

THE MOCK AUCTION.

"THIS London of yours is a wonderful place—a very strange place," said a friend from — shire, the other day, as we were sauntering along the streets to hunt out the more prominent lions in town.

"Yes, it is," I replied; "and if you don't keep your eyes much wider open than you'll ever have any occasion for in — shire, you'll find it a great deal stranger than pleasant.

"We have a great many tastes to suit, and a great many ways to suit them. We have places to get drunk in, and places to get sober in; places for sin, and places for repentance; places to get rich in, and places to get poor in; places to earn money laboriously, and others to spend it foolishly in — ay, and viciously; places for virtue, and places for vice; places to rob and be robbed in; places to cheat and be cheated in; and places where both robbing and cheating are combined, in order to save the customer the trouble of going farther and risking the chance of faring worse. We are a great people in this modern Babylon of ours, and deserve encouragement from the charitably disposed, especially when we have large shops in the most public thoroughfares, in open day, robbing and cheating from morning to night, every day in the year, and that, too, under the strong protection of the law."

"You astonish me. Why, what places can those be?"

"They are mock auction-rooms. The 'first robber' takes out a license as an auctioneer, then he gets a small quantity of goods, generally in the cutlery and plated line, and a few engravings 'dear at a gift'; with these he repairs to some unoccupied house in a good street, such as Holborn, or the Strand, pays the house-agent or landlord a weekly rent, prints large bills of sale, hires half-a-dozen confederates, opens shop, begins to sell, 'dirt cheap,' to the confederates, until some innocent, with more money than wit—somebody like yourself, now, who is so well up to everything—walks in, and then they go to work, swindling him in front, and picking his pockets in rear. They persuade him how underpriced everything is being sold at; and as he wishes to take some bargains home to the old manor-house, he bids, and is—done!"

"But why doesn't the law put a stop to it; surely the police must know that the whole affair is a swindle?"

"They do know well enough; but then, the law says it might happen that the confederates are not confederates, and, as the man pays a license, the least the public can do is to take care of themselves and never enter such a place."

"Surely it is a disgrace to the metropolis that dens of this kind should exist with impunity!"

"That is just it; but you see, my dear fellow, your bucolic mind doesn't understand us and our ways. Humbug and Rascaldom must have some protection, or the arts would die out, and we would have nothing to sharpen our wits upon."

I then directed my friend's attention to a sharp, cracking noise from a shop on the opposite side of the street, and we at once crossed over. The "Lot" was up, and the house was very much out of repair, and dingy in the extreme. I saw at a glance that the mock auction business was going on inside. The walls were decorated with tea trays, old worn engravings, looking-glasses, and large placards of the sale as follows:—

FOR A FEW DAYS ONLY!

ENGRAVINGS AND CUTLERY—SILVER-PLATED, PAPIER MACHE, AND CABINET GOODS—MASSIVE TEA AND COFFEE SERVICES—VALUABLE ENGRAVINGS, &c. &c.

BEING A LARGE BANKRUPT STOCK TO BE SOLD WITHOUT RESERVE!

BY PEREMPTORY ORDER OF THE COURT OF BANKRUPTCY.

The window of the shop was "baited" with some of the "tremendous sacrifices" to be had so easily within. The touter is at the door; just as you see him at some of the large drapery and "less than cost price" shops, that pursue their trade in the same reputable (?) way in some of the most frequented thoroughfares of both the City and West-end. Let us enter here; I don't think the auctioneer, or his "customers," will know either of us. Now, what do we find? There's my "respectable" friend, Mr. Nebuchadnezzar—"Nebby," he is called for shortness, by his familiars—on the rostrum, surrounded by his *aidés-de-camp* below. Take a swindling bankrupt, a broken-down gambler, a low public-house card-sharper, a swell-mobman, and a thoroughstreet-scamp, and you have the materials out of which Nebby can organise a splendid working-staff. He himself has been long vomited forth from his own

people, for a most extensive course of moral and social abominations; and he now seeks his revenge by the practice of legalised rognery. When he is not at business, "going, going!" he leans over the rostrum, upon his elbows, clasps his hands in front of the tip of his nose, and sings snatches of that delightful melody called "The Spider and the Fly." And he can throw great spirit into it at times, especially after he has been operating successfully. I don't know the whole of the song, but the first line of it is at your service. Here it is—

"Will you walk into my parlour?" said the spider to the fly."

There is a chorus to the song, and I would strongly recommend every one coming to London to thoroughly understand it by heart, and practise it in the train on the way up.

The confederates are talking among themselves, and speculating on the next chance that may turn up. Some of the "swell" decoys are not here, but, as soon as the business gets into full swing, they will make their appearance, and, as "my lord," or "my lady," buy large quantities of goods and direct them to be sent to the most aristocratic localities, pay for them in sham notes, and excite the desire of such unsuspecting lambs of the outer world as may be present. Things are moving—we shall soon see the way they manage it!

If you will cast a glance at the "goods," you will find they are the "bads" of the most worthless character; such as could not be sold, except at the price of damaged articles of the lowest kind, anywhere else but in places like this.

They have noticed us looking in at the door, and reading the placard. Nebby leaves off "The Spider and the Fly," springs to his feet, and prepares to "work the oracle," as he calls it. The decoys, who were chatting comfortably together when we were looking in at the window, now separate. They are perfect strangers to each other, and Nebby knows them not; two or three flies have walked in, and the spider resumes his persuasive canticle in more serious metre.

