ROLF BOLDREWOOD

# A SYDNEY-SIDE SAXON

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# Chapter I
# Job Claythorpe, Of Applegate, Ploughman

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ABOUT the first thing I can call to mind rightly, I was living with father and mother in a bit of a cottage in the village of Applegate, near Westerham, in Kent, not far from the Sussex border, where the river Darent rises. Sister Jane was there too. There had been ten of us, but only me and she were left.

We were well scattered, sure enough. Bob, he was the eldest, had 'listed for a soldier and got killed in the Indies. Jack went to sea, and was never heard of after. Bill was smothered in a coal mine, and Joe was hurt that bad in a fight with the keepers--he being given to poaching--that he never got rightly shut of it, and died within the year. Bessie married and went to America, and Sally was in service in Rochester. Two of 'em, a boy and a girl, died young; all the better for 'em, the folks said. So Jenny and I were the only ones left with the old folks, and quite enough too, considering what there was to keep house on.

Jane was only four years older, but she was like a mother to me ever since I could mind of anything. She used to dress me--it didn't take much to do that, but she'd always wash my face and hands and keep me clean, if we were ever so stinted, besides taking me out for walks in summer, and sometimes for a great treat to Harton Wood. She teached me my prayers and Bible stories, and texts as I grew bigger.

Mother wasn't strong then, she always seemed to me as if she was clean wore out and tired to death--poor mother! She was forced to lie a-bed for days and days, then she'd let Jane look after me as much as ever she liked, and a good thing it was for me, I can tell you.

Father was one of the best farm labourers in the parish in his day, folks said, but he was getting old now, and couldn't work like he used to, because of the rheumatics. A man's not really old at fifty--see what I can do, that am many a year past that; but then I haven't led the life father had. No! thank God, or I shouldn't be here with all you youngsters round me, and such runs as Bandra and Willendoon, and Yugildah mine, and be your'n when I'm dead, and all the best of it secured in freehold too. Thank God again for that; and never forget, you lads and lasses, to bless the day in your hearts when your dad left Old England for good and all.

As to the life a farm labourer lives in England, where he's told in his catechism to be thankful and contented in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call him. I was reading a book written by Mr. Henry Kingsley--I always read anything with his name to it, because I once saw him at the Anderson's Creek diggings, when I went down to Melbourne with fat cattle. He was working away there at a 'long Tom' with his trousers as yellow as a guinea, and a blue serge 'jumper' on. He's a college-read man, and a brother of the great clergyman at Eversley.

So he knows both sides. What such a man writes is worth any one's while to read. Some people say reading's a waste of time for a man who's got his living to get. All I can say is, that if I hadn't been given to reading when I was a

youngster I'd never been here. And now reach me that book there about an English labourer's life. Read you what he says.

Well, as I was saying, father got the rheumatism so bad one winter that he couldn't work, and could hardly crawl along with a stick. He'd worked well all his life, and been proud of his work, but he wasn't a man to save. He liked his glass of beer and his pipe of a Saturday night--and now and then when it wasn't Saturday, in the village inn, the George the Fourth. And no wonder. Poor old father! it was about the only pleasure he had in life. He never had a holiday, winter or summer, that I can remember. And if he liked a yarn with his cronies and the other farm drudges, and a seat by the fire in the cosy parlour at the George the Fourth, with a clean sanded floor, No wonder, I say again. I've never a word to say against honest work. I've worked hard myself for many a year, though I say it. But work every day of the year except Sundays, and the beasts to be fed and watered then--father was a ploughman most of his time--year in, year out, with never a change or a bit of sport, and only on wages just enough to keep body and soul together--it's more than a man can stand or ever was intended to. So the old men will drink and forget their hard lives, some of them, and the young ones rebel and run away to sea, take the Queen's shilling, or go poaching, half for the gain, and more than half for the sport and danger of the thing.

