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Anonymous

***A Visit to "Daisy Nook", or,
a Londoner's Glance at Lancashire Life.
By a Member of the Savage Club
(1863)***

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Business led me down to Manchester last April, and I took the opportunity to call upon a gentleman whose acquaintance I made in London, and who is well known in Lancashire by his sketches of Lancashire life. I mean Mr. Benjamin Brierley. I found my friend busy with his forthcoming book, "Chronicles of Waverlow," and the delight at meeting each other was, I believe, mutual. I must become his guest for a time. We were soon enjoying over again the experiences of last season, when we met at the club, and our Cockney brethren were treated for the first time to a taste of genuine Lancashire. I shall not soon forget the evening that our northern friend was introduced

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to the "Savages". Circumstances for the time made him a sort of "lion" for the Lancashire distress was then the talk of every circle. We were not long in finding that "touch of nature" which "makes the whole world kin," and removes, as if by magic, the reserve which is natural to first acquaintance. That night the "Doctor" mixed the punch; --"Little Billy" was sung, and the "Merm-i-ade" decoyed her lover to the "bottom of the sea." H--was in fine humour, and S--made our sides ache with laughing. We had all read or heard of Waugh's wondrous song, "Come whoam to thi childer an' me", but few of us thoroughly understood it from its being written in the native dialect, and, consequently, difficult for a southerner to read.

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Brierley was asked to recite the poem. He consented on seeing we were all so eager to hear it, and the delight which everyone felt over the recital was such as to damage the popular notion that a Cockney cannot understand a Lancashire man when he speaks in his native and much loved Doric. But to my visit.

I wanted to have a peep at Lancashire --that Lancashire which we have pictured in our stories of the county, where the oddity of character ascribed to the people, is still in some degree preserved. I soon discovered that it was not to be found in Manchester, nor indeed in the immediate neighbourhood, and that if I wished to avoid mixing the pure metal with the alloy furnished by immigrants from the Shannon and the Liffey, I must go where tall chimnies were not so plentiful. I had read of "Daisy Nook", but thought the picture overdrawn. How could Lancashire boast such scenery as is described in "A Day Out?" Pure rivers and grassy glades; quiet paths and "leafy solitudes"; rustic cottages where the shuttle of the hand-loom can still be heard. Surely they belonged not to modern Lancashire. The steam-engine has swept away or swallowed them up long since.

I named these misgivings to my friend, and proposed, more in jest than in earnest, that we should pay a visit to the now celebrated scene of "A Day Out" and "Bunk Ho", if it was only to have an hour's roughing amongst those agreeable "savages" whom he has depicted in his several sketches.

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Potter, the artist, whom I had also met in London, hearing of my being in Manchester, came down from Oldham to see me, and after spending a jolly evening with us, he agreed to meet us at "Daisy Nook" on the day appointed for our visit. Mr. M--, a musician, was also enlisted, and the projected excursion promised to be a pleasant one, whatever the nature of the country might be.

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The day came—Monday—and the morning was a Manchester one all over; as unpropitious as it possibly could be. It had been rainy and blustering the night before, and though now it was comparatively quiet, there was a murkiness in the atmosphere that reminded one of a stage fog wound up. The day, however, brightened as it progressed. In the afternoon it decided to be fine, and gave us an assurance of its good intentions by displaying an almost cloudless sky; not quite so blue as we see in paper-hanging prints of Italian landscapes, but sufficiently to make the sunshine it disclosed most refreshing and delightful. So with good appetites for enjoyment we set out.

Most readers of Brierley's works are probably unacquainted with the exact locality of the district to which he has given the slightly poetical name of "Daisy Nook". Stripping romance from the author's description, "Daisy Nook" has hitherto been known by the name of "Waterhouses". It is situated about five miles east of Manchester; about three south of Oldham, and as near as may be guessed two miles north-west of Ashton-under-Lyne. Brierley very ingenuously concealed this whereabouts in the description of his journey, so as to give the place a sort of mythical existence. Mr. Potter, his illustrator, was the first to discover where the scene of "A Day Out" was laid, and this discovery was the means of begetting a friendship betwixt the two, which is of the closest kind.

