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PUFF AND PUSH

It is said that everything is to be had in London. There is truth enough in the observation; indeed, rather too much. The conviction that everything is to be had, whether you are in want of it or not, is forced upon you with a persistence that becomes oppressive; and you find that, owing to everything being so abundantly plentiful, there is one thing which is *not* to be had, do what you will, though you would like it, have it if you could—and that one thing is just one day's exemption from the persecutions of Puff in its myriad shapes and disguises. But it is not to be allowed; all the agencies that will work at all are pressed into the service of pushing and puffing traffic; and we are fast becoming, from a nation of shopkeepers, a nation in a shop. If you walk abroad, it is between walls swathed in puffs; if you are lucky enough to drive your gig, you have to 'cut in and out' between square vans of crawling puffs; if, alighting, you cast your eyes

upon the ground, the pavement is stencilled with puffs; if in an evening stroll you turn your eye towards the sky, from a paper balloon the clouds drop puffs. You get into an omnibus, out of the shower, and find yourself among half a score of others, buried alive in puffs; you give the conductor sixpence, and he gives you three pennies in change, and you are forced to pocket a puff, or perhaps two, stamped indelibly on the copper coin of the realm. You wander out into the country, but the puffs have gone thither before you, turn in what direction you may; and the green covert, the shady lane, the barks of columned beeches and speckled birches, of gnarled oaks and rugged elms—no longer the mysterious haunts of nymphs and dryads, who have been driven far away by the omnivorous demon of the shop—are all invaded by Puff, and subdued to the office of his ministering spirits. Puff, in short, is the monster megatherium of modern society, who runs rampaging about the world, his broad back in the air, and his nose on the ground, playing all sorts of ludicrous antics, doing very little good, beyond filling his own insatiable maw, and nobody knows how much mischief in accomplishing that.

Push is an animal of a different breed, naturally a thorough-going, steady, and fast-trotting hack, who mostly keeps in the Queen's highway, and knows where he is going. Unfortunately, he is given to break into a gallop now and then; and whenever in this vicious mood, is pretty sure to take up with Puff, and the two are apt to make wild work of it when they scamper

abroad together. The worst of it is, that nobody knows which is which of these two termagant trampers: both are thoroughly protean creatures, changing shapes and characters, and assuming a thousand different forms every day; so that it is a task all but impossible to distinguish one from the other. Hence a man may get upon the back of either without well knowing whither he will be carried, or what will be the upshot of his journey.

Dropping our parable, and leaving the supposed animals to run their indefinite career, let us take a brief glance at some of the curiosities of the science of Puffing and Pushing—for both are so blended, that it is impossible to disentangle one from the other—as it is carried on at the present hour in the metropolis.

The business of the shopkeeper, as well as of all others who have goods to sell, is of course to dispose of his wares as rapidly as possible, and in the dearest market. This market he has to create, and he must do it in one of two ways: either he must succeed in persuading the public, by some means or other, that it is to their advantage to deal with him, or he must wait patiently and perseveringly until they have found that out, which they will inevitably do if it is a fact. No shop ever pays its expenses, as a general rule, for the first ten or twenty months, unless it be literally crammed down the public throat by the instrumentality of the press and the boarding; and it is therefore a question, whether it is cheaper to wait for a business to grow up, like a young plant, or to force it into sudden expansion by artificial means. When a business is manageable by one or two hands,

the former expedient is the better one, and as such is generally followed, after a little preliminary advertising, to apprise the neighbourhood of its whereabouts. But when the proprietor has an army of assistants to maintain and to salarise, the case is altogether different: the expense of waiting, perhaps for a couple of years, would swallow up a large capital. On this account, he finds it more politic to arrest the general attention by a grand stir in all quarters, and some obtrusive demonstration palpable to all eyes, which shall blazon his name and pretensions through every street and lane of mighty London. Sometimes it is a regiment of foot, with placarded banners; sometimes one of cavalry, with bill-plastered vehicles and bands of music; sometimes it is a phalanx of bottled humanity, crawling about in labelled triangular phials of wood, corked with woful faces; and sometimes it is all these together, and a great deal more besides. By this means, he conquers reputation, as a despot sometimes carries a throne, by a *coup d'état*, and becomes a celebrity at once to the million, among whom his name is infinitely better known than those of the greatest benefactors of mankind. All this might be tolerable enough if it ended here; but, unhappily, it does not. Experiment has shewn that, just as gudgeons will bite at anything when the mud is stirred up at the bottom of their holes, so the ingenuous public will lay out their money with anybody who makes a prodigious noise and clatter about the bargains he has to give. The result of this discovery is, the wholesale daily publication of lies of most enormous calibre,

and their circulation, by means which we shall briefly notice, in localities where they are likely to prove most productive.

