

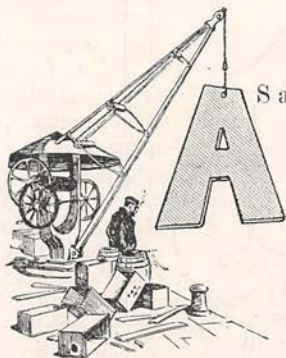


WAPPING-ON-THAMES.

By W. W. JACOBS.

(Author of "Many Cargoes.")

Illustrated by WILL OWEN.



AS a residential neighbourhood Wapping is perhaps undesirable, though a considerable population contrives to exist in the narrow streets hemmed in between the dock walls and the

warehouses fringing the river. For the river itself is completely hidden, except where the swing-bridges, which give entrance to the docks, afford a passing glimpse.

From a picturesque point of view Wapping was no doubt much better in the days when docks and swing-bridges were unknown. When the bow-windows of its ancient taverns projected quaintly over the river and the watermen's stairs inspired the muse of the song-writer. Then the raucous bellowings of hasty steamers were unknown, and sailing craft thoughtfully waited for tides, while master-mariners sat drinking in the bow-windows aforesaid.

The old church and the charity school, with the overgrown graveyard opposite, with its rank grass and depressed trees, are the remains of those days. The green of the churchyard is a relief to the bricks and mortar, for trees are scarce in Wapping,

though there are a few others in front of the old-fashioned houses on the breezy pier-head hard by—trees which, having been coaxed to grow in that uncongenial spot, conscientiously endeavour to indicate the seasons, and make very few mistakes considering.

High Street, Wapping, the principal thoroughfare, realising, possibly, that High Streets are apt to adhere too slavishly to one pattern, appears to have determined to be original. It sternly eschews the drapers and hatters, the bootmakers and tailors of other High Streets and confines its retail trade almost entirely to coffee-shops and taverns. The coffee-shops are as conservative as the street, and one window is much like another—herrings, rejoicing in their strength, competing for favour with bacon of guaranteed mildness and eggs of blameless exterior.

Early in the morning the night-watchmen are awakened by vans, and late at night their sleep is broken by them. For Wapping revels in vans of all shapes and all sizes, but preferably large, and has laid down granite roads for their especial delectation. The vans are from all quarters of London, and their drivers from all parts of the country, but the latter are the willing victims of one dominant idea. It is the ambition of every carman—the thing for which he plots and plans, and swears and lies—to be

attended to out of his turn. The more out of his turn the better, and a boy of innocent aspect and no principles, who will ably second his perjuries, is as the apple of his eye. This, and sitting in dangerous attitudes on the tailboard of the van, or doing a double-shuffle on the extreme edge of the kerb, is the van-boy's part in life. In his spare moments he watches his chief back horses, for, as a backer of horses in a blameless sense, the river-side carman has probably no equal in the world. At one time, in addition to the road, he had about two feet of pavement to manoeuvre on as well, but now he has been warned off by iron posts of the most upright and rigid bearing.

Down Tower Hill, thinking no evil, comes a mildewed four-wheeler driven by an elderly cabman, who pulls up so sharply at the bottom of the hill that the horse slides a yard or two and then tries to sit down.

"Drive on, cabman!" says a shrill voice inside, as the owner of it knuckles at the glass. "What are you stopping for? It's farther on!"

"All right, lady," says the cabman. He knows that the sex requires humouring and "clucks" the horse on exactly seventeen inches.

"Any chance o' gettin' by, sir?" he inquires with deep respect of a tall policeman.

The tall policeman eyes the traffic critically and a Pickford's van severely. Pickford's horses are pawing the pavement, while their tail-board is giving great offence to a pair of horses behind.

"Pickford!" yells the tall policeman with great suddenness.

Half-a-dozen voices take up the cry of "Pickford," and Pickford's representative not being forthcoming (he is at the present moment making Language, with a capital L, do for argument with the foreman), a small boy appears from the depths of the van to see what he can do.

"Put your van back a bit!" says the tall policeman austerly.

