

By A SHROPSHIRE POSTMAN

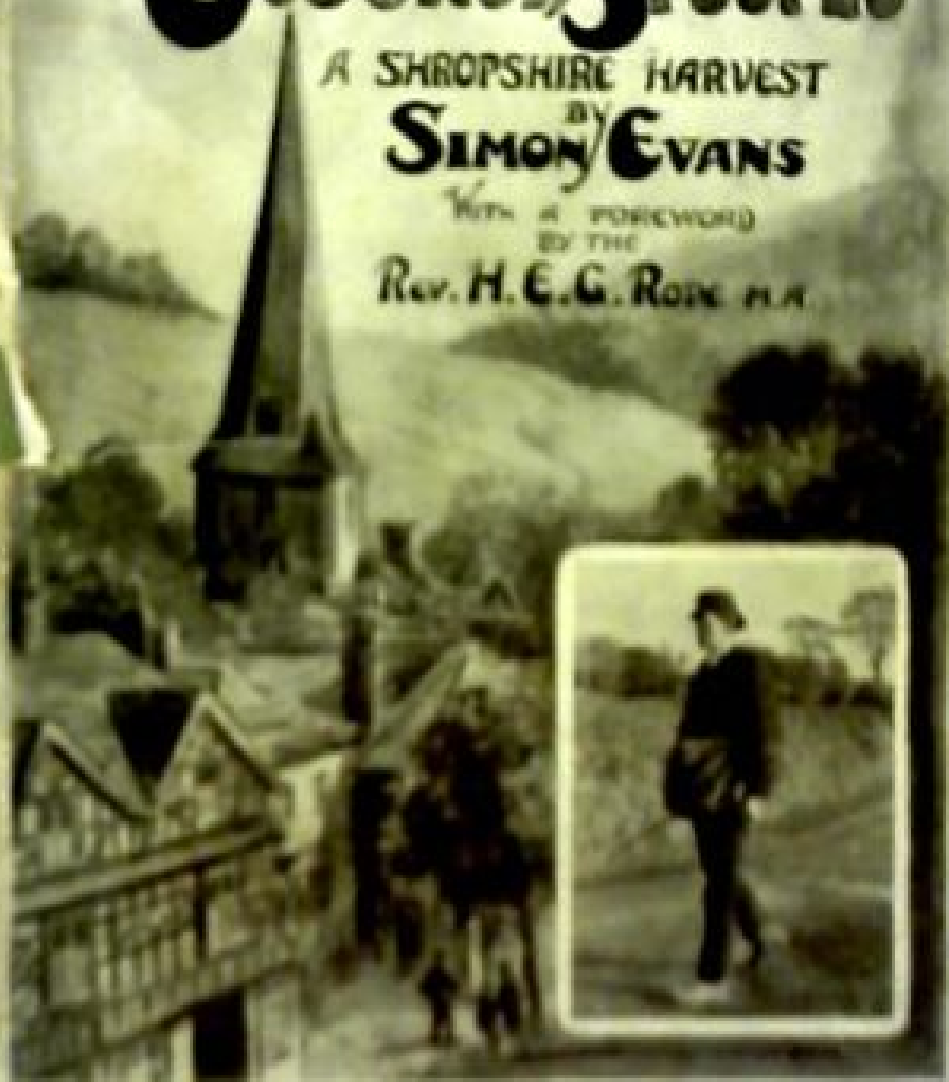
ROUND ABOUT THE CROOKED STEEPLE

A SHROPSHIRE HARVEST

BY
SIMON EVANS

WITH A FOREWORD
BY THE

REV. H. E. G. ROSE, M.A.



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THE CROOKED STEEPLE

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A Shropshire Harvest

BY
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WITH A FOREWORD BY
THE REV. H. E. G. ROPE, M.A.

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DEDICATED AS A TOKEN OF GRATITUDE TO

MISS SHANNIE CRANTON

WHO FIRST DREW HER FATHER'S
ATTENTION TO MY EFFORTS ON
THE WIRELESS AND THUS
INSPIRED THE PUBLICATION
OF THIS
VOLUME

FOREWORD

THE PRIEST, THE POSTMAN, AND THE PUBLISHER

IN mid-August of last year at Woodbridge in Suffolk my friend Father Shebbeare said to me, "here is something that will interest you, a man from your own neighbourhood," as he pointed out a newspaper report of a talk given upon the wireless about a country postman's outlook on life. I was attracted by a freshness and spontaneity quite unmistakable. On returning to Cleobury Mortimer I found a letter from the publisher of this work who had heard the talk itself which had greatly impressed him. The upshot was a visit paid by him to Cleobury at the end of the month and a very pleasant foregathering of priest, publisher and postman under the roof of that prince of hostelryes, the King's Arms, which we all heartily commend to any who appreciate excellent fare, perfect cleanliness, homely quiet and a rare old-world courtesy together with astonishingly moderate charges. Let fashion flaunt her garish outward gilding; here the fine gold is within.

I had the pleasure of correspondence with Mr. Cranton in the remote year 1916, when he offered on my behalf a little volume of poetry, *Religionis Ancilla*—one order, he told me, bespoke *Religious Amelia!*—to a public not over-grateful.

"Well, British Public, ye who like me not
(God love you!) and will have your proper laugh
At the dark question, laugh it! I laugh first."

I had not known Mr. Evans except by sight. *Virgilium vidi tantum.*

Now I was 'brought acquainted' with his work also on that evening of pleasant memory. Again what struck me was its freshness and its utter sincerity. Here was a man who wrote from his heart and told us in excellent English what he had eagerly observed and deeply felt, a brother of the pen who had lived with the hills and skies, the fields and rivers, until the modern city life, that pleases such multitudes who know not of God's handiwork, appeared as the Slough of Despond from which he had happily escaped, a thing so unnatural, so void of dignity and meaning, so divorced from normal historic humanity, so oppressive with its futile frenzy of noise and motion that one marvels how any thinking being can willingly endure it. An age that

has forgotten the Creator can find no joy in His visible creation, but seeks escape from the emptiness to which it has reduced ‘modern life’ in ever more restless distraction, more insane locomotion, the pace increasing the longing to escape which in its turn increases the pace. “That way madness lies.”

Mr. Evans has not only a love of nature but a power of utterance, a limpid style, unspoiled by artifice or preciosity, akin to the river he loves. To his Welsh blood and his Welsh mountain-home he owes very much, much also to his own reading of our best English writers. The fearful experiences of the Great War (and the hateful ‘war propaganda’) have deepened a natural tendency to reflection and enlarged his range of thought. To this we owe the beautiful *War Days in a Derbyshire Village*.

The things that matter, the things that endure, these are constantly with him, the abiding elements of human life under the sun and the stars, birth, death, sorrow, joy, the life of field and fold, of forge and homely workshop, the primal and needful occupations, all “looked on by the silent stars.” To such a soul the whirligig of fashion, the Bacchanal riot of our speed-drunken modern world are but a wearisome insanity, quite literally “full of sound and fury” and signifying very much ado about nothing.

And here we have one who has felt intimately the continuing marvel of

Dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even,
With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,
And solemn midnight’s tingling silentness,

and perceives dimly, all too dimly as yet, that “the Heavens shew forth the glory of God, and the firmament declareth the work of his hands. Day to day uttereth speech, and night to night shareth knowledge.” How rarely found to-day is that reverent delight in “the infinite shining heavens” made evident in these pages.

Let me hasten to add that Mr. Evans is no unapproachable recluse, but a very companionable man and a shrewd humorist, witness his *Lofty Buys a Car*, a man at ease among his country and market-town neighbours. Cleobury Mortimer, thank God, is small enough to remain human. Its indwellers are few enough to be neighbours and many enough to form a homely civilised society. (These two epithets, the world may one day rediscover, are correlatives.) The little bourg has no call to envy the dehumanized robots of any ‘efficient’ Shylockopolis. And even were its speech but “rustic cackle” (of that let the reader judge for himself), there are many educated persons who would find such better by far than the ‘talkies’ and the ‘best sellers’ of flatulent “Progress.”

If the reader desires local characters and local colour, the Bellocian humanity of a still surviving part of English England, let him turn to *William P. P. Mortimer*, or a *Country Market*, if war memories and reflections thereupon to *Soldier*, *War Days in a Derbyshire Village*, and the poignant poem headed *Memories*. If there is a touch of Shelley in their author, there is also a touch of Charles Lamb and Dickens.

This gives a richly varied interest to the whole. Again, he has broken new ground. Many an author has made some neighbourhood his own. Hardy has his Wessex, Belloc the downs and streams and coasts of Sussex, and Blackmore his Devonshire.

But no one, not even A. E. Housman, whose *Shropshire Lad* has mention of the Clee Hills, has told us yet in prose or rhyme the remote, tranquil, and appealing beauty of the Rea Valley with its rippling waters and its chiming place-names. I count it an honour to be asked to write an introductory word for the first book dedicated to its happily unguidebooked beauty. Heaven forbid, however, that the Rea Valley should suffer the desolation called "development" by the ghouls of "Progress." Assuredly all charms do fly at the first touch of their abhorred pseudosophy.

The mention of the *Shropshire Lad*, perhaps our county's greatest poetic classic, leads me to add that while our author has felt its poignant beauty and marvellous Greeklike finish, he is free from the morbid pessimism of negation that too often informs it, although the poem *Memories* gives glimpses of a mood that might indeed have developed in that direction, but happily has not done so.

It behoves me to say also, as one who has known by experience a state of mind closely resembling the author's, that I have written these words with a confident hope that Mr. Evans will travel further in his contemplations, will pass from sometimes hesitant quest to glad affirmation of "a presence that is not to be put by, . . . a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused," that he will find, as the writer of this foreword found, that Nature alone is not enough, and fails us in our great need, that Nature is the work and not the Artist, the song and not the Singer, the expression and not the Person; that we are to see by "the lamp Beauty the light God," that every sincere and reverent lover of God's handiwork in nature and in man learns sooner or later

“But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart . . .
Nigh and nigh draws the chase,
With unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy.”

I may not at present say more, I cannot in conscience say less. The great classic poetry of Christian Wales is full of rightly ordered love of Nature.

In conclusion, to all who love fresh heartfelt delight in nature and in unsophisticated, unacademical, “unsped-up” humanity, to all who love what is left of English England and hope that one day, please God, it will return, I heartily and confidently commend these pages.

H. E. G. ROPE.

MAWLEY HALL,
CLEOBURY MORTIMER, SHROPSHIRE,
January, 1931.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I WISH to thank the British Broadcasting Corporation for their permission to include in this volume the talk "My Daily Round" which I broadcasted from 2 LO, and also the Editors of *The Liverpool Weekly Post*, *The Birmingham Mail*, *The Nottinghamshire Guardian* and *The Bookmark*, for their consent to the inclusion of essays which have appeared in their respective papers.

I WALK THE VALLEY OF THE REA

I WALK THE VALLEY OF THE REA

*I walk the Valley of the Rea
And many friends I have with me,
A thousand birds that wake the morn,
A whispering breeze amid the corn.
Against the sky, the head of Clee
And trees that wave their arms at me.
A gusty wind on lonely hills,
The music of the little rills.
The River, gurgling 'neath the bridges
And golden gorse on windy ridges.
A lark ascending to the sun
The skies a-changing as they run.
A "rainbow like a jewelled arm"
And Moses Cadd of Detton Farm,
And when I see a starry sky
I pray that I may never die.*

*The Sun, the Stars, the Wind, the Rain,
Gave me back my life again.
Give me these and country fairs
And I am rid of worldly cares.
Give me health and eyes to see
I'll ask no more of Heaven.*

GOD MADE THE COUNTRY, MAN THE TOWN

GOD MADE THE COUNTRY, MAN THE TOWN

“In faith and food and books and friends
Give every soul her choice,
For such as follow divers ends
In divers lights rejoice.”

—*Kipling.*

SINCE the war ended, until four years ago, I lived in and out of hospitals. Old iron had been dug from various parts of my body and wounds refused to heal. That new and awful curse of the war, poison gas, had left wounds upon my lungs.

In 1926, after spending six months with other unfortunate ex-soldiers in a convalescent home on the South coast, I was advised to go and live quietly in a quiet place.

A little walking was advised to strengthen my weakened legs, fresh air and rest were advised to strengthen my lungs—and I had not the means of living unless I worked.

On my return to Birkenhead I saw my chief, the postmaster, and after much talking and many interviews with doctors who disagreed I won—a complete change.

A rural postman was required in South Shropshire. His headquarters would be the old village of Cleobury Mortimer and his “round” was the Rea Valley.

Now I am that postman and I walk the Valley of the Rea from Walfords Bridge to Dudlick Mill.

Not long ago I returned from a holiday on the Merseyside, and some little talk I had with old friends in Liverpool has tempted me to write some reasons for a statement I made.

I said I was no longer of the town. I said I cared not if I never saw a city or a town again and that I was, by adoption, a countryman, and I added (much to their annoyance),

“The folk that live in Liverpool,
Their heart is in their boots;
They go to work like lambs, they do,
Because the hooter hoots.”

• • • • • •

Ever since I was a child the miles and miles of bricks and mortar, the smoking chimney stacks, the factory hooters, the blaring fog horns of the River, the screeching of tramcars, the tired and worn appearance of the majority of people of every class, all these, and much more, were reasons for my depression of spirits.

I could not, try how I would, really and truly enjoy life in the midst of such ugliness, strife and distress, in such a driven kind of world.

The hurry and bustle alone was always a weight on my mind and always a sense of the unrightness of things was with me. I would, I thought, rather be

“Honest John Thomas,
A hedger and ditcher,
Who, altho’ he was poor,
Ne’er wished to be richer.”

I will always remember the feeling of peace and contentment which was mine on the day I settled in Cleobury four years ago. It was a calm happiness far above the happiness which a seaside holiday or a music hall could give.

The knowledge that I was no longer a single cog on the wheel of a great machine but an individual in this wondrous pleasant countryside gave me a new spirit of calmness, a deep and quiet peacefulness of the inner self. A little of this peace of mind is worth a thousand so-called happy days.

Cleobury is beautifully situated and the people, shall I say, mix well. (Can any town say as much of their people.) I admit it may be because we have so small a population that two circles of society would be hardly possible.

On a summer’s evening I ask no better company than that of the members of our bowling club.

Almost every evening you can find a policeman, a schoolmaster or two, several farmers, the bank manager, Slack-rope the sailor, the butcher, the baker, “mine hosts” from the Inns, the doctor, the lawyer, the saddler, and the postman.

What a collection of characters!

If Dickens were alive now he could, if he were to visit Cleobury, write a companion volume to *Pickwick Papers*.

Our games at home are pleasant but our games against the teams of nearby market towns and villages are feasts of fun.

Even our journeys out and returning are such as the town could not supply.

An ancient Ford car leads the way, followed by traps, gigs, dog-carts and single horsemen.

Nowhere near a town is there a Wayside Inn like Hopton's "Crown."

"I would have you know John Farlow's 'Crown'
Where the road runs up and the brook runs down."

It is strange but true that, no matter to what point of the compass we have travelled, we always contrive to return *via* the Vale of Hopton.

Here our old car and perhaps a trap or two draw up and our men dismount. "Ham and egg supper, John," is the order. "Certainly gentlemen," replies John. Then in the quaint old dining room we seat ourselves.

Through the open window we hear the brook babbling over the stones beneath the old bridge and the music of the wind is heard in the tall trees.

What a supper! Perhaps mushrooms are added, perhaps,—well we trust Old John and we have never had cause to regret our trust.

Old Ira Offin, at the head of the table, is seated in a great armchair which was surely made to fit his huge back and lower limbs.

He serves, and as each dish is handed to him his large round apple-red face becomes one great smile and when he smiles his cheeks become still more red, they swell and rise until his eyes appear to be no more than two slits beneath his eyebrows.

The compliment he pays to every dish of food is the same "Ho! Ho! A lovely fish, my boys, a lovely fish."

Such praise from Old Ira Offin is praise indeed for he is a keen fisherman and he considers a dish of silver eels the most tasty and appetising food known to this world.

