A. R. HOPE MONCRIEFF

MIDDLESEX

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PREFACE

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MIDDLESEX, squeezed up as it is among more expansive beauties, and too much overshadowed by the chimneys of Greater London, may not be thought of as a show county. But no shire need hang its head that contains such scenery, still hardly spoiled, as can be found about Hampstead Heath, Enfield Chase, Harrow Weald, and the leafy heights of Pinner, with many islets of pleasant greenery not yet drowned in the brick-and-mortar deluge. Its very misfortune of being so near a rich city contributes one feature of ornament in notably frequent parks, pleasure grounds, and gardens. Then its hills, vales, and woods can boast a special interest in having perhaps inspired more of our great poets than has any larger English county. The writer has explored it in every corner, marking out charms often neglected by those who hurry over its dusty or muddy high roads to reach neighbouring bounds that have not always a better right to give themselves airs of rurality.

MIDDLESEX

I

LONDON’S COUNTY

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FRESH from having sounded Surrey’s praise, I find myself called on to put a new barrel into my organ for the tune of

Middlesex. At once comes to mind a scene in a petty sessions court, where it was a certain lawyer's business to tear to rags the character of a witness on the opposite side, as he did with professional gusto. But when the next case came on, it was the turn of this damaged witness to stand in the dock; then the lawyer himself led the laugh raised by his announcement: "I appear for the prisoner, your worships!" Clients must reckon with such awkward chances where a small knot of country solicitors divide the alternation of blowing hot and cold on the course of justice.

At the time I thought this particular client unfairly used; but it occurs to me that I am now in much the same plight as was his turncoat champion. In that volume on Surrey I had not foreseen how I was to hold a brief for Middlesex, with which I then made some odious comparisons, and called Cobbett to witness, in his downright way, against the latter county as "all ugly." Now, we hack-writers, a poor but more or less honest tribe, do not pump up sweet or bitter so easily as those fountains of legal eloquence that at the Old Bailey or elsewhere stand ready to spout high moral indignation, touching emotion, and jury-bamboozling argumentation for whichever party may be first to put a fee in their slot. The literary conscience being less elastic, I have nothing for it but to acknowledge that, in the heat of advocacy for Surrey, I was led into speaking with too little respect of its neighbour across the Thames. As for my witness, counsel on the other side might easily show that he had an itch for venting random abuse, that on occasion he vilipended the fairest parts of his beloved Surrey, and that he lived in the flattest and tamest corner of the slandered

county. As for myself, casting off the metaphor of wig and gown, I humbly and heartily cry *peccavi*, I recant my error, and in the following sheets will stand to do ample penance for having said any word that might bring a blush of resentment to the cheek of Middlesex. What I may have hinted to its disparagement was spoken in haste, without malice, and I trust fully to explain it away after the example of that courtly German tutor who, on his princeling pupil translating *albus* as “black,” remarked, “Quite so, your Transparency—black, but not indeed absolutely black; rather verging on grey—one might say light grey, or even white, if his Serene Highness will graciously allow.”

In sober earnestness, as English counties go, there is little need of apology for Middlesex, which, if not ranking as a show county, and certainly not so charming, on the whole, as Surrey, has some bits hard to match. It may be truly said of this green-robed damsel that “when she is good she is very, very good,” and that when not so good, she is seldom “horrid.” The worst of it is flats fit for market-gardens and football fields, of which the largest stretch extends on the west side of London. Yet here, too, one is seldom out of sight of some pleasant rise, some oasis of park wood, some straggling line of hedgerow timber; and even that most dreary edge of the county, the marshlands of the Lea, is overlooked by the heights of Clapton and Enfield. The general character is a gently undulating surface, swelling more boldly in the heights north of London, and in the ridge above Stanmore, where, at its junction with Hertfordshire, Middlesex reaches a highest point of about 500 feet. The most marked features are those two lines of high ground,

the latter walling in the north side and curving round on the north-west, then between them the basin of the Brent, in which stand up isolated hills like that of Harrow.

