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THE WAY I HAVE COME

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I was born at Harrow in Middlesex. Now Harrow is part of London. As I first remember it, there were meadows of a heavy clay (that had once grown good corn), massive hawthorn hedges, and a few slouching farmhouses.

But the agricultural aspect I best remember was the tramps. They came for the hay-harvest, and when they went away they left their cast-off belongings – broken boots, old billycans – in the ditches. I used to look covetously at these, and long to take them home, and my nurse would say to the other nurses that I was a child with low tastes.

In spite of these remnants, our life was so much a town life that, when holidays came, we 'went to the country'. My grandfather had a country living on the Surrey-Sussex border. There I was the usual happy and innocent little townee. Meadows meant buttercups and white violets, the village meant going to tea with kindly parishioners who had a great many flies in their parlours. One more realistic experience was being taken to drink milk 'from the cow'. The milking shed was filthy, so was the animal. I swallowed a mugful under protest, and was instantly sick.

Long afterwards my grandmother told me that not till she went to this village – she was an elderly woman then – did she realize that iniquities she had thought of as rare vestigial occurrences in crime-sheets persisted and were taken as a matter of course among these cottage homes of England. One punctual church-goer lived in open incest with his daughter. Rape and brutality accompanied the course of true love, children had the upbringing of little hell-fiends. Worst of all was the indifference of public opinion and the ignorant hopeless animal resignation of the victims.

I doubt if it is possible for a 'nicely brought up' child to get more than a superficial feeling of the country. The country was a place where the pleasure of picking flowers and running barefoot was chequered with thoughts of bulls and adders, where mothers and aunts painted in water-colours, where one was taken in wagonettes, with a clattering picnic-basket, to see the beauties of the district. I remember a holiday in Wales, when it rained incessantly, and all the beauties – it seemed – were wet too, either lakes or waterfalls.

Certainly I did not begin to get my teeth into the country until I was about eleven years old, when we began going every summer to the Ettrick valley in Selkirkshire. Now I was old enough to ramble alone; I knew the Border ballads and legends, so I had company out of the past if I wanted it; and, as we went year after year to the same place, I made friends with the present too, and saw how it linked one to the other.

It fell about the Lammas-tide
When the muir men win their hay.

I had known these lines, and felt their melancholy music. But they came home to me one raining August when the small dark pokes of rushy hay went floating down the flooded valley, and the farmer stood watching them go by with never a word.

Sheep farming, though, was the dominant industry. I had been told a shepherd knew every sheep in his flock by sight, and I spent much time in staring at one sheep after another and trying to memorize their physiognomies. I began to think it was possible; then it occurred to me that shepherds do not always identify sheep full-face. I learned, too, that the natural gait of sheep is about two miles an hour, and that to drive them faster is to overdrive them. To this day, though I have been for so long 'forth of the kingdom of Scotland', I feel scornful when I see English flocks being jostled along the road, limping and sweltered, and I recall the Jemmy Grieves and the Watty Hoggs, keeping up hour after hour their skilled dawdle as they drove the year's lambs to their southern wintering.

If when the war of 1914-1918 came there had been a demand for shepherdesses I think I would have volunteered for such work. As it was, I turned to man and metal. At first 1 worked for Belgian refugees; then I joined up on a scheme for doing supplementary work on munition-making. The plan was that women of the leisured class should have a rapid training and then work at the weekends in order to relieve the regular hands; and the leaflet of information about the spell of preliminary training said, 'Low-heeled shoes are advisable, and evening dress is not necessary'. I now see that this was a 'dilution' scheme, devised to avoid the payment of overtime rates to the regular workers. I am ashamed of an ignorance that made me a blackleg: on the other hand I am glad to have worked, even for a little time, in a factory. The conditions were bad, there was an incessant shortage of essential small tools, there was no canteen, and the sanitation was an outrage.

My father encouraged me to write an article about my experiences, and I did so. It was youthfully precious, but lively, and a magazine paid me sixteen guineas for it, an interesting comparison with the six shillings odd (if I got the shilling bonus) for an eight-hour shift. Then a daily paper asked me for a short 'middle', emphasizing the bad conditions. The MS was acknowledged in a letter that remarked that, since the object of the article was to better the lot of the munition workers, they felt sure they need not offer me payment. I replied that it would not better the condition of any workers to write commissioned articles for nothing. They saw the force of this, and paid.

One's first earnings are delicious, more so if one has grown up a member of a class and sex presumedly subsidized but unpayable. Even better was the discovery that the pen could be used as a sword.

But my pen was soon inditing of a very different matter. In 1917 the Carnegie U.K. Trust, bound under their charter to benefit music, guaranteed the preparation and publication of a corpus of fifteenth and sixteenth century English church music. By what I can only look on as an inspired perversity, this was the musical epoch I had chosen to study. I was admitted to the editorial committee, with a salary, and went to live in London, where I was immediately absorbed by the fascinating discipline of living alone.

