

Stables Gordon

**The Cruise of the
Land-Yacht «Wanderer»: or,
Thirteen Hundred Miles in...**



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The Cruise of the Land-Yacht «Wanderer»; or, Thirteen Hundred Miles in my Caravan

Preface

I need, I believe, do little more herein, than state that the following pages were written on the road, on the *coupé* of my caravan, and from day to day. First impressions, it must be admitted, are not always infallible, but they are ever fresh.

I have written from my heart, as I saw and thought; and I shall consider myself most fortunate and happy if I succeed in making the reader think in a measure as I thought, and feel as I felt.

It is but right to state that many of the chapters have appeared in *The Leisure Hour*.

Some of the illustrations are from photographs kindly lent me by Messrs Valentine and Sons, of Dundee; others from rough sketches of my own; while the frontispiece, "Waiting till the Kettle Boils," is by Mr Eales, of Twyford.

Gordon Stables.

The "Wanderer" Caravan, Touring in Yorkshire, *August* 1886.

Chapter One. Introductory – Written Before Starting

No man who cannot live in his house on wheels, cook, eat, and sleep in, on, or under it, can say that he is cut out for a gipsy life. But to do this you require to have your temporary home well arranged – a perfect *multum in parvo*, a *domus in minima*. The chief faults of the old-fashioned caravan are want of space – two ordinary-sized adults can hardly move in it without trampling on each other's toes – general stuffiness, heat from sky or stove, or probably both combined, and a most disagreeable motion when on the road. This latter is caused by want of good springs, and errors in the general build.

“The man who is master of a caravan,” says a writer, “enjoys that perfect freedom which is denied to the tourist, whose movements are governed by the time-table. He can go where he likes, stop when he lists, go to bed at the hour which suits him best, or get up or lie daydreaming, knowing there is not a train to catch nor a waiter's convenience to consult. If the neighbourhood does not suit the van-dweller, all he has to do is to hitch in the horses and move to more eligible quarters. The door of his hotel is always open. There is no bill to pay nor anybody to ‘remember;’ and, if the accommodation has been limited, the lodger cannot complain of the charges. In a caravan one has all the privacy of a private residence, with the convenience of being able to wheel it about with a facility denied to the western settler, who shifts his ‘shanty’ from the ‘lot’ which he has leased to the more distant one which he has bought. In the van may, for all the passer-by can discover, be a library and drawing-room combined, or it may be bedroom and dining-room in one, though, as the pioneers in this mode of touring sleep under canvas, we may presume that they find the accommodation indoors a little stuffy.”

Now, this sounds very well, but at the present sitting I have my doubts if a gipsy's – even a gentle-man-gipsy's – life be altogether as independent and sunshiny as the sentences represent them to be.

About going where he likes, for instance? Are there not certain laws of the road that forbid the tarrying by the way of caravan folks, for a longer period than that necessary to water and feed a horse or look at his feet? By night, again, he may spy a delightfully retired common, with nothing thereon, perhaps, except a flock of gabbling geese and a superannuated cart-horse, and be tempted to draw up and on it, but may not some duty-bound police man stroll quietly up, and order him to put-to and “move on?”

Again, if the neighbourhood does not suit, then the caravan-master may certainly go elsewhere, *if* the horses be not too tired or dead lame.

To be sure, there is inside a caravan all the privacy to be desired; but immediately outside, especially if drawn up on a village common, it may be noisy enough.

As regards going to bed and getting up when he pleases, the owner of a caravan is his own master, unless he chooses to carry the ideas and customs of a too-civilised life into the heart of the green country with him, and keep plenty of company.

Methinks a gentleman gipsy ought to have a little of the hermit about him. If he does not love nature and quiet and retirement, he is unsuited for a caravan life, unless, indeed, he would like to make every day a gala day, and the whole tour a round of pleasurable excitement – in other words, a *farce*.

It is, however, my impression at the present moment that the kind of life I trust to lead for many months to come, might be followed by hundreds who are fond of a quiet and somewhat romantic existence, and especially by those whose health requires bracing up, having sunk below par from overwork, overworry, or over much pleasure-seeking, in the reckless way it is the fashion to seek it.

Only as yet I can say nothing from actual experience. I have to *go* on, the reader has to *read* on, ere the riddle be solved to our mutual satisfaction.

Chapter Two. The Caravan Itself – First Trials – Getting Horsed

“A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!”

Travelling through the romantic little village of Great Marlow one summer’s day in a pony-trap, I came suddenly on a row of caravans drawn up on the roadside. Some flying swings were started just as I approached, and the unwonted sight, with the wild whooping and noise, startled my horse. He shied, and made a rather thoughtless but very determined attempt to enter a draper’s shop. This resulted in damage enough to the trap to necessitate my staying an hour or two for repairs.

I would have a look at the caravans, at all events.

There was one very pretty little one, and, seeing me admire it, the owner, who stood by, kindly asked if I cared to look inside. I thanked him, and followed him up the steps. It proved to be a good thing of the class, but inside the space was limited, owing to the extraordinary breadth of the bed and size of the stove.

I asked the address of the builder, however, and wrote to him for an estimate. This was sent, but the penmanship and diction in which it was couched sent no thrill of pleasure through me. Here is a sentence: “Wich i can build you a wagon as ill cary you anyweres with 1 orse for eity pounds, i ’as built a power o’ pretty wagons for gipsies, an’ can refer you to lots on ’em for reference.”

Well, to be sure, there is no necessity for a builder of caravans being a classical scholar, but there was a sad absence of romance about this letter; the very word “wagon” was not in itself poetic. Why could not the man have said “caravan”? I determined to consult a dear old friend of mine who knows everything, C.A. Wheeler, to wit (the clever author of “Sportascrapiana.”)

Why, he said in reply, did not I go straight to the Bristol Waggon Company? They would do the thing well, at all events, and build my caravan from my own drawings.

This was good advice. So I got a few sheets of foolscap and made a few rough sketches, and thought and planned for a night or two, and thus the Wanderer came into existence – on paper.

Now that the caravan is built and fitted she is so generally admired by friends and visitors, that I may be forgiven for believing that a short description of her may prove not uninteresting to the general reader.

Let us walk round her first and foremost and view the exterior.

A glance will show you (see illustration) that The Saloon Caravan “Wanderer” is by no means of small dimensions. From stem to stern, without shafts or pole, she measures nearly twenty feet, her height from the ground being about eleven feet, and her breadth inside six feet fully.

For so long a carriage you will naturally say the wheels seem low.

This is true; the hind wheels are little over four feet, but they are *under* the carriage. Had they been tall they must have protruded beyond her considerably, and this would have given the Wanderer a breadth of beam which would have been awkward on the road, and rendered it impossible to get her through many gateways.

I might have had a semicircle or hollow in the sides of the caravan, in which high wheels could have moved without entailing a broader beam, but this would have curtailed the floor space in the after-cabin, on which my valet has to sleep athwartships, and this arrangement was therefore out of the question.

But she must be very heavy? Not for her size and strength. Although solid mahogany all round outside and lined with softer wood, she scaled at Bristol but 30 hundredweight, and loaded-up she will be under two tons. The loading-up includes master, valet, coachman, and a large Newfoundland dog, not one of whom need be inside except “coachee” on a stiff hill.

Obedying my instructions, then, the builders made her as light as was consistent with strength. The wood too is of the best and best seasoned that could be had. A firm that builds Pullman cars, not only for England but for America, has always a good supply of old wood on hand.

But if the Wanderer does not look light she certainly looks elegant. Polished mahogany with black and gold mouldings and shutters – jalousies – leaves little to be longed for as regards outside show, neither does it give a gay appearance. The wheels and underworks are dark chocolate, picked out with vermilion. The only “ornament” about her is the device on the side, and this is simply a sketch of the badge of my uniform cap – crown, anchor, and laurel leaves, – with a scroll of ribbon of the Robertson tartan, my mother’s plaid. This looks quite as pretty and costs less than armorial bearings.

In the illustration the fore part of the caravan is visible. There is a splashboard, an unusual luxury in carriages of this kind. The *coupé* is very roomy; the Newfoundland lies here when he likes, and a chair can be placed on it, or if rugs and a cushion are put down it forms a delightful lounge on a fine day, and this need in no way interfere with the comfort of either the driver or the great dog. The driver’s seat is also the corn-bin, and holds two bushels. From the broad panel at the other side of the door a board lets down at pleasure, and this forms still another seat for an extra passenger besides myself.

It may also be noticed that the front part of the roof protrudes, forming ample protection against sun and rain. This canopy is about three feet deep.

The brake, which is handy to the driver, is a very powerful one, and similar to those used on tram-cars. There is also an iron skid to lock one wheel if required on going down hill, and a roller besides for safety in stopping when going up hill.

There is a door behind right in the centre, similar in appearance to the front door, with morsels of stained glass let in at the upper corners.

Both doors have light shutters that are put up at night.

Under the rear door the broad steps are shipped, and at each side is a little mahogany flap table to let down. These the valet finds very handy when washing up. Beneath each of these flaps and under the carriage is a drawer to contain tools, dusters, blacking-brushes, and many a little article, without which comfort on the road could hardly be secured.

Under the caravan are fastened by chain and padlock a light long ladder, a framework used in holding out our after-awning or tent, a spade, and the buckets. But there is also space enough here in which to hang a hammock.

Under the caravan shafts are carried, which may, however, never be much required.

In order to give some notion of the internal economy of the Wanderer I append a linear plan of her floor.

I may mention first that there is quite as much room inside for even a tall man to stand as there is in a Pullman car.

Entering from behind you may pass through *A*, the pantry or kitchen, into *B*, the saloon. Folding doors with nice curtains divide the caravan at pleasure into two compartments. *C* is the sofa, upholstered in strong blue railway repp. It is a sofa only by day. At night it forms the owner’s bed. There are lockers under, which contain the bedclothes, etc, when not in use, as well as my wardrobe. *D* is the table, over which is a dainty little bookcase, with at each side a beautiful lamp on brackets. *E* is the cupboard, or rather the cheffonnière, both elegant and ornamental, with large looking-glass over and behind it. It will be noticed that it juts out and on to the *coupé*, and thus not only takes up no room in the saloon, but gives me an additional recess on top for glove-boxes, hanging baskets for handkerchiefs, and nicknacks. The chiffoniere and the doors are polished mahogany and glass, the bulkheads maple with darker mouldings, the roof like that of a first-class railway carriage, the skylight being broad and roomy, with stained glass and ample means of ventilation.

The other articles of furniture not already mentioned are simple in the extreme, simple but sufficient, and consist of a piano-stool and tiny camp-chair, music-rack, footstool, dressing-case, a

few artful cushions, pretty mirrors on the walls, with gilt brackets for coloured candles, a corner bracket with a clock, a guitar, a small harmonium, a violin, a navy sword, and a good revolver. There are gilded cornices over each window, with neat summer curtains, and also over the chiffoniere recess.

The floor is covered with linoleum, and a Persian rug does duty for a carpet.

The after-cabin contains a rack for dishes, with a cupboard above, a beautiful little carbon-silicated filter, – the best of filters made – a marble washstand, a triangular water-can that hangs above, complete with lid and tap, and which may be taken down to be filled at a well, a rack for hats and gloves, etc, neat pockets for tea and other towels, a box – my valet’s, which is also a seat – and a little flap table, at which he can take his meals and read or write. Also the Ripplingille cooking-range. This after-cabin is well-ventilated; the folding doors are shot at night, and the valet makes his bed athwartships, as I have already said. The bed is simply two long soft doormats, with above these a cork mattress. The latter, with the bedding, are rolled up into an American cloth cover, the former go into a Willesden canvas bag, and are placed under the caravan by day.

