

A DAY AT A COUNTRY FAIR.

By A. S. APPELBEE.

Illustrated by A. J. WALL.

THE sedges by the riverside swayed gently in the summer breeze, and the poplar leaves whistled overhead and turned their grey faces to the sunlight, as I sat in a ferry-boat waiting to be carried to the opposite shore for a lazy day of reading in the shade. The ferryman did not believe in two journeys where one would do, and paused till an individual halfway back to the village came up, who proved to be none other than Jack Shipley, disguised in his Sunday clothes. Ordinarily Jack is a picturesque personality, well set up and well favoured, with a clear eye and a steady hand, who takes a pride in the occupation of a gamekeeper. An inquiry as to the reason of this metamorphosis elicited that

it was "club-day," or the anniversary of a friendly society, in the nearest little town.

"It'd do you writin' chaps a sight of good to go and see some real life," said Jack sweetly. "I'll take you to the club dinner, so

as you won't starve, and show you the fun of the fair after."

Of course I went. It was worth it to have the three-mile walk to the town with a man whose views were quaint and original,

but whose observation might have rivalled that of Richard Jefferies. When we arrived, the three clubs in the district were taking part in a joint church-parade. The parson was slipshod and prosy, as country parsons may be without reproach, and we joined a group who had disposed themselves on the tombstones outside, to see the procession start before they walked down to dinner. Jack was cordially welcomed.

"What, Master Watson," he said to a patient-looking old

fellow in corduroy, "you at the Trinity Feast again! Where be you livin'?"

"At the big 'ouse," said the old fellow quietly, using a current localism for the Union workhouse. "'Ow's your missis?"



“You be broke, Master Watson, and no mistake.”

"Oh, I didn't know. She's very well. And 'ow be you?"

"Well, in 'eart 'ealth I be as well as ever I was, but I've lost some'ow the use of one 'and"—it was plainly paralysed—"and they turned me off then from my job. But there, I were seventy-three; what else could I expect?"

There was not a trace of animosity in the tone in which the words were spoken.

"You be broke, Master Watson, and no mistake," said a young wife sitting near, with all the brutal frankness of the country. "'Ow do they use you?"

"Pretty fair, Jaën, pretty fair; but it's my last Trinity. I shall never come no more."

"Why not? Where shall you be?"

"Dead, Jaën," said the worn-out old worker quite peacefully.

Just then the brass band struck up a dance tune and Watson was forgotten in the bustle. The club members filed out in shiny black coats and trousers that had fitted their fathers, possibly, and bore evidence in their creases of careful preservation. These contrasted oddly with their rolling agricultural gait and with their brightly coloured sashes and insignia of office, as they marched two and two behind the banners of their respective orders down the entire length of the village. We went to the largest dinner, in a tent at the back of a public-house, where the local M.P. presided, sitting at a table reserved for about a dozen visitors. Viands specially cooked, and wine from his own cellar, aroused no remark among the two hundred members, who were used to this kind of thing on the part of the squire, besides being fairly occupied in obtaining their own half-dollar's worth. The platefuls that followed one another down their bronzed throats would have to be seen to be believed. My next-door neighbour put the matter in a nutshell.

"Where's your feyther, Bill?" said someone to him.

"Not comin' this year," replied my neighbour.

"'Ow's that, Bill?"

"'E says 'e's allus bad for three days after Trinity."

The pudding was stodgy and heavy, but less so than the oratory from the visitors' table and the statistics hurled at us by the secretary. Only one item relieved the gloom, and that was when an unpopular squire replied to the toast of his health. Agricultural hinds of to-day, at any rate, are not

much like the popular ideal created by Charles Kingsley. Instead of showing sullen respect, the villagers suppressed the offending squire by quietly starting a universal hum of conversation on local topics, in which the speaker was bound to be stifled, shout he never so loudly.

Outside in the pure air again the place was livening up. Carts had rolled past till the inn yards had overflowed into the streets—there were two streets. Where the place simmered in the forenoon, it boiled now. Cheap Jacks and rock stalls were doing a flourishing trade with customers whose good humour was only equalled by their open-eyed astonishment, as they witnessed some simple feat of sleight-of-hand, or recognised an acquaintance never seen since the corresponding day last year. Leather-lunged rascals shouted of the ease with which cocoanuts could be exchanged for pence in alleys where the nuts had just been secured in iron hoops as firmly as circumstances and a mallet permitted. The rival orchestras of the sea-on-land and of the jenny horses blared in a brazen cacophony. Down-at-heel villains howled the latest music-hall airs—all the questionable morality that could be obtained in six of them for a penny. Showmen announced their wares in a monotone that added to the din.

