

EVOLUTION OF THE CLUB

HOW ITS PRESENT MAGNIFICENCE WAS ATTAINED.

THE SYMPOSIUMS IN BEN JONSON'S DAY—

HOW MANY OF THE CLUBS WERE FORMED—MISCELLANEOUS NOTES.

Dining clubs, that is those which meet only on special occasions solely for the purpose of a social dinner, are probably as numerous as the private card clubs. These clubs are more in accordance with the originating idea of clubs in the bygone days of the Elizabethan era than the pretentious social clubs of the present day, with their palatial abodes partaking more of the character of a hotel, with all the modern improvements, than a private resort. Still, they possess the privacy and many of the comforts of a home. Indeed, until the present century the germ of the club idea was the symposium of the beautifully laden table. Of such clubs wise Ben Jonson and his successors have delighted in writing about. It is proper to claim, under the circumstances, that the modern club grew out of such a small acorn as a festive dinner, now only an incidental feature of club life. Not to delve very deep into the history of the past, it may be stated that the now popular Lambs Club was directly evolved from a dining coterie that met fortnightly at dinner in the Union-Square Hotel chiefly to glorify the late H. J. Montague. The origin of the Press Club and the Sorosis, now both prosperous and representative institutions, may be traced to a series of Saturday subscription dinners held at Delmonico's, at Fourteenth-street and Fifth-avenue, by a coterie of the editorial writers on the several morning papers. When these dinners were started it was agreed by all composing the coterie that, in order to secure an intellectual feast worthy of the capital menu always presented, the speakers and their subjects should be ordered, like the dishes, in advance, so that the usual impromptu post-prandial stupidity should not be inflated on the assemblage, but the best efforts should be given on the occasion. It happened, however, that a well known *hon vivant* and after-dinner speaker neglected to prepare an address on the English nobility, and, rising to his feet when called upon by the dignified and erratic Chairman, he audaciously made fun of the idea by likening the occasion to the weekly schoolboy ordeal of reading compositions aloud in school after having laboriously composed them. The shaft of ridicule blighted the coterie, and after this it was found to be impossible to keep the speakers in the traces or the dinners a profound secret, as originally intended. It was, by the way, this coterie of journalists that afterward entertained at dinner, Charles Dickens, Horace Greeley presiding. The Press Club was evolved from these dinners, in that nearly all of that coterie afterward became members of that institution; and the Sorosis, which was founded by the esteemed and accomplished wife of the first and organizing Chairman of the coterie, first obtained celebrity by entertaining the gentlemen at a dinner. The Sorosis, with all due respect to a very worthy and influential institution, is not much more now than a table club, meeting once a month at lunch and once a year at dinner. While the Sorosis has maintained the custom of entertaining the gentlemen at its annual dinner none of the gentlemen have reciprocated, though the Lotos, for instance, prides itself so much on its dinners and its ladies' receptions.

There is probably not a popular or fashionable restaurant in the city that does not have its dinner club, which meets once a week or twice a month merely for the purpose of having a good time around the social board. It would be a mere advertisement to mention many of these so-called clubs, which are of importance only in their individual estimation and that of the Chairmen and the waiters. Some of these clubs, however, are popularly recognized and really occupy positions of importance to a certain extent. There is the Twilight, that meets fortnightly and discusses some such abstruse subject as "Shall the Board of Aldermen be abolished?" admitting to the debate invited guests so that a genuine, honest discussion is often secured. In the Summer time the Twilight holds its dinner, *al fresco*, on the roof of a down-town restaurant, but during the Winter it meets at an Italian restaurant up town. It has flourished for several years and has a large membership. There is the B Club, organized several years ago to attempt to disprove the popular superstition regarding the ill-fated number 13 by a persistent demonstration by actual personal experience and example of its unreliability. The 13 Club meets at dinner once a month. Originally there were only 13 members, but the jollity of the dinners or skepticism regarding the superstition has swelled the number to now over a hundred. The menus are coffin-shaped and appearing with the numerals XIII, ominously conspicuous thereon. The tables are arranged for 13; there are 13 courses; only 13 speeches are allowed, and if possible there is an aggregation of 13 tables, each having 13 guests. It must be added that the dinner, which is exceptionally jolly—as jolly as the annual spree of the Associated Undertakers—always occurs on the 13th day of the month. It should also be added that the experience has demonstrated the absurdity of the popular theory regarding the number 13. The Last Man is a dining club known to many. The Titans is a dining club that has a Summer and a Winter dinner. No one under six feet in height is eligible to membership. An effort is made at these dinners to assimilate the prosaic present with the classical past in the odes delivered and the songs sung. The Hoboken Turtle Club is an ancient organization that believes its name by having its dinners during the season up the road. The Peanut Club never meets as a body except at a dinner given by one of its members who has been surprised by another without having the emblem of the club about him, and consequently has to pay the forfeit of a dinner. So careful are the members, chiefly a coterie of merchants in the dry goods district, always to carry the gold, silver, iron, or metal peanut about them, and thus avoid being caught—as in that case the challenger is compelled to stand the dinner—that it is generally worn attached to a string around the neck and never removed either on retiring or going in swimming. Another club of down-town merchants that meets daily at a popular restaurant compels a member to supply the crowd with the wine if he or his guest is guilty of any such breach as eating with his knife, tucking his napkin under his chin, paring his nails at table, or drinking out of the finger bowl. The annual dinner at Coney Island of the Ichthyophagus Club may be considered one of the events of the season, and a sort of natural history treat or feast. The oldest club in the country, the Schuylkill, is a dining club, organized as far back as 1740 or thereabout, and meeting periodically during the fish season on the banks of that beautiful stream, each member being compelled to do his own cooking. Another popular Philadelphia dining club, almost equally well known by reason of its entertaining so many celebrities, is the Clover Club. All the tables and menus are clover leaf in shape, and a peculiarity of the gathering is that the speakers are mercilessly ridiculed and chaffed by the members while speaking, in an effort to get him disconcerted and displeased. The speaker, it may be readily imagined, is put upon his mettle, but if he maintains his self-possession he is soon let have his way unmolested. Mention should also be made in this connection of an editorial coterie that meets once a month at a dinner at an up-town restaurant for the purpose of jovially chaffing each other over their daily professional experiences since their last meeting. The Lambs keeps up its originating idea by giving a monthly dinner during the season, and so, too, the Lotos is always alert for a celebrity to entertain at one of its dinners which have made it famous the world over. It may be stated that these are the only two regular full-blown clubs with clubhouses for daily resort, that make it a practice to regularly give club dinners.

