

The Gipsy Scandal and the Danger  
to the Commons by J. St. Loe Strachey  
and Amabel Strachey

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EPISODES OF THE MONTH

ON Sunday night, April 14, the greatest steamer in the world, the White Star liner *Titanic* (46,000 tons), struck an iceberg in latitude 41.16 North, longitude 50.14 West, on her maiden trip to New York, and sank in about four hours. The loss of life was appalling, amounting altogether to some fifteen hundred souls. The English language has been ransacked and beggared to describe a catastrophe dwarfing all previous shipwrecks, and rendered all the more harrowing by the misleading wireless messages which were flashed over the world by amateur Marconis throughout the day following the disaster, representing all the passengers as having been saved, and by the universal and invincible belief that so magnificent a vessel was greater than nature, being unsinkable. It was only gradually that the full proportions of the tragedy dawned upon a horrified world. Our knowledge of what actually happened is still subject to revision in the light of fresh evidence, but happily nothing has transpired to shake the first impression that the population of the *Titanic*, numbering 2206 all told, contained its full quota of heroes, men and women, and though some hasty estimates may have to be revised the engineers who stuck to their dangerous posts to the very end, and the band which endeavoured to

## THE GIPSY SCANDAL AND THE DANGER TO THE COMMONS

WE all remember how the hero in the fairy stories is confronted with the difficulty of destroying an enemy who constantly changes his shape. The hero cuts off the head of the wicked wizard, and the wizard instantly turns into a rat. He has no sooner killed the rat than he finds in its place a bull with threatening horns. The bull disposed of, the enemy becomes an old woman, the old woman a serpent or a toad, a dog, or even a mist or a puff of smoke. The exhausted combatant is only successful if he can get some kind friend to whisper to him the magic word or to explain the particular manner in which his Protean foe can be disposed of. Something very like this has happened and is happening with those who want to save the commons, downs, and open spaces of the South of England, and to overpower those who would despoil them. Our fathers, unaccustomed to the ways of social sorcery, naïvely believed that all it was necessary to do was to cut off the head or at any rate restrict the powers of the lord of the manor. Alas, the lord of the manor was no sooner worsted in battle than he turned into other shapes. First, the enemy of the commons changed into the horrid and dangerous form of a railway company. Next he was a burial board, a district council—or again, the contractor of a rural highway authority intent on grubbing up the turf for flints. He has even been known to take the shape of the War Office, of an isolation hospital, or of a refuse destructor. But, last of all and perhaps worst of all, he has turned into a gang of gipsies. This new, and let us hope final form, is the most difficult to overcome of all. He is apparently invulnerable. He fears neither the law nor public opinion. His

dirt-begrimed coat is an armour of proof which turns the edge of every weapon addressed against it. It is no exaggeration then to say that the last enemy is the worst.

Those who are ignorant of what has happened to the Surrey commons during the last two years will probably be inclined to smile at this protest as overdone. Some of them, indeed, may be tempted to say that an encampment of gipsies, their tents, donkeys, and ponies, add to the charm of the Downs and improve their picturesqueness. "What can be more lovely?" I can hear such advocates declare, "than the softly wreathing blue smoke of the gipsy's fire curling above the hawthorns on the wind-swept hill?" I wish those who take this view of the gipsy question could come with me to one of the most beautiful of all the Surrey open spaces, Newlands Corner, on the North Downs, the place which Cobbett, in his *Rural Rides*, describes as possessing the most beautiful view in the South of England; the place where meet the wastes of the three manors of Albury, Merrow, and Clandon. Along the crest of the Down runs the ancient Tin-way of the Phœnicians, or rather the way along which the ancient Britons brought the tin to the (?) Phœnician ships in the Isle of Thanet, for I believe the antiquarians will no longer allow that the Phœnicians ever entered Britain. This is the great road which afterwards became part of that broad track which was the Pilgrims' Way to Canterbury, and which in later years the countrymen knew, and even know now, as the Drove Road. Here sheep, till some three years ago, fed in sober security on green and unpolluted turf. Along the top of the Down and on the south the grass spreads in green lawns, and on the rougher ground runs, as it were, in emerald rivulets among the bracken and the heather or between the giant boles of yew trees ancient as the hills that bear them. Here are oak and ash and thorn worthy to attest "the full great oath" which Glasgerion swore in their names. One of the green sward paths that has such sponsors to adorn it is the old racecourse. Here Eclipse, the noblest horse of which the records of the world bear witness, ran in all the symmetry of his matchless beauty. It was of this noble stretch of country that Grant Allen declared that if we wanted to know what the world looked like in the days of the Phœnicians, we might find an example in the

“tangled district near Guildford still known as Fairyland.” This is country which has never been under the plough, has never been planted or touched except by what the old lawyers called “bite of mouth of cattle.”

