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978-1-108-08155-9 - Anecdotes of the Manners and Customs of London from the Roman Invasion to the Year 1700: Volume 3

James Peller Malcolm

Excerpt

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## CHAP. I.

## AMUSEMENTS.

DULL and monotonous would the circle of existence have been, had not the Divinity decreed moments when the mind, fatigued with thought, seeks for relaxation in frivolity. It is of little importance what mode is adopted to employ those moments, provided every immoral and dangerous pursuit is avoided. Many of the Amusements of the aborigines of England would now be considered by their descendants as fatiguing and almost impossible, particularly those which required strength and energy in the limbs, and long privations of rest. The natural suggestions of the human mind, unassisted by reflection and contrivance, produced dancing: every fortunate event occurring to individuals prompted the joyous leap, the contagious motion. Families thus infected introduced method, to avoid collision; and as some one or other excelled in the gracefulness or agility of their movements, imitation soon

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effected improvement. Singing originated from the same source; and the utterance of pleasing sounds being co-eval with the active expression of pleasure, the step unavoidably regulated the voice, and the voice the step. Instrumental assistance might have been the consequence of accident: any substance producing a heavy deep sound, when struck, marked pauses in the leap; but the pipe resulted from some exertion of the ideas. Judging from the circumstances already mentioned, and the modes of dancing, accompanied by rude drums and flutes in Savage nations at present, we cannot doubt our countrymen and women had their dances as early as they were aggregated.

If the generality of the Celtic nations were in the habit of indulging upon all great occasions in the pleasures of eating and drinking, as it is asserted they were, their feasts must have often ended in dancing, if not in the contentions of intoxication. At a later period, refinement might introduce bards, who sung or recited the favourite exploits of their wars: whether they had dances appropriated to martial purposes, is doubtful at least, though probable: a rude harp is, however, assigned them by antient authors.

The instinctive sports of infancy suggested their subsequent usefulness, in providing food, and resisting their enemies. All young animals  
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are in the habit of springing upon each other, struggling together, and chasing one another; and in this respect the youth of the human species closely resemble them—wrestling, leaping, and running, being universally the first attempts at infantile amusement; to those are added throwing of stones, swimming, &c. Emulation may be assigned as a sufficient reason for improvement in these exercises; and as youth were not originally taken from them for the purposes of modern times, they were pursued till uncommon address and excellence were attained, and each branch became a part of the system of offensive and defensive war, at the period of manhood. Hunting cannot be considered altogether as an amusement, as it was a necessary labour in the then state of society. Several other methods may have existed to prolong the hours of relaxation, but they are totally unknown to us at present. We shall, therefore, proceed to the time when the Romans introduced their customs in this particular.

The policy of these people was as conspicuous and eminent as their courage; hence we may suppose those athletic exercises, which were practised by themselves on the Continent, tending to make the youth fearless and skilful in combat, were in some degree suppressed in the earlier stages of their residence here, for very obvious reasons. After some time elapsed, we find that

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amphitheatres were erected, though not of the best materials, where the soldiers and the natives were entertained in miniature with wrestling and all the other sports of the Circus; and as some of those were practised by slaves, it is not improbable captive Britons sometimes glutted the savage vengeance of the invaders by cutting one another to pieces before them. Many of the little games of chance used by the Romans, that of *latrunculi*, similar to the modern chess, the *ludus talorum*, and the *ludus tesserarum*, or dice, we still persevere in admiring, the latter even to our destruction. The ball served for the foundation of several kinds of diversion, and nearly as we practise it at present; and beating the hoop set with rings amused many a muscular Roman, though with us it has descended to youth alone. Pitching of quoits is also another of the arts we have derived from them.

The theatrical representations of Rome were imitated in her colonies, if not immediately after their conquest, yet certainly when the government of them became settled and secure; but as they do not appear to have been naturalized, they cannot be considered as belonging to the Britons. With respect to the instruments of music, the Romans introduced to us the *Tubæ*, the *Cornua*, the *Buccinæ*, and the *Litui*, each of which were made of brass, and resembled our trumpet,

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trumpet, the bugle or French horn, and the haut-boy or pipe.

As the unhappy residents of this island enjoyed very short intervals indeed of the “piping time of peace,” amusements, which had not a tendency to promote the operations of war, must have been much neglected, except upon particular occasions. Whatever methods were in use on the arrival of the Saxons to exhilarate the individual or public mind, ceased, and certainly did not revive till they were destined to be rivalled or superseded by those of the new oppressors, which we are now to trace to the best of our ability. A warlike people naturally divided them into three classes, the military, the chace, and domestic. In the first instance, they did not differ greatly from ourselves, as the arts of swimming, riding, boxing, leaping, running, and wrestling, were equally necessary for the soldiery of both nations, and were indeed common throughout all parts of the world. Dancing, in their particular case, seems to have been included in the military useful amusements: ancient illuminations of MSS. convince us, that persons armed danced with swords and shields, with which they performed such exercises as were difficult, and perhaps not perfectly necessary in battle. Tacitus also describes noble youths as having danced naked amidst the projecting points of swords and spears, with so  
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much skill and grace as to excite equal astonishment and admiration. These may be considered as the superior accomplishments of the better classes, who possibly did not at any time indulge in the more effeminate movements similar to those since invented. As the daughter of Herodias danced before the King a very long time before that now under consideration, it would be extremely ungallant indeed to suppose the females of this branch of our ancestry did not approach her excellence, particularly as we are convinced musicians of the Saxons danced while they sounded their instruments; and that even bears were taught that fascinating amusement, as has been fully proved by Mr. Strutt in his Sports and Pastimes of these people.

