

FISH AND FLESH IN LEATHER LANE.



HE man who is in Leather Lane is there. As this may savour somewhat of the nature of a truism, we hasten to state that among the inhabitants of Leather Lane, especially at certain seasons, there would not appear to prevail that certainty of position and locality which exists in more favoured spots. As the fact of being in Leather Lane, and yet not being there, would obviously lead to most inconvenient, if not most disastrous results, the be-

fore-mentioned inhabitants, on certain evenings, about nightfall, impressed with a sense of the danger besetting chance comers who might possibly labour under such misconceptions as we have named, take the opportunity of calling and shouting out at intervals, "Here you are!" "'Ere yer are!" "Yer y' ar!" so that the passenger who may possibly have had only a lingering suspicion of having been where he was up to that moment, becomes strengthened in his conviction by this loud and corroborative expression of public opinion, and proceeds on his way with greater confidence.

We have said that the inhabitants of the locality take these precautions in order to prevent misunderstandings in the minds of passers-by; but it must be admitted that they would not appear to be entirely actuated by such a purely unselfish motive. For they habitually mention in the same breath that they have potatoes to 'sell at a penny a pound; that their cabbages are three for twopence; that their fish was never better and never cheaper, and so on. So that a cynic might possibly say their whole aim and object is to sell their potatoes, cabbages, fish, &c., and their shouting out that you are there, when you had not the remotest suspicion of being anywhere else, is done only to startle and attract attention.

If this be so, it would be to their advantage if they did not all shout so loudly at one time. For the result is that the ear becomes so accustomed to hear the same statement in so many tones, that it is at last as impossible to be startled, as it would be for a soldier by the report of a musket on the field of battle. It would be impracticable, however, that any arrangement obviating the defect mentioned could be made, since each merchant is so deeply impressed with the quality, cheapness, and excellence of the goods he sells. Never was such an assembly of conscientious and high-minded dealers in the world. They are all bawling themselves hoarse with their tremendous efforts to make the public understand what bargains they are letting slip every minute that passes. Take their goods in your hands, look at them, feel them, taste them, count them, weigh them, do anything

except take them away without paying for them; and, after that, if you don't buy them, just to prevent the man going out of his mind in frantic efforts to understand how it is you can let such an opportunity slip, you must be hard-hearted indeed. We have found the study so interesting in the crush of the crowded pavement, the smell of fish and vegetables, the flare and stink of gas and naphtha-lamps, and the screams and yells of the dealers, that we have thought it worth a close and attentive inspection.

The chief fish sold are soles, plaice, eels, mackerel, haddocks, and herrings, fresh and dried. We shall see a shock-headed, bull-necked vendor behind a stall, with a heap of plaice on one side, a tub of very dirty water on the other, and a small block and a knife in the middle. The inevitable naphtha-lamp of course flares overhead.

"Now!" roars the hatless, thick-set trader, as he grasps a large plaice with his great thumb driven into its gills, and flops it into the water to give it a fresh appearance. "Here y' ar!" Then he roars again, as with three bangs of his knife on the block he cuts off the fish's tail and two side-fins—"Who'll 'ave this lot? who'll 'ave it for sixpence—fivepence—fourpence?" This last as he chops off its head and throws it into half a sheet of newspaper, for the inspection of the public. "The whole bloomin' lot for fourpence," he adds persuasively. It is promptly bought, and "Come on, come on, come on!" shouts the merchant again, "as many as yer like; I'm ready for yer; who'll 'ave this lot for fourpence?—any number on 'em here. Who'll 'ave this lot?"—(bang—bang—bang)—"'ere y' ar for fourpence—fourpence!" (yelled out with crimson face and starting eyes)—"Here, take it away;" and he pitches it into the arms of a thin, wan woman, with a child at her breast, and gives her two fishy pennies in exchange for her sixpence. "Who's on again?"—(bang—bang—bang)—"who's for this lot? Oh, you may smell 'em, missus; and now go home and tell the old man there's a chap in Leather Lane selling fish as don't stink—fourpence. Will y' 'ave it?" And she does have it, as most of the crowd do eventually, for the man's fish are prodigiously cheap, and how he manages to sell them so is his business, and not Leather Lane's.

