

SHADOWS OF THE OLD BOOKSELLERS

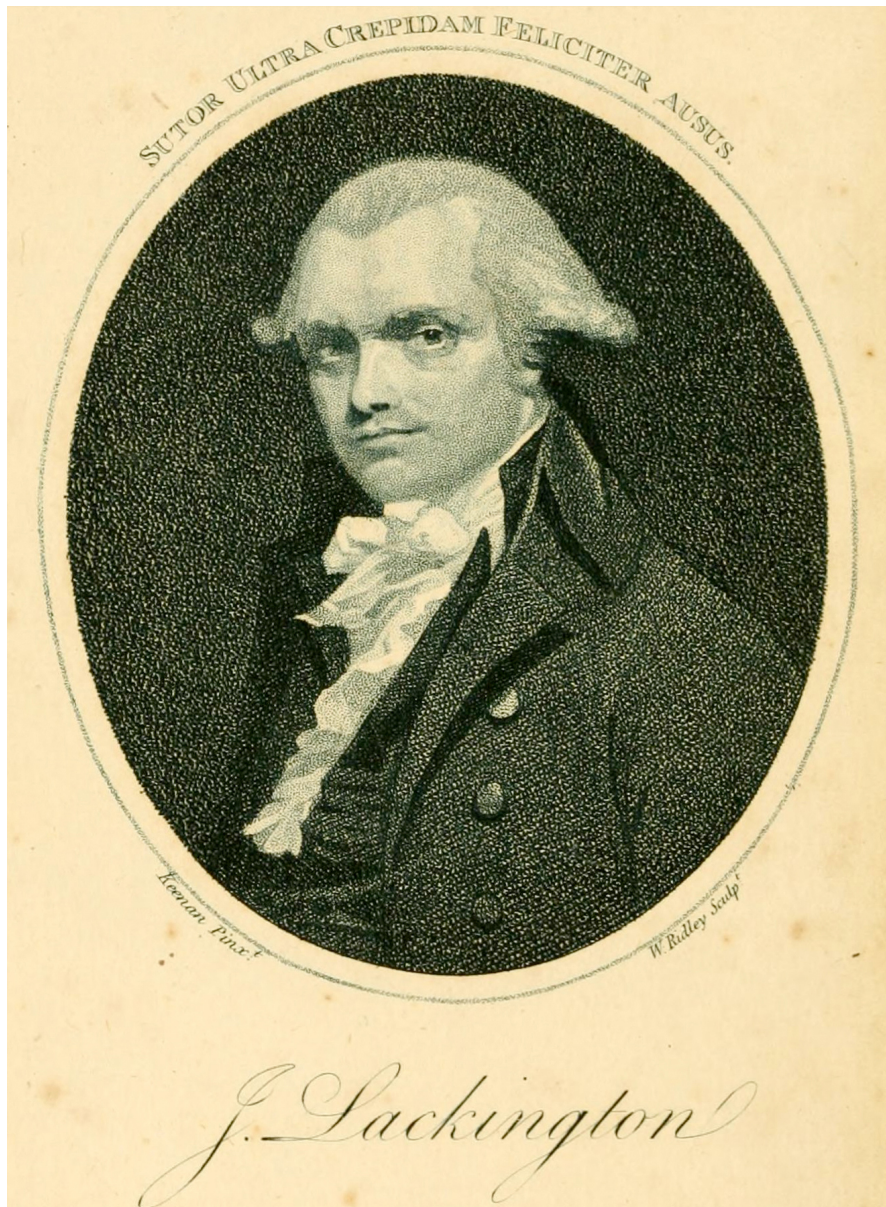
BY

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CHAPTER XIV

JAMES LACKINGTON

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JAMES LACKINGTON: note the motto which might translate as "the cobbler happily dares to reach above his last": this is a play upon the old phrase - cobbler, stick to your last.

CHAPTER XIV

JAMES LACKINGTON

WHEN I was about ten years old, my father took me to London for a short holiday. He had business to transact with booksellers, of whom I remember Messrs. Robinson, of Paternoster Row, and Mr. Wingrave, of the Strand, for whom he printed the *French Grammar*, and other works of M. Porny. The dingy warehouses of the great marts of literature did not attract much of my curiosity. But my father had a sight in reserve for me, almost as remarkable as Saint Paul's or Mrs. Salmon's waxwork. I went with him to "The Temple of the Muses." The building was burnt down some years ago, but I have engravings which assist my recollection of what I saw in 1801.

