INK-PHOTO. SPRAGUE & Co LONDON.

NEW FOREST GIPSIES.

THE GIPSIES OF THE NEW FOREST.

Read at a Field Meeting, July 22nd, 1893.

By R. W. S. Griffith.

Visitors to the New Forest will hardly fail, when exploring the parts away from the beaten track, to come across the rounded tent inhabited by the Gipsy dweller, who makes the New Forest his headquarters; moving about within the Forest boundary, or as work offers, migrating to a greater distance, but always returning to the old camping grounds in the winter months.

The number of Gipsies or "travellers" as they are locally called, who use the Forest as head quarters is considerable, but the actual number, to be found at any time within the Forest boundary from the condition of their life varies daily. Roughly speaking about 60 families numbering 400 men, women and children, may be taken as the fullest average at any time. This number during the harvesting and hopping season is greatly reduced, so that in August, one tenth of the above figures would be nearer the mark.

Their camping places are chosen with a view to shelter and dryness, therefore not under trees in the wet season. A supply of good spring water, for they are very particular about the quality of the water they use for drinking, has to be considered, also the proximity of a suitable market for their saleable productions. These essential points rule out many of the Forest localities as unsuitable, and you may in such look in vain for the Gipsy tent. Their regular camping grounds are chiefly at the following points:—

North.—Godshill Wood, Whinyates, Crock Hill, Copythorne.
East.—Ipley, Pennerley, Lady Cross, Norley Wood.
West.—Poulner Pits. Picket Post, Burley, Thorny Hill.
South.—Bransgore, Shirley Holmes, Pennington, Setley.
Central.—Rufus's Stone, Bartley, Buskett's Lawn, New Park.

Outside the actual boundary, at various places near Bournemouth; and at Blackhill, near Wellow. Among holly-bushes or thick undergrowth at these points the Gipsy tent can generally be found, or the traces of a recent encampment, the tent on examination being found to be but a fragile defence against a winter storm, wet and cold.

Our first enquiry on coming in contact with these wanderers will be as to who they are. They are not as a whole of the pure Gipsy descent—in fact, the real Gipsy is in the minority; by this is meant the descendant of the old Gipsy families, who adopted aristocratic names from the wealthy families, who in olden days protected them, such as the Stanleys, Lees, Eyres, Coopers, Burtons, etc. These form perhaps one fourth of the total found in the Forest. The remainder are known among themselves as "mumpers," by the local villager as "travellers," and are a mixture of tramp and Gipsy, and kept up by accession of others who take to a roving life.

They are kind and hospitable to strangers, and have a peculiar skill in picking up and befriending young lads, who may have run away from home, or who are friendless; and the charm of the Gipsy tent extends to the village girl and sometimes to the domestic servant, as it is found on enquiry among the families that some of the men and women have been brought up under very different circumstances.

The van dwellers are the wealthy members of the Gipsy families, but of these there are practically none in the Forest, a few may have a pony and cart, but the majority are at the lowest level of the tent dwellers' life as to worldly possessions; their existence is from hand to mouth, and extremely hard, and a very slight observation of this fact leads naturally to the enquiry as to how they contrive to live at all. Briefly by very hard and ill paid work.

They are makers of tin ware, tinkers, umbrella menders chair bottomers, clothes peg makers, bee hive and basket makers, chimney sweeps, rag and bone collectors, etc.

They watch the seasons and adapt themselves to them, at Christmas time the men are busy making skewers and clothes pegs, in the summer they make bee-hives of grass or straw, and very good basket work.

Then flowers are gathered for sale in the towns, snowdrops, daffodils, primroses, and forest ivy. They also get the pith out of rushes, and make it up with moss into artificial flowers.

NEW FOREST GIPSY.

Generally the men remain at home and manufacture articles, while the women and children take them out for sale to the towns and villages.

The women in consequence dictate the movements of the family according to the good or bad market of their goods to sell which requires them very often to walk many miles encumbered with heavy burdens and the inevitable baby.

The old Gipsy woman above portrayed is a Mrs. Lakey, generally referred to as the Queen of the Gipsies, though not really such; she may however be taken as a good specimen of the average type of New Forest Gipsies, constant residents. The family in the illustration (opposite page 277) is that of the Roses, comparatively well dressed, owning a cart, and therefore of a slightly higher position—decent respectable people, who move about considerably.

In summer and harvesting time they move away to the harvest and hopping grounds, and earn some ready money by peapicking, haymaking, harvesting and hop-picking, the farmers in many instances preferring Gipsy to casual village labour, for the Gipsy is most reliable, generally an excellent workman, and invariably very civil. This money enables them to stock their hawking baskets with various little things, which, with their own products, they hawk round; and as the Gipsy never burdens himself with superflous clothing, his return from such a neighbourhood as Alton (for instance) is marked by the old boots and clothes discarded for the new ones purchased with the hopping money.