The advertisement in the daily or weekly papers, the placard on the walls or boardings, the perambulating vans and banner-men, and the doomed hosts of bottle-imps and extinguishers, however successful each may be in attracting the gaze and securing the patronage of the multitude, fail, for the most part, of enlisting the confidence of a certain order of customers, who, having plenty of money to spend, and a considerable share of vanity to work upon, are among the most hopeful fish that fall into the shopkeeper's net. These are the female members of a certain order of families—the amiable and genteel wives and daughters of the commercial aristocracy, and their agents, of this great city. They reside throughout the year in the suburbs: they rarely read the newspapers; it would not be genteel to stand in the streets spelling over the bills on the walls; and the walking and riding equipages of puffing are things decidedly low in their estimation. They must, therefore, be reached by some other means; and these other means are before us as we write, in the shape of a pile of circular-letters in envelopes of all sorts—plain, hot-pressed, and embossed; with addresses—some in manuscript, and others in print—some in a gracefully genteel running-hand, and others decidedly and rather obtrusively official in character, as though emanating from government authorities—each and all, however, containing the bait which the lady-gudgeon is expected to swallow. Before

proceeding to open a few of them for the benefit of the reader, we must apprise him of a curious peculiarity which marks their delivery. Whether they come by post, as the major part of them do, not a few of them requiring a double stamp, or whether they are delivered by hand, one thing is remarkable—*they always come in the middle of the day*, between the hours of eleven in the forenoon and five in the afternoon, when, as a matter of course, the master of the house is not in the way. Never, by any accident, does the morning-post, delivered in the suburbs between nine and ten, produce an epistle of this kind. Let us now open a few of them, and learn from their contents what is the shopkeeper's estimate of the gullibility of the merchant's wife, or his daughter, or of the wife or daughter of his managing clerk.

The first that comes to hand is addressed thus: 'No. 2795.—declarative notice.—*From the Times, August 15, 1851.*' The contents are a circular, handsomely printed on three crowded sides of royal quarto glazed post, and containing a list of articles for peremptory disposal, under unheard-of advantages, on the premises of Mr Gobblemadam, at No. 541 New Ruin Street. Without disguising anything more than the addresses of these puffing worthies, we shall quote *verbatim* a few paragraphs from their productions. The catalogue of bargains in the one before us comprises almost every species of textile manufacture, as well native as foreign—among which silks, shawls, dresses, furs, and mantles are the most prominent; and amazing bargains they are—witness the following extracts:

'A marvellous variety of fancy silks, cost from 4 to 5 guineas each, will be sold for L.1, 19s. 6d. each.

Robes of damas and broche (foreign), cost 6 guineas, to be sold for 2½ guineas.

Embroidered muslin robes, newest fashion, cost 18s. 9d., to be sold for 9s. 6d.

Worked lace dresses, cost 35s., to be sold at 14s. 9d.

Do. do. cost 28s. 6d., to be sold at 7s. 6d.

Newest dresses, of fashionable materials, worth 35s., to be sold for 9s. 9d.

Splendid Paisley shawls, worth 2½ guineas, for 16s.

Cashmere shawls (perfect gems), cost 4 guineas, to be sold for 35s.'

A long list of similar bargains closes with a declaration that, although these prices are mentioned, a clearance of the premises, rather than a compensation for the value of the goods, is the great object in view; that the articles will be got rid of regardless of price; and that '*the disposal will assume the character of a gratuitous distribution, rather than of an actual sale.*' This is pretty well for the first hap-hazard plunge into the half-bushel piled upon our table. Mr Gobblemadam may go down. Let us see what the next will produce.

