

BOOKSELLING, like bookmaking, has its priests of all grades. To some of them it brings fortune, to others a bare subsistence. Sweeping downwards from the princely establishment to the humble shop in the back street we are apt to imagine that the whole gamut has been struck; but no, there is yet a lower note in the scale. This note it may be worth while to sound.

The book-barrow man is a familiar object on London streets. His establishment is nothing if not modest, and its surroundings are generally the reverse of literary; to wit, it is very often to be found in conjunction with greengrocery and flower-selling. In fact, at some period of his career the proprietor may have followed one or other of these lines before turning his talents into more intellectual channels.

"Always a bookseller? w'y, no, sir; though I've been twenty year at the job. I've tried heverythink: fruit, flowers an' all, afore I took to the books." Such was the confession of the book-barrow man whose wit and wisdom it was my privilege recently to enjoy by the wayside, amid the roar and bustle of Farringdon Road. He was a sagacious middle-aged man, clean-shaven (or what passed for it), with an intelligent grey eye, and an epigrammatic tongue that required little persuasion after the first reticence had worn off. We soon became friends, and bit by bit he let me into the story of his ways and days.

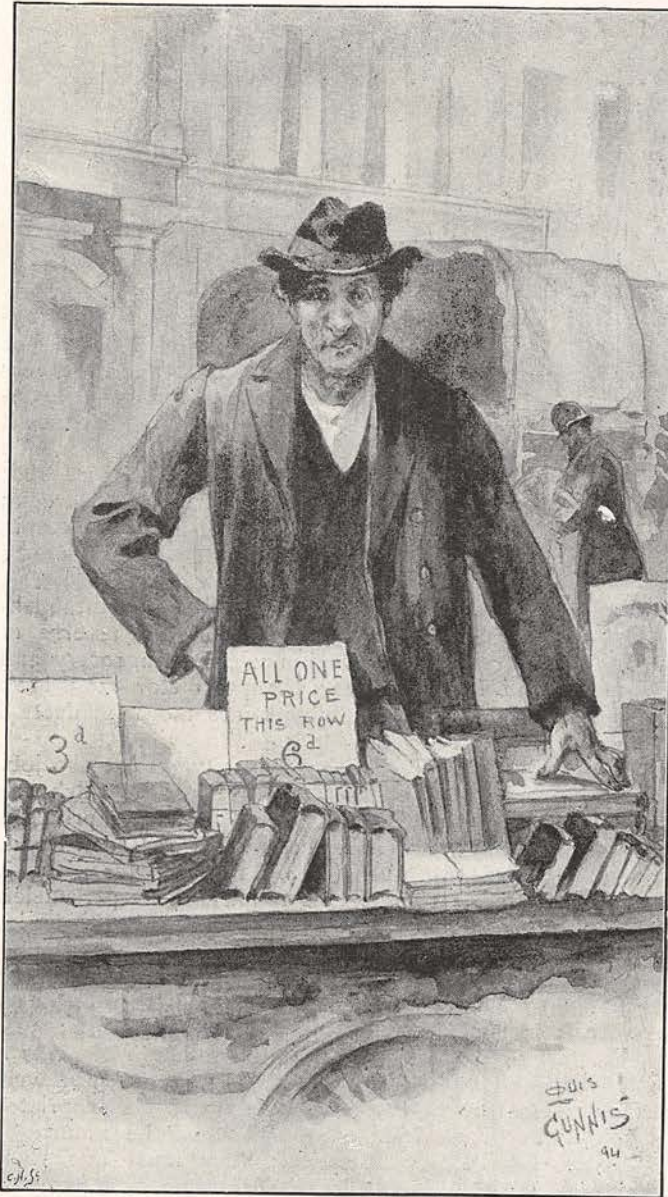
"My name, sir? there, sir." As he spoke he kicked out from beneath the barrow his business card in the shape of a long gaudy signboard, not then on duty, as his awning was not up. It told his name and that of his business house: "Ye Olde Caxton Book Stall"—a characteristic title, for my friend, up to his lights, was a lover of ancient tradition. The business was not wholly confined to books, however, for one tray was devoted to musical literature—the best-paying part, the proprietor averred. "But there ain't no demand for proper kind o' moosic now," he mourned; "folks don't want fine old songs like 'Enery Russell's; they must 'ave their 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ays' nowadays. Rubbish! I calls 'em." His scorn was perfect.