Could Liverpool, I ask my friends, provide such simple fare in so appetising a manner? and where in the City would I find such jovial company?

And what of the atmosphere? What of the characters? What of the great old kitchen where home-brewed ale and cider are served? What of the blackened beams and hams and onions on the racks?

One can call upon Old John some quiet evening as I often do, find a seat on the ancient screen where old men sit to drink their “zidur” and talk of “hosses.” Perhaps “Old George” their famous strong man (that was) now a hearty upright fellow of 87 summers will talk to you of his younger days and “Eh!,” he will say, “I wish, siree, I wish a wur a young chappie agin’,” and with great gusto he will lose himself in his own youth—

“But most of all I would have you rest
At the ‘Crown’ by night then you’d like it best—
When the lamp is lit, and the shadows grow,
And Old John talks of long ago,
For then I know you’d love the ‘Crown’
Where the road runs up and the brook runs down.”

• • • • •

II

Our old village has neither a theatre nor a picture house (for which blessing, many thanks) but could anything be more humourous or produce more hearty laughter than the tripe and onion suppers followed by impromptu concerts held in the club room of the “Old Blue Boar”?

Every man who has dined must perform, he must sing, recite, tell a good story or amuse the company in some way.

Kipling’s “Snarleyow” may be followed by a Christmas Carol. Harry Markham’s hundred year old comic song (still as comic as ever it was) may be followed by a most excellent rendering of “Mary.”

Tim Hearty, who has the longest legs in the county, may stand upon his head on the piano stool and while in this position drink a large tankard of ale.

But always the tit-bit of the evening is Old Tom Reader. His head appears to be carefully balanced on top of his long thin neck. He has lived his whole life long in and out of stables, always with horses, until now, in both action and gait, he resembles a horse. His long thin legs, slightly bent at the knees, must surely begin their growth somewhere above the waistline. His song is known only to himself and only he knows how many verses it contains, each one of which begins,

“Gently! Gently! Gently does the trick,
Softly! Slowly, never be too quick.”

and there is much good advice given with each and every verse.

It is only long and continued applause which drives Tom away from the piano. He finds his pewter pot filled with best home-brewed, and drinks the health of all present in one long draught. Thus refreshed he turns again to the piano, and now the applause is louder than ever, bowing low and with many expressions of thanks Tom now resumes his seat and his pewter pot.

Could Liverpool or any city provide me with such as this?

• • • • •

Again, what of the wit and humour filling the air of Wednesday evenings.

After the cattle, sheep and pigs are all bought and sold and the markets closed then sit quietly in any old inn about the village with your ears well cocked. If the dialect is not too difficult you will hear the wit and wisdom, the humour and sarcasm of these country folk.

Can the dealers of the Midland cities make any advance against them? not one inch.

Such evenings are real entertainments.

• • • • •

If a city friend should call upon me I ask him whither shall we walk. Is it a morning stroll to Mamble or shall we

“——leave the road to Mamble
And take another road
To as good a place as Mamble
Be it lazy as a toad:
Who travels Worcester country
Takes any place that comes
When April tosses bounty
To the cherries and the plums.”

During the walk we can call on a farmer friend or two and sample his cider and perry. How quickly do the hours fly away on such excursions.

Later in the day a pleasant walk is across the Common to the old-world villages snuggled at the foot of Clee Hill. Sparkling brooks and rushing springs are everywhere.

Not long ago it chanced, on such a walk, a friend and I were surprised by a storm. We took shelter in an old farmhouse, and here we were happy

prisoners until almost midnight. Now we had twelve good miles to walk. Refusing the offer of a pony and trap we set off for Cleobury by way of lanes and footpaths.

The call of the corncrake would scatter our thoughts and set us talking for a while, then the stillness of the countryside would lead us again into quietness.

Occasionally we heard the muffled barking of a dog; a fox or roving gipsy had disturbed the peace of some distant farmyard.

When passing through the spinneys we heard rustlings and stealthy movements. The wild life was alert at any sign of danger.

It was now a beautiful starlit night. Night has always been full of beauty for me, it is as if I feel the cool hand of the Creator calling a pause, a rest from the rush and bustle of the day. Thoughts come slowly and easily to me at night, never tumbling over each other as they do in the bright light of day.

Then high above a lark began to sing. We stood and searched the skies but could not find the bird. We followed the sound with our eyes, now to the left, now ahead, now up, up so high the sound scarcely reached our ears, now it dropped, closer, closer, then up again,

“He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.”

We stood leaning against the soft hedge and stared above but we never found that bird. Perhaps it was a spirit, perhaps—well, what matter, we heard her song, we felt the thrill and—I thought of the miles of docks on the Merseyside, of the tramway cars at this early hour shaking the city into wakefulness. I thought of the smoking chimney pots, and of the many thousands of human beings who would soon fill the factories, offices, workshops and shipyards, and I thanked God it was my lot that day to walk the fair Valley of the Rea.

“God made the country and man made the town.”

My friends ask me how I live in such a quiet country and I wonder how they exist in their great hives of hurry.

From the top of a city building one can see mile upon mile of slated roofs and countless smoking chimneys: here I have miles and miles of “England’s green and pleasant land,” rolling pastures, yellow brown cornfields almost ready for the harvesters, while scattered here and there and darkly green as the distant woods are orchards full of ripening fruit.

My walks are not disturbed by hordes of clanging tramcars and bands of hooting taxicabs, I may hear the calves softly calling or the sheep and lambs bleating on the hillsides.

But some will say, "In the city we have museums, theatres and art galleries."

Is it art you wish for?

"What is art whereto we press,
In paint and prose and rhyme,
When Nature in her nakedness
Defeats us every time?"

Four years ago I was an almost hopeless invalid. When I suggested that I would improve my health by walking twenty miles of hill and dale per day, the doctors said, "Pure foolishness."

Am I still an invalid? No—I am as fit as the proverbial fiddle and after a long day walking am fresh and ready to join my friends in their sport.

The war certainly robbed me of much, but at the balance it may be that I have gained more than I lost, for here in this pleasant countryside I have new friends and I have found,

"Tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in everything."

MY DAILY ROUND

MY DAILY ROUND

THE old village of Cleobury Mortimer is almost as it was one hundred years ago. Excepting the few shopkeepers and their like all the men work in the fields, for it is the centre of a good farming country. Certainly the old-world atmosphere is broken into at times; for instance, the pair of steaming horses and the bright red van which brought the Royal Mail each morning have given way to the modern motor-car.

The local grocer is also the local postmaster, and soon after six o'clock each morning in the little room adjoining his store, my comrades and I prepare our day's work.

The nature of the country with its hills and dales, the winding River Rea with its many tributaries, and the position of the farmhouses are all reasons why the postmen of this district perform the whole of their duty on foot.

My outward journey is one of about twelve miles, but my calling places are few, for the Valley of the Rea (my round) is made up, for the most part, of large stock farms. My load is never a big one, ten or a dozen daily papers and a bundle of letters is my usual share.

The village and most of its inhabitants still sleep when I begin my walk by climbing School Hill. From its height I see the village below me nestling half in and half out of the Valley. The leaning spire of the old church is in the midst of a medley of vari-coloured roofs and gables. It has the appearance of a weather-beaten old shepherd silently contemplating his flock.

Each season of the year has its own beauties. On a winter's morning when the air is clean and cold and the ground frozen hard I can enjoy good hard walking and the warm glow which steals over my body is one of the joys of life.

When a thick hoar frost covers the countryside, every tree and hedgerow is a beautiful picture, every coppice and spinney is a miracle of delicate tracery.

Then comes the season of showers and sunshine; of April, glittering green, the poet sings:

“Laugh thy girlish laughter;
Then, the moment after,
Weep thy girlish tears!

Often a rainbow's end lies across Abdon Hill and circles the sky like a great jewelled arm and almost every morning the hillsides are dew pearled.

Summer follows on, now I meet young and old at work in the hayfields and the farm wagons carry great jars of cider slung beneath them.

When opportunity permits I walk along the cool brookside or near the Rea chattering gaily, as on he dashes and gurgles down the Valley.

Next comes Autumn when Nature's promises are fulfilled, the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness."

In the orchards surrounding the farmhouses the trees are loaded with fruit, occasionally a ripe apple or pear falls at my feet with a dull thud. As I pass the buildings I hear the gentle mooing and movements of the milking cows and the quick splashes of sound caused by the thin streams of milk quickly filling the milkers' pails.

How sweet is the morning air! How peaceful the countryside! At this hour (the morning at seven) and in this season, the only sounds are the flight and calls of birds, the music of the wind in the trees and the splash and gurgle of the sparkling waters of the brooks.

A few minutes walk from the Village brings me to a point where I leave the road and take to the footpaths. In the fields the cattle graze contentedly. "I think I could turn and live with animals, they do not sweat and whine about their condition, they do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins." My approach does not alarm them, even though my clothes brush them as I pass by, but, if I have a companion at my side they scamper away at once, they do not readily admit strangers into their trusting friendship.

Now I climb a broken stile and push through Musbatch Coppice to reach the mile-long path to Reaside Farm, here I can swing away at a good pace.

What a joy it is to be abroad on such mornings as we have been given of late. With Hazlitt I sing, "Give me the clear blue sky over my head, and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me and three hours' march to dinner—and then to thinking! It is hard if I cannot start some game on these lone heaths, I laugh, I run, I leap, I sing for joy."

About this hour of the morning my time-table allows me a few minutes for a hasty lunch, but I prefer a pipe of well-flavoured tobacco and I consider this first early morning kiss from "My Lady Nicotine" is her best and sweetest.

At any farmhouse it is possible to satisfy the most thirsty man, or party of men, for every cellar contains many tall casks of perry and cider, and this is given away as freely as if it were water from the ever flowing Rea.

Why are most farmers such quaint characters? Perhaps because of their independence. They wrestle with Nature for a livelihood. They buy and sell in the markets, sharpening their wits upon the wits of their neighbours.

At Detton Farm old Moses Cadwallader (almost as broad as he is tall) gives me a shout of welcome from his chair beside an open fire, where, in winter-time huge logs of wood crackle cheerfully. He calls for a jug of cider and while we quaff the sparkling liquid he listens to any news I may have, for a rural postman is expected to bring all the latest tit-bits of news (and well does Old Moses know that much of the news I bring him is hatched behind the creaking sign inscribed "Ye Olde White Duck." It is but seldom a bad egg is found in this sitting).

In Harcourt Dingle, a mile or so nearer my journey's end I find that Boswell, the gipsy, has pitched his camp and will worry the farmers once again. His letters I must read at least four times and perhaps write his reply also.

Nearby I meet Will Link, the rabbit catcher, and yet again he tells me with all the force at his command why his old enemy Boswell should be forced to spend all his days on the heights of Catherton Common.

Higher up the Valley I hear Tom Bourne, the whistling ploughman, and perhaps meet Jonathan Budd, a hedger and ditcher and a great authority on wild life. No matter whom I meet in the lanes and fields I must pass the time of the day.

After climbing Prescott Bank I like to lean upon the gate and rest awhile.

"What is this life, if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare,
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows;
No time to see when woods we pass
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass,
No time to see in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars like skies at night.
A poor life this, if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare."

Here before me is a view which should make all men stare and wonder.

The fertile Valley is stretched between myself and Abdon Hill. On a clear day one can see the purple heather capping the summit over 1,700 feet above sea level. Nature has decked the hill in most royal robes. Beneath the purple crown of heather are great shoulders of glowing gorse, then richly

wooded slopes with here and there an open space where tall ferns grow and sheep graze. A little lower are the hedged fields which were won from the hills by the perseverance of the farmers of other days.

When the sun shines upon this landscape it is a patchwork of wonderful colour. The open reaches of the River glint beneath the sun, and as we raise our eyes from the rich yellow cornfields the colours gradually change until at last they merge into one deep shade of purple upon the summit of the Hill.

While I stand and admire this glorious countryside a gray old crane flaps its way idly down the Valley following the course of the winding Rea and, in great contrast, a green-backed woodpecker darts past. The country children call it the laughing-bird because of its strange call which resembles a shrill laugh.

When my outward journey is ended I sometimes wander to farmyards and here I become one of a company discussing “barrens” or “a good half-legged ’un”, or I hear why Tom the shepherd favours none but Clun Valley sheep.

At White Mill farm my journey ends, here I lunch, home-made bread and half a cheese, together with a jug of that most excellent cider known as “rough-thorn” are brought on the table. After a rough but wholesome meal I make my way to the true end of my journey. Half-a-mile away, near the roadside, my distant masters have provided me with a hut which may be called a Post Office until three o’clock, here I am sometimes called upon to sell a postage stamp or I may be given an order for a gun licence.

It is here I have my books and, “far from the madding crowds ignoble strife” I can say with the poet, “What are my books? My friends, my loves, my church, my tavern, and my only wealth.”

Promptly at three o’clock I begin my return walk. At various points my whistle is brought into use, a warning to the few farmers and cottagers that His Majesty’s Royal Mail is about to pass their way.

Now I can brook no delay, I collect their few letters, have perhaps a word or a jest and on I go, for the Mail leaves that old-world village from where I began my journey even more promptly than it arrives.

The life of a rural postman, however, is not always as smooth as a mill pond. Not long ago I had a little adventure which proves that we have our ups and downs.

Our little River Rea was unusually high, and as I approached the old footbridge at Hardwicke Ford I could see the clay-brown waters swirling rapidly away. At this point the River is perhaps twenty feet wide.

The footbridge is simply a tree trunk reaching from one bank to the other and rough-hewn along the upper surface. True, a single handrail is fixed along the downstream side, but the wise use this only as a guide, never as a support.

I was pleasantly surprised to find the footbridge above water, for the Rea had been steadily rising for some twenty-four hours.

I stepped forward as I had done on countless previous occasions but when midway I felt the old bridge move beneath my feet. I hesitated for a moment, wondering whether safety lay in an advance or a retreat. Too late! For as I looked the bank crumbled; the bridge collapsed, and I was plunged into the rushing swirling waters.

Luckily I am a fair swimmer, this fact was certainly in my favour, but—swimming was impossible.

After the shock of the first sudden plunge I found great difficulty in keeping my head above water, I was swept downstream as easily as if I were a piece of dead driftwood and it was as if invisible hands clutched me and drew me, now to the left, now to the right, now down, down into deep unknown caverns.

I fought against the waters and the current. I gasped and panted. The earthy, gritty water almost choked me. I strained every muscle and sinew in my efforts to grasp overhanging branches.

At every bend of the River I was swept near, so near the bank, but as soon as I touched soft earth I was caught by the swiftly moving current and drawn struggling and contesting back to my agonizing fight.

At last I felt my speed reduced and that power against which I was so helpless, that clutching power which drew me this way and that way, had almost ceased to exert itself.

I regained a little of my calm and looked about me. Could I have travelled so far? The Draycott Meadows were on either side of the River, a quarter of a mile at least from where I had been so suddenly thrown into the waters.

However, I had little time to think; I was swept round a bend of the River and carried into the midst of the branches of an old tree which had fallen half in and half out of the water.

This proved my saviour. Although I was bruised and a little distressed I had no serious hurt, and by dint of great effort I succeeded in struggling, by way of a great branch, back to the green security of Mother Earth.

But what of the ups and downs of this rural life? I thank God I left the city and became, by adoption, a countryman of no mean country.

My friends have sent me long letters full of sympathy. How dull it must be the long year round, they say, and what enjoyment can I have they ask?

They do not understand, nor can I hope to enlighten them.

Beside these singing streams and in these peaceful dales I have found beauty and quiet, unruffled and serene.

What are the attractions of a town for one who has found the magic of the open?

I know a clustering group of silver birch and a glistening stream surrounds them. From Shunsley Hill I have seen the morning mists curling in the Valley and slowly disappearing. Artists come to paint these scenes, but with Kipling they must admit that

“Nature in her nakedness
Defeats us every time.”

The people of the towns talk and write of music. Ah! Let me lie beside the Rea where he tumbles over Detton Rocks or let me hear a high wind in the tree-tops.

