



By W. OUTRAM TRISTRAM.

Illustrated by HERBERT RAILTON.



THE roar of Fleet Street comes mellowed to it through a covered way under which Personages have passed. This cannot be said of every covered way in London; but then every covered way does not lead to a house of entertainment at whose well-worn tables Johnson has sat and Boswell has twaddled. As becomes the simplicity of real greatness, there is no parade in this approach. Unadorned by directions designed to raise false hopes, unprofaned by picture posters of the latest melodramatic successes, leading only from the bustle of a thronged street into a quiet alley, this passage passes straight to its purpose; and on emerging from it the tavern door smiles invitingly on the right hand side.

It smiles with a grave and decorous invitation, as becomes a house whose conduct has long risen above the realms of criticism, whose assured fortunes solicit no stranger's purse, whose stout is of the real genuine stunning, and whose chops are *chefs d'œuvre*. Face to face with the Old Cheshire Cheese, the connoisseur in taverns feels soothed. No architectural prodigies take away the breath. No copper sign of ornate workmanship swings above the entrance clamorously claiming notice. No projecting gables peer upon the alley to divert intending feeders from that calm consideration of chops essential to their assimilation, by suggestions of that disquieting atmosphere of treason and intrigue, of midnight meetings and Jesuits in counsel, which Tudor remnants in London invariably evoke. No! The imagination is unfired here, and the inner man remains at rest. All is staid, unadorned, and wholesome in this exterior, like the fare proffered within.

The entrance to this unpretentious eating house is of Georgian proportions.



APPROACH IN THREE FALCON COURT.

Strait is the gate and narrow is the way, and no bemedalled commissioners stand on guard. But down the passage come savours of surpassing fragrance; the rattle of knives and forks is heard from the dining-room, accompanied by loud laughter; plates are clashed together by practised hands who have no fear of a chip before their eyes, and above all the monotonous voice of the waiter rises eternally, bawling incessant orders up the stairs to the cook. His cry, like all great utterances, needs studying, like a code of signalling or the language of heraldry; but it sounds as strangely at first in the new visitor's unpractised ear as might some old-world curse or incantation heard on an oak staircase.

"Cook"—thus this paean proceeds—"one mut and two kids to follow; stewed cheese; two muts to follow; one steak, well done; one steak, underdone; steak and shalot; one sos and mashed potatoes; separate sos; one mut and two sos to follow. Cook a single mut and two followers down together."

Curiosity compels one to penetrate these mysteries. We enter the Cheshire Cheese. The house's character stands at once revealed in the narrow passage running straight through into a yard beyond, from which left and right open two rooms, one larger than the other, but each devoted to dining, and each furnished in the same way. From everything which meets the eye the true atmosphere of the old tavern breathes; from the sawdust or sand on the floor to the heavily timbered windows, the low planked ceiling, the huge projecting fire-place with a great copper boiler always on the simmer, the high, stiff-backed settles which box off the guests, the solitary picture of a great departed waiter. Far, far from this decorous simplicity are banished all the new-fangled ideas of the fashionable restaurants now in vogue, with their garishness and their glitter, and their third-rate frescoes, and their supercilious waiters of foreign origin, fitted neither by temperament nor understanding to minister to a true Briton's whetted wants. With our insularity rapidly departing, however, and already beginning to be looked down upon as a subject for shame, this perhaps does not matter. But here, at least, in this Cheshire Cheese may be seen by the curious one of the few last temples of that insularity's spirit. Here is no home for kickshaws and cigarettes. From this kitchen comes no sample of fashionable culinary art, that "Art with poisonous honey stolen from France." Nothing of that kind obtains at the Cheshire Cheese. Here the narrowed kingdom lies of point steaks turned to a second and served hissing on plates supernaturally hot, of chops gargantuan in size and inimitable in tenderness and flavour, of cheese bubbling sympathetically in tiny tins, of floury potatoes properly cooked, of tankards of Salt's beer, of extra creaming stout, of a rump-steak and oyster pudding served on Saturdays only, and so much the specialty of the house that I must deal with it hereafter. All smacks here of that England of solid comfort, and solid plenty.

