

Henry Hunt's account of Peterloo (from *Memoirs, Vol.3, written 1822*)

About twelve o'clock an open barouche was drawn up to the door of Smedley Cottage, to convey to the meeting myself and those who were assembled at Mr. Johnson's. It was settled that I should take the chair, that Johnson should move the Resolutions and the Remonstrance, and that John Knight should second them. It was not anticipated that any other person would address the Meeting. We entered the barouche soon after twelve o'clock on the morning of the 16th of August 1819, and proceeded immediately towards St. Peter's Plain, on which spot the Meeting was to be held. We were attended by an immense multitude, preceded by a band of music, and we very soon met the Manchester Committee of Female Reformers, headed by Mrs. Fildes, who bore in her hand a small white silk flag. These females were all handsomely dressed in white, and they proposed to lead the procession to the field, walking two and two, but as, in consequence of the crowd, this was found to be impossible, they fell into the rear of the barouche, which position they maintained, with some difficulty, during the whole way till we arrived at the Hustings. Mrs. Fildes, who carried the flag, was taken up at my suggestion, and rode by the side of the coachman, bearing her colours in a most gallant stile. As, though rather small, she was a remarkably good figure, and well dressed, it was very justly considered that she added much to the beauty of the scene; and, as she was a married woman of good character, her appearance in such a situation by no means diminished the respectability of the procession, the whole of which was conducted with the greatest regularity and good order.

When I entered the field or plain, where the people were assembled, I saw such a sight as I had never before beheld. A space containing, as I am informed, nearly five acres of ground, was literally covered with people, a great portion of whom were crammed together as thick as they could stand. Great bodies of people had assembled and marched to the spot in regular order, each striving with the other which should contribute most to the respectability of the meeting by peaceable conduct; every one appeared to be animated with the greatest enthusiasm and devotion to the cause for which they had come together; that cause being solely either to petition, to address, or to remonstrate with, the throne, for a redress of insupportable grievances. Every one appeared to me to be actuated by a similar feeling to that by which I felt that I was prompted in attending the meeting--namely, the performance of an important, a sacred, and a solemn duty to ourselves and our country. Let the reader who was not present picture to his imagination an assemblage of from 180 to 200 thousand English men and women, congregated together to exercise the great constitutional right of laying their complaints and grievances before the throne, and when he has done this, he may form an idea of the scene which met my view.

The moment that I entered the field, ten or twelve bands struck up the same tune, "See the conquering hero comes;" eighteen or twenty flags, most of them surmounted by a Cap of Liberty, were unfurled, and from the multitude burst forth such a shout of welcome as never before hailed the ears of an individual, possessed of no other power, no other influence over the minds of the people, except that which he had gained by an honest, straight-forward discharge of public duty. With some difficulty, and by slow degrees, the carriage was drawn

up within a few yards of the Hustings, where the crowd was so dense as to forbid the approach of the carriage any nearer. We alighted, and, an avenue being made for us, we ascended the Hustings. The ladies composing the Committee of Female Reformers had followed close to the carriage up to this point, and therefore it was absolutely necessary to dispose of them in some place of safety, to prevent their being trampled under foot. Some part of them were placed in the carriage, which we had left, and the remainder were assisted upon the Hustings.

