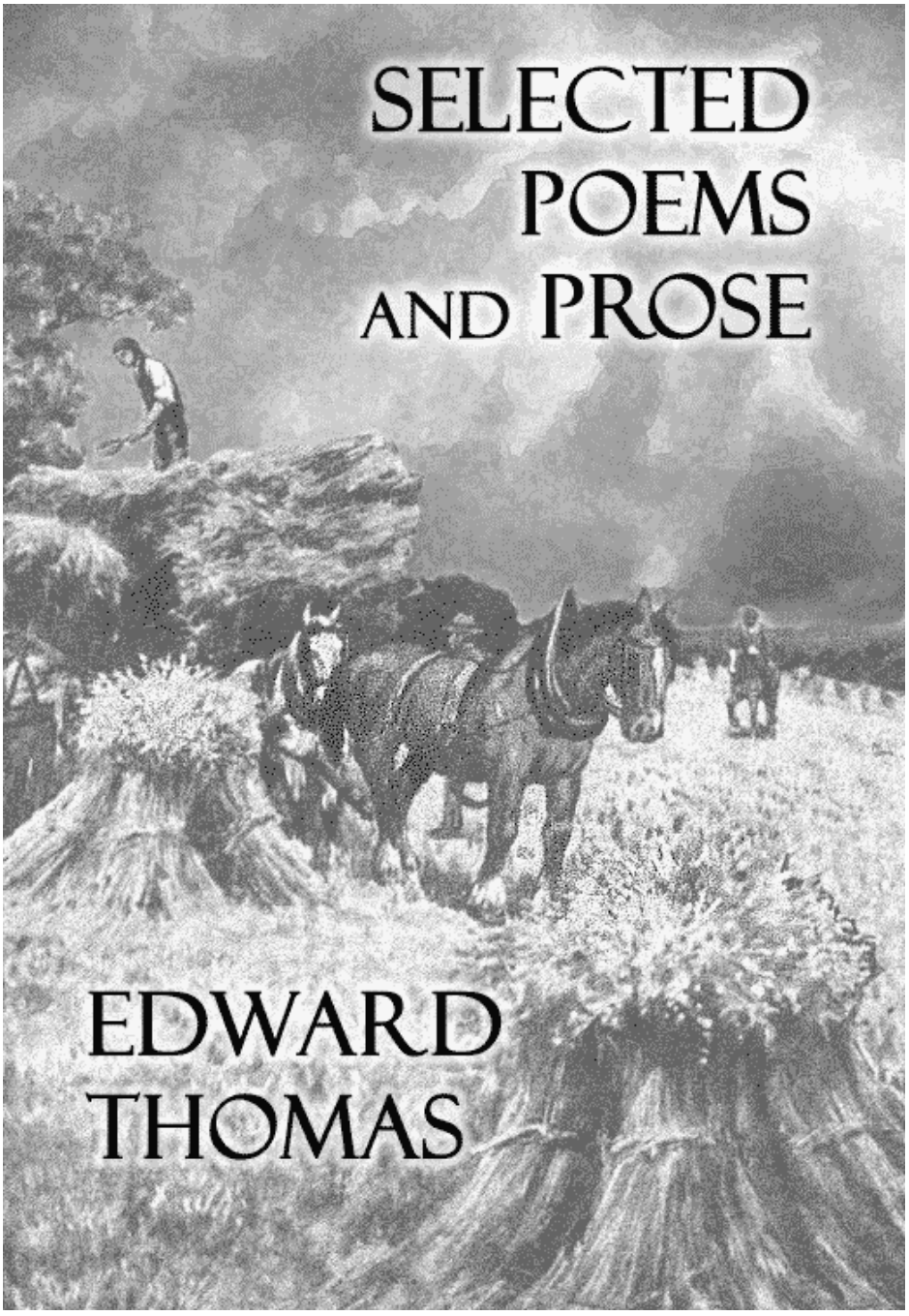
SELECTED
POEMS
AND PROSE
EDWARD
THOMAS

Edward Thomas

Selected Poems and Prose

Compiled by Emma Laybourn

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Introduction
Edward Thomas: A Brief Biography

Edward Thomas is now a highly regarded poet, yet he spent most of his career as a writer of prose, and did not begin writing poetry until three or four years before his death at the age of thirty-nine. His poetry shows a deep knowledge and love of country life – its landcapes, wildlife, people and traditions – expressed in a spare, sometimes colloquial style which echoes the rhythms of natural speech.

Thomas's prose works are nowadays much less read than his poetry. While uneven in quality, they show the development of his meticulous observance of nature and contain passages of great clarity and beauty. He was drawn towards the old traditional ways of the countryside, which were being superseded even as he wrote; his books and poems depict a world which to some extent has now vanished.

Philip Edward Thomas was born in March 1878, in London, to parents who were both originally from Wales. Edward's father, Philip Henry, was probably a Welsh speaker whose family – like many other Welsh families at the time – had migrated from a rural area to the industrialised south-east of Wales. Philip Henry was a civil servant for the Board of Trade, a respected public speaker and occasional lecturer. Edward's mother Elizabeth, née Townsend, was the daughter of an alderman from Newport in Wales.

Edward was the eldest of six boys. His family moved several times within London, but Edward, as shown by his *Fragment of Autobiography,* (of which there are extracts at the end of this book) was always able to gain access to more natural surroundings – whether Wandsworth Common or further afield – on his increasingly long walks. When not at school he had a considerable amount of freedom to roam and follow his own pursuits, chief amongst them being fishing and keeping pigeons. Holidays were often spent with his grandparents in Swindon, Wiltshire, where he learnt to appreciate rural life and the ways and lore of country people.

Although he also read widely – the books of Walter Scott being favourites, along with adventure novels – it seems that most books did not greatly influence him until he discovered the works of Richard Jefferies (1848 to 1887). Jefferies, who was from Wiltshire, was an acclaimed writer on the countryside, its natural life and history. As a teenager, Edward began to write essays on nature, some of which were published in journals, an enterprise in which he was encouraged by his father and a new friend, James Ashcroft Noble, a journalist and critic.

In 1894, aged fifteen, Edward was sent to St. Paul's School, a public school (which in the UK denotes a private school for the well-

off.) He felt out of place there, being younger than the rest of his class, and conscious of his lower social status. None the less he did well academically, and began to prepare for examinations to enter the Civil Service.

By 1895 he began making regular visits to the house of James Noble, who was seriously ill: and there he met Noble's daughter, Helen, who was to become his wife. Helen, who had left school to nurse her father, was a frank, loyal and resilient young woman. She regarded herself as unintellectual, yet after Edward's death she would go on to write two short autobiographical works about their life together which are vivid and even luminous in their recollections.

In the first of these works, *As It Was*, Helen described her first acquaintance with Edward (whom she renamed David in her books):

'David was tall – just six feet – and slim, with a broad chest and shoulders, which he carried well – loose-limbed and athletic. He had a beautifully shaped head with a fine brow, and his thick fair hair, worn rather long, curled a little over his forehead and ears. His nose was long and straight, his mouth very sensitive… The eyes were grey and dreamy and meditative, but fearless and steady, and as if trying to pierce to truth itself… His hands were large and powerful, and he could do anything with them from the roughest work to the most delicate: they symbolise for me his strength and his tenderness. It is his hands even more than his beautiful face that remain in my vision when I think of him; I shall never forget them.'

Helen's father was very fond of Edward; her mother, however, liked him less – 'she could find in this quiet, reserved, clever boy no point of contact.' Helen herself found an immediate point of contact in their shared love of the outdoors:

'I remember in that first walk how we scrambled about in a little roadside copse. It must have been winter or early spring, for the trees were bare, and David showed me many old nests, telling me the names of the birds which had made them, and pointing out to me their special characteristics… All his knowledge of everything we saw, and all his intimacy – everything lifted me at once into a new world. I was at this time about eighteen, and he nine months younger… But even now I felt he was "the Genius" and I a very ordinary girl, as indeed I was.'

Helen described herself as a plain girl, but she was robust and physically confident, taking joy in her own health and strength. The two of them became close and after her father's illness and death their friendship turned to love. Helen departed to work as a nursemaid, while Edward was also changing his plans for his future. According to *As It Was*:

'[Edward] was hating more and more the idea of the Civil Service as a means of earning his living, and at about this time, greatly to his father's anger, he gave up the work, and decided to try and earn his living by writing. Several of the literary weeklies were taking his essays, and his book had had a fair sale. His father, naturally enough, hated the precariousness of this way of living, and after a lot of

discussion it was decided that [Edward] should go to Oxford. He liked the idea of going to the university, but dreaded it too, for he had had so very little social life and was so unused to meeting his fellows; and also the thought of separation from me was hateful to think of. We had often spoken of our life together, and had made great plans for the education of our children. We hated the thought of a legal contract. We felt our love was all the bond that there ought to be…'

The book Helen referred to was *The Woodland Life*, a collection of Edward's observations on the countryside along with a nature diary, which was published in 1897, and was dedicated to James Noble.

Before Edward left for Oxford in that year it seems that he and Helen took a holiday together in a Wiltshire Cottage for what Helen called 'a tiny honeymoon' – an experience that made both of them very happy. However, it is at this point in her book that Helen reflected on the difficulties ahead:

'I knew that all my life my only peace would be to be needed by him. And so it was.

'For there were to come dark days when his brooding melancholy shut me out in a lonely exile, and my heart waited too eagerly to be let into the light again. When those days came, with no apparent reason for their coming, bringing to him a deep spiritual unrest and discontent, he would be silent for hours, and perhaps stride out of the house, angry and bitter and cruel, and walk and walk far into the night, and come home, worn out with deadly fatigue… But this was to come, and it was only now and then I had hints of this darkness in his soul, this fierce unrest which beyond all found peace in nature, but not in me. Alone he had to be in his agony, but when he emerged from it, exhausted by God knows what bitter contest, he looked for me and needed me, and our love was always the firm ground on which we stood secure and that no storm ever swept away.'

When Edward went to Oxford he and Helen wrote to each other every day. She relates:

'His letters were full of his new life, and I could tell how much how he was enjoying the society of his fellows and also the freedom from home rules which he experienced for the first time in his life… [He was] working fairly hard at Oxford and rowing for his College, and experimenting in all sorts of experiences. He tried alcohol and opium, and used to write to me and tell me everything that he went through in these various phases… He had made a large number of friends, many of whom he kept all his life. He had a wonderful capacity for friendship, and inspired love and admiration wherever he went. He exacted a great deal, and gave a great deal. He was enjoying it all enormously, and this life helped to overcome his natural shyness and reserve.'

She adds that Edward was earning about £80 a year by writing essays:

'His writing was always full of a deep melancholy; even in his Oxford days this melancholy and spiritual disquietude was becoming more and more characteristic of his temperament.'

At this time Edward wrote in one his letters to Helen:

'My youth flies from me, so. No more can I find if not content, yet a gorgeous enjoyment, in mere dreams, where men have no past. As to dreams, day dreams, not only do they no longer impose upon me an innocent belief, but they become less glorious, less real, less natural, and less frequent.'(Quoted in R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: a Portrait,* ch. 4.)

When Edward had been at Oxford for two years Helen found that she was pregnant. At this point they had not yet spoken of marriage. Helen had a small legacy which removed some anxiety about money, and they married in June 1899 – not telling Edward's parents until after the event. Edward continued to study, though not altogether happily, writing:

'I have a craving (which might be misconstrued) for the society of such very youthful, fresh creatures as this year's History scholar… I felt quite some of the pangs of disappointed love. I kept hearing his voice through the wall.' His love for Helen was not exclusive nor sufficient for him, in a pattern that was to repeat itself later in his life. (*Edward Thomas: a Portrait* ch. 5)

Meanwhile Helen went to live with friends and then with Edward's parents, until in early 1900 she had her baby boy, Merfyn, an event with which her first book *As It Was* closes.

Edward graduated in 1900, determined to make a living as a writer. Helen's second volume, *World Without End*, describes their first house as a family – the first of several in London and then in Kent:

'He found, in a new street in what was obviously doomed to become a slum, a half-house of which the rent was seven and sixpence a week…The downstairs people frightened me rather because of their way of moving out in the middle the night. Very seldom did the downstairs tenants stay longer than a fortnight… All were terribly poor and degraded.

'Here we lived for a few months. During that time [Edward] was out a great deal looking for work, going from one editor's office to another, sending in his card; sometimes being received courteously and sometimes not; sometimes given a book to review or the half promise to accept an article. He returned from these dreadful expeditions tired and depressed and angry, hating himself for his failure…

'With the first glance at his face I knew what the day had been. If it had been a bad one there was no need of words, and none were uttered. I could do nothing, for if I said one word which would betray that I knew what he had endured and was enduring, his anger and despair and weariness would break out in angry bitter words which would freeze my heart and afterwards freeze his for having uttered them…

'Some days [Edward] would be at home all day writing and reading, happy and eager with the impulse for creative work which gave him greater satisfaction than anything else… Often we were

quite reckless with money. Once when a cheque was bigger than we had expected we bought a beautiful and costly brass lamp made in the William Morris workshops. At other times we were so poor that when [Edward] was out for several successive days I lived on the remains of a Christmas pudding… When we had not enough money for anything else we lived on bread and cheese and tea.

'Yet little by little [Edward]'s work was increasing, and before we left London he had published his first volume of essays.'

This volume was *Horae Solitariae*, which sold moderately well. However, Edward was suffering from the uncertainty of his financial prospects, writing:

'I suppose I must grind out some fiction, though… I am very badly off for plots, and frankly I don't feel justified in writing of men and women whom I have scarcely met and never studied.' (*Edward Thomas: a Portrait*, ch. 6.)

He was given work reviewing books and worked hard to meet the deadlines. The new house in Kent seems to have been a pleasant enough one, next to a cherry orchard: but it was hard for Edward to anticipate with pleasure the birth of his daughter Bronwyn in October 1902. Although he enjoyed the company of his small children he wrote, 'I often want to go away and walk and walk for a week anywhere so long as it is by an uncertain road.'

In 1903 he was commissioned to write the book *Oxford*, a task which he did not particularly relish: 'Day after day I had to excite myself to write what I could… It has left me dried up, and I feel that I shall never do good, slow, leisurely work again.' The strain of the work led to a deterioration in his physical and mental health, and with Helen's encouragement he spent time in Wiltshire and London to recuperate. A move to a different, larger house in the Kent countryside also improved his well-being; and he was asked to write a new book, *Beautiful Wales*.

Although he expressed deep dissatisfaction with this new book, it is one in which his own descriptive voice becomes clear, and was favourably reviewed. Edward was now establishing a reputation as a writer, and was soon working on his next book, *The Heart of England*. While he did not find such work easy, it had its compensations, as Helen describes:

'[Edward] had a fair amount of work, but never enough to keep him from anxiety, and never enough to free him from the hateful hack-work books written to the order of publishers, which though he did them well did not at all satisfy his own creative impulse, the damming up of which contributed largely to his melancholy. Yet against this has to be put that he was untrammelled by routine. He loved the life he lived away from towns, his own master, though in a freedom that perhaps gave him too much opportunity for brooding and for introspective doubts and hatreds of himself. He went to London fairly often, and kept in touch with a large circle of friends… some became very intimate with the different phases of our domestic life, and helped both [Edward] and me over difficult periods.'

One new friend that Edward made was the poet W.H. Davies, an itinerant Welshman whom he met in 1905, and who at the time was unknown. Edward would help Davies greatly with accommodation and encouragement over the years to come. He in turn was often supported by his own friends, amongst them the artist James Guthrie, the writer Edward Garnett and the poet Walter de la Mare.

After the completion of *The Heart of England*, Edward and Helen moved house again, this time to Petersfield in Hampshire. Part of the reason for the move was the new house's proximity to Bedales, a progressive school, which Merfyn now began to attend.

Here Helen soon made friends with the school staff, and began teaching at the school, while Edward did not find the people so congenial. He began to suffer from more frequent attacks of depression, and at one point, he evidently contemplated suicide: Helen described how he went out with a revolver in his pocket, so that she feared she would not see him again. Edward himself wrote in his private notes about his contemplation of suicide:

'I went out and thought what effects my suicide would have. My acquaintances – I no longer have friends – would talk a day or two... W.H. Davies would suffer a little, Helen and the children – less in reality than they do now, from my accursed tempers and moodiness.' (*Edward Thomas: a Portrait*, ch. 8). He later turned the incident into a short story, *The Attempt*, in his anthology *Light and Twilight* (of which extracts are included below.)

Edward's claim that he had no friends was at odds with Helen's view:

'His friends... had to come more than half-way to meet his reserved and shy nature, but their effort was well repaid, for with his personal charm, his talk, his dry humour, his clear intellect, his sincerity, his generous appreciation of his contemporaries, and his ungrudging efforts on their behalf, his never failing loyalty – and added to these qualities his striking appearance and a beautiful voice – it is not to be wondered at that he created in the hearts of the people with whom he came into contact a more than ordinary friendship....

'The quality in him that I most admired was his sincerity. There was never any pretence between us. All was open and true. Often he was bitter and cruel, but I could bear it because I knew all. All was known, all was suffered and endured; and afterwards there was no reserve in our joy.'

Indeed, it seems that there were many times of happiness, for example during outings in the countryside with their children. Edward loved to make things for his children, to sing and tell stories to them, and to explore the outdoors with them, showing them flowers and birds' nests. He had also been commissioned to write a book about his hero Richard Jefferies, a task he was able to approach with enjoyment.

In 1907 Edward spent some time in Suffolk, under a doctor's regime, and while there became besotted with a seventeen year old

girl, Hope Webb, the daughter of old friends. Helen was aware of this attachment, and while it caused her great pain, did not try to forbid it. It is possible that Edward found the intensity of his wife's love too much for him, and sought escape in other attachments. That for Hope Webb came to nothing, and he did not see her again.

He returned home and continued his work writing and reviewing with great industry, but also with a return of bouts of weakness and depression. After the book on Jefferies came another travel book, *The South Country*. However, sales of this last book were disappointing; and with Helen again pregnant, Edward felt the oppressive need for more work.

He offered several book ideas to publishers and produced two books of literary criticism, *Maurice Maeterlinck* and *Feminine Influence on the Poets*, in short order without thinking highly of either. Helen gave birth to a second daughter, Myfanwy, in August 1910; within a month Edward had left for a holiday walking and visiting friends. He soon produced another travel book, *The Icknield Way*, which shows the signs of hasty writing, and was working on a book about the writer George Borrow. But he was feeling the strain. In 1911 he wrote,

'I wish I could escape from book-writing... Things get so rapidly worse that something must happen soon inside my head or outside. I hope outside...

'I have somehow lost my balance and can never recover it by diet or rule or any deliberate means, but only by some miracle from within or without. If I don't recover it and causes of worry continue I must go smash...' (*Edward Thomas: a Portrait*, ch. 10).

Walking provided one means of escape. During his excursions Edward filled notebooks with his observations, which he later drew on in his books and his poetry. He already had his own studio where he worked, and now decided to spend more time in London. Meanwhile he stayed with friends at East Grinstead, in Sussex, where he wrote his only novel, *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*: a book that contains some lively description but suffers from the lack of a plot. It was published in 1913.