I never wish to see the town again, great dusty hives of hurry, because here

“I have seen dawn and sunset on moors and windy hills
Coming in solemn beauty like slow old tunes of Spain:
I have seen the lady April bringing the daffodils,
Bringing the springing grass and soft warm April rain.”

What an experience it is to stand upon some hillside and watch the dawn approach.

Before the dawn the countryside seems not so much asleep as lying quietly at rest, the hills around appear to rise and fall easily and gently like some strange and great giant's breast.

Then comes that first faint rustling in all the leafy trees and a shimmering of the air which is felt almost as well as it is seen. Another day is dawning. Mother Earth's short rest is over. How softly does she wake. Standing on these lonely hills I often watch her and think how much she resembles a healthy child or a strong man waking from a pleasant dreamless slumber. “There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother.”

NIGHT

NIGHT

Is it possible to find interest and enjoyment out of doors all through the night?

I have recently had such an experience and I certainly found it interesting and enjoyable, that is, if it is enjoyment to be deeply touched by the strange moving beauty of a starry night, to marvel in silence at the wonders one can see and hear during these quiet hours.

Much is written of the beauty of sunset and dawn but little of the wonderful hours between.

George Borrow's friend Petulengro was one who knew the beauty and wonder of the night. Did he not say, "There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon and stars, brother, all sweet things."

It was only by chance that I saw the wonders of the night, just a whim which turned my footsteps to the high land.

I had intended to walk to the house of a friend some miles distant, but I chanced upon Tom Dallas. Tom is a strange mixture of a man. Although still young he is known for many miles around as a successful cattle dealer.

We actually spun a coin to decide whether we should walk south into Worcestershire or west to Ludlow. Ludlow won.

Rain began to fall just as we were about to leave the village and dear old Mrs. Miles of the "Green Man" invited us to fill the easy chairs before the smoke-room fire. Stretched before the blazing logs we slept, slept for hours.

A little before five o'clock we woke to find the sky blue and clear and a fresh wind blowing.

Over the Clee Hills to Ludlow. Eleven miles. Yes, we would walk, no matter what hour we returned, we had slept well and would need little or no sleep that night.

The remainder of the day passed pleasantly enough and we left Ludlow about eleven o'clock.

It was too pleasant a night to hurry, we walked slowly and talked

"Of shoes and ships and sealing wax,
Of cabbages and kings."

We took a winding by-lane in order to cross the summit of the hill. At last we reached the highest point, over 1,700 feet.

I climbed into a heap of great rocks known as the “Giant’s Chair.” I filled and lit my pipe, but when I lay back in the “Chair” my pipe was forgotten.

Looking upward from my couch of stone I gazed into the starry night. I have never seen so many stars.

The immensity of the heavens gradually dawned upon me. From a point immediately above my head to the North, South, East and West, to the edge of beyond in every direction, millions of stars twinkled. One dropped and disappeared.

The Milky Way was a great star-littered road across the plains of heaven.

Up there, the highest point for miles around, the silence almost hurt.

I had, shall I say, a new range of vision.

The tremendous indefinable distances!

The smallness of the Earth!

Here, lying on the summit of the Hill, the whole small earth, as it were, beneath me, I visualized things as I had never done before.

The Earth was a speck floating in space with millions of other specks and on this small speck, this Earth of ours, is England, and what beauty of mountain and valley, glen and grove we have.

A glorious night on a mountain top before the dawn wind signals the approach of day.

Under such conditions is it possible for a man to dwell on the mean and petty things of life? I think not.

I realized the very nearness of great elemental forces whose earthly expression is beauty undiluted.

I thought of the wonderful words which Carlyle gave to Tenfelsdröck when he gazed down upon the city at midnight, that striking passage which ends “—such work goes on under that smoke counterpane!—But I, mein Werther, sit above it all, I am alone with the stars.”

I thought of R. L. S., of the night he spent beneath the pines on the hillside and of his words.

“Night is a dead monotonous period under a roof; but in the open world it passes lightly, with its stars, and dews, and perfumes, and the hours are marked by changes in the face of nature.

“I thought I had discovered one of those truths, which are revealed to savages and hid from political economists, at least I had discovered a new

pleasure for myself.”

How long I lay stretched upon that rock musing I do not know. It was Tom who shook me from my thoughts. Looking into such a night, he said, made him half afraid to think.

We set off again and walked for perhaps two miles without a word being spoken.

A few scattered pine trees grow along the edge of the common in clumps of two and three; tall and still in the starlit night they look like lonely guardians of the Hill.

At the foot of the Hill it was the old-world yet, brooks and streams murmured and we heard the faint rustlings and stealthy movements of the night-life in the woods and undergrowth.

In the shelter of Dawstone Coppice the vague outlines of a gipsy tent and caravan could be seen. The gentle puffing of the morning breeze caused the embers of their open fire to glow as red as a rising sun. Several families of these wanderers still roam this countryside.

The magic of the night air set me thinking how pleasant such a free life would be. To take such people and house them in the brick and mortar of an industrial town were as cruel as to imprison a linnet or a vivid blackbird of this beautiful Valley, even though its cage be hung in the finest room of a mansion.

In this atmosphere and under these conditions I felt I could walk for countless hours.

Night is the time for meditation, in the day there are so many things to distract a man.

I stood on the old footbridge over Crumps Brook and tried to define the various night sounds.

“There in the windless night time
The wanderer marvelling why,
Halts on the bridge to hearken
How soft the poplars sigh.”

The magic of the night air held us both, we seldom spoke, a word or two as to the direction we should take, that was all.

Skirting Hopton Wafers, one of the prettiest villages of the Welsh Border country, we saw in the thin mist that hung about the brook: Hopton’s “Crown.” This old hostelry always brings to my mind Longfellow’s “Wayside Inn.” Snuggling beneath a hanging coppice, and almost

surrounded by the winding lane and brook, the ground it stands on seems hardly large enough to support such a rambling old place. The builders of old appear to have let in a window wherever wall space allowed it. Every wall possesses many windows and no two windows are alike.

The roof appears to be a collection of gables of all sizes, and in the dim light of the approaching dawn the old tiles glowed a dull rose-red where bright green and yellow moss had not yet grown.

After climbing Hollywaste Bank just before the dawn Tom and I halted on the same step. A lark arose and poured out her welcome to the day. So sudden and close was her song it was as if she had risen from beneath our feet.

Higher and higher she rose, then down, down so close I thought I could reach her with my outstretched hand. Then up again, still pouring out upon the sleeping world “a flood of harmony.”

“And now ’twas like all instruments,
Now like a lonely flute,
And now it is an angel’s song
That make the heavens be mute.”

We both stood speechless, staring, but never saw that bird.

• • • • •

Like Stevenson I have discovered a new pleasure for myself. I have seen the wonders of the night and I know—

“The silence that is in the starry sky
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.”

• • • • •

“STEPPLE END”

“STEPPLE END”

“—Let me consider a space,
In the soft blue veil of the vapour,
Musing on Maggie’s face.”

THESE lines, from a poem by Rudyard Kipling, are the spoken thoughts of a young man who, in the haze of smoke from his cigar, weighs in the balance his lady-love and his cigars, he must choose either a bride or—My Lady Nicotine.

Just now the lines bring to my mind a picture entirely different from the one intended by the poet.

• • • • •

It is a morning in February (February mornings have a beauty all their own). I had loitered through my favourite dingle, Stepple End, crossed the old footbridge over the Rea, and was climbing the steep meadow towards the ploughland of Stepple Hall Farm.

Leaning on the gate, between the spinney and the thick well brushed hedge, I saw Tom Laird the keeper (if you wish to rest in the open country and still retain a standing position the best way of all is to lean on a gate).

A glossy-coated black retriever lay at Tom’s feet and his gun, smooth and polished by constant handling, stood beside the gatepost. The blue grey smoke from his pipe slowly curled and rolled about his head, in the clear air of the windless morning it resembled a halo.

Something (I know not what), prompted me to slacken my pace, perhaps it was old Tom’s rapt and meditative appearance. Even when I arrived at the gate I did not speak, I turned and sat on the rails of the spinney fence.

Strange, I thought, how that cloud of smoke hung about Tom’s head, none floated away as it usually does, even in the calmest air, nor did the cloud become more dense, although he still puffed quietly at his pipe.

For forty-three years Tom Laird has been a keeper in the Valley. I have never met him indoors and, for me, Tom Laird without a dog at his heels and a gun tucked under his arm would be Tom Laird half-dressed.

He wore side-whiskers, but always his upper lip and chin were clean-shaved, showing a strong firm mouth. He had puckered his old eyes so often that now long deep wrinkles ran from their outer corners into the thick hair about his ears. His large mahogany-coloured hands look very capable and I

know of no man who has so powerful a grip, yet when tending sick birds or doctoring a sick puppy his touch is as gentle as a woman's.

The right sleeve of his jacket is much worn by the movement of his gun and a patch of thin leather has been let into the right shoulder where the gun butt rests so often.

Until a year or so ago he had been a fine upstanding man, but now one could see the signs of age—old age. He was never so “pert” as hitherto, he stooped a little and he leaned on gates more than a man should.

In silence we both gazed into the quiet dingle.

“A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.”

To every man who loves the country these words are full of meaning.

Stepple End, beautiful in every season, is the most peaceful dingle in the Valley of the Rea. Now the tall ferns lay dead, but amid the green of the grass and the grey brown of tree trunks they were richly brown and warm. The outlines of tall leafless birch trees were marvels of delicate tracery, while beech and oak raised their stronger naked arms towards the sky.

The little Rea, after tumbling over Detton Rocks turns sharply into the dingle and promptly enters into harmony with the surroundings, flowing slowly and murmuring gently, until he reaches Goesland Ford, a full quarter of a mile away, where he can be heard chattering and gurgling over the pebbles.

Deep in Stepple End I know great banks of dew-damp snow-drops and many sheltered crannies where violets grow, and soon bright primroses will be sprinkled about the dingle as thick as stars in the sky on a frosty night.

I glanced again at Old Tom, still a halo of blue-grey smoke curled and rolled about his head.

What were his thoughts at this moment?

He loved Stepple End as much as, or more, than I did. Many times while tramping Stepple ground he has said to me, “Ah! I would like to build myself a little housen in this vale.” It was the dream of his life, to live his last years in a little cottage near Stepple End.

“God gave all men all earth to love,
But since our hearts are small,
Ordained for each one spot should prove
Beloved over all.”

Here in Stepple End there is not a day of the whole long year without some beauty of colour and sound, without perfume. I have heard the tap-tap-tapping of the green-backed woodpecker followed by her shrill laugh as she flies past in joyous swoops. Often a startled rabbit will skurry off from a tuft at my feet. Of late a regular visitor to the dingle is a ragged old thrush, perched above the murmuring stream she sings bravely, sunshine or cold drizzle, it matters not to her.

Still Tom was silent, still he gazed on the calm beauty of the dingle and the peaceful Valley beyond, but his silence was eloquent, it spoke these words,

“——Let me consider a space,
In the soft blue veil of the vapour,
Musing on Maggie’s face.”

A little more than twelve months ago Tom had lost his partner. In the churchyard, high above the wood and overlooking the Valley, his wife Maggie was laid to rest. On that winter’s day at the graveside, Tom became an old man, since then he has aged still more, lost his hardy manhood, lost also, the dream of his life, a cottage near Stepple End.

For many years he had held grimly but quietly to his plan of a happy life in retirement, but since his loss he has let go his hold.

Occasionally I have seen his lips move as if he were slowly and sorrowfully admitting defeat. His dreams had fallen about his shoulders and his hopes were shattered.

• • • • •

Spring is not far distant and Stepple End will be bright with flowers and birds. The Rea will flow beneath a roof of green leaves, leaves that whisper and rustle in the breeze, adding their soft music to the music of the rippling River. There will be green ferns waist-high, hawthorn blossom white and red, and carpets of dancing daffodils.

But, for me, there will be a touch of sadness in all this array of beauty.

“——Let me consider a space,
In the soft blue veil of the vapour,
Musing——”

Tom Laird was found in his favourite dingle sitting on a fallen tree, his back resting against a giant beech and his pipe held firmly in his hand. Nearby, propped against a tree, stood his gun, while “Gel”, his faithful old dog, stood beside him, the shaggy old head resting on his master’s knee.

A peaceful quiet death, deep in the heart of his beloved Stepple End.
He is now at rest beside Maggie in the churchyard high above the wood.

BOOKS AND A COUNTRY POSTMAN

BOOKS AND A COUNTRY POSTMAN

“All round my room my silent servants wait—
My friends in every season.”

I HAVE been asked, what is the value of a study of literature?

To this question many hard-headed business men would answer, “Of no value unless the knowledge you gain is a means of increasing your income.”

A young student might answer, “I value it because such knowledge may bring me success and honours.” Another of whom the question is asked, if he answered with truth, would say, “I wish to mix freely with men and women and if I am able to talk well I will be a more important person.”

Now, I am a country postman. Of what value is a study of literature to me?

I cannot hope to increase my income by such studies nor can I hope for success or a higher position in my walk of life, and I certainly do not wish to parade my newly gained knowledge before the people of the countryside.

What then is the object, what the motive of such a study?

First of all I become acquainted with the noblest and best men of each age, with those men whose great task it was to clothe their thoughts with words and who left behind them an inexhaustible supply of wisdom and beauty.

A study of English Literature is also an account of my country's progress, not a list of dry FACTS and dates, but personalities, colour and life. I learn how the ordinary people lived and understand a little of the difficulties against which some few struggled and fought for their ideals and aspirations.

By reading carefully and regularly we can improve our understanding of the true meaning of great writers and our ability to express our own thoughts becomes greater.

If a man has a quantity of drugs and medicine, such possessions are of little use to him unless he understands something of their value and methods of application; and so with literature, the value of our books will increase in proportion to our understanding, we learn how to use them and how to apply their beauty and light to our lives.

By studying literature broadly we discover that certain men and books appeal to all that is best in us, and as a result of this knowledge we are able

to supply the mind with that food which adds to its strength and beauty.

If we have studied some sound philosophy and know what the great thinkers thought, we have increased our self-confidence.

Literature (especially the drama and the novel) gives us insight into the lives, thoughts and feelings of our fellow men and women.

Many people spend their lives in what may be described as small compartments, their minds cannot or will not escape from the monotonous existence into which circumstances have forced them. A study of literature is a means of escape, it will expand and make more full the shrunken mind.

But there is in the love of books something difficult to define, just as it is difficult to define a love for mountains, for high winds, for little children.

I value a certain poem more than another. Why? probably for the same reason that I value primroses and cornflowers more than tulips and hyacinths.

My daily walk over the hills and along the banks of the Rea is my daily opportunity to try to see and understand what Wordsworth and Keats saw and understood. I have the company of wise old men; Carlyle braces me up, Emerson teaches me to be calm and cool, they both insist that I am somebody and that when I am my true self I am happiest. I have the company of those young men whose words are full of buoyancy and ardour.

It is to the credit of these companions that my life has such an interest.

The study of English literature has given me a host of silent friends; "I am never less alone than when alone."

“MEMORIES”

“MEMORIES”

Oh! I did go to Wenlock Fair,
Free of trouble, free of care;
I entered where “home brew’d is sold,”
And met three soldiers, young and bold.
They talked and drank as soldiers will,
The army was the army still.

Then ghosts of my dead comrades came,
Some were armless, some were lame,
And some looked out of sightless eyes,
But all looked most exceeding wise;
They drank black rum and Flemish wine—
What memories of the war were mine.

That night the air was warm and still
When I set out for Brown Clee Hill.
And why I walked I cannot tell,
Nor why that night nine bright stars fell;
I heard the wind in tree-tops moaning,
And thought I heard my comrades groaning.

The curling mist above the River
Was poison gas that made men shiver.
And scenes of dread about Noyon
I saw in fields near Stottesdon.
And as I neared to Dudlick Mill
Visions came to haunt me still.

In deepest shadows near the wood
A tall young Prussian soldier stood.
I knew him not, but now I know
That I was born to strike the blow.
I would I could forget the night
We fought beneath the dropping light.

But still I see his matted hair
And his blue eyes so fixèd stare.