No top-coat or anything unsightly hangs anywhere; economy of space has been studied, and this goes hand-in-hand with comfort of fittings to make the gipsy’s life on the road as pleasant as ever a gipsy’s life can be. A glance at the illustrations of our saloon and pantry will give a still better idea of the inside of the Wanderer than my somewhat meagre description can afford. These are from photographs taken by Mr Eales, of Twyford. (The frontispiece to this book is also by Mr Eales.)

The Ripplingille cooking-range is a great comfort. On cool days it can be used in the pantry, on hot days – or, at pleasure, on any day – it can be placed under our after-tent, and the *chef’s* work got through expeditiously with cleanliness and nicety. Our caravan *menu* will at no time be a very elaborate one. I have long been of opinion, as a medical man and hygienist, that plain living and health are almost synonymous terms, and that intemperance in eating is to blame for the origin of quite as many diseases as intemperance in drinking.

On Getting Horsed

A correct knowledge of horseflesh is not one of those things that come intuitively to anybody, though I have sometimes been given to think it did. It is a kind of science, however, that almost every one, gentle or simple, pretends to be at home in. Take the opinion of even a draper’s assistant about some horse you happen to meet on the road, and lo! he begins to look knowing at once, and will strain a nerve, or even two, in order to give you the impression that *he* is up to a thing or two.

But let a young man of this kind only see the inside of a stable a few times, then, although he can hardly tell the heel from the knee in the *genus equus*, how glibly does he not begin to talk, till he almost takes your breath away, about capped hocks, side-bones, splints, shoulders, knees, fetlocks, and feet, and as he walks around a horse, feeling him here or smoothing him there, he verily seems to the manner born.

Ladies are seldom very far behind men in their knowledge of hippology. What young girl fresh from school can be found who cannot drive? “Oh, give me the reins, I’m sure I can do it.” These are her words as often as not. You do not like to refuse, badly as a broken-kneed horse would look. You sit by her side ready for any emergency. *She* is self-possessed and cool enough. She may not know her own side of the road, but what does that matter? If a man be driving the trap that is meeting her, is it not his duty to give place to her? To be sure it is. And as for the reins, she simply holds them; she evidently regards them as a kind of leathern telephone, to convey the wishes of the driver to the animal in the shafts.

But a man or woman either may be very clever at many things, and still know nothing about horses. It is their want of candour that should be condemned. Did not two of the greatest philosophers the world ever saw attempt to put their own nag in the shafts once? Ah! but the collar puzzled them. They struggled to get it on for half an hour, their perseverance being rewarded at last by the appearance

on the scene of the ostler himself. I should have liked to have seen that man's face as he quietly observed, suiting action to his words, —

“It is *usual*, gentlemen, to turn the collar upside down when slippin' it hover the 'orse's 'ead.”

But what must the horse himself have thought of those philosophers?

Now I do not mind confessing that riding is not one of my strong points. When on horseback there ever prevails in my mind an uncertainty as regards my immediate future. And I have been told that I do not sit elegantly, that I do not appear to be part and parcel of the horse I bestride. My want of confidence may in some measure be attributed to the fact that, when a boy of tender age, I saw a gentleman thrown from his horse and killed on the spot. It was a terrible sight, and at the time it struck me that this must be a very common method of landing from one's steed. It seems to me the *umbra* of that sad event has never quite left my soul.

It is due to myself, however, to add that there are many worse whips than I in single harness. Driving in double harness is harder work, and too engrossing, while “tandem” is just one step beyond my present capabilities. The only time ever I attempted this sort of thing I miserably failed. My animals went well enough for a time, till all at once it occurred to my leader to turn right round and have a look at me. My team was thus “heads and tails,” and as nothing I could think of was equal to the occasion, I gave it up.

Notwithstanding all this, as far as stable duties are concerned, I can reef, steer, and box the compass, so to speak. I know all a horse needs when well, and might probably treat a sick horse as correctly as some country vets. No, I cannot shoe a horse, but I know when it is well done.

It is probably the want of technicality about my language when talking to real professed knights of the stable, which causes them to imagine “I don't know nuffin about an 'orse.” This is precisely what one rough old farmer, with whom I was urging a deal, told me.

“Been at sea all your life, hain't you?” he added.

“Figuratively speaking,” I replied, “I may have been at sea all my life, but not in reality. Is not,” I continued, parodying Shylock's speech — “Is not a horse an animal? Hath not a horse feet, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with good oats, oftentimes hurt by the whip? Subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?”

The man scratched his head, looked puzzled, and we did not deal.

But, dear reader, were I to tell one-tenth part of the woes I endured before I got horsed and while still tossed on the ocean of uncertainty and buffeted by the adverse winds of friendly advice, your kindly heart would bleed for me.

I believe my great mistake lay in listening to every body. One-half of the inhabitants of our village had horses to sell, the other half knew where to find them.

“You'll want two, you know,” one would say.

I believed that I would need two.

“One large cart-horse will be ample,” said another.

I believed him implicitly.

“I'd have a pole and two nags,” said one.

“I'd have two nags and two pair of shafts,” said another.

“I'd have two nags,” said another; “one in the shafts and the other to trace.”

And so on *ad nauseam* till my brains were all in a whirl, and at night I dreamt I was a teetotum, and people were playing with me. Perhaps they were.

A friend to whom I appealed one day in my anguish cut the Gordian knot.

“You've got a nut on you?” he remarked (he meant my head). “Well,” he said, “make use of that.”

I took his advice.

Chapter Three.

First Experiences of Gipsy Life – The Trial Trip – A ThunderStorm on Maidenhead Thicket

“Now rings the woodland loud and long,
The distance takes a lovelier hue,
And drown’d in yonder living blue
The lark becomes a sightless song.
“Now dance the lights on lawn and lea,
The flocks are whiter down the vale,
And milkier every milky sail,
On winding stream or distant sea.”

Tennyson.

It was to be our first outing – our trial trip, “by the measured mile,” as navy sailors call it. Not so much a trial, however, for the caravan itself, as for a certain horse that was to be attached thereto; and, considering the weight of our house upon wheels, I thought it at least doubtful if any one horse would be sufficient to do the work.

The horse in this instance was – a mare. A splendid powerful dark bay draught mare, with small head, strong, shapely, arching neck, good shoulders, and long enough in body not to look cloddy. Her tail, about two yards long, had been specially plaited and got up for the occasion.

Matilda, as she was named, had never done anything except ploughing before, unless it were an occasional visit to the railway station with a load of wheat or hay. But she appeared quiet, and took the situation in at a glance, including the caravan and its master. We put-to, and after as much manoeuvring as would have sufficed to bring a P. and O. steamer away from a Southampton pier, we cleared the gate and got fairly under way.

In the matter of provisions the Wanderer was amply furnished. We had edibles for the day, and enough for a week, my wife having been steward and caterer for the occasion.

My companion *voyageurs* were the two eldest members of my family – Inez (aetat 7), Lovat (aetat 10), their summer dresses and young beauty making them look quite gay. Besides these, I had Hurricane Bob, my champion Newfoundland, who looked as though he could not quite understand any part of the business.

Very slowly at first walked that mare, and very solemnly too – at a plough-pace, in fact, – and the farmer’s man walked soberly on at her neck. A rousing touch or two of the light gig whip mended matters considerably, and there was far less of the “Dead March in *Saul*” about the progress after this. Matilda warmed to her work; she neighed merrily, and even got into a kind of swinging trot, which, properly speaking, was neither trot nor tramp, only it took us over the ground at four knots an hour, and in pity I made the farmer’s man – who, by the way, had his Sunday clothes all on – get up and sit down.

The morning was very bright and sunny, the road hard and good, but dusty. This latter was certainly a derivative from our pleasure, but then gipsies do not have it all their own way in this world any more than other people. The wind was with us, and was somewhat uncertain, both in force and direction, veering a little every now and then, and soon coming round again. But a select assortment of juvenile whirlwinds had been let loose from their cave, and these did not add to our delight.

Matilda had plenty of pluck, only she must have thought it an exceedingly long furrow, and at the end of two miles suddenly made up her mind to go about of her own accord. This determination

on Matilda's part resulted in a deviation from the straight line, which nearly landed our fore wheels in the ditch; it also resulted in admonitory flagellation for Matilda.

Before we had gone three miles the perspiration was streaming down the mare's legs and meandering over her hoofs, so we pulled up to let her breathe. The day was young, it was all before us, and it is or ought to be in the very nature of every gipsy – amateur or professional – to take no note of time, to possess all the apathy of a Dutchman, all the drowsy independence of a garden tortoise.

The children begged for a cake, and Inez wanted to know what made the horse laugh so.

She might well put this question, for Matilda neighed nearly all the way.

"Why, pa," said Inie, "the horse laughs at everything; he laughs at the trees, he laughs at the flowers, and at the ponds. He laughs at every horse he meets; he laughed at the cows cropping the furze, and at the geese on the common, and now he is laughing at that old horse with its forefeet tied together. What are the old horse's forefeet tied together for, pa?"

"To keep him from running away, darling."

"And what does this horse keep on laughing for?"

"Why, he is so proud, you know, of being harnessed to so beautiful a caravan, that he can't help laughing. He wants to draw the attention of every creature he sees to it. He will be sure to dream about it to-night, and if he wakes up any time before morning he will laugh again."

"Oh!" said Inie, and went on eating her currant-cake thoughtfully.

In about a quarter of an hour we had started again. Lovat, who had been aft having a view at the back door window, came running forward and said excitedly, —

"Oh! pa, there is a gentleman with a carriage and pair behind us, making signs and shouting and waving his whip."

I pulled to the side at once, and the party in the waggonette passed, the gentleman who handled the ribbons scowling and looking forked lightning at us. No wonder, the idea of being stopped on the road by itinerant gipsies!

Well, in driving a large caravan, as you cannot look behind nor see behind, it is as well to keep pretty near your own side of the road. This was a lesson I determined to lay to heart. But if seeing behind me was impossible, hearing was quite as much so, unless it had been the firing of a six-pounder. This was owing to the rattling of things inside the van, for, it being but our trial trip, things had not settled shipshape.

It is but fair to the builders of the Wanderer to say that an easier-going craft or trap never left Bristol. The springs are as strong and easy as ever springs were made. There is no disagreeable motion, but there is – no, I mean there was on that first day – a disagreeable rattling noise.

Nothing inside was silent; nothing would hold its tongue. No wonder our mare Matilda laughed. The things inside the sideboard jingled and rang, edged towards each other, hobnobbed by touching sides, then edged off again. The crystal flower-boat on the top made an uneasy noise, the crimson-tinted glass lampshades made music of their own *in tremolo*, and the guitar fell out of its corner on top of my cremona and cracked a string. So much for the saloon; but in the pantry the concert was at its loudest and its worse – plates and dishes, cups and saucers, tumblers and glasses, all had a word to say, and a song to sing; while as for the tin contents of the Rippingille cooking-range – the kettle and frying-pan, and all the other odds and ends – they constituted a complete band of their own, and a very independent one it was. Arab tom-toms would hardly have been heard alongside that range.

With bits of paper and chips of wood I did what I could to stop the din, and bit my lip and declared war *à outrance* against so unbearable a row. The war is ended, and I am victor. Nothing rattles much now; nothing jangles; nothing sings or speaks or squeaks. My auxiliaries in restoring peace have been – wedge-lets of wood, pads of indiarubber, and nests of cottonwool and tow; and the best of it is that there is nothing unsightly about any of my arrangements after all.

But to resume our journey. As there came a lull in the wind, and consequently some surcease in the rolling storm of dust, we stopped for about an hour at the entrance to Maidenhead Thicket. The children had cakes, and they had books, and I had proofs to correct – nice easy work on a day's outing!

