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The Silent Isle

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THE SILENT ISLE

**By Arthur Christopher Benson
Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge**

Nec prohibui cor meum.

Fourth Impression

1913

To PERCY LUBBOCK

INTRODUCTION

There are two ways of recording and communicating to others an impression, say, of a building or a place. One way is to sit down at a definite point, and make an elaborate picture. It is thus perhaps that one grasps the artistic significance and unity of the object best; one sees it in a chosen light of noon or eve; one feels its dominant emotion, its harmony of proportion and outline. Or else one may wander about and take sketches of it from a dozen different points of view, record little delicacies of detail, tiny whims and irregularities; and thus one learns more of the variety and humours of the place, its gestures and irritabilities, its failures of purpose or design. The question is whether you like a thing idealised or realised. As to the different methods of interpretation, they can hardly be compared or subordinated. An artist does not choose his method, because his method is himself.

The book that follows is an attempt, or rather a hundred attempts, to sketch some of the details of life, seen from a simple plane enough, and with no desire to conform it to a theory, or to find anything very definite in it, or to omit anything because it did not fit in with prejudices or predilections. The only unity of mood which it reflects is the unity of purpose which comes from a decision. I had chosen a life which seemed to me then to be wholesome, temperate, and simple, in exchange for a life that was complicated, restless, and mechanical. The choice was not in the least a revolt against conventions; it was only the result of a deliberate belief that conventions were not necessary to contentment, and that if one never ventured anything in general, one would never gain anything in particular. It was not, to speak with absolute frankness, intended to be an attempt to shirk my fair share of the natural human burden. If I had believed in my own power of bearing that burden profitably and efficiently, I hope I should not have laid it down. It was rather that I thought that I had carried a burden long enough, without having the curiosity to see what it contained. When I did untie it and inspect it, it seemed to me that a great part of what it contained was not particularly useful, but designed, like the furniture of the White Knight's horse, in *Through the Looking Glass*, to provide against unlikely contingencies. I thought that I might live life, of the brevity

and frailty of which I had become suddenly aware, upon simpler and more rational lines.

I was then, in embarking upon this book, in what may be described as a holiday-making frame of mind, as a man might be who, after a long period of sedentary life, finds himself at leisure, strolling about on a sunny morning in a picturesque foreign town, in that delicious mood when the smallest sights and sounds and incidents have a sharpness and delicacy of flavour which brings back the untroubled and joyful passivity of childhood, when one had no need to do anything in particular, because it was enough to be. It seemed so futile to go on consuming stolidly and grimly the porridge of life, when one might take one's choice of its dainties! I had no temptation to waste my substance in riotous living. I had no relish for the passionate and feverish delights of combat and chase. It did not seem to be worth while to pretend that I had, merely for the sake of being considered robust and full-blooded. To speak the truth, I did not particularly care what other people thought of my experiment. It seemed to me that I had deferred to all that too long; and though I had no wish to break violently with the world or to set it at defiance, I thought I might venture to find a little corner and a little book, and see the current spin by. It seemed to me, too, that most of the people who waxed eloquent about the normal duties and responsibilities of life chose them not reluctantly and philosophically, but because, on the whole they preferred them, and felt dull without them; and I imagined that I had my right to a preference too, particularly if it was not pursued at the expense of other people.

Whether or not the choice was wise or foolish will be seen, or may be inferred. But I do not abjure the theory. I think and believe that there are a good many people in the world who pursue lives for which they are not fitted, and lose all contentment in the process, simply because they respect conventions too much, and have not the courage to break away from them. Some of the most useful people I know are people who not only think least about being useful, but are ready to condemn themselves for their desultoriness. The people who have time to listen and to talk, to welcome friends and to sympathise with them, to enjoy and to help others to enjoy, seem to me often to do more for the world than the people who hurry

from committee to committee, address meetings, and do what is called some of the drudgery of the world, which might in a hundred cases be just as well undone. It is most of it merely a childish game either way; and the child who looks on and applauds is often better employed than the child who makes a long score, and thinks of nothing else for the rest of the afternoon.

