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WAKEMAN'S WANDERINGS

LONDON COSTERMONGERS.

The Most Distinctive Lively Folk in England—Their Daily Life, Haunts and Amusements—They Mate, but Seem to Marry—Gotlandish Derby Day Coster Cavalcades.

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LONDON, Aug. 15.—There are between 60,000 and 80,000 costermongers in this 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.

There is good reason for this. Our street venders of fish, fruits and vegetables comprise an ever changing horde of widely varying and unexpected nationalities. A hawker in our country, from whatever race he originally came, becomes a hawker longer than usually enough. If he is not successful in his ventures between markets and enormous he shortly drops out of the ranks through sheriffs sale or ignominiously in another calling. If his venture, his swaybacks steed and his ramshackle wagon bring him profit, he will make the best bargain possible to another aspirant for his belongings, rents and "good will," is shortly found in possession of a market stall or grocery, and everlaiter enters the vocation and associations which gave him prosperity.

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.

Some of the marked characteristics and customs I have noted concerning both Gipsies and costermongers are noteworthy. Both races are bitterly opposed to book knowledge, and not 5 per cent, of either in England 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 rob all others not of their kin. Both, however, are humble and actually law abiding in their daily lives, are hereditarily the enemies of all law and authority, and both will make the most desperate sacrifice to avoid becoming involved in any complications of the law. And both are religiously, superstitiously and hereditarily Christians, as by comparison would put all the Hamilton, Mancels and Pioneers to fervent blush and shame.

The earliest record of London costermongers' cries is said to be in Lydgate's poem of "London Lickpenny" in the time of Henry V, about 475 years ago. Shakespeare refers contemptuously to "those costermonger times." Ben Jonson makes his Morose swear 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 lusty like the head."

So far as can be traced in history and literature these folk were precisely the same in mode of life, question and characteristics hundreds of years ago as at the present time. Like the Bohemian of Saxe Hayne and Galway, and still like the Gipsies, they have scarcely ever been known to intermarry with other classes. It is said in that the costermongers of the London of today form almost a little realm of their own, ever changing in outlines, yet changeless in character and identity, with a purer stream of blood, of its kind, than that of half of the English nobility, and with ancient customs and traditions remaining unchangeable laws of guidance in themselves, all to a more marked degree than is true of any equal number of people in any corner of Europe.

If all this were true the type of the London costermonger he would still be found a picturesque object by the casual observer. In the first place his costume is picturesque. You will not find at Cannes, Monaco or Palermo, in Sicily, more odd or colorful groupings than those crowds of sojourners in 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 sends the Bohemian people.

At his daily labors the coster will have on his head a small cloth cap, well to one side, with the visor either pulled to the sky or sloping one side of his neck. He is never without his black or flashy colored silk "kingsman," or heavy, loosely gathered neckerchief, always tied in a sailor's knot and the ends tucked in the folds of his gay woolen shirt—the whole exposing a fine, well curled and often hairy neck and chest. His waistcoat is long, like a jacket's, with numerous pockets and huge tails, and always of corduroy or velveteen. His trousers are half Newhaven in cut, of corduroy or coarse duckings, and their side buttons flap over the top shoes worn by any lowly man in London. Added to this are pearl or polished metal buttons innumerable.

In the matter of buttons their "best togs" for Sundays and holidays are truly startling. Whether of metal or pearl, they are from the size of a dollar to a half quarter, 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 side seams and edges of the trousers, from just below the knee to the very edge of the trousers leg, so that the last button clicks and pulters against the pavement and the shoe.

The outer women are none the less striking in their garb and appearance. Like the men, they are all well shod, and wear short dress serge petticoats, showing their ankles and shapely feet. These petticoats are as single as a Clubleigh Bridgeite. 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 solid woolen plaid or silk shawl covers the shoulders, its ends crossed upon the breast, where it is always fastened with a brooch of large dimensions.

But the hair and the headgear are most distinctive. From them alone a costergirl is as when recognizable. The hair is of dense jet black and always as large as a coster's cartwheel. It generates alarmingly in frost, and above this canopy waves a forest of ostrich plumes. Coster girls belong to clubs for the purchase of these prized feathers, and there is go self-sacrifice they will not make to possess the largest, most perfect and fine specimen. The hair is bestowed behind in a large braid. A "pert" minnie from this river each ear and a heavy, straight lick for scissors either cheek. Above the forehead the hair falls straight down in the bangs, but is then frizzled and curled until it resembles, not pen, but enough like unto it to arrest instant attention of Jim. As a coster recently remarked to me, "Our dollies (girls, sweethearts, women) 'as a style to 'em that's 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 1,200 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, propelled by the man, wait 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 about are sometimes provided with donkey carts or barrows, but oftener with "sieves," or shallow baskets, which with their heavy contents are carried on their heads.

A curious sort of business has always been in vogue owing to the impecuniousness of the costermongers as a class. This is the letting out for a shilling a day, horses and carts. Out of the 30,000 or 40,000 the transient population of London fully 15,000 are actually engaged in daily hawking, the remainder being old folk or children unable to work save at odd times. Fully one-half of the daily workers own their own donkeys, barrows and carts. The other half hire them at ruinously onerous rates. The donkey and cart are seldom hired, nearly all of those worth being owned by the same. The rates prevailing are narrows are usually hired at threepence per day or one shilling for the week for a borrow originally costing less than two pounds. Any one who knows how the costermonger lives, and how children and women are all at