



W.SAYERS

SOME HISTORIC FEASTS

BY FREDERICK DOLMAN.

TH**ERE** is only one Lord Mayor's Show, but the Lord Mayor's Banquet has its compeers in several of our provincial towns. The Guildhall function has long had national importance, but it is only of recent years that circumstances have brought into general notice such historic anniversaries as the Cutlers' Feast at Sheffield, the Colston Banquets at Bristol, and the Oyster Feast at Colchester, whilst the Merchant Dinner at Edinburgh, and the Bean Club Dinner at Birmingham, which can boast a similar antiquity, still lack the fame to be gained from big headlines in the newspapers. The former have become celebrated from Land's End to John o' Groats, since public men of the first rank were persuaded to sit at the festive board and, after dining, deliver their souls on great questions of the day.

In Sheffield, indeed, it is quite believed that "the banquet of the North," as it is called, now eclipses that of the Lord Mayor of London in the interest of its oratory for the commercial world. In the last four years Lord Rosebery, the

Duke of Devonshire, Mr. Balfour, and Sir Michael Hicks-Beach have successively held the post of honour and delivered addresses on the most important topics of trade and finance. It would look as if the Cutlers' Feast will henceforth occupy the same position in reference to such subjects as the Guildhall Banquet has so long enjoyed with reference to foreign affairs, both being recognised occasions for an exposition of the policy of the Government of the day.

It is not unfitting that it should be so. The Master Cutler, who gives the annual feast, is the head of an association which is of the utmost importance to the trade and commerce of the country. The Cutlers' Company of Sheffield is not quite so old as some of the "Companies" of the City of London, but unlike the latter it continues to maintain the most intimate connection with the industry whose name it uses. It may be said that some of our City

Companies now do little else but dine, whereas the Cutlers' annual feast merely rounds off years of good service to Sheffield's



Photo by]

[Middletom.

THE LATE MR. MAURICE RODGERS.
(Master of the Cutlers' Company, Sheffield,
1897-8.)

staple trade, mainly in protecting the reputation of its products. The exact age of the Company is doubtful, but the feast given last November by the Master, Mr. Maurice Rodgers, who then entered upon his year of office (and died before its expiration), was the 274th entertainment of its kind. Mr. F. C. Wild has now been formally installed as Master Cutler.

It is recorded that in the year 1624, in which the Company was incorporated, the dinners cost 6s. and the wine 26s. Even in 1749—according to a recent writer in the *Sheffield Independent*—the bill amounted to only £2 2s. 9d., of which nearly half was set down for "ale and punch." This bill makes a curious contrast with the *menus* of recent feasts and their catalogue of fine viands and choice wines. The reign of luxury probably began with this century, for in 1808 the Master Cutler decided that, considering the hardness of the times, the feast was an unjustifiable extravagance, and the year was accordingly allowed to pass by without the historic hospitality; and the following year the feast was held as usual, but a charge of 15s. each was made to those who partook of it.

In these times the outlook would be black indeed before the Master Cutler would think of assuming his honourable office without bidding several hundred of his fellow citizens to this sumptuous banquet. But, whilst the Master Cutler is the host of the occasion, he often receives valuable help in preparing for it. Thus, ample contributions of game will come from the fine preserves of "the Dukeries" surrounding Sheffield, and there will probably be large gifts of fruit from the gardens of personal friends of the Master Cutler. The plate and cutlery on the table usually come from his own workshops, are often specially made for the occasion, and invariably form a striking exhibition of the arts in which Sheffield is supreme.

At one time the Sheffield ladies had a feast to themselves on the day following that of their lords and masters. Their privileges now consist in partaking of "light refreshments," sitting in the balcony of Cutlers' Hall as soon as the speeches begin, and afterwards following the Mistress Cutler into the drawing-room to make the acquaintance of the distinguished guests from London. Their appearance in the balcony is always the signal for a most enthusiastic cheer from the diners, many of whom subsequently turn with relief from the views of a prosy speaker to those of Yorkshire beauty.

The Cutlers' Hall, in which the feast is always held, is not a very imposing structure. From the street it looks what it is—a fine piece of patchwork. It was first built in 1832, altered and enlarged in 1867, and again in 1887. The banqueting hall, which dates from 1867, is of noble dimensions and is finely decorated in the Italian style, but by common consent of all the orators at every feast is one of the worst possible places in which to speak. To the Sheffield reporters a verbatim report of the guest of the evening's speech is one of the greatest hardships in life. The walls are filled with portraits of past Master Cutlers, as well as of other distinguished Sheffield men.

