



2,000 years ago, "even sleep is denied by heavy care." To-day the commonplace is apt as ever; men labour, and when they would rest care sits on the pillow. But there is another and less spiritual cause of wakefulness at work in modern life. Some there are who, when sleep is to be had, can sleep well and soundly despite their toil, but the pressure of their calling bids them be stirring while others prolong repose. Not the worst example of this class is he who vends fruit for the refreshment of all who care to patronise his two-wheeled establishment. Early and late, late and early, catching the market, or catching customers, he pursues his precarious trade, thankful if at the day's end he has sold out; if not, vaguely hopeful of better luck to come.

The roar of traffic was subsiding, and the City pavements were rapidly clearing when I found my fruit-barrow man in Queen Victoria Street still doing a little business, though customers were growing very scarce. He hailed me eagerly as a prospective patron—"Bewtiful cherries, sir, only tuppence a pound; a pound? yessir; thank ye, sir." The small transaction inspired confidence, my merchant was communicative, and in a few seconds we were deep in conversation. For a good two hours his tongue wagged incessantly, as I drew from him the story

of his hardships, which were many, and his pleasures, which were lamentably few.

It had been a bad day. A considerable portion of the stock still remained and was being sold at what it would bring. Between one and two o'clock, the best business time, the price had been about fourpence per pound, which meant a penny or so of profit. After two, hope languishes, and so do prices. "We just taikes wot we can out o' them, sir, and clears out as far as possible. Wot's over may be bad to-morrow, an' only fit for the jam-smasher; not fit to show to the public. If you puts it on, w'y, down comes the condemner, and it's one pound or twenty d'ys for exposin' bad fruit. But I tells ye, sir, one thing I never did, and that was show bad fruit to the public. Ask Mr. Johnson 'ere if I ever did." Mr. Johnson, a passing friend, though careful to explain that he was not in the "traide" himself, gave corroborative evidence on the strength of long personal acquaintance. After this overwhelming testimony I had no choice but believe, and my ready grain of salt was wasted.

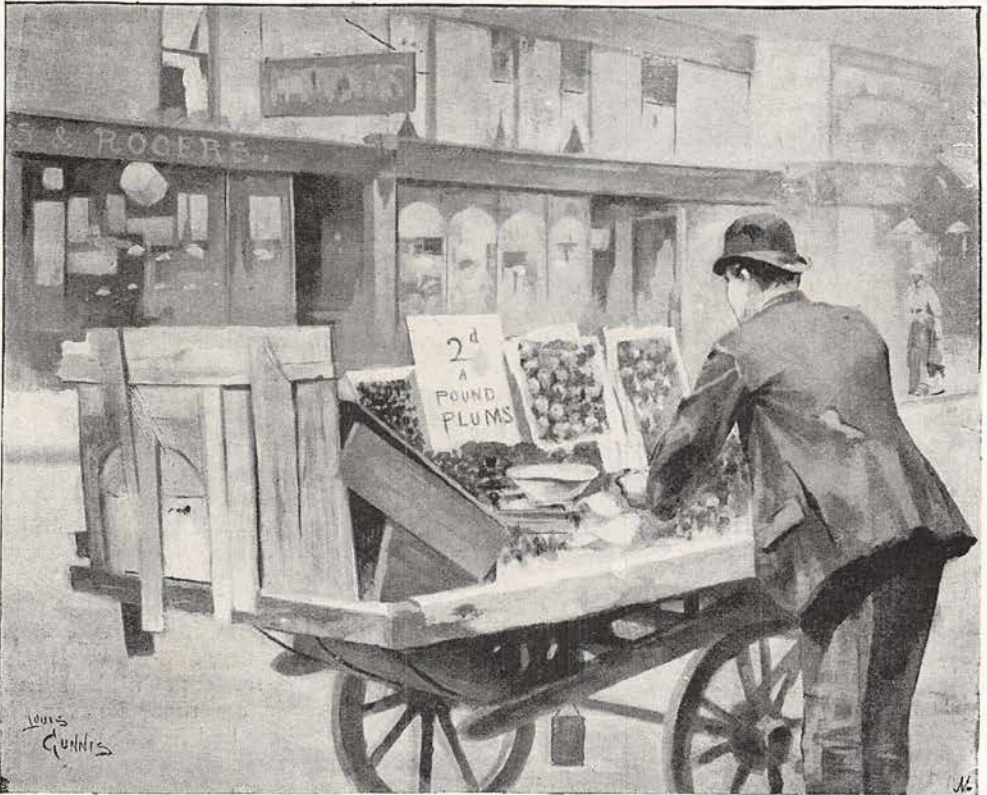
The conversation turned on finance. My informant was voluble and eager to give information, but very often his statements rather more than savoured of the contradictory. By a little judicious handling, however, I obtained a rough outline of his business position, which is probably true in the main. Taking him at several points, I got possession of data on which I founded a sort of "personal equation," whereby it was possible

