

HOW TO BECOME A FREEMAN OF THE CITY OF LONDON.



able in any one, we might excuse a free-born Londoner for entertaining it towards the rest of mankind. To be a citizen of the greatest city upon earth is something, deny it who can. The public spirit, the wealth, the liberality, the far-reaching influence, the ancient history of the great metropolis might well make one proud to say, "In London I was born."

The next best thing to being born in London is to take up one's residence in it. One sees then really what the world is like; and it has been on a happy morning of good fortune that many a stranger has arrived to make it his home. But coming to a place, and carrying on business, and making a fortune, it may be, in it, constitute no particular tie. The sentimental feeling of belonging to the place is still wanting. Now this feeling, so far as London is concerned, may be supplied by a very simple process, and that consists in qualifying oneself for obtaining the freedom of the City. Whoever cares to be at a little trouble and a small expense, may claim Gog and Magog as his patron saints, and feel not only that he is the special care of the metropolis, but that he represents in his own person a long line of illustrious freemen, to whom even monarchs have come a-begging with their hats in their hands.

But what is a freeman? who are the freemen? have they any privileges? and how is the freedom taken up? The object of the present paper is to furnish some information in answer to these interesting questions.

To begin, we shall go far back. According to ancient law and custom, the City of London embraced all the commonalty who had resided within its bounds for a year and a day. Even a serf-born—in the days when there were serfs in England—if he were fortunate enough to accomplish this short stay, became free. This liberal statute, which applied equally to other English cities, was largely taken advantage of in London; there were always many *freed-men* among its freemen and citizens.

Gradually it became less easy to be made a freeman. The great trading companies came into existence, and they complicated matters. The freemen became an exclusive class, to enter which, simple residence no longer sufficed. There were now two paths to enfranchisement: one, and the more regular, was service by apprenticeship—a long and tedious road. The other, a short cut, consisted in a pecuniary payment. Those who availed themselves of the latter became free by

redemption, as it was called—an expression implying the purchased acquisition of the more authentic title.

The right of making freemen has at all times been zealously guarded by the City authorities. Even a royal charter is insufficient to make one free. Edward III. once granted to a foreigner, who is said to have been the first apothecary in England, all the liberties and immunities of a citizen of London, but the freemen refused to recognise him as one of themselves.

For many a day the privileges enjoyed by the freemen of London were considerable enough to make those of the present time half regret that they have come into the world so late. The greater number of these privileges related to trade, as became a mercantile city. Strangers were excluded from carrying on business either wholesale or retail, except under vexatious restrictions. The greatest jealousy was manifested towards them. By ancient custom and regulation, "foreigners" to the freedom were not allowed to reside more than forty days in the City, and there was a well-recognised law that if they sold any of their goods to other "foreigners," these goods would be forfeited. We meet with numerous examples of these forfeitures in the early City records.

No journeymen could be employed in the City unless they were freemen. Even as late as 1749 the observance of this custom was insisted upon. In that year a case was tried in the Lord Mayor's Court between a club of journeymen free painters, and a citizen and master painter, for employing a person not free to work for him within the bounds. The master pleaded that trade was so brisk he could not get on without importing non-freemen. The jury seem to have had some difficulty in deciding the question, but, being kept from two in the afternoon till six the next morning without food, fire, or candle, they made up their minds, and returned a verdict for the journeymen. The master painters of London felt greatly aggrieved at the verdict, petitioned the Common Council to employ "foreigners," and ultimately, under certain regulations, were allowed to do so.

Besides enjoying pretty much the monopoly of business, the citizens of London were free from all ancient tolls and taxes. They were also exempt, down to the days of press-gangs, from being impressed as sailors or soldiers, a protection extended to their apprentices. This was an old privilege: we find it confirmed by a charter of Edward III., which declared that no freeman of London should be obliged either to go or send to war out of the City.

"To treat of the great and notable franchises, liberties, and customs of the City of London," says Lord Coke, "would require a whole volume of itself," and one can hardly do it justice in two pages. We shall, therefore, leave speaking of freemen as they were, and consider them now from a less picturesque, but more modern, point of view.

