

# THE OLD SHOWMEN,

AND THE

XXVII. 89. 40

# OLD LONDON FAIRS.

BY

THOMAS FROST,

AUTHOR OF

'HALF-HOURS WITH THE EARLY EXPLORERS.'

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1874.

*All Rights Reserved.*

fairs was commenced by persons who would willingly have suppressed amusements of every kind, and were aided in their endeavours by persons who had merely a selfish interest in the matter. In the summer of 1750, a numerously signed petition of graziers, cattle salesmen, and inhabitants of Smithfield was presented to the Court of Aldermen, praying for the suppression of Bartholomew Fair, on the ground that it annoyed them in their occupations, and afforded opportunities for debauchery and riot. The annual Lord Mayor's procession might have been objected to on the same grounds, and the civic authorities well knew that the riots which had sometimes occurred in the fair had been occasioned by their own acts, in the execution of their edicts for the exclusion of puppet-shows and theatrical booths. Their action to this end was generally taken so tardily that booths were put up before the proprietors received notice of the intention of the Court of Aldermen to exclude them; and then the tardiness of the owners in taking them down, and the sudden zeal of the constables, produced quarrels and fights, in which the bystanders invariably took the part of the showmen.

The revenues which the Corporation derived from rents and tolls during the fair constituted an element of the question which could not be over-

looked, and which kept it in a state of oscillation from year to year. The civic authorities would have been willing enough to suppress the fair, if the question of finance had not been involved. If the fair was abolished, some other source of revenue would have to be found. So they compounded with their belief that the fair was a fount of disorder and immorality by again limiting its duration to three days, and excluding theatrical booths and puppet-shows, while abstaining from interference with the gambling-tables and the gin-stalls.

Giants and dwarfs, and learned pigs and performing ponies had now the fair to themselves, though their showmen probably took less money than they did when the theatrical booths and puppet-shows attracted larger numbers of people. Henry Blacker, a native of Cuckfield, in Sussex, twenty-seven years of age, and seven feet four inches in height, exhibited himself at the Swan, in Smithfield, during the three days to which the fair was restricted in 1751. The principal show seems to have been one containing two dwarfs, a remarkable negro, a female one-horned rhinoceros, and a crocodile, said to have been the first ever seen alive in this country. The more famous of the two dwarfs was John Coan, a native of Norfolk, who at this time was twenty-three years of age, and only three feet

two inches in height, and of thirty-four pounds weight. His fellow pigmy was a Welsh lad, fourteen years of age, two feet six inches in height, and weighed only twelve pounds. The negro could throw back his clasped hands over his head and bring them under his feet, backward and forward; and was probably "the famous negro who swings his arms about in every direction," mentioned in the 'Adventurer.'

The exclusion of the theatrical booths and puppet-shows from the fair produced, in the following year, a serious disturbance in Smithfield, in the suppression of which Birch, the deputy-marshal of the City, received injuries which proved fatal. This resistance to their edict did not, however, deter the civic authorities from applying the same rule to Southwark Fair, which was this year limited to three days, and diminished of its attractions by the exclusion of theatrical booths and puppet-shows. The principal shows were Yeates's, which stood in George Yard, and consisted of an exhibition of wax figures, the conjuring tricks of young Yeates, and the feats on the slack wire of a performer named Steward; and the female Samson's, an Italian woman, who exhibited feats of strength in a booth opposite the Greyhound, similar to those of the French woman seen by Carter at May Fair, with

the addition of supporting six men while resting on two chairs only by the head and heels.

Towards the close of this year a man named Ballard brought from Italy a company of performing dogs and monkeys, and exhibited them as a supplementary attraction to the musical entertainments then given at a place in the Haymarket, called Mrs. Midnight's Oratory. The Animal Comedians, as they were called, became famous enough to furnish the theme of an 'Adventurer.' The author states that the repeated encomiums on their performances induced him to be present one evening at the entertainment, when he "was astonished at the sagacity of the monkeys; and was no less amazed at the activity of the other quadrupeds—I should have rather said, from a view of their extraordinary elevations, bipeds.

"It is a peculiar happiness to me as an Adventurer," he continues, "that I sally forth in an age which emulates those heroic times of old, when nothing was pleasing but what was unnatural. Thousands have gaped at a wire-dancer daring to do what no one else would attempt; and thousands still gape at greater extravagances in pantomime entertainments. Every street teems with incredibilities; and if the great mob have their little theatre in the Haymarket, the small vulgar can