

JUNE.—WHITSUNTIDE PROCESSIONS.



When the merry bells ring round,  
 And the jocund rebecks sound,  
 To many a youth and many a maid  
 Dancing in the chequer'd shade,  
 And young and old come forth to play  
 On a sunshine holiday—MILTON.

WHETHER Whitsuntide falls in May or June, it is always a season of great festivity; and, since so many old customs are dying away, we may consider it our greatest English holiday. In the country, nearly every club has its procession and feast at Whitsuntide; and almost every village and town is sounding with music; and in some large places half a dozen clubs may be seen marching to church, each with its band and banners, and every member in his holiday attire. We, who are dabblers in old black-letter lore, look upon these benevolent and useful institutions with great interest, knowing that such clubs or guilds, existed in England a thousand years ago—that the Saxons had their sick and burial societies, and that every brother who did not attend a funeral was then fined as now. According to these old Saxon laws, when a member died he was to be buried wherever he had desired; and, if any brother neglected to attend, he was fined a measure of honey: the club was to furnish half the refreshments consumed at the funeral, and each member was to pay twopence—a large sum, considering the value of money in those days, when a sheep could be purchased for a shilling, an ox for six, and four hens for sixpence. It is this very antiquity which renders these benefit societies so interesting in our eyes;

and as we know that they had their merry meetings as well as their "funeral marches," we never look upon them as they go "sounding through the town," without thinking that, above a thousand years ago, similar processions passed along the ancient streets of Saxon England.

Oh! what a jingling of bells is there on the morning of Whit-Monday. What a running to and fro from house to house—for the women have in many places their clubs as well as the men, and they are probably all going in procession to the same church. Nanny runs in to ask Betty how she looks in this or that; if her new gown "sits" nicely, or she should trim her cap with blue or pink; for it must be understood that no bonnets are allowed in the procession; if it rains, umbrellas may be carried. We shall commence with the ladies first. White dresses are, of course, prevalent, though they are agreeably relieved here and there with a gown or two of gaudy colours. The ladies who hold office walk behind the band, each carrying a neat white wand, adorned with ribbons and flowers; every fair member also bears a beautiful posy; you almost wonder where so many flowers could be gathered; but what they carry with them is nothing compared to the quantity which decorate the club-room in which they



will take tea in the afternoon. Gravely, stately, and good-humouredly do they proceed along, the single ones looking down as if ashamed, and seldom venturing to raise their eyes if passing by a house they are in the habit of visiting. Not so with the married women. They are on the look-out to acknowledge everybody they know; and at every recognition there is such a waving of handkerchiefs that you might almost fancy they were about to proceed on a very long journey, and were bidding farewell to their acquaintance. But the most amusing part is the children. They are stationed on every step or little eminence, the bigger brother or sister holding a lesser one in arms, and looking out eagerly for mother. The mother is all to them, and she also is watching anxiously. At last you hear the little voices exclaim, "Here she comes!" "There she is!" "That's her!" and she is sure to rush out of the ranks to give them something out of her pocket; and no end of kisses, with numberless admonitions to take care of themselves, and so on. And many a turn of the head will she give before she is out of sight. Among such processions as these we have seen faces and forms that would have arrested the eyes of both painter and sculptor, and shown them that the beautiful belongs not alone to either antiquity or Greece. We have also seen the hair arranged in such a chaste style, and so gracefully adorned with natural flowers, that many a haughty heiress would have been proud to have risen with her ringlets so arranged from the hands of a fashionable tiring-woman.

Their overpowering presence made you feel  
It would not be idolatry to kneel.

