Early Memories of the Border Gipsies.

THE curtain veiling the memory of the past is seldom so heavy but that the merest breath, or a touch lighter than thistle down, will sweep it aside, in a flash of time swifter than the lightning in its flight.

A fleeting perfume, a strain of music, the echo of a laugh drifting in at an open window, or a single word dropped on the street by a passer-by, is sufficient to lay bare to the inner visions, down to the minutest detail, events which for whole generations have been past and forgotten.

The much talk and the frequent letters and newspaper notices dealing with the present invasion of our shores by German gipsies have doubtless had their share in touching a long disused spring of my own memory.

My youthful predilection for the nomadic descendants of old Egypt wherever born and wherever dwelling, and my unfailing interest in all that pertained to the dusky sons and daughters of the Border tribes in particular, come at this time vividly back to me. My early home lay not far distant from Jedburgh, Yetholm, Hawick, and Redpath, in all of which towns and villages many of these wanderers regularly established their winter quarters—Yetholm being, of course, pre-eminently the Border gipsy's muster place and royal city. Opportunities, therefore, for making acquaintance with members of the various tribes were not lacking, and with several of them I had dealings on many occasions. I may add that with all whom I ever had to do my relations were uniformly of the friendliest and pleasantest. The highway from more than one of the towns just mentioned passed close by the gate of my old home, and over this road on most days of the week might be seen travelling the cart of a Faa, a Young, or a Douglas. It might be a cart of hay or cut grass obtained no matter how! With a horse attached which in leanness rivalled the classic Rosinante, but which driven full tilt with whip and rein must certainly have far outdistanced the gentle knight of La Mancha's famous steed.

It might be a cart of crockery crawling along slowly on a summer's day, its driver half asleep on the "tram" or sauntering lazily alongside with idle whip and a loose rein thrown over his arm. The inevitable female drowsed heavily in a snug corner at the back of the cart, only waking up when the vehicle paused here and there to permit its occupants to refresh themselves with a snack and a pipe, while the horse browsing contentedly made a hearty meal off the wayside grass. A certain pause was made at every cottage and gate by the way side, when the female, swinging her basket on her hip, trudged off to display her wares and chaffer with the inmates of the cottage or the "big hoose."

Once a year it was a long procession of carts that trundled briskly and in a purposeful manner past our gate, the drivers stepping out with an air of cheerful anticipation and whistling merrily, the wives perched high on a perfect mound of Lares and Penates, with dozens of little dusky heads and faces peeping out in every direction round and about them. These were wending their way to settle in camp on the green at St Boswells, and there they would hold high festival while still keeping an eye to business and the main chance, during the celebration of the famous Fair on the eighteenth of July.

In the wake of the smaller fry would follow the aristocracy of the tribes in their gorgeous caravans painted yellow and red, the little chimneys sending a thread of blue smoke heavenwards, a young mother, baby in lap, seated on the step ladder at the back enjoying the view and the air from the open doorway. Her husband, the huge bullet-headed fellow, shouting in strident tones to his subordinates and hurling a curse at the poor "messan" leashed at the hind wheel, would on the morrow duly mount the platform in front of his caravan dressed in irreproachable tights and invite the public, as long as his lungs served, to "walk up and see the show." These caravans, with their painted suggestions in glaring colours of all the wild beasts of the jungle, and their rows of little windows so daintily curtained in spotless white lace, whispered to me of mysteries unspeakable.

The delights of a carefully conducted walk through the camp on a fine evening before the Fair comes back to me with a thrill even in the aftermath. The women washing busily by the burnside, the really white linen bleaching or drying on the grass, the horses and donkeys "hobbled" and grazing peacefully all over the common, the huge fires overstepped by the customary tripod from which swung the well filled pot or steaming kettle, the little ones creeping to bed under the cart canopy which formed the sleeping tent at night, the dark faces around and about glowing in the red firelight, are all pleasant memories never to be entirely forgotten.

