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Yankee Gypsies

by John Greenleaf Whittier

April, 1997 [Etext #878]

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Yankee Gypsies

by John Greenleaf Whittier

"Here's to budgets, packs, and wallets;
Here's to all the wandering train."
BURNS.(1)

I CONFESS it, I am keenly sensitive to "skyey influences."
(2) I profess no indifference to the movements of that capricious old gentleman known as the clerk of the weather. I cannot conceal my interest in the behavior of that patriarchal bird whose wooden similitude gyrates on the church spire. Winter proper is well enough. Let the thermometer go to zero if it will; so much the better, if thereby the very winds are frozen and unable to flap their stiff wings. Sounds of bells in the keen air, clear, musical, heart-inspiring; quick tripping of fair moccasined feet on glittering ice pavements; bright eyes glancing above the uplifted muff like a sultana's behind the folds of her *yashmak;* (3) schoolboys coasting down street like mad Greenlanders; the cold brilliance of oblique sunbeams flashing back from wide surfaces of glittering snow, or blazing upon ice jewelry of tree and roof: there is nothing in all this to complain of. A storm of summer has its redeeming sublimities,--its slow, upheaving mountains of cloud glooming in the western horizon like new-created volcanoes, veined with fire, shattered by exploding thunders. Even the wild gales of the equinox have their varieties,--sounds of wind-shaken woods and waters, creak and clatter of sign and casement, hurricane puffs, and down-rushing rain-spouts. But this dull, dark autumn day of thaw and rain, when the very clouds seem too spiritless and languid to storm outright or take themselves out of the way of fair weather; wet beneath and above, reminding one of that rayless atmosphere of Dante's Third Circle, where the infernal Priessnitz(4) administers his hydropathic torment,--

"A heavy, cursed, and relentless drench,--
The land it soaks is putrid;"

or rather, as everything animate and inanimate is seething in warm mist, suggesting the idea that Nature, grown old and rheumatic, is trying the efficacy of a Thomsonian steam-box(5) on a grand scale; no sounds save the heavy plash of muddy

feet on the pavements; the monotonous, melancholy drip from trees and roofs; the distressful gurgling of waterducts, swallowing the dirty amalgam of the gutters; a dim, leaden-colored horizon of only a few yards in diameter, shutting down about one, beyond which nothing is visible save in faint line or dark projection; the ghost of a church spire or the eidolon of a chimney-pot,—he who can extract pleasurable emotions from the alembic of such a day has a trick of alchemy with which I am wholly unacquainted.

(1) From the closing air in **The Jolly Beggars,** a cantata.

(2) "A breath thou art
Servile to all the skyey influences,
That dost this habitation, where thou keep'st
Hourly afflict."

Shakespeare: **Measure for Measure,** act III. scene 1.

(3) "She turns and turns again, and carefully glances around her on all sides, to see that she is safe from the eyes of Mussulmans, and then suddenly withdrawing the yashmak she shines upon your heart and soul with all the pomp and might of her beauty." Kinglake's **Eothen,** chap. iii. In a note to **Yashmak** Kinglake explains that it is not a mere semi-transparent veil, but thoroughly conceals all the features except the eyes: it is withdrawn by being pulled down.

(4) Vincenz Priessnitz was the originator of the water-cure. After experimenting upon himself and his neighbors he took up the profession of hydropathy and established baths at his native place, Grafenberg in Silesia, in 1829. He died in 1851.

(5) Dr. Samuel Thomson, a New Hampshire physician, advocated the use of the steam bath as a restorer of system when diseased. He died in 1843 and left behind an autobiography (**Life and Medical Discoveries**) which contains a record of the persecutions he underwent.

Hark! a rap at my door. Welcome anybody just now. One gains nothing by attempting to shut out the sprites of the weather. They come in at the keyhole; they peer through the dripping panes; they insinuate themselves through the crevices of the casement, or plump down chimney astride of the raindrops.

I rise and throw open the door. A tall, shambling, loose-jointed figure; a pinched, shrewd face, sun-brown and wind-dried; small, quick-winking black eyes,—there he stands, the water dripping from his pulpy hat and ragged elbows.

