# A Country Fair* by Charles Hippisley Meade


A Victorian country fair

For a week or more, there has been a subdued but growing excitement in the quiet village of Highly Drowsy. Marbles for the time have lost their charm for the rising generation of the place. The children have spent their hours when out of school in hanging about the field in which the annual fair is shortly to be held, for it is this that is occupying all their thoughts as well as those of their elders and, to be conventionally polite, their betters.

I can well remember that time when I looked forward to that day as those village school children do now. As the great event approached, the very field seemed to change in appearance and to acquire an importance which its less favoured neighbours, with all their heavy hay crops, knew nothing of. Here would assemble from all parts of the great unknown outside world strangers high and low, though

* This is a transcript of Charles Meade's hand-written account of Binegar Fair, which ran from 1348-1955. It is undated but appears pre-1900. It is of its time and, in some scenes, depicts sexist and ethnic attitudes and language usual then but not acceptable today. A biographical note is at the end.

there were in truth fewer high among them than my youthful imagination pictured. Indeed at that time had I heard that the Prince of Wales or the Emperor of all the Russias was coming, I doubt if it would have excited more surprise in me than that it was a wonder they had never come before.

With what awe did I contemplate the burly ruffian who was the owner of the caravan laden with brushes and basketwork of every description, and who gave out that he had come from twenty miles the other side of London! The metropolis itself was but a name to me, and anyone who had penetrated into the unknown lands that lay beyond, was surrounded with a halo of mystery exceeding even that which seems now to rest on the greatest of African explorers. Strange scenes his eyes must have gazed on and uncouth dialects have struck upon his ear! As he sat on the steps of his wandering emporium puffing deliberately at the short black cutty between his teeth, I saw not a low-bred untrustworthy blackguard before me, whom the police wanted for his part in a drunken brawl and certain graver misdemeanours, but a worthy hero of romance who had travelled wide and had a hand in deeds the recital of which thrilled my youthful heart.

After a lapse of some years, on renewing my acquaintance with Highly Drowsy fair, I found many of its glories departed, and indeed, it seemed but a poor tawdry event after all, inclining one to wonder why the Highly Drowseians troubled themselves about it. That excitement of which I used to partake of my full share seemed curious and inexplicable. "Tempura mutant" [times change] and yet (this thought came after the philosophical evening pipe) perhaps many of those events which we grown-ups and highly educated members of society look forward to so anxiously, to partake in which we make such eager efforts and such extensive preparations, are not a whit more important or more rationally constituted than Highly Drowsy fair.

Though this festival lasts but one day, it makes, as I said, its approach felt for some week or ten days in advance not merely by the changed habits of the village children nor merely by the flood of conversational powers which come upon the older inhabitants, who at this time never think of passing one another without some remark on the great topic. The weather-wise prophesy continually what sort of day it will be, each knowing accurately when the rain will cease or the sun be clouded, though their prognostications do not always agree; while the patriarchs of the village have hosts of old world memories to pour forth of the time when the fair lasted a whole week; and decrepit old men will tell marvellous tales of the deeds of prowess of their youth when, before the police were thought of, Highly Drowsy fair was the scene of many a fight which occasionally ended in the death of one of the combatants. One old man told me that four men were "strung up" in one day for rioting at the fair, and that he himself saw the sentence executed, journeying some thirty or forty miles to do so, adding as a casual after-thought, that one of the men was some time later found to be entirely innocent, but that he was "main like one of the ring leaders". That was in the good old days of constables and public executions, when still in this out-of-the-way part of Great Britain where were certain roads on

which one travelled at the risk of one's purse and life to. Men still alive can point out spots formerly famous as "main highway robbery places" and can give a graphic account of runs they have had for dear life, though their legs are shrunk and crooked enough now. Yes, Highly Drowsy fair sets strange stories afoot of times which to the present young generation seem far away in the Dark Ages, but from which, after all, we are not so very far removed.

