
Public Dinners in London

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PUBLIC DINNERS IN LONDON.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

PERHAPS there is no country in the world in which so much is done by the system of "voluntary contributions" as in England, and in which, accordingly, the managers of charitable institutions have to keep so keen an eye open to the main chance. Hospitals, homes, and benevolent funds blessed with any special endowments are very rare with us, while state aid is practically unknown; and as a very large amount of money is annually needed for the support of the charities, useful and otherwise, of which we are, on the whole, not unjustly proud, it is necessary that something of the instinct of the showman should be combined with business tact and organizing power to make a really successful secretary or manager to any institution which is "supported by voluntary contributions."

Of late years every sort of dodge has been tried to attract the public, and every kind of bait has been used to extract the money from their not unwilling pockets. Bazaars and fancy fairs; balls and dramatic entertainments; hospital Sundays with their more or less persuasive sermons; hospital Saturdays with their young women rattling money-boxes at every street corner,—all these and many other devices, sometimes in very questionable taste, are tried in turn by the astute professional philanthropist. Nor, if we may judge from their frequent repetition, do these allurements ever fail of success. Charity is a good thing in itself, and when it can be combined with a reasonable amount of amusement it is, in the eyes of most people, still better. It is, to be sure, a pity that it should be necessary to incur so much outlay in such matters that by far the larger amount of the public money which is spent upon them should be swallowed up in expenses; but even in the sacred cause of charity people like to have something for their

money, and it is very seldom that the subscribers waste a thought on the excessive cost of the advertising and of the entertainment which has wheedled them into such a frame of mind as to induce them to part with their half-crowns or their sovereigns, or even, in extreme cases, with their banknotes.

But all these devices are of mere mushroom growth compared with that time-honored institution, the public dinner, which was one of the primitive methods of appealing to the charitable, and which flourishes even more luxuriantly to-day than it did in its earlier years. It is, perhaps, the most extravagant and wasteful way of filling a subscription list that was ever invented, but that doesn't matter. We are a conservative people even in these days of democracy, and "advanced" principles—or want of principles—of all kinds; and the great institution of the public dinner seems to be one of those things which have attained the unassailable rank of fetish in the eyes of Englishmen of all classes, and which are not to be disturbed by any absurd considerations of the proper relation of expenditure of time and money to the ultimate result in available net cash.

It would seem as if there must be something peculiar about the public dinner, which has for generations appealed to the average Briton; and, as an institution, it must surely in its early days have possessed an enviably sound and robust constitution. For, in truth, anything more depressing to mind, body, and estate than most of the dinners of bygone days it is difficult to imagine. The Freemasons' Tavern, Willis's Rooms, the Albion in Aldersgate Street, and the London Tavern in Bishopsgate Street over against the offices of the then great house of Baring, were the chief scenes of these sacrifices to dyspepsia and gout as I remember then in the later 'fifties. Sometimes a good dinner and a fair glass of wine were to be had at the Albion and the London Tavern, but, as a rule, and for the guinea which was the customary charge for a dinner ticket, the banquets were but ill-designed and ill-cooked affairs abominably served by a tribe of dirty, ill-dressed waiters, the like of whom these later days could scarcely produce, while the wine, even at this distance of time, is not to be thought of without a shudder. Bottles of a vapid, acid hock, and decanters of a sherry of a peculiarly stinging quality used to be ranged on the tables at the commencement of these remarkable feasts; a sweet liquid, which

was supposed to fulfil all the functions of champagne if only it retained a certain friskiness for a minute or two after the cork had popped, was served in thrifty quantities during the progress of the meal, and the subsequent toasts were drunk in a specially thorny port or a fatally loaded claret, as the victim might select. Little attempt was made at table decoration. A few hideous articles of plated ware—epergnes filled with artificial flowers which could not have been expected to deceive the most innocent and credulous mind, empty wine coolers, well-worn salvers and the like—straggled in disorderly fashion about the table, and there was usually such an attempt at dessert as would have put any self-respecting kitchen-garden to shame. The waiters were as conspicuous for their rapacity in the matter of tips as for their frowsy, dirty shabbiness, their general incompetence, and their tendency to remove half-emptied bottles from the table for their own private consumption, while the ease and rapidity with which they got drunk were at least as remarkable as any of their other engaging qualities. The dinner itself was always a long, tedious affair, and it was almost a relief when the toastmaster took the chairman in hand, and the “business of the evening” began with its dreary speeches trailing their slow length among the heeltaps of the thorny port and the loaded claret, and driving the company to tamper still further with their digestions by the consumption of dried-up nuts, withered apples, and wizened grapes, which, for some inscrutable reason seemed to be universally and unsuccessfully tried as a remedy against the all-pervading boredom.