to correct my observations of this metropolitan planet.

The stock for the day had consisted solely of cherries; six "mollies" (baskets in the form of a truncated cone) holding about 10 lbs., and five "flat baskets" holding about the same amount. For the fruit alone 22s. 10d. had been paid, which comes fairly near the 3d. per pound, alleged by my frank informant a few minutes earlier. Further there was, he declared, a deposit of 1s. on each "empty,"

barometer rises and falls, though oftener down than up. From the slender takings a small deduction has to be made for food, which renders the cash in hand yet scantier. A few days bad luck must mean absolute bankruptcy.

"'Ow do I do w'en cleaned out, sir? W'y, we just 'as to borrow." Then came a tale of a lady money-lender who charges five shillings in the pound interest. As I had heard of her in another quarter, and the two accounts tallied accurately, this



A BARROW MAN.

*i.e.*, empty basket, refunded when the said "empty" was returned; and the account of the day's expenses was completed with 11d. for paper bags and 3d. for fresh leaves "to maik a clean show in front o' the paiper, d'ye see, guv'nor?"

It was lamentable to learn that after all this outlay the day's takings were reckoned at about 14s. That meant, of course, starting with a reduced stock to-morrow; but on the other hand, to-morrow might see the stock sold out with about 2s. profit over all; to-day's remnant would bring about 4s. if it kept fresh overnight, and so this little trade

worthy usurers cannot be altogether a myth. Her screw is driven very tight.

"I ought by rights to give Polly (Polly's my wife, her proper name's Mary) two bob a day grub-money."

"But you can't always do that?"

"W'y, no, sir, I can't." He looked very melancholy as he said it.

"And then about your own grub. How do you manage that?"

"Well, you see, I doesn't take nuffin' till night. I just goes on wiv *two* glasses o' beer and *two* glasses o' beer at odd times durin' the d'y. Oh, no, sir, no, I never feels 'ungrly."

As he mentioned these libations my eye travelled down his stumpy figure, and I discovered evidence of this method of nourishment. Beer was not written on his face to any great extent, but another part of his anatomy would have done credit to a German student, or the Justice in Shakespeare's Seven Ages. The cost of this refreshment might be about sixpence or eightpence a day; and this is evidently lost sight of entirely when the day's drawings are counted at night. Good days and bad together he considered that he might clear about 18s. a week. If so, there must be some phenomenally good days to compensate for the bad ones, if they are such as he painted them.

Then, too, there is the consideration of rent, which complicates the problem, for he fixed that at 3s. 6d. weekly. It is evident that "Polly" has to be content with much less than 2s. a day for "grub-money."

From the slippery ground of finance we passed to personal history.

"I was born in Lambeth, and first went out with the barrer w'en I was about twelve. The man eight doors orf took me fust. Then one day 'e sent me wiv a barrer myself. I 'ad luck, maide five or six shillin's; next d'y 'ad luck again; then I began to grow artful, I did; an' so 'ere I am."