At this time Edward had become involved with the children's writer Eleanor Farjeon, one of a group of literary friends, and this seemed to exacerbate his discontent at home. Helen was aware of this friendship, writing in *World Without End*:

'I knew... that she had met Edward very much more than half way in the warm friendship which was necessary to win him from sensitive distrust. I knew also from his letters that among this high-spirited, confident, successful crew, in his heart he was bitter and lonely, and that this girl was the only one with whom he had felt easy...

'Another dreadful day. The children avoid him as much as possible, and are afraid to talk at meals. He knows it, and it is fresh torture to this tortured spirit. He tries to make them say they hate him, and they cry and will not. A black gloom is over the house. I

dread his going to the study; I dread his coming back. I feel my face stiffen into deep lines. I am possessed by fear. He speaks little, but what he says is said to hurt me and doubly hurt himself. I keep myself hard at work, for if I stopped I should become physically capable, as spiritually I am paralysed.'

Then Eleanor came to visit – an event that Helen found difficult, although she liked Eleanor for herself.

'As he talks and she responds so quickly his face looks less haggard and the eyes less weary, and I want to thank her... More than all I want to be alone, and I want him to be happy with [Eleanor] until I am sure all is well with him...'

When Helen was alone with Eleanor she put her arms around her, saying:

' "You see how it is... He has shut his heart against me, and love has no place in his heart. He cannot help it. His spirit is too weary for love, his discontent too bitter... If love could come to him again through you... it would be like new heaven and a new Earth."'

Eleanor, who was in love with Edward and supported him for the rest of his life, also became close to Helen. She recounted her memories of Edward in her own memoir, in which she wrote that Helen's account was essentially true. At this time Edward was also encountering difficulties in his relationship with his son Merfyn, who was now thirteen and had none of his father's interest in books.

Meanwhile Edward continued to produce books prolifically: the travel book *In Pursuit of Spring*, a study of the Victorian essayist Walter Pater, a biography of Keats (which would be published in 1916), and his own 'Fragment of Autobiography', which was not published until 1938, as *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*.

1914 was marked by two events that would change Edward's life. The first was his growing friendship with the American poet Robert Frost, whom he had met the previous year: the second was the outbreak of war.

Frost was on a prolonged trip to England, visiting a number of writers. Edward and he went on a walking holiday together, which led to long discussions between them about the nature of poetry. Not long before, Edward had told Eleanor Farjeon, 'I couldn't write a poem to save my life.' It was Frost who spurred him to the attempt.

Eleanor Farjeon wrote in her memoir:

'A particular incident sticks in my memory. [Robert Frost] and Edward and I were strolling along a lane, and Robert was talking of what he called the 'cadence' in the human voice, which accompanied the speech that came natural to it; as the speech native to his New Englanders north of Boston followed the cadence which changed it into the poetry Edward had described as 'better than prose'. While we walked, we saw across two hedgerows a man's figure standing against the skyline on top of a cart; he had a fork in his hands with which he caught and attacked some load, corn or manure, pitched from below. Frost stopped and shouted a question across the fields – it might have been, "What are you doing there, this fine afternoon?" but

whatever the words the man could not have heard them. He too shouted some answer that rang through the air, and it was impossible for us to distinguish what he said. But the cadence of the answer was as clear as that of the question. Robert turned to Edward. "That's what I mean," he said.

'I can't doubt that this was one of the revealing moments to Edward, a moment in which his own cadence was made clearer to himself; so that those who ever heard the movement of his beautiful reflective voice can hear it now in the simplest utterance of a small unforgettable poem.

'*Yes, I remember Adlestrop* – the cadence is there.'

While this newly attempted form of writing gave Edward great pleasure, the declaration of war gave him great concern – not least about what path he ought to take. Eleanor Farjeon wrote:

'In the first months of 1915 Edward's letters are chiefly concerned with the stream of poetry which was now in flood, and his desire to follow Frost to America when the family left England in February. His indecision was only partly due to the fact that he couldn't afford it; a deeper reason was that he could not be satisfied while he was doing nothing for England. He had been trying this problem over for many months, and when, with seeming suddenness, he enlisted, it was the result of having considered and rejected any other course…

'Until all this came to a head in July, his absorbing satisfaction was in the poems which he was now sending to me regularly as he wrote them. When minor points had been settled I typed them for him, but it was nearly another three months before he showed them freely to the men whose opinions he valued, and tried them with the good-class periodicals. The poems teemed in him every day as he walked up the hanger to his study. "I can hardly wait to light my fire," he wrote, in the excitement of new creation that was robbing the old unhappiness of its power.'

Edward submitted his poems under the pseudonym of Edward Eastaway, and was disappointed when editors rejected them. 'No-one had any room for such quiet meditative verse,' suggested Helen in *World Without End*. 'This failure was a great disappointment to him, and it was difficult for him in the face of it and with his lack of self-confidence to believe the appreciative criticism he obtained from his friends.'

Being a competent and practical man, and older than most of the army volunteers, once he joined up Edward was quickly promoted to lance-corporal and was involved in training the men in map-making and other tasks. While posted at a camp in Essex, he wrote to Frost:

'I wonder would you recognise me with hair cropped close and carrying a thin little swagger cane: many don't who meet me unexpectedly, and they say I never looked so well in health.' (*A Portrait of Edward Thomas*, ch. 15). Helen wrote that he hated many aspects of the army – 'the stupidity, the injustice, the red tape and the conditions of camp life. But he worked hard to perfect himself in the job he had undertaken to become a proficient soldier.'

In fact not only his physical but also his mental health improved; not merely because being a soldier gave him a routine and a sense of usefulness, but also because it relieved him from the necessity of uncongenial work, and gave him time in which to write his poetry, with a growing conviction that he had found his medium. 'His old periods of dark health had gone for ever,' wrote Helen. 'The sensitive introspective quality of his nature remained, but the black despair had given way to calm acceptance.'

In December 1916 Edward volunteered to go out to France. 'Don't let Helen know,' he instructed Eleanor, but of course she had to be told. His final visit home at Christmas was both wonderful and terrible for Helen:

'When the baby had gone to bed, [Bronwyn] would sit on his lap, content just to be there, while he and [Merfyn, now an apprentice engineer] worked out problems or studied maps. It was lovely to see those two so united over this common interest.

'But he and I were separated by our dread, and we could not look each other in the eyes, nor dared we be left alone together…

'The last evening comes… and we are left alone, unable to hide our agony, afraid to show it…. He raises my head and wipes my eyes and kisses them, and wrapping his greatcoat round me carries me to our bed in the great, bare ice-cold room. Soon he is with me, and we lie speechless and trembling in each other's arms. I cannot stop crying.

'[Edward] did not speak except now and then to say some tender word or name, and hold me tight to him… So we lay, all night, sometimes talking of our love and all that had been, and of the children, and what had been amiss and what right. We knew the best was that there had never been untruth between us. We knew all of each other, and it was right. So talking and crying and loving in each other's arms we fell asleep as the cold reflected light of the snow crept through the frost-covered windows.'

The next day Edward walked away through the mist and snow, and she did not see him again.

At the end of January Edward was sent over to France, where he entered a different world. In a letter to Robert Frost he wrote:

'You know the life is so strange that I am only half myself and the half that knows England and you is obediently asleep for a time. Do you believe me? It seems that I have sent it to sleep to make the life endurable – more than endurable – really enjoyable in a way.' He was not yet on the front line, but based in the HQ; yet when he rejoined his battery in early March, and had experienced bombardment, he was still able to write cheerfully to Merfyn:

'You would have laughed to hear the machine-gunners talking to one another and chaffing the infantrymen as they came along the trench tired and dirty. The men all think we are fast winning the war now. I wonder if we are; I hope so. Of course I am not a bit tired of it. I want to do six months anyhow, but I don't care how much so long as I come back again.' (*A Portrait of Edward Thomas*, ch. 16).

In his personal diary he was always noting the signs of nature around him:

'Sods on f/c's dugout begin to be fledged with fine green feathers of yarrow. Sun and wind drying the mud. Firing all day, practising barrage etc. Beautiful pale hazy moonlight and the sag and flap of air. Letters to Mother and Helen. HAMLET.'

This was a note made on 5th April. Four days later, on Easter Monday, 1917, he was killed by a shell.

Soon after his death, his father revealed that Edward was the real writer of the poems of Edward Eastaway. A few months later, much of his poetry was published in a volume entitled *Poems* by Edward Thomas: a further volume, *Last Poems*, followed in early 1918. His death marked the beginning of his fame as a poet.

Eleanor Farjeon wrote of him in her memoir:

'As for the man in the centre of the maze, how can he be conveyed? To speak of Edward's qualities of mind, his extreme sensitivity, his humours, his power to hurt, his scorn of humbug, his love of natural things, his personal beauty, tells nothing at all to those who had not "the blessing and illumination of knowing him"....

'"Even to think of him makes him as present as if he were entering the room," Walter de la Mare wrote in 1953; adding, like a sigh, "How I wish he were."'

Sources

Eleanor Farjeon, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (London: OUP, 1958).
Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas: a Fragment of Autobiography* (London: Faber, 1938)
Helen Thomas, *As It Was* (London: Heinemann, 1926)
Helen Thomas, *World Without End* (London: Heinemann, 1935)
R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: a Portrait* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)

A Note on the Selection

Most of Edward Thomas's poems are included in this selection. I have omitted a few which in my (fallible) opinion are of lesser quality. There are brief explanatory notes after some poems, chiefly about vocabulary and place names.

If you are interested in the locations which inspired Thomas's poetry, there is an excellent blog on the subject by Nick Denton at www.edwardthomaspoetryplaces.com . Mr. Denton's identifications are done with the aid of the Edward Thomas field note books, copyright Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York.

The poems here are not arranged chronologically, but are grouped by theme. Although they are predated by his prose works they have been placed before the prose.

Of Thomas's prose works, seven of his books on travel and the countryside are represented here by long extracts. In his early prose works Thomas seems anxious to prove himself both learned and clever – learned in the large amount of reading and research with which the works are littered, and clever in the dry, sometimes cynical and arch style in which he lays his learning before the reader. But there are also episodes of observation, both of people and in particular of places, in which neither cleverness nor scholarship are paramount; rather, they draw on his poetic and imaginative sense. This power of observation is seen fully developed in *Beautiful Wales, The Heart of England,* and *The South Country,* which contain many passages of singular clarity and beauty. These books are not travel guides, as might be suggested by their titles, but are rather a series of descriptive essays on the nature of the land.

As well as his writing on the country, also included are excerpts from Thomas's collection of short stories, *Light and Twilight*. Although he wrote a number of biographies and literary studies, the only ones represented here are *A Literary Pilgrim in England,* which is of interest for his opinions on various poets; and *Richard Jefferies, his Life and Work* – Jefferies being the writer who perhaps more than any other influenced Thomas's own life and work. Extracts are included from the last chapter of that book.

The nature and travel books are listed in chronological order of publication, followed by the other prose works; and finally, excerpts from Thomas's *Fragment of Autobiography,* which was not published until 1938.

This compilation aims to show the most striking and personal elements of Thomas's prose. Since he tended to write in very lengthy paragraphs, some extra paragraph breaks have been introduced.

Occasional explanatory notes by the compiler are given in square brackets, [thus].

The full text of a number of Thomas's books can be found online at Project Gutenberg and Open Library.

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Selected Poems

Nature

Sowing

It was a perfect day
For sowing; just
As sweet and dry was the ground
As tobacco-dust.

I tasted deep the hour
Between the far
Owl's chuckling first soft cry
And the first star.

A long stretched hour it was;
Nothing undone
Remained; the early seeds
All safely sown.

And now, hark at the rain,
Windless and light,
Half a kiss, half a tear,
Saying good-night.

Thaw

Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed
The speculating rooks at their nests cawed
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass,
What we below could not see, Winter pass.

March

Now I know that Spring will come again,
Perhaps to-morrow: however late I've patience
After this night following on such a day.

While still my temples ached from the cold burning
Of hail and wind, and still the primroses
Torn by the hail were covered up in it,
The sun filled earth and heaven with a great light
And a tenderness, almost warmth, where the hail dripped,
As if the mighty sun wept tears of joy.
But 'twas too late for warmth. The sunset piled
Mountains on mountains of snow and ice in the west:
Somewhere among their folds the wind was lost,
And yet 'twas cold, and though I knew that Spring
Would come again, I knew it had not come,
That it was lost too in those mountains chill.

What did the thrushes know? Rain, snow, sleet, hail,
Had kept them quiet as the primroses.
They had but an hour to sing. On boughs they sang,
On gates, on ground; they sang while they changed perches
And while they fought, if they remembered to fight:
So earnest were they to pack into that hour
Their unwilling hoard of song before the moon
Grew brighter than the clouds. Then 'twas no time
For singing merely. So they could keep off silence
And night, they cared not what they sang or screamed;
Whether 'twas hoarse or sweet or fierce or soft;
And to me all was sweet: they could do no wrong.
Something they knew – I also, while they sang
And after. Not till night had half its stars
And never a cloud, was I aware of silence
Stained with all that hour's songs, a silence
Saying that Spring returns, perhaps to-morrow.

But These Things Also Are Spring's

But these things also are Spring's–
On banks by the roadside the grass
Long-dead that is greyer now
Than all the Winter it was;

The shell of a little snail bleached
In the grass; chip of flint, and mite
Of chalk; and the small birds' dung
In splashes of purest white:

All the white things a man mistakes
For earliest violets
Who seeks through Winter's ruins
Something to pay Winter's debts,

While the North blows, and starling flocks
By chattering on and on
Keep their spirits up in the mist,
And Spring's here, Winter's not gone.

Two Pewits

Under the after-sunset sky
Two pewits sport and cry,
More white than is the moon on high
Riding the dark surge silently;
More black than earth. Their cry
Is the one sound under the sky.
They alone move, now low, now high,
And merrily they cry
To the mischievous Spring sky,
Plunging earthward, tossing high,
Over the ghost who wonders why
So merrily they cry and fly,
Nor choose 'twixt earth and sky,
While the moon's quarter silently
Rides, and earth rests as silently.

Note
"Pewits" is the spelling commonly used by Thomas for peewits or lapwings.

Bright Clouds

Bright clouds of may
Shade half the pond.
Beyond,
All but one bay
Of emerald
Tall reeds
Like criss-cross bayonets
Where a bird once called,
Lies bright as the sun.
No one heeds.
The light wind frets
And drifts the scum
Of may-blossom.
Till the moorhen calls
Again
Naught's to be done
By birds or men.
Still the may falls.

Tall Nettles

Tall nettles cover up, as they have done
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough
Long worn out, and the roller made of stone:
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.

This corner of the farmyard I like most:
As well as any bloom upon a flower
I like the dust on the nettles, never lost
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.

July

Naught moves but clouds, and in the glassy lake
Their doubles and the shadow of my boat.
The boat itself stirs only when I break
This drowse of heat and solitude afloat
To prove if what I see be bird or mote,
Or learn if yet the shore woods be awake.

Long hours since dawn grew, – spread, – and passed on high
And deep below, – I have watched the cool reeds hung
Over images more cool in imaged sky:
Nothing there was worth thinking of so long;
All that the ring-doves say, far leaves among,
Brims my mind with content thus still to lie.

Note
Ring-doves – possibly collared doves

Haymaking

After night's thunder far away had rolled
The fiery day had a kernel sweet of cold,
And in the perfect blue the clouds uncurled,
Like the first gods before they made the world
And misery, swimming the stormless sea
In beauty and in divine gaiety.
The smooth white empty road was lightly strewn
With leaves – the holly's Autumn falls in June–
And fir cones standing stiff up in the heat.
The mill-foot water tumbled white and lit
With tossing crystals, happier than any crowd
Of children pouring out of school aloud.
And in the little thickets where a sleeper
For ever might lie lost, the nettle-creeper
And garden warbler sang unceasingly;

While over them shrill shrieked in his fierce glee
The swift with wings and tail as sharp and narrow
As if the bow had flown off with the arrow.
Only the scent of woodbine and hay new-mown
Travelled the road. In the field sloping down,
Park-like, to where its willows showed the brook,
Haymakers rested. The tosser lay forsook
Out in the sun; and the long waggon stood
Without its team, it seemed it never would
Move from the shadow of that single yew.
The team, as still, until their task was due,
Beside the labourers enjoyed the shade
That three squat oaks mid-field together made
Upon a circle of grass and weed uncut,
And on the hollow, once a chalk-pit, but
Now brimmed with nut and elder-flower so clean.
The men leaned on their rakes, about to begin,
But still. And all were silent. All was old,
This morning time, with a great age untold,
Older than Clare and Cobbett, Morland and Crome,

Than, at the field's far edge, the farmer's home,
A white house crouched at the foot of a great tree.
Under the heavens that know not what years be
The men, the beasts, the trees, the implements
Uttered even what they will in times far hence–
All of us gone out of the reach of change–
Immortal in a picture of an old grange.

Notes
nettle-creeper – another name for a whitethroat
"Clare and Cobbett, Morland and Crome": this line refers to the poet and farm labourer John Clare (1793 – 1864); the radical politician, farmer and writer William Cobbett (1763 – 1835); George Morland (1763 – 1804), an impoverished painter of country scenes, and John Crome (1768 – 1821), a landscape painter. All are representative of the countryside of the past.

Birds' Nests

The summer nests uncovered by autumn wind,
Some torn, others dislodged, all dark.
Everyone sees them: low or high in tree,
Or hedge, or single bush, they hang like a mark.

Since there's no need of eyes to see them with
I cannot help a little shame
That I missed most, even at eye's level, till
The leaves blew off and made the seeing no game.

'Tis a light pang. I like to see the nests
Still in their places, now first known,
At home and by far roads. Boys knew them not,
Whatever jays and squirrels may have done.

And most I like the winter nests deep-hid
That leaves and berries fell into;
Once a dormouse dined there on hazel-nuts,
And grass and goose-grass seeds found soil and grew.

Interval

Gone the wild day:
A wilder night
Coming makes way
For brief twilight.

Where the firm soaked road
Mounts and is lost
In the high beech-wood
It shines almost.

The beeches keep
A stormy rest,
Breathing deep
Of wind from the west.

The wood is black,
With a misty steam.
Above, the cloud pack
Breaks for one gleam.

But the woodman's cot
By the ivied trees
Awakens not
To light or breeze.

It smokes aloft
Unwavering:
It hunches soft
Under storm's wing.

It has no care
For gleam or gloom:
It stays there
While I shall roam,

Die, and forget
The hill of trees,
The gleam, the wet,
This roaring peace.

October

The green elm with the one great bough of gold
Lets leaves into the grass slip, one by one,–
The short hill grass, the mushrooms small milk-white,
Harebell and scabious and tormentil,
That blackberry and gorse, in dew and sun,
Bow down to; and the wind travels too light
To shake the fallen birch leaves from the fern;
The gossamers wander at their own will.
At heavier steps than birds' the squirrels scold.

The rich scene has grown fresh again and new
As Spring and to the touch is not more cool
Than it is warm to the gaze; and now I might
As happy be as earth is beautiful,
Were I some other or with earth could turn
In alternation of violet and rose,
Harebell and snowdrop, at their season due,
And gorse that has no time not to be gay.
But if this be not happiness, – who knows?
Some day I shall think this a happy day,
And this mood by the name of melancholy
Shall no more blackened and obscured be.