I speak to him; but he returns no answer. With a dumb show of misery, quite touching, he hands me a soiled piece of parchment, whereon I read what purports to be a melancholy account of shipwreck and disaster, to the particular detriment, loss, and damnification of one Pietro Frugoni, who is, in consequence, sorely in want of the alms of all charitable Christian persons, and who is, in short, the bearer of this

veracious document, duly certified and indorsed by an Italian consul in one of our Atlantic cities, of a high-sounding, but to Yankee organs unpronounceable, name.

Here commences a struggle. Every man, the Mahometans tell us, has two attendant angels,--the good one on his right shoulder, the bad on his left. "Give," says Benevolence, as with some difficulty I fish up a small coin from the depths of my pocket. "Not a cent," says selfish Prudence; and I drop it from my fingers. "Think," says the good angel, "of the poor stranger in a strange land, just escaped from the terrors of the sea-storm, in which his little property has perished, thrown half-naked and helpless on our shores, ignorant of our language, and unable to find employment suited to his capacity." "A vile impostor!" replies the left-hand sentinel; "his paper purchased from one of those ready-writers in New York who manufacture beggar-credentials at the low price of one dollar per copy, with earthquakes, fires, or shipwrecks, to suit customers."

Amidst this confusion of tongues I take another survey of my visitant. Ha! a light dawns upon me. That shrewd, old face, with its sharp, winking eyes, is no stranger to me. Pietro Frugoni, I have seen thee before. *Si, signor,* that face of thine has looked at me over a dirty white neckcloth, with the corners of that cunning mouth drawn downwards, and those small eyes turned up in sanctimonious gravity, while thou wast offering to a crowd of half-grown boys an extemporaneous exhortation in the capacity of a travelling preacher. Have I not seen it peering out from under a blanket, as that of a poor Penobscot Indian, who had lost the use of his hands while trapping on the Madawaska? Is it not the face of the forlorn father of six small children, whom the "marcury doctors" had "pisened" and crippled? Did it not belong to that down-east unfortunate who had been out to the "Genesee country"(1) and got the "fevernager," and whose hand shook so pitifully when held out to receive my poor gift? The same, under all disguises,--Stephen Leathers, of Barrington,--him, and none other! Let me conjure him into his own likeness:--

(1) The *Genesee country* is the name by which the western part of New York, bordering on Lakes Ontario and Erie, was known, when, at the close of the last and beginning of this century, it was to people on the Atlantic coast the Great West. In 1792 communication was opened by a road with the Pennsylvania settlements, but the early settlers were almost all from New England.

"Well, Stephen, what news from old Barrington?"

"Oh, well, I thought I knew ye," he answers, not the least disconcerted. "How do you do? and how's your folks? All well, I hope. I took this 'ere paper, you see, to help a poor

furriner, who could n't make himself understood any more than a wild goose. I though I'd just start him for'ard a little. It seemed a marcy to do it."

Well and shiftily answered, thou ragged Proteus. One cannot be angry with such a fellow. I will just inquire into the present state of his Gospel mission and about the condition of his tribe on the Penobscot; and it may be not amiss to congratulate him on the success of the steam-doctors in sweating the "pisen" of the regular faculty out of him. But he evidently has no wish to enter into idle conversation. Intent upon his benevolent errand he is already clattering down stairs. Involuntarily I glance out of the window just in season to catch a single glimpse of him ere he is swallowed up in the mist.

He has gone; and, knave as he is, I can hardly help exclaiming, "Luck go with him!" He has broken in upon the sombre train of my thoughts and called up before me pleasant and grateful recollections. The old farm-house nestling in its valley; hills stretching off to the south and green meadows to the east; the small stream which came noisily down its ravine, washing the old garden-wall and softly lapping on fallen stones and mossy roots of beeches and hemlocks; the tall sentinel poplars at the gateway; the oak-forest, sweeping unbroken to the northern horizon; the grass-grown carriage-path, with its rude and crazy bridge,--the dear old landscape of my boyhood lies outstretched before me like a daguerreotype from that picture within, which I have borne with me in all my wanderings. I am a boy again, once more conscious of the feeling, half terror, half exultation, with which I used to announce the approach of this very vagabond and his "kindred after the flesh."

