

NOTE

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BROADCHALKE, 22 Jan. 1920.

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IN A GREEN SHADE

ROUND ABOUT A PREFACE

The title has become equivocal, since there are more green shades in employment now than were dreamed of by Andrew Marvell. Science is a great maker of homophones, without respect for the poets. There is, for instance, the demilune of lined buckram borne by the weak-eyed on their foreheads, the phylactery of the have-beens—I lay myself open to be believed a cripple, or to look an old fool. A vivacious reviewer in *Punch's* "Booking Office," will have a vision of me as a babbling elder peering at society from below a green pent. However—I must risk it. It says exactly what I mean; and what I have written I have written.

The point is that, having worked hard for a good many years, I can now consider my latter end under conditions favourable to leisurely and extended thought, sometimes in a garden made, if rightly made, in my own image, sometimes in a house which was built aforetime, in a day when men wrought for posterity as well as for themselves. In such seed-plots it is impossible that one's thoughts should not take colour as they rise. Whithersoever I look I see as much permanency as is good for any sojourner upon earth; I see embodied tradition, respect for Nature's laws, attention to beauty, subservience to use; all this within doors. Outside, the trees, the flowers are my calendar; the birds chime the hours; periodically the church-bell calls the travellers home. Between all these friendly monitors it is hard if one cannot keep the mean. If the passing-bell tempts me to moralise overmuch I may turn to the creatures, and learn to live for the moment. I should be slow to confess how much worldly wisdom I have won from what we choose to call the lower orders of creation, because nobody willingly betrays the whereabouts of his buried treasure, or the amount of it. Mr. Pepys, I remember, forgot both on a certain occasion, and had a devil of a time

until he recovered his hoard. But my wealth was not made with hands, or not with my hands.

My house is fortunately placed, too, in the village street, so that I am in touch with my neighbours and their daily concerns, which I make mine so far as they are pleased to allow it. I am aware of them all day long by half a hundred signs; I know the trot of their horses, the horns of their motor-cars—that shows that there are not too many of them—the voices of their children, the death-shrieks of their pigs, the barking of their dogs. Not a day passes but one or other is in, to have some paper signed, to air a grievance, or to ask advice. The vicar and the minister are my good friends, and, I am glad to say, each other's. The farmers understand my ways (it is as much as I can expect of them), and the labourers like them. All this keeps the pores of the mind open; you cannot stagnate if you are useful to other people. Nor—unless you are a fool—can you be strict with your categories. The more you know of men and systems the more overlapping you see. I could not now, for my life, pigeon-hole my acquaintance in this village of five hundred souls. "I have now been in Italy two days," Goethe wrote, "and I think I know my Italians pretty well!" When he had been there two years he knew better.

If ever there is a time for sententiousness it is when one is elderly, leisured and comfortable; that is the time to set down one's thoughts as they come, not inviting anybody to read them, but promising to those who do, that they will find a commentary upon life as it passes, either because it may be useful or because it may have been earned. I hope I have neither prejudice nor afterthought; I know that I have, as we say now, neither axe to grind nor log to roll. Politics! None. I want people to be happy; and whether Mr. George make them so, or the Trade Unions, whether Christ or Sir Conan Doyle, it's all one to me. I have my pet nostrums, of course. I believe in Poverty, Love, and England, and am convinced that only through the first will the other two thrive. I want men to be gentlemen and women to be modest. I want men to have work and women to have children. Any check on production, Trade-Union, war, or something else, will get no good words from me. As for war, after our late experience, I confess that I could be a Mr. Dick with it, but we are not apt in the country to dwell overmuch on war now it is over. We

honour our beloved dead; those of us who have returned un battered go now about our work with cooler, more critical eyes, but mostly with lips closed against our three or four years' experience. Khaki has disappeared; the war is over; let us forget it. If there is a people to be pitied, swarming and groping on this tormented earth, we say, it is the German people; but that seems an insufficient reason for hating them *in sæcula sæculorum*. A German is a human being, and very likely Mr. Bottomley is one too, and not a big-head in a pantomime; such also may be Mrs. Partington's nephew and the editor of the *Morning Post*. There does not seem much difference between them, and we must be charitable.

