GIPSYING ON THE LITTLE OUSE

I.

(By “Wandering Will”.)

The instincts of the prehistoric nomad are not yet dead within us. Civilisation decrees that where our livelihood is, there shall our bodies be also; where our treasure is, there may our hearts be found. But there come times when the decrees of civilisation are spurned, and then our daily haunts know us not, as we hie forth to recruit our energies, and endeavour to disperse brain-fag, than which nothing is more wearisome. Generally this means exchanging one civilised sport for another – the metropolis or the country for the seaside; the seaside for the metropolis; the Midlands for East Anglia, or the thousand and one changes of locality holiday-makers accomplish. When the time for our annual holiday once more approached there was the usual discussion in the sanctum of sanctums as to where we should go, and by what means. Walking tours and cycling tours had gone before, so at length we determined to cast off civilisation for the nonce, and take a boat down into the wild fenland, where with provisions for a week, a covering for the night, and indispensable sundries, we would live as nearly as possible the life of our prehistoric forbears. After this preliminary dissertation, to a true and faithful record of our doings and misdoings; and the bird and the animal life (including specimens of the genus homo) in the districts through which we passed.

From the verge of the mill-pool, across which the weeping willow and the weeping ash bow continually one with the other, we loaded the “Gipsy” with her cargo of provisions, luxuries and necessaries, on the first Saturday in the month of September, and rowed down the river Thet ‘neath the overhanging elms, to its junction with the Little Ouse river. A grey-haired son of the soil sat on one of the seats on the Haling Path perusing his *People’s Weekly Journal* of the previous day, with too much interest to raise his eyes to look at a passing boat, a degree of self-restraint strange indeed in the neighbourhood. One of those imps of darkness, a printer’s devil, sat upon a long black punt, and being desirous of relieving ourselves of a little work if possible, we took him on board. The gate of the first staunch was down, and bravely did “Roving Richard” ascend the wheel and tread the spokes like a man on the treadmill (indeed a suspicion did cross my mind), raising the gate sufficiently for our boat to get through. These staunches, of which there are eight all told on the Little Ouse, were erected by the Thetford Navigation to keep a sufficient head of water in the higher reaches of the river for barges to get to and from Lynn. Railway traffic has almost abolished that of the river, and the staunches are now falling a prey to senility of a rabid type. Anglers of varying types look on our passage with a condescension born of their superiority of station in the world, for we are in the depths, and they are on the heights patiently striving to induce certain of the tribe *pisces* to exchange one element for another. Ye printer’s devil offers to tow us to the second staunch. The crew held a consultation, and unanimously accepted the offer. As the success of our trip so largely depended on the weather, we commenced to make a study of it. We talked learnedly of wind currents and atmospheric pressure, with the result that when we again arrived at home we could tell what the weather would be as well as certain almanacks, and by the same method - guessing. Along the serpentine reaches of the river – perfect horseshoe models many of them – did we glide in the rear of that tow-rope. We passed a company in a boat intent on “dagging” for eels with a glade, but sport seemed poor. After much deliberation a penny was tossed into the air, and the manner of its fall determined what status each of the crew should have. The appointments were duly gazetted as follows:- “Wandering Will” to be skipper and cook, “Roving Richard” to be chief engineer and cabin boy, and by these titles henceforth shall they be known. Grey rabbits pricked up their ear at our approach, and then made a sudden bolt into their subterranean dwellings. There were quite a fleet of pleasure boats going through the second staunch as we hove in sight round the bend of the river, and we just manage to squeeze through at their tail before the door goes down with a run.

Soon we are in the solitude of heath and marsh. We get within a few yards of two herons on a business bent in the ooze bordering a ditch. They rise with many harsh imprecations on our lack of manners in interrupting them whilst at dinner, and give their huge wings a few extra flaps to the minute in their endeavour to find what is the furthest possible distance from us they could reach in the shortest possible time. Against the sky we could see the outline of their awkward-looking legs trailing astern, and serving the same purpose as a rudder to their lumbering wings. On the heath to our left was a sight to be remembered for all time. Acre upon acre, undulation upon undulation, thickly covered with heather abloom – a veritable blaze of purple, for we seemed to have caught it when at the zenith of its beauty. A few brace of mallard rise up from the sedge-lined river margin, alighting again further downstream. The gates of the third or Turfpool, and the fourth or Croxton staunches were both raised, although we only just managed to squeeze through the latter by a hair space. By the row of pollard willows, the flowering reed-tufts were waving in the wind with a prolonged swish. At the spring of icy-cold water on Thetford Common we fill our kettles and water-bottles, and row past the Two-Mile-Bottom works, where the river is almost blocked with floating weeds. In the narrow reach before the fourth staunch moor-hens were scuttling to either bank, trailing their legs in the water, but uttering nary a note. And one might beat the sedge all day long and they would not emerge from their hiding-places. They possess a marvellous faculty of “living squat”. An agricultural labourer in a punt was placing his store of eel-hives for the night, and his boat looked quite like a basket-maker's establishment. A sprit (the quant of Broadland) was his method of propulsion, and his pace was the reverse of that of a snail. Huge flocks of lapwings and starlings were going through various aerial evolutions over Santon Downham Heath – the usual autumn manoeuvres of these birds.

We try for a mooring-ground for the night amongst a clump of willows on the right bank overhanging the water, but after a long search can find none to our satisfaction; so we move on. Just past the row of giant pines and L-shaped inlet runs from the river under the main line of the G.E.R. into Tanner’s Well, Pit or St. Helen’s Well. This inlet has no name, so for our own convenience we christened it “Gipsy Creek”. The creek itself, or rather the water in it, has an unearthly, ghastly look. This water is strongly impregnated with lime, which gives it a preternatural translucency, and even the leaves of the weeds in it are encrusted with a white sediment, and so, even at night-time, the water has a light, ghostly look. In the railway arch the water from above filters through chalk, and small limestone stalactites are thus formed beneath the bridge, the water seeming to drip continually. After we had tightly moored the “Gipsy” to the bank by means of two iron stakes fore and aft, the kettle was put on the oil stove under the lee of one of the pollard willows, beneath which our craft lay, and then we set about erecting our shelter fro the night. We made three arches of osiers, the thick ends being fixed in the sides of the boat, and they were then twined round each other. A strong rope was fastened to a ring in the stern, and passed tightly round the centre of the three arches, and then round the fore seat. Two more osiers as lateral support completed the framework. Over this we threw a large waterproof sheet, and from safety pins along its edges hung leaden weights, which effectually kept it taut, and prevented the wind getting beneath it, without injuring the fabric, and our shelter for the night was erected. Ominous sounds of a yearning after music from the direction of the kettle announced that the water was about to boil, so the skipper put some tea into a muslin bag, and after tying the said muslin bag to the handle of a hot water jug, poured the boiling water on. I have it on the authority of the cabin boy and chief engineer that the tea was good, and altogether it was an ideal meal in the gloaming, for to both of us there came the same feeling that inspired Robert Louis Stevenson when he wrote:-

> Bed in the bush with stars to see,
> Bread I dip in the river-
> There’s the life for a man like me,
> There’s the life for ever”

The meal concluded, we further put our house in order, meanwhile watching the express trains and some that were not express go thundering by. Hundreds of starlings had collected on two lightning-struck willows in the swamp hard by, and the bare charred boughs were literally black with them. Others who were in doubt as to

where their roosting-place for the night should be were wheeling round and round with a chatter that the cabin boy considered quite unnecessary, and he expressed a desire to massacre some, but more merciful counsels prevailed.