If Grant Allen, who wrote so fervently of the Downs at Newlands Corner, could visit them now, he would turn with a heavy heart, for this year they are sick with the pollutions of the encampments. The green turf is covered with the hideous dirt and litter that the gipsies always leave behind them. Let no one suppose that I am using the word “pollution” rhetorically. An old pair of stays, two battered and draggled straw hats, three old boots—unfortunately the most indestructible of objects—plenty of horse dung—the gipsies keep their ponies quite close to them at night—innumerable old rags half trampled into the mud, large sections of clothing in the way of old coats, old skirts, old trousers, and all these mingled with a mass of tin cans, broken bottles, and bits of bones, skin, and offal, and so forth and so on: such is the inventory of the Gipsies’ resting-place. How the gipsies contrive to leave boots not in pairs but in threes or singly is, as Sir Thomas Browne would say, a puzzling question, if not beyond all conjecture, but apparently every encampment sees the abandonment of a great deal of disused clothing. And what I am describing is unfortunately not, as it used to be in past years, a single instance of dirt and destruction which could be endured with the knowledge that the kindly earth would soon re-absorb a great deal of the pollution. The grass would entwine itself round the old bottles and the tins, and “smiling nature reassume the land.” Now, however, in half an hour’s walk in three directions from Newlands Corner one may see literally dozens of places where the gipsies have camped and left these shameful traces behind them.

I need not, however, dwell upon this in detail, for what I am writing is but an introduction to a diary kept by my daughter for five weeks this year, and at a time when gipsies are least frequent visitors, that is in the depth of the winter. During one week in November and four weeks in December she has recorded day by day and from personal observation the state of the Downs. I asked her in keeping her diary, though not

to extenuate, to write down nothing in malice. After checking her diurnal observations I can most sincerely say that if she has erred it is in the direction of being too kind, not too severe, to the gipsies. The reason why the gipsy problem has become so much more acute of late is an interesting one, though tragic for those who, like me, dwell on the Downs. Twenty, or even three, years ago our gipsy visitants were not numerous enough to cause serious trouble. Now they come in battalions. The first and chief reason I cannot doubt is that the gipsy, vagrant and nomadic population has been of late driven off the wastes and commons of the valleys by the action of the police and of the lords of the manor. The result of this greater vigilance in the lowlands is to force the gipsies on to the high ground. They attract, as a rule, less attention here than they do in the valleys. Yet another reason is to be found in the wetness of the winter of 1910-1911. A police officer, who probably knows as much about the gipsies as any man living, told me a year ago that he had asked a gipsy why he and his fellows had come so much of late to the Downs. The man answered him: "You don't want us to get drowned, do you?" Just as in a great flood rats and other animals take to the hill-tops, so the gipsies, flooded out in the Weald of Sussex and the low-lying parts of Surrey in 1910, have taken to the North Downs.

It is not my intention on the present occasion to attempt to say how the gipsy problem, involving as it does all sorts of questions of police and sanitation, ought to be solved. I will only remark that at present it is not being solved at all. The police, when put in motion by the lord of the manor in regard to any particular common, merely move the gipsies on and force them to pack up their tents, put them in their vans, and move on. Of course the gipsies only go on to some other open space, and in a day or two are back again like a stage army, to pollute yet another portion of the Downs. The present system merely keeps the gipsies in circulation. It does not forbid them to camp, nor is any effort made to regulate their encampments. Nothing, indeed, effectual can be done until the whole question of tramping and vagrancy is dealt with, as there is little doubt it ought to be dealt with by the establishment of penal and labour colonies. My desire on this occasion is merely



to do what I endeavoured to do at the meeting of the Commons Preservation Society in 1911 at which I spoke, that is, to point out that the commons and waste places which that admirable Society has preserved as a heritage for all England are being destroyed by the gipsies. And here I may say parenthetically that though a dweller on the Downs, my desire is not to keep them from being frequented by the public. If that were my wish I might view the gipsy encampments with equanimity, for it is hardly too much to say that when the school feasts and the club outings take place next July and August, the unhappy picnickers will be at a loss to find a piece of grass on which to have their tea and play kiss in the ring which has not been defiled by the gipsies.

