

Men of the East.

By Miss B. J. BLACK.

EAST ANGLIA, and especially the corner which borders upon the Wash, was for long a land by itself, holding comparatively little communication with the rest of the world, marrying with "home folks," and, as a not unnatural consequence, despising the men "of the sheers" (shires) in a good-humoured, whole-hearted way.

It was well into the sixties before the completion of the Great Eastern Railway to Hunstanton brought us into contact with the outside world, and the purchase of Sandringham by "the Prince" awakened national interest in a forgotten corner of England. Much, very much, has happened since then.

The spread of modern education has made our young people more or less like others all over the land. They devour books and magazines, and their speech and ideas are no longer distinctly local. Nor is a situation "in the sheers"¹ regarded as "a living grave"—a favourite description not so very long ago!

But it will take more than one generation to sweep away all the Norfolk characteristics; and I notice in the elder generation of young folks, those who are now settling down into married life, a certain return to tradition, an observance of local custom, which makes me hopeful that we may yet retain and hand down some of our Norfolk ways.

Not that they are all excellent ways, by any means; but in an age which seems to level out individuality as under a steam-roller, it is something to have any distinctive ways at all!

Perhaps among the working class one of the most distinctive is a certain surly suspicion of the motives of new-comers, even the kindest. The Norfolk labourer is not simple and guileless, by any means. Distrust is natural to him, and his methods of showing this feeling are often interesting to an observer.

¹ *I. e.*, shires.

A neighbouring landowner, in the kindness of his heart, proposed a highly beneficial scheme to the men on his home farm. Every year of service was to count towards a bonus, to be given at the end of five years. It would have amounted to a very handsome sum; but the labourers in a body declined the offer. Nobody had ever done such a thing before. It would "tie them down," and—the landowner was a new-comer. "He's a speckulative kind of gentleman, I reckon," said one labourer casually; "but he don't catch me with his bonuses!"

Even when you are an "old standard," and therefore to be trusted, it is well to remember this ingrained suspicion.

For instance, in suggesting a place for a daughter, it is not wise to say: "I have heard of such an *excellent* place for Annie, Mrs. Minns. I am sure she would be happy with Mrs. H." Mrs. Minns's face would instantly express the unspoken thought, "*Why* does she want my girl to take that place?" A person of experience says in a doubtful, deliberative tone: "I *think*, Mrs. Minns, that Annie would do well there. Certainly Mrs. H. is very particular; you might think her rather strict in her ways; but her last housemaid stayed three years. I think, on the whole, it is a good place." Somehow the suggestion of doubt inspires confidence that you have no private "axe to grind" in recommending the place.

One often reads, especially at election times, impassioned speeches by orators from town, in which the tyranny of squire and parson over the labourer is vigorously denounced, and the oppressed peasantry are urged to show themselves men by voting as they please, etc. Such utterances provoke a quiet smile in those who, like the writer, have spent a lifetime in contact with the Norfolk labourer. There is not, in fact, a less "oppressable" individual in the kingdom than he. You may talk him down easily enough, and fancy you have gained your point; but he will go his own way, ordering his actions, not by your arguments, but by his own deep-rooted convictions of what is good for him and his. If he thinks it worth while, he will speak out plainly enough on any matter he cares about,

often with distrust and prejudice, at other times with a sturdy good sense, a rough humour, that "touches the spot."

A rather unwise new Vicar of an East Anglian parish had managed to set his flock by the ears owing to ill-judged innovations. His folly was plainly put before him in a chance talk with an elderly labourer.

"T' fare to me," said he, "when a new reverend come to a place, he'd ought to be like a man a-gropin' in the dark. He don't know the folks, nor yet they don't him; and he don't know what's gone afore. But if he grope and grope, and don't *jump* at 'em like, why, *he'll do*."

I spoke of Norfolk humour. It is a quality easier to illustrate than to describe. An East Anglian who sets out to be funny is generally unspeakably dull, trite, and banal. But, half unconsciously, he is often genuinely humorous, and he can hit off a situation in few words with absolute truth and force.

