

COTTAGE TALE

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GRAVE FAIRYTALE

QUINTET

TIME'S DOOR

THE LITTLE CHRONICLE OF MAGDALENA BACH

BACH (*Duckworth's "Great Lives"*)

SUSSEX COTTAGE

BUILDING A COTTAGE

LUCY AND AMADES

ENGLISH SPINSTER: A PORTRAIT

A WOMAN TALKING

COUNTRY WAYS

THE YOUNG LINCOLN

COTTAGE TALE

by

ESTHER MEYNELL

“Come, my love, let us go into the fields,
let us lodge in the villages.”

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Foreword

The two little ghost stories are both based on actual places—one a cottage in Sussex, the other an old manor house in Surrey. The cottage story is completely imaginary, simply made to fit the distinctly sinister impression the cottage made on my mind; the other story has a foundation of legend, though most of the details are altered.

I am indebted to the Editor of *The Field* for his kind permission to reprint “Ladies at the Cottage”, which first appeared there as “Country Englishwomen”. Also for permission to quote W. K. Holmes’ poem “Bread” which was published in *The Field*. To the Editors of the *Sussex County Magazine* and of *Homes and Gardens* my thanks are also due for permission to reprint “The Old Cottage” and “The Manor Mill”.

E. M.

Cottage Tale

I

COTTAGE AND VILLAGE

1

There are two schools of thought about cottages, two opposing views and attitudes. There are the people who believe in the real old cottage as the only perfect dwelling-place; and the people who cannot be induced to live in an old cottage—they demand the new, the hygienic, the labour-saving, the streamlined, the house which is a “machine for living in”. These are the people who see nothing but the drawbacks in ancient buildings—dilapidations, inconvenience, no room to stand upright, “domestical mice” as Gerarde the Herballist called them, damp walls, *al fresco* sanitation, candle-pervaded gloom after sunset, or a perpetual odour of paraffin and, possibly, hauntings, or at least creakings and queer noises in the dark middle of the night. But on the other hand, there are those who just as heartily abhor the modern cult of a hospital-like efficiency in the home, who shudder at the cold cleanliness, the lofty ceilings, the shadowless and graceless illumination, the raw fenestration, the central heating that warms the body and chills the spirit, the complete absence of “atmosphere”.

Well, the extremists must fight it out. It is not necessary to go so far in either direction. There is something to be said for trying both, if opportunity offers that somewhat unusual adventure—the only finally valid test for anyone is their own personal experience. All my life I had wanted to live in a genuine old cottage, a Regency cottage would have satisfied me, so long as it was the real thing—far preferable to sham Tudor. But neither Regency nor Tudor had come my way. All my experience, and I had a fair amount to look back on, had been with two completely new houses which I had built myself, or with comparatively modern houses, reasonably convenient and pleasant, but lacking the patina of age. I had meant the two houses I built myself to be cottages—but they were not cottages, because modern building bye-laws do not permit one to build cottages in these days, as they insist on a certain unnecessary height of rooms, and a certain excessive area of window to floor space. Building, in spite of bye-laws, is one of the most

interesting and exciting pursuits in which it is possible to indulge, and these two small houses in whose erection I was concerned were, owing to an admirable architect, skilfully designed, most attractive on all elevations, and both had notably good roofs of old tiles—the mean roof is a horror, like a face with no forehead. If the house, as in certain styles of architecture which have quiet dignity, shows no roof at all, but is finished with a parapet, that is a different matter altogether, but that is not a style that belongs to cottages. In old cottages the roof is generally the most notable part of the building, generous, protecting, often coming almost down to the ground in a “catslide”.

My two houses, though they could not quite succeed in being cottages—the architect did, however, say of the smaller of the two, “Well, anyway, it looks rather like a little country pub!”—had good and ample roofs. And they were comfortable and well planned. I liked them both extremely, and the honest way they were built, with sound materials and workmanship.

But at the back of my mind there remained a deep-seated hankering for the really old cottage, which all the amenities of the new could not quite satisfy. I had a desire for the magic quality of the really little house, the cottage which is the true home of fairy tale.

The subtle yet simple qualities which pervade a proper old cottage cannot be better described than in these words of Estella Bowen in *Drawn from Life*:—

“There is something inexpressibly touching and reassuring about a very old cottage, set in a gentle English landscape that has been inhabited for many generations by ordinary country folk. Something which seems to say: if you come inside here you can live your own true life in peace and security and privacy. . . and if you are but humble and modest enough, you will find sufficient delight in the practical things which you must do in order to live here, to fill your life. The cottage has seen many generations out of their cradles and into their coffins, and it will shelter you as it has sheltered them.”

SIMPLE
COTTAGE

In another book, Maude Egerton King’s *The Country Hermit*, there is also a sympathetic description of a cottage:

“The ancient English oaks serving it for structure had claimed in return no little obedience to their bent. Its walls were no straighter than the great stem that had known just how far to give and take, here in the wall-angles, as there in the forest; there ran a ripple right across where the tiles clothed

without hiding the great roof timbers; and everywhere, wattle-and-daub, lattice and door, had fitted themselves in with a minimum forfeiture of the forest's age-long records. The cottage was certainly strong, and quite as certainly—from the buttress-chimney at one end to the bread-oven and woodshed at the other—was it beautiful with the unconscious beauty that follows all generous fulfilment of a simple household need.”

But genuine old cottages are remarkably hard to come by in these days, especially cottages in or close to a village. I did not feel brave enough, or young enough, to tackle the cottage which may still occasionally be found, miles from anywhere, isolated down a muddy lane, or on the edge of a lonely wood—which certainly would become a wolf-haunted forest in the depths of the night—lacking electric light, drainage, or water, save from a well. The dreadful, adorable well!

Of course it's quite unreasonable to rejoice in old homes and old ways of living, and at the same time desire the ease of electricity. But however unreasonable, I do. Anyone whose life is much spent among books, who regards the long winter evenings as specially designed by nature for the purpose of reading, cannot but desire the boon (for it is a boon) of electric light. Not the naked cold white bulb fitted in the centre of the ceiling, not the much-lauded “daylight” lighting—who wants daylight when the curtains are drawn?—but the clouded bulb in the well-shaded table lamp close to the reader's elbow, the light that is at once clear and steady and as soft as you choose to make it. Candles to talk by, yes; but electric light to read and work by.

But of course I never expected to obtain the genuine old cottage and the comfort of electric light and hot water together. Then something happened, and I did.

2

“Well,” said an up-to-date and outspoken friend to me, “if you *like* living in a hovel——!”

She had just heard that I was selling the house I had built with such pleasure seven years earlier, and that I had bought an old Sussex cottage in the middle of an old Sussex village, which in some respects resembled the cottage at Three Mile Cross where Miss Mitford wrote her enchanting *Our Village*. Like her abode, mine was right on the village street—her cottage was welded into the village economy by the Swan Inn on one side and a general shop on the other, but if mine did not exactly follow this prescription

I had an inn not far away, and a grocer's shop housed in a pleasant little dwelling across the road. The cottage was small, though it had one long room, obtained by throwing two small ones together; the ceilings were low-pitched (a joy unattainable in modern houses) and it was necessary to duck a little in going through the oldest doors.

In this Sussex cottage it is easy to feel in tune with Mary Mitford when she sat at her desk in her Berkshire cottage and wrote under that homely roof the opening sentences of the book which, little as she guessed it, was to make her famous:

IDEAL AND
REAL

“Of all situations for a constant residence, that which appears to me most delightful is a little village far in the country; a small neighbourhood, not of fine mansions finely peopled, but of cottages and cottage-like houses, ‘messuages or tenements’, as a friend of mine calls such ignoble and nondescript dwellings, with inhabitants whose faces are as familiar to us as the flowers in our garden; a little world of our own, close-packed and insulated like ants in an ant-hill, or bees in a hive, or sheep in a fold, or nuns in a convent, or sailors in a ship; where we know everyone, are known by everyone, interested in everyone, and authorised to hope that everyone feels an interest in us.”

In spite of its low ceilings and small rooms the cottage I was hoping to buy was no more a hovel than it was a mansion. Instead it had a number of the things that I had always wanted in the imagined cottage which I had never really expected to encounter in daily life—or if encountered, only in the firm possession of some one else, and quite unobtainable.

In the first place the cottage was genuinely old, without question or doubt. It was probably of seventeenth century date, with later accretions, and also remains of much earlier ones. There probably had been a cottage here in the fourteenth century, and some of the massive timbers with the rough assembly marks cut in them, still in existence in the walls, may easily go back to that date. There are two king posts supporting the roof timbers, though they are difficult to see in the dark and dust under the tiles. The site of the cottage was on the earliest inhabited part of the village—the little hill of sandrock whereon was built the thirteenth century church, where clustered all the most ancient surviving dwellings. That little sandrock hill, in early times had risen above the surrounding sea of stubborn clay soil, whereon the waters lay in winter and the mists brooded. Nobody was so foolish as to build on clay so long as there was a site to be had on the sandrock upon which to erect a dwelling of wood or wattle-and-daub. As a

consequence the hill on which the village began was crowded by the people who were very wisely keeping off the cold and sucking clay. Cottage was set by cottage, and little gardens and plats squeezed each other into irregular shapes. Those lines of structure more or less remain to the present day, as is the rule in old villages, though here and there some wealthier or more important inhabitant has seized and thrown together one or two of the cottages and their little gardens, thus making a larger abode among the smaller. One cottage may have absorbed another's garden, or a corner of waste land that may once have been a headland of the ploughed field. There is no end to the surprises and unexpected discoveries that lie behind the placid non-committal frontages of the houses in an old village or country town—enchanted gardens, where no garden seemed possible; great Tudor beams covered up by Georgian plaster facades. The only building that is certain to offer neither surprise nor pleasure is one where the jerry-builder has erected his mean structure on the site of something whose value and attraction he had no eyes to see, or mind to understand.

In this very village a pair of rectangular shops of no more architectural grace than the commercial doll's house whose front opens all in one piece, replace an ancient cottage I myself remember. It was a cottage admittedly dilapidated, but not beyond careful and skilled repair, with a lovely roof, still partly "heeled" with its original Horsham stone slabs, and at the side of the cottage a great and noble "sarsen" stone, which had probably been dug from the foundations a few centuries ago, and had stayed there owing to the sheer difficulty of removing it—the breadwinner of the cottage found it an admirable seat on which to smoke an evening pipe and survey the village scene. There was also the most beautifully shaped holly-tree I have ever seen—a holly of some considerable age, for they are slow-growing trees; the stem of the tree was as thick as a man's arm, and the whole tree as shapely as though it had come out of a fairy tale. But such beauty was uneconomic; two ugly shops were better than one beautiful old cottage—so it has vanished, to the permanent loss of the village.

CHANGES

My cottage has suffered many changes from the time I first knew it up to the time it came into my possession.

As I first beheld it, modestly fronting the village street, it had a simple Georgian face. There was a door in the middle, a small-panelled Georgian sash-window on either side, and three similar windows above—the whole

front whitewashed and pleasant in its unassuming air. Put a little green-painted wooden fence in front of it and some red pots with red geraniums in the windows, and it might have been one of the illustrations in Kate Greenaway's *Under the Window*. Inside—for I knew the old Sussex couple who lived there—it was exactly as might be expected, a clean and comfortable cottage interior, a little square parlour on one side of the door, a little square living-room on the other side leading to the kitchen—where there still remained the old bread-oven in the thickness of the wall—the parlour being backed by a very small scullery, with a pump-handle delivering cold water to the sink. The kitchen had the usual small cottage range, with a cheerful high fire beside the black-leaded oven. Straight up the middle of the cottage from the front door was a steep and narrow stairway leading to four low-ceilinged bedrooms, all pleasantly papered in old-fashioned spriggy cottage wall-papers. No bathroom, of course, and no suggestion of old timbers or beams.

That was my cottage as I first knew it. Years passed. I built, and lived in, two other houses in the same village, and in the process of building the first of these houses I observed drastic changes taking place in the little Georgian cottage—the whole modest front was being pulled out and a highly Tudor façade put in its place. Old oak beams, diamond-paned windows, and all—a regrettable suggestion of Ye Olde Tudor Tea-room. I shrugged and passed by without any more detailed notice—I was too much absorbed in the house I was building to have much time or thought for any other abode.

More years went by, in that amazing and imperceptible way years have. The sham Tudor became less objectionable with time. The inserted beams and window frames had at least the merit of being beams and being oak—they were not creosoted deal laths nailed on. So stood the cottage. I had never entered it since the mock Tudor changes.

Then one destined day I had occasion to do so, on a winter evening, as dusk was descending, and I was as surprised as a child at the transformation scene at the pantomime. The interior was completely strange to me. Gone was the small square room, with its papered walls and its prim little iron grate. Instead, there was a long room, much longer than it was wide, with a window at either end, and a great open hearth—eight feet wide, as I found later—with a glowing log fire and an iron hood on which was the date 1648. The wallpaper had vanished, and revealed the whitewashed brick of the old walls themselves, with odd little recesses for keeping the salt dry, and a narrow seat in the ingle wall. There was curious brickwork and over-sailing

CROOKED
ANGLES

courses at either end of the wide hearth, rough and vigorous in workmanship, as befitted a cottage. Above was a massive bressummer beam and a wide shelf close under the low beamed ceiling. Beyond the hearth was the opened-out remains of the old closed bread-oven I remembered, with the two-handled iron door still there. The second half of the room—that which had been the old kitchen—was on a different level, a foot higher than the parlour. Over the great open hearth was another solid beam, with a high shelf above it. In the old days this had been the hearth where the cooking was done, while the other one was where the “forefathers of the hamlet” drank their mulled ale and smoked their clay pipes—I have a long brand-tongs which was used to lift a glowing ember from the fire, in the days when matches were unknown. No doubt in both wide chimneys bacon was smoked.

Across the ceilings of both rooms stretched satisfactorily solid rafters, supported on massive tie-beams. The height of the beams from the floor was exactly right to my thinking—giving the sense of comfort and protectiveness that only low rooms possess, yet not so low as to be oppressive and actually on one’s eyebrows. Proportion is the secret of good interiors, and this cottage room had that grace. The old builders, who built so simply without any striving after effect, knew a secret or two that later ages have forgotten. They knew things by instinct, they did not need foot-rules and T-squares to achieve results. Actually, as I was to discover later, when it came to fitting bookshelves and hanging pictures, there was hardly an angle that was true, a line that was quite straight. It gave one the pleasant feeling that human hands had built the cottage, not machines. It is partly this which gives that enchanting softness to old buildings, the look as though they had grown naturally from the earth on which they stand.

4

That was my first impression of the cottage, and it was not long before I had the whole plan of the little place by heart, for the possibility that it might become my property was developing enticingly before me. One drawback, as it might seem, that it had only the tiniest garden, was mitigated by the thought that, so small a space would not require the services—even the very occasional services—of that elusive and refractory individual, the “jobbing gardener”. And the garden, though so small, had the attraction of being enclosed by old red-brick and flint walls, really high and proper ones, so that though in the very centre of the village it was entirely secluded and sheltered. There were three deep flower-borders—lack of space made it impossible to think of growing the useful and patriotic vegetable—

surrounding a little red-bricked square where a garden chair or two and a tea-table might be set, and where over the garden walls the pleasant chime of the church clock floated, telling the rural hours. At one corner was a little brick shed, with a gabled roof. Up the high southern wall climbed a wistaria. At the other side was a large lilac tree covered in early summer with fragrant white trusses of bloom. There were a number of roses climbing on the walls. It was the sort of little garden plot in which to grow daffodils and tulips, primroses and pinks, rosemary and southern wood, and on that sheltered southern wall I saw a peach tree. I would have liked my favourite mermaid rose there, but she is a rampant lady when she gets a spot that suits her, as I had discovered, after being told that she was delicate and temperamental, and there she would have been so comfortable that she would have smothered everything else with her vigorous thorny stems, her bright leaves, and the open-hearted beauty of her cream and gold blossoms. The flowers have such a fragile air, that it is amazing to discover that mermaid will apparently stand up to anything, including two of the most frozen winters southern England has known for generations, and being torn from the wall and half smashed by a violent westerly gale. Such irrepressible growth as hers was not for the restricted spaces of a little walled cottage garden—it was necessary to leave room for other plants to live and breathe.

5

Anyone who has bought a house knows the alternations and the up-and-downs of the business. The unexpected difficulties, the inclination to throw the whole thing up, the incredible slowness and caution of family solicitors, the disapproving and foreboding friends who tell you of all the frightful disappointments of other people who have bought houses—especially old houses. A ghost seems to be the least objectionable thing you must expect.

THE SMALL
BUILDER

To all this was added another difficulty—that of getting any repairs or alterations, even quite essential ones, done in war-time. Even when given a full six months' notice to do some small jobs, the builder failed to accomplish them. He came over himself to explain why he couldn't do it. He was a nice middle-aged man, evidently distressed and bewildered at finding his old-fashioned business no longer under his own control—"the Gov'ment" took his men, even as they walked into the yard in the morning; he had nine men last week, this week he had only four, next week he might have none. He daren't let the Gov'ment know he was doing a private job—"They've took my last plasterer, and I'm in the middle of a job!"

One saw his difficulties and delays were not his fault; nevertheless there were things which had to be done somehow or other. One of them was a bit of brickwork, and at last, after many postcards and telephone calls, the builder sent a bricklayer and his mate. I like bricklayers; all my previous experience of them, which had been considerable, had been pleasant and interesting. But this bricklayer was not of that sort. He was surly and taciturn. If you asked him a question, he “couldn’t say,” and “didn’t know”—and didn’t care, I added to myself. How much I wished for my old builder and the “band of brothers” he had gathered round him—those men so friendly and able and amusing. But the war had scattered them and vast Government works had absorbed them. It was evident that such small alterations as my cottage needed would have to be done piecemeal as time and opportunity offered. They were fortunately not very serious—the walls were not damp and the roof was sound. The interior was, as it should be in an ancient cottage, cream distemper and old beams. There were no layers of frightful papers to remove.

Then at last came the day when all the necessary papers and documents were signed, and the old cottage was actually my property. From the very beginning I had always believed that this would happen, that the cottage was my destined home. I liked it—and felt that it liked me. Some houses quite definitely do not like one, and in that case it is rash to attempt to live in them. But there was something essentially friendly in this cottage, a homely kindness.

But however kind the cottage, one thing was certain, it would not hold all my possessions. Some of the larger pieces of furniture would have to go. But the books must find a home in the old cottage, whatever else did not. By a fortunate chance the ranges of shelving which had been made for them exactly fitted two of the walls, as if they had been measured to fit them. Another sign of the kindness of the cottage! And so once more the exhausting business of taking down the shelves—nice thick ones which do not bend under the weight of closely set books—and putting them up again, of packing the books into crates and unpacking and sorting them, had to be gone through again. These are the only times in life when I feel that it is possible to have too many books. But once the books are dealt with, the rest of the move is quite a trifling affair—more enjoyable than otherwise. Surely one of the real pleasures of life is planning and arranging a new home, especially in the kind of cottage I have always regarded as the right sort of home. I have got a cottage mind and would be definitely unhappy if I were obliged to live in a vast Palladian mansion, with

“Rich windows that exclude the light,
And passages that lead to nothing.”

I always think with sympathy of poor Fanny Burney, condemned by her duties as lady-in-waiting to Queen Charlotte to such a formal and trivial life, in such drearily impressive surroundings. What she really loved, poor creature, was what she in the end happily attained when she married, that cottage at West Humble. “Pleasure,” she wrote to her husband, “may reside in London”, where she was on a short visit, “but happiness, O, it has taken its seat, its root at West Humble! The more I am away the stronger I feel that there, and there alone, to *me* is its abode. . . most thankfully to God shall I return to-morrow to my thrice-dear cottage.”

MOVING
HOUSE

6

I often wonder how long-distance removals were accomplished in Burney’s day, and earlier. The spacious covered vans called by the lumbering name of pantechnicons, like small houses on wheels, into which removal firms pack and transport our possessions with such efficiency, of course did not exist in earlier days. One reason was because eighteenth century, and still more Tudor, roads would not have stood up to them: the vans would have been hopelessly bogged. On the notoriously bad roads of Sussex a lady simply going to church in her own parish in the winter needed six oxen to drag her there in her coach—horses could not do it. I suppose the moving must have been done in farm waggons bit by bit, spinning out a move over a week or more, if it was a large one—most uncomfortable. Thomas Hardy must have seen it done many a time in the manner in which he describes Bathsheba Everdene riding on the top of her worldly possessions, and looking at her handsome self in her mirror as she did so.

In much earlier centuries great people when they moved from one mansion to another—which was a common practice, as the lord and lady, with their retinue, moved from one estate to another at stated intervals in order to consume the produce on the spot—not only took with them their apparel and personal possessions, but their heavy furniture, their carpets and hangings, and even the glass from their windows—glass being a rare and precious commodity which could not be duplicated in each manor house. One of the things that is notable in domestic life in earlier centuries is the costliness, the fantastic costliness, of the clothing and the food, the extravagance and waste, compared with the hardness and sparseness of the household furniture. A great household might have only two chairs with

arms, while a four-post bed, an oaken coffer, and a wall-mirror, were sufficient furniture for a lordly bedchamber. Of course the coffer was handsomely carved, and the hangings of the bed rich with embroidery, but such furnishings give a very meagre feeling of comfort. Yet many a painting of medieval times will show some such scene, perhaps depicting the birth of Our Lord—with the delicious medieval disregard of the simplicities of Bethlehem—Our Lady lying in a vast high bed, surrounded by waiting women in peaked headdresses and embroidered gowns, one of them holding or bathing the Holy Child on the coffer, which is the only other article of furniture in the stately room, except perhaps for one wooden stool. There was evidently little provision for aching backs and feet even in wealthy households. The only concession to comfort seems to have been cushions on which to sit on the floor. Though if the floor was covered with the filthy and seldom changed rushes which so shocked a Dutch visitor to England, that cannot have been very attractive.

But every step forward into what we should call domestic comfort and decency was hotly resented by the old die-hards of each century. Fire-places with chimneys in the wall for the smoke to escape by were regarded by many of them as heralding the downfall of England. Men who could not endure the smoke that had made their forefathers' eyes water as it slowly found its way through a hole in the roof, were but men of straw, and England needed "oaken men"—well smoked and seasoned men—to maintain her greatness.

7

We may smile at these little foibles of the die-hards in each generation, the praisers of times past, as we all tend to be as we grow older, because we are looking backwards to our youth. But there is one thing that is more important than being thoroughly smoke-dried in the Tudor fashion in producing the proper "oaken" qualities in the English people, and that is the sense of ownership. "The principles of property are universal," said Arthur Young; "a man will love his country the better for a pig." A doctrine with which Cobbett thoroughly agreed. There is sound American reality and wisdom in Walt Whitman's words, ". . . it is in some sense true that a man is not a whole and complete man unless he *owns* a house and the ground it stands on. Men are created owners of the earth. Each was intended to possess his piece of it."

"PRINCIPLES
OF
PROPERTY"

How deep-rooted is this instinct is shown in the permission given in the old forest charters of England that if a man between sunset and sunrise can

build a dwelling upon common land, and enclose a piece of it wherever there is a tree growing, and a beast feeding, while in the dwelling there is a fire kindled, a chimney smoking, and food in the pot cooking over the fire, such dwelling shall belong to the builder. A pretty big undertaking, but with the help of friends no doubt it could be done, and well worth the struggle, for then the happy man had his plot of land, his roof, his own fire at which to cook his food—the essentials of a proper life.

I look at old cottages, abutting on old commons, obviously filched from the common land, and wonder if they began in such a strenuous summer night's work.

It is not difficult to believe that more than half the troubles of our present world are because there is so little ownership of *things*—and the most important of all things is the land, the food that is grown on it, and the house that is built upon it—as opposed to the ownership of that chimerical will-o'-the-wisp, money, which inflates or deflates, and disappears, and does all sorts of things which no ordinary person can understand. The only thing it does not do is the old-fashioned thing of buying a sovereign's worth of goods, with a sovereign, as the golden sovereigns themselves have disappeared. Money now is nothing but a myth, like the gold in the fairy tale, which had withered to a handful of dead leaves the next morning. But a field, a garden, a roof, are things that are good in themselves, that minister to the real life and happiness of human beings. Arthur Young's sow is company and occupation, and increase while she is alive, and a wholesome store of food when she is dead. A cottage is not only shelter, but home. In a better arranged world each family would own its house, large or small, according to their needs, and because they owned it find pride and joy in its care and upkeep. Of course there are slatternly families who ruin every place they dwell in, but that is partly because they have never owned anything, and never developed the sense of responsibility that comes with ownership, and that if encouraged spreads from the cottage to the village, from the village to the county, and from the county to the country. Every shining window-pane and every nicely painted gate and door in a village is a sign of this.

It is very pleasant to see this sort of simple reality in perspective in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enhanced to us by the lovely patina of the past. William Stukeley wrote to his friend Samuel Gale in 1726, telling him: "I am fallen into a very pretty mixture of business and amusement wherein happiness of life consists. Last summer I spent in fitting up part of my house, and levelling my ground for gardening, in which I am at this time

"HAPPY THE
MAN"

very interested. I am planting greens, flowers, alcoves, herbs, fruit trees, and what not. I am laying out the stations of dryads, urns and statues, inoculating mistletoe, and trying vegetable experiments. Within doors I am fitting up my study, which has a most charming prospect over my garden and adjacent valley, pretty much like that at Amesbury, and just within hearing of a great cascade of the river, which is very noble and solemn; that by day raises the mind to a pitch fit for study, by night lulls one asleep with a most grateful noise.”

There speaks a happy man, busy in his garden and his house. It is the same mood as Cowper’s, which on a more domestic level gives such charm to his *Letters*. It is a temper peculiarly English:—

“Happy the man whose wish and love
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air
In his own ground.”

And it is not only the poets who possess it, for we find that great painter Thomas Gainsborough saying, “I’m sick of portraits and wish very much to take my viol-da-gamba and walk off to some small village, where I can paint landscapes and enjoy the fag-end of life in quietness and peace.”

John Constable wrote on one occasion: “I never saw the elder bushes so filled with blossom—they are quite beautiful—and some of their blossom foreshortened as they curve over the round head of the tree itself are quite elegant—it is a favourite of mine and always was—but ’tis melancholy.”

Constable shows his country origin in thus appreciating that humble bush the elder, which so essentially belongs to the cottage and the rural hedgerow. His sensitive eye naturally saw many things that others miss, and anyway, as Blake said, “A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.” Constable may be said to have painted the very spirit and epitome of an English cottage when he painted his Cottage in a Cornfield—the steep-pitched roof of thatch that covers the innocent little dwelling, with its setting of ripening corn, farm gate, hedge trees, and dappled English sky, the white clouds touched with a threat of rain.

Jane Austen, as was to be expected from her delicate and observing eye, and the setting of her own domestic life, has much to say about cottage and mansion. She had experience of both, and of that house which, from its middle station between both, may be regarded as the nodal point of the English country scene, the Parsonage. In *Sense and Sensibility* there is much discussion of cottages. When Mrs. Dashwood contemplates alterations to

Barton Cottage she speaks with the authentic voice of all cottage improvers:

“The parlours are both too small for such parties of our friends as I hope to see often collected here; and I have some thoughts of throwing the passage into one of them, with perhaps a part of the other, and so leave the remainder of that other for an entrance; this, with a new drawing-room, which may be easily added, and a bedchamber and garret above, will make it a very snug little cottage. I could wish the stairs were handsomer. But one must not expect everything; though I suppose it would be no difficult matter to widen them. I shall see how much I am beforehand with the world in the spring, and we will plan the improvements accordingly.”

Mrs. Jenkins in recommending the excellence of Delaford, Colonel Brandon’s place in Dorset, gives us a nostalgic glimpse of eighteenth century tranquillity when she says that it was “only a quarter of a mile from the turnpike-road, so ’tis never dull, for if you only go and sit up in an old yew arbour behind the house, you may see all the carriages that come along. Oh! ’tis a nice place! A butcher hard by in the village, and the parsonage house within a stone’s throw.”

8

In my cottage it is not even necessary to go and sit up in a yew arbour or a gazebo—there is a very charming one of brick on the end of a high old wall not far away—in order to see all that passes in the village. Why does one get such curious satisfaction from sitting unseen at a window, preferably a first-floor window, and watching the people one knows by sight, if not personally, going to buy stamps at the post office, or buns at the baker’s? Perfectly ordinary people, just like oneself, engaged on their small daily affairs, just as one is oneself. Anyway, it is such an enthralling pursuit that any piece of needlework in the hands of the looker-on in the window-seat does not make much progress, or the pages of the book are turned at very rare intervals. It is partly, I suppose, just ordinary human curiosity, and partly a sense of kinship—these are the people of “Our Village,” who belong here, and their affairs are our affairs in a sense. Or if they do not belong, if they are strangers, then the question at once arises—who are they, and what are they doing here? No doubt, to a superior mind, it’s all very silly, but superior people miss a lot of fun. I, at least, feel certain that for the last few hundred years, the dwellers in my cottage have been watching the Village Players from this admirable position on the very crest of the steep little high street.

VILLAGE
PEEP-SHOW

Almost everything of interest must have passed this cottage, including the thrilling (and somewhat perilous) arrival of the London coach.

It is traditional that there was a cottage here, on this site, in Saxon times, and it is even said that there are traces of Saxon work in the cellar, though about this I am somewhat sceptical. But it is obvious that from the time when there was a church on the little eminence of sandrock which is the core of this village, there would have been dwellings of some sort on this same hill. Another inducement to build here was that good water was easily available. There are abundant wells scattered about, most of them now covered in, but many still open and principally used for the purpose of watering gardens.

I had hoped to find a well in my little paved garden—it was plain that so old a cottage must have had one. But there was no sign of it, till one day a couple of the bricks paving the centre of the little garden became uneven and gave way. When they were lifted it was seen that the earth beneath had fallen in, and the curved side of what was plainly a steened well was discovered. I longed—for I love wells as much as I am afraid of them—to have the whole thing opened up and restored to use. But it was too difficult, it would have meant structural alterations to the cottage, for the bit of well that could be seen was half-way across the door from the living-room to the garden, so that little Johnny-Head-in-Air, going to pick a pansy, would have fallen straight in, had the lid been off. So the bricks were regrettably restored and cemented, though now I can get a certain satisfaction from knowing as I stand at the garden door, that the well is actually there, and that like Mrs. Dashwood, when I can “see how much I am beforehand with the world,” I may do something about it.

The old sort of well-digging is fast disappearing if not already gone, and the men who have themselves done it, or seen it done, are not often to be met in these days. But this village has one or two survivors, and from them I have heard a few things. In steening a well, that is lining its sides with brick, the steening iron is driven in to the side, and ten feet or so of brick courses supported on it. The bricks, being curved, support each other by pressure. An odd thing is that with the first six feet of well dug there is good air, while the next six feet the air is so bad that a candle will not burn in it; but below that there is good air again.

At Newtimber Place in Sussex, that attractive old moated house at the foot of the Downs, there is a well where the water, whether it is pumped off all day, or none drawn at all, is always eight feet in height, while the moat,

just outside, is twice the depth. The moat is fed from four or five springs in its bed.

The filling of wells is something of a mystery, but most of the countrymen I have talked to on the subject believe that it is the October gales which fill the Wealden wells. Rain, even heavy steady rain, takes a long time before it raises the level of the wells, but when the October gales come, even without much rain, they drive the sea through the chalk cliffs, the chalk filters the salt, and the wells fill up.

SMUGGLING
DAYS

Whether this is scientifically correct I do not know, but I am sure that the slow personal observation of the countryman gets much nearer the natural truth of things than the scientist in his laboratory who hardly knows what fresh air smells like out-of-doors, though he may analyse it in a test-tube.

9

It is much more difficult to discover the history of a cottage than of a mansion, though the cottage may be as old, or much older, than the mansion. But cottages have rarely any history—they are built by the humble, for the humble. No architect is employed, there are no elaborate accounts or “statements”; any alterations and additions are done from hand to mouth. The people who lived in these old cottages were to all intents and purposes anonymous, their only records a birth or a marriage or a burial in the church registers. They were seldom more than tenants of their cottages, but sometimes they owned them and stamped their names upon them, and the name would go on, often enough, for generations after their deaths—go on, in fact, till some “foreigner” bought the cottage for idle week-ends, and gave it some silly fancy name, often by so doing blotting out a bit of local history.

My cottage had a name and a bit of history attached to it. The name had been replaced by another one, but I had the satisfaction of restoring it, and so bringing back to the village that had known him, the name of one of the “gentlemen” who in times past pursued their careers upon the coasts of France and Sussex. Did that smuggling predecessor of mine hide his brandies and his silks and tobacco in my capacious cellar? I should like to know more about him, and perhaps some day I shall find out. Sometimes when I wake in the night I imagine the sound of the smugglers’ ponies trotting up the village street—“Turn your face to the wall, darling, while the gentlemen go by,” as the Sussex mothers told their children. Curiosity was unhealthy.

But if I so far know little about the smuggler who names this cottage, I have an interesting link with a later dweller under this roof. He was the landlord of an inn a little lower down the village street which still exists, though in a sadly altered shape from what it was in his day. Now it is a bad example of Brewer's architecture, with every fault of proportion, colour, and texture it is possible to cram into the elevation. It is a blot on an attractive village street. Less than a hundred years ago, as I have been told by one of the old inhabitants, who has known the village from his childhood, there was on that spot a tiled and timbered inn. "Very picturesque it were," he said, "artists often come and paint it."

This is his narrative, in his own words:—

"Where the present inn now is there were an old inn and a malthouse, where they brewed their own beer. The place where they shovelled the malt was so low that a man had to stoop as he shovelled. It was entered by a low archway, and the floor was covered with tiles which was all pock-marked with little holes. The place were called 'The Arches,' or the 'Dark Arches.' The old inn had the door at the southern corner, and a flight of steps went up to it. Outside there was a big elm tree and a well with high brick sides and a stone slab with an iron ring on the top. Lower down, below the Bull was Golden Square—a little square of cottages with a well in the middle. Golden Square made the Lewes Road so narrow at that point that a load of straw brushed the houses on each side as it passed. Hoathers was where the village chimney sweep lived, and a cellar underneath was his soot-hole where he used to empty his bags of soot. The farmers used to buy the soot to put on their fields, and they employed the sweep to spread it, as it was such a dirty job."

INNKEEPER'S
ACCOUNTS

Golden Square, that little courtyard of ancient cottages round a well, has long vanished away.

But to return to that landlord of one of the four village inns—a liberal allowance for so small a place!—who once owned my cottage, and the reason I know something about him.