Perhaps it will be said that I am too hard upon the gipsies and that I ought to discriminate between them and the tramps and vagrants of a lower description—men and women not of the Romany clan—who move up and down the roads and camp on the commons. It would be pleasant to think that this was the case, but I am beginning very much to doubt it, and to hold that Borrow's gipsies were creatures of his imagination. I may quote in evidence the very best, sanest, most careful, and most poignant observer of the English country life who ever lived, the poet Crabbe. Consider his picture of the gipsies in "The Lover's Journey." The words in which Crabbe describes the gipsies of his day exactly fit those gipsies to be found on the Surrey Downs at this very moment :

Again, the country was enclosed, a wide  
And sandy road has banks on either side ;  
Where, lo ! a hollow on the left appear'd,  
And there a gipsy tribe their tent had rear'd ;  
'Twas open spread, to catch the morning sun,  
And they had now their early meal begun,  
When two brown boys just left their grassy seat,  
The early Traveller with their prayers to greet ;  
While yet Orlando held his pence in hand,  
He saw their sister on her duty stand ;  
Some twelve years old, demure, affected, sly,  
Prepared the force of early powers to try ;  
Sudden a look of languor he descries,  
And well-feigned apprehension in her eyes ;  
Trained but yet savage, in her speaking face  
He marked the features of her vagrant race ;

When a light laugh and roguish leer expressed  
 The vice implanted in her youthful breast;  
 Forth from the tent her elder brother came,  
 Who seemed offended, yet forbore to blame  
 The young designer, but could only trace  
 The looks of pity in the Traveller's face:  
 Within, the Father, who from fences nigh  
 Had brought the fuel for the fire's supply,  
 Watched now the feeble blaze, and stood dejected by.  
 On ragged rug, just borrowed from the bed,  
 And by the hand of coarse indulgence fed,  
 In dirty patchwork negligently dress'd,  
 Reclined the Wife, an infant at her breast;  
 In her wild face some touch of grace remained,  
 Of vigour palsied and of beauty stain'd;  
 Her bloodshot eyes on her unheeding mate  
 Were wrathful turned, and seemed her wants to state,  
 Cursing his tardy aid—her Mother there  
 With gipsy state engrossed the only chair;  
 Solemn and dull her look; with such she stands,  
 And reads the milkmaid's fortune in her hands,  
 Tracing the lines of life: assumed through years,  
 Each feature now the steady falsehood wears;  
 With hard and savage eye she views the food,  
 And grudging pinches their intruding brood;  
 Last in the group, the worn-out Grandsire sits  
 Neglected, lost, and living but by fits:  
 Useless, despised, his worthless labours done,  
 And half protected by the vicious Son,  
 Who half supports him: he with heavy glance  
 Views the young ruffians who around him dance;  
 And by the sadness in his face, appears  
 To trace the progress of their future years:  
 Through what strange course of misery, vice, deceit,  
 Must wildly wander each unpractised cheat!  
 What shame and grief, what punishment and pain,  
 Sport of fierce passions, must each child sustain—  
 Ere they like him approach their latter end,  
 Without a hope, a comfort, or a friend!

"Misery, vice, deceit" is, I fear, still the fate before the gipsy child. Crabbe shows that the physique of the children is as a rule as poor as that of the parents. The open-air life has not brought them either health, grace, or beauty. The picture is indeed exact. Jeffrey, the Edinburgh Reviewer, said of it: "This picture is evidently finished *con amore*, and appears to

us to be absolutely perfect, both in its moral and its physical expression." These are strong words, but I can endorse them to the letter.

But when one thinks of the gipsy children one feels ashamed to trouble about the Downs or to care whether they are polluted or not. What is the turf compared with the fate of the vagrant children? As one looks at the boys and girls round the tents, one would like to think with Wordsworth, "That they at least are free, From taint of deadliest injury," but alas, to put the matter into the words of a country neighbour: "The poor things han't got a chance."

Perhaps if our local authorities will be moved neither by the thought of what is happening to the gipsy children, nor the pollution and so destruction of the Downs as places for public health, recreation and mental refreshment, they may be moved by the thought that if ever we should have a serious outbreak of plague in these islands, the gipsies would be certain to be soon infected and to spread the black death broadcast. The gipsies always leave food about, and to this food the rats are attracted. Thus if the rats or the rabbits became diseased, it would be quite impossible for the gipsies to escape the plague. But how would it be possible to tend plague-stricken gipsies in the vans and tents in such a way as to give them the ten per cent. of chance which the plague allows or to prevent further infection? Without question, the gipsies are a great peril to the national health, and if once the plague gets established in these islands we shall be asked to deal with them under panic conditions. Surely it would be far wiser and far more humane to deal with them now, when care can be taken to cause them as little suffering as possible.

J. ST. LOE STRACHEY.

#### A GIPSY DIARY OF FIVE WEEKS AND A DAY—1911

*Saturday, November 25.* This morning a number of gipsies arrived at Newlands Corner. I counted at least four children of school age among them and some younger children. They had with them three large vans, two tilt-carts, seven horses and a number of dogs, these latter of a sporting breed, rather like a rough-haired greyhound.

*Sunday, November 26.* The gipsies have not gone from the main encampment, and to-day we noticed two independent camps east and west of them.



None of these people are real gipsies; they are at best what Borrow would have called "half-breds," and some of them are, I am sure, trampers pure and simple.