There is a collection of useful implements of inebriety in the bar of the Cheshire Cheese, which brings the place's past more vividly perhaps before one than any view of its sanded floors, low ceilings, or quaint staircase, disappearing suddenly from the entrance passage in formal but inviting bend. One of the punch-ladles has a William the Third guinea soldered into the bowl, a circumstance which evokes visions at once of big-wigged gentlemen discussing the battle of the Boyne, or that elaborate march-past from Brixham to Whitehall which set the seal to the Great Revolution. The Cheshire Cheese was never a Jacobite house. That distinction is especially attached to the Old Blue Posts in Cork Street, now, as far as its original form is concerned, but a restoration standing on the site of a memory. But without the animus of Jacobite discussion plenty of causes for sword drawing were to be found under a tavern roof as the night grew late; and there is a room up stairs in the Cheshire Cheese which suggests vividly one of those battle pieces in convivial life which novelist and memoir writer are never tired of describing, and which were no doubt matters of common occurrence in houses such as this, when gentlemen drank deeply and wore small swords, and George the Third was king. One may imagine in this room, the fire burning low, the candle, put on a chair, spluttering and casting uncertain shadows, and two red faced gentlemen in a breathing state lunging at each other across the table; while the drawer listens outside the door with his ear to the keyhole, anxiously awaiting the first groan which will warrant his intrusion, and the chamber-maid presses both hands to her ears hysterically to shut out the clash of steel. Such an arrangement as this was often had recourse to by gentlemen excitedly anxious to settle a difference, and wishing to save themselves the trouble of a walk to

Tothill Fields. The Cheshire Cheese has, I make no doubt, many such an incident stored among its eighteenth century experiences.

A later period of the house's history is more practically reflected in the picture of the great departed waiter which I have already referred to, and which hangs in solemn state sole ornament of the dining-room's mellowed walls. Here the very spirit of the tavern of 1800 is caught to perfection. Grave, pompous, filled himself with

good cheer, and the reputation of the house which it is his privilege to serve, this head waiter long defunct prepares to uncork a bottle of the house's choicest wine. Inspired by the solemnity of the moment his pose is almost heroic: he wears knee breeches and stockings; and the corkscrew about to be applied to a cork beyond suspicion is turned upwards to an attentive heaven. His head is bent reverently, and his feet are in the first position. Below this august discloser of a classic cellar's treasure, the guest of the house sits with head bent expectant: it is clear that he is no neophyte; he is at ease in his inn, his beaver hat and gloves have been thrown carelessly on a chair; his coiffure is worthy of George the Fourth, and his attitude is that of confident anticipation. He is a judge of good wine; he is aware that this waiter would not stoop to deceive. The background of this painting, carefully copied from a section of the room, lends an additional value to the theme—makes it not so much a portrait of a celebrated waiter as another vivid impression of the tavern's past.



ENTRANCE IN WINE OFFICE COURT.

Such strike me as being the most salient features of the house itself. Of its great guests in the past a list might be made, to judge from suggestions given me, equalling in length some of those amazing petitions which are offered on stray occasions to the consideration of an astounded House of Commons. The catalogue of the ships would be a comedy to it. For it must be remembered that the Cheese has stood where it now stands for considerably over two hundred years (three centuries is claimed for it by its more ardent devotees), and situate as it is in what has been always more or less a literary quarter of London, its sanded floors have been trod no doubt in all periods by distinguished literary feet. But to suggest that Shakespeare ate here is I think a mistake. I have no doubt that he may have done so, may have strolled in for a chop in the intervals of rehearsing some masterpiece at the Blackfriars Theatre in Playhouse Yard; but so many great men have feasted here after him, that as a feeder his impres-

A STORIED TAVERN

sion is faint. The belief too that the left hand dining-room was in Herrick's mind when he apostrophized rare Ben Jonson in lines that most people know by heart, is founded,



THE ENTRANCE HALL.