"There ain't much doing in the books just now," he pursued; "my customers is mostly out o' town." These clients, he assured me, were chiefly "theological people," though what he meant precisely by that term I could not easily determine. The stock certainly did not point that way, for except a set of Blair's Sermons theology was not in evidence. It was the usual nondescript assortment of the old bookstall—some history, some poetry, some political economy, and a lot of trashy novels to finish up with. Of *libri variores* there were none. Classics were at a discount. "Them works o' Cicero, sir, as I'm asking two bob for, I could once ha' sold for ten; there's no gettin' hanythink for the ancient classics nowadays. In modern works, too, unless it be a first edition, a good *old* copy don't

fetch much, seein' you can get all Scott and Dickens in cheap editions at $4\frac{1}{2}d.$ the volumn. An' people don't buy a book

seven an' eight. Wot would I call a good d'y's takin's, sir? Well, two pound; a bad d'y? well, three bob; that's a reg'lar bad 'un. We suffers lots from rain; especially the moosic. On bad d'ys we just st'ys on with the cover up, but even then there's lots o' damage."

"Two-pound d'ys" must indeed be few and far between, for I learned, after a judicious purchase had conduced to greater confidence, that the average weekly "talk-in's" were about £3 10s. Of this, 15s. must go weekly in mere up-keep of the stand. The barrow is hired for 4s., the tray for 1s. The rent of a place to keep them in is 4s., and "as them things is 'eavy, sir, I needs assistance to put them up. That's a shillin' a d'y." About £2 weekly is required to buy in new stock, as the lot in hand is generally cleared out in three days. Little more than 15s. can be counted upon for living expenses. Buying is a great problem. "If I'd capital, sir, I'd 'ave a very different class o' books, but w'en a man 'as only a pound to lay out 'e must be careful. A man wi' ten pounds can be a bit rash. I can't get nothink together, as it is. You see, for the 15s. I p'ys for 'ire you could rent a shop, but wot's the good o' a shop w'en you've nothin' to put



HE WAS A SAGACIOUS MIDDLE-AGED MAN.

now, they rather reads wot somebody else 'as to say about it. Nowadays nobody goes *deep*. Then the competition—w'y, there's twenty on us round about 'ere, all tryin' to eat one another up. Ah! you must stick to it, if you're to get along. It won't do to go 'ome at two o'clock. My hours is from ten to between

in it? There ye are!

"W'ere do I buy? W'y, everywhere. I attends sales sometimes out as far as Rumford. Further I don't go. If I sees a lot advertised maybe as far away as Brighton I don't go there; I just writes to the auctioneer, and if he 'as no 'igher offer, w'y, the books is mine. Do I

choose? No, sir, I just taikes the lot. Such lots as I gets is usually advertised along with miscellaneous articles. I offers for the books, and so gets 'em. Ever 'ave the chance o' a good offer? Well, that depends on the book. If it were a folio Shaikspeare now, o' course that would fetch a hundred guineas; or a first edition Chuzzlewit, there would be money in it, but (he spoke reverently, as of the unattainable) such things doesn't come our length—all snapped up before they reaches the loikes o' us. Then the buyers knows far more about the books we gets than we do, sir."

"Indeed?" I rejoined, affecting slight incredulity to draw him further.

"W'y, yes," he insisted confidentially, "they knows 'em; and you may be sure the best is soon picked. Oh, there's lots o' oyes! Suppose I'm in doubt, I goes this w'y. I may fancy a book's worth a bit, some book not so well known. Well, there comes an offer o' eighteenpence. I refuses. The second man comes, and 'e says eighteenpence. Then the third man says the same, and so on. Well, ten to one the fifth man gets it for eighteenpence. Oh, they knows, and, you see,

his curious method of settling a doubtful valuation; but it was a moment that called for gravity, so I silently acquiesced, not attempting any argument, and led him to other themes. His interest in the inside of the books was not great. "Do I ever try a book on Sunday? Well, to tell you the truth, I mostly sleeps all Sunday, I'm so tired. It's wearin' out bein' here all day in the street amongst all this noise; but sometimes I 'as a go at a book and gets somethink out o' it." Book-plates, however, he was keen on, and evidently was something of an expert in them. "The demand is not what it was, but I've 'ad some foine plates through my 'ands in my toime. I used to tear out the cover often an' often to get the plate.



