

MAY.-MAY-DAY GAMES.



Hark ! how Delight
Knocks with her silver wings at every sense,
For merry May her pastimes doth commence.
Hark ! how the peasants, with their music loud,
Raise many an ancient ditty ; while a crowd
Of snow-clad maidens, crowned with garlands gay,
Are tripping lightly round the Queen of May.—*Cleveland's May-Day.*

ONE of the oldest and most poetical of all our country amusements was the celebration of May-day. Mention is made of it by our earliest chroniclers and poets ; and so great is its antiquity, that the very origin is lost. Some believe that it is a custom which has descended down to us from the times of the old Druids ; others, that it was introduced into England by the Romans. But, as it is not mentioned by any historians who have recorded the manners of that period, I shall leave the matter to rest where it is ; for it is sufficient to know, that, four or five hundred years ago, May-day was a great holiday in England. Our forefathers were great lovers of nature, had more holidays than we have now, and had few of those in-door amusements which we possess ; and I have always considered May-day as one of those joyous celebrations with which they welcomed the return of spring—the season which brought back the birds, and flowers, and long green leaves, and threw open once more, as it were, the gates which led to their summer amusements, their joyous out-of-door pastimes, which, during the long, dark winter, had been closed. It seemed but natural that they should set

out on their merry pilgrimage to the woods, when the trees were again putting on their green garments ; when they could, on the darkening hedges, point out the very spots where the May blossoms would be hung ; when the daisies were once more strewn, like radiant pearls upon the grass ; and, in deep woodland nooks, the blue-bells lay sleeping like an azure cloud that had fallen from heaven ; and primroses and violets nestled side by side on the warm and sunny banks. It was then that they sallied forth, with axe in hand, to fell one of the tall, straight, tapering trees which grew in the forest, for they always brought home the most beautiful one they could meet with for their May-pole. Sometimes it was dragged from the woods by oxen garlanded with flowers, and accompanied by music ; while men and maidens, bearing green boughs, swelled the procession ; and thus they brought home May. Spenser, who lived in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, presents us with the following description of bringing home May, in his "Shepherd's Calendar." The scene here painted he had, no doubt, often witnessed :—

Young folk now flock in everywhere,
To gather May-bushes and smelling herbs,
And home they hasten, the posts to dight,
And all the church pillars, ere daylight,
With hawthorn-buds, and sweet squillins,
And garlands of roses, and sops of wine.
Even this morn'g—no longer ago,
I saw a shoal of shepherds out go,
With singing, and shouting, and jolly cheer;
Before them went a lusty labourer,
That unto many a horrid play'd
Where to they danced, each one with his maid.

To see these folks making such j-yance,
Made my heart after the pipe to dance,
Then to the green wood they sped them all
To fetch home May, with their musical;
And home they bring him in a royal
throne,
Crowned as king; and his queen, fair one,
Was Lady Flora, on whom did attend
A fair flock of fairies, and a fresh band
Of lovely nymphs. O that I were there,
To help the ladies their May-bush to bear.

On the village green, the tall May-pole was roared, amid merry shouts and loud huzzas, and the deep sounding of music; they built up arbours out of the branches they brought from the forest; they decorated the fronts of their houses with boughs; and on the tall May-pole hung many a garland of beautiful flowers. A bower was placed at the head of these arbours, which stood higher than the others. Within and without it was decorated with flowers, and set apart for the Queen of May, who was, generally, some peasant girl, selected by the unanimous consent of her companions. Sometimes the daughter of the Lord of the Manor presided as May Queen, and the whole family issued from their old ancestral hall to join in the May-day games. Then there were rustic youths dressed up in the costume of Robin Hood and his merry men, and Maid Marian; recalling the days of old, when these daring outlaws were the dread and pride of Sherwood Forest, plundering the rich to feed the poor; and chasing the dun deer through the thickets, in spite of Norman keepers and cruel forest-laws.