How often have I persuaded old John Coombes to pour forth for our mutual delight his memories of those by-gone times! Wondrous were the booths and standings of the days when he was "a-courtin' Ann" who has lain these many years in her last sleep under the shadow of the old church tower; and then a generation of men indeed walked the earth – "Fighting Jack", as the old man proudly tells you he was called, being famous among the redoubtables! Many a time he fought for the honour of Highly Drowsy against the youths sent forth with combat intent from the neighbouring village of Pokey in the Lanes. He waxes enthusiastic over his account of how he repelled the combined attack of three, and only had to be carried stunned from the field when a fourth gave him a cowardly blow from behind. The fuss that Ann made over him when he was borne into the farm house, where she was servant maid and he cowman, he describes with an attempt to satirize woman's timidity, but it breaks down, and he relapses into a silence from which none of our cunning can raise him over that thought of his sweetheart of many days ago.

But besides the gossip and stories the lanes around Highly Drowsy all tell for some time in advance that the fair is approaching, for they are tenanted by that strange folk the gipsies – an alien race living among us; coming from no one knows where; which has contrived to keep itself a distinct community for no one knows how long.

There they sit under the green hedgerows roasting their hedgehogs and boiling mysterious victuals in their iron pot, the men lying lazily smoking in the sun and the women squatting over their basketwork, also smoking, while a host of bare-footed, bareheaded brats play under the gorgeously decorated caravan and among the horses' heels. What brings them to the fair or indeed, what is their business in this world at all nobody seems accurately to know. They sell occasionally a half-starved pony or a broken-down horse and, I suppose, the baskets and brushes which they are always making. Yet how they live is a mystery, though perhaps the gamekeeper could partly explain it; and how they grow rich enough, as some do, to give their daughters a pint of sovereigns as a marriage dowry is a greater mystery still.

There was an old gipsy in these west-country parts who was I believe of the blood royal, at any rate he rejoiced in the name of Stanley and had a keen appreciation of fox-hunting. Mounted on some old screw he would make the pace with and see as much of the sport as the best of them. One day he was charging a thickset hedge in reckless fashion and a gentleman in the field, amused at this turn out and zeal, shouted after him "On, Stanley, on". To his astonishment, as the old screw cleared the fence, the reply came triumphantly back "Were the last words of Marmion", and

away went gipsy and steed to the front. One would like to know if Walter Scott is indeed read in the grassy lanes where the gipsies leave charred patches on the turf and some few rags clinging to the brambles as they wander from place to place.

But to return to the fair, or rather to the preparations for it, since as yet we are not nearly ready for the great event. The herds of cattle which come in for some days previously are taken in to keep by the neighbouring farmers, and it is well worthwhile to watch them being turned, all dust-covered and way-worn, from the high road into the field they are to rest in. Hours of pleasure they give as the sight of fresh green pasture meets their eyes, and before long they fall to eating every blade they can find. How they revel too, in the long deep draught of cool water from the pool which many start at a trot to reach as soon as they discover its whereabouts! Delightfully refreshing must it be to wade there knee deep and bathe their weary legs, for many of them have come from far by road and train and some by boat from the Emerald Island itself.

Then the horses, too. In droves of thirty or forty they come with their disreputable but entirely amusing owners, who put up at the neighbouring public houses and fill them with Irish brogue and the smell of whiskey. Happy-go-lucky creatures are these Irish jockeys. Easily moved to wrath they will knock you down for the asking one moment, while, as easily pacified, they will "drink your honour's health" the next. Modesty and retiring nature are not among their characteristics. Jim who has known Polly all his life and kept company with her for two years past, is struck into more than his usual dumbness at the familiarity and endearing epithets with which Mike, who hails from County Cork, addresses her, and is somewhat inclined to resent the way in which she tolerates it. But Mike is prodigal in the standing of drinks and Jim decides on smothering his indignation with the reflection that "tis fair time". Why Mike and the kindred spirits of that ilk do not all perish before they arrive at years which are commonly supposed to be those of discretion, has long been a puzzle to my mind; you will perhaps understand why if you see them in the fair, but, before we meet them there booths are to be put up and the sheep pens got ready and I know not what besides.

