

DRAWN FROM THE LIFE.

V.—VAGABONDS.



F the law be operative to "comprehend all vagrom men"—as Dogberry puts it—it is necessarily loose in administration. We are every now and then reminded by some case before a police magistrate or a justice of the peace, that to have no settled place of abode is in itself an offence which may be summarily dealt with; and possibly some such interpretation of the Vagrant Act may be necessary in dealing with incorrigible tramps, who follow no calling but mendicancy, and infest the high-ways, ready to extort money from timid people, who can be easily frightened by their threatening aspect and violent language.

None of us have much sympathy for the idle hulking ruffians or sneaking thieves who tramp from one union to another, leaving their remarks in cypher on the walls of the casual-sheds, and their hieroglyphics on trees and fences and garden-palings, directing those of their fraternity who may follow, where begging will be most successful, which is the best halting-place, and even what gaol is least disagreeable in its discipline. At the same time most of us feel a distinct twinge of pity for those poor vagabonds who in their wanderings strive to pick up a living either by following some light calling, or by displaying certain amusing accomplishments.

"To have no settled occupation or place of abode," is a phrase known to the law just as some of the representatives of vagrancy may be known to the police, and be undistinguished from actual mendicants or tramps; but as a matter of fact in this country, and especially in or near to this great, striving, seething, restless, wealthy, poverty-stricken, benevolent, cruel, Christian, heathen city, everybody is supposed to dwell somewhere. Actual houselessness does exist, no doubt, in spite of the casual-ward and the night-refuge for the destitute. Homelessness is unfortunately too common. Witness the common lodging-houses of Spitalfields, Drury Lane, and Holborn—the tramps' kitchens of Golden Lane and Saint Luke's; but even vagabonds lodge somewhere; for a good many months in the year there is no life "under the greenwood tree" for the great vagabond contingent of London; and, indeed, a very large proportion of representative vagrancy cares but little for the greenwood tree at all. It likes the banks of the Thames on Boat-race day—Epsom Downs while the Derby and Oaks are being run—some of the few remaining fairs not too far out of London; and sections of the vagabond company are to be found at sea-side haunts, on river steamers, and in excursion

trains; while if there be money in the exchequer, and the big drum and pandean pipes are out of pawn, and mother and the children can undertake the journey, a party may be made up to "work" some of the counties where the halting-places are known, and the tramp for each day not too difficult.

Sometimes, again, the outside vagabonds—acrobats, tumblers, conjurers—may have a lucky chance of an engagement in some organised troupe, with a circus and a stud of trained horses, or they may join a big show, and stow themselves and their families away in tilted carts and caravans which are drawn up on the edge of some bit of sheltered heath, on a village common, or even on a waste piece beside some country lane.

It gives one a strange sensation to come suddenly upon one of these parties at broad noon on a summer's day, before the pale woman and sickly-looking children have had time to become sunburnt and fresh after their long hibernation in some foul London lodging-house. The appearance of the men, too, is not suggestive of a deep appreciation of the freedom of nature. There is a world of "speculation in those eyes with which" they "glare withal." They appear to be constantly counting probabilities of making a



BRINGING HIM OUT.

living, speak to each other in gruff-muttered undertones, have an evident suspicion of the proprietor to whom they have engaged themselves, and look furtively at the passer-by, as though they wondered whether he would be likely to witness their performance at the next "pitch."

For some time after the beginning of their vagabond campaign, they have still the frowsy tavern air of the London slum about them. They seem still to be looking into the pewter-pot, which has left its beery

ring on a tap-room table, where the flies stick fast, and the only sign of a bird is the sign of the house—the “Magpie and Stump,” the “Eagle,” the “Peacock,” or the “Feathers.”

They will have to be a week or two at work before this wears off; and then on the village common will be worn a bare ring, where horses have galloped round to the braying of a brass band, under the big marquee where Mr. Merryman made his poor threadbare jokes, and roared himself hoarse; and those wonderful “star riders, Mesdemoiselles Pauline and Thérèse,” performed their marvellous feats of equestrianism; or little Bob, known to the public as “Roberto, the Infant Wonder,” was practising “the trip” with the clown who has taken him for an apprentice, and means some day to bring him out at a London theatre.

