

THE BEEFSTEAK ROOM AT THE LYCEUM.

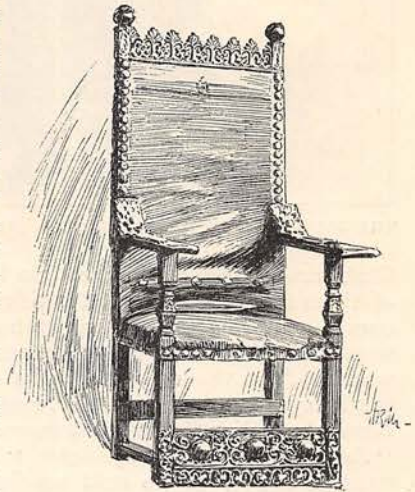
[AN HISTORICAL REVIEW OF AN OLD LONDON CLUB.]

By FREDERICK HAWKINS.



IN the social history of this country we occasionally read of clubs purely convivial in their character, insignificant in point of numbers, and yet acquiring a renown not soon to be forgotten. Such a club was that which Samuel Johnson helped to form at the "Turk's Head" tavern in Soho, and in which, though associated there with Burke and Reynolds and Goldsmith, he was the most vivid and distinctive figure. "I believe Mr. Fox will allow me to say," wrote the then Bishop of St. Asaph, "that the honour of belonging to this body is not inferior to that of representing Westminster in Parliament." Garrick condescendingly "thought that he would be of them." "Think he'll be of us!" roared Johnson; "how does he know that we will permit him? The first duke in England has no right to hold such language." Except as regards eminence of *personnel*, however, a club of earlier origin and later decease, the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks, is of scarcely less interest. It consisted of but a few persons; eccentric customs spread its fame over and beyond London, and the privilege of being admitted to it was courted far and wide. In the present article, partly with the aid of a rare volume on the subject by the late Mr. Walter Arnold, I propose to give an account of this brotherhood, the most unique in its way yet formed.

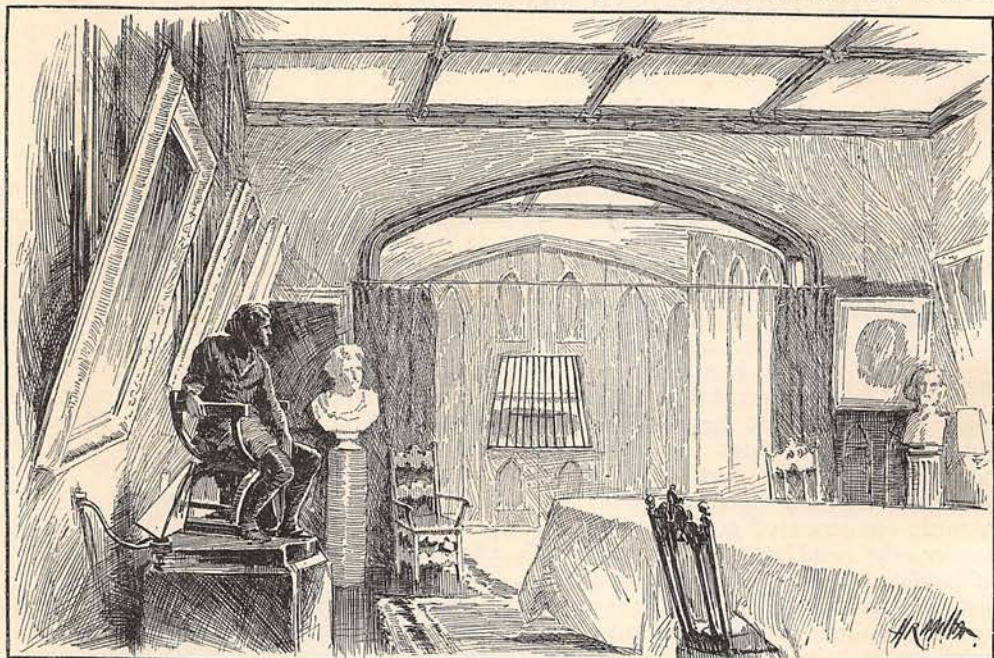
Not until the time of Queen Anne did the club become a recognized feature of London life, although it may be said to have existed in effect at the "Mermaid," the "Devil," and other haunts of the Elizabethan poets. Ned Ward, writing in 1709, shows that institutions of the kind had a marked tendency to multiply. "Man," the *Spectator* wrote in 1710, "is said to be a sociable animal, and as an instance of it we may observe that we take all occasions and pretences of forming ourselves into those little nocturnal assemblies which are commonly known by the name of clubs. When a set of men find themselves agree in any particular, though never so trivial, they establish themselves into a kind of fraternity, and meet once or twice a week, upon the account of such a fantastic resemblance. I know a considerable market town in which there was a club of fat men that did not come together (as you may well suppose) to entertain one another with sprightliness and wit, but to keep one another in countenance. The room where the club met was something of the largest, and had two entrances, the one by a door of a moderate size, and the other by



