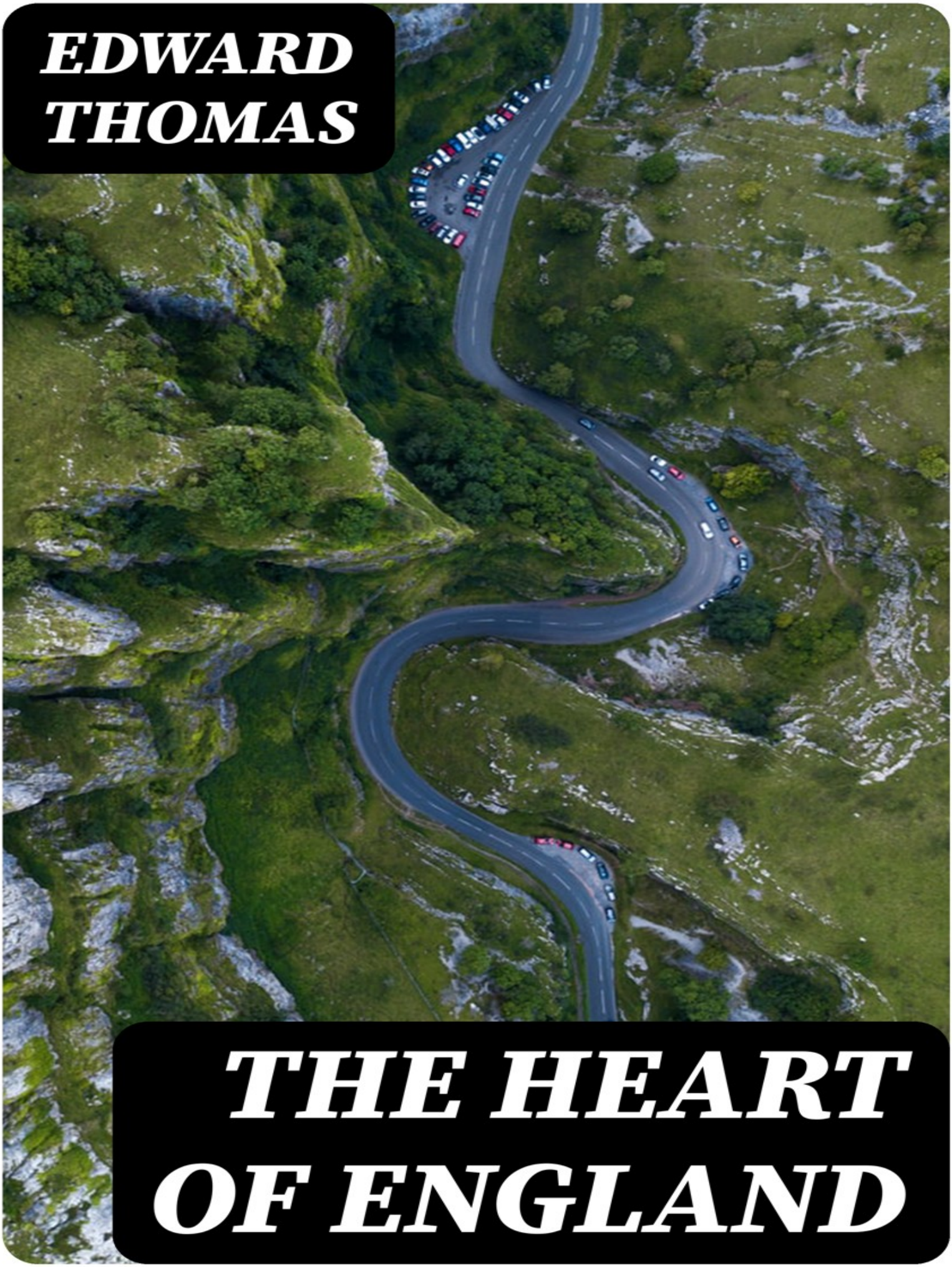
EDWARD THOMAS



THE HEART OF ENGLAND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Edward Thomas

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CHAPTER I
LEAVING TOWN

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Sunday afternoon had perfected the silence of the suburban street. Every one had gone into his house to tea; none had yet started for church or promenade; the street was empty, except for a white pigeon that pecked idly in the middle of the road and once leaned upon one wing, raised the other so as to expose her tender side and took the rain deliciously; so calm and unmolested was the hour.