At one of the corners of Finsbury Square, which was built in 1789, there was a block of houses which had been adapted to the purposes of a great shop or warehouse, and presented an imposing frontage. A dome rises from the centre, on the top of which a flag is flying. This royal manifestation (now become common to suburban public-houses) proclaims that this is no ordinary commercial establishment. Over the principal entrance is inscribed, "Cheapest Booksellers in the World." It is the famous shop of Lackington, Allen, and Co., "where above Half a Million of Volumes are constantly on Sale." We enter the vast area, whose dimensions are to be measured by the assertion that a coach and six might be driven round it. In the centre is an enormous circular counter, within which stand the dispensers of knowledge, ready to wait upon the country clergyman, in his wig and shovel-hat; upon the fine ladies, in feathers and trains; or upon the bookseller's collector, with his dirty bag. If there is any chaffering about the cost of a work, the shopman points to the following inscription: "The lowest price is marked on every Book, and no abatement made on any article." We ascend a broad staircase, which leads to "The Lounging Rooms," and to the first of a series of circular galleries, lighted from the lantern of the dome, which also lights the ground floor. Hundreds, even thousands, of volumes are displayed on the shelves running round their walls. As we mount higher and higher, we find commoner books, in shabbier bindings; but there is still the same order preserved, each book being numbered according to a printed catalogue. This is larger than that of any other bookseller's, and it comes out yearly. The formation of such an establishment as this assumes a remarkable power of organization, as well as a large command of capital. I daresay I wearied my father with questions about this wonderful Mr. Lackington, marvelling how rich he must have been; how learned! He might have answered my enquiries by showing me a very common print with this inscription: "J. Lackington, who a few years since began Book-selling with five pounds, now sells one hundred thousand volumes

yearly; or, the Cobbler turned Bookseller." A year or two later, my desire for information was abundantly satisfied by the perusal of a book entitled *Memoirs of the forty-five first years of the Life of James Lackington, the present Bookseller in Chiswell Street, Moorfields, London, written by himself, in Forty-seven Letters to a Friend*. This autobiography was originally published in 1791, before "The Temple of the Muses" had been inaugurated. I perhaps did a little injustice to the character of this book in once describing it as "that farrago of sense and absurdity." There is certainly a good deal of nonsense to be found in it, but the real information which it contains, and the curious picture which it presents of the struggles of a young man, almost without the rudiments of knowledge, and miserably poor, to become rich and famous in the annals of bookselling, require a careful and candid exposition.

James Lackington was born at Wellington, in Somersetshire, in 1746. His father, George Lackington, was a journeyman shoemaker. The name, I am informed, is not yet extinct in that town and neighbourhood. His mother was an honest and industrious woman ; his father an habitual drunkard. Their poverty was such, under the father's idleness and improvidence, that the mother could not afford to pay two-pence a week for the little boy's schooling. His superfluous energy expended itself in all sorts of mischief, till his commercial talent was developed in his employment by a baker, to cry and sell apple-pies about the streets. His first steps in the paths of bookselling are thus described: " During the time that I lived with the baker, my name became so celebrated for selling a large number of pies, puddings, &c., that for several years following, application was made to my father for him to permit me to sell Almanacks a few market days before and after Christmas. In this employ I took great delight, the country people being highly pleased with me, and purchasing a great number of my almanacks, which excited envy in the itinerant venders of Moore, Wing, Poor Robin, &c., to such a degree, that my father often expressed his anxiety lest they should some way or other do me a mischief. But I had not the least concern; for, possessing a light pair of heels, I always kept at a proper distance. Oh, my friend, little did I imagine at that time, that I should ever excite the same poor mean spirit in many of the booksellers of London and other places."

