

## The Last of the Old Curiosity Shop.

**I**N Fetter-lane, nearly opposite the Record Office, there is an old magazine of knick-knacks which has a rare interest for the antiquary and the lover of literature. It was a chosen haunt of Charles Dickens in his younger days, and is evidently the original of the "Old Curiosity Shop."

Outside (says the *Globe*) it is a plain shop easily overlooked, and probably few of the busy people who traverse the alley on their way between Holborn and Fleet-street ever notice it. The grimy panes of the window present the usual medley of old china and tarnished silver, of dingy engravings and rusty ironwork, with here an opera glass in its leather case, and there a first edition of "Master Humphry's Clock" in green covers.

Entering by the street door, we gain the shop by another on the left, and find ourselves in a kind of prison dock formed by the counter, with its piles of tattered prints. The body of the shop is crowded with oil paintings, dim and cracked by age, old vases and soup tureens, old glasses and tankards, old filigrees and carved mantel pieces, and a hundred other vestiges of the past, all huddled in picturesque confusion, every niche or nail supports a dish or frame.

The walls are lined with shelves of books, all black and greasy with long use, and an old clock up in the corner seems to mark the very day when the library went out of fashion. Behind the counter sits an antique dame who is quite in keeping with her singular environment. She is dressed in an old black lace cap, a shepherd tartan shawl crossed on her bosom, and a plain gown of some dark stuff. Eighty years or more have bent her shoulders and crippled her steps, but her bright black eye and strong aquiline features retain the traces of uncommon beauty, and her strident voice bespeaks the force of a genuine and vigorous character. She might sit for the picture of some fairy godmother, or Alice Gourlay, or Elspeth

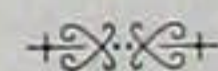
of the Craighburnfoot. Wife and widow, she has occupied this house for over sixty years. Her husband was a master printer, who invented a process of chromo-lithography and worked three printing presses on the premises, while she read the proofs, attended to her circulating library, and prepared the catalogue or invested in old china and the first editions of Dickens.

The library in its day was popular with the law students of the neighbouring inns, and hither came young Dickens with his friend Whiffen, or Wiffen, who was apprenticed to a gold and silversmith near

by. The old lady has many an anecdote of the future novelist, who was then only about eighteen or twenty, and looked, as she remarks, like a farmer's son or lad from the country. "He would lean his shoulder on the counter there," she cries with evident relish. "Ah! I can see him now, with his pleasant face, his quiet, rippling laugh, and gentle ways. Aye! whenever he laughed he always threw up his upper lip." Dickens read voraciously all the spirited fiction of the day, such as the tales of Fenimore Cooper, and the adventures of Dick Turpin or Captain Kidd. He would sometimes criticize the books to her, pointing out the faults or merits of various writers.



THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP.



A MOVEMENT is on foot for greatly extending the usefulness of the Guildhall Library by making it a free circulating library open to all comers, or, at least, to all persons occupied in the City. There is already a fine nucleus of books at the Guildhall, but the necessary additions and repairs would require an income of about £20,000 a year, and this could only be obtained by means of a rate. The City of London Library would then be one of the finest in the kingdom, and it would be as easy for a Londoner to obtain the loan of a first-class book as it is now in some provincial towns. It is thought that the Cripplegate and Bishopsgate endowments, amounting to several thousands a year, might be utilised in connection with the scheme.