The houses were in unbroken rows and arranged in pairs, of which one had a bay window on the ground floor and one had not. Some had laurels in front; some had names. But they were so much alike that the street resembled a great storehouse where yards of goods, all of one pattern, are exposed, all with that painful lack of character that makes us wish to rescue one and take it away and wear it, and soil it, and humanise it rapidly.

Soon a boy of nine years old came out of one house and stood at the gate. At first he moved briskly and looked in every direction as if expecting to see some one whom he knew; but in a little while he paused and merely looked towards the pigeon, so fixedly that perhaps he saw it not. The calm silenced him, took him into its bosom, yet also depressed him. Had he dared, he would have shouted or run; he would have welcomed the sound of a piano, of a dog barking, of a starling coldly piping. While he still paused an old man rounded the corner of the street and came down in the roadway towards him.

The old man was small and straight, and to his thin figure the remains of a long black coat and grey trousers adhered with singular grace. You could not say that he was well dressed, but rather that he was in the penultimate stage of a transformation like Dryope's or Daphne's, which his pale face had not altogether escaped. His neglected body seemed to have grown this grey rind that flapped like birch bark. Had he been born in it the clothing could not have been more apt. The eye travelled from these clothes with perfect satisfaction—as from a branch to its fruit—to his little crumpled face and its partial crust of hair. Yet he walked. One hand on a stick, the other beneath a basket of watercress, he walked with quick, short steps, now and then calling out unexpectedly, as if in answer to a question, "Watercresses!" No one interrupted him. He was hungry; he nibbled at pieces of cress with his gums, and so kneaded his face as if it had been dough. He passed the boy; he stooped, picked up a rotten apple, and in the act frightened the pigeon, which rose, as the boy saw, and disappeared.

The boy raised his head and watched. He saw the old man—as in an eloquent book and not with his own usually indolent eyes—and thought him a traveller. Yes! that was how a traveller looked—a strange, free man, hatless, walking in the road, ignoring puddles, talking carelessly to himself; from the country—such was his stick and the manner of his clothes; with something magnificent and comely in his hoariness; sleeping the boy knew not where, perhaps not at all, but going on and on, certainly not to church, but perhaps to places with mountains, icebergs, houses in the branches of trees, great waters, camels,

monkeys, crocodiles, parrots, ivory, cannibals, curved swords. And the boy flushed to think that the quiet street was an avenue to all the East, the Pole, the Amazon ... to dark men who wondered about the sunlight, the wind, the rain, and whence they came ... to towns set down in the heart of forests and lonely as ships at sea. But whatever he was, the old man was more blessed than any one whom the boy had ever seen.

The old man was gone out of sight. The boy started to run and follow; but he stumbled and fell and uttered his intolerable longing in a fit of grave tears, while the street began to be bright and restless again.

I thought to follow him myself. But the next day I was still in that grey land, looking at it from a railway train.

The hundreds of streets parallel or at angles with the railway—some exposing flowery or neglected back gardens, bedrooms half seen through open windows, pigeon houses with pigeons bowing or flashing in flight, all manner of domesticities surprised—others a line of shop fronts and gorgeous or neat or faded women going to and fro—others, again, a small space that had been green and was still grassy under its encumbrance of dead trees, scaffolding and bricks—some with inns having good names—these streets are the strangest thing in the world. They have never been discovered. They cannot be classified. There is no tradition about them. Poets have not shown how we are to regard them. They are to us as mountains were in the Middle Ages, sublime, difficult, immense; and yet so new that we have inherited no certain attitude towards them, of liking or dislike. They suggest so much that they mean nothing at all.

The eye strains at them as at Russian characters which are known to stand for something beautiful or terrible; but there is no translator: it sees a thousand things which at the moment of seeing are significant, but they obliterate one another. More than battlefield or library, they are dense with human life. They are as multitudinous and painful and unsatisfying as the stars. They propose themselves as a problem to the mind, only a little less so at night when their surfaces hand the mind on to the analogies of sea waves or large woods.

Nor at the end of my journey was the problem solved. It was a land of new streets and half-built streets and devastated lanes. Ivied elm trunks lay about with scaffold poles, uprooted shrubs were mingled with bricks, mortar with turf, shining baths and sinks and rusty fire grates with dead thistles and thorns. Here and there a man in a silk hat or a little girl with neat ankles and high brown boots stepped amidst the deeply rutted mud. An artist who wished to depict the Fall and some sympathy with it in the face of a ruined Eden might have had little to do but copy an acre of the surviving fields.

