

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1944.

My Grandfather's Farm

By SQUADRON LEADER H. E. BATES

ALONG one of the river valleys of Eastern Midland England, about a hundred miles from the sea, as near the heart of the country as you could ever wish to get without using a pair of fine-adjusted callipers; on the strong clay-land through which Cromwell's men tramped to fight decisive battles against kingship; where Bunyan preached in small stone country churches and sometimes caused clergy to be outlawed for doing so; and where Clare, mad but most English of lyrical poets, tramped crazily through the hedgerows after escaping from a madhouse near London, eating grass on the roadside so that he could live to see the rolling green fields of home, my grandfather once, in my boyhood, had a farm.

It was a very small farm. We grew wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, roots and cabbages; we kept chickens and in June we made hay. It was surrounded by other small farms. They, too, grew wheat, barley, oats, potatoes, roots and cabbages; they also kept chickens, and in June they, too, made hay. These little farms were bounded and watered by little streams. In the streams were very little trout, which basked in gravelly shallows under pink crab trees when the sun first grew hot in spring. But the little streams ran in turn through little villages, and roads ran in turn up little hills.

On fine summer Sunday evenings we used to drive up these hills in a horse and buggy, at something under three miles an hour, until we stopped for a breather or to talk to an encampment of gipsies, on a long high plateau. From this plateau of open cornland, fringed with woods, we could see behind us our own small farmland, and all round it the spires of nine country churches. We could see, in the valley below, a church where Bunyan had preached, a field where Romands and Icenis fought for possession in the years before Christ, and beside it a small thatched public-house kept, without having changed much since the days of Dickens and Dryden and even King Charles himself, by my Aunt Matilda. And in all the world you could not have found a more peaceful scene.

I have just been back, after twenty-five years, to look at this farm, this land and these little hills. If you could have come with me you

would still have seen the fields of young corn, the woodlands in the distance, the little pub, the church where Bunyan preached and the field where the Romans fought. You would still have seen the points of nine churches rising out of the calm horizon. But among them, now, you would see a truth point too. And that truth point is the American flag.

It has been said that history books have a habit of being written by liars. But the history of my grandfather's farm and the American flag does not need to be told by liars in order to make it sound good. For one day it will be told by at least 5,000, and in time perhaps 10,000 American boys, all of whom have been there. There are still another 1,000 who would speak if they could: except that their tongues are dead.

What they have done to the country of my grandfather's farm is to take a giant razor and shave off the huge brow of the hill. They have torn three huge runways across the cornland. They have cut the old spruce fox-covert in half. They have made a perimeter track that would take my grandfather and I, in the buggy, between an hour and two hours to drive round. They have taken the little woods where I once gathered violets and found birds' eggs and have shorn them away and made dispersal points for Fortresses. They have, in fact, set down on this flat hill-top an armed camp that would have made Cromwell's men stare like children and the Romans run into the burrows of the hill-side in fear. They have made an American town.

They have been here for two years now, shaving away gradually other bits of woodland, other hedgerows, other fields, to make room for more men and more aircraft: work originally began by the R.A.F., for the R.A.F. and at Britain's expense. There used to be a woodland where butterfly orchids bloomed like exotic green-white ghost-flowers in June and where a huge grandad of an owl once frightened my soul out of its childhood wits. The bulldozers have obliterated it. There was a place where a stream ran over the road and where, on warm summer days, I caught tiddlers with my hands among the water-cress. They have made a concrete culvert over it so that the ammunition lorries don't bump any longer in the stones of a stream-bed worn by centuries of water. They have taken away another wood and put an officers' club-house there, with Bairnsfather drawings on the walls, and, in one room, a coat of arms with a friendly but apt mockery of the R.A.F. motto—*Per trouble ad trouble*.

Nor is any motto, made in jest, ever likely to be more bitterly

true. In all the dispatches you ever read from famous front-lines, Alamein, Tunis, Arakan, Anzio, Catania, Guadalcanal, you probably never noticed one that had for its date-line this English hill-top, with its violets and crab-blossom blooming above a Roman battleground. You probably never read that almost 1,000 United States airmen have flown away from this English base and have not returned. You probably never read that in the early days of America's part in this war one of the hardest things for the Eighth Air Force—as it had been for the R.A.F.—was to get replacements for the aircraft that never came back. You probably never read of the American officer who stood on this hill and watched fourteen of his Fortresses take off for Occupied Europe, saying: "This is the proudest hour of my life, the moment I have waited for," only to stand there a few hours later, watching a solitary aircraft return, and saying then with tears in his eyes, "We are the greatest industrial nation in the world—but now I haven't a plane to fly."

