

A HOME FOR STRAY BOTTLES.

BY WILLIAM OWLER.



VERY interesting question is "What becomes of bottles that have once contained 'fizzing drinks,' commonly known as temperance beverages?" The early Church started the temperance movement in England in 596, and King Edgar in 960 attempted to make his subjects teetotalers by Act of Parliament. Subsequent Acts have been inscribed on the Statute-book to induce the common people to live soberly, but all to no purpose. One knight of St. Crispin decided he would not spend his holiday abroad, and therefore he invited to his home all his friends, with whom he made merry, and dispensed with lavish hand brandy and soda. And what an *omnium gatherum* of refuse bottles were collected in that cellar! Yet it was nothing compared to the marvellous sight we beheld in the old workshop of a gas

engineer in Southwark. As we gazed in amazement at the sign of "The Bottle Exchange" we ventured to engage the attention of a mild-mannered man who was checking an inward entry of bottles, which were afterwards "sorted" and placed in boxes for removal to their original owners. All "the lost, stolen or strayed" mineral water bottles find a home in the racks at Holland Street, and here their flight is arrested for the purpose of being returned, sold, or destroyed. The Bottle Exchange

confines its operations to bottles which have contained lemonade, ginger beer, soda or seltzer water, and here the line is drawn. No "black beetles" come within the four walls of the Exchange, and to have beer bottles in the racks would offend the tender consciences of temperance advocates. Beer bottles seldom go astray or wander from "the house of call." And the reason is obvious. Beer-drinkers have to pay full value for the loan of the bottles; buyers of mineral waters pay a nominal deposit. The manufacturers and bottlers, however, pay 1½d. for each bottle, and, although charging for the contents, yet no fee was originally made for the bottle. This occasioned great loss to the mineral water manufacturers, and the object the Bottle Exchange has in view is to restore the bottles to the owners. The retail dealers were under no obligation to return them. The customers laid them aside as soon as done with; and consequently thousands of mineral water bottles have been recovered from dustbins and underground cellars, or purchased from marine-store dealers, who formerly sold them to rival traders.

All this has been changed since the Bottle Exchange opened its doors. The depôts extend from Chatham to Oxford, and from Northampton to Brighton. The members number over 300, and there are 10 branches within a radius of 100 miles. The bottles in the collection come from India and all parts of the world; and we saw 50 gross ready to return to the East. Many of these bottles arrive in London in ships, and the Exchange pay the men who deliver them at the "home." The origin of this novel scheme was to protect bottle-owners in the mineral water trade; and over ten years ago the Mineral Water Bottle Exchange and Trade Protection Society was founded, with Mr. Walter Davenport as secretary. The members comprise nearly all the manufacturers within 100 miles of the metropolis, and the society is managed by a council of delegates chosen by the members of the various districts covered by its operations. Formerly thousands of pounds were lost in bottles, and some manufacturers were ruined. The public looked upon the bottles as of no value, the retailer was equally careless, and in many cases

other people's bottles were frequently used. To remedy the evil the name of manufacturers was blown on the glass, but that only made it useless to a rival, and it was not sent back to its rightful owner. Hence the idea of an Exchange and Trade Protection Society in which the members agreed to put an end to the fraudulent system which had hitherto prevailed. The members were pledged to forward the bottles of rival traders to the depôts which were opened in different parts of the metropolis in order that they might be returned. Co-operation was necessary to make the operations of the society successful. Inspectors were appointed to see that one manufacturer did not use the bottles belonging to his neighbour, and lost and stray empties were forwarded to the depôts by marine-store dealers and others. Arrangements were also made with vestries and dust contractors to forward to the Exchange all the bottles which came in their way; and now this novel Exchange is an active company of traders under

the Trade Marks Act. A small charge is made to members receiving back bottles, but non-members pay a higher scale. Seven years ago certain engineering works were leased, and the London depôts centralised in Ridler Place, Holland Street, Southwark. A dozen other societies were formed in the United Kingdom, which are affiliated with the Bottle Exchange, so that the bottles of mineral water makers are now protected and find their way back to the place of origin.

