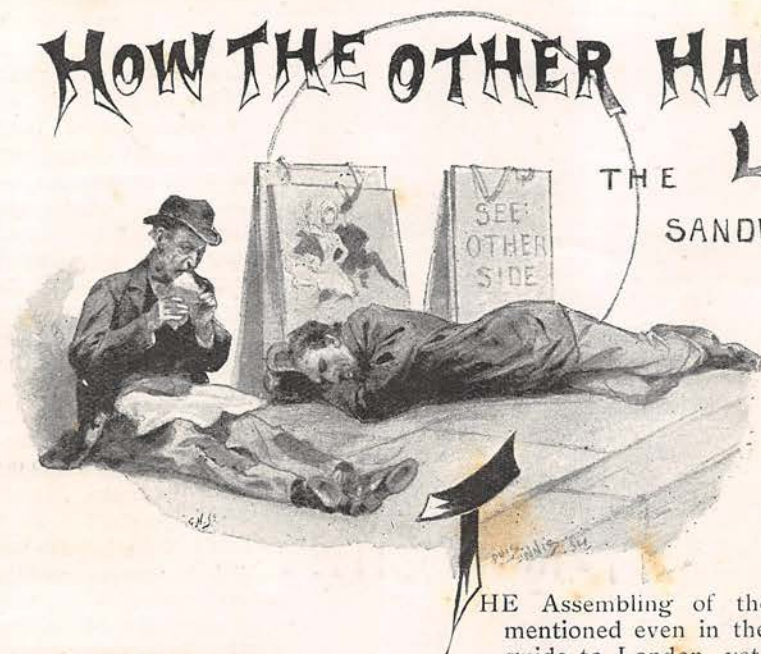


HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

THE SANDWICH MAN



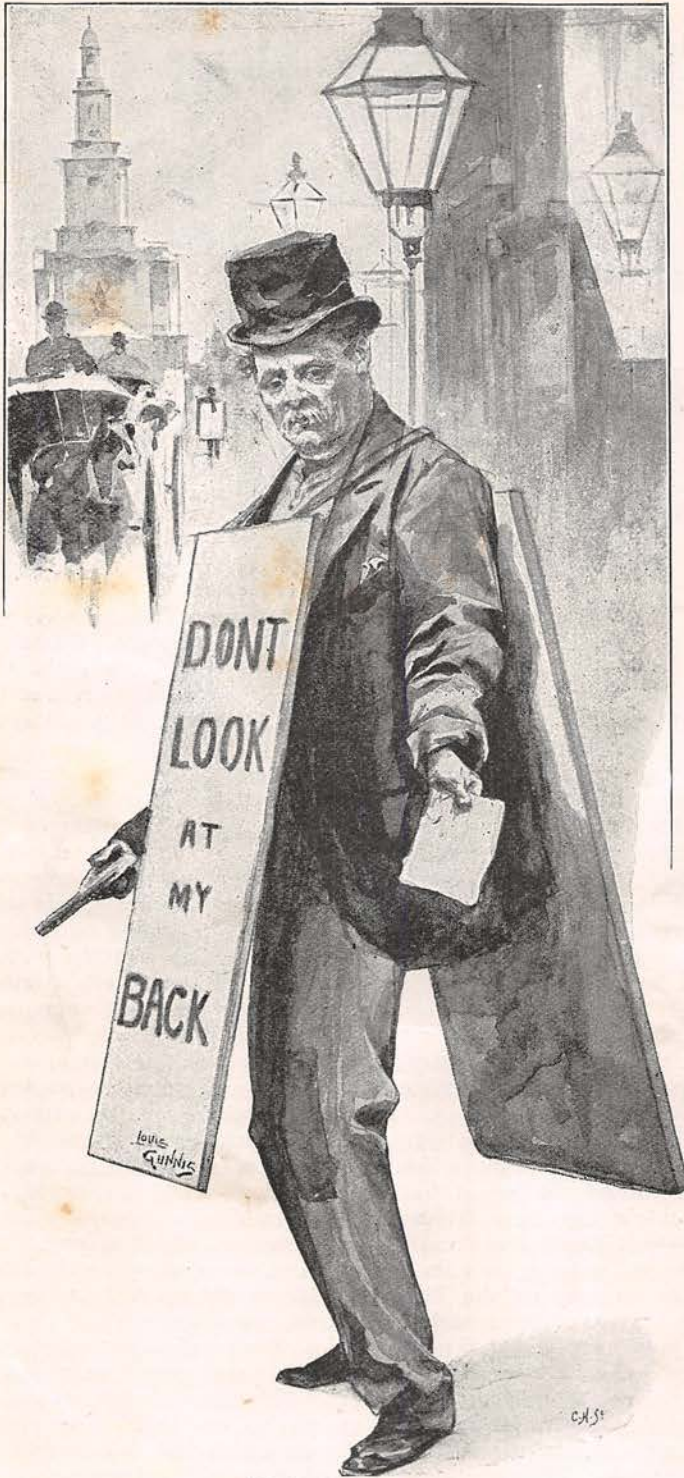
HE Assembling of the Outcasts is not mentioned even in the most voluminous guide to London, yet it is a sight that all should see who wish to realise the