Well, spite of all his hard work, and mother's too, she wore herself out before him; and seeing that she gave herself no rest, morning, noon, and night,--never spent a penny she could help, and wouldn't have drunk a glass of

beer to save her life,--father went to the wall. I was nigh ten years old then, and a cruel hard winter it was. The parish overseer said he must go to the poorhouse, as he couldn't work and had no money. It wasn't likely, at eight and ten shillings a week in his best days, with food and clothes, and fire and rent for the cottage, and everything to find out of that. There's no hut and rations, and wood fetched, and a cook and all that found for a labouring man in England, I can tell you all. Of course, he couldn't be allowed to starve quite. He'd got pretty low and weak, but he'd have plenty of things from the farmers that used to employ him, and the squire's lady and the clergyman's wife sent him and mother soup and things, with a glass of port wine now and then, and coals and blankets. They were kind, I won't deny that, but it couldn't go on for ever. Then, one snowy day before Christmas, the overseer told father that he and mother must be taken to the poorhouse.

I remember the day as well as yesterday. I always feel as if I could cry my heart out over it as I did then. It did seem so hard! Father had worked and slaved in that parish all his life, man and boy, from the time he was able to be crow-boy, and that was young enough. He'd never had time to go to school, so he couldn't read nor write, nor poor mother either. He had been the best mower, the best thatcher, the best ploughman in the parish, and now, when he was broken down with hard work, 'screwed' as you boys would say, there was no paddock nor pension for him. Nothing but to spend his last years in a place like a gaol, to linger out the dregs of life within bare walls, and be parted from the wife that he had loved and honoured all his days. It was

hard and heart-breaking, but there was no help for it. Everybody seemed to think it was the only thing to be done, and as natural for a farm labourer to go to the poorhouse when his labour came to an end as for a horse to be sent to the knacker's. More than one said it was a thing to be thankful for, and that we should be grateful to Government for providing a home for father and mother in their old age. But it wasn't a home. How could it be a home when they were parted from each other, against the words of the prayer-book when they were married in the old parish church? I told the parson so, when he was talking to me that way afterwards, and it made him that angry that he wouldn't say another word, and went away in a huff, like.

However, we got partly used to it after a while, but it always made me that wild, and yet broken-hearted at the same time, when I went to see them. Father walking about with a lot of other old men, some of 'em cross--grained and others that stupid they looked like the people in the county madhouse, and others swearing and cursing with every word that came out of their mouths. I thought how different it all was when father was in good work, and used to come home and smoke his pipe in the porch beside the cottage door, with the honeysuckle twining over it, and we young ones playing, and mother bustling about getting tea ready. There was not much to eat at any time; we thought a great deal of a bit of meat on Sunday--bacon now and then. But it was homely, and we were happy in the way all folks are when their home is their own, and they can do as they like there, however poor and humble it is.

That's the reason I've always said a young fellow's better off on a forty--acre free selection in this country, though he and his wife may have to work hard and live spare, than taking good wages on a station. He's got his HOME, where he can have his pigs and his chickens, his horses and his cows, and where he can sit and read his paper of evenings and Sundays, and see his children run over the grass without interfering with any one. Lord! what would father and mother have given to have had such a place, with wood and water for nothing, and timber to build a cottage, and steady work at high prices when the cash ran short from the squatters round about! We'd have thought it like going to heaven straight off. But like poor ignorant folk, as we all were, we knew no more about Australia, or Canada, or New Zealand, than the man in the moon. If we thought of them at all, it was like the Indies or Africa--hot strange countries, where there were wild beasts and slaves and snakes, and all kinds of varmint.

We had tight work, Jane and I, to make out a living that winter. Old Aunt Betsy took us in, though she could barely keep herself. You youngsters don't know what bad weather means in this happy country. No, nor poverty, nor hunger, nor a lot of things that English labouring men and women are brought up in, as one may say. When I think of the long dark days, the snow and sleet, the bitter hard frosts, lasting a month at a time, when there was no work, and as little food, or fire, or clothes as poor little creatures like me and Jane could keep body and soul together upon, it makes me shiver again. When I look back over those dark years I wonder, so I do, how we ever lived through it all.