And as I gazed upon him, dead,
A lark arose and upward sped;
Her song was shrill and loud and clear,
She surely wished all Heaven to hear
OF MURDER DONE NEAR FLAVEY WOOD
AND OF MY HANDS—ALL STAINED WITH BLOOD.

And then to ease my restless mind
His name and number I would find.
About his neck I sought a disc,
I little knew I ran a risk
Of memories that are nought but pain
And knowledge that all war is vain.

My searching fingers found reward—
A heavy disc upon a cord,
But in the glare of Verey light,
Which made bright day of awful night,
It was no disc my hand did hold
But pendant wrought of purest gold.

The portrait in my bloodied hand
Was —— his chosen of the land.
And as I gazed, 'twas then I saw
The cursèd horror of the war.
In distant homes are broken hearts
Because we puppets play our parts.

All night I walked about the Hill
From Abdon's crown to Dudlick Mill.
I met the men who stayed behind—
They perhaps have peace of mind.
And blood-red will the poppies be
As long as I have eyes to see.

MY FRIEND—THE WIND

MY FRIEND—THE WIND

A RUDE boisterous blustering fellow, but how welcome. I love him for his rudeness. No half measures with him, he comes and smites and shakes you just as some rollicking old friend of your youth would greet you half the world away.

I would I could meet him every day, rude Boreas from the North, or him of the West wild and fresh from the Atlantic.

(A country postman should be a cheerful chap and were the winds always a-blowing the farmers of the Rea Valley would find me always happy and loud-singing.)

On Stepple Slopes I often meet my friend, and almost always from the West he comes. In the lower spinneys he first greets me, soft and sad at times like gentle sighs, but in Goesland Firs he whispers and whistles gaily. Oh! the music in the tree-tops.

On the higher slopes he sings louder, hear him roaring above the great old oaks of Detton Wood, loud long bursts of sound tumbling from the skies.

Down in the Valley it is as if one listened to the Wind God playing the light merry music of the fiddle and the flute, but on the high hills that look towards the mountain tops of Cymru one hears the resounding crash and roll, the wonderful rise and fall of sound. Heaven's own grand organ music.

If I were asked,

“Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow”;

I would answer—“Yes, come with me to Abdon Hill and let the wild West Wind blow your bowler hat to Hades.” We will pass through the long orchard of Stepple Hall Farm, and here a gusty breeze will shake the trees now blossom laden and down will rain upon us pink and white petals, cool and sweet as scented snow.

Now, through Detton Wood, hear the music in the leafy tree-tops, whishing and whushing, rising to a scream of delight, then dropping to a gentle murmur. The music of massed instrumentalists and organs are but feeble attempts to reach the grandeur of Nature.

Now, out of the Wood to the long lone heath where in four years I have never yet met a human being. Yonder, miles away, rise the hills of Wales and

here my jolly rollicking friend the Wild West Wind is never half-hearted, face him and you must fight him, but he never harms you, he buffets you and blusters, but he is always cheerful and friendly.

Turn and walk north-east and you are a human sail, he almost lifts you as he helps you on your journey. See the oaks on yonder ridge, how their great branches shake, like great leafy arms waving and cheering you on your way, and on Draycott Bank the clustering groups of birch and ash saplings bend and bow to greet you. Oh! the music of rustling leaves and, oh! the joy of walking with the wind in lonely places.

“I laugh, I run, I leap, I sing for joy.” A hidden watcher might remark—“A madman walks the heath,” but what care I, I wave my arms in answer to the friendly trees. I throw back my head and sing lustily and strangely enough the tunes are old and half-forgotten, but the wind recalls them all, old hymns for the most part. Aberystwyth! Cwm Rhondda! learnt years ago at a little Welsh Chapel in the heart of the mountains. I have never heard them since I was a child, but when I walk this lone heath the old tunes tumble out to join the joyous wind and he lifts and carries them into the high air, where plovers beat their wings, banking and rolling, swooping and swerving, and here the plaintive call of the curlew can be heard between the squalls.

George Borrow’s friend, Jasper Petulengro, is the man for me. Listen to his words:

“There’s night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there’s likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?”

“I would wish to die——”

“You talk like a gorgio—which is the same as talking like a fool—were you a Rommany Chal you would talk wiser. Wish to die, indeed!—A Rommany Chal would wish to live for ever!”

“In sickness, Jasper?”

“There’s the sun, and stars, brother.”

“In blindness, Jasper?”

“There’s the wind on the heath, brother; if I could only feel that I would gladly live for ever. Dosta, we’ll now go to——”

• • • • •

Are you depressed? Do the cares of the world weigh heavy upon you? Have minor troubles vexed your mind? Heigho! Then, out on the windy hill-top, hatless and collarless.

Sing with the singing wind and if he roar, roar with him, join him, be as merry and as boisterous as he, but hatless and collarless you must be.

A man who wears a bowler hat on a windy hill-top, is a man who would take his morning bath in socks and suspenders.

MY FRIEND—THE RIVER

MY FRIEND—THE RIVER

IN the space of four years I have walked the Valley of the Rea more than twelve hundred times; not the whole long length of the River but from the old stone bridge below the village to Dudlick Mill, maybe six miles as the crow flies, but twelve miles if you follow the twists and turns of these winding waters.

I know the varied music of this friendly stream; the deep hollow tune he sings as he flows beneath the hanging wood and round the ruined mill; the low pleasant murmur as he gurgles and trickles over the stony ford at Neen; the crash and splash, loud with the joy of youth and movement, as he tumbles over Detton Rocks; the smooth sweet melody as he glides through Mawley meadows here to leave me still singing

“——with pebbles in his throat,
Gurgling towards the sea with all his might.”

There are fallen trees which can be used as bridges, and shallow places where large stones are only a few inches below the level of the water (here if a man is well-shod he can cross dry foot).

In this twelve mile length of River there are six narrow hump-backed stone bridges over which only one vehicle can cross at a time. Of these the old Roman bridge at Prescott is my favourite, it spans the River where it is about twenty feet wide and possesses some unusual features.

Looking over the broken rails on the upstream side one can see the projecting centre column built like the bow of a ship. When the Rea is in flood then this upright ridge of stone cuts the water like a ship at sea.

There are eight footbridges, narrow wooden structures, so narrow that they are problems for stout men.

For the most part deep meadows slope towards the River's edge, deep meadows where white-faced Hereford cattle graze. Here and there long plantations of ash and larch border the stream, and amid these trees daffodils, violets and primroses grow in profusion.

If you wish for holy quiet and the deepest peace seek the quiet dingles through which these waters flow. Ferns grow waist-high in these “bee-loud glades” and the scent of the hawthorn mingles with that of a nearby bean-field.

No matter what the season of the year there is beauty to find.

A clustering group of silver birch is reflected in the almost still water, and there are quiet reaches where the flow is slow and where the sun's rays play upon the waters almost all the day, here one can bathe; long tree roots against the bank enable one to climb direct to the clean green meadows.

But the River has his angry moods, then he rages down the Valley carrying all before him, trees, bridges, hen-coops, sheep and cattle. Indeed, during the heavy rains of last Spring he embraced me and for almost half a mile I fought him and but for an old friendly tree which had fallen in my path (and his) I might well have been his victim. But these moods do not hold him long, he is soon his chattering merry self again.

I often look at him from the high hills, like a happy boy he seems to play hide and seek, quietly he disappears into "a tunnel of green gloom," for perhaps half a mile he is hidden, then into the open once again chuckling and laughing about the stones, glinting and sparkling in the sun as he glides through Oreton meadows.

I have found the River a friend and a counsellor. His gentle murmur is soothing, he whispers, "haste not, rest not, now be merry and gay, now be cool and calm but steadily pursue your course."

I am the postman of the Valley and can count many friends among the scattered population; not last among my friends, I name, "The River."

WAR DAYS IN A DERBYSHIRE VILLAGE

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I HAVE read many books of the great war, of the blood and the slaughter, of the lust and the folly. I know these horrors existed and I know that in our hospitals we still have thousands of broken men.

From September 1914 to May 1919 I was a soldier, my regimental number, 23117, is still ready on my lips.

While reading the books of the war I see again—Ypres and the broken trenches, the Somme and the remnants of a Company, dug-outs, billets and rest-camps, a thousand and one chords of my memory are touched.

But why (I have asked myself) why are there not more books dealing with the other side of war, the bright periods, the clean friendships and the beauty made more beautiful because of the surrounding horrors?

One period of my army life will be forever bright and clear.

In the Autumn of 1916 I was in Hospital. After doctors had probed into my foot I was sent to a V.A.D. Hospital as a convalescent case.

I still remember the calm contented feeling which was mine when I found myself in a large house on the outskirts of a Derbyshire village.

England! Old England! As if in answer to my prayers I was in the heart of rural England.

The square tower of the ancient village church could be seen behind a row of tall poplars, and all around were green slopes and well-trimmed hedges.

“Say, is there Beauty yet to find?
And Certainty? and Quiet kind?
Deep meadows yet, for to forget,
The lies and truths and pain? Oh! Yet
Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?”

The house had been the country residence of a business magnate and was either given or loaned as a Convalescent Hospital.

How easily we settled down, thirty-five patients, each fit patient said “Good-bye” with many regrets at leaving and each new arrival was welcomed as the long-lost son of some large family.

The nurses were volunteers from the surrounding district and they were as many as, if not more, than the patients.

It appeared to be the rule that every patient should be given a nick-name. I was a sergeant and became “Sarge” until another sergeant was admitted when I became “Chick” (this because, or in spite of, my height and size).

I was soon fit to attempt walking, but crutches for a man six feet two inches in height could not be found at once. This meant that I had to stick to my wheeled chair.

It was my habit to wheel myself into the garden, and, with a little help transfer myself into a deck-chair with a leg extension.

I had no reason to complain of my long sitting out hours, for books, magazines and tobacco were always at my side. (After twelve months on and about the Ypres front it is not difficult to satisfy a man, and here it was heaven.)

A low hedge divided the garden of this temporary hospital from the garden of a villa and in the shelter of this hedge I spent many pleasant hours.

One morning I was surprised to hear a voice behind the dividing hedge.

“Good morning, Mr. Chick,” a pleasant girlish tone.

I gave “Good morning” in reply and added my regret that I was unable to turn my chair, my orders were to call for assistance if I wished to move.

“Please don’t move,” came the answer, “I can get through the hedge.”

A few seconds later the hedge crackled and “she” arrived. A slip of a child she was, of nine or ten years, in the uniform style of dress worn by high school girls, very slim and long-legged but her bright eyes and complexion told of sound health. Two long plaits of hair hung down her back.

She held her school hat in both hands and I saw it contained a large paper-bag of home-made toffee. This she placed at my side.

In spite of my objections I was forced to accept all this black sticky sweetmeat, there were others who would help to eat it, she said, and there was plenty more.

She talked of the village, of the hospital, of her school, she hoped I would soon be better and she was sorry I could not walk, her hopes and wishes followed each other so quickly I had but little chance of adding to them.

She lived in the villa over the hedge, she said, and this garden had always been her playground.

This was the first of many visits.

She continued to address me as “Mr. Chick,” when I told her my name was Evans, she coloured, apologised and shyly asked if she might call me “Mr. Chick” or “Chick” as the men did. To this I agreed.

Her name, she told me, was Joan Hargreaves.

And so a strange friendship began, she, a little child with wistful expressive features, and I, a Sergeant of an Infantry Battalion and (she said) the biggest soldier that ever was in this hospital.

Every day she called, and on holidays she spent all her time either in the Hospital or in the Hospital grounds. What a jolly little companion she was and how she talked! Her questioning led to the discovery that I knew, or had known, Kipling’s *Big Steamers*, she at once commanded that I should take the part of the *Big Steamers*, she would ask the questions.

In a week or so I knew by heart, not only *Big Steamers* but all her school poems.

Then (her requests never surprised me now), she asked if I would attend the school playing grounds to see a net ball match.

This was too much for me. I was really afraid. I excused myself. I was not yet accustomed to crutches and her school mistress would probably object.

My excuses proved of no avail. I had a letter from her school mistress inviting me and any friends I cared to bring. I remember, even now, that I murmured a silent thanksgiving for those words “and any friends.”

How could I enter a girls’ school without support? Old Taffy Morgan of the S.W.B.’s I knew I could depend upon, and after a little persuasion our ward-mates also promised to attend.

These events soon became popular, for light refreshments and cigarettes were provided.

My little friend was highly delighted, for was she not responsible?

Sometimes she treated me as she would a much older brother, but more often I was as her youngest brother and had to obey her every command.

When time permitted she made a round of the bed patients and took orders for writing pads, postcards, razor blades and such-like. Then I was called for, she would hear no excuse, we must go shopping.

How she would raid the village stores! Nothing would meet her demands but the exact orders given by the men.

Once I remember she was taken (much against her will) to Nottingham on a visit to friends.

While she was away the motor-car owners of the district brought their cars to the Hospital. We were informed that a matinee had been arranged for the wounded. We were taken to Nottingham.

The usual crowds had gathered at the Theatre entrance. Streams of men in hospital blue from the City hospitals filed through the doors. Before I hobbled halfway across the pavement I heard a shout, my little friend broke through the crowd.

She was all excitement.

She, her mother and her aunt, were returning to the village and she asked if she could stay and return with the men.

I spoke to her mother and the Theatre manager and it was arranged that she should have a seat.

There never was a more delighted child, several times she pulled my sleeve and attempted to whisper her thanks. Words failed her until she stood and looked about the crowded hall, then I heard between gasps,

“Only—soldiers—nurses—and me.”

This was true, from our position we could see, pit, circle, galleries, boxes, everywhere hospital blue. Blue coats and red ties in mass formation, while here and there white aproned nurses moved about.

How proud she was that day!

The time came when I was marked fit and I saw the inevitable before me, hospital leave, training camp, and active service.

When my little friend heard, she protested, went in search of the Sister; I still limped, she said, I was not yet fit.

What a strange child she was, so demure, yet so confident!

Her parents invited Taffy Morgan and myself to tea on the last day.

“Good-bye” had to be said, early next morning my train would leave.

How that child wept, I must promise to write, I must promise this, I must promise that.

I promised all!

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I wrote to her and her parents, and later I sent field cards and souvenirs from France.

Always her reply came, long childish letters, and often enough childish gifts.

While reading those letters in a noisy billet, or a dirty rat-infested barn amid troops of shouting men, I saw again that quaint old Derbyshire village, the garden, and the child.

“There’s peace and holy quiet there,
Great clouds along pacific skies,
And men and women with straight eyes;
Lithe children lovelier than a dream,
A bosky wood, a slumbrous stream,
And little kindly winds that creak
Round twilight corners half asleep.”

The happy weeks of convalescence I spent there were made more bright and cheerful because of her friendship and afterwards the weary dreary days were brightened by her childish letters.

During this period I spent in France the memory of this little child meant much to me.

Of what value were Church Parades when we marched from them to an attack? And out at rest, after talking to a padre, one might walk into a bayonet fighting class to learn how to kill.

Even to-day I bless the memory of that child, and I trust that whatever Gods there be have rewarded her.

I have not been able to thank her, for in the summer of 1918 I was wounded and gassed and lay in hospital for months unable to write. When I recovered sufficiently to write I did so but my letter was returned with the endorsement “Gone away.”

I often think of my little friend, for me she has never grown up, she is still, in my mind’s eye, a little school girl, with flying pigtailed.

If she should read this she will realise a little of the good she has done.

Most of those who spent part of their war service in hospital blue can recall happy days. Those who were fortunate enough to spend a little time in a certain Derbyshire V.A.D. Hospital will, I know, remember a cheerful little messenger who never tired of helping others.

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THE VALLEY OF THE REA

THE VALLEY OF THE REA

The valley of the Rea is fair and wide,
The gorse upon the upland is aglow;
And rolling pastures meet the riverside,
Or cheery orchards blossomed white as snow.

The cornfields (they are scattered here and there,
As if by chance they fell from out the sky),
Give promise of a crop both rich and rare,
Their tender shoots like bright green carpets lie.

