

## *In the New Oriental Department*

ONE hour to closing time in the X and Y Stores. Here, in the new Oriental Department, the air is heavy and enervating—pungent with odours of Eastern woodwork, laden with the perfumed dust from piles of rich Eastern fabrics and warmed with the fumes of incense in metal boxes and the vapour from quaint little coloured lamps. Especially oppressive and exhausting in the dimly-lit corner where the pale-haired assistant half leans against the Indian screen and languidly sweeps the "new line" of Persian glass with his long peacock feather brush.

"Wike up, Alf," whispers a passing confrère, "yer' 'arf asleep, and gvnor's piping yer."

The friendly warning was needed.

"Mr Nasher—attention!"

It is the voice of the superintendent—short and sharp, like the crack of a whip.

"Oh, yes, madam," says Mr Alf Nasher, rousing himself from his languorous reverie. "Quite a new line. The 'ole of these trays of glorr was purchased by aar travellers in the market place of Bagdad. Nothing like it ever reached London before. Sim'lar to Bo'emian, but the Bo'emians can't produce these exquisite opal tints, nor blow the threads so fragile-like. Perfect spider's web! Make a very beautiful wedding present, that tall pair, I should say, madam, or the small ones, or one alone, madam."

But, while he cries his wares in orthodox fashion, keeping his almost colourless grey eyes fixed upon the lady's animated face, the pupils dilate until nearly the whole iris is swallowed by their darker shade; then slowly contract, become smaller and smaller until they are as black spots in their vague surroundings, and the young man begins to dream.

All this afternoon, since his indigestible, salt-beef dinner, he has been assailed by the press and throng of his trance-world, finding vehicles for brain-wanderings in every detail of his work, in despite of his struggles to keep his feet on the solid ground of everyday life.

The lady customers—and in this department nearly all the customers are of the softer sex—at once enervate and torment by drawing him, blindfold, into the realm of luminous shadows and diffused and rose-coloured light. Blondes and brunettes—the young specimens fresh, innocent, adorable in their gauche sim-

IN THE  
NEW ORI-  
ENTAL DE-  
PARTMENT

IN THE  
NEW ORI-  
ENTAL DE-  
PARTMENT

plicity; the maturer types in the flush and fire of high-toned and dragon-fly loveliness; the faint carmine tints of old porcelain, lips like geranium petals, curls like spun gold; the thick, white skins and heavy, black tresses, long lashes, full eyelids veiling the mystery of amorous Sphinxes; diffident Madonnas; flashing Cleopatras; all moulds, all forms of feminine grace or seductiveness—all troubling, tormenting him, since the clogging mid-day meal, all furnishing irresistible material for dreams.

Suppose that he were rich, preposterously wealthy, rich enough to buy up the X and Y, stock, lot and barrel, if the fancy moved him, from the roof tree and Toys No. 1 to the cellars and the overflow of sewing-machines from No. 20.

Ransacking departments, building them in with invoiceless goods, could he not win them—*buy* them all? Why shy at the word? Are they not all of them to be bought if you are rich enough to pay the price? Who among them would long withstand the virtue-sapping seduction of the Jewellery Department—all his, from the tiaras on sale or return from the great Midland houses, to the little “merry-thought” brooches (9 carat, one split pearl, 18s. 9d.), bought net and stocked by the gross? He could gauge the power of the Jewellery Department by those merry-thoughts. For had he not given one to Sybil Cartwright, of the middle counter of “Gloves, Hose and Underwear”?

A brown-haired, moon-faced maid—Sybil—with hair swept over egg-shell ears, and almond eyes, darkly lustrous as a summer's night on the banks of the Karun, and the haughty insouciance which can laugh at the wooing of a rosetted shop-walker or a ground-floor desk clerk, not to mention an undecorated assistant! But to be bought, no doubt, like the countesses and duchesses whose fur-clad menials fill the “out” benches of the hall. “What are in all those saddle-bag sacks which I see the warehouse men carrying all day long into the Deposit Account Office?” asks Sybil disdainfully. “Gold, young lidy, *my* gold. Same as what I've bought the ole Stores with.”

“Praad” she might be, and cold too, and dignified in demeanour; but he could set her dancing for his pleasure in a marvellous, secret flat, obtained through the X and Y House Agency, and furnished “remorseless” out of this very department, within a month—yes, dancing before him, dressed like some Nautch girl,

and all jingling and jangling with diamonds, rubies and sapphires, as she twisted and squirmed about to the muffled music of an X and Y "ten performer band," hidden away in the next room. "Praad, may be! but mine at last!"

Yet how restricted the power, how feeble the effect, of the vastest treasure here in England, in these prosaic, convention-ruled days! But to have the wealth and the power, too: to be an Eastern potentate, absolute, uncontrolled lord of all the land! Ah, Sultan and King! sensual, merciless, if you like, but splendid even in his depravement; capable of fine flashes of magnanimity to illumine the dark background of his soul's demoralization. "Lord of all this, my humming, bustling market-place, my walled city and my palace all in one—all these busy clerks and assistants my troops, bearers and servants; the liftmen my bronzed captains; the frock-coated commissionaires my corpulent, white-faced body-guard, safe and harmless guardians of the new block of women's sleeping accommodation, which I herewith appropriate as my seraglio, and over which I set them on guard." . . .