The art of riding well naturally produced horse-races; and the swiftness and conduct of that noble animal was eminently useful both in battle and the chase. When the vindictive passions of the chiefs were at rest, their ambition was directed to excellence in hunting: consequently, the swiftest and most dangerous animals were selected for pursuit through the rough half uncultivated country; and he secured the public applause who followed the dogs and the flying beast with least regard to the chasms and precipices which lay in his way, and tore himself through the underwood with the greatest indifference to the

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the wounds the branches inflicted. The kings and princes, the nobles and chiefs, of this hardy race were early initiated in the mysteries of the chase as an essential part of their education, and consequently became adepts in hunting. Hawking, an appendage to this pursuit, but infinitely inferior to it in enterprize and exertion, was probably brought into England by the Saxons, though the former diversion was as familiar to our countrymen as to their oppressors.

The amusements of the domestic circle must have been in some degree similar to those of the Romans. Whether the Saxons introduced the two species of dice mentioned as used by them; or found them here, it is certain they played deep with them, as did the antient Germans. Singing and conviviality were well known in the Northern nations; and they doubtless had many ridiculous sports, which might well be collected in those of their present descendants, were it necessary. Itinerant poets, musicians, and buffoons, often contributed their aid, as we find by Bede the historian.

It would be almost an impossibility to collect any thing like a *satisfactory* account of the common amusements of the invading Normans and their immediate successors; but it will not be difficult to demonstrate, that the games of chess and dice found general encouragement amongst them,

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them, when the usual gymnastic exercises were prevented by the weather or night. It is well known, they were adepts in shooting the arrow, racing, leaping, throwing stones, baiting bulls and boars, horse-racing, and even cock-fighting, exclusive of their excellence in hawking and hunting. The lowest gradation of amusement, calculated to promote military purposes, is described by Fitz Stephen, and was of a ludicrous and rather dangerous nature. A post was set upright in the Thames, on which a shield had been firmly fastened: a boat with a platform on the bow, which supported a young man armed with a spear, was rowed with great violence towards the post; when arrived within reach, the man strained every muscle to break his weapon against the shield, that he might thus gain the prize, and avoid a severe ducking, the inevitable consequence of failure. Every precaution was used to prevent drowning on these occasions, and Fitz Stephen says their immersion caused infinite merriment to the spectators.

The Quintain, mentioned by Stowe, had its origin from a whimsical idea; and those who practised with it were compelled to exert no trifling degree of agility to avoid the heavy blows it inflicted. In this instance, a strong post was placed erect in the ground, on which a piece of wood turned by means of a spindle; at one extremity



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tremity a bag of sand was suspended, and the other presented a surface sufficiently broad to make it practicable to strike it with a spear when on full gallop on horseback; the pressure from the spear caused an instantaneous whirl of the wood, which was increased by the weight of the sand, and that saluted the back of the horseman in no very gentle manner, if the speed of his courser happened to be less than that of the quintain.

The Tournament was the most important, the most dignified and expensive, of all entertainments; and for that reason confined to princes, barons, and knights, as even the esquires were forbid to enter the lists at them. A modern can barely imagine the interest and splendour of these martial exhibitions, which in many respects equalled, and in some excelled, those of the Roman circus. The area of the tournament was the theatre on which emperors, kings, and their nobles of every rank who were knights, contended for the prize due to superior skill in arms; and when we consider, that the spectators, both male and female, were composed of all that was powerful, honourable, and beautiful, from every part of Europe, we may readily conceive the magnificence of the scene, the polished armour, the dazzling display of rich silks, embroidered with gold and silver, and the jewellery of the ladies.

It is very probable that the idea of tournaments originated

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originated from Rome; if so, the people of this country were not altogether indebted to the Normans for their knowledge on the subject, though it cannot be disputed they introduced the pomp, order, and regulations, which prevailed at the celebration after their arrival. Policy prevented the encouragement of tournaments, soon after the invasion; and they were far from frequent before the reign of Richard I., who granted licences for them, and exacted a duty from each of the combatants. The time selected by monarchs for tournaments were usually upon their obtaining a victory, their marriage, or coronation; and on those occasions heralds were sent to the surrounding courts with general invitations to all true knights. A spacious plain was selected and inclosed by towers and curtains, ornamented with such architectural designs as were the style of the period; within those, and facing the arena, were seats of various elevations and decorations suited to the personages intended to occupy them, composed of sovereigns, princes, their consorts, lords, ladies, knights, judges of the combats, heralds, and musicians. Those knights who proposed to enter the lists, suspended their shields for some days previous to the tournament in the cloister of a monastery situated near the scene of action, where it was customary for knights and ladies to examine them: if one of the latter touched a shield,