

"the gang system," one of the greatest curses, I believe, to the well-being of the morals of the labourers' children. It is also the constant bugbear of the parochial clergyman. For instance, no sooner is one school nicely established and the attendance good, than one fine morning you enter the room and find it nearly deserted, and the schoolmaster or mistress in great trouble; for all education is virtually abandoned at such times, when "stone picking," "bird keeping," "potato gathering," "bog or peat turning," arrives. Thus the children's education proceeded under great difficulties, which made the establishment of night schools and adult classes all the more necessary.

### BUSINESS HOURS IN LONDON STREETS.

THE lower we descend in the scale of commerce and traffic, the harder and more oppressive becomes the labour of those by whom business is carried on. When the great Baron Rothschild used to take his station at that pillar in the Royal Exchange, and transact his momentous bargains more by nods and signs than by articulate speech, he was seldom there for more than an hour or an hour and a half in the day; yet in that brief space of time it was nothing unusual for him to gain from fifty to a hundred thousand pounds. Our merchant princes spend but little time, comparatively, in their offices and warehouses, and derive their magnificent incomes without undergoing anything like bodily labour, being able to delegate all that to others. It is much the same with the prosperous banker: his hours are fixed, to be sure, but they are few and limited, and followed by certainly-recurring leisure. So with the wealthier class of dealers and traders in the money-making callings; they can and do shut up their shops and places of business early in the evening, and betake themselves to the enjoyments they most affect. It is different with the average trader, who pleads that he must make the most of his day in order to keep his credit good; and it is still more different with the struggling one, who must rise early and go to bed late, and eat the bread of carefulness, that he may make both ends meet, and have bread to eat at all.

It is in the traffic of the streets that the limitations as to time are the widest, and the struggle for bread is the fiercest. There are peripatetic traders of one class or other pursuing their occupation in the highways and byways of London for more than twenty hours out of the twenty-four; they are the earliest and the latest of all the traffickers of the metropolis: so early and so late, indeed, are some of them, that to many people it is a mystery what business they find to do. Let us glance at one or two of them.

The early breakfast-houses in London, thousands in number, though they open long before sunrise, are anticipated in their labours by the early breakfast-stalls erected in the streets. We have come upon these stalls at their first appearance less than three hours after midnight. They are among the oldest of the street institutions in London, and are doubtless a boon to a large class of early workers, who, rising long before dawn, are enabled by their means to break their fast with something solid and something hot at the price of a penny or threehalfpence; and they are no less welcome to the poor night-wanderer, who, not having twopence to pay for a bed, camps out, and hoards his one penny to pay for a breakfast. The breakfast used to consist of a thick hunch of bread, with dripping or salt butter, and a cup of saloop, which was a decoction of sassafras

chips, in place of salep (the dried and pounded tuber of *orchis mascula*), sweetened with coarse sugar. Since the fall in the price of tea, saloop is gone much out of fashion, though there are still a few of the old staggers who supply it to customers to whom use has made it pleasant. The salopians pitch their stalls in all weathers at all seasons of the year, and for the most part in spots where in daytime the traffic is densest: we have seen them in the Strand, in Holborn, on the bridges, and in the most frequented parts of the City. They vanish before the business hours, and that of necessity, for the crowd would crush them out of the way did they attempt to remain. An exception seems to be made in their favour in Covent Garden, where they do business under the piazzas to a later hour.

The milkman is known for an early bird, but he is not generally known for such an early bird as he really is. He has to turn out often before four in the morning, to get his horse in the cart and load his empty cans, that he may drive off to the railway-station and exchange them for full ones—most of the London milk now coming daily from the country, and being sent up by the earliest trains. Almost as early, the watercress hawkers betake themselves to Farringdon Market to buy their stock, and to cleanse and bundle it in preparation for hawking. About the same time the straggling hosts of costermongers begin to invade Covent Garden and Billingsgate. Few people who have not witnessed their matutinal gatherings have any conception of the numbers of these gentry. They not only inundate the district, but literally overflow in all directions, blocking up the channels of approach from every quarter, and presenting in their motley assemblage a spectacle as startling as it is significant.

Of the mass of traders of all descriptions who throng the thoroughfares during the ordinary business hours, we can say but little here. Their numbers, which have always been great, are constantly on the increase. With the growth of wealth around us there is, and always must be, a corresponding growth of poverty—and numbers are being constantly thrust into the streets to earn a living, who in times past were able to maintain themselves at home. This is one reason—perhaps the principal reason—why within the memory of the existing generation the traffic of the streets has assumed so many and such various phases. Time was when little if anything besides comestibles was sold in the street. Pies, gingerbread, cakes, nuts, fruits of all kinds when they were in season, fish just arrived from the sea, vegetables for the table—such used to be the stock of the street trader, supplemented in summer by flowers "all a-growing and a-blowing" in pots, and flowers in bouquets and posies gathered from the garden. We have changed all that now, and indeed have been long familiar with the change. At the present moment you can buy almost anything in the streets of London without troubling the shopkeeper—anything, that is, which is at all portable. The travelling stationer hawks his writing paper and envelopes; the printseller sets out a gallery of art in the concavity of an upturned umbrella; the cabinet-maker decks the dead-walls with his writing-desks, work-boxes, and letter-racks; the cutler sidles up to you with his razors; the working optician claims attention to his eye-glasses and spectacles; the toy-maker displays his stock of toys on the kerb; walking-sticks, padlocks, dog-collars, carpenters' tools, microscopes, mirrors, musical instruments, flat-irons, roasting-jacks, pots, pans, brushes, mops, glass, china, tin-ware, jewellery, statuary, paintings in oil—all these things, and a thousand things besides, walk the streets



of London on the backs of their producers and purveyors, all eagerly on the look-out for a market. The number of wandering commercials engaged in this multifarious traffic has never been even approximately ascertained, and probably is not ascertainable; they must amount to some tens of thousands, and seeing that the rents of shops are constantly growing dearer, while the flag-stones are free from both rent and taxes, there is little likelihood at present of their diminishing. We leave this heterogeneous cosmos of commerce to the reader's tender mercies, confessing, however, to a substratum of regard for them all, and commending them to his kindly consideration.

