

## A WILTSHIRE VILLAGE

"What is your nearest village?" I asked of a labourer I met on the road one bleak day in early spring, after a great frost: for I had walked far enough and was cold and tired, and it seemed to me that it would be well to find shelter for the night and a place to settle down in for a season.

"Burbage," he answered, pointing the way to it.

And when I came to it, and walked slowly and thoughtfully the entire length of its one long street or road, my sister said to me:

"Yet another old ancient village!" and then, with a slight tremor in her voice, "And you are going to stay in it!"

"Yes," I replied, in a tone of studied indifference: but as to whether it was ancient or not I could not say; - I had never heard its name before, and knew nothing about it: doubtless it was characteristic - "That weary word," she murmured.

- But it was neither strikingly picturesque, nor quaint, nor did I wish it were either one or the other, nor anything else attractive or remarkable, since I sought only for a quiet spot where my brain might think the thoughts and my hand do the work that occupied me. A village remote, rustic, commonplace, that would make no impression on my preoccupied mind and leave no lasting image, nor anything but a faint and fading memory.

Thus I pacified Psyche and kissed her,

And tempted her out of her gloom -

And conquered her scruples and gloom.

And fortune favoured her, all things conspiring to keep me content to walk in that path which I had so readily, so lightly, promised to keep: for the work to be done was bread and cheese to me, and in a sense to her, and had to be done, and there was nothing to distract attention.

It was quiet in my chosen cottage, in the low-ceilinged room where I usually sat: outside, the walls were covered with ivy which made it like a lonely lodge in a wood; and when I opened my small outward-opening latticed window there was no sound except the sighing of the wind in the old yew tree growing beside and against the wall, and at intervals the chirruping of a pair of sparrows that flew up from time to time from the road with long straws in their bills. They were building a nest beneath my window - possibly it was the first nest made that year in all this country.

All the day long it was quiet; and when, tired of work, I went out and away from the village across the wide vacant fields, there was nothing to attract the eye. The deadly frost which had held us for long weeks in its grip had gone, for it was now drawing to the end of March, but winter was still in the air and in the earth. Day after day a dull cloud was over all the sky and the wind blew cold from the north-east. The aspect of the country, as far as one could see in that level plain, was wintry and colourless. The hedges in that part are kept cut and trimmed so closely that they seemed less like hedges than mere faint greyish fences of brushwood, dividing field from field: they would not have afforded shelter to a hedge-sparrow. The trees were few and far apart - grey naked oaks, unvisited even by the tits that find their food in bark and twig; the wide fields between were bare and devoid of life of man or beast or bird. Ploughed and grass lands were equally desolate; for the grass was last year's, long dead and now of that neutral, faded, and palest of all pale dead colours in nature. It is not white nor yellow, and there is no name for it. Looking down when I walked in the fields the young spring grass could be seen thrusting up its blades among the old and dead, but at a distance of a few yards these delicate living green threads were invisible.

Coming back out of the bleak wind it always seemed strangely warm in the village street - it was like coming into a room in which a fire has been burning all day. So grateful did I find this warmth of the deep old sheltered road, so vocal too and full of life did it seem after the pallor and silence of the desolate world without, that I made it my favourite walk, measuring its length from end to end. Nor was it strange that at last, unconsciously, in spite of a preoccupied brain and of the assurance given that I would reside in the village, like a snail in its shell, without seeing it, an impression began to form and an influence to be felt.

Some vague speculations passed through my mind as to how old the village might be. I had heard some person remark that it had formerly been much more populous, that many of its people had from time to time drifted away to the towns; their old empty cottages pulled down and no new ones built. The road was deep and the cottages on either side stood six to eight or nine feet above it. Where a cottage stood close

## A Wiltshire Village

to the edge of the road and faced it, the door was reached by a flight of stone or brick steps; at such cottages the landing above the steps was like a balcony, where one could stand and look down upon a passing cart, or the daily long straggling procession of children going to or returning from the village school. I counted the steps that led up to my own front door and landing place and found there were ten: I took it that each step represented a century's wear of the road by hoof and wheel and human feet, and the conclusion was thus that the village was a thousand years old - probably it was over two thousand. A few centuries more or less did not seem to matter much; the subject did not interest me in the least, my passing thought about it was an idle straw showing which way the mental wind was blowing.

