

CURIOSITIES OF THE CUSTOMS.

DESCRIBED AND ILLUSTRATED BY

A. KEMP.

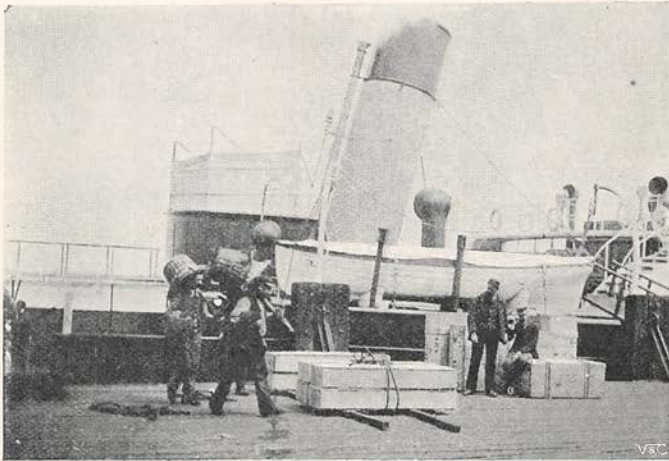
FEW people have any real conception of the manifold interests of His Majesty's Customs. The popular idea of this busy department, which plays such an important part in matters affecting the Imperial revenues, is that its functions consist chiefly in the examination of the personal belongings of travellers from foreign parts, and in the collection of the duties on tobacco, spirits, and a few other "necessaries" of modern life. As a matter of fact, the work of the Customs is not only enormous, but of infinite diversity, much of it being quite outside the increment of revenue.

A Customs officer has to be a man of parts. He must needs have some of the characteristics of the detective, the lawyer, the man of business, the diplomat, the chemist, the manufacturer, the sailor, and the man of science—besides a great deal more. His lot is commonly one of hard work and not too extravagant emolument; he is sent hither and thither at the mercy of his Board, uprooting himself from some place where he has pitched his tent domestic, only to repeat the process a little later on, to the disturbance of his household gods—and goddesses. But a Customs man is generally a cheerful soul, ever ready to do his duty, no matter at what cost to himself.

Among the decidedly odd jobs that fall to the hand of the Customs department is the checking of the lists of immigrant aliens and the examination of the rags which do duty for clothes with many of the poor folk who flock to this happy England of ours in

their thousands—and, it must be added, in all their native dirt. "Packages containing corpses" likewise have to be dealt with by the Customs officer, in accordance with the rules and regulations laid down for his guidance. A gruesome duty, but a necessary one, for the supposed "corpse" may, in the absence of proper and official certification, turn out to be a barrel of spirits or a big box of cigars.

In a country like England, dependent so largely on foreign supplies of food, stringent regulations are necessary for the safeguarding of the health of the home consumers. The importation of cattle is obviously a matter of great importance, and the Customs have to see that no "live meat" comes from some thirty prohibited countries,



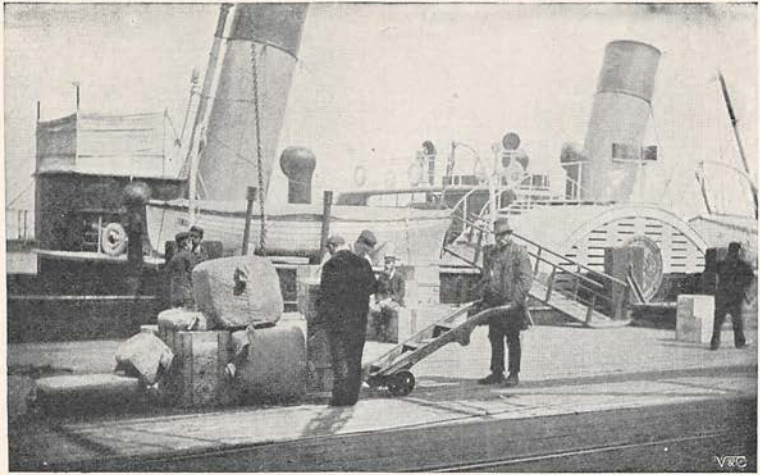
"DOCKERS" AT WORK.

