

CHAPTER VIII

OUR CLUB DAY

IF there is one time and one place more calculated than another to give a favourable impression of the happiness of the lower classes in rural districts, the season is assuredly that of Whitsuntide and the scene of one of England's pleasant hamlets - on its CLUBDAY! From time immemorial, or at any rate from the foundation of village-clubs, the Whitsun week has been made famous, synonymous in short with the idea of festivity, by the annual feastings and rejoicings of the members. Our club-day, as I well remember, had been held "time out of mind" on the Tuesday and I have a deliberate reason for thinking that, of all the days of the week, Tuesday is the very best for the purpose, a reason quite distinct from any predilection I might have had for it from the mere fact of its being "ours."

It has the preference of Monday, because such a day as a Club-day, which comes but once a year, requires to be looked forward to and luxuriously talked over and in a manner prepared for before-hand and all this with a freedom that Sunday can't conveniently permit so that as the best part of a great enjoyment is often found to have been in the *immediate expectation* of it for which Monday, as a club-day, affords no proper time, we'll consider that day to be fairly out-rivalled.

Now, just as it is most desirable to have a leisurely foretaste of any approaching felicity, it is not well that the time allowed for it should be too long. For the due reception and observance of a club-day, I am strongly of opinion that one entire preparatory day is the identical time required. Expectation in that space, strengthens the spirit for enjoyment, while a longer interval enfeebles it. This argument, if held as valid, weakens the claims of Wednesday and its successors in the Whitsun week, and leaves 'our' Tuesday with a triumphant character as the best of club-days.

"Club-Day," to the villager of every degree, from the squire who lives up at the great house, down to the veriest urchin in 'the Union,' carries with it a gladdening association, a happy recollection of the past, with a joyful anticipation of the future. The legislature of this nation has wisely protected these clubs, or benefit societies and to the poor man they afford a consolation and comfort when, but for their existence, he would in his affliction be destitute and helpless. Independently of the advantages which the society affords, the assembling together of old friends, some of whom meet only on these occasions, the mixture of youth with age and the objects of the meeting, give an interest to the holiday which is seldom equalled. I must make a distinction between these societies and those which are held in large and wealthy towns. The latter are, I believe, to the artisan and labourer, highly beneficial but it is to the Village Club I would direct the attention of the reader, where the entire population, men, women, boys, girls, young and old, all seem to enter into the spirit of the meeting, and give themselves up to joy, mirth, and good-humour. If it please you, kind reader, we will in imagination "create" our country village in Whitsun time and watch the preparations and arrangements now in progress for "the club."

Looking down that lane, do you see a cottage close by the stile? See how neat and orderly everything looks there! The sun shining so brightly on its white walls, the bees are all out, high busy and seem to participate in the general joy and surely there is a more than usual perfume to-day from those large double gilly-flowers! That cottage is tenanted by a poor widow, who for the last seven years has been sorely afflicted with rheumatism and obliged to depend on the exertions of her two children for support. Her husband died some years ago and dame Curtis was left with a pigeon-pair. By her exertions, and the assistance of the club, she apprenticed her boy to a baker in the neighbouring town and he has lately been trying to get into business himself and I hope he will succeed, for he has been a kind and dutiful son and his success would enhance his poor mother's comforts. Her other child (a pretty little girl) was brought up at the village school and taken

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at thirteen years of age to look after the two young children of lady C—up at the manor-house but the illness of her mother obliged her to leave and she has taken such care of her! Has so worked for her and made such notable use of her good brother's savings, that the poor old soul has lived comparatively comfortable. Every community must by a natural law have its "leading" men. The most intelligent or *lightest* members will work their way to the top of this stream of life and in our rural society dame Curtis's husband was a great authority and a great favourite as well. Through ten consecutive years they persisted in it that he, and nobody but he, should serve as head-steward, although they continually made a breach in the "*reggylation*s" thereby, for I remember that stewards were to be chosen from the members in rotation, as their names stood on the list but then, as they used to say for an excuse, "*Reggylation*s weren't made for the like o' master Curtis". It was quite a treat to see the fresh faced fellow on club-day, with his happy looks, immaculate smock, rosette and flying favours, and to notice how the young and old all looked out for a passing word from master Curtis and what a tone of respect there was in their cheery greeting. Poor fellow! In the prime of life and bloom of health, he caught a chill, which eventually swept him off in the middle of his days and at his death every member of the club "went heavily," as a man that mourned for his brother.