"Any children to keep? W'y, six on 'em, guv'nor, all like steps o' stairs." Poor things, I thought, they must often be hungry! As delicately as might be I ascertained that this was the case. For all this, however, there was evidently conjugal felicity. "Polly's a good girl, sir, she taikes up w' nobody, doesn't Polly. Like 'er? Yes, as well as the d'y I married 'er, p'r'aps better, guv'nor. We lives in two rooms, one up an' one down, tho' I don't think we can be there long if things goes on like this. 'Polly,' I says, 'we can't p'y this rent much longer, that we can't.'" He was evidently very anxious to keep their home together, such as it was, but things were looking black. Polly's attitude towards the threatened removal he did not chronicle. One room for eight persons cannot be a hopeful outlook. There are more children than they have been years married. There are other troubles, too, at home, not financial, but entomological. "To tell you the truth, guv'nor," (he became very confidential) "we've bin sleepin' this while back on orange-boxes: can't dare to go to bed. Ugh, they're

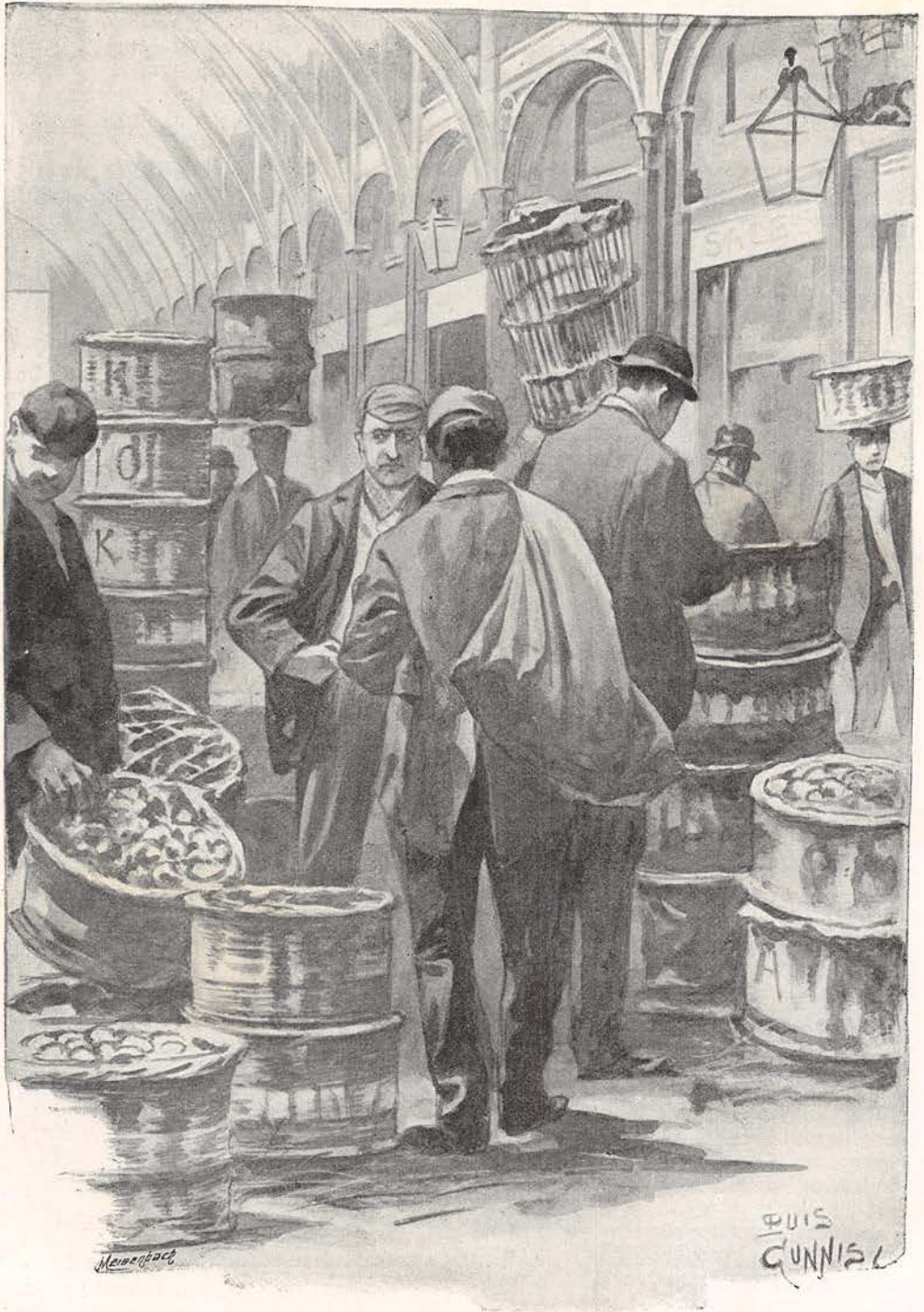
swarmin'! I tried a reg'lar 'bleach up' wiv sulphur lately, but it were no good."