A cousin of mine, travelling on the Great Eastern Railway some time since, heard two labourers discussing some recent frauds by a shopman. Said one to the other: "And they looked in the books, and there 't wor. And they looked in the till, and there 't worn't." It was the case in a nutshell.

Many working men, especially the older ones, whose racy Norfolk is untinged by "newspaper English," can tell a story inimitably. Hear Elijah Parker, honestly proud of his own diplomacy in managing a "narrow" wife. "Yes, thank'ee, she's better; but she've been wonderful queer. She've took a rare curious notion as she've frogs inside of her, and she'll lie abed a-groanin'. 'Oh, 'Lijah,' she'll say, 'whatever shall I do? Them frogs is a-croakin' and a-croakin', and 'twill drive me mad.' Doctor, he say 'tis narves, and I must make her take exercise, he say. Dash it, I say, tain't so easy, and her lyin' abed and makin' me fetch and carry like as I wor a little dawg. Well, I says, anyway I'll *try* and give her exercise. Next mornin' I took and stripped that there chamber where she lay; every mite of furniture I took out, and all her clothes, and I down with 'em into the livin'-room. M'ria, she thinks as

I wor agoin' to fye out the place, and, bein' a mighty clean woman, she didn't say much, only to bid me be kurful. When the room was as bare as your hand 'cepting the bed, ' Now, my wench,' I says, ' doctor, he say you've got to take exercise, and I done my best as you should. What you want,' I say, 'you'll have to fetch.' And with that I up and out. She shruck the bitterest. I heerd her as I got to the gate, but I never took no notice. Howsoever, when I come home M'ria, she wor up and dressed, and the things was all back again, so I knew she'd took exercise *that* day!"

The greater comfort of the Union workhouses and the careful nursing of the old and infirm in their wards has had one unexpected result—it is becoming rare to find the cottage in which the three generations live together, the old granny or grandad giving an eye to the tinies, while the busy mother is washing or charing. The old people are "in the House"—paid for, maybe, by their children, but losing the freedom and interest of outside life, and the love and care of the young ones of their own blood. Even the smaller tradespeople will sometimes contentedly allow their old parents to go to the Union, when only a generation ago the bare idea would have been an impossibility. Of course, there are cases where senile infirmity or hopeless disease give good cause for the removal of an old person to the care of skilled nurses; but as a steadily growing *custom* it is regrettable.

Curiously enough, it is often with the very poor that the distaste to "the House" is strongest, though in their case the difficulty of care and nursing is a real one.

Old Betty Binks is an instance in point. She is over eighty, has brought up twelve children on very narrow means, and tells you triumphantly: "I only buried one out o' the lot—and that wor my thirteen', and fell off o' the table, where I'd put him for stowage, like."

Betty's sons are all labourers—fine, tall men, with heavy, good-humoured faces, and already rivalling their mother in the number of their families. They cannot do much for her in her

paralyzed old age beyond giving her an occasional sixpence or a shilling "for coal." Betty has her outdoor relief, and for the rest she is entirely cared for by her two daughters—hard-featured, hard-working women, whose past has been a sadly marred one; but it *is* past, and they are now lights of the local wing of the Salvation Army. They have a helpless, imbecile uncle to care for as well and sundry unfathered children; but, as for letting the two old people go to "the House"—well, it would be a bold person who would suggest it!

Betty has the full use of her tongue, though her limbs are helpless; and as her bed is in the kitchen, she can, and does, remark on any shortcomings of the household with point and freedom. For she is not at all a "story-book" old lady; her life has been of the roughest—field work, heavy washing, and charing. Until well over seventy she trudged two miles out and back again, to the neighbouring seaside town, three times a week, in all weathers, doing a hard day's work there to boot. Small wonder that her helplessness frets her, and that her daughters admit that she is "a bit wearin' at times." But they are marvellously patient, very tender, those hard-looking women, for, after all, it is "mother" who suffers and complains, and—"she've had a deal to put up with," says Martha pityingly.

