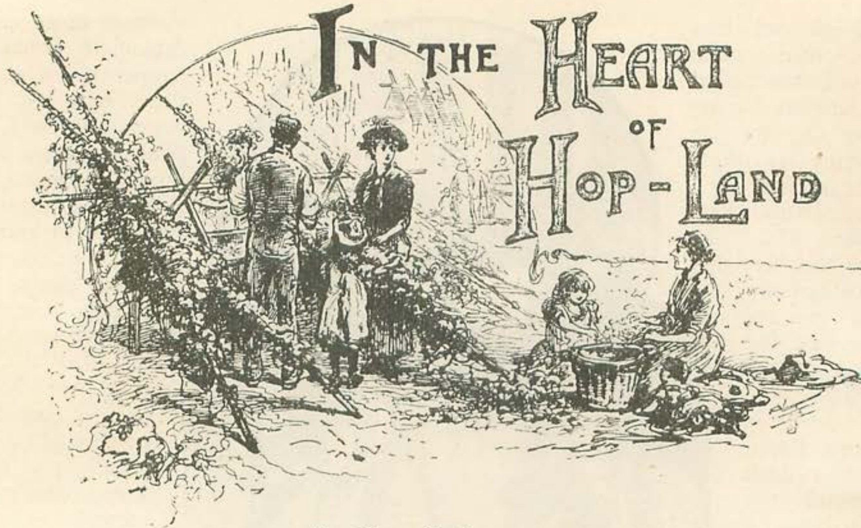

In the Heart of Hop-Land

By Miss T. Sparrow.

"WELL, them's fools as does it, that's all I can say," and Beery Bill, a hawker up Houndsditch way, tugged his cart through the doorway by tilting it so savagely that the unsold vegetables rolled about the floor.

His partner, meek and jaded-looking, did not rise from the wooden box on which she was sitting, with a puny child on her lap, while two even punier pounced upon some unsavoury carrots and began munching them with gusto.

"It's for the sake o' the childer," she said, feebly, with that weary reiteration in her tone which takes the place of reasoning in the minds of the ignorant; "that's every blessed bit o' food they've 'ad to-day."

Beery Bill did not answer at once; he unearthed a canvas sack from underneath a heap of garden produce which that morning had been voted too stale for selling purposes, and was left to further rot in a corner, and having disposed of this round the netherpart of his person, he squatted on the ground opposite his partner and thoughtfully lighted his pipe.

"It's for the sake o' the childer I say no," he began, when the first puffs had proved satisfactory; "'op-picking is all very well in its way, but the company is mixed, very mixed. The young varmints er bad enuf 'ere in the town; they ud be ten times wuss running wild in the country."

"I enjoyed 'op-picking myself many a time," said the faded woman, with a little sigh for the green fields and the balmy air, and the babbling brook and the dappled sunsets that were but a memory for twenty-five grimy, squalid years.

"So did I," he replied, condescendingly; "but it's gone down in style since then. Farmers used to know their 'ands, and take them reg'lar year by year. Now anybody goes—even toffs!" The scorn in the last word was indescribable, and he shook the ashes from his pipe with the air of one who had clinched the subject altogether.

Then the meek one tried another tack.

"Wegetables is not profitable this season," she began, cautiously.

"That's so," he replied.

"It's so 'ot—they're too plentiful."

"And stink afore you get to the best streets, no need to tell me that," he remarked, drily.

"The 'ops, as they do say," she went on, playing her last card tentatively, "'ave never been so fine, and the farmers are payin' 'ands what they like to ask."

His dirt-stained hand tugged at his grizzled beard; perhaps visions of a froth-filled pewter in a cleanly village "pub" floated before his bleared eyes. Anyway, his voice was less dogmatic when he spoke again.

"Folks talk a pack o' lies, Melier, and I shouldn't hearken to such. Not that I want to be unreasonable to you, and if you 'ave taken a fancy to go 'op-pickin', a 'op-pickin' we will go. It's the journey down's the hobstacle; the people 'er that rough, it's not fit for you and the kids. If we could track it, now."

"What's that?" I inquired, speaking for

the first time from the one chair this interesting family owned.

(Perhaps here is the place to introduce myself, as an individual in quest of personal experience, and able to vouch for the truth of what follows.)

"It's goin' by road," Bill explained; "in a waggon, with friends, and takin' your furniture too."

"I thought that never was done now," I remarked.

