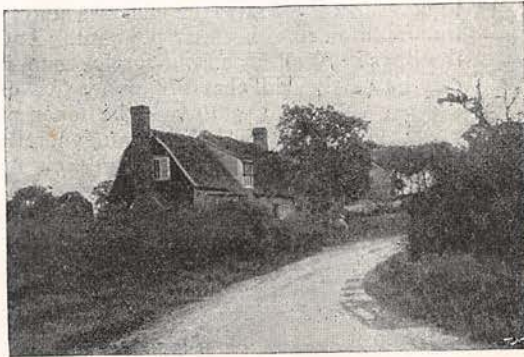


WITH THE ESSEX FARM FOLK.

By ARTHUR T. PASK.

THE mellow light of evening streams over the ragged hedge and spreads the shadow of the blackthorn on the dusty road. Through the straggling pine-branches that fringe the copse the wood-

broad view of the country around. How different it all looks here from what it was twenty-five years ago! Then Farmer Jones came by with his spaniels—for it is not very far off from the marshes—and met your glance with broad sympathetic smile—yes, the wheat did look well; there could be no doubt about that. Now, as if to epitomise everything, the broken five-bar gate is left open, the fields are not worth the taking care of. Yes, where once the light breeze set the tall ears swaying, the thistle and the marshmallow hold their own. All good enough doubtless for a melancholy study; by no means cheering to the Essex farmer. Plenty of still-life detail of course for the artist: a broken harrow in the corner of the field, a rusty tea-can that was once slung in Giles's knotted red handkerchief, a sign of



ON THE BROW OF THE HILL.

pigeon flies with heavy wings; the cuckoo has "tipped its tune in the middle of June," and left the woods long since; the martin, who is busy with his nestlings under the barn eaves, discourses anything but the sweetest music. One! two! three! four! five! six! seven!—the village clock has just struck, and, as if in answer, a leaf falls from the rugged elm. Says Sentiment: "Now is the time for the nightingale to start its song"; answers prosaic Common Sense: "They like to kill the pig just after twilight." But neither Philomel nor porker add or take from the still beauty of the evening. Still—yes, the evening is almost too still. The dog-roses and the honeysuckle may link their sweetness, the white geranium may rise above the burdock, the robin's eye may give friendly greeting, above all may be the *blauen Himmels freundlich Bild*, yet a sense of dull sadness weighs heavily upon you. It does not even pass away when you have reached the top of the little hill, where, the hedges being somewhat lower, there is something like a

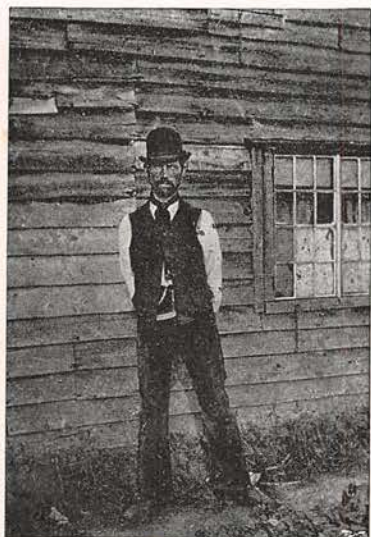
bad times and decay in everything. It is best to walk on. There, down in the little vale below, is the small town where you mean to make a half-hour's halt. Though it is a quarter of a mile off, there can be seen the whole length and breadth of its one wide street. The red-brick houses are no Ruskin



A HUMBLE HOME.

eyesore. The old square church-tower at the end is a lovely bit of bluish grey. Nay, the ivy-clad buttress has quite a purple tint. By the wheel-pump the

gossips make a charming group. But the town is almost deserted. Take the Red Lion to begin with. That rampant creature on the sign-post? From wind

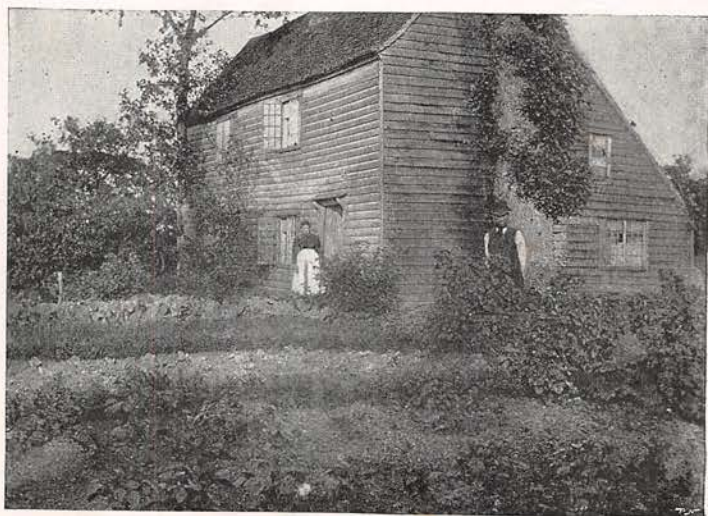


A SON OF THE SOIL.