The booths are erected one or two days beforehand. As the village children watch the entrance of the first wagon load of poles and ropes and sheets, their excitement becomes too much for them and they rush off to bring Jack and Tom and the baby to see it. All the disreputable characters assist at putting up the tents and building the primitive oven in which the hot dinner will be roasted. Old Jack Sheppard creeps out of "the house" and crawls over some five long miles to be present. In his day, those five miles would have seemed short enough, and he has, if truth were told, travelled more than four times that distance after work to make a good catch of rabbits or it might be pheasants. Here he is now though, on two sticks, bent almost double. You might wonder why he hangs about the rough-built oven and prefers to pass the night there rather than in one of a host of more comfortable lodgings he could tell you of. But the fact is Jack has for many years occupied the honourable

position of turnspit on fair days, and he is determined to give no usurper a chance of supplanting him and taking from him the hot dinner with drink and few coppers which are his pay.

In the evening when the booths are half up, for from fear lest it should rain their canvas will not be hoisted to its full height to the morning, all the loafers of the village stroll up to the fair ground and loaf there instead of at the corner by the public house. Presumably they come just to convince themselves that it is fair day tomorrow, and to satisfy themselves that due preparations are being made, for they only stand about with their hands in their pockets and smoke and spit and eye the row of barrels which will be tapped next morning.

In a corner of the field there is a gipsy van with its women preparing the evening meal and the smoke curling up out of its quaint chimney, while the horse is cropping the grass near and occasionally shaking the heavy collar back from his ears with a toss of his head. Underneath the van lies a big lurcher and a medley of buckets and harness and men's coats. Through the shimmering green of the beeches the westward sun sends its rays and slowly sinks from view. Gradually the twilight fades and the voices on the field become fewer until the silence of the night hangs over the scene.

When the eventful day breaks a group of village children, where excitement is now at fever point, are on the ground almost as soon as the gipsy's lurcher has shaken himself and wandered off in search of a stray bone, and sometime before the first flock of sheep have arrived and are hustled into the pens with much barking on the part of the two or three smart dogs who are on the spot. By degrees the sheep pens are filling up and a few pigs are driven in and pulled, remonstrating with all the squeaks at their command (and these are not a few), from the cart by their ears and tails. One or two horses arrive, but, with the exception of a few cart colts, these early comers are for the most part a seedy looking lot. They have learned to look even on fairs with a philosophical resignment, and drop off to sleep as soon as they have taken their position. Little is the attention they attract as they doze complacently with the memory of many fairs within their breasts. Now and then some wag, who has no intention of becoming a purchaser, facetiously asks "how much for the old horse?" and feigns to be frightened out of the bargain when he hears the price. Or perhaps a would-be buyer approaches and after judiciously circling around, with the appearance of being struck more favourably by every other animal, he casually asks in passing the price of the one on which he has cast his eye. Astonishment at the enormity of the sum named compels him to retreat with assumed indignation at the insulting way in which his advances have been met; but his pride is not too seriously injured to prevent his listening, under protest always, to the proposals of the owner to meet him half way. If he has named a figure perhaps he is willing to split the difference and a bargain is struck, but more probably he will bide his time and stroll

round later on, when the seller is beginning to lose heart and will clear out at any price he can get.

Cows and calves and bulls and steers are now pouring steadily into their part of the field, some coming in large herds, some in twos and threes, while occasionally an old bull arrives singly, giving the man who is leading him with a stick and ring through the nose all he can do to prevent him from breaking away. Now and then indeed, some beast makes a mad plunge among the horses and people, being only driven back to his proper place after much running and unparliamentary language on the part of the drovers who are in charge of him.

These cattle drovers are a queer race which probably New Education Codes in course of time will banish from the land. The professional drover is one of the most disreputable looking members of society you could well find. His coat is a patchwork of stuffs of various hues and patterns, and the most complimentary mention one can make of his trousers is that they match his coat. At every fair and market round they are regular attendants and their life must indeed be a rough one as, though they have their regular patrons, they are by no means sure of a job, and when they get one they often have to drive a lot of cattle or sheep some twenty miles or more. If you have never driven cows or sheep for any distance you can scarcely realize how slowly they walk and what tedious work it must be creeping after them for hour after hour, occasionally stopping for the fatter individuals to regain their breath.