Their conditions of life are however very hard, and must awaken the sympathy of every feeling heart.

The child, born in the fragile tent, with the rain streaming in and making the ground like wet sponge, or with the east wind, and snow or frost searching out every crevice, lives or dies—the mother generally lives, the child, if it lives, grows up as hard as nails, insufficiently clad, barefooted, half fed, yet happy so long as the turf is soft to the feet, and there is something to eat, but when the ground is frost bound, and the feet frost chapped, even the Gipsy child's light heartedness gives in, and the winter life is one long suffering borne uncomplainingly.

Their food rarely contains any meat, for they get very little help in the way of broken victuals given to them; they cook on Sundays their puddings and vegetables with a little pig meat, if in luck, or with a tasty roasted hedgehog, or now and then rabbit. Undoubtedly such does *occasionally* find its way to their pot, but they are not as a body poachers.

They are certainly not addicted to poaching so much as are many of the villagers; and as a consequence the Forest keepers rarely have cause to interfere with them.

It may be imagined from their condition of life, very little can be said as to their cleanliness. The virtues of soap and water they do not understand, though there has been a distinct advance in the right direction in this matter of late years. As regards honesty, morality and temperance they will bear comparison with many in our average village life. Several proofs have come under the writer's notice of their

honest and straightforward behaviour, when circumstances certainly favoured dishonesty.

Their marriage customs are peculiar, but held to be binding, and their love for their children is proverbial. Many couples have been induced during the last few years to be married at some neighbouring church.

The Gipsy is not an habitual drunkard, though he may at times, such as at some successful fair, exceed and take more beer than he should, but there are many who never touch intoxicants at all.

They have one especially weak point—the want of the appreciation of truth. From the earliest the children appear to make up their story as they tell it, and the difficulty to get them to tell the truth is very great.

They do not tell fortunes, but they tell untruths and the begging story of "sick husband," "dead child," "poor widow with six (always six !) little children," etc.,—to induce you to part with your money is a common device with them. Without attempting to extenuate this side of the Gipsy character, it may be well to remember (so that they may be spared the whole of our indignation) that there are other high sounding stories which succeed in extracting considerably more than the Gipsys' penny or sixpence from our pockets "under false pretences."

They are very fond of animals, some even keep fowls, which, though moving from place to place, sit on eggs, and bring off good broods. The New Forest Gipsy in common with the rest of the Gipsy tribes and families understand and use more or less, the Romany language, or patter, that curious assortment of words consisting of root words from all languages, but bearing distinctive evidence of its eastern origin. It is very incomplete in its vocabulary and is rarely spoken now in its fulness, our New Forest Gipsy using only a few Romany words interspersed with ordinary English and in this differing from the old Gipsy families, who could patter in Romany exclusively. As an instance of the scantiness of this language may be taken the Gipsy word *Beshaley*, their name for the family of the Stanleys. They began by translating it as *Stand-leys*, but as they have no word for stand, but one for sit, they call themselves Beshaley,

or the *Sit-downs*. This scantiness led to many curious com pound Romany words. The genuine Romany for the following sentences: "Do not forget sir, my old hat, which you promised me you would bring me. Thank you, sir. You are good friends to me. I like you, sirs," would be: "Maw bisser, rei, meeri poori staadia too pendas too andessa mandi, Parikeràw toot, rei. Too shan koshto reiàw kater mandi. Mandi komooa tumendi, reiaw." The broken modern Romany runs in this way: Ourli! mandi's been to the welgaurus at Ringwood. I leled mi shero poger'd odoi. You can feel the hev akei adre mi bal still. It kaird me divio. It dookers mandi still sometimes. A Gorgio opré a gry wel'd kestering adràl the welgaurus and I was atchin odoi and he pen'd!," etc.. *(English)*: "Yes, I've been to the fair at Ringwood. I got my head broken there. You can feel the hole here in my hair still. It made me mad. It hurts me still sometimes. A gentile on a horse came riding through the fair, and I was standing there, and he said," etc.

From time to time agencies have attempted the civilization and education of these Gipsy wanderers, and have met with a certain amount of success. For several years a missionary and his wife have spent their time among them, teaching them cleanliness, helping with clothing and food, and ministering to body and mind wherever possible, and teaching the children reading and religious truths. A good many couples have been induced to be married at church, and some families to go into houses—above all, the animal-like suspicion and shyness, the result of years upon years of treatment as outcasts, is being broken down, and these poor creatures are finding there is an interest in them, and a place for them among the Gentiles as they call those who do *not* live under canvas.

By contact with outside friends a healthy discontent with their life arises among the children, and it may be hoped that this already decaying race may be hastened in its "decay," by the stopping the supply and that the pluck, kindness, and civility, which the Gipsy possesses, may yet be absorbed into the English race, to their mutual advantage.