*Monday, November 27.* This morning the main camp had not moved. The gipsies had lighted large fires and strewn the ground with their refuse. The ground will, I am afraid, be very foul for some long time to come, or at least until we get heavy rain.

My father and I riding to the east along the ridge of the Downs, saw a large encampment near Sir H. R.'s house (about two and a half miles from Newlands Corner). It consisted of three vans and three or four tilt-carts. Judging from the number of blanket tents we saw (at least half a dozen) there must have been a great many gipsies belonging to it. We only saw the "camp guards," however, for no doubt the "main body" of gipsies were out begging, hawking clothes-pegs, telling fortunes, or otherwise furthering the "affairs of Egypt." We did see five children of school age, however, and some toddling babies who looked extremely dirty and unhealthy. This afternoon the main camp moved from Newlands Corner.

*A propos* of the health of gipsy children, I was told at a hospital that gipsy children suffering from diseases resulting from dirt, exposure and underfeeding, have of late been fairly frequently admitted. On one occasion, I was told, some gipsies brought in an unfortunate child suffering from severe bronchial-pneumonia and in a high fever, but the gipsies could not be induced to leave the child in hospital for so much as one night but insisted on taking it to almost certain death in the caravans or tents.

*Tuesday, November 28.* To-day I went out walking and tried in vain to prevent my two dogs from sniffing round some old gipsy camping-ground where there were a number of dirty rags, bits of mouldy food, burnt-out fires, &c. I am afraid that they may pick up some infection, as the gipsies' dogs, and apparently the gipsies themselves, may have had almost anything the matter with them, and any disease, from mange to plague, might be spread in this way.

*Wednesday, November 29.* Out riding this morning I saw a new encampment near Newlands Corner, consisting of three large blanket tents and one small cart. Two dogs guarded the camp and there were two horses grazing near by. I saw two children of school age returning to the camp with water.

*Thursday, November 30.* To-day the camp, which was pitched near Newlands Corner on Wednesday, trekked on to the east and I saw the whole *ménage*. There were two particularly dirty and forbidding-looking men, three lads of about fifteen years of age, a young girl of perhaps seventeen or eighteen, a boy of ten and two other children. They cannot possibly all belong to the same family and I cannot help feeling sorry for the young girl, who is rather pretty and not as brutalised looking as these women often are. She will not have much chance, poor thing.

*Friday, December 1.* I was in London all day and therefore saw nothing of these poor travesties of Borrow's Egyptians. One cannot help wondering what Mr. Petulengro or Tawno Chickno, "The World's Beauty," would have thought of calling these tramps gipsies simply because they had tents and vans.

*Saturday, December 2.* To-day out riding we saw a family encamped in a thick "bosky" or clump of trees and undergrowth near Newlands Corner. They had got a rather large blanket tent with them and had lighted a particularly big fire. Fortunately the undergrowth is very wet and there is therefore not much danger of its catching alight. Had the weather been frosty and dry it might easily have set that part of the Downs on fire. There were three children among the party, two of them of school age.

*Sunday, December 3.* A new encampment has been made further along the Downs to the east than Newlands Corner. It consists of two tents and a small cart, the bushes near by are absolutely covered with clothes, or rather pieces of stuff apparently hung there to dry, and the gipsies have lighted a large fire.

*Monday, December 4.* The gipsies of the "washing" moved on to-day, but we saw another small camp in a little hollow about a mile and a half from Newlands Corner (more exactly about half-way between Newlands Corner and One Tree Hill). We noticed no less than four children of school age among the party\* and we also observed that they had chosen, apparently because they preferred it, a particularly foul site for their camp. Whole generations of gipsies have camped in this hollow, the floor of which is by now covered with horribly evil-smelling rags, hay which has been originally used for bedding, and is now sodden with the rain, old worn-out boots, their leather cracking and mouldy, brims of straw hats, hunks of gnawed bread, old bones, horrible greasy tins blackened by the fire and smelling of rancid fat, cinders of burnt-out fires, and mouldering horse-dung. These are the kind of surroundings which the gipsies and trampers seem to like best as they almost always camp on an old site. We also saw a man and a woman to-day with a perambulator (a favourite substitute for a cart), the woman with a very young baby in her arms. I saw another of the children from the bosky a long way away with a woman. They have all therefore probably moved on.

*Tuesday, December 5.* I did not see any gipsies to-day, having been for a walk in the morning in a district which is always fairly free from them. Last year, at about this time or a little later, gipsies were encamped in quite extraordinary numbers at Newlands Corner. I remember counting no less than thirteen separate encampments (not single vans but groups of two or three) at one time. It was one of the most remarkable sights that I have ever come across to see all the children playing together. They must have numbered from fifteen to twenty of all ages, all extremely ragged and dirty and apparently in a large proportion suffering from diseases of the eyes and skin.

