

small round stones, like those in some of our old English towns. The excavators have also discovered the foundations of several dwelling-houses of considerable importance, in one of which is a hypocaust, about 25 feet by 23, still in good preservation. A quantity of burnt wheat has been discovered, as in the Roman house at Blenheim, near Oxford; and other proofs are furnished that the city, or some portion of it, was destroyed by fire. Mr. Wright, under whose superintendence the work of excavation is proceeding, says that "the houses seem generally to have been roofed with micaceous slate, set lozenge-shaped, so that from a distance, when seen in the sunshine, (as it occupies a beautiful elevation from the Severn, commanding the Vale of Shrewsbury,) the Roman city must have glittered like a city of diamonds."

It would be to the honour of our country if the necessary funds were furnished for carrying forward the work of exploration with more rapidity, and under constant superintendence of such a kind as to secure the due record of every discovery. No vestige of the remains of this interesting Roman city should be allowed to escape observation; and it will be not much to our honour, as an enlightened people, if this rare opportunity is not improved to the utmost extent.

A CUSTOM OF THE "CUSTOMS."

ONCE a year or so, or perhaps a little oftener, there takes place at the Custom House a rather remarkable kind of exhibition, which endures for a few days, and is then followed by an auction sale, also rather remarkable, which, however, does not take place at the Custom House, but at the Commercial Sale Rooms, Mincing Lane. The exhibition consists of an *omnium gatherum* collection of various articles, differing marvellously in character and description, and the bare enumeration of which would fill a goodly number of these columns. They comprise nearly every portable species of goods of continental manufacture, from the costliest gems and jewellery down to farthing toys, and from brandy in the butt to delicate laces and embroidery. There are all sorts of carving and cabinet work—of scientific instruments—of clocks and watches—of appliances photographic and electrical, and of musical instruments, fragmentary or entire.

All these multifarious objects are the property of the Queen, and have become so in consequence of their having in some way or other infringed the Customs regulations of the country. It is not to be supposed, however, that in the mass they represent so much roguery and smuggling, or attempts at smuggling. A portion of them have doubtless become so forfeited, and their quondam owners are justly punished by the loss of their property, for designing to defraud the revenue. But a good many of the articles have lapsed to her Majesty, owing to some neglect or informality, never contemplated by their owners; others have been abandoned by the exporters, on the discovery that nothing would be gained, except perhaps a loss, by paying the duty upon them and sending them into

the market; while others—and these, we imagine, constitute a large proportion of the whole—are what are called *ad valorem* goods, which have been retained by the Custom House officers and paid for at the prices set upon them by their owners.

A word of explanation seems necessary here. Upon most goods which pay duty on entering the British markets, a definite amount is levied according to a fixed tariff; but it is found in practice impossible to attach a definite duty on all kinds of wares, as things apparently quite similar may yet differ immensely in value, owing to high and elaborate finish in the workmanship, and other causes not readily perceptible save to those familiar with such species of manufacture. In such cases, it is obviously just that the duty should be rated in proportion to the value of the article; and therefore it is so rated. One consequence of this plan, however, is, that foreign manufacturers are too frequently induced to put a lower nominal value on their goods than they are really worth, in order to escape a high duty. To meet and counteract this tendency on their part, the Customs authorities reserve to themselves the right of purchasing any of the *ad valorem* goods at the prices set upon them by the owners, who are thus occasionally punished for attempting to evade a portion of the just duty. But out of this practice of the Customs authorities has arisen another consequence, not generally recognised or talked about, but which is perfectly well known to importers of certain descriptions of goods. Manufacturers abroad, knowing the contingencies to which the *ad valorem* goods are exposed, will make up a description of wares which are intended to meet these contingencies—wares which shall look well and yet be valued at a low figure, and which they would as willingly sell to her Majesty at the price they set on them, as have them passed through the customs and into the market in the regular way. There is a case in point ticking in our pocket as we write: it is a gold hunting-watch, lever movement, jewelled in ten holes, with compensation (?) balance, carefully finished works, and a couple of stout cases. It has been going well for the last seven years, varying about a minute and a half in a week from Greenwich time, and is in all respects a handsome and serviceable article—having on its dial, in characters too small to be read without a magnifying glass, the words, (say) "Etienne Horloge et Frères, St. Croix." Now we happen to know from the best authority, that Monsieur Etienne Horloge (say) made this watch, and some hundred others like it, on purpose for her gracious Majesty to buy. It cost us exactly ten pounds, including the duty, and was bought at a Custom House sale. It suited Monsieur Etienne Horloge quite well to let her Majesty have these watches at ten pounds sterling each, minus the duty; and their superior appearance, weight of metal, and evident good workmanship, tempted the revenue officers to buy them, in the hopes of making a profit themselves; for in all cases where such goods are taken at a valuation and sold, the profit, if any, is divided equally between the officers who seize and the Crown. The foreign manufacturer who plays this game must furnish a good article at a low price, and in this instance, at

least, he has done so; if his profits are small, he has, on the other hand, the advantage of prompt cash payments and exemption from the liability to bad debts. We are not aware to what extent this sort of speculation has been carried by the foreign producers, or whether it has ever been followed by other than jewellers and makers of time-pieces; but there are so many curious things in the mass of matters to be sold, which could never have got there out of the grasp of the contrabandist, that we are inclined to think that the *ruse* is, or rather has been, pretty generally practised.