The building affairs of this village were for many generations in the hands of one family—a family established here before the Reformation—and had descended from father to son, or uncle to nephew, from time-everlasting-beyond, as people used to say in Sussex. The present

Blind Roller and Furniture, with mahogany brackets	£0 3 6
30 feet of 1 in. deal to shelves in cellar	0 10 0
1¾ in. Deal Copper Lid	0 5 0
Deal Steps	0 5 0
Oak Form	0 2 6
Knife Board and Bracket	0 1 9
Kitchen Table	0 13 6
Deal Meat Safe	1 12 0
Set of 8 Mahogany Chairs	3 3 0
To picking and stuffing to Chair Covers at 1s. 6d.	0 15 0
Repairing Tea-Caddy	0 6 0
Rosewood Dressing Case	1 0 0
Butter Box	0 5 6

Apart from actual furniture making there were such things as:—

1 day Paper Hanging	£0 3 6
1 day Jobbing	0 0 10
Man, 4½ days	0 14 2

Having had all this varied work done to equip his cottage and make it comfortable—the eight mahogany chairs and the ten down cushions, and the rosewood dressing case, even suggest a certain degree of elegance—it is very satisfactory to record that Mr. Hewins paid his bill on September the 8th, 1838. He was probably one of those honest old-fashioned men who did not believe in either giving or taking long credit. I feel a distinct respect for Mr. Hewins, and wish I could see what his mahogany chairs and oak bedsteads were like—knowing the quality of the work of the firm that made them, the probability is that they are still giving good service in this or some adjoining village.

RURAL
CRAFTSMEN

It is right and proper that it is no longer possible to get the work of a man for four and a half days for fourteen shillings and twopence—what is to-day's tragedy is the disappearance of the rural craftsman, who took such a pride in his work. One by one they die out, and their sons, and still less their

grandsons, do not carry on the traditions, they become machine-minders and motor mechanics.

This village is fortunate in that it still holds a few survivors of the old race of rural craftsmen—not necessarily survivors in the sense of age, but inheritors of the tradition. We have a blacksmith—and a village without a blacksmith is not a proper village—who is capable of doing a good deal more with iron than shoe horses, though that in itself is a craft, a very ancient one, and adorned for ever by that lovely line of Gerard Manley Hopkins about the blacksmith who

“Didst fettle for the great grey dray-horse his bright and battering sandal!”

Then we have a carpenter—no, I beg his pardon, a joiner—who not only makes admirable things in wood, stools, tables, and such like, but who makes his own wood-stains from the juices of suitable plants which he gathers himself. More than this, he is also willing to do all sorts of odd jobs, like concreting the floor of a garden shed, mending a lock, painting or distempering, or upholstering an armchair. All these things he has done for me with admirable efficiency. He is interested and experienced in the old ways, and when he took off and adjusted a door-lock for me, he told me it was probably one hundred and fifty years old, had been made by the village blacksmith, and had the old flat-ended, instead of pointed, hand-made screws. All these things I like to know, and it was he who pointed out to me that the old door posts of some of my rooms are tree-trunks stood upside down, because the broader root end better supports the ceiling beams, and the sap runs out, which keeps the wood from rotting.

There is much of the old rural vitality and handiness in him, which he very likely inherited from his grandmother. He surprised me one day by saying that he'd got to live to be a hundred and five. I said that I hoped he would, if he wanted to, though personally it was not my ambition. “Well,” he replied smiling, “you see I've made up my mind that I must beat my grandmother—she lived to be a hundred and four.”

“A hundred and four!” I exclaimed incredulously.

“Yes, a hundred and four and seven weeks. She was the oldest woman in England, and she got a telegram from the King on every birthday after she were a hundred. And she wasn't bed-ridden, you know. She kept on with living. The morning she died she went down the garden to feed her chicken, and when she didn't come back, my mother said to me I'd better go and see

what had come to her, so I went—and found her dead by the chicken-house, but she'd scattered the corn first."

"Well," I said, "I call that a good way to die!"

"So do I—go off quick like that. But I must make it a hundred and five. Can't be beaten by my old grandmother!"

12

In an old village the fronts of the houses and cottages are often very non-committal, and hardly suggest the odd surprises and the romantic charms that are hidden away at the back—the lovely and unexpected angles of ancient roofs, the tucked-away gardens, the old, but still richly blooming fruit trees. Behind a perfectly ordinary shop may be a most surprising courtyard, with a gallery and a grape-vine that suggests Italy, far more than Sussex.

VILLAGE
POST OFFICE

From the back of this cottage I have as pretty a view of old mellow walls and roofs as anyone need wish, and find myself overlooking part of the enclosed garden that belongs to the village post office, which from the front does not look as if it had any garden at all. A portion of this garden is occupied by a curious brick-lined cave or archway, overgrown with grass on the outside, whose purpose no one is quite sure about, though it is believed that it may have been used for storing grain so long ago as the Napoleonic wars.

The post office itself, though small and housed in an old cottage, whose circular brick bread-oven, a particularly large one—suggesting that once this was the village baker's—is now used for His Majesty's parcels, is the centre of constant village meetings, where the old people come for their pensions, and the careful people to deposit their savings.

The tiny and unimproved village post office is a friendly place—and at its richest when lit by a suspended and odorous paraffin lamp. Such survivals are unhappily rather rare nowadays. But though our post office has electric light, it has not lost its rural feeling, and still supplies other needs than those of stamps and official forms. Here can be bought birthday cards of a glossy richness of gilt and colour and a lusciousness of verse that has sadly passed out of fashion. Here, the narrow window was adorned—till sweet rationing came in—with tall glass jars of brown and white bull's eyes, barley-sugar, cinnamon balls, and long black ribbons, like leather boot-laces, of liquorice. These delicacies are gone. But tobacco and cigarettes can still be bought, and sealing-wax and furniture polish and cabbage plants and

bundles of leeks. And while you are choosing your vegetables—the post office lettuces are always good—the postman, dodging round the narrow counter with his bag, will whisper hoarsely in your ear, “I’ve got a parcel for your place this morning,” and vanish on his bicycle like Ariel to put a girdle round the earth.

There is nothing aloof and official about our postman. It is true that he wears His Majesty’s dark blue and red-edged uniform, but the official cap is worn so much on the back of the head that it is almost invisible from a front view, while, except in the bitterest weather, the official coat is open and blown back by the speed with which he pursues Government business on his rusty and creaking (though red-painted) bicycle. He also apparently gardens in the official trousers, so that there is no overpowering Governmental impressiveness about them.

But we accept all this as part of the human note he imparts to the business of being a postman. He takes an interest in our affairs. He scorns letter-boxes and slits in the door—they do not at all agree with his forthright style. Without knocking or ringing he opens the front door and lands parcels, if there are any, with a crash on the floor, and scatters the letters like manna on the mat. Then, though the bang of the parcels is quite sufficient to warn the household of his visit—he must specially enjoy depositing my parcels, for they are usually books, and therefore solid—he slams the door shut and gives a hearty rap on the heavy iron knocker.

If anyone arrives at the door while he has it open he makes a few remarks on his deliveries. “It’s only the coal bill,” he will say, or “I don’t think there’s anything you’ll much care for to-day.” One has the feeling that he really takes an interest in one’s correspondence. He keeps up the tradition of the older village Post Office, where the contents of a telegram was practically public property. “If the village postmaster or postmistress smelt a rat,” it was said with a considerable degree of truth, “it would not be long before all the parish would get a sniff.”

In the course of the year I have so many parcels of books from a well-known firm of booksellers in London, that our postman no longer looks at the address—he just sees the bookseller’s label and slams the parcel in at my door. Twice I have had parcels of books from that firm delivered to me, though they were addressed to other residents in the village. No doubt the postman justly considers there can only be one person in the parish foolish enough to buy so many books. “*Another* parcel a’ books for you!” he will say with a

COUNTRYM
AN IN
LONDON

sardonic gleam in his eye. I cannot but feel that any other commodity would strike him as more reasonable.

The story is told of a Sussex farm labourer who once went to London for the day—a considerable adventure—and finding himself out of tobacco, sought a Post Office to supply his need. When informed by a superior young lady that they did not sell such a thing he said to her: “Then it’s time as you did, young woman. You’re behind the times up here in Lunnon. Why, where I comes from you can get bacca at the Post Office, as well as bull’s eyes, and first-rate young cabbage plants, and wallflowers too, if do be as you’re partial to flowers.”

It will be a sad day when that kind of village post office—and the varied and individual village postman who goes with it—is wiped out by a cold and official efficiency. But perhaps so long as the village remains a village that will not happen. The natives of the remoter places are not all cut to a pattern.

13

Fortunately, there is nothing cut to a pattern about our shoemaker. It is possible that there is not another like him in the whole of Sussex. Deliberation is his note. You hopefully take your shoes to be re-soled, always getting the promise, “Within the week, ma’am,” and always knowing that you will be uncommonly lucky if you see them again within a fortnight or three weeks. But it is impossible to be annoyed, however urgently they may be needed, both because the shoemaker in his leather apron is so well-intentioned, and because before your eyes is apparently the whole footwear of the village, piled on the counter and on the floor in a surprising state of disrepair and need of hospital attention—all there before your shoes arrived to join the depressed throng. How the shoemaker disentangles any particular pair from the dilapidated heaps of mended and unmended is a mystery, but he seems to know them all apart as a shepherd knows his flock. Doubtless many of the shoes have visited him before for his ministrations—from the heavy boots of the man on the land, to the rather pathetic shabby smartness of cheap feminine shoes.

I was rather ashamed of handing him my pair. “They are rather worn,” I said, “but in these days——”

He picked up some shoes from the counter that looked beyond hope. “Yes, in these days folks has rooted out their old shoes as they would ’ave put in the dust-bin a while agone. But I’ll make ’em walkable again,” he says, looking at them affectionately.

Then you explain what you want done to your own not quite so disreputable pair. “Always goes just there, don’t you, ma’am?” says the shoemaker, with the air of pleased surprise he unfailingly shows on rediscovering this peculiarity. “Well, the Gov’mint says not a sole where a patch’ll do, and a patch’ll cover this all right. But the best thing for you, ma’am, as always do walk that hole through, is a pair of them rubber soles.”

“But I thought rubber was almost unobtainable since——”

“Gov’mint says it ’ud rather you had rubber than leather, so I’ll get you a pair o’ them rubbers for next time. I expect you’ll be through again in a couple of weeks or so,” he says cheerfully.

No doubt I might be, if I had the shoes, but he will prevent me wearing them for that length of time at least.

The shoemaker lives a few miles outside the village, cycling in each day with a black linen bag on his back, to his funny little single-room shop up a flight of broken steps, and this distance makes it possible for us to compare notes on that true country topic, the weather. His weather and my weather are not always the same.

VILLAGE
SHOEMAKE
R

“I got a lovely drop of rain yesterday,” he says, “just what I wanted. I’d planted out a hundred cabbages in my garden the night afore, and they were a bit droopy-like, but the rain its made ’em stand up like soldiers.”

“Oh, you mean that thunderstorm,” I cry enviously. “No, we only got a few drops, nothing to do any good. Thunderstorms always seem to circle round here, leaving us dry in the middle—it’s quite maddening.”

“Thunderstorms be curious. You stand in one field and get drowned, and the next field’s as dry as the inside of a bad nut. Pity you didn’t get the rain, but I wish you could see my cabbage plants now. Well, ma’am, if you’ll call the middle of next week I’ll have your shoes ready.”

But I, knowing my shoemaker, decide that the end of the week after will be quite soon enough.

As I always pay for my shoe-mending as soon as I manage to retrieve my shoes, I never get a bill, and even if I did it would not be so enchanting as an early eighteenth century shoemaker’s bill which I came across—I cannot now remember where:

The date is 1708:—	s. d.
Clogging up Miss	10
Mended up Miss	2
Toe capped Master	3
Turned up, clogged up, and mended Maid	1 6
Lined, turned up, and put a piece on Madam	4 6
Tapping Madam	6
Soleing and covering the Maid	6
Putting a piece on Madam	6
Stretching and easing little Master	7
Welting and stretching the Maid	6
Mending and patching the Cook	6

£0 10 8

All these domestic repairs to the family for half a sovereign seem cheap. Madam, one feels, must have been quite a new woman!

14

No woman who is herself house-proud—or cottage-proud, which is really a more acute form of the disease, for in a cottage there is only room to keep the household treasures for which one genuinely cares, those whose absence would leave a blank in existence—but lets her heart go out to another woman who has the same feelings, those feelings on which the homes of England are really based. Age does not wither them, for Mrs. Anne Gilbert when she was seventy-three years old in 1854, moved into a new house and described how much she enjoyed reducing to order “the absolute insurrection of chairs, tables, sofas, and everything which we ought to keep under.” She went on, “It is a pleasant spot to call home. I do so enjoy it daily and hourly, often opening a door, or looking out of my window, for the simple pleasure of seeing how pleasant it is!”

Pity the woman who has never known that simple pleasure!

But who, it may be asked, was Mrs. Anne Gilbert? It is not a name that bears any particular quality of distinction. Perhaps not, but when Anne is restored to her maiden name of Taylor, and it is recalled that she had a sister named Jane, then a little light dawns. In the National Portrait Gallery are the portraits of

JANE AND
ANNE
TAYLOR

two serious-looking little girls holding hands, in long full gathered skirts, with wide sashes tied in large bows. These little girls are Jane and Anne Taylor, and the picture was painted by their father, the Reverend Isaac Taylor. It was Jane who wrote the famous verses, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," which so many baby lips have repeated. At Lavenham, in Suffolk, there is a fifteenth-century half-timbered house officially called "Shilling Grange," which was the early home of Jane and Anne Taylor, and in consequence it is known in Lavenham as "Twinkle House."

The Taylors were an interesting family, even apart from their talents, full of the soundest English qualities. The little girls' grandfather came from Worcester, and had a wish to get to London to develop his gift for engraving. He had no money to pay for a conveyance, all he could raise was half-a-crown for leave to walk beside the stage waggon for protection, all the way from Worcester to London.

The mother of Jane and Anne did not much believe in female authorship. "Lady authors," she said, "would have been better to employ themselves in mending the family stockings."

Fortunately, her daughters did not follow her advice, and it is rather amusing to know that she herself, when she reached the age of fifty-six, took to the pen and produced a book, and continued to write till she was well on to seventy.

Anne's marriage was directly due to her writing, and makes a curious little tale. Her literary work produced such admiration in the breast of the Reverend Joseph Gilbert, a widower of thirty-three, without children, that he wrote to her, wishing to know whether "any peremptory reason existed which might lead him to conclude that a journey, undertaken with the purpose of soliciting her heart and hand, could not possibly be successful." In other and less circuitous words was she already plighted to another? It is rather a Jane Austen-like situation, and like a proper heroine of one of those novels, Anne replied that she could not possibly consider of it. However, the ardent clergyman went down to Devonshire, in despite of her discouragement, and in due time Anne Taylor became Mrs. Gilbert, and continued to enjoy her life and her home to a good old age. She said she was always ready to turn to "Hook, Crook, and Co.," in any difficulty, and she very wisely said, "To live *in the day* is the secret of cheerful living."

The Taylor family, who in course of time became rather widely separated, had the charming custom, on the night of each full moon, if the

sky was clear at nine o'clock, of each looking at it alone, to "meet in thought."

In these days everyone justly loves *The Wind in the Willows*, and takes an almost hysteric joy in the doings of Mr. Toad—

"The world has held great heroes,
As history books have showed.
But never a name to go down to fame
Compared with that of Toad."

But I wonder how many people know the delicious "Toad's Journal" that Jane Taylor wrote. It shows delicate observation and humour.

"Crawled forth from some rubbish," wrote her Mr. Toad in his journal, "and wink'd with one eye

Half opened the other, but could not tell why;
Stretched out my left leg, as it felt rather queer,
Then drew all together, and slept for a year.
Awakened, felt chilly—crept under a stone;
Was vastly contented with living alone . . .
Grew pensive—discovered that life is a load;
Began to be weary of being a Toad."

Thinking of toads reminds me of someone I heard of who had a gardener of the name of Snail, which from every point of view has a singular charm and appropriateness.

"Snail, have you clipped back the ivy?"

"Well, ma'am, it seems a pity to do that, it's so warm and comfortable in the winter."

"Snail, how are the lettuces coming on?"

"Oh, I finds them very satisfactory, ma'am."

"Snail, you've been a long time cutting that asparagus."

"Slow and sure's my motta, ma'am."

"Snail, just listen to that thrush!"

"Can't say I ever liked them dratted birds."

In my tiny garden I have no responsibility for any gardener at all, and no asparagus or lettuces to worry about. There is a certain peacefulness in this, for though one's own fresh vegetables are a joy, they mean a considerable amount of trouble, money, and often disappointment. A friend of mine said ruefully that she reckoned every strawberry she grew cost her ninepence each! And there are opportunities in the country, even if one has no vegetable garden, of getting fresh vegetables that do not exist in towns. There are generous friends who grow more than they actually need—it is very difficult to adjust garden crops to the requirements of the household. There is usually a glut of one thing, even if there is a scarcity of another. Peas going yellow in the pod are no good to anybody. We all have suffered at times, as John Halsham said in that lovely Sussex book *Idlehurst*, from the gardener's choice "of that elderly grey pod filled with hard cubic seeds which was his ideal of a 'nice-eatin' pea.'"

VEGETABLE
WORRIES

It is to be hoped that elderly pea was not the third vegetable that an American Ambassador had in mind when he said, "The English have only three vegetables, two of these being cabbage." But it may justly be claimed that since that was written we have improved considerably both in the art of growing and of cooking vegetables. Though even so we cannot write about the kitchen garden with such a lyric grace as did James Harvey in an earlier century: "What a fund of choice accommodations is here! What a source of wholesome dainties! and all for the enjoyment of man. Why does the parsley, with her frizzled locks, shag the border, or why the celery, with her whitening arms, perforate the mould; but to render his soupes savoury?"

There is something rather enchanting, half childish, half pompous, in eighteenth century writing about nature, about flowers and vegetables and verdure and vistas.

Earlier still there is a quite different charm, much more dewy, as of people seeing things for the first time, and rather surprised at what they behold.

Take these delicate descriptions from an old Herbal, whose name and date has unfortunately vanished:—

"The lime that in autumn becomes wan and spotted as a doe.

"The wyche-elme whose gold is let loose on the wind after night frosts and cold dawnes.

"The sloe whose excellent purple blood maketh so fine a comfort.

“The green-smockt filberte.

“Many do fear the goodly mushroome as poysonous, damp weeds; but this doth in no ways abate the exceeding excellence of God’s Providence that out of the grass and dew where nothing was, and where onlie the little worm turned in his sporte, come, as at the shaking of bells, these delicate meates.”

One of the attractions of the old country names for flowers is that they show the same fresh observation, touched, here and there with a rough country humour. The Pansy has several well-known names, the most famous being Love-in-idleness, but it is also called Kiss-me-ere-I-rise, Three-faces-under-a-hood, Call-me-to-you; Fritillary is the Ginny-hen-flower, and the Checkered-lily; Crocus is Son-before-the-father; Solomon’s Seal is Ladder-to-Heaven; Ground-ivy is Gill-creep-by-the-ground; Thrift, Our-Lady’s-cushion; Mullein is Haae’s-beard, Peter’s-staff, and High-taper; Foxglove is also Thimble-wort; while Dock is Patience—it might be more suitable to call it Obstinacy. There are, of course, hundreds more country flower names.

In a more practical mood an old gardener once told me that if a bunch of young juicy elder bush was drawn along the rows of broad beans, it would help to keep away black fly, as they “Can’t abide” the smell of elder.

But I have no rows of broad beans. Instead I have that more permanent and very satisfactory thing, three high old walls enclosing my little garden into complete privacy. Of course, the walls being high, they also exclude to a certain extent the eye of the sun, as well as of neighbours. But I am no lover of unmitigated sunshine, and always feel that one of the pleasantest things in a summer garden is shade. I have enough sun to grow a few roses, and on the southward facing wall is a wistaria which evidently appreciates its position. There is also a big white lilac tree, and bulbs, and primroses and polyanthus and pinks, and a little lawn the size of two pocket-handkerchiefs, and big wooden tubs with hydrangeas and pansies. All very pleasant to look at from the windows at the back of the cottage, and large enough to sit in when the weather is warm—and owing to the surrounding and sheltering walls it is warm in the little garden when it may be quite cold in the open country. And on the dewy morning of a sweltering day it is cool and delicious.

WALLED
GARDEN

Beyond my walls—it would be better still if they were inside them!—are two tall old pear trees, which in the spring are full of blossom, looking magical against the old red roofs beyond, and in the autumn full of fruit. So my garden, small though it is, offers me many pleasures, and none of the

pains, responsibility, and aching back that falls to the lot of the proper gardener.

16

If one does not, owing to this circumstance of no garden space, grow fruit and vegetables oneself, at least one may see them superbly grown at a village Produce Show. The day of our first Produce Show was a perfect balmy October afternoon. The village, needless to say, turned up in force to see its well-scrubbed turnips, carrots and swedes, its shining apples and rosy tomatoes, all reposing with an air of calm self-satisfaction on the long tables in the tent. There was a natural desire to see not only one's own products, but to behold the fruit of rival forks and hoes. The exhibits were quite remarkable for quality—we think quite well of ourselves in this village, but we had not realised we were quite so good as that. Superbly grown vegetables—even though some of them were a little on the large side for perfect eating; exceptionally fine apples and pears; onions in generous plenty, firm and glistening with health; cauliflowers that were like Victorian bridal bouquets. Moreover there were innumerable dishes of those almost mythical things called by the Food Controllers “shell eggs”—dozens of them, large in size, utterly unlike the dwarfish rubber-stamped ones, and mostly the pleasant brown of a sun-burnt arm. There were also cakes with currants and raisins in them, and shining jars of bottled plums and other fruits, very translucent and jewel-like in colour. Altogether it looked as though peace and plenty had come again.

The field in which the Produce Show was held is one of the most beautiful in a beautiful village. It is elevated, and runs up to a little hill, it has old trees in it, and provides enchanting glimpses of village roofs and the backs of ancient cottages with their steep “catslide” roofs. The backs of old cottages are always surprisingly and pleasingly different from the fronts.

This field has been associated for a century and a quarter with the village Fair, which is known by the name of the Currant, Gooseberry and Copper Kettle Show. This show—
till temporarily reduced in scope by war—took place at the end of July, and was the occasion of much rural rejoicing, for not only was there the tent of competitive vegetables and fruit and flowers, but there were enormous teas at 1s. a head—teas which were a meal and a bit over—but there was a truly glorious roundabout and coconut shies, and Aunt Sally, and other amusements. These unflinching attractions were provided by a travelling gypsy family, or rather clan, who arrived year after year with their

VILLAGE
FAIR

lumbering train, in smart and shining caravans. It was a real family business. There was a grandfather and a grandmother—a most stately old lady—three dark and handsome sons, each son complete with his own caravan, wife, and each July a new tumbling brown baby. All the caravans were smart, and shining with paint and gilt, with spotless curtains at the little windows. Some village Peeping Tom declared there were silk eiderdowns on all the beds.

These family caravans clustered together at the back of the big field, and there the domestic affairs of cooking and washing and looking after the children went quietly on. The lean dark young men were in charge of the dazzling roundabout with its proud fantastic horses swinging round the roaring organ. This was the very heart and centre of the Fair's gaiety. Without the bright and blaring music of the mechanical organ—overpowering close by, but curiously enchanting from a distance—the Fair would not have deserved its name. But it was when night fell that the scene took on its finest flavour. The naphtha flares cast a fantastic illumination—a brightness set in the blackness of trees and dim huddled roofs. The figures of the villagers, shifting in and out of the lights, took on an air of timelessness, their garments became fluid, and might have been worn by the inhabitants in time of the Napoleonic Wars, or an earlier period still—the queer unnatural light was like a shutter of time. It gave one a strange feeling to come away from the Fair, into the soft summer darkness, the stars once again becoming visible, the houses so quiet, the village street so deserted. A dim light here and there in a cottage window showing that the only people not gathered into the magic field of the Fair were the aged, the sick, or the infants—though it must be admitted that both the aged and the infants put in valiant and prolonged appearances upon the merry scene.

Vegetables, the heaviest pint of gooseberries, even the coveted copper kettle—many a cottage chimney or chest of drawers is adorned with one of these honourable trophies—were all forgotten in the excitements of the Fair at night.

But in the morning we come back to the solid rewards of labour with the hoe and spade. Prize vegetables, when cooked for the grower's dinner, acquire a special flavour.

People have begun to realise the importance of fresh, abundant, and conservatively cooked vegetables. They are now treated with a proper respect. We have also, though it is to be feared not yet sufficiently fully, come to see that a baker's loaf is not necessarily bread.

“And chalk and alum and plaster
Are sold to the poor for bread,”

wrote Tennyson in “Maud.” And not to the poor only, but to the whole population from the time that they abandoned the practice of making and eating home-grown, home-ground, and homemade bread. In the bad days when the wage of the labourer in husbandry was ten or twelve shillings a week (sometimes actually less) the only way he and his family managed to live at all was because the bread, which was their principal article of food, meat being too costly save for the rarest use, was really the staff of life, and contained the whole wheat berry. It was home-grown wheat and grown on land that was manured by farmyard dung and not by chemical fertilisers. They used to say, “No cattle, no dung; no dung, no corn.” A chunk of bread made from whole wheat, without any accompaniment, was a much better meal than a white loaf and a cheese so “processed” that without the label it would have been difficult to tell it from soap.

Mr. C. H. Middleton, whose friendly voice was familiar to thousands of gardeners, in a book called *Village Memories* said: “Bread was largely a home-produced product when I was a child. In addition to their gardens, most of the cottages had a large allotment, on which they grew corn. This was harvested, thrashed by hand, and ground by the local miller, who took the bran as payment, and returned the flour, a whitish speckly mixture, which the cottagers made into great loaves of bread like cushions that never seemed to get dry or stale. The straw was used as litter for the pigs, and in due course returned to the ground as manure, so that nothing was wasted.”

VILLAGE
FAIR

I have heard at first hand from one of the older inhabitants of this Sussex village of this kind of cottage loaf. He told me of the bread he, in his very poor family, was brought up on. It was only baked once a fortnight in the brick oven. The children always used to hurry home—there were nine of them—on the fortnightly baking day, as their mother always baked them each a little cottage loaf, about the size of a fist, which they had hot for their tea. “It was different bread from what we get now,” said the old villager mildly, “There was more *to* it.”

There certainly was, including the vital germ of the wheat berry, in that “dusky loaf smelling of home,” as Tennyson called it.

Beef and beer are traditionally regarded as the foundations of England—it would be a good deal truer to say bread and bacon. That, from the time of Domesday and beyond, has been the traditional meal of the labourer in husbandry in this country.

Through the centuries, in his *Song of the Plough*, Maurice Hewlett saw him eating it:—

“Under the sun on the gray hill,
At breakfast cramp behind the hedge,
There ate he, there eats he still,
Bread and bacon on the knife’s edge.”

We seem much less conscious of the importance of bread in these days than were our ancestors during the Napoleonic wars. In 1795 there was much distress caused by the shortage of wheat, and in July of that year, before the new crops were harvested, the Duke of Northumberland wrote a letter on the subject to his House Steward at Syon:—

“To Henderson,

“In consequence of the present scarcity of wheat. . . you will give the most positive directions to the Butler, that neither rolls nor any other kind of wheaten bread finer than that which. . . is called by the name of Standard Wheaten Bread, be after this day brought into my family. . . also that the Clerk of the Kitchen be desired to make no puddings, pies, tarts, or cakes, in which flour is used; and that my own dinner for the future is to consist of one course unless orders are given to the contrary; and no hot joints, and only one kind of cold meat to be at my side table.”

It is interesting to see not only the cottage wife, who had probably ground her corn from the fields her husband had ploughed and sown, but also a great English Duke, realising the value of bread.

If the people’s bread in the past centuries of our history had been the emasculated white loaf it is highly probable that the poorer classes, who so largely depended upon it for their nourishment, would have died as thickly as they did under the stroke of the Black Death—it would have been the White Death, instead of the Black. Yet, even after the grim lessons of this war, there are numbers of ignorant—or interested—people who want to get the population back to the white loaf. The dead and deadly white loaf, from which the vital wheat germ has been extracted, that germ which gives taste and goodness to the bread, and life to those who eat it. Those who meekly eat the white loaf of “chalk and alum and plaster,” even declaring that they prefer it, in due course suffer from one or other of the many advertised ailments, and proceed to buy back the wheat germ in an expensive doctored form which they should have eaten in their daily bread.

“Lord, what fools these mortals be!” as Shakespeare’s Ariel justly remarked.

We are used to regarding the meat of wild animals as the food of our neolithic ancestors—we imagine them sitting in their caves or huts, clad in the skins of the creatures they had slain, and gnawing at the bones. It is true that Early Man was a hunter before he became a tiller of the soil. But archæology shows us that the men of the New Stone Age grew wheat of a kind, reaped it with a flint sickle—a most delicately knapped implement with a minutely serrated edge—and stored the grain in underground pits. That corn was grown and used considerably in the Bronze Age is shown by the many stone querns that have been discovered. The Romans found the corn crops in England so abundant that English wheat was imported to Italy. So it may be seen that the growing of corn in this country is an ancient business, and the bread our people eat was made from home-grown grain. Of course during the Middle Ages the bread of the peasantry was not wheaten bread, but mostly made from rye, or rye mixed with wheat, which was called maslin. Sometimes, in bad years, even rye was too costly. In 1586, two years before the coming of the Spanish Armada, Harrison wrote: “The price of corn of late years has been so high that the artificer and poore labouring man is not able to reach unto it, but is driven to content himselfe with horsse-corne, I mean, beanes, peason, otes, tares, and lintils; and therefore it is a true proverbe and never so well verified as now, that hunger setteth his first foot into the horsse manger.”

ENGLISH
CORN

Corn has always been the true foundation of agriculture—and I am told that an acre of wheat will keep three families in bread for a year—as bread is the staff of life.

In *The Field*, in 1942, there was printed a poem by W. K. Holmes, called simply “Bread”, which I think every country housewife ought to learn by heart. I quote a portion of it:—

“Not enough has been said
In praise of bread.
We’re aware that as food
It’s exceedingly good,
But few of us properly savour
Consistency, flavour,
Appearance, as well
As its kind, wholesome smell.

.....

Enhanced while you eat
By this vision of wheat—
The tiny green sprouts of its wonderful birth,
Then the emerald haze that conceals the brown earth;
Next, the wide tall-grown acres in shadow and sun,
Astir like the sea when the little winds run,
And last, the ripe gold when the harvest is near
To crown with its treasure the hopes of the year;
Rain, moonlight, and lark-song—the whole season’s round
Distilled and condensed that plain bread may abound.”

May is what can be called the weaning time of the young wheat, for by then it has exhausted the nourishment stored in the parent grain, and the growing blade has to seek its own nourishment—if the weather is unkindly, as May often is, the growing wheat turns yellow, finding the struggle for life rather hard, but sun and showers help it to recover.

There is a very charming child’s story by Frances Hodgson Burnett, famous as the creator of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*—a much better book than people nowadays imagine—called “The Proud little Grain of Wheat”, which gives an admirable and amusing account of the life of a grain of wheat from harvesting, thrashing, sowing, harvesting and thrashing again, to milling, and its final appearance in a cake—a very rich cake, for it was a very proud grain of wheat.

With corn and the growing of it are linked two buildings which have had almost as great an influence—though a less permanent one—upon our landscape as that of the village church, the watermill and the windmill. The watermill came first, but the windmill, because it was always set upon a height or ridge to catch the breeze, was naturally more conspicuous than the tucked away, low-

WIND AND
WATER
MILLS

lying watermill. In older days Sussex was peppered with windmills—the sturdy tower-mill, the post-mill, and the pretty smockmill.

These mills, at least the wooden ones, when they were found to have been set up in unsuitable places, were sometimes moved entire as they stood, by means of a huge slow team of oxen, who pulled so steadily and strongly that the miller might stand at ease in his mill enjoying the ride. Horses were no good at this job. An old Sussex shepherd who saw the white post-mill, which now looks down on the little hamlet of Clayton, moved there from its original position miles away, said “They tried to get it up the hill with horses, and they broke the tackling every time, ’cause they snatched, ye see; so they had to get oxen, ever so many pairs, and they drewed it as steady.”

The names of the mill-tools have a sturdy, honest quality of their own—scoopes, spudgels, bilboes, biddels, bushels, scuppits, tole-dishes, tedders, pritchels, sheps. Trap doors in windmills are called cheps.

It is one of the sad and curious results of so-called civilisation that the natural and ancient use of wind and water mills to grind corn for bread is dying, is almost dead. The country mills are being killed by Big Business, which has no use for them. A fine old farmer, Mr. William Wood, who lived not far away from this village, wrote a book called *A Sussex Farmer*, and in this book he said:—

“When I was a lad there was in every country parish a mill, or two or three, driven by water, wind, a few here and there by steam. These mills provided, or could provide all the flour required in their area. They ground the corn the farmers wanted ground, to supply meal for their pigs and cattle, furnished bran, middlings, etc., fresh and of better quality than can be got now anywhere. They also provided for the farmer a market easily available at his door, for all the wheat, oats and other corn he wished to sell. These mills have disappeared, and *every* farmer suffers from the loss.”

That is the opinion of a large Wealden farmer who was eighty-three years old when he wrote the book, and whose forbears had farmed the same parts of Sussex for four hundred years.

Now that windmills are so unhappily out of use, no longer part of the daily life of the community, the uses and customs of the miller are forgotten. In the old days the position in which the sails stood when at rest had significance. The pious miller, in memory of his Salvation, stood his sails in the form of a cross at the close of the day’s work—this was known as the “Miller’s Pride”. If the sails were set in the form of St. Andrew’s Cross, it

meant that no more grist would be ground that day. When the miller died twenty slats were removed from the sails, and they were slowly and solemnly moved round in harmony with the tolling of the church bell. The daily acts of our forefathers recognised the integrity, the sacramental quality, of the corn by which man lives, and the very word lady, so degraded in common use, meant the loaf-giver, or the loaf-kneader.

In my cottage there remains part of the old brick oven, adjoining the wide kitchen hearth, but it has been opened up and rendered useless for baking, so now I store some of my china there. But it still retains the old two-handled iron door, the edges of which are partly burnt away by the fierce heat which used to roar within while the faggots or bundles of furze burnt themselves away, making the bricks red-hot—then the ashes were swept out, and the waiting loaves put in with the long-handled peel. I should like some of that bread which once was baked in my cottage oven.

19

The iron hood over the bigger of the two open hearths in the cottage bears, as I said earlier, the date 1648. It adds a new excitement to history when sitting by the fire beside a hearth bearing that date, to take down a history book or two from the shelves and read what was happening round about that year, and try and realise what the domestic conditions were like, and how a cottage of the better sort, or a small farmhouse, would be furnished and equipped.

THE CIVIL
WAR

In the first place one thing is plain. As this cottage and the village in which it is set, is in the Sussex Weald, it would have very little concern with happenings in London. Whether King or Parliament were in power would make very little difference to the rude forefathers of the hamlet, though no doubt they expressed their views to each other with some vigour, and with so thick a Sussex burr that if any Londoner happened to be about, he would remain entirely ignorant as to what those views were. The genuine ancient rural atmosphere was very protective, and a true Sussex man has always been inclined to think that what was happening in Sussex was far more important than what happened in the rest of the Kingdom. His eyes looked to Lewes or Chichester, and actually, a few centuries ago, he did not often look outside his own village.