depths to which men can sink in the richest city in the world. It takes place every week-day morning, chiefly in Ham Yard, in Dean Street, and near the Savoy. Between the hours of eight and nine there come to those places hundreds of the most miserable and hopeless wretches in England, all seeking work as sandwich men.

When, one morning, I walked into Ham Yard, decked in the usual attire of the "dossier," I shared in the common impression that any man can obtain a job as board-carrier by applying at one of the offices. But I soon learnt my mistake. Scores of others had come on the same errand as myself, and a few words with them shattered all my hopes. "There's no chance of a new hand getting taken on," one and all told me. "Sometimes, about May, when all the plays and the picture galleries are on, they'll have strangers, but they always pick out the old hands first, as they ought to. It's no use waiting here, for you're only wasting your time. There's not enough for us, let alone you."

But in spite of the warning of the experienced carriers most of us remained in the yard. We formed up in rows near the office door, and every time the manager came out we all looked eagerly towards him. He would beckon first to one, then to another, until he had got as many as he wanted. The fortunate ones would be given their boards and go off, under the guidance of one specially chosen leader; while the remainder of us waited and hoped that next time we should be selected.

The crowd in the yard might have been divided into several distinct groups. There were some among us with bleared eyes and shaking frames, who had spent the previous night on the street, striving in vain to get snatches of sleep on the seats of the Embankment or the recesses of the Thames bridges, and hurried on everywhere by the police. One or two of these could have told, had they wished, how it feels to live for three days without food. Strange stories of starvation get whispered from one to another in the crowd in Ham Yard. Another group represented the most hopeless class of any, the confirmed "dossers." These can be distinguished at a glance by their filthy condition, their contented expression, and their dirty pipes. They have grown to like the life of an outcast, and now would not take anything better if it were offered to them. They are the plague of every philanthropic society, the absorbers of most of the money that is scattered in charity, and the greatest ne'er-do-wells possible. But most of us were not of this class, we were simply honest seekers after work. Our trousers, it is true, had all whiskers at the bottom, and most



AN OLD SOLDIER.

see the attempts that had been made to keep tidy notwithstanding, the clean boots, the neatly folded neckerchiefs, and the well-washed faces. The usual age was between twenty-six and forty-five, the very prime of life, though among us were to be found a few who had seen three score years and several who were hardly more than boys.

A little before nine o'clock the manager came out of his office and announced, in tones loud enough for all to hear: "No more men will be wanted to-day." On hearing this, most of us made off. Some who had money went to invest their cash in fancy articles to sell on the streets; others went to the railway stations to see if they could earn a few coppers by opening cab doors or the like, while several of us went the round of the remaining advertising yards. But we might have spared ourselves the trouble. Everywhere we met with the same reception. "There is no chance for you to-day. We cannot find our old hands work, much less others."