There is a fine specimen of the John Bull type of farmer in a tall white hat, grey overcoat thrown open and showing a broad exposure of blue waistcoat and corduroy breeches with tan leggings below them. With what gusto does he punch the sides of those beasts, huddled closely together and enquire, "How much for the little bunch of heifers?" Continuing the deal, he describes them as "a plain lot" and expatiates on their want of udder, while he insists that the responsibilities of maternity will not fall to this or that one's lot. Having become their owner he lauds them to the skies as "growers every one of 'em, and not a barrener in the lot". He confidently assures Squire Wideacres that at the moment he bought them he thought "this is just the sort to go into the Squire's dairy" and that to no one else would he pass them at the modest profit of a crown a head. Having persuaded the worthy old gentleman into buying them he points out another group saying, "There's a little lot will do credit to some one next year and I should like you to have 'em, Sir. Bid us a bad price for 'em. I'll take a bad price just to liven them others up. If you give me a bid, I'll do what I can and I know you'll say you never bought fourteen better bred ones in your life".

That lean man in almost clerical attire who is haggling over the price of three old dairy cows is, if you only knew the truth, a capitalist of no mean order and owner of some hundreds of acres. He has made his money he will tell you by sticking out for the last sixpences, and rumour says of him that having once left a market on foot he

regretted not having purchased some cattle there after eleven miles of his walk home had been accomplished; instead of going on and sleeping off his vexation, he turned round, walked the eleven miles back, completed the purchase of the coveted beasts and trudged contentedly home behind them. Surely it is a first reward of his energy that he now rides at his ease in his own trap to fair and market; but though the days of his need are long since passed he will haggle for the last sixpence till the end of his life.

The fair is now reaching its height and the sea of faces round us becomes positively bewildering. Here a smart young farmer in jack boots and spurs passes us on a showy looking young horse, who, with his thickset haunches and short nervous tail looks as if he could both go and jump. There comes a farmer's trap with the owner driving and his "Missus" at his side smiling benignantly beneath the feathers in her hat, while several daughters (quite conscious of having their best gowns on) are squashed into the back seat, whence they can well observe and respond to the greetings of their admirers. "Goodness, Mary Jane, how that young man is staring; it makes me feel hot all over, that it do!" says one, emphasising the remark with a giggle and a prod at her sister's ribs with the handle of her sunshade. Dealers are here without number, some in the long white coat with large bone buttons which men of their profession affect, and an oak sapling (the more perversely crooked the better) in their hands or a whip wherewith to flick horses as they pass – whips bound with many brass rings and having bone handles convenient to be sucked.

There is another type of dealer, half, if not wholly, gipsy. Men of this stamp wear large coats with countless pockets inside and out and buttons of mother of pearl studded here, there and wherever they can be no manner of use, in mere exuberance of display. You might as well hope to catch a weasel dozing or a Bristolian sleeping with both eyes shut, as expect to get the better of these men in a deal, as one Josiah Hopwell found out to his cost.

In every way was Josiah a worthy citizen of the town of Little Magnus; no public meeting of its local potentates was felt to be complete without him, and on every Board he sat to uphold those principles of strict economy in expenditure which rendered him so dear to his fellow-townsmen. Not a protest was entered at the assemblies in the Town Hall against the reckless outlay that the Sanitary Commissioners wished to force upon the town, but Josiah was the mover, or at least seconded its adoption.