*Wednesday, December 6.* I was in London all day and so saw no gipsies.

*Thursday, December 7.* A remarkably wet day to-day. Walking down the road to the Silent Pool we met a tramping man and woman who had a very young baby in a perambulator with them. We also met another tramp, a man, who did not like the look of our bull-terrier at all.

*Friday, December 8.* This afternoon the turf was too hard and slippery after the frost for riding and I did not go near the gipsies' haunts. In the

\* Two of these children are those who have moved on from the bosky, I think.

morning, however, we had a great deal of trouble with the bull-terrier, who, puppy-like, will go and smell out all the decaying food which the gipsies leave about, and lick the horrible rags and filth. One thing is particularly disgusting about their old camps, that is that after they have struck their tents, they leave their beds of dried grass or hay scattered about on the ground, and these must literally swarm with vermin.

*Saturday, December 9.* To-day my father and I rode along the top of the hill to Netley Heath where we saw two gipsy camps. The first consisted of two large blanket tents and a four-wheeled cart; and the second appeared to consist of tents also. We did not happen to pass very close to the latter and so did not see it very clearly, but it was probably larger than the first as we saw two horses belonging to it.

*Sunday, December 10.* It has been extraordinarily wet all day and although we went for a walk, we saw no gipsies. The hill seems too exposed for them in this bad weather.

*Monday, December 11.* A number of gipsies arrived this afternoon. This morning my father and I rode out and not a gipsy was to be seen at Newlands Corner, only the usual dirty rags, &c. By the afternoon, when my mother and I went out for a stroll, a large camp was established at Newlands Corner, consisting of three big vans with probably three but certainly two horses. We also saw another smaller camp a little further along to the west, consisting of two blanket tents. There are belonging to this encampment one woman, two men, a baby, and two large dogs.

*Tuesday, December 12.* This morning I started for Yorkshire and I shall be away for nearly a week.

Last year the gipsies did an extraordinarily annoying thing. Whilst we were away they turned a number of horses into the garden (I am told about six). All the gates were, I believe, shut as usual, so that it would have been impossible for the horses to have strayed in. The gipsies must have intentionally opened one of the gates and driven them through. Fortunately the horses did not get into the main part of the flower garden, which is mostly up one or two steps, but they did considerable damage to grass paths, &c., before the gardener discovered their presence and drove them out.

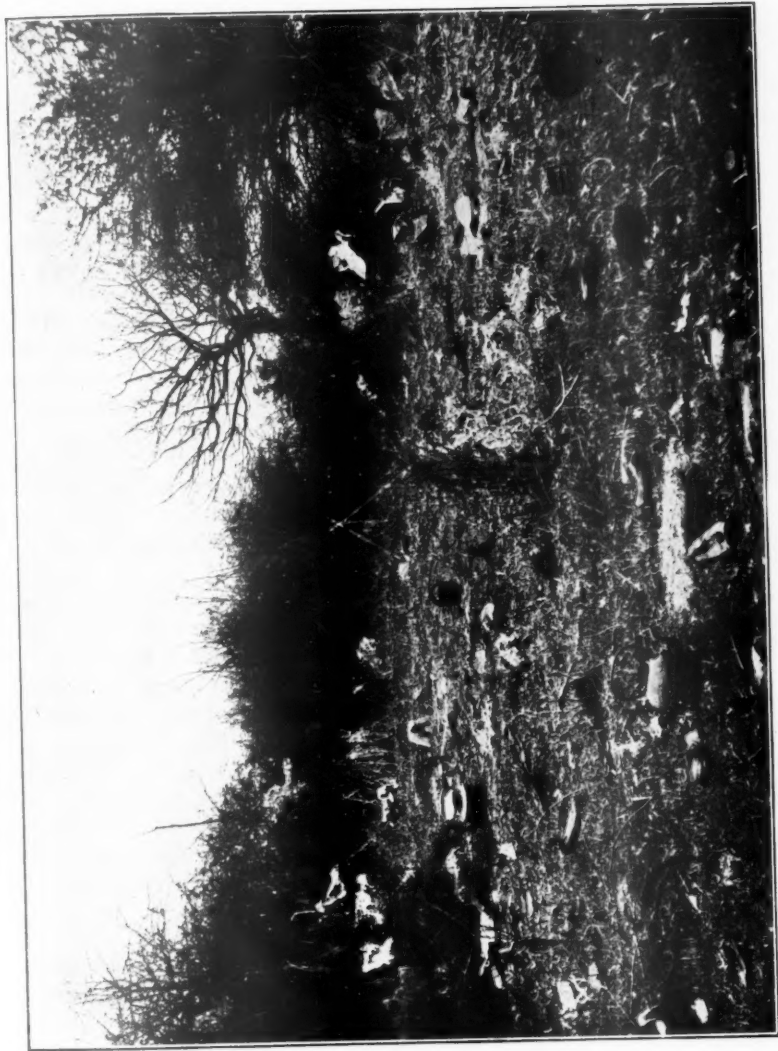
*Wednesday, December 13.* I have not heard if any gipsies were seen to-day. Where I am staying in Yorkshire they seem to be quite free from them.