The toastmaster, in those days, was a personage of great importance, and it was almost as desirable to secure a good toastmaster as a good chairman. In fact the general conduct of the business of the meeting, unless the chairman knew all the ropes—which was not always the case—practically devolved upon the toastmaster. The most distinguished of these functionaries at the time of which I am now writing was one Harker, a portly and handsome man with formidable black whiskers and a superb bass voice which was the despair and envy of all his professional brethren. Harker was, if I remember rightly, a crier or usher at the Old Bailey, and it is possible that something of the dignity of the presiding judges clung to him and gave him a certain impressiveness as he waved his baton, or whatever substitute represented

it at the moment, and demanded "silence faw the chair." Harker was popular with chairmen ; firstly, because he could post them up thoroughly in their work, and, secondly, because he was a person of infinite tact, discretion, and sobriety. In these respects he did not resemble another toastmaster whom I knew very well. This functionary, I remember, at a dinner over which my father presided, had been making himself even unusually officious and meddlesome until the chairman, who knew his business thoroughly, could bear it no longer. So, by the hands of the toastmaster himself, he sent me a pencilled note, which the gentleman delivered with a whiskeyfied little speech to the effect that he was sure it meant something kindly for somebody from the "dear, good dad," but which simply contained the words: "For Heaven's sake get rid of this man for me; he is worrying me to death."

Those were the days of long, long speeches, and plenty of them, mostly from perfectly incompetent speakers ; of the reading of dreary lists of figures by secretaries who had never been taught the simple art of making themselves heard in a large room ; of a general depression of spirits which set in early and which no amount of liquid refreshment could assuage; and the odd part of all was that all this sort of thing had been going on in almost exactly the same way for years and years. My experience of public dinners began in about the year 1856. Twenty years before, one of the *Sketches by Boz* had dealt with public dinners, and really all that time had made little or no difference, and had brought about little or no improvement. It might almost have been said of almost any public dinner in 1856 as it had been of the dinner of the "Indigent Orphans' Friends' Benevolent Institution" in 1836, that

"waiters, with wine baskets in their hands, are placing decanters of sherry down the tables at very respectable distances; melancholy looking salt-cellars, and decayed vinegar-cruets, which might have belonged to the parents of the indigent orphans in their time, are scattered at distant intervals on the cloth; and the knives and forks look as if they had done duty at every public dinner in London since the accession of George the First."

Still might it have been said of the dinner itself :

"Tureens of soup are emptied with awful rapidity—waiters take plates of turbot away to get lobster sauce, and bring back plates of lobster sauce without turbot; people who can carve poultry are great fools if they own it, and people who can't, have no wish to learn."

Still was it true that :

"The chairman rises, and, after stating that he feels it quite unnecessary to preface the toast he is about to propose with any observations whatever wanders into a maze of sentences, and flounders about in the most extraordinary manner, presenting a lamentable spectacle of mystified humanity, until he arrives at the words 'constitutional sovereign of these realms,' at which elderly gentlemen exclaim 'bravo,' and hammer the table tremendously with their knife-handles."

Very little, indeed, has been changed in the course of that twenty years, and it is really astonishing how such a state of things could have continued so long and how it was that the public dinner did not, years ago, die the death which it so well deserved.

But the time for reform was coming, although not immediately, and the strange vitality of the public dinner enabled it to survive until there set in the wonderful alterations in public manners and customs ; the astonishing change in the ideas of the average Briton in regard to gregarious eating and drinking ; the complete subversion and destruction of old habits, old fashions, and old ways of doing things ; the practical rebuilding and rearrangement of London ; the reforming off the face of the earth of so much that Mrs. Grundy held dear ; which progressed with a thoroughness and rapidity that almost took away the breath of Londoners of the old school. The first sign of the startling changes to come was noticeable, I think, when Messrs. Spiers and Pond invaded us from Australia and taught us that the peculiar bill of fare and the remarkable arrangements for the discomfort of the public which were so faithfully chronicled in the veracious history of the *Boy at Mugby* were really not governed by any fixed and immutable law of nature, but were subject to alteration and improvement like any of the other arrangements of the sons of men. Presently the restaurateurs followed suit, and instead of the half-dozen decent places—I don't even think there were so many—in which one could dine in public thirty or forty years ago, a crop of handsome, commodious, and convenient restaurants has sprung up, with the result that the old absurd idea that there was something "fast" and almost improper about dining in a public room, especially for ladies, vanished into the limbo which has of late years swallowed so many absurdities, and all the habits of an immense number of Londoners became practically changed altogether. Then came

the era of great hotels, and when some of these began to lay themselves out for the entertainment of great numbers of people in handsomely furnished and conveniently arranged rooms, specially built for the purpose, the public dinner took a new lease of life and started on what promises to be a career of greater success and prosperity than ever.