But, bang, bang! *tirra, tirra!* here they come—the "United Brothers." The blacksmith who beats the big drum will assuredly drive the ends in; he wields the drumsticks as if he had got a sledge-hammer in each hand, and the anvil before him. Oh! what a banner—it takes four men to support it, and two others to keep it steady by holding the tasselled strings. It was painted by Paul, the house-painter; and he has been much prouder ever since he did it. It would hardly be admissible into the British Institution—but let that pass; were any one to venture to criticise the performance, he would be indignantly told that it cost above twenty pounds. Although the tailor is a little out of both time and tune, yet he blows lustily at the clarinet; and the young butcher is not to be found fault with, considering he has only practised on the bugle for about twelve months. What a jolly fellow that is who shakes the cymbals—his very eyes laugh again; what a clashing he makes; he cares nothing about time; "Make yourself heard, neighbour," is his answer. You can tell from his looks that he has already been busy with the ale-cup, and that he is not the only one. And those are the stewards. "Deary me!" exclaim the women, "who ever would think that was Trippet, the tripe-seller; or the other, Johnny Lee, who goes round repairing umbrellas?" but they are though; and are resolved to let you see what they can do when they choose: a nod from either of them is something to be thought of to-day, I can tell you; for they are the stewards, and were elected for the first time at the last meeting. Next club-feast-day two others will march, with the same staidness, in their places. When Trippet and Lee have served their twelvemonth, should they live fifty years after, everything they can remember will be recalled either as having transpired so many years before or after they were the stewards.

Bang, bang! All the windows are up; the whole street is crowded; women with children in their arms, and boys and girls, close in and follow the procession: the men walk two and two—there is about a yard's space between each couple. What a length the procession reaches! There are at least one hundred members "strong;" and the latter word is pronounced with something like an emphasis. True enough, they march oddly: a few are very careful, but these, no doubt, are younger members; the old United Brothers seem to jog along "cheek by jowl" anyhow as they can—they look as if they were used to it; they wear their honours without blushing, some, you see, with a flower held between the lips. This is very common in the country; every one has a posy in the button-hole of his coat, for that is in accordance with club orders. Now they near the church; they will never be able to get that large banner within the porch—but they have: it required great care; and there will be a good deal of talk about after how the wind caught it at this corner, and how they staggered at that, and you would go away with an idea that a man must be to the "manner born" before he is ever able to bear a banner.

The clergyman invariably preaches a sermon, in which the words unity, brotherhood, good-fellowship, charity, duty, &c., occur a great many times. He also dines with the club, a sure guarantee that for some time after the cloth is removed good order will be maintained. There are two old club-mates who have sat together at the dinner for years, and have always introduced the same argument. One maintains that "Whatever is Right;" the other takes the opposite side, and argues that, if it is so, "then Murder is Right." They always have a little knot of listeners, and are thought rather clever. The clergyman has, on one or two occasions, entered the field; but now he seems to be weary of it, and if appealed to admits "that much may be said on both sides." The dinner we pass over; the health of the retiring stewards is of course drunk, then Trippet and Lee have to say a few words; and if it is late in the evening a few of the brothers are sure to get rather boisterous, and to cry out "Go it Lee!" or Trippet. Some of their wives also occasionally drop in at the close of the day.

Summer has now thrown open her green doors; the whole landscape is richly hung with the most beautiful foliage; the fields are ankle deep in flowers, and the earth will never look more lovely than now. Nature everywhere holds high jubilee; bird and bee and brook have each found a voice, and all day long are calling to and answering each other. Beautiful are the mornings and evenings of June, when the dew hangs upon the blossoms, and all that sweet aroma, which the hot sun will exhale, floats about the earth. Thomson, in his "Castle of Indolence," has beautifully described the luxury of green fields at this season:—

Was nought around but images of rest—  
Sleep-soothing groves, and quiet lawns between,  
And flowery beds that slumberous influence cast,  
From poppies breathed; and beds of pleasant green,  
Where never yet was creeping creature seen.  
Meantime unnumber'd glittering streamlets play'd,  
And hurried everywhere their waters sheen,  
That as they bicker'd through the sunny glade,  
Though restless, still themselves a lulling murmur made.

Join'd to the prattle of the purling rills,  
Were heard the lowing herds along the vale,  
And flocks loud-beating from the distant hills,  
And vacant shepherds piping in the dale;  
And now and then sweet Philomel would wall,  
Or stock-doves plain amid the forest deep,  
That drowsy rustled to the sighing gale;  
And still a coil the grasshopper did keep;  
Yet all these mingled sounds inclined to sleep.