*Thursday, December 14.* I hear that there were a party of gipsies at Newlands Corner to-day consisting of two women, three men, and three small children, who all appeared to be exceedingly ragged and dirty.

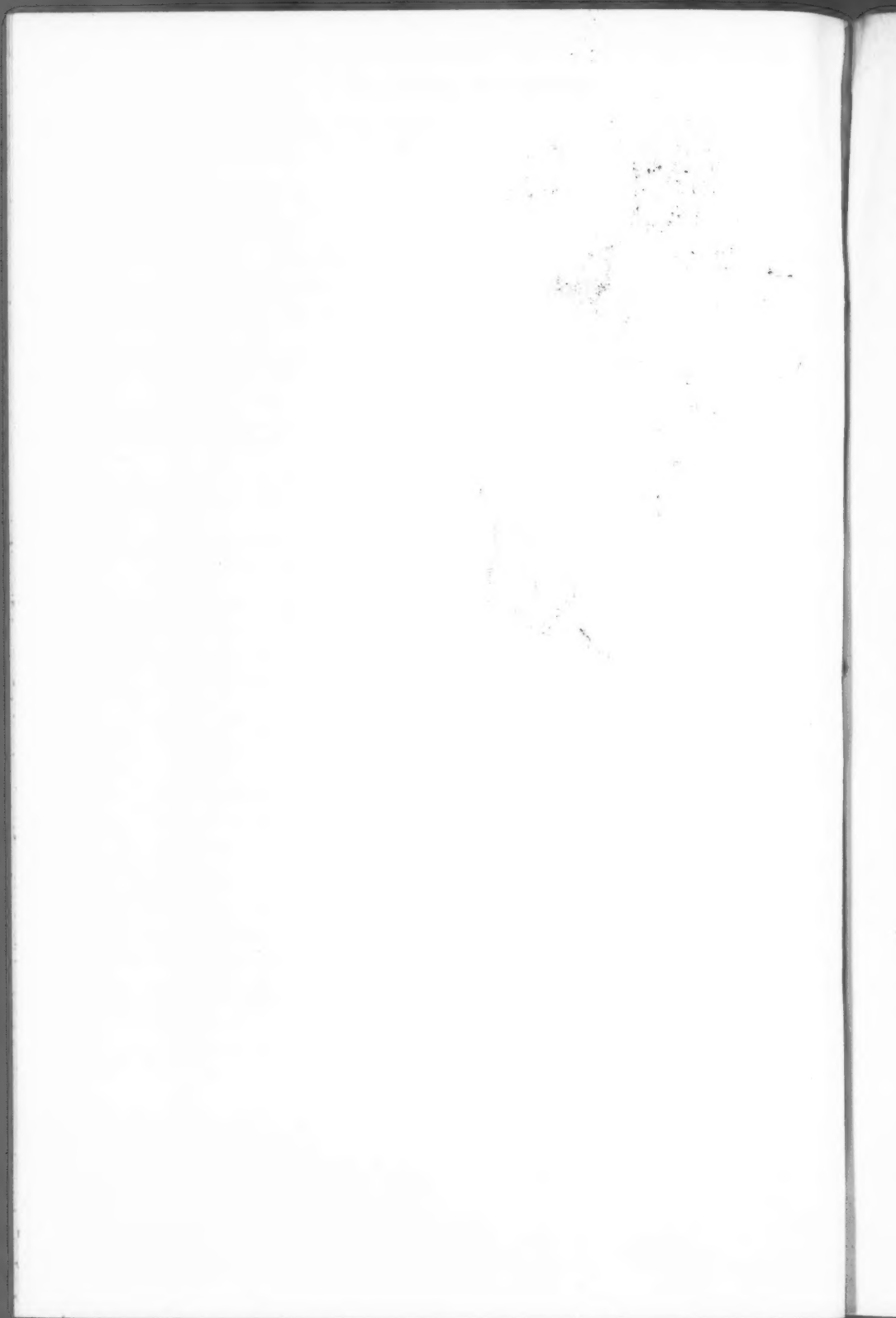
*Friday, December 15.* I do not know of any gipsies being seen to-day. Probably my informant did not go farther than Newlands Corner. I wish that I could hear when the encampment of Monday was moved but I cannot find out.