THE PRESIDENT'S CHAIR.

a pair of folding doors. If a candidate for this corpulent club could make his entrance through the first he was looked upon as unqualified; but if he stuck in the passage, and could not force his way through it, the folding doors were immediately thrown open for his reception, and he was saluted as a brother. I have heard that this club, though it consisted of but fifteen persons, weighed above *three ton*."

One of these associations was a Beefsteak Club, which seems to have been formed early in the eighteenth century. Where it met is not known, but that it enjoyed more than a passing importance there can be little doubt. It is described as having been composed of the "chief wits and great men" of the nation. "Our modern celebrated clubs," says the *Spectator*, "are founded upon eating and drinking, which are points wherein most men agree, and in which the learned and the illiterate, the dull and the airy, the philosopher and the buffoon, can all of them bear a part. The Kit Cat itself is said to have taken its original from a mutton-pie. The Beefsteak and October

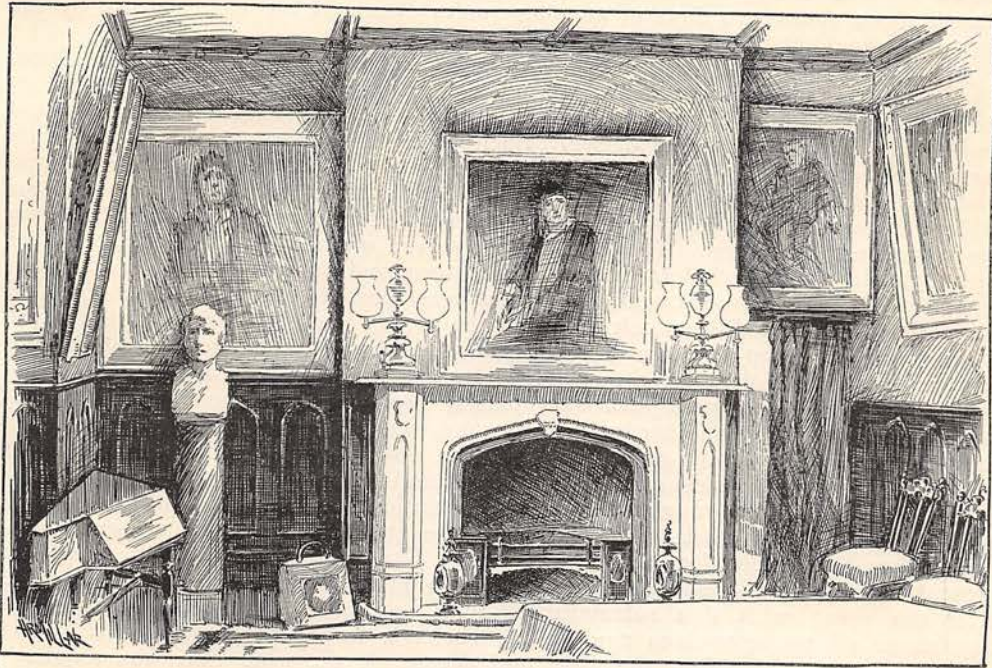


THE CLUB ROOM IN EXETER STREET. (THE KITCHEN IS SEEN BEYOND THE GRIDIRON-SHAPED GRATING)