On mossy banks the ferns and violets grow,
And dew-damp clusters of the bright primrose;
Tall foxgloves nod their heads when breezes blow,
But queen of every hedgerow is the rose.

The ever flowing River babbles on,
The open reaches glint beneath the sun;
Now into leafy caverns she has gone,
And over stony fords she gaily runs.

At Reaside Farm which once was Cromwell's seat,
Forgotten is the ringing clash of arms;
Now calves do softly call and lambs do bleat,
And happy children play about the barns.

The white-faced cattle stare with wondering eye,
A lazy crane sails idly o'er the stream;
The curly-coated sheep with timid eye,
Of these, when far away, a man may dream.

“WILLIAM P. P. MORTIMER”

“WILLIAM P. P. MORTIMER”

AGED: 76-79

FOUR years ago I settled in Cleobury.

The guide book is full of praise for the ancient place, but the old countryman who directed me thither knew nothing of guide books.

“Ah!” he replied in answer to my query. “Ah! Cleobury, it be a quaint ould town wid a crooked steeple, twisting streets an’ drunken people.

“There be poachers, gypies an’ dealers allus about, an’ devil-may-care lot o’ farmers there be, an’,” here he raised his hands as if in despair, “there be ‘Maister William,’ ten year sin’ I see him, an’ a rantin’, roarin’, ravin’ madman he were then, to be sure.”

The very night of my arrival I met “Maister William,” and it was my pleasure to meet him on many occasions until death at last stilled for ever that inimitable personality, William Patrick Pardoe Mortimer.

Even death has not altogether robbed the village of the old man, for his quaint sayings and mannerisms, his exploits and adventures are still discussed and still bring laughter and merriment in their wake.

“Maister William” was, when I first met him, a man of 76 summers. He was over six feet in height and broad in proportion. His face was drawn and heavy with loose folds of parchment-like skin about the jaws. He had a well-shaped rather prominent nose and a high forehead—the very head to wear a judge’s wig. His clothes were made of good hard-wearing cloth cut out in the style much favoured by the farmers of forty years ago.

His greatest delight in life was to debate and discuss.

No subject appeared to be foreign to him, was it Shakespeare or sheep, spiritualism or walking-sticks, great wars or fiddlers, he was always ready.

When seated amid travellers, local tradesmen and well-to-do farmers in the smoke-room of the “Horn and Trumpet,” it was the old man’s delight to match his wits against the best man he could find.

At a certain hour each evening, in the quaint old kitchen of the “Peacock,” he occupied the armchair which stood between the ancient grandfather clock and the open hearth.

There were times when his old fighting spirit appeared to be dead within him, stern and silent he would sit heeding not the chatter and buzz of conversation.

What, I wonder, passed through the old man's mind on such occasions; what, I wonder, were the old man's thoughts when farmers' sons, timber haulers and timber fellers discussed feats of horsemanship, lifting and hauling.

"Maister William" was always a great lover of horses and in his younger days was an exceptionally strong man. Perhaps among these strong young horsemen he lived parts of his life over again.

There were occasions when he drew a simple countryman into discussion, but then he wore the velvet gloves; it was only when he met a foeman worthy of his steel that he aimed for a crushing victory.

When he had proved a point against an old acquaintance he would thrust out a huge hand for a hearty shake and whisper in the most kindly manner: "Sir, I will be your guide, philosopher and friend, if you will allow me."

How deftly the old man played with his opponents. His gentle manner, his humour and his kindly smile, put almost all men at their ease, yet, for all his apparent nonchalance, the keen observer could not fail to detect his great reserve of power.

He considered talking an art, and certainly he was a master of his art. He possessed the easy command of words and the smooth polished manner of the expert.

He had a wonderful memory, and could quote long passages from the classics without difficulty.

I once questioned him as to his favourite books; his reply was that now, in his old age, two books, and two books only were all he asked for. "Willie" Shakespeare and the Bible.

Of new books he would not hear. He insisted that life was too short for any of us to really grasp all the truth and beauty contained in old and well-tried volumes.

In the fall of the year soon after my arrival in Cleobury, I chanced to meet "Maister William" standing at the head of his fast young mare. He was almost hidden in a huge ulster and asked me if I would care to accompany him for an evening drive. It seemed that a stranger staying at the "Black Bull" had urgent business calling him to Ludston, a small town some eleven miles distant.

I gladly accepted his invitation and when joined by the stranger we set off.

It was a pleasant stretch of country, the fine hard road lay before us like a long white ribbon zig-zagging across the common.

The old man tried hard to lead the stranger into a battle of wits, but without success. He agreed with “Maister William” whenever possible and when cornered he denied all knowledge of the subject.

On arriving at Ludston the stranger found a message awaiting him which cancelled his business, and we all three adjourned into the smoke-room of the “Bay Horse Hotel.”

Here “Maister William” in his own inimitable manner drew the company into conversation. Very soon question and answer were fired across the room and the old man’s eyes sparkled and shone with delight. Before long he had turned the conversation into channels which caused a tremendous uproar.

A tall horsy-looking waiter, judging the old man to be the cause of the trouble, requested him to leave.

Never will I forget the man’s startled look and hasty backward movements when “Maister William” making a great pretence of rage and advancing upon him with long strides roared:

“Away, thou knave! away!
I would not words with menials bandy,
Besides, my sword and pistols are not handy.”

However, I now persuaded him to leave, for I could see that dusk was falling and we had to cross the open common.

Old William, chuckling with glee, let the mare have her head, and she knowing that we were homeward bound made sparks fly from under her hoofs.

When crossing the common we ran into a heavy mist and night fell upon us like a great blanket.

As a guide for late travellers, large white-washed stones had been placed along the roadside at intervals of about 50 yards, for the bogs and marshes are unpleasant places and no hedges grow on the Common.

The stranger appeared rather alarmed at our hot pace, and had not spoken for some time.

At last he chanced to remark: “Surely we did not come this way, I don’t remember the tombstones,” referring to the white guide stones.

“Tombstones!” bellowed “Maister William.” “Tombstones! you—fool! They are milestones,” and with those words he whipped the mare into a still faster gallop. Every moment I expected the high trap to collapse beneath us or fly into a thousand splinters.

The stranger’s face was as white as the stones which flashed by. In his fear he clung tightly to my arm. He afterwards declared that “Maister William” was mad and that the devil himself would be a more pleasant companion.

Not long ago I entered the kitchen of the “Peacock” hoping to find the old man in a fair humour. The moment he saw me his head commenced to nod as if in assent. This was one of his strange mannerisms. Sometimes his nodding meant “Yea” but more often it meant “Nay.” One could never be sure of him.

On this occasion, still nodding his head, he shook hands, bade me sit near him and asked what it would please me to drink. I knew him well enough to know that he wished to do battle.

“Young man,” he said,—this being his customary way of addressing me. “Young man, what is your opinion of predestination?”

Now I well knew that only when strongly opposed did he show his best form and I well knew that whatever my answer he would oppose me. Knowing very little of the subject but wishing to hold the old man to his pleasure I replied by quoting Henley:

“It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll;
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.”

“By God! Young man,” Maister William replied, “I love you, but,” he added with a deep dry chuckle, “we will talk on this subject for a little while.”

What could I say or do? I knew the old man was deeply read and learned. I knew that beneath his present calm and unruffled appearance he had a swift and cutting wit.

I knew that right or wrong I would be beaten, but if you could see, as I have seen, those deep set eyes light up and sparkle with pleasure, if you could hear, as I have heard, that smooth confident voice carrying him on to a smiling victory, then you, like myself, would accept defeat as often as I did and still court his company. Yes, even the vanquished found a pleasure in his victory.

Many of his remarks were so quaint they became fixed in my mind.

Once I tried to thank him for some sound advice he had given me. “Young man,” was his answer, “you know that the Book instructs us to help one another, listen to me, here is a little advice it would be well for you to remember: ‘Cast thy bread upon the waters and in many days it shall return unto thee’ with a great hunk of cheese upon it.”

On another occasion I sought his company at the “Peacock” and found him seated in the old armchair, staring fixedly at the distant hill-tops which rose some three miles beyond the open windows. Suddenly he began to nod vigorously, but whether in assent or dissent I could not be sure. He muttered beneath his breath. His hands moved as if to aid his argument. He appeared to have invisible opponents.

None of the company remarked upon his conduct, they knew his strange whims and fancies. Suddenly he stood erect, brandished his stick and roared in his deep stentorian voice, “Avaunt! foul fiends! Avaunt!”

Trembling visibly he stood for a while ready, as it were, to attack his tormentors. Then he looked about him with calmer eyes and with a deep groan sank into his chair only to rise again to strike the table a tremendous blow. “John, John,” he roared, “Landlord! Bring it up, I’ll fill me with the old familiar juice, methinks I might recover by and by.”

On such occasions as these we were really entertained. Words poured from his mouth in rushing cascades. He invited all to argue against him. He compelled some to defend themselves. Those who remained silent became his butt. His tongue was like a sword, cut and thrust, thrust and cut. He knew each man in the company, he knew their beliefs and disbeliefs, he knew their faults and failings, and to the credit of these solid countrymen, it must be said they did not shirk the battle. They knew their “Maister William” would not extend himself unless the opposition was worthy of his powers.

There were times when a little bitterness became apparent, but “Maister William” was equal to such occasions. His wit was so swift and his ability to find a rich infectious humour in the most serious situation was astonishing.

How clear and forceful was his language when he quoted a passage from the classics.

What an actor he might have been!

I well remember the last evening I saw him in the “Peacock.” He rose to his full height, threw out his arm and began:

“All the world’s a stage
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His Acts being seven ages.”

The flickering flames of the Inn fire threw strange lights on the old man’s lined face as he rolled out these words, on to the end he continued, and what depths of sadness he gave to the last words of the passage, “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans—everything.” It was, however, as if his reason and instinct were at war, certainly they were not in true harmony, for I have more than once at his request, quoted Longfellow’s “Psalm of Life.” When I spoke the words of the second verse:

“Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
‘Dust thou art to dust returnest’
Was not spoken of the soul.”

Then his huge hand would clasp my shoulder in a vice-like grip. He appeared to realize the futility of discussion on this point. “Faith! Young man,” he would remark sadly, “Faith is what most of us lack.”

William, my old friend, why did I not meet you in your younger days? Then you had “a step more active, a more enquiring eye,” and maybe “a tongue more varied in discourse” (but this latter I can hardly believe).

When I think upon our friendship in those last few years of your life, when I remember:

“——how often you and I have tired the sun
with talking and sent him down the sky,”

then I am full of regrets that I missed so many years of your company.

What strange topics we have discussed, and what strange questions we have asked, “and many knots unravel’d by the road; but not the Knot of Human Death and Fate.”

And now you have gone to seek an answer to the great question, gone to unravel the last knot. How you did love to theorise upon this point. In what various ways did you approach this question and, in your honest doubt, you were never given a satisfactory answer.

Sometimes, when seated in the kitchen of the “Peacock,” I gaze upon that empty armchair beside the grandfather clock, then my thoughts wander back to the happy hours I spent in your company, and I whisper to myself:

“Still are thy pleasant voices,
Thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away,
But them he cannot take.”

“A COUNTRY MARKET”

“A COUNTRY MARKET”

READER (Shades of Charles Lamb), would'st thou see business and pleasure combined; would'st thou see bustling activity amidst truly rural surroundings and the people of Old England in a battle of wits; would'st thou see Sam Weller, George Borrow, Father O'Flynn, Uncle Tom Cobbley and All?—Come with me to Cleobury—but let it be on a market day.

Oh! the hurrying and the skurrying, the hustling and the bustling. Farmers from four counties, red-faced men, bearded men, tall men, short men.

Oh! the hand-shaking and the shouting as if they had not met since—Mafeking's relieved! or as if their farms had been isolated by some great flood for a whole twelve months.

Plump old dames, apple-cheeked maids, farmers' wives and daughters hurrying up and down the High Street, with baskets of fresh butter and eggs on their arms. Here are ducks, hens and cockerels, heads downwards, corded legs, quack quack quacking and cluck cluck clucking.

Traps and gigs, each projecting its wheels over the lowered shafts of its neighbour; fifty, sixty, seventy of them under the trees which line the road from the “Crown” to the “Crooked Billet.”

Now, let me lead you through the “Crown” to the Auction Yard beyond.

Here's a noise to wake the dead!

Cattle bellowing, cows have lost their calves, calves have lost their mothers, sheep are bleating loud and continuously, drovers shouting and cursing as they drive fresh yearlings some this way, some that way. Pigs, the stubborn brutes, run squealing in every direction except the right one.

White-coated butchers and dealers, talking and arguing fast and heatedly, this might be the only market in the four counties.

Among this great crowd we must give pride of place to the auctioneer.

He stands on a narrow plank (which runs between the pens) five feet or so above the ground, before and behind him are the penned up sheep and cattle. His clerk is at his side, book in hand; how he understands his work amid this hullabaloo is more than I can say.

This auctioneer is certainly a great man. How he talks!

“Gentlemen,” he begins, “Mr. Ira Offin’s little bunch of outlyers. All straight and sound. I’ve never seen a better lot. Who will start them?”

A rumble of remarks from the crowd and a bid is made.

“What! What! What!” roars the auctioneer affecting great surprise. “Did I hear you right, sir? Eh! Yes! Don’t be silly! Don’t be foolish! Come! Come! This is a place for business.”

Now he appeals to the buyers to use their wonderfully sound judgment. He praises them (for a purpose) he draws this one and that one into conversation (for a purpose).

Ah! Now a better price is offered and run up immediately by half-crowns until a stop is reached at last.

Now the auctioneer again praises the cattle, invites the buyers to come forward and really look at the stock (as if they had been bidding for something hidden away).

Now he becomes sarcastic, bitter and humourous in turn. He talks and talks, repeating his statements with added emphasis. Now he repeats the last offer made.

“Nineteen! Nineteen! Nineteen sovereigns I am bid.”

His quick eye moves about the crowd. The offer “Nineteen” is repeated with amazing rapidity. Then at last he adds sharply:

“And half-a-crown, come, come, gentlemen, Mr. Abel, you——Thank you, and half-a-crown. Nineteen five I am offered, Nineteen five; Nineteen five.”

Again the offer is repeated at least a score of times.

Again half-a-crown is offered, but did you see any reason for this rise in the price? did you hear any bid made? No. Now take your eyes off the Master of Ceremonies and watch the crowd.

Ah! now you see the reason, an almost imperceptible nod there and—up goes the price; another buyer places the crook of his stick on his shoulder and—up goes the price; another takes a slow and languid look at the sky and—up goes the price.

It matters not that all these signs are so slight, the actions so slow and easy amid the excited talking of men and the fearsome bellowing of cattle, the result is always the same, a name is whispered to the clerk and—up goes the price.

And so the business continues, at each pen of cattle, sheep or pigs the same excitement, the same quiet buying amid the clamour and din.

The auctioneer is certainly up to his work. His quick eyes note the true value of the stock at once. He appreciates real humour from the buyers, but he scorns foolishness.

An old sow and a pen of aged ewes are quickly disposed of. He knows how useless his most fluent talk would be if quality were about, and he knows the signs of lack of interest better than any man in the market. A puffed-up interest he laughs at and he scores off those against him to the great amusement of the crowd.

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Now come with me to the “High Clouds” a quaint old inn near-by. Its outside appearance is that of a musty old lawyer’s office but within all is merriment and mirth.

Farmers are gathered here and, amid hand-shaking and laughter, they talk of “barrens, gilts, half-legged ’uns, outlyers, weights and prices.”

Tankards of home-brewed ale and glasses of choice wine are on the tables and window-ledges. On the right hob of the fire-place is a large tankard of mulled beer and on the left hob a similar tankard of egg-flip.

The fellow-feeling is infectious, but amid the coming and going we can escape once again into the Market Place.

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Now to the “Horn and Trumpet.” Here are drovers, farmhands, poachers and swarthy gypsies, one might be in a foreign country for the dialect is difficult to understand. “Happy Harry,” the landlord, and his son, are kept busy cleaning tables and refilling mugs, quartering loaves and cutting at a huge cheese.

Say not that the rural life of England is dead.

