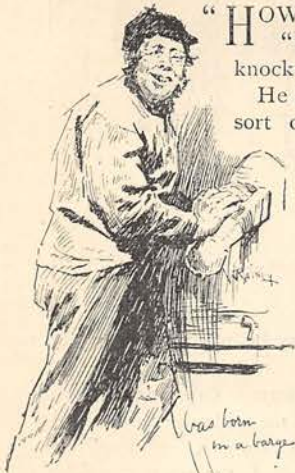


## THROUGH LONDON ON A BARGE.

BY F. M. HOLMES.



"HOW goes it, old feller?"  
 "Oh! pretty fair; keeps knockin' about pretty steady."

He is a pleasant, good-tempered sort of man: not at all like the coarse, foul-mouthed bargee one thinks of as typical of the race; and he has a cheerful greeting for most of the men he passes.

His wife is something like him in temper, and his introduction of her is queer.

"Oh yes, go in the cabin. The missus is there; she won't hurt you; she is very quiet;"—a gentle in-

dication, we take it, that some bargees' missuses are not so pleasantly disposed.

Within the cabin a plague of flies is going on. The wretched insects are buzzing everywhere. On the right hand stretches a broad settle, on which a bed could be made up at night; in front is another, though smaller, settle; while on the left are cupboards in which the bedding can be kept.

"Sleep here? Oh yes; and we shets the doors and the top part there, and we're as snug as possible."

Ugh! the very idea is repulsive. The cabin is stuffy even now—as stuffy as some country cottages—and what it must be with the doors and hatchway shut is sickening to contemplate. Strange, the inflexible dislike which some among us cherish to fresh air in their dwellings. But the bargee likes his life.

"I'd sooner live in our boat than in they places," says he, pointing to some London dwellings on the canal side. "I lay a penny we're more comfortable than what they are in their rooms. And if it's anyways hot, you can always hev a bath!"

A glance at the dirty greenish water did not promise a very enjoyable ablution. But not long before I had seen a boy lie on his chest over the canal side and wash his face in the water, and then comfortably polish his dripping countenance with his cap. So, apparently, this is one of the unrecognised uses of the canal.

"I was born in a boat,"

declares bargee in a triumphant tone, "and I've bin at the work all my life. Yes, I likes it all right."

He seemed to do so. There was an air of contented happiness about him which was as refreshing in its way as, no doubt, he found the canal bath.

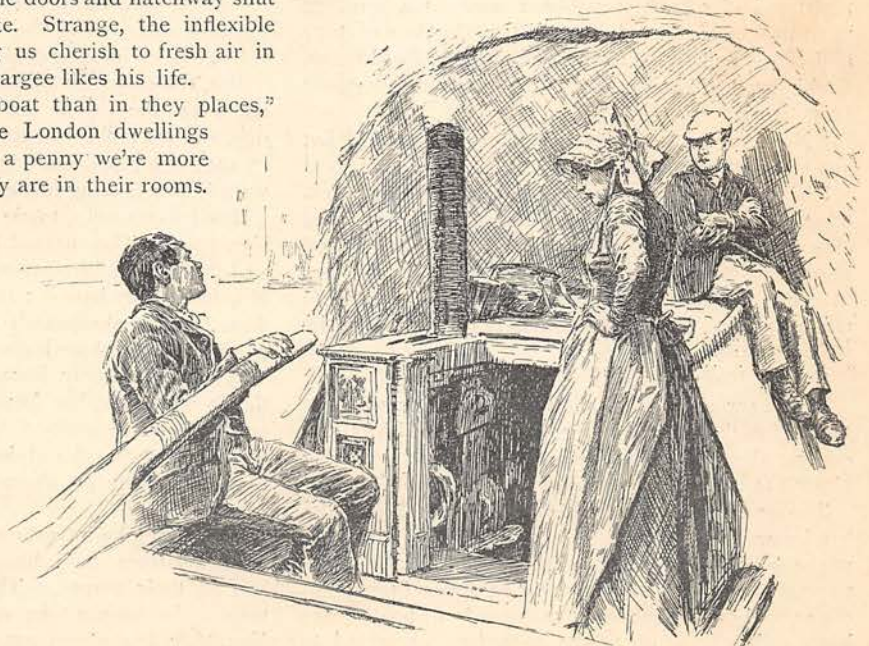
"Is that a lamp you've got over there?"