The sojourner in the green shade will find himself, as I have found myself, more interested in people (but not those people) than in books. We have too many books, as I discovered when I left London for good. I sold six tons, and again another six, when, after two years in West Sussex, I came home. Now I have collected about me the things I can't do without, the things of which I read at least portions every year, as well as a few which it is good to have handy in case of accidents. Book-collecting is a foppery, a pastime of youth, when spending money is as necessary as taking exercise, and you are better for an object in each case. But I find that I now read with motives other than those of old. I am now more interested in the author than in his book. That must mean that I am more interested in life than in art. I am reading at this moment Professor Child's edition of the Ballads, and though I am occasionally moved to tears by the beauty and tragic insight of things like *The Wife of Usher's Well*; *Clerk Saunders*, or *Lord Thomas and Fair Annie*, I am sure that considerations altogether unliterary move me more—such, for instance, as curiosity to know who composed, and for whom they composed, these lovely tales. I don't suppose that we shall ever know the name, or anything of the personality of any one poet of them. Those poets were as anonymous as our church-builders, and if they were content to be so we should be content to have it so. But one would be happy to know of what kind they were, and perhaps even happier (certainly I should) to realise their auditors. Did they write for men or women? That is one of my consuming quests. The staves of the *Iliad* were for men: that seems certain. Those of the

Odyssey not so certainly. But take this from *May Collin*, and consider it.

You know the story, how "She fell in love with a false priest, and rued it ever mair"? The priest followed her "butt and ben," and gave her no peace. They took horses and money and rode out together "Until they came to a rank river, Was raging like the sea." There the priest declared his purpose:

"Light off, light off now, May Collin,
It's here that you must dee;
Here I have drown'd seven kings' daughters,
The eighth now you must be."

So her torture begins. He bids her cast off "her gown that's of the green," because it is too good to rot in the sea-stream; next her "coat that's of the black "; next her "stays that are well-laced"; lastly her "sark that's of the holland" — all for the same reason. Then the girl speaks:

"Turn you about now, false Mess John,
To the green leaf of the tree;
It does not fit a mansworn man
A naked woman to see."

The point is that he obeys her. She catches him round the body and flings him into the tide. *Women were listening to that tale.*

If I am to deal with life it must be in my own way, for there's no escape from one's character. I may be a good poet or a bad one — that's not for me to say; but I am a poet of sorts. Now a poet does not observe like a novelist. He does not indeed necessarily observe at all until he feels the need of observation. Then he observes, and intensely. He does not analyse, he does not amass his facts; he concentrates. He wrings out quintessences; and when he has distilled his drops of pure spirit he brews his potion. Something of the kind happens to me now, whether verse or prose be the Muse of my devotion. A stray thought, a chance vision, moves me; presently the flame is hissing hot. Everything then at any time observed and stored in the memory which has relation to the fact is fused and in a

swimming flux. Anon, as the Children of Israel said to Moses, "There came forth this calf." One cannot get any nearer, I believe; and while I do not pretend that I have said all there is to say about anything here, I shall maintain that I have said all that need be said about the things which I touch upon. In an essay, as in a poem, the half is greater than the whole, if it is the right half. If it is the wrong half, why, then the shorter it is the better.

As most of these commentaries were written during the year which is mercifully over, it would not have been possible, even if it had been sought, to avoid current topics. Why should a writer shrink from being called a journalist? He need not cease to be writer. But if he wishes to be true to his original calling, to make his hope and election sure, he must always be careful to seek the universal in the particular; and that is where your idealist has such a pull, for he can see nothing else. And if he does that he need not be afraid that the conventions of Time and Space will be a hindrance to his book's path. He will be readable a century hence; he will be readable in the Antipodes; and that is as near infinity as any of us, short of Chaucer and Shakespeare, need trouble about. In the country one reads, not skims, the daily paper; and if one's comments are leisurely, perhaps they are all the better. At any rate one is not tempted to see the end of the world in a strike, or a second Bonaparte in Signor d'Annunzio. To me that poet seems rather a comic-opera brigand. I suspect him of a green velvet jacket with a two-inch tail. But if you regard him *sub specie eternitatis*, then I fear we must see in him all Italy in epitome. That was how Italy went to war—but you must live in the country to understand things like that, out of range of the tumult and the shouting.

No more of Signor d'Annunzio here or elsewhere in these pages; but of ourselves and our needs somewhat. Nobody could have lived through last year without considering anxiously whither we are tending and with what pretence. As the occasion moved me I have said my say about those matters, and here the reader will have as much of it as I am ready just now to give him. This is perhaps some sort of an apology for what may be found hereafter of a hortatory kind. I may be charged with wanting to do people "good." Well, if trying to make them happy is trying to do them good, then I confess the charge. There is no doubt whatever that they are not happy

now. They hate too many people, they pant and toil after the wrong things; they serve false gods and forget the true ones. That is what we think about it in the country; and I am of the country's opinion.