European, Asian, and African, and that what is permitted to be imported from the few remaining regions of the globe arrives in good condition and fit for John Bull's larder. The whole of the foreign meat supply is hedged around with regulations, which, it is scarcely needful to add, are faithfully enforced by the vigilant officers of the Customs to whom the duty of supervision is entrusted.

We are hearing much of Land Registry Acts and the machinery for their efficient administration; but it will be an unhappy day for the lawyers if property in land is ever transferred and dealt with in the simple, speedy, and inexpensive fashion sanctioned by the Customs in regard to property in ships. A shipowner can get his vessel "registered," and obtain a parchment certi-

ificate of registry containing all the necessary particulars of measurement and so forth, for the modest charge of one shilling. He can mortgage or otherwise deal with his estate and interest in the vessel, and have all the usual steps legalised for an even smaller cost—to wit, nothing! Anyone can obtain information as to the legal ownership in a ship by paying an inspection fee of a shilling, and certified copies of any mortgages, bills of sale, and other interesting documents for a trifling sum. All this work is done in the Long Room of a Custom House. Everyone has heard of the literally Long Room of the London Custom House, but it is not generally known that the oftentimes poky and decidedly shabby apartments in provincial Custom Houses, where work of a similar character is done to that disposed of in the metropolitan establishment, are also called "long rooms." But the average official looks not to names, but to precedents.

Happily for the navigator, the English coast is well supplied with lighthouses, buoys,



A CLOSE INSPECTION.

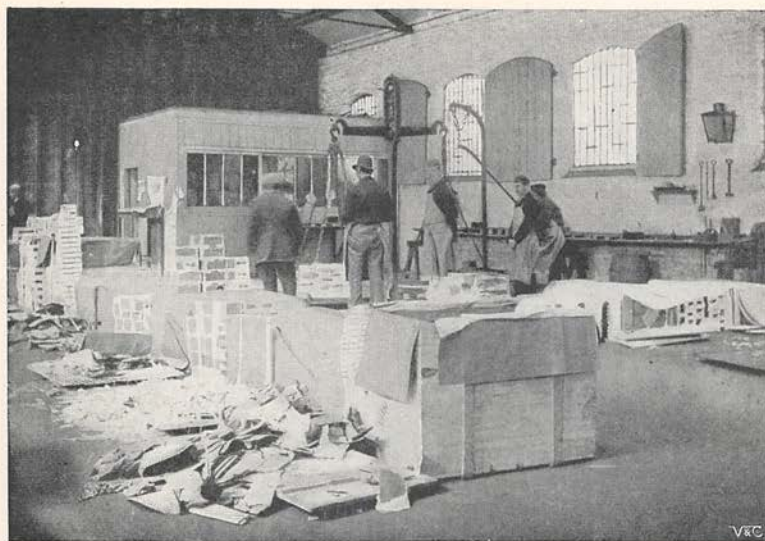
and light-vessels, towards the maintenance of which the imposts known as "light dues" are in part devoted. The Customs collect these dues from both home and foreign ships touching at English ports, and it occasionally happens that part of their duty is to take the strangers' measure, very literally, in order to ascertain the tonnage and determine the amount properly payable for these useful coast defences.

Everyone knows that the sands and channels of our coasts are subject to constant change; and for the furtherance of the safety of ships and sailors it is necessary that the masters of vessels should be kept

informed of these vagaries of the shoals. The Customs undertake the work. A wrecked vessel is sometimes in a position dangerous to navigation, or it may be that floating wreckage adds a new risk to the mariner. All these and cognate facts are reported by the Customs, and the Trinity authorities either take the necessary steps for the removal of the obstructions, or, if this is not practicable within a given time, notices



A THOROUGH SEARCH.



WEIGHING TOBACCO.

by the Customs, who stand to them *in loco parentis*, and soften, as far as may be, the rigours of their lot. The Customs also enrol and pay that important arm of our national defence, the Royal Naval Reserve, besides acting as paymaster to pensioners.

