

## CONCERNING COVENT GARDEN.



If you are journeying along a narrow London street early in the morning, and you meet a woman carrying a basket of flowers on her head, there is nothing remarkable in the occurrence; but if you presently meet another, and then two or three more—if on further progress you find

more women seated upon convenient door-steps, arranging little bunches of flowers with fern-leaves and bits of wire, wherewith to decorate the button-holes of the sterner sex—if you should then further observe that pieces of cabbage-leaves and other vegetable remnants lie about the streets, that the few shops open at that hour are either coffee-houses, public-houses, or fruit-salesmen's, that an odour hangs in the air like a combination of a bouquet of roses and main drainage—an odour of oranges, black currants, mint, pineapples, rotten eggs, and brandy-and-water—if you notice piles of peculiar, round, squat-looking baskets standing at every available corner, or moving about the streets on men's shoulders, like so many animated Chinese pagodas, and that the street is almost blocked with horses and carts and wagons, with men running about with heavy baskets on their shoulders, jostling one another as they pass, and that every cart, wagon, and basket contains something in the nature of garden produce—you probably will not be very far wrong in assuming that you are near Covent Garden.

Busy, thrifty, crowded, jostling, dirty Covent Garden! What a deal of business is transacted here before many people have opened their eyes in the morning! The place is full of market porters, who pass to and fro burdened with baskets of fruit and vegetables, which they discharge into the carts belonging to the respective purchasers. And the great difficulty attending the operations of these porters is how to tell which is their right cart, so they adopt the expedient of shouting as loudly as they can the name of the purchaser of the fruit they bear on their backs, till they receive an answer from some one in charge of that gentleman's cart. The salesmen and market-gardeners stand in their half shops, half counting-houses, or congregate in little groups about the road and pavement. Flower-girls and costermongers thread their way about, looking where to buy cheapest the materials for the day's business, and all around is a ceaseless

jargon of voices keeping up a continuous chatter and shouting.

"Stand a one side, guv'nor, please!"—"Roberts! Roberts!"—"Four shillings a bushel, I'll sell"—"Higher up with that hansom!"—"Mr. Johnson, I"—"Roberts! Roberts!"—"Seen that boy o' mine, Joe?"—"They're dear, sir, dear at the price; nine shillings is what I've been paying this last"—"Roberts! Roberts!"—"Now, dummy, you've put them turnips in the wrong cart!"—"The wrong cart? I never see"—"Hi—hi—hi! d'ye want to be run over, Billy Green?"—"Roberts!"—"Three for sixpence, sir"—"Goin' to 'ave a pint along o' me, then?"—"I say, Mr. What's-a-name"—"You left your hat behind you, James"—"Are you Roberts's cart? blessed if I ain't been a-lookin' for you all"—"Where's Dickson? Here, Dickson, what did you?"—"Well, I won't take 'em. Look at them for carrots!"—"Steady on there with them Williams"—"Oh! my good man, do look where you're"—"Out o' the road, marm, please"—"Now I won't have these baskets here; I've told"—"Hand 'em over, Mr. Jellimore; you can always make your own terms with me, I think," and so on.

The first aspect which strikes one, on looking at the motley scene, is the enormous *quantity* of fruit and vegetables which are being bought and sold. Large wagons stand piled up high into the air with cabbages alone, while carrots, turnips, and parsnips claim an almost equal share in the market transactions. As for the fruit, the bushels and bushels of it that pass into the market make one wonder whence all this vegetation comes: a wonder which finds its explanation in the fact that for the supply of Covent Garden, and the other London markets, which are small in comparison with it, there are 12,000 acres of land under cultivation. In the preparation of this land and its products, about 35,000 persons find employment. So we can understand now how the centre of all this should present a busy aspect.

A stranger and more sentimental interest attaches itself to the picture when we think for a moment what changes time has made: 650 years ago Covent Garden was a garden in more than name, for it was the spacious garden of the Convent at Westminster, and from *Convent* Garden is its present title derived. Here might the Lady Abbess have paced at eve, enjoying the cool shade of the trees and the scent of the flowers. About 250 years later, the present owners of the property, the Bedford family, came into possession of it, and with it were handed over to them seven acres of ground (now forming Long Acre), which in those delightfully primitive times, when there were not quite so many Londoners existing, and those who did exist took life a little easier, were gravely valued at six pounds, six shillings and eightpence per annum!

The earliest mention of the market itself is in 1698, when a few small traders might be found "in a small



grotto of trees," disposing of vegetables and fruit. Turned away from there six years later they congregated in the centre of the square, set up a few rough sheds and stalls, and laid the foundation of the mighty throbbing market that now covers the spot.