Yes, that was the lamp, and so polished was the little brass contrivance that it shone like gold.

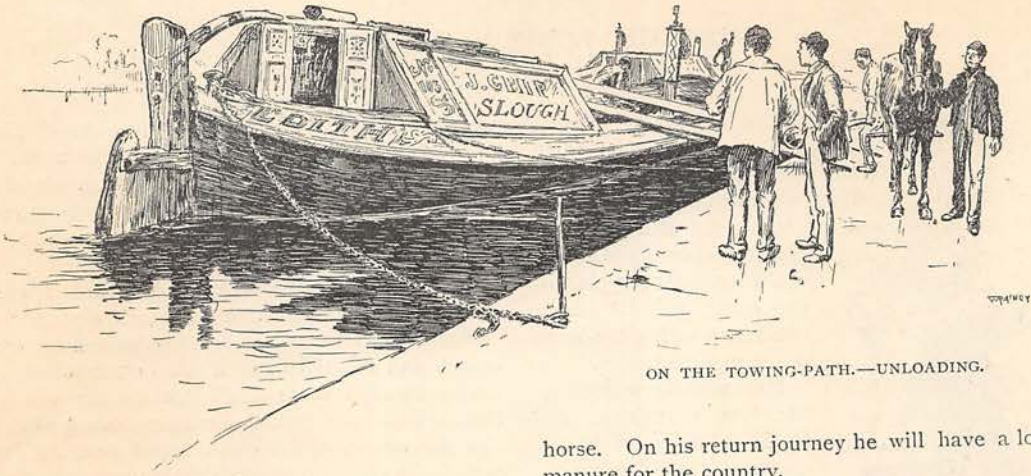
Near by gleamed a brass candlestick, equally bright, and the ticking of a small clock sounded distinctly through the cabin. For all the world, the narrow little room looked like a small cottage kitchen; and the ticking of the clock, heard here so clearly, though the roar of London sounded without, added to the semblance.

Yet, of course, there were differences. The stove would perhaps seldom, or never, be seen in a cottage. It was on the left as you entered, near the door, and on the opposite side from the broad settle. It was a curious egg-shaped contrivance of iron, with the lower part of the oval cut off, as it were, and the upper point prolonged into a pipe which passed through the roof, and served as chimney. A large part of the front could be removed, to disclose the glowing fire, or hooked on to serve as a "blower," and save puffing out the cheeks of the fire-lighter.

Like a cottage kitchen, too, was some of the painting. It glared in such crudely vivid colours that South Kensington would have been shocked. Nor was the scene depicted, which represented a curious



A STRAW BARGE.



ON THE TOWING-PATH.—UNLOADING.

kind of a castle, particularly enchanting. This adornment beamed forth from cupboards—or, being on the water, we should call them lockers—lining the left side of the little cabin.

“Roof watertight? Oh, yes, that’s safe enough.”

It rises a little above the sides of the barge, so that more height is given within the cabin, which is situate at the stern of the boat, and the level space affords a sufficiently pleasant lounging-place outside in fine weather. The narrow doors of the cabin open outward near the tiller, and the “man-hole,” or hatchway, at the top gives space in which the tiller can work. When not wanted, the tiller can be unshipped from the rudder.

Crudely bright colours flame outside the barge cabin, as well as inside. It is adorned, too, by the name of its owner and the place whence it hails, or is registered—for each canal-boat used as a dwelling must now be registered, according to the Acts of 1877 and 1884—and so the names of Uxbridge, Paddington, Berkhamstead, and others, shine forth on the gaudy frame-work.

“Now, then, get out the whip!” cries bargee. “Let ‘em know we’re comin’!”

The long lash is not intended for the horse’s back. That patient quadruped is not far off, stepping along slowly in front; but the thong could not have reached him. The whip is in the second barge, for we have two, one towing after the other. No; the whip is to make signals. What the whistle is to the engine the whip-crack is to the barge.

