

SMALL TRADERS.



AMONG the few proverbs in the English language against which no other proverb can be quoted that either contradicts or neutralises it, is the following—"One half of the world does not know how the other half lives," and this can nowhere be better proved than in our overgrown metropolis. To pass through any of our West End fashionable streets, in which the inhabitants almost seem to be suffering under a plethora of wealth, and to whom want, unless by name, is unknown, can give but a very imperfect idea of the misery which exists in the densely crowded back slums of Bethnal Green, Shoreditch, and Ratcliff Highway, or the thousands of individuals whose first thought, when they wake in the morning, is in what manner they can obtain the food on which to support themselves through the day.

The flourishing barrister, when he drives in his carriage to the Court of Law to plead the cause for which he has received a heavy fee, little dreams of the pecuniary anxieties of many an attorney's clerk, and the difficulty he finds to make both ends meet; and the fashionable physician, to whom minutes are as guineas, seldom dreams of the hard struggle many a general practitioner in a poor neighbourhood, with skill scarcely less than his own, has to keep up even a respectable appearance.

Again, the members of the female aristocracy when giving their orders to a court milliner, and imperatively insisting on the sumptuous dress, in which they are to appear at the next drawing-room, being sent home without fail by a certain hour on the day previous to the event, seldom if ever cast a thought on the poor workwoman whom she obliges to work half through the night, or to be dismissed from her employment, and thereby be thrown out of bread, should she refuse or remonstrate against the injustice practised on her.

Perhaps the strongest contrasts between rich and poor may be found in the mercantile world. A stranger walking through Cannon Street, Lombard Street, Threadneedle Street, and in fact the whole of the City, for the poor and the working classes are now almost completely driven from it, might imagine, while viewing the palatial edifices in which our merchants and bankers carry on their affairs, that all engaged in commerce are to a greater or less degree accumulating wealth with most enviable facility. But even here the traces of a hard struggle for dear life may be observed by marking the exertions of the costermongers with their barrows laden with fruit, and the anxieties and difficulties attending their transactions.

But it should also be remembered that the street

fruit-seller is not the only open-air dealer in the City; there are others, whose lot is far more to be sympathised with; a class indeed as far inferior to his as a pawnbroker in a low neighbourhood would be to a Rothschild or a Baring. Let us take for example the seedy-looking, broken-down individual, in threadbare garments and napless hat, once black, now brown from exposure to the atmosphere, who has invested a capital of perhaps a couple of shillings in a number of "very pretty gold watches, with chains and keys complete," which he offers to the public "at the small charge of one penny each." If you have leisure and patience, watch him for some time, and find how often he repeats his monotonous offer before he finds one purchaser. What his trade returns are it would be difficult to say, for he is not communicative on the subject of his private affairs; but let us assume that he has been standing in the road beside the pathway at the broad end of Cheapside, from nine in the morning till six in the evening, and in the whole nine hours has succeeded in obtaining a customer every ten minutes. His gross returns for the day can, at that rate, only amount to four shillings and sixpence, out of which he has to deduct the first cost of his watches, which will leave him but a sorry balance to the good when he mentally makes up his accounts in the evening. It would be interesting to trace how many persons' hands one of these penny watches has passed through before it reached the purchaser, and what was the proportionate profit or wage of each. Might not a proposition of the kind be introduced as a question in the decimal section of some work on arithmetic? It would tend to prove the amount of skilled labour frequently employed in the manufacture of a child's penny toy.

The dealer in penny watches, in common with the open-air fruit-seller, is much interested in the state of the weather. A wet or even a damp day to him would seriously diminish the lustre of his wares, and thereby greatly deteriorate their sale, for their gold-plating is too thin to stand much rubbing.

Other dealers in metal street-wares also suffer much from atmospheric moisture. There is a dealer in dolls' copper saucepans and kettles, holding perhaps two table-spoonfuls each, who generally takes up his stand near the Mercers' Hall, and appears to melt away, taking his wares with him, at the approach of rain, but who regularly appears again at the first glimpse of sunshine. Other street-trades suffer perhaps more from the effects of the weather than any of those which have been brought under the reader's notice. Dealers in "twenty-four views of the principal edifices in London, comprising the Mansion House, Bank, and Royal Exchange, printed on thick folding paper in the best manner, being the cheapest article of the kind ever offered to the public for the small charge of one penny," suffer severely, as well as their wares, from the rain. A speck of mud or the drippings from a passing umbrella will frequently destroy the beauty

and the sale of a whole series of these views ; in fact, many a dealer has become bankrupt or insolvent from the effects of a sudden violent shower of rain.