Passing the “Green Man” later you may hear loud shouts for “Cocker” the ostler.

Stabling here for thirty horses.

How are the many horses and traps paired off? Is “Cocker” the ostler responsible? If so, does he rely on his memory? or do the horses know their own traps?

At any rate I have never heard of a mistake.

Just as a farmer and his wife meet at the appointed time so does a horse and trap meet and await them.

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Market day is held in Cleobury once each week, fifty-two market days each year. Is there not a good deal of Old England in such events?

Why do the people of the crowded cities rush to crowded seaside towns and call such changes holidays?

But it is better so. Without the city visitors Cleobury will continue to be Cleobury for many years to come.

“LOFTY BUYS A CAR”

“LOFTY BUYS A CAR”

NOT far distant from Cleobury is the quaint old village of Landican. It lies snuggled amid the quiet hills, nine miles from a railway station, truly an ideal place in which to rusticate.

One of my many friends in the village is Lofty, a brother postman. He has won for himself a reputation and—a warm place in the hearts of the natives.

Lofty arrives in the village each week-day morning at about nine o'clock. His duty begins at Melstone, a small market town, nine miles distant, and he delivers letters to the few scattered farmhouses on his way to Landican.

Arrived in Landican he completes his delivery in the village and here he remains until three o'clock, when he sets off on his return walk to Melstone.

Lofty, an ex-sailor, is a tall loose-limbed man of about forty years, ever ready for a joke and full of wit and humour.

At tippit, darts and cider-tasting he has no equal, but rabbiting and fishing are his favourite pastimes.

Not long ago he took up motoring, bought a car and drove it.

This was the way of it:

I saw him among the crowd at the Old Hall sale. When an ancient two-seater of mysterious make was driven into the ring, a silence fell on the crowd, even the auctioneer hesitated a little and slurred his words for a time.

Was it the slight list to starboard or the dilapidated canvas hood which resembled a huge battered pith helmet, or was it the take-me-if-you-dare expression of the broken radiator which gave the car a rakish devil-may-care appearance?

At any rate the price was run up to £15, and at that figure the bidding ceased much to the disgust of the loquacious auctioneer, who had now recovered his best selling manner.

It was then that Lofty whispered in my ear:

“Her came in under her own steam an’ her answered the helm well an’ mane’s the lift I’ve had in her, I’m thinking her’s mine.”

The auctioneer, apparently in distress, asked another half-crown and Lofty nodded.

“Going! Going!” sang the auctioneer, “at fifteen sovereigns and half-a-crown, Going!—Going!—Gone! Mr. Lofty Waldron of Melstone.”

“Ten year ago,” Lofty remarked to me, “I had a one and three quarter Viper, a powerful bike her was. Ay! Ay! I knows all about motor engines. My missus ’ull play Hamlet about her, but its Sunday to-morrow an’ I’ll have her out for a spin, All’s well.”

Whether he referred to the car, his “missus” or both, I could not be certain.

Lofty called for assistance and the car was pushed and pulled into the farmyard behind the “Fox and Duck,” the innkeeper being a farmer of some repute as well as “mine host” of the village.

It was now three o’clock and Lofty set off for his home town, Melstone. He had planned to return later that evening and take his car home by moonlight.

Later that evening Lofty *did* return and made merry at the “Fox and Duck.”

Luck was on his side, he won at tippit, cork pool, quoits, high-kicking, darts, corkaloo and many other pastimes born in country inns.

Lofty’s appearance in the village at this hour brought all the village wits and worthies together.

The fun was fast and furious.

Lofty was now “right fou” and the question was, if he fell could he rise?

“Farewell, my darlings,
I’m goin’ away to leave you
I can no longer stay,
The good ship she’s in motion,
We’ll soon be on the ocean,
So, Farewella! Goodboya!
Farewell for ever more.”

That was Lofty’s song.

At last preparations were made for his departure. “Mine Host” and a dozen of the strongest customers gathered about the ancient decrepit car which appeared to be leaning against a stable door, that rakish amused expression written all over its discoloured radiator.

But Lofty would have no assistance.

“Leave her to me, me boys,” he shouted, “I knows how to manage a lidy.”

Then followed much cranking and straining, altering of levers and gadgets and at last a sputtering roar.

Lofty took his position behind the wheel and attended to driver’s duties.

“Avaunt there! Hi up! you lubbers,” he roared, and at that moment the car jerked forward a foot—only a foot—then she raced backwards at top speed scattering the watching crowd in all directions.

“Darn my liver,” Lofty afterwards remarked, “she raced astern at forty knots an’ the steerin’ gear was all to blazes.”

Tom Wathmore, a huge ploughman, had fallen between the shafts of a wagon while Dick Adams and Nat Brown had crashed into each other and lay spread-eagled on the rich manure beside the cowshed doors.

The others ran in every direction, arms and legs flying like windmill sails.

“Yah, yer bunches o’ arms and legs,” yelled Lofty, “Hold her! Damn yer! Hold her!”

He himself hung to the wheel as if by so doing he had his only chance of remaining on this earth.

The little car raced backwards the full length of the farmyard.

Gurr-rr-rr-rr—Bump; a sudden stop. A stack of last year’s manure, five feet high, saved the situation.

Lofty shook and grunted as he lay across the wheel while the engine raced and the wheels spun.

“Darn my liver and rags,” was Lofty’s quiet remark after stopping the engine. “I’ll bet my stern lamp’s busted.”

Shouts and curses rained upon him from behind stable doors and cowsheds, from beneath wagons and traps, while the old blacksmith roared at him from the window of the brewhouse where he had taken refuge.

“Dang you, Lofty,” came the hoarse voice of “Mine Host” from beneath a wagon, “Dang you, you’m killed my best Rhody Red, a raal laying machine she were.”

Lofty saw trouble all around him and realised that his stronghold was his car.

“Sorry, sorry,” was his calm reply to their curses, “Her’ll steam ahead all Sir Garnet, her needs jest a wee bit o’ humouring, a proper lady her be, a

proper lady.”

Lofty then ventured out of the car to crank “her” up; on this occasion he was quickly successful and leapt back to the wheel.

“Stand clear o’ the harbour gates you lubbers,” he bellowed, then off he sailed straight for the open gateway, missing the left gatepost by an inch.

His method of navigation around these corners will be talked of in Landican for many years to come.

He raced across the High Street as if he intended to rest in the kitchen behind the village stores—then seeing danger ahead he suddenly twirled the wheel. The off mud-guard caught and scattered the contents of two cases of tinned salmon and one of condensed milk, then ripped a large hole in a sack of sugar which stood outside the stores.

Still Lofty twirled at the wheel.

Would he circle and re-enter the yard of the “Fox and Duck”? No, not quite, but he caused the crowd to race back to their positions of safety before righting the car and racing away towards Melstone at (judging by the engine’s roar) fifty miles an hour.

I rather feared for Lofty’s safety, so borrowed a push bike and followed.

Down the lane, round the bend at Six Ashes, on to Irby corner, here I thought is a wrecked car, but no, no sign of Lofty.

Two miles further on at Draycott Bank, I drew in to the grass sward and dismounted. In the shelter of a high holly hedge I heard a voice, Lofty’s.

I climbed a gate and walked down the sheltered side of the hedge.

“Darn my liver an’ rags,” I heard, “her be tighter’n a bung in a barrel.”

I saw that the two left wheels were deep in the ditch while the right rear wheel was deep in a channel which drained the water from the road.

Lofty walked from bow to stern of “her” talking to “her” in quite a friendly voice.

Then, changing his tone, he stood back, stared at his purchase and cursed her loud and long, after which he moved first his right foot, then his left foot, as if considering the wisdom of taking a running kick at “her.”

“This be my first night out with you,” he said as if talking to a companion, “an’ you—you lands me in the ditch, by damn.” After some consideration Lofty appeared to change his mind regarding the kicking treatment.

He walked towards “her,” sat on the foot board and placed his surely aching head in his hands.

“Darn my liver an’ rags,” I heard. “If I canna ride home in her I’ll have a night’s lodging free o’ charge.”

Slowly he took off his right boot and threw it beneath the car, then a similar performance with his left boot, next he took off his hat, collar and tie and threw them on the seat behind the wheel, then he carefully took his watch from his pocket and still more carefully wound it, after which, he hung it by its long chain on the off lamp bracket.

Reaching into the car he drew forth a huge great coat, after a short examination of this article of wear, he clamoured into the car, snuggled himself into a comfortable position on the seat and covered his outstretched body with the great coat.

Less than a minute later I heard soft nasal music, the notes rising and falling, slowly and regularly, the natural music played by a tired healthy man at rest, it bespeaks a man who possesses an easy and guiltless conscience.

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Next day was Sunday and while walking the narrow lane towards the River, I met old Ira Offin of Draycott Farm.

He winked a huge wink and smiled a large smile, for he was one who had witnessed Lofty’s departure some twelve hours ago. “Lofty called on me this morning,” said Ira, “Hungry as a hunter he were, enjoyed his breakfast, and,” here old Ira chuckled, “he asked if he could borrow a hoss to lift his car a wee bit. Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho!” Ira bubbled over with laughter, “Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! I sent Tom down with the hoss an’ he tells me that Lofty gets off as easy as pat my hand. A wunnerful lad is Lofty, I ’members last Christmas when he—,” then Ira told me of the many adventures which have befallen Lofty.

But “it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good.” I heard later that the Sergeant and Constable (the full strength of the Melstone Police) were on the old stone bridge which leads into the town from the Landican road at eleven-thirty p.m. and there they paced and stamped until after two o’clock in the morning, wearily waiting and roundly cursing.

News travels quickly even in these rural parts and it had been told in Melstone that Lofty had bought a car, and it was known that Lofty had not taken out a licence, and Lofty’s wit, humour, and dry sarcasm at the expense of certain officers were good reasons why he should be cared for.

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However, Lofty, sitting upright behind the wheel, sailed in on “her” under “her” own steam at about nine o’clock on Sunday morning while the vigilant police of that town slept the sleep of tired men.

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A few days later Lofty and I sat over a couple of tankards of “home-brewed” and he told me he had no regrets regarding his adventure in the motor world.

“I sold her on that very Sunday,” he said, “A man who lives on yonder hill bought her. Three pounds clear profit and one night’s free lodge—Ahoy! Landlord, fill these please.”

“Mine Host” of the “Fox and Duck” complied with but a small show of grace and limped away.

“He looks as if he be carrying the monkey,” said Lofty in a hoarse whisper, “An’ the way he glares at me makes me wonder what I done.”

COUNTRY PLEASURES

COUNTRY PLEASURES

THERE are some country pleasures known to but a few.

How pleasant it is to lie on some heathery hill-top on a warm summer's night, gazing into the starry sky, searching, perhaps, for old friends, Hesperus, Uranus, the Great Bear.

Then there is the deep satisfying pleasure of pitching one's tent beside some singing stream, the open door towards the East, and waking before the dawn to hear the dawn wind whispering and rustling in the leafy trees and then, to watch the first shimmering light of day appearing in the Eastern sky.

These are pleasures one can enjoy alone. Great pleasure there is in good company, and at the fortnightly cattle sales held in our village I ask no better company than John Pope, Fred Link, Will Bray, Bert Whitman and Moses Cadwallader, farmers of renown. Whether you be with them in the auction yard among the sheep and cattle or beneath the black beams in the village inn you will have merriment and mirth near-by, or, as the French say, you will suffer from sunshine in the stomach.

If a cool evening should tempt me to walk I stride out to Arrowe Hall Farm and sit in the open porch with old Ira Offin and his two six-foot sons. (Here the perry jug is never allowed to stand empty.)

My walk to Arrowe Hall, however, may be nipped in bud by Vic Connor the butcher's son. "Come with me," he may remark when passing "The Duck and Gun," "it's eight pip emma and before midnight I must buy sixty pigs for Dash and Dash of Birmingham."

(Vic's car is one of Henry Ford's first hundred and we must scour the countryside for miles around drinking a health at every call.)

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This old hamlet with its crooked steeple is situated on the pleasant slopes south-east of the Clees.

Now, as I listen, the old church clock strikes the midnight hour, the strokes following each other so fast I wonder if Father Time wishes to hurry out the spent day or if he makes haste to welcome the new.

There are times, even in this quiet countryside, when the air of bright day-time is full of twanging harps and the mind vibrates to this and that fleeting chord, times when a man's thoughts are as many and as varied as

the birds of the Valley, and, like the birds, they swoop into our line of vision and thought only to fly away never to return.

But let a man lean on a gate and gaze fixedly into the starry sky, the nightly miracle, then come long still thoughts, great deep thoughts.

Is it Emerson who wrote; “If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would man believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty.”

During the day at this season of the year the countryside is happy, gay and glad, but at night, especially just before the dawn, the beauties of the countryside are deeper and more impressive.

“How beautiful is night!
A dewy freshness fills the air,
No mist obscures, nor cloud, nor speck, nor stain,
Breaks the serene of heaven.”

Why waste such nights in sleep? Nearby there is a pleasant walk for the midnight hour, around the Hanging Bank, through Cherry Orchards, along the Brookland Meadows and so home again.

It was on such a night as this that I had a strange experience.

The old village was as quiet as any dingle in the near-by Wyre Forest. The half dozen shops and equally as many inns had closed their doors some three hours earlier.

The old couple at the cottage where I have a room had long ago retired to bed when I stepped outside and walked the garden path. I glanced above at the twinkling stars, stood for a while leaning on the gate puffing idly at my pipe, the blue-grey smoke curling slowly upwards.

Up at the Lea Farm the muffled “Woof Woof” of John Pope’s old sheep dog ceased and the High Street was as quiet as any woodland grove.

Suddenly, breaking the silence of the Valley, I heard a song. Clear and pure, louder and still louder it came until it flooded the Valley.

There could be no mistaking such a song—it was the nightingale. Could I, I wondered, get close to the bird?

I decided to walk down the brookside. Five minutes later I was at the old mill where the brook joins the winding Rea.

The waters, babbling and chattering under the mill wheel and over the stony ford, were not loud enough to drown the thrilling notes. I turned and walked upstream along the river bank, the noisy waters allowing me to reach

the springy grassland of the Mickley Meadows, now I could move as silently as a ghost.

At last I was almost beneath the tree from which the bird still poured forth its wonderful song. I sat upon a log and leaned my back against an old sally tree.

I know not how long I sat staring with unseeing eyes into the darkness.

“The voice I heard this passing night was heard
In ancient days by Emperor and Clown;
Perhaps the selfsame song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.”

I heard that song and nothing more. I forgot all that ever troubled me. I forgot all that ever pleased me. I was only conscious of the bird singing “of summer in full throated ease.”

This is a rare pleasure in these parts, to sit beneath a sally tree and listen to a nightingale.

The words of old Izaak Walton are so apt and so true of my own feeling I cannot do better than quote him.

“But the nightingale, another of my airy creatures, breathes such sweet loud musick out of her little instrumental throat that it might make mankind to think that miracles are not ceased. He that at midnight, when the very labourer sleeps securely, should hear, as I have very often, the clear airs, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth and say, ‘Lord, what musick hast thou provided for the Saints in Heaven when thou affordest bad men such musick on Earth.’ ”

At last I heard a rustle of leaves above me, and glancing upward, saw a large grey bird sailing quietly over the stream with apparently motionless wings.

The song had ceased, my bird had flown, perhaps that old owl flying near had startled her.

I had thought that the song of the nightingale was the only sound floating on the night air, but now I could hear the rustling leaves, and faintly in the distance, the quiet murmur of the waters babbling over the ford.

Slowly I retraced my footsteps downstream and thought how quiet and peaceful was the night and how beautiful that song.

Then—why it should be I know not—my mind travelled back some years.

Again it was a night in May and the countryside about me was quiet and still except that faintly in the distance a dull booming caught my ears.

I was a sergeant in a Line Regiment and with half a company of men I waited with taut nerves. With bayonets fixed we strained forward to catch the slightest sound. We were waiting for the whistle, the signal which would send us over to kill—to kill.

