

THE "LITTLE MESTER."

Is the venerable institution known in Sheffield as the "Little Mester" fading out of existence? The question is interesting, though it hardly reaches the dignity of importance, for in practical life men and things lose importance in exact proportion as they lose power. If it be true, as is currently believed, that the "little mester" is being pushed from his stool by the ever-broadening shoulders of the large manufacturer, persons with a taste for antiquarian matters will welcome him as an acquisition, and will fondle his remains, but his decline will hardly dislocate any scrap of mechanism in the great practical world, which never looks back. The extinction, if it be really threatened, is bound to be tentative and gradual; and when the last forge shall be put out and the last manufacturing irregular has been gathered into the ranks of organized labour, the industrial fabric will scarcely feel any vibration from the shock of dissolution. There can be no doubt, we think, that for good or for evil this process of absorption is going on, and that in a few years the "little mester" of the cutlery and hardware trades will be little more than a historical object. Without attaching under weight to what we see in other directions, or to the general tendency in large concerns to play the part of Aaron's serpent, there is undoubtedly a fundamental disposition in modern existence to fuse and merge common interests in order the better to fight a common battle. For this purpose the lion may often lie down with a lamb, though in this case we are bound to say that the lamb is "inside the lion." The special difficulties with the "little mester" of the cutlery trade has had to face of late years have been great. Foreign competition, labour-saving machinery, and erratic demand may be named as the chief factors in this discomfiture; and perhaps the last is the worst. For years the great backbone upon which the "little mester" relied for his trade was the American market, which then poured forth its orders into the lap of Sheffield without reserve. American work was then comparatively safe stock, and employment was consistently good or uniformly poor, according to the height of the commercial tide. Since then the Transatlantic orders have undergone a prodigious change both in character and

in bulk. We no longer get them in indiscriminate profusion, nor do we get more than a respectable proportion of the whole. Roughly the trade may be divided into three classes—best, medium and common. Of these the best, no doubt, go to Sheffield, but they are placed with the great houses there. The second class are chiefly supplied by native producers, and the third by Germany. We can count upon our fingers nearly a dozen Sheffield houses, alive and dead, which have dropped out of the American trade within the last twelve years, and which, in so disappearing, having left scores of pendant "little mesters" in the lurch. Such American orders as the "little mester" browses upon now come to him in a harrassing, hectic flush, lasting a month or two and leaving him high and dry for three or four more. This desolate hiatus tells heavily on his financial resources. He cannot keep his men together; they go to the surer employment of the larger houses. He is afraid to employ himself on approved patterns for the same reason that the merchant who feeds him hesitates to give him speculative work, viz., that American buyers are as fickle as the wind in their choice. There are other reasons for the decay of this ancient representative of the cutlery trade, which we have not space to exhaust; but two may be mentioned—the scarcity of juvenile labour, consequent on educational requirements and the attraction of higher wages elsewhere, and the practice followed by some 'cute direct buyers of penetrating the lair of the "little mester" for their own profit.—*The Ironmonger.*

A DIAMOND THIEF.

A CLEVER THEFT AND HOW IT WAS DISCOVERED.

An old horse-car conductor, telling a Chicago reporter of his experience with thieves on his cars, mentioned the case of "Dandy Ben," a well known pick-pocket, whom he had arrested one day after a lady passenger had discovered the loss of a valuable diamond earring. "He was searched," said the conductor, "from the crown of his hat to the sole of his boots, but

THE DIAMOND WAS NOT DISCOVERED.

It was not on his person, I was beat; and when Dandy Ben sarcastically asked me if I was satisfied, I told him I was.

'Well, then I am not,' he said, 'you will hear from me again.' And taking a note-book from his pocket, he coolly took down the number of my car and stepped off. The car was again searched for the earring, but in vain, and the unhappy lady who had lost it was inconsolable."

"Was it never found?"

"Yes, One morning, a few days after the event, I was loitering about the car-barn, having a half hour between trips. The only other person around was the foreman of the barn, and he stood in one of the wide-open doors, when a shabby, rusty, dilapidated old tramp came limping along, looking as forlorn and wretched as the last rose of summer. It was a cold morning, and the old fellow sidled up to the door, and then suddenly whicked inside to escape a fiercer gust of wind than usual. With a rather fatigued air he asked the foreman's permission to sit down in one of the cars, where he could rest and be out of the wind for a few minutes. He seemed so harmless and tired and cold that the foreman consented, and the old chap shuffled along into the barn. He passed three or four cars, looking at the number of each, before he finally clambered into one and sat down in a corner. I noticed this, but not with surprise, for I had recognized the man. I don't know how I

PENETRATED HIS DISGUISE

so readily, but the minute I laid eyes on that old tramp I knew it was Dandy Ben. He didn't seem to notice me, or, if he did, he doubtless thought his disguise was all-sufficient. I wondered what new game the rascal was up to now, and concluded to do a little watching on my own hook without imparting the secret of my discovery to the foreman. I sauntered to and fro for several minutes, trying to decide the best course to pursue to find out the trickster's game; then, all of a sudden, a thought struck me. Without any further hesitation I walked directly and rapidly to the car door which the tramp had entered, jerked open the door and stepped inside. While doing this I caught the sound of a hurried movement on the part of the occupant of the car, and by the time I got my eyes on him he was leaning back in his corner feigning asleep. But he had not had time to put out of sight a chisel and a small saw which were only partially concealed beneath his coat. The sight of these tools confirmed my suspicion. I caught