When the shades of night had rendered the things that are on the earth an obscure smudge of gloom we entered our habitation, and having fastened the hurricane lantern to the centre arch, the cabin boy read a scientific article on “The way women surmount stiles”, and the skipper made up the log. Now and then came the plash of of a fish in the creek, for sluggish bream of fictitious size haunt the still waters, and from the sedge-lined river’s marge the hoarse croak of a moorhen, or the call-note of a wild duck. From the higher ground above St. Helen’s Well came the plaint of the lapwing and the shrill whistling of the stone curlew, whilst the night through there was the monotonous drip of the water from the railway arch into the creek, and the moaning of the wind through that gigantic Aeolian harp, the Half-Moon Plantation of pines. Its cognomen was gained because of its semi-lunar formation, and not as some bibulous individual supposed, who sought half a day and found nothing, from a public-house by name the “Half-Moon”. This first night of our novel surroundings we slept but little, and that not until the small hours. We could distinctly hear the trains leave Brandon and Thetford Stations, and trace their progress until they thundered past like fiery serpents of the night. Nearer still than the plantation did the wind voice its wailing. In the reed bed across the water it kept up an incessant whispering, whilst even the sedge against which we were moored continually traced mystic figures on our boat at the will of the wind, rasping and grating in chorus the long night through. And ever in the lulls came the patter of the raindrops overhead, or the thud of the drippings from the pollard willows. Certain beetles, moths, gnats, and log-legged spiders betrayed a much greater liking for our company than we did for theirs; but they look so much better in test-tubes or cabinets than when, for instance, endeavouring to find the bald spot on one’s head. When in a semi-somnolent condition we heard the unmistakeable pugnacious squeal of a rat close at hand; but so long as he kept a respectable distance we had not enough energy to arouse ourselves, and when the mail train from the metropolis had gone by with a rush Morpheus claimed us for his own, and for a few hours we slept.

No. II. will include Santon, Brandon, and Cross Water (Lakenheath)

GIPSYING ON THE LITTLE OUSE

II.

(By “Wandering Will”.)

We awakened about 4 o’clock the next morning by the whistling of the stone curlews on the surrounding heaths. An hour later the reed warblers commenced warbling in the sallows, the ubiquitous sparrows chirped from the tree-tops, and the starlings that had rested on the charred willow commenced making observations and their toilet at the same time. With all nature busy around us we could not slumber, so, before 6 a.m., we arose, and whilst the skipper washed up the tea things from the previous eve, the cabin boy folded up our nocturnal robes. After putting the kettle on for breakfast we had a stroll round. Our friend of the previous evening was raising his eel-hives, but with what result we cannot tell. From the parapet of the railway bridge with our field glasses we could search the nooks up and down the valley. Broods of moorhens – dozens of them – were scuttling backwards ad forwards on the adjacent reach of the river, and around their tunnelled dwellings in Tanner’s Well Pit, a score or so of belated martins hovered and twittered, halting between two opinions – whether or no it were better to depart for sunnier climes at once. Two fine bream were sluggishly making their way down the creek into the river; in the translucent water we could see the very movement of each fin. At length the water in our kettle boiled and the coffee was made. The skipper fried the bacon and the cabin boy poached the eggs. A rustling in the sedge attracted our attention. Two water-voles were making merry, running and swimming along the bank of the creek, secure in their solitude. Now they have a neck and neck race across the stream, but he on the far side was adjudged the winner by the spectators.

Soon after 8 we struck camp and were soon gliding down stream again, with a drizzling rain driving in our faces. On the right bank was a mediaeval farm house, picturesque in its decay, with a plastered exterior and bay windows. Roses and old-fashioned creepers climbed over its front or hung in graceful festoons; sentinel-like sun-flowers guarded the porch; sparrows twittered in the old ash tree in the corner of the garden; and beneath the overhanging willows as the water’s edge a brood of moorhens were disporting in the security of man’s protection. Close at hand was the small church of Santon St. Helen’s (said to be the smallest in Norfolk), and we mused on the lone epitaph in the churchyard - “Not forgotten”. A costly monument could have said no more. The wood came down to the haling path, and its oppressive silence hung o’er us as a pall.

> For here in this enchanted wood,
> Like music of the shell
> The spacious silence sings always,
> And in its depths the live-long day
> Weird phantasy doth dwell.

Beneath Santon Bridge we determined to wait awhile in hope of the weather clearing, and also to write a letter or two. Fate was unkind to us in that we could not find the shrinking little blue-eyed flower of the river’s brink. From Santon to Brandon the river is deep and narrow, its tortuous course passing through charming sylvan scenery. Alder copses fringed with flaming reed-tufts in all the glory of autumnal beauty; dense pine plantations, solitary oaks and ashes of giant growth, and oft the overhanging willows and dwarf alder clumps. The chief engineer rigged him up an oar in the bows by three stays, and by having the tow rope in the middle escaped the dense growth of the banks. Across the low-lying meadows were huge patches of reeds and rushes, for the waste places of man are the gardens of nature. In the rifts of the rain-cloud the sun glinted on the flowering reeds, and the sheen of their beauty was outlined against the dark depths of the fir plantations behind. It was long after the red-tiled, black flint cottages of Brandon came into sight across the meadowland that we

moored our boat by the Brandon Bridge, for the river twists and turns in an entirely unnecessary and provoking manner. Not for 100 consecutive yards is it certain in which direction it should flow to meet the mother of waters, the Great Ouse. Along the banks stood patient anglers, and as the breeze waxed or waned came the silvery cadence of the bells from Brandon Church. Brandon Bridge is quaint indeed, but a fuller description of it and Brandon must be left until the return journey. The cabin boy walked up to the post office with the letters, greatly to the admiration of the natives, for he was stylishly dressed. On his Saxon head was a large tam o'shanter; next came wrap, sweater, trousers, and buskins, with, of course, sundry other articles of attire.

