

The Examiner.

"THIS IS TRUE LIBERTY, WHEN FREEBORN MEN—HAVING TO ADVISE THE PUBLIC, MAY SPEAK FREE."—EURIPIDES.

VOL. II.]

CHARLOTTETOWN, P. E. ISLAND, MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 1849.

[No. 74.]

[From Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, Dec. 2, 1848.]

FEASTS.

THE institution of feasts is one of the few customs current in all nations, savage and civilised, from the Londoner's Christmas dinner to the Kamskadale's glorification over mushroom wine in the first days of September. Every people have their feasts. The details may and do differ considerably, as in the cases cited, but the principle of feasting appears to be the same throughout the world; its origin evidently rests among the peculiarities of human conduct and history, as no species but our own in the wide creation has been observed to appoint assemblies, or make preparations for the purpose. Some of them have indeed been too often feasted at the expense of man—such as wolves and ravens in great battle fields; and the old poets were accustomed to represent them as calculating the chances, and rejoicing in the prospect of war; but this was in the style of the court jester, who, when a quarrelsome prince of Hungary, just come to the throne, inquired why so many carrion crows appeared in the neighbourhood of Presburg, informed him that they were assembling to congratulate each other on his majesty's happy accession, as there would soon be plenty of provisions on either the German or Turkish frontier.

Religion, politics, and social habits have contributed to the number and variety of the world's feasts; and those of religious institution, however perverted from their original design, are generally found to have the most continuous hold on popular memory. A monk, some centuries ago, obliged the world with a treatise entitled 'The Feasts of all Times,' which he divided into the special and the stated. Under the first division were comprehended great banquets, for the celebration of particularly happy occasions, or at least those that were so considered; and under the last, the fixed and annual festivals that always return with their seasons. The monk's volume must have been entertaining, though its subject is now considerably out of date, for part of the book was occupied with directions, as the author said, for the government of feasts in general, according to the wisdom of the ancients, and the old approved rules of festivity. Whether it is that our times are too prudent and business-like to countenance the consequent expense of time and funds, that the daily wants and wishes of civilised mankind have increased to such a degree as to engross their entire energy and attention, till all work and no play has become the description of these latter days, or that the nations, having outgrown their childhood, no longer place their chief joy in plumcake and holidays, it were difficult to decide; but the glory of feast and festival has waned from among us, and, like the rest of the old world's customs, now presents but feeble and fading memorials, which every year diminishes.

The special feasts or banquets which formed such an important item in the expenses of earlier times, are indeed still worthily represented by our great public dinners. A French tourist has remarked that everything in England begins and ends with a dinner; and the zeal of no party could be satisfactorily demonstrated without the play of knives and forks, as if the highway to the sympathies of the nation led through the digestive organs of its people. These observations were never more strikingly verified than in the present day. The dinner is an affair of all-work, and does duty on every occasion: the tribute of admiration to the genius of a successful poet, of sympathy with a disappointed politician, and of confidence in a popular minister, is a dinner. By this events are commemorated, political parties strengthened, and mercantile companies cemented; in short, interest, resolution, and enthusiasm, all come out in the shape of a dinner. Balls are at times produced by the same causes, but they generally come as afterpieces, in consideration of the ladies, all of whom are not likely to be satisfied by seeing 'the lions feed' from

the gallery, however curious or edifying the spectacle may be; but dining is the recognized demonstration of the modern Englishman. The more showy but unsubstantial fete has long been the favourite method in France, perhaps from its pageant-like character being better suited to the theatrical genius of the people; but even there the dinner-giving doctrine has recently gained ground; and it cannot be forgotten that government opposition to a reform banquet was the drop that overflowed the cup in the late revolution; and Louis-Philippe may be fairly said to have lost his crown for spoiling a dinner.

The greatest displays of this festive kind made in Britain of late years have originated in political zeal. The great banquet by which the passing of the Reform Bill was celebrated, and some of the dinners given to O'Connell in the zenith of his popularity, are remarkable examples. They had no rivals in their line, except one or two coronation banquets, and the fete given by George IV., when Prince Regent, to the allied sovereigns at Carlton House.

The preparations for this royal 'blow out' were completed some weeks previous to its occurrence, and exhibited to the public, with no small profit to the regent's servants. 'Ave you been at Carlton 'Ouse?' is said to have become a standing inquiry among Cockney acquaintances, the sight being regarded as scarcely inferior to the Christmas pantomime. But even kings and princes no longer feast as of old. What are our modern dinners, with all their toasts and speeches (the latter, by the way, being a luxury or infliction unknown to our ancestors), compared to the banquets chronicled among the doings of past generations?