Street after street many of us walked, for hour after hour. Even to-day the hopeless horror, the bitterness and despair of that unavailing search, remain stamped on my mind. "Work!" cried one man to me. "Work! I'd as soon look for gold on the streets of London as I'd look for work. You can't find it, and it's not to be had. Once they

of our coats had nearly every trace of colour washed out of them. But it was pitiful to

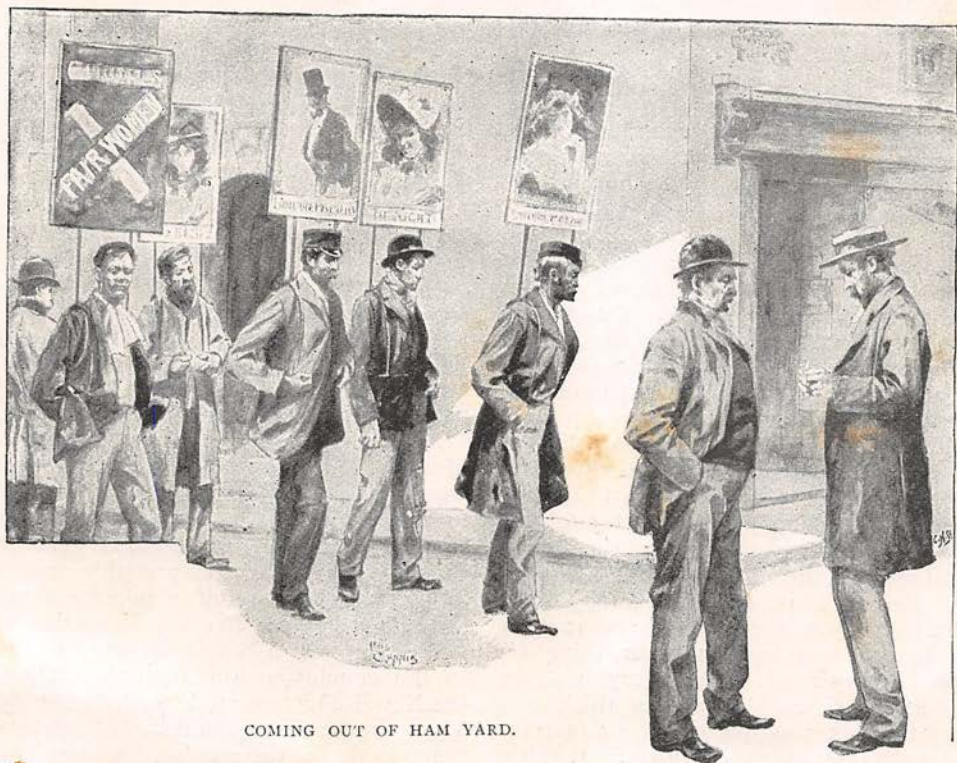
I'd look for work. You can't find it, and it's not to be had. Once they

get us down they keep us down, and here we stick."

There is no need for me to relate in what way I did at last succeed in getting taken on. One morning I found myself one of a lucky band of seven, chosen by

like sails. Consequently, in the slightest breeze the carrier is almost doubled up, or feels that his back will break in the effort to stand upright.

My companions were carrying advertisements of a South London boot shop.



COMING OUT OF HAM YARD.

a well-known firm in Dean Street, to perambulate the classic thoroughfares of the Old and the New Kent Roads. Our boards were of the latest pattern, the "overhead" style, and we were provided with a special uniform. In place of our own hats and coats we were given peaked caps, and semi-military coats of blue cloth, with red collars and cuffs, and brass buttons. Each of us carried our boards by means of a metal frame, fitting over the shoulders and secured by a strap round the waist. This frame supported a small iron advertising plate at one's back, and a large canvas covered board over one's head. The overhead frames are not at all uncomfortable to carry, and experienced hands say they would far rather have them than the old-fashioned kind. Pads are provided, so that the weight shall not press heavily on the shoulders, and they are lighter than they look. Their chief disadvantage is that the large boards overhead catch the wind

My announcement was of a different kind, and ran thus :

"H—'S PATENT ADVERTISING
BOARDS.