The Civil War, which had been raging round about England for some years, had in 1648, died into a kind of apathy. The nation did not like the prospect of being ruled by the Army, and nobody any more believed that they could trust the word of Charles I. 1648 was his last year of life, for in

1649 he had only thirty days of January left to live. No doubt the beheading of King Charles on that cold winter morning produced a shock in every Sussex village—even though Sussex had not seen much of the Civil War except when Hopton and Waller met at Arundel.

I have heard a curious little story of the Civil War from some relations of mine, and this is a ghost story at first hand, not, as is more usual, at several removes from the source. These relations were a young married couple who were staying in Somerset with some friends in an ancient manor house which in pre-Reformation days had been a monastery. They slept in a bedroom that looked on to quiet fields across which a little-used road ran, swinging from a slope on the right hand down to the little valley in which the manor house stood, and then climbing the opposite slope on the left. This road was clearly in view for several miles on either side. In the middle of the night they were wakened by the fierce growling of their dog, who was sleeping in the room with them. Then they heard the sound of galloping horses. Wondering what all the sudden noise was about they leapt out of bed and ran to the window. It was a clear moonlit night, there was nothing moving on the road, and the whole stretch of country lay as still to sight as it was unrestful to ear. Horses were audibly galloping down the road, past the manor house and up the opposite slope, there were sharp clashes of steel and shouting. But there was nothing whatever to be seen on the open moonlit road, which was completely blank under the sky. The dog was fearfully excited, and had to be restrained from jumping out of the window. The sounds gradually faded away, and the night became as peaceful as it looked.

In the morning at breakfast they told their hostess of their strange experience, and said if there had not been two of them, as well as the dog, they would have thought it a dream.

“Oh,” she said calmly, “That always happens on that particular night—the first skirmish of the Civil War took place on that old road.”

The relatives who told me this tale are both Quakers, whose word may be taken as their bond.

It is just another of those happenings which cannot be explained.

In the seventeenth century life was very stationary, as, indeed, it was to remain for at least a century and a half afterwards in “slow Sussex”. Even when the railways came, it made very little difference to villages in the remoter parts,

and right up to the end of the nineteenth century it would have been possible to have collected a surprisingly large number of inhabitants who had never seen a railway train, much less ridden in one. The delicious story is told of a lady of Lewes—really she ought to have resided in Cranford—who with great difficulty and much trepidation on her part, was persuaded to take a short railway journey to visit some friends. They congratulated her on her courage and safe arrival—yes, she admitted, still trembling, it was true she had arrived safely, but the train had killed seven people on the way. This statement was received with natural amazement, until it was discovered that the unnerved traveller thought that every time the engine whistled it had killed somebody.

In May, 1840, William Lucas wrote in his *Quaker Journal*: “To Brighton at 8 by Sam’s Coach, fine travelling. The country looking very rich and beautiful, the stupendous cuttings, embankments, and tunnels of the Brighton Railway in sight the greater part of the way. I doubt if it ever pays.”

That was in the middle of the nineteenth century. It may easily be imagined that in the middle of the seventeenth century life in this Sussex village and in this Sussex cottage was very secluded and self-contained. News filtered through from London very slowly and uncertainly. By that time there was a kind of news-sheet in manuscript sent down from London to certain subscribers in the country, and from thence the more striking items of intelligence would percolate down to the unlettered population. Even a piece of news so startling as the beheading of the King might take some time to penetrate to the remoter farms and hamlets. The state of the crops, and whether the old sow was going to recover, was really much more important to the cottager and small farmer than the state of Parliament—life has always taught them the lesson of putting first things first, and food comes before politics.

At this time, in districts which had not been ravaged by the Civil War, food was good and cheap. Eggs, a hundred eggs, could be bought for one shilling, and a “little chicken” for sixpence. Both geese and turkeys were cheap. Most cottagers kept “the cleanly bee”, for honey was still largely used instead of sugar. Cheeses were homemade wherever there were cows. Green cheeses were made with sorrel juice, there were “slipcoat” cheeses, and cheeses flavoured with marigolds. The seventeenth century housewife was well acquainted with the uses of herbs. A certain Lady Hatton writing from her country house to her husband in town speaks with the authentic voice of all women in similar circumstances—whatever the century: “Pray,

dear, let Smith buy a Westphalian ham, 2 or 3 neats tongues, and *do* remember the pickles, and we had better have a pint of oil.”

But had Lady Hatton been a farmer’s wife she would have had her own home-cured ham, and would have scorned any pickles not made by her own hands from her great-grandmother’s recipe. On the beams of what was once the kitchen in my cottage are some massive iron hooks meant for the hanging of hams—I am glad no one has removed them, but indeed it would be a tough job to do so, for old iron, grown into old oak, is not easily severed.

The fuel burnt on the open cottage hearth would certainly be wood, and those who lit the fire would perhaps be more apt than we are to remember the beautiful words of Isaiah: “Behold all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks; walk in the light of your fire and in the sparks that ye have kindled.”

No doubt the fine new iron hood, made by the smith, to conduct the sparks and the slow spirals of smoke up the chimney—people by then being less patient of the smoke-drying process than their Tudor ancestors—would be much admired by the neighbours. “Sea-coal”, as it was called, because of its sea-journey down the coast from the north to London, was in use (Evelyn wrote a treatise against it called *Fumifugium*) but not in country places. The consumption of wood must have been considerable for domestic heating, and caused John Claridge in 1670 to write:

RUSH-
LIGHTS AND
CANDLES

“This month of December let Landlords remember
To set store of workmen in planting of timber,
The wanting thereof this land doth lament,
So little is planted, so much there is spent.”

So English shiftlessness in regard to forestry is no new thing.

The common cottage lighting of that period would be the rushlight, supplementing the glow of the wood fire. Gilbert White has a charming description of the making of rushlights which anyone can read for themselves in the *Natural History of Selborne*. Candles, of course, were more costly, and wax candles only for the well-to-do, but farm wives and careful cottagers made their own candles—dipping the wicks into hot tallow or mutton fat (which would certainly smell when burning) and as they cooled and hardened dipping them again and again until the necessary thickness was attained. These candles were not straight-sided like the moulded candles, for the tallow as it cooled ran downwards, so that the

bottom end was thicker than the top. The candles of the wealthy were made of wax and scented oils, so that they smelt agreeably when burning.

It is quite suitable that I have an iron rushlight holder, stuck in a chunk of oak, standing on the high shelf above my cottage hearth, but I confess to feeling thankful that I have a considerably better form of lighting. The evening hours in winter must have been very long when there was nothing but a rushlight or an odorous tallow dip to see by. But, of course, cottagers and farm people sensibly got over this difficulty by going to bed very early.

There is a seat built into the brick wall of my cottage ingle—a shallow and hard seat, but warm and out of all draughts. For the rest I do not imagine much luxury in this dwelling room in the middle of the seventeenth century, though the people who lived in a substantial cottage of this kind would be something better off than the actual “labourer in husbandry”. What we call cottages now, if built in brick and timber or stone, were the homes of the established among the village community—a farm bailiff, or reeve, or what the cloak and sword novelists will persist in calling “mine host”, like Mr. Hewins, the Inn landlord who owned and lived in this cottage a hundred years ago.

But even these quite substantial people, who were so much better off than we who now take cover under cottage roofs from the economic blizzard that blows in these lean days, did not look for the comforts we regard as essential. A hard and backless bench, a few joined stools, one, or perhaps two wooden chairs with arms—the early wheelback chair came in during this century—with a wainscot cupboard for cups of treen and a pewter dish or two, would be the plenishings. Round the hearth there would be some three-legged skillets of metal, to stand in the hot ashes, a long-handled fry pan, the fire dogs and fire back of Sussex iron, and a great black kettle or pot hanging above the flames. All these things, though of everyday use, would be well and solidly made, and the furniture would be of well-seasoned oak. We now call these things of everyday humble use “antiques”, and value them for the quality of their making and the signs each bears of being the work of the individual craftsman. Had they not been well made—had they been glued together in a factory—they would not have lasted for three hundred years.

Beside the hearth, and in constant use, would be a spinning wheel. A common dress of the country woman in the middle of the seventeenth century would be a “red petticoat, grey cloth waistcoat, linsey woolsey apron, red neckerchief, black hood and white cap”. Add to that, stout buckled shoes

SUSSEX
PUDDING

and home-knitted worsted stockings, and you have a very sensible and attractive figure. When dressed in their best clothes some of the country women still wore a small starched ruff, though the ladies of London and the Court wore the wide falling laced collar.

Most of the little trimmings and oddments with which rural maids and matrons adorned themselves would be brought from the travelling pedlar. Autolycus still ruffled it about the countryside, though in 1648 the time was drawing near when Puritan rule would look coldly upon him and his incentives to frivolity, even if he was not entirely suppressed with the maypole.

One thing the Puritans did not attempt to take away was the belief in and the fear of witches, so that if the merriment of the winter hearth was subdued, the thrill and shudder might still be enjoyed. The whole of the seventeenth century may be said to have taken a dark tinge from the witch-hunting tastes of that horrid monarch James the First. It was at its worst in the first half of the century and gradually became less virulent as the century went on, but it made the lives of a tragic number of solitary old women into a nightmare, and is not a pretty thing to look back upon.

In the little garden at the back of this cottage—probably at that time larger, for the houses on either side were built at a later date, and possibly filched some of the original plot belonging to the cottage—the now closed in well would be in daily use, and the mistress would grow herbs to flavour her rather heavy cooking. Rosemary and marigolds were regarded as pot herbs. We can believe that many a Sussex pudding was boiled in the pot on this hearth. It is an ancient and dangerous dish. Two centuries or so later the Reverend W. D. Parish said in his *Dictionary of the Sussex Dialect*:

“For the Sussex pudding is a compound of flour and water made up into an oblong shape and boiled. There is a moment when it is first taken out of the saucepan, when it can be eaten with impunity; but it is usually eaten cold, and in that form I believe that it becomes the foundation of all the ills that Sussex spirit and flesh are heir to. It promotes a dyspeptic form of dissent which is unknown elsewhere. It aggravates every natural infirmity of temper by the promotion of chronic indigestion, and finally undermines the constitution; for the first symptom of the decay of nature which a Sussex man describes is invariably that he can’t get his pudding to set”.

The seventeenth century cottage garden would not display the latest fashionable flowers which at that time were introduced into England, such as the tulip, the nasturtium, the crown imperial, honesty, and love-in-a-mist

—all to become true cottage flowers in later days—but there were plenty of older and sweeter ones, the flowers that Shakespeare knew.

21

Finding ourselves in the seventeenth century, owing to the date on the cottage hearth, it is interesting to pause and recall the names of some of the writers who were living in England in that year of 1648. There is nothing so helps us to savour the atmosphere of the time as these names. They are like keys to open many doors. In that year many people were still living in London and Warwickshire who had seen and spoken with Shakespeare. Milton, who was a child of eight—though we cannot associate much that is childish with Milton—when Shakespeare died, was the dominant literary figure up to the last quarter of the seventeenth century. In 1648 his famous *Areopagitica* had been written four years—all his middle years being given to the writing of stern Puritan pamphlets. But he had already made himself immortal by his marvellous “Hymn on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity”—written when he was twenty—which was followed by the eternally lovely “L’Allegro”, “Il Pensero”, “Comus”, and “Lycidas”. How the hand that had plucked such a lyre could abandon it for twenty years of prose pamphlet writing remains a mystery, only to be in part accounted for by Milton’s puritanical sense of duty—that “stern Daughter of the Voice of God”. It may be considered one of the major achievements of the Merry Monarch that it was his Restoration which drove Milton back to poetry. In spite of his Italian travels and his deep classical learning, Milton was very English—his Garden of Eden was much more British than Asiatic. He rejoiced to breathe

MILTON
AND
BUNYAN

“Among the pleasant villages and farms
Adjoined, from each thing met conceives delight,
The smell of grain, or teded grass, or kine,
Or dairy, each rural sight, each rural sound.”

He has depicted these rural sights and sounds with a perfection that only Shakespeare with his greater warmth and depth has excelled—pictures as simple and as imperishable as—

“While the ploughman, near at hand,
Whistles o’er the furrowed land,
And the milk maid singeth blithe,
And the mower whets his scythe,
And every shepherd tells his tale
Under the hawthorn in the dale.”

Bunyan, though his *Pilgrim's Progress* was not to appear till two years after Milton's death, was also a very English writer, whose mind was deeply marked by the wars and controversies of the seventeenth century. His memorable book is a vivid picture of the life and the people he saw about him in the English countryside, and, after the Bible, was for generations more read under cottage and farmhouse roofs than any other work of the English genius. It was recognized as a great moral work—the fact that it was a very fine story was less stressed, though not less enjoyed by those who regarded fiction as definitely sinful.

Thomas Campion had only nineteen years of life in the seventeenth century, but the tone of his work is less Tudor than of that century. His poem on Jack and Joan is a nice homely picture of rural life:

“Jack and Joan, they think no ill,
But loving live, and merry still:
Do their weekdays' work, and pray
Devoutly on the holy day:
Skip and trip it on the green,
And help to choose the Summer Queen;
Lash out at a country feast
Their silver penny with the best.
Well even they judge of nappy ale,
And tell at large a winter tale;
Climb up to the apple loft,
And turn the crabs till they be soft.
Tib is all the father's joy,
And little Tom the mother's boy.
All their pleasure is content;
And care, to pay their yearly rent.
Joan can call by name her cows
And deck her windows with green boughs;
She can wreaths and tutties make,
And trim with plums a bridal cake.
Jack knows what brings gain or loss;
And his long flail can stoutly toss:
Makes the hedge which other break
And ever thinks what he doth speak.”

Jack and his Joan are real country people, not the nymphs and shepherds who so abounded in Elizabethan pastoral poetry.

With a span of life that stretched from the last years of Elizabeth to the year of Milton's death, Herrick claims three-fourths of the seventeenth century as his own, though his gay, robust, and lyric spirit seems more truly to belong to the Tudor age; not for him was the solemn organ music of Milton, or the sense of sin of Bunyan. He was more countryman by force than choice, but when he had settled down to his Devonshire living at Dean Prior—and he was there for twenty-eight years, and again for the last twelve years of his life—he discovered the charms of bucolic existence and enshrined them in hundreds of jewelled lyrics. Being so remote from the troubled world of his day, the glow of the Tudor sunset still seems to lie upon his rural afternoon. Had Shakespeare or Ben Jonson clicked his garden gate to find him writing verse under his yew hedge, they would have seen little change save some slight difference in the fashion of his clothes and in the cut of the “tempestuous petticoat” of his waiting maid. The fashion of his house, his furniture, his food and drink, would be still that of the sixteenth century.

HERRICK AT
HOME

The most famous and perfect of his lyrics, to daffodils, to blossoms, to meadows, to Julia, to Corinna “going a-Maying,” are so well-remembered that it would be foolish to quote them. Instead here is a very simple and charming description of himself and his rural life:—

“Though Clock,
To tell how night draws hence, I’ve none,
A Cock
I have, to sing how day draws on.
I have
A maid (my Prew) by good luck sent,
To save
That little Fate me gave or lent.
A Hen
I keep, which, creaking day by day,
Tells when
She goes her long white egg to lay.
A Goose
I have, which, with a jealous ear,
Lets loose
Her tongue, to tell what danger’s near.
A Lamb
I keep, tame, with my morsels fed,
Whose Dam
An orphan left him, lately dead.
A Cat
I keep, that plays about my house,
Grown fat
With eating many a miching mouse.
To these
A Tracey I do keep, whereby
I please
The more my rural privacy,
Which are
But toys to give my heart some ease;
Where care
None is, slight things do lightly please.”

Herrick wrote a poem on “His Content in the Country”—

“Here, here I live with what my board
Can with the smallest cost afford.
Though ne’er so mean the viands be,
They well content my Prew and me.
Or pea, or bean, or wort, or beet,
Whatever comes, content makes sweet.
Here we rejoice, because no rent
We pay for our poor tenement
Wherein we rest, and never fear
The landlord, or the usurer.
The quarter day does ne’er affright
Our peaceful slumbers in the night.
We eat our own and batten more
Because we feed on no man’s score.”

His cat evidently added to Herrick’s content, and he observed its ways with care.

“And the brisk mouse may feast herself with crumbs
Till that the green-eyed kitten comes.”

He would sometimes sit up so late with a friend talking by the hearth that they saw

—“the fire less shine
From th’ embers than the kitling’s eyes.”

Chaucer, too, had observed a cat, though with a more humorous eye—

“. . . if the cattes skin be slyke and gay,
She wol not dwelle in house half a day,
But forth she wole, er any day be dawed
To shewe hir skin, and garn a-caterwawed.”

And he says again—

“Let take a cat and foster him wel with mylk
And tender flaisch, and make his bed of silk,
And let him see a mous go by the wal,
Anoon he wayveth mylk and flaisch and al
And every deynte which is in that hous,
Such appetit hath he to ete that mous.”

It is pleasing to think of the eyes of Chaucer and Herrick both considering the ways of the common cat. But the cottage hearth is certainly not complete without a cat—apart

from the need to keep a check on what Gerarde, the Elizabethan Herbalist, politely called “domesticall mise”.

Herrick modestly hoped that his muse might:—

“Sit and piping please
The poor and private cottages . . .
There, there, perhaps, such lines as these
May take the simple villages.”

There is a group of seventeenth century singers remote and heavenly, far removed from Herrick and poets like Lovelace and Andrew Marvell and Abraham Cowley, whose “wish” has been echoed in so many hearts since his day:—

“Ah, yet, ere I descend to the grave,
May I a small house and large garden have;
And a few friends, and many books, both true,
Both wise, and both delightful too!”

These poets were George Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, and George Herbert, whose brief life claimed but thirty-two years of the seventeenth century. It was as natural to Vaughan as it was later to William Blake, to know:—

“Angels lay leiger here; each bush and cell
Each oak and highway knew them:
Walk but the fields, or sit down at some well,
And he was sure to view them.”

Truly heavenly though was George Herbert’s muse, he yet had links the others lacked with the humble daily life of his time. He was a parish priest, as well as a poet, and wrote in prose as well as verse. He wrote a book called *The Country Parson*, in which he set down how those of his vocation should live. “The furniture of his house,” he says, “is very plain, but clean, whole, and sweet, as sweet as his garden can make; for he hath no money for such things, charity being his only perfume, which deserves cost when he can spare it. His fare is plain and common, but wholesome; what he hath is little, but very good. . . . If he adds anything, for a great day or a stranger, his garden or orchard supplies it, or his barne or backside; he goes no further for any entertainment lest he goe into the world.”

The Country Parson is well worth study, and gives us a pretty close picture of the way that Herbert himself lived among his flock, full of holy charity, helping lame dogs over stiles—and poor horses fallen on the roads—visiting his parishioners as they were “wallowing in the midst of their

affairs”, by which he meant not just calling on formal occasions; making music, and writing his lovely verse.

Izaak Walton, who wrote Herbert’s life, commended it for “its charity, humility and all Christian virtues”. It was “lowly in his own eyes and lovely in the eyes of others”.

22

Those were the great voices, and in general unheard by the contemporary country people, few of whom could read. But if books were no part of their daily life, they sweetened their rural labours by old and charming songs, as Izaak Walton has told us in a famous passage of his *Compleat Angler*, the passage in which Piscator asks the milk-woman to “sing a song that was sung by your daughter when I last passed over this meadow, about eight or nine days since”.

“What song was it, I pray?” asks the milk-woman, “was it ‘Come shepherds, deck your herds?’ or ‘As at noon Dulcina rested?’ or ‘Phillida flouts me?’ or ‘Chevy Chase?’ or ‘Johnny Armstrong?’ or ‘Troy Town?’.”

But Piscator says, “No, it is none of those; it is a song that your daughter sang the first part, and you sang the answers to it.”

So the mother says to her daughter, “Come, Maudlin, sing the first part to the gentleman with a merry heart; and I’ll sing the second when you have done.”

We have another contemporary rural picture of the seventeenth century in one of Dorothy Osborne’s letters, written in June 1653, when she says that after the heat of the day is past, “about six or seven o’clock I walk out into a common that lies hard by the house where a great many young wenches keep sheep and cows and sit in the shade singing of ballads. I talk to them and find they want nothing to make them the happiest people in the world, but the knowledge that they are so”.

DOROTHY
OSBORNE

Dorothy Osborne is so enchanting that it is tempting to linger in her company. She and her lover, Sir William Temple, were parted for years because, like another Juliet and Romeo, their “houses” were at war: Dorothy’s being Royalist and Temple’s Parliament. Their communication was by letter, brought by carrier once a week to Dorothy’s ancient country house at Chicksands. “I admire at myself,” she says in one of these letters, “to remember how I have been transported with the sight of that pitiful

fellow, and now that I know he had no letter for me how coldly I looked upon him.”

She gives us many intimate little glimpses of rural life at that time, in spite of being a serious young woman and a great reader, and remembers how her William likes “marmalade of quince”. She tells him that the only way she can get her medicine down—“a drench that would poison a horse, I believe”—is to drink his health in it. “Tis the infusion of steel, and makes me so horribly sick, that every day at ten o’clock I am making my will and taking leave of all my friends.”

But we will leave her at a happier moment than when she is trying to swallow her “drench”. One day in July 1653, she wrote: “Last night I was in the garden till eleven o’clock. It was the sweetest night that e’er I saw. The garden looked so well and the jasmine smelt beyond all perfume.”

But a woman in love needs more than the scent of jasmine for her felicity. Eventually these long-parted lovers achieved their hope and were married, and there is every reason to believe that they lived happy ever after. But some readers of Dorothy Osborne’s letters may wonder whether Sir William Temple was quite worthy of so rare a woman, even though her charming face was “marr’d by the small pox”, before he wedded her.

In the classic edition of her *Letters*, edited by Edward Abbott Parry, he has an interesting note about the shop at the sign of “The Flower Pot”, where Dorothy wanted to procure a quart of orange-flower water. He says there were several “Flower Pots” in London at that time. “An interesting account of the old sign,” he goes on, “is given in a work on London tradesmen’s tokens, in which it is said to be derived from the earlier representations of the salutations of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, in which either lilies were placed in his hand, or they were set as an accessory in a vase. As Popery declined, the angel disappeared, and the lily-pot became a vase of flowers, subsequently the Virgin was omitted, and there remained only the vase of flowers.”

Which might be taken as an allegory of many things which have happened since “the Virgin was omitted”!

Once started on the backward path it is a temptation to go a little further, back into the sixteenth century when was written a book called *A Dialogue Against the Pestilence* by William Bullein, in which there is some very amusing and natural conversation between a citizen of London and his wife,

riding out of the City to escape the plague. The London lady is of a type that still exists, we have all met her.

She says to her husband: “How pleasant are these sweet fields, garnished with fair plants and flowers. The birds do sing sweetly and pitifully in the bushes; here are pleasant woods. Jesus, man, who would be in the city again? Not I for an hundred pound.”

But soon her enthusiasm begins to wane, and after a little while she exclaims, “I never was so far from London in all my life. How far have we ridden already, sir, I pray you?”

ELIZABETH
AN LADY

“Wife,” replies her husband, “we have ridden ten miles this morning.” When they have ridden further and come to a small town, he asks her, “How like you this town, dame?”

“A pretty street,” she answers condescendingly, “but methinks the people go very plain; it is no city as I do suppose by their manners.”

A little further on she exclaims, “What great smoke is in yonder wood? God grant it be well.”

“It is nothing but making of charcoal in that place,” the husband replies. Presumably he is used to his wife. Certainly these scraps of dialogue give us a very clear idea of that Elizabethan lady.

A phrase-book of 1593, compiled for the use of foreigners in England, shows something of the conditions of travel in that day. “The way is very hard to be kept without a guide.” “Enquire of shepherds and shepherdesses whom you shall meet in travelling.” “Tis a good country that has not a one mile of naughty way.”

In the following century there was published *A Survey of 26 Counties* which gave this very sound advice to its readers:—

“Let him that purposeth to travel, first
Begin where he was born, bred up and nurst,
That’s his own country.”

The people who miss the humanity of history miss more than they know, and without the underlying bony structure of history, which articulates the joints and puts reality into things, it is quite impossible to understand the English countryside.

We have forgotten what that wise historian Augustus Jessop said long ago:—

“History! what is history but the science which teaches us to see the throbbing life of the present in the throbbing life of the past.

“A whole people is rapidly breaking with the past from sheer ignorance that there is any past that is worth knowing.”

It is lack of even the elements of historical knowledge which has produced so much “pretty” writing about country life, so much gush and sentimentality. A knowledge of the country, to those who through no fault of their own are not born and brought up there, is not to be acquired without hard work, without humility and willingness to be instructed by those people who *are* the country, because they and their forbears have been rooted there since “time-everlasting-beyond”. John Aubrey said that when a boy he did ever love to converse with old men as living histories. They are—mostly unconscious—repositories of history, and if these men and women were to be suddenly transplanted back into the sixteenth century, or the fourteenth, or the thirteenth, they would display very little surprise or discomfort, for their roots are still where their forbears’ roots were in those past centuries, in the land. The changes—the terrific and horrifying changes—of our uneasy day are still at the top. Under all the mechanical monsters, there still remains the soil, the fundamental earth. Were it not there, then “chaos is come again”.

24

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we get diaries and journals, as well as letters, written by people who do not belong to what are called the educated classes—but let those classes remember the glorious and vitally true remark quoted by Reginald Hine in his fascinating *Confessions of an Un-Common Attorney*. “‘Well,’ said a fine old rustic, ‘well, I like eddicated people, but the wust on’t is they be so dommed ignorant.’” But the people to whom writing is not an easy task, who spell queerly, yet often express themselves with the same forthrightness with which they would plough a furrow or fell a tree, and we get a vivid impression of direct truth which does not invariably happen with more polished users of the pen. A village Pepys is a valuable person, and it is his earthy and vernacular quality which makes Cobbett such a fund of riches. Sussex has one diarist in Thomas Turner of East Hoathly who has been accepted widely and much appreciated outside his native county, and she has smaller men who have great local value and interest. But the really interesting thing about these people is that the quill pen is but the feather in the cap of their achievements—they were so many

SUSSEX
DIARIES

other things before they even began to be writers. The village of Ditchling had one of these keepers of a “Jernel” in John Burgess, though he states that he was “never taught to whright”—these whistling and redundant letters in his spelling of the word suggest the bitten tongue and hissing breath of the early struggler with the pen. His “Jernel” has received careful study and quotation by Mr. John Sawyer in one of the volumes of the Sussex Archæological Society’s *Collections*. Mr. Sawyer alludes to John Burgess’s many activities at Ditchling, saying that “although he might be described as a currier, he was a fell-monger, wool-dealer, breeches-maker, jacket-maker, stay-maker, glover, harness-maker, rope-maker, grave-digger, gardener, hay-maker, harvester, bookbinder, and appraiser by turns; he helped the carpenter when he came to work for him; assisted the builder in repairing his house; dug a well; brewed beer; sold nuts and ginger-bread at Ditchling Fair; and filled in his spare time with such trifles as ‘caring oats’; ‘work a making a new Hog pound’; ‘making a short lader’ and other ‘od’ jobs”.

What a freedom and fullness in a life like that—surely a man after Cobbett’s own heart, especially as he was imbued with such a passion for freedom that he went to seek it in America in 1794, and declared that he would not exchange the right to do and speak as he liked, “the great source of Human Happiness, no, not for all the riches in Ditchling”.

The inhabitants of that village should be proud to remember that a man so many-sided and capable, so firm in his belief in the right of the human being to freedom of speech and action, once resided there.

But these independent and able men are happily not yet extinct, even in these “directed” days. One and the same man has swept my chimneys, mended my roof, and pruned my roses—all with the utmost efficiency. I daresay he has other activities, but so far I have not had need to call upon them. But it is only the countryman “on his own” who will do these things for you, and do them so reasonably that you almost feel ashamed to pay the bill. Once you apply to “firms” and “specialists” you step within the cage of the commercial tiger.

And so one’s thoughts come back to Cobbett, that great champion of freedom, independence, and each man doing his own job with his own hands. One of Cobbett’s fundamental principles was, as he said, “that the affairs of the nation ought to be so managed, that every sober and industrious and healthy man ought, out of his own wages, to be able to support himself, wife and family in a comfortable and decent manner”.

Sometimes the political folly of human beings drove him to such despair that he was thankful to be able to say “. . . here I am, looking out of the window of a farmhouse upon a green common, inhabited by sensible cows, sheep, and geese”.

But he never failed in sympathy with the poor cottager. “If we suppose the great Creator,” he wrote, “to condescend to survey His works in detail, what object can be so pleasing to Him as that of the labourer, after his return from the toils of a cold winter day, sitting with his wife and children round a cheerful fire, while the wind whistles in the chimney and the rain pelts the roof?”

If Cobbett had never written another line save that, it would be sufficient to make us delight in him—so homely, in a sense so absurd, viewed in the light of a mysterious universe, and yet full of that human and divine love without which we are nothing.

A GREAT
HEART

Cobbett is so practical, so fierce, and as it may seem so material, and yet the thing of which we are most conscious about him is his great heart, backed by an equally great courage. Because of this courage he endured quite a few of the trials of St. Paul.

No one whose privilege it is to live under an English cottage roof should be without a copy of his little book *Cottage Economy*.

But pleasant as it is to linger among the poets and the domesticities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there are things in this present day that still retain a quality of their own and seem worth setting down—though I confess the things that have most appeal to me are those which have some savour of remembrance of times past, perhaps because they are vanishing, and if not recorded may be forgotten.

Even if far less great than he is as poet and novelist, would not the works of Thomas Hardy still be a most precious heritage to English people because of their setting—those scenes of Hardy’s in field and farm, his rural domestic interiors, portrayed with the truth and simplicity of great art. We each of us, as we grow older, are the holders of our tradition. Fifty years will make a tradition, and a hundred history. And each memory is linked to the recollections of an earlier one in the memory of parents, nurses, old servants. It would not take many lives of people round about eighty years old to reach back to the Norman Conquest—the child’s hand linked to the

grandparent's covers a long span. And to live under an old roof, a roof so much older than several generations, increases this feeling.

Not a great many years ago there was living on his estate in East Sussex an old Squire who really belonged to the eighteenth century, or the early part of the nineteenth. He was a complete tyrant, but a beneficent tyrant. He quite genuinely believed that it was ordained by the Almighty that he should rule his tenants and servants body and soul, and that the men should touch their forelocks and the women curtsy whenever they saw him. But because he was a good sportsman, had a very violent temper (considered quite proper in "the gentry") and a warm heart, everybody loved him. What the "old Squire" did and said was talked about with pride and satisfaction in every cottage and farmhouse on his estate. Everybody on this estate was well looked after and contented. If wages were small, as rural wages were at the end of the nineteenth century and the early part of this one, everybody who needed them had coal and blankets and beef, and soup, and brandy and other necessities and comforts when they were ill.

The atmosphere of that time is well conveyed in a book by John Halsham, *Idlehurst: a Journal Kept in the Country*, published just at the end of the nineteenth century, and now unfortunately unobtainable. There is depicted farming as it was at that time (even then degenerate in the eyes of the older country people). We have this picture:

“. . . old Tomsett came down the lane with beer for the men at the reaper, and stopped to talk a spell. He argued that the wheat was looking middlin' good. But O dear! it wasn't worth talking about now! They 'spec' the land to grow it all of itself like—never clean it proper now naun. When I was a boy they'd be mowin' a field a week at a time, cleanin' and burnin' and breakin' it up. An' you never see them turnrice ploughs now—that *was* ploughin'; now they just tetches the top with two 'orses. And these 'ere machines—well, you look at it! When I was a boy, the farmers they *was* farmers then—why, there'd be twenty times as much wheat growed in the parish as there is now. The farmers they allus comed to church o' Sunday in white frocks, and tall hats, and leggin's; and after church they'd all talk in the churchyard, and show their corn and that and afterwards they'd have a good booze at the Greyhound. Sims to me as how the farmin' began to go out just when the machines and all that lot come in; and look at it now!"

SUSSEX
LABOURERS

Another countryman in that book, Avery, speaks about the smocks: "He was complaining of the vanishing of the old 'round frocks.' He hardly knew

where to get one now. 'Won'erful good they was. They'd keep out rain better nor any top-coat; and that warm across the chest again the wind."

"I find in talking with old Avery," said John Halsham, "there is a kind of laid-up sunshine in his nature, a quality impenetrable by winds of fortune, which makes him a shelter for others on bleak days."

These were the kind of Sussex agricultural labourers who dwelt under the old Squire's benevolent, if tyrannical, rule. They all went to the village church on Sundays because Squire would have had something to say about it had they failed to appear—he had no scruple in standing up in church to see who was missing. On "Communion Sunday" there was not a soul in the congregation who would have dared to approach the altar rail before the Squire and his lady, and then the other gentry in proper order of precedence, had first received the bread and wine. Everyone was fully aware of his "proper station", and, strange as it may seem, it resulted not so much in servility, as in a certain dignity.

And the decorous morning service would now and again provide a little joyful variety. The Squire, of course, always read the Lessons in a loud and "tally-ho" kind of voice, and on one occasion, as he finished, he said in the usual formula, "Here endeth the Second Lesson," but adding hastily, "No, damme, it's the First." On another occasion when reading the Lesson he turned over two pages by mistake, and finding it did not make sense, exclaimed, "Where the hell have I got to?"

The farm labourers, the ploughmen, the hedgers, the cowmen, his own gardeners and grooms, would not like him any the less for his little lapses. He belonged, in Cobbett's words, to "the resident native gentry, attached to the soil, known to every farmer and labourer from childhood, frequently mixing with them in their pursuits where all artificial distinctions are lost". Perhaps he was not quite capable of displaying the imagination of the Duke who, overtaking a yeoman farmer walking along the road, pulled up and said, "Cousin, jump into the carriage with me, and let us have a talk together; we have not met for one hundred and eighty years."

But this Sussex Squire, who has only been dead a quarter of a century or so, knew all the country people round about him, their circumstances and their families, and visited them when they were in trouble. Once he went to see a labourer who was laid up in bed with bad bronchitis, and though it was bitter weather found there was no fire in the cottage bedroom. "Tom," said the Squire, "you ought to have a fire in your room this weather." "The bedroom an't got no fireplace, sir." Tom answered, pointing out the obvious

lack. The Squire was shocked, and immediately gave orders to the local builder that all the farm labourers' cottages on his estate without a fireplace upstairs should be provided with one, even if the chimney had to be built right up from the ground. This was promptly done—"old Squire" expected his orders carried out "immediately, if not sooner"—for all the cottages without an upstairs fireplace, and cost him well over £500.

Motor cars were abhorrent to him, and all his guests, whatever the weather, who arrived in them had to descend at the lodge gates and walk on foot up the quarter-mile drive to the Hall. If they complained he told them they should come in the proper fashion behind horses—he wasn't going to have those stinking machines at his doors.

26

Such characters are seldom encountered nowadays—we are all smoothed out and made much more to a pattern. It may be more comfortable not to live among the kind of people who stride about in Shakespeare and Dickens—all of whom are essentially English—but it is certainly less interesting.

