

# FRANK SMEDLEY

the author, resident at Beech Lodge,  
Marlow, 1863-1864.

By Hugh Grice



Beech Lodge at the foot of Happy Valley, Marlow, was purchased in 1863 by Francis Smedley a man of crippled body but gifted intellect who wrote popular novels and humorous verse under the name of Frank Smedley.

Born in Marlow in October 1818, the only son of Francis Smedley of Grove Lodge, Regents Park, and of Frances Sarah, daughter of George Ellison of Alfred House (otherwise known as Cromwell House, or latterly the Old Post Office), Marlow, he developed an affliction of the legs that confined him to a wheelchair and required him to be privately educated. His powers of observation and skill with the pen led, nevertheless, to his contributing a series of articles to a London periodical under the title "Scenes from the Life of a Private Pupil", and these were so well received that in 1850 they were expanded into a novel under the title of "Frank Fairlegh" with 30 illustrations by George Cruikshank, the eminent artist and caricaturist. Smedley's biographer (DNB, vol. 18) said this about the book:

*"To give a satisfactory picture of youth in a state of pupilage, which should entertain at the same time boys and their elders. is a difficult if not impossible task; but, after 'Tom Browns Schooldays' (and excluding 'Vice Versa'), it is probable that no book has arrived nearer a solution of the problem than 'Frank Fairlegh', the first few chapters of which represent the summit of Smedley's literary achievement. In obtaining his success, the author happily eschews any attempt at pathos and relies on well-devised incident and a genuine, if somewhat rudimentary. vein of pleasantry.*

Other publications followed. but none achieved quite the same success, despite being extensively illustrated by Hablot Browne, known as "Phiz". whose brilliant graphic interpretations greatly added to the popularity of the novels of Charles Dickens.

Living most of his life with his parents at Grove Lodge. Smedley formed a close friendship with Edmund Yates with whom he published in 1855 a book of nonsense verses entitled "Mirth and Metre. by Two Merry Men". In the following year he suffered on being thrown from his pony carriage and dragged some distance before the *pony* could be stopped. Following his father's death in 1859 he continued to live with his mother in London. but as his health began to deteriorate he yearned for a summer retreat in the town of his birth and he purchased Beech Lodge for the purpose. Sadly. he enjoyed the place for only a year as he died in May 1864. It was in the following year that Yates published a collection of Smedley's poems as "Gathered Leaves,\_" and to this he contributed a preface paying a warm tribute to his friend:

*"His physical malady had kept his intercourse with the world so restricted, that while his mind was full, strong and manly; his experiences of certain sides of life were as pure and unsullied as those of a young girl. All the impulses of his soul were deep-set, earliest, fervent, and generous.....He had the strong liking and dislikes, petulances, love of small jokes, desire of praise, and irritation at small annoyances, which are frequently found in women; but, on the other hand, he had a magnanimity, an amount of patient long-suffering, and a courage, both moral and physical, such as are given to few men. He was of unsullied honour, and unswerving integrity, impatient of double-dealing; impetuous. yet easily guided; simple minded, and of fervent faith. "*

Similar expressions of esteem were contained in the Gentleman's Magazine (1864. i, 811) where the Northern Whig was quoted as saying:

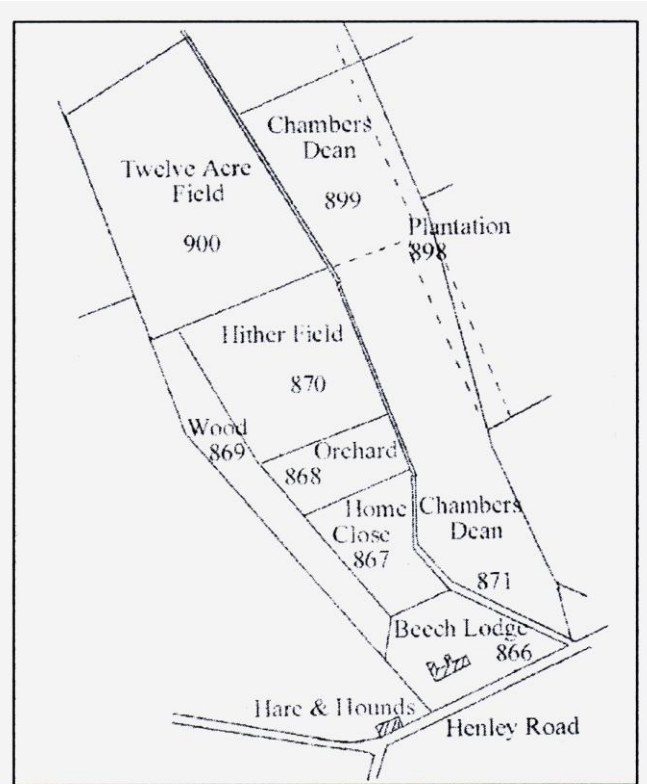
*"The deceased was perhaps one of the most remarkable instances of the triumph of mental vigour over bodily infirmity that the history of literature recalls. From his infancy the late Mr. Smedley was afflicted with the most distressing deformity - natural malformation to such an extent that he could neither walk, nor ride, nor indulge in any active exercise whatever. By a curious antithesis to his normal invalid condition, the whole bent of his taste was in the direction of manly power feats of physical prowess, bold action, and daring enterprise. No reader of 'Henry Coverdale's Courtship'. Lewis Arundel. or 'The Fortunes of the Colville Family' would have conceived that the author was a life-long cripple who could not even sit at a desk and hold a pen without the aid of special appliances: who had never participated in any of the manly and vigorous scenes which he loved so much to depict in powerful and animated language; who seemed shut out by nature by his birth from all hope of ever taking part in the world or its ways: and who yet by an effort of the strong will and stout heart that were given him, made himself a name in literature and a place in society, and lived an object of tender regard and affectionate esteem among all his friends."*

That Smedley was indeed well adjusted to his infirmity is illustrated by an extract from "Frank Fairleigh" where, at the penultimate of the 496 page novel, the chief character acting out the author's sentiments says :

*"Reader, the interest of my story, always supposing it to have possessed any in your eyes, is now over. Since the occurrence of the events I have just related, the course of my life has been smooth and, though not exempt from some share in the 'ills the flesh is heir to', an unusually happy one. "*

As to his connection with Marlow, the last word can be left to Edmund Yates who included the following in his memorial of Francis Edward Smedley :

*"On Sunday 1 May (1864) he was found by his servant, who came to call him, in a state of stupor, speedily followed by a succession of epileptic fits and by the evening he was dead. On Monday*



The estate of Francis Smedley in Happy Valley, Marlow

*9 May we laid his mortal remains in Marlow Churchyard, between the church where the kneeling hamlet drains 'The chalice of the grapes of God,' and the river which he loved so well. The shops in the little town were all closed, and the weather was most tempestuous, the churchyard was filled with the townspeople, who had all known and esteemed the kind-hearted, cheerful spirit who had lately sojourned amongst them. whose dire malady had never soured his temper, but who always had a pleasant word and a merry jest for those who passed him as he travelled to and from the town in his wheel-chair. All peace to his ashes! The calm tranquillity of Marlow churchyard will not be less endeared to the lover of the picturesque because it contains the mortal remains of one who ministered in his life to the innocent amusement of his fellow creatures, and who with the spirit of a man combined the simplicity of a child. "*



*Family tomb between the church and the river at All Saints, Marlow*

### ***Postscript concerning Beech Lodge***

By his will, Frank Smedley left Beech Lodge to his mother, and for some years after 1864 the house was occupied, according to local directories, by a Mrs Gillaird. She, presumably, was a tenant at will. Smedley's mother died in 1876 and left a complicated will by which she divided her estate among various members of her family. In 1877, Robert Hammond-Chambers contracted to buy Beech Lodge for £5700, but had first to disentail the Smedley connection before completing the purchase in 1879 (see "The Hammonds of Western House" p.39). Hammond-Chambers seems then to have been responsible for demolishing Beech Lodge by the Hare and Hounds and for building Beechwood House on higher ground.