November

November's days are thirty:
November's earth is dirty,
Those thirty days, from first to last;
And the prettiest things on ground are the paths
With morning and evening hobnails dinted,
With foot and wing-tip overprinted
Or separately charactered,
Of little beast and little bird.
The fields are mashed by sheep, the roads
Make the worst going, the best the woods
Where dead leaves upward and downward scatter.
Few care for the mixture of earth and water,
Twig, leaf, flint, thorn,
Straw, feather, all that men scorn,
Pounded up and sodden by flood,
Condemned as mud.

But of all the months when earth is greener
Not one has clean skies that are cleaner.
Clean and clear and sweet and cold,
They shine above the earth so old,
While the after-tempest cloud
Sails over in silence though winds are loud,
Till the full moon in the east
Looks at the planet in the west
And earth is silent as it is black,
Yet not unhappy for its lack.
Up from the dirty earth men stare:
One imagines a refuge there
Above the mud, in the pure bright
Of the cloudless heavenly light:
Another loves earth and November more dearly
Because without them, he sees clearly,
The sky would be nothing more to his eye
Than he, in any case, is to the sky;
He loves even the mud whose dyes
Renounce all brightness to the skies.

Swedes

They have taken the gable from the roof of clay
On the long swede pile. They have let in the sun
To the white and gold and purple of curled fronds
Unsunned. It is a sight more tender-gorgeous
At the wood-corner where Winter moans and drips
Than when, in the Valley of the Tombs of Kings,
A boy crawls down into a Pharaoh's tomb
And, first of Christian men, beholds the mummy,
God and monkey, chariot and throne and vase,
Blue pottery, alabaster, and gold.

But dreamless long-dead Amen-hotep lies.
This is a dream of Winter, sweet as Spring.

After Rain

The rain of a night and a day and a night
Stops at the light
Of this pale choked day. The peering sun
Sees what has been done.
The road under the trees has a border new
Of purple hue
Inside the border of bright thin grass:
For all that has
Been left by November of leaves is torn
From hazel and thorn
And the greater trees. Throughout the copse
No dead leaf drops
On grey grass, green moss, burnt-orange fern,
At the wind's return:
The leaflets out of the ash-tree shed
Are thinly spread
In the road, like little black fish, inlaid,
As if they played.
What hangs from the myriad branches down there
So hard and bare
Is twelve yellow apples lovely to see
On one crab-tree.
And on each twig of every tree in the dell
Uncountable
Crystals both dark and bright of the rain
That begins again.

Digging

Today I think
Only with scents, – scents dead leaves yield,
And bracken, and wild carrot's seed,
And the square mustard field;

Odours that rise
When the spade wounds the root of tree,
Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed,
Rhubarb or celery;

The smoke's smell, too,
Flowing from where a bonfire burns
The dead, the waste, the dangerous,
And all to sweetness turns.

It is enough
To smell, to crumble the dark earth.
While the robin sings over again
Sad songs of Autumn mirth.

Note
Goutweed = ground elder

Snow

In the gloom of whiteness,
In the great silence of snow,
A child was sighing
And bitterly saying: "Oh,
They have killed a white bird up there on her nest,
The down is fluttering from her breast."
And still it fell through that dusky brightness
On the child crying for the bird of the snow.

Out in the Dark

Out in the dark over the snow
The fallow fawns invisible go
With the fallow doe;
And the winds blow
Fast as the stars are slow.

Stealthily the dark haunts round
And, when a lamp goes, without sound
At a swifter bound
Than the swiftest hound,
Arrives, and all else is drowned;

And I and star and wind and deer,
Are in the dark together, – near,
Yet far, – and fear
Drums on my ear
In that sage company drear.

How weak and little is the light,
All the universe of sight,
Love and delight,
Before the might,
If you love it not, of night.

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Places

The Manor Farm

The rock-like mud unfroze a little and rills
Ran and sparkled down each side of the road
Under the catkins wagging in the hedge.
But earth would have her sleep out, spite of the sun;
Nor did I value that thin gilding beam
More than a pretty February thing
Till I came down to the old Manor Farm,
And church and yew-tree opposite, in age
Its equals and in size. The church and yew
And farmhouse slept in a Sunday silentness.
The air raised not a straw. The steep farm roof,
With tiles duskily glowing, entertained
The mid-day sun; and up and down the roof
White pigeons nestled. There was no sound but one.
Three cart-horses were looking over a gate
Drowsily through their forelocks, swishing their tails
Against a fly, a solitary fly.

The Winter's cheek flushed as if he had drained
Spring, Summer, and Autumn at a draught
And smiled quietly. But 'twas not Winter–
Rather a season of bliss unchangeable
Awakened from farm and church where it had lain
Safe under tile and thatch for ages since
This England, Old already, was called Merry.

Note
Manor Farm was in the hamlet of Prior's Dean in Hampshire, not far from Thomas's home.

The Path

Running along a bank, a parapet
That saves from the precipitous wood below
The level road, there is a path. It serves
Children for looking down the long smooth steep,
Between the legs of beech and yew, to where
A fallen tree checks the sight: while men and women
Content themselves with the road and what they see
Over the bank, and what the children tell.

The path, winding like silver, trickles on,
Bordered and even invaded by thinnest moss
That tries to cover roots and crumbling chalk
With gold, olive, and emerald, but in vain.
The children wear it. They have flattened the bank
On top, and silvered it between the moss
With the current of their feet, year after year.
But the road is houseless, and leads not to school.
To see a child is rare there, and the eye
Has but the road, the wood that overhangs
And underyawns it, and the path that looks
As if it led on to some legendary
Or fancied place where men have wished to go
And stay; till, sudden, it ends where the wood ends.

The Combe

The Combe was ever dark, ancient and dark.
Its mouth is stopped with bramble, thorn, and briar;
And no one scrambles over the sliding chalk
By beech and yew and perishing juniper
Down the half precipices of its sides, with roots
And rabbit holes for steps. The sun of Winter,
The moon of Summer, and all the singing birds
Except the missel-thrush that loves juniper,
Are quite shut out. But far more ancient and dark
The Combe looks since they killed the badger there,
Dug him out and gave him to the hounds,
That most ancient Briton of English beasts.

Note
A combe (alternative spellings are coomb or coombe) is a short, often wooded valley in the side of a hill.

Adlestrop

Yes. I remember Adlestrop–
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop – only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Note
Adlestrop is a picturesque village in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds.
Its railway station became defunct in 1966.

The Green Roads

The green roads that end in the forest
Are strewn with white goose feathers this June,

Like marks left behind by some one gone to the forest
To show his track. But he has never come back.

Down each green road a cottage looks at the forest.
Round one the nettle towers; two are bathed in flowers.

An old man along the green road to the forest
Strays from one, from another a child alone.

In the thicket bordering the forest,
All day long a thrush twiddles his song.

It is old, but the trees are young in the forest,
All but one like a castle keep, in the middle deep.

That oak saw the ages pass in the forest:
They were a host, but their memories are lost,

For the tree is dead: all things forget the forest
Excepting perhaps me, when now I see

The old man, the child, the goose feathers at the edge of the forest,
And hear all day long the thrush repeat his song.

Note
Green roads, more commonly known as green lanes, are unpaved trackways which are often very ancient.

The Mill-Pond

The sun blazed while the thunder yet
Added a boom:
A wagtail flickered bright over
The mill-pond's gloom:

Less than the cooing in the alder
Isles of the pool
Sounded the thunder through that plunge
Of waters cool.

Scared starlings on the aspen tip
Past the black mill
Outchattered the stream and the next roar
Far on the hill.

As my feet dangling teased the foam
That slid below
A girl came out. "Take care!" she said–
Ages ago.

She startled me, standing quite close
Dressed all in white:
Ages ago I was angry till
She passed from sight.

Then the storm burst, and as I crouched
To shelter, how
Beautiful and kind, too, she seemed,
As she does now!

The Long Small Room

The long small room that showed willows in the west
Narrowed up to the end the fireplace filled,
Although not wide. I liked it. No one guessed
What need or accident made them so build.

Only the moon, the mouse and the sparrow peeped
In from the ivy round the casement thick.
Of all they saw and heard there they shall keep
The tale for the old ivy and older brick.

When I look back I am like moon, sparrow and mouse
That witnessed what they could never understand
Or alter or prevent in the dark house.
One thing remains the same – this my right hand

Crawling crab-like over the clean white page,
Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,
Then once more starting to crawl on towards age.
The hundred last leaves stream upon the willow.

The Sheiling

It stands alone
Up in a land of stone
All worn like ancient stairs,
A land of rocks and trees
Nourished on wind and stone.

And all within
Long delicate has been;
By arts and kindliness
Coloured, sweetened, and warmed
For many years has been.

Safe resting there
Men hear in the travelling air
But music, pictures see
In the same daily land
Painted by the wild air.

One maker's mind
Made both, and the house is kind
To the land that gave it peace,
And the stone has taken the house
To its cold heart and is kind.

Note
A sheiling (or shieling) is a roughly constructed shepherd's hut.

The Penny Whistle

The new moon hangs like an ivory bugle
In the naked frosty blue;
And the ghylls of the forest, already blackened
By Winter, are blackened anew.

The brooks that cut up and increase the forest,
As if they had never known
The sun, are roaring with black hollow voices
Betwixt rage and a moan.

But still the caravan-hut by the hollies
Like a kingfisher gleams between:
Round the mossed old hearths of the charcoal-burners
First primroses ask to be seen.

The charcoal-burners are black, but their linen
Blows white on the line;
And white the letter the girl is reading
Under that crescent fine;

And her brother who hides apart in a thicket,
Slowly and surely playing
On a whistle an olden nursery melody,
Says far more than I am saying.

Notes
Ghylls – narrow valleys, often containing a stream
Charcoal burners: charcoal burning was an ancient craft that involved coppicing and cutting wood that was burnt in kilns to produce charcoal, which was then used in iron-smelting and other industries. Here the charcoal-burners are depicted as black with soot.

I Never Saw that Land Before

I never saw that land before,
And now can never see it again;
Yet, as if by acquaintance hoar
Endeared, by gladness and by pain,
Great was the affection that I bore

To the valley and the river small,
The cattle, the grass, the bare ash trees,
The chickens from the farmsteads, all
Elm-hidden, and the tributaries
Descending at equal interval;

The blackthorns down along the brook
With wounds yellow as crocuses
Where yesterday the labourer's hook
Had sliced them cleanly; and the breeze
That hinted all and nothing spoke.

I neither expected anything
Nor yet remembered: but some goal
I touched then; and if I could sing
What would not even whisper my soul
As I went on my journeying,

I should use, as the trees and birds did,
A language not to be betrayed;
And what was hid should still be hid
Excepting from those like me made
Who answer when such whispers bid.

The Ash Grove

Half of the grove stood dead, and those that yet lived made
Little more than the dead ones made of shade.
If they led to a house, long before they had seen its fall:
But they welcomed me; I was glad without cause and delayed.

Scarce a hundred paces under the trees was the interval–
Paces each sweeter than sweetest miles – but nothing at all,
Not even the spirits of memory and fear with restless wing,
Could climb down in to molest me over the wall

That I passed through at either end without noticing.
And now an ash grove far from those hills can bring

The same tranquillity in which I wander a ghost
With a ghostly gladness, as if I heard a girl sing

The song of the Ash Grove soft as love uncrossed,
And then in a crowd or in distance it were lost,
But the moment unveiled something unwilling to die
And I had what most I desired, without search or desert or cost.

Note
"The song of the Ash Grove": *The Ash Grove* is a traditional Welsh folk song.

Two Houses

Between a sunny bank and the sun
The farmhouse smiles
On the riverside plat:
No other one
So pleasant to look at
And remember, for many miles,
So velvet-hushed and cool under the warm tiles.

Not far from the road it lies, yet caught
Far out of reach
Of the road's dust
And the dusty thought
Of passers-by, though each
Stops, and turns, and must
Look down at it like a wasp at the muslined peach.
But another house stood there long before:
And as if above graves
Still the turf heaves
Above its stones:
Dark hangs the sycamore,
Shadowing kennel and bones
And the black dog that shakes his chain and moans.

And when he barks, over the river
Flashing fast,
Dark echoes reply,
And the hollow past
Half yields the dead that never
More than half hidden lie:
And out they creep and back again for ever.

Note
Plat – a plot of ground

The Mill-Water

Only the sound remains
Of the old mill;
Gone is the wheel;
On the prone roof and walls the nettle reigns.

Water that toils no more
Dangles white locks
And, falling, mocks
The music of the mill-wheel's busy roar.

Pretty to see, by day
Its sound is naught
Compared with thought
And talk and noise of labour and of play.

Night makes the difference.
In calm moonlight,
Gloom infinite,
The sound comes surging in upon the sense:

Solitude, company,–
When it is night,–
Grief or delight
By it must haunted or concluded be.

Often the silentness
Has but this one
Companion;
Wherever one creeps in the other is:

Sometimes a thought is drowned
By it, sometimes
Out of it climbs;
All thoughts begin or end upon this sound,

Only the idle foam
Of water falling
Changelessly calling,
Where once men had a work-place and a home.

For These

An acre of land between the shore and the hills,
Upon a ledge that shows my kingdoms three,
The lovely visible earth and sky and sea,
Where what the curlew needs not, the farmer tills:

A house that shall love me as I love it,
Well-hedged, and honoured by a few ash-trees
That linnets, greenfinches, and goldfinches
Shall often visit and make love in and flit:

A garden I need never go beyond,
Broken but neat, whose sunflowers every one
Are fit to be the sign of the Rising Sun:
A spring, a brook's bend, or at least a pond:

For these I ask not, but, neither too late
Nor yet too early, for what men call content,
And also that something may be sent
To be contented with, I ask of fate.

Note
The Rising Sun – this may refer to a public house of that name at West Bagborough in Somerset, where Thomas had walked and cycled. The case for this location is persuasively argued by Nick Denton in his blog post:
https://www.edwardthomaspoetryplaces.com/post/for-these

The New House

Now first, as I shut the door,
  I was alone
In the new house; and the wind
  Began to moan.

Old at once was the house,
  And I was old;
My ears were teased with the dread
  Of what was foretold,

Nights of storm, days of mist, without end;
  Sad days when the sun
Shone in vain: old griefs and griefs
  Not yet begun.

All was foretold me; naught
  Could I foresee;
But I learned how the wind would sound
  After these things should be.

Home

Often I had gone this way before:
But now it seemed I never could be
And never had been anywhere else;
'Twas home; one nationality
We had, I and the birds that sang,
One memory.

They welcomed me. I had come back
That eve somehow from somewhere far:
The April mist, the chill, the calm,
Meant the same thing familiar
And pleasant to us, and strange too,
Yet with no bar.

The thrush on the oaktop in the lane
Sang his last song, or last but one;
And as he ended, on the elm
Another had but just begun
His last; they knew no more than I
The day was done.

Then past his dark white cottage front
A labourer went along, his tread
Slow, half with weariness, half with ease;
And, through the silence, from his shed
The sound of sawing rounded all
That silence said.

The Hollow Wood

Out in the sun the goldfinch flits
Along the thistle-tops, flits and twits
Above the hollow wood
Where birds swim like fish–
Fish that laugh and shriek–
To and fro, far below
In the pale hollow wood.

Lichen, ivy, and moss
Keep evergreen the trees
That stand half-flayed and dying,
And the dead trees on their knees
In dog's-mercury and moss:
And the bright twit of the goldfinch drops
Down there as he flits on thistle-tops.

The Barn

They should never have built a barn there, at all–
Drip, drip, drip! – under that elm tree,
Though then it was young. Now it is old
But good, not like the barn and me.

To-morrow they cut it down. They will leave
The barn, as I shall be left, maybe.
What holds it up? 'Twould not pay to pull down.
Well, this place has no other antiquity.

No abbey or castle looks so old
As this that Job Knight built in '54,
Built to keep corn for rats and men.
Now there's fowls in the roof, pigs on the floor.

What thatch survives is dung for the grass,
The best grass on the farm. A pity the roof
Will not bear a mower to mow it. But
Only fowls have foothold enough.

Starlings used to sit there with bubbling throats
Making a spiky beard as they chattered
And whistled and kissed, with heads in air,
Till they thought of something else that mattered.

But now they cannot find a place,
Among all those holes, for a nest any more.
It's the turn of lesser things, I suppose.
Once I fancied 'twas starlings they built it for.

The Barn and the Down

It stood in the sunset sky
Like the straight-backed down,
Many a time – the barn
At the edge of the town,

So huge and dark that it seemed
It was the hill
Till the gable's precipice proved
It impossible.

Then the great down in the west
Grew into sight,
A barn stored full to the ridge
With black of night;

And the barn fell to a barn
Or even less
Before critical eyes and its own
Late mightiness.

But far down and near barn and I
Since then have smiled,
Having seen my new cautiousness
By itself beguiled

To disdain what seemed the barn
Till a few steps changed
It past all doubt to the down;
So the barn was avenged.

Note
The down in this poem may refer to Butser Hill near Petersfield, Hampshire (see Nick Denton's blog post at:
https://www.edwardthomaspoetryplaces.com/post/the-barn-and-the-down

The Mountain Chapel

Chapel and gravestones, old and few,
Are shrouded by a mountain fold
From sound and view
Of life. The loss of the brook's voice
Falls like a shadow. All they hear is
The eternal noise
Of wind whistling in grass more shrill
Than aught as human as a sword,
And saying still:
"'Tis but a moment since man's birth
And in another moment more
Man lies in earth
For ever; but I am the same
Now, and shall be, even as I was
Before he came;
Till there is nothing I shall be."
Yet there the sun shines after noon
So cheerfully
The place almost seems peopled, nor
Lacks cottage chimney, cottage hearth:
It is not more
In size than is a cottage, less
Than any other empty home
In homeliness.
It has a garden of wild flowers
And finest grass and gravestones warm
In sunshine hours
The year through. Men behind the glass
Stand once a week, singing, and drown
The whistling grass
Their ponies munch. And yet somewhere,
Near or far off, there's a man could
Be happy here,
Or one of the gods perhaps, were they
Not of inhuman stature dire,
As poets say
Who have not seen them clearly; if
At sound of any wind of the world
In grass-blades stiff
They would not startle and shudder cold
Under the sun. When gods were young
This wind was old.

First Known When Lost

I never had noticed it until
'Twas gone, – the narrow copse
Where now the woodman lops
The last of the willows with his bill.

It was not more than a hedge overgrown.
One meadow's breadth away
I passed it day by day.
Now the soil was bare as a bone,

And black betwixt two meadows green,
Though fresh-cut faggot ends
Of hazel made some amends
With a gleam as if flowers they had been.

Strange it could have hidden so near!
And now I see as I look
That the small winding brook,
A tributary's tributary, rises there.

Roads

I love roads:
The goddesses that dwell
Far along invisible
Are my favourite gods.

Roads go on
While we forget, and are
Forgotten like a star
That shoots and is gone.

On this earth ’tis sure
We men have not made
Anything that doth fade
So soon, so long endure:

The hill road wet with rain
In the sun would not gleam
Like a winding stream
If we trod it not again.