The second is addressed thus: '*To be opened within two hours after delivery.—special commission.—Final Audit, 30th October 1851.*' The contents are a closely-printed extra-royal folio broadside, issued by the firm of Messrs Shavelass and Swallowher, of Tottering Terrace West. It contains a voluminous

list of useful domestic goods, presenting the most enormous bargains, in the way of sheetings, shirtings, flannels, diapers, damasks, dimities, table-cloths, &c. &c. The economical housewife is cautioned by this generous firm, that to disregard the present opportunity would be the utmost excess of folly, as the whole stock is to be peremptorily sold considerably *under half the cost price*. The following are a few of the items:

'Irish lines, warranted genuine, 9-1/2d. per yard.

Fine cambric handkerchiefs, 2s. 6d. per dozen.

Curtain damask, in all colours, 6-1/2d. per yard.

Swiss curtains, elegantly embroidered, four yards long, for 6s. 9d. a pair—cost 17s. 6d.

Drawing-room curtains, elaborately wrought, at 8s. 6d. a pair—cost 21s.'

The bargains, in short, as Messrs Shavelass and Swallowher observe, are of such an astounding description, as 'to strike all who witness them with wonder, amazement, and surprise;' and 'demand inspection from every lady who desires to unite superiority of taste with genuine quality and economy.'

The next is a remarkably neat envelope, with a handsomely embossed border, bearing the words, 'on especial service' under the address, and winged with a two-penny stamp. The enclosure is a specimen of fine printing on smooth, thin vellum, in the form of a quarto catalogue, with a deep, black-bordered title-page, emanating from the dreary establishment of Messrs Moan and Groan, of Cypress Row. Here commerce condescends

to sympathy, and measures forth to bereaved and afflicted humanity the outward and visible symbols of their hidden griefs. Here, when you enter his gloomy penetralia, and invoke his services, the sable-clad and cadaverous-featured shopman asks you, in a sepulchral voice—we are not writing romance, but simple fact—whether you are to be suited for inextinguishable sorrow, or for mere passing grief; and if you are at all in doubt upon the subject, he can solve the problem for you, if you lend him your confidence for the occasion. He knows from long and melancholy experience the agonising intensity of wo expressed by bombazine, crape, and Paramatta; can tell to a sigh the precise amount of regret that resides in a black bonnet; and can match any degree of internal anguish with its corresponding shade of colour, from the utter desolation and inconsolable wretchedness of dead and dismal black, to the transient sentiment of sorrowful remembrance so appropriately symbolised by the faintest shade of lavender or French gray. Messrs Moan and Groan know well enough, that when the heart is burdened with sorrow, considerations of economy are likely to be banished from the mind as out of place, and disrespectful to the memory of the departed; and, therefore, they do not affront their sorrowing patrons with the sublunary details of pounds, shillings, and pence. They speed on the wings of the post to the house of mourning, with the benevolent purpose of comforting the afflicted household. They are the first, after the stroke of calamity has fallen, to mingle the business of life with its regrets;

and to cover the woes of the past with the allowable vanities of the present. Step by step, they lead their melancholy patrons along the meandering margin of their flowing pages—from the very borders of the tomb, through all the intermediate changes by which sorrow publishes to the world its gradual subsidence, and land them at last in the sixteenth page, restored to themselves and to society, in the frontbox of the Opera, glittering in 'splendid head-dresses in pearl,' in 'fashionably elegant turbans,' and in 'dress-caps trimmed with blonde and Brussels lace.' For such benefactors to womankind—the dears—of course no reward can be too great; and, therefore, Messrs Moan and Groan, strong in their modest sense of merit, make no parade of prices. They offer you all that in circumstances of mourning you can possibly want; they scorn to do you the disgrace of imagining that you would drive a bargain on the very brink of the grave; and you are of course obliged to them for the delicacy of their reserve on so commonplace a subject, and you pay their bill in decorous disregard of the amount. It is true, that certain envious rivals have compared them to birds of prey, scenting mortality from afar, and hovering like vultures on the trail of death, in order to profit by his dart; but such 'caparisons,' as Mrs Malaprop says, 'are odorous,' and we will have nothing to do with them.