Albeit half-conscious of what that way was, I continued to assure Psyche - my sister - that all was going well: that if she would only keep quiet there would be no trouble, seeing that I knew my own weakness so well - a habit of dropping the thing I am doing because something more interesting always crops up. Here fortunately for us (and our bread and cheese) there was nothing interesting - ab-so-lutely.

But in the end, when the work was finished, the image that had been formed could no longer be thrust away and forgotten. It was there, an entity as well as an image - an intelligent masterful being who said to me not in words but very plainly: *Try to ignore me and it will be worse for you : a secret want will continually disquiet you : recognise my existence and right to dwell in and possess your soul, as you dwell in mine, and there will be a pleasant union and peace between us.*

To resist, to argue the matter like some miserable metaphysician would have been useless.

The persistent image was of the old deep road, the green bank on each side, on which stood thatched cottages, whitewashed or of the pale red of old weathered bricks; each with its plot of ground or garden with, in some cases, a few fruit trees. Here and there stood a large shade tree - oak or pine or yew; then a vacant space, succeeded by a hedge, gapped and ragged and bare, or of evergreen holly or yew, smoothly trimmed; then a ploughed field, and again cottages, looking up or down the road, or placed obliquely, or facing it: and looking at one cottage and its surroundings, there would perhaps be a water-butt standing beside it : a spade and fork leaning against the wall; a white cat sitting in the shelter idly regarding three or four fowls moving about at a distance of a few yards, their red feathers ruffed by the wind; further away a wood-pile; behind it a pigsty sheltered by bushes, and on the ground, among the dead weeds, a chopping-block, some broken bricks, little heaps of rusty iron, and other litter. Each plot had its own litter and objects and animals.

On the steeply sloping sides of the road the young grass was springing up everywhere among the old rubbish of dead grass and leaves and sticks and stems. More conspicuous than the grass blades, green as verdigris, were the arrow-shaped leaves of the arum or cuckoo-pint. But there were no flowers yet except the wild strawberry, and these so few and small that only the eager eyes of the little children, seeking for spring, might find them.

Nor was the village less attractive in its sounds than in the natural pleasing disorder of its aspect and the sheltering warmth of its street. In the fields and by the skimpy hedges perfect silence reigned; only the wind blowing in your face filled your ears with a rushing aerial sound like that which lives in a seashell. Coming back from this open bleak silent world, the village street seemed vocal with bird voices. For the birds, too, loved the shelter which had enabled them to live through that great frost; and they were now recovering their voices; and whenever the wind lulled and a gleam of sunshine fell from the grey sky, they were singing from end to end of the long street. Listening to, and in some instances seeing the singers and counting them, I found that there were two thrushes, four blackbirds, several chaffinches and greenfinches, one pair of goldfinches, half a dozen linnets and three or four yellowhammers; a sprinkling of hedge-sparrows, robins and wrens all along the street; and finally, one skylark from a field close by would rise and sing at a considerable height directly above the road. Gazing up at the lark and putting myself in his place, the village beneath with its one long street appeared as a varicoloured band lying across the pale earth. There were dark and bright spots, lines and streaks, of yew and holly, red or white cottage walls and pale yellow thatch; and the plots and gardens were like large reticulated mottlings. Each had its centre of human life with life of bird and beast, and the centres were in touch with one another, connected like a row of children linked together by their hands; all together forming one organism, instinct with one life, moved by one mind, like a many-coloured serpent lying at rest, extended at full length upon the ground. ,

I imagined the case of a cottager at one end of the village occupied in chopping up a tough piece of wood or stump and accidentally letting fall his heavy sharp axe on to his foot, inflicting a grievous wound. The tidings of the accident would fly from mouth to mouth to the other extremity of the village, a mile distant; not only would every individual quickly know of it, but have at the same time a vivid mental image of his fellow villager at the moment of his misadventure, the sharp glittering axe falling on to his foot, the red blood flowing from the wound; and he would at the same time feel the wound in his own foot, and the shock to his system.

