rapid, loud, dashing in aspect and manner, with a great fund of animal spirits, and a prodigious stock of assurance and conceit, respectability was, to say the truth, the precise qualification which Mr. Joseph Hanson most needed.

Then the good town of Belford being divided, like most other country towns, into two prevailing factions, theological and political, the worthies whom I am attempting to describe prudently endeavoured to catch all parties by embracing different sides; Mr. Joseph Hanson being a tory and high-churchman of the very first water, who showed his loyalty according to the most approved faction, by abusing his Majesty's ministers as revolutionary, thwarting the town-council, getting tipsy at conservative dinners, and riding twenty miles to attend an eminent preacher who wielded in a neighbouring county all the thunders of orthodoxy; whilst the soft-spoken Mr. Thomas Long was a Dissenter and a radical, who proved his allegiance to the House of Brunswick (for both claimed to be amongst the best wishers to the present dynasty and the reigning sovereign) by denouncing the government as weak and aristocratic, advocating the abolition of the peerage, getting up an operative reform club, and going to chapel three times every Sunday.

These measures succeeded so well, that the allotted six months (the general period of failure in that concern) elapsed, and still found Mr. Joseph Hanson as flourishing as ever in manner, and apparently flourishing in trade; they stood him, too, in no small stead, in a matter which promised to be still more conducive to his prosperity than buying and selling feminine gear,—in the grand matter (for Joseph jocosely professed to be a forlorn bachelor upon the lookout for a wife) of a wealthy marriage.

One of the most thrifty and thriving tradesmen in the town of Belford, was old John Parsons, the tinman. His spacious shop, crowded with its glittering and rattling commodities, pots, pans, kettles, meat-covers, in a word, the whole *batterie de cuisine*, was situate in the narrow, inconvenient lane called Oriel Street, which I have already done myself the honour of introducing to the courteous reader, standing betwixt a great chemist on one side, his windows filled with coloured jars, red, blue, and green, looking like painted glass, or like the fruit made of gems in Aladdin's garden, (I am as much taken myself with those jars in a chemist's window as ever was Miss Edgeworth's Rosamond,) and an eminent china warehouse on the other; our tinman having the honour to be next-door neighbour to no less a lady than Mrs. Philadelphia Tyler. Many a thriving tradesman might be found in Oriel Street, and many a blooming damsel amongst the tradesmen's daughters; but if the town gossip might be believed, the richest of all the rich shopkeepers was old John Parsons, and the prettiest girl (even without reference to her father's moneybags) was his fair daughter Harriet.

John Parsons was one of those loud, violent, blustering, boisterous personages who always put me in mind of the description so often appended to characters of that sort in the dramatis personæ of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, where one constantly meets with Ernulpho or Bertoldo, or some such Italianised appellation, "an old angry gentleman." The "old angry gentleman" of the fine old dramatists generally keeps the promise of the play-bill. He storms and rails during the whole five acts, scolding those the most whom he loves the best, making all around him uncomfortable, and yet meaning fully to do right, and firmly convinced that he is himself the injured party; and after quarrelling with cause or without to the end of the comedy, makes friends all round at the conclusion;—a sort of person whose good intentions everybody appreciates, but from whose violence everybody that can is sure to get away.

Now such men are just as common in the real workaday world as in the old drama; and precisely such a man was John Parsons.

His daughter was exactly the sort of creature that such training was calculated to produce; gentle, timid, shrinking, fond of her father, who indeed doated upon her, and would have sacrificed his whole substance, his right arm, his life, anything except his will or his humour, to give her a moment's pleasure; gratefully fond of her father, but yet more afraid than fond.

The youngest and only surviving child of a large family, and brought up without a mother's care, since Mrs. Parsons had died in her infancy, there was a delicacy and fragility, a slenderness of form and transparency of complexion, which, added to her gentleness and modesty, gave an unexpected elegance to the tinman's daughter. A soft appealing voice, dove-like eyes, a smile rather sweet than gay, a constant desire to please, and a total unconsciousness of her own attractions, were amongst her chief characteristics. Some persons hold the theory that dissimilarity answers best in matrimony, and such persons would have found a most satisfactory contrast of appearance, mind, and manner, between the fair Harriet and her dashing suitor.