UNKNOWN
GRANDPARE
NTS

My Hallam grandparents, who were both dead long before I was born, and only known to me as I grew up by hearsay, were "characters" in that sense. When I was a child I was passionately interested in them, and always begging my mother for tales about them, but any relic and vestige of them had utterly vanished owing to my grandmother's hotheaded folly. The complete dispersal and disappearance of a substantial and well-to-do home was entirely owing to her. And all this happened when my mother was only nine years old, so that she had nothing save vague remembrances of the furnishings and pictures and adornments that surrounded her early years. Sometimes she used to look in the windows of antique furniture shops at a Sheraton chair, a mahogany wine-cooler, an inlaid tea-caddy, and say "I wonder if that was once in my old home?"

I do not even know what my maternal grandfather and grandmother looked like, for though, in the fashion of their day, they both had their portraits painted in oils; those portraits, like all the rest, have vanished. It is even possible that in some sale-room I may actually have looked upon those pictured countenances and not known them—"Portrait of Unknown Lady—Portrait of Unknown Gentleman."

My mother's parents—as a child I never regarded them as my grandparents, but simply as exciting people in a book—were a handsome

couple who had plenty of money to live a leisured life (where it came from I never heard, that was not the interesting part of the story); with the setting and accessories as comfortable as need be wished, there was apparently no need to economise on anything. My grandfather, Michael Hallam, was an officer in the Yeomanry, and every detail of his uniform and equipment was of the most expensive quality; his buttons, instead of being silver-plated, were of solid silver—a detail that impressed my childish imagination; I used to see them as large as hen’s eggs! He was also a keen rider to hounds and had a couple of good hunters. The only thing that survived out of the family wreckage, the only thing my mother possessed that had belonged to him, was his gold half-hunter watch. His wife was just as particular as to the quality of all she wore and used. The trouble was that both these people had extremely violent and uncontrolled tempers. My grandfather, just because something had upset him, twice walked straight out of the house and went round the world. And this, it must be remembered, was in the days of sailing ships, so it was no small adventure. At least his temper would have time to cool off in those long slow days at sea. Then he died as a comparatively young man—how and why I do not remember hearing—and left a widow not much over forty, good-looking and well-dowered. There were two daughters of this marriage, the only children, my mother and her sister, who was actually twenty years older than she was, and when my mother was born was already married and had a child. So my infant mother was born an aunt, a rather absurd situation. I have never heard of so big a gap in a family, with no children in between who had died or been still-born.

The tale of my grandmother follows very much on the lines of one of Mrs. Henry Wood’s novels—curious how like life is to fiction sometimes! The widow was not left long to pine in solitude—the attractive villain soon appeared upon the scene, a man a good deal younger than she was, and with a good name to offer, as well as good manners. He had, apparently, not much difficulty in persuading her to marry him. All the old family friends tried to prevent her from making such a foolish alliance, but, as ever, she was headstrong. The family solicitor then tried to induce her (for there was no Married Women’s Property Act in those days) to tie up some of her money for the benefit of her daughters, but she would not listen to any advice. In the true dramatic tradition she exclaimed, “If I did not trust the man I am going to marry, I would not marry him!” I always loved that bit when my mother told me the tale. So she married him, and in two years he had run through her property—the gold hunter watch was the sole thing remaining to my mother—and my proud and foolish grandmother died of a broken heart, still a

HOUSEHOLD
TREASURES

comparatively young woman. What happened afterwards my mother never told me, and I, feeling the curtain had been rung down, never enquired. It was all quite impersonal to me, though exciting. Had I ever seen the portraits of these maternal grandparents it would have come closer. All I possess is the gold watch, and a funny little daguerrotype in a padded morocco case of my mother when nine years old, attired in stiff crinoline skirts of dark striped silk, her hair in orderly ringlets, her expression fierce, looking about forty.

27

I cannot feel any personal sense of loss about grandparents who were dead so long before I was born, but I do feel a sense of loss for the household things I might in the course of time have inherited from them in different circumstances. The household possessions of grandparents are worth having—especially when they are pushed back almost another generation by the late birth of the child who was my mother. The patina of the past lies upon such things, whereas the belongings of one's aunt or one's cousin (unless inherited) have no grace of that kind. Fashions in furniture are a bad thing. We look now with horror on the contorted mud-coloured pottery, the gesso-work, the furniture with cut-out hearts for decoration, the pewter clocks trimmed with lumps of turquoise-matrix, of the Art Nouveau period. It is equally difficult to imagine anyone inheriting with gratitude in years to come, the tubular steel chairs and glass operation-tables of an already slightly demodé fashion. Once you step back past the Crystal Palace period of the Great Exhibition which was to make all things new, you arrive at an apparently Elysian time when everything that was made for daily life, from a house to an iron kitchen candlestick, was seemly and beautiful. If one's taste is not "modern," it is curious to notice how everything one buys to adorn the home is either an original, or a copy, if the original is too expensive, of something that was made before 1851. It is true there has been a revival of taste for "Victoriana", for the what-nots, the little curly cane-seated chairs, the hanging shelves, the round rosewood tables, and so on—but that is because certain clever people who must be original at all costs, think it "amusing", not because they think it beautiful. It is not at all amusing to dust this Victorian furniture and ornaments. There was at least the sense of saving work in stripping a room of everything but furniture of stainless steel and glass, and perhaps one quite incomprehensible picture, which might be a tank in a sandstorm or a tortoiseshell cat, according to your mood.

Morris's advice still stands: "Have nothing in your house which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful." And to that one may add a feminine test of beauty—Is the object worth dusting every day just for the pleasure of looking at it? If so it is beautiful, at least to you. Beauty is, of course, a relative term—a pair of those ridiculous cottage china dogs, black and white, of a breed remotely resembling a spaniel, with staring eyes, and gilded chains hanging from their collars and looped across their fronts, sit upon my chimney shelf. Impossible to call them beautiful, yet I never tire of seeing them there, partly because they are so in keeping with their surroundings; partly because they are not fakes, but the genuine thing, their history is known for the past ninety years. I wash them carefully at intervals in soapsuds, though this simple business is complicated by the fact that each dog has a small, mysterious hole communicating with its hollow interior—the water, in the course of washing gets in and is extremely difficult to get out, owing to the many curves and recesses of the canine bodies. I drain them circumspectly and restore them to the high shelf; nevertheless, several hours later I may be surprised by a splash of water—the dogs are still dripping, though their blank and haughty stare as you look them reproachfully in the eye will certainly deny it.

PIGEONS
AND CHINA

Many kinds of beautiful and costly china are quite out of place in a cottage setting, which is no cause of regret to me, for I much prefer the simpler kinds of ware. For ordinary household use jugs and bowls and dishes of that old-fashioned cottage pottery, light brown, banded in white, on which are sea-weedy looking patterns in blue, is extremely pleasing—one does not get tired of it. For decorative beauty silver and copper lustre ware is very hard to beat. Certain kinds of cottage flowers such as polyanthus, deep blue forget-me-not, grape hyacinth, marigold and nasturtium and pinks, never look so well as when arranged in copper lustre jugs and bowls. The rich glowing tones of the lustre, sometimes adorned with painted flowers, but more often with bands of deep blue and embossed decoration, is enchanting. It looks lovely with spring flowers, and cosy as it reflects and deepens the firelight of winter.

I once had a nice little cottage collection of copper lustre, the fruit of years of hunting in the humbler antique shops. It was arranged on a set of corner shelves in the dining-room, which had a door opening into the garden. I also had pigeons, and one day when the garden door was open, the pigeons came in and arranged themselves decoratively on the display of lustre. All might have been well, had not the first person to enter the room and see the pigeons perched so precariously among the china, not waved

wild arms and cried “Shoo” loudly. The pigeons naturally fled, and most of the lustre crashed to the floor. Only three pieces survived intact, and with the curious fatality which attends these affairs, they were the three pieces I could have best spared. There was a copper lustre bowl, of a deep and brilliant glaze, scattered over both inside and outside with bright blue flowers with a white centre that I specially cherished, and that was in the smallest fragments of all.

But in spite of that sharp lesson I still do not like china behind glass, any more than I like books shut in as though to be seen and not read.

Ornaments made of iron do at least give one a sense of security. I have a nice Sussex iron fireback, iron fire dogs, and an iron chimney hanger with a ratchet for adjustment—all of the old common cottage fireside use. But more than that, I have some rather curious and pleasing iron ornaments which are, I believe, about a hundred years old, and were made to adorn cottage hearths. They are figures of dogs, retrievers and greyhounds, a lion, a fat and curly-wooled sheep, a sheaf of corn, and a larger figure of a ploughman with his horse and plough. Also, more delicately made, are three classical female figures bearing flowers and fruit. All these figures are flat at the back, made to stand close to a wall. They look best against a whitewashed, unplastered brick wall. They give one rather the feeling that the old Sussex ironfounders, when they had done their bigger jobs, like cannon to beat the Armada with and railings for St. Paul’s Cathedral, having a bit of iron over, amused themselves with making these somewhat substantial toys.

So many country things were made in wood—I do not mean the big pieces of furniture such as a refectory table or a Court-cupboard, but small things like a wooden platter, a wooden cup, a tea-caddy, or a corn-scoop. I have one just made out of one solid piece of wood, handle and all, by some rural craftsman. It is plain and simple, but in the grace of its lines, its balance, and fitness for purpose, could not have been better made had Thomas Chippendale been its creator. Simple as it is, it is obvious in the surety of its lines that inherited skill has gone to its making. A pair of wooden bellows is another tree-made object that is not only decorative but useful by the fireside. There are few occupations more soothing than the slow bellowing of a Down fire—the sudden flames running in and out of the ash and about the logs like little salamanders.

WINTER
FIRESIDE

In a book that was written by the Reverend Avis Willmott, who was a friend of Miss Mitford’s, called *Summer Time in the Country*, he has a

pleasant account of the joys of the winter fireside, as opposed to that depressing thing a fireless hearth on a cold, wet summer evening:—

“A rainy day is a winter-luxury,” he says. “A cold, wet, breezy, blowing night in December, gates swinging, trees crashing, storm howling—that is enjoyable—it is the weather to finish *Christabel* in. How full of heat, light, and comfort everything is within doors! The flickering fire, beaten into a blaze, the bubbling urn, the rustled book, and all the scenery of a thoughtful fireside, rise to the memory. Cowper describes the hour which he delighted to lose in this waking dream, when he had drawn the chair up to the fender, and fastened the shutter that still rattled. . . a wet winter evening is a very enjoyable characteristic of the season. The wood-ashes are aids to reflection. But a rainy day in summer is altogether different; it is the Faërys dancing-hall with the lights extinguished. A paper-network flutters where the fire ought to be; a red cinder, for the parish-clerk to disappear in would be worth its weight in silver. The eye wanders up and down, and finds no rest; the room itself wears a heavy, disconsolate expression; the tables and chairs are miserable; the dozing fly mopes on the damp glass; and the flowers in the window look like mourners, just returned wet through from the funeral of flora.”

All who have a fire on the hearth will respond to the admirable truth of that description. The days when every house is centrally heated, and the open fire no longer exists, will certainly be very depressing. People may talk as much as they like of the dirt and extravagance of the open fire, but the human spirit needs something more for its sustenance than hygiene.

The distemper and dark beams of the cottage need colour, as well as firelight, to show at their best. One of the ways the cottager of the past, with no money for decorative effects, achieved colour was by means of patchwork—which, also, of course, was an economy in the using up of small scraps of material. Old patchwork is marvellously attractive, as pleasing as a garden of flowers. It is commonly made of pieces of old chintz and cotton, arranged generally with amazing skill and an eye for colour. More rarely the patchwork is of silk—but on the whole silk patchwork is not so attractive as cotton patchwork, there is a more “moneyed” air about it which takes away from its cottage charm. I have a large quilt made entirely of woollen pieces, which is rather unusual, I think, and though it is very simply made, with no elaborate patterning, being just squares two inches each way, its effect is very pleasing, and its warmth considerable.

Another form of woollen decoration I cherish is a large cross-stitch picture done in coloured wools—early Victorian, very beautifully worked, of

a mamma dressed in a spreading crinoline, with ringlets of raven black, reading the Bible to an obviously pious little girl, also crinolined, with long white drawers showing beneath. They are both seated in a flower garden with lots of hollyhocks. There is an air of peace and virtue about it that is slightly overpowering. The stitching is close and even though it was the work of an old countrywoman. It is of a later period than many of the samplers, but it has a good deal of their atmosphere.

The most attractive kind of table in a cottage is the oak gate-leg, and I am proud of the one I possess—it is large and generous in size, yet with the kindness of its design, can be made quite narrow and pushed against a wall. A lot of oak has gone to its making, its weight is surprising, and the grain and colour of the wood is beautiful. It was the gift of an old friend, and when I accompanied him to the antique gallery where it was displayed to see if it was what I really liked (not much doubt of that!) the very ducal shopman said to me, “May I ask, Madam, if you keep a manservant?” I found it difficult to retain a suitable gravity when I answered this searching question in the negative. His face fell, as he looked at the table, with its magnificent and gleaming surface. “We find,” he said pontifically, “that women servants have not the strength to polish large pieces of furniture satisfactorily.” Sure enough, as I have discovered when I have tried my own hand on this table. In the days when I had a proper garden and a gardener, on wet and un-gardening days I often turned his strong arm on to my table, to its obvious benefit.

THE GATE-
LEG TABLE

Another good type of table is the refectory, perfect for a long narrow room. Most of them are too big for a cottage, so the one I have was made for me, to my own measurements. Which of course means that it is not an antique, but it is made after an ancient model, and the oak is over three hundred years old, having come out of an old house in Lewes High Street which was pulled down some years ago. I saw the table in all the stages of its making, and it is pegged and wedged together with oak; there is not a nail in it.

A good many years ago I went to a place at Ipswich where antique furniture was copied—not a fake business, but quite openly. Perhaps a wealthy man had one Chippendale cabinet and two recesses to fill, or one Hepplewhite dining chair was missing from a set. The work was marvellous, and as full of craftsmanship and skill as anything done in the best eighteenth century workshops. The only trouble was that when the copy was completed

it was difficult to tell it from the original. Secret marks had to be put on for identification.

My clocks are all old, and one in full going order, yet is temperamental. It decides, at its own good pleasure, to have a rest, and no coaxing will induce it to continue telling the time. At first I naturally thought a spring was broken, till I found out, idly turning the hands round, being tired of seeing them stationary at the same hour, that the clock had taken its rest and was ready to work again. It goes on for months, and then stops, and after a week or a fortnight, if the hands are turned round through the circle of the twelve hours, will start going again. It has no connection with being wound up; stopping is just as likely to happen when the clock has recently been wound up.

But I am not entirely dependent on this or my other clocks, for I have a much older time-teller—an hour-glass, so elegant in shape, and so fascinating to watch as the sand slips through like water. It once was in use in a little Sussex village church, to time the sermon. How many eyes have gazed at it, wondering when it was going to bring “Passon’s” discourse to an end—the housewife anxious about her Sunday joint, the children longing to get out into the sunshine, or the snow, that was going to waste outside, the labourer feeling that the dryness of the sermon needed the amelioration of a mug of home-brewed.

I find it satisfying to have these old things under my cottage roof. Nevertheless, most of them I have bought, or acquired by other forms of bribery. I cannot but think regretfully at times of the old and lovely possessions which I should normally have inherited from my unhappily headstrong grandmother.

Three things are necessary to make a room alive: the ticking and chiming of a clock, the warmth and movement of a fire, the colour and shapes of flowers. There are people who cannot bear cut flowers in a room—and one of them, well known to me, was a most successful gardener, who grew lovely blooms of all kinds, but could not endure to have them indoors; flowers, in her opinion, should always be seen growing. But most people delight in flowers in the house, as I do myself. A room without flowers seems sadly lacking in grace. But cut flowers are often much ill-used, crammed into ugly and over-decorated receptacles, mixed with foliage which has no relation to their own, and spotted all over a room in tiny, tippy vases which only hold a thimbleful

FLORAL
DECORATIO
N

of water. But these mistakes are not made so often as they used to be, owing largely to the teachings of Constance Spry and Gertrude Jekyll. Constance Spry is a little too rich for the cottage, her arrangements are generally too large and elaborate, as are the marble and alabaster containers she uses so skilfully. Clever and imaginative as she is I sometimes feel that she is inclined to make too much of the settings and objects in which she places her flowers. A simpler handling is, on the whole, kinder to them—flowers are so lovely they only need to be shown, they do not need showing off. But there is much to be learned, even when it has to be modified to suit humbler surroundings, from her arrangements, and in her book *Flower Decoration* she has these very sound bits of advice. Do not put, she says, “flowers with coarse stems or such as discolour the water into transparent vases. Nor do I think transparent vases are good for an arrangement with too many stems—one gets a confined effect”. Then, “The placing of vases when they are filled is not always an easy matter. Generally speaking, flowers look best with a solid background, and not with the light behind them. There are some exceptions to this—willow weed and bluebells, for instance, look best with the light shining through them.”

One essential of flower arrangement, to my thinking, is that they should look comfortable in their jars and glasses, and as if they had enough water to drink. That is one of the reasons why I dislike flowers arranged in baskets and painted garden trugs, for these are things that do not hold water. Of course one knows that a water-container is concealed in them, but that makes the whole thing a kind of sham.

People who have to buy all their flowers are unfortunate, not only in that their flowers will cost them a great deal of money, but because they can never have their flowers in bud. Whoever saw a bunch of daffodils in tight, almost green, bud in a florist’s shop? Yet every single bloom will come out in water, so that the purchaser could have the joy of watching the unfolding flowers and also keeping them so much longer. But the florist always sells those ugly big trumpet blooms, so fully open that they are only a day or two removed from that transparent granular look in the petals which heralds dissolution. The same with roses, always fully blown, never in their lovely and much more colourful bud. This is true of most other florist’s flowers. But those who are fortunate to live in the country can pick their own flowers at their most fortunate and lasting moment.

Having done this, and gathered the lovely wildings from the fields and hedges at their own special times and seasons, the next thing is to arrange them in the right way and in the

JARS FOR
FLOWERS

right combinations. As a guide—and she was also a pioneer in this matter—there is nobody to equal Gertrude Jekyll. Many years ago, in 1907, she wrote a book called *Flower Decoration in the Home*, which was published by “Country Life”, and still, in my opinion, remains the best of all the many books that have been published since on the subject. It is simple and straightforward, and completely without extravagance. She regards flowers for their own sakes, and not as a background to an ornate life. At the time she wrote this book flower-holders and receptacles were still so ugly and unsuitable, from the Victorian aftermath, that Miss Jekyll was driven to design some flower-glasses herself, which were made to her direction and called Munstead glass. “Formerly,” she says in this book, “it was difficult to get useful glasses for holding cut flowers. They were nearly always of a trumpet shape, widest at the lip and tapering down to a point just where it is most desirable to have a large quantity of water. . . . It was so evident that flower-glasses of useful shape and good capacity were wanted that I drew some shapes and had them made in a non-expensive quality of glass.”

Several of the illustrations in her *Flower Decoration* show how satisfactory are the shapes of her flower-glasses, how adaptable to different heights and kinds of flowers. She also was among the first to realise how attractive were various homely household things as flower-holders, such as the ordinary greyish ginger-jar, still wearing its wicker jacket, pewter mugs, and such-like simple things. Perhaps because of their link of nationality, pæonies never look so well as in a big Chinese ginger-jar—the solid curves of the jar balance the heavy buds and architectural leaves of the flowers.

I find that the most agreeable and adaptable containers for all sorts and kinds of flowers are off-white pottery—a jar of good shape, but ugly colour may be painted off-white—the black, slightly iridescent black, Sussex Dikker ware, glass, and brass or copper. I have a heavy old brass half-pint pot which is perfect for many sorts of flowers, and a little ancient squat copper saucepan, battered and mellowed with many rubbings, which holds short-stemmed coloured flowers delightfully—violas in all shades and the richer polyanthus look particularly well in it. Then a big copper jug is admirable for winter foliage arrangements, giving the colour which foliage lacks, and, of course, responding with harmony to beech leaves, and with contrast to a big clump of honesty, with or without cape-gooseberries. One of the things to remember in arranging large masses of foliage is to get variety in shape—yew by itself is sombre because of monotony, as well as the dark green, but yew combined with bunches of bay and aucuba is most decorative. Yew in spring, with gold-green feathers of new growth hung on each spray, is lovely. Laurestinus is a great winter help, and, rather oddly,

looks well with a few early daffodils. Catkins—and they come almost before winter has begun!—and palm and sprigs of young larch, are all lasting and enchanting. Many people think that windflowers are not worth picking, saying they droop in water. I have never found this so. Many people, also, think bluebells ugly in the house—this entirely depends on the shape and colour of the jar in which they are put. Like cut hyacinths they are a little difficult to arrange, but they last a long time if picked in the budding stage. The fragile little early white violet which grows so thickly on hedge banks before the leaves come, also lasts a long time in water, though it does not look as if it would, and keeps its delicate, delicious fragrance. Most of the varieties of wild orchis last well in water, but they ought not to be plucked, or at the most only by ones and twos. They should be admired where they grow, and the fewer people know where that is the better. It is very difficult for most of us to keep our hands from picking and stealing when we see wild flowers growing in abundance—it is such largesse, it is “something for nothing,” of which life does not give us overmuch. But to take more than a careful little means eventually the end of the wild flowers which are such a source of delight.

29

It surprises me to find how many birds there are right in the middle of the village. When I left my garden on the outskirts of the village, to live in the very middle of it, where I am surrounded by old houses and roofs, I thought regretfully that I should have little bird company save the universal sparrow. But I am glad to say I was wrong. The cheerful competent robin quickly made his appearance in my little walled garden, and looked me over with his black eye, much with the air of deciding whether he thought I was a suitable inhabitant of his long established territory. He kindly decided I might stay, so long as I paid tribute in the shape of winter crumbs and a little digging to turn up the worms now and then.

WAYS OF
BIRDS

The thick matted ivy that climbs up an old house-wall which margins my garden, I soon found was a favourite retreat of the thrushes, who sit there on a high brick ledge overhung by ivy, for long spells, looking rather like replete old gentlemen after a good dinner. Indeed, the dinner often consists of the black ivy berries, and it is rather amusing to watch a thrush—who is heavy, as birds go—trying to balance on the yielding ivy twigs while he snatches fiercely at the berries, which he gobbles in a great hurry, feeling the precariousness of his perch.

The high boughs of my neighbour's tall old pear tree are a favourite resort of the glossy and iridescent young starlings, who sit there and shriek their joy in a highly satisfactory world. They are apparently equally pleased with a perch on a cottage chimney—they will sit and sing on the actual edge of the chimney with the smoke coming up from a fire below. They do not seem to mind the smoke and the warmth in the least.

Blackbirds, too, sing beautifully from any vantage point in the garden, in spite of the closeness of the cottage. The enclosing roofs seem to hold and echo their lovely song.

Bullfinches are abundant. They hop about in the garden, and on the boughs, and come eagerly to any feast that is spread, with the pretty flush of their red and white and brown feathers. They will also peck about right in the High Street, barely shifting for the passers-by, and darting into the road in the wake of a roaring lorry to pick up an attractive morsel. The bullfinch is a fearless and friendly bird.

But the most surprising thing to me was to discover that house-martins would build their mud nests on houses which front all the traffic that goes through the village. They build, rear and feed their young, dart and swirl across the street, never alighting, but sweeping close to the ground and then up again in lovely curves. And one of the most pleasant village sights is to see them sitting in enchanting rows on the telegraph wires discussing their coming autumn travels.

A little higher up the village street, near the field where the Fair and the Produce Shows are held, is a tall clump of elms—that tree which always seems such an essential part of any English village scene. The rooks have taken possession of these elms, and there, with much argument and disagreement they build their clumsy and uncomfortable nests. They are untidy builders, and drop as many sticks as they use—though how they do it at all, and manage to make those cradles, swaying in the windy air, hold the rook babies at all, is a great mystery. But no village is complete without its rooks, and I like this little verse written by F. S. Boas:—

“ ‘Caw, Caw,’ says every rook,
To the dreamer his dreams, to the scholar his book.
‘Caw, Caw, but the things for me
Are the starry sky and the windy tree.’ ”

One of my sharp childish recollections is being in a little Sussex wood when a couple of young farmers arrived there, and taking no notice of me, began shooting the rooks. The poor things flapped out of the nests. I rushed

up to one of the men and punched him with my fists as hard as I could, shouting, “How dare you kill those rooks?” “Ain’t your rooks, are they?” he answered good-temperedly, “You better get out of here or you’ll be getting hurt.”

I was hurt, badly. I ran away, crying, feeling as if the end of the world had suddenly come, and wishing I was big enough to hurt those men and save those rooks.

In the church tower here there are white owls—so that even in the very middle of the village there is quite a nice little company of birds—though we do not go to quite the lengths of my dear Mrs. Henry Wood, who in one of her novels—I think it is *Within the Maze*—described the nightingale and the lark singing together in the same tree!

OBSTINATE
ANIMALS

30

Though my cottage is in the middle of a village, it does not take a walk of five minutes to be among fields and rural operations, and in full sight of the sweep of the South Downs. I can easily take the advice of Mistress Anne Killigrew:

“Arise, my Dove, from midst of Pots arise,
Thy sully’d habitation leave,
To dust no longer cleave,
Unworthy they of Heaven that will not view the skies.”

I may resent the aspersion on my habitation, but the advice is sound and I often take it.

One day I spent some time leaning over a gate and watching an everyday sight in the country—a farm man, single-handed, driving ten cows out of a large field through a narrow gateway. To those who have no intimate knowledge of the nature of cows this may seem a simple matter.

But there are several things to be said about cows. Though generally placid, they can be, if they choose, both obstinate and wild. A farmer once said to me that an angry cow was far more to be feared than a bull—on the principle, I suppose, of “the female of the species is deadlier than the male.” Also cows are remarkably heavy, as anyone who has tried to pull or push one knows. Even a calf can pull a man off his feet if he is leading it by a headstall and the calf suddenly decides to go in another direction.

On this particular morning it was George's job to drive those cows from the field they were in, along the lane, to another field half a mile further on. He arrived in shirt sleeves on a battered bicycle, leaned it against the hedge, propped open the gate and entered the field, making encouraging noises. "Coom up, Sally; coom up, Daisy." I gathered that these were the senior matrons, whose example would influence the others. Sally and Daisy raised their heads and looked at him with complete indifference—it was not milking time. Several of the other cows decided this was a good moment to lie down and have a rest; they proceeded to do so in the deliberate, angular, and awkward manner of cows, who always look singularly ill-jointed in the process of lying down and getting up. George became a little more emphatic in his remarks, and waved his arms.

One of the two horses in the field then got nervous, thinking George wanted to catch him for work—he kicked up his heels and started to career all round about. The cows bunched together, watching this circus performance, which gave George a chance to round them up a little nearer to the gate. Then one cow thought she would like a drink and ambled off towards the pond in a far corner of the field, whereupon several of her companions decided this was a good idea, and started to follow. George managed to head them off by much running and waving of his energetic arms.

By this time one cow had discovered the open gate and blundered through it, while most of the others stood debating in their slow minds whether this was an example to be followed. Suddenly they all began to bundle through the gateway, bumping and pushing with clumsy urgency. But one perverse animal detached herself from the herd and started at an ungainly canter for a distant goal. George tore after her—he'd taken a lot of exercise in the last ten minutes—steered her gatewards with a hearty slap on her rump, got her through, closed and fastened the gate, leaped on his bicycle, and pedalled after the straggle of cows moving uncertainly down the lane. I could only hope George had someone to help him get those cows into the other field, but I do not expect he had. It was just one of the minor jobs in his day's work.

I suppose cows and horses have no objections to eating after each other, or they would not be put in the same field. Anyway cows leave something for horses to eat, as horses eat closer than cows, for the cow presses her thick tongue under each mouthful before she tears it off, but a horse bites right down to the ground.

"GOOD-BYE,
COWS!"

In one of his books A. G. Street says, “most farmers hate cows. To them the dairy cow is a lowly, offensive taskmistress, who produces milk and mess on seven days in every week. None serves her willingly, but only when circumstances insist.”

He would agree with a merry Land Girl who jumped on the country bus to go for a week-end holiday. As we passed the farm where she was working she waved her hand to the cows in the field and cried, “Good-bye, cows! I hope you’ll all be dead when I get back!”

Cows are definitely impervious to outside suggestion—or they are placidly aware of their own strength. On a certain Common not far from here—which boasts of a Reeve, a title that takes one pleasantly back to the Middle Ages—where the commoners’ cows are turned out every summer, there is only one patch of shade, lying on the main road that crosses the Common. Here the cows congregate on hot days, lying down and chewing the cud. As to traffic—well, let it climb over their angular backs, they do not care. The motorist, the two-hourly country ’bus, have to pull up, and gently edge their bonnets into the cows, literally pushing them out of the way. The minute the ’bus or car has passed, the cows lie down again with a faintly disgusted air. They no doubt justly claim that cows came before cars.

31

A good many years ago “The Studio” published an admirable reproduction of a *Treatise on Landscape Painting and Effect in Water Colour*, by David Cox. This is a treasure to the lover of old and simple country things, and shows what a true artist’s hand and eye can make of the humblest objects. The first page illustration gives three sepia studies—the first a kitchen bowl and four eggs; the second a stone harvester’s jug and a wicker-basket with a cloth over it; the third a wooden rake leaning against an oak harvester’s barrel, with a couple of foxglove plants. Nothing could be simpler than these little drawings, they are without colour, yet the glow and the scent of summer seem caught in the two outdoor ones, and the cool comfort of the farm dairy in the other.

Cox himself, giving his “General Observations on Landscape Painting” in this *Treatise*, says—

“. . . a cottage or a village scene requires a soft and simple admixture of tones, calculated to produce pleasure without astonishment; awakening all the delightful sensations of the bosom, without trenching on the nobler provinces of feeling. On the contrary, the structures of greatness and

antiquity should be marked by a character of awful sublimity, suited to the dignity of the subject, indenting on the mind a reverential and permanent impression, and giving at once a corresponding and unequivocal grandeur to the pictures. In the language of the pencil, as well as of the pen, sublime ideas are expressed by lofty and obscure images; such as in pictures, objects of fine majestic forms, lofty towers, mountains, lakes margined with stately trees, and clouds rolling their shadowy forms in broad masses over the scene. Much depends upon the classification of the objects, which should wear a magnificent uniformity; and much on the colouring, the tones of which should be deep and impressive.”

This has the true eighteenth century touch about it—Cowper and Collins and Jane Austen might have written it. There is reason and sense in it, though there is also something which makes us smile a little. But there is a sound basis about it—it is like contrapuntal structure in music within whose confines Bach was prepared to achieve his immortality. Sublimity was not, of course, David Cox’s aim or natural atmosphere, as it so easily was Bach’s, but within his own medium as perfect, he also, like Bach, was content to draw his little “Two-Part Inventions.” This *Treatise* is full of them. Page after page of studies—of a pigeon-cote; an old square pump in a cobbled yard, with some very humble washing hanging beside it; bridges, rough country bridges; an old moss-grown watermill; sensitive drawings of trees. But it is when he comes to cottages, humble cottages that look as though they had grown out of the earth on which they stand, that he is at his most enchanting. One knows that here are the cottages in which he would feel at home. Pages of these kind of drawings are followed by wash drawings, in monochrome, many of which look as if they are just about to burst into colour, the church and the haystack, for instance; the morning view of Windsor Castle; or the “lane at Edgbaston, near Birmingham”, which displays one solitary small cottage, with the smoke from its chimney ascending against the trees.

AN ENGLISH
PAINTER

There is another wash drawing called “View in Battersea Marsh”, which gives a similar shock of surprise to a modern eye—pollard willows hanging over water, rushes, a quiet cow or two, against a sunset sky, not even one cottage to be seen. Another lovely drawing—and, happily, in this case, unaltered—is Warwick Castle at twilight.

But of course to get the full quality of David Cox, colour is necessary, and there are a number of his water-colours reproduced in this book. Compared with the monochromes it is like Bach using a chamber orchestra, strings and woodwind, instead of the clavichord. Every one of these little

water-colours gives pleasure and calls for comment. But I will only pick out three—a cornfield in process of being reaped, a sort of concentrated essence of rural England, the England that bore bread; a picture called “Wind” composed of the simplest elements, an old wooden post-mill, a cottage, partly hidden by a dip in the ground, an old man with a cart drawn by a white horse, an old red-cloaked woman with a flock of white geese, and a sky, a soft blowy sky, where the clouds seem to move as you look at them. The third picture is so strange it might almost have been painted by William Blake, it is called “Rainbow Effect, Westminster Abbey from Battersea Marsh”. There is a pale rainbow arching across the picture against a dove-grey sky, against which far away across the marsh the Abbey rises like a white ghost. There is no sign of London, only the “sweet Thames” with a barge and some white-sailed little boats like butterflies floating on the tide. It is the Abbey of Westminster as Edward the Confessor might have seen it as it was to be in a dying vision.

David Cox was only thirty when he published the first part of this *Treatise*, with all its “Examples in Outline, Effect, and Colouring.” He published it at the request of the pupils by whom he earned his living as an artist. He could not live on the sale of his pictures; he only once in his life, it is said, received the sum of £100 for a picture. For a while this beautiful English water-colourist was appointed drawing-master to the Military Academy at Farnham, which does not suggest a very happy setting for his gifts. But he did not stay long in this post, for he knew what he wanted to do, which was to paint English landscape. He retired for many years to Hereford. Money was never an important object with him—so long as he had a pittance on which to live and the opportunity to paint, that was all he asked of existence. He had no advantages of birth and education; his parents were humble people, and he began to earn his living as a scene-painter. Both in his circumstances—though his were not quite so impoverished—and in his exquisite and observing eye, he had a good deal in common with John Clare, called the “peasant poet,” who in words instead of pigments was such a perfect English landscape painter.

If all England, in the time that is coming, is given over to the “planners,” and is swamped with factories, aerodromes, motor roads, and municipal parks (of all places the most dreary), there will be nothing left to show what England once was like save the pictures of the landscape painters, and the works of

the rural poets. Even poetry not of the highest class will then be full of nostalgic enchantment, like John Dyer's:—

“I am resolved, this charming day,
In the open field to stray;
And have no roof above my head
But that whereon the gods do tread.
Before the yellow barn I see
A beautiful variety,
Of strutting cocks, advancing stout,
And flirting empty chaff about,
Hens, ducks, and geese, and all their brood,
And turkeys gobbling for their food;
While rustics thrash the wealthy floor,
And tempt them all to crowd the door.”

But a much better rural poet than Dyer is William Barnes. A number of his Dorset dialect poems are well known, as they have been included in classic anthologies, but many people are still frightened of dialect—and indeed, it has so sadly died out in the English counties that it is almost as strange to the majority of people as the language of Langland and Chaucer, and this means that not only our speech, but our minds, are the poorer, for not only is history wrapped up in dialect, the very sources and roots of our speech, but it is full of racy sayings sprung from long inherited observation and experience.

Folk tales, too, are full of golden ore—they tell a good tale, they illustrate a moral with a delightful natural richness, and sometimes they leave behind an actual visible relic, as does the tale of the Pedlar of Swaffham, which is a peculiarly satisfactory story. It is to be found in Joseph Jacobs' *English Fairy Tales*, but the full history of the tale is not contained in that volume and its successor, for Jacobs collected the stories primarily for English children, not for the folk-lorist and the student of dialects, though he said: “Wherever there is community of language, tales can spread, and it is more likely that tales should be preserved in those parts where English is spoken with most of dialect.”

