

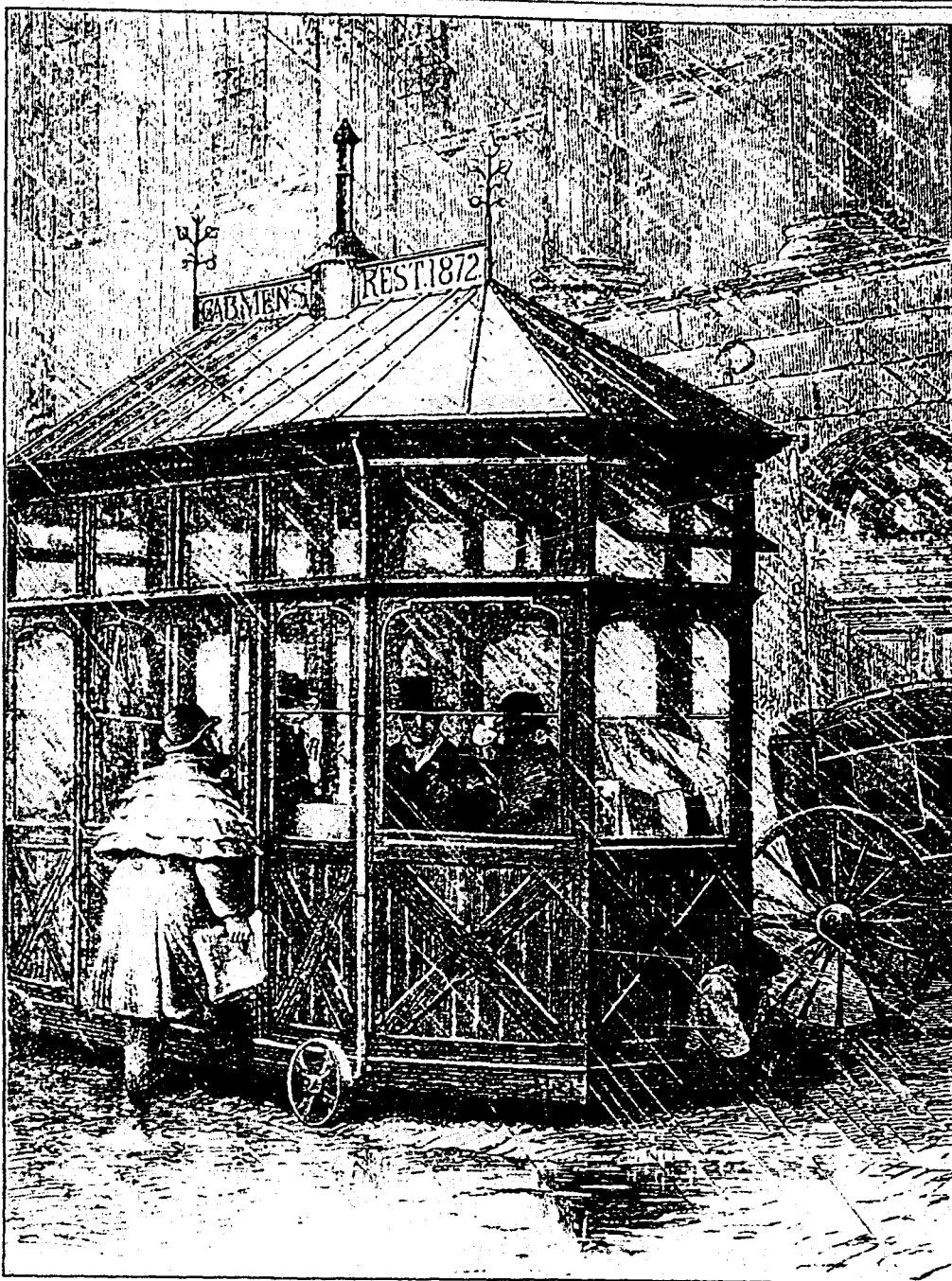
ROBUR.

An Essay on the Agonies of Thirst.

BY GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA.

I happened to be walking one afternoon along Bonny Street, Camdentown (so called, I apprehend, from its having once been the residence of the amiable, enlightened, and appreciative African monarch who made the immortal Close his Post Laureate), when the strange word Robur suddenly struck my pensive eye. This is an age of fine writing, and at first I felt inclined to think that Robur (the classical signification of the name is, of course, familiar to you, O my Spungius) must have been adopted by the police authorities of Camdentown as a fancy name for the local station-house. The languages of old Greece and Rome are, I can tell you, assiduously cultivated in the remote district of North-western London, where young Charles Dickens lived once upon a time, and where the marble effigy of Richard Cobden dominates the Hampstead road, and awes the omnibus conductors journeying toward the "Mother Redcap." Camdentown is full of excellent schools; and all the young ladies at Miss Bass's Middle-class Academy are versed, I believe, in the Greek Anthology, and always write their valentines in Latin hexameters. "Yes," I murmured, "Robur must certainly be an elegant equivalent for station-house. I have heard Indian officers speak of that place of duration as 'Chokee'; why not Robur?"