We navigated through the middle arch of the three, and then slowly rowed past the trim garden on the left, with its many nooks in which Cupid should delight in. But Cupid's tastes somehow vary. By the sixth or Brandon staunch three gentlemen from Cambridge were encamped. They had just competed their morning toilet and meal. One of them was surely the double of Dr. W. G. Grace, for the resemblance was marvellous. We had to raise the staunch gate, which is by no means light, for each succeeding one downstream seems to get heavier. Taking it in turns, we we towed along under the railway to the seventh or Sheepwash staunch, where we moored for dinner. The spire of Wilton Church was visible from near the railway bridge. We fastened the "Gipsy" to the middle pier, and the skipper rummaged around in the reed-bed where the waving tops that for ever whisper in the breeze were far above his head. Dinner; thence on to Wilton Bridge. A crowd of young men were making merry at a riverside public house, kept by one "Grimmer Rolph", probably a descendent of one of the Norse pirates. As we passed under Wilton Bridge a yacht came bowling along upstream before a stiff breeze, and was brought round cleverly to the quay, where her occupants disembarked. About a mile on the further side of Wilton Bridge we saw Ely Cathedral as a spectral shape far away over the fen land, and wherever one goes in the fens one cannot but be struck by its dominance. The Isle of Ely is the heart of the fenland, and one can well imagine the fenmen in the days of long ago almost worshipping the sacred fane which watched over them in their isolation and their battles with nature. Soon after 4 p.m. we reached Cross Water, our destination for the night. This is the eighth or Lakenheath staunch, the last on the Little Ouse. We moored the Gipsy in a little creek this side of the sluice, of which anon.

The stove was taken on shore, and a shelter made for it by fixing four willow twigs in the ground and round them twining a waterproof sheet, and on it was placed a kettleful of river water, for such do the inhabitants all the way along have to drink. During tea both crew were attacked with severe indisposition resulting on some tinned meat for dinner. Soda water from the "Green Dragon", commonly called "The Staunch", hard by, somewhat solaced their feelings. Crosswater is the strongest of the staunches on the Little Ouse, is in excellent repair, and has a staunch-keeper to attend to it. A public footpath crosses the water here (hence the name), and this is protected by railings. There are three parts to the staunch – the staunch-gate, the overfall, and the three sluices. In the gloaming we talk with two lightermen, who had brought a gang up with coal from Outwell for Lakenheath Drainage Mill, which supplanted the old black wind mill. Thousands of starlings rustled in the reed-bed no two yards from where our boat lay in its sheltered nook, and as we looked between the reed-stakes into its hazy depths one could not wonder that the men of the Danelagh peopled such places with wills-o'-the wisp, witches, werewolves, ghosts, and the spirits of nature. Whilst the skipper meditated on these things the cabin boy fished and caught two roach. When dusk had almost merged into darkness, the sluice-keeper and inn-keeper came forth to cast their eel nets for the night. A long net was put athwart the stream on the top side of the staunch to stop all floating weeds and matter that would encumber the purse-net. This latter consisted of a framework that fitted into one of the sluices and then a long and gradually narrowing net, kept out at full length by the rush of the water, and on these autumnal nights the eels endeavour to pass the sluice only to find themselves in the net. Before 8 p.m. we had retired, and were hushed to sleep by nature's music – the gurgling of the water through the sluice, the rustle in the reed-bed, and the purling river ever-flowing the night through.

At 4 a.m. we were half roused by the raising on the nets, but slept on until 6, and with ten hours sleep felt refreshed in body and mind. From the top of the staunch was a magnificent view of of the sun-kissed east and the fenland stretching away into infinity. The cabin boy fished, and the skipper discoursed with the sluice-keeper on the otters that find a home in the swamp. At breakfast a large flock of ducks swam up the inlet to us

and waited patiently for such crumbs as were vouchsafed to them. Four of five stood on their heads to get a lump of sugar from the muddy bottom, and then hoarsely proclaimed their indignation at the deception. But now came another attraction for them. The eels caught in the net were being removed from the punt to the eel-boxes, and amongst them were many dead dace and roach. These were thrown into the river, and the ducks bolted them whole, even up to four or five inches in length. Occasionally a stray one got into the current and was taken down stream, and then it was a picture to see the race when they caught sight of it. From Cross Water the river takes a north-westerly direction, turning just past the drainage mill. About nine we struck our camp and raised the staunch, whilst the sluice-keeper raised the sluices to reduce the head of water a bit to that the "Gipsy" could get through. After rowing a mile down stream we lengthened the tow line and got out on the bank. These banks protect the fenland from the flood waters of the river, which are pumped by the drainage mills, and run from Witton Bridge to Brand Creek on the Little Ouse, and are then continued on the Great Ouse to the sea. They are constructed of blue gault, which is an ideal substance for the purpose, but is terrible to walk on after rain. From the top of the bank where we landed Ely Cathedral could be seen looming large on the horizon, appearing to be almost due south. At a public-house in the village of Feltwell Anchor the crew decided to stop and have some ginger beer. We chatted with mine host and another occupant of the bar, and were much enlightened thereby. Mine host said that Feltwell Anchor was six miles from anywhere and I do not doubt his word. On a bill relating to the church of "S. John Little Ouse", the incumbent styled himself "Priest in charge". The natives did not know if it was a Protestant Church, but had a vague idea that it belonged to the Church of England. The subject of maps was touched on, and here again we learnt much. The learned native informed the company that maps is wunnerful things. Why they even tell you which way to go and how far it is better'n if you know yourself. Marvellour, I call it". The landlord timidly hazarded that perhaps we had seen a map. We had to admit the impeachment; we had seen certain marvels in our time. The learned native was visibly impressed, but we could stay no longer. We passed under a modern iron bridge, and a few reaches after leaving Feltwell Anchor were overtaken by the pleasure steamer Pride of the Ouse, outward bound from Thetford, chartered by the most ardent river-lover in the town and party. An offer of a tow to Brand Creek was accepted, as our ultimate destination was Denver Sluice, theirs Cambridge. It was pleasant work riding the swell of a steamer with foaming froth-churned spume of her paddles scurrying away in our wake, and, with naught to do but observe and read in the stern, for we had unshipped the rudder and trusted to the steamer's guidance. Here we were in the fenland – the land of the illimitable sky, where are such sunrises and sunsets and visions of cloudland as nowhere else does Great Britain give. From the river the view was almost nil, for the steep banks arising from the water's edge obstructed the view, at the same time narrowing the channel, and making the river run deep and slow – more majestic than the babbling, hurrying stream in the higher reaches, but with none of that element of enchantment possessed by the latter. One fact that struck us most forcibly here and wherever we went was that the nearer people live to the water the dirtier do they appear. Between Cross Water and Brand Creek are many "shanties" – wooden erections in lieu of houses – for the uncertain soil of fenland is apt to give way to the weight of a brick house. At the Ship Inn, Brand Creek, at the junction of the Little Ouse with the Great Ouse or Ten Mile, the Pride of the Ouse stopped, and we were given the opportunity by the gentleman who had chartered the steamer of going with him to Cambridge, returning in the same manner as far as Brand Creek. After a minute's consultation the crew of the Gipsy accepted with thanks.