The Pedlar was a real person. He lived in the reign of Henry VII, and his name was John Chapman, he lived at Swaffham in Norfolk, and made his living as a tinker or a pedlar—perhaps he combined the two trades. His portrait is carved on one of the bench ends in Swaffham Church, and his dog too. The Pedlar wears the dress of his time, with a scarf tied round his head and a floppy felt hat on the top of it, while his pack is strapped on his back.

Now this Pedlar, this real Norfolk countryman, John Chapman, had a dream that repeated itself three nights running. He dreamed that if he went to London Bridge something fortunate would happen to him. London Bridge was well over a hundred miles from Swaffham, and he had no means of getting there save on foot, but the very nature of a pedlar's calling accustoms him to walking, so John Chapman, with his pack on his back and his dog for protection and company, set off for London Bridge, paying for food and rough lodging on the way by selling his wares. In due time he reached the famous bridge over the Thames, and no doubt was impressed by its size and the houses and booths that lined it on both sides. He walked up and down the bridge all day, waiting for the piece of good fortune promised by his thrice-repeated dream. This pacing back and forth aroused the curiosity of one of the shopkeepers on the bridge, and towards the evening he asked the Pedlar what he was waiting for. So Chapman told of his dream. The Shopman laughed at him and called him a simple fellow. "Why," quoth he, "there's nothing in dreams. I've had a dream that if I went to a place called Swaffham in Norfolk I would meet with a pedlar who had a little plot with an apple tree in it, and under that apple tree a pot of gold was buried. Who'd take any notice of such folly?"

But the Pedlar did, for in his little bit of ground there was an apple tree. He hastened back as fast as he could to Swaffham, and dug under his little tree, and there found a pewter tankard full of gold coins. He told nobody, very wisely, and stowed the coins safely away, but put the tankard for sale in his little shop. There was a Latin inscription on the tankard which Chapman naturally could not read, but one day a learned man came in who translated it as meaning, "Under me is another twice as big."

DORSET
POET

The Pedlar took the hint, and digging deeper under his golden apple tree he found a still larger tankard full of coins. He again kept his own counsel about all this wealth. But when the time came that his parish church of Swaffham was in need of repair, the Pedlar gave what was in those days the very large sum of £200 to rebuild the north aisle. And that is why he and his dog are carved on the bench ends, and also in the market-place of Swaffham.

But in recalling this folk story which has been familiar to me from my childhood, for the Jacobs volume was a much-read book—the favourite tale of all was "Tom Tit Tot"—I have wandered away from William Barnes and his poetry, though as he belonged to that rural tradition he was akin to such a

folk tale. It is unfortunate that any form of dialect is such a closed book to many people that they will not even attempt to read it, though any English dialect, whether it is Yorkshire or Northumbria, or Somerset or Essex, yields very quickly to a little perseverance. And it is a pity to miss poems so exquisite and rural as those of William Barnes for fear of a little Dorsetshire speech—indeed, such an idea might even cut one off from the rural humours of Hardy's novels. But fortunately William Barnes did not confine his poetic muse to dialect. He wrote a number of poems in ordinary English, which were published in 1868 as *Poems of Rural Life in Common English*, of which he said modestly:—

“As I think that some people beyond the bounds of Wessex, would allow me the pleasure of believing that they have deemed the matter of my homely poems in our Dorset mother-speech to be worthy of their reading, I have written a few of a like kind in common English; not, however, without a misgiving that what I have done for a wider range of readers, may win the good will of fewer.”

This seems to have happened, for many readers who, in spite of the dialect, knew something of the earlier poems, have never heard of the English ones, and there is much that is true and charming in the little faded blue and gold volume. Here is the first verse of a real cottager's song, “Winter Coming”:—

“I'm glad we have wood in store awhile,
For soon we must shut the door awhile,
As winterly winds roar awhile,
And scatter the whirling snow.”

Then there is the simplicity of “Home,” of which this is a portion:—

“As the sun from his high summer bow,
To the west of the orchard would fall,
He would leave the brown beehives in row,
In the shade of the houses' grey wall.
And the flowers, outshining in bloom,
Some in light, and some others in gloom,
To the cool of the air,
And the damp of the dew,
The air from the apple-tree shades
And the dew on the grasses' green blades.

And there was my orchard well-tined,
With a hedge and a steep-sided bank;
Where ivy had twin'd on the rind
Of the wood-stems, and trees in high rank,
To keep out the wide-lipped cow,
And the stiff-snouted swine that would plough
Up the soft-bladed grass,
By the young apple-trees—
The grass that had grown a good height,
And the trees that in blossom were white.”

It all sounds very simple, but Barnes was in reality an accomplished poet, a widely learned man, and a great linguist. In the perfect little poem called “Lowshot Light”, he used a Persian metre, with this deliciously English result:—

“LOWSHOT
LIGHT”

“As I went eastward ere the sun had set,
His yellow light on bough by bough was bright.

And there, by buttercups beside the hill,
Below the elmtrees, cow by cow, was bright.

While, after heavy-headed horses’ heels,
With slowly-rolling wheels, the plough was bright.

And up among the people, on the sides,
One lovely face, with sunny brow, was bright.

And aye, for that one face, the bough, and cow,
And plough, in my sweet fancy, now are bright.”

Barnes had a serious interest in metre, as well as in all country things, and how delicate was his ear is shown in his use of alliteration—a clumsy tool in the wrong hands:—

“By dipping Downs at dawn of day,
Or dewy dells when daylight dies.”

Or—

“By morning meads, or mid-day mound,
Or mellow midnight’s mounted moon.”

There are many lovely things in the little volume, of which the best known is perhaps “The Mother’s Dream”, though “The Wind at the Door” is extremely poignant. It is obvious that a much greater—but not more truly rural—poet, Thomas Hardy, learned from William Barnes, who in himself was a rich and interesting personality, and of whose poetry H. J. Massingham has so truly said: “All the sweetness and greenness and floweriness of the Dorset pastures is in Barnes, and all that lives upon them, man and beast and bird.”

Barnes was one of those English and notable men who have added lustre to our country parsonages.

34

Barnes had a theory that mothers and those in charge of young children should keep a record of their children’s early struggles with their native tongue. Their twists and perversions and misunderstandings had, he considered, a philological value. If mothers do this at all—and most of us, in the first flush of motherhood, begin it, even if we do not always persevere with the good work—they do it because the child’s sayings are so amusing. But as the child grows its sayings become normal, or worse, become sophisticated, and the records are discontinued. But I had a young relative who, as she grew up, did not grow out of her own peculiar manner of speech, her own peculiar misuse of words and twisting of proverbial sayings. Even when she had fully reached what are called years of discretion she would come out with the oddest remarks, to her own embarrassment, but the joy of whatever company she was in—for her remarks were completely unconscious. Indeed, nobody could have made them up. A surreptitious family record was made of these sayings, and I quote a few of them, for even after many years they still seem to me to be refreshingly unexpected.

TWISTED
SAYINGS

Here are two or three about food:—

I believe this tapioca pudding would stick you together inside if you were coming undone.

I feel quite drunk with thirst.

I do rather like curry, if it’s very tepid, and lots of rice, and only once a year.

I like your jam, but it rather claws me, it’s so sweet.

She invariably got proverbial sayings wrong—I have more bows to my string than that.

It made you shudder in your boots.

Cracking one's own nut, was her version of blowing one's own trumpet.

Rue your own dream.

It was to waylay suspicion.

It was pitch dark, there was only a tiny skylark at the end of the passage.

I could spend a month there every night.

Such a beautiful little mouse, almost a Persian.

I've scrubbed my face till the first curricule nearly came off.

I don't think much of your half-hours, they are apt to dwindle into hours.

She went into a room where someone was asleep—I didn't want to wake her, so I stole out like a nightmare.

Forty minutes' wink—a much truer description of what it usually is.

She dresses as if she continually expected to come back wet.

An ephemeral (effeminate was meant) man who liked scent.

Look at those swans pruning themselves.

I listened for it in my mind's eye.

Once the honeysuckle syncopates it's done for.

Of a fine emerald ring—The ring had a green stone, you know, something like a bicycle lamp.

Of the energetic wife of a limp husband—He flickers and she blows him.

When the tendency of everything is becoming more and more standardized—standardized speech and standardized pronunciation—such wanderings from the concrete path on to the grass as these examples are refreshing, and perhaps deserve a little more than exclusively family enjoyment. It is something of the same feeling that makes people collect old epitaphs, for they are so individual. I am not going to embark on that extensive subject, though there is one strange epitaph it would be interesting to interpret. It is in the graveyard of Christchurch in Hampshire, and it is this:—

“We were not slayne but rays’d
Rays’d not to life,
But to be buried twice
By men of strife.
What rest could the living have
When the dead had none.
Agone among you,
Here we ten are one.
H. Roger, died April 17, 1641.

J. R.”

There is a mystery to which the inscription gives no answer.

Little Charles Lamb asked a very natural question when, as a child, he was walking through a churchyard with his two-year-old sister. He read the tombstones with all their praise of the virtues of the deceased. “Mary,” he said, “where are the naughty people buried?”

In the *Letters* of Llewellyn Powys there is a perfect saying quoted of an old Dorset labourer who was dying. “How can I die,” he said, “with all they bees in the garden staring at I?”

One almost feels that could only have been said by an inhabitant of Hardy’s Wessex.

I was once told an odd little churchyard story by a country solicitor which has nothing to do with death. The story is this. Two brothers and two sisters went to a country church to be married, both couples afflicted with true rural shyness and embarrassment, and so dumb-smitten that the parson had to do a good deal of prompting to get the necessary responses out of them. When the double ceremony was at last concluded and they all moved to the vestry to sign the register, it was with some giggling revealed to the Vicar that he had married the wrong brothers to the wrong sisters—“got us mixed like.” The poor clergyman was appalled at what he had done, and had frightful thoughts of special Acts of Parliament to untie the knots which he had tied. It was a warm summer afternoon, and he suggested to the mismated couples that they should wander about in the churchyard for a while, so that he could try and think what could be done. At the end of half an hour he came out with a distraught countenance, having found no solution. But he found the newly married couples looking extremely cheerful, and they told him as he needn’t do nowt, as they’d decided to stay

as they was, thanking him kindly. And the marriages are said to have turned out quite successful.

Any English village that has retained its natural characteristics still centres round the church—even an age which has to a considerable extent lost the old reverence for religion still desires the church’s blessing on the three great acts of mankind, birth, marriage, and death. Where ever the conformity of the country permits it the church almost invariably dominates the village, though in certain places the castle disputes pre-eminence with the church. The usual position for the church is on whatever height or hill the situation offers, and clustered round about are the houses and cottages of the village, with the village pond often at the foot of the church hill. This, or some variation of it, is the general arrangement of Pulborough, Harting, Ditchling, Upwaltham, and Rudgwick in Sussex; of Goudhurst in Kent; of Stock, Wendens Ambo and Finchingfield in Essex; of Kersey in Suffolk; of Groby in Leicestershire; Bolingbroke in Lincolnshire; Ovingham in Northumberland; Ewelme in Oxfordshire; Tredington in Worcestershire; Hartland in Devon; Stogumber in Somerset; Coxwold in Yorkshire; and Selborne in Hampshire—to choose a few names from some of the English Counties.

CHURCH
AND
VILLAGE

Selborne is probably the best known of these villages, and its situation and setting—its huge and ancient yew, its grouping of charming cottages round about the church, may be taken as the type. In Gilbert White’s own words: “In the centre of the village, and near the church, is a square piece of ground surrounded by houses, and vulgarly called the Plestor. In the midst of this spot stood, in old time, a vast oak, with a short squat body, and huge horizontal arms extending almost to the extremity of the area. This venerable tree, surrounded with stone steps, and seats above them, was the delight of old and young, and a place of much resort in summer evenings; where the former sat in grave debate, while the latter frolicked and danced before them.”

And here, out of a much newer book, but a permanent one by reason of its lovely truth, comes another description. The book is Adrian Bell’s *Men and the Fields*:—

“There is a pond with ducks, strawyards, a stockyard, a thatched barn, beside or near the church. The church is part of their group, standing slightly above them. . . Inside the church a great Norman arch is dominant, with its

toothed design. One arch spans the whole, you look through it to the altar. The church is so small, the windows of the nave are no more than dream-holes, the wall so thick the light has the effect of being poured in through a funnel. The nave is secular in its businesslike simplicity; its silence but a pause in the labour of labouring men. But the arch transforms everything. Civilized, it supports easily a weight of time.”

That is just what any village church does support—“a weight of time”. The church is almost always far older than any other existing building in the village. A thirteenth or fourteenth century domestic dwelling is exceptionally early, but a church—or portions of a church—may be of the eleventh or twelfth centuries, and there are a number of still earlier churches, or church towers, in existence. The House of God was built in stone, or sometimes on the coasts in flint walling with stone quoins, while the houses of men—unless they were the military castles of great lords—were built in early times in timber and lathe and plaster, and those early examples have practically all perished. Building in brick was an altogether later matter, for after the Romans went, bricks were no longer used here for many centuries.

The village church, with its massive walls, was the centre and refuge (if there was no feudal castle) of the villages in times of danger. The construction of many a church tower, with no outer door, the narrow windows, high up in the wall of the nave, are evidence of this. Then the frescoes, the “Dooms” painted upon the church walls, were the picture books of the villagers who could not read, but who during Mass could study in close and horrific detail what happened to the naughty people who went to Hell, and the less exciting bliss of those who attained to Heaven. In the church the villagers were christened, wedded, and made ready for the grave. The church gave them their first drama, the Miracle Plays. In the church they held such permitted festivities as “Church Ales”.

“THE
ARISEN
LORD”

So, when we look at any old village church—and a real village does not run to multiple churches, as towns do, and so the existing one is ancient—we are looking at what has been the very core of village life for something that may be near a thousand years. It is a solemn thought and one not to be lightly considered. Even before Christianity came to Britain, the hill or mound on which the village church is so frequently built, often had sacred and awe-inspiring associations for a pagan people—associations which the first church-builders were wise enough to link with the new Christianity, instead of leaving them derelict, perhaps to be visited in secret by followers of the old heathen gods.

Therefore in looking at the village church we are looking at the heart of that village. And more than that, if we recall a lovely legend, which cannot be better told than in the words of that great and extraordinary man, Hawker of Morwenstow. "I used yesterday in my sermons," he said on one occasion, "one of the pious notions of old time. Said the Forefathers, 'Where did Lord Jesu abide during the forty days and forty nights?' Said some—'He went like thought from land to land—He glided as angels glide all round the earth, and wheresoever He foresaw in His omniscience that there would afterwards be a church builded and consecrated there the Lord paused the sole of His foot and hallowed it.' Said I yesterday, 'What a thought to think that here the arisen Lord once stood still, and looked along the sea, and made benediction with the print of the nails on this most blessed ground'."

36

England is so full of lovely villages, we are in general so proud of them, and are at last beginning to be considerably uneasy as to the horrid effects of "Progress" upon their continuing beauty, that we do not often stay to consider what caused them to exist just how and where they are. We are apt to assume that they are a special gift of Providence to this fortunate Isle. Their very mellowness gives them the look of having been where they are from "time-everlasting-beyond".

How marvellous if it were possible to have an authentic film—not a Hollywood make-up—that would roll time backward from this day to the Sussex Bronze Age villages that have been dug by the archæological spade on the South Downs. Careful historical research and knowledge give us the bony structure of history. We know dates and periods and styles of architecture, but all this knowledge is a little angular, and moves somewhat as an articulated skeleton would move—jerkily. Well, we can never have such a film, unless some method can be discovered for picking up records given off by ancient walls and fields. So we are driven back to our more or less scrappy patchwork.

One fundamental fact emerges, and with this as a raft we cannot quite drown in the sea of the unknown, and this is that the reason for every ancient village being where it is, in the first case is geological. Later villages and many towns arose because of trade, the discovery of coal, and so on. But all really old villages exist where they do because of the structure of the ground.

The first thing that human beings need is water within reachable distance. Of course rivers provide this easily. But

EARLY MAN

in the case of Sussex the rivers of the Weald—the great range of the South Downs has no rivers owing to the nature of the chalk—ran in swampy and wooded country that early man was afraid of because of the natural and supernatural enemies he believed lurked there. He felt much safer on the open Downs where he could see all around him. So there he built his early villages and hill forts, and buried his dead in the barrows whose outlines still show against the sky. It was also much drier and more comfortable on the chalk than on the clogging clays of the Weald, at a period when the rainfall was greater and the water-table higher than it is now. The chalk is like a sponge, the rains soak down through it till they are caught and held by some impervious geologic layer, and then, through the cracks between the two layers the springs gush out. These springs are the cause of villages—of that long string of lovely villages which lie at the northern foot of the South Downs, very old villages, on a very old road.

In the Weald itself, here and there, are little risings and hillocks on which villages grew for the double reason that there good water was to be had for domestic use, and the height, even if small in altitude, kept the feet of the village out of the marsh or clay. These villages often have “eye”—island—as part of their name. The little hamlet, with a very fine church, of Hamsey near Lewes, is a good example of this, for even to-day, when the waters are out—a most enchanting sight—on the Lewes Levels in winter rains, Hamsey stands up a very visible island and makes it easy to imagine what all that country was like in early centuries.

The old and narrow ways of a village, and the lanes leading to and away from it, owe their bends and twists to natural causes—to a drier bit of land, to avoiding some obstacle now vanished, to the approach to a river ford where now there is a bridge higher up, or to the lay-out of the old open fields in shots and furlongs, by which the village grew its daily bread, traces of which now only survive in an odd field name, or the apparently unnecessary angle of a lane. Once the Romans and their surveyors left England, roads just grew by custom and need, instead of being planned.

The church is the centre of the village in so many ways, and not least in being the oldest depository of its written records. So early as 1287 it was ordained that every church should have a church chest for the keeping of valuable records, and some village churches are fortunate enough still to possess their ancient chests, carved and hollowed out from the solid trunk of an oak. There was also enacted a later law that each church should have a chest for the safe keeping of the registers, and that it should have three separate locks, of which the parson was to have one key, his churchwarden

another, and the people's churchwarden the third, so that the chest could not be opened without the presence of the whole three of them.

For any village to be in the proper tradition and deserve the name, it requires at least one inn or pub (it will almost certainly have more), a blacksmith's forge and a wheelwright's shop. There must also be a sound carpenter, though the wheelwright should be that, for no village can get through its daily life without the services of a good carpenter—"His father's name before him was Chips, and his father's name before him was Chips, and they were all Chipses."

Of course to complete the village there are the necessary cottages and larger houses, including a Hall, Grange, or Manor House, with a Rectory or Vicarage. There will be a General Shop—which may also be the Post Office—and such other shops as the village needs, with farmhouses and farm lands surrounding the village. There should also be a mill, either a windmill or a watermill, though it is to be feared that in these days it will only be a relic of a more wholesome past, and not in working order. That, roughly, was the complete village, which in the old days was a self-contained unit, that could feed and largely clothe itself, and to a greater or lesser extent pursued various useful handicrafts. Not "crafts" in the modern debased sense of the word, meaning things that are useless and intended for ornament—a purpose they rarely fulfil.

The meaning of it all is shown in this fine passage from H. J. Massingham's *English Countryman*:—

“. . . the intimacy of the bond between craftsman and husbandman since England was first cultivated by the Neolithic farmer is outlined. This is the second integration of craftsmanship. The bond is a family one between man and earth because husbandry conditions the very existence of most of the rural crafts, even though craftsmanship, which is itself a kind of husbandry, is the older. If the cattle were the farmer's, the gate was the craftsman's which kept them in. If the plough broke the earth for the crops, the smith made the plough. The earth and what grew from it were the raw material both for the farmer and the craftsman. Actually, the union was even closer. From times immemorial, the practice of a craft was the part-time or seasonal occupation of the husbandman, while the craftsman almost invariably had a 'close' or holding of his own, the hurdler an acre or less of coppice, the basket-maker an osier-bed, the straw-plaiter a plot of corn, the potter a stake in the clay-pit, the mason or waller a share in the quarry. Or the wife of the land-worker practised gloveing or lace-making in the intervals of nursing the baby or

CRAFTSMAN
AND
HUSBANDM
AN

getting her husband's dinner. The daughter of a shepherd I know had her bobbins made by her father home from the fold. Nowhere could the peasant art and domestic industry be unpicked from the peasant's tillage—the whole was a seamless garment. The home, the family, and the country—craft embraced all these in one.”

The life of the old village was sustained by a large Common, which belonged to the villagers and made possible that “cottage economy” so justly commended by Cobbett. The Enclosures, which began in the sixteenth and culminated in the middle of the nineteenth century, brought this natural economy to a tragic end, and reduced the “labourer in husbandry” to a landless and dependent position—a “living wage” having only been granted him when England realised that without him the towns would starve—in which he struggled till the last few years. Even now, though he has a better wage, the man who cultivates the land has none of his own.

Most villages, owing to the iniquity of the Enclosures, have lost their Common Land, and are lucky if they have kept a village green, or cricket pitch. But the village best known to me has had the unusual fortune to keep its Common of five hundred acres untouched and still the property of the villagers, who according to ancient usage hold a larger or smaller portion of the grazing, which is divided into “yards”—a yard is roughly eight acres. Each yard carries with it the grazing rights for one horse, or two cows, or sixteen sheep. But whether a holder has but half a yard or ten yards, he has one vote, and the small owner's vote is as good as the large owner's vote, and when it comes to questions concerning the administration of the Common Land all the holders must be unanimous in order to take action—one negative can hold up a score of affirmatives. The head of this ancient organisation and group of countrymen is still called the Reeve. He has a Ranger or “broker” to assist him in supervising the stock grazing the Common. In the autumn the owners can cut the bracken and gorse for a small payment. The Lord of the Manor has no power to interfere with this handful of hereditary freemen.

The Common itself, with its rolling acres of rough grazing, its golden blazon of gorse, its windflowers and cowslips, its pasturing cows and heifers, its wide sky, and enchanting views of the far-flung line of the South Downs, spells freedom in noble letters. Such freedom of ownership is the natural right of every countryman, and the natural economy of the land was once based upon it. The Domesday serf, on whom people look back with pity, had his own little private toft or close and his share in the common

fields—the Lord of the Manor had no more, though of course his holdings were on a much larger scale.

Such common rights and usages were all part of the self-containedness of the old village life, which had continued unbroken from Saxon times until the Industrial Age put natural human needs into fetters. Mass production has all but killed craftsmanship, initiative, and the old joy in good work for its own sake. There was much that was grim and hard and brutal in the old days, and the poet Crabbe—so little read nowadays, partly because of his gloominess, nevertheless a valuable recorder of certain aspects of past rural life—has told us a good deal about those days, and he has been justly called the “Poet of the Poor”. Instead of reading his long narrative poems—which are monotonous and depressing except in small doses—it is more attractive to turn to a magnificent description of the old yeoman way of existence given by his son in the *Life* he wrote of his father. This biography was first published in 1834—Crabbe was born in 1754 and died in 1832—and describes a way of living that George Crabbe, the son, remembered from his childhood, which even then had something of the quality of a museum piece. But how superbly the young Crabbe describes what had evidently deeply impressed his childish mind.

JOURNEY
INTO
SUFFOLK

“There are few situations on earth more enviable,” he says, “than that of a child on his first journey with indulgent parents; there is perpetual excitement and novelty.” And he goes on to tell how, dressed in his first suit of real boy’s clothes, in the balmy month of September, 1791, he journeyed with his father and mother in “their huge old gig” into Suffolk, visiting for the first time the scenes and places that had been familiar to him from his earliest nursery days through the conversation of his parents.

“On the third day,” he goes on, “we reached Parham, and I was introduced to a set of manners and customs, of which there remains, perhaps, no counterpart in the present day. My great-uncle’s establishment was that of the first-rate yeoman of that period—the yeoman that already began to be styled by courtesy an Esquire. . . . His house was large, and the surrounding moat, the rookery, the ancient dovecot and the well-stocked fish-ponds, were such as might have suited a gentleman’s seat of some consequence; but one side of the house immediately overlooked a farmyard, full of all sorts of domestic animals, and the scene of constant bustle and noise. On entering the house, there was nothing at first sight to remind one

of the farm—a spacious hall paved with black and white marble—and at one extremity a very handsome drawing-room, and at the other a fine old staircase of black oak, polished till it was slippery as ice, and having a chime-clock and a barrel-organ on its landing-places. But this drawing-room, a corresponding dining-parlour, and a handsome sleeping apartment upstairs, were, all *tabooed* ground, and made use of on great and solemn occasions only—such as rent-days, and an occasional visit with which Mr. Tovell was honoured by a neighbouring peer. At all other times the family and their visitors lived entirely in the old-fashioned kitchen along with the servants. My great-uncle occupied an armchair, or, in attacks of gout, a couch on one side of a large open chimney. Mrs. Tovell sat at a small table, on which, in the evening, stood one small candle, in an iron candlestick, plying her needle by the feeble glimmer, surrounded by her maids, all busy at the same employment; but in winter a noble block of wood, sometimes the whole circumference of a pollard, threw its comfortable warmth and cheerful blaze over the apartment.

At a very early hour in the morning the alarum called the maids, and their mistress also; and if the former were tardy, a louder alarum, and more formidable, was heard, chiding the delay—not that scolding was peculiar to any occasion, it regularly ran on through all the day, like bells on harness, inspiring the work, whether it was done ill or well. After the important business of the dairy, and a hasty breakfast, their respective employments were again resumed; that which the mistress took for her especial privilege, being the scrubbing of the floors of the state apartments. A new servant, ignorant of her presumption, was found one morning on her knees, hard at work on the floors of one of these preserves, and was thus addressed by her mistress:—“*You* wash such floors as these? Give me your brush this instant, and troop to the scullery and wash that, madam!. . . As true as G-d’s in heaven here comes Lord Rochford, to call on Mr. Tovell.—Here, take my mantle” (a blue woollen apron), “and I’ll go to the door!”

WASHING
THE FLOOR

If the sacred apartments had not been opened, the family dined on this wise:—the heads seated in the kitchen at an old table; the farm men standing in the adjoining scullery, door open—the female servants at a side table, called a *bouter*; with the principals, at the table, perchance, some travelling rat-catcher, or tinker, or farrier, or an occasional gardener in his shirt sleeves, his face probably streaming with perspiration. . . . On ordinary days, when the dinner was over, the fire replenished, the kitchen sanded and lightly swept over in waves, mistress and maids, taking off their shoes, retired to their chambers for a nap of one hour to the minute. The dogs and cats

commenced their siesta by the fire. Mr. Tovell dozed in his chair, and no noise was heard, except the melancholy and monotonous cooing of a turtle-dove, varied, however, by the shrill treble of a canary.

What a robust and yet charming picture of old English country life George Crabbe the younger has painted in those words, bearing the stamp of truth and authenticity in every phrase.

38

It must not be forgotten that the beauty of the English scene as we behold it, more especially in the eastern, southern, and western parts of England, is largely due to the hand and the husbandry of man. The beauty of the northern parts of England, where it has not been ruined by the “dark satanic mills”, is largely a wild loveliness of moor and lake and mountain. Cornwall, also, stands outside the cultivated scene, with its rocky coast and its romantic harbours, but the country behind the coasts is so curiously desolate and lowering, and the china-clay streams running milk have an uncanny look. I do not want to have forty thousand Cornishmen demanding to “know the reason why” I say this—it is only my own small private impression, made upon me by the little I have seen of inland Cornwall. My mother evidently had the same feeling—had she not I might have been a Cornish woman by adoption (though I am told Cornwall never adopts you unless you can claim right of birth). There was a time, which I was too young actually to remember, when my parents had the whole of England to choose from when they decided to buy land and settle down. They went to Redruth to see a house that was for sale and seemed to meet many of their requirements—even in those days the perfect house was not entirely easy to discover. When they reached Redruth it was raining, and the country all round about looked so dismal that my mother flatly refused even to leave the station to look at the house, though they had come so far to see it. Nothing would induce her to live in such a place, she declared, and feminine unreason triumphed. In her place I could not have behaved in such a way, for there are few things I find more exciting than looking at houses, good, bad, or indifferent, and planning what might be made of even the worst of them.

Then there was a house in Selsey Bill that my parents considered purchasing. It belonged to a lady with whom we were staying in one of the fine old Regency Squares in Hove, who wished to sell it, preferring the dignified decorum of Hove to the more primitive Selsey. I have no recollection of the house at

HAROLD
MONRO

Selsey, probably I was never taken to see it, but I have a very clear remembrance of the ancestral portraits on the walls of our hostess, mainly of cavaliers in curled wigs and lace ruffles and steel corselets. I copied them very laboriously and badly in coloured chalks and became a violent partisan of the Stuarts, till in somewhat later years Carlyle got hold of me and turned me round to look at Cromwell.

Anyway we did not go to live at Selsey, but to another part of Sussex among the Downs. But I think there would have been a certain charm in dwelling on that curious spit of land, with all its memories of good St. Wilfrid. In much later years I went there to see Harold Monro and his wife, who had a cottage there one summer. I well remember motoring to it in the summer dusk, the odd feeling of that flat country, and the sense of the sea, the impression that there was really nothing to prevent it crawling in and overwhelming everything. This feeling was lost over the Monros' supper table—soup served from a large blue Spanish pottery jug, which seemed to me such a nice liberal way of doing it—with the low cottage windows open to the warm dusk and the curtains sucking in and out to a little coastwise breeze. And the talk, always good if Harold Monro was in the mood for talking.

I do not think it was of the Selsey Cottage that Monro wrote that lovely little series of poems called "Week-End," but of another Sussex cottage in the Arundel district:

"Out in the country everyone is wise:
We can be only wise on Saturday.
There you are waiting, little friendly house:
Those are your chimney-stacks, with you between,
Surrounded by old trees and strolling cows,
Staring through all your windows at the green.
Your homely floor is creaking for our tread;
The smiling teapot with contented spout
Thinks of the boiling water, and the bread
Longs for the butter. All their hands are out
To grab us, and the gentle blankets seem
Purring and crooning: 'Lie in us and dream.'"

To have known Harold Monro was to remember him—his very dark face, his narrow sad eyes, his beautiful voice. He was of a much bigger stature, both as a poet and as a person, than many of the poets who thronged about him and whom he helped and encouraged with such selfless generosity. I suppose most people associate him with the romantic Poetry

Bookshop in the London slum of Theobalds Road, and the strange old tumble-down barn behind it—once there must have been a country farm there—in which the Poetry Readings took place. But I like to remember him in his Sussex cottage, and writing poems like “Week-End,” and “Milk for the Cat,” and “Trees”—he gave that poem to me in its slim black-bound dress—and “Real Property”:—

“I will not have that harvest mown:
I’ll keep the corn and leave the bread.
I’ve bought that field; it’s now my own:
I’ve fifty acres in my head.”

And how infinitely nostalgic and characteristic of him to remember now that he is dead his lines:—

“It is not difficult to die . . .
The cheerful clock without a pause
Will finish your suspended day.”

Harold Monro was a wonderful reader of other men’s poetry (he was very modest about his own), and I realised his power when one evening in our house he read aloud Eliot’s *Waste Land*, which then was new. I had tried to read it myself and found it quite unintelligible—not being a “modernist” in poetry, or anything else—but with Monro’s reading it became quite another thing, and a certain stark beauty emerged.

Harold Monro’s too-early death, like that of Edward Thomas, was a tragedy for English poetry. It robbed this country of a poet growing to greatness. He was deep and slow, not one of those April poets who burst into early song. He was only just beginning to discover the powers that were in him.

One of the books he introduced me to was the *Letters* of Edward FitzGerald, which I had always avoided because I hated the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam so heartily. I always have loathed anything that savoured of the Orient—even pictures of camels and palm trees and minarets make me feel positively ill. And there was another reason for abominating the Eastern poem. In my childhood and youth every drawing-room table with the slightest claim to literary culture had a copy of the *Rubaiyat* upon it, generally bound in limp suede or vellum with those nasty overlapping edges which make a book look so dishonest. Nowadays the only time one comes upon the poem in its limp suede (gone all greasy) is at a village jumble sale in company with a backless copy of the *Sorrows of Satan*, the two representing “literature” on

FITZGERALD'S LETTERS

the stall devoted to old shoes and very second-hand hats. Another popular use of Omar in my childhood was to inscribe quatrains from the poem in “Gothic” lettering on dreadful “Art” pottery—the philosophy of the Persian poet was almost as popular on this pottery as:—

“Be the day weary, be the day long,
At last it ringeth to Evensong.”

which adorned innumerable tea-pots, spill-jars and shaving mugs.

So FitzGerald was not a name that sounded well in my ear, and seemed utterly remote from all the English things and scenes I loved. One day I expressed my contemptuous feelings in something of this fashion to Harold Monro. He smiled in his slow way, and asked me if I had ever read FitzGerald’s letters. I said no, and I did not think they would appeal to me. He said gently that he would lend the *Letters* to me, and would like me to look at them. I did, and found in them such lovely things, so purely English, as this:

“I read of mornings the same old books over and over again, walk with my great dog of an afternoon, and at evening sit with open window, up to which china roses climb, with my pipe while the blackbirds and thrushes begin to rustle bedwards in the garden.”

Or his account of fishing, with “the perennial Ouse, making many a fantastic winding”, and how he stayed at an inn, “the cleanest, the sweetest, the civillest, the quietest, the liveliest and the cheapest that ever was built. . . . On one side, it has a garden, then the meadows through which winds the Ouse: on the other the public road with its coaches hurrying on to London, its market people halting to drink, its farmers, horsemen and foot passengers. So, as one’s humour is, one can have which ever phase of life one pleases: quietude or bustle; solitude or the busy hum of man: one can sit in the principal room with a tankard and a pipe and see both these phases at once through the windows that open upon either.”

Could anything be more redolent of rural England than that, or more remote from Persia?

The American appreciation of England is in many ways keener than our own—partly because use and wont (that deadening pair) have not dulled their seeing. Mark Twain, who was almost as definitely American as was Abraham Lincoln, wrote:

“. . . that beauty which is England is alone—it has no duplicate. It is made up of very simple details—just grass, and trees, and shrubs, and roads, and hedges, and gardens, and houses, and churches, and castles, and here and there a ruin, and over it all a mellow dream—land of history. But its beauty is incomparable, and all its own.”

If an American from the great Land of Hustle ever got there, would he not enjoy more than any of the native born could possibly do, the inscription on the solitary little inn at Upwave, in the Cambridgeshire fenland, which says “Five miles from anywhere. No hurry.”

Considering the curious gritty ugliness of so many American place-names, especially in the Middle West, Americans surely must enjoy, even more than we ourselves do, the fantastic charm and absurdity of English village names—which are really crystallised history, gone deliciously askew in the usage of centuries. Such names as Ripe and Rudgwick, and Twineham and Wineham in Sussex; Broughton Pogges and Filkins in Oxfordshire; Mells and Vobster in Somerset; Fingrinhoe in Essex; Queen Camel in Somerset; stately Redmarley d’Abitot in Worcestershire. There are, of course, thousands more.