Quite apart from the preparing of the statistics of the enormous import and export trade of the country—a Brobdingnagian task, in all verity—upon the Customs

are framed by them and circulated by the Customs to all concerned. Again, a wrecked vessel will very frequently break up and scatter its *disjecta membra*, comprising, it may be, portions of a valuable cargo, along quite a considerable stretch of coastline. The ubiquitous Customs officers take charge of the flotsam and jetsam, and act as intermediaries between the salvors and the owners—not always the most delightful of tasks. On a pinch, too, the man in blue will act as auctioneer!

The immortal Dibdin sang—

There's a sweet little cherub that sits up aloft,
To keep watch for the life of poor Jack;

but cherubs seem to be at a premium in these more prosaic days, and hence it is, perhaps, that the duty of guardian angel has fallen upon the broad shoulders of the Board of Trade. At a great many ports the Customs play the watchful part instead, and look after the sailor's well-being in many ways—his food, wages, accommodation on ship, the loading and stowage of the cargo, the payment of his allotments while he is away, the transmission of his wages when he gets home, the banking of his savings, and a dozen other things. When a seaman dies, the Customs often take charge of his goods, chattels, and moneys, to be handed over to the poor fellow's relatives—on sufficient proof, of course. The Customs officer is also frequently a recording as well as a guardian angel, and the registers that he keeps are really almost beyond enumeration. Fishing apprentices, too, are indentured

falls the duty of enforcing the provisions of the Merchandise Marks Act, a statute which is designed to prevent the palming off upon the unwary goods that are apparently of British manufacture, but which are in reality made beyond His Majesty's dominions. It is, of course, a comparatively simple matter to discover a colourable imitation of a British-made article, but the difficulty is to anticipate some roguish trick by which the counterfeit may, after it has passed the examination test, assume the guise of the real. Inscriptions, "Made in Germany," might easily be removed unless certain precautions were taken, perhaps by the substitution of some insignificant part on which the legend appears. Hence it is that the distinguishing mark is commonly required to be on some vital part of the article, failing which it is sent to "the Board" for adjudication, and possible rejection. Sometimes goods are sent over to us bearing no mark whatever. In such cases the Customs are powerless, and the matter is left to the discretion of the police, to take up and prosecute. English-made goods have such a high reputation all over the world that the preventive measures taken here are greatly a protection to customers everywhere. England is very largely a market, and goods to the value of millions of pounds sterling are sent here, only to be exported in the ordinary course of business to our customers abroad. It is therefore of the first importance that foreign-made goods of inferior quality should not be allowed to

come into or leave the country under a false pretence of British make, to the delusion and pecuniary loss of the innocents who abound both at home and abroad. Englishmen are pardonably proud of the excellence of British-made watches, and while fully alive to the merits of watches of foreign manufacture, and to their comparative cheapness, a wise insistence is observed in regard to the marks indicating the place of origin of both watches and cases. A watch or case of foreign origin, and not bearing a distinguishing mark accordingly, is permitted to be stamped by one of the Assay authorities in this country, provided that the word "foreign" is clearly shown on the shield wherein the year of production and carat value are indicated. By this means a purchaser knows that he is buying a foreign-made article which has passed the test imposed by our own goldsmiths' companies. The shield for a gold case is cruciform, while that for silver is octagonal. The movement of a foreign watch has to be distinctly marked with the place of origin.

The collection of the revenue of dutiable articles forms in reality but a small part of the work of the Customs department, although a



GAUGING.

most important one to the national exchequer. A hundred years ago there were about 1,500 articles subject to impost, realising an annual income of about six millions sterling. To-day there are about a dozen things subject to duty, but the income derivable is approximately twenty millions—not counting the thirty millions yielded by the Excise. Apart from the small duties payable on tea, coffee, cocoa, dried fruits, and the like, the large amount leviable on spirits and tobacco makes the temptation to defraud very great. The detection of spirits in all sorts of apparently innocent preparations is one of the most difficult things that the Customs have to do, and is the subject of incessant

vigilance. An infinity of delicate laboratory tests have to be made where "obscurtion" exists, and upon the amount of spirit discoverable in the article duty is enforced. Such apparently guileless compounds as medicinal extracts, tooth washes, corn cures, remedies for asthma, liquid fish glue, elixirs of iron or opium, pomades, oil of tar or mustard, liquid soap, eucalyptus vinegar, and liquid prepara-



DETERMINING THE DUES.

