

THE ENGLISH FARMER BOY.

"THE BIRD-TENTER" was the name given to children who scared the birds from the corn, or tented, or looked after anything that had to be driven home at night, and no other term was used by our Saxon forefathers to describe such an occupation, which has come down unchanged to the present day in the northern and midland counties. Chaucer uses it in the same sense; and where an inquiry is made after little Bill Blewitt in one of our oldest nursery rhymes we are told that he is "tenting his sheep, under the haycock fast asleep," which is very often the case with the "corn-tenter," for birds are very early risers, and the boy who watches them must be up with the dawn, and breaking the silence that hangs over the dewy fields, if he would "tent" his master's corn and scare away the hungry foragers. To tent the corn, or sheep, cattle, and pigs, is about the first employment a country child is put to, often commencing with a penny a day wage, and, as the corn ripens and harvest times draws nearer, advancing, for three or four weeks, to twopence, if the little sentinels merit so high a salary by being at their post by daylight, shouting till they are hoarse and flapping their bird-clappers until their little arms ache. In our boyish days, when we "tented" the corn in old Lincolnshire—a land filled with grey old churches which have outlasted the names of the saints to whom they were dedicated—we had an ancient rhyme which we half-said, half-sung while rattling our wooden bird-clapper, and that was

Away, birds, away, and come no more to-day,
Take a ear and leave a ear, and come no more for seven long year.
Away, birds, away.

And many a childish voice may be heard in the corn-fields of green Old England chanting the same bird-song, as their forgotten forefathers did in their day long centuries ago.

What miles these little "tenterers" will at times wander with their charge from home! their boundary generally being some far-away tollgate, up to which all the roadside waste is their pasture on both sides the way. A few green lanes leading only to fields they are forbidden to enter; as to the rest of the wayside it is all their own, and the old cow, horse, donkey, pigs, and sheep may wander at will; and famous grazing there used to be on these wayside pastures lying to the right and left, and often as wide again as the broad highway that ran between them. For miles these long wastes were untenanted, and had neither edge nor ditch, often only a winding footpath threading its way through them, more used than that beside the highway, for it was soft as a fleecy carpet to the feet. And, oh! how much pleasanter it was to tent cattle there than watch the corn-fields, where the children couldn't run where they liked, because of the standing corn; to see everybody and everything passing—the stage-coach with its four horses, that seldom went less than ten miles an hour, where the guard blew his horn and waved his hand as he passed the corn-tenterers, for little Polly was oftener with her brother Jack than not, and the good-natured guard knew how it would please the children to be so noticed. There was no such entertainment to be found in the corn-fields, often hemmed in every way by other fields, no highroad near, and only the birds which they had to frighten away from the corn for companions from dewy morn to blue twilight, or the little wild animals that hid themselves amid the stubble.

Bloomfield when a boy had often "tented" the corn, though he makes no mention, in his beautiful poem, of the bird-clapper used to scare away the birds which he sees

Drop one by one upon the hending corn

from the hawthorn hedge. He also used a pole to beat the hedges, and "assail their close retreat," which we never saw done in Lincolnshire, though we often threw stones or pieces of hard earth into the hedges when our bird-clapper and shouting "Away, birds, away" failed in scaring them off. No doubt hundreds of country children without the power of describing what they saw, amused themselves as he did while tenting the corn alone in the fields. That beautiful picture has more than once been engraved, though never drawn to our satisfaction, where Bloomfield watches the ascent of the bird that "at heaven's gate sings," while he is tenting the corn, and lying down to observe it soar singing up the sky:—

Close to his eyes his hat he instant bends
And forms a friendly telescope, that lends
Just aid enough to dull the glaring light
And place the wandering bird before his sight.

Then he tells us there were times, even with this aid, when he could only see the skylark as it "wheeled direct from shade to light." It is a little picture; but a more perfect bit of word-painting exists not in all our rich treasury of English poetry, and we refer our readers to that portion of his "Farmer's Boy" entitled "Summer" for the remainder of this rich bit of true nature.