Another shout now filled the air, as a compliment to me, and I took off my hat, to endeavour to address this immense multitude, with a full conviction that the very orderly conduct of the people would deprive their enemies of all pretence whatever to interrupt their proceedings. I had scarcely uttered two sentences, urging them to persevere in the same line of conduct, when the Manchester Troop of Yeomanry came galloping into the field, and formed in front of a house occupied by a Mr. Buxton, where it was said the Magistrates had assembled for the purpose of keeping the peace. As soon as the military appeared, the people, (as is always the case under such circumstance) began to disperse and fly from the outskirts. To prevent the confusion likely to arise from such a circumstance, I caused three cheers to be given, which had the desired effect of restoring the confidence of the people, who did not, indeed, suspect it to be possible that the devil himself would have authorised the Yeomanry to commit any violence upon them, as there was not the slightest symptom amongst them that could have created any real fear in the mind of the most timid. Before, however, the cheering was sufficiently ended to enable me to raise my voice again, the word was given, and from the left flank of the troop, the trumpeter leading the way, they charged amongst the people, sabring right and left, in all directions, sparing neither age, sex, nor rank. In this manner they cut their way up to the Hustings, riding over and sabring all that could not get out of their way. In this magnanimous exploit, several fell dead, and hundreds were wounded; and this was done in cold blood, with the most savage ferocity, without the slightest provocation having been given by the people, and without one act of resistance, without ONE STONE, ONE STICK, or ONE FINGER having been raised even to resist, much less to provoke, such a bloodthirsty, such a cowardly, wanton, cruel, and murderous act. At length it turned out that these diabolical deeds were committed in order, as it was pretended, to execute a warrant, to apprehend myself and others who were upon the Hustings with me. Now I most solemnly declare, that this warrant could have been executed with the greatest possible ease, by any single constable, without the aid of the military, or any breach of the peace whatever; and I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind, that the magistrates were fully sensible of this fact at the time when they ordered the ferocious Yeomanry to charge and cut down the people. The object was to strike terror into the minds of the assembled multitude, and to pull down reform by the sword, regardless of the blood that would be spilt in the enterprise. That my life was meant to be a sacrifice no reflecting man can for a moment entertain a doubt. We were now seized and taken, by Nadin and his runners, to the house where the worthy projectors of the plot were sitting in solemn conclave. While we were passing to the house, amidst the screams of the flying, and the piercing cries and groans of the dying people, two ruffian Yeoman made several efforts to cut me down, but each time I guarded myself, by placing Nadin between myself and them as they renewed their charge upon me. Nadin endeavoured to escape, and to leave me to their mercy, but, with the aid of providence, I held him

fast, and used him as a shield to ward off the deadly blows of these blood-thirsty cowards. Nadin was so alarmed that he at length yielded like a child to the direction of my arm, and quietly suffered himself to be placed before me as they came up, hallowing lustily for them to desist, and using his staff for his protection. They, however, charged, and cut at me several times, and I received three cuts from them, a slight one on the back of my hand, and two others in my head, which cuts penetrated through my hat. As I entered into Buxton's house, pinioned between two constables, Nadin and another, a ruffian came behind me and levelled a blow at my head with a heavy bludgeon, which would have felled me to the earth, had I not been supported by the constables, who had hold of my arms. One fellow very deliberately took off my hat, that the other coward might have a fairer blow at me, which he instantly repeated, and had I not at the moment fortunately slipped my head on one side, my scull must have been fractured. Nadin cried shame at this, and replaced the hat upon my head, saying it was too bad! By this means Nadin saved my life, as it was evidently the intention of the ruffian to have taken it. The fellow who acted such a cowardly and diabolical part, was a general in the English army, of the name of C---y, who was then on half-pay, and living at Pendleton.

The following extract from a letter, written to Mr. Sheriff Parkins by his brother, who was an eye-witness of the transaction, speaks for itself; it was given to me by Mr. Parkins to make what use of it I pleased, and I shall therefore insert it verbatim:

79, Water-Street, Manchester,

"I take up my pen to relate to you one of the most daring, cruel outrages that ever was committed on a defenceless people. I was within ten yards of the Hustings, when the cavalry surrounded the stage on which Mr. Hunt, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Knight, and many other gentlemen, whom I personally knew, were standing, with several ladies. At this time the main body of the Cavalry made a charge on the people who were assembled, and cut down all before them; and if I had had a pistol, I would have levelled that villain C----y, who used Mr. Hunt in such an outrageous manner, that if I had gone into eternity that moment, I would have shot him; but I had nothing but a small walking-stick in my hand, with which I parried off several blows that were aimed at me, and thank God I received no material injury. I never saw a man behave with more fortitude than Mr.

Hunt did on that most trying occasion.

"Instead of reading the Riot-Act, and ordering the people to disperse, the military came on without any notice whatever. Mr. Hunt was committed to the New Bailey Prison, and what will be the result of all this the Almighty only knows. If you will do a praiseworthy action, come down and back Mr. Hunt, and your name will then be handed down to posterity with the blessing of thousands of your suffering countrymen."