

## GIPSY LIFE IN LONDON.

THE DRESS, HABITS AND MORALS OF THE STREET HAWKERS.

How Costermongers Resemble the Gipsies—A Numerous Class Who Lead a Life in the Open Air—How they Exist and Multiply—At War with the World.

There are between 50,000 and 60,000 costermongers in the city of London. Their vocation is the same as that of the street hawkers of American cities; but those who have made the most careful study of the latter, can form no proper idea of the characteristics of the former without personal acquaintance.

The entire life and conditions of the London costermonger are different, and this fact, as well as his strange personality and whimsical trade and social ethics, makes him a most unusual and interesting character. Besides, he is a curious and integral part of this great and ever wonderful Babel of London.

The great distinguishing difference between American hawkers and London costermongers, out of which the interesting peculiarities of the latter have grown, is the extreme antiquity of costermongers as a distinct class or race. Indeed they may with propriety be considered as a race; and I am not so sure but that in a more thorough acquaintance with them than I have gained, it would be found that they possess the ancient Roman or Gipsy strain of blood. I have certainly noticed in them many race characteristics of the gipsies; and their origin, historically considered, almost exactly corresponds with the period in which gipsies were first noticed in England.

Some of the marked characteristics and customs I have found common to both gipsies and costermongers are noteworthy. Both races are bitterly opposed to book knowledge, and not five per cent. of either, in English, can read or write. Both are hereditarily roving in nature, and would pine and die if forced for any length of time into indoor labor. Both mate rather than marry; and while remarkable for their fidelity in this relation, they hold in deep contempt religious or civil marriage rites.

Both are the most honorable and honest people who live in all dealings among themselves, but hold it the height of wisdom and morality to "do" all others not of their ilk. Both, however, meek, humble and actually law-abiding in their daily lives, are hereditarily the enemies of all law and law officers; though both will make the most desperate sacrifice to avoid becoming involved in any complications of the law. And both are, religiously, agnostics of such luminousness and density as by comparison would put all the Hamiltons, Mansels and Spencers to tervent blush and shame.

The earliest record of London costermongers' cries is said to be in Lydgate's poem of "London Lyckpeny" in the time of Henry V., about 475 years ago. Shakespeare refers contemptuously to these costermongers' times; Ben Jonson makes his Morose swoon if he hears a costermonger's cry; and Dr. Johnson gives the derivation of "costard-monger" as originating in the street sale of apples or costards "round and bulky like the head."

So far as can be traced in history and literature these folk were precisely the same in mode of life, vocation and characteristics hundreds of years ago, as at the present time. Like the fishermen of New Haven and Galway, and still like the gipsies, they have scarcely ever been known to intermarry with other classes. The result is that the costermongers of the London of today form almost a little realm of their own, ever changing in confines yet changeless in character; and still like the gipsies, they have scarcely ever been known to intermarry with other classes. The result is that the costermongers of the London of today form almost a little realm of their own, ever changing in confines yet changeless in character; and still like the gipsies, they have scarcely ever been known to intermarry with other classes.

It all this were not true of the London costermonger he would still be found a picturesque object by the casual observer. In the first place his dress is picturesque. You will not find at Catania, Messina or Palermo, in Sicily, more odd or colorful groupings than these crowds of costers at the markets or at their evening and holiday resorts. Indeed there is a dash of the Gipsy in the dress of these folk that constantly recalls the Romany people.

At his daily labors the coster will have on his head a small cloth cap well to one side, with the visor either pointed to the sky or sawing one side of his neck. He is never without his black or flashy colored silk "kingsman" or heavy, loosely gathered neckerchief, always tied in sailor's knot and the ends tucked in the folds of his gay woolen shirt; the whole exposing a fine, well corded and often hairy neck and chest. His waistcoat is long, like a jockey's, with capacious pockets and huge tabs, always of corduroy or velvet. His trousers are half Mexican in cut, of corduroy or coarse ducking, and their wide bottoms flap over the best shoe worn by any lowly men in London. Added to this are pearl or polished metal buttons innumerable.