We need, it seems to me, many things—religion, love, work, seriousness and so on; but what we need most of all, as I believe, is to wash our hands. For five years they have been groping and wrenching in the vitals of other people. They are foul and we are still drunk with the reek. In God's name, let us wash and then we can begin to build up the world again. We see the need of that out in the country, but so far as I can judge by what I read or have seen of London, there's no notion of it there.

But there's not much about London in this book.

CHANGE AND THE PEASANTRY

A book which I shall never willingly be without, one of my minor classics, is *Idlehurst*. Published in 1898, its author John Halsham, it has a touch upon country things, the penetrating, pitiful and *tant soit peu* condescending touch upon them of one who is both scholar and recluse, fastidious but discerning. He reads our earth, cloud-scape, landscape, season, foison, man and beast of the field, with the same wistfulness which women who have known sorrow exhibit for children who have not. Reading him again, however, last night, after the long interval of fever and unrest which the war has enforced, I found his pessimism troublesome. Sussex, so far as I know it, is not so degenerate as he seems to have found it; and surely since the war began he must have changed his mind. It is hard to remember 1898, or 1913 for that matter, but I happen to know that Sussex emptied itself of its young manhood, and voluntarily, because I went to live there for a while in 1915 and found the village of my choice bare of youth. But that was West Sussex, and John Halsham lives nearer London, in the forest region, as I judge, which is a part of the country overflowed and become suburban. I don't doubt but complete cockneyfication will be the ultimate fate of that

country of deep loam and handsome women before many years are over. Going down to my village from London, I could not feel that I was in the country until I had passed Pulborough; and further east the same would hold good to Lewes.

But when Mr Halsham in his bitterness cries out that "the town has overflowed the country," meaning the whole country, and that "we are cockney from sea to sea," he is being tragic at the cost of truth. Would he drag Wiltshire and all the pastoral West into his turmoil? You may go about any of the villages here, watch the daily doings of the inhabitants, and feel confident that, practically, there has been no substantial change since the Norman Conquest. The "feeling" of the scene is the same as it always was, the outlook of the people, their habit of mind, is the same. The one apparent difference is in religion, and that is not a difference of substance but of accident. We have forgotten the Madonna and the Saints, who were taken away from us by violence. We still go to church, but they are not there any more. They were expelled with a fork: one Cromwell but completed what another began. And now it is late in the day: they can never be brought back. "Vestigia nulla" is true of religion as of every other human affair. But it was not them we worshipped. Rather it was what they stood for — which endures.

All this leads me away from John Halsham and *Idlehurst*. A good antidote to his extreme depression is to be found in another beautiful book which, if not a classic, will become one. I mean *A Shepherd's Life*, wherein Mr. Hudson reveals the very heart of pastoral Wilts. I went right through it only the other day, journeying from Sarum to Trowbridge on county business — Wishford, Wylke, Codford, Heytesbury, and so on to Melksham and Westbury — names which to us are symphonies. No change from the sempiternal round of country labour in those quiet hollows, though it is true that you saw soldiers in buff unloading railway trucks, and that the valley was lined with their wooden hutments. Soldiers, indeed, we have known ever since the Norman Conquest; but the country is bigger than they are, and they fall into its ways even as their huts fade into the shadows cast by its everlasting hills. Mr. Hudson, by the way, does not seem to have encountered a witch. We had one in this village a few years ago, and she may be here still, though I haven't come across her. She laid a malison on my chauffeur's potatoes — I had one once — and (as

he told me) blighted the year's crop. He was digging in his garden when she, a dark-browed old woman with a beard, leaned over the gate and asked him for some kindling wood. He, a Swiss, who may not have understood her, waved her away, saying that he was busy. "You will get no good out of those taters," said she, and slipped away. That was five years ago.