Many years ago, when visiting friends in the neighbourhood of Yetholm, that beautiful Border village nestling so sweetly at the base of the green Cheviots, it was my privilege to be duly made acquainted with Queen Esther Faa and the trim little cottage which served her for royal residence. The gipsy Queen was even then an aged woman, though her alert upright figure gave her all the appearance of one younger by many years. In her neat print frock, white apron, and spotless muslin cap, triple frilled all round her face and tied under her chin, Esther's personal appearance was extremely prepossessing. As she received my friend and myself in the tidy kitchen, which did duty as audience chamber, her manner was kindly without any display of warmth or cordiality; it was indeed flavoured with a pretty strong tincture of reserve and dignity. This reserve, however, melted somewhat as the conversation proceeded, and suddenly changed to extreme graciousness on the discovery that I was my father's daughter.

"Mind him!" she said with fine scorn in reply to my question, "fine div I mind him. He's a kind gentleman, look ye—aye kind an' freendly to me an' mine."

But it is round the family of Douglas that most of my memories crowd. Old Tommassin Douglas, grandmother and great-grandmother to half of the existing tribe, comes clearly before me, as she used to sit, crouched on the low stone kerb of my grandmother's back kitchen, her basket on the floor for inspection, her clay pipe between her lips, and a black scowl for any one who might be foolhardy enough to mock her by word, look, or smile. An ancient, withered crone was Tommassin, more than any one I have ever seen fulfilling my idea of what an old-time witch might have looked like. Her uncanny looking face, creased and wrinkled like a winter apple, was habitually encircled by a rusty black cottage bonnet, her complexion in tint and texture resembled antelope skin, and there was ever a cruel gleam in her glittering black eyes which sent a shiver down my spine, as I eyed her with respectful demeanour and at a safe distance. Of Tommassin's numerous offspring "Leein' Jenny" and "Rech" have long since gone to their rest. Of Jenny, it is recorded to her discredit that she alone of all her family was convicted of theft by my mother. A substantial leg of mutton was one day missing from the larder. Jenny had that day paid one of her periodical visits, and the servants took solemn oath that she had been seen to purloin the joint and make good her retreat.

Jenny was charged with the theft on her next day of call, but true to her popular title she stoutly denied it. The story goes that "Rech," being called upon at Hiltonshill toll-bar to pay toll for her donkey, promptly demanded if "burdens were chairged for." On being assured to the contrary by the unsuspecting toll-keeper, Rech serenely shouldered her ass and strode triumphantly through the gateway not a penny the poorer—a feat which, whether the tale be true or not, the gipsy's extraordinary height and general physique made perfectly possible.

Rech's daughter (by which appellation alone she was known to our family) had on one occasion the good fortune to appear on the scene in time to fish my young sister out of Tweed. The child had been playing by the riverside, and, slipping on the slimy stones, stumbled into shallow water, whence she was drawn and restored to "terra firma" by Rech's daughter. This act of quite uncalled for heroism served as a never-failing plea for many a subsequent appeal for charity! Rech being ill in our vicinity some time later, her daughter appeared at the kitchen door one morning with an earnest request for a "snuff of tea" for the sick woman—"My mother's affie fond o' a cup o' tea," was urged by the young hopeful. She was liberally supplied not only with the snuff of tea, but with bread, butter, and cheese as accompaniments. After looking these delicacies carefully over Rech's daughter remarked ingratiatingly, "My mother's affie fond o' a taste o' jeelly—the mistress 'll mind it was me that pu'd the little leddy oot o' Tweed no lang sin'."

Charles Douglas, popularly distinguished as "Tabor," was for long a well-known vagrant on the Border roads, which he perambulated alone and on foot. With his ill-fitting garments, his filthy wallet slung over one shoulder, and what was visible of the man himself begrimed and unkempt, Tabor presented a sum-total of the most unwholesome and unsavoury description.

It is told of Tabor that, opening the door of a friendly cottager one evening, he found the family seated spoon in hand around the steaming potato pot. No invitation to partake of supper being proffered, Tabor, who was naturally of a laconic habit of speech, seated himself in perfect silence on a stool behind the door. Soon, however, the appetising steam, as it made its irresistible appeal to his hungry

stomach overcame all effort at self-effacement, and he suddenly was heard to enquire slowly, as if turning over in his mind an offer of refreshment: "Tabor, tak' a tattie?—aye, Tabor, tak' twa."

