

## HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES.

“FINE OYSTERS!”

BY JAMES D. SYMON.

ROTUNDITY, enveloped in a brown coat, ancient but comfortable, that almost swept the ground; a “bowler” crowning a head and face that irresistibly suggested a sun-fish—that is an impressionist sketch of one who nightly patrols a certain unfashionable West-End district, inviting in stentorian tones the inhabitants to purchase his “Fine oysters!”

Slowly he plods along his accustomed round, patiently pushing his barrow and pausing frequently to send his voice down the street, where it re-echoes from side to side like a giant tennis-ball in a court of the ancient model. It was the dull “flip-flop” of his business cry that first made me pause to take note of the merchant, whose keen business eye swiftly took note of me. The heavy powerful voice rose once more, then sank to a conversational tone, and a remark, edged with a jest, tempted me to seek the gentleman’s better acquaintance. “Sixpence a dozen! They’re for saile, Guv’nor, not for advertisement!” He set his barrow down as he spoke, and faced me. It must be confessed that neither dealer nor stock-in-trade had an altogether tempting aspect when viewed critically by the light of the four guttering candles, enclosed in smoky lamp-glasses, that adorned the stand. But it was his wit, not his wares, that I desired to taste, so I ventured a question or two on strictly trade topics, in hope of being able to draw him out without resorting to bribery in the first instance. If conversation flowed, he could be remunerated at the close of our talk; just now a purchase would have been impolitic. He expected his customers to open and partake on the spot, or if not, to carry the goods away at once. A public banquet I could not away with; and it was plain that to buy and linger without falling on the delicacies would have given offence, and would either have rendered him altogether dumb or provoked him to oratory—of an amusing character, doubtless, but not (to borrow the watchword of

modern popular journalism) “what was wanted.”

The hope, however, of an ultimate transaction, or, perhaps, of something else (to be noted later), kept his tongue wagging bravely for a little on what was, no doubt, arrant “shop.” Well content, I let it wag, for shop was wanted.

There were two qualities of oysters on the board, each pile with its attendant placard announcing that the one might be had at sixpence a dozen, the other at fourpence. “You see,” explained the vendor, “I can get them at about two shillin’s the hundred, but they stand ye in ’arf-a-crown the ’undred all told: wot wiv candles and winegar, you can’t get out under the ’arf-crown. Supposin’, now, I started wiv three ’undred o’ the best, that ’ud be seven-an’-six. If I sold out at sixpence the ’undred I’d be five shillin’s to the good, but one can’t count on that. Then there’s a shillin’ a d’y for the barrer and two-an’-six a week for house-rent, and one-an’-six a d’y to the missus, an’ the copper’s tip to let ye stand ten minutes. So, you see, we can’t clear much, good an’ bad d’ys together. Oh, it’s a foine time we ’ave; I wonder *you* ’aven’t a barrer yourself, Guv’nor. You’d think even a pound a d’y not good enough for bein’ wet through. I s’y”—the rotund little body waddled closer to me and struck the attitude Mr. Gus Elen has rendered classic—“I’ll toss yer for two drinks, Guv’nor! W’en one’s bin out in the cold and the wet for hours ’e needs a glass o’ ale.” Plainly the moment had come for encouragement, but I waived the glorious hazard of the spinning coin, and made the little man happy by a more direct and certain method. His affection warmed from that moment, and personal talk became easy and unrestrained. He knew the true secret of friendly converse between man and man. Out came a stumpy clay, which he charged with villainous shag; then, pulling off one of his sooty lamp-glasses from the



"I'LL TOSS YER FOR TWO DRINKS, GUV'NOR!"

dip it enshrined, he bent down and set the calumet agoing at the candle-flame. Between the comforting puffs came his story.

"I goes to market early—yes, Sir, Billingsgate—gets there at seven, an' sometimes 'as to wait four hours. Then I comes 'ome and puts the stock in a cellar—a nice cool place the landlord lets me 'ave for nuffin'. Goes out wiv the barrer at five, starts 'ollerin' at six. About seven o'clock, on an' orf, is the best business time; some folks likes 'em afore seven, some later, but by nine things gets pretty slack, an' there ain't much 'ope o' more traide for the night, I taikes 'ome wot's left over. You see, you tries always to increase your stock, if you can; but it's werry 'ard w'en one 'as debts. Lately I was cleared out, an' a gen'leman opposyte the street wi' me, 'e-guv me 'arf-a-crown. It goes for food. Then 'e give me five shillin's. I'm tryin' 'ard to clear it orf, but we *must* eat, Guv'nor. If I was livin' as I ought, I couldn't get clear. Oh, the streets! I wish I'd never seen 'em! I was 'prenticed to a wheelwright fust, and then was in a pianoforte plaice; but it was the streets, the streets, allus the streets, for me!"

