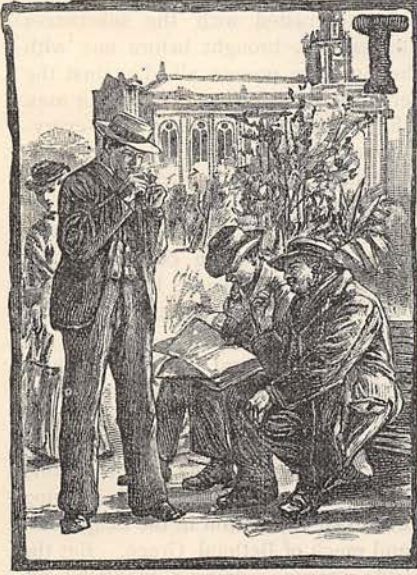


## BANK HOLIDAY AT BETHNAL GREEN.



THE opening of Victoria Park and the Bethnal Green Museum were two facts which indicated at last some active interest in the needs and dues of East London dwellers. Parks in plenty, museums and art-collections in abundance stud the

western half of London. Now its less distinguished part has been given breathing-space and a fairly representative collection of artistic and industrial objects.

We selected for our visit the afternoon of a Bank Holiday in summer. As we passed along it was clear that Bethnal Green recognised the social festival. In its narrow streets such children as boasted that luxury were playing about in their "Sunday best," painfully conscious of its restrictive tendency. The usual complement of parents were lounging at the open doors, viewing with languid interest the children's play. In the main thoroughfare, the Bethnal Green Road, the bustling crowd passing the shuttered shops seemed with one accord bent on pleasure. Working men, with their wives, and occasionally children too, were jostled by the usual bands of noisy youths. Lads of precocious looks pursued their way with the self-possession born of town life and early reliance upon their own resources, whilst here and there some two or three children of more tender years, hand in hand, were threading the maze. There were faces, too, and forms that aroused unpleasant reflections—men and women of villainous looks from the kitchens of Spitalfields or Whitechapel, and ragged urchins pattering on naked feet over the hot pavement. Here and there in the passing throng came the faces of foreign Jews, and their *patois*, neither German nor Russian nor Hebrew, but a mixture of all these and ever more tongues, fell strangely on the ear.

The long road ended at last, and we found ourselves at the veritable Bethnal Green. Between St. John's Church and the Museum is a pleasant oasis of green turf and blossoming flowers, freely open to the public; and fully are its merits recognised. On that sunny afternoon the comfortable garden-seats were in great demand. Here and there they were giving a

welcome rest to tired grandfathers, who from that retreat could still keep a watchful eye upon their boisterous charges. Here, too, in fine weather one is certain to find invalids of either sex.

The Museum itself lies a little to the left, on a plot of ground purchased mainly by local subscriptions, and handed over to the Committee of Council on Education in the year 1869. Externally the building is not attractive—a simple, unpretentious outline, with red-brick walls but slightly adorned, and offering no violent contrast to the adjoining church or the houses around. It was opened by the Prince and Princess of Wales on June 24th, 1872.

A handsome fountain stands in front, and is an object of much interest to the onlookers in summer. But during the winter months it is covered by a gigantic wooden extinguisher, and so becomes anything but an adornment.

We entered at once at the turn-stile, admission being free except on one day of the week, when sixpence is charged to the few who then come to pay it. Within we found the building to be arranged, roughly speaking, as a main court with two tiers of galleries on three sides. There is nothing imposing about the general effect, but the whole arrangements seem business-like, and well adapted to serve their purpose. Before the visitor, as he enters, two lines of cases stretch down the area, containing specimens of modern English and foreign pottery and glass, arranged in chronological order. The visitors round about us were expressing their comments upon these freely enough, and in tones sufficiently audible.

"Lor!" cried one young girl to her gaily-dressed companion, indicating with outstretched finger a large earthenware vase of Italian manufacture. "If we ain't got just sich another jug as that at 'ome!"

Another group were contending as to the uses to which a large *plaque* might possibly be put. The general idea pointed to its use as a dessert-plate, although the speakers acknowledged their fallibility on such a point.

The majority of the visitors seemed to be respectable artisans and their families. But there were not wanting representatives of the classes below that, to whom ragged attire and dirty faces seemed not incompatible with a satisfactory inspection of the Museum. The lads and young girls of various grades were numerous, and many of their outspoken comments were shrewd beyond their years.

The glass and pottery, with some specimens of silver and bronze ware, excited considerable attention, but, as far as the men were concerned, were of inferior interest to two fine specimens of the British cabinet-maker's handiwork—a magnificent sideboard from the Exhibition of '55, and a beautiful satin-wood cabinet from that of '66. These met with far more admiration than an elaborately carved *secrétaire* of walnut, in the Italian style of the sixteenth century, made by

Barbetti, of Sienna, which appeared in the Exhibition of '51.

