

LONDON HORRORS.

(By the Special Correspondent of the Morning Post.)

It has long been the boast of moving panoramas that their chief aim is to convey instruction. They carry us across America, or from Southampton to India; they hop from city to city throughout Europe, or they glide past with certain pictures of Australia; but they avoid a sketch of London. No speculator has ever been bold enough to grapple with the back streets—the human warrens—on the south side of the metropolis; to start from Bermondsey, on the borders of Deptford, and wriggle through the existing miles of dirt, vice, and crime, as far as the Lambeth Marshes. Picturesque as poverty and wretchedness look upon canvas, free as pictures are from harsh voices and unpleasant smells, no attempt has ever been made to deal with the black-holes of London in this popular form, and the "Special Correspondent" still remains in possession of the property.

A very vast and melancholy property it is. Within the boundaries before mentioned, and down in the hollow of the water-side basin of London, lighted up at intervals with special markets of industry, or budding into short patches of honest trade, sinking every now and then into dark acres of crime, and covered everywhere with the vilest sores of prostitution, are something like 400,000 people, or one-seventh part of the whole metropolitan population. In many respects its standard of civilisation is lower than either that of Whitechapel or St. George's-in-the-East, especially in the Southwark and Waterloo-road districts. It has scores of streets that are rank and steaming with vice; streets where unwashed, drunken, fishy-eyed women hang by dozens out of the windows, beckoning to the passers-by. It has scores of streets filled with nothing but thieves, brown, unwholesome tramps' lodging-houses, and smoky receptacles for stolen goods. To look at such places—to know from experience that they have existed in this state for 20 years, and to learn from history that many have been notorious for more than a century—makes me doubt whether the world has really such things as working vestries, inspectors of nuisances, police authorities, and local self-government. I am no advocate for routing out the industrious poor from an overcrowded district to make room for stucco temples or ornamental squares. Such metropolitan improvements are merely quieting doses for grumbling ratepayers, and schemes for benefiting one corner of London at the expense of another. The working classes in most cases must be "near their bread," and there are acts of Parliament more than enough to exercise a control over the structure and arrangement of their dwellings. But the recognised haunts of vice and crime want no ventilation, no enlargement, no tinkering philanthropy. They ought to be ploughed up by the roots. The Mint, in Southwark, is still the dear old collection of dens which it was in the days of our grandfathers, and, if it has no murky cellars like old St. Giles's, this virtue is due more to geology than local self-government. The foundations are nothing but rotten muck. The whole district is far below the level of high-water mark in the river, and the sewage in many places bubbles up through the floors. The courts and alleys branch off on either side at every step, leading into endless mazes of low, sooty passages, squares, and "rents." Some of these holes and corners must have received their titles from the most bitter satirists, for they bear such names as White-hind-alley, and Dove-court—emblems of purity—Rose-passage and Mellor-street. In some cases a little learning and mystery are combined in the name, and one row of stunted dwellings is known as Pariaetalia-place. In another case the proprietor of the property is less ambitious, and is contented with the humble and appropriate name of Halfpenny-court. Considering the alarming fruitfulness of mothers in most of those wretched neighbourhoods, I should like to have some of the places christened Malthus-yard.

The dreary zig-zag panorama of the south side of London—the part that is popularly known under the head of "over the water"—might open at Lower Bermondsey, near Jacob's Island. Here we begin with an old, dilapidated red-brick mansion, sunken, decayed, chipped, and neglected, let out in tenements, with rowing-sculls in its passage, a boat lying high and dry in its yard, and its old garden covered with courts and huts of the most wretched character. Its overhanging, hood-like porch is still full of the ancient mouldings, representing clusters of fruits and flowers, and containing the date, *in relief*, of 1700. Near this place is a black, shattered wooden building, which looks in its outlines like those houses which children draw upon slates at the early age of three years. The courts at the back are crowded with hovels whose rooms have not always got doors and whose windows have not always got sashes. There are bare, black bits of ground, occasionally containing one withered tree; and close courts with public yards, where the inhabitants have the usual privy in common. The rents are 2s. and 3s. a week by the room, or 4s. a week by the house. In one yard a ragged crippled man and a ragged child were spinning a rope, while a sooty woman, with an infant, looked on from one of the window holes; and in another yard a decent old woman, whose room sent forth a gust of hot irons, was quarrelling with a bricklayer about the drain, and being told that "she was never satisfied."

Going towards London-bridge you can branch off on either side, and visit numerous small courts and alleys, more or less dirty, neglected, and degraded, but you will find nothing, perhaps, worse than Magdalen-court, in Tooley-street. It is a blind alley of small two-storied houses—close, dwarfed, foul, and unwholesome—filled with the lowest order of people who prey upon sailors, and curtained at intervals with patched clothes hanging across to dry from house to house. The rents are high, as an extra profit is always made out of such places, and the houses let for about 7s. a-week. There are hundreds of such courts at Wapping and Rotherhithe, on both sides of the river, filled with coarse drunken women, whose thick fingers are covered with showy rings. Sometimes a crew of Malay sailors are enticed into these traps; raw spirits are sent for in basins and quart pots from the neighbouring public houses; robbery, quarrels, madness follow, as a matter of course; knives are drawn, a "muck" is run, and the whole bleeding, riotous, drunken population roll out into the open thoroughfare.

Bermondsey-street will show you a few more holes and corners on your road to the back of St. George's Church, in the Borough, every place being painfully like every other place, and every inhabitant, with a few straggling exceptions, painfully like every other inhabitant. When you arrive at the back of the church, you may look up Kent-street, another nest of dirt, vice, and overcrowding, which is in much the same state as it was when Smollett called it "a beggarly and ruinous suburb," and bemoaned the necessity for bringing visitors from the Continent through it on their road into London. It was then the highway from Southwark to Dover—part of the Old Kent-road—and the French mail was often robbed when passing along it. The plan was to draw a rope across the entrance, over which the horse stumbled, and the postboy had to return to the city and report the loss of his bags. Its character now is very slightly improved, and it is still the worthy companion of its neighbour, the Mint.

Victoria Theatre, formerly called the Coburg, is a large, well-built house, and has been celebrated in its time for good acting; but it is now one of the "threepenny theatres," giving a very coarse kind of drama, suited to its audiences. The fittings are faded, the walls are smeared with greasy dirt, the pit floor is muddy and half covered with orange peel and broken bottles, and the whole place is a little cleaner than the courts and alleys at its back, but nothing more. The audience are worth looking at; and on the night of a popular drama, such as "Oliver Twist" or "Jack Sheppard," the gallery presents a most extraordinary picture. Half the evil, low-browed, lowering faces in London are wedged in twelve-hundred deep, perspiring, watchful, silent. Every man is in his yellow shirt sleeves, every woman has her battered bonnet in her lap. The yell when Bill Sykes murders Nancy is like the roar of a thousand wild beasts, and they show their disapprobation of the art and their approbation of the actor, by cursing him in no measured terms. I once heard an eminent performer say that he looked upon hisses as applause when he played Iago; and if he played it at the Victoria Theatre, earnestly and powerfully, he would stand a chance of being spit upon and pelted. The most daring "star" never ventures to appear at this dramatic temple.