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THOMAS MERCER,

The Blind Fiddler of Witherwick.



IN Yorkshire we have had several famous characters, such as "Boot and Shoe Jack" of Beverley; "Flint Jack," the manufacturer of spurious arrow-heads; Jimmy Hirst, who hunted with his bull on Rawcliffe Moor; and "Blind Jack," of Knaresborough, the famous road-maker, and others, all of whom have, more or less, received considerable notoriety; but down to the present time no one has taken the trouble to perpetuate the memory of the "Blind Fiddler of Holderness," who in his day was equally famous, and deserves to be honoured with those above named.

6

Blind Tom Mercer, or, as he was commonly called by the villagers in Holderness, "Tom Massey," was for many years a well-known character as a fiddler, and singer at feasts and fairs and on account of his wonderful ability for composing extempore songs. At one time or another he had travelled throughout the length and breadth of Holderness, from Spurn to Bridlington, accompanied by his fiddle, attending Club Feasts and Martinmas hirings, and there are many old people living at the present day who can recall with high glee the jovial days spent in their youth in dancing on the green to the merry strains of the music of his fiddle.

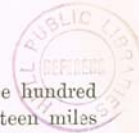
He was also a frequent visitor at the village inns, especially at the annual hirings of the farm servants, and his familiar face was always welcomed by the company assembled there.

Tom Mercer was born on April 20th, 1806, and was a native of Witherwick, a small agricultural village situated about a mile east of Whitedale Station, on the Hull and Hornsea Branch of the North Eastern Railway, and five miles south by west from Hornsea. The village

7

at the present time contains some three hundred inhabitants, and is distant nearly fourteen miles from Hull. His father, Thomas Mercer, was a farm labourer, and had a son and a daughter, both of whom were born blind. Tom owing to his affliction received but little education, and what he did obtain was learned at the National School of his native place; and also what conversation he could pick up by "hear-say" amongst his playmates and afterwards at the blacksmith's and shoemaker's shops at Witherwick. When old enough to learn a trade, he went to Patrington, where he was employed for some time by Mr. William Reckhouse, Basket-Maker, but he did not stay there long, as the business of a basket-maker was not good or congenial enough for his tastes, so he returned home again, and became a frequent visitor at the shoemaker's shop at Witherwick, where he first learned to play his fiddle.

One day his father, happening to go through the village, found Tom playing his fiddle in this shop, when he said: "I'll have a different job for thoo this winter—I'll have thoo thrashing in barn." Tom did begin, but it was work he did



not like; it began, as he called it, "To bite a bit," so he commenced breaking the flail souples* by knocking them on the flags instead of on the corn. So Tom said: "Our owd chap says to me, 'Thoo can go on breaking them, I've plenty to last the winter.'" Next day, he says, "I began to think I should have to alter my tactics, and was listening to know whereabouts my father was, when I let go with my flail and felled him into the barn floor." His father jumped up and exclaimed, "Is tha gaming to knock my heead off!" So Tom said, "Thoo knows I can't see where you are." Whereupon his father says, "Gan yam with tha," and Tom replied, "That was just what I wanted."

After having acquired, by patiently listening and by constant practice, the rudiments of music, he taught himself how to play his fiddle, so that he could accompany himself or others in singing the local topical songs of the day. He then

Note.—* The souple or swiple is the short piece of stick which is fastened, by thongs, on the end of a longer stick or handle of the flail, and forms a sort of swivel, by which, when it is brought to bear down, thrashes the grain out of the ears of corn.

imagined that he could, or ought to, earn his livelihood by this means. But on account of his blindness another difficulty arose in his mind. How was he going to find his way about the country roads and lanes?

He subsequently secured the services of several youths living in the neighbourhood to act as guides, amongst whom were the late Mr. Robert Smith, of Patrington; Mr. McKey, Ellerby; Frank Thompson, Preston; and latterly Mr. Scott, now living, at an advanced age, at Cottingham. It was through the kindness of Mr. Scott that I obtained the words of the two songs "The Donkey Race" and "Nancy"—he having related them to me from memory.