I fear, on a corrupt reading of a famous passage, though the Cheese in this instance may be perhaps allowed the benefit of a doubt.

But with these doubtful celebrities subtracted the house's roll of famous visitors remains sufficiently full. Voltaire was certainly here; Bolingbroke in this place

cracked many a bottle of Burgundy ; and Congreve's wit flashed wine inspired, while Pope, sickly and intolerant of tobacco smoke, suffered under these low roofs I doubt not many a headache. But it is of its distinguished visitors of later days that the Cheshire Cheese as it now stands reminds one most fully. Johnson, Garrick, Goldsmith, and Chatterton were undoubted frequenters. Many a time the great Samuel, turning heavily in his accustomed seat and beset by some pert sailing pinnace, brought, like a galleon manœuvring, his ponderous artillery to bear. Goldsmith lived at No. 6 Wine Office Court, where he wrote or partly wrote the *Vicar of Wakefield*, his fagging inspiration possibly gaining assistance from the tavern's famed Madeira.

In a house which still stands in Gough Square, Johnson lived from 1748 to 1758, struggling, with that heavy pertinacity which was his, through some of the darkest years of his life. Here he fought against such engaging and diversified deterrents to success as hypochondria, the coldness of friends, a patron's impertinent condescension and the vacillating opinions of publishers. Here he suffered an added and for a time a paralyzing blow in the death of his wife, whose plainness the eyes of her ever faithful lover transfigured into beauty, and whose acrimonious bickerings seemed to his enslaved senses the outpourings of a disposition singularly temperate and serene. Here through all these difficulties, which would have killed a lesser nature, Johnson worked. He commenced both the *Idler* and the *Rambler*, and put the first stroke of the pen to that long meditated dictionary, now voted so uncommonly faulty and out of date. This struggling author must have beenglad, I think, when the clock's hand told him that the day's work was over, and the time come for rest, relaxation, and the Cheshire Cheese.

