Wakeman's Wanderings.

ODD INCIDENTS OF FOREIGN TRAVEL AND OBSERVATION

LONDON, June 4, 1893.—During the somewhat extended period in which I actually lived the daily life of a costermonger in London, many interesting observations and experiences, aside from those connected with the immediate concerns of buying and hawking vegetables, fish, flesh and fowl, were naturally resultant from my association with "Slampey Jem," the coster, and his wife Becky, and what may be regarded as the aristocratic coster society, to which our signal financial success speedily gave us admittance.

It may not have been an original discovery on my part, but I was soon convinced of the correctness of a curious series of surmises growing out of much previous observation and study of the habits, manners and speech of London folk in general; a conclusion which seems worthy of extended discussion by others more able to make exact and authoritative comparison. This was, in brief, that the generic things we call "cockneyisms," in speech and manners, really have their origin chiefly among London costermongers.

It is exceedingly difficult to make this clear to those who have not lived in London, and also in large cities of other countries, long enough to have caught that exceedingly winsome feature of all great, old and compact communities which, for a better name, may be called "local color." Observation will nearly always disclose it to largely consist of the reflexive influence upon higher classes from unique or outlandish lower classes, that genial *Jakkerie* and humorous or tragic realism of the lowly almost instantly transformed into the wit, humor, repartee and "slang" of those above them; until, in degree, habit of speech, form of the commoner colloquial expressions and even distinctive manerisms, become fixed and characteristic with and upon that grade of folk closest in mind, feeling and vocation to the characterful lowly people whom they have consciously or unconsciously imitated.

Thus I have heard in noted Paris salons the common jibes of the canaille and the boulevardiers from lips quite unconscious of their origin; in American clubs and drawing rooms countless giant and patter expressions already long previously discarded in New York's Bowery slums, where they first took form; in the finest Edinburgh homes, the wise, curt and droll sayings of Newhaven fish-wives and the Geordies of Cowgate and Grassmarket; and from London concert-halls, up through London clubs, past English castles and noblemen's city houses, to the floor of parliament itself, the latest epithet and witty cut, catch-phrase of London costermongers, coined by my comrades in the moments, at "funerals," instituted at the Sunday-night smoking-room concerts, at "penny-gaffs," or in valiant blackguarding battles with Covent Garden porters and the glib-tongued "mobbers" or fish-carriers of ancient and odorous Billingsgate.

As to "cockney" London folk high and low, clear and distinct lines may be drawn. The coster is the typical, indeed the genuine, cockney. His vernacular which is so outlandish that one has to have long acquaintance with it to understand it at all, is not slang, because it is his original and unalterated mode of expression. His swagger, his oaths, his terrible objurgations, his impulsive generosity, his reckless gambling, his fondness for pets, his roving ways within the great city, his grotesque apparel, his aversion to a fixed habitation, his suspicion of anything savoring of religion, his uncomparable Agnosticism, his self reliance, his fatalism, his fondness for his kind and his and yet his seeming brutality in all domestic relations, his hardness and his tenderness, and his almost stern and Spartan loyalty to his friends, his race and his traditions, are all inexplicable and tantalizing to one studying the character little or not but they are absolutely and invidably his own. There is not an iota of pretense, hypocrisy or affectation about him. Because of this, all one of London lowly next him in the social scale, have in from some to years' time been unconscious imitators of much of his speech, some of his manners, a good deal of his swagger and bluster, and not a little of his hardness and brutality. All these latter folk are often generically regarded as "cockneys" but their cockneyism is assumed, copied, unreal. Consequently it is as offensive to the intelligent Englishman, who often errs in mistaking it for the genuine article exclusively possessed by the costermongers, as it is to the wondering American, who knows nothing whatever about its origin.