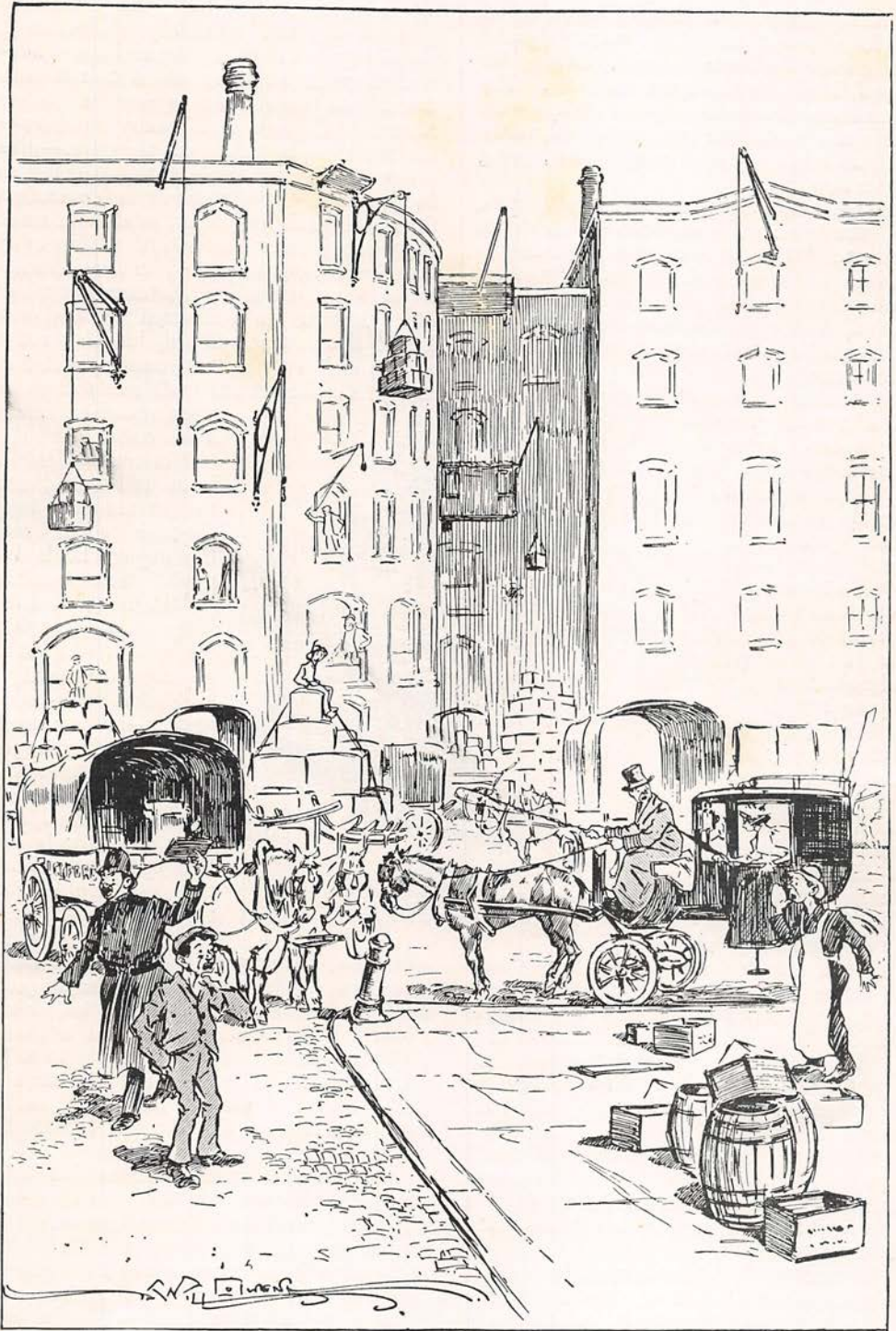
The urchin grasps the horses' heads, brings them forward a bit, thrusts them back, slipping and stumbling with their heads in the air, and having made at least a foot more

space, pauses triumphantly and asks, "How's that?"

The only reply of the tall policeman, who is a man of few words, is to bawl for "Pickford" again. The cabman, in the most familiar manner, also calls for "Pickford," and a string of vehicles behind him also call on the name of "Pickford" with



SOME GENTLEMEN OF WAPPING.