The children, too, learn lessons of patience and forbearance with the paralyzed old grannie which may stand them in good stead in after-life.

A visit to a household like this sends one away with many thoughts, not wholly sad ones. For surely in this pleasure-loving, pain-hating age it is strengthening to one's faith in human possibilities to see the Divine qualities of self-sacrifice and patience cropping up in apparently "stony ground," and bearing their ancient, lovely harvest of "little, unremembered deeds."

Men of the East in veritable deed—the gipsy families—are less and less with us each year. Many of the younger people are house-dwellers (as the true gipsies contemptuously call

them), or have married house-dwellers, and their children are absorbed into the normal village population.

But, up to quite recent years, this district of Norfolk, with its wide, marshy grazing-grounds and grass-edged "droves," was a very favourite camping-place for real tent-dwelling gipsies—Maces, Lees, and Alisons. Spring after spring the tents were pitched in the same spot—a broad, grass drove leading to the beach, a convenient place for drift-wood and other odds and ends. Very low were the tents, very long, and the covering had the oddest patchwork effect, as if all the old coats and petticoats of the tribe had been flattened out and sewn together to make it.

Inside, it was certainly stuffy, but delightfully interesting. From any corner of the crowded habitation might be produced queer and unknown "wonderments"—scaly things in bottles, strings of foreign shells, or even a live marmoset! A visit to the gipsies was one of the joys of spring to us as children, and we were always warmly received for the sake of the elder generation.

Long years before, the squire's daughters had actively interested themselves in the gipsy clan. Each baby was brought to church for baptism, the only stipulation being that "Miss Helen and Miss Fanny" should themselves be sponsors and choose the name, and that it must not be a "common one." So Evangeline followed Algernon, and the twins Naomi and Leonie, a lovely little pair, were succeeded by a long line of romantically-named brothers, sisters, and cousins. Their godmothers saw to their religious instruction as they grew older, and even coaxed some of the little ones into the village school to learn reading during the summer months.

With a warm-hearted folk like the gipsies, the frequent visits, the care in sickness, and the real interest taken in them, were never forgotten. Years afterwards one of their old friends returned, as a widow, to the village. Going into church one Sunday morning with her tribe of little ones, her hand was seized by an old man with the very audible exclamation, "Why, it's my Miss Fanny, with all her children!"

It had a dubious sound, perhaps; but the joy of the old gipsy patriarch was so unmistakable, his "grip o' the hand" so warm, that "Miss Fanny" returned his greeting with heartiness equal to his own, and her children were his fast friends ever after.

Much of the picturesqueness of our village went with the gradual disappearance of those handsome, stalwart gipsies. The earrings of the men, the gay beads and handkerchiefs of the women, the brilliant smiles, the hearty welcome to the camp, were pleasant sights. As tinkers and brushmakers they were in general request; nor were there, as far as I can recollect, any serious complaints as to their gipsy doings. One of the last of "our gipsies"—the old wife of Algernon—died only the other day, tenderly nursed night and day through a terrible, wearing illness by her devoted husband. It fretted the old lady to end her days perforce as a house-dweller. But modern sanitary regulations would not allow of the tent on the marsh, and she could only lament the dire necessity, and welcome the visits and attentions of the descendants of her early friends.

Happy days were those before East Anglia became civilized, when a merry party of children could drive through the lanes singing at the top of their voices, and meeting with no other notice than the slow grin of the labourer on the other side of the hedge; when the "audit party" given by the squire to his tenants and their wives was our wildest dissipation, and the school-treat a most thrilling event; when "dickeys" (donkeys) flourished greatly, and bicycles and motors were not; when much of the old feudal feeling between masters and men lingered yet, and it was an unheard-of thing to "turn off" an old labourer at the approach of winter.

Happy days—yes! But I am *laudator temporis acti*; and that plainly shows that I am growing old myself, and that the increasing distance from those golden days probably lends 'enchantment to the view.'