Meanwhile great banks of clouds (*cumulus*) came up from the north-east and obscured the sun and most of the sky, only leaving ever-changing rifts of blue here and there, and the wind went down.

Maidenhead Thicket is a long stretch of wild upland – a well-treed moor, one might call it, and yet a breezy, healthful tableland. The road goes straight through it, with only the greensward, level with the road at each side, then two noble rows of splendid trees, mostly elm and lime, with here and there a maple or oak. But abroad, on the thicket itself, grow clumps of trees of every description, and great masses of yellow blossoming furze and golden-tasselled broom.

To our left the thicket ended afar off in woods, with the round braeland called Bowsy Hill in the distance; to the right, also in woods, but finally in a great sweep of cultivated country, dotted over with many a smiling farm and private mansion.

Maidenhead Thicket in the old coaching days used to be rather dreaded by the four-in-hands that rolled through it. Before entering it men were wont to grasp their bludgeons and look well to their priming, while ladies shrank timorously into corners (as a rule they did). The place is celebrated now chiefly for being a meeting-place for “Arry's 'Ounds.”

How have I not pitied the poor panting stag! It would be far more merciful, and give more real “sport,” to import and turn down in the thicket some wild Shetland sheep.

Some few weeks ago the stag of the day ran for safety into our wee village of Twyford; after it came the hounds in full cry, and next came pricking along a troop of gallant knights and ladies fair. Gallant, did I say? Well, the stag took refuge in a coal-cellar, from which he was finally dragged, and I am thankful to believe that, when they saw it bleeding and breathless, those “gallant” carpet-knights were slightly ashamed of themselves. However, there is no accounting for taste.

Sometimes even until this day Maidenhead Thicket is not safe. Not safe to cyclists, for example, on a warm moonlit summer's night, when tramps lie snoozing under the furze-bushes.

But on this, the day of our trial trip, I never saw the thicket look more lovely; the avenue was a cloudland of tenderest greens, and the music of birds was everywhere around us. You could not have pointed to bush or branch and said, “No bird sings there.” It was the “sweet time o' the year.”

Where the thicket ends the road begins to descend, and after devious and divers windings, you find yourself in the suburbs of Maidenhead, two long rows of charming villas, with gardens in front that could not look prettier. The pink and white may, the clumps of lilac, the leafy hedgerows, the verandahs bedraped with mauve wistaria, the blazes of wallflower growing as high as the privet, and the beds of tulips of every hue, and beds of blood-red daisies in the midst of green lawns – it was all a sight, I can assure you! It made Matilda laugh again, and the children crow and clap their tiny hands with glee.

We passed through the town itself, which is nice enough, and near the bridge drew to the side and stopped, I walking on and over the bridge to find a place to stand for a few hours, for Matilda was tired and steaming, and we all looked forward to dinner.

The river looks nowhere more lovely and picturesque than it does at Maidenhead in summer. Those who cross it by train know this, but you have to stand on the old bridge itself and look at it before you can realise all its beauty. The Thames here is so broad and peaceful, it seems loth to leave so sweet a place. Then the pretty house-boats and yachts, with awnings spread, and smart boats laden with pleasure-seekers, and the broad green lawns on the banks, with their tents and arbours and bright-coloured flower vases, give this reach of the Thames quite a character of its own. How trim these lawns are to be sure! almost too much so for my ideas of romance; and then the chairs need not be stuck all in a row, nor need the vases be so very gaudy.

I found a place to suit me at last, and the Wanderer was drawn up on an inn causeway. Matilda was led away to the stable, the after-steps were let down, and the children said, “Isn’t it dinner-time, pa?”

Pa thought it was. The cloth was spread on this soft carpet, and round it we all squatted – Hurricane Bob in the immediate rear – and had our first real gipsy feed, washed down with ginger-ale procured from the adjoining inn.

I wondered if the Wanderer really was an object of curiosity to the groups who gathered and walked and talked around us?

Younger ladies, I know, were delighted, and not slow to say so.

But I do not think that any one took us for hawkers or cheap-Jack people.

“If I had that caravan, now, and a thousand a year,” we heard one man observe, “I’d kick about everywhere all over the country, and I wouldn’t call the king my cousin.”

Soon after we had returned from a walk and a look at the shops a couple of caravans with real gipsies crossed the bridge.

“Stop, Bill, stop!” cried one of the tawny women, who had a bundle of mats for a chest protector. “Stop the ’orses, can’t yer? I wouldn’t miss a sight o’ this for a pension o’ ’taters.”

The horses were stopped. Sorry-looking nags they were, with coffin heads, bony rumps, and sadly swollen legs.

“Well I never!”

“Sure there was never sich a wan as that afore on the road!”

“Why, look at her, Sally! Look at her, Jim! Up and down, and roun’ and roun’, and back and fore. Why, Bill! I say, that wan’s as complete as a marriage certificate or a summons for assault.”

We people inside felt the compliment.

But we did not show.

“Hi, missus!” cried one; “are ye in, missus? Surely a wan like that wouldn’t be athout a missus. Will ye buy a basket, missus? Show your cap and your bonny face, missus. Would ye no obleege us with just one blink at ye?”

They went away at last, and soon after we got Matilda in and followed.

With her head towards home, and hard, level road, Matilda trotted now, and laughed louder than ever.

But soon the road began to rise; we had to climb the long, steep Maidenhead hill.

And just then the storm of rain and hail broke right in our teeth. At the middle of the hill it was at its worst, but the mare strode boldly on, and finally we were on fairly level road and drew up under some lime-trees.

The distance from Twyford to Maidenhead is nine miles, so we took it as easy going: as we had done coming.

We had meant to have tea in the thicket, but I found at the last moment I had forgotten the water. There was nothing for it but to “bide a wee.”

We stopped for half-an-hour in the thicket, nevertheless, to admire the scenery. Another storm was coming up, but as yet the sun shone brightly on the woods beyond the upland, and the effect was very beautiful. The tree masses were of every colour – green elms and limes, yellowed-leaved oaks, dark waving Scottish pines, and black and elfin-looking yews, with here and there a copper beech.

But the storm came on apace. The last ray of sunlight struck athwart a lime, making its branches look startlingly green against the dark purple of the thundercloud.

Then a darting, almost blinding flash, and by-and-bye the peal of thunder.

The storm came nearer and nearer, so that soon the thunder-claps followed the flashes almost instantly.

Not until the rain and hail came on did the blackbirds cease to flute or the swallows to skim high overhead. How does this accord with the poet Thomson's description of the behaviour of animals during a summer thunderstorm, or rather the boding silence that precedes it? —

“Prone to the lowest vale the aerial tribes
Descend. The tempest-loving raven scarce
Dares wing the dubious dusk. In rueful gaze
The cattle stand,” etc.

Our birds and beasts in Berkshire are not nearly so frightened at thunder as those in Thomson's time must have been, but then there were no railway trains in Thomson's time!

The poet speaks of unusual darkness brooding in the sky before the thunder raises his tremendous voice. This is so; I have known it so dark, or dusk rather, that the birds flew to roost and bats came out. But it is not always that “a calm” or “boding silence reigns.” Sometimes the wind sweeps here and there in uncertain gusts before the storm, the leaf-laden branches bending hither and thither before them.

We came to a part of the road at last where the gable end of a pretty porter's lodge peeped over the trees, and here pulled up. The thunder was very loud, and lightning incessant, only it did not rain then. Nothing deterred, Lovat, kettle in hand, lowered himself from the *coupé* and disappeared to beg for water. As there was no other house near at hand it was natural for the good woman of the lodge, seeing a little boy with a fisherman's red cap on, standing at her porch begging for water, to ask, — “Wherever do you come from?” Lovat pointed upwards in the direction of the caravan, which was hidden from view by the trees, and said, —

“From up there.”

“Do ye mean to tell me,” she said, “that you dropped out of the clouds in a thunderstorm with a tin-kettle in your hand?”

But he got the water, the good lady had her joke, and we had tea.

The storm grew worse after this. Inez grew frightened, and asked me to play.

“Do play the fiddle, pa!” she beseeched. So, while the “Lightning gleamed across the rift,” and the thunder crashed overhead, “pa” fiddled, even as Nero fiddled when Rome was burning.

Chapter Four. Twyford and the Regions around it

“I heard a thousand blended notes
While in a grove I sat reclined
In that sweet moor, when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.
“One moment now may give us more
Than fifty years of reason;
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season.”

Wordsworth.

Not to say a word about Twyford – the village that has given me birth and bield for ten long years – would be more than unkind, it would be positively ungrateful.

I must hasten to explain, however, that the Twyford referred to is THE Twyford – Twyford, Berks. About a dozen other Twyfords find their names recorded in the Postal Guide, from each and all of which we hold ourselves proudly aloof. Has Twyford the Great then, it may reasonably enough be asked, anything in particular to boast of? Well, methinks to belong to so charming a county as that of Berks is in itself something to be proud of. Have we not —

“Our forests and our green retreats,
At once the monarch’s and the muse’s seats,
Our hills and dales, and woods and lawns and spires,
And glittering towns and silver streams?”

Yes, and go where you will anywhere round Twyford, every mile is sacred to the blood of warriors spilt in the brave days of old. Not far from here Pope the poet lived and sang. The author of “Sandford and Merton” was thrown from his horse and killed at our neighbouring village of Wargrave, the very name of which is suggestive of stirring times. Well, up yonder on the hillhead lived the good old Quaker Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania. Yet, strange to say, no Americans are ever known to visit the spot. There is at Ruscombe (Penn’s parish) a pretty and rustic-looking church, and not far off is the cosy vicarage of redbrick, almost hidden in foliage. On a knoll behind it, and in the copse at one side, is quite a forest of waving pines and larches and oaks. Hidden in the centre of this forest is a rude kind of clearing; in reality it has been a quarry or gravel-pit, but it is now charmingly embanked with greensward, with here and there great patches of gorse and bramble.

This place all the livelong summer I made my everyday retreat, my woodland study. But it is not of myself I would speak. At one side of this clearing stands a great oak-tree. It rises from a flat grassy eminence, and affords an excellent shelter from showers or sun. At the foot of this tree sometimes, on moonlight midnights, a tall and aged figure, in a broad-brimmed hat, may be seen seated in meditation. It, or *he*, ever vanishes before any one is bold enough to approach. Can this be the ghost of Penn? Mind, I, myself, have never seen *it* or *him*, and the apparition may be all fancy, or moonshine and flickering shadow, but I give the story as I got it.

Twyford the Great is not a large place, its population is barely a thousand; there is a new town and an old. The new town is like all mushroom villages within a hundred miles of the city – a mere tasteless conglomeration of bricks and mortar, with only two pretty houses in it.

But old Twyford is quaint and pretty from end to end – from the lofty poplars that bound my orchard out Ruscombe way, to the drowsy and romantic old mill on the Loddon. This last is worth a visit; only, if you lean over the bridge and look at this old mill for any length of time, you are bound to fall asleep, and I am bound to tell you so.

Twyford in summer, as well as the neighbourhood all round, may be seen at their best. The inhabitants of Twyford are at their best any day. I have strong reasons for believing the village must have been founded by some philosophical old Dutchman, or Rip van Winkle himself. And the peace of Penn seems to rest for ever around it.

The amusements in my wee village are few, rural, and primitive. Amateur cricket in summer, amateur concerts in winter, sum up the enjoyments of “Twyford at home.”

But the most delightful time of all in our Twyford is the season from March to June. Concerts are over, cricket has not commenced, and therefore dulness and apathy might now be reasonably supposed to prevail among us. Perhaps; but the lover of nature is now quite as happy as the birds and the early flowers and budding trees.