The advent of wandering beggars, or "old stragglers," as we were wont to call them, was an event of no ordinary interest in the generally monotonous quietude of our farm-life. Many of them were well known; they had their periodical revolutions and transits; we would calculate them like eclipses or new moons. Some were sturdy knaves, fat and saucy; and, whenever they ascertained that the "men folks" were absent, would order provisions and cider like men who expected to pay for them, seating themselves at the hearth or table with the air of Falstaff,--"Shall I not take mine ease in mine inn?" Others, poor, pale, patient, like Sterne's monk,(1) came creeping up to the door, hat in hand, standing there in their gray wretchedness with a look of heartbreak and forlornness which was never without its effect on our juvenile sensibilities. At times, however, we experienced a slight revulsion of feeling when even these humblest children of sorrow somewhat petulantly rejected our proffered bread and cheese, and demanded instead a glass of cider. Whatever the temperance society might in such cases have done, it was not in our hearts to refuse the poor creatures a draught of their favorite beverage; and was n't it a

satisfaction to see their sad, melancholy faces light up as we handed them the full pitcher, and, on receiving it back empty from their brown, wrinkled hands, to hear them, half breathless from their long, delicious draught, thanking us for the favor, as "dear, good children"! Not unfrequently these wandering tests of our benevolence made their appearance in interesting groups of man, woman, and child, picturesque in their squalidness, and manifesting a maudlin affection which would have done honor to the revellers at Poosie-Nansie's, immortal in the cantata of Burns. (2) I remember some who were evidently the victims of monomania,--haunted and hunted by some dark thought,--possessed by a fixed idea. One, a black-eyed, wild-haired woman, with a whole tragedy of sin, shame, and suffering written in her countenance, used often to visit us, warm herself by our winter fire, and supply herself with a stock of cakes and cold meat; but was never known to answer a question or to ask one. She never smiled; the cold, stony look of her eye never changed; a silent, impassive face, frozen rigid by some great wrong or sin. We used to look with awe upon the "still woman," and think of the demoniac of Scripture who had a "dumb spirit."

(1) Whom he met at Calais, as described in his *Sentimental Journey.*

(2) The *cantata* is *The Jolly Beggars,* from which the motto heading this sketch was taken. *Poosie-Nansie* was the keeper of a tavern in Mauchline, which was the favorite resort of the lame sailors, maimed soldiers, travelling ballad-singers, and all such loose companions as hang about the skirts of society. The cantata has for its theme the rivalry of a "pigmy scraper with his fiddle" and a strolling tinker for a beggar woman: hence the *maudlin affection.*

One--I think I see him now, grim, gaunt, and ghastly, working his slow way up to our door--used to gather herbs by the wayside and called himself doctor. He was bearded like a he-goat, and used to counterfeit lameness; yet, when he supposed himself alone, would travel on lustily, as if walking for a wager. At length, as if in punishment of his deceit, he met with an accident in his rambles and became lame in earnest, hobbling ever after with difficulty on his gnarled crutches. Another used to go stooping, like Bunyan's pilgrim, under a pack made of an old bed-sacking, stuffed out into most plethoric dimensions, tottering on a pair of small, meagre legs, and peering out with his wild, hairy face from under his burden like a big-bodied spider. That "man with the pack" always inspired me with awe and reverence. Huge, almost sublime, in its tense rotundity, the father of all packs, never laid aside and never opened, what might there not be within it? With what flesh-creeping curiosity I used to walk round about it at a safe distance, half expecting to see its striped covering stirred by the motions of a mysterious life, or that some evil monsters would leap out of it, like robbers from Ali Baba's jars or armed men

from the Trojan horse!

