



## XIII.

## THE MERT MAN.

There is one thing about Somerset, it contains persons, things, and places which are absolutely unique. They are not to be found in any other part of England, and are not even to be unearthed in Somerset itself except in particular localities where they have rooted and from which they absolutely decline to be transplanted. Take Merriott and the Merriott men, for instance. Such a place and such a people exist nowhere else; even words they use are heard in the village street only—true, unadulterated old English, which has defied corruption in this place since the days of King Alfred. I am speaking of forty years ago. Where such a village, where such peculiarities, where such uniqueness? At one time Merriott was locally known as "Little Ireland." I don't know why, except that occasionally some of the young bloods did their best to occasionally reproduce scenes from "Donnybrook Fair." And when the Merriott man of that day laid himself out for a "bean feast" the proceedings were carried on in 24-carat style. The thing was not half done, and it was wisdom on the part of the village policeman to keep himself and his silk hat—for the "bobbies" wore top hats then—out of the way until matters had quieted down. Perhaps the place was called "Little Ireland" because of its

fertility. It certainly did not earn the sobriquet through its schoolmaster, for no-one ever heard the worthy pedagogue express himself in similar terms to a Hibernian brother, who, in addressing one of his pupils, said: "You have been coming to school early or late. You were behind before, but if you keep as you are, you will be first at last." The Merriott man in the Sixties did not trouble much about "schooling." Why should he? He knew his business; had an eye as keen as a hawk for a horse, could haggle with Old Niek and beat him, and without the slightest suspicion of the knowledge of arithmetic, could give you "hand-pat" the cost of a hundred and twenty-one and a-half bags of carrots at so much per bag in less time than a "scholar" could turn the figures over in his mind or place them on paper. You could never have a "Mert" man in those days.

Now, though many of the old working class inhabitants were unable to read or write, and rather boasted of having had no "book larning," but that they could make a "kriss kross," there were many good points inherent in the population. They were hardy, hard-working, honest people, and it is stated that, viewed from a distance at from three to four o'clock of a summer morning, more smoking chimneys would be observed in Merriott than in any other village of the size in the county. With regard to their honesty, my late deceased friend, Mr. Wheatley, used to assert that at his sales, at Merriott, of chattel property and moveable stock, no regard was paid to the conditions prohibiting removal till the lots were paid for at the close of the sale, but everything was carried off. The purchasers, however,

came back to a man, and squared up, many jocosely asking "Wat be gwain to stan'?"

What a race they were—broad-shouldered, strong as horses, rough and ready, a typical Romany breed. And the women-folk were on a par with the male portion of the fraternity. They all wore sun-bonnets, beautifully white, and they went into the fields to labour, and bent their backs to their work like the women depicted in Millet's famous picture, "The Gleaners." They were no "slom-micks."

I have said Merriott was unique. The houses proved that—that is the dwellings of those who laboured. The village shops were useful establishments, if not ornate; the Post Office was an unpretentious looking building; the inns gave the appearance of being comfortable within; the houses of the better classes were snug and substantial; and the crowning building of the village proper was the Brewery, and "Mer't"—no native would call it "Merriott"—beer was a beverage not to be despised, nor was its cider. The ordinary cottages were usually thatched, low, dark-looking dwellings. One entered the living room direct from the street. Generally, there was not a super-abundance of room. The "chimmer" windows were small and not too frequently used, and some of the houses which existed in the Sixties would scarcely pass muster by the sanitary experts of to-day. But the men and women who emerged from them were fine specimens of the manhood and womanhood which are found in Somerset. Perhaps it was because they lived the greater part of their lives out of doors in the fresh air, associating with Nature, and coaxing from the

soil the fruits of the earth. Merriott was a strange place in this respect; practically the whole of the land was devoted to gardening on an extensive scale. There is no large town near, but the "Mert" man's market was the whole of England—the dealer of those days declined to be confined.