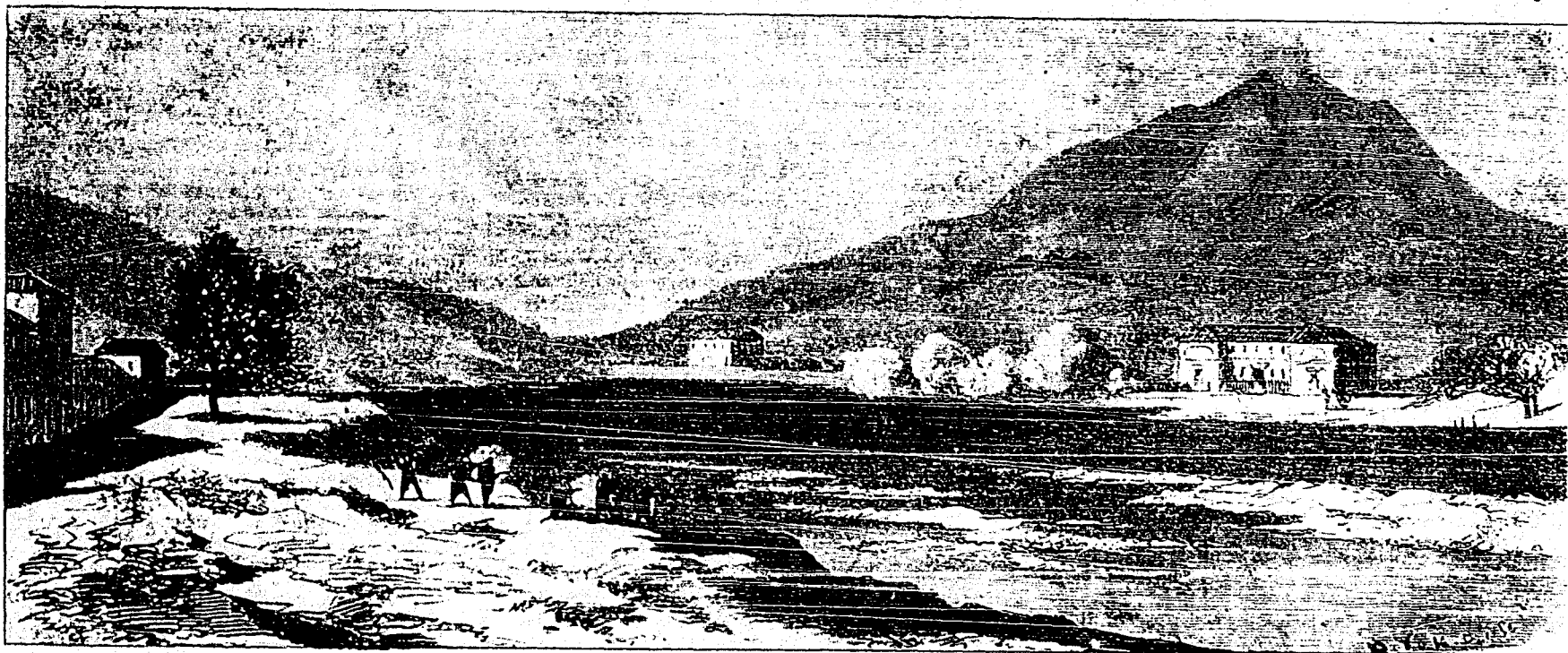
So I went home, and, as is my custom when I have stumbled against a word that tickles me, I read up Robur. The authorities on the subject are not very recondite, and are far from difficult of access. Robur, according to Lucretius, implies the idea of hardness and strength; and Pliny tells us that it is a very tough kind of oak; indeed, the germs of the wooden walls of England (now superseded by the floating kitchen-ranges and submarine coal-cellars termed iron-clads) were probably the *naves totæ factæ ex robore* of Julius Caesar. Virgil also gives to the oak the epithet of "robust," and Cicero ("jolly old Cicero," as poor James Hannay used to call him: you died too soon, James, and the bookmakers are hungering to write your life, when, goodness knows, there is but little to write about in it, save to say that the nineteenth century saw no brighter, braver, and unhappier spirit)—Cicero, I repeat, hints that the Lacedæmonians were accustomed to