A north wind swept the land clean. In the hedges and standing trees, it sobbed at intervals like a bitter child forcing himself to cry; in the windowless houses it made a merrier sound like a horn. It drove workmen and passers-by to spend as much time as possible in “The King’s Head,” and there the medley of the land was repeated. Irish and Cockney accents mingled with Kentish; Americans would have been out of place. No one seemed to dislike the best room in the inn, where there was a piano, a coloured picture

of Lord Roberts and of the landlord as a youth, an old print of snipe-shooting, some gaudy and fanciful advertisements of spirits, and no fire to warm the wall-paper which had once had a pattern characteristic of poor bathrooms.

I felt a kind of exalted and almost cheerful gloom as I stepped out and saw that it was raining and would go on raining. O exultation of the sorrowful heart when Nature also seems to be sorrowing! What strange merriment is this which the dejected mind and the wind in the trees are making together! What high lavolt of the shuffling heels of despair! As two lovers wounded and derided will make of their complainings one true joy that triumphs, so will the concealing rain and the painful mind.

The workmen had gone; faint lights began to appear through the blinds of the finished houses. There was no sunset, no change from day to night. The end of the day was like what is called a natural death in bed; an ill-laid fire dies thus. With the darkness a strange spirit of quiet joy appeared in the air. Old melodies floating about it on that mourning wind. The rain formed a mist and a veil over the skeletons round about, but it revealed more than it took away; Nature gained courage in the gloom. The rain smoothed her as it will wash away tears on the lonely hills. The trees were back in Eden again. They were as before in their dim, stately companies. The bad walking was no annoyance. Once I came upon a line of willows above dead reeds that used to stand out by a pond as the first notice to one walking out of London that he was in the country at last; they were unchanged; they welcomed and encouraged once more. The lighted windows in the mist had each a greeting;

they were as the windows we strain our eyes for as we descend to them from the hills of Wales or Kent; like those, they had the art of seeming a magical encampment among the trees, brave, cheerful lights which men and women kept going amidst the dense and powerful darkness. The thin, incompleted walls learned a venerable utterance.

The night grew darker. The sound of pianos mingled with the wind. I could not see the trees—I was entrapped in a town where I had once known nothing but fields and one old house, stately and reticent among the limes. A sense of multitude surged about and over me—of multitudes entirely unknown to me—collected by chance—mere numbers—human faces that were at that moment expressing innumerable strange meanings with which I had nothing to do. Had I said to one who entered an adjacent house that I was retrospectively a lodger of his, since I had once hidden for half a day in the hollow oak in his front garden, he would have stared. Here were people living in no ancient way. That they supped and slept in their houses was all that was clear to me. I wondered why—why did they go on doing these things? Did they ever sit up thinking and thinking, trying to explain to themselves why they were there, and then fall asleep in their chairs and awake still with the same goalless thought and so go shivering to bed? The window lights were now as strange to me and as fascinating as, to a salmon swaying by a bridge, the lights and faces of the poachers on the bank. As if it were new came back to me the truism that most men are prisons to themselves. Here was a city imprisoned deep, and I as deep, in the rain. Was there,

perhaps, joy somewhere on account of those thousands of prisoners and lighted windows?

I left London that night on foot. By way of preparation, I stayed until after midnight to listen to a sweet voice that drew upon all the gloom and jangle of London the sweet patterns of some old country melodies. Strange and pleasant it was to look out upon the London night of angry-ridged, tumultuous roofs, and then, sharply drawing a curtain, to live upon a cadence, a melody—

“As I walked forth one Midsummer morning
A-viewing the meadow and to take the air ...”

A pure rose upon a battlefield, a bright vermeil shell upon a slatternly sea-shore after storm, would not be of a more piercing beauty than those songs just there.