From "tenting" corn in the fields, and cattle by the roadside and in the lanes, the farmer's boy gets promoted to driving the ploughman's horses, for they often require a good deal of urging on when the land is heavy. Then he is trusted to bush-harrow the grass-fields by himself; and for this rural labour he has only to get a gate lifted off its hinges, thrust a lot of thorns through the bars, place it flat, and yoke a horse to it, then go up and down the fields all day long, when it combs up the young grass after the winter rain, snow, and frost has pressed it down, and makes it smooth and level for the sunshine and showers to fall on and revive. Then he

is trusted to look after the farm horses, take them to water, and fodder them at night, having carefully attended to the instructions that have been given him by the foreman, and kept his eyes wide open as well; for the time arrives when he is taken into the great farmhouse to board, and he envies no living soul in the wide world when he is promoted to this high estate. He likes work and lives well; what more does he want? Nothing, would have been the answer to such a question in our boyish days. But England thinks different now, though he never knew the want of it then, but went on as his father's father had done before him, who never had any education, and was fortunate if he could read a little by slowly spelling each separate word.

The English Farmer Boy who now awakens the sweet silence of the early morning with his bird-clapper among the ripening corn has a brighter prospect before him than opened upon our boyish days. But we hope the rules of the new Education Bill will not be enforced very rigidly among the children of the hard-worked and poorly-paid villagers, where little Jack or Polly's shilling a week buy as much bread as nearly four times the amount would have purchased when we tented birds and gleaned the falling ears in the corn-field during the time that all foreign ports were closed against England—a time of bad harvests—when corn was selling at six guineas a quarter in the market-place of "Our Old Town." Weed out the superfluous beershops from the land—those haunts of drunkenness and nurseries of crime; let the labourer be better paid, and his leisure time occupied with a little garden from our miles of waste land, or as near his humble home as it can be got, for a few shillings a year rent; then educate the children, and we shall have a New England, peopled with an intelligent race, instead of a round-headed and half open-eyed peasantry that know nothing and care for nothing beyond what they shall eat, drink, and wear, and have a roof over their heads. Make them able to read, and you create a new appetite which their ignorant fathers never had, for the mind that craves for knowledge has less of the human animal about it and is not turned so often to the trough.

One pleasure the English Farmer Boy cannot be deprived of, except by affliction, and that is the enjoyment of the various seasons of the year, for he finds it in all the changes. He stands face to face with the works of the Creator and beholds the hand of God in all he sees—the sunshine and the shower obey His bidding, and the tree attains its giant height, and the corn is made ready for the sickle by His invisible power. Educate the little corn-tenter, and he will be in closer communion with nature than ever his fathers were through their long lives, and he will soon know a many things that they sat staring at with wondering eyes and open mouths without rising any the wiser from their vacant study.

They will then, like Bloomfield while he was only a farmer's boy, notice "the wheat-ear form a graceful bow, with milky kernels weighed down," even while the beautiful wild-roses remain in bloom on the briery branches, and long before the summer sun has browned them. And where, for a rich and delicate colour, can a flower be found to excel the wild rose of the waste, which the little corn-tenter so often gathers while scaring away the birds? No garden roses we ever saw have so beautiful and warm a crimson as we have found in our hedge roses, when they faced the sun, which every separate petal received and basked in, for they lose that rich colour, which is as captivating to the eye as a handsome face in a homely cottage-garden, when they are transplanted and become double, like a flounced dress that draws away the eye from the plain white frock without pleasing it so well. What a height we have seen roses trained up the walls of some of our old country halls and long-standing farm-houses! they formed a frame of flowers round the bed-room windows; and, oh! how sweet the apartments must have smelt into which they breathed their fragrance! We think we can understand why a poor soul who has a room beside a poisonous sewer in a stifling court is so ready to leave the world, while a dweller among roses in "sweetness and light" is in no hurry to pack up and be off to heaven, for a habitation so situated is "a little heaven below." Shakspeare makes one of his kings, weary of the pomp and ceremony of a court, exclaim

O God! methinks it were a happy life
To be no better than a homely swain;

and contentment embowered in roses must be a happier state of existence than sitting on a golden throne "arrayed in purple and fine linen," with bedizened hirelings kneeling around the dais on a costly carpet that hides the sleeping volcano beneath. The surface work of even good kings and great armies is too often useless, for what they cut down leaves its seed on the earth, and the piled trench but makes a richer soil for revenge to spring out of, as when a graveyard is opened its poisonous gas fills the whole of the surrounding neighbourhood. Why do the most beautiful roses grow about our old battle-fields? Is it not as if the voice of old Mother Earth was continually rebuking us, saying in an ever-complaining voice, "See, how sweet and beautiful all the ground is that covers me when I am left to sleep in peace and the feet of contending armies come not to trample me down! I have by the silent power I possess in my dark laboratory caused beautiful roses to spring from the crimson blood that has been shed in the past centuries. Trouble me no more, lest, instead of sweet flowers, I make huge volcanoes belch forth such destructive fires as shall redden the midnight that will then settle down over the world."



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