Now Josiah was withal an undertaker, an artistic undertaker I would have you understand – not one of those soulless individuals in seedy black gloves who carry on their business as though it were merely a matter of pounds, shillings and pence. No! Josiah delighted in his calling as in one of the fine arts and had made a specialty of one of its branches – the funerals of the young. Thanks to him, Little Magnus boasted a miniature hearse drawn by a diminutive pony with long sweeping tail and flowing mane. All was perfect but for two things – the pony had a white star on his

forehead and a white sock on his near hindleg and was moreover a jibber. It was the especial awkwardness of his jibbing propensities that decided Josiah to part with him, and for this purpose he drove him over to Highly Drowsy fair. As he entered the fair a dealer stopped him, enquired the price of the pony and after the inevitable haggling of the market, Josiah let him go for a five pound note feeling glad to be rid of him at that.

Now a miniature hearse is useless without a diminutive pony, so Josiah looked around him to see if there was anything that would suit him. While he was doing so, the man to whom he had sold the jibber accosted him and informed him that he had just parted with it again. Hearing that Josiah wished to replace it, he kindly offered his assistance, and on learning what manner of animal he was in search of, said that a friend of his had one that would be "just the ticket". So Josiah went a viewed the friend's pony. It was just such a one as he desired, coal black all over, and though his tail was very short and his mane hogged, yet both would grow in time, and the miniature hearse could again trundle through the streets of Little Magnus to the delight of all beholders. Nothing under fifteen pounds would induce the owner to part with it, but it seemed to be so exactly what he wanted that at last Josiah paid the money down, not however before the man had solemnly assured him that this pony was no more a jibber than he, Josiah himself, was.

Very proud he felt of his new acquisition as he drove it home, and the next morning he went early to visit it in the stable. Among the minor vices of the beast he had parted with the day before was that of crib-biting, and Josiah certainly felt vexed on hearing the familiar "crunch, crunch" at the manger as he entered the door. The man came in to groom the animal and was proceeding on this business with the usual 'hushing' accompaniment when Josiah was startled by hearing it stop and a distinctly indifferent word take its place. He enquired loftily into the cause of the expletive, meaning to deliver a stern rebuke to his servant for using such language in his presence, but on the man showing him that some white hairs were plainly visible on the forehead of the new pony where the damp wisp of hay had passed over it, an enormous oath escaped from his lips as he eagerly directed that the wisps of hay should be directed to the near hind leg of the animal before them. Who shall describe the agony which pierced Josiah's soul as slowly a white sock became visible? Even yet not satisfied he had the trap brought out and the pony put to. The fearful suspicion was true. Not an inch would the animal budge. The same that he had sold for five pounds and bought again, minus its mane and tail, for fifteen certainly profited the artist!

Now that the fair is at its thickest what a tempest of sounds is raging round us! Here a Cheap Jack is selling his goods which are chiefly composed of rejected military accoutrements. "I say, look here! I only want two or three hundred of you gents to come round to see what I've got to offer you today. Here's a lot of Government

stores what cost nothing and I want to sell 'em at the same price. Well I'm blowed if I ever see'd such a thing in all my life. Here's two whips worth four pound ten (I don't mean four pound ten in money, but four pounds of beef steak and ten pen'worth of onions, - and a hungry man can do well with that). Now I met a chap this morning what would give five pounds any day to see two such whips as them, and he was a poor blind man. Four bob is what I am going to ask you for these two whips, and if you've got a stubborn horse of a lazy wife, you can't do better than buy 'em. You just goes in and sez, "Mary, once, Mary, twice", and afore you sez it three times she's out of bed and downstairs and got the kettle boiled afore the fire's lighted. I'll take three-and-six, three-and-five, three-and-four, three, two, one, and if I sells 'em for less than three bob when I go home my guv'ner will lock me up in a cook's shop with a muzzle on. Now I want to see if you've got any money in your pockets today so I'm blowed if I don't let you have them for two-and-nine. Is there a buyer? Well s'elp me Moses two-and-eight, seven, six, and if you won't have 'em now I've a damned good mind to put two-and-six with 'em and let you have 'em for half-a-crown; damnder good mind to put 'em again down, and if I does, I won't take 'em off again under three-and-a-tanner."