Clubs are neither of them averse to eating and drinking, if we may form a judgment of them from their respective titles." The chief providore of the Beefsteaks was the comedian Estcourt, who must have been deemed an excellent companion. In the words of Cibber, he was "so amazing and extraordinary a mimic, that no man or woman, from the coquette to the privy councillor, ever moved or spoke before him, but he could carry their voice, look, mien, and motion instantly into another company." Reversing what Garrick did in years to come, he left the stage to turn wine merchant. "Estcourt," says the *Spectator*, "has laid in, at the 'Bumper,' Covent Garden, neat natural wines, to be sold wholesale, as well as retail, by his old servant, trusty Anthony," Aston the prompter. "As Estcourt is a person altogether unknowing in the wine trade, it cannot be doubted that he will deliver the wine in the same natural purity that he receives it from the merchants"—a characteristic piece of raillery. At the club, it appears, the erstwhile comedian, by virtue of his office there, wore a small gold gridiron, which was suspended from his neck by a green silk riband.

In 1735, twenty-three years after the death of Estcourt, another Beefsteak Club came into existence. John Rich, the most expressive of non-speaking harlequins, was then the manager of Covent Garden Theatre, with George Lambert as his principal scene-painter. "Being a person of great respectability in character and profession," says Edwards in his *Anecdotes of Painting*, "the latter was often visited, while at work in the theatre, by persons of the first consideration both in rank and talents. As it

frequently happened that he was too much hurried to leave his engagements for his regular dinner, he contented himself with a beefsteak broiled upon the fire in the painting room. In this hasty meal he was sometimes joined by his visitors, who were pleased to participate in the humble repast of the artist. The savour of the dish and the conviviality of the accidental meeting inspired the party with a resolution to establish a club, which was accordingly done, under the title of the Beefsteak Club; and the party assembled in the painting room. The members were afterwards accommodated with a room in the playhouse." Other accounts ascribe the honour of originating the idea to Rich himself, whose room in the theatre was a daily resort of men about town, and who, in company with his scene painter, would dine there at two o'clock off a hot steak and a bottle of old port "from the tavern hard by." Be this as it may, a Beefsteak Club was thenceforward housed in the theatre, to which it may be said to have lent an additional distinction.



THE CLUB ROOM LOOKING WEST.

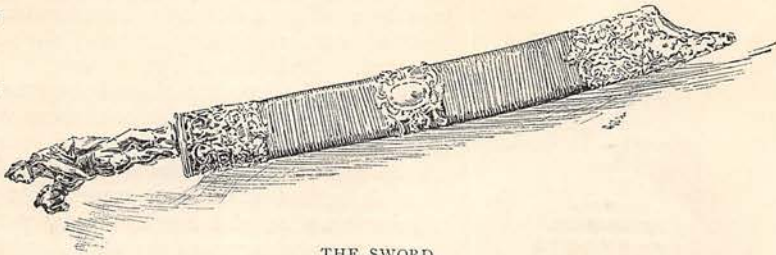
Some of the rules laid down for the governance of the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks—as the new fraternity, thinking the term “club” vulgar, elected to style itself—are not unworthy of notice. The number of members was not to exceed twenty-four. Whenever a seat became vacant every member present then or on the two succeeding days of meeting might propose a person (not present) to fill up such vacancy, and on the third day of meeting after such vacancy declared the members then present should proceed to the election of a person to supply the same (by balloting), and the one selected by the minority should be declared duly elected a member of the society, and on his admission should pay three guineas to the treasurer for the use of the society. Every member should succeed in rotation to the dignity of president, and on that day should bear the expense of the beef, and if then present, might introduce one person as a visitor without incurring any penalty for so doing; and if absent the last president then present should officiate (in his stead) as president of the society. Beefsteaks should be the only meat for dinner, the broiling beginning at 2 P.M. on each day of meeting, and the tablecloth removed at half-past three. No liquor after the first quantity should be introduced unless voted by the majority and ordered before six o'clock. Each member who had quitted the society (without being expelled) should be permitted to visit at any meeting on paying equally with the members then present. Every member who introduced a visitor at any day of meeting should incur a penalty of five shillings for each person so introduced, to be paid to the treasurer