But Jane stuck to me like a true sister, as she was, all through the worst of the time, else I'd never have been here now. She never was one to think of herself at all. She slaved away at any kind of work she could get, late or early--house-work, needle-work, dairy-work in winter, field work and harvesting in spring and summer--anything she could earn a penny by; and she never spent nothing except in clothing for herself and books for me--for even when things were at their worst, she always made me stick to the bit of schooling she managed to get for me.

'Never mind about anything else, Jesse,' she used to say to me, 'as long as we have meat and drink, and clothes to our back. You be a good boy and learn to read and write, and do sums. They're the keys of power and riches, and men's favours, I can see, if they're used right. I don't want you to be a working drudge all your life, to be shut up and made a prisoner of when you're no more use, like poor father, and you don't want it, Jesse, do ye, my boy?'

'No, Jane! I'd like to be something better,' I used to say, 'but how am I to do it?'

'You go on with your book, and learn your geography and history,' she said, holding my hand and looking up to the stars--it was always at night we used to have these talks. 'God will show us a way. But we must help ourselves and go away from this place.'

'Go away from England? Oh! Jane, how can you think of that,' I said. I was like all boys and plenty of soft young fellows in country parts. I hated the thought of leaving the place where I was born and bred.

'How could the Queen get soldiers, and sailors, if everybody was like that? We can do as much as others; England's not the only country in the world, Jesse!'

Well, as I said before, though it was hard living and struggling for the first few years, things got better with us by degrees. Jane's steady industry and the motherly care she took of me, raised her up friends in the village. The clergyman's wife told the squire's daughter about her--what a good girl she was; how her father and mother were in the workhouse, and that she kept me and put me to school out of her small earnings. They took a fancy to her. Good principle and industry WILL make its way in the world, no matter what people say. So they used to give her needlework and clear--starching to do, and made her presents of clothes and what not. The young ladies at the Hall wanted her, after a bit, to go there as under-housemaid, which would have been looked upon as grand promotion for a girl like her, in the village. But she wouldn't take it. Aunt Betsy had been very good to us, as far as she'd been able. She'd always give us a home and house-room such as it was. She had begun to get feeble and ailing now. So Jane said she wouldn't leave her. Besides she wanted to be in the way to look after me, in school and out of school. She was afraid of my getting in with bad companions, too. I was always terrible fond of hunting and snaring and shooting when I could get a chance. She was afraid I'd get led into poaching like poor brother Joe, that was shot. So she wouldn't quit me and Aunt Betsy, though her living at the Hall would have been most like a lady's life compared to what she'd been used to. The Squire's eldest daughter, that

managed the house, his lady being dead, was quite put out about it.

'Surely you are foolish in refusing so good a chance of getting on in the world,' she said.

'I'll never leave poor old Aunt Betsy, Miss Walsingham, she can't do for herself, nor the way she used to, and then there'd be Jesse all by himself.'

'Room might be found for him, to help in the garden, or the butler's pantry,' said the young lady. 'He could be provided for too. You see I am really anxious to help you.'

'I shall always be grateful, Miss,' says Jane, making a curtsey. 'But I want to keep Jesse at school another year. Then he ought to be able to hold his own in the world.'

'He is old enough to earn his living now,' said the young lady. 'I hope you do not wish him to grow up one of those half-educated troublesome lads that are the pest of a village.'

'We come of a good working stock, Miss,' says Jane, quite bold for her (she was always so meek and mild, but you couldn't turn her once she'd made up her mind). 'He and I have worked hard all our lives. We shall have to work harder yet before we come to what I hope to see. But I want him to labour to some purpose, and not to wear out his life in the service of others who forget him in the hour of his need.'

'I hope, Jane,' says the young lady very seriously, 'that you have not been reading any of those abominable radical books that are written to turn simple people's brains.'

'I have read very little, Miss,' said Jane, quite respectful. 'I haven't the time, indeed, but I want to know more than I do,

and for Jesse to do the same. I can't think there's any harm in that.'