THE BOOK-BARROW MAN IS A FAMILIAR OBJECT ON LONDON STREETS.

guv'nor, it's foive to one against the bigger price. So the chances are it's correct."

It was difficult to restrain a smile over

W'y, d'ye know, sir, by roights, I oughter 'ave 'To 'Is Royal 'Ighness' on my sign. I've sold book-plaites to a man as used to sell 'em again to the Prince; so I've as

good as sold 'em to *him*. Once I sold 'im a fine King Charles that 'e gave as a present to the Princess, and she 'as it under a glass caise. I'd know it anywhere; my mark's on it, though nobody but me could find it. Oh, this man used ter sell lots on 'em again to the Prince, w'ich was as good as if I done it myself." My risibility was greatly tried once again when my informant favoured me with the supposed middleman's name, adding "'e were at that time secretary to 'Is Royal 'Ighness."

It would have been a neglect of the interviewer's duty had I failed to interrogate my companion as to any distinguished people he had met or done business with. He mentioned a long-departed Justice. "Oh, 'im an' me's 'ad many a row, sir. 'E used ter throw my books about so when 'e'd done lookin' at 'em." Another acquaintance of note, he informed me, had recently said to him: "Well, the Vestry hasn't cleared the stalls away yet?" "No, they 'ave *not*, thanks to *your* relative's decision in the Law Courts." This opened the flood-gates of my bibliopole's eloquence, for the street-stalls dispute has evidently been the great and burning question of his life. He was severe on the Vestry, and recounted with tremendous gusto his deputation speech. Of one reverend complainant he spoke with bitterness. "One d'y, in a bit of a block, 'is *majesty* 'ad to walk a bit in the middle o' the road. Therefore 'e says, says 'e, 'Clear out the stalls.'" When this was brought up at a meeting my friend waxed crushingly eloquent, if his own report be accurate. "'Ad to walk a bit in the middle o' the road, indeed; w'y, the Greatest Man that ever lived walked in the middle o' the road; the Greatest Man that ever lived walked without shoes on His feet; the Greatest Man that ever lived rode upon a donkey! You calls yourself a Christian man! I says, you oughter know better. The Greatest Man in the world did all that; wot's more, 'E didn't persecute poor people. There's room for everybody if folks would just maikie w'y a bit."

Incident and anecdote now flowed in a stream too copious for the limits of the present article, though so quaint and interesting that it is with reluctance passed over. Toleration of the poor by the wealthy was his great theme, and evidently his panacea for the bulk of social evils. He illustrated his discourse with personal incidents, and glorified America