In the matter of buttons their "best tops" for Sundays and holidays are truly startling. Whether of metal or pearl, they are from a half-inch to an inch in diameter, and are set as thickly as they can be placed around the cap band and visor edge, down the edge of the waistcoat from throat to point, above every pocket, and along the edges of all lapels, upon the sleeves nearly from wrists to elbow, and along the wide plush side stripes of the trousers, from just below the knees to the very edge of the trouser's leg, so that the last button licks and patters against the pavements and the shoe.

The coster women are none the less striking in their garb and appearance. Like the men they are all well shod, and the short coarse serge petticoats showing their ankles and shapely feet. These petticoats are as ample as a Claddagh fish-wife's. Their waists are always low at, or are left open in, the neck, and usually the latter, as with the men, is adorned with a flashy silk neckerchief, while a small woolen plaid or silk shawl covers the shoulders, its ends crossed upon the breast, where it is always fastened with a brooch of huge dimensions.

But the hair and the headgear are most distinctive. From these alone a coster girl

is anywhere recognizable. The hat is of straw or felt, and always as large as a coster's cartwheel. It protrudes alarmingly in front, and above this canopy was a forest of ostrich plumes. Coster girls belong to clubs for the purchase of these prized feathers, and there is no ordinary sacrifice they will not make to possess the largest plumes that can be bought. The hair is bestowed behind in a large braid. From the above the forehead the hair falls straight almost to the brows, but is then frizzled and curled until it stands upward and outward like monstrous matted *chance de frise*. As a coster proudly remarked to me: "Our donahs (girls, sweethearts, women) 'as a style as is all their own."

The costermonger's outfit comprises either a handbarrow, a spring cart on two wheels, on which he will load from 800 to 1,000 pounds of fruit or vegetables and with the help of a boy or his "donah" push the same a dozen miles in a day; or a donkey and cart, possessed by the more well-to-do. I have seen the latter loaded with from 1,200 to 1,500 pounds weight at Covent Garden market. The women, when hawking alone are sometimes provided with donkey carts or barrows, but often with "shallows" or shallow baskets, which with their heavy contents are carried on their heads.

Anyone desiring a superficial observation of this class can find ample studies of costers at the chief London markets. Daily 5,000 come to Covent Garden market; fully 2,000 are at Spitalfields; perhaps 500 each will be found at Borough and Leadenhall; and fully 3,000 are distributed among the lesser city and suburban markets. Covent Garden market is the most interesting place to visit, not only for its historic associations but for its opening of two o'clock in the morning until eight or nine o'clock, from 3,000 to 4,000 coster carts will have come and gone. The remainder in attendance wait until afternoon to dicker with the "hagglers" or speculators, who have bought unsold loads from farmers "in the lump."

I would write of the coster's home life, but he has none. The Gipsy, even the poor London Gipsy of the loathsome van, is vastly his superior in this respect. In the past three years I have visited more than a thousand costers' haunts and habitations. In them all I have not found a dozen genuine homes. The nearest approach to the home is where the coster is fairly well-to-do, and owns the donkey and cart or a couple or three. In these, the coster, his wife or mate, their children and the donkeys in one basement room together. But the character of the man's and the woman's work keep them upon the street. They eat at cheap chop-houses and coffee stalls. Their evenings are passed at the tap room, the "penny gaff" shows, the rat-pit, and the cheap music halls.

Boys and girls leave their parents and mate at from fourteen to sixteen years. They take furnished rooms in the coster districts of Leather Lane, Drury Lane, Shoreditch, Old Street Road, Marylebone-lane, Dockhead, Bethnal Green, Whitechapel, Camberwell and the like, and are at once full-fledged costers. Children are born to them, and are "minded" from the first year. In the morning they take their chances for life and education in the slums. At six or seven they accompany their parents, or are hired out to other costers. In a few years more, some fancied slight or too severe a beating occurs, or the coster youth or lass have met their affinity, and they are away for themselves without partings or regrets.

