

## SOME VANISHING RURAL TYPES.



THE Elementary Education Act of 1870 is truly effecting a revolution. The prophets have to this extent been justified by the fact, although in details their forecasts may have gone astray—as forecasts will—and the fears of the pessimists have proved as unfounded as have the rose-

coloured dreams of those who looked for a speedy millennium through the systematic diffusion of the three R's. Gradually, yet surely, the influence of the School Board is spreading into the most remote corners of the land. Dwellers in country places have especial opportunity of observing how broad and deep is the change which the leaven of even a little learning brings about. It transforms the very peasant, the sturdy tiller of the soil, who from time immemorial has been spoken of with half-affectionate, half-contemptuous familiarity as "Hodge," "Giles," &c. He is not the man he was. There is already a distinct line of separation between the old order and the new. The grandsire may cling, with the tenacity of aggrieved conservatism, to the roomy round smock as garment fit for either work-day or gala; but the grandson disdains even corduroy, and must have his suit of "check" conveyed through the hands of a local clothier from city machine-rooms. And as with attire, so with food and with amusements. The wheels of progress may still be clogged with the dust of centuries, but they are no longer stationary. They quiver and revolve under the pressure of the mighty spring called FASHION.

The result of nearly a decade and a half of compulsory school attendance, and of regularly recurring Government examinations, is of a decidedly levelling character. The levelling is upward, no doubt; but, nevertheless, it has its awkward side for lovers of the abnormal, the quaint, and the humorous. The generations of embryo agriculturists that crowd the "Board" classes to-day will not be as were their fathers. The iron of remorseless culture smooths out many an odd crease in mind and disposition, and will inevitably rob the playwright and the novelist of the future of much rich material. Certain types of social life and activity that have figured again and again in successful works of fiction are plainly journeying at a constantly accelerating pace towards extinction, and to the character-sketcher of the twentieth century will be historic myths, and nothing more.

There is the entirely illiterate self-made man. Dozens of amusing stories might be collected of this certainly praiseworthy, though sometimes excessively vain, individual. He is an artless proficient in the humorous misuse of words. Able neither to read nor to write, he yet has grasped the grand idea that speech, to be impressive, must be sonorous, that five syllables are always more striking and effective than two; and this theory he cheerfully puts into practice. A representative of this rapidly shrinking class was present at a country auction, and inspecting some lumber in out-houses, with a view to thrifty purchase, had his attention attracted by a dilapidated cart, marked in the catalogue, say, as "Lot 99." He walked round and round the vehicle, as though dimly conscious that there was somewhere a flaw in the presentment, if only he could be shrewd enough to discover it. Suddenly his broad, bucolic face broke into a smile. He had solved the mystery.

"Why, Dick," he cried to his companion, "it's one wheel *sufficient*."

The same worthy ultimately drifted into the ranks of the professional brokers, and at the commencement of this section of his career borrowed money on occasion of a philanthropically disposed old lady, who, in darker days, had kept the wolf from Tim Blount's door by casually employing him in her garden; and, feeling a genuine interest in her *protégé*, the generous capitalist was accustomed, on the morrow of any important stroke of business, to ply Tim with inquiries as to his success. With the new-born reticence of the rising tradesman, Tim came to resent these questions, however reasonable and however friendly they might be, and at last he dared sullenly to protest. The lady was at once amazed, pained, and indignant.

"Why, Tim, you know I have always been willing to help you," she said.

Tim admitted a truth he was powerless to deny.

"Yes, yes, ma'am—that's so," he replied; "but what I say is, as you al'ays wants to know too much when I pays you. You ain't satisfied w'out all the *inticulars* of t' deal."

As a buyer, Tim was usually a model of caution; but his lack of education now and again led him into ludicrous blunders. One specimen will serve amongst many.

A pile of red-backed army lists came into a market Tim frequented, and were offered for sale at the price of the proverbial song. They were old, and hence valueless, except as supplies for the butterman. But the brilliancy of the covers caught our friend's eye. Here, surely, was the chance to turn a nimble shilling—perhaps half a score of such handy coins. Tim bought them, carried them home in triumph, tore off the lids, made them as tidy—the lids—in appearance as he could, and marched courageously away to the shop of a local newsagent and bookbinder.

"You want to sell me these!" said the stationer, in astonishment. "I've no use for them whatever."

Tim's face fell. "No use for 'em?" he echoed.

"Certainly not."

"But you make books here, don't ye?"

An inkling of how the matter really stood broke in upon the tradesman's mind, and with difficulty he repressed a burst of laughter.

"We bind them for our customers," he answered.

