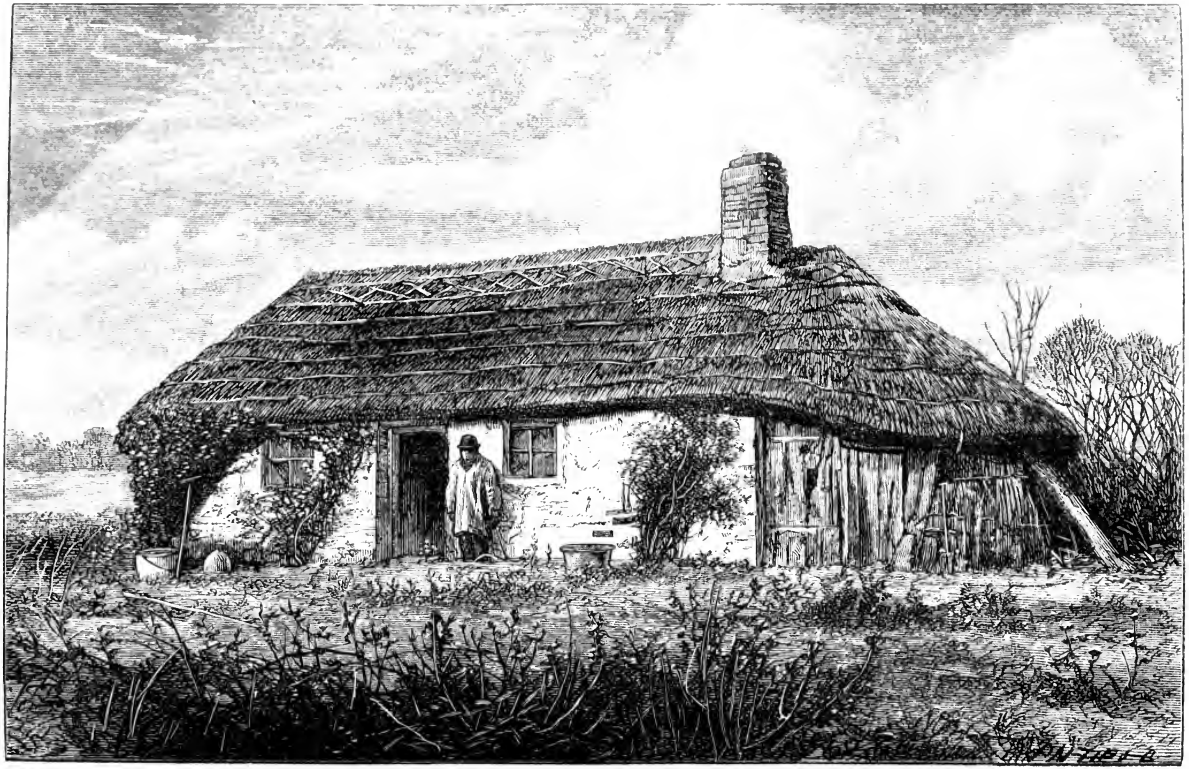

JOHN P——, AND HIS "COTTAGE." See page 47.

(From a photograph, taken expressly for this work.)

THE

ENGLISH PEASANTRY.

BY

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"THE 'ROMANCE' OF PEASANT LIFE," ETC. ETC.

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TO THE

REV. EDWARD GIRDLESTONE, M.A.,

CANON OF BRISTOL,

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN RECOGNITION OF HIS NOBLE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE
THE CONDITION OF THE ENGLISH PEASANTRY,

This Work is Inscribed,

BY HIS SINCERE FRIEND,

THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE.

IT is a remarkable circumstance that, notwithstanding the great and growing importance of the subject, no comprehensive work on the English peasantry has appeared since the commencement of the movement which led to the establishment of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. The only comprehensive sources of information in reference to this subject are the Reports of the Royal Commission (1867) on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture. But these Reports, included in seven large and closely-printed Blue Books, are far too bulky for general use; besides which, the information contained in them is not arranged in a manner adapted for popular reading.

It seemed to me that a work on the English peasantry, giving in a concise, accessible, and

popular form, reliable facts as to wages, cottages, the truck system, allotments, &c., would be invaluable as a text book. Such a work would not be complete unless it included information in reference to the system of migration originated and maintained by Canon Girdlestone, and some account also of the origin and progress of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. In the present work I have dealt not only with these, but with other important parts of the subject.

In the first chapter will be found a summarized account of the general condition of the English peasantry as to wages, cottage rents, piece work, privileges, truck, pauperism, &c. The facts have been very carefully extracted from the Reports of the Commission on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture, and from the Poor Law Returns. For this invaluable summary, which presents a mass of important facts relating to the peasantry in every part of England visited by the Commissioners, I am indebted to the courtesy of the Hon. E. Stanhope, one of the Commissioners.

The two following chapters contain the interesting and important facts which I gathered during

two personal visits of inquiry amongst the labouring population of the agricultural districts of the West of England. The first of these visits I made in the early part of 1872, just after the "strike" in Warwickshire. The second visit was made last summer. I went down to the Western Counties on both these occasions as the special correspondent of *The Morning Advertiser*. I have already published a reprint of my 1872 letters. In the present work I have included a few quotations from those letters, in order to preserve the completeness of the narrative. My letters contributed to *The Morning Advertiser* in 1873 were not reprinted, and some portions of them are therefore included in Chapter III.

Chapter V. gives a history of the work of Canon Girdlestone, and it discloses some startling facts. In succeeding chapters will be found some account of the life of Joseph Arch, the President of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, together with a history of the very interesting circumstances connected with the establishment and development of the agricultural labourers' organization.

The important question relating to tenant farmers and their grievances has also been dealt

with, and in a subsequent chapter attention has been drawn to the serious depopulation of the rural districts of the West of England.

Many other phases of the agricultural labourers' question have been noticed: and I earnestly put forth my work in the hope that it may be considered a not unimportant contribution to a subject which is one of really national importance.

I take the opportunity of making my acknowledgments to the Rev. Canon Girdlestone, to the Hon. E. Stanhope, to Mr. R. A. Kinglake, J.P. for Somersetshire, and to Mr. C. S. Read, M.P., for assistance rendered to me in the preparation of my work.

F. G. H.

Brunswick Lodge,
South Hackney,
March, 1874.

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THE ENGLISH PEASANTRY.

CHAPTER I.

GENERAL CONDITION OF THE ENGLISH PEASANTRY.

THE memorable "Strike" of agricultural labourers in Warwickshire will go down to history as one of the most important events of the present century. It was the immediate forerunner of a movement which has, during the past two years, attracted an extraordinary amount of public attention; and at the present moment "the agricultural labour question" is one of the most difficult as well as one of the most important of our social problems.

Until the Warwickshire strike had succeeded in arousing public sympathy on behalf of the English peasantry, this section of our labouring population had been little thought of, and in fact very little was known regarding their condition and mode of life. The following statement concerning the

earnings and expenditure of a Warwickshire peasant, made by the special correspondent of *The Daily News*, in a letter published in that paper on the 27th of March, 1872, will give some idea of the condition of the Warwickshire labourers at the time of the "strike." The correspondent stated that the family of the labourer whose case was described, consisted of a wife and five children, ranging in age from sixteen down to four. The man's wages were 12*s.* a week. The eldest boy earned 3*s.* a week. None of the other children brought anything in. The two elder ones went to school; the two younger ones were kept at home. Here is the "balance sheet" as given by the special correspondent:—

"Wages, father 12*s.*; son, 3*s.*; = 15*s.* per week. The week's bread and flour, 9*s.* 4*d.*; one cwt. of coal, 1*s.* 1*d.*; schooling for children, 2*d.*; rent of allotment (1 chain), 1*d.*; total, 10*s.* 8*d.* Leaves for butcher's meat, tea, sugar, soap, lights, pepper and salt, clothes for seven persons, beer, medicine, and pocket money, per week, 4*s.* 4*d.*"

Beyond what was supplied by newspaper correspondents at the time of the commencement of the movement in Warwickshire, the only sources of

information in reference to the condition of the peasantry were the Reports of the Commissioners in Agriculture, appointed under the Royal Commission of the 10th of May, 1867. These reports however, occupying, with the evidence obtained by the Commissioners, seven closely printed volumes, containing something like 2250 pages, were not readily accessible to the general public; and had they been so, the method in which their contents were arranged was not sufficiently concise to render them available for popular use. In fact, the object of the investigations conducted under the authority of the Commission of 1867 was "to inquire into and report upon the employment of children, young persons, and women in agriculture, for the purpose of ascertaining to what extent and with what modifications the principles of the Factory Acts can be adopted for the regulation of such employment, and especially with a view to the better education of such children." The inquiry by the Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners was continued from 1868 to the end of 1870, and during that interval it was conducted in England, Wales, and Scotland. The first two reports, however, presented in 1868 and 1869, relating

to England, are those which possess the greatest interest in connexion with the agricultural labourers' movement. I believe that none of the information which was collected during the period named has ever been published in a concise, accessible, or popular form; and in fact it would have been a work of considerable difficulty to extract, for the purposes of a popular publication, the necessary facts from the great mass of evidence published by the Commissioners.

I am indebted, however, to the kindness of one of the Commissioners—the Honourable Edward Stanhope—for a very valuable *résumé* of the contents of the elaborate Reports for 1868-9 of the Commissioners and of the Poor Law Return for 1870, so far as they relate to the average wages of ordinary labourers, cottage rents, cider and beer allowance under the truck system, piece-work, pauperism, &c. From this *résumé* I have been enabled to present the information which will be found in this chapter. Although the facts which will be stated were gathered during 1868 and 1869, they may, I have every reason to believe, be accepted as representing generally the condition of he labourers about the time when the movement of

1872 was commenced, because no circumstances—except local and accidental ones—happened between the two periods named, calculated to affect the rates of wages prevailing at the earlier date.

The information which follows anticipates in a certain measure the more detailed explanations which will be found in the subsequent parts of this work. My object in this chapter is to present—if the expression may be used—a kind of "bird's-eye view" of the condition of the English peasantry. My own minute and careful investigations, conducted during my two personal visits to the agricultural districts of the West of England, will supply, I trust, what is required in other respects. It would of course be impossible in anything like a moderate compass to present to the reader a complete picture of peasant life in England; besides which, a full and searching inquiry on which to found such a history would occupy years to complete. The investigations of the Agricultural Commissioners occupied nearly three years, and they only extended to parts of counties. Still the Commissioners of course endeavoured to get, as nearly as they could, representative facts. In the same way, the facts which I myself gathered serve

to give a fair indication of the general system prevailing in the districts through which I travelled; and although there is no doubt that the very worst phase of our agricultural system—in so far as it relates to wages, cottages, and to the general treatment of the peasantry—is to be observed in the West of England, more particularly in Somersetshire, the agricultural system in the West of England is, in the same general way, with few exceptions, more or less representative of all the English rural districts.

The changes which have been effected since the commencement of the agricultural labourers' movement will be indicated in the subsequent chapters of this book. But, in so far as the period to which the following facts refer is concerned, it is not too much to say that the general condition of the English peasantry was wretched and deplorable in the extreme. As to the general state of the cottages throughout the English counties, I believe it to have been, and to be at the present time, bad. But although the Reports of the Commission contain much valuable and interesting information in regard to the cottage accommodation in the several agricultural districts, no general

attempt was made by the Commissioners to compare the counties in this respect one with another. They did not, in fact, adopt any system in reference to this branch of their inquiries on which a basis of comparison could be formed.

So far as the West of England is concerned, I have been careful to record the result of my inquiries concerning cottage accommodation, and to give also descriptions obtained from actual observations ; and I am convinced that those descriptions will give a fair idea of the state of the cottage accommodation in the West of England.

In now proceeding to present statements concerning the general condition of the peasantry in the several English counties, based upon the table to which I have already referred, it must be understood that the most reliable of these statements are those—and I shall carefully distinguish them—obtained by the Royal Commissioners in Agriculture. The Poor Law Returns are given for what they are worth, but it must be remembered that, as a rule, they are most unreliably made, the principle upon which they are calculated varying in the different Unions

of the same county. The facts given, it must not be forgotten, relate to ordinary labourers; not to carters or shepherds. Mr. Stanhope's opinion is, that beer or cider, when given regularly to the labourers, ought to be reckoned as worth 1*s.* a week; and he considers also that "perquisites" depend so much on the individual employer that they cannot be valued. He, in common with the Bishop of Manchester, is of opinion that the ordinary weekly wage may be taken as the true test of an agricultural labourer's earnings in any part of the country. An alphabetical arrangement of the counties will, I think, be the best which can be given.

In Bedfordshire the average wages of agricultural labourers were from 11*s.* to 12*s.* per week for day-work, besides some extra payment for working on Sundays, sometimes with beer, calculated at 1*s.* a week. Piece-work and beer together enabled a labourer to command average wages equal to 13*s.* 6*d.* per week. Cottage rents, in the Bedford and Woburn Unions, were from 1*s.* to 2*s.* 6*d.*, and sometimes to 3*s.* 6*d.* per week. Wages according to the Poor Law Returns were given at, in the Bedford and Woburn Unions, from

10*s.* to 11*s.* per week. Pauperism was equal to 7·2 per cent. of the population (1871).

The average wages in Berkshire were from 10*s.* to 11*s.* per week. In the Witney Union, however, they were only 9*s.* There was an extra allowance during harvest, with beer for carting, &c. Cottage rents were on the average from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. The Poor Law Returns for Berkshire stated that the average wages in the Hungerford Union were 9*s.* a week; in the Faringdon Union 10*s.*; in the Wantage Union 10*s.* When labourers work by task, they could get 11*s.* per week. Carters in this county were allowed a quart of small beer daily in some cases; also a cottage. The pauperism in Berkshire was equal to 6·5 per cent. of the population.

The wages of the Buckinghamshire peasants were reckoned at from 11*s.* to 13*s.* per week, with some extra payment for work on Sundays when it was required. If instead of working by the week the Buckinghamshire peasant worked by the piece he could earn, including the value of the beer supplied to him, from 1*s.* 6*d.* to 2*s.* 6*d.* in addition per week. Carters and shepherds earned 2*s.* more per week than ordinary farm labourers. Rents

ranged from 1*s.* to 2*s.* 6*d.* per week, and were sometimes as high as 3*s.* 6*d.* per week. Pauperism in Bucks was equal to 6·3 per cent. of the population.

In the county of Cambridge agricultural wages ranged from 10*s.* to 13*s.* per week. Rents were from 1*s.* to 2*s.* weekly, and pauperism was reckoned at 6·9 per cent.

In the county of Chester wages were, in the Nantwich Union, from 11*s.* to 12*s.* per week. There was very little of the work done by the piece in Chester. But in some cases married men who might be required to work at some little distance from their homes were boarded in the farmhouses, and in addition to their board received wages of sometimes 5*s.* and sometimes 6*s.* per week. Rents in this Union of the county were reckoned generally to be about 1*s.* 6*d.* per week. The Poor Law Returns gave the wages as follows:—In the Nantwich Union, 12*s.*; in the Runcorn Union, 15*s.* and beer; and in the Hawarden Union, 15*s.* per week. Pauperism 3·2 per cent. of the population.

The wages of ordinary labourers in the portion of Cornwall which bordered on Devon were 9*s.* to

10*s.*, with the privilege of grist corn and potato ground. Away from the borders of Devon, wages were 12*s.* Some of the best of the peasants in Cornwall were employed on piece-work. The Poor Law Returns represented the weekly wages to be in the Camelford Union, 11*s.*, with food and drink at harvest time. Pauperism was 4·9 per cent.

In Cumberland and Westmoreland wages were from 15*s.* to 18*s.* per week, occasionally with privileges. Sometimes two-thirds of the farm work in these counties, however, was done by farm servants living and boarding in the farmhouses. The Poor Law Returns gave the following information in reference to the several Unions :—Brampton Union, 15*s.* ; Wigton Union, 15*s.*, or 9*s.* and food ; Bootle Union the same ; East Ward Union, 14*s.* to 16*s.* 6*d.* ; Kendal Union, 17*s.* to 18*s.* per week. Pauperism 3·8 per cent.

Near the mines of Derbyshire wages were from 14*s.* to 17*s.* But it was stated in this county that "an average man could command an average wage of 15*s.* per week, besides having some potatoes planted for him." The Poor Law Returns for the Bakewell Union gave the wages at 14*s.* per week. Pauperism 2·4 per cent.

Wages in Devonshire were given at from 8*s.* to 9*s.* per week. There was cider in addition (generally two quarts a day), and sometimes perquisites, such as grist corn, food at harvest, firewood, or potato ground. In addition to this remuneration, carters and shepherds had their cottages rent free. Cottage rents in Devonshire were reckoned at from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* per week. The Poor Law Returns gave the following information as to wages and allowances of cider, &c. :—In the Axminster Union, 8*s.* 6*d.* to 9*s.*, with three daily pints of cider ; Okehampton Union, 10*s.* to 12*s.* per week, with three pints of cider, and potato ground ; Tiverton Union, 9*s.* with two quarts of cider, fuel, and some other privileges ; Barnstaple Union, 11*s.*, but no piece-work. Pauperism 5·7 per cent. of the population.

In Dorsetshire the wages were 8*s.* per week, with a cottage rent free ; 9*s.* a week without one. The privileges were thus described :—"In Vale of Blackmore some cider only, sometimes grist corn, potato ground, or cartage of fuel. These might add 2*s.* a week to the average wage, or nothing." On the whole, ordinary labourers earned (piece-work and everything included) from 10*s.* to

11*s.* per week. Rents of cottages were from 1*s.* to 2*s.* per week. The Poor Law Returns gave the wages in the Wimborne Union at from 9*s.* to 10*s.* a week, with no extras; in the Poole Union from 12*s.* to 15*s.* a week; in the Wareham Union 9*s.* 6*d.* to 10*s.* a week (besides cottage, garden, and manure); in the Cerne Union from 9*s.* to 10*s.* a week, together with cottage, garden, and grist corn. The return per cent. of pauperism in Dorsetshire was 7·1.

In the county of Durham wages ranged from 15*s.* to 18*s.* per week; hinds received from 10*s.* to 13*s.* 6*d.* a week, besides a house rent free, the free cartage of fuel, and some potatoes. Rents were from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. The Poor Law Returns represented wages in the Darlington Union at 15*s.*, with house free of rent, potatoes, meat, and drink at harvest time. In the Sedgefield Union the wages were 17*s.* Pauperism was 3·5 per cent. of the population.

In the part of the county of Essex near London wages were represented to be from 10*s.* to 13*s.* per week. It was stated that "first-class labourers could earn from 35*l.* to 36*l.* a year, or 13*s.* 6*d.* a week with piece-work, &c. Rents of cottages were

1*s.* 6*d.* a week. The Poor Law Returns gave the wages in the Billericay Union at 12*s.* a week; in the Tendring Union at 11*s.* a week; in the Dunmow Union at 10*s.* a week, together with beer at harvest time. Pauperism was returned at 6·2 per cent. of the population.

The wages of the peasantry in Gloucestershire were 9*s.* to 10*s.* a week, with cider daily in addition, valued at from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. It was stated that "first-class labourers could earn from 32*l.* to 35*l.* a year," but allowing for lost time, their earnings would often barely exceed the usual weekly rate. In the Vale of Berkeley wages were from 1*s.* to 2*s.* a week higher. Rents were from 1*s.* to 2*s.* a week. The Poor Law Returns gave the following statement. In the Newent Union wages were 10*s.* a week. In the Strood Union from 10*s.* to 12*s.* In both these Unions it was stated that drink was sometimes allowed. In the Stow Union wages were 9*s.* 6*d.*; in the Cheltenham Union 10*s.* a week, together with an allowance of cider. Pauperism was equal to 5·2 per cent. of the population.

From 10*s.* to 11*s.* were given as the weekly wages of the peasantry in Hampshire: with no truck system. Rents of cottages from 1*s.* to

1*s.* 6*d.* per week. According to the Poor Law Returns, the wages in the South Stoneham Union were from 11*s.* to 11*s.* 6*d.* per week; in the Droxford Union from 11*s.* to 12*s.* per week; in the Alresford Union, 10*s.* per week; and in the Andover Union from 10*s.* to 11*s.* per week. Pauperism was 5·5 per cent.

In the county of Hereford the wages were from 9*s.* to 11*s.* per week, together with a daily allowance of cider, valued at 1*s.* a week. The allowance was two quarts a day in winter and three in summer. Rents were from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. Piece-work in Herefordshire would, it was calculated, make, taking the year through, from 1*s.* to 2*s.* a week extra. But at harvest time 1*l.* was generally given in lieu of piece-work. Perquisites were uncertain. Pauperism was 5·1 per cent. The statements as to wages and cider given by the Poor Law Returns were: in the Ledbury Union from 9*s.* to 11*s.* per week, with sometimes two and sometimes three pints of cider daily; in the Hereford Union they were from 9*s.* to 10*s.* per week, together with cider; and in the Bromyard Union 10*s.* per week with cider.

In Hertfordshire wages ranged from 10*s.* to

12*s.* per week. The Poor Law Returns for that county give the wages in the Royston Union at from 11*s.* 3*d.* to 11*s.* 6*d.* per week, and in the Hitchin Union from 10*s.* 9*d.* to 11*s.* 6*d.* a week. Pauperism 6·5 per cent. of the population.

The Poor Law Returns for the St. Neot's Union in Huntingdonshire give the wages of the farm labourers at from 10*s.* to 11*s.* per week. Pauperism was 5·2 per cent. of the population.

On the Clay lands of Kent wages were stated to be 12*s.* a week, rising in other parts of the county to as high as 15*s.*; but by piece-work in the hop districts 5*s.* or 6*s.* a week extra could be obtained. The Poor Law Returns for this county gave the wages at 14*s.* a week in the Faversham Union; at 13*s.* to 14*s.* in the Eastry Union, and at 15*s.* per week in the Romney Union. Cottage rents were stated to be 2*s.* 6*d.* per week.

The Poor Law Returns for Lancashire stated that wages in the several Unions were as follows: in the Ormskirk Union, 15*s.* a week, or 12*s.* a week with some food in addition; in the Clitherow Union, 15*s.* to 16*s.* 6*d.* per week, or 7*s.* a week

with board and lodging. In the Garstang Union, 7*s.* a week, with food. Pauperism was as low as 3·3 per cent.

In Leicestershire wages were from 11*s.* to 13*s.* per week; higher wages, however, being obtained in the districts around towns, and in those where the collieries were situated, together with an extra 1*s.* for work on Sundays. There was very little piece-work in this county. Cottage rents were from 1*s.* 6*d.* to 2*s.* a week. The Poor Law Returns gave wages as follows:—Market Bosworth Union, 13*s.*; Melton Union, 12*s.* to 14*s.*; Pauperism 4·3 per cent.

The peasantry of Lincolnshire obtained 15*s.* a week, except in the south-eastern part of the county, where the wages were 13*s.* 6*d.* There was a good deal of piece-work in Lincolnshire, enabling the labourers in the northern parts of the county to add to the usual wages obtainable in those districts 2*s.* a week on the average. In some parts of Lincolnshire the labourers lived on the farms, and were paid partly in kind, their wages being valued at from 40*l.* to 45*l.* a year. Rents of cottages from 1*s.* 6*d.* to 2*s.* 6*d.* per week. The wages in the Louth Union, according to the Poor

Law Returns, were from 13*s.* 6*d.* to 15*s.* per week. Pauperism 4·9 per cent. of the population.

In Monmouthshire wages were 10*s.* a week, together with an allowance in the usual way of two quarts of cider. Near the town of Monmouth wages were 9*s.*, and there were perquisites in addition. The Poor Law Returns stated that wages in the Monmouth Union were 11*s.* a week, with an allowance of two quarts of cider; Bedwelty Union, from 15*s.* to 16*s.* a week; Newport Union, 13*s.* Pauperism 6 per cent. of the population.

Agricultural labourers' wages in the county of Norfolk were from 11*s.* to 12*s.* a week. It was stated that first-class men in that county could with piece-work earn from 37*l.* to 40*l.* a year. The Poor Law Returns gave the following statements:—Wages in the Aylsham Union from 10*s.* to 12*s.* a week; in the Depwade Union, 10*s.*; in the Downham Union, 10*s.* Pauperism 6·8 per cent.

In Northamptonshire wages were, in the south, 11*s.* a week; in the north, 13*s.* a week. There was a good deal of piece-work to be obtained in this county. Cottage rents were from 1*s.* to 2*s.* per week. From the Poor Law Returns the following

statements are obtained :—Wages in the Brixworth Union, 12*s.*; in the Oundle Union, 11*s.*; in the Peterborough Union, 12*s.* Most of the men permanently employed on the farms were allowed to get potatoes.

The state of wages, privileges, &c., in the county of Northumberland was as follows :—Wages reckoned from 15*s.* to 18*s.* a week, including everything, and taking the average of corn as a basis.

In explanation of the system pursued in Northumberland it will be necessary to quote from the Commissioners' Reports as follows :—"'Hind' is the name given to the carters who work the horses; each man looking after two horses. There are also shepherds, spademen, and byremen. It is the custom of the country to pay the labourers mostly in kind, but a few prefer money payments. Their wages may be put at 15*s.* to 18*s.* a week, including everything, and taking the average price of corn as a basis. The hind who is paid in kind has a cow kept for him, and receives also 5*l.* or 6*l.* of stint-money in lieu of an allowance formerly given for the keep of a "dry cow." He has a certain amount of corn, permission to keep one

pig, or two as the case may be, a house rent free, coals led, and potatoes planted. The three last items are more or less considered as the retaining fee of the woman worker, formerly known by the name of the 'bondager.'" The Poor Law Returns for Northumberland gave wages as follows:—Morpeth Union, 15*s.* to 16*s.*; Berwick Union, 15*s.*; Glendale Union, 16*s.* to 18*s.* Pauperism 4·5 per cent.

In Nottinghamshire wages were 15*s.*, and near the larger towns somewhat higher—on the clay soils somewhat lower. Cottage rents were from 1*s.* 6*d.* to 2*s.* per week. The Poor Law Returns for the Newark Union gave wages at from 12*s.* to 15*s.* a week. Pauperism was 4·7 per cent. of the population.

In Oxfordshire the wages were from 10*s.* to 11*s.* a week, with extra payment during harvest time. The rents of cottages were from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. In the Witney Union the wages were 9*s.* a week. Pauperism 4·7 per cent.

The wages of farm labourers in Shropshire were from 9*s.* to 10*s.* a week in the south-west of the county, and from 10*s.* to 12*s.* in the north. Food given for overtime during harvest. In some cases there were perquisites such as cartage, cottage rent,

and short hours of labour. Cottage rents were from 1*s.* 6*d.* to 2*s.* per week. The Poor Law Returns gave the wages in the Shiffnal Union at from 11*s.* to 12*s.*, with an allowance of beer, two quarts, and potato ground. Pauperism 4·1 per cent.

In the county of Somerset wages were in the western districts 7*s.* or 8*s.* a week, with cider and sometimes perquisites. Cider, two or three pints a day, valued at 1*s.* a week. Sometimes potato ground or grist corn was given. The Poor Law Returns gave the wages in the Shepton Mallet Union, at from 10*s.* to 11*s.*, with three pints of cider; in the Axbridge Union, 10*s.*, with four or five pints of cider. Pauperism 6·8 per cent.

In the Uttoxeter district of Staffordshire wages were 12*s.* a week, with some perquisites of varied character. On the pasture lands of this county work was not very constant. The wages were higher near the large towns. The Poor Law Returns gave the wages for the Burton Union at 13*s.*, with two quarts of beer. Pauperism 3·7 per cent.

The Poor Law Returns for Suffolk gave the wages in the several Unions as follows:—Stow Union, 10*s.* a week; Samford Union, 11*s.* a week;

Blything Union, from 10*s.* to 12*s.* per week. Pauperism 7 per cent.

In Surrey (near London) wages were from 12*s.* to 15*s.* per week. By piece-work, taking the year through, 1*s.* to 2*s.* might be added to these wages. Rents were 1*s.* 6*d.* a week, except near London. The Poor Law Returns for the Epsom Union gave wages at 14*s.* a week; for the Godstone Union, 13*s.* a week.

In the county of Sussex wages were 12*s.* to 13*s.* a week. Cottage rents were from 1*s.* to 2*s.* 6*d.* a week. The Poor Law Returns gave wages as follows:—In the Ticehurst Union, 12*s.*; in the Horsham Union, 12*s.*; in the Thakeham Union, 12*s.*; in the West Hampnett Union, from 12*s.* to 13*s.*; in the Midhurst Union, 12*s.* Pauperism was 5·5 per cent. of the population.

The wages of Warwickshire labourers were 11*s.* per week in the south, and 12*s.* a week in the north of that county; and it will be seen that these were the wages at the time of the "strike." Cider was sometimes given, and perquisites also were given occasionally. The rents of cottages were from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. Wages, according to the Poor Law Returns, were in the Warwick Union,

12*s.*; in the Stratford Union, 11*s.*; and pauperism was 3·6 per cent.

Wiltshire labourers received from 9*s.* to 11*s.* a week. Piece-work, when obtained the year through, would add to these wages from 1*s.* to 2*s.* a week, but sometimes 1*l.* was given in lieu of it. Cottage rents were from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* per week. The Poor Law Returns gave wages in the Chippenham Union at 11*s.*, together with beer; in the Melksham Union, 11*s.*; in the Warminster Union, from 9*s.* 6*d.* to 10*s.*; in the Alderbury Union, from 9*s.* 6*d.* to 10*s.*; and allowances were seldom given except at harvest time. Pauperism in Wiltshire was 7·2 per cent. of the population.

In the western parts of Worcestershire the wages were 9*s.*, in the eastern parts of that county, 12*s.* per week. In some cases cider was given, as in Herefordshire. The payment for harvest work was by the piece; sometimes, however, 1*l.* extra being given instead. Rents of cottages in Worcestershire, from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. The Poor Law Returns gave wages in the Stourbridge Union, at 12*s.*, together with beer; in the Evesham Union, 10*s.*, and cider; in the Pershore Union,

10*s.* to 12*s.*, together with cider; in the Droitwich Union, 10*s.*, and cider. Pauperism 4·1 per cent.

