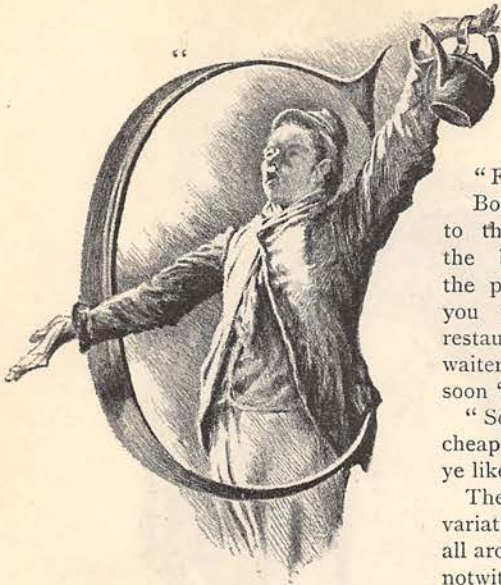


THE PEOPLE'S FAIR.

BY F. M. HOLMES.



“COME on, buyers! any price ye like!”
 “T u p-
 pence?”

“F o pence.”
 Both sides stick to their text, and the bargain, like the particular dish you want at the restaurant, is, in waiters' language, soon “hoff.”

“Sort 'em out cheap; any price ye like!”

The cry, with variations, echoes all around you; but notwithstanding the frequent invitation,

the bargain-hunter will not find everything at exactly any price he likes.

“Have those scales any weights?”

“Weights, gov'nor? Yus, two pounds.”

“What is the price?”

“Eight-and-six.”

You walk away.

Eight shillings and sixpence may be cheap, or it may be dear; but it strikes you as rather dear for the big People's Fair. Perhaps the vendor thinks so too, for he roars after you, no doubt prepared to take less. But you do not want the scales, and you walk on. There are hundreds of other things to see, and some of them are undoubtedly cheap—very cheap.

There are eye-glasses, for instance, at sixpence a pair. If they happen to suit your sight, they are a bargain indeed; if not, they are dear at any price.

“If any gentleman can't deal off me,” says a soft, seductive voice, “they can't deal off anybody.”

Her face is as pleasant as her voice, and, with a boy by her side, she presides over a wide expanse of heterogeneous articles.

She is evidently of opinion that the fascinations of the fair sex need not be confined to the drawing-room. Sitting there in the open Cattle Market, with a man's coat round her knees and her little son beside her, she appears as much at ease and as gracious to those about her as if she were dispensing tea in a cosy, lamp-shaded apartment at Kensington.

A man is bargaining with her for a number of yellow-looking knobs, such as might be used for the adornment of cheap bedsteads; and her smile is so agreeable and her words so good-natured that she gets her price and makes you believe it is the cheapest in the market. And she gives one knob extra to clear the lot out, with such an air of good-



“A MAN IS BARGAINING WITH HER FOR A NUMBER OF YELLOW-LOOKING KNOBS.”



"MANY, OF COURSE, DEAL IN OLD CLOTHES AND DRAPERIES."

tempered generosity that the bargain appears doubly satisfactory.

Quite a number of feminine vendors adorn the Fair. Many, of course, deal in old clothes and draperies of various kinds. One has wreathed her head in an amber-coloured handkerchief and muffled herself up in great-coats, for the day is cold. Out of the amber-tipped mountain of clothes appears her face as though carved in red wood, and grinning at the jokes of the bystanders.

"I can't do it, my dear girl," says another, with a touch of feminine vehemence and a dash of good-nature. "I've had to work all day for nothin' so far; so"—giggling here just as though she were a fashionable boarding-school miss—"so I can't go on doing it—can I? Now, here is a nice warm jacket for half-a-crown," and by-and-by, after more asseverations of "my dear girl," a bargain appears to be struck.

Not far off a faded woman sits overlooking faded pictures. She has not the pleasant grace of the Queen of the Yellow Knobs, or the red-faced grin of

the amber-tipped mountain, or the good-natured vehemence of "my dear girl," and she sits silent and alone. But truth to tell, her pictures do not seem likely to add to the gaiety of home.

Where is the People's Fair? and what is it? Curiously enough, it is held at the Islington Cattle Market, on Fridays when the cattle do not perform. But its connection with cattle seems of the vaguest and slenderest.

As to what the Fair is, one may say that almost everything is sold there, from horses to flowers, from carts and cabs to rusty keys. Here is a man offering in a weak voice four dirty white plates for threepence, and he puts a penny on the top plate by way of extra inducement.

"Cheap lot, that," says a man in the crowd, winking at me.

He evidently thinks I am a smart man like himself. I beam on him with my usual genial smile, and he appears much gratified.