So many lightning-tipped pens have written about spring and its enjoyments, that I shall not here attempt to sing its praises. I may be excused for saying, however, that while the inhabitants of towns and cities like, as a rule, to have their spring all ready-made when they pay a visit to rural districts, the orchards all in full bloom, the may all out, and the nightingales turned down, we simple-minded “country bodies” delight in watching and witnessing the gradual transformation from leafless tree to glittering leaf; from bare brown fields, o’erswept by stormy winds, to daisy-covered leas, cowslip meads, and primrose banks.

To me – and, no doubt, to many – there is far more of beauty in a half-blown floweret of the field, say the mountain-daisy, Burns’s “Wee modest crimson-tippèd flower,” than there is in a garden favourite full outspread – take the staring midday tulip as a familiar example.

Down here in bird-haunted Berkshire spring begins in February even, whatever it may do in Yorkshire. Now noisy rooks begin to build; the mavis or thrush, perched high on some swaying tree, sings loud and sweet of joys in store; on sunny days I’ve known an invalid-looking hedgehog or dormouse wriggle out from his hibernal grave, look hungrily around, sun himself, shiver, and wriggle back again. But the sly snake and the sage old toad stick close to bank until the days are longer. Even thus early an occasional butterfly may be seen afloat, looking in vain for flowers. He cannot be happy; like the poet, he is born before his time.

But soon after big humble bees appear about gardens and woodland paths, flying drowsily and heavily. They are prospecting; they get into all kinds of holes, and I may say all kinds of scrapes, often tumbling helplessly on their backs, and getting very angry when you go to their assistance with a straw.

Did it ever strike the reader that those same great velvety bees are republicans in their way of thinking? It is true. One humble bee is just as good as another. And very polite they are to each other too, and never unsheath their stings to fight without good occasion. Just one example: Last summer, in my woodland study, I noticed one large bee enter a crimson foxglove bell. Presently round came another – not of the same clan, for he wore a white-striped tartan, the first being a Gordon, and wearing the yellow band. The newcomer was just about to enter the bell where bee Number 1 was. Bee Number 1 simply lifted his forearm and waved the intruder back. “I really beg pardon,” said bee Number 2. “I didn’t know there was any one inside.” And away he flew.

In February, down with us, the hazel-trees are tasselled over with catkins. Every one notices those, but few observe the tiny flower that grows on the twig near those drooping catkins. Only a tuft of green with a crimson tip, but inexpressibly beautiful. At the same time you will find the wild willow-bushes all covered with little flossy white cocoons.

There will be also a blaze of furze blossom here and there in the copse, but hardly a bud yet upon the hedgerows, while the great forest trees are still soundly wrapped in their winter sleep.

But high up on yonder swaying bough the thrush keeps on singing. Spring and joy are coming soon.

“It is the cuckoo that tells us spring is coming,” some one may say. The man who first promulgated that notion ought to have been tried by court-martial. The cuckoo never comes till leaves are out and flowers in bloom. Nor the noisy wryneck nor melodious nightingale. These are merely actors and musicians, and they never put in an appearance till the carpet has been spread on the stage, and the scenery is perfect.

A cherry orchard is lovely indeed when its trees are snowed over with the blossoms that cluster around the twigs like swarms of bees, their dazzling whiteness relieved by just the faintest tinge of green. An apple orchard is also beautiful in the sunshine of a spring morning when the bloom is expanded. I grant that, but to me it is far more to be admired when the flowers are just opening and the carmine tint is on them.

Probably the pink or white may look best when in full unfolded bloom; but have you ever noticed either of these just before they open, when the flowerets look like little balls of red or white wax prettily set in their background of green leafage? The white variety at this stage presents an appearance not unlike that of lily-of-the-valley bloom, and is just as pretty.

The ordinary laurel too is quite a sight when its flowers are half unfolded. The Portuguese laurel blooms later on; the tree then looks pretty at a distance, but its perfume prevents one from courting a too close acquaintance with it.

But there is the common holly that gives us our Christmas decorations. Has my city reader noticed it in bloom in May? It is interesting if not beautiful. All round the ends of the twiglets, clustering beneath last year’s leaves, is first seen an excrescence, not unlike that on the beak of a carrier pigeon. This opens at last into a white-green bunch of blossom, and often the crimson winter berries still cling to the same twiglet. This looks curious at least – May wedded to bleak December, Christmas to Midsummer.

The oak and the ash are among the last trees to hear the voice of spring and awaken from their winter’s sleep. Grand, sturdy trees both, but how exceedingly modest in their florescence! So too is the plane or maple-tree.

The first young leaves of the latter are of different shades of brown and bronze, while those of the stunted oaks that grow in hedgerows are tinted with carmine, making these hedges gay in May and June even before the honeysuckle or wild roses come out.

The oak-trees when first coming into leaf are of a golden-green colour, and quite a feature of the woodlands. The tall swaying poplars are yellow in leaf at first, but soon change to darkest green.

But in this sweet time of the year every tree is a poem, and the birds that hide among their foliage do but set those poems to music.

It is interesting to note the different kinds of showers that fall from the trees. Here in Twyford I live in a miniature wilderness, partly garden, partly orchard, partly forest. Very early in the year the yew-tree yonder sheds its little round blossoms, as thick as hail; soon after come showers of leaf scales or chaff from the splendid lime-trees; and all kinds of showers from the chestnuts. Anon there is a perfect snowstorm of apple-blossom, which continues for more than a week; and early in June, when the wind blows from the east, we are treated to a continued fall of the large flat seeds of the elms. They flutter downwards gently enough, but they litter the ground, cover the lawns and flower-beds, and lie inches deep on the top of the verandah.

A drive from Twyford to Henley-on-Thames is very enjoyable on a summer’s day; a journey thither in a great caravan like the Wanderer is still more so. The first two miles of the road might be termed uninteresting, because flat and monotonous, but it is uninteresting only to those who have no eye for the beauty of the wild flowers that line the banks, no ear for the melody of birds.

Wargrave, just two miles on the road, lies among its trees pretty close to the river’s bank. I should not like to call it a health resort all the year round, owing to the killing fogs that bury it at

times, but in the season it is a pleasant spot at which to spend a week. Wyatt's is the inn, a well-known river house indeed – old-fashioned, clean, and comfortable. There is a sign on a pole outside which is worth taking a look at. Mr Leslie and Mr Hodson (the well-known artists) were sojourning here once upon a time, taking their ease at their inn. Perhaps it was raining, and the time felt long. Anyhow, between them they painted that sign, and there it hangs – Saint George on one side engaged in deadly combat with a monster dragon; on the other side the dragon lying dead, and Saint George dismounted, and engaged refreshing himself with a tankard of foaming ale.

From Wargrave to Henley the scenery is sweetly pretty, and the river never leaves your side, though at times it hides behind and beneath the spreading trees.

As every one has heard or read about or been at Henley Regatta, so every one knows something of Henley itself. It is a charming little town, and the wooded hills about, with, even on their summits, the white mansions peeping through the trees, the river – broad and sweeping – the fine old bridge, and the church, combine to form not one picture only, but a picture in whichever direction you choose to look.

From the top of the church steeple the views on all sides are delightful.

I recommend this plan of seeing scenery to my American friends at present visiting England, and to every one else; never miss a chance of visiting the churches and getting up into the steeple. By this means I have oftentimes found refreshment both for mind and body.

If it were not that I wish to wander and roam through my native land, and actually *feel* from home, I could write a book on Berkshire alone. Even in the immediate neighbourhood of Twyford there are hundreds of beautiful spots, which those in search of health and quiet pleasure would do well to visit.

Marlow is a delightful village; all round Maidenhead, up and down the river, it is even more so. One might say of the country hereabouts, especially in summer and autumn, —

“A pleasing land of drowsy head it is,
Of dreams that wave before the half-shut eye
Of gay castles... And soft delights that witchingly
Instil a wanton sweetness thro' the breast.”

Chapter Five. A First Week's Outing

“From the moist meadow to the withered hill,
Led by the breeze, the vivid verdure runs
And swells and deepens to the cherished eye;
The hawthorn whitens; and the juicy groves
Put forth their buds, unfolding by degrees,
Till the whole leafy forest stands displayed
In full luxuriance to the sighing gales,
Where the deer rustle through the twining brake,
And the birds sing concealed.”

Thornton's "Seasons."

Early in May I left my village to enjoy a taste of gipsy life in earnest – a week on the road.

Matilda is a splendid mare, and a very handsome one. Strong and all though she be, there was in my mind a doubt as to whether she could drag the Wanderer on day after day at even the rate of ten miles in the twenty-four hours.

It had been raining the night before, and as the road from our yard leads somewhat up hill, it was no wonder that the immense caravan stuck fast before it got out of the gate. This was a bad beginning to a gipsy cruise, and, as a small concourse of neighbours had assembled to witness the start, was somewhat annoying. But a coal-carter's horse came to the rescue, and the start was finally effected.

Matilda took us through Twyford at a round trot, and would fain have broken into a gallop, but was restrained. But the long hill that leads up from the Loddon bridge took the extra spirit out of her, and she soon settled down to steady work.

There is a pretty peep of Reading to be caught from the top of the railway bridge. No traveller should miss seeing it.

Rested at Reading, our smart appearance exciting plenty of curiosity. It was inside that the crowd wanted to peep – it is inside all crowds want to peep, and they are never shy at doing so.

The town of Reading is too well-known to need description; its abbey ruins are, however, the best part of it, to my way of thinking.

The day was as fine as day could be, the sky overcast with grey clouds that moderated the sun's heat.

Our chosen route lay past Calcot Park, with its splendid trees, its fine old solid-looking, redbrick mansion, and park of deer. This field of deer, I remember, broke loose one winter. It scattered in all directions; some of the poor creatures made for the town, and several were spiked on railings. The people had “sport,” as they called it, for a week.

It was almost gloomy under the trees that here overhang the road. Matilda was taken out to graze, the after-tent put up, and dinner cooked beneath the caravan. Cooked! ay, and eaten too with a relish one seldom finds with an indoor meal!

On now through Calcot village, a small and straggling little place, but the cottages are neat and pretty, and the gardens were all ablaze with spring-flowers, and some of the gables and verandahs covered with flowering clematis.

The country soon got more open, the fields of every shade of green – a gladsome, smiling country, thoroughly English.

This day was thoroughly enjoyable, and the mare Matilda did her work well.

Unhorsed and encamped for the night in the comfortable yard of the Crown Inn.

When one sleeps in his caravan in an inn yard he does not need to be called in the morning; far sooner than is desirable in most instances, cocks begin to noisily assert their independence, dogs bark or rattle their chains, cows moan in their stalls, and horses clatter uneasily by way of expressing their readiness for breakfast. By-and-bye ostlers come upon the scene, then one may as well get up as lie a-bed.

Though all hands turned out at seven o'clock am, it was fully eleven before we got under way, for more than one individual was curious to inspect us, and learn all the outs and ins of this newest way of seeing the country. The forenoon was sunny and bright, and the roads good, with a coldish headwind blowing.

Both road and country are level after leaving Theale, with plenty of wood and well-treed braelands on each side. This for several miles.

Jack's Booth, or the Three Kings, is a long, low house-of-call that stands by the wayside at cross roads: an unpleasant sort of a place to look at. By the way, who was Jack, I wonder, and what three kings are referred to? The name is suggestive of card-playing. But it may be historical.

The fields are very green and fresh, and the larks sing very joyfully, looking no bigger than midges against the little fleecy cloudlets.

I wonder if it be more difficult for a bird to sing on the wing than on a perch. The motion, I think, gives a delightful tremolo to the voice.