The wages of the peasantry in Yorkshire were from 14*s.* to 15*s.* a week, with a good deal of piece-work. In some cases the men received 7*s.* or 8*s.*, together with their food. Rents of cottages were from 1*s.* 6*d.* to 2*s.* 6*d.* The Poor Law Returns gave the following information as to wages:—Settle Union, 13*s.* 6*d.* to 18*s.*; Pateley-bridge Union, 15*s.* to 17*s.*; Doncaster Union, 15*s.*; Thorne Union, 13*s.* 6*d.* to 15*s.*; task work very rare to get; Malton Union, 15*s.*, or 7*s.* to 8*s.*, with food; Leyburn Union, 13*s.* to 18*s.*; Richmond Union, 12*s.* to 15*s.* Pauperism 2·9 per cent. of the population.

CHAPTER II.

PEASANT LIFE IN THE WEST OF ENGLAND IN 1872.

THE agricultural labourers of Dorsetshire have long had the reputation of being the most wretched of all the labouring classes of England. The most dire distress has for years existed amongst the peasantry in each of the four great agricultural counties of the West of England—Somersetshire, Dorsetshire, Wiltshire, and Devonshire. But it has generally been thought that the most extreme wretchedness was to be found in Dorsetshire. This was, no doubt, true of that county up to within the last quarter of a century, and even within a more recent period there appears to have been some strong evidence of the existence there of exceptional distress. In an able and powerful work on Emigration,* published in

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* *Britain Redeemed and Canada Preserved.* By Alfred B. Richards, Barrister-at-Law. London. Longmans and Co.

1850, there is the following reference in a chapter on "English Distress," to the condition of the Dorsetshire Labourers. "Now the note is pealed by Lanark, pinched with hungry wretchedness; or the cry comes from Lancashire, from Gloucester, Sussex, Norfolk, Cambridge, Hants, Notts, Berks, till the chorus is swelled to its full volume of distress by the deep groans of Dorset, where the wages of the labourer are 5*s.* a week, and where committals for crime have recently increased from 300 to 1300."

Some years ago, but since the period to which the work from which I have quoted refers, the distress amongst the Dorsetshire peasants was so great that public attention was directed to it through the medium of *The Daily Telegraph*, and contributions from benevolent persons, amounting to several hundred pounds, were forwarded to the Editor of that journal, who deputed one of his staff to go down to the scene of the distress, and distribute the money which had been subscribed.

Since that time, however, the condition of the agricultural labourers of Dorset would appear to have slightly—very slightly—improved, because

at the time of the commencement of the labourers' movement, the balance of misery seems to have inclined on the side of the peasantry of Somersetshire, as I shall have occasion to show. I am indebted to the courtesy of the Editor of *The Daily Telegraph* for the following admirable sketch of peasant life in Dorset, which appeared in the above-named journal, on the 30th of April, 1872. I will give it entire :—

"Our estimable but phlegmatic compatriots, the descendants of the ancient Durotrigas, have become infected with the turbulent spirit of the age. They have tired of the conservative theology which set before them as the chief end of a Dorset man's existence the art of domestic vegetation on 9*s.* a week. When one hears of the territorial demigods who share the county amongst them, of the thousand acre and twelve hundred acre farms in which it is parcelled out, of the square miles of cover in which game preserving is studied like a fine art, and of the enormous sums which Dorsetshire farmers can afford to spend on machinery, he may set down the 'landed interest' in Dorsetshire as an institution which it is not desirable to offend. When he turns from the capitalist to the labourer

he sees weakness arraying itself against strength—the mole challenging the eagle to mortal combat.

"The unsightly belts of furze and brushwood which render the upper part of Hants a striking illustration of Lord Derby's low estimate of English agriculture, extend for some distance into North Dorset. The Somerset and Dorset Railway traverses, between Salisbury and Wimborne, a large tract of land quite as indifferent as that in the vicinity of the Plain. But an approach to the coast relieves this dusky, depressing monotony. The wilderness of furze breaks itself against the refreshing verdure that clothes the chalk hills. The peat-coloured flats which imperfect drainage has coaxed into rearing coarse wheat are exchanged for loamy bottoms, capable of growing anything that can be planted in them. The population undergoes a corresponding improvement. North Dorset has evident difficulty in sustaining hamlets and villages, which shrink as far apart from each other as they can get. But immediately on entering South Dorset you return to urban civilization. Dorchester here is a provincial town of some energy as well as respectability. Though it adheres to the cramped and promiscuous style of archi-

tecture which it learned in the days of King Athelstane, it does not go to sleep on its historical reputation. It has modern life in it, and can produce a considerable bustle on its weekly market days. Its vitality is drawn from a comparatively narrow district running out towards Bridport on the west and Weymouth on the coast side. But my inquiries to-day have not taken either of these directions. They have led me more into the centre of the county, across the sharply defined hills among which the Stour threads its way to the sea. The road out of Dorchester shades itself for some distance under a beautiful avenue of elms. Then it ascends a broad-flanked hill, on which spacious enclosures are being made for the approaching Agricultural Show. Beyond that it gets buried in the shadow of a cover belonging to the principal landowner in the district, Lord Ilchester. This spreads out for miles on either side of the highway, and effaces for a time every symptom of resident cultivation. When you regain glimpses of ploughed fields and sprouting wheat, you are on the confines of a model Dorsetshire village. Piddletown occupies the crest of a great ridge which shuts out the semi-

urban environs of Dorchester from the genuinely rural centre of the county. It rejoices in most of the essentials of Arcadian felicity. The squire takes a direct and fatherly interest in his villagers. He has built them from time to time numbers of good cottages, and he has furnished them with ground for garden allotments. The tenants he has selected for his farms are men who make the best of a bad system of labour. They pay the full standard wages of the county—oftener, I believe, the 9*s.* maximum than the 8*s.* minimum. Though privileges, as a matter of right and custom, have almost died out in Dorsetshire, they linger on sufferance in Piddletown. One of them is the ancient perquisite of gristing, under which each labourer can claim a bushel per week of wheat for family use, at the uniform rate of 5*s.* When wheat was liable to fluctuations, which sent it up sometimes as high as 10*s.* or 12*s.* a bushel, "gristing" gave the labourer some security for having always a moderately cheap loaf. Of late years the customary price of the wheat has more nearly represented its market value, it being but the second quality of a kind which does not stand high at Mark-

lane. On one or two farms about Piddletown, "gristing" has been temporarily, perhaps permanently, suspended; but the men have received liberal compensation in an addition of 1*s.* a week to their cash wages. The potato ground, which seems to prevail throughout the whole of the West of England, is granted here without any of the drawbacks and qualifications that are being introduced elsewhere. Small kindnesses are also practised by the farmers, which go a long way in promoting friendly feeling amongst the labourers. A man would very seldom be refused a truss of straw for his pig when he is so fortunate as to possess one. In a county so well timbered, it would be hard if something were not done to help to keep his pot boiling in winter. He stands a chance, provided he be faultless as a labourer, and properly deferential as an inferior, of having a hundredweight or two of firewood delivered at his door in the cold weather.

"Piddletown, it will be seen, depends a great deal on the grace of its suzerains. When they smile benevolently it stops a certain degree shorter of starvation than when they have to frown reprovingly. What might happen if in a moment of supreme

displeasure they were to withdraw their pigstraw and firewood, the most vivid imagination in Piddletown cannot conceive. The bare money value of labour in the parish is just 9*s.* per week. I met one hirsute, thick-spoken individual trudging home this afternoon who informed me, with excusable bucolic pride, that he had been getting 10*s.* a week for the past two years, but his expression indicated that Piddletown was not blessed with many labourers up to his level. Afterwards he added an explanation which discounted his triumph. He was a cowman, and had to be at the service of his cattle on 'Sundays and working days.' Moreover all his privileges had been commuted for the extra shilling. He could claim neither potato ground nor pigstraw, and his house in Piddletown, which cost him 1*s.* 6*d.* a week, lay at some distance from his work. He was not unaware that his master obtained a good shilling's worth for the additional wage; yet it had never entered his mind that a new dispensation might arise in which labourers like himself would not be content with 10*s.* a week. He had heard as a rumour, bordering on the incredible, that in the next parish of Milborne St. Andrew the whole of the men had combined and

given notice to their masters that they would strike if they were not paid 2*s.* per day. Piddletown had not dreamed of any such insubordination as writing to a master about wages, much less had it dared to think of such a millennium as the possession of a weekly income of 12*s.*

"Close to the scene of this conversation there was a row of two-storey cottages, standing at some distance from the road, in the middle of well-kept gardens. They had the substantial, orderly appearance which implies good designing and liberal expenditure. I expected to hear them described as model cottages of five or six years old—the earnest of comfortable, decent housing for Piddletown. They had, however, stood there a quarter of a century, and were still in moderate repair. Most of them were occupied by tenants of long standing, who, on account of their respectability, paid only a rental of 5*l.* per annum for the use of as many rooms. On one side of the stair, which ascended almost directly from the front door, there was a sitting-room, and on the other, two kitchens, one behind the other. The upper floor was divided into three bedrooms. My chaperone here was a woman of the class from which Chancellors

of the Exchequer ought to be drawn when we come to female Parliaments. She had reared a round dozen of a family in the house she was showing me. Her husband had never earned, till within the past month, more than 8*s.* 6*d.* a week, out of which had to be set aside the landlord's 2*s.*, and then about 4*d.* a week for the sick club. Between the garden and the potato ground on the farm they had always grown a sufficiency of vegetables. When they could buy one they had fed a pig; but, failing their home-grown bacon, they had rarely tasted meat. The 6*s.* which remained in bare cash for victualling the family would not have provided dry bread, had the mother not eked it out by her own earnings as a charwoman. By dint of unwearying toil and Spartan thrift she had educated her children and started them respectably in the world, all but the youngest, a little girl still at school. She could not explain when it was done the superhuman pinching by which it had been accomplished. Unselfish heroine as she was, she had less pity for herself than for neighbours, whose struggle for existence had been harder even than hers. Few of the wives in the village could obtain the light indoor

work that fell to her lot. They had been obliged to go a-field, and to take, for the market price of a day's hoeing or reaping, sometimes as little as 6*d.*, and rarely more than 8*d.* The female bucolic flourishes still in Dorset. To-day, on the road between Dorchester and Milborne, there were as many labourers of that sex as of the other to be seen shambling along in heavy boots, with their hoes across their shoulders, or sitting by the wayside, with a sodden and sulky expression of weariness. Farmers do not care for employing them any more than they care for the employment; but their only escape would be into the hands of a harder taskmaster—hunger. Dorset inexorably demands that both parents shall be breadwinners for the family. If it had to trust to one, it would have to go forthwith on half-rations. The women perfectly understand this condition, and, hard-featured as they look, they bravely perform their double duty. They have to bear a good character at home as well as in the field, for the suzerain has much of their domestic comfort under his control. It all rests with him whether they are to be pushed out of the way under a mouldy thatched roof, or to be raised to a place of honour in one

of the new cottages. He can even exercise a Malthusian check on population, by delaying marriages until it pleases him to lodge the young couple. A house to let would be a phenomenon in Piddletown. Were it to get abroad six months beforehand that John Nokes was giving up his place, or going to be turned out, the question of who was to succeed him would excite Piddletonian gossip into convulsions. The village has hardly yet recovered from the agitation causd by the last row of cottages built, though they are now several years old. They have formed a fashionable quarter in Piddletown, and command rents which go considerably beyond the reach of 9*s.*-a-week householders. I am giving the lowest estimate I heard in saying that some of them cost their tenants 7*l.* per annum. But they are unquestionably good houses of their class, substantial in structure, and conveniently arranged. The old cottages are let at from 5*l.* a year down to 3*l.*

"On the farther side of Piddletown we exchange the *dominion* of Lord Ilchester and Squire Brymer for that of Sir John Michel and Squire Mansell. The latter practises paternal government on a minute scale in the hamlet of Milborne

St. Andrew. He has introduced most of the improvements eulogized by Mr. Disraeli, with the exception of model cottages, which are still wanting. One can understand his feeling a Conservative tenderness for the whitewashed mud-walls and the moss-grown thatch placed there by his ancestors. They are a poetic feature in the landscape over which he presides; and if addicted to inflicting rheumatism or ague on unpoetic tenants, these are physical conditions which a Dorset man expects to present themselves as naturally as his eye teeth. Milborne cottages do occasionally succumb to old age and get pulled down, but no other form of innovation is permitted amongst them. I could not meet with any one able to determine how many years it was since the youngest of them was built. It was much easier to trace a universal consciousness of the great need there was for a dozen or two more. Building will be an indifferent investment, however, at the current rentals, which average only 1*s.* a week. Milborne housekeeping is sensibly ameliorated by the Squire's leniency as a landlord. But his kindness is flavoured with eccentricity. In respect of garden allotments, the village is under a sump-

tuary law, which restricts holders to about five perches per head of their families. They have the consolation of paying a peppercorn rental of 2*d.* per perch per annum; but the earth-hunger gnaws at their hearts. They actually covet not only more cottages, but more garden ground. It is a long stride for their imaginations from their own limited cabbage beds to the thousand-acre farms on which they have to labour for the good of other men's pockets. Not that the farmers of the parish are anything else than gentlemen whom it should be a pleasure and an honour to work for. They are, it is true, lukewarm as to the ancient customs of 'gristing' and potato ground; but they have dropped readily into the groove of modern philanthropy. They support a very fair school, and some time ago they helped to establish a village reading-room, whereby hangs a tale. In this room Hodge's study of Conservative politics as taught by the local press was tempered with glimpses of less fossilized journals, which had been unwittingly subscribed for by his patrons. Treason penetrated into the camp. Last Saturday night the labourers met in this very reading-room, and concocted a disloyal manifesto against

their benevolent employers. It was expressed in the form of an intimation that, after the 27th of April, 'We, the undersigned, would one and all decline to work any longer for less than 2*s*. per day of nine hours.' An identical note was addressed to each farmer in the parish, bearing the signatures of all the men in his employment. One of the signatories was deputed to deliver the ultimatum, which was done accordingly on Monday morning.

"This *coup* is not likely to succeed so well as it deserves, for during the week some of the men grew nervous, and withdrew their names. The masters believe that there is plenty of labour to be purchased at the present price, and some of them argue that it would be bad for the men themselves to increase it. Their inducement to remain in Dorset would be strengthened, and that, according to the farmers, is the root of all the evil. If the surplus labour of the county would have sense enough to transfer itself to another market, the remainder could be better paid in consequence, were they only to get what was saved in poor rates. Under the ruling system of cultivation, Dorset needs only machinery and

gamekeepers. It is never without men seeking work, and some who have once escaped from it are infatuated enough to return."

I had myself resided in Somersetshire many years, and I believed that the condition of the peasants in that county was worse than in Dorsetshire. I had, however, been absent from the district for about ten years, and did not therefore know what changes might have taken place in the meantime in the relative condition of the peasantry in the two counties. In a letter, however, which I received (May, 1872) from Mr. R. A. Kinglake, J.P. for Somersetshire, occurred the following passage :—" In my opinion the Dorsetshire labourers are better off than those in Somersetshire. I have been a magistrate for this county for twenty years, and am well acquainted with the habits of the working classes."

Before going down into the West of England to prosecute my inquiries through the agricultural districts, the following statement of the case of a Somersetshire labourer caught my eye. The details of this case, which had been published in a local newspaper, are interesting ; and I will give them just as they appeared, merely remarking that

the wages received by the labourer in the instance given were exceptionally high for the West of England. Here is the statement:—

"The following is an account of a year's earnings and expenditure of John ——, an agricultural labourer in full employment. His case is not the miserable lot of one but of many thousands of his class, who are in as bad and, in some instances, in a worse condition. John received from his employer, between Lady-day, 1871, and Lady-day, 1872, 19*l.* 16*s.* 6*d.* for piece-work (hedging, draining, turnip hoeing, mowing, and harvesting) and 12*l.* for day-work, at 10*s.* a week, inclusive of twenty-one days' lost time on account of bad weather. Thus this young English labourer's total year's income was 31*l.* 16*s.* 6*d.*, besides three pints of cider on six days of the week and none on Sundays. Let us now turn to the debit side of this account, and the items shall be furnished by John's wife, a careful and notable woman—for you must know that John has a wife and four children to provide for out of his earnings. Rent, 2*s.* a week, 5*l.* 4*s.*; poor rates, 7*s.* 6*d.*; tithes, 1*s.* 6*d.*; one hundredweight of coal per week, 2*l.* 12*s.*; one year's shoes for the family and mending 2*l.* 5*s.*;

bread, 4*s.* 6*d.* per week, 11*l.* 14*s.*; one quarter of an acre of potato ground, 2*l.*; seed potatoes, 1*l.*; club pay, 12*s.*; soap, 10*s.* 10*d.*; tea, 3*d.* per week, 13*s.*; candles, twenty weeks, 7*s.* 6*d.*; quarter pound of butter a week, 17*s.* 4*d.*; half-a-pound of treacle, 6*s.* 6*d.*; matches, thread, and tape, 3*s.* 6*d.*; broom and salt, 2*s.*; two cups and saucers, 4*d.*; four plates and mugs, 1*s.* 4*d.*; four children's schooling, at 1*d.* per week, 17*s.* 4*d.*; tools—scythe, two hooks, whetstones, pickaxe, two shovels, crossaxe, spade, turnip hoe, 1*l.* 12*s.* 10*d.*; repairing ditto, 5*s.* 3*d.*; total, 31*l.* 13*s.* 9*d.*; leaving a balance of 2*s.* 9*d.* to buy the family butcher's meat, clothing, and other absolute necessaries, for which, if procured at all, the village shopkeeper and the travelling packman must be the sufferers. John is in hope of being better off, for his master (a guardian) has promised to try and get him a shilling or two a week from the Union; but he says he must first see the doctor, and get some of his family upon the sick list."

What would strike a stranger most forcible on visiting Somersetshire during the spring or summer is the contrast afforded by the loveliness of the scenery and the wretchedness and squalor prevail-

ing amidst the agricultural population of the villages. The area of the county is 1,049,815 statute acres, and it is consequently one of the largest of our English counties. By the Census of 1871 it was proved to contain a population of 463,483 persons, which would give an average of 0·44 of a person, so to speak, to an acre, and 2·27 acres to a person. It is almost inconceivable that upon so large an expanse of land, so thinly inhabited and with so rich a soil, the labourers should have been found in so destitute a condition. At the time when I arrived in the county on my mission of inquiry, no attempt whatever had been made by the peasantry to better their condition. Mr. Kinglake, to whom reference has already been made, had been the first amongst the gentry to call attention to their miserable state. At that time, a month after the commencement of the movement in Warwickshire, there had been no "strike" whatever in the county. This was a remarkable circumstance. Not only, however, had there been no "strike," but there had been no kind of movement whatever in Somersetshire on the part of the agricultural labourers, who had been enervated by years of grinding misery, and had been brought into a

state of hopeless despair. The news of the rising in Warwickshire had been discussed over and over again in the well-to-do circles. The local newspapers had, of course, duly chronicled the strange uprising which had astonished everybody. The news slowly got to the labourers themselves—the poor ignorant peasants could not read it. But even then the slow comprehension of the half-starved Somersetshire hind could not grasp the full meaning of the "strike." It did not at first occur to him that he could be interested in the movement to the extent of taking the same bold course as that which had been adopted in Warwickshire. In fact, the West of England peasant did not understand the efficacy of combined action. He could understand a bargain between a master and his man up to a certain point. That is to say, if one employer gave more than another, say to the extent of 1*s.* or 2*s.* a week, he would naturally endeavour to get the higher wages, and think himself lucky in doing so. But the notion that by combined action on the part of the labourers in a particular locality all the masters in that locality could be forced to give more wages than they might of their own free will choose to give,

had certainly never entered his brain. In fact, such an extreme depth of misery had been reached by these West Country peasants, that they appeared to have lost even the desire to better themselves. It is difficult for those who have been born and brought up in towns, and who have had little or no experience of the country, to understand this. Such, however, was the actual condition, and such were the feelings of the Somersetshire peasantry at the time to which I allude. Whilst making this assertion, it is important to notice that land in Somersetshire had been steadily rising in value for many years. Since 1843 in fact, taking the county as a whole, it had gone up twenty-five per cent. Notwithstanding, however, this great increase in the value of the estates, which were chiefly in the hands of two or three large owners, the cottage accommodation was, with few exceptions, deplorably bad—a state of things for which the landowners were entirely responsible, and for which there was, of course, no excuse.

Arrived in the county I lost little time in commencing my inquiries. It will, I think, be most convenient to give my experience in narrative form, describing in the order in which I visited

them the various districts through which I passed.

Starting from Weston-super-Mare in the direction of Banwell, I met an old labourer trudging wearily along, and I stopped a few minutes to question him. I learnt that he was seventy-seven years of age, and had worked in the district as a farm labourer nearly all his life. He had no wife or family, if I recollect rightly, but had only himself to support. At his age he could not, of course, do much active work. Still he was regularly employed by a farmer, working as well as he could during the day from about six in the morning to six at night. His wages were 7*s.* per week. He paid out of that sum for his cottage 1*s.* 6*d.* per week, thus leaving 5*s.* 6*d.* with which to find himself in food and clothes. No doubt, wretched as his circumstances were, he was comparatively well off in having so large a sum with which to support only himself. But it was pitiable to find such a result at the end of a long life of hard toil, and to think that a poor old creature of seventy-seven, who must at that advanced age have needed some comforts, was reduced to a sum per week which could only be sufficient to

find the barest necessaries. In the particular neighbourhood where this old man lived there had been just before my visit a slight rise in the wages in consequence of the Warwickshire "strike." Skilled labourers were receiving 11*s.*, and in some cases 12*s.* a week.

A little further on I saw a strange sight. Lying a little way back from the road, I descried what I should have thought was a pig-stye, but for the fact that a man was at a kind of door, cutting up a dead sheep. I called him out and questioned him concerning himself and his cottage. I was then invited by him to visit the interior of the latter. Unless I had seen it I could not have believed that such a place could exist in England. I had to stoop very low to get inside this habitation of an English agricultural labourer. The total length of the miserable hut was about seven yards, its width three yards, and its height, measured to the extreme point of the thatched roof, about ten feet; the height of the walls, however, not being so much as six feet. From the top of the walls was carried up to a point the thatched roof, there being no transverse beams or planks. In fact, had there been any,

I could not have stood upright in this hovel. There was, of course, no second floor to the place, and the one tiny floor was divided in the middle into two compartments, each being about three yards square; one used for a bedroom and the other for a sitting-room. The ground was irregularly paved with large stones, with earth between and in their crevices. On my remarking that the floor must be very damp, if not wet, in winter, the man said, "Oh no, sir, it don't 'heave' much;" by which he meant that the moisture did not come up very much through the stones. From the thatch, in all directions, hung festoons of spiders' webs, intermingled with sprays of ivy, which, but for the terrible squalor of the place, would have given a romantic appearance to the hut. John P. (the inhabitant of this "cottage") was a short, thickset man, sixty years of age. He had lived there, he told me, a quarter of a century. His predecessors were a man, his wife, and six children, all of whom he said had slept in the "bedroom," nine feet square. John told me that he could not work now so well as he used to do; but nevertheless he looked strong and healthy for his age; and his principal duty—a

responsible one—was to look after his master's stock. His wages were 5*s.* a week. Out of that he paid his master 2*l.* 10*s.* a year rent for his "cottage," and 10*s.* a year more for the privilege of running his pig—for John had a pig, as well as some fowls—on his master's land. John also rented one-eighth of an acre of potato ground, for which—still out of his miserable wages—he paid 15*s.* a year. And yet this man was happy amidst it all. His wretched patched garments looked singularly inconsistent when viewed in connexion with his happy-looking face. He spoke well of his employer. His cottage walls were made of hardened mud, and some time since the rain had come through the old thatched roof, and he thought it was very good of his master to put a new roof and a new door to his "cottage" when he asked him to do so. John had been married, but had lost his wife. One daughter, however, was still living, and she had married a policeman in London. John said that when his cottage became no longer fit—according to John's idea of fitness—for a "residence," the "master" intended to pull down the mud walls and plough up the site.

After a further drive of some six miles through an extensive tract of rich agricultural land, I reached the Vale of Wrington. In the parishes of Wrington and Burrington the wages of the peasants were in some cases 11*s.* a week, in others 12*s.* But the state of the population was deplorable. In this district, in fact, as in too many others, the inhabitants suffered from not having in their midst a resident landowner who might have made it his business to look after their social and physical necessities. The greater number of the cottages in the village of Wrington were in a wretched condition. Some of them had positively become so bad that they could not by any possibility be made habitable: and they were therefore in some cases turned into barns or storehouses, and in others, I believe, put to no use whatever. In fact, all the cottages in Wrington, with very few, if any, exceptions, were in a bad condition, and even thus they were not capable of decently housing the poor population of the place. Overcrowding to a deplorable extent was the result, producing all the terrible evils which invariably spring from it As another result of the limited cottage accommodation in Wrington, some of the labourers were daily

obliged to walk two miles to their work from their homes, and of course the same distance in returning home after each day's work. It would not matter what the weather might be: the inevitable two miles' walk must be performed by these poor fellows, often through the pouring rain both going and coming. To farm labourers in general an umbrella is an unknown luxury. Very few families amongst the peasantry in the West of England could be found to possess one, even of the commonest description. Of course it is often the case that farming operations are suspended during very wet weather; in which case men who are employed by the day lose their day's wages altogether. But when the rain is not sufficiently heavy to stop work, the labourers are naturally enough glad to do what they can, and a two or three miles' walk through a steady rain, not heavy enough perhaps to preclude altogether the much-desired work, but quite heavy enough to wet through to the skin the thinly clad peasant, is, it will be admitted, a miserable prelude to a hard day's toil. Then at the close of the day's employment, wet, tired, and hungry, there must be another weary plod, oftentimes through the rain again, and along deep-rutted miry

roads, before the wretched cottage is reached, where a scanty meal of the coarsest and commonest kind is the sole reward at the best of times for the long hours of cheerless toil.

It may be thought that there is a brighter side to this picture than the one which I have described. No doubt a walk to work on a fine spring or summer's morning is much more pleasant than a walk through the rain: but the summer walk is one thing to the well-fed sedentary man who takes it for pleasure, and quite another thing to the poor ill-fed peasant, who has the cheerless prospect before him of a day of hard manual labour. To have to walk four, five, and sometimes six miles in addition to a hard day's work in the fields, would cause a terrible strain upon the physical strength of even the most robust.

The deficiency of cottages in the village, besides giving rise to the evils of overcrowding, and imposing upon a great number of the labourers the necessity of walking long distances to and from their work, naturally made rents high, and thus increased the hardships of the poor villagers. The rents, I was informed, were as much as 7*l.* a year when there was no garden attached to the cottage,

and 9*l.* a year for cottage and garden. When agricultural labourers have great facilities for renting allotments of the landowners or farmers on reasonable terms—a privilege which is very rare in Somersetshire—they are enabled to add to their small means by the annual produce from their ground.

At Wrington, however, I found that the allotments for the peasants were very few in number, owing to the desire of the owners of land to increase the size of the large farms by throwing into them every available plot of ground. I was informed that there were 1000 acres of land in the neighbourhood used as a common, but well adapted for sites for cottages. No new ones, however, had been built, and hence the really serious want of house accommodation in the district.

To all the hardships and privations of the inhabitants of the overcrowded cottages of Wrington a really alarming amount of sickness was added, owing to the very bad and defective state of the drainage in the place.* In many cases, in fact, the

*Twelvemonths after my first visit to the village of Wrington, the Local Sanitary Officer reported (June, 1873) to the Axbridge Board of Guardians that the sanitary condition of Wrington

cottage closets were built over the village brook from which the inhabitants drew some of their water supply.

Even the administration of justice was conducted in a small room in the village instead of, as should have been the case, in a suitable building specially set apart for that purpose.

Milk, a most important article of diet, could scarcely be obtained at all by the labourers of the Wrington farmers. In fact, there was only one farmer in the village who would sell milk, which in most cases was given to the pigs.

Farmers ought to make great efforts to give their men the opportunity of obtaining for their families an abundance of milk, which would prove an invaluable addition to their ordinary bread diet.

Somersetshire is one of the finest cider producing counties in England. Hence a custom has grown up there, as in other of the cider counties, of paying part of the wages of agricultural labourers in cider; the quantity supplied to the men varying

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was so bad, that he had discovered nineteen cases of fever in fourteen houses; and he further reported that no less than twenty-six children, suffering from fever, were absent from the village school at one and the same time.

from two pints to two quarts per day. Women and children engaged in farm work are also supplied with cider when employed. I obtained the testimony of an old man, who had had fifty years' experience as a farm labourer, and he gave me a truthful description of the horrible liquor that is given to the agricultural labourer under the ironical name of cider. It is a well-known fact that in Somersetshire, and in other of the western cider-producing counties, the farmer nearly always keeps "two taps running," according to the expression of that part of the country: one tap for himself and his friends, and one tap for the farm labourers. The farmer's own cider—I can speak from my own knowledge as well as from the evidence of my informant—is most carefully made. The very best apples are selected, the manufacturing process is carefully gone through, and real cider is produced. If a stranger to the country wants to taste the best cider, the farmer will give him what he will tell him in confidence he keeps for his "own drinking." Now for the labourers' cider—tap number two. The very worst apples are, in the first place, selected—the "windfalls;" and these, with dirt and slugs, are ground up for the

peasants. When the "windfalls" are used for feeding the pigs the labourer has what is called the "second wringing"—that is to say, the apples for the farmer's "own drinking" cider are put into the press, and after the best part of the juice has been extracted the cider "cheese," as the mass of apples in the press is called, is subjected to yet greater pressure, and what is expressed from the "cheese" on this occasion is called the "second wringing." This is greatly inferior to the "first wringing." To complete the process and make a liquor worthy of tap number two, the following plan is adopted :—To every hogshead of the "second wringing" is added four gallons of hop-water. This is added for the purpose of preserving the "second wringing," which without such addition would, from its thinness and inferiority, turn to vinegar. My informant, to give me some idea of the difference in quality between the farmer's "two taps," said that good cider usually costs about 30*s.* a hogshead, whilst the "second wringing" was worth only about 10*s.* a hogshead.

From Wrington I directed my inquiries to some of the villages in the mid-division of Somerset-

shire. A wretched sight met my view as I crossed the threshold of a cottage at Stoke-sub-Hamdon, not far from Yeovil. The stone floor of this cottage might perhaps, at one time, have been tolerably even, but that must have been very many years before my visit. When I saw it there were numerous large fissures between the flags where the stone had gradually got broken away, leaving a number of pits.