The St. George's Club, on Hanover-square, London, which entertained Oliver Wendell Holmes, is likely to become the foremost in the English metropolis, as it is progressive in its ideas, has a handsome and commodious clubhouse, and will open its doors to strangers. As the club will specially cater to Americans, some facts regarding it will be interesting. The club, originally known as the Cercle des Etrangers, was established to give club accommodation to that very large floating population of London formed by American, Continental, and colonial visitors who are in England for long or short periods, "London being singularly deficient in the means for extending hospitalities and fellowship to strangers, as the rules of most of the existing clubs make little, if any, provision for such contingencies." To quote from the annual report, an "important element already existing in the club, which it is desirable strongly to reinforce, is that formed by our American cousins. It may be said, without fear of contradiction, that every American who is of English extraction, whatever may be his condition, hopes, sooner or later, to visit the home of his forefathers. Arrangements have been specially made for the admission of American members, on terms and conditions which cannot fail to be favorably received throughout the States." Excepting for the members of the Lotos, which exchanges with the Savage, it is very difficult for any stranger to obtain admission to a London club, except, of course, as a guest in a private dining room, and such a club as the new St. George's ought to supply a long felt want among clubmen who find themselves in the English metropolis. The club is thoroughly cosmopolitan, and as such has no class distinctions, and will consequently embrace all the elements that make club life so attractive, though so seldom combined. The St. George's was organized in 1874.

The telegraph dispatch in the papers the other day from Hartford that the clubs of Connecticut would be compelled to pay the liquor and tobacco license, which has been generally dodged, it would appear, by the clubs throughout the State, excepting the Hartford Club, caused local clubmen surprise. The local clubs have been paying this tax ever since 1871 or 1872. The question then came up, and a club in Troy was allowed to test the case in a friendly suit, which was decided in favor of the Government. All the clubs have since regularly settled with the Internal Revenue Collector. It would seem from the Connecticut papers that none of the clubs of that State have paid the tax excepting the ancient and honorable Hartford Club.

If more persons could afford it there would be many riding clubs, with annual equestrian tours, such as that now enjoyed by a cavalcade of the members of the New-York Riding Club, en tour

of the shore route in New-England. So, too, there would probably be more four-in-hand clubs if it were not so expensive to maintain a stable and equipment.

It is probable that the Republican Club will regularly enter the lists as a social club next season by a series of ladies' receptions and entertainments in the evening, the members being delighted with their experience the other evening.

The Mohicans have been organized for a year or more, but have only recently been incorporated. This is a coterie of journalists and actors, and affiliating business men and politicians, who are numerous enough to form the nucleus of a club. The object is entirely social, and the pride of the club is the comedian John A. Mackay. The club has rooms on West Twenty-seventh-street, a few doors from Broadway.

The Union League is preparing to erect a dynamo in its cellar, so that it can supply its own electric lighting in preference to being on a circuit. The League, the Union, and the Lotos are illuminated by electric lights.

The Lambs are talking about giving up their annual "wash," which, if it comes off, will be given the first Sunday in June.

The question of removal has been completely dropped in the Century, and never was seriously agitated in the University Club.

The Manhattan billiard players contemplate a match with those in the Lotos. Mr. Dan Starr, Dr. Flint, and Mr. Durro are the most expert players, and are better than the run of amateurs by long odds.