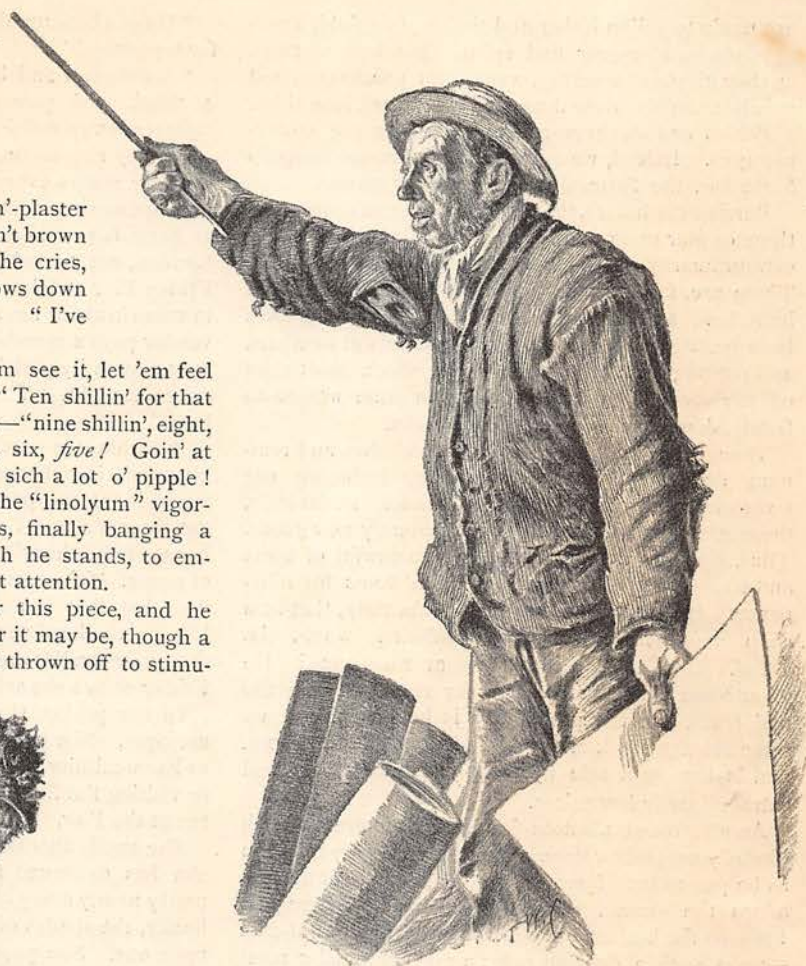
Large pieces of floor-cloth are going at ridiculous

prices. They are sold by Dutch auction: a cheap-jack sort of business, in which the excited vendor commences at a high price and comes down low.

"Look hyar," shouts one man with stentorian voice, "here's linolyum for you; 'tain't stickin'-plaster you're buyin'! Here's quality, 'tain't brown paper. Ah! look out, there!" he cries, as the piece of "linolyum" he throws down nearly knocks someone over. "I've killed ten men here to-day!"

"There—spread it out; let 'em see it, let 'em feel it!" he shouts to his assistant. "Ten shillin' for that lot"—a piece, say, nine feet by six—"nine shillin', eight, seven-and-six, seven, six-and-six, six, *five!* Goin' at five shillin'?" Why, I niver see sich a lot o' pippel! Five shillin'!" And he smacks the "linolyum" vigorously with loud sounding blows, finally banging a small piece on the cart in which he stands, to emphasise his statements and attract attention.

Five shillings is his price for this piece, and he generally gets his price whatever it may be, though a few pence may now and again be thrown off to stimulate languid buying.



"HERE'S LINOLYUM FOR YOU!"



"SHE HAS TURNED OVER AND CONSIDERED PRETTY NEARLY EVERY OLD SAUCEPAN LID IN THE MARKET" (p. 646).

Oil-cloth vending is quite a favourite trade at the People's Fair. There were three big establishments at it one foggy afternoon. A man stands on the waggon which has brought the remnants, and with much volubility and "go" and excitement disposes of the pieces one after another. If one piece fails to take at his upset price, down it goes for the present and up comes another in its place.

Stay—here is noise, here is racket! We are near the horse-fair now. Here the sorry knackers are galloped vigorously up and down, sometimes harnessed to ramshackle carts and carriages, sometimes alone. There are no second-hand shirts to be sold here, no bargaining for two-penny-halfpenny bundles of remnants, no half-crown jackets; but there is a very "second-hand" look about the horses.

It is surprising, the prices at which some of these poor screws change owners, and surprising, too, how the poor brutes

are made to gallop hither and thither, to exhibit some appearance of vigour and spirit. But look at them as they all stand together, waiting for purchasers, and note how the ribs show through their starved, lean sides.

Ponies and donkeys are here too, for the costermongers. Indeed, we might call it the costermonger's horse fair, the Tattersall's of the poorer classes.