We purposed, on setting out, taking the train from Miles Platting to Clayton Bridge, which would shorten our walk by about two miles. We had, however, delayed starting till within five minutes of train time; and as we had nearly half-a-mile to walk to get to the station, we had to put on steam;—much to the annoyance of Mr. M--, who is short

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and stout; consequently, not over well cut out for taking the lead in a quick race. I had soon a striking intimation that we were in the land

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of "Tim Bobbin", through an incident which occurred as we were crossing Collyhurst. We could hear the train labouring up the incline, and alarmed lest it should leave us behind, we struck out over a brick-croft at a speed that made coat-tails fly, and put hats in danger of being blown or shaken off. Mr. M-- was puffing mightily in the rear, and for a short time it was a question whether he or the engine were grunting loudest. As we were passing a group of boys at marbles they looked up from their play, and probably fancying we were engaged in a pedestrian contest, shouted most lustily. We were distancing Mr. M--, and as that gentleman came upon the group, sweating like a puddler, they set up a louder shout, and--"Well done, Tubby"--"Bravyo fat-un!" encouraged the gallant gentleman in his endeavours to catch us. We so thoroughly enjoyed this incident that it completely broke us down. We could run no further from sheer laughing, and we had the delightful satisfaction of watching the train depart from the station without us.

Nothing now remained but to do the journey on foot; so pocketing our disappointment, which good temper made it easy to do, we went on to Newton Heath. We left the main road at the "Duke of York,"--passed the Church--crossed Botany Green (or Botany Bay Green)--took a quiet road which led through a prettily wooded dell (pity the trees were not in full foliage)--ascended the upland again, and after a short walk, the valley of the Medlock spread itself beautifully, if not grandly before us. I could not have believed that there was such pretty places so near to Manchester; but I am told that further on--up in Saddleworth--the scenery will bear honourable comparison with the most picturesque districts of North Wales.

Crossing an elbow of the valley, we proceeded up a very steep and very narrow road which led us to the village or ham-

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let of Woodhouses. Here we had to call upon an acquaintance, and I took the opportunity thus afforded of looking into the character of the district and its inhabitants.

The village, which comprises only a few cottages, lining each side of a straight lane, is, I am informed, as thoroughly Lancashire as any to be met with. Nearly every cottage has its garden either back or front, and fruit and flower-growing is carried out to a perfection quite marvellous.

The people are mostly handloom weavers of the better class; all remarkably fond of music as may be gathered from the display of "band" instruments which many of the dwellings contain. There is another feature which the place is noted for, its pretty girls; and when we reflect that the physical development of these young persons has never been influenced by the cramping associations of the cotton-mill, it is natural to suppose they are likely to be of the finest specimens of the "witches" the county is famous for.

We were now within ten minutes walk of "Daisy Nook". The sun was mellowing its light in the orange tinted west. Evening was setting in, and my eagerness to behold the now celebrated spot before the charm of sunshine had faded from it, shortened our stay at Woodhouses, and we proceeded to our destination without any more delay. The valley lay on our right, and as we approached it the "Nook" was indicated by a soft blue atmosphere that hung over it. Laughter and other sounds of merriment came ringing up from below, and we could hear that a discourse was being carried on somewhere in rather a high tone. "Here we have Red Bill's", I observed, as my eye caught the name on a sign-board which swings at the corner of the house represented in our title page. So it was. We stood for a few moments contemplating the prospect and listening to the sounds of merry voices which contrasted pleasingly with the otherwise quiet

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scene. About the grounds, a number of young people were scattered. Some were enjoying themselves with extemporised swings constructed by fastening ropes to trees,

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others were strolling or running about the garden, and a group of them stood in the fold with pots of milk in their hands; evidently relishing such an article of refreshment. We afterwards learnt that they were a pic-nic party from Oldham, and were people belonging to the middle classes.