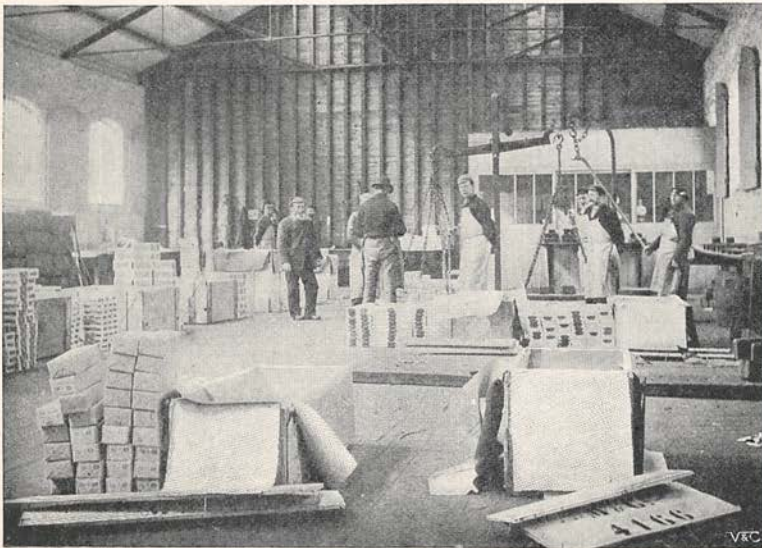
tions of beef have been found to contain ethylic alcohol and other liquids liable to duty, and duty they have to pay according to their deserts.

It goes without saying that the officers of His Majesty's Customs are perfectly loyal and faithful in protecting the revenue of the King, and it says much for the integrity of the service that, although the flock of preventive men is very numerous, black sheep are seldom, if ever, found. Some years ago, however, a tide surveyor abused his position by systematic fraud and foul dealing, and was only discovered by a bit of over-reaching with some of his dupes. It was his habit to buy tobacco abroad, and hire small vessels through an agent, who would see to the loading of the contraband and give instructions for the run to the surveyor's own port. The goods would usually be landed surreptitiously, he partaking in the profits of the run; but the perfidious scoundrel would occasionally seize what were really his own ships and cargoes, and have the crews arrested. In the result, he would get a share of the proceeds of the vessel when sold, poll-money for each member of the crew convicted, and a poundage on the contraband seized. This went on for some time without suspicion being attached to the arch-conspirator; but a day of retribution came, and he righteously got his *congé* from the service. But so willing were the public at the time to wink at smuggling, that the corporation of the borough where the nefarious operations had

been carried on actually gave to the culprit, some little time after his dismissal in disgrace, a snug and profitable post as harbour-master!

The dodges that have been resorted to from time to time to evade the full payment of duty can only be described as ingenious. At one time duty was charged on tobacco by its weight, without regard to the quantity of moisture. An inventive soul hit upon the expedient of consigning his tobacco to some place in the Channel Islands, where the leaf was systematically dried and then packed by hydraulic pressure into barrels to prevent the absorption of an appreciable quantity of moisture during the few hours' run to an English port. Duty was then paid on the weight, and afterwards, when the tobacco was manufactured, it was allowed to absorb sufficient moisture to its own normal liking—a splendid profit obviously resulting on the transaction. For a long time this lucrative performance went on, but ultimately the Government got wind of it and damped things very effectually by charging a proportionately higher rate of duty on tobacco that contained less than the normal amount of moisture. The Channel Island calidarium was thereupon incontinently closed.

