

THE WANDERING TRIBES OF GREAT BRITAIN.

(THE WAY SOME FOLKS LIVE.)



ON THE ROAD.

FEW years ago there existed within a mile or so of my village home a secluded by-road, by which the distance between two of the largest neighbouring places was considerably shortened for such travellers as might care to use it. These were, however, but few; so few, indeed, that the beautiful green-sward which

spread invitingly along between its shaded banks suffered but little injury from passing vehicles of any kind, and it was but rarely that even a horseman, much less a foot-passenger, was seen to venture along its sequestered route.

For among the neighbouring villagers it had acquired an evil reputation, and even to this day the little that remains of it—for by virtue of the Enclosures Act the greater part of it has long since been abolished—still retains its old and somewhat sinister appellation of the Dark Lane. It was a favourite haunt of the numerous gipsy and other travelling bands that passed that way, and strange stories used to be told by the oldest inhabitants of the scenes that they had often witnessed there in their earlier days, and of the terror with which these swarthy visitors had inspired their childish minds. Even long afterwards, and within my own recollection, the neighbouring lanes were the frequent resort of bands of these passing itinerants, and numerous scarred and blackened spots edged with ashes and bits of charred wood continually indicated where they had taken up their quarters for the night or cooked their evening meal. Especially was this the case on the many patches of waste land which then, more frequently than now, were to be met with either at the turning of a road or skirting along the side of a wood or a secluded lane.

From the operation of the Act already referred to, the district is now but seldom reminded of the existence of the gipsy tribes, except by the occasional passing of one of their showy vans laden heavily with a motley variety of domestic ware. But in some parts of Great Britain, especially in the vicinity of heaths and com-

mons, they are still to be met with as of old, and perhaps in increasing numbers.

“Hast thou not noted on the bye wayside
Where aged saughs lean o'er the lazy tide
A vagrant crew, far straggled through the glade,
With trifles busied, or in slumber laid:
Their children lolling round them on the grass
Or pestering with their sports the patient ass?”

The gipsies were at one time commonly supposed to be Egyptians, and there can be little doubt that their present name is an outcome of that altogether erroneous impression. They are entirely distinct in character from any class of inhabitants living in Egypt at the present day; and although large numbers of them have taken up their abode in that country, they are always looked upon as strangers as much as in Britain or elsewhere. The truth is, they originally came from India, and probably are members of what is known as the low caste or Pariah race. The similarity, and in many respects the identity, of their customs and habits with those of that tribe point to this, and it is supposed that, from whatever cause, their exodus took place at different periods between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. After wandering through various countries, some of them perhaps taking Egypt on their way, they landed for the first time in Great Britain during the early part of the sixteenth century.

For nearly four hundred years, therefore, have we had large numbers of this alien race dwelling in our midst, and retaining still in great measure their ancient manners, customs, and language. They pride themselves particularly on their retention of the latter, which they call Rommaney, and which is said to belong to what is known as the “recent Indian” family. A large proportion of its words are found both in Hindustani and Persian. Its grammar also resembles in some degree that of these languages, and yet, whether in original formation or from the modifying influences brought to bear upon it during the wanderings of the gipsies through the various countries they traversed in early times, it is so different as to lead experts to class Rommaney as a distinct language. Mr. Leland tells us that many of its words have an old Sanscrit character, and that despite the mutilated, diluted, and impoverished state of the language—which, as at present spoken by English gipsies, presents the appearance of one perhaps never fully developed, and now in a state of rapid deterioration—there are reasons for believing it contains the fragments or framework of some extremely ancient Aryan tongue.

It is interesting to remark that English Rommaney contains more Hindustani and Persian words than any of the Continental dialects, and until the last half-century was spoken with some degree of grammatical accuracy. It had, however, begun to Anglicise even so long ago as 1542, as is proved by the specimen given as Egyptian in Andrew Borde's

"Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge," published in that year. Since that time a large number of English words have been incorporated with the language, but every gipsy of true blood still carefully

fathers, and forced upon them the conviction that, notwithstanding its many drawbacks, "the gipsy's life was a joyous life." To them these human birds of passage seemed—



A GIPSY ENCAMPMENT.

distinguishes between them and those of their ancient tongue.

The life of the gipsy has ever been more or less surrounded with a halo of romance. His mysterious origin, his strange customs, his complexion, language, and soothsaying arts have doubtless had much to do with this. His wandering tendencies and intense love of liberty and independence of all the restraints of civilisation increased the admiration of our wondering fore-

"Free as the winds that through the forest rush,
Wild as the flowers that by the wayside blush."