(No. III. will include the Great Ouse and Cam to Cambridge, returning to Denver Sluice.)

GIPSYING ON THE LITTLE OUSE

III.

(By “Wandering Will”.)

In the Ten Mile the river became wider and deeper, and the banks higher. On the bosom of the waters were hundreds of ducks, in all the shades common to them, and the whistle of the steamer was frequently in evidence to warn them from taking up all the channel. Occasional spectators on the river’s bank seemed much interested in our progress, especially some rustic juveniles fishing with bean poles and minus all incidentals. After the two bridges at Littleport came a straight stretch of three and a half miles. After a beauteous morn, a drizzling rain had set in. Littleport Church, with its square tower, and the Skating Ground, whereon the racing cracks of the world contest when King Frost holds sway, lay on out right. Our confined position in the small boat made the crew of the Gipsy cramped, and so we were asked to board the steamer. This we did by hauling on the tow line until our boat was under the stern, and then making a spring on board. The distance between Littleport and Ely is not great, the cathedral being in sight most of the way. The river winds in a wonderful manner through Ely, passing under the railway three times, and then again under the branch line to Soham. From one reach of the river an almost due east view of the cathedral towering over was obtained, and the peculiarity of this must be seen to be appreciated, for description is inadequate.

Ely City is ancient, quaint and dirty. Curious houses and nondescript buildings rise up from the water’s edge, and the osier-growing and basket-making industry is strongly to the fore. On towards Cambridge the country is extremely flat and desolate, with fine views of Ely Cathedral obtainable from the various reaches and the river meanders through the marshland. Various gangs of lighters belonging to Fen Commissioners were moored in and near Ely, and we met one coming from Cambridge. A curious inn sign on the left bank of the Cam, which has a more than local reputation, reads thus:- “Five miles from anywhere. No hurry”, and is popularly known as “No hurry”. Before entering into Swaffham Lock we passed one of the most marvellous conglomerations of humanity ever gathered within a given area. They were members of an Angling Club in competition – 87 all told - and each had his own little plot on the river bank marked out, and unto him was given the command, “Thus far shalt thou come and no further”. There were striplings and greybeards, thin men and fat men; some who were evidently highly-respected members of the community, others whose respectability was not so evident. One only did we see with a fish, and he was a veteran with a three-inch roach in his hand, eyeing it with the admiration of a man who thinks he has caught a whale. In one thing only did they all agree – in the look of patient resignation with which they waited for the fish to bite, save only he with the marvellous catch, and his ecstatic beaming countenance. In Cambridge we afterwards heard that the prize for heaviest catch was taken by 2½lb., and that the anglers did not average three fish apiece. Anglers are all enthusiasts, and I wonder what those men would think if they could all have been set down by the swift-flowing, crystalline Little Ouse or Lark, and hauled out fish by the stone, instead of luring undersized fish from the stagnant dirty Cam. At Bottisham Lock a brawny amazon helped with the lock-gates, and on the far side were moored the “Otter” and the “Outer Hound”, which had brought the anglers from Cambridge. Near Clayhithe were splendid tea gardens, in which picnic parties made merry. From Waterbeach on we lost sight of the wooden shanties of the fen, and picturesque ivy-covered thatched cottages, the land beginning to assume a more prosperous and civilised appearance. From Bottisham to Cambridge is a fine towing path, mainly of gravel, bordered with pollard willows, from which the performances of the ‘Varsity crew and the college crews are watched with enthusiasm in the days when the undergraduates are “up”. Fresh beauty was unfolded in each succeeding reach of the river. Sky-soaring aspens, with their tremulous never-ceasing, whispering o’er-shadowed the dank stream, and by their roots clumps of alders bowed to the water. A maiden and a youth were paddling in a Canadian canoe in

front of us as we rounded a bend, but the maiden soon deemed in incumbent to cease. As we passed by she held up her umbrella with a haughty air of unconcern worthy of Ellen Terry, whilst her poor brother (for so we judged him) worked like a slave from Zanzibar. And still the rain descented. Soon came into view the tall chimneys of the Cambridge brickfields, and passing under the railway once more we were soon in the outskirts of the town. In the boating establishments there seemed boats enough for all Cambridge to row, and the big boathouses of the colleges seem more like mansions that what they really are. In Cambridge is another lock, making three on the Cam, and about a hundred yards past this we moored for the night in the next berth to the Pride of the Ouse, near the George Inn.

A pleasant tea with the steamer's company, and then we rig up our nightly abode and go for a stroll. We visited a penny waxwork show of mechanical models, and otherwise strove to add to our knowledge by a visit to the 'Varsity town of the East. Before retiring we decide to fill our water-bottles with pure water, undefiled by the Cambridge sewers, and give them into the charge of a youth of uncertain age, who will some day repose in a dime museum and the champion fat man. After recovering one's breath after the first shock, one could only exclaim with Dominic Sampson – "Pro-dig-ious". At 10 oclock the chief engineer "doused the glim", an operation requiring a certain mount of mechanical skill - an element lacking in the skipper's composition. It rained hard, and through the night came the unearthly buzz of the dynamos from the electric light works a few yards off, and the crew of the Pride of the Ouse were distinctly merry, so it befell that we did not obtain much more sleep than the proverbial "forty winks". In the early hours of the morn, when the skipper was on the verge of dreamland, a most peculiar sensation hovered around his mouth. It was the tail which belonged to a Thomas cat sitting on the stern seat, sweeping round with an artistic curve as the animal tried to find a soft board. A curious scientific fact we discovered in our gipsying is that the softest boards are those which have the thickest rugs on them. I am afraid that the blessings of the crew of the Gipsy availed that cat but little. The skipper tried to get that cat to settle down in a becoming manner, but, as the cabin boy remarked, it was "obstreperous", and totally declined. With that presence of mind which characterises him in emergencies, the cabin boy lifted up that Thomas cat by the first available portion of its anatomy (being pitch dark I cannot say where that was) and with some little trouble deposited on the quay, whence I doubt not that it migrated to other climes.

