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COUNTRY FRIENDS

● Mr. Bates, formerly a clerk, published his first novel at 20, about twenty years ago: he found success with his "The Poacher" and "The House of Women," supremely able studies of village life in England: now he lives out in Kent, and writes and gardens.

COUNTRY friends . . . A sweet, easy phrase . . . Yet the making of country friends is as easy, roughly, as mowing grass with a blunt scythe. The man who takes his car, dashes down into the country, orders universal pints in the Red Lion, plays darts with people he calls yokels and calls everybody over sixty "Dad!" is just about as likely to make country friends as he is to make a fortune out of tinned acorns.

In the country the old make friends most easily. The young countryman is inclined to be arrogant, slap-dash, suspicious. A young country friend is a rare bird. The old, on the other hand, stretch out for friendship. They are often lonely. They

like to look back. They see a world we never saw and they find pleasure in re-creating it.

I like to think that I have in a short lifetime numbered all sorts and conditions of men among my country friends: farmers, gardeners, wheelwrights, cowmen, fishermen, shepherds, bricklayers. I once numbered among them a man who took his hens for walks, with great solemnity, on summer evenings.

In a long succession of old country friends I count also a couple of old ladies: tough old hawks in black crepe and lace of their own making. The girls of to-day, reared on "hot" music and he-men boy-friends, like to fancy themselves as products of a tougher world. These old ladies, fed on sugar-balls (once a week) and lace-schools



(fourteen hours a day) belonged to a world so tough that it was in some aspects almost savage. They saw men hanged—and liked it.

"Oh! yes," they tell me gaily, "we saw men hung." They laugh about it, as though to say "Very funny, this hanging!" Over 70 years ago they walked a long way to see this pretty business—and not once, but often. A great day: crowds in the streets, sweet-stalls, much hullabaloo and excitement. "Oh! yes, he just went up and then he went down. Eh? You can't hear. I say he just went up and then went down."

Then out will come their lace-bobbins: those small bone tools of the lace-making craft, crudely but sweetly imprinted with the records of country friendships: "Kiss me quick," "Forget me not," "Love me Truly." And there it is, sure enough, the record of the hanging: "Joseph Somebody. Hung 1863." A nice souvenir of the occasion. And we marvel and part with much laughter. Very funny, to see a man hanged.



Out of that same world, too, I had another friend—a poacher. A man of vast physique. On black winter nights, with the west-wind hitting the ash branches together with that wild clapping sound, I like to think of him going out on solitary and dangerous journeys: long tramps in the darkness, the nets, the rabbits, the blood on his hands, the long track back—perhaps 15



"That'll show you why we git such a hell of a lot o' wind lately."

ENDS OF MINE

The Giant Poacher, and Others

By
H. E. BATES



miles—in the darkness, the clash with keepers.

He had great stories; the greatest was about a policeman who followed him, mile after mile: poacher, policeman, tramp, tramp, poacher, policeman, never catching up, never dropping back. Mile after mile my friend could hear those feet behind him, at the same relentless distance, in the darkness.

Finally he stopped. He waited, huge, ready. The policeman came up. They stood and looked at each other in the country blackness. The poacher contemplated the policeman, the policeman the hugeness of the poacher. They did not move.

At last the poacher said, very quietly: "You better git back home to the mussus afore you git hurt."

And the policeman turned, without a word, and went.



Friendship is worth winning from a man who shaped his character in such fashion. Cheap pints will buy touched caps, but not friendship like this.

Not that the young never make friends. On the contrary. I cherish highly the friendship of Alfred, a raw tomato-faced boy in the twenties. He helped, in the past, to shape my garden. We dug together, hurled rocks about, made fences. There was very little Alfred could not do.

But there was much he had not done. He had never been to London. "But," he said staunchly, "I bin to Maidstone. . . . So I know what it's like."

He had never been up in an aeroplane, either, but he knew that aeroplanes made a difference to the four winds of heaven. "They must do," he said. "Think of all the aeroplanes that fly over, then you think of the wind one propeller makes, then you multiply it. That'll show you. That'll show you why we git such a hell of a lot o' wind lately."

I tried to persuade Alfred to play cricket. But no, he wasn't keen. Perhaps he was right. Here, on my village green, the pitch is the world's terror. Men have been bowled here by wides. A man can break a ball two yards. We could clean bowl Bradman, three balls out of five, on this pitch. Some day somebody will be killed by a bumper that would make Larwood look like an old maid.

Perhaps that explains the slow, profound

protest of a young man who came slowly in to bat, a snail of a cricketer. Slowly he dragged himself in.

"Come on, Harry. Buck up," we said. "Buck up."

"Ah!" he said. "I wa'n't born in a hurry."

Nor are country friendships born in a hurry. They are born, primarily, out of a depth of sympathy for the country itself. There must be points of contact, of understanding, to accomplish that slow and often unspectacular union. Never be in a hurry to make friends with a countryman.



"A man of vast physique."

He worked with us on the land. He shared our food. He was bound to us by the most tremendous loyalty.

Our trouble is that we have not seen him for almost twenty years. But the friendship goes on all right: past treaty revisions and demands for colonies, through the intervening barrage of distrust and of re-armament. It is something quite imperishable.

A country friendship, in fact. Long and slow to make, but good to keep. As staunch and fine as the oaks which, as I write, are budding redly for spring.

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