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THE OUSE AND THE NEN

by

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IF I draw an imaginary triangle with its points at three little riverside market towns, St. Neots and Olney on the Ouse and Thrapston on the Nen, its sides will make the boundaries, roughly, of the piece of English countryside I know best, perhaps the only piece of English countryside that I know at all. For though I have lived and travelled outside those boundaries, there is no other section of England in which I can walk, as I can in and about these river valleys, and name almost any village and farm and pond and spinney and road and field and stream. Nor is there any other piece of England in which I can walk so much in imagination. Sitting here, in the heart of Kent, I do not even need to shut my eyes in order to conjure up in perfect detail the valley of the Nen with its solitary ash-trees standing about the cold fields that lie between the towns and the iron-ore furnaces, or the valley of the Ouse with the broader river winding slowly and intricately through rich pastures and primrose-woods and the pink and white and yellow washed villages with their old water-mills. They come before my mind's eye without thought or the faintest effort of recollection.

It must have been about 1910, I think, when I first

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began to know this country consciously. My grandfather, a man of progressive mind, with a deep sympathy for the oppressed and an even deeper sympathy with the land, had about that time taken the most revolutionary step in his life. As a boy he had worked on the land; later he had taken up what was then and still is the staple trade of the Nen towns, the trade of shoemaking. Cobbett had a great admiration for shoemakers and he was, I think, right in his admiration. At any rate it was, in my grandfather's day, the shoemakers who were always in the thick of all schemes for social and political reform. They were—and still are—great men for argument and discussion. They were progressive men—the Bradlaughites, the revolutionaries of that day. It was they who could read, it was they who clubbed together in the workshop to buy a daily paper in order to see whether Bradlaugh had raised hell again in the Commons or what the Fenians were doing in Ireland, or what, most remarkable thing of all, was to be the next Shakespeare play at the Lyceum or some other theatre in London. And when *The Merchant of Venice* or *Hamlet* finally came on, it was they who clubbed together again and went to London to see Tree as Shylock or Hamlet and then came back again to recite *Hath not a Jew*, or *I am Thy Father's Ghost* to their shopmates at the benches. They were men of extraordinarily free thought, so unlike the oppressed farm labourers who worked from dark to dark for starvation wages and meekly voted for the same election candidate as the man who paid them. That freedom of thought may have been in some way encouraged by their freedom of action. For the shoemakers of that day were free-lances. They worked

more often than not on their own premises, in little wooden or brick shoemaking shops in their back gardens, fetching the shoe-uppers or soles in dozens or grosses, in the raw state, from the factories, and then making up the shoes, complete, with their own hands. In that way they were their own masters. They could work feverishly or lazily, as they cared. They could cease work to argue about Gladstone or Bradlaugh, knowing that no one would stop them. They could take a day off—and they always did on Mondays—to sober up after a bout of boozing. They would take half a day off in order to see a circus procession or a meet of the fox-hounds. They would take an hour off simply in order to have a fight, or if there were the faintest rumour that Ladysmith had been relieved. And every summer they took six or seven weeks off, going back to land with their wives and families for the harvest and the gleaning. That harvest meant much to them and the gleaning almost as much, for by the one they could earn enough to clothe themselves for a whole winter and by the other enough to keep themselves in bread. Thus, by the harvesting and the gleaning and the fox-hunting, they kept in touch with the land. It was really their true love. Almost without exception they had begun their lives on the farm and almost without exception they would have gone back to it, just as to-day very many of them would go back to it, if they only could.

It was about the land that my grandfather made his revolutionary decision and it was through that decision that I myself came to live in closer touch with the countryside. It may have been that his health in the little dark shoemaking shop was getting poorer,

or it may have been that there was an unusually bitter spell of bad trade, or it may have been that his own back-to-the-land ideas had been suddenly encouraged by some political spouter—but at any rate he decided to go back to the land.

It was, as I say, a revolutionary step. He had no money, he was in middle life and he had no sons to help him. A farm was beyond him, but he had read much and had argued much about small-holding schemes, and it was a one-man holding of five acres that he finally rented on the south slope of the Nen valley.