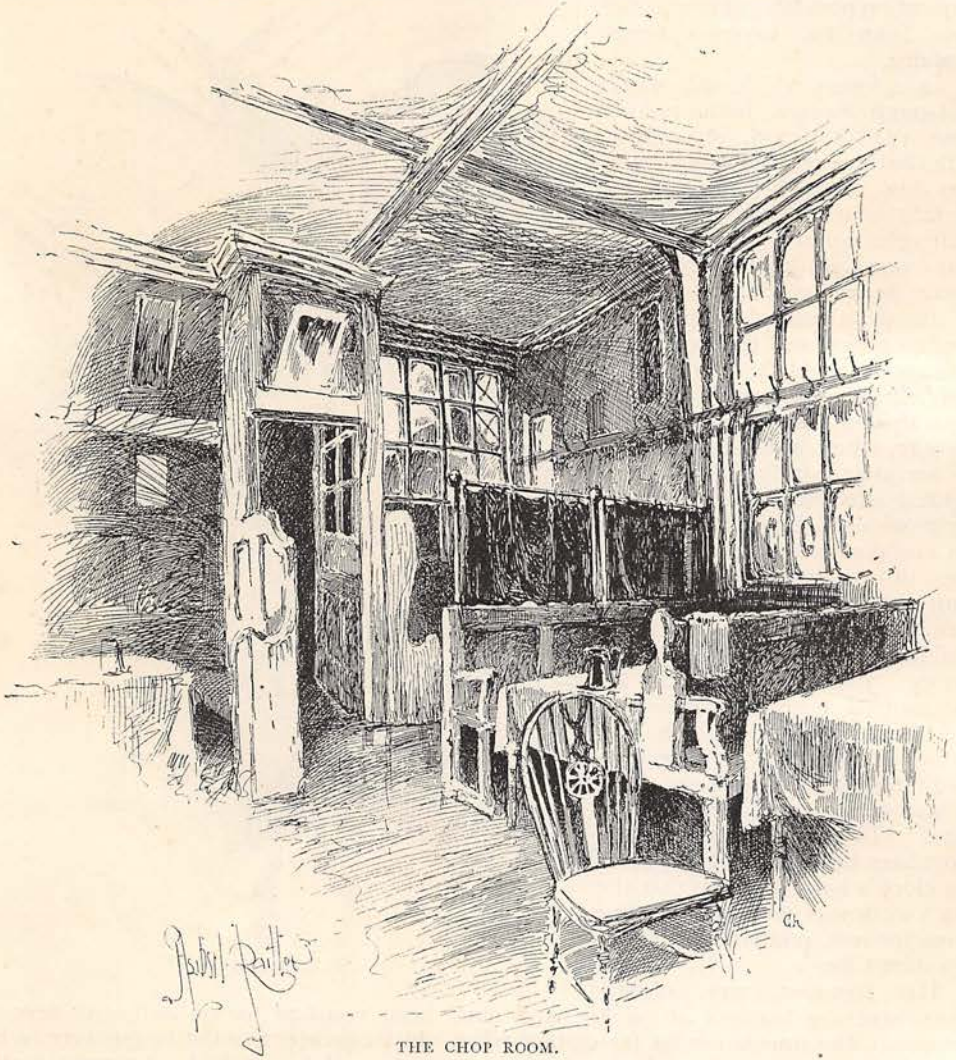
His frequent, nay, nightly visits here are matters of history, and have been vouched for on authority beyond dispute. The time is not so far distant when old frequenters to the house were to be found who had drunk and eaten with men whom Johnson had conversationally annihilated, and who recalled the circumstance with an extreme clearness of recollection. A recollection this, which joined the record of two generations of the tavern's great visitors. And the second generation offered names not unworthy to compare with the first, such notabilities as these figuring in the list, Dickens, Thackeray, Douglas Jerrold, Mark Lemon, Shirley Brooks, Tom Taylor, John Forster, Sir Alexander Cockburn, Professor Aytoun, Tom Hood, Andrew Halliday and Charles Mathews.

So much for its departed guests, who I doubt not linger still about their favourite haunt, impalpable presences in bag-wigs, and full-bottomed coats, and more modern garments, now equally out of fashion, misanthropically eying the present proprietors of their once favourite seats, full of a ghostly contempt for the wit combats of the



THE STAIRWAY.

moderns ; stern critics to whose gibes the old walls return no echo, transparent toppers whose formal footsteps leave no print on the classic sand. Of the moderns who now sit in the seats of their literary ancestors much remains to be written in that fulness of time which comes to all great men when life ceases, and the biographer seizes his pen. Meanwhile some of the chiefest of our journalistic lights of to-day are to be seen at the Cheese. "Brain Street" is just round the corner with its score of great offices of great organs of public opinion, and hither in the intervals of dictating the policy of nations, rush scores of our young literary giants in quest of chops as a rule, and on Saturdays



THE CHOP ROOM.

of beefsteak and oyster pudding. This is the day of days on which to see these lions feed. The room is crowded. On every pale brow expectation sits plumed. A casual intruder, little knowing, calls for a chop. Derision is clearly marked in the waiter's ordering tones, and *habitués* smile at each other pityingly. Then in the midst of a reverent hush, by the hands of three waiters up-borne, the sacred pudding appears ! Its size is prodigious. It smokes upon the board—standing immediately under the picture of the departed waiter. The tavern's courteous and genial proprietor prepares to play the part of high priest. No unseemly hurry marks his performance of his august office. He glances round calmly, then slowly raises the sacrificial knife and plunges it into the pudding. A suppressed murmur of satisfaction rises. Ambrosial essences ascend.