and weather and lack of the brush, he has faded to a dingy chocolate. From the posts of the portico the white paint has peeled off. They look none the smarter for being adorned with the yellow posters announcing the coming of a travelling circus. No brace of smart gigs with spanking mare between the shafts is drawn up in front of the hostelry. No dogs are yelping and frisking in the road. It is Sleepy Hollow with a vengeance—the vengeance of bad times falling with a heavy shadow. Yet, "Hullo, there!" Good friend the doctor, who has been paying a call opposite, hails you from across the road.

"There *has* been a good deal of sickness about lately? Of course there has! In summer-time there is always a heavy percentage of measles and scarlet-fever among the

labourers' children. Defective sanitation? Very likely, but how is the farmer capable of keeping the cottages in repair? It's as much as he can do to pay his own rent; as to doing what's wanted and then, say, deducting it from his wages at sixpence or a shilling a week, Giles is not at all in a hurry to jump at any terms of that kind. A shilling a week means, if he be a moderate man, two-thirds of his threepenny beer money. Not to be thought of. In winter-time the children suffer a good deal from bronchitis and pneumonia. Bad clothing, lack of nourishing food, and the want of physique in consequence, in severe weather raise the sick rate among the children to quite forty per cent. And the boys? Well, as an old-service man, it can be safely said that not above five or six per cent. of them would be taken as naval recruits. With the children generally the stooping to weed, hoe, or pick up potatoes and the like causes great contraction of the chest. From thirteen to sixteen the boys do stand a bit better from their work, being more upright. Physical drill in the Board School? Yes, an excellent idea. Among the farm-people's children it should be increased, as at any rate it gives them something of a set-up that may last them the rest of their lives. Again, it gets them in the way of doing things by rule—helps, in fact, to make 'em smarter altogether. And when are the men at their best physically? Why, from twenty to twenty-five, particularly if they don't happen to get married. The truth is their health depends entirely on the matter of finance. Could a man afford to



THE LABOURER'S HOME.

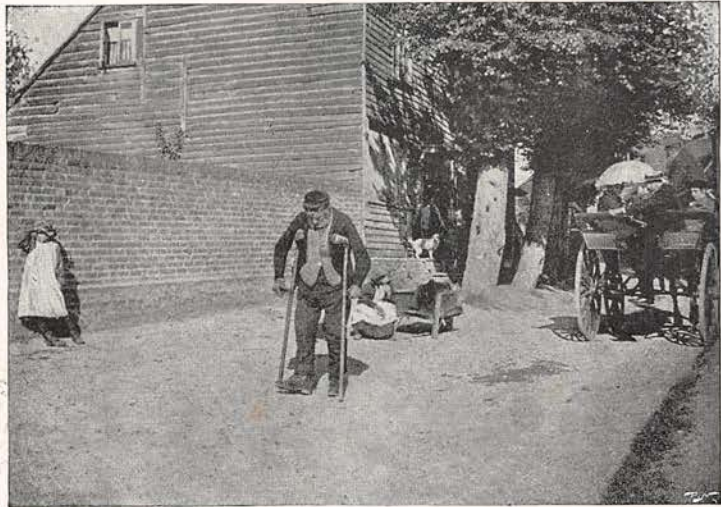
drink good mild ale instead of that beastly saccharated threepenny he would be all the better for it. And meat? A man must have plenty of that if he wants to keep up his muscular fibre. As a rule Giles, if he is at all overdone and underfed, begins to fall off at about thirty; at sixty-five he is no good at all—pneumonia or bronchitis in the end manage to finish him off, even as they had a try at it when he was a youngster. Still, for all that, though he may not be up to work he is not out of the way of enjoying himself. There's old —, now; he's close on eighty, or more, perhaps; he can only hobble about on crutches, but as he's not in the Union and his sons are well-to-do, they keep him going, and so he can enjoy his half-pint and crack a joke with anyone. Reading and writing, of course, are not much in his line, yet his head-piece is quite as good as the average town mechanic's. But let's go into the Red Lion. I've got a case there."