They are lonely
While we sleep, lonelier
For lack of the traveller
Who is now a dream only.

From dawn’s twilight
And all the clouds like sheep
On the mountains of sleep
They wind into the night.

The next turn may reveal
Heaven: upon the crest
The close pine clump, at rest
And black, may Hell conceal.

Often footsore, never
Yet of the road I weary,
Though long and steep and dreary
As it winds on for ever.

Helen of the roads,
The mountain ways of Wales
And the Mabinogion tales,
Is one of the true gods,

Abiding in the trees,
The threes and fours so wise,
The larger companies,
That by the roadside be,

And beneath the rafter
Else uninhabited
Excepting by the dead;
And it is her laughter

At morn and night I hear
When the thrush cock sings
Bright irrelevant things,
And when the chanticleer

Calls back to their own night
Troops that make loneliness
With their light footsteps' press,
As Helen's own are light.

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead
Returning lightly dance:

Whatever the road bring
To me or take from me,
They keep me company
With their pattering,

Crowding the solitude
Of the loops over the downs,
Hushing the roar of towns
And their brief multitude.

Note
"Helen of the Roads" – St Elen or Helen was a figure in Welsh mythology, mentioned in the Mabinogion, (a medieval collection of Welsh tales): a 4th century high-born lady, she founded churches in Wales and instigated the building of a number of roads.

The Brook

Seated once by a brook, watching a child
Chiefly that paddled, I was thus beguiled.
Mellow the blackbird sang and sharp the thrush
Not far off in the oak and hazel brush,
Unseen. There was a scent like honeycomb
From mugwort dull. And down upon the dome
Of the stone the cart-horse kicks against so oft
A butterfly alighted. From aloft
He took the heat of the sun, and from below.
On the hot stone he perched contented so,
As if never a cart would pass again
That way; as if I were the last of men
And he the first of insects to have earth
And sun together and to know their worth.
I was divided between him and the gleam,
The motion, and the voices, of the stream,
The waters running frizzled over gravel,
That never vanish and for ever travel.
A grey flycatcher silent on a fence
And I sat as if we had been there since
The horseman and the horse lying beneath
The fir-tree-covered barrow on the heath,
The horseman and the horse with silver shoes,
Galloped the downs last. All that I could lose
I lost. And then the child's voice raised the dead.
"No one's been here before" was what she said
And what I felt, yet never should have found
A word for, while I gathered sight and sound.

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The Owl

Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved;
Cold, yet had heat within me that was proof
Against the North wind; tired, yet so that rest
Had seemed the sweetest thing under a roof.

Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,
Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.
All of the night was quite barred out except
An owl's cry, a most melancholy cry

Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,
No merry note, nor cause of merriment,
But one telling me plain what I escaped
And others could not, that night, as in I went.

And salted was my food, and my repose,
Salted and sobered, too, by the bird's voice
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.

When First

When first I came here I had hope,
Hope for I knew not what. Fast beat
My heart at sight of the tall slope
Or grass and yews, as if my feet

Only by scaling its steps of chalk
Would see something no other hill
Ever disclosed. And now I walk
Down it the last time. Never will

My heart beat so again at sight
Of any hill although as fair
And loftier. For infinite
The change, late unperceived, this year,

The twelfth, suddenly, shows me plain.
Hope now, – not health, nor cheerfulness,
Since they can come and go again,
As often one brief hour witnesses,–

Just hope has gone for ever. Perhaps
I may love other hills yet more
Than this: the future and the maps
Hide something I was waiting for.

One thing I know, that love with chance
And use and time and necessity
Will grow, and louder the heart's dance
At parting than at meeting be.

It Rains

It rains, and nothing stirs within the fence
Anywhere through the orchard's untrodden, dense
Forest of parsley. The great diamonds
Of rain on the grassblades there is none to break,
Or the fallen petals further down to shake.

And I am nearly as happy as possible
To search the wilderness in vain though well,
To think of two walking, kissing there,
Drenched, yet forgetting the kisses of the rain:
Sad, too, to think that never, never again,

Unless alone, so happy shall I walk
In the rain. When I turn away, on its fine stalk
Twilight has fined to naught, the parsley flower
Figures, suspended still and ghostly white,
The past hovering as it revisits the light.

The Bridge

I have come a long way to-day:
On a strange bridge alone,
Remembering friends, old friends,
I rest, without smile or moan,
As they remember me without smile or moan.

All are behind, the kind
And the unkind too, no more
To-night than a dream. The stream
Runs softly yet drowns the Past,
The dark-lit stream has drowned the Future and the Past.

No traveller has rest more blest
Than this moment brief between
Two lives, when the Night's first lights
And shades hide what has never been,
Things goodlier, lovelier, dearer, than will be or have been.

The Glory

The glory of the beauty of the morning,–
The cuckoo crying over the untouched dew;
The blackbird that has found it, and the dove
That tempts me on to something sweeter than love;
White clouds ranged even and fair as new-mown hay;
The heat, the stir, the sublime vacancy
Of sky and meadow and forest and my own heart:–
The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning
All I can ever do, all I can be,
Beside the lovely of motion, shape, and hue,
The happiness I fancy fit to dwell
In beauty's presence. Shall I now this day
Begin to seek as far as heaven, as hell,
Wisdom or strength to match this beauty, start
And tread the pale dust pitted with small dark drops,
In hope to find whatever it is I seek,
Hearkening to short-lived happy-seeming things
That we know naught of, in the hazel copse?
Or must I be content with discontent
As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?
And shall I ask at the day's end once more
What beauty is, and what I can have meant
By happiness? And shall I let all go,
Glad, weary, or both? Or shall I perhaps know
That I was happy oft and oft before,
Awhile forgetting how I am fast pent,
How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to,
Is Time? I cannot bite the day to the core.

Melancholy

The rain and wind, the rain and wind, raved endlessly.
On me the Summer storm, and fever, and melancholy
Wrought magic, so that if I feared the solitude
Far more I feared all company: too sharp, too rude,
Had been the wisest or the dearest human voice.
What I desired I knew not, but whate'er my choice
Vain it must be, I knew. Yet naught did my despair
But sweeten the strange sweetness, while through the wild air
All day long I heard a distant cuckoo calling
And, soft as dulcimers, sounds of near water falling,
And, softer, and remote as if in history,
Rumours of what had touched my friends, my foes, or me.

Liberty

The last light has gone out of the world, except
This moonlight lying on the grass like frost
Beyond the brink of the tall elm's shadow.
It is as if everything else had slept
Many an age, unforgotten and lost
The men that were, the things done, long ago,
All I have thought; and but the moon and I
Live yet and here stand idle over the grave
Where all is buried. Both have liberty
To dream what we could do if we were free
To do some thing we had desired long,
The moon and I. There's none less free than who
Does nothing and has nothing else to do,
Being free only for what is not to his mind,
And nothing is to his mind. If every hour
Like this one passing that I have spent among
The wiser others when I have forgot
To wonder whether I was free or not,
Were piled before me, and not lost behind,
And I could take and carry them away
I should be rich; or if I had the power
To wipe out every one and not again
Regret, I should be rich to be so poor.
And yet I still am half in love with pain,
With what is imperfect, with both tears and mirth,
With things that have an end, with life and earth,
And this moon that leaves me dark within the door.

Rain

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
For washing me cleaner than I have been
Since I was born into this solitude.
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying to-night or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be towards what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

"Home"

Fair was the morning, fair our tempers, and
We had seen nothing fairer than that land,
Though strange, and the untrodden snow that made
Wild of the tame, casting out all that was
Not wild and rustic and old; and we were glad.

Fair, too, was afternoon, and first to pass
Were we that league of snow, next the north wind.

There was nothing to return for, except need,
And yet we sang nor ever stopped for speed,
As we did often with the start behind.
Faster still strode we when we came in sight
Of the cold roofs where we must spend the night.
Happy we had not been there, nor could be.
Though we had tasted sleep and food and fellowship
Together long.

"How quick" to someone's lip
The words came, "will the beaten horse run home."

The word “home” raised a smile in us all three,
And one repeated it, smiling just so
That all knew what he meant and none would say.
Between three counties far apart that lay
We were divided and looked strangely each
At the other, and we knew we were not friends
But fellows in a union that ends
With the necessity for it, as it ought.

Never a word was spoken, not a thought
Was thought, of what the look meant with the word
“Home” as we walked and watched the sunset blurred.
And then to me the word, only the word,
“Homesick,” as it were playfully occurred:
No more.

If I should ever more admit
Than the mere word I could not endure it
For a day longer: this captivity
Must somehow come to an end, else I should be
Another man, as often now I seem,
Or this life be only an evil dream.

Lights Out

I have come to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose
Their way, however straight,
Or winding, soon or late;
They cannot choose.

Many a road and track
That, since the dawn's first crack,
Up to the forest brink,
Deceived the travellers
Suddenly now blurs,
And in they sink.

Here love ends,
Despair, ambition ends,
All pleasure and all trouble,
Although most sweet or bitter,
Here ends in sleep that is sweeter
Than tasks most noble.

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown
I must enter and leave alone
I know not how.

The tall forest towers;
Its cloudy foliage lowers
Ahead, shelf above shelf;
Its silence I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
And myself.

Cock-Crow

Out of the wood of thoughts that grows by night
To be cut down by the sharp axe of light,–
Out of the night, two cocks together crow,
Cleaving the darkness with a silver blow:
And bright before my eyes twin trumpeters stand,
Heralds of splendour, one at either hand,
Each facing each as in a coat of arms:
The milkers lace their boots up at the farms.

Old Man

Old Man, or Lad's-love, – in the name there's nothing
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man,
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,
Growing with rosemary and lavender.
Even to one that knows it well, the names
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
At least, what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names.

The herb itself I like not, but for certain
I love it, as some day the child will love it
Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush
Whenever she goes in or out of the house.
Often she waits there, snipping the tips and shrivelling
The shreds at last on to the path, perhaps
Thinking, perhaps of nothing, till she sniffs
Her fingers and runs off. The bush is still
But half as tall as she, though it is as old;
So well she clips it. Not a word she says;
And I can only wonder how much hereafter
She will remember, with that bitter scent,
Of garden rows, and ancient damson-trees
Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door,
A low thick bush beside the door, and me
Forbidding her to pick.

As for myself,
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,
With no meaning, than this bitter one.

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember:
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

Note
"Old Man" – the shrubby plant *Artemisia abrotanum*, also known as European sage. It has small feathery leaves and a pungent scent.

February Afternoon

Men heard this roar of parleying starlings, saw,
  A thousand years ago even as now,
  Black rooks with white gulls following the plough
So that the first are last until a caw
Commands that last are first again, – a law
  Which was of old when one, like me, dreamed how
  A thousand years might dust lie on his brow
Yet thus would birds do between hedge and shaw.

Time swims before me, making as a day
  A thousand years, while the broad ploughland oak
  Roars mill-like and men strike and bear the stroke
Of war as ever, audacious or resigned,
And God still sits aloft in the array
  That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind.

Under the Woods

When these old woods were young
The thrushes' ancestors
As sweetly sung
In the old years.

There was no garden here,
Apples nor mistletoe;
No children dear
Ran to and fro.

New then was this thatched cot,
But the keeper was old,
And he had not
Much lead or gold.

Most silent beech and yew:
As he went round about
The woods to view
Seldom he shot.

But now that he is gone
Out of most memories,
Still lingers on,
A stoat of his,

But one, shrivelled and green,
And with no scent at all,
And barely seen
On this shed wall.

The Unknown Bird

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard
If others sang; but others never sang
In the great beech-wood all that May and June.
No one saw him: I alone could hear him
Though many listened. Was it but four years
Ago? or five? He never came again.

Oftenest when I heard him I was alone,
Nor could I ever make another hear.
La-la-la! he called, seeming far-off–
As if a cock crowed past the edge of the world,
As if the bird or I were in a dream.
Yet that he travelled through the trees and sometimes
Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still
He sounded. All the proof is – I told men
What I had heard.

I never knew a voice,
Man, beast, or bird, better than this. I told
The naturalists; but neither had they heard
Anything like the notes that did so haunt me,
I had them clear by heart and have them still.
Four years, or five, have made no difference. Then
As now that La-la-la! was bodiless sweet:
Sad more than joyful it was, if I must say
That it was one or other, but if sad
'Twas sad only with joy too, too far off
For me to taste it. But I cannot tell
If truly never anything but fair
The days were when he sang, as now they seem.
This surely I know, that I who listened then,
Happy sometimes, sometimes suffering
A heavy body and a heavy heart,
Now straightway, if I think of it, become
Light as that bird wandering beyond my shore.

The Sign-Post

The dim sea glints chill. The white sun is shy.
And the skeleton weeds and the never-dry,
Rough, long grasses keep white with frost
At the hilltop by the finger-post;
The smoke of the traveller's-joy is puffed
Over hawthorn berry and hazel tuft.

I read the sign. Which way shall I go?
A voice says: You would not have doubted so
At twenty. Another voice gentle with scorn
Says: At twenty you wished you had never been born.

One hazel lost a leaf of gold
From a tuft at the tip, when the first voice told
The other he wished to know what 'twould be
To be sixty by this same post. "You shall see,"
He laughed – and I had to join his laughter–
"You shall see; but either before or after,
Whatever happens, it must befall,
A mouthful of earth to remedy all
Regrets and wishes shall freely be given;
And if there be a flaw in that heaven
'Twill be freedom to wish, and your wish may be
To be here or anywhere talking to me,
No matter what the weather, on earth,
At any age between death and birth,–
To see what day or night can be,
The sun and the frost, the land and the sea,
Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring,–
With a poor man of any sort, down to a king,
Standing upright out in the air
Wondering where he shall journey, O where?"

Note
Traveller's joy – a wild clematis, a climbing plant with long, feathery seedheads.

The Lofty Sky

Today I want the sky,
The tops of the high hills,
Above the last man's house,
His hedges, and his cows,
Where, if I will, I look
Down even on sheep and rook,
And of all things that move
See buzzards only above:–
Past all trees, past furze
And thorn, where nought deters
The desire of the eye
For sky, nothing but sky.
I sicken of the woods
And all the multitudes
Of hedge-trees. They are no more
Than weeds upon this floor
Of the river of air
Leagues deep, leagues wide, where
I am like a fish that lives
In weeds and mud and gives
What's above him no thought.
I might be a tench for aught
That I can do to-day
Down on the wealden clay.
Even the tench has days
When he floats up and plays
Among the lily leaves
And sees the sky, or grieves
Not if he nothing sees:
While I, I know that trees
Under that lofty sky
Are weeds, fields mud, and I
Would arise and go far
To where the lilies are.

Parting

The Past is a strange land, most strange.
Wind blows not there, nor does rain fall:
If they do, they cannot hurt at all.
Men of all kinds as equals range

The soundless fields and streets of it.
Pleasure and pain there have no sting,
The perished self not suffering
That lacks all blood and nerve and wit,

And is in shadow-land a shade.
Remembered joy and misery
Bring joy to the joyous equally;
Both sadden the sad. So memory made

Parting to-day a double pain:
First because it was parting; next
Because the ill it ended vexed
And mocked me from the Past again,

Not as what had been remedied
Had I gone on, – not that, oh no!
But as itself no longer woe;
Sighs, angry word and look and deed

Being faded: rather a kind of bliss,
For there spiritualized it lay
In the perpetual yesterday
That naught can stir or stain like this.

Aspens

All day and night, save winter, every weather,
Above the inn, the smithy, and the shop,
The aspens at the cross-roads talk together
Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top.

Out of the blacksmith's cavern comes the ringing
Of hammer, shoe, and anvil; out of the inn
The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing–
The sounds that for these fifty years have been.

The whisper of the aspens is not drowned,
And over lightless pane and footless road,
Empty as sky, with every other sound
Not ceasing, calls their ghosts from their abode,

A silent smithy, a silent inn, nor fails
In the bare moonlight or the thick-furred gloom,
In tempest or the night of nightingales,
To turn the cross-roads to a ghostly room.

And it would be the same were no house near.
Over all sorts of weather, men, and times,
Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear
But need not listen, more than to my rhymes.

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves
We cannot other than an aspen be
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,
Or so men think who like a different tree.

Ambition

Unless it was that day I never knew
Ambition. After a night of frost, before
The March sun brightened and the South-west blew,
Jackdaws began to shout and float and soar
Already, and one was racing straight and high
Alone, shouting like a black warrior
Challenges and menaces to the wide sky.
With loud long laughter then a woodpecker
Ridiculed the sadness of the owl's last cry.
And through the valley where all the folk astir
Made only plumes of pearly smoke to tower
Over dark trees and white meadows happier
Than was Elysium in that happy hour,
A train that roared along raised after it
And carried with it a motionless white bower
Of purest cloud, from end to end close-knit,
So fair it touched the roar with silence. Time
Was powerless while that lasted. I could sit
And think I had made the loveliness of prime,
Breathed its life into it and were its lord,
And no mind lived save this 'twixt clouds and rime.
Omnipotent I was, nor even deplored
That I did nothing. But the end fell like a bell:
The bower was scattered; far off the train roared.
But if this was ambition I cannot tell.
What 'twas ambition for I know not well.

Note
Elysium – in Greek mythology, a paradisal afterlife. In Homer's writings it was a land of perfect happiness at the end of the Earth.

Beauty

What does it mean? Tired, angry, and ill at ease,
No man, woman, or child alive could please
Me now. And yet I almost dare to laugh
Because I sit and frame an epitaph–
"Here lies all that no one loved of him
And that loved no one." Then in a trice that whim
Has wearied. But, though I am like a river
At fall of evening while it seems that never
Has the sun lighted it or warmed it, while
Cross breezes cut the surface to a file,

This heart, some fraction of me, happily
Floats through the window even now to a tree
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale,
Not like a pewit that returns to wail
For something it has lost, but like a dove
That slants unswerving to its home and love.
There I find my rest, and through the dusk air
Flies what yet lives in me. Beauty is there.

Home

Not the end: but there's nothing more.
Sweet Summer and Winter rude
I have loved, and friendship and love,
The crowd and solitude:

But I know them: I weary not;
But all that they mean I know.
I would go back again home
Now. Yet how should I go?

This is my grief. That land,
My home, I have never seen;
No traveller tells of it,
However far he has been.

And could I discover it,
I fear my happiness there,
Or my pain, might be dreams of return
Here, to these things that were.

Remembering ills, though slight
Yet irremediable,
Brings a worse, an impurer pang
Than remembering what was well.

No: I cannot go back,
And would not if I could.
Until blindness come, I must wait
And blink at what is not good.

Note
"blink at what is not good" – i.e. ignore it, close his eyes to it

Good-Night

The skylarks are far behind that sang over the down;
I can hear no more those suburb nightingales;
Thrushes and blackbirds sing in the gardens of the town
In vain: the noise of man, beast, and machine prevails.

But the call of children in the unfamiliar streets
That echo with a familiar twilight echoing,
Sweet as the voice of nightingale or lark, completes
A magic of strange welcome, so that I seem a king

Among man, beast, machine, bird, child, and the ghost
That in the echo lives and with the echo dies.
The friendless town is friendly; homeless, I am not lost;
Though I know none of these doors, and meet but strangers' eyes.