Besides his one great and distinguishing quality of assurance and vulgar pretension, which it is difficult to describe, by any word short of impudence, Mr. Joseph Hanson was by no means calculated to please the eye of a damsel of seventeen, an age at which a man who owned to five-and-thirty, and who looked and most probably was at least ten years farther advanced on the journey of life, would not fail to be set down as a confirmed old bachelor. He had, too, a large mouth, full of large irregular teeth, a head of hair which bore a great resemblance to a wig, and a suspicion of a squint, (for it did not quite amount to that odious deformity,) which added a most sinister expression to his countenance. Harriet Parsons could not abide him; and I verily

believe she would have disliked him just as much though a certain Frederick Mallet had never been in existence.

How her father, a dissenter, a radical, and a steady tradesman of the old school, who hated puffs and puffery, and finery and fashion, came to be taken in by a man opposed to him in religion and politics, in action and in speech, was a riddle that puzzled half the gossips in Belford. It happened through a mutual enmity, often (to tell an unpalatable truth of poor human nature) a stronger bond of union than a mutual affection.

Thus it fell out.

Amongst the reforms carried into effect by the town-council, whereof John Parsons was a leading member, was the establishment of an efficient new police to replace the incapable old watchmen, who had hitherto been the sole guardians of life and property in our ancient borough. As far as the principle went, the liberal party were united and triumphant. They split, as liberals are apt to split, upon the rock of detail. It so happened that a turnpike, belonging to one of the roads leading into Belford, had been removed, by order of the commissioners, half a mile farther from the town;—half a mile indeed beyond the town boundary; and although there were only three houses, one a beer-shop, and the two others small tenements inhabited by labouring people, between the site of the old turnpike at the end of Prince's Street, and that of the new, at the King's Head Pond, our friend the tinman, who was nothing if not crotchety, insisted with so much pertinacity upon the perambulation of the blue-coated officials appointed for that beat, being extended along the highway for the distance aforesaid, that the whole council were set together by the ears, and the measure had very nearly gone by the board in consequence. The imminence of the peril saved them. The danger of reinstating the ancient Dogberrys of the watch, and still worse, of giving a triumph to the tories, brought the reformers to their senses—all except the man of tin, who, becoming only the more confirmed in his own opinion as ally after ally fell off from him, persisted in dividing the council six different times, and had the gratification of finding himself on each of the three last divisions, in a minority of one. He was about to bring forward the question upon a seventh occasion, when a hint as to the propriety in such case of moving a vote of censure against him for wasting the time of the board, caused him to secede from the council in a fury, and to quarrel with the whole municipal body, from the mayor downward.

Now the mayor, a respectable and intelligent attorney, heretofore John Parsons' most intimate friend, happened to have been brought publicly and privately into collision with Mr. Joseph Hanson, who, delighted to find an occasion on which he might at once indulge his aversion to the civic dignitary, and promote the interest of his love-suit, was not content with denouncing the corporation *de vive voix*, but wrote three grandiloquent letters to the Belford Courant, in which he demonstrated that the welfare of the borough, and the safety of the constitution, depended upon the police parading regularly, by day and by night, along the high road to the King's Head Pond, and that none but a pettifogging chief magistrate, and an incapable town-council, corrupt tools of a corrupt administration, could have had the gratuitous audacity to cause the policeman to turn at the top of Prince's Street, thereby leaving the persons and property of his majesty's liege subjects unprotected and uncared for. He enlarged upon the fact of the tenements in question being occupied by agricultural labourers, a class over whom, as he observed, the demagogues now in power delighted to tyrannise; and concluded his flourishing appeal to the conservatives of the borough, the county, and the empire at large, by a threat of getting up a petition against the council, and bringing the whole affair before the two Houses of Parliament.

Although this precious epistle was signed Amicus Patriæ, the writer was far too proud of his production to entrench himself behind the inglorious shield of a fictitious signature, and as the mayor, professionally indignant at the epithet pettifogging, threatened both the editor of the Belford Courant and Mr. Joseph Hanson with an action for libel, it followed, as matter of course, that John Parsons not only thought the haberdasher the most able and honest man in the borough, but regarded him as the champion, if not the martyr, of his cause, and one who deserved everything that he had to bestow, even to the hand and portion of the pretty Harriet.

Affairs were in this posture, when one fine morning the chief magistrate of Belford entered the tinman's shop.

"Mr. Parsons," said the worthy dignitary, in a very conciliatory tone, "you may be as angry with me as you like, but I find from our good vicar that the fellow Hanson has applied to him for a licence, and I cannot let you throw away my little friend Harriet without giving you warning, that a long and bitter repentance will follow such a union. There are emergencies in which it becomes a duty to throw aside professional niceties, and to sacrifice etiquette to the interests of an old friendship; and I tell you, as a prudent man, that I know of my own knowledge that this intended son-in-law of your's will be arrested before the wedding-day."