And anyhow, this is what I saw and thought and did; not a very magnificent performance, but a little piece of life observed and experienced and written down.

THE SILENT ISLE

I

The Silent Isle, I name it; and yet in no land in which I have ever lived is there so little sight and sound of water as here. It oozes from field to drain, it trickles from drain to ditch, it falls from ditch to dyke, and then moves silently to the great seaward sluice; it is not a living thing in the landscape, bright and vivacious, but rather something secret and still, drawn almost reluctantly away, rather than hurrying off on business of its own. And yet the whole place gives me the constant sense of being an island, remote and unapproachable; the great black plain, where every step that one takes warns one of its quivering elasticity of soil, runs sharply up to the base of the long, low, green hills, whose rough, dimpled pastures and old elms contrast sharply and pleasantly with the geometrical monotony of the immense flat. The village that I see a mile away, on a further promontory of the old Isle, has the look of a straggling seaport town, dipping down to wharves and quays; and the eye almost expects a fringe of masts and shipping at the base of the steep streets. Then, too, the encircling plain is like water in its tracklessness. There are no short cuts nor footpaths in the fen. You may strike out for the village that on clear days looks so close at hand, and follow a flood-bank for miles without drawing a pace nearer to the goal. Or you may find yourself upon the edge of one of the great lodes or levels, and see the pale-blue stripe of water lie unbridged, like a pointed javelin of steel, to the extreme verge of the horizon. The few roads run straight and strict upon their reed-fringed causeways; and there is an infinite sense of tranquil relief to the eye in the vast green levels, with their faint parallel lines of dyke or drift, just touched into prominence here and there by the clump of poplars surrounding a lonely grange, or the high-shouldered roof of a great pumping-mill. And then, to give largeness to what might else be tame, there is the vast space of sky everywhere, the enormous perspective of rolling cloud-bank and fleecy cumulus: the sky seems higher, deeper, more gigantic, in these great levels than anywhere in the world. The morning comes up more sedately; the orange-skirted twilight is more lingeringly withdrawn. The sun burns lower, down to the very verge of the world, dropping behind

no black-stemmed wood or high-standing ridge; and how softly the colour fades westward out of the sky, among the rose-flushed cloud-isles and green spaces of air! And out of all this spacious tracklessness comes a sense of endless remoteness. While the roads converge like the rays of a wheel upon the inland town, each a stream of hurrying life, here the world flows to you more rarely and deliberately. Indeed, there seems no influx of life at all, nothing but a quiet interchange of voyagers. Promotion arrives from no point of the compass; nothing but a little tide of homely life ebbs and flows in these elm-girt villages above the fen. Of course, the anxious and expectant heart carries its own restlessness everywhere; but to read of the rush and stress of life in these grassy solitudes seems like the telling of an idle tale. And then the silence of the place! The sounds of life have a value and a distinctness here that I have never known elsewhere. I have lived much of my life in towns; and there, even if one is not conscious of distinct sound, there is a blurred sense of movement in the air, which dulls the ear. But here the sharp song of the yellow-hammer from the hedge, or the cry of the owl from the spinney, come pure and keen through the thin air, purged of all uncertain murmurs. I can hear, it seems, a mile away, the rumble of the long procession of red mud-stained field-carts, or the humming of the threshing-gear; or the chatter of children on the farm-road beyond my shrubberies breaks clear and jocund on the ear. I become conscious here of how noisily and hurriedly I have lived my life; happily enough, I will confess; but the thought of it all—the classroom, the street, the playing-field—bright and vivacious as it all was, seems now like a boisterous prelude of blaring brass and tingling string, which lapses into some delicate economy of sweet melody and gliding chord. It has its shadows, I do not doubt, this Silent Isle; but to-day at least it is all still and translucent as its clear-moving quiet waters, free as its vaulted sky, rich as its endless plain.

