

"ON THE CLUB."



THE institution of genuine "workingmen's clubs" has for some time past occupied so much attention that it may be hoped we shall one day see

those useful associations established in all our populous districts. At present, however, though the Working Men's Club and Institute Union has been putting forth very earnest effort, and though working men themselves, as well as those who desire to promote their welfare, are advocating the formation of such societies, it would seem that there are certain recurring difficulties which prevent their establishment on a thoroughly independent basis.

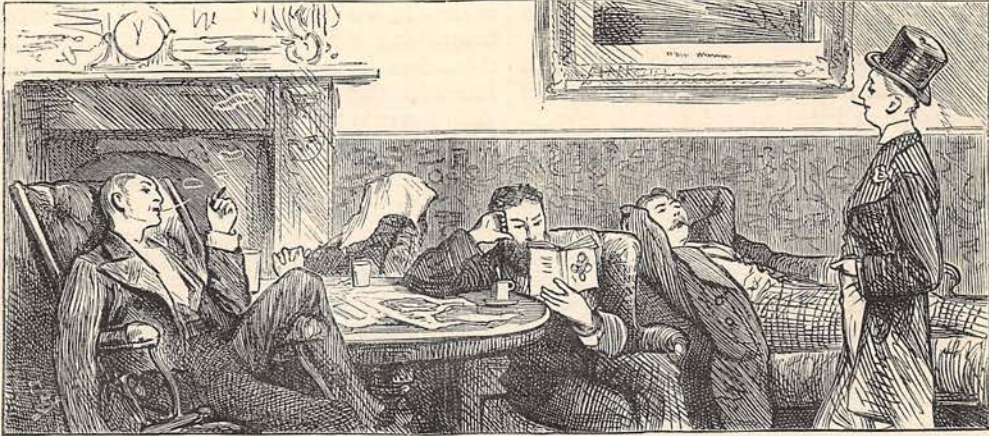
Most of the patrons of working men's clubs and societies would like to see everything made subservient to what they are pleased to call mental improvement—they would combine "instruction with amusement"—continually introduce the fly of science into the pot of social ointment, and, worse than all, not only the mental and moral improvement, but the amusement also must be on a pattern which has been ordained by dull respectability as a concession rather than a recognition—an experiment with little hopefulness attending it, rather than as a hearty endeavour to lend a helping hand in a cause common to humanity at large, and enlisting general sympathy.

In fact, there is often a too evident intention on the part of patrons to provide what *they* think will be beneficial to "the working man," without enough inquiry into what his own tastes and recreations might lead him first to appreciate. Perhaps, on the whole, he would be best pleased to have an opportunity of choosing for himself what should be the groundwork of the attractions that are necessary for making his club popular, and giving it an undoubted claim against the attractions of the public-house.

As it is, the first step of the committee, who have obtained subscriptions, is to hire an ordinary house—usually a good deal out of repair, and containing a number of rather awkwardly-shaped rooms. There is no large assembly room—no money to spend even on common decoration or graceful ornament—no funds to provide comfortable and tolerably handsome furniture. For the most part, when the sum subscribed is spent, all that there is to show will be a rather sordid, dull, ricketty place, bare and repellant, and with such a poor list of recreations or of means for genuine social improvement, that there is necessarily an effort to induce the first dozen or two of members to make use of it. It is ten chances to one that these first members by no means represent the artisan or skilled working class. There are a few respectable men of this sort, but the rest are lads or youths working at casual employment, and men engaged in shifting labour, who go in and out wearily and wistfully, not quite knowing what is expected of them. Unfortunately, some of them can scarcely do more than spell out the news in the evening paper; and the "library," which often consists merely of a few spare books sent by people who are rather glad to get rid of surplus copies of dry works, offers few attractions. The place is perhaps altogether better and more comfortable than the ordinary tap-room, but while it is under the control of a patronising committee, there is a feeling of restriction which takes long to wear off; and the advantages



"A DULL, RICKETTY PLACE, BARE AND REPELLANT."



A WEST-END CLUB.

offered are not obvious enough to counterbalance the want of independence which is felt by the very men who would be most desirable as members.

It very frequently happens therefore that the original committee, even when it consists of a majority of working men, is constantly clogged with a sense of incongruity. The actual working men who are upon it cease to attend—with one or two exceptions—and it is quite possible that those who remain contrive to become the hangers-on of one of the patrons who has political or other interests to serve, by making the club itself a sort of committee-room or central association during a public contest in which he is a candidate.

This of course is only an occasional result of the indifference displayed by the real representatives of the working classes of a district, to an association which assumes their name, without meeting their needs; but the indifference itself is the obstacle which proves to be almost insurmountable.

It will necessarily be so till the first effort shall be to secure a comfortable, spacious, and cheerful place of meeting, a place in itself suggestive of innocent social pleasures, and adorned with objects that are associated with refined taste and purifying thoughts. There should be one large room or assembly hall of this description, and there may be also other cosy rooms, plainly furnished and devoted to special objects; but they should all be in repair, cleanly painted and papered, and well warmed and ventilated. Whatever may be the nature of the refreshments, they should be of good quality, and served in a neat and attractive manner, without that offensive sense of sloppiness and make-shift which is too often apparent in common coffee-houses, and has been as often adopted by those who, not knowing the working man, think that he prefers it, because he is not very fastidious, nor given to complaining about trifles.