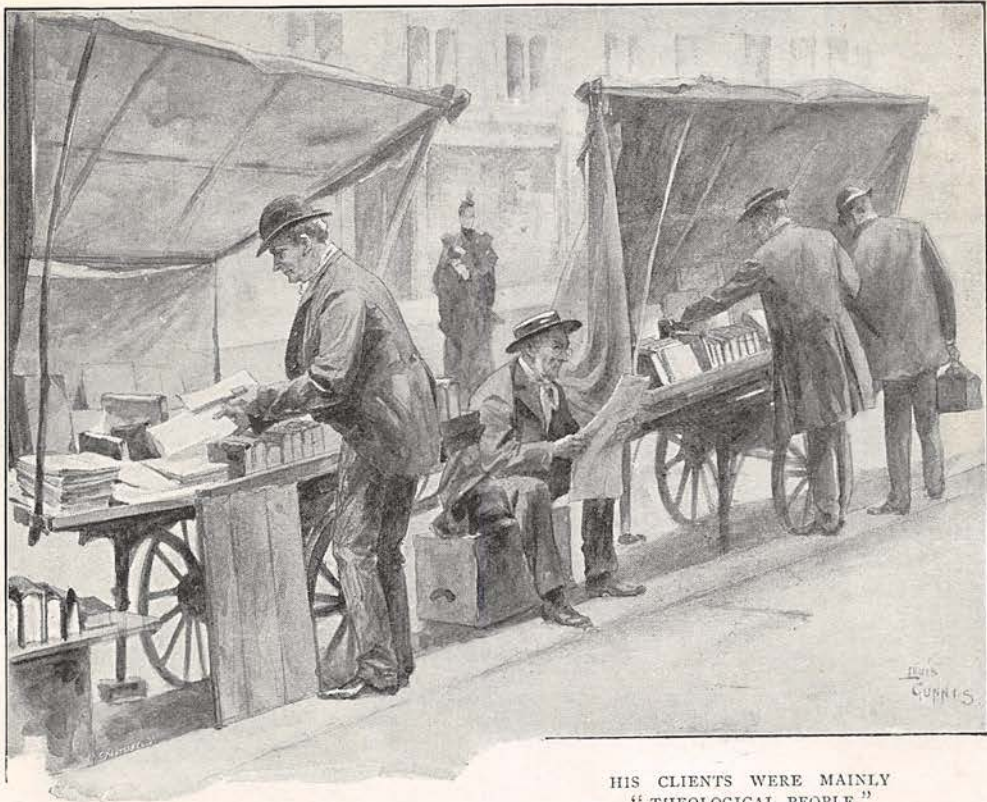
(which he had seen in his pre-bookselling days) as greatly superior to England in charity and hospitality.

Of the professional anecdote proper he had not much to give. His knowledge of what was what in old books did not appear to be extensive. Certain outstanding works he knew the value of, but, as he said, they seldom came his way. A friend of his had once got hold of a Kilmarnock edition of Burns, and in ignorance had parted with it for a shilling or two to an expert, who turned it to better account. He had no reproach for the unwitting one, and seemed to consider the affair merely another instance of the buyer's superiority. That he accepted stoically.

Reverting to the theme of distinguished men, I asked whether he had ever seen the immortal Charles. He had not, to his knowledge. "There's some as s'ys they 'ave; but oh, dear, sir, there's a lot o' flummery talked about Dickens, a *lot* o' flummery." He then launched out into gratuitous scepticism regarding reputed originals. Only one original would he allow, and that was for the "Old Curiosity Shop." He declared that it stood in Fetter Lane. "There was a widow kept it, and Dickens, w'en passin', would often go in to 'ave a gaime with 'er. There's other plaices claims it, but I don't believe on 'em." That Fagin was a Saffron Hill character he thought just credible, "but there's a lot o' flummery talked, a lot o' *gas*!" Thereon he was dogmatism rampant.

So the morning wore away. Many visitors paused at the stall, but not many made purchases. Most of the books were priced very low, threepence was a common charge, and a well-preserved third volume of the *Cornhill* went at sixpence. The "missus," who assisted, came occasionally to inquire a price, and if the bargain was struck she reappeared and pressed the coins well home into the marital palm.

The talk drifted back to personalities. "Yes, I've seen life on all sides, sir, wi' all its trials, troubles, and triboolations. Spells o' bad luck? W'y, yes, bin three months at a time not knowin' w'ere to turn, but it all caime right agen, some'ow. Me and the missus manages to get along. No, we a'n't got no children. We've bin together these twelve years. Keep to one plaice? yes, sir. You finds it best. Folks gets confidence in you if you stays. We can't save, but we



HIS CLIENTS WERE MAINLY
"THEOLOGICAL PEOPLE."

maikes a livin'—always 'as something to eat, and can keep our little plaice above our 'eads. Now and then we sees the green fields, it ain't often, but sometimes we does it. Savin's out o' the question now: too late. Must just stick to the business as long as ever we can, and then—the workhouse." He brought the name out with a jerk. He didn't altogether relish the prospect; but there was

a bold effort to maintain his bluff hilarity as he said the word. "Is that the end?" I queried, saddened, yet admiring his sublimely cheerful acceptance of the inevitable. The keen grey eyes looked straight at me for a moment, then the reply came quietly: "Yes, that's the end. You'd like an 'ansom, guv'nor; w'y, I'll fetch you one. 'Ere you are; goodbye, sir, goodbye!"