

The Revels at Flordon

IT is only by grace of a telephone call from the Rector that I shall be able to tell you whether, in the great Coronation Day tug of war across the river at Flordon the married men pulled the single into the water, or the single pulled the married.

Newspapers have a deplorable habit of keeping to time, which village celebrations have not. The consequence is that I had to come into Norwich to write this article when the single were leading the married by two goals to none half way through the comic football match, and the tug of war was still only a twinkle of anticipation in the spectators eyes.

The river in point of fact is only a shallow stream dividing the parishes of Flordon and Hapton, but a gentleman who was not engaged in the tug of war told me with relish that the mud in the bottom must be three feet deep. Moreover the football match was being played with such a zest that it seemed probable whichever team lost the subsequent tug of war would not give up the struggle until it had been dragged not merely into but through the river. So although I had already relinquished with a sigh the evening social and the bonfire, I shall regret to the end of my days that I did not see the tug of war.

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The children, in the afternoon, had set an example of decorum. Impervious to the showers, they had paraded in fancy dress on the gravel sweep in front of the rectory porch (and the Rector had got up at four in the morning to perfect the smoothness of the gravel for that grand occasion). A sweet little girl with half a cottage garden in her arms had won a first prize, as a flower girl; and a fierce little boy with a wooden cutlass in his hand and a black patch over one eye had won another first prize, as a pirate; and Mrs. Webster, of the Hall, had presented the prizes.

Then the little boy, tearing the patch from his eye, had won two races in succession over an uphill course of about seventy yards over the most level part of the Rector's glebe, which constituted a slope of about one in ten. Unbreathed, the winner raced back to the starting post for his jacket. His pirate's beard and moustachios were still stuck firmly to his face, and he probably had his tea in them.

Still, nobody minded the shower's for Flordon had provided itself with big farm carts, the space between them spanned by ladders and roofed with a stack cover to keep all dry. There an old gentleman with a grand walrus moustache, a Coronation favour in one buttonhole and a whole bouquet of roses and sweet peas in the other, told me how he had won a penny and a coloured handkerchief for winning a race at the village celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee—and pennies, he said, were worth having in those days, for he was out at work then, at ten years old, earning two shillings a week as a farm boy.

And how he roared when, the children having had their turn the men of the village came out for the sack race! A sack race at Flordon is not so much a race as a tournament, a melee, in which the competitors bowl each other over down the slope of the Rector's glebe, and the winner is the last man left standing. Finally, to crown all, one man of muscle picked up his little wife, put her in a sack, and raced round the field with her on his back.

That was the stuff to raise an appetite for tea, and the elder girls had it first then waited on the

children in the big stone-floored kitchen of the rectory, and each child had a Coronation mug. Then all the grown-ups crowded into the rectory room, which serves the parish for its social occasions, and there we had what Norfolk calls a high old meat tea (the Rector's wife and the ladies of the Coronation committee had missed the Coronation broadcast to get that tea ready and my neighbour at table had spent two hours carving the chickens and ham).

There was beer to accompany the meal, and a glass of wine for the toasts, and we toasted everybody, including the Parish Council, and sang "God save the Queen" twice—once for a grace before meat, and once afterwards for good measure. It was not until afterwards that anybody realised the one thing they had forgotten to serve was tea—but that didn't matter, they said; they'd have it later on, at the social.

It was after tea that we fell behind time—and indeed, only giants would play football, comic or otherwise, immediately after such a meal. So the married team spent half an hour in the dressing room, which was the rectory kitchen, dressing themselves in garments borrowed from their wives, and the single team dressed as anything from clowns to clergymen; and at last they sallied forth to play Association football with a Rugby ball on the mountainous pitch of the rectory glebe.

The married were two goals down at half-time because, although they defended their goal with a stirrup pump, they were playing uphill, but the Rector has just telephoned to tell me that in the second half, playing downhill, they made it a draw, 2-2, and left all to be decided by the tug of war across the river.

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And to conclude the heroics of Flordon, the tug of war across the river was decided not by one pull, but by the best of three and the single men won. The Rector pulled as anchor man for them and for the married alternately, and was spared the water because, after turning a somersault, he fetched up against a fence post, but Mr. Geoffrey Webster, of the Hall, refusing to let go the rope, was pulled through the river twice.

It seems that after the tug of war somebody noticed it was raining. So they went on to the social in the Rectory Room, and tea, and the Queen's broadcast. At ten there was to be a bonfire—and rain or no rain, I am certain the Flordon bonfire blazed, for that village is unquenchable.