for the use of the society. On the first day of meeting, on the first Saturday in December, on the first Saturday in February, and on the last day of meeting in each season, no visitors should be admitted. If any member proposed to lay a wager, and the person to whom it was proposed said "Done," it should be deemed a wager laid, whether the proposer did or did not reply to such acceptance of his proposal; and whatever was lost on any wager should be paid to the treasurer for the use of the society. The president for the time being should be invested with the insignia, and order and decency be duly observed while the House was sitting, and more especially whenever the president should call to order; and any order being made and seconded, and not withdrawn, the question moved for should (after free debate thereon) be put and determined before any other, except the previous question. Every member found guilty of any crime or misdemeanour in the society, and neglecting or refusing to submit to the penalty or censure by him incurred, and every member absenting himself three successive days of meeting (unless excused for such absence by the majority), should stand expelled the society.

Meetings of members were held every Saturday between November and June. All the members had to wear a sort of uniform, namely, a blue coat and buff waistcoat, with brass buttons bearing a gridiron and the words "Beef and Liberty," and also a ring having the same device. Each could introduce one guest except on particular days, when accounts were looked up, the merits of candidates discussed, and other business matters gone into. One side of the room was occupied by an enormous gridiron, through which one could see a cook in a white cap and blouse standing by a fire in readiness for action. The steaks were served on hot pewter plates, together with Spanish onions, eschalots, and baked potatoes, and were washed down with port or porter. The only second course permitted was toasted cheese. This disposed of, the cloth was removed, the cook collected the money in a plate, and the rest of the evening was given up to noisy revelry. Invested with a silver badge resembling the buttons and rings spoken of, the president for the time being was installed in his chair, from which he gave invariable toasts, proposed resolutions, called erring members to order, and, whether he liked it or not, sang the "Song of the Day." His eminence hedged him with no sort of divinity; any deviation on his part from the customs of the society, such as failing to put on and instantly take off a plumed beef-eater's hat when he brought forward a resolution, exposed him to a storm of objurgations. Other officials by rotation at the gathering were the vice-president, the bishop, the recorder, and the boots. The first, as the oldest Beefsteak present, had to be at the beck and call of the president; the second said grace after the meat with due solemnity of tone and mien; the third took formal cognizance of transgressions against the society's laws; the fourth, even while at dinner, had to fetch from the cellar and decant all the wine that was required. Delinquents were marched out of the room, arrayed in a white sheet (the tablecloth), and roundly reprimanded by the recorder. Black balls were never used in the balloting; the qualifications of a candidate were tested before he could be put up. On being elected he was brought in with a bandage over his eyes, the bishop (mitred) standing on his right, a member bearing a sword of state on his left, and halberdiers in fanciful costumes bringing up the rear. The recorder recited to him a charge alternately solemn and sportive, to the effect that within those sacred walls good-fellowship was to be joined to good breeding, that badinage should never degenerate into personality, and that any infraction of the rule would be followed by the expulsion of the offender. The oath sworn to by the member was as follows:—"You shall attend duly, vote impartially, and conform to our laws and orders obediently; you shall support our dignity, promote our welfare, and at all times behave as a worthy member of this Sublime Society; so Beef and Liberty be your reward." Having undertaken to do all this, he was told to kiss the "book," which turned out to be a beef-bone in a napkin; and then, with the bandage removed, he sat down amidst a shower of congratulations. It would not be easy to convey an idea of the charm which these gatherings obviously possessed. Everybody seems to have brought with him a good story; flashes of wit and humour were neither few nor far between; the very spirit of mirth may be said to have descended upon the whole company.