Then I set out and began to stain the immense silence of the city with the noise of my heels and stick. A journalist or two went by; a fat man and his fat dog straying from the neat bar of a Conservative Club homewards without precipitancy; a few pleasure-seekers with bleared or meditative eye; a youth with music in his steps, fresh from some long evening of talk and song, perhaps his first. Here was a policeman stern and expectant in a dark entry, or smoking a pipe; there stood or sat or leaned or lay men and women who no more give up their secrets than the blinded windows and the doors that will not be knocked at for hours yet. How noble the long, well-lighted streets at this hour, fit with their smooth paved ways for some roaring game, and melancholy because there is no one playing. The rise and fall of the land is only now apparent. In the day we learn of

hills in London only by their fatigue; in the night we can see them as if the streets did not exist, as they must have appeared to men who climbed them with a hope of seeing their homes from the summits or of surprising a stag beneath. The river ran by, grim, dark and vast, and having been untouched by history, old as hills and stars, it seemed from a bridge, not like a wild beast in a pit, but like a strange, reminiscential amulet, worn by the city to remind her that she shall pass. How tameless and cold the water, alien, careless, monstrous, capable of drowning in a little while the uttermost agony or joy and making them as if they had never been. I passed by doors where lived people whom I knew, but it was two o'clock in the morning; they could not know me. I wondered which of them I could safely disturb. With what expression would they come down from their warm beds and oblivion, with dull, puzzled eyes, and slowly recall those things which—even the pleasant ones—our lonely lives so often reduce to mere entries in a tedious chronicle. I left the question unanswered.

Now I saw a tall, stiff crane surmounting the houses and nodding in the sky, itself simple, strong, direct, weighing the city against the heavens in an enormous balance with Rhadamanthine solemnity.

Endless were the vast caves and deserts of the streets, most strange the unobserved, innumerable things prepared for the eyes of men on the coming day—glittering windows of cutlery, food, drugs, sadlery—the high walls with coloured advertisements of beer, medicine, food, actors, newspapers, corsets, concerts, pickles. The dark windows, the windows lit to serve some purpose unknown, seemed to make it

necessary to cry out, to raise an alarm, to make sure that the darkness or light meant only the usual things. Now and then several streets ran towards one another and left a square or irregular space at their meeting, surrounded by an inn with a sign, a stone trough, an old eighteenth-century house, its windows emphasised by white paint, a row of pollarded limes, a scrap of orchard—once perhaps the heart of a village. Or for almost a mile the streets ran straight, with branches at right angles, and suddenly a large house stood back and its garden of limes and lawn broke the monotone. The names of the streets were an epitome of the world and time, commemorating famous and unknown men, battles, conspiracies, far-off cities and rivers, little villages known to me, streams and hills now buried by houses; the names of the inns were as rich as the titles of books in an old library, suggested many an inn by wood and mill and meadow and village square, but all confused as if in a marine store. And as I walked through old and new villages, rents, courts, alleys, lanes, rises, streets, buildings, roads, avenues, I seemed to be travelling through the Inferno and Purgatorio, but before the first man had entered them and without a guide. It was immense, sublime, but its purposes dark and not to be explained by the policemen here and there in charge. Nor, passing through Battersea, did I meet the famous man who has threaded this mystery. He, at least, would have taken me to a housetop and have unravelled space; but I expected him at street corners and on commons in vain. But presently I reached a sign-post that stood boldly up with undoubted inscriptions, one of them to London, and away from that I set my face, though I

saw market-carts going the way I had come, with drowsy carters, one lamp, and horses whose shadowy muscles quivered in the electric light. That sign-post seemed to make all things clear. Like a prophet it rose up, who after an age of darkness says that the path of life and goodness is plain, that he knows it, and that all who follow him will be saved. Not for him hesitation and qualification; but to all men perplexed by definitions, testimonies, other prophets and their own thoughts, he cries: “This is the way.”

“The world may find the Spring by following her.”

I followed and needed only a good marching song. By chance I lighted on one which was first sung by countrymen. It is not triumphant—the mind wearies of a triumphant song in solitude and at night—but it persists and acknowledges no end. It was made by feeble, mighty-limbed men who knew what it is to go on and on for ends which they do not entirely apprehend. It matches the hurrying feet of the lover or the limp of the hungry man at dawn. It begins—

“With one man, with two men,
We mow the hay together;
With three men, with four men,
We mow the hay together:
With four, with three, with two, with one, no more,
We mow the hay and rake the hay and take it away
together.”

It goes on—

“With five men, with six men,

We mow the hay together;
With seven men, with eight men,
We mow the hay together;
With eight, with seven, with six, with five, with four,
with three, with two, with one, no more,
We mow the hay and rake the hay and take it away
together.”