On the whole it would seem as though those wanderers were most open to these vagabond influences who go out to seek their own fortunes without joining a large company, or doing suit and service to a manager; but then they need to have what may be called a regular show to make their position comfortable.

Who does not remember the inimitable description of the itinerants in “The Old Curiosity Shop?” Who can doubt that the proprietors of Punch-and-Judy and of performing dogs revived in the great novelist that curious vagabond instinct to which I have already referred? No man who was altogether a stranger to the longing to get away, and lose even personal identity for a time, could have written as he did about these people.

It must be remembered, however, that these vagabonds are town-dwellers—that for six months in the year they probably live in doleful lodgings in some foul neighbourhood, or in the dreary tangles of courts and alleys about Spitalfields or Soho, and form a portion of the underpaid or of the unemployed. They are mostly at work at other avocations during a great portion of the year, and go out as show-folk vagabondising just as Civil Service clerks take a turn at literature and the drama, or as Irish labourers and their families go “hopping.”

Some of them, like the itinerant dealers in cheap penny-worths, seldom leave London at all. The stringency with which street performances are forbidden in certain localities does



CHICKWEED AND GROUNDSEL.

steadfastly refuse to accept engagements to play at private houses, because they have a regular set of patrons for each hour of their short working day.

It is surprising how well a connection of this sort will answer—but, of course, the fortunate artistes who secure such support are more than ordinarily skilful, and are few in number.

It is seldom now that we see acrobatic or necromantic performances in London thoroughfares. In some of the by-streets of the Strand, and about Covent Garden, we may see a stray exhibitor now and then; and on Tower Hill the patterer, the professor of sleight-of-hand, and the performer with tame birds and cats may draw and keep a crowd. Punch-and-Judy, and the galanty show, with its shadowy drama of “Billy Waters and the Irascible Cobbler,” are still winked at by that relaxation of strict legality which is a necessary recognition of the sympathy that we all have for free shows and pastimes, that

help to relieve the dreary monotony of London streets, and give them something of life and colour. The same may be said perhaps of the Ethiopian serenaders, the knife-spinners, the ingenious gentlemen who fling large potatoes into the empyrean, and receive them crashing upon their foreheads, whence they split into a thousand fragments, and leave the operator with unfractured skull, and ready to receive the congratulatory subscription of coppers.

It is difficult to imagine these people living in the midst of squalid streets, in common lodging-houses, in the hovels of low neighbourhoods, or in beer-shops and taverns in the purlieus



A FORTUNE-TELLER.

of London theatres; harder still to fancy them, in the off season, doing odd jobs in any capacity where light labour is wanted, or carrying some of their accomplishments to entertain the company at public-houses. Some of them get a living—a poor one enough—as supernumeraries at theatrical entertainments, where they carry banners, or “go on” in the pantomime; and their children may be fairies or imps in the ballet, their wives sixth-rate dancers, or “dressers” to the actresses at some minor house.

This, however, is where they “keep to the profession.” The acrobats and circle people do this for the most part; the showmen work the nearer provinces and the suburbs; and, as I have said already, the small professionals, the conjurers, the Punch-and-Judy men, who do not go to distant towns, and take up their temporary abode there, and all the rest of the great body of vagabondage dwelling in and around London, from Somers Town to Stratford, and from Belleisle to the New Cut at Lambeth, work at casual callings, and “make out” the winter, till the season comes round when they can furbish up tights and spangles, mend and re-decorate their puppets, hire a caravan, and get a friendly help to start a new enterprise, or join a company on a “provincial tour,” and live once more that strange, houseless, roving life, which should be so full of fancy and of poetry, and is really so full of hard fact and true twopenny prose.