50,000 PERSONS SEE THIS ONE EVERY DAY.
*The most effective means of securing publicity
ever invented.*"

The seven of us started off from Dean Street at about nine o'clock, carrying our boards on our shoulders. Two of us were Irishmen, one was a Welshman, one a half-bred Scotchman, and the nationality of the others I could not tell. Judging from appearances, at least three of our party had at one time been in the Army. I was not surprised at this, for one finds nearly everywhere that about half of the unemployed are army reserve men. This is often not the fault of the old soldiers themselves, for they usually know no trade, and employers, as a whole, are unwilling to give them work. The general

aversion to the military is our national method of making the defence of our country popular.

Our leader was a specially fine fellow, tall, clear-eyed, and intelligent. He looked, in spite of his dress, a very ideal business man, and one could not help wondering what it was that had brought him down so low.

We had not to reach the New Kent Road till eleven o'clock, so we went slowly along and took abundant rest by the way. Every now and then we would turn into a side street, place our boards against a wall, and sit down on the pavement. In the course of our talks while lingering thus, I learnt many things. The subject of the best place to dine formed a leading topic of conversation. One was in favour of Ham Yard Soup Kitchen, where a dish of pea soup (so thick that the spoon stands up in it) and an unlimited supply of bread can be had for a penny. The bread, it may be added, is collected each morning from the West-end clubs.

"Grosvenor Mews is a sight better than Ham Yard," interposed another. "You have to pay tuppence at the Mews, but then you don't have such a crush, and the food is ever so much nicer. They give you a good dish of mutton broth, and you have another thing as well. Ham Yard is all very well in winter, but I can't stand its thick pea soup this hot weather. It fills a man up and makes him that uncomfortable that it's awful."

"This is very poor work," said another to me. Here let me observe in passing that sandwichmen do not always talk such ungrammatical slang as certain delineators of poor life make out. "Board-carrying is the most degrading work to be had."

"But it brings in honest money, at all events," I responded, feeling that I must say something.

"Honest? yes, but it's a poor business. A man might do a great deal better for himself than this. If you only keep up a decent appearance, and don't let yourself go down, you always stand a chance." As he said this he looked at me keenly, as though he would convey a reproach for my rags, which were the reverse of decent.

"But what is a man to do?" I asked. "Clothes wear out, and boots go in holes;" and I pointed to the leaky pair of shoes I was wearing. "Where are new ones to come from?"

"That's very true; but yet this is only

a hand-to-mouth existence, just enough to live on and no more. Now you know Holborn?"

"Yes."

"Well, behind Holborn there is a place, Field Lane, where they do a fine work. If you go there, and have got a character from your last place, they'll take you in, and keep you, and find you something to do. A young fellow like you, who's been educated, would get along all right there. But you must have a character."

Then we all fell to discussing the best ways of earning a livelihood. There was a general agreement that the surest method, on the whole, is to get taken on by one of the penny evening papers as a regular street-seller. They give their men six shillings a week, besides the regular commission of fourpence on every thirteen sold; and most of us thought that any one ought to be able to make a very decent living out of this.

At eleven o'clock we paraded up in front of the establishment of the boot-seller whose wares my companions were advertising, and started our perambulations of the Kent Roads. To the ordinary reader, the Old Kent Road will probably only be known as the *locale* of a popular comic song; but before I had been tramping up and down it for a couple of hours I came to the conclusion that both the Old and the New Roads are well worthy of study. They are wide, granite-paved streets, remarkable for their noise, business, and *bons marchés*. Part of the roadway on either side is occupied by open fish, fruit, and clothing stalls, and many of the tradesmen deposit half of their wares on the pavement for people to see in passing. The price of provisions of all kinds is remarkably low. "Sterling tea" is advertised at a shilling a pound; "pure" butter (Kent Road tradesmen are very insistent on the purity of their goods) is 8d. a pound, and "pure new" milk twopence halfpenny a quart. The amount of heavy traffic rattling along the road all day long is considerable, and the noise is so great that at one time I stood within a dozen yards of a barrel organ without being able to hear a note of the music played by it.