A wanderer in the country not only finds pleasure in the beauties of Nature, but feels a delight in witnessing the enjoyment of others, and in none more than seeing the children of the poor—those who have about them the stamp of City-courts and crowded alleys—running for once free and happy along the

green lanes and over the pleasant field-paths. It makes a kind-hearted man sigh to think how those little creatures, ordained naturally to be happy, are shut up in stifling rooms, or left to wander at will through the hot and suffocating streets, in too many instances without any one to care either for their moral or bodily wants. Such have we sometimes had around us for the distance of a mile or two. They were rummaging every bank, peeping into every hedge, and plucking every flower they came near; they seemed to run over as much ground as a dog; they were never still—but here, there, and everywhere; ever discovering some object, new and wonderful to them, such as they had never before beheld in their City alleys; a molehill prettily marked, or a little clump of moss, were marvels in their eyes. Then, what a long consultation would there be at the door of some road-side ale-house. They perhaps mustered three or four pence amongst the whole half-dozen; the hungriest were advocates for half-penny-loaves—the extravagant for a pennyworth of cheese. What a half-bashful joy played about their little dirty faces, if any good-natured pedestrian stepped in, and, by contributing a few halfpence, settled the dispute, and for once allowed them to revel in (to them) a rich banquet of bread and cheese. City-bred although they were, there would be a look of mingled gratitude and delight, which proclaimed, in unmistakable though silent language, that those young hearts were not yet wholly corrupted, but that there lay the soil which might be made either to bear poisonous weeds or goodly fruit. In a City street their very language might perhaps shock the stranger; but here they are often met with in their best and gentlest moods. We have somewhere said—though we cannot now lay our hands upon the passage—that God still adorns the earth with trees and flowers as beautiful as ever waved in Eden, as if to prove to man, that however low he may have fallen, the lovely objects of field and wood have not degenerated; but that the rose is still as sweet, and the leaves as beautiful and green, as they were before man offended his Maker. All remains as lovely as when first fashioned by the great Creator. Nothing ever pained us more than the great sweeping Enclosure Act. It seemed as if the last link was severed that united man to the wonderful works of God—that he was no longer to "consider the lilies of the field how they grow."

There is a rural scene which somehow seems to linger upon our memory more than any other. We can recall it any time, from the trees that overhang the foot-path and throw their shadows into the water, to the very bend the river makes as it goes broadening out between the meadows, or circles like a belt of silver around the foot of the hills, until it diminishes like a bright cloud in the distance. We have often described it as seen in the early morning, or in the golden noon of day, and when the blue twilight has thrown over it a shadowy veil. Here sheep beat, and jingle their musical bells as they crop the wild thyme from the bewitched hillocks, or browse amongst the luxuriant clover in the neighbouring pastures; knee-deep the plump-sided oxen graze, or, chewing the cud, lie buried among the flowers of summer. The heavy waggon goes slowly rumbling up the steep acclivity, on the summit of which stands the old weather-beaten mill, through whose rent sails we can see patches of the bright sky behind. On every hand figures are crossing the landscape. We see the angler with his wicker basket borne on the end of his folded rod, which rests upon his shoulder. We see figures moving every way.

They come from still green nooks—woods old and hoary,  
The silent work of many a summer night,  
Ere those tall trees attain'd their giant glory,  
Or their proud tops did climb that cloudy height.  
They come from spot which the gray hawthorns dignify,  
Where stream-kiss'd willows make a silvery shiver.

Who can ever fully express the pleasures of a country life? says an old author, with the various delights of fishing, hunting, and fowling, with guns, greyhounds, spaniels, and several sorts of nets. What refreshment it is to behold the green shades—the beauty and majesty of the tall and ancient groves; to be skilled in the planting and training of orchards, flowers, and pot-herbs; to temper and allay these harmless employments with some innocent and merry song; to ascend sometimes to the fresh and healthful hills; to descend into the bosom of the valleys, and the fragrant dew meadows; to hear the music of birds, the murmur of bees, the falling of springs, and the pleasant discourses of the old ploughman. These are the blessings which only a countryman is ordained to, and are in vain wished for by the denizens of smoky cities; they are, indeed the "sights and sounds that give delight, but hurt not."