It was a season of rejoicing throughout the length and breadth of the land. Nor was London a bit behind in the celebration of this ancient festival. Even in the City, the tall May-pole was erected; and any one who had passed along Cornhill on May-day a few centuries ago, would have seen green arbours erected there, and huge daken boughs hanging over the street, and the milk-maids, and all the merry old citizens, with their wives, daughters, maids, and apprentices, congregated about the May-pole, many of them dressed in old fanciful costumes, and giving themselves up to all the fun and jollity of May. But time has not preserved even the names of the mazy measures which they danced; and nearly all we know of the ancient pipe and tabor, the favourite music to which they timed their footsteps, is gathered from glancing at some scarce engraving. "Gone are the days of Gamelyn." "The May-pole," says an old writer, "was consecrated to the Goddess of Flowers, and the garlands were left upon it the whole year, without being disturbed by any one;" and I well remember passing through a village, at the end of April, in which a tall May-pole stood, only a few years ago, and seeing the last year's garlands hanging upon it, all wan and withered, and beaten by the storms of the past winter.

In those times, it seems to have been a custom to set out for the woods soon after midnight, so that by sunrise the May-pole was felled, and the branches gathered, and the procession ready to start, on its way home. In a book written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, it is stated that sometimes as many as forty yoke of oxen, each having a sweet nosegay tied to the tip of his horns, were employed to draw home the May-pole; that they covered it all over, from top to bottom, with flowers and sweet herbs, which they bound round with strings; fastening, at equal distances, cross bars upon it, to the end of which they attached garlands; and thus decorated, it was hoisted up, amid the leaping and dancing and joyous shouts of the assembled multitude.

A sum of money was allowed in those days for the erection of green arbours around the May-pole. The King and Queen, or Lord and Lady of May, as they were called, were dressed out in scarfs and ribbons, and plumes of feathers, and made as fine as it was possible to array them.

Henry the Eighth, one morning in May, attended by several of his nobles, dressed in the quaint costume of Robin Hood and his merry men, suddenly entered the chamber where the Queen and her ladies were seated, much to the alarm of the latter, who were thus taken by surprise; for it appears that the King and his followers were armed with bows and arrows, and swords and bucklers, like the outlaws of old; and fine screaming there was, no doubt, amongst the Queen and her ladies, when their apartment was broken into by a troop of armed men; who, however, instead of carrying them off, like the ancient freebooters of the forest, and keeping them prisoners under the greenwood tree until they paid down a handsome ransom in gold, contented themselves by performing several wild woodland dances, then taking their departure.

The same Monarch, also, once rode out with his Queen and a whole concourse of nobles, one fine May morning, to the top of Shooters-hill, above Greenwich, and there they were received by a large troop of men, amounting to about two hundred, who were all dressed as foresters, in a costume of Kendal green, and headed by a captain, whom they called Robin Hood. These May-day foresters, dressed up for the occasion, amused their Royal and noble visitors by showing them their skill in archery; and when this was over each blew his bugle-horn, and conducted the King and his train into a wood under the brow of the hill, where a large arbour was erected of green boughs, consisting of a hall and two chambers, all decorated with flowers and sweet herbs; and here a mighty feast stood ready prepared, quite in keeping with the scene, consisting of venison, venison-pasties, and a copious supply of the blood-red wine, for such, the old ballads say, often formed the forest-banquet of Robin Hood and his merry men. A joyous May-day must that have been, presided over by the King and Queen of England; for Henry the Eighth was then a young man, greatly beloved by his people; and in the laughing merry Monarch who presided over that woodland repast, who drank deep healths to the Lord and Lady of May, and was the foremost to lead off the joyous dance in that summer hall, roofed over with green branches,—few would have traced the future murderer, or read in the outlines of the then jocund Monarch the cruel beholder of so many of his wives. For the Royal tiger seemed then as harmless and playful as a lamb; and those who were around him but little dreamed that his memory ever after, throughout all time, would be preserved in one of the darkest stains that ever fell, and lay an eternal blot upon the pages of history.

On their return from this woodland banquet, they were met by two ladies, richly attired, who rode in a beautiful chariot, drawn by five horses; and on the back of each horse was also seated a lady, one of whom was called the Lady of Showers; another, the Lady of Green; the third, the Lady of Vegetation; the fourth, of Pleasure; and the fifth, of Sweet Odour. Of the two who occupied the chariot, one was called the Lady of May, and the other the Lady of Flowers; and they entertained the assembled company with songs, as they returned to Greenwich. Such was an English May-day in the reign of Henry VIII.