However luck may go with the coster folk they are sticklers for their amusements every holiday. Every evening will find them at the music hall, the rat pit or their tap room haunts. There are more than 300 of the latter exclusively patronized by coster men and women.

EDGAR L. WAKEMAN.

### Business Men's Wives, Please Note.

A delegation of young men lately waited on their employer's wife with the oddest request on record. "You see, madam," said the spokesman, "we want to have a half-holiday every Saturday. Now, if you will be particularly nice to Mr. Jones for a few days, we'll go to him and ask—"

"Gentlemen," the lady haughtily interrupted, "do you imply that I do not understand what is due to my husband?" "Oh, I know all about it, madam," the spokesman went on. "I'm married myself. Things go wrong in the house, and you're tired and cross at breakfast. Then we suffer at the office. You stay late to chaperon your daughter at a ball, and we have more trouble at three o'clock in the morning. You see how the matter stands, and how greatly you will oblige us by being more than usually agreeable to Mr. Jones for three or four days? The fourth day give him the best breakfast you can—everything that he likes best—and we'll get what we want in about three minutes. Talk about a woman having no influence in the business! Why, the humor she's had more effect than a bank failure or a boom in trade."

She thought she ought to be angry, but, instead, she laughed, and agreed to the proposition, and four days later, when they waited on the head of the firm, he made the closing hour twelve o'clock and said that never in the history of the firm had things run as satisfactorily as they had during the last four days.

### A Japanese Snake Swallower.

A wonderful story reaches us from Japan of a snake-swallower who has outdone all forerunners in the art. One called Saito Tora-no-suke was one day breaking up some land when he came upon a snake three feet long. Seizing it in his hands, he cried out to his companion that if they would give him four dollars he would swallow the snake. Although dollars are scarce in Japan, it is stated that the money was at once subscribed, the onlookers not believing the bet would be won. But, true to his word, Saito put the head of the creature into his mouth, and swallowed the whole three feet without difficulty. The punishment for his temerity was swift and terrible. While his companions were gazing at him, speechless with horror and astonishment, he was seen to change colour and fall to the ground in great pain, and he died in a few minutes.

### BLITHESOME CANARIES.

How They are Taught their Pretty, Joyful Strains.

In the year 1842, when the first importation of singing birds was made from Germany to New York, cages could not be found for them; the proper food could not be procured; and the bird-fanciers were so few that of the one thousand birds landed the greater number perished unsold. The love for them, however, was kindled and grew. In 1853 the same importer sold 10,000, and in 1860 15,000. By this time one New York house alone imported from Germany, between the months of September and June, 42,000 birds; and this number was equalled, if not excelled, by other houses.

A calculation has been made that proves the significant fact that enough iron wire to belt the globe with a netting a yard wide is manufactured yearly into cages for birds.

The favorite house birds are canaries—brought in chiefly from the vicinities of the Hartz Mountains—a land noted for pure air and delicious spring water. They make their voyage of the Atlantic in little cages of a size not more than a hand square, fastened together in rows and piled upon each other under a covering of canvas. The ordinary package, four feet long and two feet broad, contains 200 birds. Every day during the journey the canvas screen is unfasted and the cages supplied with seed and water, which attention the poor little prisoners are returned to their gloom, where we trust they comfort themselves, since sorrow is the source of "gentle fancies," by composing songs to sing when they are free.