I am not going to assert that the new order is perfect. It is, in fact, a long way from being anything of the sort. But its superiority over the old state of things is not to be questioned. You do not always get a first-rate dinner even now at the Criterion, the Freemasons, the Café Royal, the Albion, or the Metropole, but you do assuredly get a meal which, whether for its component parts, its cooking, or its service, is immeasurably better than such things used to be. It is, no doubt, still well to be at the chairman's table, and the casual member of the general public who is allotted a remote seat at a distant table still, as a rule, fares worse than those in higher places, but even he is better off than the chairman's own immediate friends were years ago, and will have in all probability a better dinner than he could have hoped for in the 'thirties, the 'forties, the 'fifties, or the 'sixties. It is still more than suspected that the vintages which are provided for the guests at the upper table are more desirable than those which are served out to meaner mortals, but, at all events, the days of that stinging sherry and that thorny port are over, and for the temperate consumer there is little or no likelihood—which in earlier times was almost a certainty—of waking in the morning with a sensation of having been poisoned overnight. Cloakroom arrangements are so much improved that one may fairly hope to get one's own hat and coat when one goes away, which is a considerable gain when one remembers the old story—"Hat, sir? Oh, all the best hats have been gone this hour." The waiters are a different race altogether from their predecessors. I don't mean to say that there is not sometimes very considerable room for improvement, but the modern men have little indeed in common with the shabby genteel, tipsy, baksheesh-grabbing, incompetent of old days. Baksheesh is certainly still expected, and occasionally asked for with more urgency than politeness, but you may console yourself by thinking that if you do give a waiter a tip nowadays you generally have had pretty fair value for

your money, and that was rarely the case in times gone by. Most of the managers of places where public dinners are given profess that their waiters are strictly forbidden to receive tips, and I remember being quite seriously taken to task by one of them when I ventured to remonstrate in print on a particularly flagrant case of extortion which came under my immediate notice a few years ago at a dinner of the Royal General Theatrical Fund. I was told then—and have been told since—that inspectors, or superintendents, or managers, or some such functionaries are always on the watch, and that any waiter who takes a tip is summarily discharged, but I know this to be a light-hearted little fiction similar to that which is kept up in like manner by the railway companies. Besides, really good waiters are scarce, even now and can practically dictate their own terms. And, again, if tips were really and seriously forbidden, the cloakroom attendant would not be provided with that plate containing a few shillings and sixpences, which he now and then accidentally rattles in so very suggestive a manner.

And there is yet another vast improvement which conspicuously marks the public dinners of to-day. Not only are the dinners themselves, the rooms, the wine, the service immeasurably better than they were; the speeches have shared in the general "betterment," and are very seldom so prolix or so ill-delivered as were those of yore. It may be that Englishmen generally have come more out of their shells, and are less embarrassed when they foregather with their fellow-creatures in public places than they were, but it is an indisputable fact that the average of public speaking in England—or, at all events, let me say in London, as it is to London that I am more particularly referring—has been very much raised of late years. Something of the improvement, no doubt, is due to the Prince of Wales, who set the excellent example of making short speeches—besides doing still further service to his fellow-diners by introducing smoking after dinner. But, whatever the reason or reasons may be, you will hear infinitely more good, or reasonably good, after-dinner speaking now than was to be got in the old days. There is no one living, I think, who can equal or come near my father, who was the very best after-dinner speaker I ever heard, besides being one of the best and most resourceful of chairmen; but I am sure I can count many more speakers of the first class now than I could at any

previous time. As might perhaps be expected, it is at the theatrical dinners that most of the best speakers are to be heard. Mr. Henry Irving has trained himself into an excellent after-dinner speaker; Mr. Bancroft, Mr. Beerbohm Tree, and Mr. Charles Wyndham all talk well; Mr. Comyns Carr's speeches are always charming, both from the literary and elocutionary points of view; and Mr. Arthur Pinero has no superior—I might almost say no real rival—among the best of them all. Literature is not very strong just now in this department, and the speeches at the dinners of the Royal Literary Fund and similar institutions are apt to be deadlly dull, but Mr. W. E. Lecky speaks very well, if not so well as he writes, and Mr. George Augustus Sala has long been distinguished for the capital speeches which he can make about anything or nothing, as the case may be, with an energy a readiness, and a wealth of illustration and anecdote which call up reminiscences of the immortal Fred Bayham himself. A most delightful after-dinner speaker was James Russell Lowell—but then he was an American, and most cultivated Americans have the gift of eloquent speech; and Edmund Yates, whom we lost only the other day, could speak very well on occasion, although he was sometimes too didactic, and although I remember his once breaking down altogether, and subsiding in the middle of a speech absolutely dumb and covered with confusion.