There stand the proprietors of the boxing booth uttering unearthly yells and entreating the rustics to step and have a round with the coloured man whose appearance as he stands on the platform swallowing burning tow, is about as attractive as that as his native idols. Clapping his hand on his mouth while the negro hideously distorts his features, the senior proprietor begins his address. "Now gentlemen we have come here to tell you the same old story, and to show you who we are and what we are capable of doing. This gentleman on my right is my brother Tom Scraggs of Beauchester, as you well know; equal to any man of his weight in the kingdom and champion boxer of the West of England. Beyond him stands Jim Butcher who can show you as pretty a bit of sparring as any man alive, and the coloured gentleman is Sam Bull, better known as Liverpool Jack who was winner of four open prize fights and eighteen open competitions. He ain't used to travelling with this sort of show, gents, but being in reduced circumstances he has consented to come with us. What gent is there on the field that'll step up and have a round with the black man? We don't want to break your heads and disfigure you – we don't want to knock you about and give you bloody noses but just to have a friendly spar to show you what we are capable of doing if called on." A gent from the outside here presses through the crowd and catching the gloves which are thrown to him they enter the tent which is quickly filled. Here Scraggs introduces the combatants to the spectators as follows. "Now, gents, this is just a friendly round between my brother Tom Scraggs of Beauchester champion of the West of England and a stranger who has volunteered as a friend." The stranger is Scraggs' own brother-in-law who is travelling incog: in order to come forward when necessary to encourage the hesitating rustics by obtaining early victories over his relatives and the darky. The first round is brought to a close by "the stranger's" pummelling Scraggs Junior's face while he holds one hand behind his back. Then

"time" is called and after a short rest, the order "take your corners" shouted and the second round begins.

The younger Scraggs shows somewhat better form this time and his admiring elder brother appeals to the company with "now gents if you call that a pretty set-to, just put your hands together and encourage the lad. I am sure they deserve a drink – there's no compulsion and you've no more to pay but if you think they've shown a good set-to just put something in the hat."

"Round number three and last" is then announced and the company is begged if they see anything worth applauding to put their hands together and give a hearty clap all round. Scraggs retrieves his reputation as Champion of the West of England and the stranger retires discomforted as the elder brother shouts, "end of third round, it's all over and there's the way out."

The babel of tongues round us shouting, laughing, cursing, sound as if the devil has come to his own again and is keeping high festival in honour of the occasion. Now there is a distinct addition to the roar, and as we press forward to learn the cause, we recognise the figure of our old friend Mike, careering wildly across the field on a colt with thirty others in his train. That is the Irish man's method of announcing his entrance and one must admit it is successful. Helter-skelter, the people fall aside to make a path for his royal progress and he need not fear that his presence at the fair will be unknown. When he arrives at the spot he has selected for carrying on his business, the colts are driven so closely together that any danger of their injuring one another by kicking is avoided. Mike then waving aloft a pink calico flag directs his "boys" to fetch out the little grey filly which is the "pride of his eyes" and an "Oirish jewel" and proceeds to harangue his quickly gathering audience.

"Now, you buyers, here's a horse I'm showin' ye, and no imitation at all. Sure she'll jump over her own height and wouldn't harm a baby in the stable. Och! That's no blemish at all ye're looking at, but just a bit of s scratch she got in the boat." Having lifted all her legs and passed his hand all over her, he hangs on the end of her tail, while the animal is too terrified to offer any remonstrance, apostrophising her as follows. "Wo, you blood horse! Wo, you peacock! Wo, you live stargazer! Wo, you low long rogue! Wo you good fellow! Wo! Wo! You cock of the walk from the County of Cork! Sure, gintlemen, she's just come off the mountain and is poor as a rook but poverty's no crime! Wo, you little jewil! Look at her walk, gintlemen, look at her walk! She walks like a lady at a ball. Look at her long neck and short back and her blood head you could put in a pint pot! Wo, you lively monkey!"