That field became for me, and still remains, the very heart of that triangle of country I know most intimately. From that field we could, in clear summer weather, stand and count nine church-spires rising out of the bare surrounding country. They are such spires as are not to be seen elsewhere in all England. My grandfather would hold me on his shoulder and name them for me, rhyming their bell sounds, and exclaiming excitedly when their weathercocks flashed in the sun. At first his only vehicle on that land was a wheelbarrow, in which he used to wheel me home, very tired, on late harvest evenings, but very soon he replaced it by a two-wheeled cart and a shaggy brown pony and then by a high black trap and a white horse, and in that black trap we used to drive out together on summer Sunday evenings to the villages whose spires we could count from the field. As we drove along everything created for me an impression of great quietness and loveliness: the fields of ripening corn, the sweetness of beanfields in blossom, the solitary oak-copses, the old hedges of hawthorn bloom, the cattle in the valley,

the sunshine twinkling on the horse's harness and on the streams that ran here and there over the roadside. All the bells of those nine churches would ring and peal and dong and jangle across the valley together and then one by one grow silent again, the silence of every bell making the quietness deeper and sweeter. Sometimes we would pull up to gaze in silence at a field of beans or a litter of pigs or to listen to a nightingale in a copse, or to have a word with a passing farmer. Generally we kept along the high land above the river and it would not be long before we came to a hillock from which we could look across what was for us unknown country—the flat lands of Huntingdonshire. It was not until much later that I travelled into that corner of the triangle, into that flattish country lying between St. Neots and Kimbolton, a country of wonderful cowslip-fields, old cottages washed in many colours, pink and orange and white and cream and terra-cotta, and forsaken windmills. We used to speak of Kimbolton then as we might speak now of Peking, of something vague and immensely far-distant, a strange town in a strange country. It has not changed since that time. It is a town that has preserved the individuality it gained in another century: its streets have still their vague pavements of brown pebbles, its houses with their black doors and tall windows have that unalterable eighteenth-century look of severe and snobbish prosperity, its inns are spacious and always, I fancy, half empty. In summer it is pleasant to stand under the castle walls, out of the hot sun, and gaze at the cool green-washed and lemon-washed walls of the tall houses and the flower-festooned inns. But on that flat land, in winter, there is a wetness and rawness

that strikes up into the heart. The winds coming off the Fenlands have nothing to break them and they bring with them the raw bitterness of that everlastingly flooded land.

But on those Sunday evening excursions we never travelled as far even as the fringe of that country. Turning, we would drive back along the north side of the valley, among the spires themselves, through the villages that even then had lost, though I did not know it, their character and their souls.

It seems strange to me now that the eyes of childhood could register so much of the beauty and so little of the ugliness of that valley side. For it is a country, I think, that has never been beautiful in my lifetime. In 1910, the time of my grandfather's decision to return to the land, the shoemaking trade had already become the boot industry. Factories, the most hideous factories perhaps in the southern quarter of England, had begun to spring up in place of farms, gasometers in place of copses, long, jerry-built rows of houses were pushing out into the cornfields. There was a change in the people too. With generations of rural life behind them they had become transformed, in one decade, into town-dwellers. In another decade the bastard generation of that alliance between town and country was swarming everywhere. The red towns sprawled wider and wider across the bare valley sides. Up went the red-bricked chapels, the billiard-halls, the temperance hotels, the clubs and still more factories. In came the religious sects, splitting away from each other into pettier sects on the slightest chance, parading the streets with their brass bands, poisoning life with their godliness every bit as much as they accused the ungodly of poisoning it with their drunkenness. And in, of course, came the money, the cheap contractors, the exploiters of labour and the political vote-seekers. The transformation was not so rapid as with, say, the middle-west of America, but it was more insidious. The town in which I was born had grown, in my grandfather's lifetime, from a one-street village in which he dare not walk on winter nights without a lantern, to a town of twelve thousand people complete with a dozen religious sects and a white-elephant hotel and the germs of a civic snobbery. In America it was a new life, an utterly new civilization, that sprang up. There was no alliance between old and new, between town and country. The seed of civilization was dropped into virgin soil. But in the Nen valley it was very different; there was a definite alliance between old and new, and it was more repugnant because the new almost destroyed the old, but not quite. The poison of factories and cheap religion and jerry-builders was strong, but it just failed to exterminate the old spirit of village life. Thus the new towns of the Nen never became, and never have become, towns in the true sense, but only half-towns, half-villages, without the shape or dignity or pride of either one or the other. They are essentially bastard growths, each unconscious of it and each curiously proud of the ugliness which is for them a symbol of progressive life. They are traditionless. They have no history except the history which the minutes of council meetings make for them, and nothing remains of the history of the villages they once were except the church spires whose bells used to ring so sweetly over the wheatfields on the summer evenings as we drove about the valley in my childhood.

Now, when I think of it, my grandfather's decision to go back to the land was more than revolutionary. It was providential. In another year or two the town-poison would have been in his blood, but because of that return to the land he escaped. In a year or two the land had given him back his native aristocracy of mind and bearing and character. Somewhere about the time when he bought the horse and trap he had become once more a full-blooded countryman, secure from the factory poison that was eating up the lives of the shoemakers he had left behind. He was working on the very soil where he scared birds as a boy, walking every day along the very road where he had ridden his master's pony with its load of beer-bottles in distant harvest-times.

