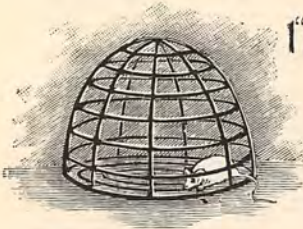


“ONLY ONE PENNY.”



“ONLY one penny!”

We Londoners are all of us so accustomed to hear the above words shouted at and around us, at every hand's turn, that they fail to awaken in us anything like interest, much less

do they excite either surprise or wonder. In every crowded thoroughfare, whether it be Oxford Street or Cheapside—perhaps, too, most frequently in the vicinity of the Bank and Exchange—they are re-echoed lustily. At all the halting-places for 'buses, they fall thick and fast upon the passenger's ear. As a rule we pay no heed to them, or if it should happen to be a day on which our nerves are upon the *qui vive*, we hurry out of hearing as quickly as possible, without so much as casting a glance towards the vendor of penny wares. But a foreigner, on coming to our City, is at once struck and attracted by the marvels which are daily sold in our streets for the price of one penny.

Although penny articles are sold in the streets in other countries, yet I never remember to have seen any of equivalent value retailed for so trifling a sum. It was the admiration expressed by a travelled South American gentleman that made me first think about this matter. I had never done so before, but I at once determined—for curiosity's sake—to make a collection of penny varieties.

It was not long before I had an opportunity of making my first purchase. Coming round a corner into Oxford Street one day, my ears were immediately assailed with the words “Only one penny!” I turned, and behold! crawling upon the pavement quite close to me, a brilliant gold and green beetle, about the size of a young crab. Hardly had I time to start in surprise, when, moved by an invisible wire, it leapt into

the air almost as high as my head. A moment more, and it was again at my feet, moving its lazy legs in true beetle fashion.

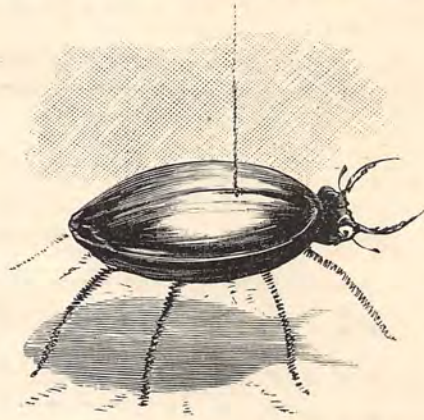
“Only one penny, my lady! All alive ho! South American *bittle*; only one penny!”

I was half afraid of the monster, but I bought him nevertheless, taking

good care to secrete him in an outside pocket of my jacket, although in constant dread, as I walked along, lest he should be abstracted from so convenient a receptacle before I reached home. Then I fell to thinking about my beetle's antecedents. Where did it come from? Were its legs, wings, body, all made

in the same manufactory? How had it been coloured? How many hands had been employed in making it?

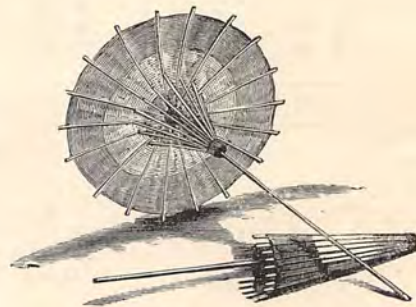
I was still ruminating upon the contents of my pocket, when “Only one penny!”—the latter word



pronounced with a snap, like the click of some refractory box-cover—aroused me from my reverie.

A small knot of people had assembled round the salesman. The object of their curiosity was a miniature perambulator, inhabited by a baby doll, which was running along the pavement. Dolly was in a great state of excitement, kicking its heels right vigorously. Of course I purchased it, though I own to feeling sure that baby was a swindle, and would kick its heels at no one's bidding save that of the individual who sold him. In this I was mistaken. As soon as I had a vestige of a chance, I pulled the string attached to the little carriage, and its tiny occupant went through its former antics in grand style. So noiselessly too! I could not but think how very much more charming it was than a live youngster! What a row such a one would make, were it to perform the same feat! What laughing and vociferation!

