

THE READY RECKONER.

BY MARGARET VANDEGRIFT.

All Mr. Finnigan's numerous friends called to congratulate him when he effected the purchase of the Harmony Saloon, and removed from the small corner grocery which had been the corner-stone of his fortune into the palatial brick building, with pillars on either side of the door, and stained-glass windows, where he proposed henceforth to dispense to his customers "pure liquors only!" The two conspicuous red-lettered signs which shone in the plate-glass window—

A FRIED OYSTER WITH EVERY DRINK!

FREE LUNCH FROM 10 TO 12 TO-DAY!

—may have had something to do with the suddenly increased number of Mr. Finnigan's friends, but the congratulations were none the less sincere.

"Sure, old woman, its fast we're going up the ladder, and we but six years in this blissid free country!" said the proprietor to his faithful wife as he for the first time lit the gorgeous central chandelier and side brackets, which, like the false beacon-fires of the wreckers of old times, were to lure so many victims to their destruction. "Whin we began wid the corner-stall, and the cakes and oranges, and the stone bottles of spruce beer and mead, it's little we dreamed of this same!" and he looked proudly around the cheerful room, with its glowing stove, gaudily painted walls, and profusion of gilt moulding.

But there was no responsive light on Mrs. Finnigan's face as she replied:

"It's all very well for uz, Jimmy, but, do what I will, I can't rid myself of them two faces—the woman's and the bit of a girl's—that looked in at the door to see was John Ryan within, the last night the little shop was open, and it's not with my good will we made the change. We'd a nate little grocery business, and we'd 'a' made it nater, wid a place like this in a good neighborhood, and our sows would—"

"Thin I've heard quite enough of our sows of late," interrupted Mr. Finnigan, angrily; "and it's trying my soul you are wid your senseless prating. How often must I tell you that I've promised the praste to keep none but good dacent liquors, and never to sell to man or boy that's had enough, let alone too much? So now you may go up to the foine room that I've furnished for your own comfort—small thanks to me; and when I see your face again, I hope it won't blacken the air about it as it's doing now."

Mrs. Finnigan was wise enough to go to the "foine room" without further parley; admitting to herself as she went that it was not in nature for Jimmy to be suddenly put in possession of those rows of shining bottles without "thying" the contents of two or three.

The new business prospered beyond Mr. Finnigan's wildest hopes. He had wisely chosen a stand at the junction of two streets which were chiefly occupied by day-laborers, and those who were not caught as they went to work in the morning—and often those who were as well—were pretty sure to fall into the net as they came home at night.

The fried oyster with every drink, and free lunch from ten to twelve, had been found so profitable on the first day that the sign was never removed. The fried oyster, under Mr. Finnigan's careful supervision, was always plentifully salted, and the free lunch consisted generally of dry crackers and pungent cheese, varied once or twice a week by a red herring or a small plate of highly seasoned stew for each guest. Mrs. Finnigan having once or twice ventured to omit the red pepper from the latter dish, on the plea that it compelled her to "snaze the head off her intirely," was no longer entrusted with the seasoning; her husband, who, in his own peculiar fashion, still loved her, preferred attending to this branch of the business himself to engaging in a daily altercation with her.

Before the opening of the Harmony Saloon the neighbourhood had been a remarkably quiet and peaceful one; but now street fights, domestic quarrels, and noisy mirth began to attract the attention of the police to that particular quarter of the town. Mr. Finnigan found it rather difficult to adhere to his resolution not to sell liquor to any one who was "full." Several times he yielded through absolute fear of the drunken threats hurled at him, and several more times he professed to have been deceived by the entirely sober manner of his customer. Some of the more decent people in the neighbourhood made vigorous efforts for the indictment of the Harmony Saloon as a nuisance, but they had neither money nor influence; it was near the time for an important city election, and offence would have been given, not only to Mr. Finnigan, but to a large number of voters who were members of his profession; so nothing was done, even when, after a side-door to the saloon had been unobtrusively cut, it was more than rumored that a quiet drink on Sunday morning was among the attractions of the Harmony Saloon.

