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TOWN VERSUS VILLAGE

Give Me The Country!

says H. E. BATES

Here at work in his Kent garden is the novelist who takes up the challenge of Louis Golding. Last week Golding declared crowds were the breath of life to him, that a week-end in the country sent him "whimpering back to town"

FORTY years ago a small boy began to follow a man with a plough. Soon he rode on the harrow that followed it. In time wheat was drilled in the earth, and in spring, when it was green, the boy was given a little goose-necked hoe, about the size of a walking-stick, and he followed the man with that, hoeing down thistles and coltsfoot and dandelion. Skylarks built in clods about the wheat-field; they sang brilliantly overhead, tossed in sunny spring wind.

When harvest came the boy was given a small rake, also about the size of a walking-stick, and with it he raked corn into small sheaves, tying them with straw bonds and humping them into shocks. At dinner time he sat under the shocks with men of beery countenance who smoked powerful shag in clay pipes and told tales and spat with terrifying accuracy across formidable distances and struck matches on the seats of their corduroy breeches.

In the evening he rode a pony to the beerhouse to fetch their beer. There was everywhere a sweet, rich smell of corn, of sun-baked earth, of horses and men, of shaggy, beery breath, of immemorial harvest and eternal summer. The moon came up. And finally the small boy fell asleep where he stood and was taken home in a cart, dusty with corn and blotchy with harvest bugs and drugged and browned by sun, to sleep in a little room smelling of apples and not know how happy he was.

That small boy was myself. And somewhere about this time—exceptional not only for me but for the whole of modern civilization—I began to be dedicated to the proposition that country life is the best in the world. Since that first dedication, which was no more conscious than the taste of good home-baked bread and cheese, two world wars have swept over England; but the proposition, the dedication and the proof remain, as far as I am concerned, as firm as ever.

Whatever I have done, whatever I have been and whatever else I have believed in a world that is not kindly to established belief of any kind, I have remained, at heart, the small boy in the wheatfield, hoeing the earth and helping to raise from it the bread that sustained me.

Not long after I was given that first goose-necked hoe with which to slash about among the bright yellow coltsfoot flowers and the skylarks' nests, there occurred the first of two cataclysmic revolutions. They had already been preceded by another: but more of that later. The first of these revolutions resulted in the passage overseas of some millions of Britons dressed in uniform that now looks as suitable for battle as the uniform of a cinema commissionaire, and the death of a considerable part of them. It was their intention to shape a better world.

Posterity would have expressed their dying thoughts admirably if politely by engraving on those millions of white crosses that the traveller may still see about the wheatfields of north-eastern France the words, "What price glory?" And they, if they could have listened, would no doubt have been immensely surprised to hear posterity's answer.

Those soldiers had gone out, as British soldiers always do, to subdue an enemy abroad: to wipe out this injustice and that injustice, this tyranny and that tyranny, this blah-blah and that. When the smoke and the cheering and the words had died down an astounding thing appeared. Tyranny and injustice and blah-blah had not been killed in Europe; but at home a mortal blow had been struck at two great institutions that had seemed for centuries the pillars of life in the countryside: church and great house. The fabric of country life tottered under a blast of fresh air. The soldiers, not for the first time in history, had shot at one enemy and killed another.

Country life now began, in earnest, a great revolution. Earlier a new, noisy, horrible and altogether unbeautiful toy had been invented: a

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quite undignified affair, a self-propelled carriage, a thing called a motor car. What, said the ladies, will they think of next? What on earth, said the diehards, are we coming to?

This, in fact, was the other revolution. This horrible new invention called the motor car was to be, far more than Acts of Parliament, political designs and political promises, the most powerful single unit of the early century. This little thing called the internal combustion engine was now to force immense changes, some catastrophic, on man's conception of progress by earth and air. It was to reshape the art and practice of war. It was to make ludicrous all previous conceptions of speed between place and place.

But one of the most significant things of all—certainly to the boy with the goose-necked hoe, who had grown up to think of any place of twenty miles distance as being as remote as Peking—was that it bored through the established pattern of country life like a rocket. It suddenly opened up the close and narrow communications of the English rural scene, even to their farthest ends, almost ruthlessly; it suddenly liberated it from centuries of isolation, solitude, sleepiness and separation.

WITHIN a few years the phrase "burying yourself in the country" was dead; a vast red ribbon of country dwellers splashed their mark on the green fields between London and Brighton, a process repeated everywhere; even Mr. Bernard Shaw, who earlier had written an essay on the dark horrors of a country weekend at the end of the nineteenth century, retired to rural Hertfordshire, there to become such an ardent countryman that he finally took to climbing apple trees on Sunday afternoons and fell off and broke a most distinguished leg.

Soon, aided by threats of another war, everybody became country-conscious. Thousands who could afford cottages in the country bought them for weekends. Many who had not known the difference between a buttercup and a bulrush discovered not only that there was a difference but that such simple things, together with the mere spell of greenness, air and earth, had a charm unknown to bricks and mortar. Country life and town life became, in fact, closer than ever: the great and indispensable complement to each other. And all because the internal combustion engine made the countryside accessible as it never had been before.