"I'll bail him," said John Parsons, stoutly.

"He is not worth a farthing," quoth the chief magistrate.

"I shall give him ten thousand pounds with my daughter," answered the man of pots and kettles.

"I doubt if ten thousand pounds will pay his just debts," rejoined the mayor.

"Then I'll give him twenty," responded the tinman.

"He has failed in five different places within the last five years," persisted the pertinacious adviser; "has run away from his creditors, Heaven knows how often; has taken the benefit of the Act time after time! You would not give your own sweet Harriet, the best and prettiest girl in the county, to an adventurer, the history of whose life is to be found in the Gazette and the Insolvent Court, and who is a high churchman and a tory to boot. Surely you would not fling away your daughter and your honest earnings upon a man of notorious bad character, with whom you have not an opinion or a prejudice in common? Just think what the other party will say!"

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Mallet or Mr. Mayor, if you prefer the sound of your new dignity," broke out John Parsons, in a fury, "I shall do what I like with my money and my daughter, without consulting you, or caring what anybody may chance to say, whether whig or tory. For my part, I think there's little to choose between them. One side's as bad as the other. Tyrants in office and patriots out. If Hanson is a conservative and a churchman, his foreman is a radical and a dissenter; and they neither of them pretend to dictate to their

betters, which is more than I can say of some who call themselves reformers. Once for all, I tell you that he shall marry my Harriet, and that your nephew sha'n't: so now you may arrest him as soon as you like. I'm not to be managed here, however you and your tools may carry matters at the Town Hall. An Englishman's house is his castle."

"Well," said Mr. Mallet, "I am going. God knows I came out of old friendship towards yourself, and sincere affection for the dear girl your daughter. As to my nephew, besides that I firmly believe the young people like each other, I know him to be as steady a lad as ever drew a conveyance; and with what his father has left him, and what I can give him, to say nothing of his professional prospects, he would be a fit match for Harriet as far as money goes. But if you are determined——"

"I *am* determined," roared John Parsons. "Before next week is out, Joseph Hanson shall be my son-in-law. And now, sir, I advise you to go and drill your police." And the tinman retired from behind the counter into the interior of his dwelling, (for this colloquy had taken place in the shop,) banging the door behind him with a violence that really shook the house.

"Poor pretty Harriet!" thought the compassionate chief magistrate, "and poor Frederick too! The end of next week! This is only Monday; something may turn up in that time; we must make inquiries; I had feared that it would have been earlier. My old tetchy friend here is just the man to have arranged the marriage one day, and had the ceremony performed the next. We must look about us." And full of such cogitations, the mayor returned to his habitation.

On the Thursday week after this conversation a coach drew up, about eight o'clock in the morning, at the gate of St Stephen's churchyard, and Mr. Joseph Hanson, in all the gloss of bridal finery, newly clad from top to toe, smiling and smirking at every instant, jumped down, followed by John Parsons, and prepared to hand out his reluctant bride elect, when Mr. Mallet, with a showy-looking middle-aged woman (a sort of feminine of Joseph himself) hanging upon his arm, accosted our friend the tinman.

"Stop!" cried the mayor.

"What for?" inquired John Parsons. "If it's a debt, I've already told you that I'll be his bail."

"It is a debt," responded the chief magistrate; "and one that luckily he must pay, and not you. Three years ago he married this lady at Liverpool. We have the certificate and all the documents."

"Yes, sir," added the injured fair one; "and I find that he has another wife in Dublin, and a third at Manchester. I have heard, too, that he ran away with a young lady to Scotland; but that don't count, as he was under age."

"Four wives!" ejaculated John Parsons, in a transport of astonishment and indignation. "Why the man is an absolute great Turk! But the thing's impossible. Come and answer for yourself, Joseph Hanson."

And the tinman turned to look for his intended son-in-law; but frightened at the sight of the fair claimant of his hand and person, the bridegroom had absconded, and John Parsons and the mayor had nothing for it but to rejoin the pretty Harriet, smiling through her tears as she sate with her bride-maiden in the coach at the churchyard-gate.

"Well; it's a great escape! and we're for ever obliged to you, Mr. Mayor. Don't cry any more, Harriet. If Frederick was but here, why, in spite of the policemen—— but a week hence will do as well; and I am beginning to be of Harriet's mind, that even if he had not had three or four wives, we should be well off to be fairly rid of Mr. Joseph Hanson, the puffing haberdasher."

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MR. JOSEPH HANSON, THE HABERDASHER \*\*\*

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