

VIII

MERRIE ENGLAND

Now it might be supposed by someone reading these brief abstracts relating to Tyburn that life in ancient London was a grim and terrible business. That is wholly a false conclusion. The great mass of the people went quietly about their business undisturbed. Moreover there were frequent pageants on the river and ridings in the City—such gorgeous shows as the Londoners have always enjoyed. Many tournaments were held and the population of all classes had their sports and pastimes. There was much to do in the way of work, for apart from its trade London was a city where all the crafts were cultivated. It was a busy London and a merry London in the Middle Ages.

Take for example this from our old twelfth century friend Fitzstephen, the monk of Canterbury.

Without one of the gates is a certain field, Smooth both in name and situation. Every Friday, except some greater festival come in the way, there is a brave sight of gallant horses to be sold: Many come out of the City to buy or look on, to wit, Earls, Barons and Knights, Citizens, all resorting hither. It is a pleasant sight there to behold the Nags, well fleshed, sleek and shining, delightfully walking, and their feet on either side up and down together by turns; or also trotting horses which are more convenient for men that bear arms: these, although they set a little harder, go away readily and lift up and set down together the contrary Feet on either Side. Here are also young colts of a good Breed, that have not been well accustomed to the bridle; these fling about, and by mounting bravely shew their mettle. Here are the principal horses, strong and well limbed. Here also are the Brest Horses, (fit to be joined by couples) very fair and handsome, and sleek about the ears, carrying their Necks aloft, being well fleshed, and round about the buttocks. The buyers first look at their soft and slow pace, and after cause them to put on with more speed, and behold them in their Gallop. When these Coursers are ready to run their Race, and perhaps some others, which in their kind are both good for carriage and strong for Travel; the People give a Shout, and the Common Hacknies are commanded to go aside. They that ride are Boys: Three together, and sometimes two make matches among themselves, being expert in governing their horses, which they ride with Curb Bridles, labouring by all means that one get not the race from the Other. And the very Beasts, in like Manner, after their fashion, are eager for the Race, while their Joints tremble, and impatient of delay, endure not standing still in a Place. When the Token is given, they stretch out their limbs, and run with all activity and Speed: the Riders spurring them on, for the love of Praise or the hope of Victory; and exciting them by whips and cries. You would think everything were in motion with Heraclitus; and Zeno's Opinion to be false, saying that nothing moves from place to place.

THE MUSEUM JOURNAL

In another part stand the country people with Cattle and Commodities of the Field, large Swine and Kine with their Udders strutting out, fair bodied Oxen and the woolly Flock. There are also Cart Horses, fit for the Dray, the Plough or the Chariot: and some Mares big with Foal: together with others that have their wanton colts following them at their Side.

Or this.

To this City Merchants bring in Wares by Ships from every nation under heaven. The Arabian sends his Gold, the Sabeen, his frankincense and Spices, the Scythian Arms, Oil of Palms from the plentiful Wood: Babylon her fat soil, and Nilus his precious Stones: The Seres send purple garments: they of Norway and Russia Trouts, furs and Sables: and the French their wines.

Or this.

London, instead of common interludes belonging to the Theatre, hath plays of a more Holy Subject: Representations of those Miracles which the Holy Confessors wrought, or of the sufferings wherein the glorious constancy of Martyrs did appear.

“Moreover that we may begin with the Schools of Youth, feeling once we were all children: Yearly at Shrovetide, the Boys of every School bring fighting cocks to their masters, and all the forenoon is spent at School to see these Cocks fight together. After dinner all the youth of the City goeth to play at Ball in the Fields: the Scholars of every study have their Balls. The Practisers also of all the Trades have everyone their Ball in their hands. The ancients sort, the Fathers, and the wealthy citizens, come on horseback to see the youngsters at their sport, with whom, in a Manner, they participate by motion: stirring their own natural heat in the view of the active youth, with whose mirth and liberty they seem to communicate.

Every Sunday in Lent, after Dinner, a Company of young men ride out into the field on Horses which are fit for War and principal Runners. Every one among them is taught to run the rounds with his horse. The Citizens' Sons issue out through the gates by Troops, furnished with Lances and warlike Shields: The younger sort have their Pikes not headed with Iron, where they make a representation of Battle, and exercise a skirmish. There resort to this exercise many Courtiers, when the King lies near Hand, and young Striplings out of the families of Barons and great Persons, which have not yet attained to the warlike girdle, to train and skirmish. Hope of victory inflames every one. The neighing and fierce Horses bestir their joints and chew their Bridles, and cannot endure to stand still: At least they begin their Race, and then the young Men divide their troops: some labour to outstrip their leaders, and cannot reach them; others fling down their Fellows and get beyond them.