"PICKFORD!"

profane fervour. "Pickford" turns up at last in a heated condition, having signally failed with the foreman, and grasping his horses' heads, backs them violently. The commotion that ensues is tremendous, the docile and intelligent animals behind, realising that it is a case of *sauve qui peut*, going where they can.

There is now room for the *cortège* to pass, and the cabman, having brooded over his wrongs until he is word-perfect, tells the carman his opinion of him as he goes by. It is a long opinion, quite a character-study, in fact, and despite the haste of his fares, he walks his horse so that the offender shall not miss a word of it.

"Ermitage Wharf?" he inquires politely of a bystander, turning a deaf ear to his adversary's reply.

"Straight ahead," says the man addressed, "but you can't get by!"

"Ho! can't I?" says the cabman with the air of a man who has just done greater things than that. "An' w'y not?"

"Cos the bridge is swung," says the other cheerfully.

The cabman swings himself off his box, and opening the door of his vehicle, breaks the news to his fares. The three ladies lean forward anxiously, and with one accord blame him for it, one lady remarking darkly that four-wheelers are all alike, and drawing offensive comparisons between the present vehicle and a hansom.

"I can't 'elp the bridge being swung," says the cabman. "It ain't no pleasure for me standing here listening to you. 'Ar long 'll it be, mate?"

"I think they're almost through now," says the other. "There's just a few empty lighters going into the dock—unless the *Evening Star* is coming out," he adds thoughtfully.

Fortunately for all concerned the gallant ship mentioned does not come out. The bridge swings together again, and the cabman, gathering up his reins, rattles briskly over the stones to his destination.

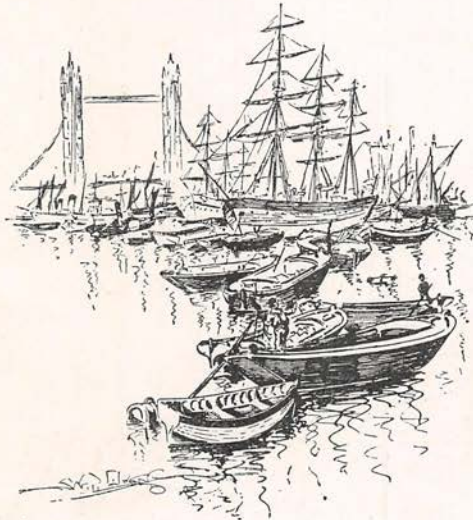
If the traffic in the streets is thick, that on

the river is almost as bad. Huge steamers come slowly and cautiously up, moaning plaintively with their steam-sirens whenever they see anything about to run into them. At times there appears to be no offing at all, and even penny steamers—the most expert craft on the river—give a low whistle and wonder what is going to happen next. It is usual at such moments for an old and leaky boat, laden with small boys, who prefer this mode of whiling away the dinner-hour to eating, to stop in mid-stream to recover an oar. Extraordinary feats of navigation are performed by the crew before this is accomplished, but they get it at last, and ignoring the remarks hurled at them from the various craft, settle down to work again and ram a steam collier.

Work on the wharves is at full swing, and the cranes are busy lowering goods into the gaping holds beneath. Sometimes the freight drops from the slings on to the workers, and once a crane we knew—ordinarily a well-behaved, reliable worker—took too much aboard and plunged fifteen feet into the river below. It took the driver with it, and when his friends got him up, as a preliminary to burying him, they found, to their astonishment, that he

was alive. He was never a man to make much fuss; and after he had sat on the jetty and been patted on the back, he looked round at the place the crane had left, and said that perhaps, as there didn't seem to be anything for him to do, he might have a half-holiday for once. He added, as an extra inducement, that he felt a little bit shaken.

It is not until Sunday arrives that Wapping becomes quiet, and then the change is almost oppressive in its thoroughness. The streets are practically deserted in the morning, except for a few men who have got up early by force of habit rather than the promptings of virtue, and a chance cat slinking furtively along in the shadow of the warehouses, ready to dart beneath a gateway at the first sign of a dog.



"THE RIVER IS ALMOST AS BAD."