There was another class of peripatetic philosophers--half pedler, half mendicant--who were in the habit of visiting us. One we recollect, a lame, unshaven, sinister-eyed, unwholesome fellow, with his basket of old newspapers and pamphlets, and his tattered blue umbrella, serving rather as a walking-staff than as a protection from the rain. he told us on one occasion, in answer to our inquiring into the cause of his lameness, that when a young man he was employed on the farm of the chief magistrate of a neighboring State; where, as his ill luck would have it, the governor's handsome daughter fell in love with him. He was caught one day in the young lady's room by her father; whereupon the irascible old gentleman pitched him unceremoniously out of the window, laming him for life, on a brick pavement below, like Vulcan on the rocks of Lemnos.(1) As for the lady, he assured us "she took on dreadfully about it." "Did she die?" we inquired, anxiously. There was a cunning twinkle in the old rogue's eye as he responded, "Well, no she did n't. She got married."

(1) It was upon the Isle of Lemnos that Vulcan was flung by Jupiter, according to the myth, for attempting to aid his mother Juno.

Twice a year, usually in the spring and autumn, we were honored with a call from Jonathan Plummer, maker of verses, pedler and poet, physician and parson,--a Yankee troubadour,--first and last minstrel of the valley of the Merrimac, encircled, to my wondering young eyes, with the very nimbus of immortality. He brought with him pins, needles, tape, and cotton-thread for my mother; jack-knives, razors, and soap for my father; and verses of his own composing, coarsely printed and illustrated with rude wood-cuts, for the delectation of the younger branches of the family. No love-sick youth could drown himself, no deserted maiden bewail the moon, no rogue mount the gallows, without fitting memorial in Plummer's verses. Earthquakes, fires, fevers, and shipwrecks he regarded as personal favors from Providence, furnishing the raw material of song and ballad. Welcome to us in our country seclusion, as Autolycus to the clown in "Winter's Tale,"(1) we listened with infinite satisfaction to his reading of his own verses, or to his ready improvisation upon some domestic incident or topic suggested by his auditors. When once fairly over the difficulties at the outset of a new subject his rhymes flowed freely, "as if he had eaten ballads, and all men's ears grew to his tunes." His productions answered, as nearly as I can remember, to Shakespeare's description of a proper ballad,--"doleful matter merrily set down, or a very pleasant theme sung lamentably." He was scrupulously conscientious, devout, inclined to theological disquisitions, and withal mighty in Scripture. He was thoroughly independent; flattered nobody, cared for nobody, trusted nobody. When invited to sit down at

our dinner-table he invariably took the precaution to place his basket of valuables between his legs for safe keeping. "Never mind they basket, Jonathan," said my father; "we shan't steal thy verses." "I 'm not sure of that," returned the suspicious guest. "It is written, 'Trust ye not in any brother.'"

(1) "He could never come better," says the clown in Shakespeare's **The Winter's Tale,** when Autolycus, the pedler, is announced; "he shall come in. I love a ballad but even too well, if it be doleful matter merrily set down, or a very pleasant thing indeed and sung lamentably." Act IV. scene 4.

Thou, too, O Parson B.,--with thy pale student's brow and rubicund nose, with thy rusty and tattered black coat overswept by white, flowing locks, with thy professional white neckcloth scrupulously preserved when even a shirt to thy back was problematical,--art by no means to be overlooked in the muster-roll of vagrant gentlemen possessing the **entree** of our farmhouse. Well do we remember with what grave and dignified courtesy he used to step over its threshold, saluting its inmates with the same air of gracious condescension and patronage with which in better days he had delighted the hearts of his parishioners. Poor old man! He had once been the admired and almost worshipped minister of the largest church in the town where he afterwards found support in the winter season, as a pauper. He had early fallen into intemperate habits; and at the age of three-score and ten, when I remember him, he was only sober when he lacked the means of being otherwise. Drunk or sober, however, he never altogether forgot the proprieties of his profession; he was always grave, decorous, and gentlemanly; he held fast the form of sound words, and the weakness of the flesh abated nothing of the rigor of his stringent theology. He had been a favorite pupil of the learned and astute Emmons,(1) and was to the last a sturdy defender of the peculiar dogmas of his school. The last time we saw him he was holding a meeting in our district school-house, with a vagabond pedler for deacon and travelling companion. The tie which united the ill-assorted couple was doubtless the same which endeared Tam O'Shanter to the souter:(2)--

"They had been fou for weeks thegither."