"Ah! just so," in tones which seemed to show that the speaker imagined himself at last on the high road to the achievement of his purpose; "and that's why I want to sell you these, cheap as——"

"They are quite unserviceable."

"What, sir?"

The verdict was repeated.

"Whew! I thought as how—fine an' gay they are— as how they'd very likely do for Bibles."

Complete explanation was a work of time and difficulty, but at length it was accomplished, and Tim carried off his scoffed-at treasures, reflecting, no doubt, on the imprudence of tampering with trade mysteries, and on the vanity of great expectations.

Another type, doomed to disappear before the on-creeping wane of culture, is that of the thoroughly ignorant and obstinate man—the being whose perversity, ungoverned by judgment, is continually bringing him into comical collision with equally stubborn facts. At country polling places, at such an important crisis as an election for some rural Board, these idiosyncracies are abundantly revealed.

An amusing case in point occurred at a contest in an agricultural township but a few months back. An honest but dubiously enlightened voter came away from the hall which was the centre of attraction in high glee.

"I wasn't goin' to do as yon whipper-snapper of a clerk ordered, not I," he boasts. "Mark the paaper just here," he says. "Ay, my man, I thinks, 'I'll see to it.' 'Down this side's the list of names of the candidates—Brown, Finch, Goldthorpe, and the others,' he says agin. 'Mind you put the votes against your men, and give the correct number.' Thinks I, 'You're wastin' yer breath, young fellow; I'll be led by none o' ye.' An' so I outs with my pencil—bought it o' purpose—and I takes the paaper, and I scratches on it t' names of the men I wanted—none o' them as was printed down yon. Hah! hah! I always was for havin' my own way, an' I find as it's generally the best way in t' long run, too."

And amid the smiles of a group who know by experience the utter uselessness of remonstrance, feeling himself every inch a conqueror, and perfectly oblivious of the circumstance that in every sense his votes have been wasted, the ancient labourer chatters on. He is pleased, and therefore garrulous.

Again, the system of compulsory education is making a swift end of that mirth-provoking rural oddity, the unlettered victim of sentiment. Cupid is an archer who aims indifferently at high and low, and sometimes his shafts pierce deepest where least ex-

pected. A country printer was able, not long since, to afford the writer an amusing proof of this.

"Talking of minor poets, I once had a singular patron in that department," he said. "The would-be wooer of the muse—and of a charming young lady as well—was a farmer's man."

"A second Bloomfield, perhaps."

"Hardly. He was very illiterate—could only just manage to read and to write; and was past the age, I should imagine, at which much improvement was probable. But he was a sufficiently eccentric individual, if not a genius. He called at my printing office first one Saturday evening, rather late. 'You be a printer, I reckon,' he said. I replied that I had that honour. He fumbled for some seconds in the depths of a capacious grocery basket, and ultimately produced a blurred and blotted sheet of paper, which, on examination, proved to contain some half-dozen verses of the veriest doggerel it was ever my lot to read, and evidently the compilation of a love-sick swain. 'What'll it cost to get this po'try printed?' he asked. 'That depends on how many copies you require!' I said. 'Copies!' he repeated, 'I only want one, o' course.' Accordingly I gave him my terms; and he accepted them, and left the dingy manuscript. The next Saturday evening he called, received his precious production in all the glory of type, paid for it, and departed. A week later he returned with a second order. 'But'—and he shook his head at me with a deprecating gesture—'you'll not alter t' words this time; I wants it done 'zactly as I brings it.' I am afraid it was hardly remorse so much as a sudden and overwhelming sense of the comedy of the situation that made me bite my lips and remain momentarily silent. I had taken the unwarrantable liberty of revising the 'poet's' spelling and grammar, so as to bring them into, at any rate, an approximate agreement with modern usage. I bowed, and without expostulation promised for the future implicit obedience. And again a tattered MS. was committed to my care. But for the printed slip of this the writer did not soon appear. Only after a three weeks' interval he once more invaded my office. From his dejected air it was evident something had gone amiss, and from the nature of the rhymes I had 'set up' at his command—addresses 'To my dear Luv,' &c.—it was easy to guess what the trouble was. And bit by bit—without the least shamefacedness—he told me his story. He was madly enamoured of his master's daughter, and fancied that in her frank, girlish smiles as they occasionally met on the farm precincts he read reciprocated affection. To her he sent his pathetic missive, with the result of parental contumely and dismissal. 'Ah, sir!' he sighed, 'maybe if you'd a' done that as I scribbled it, 'twould ha' touched her heart better.'"

With this narrative of an episode not fictitious, however far removed from the ways and doings of a more disingenuous society, we take leave of a tempting and wide subject.