VILLAGE
NAMES

One of the ways in which Thomas Hardy showed how deeply he understood his Wessex, is the manner in which he created imaginary names for the real places in his novels. They have the quality of authenticity so strongly that a devoted reader of Hardy barely knows which is the real name of a place, and might easily find himself asking at the railway station for a ticket to Toneborough or Budmouth, and describing his visit to Shaston or the Isle of Slingers.

English people are still quite inclined to take it as a compliment when they read what Nathaniel Hawthorne said about us a long time ago: “Life in the English country is fossilised. . . . The man who died ever so many years ago still walks the village street, and must be buried again to-morrow in dust that has already covered him half a score of times.”

We also are unconsciously flattered by whoever said of us, “One of those typical English faces, once seen never remembered.” We *like* to be like that—anonymity is a great virtue (how many of us in our earlier years have thought Anon was a great author?) Or at least it used to be before Hollywood damaged that pure ideal. But English country people like to sink into their background—that is why the rural house, and still more the cottage of the past, are as beautiful and inconspicuous as wayside weeds—

they are not there for show and for the gaping eye, but to enclose and cherish very private lives. Therefore the tall clipped hedges and the high walls. There is enough open beauty in the English countryside to satisfy any passer-by without his being able to see what is going on at Jessamine Cottage, or in the “high hall garden”.

Let the passer-by instead look at the dandelions “lying in ditches and staring at the sun”. Or at the stream sides full of dried and withered kecksies—where the tall rose bay willow-herb stands in ranks and companies there will be a gathering of ghosts, pale and faded seed-pods feathering themselves away to dissolution and resurrection.

As Dr. Johnson said with his usual wisdom, “It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible.”

To possess the power to appreciate both the great and the small things in life is to be fortunate. Or, lest that sound a little pompous, let us correct it by using the lovely sentence of Sir Walter Raleigh (not Queen Elizabeth’s, but the other one) about “a fine rolling liquid eye for romantic and poetic purposes, in addition to the little pig eye that we all use at home”.

That “little pig eye” is very useful, it sees a lot of interesting things that the fine rolling orb would miss.

Hans Andersen may be said to have had it metaphorically—as well as physically, for his eyes were curiously small in proportion to the rest of his long horse face—for he has taught many generations to see innumerable tiny things that they would never have noticed had it not been for his eye and his mind which took such delight in the things that are small.

Rex Whistler’s illustrations to Hans Andersen seem to me the perfect ones. He has the mannered style, just faintly touched with the *macabre*, combined with a tenderness that is exactly fitted to the peculiar quality of Hans Andersen. Whistler, who was so happy among the stately homes of England and in elaborate settings, yet had a charming understanding of the homely—as may be seen in the way he drew the humble cottage chest of drawers with its white china knob handles, the guttering candlestick, the wooden cradle, the old woman coming from the pump with her pail of water. They are real cottage interiors—just as real as the famous double-cube room at Wilton—and Cobbett’s grandmother might have lived in them, or Marty South, or the young country couple of a hundred or so years ago quoted in *The Countryman*. The prospective bridegroom wrote to his “Dearest

A HUMBLE
HOME

Mairey”—“Father is going to gie us a bedstead and Granny five pound note to buy us washstand, fireirons mousetrap and soap and we must wait till we can buy glass crockery and chiney.” He concludes his letter by saying in the true country way, “I be happy to tell ye that our Old Sow have got seven younguns last night.”

How one would like to know the future history of William and his “Mairey”—what their cottage was like, whether it was thatched or tiled, how they managed to get the necessary chiney when they had bought the mousetrap and other furnishings with Granny’s five pounds. It is also to be hoped that the Old Sow continued her productive career.

This may be looking at life with the “little pig eye”, but these humble things and humble ways are the real foundation of human existence. And sometimes the humble have found their voice and added worthily to the great body of English poetry. Robert Bloomfield, with his “Farmer’s Boy”, and John Clare, with all his lovely work, are well known; but fewer people have heard of the daughter of a Northamptonshire gardener, who died at the early age of twenty-four in 1745, and who wrote verse of considerable merit. Jane Leapor’s content in her humble lot is expressed in these lines, where the cottager speaks with pride:

“Believe me, I can find no charms at all
In your fine carpets and your painted hall.
'Tis true our parlour has an earthen floor,
The sides of plaster and of elm the door;
Yet the rubb’d chest and table sweetly shines,
And the spread mint along the window climbs:
An aged laurel keeps away the sun,
And two cool streams across the garden run.”

How fortunate it is that twelve times in the year we have a different month to live in. It would be monotonous if all the year were January, or even June. The changing months add a spice to existence which we should miss considerably were it withdrawn—the last day of one month is quite different from the first day of the next. There can be no question of boredom for country people who walk through the twelve varying months of the year from January to December, each of which, apart from its changing interest, has such a definite effect upon the countryman’s crops and fortune.

“Why, one day in the country
Is worth a month in town,”

said poor Bloomsbury-bound Christina Rossetti. How much happier a creature she might have been had she but lived in a cottage in a village with a funny name, such as Edward Thomas set forth:

“Margaretting or Wingle Tye,
Or it might be Skreens, Gooshays, or Cockerells,
Shellow, Rochetts, Bandish, or Pickerells,
Martins, Lambkins, or Lillyputs.”

The very names of the months have a quality of their own, and the syllables paint a variety of pictures—the sort of picture Vita Sackville-West has caught when she says, “January, to me, is a large pewter plate stained with the reflection of a red sunset.” These pictures are all unified by a country setting, to which is added the history, the folk lore, the relics of fertility cults, the agricultural customs and seasonal works of innumerable centuries of English life. Old tales, old poetry, old country songs and weather sayings are in it too—it is a rich and comfortable brew.

In spite of the urban separation from the earth of the larger part of the population, we still, each one of us, retain something of the instinctive interest that earlier man felt in the weather and the changes of the seasons on which his whole existence depended. If any month of the year stepped too wildly out of its natural character then disaster might overtake the flocks and the crops. And that remains true even in this boastful mechanic age—the farmer’s eye is always on the sky.

THE
WEATHER

English people are laughed at because of their constant resort to the weather as a topic of conversation. In the country it is perfectly natural; in the town it may seem slightly absurd, but it shows, that in spite of the constant contact with pavements, townspeople have inherited roots in the earth. There is still in their veins a drop of the old blood which believed that the signs of a bad year were to be discerned, “If the oake apple bred instead of a fly, a spyder: if comets or meteors oppresse the ayre: if the sunne has his whole body or at least three parts eclipsed. . . the yeare will prove barraine and fruitless.” On the other hand if Christmas Day should fall on a Sunday, it was an unfailing sign “that the yeare shall be good, seasonable, and abounding with all store and plenty”.

There is something exciting about weather, even in our comfortably moderate climate. We all like to read and hear about it—even if it’s only a

“depression approaching from Iceland”—and some of my favourite pages in Gilbert White’s *Selborne* are those where he talks about weather. When he begins one of his letters by saying, “As the frost in December 1784 was very extraordinary, you, I trust, will not be displeased to hear the particulars”, I feel as if he were talking to me, and I read on eagerly about the “vast snow”, and the quarrelling thermometers, and the frost-bitten fingers of the men thrashing in a barn, till I come to the end: “This frost killed all the furze and most of the ivy, and in many places stripped the hollies of all their leaves. It came at a very early time of the year, before old November ended, and yet may be allowed from its effects to have exceeded any since 1730-40.”

Thunderstorms are amongst the most exciting of weather events, and though Selborne, as Gilbert White says, generally escaped them, as they circled round the hills, he has much to say about them that is interesting. We can but regret the wretched Aikin of Warrington, whose ill-timed industry on a similar project prevented Gilbert White from writing his proposed “Natural History of the Twelve Months of the Year”. How delightfully he would have done it is shown by his exquisite account of the shower of cobwebs. He begins with his usual precision:

“On September 21st, 1741, being then on a visit, and intent on field diversions, I rose before daybreak: when I came into the enclosures, I found the stubbles and clover-grounds matted all over with a thick coat of cobwebs, in the meshes of which a copious and heavy dew hung so plentifully that the whole face of the country seemed, as it were, covered with two or three salting nets drawn one over another. When the dogs attempted to hunt, their eyes were so blinded and hood-winked that they could not proceed, but were obliged to lie down and scrape the incumbrances from their faces with their forefeet.” Then, “As the morning advanced the sun became bright and warm and the day turned out one of those most lovely ones which no season but the autumn produces; cloudless, calm, serene. . . . About nine an appearance, very unusual began to demand our attention, a shower of cobwebs falling from very elevated regions, and continuing without any interruption, till the close of the day. These webs were not single filmy threads, floating in the air in all directions, but perfect flakes or rays; some near an inch broad, and five or six long. . . . On every side as the observer turned his eyes he might behold a continual succession of fresh flakes falling into his sight and twinkling like stars as they turned their sides towards the sun.”

But though Gilbert White did not write his “Natural History of the Twelve Months of the Year,” which would

RURAL
DAYS

have been such a treasure, he did keep a *Naturalist's Journal* —less well known than the *Natural History of Selborne*, but full of delights. It has been admirably edited by Walter Johnson. In this *Journal* we see Gilbert White doing what all good gardeners do, poking round his garden with bent head, watching the progress of each plant, waiting for the exact moment to pick the pears, as well as studying the ways of birds, insects, and the inhabitants of Selborne. Page after page is filled with such things as:

“Planted numbers of brown Dutch lettuces under the fruit wall to stand the winter.”

“Mr. Yalden mows a field of barley.”

“Mrs. Snooke’s tortoise, after it had been buried more than a month, came forth and wandered round the garden in a disconsolate state, not knowing where to fix on a spot for its retreat.”

“Crocuss in great splendour.”

“Rooks begin to build.”

“Wasps begin to come. Growing weather.”

Like Hans Andersen, Gilbert White had the “little pig eye”, for which we must be eternally thankful.

41

What a pleasant task it would be to make an anthology of all that has been said in poetry and prose on English weather and the qualities and characteristics of the twelve months—each of which has its own peculiar flavour, combined with its own peculiar behaviour, which is what makes the months so interesting. If we knew exactly what was going to happen every month, as they do in tropic countries, that at a certain date the rains come, that at another date the rains stopped, that unbroken sunshine was certain for months and months, how horrible it would be. All the interest would be knocked out of weather, nothing left but sheer boredom. We cannot even be sure of bad weather in England, and as like as not we may have a beneficent November and a freezing May.

I have an old book called *The Climate of Uckfield*, which I bought entirely for its title. There is something pleasing in the idea that this little East Sussex town has a climate all its own, quite different from the climate at Lewes or Brighton. It illustrates the strong English sense of individuality and resentment of communal monotony—let each village have its own climate if possible.

“No one,” said Charles Lamb, “ever regarded the first of January with indifference. It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left.” In January the heart lifts, however cold and bleak the days, with the thought that a new year has begun—the year that is always going to be better than the old one. We feel like Keats when he said, “The Thrushes and Blackbirds have been singing me into an idea that it was spring, and almost that leaves were on the trees.”

Anyway, if there are no leaves on the deciduous trees, except the crisp old leaves of beech, there are the modest little russet catkins, lambs-tails, wagging in the wind, and a primrose is to be found here and there under a sheltering drift of brown leaves. Also January often gives superb sunsets after a sullen day. But it is still very much fireside time, and it is always a good moment when the cottage curtains are drawn, the bellows are applied to the fire, and a book is taken down from the shelf—perhaps Bloomfield’s *Farmer’s Boy*, in order to recall:—

“Gladness to spread, and raise the grateful smile,
He hurls the faggot, bursting from the pile,
And many a log and rifted trunk conveys,
To heap the fire and to extend the blaze
That quivering strong through every opening flies,
Whilst smoky columns unobstructed rise.”

There is hardly an English author but has written of the joys of the fireside in novel or poem or essay, in spite of the fact that more “civilised” and up-to-date people than ourselves regard our methods of domestic heating as totally inadequate—our open hearths where the fire bakes the front, while inescapable draughts freeze the back of whoever sits by the fire. One valiant effort of self-protection against draughts was made in the high backed settee and the grandfather wing armchair, but since then nothing serious has been done by the vast majority of us, who have a feeling that there is something effeminate about central heating. We feel that central heating would make us a little ashamed to sing with our Shakespeare:—

EARLY
SPRING

“When icicles hang by the wall
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail.
When blood is nipp’d and ways be foul . . .”

There is still some of the blood of the old die-hards left in us, which in Shakespeare's own time deplored the removal of the central fire, with the smoke escaping how it might, to a chimney with a flue in the wall, the "new chimney" of which Shakespeare spoke, fearing lest this luxury should make the "oaken men" into "men of straw".

But February makes the fireside less important, and usually gives some golden days each minute of which must be spent in the open air. And March must recall however wild and blustering it may be—the simple lovely lines of Wordsworth:—

“It is the first mild day of March:
Each minute sweeter than before
The redbreast sings from the tall larch
That stands beside our door,”

with its invitation to Dorothy:—

“Then come, my sister! Come, I pray,
With speed put on your woodland dress;
And bring no book: for this one day
We'll give to idleness.”

With the coming of April Wordsworth must be remembered again—though really there is never any month in which he can be forgotten—because of that enchanting cuckoo song:—

“O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,
Or but a wandering Voice?”

It is odd how that migratory and lazy bird, with its haunting two-syllabled cry echoing over meadow and primrose coppice, seems the very epitome of an English spring, the voice of all its joys. But even more than Wordsworth, it is Chaucer who walks in April into the English scene in a crystal shower of rain. He seems to hold our past in his hands, as well as our future in poetry. And it is strange to think of a past not so very remote, when, as Chaucer tells us, the country was still in the town, even in London town, and the City magnates used to go through London Wall by Aldgate or Ludgate, out into the meadows “a' Maying”.

Midsummer Day opens a peep into something much older, under the blooming hawthorn tree, and the proper place to spend a Midsummer Day dawn or sunset would be Stonehenge—those dark Stones a hieroglyph of the past against the spreading light of the morning or the evening sun.

July and August have a less mysterious air, hot and plodding months, full of farming toil, the trees heavy and dark—all except the lovely beech, whose leaves never have a dull moment throughout the year—the wild flowers and the garden flowers at a certain ebb of beauty.

But with September the glory returns in the “season of mists and mellow fruitfulness”. The fields are golden with corn or stubble, the cottage gardens are rich with flowers of many colours, the roses bloom again, the whitewashed cottage apple trees are thick with yellow or reddening globes, the fruit, the plums and pears and peaches, on old red walls hum with greedy wasps. It is the perfect month, and it rarely disappoints with unkind weather. The September moon is the most magical of all. The touch of cold at evening once more gives the excuse to light the fire at sunset and to feel the comfort of cottage walls—there is a touch of homelessness about high summer. There is something more friendly to the human heart in the shortening days, even with the prospect of winter ahead, than in the lengthening days of early spring, which bring an inexplicable melancholy as the light lengthens. There is something tender and kind in cottages in an autumn evening, with the first lamplight showing through door and window against the fading sky.

AUTUMN'S
LARGESSE

Liberal September gives fine food in both hands; her cool misty mornings offer mushrooms, and her hot noons the rich blackberry (which must not be eaten when September is gone), and the green-cased nut. The butterflies are dancing their last dances.

The bounty of apples are mostly gathered in during October, and in the days when cider was made in the presses at the farms the smell of crushed cider apples was the characteristic rural scent of the month. And that other autumn odour of garden bonfires begins and goes on in the dark days of November—the thin blue smoke of the rubbish fire and that of the cottage chimney wavering up against a cold pale sky. In November mornings the comforting hum of the thrashing machine is heard at work in the stackyard. In past times it was the flail upon the threshing floor of the great barn—from which comes our word threshold, across which we step each time we enter or leave our homes.

Tennyson wrote a nice little poem about winter:—

“The frost is here,
And fuel is dear,
And woods are sear,
And fires burn clear,
And frost is here
And has bitten the heel of the going year.

Bite, frost, bite!
You roll away from the light,
The blue wood-louse, and the plump dormouse,
And the bees are stilled, and the flies are kill’d,
And you bite far into the heart of the house,
But not into mine.

Bite, frost, bite!
The woods are all the searer,
The fuel is all the dearer,
The fires are all the clearer,
My spring is all the nearer,
You have bitten into the heart of the earth,
But not into mine.”

December, in the eyes of us all, is the month that leads up to Christmas, to toys and stockings and a candle-decked fir-tree; but above all to the honour of a “maiden that was makeless” and the Holy Child born on that day which ever since has been christened by His name. How near to the happiness of any child in a toy or a cake, are the words of the shepherds bringing their simple gifts to the infant Jesus in a fourteenth century Chester Nativity Play. Says one shepherd:—

“Loe, sonne, I bringe thee a flagette,
Thereby hanges a spoune,
To eat thoy pottage with all at noune.”

Says another shepherd:—

“Nowe childe, all though thou be coming from God
And be God thyself in thy manhoode,
Yet I know that in thy childhoode
Thou wil’t for sweet meats look.
To pull downe aples, pears, and plumes
Ould Joseph shall not need to hurte his thoombes
Because thou hast not plenty of crumbes
I give thee here my nutthoocke.”

How near that brings the fourteenth century, in its simplicity and homeliness. So might any old rural labourer have spoken but a generation ago.

And whatever the year, whatever the month of the year, summer or winter, whatever the weather, there is no better advice than that which, through Shakespeare, King Henry V gave to his Kate.

“. . . a good heart, Kate, is the sun and the moon; or rather the sun and not the moon; for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps his course truly.”

II

LADIES AT THE COTTAGE

1

Our vision of the past is apt to be a little distorted, because we see it as almost entirely masculine. We see the ploughman—certainly the first of agricultural figures; we see the sower going forth to sow; we see the farmer, usually, in imagination in the eighteenth century dress which is still the wear of John Bull in cartoons; we see the keeper in velveteens with a gun sloped under his arm. If any feminine figure appears at all in the country scene, she is but toying with a hay rake and a sun-bonnet, or perhaps—as a great rural author has shown her to us—milking like Tess in the Vale of the Great Dairies.

This because history, whether political or economic, is almost always written by men. And, apart from history, the great naturalists and the great nature poets have been men, and women have been but accessory—if visible at all—in the rural scene. That women in past centuries have worked at field tasks we know; but they have been so poor, so overburdened, so unconsidered, that they have been almost invisible against the background of the soil. Women of wealth and position naturally did not labour in the fields, were never even seen there. They took the air delicately in pleached alleys and shrubbery walks (as Jane Austen often shows us), or admired the formal parterre, or, in earlier times, the knott garden or the herbary. If they appreciated the country scene there is little record of it; the embroidery needle was their natural implement, not the pen.

And, in any case, in earlier times it was so natural for women to live a country life—if we take the great majority of them who were in no way connected with the Court—that there seemed no particular reason to say anything about it. Country scenes and doings were simply accepted as the normal way of existence. The better off these women were the more they were hedged away from any direct contact with nature; while the poorer women were busy enough in just getting through their daily toil in cottage or field—hens, pigs, and children alone are a full-time occupation. It was men who wrote and published their opinions and feelings; it was men who were responsible for the *Annals of Agriculture*. There was no female Cobbett, though she could have found plenty to say. In earlier days Herrick gave us

delicious country pictures, with country girls fluttering about like butterflies in silken petticoats, but what these girls themselves thought of their lives he does not tell us.

There is one feminine creature of this period who has left us some record of her thoughts and feelings in her enchanting *Letters*, and that is Dorothy Osborne. She lived in the country, and she took a somewhat aloof, philosophic pleasure in certain aspects of the rural scene. Her letters have many a pretty pastoral picture. But as we look at her portrait, her charming intellectual face, her graceful white neck, her rich dress and silken sleeves, we know that her contacts with country life were not close.

And there was one thing which prevented the enchanting Dorothy Osborne from becoming the perfect countrywoman—she was not a spinster. She married the man she had loved so long and so devotedly, and shared his distinguished career at home and abroad.

We are driven to the conclusion that the great countrywomen, those who have left their mark upon the English scene, in a new kind of gardening, like Gertrude Jekyll; or in writing of English rural life, so that it is immortal and lives for ever, unchanged and unspoiled, like Jane Austen and Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Russell Mitford; or in so identifying themselves with a country place, like Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, that ever afterwards they have been known as the Ladies of Llangollen, and their curious half-timbered cottage become famous because they lived in it, are all spinsters. It is certain they all loved the country with such a deep-rooted passion that it contented their hearts and filled their lives. It is true they had also close human contacts—Dorothy with her brother William, Jane Austen with her sister Cassandra, the “Ladies” with each other, Miss Mitford in her blind devotion to that selfish charmer, her father. But one and all, they had the capacity to draw from the country itself the very stuff of existence, to find in it not only daily bread, but nectar.

COUNTRY
ENGLISHWO
MEN

It will be interesting, I think, to make a little closer enquiry into a few of these English countrywomen’s manner of existence. I am pleased and proud to imagine them as visitors to this cottage which is amply old enough to have welcomed even the earliest of them, Celia Fiennes.

Three hundred years or so ago travelling in England was not undertaken just for the fun of the thing. The roads were inevitably bad—hardly to be

called roads in the modern sense; worse than the muddiest and most poached of farm tracks. There is a legend in Sussex—where the Wealden roads were particularly atrocious—that a traveller discovered a hat lying on the top of the mud, he investigated, and found a man under the hat, and a horse under the man. Ladies going to church in their lumbering springless coaches had to be dragged by teams of six or eight oxen. Apart from the state of the highways there were dangers from highwaymen, and the difficulty of finding any tolerable accommodation except on the main roads. Naturally, under such conditions, the ladies of Stuart and later times stayed at home, except for a possible annual journey to London, or to “take the waters” at some popular spa.

But there was one lady, who lived when William and Mary were on the throne, who was a determined traveller, ceaselessly anxious to see the places of beauty and interest in her native land. Her name was Celia Fiennes, and she was fortunately placed, as she had wealth and position, her brother being the third Viscount Saye and Sele.

She was continually mounting her horse and trotting off, with a manservant following her, to visit one place and another. She thought nothing of journeys of hundreds of miles, and if she found herself at nightfall out of reach of the house of a friend or relation, or any respectable hostelry, she would sleep in a cottage, even though exclaiming at the squalor and discomfort. These adventures of hers would have been lost to us, and only recounted for the benefit of her family on her return from her various journeys, if she had not been as industrious with her pen as she was indefatigable in her travels. She kept a Diary, which her kinswoman, the Honourable Mrs. Griffiths, daughter of the fifteenth Lord Saye and Sele, who edited it in 1888, said, “almost takes the position and value of an historical document”.

It is more than this, for many historical documents are dull, but Celia Fiennes’s diary is not. It is fresh and straightforward, it goes on steadily like a stream, setting down all she saw. She had the truly observing eye, and she had the great merit of not trying to be clever, she was simply writing down what she beheld as clearly as she could, and that makes interesting reading at any time—naturally greatly increased in value by the lapse of two and a half centuries since she wrote her impressions of the world around her.

In Mrs. Griffiths’ edition of this Diary the spelling is given as she wrote it, and the abbreviations of the period, which add to its charm, but for convenience it is modernised here, though retaining her individual use of capital letters.

The authoress begins by saying that her diary was never intended for publication, and was not likely to fall into the hands of any but her near relations—a statement at one time considered almost essential by those who definitely designed to appear in print, but we may believe Celia Fiennes meant what she said. She goes on to say that if ladies would “spend some of their time in journeys to visit their native Land, and be curious to Inform themselves and make observations”, it would be a sovereign remedy “to cure or preserve from those Epidemic diseases of vapours, shall I add Laziness?—it would also form such an Idea of England and add much to its Glory and Esteem in our minds and cure the evil Itch of over valuing foreign parts”. The ladies, she added, would then be spared “uneasy thoughts how to pass away tedious days, and time would not be a burden when not at a card or dice table”.

She had also something to say to the gentlemen—telling them that it was essential that those employed in the service of their Country should “know and inform themselves of the nature of Land, the Genius of the Inhabitants”.

Undoubtedly Celia Fiennes was a woman of parts. It is evident, on perusing her Diary, that one of her passions was inspecting fine houses and describing their furnishings and appointments and gardens with great minuteness. She was much pleased with the “water-works” at Wilton, the seat of the Earl of Pembroke, where at the entrance to a grotto there were pipes that “Spouts Water up to meet the strangers”. Carved figures at the corners wept water on the beholders, while people going to hear what they thought was a nightingale singing were caught by a sluice—“it washes the spectators, designed for diversion”.

From Wilton she proceeded to Stonehenge—which she calls Stoneage—and justly says is “one of the wonders of England”, She declared of the stones that “to increase the wonder of the Story is that none Can Count them twice alike”.

Like most well-to-do women of her day, Celia Fiennes was indefatigable in “taking the waters”. In her diary she gives much amusing detail about her visit to Bath, and describes the correct costume for bathing: “The ladies go into the bath with Garments made of a fine yellow canvas, which is stiff and made large with great sleeves like a parson’s gown: the water fills it up so that it is borne off that your shape is not seen, it does not cling close as other Linen, which Looks sadly”.

She also tells of the sergeant who walks about in the bathing galleries and “takes notice Order is observed and punishes ye Rude, and most people

of fashion sends to him when they begin to bathe, then he takes particular care of them, and compliments you every morning, which deserves its reward at ye end of the season”.

She also travelled to Harrogate where, she says, is the “Sulphur or Stinking Spa, not Improperly termed, for the Smell being so very strong and offensive that I could not force my horse near the well”. But she managed to drink a quart a morning for two days, and thought the waters very good “if you can hold your breath so as to drink them down”.

The unpleasantness of the waters was compensated by a “very Large Salmon that cost and the sauce but 18d., it was very fresh and good and above three-quarters of a yard long”.

She travelled as far north as Scotland, but the country did not please her any more than it did Dr. Johnson on a later occasion when he said the best prospect in Scotland was the road to England. The only accommodation she could find, except in Edinburgh and Aberdeen, was in noblemen’s houses. These houses, she said, “Are all kind of Castles and they Live great, though in so nasty a way as all things are even in these houses one has Little Stomach to Eat or use anything.”

As she approached Newcastle on her return she saw “abundance of Little Carriages with a yoke of oxen and a pair of horses together which is to Convey the Coals from the pits to the Barges on the river”. The sulphur of the coal “taints the air and it smells strongly to strangers—upon a high hill two mile from Newcastle I could see all about the Country which was full of coal pits”. This was in 1697.

INQUISITIVE
TRAVELLER

In all her journeys she only complains once of any fear from highwaymen, and this was near Chester. “There I think I may say was the only time I had reason to suspect I was Engaged with some highwaymen. 2 fellows all on a sudden from the wood fell into the Road, they Looked trussed up with Great Coats and as it were bundles about them which I believe were pistols, but they dogged one before and the other behind and would often look back to each other, and frequently jolt my horse out of the way to get between one of my servants horses and mine.” However, she says, “the providence of God so ordered it as there was men at work in the fields haymaking”.

Shrewsbury, she found, was supplied with water through pipes, and “there are abundance of people of Quality lives in Shrewsbury, more than in any Town Except Nottingham; it’s true there are no fine houses but there are

many Large old houses that are Convenient and stately, and it's a pleasant town to live in, and great plenty which makes it Cheap Living”.

Exeter also pleased her, and she gives a detailed account of the making of West County serges, the sale of which “turns the most money in a week of anything in England. One week with another there is 10,000 pound paid in ready money, sometimes 15,000 pound”.

Windsor Castle was one of the places she visited and described in great detail. Her feminine soul (no doubt she was a skilled needlewoman when not on horseback) was thrilled by the massed embroidery on the “chair or throne of State”. The canopy over it “was so rich and Curled up and in some places so full it Looked very Glorious, and was newly made to give audience to the French Ambassador to show the Grandeur and magnificence of the British Monarch—some of these fooleries are requisite sometimes to create admiration and regard to keep up the State of a kingdom and nation.”

At the time Celia Fiennes was writing her Diary the new St. Paul's of Wren was still lacking its crowning Dome. “It is now almost finished and very magnificent, the Quire with Curious Carved work in wood,” she wrote, “this is all finished (with a sweet organ) but the body of the church which is to be closed on the top with a large Cupilo is not quite done.”

Everything she saw and heard interested her—to use her own word, she was a “spectatrix” of the pageant of her day, and it seems a pity that a somewhat earlier and much more famous Diarist, Samuel Pepys, could not have met and exchanged impressions with her, for in a milder and more feminine manner, she viewed all about her with the same eager interest. And as her Diary displays what she herself calls in her somewhat ungrammatical fashion, “the freedom and easiness I speak and write”, she is a very pleasant companion with whom to journey about England—while sitting by the fireside—when William and Mary ruled the land.

3

In the time of Jane Austen nearly all the authors were men: even novels were almost exclusively written by masculine hands. The outstanding English novelists were Richardson, Fielding, and Walter Scott—the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, and George Eliot had not yet appeared upon the literary scene. The solitary feminine story-teller among the novelists was “little Fanny Burney”, friend of Dr. Johnson, and the successful authoress of *Evelina*. That is until Jane Austen herself began to write—so quietly and secretly that for long

THE
IMMORTAL
JANE

enough only her family knew that she committed such an indiscretion. The needle, not the pen, was the proper feminine implement.

There never was a more unassuming and unselfconscious authoress than Jane Austen. She wrote for the pure love of writing, the enjoyment of setting down on paper the comedy of quiet English country life as she saw it about her, and if her novels had never been printed she would still have continued to write for the amusement of herself and her beloved sister Cassandra. This may partly account for her singular success. She had no ambitious and over-reaching ideas, and what she did was done perfectly. Her novels are miniatures on ivory, or those charming eighteenth century silhouettes which are filmy at the edges; they are not portraits in oils.

Sir Walter Scott wrote in his *Journal* that he had been reading *Pride and Prejudice* for the third time at least. "Miss Austen," he went on, "has a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any man going; but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied me."

That is a particularly generous tribute, as there was nothing either Scottish or "Gothick" about Jane Austen.

But Jane Austen's most devoted admirers have always been men, perhaps because she is the most feminine of authors. Her reputation is founded on no more than six novels, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*.

She was a country parson's daughter, and thus was born in an admirable midway station for observing the life of her neighbours, both of the "labouring poor" and the idle wealthy in the last years of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth. The delicate finish of her novels may be partly due to the fact that she was born into an age of elegance in architecture, furniture, and manners. The date of her birth was December, 1775, and she was born at Steventon Parsonage in the county of Hampshire. The Parsonage was a modest pleasant house—sad to say it no longer exists—of three stories, with dormer windows in the roof, and a trellised porch.

It was sufficiently simple not to alarm the poor, and sufficiently dignified to be on friendly terms with the Squire and the local "landed gentry".

But though her birthplace was modest, Jane Austen, through her family connections, was completely at home in the mansion, as her novels show in countless touches. She much enjoyed the stately and elegant surroundings of her brother Edward's Godmersham Park, and it was much to her taste to "be alone in the library" there, "mistress of all I survey". Once when Cassandra was staying at Godmersham she wrote to her half jokingly from Steventon, "People get so horridly poor and economical in this part of the world that I have no patience with them. Kent is the only place for happiness; everybody is rich there." But she knew how to be as elegantly serene and pleased with little economies and contrivances at Steventon and Chawton Cottage, as she was with the lavish comfort of Godmersham.

In her novels she always wrote of that with which she was thoroughly familiar—where her personality and genius come in, was in her delicately accurate observation, and her quiet delicious sense of humour and eye for the absurd. Her pictures are generally of the English country house scene; Mary Russell Mitford's are of the English village; and Gilbert White's of the English countryside. These three distinguished and enduring writers, whose works have become English classics, all belong to Hampshire.

The seven Austen children at Steventon Parsonage were all boys, with the exception of Jane and her elder sister Cassandra. Two of the boys, Charles and Francis, became sailors, and fought in the Napoleonic wars, and so distinguished themselves that they both became Admirals. The connection between the Parsonage and the Navy has always been close—Nelson himself being a parson's son. Jane Austen, who had a deep sense of family attachment, was devoted to both her sailor brothers, and in her last and most beautiful and tender novel, *Persuasion*, gave in Captain Wentworth, the hero of the tale, a delightful portrait of a naval officer. And in *Mansfield Park* there is the jolly little naval cadet, William Price, obviously based on memories of her brothers in the early stages of their naval careers.

SAILOR
BROTHERS

But apart from these naval characters, the men in Jane Austen's novels appear to have little to do except dance, ride, flirt, and plan improvements to their estates. Even those of them who are in the Church—and she has some admirable and amusing clerical characters—do not seem overburdened with their duties. There is the true eighteenth century air of elegant leisure about her novels—balls, assemblies, conversation, flirtation, and "taking the waters" at Bath, all to the end of making a good match, are the staple of her books. With such slight material has she created enduring delight.

Her own life was made up of these elements, but with a more marked background of homely domestic duties. She danced whenever opportunity offered, but she also darned, and made becoming mob caps, and took over the housekeeping. In a letter to Cassandra she says: “My mother desires me to tell you that I am a very good housekeeper, which I have no reluctance in doing, because I really think it’s my peculiar excellence, and for this reason, I always take care to provide such things as please my own appetite, which I consider as the chief merit in housekeeping.” It is satisfactory to learn that she had a new maid-servant who “seems to cook very well, is uncommonly stout, and says she can work well at her needle”.

A merit of the housekeeping of those days was that, at any rate in the country, everything was home-grown and homemade. The bread was home-baked, and the beer home-brewed, and the ladies of the house were not only accomplished in fine needlework, and in playing the harp and the spinet, but in the kitchen and still-room.

Mrs. Austen, Jane’s mother, was a woman of character and energy. In spite of her family of five sons and two daughters, she not only ran her household efficiently—there is no doubt those eighteenth century housewives were efficient, from all the accounts we have of them—but she worked hard in her garden, even digging her own potatoes, and wearing a smock, or round-frock, like a labouring man’s, as well as in her leisure moments making beautiful and elaborate patchwork quilts—and of all feminine handicrafts patchwork quilts seem to me the most enchanting. It is interesting to imagine Jane, while her mother worked at these quilts, leaning over her little sloping desk, creating the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*, and sometimes laughing quietly to herself at what they said and did. She wrote on small sheets of paper, so that if visitors suddenly arrived they were easy to cover up and hide. Her authorship was a secret and family affair.

Jane’s education was slight. She went for a time to the Abbey School at Reading with Cassandra, though she was very young, but she could not bear to be parted from her elder sister. Mrs. Austen once said that if Cassandra were going to have her head off, Jane would insist on sharing the same fate. After that she seldom left her native Hampshire, with the exception of occasional visits to stay with a married brother, or to Kent, to another brother at Godmersham Park.

She was content that her novels should remain for years in manuscript, and when they were published that they should be anonymous. *Sense and Sensibility*, which appeared

in 1811, was “By a Lady.” *Mansfield Park*, which she began in the same year, was not published till 1814. But the first edition of this novel sold out in six months, and her other novels soon found admirers.