Then with a swoop of his flag before her eyes he bids Tim "hould on to the long halter and above all "do be careful of the customer's corns" and the beast plunges madly round. When the interest in this part of the proceedings begin to flag, he boldly asserts she will carry as "aisy as a rocking chair", and that "a lady could hold her with her apron strings". Tim is then told to "back her" and up he scrambles only to be bucked off before he is fairly seated. Nothing daunted, he again makes the

attempt and at last succeeding, with only a halter passing through her mouth, starts off as fast as four nimble legs can carry him. Tim generally manages to pull up after a time and turn round to gallop back in the same fashion, but sometimes an unusually headstrong colt carries him at a strong gallop right across the fair till it comes to a dead stop in the midst of a group of carthorses, among whose legs he dextrously throws himself and creeps out immediately afterwards none the worse for his tumble.

Mike not only understands how to sell a horse but is no fool in the matter of buying. He assures young Squire Wideacres, who wishes to sell him a bay mare that has never recovered from a strain got in last season's hunting field, that you can get a made horse at mackerel price – three a shilling – that she's only fit to go in a cab and when the young squire says he will take thirty-five pounds for the mare and let Mike send her to Leicestershire and make fifty, he is met with the retort – "Och, sind her to Melton you'll be meaning to make pies of". Mike expresses only moderate satisfaction with the result of his hard day's work and says he has only been able to sell out as he bought 'em all on trust and niver intends to pay the money for them; but as this statement is contradicted by the one he made ten minutes later when he says "Sure in Oirland, your honour, they won't let 'em go out of their sight without the money, not if you give them a thousand pounds," it is difficult to say how he has really fared.

I had almost forgotten to point out the old donkey man to you, though he is one of the most picturesque figures in the fair in his large red waistcoat and marvellously broad brimmed, wide awake, with his nether limbs encased in corduroy breeches and grey stockings. One is liable to overlook his two or three donkeys as they stand with the proverbial patience of their race in a corner of the field. They become more conspicuous as the day wears on, for the great bulk of the people who have come primarily to do business are early goers, and an hour or two after the thick of the fair is reached sees the numbers on the field sensibly diminished.

The tide of traps and riders ebbs steadily outwards and among them you may see some already discovering the eccentricities of their new purchases, which perhaps show more inclination to lie down or to run back than to set their shoulders to the collar and pull in the right direction. Pedestrians are pouring out, some with a saddle on their shoulders and a bridle hanging over their arm; some not quite steady on their legs or sure of the right way home; while a few are escorted from the field by one of Her Majesty's servants in blue cloth, loudly protesting their indifference to the compliment in forcible language.

Though so many are leaving, the fair is by no means drawing to a close, and a goodly number remain to intend to partake of the fun which is to follow. Village dames with their families streaming behind them, venture now for the first time to enter the field and young men are looking for their sweethearts to enjoy with them the pangs of a pseudo sea-sickness in the swings which have hitherto been

neglected. Solemnly they go backwards and forwards, facing each other in the miniature boats and gazing with the rapture of rising love or other aspiring sensations, into each other's eyes. The nephews and nieces of long-suffering endeavour and ever-benignant Aunt Sally are giving the old lady such a bad time of it that one marvels she does not henceforth abjure the pleasures of her short clay, which must smoke very sweetly if it renders endurable the contempt it draws on her. In what light would Aunt Polly or Aunt Betty contemplate her conduct if we hired three sticks a penny to hurl at their dear old noses?

Can it be true that we once regarded the gingerbread goods displayed on the temporary counters of the standings and technically known as "farings", as "food for the gods"? Neither they nor the bulls-eyes which fill the square, thick-necked bottles by their side tempt one now and in vain does the substantial old dame with cork-screw curls invite us to purchase of her wares. We turn a deaf ear to her entreaties though there was a time when she could wheedle the last penny from our pockets. In spite of our indifference, she and her next door neighbour of the shooting gallery are doing a roaring trade, and the number of bushels of nuts they have disposed of in the course of one day must be alarming. Wherever we meet Bill and Tom and Jim at any time since nine this morning, we discover them in the act of cracking a nut between their teeth or adroitly expectorating the shell.