The next, and the last we shall examine ere Betty claims the whole mass to kindle her fires, is a somewhat bulky envelope, addressed in a neat hand: *To the Lady of the House*. It contains a couple of very voluminous papers, almost as

large as the broad page of *The Times*, one of which advert mysteriously to some appalling calamity, which has resulted in a 'most disastrous failure, productive of the most *intense excitement* in the commercial world.' We learn further on, that from various conflicting circumstances, which the writer does not condescend to explain, above L.150,000 worth of property has come into the hands of Messrs Grabble and Grab, of Smash Place, 'which they are resolute in summarily disposing of *on principles commensurate with the honourable position they hold in the metropolis.*' Then follows a list of tempting bargains, completely filling both the broad sheets. Here are a few samples:

Costly magnificent long shawls, manufactured at L.6, to be sold for 18s. 6d.

Fur victorines, usually charged 18s. 6d., to sell at 1s. 3d.

2500 shawls (Barège), worth 21s. each, to sell at 5s.

Embroidered satin shawls (magnificent), value 20 guineas each, to be sold for 3 guineas.'

The reader is probably satisfied by this time of the extraordinary cheapness of these inexhaustible wares, which thus go begging for purchasers in the bosoms of families. It is hardly necessary to inform him, that all these enormous pretensions are so many lying delusions, intended only to bring people in crowds to the shop, where they are effectually fleeced by the jackals in attendance. If the lady reader doubt the truth of our assertion, let her go for once to the establishment of Messrs Grabble and Grab last named. An omnibus from any part of the city or suburbs

will, as the circular informs you, set you down at the door. Upon entering the shop, you are received by a polite inquiry from the 'walker' as to the purpose of your visit. You must say something in answer to his torrent of civility, and you probably name the thing you want, or at least which you are willing to have at the price named in the sheet transmitted to you through the post. Suppose you utter the word 'shawl.' 'This way, madam,' says he; and forthwith leads you a long dance to the end of the counter, where he consigns you over to the management of a plausible genius invested with the control of the shawl department. You have perhaps the list of prices in your hand, and you point out the article you wish to see. The fellow shews you fifty things for which you have no occasion, in spite of your reiterated request for the article in the list. He states his conviction, in a flattering tone, that *that* article would not become you, and recommends those he offers as incomparably superior. If you insist, which you rarely can, he is at length sorry to inform you that the article is unfortunately just now out of stock, depreciating it at the same time as altogether beneath *your* notice; and in the end succeeds in cramming you with something which you don't want, and for which you pay from 15 to 20 per cent. more than your own draper would have charged you for it.

The above extracts are given in illustration of the last new discovery in the science of puffing—a discovery by which, through the agency of the press, the penny-post, and the last new London Directory, the greatest rogues are enabled to practise

upon the simplicity of our better-halves, while we think them secure in the guardianship of home. We imagine that, practically, this science must be now pretty near completion. Earth, air, fire, and water, are all pressed into the service. It has its painters, and poets, and literary staff, from the bard who tunes his harp to the praise of the pantaloons of the great public benefactor Noses, to the immortal professoress of crochet and cross-stitch, who contracts for L.120 a year to puff in 'The Family Fudge' the superexcellent knitting and boar's-head cotton of Messrs Steel and Goldseye. It may be that something more is yet within the reach of human ingenuity. It remains to be seen whether we shall at some future time find puffs in the hearts of lettuces and summer-cabbages, or shell them from our green-peas and Windsor beans. It might be brought about, perhaps, were the market-gardeners enlisted in the cause; the only question is, whether it could be made to pay.

RECOLLECTIONS OF A POLICE-OFFICER

THE MONOMANIAC

The following narrative relates more to medical than to criminal history; but as the affair came in some degree under my notice as a public officer, I have thought it might not be altogether out of place in these slight outlines of police experience. Strange and unaccountable as it may at first appear, its general truth will hardly be questioned by those who have had opportunities of observing the fantastic delusions which haunt and dominate the human brain in certain phases of mental aberration.