The coronation feast of Edward III. cost a sum in those days equivalent to about £40,000 of the present currency; and as the church came little behind the crown in either ability or expense in that feasting period, at the installation of Ralph, abbot of St. Augustine, Canterbury, in 1300, six thousand guests were entertained with a dinner consisting of three thousand dishes. That these dishes must have been tolerably substantial, is presumable from the fact, recorded on most respectable authority, that at the marriage feast of Alexander III. of Scotland, and the Princess Margaret, daughter of Henry III. of England, which was solemnised at York, the archbishop of that city presented the English king with sixty fat oxen, which were all consumed on the occasion. Some portions of those profuse entertainments would create something more than surprise in the mind of a modern diner-out: for example, the flesh of cranes, herons, and hawks, prepared in various fashions, were accounted delicacies. Great pieces of whale and young porpoises are mentioned in terms much higher than those employed by a fishmonger of to-day in describing his new turtle even to a London alderman.

Though it does not appear that the 'feast of reason and the flow of soul,' so often referred to since its mention by the original poet, formed any considerable part of the great old banquets, provision for their mental refreshment was not entirely neglected; but the apparatus for that purpose now reads rather strangely, especially when we find mimics, and bards, and fools, together with morris-dancers, tumblers, and moralities, described as appearing between the courses under the title of 'Interneats' amusements so called were among the most expensive and peculiar supplies necessary for great feasts of the middle ages. The French particularly excelled in them. At a dinner given by their king, Charles V., to the emperor of Germany, towards the end of the fourteenth century, the following ingenious device was exhibited:—A ship with masts, sails, and rigging was seen first; she had for colours the arms of the city of Jerusalem; Godfrey de Bouillon appeared on deck, accompanied by several knights armed cap-a-pie; the ship advanced into the middle of the room or hall, without the machine which moved it being perceptible. Then

the city of Jerusalem appeared, with all its towers lined with Saracens. The ship approached the city; the Christians landed, and began the assault; the besieged made a good defence; several scaling-ladders were thrown down; but at length the city was taken.

The difficulty of executing such a festive design in an age when mechanical science was so little understood, may be imagined; but it is a proof to what expense and trouble the men of those days were willing to go for their feasts' sake, and, as the chronicler adds, 'made all who heard of it admire, and delighted the emperor between the two great courses of fish and fowl.' The feasts of old Europe in their most costly days were, however, but feeble imitations of those by which the Eastern monarchs rejoiced the hearts and lightened the purses of their subjects about the same period. The festive details in the 'Arabian Nights,' so dazzling to the early imaginations of most readers, are, incredible as it may seem, far outshone by some real affairs of the kind which have found place in authentic history. The marriage feast of the Caliph El-ma-Moon continued for nineteen days, the father of the bride entertaining on the banks of the Tigris crowds which no palace could contain; and by way of variety, between the courses showers of gold coins, bags of ambergris, and at length balls of musk, were scattered among them, the latter enclosing small papers, each of which was a ticket for some of the different kinds of disposable property most valued in Asia—lands, slaves, and horses; the fortunate scambler being made aware by proclamation that immediate possession should be given of whatever was inscribed on the paper. The *chef d'œuvre* of this feast was a candle of ambergris, weighing eighty pounds, which burned in a golden lantern in front of the palace, and a trayful of pearls, which the bride's grandmother emptied upon her and the caliph as they sat in state. After this pattern wedding, we are informed that El-ma-Moon bestowed upon his father-in-law the revenue of a Persian province for a year, in order that that munificent satrap might have an opportunity of reimbursing himself, the taxes being completely in his power to increase or diminish; and it is not probable that he adopted the latter arrangement.

This present-making fashion was a frequent attendant on ancient feasts, and by no means unknown in Europe; but sums of money and rich dresses seem to have been the approved offerings in western lands, and are often mentioned as bestowed by sovereigns on their guests. A curious and somewhat characteristic mode of presentation was once adopted by a Chinese emperor at a great feast given to celebrate the birth of his son. The utensils with which each guest was provided for the occasion were according to the rank of the user, the lowest of gold, and those in the ascending scale ornamented with gems of more or less value; and a public crier in the midst of the entertainment announced that they had his majesty's permission to carry them home when the assembly broke up. Asia is indeed the native soil of feasts, where they have expanded to the greatest magnificence. The diminished power and wealth of its princes no longer enable them to emulate the wedding of El-ma-Moon; but they still maintain the feasting fashion of their ancestors, with all the remnants of expense and splendour they can muster; and so essential is a feast on felicitous occasions considered to the respectability of private life, that families of even the inferior castes in Hindoostan have been known to expend not only the savings of years, but their entire means of subsistence, in furnishing forth a single wedding. It has even been urged as an excuse for the infanticide of female children, in former times more frequent among them, that the expense of marriage feasts would thereby be spared to the family. So much for Eastern providence!

To use an American phrase, the further we 'advance backward' in civilisation, the importance and magnitude