But, to return to the exhibition. It is not by any means a crystal palace sort of affair. The show-room is a place of plastered walls and unpolished undusted wooden counters, and the exhibitors are the officers and their subordinates, who keep a sharp eye on everybody and everything. The room is crowded with people, among whom the gentler sex are not wanting, and there is further present a generous sprinkling of sons and daughters of Israel; and all are busy in viewing, handling, and testing the plethora of goods exposed on all sides. Whoever wants to inspect a particular lot, asks for it by the number in his catalogue, and it is pointed out to him if exposed to view, or if not, is withdrawn from the lockers and put into his hands. The catalogue is a bulky pamphlet, containing something short of two thousand lots in all, and therefore it takes several days for all the buyers to become satisfactorily acquainted with the goods: they make the best use of their time, for they know—what perhaps you do not know—that the whole stock to be sold will be seen no more after this exhibition is closed, until the several lots are knocked down and the wares are deliverable to the buyers.

The sale by auction, which will extend over several days, comes off, as before stated, in Mincing Lane, and it presents a scene differing most essentially from that of the average auction rooms of the metropolis. You will note, in the first place, that not only is there no exhibition of the goods sold, but there is no description of them: all that is put up for sale is Lot 45, or Lot 450, irrespective whether it be a child's cradle or a score of revolvers; and, in the second place, you will note that there is none of that ridiculous waste of time observable elsewhere, while a lot destined to sell for £7 is crawling up to that climax, under the competition of the crowd, from a bidding of 10s. The Customs auctioneer will submit to no such nonsense as that: generally, he starts the lots himself. Supposing it to be Lot 246, three gold watches, he says, "246, £25;" and if he says that, you may be sure he does not intend to take less. Somebody is pretty sure to nod, and thus accept the bidding, when, unless there be an almost instantaneous advance, down goes the hammer, and the watches are "gone." In all such "sudden death" movements you may imagine, if you like, that the goods sold are the retained *ad valorem* goods, and that the upset price is the price that has been paid for them by the seizing officers, plus the duty and a small percentage for expenses; and if you imagine that, be assured that you will not be always mistaken. When the lot is not started by the auctioneer, but

is left to the unguided competition of the crowd, if you watch the proceedings you may see something to astonish you—only do not let yourself be tempted, by the appearance of a great bargain, to bid for what you know nothing about: if you do, it may happen to you, as it has happened to others before to-day, that, when the hour of delivery comes, you shall be glad to pay the price you have bidden for the goods, and yet leave them still in the Queen's warehouse. The fact is, that you may be called on to pay the duty in addition to the price at which the lot was knocked down, and may find that the said duty alone is far more than the lot is worth to you or any one else.

There is another respect in which the Custom House sale differs from all other miscellaneous sales in the metropolis—it is a *genuine* sale; and we should hesitate positively to affirm as much of any other goods sale advertised in the "Times" throughout the year. Whatever the wares at the Custom House are worth in ready money, that the owner of the property receives. Her Majesty is not exposed, as her subjects are, to the gross villainies of auction conspirators, and "knocking-out" gangs, who, all London over, make a prey of the unfortunate, and fatten on the spoils of the widow and the orphan.

We have given the above brief sketch of a Custom House sale at this time, because it is one of our commercial phases which we have a notion is on the point of disappearing. The new tariff, which came on the carpet along with Mr. Gladstone's budget, will put an end to the levying of duties on so many articles of foreign manufacture, that, when that has once come into operation, the attractions of the Custom House sale will have vanished, if the sale does not die out altogether. If any of our readers, therefore, wish to have a deal with her Majesty, they had better make haste about it, and not miss the next busy gathering in Mincing Lane, which it is probable will be the only opportunity ever offered them in that quarter, of purchasing, as Messrs. Chowser would say, "unprecedented bargains" from such an "extensive assortment of continental manufactures."

UP THE HOOGLY.

"HEAVE the main yard aback, and lay to for a pilot." We have arrived at the mouth of the Hooghly, and want a pilot for Calcutta. Valuable freights have drawn so many ships here, that the "Board" cannot supply pilots fast enough to meet the demand for them; so we shall probably have to remain where we are all night, and wait the arrival of some homeward-bound vessel down the river from Calcutta, which will have no further need of one. The wished-for gentleman at length arrives, and, being favoured by the south-west monsoon, we proceed rapidly up the river.

We were joined at Diamond Harbour by a gang of Lascars, called "tow-boat-wallah," who assisted our crew in working the ship. The leadsmen give their soundings in a most plaintive tone: "Sát baam milla nai," "Cheh baam," etc. etc.—no bottom