For five years I was a complete cockney. If I went into the country it was to disport myself, or to visit.

Then, one hot August morning, I bought an ordnance map of the Essex marshes. I liked maps. I liked place-names, and the picture-making technique of map-reading. Now I thought that I might like marshes. I chose a place on the Blackwater estuary where the map said 'Inn', made out a bridle-path route from Southminster station, packed a knapsack and went off for a weekend. As far as the route was concerned the map was infallible; but there was no inn. I saw a small farm-house, and asked there where I could find lodging for the night. The woman of the house suggested I should stay there, since there were no lodgings. I stayed for a month, replenishing my wardrobe and my library by letters to drapers and booksellers. All day I walked over the marshes, or sat on the sea-wall listening to the grasshoppers, absorbed in the discovery that it was possible to write poetry; and every evening I talked to Mrs. May, or rather Mrs. May talked to me. She was an admirable talker, with the usual country long memory for local stories and local characters. And she had the less usual gift of being able to talk clearly and illuminatingly about agriculture and the problems of the small farmer.

Some six years later I used my memories of this stay in the Essex marshes in a country story called *The True Heart*. At the time I wrote it I was thinking a good deal about the technique of narrative and as an experiment I retold in this novel, and in the terms of late nineteenth-century rural England, the legend of Eros and Psyche. I supposed that most readers would recognize the story, but few did, though I had reproduced it closely, and named my characters to recall, either by sense or sound, their originals. Venus was Mrs. Seaborn, the wife of a clergyman (as a divinity she had to be placed among the gentry), and I received a highly reproachful letter from the wife of another clergyman, saying that Mrs.

Seaborn was completely unrepresentative.

I went back to London from Essex thinking about the country. That winter I read the Hammonds' *Village Labourer, Piers Plowman,* and Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, and thought on. I read also, in manuscript, a novel called *Mr. Tasker's Gods*, by one T. F. Powys. In the spring I went to Dorset, where I met the writer, and read more of his work - in manuscript then. I was much impressed by it, and, further, I believed in it. Cobbett and the Hammonds and Mrs. May and Crabbe and my grandmother, and a series of articles called 'England's Green and Pleasant Land', which had come out in the *Nation*, were a cloud of witnesses towards the likelyhood that the English Pastoral was a grim and melancholy thing.

That summer, also in the *Nation*, I read an advertisement of a cottage to let, with 'privacy and electricity'. I liked the idea of such a conjunction. What I found when I arrived to take possession I liked even better. For the cottage was at Idbury and its lessors were John and Elspet Robertson Scott.

We met, so to speak, round the same cauldron. John and Elspet had also been thinking - for a long time - about the country. It seems incredible now; but, for all that, it is true that when they first went to the Cotswolds it was with intentions of a peaceful retirement, a well-earned rest. The honesty of their hearts set them off again on the most dragon-tracking, Jerusalem-building years of their lives.

They had been thinking about the country, there and in Essex; and they had already got down to doing. I had never before met reformers with such a well-adjusted equation of lack of illusion and fullness of hope. Idbury was then a melancholy little hamlet, full of picturesque cottages that had gone bad; and houses that have gone bad weigh heavily on those who live in them. But it takes more than new roofs – John was having a dozen cottages built – to make a new man. Culture and social intercourse enter after the sweeping and garnishing. John and Elspet had got the use of the church school on Sunday afternoons. On the Sunday before my arrival Edith Evans had read about the death of Socrates to a village audience; before Edith Evans a skilled man had shown, on a week-night, how to re-upholster worn-out chairs; and before the upholsterer there had been May Muckle's string quartet. 'They didn't care so very much for the upholsterer', said Elspet, 'but they loved Socrates and the music.'

Some years after came a letter from John saying that he was convinced that, whether people would like it or no, there needed to be a magazine that would treat of the country not only as a place to grow corn and rear cattle in, and hunt and shoot in, but as a place where people lived. Though I am proud to be one of the original subscribers to *The Countryman*, I am prouder to be, so to speak, one of the original subscribers to Idbury; and I still praise as superlatively tonic that early vintage of *The Countryman* when the Editor and his immediate circle wrote almost the whole of it.

It was towards the end of this decade that I bethought me that it was about time to try to do for this date what Crabbe had done for his: write a truthful pastoral in the jog-trot English couplet. And I wrote a narrative poem called *Opus 7* about a comfortless old woman in a village who turned a random flower-patch into a commercial success in order to buy drink to warm her old bones. I wrote it in London, but by the time it was published I was a cockney no more. As casually as I had gone to Essex I began to live in Dorset.