Among these admirers was the Prince Regent, who kept a set of them in each of his residences. Hearing on one occasion that Miss Austen was on a visit to London, the Prince sent the librarian of Carlton House to call upon her, and “pay her every possible attention”. He also intimated that he was willing to accept the dedication of one of the novels, so *Emma* was dedicated to the royal patron—the Prince’s taste must at least be admitted catholic, if it could at one and the same time admire so delicately domestic a work and the arabesques of the Royal Pavilion at Brightelmstone. The librarian went so far as to suggest that Miss Austen should write a German historical romance—which does not imply that he was himself very well acquainted with her novels—but she shook her pretty head at him and wisely, and perhaps ironically, declared that was quite beyond her powers.

In appearance she was slender and graceful. She is described as having “a rich colour, hazel eyes, fine features, and curling brown hair”. Neither she nor her sister ever married, though Cassandra would have done so, had the man she loved not died. There is a suggestion of a shadowy romance in Jane’s life, but she had a marked reticence about her own deepest feelings, and no record remains, only conjecture. But if she missed a home and husband and children of her own, she had a full family circle with her mother and sister, her brothers, and their wives and offspring. She was regarded as the “perfect aunt”.

Her family attachments were warm, and apart from that, she had created enough living characters in her novels to keep her from loneliness. She enjoyed her own characters, and often sitting in the family circle, she would suddenly laugh to herself and running to her desk, write hurriedly for a few minutes—some bit of dialogue was coming to life in her mind. She herself spoke disparagingly of “the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour”. That has not been the judgment of posterity. Her “little bit of ivory” will outlast many an ambitious canvas and mural painting.

She died at Winchester in July 1817, in the arms of Cassandra, and she is buried in Winchester Cathedral. Hers is not one of the resounding names in English literature, but it is beloved in castle and cottage because it is full of light and of laughter, and peculiarly and deliciously English.

There is no link between Jane Austen and Mrs. Henry Wood, except that they were both feminine, and both novelists. One was a finished artist and produced little; the other was not an artist at all, and produced so much that it is doubtful if any person living has read all her books, or can even recall more than a few of their titles. But a book like *East Lynne*, which has enthralled as many hearts as any work of Dickens, cannot be utterly pushed aside, however the highbrows may scoff at its sentimental absurdities. She was a born story-teller, prolific, uncritical, and very much a “period piece”. To modern ears much of her writing sounds simply ludicrous, but it was written in perfect seriousness and good faith. Take the well-known *Mrs. Haliburton’s Troubles*, for instance. The virtuous and impoverished heroine, Mrs. Haliburton—there is a bad and wealthy family who live in a mansion with the marvellous name of Pomeranian Knoll—owing to her husband’s illness approaching a fatal end, can no longer afford the comforts of life, being reduced to doing without even a single servant. Faced with this tragedy Mrs. Henry Wood asks her feminine readers if they have ever known such a case, “When a lady—a lady, mind you, and it is what Jane was—has had to put away her habits of refinement, and pin up her gown round her and turn to and cook.”

Snob, one is inclined to say—smiling the while at the idea of the unfortunate “lady” having to pin up her gown before she could begin the degrading occupation of cooking, losing all claim to refinement by so doing—then one is surprised to find in one of her novels a poor boy, whose mother was also in the unhappy position of being unable to afford a servant, being called “snob” for that reason by a contemptuous rich boy. Which is a curious example of a change in the meaning of a word in a comparatively short period of years.

Mrs. Henry Wood was really a close observer of her own time and of the time immediately before it, and so became a valuable recorder of the social scene. Most of her books have a rural setting, or a background of the small country town, which used to present such a pleasant aspect of English life, but is now unhappily disappearing into the colourless impersonality of town and far-stretching suburb.

Of all her innumerable novels the six volumes of *Johnny Ludlow* are her high-water mark. They give a close and minute impression of the daily life of a not very wealthy English squire, and of the strange things that can occur in the quietest rural parish. There is great variety in the tales, and a nice fat

one-volume reprint of the whole series would be a pleasant addition to any country bookshelf, and a great resource on the wettest of days.

One of the things that is attractive about Mrs. Henry Wood is that she so much enjoyed her own books. Her son Charles who wrote her biography in the 'nineties, said of her: "No one took greater pleasure than herself in her own books. As the years went on she keenly enjoyed her own stories, and would re-read them every few years with as much interest as when they first appeared. Perhaps the only thing that gave her more pleasure was to write them."

That seems to me rather simple and endearing, especially in one who was a "best-seller" to a degree staggering even in modern eyes. Her first book, which she wrote in less than a month, won a prize of £100 offered by the Scottish Temperance Society for a novel exposing the evils of drink. This was *Danesbury House*. Her second novel was *East Lynne*, which was refused by two well-known publishers—George Meredith being the reader for one of them, and hardly likely to appreciate the qualities of Mrs. Henry Wood. It was published by Bentley, and almost at once people were fighting to read it—one angry lady is said to have boxed the ears of an assistant who told her he had not a copy left—and they have been reading it ever since, from 1862 until the present day. No book without merit as a story can continue in favour so long as that.

To a considerable extent Mrs. Henry Wood is a writer with a topographical background, which gives her a certain weight and value. One is almost tempted to think that all great novels, all novels with the quality of permanence, have this background. The names of Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell, Dickens, Thomas Hardy above all, are associated with places, either under their real names, or thinly disguised. *Landscape with Figures* is a peculiarly English type of novel.

Of course the name of Mrs. Henry Wood—what a pity she did not use her own name of Ellen Price, instead of sheltering in Victorian fashion behind that of her undistinguished husband—cannot be put in the same category as the names of such famous authors. But in her books she depicted places she knew and loved, and Hestonleigh, which often appears in them, is the cathedral town of Worcester, as those who know it will have no difficulty in recognising.

She was born in Worcester in 1814, and brought up largely by her grandmother. This grandmother was a remarkable old lady, a repository of old country lore, and

DOROTHY
WORDSWORTH

tales that went back well into the eighteenth century. The -----
small Ellen owed her much, for she was a fine story-teller, and sitting by the
fireside filled that receptive mind with local legends, accounts of ghosts, and
highwaymen, and lonely inns, and the Mop Hiring Fairs; while her father
was a keen antiquary and student of ancient documents. So Ellen Price early
stored her imagination with rich material for her future novels, and the tales
of *Johnny Ludlow*. She inherited her grandmother's gift of story-telling, and,
through that grandmother's memory, covered something like a century-and-
a-half of English rural history, for her own life stretched from the year
before Waterloo to 1887, three-quarters of a century.

5

It may be said that Dorothy Wordsworth is the first really articulate
English countrywoman. She was born in the latter part of the eighteenth
century, and at that time feminine appreciation of the country, with rare
exceptions, was a narrow one; mountain scenery was still "horrid", and
country life looked at askance, except for a few summer months—save, of
course, by the unfortunates who had to live there.

Then Dorothy Wordsworth was born at Cockermouth in 1771, the
destined sister of the greatest English nature poet. To her native
sensitiveness was added a freshness, a kind of innocence, of perception, and
a natural unstudied grace and truth with her pen, that no other woman has
equalled. She wrote as unconsciously as she lived—and she wrote of the
country and country things because her whole life was full of them. She was
no creature of indoors. She loved all weathers: storm and snow, thunder and
rainbows, spring rain, and summer heat—dawn and sunset—she lived in
them and with them, with some of the passion and yet the simplicity of a
bird. She walked incredible distances. She once referred to "William's fine
friends, a pair of good legs", but her own were equally serviceable to her.
She cared little if she were soaked by rains or buffeted by gales. She got up
regularly at six o'clock in the morning to walk by herself—or better still
with her brother—for two hours before breakfast. All that she saw sank into
her mind.

In her childhood she and William—he was only a year older than she
was—were devoted to each other. Then the death of both parents and the
resulting poverty, flung them apart, and for some years Dorothy had to
endure an uncongenial and restricted life with relatives who much
disapproved of her "wild ways", of her "rambling about the country on
foot", of her complete failure to follow the feminine pattern of her period.

Through all opposition she clung to the hope that one day she and William would dwell under the same roof. In his poem “An Evening Walk” Wordsworth refers to this dream, and how this hope was “gilding that cottage with her fondest rays”. At last circumstances enabled the separated brother and sister to set up house together. “The day on which I found a home under the same roof as my brother,” said Dorothy, “was the day of my felicity.”

Their first home was at Racedown in Dorset, but they were so poor that, as William declared, their diet was chiefly air and the essence of carrots and cabbages and turnips. This, however, mattered little, for they had each other, the country existence they loved, and very soon the young Coleridge was to come into their lives. It was to be nearer Coleridge that the Wordsworths moved to Alfoxden, set so delightfully among the Quantock Hills, in Somerset.

Alfoxden must always be memorable, for it was there that Dorothy Wordsworth began, in January 1798, that *Journal* which is the outstanding feminine contribution to country literature. How simple, how unconscious of what she was doing, are its opening words:—

“The green paths down the hillsides are channels for streams. The young wheat is streaked by silver lines of water running between the ridges. . . . After the wet dark days the country seems more populous. It peoples itself in the sunbeams.”

Coleridge said of her that her “manners are simple, ardent, impressive. In every motion her most innocent soul out beams”. But de Quincey’s description of her is the fullest. He said that she was small and slender, with a gipsy complexion; her eyes were “wild and startling, and hurried in their motion”, showing how “some subtle fire of impassioned intellect apparently burned within her”. She was so eager and ardent she often stumbled in her speech, and her movements had a “glancing quickness”—there was much of the bird about Dorothy. She was content to be ignorant of many things, he said, but what she knew and cared for lay in “the temple of her own most fervent heart”. This was the girl of whom her brother wrote:

POETS’
POVERTY

“Birds in the bower and lambs in the green field,
Could they have known her, would have loved.”

He declared that it was his sister made him a poet:—

“She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
A heart the fountain of sweet tears,
And love, and thought, and joy.”

To know his poetry and Dorothy’s *Journals* is to realise how close was their mental companionship. They saw and were moved by the same things, and while William was writing a poem on something that had attracted him, Dorothy, quite independently, would be describing it in her *Journal*—and her prose descriptions were often quite as beautiful as his poems.

The poverty of William and Dorothy Wordsworth brought them very close into the rural life about them. Milk and bread and vegetables were for years their staple diet—meat and tea were luxuries, just as they were to the cottagers. In their long walks about the countryside they went into the cottages to dry themselves by the fire when they got drenched, or to ask for a cup of milk, where the cottager kept a cow. Dorothy admits that she was not free of the common feminine fear of cows: “I sat half an hour afraid to pass a cow. The cow looked at me and I looked at the cow, and whenever I stirred the cow gave over eating.” There is an account of how Dorothy got lost in a peat moss in the dusk, across which there was only one path of stepping stones to safety, and of how she wandered, sinking sometimes to her knees, and finally extricated herself, and knocked at a cottage door, looking like a speechless ghost and bursting into tears. The Cottage people dried and warmed her, and led her home, and were so concerned that they came next morning to see how she was. Dorothy did not forget these things.

Country people and the poor move constantly through her pages. She was so poor herself, that when she met a wandering sailor she could only give him a halfpenny—but it was as much as a shilling to them both. When beggars came to her door at Dove Cottage she always gave them bread, if she had nothing else, and talked to them with sympathy. Once a thin little boy, whom she had seen the year before, came begging. He had not grown at all in the interval, and she asked him if he got enough to eat. “Nay,” he answered, surprised at such a foolish question. She and William were distressed by the state of the Dalesmen, who had once owned their fields, and, as one of them said, were now “forced to sell, and all the land goes into one hand”. It was Enclosure in its northern form.

When they settled at Dove Cottage in Grasmere—“Dove Cottage is truly the central point of all our ‘joy’”, said Dorothy—the rent of which was only £8 a year, they set to work upon the garden, planting vegetables for food, and Dorothy walked all over the country, collecting costless treasures of wild

“A CRYSTAL
VASE”

flowers for its adornment—thyme, columbine, wild orchises, primroses, and foxgloves. And while she collected these plants she made friends with the country people, the pedlar, and the carrier, the cottage women at their baking and washing. All that she saw and felt she set down in her *Grasmere Journals*, and her accounts of her tours round about, and in Scotland. She was the passionate traveller, and could get more out of going into the garden to pick peas for dinner than other people do out of a journey to Rome.

When William married, wisely and well, a girl whom his sister also knew and loved, and brought her to Dove Cottage, Dorothy rejoiced and shared in their happiness and gave herself in generous outpouring of devotion to her brother's children. She nursed and taught them, and saved and contrived for them, cutting down their father's garments or old cloaks of her own. She still managed to walk about the countryside with William or by herself.

But there was a change—a difference. Her natural wildness, her passion for being out of doors battling with the weather, watching the changes of the seasons, the growth of plants, the ways of birds, had perforce to yield somewhat to insistent domestic claims. When the Wordsworth family inevitably outgrew Dove Cottage, they always seemed to be moving, and Dorothy always seemed to be shifting piles of books and battling with chimneys that smoked—all their chimneys appeared to smoke in a devastating manner. Amid all this one cannot but feel that Dorothy is a little like a skylark in a cage, with all the burdens that family poverty and family affection thrust upon her. And outside the family circle her heart was continually torn by the moody, miserable, self-pitying Coleridge, so changed in later years from the brilliant being who had composed the *Lyrical Ballads* with Wordsworth.

The sensitiveness and ardour of Dorothy's nature, the constant strain upon her too-intense affections, her tremendous energy in walking and working, proved eventually too much for both her physical and mental strength. Maurice Hewlett called her a "crystal vase", and the vase cracked. But her lovely spirit, her delicate and precise eye, her deep passion for all country sights and sounds, are preserved for ever in her *Journals*, which at last we possess complete in E. de Selincourt's beautiful and final edition. Nothing written by a woman upon the English rural scene, of life as lived in the depths of the country a hundred and fifty years ago, can rank above them. Their charm is only equalled by their utter simplicity, and the sense that there "the heart speaketh".

Most people have heard of the Ladies of Llangollen, and perhaps seen a reproduction of the well-known picture showing two plump old ladies in dark blue riding habits and tall hats, with white stocks, and edges of white petticoats showing beneath the uplifted habits. But who they were and what made them famous, so that their ornate black and white cottage at Llangollen is still a place of curious pilgrimage, is not so much in modern minds.

The two girls who were to become known as the Ladies of Llangollen, and who in their day were called “the most celebrated virgins in Europe”, were Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, both daughters of famous Irish families. In the eighteenth century the only destiny for well-born damsels was marriage—regardless of inclination, but carefully planned to increase the family’s wealth and worldly position. It was for this end that daughters were expensively brought up, dressed, and taught lady-like accomplishments.

The scandal of these two young women was that neither of them inclined to this forced matrimony, and in spite of their good looks and the opportunities thrust upon them, persisted in remaining single. When they met each other they found their minds and tastes so attuned that they desired nothing better than to be allowed to spend the rest of their lives together in some quiet country spot. Parents and relations were horrified, and Eleanor Butler was sent off to London, to see if the fashionable life there would make her more sensible. But she was a person of considerable force of character, and her journey to London took her on the old coaching road through North Wales, and she stayed a night at an inn in the Vale of Llangollen.

Slipping out alone for a walk she found a little four-roomed cottage in a lovely position, which was empty and for sale. Instantly she decided that she would buy it, and that she and Sarah Ponsonby would live there together. There was no difficulty about the purchase, as the cottage was supposed to be haunted, and she bought it there and then for £180, while the other coach passengers were having their supper at the inn.

London society having completely failed to alter her character and her views as to what constituted the good life, she returned to Ireland, and she and Sarah decided that their only plan was to elope. This attempt was frustrated by Sarah suddenly developing tonsillitis and becoming so ill that she had to be brought

LADIES OF
LLANGOLLE
N

home. Secret elopement having failed, they then boldly announced that they were going away together to live in the cottage Eleanor Butler now owned at Llangollen. This succeeded, for their annoyed relatives washed their hands of the intractable young women, and let them go.

The first thing they did, after crossing the Irish Sea, was to provide themselves with suitable garments for the simple country life they wished to lead—women's clothes in those days were hot well fitted for an outdoor life. The plainest things that could be got then were a cloth habit and a beaver hat, and this costume they adopted and wore for the rest of their lives, while their fair hair was worn cut short and powdered. They both had a great air of breeding, and could carry off any style they chose to adopt.

Having equipped themselves suitably, the next thing was their Welsh cottage. The old four-roomed abode was pulled down, and a new one built—building in 1778 without elaborations of plumbing and heating was a comparatively simple matter. And while the cottage was being built Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby wandered about the hills and valleys together, rejoicing in the beauty of their chosen home, relaxing after all the family friction they had been through. They spent whole days out of doors in the summer weather, walking, and talking, or sleeping in the heather, just as they felt inclined.

But the building and furnishing of their home, and the making of a garden, filled most of their time and interest. The long, low, semi-Gothic abode, which was to become their home for half a century, was filled with carving, and oak furniture, and panelling—easily and cheaply to be acquired in those days. A visitor to the house in later years said of it: “The dwelling is covered on the outside with curious carved woodwork, and the interior, judging from reproductions, must have been as curious as old china, carved cabinets, family cats and poodles could make it.”

Behind the house was a rushing stream, in a ravine full of trees, and there was a spring. The Ladies made a fountain of this spring with an ancient font and carved stones they had found in the ruins of Vale Crucis Abbey close by. “E.B.” and “S.P.” wrote some verses on this spring, which were carved on the surrounding stones. These verses were in the true eighteenth century tradition of a country life hedged from contact with earthly reality, but the Ladies of Llangollen, as they soon came to be called, were not content to live a country life that was only one in name. They were true lovers of nature, as well as being practical, capable and highly educated women.

The home the Ladies of Llangollen built for themselves was called Plas Newydd, and they not only filled it with old oak, but with books in four languages on history, philosophy and poetry, which in the long winter evenings by the fireside they studied together, Eleanor Butler generally, reading aloud, while Sarah Ponsonby painted or embroidered. Among their books were over a score on gardening. And they did not simply read about gardening—they gardened. They dug and planted with their own hands, and not content with the land which had been bought with the original cottage, they hired some adjoining fields from a neighbouring farmer and embarked on what would now be called a “smallholding”—they had their own cows and made butter, they brewed their own beer, and grew flax and spun their own table and bed-linen.

BOVINE
ANXIETIES

Their two cows were a source of much interest. They were called Primrose and Margaret, and on one occasion when Margaret was taken ill most of the local farmers came to offer advice, and in spite of the number of physicians—eight of them at one time standing round the bovine bedside—the cow’s life was saved. In their anxiety the Ladies visited her at night by the light of a lantern.

In the course of time both the Ladies themselves and their little estate, became more than locally famous—not only their own friends came considerable distances to visit them, but complete strangers wanted to inspect the place. Occasionally this was permitted in the case of the garden, if the Ladies were satisfied with the manner of the request—they were very particular about behaviour.

Anna Seward, the “Swan of Lichfield”, was one of their friends. She visited them in 1795 and described the garden without a weed, the garden house “with its implements arranged in the exactest order”, the shining dairy, and the house itself. Of Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby—“the enchantresses beneath whose plastic wand these peculiar graces arose”—she said, “When we consider their intellectual resources, their energy and industry, we are not surprised to hear them assert that, though they have not once forsaken their Vale for thirty-six hours successively since they entered it seventeen years ago, yet neither the long summer’s day, nor the winter’s night, nor weeks of imprisoning snows, ever inspired one weary sensation, one wish of returning to that world first abandoned in the bloom of youth, and which they are yet so perfectly qualified to adorn.

The Ladies of Llangollen kept a *Journal*—“the short and simple annals of the poor”, as they called it, for poor they were according to the standards

of the families of Ormonde and Bessborough from which they sprang. But they were fortunate in that they realised—and continued to realise for full fifty years—how rich they were in their devoted affection for each other, in the enjoyment of their cottage and garden, and the simple pleasures of country life, which cost so little and endure so long. Constantly in the *Journal* is such a statement as “A day of the most perfect and sweet retirement”, “A day of delicious retirement”. Together they watched sunsets and went for moonlight walks, and leaned over gates to look at the valley and listen in the silence to Thomas Jones playing his pipe on the churchyard wall. They entered fully into the life of their cottage neighbours, and were both loved and looked up to.

As a gardener Lady Eleanor Butler in particular was notable, and they both liked a garden to be more natural than formal. There was, of course, the winding shrubbery walk—“nothing in extent and everything in grace and beauty, and in variety of foliage”, as Anna Seward described it. But they had also masses of primroses and wild violets and white foxgloves. They bridged the stream in the dell, and put seats in the best places for admiring the sylvan prospect. They employed a man for the heavy work, but they planted out their own seedlings, and clipped hedges, and picked their own fruit—they grew cherries, raspberries, gooseberries, and figs, apricots, peaches and nectarines. Their kitchen garden was neat and productive, and besides the ordinary vegetables they produced cucumbers, mushrooms and melons.

But much as the Ladies loved their rural retirement, the great world they had left began to visit them in increasing numbers. They were at once too unusual and too delightful to be left solitary. One masculine admirer said of them: “That they should prefer one another to us does not surprise me, since they have each drawn a prize in life’s lottery, but why we have allowed it I shall never understand.”

Their hospitality was unflinching, and some of the most distinguished people of the day visited them. For themselves they refused to sleep away from their own roof, though they were quite prepared to spend the day with friends who were within driving distance, even though the day might begin at nine o’clock in the morning and did not end till three-thirty the following morning.

ENGLISH
SPINSTER

For fifty years the Ladies of Llangollen lived together in complete happiness in their Welsh home. Then Lady Eleanor, who was over eighty and nearly blind, died. At the funeral Sarah Ponsonby got some strange comfort from a dog which suddenly appeared and insisted on attaching

himself to her. She took him home, christened him “Chance”, and he lived with her till her own death, two years after that of her lifelong friend. On the day of her burial the dog “Chance” disappeared and was never seen again.

7

Mary Russell Mitford is almost amusingly typical of her class and time—an epitome, as it were, of the English spinster. She came of solid, rooted English stock. Her mother was the daughter of a Church dignitary who was a connection of the family of the Dukes of Bedford. Her father was a younger son of the Mitfords of Bertram Castle in Northumberland.

Her father was the outstanding factor in Mary Mitford’s life. His career as a doctor of medicine was negligible, but he was extremely handsome (a quality his daughter did not inherit) and popular, a great sportsman, but an incurable gambler, and equally incurably extravagant. He was the sort of man who could go gaily through any number of fortunes. He had none of his own, being the younger son of a younger son, but he cleverly married money, Miss Russell being a considerable heiress, which made up for the fact that she was plain and ten years older than her husband. Dr. Mitford dissipated her fortune with extreme rapidity, and then his daughter, by an extraordinary chance, won him another one.

Mary Russell Mitford was the only living child of the marriage, and was adored by both her parents. She was born at Alresford in Hampshire in December 1787, and her early years were passed in the comfortable affluence that her mother’s fortune provided. When she was very young she showed herself unusually quick and intelligent, and early began to notice the local characters and the rural life about her. Into her mother’s refined existence a sporting flavour was infused by Dr. Mitford, who cared more for coursing and cards and his famous breed of greyhounds than for his patients. It was through Dr. Mitford’s greyhounds that he and Cobbett first made acquaintance. There was a good deal of outward resemblance between them—both tall, bluff, handsome Englishmen with hearty, downright views, though in character and ability and heart Dr. Mitford fell far below Cobbett, who was a really great man, willing to suffer for his beliefs.

The Mitford family stayed at Botley with the Cobbetts, and on one occasion William Cobbett wrote to Dr. Mitford on hearing of a friend’s death: “You and I must be clay again, and it is useless to repine. While this life lasts, however, let us be kind to one another, and among the objects of our kindness we beg you to be assured that there are very few indeed that have the Precedence of you and Mrs. and Miss Mitford.”

Dr. Mitford, however, was determined to enjoy himself before he became “clay again”, and he did so to such purpose that before his daughter was ten years old he had pulled all the comfortable circumstances of their life in ruin about their heads, and they were all living in penury near Blackfriars Bridge in London.

But Dr. Mitford was an incurable optimist; he always expected “something to turn up”. And it actually did. He was a born gambler, and he promised his daughter a lottery ticket for the Irish Sweepstake as a present for her tenth birthday.

LOTTERY
TICKET

He took her to choose the number and she decided on 2224, but there were certain technical difficulties about that ticket, so Dr. Mitford suggested she should choose another number. But Mary refused, it was that ticket or none for her, as the figures added up made her age. Her persistence so impressed her father’s superstitious gambler’s mind, that after some difficulty and rearrangements the ticket was procured. It won a prize of £20,000.

Immediately Dr. Mitford decided once again to become a country gentleman. He bought an estate near Reading, with an Elizabethan manor house upon it, which he promptly pulled down and built a mansion more to his taste upon the site. Horses, greyhounds, coursing meetings and lavish entertaining once more abounded. Mary loved a country life and greyhounds as much as her father did—his one disappointment with her was that she was not happy on a horse. But she and her mother had a little pony-chaise in which they used to drive about the country lanes together, and do their shopping in Reading. She was a most devoted daughter, and thought her father the handsomest, most genial, and most generous of men—as he was with his wife’s and daughter’s money—and her mother the sweetest and most sympathetic of women. Neither she nor her mother could see any flaw in Dr. Mitford.

Their financial troubles were always due to unfortunate circumstances, never to his extravagant ways.

Naturally, with this lavish manner of living, Mary’s lottery-money of £20,000 soon melted away. Much of the handsome furniture, the first-rate equipment of stable and coach-house was not even paid for. The tradespeople became less polite. Dr. Mitford did not find the country gentleman’s life as pleasant as he felt it ought to be. He returned more or less to London, leaving his wife and daughter to grapple with the difficulties accumulating at Bertram House. He was looking for another lucky lottery ticket, or some other gambler’s way of retrieving his dissipated fortunes.

In only one characteristic was Mary Russell Mitford like her father—she had his incurable optimism, “the aptness to hope, the will to be happy”, as she once said, “which I inherit from my father”. She was plump and cheerful. “Merry Miss Mitford” Ruskin called her. But unlike Dr. Mitford, she was honourable and conscientious, as was her mother, but Mrs. Mitford was too fragile to grapple with the difficulties of life. Mary had to deal with all the family troubles. One of her plans was to sell that white elephant, Bertram House, and move into a cottage as soon as possible; and the other plan was to make some money by writing poetry and plays—she had already achieved some mild success in this way. But there were several unpleasant years before the “commodious mansion” was disposed of, with the house and grounds getting ever more shabby, and the tradesmen ever more pressing. Dr. Mitford kept well away from all this. Pictures and other treasures had to be sold to keep the creditors at bay, servants were dismissed, and the horses sold. Mary found it difficult to pay even for the food of her beloved greyhounds. But through all these difficulties she solaced herself with the small and costless joys that the countryside offered her. “One has such pleasure,” she said, “in doddering along the hedgerows gathering violets and wood-sorrel, listening to the woodlark, watching for the nightingale—such enjoyment in the mere consciousness of existence in the wind and the sunshine.”

The cottage for which she longed was at last found at Three Mile Cross, near Reading, and she moved in with her parents with characteristic cries of delight at its smallness and, as she hoped, inexpensiveness, though she declared that the rooms were so small and she was so large that she felt somewhat like a blackbird in a goldfinch’s cage.

It was a real cottage, nothing between it and the road but a low fence and a narrow strip of garden. On one side was a little pony stable. It had small lattice windows, smothered in honeysuckle and jasmine, and up the buttress of the chimney grew a splendid old apricot tree. At the back was a garden, which in time Miss Mitford was to pack with flowers, for she was the sort of person who cannot exist without a garden. This cottage garden was much nearer to her heart than the impressive “grounds” of Bertram House. She tended it herself with the help of an odd boy now and again, and was happy not to live in fear of a gardener’s official frown.

MISS
MITFORD’S
GARDEN

The garden was at the back of the cottage at Three Mile Cross, and she describes it in some detail:—

“Fancy a small plot of ground, with a pretty, low, irregular cottage at one end; a large granary, divided from the dwelling by a little court running along one side; and a long thatched shed open towards the garden, and supported by wooden pillars on the other. The bottom is bounded half by an old wall, and half by an old paling, over which we see a pretty distance of woody hills. The house, the granary, wall and paling are covered with vines, cherry trees, roses, honeysuckles and jessamines, with great clusters of tall hollyhocks running up between them, a large elder overhanging the little gate, and a magnificent bay tree, such as shall scarcely be matched in these parts, breaking with its beautiful conical form the horizontal lines of the buildings. This is my garden; and the long pillared shed, the sort of rustic arcade which runs along one side, parted from the flower-beds by a row of rich geraniums, is our out-of-doors drawing-room.”

That was what her garden became after she had worked on it, but in the early days she had some troubles, and as she said in one of her letters, “some neighbours of ours (pigs, madam) got into my little flower court and made havoc among my pinks and sweet peas”.

When she first went to live in the cottage the neglected garden was smothered in a pretty red and white flower which grew so profusely that it had to be uprooted like a weed, or nothing else would have a chance to grow. The plant seemed to be quite unknown, though it had been christened “the Spicer”, after an old naval officer who had once lived in the village and was supposed to have brought the seed in his pocket from “furrin parts.”

But once “the Spicer” was rooted out and things put in order, the garden was crowded with flowers. “My little garden is a perfect rosary,” Miss Mitford said, “the greenest and most blossomy nook that ever the sun shone upon.”

On one side of the cottage was the Swan Inn, and on the other the proper kind of village shop, which sold everything from candles and cheese to boot-laces and mouse-traps. Poverty and proximity made Miss Mitford, with her quick and observant eye and warm heart, into the complete villager. She might have been that and remained unknown to fame, but the fact that she had a ready pen—all her life she conducted an enormous correspondence with her many friends, apart from her official literary labours—made her the perfect chronicler.

It was in the cottage at Three Mile Cross that *Our Village* was written. When she wrote these village sketches nobody had done anything of the kind before. She herself did not

THREE-MILE
CROSS

realise that there was anything special about them, and was as surprised as she was delighted at the enthusiasm they called forth. She had merely set down the country scene as she saw it about her, and episodes in the lives of some of the village people. It was all so simple: making a cowslip ball; a village cricket match, “a real solid old-fashioned match between neighbouring parishes, where each attacks the other for honour and a supper, glory, and half-a-crown a man”; the village shoemaker, wheelwright, and baker, each with his own cow; the blind old man, led by a little boy, who with a sickle and a sack earned his living by cutting the wayside grass to feed the village cows. She said that her descriptions were “written on the spot, and at the moment, and in nearly every instance with the closest and most resolute fidelity”. The opening sentence of *Our Village* has found response in numberless hearts: “Of all situations for a constant residence, that which appears to me most delightful is a little village far in the country.”

Through Mary Mitford’s eyes and by aid of her faithful pen that English village, no more beautiful and interesting than hundreds of others—in fact less beautiful than many—has become a permanent part of the English scene. And it is not only the English rural classic she wrote, but Mary Russell Mitford herself that we love and admire. When living she held the affection of her many friends, not less because she was at times faintly comic, as when she went to a literary party wearing a new cap which she had bought and donned on the way there, but had failed to remove the price ticket. She was small and plump and rather plain, but James Payne was impressed by her vividness, and “gleaming under a great globular brow, two such eyes as I never perhaps saw in any other Englishwoman”. She was brave in the way she squeezed every scrap of happiness from her restricted circumstances, and in her endless patience and devotion to her ageing and difficult father, who grew more selfish with every year of his long life—all who cared for her prayed that he might die before he killed her.

She was, in a word, typical of many well-born but impoverished spinsters living in the country—with just the difference that out of her experiences she made that enchanting and enduring thing called *Our Village*.

George Eliot was born a countrywoman in the full and proper sense of the word. The date of her birth was the end of 1819—just six months after that of the Princess Victoria. She was born in the county of Warwickshire, at Arbury Farm. Her father, Robert Evans, was a peasant, who had with some difficulty raised himself to the position of a yeoman farmer. He married

twice, and his second wife, a “superior” woman, come of a somewhat higher class than her husband, was the mother of the little Mary Ann Evans who was to merge her honest yeoman name in that of “George Eliot” which she made so famous by her pen.

As that baby girl lay in her cradle amid all the bustlings of farm life, little did those about her imagine how she was to set down in print—in itself no matter for a female to meddle with in those days—the scenes and people of the rural England among which she grew up. She was born at the right time to record the full round of the old agricultural life, with its unsmoothed contours, and its development of human character and craftsmanship. Machinery had not then lifted its sinister head. The hand and the tool met in direct contact; food came from the immediate fields; “artificial” were not in use, it was still “no cattle, no dung; no dung, no corn”. Agriculture in Warwickshire at that date had not altered greatly from what it was in the time of Shakespeare.

By a singular piece of good fortune Mary Ann Evans was not only born in the right environment, but with the power to set down in her pages the existence of the farm, village, and small country town as she knew it, and to give it an imperishable life.

But this piece of good fortune for her—and for us—was offset by a twist in her nature. It was as though her christening were attended not only by a good, but by a bad fairy. The sheer necessities of her early life, caring for her father after her mother’s death, kept her in her native countryside, absorbing the impressions which were to be her treasure of gold. As a small child she had driven a great deal with her father about the Warwickshire lanes, as he went upon his farming and estate business. All she saw and heard sank unconsciously deep into her mind and memory, as it does in childhood. Her father, and her elder brother Isaac, were her best beloved companions. The first book she ever had was given her by her father, and she cherished it till her death—it was called *The Linnet’s Life*, and was illustrated by excellent woodcuts.

THE BAD
FAIRY

At the age of seventeen, when her mother died, she became mistress of the farmhouse, and made cheese, butter, and jams, showing herself a thoroughly capable housewife. Enough of the farm tradition remained in her blood to make her say in 1863 when she was far removed from such things, “I think, after all, I like a clean kitchen better than any other room.” Even when she was sixty and famous, the farmer’s daughter still spoke in her when she said, “I am always made happier by seeing well-cultivated land.”

But when her father died—her brother was married and farming in his place—she set out upon the pursuit of all kinds of mental adventures. This was the legacy of her bad fairy. She decided that it was impossible for a woman of brains—and she knew, quite truly, that she was a woman of brains—to continue to believe in Christianity. She fell into dismal German metaphysical swamps, and translated dreary German atheistical works. There was a great deal of solid persistence about her, and she went on and on, even when she admitted herself that she was “Strauss-sick”. She was not lacking in that curious idea that if a thing was dull and difficult to do, it followed that it was good for you.

She travelled abroad, not in pursuit of pleasure, but of self-improvement. Then she went to live in London, in the Strand. She met Herbert Spencer—there was even an idea that she might have married him, if he had asked her, but he said her nose was too long, very fortunately for her. We should never have had *The Mill on the Floss* and *Adam Bede* from Mrs. Herbert Spencer, though we might have had *Romola*. She tried to make her life full of uplift, learned any number of languages, and became more and more depressed. She was solemn and heavy, and quite unlike the farmer’s daughter she had been born.

She was always longing for sympathy and understanding, for she lacked buoyancy and self-confidence, and when she met George Henry Lewes he gave her just the support she needed. She needed it so badly that, in defiance of all the strict traditions and moral code in which she had been brought up, she decided to live with Lewes, though he had a legal wife. This, of course, shut all respectable doors to her, including those of her own relations, but the attachment lasted for a quarter of a century, till Lewes’s death, and in spite of lacking the blessing of Church and State, was a triumphant success.