The seven of us paced along, thirty yards apart, in single file. I was the back man, and I could see the long line of yellow boards ahead of me. Rival tradesmen gazed enviously at us, and for a moment I felt quite proud of being the cause of a trade triumph. But my high

spirits were soon checked. "Whatryronthft-path putyrnprsn," I heard a threatening voice cry in my ear; I looked up, and saw a short, stout, and very much excited constable standing by me.

"What did you say, sir?" I asked.

The man grew calmer.

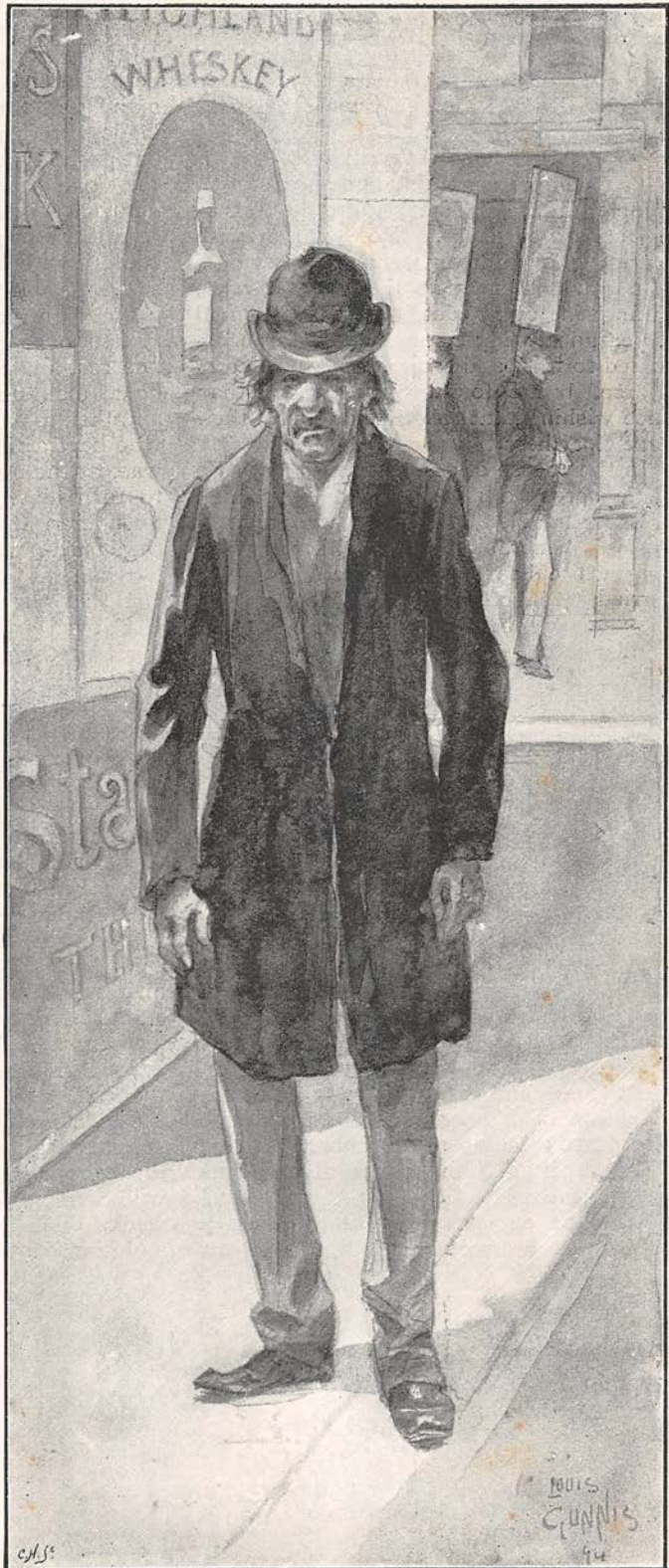
"What are you doing on the footpath?" he asked. "Don't you know I can put you in prison? Go off!"