Turning next to the lower gallery, we found on the left a series of cases illustrating the composition of the human body, together with the nature, growth, manufacture, and adulteration of its chief classes of food. Here, too, we remarked a very thoughtful plan by which each series was accompanied with explanatory and statistical details plainly put, and printed in large type. From the objects themselves, and the annexed paragraphs, a visitor of average intelligence could by careful inspection acquire a fairly clear idea of the subject under review. In this way knowledge was almost imperceptibly gained, which hours of study would otherwise have been needed to impart, even with the necessary books and inclination to use them. It was worth remarking, too, that as a rule the visitors did not content themselves with any mere cursory glance at the cases, but passed along the lines of bottles, and slowly deciphered their inscriptions in a way indicative of a thoroughly aroused interest.

The vessels containing the fibrine, fat, and other constituents of the human body were viewed by many with a shudder. But those cases which displayed the varieties of sugar in several stages of manufacture, nuts, and grapes, with their various products, were objects of absorbing interest to the housewives. So,

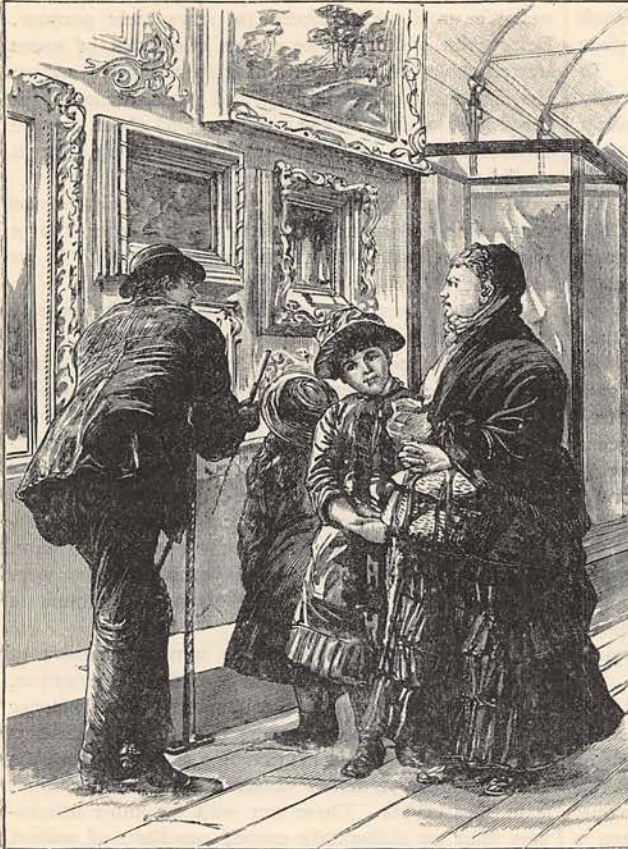
too, were the samples of tea—the growth of which was illustrated by some pictures drawn by a Chinese artist—and of coffee, accompanied by a number of Indian photographs showing its method of culture. Farinaceous foods, contrasted with the substances used in their adulteration, brought before one with painful reality the inventive powers allied against the unwary consumer. In the long list of foods for man neither fish, flesh, nor fowl was lacking, and everything had been done in the way of explanation that could guide any visitor as to the diet required by his manner of life.

Continuing our course round this gallery, we next arrived at a section devoted to the covering of the outward man. Here were the various kinds of wool and silk, crude and manufactured. Each case was, as usual, accompanied with explanatory notes on the nature and statistics of the several trades concerned. Silks and poplins, plain and brocaded, from the looms of England, Dublin, France, Damascus, and other more remote quarters, made a brave show. It was one, too, of special interest, for many of the visitors must have remembered the time when silk-weaving was the almost universal occupation in the neighbouring Spitalfields and much of Bethnal Green. But the genuine Spitalfields weaver, earning a living by his trade, is daily becoming more and more of a rarity.