The after-dinner speeches of politicians are apt to be troubled with reminiscences of the manner and the style which find favor on the platform or in the House of Commons, but Lord Rosebery, Mr. Balfour, and Mr. Chamberlain are quite as good, though in a different way, after dinner as they are in business hours. Scientific after-dinner speaking is apt to deal too exclusively with shop, relieved by that mild jocularly which is so dear to the scientific mind; and art, with one exception, makes but little mark after dinner: That exception is to be found, of course, in the magnificent sesquipedalian periods of Sir Frederic Leighton, the President of the Royal Academy, whose ornate and florid style easily beats even Mr. Chauncey Depew in the American's most magnificent moments, and who serves his complimentary butter—in prodigious quantities—from a lordly dish, indeed. The Prince of Wales is not a great speaker, but always says what he has to say in a thoroughly business-like style and with an air of conviction, which leads to a feeling of some surprise when you

read the speech next day in the papers, and discover how very little there was in it after all. Above all things His Royal Highness has cultivated the virtues of conciseness and brevity, and never could, by any chance, bore anybody. I should not like to suggest that one could say the same of all after-dinner speakers, but a thoroughly bad speech is quite the exception in these times, and modern audiences have an uncomfortable habit of taking things into their own hands when a speaker shows indications of not knowing when to stop.

Among the other great changes which have come over the public dinner the question of the selection of a chairman is one of the notable. Once upon a time a noble lord—practically any noble lord would do—was almost indispensable, and the old Duke of Cambridge easily held the record, I should think, for the number of occasions on which he had appealed to an after-dinner audience in the cause of charity. Nowadays, when the general public is to be got at, there is little faith in ordinary lords, and it is even whispered that Royalty, unless under very special circumstances, is no longer a sure draw. To the officials of the older and wealthier charities this is not a matter of great importance. Their dinners are supported mainly by friends of the institution itself, and any gentleman of position and influence who is well known to them makes as useful a chairman as anybody else, and has as good a chance of drawing a satisfactory subscription list. But the capture of the latest celebrity, the representative of the very newest “boom,” is of the greatest importance to the anxious secretaries and committees of the smaller charities, who have to offer the public a fair equivalent for its money, and necessitates an amount of ingenuity and diplomacy which would surprise most people who do not know how much working such things want. And when the great chairman question is satisfactorily settled a considerable amount of tact and skill has to be brought to bear to advertise the show properly to the public, which has become by this time a little shy and wary in such matters. All sorts of tricks are tried, but the managers of some of the older and more conservative charities, when they have secured the services of a first-class peer, still pin their faith on an extremely old dodge which was described as far back as the time when Mr. Boffin came into his fortune.

“And then the charities, my Christian brother!” says the
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author of *Our Mutual Friend*, who had as much experience of public dinners as most people.

"And mostly in difficulties, yet most lavish, too, in the expensive articles of print and paper. Large, fat, private double letter, sealed with ducal coronet. 'Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire. My Dear Sir—Having consented to preside at the forthcoming Annual Dinner of the Family Party Fund, and feeling deeply impressed with the immense usefulness of that noble Institution and the great importance of its being supported by a List of Stewards that shall prove to the public the interest taken in it by popular and distinguished men, I have undertaken to ask you to become a Steward on that occasion. Soliciting your favorable reply before the 14th instant, I am, My Dear Sir, your faithful Servant, LINSEED. P. S.—The Steward's fee is limited to three Guineas.' Friendly this, on the part of the Duke of Linseed (and thoughtful in the postscript), only lithographed by the hundred and presenting but a pale individuality of address to Nicodemus Boffin, Esquire, in quite another hand."

That this device is still popular argues a singular want of invention on the part of secretaries and committees, or, what is more likely, a constant and surprising gullibility on the part of some sections of the world of London. But that public dinners should still meet with so much favor as they still enjoy is in itself so remarkable a fact as to dwarf any minor details.

Finally, it may be noted that the attempt to popularize the presence of ladies at table at public dinners has met with but indifferent success.

CHARLES DICKENS.