



"THE BAILIFF."

THE county of Kent, with its hop gardens, corn and hay fields, and cob-nut plantations, uncontaminated by the vitiating smoke that frequently blights and lays bare the countryside around our great manufacturing centres, has been appropriately called "The Garden of England." Yet this poetic name might with even stricter accuracy be phrased anew as "The Orchard of England," for although the most generally known product of the county is the hop, Kent is also a stronghold of another agricultural industry, annually increasing in proportions, which bids fair seriously to rival the product so long and so intimately associated with the district. This is the extensive cultivation of cherries, strawberries, raspberries, and currants.

Properly speaking, there are two great fruit-growing districts—one in the north of the county around Swanley, where the largest orchards in the country are to be found, and the other in mid-Kent, round the old county town of Maidstone. The former district is almost entirely devoted to the cultivation of strawberries,

## AMONG THE KENTISH FRUIT PICKERS.

BY FREDERICK A. TALBOT.

raspberries, and currants, or, to adopt the parlance of the fruit-grower, "bottom fruit," while the cherries and plums are chiefly grown around Maidstone.

The annual consumption of fruit of all sorts in this country is enormous, and these particular fruits, owing to their perishable nature, have to be produced as near home as possible. Our markets absorb a vast quantity of the production merely in the supplying of the ephemeral demands of the table; but by far the largest consumption of fruit is that carried on through the medium of the several large jam and preserved fruit factories.

Contracts are arranged between the fruit grower and the jam manufacturer by which the former agrees to supply so much fruit every season. If the crop is a plentiful one, then the grower is able more than sufficiently to meet the demands of the manufacturer and is able to dispose of the fruit over and above this contract quantity at Covent Garden or other markets in various parts of the country. If, on the other hand, there should be a scarcity of fruit, then the grower may have the greatest difficulty in supplying his contracts, and the result is that the jam manufacturers,



A HEAP OF  
FRUIT BASKETS.

by buying up all the available fruit, leave scarcely any for marketable purposes; consequently fruit rises in price. There is a



great deal of uncertainty in the cultivation of fruit. In the spring, when the fields are one mass of bloom, there is every promise of an abundant crop; then Jack Frost pays a visit one night, later than he is wont, and plays sad havoc with the blossom, ruthlessly dashing to the ground all the farmer's bright prospects of a successful season.

The fruit gardens near Swanley extend in all directions. Acre after acre of undulating ground is covered with the dark green foliage of the currant bushes and raspberry canes, or carpeted with strawberry plants all planted in regular longitudinal rows. On

height, and would only bear fruit at the ends, but by keeping them cut back they grow very bushy, and the fruit, in addition to being stronger, better, and richer, is much more abundant. Probably the strawberries require the greatest amount of attention, for, in the spring, straw has to be distributed among the plants to preserve the fruit.

Towards the end of May there is a general exodus from London and other towns of that nomadic population which finds employment in the harvesting of various country products. Many of these summer labourers journey from farm to farm in their caravans search-



WEIGHING THE FRUIT.

some farms space is economised by planting the strawberries in rows between the currant bushes, but in the majority of cases fields are set aside for the sole cultivation of the different classes of fruit.

The plants require but little attention in their culture. After the pickers have completed their task the raspberry canes and currant bushes are pruned and the strawberries trimmed. Ploughing performs the dual objects of loosening the earth around the roots and clearing away the weeds. The raspberry canes are pruned to a height of about three feet. If this were not done they would grow to six or eight feet in

ing for employment, while vast numbers have to be content with "Shanks' pony," spending the nights in barns, out-houses, or under the wayside hedge. The majority of the farmers, however, prefer to employ the hands living upon their estates, assisted by the wives and children, as the lawlessness of this vagabond contingent has become intolerable. Yet they are obliged to utilise the services of a large number of gipsies, for the fruit season is short—it lasts about six weeks in all—and work has to be maintained at high pressure during that period in order to gather the crops in. On the farm I visited, which comprised some 400 acres, about 500





RASPBERRY PICKERS AT WORK.

pickers were employed, most of them gipsies in this case.