He took for his text the first seven verses of the concluding chapter of Ecclesiastes, furnishing in himself its fitting illustration. The evil days had come; the keepers of the house trembled; the windows of life were darkened. A few months later the silver cord was loosed, the golden bowl was broken, and between the poor old man and the temptations which beset him fell the thick curtains of the grave.

(1) Nathaniel Emmons was a New England theologian of marked character and power, who for seventy years was

connected with a church in that part of Wrentham, Mass., now called Franklin. He exercised considerable influence over the religious thought of New England, and is still read by theologians. He died in 1840, in his ninety-sixth year.

(2) Souter (or cobbler) Johnny, in Burns's poetic tale of *Tam O'Shanter,* had been *fou* or *full* of drink with Tam for weeks together.

One day we had a call from a "pawky auld carle"(1) of a wandering Scotchman. To him I owe my first introduction to the songs of Burns. After eating his bread and cheese and drinking his mug of cider he gave us Bonny Doon, Highland Mary, and Auld Lang Syne. He had a rich, full voice, and entered heartily into the spirit of his lyrics. I have since listened to the same melodies from the lips of Dempster(2) (than whom the Scottish bard has had no sweeter or truer interpreter), but the skilful performance of the artist lacked the novel charm of the gaberlunzie's singing in the old farmhouse kitchen. Another wanderer made us acquainted with the humorous old ballad of "Our gude man cam hame at e'en." He applied for supper and lodging, and the next morning was set at work splitting stones in the pasture. While thus engaged the village doctor came riding along the highway on his fine, spirited horse, and stopped to talk with my father. The fellow eyed the animal attentively, as if familiar with all his good points, and hummed over a stanza of the old poem:--

"Our gude man cam hame at e'en,
And hame cam he;
And there he saw a saddle horse
Where nae horse should be.
'How cam this horse here?
How can it be?
How cam this horse here
Without the leave of me?'
'A horse?' quo she.
'Ay, a horse,' quo he.
'Ye auld fool, ye blind fool,--
And blinder might ye be,--
'T is naething but a milking cow
My mamma sent to me.'
'A milch cow?' quo he.
'Ay, a milch cow,' quo she.
'Weel, far hae I ridden,
And muckle hae I seen;
But milking cows wi' saddles on
Saw I never nane.'"(3)

(1) From the first line of *The Gaberlunzie Man,* attributed to King James V. of Scotland,--

"The pawky auld carle came o'er the lee."

The original like Whittier's was a sly old fellow, as an English phrase would translate the Scottish. *The Gaberlunzie Man* is

given in Percy's **Reliques of Ancient Poetry** and in Child's **English and Scottish Ballads,** viii. 98.

(2) William R. Dempster, a Scottish vocalist who had recently sung in America, and whose music to Burns's song "A man 's a man for a' that" was very popular.

(3) The whole of this song may be found in Herd's **Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs,** ii. 172.

That very night the rascal decamped, taking with him the doctor's horse, and was never after heard of.

Often, in the gray of the morning, we used to see one or more "gaberlunzie men," pack on shoulder and staff in hand, emerging from the barn or other outbuildings where they had passed the night. I was once sent to the barn to fodder the cattle late in the evening, and, climbing into the mow to pitch down hay for that purpose, I was startled by the sudden apparition of a man rising up before me, just discernible in the dim moonlight streaming through the seams of the boards. I made a rapid retreat down the ladder; and was only reassured by hearing the object of my terror calling after me, and recognizing his voice as that of a harmless old pilgrim whom I had known before. Our farmhouse was situated in a lonely valley, half surrounded with woods, with no neighbors in sight. One dark, cloudy night, when our parents chanced to be absent, we were sitting with our aged grandmother in the fading light of the kitchen fire, working ourselves into a very satisfactory state of excitement and terror by recounting to each other all the dismal stories we could remember of ghosts, witches, haunted houses, and robbers, when we were suddenly startled by a loud rap at the door. A stripling of fourteen, I was very naturally regarded as the head of the household; so, with many misgivings, I advanced to the door, which I slowly opened, holding the candle tremulously above my head and peering out into the darkness. The feeble glimmer played upon the apparition of a gigantic horseman, mounted on a steed of a size worthy of such a rider,--colossal, motionless, like images cut out of the solid night. The strange visitant gruffly saluted me; and, after making several ineffectual efforts to urge his horse in at the door, dismounted and followed me into the room, evidently enjoying the terror which his huge presence excited. Announcing himself as the great Indian doctor, he drew himself up before the fire, stretched his arms, clinched his fists, struck his broad chest, and invited our attention to what he called his "mortal frame." He demanded in succession all kinds of intoxicating liquors; and on being assured that we had none to give him, he grew angry, threatened to swallow my younger brother alive, and, seizing me by the hair of my head as the angel did the prophet at Babylon,(1) led me about from room to room. After an ineffectual search, in the course of which he mistook a jug of oil for one of brandy, and, contrary to my explanations and remonstrances, insisted upon swallowing a portion of its contents, he released me, fell to