Green peas were cultivated by the acre, so were onions and cabbages; potatoes by the field full, and carrots ditto. Merriott cabbage plants are known the world over. What a tuneful cry the Merriott woman had as she vended her wares around the neighbouring towns. There was none of that ear-splitting, raucous tone typical of the city hawker, but a description of what her cart contained was told in a voice toned, as it were, by the sweet air of Somerset and the beautiful surroundings of this particular portion of the "Land of Summer." "Teddies, cabbage, turnets, pasnips," the women would shout. "Hi! missus. You've got a hole in yer face." "Iss," she replies, "and you've got one in yer breeches." "Wug-off" to the horse, and away the curtain-bonnetted dame would go, feeling she had silenced the "young huz-burd." How delightful it was to hear the old Merriott man wish one good morning. He would do it "thuswaays"—  
"Vine marnen' 's marnen."

Vine marnen' yes'day marnen'.  
Wern't sich vine marnen' marnen' avore, wer't? "Where can one hear so poetical a greeting as that? It is, by the way, not peculiar to "Mer't"; it is to be met with all along the South-West of Somerset, and particularly down-along among the beans and the "teddie" growing districts of dear old cider land. And many of the old men who gave you

that greeting wore smock frocks—a picturesque article of attire in those days—with a broad flap or collar, the back, breast, and shoulders being gathered up into narrow pleats, the sleeves full and buttoned tight at the wrists. How smart they looked going to church “a-Sunday,” their dames in snow-white curtain bonnets and wide-skirted black dresses. “No skimpy fool dress for uch,” a Merriott woman would have said if she had lived in the present day.

Where all the things produced in Merriott went to goodness only knows. If one wanted a load of rags, a load of soot, or a load of hay, it could be obtained in Merriott. So could a load of apples, or of mistletoe, or holly, and when these things failed the “Mer’t” man would deal in fish, or in hedge-nuts, or, better than anything, in horseflesh. What a “Mer’t” man didn’t know about a horse wasn’t worth running after. He could get rid of a “screw” with great professional acumen; he could make an animal with three legs and a swinger travel far faster than many with four sound props. It was an education to listen to a Merriott dealer getting rid of a horse to a stranger. Of course, there never was such an animal. And the said animal was put through his paces along the road in front of the village inn. Whips cracked—every Merriott man had a whip—a yell went up from dozens of throats, and Bucephalos, thinking the fiends were let loose, would prance and caper like a two-year-old, and a deal or a “chop” was generally effected, and it may be assumed that the Merriott man never finished second place.

Rough and ready, they were a good-hearted race, full of business, but with much dry humour. And

they could enjoy themselves when the opportunity presented itself. What a time the Club festival was, when the place was decorated, the bells rang, and the genial President of the Men’s Society, wearing a tremendous nosegay, led the procession through the village to the orchard, where, under a marquee, the dinner took place. And what a dinner! How the joints disappeared. There was no “finnikin” appetites apparent around the board groaning with the weight of the good things provided. The “helpins” were substantial. What mattered if a worthy Club member mistook a custard for mustard, or if he showed a preference to associate Colman’s Superfine with his plum pudding. Ah! the pudding! A “Mer’t” man in those days was always good at his dish. “Gi’e uchy a bit o’ thick leedle ceake, Garge,” and “Garge” would promptly cut a huge pudding in half, taking one portion himself and handing the remainder to his companion. The Merriott air produced excellent appetites, and this was apparent on Club days especially.