We entered the "public" by the back door, to gain which we had to descend a steep bank by a path cut out like a flight of stairs. Here the landlady met us, with a face so full of bloom that it would have astonished a rouge-pot; and she acquainted us with the agreeable intelligence that Potter had been waiting "ever so long". The fumes of tobacco, and the heat which met us at the inner door, threatened to drive us back, and the noise which greeted our ears was almost deafening. The landlord, to whom an intimation of our visit had been conveyed, honoured the occasion by inviting a few of his neighbours, who are unfortunately too poor to spend anything in these "hard times", and a number of pint pots, held out at arms length, and which formed a cluster like a large crockery chandelier, were offered us, but which we were under the necessity of refusing. With a hand fashioned into something betwixt a sledge-hammer and a vice, "Red Bill", gripped and bade us welcome to "Daisy Nook". Potter rose from the seat of honour, (i.e. the rocking-chair) and with a most magnificent grin on his countenance, said, while he shook us warmly, that the fun had been going on for an hour or so, such as he had never heard before. Seats were vacated for us near the "ingle", and we suffered ourselves to be partially roasted during a considerable portion of our stay; for, though the day was warm, the fire which "mine host" had provided was such a one as would have taken the start out of an untravelled cockney, even had it been at a Christmas feast.

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Such an assembly as we were now amongst, would, so far as my Lancashire experience goes, have been difficult to have met with anywhere else than in "Daisy Nook". Some of them were colliers on very short time, and very short means, but with a capacity for enjoyment that contrasted most freshly with the disposition of other classes

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of sufferers. There was nothing moody about them; they laughed as heartily as they would have done in good times with plenty in their butteries. Even their poverty was a temporary source of enjoyment to them. They joked about the shifts they had to make, as if it was the most amusing thing in the world to be scheming for bread. Most of them were partially "dressed up", and had I not known something about the resources of the Lancashire Distress Clothing Depot in London I should have been puzzled to account for the taste which some of them displayed in their choice of finery. One individual was flourishing about the house with some parts of his person adorned in a style of costume that might have been fitting for a duke, whilst the rest betrayed his calling both by its make and texture. Another exhibited a waistcoat quite superb in its pretensions, and of which he appeared to be intensely proud. A grey velvet one it was, elegant in cut, and had, no doubt, once been smart, but was now a little the worse for wear. On being interrogated about its history, and how it had come into his possession, the wearer screwed up his countenance, and inclining his head with a motion of seeming importance, said—"It's a 'dow' waistcoat"; implying by the term that it had been given by the relief committee. The garment, he averred, when descanting upon its history, had originally belonged to a "bookkeeper". This he knew from the fact of his having found "two pens" in one of the pockets, as well as from a disposition he felt, when wearing the waistcoat, to be "writin an figurin abeawt summat".

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"Tawk abewt berryln cloas", said a third; "if we wurt turn eawt in us Sunday suites we should hardly know one another. Ther's nobbo one tailior for miles reawnd, an he's welly clemmed to th' deeth; for sin' these clooas coom fro Lunnun we'n had no cagion t' buoy any if we'd had brass".

"How do you manage to fit yourselves?" I enquired of a person whose coat had no doubt had done duty at one of Her Majesty's levees.

"Oh, we dunno care so much abeawt th' fit," he replied. "If we con get inside, an' keep it fro tumblin off, or bein' blown away, we'st do. Look here," he continued,

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showing a piece of coat-skirt, "this wur never bowt for under a guinea a yard, an' it's welly as good as new. It'll be a cooat for me this next ten yer, if aw dunno get messurt for a wooden un i'th' time."

"Owd So-an-so" remarked an individual in the corner, alluding to another with a very hard nickname, "has had a pair o' double-boxed breeches gan him."

What kind were they? was eagerly asked by the company.

"Wheay," said our friend, "they'rn what they coen peg-top treawsers; an' th' slops deawn to th' knees wurn wide enoof for two legs apiece. So there Bet shortent 'em, an' made one int' two, for knee breeches. When one pair o' slops are done, he'll ha' th' tother lindert on to th' owd crackers; so then he'll have a pair o' what aw co double-boxed knee-breeches, beside a good pair o' leggins made eawt o' what wur cut off th' bottoms."