For several years did the Beefsteak Club remain in its original quarters. The meagre records we have of it are not without interest. Besides Rich and Lambert, the first group of members included Dennis Delane, the actor, and

William Hogarth, then at the outset of his brilliant career. Names more or less familiar to us meet the eye as we go through the list of subsequent Beefsteaks—the names, for instance, of Theophilus Cibber, John Wilkes, the Earl of Sandwich, George Colman the elder, and the singer John Beard, for whom, among other things, Handel invented the tenor parts in the *Messiah*, *Judas Maccabæus*, and *Israel in Egypt*. Many years before Colman's election, which took place in 1767, he glanced at the Sublime Society in the pages of the *Connoisseur*. "Our only hopes," he pleasantly wrote, "are in the clergy and the Beefsteak Club. The former still preserve, and probably will preserve, the rectitude of their appetites, and will do justice to beef wherever they find it. The latter, who are composed of the most ingenious artists in the kingdom, meet every Saturday in a noble room at the top of Covent Garden Theatre, and never suffer any dish except beefsteaks to appear. These, indeed, are most glorious examples; but what, alas! are the weak endeavours of a few to oppose the daily inroads of fricassees and soup-maigres?" "The Beefsteak Club," bursts out an occasional visitor to the room, Tom Davies, "is surely one of the most respectable examples of jovial and agreeable companies in the metropolis!" "Your friends at the Beefsteak," wrote Churchill to Wilkes in 1771, "inquired after you with the greatest zeal, and it gave me no small pleasure that I was the person of whom the inquiry was made." Essentially Whig in its political sympathies, though not outwardly identifying itself with any political party, the club could not fail to commend itself to the favour of the Prince of Wales, who joined it about the time of his secret marriage to Mrs. Fitzherbert. It has been said that the First Gentleman in Europe was allowed to make a twenty-fifth member; as a matter of fact, he had to wait for his election until a vacancy occurred. Among those who preceded or followed him to the "noble room" at the theatre were the Earl of Surrey, Sir Harry Angelfield, the Earl of Inchiquin, the Duke of Norfolk, George Colman the younger, the Earl of Guilford, Charles Morris ("The Bard"), Sir Michael Nugent, the Duke of York, and John Philip Kemble.



THE SWORD.

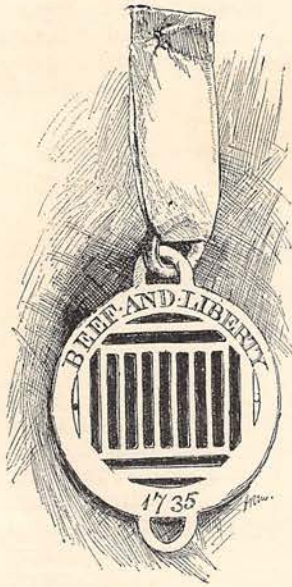
Early in the nineteenth century, having been forced by the burning of Covent Garden Theatre to find other quarters, the Beefsteaks betook themselves to the Bedford Coffee House, which they occupied until 1809, when accommodation was found for them in the recently built Lyceum Theatre. There, as it would seem, the Sublime Society passed the happiest and most blithesome hours of its existence. In addition to the best of the old surviving members, such as Charles Morris, it could boast of possessing the Duke of Sussex, William Linley, Samuel James Arnold, John Richards, Sir William Bolland (Baron of the Exchequer), James Lonsdale, Henry Frederick Stephenson, Lord Grantley, Henry Brougham, Admiral Dundas, the Duke of Leinster, Sir John Cam Hobhouse (afterwards Lord Broughton), Sir Francis Burdett, and Lord Saltoun. Morris had now become the "life and soul" of the society. Outside its walls he did not seem to have his being. He had uncommon lyrical gifts, and nothing gave him half so much pleasure as to exercise them for the benefit of his fellow Beefsteaks. Songs however were not



THE RING.