Never again, perhaps, after to-morrow, shall
I see these homely streets, these church windows alight,
Not a man or woman or child among them all:
But it is All Friends' Night, a traveller's good-night.

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PEOPLE

Women He Liked

Women he liked, did shovel-bearded Bob,
Old Farmer Hayward of the Heath, but he
Loved horses. He himself was like a cob,
And leather-coloured. Also he loved a tree.

For the life in them he loved most living things,
But a tree chiefly. All along the lane
He planted elms where now the stormcock sings
That travellers hear from the slow-climbing train.

Till then the track had never had a name
For all its thicket and the nightingales
That should have earned it. No one was to blame.
To name a thing beloved man sometimes fails.

Many years since, Bob Hayward died, and now
None passes there because the mist and the rain
Out of the elms have turned the lane to slough
And gloom, the name alone survives, Bob's Lane.

Note
A cob – a small, sturdy riding-horse. It can also mean a hazel-nut.

Lob

At hawthorn-time in Wiltshire travelling
In search of something chance would never bring,
An old man's face, by life and weather cut
And coloured,– rough, brown, sweet as any nut,–
A land face, sea-blue-eyed,–hung in my mind
When I had left him many a mile behind.
All he said was: "Nobody can't stop 'ee. It's
A footpath, right enough. You see those bits
Of mounds – that's where they opened up the barrows
Sixty years since, while I was scaring sparrows.
They thought as there was something to find there,
But couldn't find it, by digging, anywhere."

To turn back then and seek him, where was the use?
There were three Manningfords,– Abbots, Bohun, and Bruce:
And whether Alton, not Manningford, it was,
My memory could not decide, because
There was both Alton Barnes and Alton Priors.
All had their churches, graveyards, farms, and byres,
Lurking to one side up the paths and lanes,
Seldom well seen except by aeroplanes;
And when bells rang, or pigs squealed, or cocks crowed,
Then only heard. Ages ago the road
Approached. The people stood and looked and turned,
Nor asked it to come nearer, nor yet learned
To move out there and dwell in all men's dust.
And yet withal they shot the weathercock, just
Because 'twas he crowed out of tune, they said:
So now the copper weathercock is dead.
If they had reaped their dandelions and sold
Them fairly, they could have afforded gold.

Many years passed, and I went back again
Among those villages, and looked for men
Who might have known my ancient. He himself
Had long been dead or laid upon the shelf,
I thought. One man I asked about him roared
At my description: "'Tis old Bottlesford
He means, Bill." But another said: "Of course,
It was Jack Button up at the White Horse.
He's dead, sir, these three years." This lasted till
A girl proposed Walker of Walker's Hill,
"Old Adam Walker. Adam's Point you'll see
Marked on the maps."

"That was her roguery,"
The next man said. He was a squire's son
Who loved wild bird and beast, and dog and gun
For killing them. He had loved them from his birth,
One with another, as he loved the earth.
"The man may be like Button, or Walker, or
Like Bottlesford, that you want, but far more
He sounds like one I saw when I was a child.
I could almost swear to him. The man was wild
And wandered. His home was where he was free.
Everybody has met one such man as he.
Does he keep clear old paths that no one uses
But once a life-time when he loves or muses?
He is English as this gate, these flowers, this mire.
And when at eight years old Lob-lie-by-the-fire
Came in my books, this was the man I saw.
He has been in England as long as dove and daw,

Calling the wild cherry tree the merry tree,
The rose campion Bridget-in-her-bravery;
And in a tender mood he, as I guess,
Christened one flower Love-in-idleness,
And while he walked from Exeter to Leeds
One April called all cuckoo-flowers Milkmaids.
From him old herbal Gerard learnt, as a boy,
To name wild clematis the Traveller's-joy.
Our blackbirds sang no English till his ear
Told him they called his Jan Toy 'Pretty dear.'
(She was Jan Toy the Lucky, who, having lost
A shilling, and found a penny loaf, rejoiced.)
For reasons of his own to him the wren
Is Jenny Pooter. Before all other men
'Twas he first called the Hog's Back the Hog's Back.
That Mother Dunch's Buttocks should not lack
Their name was his care. He too could explain
Totteridge and Totterdown and Juggler's Lane:
He knows, if anyone. Why Tumbling Bay,
Inland in Kent, is called so, he might say.

"But little he says compared with what he does.
If ever a sage troubles him he will buzz
Like a beehive to conclude the tedious fray:
And the sage, who knows all languages, runs away.
Yet Lob has thirteen hundred names for a fool,
And though he never could spare time for school
To unteach what the fox so well expressed,
On biting the cock's head off, – Quietness is best,–
He can talk quite as well as anyone
After his thinking is forgot and done.
He first of all told someone else's wife,
For a farthing she'd skin a flint and spoil a knife
Worth sixpence skinning it. She heard him speak:
'She had a face as long as a wet week'
Said he, telling the tale in after years.
With blue smock and with gold rings in his ears,
Sometimes he is a pedlar, not too poor
To keep his wit. This is tall Tom that bore
The logs in, and with Shakespeare in the hall
Once talked, when icicles hung by the wall.
As Herne the Hunter he has known hard times.
On sleepless nights he made up weather rhymes
Which others spoilt. And, Hob being then his name,
He kept the hog that thought the butcher came
To bring his breakfast 'You thought wrong,' said Hob.
When there were kings in Kent this very Lob,
Whose sheep grew fat and he himself grew merry,
Wedded the king's daughter of Canterbury;

For he alone, unlike squire, lord, and king,
Watched a night by her without slumbering;
He kept both waking. When he was but a lad
He won a rich man's heiress, deaf, dumb, and sad,
By rousing her to laugh at him. He carried
His donkey on his back. So they were married.
And while he was a little cobbler's boy
He tricked the giant coming to destroy
Shrewsbury by flood. 'And how far is it yet?'
The giant asked in passing. 'I forget;
But see these shoes I've worn out on the road
And we're not there yet.' He emptied out his load
Of shoes for mending. The giant let fall from his spade
The earth for damming Severn, and thus made
The Wrekin hill; and little Ercall hill
Rose where the giant scraped his boots. While still
So young, our Jack was chief of Gotham's sages.
But long before he could have been wise, ages
Earlier than this, while he grew thick and strong
And ate his bacon, or, at times, sang a song
And merely smelt it, as Jack the giant-killer
He made a name. He too ground up the miller,
The Yorkshireman who ground men's bones for flour.

"Do you believe Jack dead before his hour?
Or that his name is Walker, or Bottlesford,
Or Button, a mere clown, or squire, or lord?
The man you saw, – Lob-lie-by-the-fire, Jack Cade,
Jack Smith, Jack Moon, poor Jack of every trade,
Young Jack, or old Jack, or Jack What-d'ye-call,
Jack-in-the-hedge, or Robin-run-by-the-wall,
Robin Hood, Ragged Robin, lazy Bob,
One of the lords of No Man's Land, good Lob,–
Although he was seen dying at Waterloo,
Hastings, Agincourt, and Sedgemoor too,–
Lives yet. He never will admit he is dead
Till millers cease to grind men's bones for bread,
Not till our weathercock crows once again
And I remove my house out of the lane
On to the road." With this he disappeared
In hazel and thorn tangled with old-man's-beard.
But one glimpse of his back, as there he stood,
Choosing his way, proved him of old Jack's blood
Young Jack perhaps, and now a Wiltshireman
As he has oft been since his days began.

Notes

"Lob-lie-by-the-fire" is a figure common in British folklore – also known as the lubberkin, brownie, or hob, by tradition Lob would carry out household tasks in exchange for a saucer of milk. He is related to Robin Goodfellow, and Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Love-in-idleness" – pansy.

"Jan Toy" – this is apparently a reference to an old West Country saying about "Lucky John Toy who lost a shilling and found a tuppenny loaf."

"The Hog's Back" – a ridge in Surrey, in south-west England.

"Mother Dunch's Buttocks" – another name for Wittenham Clumps, a pair of wooded hills in the Thames Valley in Berkshire.

"When icicles hung by the wall" is a reference to a song about winter from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, which begins "When icicles hang by the wall".

"Herne the Hunter" is a figure of English myth, whose origin is unclear; but he was a phantom huntsman associated with Berkshire, and was mentioned in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

"Wrekin hill; and little Ercall hill" – two hills close to each other in Shropshire.

The character of Lob has been linked with "Dad" Uzzell, the elderly friend whom Edward Thomas depicted in chapter 9 of his *Fragment of Autobiography*. However, he may also be drawn from another old man described in Thomas's notebook: for a discussion of the origins of the poem, see Nick Denton's post at https://www.edwardthomaspoetryplaces.com/post/__lob

Wind and Mist

They met inside the gateway that gives the view,
A hollow land as vast as heaven. “It is
A pleasant day, sir.” “A very pleasant day.”
“And what a view here. If you like angled fields
Of grass and grain bounded by oak and thorn,
Here is a league. Had we with Germany
To play upon this board it could not be
More dear than April has made it with a smile.
The fields beyond that league close in together
And merge, even as our days into the past,
Into one wood that has a shining pane
Of water. Then the hills of the horizon–
That is how I should make hills had I to show
One who would never see them what hills were like.”
“Yes. Sixty miles of South Downs at one glance.
Sometimes a man feels proud at them, as if
He had just created them with one mighty thought.”
“That house, though modern, could not be better planned
For its position. I never liked a new
House better. Could you tell me who lives in it?”
“No one.” “Ah – and I was peopling all
Those windows on the south with happy eyes,
The terrace under them with happy feet;
Girls–” “Sir, I know. I know. I have seen that house
Through mist look lovely as a castle in Spain,
And airier. I have thought: ’Twere happy there
To live.’ And I have laughed at that
Because I lived there then.” “Extraordinary.”
“Yes, with my furniture and family
Still in it, I, knowing every nook of it
And loving none, and in fact hating it.”
“Dear me! How could that be? But pardon me.”
“No offence. Doubtless the house was not to blame,
But the eye watching from those windows saw,
Many a day, day after day, mist – mist
Like chaos surging back – and felt itself
Alone in all the world, marooned alone.
We lived in clouds, on a cliff’s edge almost
(You see), and if clouds went, the visible earth
Lay too far off beneath and like a cloud.
I did not know it was the earth I loved
Until I tried to live there in the clouds
And the earth turned to cloud.” “You had a garden
Of flint and clay, too.” “True; that was real enough.
The flint was the one crop that never failed.

The clay first broke my heart, and then my back;
And the back heals not. There were other things
Real, too. In that room at the gable a child
Was born while the wind chilled a summer dawn:
Never looked grey mind on a greyer one
Than when the child's cry broke above the groans."
"I hope they were both spared." "They were. Oh yes.
But flint and clay and childbirth were too real
For this cloud-castle. I had forgot the wind.
Pray do not let me get on to the wind.
You would not understand about the wind.
It is my subject, and compared with me
Those who have always lived on the firm ground
Are quite unreal in this matter of the wind.
There were whole days and nights when the wind and I
Between us shared the world, and the wind ruled
And I obeyed it and forgot the mist.
My past and the past of the world were in the wind.
Now you may say that though you understand
And feel for me, and so on, you yourself
Would find it different. You are all like that
If once you stand here free from wind and mist:
I might as well be talking to wind and mist.
You would believe the house-agent's young man
Who gives no heed to anything I say.
Good morning. But one word. I want to admit
That I would try the house once more, if I could;
As I should like to try being young again."

The Child on the Cliffs

Mother, the root of this little yellow flower
Among the stones has the taste of quinine.
Things are strange to-day on the cliff. The sun shines so bright,
And the grasshopper works at his sewing-machine
So hard. Here's one on my hand, mother, look;
I lie so still. There's one on your book.

But I have something to tell more strange. So leave
Your book to the grasshopper, mother dear,–
Like a green knight in a dazzling market-place,–
And listen now. Can you hear what I hear
Far out? Now and then the foam there curls
And stretches a white arm out like a girl's.

Fishes and gulls ring no bells. There cannot be
A chapel or church between here and Devon,
With fishes or gulls ringing its bell,– hark.–
Somewhere under the sea or up in heaven.
"It's the bell, my son, out in the bay
On the buoy. It does sound sweet to-day."

Sweeter I never heard, mother, no, not in all Wales.
I should like to be lying under that foam,
Dead, but able to hear the sound of the bell,
And certain that you would often come
And rest, listening happily.
I should be happy if that could be.

The Child in the Orchard

"He rolls in the orchard: he is stained with moss
And with earth, the solitary old white horse.
Where is his father and where is his mother
Among all the brown horses? Has he a brother?
I know the swallow, the hawk, and the hern;
But there are two million things for me to learn.

"Who was the lady that rode the white horse
With rings and bells to Banbury Cross?
Was there no other lady in England beside
That a nursery rhyme could take for a ride?
The swift, the swallow, the hawk, and the hern.
There are two million things for me to learn.

"Was there a man once who straddled across
The back of the Westbury White Horse
Over there on Salisbury Plain's green wall?
Was he bound for Westbury, or had he a fall?
The swift, the swallow, the hawk, and the hern.
There are two million things for me to learn.

"Out of all the white horses I know three,
At the age of six; and it seems to me
There is so much to learn, for men,
That I dare not go to bed again.
The swift, the swallow, the hawk, and the hern.
There are millions of things for me to learn."

Notes

Westbury White Horse – this is believed to be the oldest of several white horses which decorate the slopes of Wiltshire, and which are made white with chalk exposed by cutting away the grass. It is over 50 metres long.

Hern – an older form of *heron*.

The Chalk-Pit

"Is this the road that climbs above and bends
Round what was once a chalk-pit: now it is
By accident an amphitheatre.
Some ash-trees standing ankle-deep in briar
And bramble act the parts, and neither speak
Nor stir." "But see: they have fallen, every one,
And brie and bramble have grown over them."
"That is the place. As usual no one is here.
Hardly can I imagine the drop of the axe,
And the smack that is like an echo, sounding here."
"I do not understand." "Why, what I mean is
That I have seen the place two or three times
At most, and that its emptiness and silence
And stillness haunt me, as if just before
It was not empty, silent, still, but full
Of life of some kind, perhaps tragical.
Has anything unusual happened here?"
"Not that I know of. It is called the Dell.
They have not dug chalk here for a century.
That was the ash-trees' age. But I will ask."

“No. Do not. I prefer to make a tale,
Or better leave it like the end of a play,
Actors and audience and lights all gone;
For so it looks now. In my memory
Again and again I see it, strangely dark,
And vacant of a life but just withdrawn.
We have not seen the woodman with the axe.
Some ghost has left it now as we two came.”
“And yet you doubted if this were the road?”
“Well, sometimes I have thought of it and failed
To place it. No. And I am not quite sure,
Even now, this is it. For another place,
Real or painted, may have combined with it.
Or I myself a long way back in time…”
“Why, as to that, I used to meet a man–
I had forgotten,– searching for birds’ nests
Along the road and in the chalk-pit too.
The wren’s hole was an eye that looked at him
For recognition. Every nest he knew.
He got a stiff neck, by looking this side or that,
Spring after spring, he told me, with his laugh,–
A sort of laugh. He was a visitor,
A man of forty,– smoked and strolled about.
At orts and crosses Pleasure and Pain had played
On his brown features;– I think both had lost;–
Mild and yet wild too. You may know the kind.
And once or twice a woman shared his walks,
A girl of twenty with a brown boy’s face,
And hair brown as a thrush or as a nut,
Thick eyebrows, glinting eyes–” You have said enough.
A pair,– free thought, free love,– I know the breed:
I shall not mix my fancies up with them.”
“You please yourself. I should prefer the truth
Or nothing. Here, in fact, is nothing at all
Except a silent place that once rang loud,
And trees and us – imperfect friends, we men
And trees since time began; and nevertheless
Between us still we breed a mystery.”

The Other

The forest ended. Glad I was
To feel the light, and hear the hum
Of bees, and smell the drying grass
And the sweet mint, because I had come
To an end of forest, and because
Here was both road and inn, the sum
Of what's not forest. But 'twas here
They asked me if I did not pass
Yesterday this way? "Not you? Queer."
"Who then? and slept here?" I felt fear.

I learnt his road and, ere they were
Sure I was I, left the dark wood
Behind, kestrel and woodpecker,
The inn in the sun, the happy mood
When first I tasted sunlight there.
I travelled fast, in hopes I should
Outrun that other. What to do
When caught, I planned not. I pursued
To prove the likeness, and, if true,
To watch until myself I knew.

I tried the inns that evening
Of a long gabled high-street grey,
Of courts and outskirts, travelling
An eager but a weary way,
In vain. He was not there. Nothing
Told me that ever till that day
Had one like me entered those doors,
Save once. That time I dared: "You may
Recall"– but never-foamless shores
Make better friends than those dull boors.

Many and many a day like this
Aimed at the unseen moving goal
And nothing found but remedies
For all desire. These made not whole;
They sowed a new desire, to kiss
Desire's self beyond control,
Desire of desire. And yet
Life stayed on within my soul.
One night in sheltering from the wet
I quite forgot I could forget.

A customer, then the landlady
Stared at me. With a kind of smile
They hesitated awkwardly:
Their silence gave me time for guile.
Had anyone called there like me,
I asked. It was quite plain the wile
Succeeded. For they poured out all.
And that was naught. Less than a mile
Beyond the inn, I could recall
He was like me in general.

He had pleased them, but I less.
I was more eager than before
To find him out and to confess,
To bore him and to let him bore.
I could not wait: children might guess
I had a purpose, something more
That made an answer indiscreet.
One girl's caution made me sore,
Too indignant even to greet
That other had we chanced to meet.

I sought then in solitude.
The wind had fallen with the night; as still
The roads lay as the ploughland rude,
Dark and naked, on the hill.
Had there been ever any feud
'Twixt earth and sky, a mighty will
Closed it: the crocketed dark trees,
A dark house, dark impossible
Cloud-towers, one star, one lamp, one peace
Held on an everlasting lease:

And all was earth's, or all was sky's;
No difference endured between
The two. A dog barked on a hidden rise;
A marshbird whistled high unseen;
The latest waking blackbird's cries
Perished upon the silence keen.
The last light filled a narrow firth
Among the clouds. I stood serene,
And with a solemn quiet mirth,
An old inhabitant of earth.

Once the name I gave to hours
Like this was melancholy, when
It was not happiness and powers
Coming like exiles home again,
And weaknesses quitting their bowers,
Smiled and enjoyed, far off from men,
Moments of everlastingness.
And fortunate my search was then
While what I sought, nevertheless,
That I was seeking, I did not guess.

That time was brief: once more at inn
And upon road I sought my man
Till once amid a tap-room's din
Loudly he asked for me, began
To speak, as if it had been a sin,
Of how I thought and dreamed and ran
After him thus, day after day:
He lived as one under a ban
For this: what had I got to say?
I said nothing, I slipped away.

And now I dare not follow after
Too close. I try to keep in sight,
Dreading his frown and worse his laughter.
I steal out of the wood to light;
I see the swift shoot from the rafter
By the inn door: ere I alight
I wait and hear the starlings wheeze
And nibble like ducks: I wait his flight.
He goes: I follow: no release
Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease.