'Well, I see you are a determined little puss though you look so quiet and gentle,' said Miss Walsingham. 'I suppose you must take your own way. You shall have the work as usual, and bring the boy too, he always looks so nice and clean.'

'Oh! thank you, Miss,' said Jane, who was greatly frightened at her own boldness (she told me about it many a time afterward). 'I know you are always so good to me, you'll find me always thankful to do anything for you.'

I was getting big enough then to do a pretty fair share of field-work in the summer, and used to earn a bit of money in harvest time. I began to think we should mend our fortunes after a bit. I had got on well at school, and was proud of myself, though, Lord knows, I learned little enough. But that 'little'--you boys and girls--was the making of me, and the making of the good sheep-run we've all lived on so many a year, and the good freehold estate that's come out of it. I've heard a gentleman or two say 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.' I don't hold with whoever wrote that at all. It mayn't be all that's wanted, but it's a plaguy deal better than none. A man might as well say he wouldn't eat dry bread and drink water when he was starving, because he couldn't get roast beef. Any man or woman that can read and write, keep simple accounts, and understand a map, has got hold of the levers that move the world, and it is his own fault if he doesn't prise out a corner for himself somewhere.

Talking of reading, one of you youngsters--Charley, you're a terrible boy for books--fetch me down that first one of Sir Walter Scott's novels. Yes, that's it. Ivanhoe--I've been all through the forest that's wrote about there--it's standing still--some of it just like it was in King Richard and Robin Hood's time. We haven't got those sort of things here, but I don't know that it matters so much either. Now listen to this--as is written about a station hand named Gurth--a knock-about man he was turned into afterwards, though he was tailing the pigs when he first came into the story. Here it is--

'One part of his dress only remains, but it is too remarkable to be suppressed--it was a brass ring resembling a dog's collar, but without any opening, and soldered fast round his neck, so loose as to form no impediment to his breathing, yet so tight as to be incapable of being removed except by the use of the file. On this singular gorget was engraved, in Saxon characters, an inscription of the following purport:--"Gurth, the son of Beowulf, is the born thrall of Cedric of Rotherwood."'

I recollect, as well as if it was yesterday, the day I read this, with all about Gurth and Wamba, and Fangs the dog, and the place too. Jane used to be always up and down at the Hall, and as she didn't like to leave me in the stable-yard or the garden when it was wet--and it's often wet in Kent, I can tell you, if the seasons haven't changed--so she asked Miss Walsingham if she mightn't bring me into the housekeeper's room. The young ladies used to pet me a bit, and take notice of me, and send me errands, so at last I got pretty well at home in the servants' hall and passage, and rambled about as I liked. One day I found out the old

Squire's justice-room, as he called it, where he used to have up poachers and boys for stealing apples, and so on. It was close to the housekeeper's room, and no one meddled with me, so I used to go and look about there and wonder at all the things. The first day I found an old-fashioned book-case all among his fishing-rods and whips and fowling pieces. The books were mostly shabby-looking, with brown leathern backs and ragged edges; but there was lots of fine reading in 'em, and that I seemed to take naturally to, like a retriever to water, or a pointer pup to partridges. I had to wait there sometimes till the old Squire came back from a ride, or till sister Jane had got the things ready that I was to take to some poor woman. The young ladies made me useful that way many a time, and very good it was of them. I'd never any turn for doing mischief and spoiling things, and Jane always kept me very neat and clean, so I was allowed to do as I liked pretty much. When the old Squire came upon me with a book in my hand he used to look at me as if a stray fox-hound puppy at walk had got into the house. But he never said nothing but once.

'Is that Job Claythorpe's boy?' says he. 'Your father was the best ploughman and harvest hand on the estate. Try and grow up like him, lad, and don't idle your time over books.'

I was a bit frightened, of course, but the Squire he never said nothing to me no more, so I just went on like before, and used to read anything I came across. It was all one to me. But what took most hold upon me was this bit of a piece out of this very book, where it tells you as this poor chap Gurth had a collar round his neck, like a dog, that he