

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE WAYSIDE FOLK.

Through succeeding ages there has always been a more or less wandering human population of the wild and woodland.

These nomads have included from the earliest ages outcasts from society as well as refugees from the rule of the successive foreign usurpers of the soil. There were the Celtic fugitives in early Saxon times, the Saxon refugees who were turned adrift from many a village home by the Normans, the woodland wanderers in the days of Robin Hood. There was the roving population that wandered over the land when the ravages of the Black Death in the 14th century had so hampered agriculture that in many parts farming operations had almost ceased, and there were the vagrants who travelled from village to village after the dissolution of the Monasteries. Earlier than these there were the Roma-men, the mysterious people who have wandered with their cart-houses over half the habitable world, and who, in this country, we have always called gypsies.

But there is another class of nomad which in modern times has frequented our country villages, many of them able and willing to earn a more or

less precarious living by agricultural or other work. Until quite recent times the chalk holes and other temporary shelters in this neighbourhood have served, as dwelling places for some of these roving inhabitants of the wayside.

There are some in the parish who will remember more than one of these houseless members of the community.

I think the last of them was " Old Mary." For many years she was a familiar figure in the parish. The light of her fire could often be seen at night behind a hedge along Church Road, or Hartley Hill, when not " at home " in a chalk hole or old barn.

There was a mystery about her which no one ever solved. Rumour had it that she had run away from home in early life, and that she was the daughter of a Scotch landowner of good family. It was even said that once upon a time she had lived in a castle—but perhaps it was one of the aerial sort. At any rate, there was little doubt, that she had seen better days. Her speech bewrayed her, and there was something about her which suggested a higher circle of society than that of the homeless wayfarers of the country side. Her garments may have been in tatters, but she always wore a spotless kerchief round her neck, fastened with a little brooch which looked like a good one.

"When occasion required, she gave the name of Mary Muckle, but whether authentic no one ever knew. She fell a victim to asthma and bronchitis, and was taken to the Union, where she died.

Then there was "Chaffy," a strange old man whose usual dwelling place was the chalk hole by Foxborough Wood. I believe the big can in which he carried water from the pond lay, no long time back, in the hole where he left it. The company's water was not laid on to his abode, so he dipped from the wayside pond, and—let it settle. He lived to a good old age, but there came a day when he took to his bed, such as it was, and there one morning he was found, and carried to the hospital. Not long after they brought him back to be buried.

Peter was another of our wayside dwellers. The chalk pit in Church Road was his usual shelter. He disappeared as mysteriously as he came.

Before Peter's time there was another old man in the parish who "lived rough," though I believe he was once, for a short time, induced to go into a cottage. His name was John Middleton.

Life in the open seems to have agreed with him, for he died and was buried in our Churchyard five-and-thirty years ago at the age of 103.