

HOW TO PROMOTE A SHAKESPEARE CLUB.



VERY day, if we may judge by contemporary literature, the study of Shakespeare becomes a more fascinating subject. Time marks no wrinkles on his perennial fame, and to all sorts and conditions of men of all parts of the world, Shakespeare becomes more and more a mystery, and more and more a master. It is natural, then, that in addition to the large societies which devote their energies mainly to the publication of illustrative works, and to the elucidation of difficult points, small clubs should spring up in different parts of the country,

clubs which have for their objects the reading, the careful reading, of Shakespeare's plays in the first place, and in the second the discussion of these plays in the order in which they are read. "There are few better ways," writes an enthusiastic student of Shakespeare, to whom we all owe much, "of spending three hours of a winter evening in-doors, or a summer afternoon on the grass;" and speaking after some experience we can echo his praise.

The origin of these clubs is generally something like this. Two or three friends, with common sympathies and a like interest in their studies, meet to read a play over. Each is obliged to read many parts, it is true, to be at one time a shrinking maid, and at another a witty fool; but on the whole, at the end of the reading, the general feeling is that Shakespeare is more thoroughly appreciated in this familiar reading than he can be by any closet perusal; and other similar readings of favourite plays—of *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *1 Henry IV.*, and others—probably follow. From this associated reading it is only a small step to resolve upon the formation of a regular club, to meet at stated times and seasons, and to read the plays, not in any haphazard way, but in some approximately chronological order; and it is to the principles by which such societies can be best guided that we would direct the attention of our readers at this time.

An important point is the membership. In order that each member should do justice to his part at the reading meetings, it is necessary that he should be at his ease, and this renders it imperative that the members should all be on such terms of friendship as will prevent any bashfulness or nervousness on the part of a young and inexperienced reader. At the same time it should be remembered that it is not possible to count upon the presence of every member at every meeting; and, further, that in several of the plays the characters are so numerous that even with doubling and trebling subordinate parts it is neces-

sary that the attendance should be good. Probably twenty will be found to be the lowest number with which it is possible to work well, and thirty will give greater freedom. The admission of members will be most conveniently by ballot, and such a provision in the rules as "one adverse vote in seven to exclude" will effectually prevent the admission not only of obviously unsuitable persons, but of any whose presence might prove embarrassing to even a small minority of the members. *Disunion is fatal*, and it is essential that the good feeling of the club should be promoted in every way, and the interest of the members increased in it by every means. Although the ballot may seem to some an almost unnecessarily severe test, we believe it to be necessary for the good conduct and preservation of a Shakespeare Club.

From the members a small committee should be chosen, who, along with the President and the Secretary, should conduct the business of the society. This business consists in (1) drawing up rules and submitting them for the approval of the other members; (2) preparing a syllabus for the session in which they are elected; (3) "casting" the characters in the plays to be read; and (4) arranging for the preparation of special papers upon each play. It is desirable that the President, besides being already well read in Shakespeare and the literature of Shakespeare's time, should be a man of some force of character, "a scholar, and a ripe and good one; exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading," and that the committee should be composed only of those who take so great pleasure in their work as to be able to undertake the delicate and difficult task of allotting parts with the confidence of their fellow-members. The work of this committee will often be found somewhat ungrateful, for no task can be more invidious than that of allotting parts if any feeling but perfect friendship should be permitted to make itself felt, and much of the success of the club will depend upon their impartiality and enthusiasm. If the club should have two sessions, it is desirable that new office-bearers should be elected at the beginning of each, at least that a new committee should be chosen. Probably three will be found a sufficient number for such a committee, with the President and Secretary, members *ex officio*. Retiring office-bearers in a small society may well be made eligible for re-election.

A question of more difficulty than appears at first sight is that of a name. It is desirable to eschew all such fancy terms as "The Falstaff," "The Hamlet," and most ultimate satisfaction will be found in either a name indicating the place where the club meets (as the Clifton Shakespeare Club, Bristol) or the time, the date at which the club is to meet. The place-name is the preferable if it is not too pretentious. The hours of meeting and the sessions can be best settled by each society, and if two sessions—summer

and winter—are resolved upon, it would be well to have some interval between the two. Probably two meetings a month will be best in winter, and one in summer.