There seems always a strange unsatisfactory inconsistency about Covent Garden, which I have often tried to account for and cannot, unless it is the

business that clashes with our pre-conceived associations. If we go into a warehouse filled with bales of merchandise, the presence of the trim counting-house, the spectacled, grave managers, and the methodical exactitude of all the arrangements, strikes one as fitting and proper. If we go into a busy market of fish, flesh, and fowl, the dress of the dealers, the noise of carts, the cries of animals, and the



COVENT GARDEN, PAST AND PRESENT.

combination of fruit and flowers with business, which seems to jar upon the sensitive and imaginative mind. Fruit and flowers belong to the sentimental world. They have been a constant and grateful theme of poets, and their different varieties have been invested by a pensive humanity with a language of their own. Fable-writers have taken them as legitimate means for conveying their morals, and have surrounded them with exquisite and graceful ideas. The gentle snowdrop and the modest violet, the gaudy tulip and the blushing rose, are famous in the world of poetry; and it is, perhaps, the contact of these types of the beautiful with the hum-drum and red-tapeism of

babbling and haggling of customers make at least a suitable medley—a harmonious discord, so to express it. But when we enter a scene where abound flowers, lovely flowers, represented by the choicest specimens of their most exquisite kinds, where lilies, roses, hyacinths, violets, fleurs-de-lis, and others we may not presume to know the names of, rival one another's graces and fill the air with delicious perfumes, and where luscious fruits, brought from every clime, are ranged around in profusion as lavish as in those marvellous Eastern gardens we read of in the "Arabian Nights"—when we enter a scene like this, the soul would delight to see presiding over such a collection



fairy-like damsels in most spotless white muslin, dispensing the goods with their sylph-like hands; and if the coarse ceremony of taking money is absolutely indispensable, they should give change in nothing but the whitest and newest silver.

Instead, however, of this ideal, we find horrible matter-of-fact business men, with old and eccentric hats, and a general garden-like, earthy appearance about them, actuated by no other motive than that of disposing of their flowers and fruit to the best possible advantage. Market porters, with rather less sentiment in their heads than in their boots, carry on the former baskets of nodding and vibrating exotics; announcements of sales of fruit by auction hang from the walls; and off the top of a basket of Ribstone pippins, which are tempting enough to get a universe into trouble, a dirty-handed, thick-set fellow is refreshing himself with twopennyworth of fried fish and half a pint of porter. It is this continued presence of irreconcilable characteristics, I suppose, which gives a troubling side to a walk through Covent Garden.

I have spoken of the early morning appearance of Covent Garden, when the day's work has commenced and the pressure of business is high; but it also presents a unique aspect on a Saturday evening, when by the dim light the work of closing the shops and stalls, and clearing away the quantities of refuse, is going on. The ground is covered with cabbage-leaves (hardly astonishing when we consider that 40,000,000 of these vegetables pass through the market in the course of the year), and this garbage is interspersed with, occasionally, an unsatisfactory carrot, an equivocal turnip, or a dubious potato. They are very vigorously swept up though, which we can imagine to be a rigid necessity in such a place (since otherwise it would soon become impossible to move about), into capacious wagons, and the ground is left tolerably clean, though the very stones seem to smell of fruit. Saddest sight of all is the damaged specimens of humanity who hang around the spot, attracted by the chance of picking up some remnants of the day's merchandise. Fearfully squalid-looking little children, and withered old women, prowl and wander about the porticoes and colonnades, literally seeking what they may devour. And it is rich ground they walk on in one sense. Had they a fiftieth part of the yearly rent of Covent Garden they would be free from want, for it is worth to its ducal owner about £5,000 a year, and some of the shops pay £400 rent. The space covered by it is three acres, and it cost £50,000 to build. It will give an idea how cosmopolitan the market is,

when it is said that there is more certainty of getting a pineapple every day in the year here than in Calcutta, where pines are indigenous. In fact, if you have sufficient money you can buy anything in the shape of vegetation at Covent Garden, and almost at any time. Green peas have been sold at Christmas for two pounds a quart, and grapes at twenty-five shillings a pound! And yet strangely enough the orange seems to hold itself aloof from this market, and, compared with other fruits, is seldom seen there. You would hardly think 250,000,000 oranges were every year received by this country; but it is so, although few find their way to Covent Garden.

Before we leave this most interesting locality, one ought not to fail to note what a centre of art, literature, and wit the neighbourhood has been in its time. Could we summon up the shades of the departed *habitues* of the Covent Garden coffee-houses, so often spoken of in the *Spectator*, what a host of celebrities with their flowing wigs, swords, long-skirted coats—ay, and stars and garters too, some of them—would fill the grimy streets! At the north-east corner of the Piazza, where the Bedford coffee-house once stood, would congregate the immortal Garrick and his compeers Quin, Foote, and Murphy. Garrick lived at 27, Southampton Street. And in Russell Street was situate "Button's" coffee-house, well known and famous in those days as the resort of the high-toned literary circle of which Joseph Addison was king. On the first floor would he sit of an evening, surrounded by men whose names are all known more or less to posterity, such as Pope, Steele, Swift, Arbuthnot, Savage, and Budgell. There used to be set up here a lion's head as a sort of editor's box for the *Guardian*, and the identical head, after passing from hand to hand, now rests at the Duke of Bedford's estate at Woburn. More famous still, perhaps, was "Tom's" coffee-house, opposite "Button's," for here a little later in the eighteenth century might be heard the thundering "How, sir?" "Why, sir?" and "No, sir!" of the great "Sultan of literature" himself, Dr. Samuel Johnson. Besides this man of mighty mind, the establishment numbered among its 700 members such names as Garrick, Goldsmith, Sir J. Reynolds, George Coleman the elder, the Duke of Northumberland, Admiral Rodney, and Henry Brougham, the father of the great Lord Chancellor.

A mighty change has swept over the scene since then; but while it remains so rich in interesting associations as I have described, who will deny a place in the front rank of our metropolitan lions to Covent Garden?

A. H.