One woman, confident that she had a clear case went to enter a complaint, when the following dialogue ensued:

"You say that Mr. James Finnigan sells liquor on Sunday; can you prove it?"

"That can I, foine! I stud at the open door, the side door it was, and I saw Pat McGinnis standing in front the bar—he's me own sister's son, and I'd know him from a dozen like him—and I saw Jimmy Finnigan, bad 'cess till him! lift down the brandy-bottle from the shelf, and pour the length of me longest finger in a glass, and I saw Pat raise it till his mouth, and empty it at one swallow, and he telling his mother—that's me own sister, you'll understand, and a widdy in the bargain—that he hadn't a cint in his pocket but the night before, and her husband dead, and the childer frettin' wid the hunger and cold!"

"Will Patrick McGinnis swear that what you saw him drink was brandy?"

"Dade, thin, he won't, if you'd bate him black and blue—the more fool he!"

"And are you prepared to swear that, to your own personal knowledge, what you saw Pat McGinnis drinking was brandy?"

"Me personal knowledge, is it? I'll swear to all I've jist said, twice over, and what more wud anybody want?"

"He can't be convicted on that; for all you know it might have been cold tea or coffee. You'll have to bring proof to sustain your charge before it's worth anything."

"Thin I'm to understand," with a scornful toss of her head, "that all that's left for me to do is to walk in and take a drink of a Sunday morning, and thin come here and swear I tuk it! Me, a dacent woman, with little childer of me own? And that's the law! I'll wish you a good morning, sir. Law!" she muttered, as she strode wrathfully away; "sure if they kape the law in this country, it's because there's none worth mintoning to kape! But if that's the law, I'll be up wid it. Who knows but me own home will be the next to go, for as steady as John is yet?"

For many months a commodious fruit-stand immediately opposite the Harmony Saloon had been untenanted. The last tenant had combined an eating-stand with the fruit business; but as the saloon waxed the other waned, until at last the proprietor had left "the unequal strife," and sought a fresh field. Soon after the episode just narrated it became evident that some rash mortal was about to dare his fate by another attempt at the long-deserted stall. A little man, who, owing to the fact that one leg was shorter than the other, made a slight courtesy with every step he took, appeared on the scene very early one morning, armed with bucket, mop, paints, and paint-brush, and by noon the stall shone resplendent in bright red paint, picked out with equally bright yellow, a touch of gilding here and there adding greatly to the general effect. Along the top, in somewhat irregular gilt letters, which showed equally well whether the stall was open or closed, appeared the legend:

T. LEATHERBERRY.

HOT COFFEE, HOT TEA, HOT OYSTERS.

FRUIT, CAKES, CANDY, NUTS.

There must have been a good deal of "drying" in the paint, for at a still earlier hour the following morning the proprietor arrived, trundling a heavily loaded wheelbarrow, and followed by a tall, stout, comely, middle-aged woman, who carried a large basket; and by six o'clock a sort of booth of stout canvas at one end of the stall made a cozy eating-room; two tall stools stood within it; close to the spotlessly clean counter, behind which a small charcoal furnace glowed; a bright tin coffee-pot, a large earthen tea-pot, and a kettle for stewing the oysters were in readiness at that end of the shelves, the other end being adorned with sundry glass jars full of stick-candy, a row of red apples, another of oranges, and another of gingerbread cut in various fanciful and grotesque shapes. There was a general air of comfort and cleanliness about the stand, which, on that frosty November morning, was exceedingly attractive. And two cards, adorned with large red letters, hung just below the permanent sign. One said:

"Opening Day! A cup of first-class coffee given away with every stew!"

The other:

"Opening Day! A cup of knock-you-down-and-carry-you-out tea given away with every cake or pie!"

The pies, comfortable, solid, home-made affairs, were arranged on a shelf under the counter, one or two samples being left upon it by way of temptation.