This land, this Nen country, was his native soil. He was born and bred and lived and died in the same town. But somewhere about 1880 he had gone over the Bedfordshire border, a bit wild and on the look out for sport, to do his courting. He fancied a girl named Bird and he was interested enough to walk seven miles to see her and seven miles back again. She could hardly have been more appropriately named, for she was exactly like a little pert sharp linnet. It was she who became my grandmother, linking me with the valley of the Ouse as securely as my grandfather linked me with the valley of the Nen.

So, later, in the horse-and-trap days, we drove just as often into Bedfordshire as we did to the edge of Huntingdonshire. We did those journeys with a little more style than we did the Nen excursions, for my grandmother would come with us, and she, appropriately, would have everything as neat and spick as a bird's nest.

The memory of those journeys is not only beautiful but satisfying—satisfying because I knew that I was not deceived about the beauty of the Ouse. It is still pleasant and lovely country, without ever being the country which gets into guide-books. The Ouse itself is broader than the Nen, and the valley rich with woods which come down here and there to the water's edge, the primroses and the wild-irises under the great trees meeting on the marshy banks. This alone is something that could never have happened on the Nen, for the Nen is a navigation river, with a tow-path and recurrent locks and landing-jetties, whereas the Ouse, as I know it, is never navigated. It is, I think, not only too slow for navigation but too aimless in its course. The Nen seems to be flowing straight for the sea, in haste, with a fast current, but the Ouse is broad and casual, endlessly turning and curving back on its course between the primrose woods, the passage choked with stretches of reed and osier and in summer-time by islands of countless water-lilies.

All this in itself is lovely: but in contrast to the Nen valley, with the red-brick towns, the naked fields, the iron-ore workings and furnaces, it seems heavenly. Once over the county border I used to feel, and still do feel, that I am in another world. The villages with spires are all of stone, grey limestone intermixed with tawny iron-stone and red brick, but the villages of the Ouse are of colour-washed plaster, tender cream or orange, with roofs of straw thatch, bright yellow or birds'-nest colour. Nor does the change end with the country and the architecture: there is a change of feeling in all things, in the very atmosphere and the place-names and the people.

Most of all the people. They are softer in character and speech—it is really the beginning of the south country. The speech becomes a kind of country cockney, the people milder and more rural, the names of the villages sleepier-sounding—Souldrop, Pavenham, Stevington, Milton Ernest, Turvey, Lavendon, names coined by a soft-spoken people. They are a people untouched by industry. They have still nothing but the land to give them life. And the division between yeoman and nobleman is still very strong, something to be felt in the air, so that the country people are often not only soft in the finer sense of the word, but in the gibing sense of it. They are still in servitude, the last victims of feudalism. They are still afraid, still ready to sink their identity, to fawn a little, to respect their betters.

But in the Nen valley nobody thinks of that. Industry has at least broken that bond. That fawning before the rich has vanished, for the history of the rich is too short there, its events too recent. The rich, like the towns, are jumped up. So among the poor there is a feeling, and rightly, of I'm-as-good-as-he-is. Industry has released the Nen folk from that fawning servitude to the rich, and very often the not-so-rich, even though it may have dragged them into the hard, impersonal servitude to the machine. It is true that the softness, the mildness, of speech and the character has gone, but so also has the softness, the spiritlessness, that comes from the ageless servitude of man to master.

Thus, as I say, as soon as we crossed the Bedfordshire border we were in another world, a world of woods with carefully shorn green ridings, of great mansions hidden behind great trees in great parks, of

lanes of honeysuckle and hazel, of many flowers of whose existence I had not dreamed. And this is still a fine flower country. In the sparse Nen copses the primroses are late, even where there are primroses at all, but in the Ouse woods, on the sheltered slopes, they hardly wait for spring, but come pushing up among the soft, dead oak-leaves before the danger of snow is past, the countless thousands of emerald bluebell spikes and the pinkish anemone buds coming up among them, the oxlips and the orchises following them, and then by the riverside and on the river the wild irises, the purple loosestrife and the water-lilies.

I have never seen a wild iris or a water-lily in the Nen. It is a river of few flowers and now it has lost also the things which gave it great character—every bit as much character, if not beauty, as the flowers give the Ouse. For the last of the barges has gone. In the past they came down regularly, unloading or loading at the now desolate landing-stages, carrying coal or tar or timber or corn and working their way down to the sea. They gave the Nen not only character but life. We used to watch them travelling slowly seawards as we worked the little field on the valley side. And from there also we could see the great flocks of sea-gulls that would come down, driven by bitter weather, to the flooded winter meadows, an odd skein of wild swans among them, and a solitary heron flapping sombrely.

Now this traffic of barges is dead. The tow-path gates have been nailed up, the landing-stages are rotten, the locks are green with slime. It all adds to the desolation of the Nen. It is all part of the poison, even though it is the poison of decay and not progres-

sion, and there is no longer any beauty in the Nen except the winter beauty of the vast floods and the crying flocks of sea-birds.