Having indicated the scope of the scheme we shall now attempt to depict this unique Exchange. The building is situated in a by-way, and is well adapted for the purpose of a bottle store. Passing under the gateway, there are piles of boxes of empty bottles in rows, tier above tier. Thousands of

these boxes are also in position, and the storage capacity is immense. At the time of our visit there were about 3000 gross of bottles in the Exchange. The boxes of small dealers are placed in racks, and when full the owners are advised and they send for their property. A large portion of the well-lighted building is devoted to "sorting" members' bottles. The names are inscribed on racks on the slant in which boxes are placed. About twenty names appear in each row, and these are bewildering in their number. Indeed the sorting is carried on by boys on similar lines to those in operation at the General Post Office. When a member's crate is full it is removed to the stores, but the large manufacturers generally claim the

bottles once a week. Consignments arrive daily, and van loads leave the Exchange hourly. A small sum is allowed per dozen by the society for cartage and collection on bottles sent in by marine-store dealers and dust contractors, but no allowance is given dealers or manufacturers.

Very little escapes the eagle eye of the dust collector, and hence one part of the Exchange is devoted to bottles recovered from dust-bins, where consequently the odour is not of Rimmel. But with plenty of clean water and bottle-washing machinery the most offensive-looking bottles are made sweet and clean. In fact the majority of lost or stray bottles are recovered from dust-bins, and from this source alone 87,563 dozen were returned in 1895. These dust collectors get 2*d.* per dozen for carting the bottles to the Exchange. They carefully search the heaps before being consigned to the destructors; and the major portion of London dust is "dumped" at Sittingbourne and other favourite haunts. Contractors and searchers are in the pay of this novel Exchange, and



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[A. B. Hughes.

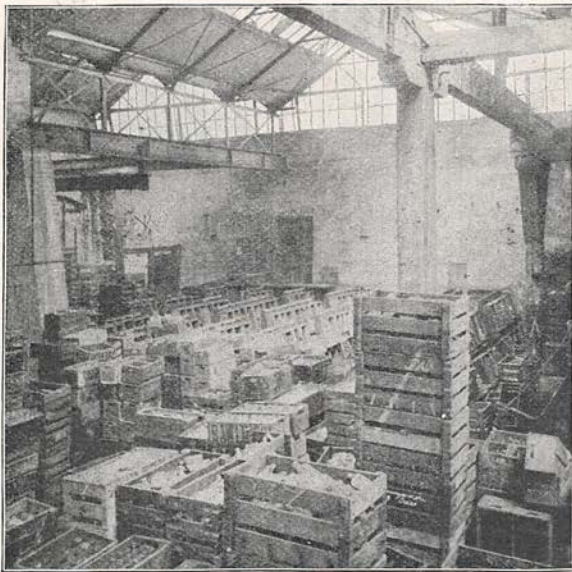
MAIN ROOM OF THE BOTTLE EXCHANGE.

not a bottle is discovered that does not find its way to Southwark. The number collected from dust-yards and marine-store dealers in 1889 amounted to the total of 113,016 dozen; during 1894 the quantity recovered from these sources amounted to 200,237 dozen. But the total number of bottles "turned over" at the Bottle Exchange during 1894 was upwards of 9,840,000, whilst in addition there were 33,000 boxes, 13,000 siphons, and 585 casks claimed by their owners. The total number of bottles "exchanged" in London and provinces in 1895 was—bottles in dozens, 445,751; boxes, single, 31,760; siphons, 16,112; and casks, 698.

The right to use bottles or siphons bearing certain marks is frequently purchased by new firms, and the attention of the trade directed thereto. Indeed stringent measures

are adopted to protect these legal purchases as if the bottles bore the name or mark of the present owners.

Fashion and shape in bottles have considerably changed, and so have the stoppers. In the council room Mr. Davenport has a cabinet full of bottles, and each one has a history. The early form was egg-shape, in stone, and one we saw was nearly 150 years old. The collection is most interesting, and the variety of bottles in shape, style, and material is a notable feature in this home of old bottles. Fortunes have been lost in developing patent corks, screws, and stoppers, and fortunes have been made by the owners of the popular devices now in common use. Strange as it may appear, the capital employed in the mineral water trade in England is £30,000,000, and the people engaged in this industry number over half a million.



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A CORNER IN THE BOTTLE EXCHANGE.