"Plenty do it every year," answered Bill, in high good humour that he was able to teach someone; "it comes cheaper in the end. You see, now the farmers 'ave to find us something better than barns, and they run up 'ouses with stone or brick floors and throw in some straw as if we were beasts. We are not accustomed to luxuries, as perhaps you see," waving his pipe round the tableless, curtainless, carpetless, chestless apartment, some eight feet square; "but we like our 'ome comforts, and must either buy 'em there or take 'em with us. It's borrowin' the 'osses is what beats me."

"You should try to join some other family," I suggested; "if you can make up a party, I will come too."

"It's the joinin' that's so 'ard," replied Bill, rising and divesting himself of his canvas wrap. "I 'ear Furniss, two doors lower, is goin' that way: 'e's a low sort o' fellow, a chimney-sweep. Then Mrs. Sam will be bound to go with 'er eight childer; but if I ketch my wife speakin' to 'er——" (and the threat was lost in his throat) "I'll go to the 'Four Stars' and cogitate there. We aint haristocrats, miss, but we 'ev our little feelin's."

A few days later and the "tracking" was begun. I must own that in fancy it had taken the shape of a nineteenth century gipsy party, and I had imagined the stalwart Bohemian van, the picturesque and neat gipsies, the cheerful horses, the light-hearted, barefooted children.

My dismay at the reality could hardly be concealed, when I joined them some five miles from St. Paul's. Two or three open, ramshackle carts, drawn by the most sorry beasts I ever came across, contained bundles, babies, parcels, and fire-irons, shied in promiscuously, allowed to remain where they fell. Dirty mattresses bulged out from dirty blankets; a child's scarlet frock, which had evidently been forgotten, was tied to the handle of a frying-pan, and waved attractively in the wind. Treacle oozed out of a hamper, whilst babies and bluebottles had a race as to who could first have their fill; kettles were stuffed with family linen (which same is a figure of speech), a variety of headgear, apparently for Sunday's donning, adorned basket-handles, sticks, and even cotton Sairey Gamps; whilst tin slop-pails made an elegant receptacle for sundry boots, pots of lard, penny combs, and half-loaves of bread. Added to this, every male as he trudged along had a big bundle slung over his shoulder, whilst every female had the same or a baby. Three boys and three girls composed the juniors of the party; which besides was formed of eight men, five wives, and two flashy damsels who were flower-girls in town.

"Have we to walk all the way?" I inquired, ruefully, of one of the latter.

"Did you 'spect a carriage and pair?" she said, tossing back her auburn mop of a fringe, "or perhaps you wanted one of the gen'lemen to give you a lift."

"We take it in turns to ride in the carts," remarked Mrs. Bill, timidly. "You go first, miss."

"THE JOURNEY DOWN."

I looked at the jolting, jumbling vehicles, at the raw-boned, spavined steeds, and heroically declined.

"How do you manage about sleeping?" I ventured to ask next.

"We pull up under a hedge, and shift the best we can," was the answer.

From that moment I genuinely agreed with Beery Bill that the journey down was a "hobstacle."

We made many a halt, always in the vicinity of a public-house. The poor man has generally coppers for a drink, and the cup went round, each one being pressed just to have a snack! Some bottles were filled with cold tea, and at one place the landlady gave the children some currant-cake.

Slowly we trundled along the road; houses got fewer and fewer; the trees became thicker and more plentiful; gardens, fragrant with late roses, wall-flowers, and southern-wood, tempted the juveniles to loiter longingly at the gates; and the ripening corn greeted our gladsome gaze on every side. Our travellers had started at 4 a.m., and before noon began to lag. So none were sorry when Beery Bill proposed we should turn into a hollow we came to and make ourselves "quite at 'ome."

"WE WOMEN SAT AND TALKED."

The horses were set free, some of the men smoked, some stretched themselves out on the long green grass and fell fast asleep. Bits of bread were doled out to the youngsters, smeared with treacle or lard, as taste inclined, and Beery Bill, who was reckoned a character, took it into his head to have a wash there and then; so, unlatching a gate, he retired to a very weedy duck pond, his wife standing by with a bit of a rag, which did duty for a towel. And we women sat and talked, as women sit and talk all the world through, the mothers of their children, the girls of their admirers, and the old crone, who was deaf and bent double, of the wonderful, brilliant "past."