Suddenly, like a blow in such tense quietness a bird began to sing, loud and clear her song rose on the night air. I gripped my rifle and clenched my teeth still harder. I felt my heart fluttering wildly, my pulses throbbed, I must—Ah!—at last—the whistle—now we were off and mad—mad to kill—to kill men we never knew.

The scene was so vivid, I fought to put it all behind me. At the gate near the mill I stood for a while and told myself it was long years ago and should be forgotten. I asked why on such a night as this the good God should send such memories, memories like clots of poison on my brain.

A few moments ago I sat upon a log while a nightingale poured out its glorious golden song, the “dreamy, gloomy, friendly trees” around me and the twinkling stars overhead.

Why! in such a scene of perfect peace? Why! to shock such holy quiet should I see that other night in May?

I saw again, under the glare of the dropping Verey lights, that tall young Prussian soldier, his blue eyes, his white and even teeth, I saw him die—an easy death—suddenly—quickly—I killed him. I knew him not—but he would kill me and so——.

And now I wondered. Had he lived would he have loved the quiet countryside as I do? Had fate reversed our lot would he have sat beneath a nightingale and listened to her song?

In the breaking light of *that* next dawn my mind was full of jumbled thoughts for at my side that tall young Prussian soldier lay—dead, while high above a bird sang her hymn of welcome to the day.

Who was he? I would find an answer to this question. Some power drove me seek an answer; and so I sought the cord about his neck. His identity disc would tell me—but no, I found the cord was threaded through a locket ring and when I looked at this I knew a sad-faced round-eyed maid would read his name in the list of those who never return.

She perhaps would smile less often and more sadly.

Why should an act of mine strike sorrow to her heart?

I would I could forget.

Now I never hear a nightingale and have an easy heart, and when I hear a bird sing at dawn I see that tall young Prussian fall and a sad-faced maid stares at me with accusing eyes.

“SOLDIER”

“SOLDIER”

AN UNCONSIDERED PRODUCT OF THE WAR

“SOLDIER” and I had been on terms of nodding acquaintanceship for two years before we became friends.

It was in the summer of 1927 that he was first seen in the village.

Any stranger who walks the length of the straggling High Street of Cleobury offers a just and sufficient reason for long discussions as to his business and destination. At times wild guesses are made as to his past life, his object in being so far off the main highways, and it is then that “Old Dig,” the village constable, squares his shoulders and acts as he imagines one of the “Big Four” would act under similar circumstances.

“Soldier” attracted me when I first saw him. It was a Wednesday morning and market day in Cleobury. Behind the Crown Hotel the cattle, sheep and pigs were herded together ready for the sale and it was here among the farmers and drovers that I first saw “Soldier”—a stranger in our midst.

He was a man of about two and thirty summers and stood over six feet in height. He was as straight as a gun barrel and broad-shouldered but slim waisted and rather slightly built about the hips. He had a head of coarse, curling black hair. His deep set grey eyes were sheltered behind thick bushy eyebrows. His features generally were not remarkable, indeed, they were inclined towards hardness excepting when he smiled, which was but seldom.

His dress consisted of a soldier’s khaki tunic, unbuttoned at the throat, an old pair of flannel trousers and heavy nailed boots.

He entered the auction yard in charge of a drove of cattle and it was a surprise to me when I heard, later in the day, that he was a farm-hand at Dale End Farm.

Dale End, a great rambling old place, had been the residence of a leading county family in days gone by, but was now occupied by one, Matthew Marshbanks, an eccentric old man and a noted breeder of Hereford cattle and Clun Valley sheep.

It was plain to see that “Soldier” was not the ordinary type of farm-hand. His speech told of some education, and his manner, a cold distant form of

politeness, kept others of his calling at a respectful distance.

Farm-hands in charge of stock, drovers from distant places and small holders of the countryside use either the “Bird in Hand” or the “Drum and Monkey” in preference to the larger hotels, and in one of these old inns, “Soldier,” quiet and unobtrusive, would take his lunch amid the talking crowd.

It was inevitable that he should become the subject of conversation (always in his absence, of course).

The men could not understand why a man of his evident talent, a stranger and, as they judged, a townsman, should be a knock-about man at a large hill farm. But it was plain to see that he did not intend to enlighten any man by explaining.

Only on one occasion was he drawn into an argument—and this led to blows.

The incident took place at the “Drum and Monkey.” Plunger Pugh, a huge man, weighing over seventeen stones began the trouble. He was partly a navy, partly a poacher. His face told plainly of many drinking bouts. He had small pig-like eyes and wore small gold wire ear rings.

Rough and coarse was his appearance and rough and coarse was his speech.

As soon as “Soldier” entered the old inn kitchen Plunger began to question, indirectly, the right of a stranger to live in the district. He suggested many unpleasant reasons for a man choosing to live in a strange countryside.

To all this “Soldier” turned a deaf ear. At last, Plunger, finding the butt of his talk beyond his reach, apparently intended to draw his remarks to a close. He spoke in loud tones and said that any man who could stand and listen to such remarks must have a skin like a rhinoceros.

At this point “Soldier” paled a little and turning to his tormentor said in icy tones, “Listen to me Mr. Flatface, all I wish to say is, that if any part of your anatomy resembles a rhinoceros it’s your b—— fat head.”

This was enough. Plunger picked up his mug, which still held a fair quantity of home-brewed ale, and flung it at “Soldier’s” head.

“Soldier” ducked quickly and the mug sailed past but the contents were splashed over his head and shoulders.

Plunger was now standing with his back towards the open door. “Soldier” rushed at him, caught him by the right wrist and the silk

handkerchief which he always wore about his neck.

The huge fellow, in spite of his weight, was forced backwards at a run and finished up on his back between the wheels of a trap in the cobblestoned inn yard.

When he rose murder was written in his eyes. Quick as a flash "Soldier" tackled him. A series of short arm blows, hard to the ribs, were followed by a stinging right drive which found its mark behind the big man's ear. "Soldier" stepped back just in time to escape a tremendous right drive from the navvy. This blow, had it found its mark, would certainly have ended the fray.

Then, before the heavy hulk of a man had recovered his balance, his lighter and more active opponent drove in a beautiful left straight to the solar plexus and in the same second a hard right with all his weight behind it to the point of the jaw.

Plunger fell like a log.

These two blows, perfectly placed and timed, ended the encounter.

"Soldier" looked at the unconscious man and calmly walked to the water-tap in the stable wall. He held his bleeding fist in the running water, then, as he walked off, he remarked to Plunger's few friends, "Splash his ugly dial with a bucket of water."

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For all his lowly calling I found "Soldier" almost unapproachable; even now, knowing him as well as I do, his manner recalls to my mind what was said of Thoreau, "I love him, but I cannot like him, and as for taking his arm I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm tree."

Our real friendship dates from the day we walked from Clunbury market.

I had refused the offer of a seat in a friend's trap, in order that I might walk the twelve miles or so of common land with him.

We talked, first of books and this led us into a world of our own, and although we agreed to disagree on many points our tastes were similar.

Then without a question from me he talked of himself.

As well as I can remember this was his story.

"Since the war ended," he began, "I have tried many avenues of life seeking something which will satisfy me, my present life is the nearest point to satisfaction I have yet reached. I will not live in the city,

‘There pass the careless people
That call their souls their own,
Here by the road I loiter,
How idle and alone.’

“My wages are small but my needs are few; a little tobacco and a few books are all the luxuries I ask.

“I feel sure I enjoy the beauties of the countryside more than the Lord of — Manor and the cattle and sheep interest me more, I think, than they do their actual owner.

“My faith—well—I almost envy a true believer, no matter what his creed, he has a prop for his weakness, something to which he can fly for support—but faith is a gift from whatever powers there be.

“I have, more than once, dreamt a strange dream, I see a huge picture, the canvas covers the end wall of a long room, it is as if the wall has fallen out and threatening clouds are massed in the sky beyond. Through the clouds a great naked right arm is thrust with hand extended as if inviting me to shake. ‘The Arm in the Sky.’

“But the great tonic for my life is the memory of the Regimental Sergeant-Major of the — Guards. Occasionally he would begin his work with the Battalion with these words, each one fired as if from a rifle, ‘Upright in Body! Upright in Mind! And fear no Man on God’s Earth.’

“These words have helped me more than creeds and philosophies.

“How long I will stay in these parts I do not know, I will wait until the spirit moves me.”

At this point “Soldier” turned and looked at me square in the eyes, I half expected him to shake hands and say “Good-night.” After a while we walked on and he continued.

“I am a man grown old before my time. I joined the army in 1914, I was then 18 years of age. Perhaps my height, perhaps my serious outlook on life brought me early promotion, no matter which, it matters not. After six months service I was a sergeant, ten months later I was a company sergeant-major and—I grew old before my time.

“The great majority of the men of my company were older than I, and the sergeants, the men with whom I lived, were, almost without exception, twice my age.

“But army life has done me a great deal of good, I will never forget that great man, my old Sergeant-Major.”

Then as we walked he told me of many unforgettable incidents of his army life. Always that Grand Old Sergeant-Major was his hero, his guide, mentor and friend. While he talked of the past he stared at the distant hill-tops as if, instead of seeing the quiet peaceful hillsides as I did, he saw again those awful nights of battle.

And so, this “old young man” (shall I call him), my new friend, told me his trials, of the manner in which, upon occasions, he had forced himself to do his duty, often flinching inwardly but refusing to show any outward sign of strain.

He had entered the army a boy, and little more than four years later he returned to civil life with an air and outlook towards life similar to that of a man of forty years.

He told me he had tried, on his return to normal life, to mix with his pre-war friends in their games and pursuits. He told me he knew that middle-aged men, such as he had lived with for four long years were not his true and proper companions, but he could not, no, try how he would, he could not become one of the party he knew in the old days. He was as an old man among them, their pleasures appeared childish to him, but he would not join the older men. Two generations he knew, the first, his own by natural laws, was too young for a man with his ideas, the second was his also, because military laws had thrust him into its midst and he had become as one of that generation. But the war ended and he was thrown aside as of no further use and so—he was living, crushed between two generations, unable to join either.

“Do I,” he continued thoughtfully, “do I still hanker after the movement and so-called glorious uncertainty of army life? I wonder.

“However it may be I try to be a useful member of the community and, at the same time, find a little happiness in life. I believe that whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist and so here I am. In these quiet hills I find life very agreeable. What matter if I have a ragged coat. I have rude health and I am at peace with the world, as for cash

‘I care for no more money than will pay
The reckoning and the charges of the day.’ ”

Hours ago we had reached Thumper’s Dingle, the parting of our ways, but we had seated ourselves on the old stone bridge, and here we smoked and talked, talked and smoked until the stars blinked and winked and finally disappeared.

Then we shook hands to our friendship, to our discovery of each other.

Afterwards I pondered on the lonely man. His state of mind was a result of the war. Here was a product of the war, as yet unconsidered, maybe there are thousands suffering in a greater or lesser degree. Their temperament did not allow them to see a single gleam of humour in war. What was this young man, "Soldier," in search of? I think I have an answer.

One day in his nineteenth year, tired after a hard day or hard week perhaps, he slept a good night of sleep, he woke next day to find himself a Company Sergeant-Major, and straightway he was nearing forty years of age.

He lost his happy years, the years of youth. Rob a man of these eventful years and he will spend the remainder of his life in search of his lost youth.

ON HOLIDAYS

ON HOLIDAYS

MAY blessings be heaped upon the head of him who invented holidays.

Do you wish to exercise the body while the mind rests or do you wish to rest the body and exercise the mind? No matter which, a holiday will answer your purpose.

Taken in the right spirit a holiday is balm for the soul and refreshment for the mind.

Is there a word in the English language so well known, yet conveying to our minds so many thoughts—of adventures in the past—of pleasant lazy days—of dreams to come true if we but follow the promptings of our own minds—of men and women we have met, some of whom are still our friends, others we have neither seen nor heard of since?

A holiday bids us fall out of the machine of which we are but a small part and wander whither we will—free, and if we choose, without a name.

Indeed, my ideal holiday resort is some pleasant corner of England, near sea and mountain, where every man and woman would enter incognito, where our professions and occupations would never be discussed.

The perfect holiday is the one in which you find the greatest amount of freedom, for our civilisation has robbed us of our freedom. The machine of State and almost any occupation marks us with the badge of servitude.

Meet those men you know to be fancy-free and talk of holidays; to your queries come various answers, one loves the sea, another the mountains, some are off to foreign lands, others (I cannot understand these) seek cities by the sea, Brighton and Blackpool. Then there are golfers, walkers and motorists (these latter use machines of various sizes and noises, the hogs and hoglets). Some are drawn to lonely shores and golden sands, happy lazy days, others seek a quiet inn and fish in a nearby chattering stream, some few prefer the quietness of their own room and pleasant labour in their own garden.

“So many men, so many minds.”

When these delightful days draw near we should allow ourselves to be captured by that holiday which has the strongest appeal, by that mode of life which has the strongest voice in our private minds so that these days will be for ever happy joyous memories of times well spent—“holy days.”

For my part I like to wander in a strange country, where I may whisper to myself each night. "To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new." On such journeyings I would be known like Hazlitt as "the gentleman in the parlour."

I love the wind in lonely places, wayside inns (many of these are snuggled away between spinneys and babbling brooks). I love the rolling moorland, purple at sunset beneath a sky of clustered gold, while in the West sword-like shafts of blood-red clouds point to the North and South.

A day of heavy rain on such a holiday is not unwelcome, then I can rest or read, and should the night be clear it is my pleasure to enjoy a walk beneath the stars during the quiet hours. How sweet and fresh is this old Earth of ours after a day of rain; the hillsides newly washed and glittering green, cool scented breezes come from the mountain tops, clean and clear for your deep-breathing, the stars are brighter and more friendly, walking on such a night how quickly comes the dawn.

I remember on the hills beyond Church Stretton the wonder and deep feeling, almost of fear, which clutched me at dawn, a dawn so full of an indescribable glory.

A man must walk alone in lonely places before he is able fully to realize the depth and meaning of Masfield's lines:

"I have seen dawn and sunset on moors and windy hills
Coming in solemn beauty like slow old tunes of Spain."

It is strange that memories of moving beauty do not entice men to wander forth in an attempt to rediscover those wonders, still green in their memory, many of which are daily events, the truth is it is the unexpected which hits us hardest and moves us most.

To push through a wood by some hitherto unknown path and, from a clearing, see a range of hills in a new light and from a different angle.—To climb a spur of rock near the summit of a mountain and see (as I did once beyond Conway), a valley unthought of.—To wake and turn one's eyes towards the familiar clock on the dressing table and see (as I did this very morning), not the clock, but through the open doorway of a ragged tent, the green hillside, tall ferns all dew-pearled, clumps of golden gorse, dark woods of fir and pine and nearby the stream chattering gaily, the same stream that

"To the quiet woods all night
Singeth his quiet tune."

Such events as these, unsought and unexpected, make a man hold his breath at the time, and are in some strange way the great events of his life.



Not long ago I re-read Hazlitt's essay *On Going a Journey* and I decided to take his advice so—I went alone.

I travelled to Settle in Yorkshire by train, then, walked hard, rambled slowly, lazed contentedly, rested long, just as the mood had me. I remembered Stevenson's words of Hazlitt, "He is none of your athletic men in purple stockings who walk their fifty miles a day: three hours march is his ideal, and then he must have a winding road, the epicure."

What a strange sense of freedom I had. A thick wad of notes in one's pocket helps to raise a man into the true spirit of such a holiday for, "Whoso has sixpence is sovereign (to the length of sixpence) over all men; commands cooks to feed him, philosophers to teach him; kings to mount guard over him—to the length of sixpence."

On such a holiday one is tempted to ask as I did. "Who am I?" and quickly the answers came.

I was a Bavarian prince who lived as he pleased; a vegetarian on tour; a discharged soldier seeking work; a circus proprietor in search of good camping ground for his merry men and horses; an unconventional parson who wished to see the interior of every inn in Yorkshire. I was any man I thought myself while I held the "ready tin."

In truth, it was a glorious holiday, one to shake a man out of himself.

