

A BANQUET AT THE GUILDHALL.

By LA PETITE.



of office, and the invited guests adding splendour to the function in their satin and diamonds or uniforms of state.

Well, the banquet I am thinking of was not quite like that, though I do not think the Guildhall was in any way dishonoured because its guests on that occasion were clad in rags and tatters, while their hands and faces, to put it mildly, seemed to have but a bowing acquaintance with soap and water.

As we made our way to the scene of action through the dusk of a cold winter afternoon, small processions of children might be seen straggling in the same direction, piloted across crowded thoroughfares by friendly policemen, and chattering in shrill, happy voices about the treat in store.

At length we reached the stately pile where the children were being ushered in with some difficulty, for they seemed too excited to move, and clutched their ticket tightly, evidently placing more confidence in the teacher or mother who had told them to take great care of it than in the strange man who wanted to beguile them into letting him have it.

Their round eyes and excited faces somehow created a big lump in our throats, and we pushed on so as to preserve our dignity, which threatened to collapse. At the very outset misfortune had overtaken one poor lad who had managed to lose his ticket and was standing at the door silently brushing his grimy tears away with a dirty coat sleeve. To be in sight of what to him was Paradise and then to be turned away! It was cruelly hard.

But though our hearts ached for him, and though the door-keepers sternly repeated—"No admission without tickets!" yet somehow we felt pretty certain the disconsolate boy would not, this time at any rate, reap the reward of his carelessness.

The very policeman's gruff voice took on a softer tone as he remonstrated with him. "A great boy like you a-cryin' like a baby!" and so left him to his fate with a secret conviction that it would not be a hard one.

Now our party consisted of three, two of whom were most anxious to help, so the mother being safely ensconced in the gallery out of harm's way, the young ones eagerly requested work.

Tables were spread all down the hall with forms to hold fourteen at each, a white tablecloth, knife and fork and two plates to every person (the topmost plate being loaded with good roast beef, and plenty of it), salt-cellars and plates of oranges and apples down the middle.

Most of the children were already seated, each set of tables being distinguished by a letter and having helpers appointed to it, while a business-like superintendent with a chart was bustling about seeing that everyone had a post and was at it.

It was well we meant what we said, for on our applying we were seized on at once, decorated with huge red, white and blue

rosettes before we knew where we were, and asked breathlessly, "What table would you like, boys or girls?"

"We want to go wherever we shall be of most use," was our prompt reply, though our breath had been rather taken away by the rapidity of action which characterised these proceedings.

"Then come over here," the superintendent answered. "I want good order kept at this table," which remark struck dismay to the depths of our hearts for we are neither of us exactly "daughters of the gods, divinely tall," and visions of unruly boys and obstreperous girls crossed our minds simultaneously.

However, my meek query, "Do you think us capable of that?" passed unnoticed, so we tramped after him forlornly with sinking hearts.

"Will you take Tables B. Three that way and three this way," were my orders, while my cousin was appointed to two tables opposite, and then we were left to our fate. I rapidly considered the position, and realising at once the physical impossibility of looking after six tables at one and the same time, I decided to keep to one only (especially as there were other helpers at the others), and chose one full of small boys, preferring them (dare I say it?) to girls as easier to manage!

Directly I took up my post at the bottom of the table they started sniggering, but I soon made friends and found them the most charming, delightful, chivalrous boys I ever came across. On my waving my hand to my mother in the gallery they demanded to know who that was, and on my telling them they also affably waved their little black paws to "teacher's mother," who was at once enrolled amongst their intimate friends with the most engaging confidence. She won their hearts by waving in return, and after that all stiffness vanished. One informed me that his mother had told him "to stuff hisself well;" another proudly proclaimed he had had "two plates full o' rice afore he came," and a third, not to be behindhand, declared he could eat seven slices of bread and butter at one go, but he did not add whether he often had the opportunity.