Meanwhile, the birds sang in the bushes, the cocks crowed in the adjacent farms, and the air was heavy with the luscious sultry sweetness of the last days of a hot and fading summer. The very leaves seemed perspiring, as they drooped or turned over with the sickly heat, and it was somewhat languidly we recommenced our tramp. The dust lay thick upon the road, and already some of our party were blistered and footsore. The children suffered most; they cried, and when scolded, whimpered pitifully below their breath. The parents carried those they could, but were hardly able to drag themselves along.

Stiller and stiller became the air, till one almost heard the blades of grass pant for breath. The dust we swallowed stuck in our throats and lay in great lumps there. The sky darkened; the earth seemed to throb beneath our cracked and swollen feet. Then came a vivid, blinding flash, and the heavy roll of thunder. We all stood still; the little ones clung, trembling, to their mothers' breasts; the horses quivered and hung their heads; the women, half-blinded and scared, hushed their frightened babes, or rubbed their dazed eyes: and the men—they remained stock still, staring at one another in a bewildered sort of way.

It came so suddenly, flash after flash, roar after roar; a blue darkness enveloped us, and then yellow flame shot out from the sky, and like jewelled daggers shone hither, thither, pierced here, there, till our very brains caught fire, and it was an effort not to scream aloud with the dazzling, brilliant beauty of it. The peals of thunder roared just above our heads; the ground shook just beneath our feet; we could go nowhere; we could do nothing—just stand to see what followed. And then down came the blessed rain, a splashing, lilting downpour that drenched us to the skin in five minutes, but relieved the painful tension of our nerves, and made us feel like human beings once again. It welled down from the heavens in ponderous sheets; it splashed up from the ground in merry hisses; our strained, dry flesh sucked it in thirstily at every pore; like drunkards returning to their cups after a period of forced abstention, we revelled in the liquid, and cared little for what followed the excess.

For all too soon the reaction came: the refreshing coolness became chilliness, the chilliness gave way to cold. Our soaked rags saturated into our shivering frames, and our limbs grew stiff, with ominous pains in the joints. The contents of the carts had turned into a squashy pulp, and the girls cried as they saw the emaciated condition of their flimsy finery. We staggered on, till an early dusk, thickened by an intermittent drizzle, momentarily increased our discomfort.

We were in a winding lane, and had just passed through a straggling village, where we had begged separately and in couples for food and shelter in vain. Our appearance was against us. For the sake of the wailing babes one other attempt was made. Beery Bill so far demeaned himself as to go to a farm with me and offer to pay a trifle for the accommodation of the whole party in a barn. We were curtly refused. Then Beery Bill took action.

"If they won't give us leave, we must take it," he said, gruffly, and when dark had descended (or the dim night pall which takes the place of dark on an August night) we drew up in a ditch and, tethering the horses, crept silently and fearsomely one by one across two fields to a disused barn. The bottom door was locked, but the men climbed and hoisted us up through the window, and we cowered down upon the hay thankful for such a shelter.

Shall I ever forget that night? The steamy noisomeness that exuded from our garments made breathing a pain, not a pleasure; we had no light but the sparks from the men's pipes and the grey shadow that came from the moon behind the clouds. I felt, rather than saw, the people grope about, winding hay round their feet to dry them, wringing the wet from their long, lank hair, and rubbing the back of the old woman, who was bad with rheumatics. Soon, too soon, I fell asleep, and fast asleep, unwitting that death had found us out in that deserted barn in that deserted field, and was stealing one away, whose tiny life ebbed fast within an arm's length of me.

At 2 a.m. they woke me.

"We must be on the tramp again," was whispered. "Norah's child is dead."

I looked across to where Norah lay. She had been comely once, but want, and what it drives to, had sadly scarred her face. The dead body of the six-year-old girl was by her side. No one showed signs of grief, but unusual quietness prevailed. All were preoccupied with the awkwardness of the dilemma.

"Shall we take it with us?" I asked one of the flower-girls, who was twisting her fringe with a hair-pin.

"Not likely," was the reply; "we must leave it here and chance it."

Stealthily we crawled from our strange bed-chamber, leaving two men behind. Beery Bill was one of them.

When we were well under way in the sunless dawn he joined us again.

"That's an orkard piece of business," he said to me, jerking his thumb to where the dead child lay, shroudless and uncoffined. "I must ask you to cut with me and do the rest o' the journey by train. If they track us, it will save the others not to be found among 'em."

So I changed attire with his wife; he shaved, or scraped off rather, his grisly beard, and thus disguised we trudged in an opposite direction to our travelling caravan. As we mounted a hill I looked back. Where the barn had stood was steeped in smoke.