The true-born gipsy's love of roaming seems inherent in his nature, and unconquerable; nothing will induce him to stay long in one place. His restless spirit yearns to be ever "on the road," and he looks upon a house, or whatever tends to a permanent residence in any given locality, as a restraint upon his liberty. Indeed, he has been thought by some to be utterly irre-

claimable. Such as he was four thousand years ago, "before the foundations of Mycenæ were laid, or the walls of Rome marked out," such he still remains, speaking the same tongue, leading the same vagabond life, cherishing the same habits, and entertaining the same supreme contempt for everything connected with civilisation. In these, as well as in other things, he exhibits his Oriental derivation in a marked degree.

The gipsies are said to hold little or no religious belief, though among a few of them, at least, there have been manifestations of a slight improvement in this respect during recent years, and among other things they often show a great anxiety to secure Christian burial for their dead.

Intermarriages have frequently taken place between those of gipsy blood and the native inhabitants of the country, and there are many descendants of the tribe, therefore, who are only "posh-an'-posh," that is, half-and-half, or "Churedis," with scarcely a drop of the "kalo-ratt" flowing in their veins. Many of the latter classes have more or less abandoned their wandering life, and conformed in some degree to the comparatively civilised habits of those among whom they dwell; and it is not easy, therefore, to speak with any exactitude as to the number of those who may be reckoned among the gipsy tribe.

But it is only with the wandering portion of those living in Great Britain that we have here to do, and of these it has been computed that there are not less than from twenty to thirty thousand. These are, however, no longer vagrants pure and simple. Some of them have fixed places of residence, and only wander about the country in the exercise of their several callings. Some are tinkers, like their celebrated kinsman John Bunyan; others work as scissor-grinders, basket-makers, and chair-menders, or are the proud proprietors of rifle-galleries, aunt-Sallys, waxwork collections, and other itinerant shows. During the spring and summer months large numbers of them attend the various fairs and races, picnics and regattas, or wherever their art of fortune-telling is likely to be brought into requisition, or their cocoanuts and gingerbreads and other tempting wares have a chance of finding customers. A few more intelligent or prosperous than the rest engage in horse-dealing, and often with very considerable pecuniary advantage to themselves.

As soon as the fairs and other merry-makings are over, the gipsy engages readily in harvest-work, and is often able to earn large sums of money in this way. Indeed he can sometimes make as many as four harvests in less than the same number of months. He first goes "up the country" into Middlesex for peashacking; then into Sussex for wheat-fagging or tying; next to North Hants for similar employment; and last of all into Kent in time for the "hopping." By the time these various engagements are ended, he has earned money enough to enable him to lay in a large stock of German or French-made baskets, clothes-lines, brooms, and similar wares, which he hawks about the country during the winter months, or when other work is scarce. Even in passing from one scene of labour

to another, he is careful not to neglect any opportunities of doing a little business on the way.

During their wanderings about the country, each family takes its own particular "beat." The peddling baskets are left entirely in the hands of the women, who may be looked upon as the slaves of the family, and on whom at these times rests the main responsibility of providing for the others. They, as well as the children, are, from long and continued practice, adepts at begging, but in return extend an Oriental hospitality to all who win their confidence or esteem, and give as freely as they take. The men usually occupy themselves within the tents, while the women are away, in "chinnin koshters," that is, cutting sticks. In other words, they are engaged in the manufacture of such humble articles as clothes-pegs and skewers. Occasionally they make baskets, and at one time this was a more common employment than now, but owing to the cheapness of French and German basket-ware at the present day, the manufacture of these articles is not found so profitable as in past times, and is therefore more neglected.

Altogether, what with making and selling the various wares of which they can dispose, the men earn, as a rule, from twelve to eighteen shillings a week. This, supplemented with the proceeds of begging and fortune-telling on the part of their wives and children, and with what they get from occasional jobs of honest hard work, enables them to live fairly well, to pay for the privilege occasionally of camping in some farmer's field, and to provide for their families. The latter are generally large, and range from about eight to sixteen in number. The gipsies are, on the whole, however, both a hard-working and a hard-faring race, and owing to frequent exposure to cold and lying on damp ground, they are extremely subject to chest and throat complaints. Many of their children die young, but those who survive their early training invariably grow up strong and active, become good rough-riders and pedestrians, and generally are very proud both of their stamina and pluck.

When not on the road, or when camping for the night, they draw up their van or pitch their tent on some common or bit of waste land, or, lacking this, within a field, to enter which they have either begged or purchased permission.

Their horses are turned loose to find their own fodder, while the human portion of the community busy themselves, some with the erection of the tent, some with making the fire and attending to the culinary department, while others go in quest of fuel, obtained often to the detriment of the farmer's hedges, or in search of means whereby they may enrich the common larder.

An impression once prevailed that gipsies lived entirely by pilfering, and their horse-stealing propensities were proverbial a generation or two ago. But whatever their fathers may have been, we are assured on good authority that the present race are, upon the whole, as honest and trustworthy as the corresponding class of equally ignorant English people. Lying and cheating, to some extent, seem inseparable from their nature; but they rarely betray any one who trusts

them, and to those who take a real interest in their welfare, they are far more honest and truthful than they are accustomed to be to one another.