I met all sorts and conditions of men, a well-known author, two fat German girls tramping Buckden Pike, a parson in disguise, tramps of the lower order, "whose only pride it is, to know no spur of pride."

I was as foolish as any schoolboy. One day I was a cattle dealer talking of yearlings or a "good half-legged 'un," the next I was—well, what matter, such irresponsibility is part of the holiday, a man can be serious for so long a time he forgets that pure light-hearted foolishness is a tonic for the mind.

Such a holiday is an adventure, one never knows what the morrow may bring forth.

In a quaint old village I met a policeman who looked like a Captain of the Guards, later in the day I met him again, now in mufti, and in the cool smoke-room of an old inn he preached Idealism.

In a lonely valley I found an inn which I believe to be a smaller edition of Longfellow's *Wayside Inn*. It was almost hidden by a hanging wood and sheltered by a steep hill, heather-capped and ferny to its foot; here, among

others I met a poor clergyman who, I believe, had a perfect right to be a poacher.

At a farmhouse, near Muker, in Swaledale, I stayed four nights, because the rough golden-hearted farmer loved music. He had a “gradely” wireless set but understood it not. By day I rambled the moors with him and talked “sheep,” in the evening until “Big Ben” struck the midnight hour we “listened in.”

I would search the programmes and “tune-in,” then whisper “The Black Dyke Band” or “Paris” or “Sandler with his violin.”

The old man would sit silent in his armchair beside a glowing peat fire, just a suspicion of a smile on his lips and in his eyes, while certain pieces of music, especially of the violin, would cause a bright tear to roll down his cheek, but his rugged sun-tanned face always wore that faint smile.

I still have in my mind the welcome I received from old Mrs. Knight the farmer’s wife. I arrived at the farm, snuggled deep in a valley I had never seen before, after walking over twelve miles of high moorland in a driving storm and was as wet as a fish. “Oop stairs with thee lad, I’ll send Jem after thee with dry cloes and a towel.” That was my welcome and after a rough towelling, I dressed myself in the coarse clean clothes of the farmer or his tall son and sat down at the family table to duck and green peas, followed by apple dumpling, fruit and cream.

That night, dressed as a native of those hills I sat for an hour or more on the old stone bridge midway between the farm and the village, the farmer and his two sons were my companions.

The heathered slopes, the distant woods, the rich pastures near the river, the “gloomy friendly trees” around me, whispered of “peace and holy quiet.”

The slow pleasant speech of the men at my side, their interest in country sights and country sounds, so familiar to their eyes and ears, told of contentment and lives spent in harmony with nature.

After the storm of the day the earth was scented and fresh. The smoke curling upward from my pipe was as white as the mists in the distant hollows.

Such a holiday as this is full of surprises. One night, an hour or so before dusk, I entered a rambling old inn, from the distance it had the appearance of a collection of gables, chimneys and long windows. No other habitation could be seen, either in the valley or on the surrounding hills, but about the inn dogs barked and yapped, cattle bellowed and sheep bleated.

This old inn, "The Gate Hangs Well," was the centre of a thinly populated district, and because market towns were so distant the auctioneers had arranged with the hill farmers to hold at least three sales each year, Spring, Autumn and Christmastide.

Next day was the day of the Autumn sale. In the fields adjoining the inn temporary cattle pens had been erected and hurdles were being thrown from a farm wagon and hastily tied together to hold "bunches" of sheep.

All was bustle and activity.

In the inn kitchen a table was laid for thirty men, these men I joined. What a happy laughing crowd they were, hill farmers who never thought of visiting a town, for such men these sales are the events of the year.

The last hours of the evening were given to drinking and entertainment.

The table was cleared and set nearer the wall, a basket of pipes appeared, some clay, some cherry-wood, all shapes and sizes, these were passed around the company, each man taking his choice, then three large fruit dishes were placed on the table each containing a pound or more of loose tobacco for common use.

Most of the songs I heard that evening were old Yorkshire folk songs and the language too was old Yorkshire, full of dialect and strange accent.

Although the songs were foreign to me the spirit of the company was infectious, the friendly jollity, the frank good nature and the open-heartedness of these up-country men made it clear to me that their world was a rare fine place to live in.

One man I remember well, not so loud in his laughter and talk as others but quick to shake a hand and drink a health, as free with his money as if he were a Rothschild. As regards his dress, he appeared to have taken just a little more care, to be just a little more particular than his neighbours.

His thick curling black hair was plentifully sprinkled with grey. He had a deep scar over his left eye and another near the point of his chin. Not a handsome man nor yet ugly, but I marked him as the most attractive personality in this mixed company.

I read in his face one who would fight against odds, one, although still in early middle age, who had met many reverses but was not embittered.

Towards the end of the evening he was called upon to sing.

His name was followed by loud shouts and much hand-clapping.

Never have I heard so sweet and clear a voice from one who had the appearance of a great rough countryman. His elocution was perfect, he had

no accompanist, for the lean middle-aged man had left the piano.

He sang first, “Moya, My Girl,” then, “I Did But See Her Passing By.”

While he sang no man spoke or whispered to his neighbour, no man beat time with his pipe or feet, no match was struck, a dead silence was allowed for that man who sang in tones so clear and pure.

Such sweet sad songs from such a man in such a company were almost unbearable.

Then, as if regretting he had silenced the company he asked all to join him in, “There is a Tavern in the Town.”

His last song was sung at the request of a tall, bearded farmer. “O My Luv’s like a Red, Red Rose.” I have neither seen nor heard of this man since —“A ship that passed in the night.”

• • • • •

But there are others whom we meet on our journeyings through life whom we cannot forget, they do not pass in the night, nor yet in a year.

It is of such men as these I will tell you now.

An acquaintance of mine who lives and labours in the city called on me at my home here in the heart of Shropshire, he had a week of freedom and wished to see the beauties of the countryside.

In my heart I thought he was too much bound by the conventions of the city to really enjoy the freedom of countrymen and country ways.

It so fell that at this time I too had a week of freedom and it was my intention, I told my friend, to walk the Broad Highway in a westerly direction until I could see and hear the waves lapping on the shores of Cardigan Bay. Would he join me? Yes, he agreed to do so.

On the second day of our walk we neared the Valley of the Llawnt, nine years before I had walked this same road.

The Wynstay Arms, an old inn, still stood, and here, if memory served me right, I had found good wholesome food, home-brewed ale and a clean bed.

It was an hour or so before dusk when we climbed the inn steps, and there I caught my companion’s arm and bade him listen.

Softly but in perfect unison came the voices of men singing an old Welsh ballad, years ago I heard my father sing the selfsame song, “Cân y Smotyndu” (Song of the Black Spot).

We both stood in the porch of the inn listening, not a note was hurried, not a note was slurred.

When the singing ended we entered and turned into a large room which served as tap-room, parlour and bar.

Through the window I saw the sun's rim resting on a distant mountain ridge. A huge log in the open hearth had ceased to flame and was now only one great red glow, this threw a dull light about the room just as the red glowing sun threw his lessening light on the mountain sides.

In the half light of the oak-panelled room I saw seven men, big men, strong men, two or three were fully dressed but the others wore only belted trousers and loose flannel shirts. They all wore heavy nailed boots of an unusual type, the bright yellow eyelet holes being let in almost to the point of the toes.

My companion and I seated ourselves and called for refreshment.

The men became silent and cast dark looks upon us.

A tall gaunt old man who appeared to be the leader of the party glared at us from beneath his beetling eyebrows.

My companion and I discussed our day's walk and the countryside we had seen.

After a while the men began talking together in Welsh, a language I understand fairly well.

"Who were we," they asked each other. I could not resist a broad smile at their wild guesses.

I, the "tall one" was, they thought, a detective or a police inspector hunting Dai Roberts, a poacher and sheep-stealer. I was a man, they said, who should be better employed.

My companion was, in their opinion, even worse than I (he was very ill at ease and could not hide the fact, this tells against a man in such company).

The talk of the men amused me for a while, but as they continued to converse in Welsh, and called my friend a rapsallion and worse, I thought the time had come to pour oil on troubled waters.

I stood, and speaking as good Welsh as I could command, I asked if they would drink with me, and begged of them to sing the ballad they were singing before I entered the room for it was an old favourite of my father's.

The men drew back and appeared abashed and ashamed, one apologised for their remarks and trusted my friend would forgive them.

(My friend looked on in amazement, he did not know I understood and spoke Welsh.)

Tankards of “home-brewed” were set before the men by a lad of 18 or 19 years, and I noticed that the old man’s drink was, as before, a bowl of broth or soup.

Then this old man, hard, stern and white-haired, advanced a pace and asked quietly enough what part of Wales I hailed from.

I told him that my father had farmed in the Valley below Mynydd Coch, but we had left the country when I was quite a child.

The old man then strode towards me, I judged him to be six feet and four or five inches in height, and in spite of his age (I learnt later that he was 71) he was as straight as a gun barrel.

He glared at me with a strange expression on his long drawn face and I prepared to defend myself; however, he halted before me and stood for a moment or two with his great arms outstretched, the palms of his big knotted hands upwards as if in supplication.

Then he took me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes.

“Man,” he said, speaking English with a very strong Welsh accent, “Man, what was your father’s name?” “Rhys Evans,” I answered. I felt his grip tighten on my shoulders, he turned me slightly and led me to the wide window through which the last rays of the setting sun could be seen shooting fanwise over the shoulder of the mountain.

In this open space near the window he held me at full arm’s length, his hands like great weights on my shoulders.

He looked squarely at me, his eyes fixed on mine as if searching, searching.

At last his head fell forward and I heard in a whisper so low and forced I barely caught the words, “It iss right. It iss right. O Crist! Maddeu i mi!” (Oh Christ! Forgive me!)

He still held my shoulders and after a while looked once again into my eyes. “I am Iorwerth Evans, your father’s brother,” he said slowly.

Now his great fists gripped still harder and I felt the tremor of his body.

His eyes searched mine as he stood waiting for an answer. For my part I was too surprised to speak. I never knew my father had a brother.

After a while I collected my thoughts and told him I was pleased to meet him, I added that the circumstances of our meeting were unusual, but they mattered not, we had met as we should meet, in the heart of the mountains, in the Land of My Fathers.

Judging by his expression my answer surprised him, he looked upwards for a few seconds then, “Fy mab,” (my son) he called quietly over his shoulder, “Fy mab.”

A man in his early thirties rose and advanced, six feet or more of solid bone and muscle.

The old man took his right hand from my shoulder and placed it on his son’s shoulder.

“Fy mab,” he said, “Cyfarfod yn awr mab Rhys, fy brawd.” (My son, meet now the son of Rhys, my brother).

The young man gripped my hand as if he meant to crack the bones.

His shirt, open at the throat, displayed a great brown deep chest.

The old man looked from one to the other of us, then he took my hand in both his own, and what hands he had, huge, mahogany-coloured and so very capable.

He bowed his head and spoke in low tones, but what he said I did not hear.

(And so in this strange manner I met my father’s brother and his son, my uncle and my cousin.)

The old man now drew himself up to his full height and asked when I had eaten last, would I eat and drink with him?

I told him I had no hunger at the moment, I had drink here, good home-brewed ale, all I asked was that I might talk with him later but now would he and his friends sing.

When he answered he dropped again into the Welsh tongue, he said they would sing and that I would hear the grand old tunes I had heard in my childhood.

He took a long staff from the corner, one similar to a shepherd’s crook, and holding this as a support for his left arm he raised his right arm shoulder high, three great fingers outstretched, his thumb holding his little finger on his palm.

The men immediately took their positions, the old man spoke one word—then—when his hand moved it was as if that movement let loose voices from every part of the big room, strong, deep resonant voices, reverberating and shaking the air.

The volume of sound rose higher as the old man’s hand, still beating time, rose higher.

This strange old man, the tallest of the tall men present, took his task seriously, his eyes flashed from one to the other, slowly but surely that swelling music rose until it was a song of loud passion while amid the music there seemed to be loud cries of despair.

Then as that hand dropped lower so the voices dropped until they were as soft and gentle as a mother's when she croons to her babe.

What songs they sang, songs unknown to me, but waking and touching some chord in my childhood's memory.

And so the night wore on, old hymns and songs were sung with such feeling and intensity they moved me like true religion.

At a late hour these strange men departed to their camp for they were timber fellers and at work on the trees my uncle had bought in the big wood little more than a mile away.

I arranged to call on them the next day, indeed, it was my wish to accompany them that very night but my companion from the city would not hear of moving away from the inn at this hour of the night. The dark forbidding mountains, he said, made him afraid, and such strangers as I talked to were not men he wished to meet.

He had not understood the Welsh tongue and, in all probability had not been able to follow what little English had been spoken.

Next morning I explained as well as I could the events of the previous night.

My friend decided to take a train from the nearest station and spend the remainder of his holiday at the seaside.

I at once left the inn and went to the camp of the timber men.

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What a joy it was to watch those men at work.

The axemen were stripped to the waist and stood with feet apart and firmly planted, with each swing of the great axe one could see the slight supple movement of their legs, their arms and shoulders were beautifully muscled, their deep chests rose and fell regularly, no panting, no hurry, the skin of their backs resembled soft smooth velvet covering muscles that rippled and rolled.

Their eyes were good, their arms were good, their bodies were sound and strong and their several tasks appeared to give them much pleasure, they sent huge chips flying into the air some falling twenty yards away.

I spent the remainder of my holiday in the camp.

I assisted with the cooking of meals and was taught how to swing an axe.

I talked and walked with that strange man, my uncle, and he became my great and good friend.

He and my father had quarrelled many years ago, and now he admitted that he had been both wrong and foolish and he prayed for forgiveness.

One day five timber haulers joined us in camp. That night we all stood around the red gleads of the fire in the centre of a clearing and sang.

The gentle evening breeze carried our voices to the distant village and soon we were joined by men and women, lads and lassies—the whole population of the village.

Now the singing began in real earnest.

By common consent my uncle conducted the choir. He arranged the company in a great half circle around the glowing embers of the wood fire. As a rostrum he had a huge block of wood, a section of a tree trunk.

When he stood on this pedestal he was in full view of all present, and what a tremendous figure he was, white-haired, gaunt and full of quiet dignity.

He spoke for a few minutes, then raised both those great arms, holding his palms downwards as if to hold and control the assembly.

What singing we had that night and what a moving scene it was.

Around the glowing dying fire a great half circle of faces were up-turned to that old man who stood high above them with arms outstretched.

Night had now fallen and the tall straight stems of the pine and spruce fir had the appearance of a high draped wall all around us, our ceiling, high above, was the sky all aglittering with the jewels of the night.

These simple country folk, when they sing, give their whole being to the task, with a joyous abandonment of all else they give their all.

Their singing that night caught my very heart-strings.

I watched my uncle; in the silence after each hymn or song he would talk sternly to his choir, then after a short pause, he would raise his arms, a silent signal telling the people to prepare for the next piece.

During the singing his face would work spasmodically, like that of a dumb man trying in vain to sing; then, during low sweet passages, he would raise his face towards the Heavens, pursing his lips as if in an ecstasy of delight.



What memories are mine when I sit and think of journeyings, not in foreign countries but in my native land.

“I hae been blythe wi’ comrades dear,
I hae been merry drinking,
I hae been joyfu’ gath’rin’ gear,
I hae been happy thinking.”

“Happy thinking,” any man who strides out on the open road with an open heart will find all he needs to enable him to sit happy thinking.

I think of men and women I have met, of dawns and sunsets I have seen, of the wind in lonely places, of a brother wind in the lower woods rustling in the leafy tree-tops, of morning mists curling in the valley and slowly disappearing and

“——in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars like skies at night.”

Holidays! Oh! Holidays! I would that I were always free I would wander all my days.

“It’s like a book, I think, this blooming world,
Which you can read and care for just so long,
But presently you feel that you will die,
Unless you get the page you’re readin’ done,
An’ turn another—likely not so good,
But what you’re after is to turn ’em all.”

“Gawd bless this world! Whatever she ’ath done—
Excep’ when awful long—I’ve found it good.
So write, before I die,

‘ ’E liked it all!’ ”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled 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.

[The end of *Round About the Crooked Steeple* by Simon Evans]