The daily round of toil commences about half past five in the morning—that is, of course, provided the weather is at all propitious. By this time the summer sun has evaporated all the dew that settled upon the fruit overnight. It is most essential that the fruit should not be at all wet when picked, or it will perish within a very few hours. Work is then continued, with one or two slight intervals, right through the day until six or seven o'clock in the evening. True, the task does not entail much physical exertion, but at the same time it is very fatiguing, especially in the heat of the day, when the sun's rays pour down relentlessly upon the backs of the stooping labourers.

The pickers are armed with small baskets, each capable of holding about six pounds of fruit. Operations are commenced upon the first row of strawberries, raspberries, or currants, whichever the case may be, and continued until all the ripe fruit has been

plucked, when the pickers attack the next row, and so on, working systematically across the field. There is no possibility of the work being indifferently performed, as hands are specially detailed off to see that the bushes or plants are duly stripped of all ripe fruit. When the baskets have been filled the fruit is weighed with an exactitude worthy of Shylock prior to its despatch to the market. The scale of remuneration to the pickers is one halfpenny a pound. On the face of it this seems a very "sweating" remuneration, but it must be remembered that in the height of the season, when the fruit is very plentiful, it takes a very short time to fill a basket, and many of the pickers by remaining steadfastly at their work are able to earn so much as ten shillings per day. Of course, as the end of the season approaches the fruit is not so abundant, and consequently it takes longer to fill the baskets, with the result that the daily earnings decrease. Then it is that the inconstancy and unreliability of the nomadic tribe of pickers



A GIPSY ENCAMPMENT.



assert themselves, for when the daily wage only amounts to about three shillings, and this after long and incessant toil, the gipsies suddenly cease work and seek for pastures new.

The fruit that is intended for jam manufacture is transferred to large, cone-shaped tubs, each holding about half a hundred-weight of fruit. These are sent to the Metropolis by road, for Swanley is only seventeen miles distant from town; so that, in addition to rapid delivery, the expense of the railway carriage is saved—a by no means small consideration. Some idea of the magnitude of the demands for fruit for the jam trade may be gathered from the fact that last season Messrs. Crosse and Blackwell, the well known jam and preserve manufacturers, purchased no less than 40,000 lbs. of one day's picking upon this farm. The largest quantity of fruit ever sent to market in one week was 220,000 lbs. The fruit intended for dessert or other domestic purposes is sent to market in the ordinary large circular baskets.

The cherry picking in the neighbourhood of Maidstone is very similar. When the cherries have, to use the agricultural vernacular, "stoned," advertisements may be seen in the press offering the orchards of fruit—not the fruit trees themselves—for sale. When the purchaser completes his transaction he has to take all future risks. Nearly the whole of this fruit, however, is consumed upon the table, very little indeed being utilised by the jam manufacturer.

Upon some barren waste or wood in close proximity to the farm will be found the gipsy encampment, where the wandering pickers, whose gregarious instinct is pro-

verbial, live, move, and have their being. It is a motley colony. Those that are in an improved position can afford the luxury of a caravan, in which all the various domestic offices and residential apartments of the ordinary householder are cramped into one narrow, oppressive, and odoriferous compartment a few feet square. Others in less flourishing circumstances erect makeshift tents of pieces of canvas, sackcloth, or anything that is available, stretched over an arched skeleton of wood. Such rudely constructed wigwams, although a tolerable habitation under conditions of fine weather, are veritable dens of misery when it rains, for the imperfect and weather-beaten canvas covering offers but little shelter, and the consequence is that the interior scanty household effects are soddened with water, and the unfortunate inmates half drowned. The owners of the farms provide long, narrow sheds, partitioned off into narrow compartments like cattle pens, about five or six feet in width and from eight to nine feet in length, for the benefit of those who possess neither a caravan nor the wherewithal for erecting a tent.

When the fruit-picking season has finished, the wanderers turn towards Maidstone and its environs along the banks of the Medway, and once more set to work in September picking the hops. With their deft fingers this employment affords them much more remuneration than may be earned in the orchards. As a few weeks elapse after the fruit season has ended before the hop-picking begins, some of the more industrious nomads occupy the interval in the corn-fields, though reaping is by no means compatible with the average gipsy's idea of work.



CARRYING THE FRUIT TO MARKET.