My cook, steward, valet, and general factotum is a lad from my own village, cleanly, active, and very willing, though not gifted with too good a memory, and apt to put things in the wrong place – my boots in the oven, for instance!

He sleeps on a cork mattress, in the after-compartment of the Wanderer, and *does not snore*.

A valet who snored would be an unbearable calamity in a caravan.

Hurricane Bob, my splendid Newfoundland, sleeps in the saloon on a morsel of red blanket. He *does* snore sometimes, but if told of it immediately places his chin over his fore-paw, and in this position sleeps soundly without any nasal noise.

On our way to Woolhampton – our dining stage – we had many a peep at English rural life that no one ever sees from the windows of a railway carriage. Groups of labourers, male and female, cease work among the mangolds, and, leaning on their hoes, gaze wonderingly at the Wanderer. Even those lazy workaday horses seem to take stock of us, switching their long tails as they do so, in quite a businesslike way. Yonder are great stacks of old hay, and yonder a terribly-red brick farm building, peeping up through a cloudland of wood.

We took Matilda out by the roadside at Woolhampton. This village is very picturesque; it lies in a hollow, and is surrounded by miniature mountains and greenwood. The foliage here is even more beautiful than that around Twyford.

We put up the after-tent, lit the stove, and prepared at once to cook dinner – an Irish stew, made of a rabbit, rent in pieces, and some bacon, with sliced potatoes – a kind of cock-a-leekie. We flavoured it with vinegar, sauce, salt, and pepper. It *was* an Irish stew – perhaps it was a good deal Irish, but it did not eat so very badly, nor did we dwell long over it.

The fresh air and exercise give one a marvellous appetite, and we were hungry all day long.

But every one we met seemed to be hungry too. A hunk of bread and bacon or bread and cheese appears to be the standing dish. Tramps sitting by the wayside, navvies and roadmen, hawkers with barrows – all were carving and eating their hunks.

A glorious afternoon.

With cushions and rugs, our broad *coupé* makes a most comfortable lounge, which I take advantage of. Here one can read, can muse, can dream, in a delightfully lethargic frame of mind. Who *would* be a dweller in dusty cities, I wonder, who can enjoy life like this?

Foley – my valet – went on ahead on the Ranelagh Club (our caravan tricycle) to spy out the land at Thatcham and look for quarters for the night.

There were certain objections to the inn he chose, however; so, having settled the Wanderer on the broad village green, I went to another inn.

A blackish-skinned, burly, broad-shouldered fellow answered my summons. Gruff he was in the extreme.

“I want stabling for the night for one horse, and also a bed for my driver.” This from me.

“Humph! I’ll go and see,” was the reply.

“Very well; I’ll wait.”

The fellow returned soon.

“Where be goin’ to sleep yourse’f?”

This he asked in a tone of lazy insolence.

I told him mildly I had my travelling saloon caravan. I thought that by calling the Wanderer a *saloon* I would impress him with the fact that I was a gentleman gipsy.

Here is the answer in full.

“Humph! Then your driver can sleep there too. We won’t ’ave no wan (van) ’osses ’ere; and wot’s more, we won’t ’ave no wan folks!”

My Highland blood got up; for a moment I measured that man with my eye, but finally I burst into a merry laugh, as I remembered that, after all, Matilda was only a “wan” horse, and we were only “wan” folks.

In half an hour more both Matilda and my driver were comfortably housed, and I was having tea in the caravan.

Thatcham is one of the quietest and quaintest old towns in Berkshire. Some of the houses are really studies in primeval architecture. I could not help fancying myself back in the Middle Ages. Even that gruff landlord looked as if he had stepped out of an old picture, and were indeed one of the beef-eating, bacon-chewing retainers of some ancient baronial hall.

It was somewhat noisy this afternoon on the village green. The young folks naturally took us for a show, and wondered what we did, and when we were going to do it.

Meanwhile they amused themselves as best they could. About fifty girls played at ball and “give-and-take” on one side of the green, and about fifty boys played on the other.

The game the boys played was original, and remarkable for its simplicity. Thus, two lads challenged each other to play, one to be deer, the other to be hound. Then round and round and up and down the green they sped, till finally the breathless hound caught the breathless deer. Then “a ring” of the other lads was formed, and deer and hound had first to wrestle and then to fight. And *vae victis!* the conquered lad had no sooner declared himself beaten than he was seized and thrown on his back, a rope was fastened to his legs, and he was drawn twice round the ground by the juvenile shouting mob, and then the fun began afresh. A game like this is not good for boys’ jackets, and tailors must thrive in Thatcham.

Next day was showery, and so was the day after, but we continued our rambles all the same, and enjoyed it very much indeed.

But now on moist roads, and especially on hills, it became painfully evident that Matilda – who, by the way, was only on trial – was not fit for the work of dragging the Wanderer along in all countries and in all weathers. She was willing, but it grieved me to see her sweat and pant.

Our return journey was made along the same route. Sometimes, in making tea or coffee, we used a spirit-of-wine stove. It boiled our water soon, and there was less heat. Intending caravanists would do well to remember this. Tea, again, we found more quickly made than coffee, and cocoatina than either.

As we rolled back again towards Woolhampton the weather was very fine and sunny. It was a treat to see the cloud shadows chasing each other over the fields of wind-tossed wheat, or the meadows golden with buttercups, and starred with the ox-eyed daisies.

The oldest of old houses can be seen and admired in outlying villages of Berkshire, and some of the bold Norman-looking men who inhabit these take the mind back to Merrie England in the Middle Ages. Some of these men look as though they could not only eat the rustiest of bacon, but actually swallow the rind.

On our way back to Theale we drew up under some pine-trees to dine. The wind, which had been blowing high, increased to half a gale. This gave me the new experience – that the van rocked. Very much so too, but it was not unpleasant. After dinner I fell asleep on the sofa, and dreamt I was rounding the Cape of Good Hope in a strong breeze.

There is a road that leads away up to Beenham Hill from Woolhampton from which, I think, one of the loveliest views in Berks can be had. A long winding avenue leads to it – an avenue.

“O’erhung with wild woods thickening green,” and “braes” clad in brackens, among which wild flowers were growing – the sweet-scented hyacinth, the white or pink crane’s-bill, the little pimpernel, and the azure speedwell.

The hill is wooded – and such woods! – and all the wide country seen therefrom is wooded.

Surely spring tints rival even those of autumn itself!

This charming spot is the home *par excellence* of the merle and thrush, the saucy robin, the bold pert chaffie, and murmuring cushat.

Anchored at Crown Inn at Theale once more.

A pleasant walk through the meadows in the cool evening. Clover and vetches coming into bloom, or already red and white. A field of blossoming beans. Lark singing its vesper hymn. I was told when a boy it was a hymn, and I believe it still.

After a sunset visit to the steeple of Theale Church we turned in for the night. Bob has quite taken up his commission as caravan guard. By day he sleeps on the broad *coupé*, with his crimson blanket over his shoulders to keep away the cold May winds; and when we call a halt woe be to the tramp who ventures too near, or who looks at all suspicions!

On leaving the Crown Inn yard, Matilda made an ugly “jib,” which almost resulted in a serious accident to the whole expedition. Matilda has a mind of her own. I do *not* like a horse that thinks, and I shall not have much more of Matilda. To be capsized in a dogcart by a jibbing horse would be bad enough, but with our great conveyance it would mean something akin to shipwreck.

The last experience I wish to record in this chapter is this; in caravan travelling there is naturally more fatigue than there would be in spending the same time in a railway carriage. When, therefore, you arrive in the evening at one village, you have this feeling – that you must be hundreds of miles from another.

(One soon gets used to caravan travelling, however, and finds it far less fatiguing than any other mode of progression.)

“Is it possible,” I could not help asking myself, “that Thatcham is only ten or twelve miles from Theale, and that by train I could reach it in fifteen minutes? It feels to me as if it were far away in the wilds of Scotland.”

People must have felt precisely thus in the days before railways were invented, and when horses were the only progressive power.

Chapter Six. Our Last Spring Ramble

“The softly warbled song
Comes from the pleasant woods, and coloured wings
Glance quick in the bright sun, that moves along
The forest openings.

“And the bright sunset fills
The silver woods with light, the green slope throws
Its shadow in the hollows of the hill,
And wide the upland glows.”

Longfellow.

It is now well into the middle of June. Like the lapwing in autumn, I have been making short flights here, there, and everywhere within a day's march previous to the start on my “journey due north.”

Whatever it might be to others, with longer and wiser heads, to me the greatest difficulty has been in getting horses to suit. I have tried many. I have had jibbers, bolters, kickers; and one or two *so* slow, but *so* sore, that an eighty-one-ton gun fired alongside them would not increase their pace by a yard to the mile.

To get horsed may *seem* an easy matter to many. It might *be* easy for some, only it ought to be borne in mind that I am leaving home on a long journey – one, at all events, that will run to weeks and mayhap months; a journey not altogether unattended with danger – and that; my horses are my motor power. If they fail me I have nothing and no one to fall back upon. Hence my anxiety is hardly to be wondered at.

But here let me say that caravanning for health and pleasure had better not be undertaken with a single carriage, however well horsed. There ought to be two caravans at least. Then, in the event of coming to an ugly hill, there is an easy way of overcoming it – by bending all your horse-power on to one carriage at a time, and so trotting them over the difficulty.

To go all alone as I am about to do is really to go at considerable risk; and at this moment I cannot tell you whether I am suitably horsed or not.

But in the stable yonder stand quietly in their stalls Pea-blossom and Corn-flower, of whom more anon. Pea-blossom is a strong and good-looking dark bay mare of some fifteen hands and over; Corn-flower is a pretty light bay horse. They match well; they pull together; and in their buff leather harness they really look a handsome pair.

They are good in the feet, too, and good “doers,” to use stable phraseology. Corn-flower is the best “doer,” however. The rascal eats all day, and would deprive himself of sleep to eat. Nothing comes wrong to Corn-flower. Even when harnessed he will have a pull at anything within reach of his neck. If a clovery lea be beneath his feet, so much the better; if not, a “rive” at a blackthorn hedge, a bush of laurels, a bracken bank, or even a thistle, will please him. I'm not sure, indeed, that he would not eat an old shoe if nothing else came handy. But Pea-blossom is more dainty. It is for her we fear on the march. She was bought from a man who not only *is* a dealer, but is not ashamed to sign himself dealer; whereas Corn-flower was bought right off farm work.

Well, time will tell.

Yes, spring is waning, though hardly yet has summer really come, so backward and cold has the season been.

We have had our last day's pleasant outing *en famille*. Mamma went, and even baby Ida, who is old enough to ask questions and make queer remarks.

A clear sky and the brightest of sunshine, though not distressingly hot. We crossed country for Wokingham. The trees very beautiful, though the leaves are already turning more crisp; in spring time, city reader mine, as the wind goes whispering through the trees, it seems as if every leaf were of softest silk; in summer the sound is a soughing or rustling one; but in winter the breeze moans and shrieks among the bare branches, and "blows with boisterous sweep."

We unlimbered in the market square at Wokingham. The English are a novelty-loving people. This was well shown to-day, for streets and pavements were speedily lined to look at us, and even windows raised, while Modesty herself must needs peep from behind the curtains. In the afternoon a regiment of artillery came into the town, and popular attention was henceforth drawn to them, though our visitors were not few.

On our way home we passed the lodges of Haines Hill, the residence of the well-known T. Garth, Esq, a country squire of the true English type – a man who, although over sixty, almost lives in the saddle, and in the season follows his own hounds five days a week. The narrowness of the avenues and plenitude of the drooping limes forbade a visit to the manor, of which, however, as we went slowly along the road we caught many a glimpse red-glimmering through the green.