So far as size goes, Middlesex has little to boast of, being the smallest but one of English counties, not half so big as Surrey. A winter day's stroll would bring us through its greatest length, and at one point it might be stepped across in a couple of hours. On the other hand, its smaller area has a considerably larger population than Surrey's, even excluding its bigger half of the Metropolitan area. But more thickly packed as it is with suburbs and villages, farms and factories, Middlesex is not so well off as Surrey for good old independent towns, and for capital has to content itself with the shabby squalor of Brentford. London seems to have cast its shadow on this side so as to stunt the growth of puny boroughs. Another contrast between the two counties is in shape, Surrey being, on the whole, more compactly contained than its sprawling neighbour. But the most striking difference is that of soil, Surrey marked off in zones of clay, chalk, and sand, that give its special ornament of dimpled variety, while Middlesex shows mainly a smug face of London clay, only here and there spotted by sandy pimples, gravelly scabs, rare warts of rock, or more frequent freckles of brick earth, in most parts interlarded with the patches and cosmetics applied by elaborate culture.

This much-enamelled nymph wears, perhaps, a too monotonous dress of green, hay and market vegetables being now the chief crops of Middlesex, though time was when its "Pure Vale" had a name for the best wheat in England to make flour for the royal larder. Yet the supply of

London Haymarkets and Covent Gardens has not blighted its most common beauty of “hedgerow elms on hillocks green.” It can be pronounced, indeed, a very well-wooded county, studded with parks and gardens, and richly laced with avenues,

THE GREAT AVENUE, HAMPTON COURT

looking like fragments of that great Middlesex forest which once covered all its heights, when the valleys were marshy wildernesses, and the most eligible residential quarters such island camps and clearings as have left their traces on Ludgate Hill and Brockley Hill at either end. For a good time back the advantages of ornamental planting have been liberally bestowed on a shire where Defoe could reckon not less than three thousand houses “which in other Places would pass for Palaces, and most if not all the Possessors whereof keep Coaches,” not to speak of myriads of gigmanity.

One glory may be claimed without question by London’s chief county—which, of course, is to be distinguished from

the County of London—that English literature must be full of scenes and images drawn from fields that lay within a walk of Grub Street. Till the last generation or two we find our poets more at home on the north side of the Thames, not a few of them, indeed, born within the sound of Bow Bells. Milton, Pope, Addison, Johnson, Goldsmith, Gray, Keats, Byron, Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, Lamb—such are the shades that at once come to mind as haunting this countryside. Even within the present bounds of London they found their whispering groves, verdant lawns, and blossoming brakes, long buried beneath bricks and mortar, where such names as Maiden Lane, Islington Green, Highbury Barn, or Willow Walk are like the tombstones of beauty that lives to be a joy for ever in immortal verse.

Population and industry have wrinkled and scarred the natural features of a county *nimium vicina Cremonæ*. London itself has spread leagues to the north since the day when one of Miss Burney's cits used "to take a walk in Tottenham Court Road as far as the Tabernacle or thereabouts, and snuff in a little fresh country air." Nearly a century earlier "Evelyn's Diary" sighed over two new streets behind Piccadilly—"to such a mad intemperance was the age come of building about a city by far too disproportionate already to the nation." Half a century later Mary Lamb could speak of Dalston as "quite countrified," where her brother, in his half-serious way, boasted of walks to such "romantic" scenes as Hackney and Tottenham. When, beyond the northern heights, a wayfarer of our generation thinks to have left the smoky Babylon behind him, he finds it breaking out again in whole towns of

suburban homes, through which its trams run to the very edge of the county; for in these days of steam and electricity London grows and multiplies not only by accretion, but fissiparously, throwing out swarms to settle upon blooming trees and flowery meads, whence, indeed, it is the drones that daily flit back to make honey in the original hive, so that we had better drop this metaphor as a stinging one.

Has any Lubbock or Maeterlinck ever had an opportunity of watching a new crop of London homes as it rises on the ground? Here is a goodly field that once fattened corn or turnips, but for long has been laid out in grass, making part of a dairy farm, a horse paddock, a golf course, or area for one of those open conical towers often standing up in the environs of our Babylon, which might be taken for Chaldean observatories or wickerwork idols, to be filled with hecatombs of captive victims, but the initiated recognise them as shooting-stands for the practice of Cockney sportsmen. Perhaps the ground is let to a cricket or football club, and that is more like to be a sign of the doom close at hand. These youthful athletes hold their playgrounds on more precarious tenure than the richer amateurs of golf; then a season comes when the gates are left open, the fences fall in gaps, the weather-stained notices to trespassers stand in idle decay, and the local urchinry press in to sport at will, no longer snatching a fearful joy. For weeks, months, the field lies waste, uncared for, sodden and sorry, trampled to flaws of bareness, with patches of rank weeds and unsavoury rubbish-heaps—a no-man’s-land, as might seem, that in truth is signed, sealed, and delivered to