There was a good laugh at this amongst my friends; but the rest regarded the contrivance as a matter of course, or a thing of every day occurrence, so gave only a slight grin by way of acknowledgment, and allowed the anecdote to pass unquestioned.

"That's just what aw've bin doin'," said a little shrivelled old

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man, who had crept to the fire to light his pipe, and now stood spreading himself on the hot hearthstone as well as his scant proportions would allow him. "Yo seen this cooat", he said, drawing our attention to his upper garment, which instead of having the appendages that once belonged to them had a sort of frill or valance round the bottom, just below the waist. "This cooat ud ha' fittut any o'th' Andreys, an if aw'd worn th' laps to it aw should aulus ha' had 'em danglin abeawt mi clogs. So aw cut 'em off as yo' may see, un' this senglet aw made mysel eawt o' what wur laft, beside a good pair o' wellers for winter. Neaw then, look at me". And he twirled himself round like a spit before the fire, whilst the company loudly expressed their admiration of his cleverness.

A number of young ladies here entered the room to pass through into the parlour. The company appeared to have been drilled into a proper behaviour for such occasions, and were as silent as a dumb meeting. Soon as the door was closed the noise broke forth

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as fresh as ever, and continued until the young people returned, when the same respectful decorum was observed as before; and when the ladies said "Good-bye!" these rough, iron men said "Good-bye" too with all the tenderness and delicacy of feeling of so many fathers taking leave of their children.

I had hitherto been so interested in what was passing that I had forgotten to order refreshments, and as I had not been accustomed to ale or spirits, I asked "mine host", if I could have anything beside.

"Ay", he replied, "yoa con oather have it coud fro' th' tap, or warm fro' th' pap". So preferring a drop of milk I was immediately accommodated with a pint fresh from the cow, and which was so much different to the "chalk and water" I had been accustomed to, that I took it with a most agreeable relish.

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Candles were now lighted,—two for each table—for the curtains of the night were drawing close, and the cool air of the twilight was driving people indoors or homewards who had been spending the afternoon about the grounds. Strange as these people were to me, I could foresee what was to follow, for one or two began humming and piping, until—"Let's ha' some singin",—was called out and taken up by the company.

"Ay, dammin yor husks, let somb'dy sing," said an old man with a shrill voice, who was leaning on the table in the corner.

Our musical friend, Mr. M--, responded, and sang "The Beggar Boy", with a nice feeling that told on the listeners, and who applauded "to the very echo" when he had finished his song. Now that "harmony" had commenced it must be kept on. "Old Robinson" (that was the old man's name) after again anathematising somebody's "husk", said he would sing; and he broke forth at the top of his voice with the "Cries of London". A frequenter of the "Canterbury", or "Weston's", would have heard something new, had he been present during the singing of this song. It is an old ballad, the burthen of which enumerates the "cries" of old London, and not the yelling and caterwauling of our modern street merchants. The manner of the singing, too, had just as much originality about it;—waving his body about, screwing up his eyes, and throwing back

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his head when an extra effort was required, and shaking his voice on coming down, in imitation of the vibrating movement in some of our street organs. The concluding verse he sang twice over, being helped in the last round by the company, which produced that peculiar effect on the ears that we experience during the singing of a "Dutch medley" by a dozen voices.

Some amusement was here caused by the entrance from the kitchen of a person with something in his fist that looked like half of a cob-loaf with a "hutch" of cheese on the top.

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"What hast gotten there, Jack?" was a question put by more than one.

"A bit of a bitin-on; that's o'", replied Jack; though he had some difficulty in grasping the "bit" from its breadth and thickness.

"Aw think that coom in bar'foot", said "Red Bill"; but what was meant by the expression I was at a loss to comprehend till Potter explained that the application of "bar'foot," implied that it had come in very quietly.

"Mind thi toes, Jack," said another; but Jack set about his "bitin on" with as stolid an indifference to the remarks that were being made as if he had not heard them in the least.

"Another sung, or summut else!" was now called for.

" Just obleeg us wi' Owd Tum's blessin, Brierley, said one of the company who had before been too busy smoking to take part in what was going on.