House and Man

One hour: as dim he and his house now look
As a reflection in a rippling brook,
While I remember him; but first, his house.
Empty it sounded. It was dark with forest boughs
That brushed the walls and made the mossy tiles
Part of the squirrels' track. In all those miles
Of forest silence and forest murmur, only
One house– "Lonely!" he said, "I wish it were lonely"–
Which the trees looked upon from every side,
And that was his.

He waved good-bye to hide
A sigh that he converted to a laugh.
He seemed to hang rather than stand there, half
Ghost-like, half like a beggar's rag, clean wrung
And useless on the briar where it has hung
Long years a-washing by sun and wind and rain.

But why I call back man and house again
Is that now on a beech-tree's tip I see
As then I saw – I at the gate, and he
In the house darkness, – a magpie veering about,
A magpie like a weathercock in doubt.

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WAR

Tears

It seems I have no tears left. They should have fallen–
Their ghosts, if tears have ghosts, did fall – that day
When twenty hounds streamed by me, not yet combed out
But still all equals in their rage of gladness
Upon the scent, made one, like a great dragon
In Blooming Meadow that bends towards the sun
And once bore hops: and on that other day
When I stepped out from the double-shadowed Tower
Into an April morning, stirring and sweet
And warm. Strange solitude was there and silence.
A mightier charm than any in the Tower
Possessed the courtyard. They were changing guard
Soldiers in line, young English countrymen,
Fair-haired and ruddy, in white tunics. Drums
And fifes were playing “The British Grenadiers”.
The men, the music piercing that solitude
And silence, told me truths I had not dreamed
And have forgotten since their beauty passed.

As the Team's Head-Brass

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewed an angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
Once more.

The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. "When will they take it away?"
"When the war's over." So the talk began–
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
"Have you been out?" "No." "And don't want to, perhaps?"
"If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more.... Have many gone
From here?" "Yes." "Many lost?" "Yes: a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree."
"And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world." "Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good." Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

Notes

Head brass – the metal part of a horse's bridle.
Charlock is a common weed which here the plough is digging up.

Gone, Gone Again

Gone, gone again,
May, June, July,
And August gone,
Again gone by,

Not memorable
Save that I saw them go,
As past the empty quays
The rivers flow.

And now again,
In the harvest rain,
The Blenheim oranges
Fall grubby from the trees,

As when I was young–
And when the lost one was here–
And when the war began
To turn young men to dung.

Look at the old house,
Outmoded, dignified,
Dark and untenanted,
With grass growing instead

Of the footsteps of life,
The friendliness, the strife;
In its beds have lain
Youth, love, age and pain:

I am something like that;
Only I am not dead,
Still breathing and interested
In the house that is not dark:–

I am something like that:
Not one pane to reflect the sun,
For the schoolboys to throw at–
They have broken every one.

Note
Blenheim oranges – a variety of apple

The Sun Used to Shine

The sun used to shine while we two walked
Slowly together, paused and started
Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked
As either pleased, and cheerfully parted

Each night. We never disagreed
Which gate to rest on. The to be
And the late past we gave small heed.
We turned from men or poetry

To rumours of the war remote
Only till both stood disinclined
For aught but the yellow flavorous coat
Of an apple wasps had undermined;

Or a sentry of dark betonies,
The stateliest of small flowers on earth,
At the forest verge; or crocuses
Pale purple as if they had their birth

In sunless Hades fields. The war
Came back to mind with the moonrise
Which soldiers in the east afar
Beheld then. Nevertheless, our eyes

Could as well imagine the Crusades
Or Caesar's battles. Everything
To faintness like those rumours fades–
Like the brook's water glittering

Under the moonlight – like those walks
Now – like us two that took them, and
The fallen apples, all the talks
And silences – like memory's sand

When the tide covers it late or soon,
And other men through other flowers
In those fields under the same moon
Go talking and have easy hours.

This is no Case of Petty Right or Wrong

This is no case of petty right or wrong
That politicians or philosophers
Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.
Beside my hate for one fat patriot
My hatred of the Kaiser is love true:–
A kind of god he is, banging a gong.
But I have not to choose between the two,
Or between justice and injustice. Dinned
With war and argument I read no more
Than in the storm smoking along the wind
Athwart the wood. Two witches' cauldrons roar.
From one the weather shall rise clear and gay;
Out of the other an England beautiful
And like her mother that died yesterday.
Little I know or care if, being dull,
I shall miss something that historians
Can rake out of the ashes when perchance
The phoenix broods serene above their ken.
But with the best and meanest Englishmen
I am one in crying, God save England, lest
We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.
The ages made her that made us from the dust:
She is all we know and live by, and we trust
She is good and must endure, loving her so:
And as we love ourselves we hate her foe.

Note
The Kaiser – Wilhelm II, Emperor of Germany during World War I.

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Will You Come?

Will you come?
Will you come?
Will you ride
So late
At my side?
O, will you come?

Will you come?
Will you come
If the night
Has a moon,
Full and bright?
O, will you come?

Would you come?
Would you come
If the noon
Gave light,
Not the moon?
Beautiful, would you come?

Would you have come?
Would you have come
Without scorning,
Had it been
Still morning?
Beloved, would you have come?

If you come
Haste and come.
Owls have cried:
It grows dark
To ride.
Beloved, beautiful, come.

Like the Touch of Rain

Like the touch of rain she was
On a man's flesh and hair and eyes
When the joy of walking thus
Has taken him by surprise:

With the love of the storm he burns,
He sings, he laughs, well I know how,
But forgets when he returns
As I shall not forget her "Go now."

Those two words shut a door
Between me and the blessed rain
That was never shut before
And will not open again.

And You, Helen

And you, Helen, what should I give you?
So many things I would give you
Had I an infinite great store
Offered me and I stood before
To choose. I would give you youth,
All kinds of loveliness and truth,
A clear eye as good as mine,
Lands, waters, flowers, wine,
As many children as your heart
Might wish for, a far better art
Than mine can be, all you have lost
Upon the travelling waters tossed,
Or given to me. If I could choose
Freely in that great treasure-house
Anything from any shelf,
I would give you back yourself,
And power to discriminate
What you want and want it not too late,
Many fair days free from care
And heart to enjoy both foul and fair,
And myself, too, if I could find
Where it lay hidden and it proved kind.

Note
Helen – Edward Thomas's wife

After you Speak

After you speak
And what you meant
Is plain,
My eyes
Meet yours that mean–
With your cheeks and hair–
Something more wise,
More dark,
And far different.
Even so the lark
Loves dust
And nestles in it
The minute
Before he must
Soar in lone flight
So far,
Like a black star
He seems–
A mote
Of singing dust
Afloat
Above,
That dreams
And sheds no light.
I know your lust
Is love.

The Clouds that are so Light

The clouds that are so light,
Beautiful, swift and bright,
Cast shadows on field and park
Of the earth that is so dark,

And even so now, light one!
Beautiful, swift and bright one!
You let fall on a heart that was dark,
Unillumined, a deeper mark.

But clouds would have, without earth
To shadow, far less worth:
Away from your shadow on me
Your beauty less would be,

And if it still be treasured
An age hence, it shall be measured
By this small dark spot
Without which it were not.

Some Eyes Condemn

Some eyes condemn the earth they gaze upon:
Some wait patiently till they know far more
Than earth can tell them: some laugh at the whole
As folly of another's making: one
I knew that laughed because he saw, from core
To rind, not one thing worth the laugh his soul
Had ready at waking: some eyes have begun
With laughing; some stand startled at the door.

Others, too, I have seen rest, question, roll,
Dance, shoot. And many I have loved watching.
    Some
I could not take my eyes from till they turned
And loving died. I had not found my goal.
But thinking of your eyes, dear, I become
Dumb: for they flamed, and it was me they burned.

Celandine

Thinking of her had saddened me at first,
Until I saw the sun on the celandines lie
Redoubled, and she stood up like a flame,
A living thing, not what before I nursed,
The shadow I was growing to love almost,
The phantom, not the creature with bright eye
That I had thought never to see, once lost.

She found the celandines of February
Always before us all. Her nature and name
Were like those flowers, and now immediately
For a short swift eternity back she came,
Beautiful, happy, simply as when she wore
Her brightest bloom among the winter hues
Of all the world; and I was happy too,
Seeing the blossoms and the maiden who
Had seen them with me Februarys before,
Bending to them as in and out she trod
And laughed, with locks sweeping the mossy sod.

But this was a dream: the flowers were not true,
Until I stooped to pluck from the grass there
One of five petals and I smelt the juice
Which made me sigh, remembering she was no more,
Gone like a never perfectly recalled air.

The Unknown

She is most fair,
And when they see her pass
The poets' ladies
Look no more in the glass
But after her.

On a bleak moor
Running under the moon
She lures a poet,
Once proud or happy, soon
Far from his door.

Beside a train,
Because they saw her go,
Or failed to see her,
Travellers and watchers know
Another pain.

The simple lack
Of her is more to me
Than others' presence,
Whether life splendid be
Or utter black.

I have not seen,
I have no news of her;
I can tell only
She is not here, but there
She might have been.

She is to be kissed
Only perhaps by me;
She may be seeking
Me and no other; she
May not exist.

She Dotes

She dotes on what the wild birds say
Or hint or mock at, night and day,–
Thrush, blackbird, all that sing in May,
    And songless plover,
Hawk, heron, owl, and woodpecker.
They never say a word to her
    About her lover.

She laughs at them for childishness,
She cries at them for carelessness
Who see her going loverless
    Yet sing and chatter
Just as when he was not a ghost,
Nor ever ask her what she has lost
    Or what is the matter.

Yet she has fancied blackbirds hide
A secret, and that thrushes chide
Because she thinks death can divide
    Her from her lover;
And she has slept, trying to translate
The word the cuckoo cries to his mate
    Over and over.

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WORDS

These Things that Poets Said

These things that poets said
Of love seemed true to me
When I loved and I fed
On love and poetry equally.

But now I wish I knew
If theirs were love indeed,
Or if mine were the true
And theirs some other lovely weed:

For certainly not thus,
Then or thereafter, I
Loved ever. Between us
Decide, good Love, before I die.

Only, that once I loved
By this one argument
Is very plainly proved:
I, loving not, am different.

Words

Out of us all
That make rhymes,
Will you choose
Sometimes–
As the winds use
A crack in a wall
Or a drain,
Their joy or their pain
To whistle through–
Choose me,
You English words?

I know you:
You are light as dreams,
Tough as oak,
Precious as gold,
As poppies and corn,
Or an old cloak:

Sweet as our birds
To the ear,
As the burnet rose
In the heat
Of Midsummer:
Strange as the races
Of dead and unborn:
Strange and sweet
Equally,
And familiar,
To the eye,
As the dearest faces
That a man knows,
And as lost homes are:
But though older far
Than oldest yew,–
As our hills are, old,–
Worn new
Again and again:
Young as our streams
After rain:
And as dear
As the earth which you prove
That we love.

Make me content
With some sweetness
From Wales
Whose nightingales
Have no wings,–
From Wiltshire and Kent
And Herefordshire,
And the villages there,–
From the names, and the things
No less.
Let me sometimes dance
With you,
Or climb
Or stand perchance
In ecstasy,
Fixed and free
In a rhyme,
As poets do.

The Word

There are so many things I have forgot,
That once were much to me, or that were not,
All lost, as is a childless woman's child
And its child's children, in the undefiled
Abyss of what can never be again.
I have forgot, too, names of the mighty men
That fought and lost or won in the old wars,
Of kings and fiends and gods, and most of the stars.
Some things I have forgot that I forget.
But lesser things there are, remembered yet,
Than all the others. One name that I have not–
Though 'tis an empty thingless name – forgot
Never can die because Spring after Spring
Some thrushes learn to say it as they sing.
There is always one at midday saying it clear
And tart – the name, only the name I hear.
While perhaps I am thinking of the elder scent
That is like food, or while I am content
With the wild rose scent that is like memory,
This name suddenly is cried out to me
From somewhere in the bushes by a bird
Over and over again, a pure thrush word.

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Selected Prose

The Woodland Life
(Extracts)

Wm. Blackwood, 1897

The Sweet o'the Year

Dark furrowed boughs of elm-trees in line dip like a bank of galley oars towards the meadow, where the slight end-most twigs mingle their young foliage with a thicket of varied grasses and blossoming plants. A myriad stars of stitchwort and purple spires of orchis join hands, as it were, over the elm-branches swathed deep in the lush growths of spring. Shadowing the spangled blossoms rise the lofty columnar boles of the elm-trees, with the black nest of a crow swinging on the topmost boughs the nest already tattered by the farmer's vindictive shot.

There, in the middle days of March, sang the early chiffchaff, first visitor to these Wiltshire meadows from the warm southern lands of ever brilliant noon. When the silent avenue was startled by his soft singing cry, the budding thorns still lingered ere they burst, and the violets had not long opened. With a fluttering flight he followed the long line of elms among their topmost boughs, crying as he flew. It seemed as though he had no care – no task but to sing, sing in the sunlight...

...On the water the first "skater" insect floats at rest, his legs making him appear like a boat with outriggers; but when going forward, breaking the surface with rapidly-dissolving ripples, he suggests a sculler progressing with an occasional stroke, content thus to take the sunlight with the least exertion and to rest on his oars. Sometimes the "skater" is stranded among the flags, and the insect that is boat and oarsman all in one disappears. So swiftly that the eye cannot guess its shape or colour, a large insect blunders along and plunges suddenly into the brook, leaving no ripple behind and seeming not to reappear: like a stone flung in, he passes out of sight.

Now almost touching the waters, and now high above the willow-boughs, the gnats sing with a finer and lighter note than the bees. Most brilliant of all the early insects, a tortoiseshell butterfly wanders over, throwing a likeness of his angled wings in the brook's mirror. He seeks the coltsfoot blossoms at the shore, and passes from flower to flower with a frolic in the sun which this morning unfurled his jewelled wings...

...Rooks and peewits feed together in the meadows, but not in contented company. One of the former continually makes a vicious rush at his gaily-plumaged neighbour, who eludes his clumsy attack with an easy flap of his rounded wings and a laughing cry as he dives and settles close by. As the peewit alights he closes his wings slowly with a conscious display of their pied plumes. Presently the rooks leave the meadow, and the peewits are alone; but they cannot remain long still, and soon they start quarrelling among themselves.

It is a beautiful sight to watch their facile turns of flight as each strives to surmount his rival. Now a couple seem as one bird, and again they part to soar and twist in opposite directions. As they race the sun gleams on their crests and greenish bars, and the peewit swings in the air with his prowess of flight. In a straight steady motion, rare indeed with a peewit, their wings are soundless, but in the whirling dashes from side to side in combat or amorous display a strange wind-like rush is made as if their joints were stiff. Under a strong sun, when it is dazzling to look up, this rushing sound betrays the bird as it passes overhead...

...Like the snow incrusted boughs of winter, the pear-tree branches of the orchard seem almost to bow beneath the weight and wealth of hoary blossom, sunlit and flashing from the dew beads that rim the faint petals. In the wind, warm and caressing from the bright sun, the crisp blossomed boughs bend and rise with a languid dreamy motion, for the odour and beauty of the million petals seem inconsistent with brisk movement. The orchard, one heaving mass of bloom, looks from afar like the foam-line that seethes and scatters spray along the sea-shore, though the wind in its frolics does not yet fling showers of petal-flakes to rise and drop twirling to the sward below among the daffodils. Beyond the pear-bloom, only a narrow band seen thus at a distance, stretches the wide sea of moaning firs...

...Steep banks sloping away from the hazel hedges imitate a mountain-side in many details. Here and there is a yawning crevice where the mould has slipped away a cavern in miniature; while the overhanging moss clothes the rugged slope as with woodland. Among these cliff-like banks, in their clefts, the red wood-mice hide as a strange tread sounds near by: or the slow, patient humble-bees creep humming in and out: while now and again the weasel slips through the portcullis of drooping moss and roots to avoid a passing foe.

Lydiard Tregose
[A small village in Wiltshire]

The meadow-path, edged with a faint white line of daisies, whose unopened cups are crimson at the brim, runs with a twisting course athwart broad fields of grass, studded at their margins by the brilliant gold blossoms of celandine. Elms, misty-purple or rust-red with expanded buds, stand out in the midst of the grass, and near where the path leaves the roadway, seven vast trees are set in a circle – the pillars of a temple domed in summer by thick foliage penetrable only to the sunlight, and floored with level grass inlaid with pearly eyebright...

One tiny form, looming faintly as yet in the distance, darkens the grey slope. The molecatcher, nearing the end of his early round, descends to the valley now where his remotest traps are set. A grey-complexioned, silent man he is, with a curious lingering gait, ever looking downward as he goes. On these wide open hills there is hardly a man without woodcraft enough to know the ways of his fellow-denizens of the waste, and, if need be, the way to set up a wire. The molecatcher is no exception, and long use compels him to watch the sward at his feet. Dark grizzled curls hang about his low, deeply-furrowed brow, while his neck, freckled and hard, is open to the wind. His back is bent rather from constant stooping than from age, and there is power in him yet, as you may note when he climbs the hill.

Of all the molecatcher's odd attire – thirdhand velveteen jacket, torn loose gaiters, and stained corduroys – his hat is the most curious. Made of soft felt, it was once white, but is now weathered to lichen-grey, and with darker streaks winding here and there; the broad brim curves downward and overhangs his forehead, shadowing all his face. Save when he looks up, half of his shaggy visage is hidden, and this concealment adds to the mystery that clings to a man of his decaying profession. By the bent brim of his hat, his curls of growing years, and by his dense eyebrows, his eyes are half hidden, as are the mole's by its protecting fur. Unperceived, the keen small eyes are ever fixed upon you; and the stranger shrinks on becoming conscious of their piercing glance through the shadow hanging about his face...

...The molecatcher's grey-clad figure stands out on the hill-slope, brilliant with the morning sun, like a dead and wrinkled thorn, seeming scarcely to move. He crosses a clover-field, where the scanty growth does not quite hide the chalk, and on a nearer approach the hares' runs show faintly as light streaks across the mingled green and grey and white. Days go by without a single visitor to the remoter parts of these broad hills, and the molecatcher may safely stoop in his path to take the hare which has lain in the wire since daybreak.

The weathered coat flaps in the wind as the hare sinks into the unsuspected pocket concealed by the ample velveteen, and, quietly as ever, the climb continues. Though he stoops, and his gaze seems always directed downward, he will note, as he looks intuitively up, the swift plovers that whistle and rush with their wings as they seek the ploughlands of the valley. Like a dim cloud, alone on the ridge, the old man sinks out of sight beyond where the smooth mounds of the ancient "castle" swell into the blue.

May Song

The rarely trodden meadow-path and the taller grass around is hoary with dew; but as it enters the hazel gloom the scattered blades do but faintly twinkle in their sheathing crystal. Tender hyacinths that open bell by bell each morning are washed with a finer hue which must vanish with scorching noon; and the little spring-vetch, mounting with spray over spray of narrow leaflets to the lowest hazel-boughs, is for the moment gay with its solitary purple flower. Tiny caterpillars, on which the whitethroat preys, seem to hang from the oaks by silver gossamers, and their own bodies are clear as amber in the delicate half-light, half-gloom, that dwells as yet in the wood's shadow. Through this weird light the early willow wrens chase one another with twirling motions like butterflies; then in the nut bushes or the broad oaks they sing their tender threnody, playing among the slender swaying twigs.