It is not that I mean to be idle here! I have my web to weave; I have my lucid mirror. But instead of scrambling and peeping, I mean to see it all clearly and tranquilly, without dust and noise. I have lived laboriously and hastily for twenty years; and surely there is a time for garnering the harvest and for reckoning up the store? I want to see behind it all, into the meaning of it all, if I can. Surely when we are bidden to consider the lilies of the field, and told that

they neither toil nor spin, it is not that we may turn aside from them in scorn, and choose rather to grow rank and strong, bulging like swedes, shoulder by shoulder, in the gross furrow. It is not as though we content ourselves with the necessary work of the world; we multiply vain activities, we turn the songs of poets and the words of the wise into dumb-bells to toughen our intellectual muscles; we make our pastimes into envious rivalries and furious emulations; and when we have poured out our contempt upon a few quiet-minded dreamers for their lack of spirit, scarified a few lovers of leisure for their absence of ability, ploughed up a few pretty wastes where the field-flowers grew as they would, bred up a few hundred gay golden birds, that we may gloat over the thought of striking them blood-bedabbled out of the sky on a winter afternoon, we think complacently of the Kingdom of God, and all we have done so diligently to hasten its coming.

There is a pleasant story of a man who was asked by an ardent missionary for a subscription to some enterprise or other in the ends of the earth. The man produced a shilling and a sovereign. "Here is a shilling for the work," he said, "and here is a sovereign to get it out there!" That seems to me an allegory of much of our Western work. So little of it direct benefit, so much of it indirect transit! When I was a schoolmaster, it always seemed to me that nine-tenths of what we did was looking over work which we had given the boys to do to fill up their time, and to keep them, as we used to say, out of mischief. The worst of bringing up boys on that system is that they require to be kept out of mischief all their life long; and yet the worst kind of mischief, after all, may be to fill life with useless occupations. There are two ways of going out into your garden. You may walk out straight from the bow-window on to the lawn; or you may go out into the street, take the first turn to the right, then the next to the right, and let yourself in at the back-garden door. But there is no merit in that! It is not a thing to be complacent about; still less does it justify you in saying to the simple person who prefers the direct course that the world is getting lazy and decadent and is always trying to save itself trouble. The point is to have lived, not to have been merely occupied. I remember once, when I was an undergraduate, staying at a place in Scotland for a summer holiday. There were all sorts of pleasant things to be done, and we were there to

amuse ourselves. One evening it was suggested that we should go out yachting on the following day. I agreed to go, but being a miserable sailor, added that I should only go if it were fine. We were to start early, and when I was called and found it an ugly, gusty morning I went gratefully back to bed, and spent the rest of the day fishing. There was a dreadful, strenuous old Colonel staying in the house; he had been with the yachting party, and they had had a very disagreeable day. That evening in the smoking-room, when we were recounting our adventures, the old wretch said to me: "Now I should like to give you a piece of advice. You said you would go with us, and shirked because you were afraid of a bit of wind. You must excuse an older man who knows something of the world saying straight out that that sort of thing won't do. Make up your mind and stick to it; that's a golden rule." It was in vain that I said that I had never intended to go if it was windy, and that I should have been ill the whole time. "Ah, that's what I call cry-baby talk," said the old ruffian; "I always say that if a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing thoroughly." I said meekly that I should certainly have been thoroughly sea-sick, but that I did not think it *was* worth while being sea-sick at all. At which he felt very much nettled, and said that it was effeminate. I was very much humiliated, but not in the least convinced; and I am afraid that I enjoyed the most unchristian exultation when, two or three days after, the Colonel insisted on walking to the deer-forest, instead of riding the pony that was offered him; in consequence of which he not only lost half the day, but got so dreadfully tired that he missed two stags in succession, and came home empty-handed, full of excellent excuses, and more pragmatical than ever.