About four o'clock the crew of the steamer arose, and we soon followed suit, and after a wash in the water of the Cam we do our daily housemaid's work, and put on the kettle to have an early cup of tea. Before 6 a.m. we had made enough tea for both crews, and by six o'clock had started. The lock-keeper at Cambridge Lock had a distinctly sleepy air, but all the same he managed to get us through safely. Then we were right away through awakening Cambridge in the gladsome early morn at the steamer's highest speed. A few anglers alone seem to have anticipated us. Bottisham Lock is extremely pretty, especially its silvery cascade. Ditton church, and that picturesque riverside hostelry of the olden time, the Plough, are passed, then Morningsea Ferry with "Foot passengers half-penny each", and next Clayhithe Bridge and Swaffham Lock. On the hedges were magnificent haws in great profusion, and hips abounded on the dog-rose bushes. Bird-life was, as usual, strongly in evidence in the early morn. Royston crows and pigeons flew overhead on foraging expeditions; huge flocks of lapwings hunted on the stubble fields; and two "herusers" flew far away at our approach. Near Cambridge we passed a the Pike and Eel, and near the Fish and Duck a pugnacious dog barked at us ferociously. Strange, indeed, it is how some of these riverside inns manage to exist. "Miles away from anywhere", as "No hurry" puts it, they cannot have much custom save that of passing bargees, and in these days that is practically nil. Scotch thistles and cattle were about all that seemed to flourish on the marshes. After passing the junction with the Great Ouse river near a powerful drainage mill, there is little of interest till the precincts of Ely are again reached. We pass quite close to Ely Railway Station, then under a bridge "cast for the Dean and Chapter of Ely". After the twistings and turnings in the city came the straight stretch to Littleport Quay. The river Lark, flowing from Bury St. Edmunds and Mildenhall, enters the Great Ouse between Ely and Littleport under a fantastically-shaped bridge. Near here we met the double of Dr. W. G. Grace returning from Brandon staunch, sailing along with his companion in a distinctly lazy manner. Between Littleport and Brandon Creek are a marvellous collection of houses – all awry. The unstable peat has played havoc with their foundations, and

gables are twisted different ways, one chimney leans out and another in, and all the vagaries which shifting foundation produce may here be seen. Flocks of lapwings hunted over the stubble fields of the great plain, with even larger flocks of starlings. At length Brandon Creek is again reached; again we board the “Gipsy” and cast off from the “Pride of the Ouse”, that record-breaking steamer disappearing round the bend into the Little Ouse, whilst we prepare to camp for dinner.

Our camp fire was soon alight on shore, a hitch in the proceedings by which we were nearly blown up being successfully coped with by the crew. After coffee hot and comestibles, we towed alternately – which thing is sad. Whilst walking on the blue gault banks of the Ouse one can quite understand why the fenner stick to their own district; after once walking on that it is a wonder they can ever leave it, for all the tenacious substances in the world one would think this is the worst. After towing duty for a short time each of the crew resembled landed proprietors with their estates hanging to the soles of their boots. At Fen Mill Bank some golden apples were hanging from a tree close by the river, therefore apples the cabin boy must have. A bargain was soon struck with a garrulous old man and a lady who was even more so, and spoil was shot down in the bows to be eaten as required. The railway crosses the river by a huge wooden bridge painted red. From a distance it looks like a fine old iron structure; but closer inspection reveals the method of its building. Between here and Denver Sluice the river is wondrous pretty. Wissey Mouth is a gem of beauty. Gigantic rushes line the bank, o’ershadowed by stately aspens, with their images perfectly outlined in the deep black river, for in the fenland all the rivers are black from the peaty soil held in solution. Over the fens heavy rains have played terrible havoc with the harvest; many field were still uncut, whilst on many others the sheaves of corn were simply rotting away. Now and again there came to us the popping of the partridge-shooters in the stubble.

A huge barrier crossed the river, and at Denver Sluice, the strongest river sluice in England, we decided to stop. Although we searched long, yet could no suitable mooring ground be found for our boat, so we were compelled to seek lodgings for two nights and the Jenyn’s Arms Inn. On our first arrival the tide was out, only seven feet of water being registered on the seaward side. After bachelor’s tea in a snug little room built for two, we tackled our correspondence, and then went forth in the gloaming to watch the incoming tide. It was a majestic sight. The swirling, seething waters were making up the 100-foot or New Bedford River at a terrific rate and if the grey fortress of Denver Sluice did not look of such impregnable strength one would tremble for the safety of the fenland. On one side of the sluice were the calm, deep black waters of the freshwater river; on the other the troubled yellow waters of the tidal stream. Across the flood, from behind the creaking windmill on the far shore, came lanes of light along the water as the setting sun vanished in the west. We were fortunate in seeing one of the highest tides of the year, for on September 8th the effect of the new moon was felt, and the difference between low and high tide was 17 feet, the rise talking place in three hours. As we looked upon the seething tumult of the waters, an old man with whom we were conversing, remarked:- “The moon and the tide wait for nowt – and time’s the same”. From the seaward side a sandpiper’s whistle was heard several times, and overhead a few pipistrelles were still flying about. “When even died, the million-tinted, and the night had come and planets glinted”, we walked alongside the drain to the old wooden bridge, and sitting on the parapet looked away o’er the great fen plain until it was lost in obscurity, when we returned to out habitation, discussed the literature of “Parodies” and then retired to rest.

(No. IV. Will contain Denver Sluice and Downham Market)

GIPSYING ON THE LITTLE OUSE

IV.

(By “Wandering Will”.)

During the night there was a severe thunderstorm and our first job on arising in the morning was to empty about a gallon of rainwater from the tarpaulin over the “Gipsy”. Whilst breakfast was preparing we had a chat with the sluice-keeper, and learned somewhat of the history on the sluices. The first sluice was built by the Adventurers in 1652 failing about one hundred year later. The second stood till 1828, and the present structure was commenced in 1832. It consists of three drainage eyes eighteen feet wide; the ebb and flow being controlled by two pairs of immense leafed doors weighing eleven tons each. To the east of these is a huge pen sluice, 74 feet long, 18 feet wide, and with leafed doors, capable of controlling a 24 feet rise of tidal water. Denver sluice is the flood-gate of the Great Ouse which is a mighty stream, flowing past Bedford, St. Neot’s, Huntingdon, St. Ives, Ely, and Littleport above the sluice; and Downham Market and King’s Lynn (which is 14 miles distant) below. The river Cam unites with it above Ely, and between that city and Denver, the Lark, Little Ouse, and Wissey are its tributaries. Immediately below the sluice the New Bedford River joins it, and not far distant it also receives the Old Bedford River and Wisbech Canal. In tines of high flood the sluice discharges the flood water of 800,000 acres of land. The sluice-keeper has seen the water over the bank, and if on the previous evening the wind had been from the nor’ard and west’ard, we should probably have seen it too. About six inches from the top of the stone pier on which the height of the tide was measured, the sluice-keeper showed us a notch made about twelve years ago for the height of the tide when St. Margaret’s, Lynn, was flooded, and great damage done to the port. On the front of the sluice-keeper’s house are over twenty swallows’ nests, there being four in one cluster, and two other clusters of three each. In the List of Tolls to be taken by the Bedford Level Corporation at Denver Sluice Bridge is one that reads:- “For every Passenger on Foot on Easter Sunday, 1d.” Passengers on Ouse Bank going to and from Divine Service on the Sunday are exempt from this toll, so they have to pay on Easter Monday instead. Swallows in large numbers were flying through the arches of the sluice, twittering as if their lives depended on their ability to make noise.