Great banks of pink and crimson rhododendrons gave relief to the eye. Looking to the right the country was visible for miles, richly-treed as the whole of Berkshire is, and with many a farmhouse peeping up through clouds of foliage.

The cottages by the roadside at this time of the year are always worth looking at. They vie with each other in the tidiness of their gardens, their porches, and verandahs.

They cultivate roses, all kinds and colours; standards and half-standards and climbers, crimson, white, yellow, pink, and purple. Stocks and wallflowers are also very favourite flowers. Even those cottages that cannot boast of a morsel of garden have the insides of every window all ablaze with flowering geraniums.

The memorable features of this pleasant day's gipsying were flowers, foliage, and the exceeding brightness of the sunshine.

At Malta and in Africa I have seen stronger lights and deeper shadows, but never in England before. The sky was cerulean, Italian, call it what you like, but it was very blue. The sunshine gave beauty and gladness to everything and every creature around us. Birds, butterflies, and shimmering four-winged metallic-tinted dragon-flies flew, floated, and revelled in it. It lay in patches on the trees, it lent a lighter crimson to the fields of clover, a brighter yellow to the golden buttercups; it changed the ox-eye daisies to glittering stars, and gave beauty-tints innumerable to seedling grasses and bronzy flowering docks.

Under the trees it was almost dark by contrast. So marked, indeed, was this contrast that when a beautiful young girl, in a dress of white and pink, came suddenly out of the shadow and stood in the sunshine, it appeared to us as if she had sprung from the earth itself, for till now she had been invisible.

Before we reached home a blue evening haze had fallen on all the wooded landscape, making distant trees mere shapes, but hardly marring the beauty of the wild flowers that grew on each side of our path and carpeted the woodlands and copses.

This was our last spring outing, and a happy one too. From this date I am to be a solitary gipsy.

Solitary, and yet not altogether so. My coachman is, I believe, a quiet and faithful fellow, and eke my valet too. Then have I not the companionship of Hurricane Bob, one of the grandest of a grand race of jetty-black Newfoundlands, whose coats have never been marred by a single curly hair?

Nay, more, have I not also my West Australian cockatoo to talk to me, to sing with me, and dance when I play? Come, I am not so badly off. Hurrah! then, for the road and a gipsy's life in earnest.

Chapter Seven.

A Start for the Far North – From Reading to Warwick

“O spires of Oxford! domes and towers,
Gardens and groves;
I slight my own beloved Cam to range
Where silver Isis leads my wandering feet.”

Wordsworth.

“A curious Gothic building, many gabled,
By flowering creepers hidden and entangled.”

There is to my way of thinking a delicious uncertainty in starting on a long caravan tour, without being aware in the least what you are going to do or see, or even what route you are going to take.

As regards a route, though, I did throw up a pebble with a black tick on it before the horses pulled out at the gate, and twice running the spot pointed to the north-west.

So we steered for Reading, and on without stopping as far as the Roebuck Hotel at Tilehurst. Nine years ago this hotel was a very small one indeed, but all gables, thickest thatch, and climbing roses and honeysuckle. The thatch has given place to red tiles, and an addendum of modern dimensions has been built. The old most ever give place to the new. But what lovely peeps there are from this hotel, from the balcony and from the bedrooms. It is a river house now in every sense of the word, though not old as a hotel of the kind, and all day long, and far into the night, the bar and passages and the coffee-rooms are crowded in summer with men in snowy flannels, and with some in sailor garb and with artificial sailor swagger.

The road leads onwards through a cool elm avenue towards Pangbourne. The copses here are in earlier spring carpeted with wild hyacinths. On the hilltop the scenery opens out again, the tree-clad valley of the Thames, fields of green grain, with poppies here and there, or wild mustard, and fields crimson with blossoming trefoil. Surely milk and butter must be good when cows are fed on flowers.

“Lay till the day” in the great inn yard of the George. Rather too close to the railway embankment, for the trains went roaring past all night long. This did not make sleeping impossible, for a gipsy, even an amateur one, can sleep anywhere; but the earth shook and the lamps rattled every time a train rolled by. Some villas are built right beneath the embankment, which is far higher than their roofs. *Facilis descensus Averni*. What a strange and terrible accident it would be were one of those trains to leave the line and run through a roof! An old lady of the nervous persuasion, who lives here, told me that she oftentimes trembled in her bed when she thought of this dread possibility.

Pangbourne is a well-known haunt for those who love boating and fishing. It is quiet, and so well shaded as to be cool on the warmest summer day. But Pangbourne is not a hackneyed place, and never, I believe, will be so.

Left about nine o'clock on June 19th. It had been raining just enough to lay the dust and give a brighter colouring to the foliage.

Ivy leaves, when young, are, as my country readers know, of a very bright green. There are on a well-kept lawn by the riverside, and just outside Pangbourne, a coach-house and a boathouse. Both are well-built and prettily shaped. They are thatched, and the walls are completely covered in close-cropped ivy, giving them the look of houses built of green leaves.

Two miles from Pangbourne a nice view of the Thames valley is obtained, round wooded hills on the right bank, with farms here and there, and fields now covered with waving wheat, some of them flooded over with the rich red of the blossoming sainfoin.

We reach the village of Lower Basildon. Spring seems to linger long in this sweet vale. Here is a lofty spruce, each twiglet pointed with a light green bud; here a crimson flowered chestnut; yonder a row of pink mayes and several laburnums, whose drooping blooms show no symptoms yet of fading or falling.

At the grotto we pass through a splendid avenue of beeches.

Just at the top of a steep hilltop we meet a girl and a boy on the same tricycle. How happy they look! We warn them of the steepness of the descent. They smilingly thank us, put on their brake, and go floating away and finally disappear among the beeches.

Every one has rushed through Goring and Streatley by train, and some may have thought the villages pretty. So they are indeed, but you must go by road to find this out. Look at them from Grotto Hill, for instance, just after you emerge from the lane.

Here is a pretty bit of road. On the left is a high bank covered with young beech-trees, a hedge on the right, then a green field sweeping down the hill to the river's edge. The Thames is here bordered with willow-trees and flowering elders. That hedgerow is low and very wild. It may be blackthorn at heart, but it is quite encanopied by a wealth of trailing weeds and flowers, and by roses and honeysuckle all in bloom, while the roadsides are laid out by nature's hand in beds of yellow trefoil and blue speedwell. The pink marsh-mallow, too, is growing in every grassy nook by the hedge-foot.

I wonder how far on my journey north will hedgerows accompany me. I shall feel sorry when they give place to unsightly wooden fences or walls of rugged stone.

High up yonder is a green grassy tableland or moor, through which goes the ancient ridge-way or cattle-road to Wales. Unused now, of course, but the scene of many a strange story in bygone times.

A little very old man gets out from under a tree and stands as straight as he can to gaze at us. Surely the oldest inhabitant of these regions. His dress is peculiar – a cow-gown worn beneath and protruding like a kilt from under a long blue coat, and a tall black hat. He bobs his wrinkled face, grins, and talks to himself as we pass. A queer old man indeed.

We stopped on Moulsoford Hill to water horses. A fine open country, and breezy to-day. Rather too breezy, in fact, for hardly had we started again before the wind got in under the great awning which covers the roof from stem to stern. It ripped the cloth from the hooks that held it, but I caught it in time, else it would have blown over the horses' heads, and might have given rise to a very serious accident.

It was market-day at Wallingford, and busy and bustling it was in the little town. The place is close to the Thames. It boasts of a bridge with nineteen arches, a very ancient history, and the remains of an old castle, which, it is said, was at one time considered impregnable. It was besieged by King Stephen, and defied him.

It held out against Cromwell too, I am told, and was one of the last places to surrender. The remains of its ancient walls are visible enough in the shape of mounds, turf-clad, and green as a grave.

Did Wallingford not hold out against the Danes also? I believe it did. I have already had so much of Oliver Cromwell and the Danes dinned into my ear, that I am heartily tired of both. If I can credit current traditions, the Danes must have been very badly handled indeed, and must have bitterly repented ever setting a foot on English shores.

The country after leaving Wallingford is exceedingly picturesque; one is inclined to deem every peep of scenery prettier than that which preceded it, and to pity from the heart people who travel by train.

Shillingford, in our route, is a little village which, as far as I could see, consists mostly of public-houses. Near here are the Whittingham Clumps, which do not look of much account, merely two

round green hills with a tuft of trees on the top of each. Yet they can be seen for many miles – almost, indeed, from every part of Berkshire.

Dorchester, some miles farther on, is quiet and pretty, and evidently an old village – its cottages look old, its inns look old, and eke the church itself. Just the spot for an artist to while away a month in summer, while an author might do worse than lay the scene of a tale in a place like this.

We stopped in front of the mansion house of Burcot, and made coffee under the chestnuts. The house lies off the road, but there is no fence around the park; we could rest in the shade therefore. Here are some splendid pine-trees (Scotch) and elms. What a noble tree an elm is, if its branches are spared by the billhook of pruner or axe of woodman! The most of our English trees are spoiled in appearance by injudicious interference.

We reached Abingdon in the evening, having done twenty miles and spent a delightful day. But the horses were tired of their long drag. There is to be a great fair here to-morrow. It is only natural, therefore, that the people should take us for real gipsies.

We have stabled our steeds, and the Wanderer lies snug in the back yard of a wealthy corn merchant, and within the precincts of the old gaol. The place was built at an expenditure of 36,000 pounds, but Abingdon being no longer the county town, it has been sold and turned into a granary. The town is all *en gala*, and the young folks, at all events, are enjoying the sights and sounds.

Visited to-night by a group of gipsies of the true type. They came, they said, to admire our “turnout.” They had never seen so grand a caravan on the road, and so on and so forth.

Abingdon is a cosy little town, a neighbourly, kindly sort of a place that any one fond of country life must enjoy living in. Abingdon should be visited by tourists in summer far more than it is.

We started early, and had some difficulty in getting through the town, so narrow are the streets and so crowded were they to-day. On the road we met droves of horses and traps or conveyances of every sort and size taking country folks to the fair. The weather was wondrous cold for June, but endurable nevertheless, albeit clouds hid the sun and showers were not unfrequent.

We reached a hilltop about noon, and all at once a landscape burst upon our view which is hardly surpassed for quiet beauty in all England.

People who journey by rail miss this enchanting scene. Just beneath us, and in the centre of the plain, lay Oxford.

We dined by the roadside, gipsy-fashion, for there was no meadow we could draw our caravan into. Started about two pm, and rattled through Oxford, only stopping here and there to do our shopping. There is no better verb than “rattled” to convey the notion of our progress. Oxford is vilely paved for either carriage or cycle.

With the bumping and shaking we received, the saloon of the Wanderer soon looked like that of a yacht in a rough sea-way.

Poor Polly, my cockatoo, the pet of the ship, is sadly put about when there is much motion. I gave her a morsel of meat to-day when passing through Oxford. To stand on one leg and eat it as usual from her other claw was out of the question, but Polly was equal to the occasion. She put the choice morsel under her feet on the perch, and so quietly rent and devoured it.

We were all of us glad to get away from Oxford, where there is no rest for the soles of the feet of a caravanite. Hurricane Bob, though he dearly loves to travel, enjoys his morsel of meadow in the evening, his mode of enjoyment being to roll on the greensward, with all four legs waved aloft.

When he gets on to a bit of clovery sward by the wayside it really is a treat to see him.

“I wouldn’t miss this, master,” he says to me, “for all the world, and I only wonder you don’t come and tumble as I do.”