When Lackington was fourteen years and a half old, he was apprenticed to a shoemaker at Taunton, who was an Anabaptist. He went regularly with the family to the meeting, but he had no idea that he had the least concern in what the minister was preaching about. His master's sons having become converted to Methodism by one of Mr. Wesley's preachers, there were perpetual controversies between the mother and her children. Their arguments and discourses, he says, "made me think they knew many matters of which I was totally ignorant. This created in me a desire for knowledge, that I might know who was right and who was wrong. But, to my great mortification, I could not read. I knew most of the letters and a few easy words, and I set about learning with all my might." He

could soon read the easy parts of the Bible and Wesley's hymns. "I had such good eyes that I often read by the light of the moon, as my master would never permit me to take a candle into my room." I shall not attempt to follow his descriptions of the Methodist organisation, and of his own experiences from the time of his conversion, when about sixteen years of age, to his twenty-first year, when, he says, "I was a sincere enthusiast." One passage presents an accurate picture of what was going on throughout the country; "Instead of hearing the sensible and learned ministers of Taunton, I would often go four, five, or six miles, to some country village, to hear an inspired husbandman, shoemaker, blacksmith, or woolcomber ; and frequently in frost and snow have I rose a little after midnight (not knowing what time of night it was) and have wandered about the town until five o'clock, when the preaching began ; where I have often heard a sermon preached to not more than ten or a dozen people."

When Lackington had grown into manhood he obtained employment as a journeyman shoemaker at Bristol. At this time he could not write, yet he composed songs, which, being printed, the ballad-singers sang about Bristol streets. He had now acquired a taste for general reading. He and a friend had a little spare money to lay out in books, but they were ashamed to go into the booksellers' shops. At last they purchased, at a stall in Bristol Fair, Hobbes's translation of Homer. Those who have looked into that most wonderful specimen of the great philosopher's capacity for poetry, will easily conceive that the young shoemakers found crabbed Homer very difficult to read. They got together some few readable books. "What we wanted in judgment in choosing our library we made up in application; so anxious were we to read a great deal that we allowed ourselves but three hours' sleep in the twenty-four." Going to work at Kingsbridge, his master expressed his surprise that he should employ the pens of others to write his letters; and thus he began to teach himself to write. In 1770 he married. His wife was always out of health, so he resolved to move to London, where he could get a better price for his work. Poor they were indeed, for the wife's sickness allowed little to be saved out of the husband's earnings. At last his grandfather in the country left him a legacy of ten pounds. If any one should still think that the means of the humbler classes have not been materially improved by the spread of the knowledge of common things and the facilities of modern civilisation, let them read the following paragraph: "So totally unacquainted was I with the modes of transacting business that I could not point out any method of having my ten pounds sent up to London; at least, no mode that the executor of the will would approve of; it being such a prodigious sum that the greatest caution was used on both sides, so that it cost me about half the money in going down for it, and in returning to town again." With the remainder of his ten pounds he purchased a few household goods. Whilst he and his poor sick wife were working in their humble room, one of Mr. Wesley's people called, and informed him that there was a shop and parlour to

be let in Featherstone-street, and if he were to take it, he might there get some work as a master. Lackington liked the idea, and hinted that he would sell books as well as shoes. When his friend asked how he came to think of selling books, he said that, for several months past, he had observed a great increase in a certain old book shop. He was persuaded that he knew as much of books as the person who kept it; and that if he could but be a bookseller he should have plenty of books to read. So with some odd scraps of leather, and with books that he had got together, worth about five pounds, he increased his capital by borrowing five pounds out of a fund which Mr. Wesley's people kept to lend out. Thus, he says, "notwithstanding the obscurity of the street, and the mean appearance of my shop, yet I soon found customers for what few books I had, and I as soon laid out the money in other old trash which was daily brought for sale." He soon moved his stock, worth about twenty-five pounds, to Chiswell-street, and a few weeks after bade a final adieu to the gentle craft.