Crack! bang! crack!

Like a series of pistol-shots they sound; and there behind, on the second barge, is a youth whirling and curling the long thong around him, and enjoying himself to his heart’s content.

The signals produce the desired effect. They “let ‘em know we’re comin’!” In other words, the men at the bridge near the Paddington Basin make ready to receive us. We have a load of straw from Wendover, and our bargee is the master of two boats. He has a colleague to steer the second barge, a lad to help him on the first, and someone to look after the

horse. On his return journey he will have a load of manure for the country.

Now the horse, which on former days has seen work on a farm, is unhooked, and we glide up to the bridge most beautifully. It is a smooth, gliding, easy motion, that of a horse-towed barge on a canal, and the pace is about four miles an hour.

Through the bridge opens up a picturesque little scene. The canal broadens into a small lake, with an island toward the centre, pleasant with trees. Away to the right branches one arm of the water to the Paddington Basin, where the Grand Junction ends in a nest of dust-yards and wharves; and away to the left runs another arm, which is the well-known Regent’s Canal. After encircling half London in its sinuous embrace, this noted waterway loses itself in the Thames at Limehouse.

At first some of the bargees view bargee’s visitor with suspicion.

“Look out, Bill; here’s the School Board man a-comin’ arter you!”

“Git down into the cabin, will yer? Hide yerself!”

But, the suspicion allayed, the little maiden appears again at the top of the cabin beside the sleeping dog, and the mother, keeping guard over another child in the cabin, polishes vigorously the shining brass-ware in her floating home.

The two remarks, made on two different barges, are significant. The School Board inspector is abroad, and the boat children must go to school with the rest. No doubt they hate it; most children do, and have done from Shakespeare’s day to this. But the boat parents seem to hate it also.

Why? Not only because they did without it in their young days, but because, being always floating on the smooth surface of their narrow waterway, they have to board and lodge their children in some town or village on shore when they send them to school.

Such, we take it, is the chief reason; for, although some boatmen have homes ashore, many of them live on their barges. That is also, no doubt, the reason why women take part so largely in canal life. You may see a stalwart young damsel guiding the horse on the towing-path, or climbing on old Dobbin’s



FOUR MILES AN HOUR.

back when the creature's work is over, and riding it to the stable, or grasping the tiller, and steering the barge itself.

The little maiden of a few summers old, the vigorous young damsel of, perhaps, nineteen or twenty, and women of uncertain age, are all engaged in play or work about the canal-boat. A man and his wife will have charge of one, and while the wife steers the husband drives the horse, or *vice-versâ*. The little toddling child begins to pull at a rope, or shout like its father, and it is wonderful that in the close, confined space it does not get hurt.

Canal life is not without its casualties, if we may judge from the fact that there are several boatmen in the Infirmary of Paddington Workhouse.

"How are you a-goin' on, mate?" shouts a voice from the balcony as the barge glides by.

"Oh, jess right!" returns the boatman, as he gives a turn to the tiller to guide his clumsy, yet easily managed, craft aright.

Yes, he has a friendly word for most of those whom he passes on his watery road; but there are others who seem quite disposed to maintain their tradition for hot and strong language.

Though the rivalry of railways has greatly affected the good fortune of canals, they are not dead yet. The Grand Junction—or, to speak more accurately, the Paddington branch of the Grand Junc-

