

Children are born to them, and are "minded" for the first year or two. Then they take their chances for life and education in the slums. At six or seven they accompany their parents, or are hired out to other costers. In a few years more some fancied slight or too severe a beating occurs, or the coster-youth or lass have met their affinity, and they are away for themselves without partings or regrets.

They are all, men and women, confirmed and hopeless gamblers in a petty way. Frequently they will back their favorite chaffinches, which are trained to fight as well as sing, or dog, or pugilist, to the loss of everything they possess. I do not believe there is a coster in London who has not at sometime been a year's labor and thrift behind his body and the clothes upon it from ill-luck at gambling. Some go to the dogs completely from it. Then they commit suicide composedly. This very curse of their character enabled me to become one of them for so long as I liked. I had unavailingly tried all means of which I was capable to become familiar with them. While cheery and friendly enough, they would never be their real selves in my presence. But I kept among them doggedly about "the joyous neighborhood of Covent Garden" market, where from 3,000 to 4,000 may daily be seen, until opportunity at last came.

I used to saunter for hours about the famous market in the early morning. On a certain May morning of last year I found among the peashellers under the market colonnades, opposite the ancient Tavistock hotel, one of the women, comely enough for a wonder among these who are generally indescribable hags, shelling in a desperate sort of way and crying as though her heart would break. More tears than pennies fell in her bowl, and the old Jezabels about her were, after quite the fashion of women, adding to her misery by taunting her with the foolishness of her marriage, which had evidently gone amiss. When these taunts became insufferable she would quietly punch one or another of their heads, when there would be a little savage scuffling and then she would resume her tears and peas. I could see she was a costerwoman; and in a few minutes' waiting I gathered enough to know that the weeping pea-sheller had run away from coster father and mother, married a coster youth of "fancy" or sporting proclivities, and that the latter, possessed of a frenzy over some chaffinch or dog, had stripped the pair, time after time, of donkey, cart and home belongings, as often lost all; and worse yet, had become so infamous among his kind that in all London he could not borrow a half crown to start anew, usually an easy thing for a coster to do, nor so much as a "thrupenny bit" with which to quench his thirst and drown his despondency. That very morning Becky, the weeping pea-sheller, had tragically left her incorrigible husband "for good and all," and at that very moment the latter, known as "Slumpsy Jem" for his ill-luck and incorrigibility, was turning away from glibbing coster groups, one after another, the picture of irretrievable despair.

The language of these folk is simply unprintable, not because of the costers' intentional obscenity and profanity, as they have the deepest pride in their own speech and ways. "Slumpsy Jem" him-

self quailed under the fusillade that morning. He slunk away like one pursued, and I followed him. Half way down Southampton Street, he made a last effort to retrieve himself by begging a loan from "Jenny Williams, the Minder"—a minder of whips for the last thirty years for all the greengrocers' carters who crowd that thoroughfare between the Strand and the market. Jenny was "up to snuff," and beat him off with her whip. Then he plunged into the Strand at a run; squirmed among and through the thundering vehicles, St. Paul's way, to Waterloo Bridge; here halted a moment or I could not have overtaken him; and started doggedly toward the Surrey side. He afterwards told me it was for "a header" into the Thames.

But I soon ran alongside him, and before he was half way to the middle of the bridge had him by the shoulder, and then, telling him he could attend to the little matter he had in mind just as well later in the day, marched him, a willing and wondering prisoner, to a cheap grill-house in the Strand for breakfast. Even an outcast costermonger filled with good food, and in company where the clink of silver is, is a different sort of fellow than one just on the point of "taking a header" off Waterloo Bridge. But he could do little else than bulge his eyes and after much emotional effort spurt out his astonishment in,

"Gor bli me, but 'ere's a go!"

It was a still greater "go" when, a half hour later, I had him help me ransack every foul pawnshop in the Minorities and we gathered up all the poor shreds of their home-belongings, even to his own brilliant Sunday "kingsman," or neckcloth, the veritable four-shillings "pegging" chaffinch which had been his downfall, and Becky's famous ostrich plume, the erst pride and envy of Shore-ditch; and, after such a charwoman's scrubbing and scouring as the place had never before known, got the broken home together again in the selfsame spot before St. Paul's bells had struck the mid-day chimes.