On arriving in London, in 1831, I took lodgings at a Mr Renshawe's, in Mile-End Road, not far from the turnpike-gate. My inducement to do so, was partly the cheapness and neatness of the accommodation, partly that the landlord's maternal uncle, a Mr Oxley, was slightly known to me. Henry Renshawe I knew by reputation only, he having left Yorkshire ten or eleven years before, and even that knowledge was slight and vague. I had heard that a tragical event had cast a deep shadow over his after-life; that he had been for some months the inmate of a private lunatic asylum; and that some persons believed his brain had never

thoroughly recovered its originally healthy action. In this opinion, both my wife and myself very soon concurred; and yet I am not sure that we could have given a satisfactory reason for such belief. He was, it is true, usually kind and gentle, even to the verge of simplicity, but his general mode of expressing himself and conducting business was quite coherent and sensible; although, in spite of his resigned cheerfulness of tone and manner, it was at times quite evident, that whatever the mental hurt he had received, it had left a rankling, perhaps remorseful, sting behind. A small, well-executed portrait in his sitting-room suggested a conjecture of the nature of the calamity which had befallen him. It was that of a fair, mild-eyed, very young woman, but of a pensive, almost mournful, cast of features, as if the coming event, briefly recorded in the lower right-hand corner of the painting, had already, during life and health, cast its projecting shadow over her. That brief record was this:—'Laura Hargreaves, born 1804; drowned 1821.' No direct allusion to the picture ever passed his lips, in my hearing, although, from being able to chat together of Yorkshire scenes and times, we speedily became excellent friends. Still, there were not wanting, from time to time, significant indications, though difficult to place in evidence, that the fire of insanity had not been wholly quenched, but still smouldered and glowed beneath the habit-hardened crust which concealed it from the careless or casual observer. Exciting circumstances, not very long after my arrival in the metropolis, unfortunately kindled those brief wild sparkles into a furious and

consuming flame.

Mr Renshawe was in fair circumstances—that is, his income, derived from funded property alone, was nearly L.300 a year; but his habits were close, thrifty, almost miserly. His personal appearance was neat and gentlemanly, but he kept no servant. A charwoman came once a day to arrange his chamber, and perform other household work, and he usually dined, very simply, at a coffee-house or tavern. His house, with the exception of a sitting and bed room, was occupied by lodgers; amongst these, was a pale, weakly-looking young man, of the name of Irwin. He was suffering from pulmonary consumption—a disease induced, I was informed, by his careless folly in remaining in his wet clothes after having assisted, during the greater part of the night, at a large fire at a coach-factory. His trade was in gold and silver lace-work—bullion for epaulettes, and so on; and as he had a good connection with several West-end establishments, his business appeared to be a thriving one; so much so, that he usually employed several assistants of both sexes. He occupied the first floor, and a workshop at the end of the garden. His wife, a pretty-featured, well-formed, graceful young woman, of not more than two or three-and-twenty, was, they told me, the daughter of a schoolmaster, and certainly had been gently and carefully nurtured. They had one child, a sprightly, curly-haired, bright-eyed boy, nearly four years old. The wife, Ellen Irwin, was reputed to be a first-rate hand at some of the lighter parts of her husband's business; and her

efforts to lighten his toil, and compensate by increased exertion for his daily diminishing capacity for labour, were unwearying and incessant. Never have I seen a more gentle, thoughtful tenderness, than was displayed by that young wife towards her suffering, and sometimes not quite evenly-tempered partner, who, however, let me add, appeared to reciprocate truthfully her affection; all the more so, perhaps, that he knew their time together upon earth was already shrunk to a brief span. In my opinion, Ellen Irwin was a handsome, even an elegant young person: this, however, is in some degree a matter of taste. But no one could deny that the gentle kindness, the beaming compassion, that irradiated her features as she tended the fast-sinking invalid, rendered her at such times absolutely beautiful—*angelised* her, to use an expression of my wife's, with whom she was a prime favourite. I was self-debating for about the twentieth time one evening, where it was I had formerly seen her, with that sad, mournful look of hers; for seen her I was sure I had, and not long since either. It was late; I had just returned home; my wife was in the sick-room, and I had entered it with two or three oranges:—'Oh, now I remember,' I suddenly exclaimed, just above my breath; 'the picture in Mr Renshawe's room! What a remarkable coincidence!'