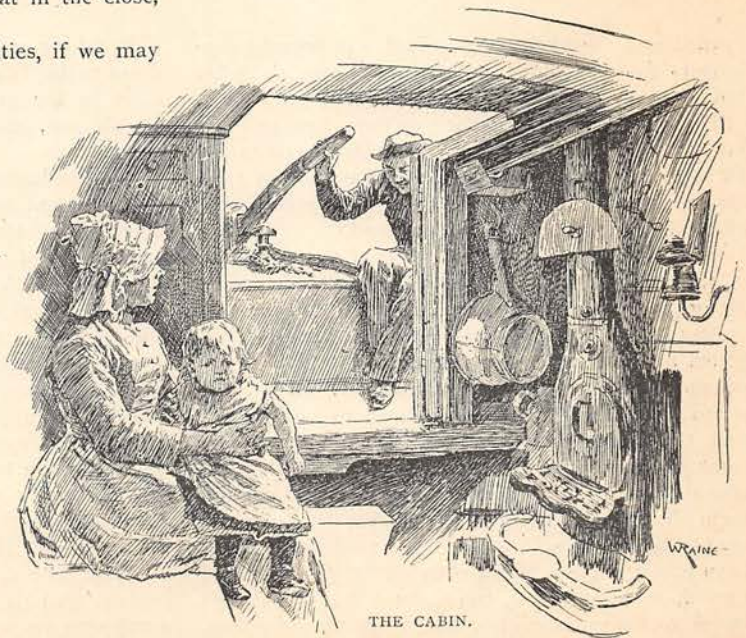
tion—which enters London by way of Willesden, Kensal Green, and Paddington, connects with a network of waterways, which spread far and wide over England.

Paddington Basin, where the Grand Junction ends, is like a small dock. Here barges are laden and unladen, though there are also wharves and landing-places further up the canal. Another end of the Grand Junction is at Brentford, where it joins the Thames.

Here, at Paddington, under a picturesque, almost Dutch-like, roof, blocks of salt are being unloaded, the projecting roof shielding the easily melting mineral from the rain. Further on, bricks and lime, or other builders' materials, are being put ashore, while on the opposite side barges are being filled with refuse from the Paddington dust carts.

The stuff brought in by these is first sifted and picked over, the old and broken bottles being placed in one heap, the battered tinware in another; finally, quantities of the refuse are taken off by the barges to be used as manure on the land. Quantities of stable manure are also taken away by barges along the canal in the same way; in fact, they convey all kinds of heavy material and bulky and weighty goods, such as sand, straw, bricks, coal, etc., in and out of London along the smooth and silent waterways. Sometimes one proprietor owns several barges, hiring men to work them; some owners, again, have but a couple, and work them themselves.

The chief canals in London are the Grand Junction



THE CABIN.

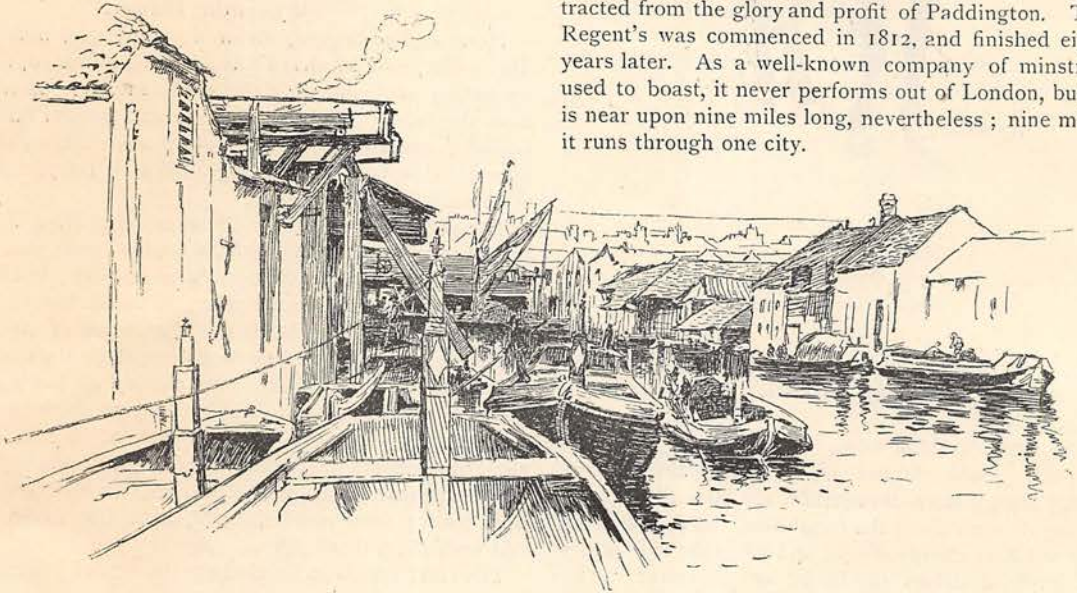
and the Regent's; and as the Regent's opens into the Grand Junction, not far from Paddington Basin, they may almost be regarded as one. Then there is Sir George Duckett's, connecting the Regent's and Hackney Cut, and the Limehouse, between the Lea and the Thames; while on the south side there is the Grand Surrey. Despite its imposing title, this is comparatively a small affair, for it is only four miles in length, extending from Rotherhithe to Camberwell, but connected with various docks.