Thompson, one of the youths named above, was one day employed leading the blind fiddler about, when they called at Mrs. Jordan Shaw's, of North End Farm, Witherwick, and she gave the lad some apple-pie and also some bread and butter. The lad, knowing that Tom could not see, gave him the bread and butter and ate the apple-pie himself. Presently, while walking along through the fields, Tom smelt the pie, when he exclaimed,

"Thoo crafty little d—l, Thoo's gin me bread and butter, and thoo's eating apple-pie thi sen." Being found out, the lad thought he would be even with him. Therefore he told Tom there was a dike in the next field they had to go across, so he (Tom) would have to jump. On arriving at the dike side he said to Tom, "Now thoo mun jump," when in so doing, he bumped his head against a large ash tree trunk that was standing on the bank, which made the blind fiddler exclaim, "Couldn't tha tell me tree was in't road," but the lad sharply retorted with, "Thoo smelt apple-pie, an' I thought thoo 'uld smell tree!" Then the lad ran away, and left Tom to the mercy of the world, and to find his way back again as best he could. After a good deal of shouting, some one in the village found Tom, and led him on to the highroad, and put him in the way of getting home again safely.

On another occasion a lad was ordered to take Tom on his round, but refused to do so, whereupon he received a sound thrashing and was made to do so by his father, so in spite, he played the following prank on the fiddler. He took him down the road to the next village, when

he led Tom to a cottage door, as the fiddler no doubt thought, and left him there, telling him he was all right and that he could play away. The fiddler played through his tune, and could hear the folks in the house laughing, as he thought, at the amusement created by his fiddling, but as the people did not come out to give him anything for his trouble, Tom, stretching out his hand to feel where he was, found that the lad had left him in an out-house near the back-door of the cottage, which incident had caused the laughter on account of his playing in such an unusual place.

From this time onward Tom grew up and became a rhythmical character of considerable notoriety in his rank of life, and turned everything into rhyme. One song, which was a great favourite among his many friends, which he sang to his fiddle accompaniment causing roars of laughter, was called "Willie Speck's Pie." The pie was sent out to the harvest field for the men, and contained more potatoes than meat. The chorus was:—

"The 'tates were of a floury sort,
They suck-ed all the gravy up."

The boy, who was on a donkey, and held the pie, fell off in some way, and the dish with its contents fell into the dust, and Mercer being in the harvest field with his fiddle, made these lines immediately.

The late Walter White, author of that interesting and gossipy work entitled "A Month in Yorkshire," when journeying in Holderness early in the fifties, went to the Nag's Head Inn, Routh, as he states, for some refreshment, where he met with the blind fiddler, of whom he has given, in his book, the following interesting account of the conversation which took place on that occasion. He says:

"In the public-house at Routh, where I stayed to dine on bread and cheese, the only fare procurable, I found a dozen rustics anticipating their tipping hours with noisy revelry. The one next whom I sat became immediately communicative and confidential, and, telling me they had had to turn out a quarrelsome companion, asked what was the best cure 'for a lad as couldn't get a sup o' ale without wanting to fight.' I replied that a pail of cold water poured down the back

was a certain remedy; which so tickled his fancy that he rose and made it known to the others, with uproarious applause. For his own part he burst every minute into a wild laugh, repeating, with a chuckle, 'A bucket o' water!'

"There was one, however, of thoughtful and somewhat melancholy countenance, who only smiled quietly, and sat looking apparently on the floor. 'What's the matter Massey?' cried my neighbour.

"'Nought. He's a fool that's no melancholy yance a day,' came the reply, in the words of a Yorkshire proverb.

"'That's you, Tom! Play us a tune, and I'll dance.'

"'Some folk never get the cradle straws off their breech,' came the ready retort with another proverb.

"'Just like'n,' said the other to me. 'He's the wittiest man you ever see: always ready to answer be 't squire or t'parson, as soon as look at

'n. He gave a taste to Sir Clifford hisself not long ago. He can make songs and sing 'em just whenever he likes. I shouldn't wunner i' he's making one now. He's blind, ye see, and that makes 'n witty. We calls 'n Massey, but his name's Mercer—Tom Mercer. Sing us a song, Tom!'

"True enough. Nature having denied sight to him of the melancholy visage, made it up with a rough and ready wit and ability to improvise a song apt to the occasion. He took his fiddle from the bag and attempted to replace a broken string, but the knot having slipped two or three times, three or four of his companions offered their aid. The operation was, however, too delicate for clumsy fingers swollen with beer and rum, and as they all failed, I stepped forward, took the fiddle in hand, and soon gave it back to the minstrel, who, after a few preliminary flourishes, interrupted by cries of 'Now for 't,' struck up a song. With a voice not unmusical, rhythm good, and rhyme passable, he rattled out a lively ditty on the incidents of the hour, introducing all his acquaintances by name, and with stinging comments on their peculiarities and weaknesses.

The effect was heightened by his own grave demeanour, and the fixed grim smile on his face, while the others were kicking up their heels, and rolling off their seats with frantic laughter.