"You fired it!" I exclaimed, pointing to the curling circles as they rose above the trees.

"Them as knows least fares best," he replied, oracularly, and I took the hint.

Perhaps it was as well that I never read a paper for three weeks, nor did I meet any of our party again.

At a roadside station we caught a hop-pickers' train, and became merged in the great floating riff-raff that belches out of London yearly at this time. Weighted with

his secret, Bill's pride was not so keen, and sighting a pal in the hawker line, he accosted him cordially, and agreed to throw in his luck with him. Fortunately for us, this "pal" had lost sight of the two relations who had booked with him a berth at Jop Hill Farm, so with the happy honesty of East-end folk, we slipped into their places, which they did not come to claim, having, no doubt, in the meantime, got a job more worth having. Our employer was of the crusty sort, though one of the largest landowners in the neighbourhood. He hated us as the spawn of humanity, and openly favoured the "home-dwellers" on every possible occasion. They took their cue from him, and flaunted us and flouted us (particularly the women) as the very dregs of creation.

"'YOU FIRED IT!' I EXCLAIMED."

Such a feeling was bound to come to a head; it did very soon.

All south country people know that the hops are first gathered into bins or canvas bags slung on a pole. A party work at a bin and are paid according to measure. Enough are gathered each day to fill the furnaces and enough only; more than enough would rot. So if the workers begin early and work hard, the bell may ring as soon as 4 p.m.; the carts go round and collect the hops, and not a stroke more may be done.

The hop-pickers are reduced to their homes or the "pub." The "homes" are buildings erected specially for them, in a field by a brook as far removed from the village as possible. They consist of a room with a partition of wood; the light comes from a sloping pane in the roof. Some straw is thrown on the stone floor, and a hook in the wall for a lamp constitutes fixtures. No fire is allowed, smoking is forbidden, even the lamp must be out at 9 p.m. Breaking the rules means forfeiture of wages. At the end of each row is a cook-house with range and sink. Here the women take it in turns to cook for the whole party, and rations are served in common. Milk and other necessaries have sometimes to be brought from the village, a two miles' trudge. No inhabitant will serve them if they can avoid it; and hop-pickers would fare badly indeed if it were not for stray pedlars (who make a mint of money at such times) selling cheap and nasty wares, but at least bringing everything to hand. This suits the women, and the men have the village ale-house. They cannot be expected to sit in darkness minus their pipe, so to the ale-house they go, where the kind publican lets them run into debt, knowing to a T what they get from the hops.

It is at the ale-house discontent is brewed. At least so it was with us. One day it rained, and as damp hops are useless, work was stopped, and we were told our services would not be wanted that day. In the afternoon it cleared up; the home-dwellers were called to work, but the bell was never sounded for us.

The whole of a weary six hours we fretted and fumed, and at night, when the men met at "The Dun Cow," their wrath culminated. They determined on a strike.

I had accompanied Beery Bill that evening and heard the details of the plot.

We were to refuse to work the next day till they had promised to pay us the half-day's work we had lost through Farmer ——'s partiality, and there was to be a distinct

understanding that we were not to be shelved in that way again. As Beery Bill expressed it: "Leddies and gen'lemen don't come down from Lonnen to oblige you by working in your fields, and then stand by and see other folk do it."

We were very brave that night, but courage oozed off in the morning. Seven a.m. is a chilly time to deliberately turn your back on breakfast, dinner, and tea. Many of the men had had a bad night with their wives, who wept and wailed at their resolve, which meant want for themselves and the "kids." But their advice was never asked; they were told to strike, and they had to.

Still, the women's moaning had this effect: the men were open to compromise, and a civil word would have soothed all. But it was not forthcoming. The deputation said their say to the foreman, who told them plainly to go to the deuce, that they bred disease and dissension wherever they went, and that to his mind they were a parcel of rogues, nothing more.

They retired, cursing low and deep. Not a soul of us left the "houses" or their environs for four entire days. The sun blazed its fiercest, burning up the hops ere they could be gathered from the poles. We saw and rejoiced. We lazed and lounged the livelong day, sick with the heat, faint with hunger; we tossed in those dark holes the livelong night, craving for a bite, a taste, a morsel of solid food. The men had forestalled their wages a week before, and but for the extra thrifty we should not even have had the milk and oatmeal flour, which was our chief sustenance. The children were sent out to gather fruit, and the women begged. Some of the men prowled about at night, and what they brought home we thankfully ate without asking questions.