A low, chuckling laugh, close at my elbow, caused me to turn quickly towards the door. Just within the threshold stood Mr Renshawe, looking like a white stone-image rather than a living man, but for the fierce sparkling of his strangely gleaming eyes,

and the mocking, triumphant curl of his lips. 'You, too, have at last observed it, then?' he muttered, faintly echoing the undertone in which I spoke: 'I have known the truth for many weeks.' The manner, the expression, not the words, quite startled me. At the same moment, a cry of women rang through the room, and I immediately seized Mr Renshawe by the arm, and drew him forcibly away, for there was that in his countenance which should not meet the eyes of a dying man.

'What were you saying? What truth have you known for weeks?' I asked, as soon as we had reached his sitting-room.

Before he could answer, another wailing sound ascended from the sick-room. Lightning leaped from Renshawe's lustrous, dilated eyes, and the exulting laugh again, but louder, burst from his lips: 'Ha! ha!' he fiercely exclaimed. 'I know that cry! It is Death's!—Death's! Thrice-blessed Death, whom I have so often ignorantly cursed! But that,' he added quickly, and peering sharply in my face, 'was when, as you know, people said'—and he ground his teeth with rage—'people said I was crazed—mad!'

'What can you mean by this wild talk, my friend?' I replied in as unconcerned and quieting a tone as I could immediately assume. 'Come, sit down: I was asking the meaning of your strange words below, just now.'

'The meaning of my words? You know as well as I do. Look there!'

'At the painting? Well?'

'You have seen the original,' he went on with the same excited

tone and gestures. 'It crossed me like a flash of lightning. Still, it is strange she does not know me. It is sure she does not! But I am changed, no doubt—sadly changed!' he added, dejectedly, as he looked in a mirror.

'Can you mean that I have seen Laura Hargreaves here?' I stammered, thoroughly bewildered. 'She who was drowned ten or eleven years ago?'

'To be sure—to be sure! It was so believed, I admit, by everybody—by myself, and the belief drove me mad! And yet, I now remember, when at times I was calm—when the pale face, blind staring eyes, and dripping hair, ceased for awhile to pursue and haunt me, the low, sweet voice and gentle face came back, and I knew she lived, though all denied it. But look, it is her very image!' he added fiercely, his glaring eyes flashing from the portrait to my face alternately.

'Whose image?'

'Whose image!—Why, Mrs Irwin's, to be sure. You yourself admitted it just now.' I was so confounded, that for several minutes I remained stupidly and silently staring at the man. At length I said: 'Well, there *is* a likeness, though not so great as I imagined'—

'It is false!' he broke in furiously. 'It is her very self.'

'We'll talk of that to-morrow. You are ill, overexcited, and must go to bed. I hear Dr Garland's voice below: he shall come to you.'

'No—no—no!' he almost screamed. 'Send me no doctors; I

hate doctors! But I'll go to bed—since—since *you* wish it; but no doctors! Not for the world!' As he spoke, he shrank coweringly backwards, out of the room; his wavering, unquiet eyes fixed upon mine as long as we remained within view of each other: a moment afterwards, I heard him dart into his chamber, and bolt and double-lock the door.

It was plain that lunacy, but partially subdued, had resumed its former mastery over the unfortunate gentleman. But what an extraordinary delusion! I took a candle, and examined the picture with renewed curiosity. It certainly bore a strong resemblance to Mrs Irwin: the brown, curling hair, the pensive eyes, the pale fairness of complexion, were the same; but it was scarcely more girlish, more youthful, than the young matron was now, and the original, had she lived, would have been by this time approaching to thirty years of age! I went softly down stairs and found, as I feared, that George Irwin was gone. My wife came weeping out of the death-chamber, accompanied by Dr Garland, to whom I forthwith related what had just taken place. He listened with attention and interest; and after some sage observations upon the strange fancies which now and then take possession of the minds of monomaniacs, agreed to see Mr Renshawe at ten the next morning. I was not required upon duty till eleven; and if it were in the physician's opinion desirable, I was to write at once to the patient's uncle, Mr Oxley.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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