Upon the Holidays all Summer, the Youth is exercised in leaping, Shooting, Wrestling, casting of Stones, and throwing of Javelins fitted with Loops for the Purpose, which they strive to fling beyond the mark: they also use Bucklers, like fighting men. As for the Maidens, they have their exercise of dancing and tripping until Moonlight.

THE MUSEUM JOURNAL

In Winter almost every Holiday before Dinner the foaming Boars fight for their heads, and prepare with deadly Tushes to be made Bacon: or else some lusty Bulls, or huge Bears are baited with Dogs.

Many Citizens take delight in Birds, as Sparrowhawks, Gosshawks, and suchlike, and in dogs to hunt in the woody ground. The Citizens have authority to hunt in Middlesex, Hertfordshire, all the Chilterns, and in Kent, as far as Graywater.

The Thames today has to feed London and he is kept pretty busy at that but long ago he had time to spare for sports as well and for the pageants that sometimes covered the water from bank to bank with rich and gaily decorated barges. Of the water sports Fitzstephen gives us this description.

In Easter Holidays they counterfeit a Sea Fight: a Pole is set up in the middle of the River, with a Target well fastened thereon, and a young man stands in a Boat which is rowed with Oars, and driven on with the Tide, who with his Spear hits the Target in his Passage: with which Blow, if he break the Spear and stand upright, so that he hold Footing, he hath his Desire: but, if his Spear continues unbroken by the Blow, he is tumbled into the Water, and his Boat passeth clear away: but on either side this Target two Ships stand in Ward, with many young men ready to take him up, after he is sunk, as soon as he appeareth again on the top of the water: The Spectators stand upon the Bridge, and in Solars upon the River to behold these Things, being prepared for Laughter.

In Winter the river was frozen over and fairs were held on the ice. Skating and similar amusements were in fashion during this season.

When the great Moor, which washeth Moorfields, at the North Wall of the City is frozen over, great Companies of Young Men go to sport upon the Ice: then fetching a Run, and setting their feet at a distance, and placing their bodies sideways, they slide a great Way. Others take heaps of ice, as if it were great Millstones, and make Seats: Many going before, draw him that sits thereon, holding one another by the Hand: in going so fast, some slipping with their feet all fall down together. Some are better practised to the Ice and bind to their shoes Bones as the Legs of some Beasts, and hold Stakes in their hands headed with sharp Iron, which sometimes they strike against the Ice: and these Men go on with Speed as doth a bird in the air, or darts shot from some warlike Engine: Sometimes two men set themselves at a Distance and run one against another as it were a Tilt, with these Stakes wherewith one or both parties are thrown down, not without some hurt to their Bodies: and after their fall, by reason of the violent Motion are carried a good distance one from another: and wheresoever the Ice doth touch their head it rubs off the skin and lays it bare: and if one falls upon his leg or arm it is usually broken: But young Men being greedy of honour and desirous of Victory, do thus exercise themselves in Counterfeit Battles, that they may bear the Brunt more strongly, when they come to do it in good Earnest.

Among the popular sports for which any lusty youth might qualify was wrestling. Enthusiasm for the wrestling match ran high and feeling sometimes developed into disturbances, for the crowds that witnessed these contests and backed their favourite champions were not always restrained in their behaviour. Yet for the most part the sports were conducted with perfect good nature and without more violent demonstrations than a modern football match. The wrestlers' prize was much coveted for the honour and acclaim that went with it and for the sake of possession. Here are some of the prizes that went to the winners: a ram, a bull, a courser with saddle and bridle, a gold ring, a pipe of wine.

The great game however was the Tournament. It was the sport of knights and nobles. At Smithfield, at Cheapside, at Whitehall, at Westminster and at the Tower, these exhibitions of military prowess and skill were held, sometimes for a week at a time, with all the splendour that attended the presence of the Court. Champions fought in the lists on horseback with lances or on foot with swords and battleaxes. The encounters were mimic battles and sometimes they were duels to the death. Sometimes the tournaments had an international character like the one between the French and English Knights at Smithfield in 1409 and the challenge of the Scottish and English Knights in 1393. It was dangerous sport but still it was sport and a spectacle in which London was profoundly interested. The last tournament took place in 1610.

