

# LYMM RUSHBEARING.

## REVIVAL OF AN OLD VILLAGE CUSTOM.

A young man seated high on a cart piled with rushes, holding up a silver cup, rode smiling through the sunny lanes of Lymm on Saturday. He was the first to ride on a rush cart through the village for twenty years, and his honest, rustio face wore all the pride of an initiator. The cart was drawn by two splendid farmers' dapples, in the finery of bright brass and artificial flowers. The rushes were raised in a solid mass on the cart, the sides cut clean and smooth as a stack sheared with a haycutter, the ends forming a sort of fringe or bunch at the four corners. Bits of coloured paper relieved the walls of green, and altogether the cart was spruce and gay. Behind it came the queerest little country pageant.

First, on an ancient horse, rode a still more ancient man, his countenance wrinkled with amusement under a wide straw hat. This was a hero of the old rushbearing days, taking his part in the revival as a relic of the former glories. Then came a strenuous band, and last a company of Morris dancers, "all village lads," admiring on-lookers said, freely and gaudily decorated, and carrying knotted white handkerchiefs instead of staves. The procession started off with a spurt of music, and wound round the Cross—with its battered sandstone base, its temple-like top, and its dial—along the lanes. It was soon lost in the soft green distance to those in the peopled market-place, but all afternoon we heard the music coming fainter through the trees, and across the water that seems to encircle the midmost street of Lymm. Now and then, in wandering about the pleasant leafy ways, one came upon the dancers tossing their arms in the sun, watched by a mixed company of farming folk and city trippers. It was a most unsophisticated festival, with a touch of the rural artlessness that pleases more than the mannered and decorous processions of towns.

Lymm is trying to revive this custom of rushbearing, which has now all but died out in Cheshire and Lancashire. At Lymm the carts always went round on the eve of the village wakes, and it was "the great do" of the countryside. The interest of Saturday's little show was indeed largely retrospective. The village elders who clustered by the roadside were of course intensely depreciatory in their comparisons. "Call that a rush cart?" said one farmer to his womenfolk, as the triumphing young man went along; "I call it a lump of old hay. If that's a rush cart you can forgive me." And he held forth in loving detail upon those former processions long since faded into nothing. The builders of rush carts used to use, it seems, big red farmers' carts with the widened tops for hay, and on this broad basis the rushes would rise nearly as high as a cottage. The rushes, which were laid with their ends outward, were

packed so tight that you could hardly pluck one out. It used to be a favourite sport with farm lads, the old man said, to try to pull rushes out, and to lay wagers on a particular rush being a short one or a long one when extracted. "Many a gallon has been won and lost that way." Then you would see not two dappled horses but four; it was an important point to have a well-matched team. The farmers round used to combine to make it up, each owner of a good dapple lending it for the occasion. If they couldn't get four greys they would have a set of bays, "and they looked nearly as well," the farmer, conservative as he was, admitted.

The rush cart builders of thirty years ago were not contented with mere plain neatness; they decorated the four corners with pretty pinnacles, and nearly covered the outer surface with flowers, and it was so broad on the summit that the whole band could sit there and blare away to their heart's content. The horses' harness would ring with bells, and the "bearing" would spend the day going about among the villages round Lymm. The farmer asked me if I had noticed "the old feller" on horseback. "He was a grand old builder in his time. Many's the cart he's reared. The young feller couldn't be expected to know much; he's too young to have seen one." My friend enlarged on the subsidiary splendours of the "bearings" of last generation; how the cobbles of the market-place would be crowded with booths and stalls, and the fun would go on till far into the night. Those were the times when "the nobility and gentry" would ride on horseback beside the rush-cart, and then there was "something in it." I suggested as a more hopeful view that now the custom had been revived it would improve with time and experience. He was not hopeful. "They can't do things now as they useter."

The country people must go a good way out of Lymm to get the rushes—to a meadow by the river at High Legh. They grow in "pits," and anyone can cut them who likes. The art comes in with the selection of the fittest for building the cart, and for that it is necessary to go to the older men who remember how these things were done. The country theory as to the origin of the custom has considerable support from the antiquaries. "They used to strew the church floors with 'em when there weren't any carpets." And for that reason "the church would take a power of an interest in it." The quaint shred of a procession on Saturday was delightfully in harmony with its surroundings—with the steep old main street so hemmed in by trees as to be almost a lane, and the rural remoteness still unspoiled in a day of railways and rebuilding. The Cross, in spite of repeated restorations, is in itself enough to give Lymm an air of age, and there remains a sprinkling of "old-fashioned houses," as the country people call the timbered and sharp-gabled cottages. It is delightful to think that, although many of the former things have passed away, the "bearing" is not yet quite departed. Rushbearing is a meaningless survival if you will; but have the town customs that are shouldering these merriments away anything of their grace and historic colouring?