Even the country-clad casuals, who occasionally bring rural cries, and smock-frocks, and round felt hats, heavy boots and leathern gaiters, into our suburban streets, are possibly dwellers in some eastward slum. The cry of “Chickweed and groundsel for your birds” may mean no more of innocence and peace than is to be found in Covent Garden Market; and watercresses, as we know, are a thoroughly recognised metropolitan article of commerce, the supply of which is obtained at one or other of the great markets every morning, or at the grounds at Hackney Wick or elsewhere.

Even the tinker may have his grindstone and barrow in a cellar in Old Pye Street, Westminster, or in a back yard in Frying-Pan Alley.

The chair-caner, who sits so freely and easily under the shadow of a wall, mending your furniture, may be a denizen of Old Nichols Street, Shoreditch, with a roving tendency which sought an outlet in Sunday bird-catching on the “Lower Marsh,” or away beyond Low Leyton, until the Small Birds’ Protection Act clipped his wings for him.

It is very difficult to distinguish the true countryman from the rural emigrant. Some of my readers may remember a woman who went about London streets, and especially in the suburbs, selling strange combinations of matchwood, gold-leaf, and wool, which children eagerly purchased as “lamb.” The powerful melodious voice in which she vended these rude toys could be heard streets off, brought buyers to the doors and windows, and with its wild, half-melancholy refrain—

“If I’d as much money as I could tell,
I never would cry, ‘Young lambs to sell,’”

suggested a hut on some lonely wayside—a gipsy tent

in the dark brushwood of Hainault Forest—a shanty on a breezy open common, amidst the heather and the hum of insects. It is possible that this weather-beaten, sad-eyed, rough-mannered woman—who had a sort of subdued gleam of tenderness for little children—lodged somewhere in Whitechapel. I firmly believe that she lived no farther off than Stratford—near which a whole colony of householding vagrants still dwells, making brooms and brushes, clothes-pegs and props, baskets and cradles, besoms and table-mats.

We see the great cart hung with such wares come swinging along our street—the woman crying with a mellow note, which is taken up in a jerky chorus by “the barker,” a fustian-clad hobbedehoy, who lugs on the other side of the way, while a trim-built, grim-visaged, sharp-eyed, half-gipsy-looking fellow is at the horse’s head, keeping a bright look-out all round, and contemplatively chewing a straw. These are not actual vagabonds, though they belong to the tribe, and some of them are half-gipsies. They live in houses, down towards the Essex border mostly, and there are others of their kind about the pieces of waste swampy common near Woolwich, and at Poplar, and other places where half-deserted streets of small tenements swarm with children. They form the connecting-link between gipsyism proper and casual vagabondism of the professional type. Of gipsyism proper there is very little left in England. When old Ann Lee died in the workhouse at Low Leyton, the “tribes” had begun to lose their characteristics. The small Hindoo head, the shallow snaky eye, the lithe figure, the thin lips, and the black twisted hair, are so different from the conventional idea of the ruddy-faced, stalwart, sloe-eyed, crisp-locked pretenders to the Romani, that few people know a true “Egyptian” now-a-days. Probably the School Board may reach these vagabonds, and even the true gipsies, some day. At present, however, neither of them are amenable to Acts of Parliament; for the Vagrant Act is an engine too crushing to be applied to a whole class, which only demands the freedom to live by casual and useful labour. It is doubtful, too, whether it can even be usefully applied to the poor entertainers—the showmen and the itinerants who “amuse to live”—without violating the principle of public recreations altogether. Present experience seems to show that while the abolition of some local fairs, and a few anniversary observances, has become necessary, that necessity has to some extent arisen from the attempt to suppress what were comparatively harmless diversions.

We nearly always find that the law tramples sternly a little in advance of the public education, and where the law is only human it afterwards relaxes, and lets in some other licence than that which it was at first strained to prevent. We have abolished Greenwich Fair and its low saturnalia, and rightly; but there are music-halls in London, each of which is a defiance to virtue, a direct incentive to vice. The only moral to be deduced from this is, let us be moderate in speaking of vagabondage. A good many of us feel an unacknowledged sympathy with it, let us discriminate between it and the vagrancy which is a source of danger and of crime.