But few works are fraught with more amusement than our old English treatises on angling: there is such a simple cunningness about these honest old fishermen, that it is difficult to refrain from laughter while perusing the most serious passages. You almost fancy that many of these quaint writers must have had certain prayers, which they ever and anon repeated while following so peaceful an occupation—brief pious sentences, offered up in the full simplicity of the heart while dropping in the line, over a bite, or when the finny prey was landed. In one book the angler is recommended "to be

full of humble thoughts, when occasion offers; to kneel, lie down, or wet his feet and hands, as often as there is any advantage to be gained thereby;" nor is he to mind "a little dirty water or mud," if he can get anything out of it. He is also advised to render himself skilful in music, so that whenever his spirits are melancholy, or his thoughts heavy, "he may remove the same with some godly hymn or anthem, of which David gives many examples." Again, he is to be strong and valiant, not to be amazed at storms, nor frightened at labour. Nor must he, "like the fox which preyeth upon the lambs, employ all his labour and cunning on the smaller fry; but, like the lion that seizeth elephants, think the greatest fish that swims a reward little enough for the pains he endures." He must also "be patient, not feel vexed when he loses his prey, although it is almost in his hand." Neither must he swear: and we still retain the old saying, "those who swear will catch no fish;" besides it would hardly have been the thing to have ripped out a thundering oath, after having chanted some "godly hymn or anthem." The angler also ought to be "a scholar and a good grammarian," as, no doubt, the fish being an ancient people, and from the earliest ages acquainted with respectable society, must have felt bad grammar grate again upon their ruddy gills. Further, he must have sweetness of speech, to entice others to follow his art; he also a knowledge of the sun, moon, and stars; be conversant with wind and weather; and have a constant and settled belief that where "the waters are pleasant and anything likely, there the Creator of all good things hath stored up much of his plenty." How religiously did these old rascals set about a little quiet murder! thanking Heaven when they succeeded, and, as Cromwell said, "had good execution."

But we must not forget the business on hand, which is to continue our remarks on angling from April; and these must necessarily be brief. From early spring, until the close of autumn, perch angling is pursued; they are very fond of lingering in shadowy places, as bridges, old mill-dams, and flood-gates, and such like quiet spots, where they readily take the bait. The perch is a beautifully marked fish; the back and a portion of the sides are of dark green, varied with black, while the belly is white and red. In form it is deep, arched, and has a large mouth, with rich golden irides. It will bite greedily at a worm.

As there are so many kinds of trout, I must confine myself to the common one, which is generally from twelve to fifteen inches in length, is of a dirty yellow colour, brownish on the back, and spotted. Early in spring the trout will take a ground bait, for which nothing can be better than a worm. Fly-fishing for trout would occupy the whole space we dedicate to the description of the month, so we must pass it by. Remember, in fishing for trout, to keep out of sight; once throw your shadow upon the water, and away the shy visitor goes. As soon as you have landed a trout, kill it—a sharp blow on the head is pretty sure to finish it; and this is better than leaving it to pant on the grass, or gasp in your fishing basket, to say nothing of the richness added to its flavour. The grayling is fond of clear, rapid streams, especially such as flow through lilly countries. It is rather less than the trout, beautifully formed; the head small; the eyes prominent, and circled with silver; the teeth very small; the head a dusky colour, and the gills a bright green, which in time become dark. The back is of a greenish blue tinge; the sides of the richest silvery grey, though when first caught glittering in the sunlight like gold, and almost gandy, through the rich dark irregular spots which dot the shifting silver. It is a rapid swimmer, and is lost to the eye in a moment. When full-grown, it is about fifteen or sixteen inches in length; and although taken all the year round, is not considered in season until September, and from then to February or the middle of spring. At the latter season, they will take almost any bait used in bottom fishing, such as worms, gentles, grubs; nor are they at all particular, if they have had a narrow escape from the hook, of attacking the bait again, even with a torn jaw. The tackle ought to be fine. The flesh is very white, and the flavour highly prized. "No life," says Walton, "is so happy and so pleasant as the life of a well-governed angler: for when the lawyer is swallowed up with business, and the statesman is preventing or contriving plots, then we sit on crowslip banks, hear the birds sing, and possess ourselves in as much quietness as the silent silver streams which we see glide so smoothly by us."