There is another class of folk in London and throughout England immeasurably less in number and real importance but inexpressibly more omnipresent and conspicuous, who masquerade as "cockneys" and who, more than all others, bring the true coster cockney into permanent disrepute. They are a sort of chromo cockneys when the genuine Turneresque reds and siberian Millet grays of the true cockney coster are brought into analytic comparison. They comprise a mixed and motlayed multitude of London men-about-town, answering somewhat to the dude Choffy Wobblers of America—young noblemen and other choice aristocrats who "go in for a lark and sing a music-hall song," I know." To these are added a few flash journalists, I am sorry to say, fellows who are on the outskirts of even the lowest of London bohemia; not many actors, for London actors are almost invariably London gentlemen; some barrow-men of chin, all pugilists, sprinters, horsemen, jockeys and professional sporting men generally; thousands of music-hall performers and the other thousands of "Tommy Rots" gained out of the free smoking-room concerts of the public houses, who are found every Monday morning at their weekly "Poverty Jamboree" symposium at the corner of York and Waterloo roads; and tens of thousands more of London clerks and apprentices—earnest and vainglorious "Semon Tippertits"—filled with fine frenzy and mock heroics that they may ever bear the, to them, true British stamp of the cockney cockneys and beery ruffians of the hour.

All of these chromo cockneys never open their mouths without effort to outdo their moral and mental superiors, the costermongers. They occasionally break loose from their London environment and travel in Ireland in Scotland, on the continent and in America.

A shilling with them is a "bob," a sovereign is a "quid," a donkey is a "moke," a cabshorse is "cat's meat," to drink liquor is to "take a wet," a glass of ale is a "tankard o' bitter," every one accosted is "guv-er-nor," and a woman is a "dossh" or a "cow." This sort of thing may possess a certain sociological and literary interest when confined to the characterful class from which it emanates, but every one of these pretentious cockneys, whether met in London or on their ruffianly travels about the world, should be set down for precisely what they are. They are no more representative Englishmen than a New York dude, carrying the manners, epithets and clothing of a flowery boy about the world, would be a typical American. They are simply cads, a disgrace to intelligent English people and an insulting humor purely upon the ignorant though sturdy and genuine costermongers they so flagrantly mimic, and who, more than all their sires and totally lacking the least of their humble virtues.

The longer one studies these curious lowly folk of London the greater is the wonder that they have not picked up more fruitful answer for the novelist, or at least for such masters of character painting as Thackeray, Reade and Dickens. They have always been utilized as the butt of quips and quirks by the penny-a-liner, the wits of Punch, the newspaper paragraphers, and, in a low sort of way, to raise the loudest guffaws at the myriad music halls of London. But not until quite recently has their character been seriously studied by a man of real genius, or their weaknesses, virtues and traits appealing to universal human recognition, been portrayed by a man of subtle perception and ardent sympathies.

That man is Albert Chevalier. Of French, Welsh and Irish extraction he was deemed by his parents for the priesthood. But instead he became a successful actor of the legitimate comedy under the Bancrofts, the Kendals and later at the Court theatre under manager Hare. In time he found himself a popular leading comedian without an engagement. Others came to him for engagements in burlesque as second comedian. This was going backward; something a London actor cannot afford to do. Some of his work in comedy had brought him among the costermongers for character study; and he remembered a few easy song he had sung in his various characters bearing on these droll folk, and had been received with peculiar favor. He suddenly resolved to turn music hall singer, a resolution which greatly astonished London ordinarily accurate complete editor Buckman. But from this time this determination was reached Chevalier must be considered in the light of poet, composer and singer. He continued his coster studies with a positive genius, a splendid education and a wonderfully acute perception of what is necessary, as with the painter, to flit only reveal by true realism, but to reveal in the subtler power of suggestion, behind them; and the result was that since his first singing of "The Coster's Serenade" at the London Pavilion, in February, 1892, he has held the extraordinary position of being the only performer upon any stage, so unique in his line of rendition and so masterful in his artistic skill as to prevent the slightest attempt at rivalry.

He is but three years of age, yet his income from his nightly performances at our leading London music halls and from royalties on his songs is from $600 to $1,000 per week—nearly equaling the salary of the President of the United States; and all this from merely discovering the costermongers of London and revealing them to the people of London. It has been done in a way to reach their hearts as well as their sense of humor lovingly, as is shown in the fact that his present engagements are permanent for a period of five years. He is a quiet, studious fellow, and while his incomparable success has opened to him the doors of the great and noble houses in London, where his genuine scholarship and refinement would render him a social acquisition without the glamour of success, he leads a modest life in his own pretty home alongside the Thames, almost under the shadow of Windsor Castle, where his books, his pipe and fishing-rod are his chief companions.