As everyone who has attended the Cutlers' Feast well knows, it has an exceedingly pleasant appendix with the ladies in the drawing-room. The banquet begins at six, so that even with a very long *menu* and a still longer toast list, there is usually sufficient balance of time before midnight for the Sheffield ladies and the Master Cutler's guests to become acquainted with each other. The spacious drawing-room is adorned for the occasion with numerous pictures by distinguished artists, daintily furnished, and bedecked with flowers, and amid such surroundings in "smoky Sheffield" the scene seems almost like a dream of fair women. It is probably in view of this part of the entertainment that the Master Cutler generally invites from London a few gentlemen like Mr. Dudley Hardy and Mr. Phil May, who, if not orators, have very interesting personalities. The after-dinner talk with the ladies is, in consequence, usually flavoured with some wit and humour. On the whole, although Sheffield does not make a public holiday of the day in October or November on which it is held—as was once the case—the Cutlers' Feast is a red-letter occasion to everyone who is "anyone" in the town.

Of the provincial banquets which in recent years have menaced the pre-eminence of that annually given by the Lord Mayor of London, the Colchester Oyster Feast is the only one which is likewise of a municipal character. It is a picturesque survival, indeed, of the "merrie England" when municipal reform was yet unthought of, and eating and drinking—which were then generally at the public expense—appeared to be the most useful employment for Mayor and Corporation. The old records of Colchester speak of a bewildering number of municipal junketings

of these toast lists has the quotation from Swinburne :—

With the garden of roses above us,
While the oyster beds teem in our reach.

But Mr. Gurney Benham himself uses the



THE FRONT PAGE OF A MENU OF A COLSTON BANQUET.

pen as well as the pencil. Thus in 1896, when Lord Rosebery attended, "The Mayor to His Guests" :—

Whether natives, or freemen, or guests from afar,
Whatever allegiance you own,
Be assured of a welcome, whoever you are,
To this feast of fat things from the Colne.
May natives with natives, for once in a way,
—Not outwardly only—agree;
May those who are freemen contrive for to-day
From all discontent to be free;
May those who are strangers feel quite at their ease,
Nor fancy they're strangers at all:
They may soon be on intimate terms, if they please,
With the natives they find in this hall.

As a rule Mr. Gurney Benham's verses have chiefly a local interest, but those which were contributed to the toast list last year, giving "The Moral of the Feast," had a more general application :—

I.

To public men—and private men as well—
The Moral of the Feast these verses tell.
In spite of foes which everywhere abound,
The cool, impassive oyster keeps his ground;
Tenacious, firm, in temper unexcelled,
His mouth kept shut, unless he is compelled,

And then imparting only what he should,
Not for his own, but for the public good,
All sweet, agreeable, in perfect taste,
With naught superfluous to vex—or waste.
Unselfishly relinquishing his ease,
His only object seems to be to please.

II.

Ratepayers rude may drag him from his shell,
And probe, and prod, and pepper him as well,
And sour his mild existence. But, what then?
To live for some brief space in mouths of men
Is fame—and such contents the oyster's soul;
To satisfy is his ambition's goal,
And though not proud, his gentle heart will flutter
To know he's worthy of his bread and butter.
So thousands here, in uncomplaining way,
Perish to make a civic holiday;
And thus the oyster, destitute of speech,
Contrives a useful thing or two to teach.

This same toast list contained, besides a number of heraldic and other devices, half a dozen principal scenes in the history of the town, portraits of past Colchester worthies, and sketches in black-and-white of some of the prominent figures at the Feast.

The purpose of the Colston banquets at Bristol is to perpetuate the memory of a true philanthropist and to honour that memory by emulation of his charity. But it is to be feared that they are best known to the world at large as occasions of political controversy, when Liberal and Conservative leaders deliver speeches that fill several columns in the morning paper. This fact led the late Samuel Morley, when M.P. for Bristol, to make the only epigram associated with his name. Mr. Morley was speaking of the surprise of people in London when he told them that the Colston dinners were really held for charitable, not political, objects. "Society," he declared, "would certainly be all the better if political views were always advocated with charity, and if all charity were politic." There is reason to fear that the charity of the Colston dinners has not always been politic, but they have certainly introduced a softening influence into party feeling at Bristol.

Edward Colston, whose birthday is thus celebrated from year to year, did nothing very remarkable



STATUE OF EDWARD COLSTON, IN THE CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, BRISTOL.

according to the standard of our own age. But in the seventeenth century it was unprecedented for a merchant—a private citizen—to give away to the poor and needy wealth which is supposed to have amounted to something like £150,000. Bristol received only a part of these benefactions—the largest part, probably, was distributed in London, where his fortune was made and where he resided for more than half his long life. At any rate, it is known that Colston once gave £20,000 for the relief of exceptional distress in the Metropolis—although the gift, as was not unusual, was made anonymously—and that he must have spent several thousand pounds in ransoming unfortunate debtors in the Fleet and Marshalsea prisons. But Bristol was Edward Colston's birthplace, and to Bristol his family had belonged for generations past.

that day in the church of St. Mary Redcliff. At the second dinner £56 18s. was subscribed, which was "directed to be paid into the Vestry of St. Mary Redcliff, the profit thereof to be given to the poor in bread on the 2nd of November for ever." These were the small beginnings of the Colston festival, which is now the means of raising several thousand pounds every year in the cause of charity.