"Please, sir, have I to walk in the gutter?" I asked respectfully. No one shall be able to say that I do not obey the Catechism, and "order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters."

"Get off the footpath, or I'll lock you up," he replied majestically.

I had now to tramp in the gutter. This did not make my walk any the easier, for the Kent Road gutters are not like ordinary ones. In one spot is a pile of fish heads, deposited from a neighbouring barrow, not far off is a heap of refuse from the greengrocer's, and next to it is a semi-liquid heap made by the water and rubbish thrown from the roadside stalls. But we board-men trudged along so slowly that we could well step out of the way of all this, though we had to keep our eyes open at the same time to avoid being run over by passing traps.

"Papa," said a little boy to his father, as they stood in front of me, and gazed hard at my boards, "what is that man?"



"Oh, that's only an advertising board, my child," the father replied. No doubt he was quite right, but there was no need to proclaim the fact so loudly right in front of my face. Even boards *sometimes* have feelings.

I soon found, however, that if boards have feelings they must not show them. People regarded us as quite legitimate objects of curiosity. Not content with staring at one's advertisement, they would also gaze intently at the board-carrier, taking in every detail of his personal appearance. My companions were accustomed to this, and took it as a matter of course, but I found myself more than once wishing that folks would direct their gaze elsewhere.

In the course of our morning march we came across a rather unusual specimen of the sandwich man. He was a well-dressed, venerable-looking old man, with long white beard and white hair. He carried two boards suspended from his shoulders, each having a text painted on it in large letters; and fastened to the top button of his coat was a piece of white ivory, with the words "Jesus only" stamped on it. He stopped me and entered into conversation. "Men want to know what good I am doing going about like this," he said. "What good are you doing? Why do you go round? To let men know that boots are for sale, so that when they see your notice they may think about boots. I go round too to make people think." Then he gave me, with a beaming smile, a little homily. "Ah well!" he concluded, "God bless you, my brother, God bless you," and he handed me a tract and passed on.

I echoed his blessing, for the old man was the only individual that day (with the exception of a sergeant of police) who seemed to treat us sandwichmen as men and brothers. Some swore at us, some roughly ordered us out of the way, some mocked at our poverty. One cad in a trap made ludicrous imitations of our

woe-begone attitudes, as though our misery were the merriest jest in the world. Did we dare to rest for a moment, pert errand boys would be sure to command us to move on. We were ever made to remember that we were nothing but pariahs—outcasts.

At one o'clock we had an hour off for dinner. We were far away from the usual resorts of board-men, so we had to be content with what could be obtained for a few coppers in the local cheap cook shops. In the afternoon we were careful not to overwork ourselves. We could not rest quite so much as the ordinary board-man does, for we had every now and then to pass the shop of our employer, who kept a sharp watch on us. Our rule was, at the end of each hour and a half, to turn down a by-street and sit down for half an hour. Ordinarily, I may say, the board-man reckons to have something like half an hour's rest for half an hour's walk, so our gang was very industrious. But even with the rests, the walking and the noise began to tell on one before the afternoon was out, and I was heartily glad when the time at last came to unstrap our boards, sling them over our shoulders, and set out for home.

For carrying overhead boards from nine in the morning till half-past five at night, the rate of pay is sixteenpence a day. For the old-fashioned boards only fourteenpence is given, and not many years ago the remuneration was a shilling a day. But it must be remembered that very few get regular employment, even at these rates, and the few who get taken on six days a week are considered quite the aristocracy of the calling. For working longer hours the men are paid extra, and sometimes a specially favoured man, keeping at it in the evening as well as during the day, will earn as much as fifteen shillings a week. This is the height of the dosser's ambition.

FRED. A. MCKENZIE.