Talking to them thus I soon found out a good deal about them. They hailed me as "Teacher" after the first three minutes, and after a quarter of an hour we might have been friends for years! I had been specially enjoined to see that they did not begin to eat before grace was said; but it will always be a marvel to me that they sat so patiently, and beyond surreptitiously testing the bread made not the least attempt to transgress. At length steaming potatoes made their appearance, a commendably short grace was said, and we were soon all as busy as bees serving out potatoes and cutting up meat. Mercifully the knives were not too sharp, for had they been so I tremble to think of the probable consequences, for they were stuck into little red mouths and played with to an alarming extent. Now small rags of handkerchiefs came into play, into which there gradually disappeared odd bits of bread, superfluous meat, and, later on, scraps of pudding, "For mother!" "Fur my little sister at 'ome," and so on.

Draughts of new milk aided digestion, but in some cases pieces of meat were transferred to a comrade with a more capacious appetite, while in others excitement almost paralysed the power to eat. A band at the upper end of the hall was all this time discoursing popular airs, and every now and then a chorus was lustily taken up by shrill voices, which echoed up to the rafters and proved conclusively that whatever else had suffered their lungs were all

right. Meat done, the puddings made their appearance amid a storm of applause. Each had a piece of holly stuck in it, and one small dandy captured a spray and instantly put it in his button-hole, giving himself insufferable airs in consequence, soon forgotten when the smoking hot sweet was placed before him, for at sight of it actually on his plate he became a mere boy again. After this oranges and apples, and, crowning joy of all, crackers (containing paper caps and jewellery in the shape of necklaces, brooches and pins, which were proudly shown as trophies) appeared on the scene.

At length all being satisfied, tables were cleared and the entertainment began, started by moving pictures of Cinderella and the Glass Slipper, so down I sat in the midst of my boys, prepared to enjoy it with the best of them. One small smutty imp with a most winsomely comical face thrust his tiny black hand into mine confidently and whispered, "May I sit next to you, teacher?" which I considered to be the loveliest compliment I had ever received, and took him on my lap on the spot. Five others (all more or less grubby) grouped themselves affectionately round me, and we sat in breathless happiness exchanging the fairy-tale in thrilling whispers, and correcting each other as to facts when necessary with the greatest good-humour. Cinderella's god-mother showed her all the other fairy-tales in "living pictures," which we hailed with vociferous applause, and for the first time I was informed of the somewhat startling fact that "Bluebeard killed 'is wife a lot o' toimes!" In the middle the "moving" story had to be interrupted to allow of the entrance of the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, whose advent had been eagerly expected all the evening and was greeted now with huge satisfaction. Modern scepticism however evidently prompted the remark that "that warn't a real Lord Mayor, 'e were only the Lord Mayor's Show!" but still the boy whose hand was shaken by the Lady Mayoress was looked on by his friends with envious awe as being highly favoured and probably destined to die young in consequence.

The various city functionaries made almost as much impression as the Lord Mayor himself, and they evidently got confused over them, probably thinking they were part of his family! Indeed, when after Cinderella an elegant little girl in white and silver appeared on the platform, they wanted to know if that was the Lord Mayor's daughter, and when a gentleman sang a solo they were sure it was the Lord Mayor in person. Speechifying was happily reduced to a minimum, but the Lord Mayor was listened to very appreciatively, and when he wound up with "A Happy New Year to you all!" a shout went up to the very skies of "And the same to you, sir!"

How sorry I was when I had to leave them with yet more pictures in store and gifts at the end of those, but I carried away with me something far more charming, the memory of a perfectly happy evening. They were all so good! A word or a look was enough to keep them quiet, and the boys were quite chivalrous and protective of one, while the girls were not above a slight push or sly pinch if they thought they were unobserved! The policeman even seemed happy, and on one small boy wishing audibly that the "copper would sit down" so that the entertainment could be seen, that gigantic personage amiably tried to make himself as small as possible.

Of all the social functions of our dear Queen's longest reign, none I am sure have been more successful than that New Year's banquet to poor children at the Guildhall.