the sole feature of the *post-prandial* entertainments. The old love of wild frolic continued without abatement. The Duke of Sussex, having been found guilty of an imaginary offence, was once condemned to stand in the white sheet. He accepted his destiny, but soon afterwards left in something like dudgeon. Next morning the mover of the resolution went to him at the palace. "I know what you've come about," he said heartily to his visitor; "I know what you've come about. I made a fool of myself last night, and shall come next Saturday to do penance again for my bad temper." One guest of the club, the Ettrick Shepherd, recounted his experience of it in the form of a dialogue, from which we may take a few sentences. "Ah, sir, they are

the queerest set of devils that were ever conjoined thegither. A' noblemen an' first-rate gentlemen, though, for a' their mischievous tricks. I never laughed as muckle in a night sin I was born. Oh! I wad like to be a member o' the Beefsteak Club!" "Do they actually dine on beefsteaks?" "Solely on beefsteaks. But what glorious beefsteaks! They do not come up all at once, as we get them in Scotland—no, nor half a dozen times; but up they come at long intervals, thick, tender, and as hot as fire. And during these intervals they sit drinking their port and breaking their wicked wit on each other, so that every time a service of new steaks came up we fell to them with much the same zest as at the beginning." "What! do they drink port during dinner?" "They do that, Billy. If ony member had ca'd for aught-aboon port I wadna hae been i' his line for forty shillings, as the bogle said. The Hon. Lord Saltoun, who was unanimously voted into the chair, had committed a high and serious offence to the club that night; so he



THE BADGE.

was adjudged to stand with a white sheet about him, while the recorder-general put on his cocked hat, and gave him a very sharp and cutting rebuke, but in a style of ludicrous solemnity quite indescribable. What do you think was Saltoun's offence? I'll defy any living man to guess. It was for sending a dozen bottles of sublime Highland whisky from his own stock for the use of the society, without leave granted. Oh! it is a joyous club!"

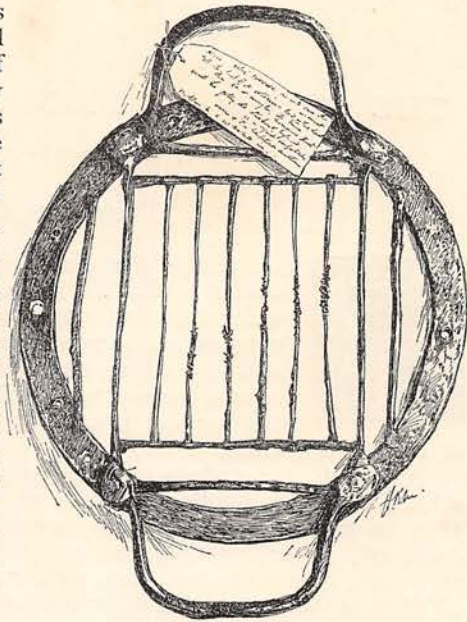
In 1830 the Lyceum shared the fate of so many temples of the drama, but a spacious room was provided for the Beefsteaks in the theatre erected immediately afterwards on the same site. Few of them could have been otherwise than delighted with their new home; the whole of the interior was in old English oak, portraits of past and present members graced the walls, and the original gridiron, rescued from the ruins caused by two fires, occupied the very centre of the ceiling.

It is worthy of note in passing that nearly everything in the place—wainscoting, picture-frames, chairs, silver, glass, cutlery, and the inevitable snuff-box—bore a gridiron and the motto of the society, and that the cook, as before, was to be seen through the bars of a huge gridiron at the eastern side of the room. Institutions have been said to resemble man in having their periods of youth, maturity, and decline. The Beefsteak Club was not to form an exception to this