It was a great day for Paddington—if not for London—when, on the 1st of June, 1801, the Paddington branch of the Grand Junction Canal was

The Grand Junction ran cheap trips into the country. Fancy cheap trips on a canal barge! But our forefathers appeared to like them, for Mr. Robins testified that they were beginning to be highly appreciated by the people who were pent in close lanes and alleys. And certainly the quiet, smooth, gliding motion, 'mid unaccustomed fields and rural scenes, would not be unacceptable to town-wearied dwellers.

Passenger traffic was quite a feature, and in those pre-railway days, no doubt, a much-appreciated feature of the canal. Boats plied frequently between Paddington and Uxbridge, and the Paddington wharves were busy with goods.

But then the Regent's Canal came along, and detracted from the glory and profit of Paddington. The Regent's was commenced in 1812, and finished eight years later. As a well-known company of minstrels used to boast, it never performs out of London, but it is near upon nine miles long, nevertheless; nine miles it runs through one city.



PADDINGTON BASIN.

opened and the first barge arrived. It brought passengers from Uxbridge, and might be doing so to-day but for the Great Western Railway.

There was a canal fever at one time, just as there was a railway mania later on, and an Act was obtained for the cutting of the Paddington Waterway in 1795. And when, six years later, the canal was opened, bells clanged, flags flew, and guns were fired.

One unfortunate individual suffered the shattering of his arm from the bursting of a gun. He never forgot the opening of the canal.

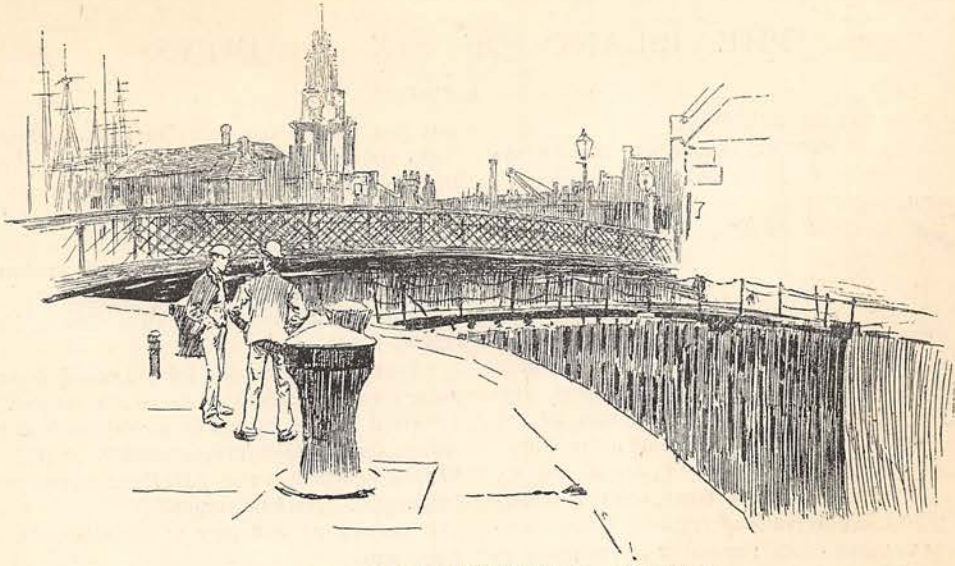
Alas! not very long afterwards a fickle public jaybelled and *fêted* the new railways, the rivals of the canals; and some fifty years later a Mr. Robins, who wrote about Paddington, was obliged to say in 1853 that the shares of the Grand Junction were—like some people—below par, though the traffic was still considerable. The medicine that would have put them above par—more traffic—was just then, perhaps, unobtainable. Now, however, the Grand Junction has been paying some four per cent. on its £1,293,700 of capital, showing that it can drive a fairly profitable business even yet, after close upon a century of working.