"'Didn't I tell ye so!' broke in my neighbour, as he winced a little under a shaft unusually keen from the singer's quiver.

"I was quite ready to praise the song, which, indeed, was remarkable. Albert Smith does not chant about passing events more fluently than that blind fiddler caught up all the telling points of the hour. He touched upon the one who had been turned out, and on my hydropathic prescription, and sundry circumstances which could only be understood by one on the spot. Without a pause or hesitation, he rattled off a dozen stanzas, of which the two may serve as a specimen:

'Rebecca sits a shellin' peas, ye all may hear em pop;
She knows who's comin' with a cart, he won't forget to stop;
And Frank, and Jan, and lazy Mat got past the time to think,
With ginger-beer and rum have gone and muddled all their drink.

With a fol, lol, riddle, liddle, lol, lol, lol!

Here's a genelman fro' Lunnon, 'tis well that he cam' down;
If he'd no coom ye rantin' lads would happen had no tune:
Ye fumbled at the fiddle strings: he screwed 'em tight and strong,
Success to Lunnon, then, I say, and so here ends my song.

With a fol, lol, riddle, liddle, lol, lol, lol!

"Lusty acclamations and a drink from every man's jug rewarded the fiddler, and a vigorous cry was set up for 'The Donkey Races,' another of his songs, which, as lazy Mat told me, 'had been printed and sold by hundreds.' The blind man, nothing loth, rattled off a lively prelude, and sang his song with telling effect. The race was supposed to be run by donkeys from all the towns and villages of the neighbourhood—from Patrington, Hedon, Hull, Driffield, Beverley, and others—each possessed of a certain local peculiarity, the mention of which threw the company into ecstasies of merriment. And when the 'Donkey from York' was introduced, with his 'sire Gravelcart' and his 'dam Work,' two of the guests flumped from their chairs to laugh more at ease on the floor. The fiddler seemed to enjoy the effect of his music, but his grim smile took no relief, the twinkle of the eye was wanted. He was now sure of his game—for the afternoon at least." Mr. White does not give the lines of the Donkey Race in his narrative, but as I have succeeded in securing them from a reliable source, I will here submit them.



The "Blue Bell," Sprotley.

DONKEY RACE.

Come all you young people that's far and near,
That loves to hear a donkey race, I tell you when and where;
In a park near Sprotley as I've heard them say,
One-and-twenty donkeys galloped one day.

With a fol, lol, riddle, liddle, lol, lol, lol.

Twenty donkeys were entered there,
They didn't do things exactly fair;
If Don Carlos was not able for to win,
They had no right for to flog him in.

With a fol, lol, &c.

A donkey from Hedon we'll not say much about,
It would have been as well if they had kept him out.
For the landlord he looked as pale as a wall
When he found his donkey was beat by them all.

With a fol, lol, &c.

A donkey from Preston was the next favourite,
And when they spurr'd her o' lord how she funk'd;
I think she would win for half a mile
If the rest of the donkeys had given her time.

With a fol, lol, &c.

A donkey from Ellerby, call it creepin' Jane,
And just by chance they'd given her right name,
For you really would have thought she had travelled from "York,"
Gotten by a "Gravel-catcher" tired of her work.

With a fol, lol, &c.

Now this was the donkey that won the prize;
She won it easy, without disguise,
Neither Hedon, nor Preston, nor Sprotley, nor Paull,
Was no more use to Creepin' Jane at all.

With a fol, lol, &c.

The donkeys which took part in those famous races were taken to Sproatley, where they were taken to the Blue Bell Inn, and were there saddled, and the riders weighed in just the same as at ordinary race meetings, after which they all went to Burton Constable Park, the seat of the late Sir T. A. Clifford Constable, Bart., where the races were run off. The late Sir Talbot Constable, then a lad, was himself a keen sportsman and took part in the fun, and rode one of the donkeys. After the races were over the company adjourned to the Blue Bell, where the events of the day were retailed for the benefit of Blind Tom, who then and there rattled off the above song, to the accompaniment of his fiddle, and to the amusement of all present. He afterwards sang it in most of the villages throughout Holderness, and the song became a great favourite with the villagers.