The throttling grip of London was upon him; but he could only writhe in utter hopelessness. His day of grace was past. The momentary disquietude vanished, however, and the old serenity reasserted itself.

"Competition? W'y, yes, there's a tidy lot in the traide, but we maikes a livin', more or less."

Evidently, it was rather less than more. Still, he did not whine, and at times made a shift to speak cheerfully, even on delicate domestic matters. Marriage had not been altogether a failure with him, he admitted, but he devoutly wished he were single. The wife was a burden he could well dispense with, though he owned that she was a good creature, who didn't "go out drinkin', or that; but then, you see, Sir, she 'asn't nuffin' to do it on." I fancied the burden of marriage arose altogether from lack of funds to maintain an establishment; later, however, I concluded that there might be other reasons, of which more hereafter. Whatever the present state of his matrimonial relations, his life had not been without its romance, its little love story.

"I was born an' brought up in Edgware Road," he continued; "I live there now in a back room, and my wife an' me was boy an' girl together. But when she

was little, her people got into trouble, an' at last there was nuffin for her but to get an 'order to go in'—wukkus, you know, Sir. They sent her to Southall School, I believe, an' after that she went to service. For a goodish bit I lost sight o' her, but at last I fell in wiv a friend o' mine—'e works in oysters too. 'E were a married man, Sir, 'e were; an' who should 'e 'a married but a sister o' my gal's. Well, my gal 'appened to be out o' a plaice, and she come to live along o' 'er sister, my pal's wife. We began to keep company an' so—" He paused and shifted from foot to foot. "And so?" I queried.

"I married 'er," he answered, with the shamefaced air of a small boy detected in purloining treacle; "yus, we wos married, an' 'ere we are! That wos five years ago—we've one baiby."

The streets by this time were growing deserted, for it was close on eleven o'clock, and Bayswater is not Piccadilly. It was a gusty night to boot, with dreary slants of cold rain, that splashed uncomfortably on the barrow and rendered it more squalid and unwholesome looking than ever. It did not seem likely that the little pile of empty shells lying in one corner would be augmented, or that the delf plates, where rain-water contended for the mastery with certain forlorn pools of vinegar, would improve upon their Barmecide hospitality. To this fact my companion was evidently alive, for he yoked himself to his car, and prepared to move. We went along together for a space indulging in fitful scraps of conversation, broken at intervals by the merchant's cry, "Fine oysters!" which he still raised, on the off-chance of luring some Paddington Montanus to bestow late patronage, and try the quality of the wares that yet remained. Nor was he disappointed. Forth from the public house at the corner came a sportive Boniface, accompanied by a friend. Both greeted the merchant familiarly. The two newcomers were in merry vein, and mine host challenged his companion to a contest of skill in guessing an oyster's age by mark of shell, even as a horse is dated by mark of mouth. But the less erudite comrade fought shy of the challenge; so from skill the worthy allies passed to chance, and tossed for "two dozen o' the best." When the vendor was appeased with a shilling, they passed within, jesting merrily on the vitalising properties of the desirable mollusc.

Evidently the last stroke of business was done. "It was no good waitin' about longer," the vendor remarked, so he said



THIS TIME MY FRIEND WAS ATTENDED—NAY, GUARDED.

good-night, and headed for home. Feeling chilled by long waiting in the wet, I turned off for a sharp turn in the same direction, and soon left the barrow and its owner far behind. But I was not done with him, as I fancied. Twenty minutes later, as I came westwards once more, I caught the murky glimmer of four stars that blinked and staggered towards me. It was the oyster-barrow and its owner wending east. This time my friend was attended—nay, guarded. On the pavement, close along-

side of the establishment and him whose humble duty it was to run it, strode a lady—a tall, martial personage arrayed in a clean white apron, whose air of proprietorship bespoke her the better half. Doubtless she made it her business to see that scanty earnings were not made scantier by marital indiscretions. It is a duty not confined to goodwives of the "Other Half." Elsewhere, at eventide, we have seen the business man being taken home!