In the deeper shadows, far among the oaks, jays squeal and chatter, drowning half the music of the wood. Suddenly, with a flash of blue-pied pinions, a jay leaves a tree where a nest of oak twigs and woven rootlets, yellow and stiff as cocoanut fibre, is hidden amid thorny boughs, a hoarse cry and a flutter of wings through the leaves following her flight. Blackbird and thrush steal across the lawn-like walks between roofing arcades of oak, halting half way over to pull a worm or to listen for a while. Unsheltered and in full view the blackbird displays a grotesque mixture of daring and timidity in his hurried though bold-seeming progress, with ducking head, and in the chiding yet half-exultant chuckle with which he slips away into cover. In his mellow music alone there lurks no sign of doubt or fear...

Winds of Winter

...Open to nearly every wind that blows, on account of their height trees lose their verdure long before the underwood. Many straggling brambles are still deep green, and creeping marsh pennywort amid the lush grass of the meadow is untainted by the sere: elder, too, that was so early to grow green in March, shows no sign of the dying hues that now prevail.

Even a flower has survived so late. Small bugloss, common but little known, bears several dark-blue petals, unexcelled even by forget-me-not. It ranks with the uncouth weeds about the edge of a ditch, with nettle and dead burdock. The oat-stubble is dappled with numberless blossoms of corn feverfew, somewhat tarnished from exposure, but still flowers, and gay by comparison with the greyness around them. All but hidden by the purple and black leaves that have been driven hither, are golden petals of a creeping buttercup, and one starry daisy...

...Except in the farthest depths of the wood, the wind is so powerful as to keep all birds to cover. Even the strong-winged rooks but rarely pass over, and sometimes appear as if about to be dashed to earth at a terrific pace; but a slight inclination of the pinions changes their course at a short distance above the ground. Finches labour with the utmost difficulty, and are temporarily beaten back. Their rate of progression, judged as they move over the regular furrows, is miserably slow.

Starlings, with stronger flight, occasionally swoop down under the fierce breath of the wind, and are almost forced to alight. Pheasants keep in hiding till hardly a yard from the passer-by, when they suddenly start up and race with the wind at headlong speed, their wings whistling loudly through the air. Now and then they crash out of the oaks, or a cock-bird crows loudly and threatens by his cry to summon the keepers ferreting by the ash stoles yonder. Wood-pigeons arrive at intervals in foraging bands of nine or ten, and settle with difficulty among the heaving tree-tops...

A Touch of Winter

Out in the fields, freshly turned by the plough, peewits run rapidly hither and thither, occasionally chirruping a low distressful note, unlike their usual screaming wail. The whole flock is within thirty yards of us, and their markings are perfectly clear, the flowing crest, the dark band beneath the throat, and the snow-white breast, showing against the clods.

With the chilling wind the snow begins to fall again, and from the shelter of this holly-tree we can watch the flakes drifting swiftly across the meadows, and rolling like thin smoke, silvering the sward and heaping by the ditches. Still the peewits move uneasily in the open, always facing the wind and the thin wall of snow bearing down upon them. Scared by a sportsman passing near them, several rise, but soon settle again, running a short distance in the very teeth of the blast. Some of them stand huddled in the furrows, as partridges do by the ant-hillocks. At length the snow ceases and the wind drops to a whisper; then over the hill-top the lapwings start up again and wheel in phantom flight, shrieking their weird night call...

A Diary in English Fields and Woods

June 17

Shivering drawl of the common bunting, as if the dust of the roadsides, which he loves, had got into his throat: he sings on the telegraph wires or bare posts by preference: quite a short song, betraying his relationship to the reed-bunting, and in a lesser degree to the larks.

July 31

Starlings whistle and chide on the London roofs, for the first time noticeably since busy May. About the beginning of this month they diminish in numbers and conspicuousness. Now they are roused by the sheet-rain of dawn; lifting their voices as the wind whistles down their chimney-perches.

The sky cobwebbed with delicatest silk, which the wind sweeps but does not destroy; the webs recur writhing and wildly spun everywhere.

Thistle-down floats on the winds, and, drifting, lines the wood-hollows tenderly.

Fading chestnuts smell of decay, not unsweetly, like the earth-odour of spring: their fruit is yet pale and bright.

Oct 12

Uproar among the assembled rooks and daws at sundown; such wild flights occur at all seasons, perhaps chiefly in the large autumn flocks. Country-folk call similar exhibitions “winding the blanket.” Frequently they seem to circle round an imaginary globe in the air, within the bounds of which they hardly enter.

Nov 8

After heavy rain the elms are stained down their grey bark as if seared with heated iron; beeches also are marked black down their green -coated boles by spring-like rills of rain from above, or by condensed mist.

Fog pierces where rain and wind cannot, and is more terrible than all to the wild things of the wood – more certain even than frost.

Two elms in a Croydon hollow, purely green and unchanged apparently by autumn; but elsewhere the elms are leafless. It is noticeable that leaves in bunches still cling to elms and poplars in London streets, where the trees are neighboured by gas-lamps. The heat, though intermittent, appears to be the cause of this.

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Horae Solitariae
(Extracts)
Dutton 1902

Chapter 2
Two scholars

In C____ shire, I know a hamlet (a mere capful of houses) that lies, dimly seen below the high-perched road, like a cluster of straw beehives, under a great wood. Even these few houses are divided from one another by several tiny streams, that run in and out like gay, live things. Thither I descended one twilight from the hills, to buy honey from a cottager. It was August. Across the road went a stream, a tinkling chain of silver beads, presently buried in trees, on which the uncertain light was mixed with shade. Here and there were sombre alders, noisy still with the delicate southern voices of invisible birds. Here and there were poplars with a sound, not of running water, but of rain (the shower apparently dying away now and then as the wind fluctuated). And in the sunset among those enormous hills a bell was ringing out a melancholy sweet *sic transit*.

There was some light outside, but none in the low room, where the beekeeper was writing. He rose and greeted us with a bow. Then he left us, after lighting a candle for our good, and one for his own use in a loft where the honey was stored. The wooden frame, grey from the touch of his hands, was contrasted with the dewy, amber cells. While we were completing the purchase, and talking, he surprised us by answering in Latin…

Chapter 4
Inns and Books

Many times after a day with the Mayfly or March brown I have thought that, considering how pleasant a portion of our life is passed at inns, their provision of books is inadequate. A railway waiting-room has (sometimes) tables of trains. At a hotel, Whitaker, [Whitaker's Almanack] Bradshaw [railway guide], a directory, and a bad novel are wholesome enough between meals and calls. At an inn, however, we need more than "twenty ballads stuck about the wall," or a collection of hunting prints and an indestructible picture of "The Soul's Awakening."…

…In several inns I have – before candles were brought in – fancied myself on board a ship in strange seas, or in a lonely camp. I seem then to be of no nation or class. The great lord "knows no such liberty." On a sharp November night, when the sky is swept broad

and clean, and garnished with stars that wink as if the wind fluttered them, one may enjoy at a small inn amidst a grey country the lonely monarchy of a helmsman at sea. The host has gone. I am the only guest.... It is so silent that I cannot endure the throne of tyrant over the night and all that is night's. I turn gladly to the wood fire that crackles like the laughter of children, and grins like the mask of comedy. But the books?...

...It was perhaps my best fortune to fall in with a volume called *The Unknown Way*. [Possibly *Poems of the Unknown Way* by Sidney Royse Lysaght, published in 1901.] Left behind by some tired reviewer, it may be, after a perusal that bred only a few jests, the book was still new. It was after midnight. The Welsh hills rose all around, their flanks vaster than the sky, and pricked, as it were, by cottage lights. Now and then the lightning snapped a fiery finger. At length enormous ridgy clouds moved along and encamped upon the summits of the range, and in the flashes they seemed to be castles that extended their towers like imprecating arms to heaven. The moon sailed up, and, no stronger than if she breathed into the night, a wind puffed amid a lane of poplars with a liquid whisper as I read many and many a lovely verse...

Chapter 5
Exiles at Play

[On visiting an unnamed abbey in Wales:]

On the walls and about the still perfumed linden a glow was tarrying as we left. It was an amber fervid evening. In the placid, breathless sunset, over the colours of the sky folded a harmonizing mist. Footsore wayfarers now and again found a pretext for turning round to take a last look at the sun. All the world gazed westwards...

...Low, massy, and in colour auburn, the full moon was perched upon a hill-top, very near; etched in black on its surface was the skeleton of an elm. To the cottager moving in his orchard it hung like a great fruit, upon each tree in turn. The rooks, even yet, were crossing the sky from side to side, straight to the moon. We kept it in sight until it grew pallid and frail in the cold wind, and rose in the centre of its hazy circles, pent in like some white maiden by a magician's lines, for ever haunted by the pale grey and crocus circles. Before us lay a broad estuary – moon-enriched, and presently like an even silver trencher, with tree shadows upon it like islets of ebony. A little starry rivulet flowed past us. And on one hand a long road wound upward, shining white, to the top of a hill, and then the moon, with all her stars....

Chapter 6
The Passing of Pan

[A piece of imaginative prose, in which the narrator finds the body of a handsome young man who has dropped dead:]

The shorn wheat-fields in that mounded country were of a pale fluid yellow that mingled with the sky's blue, and was only here and there invaded by the lustrous green of an aftermath or the solid shadow of an immense elm; in it the little woods actually seemed to float. Meadowsweet like foam, and a small scabious flower always haunted by blue butterflies of the same hue, lingered by the wayside, with faint red campions and cranesbills, and yellow buttercups, hawkweeds, ragwort, and agrimony spires.

On a white cottage wall flowered several great red roses. In a hedge I found one hawkweed blossom of a deep flame colour, like a dusky volcanic fire creeping out of the stones, the colour of the sun then about to set. One or two bramble leaves had been coloured likewise, but with green veins remaining. Placid and yet luxurious, there was something in the sunset like the old age of Lucullus. [A wealthy Roman general renowned for building a luxurious palace and gardens.] The sun itself was burning mildly and warm; the dark trees towards the west lay round it like a party of children half circling a fire, and listening to strange tales.

For in September, the early evening of the year, when darkness and light, Summer and Winter, meet without contention and combine their loveliest symbols, at sunset, a profound sense of the whole past of men and Nature is born of the sense of the year that is passing and the season that is dead, and we individuals are blended with the universe in one mellow, tranquil passion of regret. Launched by this passion upon a course of many memories, I was still far from land when I fell into deep sleep; and in my sleep I had a dream.

The mind takes a delight in contrast as one refuge from the present; so in my dream it was broad noon; and because the actual season was autumn, the atmosphere of my dream was that of spring, of early spring with its poignant colours. A great forest hung round about. The might of its infinite silence and repose, indeed, never ceased to weigh upon me in my dream. I could hear sounds: they were leagues away. The trees which I could see were few: I felt that they must be thousands deep on every hand... Not one of the trees but cast an ample shadow, like the train of a mantle falling from their shoulders and spreading outward on the sward. As the day grew, the trees appeared to retreat into the wood and leave their trains upon the grass.

Suddenly out of this great silence came the figure of a youth, walking with downward eyes, placid pace, and an attitude that expressed all the flattering thoughts of happy love and joy in life...

[Near the youth, the narrator sees the god Pan, singing:]

The song he was now singing…expressed the inexpressible magic of certain hours and places; of autumn's holy purple eve, for example; of landscapes beheld in a kind of haze of the spirit; of the moon-enriched flood, the moon aloft with all her stars. It was full of the idiom of trees and the motion of great waters.

At a pause in the song, the youth quaked to see the horned brow, the fleecy hair on the legs, and the slender bony calves ending in cloven feet, that seemed to connect the singer with the brutes…

[Pan offers his pipes to the youth, and takes him by the hand:]

Deeper and deeper into the forest they went. In the afternoon a gauzy moon had scaled cloud after cloud of the pallid east; now for a moment a sole tender star throbbed in that one placid space of milky blue amid the tumultuous cloud; and at length, in the quiet evening, with a few planets in the blanched blue, and a transparent golden silk drawn across the west, the gloomy, tranquil cattle were noisily ruminating in a white mist over the grass. Far away, sunny cones of wheat still glimmered on the hills. Boughs made no sound as these two passed – seemed, in fact, to yield like the arms of a sleeper when we alter their place. Now and then they halted, while Pan taught the secrets of the earth, the value of this and that blossom or stem. The fingers of the god shook like a child's as he offered the plants in turn.

"This," he explained at last, with a languid purple flower in his hand, "blesses the eater with eternal bliss of sleep."

They went on, both alarmed whenever night loosened a leaf or two from the forest roof, and at the lights glancing overhead in the green clerestory of the wood, when Pan presently missed his companion. He had noticed the youth loitering somewhat, as if anxious to learn more, and now saw him sinking to the ground. On reaching the spot, a deep sleep already claimed him; the purple petals lay over his cheeks like blood.

"Foolish one!" sighed Pan, "he sleeps, and will never wake. As for me, I will wait no longer." Tenderly he folded the youth's white fingers across his breast, wiped the crimson lips, took away the seven-reeded pipe and began to play. Slowly, earnestly, like one making a testament, while death is still out of sight but not out of thought, he brought once again to light all the famous memories of his old life…

…He could command adoration from none: it was time to be gone. Never again should strange ardours riot in his frame after a draught of the crimson hedgerow vintages…

…He rose, therefore, and took the seven-reeded pipe, and buried it, whence none perhaps might ever disinter it; then returned, and took his place beside the youth, where he also entered an eternal sleep.

Chapter 7
Recollections of November

In my suburban street every season, almost every month, is marked as it were in heavy black letter at its entrance. Nature here uses a brief language, like the hand at Belshazzar's feast, [a Biblical story where a hand appeared writing on the wall] and I know that it is November by the dull, sad trampling of the hoofs and feet; by that testy wind among the chimneys (the mere body of the wind; its soul it left among the hills); by the light, as of an unsnuffed candle, of the sun, that scarcely at midday surmounts the tallest housetops ; by the barren morning twilight, broken by no jolly sound of boys whistling or ballad-singing on their errands...

...There has been but one sunset since I came hither, and in the cold succeeding light, so countercharged with darkness, great clouds began to troop toward the west, sombre, stealthy, noiseless; hastening and yet steadfast, as if some fate marshalled their jetty columns hushing all that lay beneath all moving in one path, yet never jostling, like hooded priests. To what weird banquet, to what mysterious shrine, were they advancing to what shrine among the firs of an unseen horizon, with the crow and the bat? Or were they retreating, dejected guests, from some palace in the leaden east?

Chapter 8
Broken Memories

[We] only think of the old places when the fire is tranquil and lights are out, and "each into himself descends," or when we meet one who was once a friend, or when we lay open a forgotten drawer. A very slender chain only binds us to the gods of forest and field but binds us nevertheless. Then we take the old walk, it may be, in a walking suit of the best; fearful of mire; carrying a field-glass too; and smoking the pipe that used to seem an insult so intolerable in the great woods. We take the old walk, and it seems shorter than before, a walk not formidable at all, as it was in the years when the end used to find us testy with fatigue and over-powered by tumultuous impressions; when we ourselves thought the sea itself could not be far, and the names of village and hill we visited were unknown.

A railway bisects the common we cross. Everything is haggard and stale; the horizon is gone; and the spirit chafes and suffocates for lack of it. (But the gorse is in flower still.)...

...The horizon is dear to us yet, as the possible home of the unknown and the greatly desired, as the apparent birthplace and tomb of setting and rising suns; from under it the clouds mount, and under it again they return after crossing the sky.

A mystery is about it as when we were children playing upon a broad, treeless common, and actually long continued running in pursuit of the horizon.

After three miles in all we leave the turnpike, to follow a new but grassy road out among the fields, under lines of acacia and poplar and horse-chestnut last. Once more the ploughland shows us the twinkling flight of pewits; the well, and the quaking water uplifted in a shining band where it touches the stones; the voices of sparrows while the trees are dripping in the dawn; and overhead the pompous mobilisation of cloud armadas, so imposing in a country where they tilt against ebony boughs....

...But the favourite of memory is a certain flower-shadowing tree whose branches had been earthward bent by the swinging of boyish generations. Foliage and shadow muffled the sight, and seated there in profound emerald moss, the utmost you achieved was to find a name for each of the little thicket flowers. If you raised your head you would have seen in a tumultuous spasm of sunshine – say at mid March – the blue smoke upcoiling between the boughs of overhanging trees far off and dissipated in the dashing air; the trees shining in their leaflessness like amber and dark agate; above that the woodland seared in black upon the heated horizon blue; but you never raised your head.

For hours you could here have peace, among the shadows embroidered with flowers of the colour of gold. All which tantalises – sun and clouds and for ever inaccessible horizon – was locked out; only (like a golden bar across a gloomy coat of arms) one sunbeam across the brown wood; thrushes and blackbirds warbled unseen. The soul – this made a cage bird of it. The eagle's apotheosis in the fires of the sun was envied not.

What a subtle diversity of needled herbs and grass there is in the plainest field carpet! all miniature after close cropping of rabbit and sheep; auriferous dandelion, plumed self-heal, dainty trefoil, plantain, delicate feathered grasses, starry blossomed heather, illuminations of tormentil, unsearchable moss forests, and there jewelled insects, rosy centaury; nearly all in flower together, and the whole not deep enough to hide a field-mouse...

Chapter 10
February in England

How pleasant smelt the wood smoke as it rose in a blue column between the pines! Against the sky its ethereal woof was invisible. For a space the pines, with their wintry noise that never ceases, alternating with grizzled oak trees, lined the roadside. A sudden freshness told us where they ended; then the trees grew farther apart, and ash, beech and elm made a great silence that was startling,

after the companionable murmur of the firs. Their colour was that green which, though never old, is never quite youthful. Every other tree was black for miles, discovering those deep-hued cantles of the sky, betwixt the branch work, that are the peculiar wonder of leafless woods. On every side rose and fell leagues of untenanted lawn, of a cold green, that in the light of a February dawn, so clear, so absolutely clear, looked as the savannahs of Eden must have looked on the first day of the world…

…All day were seen rapid clouds tumbling past a white horizon, firmly stamped with the outlines of trees; the willow undulating all together, like a living wave of foliage and limber boughs; the river flowing out of silver into blue shadow, and again into silver where the sky bent as if to touch it; leaf and flower of celandine gleaming under the briars; whilst the air was vibrant though windless – stirred like water in a full vessel when more is still poured in. It was the most perfect of days. The air had all the sparkling purity of winter. It had, too, something of the mettle and gusto of the spring. The scent of young grass, uncontested by any flower or fruit, was sharp though faint, and thus the air was touched with a summer perfume.