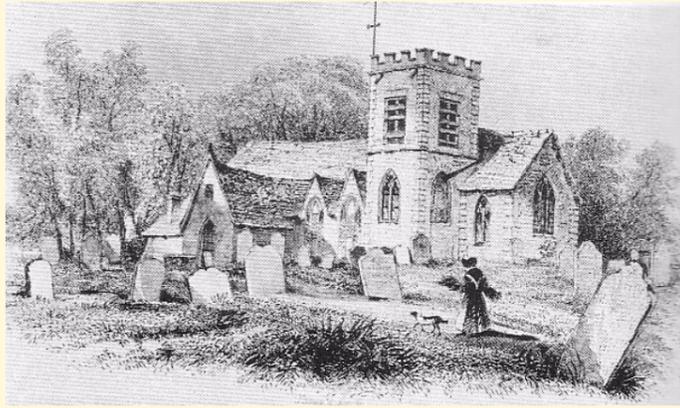
Since that sad event his widow and children have been objects of great interest to the society, particularly to the older members, who never fail on club-days to call on dame Curtis. But see! Here's a joyous troop of youngsters, all in their holiday-clothes, who are running to welcome the brass band from Lymington, which always precedes the club to church, so we will jog on again, and see the procession formed. Ah! there is dame Curtis's son, the baker, erecting a stall on which to display his gingerbread and cakes before the longing eyes of the children, whose mothers will have no peace, depend upon it, till their little ones have been large consumers.



Up at the White Lion we may observe a crowd of laughing faces, the unfurling of flags and the decoration of all sorts of hats with the established colours of the club. And who, to look at him, would think that old Davy Butler, parish-clerk and club clerk, was in his seventy-third year, while there he chases up the members who have not yet "cleared the books" as briskly as at any time these thirty summers! But there are now only ten minutes left to church-time and the three bells in the village spire, one of them being cracked and only used now in respect for the feelings of some of the old members, are already in motion to the tune of "ding, dong, puff" and here comes the good old curate, with his white head, welcome face and heart full of Christian charity and see how every casque is doffed in presence of the heavenly herald! Now then, he heads the procession and the band strikes up merrily. As a matter of course they stop at dame Curtis's, and the tidy old woman hobbles out and curtsies to the curate, who is the first to hope her rheumatism's better and to shake her by the hand. By-the-way, since we passed just now those remarkably-fine gilly-flowers have disappeared. Ah, ha! There are two splendid specimens of that flower in James Gater's coat - that tall, dark young man, who is the village smith. Here too comes Mary from the cottage and a roaming glance that rests at last upon the smith, identifies the flowers, to say the least of it!

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On again and to the church. Now they defile through the little wicket and passing along under those noble elms, they reach the porch and reverently uncover their heads and smooth down their hair as they enter. There is a great confusion for a while but as they get seated it dies away and presently, although the building is so full, you may hear a pin drop. Then the curate commences the touching language of the liturgy in a tone which greatly helps devotion and the prayers ended, the band, who



have become a choir, sing to them as an anthem, "How joyful a thing it is to dwell together in unity."

The singing over, the good curate expatiates on a similar theme and fills them with a brotherly feeling. Remark the effects of his discourse on those two old men seated side by side, whose snowy locks and serious faces excite one's veneration. Actually, under the influence of the preacher's exhortation, they grasp each other's hand and smile as if confident that nothing can ever shake *their* friendship.

But what a contrast is meantime presented in the village, where an hour ago all was noisy animation! Every cottage-door is closed, and everybody but the "helps" at the White Lion, is attending church. At the inn the landlord is absolutely in the way and drives his assistants in so many directions at one time that it is wonderful how anything is done as it ought to be. Perhaps, however, there is one personage at the Lion to-day who is still more important than the landlord - I mean his wife. She is a portly woman, at ordinary times good-humoured enough, as all portly women are nearly sure to be, but this is not an ordinary occasion, far from it and she feels that it is she alone who will be answerable for the dinner. The strong roasting fires and weighty responsibility are causing her to perspire freely and to protest that "a hundred-and-fifty dinners is too much for any 'ooman, she don't care if 'twas the queen to look to in a day." A large marquee has been erected close by the inn and the appearance of its tables would denote the near approach of dinner. Every respectable house in the village has supplied its share of feeding implements and vessels, knives, forks, plates, &c., and everybody near who has a copper or an oven, has placed it at the landlady's disposal. A dozen active young members will in a few minutes take off their coats and, under direction of the great mistress of the feast, will start towards coppers and ovens, with a view to the general concentration of the viands within the marquee.

