

WOOL-GATHERING.



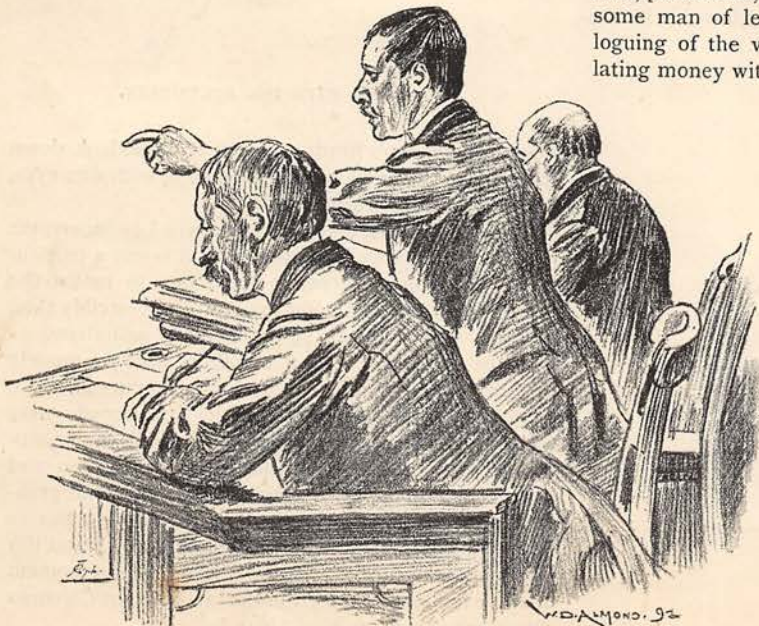
HE wonderful many-sidedness of London life has ever appeared to us as the one "wonder of the world," defying all attempts at comprehension. The oldest Londoner has not realised it fully, nor the most curious nor the most observant. Every

turn to the right or left, every glance at the newspaper, brings to light some new centre of thought which probably has its radii extending to the remotest corners of the globe. In their inter-relations, many of these centres resemble the individual inhabitants in knowing nothing of their neighbours. Spiritualists, faddists of all descriptions, and active propagandists of every conceivable and inconceivable religion and no-religion, art, science, nescience—carry on their work along their own lines and amid their own people as distinctly as each thread in a tapestry weaves its way in and out of the design without ever merging itself in any of its fellows. And then, the money-makers!—the infinite means of getting gain, from the

method of the man who throws himself before a carriage to have his leg broken, and then obtain "damages," to that of the stately personage who administers the Queen's justice in her courts of law—what an amazing field of study and speculation is here displayed to the observer of mankind! We can conceive a



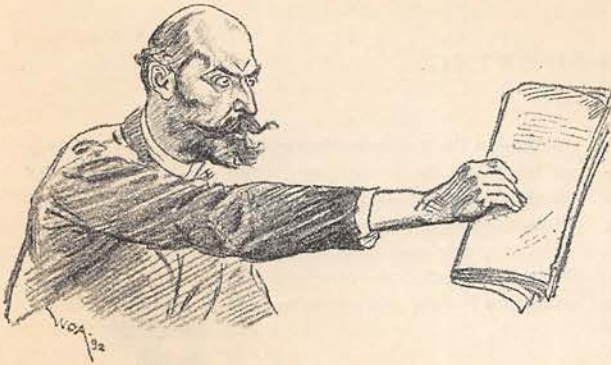
"'HALF-HALF-HALF-HALF-HALF!'" (p. 612).



THE AUCTIONEER.

task, portentous, yet entertaining and instructive, which some man of leisure may yet accomplish—the cataloguing of the various devices employed in accumulating money within "The four mile radius."

Looking back upon a fairly large experience in such matters, we doubt if we have ever witnessed a less exalting and ennobling spectacle than that presented on any afternoon in the selling season beneath the roof of the Wool Exchange, Coleman Street. The scene repeats itself throughout the year with regularly recurring intervals of about six weeks' duration, during which the room is closed. It was a dull September day upon which we first made its acquaintance. On the rising floor of a large horse-shoe-shaped room sit about three hundred would-be purchasers waiting in the gloom for the arrival of the auctioneer. Suddenly the circle of gas-jets above brightens,



THE HEIGHT OF EXCITEMENT.

a murmur runs round the assembly, and the great man appears in the rostrum, accompanied by two clerks. Every member of the audience opens his catalogue, and the rustling is as the noise of many waters. Then the proceedings commence. The auctioneer reads the description of "Lot 1," and no sooner has he opened his mouth than a dark man, who had hitherto been sitting calmly in his seat, reading *Le Petit Journal*, starts to his feet like one possessed, darts a lean forefinger in the direction of the rostrum, and gives vent to a series of what appear to be simply incoherent shrieks. At the same moment rises another in similar maniacal fashion, who, with blazing eyes, burning cheeks, and distended throat, commences to bark like a wolf. This ghastly exhibition excites only a look of benevolent interest in the countenance of the auctioneer, who takes especial note of the screams and yells of the last bidder, makes a mark in his book, taps lightly on the desk with his hammer, and "Lot 1" is disposed of! As the sale goes forward this scene is repeated again and again, and in time we are able to distinguish words in the



THE LOT WAS SOLD AGAINST HIM.

uproar. When "Lot 78," for example, is reached, an elderly gentleman darts to his feet, roars out "Eight-eight-eight-eight-eight!" at the top of his voice and with life-or-death speed, to signify that he is prepared to give 8d. per lb. for the lot in question; up start half-a-dozen others from behind, waving their catalogues wildly, and shouting "Half-half-half-half-half!" being the offer of an additional halfpenny; and then a pale, earnest-looking young man in the front row rises amid the storm, and in a voice that seems capable at a pinch of splitting the dome of St. Paul's, roars out "Three-three-three-three-three!" and triumphantly secures the lot at 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ d. The moment the hammer descends the shouting dies away, and the shouters quietly resume their seats, civilised members of society, until the fight for the next lot rouses "the ape and tiger" in them once more. Upon these strange



A DISPUTE WITH THE AUCTIONEER.

doings two sheep's heads, carved in stone, look down from above the auctioneer's head, as if, with dim eyes, wondering at the frenzy.

Such is a scene unfamiliar to many Londoners, yet open to all. As we have observed, it is not a particularly ennobling one; yet it helps one to realise the intensity of the battle for money more forcibly than any we wot of, and the momentary self-abandonment to which men who at all other times are models of dignity and decorum will sink in its pursuit. We confess that we prefer the spirit that broods over Christie's—the silent noddings of the head, the beauty of picture and porcelain, the meetings of men and women rich in the graces and gifts of life. But probably, this is not the practical spirit. Money has to be made, just as the world has to be peopled; and if a man must make a wild creature of himself for a moment or two every now and then in the sale-room at Coleman Street, who shall say him "Nay."

H. MACKINNON WALBROOK.