"Am I out a lot? Of course I is. I went and bought some o' to-d'y's stock late last night; it was two o'clock before I got 'ome, and then I was at the market



A BAD BARGAIN

again by five this mornin'. I go fust to the Borough Market. If I don't get all I wants there I goes on to Covent Garden, an' if I don't get hanythink there, w'ich sometimes 'appens, I 'as to give up for the d'y. Sometimes you can get a good thing by startin' very early an' goin' out to meet the carts on the Clapham Road.



IN THE COVENT GARDEN MARKET.

They'll not be 'ard on you. 'Ere's a poor man,' they'll say, an' give you a lot reasonable. But, bless you, if you was

well-dressed they'd taikie you for a shop-keeper and charge you; for a shopkeeper *must* 'ave things for 'is shop. That's our

way o' doin' the shopkeepers, an' we always tries to cheat 'em if we can. You must 'old up your 'ead, too, agin the shopkeepers, so I often taikes my stand opposite the door o' a big 'un."

"Losses? I should think so. A shower o' rain, an' where are yer? Then you can never tell wot like the bottom o' a basket may be. The top's always prime samples. But there's no tellin'. It's 'buy if yer means to buy, but 'ands off the goods, no turnin' over.' Look here, sir (he opened a "molly" and showed it half full of bad cherries), these is dead to the world; the top was prime, but the rest you see—*dead to the world!*

"Oh, there's no livin' for an honest man; wot wiv summonses and bad times and the condem—ner there's no livin'. W'y, if you lets down yer 'ands the copper's on ye. You *must* keep movin' if 'e's about. England's a free country, they says. Yes, I says, a free country where foreigners maikes rich and Englishmen starves. The copper lets be the Italian ice-cream man because, 'e says, 'e don't know the ways o' the country; but if *I* lets down my 'ands to serve a customer, w'y, it's five shillin's and costs. If you begs they fines you; if you sells matches they fines you; if you tries to play an honest gaime wiv a barrer and lets down yer 'ands they fines yer. Yes, a free country! You go away, there; *your* business is done;" this last to some small boys, who, after purchasing a capful of cherries, were fain to linger, entranced by the merchant's Philippic.

"Oh, if the p'lice likes, they can do

yer a lot o' 'arm. Suppose an ill-natured one sees you standin' an' summonses ye, w'y, in an hour's time if 'e sees yer 'ands down again, wot does 'e do? Taikes ye down an' charges you; no summons this time. Oh, it's a fine gaime, the streets o' London, a fine gaime! I'd like some o' the nobility to come down an' try it. But wot I says is:—"God send me the gen'leman as 'ud give me work for a pound a week *sure*, an' I'd never ax to go on the streets again, never!" Oh, it's a fine gaime, is the streets."

"Guv'nor!" his manner changed suddenly. "I may be rough, an' I know I don't pronounce my words properly, but there's one thing (he drew nearer) I've noticed yer touch yer watch once or twice—oh, yes, I saw yer, I did; look 'ere, I'll tell yer wot it is,"—he seized my hand in his and the tears came into his eyes as he spoke—"if my little children was starvin' an' cryin' for food, I'd snatch a loaf off the baker's tray, s'welp me God! I would, an' never think twice about it; but taike anythink else, guv'nor, I'd suffer *death fust!*" If his scorn was insincere, then there can be no criterion of sincerity.

The hour was getting late, and there was no hope of further trade, so summoning his brother, a youth who was to some extent dependent on his already over-taxed exchequer, he bade me good-night and wheeled his emporium away. As I meditatively turned homewards I found I had gained a little more insight into the way the other half starves. How it *lives* remains a deeper mystery than ever.