After breakfast we started on our walk to Denver Post Office and Downham Market. Between the wooden bridge and Denver Junction was a wildling hedgerow about 20 feet in width, the bushes being crowded with haws, blackberries, and sloes. An on-slaughter was made of those blackberries, and gaining knowledge by experience the cabin boy evolved yet another proverb – “A blackberry in the hand is worth two in the bush”. And as the skipper extricated many thorns from various parts of his body, thus did he make reply:- “A thorn in the bush is worth two in the hand”. Denver village is long and straggling, but picturesque withal. The majority of the houses are built of ragstone. There were cottages on which Virginian creepers were in the brilliant autumnal crimson; one on which was a rose in full bloom; and almost all had the picturesque look of antiquity. On the village green was an ancient pound made of poles connected with wires. A decrepit old crow sat on one pole, but even he looked ashamed of having any connection with such a forlorn object. The Church of St. Mary, being also built of ragstone, presents a curious appearance to strangers. In the churchyard is a tombstone bearing the carving of a fine windmill. At the Post Office we received our letters and dailies, for we had been without news of the outside world for four days. It was also a stationer’s shop, and smelt like a saddler’s place of business. Two convenient gateposts served the crew of the “Gipsy” as reading desks, but a heavy shower caused an adjournment to the shelter of a fine chestnut tree. We then walked slowly into Downham Market, having beautiful park-land on our left. In a hollow elm we found a splendid hornet's nest, but we had neither time nor material to smoke them out, and they have a stinging way of enforcing the mandate against trespassers. Opposite the entrance of the Denver Road into Downham Market is a fine County Court building, surmounted

by the Royal arms. On an inn sign we saw the “untamed mustang of the West” - a most ferocious creature. The barrier informed us that the sole object of interest was “Wellington House” where Wellington used to live. We saw it afterwards, but it was called “Nelson House”. In our wanderings about the quaint old town we again thought what a record breaking cycling track is the granite-paved High Street. At length we find our way to the Church of St. Edmund, by way of a fine avenue of lime trees. This church also built of ragstone, and contains nothing of superlative interest. There is a curious font and an iron-bound chest of wondrous strength, and here, too, the skipper was enabled to add one more to his list of perfect men – all deceased, a living specimen has yet to be found. The epitaph (which is on an interior mural tablet) speaks for itself:-

Scandal to truth and heaven’s all-seeing eye.
That men should teach e’en monuments to lye,
But when the last dread trump shall raise the deaf
Then may with truth this character be read-
Without a wish to injure or oppress,
Friend to mankind and virtue in distress,
Studious to please and fearful to offend.
Above detraction or a selfish end,
Blest with a hand more freely to bestow,
Blest with a hand to share another’s woe.
In these are virtues which are rarely known,
If this be merit we should wish our own,
Then may we say (but not without a sigh)
Near to this place these many virtues lie.

The tower was under repair, so we could not ascend, but from its foot one gains a magnificent view of the fenland. Passing through a steep and narrow alley we reach the main street once more, and descend to the river. We walk along the river wall to the girder bridge over the Great Ouse, and then return to the railway station, passing an inn called “The Spade and Becket”, a most unusual sign – becket being a nautical term used for anything by which ropes, spars, &c., are fastened. Near the station we note huge flour mills, and soon after are bound for Denver Junction in one of the tramcars of the Downham and Stoke Ferry Railway Company, and very comfortable indeed they are, fulfilling their purpose admirably. Being early Closing Day in Downham Market several anglers got off bound for the sluice. On our way back from the station we minutely search those bramble clumps, and many a blackberry was numbered with the missing. Whilst reading before tea in our bachelor's den we saw a big fire on the fenland, but made it out with our glasses to be burning after threshing. During tea the cabin boy had a mania for declining Latin nouns, which the paternal admonitions of the skipper could not check.

After the evening meal we went to see what the fishermen had caught in the tidal waters. There were some very fine catches, chiefly of bream, but also including perch, dabs, butt, and a lamprey. We saw one bream caught through being hooked in the back. But now came another incident! A horse had come down to drink at low water, and had, of course, got stuck in the yellow mud. We walked up to the scene with a fenman, and nearly had spasms through suppressed mirth. He had a distinct stride, and he also had some boots – near resembling those of “seven-league” fame as any I have ever seen. Nooses were put around the horse’s neck, and it was hauled up foot by foot as the tide rose, three hours being taken in the process. The fenmen were hardened to such scenes, for they seemed to care little whether the horse was drowned or not, their only incentive being a gallon of beer, which “the master” had promised them if successful. To pass away the time those fenmen yarned, and, for sheer Munchausen-like superlative lying capabilities, I fear me that the American journalists who supply English papers with “copy” during the “big goose-berry and sea-serpent season” must now take a second place. The “Great Ego” was prominent in all these fairy tales. In Downham Market that day we had seen signs of a wedding and many ladies and gentlemen on the opposite bank watching the struggle for life or death, we found out to be the participants. They stood in and extended line, clearly outlined against the western sky, and the skipper had his field glasses – any healthy imagination can supply the rest. The fenmen called the

clumps of rushes “fliggers” – a term we had not previously heard. A long raking craft coming in with the tide we found to be be the steamer Nancy, of Lynn, belonging to the Eastern Counties Navigation Company, and which runs to Cambridge every Wednesday, generally laden with sugar, but this trip it had also some paraffin barrels on board. We saw her go through the pen lock, into which she just managed to squeeze. When we turned in for a read, the evening was perfect. Stars above; in the west the play of the summer lightning; the flicker of the flames across the fenland from the stack refuse; and at our feet the turbulent tidal water. About 10 o’clock we had a short ramble alongside the New Bedford River to watch the height of the tide, which seemed dangerously near the top of the bank. At 10 o’clock all in the inn were in bed save the wanderers, and a few minutes after we saw the Nancy depart up the Great Ouse for Cambridge.