almost general rule. From the time of its resettlement in Exeter Street—for the entrance to it was in that unsavoury little thoroughfare—it showed more and more symptoms of decadence. The prestige conferred upon it by the presence of royalty was brought to an end by the resignation of the Duke of Sussex. Members who had done much to sustain its former reputation fell away as old age came upon them, and the vacancies thus created could never be adequately filled. Moreover, the whimsical customs so long observed by the brotherhood were gradually set aside by the younger men as too antiquated for latter-day civilization. The ring and the uniform were discarded. Boots would have the hardihood to come late, delegate his duties to the "sergeant" (cook), and even remain at table when another bottle was demanded. Penances ceased to be extorted, and the guests, instead of being compelled to speak together in acknowledgment of the toast of their healths, were allowed to be represented by one of their number only. It was also unfortunate for so limited a club that fashion should have shown an increasing tendency to have dinner parties and receptions on Saturdays, and that the extension of the railway system presented to some of the members a tempting means of returning to country homes. In the course of twenty years, to be brief, the Sublime Society lost much of its strength, its distinctive character, its special *raison d'être*. The consequence need hardly be stated. The once crowded room became less and less frequented. Indeed, there were instances of only one diner being seen there. "On such occasions," writes Mr. Arnold, "the place looked sepulchral; the table, always laid for ten or twelve, looked ghastly; the hot steaks came and went in too rapid succession, while the waiters dimly glided to and fro. At last, when the solitary one was shut in and left alone with his bottle of old port and his bowl of punch or whisky toddy (if he had the heart to make it)"—but the picture is too painful to contemplate

further. In vain were efforts made to arrest this decline by changing the day and hour of meeting; the club had the iron in its heart, and its decease was only a matter of time. At length, in the summer of 1867, it became numbered with things of the past, the furniture and portraits and appointments being sold at Christie's to defray the debts it had incurred.

For a few years the Beefsteak room was used for the storage of theatrical properties, but almost as soon as Mr. Irving undertook the management of the Lyceum he restored this venerable sanctuary to something like its former appearance, and very often now it is the scene of the informal and bright little supper parties which he delights to bring about him. Many pictures of interest and value are to be found upon the walls. Not the least conspicuous in the collection is one of David Garrick in 1774, two years before his retirement from the stage. Its fidelity is vouched for by John Fowler in an almost illegible inscription at the bottom. "This portrait of my dear and worthy friend David Garrick, Esquire, painted by Mr. N. Dance, of London, was," he says, "presented to me by himself. 'Tis in my own opinion, as well as every person's, allowed to be the most true and striking likeness of this great man that ever was executed." If Garrick read these words he could not have felt deeply flattered, since the expression of the countenance, despite the brilliancy of the half-averted eyes, is scarcely so intellectual as that ascribed to him by other artists. Next comes a panel painting of the chief scene in Hoare and Storace's musical farce of *No Song no Supper*, reintroducing us to Fawcett, John Emery, the Listons, and Kitty Stephens (afterwards Countess of Essex). Sir Martin Shee's portrait of the first-named player is also here. John Philip Kemble is represented by a half-length copy of Lawrence's familiar picture of him in the graveyard scene of *Hamlet*, Edmund Kean by one of Clint's preliminary sketches for his *Last Scene of A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, and William Charles Macready by a bust that deserves more than a passing glance. Mr.



THE GRIDIRON.

Irving's reverence for the past does not make him disregard the claims of the present; the only Portia of our time occupies the place of honour over the mantel-piece, while Mr. Toole, portrayed with the utmost care by the Hon. John Collier, looks forth from another prominent place with the sedate and thoughtful air which, if theatrical history may be trusted, usually marks the drollest comedians out of the theatre. In a recess, between *My First Pantomime, Sadler's Wells*, 1820, and *My Last Pantomime, Covent Garden*, 1880, hangs one of Phillips's two impressive portraits of Napoleon (the other is at Petworth) at a rather early stage of his career, but when his immense force of intellect and character had already made itself felt. If the nocturnal gatherings in the room were not of a private character we might say a good deal about them, especially as the guests frequently include men whose names are great in mouths of wisest censure. The last haunt of the Sublime Society was rich in agreeable associations before Mr. Irving first crossed its threshold, but they are really trivial in comparison with those which it has acquired in the few years of his epoch-making management.