But they have just regained the inn. Oh! what a bustle the landlord is in! What shouting and running among the waiters! And now, dishes of every pattern, from the china that decks the corner-cupboard of No. 4, down to the brown earthenware of the dairy - all is in requisition.

No one is allowed to enter the marquee till the stewards have seen that the curate and all his friends have been admitted. As soon as this is effected the band strike up at a signal "The Roast Beef of Old England". Observe those two old men still moving side by side! They would *not* part. No, they have sat together for upwards of twenty years and they will continue to do so. And now the clatter of knives and forks, the hubbub of the waiters, the din of the diners with that of the band, baffle all description. And predominating over all rises the stunning noise of the long drum the performer upon which seems, unfortunately, determined to call the attention of the whole party to his performances.

By this time the meat-course has been got through, a number of children have taken their places behind their respective sires and are loud in their vociferations for pudding. Incessant petitions rise up around you in these words, "please for a little piece more pudding".

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The cup has passed freely too and is imparting freeness to the tongue, but it is venting only expressions of good feeling and gratification. The noisiest person present is that old fellow who has lost an eye. He is a native of the village but in early life ran away to sea and after a number of years' service and hard fighting had a pension of five pence per diem, with which he retired to his native village. He is a great favourite with the children from his kindness to them. Being rather addicted to a drop, he is now and then disagreeable, inasmuch as he will keep on about the 'glorious first of June' and Lord Howe. He has a knack of soliloquising and when these talkative moods come on he is used to call himself *Jemmy, my child*. His real name is James Mitchell, which is tattooed on his arm with an anchor and under it the name of Susan, which nobody comprehends, for he is a bachelor and on that subject not communicative.

But the children know him by no other name than that of "Jemmy, my child." On the present occasion he is unusually happy and was deep in the subject of the glorious first of June, before he was called to order by one of the stewards, the business of the annual club-meeting not having yet terminated.

Some half-dozen brethren of the society, who are absent from the serious illness either of themselves or of their families, will be kindly provided with a good dinner and cheer from the festive board and this practical remembrance is a pleasant feature. Among the absentees are poor old Stephen Lowman who fell from a rick and dislocated his shoulder and was obliged to throw himself on the club, and Aaron Hill whose wife has been given over so poor Aaron is obliged to stay and comfort her. Neither will dame Curtis be forgotten. The young blacksmith would be certain to see to that, even if all the other members were forgetful.

The band has now ceased and it is the musicians' turn to get some refreshment. Then the good old curate returns thanks in a grace after meat. The kind tone of his voice and his venerable appearance seem to influence all present and creates this half-minute pause. That is one of the stewards who approaches him so respectfully and deposits a small parcel in white paper, which the curate pushes back again into the hands of the steward and with a benignant smile signifies that he wishes to hear no more of it. By the "rules" just now adverted to, a fee of one guinea is allowed to the clergyman for preaching a club sermon. This has been annually offered and returned in the same way, as a yearly subscription, so as to have become a custom, much better understood than expressed.

The waiters have expeditiously supplied the tables with punch, grog, &c., and now commences the jingling of glasses. The order of the toasts having been gone through, the curate and his friends are leaving amid the hearty and best wishes of all assembled. Then arises a loud cry for pipes and tobacco, on the admission of which, wives, daughters, and sweethearts, all claim the privilege of an entrée. Now then the girls begin to participate in the pleasures of the day and with the young men, soon form for a country dance, into the spirit of which they are entering *con amore*.

The "light fantastic toe" has been now in brisk motion these four hours and evening approaches. See now how kindly that old lady in the black cloak is trying to coax her husband to go home. How reluctantly he seems to part with his friends and one who wishes to detain him a little longer, has just commenced "Auld Lang Syne" The old man can't resist this, it is too much for him, he has sat down again and the gude wife is getting out of temper. Patience, patience, old lady the song will soon be over! And now there seems to be a general breakup. "Good bye!" and "God bless you!" are ejaculated by old and young and with the kindest hearts and best of feelings all are returning home, to talk and dream of "Our Club-Day!"