Of hunting there was plenty for the great forests that stretched away into Middlesex were full of deer and wild boar, wild cattle, wolves and wildcats and foxes. There were also pheasants, ducks, geese and smaller birds.

Everybody danced and everybody played on some kind of instrument. Every gentleman's education included music and dancing. People of every class even those whose education did not include the alphabet learned to play and sing, for these were universal accomplishments acquired with ease. In the palace, in the castle, in the great house, they sang and played and danced. They danced in the garden that went with every house; they danced in the meadow and they danced in the street. Every tavern had its minstrel with harp in hand and dancing girl that stepped to sound of flute and viol, and story teller that murmured his tale to the strumming of his lute or accompanied the guests as they took up the burden of a drinking song.

THE MUSEUM JOURNAL

Brynge us in good ale, and brynge us in good ale:
For our Blessed Lady's sake brynge us in good ale:
Brynge us in no brown brede, for that is made of branne,
Nor brynge us in no whyt brede, for therein is no gaine,
 But brynge us in good ale.
Brynge us in no befe, for ther is many bonys,
But brynge us in good ale, for that goeth downe at onys,
 And brynge us in good ale.

In the Great House they danced stately dances to the music of an orchestra in a gallery. People who did not live in great houses danced mostly in the street with music of fiddle or of pipe and tabor. Their dancing was perhaps more sprightly than graceful, with more agility than stateliness. They danced round dances, they danced the Morris dance and at the festival in May they joined hands and danced around the Maypole. When spring was in the fields and young blood responded to the call, they all went out, man and maid, into the fields on Mayday eve, and on to the edge of the forest where the wild rose bloomed and the hawthorn wore its robes of pink and white, they gathered the branching blooms. In the morning they returned.

Oh do not tell the priest our plight for he would call it a sin,
But we have been out in the woods all night aconjuring summer in.

That is Kipling, but in that far off England before Chaucer there were songs in honour of Mayday. They were sung by the people when they went a maying—with pipers going before and dancing all the way they sang

Sumer is icumen in,
 Lhude sing cuccu
Groweth sed and bloweth med,
 And springth the wde nu
 Sing cuccu.

Awe bleteth after lomb,
 Llouth after calve cu,
Bulluc sterteth, bucke verteth,
 Murie sing cuccu.

Cuccu, cuccu, wel singeth thu cuccu
 Ne swik thu haver nu,
Sing cuccu, cuccu nu, sing cuccu,
 Sing cuccu, sing cuccu, nu.

One of the oldest and sweetest of England's folksongs.

In each parish they set up the Maypole, decked with garlands and ribbons. Then wearing chaplets of wild flowers and singing, they danced about it in a ring, with Robin Hood and Maid Marian and Little John. At night they lit bonfires, they danced and they feasted. England was Merrie England in the Middle Ages and London, emerging from its walled seclusion led on the national aspirations and became the heart of England. John Stow writing of things whereof he knew, describes the Mayday custom.

In the month of May, namely on Mayday in the morning, every man, except impediment, would walk into the sweet meadows and green woods, there to rejoice their spirits with the beauty and savour of sweet flowers, and with the harmony of birds, praising God in their kind; and for example hereof Edward Hall hath noted, that King Henry VIII . . . on Mayday in the morning, with Queen Katherine his wife, accompanied by many lords and ladies, rode a-maying from Greenwich to the high ground of Shooter's Hill, where, as they passed by the way, they espied a company of tall yeomen, clothed all in green, with green hoods, and bows and arrows, to the number of two hundred; one being their chieftain, was called Robin Hood, who required the King and his company to stay and see his men shoot; whereunto the King granting, Robin Hood whistled, and all the two hundred archers shot off, loosing all at once; and when he whistled again they likewise shot again; their arrows whistled by craft of the head, so that the noise was strange and loud, which greatly delighted the King, Queen, and their company. Moreover, this Robin Hood desired the King and Queen, with their retinue, to enter the greenwood, where in harbours made of boughs and decked with flowers, they were set and served plentifully with venison and wine by Robin Hood and his men, to their great contentment, and had other pageants and pastimes, as ye may read in my said author.

I find also, that in the month of May, the citizens of London of all estates, lightly in every parish, or sometimes two or three parishes joining together, had their several mayings, and did fetch in maypoles, with divers warlike shows, with good archers, morris dancers, and other devices, for pastime all the day long; and toward the evening they had stage plays and bonfires in the streets.