And the men, the old shoemakers, are aware of it. The river, with the fishing and the floods and the barges, has for so long been a natural part of their lives. It is as if they must have their bit of fishing and a stretch of water. And so one sees them going off, on Saturdays and Sundays, walking or cycling, with their fishing tackle—always in the same direction, southward, always away from their native river, towards the Ouse. In the same way those who do not fish go off with their terriers, always going southward, always into the country, away from the ugliness they have helped to create.

They are in a sense like men searching for their birthright. The new generation, town-bred, has no need for this and knows nothing of it. It is the men of fifty or sixty or seventy, the contemporaries of my father and grandfather, the men who used to leave the shoemaking once a year for the harvest-field and once a week for a day's sport with the rabbits or the hounds, it is these men who are searching for something that is lost. They sprang from the soil, and it is as if they are for ever trying to get back to it. So one sees them wandering about the fields and spinney-sides with their terriers, or alone, gazing at the growing wheat or the ploughed land or the hayfields with unconscious longing. They are more often than not big men, raw and muscular, with muscles which work in the tapping-shop, on the shoemaking bench, could never have given them. There is something forlorn about their useless strength. They are men who have lost both

ways. Their true craft, the hand-sewing or stitching and fashioning of boots, is dead, and it is too late now to take up again the farming crafts that they once knew. Not that they are needed. In the jumped-up Nen towns, with their chapels and temperance movements and traditionless town-pride, there is no longer any call for mowers and ditchers and hoers and thatchers.

These men too are men of country speech, the crude but rich language that is half-droll, half-downright, the language that my grandfather and his contemporaries spoke. It is in many ways a strange speech. It is neither south-country nor north-country. A mile over the Bedfordshire border the speech becomes, quite abruptly, without intimation, almost a cockney speech, definitely southern. North of the Welland valley, over into Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, it becomes, though not quite so suddenly, a northern speech, with sharper vowels and higher and shriller intonations. But the speech of the Nen valley and the adjacent places is neither one nor the other. Nor is it a mixture of one and the other. It is separate, and—as it is spoken to-day—quite characterless, without any distinction except that it is the ugliest speech in England. It hurts one to hear it—yet the old speech, as the few old shoemakers still speak it, was amusing, lively, droll, downright, a little swaggering. But the speech in the towns to-day is a drawled, mouthing, lifeless speech, utterly bastard.

I was about to write 'as bastard as the towns themselves.' But there are places in the Nen valley, still, which are not spurious—lovely places, built of such mellow and solid stone, so perfectly and with such craftsmanship, that they remind one of Cotswold

places. There are not many finer towns in England than Oundle and Stamford and not many finer squares, country town squares, than the square with the great chestnut trees, by the church, at Higham Ferrers. Every stone in Stamford has upon it the mark of a dead prosperity. It is a fine town, but its real life has perished, the fashionable, elegant, prosperous eighteenth-century life that passed through on the great coach road or gathered there because of the Burghleys. And between the towns there are many little places, lovely also, built of this same fine stone, with the Collyweston roofs that are like Cotswold roofs. This, I should think, is the country that Clare knew—Rockingham, Collyweston, Fotheringhay—that rich pasture country between the Nen and the Welland, a country that is still very much as he knew it, the pastures broad and rolling a little between the fine woodlands that are the remnants of great forests, the beautiful stone-built halls and mansions lying secure in the folds of grassland.

But the change has begun. There is some grand scheme, now, to mine that rich belt of iron-ore that runs between the two rivers about Rockingham. The planning of towns, the draining of lakes, the destruction of woodlands has even begun. It is the old story, the story of my grandfather's day, all over again. It is the story which maddened D. H. Lawrence in Derbyshire—the insidious poison story in which the money-grabbers are the villains, the plot by now as foregone and hackneyed as the plot of any cheap romance.

So in a year or two all the north corner of my triangle will be industrial. The poison of industry works with

maddening rapidity. The miracle of Christ turning the water to wine is nothing beside the miracle of turning a primrose wood into a tannery, or a dove-house into a fish-and-chip saloon, the kind of miracle at which the English have become such masters. It is the reverse miracle, the miracle of turning ugliness to beauty, which they have forgotten how to perform. Or are they indifferent to that? Going back to the Nen valley and seeing there the growing complacency among the growing ugliness I often believe so. But seeing the men, the big, raw-boned shoemakers, walking out to the woods and fields with that curious expression of forlorn longing, as though they were looking for something lost, I do not know what to believe. And seeing them working zealously and lovingly among their flowers, on the bare, wind-swept bits of allotment or the fenced-in gardens behind the row of jerry-built houses, jealous of every scrap of colour and beauty, I am more than ever at a loss.

It is always they, indeed, who set me thinking again.