John Halsham is fond of describing himself as a Tory, and perhaps really is one of those almost extinct mammalia. I had thought Professor Saintsbury the only one left. He, I understand, thinks that the Reform Act of 1832 was a great mistake, and dislikes Horace Walpole's Letters because their writer was a Whig. Then there is Mrs. Partington's nephew, who muses perhaps without method, but certainly not without malice, in *Blackwood* once a month. He is more Jingo than Tory. He has to bite somebody. I was amused the other day to consider his girding at Sir Alfred Mond, chiefly on the score that he had a German grandfather. It did not seem to have occurred to the man that the same terrific charge could be brought against a much more august Personage, and with much the same futility. Surely it is more to the purpose that he will have an English grandson, That is the worst of musing when you neglect method and surrender to malice.

Toryism, which is a parasitic growth of mind, needs a relic to which it can cling, not a person. In the country the Church will not provide it, nor any longer the brewing interest. The air has been let into the one, and the water which they call mineral into the other. There remain the throne and the squirearchy, and of these the throne is much the stouter. For the throne is remote enough to be an object of veneration, separable from its occupant; but when the great house and the old acres are held, and not filled, by a new man, the villager, who sees more than he is supposed to see, is by no means concerned to uphold them. Most of the villages have been Radical; now they are all going "Labour." The elections, if there are to be some soon, will be very interesting, and I think surprising to Mr. George and his assortment of friends.

However—another strike or two like that recent abortion on the railways will dish the Labour Party and Trade Unionism as well—at least in the country. Down here we are new to the movement, but

have gone into it keenly, without losing our heads. Indeed, I think we are finding more in our heads than we suspected. We keep to our code; and when we find that other men don't, we begin to doubt of Unionism. One of the very best of our men said in my hearing at the time that if the railway strike were the kind of thing we were to expect, he, for one, would have no more to do with the Labourers' Union. As I have said once before, I think, responsibility (which the Union is giving us) deepens our men and quickens them too. The time is at hand when they will begin to feel their power. I have no fears. I have long known them to be the salt of the earth. If the quotation would not be from one of my own works, I would quote now.

It is an old discussion, but all my travels have convinced me that a bad peasantry is the exception. Such exceptions there are, though I don't mean to give them. If Zola had not made himself ridiculous in the act, so ridiculous as to show himself negligible, he would stand as the greatest traducer of his adopted country that France has ever harboured. But he was a specialist in his particular line of disgustfulness, and saw in rural France what he took there with him. They say that the Bulgarian peasant is a savage brute, "they" being the Greeks, of course. I would not mind betting a crown that he is nothing of the sort.

In manners, to be sure, peasantries differ remarkably. Here in the West, from Wilts to Cornwall, our rustics are sweet-mannered. They are instinctively gentlemen, if gentleness consist, as I believe, in having regard for other people's feelings. But in the Danish parts of England, to be plain, manners are to seek. That means from Bedfordshire pretty well up to Carlisle. North-east of that again, in Northumberland, you have delightful manners.

The Northumbrian peasant, like the Scottish, greets you as an equal, the Wiltshire man as a superior, yet neither loses dignity thereby. The Lancashire man treats you as his inferior, and is not himself advantaged, whether it be so or not.

A HERMITAGE IN SIGHT

I hope that I have secured for myself a haven, a yet more impenetrable shade than this, against the time when, having seen four generations of men, two behind and two beyond, I may consider in silence what is likely to be the end of it all. It is true that I am getting old, but I am not yet prepared for a lodge in the wilderness. My present house has a wall on the village street. The post-office is a matter of crossing the road; the church is at the bottom of a meadow. I like all that, because I like all my neighbours and the sound of their voices. At eleven o'clock in the morning I can hear the children let out from school, "as shrill as swifts in upper air." That, too, I like. But the time will come when silence is best, and, as I say, I believe that I have found the very place. I have had my eye upon it for years, and seldom a month passes but I am there. A small black dog and I once saw Oreads there, or said we did, and in print at that. This very year the farm to which it belongs came into the market, and was sold; the purchaser will treat with me. I have described it once, nay twice, and won't do it again. Enough to say that it is the butt end of a deep green combe in the Downs, that it is sheltered from every wind, faces the south, and is below an ancient road, now a grass track, and the remains of what is called a British village on the ordnance maps, a great ramparted square with half a dozen gateways and two mist-pools within its ambit. All about it lie the neolithic dead, of whose race, as Glaucus told Diomedes, "I boast myself to be."