The cottage was placed in a sort of hollow, and consequently in winter water would oftentimes soak up through the uneven floor. At all seasons of the year during wet weather the floor would "heave," as the poor people expressed it; that is to say, the stones and the earth between them, and in their interstices, would become very damp—sometimes quite wet. It is easy to understand the wretched state of discomfort of a "sitting-room" of this description; for this one small damp room was the general room of the family. There was only one other small room—if room it could be called—placed over the stone-floor apartment, and serving for the bedroom, where the husband, the wife, and several children had to sleep. Yet for this wretched hut, a rent of 1*s.* 6*d.* a week was paid.

This cottage was one of several, all of the same size, and all similarly comfortless. A kind of paved pathway, admitting from the road, out of which I had turned, led along by the doors of the "row," and in front of this were the several tiny pieces of garden or "potato ground," as they called it. The poor woman whom I saw in one cottage I entered told me that the "potato ground" did not grow nearly enough potatoes to supply the family. She said her husband was a "piece-worker," and earned, when in good health and in regular employment, 2*s.* a day, in addition to a daily allowance of three pints of cider. But the employment was precarious, as "piece-working" usually was, more or less, especially at such high wages as 2*s.* a day; and to give me an instance of the loss which her husband sustained during wet weather, she said that the week previous to my visit he had lost two days from that cause, and during the current week he had lost one day. Six shillings, therefore, subtracted from the fortnight's pay, left an average of only 9*s.* a week, out of which he had to pay the rent of his cottage and maintain his wife and family.

From Stoke-sub-Hamdon it was not a great

distance to Montacute. One is remarkably struck upon coming in sight of the village by the loveliness of the scenery which surrounds it. The fine mansion of the Phelips family, who own, I believe, the whole of Montacute, and also some of the property in the surrounding parishes, is seen just before making a turn in the road which leads up to the village. The mansion of the Phelips family, and the greater part of the houses in Montacute, are built of some excellent stone which is taken from a neighbouring quarry at Ham-hill. Montacute occupies a position to the extreme south of the mid-division of Somersetshire. An extraordinary contrast was presented between the external aspect of the village, the scenery of which is very beautiful, and the wretchedness and squalor which I found within the cottage homes. I made a great number of very careful inquiries, going from house to house, examining their interiors, and asking many questions with regard to the circumstances of the labourers. But the news of the Agricultural Labourers' Movement had travelled to this district before me, and the farmers had, with a kind of instinct, raised the wages of their men all round 1*s.* a week. The

average wages, which had been 9*s.* a week, were therefore 10*s.* at the time of my visit. Perhaps if an exact average had been struck, the weekly wages of the Montacute labourers would scarcely have amounted to 10*s.* a week. Here, as at Stoke-sub-Hamdon, and several other of the neighbouring villages, the wives and daughters of the labourers eked out the wretched wages of "the head of the family" by means of glove-making. Some of the work performed by these female glove-makers was excellent, and it was distressing to think that so miserable a pittance as 2*s.* or 3*s.* was all that could be earned for a whole week's labour, often performed by mothers at the cost of the almost total neglect of their young families. I will describe the circumstances of some of those whom I visited.

I went into one cottage consisting of three rooms, which had to house a family of ten persons—a man, his wife, and eight children. The eldest of those at home was sixteen years of age, the others ranging downwards from that age. The father was a labourer seventy years of age, and he worked by the day; when he was able to do a full day's work, and when he could get one to do,

earning 1*s.* 6*d.* a day. The rent of the three-roomed cottage was 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. It is obvious that half of this family could not have held to the barest existence had it been dependent on the uncertain earnings of the father. Some of the elder children were able to add something—very little it was at the best of times—to the father's earnings. The mother and one daughter, when I called, were busily engaged in glove work, straining their eyes in the poor light which came through the small casement, so that no false stitch should be made or bad work be put into the gloves. There are all sorts of risks in this humble trade; the workers being held responsible for spoilt material and bad or imperfect work, and being hedged round by fines and penalties.

I visited another cottage and learnt a most painful story. The husband, an able-bodied farm labourer, had, a short time before my visit, been receiving 9*s.* a week, but his master had raised his wages to 10*s.* From this sum he had to pay a weekly cottage rent of 1*s.* 3*d.* for a hovel with two rooms and no garden attached to it. The lower room, with a stone floor, was raised about two feet above the level of the street, and over

this was the solitary bedroom which had to accommodate the eight members of this family. Living at home there were six children besides the father and mother. The eldest was a boy of fourteen ; the next, a girl, one year younger. The boy had been earning 3*s.* a week, but had had his wages raised to 4*s.* Besides these children, there were at home four younger children, including twins, about five years old. The father, in addition to his weekly 10*s.*, had a daily allowance of two pints of cider. The mother of this family assured me that they had had no butcher's meat for a whole year. In fact, the total earnings of the family would not suffice for a proper quantity of bread. The price of bread in the village was, I learnt, 7½*d.* the quartern loaf. A little fellow, shoeless, and in rags—one of the twins, of five—was standing by his mother, who told me that the day before my visit, she had not been able to give him a morsel of bread until eight o'clock at night.

The one bedroom over the stone floor apartment was a kind of attic, almost entirely denuded of furniture. There was a window on each side. But several panes of the glass had been broken, and the holes stuffed with rags. In

this one small wretched apartment, in some parts of which I could not have stood upright, the eight persons composing this family had to sleep—father, mother, and six children. The mother told me that at one time the family living at home consisted of no less than thirteen persons, who had all to sleep in the one small bedroom of the cottage.

Another family which I visited consisted of ten persons, the father, the mother, a young man of twenty-one, who was engaged in farm work and lodged at home; a girl of seventeen, who earned 2*s.* a week at glove-making; another girl of fifteen who earned 2*s.* 6*d.* a week at gloving, but did not live at home; a boy of fourteen, another boy of eleven; twin-boys, seven years of age, and a little boy of four. The boy of fourteen earned 3*s.* a week at a farm, and the one eleven years old earned 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. Animal food was very rarely partaken of by any one in this family circle. The father rented the eighth of an acre of allotment ground, which cost him 7*s.* a year. The potatoes derived from this plot would last the family sometimes three months, but seldom longer.

The next cottage I visited was occupied by a carter, in receipt of 9*s.* 6*d.* per week. He had a wife and six children. I also visited an old man of sixty-nine years of age in a miserable hovel. The poor old creature was quite crippled up with rheumatism. He had no wife or family living. He had been employed his whole life as a farm labourer, and in his palmy days had received 9*s.* a week, and three pints of cider per day. But when I saw him he had been obliged to discontinue regular work. He obtained 1*s.* 6*d.* a week from the parish, and a loaf of bread a week in addition. Beyond this regular sum of 1*s.* 6*d.* a week his means of livelihood were very precarious. He was glad to do odd jobs occasionally, as his strength and infirmities would permit, and on such occasions he was paid by the job. His two-roomed cottage cost him 1*s.* a week. The squalor of this place was indescribable. The tiny downstair room—if by any stretch of the imagination it could have been called a room—had not even the ordinary stone flooring. The ground floor was literally the earth. Not a vestige of fire was on the hearth when I saw it. I did not venture to penetrate to the "bedroom," but from the size of the entire hut I could judge of its tiny

dimensions. The down-stair apartment was much more like a hole than a room. Such an ending as that of this old man to half a century of hard toil in the fields was painful to think of.

I visited a number of other cottages, but it was one unvarying story of misery and want. It was really a pitiable sight to see the bedrooms of several of the Montacute cottages which I visited. An old table, and perhaps a broken chair in addition, would constitute in most cases the only articles of what could scarcely be called furniture. Seldom a vestige of carpet on the floors. A few bedclothes, perhaps, huddled down in one corner. At night these had to be distributed amongst the several members of the family, who, lying about on different parts of the floor, could not possibly in cold weather get a reasonable amount of warmth.

In all the homes of the peasantry in Montacute there was, in fact, at the time of my visit a chilling air of misery and wretchedness. And yet this village was renowned for the prosperity of its farmers, the land in the district being some of the richest in the whole of the county. Its productiveness, too, was really extraordinary—exceptionally great in fact. I was told on good authority

that a large farmer might realize a fortune in seven years.

The principal farms in the district contained, respectively, 500, 240, 200, 144, and 134 acres. I was told by a practical man, who was thoroughly acquainted with farming, who had lived in the district a number of years and knew all about the land, the acreage of the farms, &c., that land in Montacute worth 4*l.* an acre, was let to the farmers at 1*l.* 10*s.* an acre, and that some land let for only 2*l.* an acre, was in reality worth 5*l.* The 500 acre farm, for instance, was, he assured me, worth at least 4*l.* an acre, but the tenant obtained it for 1*l.* 10*s.* Only ten labourers were employed on this particular farm of 500 acres. On the 200 acre farm only two men were employed.

Besides the grazing land in the Montacute district, the usual agricultural crops were grown, including wheat, barley, oats, flax, clover, mangel-wurzel, swedes, turnips, &c. To give me an instance of the extraordinary productiveness of some of the land in Montacute, my informant said that one piece of ground, which he pointed out to me, had produced, in eighteen months, crops of the value of 202*l.* This particular piece of land was

eight acres in extent. In eighteen months it had produced three crops—two of clover and one of wheat. The value of each entire crop of clover was 45*l.* The wheat produced was of the value of 14*l.* an acre. The return given above was not stated to me as being unusual by any means. It was a full crop, but not exceptionally good. The rent of this land was 2*l.* 5*s.* an acre, and it must have been worth more than double that sum.

I do not know why the Montacute farmers obtained their farms on such unusually moderate terms. Few landlords, probably, would be so little alive to their own interests as to underlet in a similar way. I can only speak to the facts as I found them at the time of my inquiry. It might have been that the arrangements between the Squire—who, I believe, did not usually reside in the district—and his tenants had been of long standing, and there might, consequently, have been an unwillingness on the part of the former to disturb terms of lease that had been handed down, perhaps, from his predecessors. Perhaps the owner of the Montacute estates was careless about the rents received for his land. But the facts were as I have given them, and I lay particular

stress upon them, because it is often urged that the reason why the farmer underpays his labourers is because he has to pay a full, if not a rack, rent to his landlord, and because also the profits of farming are very small. Such, however, was at least not the case in Montacute, which afforded a strikingly painful contrast between exceptional prosperity on the one side, and the most extreme poverty and destitution on the other side.*

From Montacute I directed my inquiries to the neighbourhood of Bridgewater, where I found the wages of agricultural labourers were, taking a fair average, about 9*s.* or 10*s.* a week, with the addition of from three to four pints of cider daily. I made some very particular inquiries at the village

* In the third chapter of my little work, *The "Romance" of Peasant Life* (Cassell, Petter, and Galpin), will be found a sketch of the singular career of George Mitchell, once a Montacute farm labourer, but now the proprietor of extensive marble works in London. Mr. Mitchell's early life illustrates in a remarkable manner the terrible privations endured by some of the peasantry, and the tyranny to which they were at that time subjected by the farmers; whilst the subsequent career of the now prosperous marble merchant affords one of the very rare examples of a farm labourer rising from his miserable condition of life. It is right that I should add that Mr. Mitchell has spent his time and his money without stint, in the cause of the oppressed class from which he sprang.

of Cannington, of a vigorous, able-bodied labourer whose circumstances may, I think, be fairly instanced as representing the condition of the labourer in that part of Somersetshire. Cottage rent in the district was, on an average, from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* per week, according, in most cases, to the size of the cottage, and depending sometimes upon the size of the garden which was attached to it. The wages of the Cannington labourer whom I questioned were 2*s.* a day for piece-work. But he usually lost his employment in wet weather. So that, making due allowance for his losses in that respect, his wages would only amount, on an average, to from 9*s.* to 9*s.* 6*d.* per week. He had a wife, he informed me, and five children, the eldest twelve years of age, and the youngest a baby of three. These five children were all girls, and, consequently, none of them could earn anything to supplement his wretched wages. He paid for the rent of his cottage 1*s.* 6*d.* a week, besides a few pence, amounting in all to about 6*d.* weekly, for schooling for his children—all of whom he sent to the village school — and for subscriptions to a coal and to a clothing club. Deducting, therefore, 2*s.* per week from an average

of 9*s.* 6*d.* or 10*s.*, it is obvious that it would be an impossibility for this man to feed and clothe his family and himself on the remainder. No doubt the subscriptions paid by agricultural labourers to the benefit clubs which exist in many villages are returned to them with interest. These clubs are partly supported by charitable subscriptions; and the farm labourers are thus encouraged to subscribe their weekly pence. The small sums accumulated in this way during the year are distributed at Christmas, that being, perhaps, the season of greatest need.

The charitable subscriptions to these village benefit clubs for agricultural labourers represent some of the "privileges" which the peasants enjoy. But the advantages gained by these benefit clubs have been greatly exaggerated. Supposing, for instance, that a man could regularly put by 6*d.* a week out of his weekly pay of 9*s.* 6*d.*, the yearly total would be 1*l.* 6*s.* If double the value of that sum were returned to him at Christmas in coal and clothing, and it is very rarely, if ever, that the labourer's deposit is *doubled*, what benefit would such a sum be to each member of a family of seven or eight persons when the amount is

spread over a whole year? Supposing the subscription to the coal club, for instance, produced at Christmas time, at the then price of coal, as much in the case of this Cannington labourer already referred to, as eight hundredweight of coal—that would be, I am sure, the utmost extent of the Christmas benefit—what quantity of coal would that be per week, supposing the best use of it was made that could be made? The fractional dividend would be small indeed, and if, with the sudden accession of an unusual quantity of coal, less than a sufficient amount of care were exercised in its consumption, the result would be almost inappreciable, as it would be also in the matter of clothing, if from the annual 2*l.* 12*s.* the price of eight hundredweight of coal be deducted and the balance divided amongst seven persons, as the only provision for a year's clothing for that number.

It is quite clear, too, that 9*s.* 6*d.* a week could not find a family of seven persons in a sufficient quantity of bread. How, then, is the problem to be solved—namely, the possibility of existence under such circumstances as those of the Cannington labourer? Canon Girdlestone once made the pithy remark, when referring to the state of semi-

starvation in which the agricultural labourers of North Devon lived, that they did not live in the proper sense of the word. They merely "didn't die." It is quite certain that individual benevolence or the rates could alone have kept these poor creatures from absolute starvation.

From Cannington Park, a piece of high ground, a view can be obtained of a very extensive tract of low lying but extremely rich pasture land, stretching away for many miles towards the Bristol Channel. This low lying land is watered by the River Parrett, which rises in Dorsetshire, and, flowing along a course some fifty miles in extent, enters Somersetshire near Crewkerne; and thence flowing by way of the rich marsh land already mentioned, joins the sea at Burnham. Bridgewater, a thriving seaport town, containing a population of 12,101, according to the census of 1871, is in the centre of one of the richest agricultural districts in England. Between Bridgewater and the Bristol Channel there is a portion of the rich and low lying pasture land known as the Pawlett Hams, the fertility of which is so extraordinary, that it has risen in value, within a period that can be remembered by people living in the district, by

not less than 300 per cent.—namely, from 2*l.* to 6*l.* an acre. The profits on grazing, therefore, must be very great. The total area of these fertile plots is some 200 square miles.

Much has been said of the benefits which the agricultural labourer derives from what is called his allotment. It has been alleged that his allotment provides him with a considerable store of vegetables for the consumption of his family, and at the same time it has been generally supposed that every labourer has an allotment of ground on which to grow his small crops of vegetables. No doubt if an agricultural labourer has the opportunity of renting, either of the farmer or of the landowner, a good sized plot of ground, at a very small rent, he does derive an appreciable advantage from its cultivation. It is obvious that his means would not admit of his renting, except under very rare and exceptional circumstances, more than a very small plot of ground. About a quarter of an acre—in some cases, but seldom, however, the quantity may be more—is the usual size of a labourer's plot; and it can easily be understood that under the most careful and remunerative system of cultivation, so small a piece of ground

could not be made to produce a very large quantity of vegetables. Still, when an allotment is granted to the labourer on reasonable terms, it is undoubtedly one important means of supplementing his small wages. In Somersetshire, however, there are few labourers' allotments, the owners of land in that county being generally disinclined to let out their land in that way. The labourers' allotment must not be confounded with the cottage garden, which is generally very small indeed, and used for planting flowers. The allotment is generally, and in fact almost invariably, separated from the cottage. Sometimes a farmer will let out a certain portion of his farm in allotments for his own men. In other cases, the landowner under whom the farmer rents, will let a small portion of his estate to his tenant's labourers. In other cases, again, the Lord of the Manor may appropriate certain portions of land for labourers' allotments, receiving a uniform rent from each.

But when stress has been laid upon the advantages which the labourers derive from the produce of their allotments, it has not been thought necessary to inquire what rent the labourer pays for his small piece of ground.

It would seem natural to expect that a farmer would let his underpaid labourer a small plot of land at a rent equivalent to that which he himself pays his landlord. In numbers of cases, however, on the contrary, the farmer manages to reap a considerable profit out of his small tenant. I heard of numerous cases of this kind in the neighbourhood of Bridgewater. The average rent of land in that district, excepting the Pawlett Hams, is about 3*l.* an acre. When labourers are able to obtain allotments at all, the size of the plot let to each man is usually about one-eighth of an acre, or rather I should say it is called the eighth of an acre, but it is usually less. In fact, there is, as a rule, no exact measurement of these allotments. They are roughly estimated to be the eighth of an acre, but the measurement generally goes against the labourer. The actual rent, however, paid by the men to their employers amounts in many cases to as much as 12*l.* an acre. The poor labourer, with his miserable wages, is therefore charged *four times* as much as the farmer himself pays to his landlord. But unfortunately the iniquity does not end here. Although let at so extortionate a rent, the land is usually taken by

the labourer in a rough and uncultivated state. Sometimes, but not always, the farmer will lend his plough and his horses to his allotment holders, free of expense. But I was told of cases where, after the labourer had dressed and improved his allotment, it was taken away from him, and another plot of uncultivated land given to him instead; the reason given by the farmer for the iniquitous proceeding being merely that he had decided not to let out again in allotments the plots which he had taken away. Of course such cases as these are exceptional, but the charging of rack-rents, and in many cases of extortionate rents, for the land let out in allotments, is a very general custom in the West of England.

The agricultural labourer is, of course, quite in the farmer's power. If he wants the allotment he must pay the farmer's terms for it; and so wretched are the circumstances of the men that they are always, and very naturally, glad to get these plots on almost any terms which will enable them to make the smallest return out of them for their expenditure in rent and labour. Sometimes farmers will let allotments to their men on very reasonable terms, will provide them with seed

potatoes for planting out, and will even allow the men to get manure for their plots from the farmyard. But such instances are exceptional.

From the neighbourhood of Bridgewater I extended my inquiries into the Vale of Taunton Deane, which includes a large extent of unusually rich and productive land. The Vale of Taunton, besides producing an abundance of the usual agricultural crops, is widely known as a great cider country. The valley in fact contains an unusual number of fine orchards which produce very plentiful crops of apples. There is, consequently, a very large quantity of cider manufactured in the district; and hence the universal prevalence of the cider truck system already mentioned, a system which is unfair in its incidence on the peasantry and pernicious in its general moral and physical results.

The wages of agricultural labourers in the districts around Taunton were, on the average, about 9*s.* or 10*s.* a week for adult labourers; there being, in addition, the usual daily allowance of cider. It is generally the case in the West of England that carters and shepherds receive about 1*s.* a week more than ordinary labourers, but for

the extra pay they have in most cases to work much longer than ordinary labourers.

Near Taunton I encountered an unusually fine specimen of an English agricultural labourer. He was a young man twenty-three years of age, tall, and muscular. He was married, he informed me, and had two children. His cottage cost him 1*s.* 9*d.* a week, and his weekly wages were 9*s.*; so that, deducting his rent, he had only 7*s.* 3*d.* a week left with which to purchase everything required for the support of his wife and children.

I paid a visit to that part of Somersetshire which has been for ever rendered famous by the story of King Alfred. The isle of Athelney is situated at the point of junction between the rivers Parrett and Tone. It is no longer covered with wood, as in King Alfred's time, but has been turned into a modern English farm. Passing through the village of Athelney, I entered a labourer's cottage. I was attracted to visit its interior by the sight of a small crowd of little children who blocked up the doorway. I passed across the tiny piece of front garden which served to grow a few potatoes for the family, and stooping under the doorway, entered the "basement." I

was politely invited by the "goodwife" to seat myself in the chair on the stone floor. Thus shut in from the outer world, I felt that it was impossible for even the most imaginative mind to suppose that there was any similarity between the peasant of to-day and the peasant of a thousand years ago. All before me was unromantic; there was nothing present but the reality of modern wretchedness. Edwin H—— was the occupier of the cottage. He was a regular farm labourer, and he received for the support of himself, a wife, and eight children, all of whom I saw, 9*s.* per week from a modern English farmer. The eldest of the children was a girl of twelve, the youngest was a baby of three months; seven were girls, and the infant in arms was the only boy. Five pounds a year was the sum paid to the landlord for rent, and a little more than 7*s.* a week was therefore left to supply the bodily needs of ten persons, with the addition of a few pence earned occasionally by the eldest girl for willow-stripping. Not one of the family had tasted animal food for about six months, except what on very rare occasions had been given by chance benevolence. Bread was the great luxury. Baker's bread, which I learned

was in Athelney 7*d.* the quartern loaf, was, however, an unknown delicacy in this family circle. The goodwife informed me that she could not possibly afford to buy baker's bread, but that she obtained the meal and manufactured at home a coarser article for herself, her husband, and her little ones. The goodwife who scolded King Alfred for allowing her cakes to burn was surely a happier being than this modern mother of eight children. The question naturally arose how could this family of ten exist at all under such privations? Private benevolence was the secret. A private gentleman in the neighbourhood filled the kind and useful office of benefactor, and distributed gifts to the poor.

Leaving Athelney, I soon entered the village of Stoke St. Gregory. On the marshes in the neighbourhood are grown large quantities of willow-trees. The stripping of the bark from the withes, as the twigs of these trees are called, gives employment to a number of women and children in the neighbourhood. The rate of remuneration is 4*d.* a bundle, and, by working for nearly twelve hours a day, it is sometimes possible for a woman to earn 1*s.* a day. In the parishes of Stoke St.

Gregory, North Curry, and Hatch Beauchamp, a great number of the cottages were very bad, some of them being, in fact, mere mud hovels. Along my line of route I noticed the several gradations from the pigstye to the inhabited cottage of the peasant. I saw a number of cottages in a state of transformation. It was curious to note how very easily a mud hovel was turned into a "barn" by taking out what might perhaps be facetiously termed the windows of such a hovel, and substituting boards in their place.

The average wages in the Stoke St. Gregory and North Curry parishes were, I found, 9*s.* a week for ordinary labourers, and 10*s.* in most cases for carters, and modern "cowherds." In some of the districts in the neighbourhood, I was informed that men were actually receiving only 8*s.* a week. This I understood was the case at Hatch Beauchamp, where is situated the seat of the Langton family. A woman living in the parish of North Curry, assured me that her husband, Henry R——, although then in receipt of 9*s.* per week as a regular farm labourer, had only a short time previously been promoted to that magnificent stipend, having not long since been paid 8*s.* a week. His

cottage I found, cost Henry R—— 4*l.* 6*s.* a year. He was, however, privileged to rent of the farmer a quarter of an acre of potato ground, at a rent for that quantity of land of 2*l.* 5*s.* a year. I inquired what price the farmer had to pay, on the average for land in the neighbourhood of North Curry, and I was informed that the value of the land was 2*l.* 10*s.* an acre. So that the farmer in this parish only charged *four times* as much for the labourer's allotment as he paid himself! Henry R——'s family consisted of his wife and six children.

The eastern division of Somersetshire extends from the populous cities of Bath and Bristol on the north to the line of the Mendip-hills, which, stretching across the county from Whatley, near the town of Frome, in the east, to the Bristol Channel at Weston-super-Mare, may, roughly speaking, be considered as the boundary between East and Mid Somerset. I found that in the eastern division of the county higher wages were given to the labourers. Probably the proximity of this district to the cities of Bath and Bristol exercised some influence upon the rates of remuneration of agricultural labourers. Bristol contains 182,524, and Bath contains 53,174 inhabitants. Weston-super-

Mare is also a very rising town. A mere village thirty years ago, its population has rapidly increased, and has actually become doubled between 1851 and 1861. The town has been called Bristol-super-Mare, and it is to Bristol what Brighton is to London. The presence of the large manufacturing population of Bristol and of two such fashionable resorts as Bath and Weston-super-Mare are no doubt, therefore, the cause, in a great measure, of the condition of the labourers in agriculture in the eastern division of this county being not quite so wretched as in the other parts. Taking this division of the county generally, I found that the average wages were not higher than 11*s.* or 12*s.* a week, with the addition of the usual quantity of cider. I consulted a labourer sixty-three years of age as to his experience, extending over a period of fifty years, during which he worked on farms in that part of the county. E—— D——, I was informed by a gentleman who had known him for a great many years, bore an unblemished character. He could read and write very well, and was what is termed a skilled agricultural labourer. He had occasionally, during harvest time, been able to earn as much as 1*l.* a week, but taking one season with another, during

his fifty years' service his average wages, he assured me, were only 12*s.* a week. He ordinarily worked in the summer from 5 A.M. to 6 P.M., and frequently, during harvest, from 4.30 A.M. until 12 at night. I believe farmers in Somersetshire very rarely, if ever, gave any money payment for the extra work at harvest time. For very hard work, often extending over six extra hours per day on those occasions, the labourer would get nothing in most cases but an extra allowance of cider and his supper. E—— D—— told me that on his average wages of 12*s.* a week he had brought up a family of ten children; his excellent wife adding to his income by taking in, from time to time, some needlework. At one time his wife and five of his ten children were prostrated by a fever. On that occasion it was only by the benevolence of the medical man who attended them—and the doctors in the rural districts are generally very good to the poor—that he was able to avoid the burden of overwhelming debt. No such luxuries as sugar or butter ever found their way into his family. Candles also are rarely used by the labourers, who have often during long winter evenings to sit without candlelight, often without fire.

It is difficult to imagine anything more wretched than sitting hungry for hours in the cold and the darkness.

During my inquiries in the West of England, I was frequently told by farmers and others that the agricultural labourers were very dissipated in their habits. There is a kind of mournful irony in talking of the "dissipation" of a man on 9*s.* a week. But I was assured, that to the extent permitted by their wretched wages, the labourers were, in very many cases, drunken and improvident in their habits. As to the general charge of drunkenness, I am bound to say, that during the whole course of my inquiries, both out of doors and in the cottages of the labourers, I never met with an intoxicated farm labourer. I was asked to believe that what caused the extreme destitution of the labourers was not so much their wretched wages as habits of intemperance and improvidence. No doubt there were cases of both drunkenness and improvidence amongst the rural labourers. But I am convinced this did not prevail to a greater extent than it did amongst labourers engaged in other occupations; and yet it is really a matter for surprise that there is not a much greater

degree of intemperance in the cider counties as the result of the pernicious cider system. Almost from their earliest years the labourers, under that system, are trained up in the habit of drinking cider. Thirty years ago the evil results of this early custom of drinking were pointed out by Mr. Alfred Austin, an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner. In his report, presented in 1843, the Commissioner, besides alluding to the practice of giving cider to very young boys, refers to another point, on which I have already touched—namely, the inferior quality of the cider given to the peasants. Mr. Austin said :—" In the cider counties part of the wages of women is paid in cider ; this is also the case with the wages of men, and also of boys from the earliest age at which they begin to work. A man has three or four pints of cider a day, a woman half that quantity. The man's cider is reckoned worth from 1*s.* 3*d.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* a week. The cider which is sold to the labourer by his master, or which is given in lieu of wages, is of an inferior kind, not made for the market but for home consumption." The Commissioner added, " I could not ascertain the real value of this kind of cider in money. I am, however, inclined to

think that the estimated value between master and labourer is too high." Further on in the report the Commissioner says :—"From seven, eight, or nine years old, a child is accustomed to drink two or three pints (a pint or pint and a half) of strong rough cider a day. I have already alluded to the cider truck when speaking of women ; but in the case of boys there is a mischief beyond the ordinary evils of this species of truck. The boy is taught to love drink from his earliest age, and a few years so confirms him in the taste that he rarely, if ever, gets rid of it in after-life."

What the Commissioner stated as his experience of thirty years ago, I can prove to have been the case on the occasion of my visit to the West of England in 1872. The same pernicious system of employing children in farm work at a very early age, and giving them a pint or two of cider daily, was still in operation at the time of my visit. Fortunately the law has already promised to effect some change in this respect ; for the Agricultural Children Act, which is now in operation, precludes the employment of very young children in farm work, and imposes upon them instead a certain amount of attendance at school, so that by

that means one of the chief evils of the cider system will be removed.

Of course it is not a very easy matter to abolish the cider system without the aid of the legislature. Farmers, in fact, as a rule, are not anxious to abolish it, because, as I have shown, under the system, the cider supplied by them to the labourer is estimated at much more than its real value. But in cases where farmers are really anxious to dispense with cider they find sometimes that the men will not meet them, but prefer the system to which they have been used all their lives. I remember having some conversation on this particular point with a farmer whom I met in the western division of Somersetshire—the low wage district. He told me he could not get men to work without the daily allowance of cider, even when the money equivalent was offered in lieu of the drink ; and the same complaint has been frequently made by farmers when, on the occasion of a deficient apple crop, they have preferred paying in money to paying in cider. Still it would be unfair to say that the chief difficulty of abolishing the cider system rests with the labourers. It is mostly to the farmers'

interest to maintain it. It is quite clear, however, that if they made a firm and united stand against it, they could easily get rid of it. It is only long habit which prevents many of the labourers from seeing how much it would be to their interest to have all their wages in money, instead of having a fifth part of those wages paid in the wretched rubbish which goes in Somersetshire by the ironical name of "cider."

Some of my most interesting and valuable facts relating to peasant life in the West of England were collected by me during a visit which I paid to the neighbourhood of Wootton Courtenay, in the extreme north-western part of Somersetshire. I had visited the principal districts of the county, but chiefly those in the neighbourhood of the larger towns. But away in the north-western corner of Somersetshire there lay an important agricultural district which contained a sort of isolated agricultural population, shut in amidst the hills, which gave to that part of Somersetshire all the characteristics of the neighbouring county of Devon. I looked forward with more than usual interest to a visit to this locality, because I believed that from its comparatively isolated situa-

tion it would afford, in all probability, a unique illustration of the operation of the semi-feudal system which had taken so complete a hold of our English agricultural districts before the commencement of the agricultural labourers' movement. The district to which I have alluded boasts of no large towns; and there is, perhaps, no district of England more completely rural in its character.