Inside the Red Lion? The poor beast would hardly get along were it not for the cyclists who now and again turn up. For a wonder, in the parlour there is a small company—a company as dismal as it might be. Take number one: as handsome a type of the Essex farmer as you could wish for; still, meanly clad indeed as compared with the ruddy, smart, half-sporting character who held the same land twenty-five years back. Times are bad, of course. "After the Crimean War, father made quite £350 a year out of the 180 acres. Forty year ago horsemen's wages were only twelve shillings, labourers' ten shillings, or even eight shillings. Thirty year ago wheat would fetch sixty-five shillings. A man would open his eyes wide now if he got thirty shillings. What's the good of it now if rents are only a pound now when they were two and three formerly? My ploughin' costs me ten shillings the acre, and harrowin' three times three shillings. Then there's seed (tho' that's cheap enough!), and the manure stands

me in nigh forty shillings the acre. People come down here and say why don't we grow vegetables—what's the good o' that? Four hundred and seventy ton of onions came in from Egypt not so long ago in one load. And as to speculatin' anyways when all's going on wrong around you, you haven't got the heart to do it."

Well! well! Yet, as in the Red Lion parlour there is not overmuch to cheer the haphazard traveller's spirits, you soon find yourself outside with your friend the doctor. He also seems to be in a somewhat depressed humour. At length he breaks out with—

"Yes, it *is* the dullness of things all round that takes the heart out of them all,



A VETERAN LABOURER.

so that they cannot grasp at any chance that comes to hand. Much less have they the energy to go out of the way to start anything new. Take market-day. In the old times a farmer started from home as if for a day's lark. He called on his way at another fellow's farm, and there was the whisky-bottle ready, and again at times afterwards the two men had a stroll round to look at the stock and chat. There was some grand market news to be picked up that was useful in making a deal. The two went on together to the next farm, and the same thing took place. I don't mean that they got to the town the worse for liquor. They were jolly, that's all. They looked at things in the best light—were brisker and spryer altogether. There's no doubt about it, the men have a much lower mental tone than their fathers. Better education can't fight

against bad times. When they call on each other's places now they say, "Will you have a glass of beer," and don't seem to be in any violent hurry to bring it out.



LAND TO BE SOLD.

There's none of the old free-and-easy fun there used to be. And no wonder. Look here now."

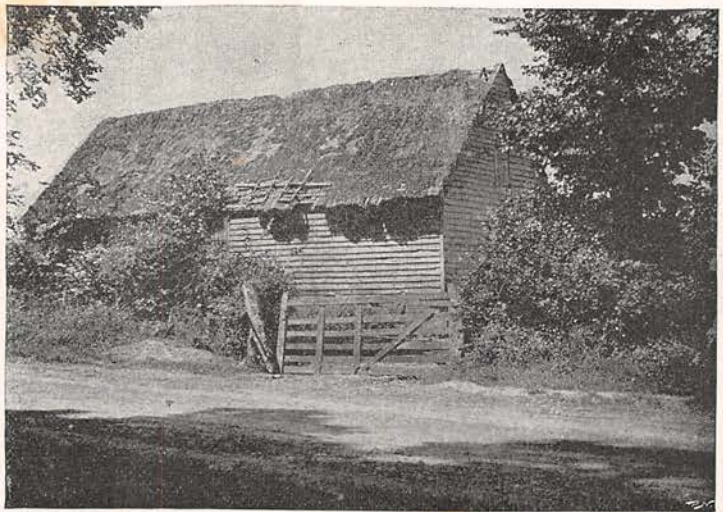
The doctor leaves off to point to a notice-board announcing freehold land for sale.

"Twenty-five years ago that land kept ten men. Now? It isn't worth while to attempt to cultivate anything that's at all near a railway-station. The builder does, or thinks he does, better with it than the farmer. By-the-way, in the plans of uncultivated Essex this has not always been plainly enough pointed out. The farms near the railway stations will fall into the hands of the Cockney squires."

In the green shady lane, however, the doctor cheers up, perhaps in the pleasure he feels in seeing his statements supported by stare-in-the-face fact. You halt to look over a five-barred-gate that has been mended with rugged faggots. See the big barn! It is almost tumbling

to pieces. The thatch has rotted off, and the mouldering rafters come through. All the buildings are in a state of picturesque semi-ruin. Against the cowsheds the nettles grow in huge bushes. There are plenty of broken lines for the artist, and plenty of signs of broken-down times for the economist. The very pig-sty is half a ruin. Yet for all this the look of the live-stock is not half so bad as you might expect. Fowls and ducks—particularly the latter—can be counted in good round numbers. But then Essex has always been a good duck county. Here again, though the farmer must needs have his say about the cramming of the county with foreign produce, and the high railway rates at home, he mentions incidentally something of some importance.