"Camerton Races," which is the topic of the next song, were run in the year 1848, on the road from Hedon to Paull. Camerton Hall, which is commemorated in the two last lines of the song, thus:

"Each parties resorted to Camerton Hall,
And a welcome was given to all that did call:"

is situated in the parish of Paull, and distant from Hedon about two miles. At the time of the Domesday Survey (1086) it was called Camerington, and was returned as a soke to Brocestwick (Burstwick). It was formerly a manor, and in the 23rd Edward III. was held by Margery, wife of Robert Boothby, who was followed successively by Sir John Constable and Sir Ralph Ellerker, of Risby, near Beverley, who devised it to his sons Ralph and Robert Ellerker, with whom the manorial rights attached to the Hall ceased. The property afterwards passed successively through the families of Morrill, Marshall, and Edward Ombler, of Trinity College, Cambridge, barrister-at-law. The original purchase consisted of 400 acres of land, and Mr. Ombler built the present handsome mansion and offices, which is surrounded with gardens and thriving plantations.*

After Mr. Ombler left, Mr. Jonathan Mitchinson became the owner of Camerton Hall, and it was he and Mr. William Tomlinson, butcher, of Hedon, who got up the trotting match

*Poulson's *Holderness* ii, 496.

which is so humorously described in the following verses:—

CAMERTON RACES.

You gentlemen sportsmen attend to my song—
I warrant 'twill please you and not keep you long;
It's concerning a trotting match that has lately been run—
The mare ran against time, but brave Camerton won.

Three minutes and a quarter was exactly the time
This mare she had given to trot just a mile;
But some were against her, and scarcely I did fare,
But she run it in time with five seconds to spare.

Ten pounds against five was the wager they bet,
And when they had laid it some parties did fret,
For it was their opinion they were taken in;
When they heard more about her they was sure she would win.

To prevent her from winning, as I have heard say,
Some person or other laid stones in her way;
But we credit her rider, for though she broke once,
He turned round quickly, not many seconds lost.

Young Wright rode the mare in most gallant style,
And he beat all his followers for the course of one mile;
His prudence, his judgment, are good and are sound,
And one to ride better could not have been found.

There's butcher from Hedon had many a good horse,
'Gainst that town and Preston he seldom did loss;
Let him come two miles further he shall have a downfall,
For we always can beat him at Camerton Hall.

She was got by Performer, as I have heard said,
And out of old Dutch, as good as ever was bred;
But with what they could do and all the foul play
They could not prevent her from winning that day.

There's health to the Umpires for what they have done;
They all must agree that brave Dutchy has won;
Each party resorted to Camerton Hall,
And a welcome was given to all that did call.

At Burton Pidsea, a little village in the East Riding of Holderness, in the year 1848, there was bred by Mr. Edward Baxter, a beautiful brown filly, named Nancy, which afterwards became known throughout England by the racing fraternity on account of her wonderful exploits on the racecourse.

A correspondent,* who signed himself "Quiz," but who was, I understand, the late Mr. J. J. Sheahan, the son-in-law of "Old Job

**Hull Advertiser*, May 2nd, 1851.



Marson,† and afterwards himself the author of the *History of Hull, Beverley, &c.*, in writing to the *Hull Advertiser* newspaper respecting the race for the Chester Cup, which was one of the greatest triumphs Nancy ever had, says:—"The race for the Chester Cup, which has been the topic of conversation in sporting circles, the workshops, and even in many private dwellings in this neighbourhood for some months past, is over, and one of the most trying handicaps of the season has been won by

"Nancy—pretty Nancy,
She always was my fancy!"

"As predicted by your humble servant in your paper for the 14th March, 1850. Bred in Holderness, trained in Beverley, and backed to a large amount in Hull, as well as in other places, what wonder that on Wednesday (April 30th, 1851), all interested in the race were on tip-toe of

†Job Marson, the famous trainer, was born in Beverley, and married at Seuloates Church, Hull, on Friday, December 6th, 1811, to Miss Cade, daughter of Mr. Martin Cade, Innkeeper, Hull. His eldest daughter, Mary, became the wife of Mr. J. J. Sheahan, and died October 20th, 1893, aged 80 years. Mr. Marson died May 20th, 1872, aged 84 years.

expectation, and the news of Nancy defeating a field of twenty-seven, and the extraordinary circumstance of three three-year-olds being placed 1, 2 and 3, spread in Beverley like wildfire, and the name of Nancy, which before was familiar even with the unbreeched, resounded through the town. It is said the drowsy watchmen here have been half-terrified in their nocturnal wanderings by nightly ejaculations from the sleeping apartments of certain gentlemen of 'Nothing can beat Nancy,' 'Nancy for a fiver,' 'Back Nancy,' &c.; a whole volume of visions, prophetic dreams, and wonderful prognostications are told now the *race is over.*" The same writer further says:—"The last time I saw her gallop was on Good Friday. She was then in excellent running condition, and a more viewly animal never crossed the threshold of a stable; indeed the universal opinion was that she was a racer to the very hoofs, and could beat on good ground, and with fair play, anything in a weight-for-age race. This now is verified. Nancy came out at Doncaster last year (1850) for the Eglinton Stakes, for which she ran a good third. She won a race cleverly at Northallerton, another at Lincoln by several lengths; at Doncaster Spring