Here the reader is about to ask a highly pertinent question. These changes were great, he remarks; they were highly significant and revolutionary and so on. But were they any good? Were they for better or worse? Hasn't the countryside been spoiled, ruined for ever?

I AM going to answer that by taking you for a walk. Down the flower borders there are several hundred dahlias in bloom, orange and pink and scarlet and yellow and white, and on the house there are roses. Beds of petunia and begonia seem now and then to give off, from brilliant purple and orange and crimson petal-flames, a series of dancing sparks. There are hosts of butterflies. A pair of goldfinches comes to feed from time to time on sprays of seed on a group of evening primroses.

Outside the garden there is still, almost everywhere, the green of summer. The oaks are black and there is no colour yet in the elms; only the horse-chestnuts and limes are turning with any prolific effect of bronze and gold. Holly berries, which for some weeks have hung among dark, shining leaves like yellow currants, are now in the half-stage between orange and red. Blackbirds feed on floppy and juicy bunches of grape-like elderberries; a few flowers of meadowsweet and honeysuckle, both pale cream, still flower about damp ditches; the pale brown keys of the sycamore have not begun to float down in the winy tender October air.

I am torn between taking you to the waterside, a mile away, or to the hills, which are nearly three. At the waterside the poplars seem to be

OVER

Give Me The Country!—continued

"Immemorial harvest, eternal summer"

"When town presses too hard on you, the

drowning great curtains of quivering lemon and green in the water. A few old quince trees, hung with yellow lanterns of fruit, stand like formally decorated trees above speared reeds. A pair of swans will be swimming among the last yellow water-lily flowers. A bevy of wild duck will get up and spin in strong emerald and blue flight above the sweet-chestnut woods, and there will be a heron, grey and gauntly beautiful, fishing among the reeds.

It all has a tranquil, sleepy, seductive, immemorial air; but on the whole I have a fancy to take you to the hills. The vast hog's backs of chalk are covered with long bear-skin woods that are mostly beeches. You go up to them by a road carved out like a deep slit between fields of chalk. Its banks are high and as you walk between them you get sometimes the impression of going through a tunnel of red hawthorn and wild clematis and hazel and viburnum tree.

All summer, since the primroses died down, flowers have covered the banks prolifically: wild marjoram, wild yellow snapdragon, willowherb, wild campanulas, moon-daisy, St. John's wort, wild yellow rock-rose, an orchid or two. Some way off you could have seen wild purple columbine: the dark granny's nightcap of your mother's childhood. You could have eaten wild strawberries and wild raspberries and smelled, in spring, the tender and delicious fragrances of a million bluebells and a solitary rare pink daphne.

But these particular enchantments are not all I wanted to show you. As you come finally up the last few yards by road you appear to be entering a vast Gothic cathedral interior of beeches. There are thousands of them. They crown the hill in grey straight columns that rise from deep beds of copper and undecayed leaves. Black yew trees, raspberry-fruited, here and there grow from the chalk, but mostly there is no other sort of trees to break this vast colonnade of beeches stretching as far as you can see, lengthwise, along the line of hill. The effect is one of staunch and calming grandeur.

Now look down. There is a view below you that seems to take in almost half of southern England. You can see for forty miles. In the south-western distance the smokestacks of channel steamers are suspended above the line of sea. Miles and miles of woodland and copse, ploughed land and orchard, hop gardens and pasture, lane and stubble, separate you from the soft grey-blue line of the South Downs. A few white sea-borne clouds seem to hold the entire picture very slightly suspended in air.

What year is it? Forget for a moment that you ever saw a motor car, that you ever saw anything flying other than a bird, that you ever heard of a gentleman called Stalin, an organization called U.N., a streetcar named Desire, a girl named Grable, another invention for blowing your fellow men to pieces more officially or more swiftly than ever before. Forget that civilization, with all its machinery and its charms, cannot feed you properly or protect you and your children from dread. Forget it all for a moment and ask yourself, as you look down on this immense extent of English earth, what year it is.

What year is it? Looking down at the fields, the woods, the sleepy church towers, red-brown roofs, grazing cattle, what year would you say it is? 1950? 1850? 1750? The year of Waterloo? The year of Ramillies and Blenheim? The year when Mozart wrote *The Magic Flute*? The year Dickens was born or when Nelson was killed or when the first balloon went up? What year? You really don't know; there is nothing to tell you.

What lies below you could be the view, unchanged except in smallest filigree details like telegraph wires, that William Cobbett saw, that Jane Austen knew, that any soldier in any one of Britain's limitless wars would dream of when far from home. It could even be the view seen by Chaucer's pilgrims as they crossed these hills 500 years ago. No sign of your great revolutionizing internal combustion engine seems to have touched a leaf or stone of it, altered a blade of its grass.

It presents, in fact, a great paradox. A great revolution has swept over and yet it remains the same. It has changed so enormously that your forefathers would not recognize it, and yet they would recognize it very well. The scene, with all its wonderful exhilaration of sun and wind and greenness and expanse of sky, is a common inheritance you share with the centuries and that in turn other centuries will share with you. The common denomination of seasonal beauty and wonder ties your experience to that of millions who have loved and always will love the country earth.

