

THE WONDERS OF MINCING LANE.

THERE are few persons who have not in the course of their lives swallowed certain nauseous doses of bark, colocynth, aloes, or castor-oil; who have not indulged in the luxury of otto of rose or musk; who have not had some dealings with the colourman, or the dyer; and yet I feel tolerably certain that not one-hundredth portion of those same readers know anything of where such articles come from, how they arrive here, and through what channel they are finally distributed. It will not occur to them that those costly drugs, and dyes, and perfumes arrived in this country from all parts of the world in huge packages; that, in fact, ship-loads of them come at a time; that the bales and cases which contain them fill enormous piles of warehouses in three or four of our docks; that several hundred merchants and brokers obtain a handsome living, many realising fortunes, by their sale; and that some millions sterling are embarked in the trade.

These things form a little-known world of their own. They thrive mostly in Mincing Lane, London. Even the omniscient Times knows nothing about them. The Thunderer is powerless within the drug circle. Search its acres of advertisements, but it will be in vain; nothing is to be found there of the dye and drug sales which are to be held on Thursday next at Garraway's. These mysteries are only to be learnt at the "Jerusalem," in Mincing Lane, London, at the "Baltic," or from the columns of the Public Ledger, a daily periodical devoted to all such matters, and known only to the initiated. In its columns you will find a motley list of all the vile materials of the Pharmacopœia; and in such quantities as to justify a belief in the existence of some enormous conspiracy to poison all living creatures.

Mincing Lane is like no other lane, and Mincing Lane men are like no other men. Any Thursday morning, between the hours of ten and eleven, and at every alternate doorway, may be observed catalogues of various drugs and dyes that are to be on sale at noon, gibbeted against the door posts. Mincing Lane men will be seen rushing madly along the pavement, as if a fire had just broken out, and they were in quest of the engines, jamming innocent lookers-on against gateways, and waggon-wheels, and lamp-posts.

It was into one of these obscure passages that I turned with a companion, groping our slow way up a narrow staircase, at the risk of constant concussions with frantic Mincing Lane men. We found ourselves in a broker's office, and thence in his sample room. This was a large square apartment, with wide counters extending round the four sides, and several tables and stands across the centre. On these lay papers containing various odd looking, un-

pleasant-smelling substances. My attention was chiefly attracted by a number of rows of pretty-looking bottles, containing some pale bright liquid, which several of the "Lane men" were busily sipping, smacking their lips after each taste, with uncommon relish. I inquired if the thin-looking bottles contained Johannesberg or Tokay? "No," I was answered, "castor-oil!" After that, I was prepared to find the "Lane men" heb-an-nobbing in laudanum, or nibbling lumps of jalap or aloes.

The time appointed for the sale approached; and, leaving the dark broker's offices, we did our best to reach Garraway's, where the auction of these articles takes place. Scores of clerks and principals were proceeding from the Lane towards the same spot. We hurried along Fenchurch Street, across Gracechurch Street, and up a part of Lombard Street, following close to the rear of a rather portly broker, who cleared a way for us in quite an easy off-hand manner, that was very pleasant to us; but not so agreeable to the six men who were offering toasting-forks and wash-leather bags for sale at the corner of Birchin Lane. I never could account for the extraordinary demand existing for these two articles in that neighbourhood; unless it be that bankers' clerks indulge freely in toast-and-water, and carry their dinners to office in the leather bags.

Out of Birchin Lane, down one narrow passage to the left, and around another straight forward, and there was Garraway's. We soon lost sight of the pictures in frames for sale outside, and turned to study the picture; out of frames inside. In the dark, heavy-looking coffee-room, there were assembled some of the mightiest City potentates,—the Alexanders, Nimrods, and Cæsars of the drug and dye world. I drew in my breath as I viewed that knot of stout, well-favoured persons, congregated at the foot of the old-fashioned staircase leading to the public sale-room above. I trod those stairs lightly, half in veneration, and laid my hands gently and respectfully on the banisters that I knew must have been pressed of old by mighty men of commerce. Down those wide sweeping stairs many had oftentimes tripped lightly homewards, after a day of golden labour, laden with the fruit of the fabled garden; sometimes, too, with gloomy brows, and feverish, flushed faces.

What a strange scene presented itself in the sale-room, when, by dint of scuffling and squeezing, we managed to force our way in. There could not have been a man left in all Mincing Lane, to say nothing of Fenchurch Street. The fog had come up the stairs and choked up the gas-lights, as effectually as though all the Lane men had been smoking like double Dutchmen. The queer little pulpit was shrouded in a yellow haze. The windows were completely curtained, half with cobwebs, half with fog. The sale was about