Before quitting the subject of the sale of fruit in the streets, a singular change, and one worth noticing, has of late years taken place among the dealers. If the reader be middle-aged, he may remember that some twenty-five or thirty years since the open-air sale of oranges was almost, if not entirely, in the hands of the Jews. In fact, it was a practice among the wealthier of that creed, when they found a destitute but worthy co-religionist, to start him in life again with a basket of oranges, and in the present day many a respectable Jewish tradesman may trace his first fortunate step in life to that circumstance. Now a Jew street orange-dealer is rarely if ever to be met with. On questioning a Jewish lady on the subject, she told me that it arose from the Irish having taken up the trade, and strange as it may appear, so great was their energy and perseverance that in the end they contrived to get the whole trade into their hands. She also brought another curious fact connected with the Irish under my notice.

Formerly the street-trade in old clothes was confined almost entirely to the Jews, in fact it was almost looked upon as a Hebrew institution among us. But now they are comparatively hardly ever to be seen, and from the same cause which deprived them of the orange trade—the influx of the Irish—the Jew in this case, as in the former, being driven from the field by the superior tact and energy of the Emerald Islander.

I asked my lady friend what street-trades were now left for the Jews. She told me there were comparatively but few, even the sponge and slate-pencil trades had been lost to them, but in whose hands they now were she could not say. Possibly the whelk and shrimp trades were the most prominent, but she added that there were but few English-born Jews to be found amongst them, and that they were almost all immigrants from the Polish synagogues, who were in the habit of sending their poor to England so as to relieve themselves from the onus of supporting them. On my asking for an explanation of the cause of the whelk trade being almost exclusively in the hands of the Polish Jews, she informed me that both whelks and shrimps were considered as *trifer* (unclean), and therefore the English Jews as a rule abstained from the trade ; “but,” she added, “although the Polish Jews sell them, they never eat them.”

Strange as it may appear, the trade in whelks is something enormous, so much so indeed as to raise our wonder from what localities so vast a supply can be obtained, and if the consumption continues at its present ratio, in the eastern districts alone, whether the source of the supply may not soon become exhausted. Nor is this a causeless alarm. Some ten years ago oyster-stalls, in our populous thoroughfares, were as common as those of the whelks in the present day. Now an oyster-stall is comparatively rarely to be seen, and on those few which still sell them an English oyster is seldom to be found. Certainly, for

one stall even of the large-shelled foreign oysters there are at least ten of whelks, and from their rapid sale they are evidently much appreciated by the public.

Would but my space admit, I could bring forward many curious details respecting the street fish-trade in London, especially that branch employed in curing and selling dried haddocks, which is chiefly carried on in the Kent Street district in the Borough. There also many other small and ill-paid trades may be found, which would tend to prove how desperate is the struggle for life among a large portion of our “really” industrious poorer fellow-citizens. In the Kent Street district principally reside the makers of paper ornaments for fire-stoves. This again is an occupation greatly under the influence of the weather. Imagine the expenditure first incurred in purchasing the particular quality of paper, and the skill in selecting the appropriate shades of colour, the amount of labour, if not taste, required in the manufacture of half-a-dozen of these ornaments, and the anxious glances at the sky to ascertain the state of the weather, previous to the dealer starting on his or her round on the morning of the sale. Imagine also the effect of a sudden shower of rain on their delicate wares, as well as the deterioration from the dust and other casualties, and how worthless is then the “ornament” on which so much skill and anxiety have been expended.

And then again let us take into consideration the lot of other dealers, even in wares which suffer no deterioration from the weather, and which are in constant demand, say for example the dealer in skewers for butchers and the vendors of dogs’ meat. In London this trade is entirely in the hands of women, and, to use their own expressive phraseology, “a hard bit of bread it is.” The skewer-maker’s room, from the number of chips of wood spread over it, resembles a small carpenter’s workshop more than anything else, only the bed in it destroys the illusion. Her profits are of the smallest, as may be judged from the fact that after the purchase of wood, and the time, skill, and labour bestowed on the skewers, she receives for them only eightpence per thousand, and even to obtain that she is obliged to call at the houses of many customers, frequently extending over a very considerable area. She would willingly raise the price of her wares, but the experiment would be a dangerous one. Poor as her trade is, and small as are the profits, there is considerable competition in it, especially from the gipsies, who having easier means of obtaining their raw material—wood—frequently free of cost altogether, whether honestly or dishonestly it would perhaps be better not to inquire too closely, would in all probability undersell her.

A hundred other small trades might be mentioned from which the means of supporting life are as difficult to obtain as those I have named, but I submit that those are sufficient to prove to the thriving man of business at what a heavy cost of time, anxiety, and labour, a large proportion of those engaged in the humbler ranks of commerce procure from their profits the bare means of existence.

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