A publisher's cheque and a small freehold cottage in a place I knew well happened to coincide. 'This small and undesirable residence', said a surveyor's report. It seemed desirable enough to me; for it had a plain face, a slated roof with the long salt-box slope, good for gathering water, and no claims to be picturesque. By now I was exceedingly wary of that falsification of values which puts weekenders into sunbonnets and causes genuine regrets at any proposal to pull down a vermin-ridden, sixteenth century nuisance and build a sound dwelling in its place. But still I proposed to be a weekender, though unsunbonneted.

> Bind me about, ye gadding vines
> And, courteous briars, nail me through.

It was couch grass, I think, that did me that service. The garden had gone back, for the cottage had stood empty some time. We set ourselves to clean it, Valentine Ackland and I. A good deal of couch grass remained. So did we.

For three years. Then we went to Norfolk and lived in a very beautiful house, the colour of a ripened pear in the sun, and much too large for us. It was so much too large that we had to employ labour. This was a mistake. If you arrive to a large house, and have a servant, though you live hard and poor and sell your surplus potatoes to the fish and chip shop (we did – it is important to grade them the right size) you become gentry, and are mistrusted. Equally, if you sell your surplus potatoes to the fish and chip shop and live hard and poor, though you live in a large house and have a servant, you are eccentric, and disliked by people with visiting cards..So we lived in a sort of Mahomet's coffin, mistrusted by the earthy and scorned by the heavenly. We decided to come down to ground.

Meanwhile the freehold cottage with its redeemed garden was let to a labourer and his wife. A confident tenant is better than any bailiff, and mine watches over the freehold salt-box like a lynx. If anything needs doing he tells me, and I do it. And if he can possibly help in the doing, he helps. But I do not flatter myself that such a relationship would be possible if I had a great many cottages and a great many tenants. A bishop should be the husband of one wife.

Another pleasant thing about the let is that it establishes, in a village of tied cottages, one farm-worker whose tenure of his home need not depend on the tenure of his job. I need not repeat that the system of tied cottages is bad for the agricultural worker. What is not said so often is that it is bad for the farmer too. A rental of 3s a week is £7 16s 0d. If 16s a year goes back on repairs it is a wonder. A farmer may have a dozen tied cottages; allowing lavishly for rates and repairs and insurance and income tax if the cottages are his own, this means that he gets £72 per annum by something which has nothing whatever to do with farming; and this sort of bonus pauperizes any man's pride in his profession.

I do not believe in becoming fast-rooted. I am ready, I hope I am able, to move anywhere and remain myself. But I acknowledge certain modifications which have come to me from living in the country. One is my attitude towards this same matter of grubbing up couch grass, the responsibility towards one's half-acre or whatever it may be of tillable ground. When I began my warfare with weeds I wanted to grow herbs and flowers. After a year or so I discovered that it was harder, and more interesting, to grow vegetables. Latterly I have realized that what I most deeply care for is the ground itself, and that a plot of earth, clean, and well dug, and raked fine, and in good heart, is the deepest gratification that gardening affords me.

A rather similar process has taken place in my appreciation of my neighbours. At first it was the flowers I enjoyed: the wisdom, the good friendships, the traditions, the racy speech, the idiomatic quality of the English country worker – or the other flowers, the *fleurs du mal*, the twists and patiently wrought vices that develop under thatch, the violent dramas that explode among green pastures. Then my interest turned to the pursuit of more serious cabbages: the average amount of unpaid overtime filched from the labourer (he knows it right enough, but daren't speak); the average weekly mileage covered by the labourer's wife who fetches all her water from the well and carries all her slops to the ditch; the average yearly increase of thistles in the neglected pasture that once grew such fine crops of barley; the relative attendance at church and at inn; the average consumption of cheap and bulking starch foods, and the consequent spending on aperients; the amount of repairs done to cottages and the amount that should be done; the cost of milk to the combine and to the town consumer; the relative value of this same milk put into children and into umbrella handles; the average number of sleepers per bedroom and of rats per sleeper, and the speculation whether insufficient sleep is not quite as serious a defect in country hygiene as bad housing, impure water, and monotonous diet; this, and bluebooks, the admirable bluebooks of the Ministry of Agriculture, calm and painstaking chronicles of a tragedy that looks neater in print than it does in being.

I still grow flowers and I still grow vegetables. I still appreciate the goings-on of my neighbours, and I still amass a solid fury at the conditions they have to endure. But meanwhile, between these people and these facts, I have realized that the essential thing in gardens is the soil, and that the soil from which these people grow, the conditions which deform their lives, are more than Britain and the decay of British agriculture. One must look farther. I am glad to think that many of them do look farther, and have come to know that the defeat of those peasants in Spain, defending their olive and orange co-operatives, is their loss, and that the new tractors swinging over the U.S.S.R. collective farms are their gain. To put things right, that have so long and so intricately been going wrong, may be a long job, must be a wide-span job. But I believe that these people I know, and their fellows in other countries, other continents, can do it, and I trust they will. For unless they put their skilled hard hands to it, we can whistle for a remedy.