The bookseller of Chiswell-street, when he was about thirty years of age, married a second time; his first wife having died of a fever. He also took another decided step. He quitted the Wesleyan society. He appears to have been rather ungrateful to his old friends, whom he calls "old women," and he became proud of following examples of the incompatibility of bookselling with enthusiastic religious feelings. "Mr. Wesley told his society in Broadmead, Bristol, in my hearing, that he could never keep a bookseller six months in his flock." Lackington had now found a most valuable assistant in his wife; "her extreme love for books" making her delight to be in the shop. He obtained also a partner of another character, a capitalist, who enabled him greatly to extend his business, but they differed upon the principle upon which it should be conducted. "I was for selling everything cheap, in order to secure those customers already obtained, as well as increase their numbers." After two years they separated, but continued good friends. Left to his own guidance, Lackington adopted a principle of business which manifests his commercial sagacity. "It was some time in the year 1780 when I resolved from that period to give no person whatever any credit." He was convinced that if he could but establish a ready-money business, without any exceptions, he should be enabled to sell every article very cheap. He marked in every book, facing the title, the lowest price he would take for it. He denied credit to his nearest acquaintance. The rank or respectability of a customer formed no exception. If the books he sent home, even to a nobleman's house, were not paid for on delivery, his porter was to bring the parcel back. The principles of ready-money and small stock have been the foundations of great fortunes in more recent times. Tapes and ribbons bought and sold upon these principles made a millionaire not far from Chiswell-street; but Lackington could only pursue one of these roads to fortune. He was compelled, as every bookseller must be, to keep a large stock. Nothing but the most unremitting vigilance could have enabled him to contend against

this disadvantage. He describes his constant accumulation of stock ; his large purchases at trade sales, such as two hundred, three hundred, five hundred copies of a book. The first Napoleon has been called " the child and champion of Jacobinism." Lackington was the champion of ultra-Jacobinism in the book trade. His revolutionary doings must have carried consternation into the Chapter.¹ "When first invited to these trade sales, I was very much surprised to learn that it was common for such as purchased remainders to *destroy* one half or three fourths of such books, and to charge the full publication price, or nearly that, for such as they kept on hand; and there was a kind of standing order amongst the trade, that in case any one was known to sell articles under the publication price, such a person was to be excluded from trade sales; so blind were copyright-holders to their own interest." The Chiswell-street innovator having for a little while cautiously complied with this custom, at length "resolved not to destroy any books which were worth saving, but to sell them off at half or a quarter of the publication prices." Of course he was reviled; his ruin was prognosticated; the doors of the trade sale rooms were shut against him. But this could last only a little while. The dams by which this flood of a natural and truly legitimate trade was attempted to be stopped, were very soon broken down. There were plenty of indirect modes of supplying him with "remainders." "By selling them in this cheap manner, I have disposed of many hundred thousand volumes, many thousands of which have been intrinsically worth their original prices." Customers of all ranks flocked to his shop. It is something higher than the complacency of egotism when he boasts of having thus enabled numbers in inferior situations of life to indulge their natural propensity for the acquisition of knowledge on easy terms. He was in advance of his time when he wrote: "I could almost be vain enough to assert, that I have thereby been highly instrumental in diffusing that general desire for reading, now so prevalent among the inferior orders of society; which most certainly, though it may not prove equally instructive to all, keeps them from employing their time and money, if not to bad, at least to less rational purposes." Reviled and discountenanced by the trade at first, the cheap bookseller soon was supplied with abundant materials for carrying on his system. "Being universally known for making large purchases, most of the trade in town and country, and also authors of every description, are continually furnishing me with opportunities." He was still, however, a subject for the finger of Scorn to point at, even when he had such a command of capital that great publishers no longer stood upon their false and antiquated principles of political economy. He says: "As the first king of Bohemia kept his country shoes by him, to remind him from whence he was taken, I have put a motto on the doors of my carriage, constantly to remind me to what I am indebted for my prosperity, viz. :-

1 The Chapter was a coffee house frequented by booksellers and was a sort of trade club.

SMALL PROFITS DO GREAT THINGS."

That carriage was scarcely to be forgiven by his detractors. I have a caricature, in which a grinning assembly, holding up their hands in wonder, stare upon the fortunate cobbler as he mounts upon a pile of books to step into his smart vehicle, drawn up in front of the Temple of the Muses.