And now is seen one of those terrible occurrences, frightful examples of a despot's tyranny, which have made this young monarch at once famous and execrable in Oriental history. "Well, let the historians talk! What must be, must be. Kismet. I have spoken."

Throwing himself down on the finest of the embroidered divans, while ready hands bring forward the huge hookah—that great unsaleable thing that has stood by the A desk of the Tobacco Department for the last three years—he summons the now trembling secretary, his grand vizier; issues his brief but awful commands; and, wrapping himself in wreaths of fragrant smoke, calmly awaits their fulfilment.

Crunch! clink, clank! The sounds of bolts and bars; then the rumble of the iron fireproof doors, as they fall in their sockets throughout the great building, leaving only the little wickets open from floor to floor, between department and department. What does it mean? Closing at half after five! Fire? What is it?

Alas, the panic-stricken cries, the shrieks of women, the groans of men, too well indicate a premonition of the horrible

IN THE  
NEW ORI-  
ENTAL DE-  
PARTMENT

IN THE  
NEW ORI-  
ENTAL DE-  
PARTMENT

truth. It is nothing more nor less than one of the Sultan's gigantic raids for the re-stocking of his harem.

"*All out! All out! All men and boys, outside!*" the unflinching guards are already roaring on the staircases, and husbands are being torn from wives, brothers from sisters, on every landing. A shriek and an oath. The astrakan toque has fallen from the head of a tall girl—a well-known customer—her hair is half down, and she is struggling madly to retain the hand of a tall guardsman, probably her betrothed. Quick as life, the guardsman snatches from the wall one of those huge Afghan knives, heavy as a hatchet, sharp as a razor, and clears a space all round him. In a moment he is overpowered and hurled back through the little wicket. Killed? Who shall say? He has resisted the Sultan's command. Death were a light punishment. "Besides, it ain't so easy to see through the 'ooker smoke."

"*All out! All out! All females over the age of thirty-five outside!*" roar the guards. The men are all gone. It is the turn of the agonized mothers and aunts and elderly sisters. Oh, lamentable scene! Oh, pitiful wailings! The most valuable parcels thrown away in anguish, the floors littered with monogrammed purses, muffs, fur capes, powder boxes, card cases, hair-pins, and what not; a screaming and raving and sobbing and gasping which might melt a granite rock to tears, as the ensnared matrons and maids rush to and fro, beating against their prison bars like a flock of trapped doves. In a voice broken with emotion and with humble deprecating obeisance, the Secretary-Vizier pleads that some daughters of shareholders may be set at liberty. But he laughs cruelly.

"That new block of buildings must be filled. I have spoken."

In the midst of the uproar a stout, middle-aged dame, overlooked by the Janissaries, appeals to him for mercy. With hideous mockery he bids her depart.

Her prayer is in truth on behalf of her nieces—two bright girls from Hastings, her brother's pride and joy, on a New Year's visit to their aunt at Earl's Court—but he affects to misunderstand, mischievously assumes that she is pleading for her own freedom, and she is hustled from his sight.

"Marshal them all through the Grocery and Candles," he

commands. "Then march them before me to their quarters. Give them food. If necessary drug them all. To-morrow we will enlarge the meshes of our royal net and let many fish pass through. To-night I am too weary to pick and choose. I have spoken."

But what is this? A slim and plainly-dressed girl forces her way through the agonized throng and throws herself at his feet. It is Sybil, from counter 5 Ladies' Hose, etc. Crouched down like a spaniel before the divan, her nice brown hair trembling on the back of her neck, upturned towards him, three times she touches the dusty matting with her white forehead, then raises her tear-stained eyes to his, and speaks.

"Oh, great Master and King! Do not do this thing. Turn your thoughts away from this monstrous wickedness. For my sake let them off. For the sake of a poor girl, open the doors and let them go. Don't go and do anything so mean and low as this."

"For *your* sake, girl? And what is the ransom you offer? Body and soul were too small a price for thwarting a king's fancy."

"No ransom, O King, if they might pay it, but a free gift. *I have always loved you*"; and now the lovely girl's pale face is suffused with blushes.

"Then rise" he cries, in clarion tones, himself springing to his full height; "and stand here beside me, my empress and my queen. Open all doors. Let the mob loose. Poor frightened slaves! your master needs ye not."

And with a superb gesture of dismissal he flings wide his open arms. . . .

Down they all go—"the new line"—tray upon tray—Bagdad's glory, the "fragile-like" novelties of the season, shivered into thousands of tinkling fragments—and, as he kneels amidst the ruin he has wrought, the merciless voice of the Superintendent hisses in his ear.

"Secretary's Office. Explain it as best you can. *'Ope for nothing from me.* I'm sick and tired of you."

W. B. MAXWELL