And how things have progressed, to be sure, since the days of my youthful "mops!" That was not a century ago, by any means; but then we rejoiced in hobby-horses that were simply run round by a couple of men. Now the hobby-horses turn up in a train of wagons, drawn by a traction engine, which subsequently snorts amidships as the three rows of brightly painted steeds pursue their giddy way, and one's best girl bobs up and down serenely by one's side. They will be worked with electricity very soon. Indeed, I hear that this is an accomplished fact in some shows already.

Jack volunteered to show me round and began the process by making straight for the nearest shooting-gallery. Here, with fearsome weapons that would have wrought more damage than some of the battleships in the Spanish war, you fractured bottles for the modest "brown." Jack hit his first two, to the evident amusement of two townsmen who were watching the proceedings. A "bob" changed hands in the form of a bet upon the next shot—of course, to the advantage of the keeper—and, almost before I realised what was going on, Jack and one of the strangers had come to an

understanding and were shooting for a wager. The other stranger turned to me.

"Your friend will lose," he said. "Gibson is a pigeon shot in Birmingham."

But Jack did not lose. They did not know keepers. Half-a-crown was the forfeit of the first man to miss his mark, and the large coin soon joined the small one.

The stranger grumbled, changed his weapon, and quadrupled the stake. A crowd soon began to gather, and Jack

"A gamekeeper bumpkin. Good morning."

The boxing-booth was our next venture. It was worth the "tuppence" demanded to see two youths as like as peas introduced as Mike Sullivan, of New York, and Tom Jones, the famous boxer of "Popular." How one loves to think the Poplar hero has not ascertained his enemy's powers already in a hundred desperate encounters, where the same referee has seen fair play! and that



"You fractured bottles for the modest 'brown.'"

opened the ball with a bull's-eye. Amid general silence both men kept their aim perfect for several rounds and there was almost a cheer. Jack, the rural candidate, had won again, and the rural folks were mightily delighted.

"Well, I'm blown! Me take down by a blooming bumpkin!" said the stranger. But Jack only smiled a frank smile, and his clear eye twinkled as he added—

he is not the son of the same mother, and that he will not be thus seconded and thus battling with his defiant antagonist every day as long as the tuppences accrue! And how fit the pair must be, drink they never so deeply in private life!

My old joy and relative, Aunt Sally, has also moved with the times. She is distinctly abreast of the modern spirit of progress, and in her latest phases might almost be accounted a new woman. Jack pointed out Aunt Sally in the form of a man with his head and hands through a board, as though he were in the stocks. The Circe who stood at the other end of the range, and dispensed

favours in the form of balls to heave at him, only a penny for two, was his wife. One can fancy that in case of matrimonial recriminations she might take a mean advantage by potting at him in an unguarded moment. Not but what the man in the stocks is very well qualified to take care of himself by means of adroit dodging. When the worst comes to the worst he has a padded turban on the top of his head, with which he plays the ball as neatly as W. G. Grace can return a straight one to Richardson. One return of this kind rebounded on to the thrower's chin. But an incredible number of shots Aunt Sally eludes, and a suitable grimace will often impel the infuriated person at the other end to part with a further copper in order to square accounts.

Some of the other shows were not of much account. There were the waxworks, where a collar and a little hair had transformed my old friend Dizzy by a Fregoli change into Gladstone. There was the marvellous

bearded woman, as to whom Jack inquired of an unkempt imp in the tent, "Is that your ma, my boy?" and received the petrifying answer, "No, sir, that's my pa." There was the Temple of Thespis, where "The Lady of Lyons" and a farce were knocked off in twenty-two minutes, and Claude in the former hoped that he might not be "gelatined."

These and many more grew uproarious as the sun sank low in the sky and the money was mostly spent. The young people got to the state of exchanging chaste salutes without an introduction. Then we old fogeys thought it time for the sober homeward journey, but we started in a forgiving frame of mind, as for most of these merry ones it was the only holiday of the year. There was almost pathos in the discourse of a young matron whom we overtook leading her two little ones, and descanting upon the merits of sixpennyworth of "fairings." It was so much pleasure obtained at so small an outlay.



"AUNT SALLY" UP TO DATE.