crying and sobbing, and confessed that he was so drunk already that his horse was ashamed of him. After bemoaning and pitying himself to his satisfaction he wiped his eyes, and sat down by the side of my grandmother, giving her to understand that he was very much pleased with her appearance; adding that, if agreeable to her, he should like the privilege of paying his addresses to her. While vainly endeavoring to make the excellent old lady comprehend his very flattering proposition, he was interrupted by the return of my father, who, at once understanding the matter, turned him out of doors without ceremony.

(1) See Ezekiel viii. 3.

On one occasion, a few years ago, on my return from the field at evening, I was told that a foreigner had asked for lodgings during the night, but that, influenced by his dark, repulsive appearance, my mother had very reluctantly refused his request. I found her by no means satisfied with her decision. "What if a son of mine was in a strange land?" she inquired, self-reproachfully. Greatly to her relief, I volunteered to go in pursuit of the wanderer, and, taking a cross-path over the fields, soon overtook him. He had just been rejected at the house of our nearest neighbor, and was standing in a state of dubious perplexity in the street. He was an olive-complexioned, black-bearded Italian, with an eye like a live coal, such a face as perchance looks out on the traveller in the passes of the Abruzzi,(1)--one of those bandit visages which Salvator(2) has painted. With some difficulty I gave him to understand my errand, when he overwhelmed me with thanks, and joyfully followed me back. He took his seat with us at the supper-table; and, when we were all gathered around the hearth that cold autumnal evening, he told us, partly by words and partly by gestures, the story of his life and misfortunes, amused us with descriptions of the grape-gatherings and festivals of his sunny clime, edified my mother with a recipe for making bread of chestnuts; and in the morning, when, after breakfast, his dark sullen face lighted up and his fierce eye moistened with grateful emotion as in his own silvery Tuscan accent he poured out his thanks, we marvelled at the fears which had so nearly closed our door against him; and, as he departed, we all felt that he had left with us the blessing of the poor.

(1) Provinces into which the old Kingdom of Naples was divided.

(2) Salvator Rosa was a Neapolitan by birth, and was said to have been himself a bandit in his youth; his landscapes often contain figures drawn from the wild life of the region.

It was not often that, as in the above instance, my mother's prudence got the better of her charity. The regular "old stragglers" regarded her as an unfailing friend; and the sight of her plain cap was to them an assurance of forthcoming

creature-comforts. There was indeed a tribe of lazy strollers, having their place of rendezvous in the town of Barrington, New Hampshire, whose low vices had placed them beyond even the pale of her benevolence. They were not unconscious of their evil reputation; and experience had taught them the necessity of concealing, under well-contrived disguises, their true character. They came to us in all shapes and with all appearances save the true one, with most miserable stories of mishap and sickness and all "the ills which flesh is heir to." It was particularly vexatious to discover, when too late, that our sympathies and charities had been expended upon such graceless vagabonds as the "Barrington beggars." An old withered hag, known by the appellation of Hopping Pat,--the wise woman of her tribe,--was in the habit of visiting us, with her hopeful grandson, who had "a gift for preaching" as well as for many other things not exactly compatible with holy orders. He sometimes brought with him a tame crow, a shrewd, knavish-looking bird, who, when in the humor for it, could talk like Barnaby Rudge's raven. He used to say he could "do nothin' at exhortin' without a white handkercher on his neck and money in his pocket,"--a fact going far to confirm the opinions of the Bishop of Exeter and the Puseyites generally, that there can be no priest without tithes and surplice.