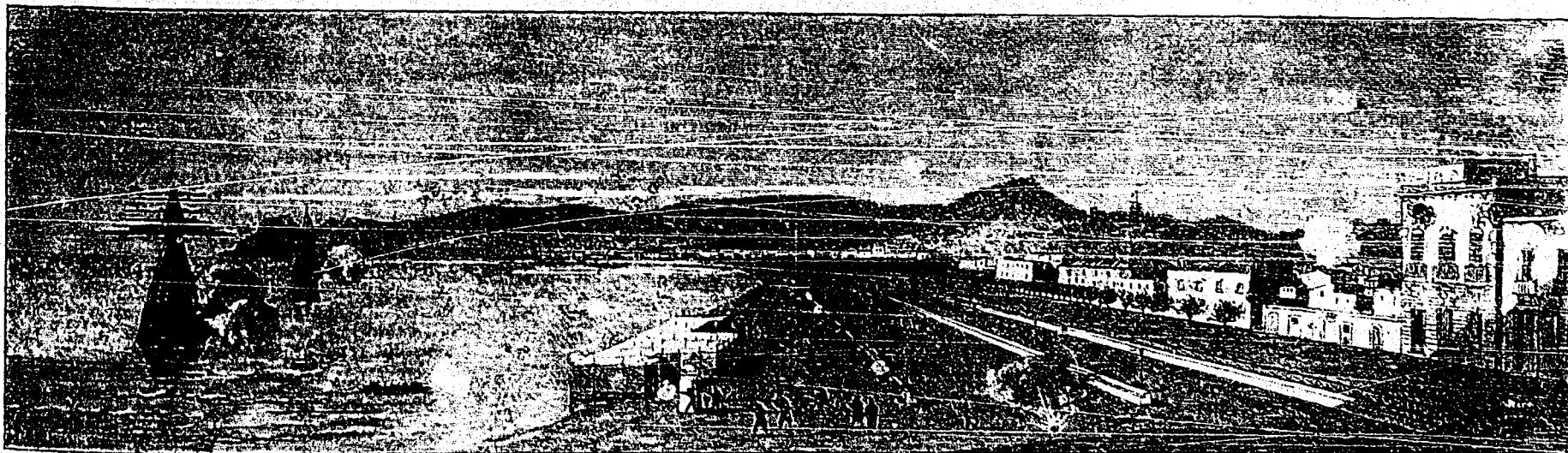
THE CABMAN'S REST, BIRMINGHAM, ENGLAND.

recline on benches of Robur the while they swallowed their black broth: a very nasty mess, I take it, not unlike *purée aux lentilles*. And again, our old friend Maro (burn our old friend Maro!) points unmistakably to the fact that the wooden horse before Troy was made from Robur. *Mais je n'y suis pas encore*. What has all this to do with the station-house? Ha! I have it. The lowest part of the Roman prison built by Servius Tullius, and sometimes called, after him, the Tullianum, was the Robur. He who was "in trouble" for a grave offence was styled *dignum carcere et robore*. A "drunk and disorderly," for example, or a young couple detected, in defiance of Mr. Ayrton's prohibition of "unauthorized games," in skipping in Victoria Park, or a gentleman who presumed to present himself at the entrance to the stalls at the Princess's Theatre without a wedding garment—that is to say, a black tail-coat and a white tie—would be clearly deserving of incarceration in the Robur. It was the *carcer inferior* mentioned by Livy and by Apuleius—the lowermost pit—a hole of circular shape (whence the last century "round-house," perchance) underneath the common prison lodging, where malefactors were herded together. But when a poor devil came to the Roborian stage, it was all up, or rather all down, with him. I have seen the real Robur in all its classic horror. In it, according to Catholic legends, St. Peter was immured, and the church at Rome built over the subterranean dungeon is thence called *San Pietro in carcere*. The existing Robur is more elliptical than circular, the roof is slightly convex, and the walls are formed of enormous blocks of unmortared masonry. In lieu of a window, there is a hole in the ceiling of this horrible cell; and through this hole the criminal was wont to be lowered, by means of a hook passed through his clothes, into the cell beneath. Now and again (so Sallust and Suetonius tell us, to say nothing of the *Acta Sanctorum*) the *carnifex* would descend into the Robur, in order to put the gentleman in "chokee" to the torture. Ultimately he would descend upon a more merciful errand—to strangle him, or to cut his head off. Then the *uncus* was brought into play again, for the purpose of hooking up the corpse and with a view to its exposition on the Gemonian steps. Those dear old classical times! What scholars and gentlemen they were, those ancient Romans, to be sure!

Naturally I felt quite proud at having completed this tour of antiquarian dis-



AFFAIRS IN SPAIN.—THE CARLISTS TAKING UP A POSITION BEFORE TOLOSA.



AFFAIRS IN SPAIN.—THE BOMBARDMENT OF ALMERIA.