She and Lewes travelled abroad, studied together, lived in London, and wrote for learned Reviews—to all appearance the country youth of Mary Ann Evans (or Marian Lewes, as she now called herself) had vanished, and would have no further influence on her life and fortunes.

Since her girlhood George Eliot had thought that brains were what mattered. If brains had been the only gift she possessed she would never have won the place she holds among English novelists as the author of *Scenes from Clerical Life*, *Silas Marner*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Middlemarch*. These were not the result of study and intention, grey cerebral matter applied to selected themes, but the natural fruit of memory allied to her native genius.

George Henry Lewes, with whom George Eliot spent twenty-five years—happy years—of her life, was not attractive in appearance, being small and monkeyish, but he was lively and clever, and two things must be put down to his credit—he made a sensitive and serious woman in an equivocal position completely content, and he recognised and encouraged her natural gift, and in her work drew her back to the country from which she sprang, and away from the arid scholastic paths where she was inclined to think her salvation lay.

When George Eliot wrote the first story in *Scenes from Clerical Life*, she was remembering—and sometimes, like many beginning novelists, she was remembering a little too close to the object, not then having fully acquired the novelist’s art of sublimating the fact into the fiction. In her next book, *Adam Bede*, she was remembering more and deeper, and with her marvellously faithful rural background, was creating character, which, though based firmly on reality, was a painting in the Dutch School, not a photograph. Dinah Morris was the flowering of memories of her Methodist aunt, and the immortal Mrs. Poyser had more than a bit of George Eliot’s own mother in her composition. She is an epitome of all capable, sharp-tongued, kind-hearted English farmers’ wives. Her character alone would make *Adam Bede* a classic. She completely ceases to be a person in a book—in a greater or lesser degree we have all known our Mrs. Poyser. “Her tongue was not less keen than her eye,” says George Eliot in a marvellous bit of description, “and whenever a damsel came within earshot, seemed to take up an unfinished lecture as a barrel-organ takes up a tune, precisely at the point where it had left off.”

THE
NOVELIST’S
ART

Her scene with old Squire Donithorne when he tries to induce Farmer Poyser to make a disadvantageous exchange of some of his fields, is a masterpiece. The Poyser family walking to church is another. So is the description of the old-fashioned Harvest Supper at the Hall Farm, and of the Labourers who sat around the generous board, like old Kester the thatcher, whose “knees were much bent outward by this time, and he walked with a perpetual curtsey”. George Eliot depicts him with a few clear strokes, and says, “You and I are indebted to the hard hands of such men—hands that have long ago mingled with the soil they tilled so faithfully, thriftily making the best they could of the earth’s fruits, and receiving the smallest share as their own wages.”

Adam Bede himself, though he is a carpenter instead of a farmer, is a fairly close portrait of George Eliot’s father. When the book was read aloud

to an old friend of Robert Evans, he exclaimed at intervals, “That’s Robert, that’s Robert, to the life!” Certain of her father’s sterling qualities are also visible in Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch*.

It is evident in these books how much George Eliot valued honesty, character, good craftsmanship—the old-fashioned country virtues. The doing of the job was the thing that mattered, not the monetary reward for doing it.

The Mill on the Floss, as is well known, is more or less an autobiography of Mary Ann Evans herself in the first part, and is also rich in portraits of persons who adorned the rural scene in her youth—authentic people who have that life of their own, apart from the printed page, which is only found in the greatest novels. We do not say “How clever!” We say “How real!—my great-aunt was just like that!”

A whole English countryside—or rather, its two-footed inhabitants—walks about in George Eliot’s four greatest novels, from squire to shepherd, from dairymaid to rector’s lady, with Methodists and doctors, and auctioneers thrown in, not to speak of the farmers and their families, and millers and shopkeepers. How an early Victorian lady ever attained such an insight into the manners and conversation at the village pub as she attains in the scene at the “Rainbow” in *Silas Marner* is somewhat of a mystery. The only possible explanation is an acute ear and a faithful memory recalling the conversation of her father’s friends and farm labourers.

How she felt about the countryside itself is well shown by a quotation from one of the less-known of her books, *Theophrastus Such*.

“. . . our midland plains have never lost their familiar expression and conservative spirit for me; yet at every other mile, since I first looked on them, some sign of world-wide change, some new direction of human labour has wrought itself into what one may call the speech of the landscape . . . our woodlands and pastures, our hedge-parted cornfields and meadows, our bits of high common where we used to plant the windmills, our quiet little rivers here and there fit to turn a mill-wheel, our villages along the old coach-roads, are all easily alterable lineaments that seem to make the face of our Motherland sympathetic with the laborious lives of her children. She does not take their ploughs and waggons contemptuously, but rather makes every hovel and every sheepfold, every railed bridge or fallen tree-trunk an agreeably noticeable incident; not a mere speck in the midst of unmeasured vastness, but a piece of our social history in pictorial writing. . . a crumbling bit of

ENGLISH
SCENE

wall where the delicate ivy-leaved toad-flax hangs its light bunches, or a bit of grey thatch with patches of dark moss on its shoulder and a troop of grass stems on its ridge, is a thing to visit. And then the tiled roof of cottage and homestead, of the long cowshed where generations of the milky mothers have stood patiently, of the broad-shouldered barns where the old-fashioned flail once made resonant music, while the watch-dog barked at the timidly venturesome fowls making pecking raids on the outflying grain—the roofs that have looked out from among the elms and the walnut trees, or beside the yearly group of hay and corn stacks, or below the square stone steeple, gathering their grey or ochre-tinted lichens and their olive-green mosses under all ministries—let us praise the sober harmonies they give to our landscape, helping to unite us pleasantly with the elder generations who tilled the soil for us before we were born and paid heavier and heavier taxes, with much grumbling, but without that deepest root of corruption—the self-indulgent despair which cuts down and consumes and never plants.”

There speaks the heart of a genuine countrywoman, though it is possible that the adulation which came to her later years, when she had become a kind of literary Sibyl, may have veiled from George Eliot the truth that when she deserted her native countryside, when she ceased to remember the scenes of her youth, her powers and her gifts deserted her.

9

Gertrude Jekyll, though she insisted with humorous emphasis that she came of an “Armigerous” family, would take pleasure in the thought that her surname, of Swedish origin, meant “Countryman”—in its English form becoming “yokel”.

In her childhood she early displayed the tastes which were to mark her life—picking dandelions with joy in her walks, in spite of her nurse’s declaration that they were “Nasty things”. When she grew older she insisted, a little to the dismay of her parents, in learning all about country crafts like thatching, hurdle-making, and milking—not content to watch, but doing the thing herself. She understood country people, and they appreciated her deep and genuine interest in their crafts and ways. Such rural employments were dying, even in her youth—she was born in 1843—but she was a pioneer in the idea of recording such things. Her book, *Old West Surrey*—unfortunately out of print in its original edition—is a volume of real importance as a record of the past, and full of enchanting photographs, all of them being taken by Gertrude Jekyll herself.

Which shows her quality. She never stood by and directed other people to do things. It did not interest her to do the decorative bits and leave the real work to other hands. She wanted to do everything herself. In her time that was an attitude rare in a woman, though it is obvious in looking at Gertrude Jekyll's face (her "plain but splendid face", as one of her friends well described it) both as a young woman and as an old one, that she was a person not easy to turn aside from any path she decided to pursue. William Nicholson recognised the character that imbued even her gardening boots when he did his famous painting of those solidly inelegant objects.

Her vitality was shown by the way in which she threw herself into one pursuit after another, and the manner in which her enthusiasm continued with her to the end of her long life—she was eighty-nine when she died. She was responsive to all the arts, and painting was one of her earliest interests, in spite of the fact that her eyes gave her trouble, even when she was a girl. Nevertheless, she painted, designed, embroidered, did wonderful patchwork and quilting, and gained such a reputation as an interior decorator that many distinguished people asked her help in beautifying their homes. She travelled in foreign countries when a girl—she who in her middle and later years grew such deep roots in her own corner of Surrey that for well over a quarter of a century she could not be induced to leave it. She tried her hand—and not in an amateur way—at many things, but all the time she was unconsciously searching for that one great craft of gardening in which she was to find the fullest possible scope for all the powers within her, and which was to make her famous.

GARDEN
GIFTS

She developed her deep country roots after the death of her father, when she and her mother settled in that particular corner of West Surrey ever afterwards linked with her name, at Munstead Hill above Godalming. The building of that house, and the creation of that garden, were the beginning of Gertrude Jekyll's real career. In the gardens at Munstead she experimented with new ways of planting and planning, realising that the old cottage gardens had a beauty which the formal "bedding out" of the period could never touch. She proved that it was possible to paint a blossoming picture with masses of natural hardy flowers. People had only to see what she had done to be converted, and enthusiastic gardeners flocked round her.

Among the visitors who came to Munstead House was Canon Hole, the famous rose grower, and he brought with him William Robinson. He and Miss Jekyll at once discovered each other as natural and destined allies and friends, and from their meeting sprang many fruitful things. She had her part

in his great classic, *The English Flower Garden*. It was out of her gardening articles for *The Guardian* that her first books grew, *Wood and Garden* and *Home and Garden*. It is a little difficult for us to realise nowadays, when we have so rich a gardening literature, how fresh and friendly those books were. People began writing in shoals to her, asking her advice as to how to alter and improve their gardens, though even she must have been a little baffled by the correspondent who, when asked what was the aspect of her flower-border, replied “most of the day it faces south-east, but due north all the morning.”

The meeting of Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens was another important event in her life. A Lutyens house, in the years that were coming, almost demanded a Jekyll garden. They fully discovered each other’s quality when Gertrude Jekyll decided, after her mother’s death, to build a house for herself at Munstead Wood, with Lutyens as her architect. In this house, and its ample surrounding gardens and woodland, she set forth all her ideas, and she watched them grow into beautiful reality. “How I enjoyed seeing the whole operation of the building from its very beginning!” she said, “I could watch any clever workman for hours. Even the shovelling and shaping of the ground is pleasant to see, but when it comes to a craftsman of long experience using the tool that seems to have become a part of himself, the attraction is so great that I can hardly tear myself away.”

She is somewhat nostalgic reading in these sparse days, with her slightly arrogant insistence on the “simple best”—seasoned oak, not deal, hand-made bricks, wrought iron, and all the rest of it.

While her house was building she lived in a cottage close by, with red-brick floors, and interior walls of whitewashed brick, unplastered (the perfect inside cottage wall), and she said the cottage was so comfortable and charming that if it had not been for the claims of hospitality, and the housing of her considerable collection of “things” (she admitted to being of an acquisitive disposition) she would have been content to live there for the rest of her life.

But her Lutyens house, when finished, was an extremely beautiful and satisfactory dwelling, marked by a solidity and simplicity unusual at the date of its building—a friend described it as “a workhouse at the time of the Heptarchy”.

At Munstead Wood Gertrude Jekyll was to live the rest of her long life, and from there her influence spread all over the gardens of England, and some few on the Continent and

“A LITTLE
FORMIDABL
E”

in America. The list of gardens she designed completely, or -----
altered, amounts to well over 300, and ranges from Arundel and Lindisfarne
Castles to a window box for a factory lad in a northern town. Many of these
gardens belonged to houses that had been built or altered by Sir Edwin
Lutyens.

To the visible example of these gardens, great and small, Gertrude Jekyll
added many other services to the cause she had so truly at heart, the
increased beauty of English gardens, and the cherishing of beauty in
domestic living. She raised fine strains of plants, she rescued sweet old roses
and cottage flowers from oblivion. She wrote a delightful book called
Flower Decoration in the Home to show—and it needed showing at that
time—that there were other methods of floral decoration than carnations or
leafless sweet peas, wedded to gypsophilum in topply little vases. She
herself used all sorts of unusual receptacles for flowers with charming
effect.

Her eyes were never strong—even early portraits show her with that
slight frown caused by poor sight, and as she grew older her eyes became
poorer. But her indefatigable and courageous spirit surmounted her
difficulties. She was obliged to give up her career as an artist, and to lay
aside her embroidery needle. So instead of using paint and a brush, she took
a spade and used flowers for her colours. And for indoor occupation, as she
grew older, she made pictures of shells, which she could do as much by
feeling as sight—and her shell pictures are really works of art, as those
know who have seen them. Irrepressible she was, and a little formidable, as
William Nicholson's portrait of her shows, with the plain banded hair,
crowned by its black velvet bow, the dark glasses, the double chin, the
substantial figure, the argumentative looking hands, as though she were
saying, "I don't agree with you at all".

One of her friends gives a delightful little glimpse of this genuine
countrywoman: "In the first years of our acquaintance, before the days of
motors, she would sometimes drive me out. . . She drove a stout cob in a
rough kind of dog-cart (I think it was called a tax-cart) with her name and
address painted on it. I thought it rather a perilous proceeding, as her sight
was even then very defective and extremely short. But we never came to
grief, and with that astonishing power of quick perception which is often
lacking in people with good sight, she never missed the smallest flower or
object of interest on the wayside."

She was almost to exaggeration the rooted countrywoman. Her last visit
to London was in the year 1904, and though she lived for another twenty-

eight years after that, nothing would induce her to go there again, even for a day.

It is one of the permanently pleasant things to think of Gertrude Jekyll, full of enthusiasms even in old age, living in the place she had chosen, like a benevolent, if slightly severe, fairy-godmother to all those who loved gardens. She and her friend William Robinson were born at a time when English gardens and gardening had sunk to a level of formal dullness it had not known for generations. Between them they brought about a transformation in planning and in horticultural methods that resulted in a definite addition to the beauty of the English scene.

Those nine English countrywomen, in their various ways, wielding such modest implements as a pen or a garden spade—in the case of Mary Russell Mitford and Gertrude Jekyll the two implements were used alternatively—have both recorded and added to the charms of their native land. Their circumstances were mostly restricted, and their influence may have seemed small, but they have taken a permanent place in English affections, partly because they are themselves so essentially English, and such a triumphant vindication of the English spinster's capacity—though two of them, it must be admitted, were married—to be happy and to be a source of happiness to others. We feel proudly that no other country could have bred them, with their peculiar gifts and qualities.

III

TWO LITTLE TALES

THE OLD COTTAGE

Anyone who marries an unknown artist must expect to be poor. I had done it and I did not regret it, though cheap and dreary lodgings were a trial to both of us for the first two years of our marriage. We both longed to live in the country, in our native Sussex—to have an old cottage, however small and inconvenient and lacking in modern comforts, that we could call our own, where David could paint his landscapes in peace, and I could keep house and garden in the way that appealed to me. Whenever David sold a picture we always escaped into Sussex and went exploring in the remoter—and, as we hoped, cheaper—parts of our desired county. Marvellous treasures of ancient domestic architecture we discovered hidden away down deep lanes that apparently led nowhere, or set, sometimes, on the edge of wide lonely commons. We were always falling in love with some old farm or cottage, and sighing, as we hung on the gate or peeped over a quickset hedge, “How lovely to live there!” By means of a request for a drink of water, or a light for David’s pipe, we often gained admission to the interiors, and a few judicious words of praise would sometimes result in our being taken over the whole domain.

Then as affairs prospered a little with us, and David began to sell a few more of his oils, he acquired a second-hand motorcycle, with a side-car, rather like a perambulator, for my use, and thereby our range of exploration was much increased. Our desire to live in some remote and ancient abode was also increased, and together we looked at many likely and unlikely places. But there was always some objection. We found, as so many others have found, that the perfect abode, apparently strewn in numbers all over the country as one walks or motors, has a curious quality of elusiveness, retreats from the eager hand outstretched to grasp it, and is never in the house agents’ books.

But one morning in late January we set off to see a cottage which David had heard of that seemed full of interesting possibilities. It was rather at the “back of beyond”, in a part of Sussex we did not know. So with a map and somewhat vague directions we set off in quest of the cottage, full of hope and excitement—in no breast does hope spring so eternally as in that of the house-hunter.

The morning had opened with a white frost which quickly melted in the sun. The Downs, remote to the southwards, looked more like dreams than anything tangible. As our motor outfit noisily (that is the worst of them) gobbled up the miles, the Downs became ever more remote, and suddenly were not there at all. It became surprisingly cold, and soon we were enveloped in an icy fog and unable to see more than a yard or two beyond the hedgerows on either side of the road, with here and there a grey and naked oak standing up in a field with an air of ghostly unreality. This mist delayed our progress; we had to go cautiously, and began to lose our sense of direction. We passed through a small hamlet which in the mist had the appearance of not really existing, especially as there were no human beings visible of whom to ask a question as to our direction—probably they had all wisely gone indoors, as the cold had become curiously penetrating. A sign-post which next loomed out of the translucent obscurity proved to have only the three final letters of its name remaining, but as they were the three final letters of the village we sought, we felt the affair was hopeful. The key of the desired cottage was kept at the forge in this village, and as we rode into its one narrow street, the mist disappeared as mysteriously as it had come down, the pale January afternoon sun shone upon us again.

We were given the key by the blacksmith, and told that Yoke Cottage was three miles down a long winding lane.

LONELY
COTTAGE

“A bit by hersen, her be,” said the blacksmith with a slow smile, “some finds her, and some doan’t.”

She was indeed by herself. The three miles gave much more the impression of being six. The road was hardly more than a cart-track, and it dipped down to a “splash” of water, and then slowly rose and climbed to a sort of tableland, from which, far away, and most unreal, as if it did not belong to this world at all, we saw the long, mild fine of the South Downs. There was no sign of habitation, till suddenly behind a hedge of holly, very old and thick, which appeared surprisingly among the ragged unpleached quickset, we saw the cottage of our quest—there could be no doubt that it was Yoke Cottage, even before we saw the half-obliterated lettering on the low swing gate set amidst the holly hedge.

David leapt down, his eyes shining. “This looks something like!” he said, gazing eagerly at the lattice windows which bulged unevenly with age, at the soft old bricks, the sloping tiles of the steep-pitched roof, on which grew a clump or two of house leek. “Nobody has been messing this bit of old Sussex about, thank the Lord!”

We pushed open the protesting little gate, and followed the path round to the side of the cottage, which proved bigger than we expected from the front, as a wing, obviously the oldest part of the building, ran backwards for some depth, built partly of flint work, and with a stone slab roof. The nail-studded oaken door, set in a deep recess, was obviously untouched Tudor. This discovery enchanted us both, and David pulled off his big gauntlet glove into which he had stuffed the key, to save the bother of unbuttoning his leather coat. But the key was not there. With an exclamation of annoyance he began looking on the moss-grown path, thinking it had fallen out as he pulled off his glove. We searched the path carefully up to where the motorcycle stood in the lane. It had fallen out on the way down from the blacksmith's, that was only too evident—the question was where, and how far away. We walked back some distance, but it was not visible, so we returned again to the cottage, determined to break in. We pushed at the heavy oak door on the chance of its not being fastened. But it was firmly and undoubtedly closed. We looked through the small-paned windows—it was difficult to see very much, but glimpses of a great open hearth, of thumb-latch doors of the ancient pattern, of stone floors and dark beams, and a bread-oven, increased our desire to enter. At one end of the cottage was a huge outside chimney, completely hooded in ivy. The windows at that end were much smaller and the glass had a faint iridescence that somehow did not please me, though David pointed it out with satisfaction as proof of its untouched age.

“Yes,” said I, “but it has a curiously gloomy look. I’m not really sure that I’d care to live here—the rooms inside must feel as if a thunderstorm were always brewing.”

As we could not get inside the cottage we went to look at the garden—if garden it could be called. There was a long stretch of rough and utterly neglected grass on two different levels, there was a small orchard of lichened and twisted apple trees, and a few old shrubs of juniper and grey rosemary, twisted like witches. We found when we broke off a few twigs from the apple trees that they were all dead, and dry and brittle as matchwood.

“And do you notice that there aren’t any flowers?” I said.

“Well, do you expect flowers in January?” David answered rather irritably.

“No. But you can see where flowers have been and will be again, even in the middle of winter.”

“Well, I suppose nobody planted them here.”

It was evident nobody had, and for some curious reason I did not like it.

A long mossy path led to a shabby, paintless, high gate in a tall old yew hedge at the bottom of the garden, and we walked along it to see what lay beyond the gate. It opened, rather surprisingly, straight on to a wide common sprinkled with gorse bushes, very peaceful and pleasant in the pale afternoon sunshine. Two low old cottages were half tucked away in a dip in the ground to the left-hand side.

LOST KEY

“Very nice, this,” said David.

“Yes, I’ll be quite glad to know we’ve got some neighbours, if we are going to live here,” I said, pointing to the cottages.

“Neighbours?” asked David, “What do you mean? There isn’t a house in sight!”

I looked at him, thinking he was joking, and again pointed out the two cottages, with their chimneys smoking in a comfortable manner.

David looked puzzled, and rather annoyed. “Don’t be silly, darling.”

He took my arm firmly, shut the garden gate, and we returned up the path. “Well, I’ve got to find that wretched key before it gets too dark. It must be on the road somewhere—it’s not very likely there’ll be anyone about to pick it up. I’ll just take the car and run back and look for it. You may as well stay here. I shan’t be long, and I’m determined to get into this house before we go back.”

I agreed to this, partly because I felt extremely cold, and partly because I wanted another look by myself at those cottages on the common.

When David had gone I went to the bottom of the garden and opened the gate again. There could be no doubt about the cottages. I saw a woman in a full blue skirt come out of one of them and go to the well.

Still feeling very cold I went and sat on a low wooden bench inside the recessed porch of the cottage. I sat there for some time, hugging my arms for warmth, and looking across the desolate garden, with the spectral apple trees lying just within my field of vision. After a while I got an uncomfortable impression that the trees were advancing towards me, but when I looked directly at them they were as they ought to be, in the place where they had been planted.

The sun was drawing down towards the horizon, and the sky, which had been pale watery blue, was taking a strange threatening brownish tint in which the sun appeared like a disk of tarnished tin. I did not like the look of the weather; it had an appearance that suggested earthquakes and hurricanes had this been the tropics instead of temperate Sussex. I began to think that David had been a long time—I began to wish urgently that he would return. I was just making up my mind to go and meet him, when suddenly I felt the grasp of a hand on my shoulder.

I was sitting a little sideways, my back to the oaken door, looking across the pathway up which anyone must come. No one had come up the path. The hand came from behind me. I jumped up in terror—the feel of that hand seemed to burn through the thick wool of my coat. I swung round to the door, and was certain I saw a faint movement as of closing it. In a panic I sprang at the door and pulled at the handle—was there somebody in the house? The door was firm and unyielding as before. I fell back, and the next thing I knew I was running out of the gate, down the hill, panting, scared incredibly in the open daylight, on the open road.

Half-way down the long hill I met David racing up as hard as he could go. When he saw me he slammed on the brake and fell off, clutching me in his arms.

“Thank God!” he said.

“What is it?” I gasped.

“The old wing of that cottage isn’t there—it was burnt down forty years ago, and all those apple trees, they were scorched dead by the heat. Nobody has lived in the other part of the cottage since, though people have tried to.”

“Was anyone burnt in it?” I asked, with a horror gripping me.

David paused. “Yes,” he said reluctantly, “an old woman who lived there alone.”

THE MANOR MILL

Joseph Hammond was a solid successful business man, not burdened with much imagination, and his cheerful, active wife was a fitting mate for him. But if not imaginative, they had enough perception of social values to realise what were the proper and popular things to do and to possess, as their increasing wealth enlarged their social opportunities. A large and comfortable modern villa facing Wimbledon Common no longer suited their needs and ambitions—something old, something with “atmosphere”, in the depths of the country, which high-powered cars rendered no longer

inconveniently remote—with a smart service flat in town, so that one did not get “out of touch”—was what the Hammonds desired. The trouble was that most of their socially climbing friends all seemed to want the same things, and had snapped up the best bargains within convenient range of London. But after some searching Mr. and Mrs. Hammond found an ancient farmhouse, which had once been an Elizabethan manor, parts of which went back to a much remoter period. The whole place was dilapidated, but with the assistance of a clever young architect, who possessed the necessary number of letters after his name, and his own ample means, Mr. Hammond proceeded to make it what he considered “comfortable”.

Wykeforde Manor was on the banks of a river which once had turned a mill, as was mentioned in the Domesday Survey of the Conqueror. The mill had vanished, but the water which once had ground corn for Norman lord and Saxon serf, was made to provide electric light and heat for Mr. Hammond. The ancient river turned on light in Mrs. Hammond’s wardrobes and store-cupboards the moment the doors were opened, and also provided ice in the battleship-like refrigerators, and heat for drying and ironing in the private laundry which once had been a cow-byre. From which it will be seen that no modern improvements were lacking in the ancient manor house.

But the antique also received due honour. Mr. Hammond knew what was due to himself and his house. He and his architect flung themselves upon the walls, ripped off clodded layers of wallpaper, uncovered ancient beams, revealed cavernous fireplaces, and made fortunate discoveries of hidden panelling. They scraped off paint, and pickled discoloured oak, and restored everything, as far as possible, to what it had been in “great Eliza’s golden time.” But while beams and rafters were uncovered, Mr. Hammond put running hot and cold water into each bedroom, though the coloured marble basins and the silver-plated taps had a somewhat curious air against dark beams and whitewash. But the curtains were Tudor reproductions in linen and embroidery. An immense refectory table, with carved and bulbous legs, carved oak chairs—extremely uncomfortable, but very handsome—and oak coffers, gave due solemnity to the dining-room. Cow-byres became loggias; the rick-yard was transformed into hard tennis-courts. The vegetable garden, with its high old red-brick walls, and its tangle of gooseberry bushes and cabbages and parsley, was made at great expense into a Dutch garden, with a sunken lily pond, paved paths, with stone cannon balls set at intervals on a low stone balustrade. A wide shallow flight of steps led down to a sweep of turf and a long herbaceous bordered walk by the side of the river. It was all very costly and pleasant, and slightly incongruous.

Having accomplished this extremely expensive “restoration”—Mr. Hammond subscribed liberally to the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings—and made himself his little “show place” in the country, the next thing was to show it to all his friends. This he and his wife proceeded to do with great thoroughness. Cars of all sizes and kinds rushed up to the entrance of the manor. Flocks of young men and maidens gambolled on the lawns, swam in the great new swimming pool, and drank cocktails in what had been cow-byres. Many of them enquired eagerly for the ghost.

THE
MISSING
GHOST

“Oh, Mr. Hammond, you can’t say there is no ghost here—why, the place is made for it! Just look at that dark little old room which you say was once the chapel. Do let Billy and me sleep there—I’m sure we would see something!”

Mr. Hammond himself had a feeling that his old Manor House was incomplete without a ghost, but on the whole he was relieved that there did not seem to be any manifestations of that nature—though interesting, ghosts were apt to be uncomfortable, and there was always great difficulty with servants in a so-called “haunted” house. He was himself reasonably sceptical on the subject of ghosts, though far away down at the bottom of his mind was the knowledge that he would certainly go considerably out of his way to avoid them. He would not even read a ghost story late at night, he felt it might disagree with him, as lobster mayonnaise, unhappily, disagreed with him.

He and his wife settled into the completed Wykeforde Manor just before Easter, and they had Easter parties and Whitsuntide parties, and steady week-end parties all through the summer months. It was a hot dry summer.

Their only son, rather a studious and shy young man, was at Oxford, and he refused to come near the Manor till the spate of parties was abated. He said the Long Vacation would be soon enough. His parents, who accepted everything he said, accepted this, and felt nothing but gratification when he wrote and said he was bringing his History Tutor down with him for a week at the beginning of the Vacation, and that he wanted the house free of guests, as his Tutor disliked miscellaneous society, and was engaged on writing a book on the agrarian conditions of the twelfth century, and as Wykeforde was mentioned in Domesday he would like an opportunity to study it in peace. So when young Hammond and his Tutor arrived at tea-time one hot sultry afternoon, the Manor was empty save for Mr. and Mrs. Hammond and the domestic staff.

Aubrey Wanstead was a tall thin person with untidy hair, serious eyes, and a pleasant manner. Young Hammond evidently thought that his parents ought to regard themselves as highly honoured to have him under their roof. Wanstead found the roof more interesting than his host and hostess, and was secretly distinctly shocked at many of the things they had done to the place.

They had tea in a loggia overlooking the Dutch garden, and beyond that the river flowed swiftly.

“Any trace of the old mill?” Wanstead asked Mr. Hammond, as he gazed at the river through the smoke of his cigarette.

“No, it was pulled down ages ago. Nothing left except a few cracked mill-stones in a bed of nettles. I was going to have them cemented into this paving, but the old cow-man—I’ve kept him on as an extra gardener, though he’s not much use, poor old chap—kept on telling me, ‘They be onlucky stones’, and Mrs. Hammond got the wind up.”

He smiled across at his wife.

“I don’t like unlucky things,” she said cheerfully.

After tea Mr. Hammond took his guest to inspect the house and gardens. It was a threatening, sultry afternoon, with cauliflower-headed clouds rolling up from the horizon.

“Looks and feels like a good old thunderstorm,” Mr. Hammond said, scanning the sky. “I hope there’ll be a storm, it would clear the air, and we need rain badly.”

Their pilgrimage brought them at that moment to the front of the Manor, where a broad gravel drive led through old wrought-iron gates to the beautiful Tudor front of the house. As they stood looking at it, their feet sank into a soft wet patch amid the well-rolled hardness of the drive.

A WET
PATCH

Mr. Hammond looked vexed. “I noticed that this morning, and when I asked the head gardener if anyone had been playing the fool with the hose, he told me that place was always wet at this time of year, even in a drought. I suppose it’s some underground spring.”

Wanstead gazed thoughtfully at the dark patch. “I don’t think underground springs usually break out in the driest season of the year, do they?”

“Perhaps they don’t”—Mr. Hammond still sounded vexed, he did not like anything defective about the place on which he had spent so much hard-

earned money—"but McNair says it only lasts a day or two, and then dries up. Still, it's a nuisance to have the entrance sopping like this, and I must get them to put in some draining tiles."

The evening was oppressive and heavy—the storm still delayed—and conversation dragged. Wanstead pleaded a headache and retired early. His bedroom looked on the entrance and the graceful wrought-iron gates, which Mr. Hammond had told him had been found fallen off their hinges and buried in long grass and nettles. He sat at his open window for some time, his eyes constantly drawn to the curious patch of wetness in the drive, showing dark against the dry gravel. He felt oddly oppressed and heavy-spirited. He decided to go to bed, and slipped between the cool linen sheets of his carved four-poster bed, whose sixteenth century angularities were softened by the most luxurious of mattresses and pillows. But the comfort of his bed did not prove sufficient to induce sleep, and after tossing and turning he again got up and sat by his window. But the feeling of oppression and almost apprehension so increased upon him as he sat there that he returned to bed, switched on the light, and tried to immerse himself in a book. Somewhere between two and three o'clock he managed to get to sleep, but woke up next morning very unrefreshed.

After breakfast he escaped for a solitary stroll, and as he went down the wide flight of stone steps, his eye was drawn again to the wet patch on the dry gravel. It had an odd appearance, and a few moments afterwards, encountering a bent old gardener, he made a remark about it.

"Eh," the old man answered, "her bain't no spring—winterbournes there be; whoever heard tell of a summerbourne?"

"What is it, then?" asked Wanstead, for the gardener spoke as if he knew.

"Sin, it be," the old man answered startingly, "Drownin' it be—only he doan't know naught of that." He jerked his head towards the house, sufficiently indicating who was in his mind.

"But what do you mean?" was Wanstead's not unnatural question.

"Oh, I bain't a-tellin' nothin; this day of all days; tain't lucky. You keep your eyes open and your ears; you be one o' them as ain't so thick in the yead as some be." Again his own head jerked in the direction of the Manor House.

Wanstead could get nothing more out of him, except the question as to which room the guest was sleeping in. When he heard it overlooked the

main entrance he nodded and said, "That be all right. You come and see I termorrer, and then it's not unbethinkable as I'll tell 'ee someut."

Wanstead's interest and curiosity were considerably aroused, and he spent the day finding out all he could of the history of the Manor. Mr. Hammond could not tell him much—antiquarian research was not his line. But young Hammond took his tutor to call on the Rector, who had given some study to local history, and who told him several interesting things about the ancient Manor, and of the Manor mill, which from the Conquest had ground the corn of the Manor's lord, and of the serfs who toiled in the great open fields at their "Boon-works". There was a Lord Ulwin at the time of Rufus, of whom nothing was known save a dim memory of ruthlessness.

LORD
ULWIN

"Village memories in a place like this, so little altered," said the Rector, "are curiously tenacious, and the village mothers, till a generation or so ago, had a habit of threatening naughty children with 'Allum,' who for no known reason, was the village bogey. It seems to me that Allum may be a memory of the wicked Lord Ulwin."

Wanstead was inclined to agree with this view when next morning he had his promised conversation with the old gardener, who was hovering about the entrance drive, evidently waiting for him.

He pointed to the patch of wet gravel and said mysteriously, "It'll be dry by ternight—last night was the third 'un, and he didn't knock."

"Knock?" said Aubrey Wanstead, "Who?"

"Him what Allum drowned."

Wanstead's heart missed a beat—what was he on the track of?

"I wish you'd tell me all about it, and begin at the beginning."

"Well, you come over to my pottin' shed an' I will—I doan't want him to hear about it." "Him" obviously being the old man's employer.

Ensnconced in the loamy-smelling semi-darkness of the potting-shed, Wanstead pieced together like the bits of a mosaic a curious tale.

"A girt long time ago—'underds of years ago, I rackon—Allum he lived at this yere Manor. A girt cruel sort of a man he be, by all accounts, and nobody mid go agin him if they didn't want to go off sudden-like."

The old man went on to say that there was a mill at the turn of the river then—that was true, thought Wanstead, remembering the facsimile of

Domesday Book for the County he had seen the day before in the Rector's study—and the miller “though he wasn't no lord, was one as liked his own way too, and he didn't like some of Allum's ways nohow. Well, one day he and Allum had a bit of a argiment, and Allum, he was riding of his girt white 'oss, as could swim like a fish, and he just rode the miller into the river and drowned him dead.”

“Yes?” said Wanstead.

“Well, 'twas this time o' year, like, and for three nights there's always that wet patch at the door. 'Tis the miller come for Allum, or those as wears his shoes, to dround 'em in the river, same as he was.”

“Whatever foundation have you for such a story?”

“Well, sir, not many knows it nowadays, and some folks as does laughs at it—but the wet's there for all to see, ain't it? And three of the owners has been drownded in the river since my father were a lad—o' course, if they ain't here when the miller come it be all right.”

Wanstead felt distinctly relieved that he had seen his host at breakfast that morning.

“And the wet patch will be dry by to-night?”

“Aye—and then it's all right for another year, like.”

No great while after this, Messrs. Wedell & Mumford offered for sale in the pages of *Country Life*, “The Ancient and Historic Manor House of Wykeforde, mentioned in Domesday, and only recently lavishly restored and fitted with every modern convenience regardless of expense, thirteen bedrooms, four bathrooms, three reception rooms. Accommodation for six cars. Own electric light and power. Fishing in the river Wyke.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

[The end of *Cottage Tale* by Esther Meynell]