June, 22nd (Monday). – A village of grey limestone houses, thatched and tiled, many with charmingly antique roofs, a village built on ground that is level, a village embowered in orchards and trees, and with so many lanes and roads through it that a stranger could not be expected to know when he was in it or when he was out of it I have said “a village built,” but rather it seems like a

village that has grown, house by house, each in its own garden or orchard, and each one different in appearance from the others. Altogether English, however, is Kidlington, and the work-a-day people are thoroughly English too, very rustic, good-natured, and simple. I do not believe they ever brawl and fight here at pothouses on Saturday nights, or that the conversation ever advances much beyond “turmutts” and cattle.

I do not suppose that Kidlington ever looked much better than it does on this bright summer’s morning. The breeze that blew all night, making the Wanderer rock like a ship at sea, has fallen; there is just sufficient left to sough through the ash-trees and whisper among the elms; cloudlets float lazily in the sky’s blue and temper the sunshine. I am writing on the *coupé*, in the meadow where we have lain since Saturday afternoon. There is silence all round, except that cocks are crowing and a turkey gobbling; there is a rustic perched on the stile-top yonder, wondering at my cockatoo, and at Bob, who wears a scarlet blanket to keep the early morning chill away; another rustic is driving a herd of lazy cows along the lane. That is the scene, and that is about all. But what a quiet and pleasant Sabbath we spent yesterday in this meadow and at the village church!

It is now eight o’clock, and time to get the horses in. I wonder what the world is doing – the outside world, I mean. I have not seen a newspaper for three days, nor had a letter since leaving home. Now hey! for Deddington.

Somewhat pretty is the country for a mile or two out of Kidlington, rising ground all the way to Sturdy’s Castle, four miles and a half. This is a solitary inn, of grey limestone, Sturdy by name and sturdy by nature, and if it could tell its story it would doubtless be a strange one. But what a wide, wild country it overlooks! It is wide and wild now. What, most it have been one hundred years ago? Found a carpet-hawker encamped with her caravan behind the castle. She travels all alone with her two children throughout the length and breadth of England. Seems very intelligent, and gives a terrible account of the difficulties to be encountered on ahead of us in getting in at night. We’ll see.

We are at present in the Blenheim country, and the Dashwood estate lies east – away yonder. I make no *détour* to visit the palace. Every one knows it by heart.

A kind-hearted carter man has told me a deal about the scenes around us, which I daresay the jolting over these ruddy roads will soon drive out of my head.

On we go again.

Hopcroft’s Holt is an old-fashioned quiet inn close by intersecting roads that to the right branch off to Bicester. Stayed here to cook and eat.

Densely wooded and well hedged country all round, quiet and retired. It must be healthy here in summer.

Blacksmith has neatly mended my tricycle, which had broken down, so that I am able to make little excursions down by-roads. The village of Upper Heyford, about two miles from here, is as quaint and ancient-looking as if some town in the Orkneys.

June 23rd. – It needed all the strength of Corn-flower and Pea-blossom to get us into Deddington, for the hills are long and steep. We are furnished with a roller that drags behind the rear wheel, in case of accident or sudden stopping on a hill, and now for the first time we needed it.

New experiences come on this tour of mine every day, though adventures are but few, or have been hitherto. At Oxford and places *en route* from there we were reported to be the Earl of E – . At Deddington the wind changed, and we were taken for Salvationists on a pilgrimage. Salvationists are not liked in Deddington, and our arrival in the market-place, an ugly piece of rocky ground in the centre of the town (population about three thousand), was the occasion of a considerable deal of excitement. We had the horses out nevertheless, and prepared to spend the night there. We pulled blinds down, and I was about to batten down, as sailors say – in other words, get on the shutters – for the boys had taken to stoning each other, when the arrival of kindly Dr T – and an invitation to come to his grounds gave us relief and surcease from riot.

As the mob chose to follow and hoot, my Highland blood got up, and I got out with Hurricane Bob, the Newfoundland. The street was narrow, and further advance of those unmannerly louts was deemed by them indiscreet.

The change from the lout-lined street to the pleasant grounds of Dr T – 's old house at Deddington was like getting into harbour from off a stormy sea, and I shall never forget the kind hospitality of the kindly doctor and his family.

To be taken for an earl in the morning and a captain of the Salvation Army in the evening is surely enough for one day.

This morning I visited the fine old church, and, as usual, got up into the steeple. If ever you go to Deddington, pray, reader, do the same. The town stands on a hill, and the steeple-top is one hundred feet higher; you can see for many miles. The country round is fertile, rolling hill and dale and valley, and densely treed. There are villages to the right, villages to the left, and mansions peeping from the woods wherever you turn your eye.

The steeple-head is covered with lead, and it is the custom of visitors to place a foot on the lead and cut a mark round it. Inside this they write their initials and the date. Here are footmarks of every size. You can even tell the age and guess the sex. Among them are those of children, but looking at some of the dates those babes must have grown men and women long ago, grown old and died. There is food for thought in even this.

We pass the village of Adderbury on our way to Banbury. From an artistic as well as antiquarian point of view it is well worth a visit. See it from the Oxford side, where the stream winds slowly through the valley. The village lies up yonder on the ridge among grand old trees, its church as beautiful as a dream. Looking in the opposite direction to-day a thoroughly English view meets my gaze. On one bank of the valley is a broad flat meadow, where cattle are wading more than ankle-deep in buttercups and grass; on the other merry haymakers are busy; away beyond are sunny braelands with a horizon of elms.

Delayed for a time after leaving Adderbury by the collapse of a traction engine on the road. We are now cooking dinner outside Banbury, the horses grazing quietly by the roadside.

June 24th. – We went quickly through Banbury, pretty though the place be. We stayed not even to have a cake. Truth is, we were haunted by our greatest foe, the traction engine fiend, which twice yesterday nearly brought us to grief and my narrative to a close.

The country 'twixt Banbury and the little village of Warmington, which lies in a hollow – and that hollow is a forest of fine trees – is beautiful. The soil in many of the fields a rich rusty red. There is what may well be called a terrible hill to descend before you reach the road that leads to Warmington. Once here, we found ourselves on a spacious green, with ample room for a hundred caravans. The village is primitive in the extreme – primitive and pretty. Are we back in the middle ages, I wonder?

Here is no hotel, no railway, no telegraph, no peep at a daily paper, and hardly stabling for a horse.

“I can only get stabling for one horse,” I said to a dry, hard-faced woman who was staring at me. I thought she might suggest something.

“Humph!” she replied; “and I ain’t got stabling e’en for *one* horse. And wot’s more, I ain’t got a ’orse to stable!”

I felt small, and thought myself well off.

The people here talk strangely. Their *patois* is different from Berkshire, even as the style of their houses is, and the colour of the fields. Wishing yesterday to get a photograph of the old church at Adderbury, I entered an inn.

The round-faced landlord was very polite, but when I asked for a photographer, —

“A wot, sir?” he said.

“A photographer,” I replied, humbly.

“I can’t tell wot ye means, sir. Can you tell wot the gemman means, ’Arry?”

“Arry” was very fat and round, wore a cow-gown, and confronted a quart pot of ale.

I repeated the word to him thrice, but ‘Arry shook his head. “I can’t catch it,” he said, “no ‘ow.”

When I explained that I meant a man who took pictures with a black box, —

“Oh, now I knows,” said the landlord; “you means a pott-o-graffer.”

But the children here that came down from their fastnesses in the village above are angels compared to the Deddington roughs. I was so struck with the difference that I asked four or five to come right away into the pantry and look at the saloon.

It rained hard all the afternoon and night, the dark clouds lying low on the hills – real hills – that surrounded us, and quite obscuring our view.

’Twixt bath and breakfast this morning, I strolled down a tree-shaded lane; every field here is surrounded by hedges – not trimmed and disfigured – and trees, the latter growing also in the fields, and under them cows take shelter from sun or shower. How quiet and still it was, only the breeze in the elms, the cuckoo’s notes, and the murmur of the unseen cushat!

We are near the scene of the battle of Edgehill. For aught I know I may be sitting near a hero’s grave, or on it. The village can hardly, have altered since that grim fight; the houses look hundreds of years old. Yonder quaint stone manor, they tell me, has seen eight centuries go by.

I don’t wonder at the people here looking quiet and sleepy; I did not wonder at the polite postmistress turning to her daughter, who was selling a boy “a happorth of peppercorns,” and saying, “Whatever is the day of the month, Amelia? I’ve forgot.”

Warmington may some day become a health resort. At present there is no accommodation; but one artist, one author, or one honeymooning pair might enjoy a month here well enough.

Started at nine for Warwick – fourteen miles. For some miles the highway is a broad – very broad – belt of greensward, with tall hedges at every side. Through this belt the actual road meanders; the sward on each side is now bathed in wild flowers, conspicuous among which are patches of the yellow bird’s-foot trefoil.

Hills on the right, with wooded horizons; now and then a windmill or rustic church, or farm or manor. A grey haze over all.

We come to a place where the sward is adorned with spotted lilac orchids.

Conspicuous among other wild flowers are now tall pink silenes, very pretty, while the hedges themselves are ablaze with wild roses.

Midday halt at cross roads, on a large patch of clovery grass. Here the Fosse, or old Roman road, bisects our path. It goes straight as crow could fly across England.

There is a pretty farm here, and the landlady from her gate kindly invited Hurricane Bob and me in, and regaled us on the creamiest of milk.

We shall sleep at Warwick to-night.

Chapter Eight.

Leamington and Warwick – A Lovely Drive – A Bit of Black Country – Ashby-de-la-Zouch

”... Evening yields
The world to-night...
... A faint erroneous ray,
Glanced from th’ imperfect surfaces of things,
Flings half an image on the straining eye;
While wavering woods, and villages and streams,
And rocks and mountain-tops, that long retained
Th’ ascending gleam, are all one swimming scene,
Uncertain if beheld.”

Strange that for twelve long miles, ’twixt Warmington and the second milestone from Warwick, we never met a soul, unless rooks and rabbits have souls. We were in the woods in the wilds, among ferns and flowers.

When houses hove in sight at last, signs of civilisation began to appear. We met a man, then a swarm of boarding-school girls botanising, and we knew a city would soon be in sight. At Leamington, the livery stables to which we had been recommended proved too small as to yard accommodation, so we drove back and put up at the Regent Hotel. But there is too much civilisation for us here. Great towns were never meant for great caravans and gipsy-folk. We feel like a ship in harbour.

Rain, rain, rain! We all got wet to the skin, but are none the worse.

The old ostler at the Regent is a bit of a character, had been on the road driving four-in-hands for many a year. He was kindly-loquacious, yes, and kindly-musical as well, for he treated me to several performances on the coach-horn, which certainly did him great credit. He was full of information and anecdotes of the good old times, “when four-in-hands *were* four-in-hands, sir, and gentlemen *were* gentlemen.” He told us also about the road through Kenilworth to Coventry. It was the prettiest drive, he said, in all England.

Beautiful and all though Leamington be, we were not sorry to leave it and make once more for the cool green country.

The horses were fresh this morning, even as the morning itself was fresh and clear. We passed through bush-clad banks, where furze and yellow-tasselled broom were growing, and trees in abundance. Before we knew where we were we had trotted into Kenilworth. We stabled here and dined, and waited long enough to have a peep at the castle. This grand old pile is historical; no need, therefore, for me to say a word about it.

After rounding the corner in our exit from Kenilworth, and standing straight away for Coventry, the view from the glen at the bridge, with the castle on the left, a village and church on the rising ground, and villas and splendid trees on the right, made a good beginning to the “finest drive in all England.”

There is many a pretty peep ’twixt Kenilworth and Coventry.

The road is broad and good, and so tree-lined as often to merit the name of avenue. Especially is this the case at the third milestone, from near which the straight road can be seen for folly a mile and a half, shaded by the grandest of trees. This is a view not easily forgotten.