Then the weather changed, and it rained continually; our houses were not weather proof, and the absence of fires chilled. Sodden and desperate, the men with matted hair and hollow eyes huddled together in corners, pretending to chuckle at the ruin the rain made in the hops, but in reality itching to finger them and devastate the gardens while still in their glory. But not a thought of yielding ever entered our heads. There is nothing like the British working-man for doggedness of resistance.

Illness came to increase our troubles. We had among our crew a pretty, quiet girl named Mary Rutherford; she was a shirt-maker by trade, and far gone in consumption; the doctor had ordered her country air, and she took this means of procuring it. She came down with a motherly old soul, who had six olive branches of her own. Mary had been down the year before, and formed an attachment to a farm servant called Larry. His simple devotion to her recalled the days of knight errantry. He wore a bit of her hat-ribbon in his button-hole; he brought her milk, warm from the cow, in a can hidden under his coat; he scrawled verses to her every day on dirty bits of paper, and he notched their combined initials on every gate-post and tree he could. They mooned about the fields at twilight, they loitered beneath the sycamores under the stars, and when the strike began he boldly visited our habitations, bringing her money and food.

Whether the midnight meanderings had something to do with it, or the damp situation of our tenements accelerated the disease, I cannot say; but Mary presently developed a hacking cough and blood-spitting. Her strength went at a stroke, and before anyone realized she was really ill, she was dead. No doctor had been called, no clergyman had been sent for; she slipped away from our midst as she had lived, with no fuss and not a word of complaint. She had suffered, and suffered in silence, and as she lay so meekly there, with the thin hands folded and the long lashes resting on the white, waxen cheeks, there was a choke in each man's throat; for they felt, had they but known, they would have given up both pipe and beer for the mild grey eyes once more to smile on them and the gentle voice once more to greet them shyly but with kindness. Larry was inconsolable, and sobbed like a very child.

She was starved through the strike, he declared, and he would work no longer with those who had hunted her to death, but would come to London and bury his grief there.

Perhaps his sorrow, so outspoken and demonstrative, compared with that generally shown by the coster class, inspired Beery Bill with an idea.

He had been pondering for some time, with his big head in his big hands, when he suddenly announced it was only right to try and bring our employer to grasp "the responsibilities of his position."

"And this is 'ow we'll do it, mates," continued Bill. "We'll carry Mary theer and we will lay 'er as she is on 'is doorstep, so when 'e rises with the lark 'e can see 'ow starvin' looks like; mebbe it *will* give 'im an appetite for breakfast."

We were all too low to resist this gruesome

"THEY LAID HER IN FRONT OF THE WINDOWS."

plan, and Bill plainly delighted in a situation. So, while a harvest moon bathed the peaceful, sylvan landscape in her cold, yellow light, and the summer breeze waved through the uncut corn and rustled in the boughs of the dark, spreading trees, three gaunt and haggard men carried, on a stretcher, the frail corpse, uncovered, for we had neither sheet nor towel to lend her.

Stepping lightly through the grounds, unwatched by dogs, they laid her in front of the windows in a bed of sweet peas and mignonette, her black hair framing her white face, which looked so sharply chiselled in the still, clear moonlight. Then they hied back to us to bide their time. On a sheet torn out of a copy-book, and pinned to her breast, was the following :—

Mary Rutherford dead
For want of bread.

This was Larry's contribution to the ghastly transaction, and probably was the nail that went straight home.

I heard later that Farmer —— sent at once for the doctor to remove the corpse for fear of infection, and when the medical examination resulted in the verdict that the inscription was about true, he sent for the foreman and was shut up with him a long time.

The result was that, at noon, Farmer —— visited our dwellings in company with the foreman. The men were all called out on the grass, and Farmer ——, a hale and hearty man, boasting eighty summers, with a blue eye as bright as any schoolboy's, his ruddy face surmounted by snow-white locks, addressed them, leaning on an oaken stick.

The upshot of his speech was that, though he refused to allow us to dictate to him as to the terms he made with the home-dwellers, if we chose to go in then and there to work, he would pay us 10d. a bushel instead of 9d. as heretofore, for the remainder of our stay. The foreman had also orders to pay a day in advance to those who had got into arrears.

We accepted the terms and turned in. The lesson had done good on both sides.

Many weeks after, when back in London, Beery Bill confessed to me and his wife that he had got the "corpse idea" from—The Surrey.