I seconded the request, and Potter added his wish that our friend would give us th' "blessin" called for.

Brierley complied, and when he got upon his feet there was such a silence as I could not have expected. The passage is from "Bunk Ho", and contains a curious mixture of the humorous and the pathetic. At first there was a laugh,—quiet but general, then a roar; but instantly, as if by magic, the hearts of these rough men were touched—deeply too—for tears welled up and streamed down their faces as though they had been

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children. I shall never forget the scene;—how the hands came over to grasp that of their friend and interpreter, and how their lips uttered blessings in return. It proved to me how much easier it is to teach men's minds by reaching them through their sympathies than by appealing to their senses only. The dozen lines of that "blessing" did more than as many sermons would have done, for they went to the hearts of all present.

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While this ebullition of feeling was passing I noticed an individual, whom I had several times heard called "Poot", whispering in Potter's ear, which communication was immediately succeeded by the former making a sudden bolt out at the front door. While he was away a good deal of fun passed round. After a short absence "Poot" returned, bringing in his arms a little boy about five years old. Setting down the youngster in the middle of the floor, as if he was shooting a game cock out of a bag, and putting a stick with a huge knob in his hand, said—"Neaw, bat thi wings an' goo on."

'Whether the boy was to treat the company to a taste of his cudgel appeared painfully uncertain, till making a very remarkable bow by striking out one hand like a swimmer, he commenced reciting some pretty verses, the theme of which was "To my stick". Were I to tell my Cockney brethren how this little fellow down in this obscure nook of this rude Lancashire delivered himself of his task they would not believe me. But in truth he had the spirit of the poem so thoroughly grafted in him and he let it out so freely, and with such a regard for pure English, that we were all struck with amazement, and we expressed our admiration by discharging a handful of copper at him. This encouraged the youth to try another "piece" which was attended with similar success. Soon as he had performed his part he was again shouldered by his father, and returned to the family circle with the same indifference to ceremony as had been observed over his introduction to us.

It was impossible on our part to get a word in at the conversation; so we sat listening and thoroughly enjoying the scene. Though the four candles were placed in candlesticks, they might as well have been without; for they were seldom allowed to

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stand on the table. Everybody appeared intent upon having hold of one of them-not only to light his pipe, but to hold ix

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his neighbour's face while he talked to him; consequently, the candles were moving about from place to place, like the torches at the murder scene in "Macbeth".

"Why don't you get a lamp?" was asked of the landlord, to whom the candle movement was pointed out.

"There's one hangs there", he replied, pointing to a paraffin oil lamp in the nook, "but it's dangerous leetin it."

"How is that?"

"Wheay, they forgotten it's a lamp, an' lain howd on't same as if it had bin a candle, and never find th' difference eawt till they rappen ther pipe-yeds again the glass; an' then they cussen it becose they conno' bet ther bacco."

An imprecation was uttered by some one against the lamp in question, and the candles continued to move about in a kind of irregular quadrille.

The harmony here took a sudden turn through an accident occurring to a party whose voice had as yet been untried. A young hound lay asleep across the hearth, and a pair of heavy shoes coming unintentionally in contact with its tail, it set up a cry that would have been considered good music if heard during a hunt, "Tche-how-boy! tche-how-boy!" "Hark forrud, Beauty!" "Tally ho! Tally-ho!" were raised and repeated by the company in such voices that the sound we could hear echoed in the valley quite distinctly.

Supper being prepared for us in another room, we left our friends to the enjoyment of their lungs and their "milk o' paradise"; the hunting shout ringing in my ears for a considerable time afterwards.

I need not describe the supper. It was, however, a most delicious one; "toasted cheese" (without ropes) being the principal food. We got on famously with it, and brought the time for starting homewards before we felt properly settled. So

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taking a hasty leave of "Red Bill", his wife, and the company remaining, we left "Daisy Nook" "bathed in moonlight", and catching the train at Clayton Bridge, arrived in Manchester about five minutes past eleven, quite satisfied that we had experienced an evening's enjoyment which need not be frowned at by the most fastidious.