But the penny articles are not alone confined to the



ornamental. My next acquisition was in the useful line. It was made from a little stall near the Exchange. “Only one penny, miss!” said the proprietor, when he noticed that I was examining one of the little fret-saws which were spread out before him. Thoroughly well

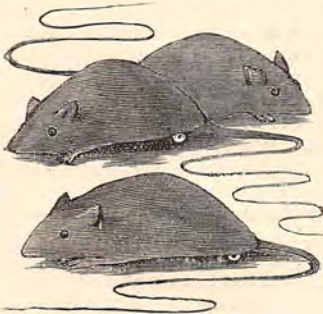
finished they were, identically the same as those for which I had paid sixpence in the shops. I did not fret myself to consider whether this was a swindle, but tried its edge upon the edge of the vendor's stall.

These penny wares have their season of fashion as well as other luxuries. Beetles and flying butterflies, chains, boys' whips with gilt handles, knitted dollies, Jacks-in-the-box, and the like, are all out of date. We want something with more life in it, in these go-ahead times. Next upon my list came a mouse in a cage—the most dainty little thing imaginable—very diminutive. "Only one penny, miss; live mouse in a cage, only one penny!" There were brown ones and white ones. Very natural they looked, speeding round their cages with remarkable velocity, their little tails protruding from it as they wheeled about.

Much might be said about the cleverness of these penny merchants. The one to whom I allude had a mouse in each hand—one white, the other brown. He held them up in the air, and whilst extolling their merits, in order to attract customers he made them run round and round with the most astonishing rapidity. Who could withstand such tempting little animals? I bought them both, but my efforts to make them go were for some time unsuccessful. They twisted their tails and jerked uneasily from side to side, but it required long practice on my part to make them run swiftly, like real *mouseys*.

"Could not these people employ their skill in some better way," I often ask myself, "and is it possible to gain a livelihood by the profit made upon the sale of articles at 'only one penny'?" Apparently it must be so, for the sellers of them are, generally speaking, able-bodied men, who are doubtless capable of earning their living in some different way.

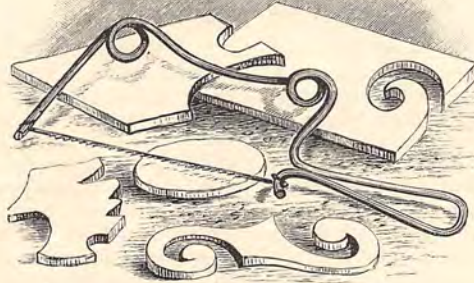
Just recently might be seen daily in Regent Street a bright little fellow, jauntily dressed in white and red, who insisted upon turning head over heels the very moment he touched the pavement. I felt doubtful about buying him, fearing he



might refuse to perform a summersault at my command, but I could not resist the temptation to try him. To my great delight he turned out to be a *bonâ fide* turn-head-over-heels youngster. Indeed, so anxious was he to perform before my very eyes, that I had

scarcely time to place him on the ground when over he went flop, as neatly as any ragged urchin might have done to earn a penny.

Were I to describe one half of the purchases I made, I might fill a small volume: fans, photographs of our Prime Minister and other celebrated men, Chinese mysteries, packets of stationery, squeaking birds (by the way, some of them don't really squeak—the man squeaks for them, as he sells them, I am sorry to say), Christmas cards, boxes of dominoes, note-books, velvet frames, valentines, American puzzles, lovers' links, toasting-forks, &c. Amongst the latest novelties, however, let me mention "Punch and his baby." "Only one penny, my laidy, Punch and his



baby. All of 'em china. Only one penny!" "Are you quite sure they are all china?" I asked very gravely, as I took up one of the little figures.

"Yes, my laidy, every bit on 'em. Only one penny!" "String and all?" I questioned, looking the youngster full in the face.

He was just ready to repeat, "Every bit on 'em," when his mind all at once grasped the fact that I was inclined to turn him into ridicule, and an expression of dire contempt shot across the weather-beaten little countenance, as he turned away from me, and began to shout, even more loudly than before, "Punch and his baby. All of 'em china. Only one penny!" I laid my penny in his basket, and pocketed Punch and his baby.

Noteworthy in these men and youngsters is the *nonchalance* with which they receive the money offered them in payment, scarcely deigning to look at it. And yet how hardly do they earn it, exposed as they are to heat and cold, sunshine or wet, as it may suit our capricious climate! Assuredly there must be something of the philosopher in them!

But I am evidently not alone in being an admirer of the variety and ingenuity displayed in these cheap little articles, since an International Exhibition of penny wares was not long ago opened at the Alexandra Palace. There we may be able to judge as to which country is likely to carry off the palm, but I cannot help thinking it will be awarded to England, and I sincerely trust it may be the case.