Of course, a man has to decide for himself. If he does not desire leisure, if he finds it wearisome and mischievous, he had better not cultivate it; if his conscience tells him that he must go on with a particular work, he had better simply obey the command. But it is very easy to educate a false conscience in these matters by mere habit; and if you play tricks with your mind or your conscience habitually, it has an ugly habit of ending by playing tricks upon you, like the Old Man of the Sea. The false conscience is satisfied and the real conscience drugged, if a person with a sense of duty to others fills up his time with unnecessary letters and useless inter-

views; worse still if he goes about proclaiming with complacent pride that his work gives him no time to read or think. If he has any responsibility in the matter, if it is his business to help or direct others, he ought to be sure that he has something to give them beyond platitudes which he has not tested. In the story of Mary and Martha, which is a very mysterious one, it is quite clear that Martha was rebuked, not for being hospitable, but for being fussy; but it is not at all clear what Mary was praised for—certainly not for being useful. She was not praised for visiting the sick, or for attending committees, but apparently for doing nothing—for sitting still, for listening to talk, and for being interested. Presumably both were sympathetic, and Martha showed it by practical kindness, and attention to the knives and the plates. But what was the one thing needful? What was the good part, which Mary had chosen, and which would not be taken from her? The truth is that there is very little said about active work in the Gospel. It is, indeed, rather made fun of, if one may use such an expression. There is a great deal about simple kindness and neighbourliness, but nothing about making money, or social organisation. In a poor village community the problem was no doubt an easier one; but in our more complicated civilisation it is not so easy to see how to act. Suppose that I am seized with a sudden impulse of benevolence, what am I to do? In the old storybooks one took a portion of one's dinner to a sick person, or went to read aloud to some one. But it is not so easy to find the right people. If I set off here on a round with a slop-basin containing apple fritters, my intrusion would be generally and rightly resented; and as for being read aloud to or visited when I am ill, there is nothing I should personally dislike more than a succession of visitors bent on benevolence. I might put up with it if I felt that it sprung from a genuine affection, but if I felt it was done from a sense of duty, it would be an intolerable addition to my troubles. Many people in grief and trouble only desire not to be interfered with, and to be left alone, and when they want sympathy they know how and where to ask for it. Personally I do not want sympathy at all if I am in trouble, because it only makes me suffer more; the real comfort under such circumstances is when people behave quite naturally, as if there were no troubles in the world; then one has to try to behave decently, and that is one's best chance of forgetting oneself.

The only thing, it seems to me, that one may do, is to love people, if one can. It is the mood from which sympathy and help spring that matters, not the spoken word or the material aid. In the worst troubles one cannot help people at all. The knowledge that others love you does not fill the aching gap made by the death of child or lover or friend. And now too, in these democratic days, when compassion and help are more or less organised, when the sense of the community that children should be taught issues in Education Bills, and the feeling that sick people must be tended is expressed by hospitals—when the world has thus been specialised, tangible benevolence is a much more complex affair. It seems clear that it is not really a benevolent thing to give money to anyone who happens to ask for it; and it is equally clear, it seems to me, that not much is done by lecturing people vaguely about their sins and negligences; one must have a very clear sense of one's own victories over evil, and the tactics one has employed, to do that; and if one is conscious, as I am, of not having made a very successful show of resistance to personal faults and failings, the pastoral attitude is not an easy one to adopt. But if one loves people, the problem is not so difficult—or rather it solves itself. One can compare notes, and discuss qualities, and try to see what one admires and thinks beautiful; and the only way, after all, to make other people good, if that is the end in view, is to be good oneself in such a way that other people want to be good too.

The thing which really differentiates people from each other, and which sets a few fine souls ahead of the crowd, is a certain clearness of vision. Most of us take things for granted from the beginning, accept the opinions and conventions of the world, and muddle along, taking things as they come, our only aim being to collect in our own corner as many of the good things of life as we can gather round us. Indeed, it must be confessed that among the commonest motives for showing kindness are the credit that results, and the sense of power and influence that ensues. But that is no good at all to the giver. For the fact is that behind life, as we see it, there lies a very strange and deep mystery, something stronger and larger than we can any of us at all grasp. There are a thousand roads to the city of God, and no two roads are the same, though they all lead to the same place. If we take up the rôle of being useful, the danger is that we become planted, like a kind of professional guide-post, giving