The land of Wootton Courtenay, and the district around, was chiefly owned by Mr. Dutton, Lord of the Manor of Wootton Courtenay; Squire Luttrel, of Dunster Castle; Sir Thomas Acland, M.P.; and Squire Hole. The very slight rise in wages which had taken place in every other district of Somersetshire which I had visited, had also taken place at Wootton Courtenay about two months before my visit. Before this rise the average wages of agricultural labourers had been no more than 8*s.* a week, with the addition of two pints of cider daily, the value of which, per week, was set down at 1*s.* Supposing the cider to have been worth so much as it was computed to be, the total earnings in money and kind were thus but 9*s.* per week. From this sum there was the cottage

rent to deduct, most of the two-roomed hovels being let at a rent of 1*s.* a week.

One farmer in Wootton Courtenay was paying to his regular labourers, at the time of my visit, no more than 6*s.* per week in money. But in addition to this he gave them each a cottage—a two-roomed hovel—valued at the weekly rental of 1*s.* In fact, therefore, he was paying his men 7*s.* per week, with the usual addition of two daily pints of cider. With one singular exception, which I have already named—the labourer at Banwell, with his 5*s.* a week, and his "privileges" previously enumerated—I should think there would be no agricultural district in England which could produce a parallel case to that of these Wootton Courtenay peasants.

With few exceptions, the hovels of Wootton Courtenay—for I can call them nothing else—contained but two rooms, one over the other, in most cases; the lower room being, of course, the general sitting-room for the family, the other room above the sitting-room serving for the one sleeping apartment. Some of these two-roomed hovels had no gardens. The wretched state of discomfort of a family of four, five, six, seven, or eight per-

sons—often more—compelled to perform every domestic office in two rooms, can perhaps be imagined better than it can be described.

The tiny bedrooms of each of the two-roomed hovels had to accommodate all the members of the family: father, mother, grown-up children, and sometimes lodgers, all sleeping in one room. Such a state of things is positively shocking, and produces worse results even than the direst poverty. What can the poor creatures do? They must have shelter, and they are forced into this indecent overcrowding by the lamentable deficiency of cottage accommodation.

A great deal has been said concerning the privileges of the agricultural labourer. The facts which I elicited on this point at Wootton Courtenay are very interesting and important.

In most cases the farmers of the district allowed their labourers portions of potato ground, the allowance being on an average one-eighth of an acre. The yield of potatoes from this ground, whatever it might be, good bad or indifferent, according to the prevalence or to the absence of the potato disease, would no doubt be, for some part of the year, a great help to the labourer, and would

provide about the only change in the prevalence of a uniform bread diet. In fact, it is really difficult to know how the poor creatures in the absence of the benefit derivable from the cultivation of a few potatoes, could possibly find a sufficient quantity of food to keep themselves and their families from absolute starvation.

Some of the allotments held by the labourers of Wootton Courtenay had, however, to be rented from the Lord of the Manor, Mr. Dutton. I understood that these allotments let out by the Lord of the Manor were nearly all of them about the same size—namely, thirty-five "yards," or nearly a quarter of an acre. The rent annually paid for these small plots of ground was, in each case, 11*s.* 8*d.*

For fuel the labourers generally cut turf from the moors. In several parts of Somersetshire the moors afford large quantities of this turf, or peat, which is regularly cut, dried, and sold to the people in the towns and villages throughout the county; thus constituting a rather active branch of industry, giving a subsistence to many hundreds of the peasants, who in such cases, however, are not engaged at all in farm work, but live by selling "turf." The "turf," as it is called in that part of

the country, makes excellent fuel. It is principally used in the towns for lighting fires, but the peasants often use nothing else. On the moors, where it abounds, the "top crust" is first taken off, and then underneath there is found a very thick bed of "turf," which extends for a considerable number of feet into the earth. This is dug out, cut into small squares and then carted into the towns and sold at the doors.

In the neighbourhood of Wootton Courtenay the peasants are able to provide a considerable portion of their fuel from the "turf." There is also a tacit understanding between the farmers and their labourers that when the latter have dug and cut their "turf," the farmers will give them the use of their horses and carts to haul it to their homes. The promise to do this though, is on the condition that the horses and carts shall be lent only when they can be spared. The result consequently is, that very often the poor labouring man after piling upon the moors a quantity of turf, finds it spoilt by rain, when the farmer finds it "inconvenient" to lend the horse and cart. These contingencies, consequently, necessitate that the peasant should purchase coal from time

to time. So that the "turf" privilege is not so great as it might appear. It appears when the "turf" has been burnt, the ashes constitute an excellent manure, and sometimes the farmers buy them of the men to use for their land.

In this particular district, as in some other parts of the county, but chiefly in Devonshire, there existed, I found, a "privilege" which has been made a good deal of by farmers and landowners, but the value of which, notwithstanding the estimation of its supposed advantages is, I think, very questionable. I refer to the system of giving "grist corn." The "privilege" amounts to this: The peasant is allowed to have at all times corn at 6*s.* per bushel, whether the market price is above or below that price. It must not be supposed, however, that the tiller of the soil gets the best corn. Far from it. No doubt a good and generous master will see that his labourer gets corn of at least a fair quality; but generally the "grist corn" is the "rakings" from the field, after the bulk of the crops has been taken way. These "rakings" often lie, I was told, for some time in the field, and in wet weather—which in our changeable climate, as is well known, constantly

occurs during harvest—the "rakings" get soaked and begin to grow out. The consequence, therefore, is that when the poor peasant gets his "grist corn," it is frequently useless; and from what I could learn, therefore, it is the farmer and not the labourer who benefits from the "grist corn" system, which is supposed to confer so great a privilege upon the latter. Now and then the farmer may allow the peasant as much as a bushel of "grist corn" once a fortnight at the regulation price, but the average quantity allowed is much less. In the neighbourhood of Dunster and Wootton Courtenay, the average allowance is between two and three pecks once in the fortnight. The quantity, however, depends upon the individual generosity of the farmer, and also upon his sense of honour and fair dealing. During the harvest month the men can earn something extra by working overtime. Some farmers during that season give their men the ordinary wages, and their meals in addition; others pay them—the best and strongest of the men—2*s.* 6*d.* and 3*s.* a day without any meals. It must be remembered, however, that the men for this extra pay often have to work from four in the morning until

ten at night; sometimes on moonlit nights until as late as twelve. But for this annual assistance the agricultural labourer—who usually has to pay the small sum thus gained to the village shopkeeper to settle old "scores"—would get ruinously into debt.

At Wootton Courtenay and in the neighbourhood I found that the children of the peasants could earn something by picking on the hills the whortleberries during the season—July and August—when these berries are ripe and plentiful. This wild fruit is used a great deal for pies and puddings by the poorer classes of people in Somersetshire; in fact, I believe, it is the only fruit that the peasants are able to afford. The berries also are sold in great quantities in the towns, being hawked about by itinerant vendors. These whortleberry dealers go out to the hills in the moor countries, and establish a kind of market overt, to which the pickers bring their fruit. Children sometimes during the whortleberry season are able to earn 8*d.* and 1*s.* a day; but this is very precarious, and the quantity picked and the sums gained depend upon many circumstances.

One naturally must entertain a profound respect

for the clergyman who has the grand good sense to know that merely spiritual instruction is of little avail in a district where the poor are lacking the most common of material necessaries. It is a noble union of ministerial functions to combine temporal gifts with spiritual admonitions. But it is one of the most mischievous results of the semi-feudal system which has too long prevailed in our agricultural districts, that the field-labourer should be dependent, to so great an extent, upon private benevolence. It is most unfair too that the burden of supplementing the wretched wages of the peasantry should be borne by any but those who benefit from their labour.

This system of benevolence, good in itself, is mischievous in its results when its exercise is required not only for relief in times of exceptional sickness and misfortune, but at all times. The labourer, in fact, under this system, is paid partly for his labour by the gifts of the benevolent, instead of deriving his whole support, as he should be able to do, from his employer.

At the time of my visit to the district, the construction of a new railway, from Watchet to Minehead, had necessitated the felling of a quantity of

wood in the neighbourhood, and this new occupation opened up in this agricultural district had had its effect, I was told, in the increase of the average wages of the peasants from 8*s.* to 9*s.* per week. Some mining operations in the district had also contributed to the same end. The men engaged in the wood felling and in the mining operations were able to get 2*s.* 6*d.* a day.

The following extract from a letter which I received from Canon Girdlestone will exhibit the condition of the North Devon peasants at the time of my first visit to the West of England, in May, 1872. In a subsequent part of this book will be found my account of the work of Canon Girdlestone; the facts having been courteously communicated to me during a visit which I paid to the Canon at the Halberton Rectory. The following is the extract:—

"In North Devon as a rule, with, of course, certain exceptions on the estates of philanthropic owners, wages are for labourers 8*s.* or 9*s.* a week, with two or one and a half quarts of cider daily, valued at 2*s.* per week, but much over valued. Carters and shepherds get 1*s.* a week more, or else a cottage rent free. The labourer has no privileges

whatever. He rents his potato ground at a high rate. Though fuel is *said* to be given to him, he *really* pays its full value by grubbing up for it old hedges in after-hours. In wet weather or in sickness his wages entirely cease, so that he seldom makes a full week. The cottages, as a rule, are not fit to house pigs in. The labourer breakfasts on tea-kettle broth, hot water poured on bread and flavoured with onions; dines on bread and hard cheese, at 2*d.* a pound, with cider very washy and sour, and sups on potatoes or cabbage greased with a tiny bit of fat bacon. He seldom more than sees or smells butcher's meat. He is long lived, but in the prime of life "crippled up," *i.e.*, disabled by rheumatism, the result of wet clothes, with no fire to dry them by for use next morning, poor living, and sour cider. Then he has to work for 4*s.* or 5*s.* per week, supplemented scantily from the rates, and, at last, to come for the rest of his life on the rates altogether. Such is, I will not call it the life, but the existence or vegetation of the Devon peasant. He hardly can keep body and soul together." Towards the end of this letter Canon Girdlestone added: "Wages during the last few weeks have risen on many farms 1*s.* per week."

CHAPTER III.

AMONG THE PEASANTRY IN 1873.

DURING the past summer I paid a second visit to the agricultural districts of the West of England with the object of noting the changes which had taken place since my previous tour of inquiry had been undertaken. I adopted the plan of walking from village to village by easy stages, entering the cottages of the peasants, and making inquiries concerning their condition. I felt that facts gathered in this way by actual observation and investigation would be very valuable. I commenced my inquiries at the north-western end of Somersetshire; proceeded for some distance through the villages along the coast of the Bristol Channel, and then crossed Exmoor into Devonshire, in which county I brought my tour amongst the peasantry to a close.

A railway was being made along the coast from Watchet to Minehead, and the railway men were

paid 3*s.* 3*d.* per day, or at the rate of about 1*l.* a week. Close to Minehead some chemical works had been established, and these gave employment to a number of the labourers in the district. The combined influence of the railway and of the chemical works had raised the wages of farm labourers from their previous dead level. Still in some cases into which I inquired, I found men with families actually receiving no more than 9*s.* per week, with the usual allowance of cider; but having out of that miserable sum to pay cottage rent, which would reduce the wages to 7*s.* and 7*s.* 6*d.* a week. Some farmers were giving 11*s.* and 12*s.* a week, with cider in addition. In some very few cases I believe more was given; but the average wages did not exceed 11*s.*, even in the immediate neighbourhood of Minehead; whilst in the districts around, the wages were less.

I found that in this neighbourhood was perpetrated in many cases the monstrous iniquity of charging the peasant four times as much for the tiny bit of allotment ground which he rented as the actual rent paid by the farmer to the landlord. I have already alluded to this practice in Somersetshire. Land let at the rate of 2*l.* an acre

could oftentimes be only obtained by the labourer on his paying for his little strip of thirty yards 1*l.* 10*s.*, or for a quarter of an acre 2*l.* In some cases, where the land was let direct from the squire, it could be obtained at a lower rate; and in these cases probably there was not much profit made out of the peasant, although there is no doubt that a rack rent was demanded. Landlords do not like to encourage the letting of allotments, because it militates against the system of large holdings. I was told of a case at Dunster in which a number of small holders of allotments, after expending their time and trouble in bringing them into good condition, were turned out of them and given the alternative of a piece of uncultivated land, or—nothing. In the best interests of the farmers, and even of the landlords, every inducement should be given to the labourers to rent allotments; and they should be allowed to have these pieces of land rather at a less than a greater rent than that paid by the farmers, because nothing, I am convinced, conduces more to produce happiness and contentment than a good allotment system; and a contented, well-fed peasantry are a great acquisition to any estate.

In one way it was pleasant to see the good which was produced by the establishment, as at Minehead, of constructing and manufacturing works, which by creating a demand for more labourers, raised the value and increased the wages of those employed upon the land. But I noticed there, as elsewhere, that it was always the best—the strongest and the most intelligent men—who were drafted away from the farms. It is in the same way the very cream of the peasantry who emigrate, and who migrate to the more prosperous districts of the North of England.

Nestling down at the feet of two hills, which rise up grandly yet with graceful symmetry from the sea level, lies the sweetly-secluded little town of Porlock. I walked from Minehead to Porlock, a distance of six miles through the finest scenery in all Somersetshire : the finest because it is purely Devonian in character, and the county of Devon is second to none for romantic loveliness. My path wound away from the town ; it gracefully bent to right and to left through an amphitheatre of beautiful hills ; now sinking between high hedges surpassingly rich in their verdant

clothing, which in the fulness of its early summer glory blotted out all but the blue sky overhead; and now passing into soft gloom as it found its way under a natural archway of trees. I had proceeded some little distance in my ramble from Minehead, when at a turn in the road I came upon a little scene, the like of which is rarely to be met with. Away from the main road a lane led up to the right, and a peep over the high hedge revealed just a glimpse of the whitewashed wall and low thatched roof of a cottage. It was impossible to resist the temptation to turn in the direction of this cottage. Down one side of the lane gurgled a limpid stream of water; and from the hedge-bank hung in all their gentle majesty of form the graceful intermingled fronds of the lady fern, the hartstongue, and the *polystichum* lapping the surface of the brook. In front a hill rose proudly up over this charming "bit." Another turning, this time round to the left, after a few steps up the lane, and a most charming sight met my view. Straight in front a narrow path led up under a kind of vista. On the right of this path there was a line of creeper-bound cottages, eighteen in all, as I afterwards ascertained. Facing

the cottages was a row of little gardens, overshadowed by fruit trees. Here and there rustic beehives were scattered over these gardens, which contained flowers and shrubs in addition to their little crops of vegetables. The walls of some of the cottages were almost hidden by the plants and shrubs which trailed upon them. This little "nook" was shut in on almost every side by orchards. Surely Mrs. Hemans must have visited this very spot when she wrote the beautiful lines:—

> "The cottage homes of England,
> By thousands on her plains,
> They are smiling o'er the silvery brook,
> And round the hamlet fanes."

There in very truth were the "cottage homes," situated in one of the most charming spots in the charming West of England; and hard by bubbled the fern-lapped "silvery brook;" and the "gurgle" of the pure water as it tumbled over the stones, mingling with the hum of the bees and the voices of the birds singing in the adjoining orchards, made a chorus of soft sounds which were a fit accompaniment to the whole scene.

"From glowing orchards forth they peep
Each from its nook of leaves,
And fearless there the lowly sleep
As the birds beneath the eaves."

"The lowly sleep." The "lowly" human element was not wanting. I caught sight of a child without shoes sitting on a doorstep. It was that of No. 1 in the row. I went up the steps, knocked at the door, and was asked, "Would I please to walk in?" by a woman who, with a baby in her arms, stood up on the stone floor as I entered, and curtseyed after the custom of the country on catching sight of me. I sat on a chair where I was politely invited to seat myself. What a change from the outside! A piteous tale was unfolded in response to my numerous inquiries. The husband was a carter, and as the wages in this district had been "risen" during the last few months, he was then in receipt of an income of 10*s.* a week, in addition to which he had three pints of cider daily when driving the horses for ordinary work, and an extra pint daily when ploughing. No cottage-rent given, no "privileges." The cottage had a tiny bit of garden-ground—fifteen yards—in front, and there

was the "privilege" of paying 7*s.* 9*d.* a year for a few yards of potato ground. The cottage-rent, under the old squire had been 2*l.* 2*s.*, but the new squire had raised it to 3*l.* 5*s.* In addition to this, out of his miserable wages this poor creature had to pay 10*s.* a year for rates—namely, poor-rates, "school-rate," and gas-rate, for the parish of Minehead. The poor folks wondered, naturally enough, why they had to pay a gas-rate when there was no gas within more than a mile of them. Deducting these items of expenditure from the grand total of 10*s.*, there was left the sum of 8*s.* 7*d.* on which to subsist each week. In this family there were the husband, his wife, and five children, besides the husband's mother, a poor old bedridden woman ninety-three years of age. The eldest of the children was a boy of nine and a half years of age. This little fellow had commenced his career as a farm labourer at the age of eight. His wages were then 4*d.* a day and a pint of cider. The previous Lady-day, however, his master had raised our little hero's wages to 5*d.* a day. The remaining children of the family were a girl of eight, a boy of seven, my little shoeless friend of five, and a baby boy not quite

two years of age. All except the husband and the poor old "granny" stood before me—these poor people are too humble to sit in presence of a stranger in respectable attire. In the one wretched downstair room were grouped these ragged little creatures, looking wonderingly at me. On the table stood a brown pan, filled with butcher's offal. This had been that day purchased at Minehead, and would, when cooked, constitute the rare "delicacy" of this family of eight. I inquired concerning the poor old grandmother, and learned that she had been bedridden for many long years. "Would you please to walk upstairs and see her, sir?" said the mother. I replied that I should like to see her, and I was accordingly shown up the narrow staircase. Winding round to the right, I was not long in reaching "the first floor." Exactly facing the stair-head was one room, and immediately to my right was another. Preceding me, my conductress led the way into the first-mentioned room.

Never have I witnessed so sad a sight as I saw in that miserable garret of a miserable hut. There was one bedstead, besides two other—I

cannot say articles of furniture—things purporting to represent a table and a chair, on the bare floor. On the wretched bedstead, in the darkest corner of the room, which might have been some twelve or thirteen feet long, by some eight or nine feet wide, and perhaps seven feet high, lay the poor old bedridden grandmother, her poor wrinkled face looking the picture of patient and uncomplaining misery. Nothing on the floor besides the wretched bedstead and the table and chair; no pictures, even of the rudest kind, on the walls. One tiny window, cut through the thick wall of the cottage, admitted a little light into this miserable chamber, and there with her head in the darkest corner, had lain for years this poor old creature, the helpless mother of an English agricultural labourer.

It is terrible to witness want and misery in the foul slums of a great city; but it is assuredly much more terrible to find it in rose-bound cottages—embosomed in the most charming of country nooks, where the very richness of nature seems to rebuke the meanness of man. The poor old bedridden woman had received from the parish a weekly allowance of two shillings and a

loaf of bread. But it would seem that even the parochial eyes had moistened at sight of her helpless misery, and the parochial pocket had furnished forth one extra shilling a week in lieu of the hebdomadal loaf of bread. I tendered a trifle in money to the poor old grandmother, whose wrinkled face shone for a moment with a pleased expression, whilst she fairly overwhelmed me with thanks which were altogether disproportioned to the smallness of the gift. Turning away, I went, before descending the stairs, into the other of the two bedrooms. Words can hardly convey with sufficient effect an impression of the abject poverty which silently but eloquently told its piteous tale in that small room. A wretched, ragged-looking bed was before me. It filled up the greater part of the room. An old, brown, worn, patched tester stretched over this bed, in which the father, mother, and the two youngest children slept. Looking at the ceiling over this tester I noticed dark stains in the plaster, and I said, "Does the rain come in there?" The rain had come in upon their bed, I was told, often and often in wet weather, but now the roof was repaired, although many vain requests had been

preferred before this work was done. On the floor at the foot of the bedstead there was a non-descript heap of rags, amongst which the three elder children slept. Seven human beings in this tiny, ill-lighted room! As in the case of the adjoining chamber, there was only one small window. Several of the panes were out, and I expressed my surprise that the landlord had not ordered new ones to be put in. But the landlord never mended windows; that was the tenant's duty; and this was one of the "duties" which the poor tenant of this "Rose Cottage" had neglected. These poor creatures may be pardoned if they cannot understand the proper and legal relationships which exist between landlord and tenant.

The row of embowered creeper-entwined cottages which contained the wretched hovel I have described, was a hamlet in itself. It was, in fact, a place I had been looking for, although it was quite by accident that I had lighted upon it; and it was not until afterwards that I learnt the name by which it was called. The occupier of No. 1 in the row, whose circumstances I have attempted to describe, was, the poor wife informed me, often ill

and unable to work, so that his weekly wages did not, even on the average, reach the miserable sum which has been named. The family kept a pig; but it was then a very young one which they had, and it would not be fit to kill for some time. They had paid 26*s.* for it. The last pig had been a dead loss, for it got the "measles," and when killed was unfit to eat. A good deal has been made by farmers and others of the "labourer's pig" question, and a great deal of misapprehension with reference to the advantage of a pig to the agricultural labourer prevails amongst those who do not understand the matter. The fact is that the pig is to the farm labourer a kind of savings bank, in which he puts the few scraps he can save out of his scanty fare, and these scraps are augmented by weekly purchases of barley meal. A half-bushel of barley meal will cost half-a-crown, and will not be any too much for a "growing" pig. In very many cases, I should certainly think in the great majority of cases, the meal and anything else which may be bought for the pig cannot be paid for at the time, as will easily be believed, out of the wages of the peasant. So during the time of fattening, the

score for the weekly supplies of meal accumulates; and when the pig is killed, a goodly portion of the carcass has to be given—this is often the particular plan adopted—to the tradesman in lieu of a money payment for the pig's "feed." Another portion of the animal is sold in order to pay the cottage rent, and very frequently nothing, or next to nothing, comes to the labourer for all his anxious care and trouble. When, as in the case just related, the pig gets the "measles" or dies, it is like the breaking of a penny bank, and all the hardly-earned savings are lost beyond recall. Putting things at their best it is a happy thing for the labourer when, besides satisfying the tradesman, paying his rent, and saving a little piece of bacon for his own use, he can get money enough from the sale of his pig to enable him to purchase another "suckling"—or rather one just passed that interesting stage of pig existence—to start another "live" savings bank. I will suppose that when ready to kill, the average weight of a pig, fattened by an agricultural labourer, is, say, eight "score." That, reckoned at 15*s.* the score, would realize 6*l.* Deduct from that the 26*s.* paid for the pigling—and it would be a very small one that

could be got for that price—and the balance is 4*l.* 14*s.* Deduct from that the "cost of maintenance," and the "back rent," and then let us judge whether pigland, the rustic Arcadia of the poets, is so enviable a place as it is represented to be. The labourer's pig is, in fact, a kind of surety with the petty village tradesman. Poor Hodge would get no "credit" if he had not some such security as a pig affords. It is a fleshy bond, due execution of which is too often exacted to the disadvantage of the labourer. There is this advantage about the pig system: it is the one ambition of the peasant to keep a pig; it is something for him to look upon with pride; it acts as an inducement for him to save. He delights in his pig; he regards him or her, as the case may be, with emotional feelings which only an agricultural labourer can understand. But it must be remembered that it is not every poor labourer—very far from it—who possesses a pig, and those who do, as I think I have shown, are not the lucky beings that they are represented to be.

It is marvellous how much light may be thrown upon the agricultural labour question as the result of patient and persevering investigation conducted

by a personal visit to the agricultural districts. A few actual facts gleaned in this way are worth more than volumes of mere theory.

In order to make my investigations as close and complete as possible, I adopted, as I have said, the plan of walking from village to village and interrogating in every possible way all whom I met. Those whom I questioned had, of course, no reason for telling me anything but the truth, but I was always careful to ask different people the same questions, and thus, by sifting and comparing the evidence I obtained, I was sure of getting at nothing but facts. I could judge myself of the richness or barrenness of the land, and of the good or bad state of its cultivation, and I could therefore make my own deductions from all that I heard. Farm labourers, although ignorant enough concerning everything outside their own particular sphere, have oftentimes valuable though rude ideas of the agricultural system adopted in the districts in which they live. I rarely failed to question any labouring man or woman whom I might chance to meet on my road. Between Minehead and Porlock I met a poor old woman with a bronzed and weather-beaten face toiling

along under a load of long poles, which she had evidently cut and trimmed herself. It was then between eight and nine o'clock, and she was just returning from her hard toil.

"What wages may you get now ?" I asked.

"Aightpence (eightpence) a day, sir," she answered.

She was, she further informed me, seventy years of age, and, poor old soul, probably on account of her feebleness, she had to work from six o'clock in the morning until eight and nine o'clock at night for her daily eightpence, with the usual allowance of some cider. She could not, of course, she told me, work every day—probably not more than four out of the six days—so that her weekly labour would produce the sum of 2*s.* 8*d.* with which to keep body and soul together. A number of women are employed in the neighbourhood of Porlock, where twelve months before my visit the state of the agricultural population was most wretched; but the discovery of some oyster beds at Porlock Weir had, by creating a demand for labour, raised the rate of wages, which in some cases were, I found, 9*s.*, in others 10*s.*, 11*s.*, and 12*s.* a week. The principal land-

owner in the district is Captain Blathwayt, but Sir Thomas Acland, M.P., and Lord Lovelace, also own property there. Sir Thomas Acland has the reputation of being a liberal landlord, and his relative, the Rector of Porlock (Mr. Hook), had introduced some reforms in the district since his arrival. Many of the cottages in Porlock were wretched hovels, some of them having only two rooms; and in that district not a very long time before my visit, wages of farm labourers were actually as low as 7*s.* or 8*s.* a week. One considerable farmer employed, to as great an extent as possible superannuated labourers, women, and children, in order to get the work done at a cheap rate, and he gave to a number of these wages no higher than 8*s.* 6*d.* a week, with the addition of cider. Out of this sum these people had to pay cottage rent. The ordinary pay of women labourers employed by farmers around Porlock was 8*d.* a day with cider, or 9*d.*, and, in some few cases, 10*d.* a day without any allowance of cider.

From Porlock I determined to cross the wild expanse of Exmoor into Devonshire. Exmoor Forest, as it is called—although it is no longer a forest—occupies something like an area of fourteen

square miles, the greater part of which is uncultivated, although some portions have been reclaimed by the proprietor, Mr. Knight. A great number of sheep are grazed upon the moorland, and there is no doubt that much of the land which is now absolutely waste might be brought into cultivation if a little more enterprise were imported into agricultural pursuits in the West of England. No doubt there are difficulties in the way, and it would be somewhat costly to bring the requisite quantity of manure across the moor. But I was assured that the operation would pay. What is required, however, is that there should be greater security for capital invested in the soil.

I spent some time in making inquiries at the little village of Exford, which lies close on the borders of Exmoor, but is not actually comprised within the moor boundary. It is distant seven miles from Porlock. Exford contains a somewhat isolated agricultural community. There is actually no cider system at Exford. In fact, there was very little cider in the place at the time of my visit, the scarcity of apples during the past two seasons being partly the reason for this; and cider was not sufficiently valued to induce its importa-

tion into the village. The Exford peasant therefore falls back upon beer. In the neighbourhood of Exford the land is owned by several small proprietors. I was told by the intelligent landlord of the "White Horse" that some of the farmers in the district had never seen a railway or a train. One family farmed between them their own estate, consisting of about 1700 acres. No member of this family had ever married. There were three brothers and three sisters, varying in age from fifty-eight to eighty. Even the farm servants in this particular farm had all remained single, although they had respectively reached forty, fifty, and even sixty years of age. There seemed, in fact, in this district a peculiar disinclination on the part of the inhabitants to marriage. The result was a serious diminution in the number of the people. The amalgamation of small farms has also aided in the work of depopulation, and the combined effect of celibacy and of the amalgamation of the farms was exhibited by the last census, according to which in this very small parish alone the numbers had fallen a hundred.

I was assured, on excellent authority, that throughout the district there prevailed a great

amount of apathy in regard to the cultivation of the land. If a farm was big enough to secure, under a system of lax cultivation, an income of from 100*l.* to 200*l.* a year, that was quite sufficient for the ambition of the moor farmer, who would make no effort to increase the productiveness of his land. The increased demand for labour, and the consequent rise in wages, were I was assured, enough in themselves to deter the farmers from making any exertion. With the characteristic obstinacy of their class, they would determine not to employ more men than could be had for the same money as they had previously paid for labour. If it were only of the Exford district that this could be said the evil would not be one of very great magnitude; but the farmer class are subject, I fear, in a very great degree to this species of inertia, and the result is a most serious one for the country. Those who have commiserated the lot of the farm labourer have generally thought of him as the recipient of 9*s.* a week, with a wife and about as many children as his weekly number of shillings. It is somewhat hard to get the public belief below 9*s.* a week. It is, in fact, difficult to conceive that any em-

ployer in England could possibly be mean enough to offer a labourer a less sum than 9*s.* for a week's hard toil. I myself, however, remember quite well the case of a Somersetshire farm labourer who, many years since, received only 7*s.* a week from a prosperous landowner and farmer, and this poor fellow had to maintain a wife and several children; and about the same time as this case came under my notice, a labourer assured me that he was one of sixteen children, and that his father had only 8*s.* a week. But times have altered since then, and the 7*s.* and 8*s.* men have been promoted to 8*s.* and 9*s.* respectively. I believed, in fact, that 7*s.* a week had been quite out of fashion for a good many years. What was my astonishment, therefore, to be informed, whilst at Exford, that not long before my visit in the district of Timberscombe, a village a few miles distant, farmers were actually giving their men only 7*s.* a week, which sum had only very recently been raised to 8*s.* a week, the rate prevailing at the time of my inquiry.