"Gentlemen, I am sorry that you should not agree as to who was the purchaser of the last lot, for I cannot help you, as the sale is public, and without reserve. I have nearly sold out that pattern, and all must go to the highest bidder. Notwithstanding some of you have made large purchases this evening, and let me tell you, *large bargains*, I cannot give you the slightest preference over the buyers who have this moment entered the sale room. This is a bankrupt stock, sold by peremptory order of the court, and all the auctioneer has to do is to sell it to the best advantage, and pay over the money to the assignees."

The decoys get up a little dispute among themselves, hint to each other about "want of gentlemanly feeling to bid against me for an article you saw I desired to have;" and there looks something like a storm brewing. "I'm a perfect stranger to you, sir," and "Don't use such language to me, or you shall be called to account for it," is a sample of the conversation used. At last they get to "You're no gentleman, sir," which is passed all round amongst them, with very *improper* emphasis and discretion, until Levy, judging from the number of unsuspecting strangers in the room, thinks the charm is wound up and stops the wordy war by putting up "a massive plated breakfast-service." The porter hands the articles round, and the decoys begin to bid against each other with great spirit. The set is knocked to that grey-haired old man, the impersonation of a long life of vice and crime.

Another lot is before the audience, and the decoy leads off the business. The stranger, after what he has witnessed, is converted to the "great bargain" truth (?), and follows the bid. Levy bows and smiles upon him with a dignity that becomes them both. "I see, sir, you know something of these matters, and are determined not to lose a chance. I like to see spirit, and you'll always find it, where gentlemen understand, *in the way you do*, the value of the goods they are buying" (?). The stranger feels flattered, and nods proudly as he bids; the song has produced its effect—the charm has worked—the fly has walked in.

And thus they go on, night after night, fleecing sheep after sheep.

"I'll never come into your place again!" a deceived and infuriated victim would thunder out.

"Don't, dear!" Nebby would say, and the attendant decoys would laugh at his wit.

"You might injure yourself if you did; but go home and send your friends. If there is a more stupid ass in the family than yourself, let him come, and we'll see what we can do for him!" And another

peal of laughter would attest the caustic brilliancy of the "first robber," who would continue—

"There are as many fools in the world as ever were fleeced, and the number increases, because the crop never fails!"

"I'll go to the Mansion House for a summons!" cries the enraged.

"Do!" answers Nebby, "and then come and have share of a threepenny basin of leg of beef soup with me" (more jeering and cheering). "I stand within the law," continues he, rising proudly on his toes, "and you may tell the Lord Mayor and the whole Court of Aldermen to —. Is there any other little article you think you would like, and I'll put it up for you? Oh! isn't it pleasant to see *such nice gentlemen taken in and done for!*"

Thus the cutting, biting, and irritating dialogue would go on, until the chief actor, the stage manager, chose to "ring down," when the curtain would fall, Nebby disappear behind the rostrum, and leave the poor bargain-buyer to be hustled by the decoys, after his pockets were well "considered."

At last an evil day came upon the mock auctioneers. The lord of London was a man who had made his "plum" by dealing largely in bees and oxen, and, like most great people, he had relations not overstocked with brains. They came to the Mansion House to ride in their kinsman's splendid carriage to the Smithfield Cattle Show. They saw the den of Nebuchadnezzar open, and filled with flies like themselves, who had just walked in. They entered, were decoyed, and purchased on an extensive scale. When the ruler of Gog and Magog saw how his flesh and blood had been depleted, he arose in his wrath, Cheapside shook, and with it the den of Mr. Moses Nebuchadnezzar; thunder followed thunder from the praetorian chair, until at last Nebby was compelled to emigrate. Since that period, he and his friends have had no settled home, but they get into unoccupied, dilapidated houses, as near the urban boundary as they can. One of the houses they are in at this instant is, at least, a couple of centuries old, and they occupy the lower part until the "taker's-down" men clear them out. The staff is still kept up to its full strength, and, as a gentleman observed to me on their threshold last evening—

"You would wonder how people simple enough could be found to be victimised by those rascals; but, I suppose they must make it pay, or they wouldn't carry it on!"

"It is surprising, to a certain degree; but that surprise will be lessened when you are told that the Levy tribe make good use of the country directories and local papers at particular seasons. Catalogues are freely distributed by them; indeed, I used, a few years ago, to meet regularly every Saturday in Deacon's old room, Wallbrook, an agent of the mock auction gang, running through the country papers, that come there every week by scores, and copying out names to whom catalogues were to be sent. I recognised him one night bidding up some 'richly-chased' dinner dishes. It is a great pity that people don't exercise their reasoning faculties a little better. Any one, not wholly asleep, may easily know a mock auction-room from a genuine one. There are the dirty, seedy, penniless-looking men before them, with here and there a clean shirt and collar, who show they have not the means to purchase a hat or a pair of gloves, to say nothing of 'magnificent candelabra.' Besides, who wants to be told that noblemen, and gentlemen, and their wives *don't* go to auction-rooms to buy 'superb tea and coffee sets?' If people would only take a very small modicum of common sense for their guide, they could not be bled and plundered so easily as they are."

Such, my friends, are the principal features of a mock auction-room, as carried on, day after day, night after night—from one year's end to the other—in the leading business thoroughfares of this well-guarded, well-governed, profusely-taxed metropolis.

"Why should such places be permitted, when their character is as morally plain as the sun at noon day in July?"

Ah! *morally* plain they may be, but *legally* plain is quite a different thing. The police magistrates ought to have full power to close such pickpocket covers by a very summary process, and remit the illustrious operators to their former occupations on the oakum bench or the treadmill. In the meantime, until that much-wanted period arrives, take the earnest advice of an old fighting cruiser among the piratical waters of London, and never, oh, never, on any pretence, trust your frail, self-confident humanity beyond the threshold of a mock auction-room.