It was a matter of surprise, as Lackington informs us, how he acquired any tolerable degree of knowledge, so as to form any idea of the merits of books, or how he became acquainted with the ordinary prices that books, especially foreign, were sold for. He affirms that he always wrote his own catalogues. He learnt enough French to make out and abridge title-pages, and contented himself with reading all the translations of the Classics, inserting the original titles in his catalogues, as well as he could. There is a humourous frankness in what he adds:— "When sometimes I happened to put the genitive or dative case, instead of the nominative or accusative, my customers kindly considered this as a venial fault which they readily pardoned, and bought the books notwithstanding." He had customers in all grades of society—learned and unlearned, rich and poor. He came at a time when the desire for knowledge was extending, as the means of gratifying that desire were constantly increasing. Cause and effect were here blended. Demand increased supply, and supply increased demand. In 1791, Lackington says that, according to the best estimate he had been able to make, more than four times the number of books were sold then than were sold twenty years before. He speaks also of the formation of book-clubs in every part of England. He had the sense to perceive what effects would be produced by circulating libraries. "I have been informed that, when circulating libraries were first opened, the booksellers were much alarmed, and their rapid increase added to their fears, and led them to think that the sale of books would be much diminished by such libraries. But experience has proved that the sale of books, so far from being diminished by them, has been greatly promoted." The food provided at these repositories was not always of the highest character. Lackington says that he has been told of booksellers who frequently offer as low as half-a-guinea per volume for novels in manuscript. Of Mr. William Lane, who died in 1814, at the age of seventy-six, Mr. Bowyer Nichols says: "He was long distinguished for his numerous publications of novels, and for the energy with which he established circulating libraries in almost every town in the kingdom." Wonderful productions were those of the Minerva press, which had superseded for a while by their decorum, their insipidity, and their really low morality, the outspoken words of the great novelists of the middle of the century. The chief supporters of the circulating libraries have a good word from Lackington. English ladies, he said, now in general not only read novels but the best books in the English language : "There are some thousands of ladies, which come to my shop, that know as well what books to choose, and are as well

acquainted with works of taste and genius, as any gentleman in the kingdom, notwithstanding the sneer against novel readers."

There were not many of the old booksellers, I fear, who thought with Lackington that the spread of Sunday Schools would "accelerate the diffusion of knowledge among the lower classes of the community, and in a very few years exceedingly increase the sale of books." In the same way, when much more effectual means of popular education had grown out of the humble Sunday Schools, there were very few of the successors of the old booksellers who could believe that the returns and the profits of cheap publications would be twenty-fold those of books for - the rich and luxurious. If the London booksellers in Lackington's time were afraid of low prices, how much more would the country booksellers dread this disturbance of their old habits of business. He gives us little information about their dealings in new works; but it was not likely to be very extensive, if we may judge from his account of the provincial trade in old books. In 1787, he set off from London to Edinburgh, and was led from motives of curiosity, as -well as with the view of making some valuable purchases, to examine the booksellers' shops. His disappointment is thus related: "Although I went by the way of York, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c., and returned through Glasgow, Carlisle, Leeds, Lancaster, Preston, Manchester, and other considerable places, I was much surprised, as well as disappointed, at meeting with very few of the works of the most esteemed authors, and those few consisted in general of ordinary editions, besides an assemblage of common trifling books, bound in sheep, and that too in a very bad manner. It is true, at York and Leeds there were a few (and but very few) good books; but in all the other towns between London and Edinburgh nothing but trash was to be found: in the latter city, indeed, a few capital articles are kept, but in no other part of Scotland." He repeated his journey in 1790, with the same results; and he found no exception to his complaint in the West of England. London was "the grand emporium of Great Britain for books, engrossing nearly the whole of what is valuable in that very extensive, beneficial, and lucrative branch of trade."

Here I take leave of this remarkable man, who did not wholly quit business till 1798. He returned to the Wesleyan connexion, built and endowed three chapels, and died in 1815, at the age of seventy. Like most self-raised men, he was proud of his humble origin, when he exhibited the grandeur of his altered circumstances. The following passage, of the date of 1791, is characteristic: "In Bristol, Exbridge, Bridgewater, Taunton, Wellington, and other places, I amused myself in calling on some of my masters, with whom I had about twenty years before worked as a journeyman shoemaker. I addressed each with 'Pray, Sir, have you got any occasion?' which is the term made use of by journeymen in that useful occupation when seeking employment. Most of these honest men had quite forgotten my person, as many of them had not seen me since I worked

for them; so that it is not easy for you to conceive with what surprise and astonishment they gazed on me. For you must know that I had the vanity (I call it humour) to do this in my chariot, attended by my servants; and on telling them who I was, all appeared to be very happy to see me."

The memoirs mentioned on page 3, *Memoirs of the forty-five first years of the Life of James Lackington*, are renowned for their curious format and style, and for the triple dedication. This was set out so:

1. To the PUBLIC
 2. To RESPECTABLE
 3. To SORDID
- } BOOKSELLERS