Following my road across Exmoor I came upon the village of Withypoole, situated in a cultivated hollow, about two and a half miles from Exford. In this village the poor labourers and their families

were in sad plight, for there were no gentlemen living in the valley, and even the clergyman did not live within three miles of the village. The poor in the agricultural districts depend to so great an extent upon private benevolence, instead of relying as they should be able to do upon fair wages paid all in coin of the realm, that it is not difficult to understand the hardships of the poor families of Withypoole. Wages were—all summed up—2*s.* a day; in some cases only 10*s.* a week. As at Exford, there was no allowance of cider. Women, working for 8*d.* a day, were employed from 7 A.M. to 7 and 8 P.M. There was actually no school of any kind in the place. There had been a private school for the children of the labourers, but the schoolmistress had been taken ill, and education at Withypoole was therefore at a stand-still. The cottages, I ascertained, were many of them very bad, containing only, in some cases, one general room and one bedroom for families of seven, eight, and nine persons. One poor woman into whose cottage I went told me a said tale of hardships and privations. Scarcely any milk could be obtained by the poor families, as the farmers kept nearly all that was produced from the cows

for the rearing of calves. The high price of meat no doubt very naturally induced farmers to breed stock to a greater extent than usual, and as a consequence more milk was required for the calves. In every way, however, the poor labourers' families were the sufferers, because whilst they were deprived of milk, the dearness of meat—11*d.* and 1*s.* a pound at Withypoole—put that article quite out of their reach.

Pursuing the road from Withypoole across the barren moor for a few miles, I at length passed through the gate which divides at that point on the road to North Molton the counties of Devon and Somerset. The country between the boundary line of the counties and North Molton is very uninteresting, but the characteristic loveliness of the Devonshire scenery is observable after passing through North Molton. Both at North and South Molton and the districts lying around them, agricultural labourers' wages had recently risen under the operation of causes which never fail to produce a beneficial effect in the rural districts. The new Devon and Somerset line from Taunton to Barnstaple, then in process of completion, passed across the north of Devon, and

necessarily created a demand for the best and strongest of the agricultural labourers. In the neighbourhood of North Molton, too, iron and copper mines had been opened; so farmers in these districts were compelled to give their men 12*s.* and 13*s.* a week. As far as I could learn—and I made many and diligent inquiries concerning the wages of the peasants in the North Devon districts—a change for the better had commenced in those districts. This, it must be remembered, was the field in which for so many years Canon Girdlestone laboured, and there can be no doubt that the excellent Canon made his mark upon North Devon. In general a much more liberal spirit prevails amongst the agriculturists in South Devon than amongst those in the northern part of the county. But it is quite time that a more liberal spirit should prevail amongst agriculturists in every district in the West of England. When it is considered that in Devonshire, out of an area of 2585 square miles, or 1,654,400 acres, no less than 1,200,000 acres are under cultivation, the importance to the nation at large of so great a tract of cultivable land being made properly productive must be manifest. Although some improvements

in the wages of the peasantry had been made, much remained to be done. In every district through which I pursued my investigations, the labourers, whilst admitting that during the previous twelve months wages had been raised, referred to the great increase in the cost of living which during the same period had taken place, a result which went very far to neutralize the advantages which they had derived from the concessions that had been made.

I venture to think that few people who have seen what I have seen of the labouring rural population in the West of England could fail to sympathize most deeply with that truly-unfortunate class of people. In Somersetshire and Devonshire, and more especially in the last-named county, the manners of the people are strikingly simple and artless. Rarely in passing through a country road does a stranger fail to be greeted with a respectful salutation from the poor country folks, and the simple and earnest kindness which one meets on every hand is often quite touching. There never seems to be the most remote idea of taking advantage of a stranger; and services never appear to be rendered with any ulterior

motives of gain. But it was sad to see people whose natural dispositions were so excellent sunk so very low in the social scale, so wretchedly housed, so miserably underpaid, and so ungenerously treated; and it cannot be other than the sincerest wish of every man who really loves his country, to see the West of England peasant raised to a position of comfort and happiness—socially, mentally, and physically; a position to which his excellent heart, his loyal, faithful, and uncomplaining disposition, and his life of hard and unceasing toil fairly entitle him.

CHAPTER IV.

EDUCATION.

EDUCATION promises to be one of the most powerful means of improving the position of the rural labourer. A better educated, and therefore a more intelligent peasantry, will not only prove better workmen, but they will better understand their own value, and will know consequently how to accommodate themselves to the demands of the labour market. At the present time the deplorable ignorance of the peasantry in the West of England constitutes the greatest obstacle to the improvement of their condition of life. Without some such agency or organization as that supplied by Canon Girdlestone during his residence at Halberton, it has been found, with few exceptions, that the labourers have been really unable to move into the more prosperous manufacturing districts of the North of England. I have explained the reason of this—in the chapter

on the work done by Canon Girdlestone—to arise from the ignorance of farm labourers as to the places where better-paid employment was to be obtained, and as to the means of transferring themselves to such places. A better acquaintance with the geography and with the resources of their own country for instance, combined with a greater degree of intelligence, would engender more self-reliance and greatly tend to remove the helplessness which is the chief weakness of the agricultural labourer.

But besides producing a better and more intelligent class of agricultural labourers, education will produce another result. It will, by preventing the peasant's children from being brought up in ignorance, fit them for other pursuits than those followed by their parents, and thus prevent in the future that accumulation of surplus agricultural labour which has been one of the chief causes of low wages. The Education and the Agricultural Children Acts will do much to insure at least a certain amount of education among the children of farm labourers. But, independently of Acts of Parliament, much may be done by earnest voluntary efforts made by

those entrusted with the work of education in the rural districts. There is an abundance of this work for the educational teachers of all denominations. In many country parishes, however, the Church School offers the only educational machinery at present in existence. I am inclined to give great praise to the general body of the ministers of the Established Church for their earnest labours in the cause of education. Still, I have met with instances in which the clergy are too indifferent to the educational requirements of their districts. A great deal depends upon the individual energy and earnestness of the minister in a country parish, and where these qualities are displayed in the cause of education they soon make their mark upon a district. It is a great thing, too, when ministers take an active and practical interest in the temporal affairs of those entrusted to their care. I could give from my own experience in the West of England more than one instance of the great good effected through the earnest and indefatigable labours of the clergy in the agricultural districts. Here is one amongst several others.

Bordering on the line of the Mendip hills in the Vale of Wrington, is the pretty village of Burring-

ton, situated in the midst of a district celebrated especially for its rich dairy produce and for the manufacture of the far-famed Cheddar cheese. The Rev. William Bishop de Moleyns is the Vicar of Burrington. He has held the living, which is in the gift of the parishioners, for about two years. Previous to his appointment to it he was, for some twenty years, the curate of the adjoining parish of Wrington, and during the whole of his residence in the district he has distinguished himself by his constant attention to the wants and necessities of the labouring poor.

I accepted a kind invitation to spend a day with Mr. de Moleyns at the Burrington Vicarage, and I took the opportunity during my visit of becoming acquainted with the school work performed in the parish, under the immediate superintendence of the Vicar. I was remarkably struck by the facts which I learnt, and as they are unusually instructive and interesting, some account of the admirable system inaugurated and maintained by Mr. de Moleyns will find a suitable place in these pages.

The population of Burrington consisted of 467

persons according to the Census of 1871. On the books of the parish school there are 109 children, and occasionally as many as 100 of these are in actual attendance, even in the winter quarter, forty-one of whom come from adjoining parishes; the remainder—one-eighth of the total population—attending from Burrington itself. Twenty-five of the total number attending are the children of well-to-do farmers and tradesmen, who are induced to send their children to the school on account of the exceptionally good education which is given there. No school board is required in the district, a voluntary rate of 3*d.* in the pound being cheerfully contributed annually by the ratepayers, in addition to the subscriptions provided by the gentry in the district. The funds, too, for the original school building and for a recent enlargement, were contributed in the same voluntary manner and without any assistance either from the Privy Council, from the Diocesan Fund, or, in fact, from any society. The education given in the school includes reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, English history, drawing, and mapping; and in these branches of knowledge the children have proved remarkably efficient, thanks to the unwearying

efforts of the excellent master and mistress. The last report of the Government Inspector was to the effect that the school had passed "a good examination in every branch and standard." The Diocesan Inspector, too, has reported concerning the admirable tone and discipline which have been maintained in it. The religious, no less than the secular instruction, is excellent, the school having been declared the most proficient for religious knowledge in the Archdeaconry of Bath. Especial attention is paid to the teaching of needlework, in which the girls have proved apt learners, as shown by the fact that they have carried off the largest number of prizes awarded for good needlework by the Deanery Association. A knowledge of needlework is, of course, a most useful and necessary acquisition for the children of the poor.

The contributions from the children towards the school amounted, during one year, to 40*l.* It is not necessary to canvass for the attendance of pupils, as it is found that the farmers and labourers are so anxious that their children should attend that they are glad to let them walk in some cases, as much as two or three miles from adjoining villages.

The general question of the education of the labourer's childen in the rural districts is so important, that I am glad to give prominence in this place to one or two important features of the Burrington School. I cannot do better than quote a statement on this point sent to me by the excellent schoolmaster at Burrington. "One thing," he remarks, "which has increased the usefulness of the school is its *social mixed character*. The farmer's child is taught with the labourer's, to the mutual benefit of both. This is a matter which is worthy of consideration, and, knowing the advantages of the system, I regret that it is not more general in our national schools. I account for this, however, by the prejudice entertained by parents. The mixed character of the school, however, effects good, because it produces kindly social feelings, and helps to break down the barrier between the two classes. The labourers take a pride in sending their children to school in company with their master's children, and I am certain that this is the secret of the clean and tidy appearance for which the pupils in this school are especially distinguished. An important object is promoted, too, by our 'Bank' or Clothing Club,

which is a great boon to those whose weekly incomes are so limited. If the pence deposited are not sent when due on the Monday morning, they are called for before Saturday night comes round. The money distributed this year amounted to upwards of 33*l.*, which was spent chiefly in shoes, &c.; and as the fund is distributed at the beginning of winter, the money comes in at a useful period of the year." The farmers and some of the tradespeople pay 4*d.* and 6*d.* per week for each child, according to circumstances. The payment for the children of the labourers is 2*d.* for each child per week, or where there are three children, 5*d.* for the three.

What serves, however, as a very powerful inducement for the labourers to send their children to the Burrington School is the prospect of their being able to obtain, through the influence of the Rector, good situations for the most promising of their boys and girls on their leaving the school. Mr. de Moleyns has always obtained situations for those in his school whom he has considered deserving. Sometimes these situations have been as gentlemen's servants; in others as pupil teachers. For many of the boys he has obtained situations as

clerks in merchants' offices, at good wages. Others have become railway porters. Many of the girls have gone into domestic service. Some of the lads from the school have gone back to the farm work, and of course, in such cases, with the education which they have obtained, they have made better workmen, and have been able to get higher wages and to claim more considerate treatment than they could have secured without the advantages of education. The most excellent feature in these arrangements is, that Mr. de Moleyns has made quite a system of his good work. When a boy or a girl, the son or the daughter of an agricultural labourer, is about to leave school, the parents, quite as a matter of course, go to the Vicar to get the expected situation; and the help thus sought is never refused. The excellence of such a system as that adopted by Mr. de Moleyns is obvious.

In a recent letter which I received from the excellent Vicar of Burrington, he informed me that for a long time previously not a single inhabitant of his parish had been an inmate of the district workhouse.

There is at Burrington an admirable system of allotments. About thirty years ago some of the

cottagers were permitted to enclose pieces of common land on the top of some of the Mendip hills. These enlosures have since been used as "garden grounds." Each garden plot averages a quarter of an acre in extent, for which a merely nominal rent of 1*s.* 6*d.* per annum is all that is required by the Lord of the Manor. These "garden grounds," as they are called, are much prized by the labourers, who grow in them their little crops of fruit and vegetables.

A system almost identical with that pursued at Burrington was adopted by Canon Girdlestone during his residence at Halberton; for, notwithstanding the great demand made upon his time by his work of peasant migration—which will be found noticed at length in the succeeding chapter—the Canon did not allow the cause of Education in his parish to suffer. As at Burrington so at Halberton, the Vicar adopted the admirable plan of obtaining situations for the most deserving of the pupils in his schools; thus offering a powerful incentive to diligence and good behaviour, and giving the most practical encouragement to education.

CHAPTER V.

THE WORK OF CANON GIRDLESTONE.

CANON GIRDLESTONE may fairly be considered as the pioneer of the agricultural labourers' movement. He, in fact, commenced, in the north of Devon, as early as the year 1866, the system of peasant migration with which his name has been associated. It is probable that had it not been for the work which he performed with such vigour and determination, the present movement of farm labourers would have been delayed a long time. For six years—namely, from 1866 to 1872, during his residence at Halberton, he carried on the excellent system which he had established. It was he, too, who first directed public attention to the miserable condition of the peasants in North Devon. The circumstances which induced him to undertake his philanthropic work of peasant migration are very interesting.

Canon Girdlestone had lived in Lancashire, and in that county had been accustomed to see the farm labourers well paid, well housed, and in every respect well cared for. The condition of the Devonshire peasants, when compared with that of the peasantry of Lancashire, presented a painful contrast. The first fact which the Canon ascertained on taking up his residence at the Halberton Vicarage was that the wages of the labourers amongst whom he had come to live —able-bodied, well-conducted men—were sometimes only 7*s.* a week and seldom more than 8*s.* a week. He at once naturally asked himself, "How is it possible, on such wretched wages, for a man to house, to feed, and to clothe, not only himself, but his wife and children, and to pay, in addition, the doctor and the midwife, when their services are required; to provide shoes, fuel, light, such incidental expenses as school-fees, and, in fact, many other items which cannot be enumerated, but which enter nevertheless into the cost of living?" It was evidently impossible to answer such a question. But Canon Girdlestone set himself closely to investigate the condition of the North Devon peasant, in order completely to

satisfy himself as to the actual circumstances of his case. He thus learnt the following facts :—

The system of agricultural labour prevailing at Halberton was representative of the whole of North Devon with very few exceptions. In addition to the average wages of able-bodied labourers, already stated to be between 7*s.* and 8*s.* per week paid in money, there was a daily allowance of, in some cases three pints, in other cases two quarts of cider, the quality of which ordinarily rendered it unsaleable. Carters and shepherds being employed on different work, necessitating much longer hours of attendance, were usually paid either 1*s.* a week more than ordinary labourers; or, in lieu of extra wages, they had their cottages and gardens rent free.

The North Devon labourer had, Canon Girdlestone affirms, absolutely no privileges in addition to his money wages. There was the nominal privilege of what is called "grist" corn, already referred to, the labourer all the year round being allowed to have wheat from the farmer, his employer, at one fixed price, whatever the state of the wheat market might be. In dear seasons this was an advantage, but when

wheat was cheap the labourer still paid the same price, which in such a case was frequently higher than the market price. But the advantage gained during seasons of scarcity was counterbalanced by the fact that the "grist" corn was always of inferior quality, consisting as it did of the tailings, or the wheat which was too small in grain for the market. From his acquaintance with the "grist" corn custom, Canon Girdlestone came to the conclusion that it conferred no privilege whatever upon the labourer.

As to work, the labourer was obliged to commence at seven o'clock in the morning, and he was supposed to leave off about half-past five in the evening, being allowed during the day half an hour for 'forenoons'—luncheon—and an hour for dinner. At this rate the nominal day would last for ten hours and a half. Really, however, the regular labourer was often kept many hours later, on overtime, but without any extra pay whatever, and sometimes from six in the morning until eight and nine o'clock at night. Piece-work in North Devon at the time referred to, was not very general, the majority of the labourers being employed on the regular weekly wages already named. In harvest

time—both in hay and corn harvest—the men were usually employed much beyond the regular hours, frequently until nine and ten o'clock at night. For this extra work each day, they usually got their supper, but seldom any additional wages, except in cases where the harvesting was done by piece-work. But it has been seen that piece-work was not the general practice.

Women were employed to a great extent, and they earned *7d.* or *8d.* a day. But deducting the wear and tear of clothes—which was considerable in the case of women—the advantage was so small as to be scarcely appreciable. On this ground, many women would have refused to work at all, but for the fact that they were very often compelled to do so by the agreement made between their husbands and the farmers; the latter making the employment of the wife a condition of the employment of the husband.

Fuel was only given to the labourer in payment for the work of "grubbing up" the foundations of a hedge, or cutting a hedge down, such work being always performed during overtime, the fuel obtained being what was "grubbed up." In very many cases the peasant of North Devon

was forbidden by the farmer to keep a pig, or even poultry, for fear he might steal the food which he required for fattening them. Potato ground could only be rented by the labourer from the farmer at a rack-rent—very frequently at four and five times the rent paid by the farmer to his landlord.

The food of the North Devon agricultural labourer was stated by Canon Girdlestone to consist of, for breakfast, what was called "tea-kettle broth," which was made by putting into a basin several slices of dry bread, which was then soaked by having hot water poured upon it, after which the sop was seasoned with a sprinkling of salt, and now and then an onion in addition; sometimes, however, with half a teaspoonful of milk. But milk could only be obtained on rare occasions, as the surplus milk was almost invariably given by the farmers to their pigs. The peasant's "forenoons," or luncheon, usually consisted of bread and hard dry pieces of skim milk cheese. The same fare constituted his dinner. The "forenoons" and the dinner, being taken during the intervals of work, were not enjoyed with so much zest as was the labourer's supper, which was the last, as well as the best meal of the day, and was

always taken at the conclusion of the day's work. The supper was, as a rule, composed of potatoes and cabbage, flavoured and made rich when the labourer was allowed to keep a pig, by a tiny piece of bacon. Butcher's meat found its way sometimes on Sundays—but only on very rare occasions—to the peasant's table. When by any chance it could be obtained, it was always in very small quantities.

At the age of about forty-five or fifty, the peasant was usually found to be "crippled up" by rheumatism, occasioned by exposure to cold, and by being frequently obliged to remain in wet clothes, either when there was no change to be had, or when there was no fire by which the clothes could be dried. At all times feeble from lack of a proper amount of food, the North Devonshire agricultural labourer, necessarily unable out of his miserable wages to make any provision either for times of sickness or for old age, had, during illness, and also finally, when totally incapacitated for work, to come upon the rates.

Such as I have described was, with few exceptions, the treatment experienced by the peasantry of North Devon when Canon Girdlestone first came amongst them. Cottages not fit, many of

them, to house cattle in—wretched hovels with two rooms and consequently no provision for the decent accommodation of families; wages not sufficient to keep body and soul together; a rich and important agricultural district, in short, populated by a peasantry enfeebled in body and depressed by their deplorable circumstances.

The question at once arose in Canon Girdlestone's mind, what was to be done? He could not permit the state of things which he found existing to go on without making some effort to put a stop to it. He did nothing hastily. He had, over and over again, visited the homes of the labourers; had made minute and searching inquiries into all their circumstances and surroundings. He could find nothing to palliate the grievous wrong which was inflicted upon them by the system under which they worked; and as a Christian minister he could not remain unmoved at what he saw and heard.

He first tried the effect of private remonstrance, but that was in vain. Then he at length determined on a bolder course. When in the month of March, 1866, the cattle plague was at its height, Canon Girdlestone delivered a sermon in Halber-

ton Church from the text: "Behold the hand of the Lord is upon thy cattle." During this sermon he plainly asked those who were assembled in the church whether they did not think that God had sent the plague as a judgment upon farmers for the manner in which they treated their human labourers, to whom they had been accustomed to give less consideration than to their cattle. This sermon raised a terrible storm in the parish. The farmers were highly indignant at the conduct of the Vicar, who had dared to make so bold a home-thrust. From that moment almost every kind of abuse was heaped upon him. A number of scurrilous and anonymous letters in reference to what Canon Girdlestone had done were published in a local newspaper. About that time the annual tithe dinner took place, and it was pre-arranged that when the time came for proposing the Vicar's health, the glasses instead of being filled should be reversed empty. The Canon, however, having learnt their intentions in time, left the room where the dinner was being held, before the time arrived for proposing his health.

As it became necessary to accept the state of things which had been produced by his manly and

vigorous protest in the pulpit, Canon Girdlestone determined to put into execution a plan which he had formed. He accordingly wrote a letter to *The Times*, giving a clear and plain statement of the wages and of the condition of the agricultural labourers in the north of Devon. The effect produced by this letter was remarkable. The Canon was literally overwhelmed with letters from all parts of England and Ireland, and with newspapers also from different parts of the country, containing letters and comments on the subject of the condition of the Devonshire peasantry. The letters contained numerous offers from farmers and others residing in England and Ireland, of good wages, with the certainty of comfortable homes for such of the men in Canon Girdlestone's district as would accept them. Some of these correspondents remitted money to pay the whole expense connected with the proposed removal of the men whom they wanted. Others remitted money with the stipulation that a part of it should be returned out of the wages of the labourers, in such a manner as they could afford to repay it. Then there were sums of money received by the Canon from philanthropic persons, who placed the money entirely at

his disposal. This money was laid out in partly paying the expenses of removing labourers when it happened that places were offered without any remittances being sent to pay the cost of travelling, and other items.

Having obtained the means of securing his object of removing the wretchedly-paid peasants of Devonshire to places where they would be better remunerated, better housed, and better treated in every way, Canon Girdlestone set himself manfully to work to organize a regular system of migration. He had the men, he knew where to send them, and he had the money furnished to defray the cost of sending them. Only one difficulty now presented itself. How was he to set the stream in motion? The answer appears simple, but practically the difficulty was not so easy of solution. The peasantry of Halberton and North Devon had been so long accustomed to their miserable circumstances that they dreaded—with the want of energy and enterprise which their depressing condition of life had engendered—making any change. A kind of "home sickness" appeared to affect them. They dreaded the journey in the first place; they dreaded the change

of habits. They feared there might perhaps be some uncertainty as to their new homes being suited to them. Hence many of them clung to the wretched state of things to which they had become used : to their hovels and to their state of semi-starvation. In some instances they were so strongly affected with this dread of change, that when every arrangement had been completed and they were just on the point of starting for their new homes, they begged to be allowed to remain, giving back the money they had received towards defraying their expenses.

It can easily be understood that it needed no little courage and no small amount of energy and determination to overcome the difficulties which Canon Girdlestone found were thus thrown in his path. But the disinclination of the peasants to move was not the greatest part of the difficulty. There was an immense amount of opposition on the part of the farmers and the landowners in the district. Canon Girdlestone was, in fact, engaged for years, during which his work was carried on in single-handed conflict with nearly the whole district of squires and farmers. Even the clergy declared themselves against him. He was, in fact, com-

pletely ostracised and tabooed by local "society."

But the enmity of the better classes in the district soon took practical shape. The Vestry of Halberton, composed almost entirely of the farmers in the neighbourhood, began their opposition by refusing to vote a church rate that was needed. At the various vestry meetings they would not hear the Vicar speak. No labourer dared to show his face at these meetings; hence the farmers had it all their own way. With singular courage and determination, the Vicar insisted, not only upon being present at the vestry meetings, but upon taking the chair, as he was entitled to do. But the farmers would not let him speak, and drowned his voice when he attempted to do so. With great patience, and with a bold face, however, the courageous minister would wait until there was momentary quiet, and then would say, "Now, gentlemen, when you have done abusing me, we will proceed to business."

One farmer, bolder than the rest, at a vestry meeting held on Easter Monday, in 1867, went up to the Canon, who was presiding, and told him, in a manner that cannot be repeated, that he

was not fit to carry offal to a bear. Two or three days afterwards this extraordinary scene formed the subject of a cartoon in *Punch*. Following up this system of persecution, and as a means of depriving the Vicar of his voice in the affairs of the parish, the farmer-vestry claimed the right to appoint both of the Churchwardens. The question, for the annoyance of Canon Girdlestone, was even carried to the Court of Queen's Bench. But judgment was given against the vestry, and the heavy costs which were incurred having to be paid out of individual pockets, appears to have taught the farmers a salutary lesson. Then, once on the occasion of the distribution of the charity bread, the farmers attempted to create a disturbance in the church. The police had to be called in, and this circumstance was made a cause of complaint against the Vicar. The complaint was carried to the Quarter Sessions at Exeter, but was dismissed.

Still the war of opposition was vigorously carried on by the local farmers, who threatened to desert the church, stop the playing of the organ, the ringing of the bells, and the singing of the choir; and to empty the church

schools. A number of the farmers left the Church and repaired to the Wesleyan Chapel in the village. But the minister of the chapel, a plain-spoken divine, told them they had better go back to their own church. This, however, they would not do, so they remained at home on Sundays. The enmity of the irate agriculturists was extended even to the ladies of Canon Girdlestone's family, who were slighted in every way, and even passed by in the road unnoticed by the local magnates.

The preceding facts are curious and instructive. It is almost incredible that so much violent and bitter opposition should have been aroused, simply because a brave and conscientious clergyman was earnestly striving to benefit the wretchedly paid half-starved labourers by whom he was surrounded. But the pockets of the North Devon agriculturists had been touched, and their most selfish instincts aroused. Few attempts at reform, however, have ever met with more unwearying and unscrupulous opposition than that which Canon Girdlestone experienced. But he anticipated resistance, and he was accordingly prepared for it. He carried out his plans in the face of every obstacle, boldly and perseveringly

and with an exhibition of singular energy and admirable method.

The system of migration commenced in October, 1866. From that date until the month of June, 1872, the admirable work was continued, and in that period between 400 and 500 men, many of them with families, were sent away by the direct instrumentality of Canon Girdlestone, to Lancashire, Yorkshire, Durham, Kent, Sussex, and other counties.

He sent a number of men to the Manchester and to the West Riding police forces. From their miserable cottages in Devonshire these peasants went to really comfortable homes in the places already named. They left wages of 8*s.* a week, and they secured in their new employment wages which were never less in any case than 13*s.* a week, and they ranged from that sum to as much as 22*s.* per week, in addition to which they had good cottages and gardens rent free.

From first to last this work of Canon Girdlestone was eminently successful. But the success which attended his efforts was largely due to the vast amount of personal labour which was bestowed upon it. It can easily be understood,

for instance, that the negotiations connected with the removal of a single labourer entailed a good deal of work; and the work was of course multiplied when a family—two-thirds of the total number removed from 1866 to 1872 were married and had families—was removed. First, the situation had to be obtained, the wages and conditions of the new employment settled, and the travelling expenses forwarded. In each case this also necessarily entailed some correspondence. A good deal of trouble too was caused by the necessary inquiry into character, especially because in many cases the farmers would not give the men any character at all on account of their leaving their employ. Canon Girdlestone, however, was naturally scrupulously particular to ascertain the character of the men he sent away, as he would of course be held responsible for any failing in this respect. When, however, the character was found to be satisfactory, the situation obtained and the wages fixed, there was a considerable amount of labour entailed in superintending in each case all the arrangements preliminary to the start. The packing up and the preparations for the journey had to be seen to. The majority of the peasants were

perfectly helpless in this respect. Almost everything had to be done for them, their luggage addressed, their railway tickets taken, and full and plain directions given to the simple travellers. The plan adopted when the labourers were leaving for their new homes, was to give them, as Canon Girdlestone did, plain directions written on a piece of paper in a large and legible hand. These were shown to the officials on the several lines of railway, who soon getting to hear of Canon Girdlestone's system of migration, rendered him all the assistance in their power by readily helping the labourers out of their travelling difficulties, and seeing them safely booked for their destinations. Many of the peasants of North Devon were so ignorant of the whereabouts of the places to which they were about to be sent, that they often asked whether they were going "over the water."

It is really difficult to estimate the immense amount of labour which during his six years of philanthropic work was thrown upon the hands of Canon Girdlestone. The only assistance which he obtained was from the members of his own family, who aided him in his unceasing labours.

But his work of migration, large in itself, became the centre of a great system. The men who went away, with very few exceptions, prospered; and they in their turn procured situations for their relations and friends in Devonshire; and undertook the work of getting them removed without any intervention on the part of Canon Girdlestone. The total number of peasants therefore removed from Devonshire to the North of England was very considerable. But the stream which began to flow from Devonshire to the more prosperous, agricultural, mining, and manufacturing districts of England, soon had the effect of stirring the stagnation which had before existed in neighbouring counties. Migrations to the North set in from Dorsetshire, Wiltshire, and Somersetshire, until at length the stream had acquired a considerable volume.

In June, 1872, after a residence of nine years and a half in North Devon, and after nearly six years of hard and untiring labour on behalf of the peasantry of the West of England, Canon Girdlestone left Halberton Vicarage, and went to reside in his present home at Olveston in Gloucestershire. The commencement of the move-

ment inaugurated by the agricultural labourers themselves, and the consequent formation of a National Union, had rendered unnecessary the work of the excellent Canon. But in his new home in Gloucestershire he frequently receives applications for labourers, from Scotland, from the North of England, from the United States, and from the Colonies. All such applications he now forwards in due course to the Secretary of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union to be dealt with by the Union authorities. But although his active personal labours in the cause of the peasantry have practically ceased, the motive power which he created amongst the down-trodden, half-starved tillers of the ground in the South and West of England has become developed to a marvellous extent. To migration has succeeded emigration; and the exodus of labourers from the western and southern counties has, at length, through the blind indifference of agriculturists to their own interests, become a very serious matter.

Canon Girdlestone, however, did what was right. His system was beneficial. He merely aimed at removing the surplus labour which was one cause of the miserable rate of wages which he found

to exist on his arrival in Devonshire. The surplus labour, however, has long since gone from the West of England. If the farmers persist—by making hard terms with their men—in driving away the labour which is necessary to them, the fault is theirs, not that of Canon Girdlestone, who inaugurated an admirable system of migration, and admirably carried it out.

The farmers of Olveston, where Canon Girdlestone now resides, have the good sense to pay and treat their labourers well; and whilst thus themselves setting an example which agriculturists in other districts would do well to follow, they maintain the most cordial and friendly relations with their new Vicar, whom they heartily respect for the manliness and courage which he so signally displayed during the prosecution of his philanthropic work of peasant migration.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NECESSITY FOR UNION.

THE facts which have been disclosed in the preceding chapters of this work in reference to the condition of the English peasantry, show conclusively the necessity which existed for creating some power which might grapple effectually with the evils connected with the employment of agricultural labour. The prevalence of commercial ideas in England was made by the First Napoleon the excuse for calling us "a nation of shopkeepers;" and the term, if not pleasing to our national dignity, was fairly expressive of our national propensities. It was the development of the arts and manufactures coincident with the growth of commerce which led to the introduction amongst us of commercial ideas, and caused the gradual extinction of feudalism.

But it was in the cities and towns that the spirit of commerce had extinguished the spirit of feudalism. In our villages and hamlets there still lingered much of that feeling of dependence on the part of the labourer which characterized the old feudal relationship; and which in feudal times was rewarded by protection and generosity. Under the feudal system, in fact those who held and those who tilled the land were bound together by mutual ties; and although the hind was the slave of his master and bound to render him absolute obedience, he at least secured a sufficiency of food, clothes, and shelter.