the speculative builder. Yet here still peep out daisies and buttercups, “the little children’s dower”; and here hawthorn and hemlock bloom bravely on the ragged hedge or choked ditch, along which wander youth and maid, for whom nature’s poorest charms are made glorious by the sunshine of life’s May-days, and their feet tread here as lightly as on the heath of Hampstead or the rich lawns of Hampton, while still they can whisper that old story, “Old and yet ever new, and simple and beautiful always.”

But too soon wooers and playfellows are exorcised by short pipes and horny hands digging trenches, laying foundations, piling bricks and mixing mortar. Already the open field may be marked out in invisible streets, labelled with titles for which the builders have much ado to draw on their invention, one erecting a chain of castles in the air, another completing a series of abbeys, a third affecting historic surnames, while a fourth may invoke famous writers or heroes of the hour, and it saves trouble when some local landmark can be pressed into service as godfather. Soon, over broken waves of grass, emerge the brick reefs wrought by trades-union zoophytes. The rows of houses rise like an exhalation, story on story. Lath and plaster, jousts and beams, stucco, slates take their place as if by *hey presto!* and where you walked on a spring evening along some puddled footpath, or some trickling rill, in the height of summer you must pick your steps on incomplete pavements of Brook Terrace or Oak Avenue, again coming upon that young couple who, earlier in the season, were all eyes for one another, but now are fain to bend their united looks

upon the high-pitched proclamations of house-agents and the fluttering hopes of “orders to view.”

Almost as soon as run up the houses may be taken. Builders’ carts are succeeded by furniture-vans; bare window after window blossoms out with blinds, flower-pots, faces watching new neighbours coming in turn to their ordeal of broken crockery, broken promises of tradesmen, struggles with furniture that must be forced to fit, clashing of tempers and tastes that ought to harmonize, ends that should be made to meet. And as these young households settle down, so does the colony clear up its litter. Now the dovetailed dwellings may be numbered, that at first, perhaps, stood precariously independent as “Honeymoon Cottage” or what not, six-roomed “Chatsworths,” two-storied “Abbotsfords,” veritable “De Vere Mansions,” housing a dozen Smiths and Browns. Gaps are filled, rough edges are rounded off, roadways are beaten smooth; one by one are barred the footpath short cuts, on which smart or smug husbands and brothers, with some salt of youthful sport in them, made hasty morning spurts to the nearest station. Their evening return is guided by lines of gaslights to the welcoming door, at which will be handed in so many circulars, and among them, too soon, demand-notes for rates and taxes.

In the intervening hours, the rawly-paved streets are somewhat silent, but for cheery whistling of butchers’ and bakers’ boys, here and there echoed by the tinkling of pianos on the hire system, now and then drowned by the postman’s knock or the rattling of commercial Jehus, who by-and-by have to look out for perambulators. And ah! at

times there comes a gloomier van to doors that must open for grief as well as for joy; then poor comfort it is to aching hearts if their dear ones have not so far to travel to that freshly laid-out cemetery that makes such a weary journey from the inner parts of London, where not even the dead may rest. But if one go-cart be turned into a household tombstone, neighbour mothers are happier in setting on their legs a brood of future citizens, who will grow up to know nothing of this suburb but as a great toy-box of bricks and mortar.