In the early morn three big gangs of lighters belonging to E.C.N. Company went through the pen lock down stream one at a time. After posting letters in Denver Sluice pillar box, with the tide 23 feet high, we departed up stream with somewhat of regret. Once past Wissey Mouth, Ten Mile Bank, and Southery Ferry, to Brandon Creek, where we left the Ten Mile River for the Little Ouse. It was near Southery Ferry in 1852 that the flood-water burst the river bank and flooded thousands of acres of land, the fens as far east as Feltwell and Hockwold being all under water. Sea birds and waders of all kinds resorted to this vast inland lake, and birds nested there in 1853 that had never previously been known to do in the memory of man. A hundred yards of so up the narrow stream we moored the boat for dinner. The stove was taken on shore and lit under the lee of a sallow, whilst the cabin boy fished and caught a fair-sized dace. We had hardly finished our soup before the heavens became overcast with a cloud of inky blackness. Hurriedly we packed up and made all secure, and then stood on the banks with our waterproofs on and watched. A dead calm came upon us; not a leaf of the sallow fluttered. Suddenly from the north came a terrible roar, and a wall of water advanced. It was an awe-inspiring sight. The rain roared like a stupendous cataract; sinuous lightning streaks pierced the cloud; and the thunder rolled from horizon to horizon. Never had the crew of the “Gipsy” seen such a downpour, and in a few minutes even waterproofs were wet through. When it had abated a little we decided to push on with all speed, but were at length compelled to take refuge in a fen cottage at the foot of the bank. The gude-wife, who was nursing a chubby infant, told us that Littleport was supposed to be their parish, but Southery was the nearest village of any size, only it was the other side of the river. When the thunder had ceased somewhat, and the rain descended fitfully, we departed for Feltwell Anchor, passing under an iron bridge, from which a crowd of admiring rustics, prevented by the rain from working, watched our progress. From the bank one got a magnificent view of the fenland, with scores of homesteads, and numberless round stacks. On a little chapel at Feltwell Anchor was a list of voters, from which we gathered that all save one lives on “Little Ouse Bank”, and resides at “Penny Hill”. At some little distance from Cross Water we asked a countryman how far it was to that place. “A mile-and-a-quarter” was the reply. A few hundred yards further on we asked another son of the soil, and according to his idea it was “About fower mild; might be more”. But is a common result of asking questions as to distance in the country. Men differ lamentably on such matters.

(No. V. and conclusion will give further details of Cross Water, Brandon Staunch, and “Gipsy Creek”.)

GIPSYING ON THE LITTLE OUSE

V.

(By “Wandering Will”.)

Arrived at Cross Water we saw the sluice-keeper going off with his gun to shoot a few of the starlings that were chattering in the reed-bed. We emptied everything out of the “Gipsy”, then hauled her on shore and turned her over to free the boat from the water that had accumulated during the storm. We then pushed her overland to the little creek in which we had before moored, and soon erected our tent for the night. When the water in the kettle boiled, we had tea on shore. The crew sat aupon biscuit tins, serving for tables, and watched a fenland sunset in all its glory:-

> “Whilst barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
> And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue,
> Then in a mournful choir the small gnats mourn
> Among the river sallows borne aloft
> Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies.”

Parallel with the horizon was a clod of inky blackness, and from behind this the sun gradually lowered. When the big blood-red globe of eternal fire filled the clear space between the storm cloud and the plain, the sight produced and awe-struck silence. The black storm-cloud above was transformed into purple, and the detached cloudlets were fringed with fleeting gold. Silhouetted against the red disc was a lone poplar tree in the far distance, and for a few minutes the earth was as a vision of the Elysian Fields. But beauty is, indeed, fleeting, and a few seconds suffice for the glory of the sheen of the waving reed-tufts to depart; and in a few more the gilding on the staunch top and on the gaunt arms of the old windmill is gone too, and only a few scattered cloudlets in the western sky are painted in carmine and gold. And when we returned to the things of earth once more skipper’s tea was nearly cold, and the cabin boy had almost forgotten whether he had just finished the meal or just begun. A fine spaniel visited us, but was extremely shy, thereby differencing from the ducks who came after the bag of boiled wheat that the cabin boy turned out. The rattling of oars in the rowlocks told of strangers, and our namby-pamby yachting friend and a lady came round the corner of the creek, and after a very long time managed to moor the boat. Everything that gentleman ought to have done, he decided to leave, like Felix, till “a more convenient season”. When speaking of the afternoon storm, when the floodgates of heaven were opened, he characterised it as “awfully damp!”. A fair fishermaid – the fenman’s daughter – came forth to fish. A dark skirt and a light blouse, a sailor hat and a white apron constituted the costume of that fishermaid. She un-moored a punt, and quanted down stream with the skill of a professional waterman, taking her station under the lee of the reeds, where she fished until materfamilias came forth and opined that it was too dark to see. Long after dark the reed-warblers were twittering amongst the reeds in which the “Gipsy” lay. After watching the setting of the eel-nets and studying elementary astronomy, we turned in, and the skipper made up the log. Then ensued a hunt for big game. How many “head” of game we slew I know not; if the spoils were counted by legs it would have been some hundreds. Our lantern had been alight in the tent for some time, and to it had come scores of long-legged gnats, longer-legged spiders, midgets, and in the dead of night a mighty beetle that bellowed like a bull. Gurgling water, whispering reeds, rustling sallows, and the crunching of herbage by the kine, made up an opiate which soon took effect on the senses of the “Gipsy’s crew”, and again they slept for nearly ten long hours.

When first we arose it was one of those “dirtiest” mornings it has ever been my lot to see. Our kettle was the first thing seen after, and then we went for a stroll along the footpath to Lakenheath, as far as the railway. Thousands and thousands of swallows were twittering around the forlorn looking black windmill, plucking up courage for their autumnal migration to sunny lands beyond the sea. Two old barges accounted for their extremely woe-begone appearance by explaining that they had got “too much grog aboard” the previous night.

In the wilderness of reeds and rushes, sedge and sallow-

> The dewdrops, quivering clear and bright,
> Tremble like tears which a weeping night
> To a gladsome lay bequeaths.

Again at breakfast time did the dogs and ducks visit us, and we turned them not empty away. From the top of the staunch we saw a sight which only an horizon of far extent can give. The black pall which covered the face of the earth was rent in twain, and slowly the sun-chased mist retreated. In the west was the gladsome light of day, the unfathomable vapour-flected blue; whilst the east was a veritable wall of impenetrable blackness.

After breakfast, by the invitation of the engineer, we visited Lakenheath Drainage Mill, which had started that morning in earnest after its summer spell of inactivity. The water in the river is often higher than the fenland, only being kept back by the banks, and these steam drainage mills have superseded the old windmills in pumping the water from the drains up to the river. This mill works a drain which runs about three miles back to Lakenheath and Brandon fens, and empties 60 tons of water a minute from the drain into the river. The machinery looked perfect, and we were much struck by the huge fly-wheel which has a diameter of thirty feet.

After packing our belongings, we made a start soon after 9, rowing for four miles. A few decrepit bulrushes lined the banks; a kestrel or windover was in sight nearly all day; over the marshes were thousands of cattle, and over them thousands of lapwings. At Wilton Bridge we spoke a pleasure steamer outward bound from Thetford. At the Sheepwash Staunch the “Gipsy” was moored for dinner. There were two fishermen, one of whom stalked a moor-hen with much zeal, but the moor-hen knew a thing or two that he did not. After much arduous labour we raised the staunch gate, and towed to Brandon staunch (which is the eastern boundary of the fenland), where we determined to encamp. For the hard labour involved in raising the staunch, according to the Thetford Navigation Act, we were liable to a penalty of £10, or three months’ imprisonment. But in these days of little water traffic that clause is practically a dead letter.