Meeting she won the Betting Room Stakes, beating Mr. Stebbings' crack Knock Knoll, and at Warwick was second (through mismanagement and bad state of the course) to Mark Tapley for the Trial Stakes." In conclusion "Quiz" states: "I cannot give the exact sum won on the Chester Cup by this event, but £60,000 I doubt not will find its way into Yorkshire from London, Manchester, &c., (if there are no defaulters), from bookmen in those places. It is said Mr. Davis, the 'Leviathan' better is 'hit' to the tune of £40,000 or £50,000. I cannot finish without congratulating Beverley on furnishing and her owners on possessing such an extraordinary animal. May 'Old Job' Marson live long to train many more like her, and may those who have won different sums of money, as hundreds must, on account of the vast 'hedging,' make good use of it. Another such event may not occur in a generation."

Before giving you the words of the song composed by the blind fiddler on the occasion, I should like to mention that there was a man living at Beverley in those days—and probably there were many similar cases—who had such faith in the doings and successes of Nancy, that he pledged

his clothes and went to bed until after the race was over. When the boys selling their papers in the streets commenced to shout "Result of the Chester Cup," this man opened the bedroom window and called out, "What's won?" The lad replied, "Nancy"; he then exclaimed, "I've won £200!" This was the only bet the man ever made, and with the winnings he set-up in business, and was very successful, and died some years ago leaving a fortune.

NANCY.

There is a mare in England,
She bears a noble name;
She was bred by Mr. Baxter,
And Nancy is her name.
I'll back her for old England,
That truth I will engage;
I'll back her for five thousand pounds
To carry weight for age.

CHORUS.

Here's success to gallant Nancy,
And the deeds that she has done;
She has beat the best of horses,
And brave Nancy she has won.

We sent her down to Islington—
 The truth I will engage—
 Martinson has scratched her out ;
 Some of the little 'tator pickers
 Sent their bit o' wage,
 Some did pawn their mangles
 And some did pawn their clothes ;
 And now she oftener has
 Turned widows out of doors. Chorus.

We took her down to Newmarket,
 Where there she did it nice ;
 Easy on one day she won her races twice,
 She won one in a canter without making a mistake,
 And she would have won the other
 But the jockey kept her "baack."

Do you remember Voltiguer
 And Dutchman running together,
 When scarcely was it known
 Which was best of one or the other ;
 But Dutchman beat Voltiguer,
 As I have heard them say :
 But Nancy did it easy
 When she run him next day. Chorus.



The Famous Nancy, with the Jockey (Kendall) and Trainer (Job Marson).



The memory of Nancy, still lives in the minds of many people, and is perpetuated at Burton Pidsea by the "Nancy Inn," and by a row of cottages known by the name of "Nancy Cottages," which were erected by Mr. Edward Baxter, the breeder of Nancy, for the benefit of the old people living in the village. Here is another instance whereby charity has benefited by "The Sport of Kings."

There is little more to relate ; poor Tom Mercer grew old and infirm as most of us all do ; and as fiddling gradually became a drug in the Witherwick market, he was forced to apply to the Skirlaugh Workhouse Board for relief, of which Mr. Richard Bethell, of Rise Park, was chairman, and Mr. John Ford the relieving officer. Mercer asked for four shillings and sixpence outdoor relief, but Mr. Ford remarked : "I thought fiddling was a good paying game, Tom." Mercer quickly rejoined, "It was, but thy father was both a fiddler and a farmer, and he failed at both." The chairman, laughing heartily at this sally, then said : "He has only asked for four shillings and sixpence, we'll give him five shillings ; he was a clever fellow." This Tom Mercer accepted grate-



fully, and no doubt his ready wit suggested a fitting song in celebration of Mr. Bethell's generosity. But misfortune follows close upon the heel of misfortune; Tom was at length compelled to go into "the House," where he ended a most eventful career on November 17th, 1858, in the fifty-second year of his age, and he was gathered to his fathers, resting peacefully beneath the sod in Skirlaugh churchyard. No memorial stone marks the spot where this noted character is buried, but whilst Witherwick and the surrounding villages live, the name of Tom Mercer the Blind Fiddler will ever live in the memory of the inhabitants.