By taking on goods through the north and east, and down to the Thames, it naturally caused a serious decline in the quantities landed and warehoused at Paddington, and wharfage values there had to climb down.

Like the human lives around it, the Regent's has its smiles and tears, its pleasant places—as when it flows beneath the leafy trees of Regent's Park—and its experiences of a commonplace and workaday world. It enjoys its West-end and its East-end. It glides between North and South Bank at St. John's Wood, and it passes through Hackney and Stepney and Limehouse, lingering by Victoria Park on its way.

It has its business places in its wharves and basins, and its big shipping in its dock by the river; and it has also its times of sorrow, when, dank and lonely, it glides through tunnels. Sometimes even it is locked up: not for its misdeeds, however, but to check its descent, through unevenness of ground, from Paddington to the Thames.

There are a dozen of these locks, and forty bridges span its course. To voyage all along it from north-west to south-east might occupy about four



THE MOUTH OF THE REGENT'S CANAL, LIMEHOUSE.

hours, if your barge were not delayed too long at the locks.

Spite of all the railways, the Regent's still seems to carry on a fair traffic, and in its dock at Limehouse, timber and coal, and heavy goods can be unloaded into barges, and conveyed through the east and north of London.

The dock has two river entrances: one large, for ships, and one smaller, for barges. The big vessels are warped through the entrance by means of wheel-blocks and capstans. On the lower pier is a stand of three large lanterns, looking down the river; on the next, between the entrances, stands a round house and a tall flag-staff; beyond is a swing bridge, movable by hydraulic power, to admit the passage of the big ships.

Beyond, again, looms up in the evening light a forest of masts against the sky, diversified by the well-known tower of Limehouse Church; and here, on the entrance pier, are two barges a-talking.

"What cheer, Sammy!" says one.

"What cheer, Bill!" answers the other.

Then they thrust their hands in their pockets, and look up and down the river.

Just below the pier a barge is moored midway between the two entrances. The wind blows the smoke clear away from the funnel, and the bargee plays with his dog while his supper is cooking.

Then he climbs the ladder and joins the two talking on the pier, and the dog comes also and barks at their shins. And, in spite of the strict prohibitions posted up, two boys saunter down and look about.

For it is evening, and this is the end. After all its London vicissitudes, here the canal joins itself quietly through the dock to the Thames, and mingles with the larger life of the river. Anon booms the hoarse whistle of big steamers, and all around sounds the muffled, softened roar of old London.

There are still so many navigable canals in England, that you could voyage from this Regent's Canal end to Liverpool by barge. So completely was this country covered by these artificial waterways during the canal fever, that there was said to be in 1836, including navigable rivers, no place south of Durham that was over fifteen miles from water-travelling.

Railways, of course, soon rushed past the slow-moving canals in public favour; but there are still more than 3,800 miles of canals open in the United Kingdom, while 120 miles have been turned into railways.

The longest canal tunnel is on the Thames and Severn, and is called the Sapperton Tunnel. Its length is 3,808 yards. No horses tug the boats through, but men—like birds for once—rest on wings: that is, projecting bits of wood, and "leg" the barges along, or push them with poles. The Lappal tunnel, on the Birmingham Canal, is almost as long, extending for 3,795 yards; and it has also the reputation of being the narrowest—only seven feet nine inches in width. The Blisworth, on the Grand Junction, is 3,056 yards long, and here steam-tugs are used to haul the barges through.

All along the waterways are inns at intervals for stabling the horses, but the boat people sleep on their boats. They are moored to the "off" side of the canal, and they shut-to the doors and sleep soundly. Sometimes they work for eighteen hours; sometimes they get a good night's rest. When the day is bright, it is pleasant enough to glide smoothly along at the rate of four miles an hour; but then there is bad weather, and storms arise. And sometimes the people you meet with are good-tempered and sometimes very much the reverse. So barge life has its points of resemblance to shore life, after all.