In like manner all thoughts and feelings would pass freely from one to another, although not necessarily communicated by speech; and all would be participants in virtue of that sympathy and, solidarity uniting

the members of a small isolated community. No one would be capable of a thought or emotion which would seem strange to the others.

The temper, the mood, the outlook, of the individual and the village would be the same.

I remember that something once occurred in a village where I was staying, which was in a way important to the villagers, although it gave them nothing and took nothing from them: it excited them without being a question of politics, or of "morality," to use the word in its narrow popular sense. I spoke first to a woman of the village about it, and was not a little surprised at the view she took of the matter, for to me this seemed unreasonable; but I soon found that all the villagers took this same unreasonable view, their indignation, pity and other emotions excited being all expended as it seemed to me in the wrong direction. The woman had, in fact, merely spoken the mind of the village.

Owing to this close intimacy and family character of the village which continues from generation to generation, there must be under all differences on the surface a close mental likeness hardly to be realised by those who live in populous centres; a union between mind and mind corresponding to that reticulation as it appeared to me, of plot with plot and with all they contained. It is perhaps equally hard to realise that this one mind of a particular village is individual, wholly its own, unlike that of any other village, near or far. For one village differs from another; and the village is in a sense a body, and this body and the mind that inhabits it act and react on one another, and there is between them a correspondence and harmony, although it may be but a rude harmony.

It is probable that we that are country born and bred are affected in more ways and more profoundly than we know by our surroundings. The nature of the soil we live on, the absence or presence of running water, of hills, rocks, woods, open spaces; every feature in the landscape, the vegetative and animal life everything in fact that we see, hear, smell and feel, enters not into the body only, but the soul, and helps to shape and colour it. Equally important in its action on us are the conditions created by man himself - situation, size, form and the arrangements of the houses in the village; its traditions, customs and social life.

On that airy *mirador* which I occupied under (not in) the clouds, after surveying the village beneath me I turned my sight abroad and saw, near and far, many many other villages; and there was no other exactly like Burbage nor any two really alike.

Each had its individual character. To mention only two that were nearest - East Grafton and Easton, or Easton Royal. The first, small ancient rustic-looking place: a large green, park-like, shaded by well grown oak, elm, beech, and ash trees; a small slow stream of water winding through it: round this pleasant shaded and watered space the low-roofed thatched cottages, each cottage in its own garden, its porch and walls overgrown with ivy and creepers. Thus, instead of a straight line like Burbage it formed a circle, and every cottage opened on to the tree-shaded village green; and this green was like a great common room where the villagers meet, where the children play, where lovers whisper their secrets, where the aged and weary take their rest, and all subjects of interest are daily discussed. If a blackcap or chaffinch sung in one of the trees the strain could be heard in every cottage in the circle. All hear and see the same things, and think and feel the same.

The neighbouring village was neither line nor circle, but a cluster of cottages; or rather a group of clusters, so placed that a dozen or more housewives could stand at their respective doors, very nearly facing one another, and confabulate without greatly raising their voices. Outside, all round, the wide open country - grass and tilled land and hedges and hedgerow elms - is spread out before them. And in sight of all the cottages, rising a little above them, stands the hoary ancient church with giant old elm trees growing near it, their branches laden with rooks' nests, the air full of the continuous noise of the wrangling birds, as they fly round and round, and go and come bringing sticks all day, one to add to the high airy city, the other to drop as an offering to the earth-god beneath, in whose deep-buried breast the old trees have their roots.