We say *freemen*, but the City freedom is not confined to the male sex. Womankind have an equal right to

it. Officially, all are freemen, but women who have paid the fees and made the necessary declaration are known abroad as freestisters. Their freedom, we may add, is suspended during married life, and is not transmitted to their descendants. The widow of a freeman is free by courtesy, but by a subsequent marriage she loses her freedom.

Whatever may have been the restrictions in former days in the way of obtaining the freedom of the City, it is now acquired without any difficulty, and, except in the case of persons who neither hold premises nor carry on business within the bounds, at a very trifling cost. A great obstacle was done away with in 1835. By a resolution of the Court of Common Council, it was then declared to be the opinion of the Court that persons should be admitted to the freedom without the intervention of the trading companies. Previous to that time it was the practice to admit no one as a freeman till he was free of one of the several societies, guilds, and fraternities of freemen composing the Corporation.

The freedom of the City may now be obtained, first of all, by servitude. One must be bound apprentice to a freeman according to the custom of the City, and serve him for seven years. At the end of that time he can become a freeman by paying the modest sum of five shillings.

The next way is by patrimony. Under this head come the sons and daughters of freemen, born after the admission of the father, and having attained the age of twenty-one. The daughters must be unmarried or widows. Both sons and daughters are admitted on paying five shillings.

Next comes the plan of redemption or purchase. Persons on the Parliamentary Register of Votes for the City are admitted on applying to the Chamberlain, and paying just the same sum as those previously mentioned. Those not on the Parliamentary Register, but who are £10 householders, and rated to the police and other rates, have the same sum to pay, and not much more to do. They must produce a certificate on applying to the Chamberlain—from the beadle or some other authority of their ward—proving that they are so rated. The form is then gone through of the Chamberlain presenting their names to the Court, and obtaining an order for their admission.

The five shillings paid by all the applicants just mentioned goes to the Freeman's Orphan School.

Some, however, who hold premises or carry on business in the City may be inclined to purchase their freedom, but be without the qualifications of being on the Parliamentary Register, or of paying rates. These are admitted on paying a fine, including five shillings to the Freeman's Orphan School, of £2 18s. 4d.

For persons neither holding premises nor carrying

on business, and wishing to become freemen, the process is more expensive. They are admitted on the Chamberlain obtaining an order of the Court for their admission, and the fine in their case, including the five shillings to the Freeman's Orphan School, is £27 18s. 4d.

The sons of aliens are admitted in the same manner as natural-born subjects.

Before obtaining the precious strip of parchment which constitutes him a citizen of the glorious City of London, each applicant must make a declaration in the following words:—

"I, A B, do solemnly declare that I will be good and true to our Sovereign Lady Queen Victoria; that I will be obedient to the Mayor of this City; that I will maintain the franchises and customs thereof, and will keep this City harmless in that which in me is; that I will also keep the Queen's peace in my own person; that I will know no gatherings nor conspiracies made against the Queen's peace, but I will warn the Mayor thereof, or hinder it to my power; and that all these points and articles I will well and truly keep according to the laws and customs of this City to my power."

This solemn declaration was substituted in 1849 for an oath which, previous to that date, had to be taken by each new freeman, engaging to "colour no foreigner's goods under or in his own name, whereby the Queen or this City might or may lose their customs or advantages;" to take "none apprentice for any less term than for seven years, without fraud or deceit," and in other ways to maintain the old laws and customs of the City.

And what now-a-days are the advantages of this freedom? Practical people will think they are not much to speak of. When we have said that the freedom entitles the children of the possessor to certain privileges in connection with the Freeman's Orphan School at Brixton, and that to the citizens of London it is a bond of union and mutual protection, we have about exhausted the utilitarian side of the question. But, as we have already hinted, it is in its sentimental aspect that the freedom of the City is of value. It is good to connect oneself with what is great and venerable and famous, even though the link which unites us be little more than a name and a strip of parchment.

There is a way of obtaining the freedom which we have not yet mentioned. We have kept it to the last, for it is the best of all. This is by gift of the City. To be made an honorary freeman in this way is the first compliment in the world. Fortune can do little more for her favourite after she gets his name inscribed in the honourable roll of citizens of the great City of London. Princes, warriors, statesmen, poets, historians, philanthropists, and explorers—men the most distinguished of their generation—all have their names written there; and to have a chance of being numbered in that list of worthies has, no doubt, often acted as a stimulus to great and noble exertions.

