

A BRIEF
HISTORY OF ENGLISH SLANG.

By CHARLES G. LELAND.

IT does not seem to have occurred to any writer that the chief reason why the early history of purely English slang is obscure, is because that previous to a certain determinate date, there was really so little of it, that it hardly existed at all. There can be no biography of a child worth writing so long as it can babble only a few words. It is probable that of these few early slang words, none have been lost. During the Saxon Early English and Middle English periods, there were provincial dialects, familiar forms of speech, and vulgarisms, but whether a distinct canting tongue was current in England, remains as yet to be established. That the tinkers or metal-workers, who roamed all over Great Britain, were a peculiar people,* with a peculiar Celtic language called *Shelta*, may be true, but canting as yet did not exist.

No discoveries have as yet been made which cast much light on the process by which English canting, or the language of the loose and dangerous classes, was first formed. This much we know, that in England, to a beginning of antiquated and provincial or perverted words, a few additions were made of Welsh, Irish, or Gaelic, with here and there a contribution from the Continent. It seems to be evident that this rill of impure English, most defiled, was a very

* John Bunyan, it may be remembered, once asked his father whether the tinkers were not "a peculiar people." Regarded from any point of view, this indicates that he suspected they were not English. Bunyan, according to recent researches, could not have been a gypsy, but as a tinker he must have known *Shelta*, or the old tinker's language, and therefore naturally suspected that he belonged to some kind of separate race.