Next we come to a man who, after contemplating a hamper of bloaters for some time, appears to have made up his mind that it is among the deepest problems of social economy that he should be able to sell them for six a penny. Pending the solution of the problem, however, he is prepared to dispose of them at that price. "Never knew 'em so cheap," he exclaims, as he lays six of them in a row on a piece of paper, "and they'll eat like butter. Who's got a penny?" Leather Lane would seem to be sensitive as to this direct challenge on the subject of its pecuniary resources, and exchanges pennies for herrings so rapidly that the man has a busy time of it.

But the most extravagant dealer in fish is surely that

man with an enormous tub half-full of fresh herrings, into which he keeps diving the upper half of his body, and selling the proceeds at twopence a dive. In he goes, and up he comes, his hands laden with the red-eyed glistening fish, which eager trembling dames stand ready to receive with great pieces of paper or their aprons. Such a trade is this man doing, that the people keep rushing away from the little crowd gathered round him and his tub, laden with their herrings, until you would think that every man, woman, and child in Leather Lane and its neighbourhood would have a herring for their breakfast to-morrow morning.

"Here you are, twopence a pound!" the vendor keeps shouting, but as he shovels them away most recklessly, without a pretence of weighing them, "twopence a dive" is a far more accurate description of his terms of business.

In butchers' meat too, a large trade is done in Leather Lane. The shops, which throughout the week have kept their own ground, on Saturday night come over the pavement, and thrust their wares prominently before the notice of passers-by. You walk in an avenue of legs and shoulders of mutton extended above your head by hooks, while bullocks' hearts swing invitingly by their windpipes before your nose. The shops are usually aristocratic enough to dispense with the naphtha-lamps, and carry their gas by means of india-rubber piping out to their stalls in the roadway. Then they dash into their trade with all the recklessness characteristic of the neighbourhood. There is no cool calculation of profit and loss. "Any price you like to-night, ladies. Pull away! pull away! pull away! Lovely meat, and bound to clear it out to-night.—What shall I weigh you, ma'am?" (to a pale woman, with a pale child at her side, and a pale baby in her arms. The woman's eye has rested for a moment on a bullock's heart). "Fourpence a pound that one—just look at it" (deftly hooking it down, and putting it under the eyes of the woman).

"How much does it weigh?"

"Over six pounds," is the result of a brief introduction to the scales—"two shillings."

It is too much, however, for the butcher's customer, and she moves slowly away.

"Don't go away," urges the butcher, "you won't get one cheaper. Or look here," he whispers, going a few steps after her, "don't tell anybody else and I'll put it in at three and a 'arf!"

But his customer shakes her head, and walks on, sorely straitened probably, poor woman, to find food for the mouths at home.

No such thoughts however, trouble the mind of the butcher as he goes once more to his meat bazaar, and roars and rants and raves for the rest of the evening.

But for really extraordinary transactions in the meat trade, commend me to those two men who have a temporary counter before them, loaded with joints and pieces of meat. Goodness only knows where their meat comes from, but if you never saw shoulders of mutton sold for half-a-crown apiece, it is worth while turning aside to see it done. For done it is, and other bargains equally cheap.

Many tit-bits and delicacies may be picked up. Here is a solitary man with a pole festooned with pigs' heads, all seeming to cry out, "Fourpence!" in concert with the man, and the great ticket that is stuck in the mouth of one of them helping to keep up the illusion.

Another stall deals in nothing but rabbits, all skinned and cross-legged, and looking as if they were prepared to lay their paws upon those exposed hearts and livers of theirs, and swear they have all come straight from Ostend that day.

Most varieties of fish and flesh can be bought in Leather Lane, and some of the richer and more isolated inhabitants of London might wonder at the luxuries "the poor people" consume. For everything, luxurious or necessary, is cheap in Leather

Lane, and "the poor people," if it were not for the fearful waste of their money in drink, might live even better than they do. But here, as in most other parts of London, too much passes over the public-house bar, causing meatless meals where meat should be. This becomes more apparent as night draws on, and drink begins to make its devotees noisy and quarrelsome; for long after the stalls, lamps, and remaining stock have been taken away by their owners, shouts and rows bear testimony to the depth of the evening's potations, hindering the anxious night from closing over Leather Lane.

But the last drunkard staggers home at last, or falls senseless in the nearest doorway, and solemn silence comes upon the scene, so that nothing but a hovering scent of the decaying refuse of animal and vegetable matter in the streets, which a wise and benevolent local government will allow to lie there all that night and following Sunday (teaching as it does such an admirable lesson of cleanliness and self-respect to the poor people around), remains to remind the observer of the noise and bustle that enlivened the street an hour or two ago.