We are all Iberians here, or so I love to believe, grounding myself upon the learned Dr. Beddoes—a swarthy people, dark-haired, grey-eyed, rather under than over the mean height. The aboriginal strain has proved itself stronger than the Frisian, and the Danish type does not appear at all. There are English names among us, of course, such as Gurd, which is Gurth as pronounced by a Norman; but it is understood that we are neolithic chiefly on the distaff side. The theory that each successive wave of invasion demolished the existing inhabitants is absurd. Not even the Germans do that; nor have the Turks succeeded in obliterating the Armenian nation. No—in turn our oncoming hordes, Celts, Romans, English, Danes,

enslaved the men and married, or at least mated with, the women. And so we are descended, and (let me at this hour of victory be allowed to say) a marvellous people we are. For tenacity, patience, and obedience to the law—not of men, but of nature—I don't suppose there is another such people in the world. Those characteristics, for which neither Celt nor Roman, Teuton nor Dane, as we know them now, is remarkable, I set to the score of the neolithic race, whose physical features are equally enduring.

When you get what seems like a clear case in either sex, you have a very handsome person.

The most beautiful woman I ever saw in my days was scrubbing a kitchen floor on her knees, when I saw her first—not a hundred miles from here. Pure Iberian, so far as one can judge—olive skin, black hair, grey-green eyes. Otherwise—colouring apart—the Venus of Milo, no less. I don't say that she was very intelligent. I wonder if the Venus was. But she was obedient to the law of her being—that I do know; and it is a matter of faith with me that Aphrodite can have been no less so.

Neither a quick-witted nor an imaginative race are we; but we have the roots of poetry in us, and the roots of other arts, for we have reverence for what is above and beyond us. Custom, too, we worship, and decency and order. We fight unwillingly, and are very slow to anger; but we never let go. Witness the last four dreadful years; witness Europe from Mons to Gallipoli. The British private, soldier or sailor, has been the backbone of the fight for freedom. But I am a long way from my valley in the Downs.

I shall first of all sink a well, for one must have water, even if one is going to die. Then I shall make a mist-pool—that art is not lost yet—because as well as water to drink I like water to look upon. Lastly, I will build a hermitage of puddled chalk and straw, and thatch it with reeds, if I can get them. It will consist of a single room thirty feet long. It will have a gallery at each end, attained by a ladder. In each gallery shall be a bed, and the appurtenance thereof, one for use and one for a co-hermit or hermitess, if such there be. I leave that open. There must be a stoop, of course. Nothing enclosed. No flowers, by request. The sheep shall nibble to the very threshold. I don't forget that there is a fox-earth in the spinney attached. I saw

a vixen and her cubs there one morning as clearly as I see this paper. She barked at me once or twice, sitting high on her haunches, but the children played on without a glance at me. They were playing at catch-as-catch-can—with a full-grown hare. Sheer fun. No after-thoughts. I watched them for twenty minutes.

If I grow anything there at all I shall confine my part of the business to planting, and let Nature do the rest. It may be absolutely necessary to keep the sheep off for a year or two, and the rabbits—but that is all. And what I do plant shall be deciduous, so that I may have the yearly miracle to expect. It is a mighty eater of time—and there won't be much of that left probably; yet a joy which no man who has ever begotten anything, baby or poem, can deny himself.

If anybody wants to see what Nature can do in the way of a season's growth, I can tell him how to go to work. Let him plant on the bank of a running water a root of *Gunnera manicata*. Let him then wait ten years, observing these directions faithfully. Every fall, after the first frost—that frost which blackens his dahlias—let him cover the crown of his *Gunnera* with one of its own leaves. Pile some stable-stuff over that, and then heap upon all the leaf-sweepings of that part of the garden. Growth starts in mid-April and proceeds by feet a week. Mine, which is about ten years old now, is thirty-five feet in circumference, nearly twelve feet high, has flowers two-feet-six in length, and in a hot summer has grown leaves seven feet across. You can go under one of them in a shower of rain and be as dry as in church. And all that done in five months. The plant is a rhubarb of sorts and comes from Chili. I should like to see it over there on the marge of some monstrous great river. In another order, the *Ipomoea* (Morning Glory), which comes from East Africa, runs it close. I had one seed in Sussex which completely overflowed a garden wall, smothering everything upon it. A kind of Jack's beanstalk, and every morning starred with turquoise blue trumpet mouths of ravishing beauty, which were dead at noon. The poor thing was constrained to be a hierodule, gave no seed. Nature is the prodigal's foster-mother.

I have a plant whose seed is much more beautiful than its flower. By the way, I have two, for the Spindle Tree is in seed, which has a quite insignificant blossom. But the plant I mean is a wild peony,