

## SEPTEMBER.—ST. MATTHEW'S DAY AT CHRIST'S HOSPITAL.



To the imaginations of those among us who are genuine venerationers and lovers of Coleridge and Charles Lamb, the pile of grey buildings within which two gifted minds progressed towards maturity, will undoubtedly have become familiar ground, in every inch of which we feel not only a deep interest, but a kind of intangible property. The characteristics of the different masters will be as well known to us as though we had individually trembled or rejoiced beneath their sway, more or less severe; and the various peculiarities of the favourite school-sillow will be as indelibly printed on our memories as if we ourselves had shared with them for years the pleasures and pains of daily life. The social features of the Institution, as it existed some forty years ago, have been brought visibly before us, by those graphic touches, half indignant half affectionate, traced by the nurslings whose fame has reflected on Christ's Hospital a lustre that will never fade. They have, however, left to more prosaic writers the task of recording matter-of-fact details respecting its previous history; and as these would, in their present form, scarcely come within the sphere of the general reader, a hasty glance at its origin may be suffered to introduce a description of the ceremony to which this sketch more especially refers.

It happened that, in the year 1552, Bishop Ridley, of martyr renown, preached before King Edward VI., at Westminster, a sermon on charity, "wherein," says Stow in his Chronicles, "he made a fruitful and goodly exhortation to the rich to be merciful unto the poor; and also to such as were in authority, to travell by some charitable way and means, to comfort and relieve them." The young King had, it may be presumed, but small reason to reproach himself with backwardness in works of piety and mercy, but his mind was, on this occasion, so deeply impressed with the heavy obligations which rested on him of practising unceasingly the precepts to which had listened, that at the close of the service he sent for the Bishop, and, after thanking him for his goodly discourse, proceeded to advise with him on the best means of relieving the condition of the poor and needy of the city of London. As the benefits contemplated were to be of no limited or temporary character, Ridley suggested the prudence of a communication with the municipality; and so zealous were both King and Bishop in the good work, that the former then and there signed and sealed with his own hand a letter on the subject, which the latter, on the same evening, personally delivered to the Lord Mayor, Sir Richard Dobbs, who held the office at that time, and who displayed the greatest anxiety to further the wishes of the young Monarch. The good divine dined with him by appointment on the following day (for even then it would appear charity and good cheer went hand in hand); two Aldermen, and six other influential men belonging to the City were present; and, by their combined endeavours a comprehensive scheme of usefulness was devised, which was speedily submitted for Royal approval, and ultimately carried out. This plan embraced almost every class of the poor. For the reformation of the vicious, Bridewell was prepared; for the comfort and relief of the sick, the Hospitals of St. Bartholomew and St. Thomas were instituted; the decayed house-keeper was relieved at home; and, finally, for the nurture and education of destitute children, was set apart the Convent of Grey Friars, which, after the dissolution of monastic institutions, had been made over by Henry VIII. to the city of London, in trust for the poor. The old buildings were speedily rescued from the dilapidated condition into which they had fallen; and in six months' time three hundred and forty children were received within the walls. In 1553, the civic dignitaries, accompanied by the scholars, clothed in their original garb of russet cotton—which was soon exchanged for the one which, with some few alterations, they now wear—attended at the palace where Edward and Ridley had held their memorable conversation, to receive their charter from the hands of the King. The bestowal of four thousand marks by the year on these Royal Hospitals as an endowment was among the last acts of Edward's life; he expired only two days afterwards, thanking God that he had been granted life to finish the work which had lain so near his heart. The deep and tender

reverence for the memory of its youthful founder, which has endured even to the present day, is a beautiful characteristic of the Christ's Hospital scholar.

Since that period the prosperity of the Institution has been subject to manifold fluctuations: the number of children descending, in the year 1580, so low as a hundred and fifty, from want of funds; and rising again, as in our own times, to twelve hundred, owing to the munificent donations of private individuals. The objects of the establishment have also been by degrees materially changed and elevated. Other sources of relief have arisen for those truly destitute children, in whose favour it was first conceived; its benefits have been, therefore, applied to others, who, though scarcely needing them less, belong to a higher grade of society. The education and moral training which they now receive is of the first order: it usually proves the basis of a well-regulated life, and not unfrequently the stepping-stone to fortune and renown. In the government of the Institution, the original regulations are, as far as possible, adhered to; and St. Matthew's Day, which was, from the first year of the foundation, set apart for the general court of the several Royal Hospitals, is still observed with the usual solemnity. It is, indeed, the great festival of the year at Christ's Hospital; and though chiefly familiar to those connected with the School, presents much that is very interesting even to the general observer.