At the sixth staunch there is a backwater forming an island, covered with a thick undergrowth of alders as reeds, and by its bank we moor the “Gipsy”. The cabin boy went into town for papers and correspondence, and the skipper laid down in the bottom of the boat, and made still closer acquaintance with the manifold charms of “Lady Geraldine's Courtship” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. A juvenile angler came and fished in the weeds, some of which he managed to catch. Passing pleasure boats view or dwelling-place with curiosity; we return the compliment. Across a few meadows was Brandon Church with one of the curious lantern-spires so familiar in Continental countries. Whilst the cabin boy spends much time in enticing a miniature roach from its habitat, the skipper sits on top of the staunch and reads “Alongside Muddy Breydon”. A stone curlew whistles not far off – a sound we did not hear in the fens; and round the staunch a nightjar and several bats hawk in search of insects. In the west the summer lightning plays. In consequence of heavy rain we enter our habitation soon after 7 p.m., and the cabin boy makes his first acquaintance with “Lady Geraldine – her courtship”. He tries his hand at Lady Geraldine’s intonation of “Bertram”, but his results did not equal hers. Rats scuttling through the sedge sounded exactly like human footsteps, so the skipper hies forth into the darkness to explore, and by patient waiting is satisfied of the origin of the mysterious noises. From afar off in the precincts of Old Brandon came the melodious nocturnal duet of a Thomas and Tabitha cat ‘midst the “Happy Homes of England”. That philanthropic individual who would found a Musical Academy for cats, where they might learn the elements of harmony, would be rewarded by the united blessings of mankind.

As usual, we awoke soon after sunrise, and read poetry until seven, when we accepted the advice given the sluggard, and arose, putting the kettle on the stove in the shelter of the alder-clump, and hanging our rugs and miscellaneous articles on the staunch to dry. After breakfast the cabin boy departed to Brandon for letters; meanwhile the skipper “tidies up”. Missing towel and tea cloth from the staunch, the skipper conjures up visions of Sherlock Holmes to aid him in the search, but all to no purpose. Two white patches at the bottom of the staunch-hole attract attention, and with an oar investigation is made, and the missing articles are rescued

from a watery grave. Soon after the cabin boy's return the Gipsy had visitors from Brandon, whom we tried in vain to enlighten as to where we put out legs at night time. Whilst making up the log certain youngsters, after the manner of Pharaoh's daughter, came down to bathe, and from whom we took lessons in the art of natation. Whatever else they lacked, pluck was certainly not wanting. Whilst the skipper rowed to Brandon the cabin boy sought inspiration for his correspondence, which he wrote on an upturned biscuit tin. We moored the Gipsy near an artist who was painting Brandon bridge from the west, with its quaint, odd shaped arches of grey stone, tall elms beyond, and a weeping willow on one side, whilst on the other were red-tiled malthouses and black barges, in truth a pretty scene, but then riverside Brandon is indeed pretty, and rarely indeed is the Royal Academy exhibition lacking representations of its beauty. Again do we moor our boat by the bridge, and sally forth into the town, where we visit sundry tradesmen and exchange current coin of the realm for eatables. From Brandon bridge to Gipsy Creek it rained hard all the way. We stop awhile beneath Sandon Bridge, and watcha rustic fisher maid, but the fish are not chivalrous enough to bite. The fifth staunch-gate had to be raised in the pouring rain, but this could not prevent a song-thrush from singing merrily in the ash-tree in the corner of the farmhouse garden. At Santon, too, a cuckoo flew past quite close, an unusually late date (September 12th) for this species to be in England. Once more we draw up to our mooring-ground in Gipsy-Creek, whilst that characteristic breckland bird, the stone-curlew, whistles cheerily from the adjacent heathland.

After tea and our usual nightly preparation, we go for a stroll. First we examine the foundations of the Saxon church of St. Helen – one of Thetford's many churches in the days of its ecclesiastical prosperity. The presemt church of Santon St. Helen was built from the ruins of this in 1623, by Thomas Bancroft, but the chancel originally formed the south transept of the West Tofts Church, which was rebuilt in 1538. On the heath above, the skipper found some magnificent Neolithic flint implements, two especially – a fabricator and a semi-lunas scraper – being unique specimens. From behind a clump of sallows we watched a company of moorhens disporting but a few yards distant. As they stood on a patch of weeds and flapped their wings they looked indeed "ungainly fowl". We decorated ourselves with some forget-me-nots and wild mint that blossomed around "Gipsy Creek" and noted a willow from which a hawthorn bush was growing. Now it was almost dark, and the reverberations of the thunder-claps rolled along the river; whilst the blue lightning streaks ever and anon cut the darkness in twain. But the storm turned aside and passed away to the northward, and when the rush of wind in its wake had gone by too, down came the rain, and so it continued all night. But the elements could not disturb us, and we slept long and sound, arising in the morning as the rain-cloud was disappearing below the horizon. Three kestrels together were flying round and round St. Helen's Well and on the river there were scores of moorhens. In consequence of the wind we cooked our breakfast beneath one of the land arches of the railway bridge. From the height above St. Helen's Well we saw a heavy shower coming up, and just had time to make all snug and get under the railway bridge, where we were imprisoned by the rain for over an hour. Then we ate all the cranberries we could find in Tanner's Well Pit, observing the while, stone curlews, lapwings, herons, and wild duck.

With regret we bid "Gipsy Creek" adieu, and explore a rush-fringed pool. There were stakes just under water, on which we nearly got wrecked, and the depth of water could not be gauged by oars. At the 4th staunch we stopped, and the skipper decorates the boat with heather from Santon Downham Heath, whilst the cabin boy watches a pike-fisher. Thence on to Thetford Common, where we land to get some water from the spring, but are forced to take refuge from a heavy shower in the fir plantation, where we note how wonderfully prolific are fungi of all kinds. Again we bale the "Gipsy" out, and row past the sallows and rushes, near which an otter put his brown head above water and gazed at us inquisitively, but soon vanishes into the recesses of the reed-bed. On our upward journey we found the current very strong, and the wind was against us also, so we did not make record time. The second staunch gate had to be raised, and near here, on the Abbey Heath, we saw our first flock of field fares this winter, from the Norse pine forests. Tea is served between the first and second staunches, and with our company complemented by two we started on the last stretch home, flushing several snipe from the sedge. The first staunch was locked, so we had the trouble getting the "Gipsy" up the overfall. In the gloaming the "Gipsy's" crew send her along at full speed with an amateur coxswain in the stern, and near

the bridge of St. Christopher our craft finds her “Anchor”, and “Gipsying on the Little Ouse” is but a remembrance.

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The author is likely W G Clarke. He joined the staff of the Norwich Mercury in 1895, later becoming a sub-editor. Following WWI he joined the staff of the Eastern Daily Press and remained there until his death in 1925.