

II.—ON GUILD PROCESSIONS AND OBSERVANCES.

By F. W. Fairholt, Esq., F.S.A.

Mr. Fairholt prefaced his remarks by observing that it was not his intention to enter into a dissertation on the origin or history of Guilds, a subject involving an amount of abstruse learning more fitted for the closet of the student than for public reading, but to narrate those ceremonial observances, curious usages, and public processions which marked their ancient state, and greatly attracted the attention of our sight-loving ancestors.

It was usual from a very early period for the trading companies of our great commercial cities to take the lead in welcoming the royal and noble personages of this and other countries when they made their public entries into these towns. It was expected that each company should attend in proper costume and official insignia on these occasions, or they were fined by the ruling powers. It was not usual with them thus to meet on such occasions alone, but many towns commemorated on great festivals particular facts in their own history. Such was the play of Hock Tuesday performed by the people of Coventry before Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth, and which was supposed to commemorate the massacre of the Danes by the inhabitants of that city in 1002, and the procession of Lady Godiva, which records the gift of certain municipal privileges to the same city.

These various trade-unions, for such the old Guilds were, originated in a necessity for self-protection in barbarous times; and they had so many privileges, that for a tradesman not to be a member of them was virtually to debar himself from the practice of his own business, or be continually fined. It became a law of each city that none but acknowledged members of such societies should be allowed to practise within its walls, and that all others be amerced by the body for a permission to labour. They thus became powerful and wealthy, and had a great love for exhibiting themselves on all public occasions. In London they always rode forth to welcome the king. The earliest instance on record is that given by Matthew Paris, as taking place in 1236, on occasion of the passage of King Henry III, and Eleanor of Provence, his queen, when they were met by the mayor, aldermen, and citizens, three hundred in number, apparelled in livery of silk and riding on horseback, each of them carrying in their hands a gold or silver cup in token of privileges claimed by the city, for the mayor to officiate as chief butler at the coronations.

The earliest mention of shows peculiar to various trades is given in the account of Edward I.'s reception after his victory over the Scots in 1298, when the Fishmongers' Company exhibited four gilt sturgeons mounted on as many horses, four salmon of silver similarly displayed, and forty-six armed knights on horses "made like Luces of the sea," and a man dressed as St. Magnus, accompanied with other mounted horsemen.

From this public display they proceeded to identify themselves with other means of

amusing the people, and hence originated the performance, by these tradesmen, of sacred dramas, founded on Scripture history, but so ludicrously adapted to the feeling and ignorance of the times, as to be objectionable to modern taste. These plays, which appear to have been common to provincial towns, do not appear to have been exhibited by the London Guilds, owing to an alarm taken by the clergy, who themselves acted them on great festivals, and who petitioned Richard II. to prevent others from doing so. For the maintenance of these plays a tax was levied on the companies generally, and even common land appropriated.

It was not only in shows that the old Guilds exhibited themselves, in the insecure times of antiquity; they marshalled themselves on Midsummer-eve, and acted as watch to the city. This ceremony was conducted by night with much pomp, and several pasteboard figures of giants were exhibited in the procession, besides morris-dancers, henchmen, and hired minstrels. These giants were exceedingly popular, as was also another character, exhibited by the Butchers' Company of Chester, and named "The Devil in his Feathers." The dragon was an equal favourite, and shared a large amount of popular applause.

All this pageantry, Mr. Fairholt observed, was traceable to the Guild processions of continental towns, who exhibited such things with even greater splendour on popular occasions. The giant of Antwerp, the greatest trading city of the Low Countries, from which we obtained the model of our first exchange, was a noble figure designed by Rubens. Malines also had its giants, male and female, with their children, similar to the giants which at one time belonged to the ancient city of Chester. Brussels also possesses a similar family of giants. They are enormous figures of wicker-work, wearing flowing draperies to conceal the men who walk within, and carry them through the streets. These giants were occasionally lent from one town to another, to swell the show on grand ceremonial observances. The only portable giant now remaining in this country belongs to the old Tailors' Company, at Salisbury.

But it was not only in human giants that the continental Guilds rejoiced; camels, dromedaries, and whales, of enormous proportions, figured in them, and among the other curious displays we meet with reminiscences of ancient popular tales, and minstrel rhymes. Thus, the Wheel of Fortune, which is of frequent occurrence in illuminated MSS., and also on the walls of churches, figures in the Malines pageant, along with an enormous representation of the famous horse, Bayard, upon which are mounted the four sons of Aymon. Thus giving modern notoriety to ancient romances, which had delighted their forefathers centuries ago.

These trade processions were not confined to Europe alone. Lady Montague describes one which she saw at Adrianople in 1707, in which the various trades carried pageants emblematic of their occupations; thus, the bakers exhibited the process of bread-making; the furriers showed stuffed figures of animals from which they obtained their wares, and all appeared as if alive in their native woods.

Mr. Fairholt concluded by observing that the three most interesting of these ancient shows remaining to us are, the Guild processions of Coventry, Preston, and Shrewsbury. That at Coventry has for its principal feature the exhibition of Lady Godiva according to the old legend, attended by knights and pages in fancy costume; the Woolcombers' Company exhibiting a shepherd and shepherdess attending their sheep in an arbour, Jason with the golden fleece, and other figures, including their patron, bishop Blaze. The Preston Guild had similar trade shows, including Crispin and Crispianus, for the shoemaker; bishop Blaze for the woolcombers; and a loom with a boy at work for the weavers. The tailors personated Adam and Eve, to show the high antiquity of their trade. At Shrewsbury the various trades march in procession with similar figures or emblems of their trades, and indulge in festivity in the various "arbours" appropriated to them outside the town.

Mr. Fairholt, in conclusion, remarked that it was this hearty and generous concurrence in public rejoicings and innocent celebration, that knit men in bonds of true fellowship in the olden times. And it was the same admirable feeling of mutual protection in which every one joined, that strengthened the good government of each city, and gave that noble spectacle of self-rule, consolidating the liberties we enjoy, and which each man feels bound personally to respect and defend. It is this feeling, still exerted, which has preserved our time-tried institutions intact amid the crash of surrounding anarchy.

III.—ON THE CHESTER MYSTERY PLAYS.

By the Rev. A. Hume, LL.D., F.S.A.

To the ordinary details of men and things, dramatic representations are related as a picture is to the letter-press,—they illustrate the text. Or they may be compared to the picture writing of the ancient Mexicans, effective so far as they go, but in their very nature imperfect as a means of public or private instruction. In a wide sense, the literature which is dramatic is much more extensive than it is usually supposed to be. The historian, for example, becomes a dramatist for the time, when, instead of treating of his characters in the third person, he allows each to speak for himself. The novelist is a dramatist, as his volumes frequently consist merely of a groundwork of dialogue, inlaid with description which might be equally well represented by moveable scenery. In all the varied affairs of life, too, we are inseparably connected with that which is dramatic. In the nursery, there is the doll or the hobby-horse in anticipation of mature years; by the fire-side, the old soldier varies his tale by shouldering his crutch to "show how fields were won;" and elsewhere, my uncle Toby stamps his foot, as he remarks with vehemence, that Le Fevre "shall march"—"to his regiment." Every one must feel that without that circumstance, whether recorded by Sterne or not, the idea of the benevolent old soldier would be imperfect.