Toussaint considers the original bird of the Canary Islands—the typical founder of this golden race—"the most skilful, most intelligent, and indefatigable of songsters." And judging of intelligence by relative size of brain and body, the canary is entitled to special respect; for his brain is in proportion to the body as one-fourteenth, which would make—by this mode of estimate—the delectable little biped about half as intelligent as man, and afford ample explanation of his faculty for learning tunes and his aptitude at surprising tricks. And as man—"paragon of animals"—has his propensities and after-dinner mood, so the canary has his yielding hour, and at evening is most effusive and most docile to be taught.

Both "short-breed" and "long-breed" canaries can be educated to add to their native repertoire of sweet notes a tune or two of a time and notes of the nightingale, the lark, the robin, and various whistling birds. Such an education adds from fourfold to tenfold to their normal value; and the process of teaching is not without its delight. The mode of teaching varies as the instrument used, but the principle of the teaching does not vary. It is, if not verily "as old as the hills," certainly as ancient as the golden days of Greece; for the secret of securing mental impressions is iteration, re-iteration. Over and over again to the listening bird must the tune be sung to learn by heart to be played or sung; and the musical ear of the little pupil must not be trusted to supply insufficiency in melody or to correct a fault. The bird copies his model as implicitly as if for conscientious task he had been born Chinese, and his accuracy may not always have the good ending of the story of the poor musician's flute.

This flute, dearly beloved by its poverty-stricken owner, had but one fault—a broken note—and one auditor—a tailor who lived next door, who came after working hours to hear the poor musician play, and who seized with a covetous admiration for the flute. After awhile the adored instrument disappeared. An old woman who tried to mend the flute, but was accused for the mental "alibi" of being stone-deaf. The time passed on, and the tailor removed to a distant town. The musician, happening to visit the place, set apart an evening to spend with the old admirer of his art. The entertainment of the evening was furnished by a learned bull-chief, who whistled tunes as deliciously as a flute—tunes that had only one fault: one little break in each of the airs by the missing of one note! The musician recognized with the thrill of regret, and with a gasp of astonishment, and with a boldness he could not restrain, wrung from the tailor a tardy confession of guilt, by exclaiming with all the emphasis of truth: "Now I know who stole my flute."

### FLIPPED WITH THE BANDIT.

An American Traveller in Mexico Who Won a Tidy Roll of Plunder.

"I had an adventure with bandits in northern Mexico a few years ago, that, while not altogether unpleasant, I have no desire to repeat," said William T. Allen at the Lindell hotel to a *Globe-Democrat* man. "Myself and two Englishmen were prospecting in the exact waist or silver when we were rounded up and robbed of our arms and about \$200 in cash. A council was then held to determine what should be done with us. It was bad policy to turn us loose, as the gang was a new one and did not desire the presence known until it had an opportunity to secure rich plunder. Several of the gang insisted that we be shot and our bodies concealed, but the chief vetoed this and had us conducted to a cave further up in the mountains, where we were closely guarded for eight or ten days. The chief, a full-blooded Spaniard of considerable education, took quite a fancy to us and frequently came in and played cards with us. He had a passion for gambling and, in order to gratify it, loaned one of my companions twenty Mexican dollars. The latter was an expert with the pasteboards, but

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before he sat in to play said, 'What's the use? If I win you will never suffer me to carry the money away.' The bandit, who imagined himself quite a card sharp, protested that he would respect his winnings and the game began. In two hours the outlaw was \$1,800 poorer and refused to play further. During our confinement he abundantly supplied us with Mexican cigars and a pretty good quality of wine. Once he came to us and said that the military was after them and that they would have to change their base. He agreed that if we would not give information to the authorities we might go free, and to this we readily consented, as we considered the Mexican military fully as bad as the outlaws. As we were preparing to depart the chief stepped before the Englishman who had worked him at cards and, counting out \$1,800, proposed to flip a coin for it. The latter consented, won and pocketed the \$3,600, while the bandit turned with an oath and led his companions further into the mountain fastnesses. We fully expected that some of the more desperate members of the gang would 'lay' for us, and relieve us of our gains, but we were not molested and reached the railway without accident."

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