This much regarding the man's personality. To converse by others who are unacquainted with costermongers themselves the peculiar conditions of London life and society which make it possible for a man to derive a princely income from creating and interpreting—for Chevalier is more than a mere singer of his songs—two or three coster songs each year is a difficult task. London is almost a great world in itself. Its costers, distinctive in character, vocation, speech, traits, habits and customs, have previously remained almost unknown people to what may be regarded as intellectual London. If Charles Dickens were living and had written a great work of fiction in which coster life and love had been delineated as powerfully that all London stood amazed at its new ignorance of its own lowly, the coster name and woman could not have been more firmly set upon the pedestals of amusement than Chevalier has placed them, through his strong flash lights and bold, broad strokes in delineation in character representation and song. He has brought to utmost universal attention the truthful and serious sides of coster character. He has shown that there are coster comedy and tragedy like that possible to your life and mine. In one after another of his songs he has sung impressions like "The Coster's Serenade," "The Coster's Courtship," "The Future Mrs 'Awkins," "Wot Cher," "The Nasty Way 'E Sez It," and "Our Little Nipper," he has brought the very heart throbbings of this uncouth class, often through pathetic tenderness, so close to those of his hearers, that the great London public, from prentice boy to prince, have awakened to the fact that costers are actually human creatures, possessing at least some of the common attributes of the humankind.

Chevalier found that these costers really made love to each other; that they were mere Romeos and Juliets among them, and such hints as these are given of the gentle passion between pearl-buttoned Jackeys and their "donahs."

You are hopeless yet dear sight in May,
Your eyes are Wedgwood blue,
Your hair is the colour of a piece of hay,
Your ah, I mustn't say what it's like for 'ere.

You are hopeless yet dear sight in May,
Give me a word of 'ope that I may win'—
You goods no goody with the strawberry jam
Wot makes 'appy as could be that 'ere.
Does in the Welsh 'Arp, wish to Lydon way.

"Wot Cher" is an inimitable delineation of the coster in his enjoyering hilarious mood. "The Nasty Way 'E Sez It," which has been pirated and put to ignoble use in America, though told, in the smooth coster way of a sneering fault-finding "pal," is a most wonderful satire on that omnipresent class of croakers who descend like harpies upon all well earned comfort and content. His latest creation, "Our Little Nipper," discloses the coster parental love for and pride in the rester boy, who is assiduously "taught" by his radiant father.

"Not in books, of course, for then 'e can't abide—
"But careful little Bey's little ways
As makes the people of us 'e can set 'ears."

Chevalier's influence has been healthful and good. While, as to London parlance, coster stock is looking up, there is decidedly less of imitated cockneyism and coster slang among the lowly, and less every-day buffoonery among the cockney cads of London. Defining and revealing costers as a class have brought them into line for social and literary consideration. This of itself gradually tends to confine imitators to a very low class of minds whose influence upon manners and speech is without weight, and delineators to a very high order of intellect, as with Chevalier, who, by painting best with nature, who will do the coster no harm, and who will omit the public's eye or touch the public's heart in a way that always makes it better for a thrill of mirth or sadness.

Chevalier's coster dialect is admirable clean; too clean to be the real thing; but too much enough of these original expressions to place the real coster before his great audiences. From having lived and toiled among them, my note-books are full of their curious turns of speech. They cannot be reproduced in print, owing to their terrible profanity and awful commingling of obscenity, while it must be remembered that the coster is absolutely unconscious of either, and would instantly "put up his fivers" to any one who would seriously intimate that he was not scrupulously respectful and polite. They are all, men and women, wonderful whistlers, and they have an odd sort of call and answer, a monotone accentuated thus:

"Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!"
"Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!"

In their greetings they are most effusive.

EDGAR L. WAKEMAN.

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10:30 a.m.	11:15 a.m.	2:00 p.m.	2:45 p.m.
3:30 p.m.	4:15 p.m.	5:00 p.m.	5:45 p.m.
5:00 p.m.	7:45 p.m.	8:00 p.m.	8:45 p.m.
7:00 p.m.	7:45 p.m.	9:00 p.m.	9:45 p.m.
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