Formerly gloves were chargeable with duty, and many were the expedients resorted to in order to evade payment. Ladies of position would smuggle quantities of handwear in the most barefaced manner, and to this day it is no infrequent thing for the fair sex to take an infinity of pains to conceal about their persons goods that they fondly imagine to be subject to duty, such as silks and laces, but which in reality are as free as air. Rather a clever trick was played upon the Customs authorities some years ago by a wily one who contrived to get a quantity of gloves into the country practically duty free. This was his expedient: He imported to a place on the coast a case of gloves, all right-handers, and refused to pay duty



WEIGHING CIGARS FOR DUTY.

on them. Of course, they were detained by the authorities. Soon afterwards he imported to London a similar case containing nothing but left-handers, and went through the same process with regard to them. Later on, the two lots were put up for sale in the ordinary course at the two ports of entry, and as the gloves were practically useless they were sold for a mere trifle—in each case to the importer himself. Needless to say, the transaction was remunerative; but it is not on record whether he tempted fortune a second time in this way.

Sailors are frequently old offenders in the gentle art of smuggling. Probably their habitual criminality is the result of heredity. Smuggling was so common a thing all round our coasts in the bad old days, that it is little wonder that the descendants of Will Watch and other famous runners of contraband have inherited the instincts of their forefathers, and to some extent acquired their habits. The Customs officers, however, are up to practically all the dodges of "Jack," whose resourcefulness is sometimes sorely tried in order to get his beloved tobacco ashore unsoiled by the touch of the revenue officer. All sorts of unlikely places and things aboard ship are used for stowage, but perhaps the most innocent method of concealment was that adopted by some old salts who left a big loaf of bread on the fo'c'sle table, apparently uncut and altogether honest. As a matter of fact, it was a hollow mockery as far as its nutritive properties were concerned, but a very solid comfort in a nicotinean sense; for it was packed tight with cigars. "The Queen's Pipe" smoked them, the jolly jack tars being themselves "smoked" in the process!

Not the least interesting thing in connection with the Customs is the number of eminent men who have been in its service, men who have helped to make English history in more senses than one. Among these are Geoffrey Chaucer, the *doyen* of our poets, William Congreve, Nicholas Rowe, Matthew Prior, and Adam Smith, whose "Wealth of Nations" is one of the classics of English literature.



OVERHAULING SUSPECTED LUGGAGE.

A curious circumstance is the fact that although Sir Christopher Wren lived to a good old age, the only building of his design that was destroyed by fire in his lifetime was the third Custom House ever erected. This was burnt down in 1711, some forty-three years after it was built.

At the present day, the average Customs officer hates wearing the uniform prescribed by the powers that be. And, generally speaking, it is a greasy, shabby sort of thing, of anything but royal significance, barring the crown that appears on the buttons and cap. Formerly, however, officers from highest to lowest wore gorgeous robes of scarlet and gold, not to speak of court dresses with the inevitable "trimmings" of rapier, silk stockings, and elaborate shoe-buckles of silver. The chief Customs officer frequently went about with a semblance of the state of the Lord High Chancellor of the realm.

The Comptroller of the Customs had to take a mighty oath in olden times. Here it is, *verbatim et literatim*:—

"Ye shall swear, that well and truly ye shall serve the king in the office of Comptroller of the king's Customs and Subsidies, in the place of Customer, and truly ye shall enter all the goods and things customable, the which shall come to the said Port or shall pass from the same; and that ye shall no gift take for to do your office, nor for anything that may fall in disadvantage of the king, nor any merchandise nor anything customable, ye shall not suffer to pass out of the said Port, without Custom due paid · and

ye shall do the office yourself, and dwell thereupon in your proper office, without making any deputy or substitute under you; and ye shall write the rolls with your own hands, and the king's profit ye shall await, and do in as much as ye may after your knowledge and power, as God help you and His saints."

Coming down to modern times, some of the reports made by the illiterate are dis-

tinctly funny. A salvor, on reporting the finding of a conical buoy, stated in cold ink that it was "a comical boy, painted black, supposed foreign." Another genius entered agricultural implements as "surgicultral" implements; ice as "dry goods"; while an instance is on record where a man was literally hoist with his own petard by the entry: "Alexander Gunn, discharged for making a false report."



"LIKE GRANDPA." FROM THE PICTURE BY J. LAWSON.