Several Kentish farmers he knows of are sending their green market-garden produce to London by coasting steamer. Perhaps the same experiment might be tried in his own county. He's not over-sure about it! Things *are* bad! "Round about here there are quite eleven or twelve farms to let, and comparative-like lying idle." But as the farmer appears to be growing somewhat irritable with the subject, once more a start is made in the high road. A group of labourers pass by. They are of somewhat poor physique and shambling gait. They

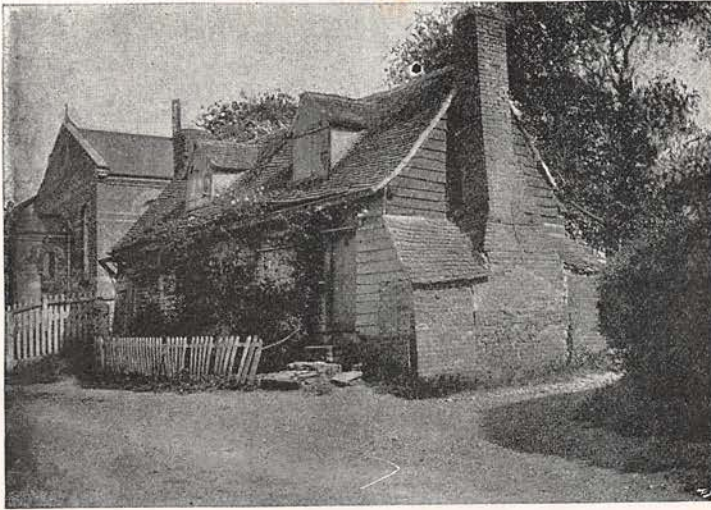


OUT OF REPAIR.

rather call to mind both in face, look, and figure some of the peasants in the potato districts about Oudenarde. "As I said

week. On Sundays he always does get a good feed. Five or six pounds of beef is bought for himself, wife, and three

youngsters. The Essex man is extravagantly particular as to quality, thinking nothing of giving one and threepence per pound (*sic*) for best top ribs. Legs of mutton, as a rule, are not purchased. Necks, however, are occasionally condescended to. Any idea of economical cooking is unknown. The sensible pot-au-feu of the French peasant would be looked upon with utter contempt. I don't suppose that they ever heard of

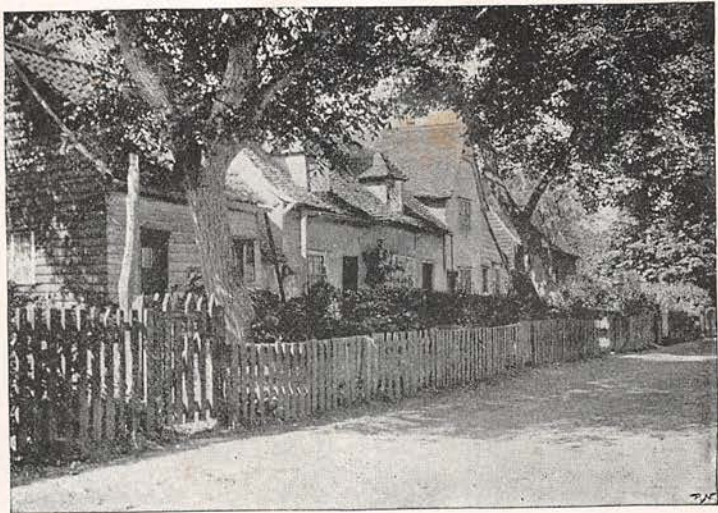


"TO LET."

before," says Mr. Doctor, "they don't have enough to eat to keep them well up. Take the horseman who rises at four o'clock! He gets a cup of tea, perhaps, not as a matter of course, an ounce and a half of fat bacon, and something less than four ounces of bread. He comes home to breakfast at eight, and has it with his children before they tramp off to Board School, the meal being much the same as before. Dinner-time with him is rather late. He cannot spare it until his team is put up at, say, two o'clock. There is nearly always a little bit of meat kept back from Sunday's dinner for two days in the week. It is only an ounce or two of hash, but with a mess of potatoes, if he have a fairish garden, sometimes with cabbage, the wife can make up a

kind of lobsouse. If he be a married man with a family he seldom has less than two bread-and-cheese dinners in the

currie; yet I'm sure that it would warm them up a bit in the winter. As to the children, they're so many 'bubble and squeakers'—that is, excepting on Sundays. Bubble and squeak—hotted-up potatoes, cabbage, and dripping—is a common meal in these parts. When they have cheese