These people have for several generations lived distinct from the great mass of the community, like the gypsies of Europe, whom in many respects they closely resemble. They have the same settled aversion to labor and the same disposition to avail themselves of the fruits of the industry of others. They love a wild, out-of-door life, sing songs, tell fortunes, and have an instinctive hatred of "missionaries and cold water." It has been said--I know not upon what grounds--that their ancestors were indeed a veritable importation of English gypsyhood; but if so, they have undoubtedly lost a good deal of the picturesque charm of its unhoused and free condition. I very much fear that my friend Mary Russell Mitford,--sweetest of England's rural painters,--who has a poet's eye for the fine points in gypsy character, would scarcely allow their claims to fraternity with her own vagrant friends, whose camp-fires welcomed her to her new home at Swallowfield.(1)

(1) See in Miss Mitford's **Our Village.**

"The proper study of mankind is man;" and, according to my view, no phase of our common humanity is altogether unworthy of investigation. Acting upon this belief two or three summers ago, when making, in company with my sister, a little excursion into the hill-country of New Hampshire, I turned my horse's head towards Barrington for the purpose of seeing these semi-civilized strollers in their own home, and returning, once for all, their numerous visits. Taking leave of our hospitable cousins in old Lee with about as much solemnity as we may suppose Major Laing(1) parted with his friends when he set out in search of desert-girdled Timbuctoo, we drove several miles

over a rough road, passed the Devil's Den unmolested, crossed a fretful little streamlet noisily working its way into a valley, where it turned a lonely, half-ruinous mill, and, climbing a steep hill beyond, saw before us a wide, sandy level, skirted on the west and north by low, scraggy hills, and dotted here and there with dwarf pitch-pines. In the centre of this desolate region were some twenty or thirty small dwellings, grouped together as irregularly as a Hottentot kraal. Unfenced, unguarded, open to all comers and goers, stood that city of the beggars,--no wall or paling between the ragged cabins to remind one of the jealous distinctions of property. The great idea of its founders seemed visible in its unappropriated freedom. Was not the whole round world their own? and should they haggle about boundaries and title-deeds? For them, on distant plains, ripened golden harvests; for them, in far-off workshops, busy hands were toiling; for them, if they had but the grace to note it, the broad earth put on her garniture of beauty, and over them hung the silent mystery of heaven and its stars. That comfortable philosophy which modern transcendentalism has but dimly shadowed forth--that poetic agrarianism, which gives all to each and each to all--is the real life of this city of unwork. To each of its dingy dwellers might be not unaptly applied the language of one who, I trust, will pardon me for quoting her beautiful poem in this connection:--

"Other hands may grasp the field and forest,
Proud proprietors in pomp may shine,
.
Thou art wealthier,--all the world is thine."(2)

(1) Alexander Gordon Laing was a major in the British army, who served on the west coast of Africa and made journeys into the interior in the attempt to establish commercial relations with the natives, and especially to discover the sources of the Niger. He was treacherously murdered in 1826 by the guard that was attending him on his return from Timbuctoo to the coast. His travels excited great interest in their day in England and America.

(2) From a poem, **Why Thus Longing?** by Mrs. Harriet Winslow Sewall, preserved in Whittier's **Songs of Three Centuries.**

But look! the clouds are breaking. "Fair weather cometh out of the north." The wind has blown away the mists; on the gilded spire of John Street glimmers a beam of sunshine; and there is the sky again, hard, blue, and cold in its eternal purity, not a whit the worse for the storm. In the beautiful present the past is no longer needed. Reverently and gratefully let its volume be laid aside; and when again the shadows of the outward world fall upon the spirit may I not lack a good angel to remind me of its solace, even if he comes in the shape of a Barrington beggar.

End of The Project Gutenberg Etext of Yankee Gypsies, by Whittier

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