In the picture of English rural life which Sir Walter Scott has given us in his "Ivanhoe," we find Gurth the swineherd, and his fellow servants, sitting at the same board as their master, Cedric the Saxon; and although the difference of rank was strictly maintained between superiors and dependents, the latter shared with the former the substantial hospitality of the mansion. In English rural life in our own day it has been said, that the modernization of the feudal system has led to the establishment of paternal relationships, which

have been productive of mutual confidence and generosity between the holders and tillers of the soil. The movement of the peasantry which commenced two years ago would, it was said, destroy those feelings of confidence and generosity, by causing the labourer to sever the friendly tie which bound him to his employer, to the mutual advantage of both. But did those mutual feelings generally exist? It is certain that they did not. There was in most cases the confidence, and frequently the cringing dependence, of the labourer without the generosity of the employer. But the modern relationships between employers and employed in the rural districts have not merely been characterized by an absence of generosity, but by an absence of justice and fair dealing.

I have already described the wages and the mode of life of the Halberton peasant during the period between 1863, when Canon Girdlestone first took up his residence there, and 1866, when he began his system of migration. The interval between 1863 and 1866 was spent by the new Vicar in ascertaining the real condition of the labourers, and in trying, but vainly, to persuade

the gentry and the farmers to effect an improvement. I have before me some notes with which Canon Girdlestone has furnished me, in addition to the facts which he related to me during my visit to him at Halberton Vicarage in the spring of 1872. The state of Halberton, the "sweet Auburn" of North Devon, between 1863 and 1866, was as follows:—General sanitary condition *very bad.* Numbers of the labourers' cottages unfit for the housing of pigs. Pools of stagnant water standing in different parts of the parish varied occasionally by stinking ditches. Heaps of manure thrown up under the windows of many of the dwelling houses. The whole village badly drained; open sewers running through the place, frequently trickling down from the cottages into the brook, from which the villagers and the children often drank, and the cattle too. Result—disease and death. The sanitary government was in the hands of the Board of Guardians, who were all farmers. These hated to incur any expense in such matters as drainage, especially when the expense fell upon themselves. Hence a perpetuation of the frightful abominations which have been described.

Every labourer in Halberton who was a householder was entitled to vote for the election of guardians, waywardens, overseers, and vestrymen. Canon Girdlestone, however, never saw a labourer at a vestry or other meeting. A labourer in fact dared not go.

The Board of Guardians of the district were, as before stated, farmers, with the exception of the ex-officio guardians, who seldom attended. The farmer guardians supplemented insufficient wages out of the general rates, and by that means kept the wages low, much to their own advantage, and greatly to the disadvantage, as must be obvious, of those payers of rates who were not farmers. Canon Girdlestone and other competent authorities are of opinion that farmers, from habit and association, make the very worst of Poor-law guardians. Such, indeed, was the case at Halberton.

Canon Girdlestone states that his attention was called to the agricultural labourers in Devonshire, not merely on account of the low wages which were given to them, but on account also of the brutal manner in which they were treated by the farmers. Some excuse might perhaps be

found for the system of low wages, in the fact that there were too many labourers in the district, and the over-abundant supply reducing the demand, caused a reduction in the market price of labour. This state of things could be, and was at least partially, remedied by migration and emigration. Nothing, however, could excuse or defend the brutal treatment which was experienced by the labourers at the hands of the farmers. It was the state of abject dependence in which the labourer was placed which encouraged the farmers to behave as they did, and the cowed abject state of dependence in which the peasant existed led him to submit to the ill treatment which he experienced.

The following facts will bear out what has been said :—

Fact No. 1.—A carter saved a valuable team for his master, a farmer, by rushing at the horses' heads when the animals had one day taken fright at something and were running away. The man fell, in doing so, under one of the wheels of the wagon. His ribs were broken, but his bravery saved the wagon and team. For two months he was confined to his bed, during the whole of

which time the farmer, his master, refused to give him one sixpence in wages, and the man had nothing but what he got from the rates. Canon Girdlestone, one day during this labourer's illness, met the master, and asked him to give the poor fellow a quart of milk occasionally for his children, whilst he remained unable to work for them. The Canon reminded the farmer that the labourer had been maimed in his (the farmer's) service, and that he had saved him a valuable team of horses. The Canon added that the milk was a trifle, which would not be missed. Will it be credited ? This farmer, who was a substantial yeoman, refused to give his poor injured servant either the milk which he was asked to give or anything else, and he never even went to see him.

Fact No. 2.—Another carter in the employ of a Halberton farmer was crushed by a restive horse in his master's stable through no fault of the man. The carter was laid up. His wages were immediately stopped by his master, who refused to give him any sort of assistance. This was not all. The man occupied a cottage belonging to his master, and being a carter he held this cottage, rent-

free, as a part of his wages. During the whole of the time that he was disabled, he was not merely refused a single penny of wages, but the rent of his cottage was charged to him, and the amount was deducted each week from the wages of his son who worked for the same farmer.

Fact No. 3.—A carter in the employ of a Halberton farmer, was sent by his master on a long journey to a distant place. The journey took him twenty hours. The master, a man of substance, refused to give him anything for his additional work beyond a bit of bread and beef and 4*d.*

As I have stated, I have all these facts on the undoubted authority of Canon Girdlestone. It is not to be supposed that every farmer is guilty of such atrocious conduct. There are generous exceptions. But I am sorry to say from my own experience, and from what I have learnt not only on the authority of Canon Girdlestone, but on the authority of other persons of equally undoubted veracity, that such instances as have been given, indicate only too faithfully the state of the relations between farmers and labourers in many a country village.

The system of administering justice in the

rural districts has often formed the subject of much discussion; and on many an occasion "the great unpaid"—as the unpaid magistracy are styled—have come in for a considerable share of public condemnation. I know that there are a great number of worthy and excellent county magistrates who earnestly strive rightly to fulfil their judicial functions. But on the other hand, there is the reverse of the picture, and there is no doubt whatever, that in too many instances the agricultural labourer gets scant justice, or no justice at all. Here is a case in point; and it will afford a curious instance of "justices' justice."

On the occasion of my visit to Halberton, in June, 1872, Canon Girdlestone was particularly anxious that I should be present at a trial which was to take place before the bench of magistrates at Collumpton. The trial arose out of an incident connected with the Canon's work of migration. Greatly to my regret I was unable to be present at Collumpton when the trial took place, as I had to leave Halberton for London on the morning of the day which was fixed for the hearing of the case. Canon Girdlestone drove me from his house to the Tiverton Junction Station,

and then he went on to Collumpton. Three days afterwards he sent an account of the scene which occurred in the magistrates' court to *The Times*, in which journal it was published. I will give it as it appeared.

"MIGRATION OF LABOUR.

"*To the Editor of the Times.*

"Sir,—Will you kindly publish the following facts, which I send you without note or comment, of which I was an eye-witness yesterday, and which are reported in the local papers?

"John Webber, a labourer, with a wife and three young children, earning 8*s.* a week, with a cottage and garden free at Holcombe-Rogus, near this village, applied to me for a place in Lancashire, which I got for him, with 16*s.* a week wages. After receiving from me 3*l.* 15*s.* for his expenses to Lancashire on Monday, May 27, in order that he might start the next morning, he was arrested on a warrant at the suit of his master, Mr. White, a farmer, on plea of breach of contract, had the money roughly taken from him, was afterwards liberated on bail and had his money returned, but

was bound to appear at the Petty Sessions at Collumpton yesterday—one whole week after he had sold the furniture and left his cottage. I was present at the trial. Of the magistrates on the Bench, one, the chairman, had granted the warrant, and another was the landlord of the farmer, Mr. White, who sued the labourer. The remaining two were landed proprietors in the adjoining parish, from which many labourers, much against the will both of landlords and tenants, have migrated. The warrant had been issued under 30 and 31 Vic. cap. 141, in which Act "contract" is defined as an agreement made "in writing or by parol." No mention was made by Mr. White of a written contract. He swore, however, that he had made a contract for a year with John Webber by word of mouth, and that he had done this in the presence of a woman servant, but when pressed he confessed that he had not summoned that servant as a witness. John Webber swore that he had never made any contract at all, but was merely a weekly servant, and had given a month's notice, which Mr. White admitted. John Webber's evidence was corroborated by that of

his wife. The farmer White, moreover, acknowledged that he had received from John Webber the key of the cottage, which was part of his wages, had occupied the garden with his own men, and had paid John Webber a week's wages then due, though usually he only paid him once a fortnight, thus voluntarily terminating the contract, if there ever had been one. The presiding magistrate constantly interrupted John Webber's advocate, and himself pleaded more strongly for Mr. White than his paid advocate did. He next conferred privately with the farmer, Mr. White, and then fined John Webber 2*l.* with costs, which, together with the sum he had already paid to the solicitor, who most ably pleaded for him, amounted to about 5*l.* All this time, though I confess I felt in my own mind very indignant, I never opened my mouth or made a sign, but remained perfectly quiet, as was my duty in a court of justice. But no sooner had the presiding magistrate pronounced his sentence upon John Webber than, without the slightest right or even provocation to do so, he turned upon me and, addressing me as though I were

the prisoner, began to animadvert on my conduct in sending labourers away for better wages. I more than once and very strongly protested against such an impertinent violation of all rule and order. Then the presiding magistrate, turning to the audience, which was large and composed partly of farmers and in still greater number of townsfolk and labourers, appealed to them as to whether he should go on animadverting on me or not. Invited in this remarkable manner by the chairman in a court of justice to express their opinions, the farmers shouted 'Yes' and the labourers 'No' at the top of their voice. The other magistrates did not interfere. The court was turned into a bear garden, such as could be seen in no other part of the civilized world except North Devon. The 'Noes' had it by a large majority. Then the chairman, finding that the 'Noes' and the Canon together were too much for him, sat down. A kind gentleman in the court advanced the money to pay the fine and costs, which the prisoner, for as such he was throughout treated, will work hard to repay. And with his wife and family he is now in Lancashire, whither he started this morning,

and is under a kind master and earning 16*s.* a week.

"Your obedient servant,

"EDWARD GIRDLESTONE,

"Halberton Vicarage, Tiverton, June 4th, 1872." Canon of Bristol."

Commenting on this trial, *The Times* in a leading article very properly asked, "What is there Canon Girdlestone has done that a court of justice should be the scene of a sort of town and county row on the propriety of his work?"

It is clear that something was required to rescue the agricultural labourers from their miserable and downtrodden condition. Everything was against them. Badly housed in most cases, living sometimes in miserable hovels unfit for the accommodation of cattle, and leading in consequence a life of semi-starvation; insufficiently clothed, and subjected frequently to the brutal ill-treatment of employers, how could they raise themselves from their unfortunate position? Even the law would not always afford them protection against injustice and oppression. The only remedy therefore it is obvious was union. No section of

the working classes in this country was so helpless as our agricultural labourers. Thinly scattered over the country in the remote and outlying rural districts, they would have been unable to effect any change in their condition without combination. The owners and occupiers of land in this country had the influence which attaches to the possession of political power, of education, and of wealth. The peasantry on the other hand possessed neither of these advantages. They were not only, in most cases, ignorant and half-starved, but they lived in a state of abject dependence upon their employers.

If our peasantry had possessed in the first place the intelligence which was necessary to enable them to understand their own value, the requirements of the agricultural labour market, and the opportunities which were presented for obtaining higher wages in other districts than those in which they lived; and if they had possessed, in the next place, the spirit and the energy necessary to enable them to move, in order to accommodate themselves to the law of supply and demand, union might not have been so necessary in their case. But under their actual circumstances, their general

ignorance, their poverty, their want of energy and independence, their scattered and isolated position, their physical and social inferiority, it is obvious that the organization, the method, the intelligence, and the great power of concerted action supplied by union, offered just the very aid which was especially needed by our agricultural labourers for the improvement of their miserable condition.

CHAPTER VII.

JOSEPH ARCH.

THERE can be no question that the leader of the agricultural labourers' movement, and founder of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, is one of the most remarkable men of the day. A thoroughly representative farm labourer, Joseph Arch has done what a few years since no one ever dreamed that a farm labourer could by any possibility do. He has originated and become the leader of one of the most extraordinary movements of modern times. Unknown two years ago beyond the limits of his native village, he has now earned for himself a great reputation. There is probably no newspaper which is printed in the English language in any part of the habitable globe which has not had something to say of Joseph Arch, and of the movement with which he is identified. In England his name is familiar to every-

body, and, like all men who have rapidly become notorious, he has his enemies. He has been maligned in every possible way, and made the subject of misrepresentation. But his honesty of purpose will doubtless win the day and ultimately silence his detractors. Some account, therefore, of the life of so remarkable a man cannot prove otherwise than deeply interesting.

Joseph Arch is a Warwickshire man born and bred. The county in which the agricultural labourers' movement commenced, produced the man who was destined to lead that movement. He is now in his forty-eighth year, having been born on the 10th of November, 1826. His birthplace is Barford, a village situated at no great distance from Warwick, and containing between 700 and 800 inhabitants. The father of Arch had been an agricultural labourer all his life, and although he was, like most of his class, deficient in education, he always bore an excellent character for honesty, industry, and sobriety. He appears to have been distinguished amongst his fellow labourers for a certain independence of character, a quality which, in general, has had little scope for development among farm labourers. Joseph Arch is a

man of pre-eminent independence, and no doubt he owes it in a great measure to his father, who, it is said, refused on one occasion to sign when ordered to do so—a petition in favour of the corn laws—a bold proceeding on the part of a peasant. The mother of Joseph Arch was a woman of no ordinary kind. Possessed of great strength of character, and embued with a spirit of piety, she taught her son to read and to write, and implanted in his mind a love for the Bible.

This early opportunity afforded to Arch of acquiring the rudiments of education gave him an advantage possessed by very few of his class. He was sent to school at six years of age and remained there until he was nearly nine. When he left school it seems that he was able to read and write tolerably well. He had also acquired some knowledge of mensuration.

Like most farm labourers' children, Joseph commenced farm work at a very early age. He was, in fact, scarcely nine years old when he began bird-scaring. This occupation is almost invariably the first which is given to the children of the peasantry. It may seem a pleasant one to some persons, and, doubtless, like everything else, it has its sunny side.

But the sunshine is very much chequered. In summer time a well fed child might manage sometimes perhaps to while away the dreary hours. But even in bright warm weather the monotony of bird-scaring must be painfully felt by the solitary child, who mostly has no companions but the birds, and even these it is his duty to drive away. In winter, however, the case is far worse. It is difficult properly to realize the miseries endured by little children who, ill-fed and ill-clothed, are exposed to the inclemency of the weather, being often pinched by the cold and drenched with rain, which the imperfect shelter of the hedge cannot effectually keep off. It is hard dreary work, too, for a young child, who must be up before daylight so as to get to the field before the birds—who are always early risers—have begun their daily raids on the newly-sown seed. Then from early dawn until the birds have retired to roost the little bird-scarers have to scream and shout at the pilferers.

Arch received 4*d.* a day for his bird-scaring. Twelvemonths later, however, he commenced to give assistance at ploughing, and obtained in consequence some small addition to his wages.

From a ploughboy he became a young teamster, and appears to have continued that occupation until he was about sixteen years old. At that time he lost his excellent mother, and the event appears to have been a great trial to him. He lived at home after his mother's death with his father, in his native village of Barford, his sister living with them and keeping house. At that time Joseph's wages were 9*s.* a week, he being then twenty years of age. The sister got married, and Joseph and his father were left alone. Besides his acquirements of reading and writing, he had managed to learn something of accounts. Just then he was offered a situation as the servant of an officer in the army; and about the same time he had an opportunity of emigrating under favourable circumstances. But he preferred to remain at home with his father. A short time afterwards he married the daughter of a mechanic living at Wellesbourne. She had, it appears, been in domestic service, and thus had acquired habits of thrift and forethought, which stood her family in good stead. Although she had not the advantages of education, she recognised its importance, and urged her husband to do his utmost to add to his stock of book learn-

ing—advice which he was not slow to profit by. He used, in fact, often to sit up late at night reading any books that he could get, whilst smoking his pipe by his kitchen fire.

Arch has, it seems, in this way managed to get some knowledge of logic, also of mensuration and surveying. He has, too, read a great number of religious books, not forgetting the Bible, which he has diligently studied. For some years, in fact, before he became the leader of the farm labourers, he occupied a good deal of his spare time in preaching amongst the Primitive Methodists, to which religious sect he belongs. On more than one occasion he has preached before very large audiences.

Finding, two or three years after his marriage, that he could not, as a regular farm labourer, support his wife and family—for by that time he had two children, a boy and a girl—he determined to try his fortune as a jobbing labourer. Taking with him some necessary tools, he therefore left home and sought piece-work in various localities. He began by gravel-digging; from that went to wood-cutting. Then he got some draining work to do, having, it is said, whilst occupied in

this work, to stand sometimes for as much as twelve and thirteen hours a day up to his ankles in water. After this he took to hedge-cutting, and became so proficient in this kind of work that he got to be much in request by the farmers in the districts around, who required such work to be done.

In fact, it was in the regular prosecution of this "jobbing work," as it is called, that Arch acquired the wide experience which he possesses of the details of practical farming. He belongs, in fact, to the very highest class of skilled labourers. During his hard training in the particular kinds of work which he preferred to do, he underwent, for the sake of his wife and little ones at home, many privations. He kept up his little establishment at Barford, and from thence—living and sleeping at home when he was able to do so—he undertook work in all the neighbourhood round. But frequently he had to leave home altogether, and travel into the adjoining counties. He also worked in Wales, exhibiting in all he did a remarkable amount of perseverance. When occupied near home he frequently walked long distances to his work; and often during his absence on these long journeys he

would put up with all kinds of hardships in order to be able to send home as much money as possible to his wife and children. He would stint himself of food during his hard work by day, and when night came on would be content to sleep sometimes under a hedge, or by a haystack, and at other times in a barn. Hundreds of times he has done this; and it is certain that no labouring man has ever led a more sober, laborious, and exemplary life than Joseph Arch.

During his laborious career, however, Arch managed, as I have shown, to acquire an immense amount of experience of agriculture and of agricultural pursuits. In fact, it is believed there are very few men in England, whether they are farmers or labourers, who possess the wide knowledge of farming which he has managed to gain. The knowledge of farmers or of agricultural labourers is, in fact, as a rule, confined to the details of agriculture which may happen to be carried out in the particular district in which they live. There has usually been evinced on the part both of farmers and of farm labourers very little disposition to move, and the experience which they gain is, therefore, as I have said, usually confined to the rota-

tion of crops and of general farming operations in their own districts. In different counties too different systems of employing labour prevail, the men being remunerated in various ways. There is the cider truck and the beer truck system. There is the "grist corn" system; there is the system of privileges in addition to money wages—a rare system by the bye. There is the system of farm servants who live and board in the master's house. Sometimes farm work is done by the job or the piece; sometimes it is done as regular daywork with wages paid by the week. Different neighbourhoods are frequently by diversity of soil adapted to different crops. There are the grazing districts, and the corn and root-crop districts. It must be remembered, too, that grazing districts are of two kinds. There is grazing for the fattening of cattle, and there is grazing for dairy produce. Then, too, the systems pursued on large and on small farms vary. The use of machinery in farm work gives the opportunity for experience of a kind that cannot be acquired in districts where machinery is not—either on account of the smallness of the farms, the poverty of the farmers, or for other reasons—generally used.

It will be seen, therefore, that Arch's mode of life for many years after he became a family man, gave him peculiar opportunities for acquiring the sort of knowledge which has especially fitted him for being the president of the Agricultural Labourers' Union. He would not, however, have acquired so much wide knowledge of farming in all its branches as he did, had he not been very superior in education and training to the great majority of agricultural labourers. By travelling about, too, he avoided imbibing the narrow prejudices shared by those who live all their lives in one little district. Perhaps, from the whole body of English farm labourers, a man could not be found who is so well able as Arch to occupy the position which he does, whilst it is certain that there are hundreds of small farmers who do not possess the half of his experience.

Added to all these advantages, Joseph Arch is endowed with a marvellous constitution. Strongly built, in robust health, muscular, and wiry, he is by nature fitted to undergo great fatigue; much of his capacity in this respect having, no doubt, been gained during his long hard training as a farm labourer. The work he has done during the

two years that he has been president of the Labourers' Union is, in fact, prodigious, and is such as would have ruined the health and strength of many ordinary men. His journeys throughout the agricultural districts of England—to-day in the north, the next day in the south, and perhaps from thence to the east and to the west, speaking sometimes night after night with great force and at great length, to large audiences, often in the open air, where the strength of lung required to make himself heard needs to be remarkable. From England to Canada, travelling from end to end of the last named country, taking notes, asking thousands of questions, and undergoing an almost inconceivable amount of fatigue. From Canada back to England, again pursuing his determined and vigorous system of organization ; it can very easily be understood that few men could do what Arch has done and what he still does.

During his hard life as a jobbing labourer Arch saw a great deal of the privations endured by men of his class. But he appears to have witnessed the worst instances of hardship in the county of Hereford. In that county he has often found able-bodied, hardworking men, earning no more

than 7*s.* a week, and on this sum having to support their wives and families. One case he relates was that of a man at whose cottage he lodged for two months. The fare of this labourer consisted of dry bread for breakfast, dry bread for dinner, and for supper bread still, but not dry bread—the bread for this, the final meal of the day, being moistened by having boiling water poured over it, and having, in addition, the flavouring of salt, a compound dish, which, in the North of Devon, is neatly termed "tea-kettle broth," but, in Herefordshire, bears the more ambitious name of "scald chops."

By dint of very hard work of the kind which has been described Arch managed to earn somewhat better wages than could usually be got by men of his class. But about this time his poor old father broke down, and, after half a century of incessant toil as a farm labourer, found himself in his last illness, for it was his last, in possession of just 4*s.* 6*d.* The expenses incident to his illness fell, of course, upon his son Joseph, who, after paying for doctor's attendance, and for the funeral expenses of his father, had become involved in debt to the extent of 10*l.* At that time he had

six children to provide for, besides his wife. To get rid of his burden of debt he again commenced his hard work as a jobbing labourer. But shortly after this he, his wife, and two of his children, were all struck down together by the small-pox. He recovered, however, and again resumed the life of a travelling labourer. After this his prospects became somewhat brighter. He gained a reputation as a very clever workman, was entrusted with important work, being sometimes placed as a kind of foreman over a number of men, and thus succeeded in paying his way. He never, however, got beyond this stage, and it has been stated that he was not able during thirty-five years' labour in farm work, notwithstanding his prudence and thrift, to make any saving. He has, however, one modest possession. The cottage in which he lives is his own, having been left to him by his mother.

Such, briefly told, is the history of Joseph Arch. He has a frank, honest, manly face, and I believe him to be just what his face tells you he is. His natural eloquence is remarkable. Perhaps one of the most striking and effective speeches which he ever made was the one which he delivered at

Exeter Hall, on the 10th of December, 1872. The agricultural labourers of England have very good reason to be proud at having secured so excellent a leader as Joseph Arch.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS' UNION.

THE first proposal for the formation of a National Union of Agricultural Labourers was made by Canon Girdlestone at a meeting of the British Association at Norwich, in 1868; the Canon on that occasion stating his firm conviction that nothing short of combination would effect any improvement in the deplorable condition of the peasantry. The idea of a National Union, then first suggested, has now become a great fact. Some account of the "small beginnings" of the movement which has now attained really colossal proportions, and of the first steps which were taken towards the formation of a Union of agricultural labourers, cannot be otherwise than interesting as an introduction to the facts relating to the present position of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union.

In the first place it is necessary to say that the

actual movement of our peasantry, commenced in the early part of 1872, was purely and solely a movement of agricultural labourers. In a speech made by the Duke of Marlborough to his tenantry in Oxfordshire, in the summer of 1872, the Duke said the movement in the agricultural districts was a state of things which owed its origin to none of the causes by which strikes in productive trades were generally determined, but that it had been brought about by agitators and declaimers who had, unhappily, the Duke said, "too easily succeeded in disturbing the friendly feeling which used to unite the labourer and his employer in mutual feelings of generosity and confidence."

I refer to this speech of the Duke of Marlborough, because it indicates the existence of an impression which has since become very general amongst certain classes of persons—namely, that the idea of the Agricultural Labourers' movement did not originate in the minds of agricultural labourers, but that it was "got up" by "strike agitators," and "fomented" by the same class of persons. This, however, is quite contrary to the fact, as the following circumstances will explain.

It appears that two or three farm labourers

who lived at a small village called Weston-under-Weatherley, situated some three or four miles from Leamington, agreed amongst themselves to send to a local newspaper a statement setting forth their small and inadequate earnings, and the hardships and privations which they, in consequence, were compelled to endure. The step was a very bold one, indeed, for farm labourers to take; but it was, nevertheless, perfectly legitimate. It is the Englishman's privilege to appeal to the press. These Warwickshire labourers did so, and in their letter they ventured to ask whether it might not be thought that the day's work of an able-bodied farm labourer was worth the sum of *2s. 6d.*

The letter was published, and amongst those who read it when it appeared were a number of labourers living at a neighbouring village—Charlcote, near Wellesbourne. The suggestion of *2s. 6d.* a day appeared to possess a pleasing fascination for these Charlcote men. They held some consultations on the subject amongst themselves; and during the course of these consultations one "bold peasant" ventured to propose that they—the men of Charlcote—should join together in a sort of

union, like the members of the trades. The proposer of this remarkable resolution at once gave practical shape to his advice by offering to subscribe a small sum of money and "sign a paper," if his companions would agree to do the same.

The proposition once made, was immediately adopted, and a sort of small club was therefore formed. But its promoters had no definite ideas as to what purpose would be accomplished through its instrumentality. However, eleven men did sign a paper, and did make a payment towards the club. Of course such a proceeding could not long remain a secret. The news of what had been done was carried from village to village, and gave rise to a very considerable amount of excitement.

Then it was for the first time that these rural conspirators turned their thoughts to the Barford labourer, Joseph Arch. They knew the character of Arch well. They knew he was an independent man; that he was a trustworthy man; and, what was essential to the success of their plans, that he was a powerful speaker. They had arranged for an audience, but they wanted an orator; and they had great confidence that the Barford preacher would suit them well. Accordingly these labourers

appointed a deputation, consisting of two men, to go to Arch and seek his assistance. This was on the 12th of February, 1872. The two men went to Arch one Monday morning to ask him, as soon as he conveniently could do so, to attend a meeting which was to be convened at Wellesbourne, a village containing about 1500 inhabitants. Arch was at home when the two men called at his cottage, and at the moment when they knocked at the door was engaged in hammering away at a box which he was making for his son, a soldier in the army. Mrs. Arch, however, heard the knock at the front door, and went to open it. The visitors asked to see her husband. But the good wife first of all asked the nature of their mission. This they explained. They desired to talk to Arch about their Union, and to ask him to help them, and to lead them. Mrs. Arch informed them that she thought they had not sufficient spirit to form a Union. She, however, on their assurance that they meant what they said, went to call her husband. Arch at once left his box unfinished, joined the men, entered into their plans with great spirit, and promised to attend the proposed meeting at Wellesbourne, which was arranged to take place

on the evening of the ensuing Wednesday, February the 14th.

The two messengers returned to their brother conspirators. Arrangements were rapidly made for the holding of the proposed meeting. The place fixed upon for holding it was the large room of an inn in Wellesbourne. A very primitive method of advertising the meeting was adopted. The shepherds and carters in the district were brought into requisition, and asked to quietly and secretly spread amongst all the men in the surrounding villages the news of the gathering which was to be held. The thing was admirably organized in this way. Everywhere the news spread, and although on the part of some of the peasants fears were expressed that the opposition of the farmers would prove too much for the men, the meeting was held, and it proved to be a great and complete success.

A long time before the hour fixed for the commencement of the proceedings, the large room of the inn was filled to overflowing. But labourers continued to come in such numbers that it was found that the room which had been selected would be altogether inadequate for the accommodation

of those who had assembled. So it was proposed to adjourn to the open air under the branching arms of a chestnut tree. This was done. During all this time the rain was coming down, and Arch had been walking through the rain and along the muddy roads from his home at Barford to the place of appointment. The astonishment of Arch was very great on observing the large assembly which had gathered to hear him. He was greeted by the men with great applause as he mounted "a pig killing board" that was brought out and placed under the tree for his accommodation. He then began his address to the assembled farm labourers. But now a strange scene ensued.

The rural police came on to the ground waiting for an opportunity to protest against the meeting as an obstruction to the highway. Arch, however, to avoid the legal difficulty, shouted to the men, from time to time, to keep the road clear. This was done. But a new difficulty then arose. "Somebody,"—it is not known with certainty who it was,—sent an intimation of what was going on to the village gasworks; for Wellesbourne had its gasworks. The consequence was that an order was given by some one that the lamps

should be turned out. Meanwhile the whole of the labourers of Wellesbourne had got to the rendezvous, and the gathering altogether, from that and surrounding villages, numbered some fourteen hundred persons. The enthusiam connected with the proceedings survived the putting out of the lamps. The labourers secured a number of lanterns and hung them on the chestnut tree, beneath which was the first "platform" of the agricultural labourers. Other lights also were procured, and were hoisted above the heads of the crowd, being displayed at the top of bean sticks, and in other ways. Then the meeting went on satisfactorily to its termination.

No verbatim report has been taken of this the first speech of Arch, because there were no reporters present to take it. But those who heard him, remember that it was an earnest eloquent address. Speaking first of the hardships which he himself had endured, he went on to describe the sufferings of his class, pointed out the necessity for a change in their condition, urged the employment of measures calculated to secure the end in view, and, above all, impressed on those present the necessity of conducting their movement with moderation and

forbearance, suggesting that their motto should be: "Defence, but not defiance."

A week following this first meeting—namely, on Wednesday, the 21st of February—Arch again attended, and spoke at Wellesbourne. Then followed a series of meetings at a number of the surrounding villages, where Arch attended, and addressed the labourers who assembled to hear him. Early in the following month—March—the men of Wellesbourne sent to their employers a letter which they had signed, and of which the following is a copy:—

"SIR,—We jointly and severally request your attention to the following requirements—namely, 2*s.* 8*d.* per day for our labour; hours from six to five; and to close at three on Saturday; and 4*d.* per hour overtime. Hoping you will give this your fair and honest consideration,

"We are, Sir, your humble Servants."

The farmers took no notice whatever of this appeal. Accordingly the celebrated "strike" took place on the 11th of March, at Wellesbourne, 200 men having joined in it. Some of the farmers conceded what the men demanded; others re-

fused to do anything of the kind, and resorted to coercive measures, in some cases evicting the labourers from their cottages. Thereupon a number of the men migrated to the North of England. A secretary being appointed for the newly-formed district organizations, an appeal was made for aid to the trade societies throughout the country. Public sympathy being deeply stirred on behalf of the Warwickshire men, subscriptions in aid of the new movement came pouring in.