incomplete directions to others, instead of finding the way for ourselves. The mistake lies in thinking that things are unknowable when they are only unknown. Many mists have melted already before the eyes of the pilgrims, and the tracks grow plainer on the hillside; and thus the clearer vision of which I speak is the thing to be desired by all. We must try to see things as they are, not obscured by prejudice or privilege or sentiment or selfishness; and sin does not cloud the vision so much as stupidity and conceit. I have a dream, then, of what I desire and aspire to, though it is hard to put it into words. I want to learn to distinguish between what is important and unimportant, between what is beautiful and ugly, between what is true and false. The pomps and glories of the world are unimportant, I believe, and all the temptations which arise from wanting to do things, as it is called, on a large scale. Money, the love of which as representing liberty is a sore temptation to such as myself, is unimportant. Conventional orthodoxies, whether they be of manners, or of ways of life, or of thought, or of religion, or of education, are unimportant. What then remains? Courage, and patience, and simplicity, and kindness, and beauty, and, last of all, ideas remain; and these are the things to lay hold of and to live with.

And even so one cannot help puzzling and grieving and wondering over all the dreadful waste of time and energy, all the stupidities and misunderstandings, all the unnecessary business and tiresome pleasure, all the spitefulness and malignity, all the sham rules and artificial regulations, all the hard judgments and dismal fears and ugly cruelties of the world, beginning so early and ending so late. An hour ago I met two tiny children, a boy and girl, in the road. The girl was the older and stronger. The little boy, singing to himself, had gathered some leaves from the hedge, and was enjoying his posy harmlessly enough. What must his sister do? She wanted some fun; so she took the posy away, dodged her brother when he tried to catch her, and finally threw it over a paling, and went off rejoicing in her strength, while the little boy sate down and cried. Why should they not have played together in peace? On my table lie letters from two old friends of mine who have had a quarrel over a small piece of business, involving a few pounds. One complains that the other claims the money unjustly; the other resents being accused of meanness; the result, a rupture of familiar rela-

ons. One cannot, it seems, prevent sorrows and pains and tragedies; but what is the ironical power which gives us such rich materials for happiness, and then infects us with the devilish power of misusing them, and worrying over them, and hating each other, and despising ourselves? And then the little lives cut relentlessly short, how does that fit in? And even when the life is prolonged, one becomes a puckered, winking, doddering old thing, stiff and brittle, disgraceful and humiliated, and, what is worse than anything, feeling so young and sensible inside the crazy machine. If we knew that it was all going to help us somewhere, sometime, no matter how far off, to be strong and cheerful and brave and kind, how easy to bear it all!

But in spite of everything, how one enjoys it all; how interesting and absorbing it all is! Wherever one turns, there are delicious things to see, from the aconite with its yellow head and its green collar in the bare shrubbery, to the streak of sunshine on the plain with the great rays thrust downwards from the hidden sun, making the world an enchanted place. And all the curious, fantastic, charming people that one meets, from the boy sitting on the cart-shaft, with all sorts of old love-histories hinted in his clear skin and large eye, to the wizened labourer in his quaint-cut, frowzy clothes, bill-hook in hand, a symbol of the patient work of the world. So helpless a crowd, so patient in trouble, so bewildered as to the meaning of it all; and zigzagged all across it, in nations, in families, in individuals, the jagged lines of evil, so devastating, so horrible, so irremediable; and even worse than evil—which has at least something lurid and fiery about it—the dark, slimy streaks of meanness and jealousy, of boredom and ugliness, which seem to have no use at all but to make things move heavily and obscurely, when they might run swift and bright.

So here in my isle of silence, between fen and fen, under the spacious sky, I want to try an experiment—to live simply and honestly, without indolence or haste, neither wasting time nor devouring it, not refusing due burdens but not inventing useless ones, not secluding myself in a secret cell of solitude, but not multiplying dull and futile relations. One thing I may say honestly and sincerely, that I do indeed desire to fulfil the Will and purpose of God for me, if I can but discern it; for that there is a great will at work behind it all, I