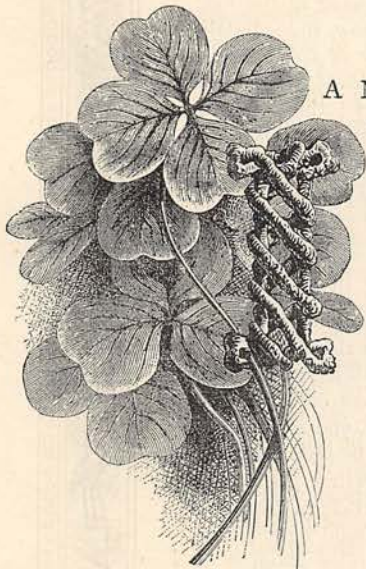
Their encampment usually consists of two or three vans and a rude tent, or wigwam, constructed of hoops and poles, and covered with stray pieces of old cloth or sacking to keep out the rain and snow. The tent is generally about sixteen feet long, seven or eight feet wide, and about five feet high in the central part. The opening which forms the doorway is sheltered by a kind of coverlet. The fire, if the weather be damp or cold, is placed within the tent, and at about the centre of the earthen floor. The smoke, or at least some portion of it, finds its way out through an opening left in the roof of about two feet in diameter. On the ground are scattered wood-chips and shavings, and the bed generally consists of a layer of straw placed upon the damp ground and covered with a piece of sacking or sheet.

There is but a scant supply of furniture and cooking utensils. An old soap-box or tea-chest usually acts as table, drawers, and clothes-box, and fingers

take precedence of absent knives and forks. Meals are taken and the washing done in a squatting posture; but the gipsies seldom indulge in much of the latter, especially as regards their bodies—possibly, as they sometimes naïvely state, “for fear of taking cold.”

The tents and vans are both often sadly overcrowded, and frequently the abodes of vice, ignorance, and disease. Indeed, their unfortunate tenants enjoy immunities in this direction withheld from other classes. The inspector of nuisances, the tax-gatherer, the rate-collector, the school-board officer, the representative of the Board of Health, all pass them by as beyond the range of their attentions. Few can either read or write, the extent of their education being a knowledge of crosses, cabalistic signs, and symbols, and of the full value of money. But we may hope, with George Smith, of Coalville, their benefactor and friend, that “gleams of a brighter day are beginning to manifest themselves upon our social horizon, which will elevate our gipsies and their children into a position that will reflect credit instead of disgrace upon us as a civilised and Christian nation.”

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A NOVEL USE FOR CRESTS AND MONOGRAMS.

It has often been somewhat of a puzzle to me to discover what pleasure any one — except the most enthusiastic student of that forlorn science heraldry — could derive from the possession of a crest-album. Years sometimes elapse before the collector has sufficient materials to fill a book, no matter how in-

defatigable he may be in hunting for them, or how great a nuisance he may prove to all his friends by his ardour in the pursuit; and, after all, the trouble taken in acquiring them, and the care expended in “cutting out” and “pasting in,” are only too likely to be lost labour, at most rewarded by an occasional glance through the pages by some casual visitor. Except from that rare scientific point of view already mentioned, a collection of crests in a book yields none of the interest which is always attached to a stamp-album, but is simply curious according to the colouring or design of its contents.

For decorative purposes, however, crests and monograms are peculiarly suitable, and are capable of being employed with exceedingly pretty effect in certain purely ornamental connections. It is strange that, in this æsthetic age, they should hitherto have been

so seldom pressed into the art of decoration, since they are eminently adapted for doing good service therein. Postage stamps, both English and foreign, were long ago made use of to adorn all sorts of things, but it has been reserved for American girls to initiate a method of utilising the devices torn from old letters or envelopes for a similar purpose. They make *bed-quilts* of autograph signatures, embroidering these with crests and filling up the interspaces with monograms!

The idea of a crest-covered fan or plate certainly appears common-place enough after such a startling mode of arrangement as that afforded by a counterpane; but it will probably be equally new to most of the readers of this paper, and perhaps (to minds on this side of the Atlantic) equally pretty. Writing from experience, I can confidently recommend the experiment as likely to produce a highly satisfactory result. There is scope for the exercise of much taste and ingenuity, as well as neatness of execution; and while the value of the crest *as* a crest remains unaltered—so that a brother may even be induced to lend his cherished collection for the purpose—the article so treated acquires quite a South-Kensington-Museum appearance. Both the materials and the work are simple in the extreme.

Let us take the fan first. As to the kind to be used, a black one (such as may be obtained at almost any fancy shop for a shilling or thereabouts) is undoubtedly the best, as it shows up the colours to advantage. If you cannot get a plain black fan, you can easily remove the design from a painted one with a sponge and water. Bear particularly in mind that old, faded, or soiled ones can be made to look, not “as good as