It goes on until a hundred is reached, proceeding after twenty by tens. And so, gradually, as the song went on, the houses opened apart, and the road ahead was a simple white line. On either hand thousands of lights showed valleys and hills; but ahead there was a promising darkness, and out of it came the Watercress Man with a basket of wild flowers on his back.

“Sir,” said he, setting down his flowers slowly, “the price of a pint of ale won’t hurt you, I suppose? I have drunk nothing since yesterday morning.”

“But have you eaten anything?” I asked, ready to admire him for asking first for drink.

“No,” said he, “I have neither eaten nor drunken. I drink four ale.”

“Thank you,” he said, when I had given him twopence for drink and twopence for food. “We are all sons of one mother. You can’t get away from that.”

“Then we are brothers,” said I.

“Certainly, if you will.”

“I should like to know you.”

“With pleasure, if you can.”

“What are you by profession?”

“A hard question. I profess nothing. By conviction I am an ill-used man, and for the moment I am a seller of flowers.”

He showed me his flowers—kingcups, cuckoo flowers, primroses from the moist woods.

“I will buy your flowers,” I said.

“No! I think I shall keep those,” and he put them in a horse trough close by. I asked him if he would return into the country with me.

“No,” he replied, “it would be sunrise before we got into the country, and I never spend the daytime in the country if I can avoid it.”

“Why?” I asked.

“As we are brothers,” he said, “I will tell you that I paint landscapes. I like nothing on earth so well as the country. I was dragged up in the Borough. The country for me! But the lover of Nature and the gamekeeper and the farmer and the landowner spoil it by day. The people are stupid, brutal. The women are not at all beautiful. Their cowsheds are the only things they have not spoilt: they are still sweet. As a lad I read the pastoral poets, and I know that these things were once far different. So I live in London and paint landscapes at sixpence a-piece, sometimes four or five of them in a morning, so that I live well. I usually put a few red flowers in with the sixpennyworth. I am sixty-eight; my son will succeed me, but badly—badly.”

“How is that?”

“Because he says that he paints Nature as she is, which is impossible. I make no such mistake, as you shall see——I aim for suggestion. Here,” he said, producing one from his pocket (a brown field sloping up to a ridge of trees, painted

black, against a silvery sky, and in that a few rooks). “Do you not hear there the wild, angry charm of hundreds of blackbirds and thrushes and larks? They sometimes make me lie down and cry before the sun rises, because I am not worthy; I do not own a little farm and drive my own plough and cause the envy of kings at my happiness.”

“Is that clump of trees right?” I asked (in need of something to say).

“Right? But the feeling is there. Is it not cold and pure and wild? I felt great as I did that. But see here again!”

Here he brought out another, also in three colours, of a landscape at dawn. Three black firs stood at the top of a steep down, and from them went a pair of dark birds out along a silver sky.

“I never put figures in my landscapes,” he explained, “but is not the spirit of a small sweet Amaryllis in it? *Ah! lovely as thou art to look upon, ah, heart of stone, ah, dark-browed maiden!* Does she not hide somewhere out of the picture; and does not a shepherd, seated perhaps under those fir trees, look for her coming? Is not the Golden Age in that sky?”

“I am glad,” said I, “that you believe in a Golden Age. Literature and art are continually recreating it for us.”

“Modern literature,” he said scornfully, “is by those who have not seen for those who do not care. What answer has literature to this?” Here he showed a third sketch.

“I know nothing of literature,” I said; “I am a journalist.”

He sighed with relief, and pointed to a yellow thatched house with windows open on to the sea, and behind the house the usual dark trees and silver sky.

“There,” he exclaimed, “literature does not believe in or understand the honest life, bound up with the seasons and beauty which is expressed by that simple scene. See, there, equal laws, harmony, aims unspotted by the world, not fearing nor loving kings. Any thoughtful man living in a scene like that would be wiser, and it would be impossible for him to err. I myself would venture to be a Daphnis or Menalcas again there. I can hear the one living pastoral poet saying in that cottage by the sea—

“Come, pretty Phyllis, you are late!
The cows are crowding round the gate.
An hour or more, the sun has set;
The stars are out; the grass is wet;
The glow-worms shine; the beetles hum;
The moon is near—come, Phyllis, come!

The black cow thrusts her brass-tipped horns
Among the quick and bramble thorns;
The red cow jerks the padlock chain;
The dun cow shakes her bell again,
And round and round the chestnut tree,
The white cow bellows lustily.” ...