From one of the booths, whose bunting hangs limply in the still damp evening air, we hear the strains of a concertina and as we peep inside we see old Bill Stock and one of his contemporaries dancing the double shuffle on a plank. "Back to back", "face to face", "the walk round" and all the other mysteries of that classic dance are gone through with a solemnity worthy of the stately measures in the rites of Ancient Greece. It is only when the call "now show time" that the vestiges of a self-satisfied smile flits over Bill's features. Round the rude plank tables men, and women too, are drinking and smoking, laughing and quarrelling. Two old cronies far on their cups are shaking hands repeatedly with words of eternal friendship which will be forgotten before tomorrow's headaches; there a woman rises and striking the drunken brute next to her a sounding blow in the face, calls him a "------". Enough! Let us get outside into the fresh air. As we hasten away a hubbub of angry voices makes us turn, and we see two men staggering out and throwing off their coats. Quickly is the word passed "A Fight" and a crowd of eager faces form a ring around them but the police are on the spot and before either of the combatants knows what he is fighting about or who 'is adversary is, they have been separated and warned to leave the field if they cannot keep the peace.

Very different was it only a few years ago when I have seen the field one mass of drunkards fighting with fists, sticks and anything they could lay hold of. The gipsy women were not infrequently to the fore in these frays born of a ridiculous squabble over a mug of ale, and as often as not they proved themselves to be Amazons of whom the unhappy man who provoked their hostility might stand in awe.

Far from pleasant are the closing scenes of the day's merriment. Wives searching for their husbands through the booths and dreading the sight they know too well will meet their eyes when he is found, hopelessly incoherent in his speech and with legs that seem desirous of going heaven-wards or hell-wards or any wither rather than homewards! Here a wife leads her lord forth, but he has cunning enough to elude her grasp and shuffle back to the attractions of the booths. In vain, does he protest the innocence of his proceedings and argue for the advisability of one more glass; his wrathful spouse at last succeeds in dragging him away, and having got him clear of the field lets him fall a helpless heap upon the turf at the wayside. Her turn comes then and the torrent of her pent-up indignation is let loose upon the unconscious head of the old reprobate.

The last load to leave the field are some eight men, varying in the stages of intoxication from that of "happy imbecility" to that of "very drunk". How they get home in safety is incomprehensible, as their only idea of driving is to lash on their beast up and down hill as fast as his legs can move the heavy cart. We expostulate with one of the party when next we see him on the condition in which he left the fair, and endeavour to make him see the folly of his ways by asking what he would have done had his neck been deservedly broken. "Sh'ld 'a had to put up wi't, I s'pose" is the only response we can get from the bibulous philosopher as he spits on his hands and resumes operations with his spade.

In the grey dawn of the morning after the fair the field looks terribly dissipated and presents a striking contrast to its gay appearance but twelve hours before. The standings and swings have all fled, leaving only a green patch amidst the brown of the surrounding down-trodden grass to show where they had been. The proprietors of the booths are taking them down in all haste to get over to Little Magnus in time for the flower show. Old Jack Sheppard is wandering round the field examining each scrap of paper to see if it be not a Bank of England note, and hunting for dropped money or other valuables. Bill Stock comes up the road on his way to work, and as we stop him to ask how he thought the fair went off he shakes his head over the degeneracy of the world in general and of his own son in particular, who "if you'll believe what I'd tell e, zir, comed up to fair with yeighteen pence in uz pockut and never spent a fard'd o't; I'd call at scan'lous." He brightens up somewhat when we congratulate him on his performance of the double shuffle on the previous evening, and leaves us saying "twenty year agone he werdn't afeard to stan' up wi' any on 'em," and that he can "knock ut out now wi' here an' there one".

**Biographical note**

Charles Hippisley Meade was born on 23 May 1866 in Binegar. He was the third son of the Rector, Reverend William Meade. His mother was Charlotte Mary (née Hippisley), William Meade's second wife. Charles graduated from Trinity College, Oxford in 1887 with a B.A in history. By 1901, Charles had married Kathleen Cotton Stapleton and lived near Wincanton before finally settling in Bath. Charles died aged 73 in Bath on 8 October 1939. His son, James was a Nobel Laureate.