On Good Friday (March 29th, 1872), a meeting was held at Leamington for the purpose of forming the several District Unions of Warwickshire into one Society, to be called "The Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union."

The meeting, attended by several thousand labourers, was held under the presidency of the Hon. A. Herbert, M.P., and the proposed Union duly established. But the movement very rapidly spread to other counties, and ultimately it was proposed to form a National Union of Agricultural Labourers. A letter, embodying this proposal, was signed by Arch, and forwarded on the 27th of April, 1872, to all parts of the country.

On the 29th of May following, a National Congress of Labourers' Delegates—eighty of whom, representing twenty-six counties, attended—was held at Leamington under the presidency of Mr. George Dixon, M.P. At this meeting, the National Agricultural Labourers' Union was finally established. Joseph Arch was elected its president, Mr. Henry Taylor its secretary, and Mr. J. E. Matthew Vincent—the present proprietor and Editor of *The Labourers' Union Chronicle*—its treasurer. It was arranged at the same time that a Council, to consist of one delegate from each of the District Unions throughout the country, should meet annually at Leamington, in order to elect an Executive Committee and the Executive Officers of the National Union, and to confer as to the general affairs of the Union. It was also decided that the Executive Committee should consist of thirteen persons—a Chairman and twelve Members—all of whom should be agricultural labourers; and that there should also be a Consultative Committee, which should be composed of friends of the Union who should be invited to attend the meetings of the Executive Committee, but with no power to vote.

The objects contemplated by the National Union of Agricultural Labourers is, as set forth by the Union—1. "To improve the general condition of agricultural labourers in the United Kingdom." 2. "To encourage the formation of Branch and District Unions:" and 3. "To promote co-operation and communication between unions already in existence." The national association aims at the establishment of a District Union in every county in England, and of branches of these district unions in each rural parish throughout the country. Each labourer who joins a branch must pay an entrance fee of sixpence and a weekly contribution of twopence to the funds of the Union. The branches, as they are established, form Committees to manage their affairs. Each branch raises an incidental fund to meet its own working expenses; but all other moneys received must be transmitted to its District Executive Committee, which in its turn, if it desires affiliation with the National Union, must forward three-fourths of all sums received to that body, the remainder being kept for the necessary expenses of the District Committee.

Since the establishment of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union on the 29th of May,

1872, the labourers' organization has become rapidly developed. The first annual conference of delegates representing the several districts affiliated with the Union, was held at Leamington, on the 28th and 29th of May, 1873. It was then stated by the General Secretary, Mr. Taylor, that the National Union included twenty-six district unions containing 982 branches, and included 70,000 members. During the year that the organization had been in existence, the total sum, including subscriptions and donations, received by the Union authorities amounted to 7024*l.* 15*s.* 10¼*d.* Of this sum as much as 1129*l.* 1*s.* 7¼*d.* had been given as donations. The sum expended by the Union authorities amounted to 6961*l.* 4*s.* 8¾*d.*, leaving a balance in hand of 63*l.* 11*s.* 1½*d.*

But the movement has, however, rapidly developed since the date of the first annual conference. Branches of the Union have now been established in every county of England, except the following—Cumberland, Westmoreland, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, and Cornwall. There are now 1000 branches containing no less than 100,000 members. The newspaper started on the 6th of June, 1872—*The Labourers' Union Chronicle*—in order to advo-

cate the interests of farm labourers, and of their movement, has reached a circulation of upwards of 30,000 copies per week. The national organization of farm labourers has now, indeed, become a great fact and a great power in the country.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GRIEVANCES OF THE FARMERS.

THE existing law in regard to farm tenancies in England is responsible to a very great extent for the present unsatisfactory state of agriculture; and hence—in a proportionate degree—for the pauperized condition of our agricultural labourers. It would not be fair to lay the whole blame for the wretched condition of the peasantry on the farmers, although much of it must fall to their share. The system under which the land of this country is at present let to tenant farmers is thoroughly bad, and the only marvel is that such a system should so long have been perpetuated. The question of tenant right, however, is one that has already been discussed by the legislature. "The Landlord and Tenant Bill" which was prepared and introduced into the House of Commons last year, by Mr. James Howard, late M.P. for Bedford, and by Mr. Clare Sewell Read, M.P. for South Norfolk, pro-

poses to make the necessary alteration in the law in regard to farm tenancies. It argues for the importance of the question of tenant-right, that two members representing opposite political opinions in the House of Commons should have been found to agree as to the urgent necessity for legislation in this matter. "The Landlord and Tenant Bill" was only advanced a short stage in the House of Commons last year. Whether it will become law this year it is, at the present time, impossible to say, and in this place it is unnecessary to discuss the actual details of the particular measure of reform in the system of farm tenancies proposed by Messrs. Read and Howard. But there can be no question whatever as to the great importance of the principle which "The Landlord and Tenant Bill" is intended to embody.

The desire for legislation on the subject of farm tenancies has arisen out of the broad fact that the tenant farmers, who constitute the great bulk of the occupiers of agricultural land in England, have very substantial grievances. The tenant farmer under the present law has absolutely no sort of security for the capital which he may invest in the land that he holds from

the landowner. If he should spend a fortune in draining and enriching his farm, and succeed in doubling or trebling its productive value, he will not be entitled to claim, on leaving its occupancy, one penny of compensation from his landlord. It is rarely the case that a man who rents of another a shop, a warehouse, or a manufactory, for the purpose of carrying on any particular business, invests money in improving or enlarging the premises which he rents. Such improvements, when required, are usually made by the landlord. But when a man rents land of another for agricultural purposes, it is absolutely necessary in the majority of cases in order to secure remunerative production, that he should be perpetually investing money in this land. The more money he invests in any necessary draining, levelling, or fertilizing the ground, the greater will his return be; and if the land were his own, he alone would benefit from the permanent improvements which he might effect. As, however, it is the exception in England for a farmer to own the land he farms, it is almost always the case that the necessary improvements introduced into agriculture are effected at the cost and risk of the farmers. When the

latter give up to the owners the land which they occupy, they must, therefore, give up the full value of the permanent improvements which they may have introduced.

If they are yearly tenants they can be turned out of their occupancy at six months' notice without any chance of recompensing themselves for their outlay. Practically, however, the fact that farmers can claim no compensation, on leaving their holdings, for unexhausted improvements is found to be a bar to the proper cultivation of land; and the result of the lax cultivation induced by the absence of due security for the investment of capital in farming, is one that affects in an important degree, not merely farmers and farm labourers, but the entire community.

It has been estimated that the annual value of the produce of our agriculture amounts to between 250,000,000*l.* and 300,000,000*l.* But even this enormous production is not sufficient for our wants; for the value of the food imported annually into this country is at the present time upwards of 80,000,000*l.* There is no doubt whatever that the difference between what we produce by agriculture in this country, and what our population requires

for its consumption, might be far more than made up if our agricultural lands were properly cultivated. In many parts of England agricultural land may be found in a very high state of cultivation; but in comparatively few places is cultivation carried to its highest state of perfection; and, taking the country generally, there can be no question that there is room for an enormous increase in its food-producing capabilities. Lord Derby has given it as his opinion, that were the soil of England cultivated up to its highest point, our agricultural produce would be doubled; and a similar opinion has been expressed by the Earl of Leicester, the Lord Lieutenant of the county of Norfolk, whose acquaintance with agricultural questions no one will be inclined to dispute.

Mr. James Howard, in a very able paper on farm tenancies, read before the Social Science Congress held at Norwich last October—in referring to the price of meat in connexion with the question of attracting more capital to the land by means of a law of tenant right, said, "The price of meat is a question which comes home to every household. Indeed, the high price of animal food is one of the most pressing domestic questions of the day. To

show what can be done in the production of meat by farmers of capital, I may instance the fact that a leading farmer in this county of Norfolk, who is in the enjoyment of security of tenure, realized in the past two years by the sale of beef, mutton, and pork no less a sum than 40,000*l.*, which was an average of from 15*l.* to 16*l.* per acre of his occupation. Deducting from this sum 28,000*l.* worth of animals bought in, there remains a net meat production of about 5*l.* per acre; and this is by no means an uncommon instance. Upon my own farms rather more than this amount is raised, and some farmers I have corresponded with, exceed even this rate of production. A farmer in the adjoining county of Suffolk, who also enjoys security of tenure, informs me that his net sale of meat reached 7*l.* per acre. Were the whole country brought up to the standard of the Norfolk farmers I have named, the produce of meat in Great Britain alone, to say nothing of Ireland, would amount to 150,000,000*l.* a year, a quantity of meat which the population would find no little difficulty in consuming. As there is no possibility in this sea-girt isle of adding to its area a single acre, the question is forced upon us, how the production of our fields and home-

steads can be stimulated so as to meet the growing necessities of the population."

In the concluding portion of his paper Mr. Howard answers the question which he propounds. I may as well quote the whole of his remarks. He says: "How more capital is to be attracted to the land is the great problem to be solved, and looking to the signs of the times, the outcry at the price of meat, and the uneasiness manifested in what is popularly called the land question, I think it desirable that no more time should be lost, but that the difficulty should be looked fairly in the face by the legislature; for in the event of a reversal in the tide of the nation's prosperity, the question may be solved for us in a rougher fashion than any well-wisher of his country would desire. Much good would unquestionably ensue from amendments in our laws with respect to ownership, devolution, and transfers of land, but no such interest would, in my opinion, have so great and immediate an influence in encouraging the embarkation in the higher cultivation of the land as an equitable law securing to the tenant an interest in the outlay of his capital.

"According to the present law of England,

whatever property a tenant puts into or upon the land becomes at once the property of the landlord. No matter to what extent the tenant may have raised the value of the estate he farms, the law takes no cognizance of any claim to the property embarked. On the other hand, if the tenant should, by improper or niggardly management reduce the value of the farm he occupies, the law gives the landlord the power to sue for dilapidations or deterioration. It is true the right is not enforced; but so long as it remains, the condition of the law is one-sided and unjust.

"The capital of the tenantry of this country is indispensable to the cultivation of the soil. The landed proprietors could no more do without the tenantry than could the farmers dispense with the labourers. Is it therefore wise that the State should ignore the property of so indispensable a class, and permit a law to remain which allows the landowner to appropriate to himself the improvements and property of his tenants without acknowledgment or compensation? So long as such a law remains, will the application of capital to farming be checked; and, as a consequence, the production of food for the people be curtailed. As is

well known, capital is proverbially shy. Every mercantile man knows full well that the primary condition in every undertaking to which it is sought to attract capital is security.

"The question may be asked, is legislation after all necessary? Will not a good understanding between landlord and tenant accomplish all that is desired? At all events, should not the landlord and tenant be left to make their own agreements? or are not leases the proper remedy? To such questions I would simply reply, that these are the very arguments which have been used for a generation past, and yet three-fourths of the land of England continues to be held subject to a six months' notice to quit, and in the great majority of cases without compensation for either permanent or unexhausted improvements. I would further point to the fact that capital, which flows so plentifully into other branches of industry, and into enterprises of every kind, both home and foreign, yet remains unattracted towards agriculture; and that not one half the capital is employed in agriculture which its development requires.

"I would also call attention to the fact that the advantage of a legal tenant-right law can be

estimated by the example already existing in this country. The flourishing condition of the agriculture of Lancashire is proverbial. In no part of the world has agriculture made greater strides than in that county. In no part of England or Scotland is there to be found so wealthy and prosperous a tenantry. Nowhere are the agricultural labourers better off, and in no county have the estates of the landlords been so enriched by the outlay of the tenant's capital. In Lincolnshire a tenant-right custom has grown up, and been in operation for two or three generations. Under this equitable system, which has the force of law, the outgoing tenant has the right to claim for improvements he has made. Customs, however, are of slow growth, and, notwithstanding the acknowledged advantages of the Lincolnshire customs, and the efforts to establish them in other parts, they have not extended beyond the limits of that county, and nothing short of an Act of Parliament will bring the whole country under the operation of a custom which has proved so beneficial to all classes concerned. The suggested remedy of leases may be dismissed with a few brief remarks.

Leases have unquestionably an advantage over yearly tenancies. But it is a question with which the State cannot interfere. The State cannot say to the landowner, "You shall grant leases," but it is quite within the functions of the State that, whether held under a lease or a yearly tenancy, the landlord shall be liable to the tenant on his quitting for the property he may have to leave behind him in or upon the land. The disadvantages of the system of leases are well known and are forcibly expressed by Mr. McNeil Caird, in an address to the Scottish Chamber of Agriculture, in which is the following statement: 'On a seven-course farm held on a nineteen years' lease, you may reckon that the last five years will be a period of reduced expenditure by the outgoing tenant and of exhaustive cropping. Then the first seven years of the new lease will be a period of liberal expenditure and gradual restoration of productive power. For the next seven years you may expect the farm, unless it has been greatly reduced, to be in full fertility; and then begins again the evil cycle of exhaustion. You will have on the individual farm seven years of Egyptian fatness, alternating with periods of comparative

leanness; but the lean years will be in the proportion of twelve to seven.' Mr. Caird shows most conclusively how much the country suffers, even under the Scotch system of leases, by the absence of a legal tenant-right. I am therefore disposed to ask, with Sir John Pakington, 'Why, under a well-regulated system of land tenure, we should not allow leases and tenant-right to go together;' but by tenant-right I do not mean what the honourable baronet means—a permissive right—but a right secured by law, and not dependent on the will of another.

"As to the question propounded, and which is often asked, 'Should not landlord and tenant be left free to make their own agreements?'—I am fully aware how much is to be said against over-legislation, and in favour of the principle of freedom of contract; but I hold that so far as the hiring and tilling of land is concerned, the expression 'freedom of contract,' like many other comprehensive brevities, is simply a figure of speech. The land of England is circumscribed, the farmers are many, and the race is prolific. The landowners are in possession of a monopoly, and as a rule can and do dictate their own conditions,

which conditions are not unfrequently injurious to the public interest. Every man who has to hire a farm knows full well that he is not on equal contracting terms with the owner. The freedom he enjoys is mainly that of refusing the farm, of which, after great efforts, he may have succeeded in obtaining the offer, and which, perhaps, a score of his neighbours stand ready to take, no matter what are the conditions imposed, if the rent is not too exorbitant. * * * * *

"It would not be difficult to show, apart from the Irish Land Act, how often legislation has, in a variety of ways, interfered, and that wisely, with freedom of contract; and how the law, in cases where the parties are not on equal terms, restrains the stronger from securing an unfair advantage. But to go into this question would swell my paper to undue proportions. I cannot but think that the majority of landowners and land agents take an erroneous view of the subject of tenant-right, and the feeling displayed upon the subject of the Bill I introduced last session was wholly unnecessary. One of our largest land proprietors expressed to me fears as to the operation of the Compensation clauses. I asked him

how many tenants on his great estate he parted with in a year. He at once saw my point, and replied, 'Why, now you remind me, the fact occurs to me that I rarely have a farm to let.' I then dwelt upon the fact that the Bill affected only outgoing tenants, and that the amount of compensation, as a landlord, he might be called upon for, as compared with his rentals, would be infinitesimal, whilst every tenant on his estate would be encouraged to spend money in its improvement; and this would be the case on the great bulk of the estates throughout the kingdom. However, it is not upon the ground of justice to the tenant nor of advantage to the landlord, that I advocate legislative interference, but upon the broader ground of the public good. To my mind, the case stands thus:—We have a limited area on which to raise the food of the people. We have a population fast growing in numbers and in purchasing power. Our fields and homesteads do not yield the amount of food of which they are susceptible. The chief impediment to increased production is want of capital. To attract the necessary amount of capital, security is indispensable; and judging by the experience of the past and the present

condition of our agriculture, this can only be accomplished by the State stepping in and recognising the claim of the tenant to the property he may have put into or upon the land of another, and which he may be called upon to leave behind him; for if we now find a difficulty in feeding 30,000,000 of people, how shall we able to meet the wants of 50,000,000?—a population which, at no distant day, will have to be provided for."

I have quoted at length from the able paper of Mr. Howard, because it accurately expresses the opinions of those whom Mr. Howard and Mr. Read, the other promoter of "The Landlord and Tenant Bill," represent—namely, the farmers of England. Mr. Howard has only expressed what will be readily endorsed by those who are conversant with agricultural questions. His remarks are, in fact, excellent; and there is only one point to which I would direct attention. He very clearly shows that legislative action is necessary to secure tenant-right. It is useless to argue, he says, that landlord and tenant should be left of their own free will to make their own agreements, and he proves to those who advocate this course that under the system which has preserved what is

called "the freedom of contract," three-fourths of the land of England has remained for a whole generation subject on the part of the farmers to a six months' notice to quit, without, in the great majority of cases, compensation for either permanent or unexhausted improvements.

But in using this argument, do not the farmers forget that it tells against themselves in the very course which they have taken against the labourers? The agricultural labourer, not having the franchise, has no political power like the farmer, by means of which to improve his position in respect to the farmer in the same way as the farmer seeks to improve his position in respect to the landowner. The only possible course which is open to the labourer is to unite with his fellows in order to force concessions which the farmers have shown no sort of disposition voluntarily to give; in order, in short, to get the power to effect in his condition that necessary improvement which mutual agreement and arrangement between himself and the farmer have failed to secure for him. Yet the farmers have loudly condemned the labourers for daring to exercise their right to combine in order to secure fair pay, good cottages, and proper treat-

ment. They have said, "Why do the men not come to us and ask for higher wages?" I reply, simply because such a request would have been useless: and although such arguments have been used for more than a generation past, *more* than "three-fourths" of the English peasantry have remained, during that period, subject to a system of wretched wages, wretched cottages, and general bad treatment.

In the present political status of the English peasantry the labourer would, without union, be far more helpless than the farmer, and far less able to obtain higher wages and better treatment from the farmer than the farmer is to obtain, without the action of the legislature, just tenant-right from the landowner. Just as in some few parts of England a good tenant-right custom renders legislative tenant-right unnecessary, so in some few places the prosperous condition of the labourers produced by the generosity of farmers renders union unnecessary. But it is the general system which is bad in respect to the treatment of the labourer. The condition of the English agricultural labourer is relatively as bad as the general condition of English agriculture, and

union is quite as necessary for the general improvement of the peasant's condition as legal tenant-right is necessary for the improvement of the farmer's position.

But looking at this question of tenant-right, apart from any consideration of feeling for the labourer, there is no doubt, that in putting in his claim for legal security for the value of unexhausted improvements the farmer is only asking for what is right and just. It is inevitable, too, that he will secure tenant-right. The concession cannot be long withheld, and it is the less likely that it will be long withheld, because, whilst the existence of the present system is especially the grievance of the farmer, it is really, and to a greater extent, the grievance of the whole people of these islands, seriously limiting, as it does, our annual food supplies.

CHAPTER X.

AGRICULTURAL CHILDREN.

THE passing of the Agricultural Children Act, which received the Royal assent on the 5th of August last, promises to be ultimately productive of good results. There is no doubt that the custom of employing very young children in agriculture has been fruitful of great evil. Where the beer and cider truck systems prevail, children by being employed in farm work have, from a very early age, acquired an unnatural love for drink ; and it has been very generally the case that the work has been done to the almost total exclusion of education. In some districts where perhaps a better system of wages and privileges has prevailed, and where there have perhaps been some good schools, managed by efficient school teachers, the children of the labourers have been able to secure the advantages of education. But such instances have been exceptional.

The Agricultural Children Act has been passed in furtherance of the principle of compulsory education, and it provides that no child under a certain age shall be employed in agricultural pursuits, without having previously undergone a certain fixed amount of school training. "A child" under the Act is defined to mean a child under twelve years of age. I have already shown that it was very usual for children to be employed in farm work as early as seven years of age. The new Act absolutely prohibits the employment of any child in any agricultural district under the age of eight years. But no child between the age of eight and ten can be employed unless the parent or guardian of such child can obtain and exhibit to the employer or his agent a certificate from the school teacher in the district, setting forth that the child has completed within the twelvemonths preceding the time when it is proposed that the employment shall commence, not less than 250 school attendances. If between ten and twelve years of age, proof must, in the same way, be given to the employer that in the twelve months preceding the employment not less than 150 school attendances have been completed. At twelve years of

age a child passes out of the operation of the Act, so that the practical effect of the law is to limit the compulsion to the period between a child's seventh and eleventh years. For instance, to render a child eligible for employment at the earliest age—namely, eight, a child, must between seven and eight, have attended school 250 times. Each certificate relating to the twelve months previous to its date will only remain in force for the twelve months immediately following the period of its date and issue. Hence a child which was furnished at eight years of age with a certificate attesting 250 school attendances in the preceding twelve months, would have between its eighth and ninth year to qualify by 250 more attendances at school for employment from nine to ten. It will be seen therefore that practically the school attendance required between eight and ten, will almost entirely preclude employment in farm work, because deducting from the year Sundays, Saturdays, and holidays, the child must, to make 250 attendances, be at school almost every day the school is open, unless attendance is given twice a day, in which case, as Mr. C. S. Read, M.P., has pointed out, each attendance counts, so that a child of eight and nine years of

age can have made the necessary attendance in six months, and a child of ten and eleven, can have given the required school attendances (150 times) in four months, thus leaving, to quote the words of Mr. Read, "a considerable portion of each year for employment when juvenile labour is most needed upon the farm." I am not sure, however, that Mr. Read has placed the exact legal interpretation upon the Act which the wording allows. The Act says (Clause 4), "'School attendance' shall mean attendance at a morning or afternoon meeting of a school for the whole of the time during which instruction in secular subjects is given at such meeting." It will be seen, however, that it does not explicitly state that the interval of the dinner hour will make a double attendance within the meaning of the Act, on the part of the child who attends morning and afternoon school, although Mr. Read as one of the promoters of the Bill may know that such was their intention in framing the 4th clause.

Certain exceptions under the Act are made in cases where there is no school within two miles of a child's home; also during the gathering of hops in the hop districts, and during hay and corn

harvest. A number of farmers, occupying in the aggregate not less than 300 acres of land, may by special application under special circumstances to the Justices at Petty Sessions, have suspended during a period not exceeding eight weeks in any one year ending on the 31st December, the compulsory restrictions as to the school attendances of labourers' children. Exceptions are also made in the case of a child's illness when it is of a nature to prevent attendance at school; and also in cases where a Government School Inspector gives a certificate as to a child having attained a certain standard of proficiency, according to the regulations of the Education Department.

I have endeavoured to be explicit in defining the meaning of the Agricultural Children Act, in the first place, because it is a measure of very great importance; and in the next place, because the actual operation of the Act has been misunderstood by many persons. The Act does not come into force until the 1st of January, 1875, so that time will be given for children to qualify for employment.

There can be no question that the Agricultural Children Act is a step in the right direction; but

there can be as little question, that in the actual circumstances of agricultural labourers it will, for a time at least, entail great hardship and suffering upon them. In the great majority of cases agricultural labourers have been obliged to rely to a large extent upon the earnings of their children; and the wretched circumstances of the parents have made it absolutely necessary that the children should be employed at the earliest age at which they could be made useful in any way. A farm labourer ought, of course, to be able to earn such wages as would enable him to support his children until they are of the proper age to work for themselves; and he ought also to be able to keep them at school until they have reached that age, and to afford to pay something towards their education. It is to be hoped that union will ultimately secure this for the labourer. Meanwhile it is to be feared that the Agricultural Children Act, excellent in itself, will operate with great harshness on the labourers and their families.

CHAPTER XI.

SERIOUS DEPOPULATION OF THE RURAL DISTRICTS IN THE WEST OF ENGLAND.

DURING my tour of inquiry through the agricultural districts of the West of England in the past summer, I first noticed the growing scarcity of agricultural labourers. A very marked change had taken place in this respect since the date of my former inquiry in the previous year. On the occasion to which I am now referring—last June—I do not remember to have seen any statement, either in the London or provincial papers, in reference to the dearth of labour; the reason being, doubtless, that the effects which have been steadily resulting from the system of migration, inaugurated by Canon Girdlestone, were at that time just beginning to be felt, but not sufficiently so to attract any attention from the public press. The discoveries which I then made, however, in reference to this important

subject, were so significant, that I communicated to the London morning paper for which I was corresponding, the serious facts and my own deductions from them. I then expressed the opinion that the continued flow of the stream of migration from the Western agricultural districts to the more prosperous mining and manufacturing districts, and the drain of labourers caused by the organized system of emigration encouraged and supported by the Union authorities at Leamington, would, in a comparatively short time, produce very serious results.

The Census returns, to which I referred as soon as this aspect of affairs had forced itself upon my attention, furnished me with some very important facts. I learnt that in 1801 the South-Western Registration District, which included the important agricultural counties of Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Wilts, and Cornwall, contained the largest population of all the ten registration districts of England; but that in 1871 this district had fallen, in point of numbers, to the sixth place. In 1801 the five counties named contained 1,100,000 inhabitants. The number, according to the Census of 1871, was only 1,870,000, showing an average

annual increase of only 11,000, or 770,000 for the full period of 70 years.

Taking as an illustration the county of Somerset—which may fairly be said to represent the other counties referred to—the returns set forth that the population of Somersetshire in 1801 was 273,577, whilst in 1871 it was no more than 463,483, showing an increase in seventy years of nearly 189,906 persons. Let me now compare this county with Lancashire, in order to show the extraordinary contrast in the matter of increase in population presented by two important English districts, the one representing agriculture only, the other representing a mixed system, chiefly manufactures, but agriculture also of a superior kind. In 1801 the population of Lancashire was 673,476. In 1871 it had considerably more than quadrupled, having in the seventy years advanced from 673,476, to no less than 2,818,904.

But the most significant facts as to the depopulation of the rural districts in the West of England are gathered when we come nearer to the present time. Taking Somersetshire, again, as representing the wretched system of agriculture prevailing in the important food-producing districts of the West of

England—a system that has depopulated the country, wasted the land, and stinted our national food supplies—it will be instructive to show what has happened in ten short years. The lesson is one that should be taken seriously to heart.

I will begin with the broad fact that the rich agricultural county of Somerset contains, roughly speaking, just over one million acres of land. On this land there were living, in 1861, according to the Census of that year, 444,873 people; that is, in its cities, towns, villages, and hamlets. In 1871, as I have already shown, the population of Somersetshire had advanced to 463,483. These figures show in the ten years an increase of only 18,610 persons—an increase entirely due to the growth of two or three of its cities and towns. But taking the purely agricultural portions of the county, we arrive at the really alarming fact that in no less than six Unions, containing 280 parishes, there is shown, since 1861, an actual decrease in the population. There is no doubt that this state of things has been entirely brought about by the miserable remuneration of agricultural labourers, and by their generally wretched circumstances—a state of things that has induced them to leave their squalid

homes in the West for better pay, better houses, kinder treatment, and brighter prospects generally, such as they have been able to secure in the North, and in some other parts of England.

It is significant and interesting to note the great difference which has taken place within the last 100 years, between the rates of wages in the Northern and Southern Counties of England. For the facts to which I am about to allude, I am indebted to a statement made by Mr. James Caird. In the year 1770 the wages were lower in the northern counties of England than they were in the southern districts, as the following figures will show. The average weekly wages of the agricultural labouring classes in the North of England were, in 1770, equal to 6*s.* 9*d.*, whilst the average weekly earnings of the Southern labourers were 7*s.* 6*d.* By the year 1850 a great change had taken place, northern wages having become 30 per cent. higher than wages in the South, which were 8*s.* 5*d.* on the average, whilst in the North they were 11*s.* 6*d.* on the average. But the difference becomes much more marked in 1873, when between the North and South of England it amounted to no less than 50 per cent., the

average weekly wages of agricultural labourers in the northern counties being 18*s.*, whilst those in the southern counties were only 12*s.*

But the depopulation of the western agricultural counties has been, within the last two years, proceeding at an accelerated rate; and unless something should speedily happen to bring back to the soil the labourers who have left, and are still leaving it, the agricultural labour question in the South and West will speedily assume an alarming aspect. The prognostications which I ventured to make last June have now been verified in many ways. Lord Portsmouth, writing from North Devon on the 4th of last January, communicated to *The Times* the fact as to the serious aspect of the agricultural labour question in the South and West of England. He said, "There is no doubt that the farmers in the South and West of England now find a difficulty in getting a sufficient supply of labour to cultivate their farms, and are beginning to put pressure on their landlords to provide comfortable cottages and gardens, so as to attract labourers to their employment."

From other and private sources I have, since the date of Lord Portsmouth's letter to *The Times*,

had evidence of the serious aspect of matters in the West of England consequent upon the dearth of labour; and that evidence has proved that the wretched cottage accommodation prevailing to a very great extent in the western counties, has had an important influence in driving the men away. One of my correspondents, the Vicar of a small parish, writes to me thus of his own district:—"The farmers, nearly all small ones, are beginning to find it impossible to get labourers; first from inability to pay increased wages, secondly from their scarcity, and thirdly from want of a proper place to put them in. These farmers I fancy will, sooner or later, have to give up in remote districts like this, and either emigrate, or become what they are now in reality—farm labourers. I am at the same time bound to say that their rents are not excessive. One part of our population is in a thriving condition—namely, servant girls, who are doing well." It is no wonder that the farmers in this village experience great difficulty in finding a proper place to put their labourers in when the nature of the cottage accommodation there is considered. I will give the Vicar's description of some of the cottages in his district. More than

one-half of his parish is owned by three non-resident landowners, two of them county magistrates. These landowners have done "literally nothing," to use my informant's words, towards contributing to the necessities of the poor. Here is the Vicar's description of two specimen cottages :—

"A woman occupying one cottage has told me she has often had to take up a lantern to go to bed by, as the wind blew out a candle unprotected. Another aged woman in one of the cottages told me last week, that she can see the stars through the chinks of her bedroom wall—which wall, by-the-bye, is shored up with poles to keep the whole thing up." The Vicar says, "I suppose you say, 'Why don't they leave?' I reply, 'Because they can't get others; and, therefore, what good are higher wages if they can't get a dry roof-tree.'"

If the state of things which has been described affected only farmers and labourers in the West of England, the evil which is produced by it would be comparatively small. It is, however, a question that very vitally affects the whole nation, and one, therefore, of such imperial and pressing importance as to demand the instant and earnest attention of the Government and the legislature.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE CHURCH.