He knew all four verses by heart.

“Your aims are wonderful,” I stammered. “If I could only see you at work, if you would only show me the scenes which inspire such antique and lofty emotions....”

“See! this is London—nothing but trees—I have seen it so as I came home. But I cannot go with you. I return to think about the Golden Age.”

He tied the flowers round the pole of a signboard that stood on a harsh courtyard of gravel strewn with dirty paper, and pursued his homeward road, eager for “The Old Angel” or “The Chequers” where he could vivify his vision of the Golden Age.

In the sky, the distant dawn sent up to the clouds a faint dream of light that made their shapes just visible. A hedge-sparrow awoke in the furze beside the road, twittered clearly and became silent again; on the other side, in some invisible trees high up, a few rooks began to talk. Then, for a little while as I went on, the darkness was complete, and the silence also, except that the telegraph wires forced a faint complaint out of the light wind.

As the clouds filled with that dream of light and the road began visibly to lengthen out, I left London behind or recognised it only in the blue bowls and copper-ware gleaming through the windows of new houses round about. Beyond them rolled a ploughed country of such abounding and processional curves that it seemed almost to move and certainly to rejoice; here and there the curves dimpled suddenly and made a hollow, where elm or beech sprang up in the midst of the ploughland, in a small consistory, grave, shining, fair. To right and left, where the curves of the land rose to the sky, the white foam of orchards half buried rosy farmhouses and their own dark boughs. The dense thorn hedges gleamed all wet, compelling the wind to dip deep into them and taste their fragrance, coolness, moistness, softness all together, envying not the earnest bee, or the dallying butterfly, or even the insect that was drowning in a dewy flower. How the dew washed away the night! I thought

that the old man had spoken truly when he said that the Golden Age comes again with every dawn. The dew gave the eyes a kind of fitness and worthiness to behold the white fruit blossom and the sudden hills of horse-chestnut green. It washed out London as the old man’s brush had done. See! the world is but a brown and fragrant cloud decorated with dark boles, green foliage, white bloom, and here and there a soul akin to them; it turns the wilful mind into a garden neat and fine, of red and white, with green lawns between, which the bee Fancy sucks at and combines. For a minute only, in one shadowed wood that faced the departing night, all the birds sang together stormily and hardly moving from the sprays on which they slept, with something of night in their voices. But as I entered the wood, already the most of them had gone hither and thither, and only on high twigs one or two blackbirds and thrushes sang, and hidden wood pigeons cooed. The young hazel boughs bent at the top with fresh leaves that were so beautiful and frail that they seemed but just to have been persuaded to stay and give up a winged life. The low wych elm twigs had been dipped in leaves. Wild cherry leaves and flowers mingled like lovers so young that the boy rivals the girl in tenderness. There was no path, and pushing through hazel and cornel and thorn, I saw the eyes of sitting birds gleam with a little anger through the lustrous green. Presently the stems were less dense; a little river ran through freshly cut underwood of hazel and ash and oak, their wounds still flashing. There pale primroses and the last celandines ran in sharp gulfs into the heart of bluebell and orchis and cuckoo-flower, and the orange-tipped butterfly

tripped over them. The mosses on the ash and hazel roots gleamed darkly gold and green. In the rivulet itself broad kingcups swayed and their leaves sank into darkness and rose into light as the ripples fluctuated. The blackbird, fed on golden hours, sang carelessly, time after time, the two opening phrases of an old Highland melody. Close by, in the cool, sombre, liquid air between the new-leaved boughs of beech sang a cuckoo, and his notes seemed not to die but to nestle and grow quiet among the leaves overhead and the flowers underfoot, and some of them even to find their embalming in the little round hawthorn clouds that sailed high above in a deep stream of blue.

Suddenly my mind went back to the high dark cliffs of Westminster Abbey, the blank doors and windows of endless streets, the devouring river, the cold gloom before dawn, and then with a shudder forgot them and saw the flowers and heard the birds with such a joy as when the ships from Tarshish, after three blank years, again unloaded apes and peacocks and ivory, and men upon the quay looked on; or as, when a man has mined in the dead desert for many days, he suddenly enters an old tomb, and making a light, sees before him vases of alabaster, furniture adorned with gold and blue enamel and the figures of gods, a chariot of gold, and a silence perfected through many ages in the company of death and of the desire of immortality.

PART II
THE LOWLAND

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