A number of Mr. Finnigan's regular customers crossed the street, upon leaving the saloon, to satisfy their curiosity regarding these signs, and for every one the little man had a cheery word and smile. The woman had gone home when the arrangements had been

completed. The legend concerning the tea met with special favour, and several of the workmen remarked that they would be various things—if they wouldn't have tried it if they had seen the sign before going into Finnigan's. To these the little man pleasantly replied that he should be on hand at noon, and again when they went home in the evening, and that they would be satisfied, he thought, with the quality of their drinks if they would try them. One or two men inquired if he did not mean to keep ale or beer, but he replied seriously that he would not try to cut into Mr. Finnigan's custom by any such tricks as that, he hoped!

When the workmen filed home, a little after six o'clock in the evening, there was a savoury smell of oysters and coffee in the air. The furnace was glowing; a lantern with red sides swung in front of the stall, and a pile of fresh rolls peeped through a white cloth on the counter. About half the men whose way led them between the two places paused, hesitated, and finally decided in favour of the stall, and for nearly an hour trade was brisk; Mrs. Leatherberry appeared from within the canvas booth; cups of hot tea and coffee passed rapidly over the counter; pies and gingerbread found their way into empty dinner-baskets; at the rosy-faced woman's suggestion more than one "large stew" filled an empty dinner-kettle, which she cheerfully washed and scalded in the capacious dishpail behind the counter. To tell the surprise and delight of the waiting Bridgets and Kathleens upon the receipt of a sober husband and a hot stew of oysters for supper into the bargain would take too much both of time and space. And on the following morning, although not more than half-a-dozen men decided in favor of Mr. Leatherberry, he did not feel discouraged; he knew the strength of the temptations which mastered the rest, and he did not expect the blade and the ear and the full corn in the ear all in one day.

His charges were moderate: five cents a cup for the tea and the coffee, two rolls for a cent, ten cents for a good bowl of oyster soup with half-a-dozen honestly counted oysters in it, ten cents for a good-sized pie made of nicely-stewed dried apples or peaches, varied by fresh apples when those on his stand began to "speck." The coffee and tea were not of a high grade, but they were well made and strong, and everything about the stall was spotlessly clean. After a week or two, a row of lending kettles, with Mr. Leatherberry's name in bright red letters encircling them, appeared on nails behind the counter, but they did not appear there long, being "out" nearly every evening until the following morning. A few were lost, but most of them were carefully returned the next day. As Mr. Leatherberry became better acquainted with his neighbors, he allowed his conversational powers to unfold. Patrick McGinnis remained firm in his allegiance to Finnigan, but was once or twice induced by his comrades to "try" Mr. Leatherberry's coffee, and on one of these occasions the little man inquired, "How much, Mr. McGinnis, does neighbor Finnigan ask for a glass of whiskey—if it's not an impertinent question?"

"He's nothing under tin cents a glass," replied Mr. McGinnis, loftily. "We're sure of the good old whiskey, there, at all times and saysons."

Mr. Leatherberry drew a small piece of chalk from his pocket, and, after a moment's rapid figuring on the upturned dishpan, exclaimed:

"It's really astonishing!"

"What is it that's astonishing?" inquired Patrick, eagerly, curiosity getting the better of dignity.

"At the rate of one drink a day," replied Mr. Leatherberry—"I don't assert that you take it, you know—but if you take it, you pay him \$36.50 in the course of a single year!"

"Why, that's more than the rint itself!" exclaimed Patrick, in astonished tones.

"May I ask what rent you pay?" asked the little man, deferentially, and adding, "we think our landlord asks pretty well for the two rooms we have, and we're talking of moving in the spring."

"Two dollars and a half a month for the two rooms," replied Patrick, warming to sociability by his good cup of coffee, "and one of them inside the other, without a window itself."

"I suppose you couldn't expect more for the money," said Mr. Leatherberry, thoughtfully; "but for five dollars a month, now, I think you might rent two good, well-lighted rooms."

"And where would we get the sixty dollars a year it would come to?" asked Patrick, somewhat scornfully.

Mr. Leatherberry figured a moment, and held up the dishpan with the following example upon it—

36.00

24.00

60.00

"You see I didn't count the fifty cents," he said, smiling.

"A cup of coffee like that is a good five cints' worth,"

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