ONE of the most striking circumstances in connexion with the movement of our peasantry for better wages, better houses, and better treatment, has been the marked indifference exhibited towards that movement by the ministers of religion. I am anxious in saying this, to make no invidious reference to any particular sect. I fear that the blame must be apportioned amongst ministers of all sects. But as it is mostly the clergy of the Church of England in the rural districts, who from the circumstances of their position, and their more intimate relationship with the peasantry, have been the most freely blamed for their indifference, it would perhaps be best to confine my observations more especially to them.

I am happy to be able to note that there are already the signs of an improved state of feeling

in this respect on the part of the clergy, who appear now to be approaching a recognition of their great responsibilities in regard to the important subject of the improvement of the condition of our agricultural labourers. At the same time it must be observed, that the particular necessity for the advice and counsel of the pastor, in the difficulties which have arisen between farmers and labourers, is not quite so extreme as it was, because some beneficial changes have already been wrought in the condition of the peasantry. But there, nevertheless, remains very much to be done in the work of improvement, and as the clergyman's duty and responsibility should always be clearly defined, it will be interesting and useful in this place to discuss the attempts which have been made to define them, in so far as they relate to the agricultural labourers' movement.

I am inclined to think that the coldness with which it is notorious the ministers of religion at first regarded the movement of the peasantry, arose chiefly from a feeling of timidity. I am of course speaking generally, because there have been individuals who have exhibited a remarkable fearlessness in denouncing the treatment experienced by

agricultural labourers ; but, as a body, the clergy were at first, as I have said, coldly indifferent to the aims and objects of the labourers. The first effect of the agricultural labourers' movement was to touch the pockets of the squires and farmers ; and such an effect was certain to call forth, as it did call forth, the antagonism of those two classes. The antagonism was unreasonable, but it was nevertheless a fact. The clergy had to confront this fact, and it would require great courage boldly to take the side of the weaker against the stronger ; to take the side of the labourers against the squire and the farmer. To do so would have embittered the relationship existing between the clergyman, the landowner, and the agriculturist : and the former, perhaps very naturally, hesitated. It would have been bold, and it would have been right, for the minister in the case of the rural labourer, to have decided against the employers who denied their servants the advantages of decent cottages and fair wages ; but the step would have required the exercise of an unusual amount of moral courage ; and would besides, in most cases, have caused the pastor to be tabooed by his aristocratic neighbours—the "society" of the rural districts. Canon Girdle-

stone ventured to adopt the bold course which has been indicated, and it has been seen that he and his family were accordingly shunned by the gentry and the farmers of North Devon.

I believe that in very many cases, if not in most cases, the clergy sympathized in secret with the efforts which were being made by the peasants to better their condition; but in very few instances was the sympathy openly exhibited. No doubt, in many instances, the clergymen in small parishes having to depend so much upon the co-operation of squires and farmers in church work, and in the general administration of parochial affairs, were placed in a very delicate and difficult position; and in such cases they naturally hesitated to place themselves in a position of direct antagonism to the monied classes.

There is, however, a section of the clergy who have repudiated their responsibilities in reference to the agricultural labourers' movement, and who have denied that it was their duty in any way to interfere in the disputes between farmers and labourers. The fact, however, that at the annual Church Congress held at Bath in the month of October last, the most prominent subject of dis-

cussion was "The Church's duty in regard to strikes and labour," furnished a sufficient indication that the responsibilities of the clergy in reference to the peasantry had been very generally recognised. The fact, too, that the number of persons who attended the Congress—more than 3000—the largest of any previous annual Congress, was also an indication of the deep and widely-felt interest in the important subject which had been announced for discussion.

Some notice, therefore, of the nature of the discussion which took place at the Congress will serve to indicate the feeling of the clergy towards the agricultural labourers' movement. It would not, I think, do justice to the feelings of the clergy as a body, to accept the view of the question taken by the Bishop of Oxford, who read the inaugural address, as representing the general feeling of the clergy. The Bishop, it is true, was "loudly cheered" on resuming his seat at the close of his address. But the Rev. Llewellyn Davies, who took an opposite view from that expressed by the Bishop of Oxford, was also applauded, and the applause culminated after the conclusion of the admirable remarks made by Canon

Girdlestone. Both sides, however, represent sections of the clergy, and it will be useful to notice the difference in the several views which were enunciated.

The Bishop of Oxford, in the paper which he read, appeared altogether to misunderstand the points of the case which were to be discussed. He appeared to raise up an argument on an unsound basis, mainly that he might be able easily to topple it down. He stated three points *seriatim* for discussion, and then proceeded to discuss them. They were, first, "The clergy have not, and cannot have the knowledge which should be possessed by any one who attempts to regulate wages." Secondly, "If they have this knowledge, neither party to this dispute has consented to be bound by their decision." Thirdly, "To regulate wages is not the proper business of the Church of Christ."

It is not necessary to notice the first two points, because they are immaterial to the issue. The whole of the Bishop's reasoning centred round his third proposition. Here he committed his fundamental error. No one ever said, or thought even, that it was the business of the Church of

Christ to regulate wages. No one could ever dream of asking the clergy, or expecting the clergy, to interfere in ordinary cases in the disputes between masters and servants. The mistake of the Bishop of Oxford, and of those who think with him, has arisen in their failing to see that interference by the clergy in the case of the agricultural labourers was demanded and required, not on ordinary economic grounds, but for the reason that the condition of the rural labourer was quite exceptional. The condition of our peasantry has long been a crying disgrace to a civilized and a Christian country. Their moral and physical degradation has been caused by their wretched wages, and by the miserable hovels in which they have been compelled to live—hovels which, from their size and circumstances, have rendered it impossible for their occupants to observe the commonest decencies of civilized life. The miserable system of low wages has compelled the employment of women and young children in farm work, and has precluded the possibility of fitting attention being paid to education, or to the requirements of domestic life. The influence produced by the low wages and by the

squalid and overcrowded homes of the peasantry has resulted, in short, in moral, social, and physical degradation. Surely the minister of religion who was endowed with a proper sense of his high responsibilities, must recognise the necessity of bold outspokenness in condemnation of any system that would promote such degradation of human beings. Unless the clergy would wish to renounce their claim to the possession of common sense, they could not but see that the moral, intellectual, and physical condition of the peasantry was the direct and immediate result of their low wages, and of their squalid homes; and if it was not the positive business of the clergy to interfere with the regulation of wages, it was their business negatively to interfere by protesting against the continuous existence of a state of things which was the direct cause of the degradation of the minds and of the bodies of our agricultural labourers. It was the particular end which would justify and render necessary such exceptional action on the part of the ministers of religion.

What the Bishop of Oxford did recommend, however, was that the clergy, whilst refraining from interference with the miserable rates of

wages, should impress on the labourers the necessity of leading virtuous lives and attending on the ordinances of religion. The Bishop added, "They tell me that this is but talk, and that there is less virtue in all these influences than in an extra shilling a week. What they say is false. The world is moved by moral and spiritual influences," &c. In saying this, however, the Bishop of Oxford thought and spoke for those who felt like himself, and he forgot that what most powerfully moved the world of the poor agricultural labourer was the painful craving after the necessary food which he could not get. The Bishop forgot, too, in his high-flown definitions of spiritual and intellectual influences, that the physical nature supports the intellectual nature, and that it is, in reality, worse than useless "to preach to bare backs and to empty stomachs," or to attempt, when a man is suffering from physical hunger, to make him see the excellence of religion and morality.

Canon Girdlestone, however, came to the rescue at the Bath Congress in a manly and vigorous speech, declaring that the clergy could not consider themselves free from blame in holding aloof from

the movement of the peasantry; that a great weight of responsibility lay at their doors; and that they ought from the pulpit to have relieved themselves more frequently from their responsibilities in the matter. He boldly described the homes of the peasantry, as in too many instances "hovels in which not one of those present would consent to stable his horses—hovels without ventilation, drainage, or the surroundings necessary for ordinary decency; hovels which bred a race of men who had nothing to look forward to but to be buried in a pauper's grave; hovels which bred a race of women whose maidenly blushes were blotched in consequence of the scenes they were obliged to witness because of the want of proper sleeping accommodation." Canon Girdlestone concluded by solemnly declaring that "the man he should most fear to meet at the last great day was the poor labourer who, perhaps, if he had exercised his ministry more fearlessly in denouncing social abuses might have been spared a life of misery and penury and a pauper's grave."

At the same meeting Mr. Beresford Hope, M.P., took the admirable course of urging every clergyman "to set himself to preach in season and out

of season the moral economic value of better cottages for the labourer." It is a noteworthy circumstance that the general tone of the meeting was one of sympathy with the agricultural labourer; and the President of the Congress, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, expressed at the conclusion of the discussion on the subject of "the duty of the Church in regard to strikes and labour," the pleasure which he felt in the fact that "the discussion had brought out so prominently the deep sympathy of the Congress with the labouring classes, and the earnest desire of its members, not only to raise them morally and spiritually, but also to give the labourers every chance of rising in the social scale."

I have made special reference to the discussion at the Church Congress at Bath, because an important historical interest attaches to the speeches which were made, representing as they do, the feeling of the clergy in reference to one of the most important movements of the present century.

CHAPTER XIII.

EMIGRATION.

THE National Agricultural Labourers' Union has early learnt to understand the law of supply and demand, and to arrive at the conclusion that even united action on the part of farm labourers could not avail to raise wages much beyond their dead level, whilst the agricultural labour market remained overstocked. Migration from the over-stocked labour markets of the South and West to the more prosperous mining and manufacturing districts of the North of England, had done something in the direction of improving the condition of the men who were left behind in the western and southern counties. Union had done something more in the same direction. But there was a point at which the efficacy of both migration and union stopped short. The plethoric patient must be bled, and the equivalent remedy for a plethora of labour is—emigration. The Agricul-

tural Labourers' Association were not slow to perceive that emigration would prove their most powerful ally. Four months after the formation of the National Union, the emigration movement was commenced by that body. Towards the end of September, 1872, therefore, 300 agricultural labourers set sail for New Zealand. From that time to the present the emigration movement has been steadily and regularly organized by the Union authorities. Even, however, when the special emigration of agricultural labourers began, we did not possess in this country a very large surplus population of tillers of the soil, although the surplus was sufficiently large to affect prejudicially the general rate of wages.

For some years past this country has been rapidly advancing in general prosperity, pauperism has been diminishing, and there has been a steady demand for additional labour in almost all branches of trade. But whilst there has been this steady demand for labour, the remuneration of the labouring classes has not advanced in the same proportion. Increased prosperity has produced the inevitable enhancement in the cost of living. Wages have, therefore, lost some of their purchasing value,

and their increase consequently has not secured to the workman the advantages which it would nominally appear to have conferred. None of this prosperity, however, had reached the agricultural labouring classes in the shape of increased wages, whilst these classes had suffered equally with all classes in the enhanced cost of living.

Yet, notwithstanding the exceptional poverty and distress of agricultural labourers, and notwithstanding also that this state of things was partly caused by their surplus numbers, the number of the surplus labourers was not abnormally large, even at the commencement of the agricultural labourers' agitation. When the process of equalizing agricultural labour—transferring it from the South and West to the North—had been completed, a comparatively small emigration would produce a dearth of labour. Emigration has already produced that result. The result, however, would have been manifested at an earlier date but for certain counterbalancing forces, which had been brought into operation, partly as the immediate effect of the growing scarcity of labour, and partly from other causes. It will be necessary in this place to notice these counterbalancing forces.

For some time past, the high price of meat occasioned by increased consumption, and to a certain extent by the raids of the cattle disease, has induced our English farmers to take land out of corn cultivation and to put it into grass. This practice alone has caused a not inconsiderable displacement of labour, for there is necessarily far less labour required in connexion with pasture land and the tending of cattle, than in the cultivation of arable land. For some time indeed, the increase of pasture land had been more than counterbalanced by the annual bringing into cultivation of waste lands; but the recent enhancement in the cost of labour has given an impetus to the formation of pasture which now shows signs of a rapid increase beyond the quantity of uncultivated land brought into cultivation. This can best be illustrated by a reference to the past twelve-months. During that period there has been an addition of 340,000 acres to our permanent pasture. But instead of this quantity of land added to pasture being more than compensated for, as hitherto, by a greater number of acres being reclaimed from waste and made cultivable, the final result shows that arable land has been diminished by not less than

200,000 acres. It has been calculated that this diminution of cultivable land has resulted, by itself alone, in the displacement of several thousand labourers.

Then, again, the formation of the Agricultural Labourers' Union, and the consequent rise in the cost of agricultural labour, has, by producing a kind of panic amongst the farmers, caused the employment, on a much greater scale than hitherto, of machinery in agriculture. Mr. James Caird—a great authority on agricultural matters—has estimated that 100 reaping machines introduced into a country side will displace the labour of 1000 men. He has calculated that during the past year, through the increased demand of the farmers for these labour-saving contrivances, there were not less than 40,000 reaping-machines at work throughout the country. He calculates, therefore, that during last harvest, the employment of these machines was equivalent to the employment of 400,000 men. Mr. Caird is of opinion that 80,000 machines—double the number employed last harvest—would suffice in twelve days to cut down the whole corn crop of Great Britain, supposing each machine to cut, on an average, 10 acres of corn per day. There will, therefore, no doubt be at least a gradual,

if not a rapid increase in the number of machines; and their use, together with the use of the steam-plough where practicable on large farms, and the use of the double furrow plough where the circumstances of the soil will permit, will ultimately, by a displacement of labour, tend to counterbalance in a greater or less degree the effect in the labour-market produced by emigration.

From the returns of the last Census, I gather the fact that we possessed in Great Britain a population of agricultural labourers numbering 1,590,000. This would give an average of one person to every 11·49 acres of the land which is under cultivation. There is no doubt, however, that this number has become of late considerably diminished. It is a very important fact that notwithstanding the augmented use of machinery, and notwithstanding the conversion of arable land into grass, there is, taking the whole of the country, a present dearth and a growing scarcity of agricultural labourers. No doubt next year machinery will be brought into yet greater requisition than it has been in the past year. But I incline to the belief that even if organized emigration were only to go on at the same rate as it has

done during the past eighteen months, the effective gain by machinery, and by the conversion of arable into pasture land, would not counterbalance the loss by emigration.

Farmers are slow to adopt machinery in lieu of manual labour. If labour is high in price, machinery is costly; and even if it were not so, many of the present race of agricultural labourers are unfitted by their unskilfulness for the efficient management of machinery. This, I think, would be found to be a powerful deterrent from the sudden adoption of labour-saving machinery on a large scale. There is proof of this in the fact that notwithstanding the greatly increased use of machinery during the past year, and notwithstanding the absorption of cultivable land into pasture, there is at the present moment a growing scarcity of manual labour.

It is interesting to contrast the present state of the population with the condition of things about a quarter of a century ago. From the interesting and valuable work on emigration* to which I have already referred, I gather the important fact

* *Britain redeemed and Canada preserved.* By Alfred Bate Richards, Barrister-at-Law.

that there was in this country in 1850 an over-population of not less than 5,000,000 persons, whom it was desirable to remove out of the old country.

As I have shown, the state of things has greatly changed since that time, and it is quite clear that we cannot now really afford to lose a single labourer. It is, however, at this juncture that we are threatened with the establishment of a gigantic system of emigration. It is not necessary for me to refer in this place at length to the mission of Mr. Arch and Mr. Clayden to Canada, and the contemplated mission of Mr. Arch, in May next, to the United States. Mr. Arch and his companion, Mr. Clayden, as delegates from the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, left this country on the 28th of August last, and proceeded hence to Canada, arriving at Quebec on the 6th of September. They went for the purpose of undertaking a tour of inspection through Canada, with the object of making arrangements for an extensive emigration of agricultural labourers from England to the "starved" labour fields of Canada. After a little less than three months from the time of their leaving England, Mr. Arch and Mr. Clayden returned to this country, arriving at Liverpool

on the 20th of November. During their stay in Canada, Messrs. Arch and Clayden had thoroughly examined the country, and had succeeded in securing the promise of hearty co-operation on the part of the Canadian Government in the proposed plans for an extensive exodus of agricultural labourers from this country. The Canadian Government have sent a Special Commissioner, Colonel George T. Denison, to England, to make the necessary arrangements, on the part of the Colonial authorities, with the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, for the organization of the special and extensive scheme of emigration of agricultural labourers to which reference has been made. The special facilities offered by the Canadian Government are as follows :—

The Government of the Dominion formerly adopted the system of clearing plots of land and erecting cottages upon them for the use and encouragement of emigrants. On the request of Mr. Arch, they have consented to build a limited number of cottages for the use of the labourers sent out from England by the National Union.

It has been the custom for the Canadian authorities to give to emigrants a bonus of

1*l.* 4*s.* 8*d.* in reduction of the steamship fares. But the money was paid only on the arrival of the emigrant in Canada. To meet the convenience of the English Labourers' Union, it has been agreed that the bonus shall be advanced in England.

The most important arrangement, however, made between the Government of Canada and Mr. Arch, has been pointed out by the Colonial Commissioner in a letter to *The Times*. Colonel Denison says: "Hitherto emigrants have been obliged to leave England and go to Canada on the general chance of getting work. Mr. Arch urged strongly that for his men he wanted something definite. The Government, therefore, agreed to issue circulars to all the local authorities, Agricultural Societies, &c., requesting them to obtain from all farmers requiring labour and having cottages on their farms, requisitions stating what labour they wanted. These requisitions, approved by the local authorities, are to be sent to the Government, who will forward a synopsis to the National Labourers' Union; and the men desiring to emigrate will, by that means, know before they start where they are going, and what accommodation they will have. This, of

itself, is an enormous advantage to a poor man with his family going into a strange country, and Mr. Arch is entitled to the thanks of his people for the manly and straightforward way in which he insisted on definite arrangements for their comfort."

So far as the completion of the arrangements for the adoption of an extensive system of emigration from this country to Canada is concerned, there appears nothing left to be desired in order to insure its complete success; and there is no doubt that unless our agriculturists make a considerable advance in the wages of the men who are left, there is every reason to fear there will be, ere long, a very serious and alarming dearth of agricultural labour in this country. The potent law of supply and demand will doubtless step in during the process of emigration, and influence the stream which will flow away from us, by compelling an advance in wages and an improvement of the general condition of the English peasant. Still, it is possible that much harm may meanwhile be done, because the best of our labourers have been going from us, and will continue to go from us in still greater numbers, in the approaching

spring, under Mr. Arch's extended system of emigration. The object of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, however, in promoting and organizing a great system of emigration to Canada, is to ameliorate the condition of the labourer at home. When that result has been secured, their efforts in the direction of emigration will cease. Meanwhile, there can be no question that nothing which the Labourers' Organization can do will so quickly accomplish the object which they desire, as the powerful expedient to which they have resorted—namely, EMIGRATION.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH PEASANTRY.

A HAPPIER condition of life for the immediate future of our peasants may be anticipated without indulgence in any visionary ideas. It is only necessary to point to what has been done in two short years to prove what may yet be done in a comparatively brief period, in the direction of still further improving the condition of the tillers of the soil. A little more than two years ago very few of those who were at all conversant with the deplorable state of poverty and ignorance into which our peasantry had sunk, would have deemed it within the bounds of possibility that a powerful organization like that of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union could have been so rapidly formed. But that institution is now a great fact, and it cannot be other than the earnest wish of all who are anxious to promote the welfare of those for whose benefit

it was established, to see it become developed in such a manner as will secure that substantial improvement which is still necessary in the agricultural labourer's position. It is not easy to conceive that this class of our labouring population could have sunk into a worse condition than they were in at the time when their movement commenced, in the early part of 1872. Their social and physical degradation at that time was so extreme that, notwithstanding the progress which they have since made, their present condition is very far indeed from being what it ought to be.

Union and emigration have together brought about a general rise of wages to the extent of from 2*s.* to 3*s.* per week on an average, in most of the agricultural districts. The mining, the manufacturing, and other industrial employments are also continuing to absorb large numbers of farm labourers, and it is certain that the continued action of all these forces must succeed, ere long, in causing a very considerable advance in the wages of agricultural labour. But it is not high wages alone which the peasant needs. There must be radical reform in the whole of our agricultural system, as it affects the labourer and as it affects the nation.

The future of the English peasantry is, in fact, bound up with the future of English agriculture. The present condition of the labourer, and the present state of our husbandry, are a disgrace to us as a nation. We are naturally proud of our commercial pre-eminence; but that very pre-eminence in commerce and industry shows by contrast the inferiority of our national agriculture. The broad fact that the soil of this country, taking it as a whole, does not produce more than half what it ought to produce, is sufficiently strong evidence of the present inferiority of our agriculture. There is the authority of Mr. J. J. Mechi for the statement that—so badly does our land want improvement—not less than 100,000,000*l.* would require to be expended merely for the proper drainage of wet lands; and Mr. Mechi is of opinion that very much more than that sum might be profitably invested in other needful agricultural improvements. To prove what can be done in this direction by scientific farming, Mr. Mechi states that on his own "poor but improved" farm of 170 acres in Essex, there was produced, for the year 1873, a balance available for rent, interest, and profit—after every other expense had been paid—of nearly 700*l.*

The movement of the peasantry and the establishment of their Union have secured the important object of directing attention to the state of our agriculture. Inquiry concerning the condition of the labourer has thus incidentally brought into more than usual prominence the wretched condition of our whole agricultural system. Hence the subject becomes a great question in which the nation no less than the miserably-paid and miserably-housed labourer is vitally interested.

It follows, therefore, that there is abundant room in the field of agriculture for legislative and other reforms. The legislature cannot interfere with the rate of wages. That is a question which may be safely left to the law of supply and demand, regulated as we have seen it can be, and is, regulated by the Labourers' Union. But the housing of the agricultural labourer is a subject that calls for the especial attention of Parliament. In spite of Enclosure Commissioners, Lands Improvement Companies, and Public Health Acts, the country is still studded with hovels that are a disgrace to a civilized country. Apart from the merely physical results of bad cottages—the wretched state of discomfort of their occupants;

the unwholesomeness; the bad drainage; all tending seriously to impair the health of the labourer and his family—there are the far graver moral results to be considered. Overcrowding, with its attendant horrors, is a gigantic evil, which spreads its corroding and corrupting influence to a vast extent amongst our rural population; and it is an evil which is caused either by the indifference, the parsimony, or the poverty of landowners and farmers, who either cannot, or will not, in by far too many instances, provide an amount of cottage accommodation sufficient to enable their dependents to observe even the most ordinary rules of decency. Some such suggestion as that recently made by Lord Portsmouth—namely, that the State should aid by loans at interest landlords who might be found unable to incur the cost of building a sufficient number of cottages upon their estates, might be adopted. In any case some prompt and speedy remedy must be provided by the legislature for a state of things that cannot be permitted to last any longer.

The legislature can beneficially interfere with the wretched truck system, and compel farmers to pay their men's wages all in coin of the realm,

instead of part in beer and cider. Under that system in the case of cider truck I have shown that the value of the drink supplied is as a rule greatly over-estimated by the farmer, to the disadvantage of the labourer; and to a great extent the same thing may be said of all kinds of truck.

The principle of compulsory education has already been extended to meet the case of children employed in agriculture; and although the operation of the new law will, as I have previously shown, inflict for a time especial and exceptional hardships upon the poor labourer, it must ultimately produce good results. Ignorance it is which has proved, perhaps, the greatest bar to the advancement of the peasant, and in too many cases—in fact in the great majority of cases—parents have, by dire necessity, been compelled to avail themselves of the earnings of their children at the earliest possible age at which a child could be sent out to work—a state of things which rendered education an impossibility. The misfortune is that the reform produced by education will, although sure, be very slow in its operation. It is one that will affect the children of the peasantry, but will not affect the present race of

labourers. Still it will help to adapt the rising generation of farm labourers to the future advanced state of agriculture, and must be heartily welcomed as a step in the right direction.

With higher wages and a better condition of life for agricultural labourers, the necessity for the employment of women in farm work will cease. The present system of low wages renders it absolutely necessary that the wives of the peasants should eke out the miserable earnings of their husbands by field labour, which is rewarded by the barest pittance, rarely amounting to more than two or three shillings a week. Under this system of female labour, some of the worst evils exist. Where mothers of families are employed in agricultural labour, the work has of course to be performed to the almost total neglect of domestic duties. The employment, too, of young girls in agricultural work has been the fruitful cause of immorality. Interference however with this kind of female labour scarcely lies within the province of Parliament. It is a matter that can be, and doubtless will be, dealt with by the Labourers' Union; but higher wages alone, as I have already said, without any more directly prohibitive influence, will by

removing the necessity for female labour, do very much towards putting an end to the injurious custom of employing such labour.

The introduction of such changes into the present system of letting land as will attract more capital to its cultivation, will lead to a greatly extended use of machinery; and this in its turn will cause a demand for a highly-skilled class of agricultural labourers. There is no reason why—when capital has been largely embarked in agriculture, and when there has been imported into agricultural pursuits more of the enterprise which is so conspicuously shown in commercial undertakings—agricultural work, under an improved system of farming, may not be made so attractive, surrounded as it should be by what will conduce to the comfort and happiness of the labourer, as to come fairly into competition with other industrial occupations, and offer good cottages, high wages, many privileges and kind treatment to all who seek it.

Much of the good and many of the advantages which, it is to be hoped, are in store for our peasants, will result from the importation of a healthy commercial spirit into the dealings which

take place between landowners, farmers, and labourers, in place of the demoralizing spirit of cringing dependence exhibited on the part of the labourer towards his employer, and of patronizing benevolence exhibited by the employer towards his labourer. I would divide the two classes by no hard and fast lines, or advocate the introduction of a harsh commercial code into the relationships existing between the occupiers and the tillers of the soil. But I do most strongly, emphatically, and earnestly advocate the extension to agriculture of so much of the strict commercial code as will prevent the workman from being dependent for mere existence on the benevolence of his employer, on the poor rates, and on the gifts of the charitable. It is quite time that agricultural labour should be assessed at its proper value. The strength and skill of the labourer—whether employed in manufactures or in farming—are his only property. Labour is the workman's stock in trade, and the farm labourer has hitherto been defrauded of the proper value of his toil. Surely the industry must be poor indeed, which cannot secure for the workman who is employed in it a decent house, sufficient clothes,

and a sufficient amount of the commonest necessaries of life for himself and his family. Even in its present state, farming is not so poor an industry as this; and if the future of our native agriculture will not permit the agricultural labourer to live less the life of a brute* than he has hitherto lived, it will be a national disgrace.

But I maintain that the future of our native agriculture will admit of the elevation of our agricultural labourers. It will admit of a well-paid, educated, decently housed, contented peasantry. To secure this result, however, for the tillers of the soil, their right to considerate treatment must be fully and freely recognised by landowners and farmers. The mischievous notion that the labourer is to be a mere machine with no ambition, and no desire to seek another and a happier condition of life than that of a mere hand-to-mouth existence, must be exploded. The peasant should be encouraged to take an interest in his occupation. His human nature must be appealed to by

* I have not previously alluded in any way to that degrading relic of a barbarous age, the statute fair. I learn, however, with great satisfaction, that a Bill to abolish statute fairs has been drafted by Mr. Arthur Kinglake, J.P. for Somersetshire, and will be introduced into Parliament this session.

securing to him the prospect that by energy and industry, by patient and persevering effort, he may rise out of his class as a man may do in every other occupation.

Few things will tend so much to make the peasant contented and to give him "an interest in the soil which he cultivates," as the extension of the allotment system. Every farm labourer should have the opportunity of renting, on very moderate terms, not less than half an acre of land. This land should be held direct from the landlord, or if held from the farmer, the rent charged should never be higher in proportion than that paid by the farmer himself. In every way the labourer should be encouraged by the farmer to make the most, by cultivation, of his small plot of land. He will thus be encouraged to regard his allotment with all the pride of a small farmer. He will grow fruit and vegetables which, after supplying his family's need, may leave him a surplus, which he can sell and then invest the money in the village savings bank, or in some other way.

It is calculated that in England there are about 350,000 small holdings of five acres in extent. Of holdings below a quarter of an acre, the number

is about 250,000. It must be borne in mind, however, that a great number of these holdings of less than a quarter of an acre are held by artisans and labourers other than farm labourers—for the town workman likes his plot of "garden ground;" and of the holdings from a quarter of an acre to five acres, few are held by agricultural labourers. But even if the whole number of a quarter of a million of allotments and other holdings were held by farm labourers—and this, as I have shown, is assuming too much—there would, taking the total number of labourers at a million and a half, be only one allotment of a quarter of an acre to six labourers.

In the matter of allotments alone, therefore, there is great room for extension, if the desirable and necessary system of giving a plot of ground to *every* labourer be established. There is some advantage, doubtless, in the large farm system adopted within moderate limits, and only for the purpose of getting the greatest production by an extended use of machinery and by economical management. It is often urged, that the large farmer can produce more per acre than the small farmer. This arises, however, chiefly from the fact that the large

farmer is almost invariably a man of capital, whilst the small farmer is not. Given the same proportion of capital, and the same facility to the small tenant as to the large one in the utilization of machinery, combined with an equal amount of energy and industry, and the chances of greater productiveness per acre will be found in most cases on the side of the small farmer.

I shall not enter, in this place, into the great land question, or discuss the merits or demerits of our English system,* beyond remarking that *some change* at least in the mode of transfer of land must be made, and is, in fact, inevitable at no distant date. A change that would tend, not to cause on the one hand the absorption of small holdings and the division of our agricultural land into great farms, or on the other hand to cause its division into a chess-board system of farms ; but a change that would *graduate* the existing system into a better and more perfect mixed system of farms ; and that would bring about at the same time a simple and inexpensive method of transferring

* *A Catechism on the English Land System*, by Mr. C. Wren Hoskyns, late M.P. for Hereford, is an admirable and popular work on this important subject.

land, and give compensation for unexhausted improvements—would be highly desirable. An intelligent, well-paid peasantry would then have afforded to their class the same opportunity of rising in life which is afforded in other occupations. The peasant would aspire first to *rent* his small piece of land. By his cow or cows, his pig or pigs, his fruit, his vegetables; by the profits derived from the keeping of poultry and bees, he might, by frugality and industry, save money. He might then aspire to increase by degrees the size of his rented land. He might in time become a small farmer, then, perhaps, a large farmer; and he might, in some cases, ultimately become a landed proprietor.

There is no reason whatever why our peasantry should be eternally tied down to slave at their toilsome occupations with no prospect of advancement, and no future beyond the plough tail. Give them a chance, place them fairly in the human race, and —coincident with the development of our national agriculture—instead of remaining a disgrace to our civilization, they will become a credit to the nation, and an important element in its glory and in its strength.

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