The secret of this great masterpiece's component parts remains locked in the heart of the proprietor, a sacred trust for ever. It is essentially a mystery of the house. Proprietor hands it on to proprietor, and he to his heirs executors or assigns, but it never leaves the Cheshire Cheese; and however much habitual consumers may believe that they have sounded the depths of its mystery, talking glibly of rump steak and oysters, they know well in their heart of hearts that there is a hidden something lurking under that shield of paste which defies analysis and remains cookery's unknown factor. How many brilliant articles and searching criticisms has not this pudding inspired?

Not that journalists and critics are the sole specimens of the literary guild who enjoy the good things provided by this unassuming old place of entertainment, which



THE CHOP ROOM FIREPLACE.

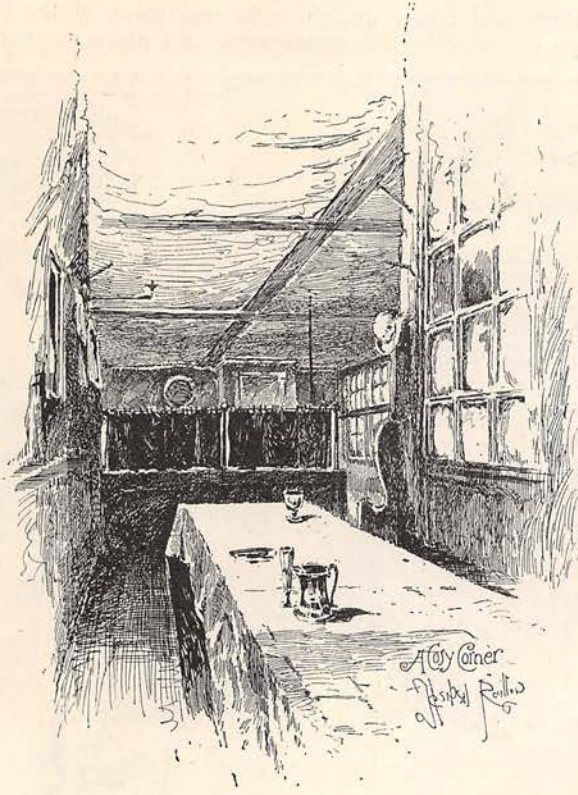
has kept its hospitable doors open in Wine Office Court for over two centuries. Authors and actors are seen sometimes at its bar; and at regular intervals a smart brougham drawn up at the entrance of the narrow passage from Fleet Street signals that one of the most successful of our modern dramatists is refreshing the inner man. Others of almost equal standing may be seen here at times, too, discussing a rival's latest success or failure, with all that wealth of detail appropriate to the occasion, and recuperating exhausted nature after the unsettling excitements of a first night.

But everywhere a general feeling of fraternity prevails—proper to time-stained walls which have listened unmoved to the literary bickerings of two hundred years, and which will continue, all must hope, to do the same impartial office for the benefit of a future generation; when the works, and the successes, and the failures, and the quite immaterial hopes and despondencies of the present, will be matter for casual comment of stray antiquaries, who have unearthed back numbers of comic journals in the Print Room at the British Museum.

That the future of such an historic tavern as this Cheshire Cheese is safe, is a hope reasonably to be relied upon. Its *clientèle* is compact and faithful; its sequestered site, out of any possible main line of improvement, guarantees it against the deplorable fate

A STORIED TAVERN.

which overtook its great rival and prototype. The Cock perished to make way for a more imposing structure. A fact which posterity may have cause to dwell upon. No further such improvements, we trust, are meditated in this part of Fleet Street. Long may the ripe Old Cheshire Cheese stand! In its independence and simplicity, in the flavour of the fireside which lurks about it, it is symbolical of the best and strongest side of our hospitable life. No false note of entertainment rings here. In an age of imitations transplanted to an uncongenial soil this old house glories in its originality still. It is a tavern, and not a restaurant. It is English.



A COSY CORNER.