On the morning of the 21st of September, an air of very unusual animation pervades the immediate environs of the stone structure in Newgate-street, which under ordinary circumstances might escape the notice of the passer-by; so calm and lifeless is the scene enclosed within those massive iron gates, which present to the mind no idea but that of perpetual exclusion. But for once they stand hospitably open, and groups of gay, well-dressed people are entering here, as well as through Christ's-Church-passage, the ordinary inlet. The visitors having probably arrived some time before the Great Hall is opened to the public, devote the interval to a quiet inspection of various inscriptions and monumental tablets to the memories of former patrons and masters, which may be found in the quiet cloisters: for these are consecrated ground, and the burial-places of many who have died within the walls. Or they saunter up to the pump in the centre of the stone quadrangle, the garden of the old convent, and endeavour to extract local information from the lips of one or two of the younger scholars who may be hovering near it. The great body of the school, however, is attending divine service in the adjacent church, where the peculiar character of the occasion has collected a far larger assemblage of persons than ordinarily meet together to consecrate the Saint's-days of our Church. The Lord Mayor, in full array, with the various members of his suite, is present, and divides public attention with the young heroes of the day, who, in a compact mass, occupy the upper galleries; and even, it is to be feared, with the sermon—which is always preached by some one who has himself experienced the benefits of the Institution, and is not unfrequently the first fruits of his ministry. Having passed into the building, and, perhaps, waited to hear the anthem sung at the express invitation of the pew-opener, who feels a personal pride in its effect, the visitor, with prudent anxiety to obtain a good position for the approaching ceremony, once more retreats, and finds his way to a small door out of the cloisters, through which, by means of a little interest, he is admitted to the range of raised seats under the gallery, at the upper end of the Hall. Once here he will find no lack of pleasant entertainment to occupy the time which may intervene before the appearance of the chief actors in the forthcoming scene.

The Great Hall of Christ's Hospital, by its noble proportions—large enough it is said to enclose a first-rate ship of war—and by the style of its architecture and decorations which are pure Gothic, creates in the mind a feeling of solemnity very rarely associated with edifices of so recent a date as the one in question, which is the third erection, and was opened as lately as 1829. We look down a vista almost two hundred feet in length, terminating in a handsome organ; on each side of which is a casement of stained glass, offering very glowing representations of the more popular Christian virtues. Below these are tiers of seats, soon, as we shall see, to be thickly tenanted. Down the whole length of the right-hand wall, are pierced large handsome windows which reflect their rainbow tints on the pictures ornamenting the opposite side. These are all connected in some way with the history of the Institution. Panels emblazoned with the arms of the different presidents and other devices occupy the vacant spaces, and a splendid ceiling of grained oak crowns the scene most worthily.

But now we hear a gradually increasing sound of rushing feet and murmuring voices, and from two apertures beneath the organ issues an endless flock of impetuous boys, who leap up to their appointed seats and arrange themselves, without confusion or delay. Those tiers of youthful faces, to which the white bands impart a similarity and sobriety almost ludicrous, the monotonous repetition of the same costume, varied only in its effect by the occasional display of a yellow stocking, present a *tout-ensemble* full of interest and individuality. As we gaze on them, we wonder where sits the Middleton or the Scoblefield of the next generation; but our meditations are soon interrupted by the entrance of the governors with their staves of office, followed by the Lord Mayor and other civic dignitaries, who present, no doubt, to the juvenile lookers-on, a spectacle of unexampled glory and dignity as they advance to their seats of honour at the top of the Hall. When quiet and order are re-established, a small moveable platform is pushed forward to a position immediately facing the Lord Mayor. A semicircular range of seats is quickly formed behind it, which are taken by the head-masters and the little group of Grecians; one of whom, however, now takes his place on the rostrum, and commences an oration in Greek, Latin, or English, as the case may be, on the benefits of the Sister Institutions. A fellow-student crouches immediately behind him to prompt in any moment of need; but there is an intellectual enthusiasm for his subject displayed in his voice and manner that soon puts an end to any fear of failure, and creates its due impression on the audience. They greet him with a warm insipiring round of applause as he descends to give place to his successor, who takes up the same theme in a different tongue. The regulations of the day formerly allowed to every Grecian the opportunity of thus publicly distinguishing himself; but the ceremony was by this means so tediously extended, that the number is now limited, and the speeches are all delivered in little more than an hour. At their conclusion, those of the orators who are proceeding to college disperse themselves among the assembly, to collect, in a glove, the contributions of the public towards their maintenance at the University; and £120 is the average sum secured by this means. According to an ancient law, the beades of the establishment, who have been themselves Bines, then advance, one by one, and having laid down their staves, retire to the bottom of the Hall, in order (says the old ordinance) "that the opinion of the court may be heard touching the doing of their duties;" this is now a mere form, and the insignia of office are immediately resumed. "God save the Queen" is now sung by all present; and the thrilling effect of these myriads of youthful voices may be easily imagined. Their peculiar power, however, is even more decidedly demonstrated by the succession of shrill cheers in which they give vent to their excitement and enthusiasm, and which merrily serenade the ears of the visitor as he passes out. Once more the cloisters present a busy scene, as strangers and residents mingle together in picturesque confusion; but, before long, all will have dispersed, and the echo of Christ's Hospital's gayest festival will exist only in the minds of those who beheld it.