"Gawd strike me lucky! hit's a likelier wallus than the Lud May'r's. One gaze o' h't'd put h'out poor donah's (darling, mistress, wife) h'eyes—Gor bli me, so't would," was Slumpsy's parting apostrophe, as we mounted a four-penny 'bus cityward way, though the dazed coster was still ignorant of our destination.

We were soon at Drury Lane. I knew an alehouse, hard by Long Acres where the pea-shellers drowned their woes when their work was done, and sometimes danced and fought. Sure enough Jenny was there, still weeping over a pot of four ale and a cold sausage; but the greatest "go" of all was these costers' meeting, drenched in tears, drowned in a full "gallon o' bitter" for parting cheer among the now enthusiastic pea-sheller companions, and storm-swept with "Gor bli mes!" "Strike me deads, or luckeys!" and other still more unctious coster oaths. The "poor donah's h'eyes" were quite "put out" on seeing her little, and loved if little, home rebuilt as it by magic, and all the rueful prophecies of her nogging companions so marvelously put to naught; and to do the poor soul justice her gratitude and delight were inexpressibly greater to discover that the magic, the total cost of which had been but three pound, four! had been wrought on the unflinching

condition that Slumpsy Jem was a reformed gambler now and evermore.

I left them alone with the greatest joy that had ever come to London costers until evening. Then we dressed in our best and joined in a costers' tea-party at a near coster friend's; for in a few hours their great fortune had been noised about, and, as with other folk of higher grade, the silver key had unlocked unwilling doors; and afterwards passed a thrilling hour at a genuine Whitechapel "penny gaff," where from 400 to 500 costers, Billingsgate porters, Lambeth butcher-boys and Whitechapel riffraff were packed in a noisome old shed, to witness a "gaff," or outrageously ridiculous pantomime, or voiceless melodrama, or wordless tragedy, in which there were indescribable murder, highway robbery, and other lurid crime, but all enacted without spoken words to evade the law governing dramatic representations, and got to our beds in Bell Lane before midnight—for I had determined to house, live and be after the coster fashion completely until the pair were well on their feet in this strange London coster world.

On Sunday there is a crazy sort of fair of goats, fowls, ferrets, rats for destroying beetles, rats for the pit, chaffinches, rabbits and much other unsavory live stock, held in the rear of Shoreditch church in Hare street, hard by our coster home. After breakfast we repaired thither and bought a respectable second-hand barrow and donkey for "two pun ten;" some sieves, shal-lows and baskets for a few shillings more, and then passed part of the day in Epping forest with a million or so of other lowly London outers. On Monday we were all at Covent Garden market, at four o'clock in the morning, and had a load of crisp vegetables disposed of by one o'clock in the afternoon among the "judging 'ouse" keepers of Bloomsbury, at a net profit, including some repairs for our cart and harness and food for our donkey, which had proven a brave and heartsome beast, of six shillings, fourpence. On Tuesday we sold cheap meat from Smithfield in the Minorities, at a profit of eight shillings, ninepence. Wednesday we were unlucky on shrimps and sprats, and gained but two shillings. Thursday, with vegetables, we cleared but five shillings. On Friday with fish, as I had friends at Billingsgate market and got favors, we returned home with a profit of eleven shillings, ninepence. But Saturday's efforts gave us the greatest achievement of all. I determined to sell to a Gipsy camp at Wandsworth. At the mention of Gipsies, Slumpsy and Becky were horrified. But I knew the Gipsy taste and Gipsy pocket, and we filled our cart with poultry, meat and fish. It was a long journey for a coster cart, out through old Chelsea, across Chelsea Bridge, and into Surrey at Wandsworth; but our day's sales netted twenty-one shillings and threepence, besides our odd experience with the Romany folk of that metropolitan Gipsyrie; and it was a glorious Saturday night when we found that our total earnings had been two pounds, fifteen shillings and a penny; or a net profit, after deducting every expense of food and rent, of two pounds, two shillings and ninepence.

A long, long story, though a pleasant one, would be the relation of the four weeks' similar life which followed; of