For New Kensington, East Hampstead, or whatever title it assumes, has pushed out apace till its spreading lava-flow half hides the scattered hamlets or groups of tumble-down cottages which may thus be preserved for a time like flies in amber. For example, look into the back roads of Tottenham, or beside the church of Walham Green, where to-day a Juggernaut procession of motor-cars would soon crush the eighteenth-century poet who still berhymed this “green” as truly rural. Your new district may well have an old church to make its moral centre, perhaps in some out-of-the-way corner of the parish; then spick and span fanes, in each shade of Anglicanism, bring their services within easy reach of any householder; and chapels of various denominations follow suit, from tin little Bethels to imitation Gothic towers and Vandal spires. Even before the perambulators peeped out on fine days, doctors’ lamps and door-plates began to shine at corners not taken up by the flare of a public-house. Babels of school buildings rise above private roofs. Galaxies of shops break out along the main thoroughfares, promoted from “Lanes” to “High Roads” or “Broadways”; and ere their

fronts have grown dingy, their windows glow on red and green omnibuses plying to some Crown or Spotted Dog, whereat, before it took the style of a hotel, the rustic borderer leisurely drank his beer and opened his ears to strange tales of what went on in London, whose lights, if they have not lured him into its tempting glare, now stretch out to cheer his secluded home. The slow buses are shoved aside by tram-lines and motors, cause as well as effect of fresh growth. Humbly neighboured mansions and well-fenced parks are turned into public playgrounds for the young urban district, that soon develops an obscure but noisy school of local politics, and heaps up a debt as recklessly as any of your rich boroughs.

Thus, in the short lifetime of a generation, some square mile or two of fields and hedgerows has been turned into a permanent camp for one of London's legions. By this time our loving couple that were among its oldest inhabitants may no longer appear in the local directory. Have they prospered in the world, we must look for them in its Bayswaters or Bromptons. Have they failed, let us pity their hunt through some newer and cheaper suburb for a jerry-built roof over rheumatic bones.

> Many at seventeen their fortunes seek,
> But at three score it is too late a week!

This portentous growth is indeed past praying for. "Every wind that blows from north or south, east or west, from India, China, America, or Australia, feeds it; every wheel that turns at home, every colonist who digs or watches his flocks at the antipodes, intensifies it. The marrow of London

is in the backbone of the world; its blood is the blood of myriad kindred populations; its million hands seize upon the fruits, the corn, the gold, the oil, and wine of every zone." Its choice suburbs, indeed, may be considered as stretching out to the Riviera, the Swiss Lakes, or the Bohemian Forest. But, as yet, the county in which the greatest of modern cities chiefly lies has a remnant of rustic charms it cannot be too coy of displaying to the cosmopolitan multitude pent up within its spreading bounds. Nor are these busy throngs blind to the charms of Nature. As willingly as the yokel seeks its streets paved with gold and gleaming with lights, so the smoked Londoner loves to wash his eyes in greenery, or to bask in the "good gigantic smile of the old brown earth," if only on a holiday stroll to Hackney Downs or Wormwood Scrubs.

> Then thy spruce citizen, wash'd artisan,
> And smug apprentice gulp their weekly air:
> Thy coach of hackney, whisky, one-horse chair,
> And humblest gig through sundry suburbs whirl,
> To Hampstead, Brentford, Harrow make repair;
> Till the tired jade the wheel forgets to hurl,
> Provoking envious gibe from each pedestrian churl.
>
> Some o'er thy Thamis row the ribbon'd fair,
> Others along the safer turnpike fly;
> Some Richmond Hill ascend, some scud to Ware,
> And many to the steep of Highgate hie.

To leave his beehive behind him, the townsman of this age has to go further afield; further and faster he does go by his trains, trams, and other machines such as those foreseen by Wordsworth in a spirit of prophesy, on which Byron's "spruce citizen" and "snug apprentice" can now

> Glance along
> Rapid and gay, as if the earth were air,
> And they were butterflies to wheel about
> Long as the summer lasted.

Or those foretold by an earlier poet:

> The filthy beasts that never chew the cud
> Still grunt and squeak and sing their troublous song,
> And oft they plunge themselves the mire among;
> But ay the ruthless driver goads them on,
> And ay of barking dogs the bitter throng
> Makes them renew their unmelodious moan.

Yet it is doubtful if dusty cyclist or goggled motorist see as much of the country as their slow-going grandfathers, and that not only because there is less of open country to see. In their haste to get away from the streets they might as well travel on the Underground Railway. These speedy wayfarers—"machines themselves, and governed by a clock"—go in the traces of a road, blinkered by its rows of suburban houses, and ready to drop for fatigue when taken out of the shafts of pace-making and record-breaking. Nay, I could name one philosopher of note who on Sundays