Supposing, then, that the club has been formed, a name chosen, a President, a Secretary, and a committee elected, the rules printed, and the syllabus issued, how will the society begin its work? It will be found useful to have forms printed, to be issued by the Secretary a week before each meeting on receiving the instructions of the committee.

Thus, for a reading meeting (for the Shakespeare Club, we presume, will have both reading and criticism meetings) one member will receive some such notice as the following—the words in italics being inserted by the Secretary:—

— SHAKESPEARE CLUB, Session 18—.

The next meeting of the Club will be held at 220, *Guismar Terrace*, on Wednesday, 17th March, 1890, at 8 o'clock p.m., to read *The Merchant of Venice*. The part of *Antonio* has been allotted to you.

HENRY ———,
Secretary,
1, Rohn's Place.

H. Jones, Esq.

If it is a criticism meeting, after the hour and place of meeting should be "Mr. *Smith* will open with a paper on *The Merchant of Venice*."

It is convenient to have more than one paper when it is possible. One Shakespeare Club has allotted to each member a particular department; thus, at criticism meetings each has his budget—one on the historical allusions in the play, one on the folk-lore, one on the theology, one on the grammar, and so on. Such division of labour cannot, however, be attained at the formation of a Shakespeare Club.

If the club are fortunate enough to have some fixed place of meeting, they will probably desire to purchase some books for reference. Chief among necessary works is a good Shakespeare Lexicon. Each member should be provided with a convenient text-book, and the edition of Shakespeare to be used at reading meetings should be fixed and indicated, either in the rules or on the syllabus. We may

conclude by indicating the main rules suggested for a Shakespeare Club—others can easily be added as circumstances suggest—but before doing so would remark that although we have throughout used the words "him" and "his," yet many Shakespeare Clubs contain ladies, and find the arrangement convenient and pleasant.

— SHAKESPEARE CLUB.

RULES.

1. The Society shall be called the ——— Shakespeare Club.
2. The object of the Club shall be the study of the works of Shakespeare, by reading and criticism.
3. A President and Secretary and Committee of three shall be elected annually, and shall have the general management of the Society. Retiring office-bearers shall be eligible for re-election.
4. Meetings shall be held on the ——— and ——— of each month, at eight o'clock in the evening.
5. The ordinary meetings shall be devoted alternately to reading and criticism—the play read at one meeting forming the chief subject of criticism at the following meeting.
6. The Committee shall cast the plays to be read, and arrange that members open each criticism meeting with a short paper on the play read at the previous meeting.
7. The Club may purchase such books as are approved by two-thirds of the members present at any ordinary meeting—notice being given of proposed purchases at the foregoing meeting.
8. The membership shall be limited to *thirty*, and candidates for admission must be proposed at one meeting and balloted for at the next—one adverse vote in *seven* to exclude.

It should also be provided that notice of any proposal to alter or add to the rules must be given at one *criticism* meeting and voted upon at the next; for it is desirable that, as many of the plays are long, the available time should not be cut up by motions and counter-motions. Provision should be made for a business meeting, and also for the admittance of visitors to criticism meetings. The rate of subscriptions can be best fixed when the extent and limits of the society have been definitely settled. It will add much to the interest of the readings if the plays are read, as was suggested above, in approximately chronological order. In the introduction to his "Leopold Shakspeare," Mr. Furnivall has furnished two chronological schemes, both of which may be consulted with advantage by those engaged in the formation of a Shakespeare Club.

"BETTER LATE THAN NEVER."



BETTER late than never—
To amend endeavour
Ere the chance is gone.
Time lost we can't recover,
The past is past and over,
The present is our own.

Ours to fight 'gainst evil,
To resist the devil,
To battle and to win.
No life is so unholy,
So debased and lowly,
That may not shake off sin.

While our life is left us,
God has not bereft us
Of hope to win at last:
Hope for all that's human,
For each man and woman
To redeem the past.

Better late than never—
Soul and body sever
From sins both small and great.
Sin brings shame and sorrow;
Begin at once—to-morrow
It may be TOO LATE!

JOHN FRANCIS WALLER.