*Saturday, December 16.* To-day my father tells me he saw a small party of gipsies about a quarter of a mile west from Newlands Corner. They had pitched a blanket tent and had a horse with them.

*Sunday, December 17.* I came home late yesterday evening. To-day it was extremely wet and we happened to take our one walk on the Merrow Downs, which are "regulated" and have a "common" keeper, who sees to it that the



GROUND SITE OF GIPSY ENCAMPMENT NEAR SIGNPOST AT NEWLANDS CORNER,  
MERROW DOWN, GUILDFORD





gipsies are prevented from contaminating these Downs with their squalid leavings. The contrast between the two stretches of land is most remarkable.

*Monday, December 18.* To-day was exceedingly wet and the Downs soaking. My father and I, therefore, kept to the roads during our ride and we saw no gipsies.

*Tuesday, December 19.* My mother and brother saw a small encampment about a hundred yards east of Newlands Corner. It consisted of one horse, one small van, and one large blanket tent. They strangely enough saw no people belonging to it.

*Wednesday, December 20.* This afternoon we saw a large encampment at Newlands Corner. There were no less than four vans, a cart, a blanket tent, and four horses, and we saw three children of school age and several men and women. Tuesday's small camp was still there and apparently the whole of the washing of the two communities was spread to dry upon the adjacent bushes. I suppose that it was washing, for although not immaculately clean, the garments, or portions of garments, of which it consisted were not really dirty.

*Thursday, December 21.* Some of the gipsies have moved from Newlands Corner, but although two of the four vans have gone, curiously enough there seem to be the same number of horses as before. The place where the van stood is now extraordinarily filthy considering for how short a time it remained. Two of the children begged from us and so did some of the women.

*Friday, December 22.* One van still remains at Newlands Corner though the others have apparently gone away. I hope that they really have gone and have not just moved on further.

*Saturday, December 23.* To-day the one van was moved on about fifty yards, I suppose in order to be out of sight of the road that the gipsies might be disturbed by no passing policeman. Every time they move they leave the ground in a most horrible condition, and I expect that if those that are left go on thus, moving a very little at a time, they will make an almost continuous track of dirty rags and sordid refuse along the Downs, for their dirty patches will soon be linked up with other rubbish-strewn areas.

*Sunday, December 24.* The gipsies have not moved on again but I find that there are many more people belonging to the van than I had supposed; especially I noticed about six very villainous looking men collected near the camp east of Newlands Corner. The gipsies of Thursday the 21st had not moved far. I find they had only gone a little way along the Downs to the west. We saw three horses grazing about but could not at first see their owners. Then we turned a corner and came upon them—a van with a patched and dirty canvas cover drawn up by the side of the green track under an old yew tree, with a fire burning in the door of the van; a dirty smoke-stained sacking tent also with a fire inside it, numberless rags, tin cans, and old boots strewn about, and amongst it all the half-clothed, unhealthy, grimy, uncared-for children running and tumbling. Half concealed in a thick clump of trees was another tent, the bright fire within it lighting up the interior. I hear that there are yet more gipsies in the little hollow between One Tree and Newlands Corner.

*Monday, December 25.* All the gipsies remained on to-day. There is now a line of them at regular intervals of about 200 yards for a mile or so along the hill top.

*Tuesday, December 26.* To-day as we rode to the meet eastwards towards Dorking, we saw a number of gipsies besides those encamped near Newlands Corner. There were two tents and one van at "The Ladies' Mile," which is about three miles from Newlands Corner, and four large vans and a very large number of gipsies on Ranmore Common about five miles away.

I was told the other day by a neighbour why it is that gipsies are specially fond of mutilating and spoiling holly trees. It is because they provide the best kind of wood for making skewers, which commodity the gipsies sell to butchers in the neighbourhood. Not that gipsies by any means confine their depredations to hollies. They also tear branches from small oaks, beeches, ash trees, &c., but they seem to be always hacking at the unfortunate hollies. The same neighbour, an authority, also told me that the gipsies do a great deal of ferreting on dark nights, much to the annoyance of the local farmers. He says that the gipsies threatened to kill one farmer because he had caught them poaching. According to local report, they are very fond of threatening people and using bad language.

*Wednesday, December 27.* To-day my brother and I rode along the ridge of the Downs to the west. We counted no less than four separate encampments within one mile from Newlands Corner. The first consisted of one van, a cart, and a tent; the second consisted of three vans and one tent; the third of one tent, and the fourth of one tent and one cart. We noticed in all five children of school age. Two of these encampments have been there since yesterday and the third and fourth have been in their places certainly since Saturday, and possibly since Friday. The filth has become dreadful, and lately the caravans have moved on a little every day or two and have thus covered an enormous amount of ground with their leavings. We saw two carts with ponies and a large number of gipsies coming up the hill in the evening. They were obviously going to camp.