But the other villages that cannot be named were in scores and hundreds, scattered all over Wiltshire, for the entire county was visible from that altitude, and not Wiltshire only but Somerset, and Berkshire and Hampshire, and all the adjoining counties, and finally, the prospect still widening, all England from rocky Land's End to the Cheviots and the wide windy moors sprinkled over with grey stone villages. Thousands and thousands of villages; but I could only see a few distinctly - not more than about two hundred, the others from their great distance - not in space but time - appearing but vaguely as spots of colour on the earth. Then, fixing my attention on those that were most clearly seen, I found myself in thought loitering in them, revisiting cottages and conversing with old people and children I knew; and recalling old and remembered scenes and talks, I smiled and by-and-by burst out laughing.

It was then, when I laughed, that visions, dreams, memories, were put to flight, for my wise sister was studying my face, and now, putting her hand on mine, she said, "Listen!" And I listened, sadly, since I could guess what was coming.

"I know," she said, "just what is at the back of your mind, and all these innumerable villages you are amusing yourself by revisiting, is but a beginning, a preliminary canter. For not only is it the idea of the

## A Wiltshire Village

village and the mental colour in which it dyes its children's mind which fades never, however far they may go, though it may be to die at last in remote lands and seas -----”

Here I interrupted, “O yes! Do you remember a poet's lines to the little burn in his childhood's home? A poet in that land where poetry is a rare plant - I mean Scotland. I mean the lines:

How men that aiver have kenned about it  
 Can lieve their after lives without it  
 I canna tell, for day and nicht  
 It comes unca'd for to my sicht.”

“Yes,” she replied, smiling sadly, and then, mocking my bad Scotch, “and do ye ken that ither one, a native too of that country where, as you say, poetry is a rare plant; that great wanderer over many lands and seas, seeker after summer everlasting, who died thousands of miles from home in a tropical island, and, was borne to his grave on a mountain top by the dark-skinned barbarous islanders, weeping and lamenting their dead Tusitala, and the lines he wrote - do you remember?”

Be it granted to me to behold you again in dying,  
 Hills of my home I and to hear again the call -  
 Hear about the graves of the martyrs, the pee-wees crying,  
 And hear no more at all!”

“Oh, I was foolish to quote those lines on a Scotch burn to you, knowing how you would take such a thing up! For you are the very soul of sadness - a sadness that is like a cruelty - and for all your love, my sister, you would have killed me with your sadness had I not refused to listen so many many times!”

“No! No! No! - Listen now to what I had to say without interrupting me again. All this about the villages, viewed from up there where the lark sings, is but a preliminary - a little play to deceive yourself and me. For all the time you are thinking of other things, serious and some exceedingly sad - of those who live not in villages but in dreadful cities, who are like motherless men who have never known a mother's love and have never had a home on earth. And you are like one who has come upon a cornfield, ripe for the harvest with you alone to reap it. And viewing it you pluck an ear of corn, and rub the grains out in the palm of your hand, and toss them up, laughing and playing with them like a child, pretending you are thinking of nothing, yet all the time thinking - thinking of the task before you. And presently you will take to the reaping and reap until the sun goes down, to begin again at sunrise to toil and sweat again until evening. Then, lifting your bent body with pain and difficulty, you will look to see how little you have done, and that the field has widened and now stretches away before you to the far horizon. And in despair you will cast the sickle away and abandon the task.”

“What then, O wise sister, would you have me do?”

“Leave it now, and save yourself this fresh disaster and suffering.”

“So be it! I cannot but remember that there have been many disasters - more than can be counted on the fingers of my two hands - which I would have saved myself if I had listened when I turned a deaf ear to you. But tell me, do you mind just a little more innocent play on my part - just a little picture of, say, one of the villages viewed a while ago from under the cloud - or perhaps two?”

And Psyche, my sister, having won *her* point and pacified me, and conquered my scruples and gloom, and seeing me now submissive, smiled a gracious consent.