A SUNNY ESSEX LANE.

the men go for American, and look with contempt upon Dutch—why, I don't know; perhaps because it's cheap and fairly wholesome. Yes; it's the want of

meat food—nourishing food, to keep up the body's heat, that makes the little ones so subject to bronchitis and pneumonia. Of course, there's some overcrowding. How can it be helped in a four-roomed cottage with five to sleep? When one gets sick the front room, the parlour, is turned into the hospital. No, no. I don't believe that there is one case in five hundred of a questionable character arising from thus being huddled up. The girls who drift away from what's right have been out to service in the small towns or, so to speak, run away to London. I think the lads, if they do use bad language, on the whole behave very well indeed to the cottage girls. Yes, in the face of all overcrowding, the moral standard is much higher than it is in the towns."

Now, as you journey on and the mellow evening light throws the long shadows of the elms across the straggling weeds of a fallow field, the nightingale makes a few trial notes. Alack! This part of the country has suffered much from the small-bird catcher. The bullfinch is growing quite a rarity, and the linnets are taken away in thousands. In these bad times even the birds are not left to cheer one up.

Still, there is something to be seen that yields some sort of satisfaction. The cotters' gardens are unusually well kept. Here is one well worth noting. It is separated by a hedge and broad ditch from the high road. There

is a stretch of land about 120 ft. by 35 ft., a bit at the side 40 ft. square or so, and a small duck-pond. If the crop turns out all right there will be two full sacks of



THE LABOURER.



THE LAST RESTING-PLACE OF THE ESSEX LABOURERS.

potatoes. One side of the long bed is bordered with broad beans, well free from fly of any sort. There are scarlet runners, carrots, onion patch, lettuces, summer cabbages, and a new plantation of late. On the plot, also, are five fairish good fruit-trees. Two of them, being planted near the hedge, save the garden growth from being over-shadowed, even if they may offer too strong a temptation to roadside petty economists. The farm horseman, who is standing amid his little wealth of produce, is a slight but well-built, sharp-eyed man of forty or thereabout. He is decently clad, and carries a watch and chain. On this land he has only been working some five or six years, having migrated from more northern Essex. His wages are fifteen shillings per week. There is no look of poverty about either him or his children. Perhaps, though, he is an exceptional personage, who is able to make the best of everything. On the duck-pond are swimming thirty-two well-fed quackers. He also counts twelve cocks and hens and fifty chickens. He is a man capable, then, even of better things under better circumstances, though it looks as if present circumstances are by no means bad. Peeping inside the front door the interior is at least comfortable-looking, whatever it may be from a sanitary point of view. There is a goodly show of mounted photographs upon the walls, a few oleographs, and two engravings of the Queen and Prince Albert. A Seth Thomas clock, three or four mahogany chairs, a looking-glass, an old sofa, and a patch of carpet suggest

but little idea of anything like squalor and misery. On the round table supper is neatly set—bread, cheese, lettuce, bottle of marmalade, but no sign of beer. It is possible that the cotter is a teetotaler, although he has not made mention of it. Perhaps the two miles' walk from the ale-house is the real reason. "But," says the doctor, "the men about here are not at all a drunken lot—a pot a day is about as much as they usually take—the only pity is that it's not better in quality. This fellow has brought up his children decently enough; the eldest girl is in service, and the boy next works on a farm nigh by—he lodges out, so that there are only three little children besides the father and mother sleeping at home. Well, I don't say that it's exactly an exceptional model household; still, it's better than a good many. It's only fair to say that most of the men about here make the best of their garden patches. No; they cannot be said to be badly off—at least, bar the tumble-down cottages they have to live in."

The horseman stands at his little gate and nods a farewell as you turn out into the sunset glow. After all, can he be so very badly off as some social scientists would wish us to believe? But when the next hill is mounted how many well-acred fields are to be seen lying fallow! Whatever the peasant may do, the farmer must be having a bad time of it.

Says the doctor: "But the Scotchmen who have come here say that they can make a 'do' of it."

You answer: "I was thinking only of the Essex farm folk who are Essex men."



AN ESSEX LANDSCAPE.