Barring the horses, the observant eye can distinguish three or four main divisions or classes of goods in this extraordinarily large and heterogeneous collection. There are, for instance, all kinds of odds and ends of household and domestic furniture, things which have been picked up for next to nothing in lots at auctions, and ranging from an old tall clock, which has ticked off the hours for years and years in some well-to-do family, down to saucepan lids and locks.

Then there are the second-hand clothes and remnant dealers of every description, including our vivacious friends of the oil-cloth trade. But thirdly, there are persons who deal in apparently new goods. Thus, there is a man with a big barrowful of boots and shoes. He offers a pair of ladies' boots for ninepence. He asseverates, and no doubt truly, that at a shop half-a-crown or three-and-nine would be asked. How then can he sell at ninepence? He gives some ridiculous reason, far removed from the real truth, but the probability is he has picked up some salvage stock or surplus faded goods somewhere, and is forcing a sale by cheap-jack manœuvres and extraordinarily low prices.

Another man is a button-fancier, as a costermongerish kind of young fellow somewhat contemptuously calls him as he passes by. Scores of cards and boxes of buttons adorn the ground where cattle usually congregate. Perhaps the buttons are old-fashioned and out-of-date—upon such a delicate point a male chronicler must not pronounce too decidedly—and the vendor has got them cheap. But there they are, and there are the fair sex looking at them.

Yet another has bundles of lace or embroidery, and another, sponges—large pieces, some of them which he offers at threepence apiece. A fourth will have brushes and broom-heads, a fifth a barrowful of socks, or of caps, or collars, and of those little shirt-fronts popularly called dickies.

Then there are a few other things that cannot exactly be classed in any of these departments. There are the flower, and bulb, and plant sellers; there are the fish vendors, offering perhaps six kippers for twopence; the coffee-stall dealers, and the cobblers' barrows.

These last are filled with odd pieces of leather, each marked with its price—sevenpence-halfpenny and so on. Some offer cards of boot-protectors at real or assumed wonderfully cheap prices. Boot-protectors, it may be explained, are little pieces of iron which may be fixed on any part of the sole when it begins to wear.

"Tuppence for three cards o' boot-perfecters. Every plate stamped, can't buy cheaper in the market," etc., etc.

Another man close by offers with the "perfecters" little bundles of bristles with which the cobbler draws his thread through the holes in stitching.

"Have a box, my dear?" cries another—"a salt-box for tuppence!"

"A dust-pan and brush for threepence!" sings out a third. "A pair o' pictures for tuppence! An eighteenpenny walkin'-stick for fo'pence!"

So they ring around you, the cries of the Fair.

There seems everything at this wonderful fair, and it is increasing. Pedlars and cheap-jacks congregate at horse-fairs and cattle-markets in the country, and London, not to behindhand, must beat the lot at its Friday Fair at Islington. The vendors are permitted to come in about nine o'clock in the morning, and each vendor pays sixpence for his or her standing, and they may remain by garish flare of naphtha light until nine or ten at night. There is no eight-hours movement here.

But what can possibly be the use of myriads of these bits of old iron, broken saucepans, and so forth? The ingenuity of the poor supplies an answer. The little daughter of Susan Green cracks the family cook-pot, or her son treads heavily on its lid and smashes it quite out of shape. Of course it should not have been on the floor, but that is an insignificant detail. Susan taps him on the head somewhat vigorously to remind him that saucepan lids are not paving stones and then when Friday comes she sallies forth to the Fair.

In her pocket she carries a measurement of that cook-pot. She likes going to the Fair quite as much as her wealthier sisters love shopping at the West-End or visiting the Stores. And there is so much more to see at the Fair.

She strolls about enjoying herself mightily. In time she has examined and turned over and considered pretty nearly every old saucepan lid in the market, and finally, the shades of evening drawing on, she decides upon one. She pays an odd copper or so for it and departs in triumph. The Green's family cook-pot resumes its career.

In the same way all kinds of bits of old iron, wheels, and keys are bought for fitting into new, or repairing old machines, utensils, and locks. Here is a man trotting away with a fender, and exhibiting much satisfaction in doing so. Here is another trundling home a couple of cart wheels; yet another hurrying away with a queer-looking sewing machine. Those long bars of iron are the axles or springs of carts. They will be purchased to build into other vehicles.

Some vendors patch up things themselves to sell. The spout of one broken teapot is soldered to the sound but spoutless body of another, and fetches a fair price. One or more sound brooms may be made out of the partially bald pates of half-a-dozen others. There seems no limit to the handy ingenuity with which new articles are made out of old.

No doubt the rage for cheapness forms one of the great attractions of the People's Fair. But there are other inducements. People like fairs; they enjoy the noise, the bustle, the variety. The East has its bazaars, Russia its Nijni-Novgorod, and though London has lost its Bartholomew's, yet another gigantic fair, but shorn of its Richardson's Show, has grown up on Friday at the Cattle Market at Islington.