What merriment used to reign on those occasions—it was a two-days’ affair, the men had their festival one day, the ladies the next. Business was suspended, horse-dealing forgotten, the local Saturnalia took place; the brewery was visited and some of the best sampled, the principal farmers were called upon, and they dispensed hospitality. There was plenty everywhere—at the private houses, at the inns, in the Club field. Club Day was one of rejoicing. Did it bear the morning’s reflection? Don’t trouble, there was the second edition to be enjoyed. And it was enjoyed. After that? Nothing but good fellowship. Even if the brow ached, a visit

to the brewery, a glass of prime October, and all was well again. And with the disappearance of the decorations the “Mer’t” man and woman went “back to the land,” the former full of vigour, the latter “lissom” as a withy, and the soil was compelled to give of her fatness, and the Merriott cart—by the way another unique example—went to and fro the country markets and to the railway stations laden with produce, the variability of which was astonishing, and only to be associated with that strange village in the heart of one of the most delightful portions of the “Land of Summer.”

In dialect, too, the Merriott man was peculiar. He spoke broad Somerset, but he did more. As I have hinted, he adhered to some old English words, which could not be heard elsewhere. The native of the village could not say “never” or “ever”; he pronounced it “nivva” and “ivva.” His personal pronoun was “Uch,” not I. It is questionable whether the ancient word “ich” or “uch” can be heard in any other part of England to-day. I am afraid it has nearly disappeared from Merriott by this time.

Even the “Mer’t” declaration of love was something out of the common, for the love-sick swain would confess to his sweetheart that “Uch d’ lu’the zoo, uch coose naa thee very jaas.” The “Mer’t” man had no use for high falutin’. Going into an ironmonger’s shop at Crewkerne one day to purchase a hook, he was shown one bearing a slight crescent mark, which in the welding had not been entirely obliterated. The “Mer’t” man pointed this out to the shop assistant as a flaw, and was met with the remark: “That’s no detriment to the

utility of the instrument.” The prospective purchaser, for a while, was dumfounded, but ultimately found his voice and said: “Uch dunno what you be saying-o, mister, but utch doo know there’s a flaa in the iver.”

The crusade against folk speech has been waged with an aggressiveness worthy of a better cause. Folk speech, like folk song, as that original but clever country parson, the late Charles Marson, of Hambridge, has written, is unknown in the drawing room. It has been hunted out of the school, chased by the chapel deacons, derided by the middle classes, and despised by those who have been educated into the three R’s. It harbours in the heathen kingdoms and wilder parts. Occasionally one comes across it in the village tap-room, or in the poor cottage. It could have been heard in Merriott at the time of which I write; may it long be heard; may the quaint Zummeret rural speech be met with for generations to come, because of its sweetness, its music, and also because of its close association with our Saxon forefathers. The rustic who calls a cow “he” is only keeping to a very ancient custom, and the “Mer’t” man who complains because a “wops” is buzzing around his ears is certainly nearer the Anglo-Saxon word than the educated man who refers to the lively insect as a wasp. What were the other peculiarities of this peculiar, but interesting, people? Heaps, hundreds. The Merriott man’s hat in those days was scarcely like the headgear affected by the dwellers in the neighbouring town. It was a kind of a cut-down “billy-cock,” and, apparently, it was good for many years’ wear. And the Merriott man’s clothes were quite unlike that

of the dweller in towns. As I have said, a few of the very old men—and the village could boast of octogenarians and nonagenarians—wore smocks and breeches; the younger ones affected corduroy trousers, and always sleeve waistcoats, with a muffler, a Merriott-patterned hat, a long-handled whip, and a lurcher dog—the latter another feature of the place. The Merriott lurcher was the most docile animal. He would trot all day under the tail of the cart, but has been known occasionally to arouse from his apparent "dog trot" to course and kill a hare and bring it back to his master. The Merriott man a poacher? Well, scarcely, but a rare judge of a dog and a hare, and a sportsman at heart. But his *forte* has always been as a dealer. I believe a native could give points to a man from any other district in England and beat him for shrewdness, sharpness, and for that extremely useful characteristic, innocence. I am certain it was the innocence of the Merriott man which ever made him successful; it stood him in much better stead than education, and he was a living example of how a man could live and thrive without troubling about "culture," German or otherwise. Yes, "Mer't" was charming because of its peculiarities, but many of those charms have passed away, never to return.