With all the beauty of this drive, however, it is too civilised to be romantic. The hedges are trimmed, and we actually noticed a man paring the grass on the edge of the footpath.

June 26th. – We are up very early this morning, for in Coventry the road-fiend rides rampant and in all his glory. They have steam-trams, which not only go puffing through the town, but for five miles out through the coal district itself. We must avoid them, get the start of them. So we are up and away long before seven.

We arrived here last night, and through the kindness of the editor of the *Tricyclist* got permission to draw in for the night into the large cricket and sports ground. The gates were closed at nine, and we had the keys. I was lord, therefore, of all I surveyed.

On the cinder-path last night a weary-looking but strong old man of over sixty was walking. He is doing or trying to do 1,000 miles in a shorter time than the pedestrian Weston. It is said that if he succeeds the brewers will pay him 1,000 pounds, and give him a free public-house, because he trains on beer instead of on tea, as did Weston!

The road leading northward from Coventry is terribly rough and rutty, and cut up with the trams from the mines, but being lined with trees, among which are many copper-beeches, it is not devoid of interest.

It is cold, bitterly cold and raw, with a strong north wind blowing, and we are obliged to wear top-coats on the *coupé*. Fancy top-coats at midsummer!

The country becomes unpleasant-looking even before the trams end. At Redworth, where I drew up for a short time to make purchases, swarms of rough, dark, and grimy men surrounded us, but all were polite and most civil.

On the hilltop we again draw up in front of an inn. The panting horses want water, and we ourselves have till now had no breakfast.

“Good beds for travellers round the corner.” This was a ticket in a window. I go round the corner. Here is a little show of some kind and a caravan. But the show business cannot be much of a success in this Black Country, for these caravanites look poverty-stricken. From a rude picture on a ragged screen I learn that this caravan is devoted to a horse-taming or Rarey show. The *dramatis personae* consist of a long, lean, unwholesome-looking lad with straggling yellow hair, a still longer and still leaner lad without any visible hair, and a short man with grey moustache. But this latter comes to the gate bearing in his arms a boy-child of ten years, worn to a skeleton, sickly, and probably dying. The boy shivers, the short man speaks soothingly to him, and bears him back into a dingy tent. I do not relish my breakfast after this sad sight.

We are not sorry when we are away from the immediate vicinity of the mines, and unlimbered by the roadside near the old Red Gate Inn. We have been following the ancient Roman road for many miles, and a good one it is, and very obliging it was of the Romans to make us such a road.

The inn is altogether so quiet and cosy that I determine to stable here for the night, and pass the day writing or strolling about.

So we cross the road and draw the Wanderer up beneath a lordly oak. In crossing we pass from Warwick into Leicestershire.

Pea-blossom is coughing occasionally. It is not a pleasant sound to have to listen to. She may be better to-morrow, for it will be Saturday, and a long and toilsome day is before us.

It is evening now; a walk of a mile has brought me to a hilltop, if hill it can be called. The view from here is by no means spirit-stirring, but quiet and calming to the mind. What a delightful difference between lying here and in that awful bustling inn yard at Leamington!

It is a country of irregular green fields, hedge-bounded, and plentifully sprinkled with oak and ash-trees and tall silver-green aspens; a country of rolling hills and flats, but no fens, with here and there a pretty old-fashioned farm peeping through the foliage.

There is not a cloud in the sky, the sun is sinking in a yellow haze, the robin and the linnet are singing beside me among the hawthorns, and down in the copse yonder a blackbird is fluting.

A pheasant is calling to its mate among the ferns; it is time apparently for pheasants to retire. Time for weasels too, for across the road runs a mother-weasel with a string of young ones all in a

row. The procession had been feeding in that sweetly-scented beanfield, and is now bound for bed, and I myself take the hint and go slowly back to the Wanderer. But Hurricane Bob has found a mole, and brings that along. It is not dead, so I let it go. How glad it must feel!

At nine o'clock the sun had set, but left in the north-west a harbinger of a fine morning. What delicious tints! What delicate suffusion of yellows, greens, and blues! Just as the sun was sinking red towards the horizon uprose the moon in the east, round and full, and in appearance precisely like the setting sun. The trees on the horizon were mere black shapes, the birds had ceased to sing, and bats were flitting about. At eleven o'clock, it was a bright clear night with wavy dancing phosphorescent-like gleams of light in the north – the Aurora!

June 11th. – Started at eight o'clock *en route* by cross roads for Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Shortly afterwards passed a needle-shaped monument to George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends. It is a very humble one, and stands in a wooded corner almost surrounded by hawthorn. Went through the village of Fenny Drayton. Why called “Fenny,” I wonder? It is a little hamlet, very old, and with a pretty and very old church, but I had no time to get up to the steeple.

Road narrow but good. A glorious morning, with a blue sky and delicious breeze.

Greensward at each side of the road, with ragged hedges and stunted oaks and ashes; roses in the hedgerows, golden celandine on the sward, and tall crimson silenes everywhere. By-and-bye the country opens, and we come upon a splendid view; and here is a sight – a hedgerow of roses nearly a mile long! Here are as many of these wildly beautiful flowers as would drape Saint Paul's Cathedral, dome and all.

We pass Sibson, with its very quaint old inn and little ivy-covered church surmounted by a stone cross; and Twycross, a most healthy and pretty rural village. There we unlimbered to dine, and in the afternoon went on towards our destination. Past Gopsal Park, with its quaint old lodge-gates and grand trees, on through dark waving woods of beech, of oak, and ash, on through lanes with hedgerows at each side, so tall that they almost meet at the top. We cross the railway now to avoid a steep bridge. Meesham is far away on the hill before us, and looks very romantic and pretty from the bridge. Its ancient church rears its steeple skyward, high over the houses that cluster round it, giving the place the appearance of a cathedral city in miniature. The romance vanishes, though, as soon as we enter the town. One long, steep street leads through it, its houses are of brick and most uninteresting, and the public-houses are so plentifully scattered about that thirst must be a common complaint here.

Ashby-de-la-Zouch lies above us and before as at last, and strangely picturesque it looks. Bows of queer-shaped trees are on each side of us; up yonder, in front, is a graveyard on a braeland; farther to the right a tall church spire, and flanking all, and peeping through the greenery of trees, is the ruined castle.

Market-day in Ashby, and we are mobbed whenever we stop to do some shopping.

The church here is well worthy of a visit; so too is the castle, but tourists ought to refresh their minds before spending a few days here by once more reading “Ivanhoe.”

It was hard, uphill work from Ashby; drag, drag, drag; horses tired, Pea-blossom limping, and all weary.

At the hilltop we came into quite a Highland country, and thence we could catch glimpses of lovely scenery and far-off blue hills.

The effects of the sunlight on the green oak woods and the yellow ashes were very charming. Lount at last; a humble inn, quiet, kindly people, and a little meadow.

Chapter Nine.

A Quiet Sunday at Lount – A Visit to a Pottery – Beeston Hall – A Broiling Day

“How still the morning of this hallowed day!
Hushed is the voice of rural labour,
The ploughboy’s whistle and the milkmaid’s song.”

June 28th.

The country is indeed a Highlands in miniature. I might describe the scenery in this way: Take a sheet of paper and thereon draw irregular lines, across and across, up and down, in any conceivable direction. These lines, then, shall represent blackthorn hedges bounding fields of flowering grass and hay. Place trees in your picture anywhere, and, here and there, a wood of dwarfed oak, and dot the field-nooks with picturesque-looking cattle-huts. In the centre let there be a cluster of irregularly-built brick-tiled houses and the domes of a pottery works. This, then, is Lount and its surroundings, where we are now bivouacked. But to complete the sketch there must be footpaths meandering through the meadows, with gaps in the hedges for rustic stiles. Nor must the cattle be forgotten.

And all the country visible from this point is broken up into round hills, and each field is a collection of smaller hills, shaped like waves of a storm-tossed ocean.

How still and quiet it is! And above the green of fields and woods is a blue, blue sunny sky. Larks are singing up yonder, their songs mingling sweetly with the chiming of the church bells that comes floating over the hills, rising and falling as the breeze does, now high and clear, now soft and far-away like.

I had the caravan half-filled this morning with bright-eyed, wondering children. A parent brought me a red cotton handkerchief.

“T’missus,” he explained, “was makin’ oop a pie, and I thought upon thee loike.”

It was kindly, and I couldn’t refuse the gift, though gooseberry pies form no part of the Wanderer’s *menu*.

Ten o’clock pm. – The full moon has just risen over the dark oak woods; a strangely white dense fog has filled all the hollows – a fog you can almost stretch out your hands and touch. The knolls in the fields all appear over it, looking like little islands in the midst of an inland sea.

The corncrake is sounding his rattle in the hayfields – a veritable voice of the night is he – and not another sound is to be heard.

Passed a garden a few minutes ago while walking out. Such a sight! Glowworms in thousands; far more lovely than fireflies in an Indian jungle.

To bed.

June 29th. – We got under way by 8:30, after a brief visit to the Coleorton Pottery. This place has an ugly enough appearance outside, but is very interesting internally. The proprietor kindly showed my coachman and me over the works. We saw the great heaps of blue clay that had been dug from the hillside and left exposed for weeks to the weather, the tanks in which it is mixed with water, the machinery for washing and sifting it, the clay being finally boiled to the consistency of putty. An old man took dabs of this putty and cast them on a revolving table, smiling as he did so as he watched our wondering looks, for lo! cups and saucers and teapots seemed to grow up under his fingers, and a whole tea-set was produced more quickly than one could have brewed a cup of tea.

A somewhat misty morning, but roads good though hilly, and scenery romantic. But at Castle Donington, a long brick town, the scene changes. Away go hill and dale, away goes all romance,

and we pass through a flat country, with nothing in it to enlist sympathy save the trees and rose-clad hedges.

But soon again comes another change, and we cross the broad and silvery Trent, stopping, however, on the bridge to admire the view.

We arrive at Long Eaton, and encamp by the roadside to cook dinner. Rows of ugly brick houses, a lazy canal with banks black with coal dust; the people here look as inactive as does their canal. Took the wrong turning and went miles out of our way.

We were stormed on our exit from Long Eaton by hordes of Board School children. They clustered round us like locusts, they swarmed like bees, and hung to the caravan in scores. No good my threatening them with the whip. I suppose they knew I did not mean much mischief, and one score was only frightened off to make room for another.

At Beeston, near Nottingham, I got talking to a tricyclist; a visit to a caravan followed, and then an introduction to a wealthy lace merchant. The latter would not hear of my going two miles farther to an inn. I must come into his grounds. So here in a cosy corner of the lawn of Beeston Hall lies the Wanderer, overshadowed by giant elms and glorious purple beeches, and the lace manufacturer and his wife are simply hospitality personified.

Such is the glorious uncertainty of a gentleman gipsy's life – one night bivouacked by a lonely roadside in a black country, another in a paradise like this.

July 2nd. – A broiling hot day – almost too hot to write or think. At present we are encamped on the road, two miles from Worksop to the south. Tired though the horses were, we pushed on and on for miles, seeking shade but finding none; and now we have given up, and stand in the glaring sunshine. Roads are of whitest limestone, and, though there is little wind, every wheel of every vehicle raises a dust and a powder that seem to penetrate our very pores. We are all languid, drowsy, lethargic. Polly the parrot alone appears to enjoy the heat and the glare. The haymakers in yonder field are lazy-looking, silent, and solemn – a melting solemnity; the martins on that single telegraph-wire rest and pant open-mouthed, while the cattle in the meadow, with tails erect, go flying from end to end and back again in a vain attempt to escape from the heat and the flies.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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