Whether you ever heard these things or not, this unnamed English hill-top is as much part of the front line as anything at Cassino or Bataan. More than that, it is home to nearly 4,000 American boys. In 1942 it was hard to fill the gaps made in the ring of giant silhouettes above the Roman battlefield. But in March 1944, in a cold, sunny, rainless England, Fortresses from this base made up for the tears and trials of 1942. They flew 19 missions in the month's 31 days—or practically a mission every 36 hours. They went out with a system of armour probably unequalled by any other aircraft in the world, leaving far behind them the days when armourers—they say it themselves—just drilled a hole or two in the fuselage so that they could carry another improvised gun. They bombed with new instruments, pin-pointing so many new places that the walls of the officers' club became too crowded for another target name to be painted on them. At last—*per trouble ad trouble*—they have come into their own. You can truthfully call it *per trouble ad trouble ad honour* now.

This piece of England, rich in history and tradition, now temporarily peopled by Americans of every kind and locality and colour, is a more living piece of Anglo-American history, to the English, than anything done by General Johnny Burgogne. You cannot build an American armed camp on an English hill without it profoundly affecting the surrounding English lives. It becomes the focal of all local interests. It becomes so that American boys become part of English homes, marry English girls and, when they die, are mourned by English

families. If there are finer, securer, deeper ties than this between two peoples I do not know where you will find them.

When this war is over they are going to erect, on the far point of the longest runway here, where it points directly outward to the North Sea, an obelisk or memorial of some sort in stone. It will have on it the names of men, citizens from every part of America, who skimmed off this green plateau and set course along the very river valleys from which, centuries ago, there evolved the standard English speech of Magna Charta and the Constitution, and from which so many men went out to colonize the New World. It will record the missions, the honours, the deaths of some of the *élite* among the American people. The wind will blow in winter-time straight from Spitsbergen down the eastern flat-lands and the wild swans will set their course along the river as they have done for centuries. The small boys who now plague the life out of every American G.I. with the aggravating question: "Got any gum, chum?" will be grown into men, driving new cars up and down the little hills where my grandfather and I drove in the buggy, and will be stopping for an evening glass of beer at my Aunt Matilda's pub. And the American flag will no longer wave on the hill.

About 130,000,000 of the American people, will never see that obelisk. My grandfather, now dead but once champion of democracy and freedom and small men's rights, will never see it. It is a little after the time of Bunyan and Cromwell, who fought here against tyrannies of their own. But there is one man I should like to see it. His name was Johann.

Johann, in the years between 1914 and 1918, worked on this hill-side, on our farm. Johann was a simple blond German boy, prisoner of war, allowed out on parole. He lived with us, worked with us, ate with us and, in time, practically became one of us. We taught him all the English he knew, we rejoiced with him when the war to end wars was over. When finally Johann went back to Germany, there to marry and have seven or eight sons, our farewells to him were farewells of great regret. He farmed a little farm of his own and he used to write telling us about it, every year, in English of a sort, for twenty years. He thought of our farm as a second home and this hill-top as his second native land. We were very fond of Johann and Johann was very fond of us. No man in the whole world ever thought more highly or affectionately of his conquerors.

In World War I there were no Americans on this hill—but only

Johann. Johann with a pitchfork carting oats or corn, Johann feeding the cattle, Johann ploughing the bare hill-side with a pair of English horses. But when Johann went away he took with him an experience of a decent, generous, forgiving and affectionate community. He took with him the seed of a new life. What happened to the seed it is hard to tell—whether Johann planted it badly, whether it fell on stony ground or whether barbaric feet trampled it to death I don't know. The fact is that nothing grew out of it. It never bore any fruit in Germany at all.

After this war another man is going home to a distant land: carrying, like Johann, a seed in his hand. I met him yesterday, in the shadow of the Fortresses, in the ground my forefathers ploughed. He is the man from Ohio.

"So you're from Ohio," I said, "that means you're a farmer."

"Yes, it means I'm a farmer all right," he said.

"What do you grow there, in Ohio?"

"Well," he said, "mostly we raise corn and potatoes."

I asked him when he planted his potatoes.

"Good Friday," he said.

"No matter when Good Friday falls?"

"No matter when Good Friday falls," he said.

Then I told him something he did not know.

"Do you know where your people learnt that from, most likely?"

I said.

"Guess I don't," he said.

"I think they learnt it here," I said. "Because here, too, the people plant their potatoes on Good Friday, no matter when Good Friday falls."

Johann, who went away from this hill-side twenty-five years ago with the memory of a decent and kindly people uppermost in his mind, most certainly does not know that the fields he helped to plough and harvest here are now a base for bombers that are blasting the tyranny out of his own people. But the man from Ohio does. And the man from Ohio, who plants his potatoes on Good Friday just as the English do, no matter when Good Friday comes, bound by the same simple faith in Christian festivals, will be able to tell a good deal about the English farm that became an American airfield. And what he cannot tell, his English wife will.

What they have to tell is not a fairy story; nor is it a piece of history manipulated by a liar who wanted the truth to be known only from

his own side. It is the story of the common principles discovered by two peoples on the top of an English hill, where American Fortresses have shorn away, for a time, the bloom and fragrance of English violets in peaceful woodlands. No doubt Johann, twenty-five years ago, had something of the same story to tell. But nobody listened to him.