The priests might call it a sin as suggested in Kipling's lines, but they never forbade the practise of these pagan rites. In fact the old Church nourished the older customs. That was one of the charges that the Puritans brought against the Church. They in their turn denounced the Mayday festival together with every other pleasant pastime and when they had the power they suppressed it altogether. Here is what a Puritan of Elizabeth's time wrote about the Maypole.

Against May, Whitsonday, or other time, all the young men and maides, olde men and wives, run gadding over night to the woods, groves, hils, and mountains, where they spend all the night in plesant pastimes; and in the morning they

return, bringing with them birch and branches of trees, to deck their assemblies withall. And no mervaile, for there is a great Lord present amongst them, as superintendent and Lord over their pastimes and sportes, namely, Sathan, prince of hel. But the chiefest jewel they bring from thence is their May-pole, which they bring home with great veneration, as thus. They have twentie or fortie yoke of oxen, every ox having a sweet nose-gay of flowers placed on the tip of his hornes; and these oxen drawe home this May-pole (this stinking ydol, rather) which is covered all over with floures and hearbs, bound round about with strings from the top to the bottome, and sometime painted with variable colours, with two or three hundred men, women and children following it with great devotion. And thus being reared up with handkercheefs and flags hovering on the top, they straw the ground rounde about, binde green boughes about it, set up sommer haules, bowers, and arbors hard by it; and then fall they to dance about it, like as the heathen people did at the dedication of the idols, wherof this is a perfect pattern, or rather the thing itself. (Stubbes, Anatomie of Abuses.)

Suppressed by the Puritans during the Commonwealth the Mayday rites were revived at the Restoration. Then was the great Maypole that from time immemorial had stood in the Strand where St. Mary le Strand now is, reared anew to a greater height than ever.

Let me declare to you the manner in general of that stately cedar erected in the Strand, 134 foot high, commonly called the Maypole, upon the cost of the parishioners there adjacent, and the gracious consent of his sacred Majesty (Charles II), with the illustrious prince the Duke of York. This tree was a most choice and remarkable piece; 'twas made below bridge and brought in two parts up to Scotland Yard, and from thence it was conveyed, April 14 (1661), to the Strand to be erected. It was brought with a streamer flourishing before it, drums beating all the way, and other sorts of music; it was supposed to be so long, that landsmen (as carpenters) could not possibly raise it. Prince James, the Duke of York, Lord High Admiral of England, commanded twelve seamen off aboard to come and officiate the business, whereupon they came and brought their cables, pullies, and other tacklins, with six great anchors. The Maypole then being joined together, and hoopt about with bands of iron, the crown and vane, with the King's arms richly gilded, was placed on the head of it, a large top like a balcony was about the middle of it. This being done the trumpets did sound, and in four hours space it was advanced upright, after which, being established fast in the ground, six drum did beat, and the trumpets did sound; again great shouts and acclamations the people give, that it did ring throughout all the Strand. After that came a Morrice dance, finely deckt, with purple scarfs in their half-shirts, with a tabor and pipe, the ancient wind music, and danced round about the Maypole and after that danced the rounds of their liberty (Duchy of Lancaster). It is placed as near hand as they could guess in the very same pit where the former stood, but far more glorious, bigger and higher, than ever any one that stood before it; and the seamen themselves do confess that it could not be built higher, nor is there such a one in Europe beside, which highly doth please his Majesty and the Duke of York. Little children did much rejoyce, and ancient people did clap their hands, saying "golden

days begin to appear. (The Citie's Loyalty Displayed, 1661. Quoted by Wheatley & Cunningham.)

Every season had its festival and the celebration of every festival began on its eve and continued through the day. At midsummer, houses in the narrow streets were hung with little lamps of different colours, row on row; garlands were strung along with green branches of Saint John's wort, birch and fennel. With music in the streets below, people danced with spirits that refused to be dull in any season or in any weather.

At Christmas the festivities were conducted under the management of a great functionary called the Lord of Misrule. He presided at Court, at the great houses and at the Inns of Court, each one of which had its Lord of Misrule. He ruled with all the pomp and privileges of a king. His robes were rich and costly as became his princely estate. He held Court. He was attended by lords, knights, gentlemen at arms, counsellors, pages, heralds, a chaplain, a jailer and a fool, and his power was unlimited. A good Lord of Misrule made a reputation that lasted his lifetime and often brought high favours from Court or Castle. He managed the masques, revels and frolics that formed the chief features of Christmas festivities.