It is certain that until the club is first made attractive in these particulars, it will not successfully contend against the more carefully appointed tavern, nor even against the common public-house, where at all events the sanded floor is clean, the seats tolerably easy, the

hearth neat, and the gas bright and cheerful. We are a little too apt to forget that there already exist organisations of which working men form the principal part, nearly all the meetings whereof are held at taverns, except on great occasions, when the gatherings of members are so large that not even the biggest assembly-room would suffice for them.

Several such associations, formed for the express purpose of mutual help, and representing very genuine interests, are still flourishing, after many years of genuine vitality and enormous growth. They are real working men's clubs, and "benefit clubs" too, and though some of them may suffer from a want of close economy, and from that necessity for holding their meetings in taverns which leads to an expenditure by individual members that, if it were added to subscriptions, would represent a vast addition to the funds, they effect a very appreciable work.

There is a definite bond of interest in these societies, an object which appeals immediately to every member, who, in case he should fall ill, or suffer from sudden



“FOR THE GOOD OF THE HOUSE.”

accident, has learnt to regard his club, or lodge, or society as a bank on which he has a claim, till he can get to work again.

How much the benefit costs by the time that it is attained may not be easy to calculate, even in some of the widely-spread and best-ordered of these associations, for there are strange fees attending the preliminary inquiries, the visitation of the member who has "declared on the society," the percentages for various charges, all "according to rules and regulations;" while at every weekly meeting the money spent for "the good of the house" where the committee or district assembly is held amounts to a sum that would represent an extra "benefit" at the year's end. It is not our business to quarrel with these arrangements, however, any more than with the banners and insignia, the stars and aprons and costumes that distinguish some associations. The "good of the house" is, after all, another word for the habit brought about by necessity of meeting at a tavern, the only place where there is a large and comfortable room, which may be occupied with entire independence, and is suggestive of the social influences that keep these benefit clubs together.

Unhappily, however, there are scores of so-called clubs and societies held at the public-house, where the opportunity for drink forms the chief attraction, or at all events where the "benefits" derived are altogether subsidiary to it; others again where designing wretches form themselves into so-called societies, taking up their head-quarters at some frowsy tavern, as in a spider's web, where they may lie in wait for the flies who come there to sip.

There is no need now to enter into all the dreadful revelations of the iniquities of burial clubs, nor of the awful inducements held out by those societies when they were less amenable to the law than they are now, and infant life was almost at the mercy of the murderer. We have most of us heard of the method by which some shabby attorney with a clerk and the landlord of a tavern have ere now formed themselves into "the board" of a loan or benefit society, and advanced sums at exorbitant interest, with rules giving them power summarily to recover the whole amount in case of any falling off in periodical payments, or to refuse any part of the benefit to defaulters who may have been an hour behind time. The columns of newspapers have given us such examples over and over again, and even now the net of the law is not close-meshed enough to catch all such birds of prey.

What we have to discover is how we may instruct working men and women to form associations for themselves, under competent advice and assistance, and yet without the degradation of a list of subscribing patrons and interposing managers.

The Club and Institute Union may find noble work in showing working men how to make use of increased leisure and higher wages, by combinations among themselves for social improvement, through means of recreation that shall add to instead of detracting from their power in the State, because it will be allied to knowledge that will take them beyond the temporary influence of any noisy demagogue or the misrepresentations of any place-hunter who may seek their suffrages.

This, too, will be effected not so much by making clubs places for instruction as means of social elevation. It is very doubtful whether classes and lectures on the "ologies" and dry studies—or politics, except as a topic of private conversation, and not in the sense of a debating society—are not all foreign to a club in its true meaning. It is a place for recreation, for pleasant intercourse, for the refined enjoyment of leisure; and though classes for studying certain agreeable acquirements may be a useful accessory, just as a free library is almost a first essential, it should never be confounded with a literary and scientific institution, or it will lack that kind of flavour of *bonhomie*—that personal interest which even a benefit club can command. Indeed it would be well to unite to every working man's club certain beneficial associations, but they should not be essential to it. Let the experiment be tried of instituting a club for working men, not on the present plan of beginning with a subscription list and a number of committee-men, but with a few persons who are in the confidence of a large number of handicraftsmen, earning good wages in a certain district where a building may be found, furnished and decorated, provisions made for refreshments and recreation, and a library placed on the shelves, without a penny of actual contribution, or any liability that may not be well secured by members' subscriptions. When we know what has been done by co-operation, surely this would be an easy task; some of the most magnificent clubs of the aristocracy have been built and furnished on the principle of debentures, and maintained by members' subscriptions and entrance fees; and establishments as significant could be erected for working men, who would not be called upon to pay more than a shilling or a few pence a week for similar advantages.

As regards less ambitious associations, and the necessity that exists for providing large and convenient assembly-rooms for their meetings, it may be hoped that when temperance cafés become conspicuous in the Metropolis, provision may be made—either in them or in some large room adjoining each establishment—for meetings of persons able to pay a moderate sum for the accommodation of holding their weekly meetings, without an additional gin and beer tax for "the good of the house."