It was, however, with the two youngest of Tommassin's daughters that my dealings were chiefly carried on, and long continued. Mary, the younger by a good many years, was a fine type of gipsy, handsome in face and figure, and of uncommon respectability. For years at regular intervals Mary appeared to barter her articles of kitchen crockery in lieu of the rags which, down to the minutest shreds, were religiously accumulated for her from month to month. When Mary ultimately renounced the wandering habits of her tribe, and established herself as a respectable householder in Jedburgh, her place on the road was promptly filled by her sister, who had long been jealous of Mary's popularity, and who had long striven to usurp Mary's custom by every means in her power, fair or foul.

Bessie was indeed a "pear off another tree," the virtues of her sister, it must be owned, finding not an abiding place in her breast. Raven-haired and swarthy of face, Bessie was fashioned closely after the pattern of Tommassin, physically and otherwise. She had all the Douglas gravity of demeanour, even when bandying jokes over her bargaining. Her capacity for patient waiting was the terror of servants—a class, by the way, for which Bessie had but scant respect.

"Tell the mistress Bessie's here, my woman," she would request with much dignity, as she made her entry into the kitchen, having ignored the existence of such a thing as a knocker. Unless it could be truthfully affirmed that the mistress was not in the house, or too ill to leave her bed, Bessie would patiently wait, enthroned on the best chair the kitchen could provide, until her object was attained.

"I'm in no hurry, my dear, there's naething pushin' me the day. I'll juist sit an' wait till she comes," and wait she did by the hour to the infinite dismay and discomfort of the inmates of the kitchen.

"Will the mistress hae an auld goon or a pair o' shoon the day, think ye?" she would enquire meanwhile—"or a warm sark? My banes are gettin' auld an' feel the cauld affie this hard weather. Gie me a bit drink o' milk, my woman, while ye're on yer feet. My mooth's as dry as a whustle."

To proffer Bessie a coin and watch her face, as she rang the piece on the table, flattened it on the palm of her hand, then gravely spat on it "for luck" before finally pocketting it, was worth twice the value of the sum expended.

Bessie's complacence on meeting one of her patrons was unbounded, and the more public the occasion the more her satisfaction overflowed. Driving towards St Boswells village one evening before the famous Fair day, I was enjoying the picturesque effect of the cluster of gipsy camps just in front of the "smiddy," when the bobbing head of a dark visaged gipsy woman seated close to a blazing camp fire suddenly concentrated my attention. There was not a second's doubt as to whom the head-nodding was directed, for the familiar voice of Bessie shouted a salutation across the green and over the heads of at least a dozen admiring neighbours and companions. My sister relates with much appreciation that Bessie once sent her a beaming nod from the top of an overburdened cart across the entire width of Princes Street.

There is a persistent effort made yearly to prevent the gipsies from enjoying their ancient privilege of encamping on the green before and after the Fair. I for one shall be sorry when this persistence succeeds in sweeping away the old-time custom. Surely small harm can accrue from the occupation of the common by those picturesque and interesting nomads for one short week out of twelve long months.

They are harmless folks when properly handled, these Border gipsies, at least so I have been accustomed to believe, and so my father and grandfather believed before me. Once a year, during at least fifty years of my father's life, their encampments were set up at the back of the wall enclosing my father's property. They carried water by permission from a well just inside our gate, cut willows for basket-making, also by permission, from the burnside skirting the private road to the house, they came and went to and from the house at all hours of the day, working no harm to man or beast that I ever heard of, and certainly respecting my father's property as carefully as if it had been their own.

A rabbit or two, even a hare or a pigeon, may indeed have found its way into one or more of the large swinging pots, but what then? There were those in our neighbourhood, neither gipsy born nor bred, of whom it was well-known that they by no means scrupled to season their pots at the expense of their neighbours when darkness and opportunity favoured them.

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