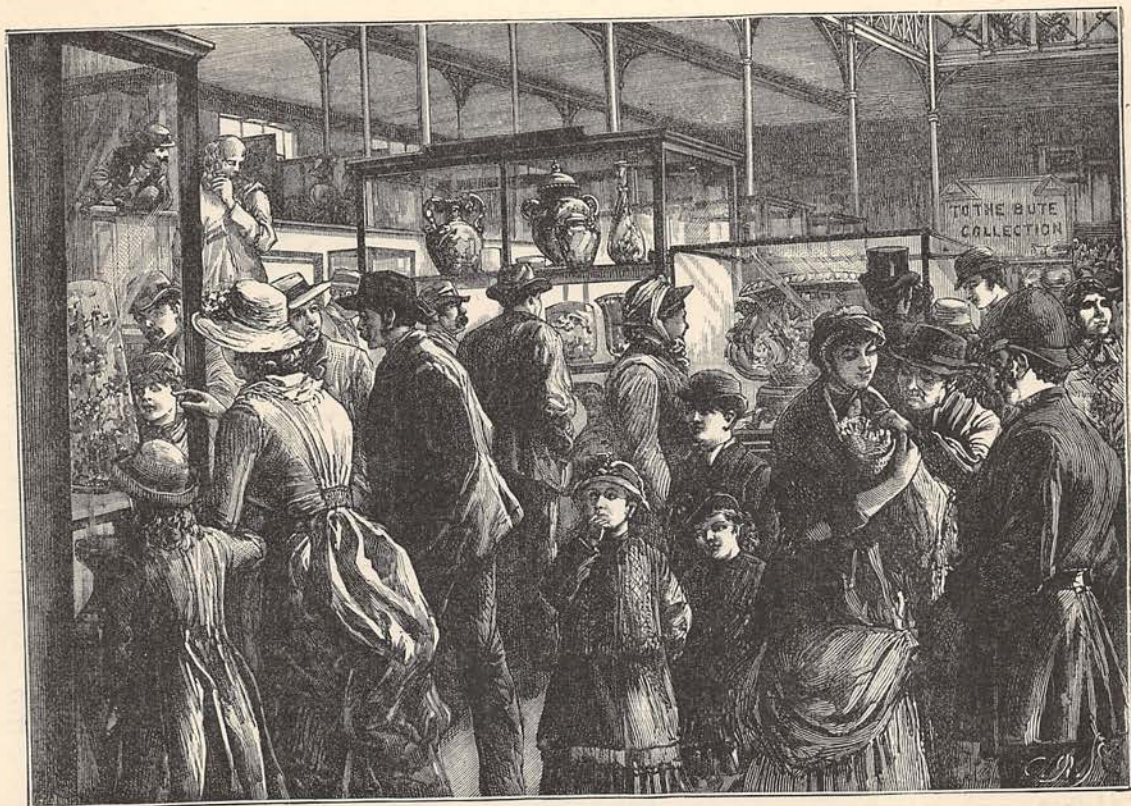
Even these cases yielded in popularity to one containing what looked like a huge coil of ship's cable. The appended tablet, which was always in the course of being slowly spelt out by some on-looker for the benefit of himself and friends, declared it to be a rope made in Japan entirely of women's hair. It was stated to be 700 feet long, weighing a quarter of a ton, to have occupied nearly five years in its manufacture, and used up the spare hair of an entire province.

A little further on, the clothing of the human body was found to be further illustrated by a large collection of furs. Here, again, the subject was one of local interest, the fur trade occupying many hands in adjacent districts. The materials and tools used in the making of silk hats, together with some shapes in an early stage, found many admirers. A pair of stuffed beavers in an adjoining case pointed to a change of fashion which had saved that busy animal from extinction. Towards the end of this section the gay plumage of various foreign birds, utilised for decorative purposes, evoked from female visitors a good deal of sympathy for "the pretty things' fate. It was observable, however, that more than one of these tender-hearted on-lookers had a bird's wing amongst the decorations of her hat.

In the gallery above was a considerable collection of water-colour drawings and



IN THE PICTURE GALLERY.



"THE VISITORS ROUND ABOUT US WERE EXPRESSING THEIR COMMENTS UPON THESE FREELY ENOUGH" (p. 299).

paintings in oil. Unless, however, the subject was a striking one they did not seem to catch the visitors' attention. Here and there some solitary person with a taste for art was going carefully from picture to picture, but the majority took sweeping glances at a large area, and moved on with only an occasional stoppage. The same thing may be observed in other collections, and where the visitors are for the most part those of greater education and refinement.

There yet remained unexplored one portion of the Museum, namely, the basement beneath the side galleries. This portion we found to contain a rather limited exhibition of furniture, an entomological collection, and, what was infinitely more attractive to a large proportion of visitors, the refreshment counters. With this semi-subterranean portion the attractions of the Museum and our visit came to an end.

It is difficult to over-estimate the good effects of such an exhibition thus placed. They are mainly of two kinds, intellectual and moral. Such a collection, intelligently examined, is in itself an educational course. To the skilled artisan of certain trades it offers an opportunity of comparing his own handi-

work with that of other men in other countries. This imparts a healthy stimulus to his own efforts, and tends to make him a better workman. It must be confessed also that our working classes are, as a body, lamentably ignorant of the first principles of domestic economy. When *they* were at school, education was not dealt out with the liberal hand it now is to their children. Here, however, is an effort to supply that lack by object-lessons on a large scale. The moral results, too, must be equally good. A walk around such a building cannot but give a healthy tone to the mind, and lead it up from the hard struggles of everyday life to an atmosphere of higher and purer things. Bank Holiday, moreover, has everywhere its own peculiar temptations, to which the Museum is an excellent antidote.

Is the place valued? The record exhibited on its walls replies by a display of figures, "Yes." Equally conclusive is the answer given by the presence there in considerable numbers of men, women, and children of several classes, some even ragged, dirty, and unkempt, but all quiet, decorous, and undoubtedly interested in their surroundings.

A. R. BUCKLAND, B.A.