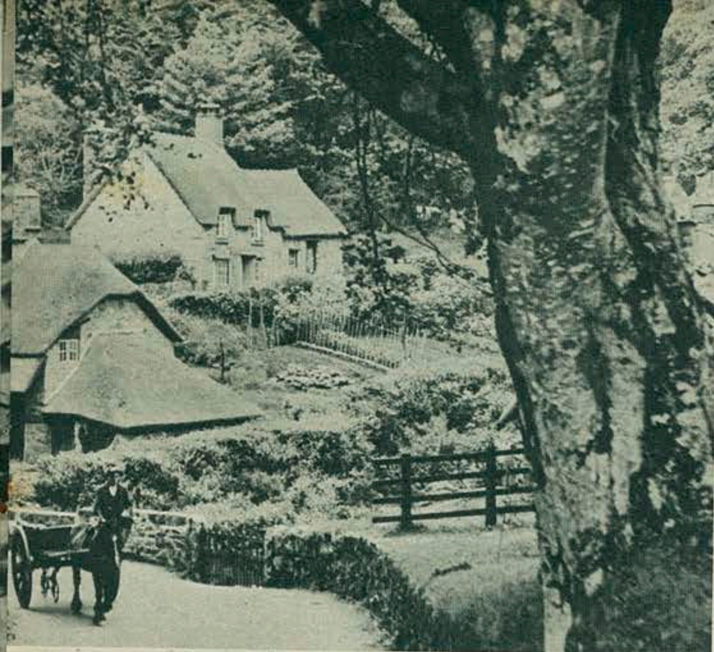
As you stand on the hills there is a feeling of being uplifted; when you begin to walk down again you are touched by a sense of tranquillity. Women are picking potatoes in brown sun-dried fields; the sunlight is exquisite; there are flashes of bright green, bright yellow, bright crimson scarves. A cloud of straw stands ready for the clamps; the potato-digging machine does a tireless juggling act up and down the field. The tractor, bright scarlet, sails about between fat sacks.

Beyond this field new corn is already springing up in a serpentine stitchery of brilliant green. There is nothing quite so delicate and lovely as its first spearing through autumn soil. Winter will thicken and coarsen it, turn it yellow, bow it down; the cold early winds of spring will ripple across it like an icy comb, and rain in May will sicken it yellow again. But now, on fresh earth, in sun warm after a day of untreacherous rain, it has a pristine and vivid delicacy that will never be equalled until, in April, the grass itself flares with that peculiar acid and unquenchable green that is one of the wonders of this odd sea-bound island of ours.

Do I now hear from far off a subdued raspberry from the man who loves towns? If I do, it is not unnatural. Do I detect a rhetorical murmur of doubt? What about the rain, the cold, the mud, the lack of what are called amenities, of facilities for art, amusement, company, eating, shopping, games? If I do, it is explicable. Man cannot live by staring at trees alone, by doting on the beauty of grass, the exquisite views from hilltops. Of course not.

Does someone ask me if I do not like towns? I reply at once that I do: that towns like Venice and Florence, Zurich and Berne, Lyons and Nice,

"There was everywhere a sweet,



country will revitalize you"

"The company of the country pub"

Innsbruck and Heidelberg, Cambridge and Cairo are, and I hope will long continue to be, as beautiful and dear to me as the Kentish hills and Midland valleys that have made up in equal parts my feast of English good fortune.

I will go further. I do not believe that country is better than town, town better than country; I do not believe their separate virtues are at all opposed. I believe they are complementary. They are the two sides of the coin of civilized existence. They are like night and day.

Which is where, for yet another time, the internal combustion engine comes in. Before its revolutionary arrival your forefather was either a townsman or a countryman; only if he was rich could he manage to be both. Now, only fifty years later, you can achieve a happy position he could rarely know. You can make the best of two worlds. You can work in a town and sleep, as millions do, in the country. You can do exactly the opposite.

You can work among smoke and bricks and turn from them, in the evening, to the rejuvenation of country air, country smells and sights, the company of the country pub. When town life presses too hard on you, wearing at nerves, the country will revitalize and re-create you.

And finally, in case you have forgotten it, let me remind you of something else. The countryside is permanent. When towns burn and fall and disintegrate under the force of explosive discoveries man is so fond of making for amusement, the countryside presents a comforting miracle of stability. The simple process of sun and wind and air nurturing earth into fruition is not an accident or a trick. It is life.

Babylons and Berlins may fall, and with them as many of man's urban crimes against himself as you care to name between Lima and Leningrad, and it will not matter much more, in the end, than the rattling down of a child's ninepins. But when grass stops growing and corn stops springing and turning white to harvest; when man stops garnering the fruits of his labour on good earth under sun and rain; when woodlands stop breaking into the lustrous scintillation of spring leaf, and hawthorn blooms stops rising like cream on the rare milkiness of maytime—in short, when country life stops, then. . . . But what need is there for me to go on? You know perfectly well what I am going to say.

rich smell of corn, of sun-baked earth and men"