Edward Colston was a staunch Churchman and Royalist through all the political changes his life witnessed; but though he was M.P. for Bristol for three years, he was never an active politician. Nevertheless, it occurred to the Tories of Bristol, when the Colston Society had had a successful career of twenty years, that they ought to establish a society of their own which should be identified with the politics as well as the philanthropy of



Photo by] [Elliott & Fry.

HIS HONOUR JUDGE AUSTIN.
(President of the Grateful Society.)



Photo by] [Clark, Bristol.

MR. C. W. WASBROUGH.
(President of the Dolphin Society.)



Photo by] [Lewis, Clifton.

MR. HERBERT ASHMAN.
(President of the Anchor Society.)

THE THREE PRESIDENTS OF THE COLSTON BANQUETS FOR 1898.

It was in Bristol, too—at the church of All Saints—that Colston was buried. The Colston Hall, which was burnt to the ground last September, was one of the various monuments that had been erected in memory of the famous citizen. But it was felt that these things would not sufficiently preserve the memory of this distinguished Bristolian, whose life had been simply unique, without one single exciting episode. So, in 1726—five years after his decease—the Colston Society, now spoken of as "the parent," for the sake of distinction, was established at a dinner held on the birthday of its patron saint, November 2 according to the old style, November 13 according to the new. At this, the first Colston dinner, the sum of £34 4s. was subscribed for the preaching of a sermon every year on

Colston. For the first few years the politics of the Dolphin Society were much more prominent than its philanthropy, and this fact led to the establishment of the Grateful Society in 1758. This society, like the parent, was politically neutral, and seems to have been started by the Bristol Whigs as a protest against the action of the Tories. The protest was not very effective, however, for a few years later they themselves started a partisan society under the title of the Anchor.

All four societies still flourish and hold an annual dinner on Colston's birthday, but it is of the Dolphin and Anchor feasts that most is heard. These names, by the way, were borrowed from the philanthropic merchant's favourite device. This device was suggested, it is said, by the return of

one of his ships long after she had been given up for lost. The vessel—so the story goes—had experienced a fearful gale, during



A MENU OF THE EDINBURGH MERCHANT COMPANY'S DINNER.

which a hole was made in the side by the anchor, and she was only saved by the coming of a dolphin, which filled up the gap. The annual dinners of the two societies—or, rather, the total sums subscribed thereat—have reflected the relative prosperity of Liberalism and Toryism in the Western city. At one time the Anchor dinner produced a larger amount, but of recent years the Dolphin has obtained and kept a good lead in the matter of subscriptions.

There is no doubt that party rivalry helps to open their purse-strings, whilst the spirit of emulation on the part of each succeeding president at the Dolphin, Anchor, or Grateful dinner likewise strengthens the subscription list, all the leading men of Bristol filling this position in turn. In one instance, many years ago, the president of one of the societies succeeded at the dinner in raising such an unprecedentedly large amount, that next year it was impossible to find anyone who would take the chair, which had, accordingly, to be left vacant.

The Dinner of "The Company of Mer-

chants" of Edinburgh is probably the most historic feast north of the Tweed. The Company was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1681, and resembles the Cutlers' Company of Sheffield and the guilds of the City of London in its main objects. Its membership consists of five or six hundred leaders in the trade and commerce of Scotland's capital, whilst to the annual dinner a number of other representative men are invited, Lord Rosebery being the principal guest in 1894. The banquet, which is of the most sumptuous character, is always held in the handsome hall of the Company in Hanover Street. This building has been in the possession of the Company for less than twenty years, but is rich in paintings, sculpture, and various souvenirs of its long past.

The history of the Merchant Company's dinner is rather matter-of-fact. But in its toast list, which has generally symbolical illustrations, there is some suggestion to the contrary. The toast of the evening is not the Edinburgh Merchant Company, but "The Stock of Broom"—its emblem. In speaking to this toast, the late Mr. Robert Chambers once said—"A modest shrub, with a great tendency to increase. As such the constituent members regarded their society and plan of charity."

"Stock of Broom Pudding," it may be added, is a popular item in the *menu*; and, on the whole, this venerable feast is doubtless as successful as the others of which I have given some account in

warming the hearts of the men—united as they are by some common tie—whom they bring together in fraternal relationship.



Photo by]

[Crooke, Edinburgh.

THE MASTER OF THE MERCHANT COMPANY, EDINBURGH.