But now evening draws on, and the nomads whose business has special reference to the decline of day begin to make their appearance. Hark! that is the muffin-bell, followed by the voice of the muffin-man! Of all the "wandering voices" that charmed the ear of the poet, commend us to him. No *vox et preterea nihil* is his, but *vox* and muffins to boot, with other succulent dainties which muffins bring in their train. Listen to what he says—

"Come buy my nice muffins, and crumpets, and pikelets,  
Come buy them of me!  
You'll find them hot, and large, and good,  
And they're all fresh baked for tea!"

He composed that beautiful lyric himself, without assistance from the poet-laureate or any one else; and if you feel disposed to criticise the muffin-man's muse, recollect, if you please, that whatever you may think of his metre, his muffins are irreproachable, and be sparing of your strictures. For our part, we never find fault with the "good man's poetry," as he calls it, choosing rather to confine our remarks to the burden of the song—the muffins themselves. Still there is one thing mysterious about the muffin-man, which has perplexed us any time these forty years, and which we could never satisfactorily get over—and it is this: why muffin-man? or muffin-boy, which is the same thing in the future tense? What have the women and the girls done, that they are rigidly shut out from the commerce in muffins? Who ever heard of a muffin-woman, or a muffin-girl? And if not, why not? as argumentative people put it. Is there any salique law that forbids the succession of the softer sex to the sovereignty of the muffin-basket? If so, give us the authority for it and set our minds at rest. For more years than make up an average generation have we looked for the muffin-woman, and have never found her, or even a trace of her. Nay, more; amid all the stir that has been made of late for woman's rights—notwithstanding all the women's conventions that have been held—the muffins have been kept carefully in the background, and usurping man (and boy) left in undisputed possession.

It is summer-time, and the sun is setting, his level beams piercing the hazy atmosphere and garbing the London chimney-pots in red shirts, till they look like an irregular squad of Garibaldians. About this time there is a branch of street trade carried on for an hour or two which always has a claim on our sympathies. Of the growing flowers in pots which left Covent Garden in the morning, many yet remain unsold. They have drooped and languished under the fierce mid-day sun, and their owners have been obliged to carry them to some sheltering shade, and quench their raging thirst, in order to restore their failing blossoms; and now they have revived again, they are brought forth in the cool of the evening to be sold for what they will fetch. Buy a few of them, my friend, for your bow-window or parlour flower-stand, and don't allow your knowledge of

the fact that their owners have no place wherein to stow them safely for the night lead you to drive too hard a bargain.

About the same time you may chance to fall in with the country lad who brings to London a dripping hamper of water-lilies in the bud. He never gathers them in flower, as, once blown, they will not long survive away from their native pools; but he plucks them by hundreds in the bud, and pulls them into full bloom as fast as they are wanted—converting the shiny, unsightly cone, into a glorious vision of beauty by a few touches of his fingers—or he will sell you a couple of the buds for a penny and leave you to open them yourself if you prefer it. You don't catch him in the full glare of sunshine, but either in some shady shelter or in the cool of the twilight hour.

At certain recurring seasons old ocean sends up her supplies of food to our shores, of the arrival of which the Londoner gets his first information from the cries that resound through the streets after dark. At one time it is sprats that are hoarsely vocal in the thoroughfare as the hour of supper draws near. It is a current notion that everybody sups off sprats once a year, though they might do worse; what may be nearer the truth is, that everybody has the opportunity of doing so when the sprat season comes round. At another time it is mackerel, and it is noteworthy that these fish are allowed to over-ride the fourth commandment, and the statute of Charles II enforcing its observance, and to be hawked and bawled for sale on the Sunday—a privilege, if it be a privilege, which our customs accord to no other fish that swims. Crabs and lobsters are often roving about the suburbs up to ten and eleven o'clock, but they only indulge in these rakish habits in hot weather; the truth being that they are in a hurry to be eaten while they are worth eating, which they assuredly will not be if they are relegated to the chances of the morrow.

One might suppose that when all the world had had their suppers, and the major half had gone to bed, there would at least be a cessation of the trade of hawking eatables in the street. By no means. It is not at all unusual for us to be roused out of our first sleep by a cry which may reach us while it is yet a quarter of a mile off, and is shot explosively from lungs of prodigious power, to the tune of "Hot! all hot! smoking hot!" As late as half an hour after midnight have we heard this cry in the far suburbs; it proceeds from the vendor of baked potatoes, who, carrying his wares on his head, and travelling at the quick march, literally hunts down his belated customers, sending forth his stentorian cry to herald his coming. Who and what are the unenviable class dependent upon him for a meal, we must leave to the conjectures of the reader.

Thus it is seen that the latest supper-time of the street nomad and his earliest breakfast-time are but a brief space apart: a little more, and we should have brought the serpent's tail round into his mouth, and made of the street traffic one complete circle. It is not so, however, we are thankful to say; there are two or three of the small hours still left in the morning when the busy spirit of traffic is lulled to quietness, and the echoes have rest in the interminable thoroughfares. We should like to extend the narrow margin of silence, and stretch it over a few more of the hours of darkness; and we cannot help longing at times, amidst the boastings of onward progress, for so much retrogression at least as shall give back to our homes the silence of the night, and to the labourer the hours of sleep for his needful refreshment and repose.