*Thursday, December 28.* A policeman and a keeper by their united efforts succeeded in "moving on" most of the gipsies to-day. We saw them "like the sands of the sea for multitude" pouring down off the hill top. Two vans passed our gate on their way towards Clandon (north). Three or four caravans went down towards Merrow (west), and two (south) to Albury. The gipsies who went to Albury were sitting by the side of the village street when we went down, and had their van drawn up on the road and were apparently begging of each person who passed them. We went on to Albury Heath where a tramping gipsy woman with a baby in her arms begged of us in a most piteous way. It is very difficult to resist a woman with a baby, but I believe if one once begins to give these people either food or money, one tramper tells another that you are "good for a copper," or its equivalent, and your house is besieged by a set of thieving and bullying vagrants. We have been specially warned by the police that, living far away from any village in a very lonely situation, we must not give anything to tramps. If we do, the word will be passed down and we shall be worried out of our lives by vagrants of all sorts.

*Friday, December 29.* There are still some gipsies walking about at Newlands Corner to-day, though I saw none who had camped. I hear that a week or two

ago there were some gipsies encamped just outside the coachman's house. His wife tells me that their language was extraordinarily lurid. I wonder if they were really talking Romany or Jargon?

*Saturday, December 30.* I did not see any gipsies to-day but I hear that some came to Newlands Corner in the afternoon.

*Sunday, December 31.* This morning we saw the gipsies who came here yesterday. They have camped just by the side of the road. The encampment consists of four large vans and four horses. There are a number of children, three or perhaps four of an age to go to school; a younger child and a baby. There are a good many people belonging to it; three or four women and apparently about six or more men and a girl of about fourteen. Further along the Downs to the west we saw another camp, this time a small one, consisting of one tent and a little cart. Later on in the morning we saw a van and a cart being driven over the Downs by some gipsies, the cart hung with rabbit skins and with a furtive and predatory dog running near it.

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I hope that the truthful witness of this dull and rather sordid diary may help to convince any reader who is courageous enough to plough through it that there is a very great and real danger threatening the beauties of the Surrey Downs. The idea that the gipsies are spoiling these Downs is, alas, no chimera. If, for instance, we were to have a vision of Mr. Kipling's delightful creation—the little half elfin girl who lived on these Downs even before the time when the Phœnicians travelled to England—if we were to see

. . . Taffy dancing through the fern

To lead the Surrey Spring again,

we should be too busy warning her not to catch her little mocasined feet in that dirty straw hat brim left by the gipsies to notice her diamond-bright eyes, and the places where this early British child of Spring could

Light her little damp wood smokes

would have to be carefully chosen that she might not sully her deer-skin cloak with the dirt of a worn-out camping ground.

In the first part of the same poem, which he is to be found in the volume of *Just So Stories*, Mr. Kipling tells us how:

There runs a road by Merrow Down,

A grassy track to-day it is,

An hour out of Guildford town,

Above the River Wey it is;

There when they heard the horse bells ring

The ancient Britons dressed and rode

To watch the dark Phœnicians bring

Their goods along the Western Road.

It is this Western Road, this Tin-way of the Phœnicians, that is now so sordidly defiled, whose bordering trees are so wantonly hacked and cut, and whose turf is so cruelly despoiled of its green freshness. Something must be done with regard to the gipsy problem if we would repristinate that gold of beauty which is the rightful heritage of the Surrey Uplands.

But a question far more vital than even that of the beauty of the Downs is also at stake, a question not of grass or of trees, but of future men and women. What is to happen to the gipsy children ?

Half naked, uncared for, dirty beyond belief, untended in illness, untaught in health, what is the future before these poor children ? Gipsy children when they are well may go to a school for a month ; when they are ill they may go into a hospital for a day (*see* November 27 in the Diary), and that is all the outside moral or physical help a child may get in that most difficult business of growing up into a reasonably right-minded and robust human being. Can we wonder that with parents too demoralised, idle, or careless to help them, few of these poor wanderers ever reach the havens of honesty or of health ?

AMABEL STRACHEY

P.S. May I add the following as a foot-note to this diurnal history. A short time ago there happened to be a gipsy child very ill, probably dying, in a neighbouring hospital. As I left the hospital one day—the child being, I believe, at death's door—just outside the hospital gate I saw five or six gipsy women. They were ragged and dirty, in the extreme, and they stood in a line at fairly regular intervals, their faces turned to the high wall of the hospital, their heads buried in their hands, moaning softly as they slowly rocked themselves to and fro. The impression produced by the group was essentially an Eastern one and reminded me of the pictures of the wailing of the Jews at Jerusalem. Was it some kind of incantation or prayer, some vague inherited memory of Eastern rites stirring within these women ?

Perhaps some student of gipsy lore may know.

A. S.