Stow in his *Survey of London* refers to the Christmas customs as follows.

First in the feast of Christmas, there was in the King's house, wheresoever he was lodged, a lord of misrule or master of merry disports, and the like had ye in the house of every nobleman of honour or good worship, were he spiritual or temporal. Amongst the which the Mayor of London, and either of the sheriffs, had their several lords of misrule, ever contending, without quarrel or offence, who should make the rarest pastimes to delight the beholders. These lords beginning their rule on Allhallow Eve, continued the same till the morrow after the Feast of the Purification, commonly called Candlemas Day. In all which space there was fine and subtle disguisings, masks, and mummeries, with playing at cards for counters, nails, and points, in every house, more for pastime than for gain.

Against the feast of Christmas every man's house, as also the parish churches, were decked with holm, ivy, bays, and whatsoever the season of the year afforded to be green. The conduits and standards in the streets were likewise garnished; amongst the which I read, in the year 1444, that by tempest of thunder and lightning, on the first of February at night, Paule's Steeple was fired, but with great labour quenched; and towards the morning of Candlemas Day at the Leadenhall in Cornhill, a standard of tree was being set up in the midst of the pavement, fast in the ground, nailed full of holm and ivy, for disport of Christmas to the people, was torn up and cast down by the malignant spirit (as was thought) and the stones of the pavement all about were cast in the streets, and into divers houses, so that the people were sore aghast of the great tempests.

In addition to all this and to crown it all there were the Pageants, the Royal Ridings, the Coronations, the Royal Weddings, the Lord Mayor's Shows, and the March of the City Watch. Such spectacles as these and especially the Royal Ridings of Plantagenet, Tudor and Stuart were on a scale of grandeur and richness quite above anything witnessed in modern times. The streets were lined with rich silks, tapestries, cloth of silver and cloth of gold. All the conduits and fountains flowed with red wine or with white wine. When Henry V returned from France, the Lord Mayor, Sheriffs and Aldermen, robed in oriental scarlet and blazing with jewels, attended by four hundred citizens dressed in murrey (wine coloured silk) and wearing jewelled collars and chains, all mounted on splendid horses with trappings of gold, went to meet the King outside the City.

Ridings were common to all great European cities in the Middle Ages, but it is only in London that they have survived into modern times to show that the appreciation and enjoyment of rich colour is not extinct. Multitudes of people with otherwise little colour in their lives find in these pageants something for which human nature craves. It is true that cities on the Continent also have their holiday pleasures and their shows. It might be said of the southern cities in particular that their demonstrations of enjoyment have the appearance of more relish, more of the carnival spirit of liberty. There is, particularly in Italian cities, more laughter, more abandonment to mirth and frolic disposition, but there is not that complete dedication of themselves to the auspicious event by all the people that one sees in London. In the South with all its sunshine, its poetry, its beauty and its warmth, the holiday spirit is an abandonment not so much to a mood as to a ritual. Compared to the spirit of a London holiday there is something almost perfunctory in that merrymaking.

The government does not and never did set apart holidays for London, or consult the calendar for a day of public rejoicing, or proclaim a feast day. London makes its own holidays in its own way and chooses its own occasions for rejoicing. The citizens know these occasions when they arrive. They are never too busy or too preoccupied and season or weather makes no difference at all. A Royal Wedding for example suits London to perfection for a holiday. Every class of citizen from the greatest to the smallest, makes preparation and enters into it, because all are moved with one accord, because their hearts are ready to rejoice and because they are free to

turn their great city at will into fairyland for their pleasure. It is *their* city, the streets are *their* streets, the police exist for *their* comfort and convenience, and the authorities—know what is expected of them. The authorities are well trained in their part; their training has been going on for ages. They know how to meet the general wish and blend their functions with the popular demonstration. They rise serenely to the occasion; they perform their part in perfect harmony with the millions whom they serve and they never fail to provide a spectacle to the Londoner's taste, a very exacting taste. Failure on their part to act up to traditional standards would be attended by consequences too awful to contemplate. But they never fail. And the result is such an amazing holiday, such a spring-tide of colour and of movement, such a flowing of the sap of life, such a flowering of kindness and content, such a portent of the human will to happiness as only London understands.