

'Hot Chestnuts.'

BY WILLIAM BAIRD, M.A., VICAR OF DYMOCK, CHAPLAIN TO EARL BEAUCHAMP.



THE antipathy of a cat to hot chestnuts is proverbial, and has furnished an apt illustration of the indisposition which most people feel to handle a matter of difficulty and delicacy. Though however man may be said metaphorically to share the instincts of 'Pussy,' with regard to 'hot chestnuts,' it can scarcely be said that he does so in the coarser and more material sense. If he did, we fear our readers would never have had the pleasure of looking at the very telling woodcut which precedes this paper. Especially in the bitter cold weather, the boys and girls of our London streets, and even the 'children of a larger growth,' cannot by any figure of speech be said to share the instincts of the feline tribe, with regard to the dainty in question. Regardless of a little possible burning, eager hands are stretched out to receive the hot chestnuts, and numberless stray halfpence find their way into the pocket of the ragged vendor of the same.

In the course of our wanderings through London streets, we have seen some picturesque sights, but although the 'Cats' meat man' and the 'Street Arab' may stand aloft in a dignity which belongs to them alone, there can be no question that the seller of chestnuts on a cold winter's day is no unwelcome or unsightly object. He is easily found, for the light of his tiny furnace at once proclaims his presence even in the very heart of a London fog. His 'plant' and stock-in-trade are of the simplest description. An old well-worn basket, surmounted by a plain deal board, usually forms the foundation on which his little furnace, very much resembling those used by menders of old glass and china, is supported. On the top of this, on a piece of perforated metal, the chestnuts steam and crackle, as if bidding for a customer. All through the long winter's day, and no inconsiderable portion of the winter's night, the seller of chestnuts plies his trade. He usually has a particular stand or 'pitch,' to which he claims a sort of prescriptive right, but he occasionally moves from one street-corner to another, and then he does with his establishment pretty much what the snail does with its house. Basket, board, furnace, and chestnuts, are placed upon the head, and present, on a winter's night, a gleaming grotesqueness amusing to men and alarming to horses. The business of selling chestnuts in the streets is mainly confined to old men, women, and boys. The work can scarcely be said to be hard, although it must sometimes test the seller's power of endurance, to stand for hours in the pinching of a London frost, or the rawness of a London fog.

Some one has cleverly called the chestnut stalls 'moveable feasts,' from the ease with which their proprietors carry them about from place to place. It is not a very lucrative trade, but the outlay connected with it is small, and both sellers and customers belong usually to the lowest class of street life.