Now and then a blackbird fluted a stave or two. But the silence was mysteriously great, because the incalculably subtle sound of the ocean was ever there, solemnizing, deepening, and as it were charging with "large utterance" the silence it could not break. The whole countryside of grassy level and rolling copse was like a shell put to the ear…

…As we passed upward to the hills, one day, the snow was fading in the sun, and the laurels rose suddenly up as they shook it off in shower after shower. On one hand the ghost of a distant mountain hung lighter than cloud. For a moment another snow shower fell, but settled only on the scattered green of the arable fields: so on that hand lay miles of dark land under a veil of delicatest cirrus. Two miles ahead, on the boldest height of all, was the ruin – the mere dust and ashes – of a castle, pale, continually lost among clouds of which it seemed a part, and as unreal as if it were still in "the region of stories," and we were reading of it in the monkish chronicle.

The path followed one side of a steep wooded valley, and at the bottom a mountain river ran fast over great stones, its noise muffled by the trees, as if it talked in its beard. For almost a mile we could hear the sounding smoke of a white cataract which gave the river its speed.…

…Approaching the castled crag, it was hard to say where crag ended and castle began. Examining the masonry, it was indistinguishable from the rock on which it lay. In summer the wild thyme and the harebell did their best to conceal what was written in terse hieroglyphics on the stones. But winter had undone these sweet deceits. By degrees a feeling of horror grew and became less vague.

I accidentally loosened a stone, which fell noisily down the almost perpendicular cliff for two hundred feet to the fields below, and by no hard feat of the fancy I felt myself as insignificant as that stone; I too was cast over the abyss. One of the walls rose almost in line with this sheer cliff, and I could not help picturing the dreadful trade when that side was building. Many a slave must have dropped from the rising wall on to the plain…

…A bat flew round the keep, and his snipping sound could be heard overhead. Hesperus came out, and burned longer than it had done before that year, so that in its tender light the land seemed in that brief half hour to advance a long way toward the season of catkins, through which the first voices from the south – chiff-chaff and wood wren – would presently creep and stir vapours of golden pollen, while in the clear noon there would be no shadow save the fly's on the great buttercup.

Chapter 13
Hengest: A Kentish Study

Hengest is a gardener of Kent, whom I first met when amber was lingering in the maple leaves of a long past autumn. He looks as if he might have conquered worlds… Standing hardly six feet high, he looks a great rather than a big man. He bends – he has been bending all his life – with a gracious stoop that also expresses craft and eagerness to move, as of a runner crouching at the start. His hair and beard are furze-brushes; the large, quiet eyes are like sweet birds hiding therein… He looks now a young man, though he has always in a sense been old, as most gardeners are perforce…

…There are rumours ever on the lips of his friends, and there is an empty scabbard over the mantelpiece at his home, deceitfully draped by texts; there are a few brilliant buttons still to be seen amongst others on his drab coat. If it is so; if in the past he was a soldier of rank, still more is his bearing to be admired…

He has come to me, wringing his hands, to announce that a certain beautiful dahlia was proud and would not "listen" to him. Even as to weeds, he early taught me the variety of their opposition, from the deep-rooted dock to which deliberate siege must be laid, to the speedwells that wage a guerilla warfare, and the traveller's joy that with its gallant flowers and plumy fruit is the light cavalry of the weeds. As some old Puritan or imaginative Welsh Calvinist would dwell upon the world of spirits until in every detail it became alive, splendid and terrible, so, yet not solely in fancy, he has evolved a scheme of the universe of flowers, passionate, intelligent, enjoying and suffering, but hard for the common eye to apprehend, because they are slow with a kind of abstract slowness.

The result of his loving study is not in every way profitable. He lets time slip away; he seems to deal in centuries and could find work which would wear out aeons...

Chapter 15
Isoud with the White Hands

[Isoud of the White Hands – otherwise known as Iseult or Isolde – is not the Iseult who was the lover of Tristan in Arthurian legend, but was a princess of Brittany. Although she married Tristan after his affair with the other Iseult and consequent banishment, she was not loved by him.]

That road could lead nobody to Rome. The only village that it passed was a mere gap in the long hedge, holding a parson, two or three fools, and a sense of ancient peace. Then it entered gently into the secret places of the land. On either side the fields and woods lay open; surprised but not alarmed by so tranquil an intrusion, they were beheld in all their divinity. The hedges of the road were so low, that only at a hill-top was the waving honeysuckle seen against the silver sky of noon or the azure of night. Overhead the oaks joined hands; through their close leaves the fractions of shining sky came and went like stars while I moved; and when the foliage of one tree met without touching the next, a blade of sky, like a sword gently unsheathed, was described by the long lines of scalloped leaves...

...One by-road went to a lifeless mill, a tall house with upper windows of ample prospect. Above the wheel the waters no longer slid fast with awful repose, but cried and leapt through the broken flood-gates into a pool in the shadow of steep banks and underwood. The house was peopled only by the beautiful machinery of polished wood, now still and morose. The wheel too was still. Callosities of dry moss on the spokes, little by little, took the place of the weed which the river had combed into such excellence...

...For a time the sky was grey with thoughts of rain. The small birds twittered nervously in the wood below; the ring doves came home gleaming in the humid horizontal beams. But presently all that was left of the grey was a tenderness in the golden light. From among the trees I could see a pool at the foot of a sloping lawn, and a swan moving to and fro so nobly, that I should have thought she was borne by the water, if that had not been as still as ice. The colours of the sunset were doubled in the pool with something added, as things are seen in dreams...

As quietly as the night was coming, and as benignly, something floated under the trees, turning an unknown face towards me; then passed away as softly as the day was fading. I just saw the pale glorious face. A bevy of dainty spaniels followed her soberly...

For a day or two such a remembered face has sometimes been a guardian genius of my ways… perhaps she was the “angel” of a heroine from my childish books, one of those of whom I fancied that I should seek their faces in the shadows, and should not be happy, or contented with my sorrow, until I saw them once more. At times she has come to me as that sweet saint, Dwynwen of Wales…

[St Dwynwen was a fourth century Welsh princess and the patron saint of lovers.]

But although visionary smiles have answered me when I called upon her spirit as Dwynwen, she came in the end to embody perfectly my fancies of Isoud with the White Hands. In the “Morte D’Arthur” she and her gallant, mournful brother, the knight Kehydius, are but as ghosts of desperate longing amid all those knights and queens… In the “Morte D’Arthur,” she fades out of sight, and, like a revenant in her faint life, we may think of her as continuing so, and here crossing my path among these fields, in the likeness of a girl, merely pure and beautiful, and a little sad, like Isoud with the White Hands.

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Oxford
(Extracts)
A & C Black, 1903

Chapter 1
On Entering Oxford

Passing rapidly through London, with its roar of causes that have been won, and the suburbs, where they have no causes, and skirting the willowy Thames, – glassy or silver, or with engrailed grey waves – and brown ploughlands, elm-guarded, solitary, I approached Oxford. Nuneham woods made one great shadow on the land, one great shadow on the Thames. According to an old custom, it rained. But rain takes away nothing from Oxford save a few nice foot passengers. It transmutes the Franciscan habit of the city to a more Dominican cast; and if the foil of sky be faintly lighted, the rain becomes a visible beatitude. [Franciscan monks' habits are grey or brown: Dominicans wear a white habit with a black cape.]

One by one the churches of St. Mary the Virgin and All Saints', and the pleasant spire of the Cathedral, appear; with the dome of the Radcliffe Camera, Tom Tower of Christ Church, and that old bucolic tower of Robert d'Oigli's castle [Oxford Castle] on the west. For a minute several haystacks, a gasometer, and the engine smoke replace them. But already that one cameo from February's hand has painted and lit and garnished again that city within the heart, which is Oxford....

...Once again I felt the mysterious pleasure of being in an elevated Oxford chamber at night, among cloud and star, – so that I seemed to join in the inevitable motion of the planets, – and as I saw the sea of roofs and horned turrets and spires I knew that, although architecture is a dead language, here at least it speaks strongly and clearly, pompous as Latin, subtle as Greek....

A man is apt to feel on first entering Oxford, and still more on leaving it, that the beautiful city is unfortunate in having but mortal minds to teach. There is a keen and sometimes pathetic sense of a great music which one cannot wholly follow, a light unapprehended, a wisdom not realised....

Chapter 2
The Stones of Oxford

If the University was early associated with a place of holiness and beauty, still more firmly was it rooted in a becoming poverty. It had neither a roof nor a certain purse. For years it had not a name. The University was in fact but a spirit of wisdom and grace; men had heard of it and sought it; and where one or two were gathered together to take advantage of it, there was her school and her only endowment…

…For Oxford, the fifteenth century was an age of libraries and books. Looking back upon it, Duke Humphrey of Gloucester seems its patron saint, [Duke Humphrey, 1390 – 1447, the youngest son of Henry IV] – donor of books to the Benedictines who lived on the site of Worcester College, and to the University,– harbinger of the Bodleian. We can still catch the savour of the old libraries at Merton where the light coloured by painted glass used to inlay the gloom under the wooden roof, or behind the quiet latticed windows above the cloisters at Christ Church. "What pleasantness of teaching there is in books, how easy, how secret," says Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham…[1287 – 1345, a noted scholar and lover of books]

…The grandiose Christ Church kitchen, which caused so much laughter because it was the Cardinal's [Wolsey's] first contribution to his college, was in fact rather characteristic of the age that followed. [The kitchen dates back to 1525.] It was built with the revenues of suppressed monasteries. It was almost contemporaneous with the destruction of many priceless books by reformers who were as ignorant of what is dangerous in books as a Russian censor. The shelves of Duke Humphrey's library were denuded and sold. The shrine of St. Frideswide's, where the University had long offered reverence twice a year, was shattered; the fragments were used here and there in the buildings of the time. [Saint Frideswide was a 7th century princess and founder of a nunnery in Oxfordshire; it was dissolved in 1524 by Cardinal Wolsey.]

The relics of the saint were husbanded by a pious few in hope of a restoration; but they were finally interred with those of Peter Martyr's wife – a significant mixture. It was the age when the University became the playground of the richer classes, and the nobleman's son took the place of the poor scholar in a fellowship…

[Peter Martyr Vermigli was an Italian theologian who supported the Protestant reforms of the church, and settled in Oxford. His wife Catherine was well known for her piety: after her death her body was ordered to be disinterred and thrown on a dung-heap by the Catholic Cardinal Pole, but after the Protestant Queen Elizabeth came to the throne 1558, Catherine's remains were re-interred with the relics of Saint Frideswide in Christ Church Cathedral.]

Chapter 3
Dons Ancient and Modern

[Edward Thomas muses, somewhat archly, about various types of academic staff to be found at Oxford]:

Among the younger men is one who spent perhaps a year in trying to combine high living and high thinking; then made a compromise by dropping the high thinking; and at last, perhaps as the result of some solemn intervention, became ascetic. He is a friend of authors and potentates. He understands a bishop, and takes a kindly interest in east-enders, so long as they are in Oxford. His aspect is grave and calm, since life, in losing half its vices, has lost all its charm. Like fine cutlery, his manners lack nothing but originality; he has a good taste in flowers, and can even arrange them. Nor is the taste in books limited by his connoisseurship in binding. He is a free and fearless reader, yet careful in the choice of books to be left on the table. If style were finish, his writing would be famous; but his beautiful style is always subordinated to a really beautiful handwriting…

Chapter 4
Undergraduates of the present and the past

The average man seldom gets into a book, though he often writes one. Yet who would not like to paint him or have him painted, for once and for ever! And, a fortiori, who would not wish the same for the average undergraduate? I can but hint at his glories, as in an architect's elevation. For he is neither rich nor poor, neither tall nor short, neither of aristocratic birth nor ignobly bred. Briefly, Providence has shielded him from the pain and madness of extremes. He plays football, cricket, rackets, hockey, golf, tennis, croquet, whist, poker, bridge. In neither will he excel; yet in some one he will for an hour be conspicuous, if only at a garden-party or on a village green…

He will in a few years learn to row honestly, if not brilliantly; to know what is fitting to be said and read in the matter of books; to discuss the theatre, the government, the cricket season, in an inoffensive way. Add to this pale vision the colouring implied by a college hat-band and a decent, ruddy face, and you have the not too vigorous or listless, manly man, with modest bearing and fearless voice, who plays his part so well in life, and now and then – on a punt, or at a wedding – reveals to the discerning observer his university…

There was for a short time, amidst but not of the University, a student whom I cannot but count as a "clerk of Oxenford." [This is a

reference to one of Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*.] He came from no school, but straight from a counting-house. All his life he had been a deep, unguided delver in the past. An orphan in the world, he had chosen his family among the noble persons of antiquity. Cæsar was more real to him than Napoleon, and Cato more influential than any millionaire…

So it happened that he came to live in a cottage attic, five or six miles from Oxford. He wanted to be a university man. He despised scholarships as if they had been the badge of the Legion of Honour. Colleges he would have nothing to do with, because they spoiled the simplicity of the idea of a university in his mind. They had made possible the social folly of Oxford. But in his reading of history he had travelled no farther than the Middle Ages towards his own time; and a picture of Oxford life in that day fascinated him. He believed that it was still possible to lead the unstable, independent, penniless life of a scholar; and he knew not why a student should hope or wish to be anything like a merchant or a prince. A merchant had money, and a prince flattery: he would have wisdom. It was likely to be a long search, and in his view it was the search that was beyond price. He wanted wisdom as a man might want a star, because it was a rare and beautiful thing. So his studies were a spiritual experience. The short passages of Homer which he knew by heart had something of religious unction in his utterance…

…He came oftener to Oxford, and gained the freedom of the Bodleian. Every day he came, bringing his own books to fill the interval before the library books arrived, although for the most part he stared at the gilt inscriptions outside his alcove window, or at the trees and roofs farther off. When he was hidden among the expected volumes he read but feverishly. He put questions to himself in the style of the schoolmen, and pondered "whether the music of the spheres be verse or prose." He tingled all over with the learned air, and was intoxicated by the dust of a little-used book. The brown spray that fell from a volume on the shelf before him was sweeter than the south wind. Week after week obscured his aims. The only moments of his old chanting joy came to him in his still undiluted expectations, when he came in sight of the city – *O fortunati quorum jam mœnia surgunt!* ['O Fortunate ones, whose walls now rise'; a quote from Virgil's Aeneid]– and at night, while the river shone like an infinite train let fall from the shoulders of the city.

He sold his books in Little Clarendon Street, and whenever he wished to read, there he found them and others ready. Most of his time passed in the corner of an inn, where he sat at a hole in the dark window as at a hagioscope [a small viewing-hole cut in a wall], and with heavy eyelids watched the University men. And it was possible to earn a living by selling the Star for a penny, night after night, and to have the felicity of dying in Oxford.

Chapter 6
The Oxford Day

The Oxford day… begins and ends at 7 A.M. At that hour, the student and the fanatical novel-reader, forgetful of time, the passive Bacchanalian, and the man who prefers the divine, long-seated Oxford chair to bed, are usually persuaded to retire; for unacademic voices of servant and starling begin to be heard in the quadrangle. The blackbird is awake in the shrubbery. Very soon the scout will appear, and will not know whether to say "Good-night" or "Good-morning," and with the vacant face of one who has slept through all the blessed hours of night, will drive men to bed. There is a dreamy laying aside of books – volumes of Daudet and Dickens, Fielding and Abbé Prévost, Morley, Roberts and Poe, – old plays and romances, – Stubbs, and the Chronicles, Stuart pamphlets, – Thucydides, Aristotle, and later Latin than Quintilian. If there is to be a Divinity examination later in the morning, there are Bibles scattered up and down, epitomes, and a sound of men's voices asking the difference between one and another version of a parable, and "Who was Gallio?" and preparing all the playful acrobatics that will pass for knowledge in the Schools. While these are trying to sleep, with the gold sunlight winning through their eyelids, one or two picked men are rising of their own free will…

…Between nine and one o'clock the different species of Oxford kind are either within doors – sleeping, talking, or working – or to be seen in various conditions of unrest; observers and observed in the High, [i.e. the High Street] in pairs or singly; and, if freshmen, either stately in scholars' gowns or apparently anxious to convince others that they have just picked up their commoners' gowns; sauntering to the book-shops, or to look at a cricket pitch or a dog; or hurrying to lectures with an earnestness that strangely disappears when they are seated and the lecture is begun…

…At luncheon there is, however, some enthusiasm; not for the meal, which is commonly a stupid one, but for the long afternoon, to be spent in the parks, or on the river…

…The river (or l'après midi) is the new college of the nineteenth century. As an educational institution it is unquestioned. The college barges represent perhaps the most successful Oxford architecture of the age. Certainly it was a thought of no mean order which set that tapering line of gaudy galleys to heave and shimmer along the river-side, against a background of trees and grass, and themselves a background for the white figures of the oarsmen. It is a fine lesson in eloquence to listen to the coaches shouting reprimand and advice, in sentences one or two words long, to a panting crew…

…There is many a true thing said at tea in Oxford. The hours from four to seven are nothing if not critical. It is an irresponsible, frivolous time, and an interregnum between the tyranny of exercise and the tyranny of food. Nothing is now commended; yet nothing is envied. I suspect that some of the causes of the University love of parody might be found by an investigator in the Oxford tea. Over his crumpet or "slow poison" the undergraduate who is no wiser than he should be legislates for the world, settles even higher matters, and smilingly accepts a viceroyalty from Providence…

…To a stranger walking from the Union or the theatre, after Tom has sounded the ideal hour of studious retirement, Oxford might well appear to be a nest of singing birds. The windows of brilliantly lighted rooms, with curtains frequently undrawn, in dwelling-house or college, reveal rows of backs and rows of faces, with here one at a piano and there one standing beside, singing lustily, while the rest try with more or less success to concentrate their talents upon the chorus: probably they are singing something from Gaudeamus, Scarlet and Blue, or other song-books for students, soldiers, and sailors; or, it may be, a folk song that has never come into print. Sometimes, in the later evening, the singing is not so beautiful….

[In the evening] …the staircases creak or clatter with the footsteps of men going up and down, to and from these rooms. Outside one or two sets of rooms the great outer door – the "oak" – is fastened, a signal that the owner wishes to be undisturbed, and practically an invitation to trials of strength with heel and shoulder from the passer-by. In the faintly lighted quadrangles, men are hurrying, or sauntering, or resting on the grass among the trees….

[The firelight] creeps along the wall, fingering title after title of our books. They are silently preluding to a second spring, when poets shall sing instead of birds, and we shall gather old fragrant flowers, not from groves, but from books. We see coming a long, new summer, a bookish summer, when we shall rest by olive and holm oak and palm and cypress, and not leave our chairs – a summer of evenings, with tropic warmth, no cloud overhead, and skies of what hue we please…

Chapter 7
In a College Garden

…Old and storied as it is, the garden has a whole volume of subtleties by which it avails itself of the tricks of the elements. Nothing could be more romantic than its grouping and contrasted lights when a great, tawny September moon leans – as if pensively at watch – upon the garden wall…. And when in February the heavy rain bubbles at the foot of the trees, and spins a shifting veil about their height and over the grass, it seems to reveal more than it conceals. The loneliness of the place becomes intense, as if one were hidden far back in time, and one's self an anachronism. It is a return to Nature. The whole becomes primeval; and it is hard to throw off the illusion of being deep in woods and in some potent presence…

…When he is in the garden, the intruder may see a complete piece of mediæval Oxford; for the louvre, and the line of roofs, and the mullioned windows are, from that point of view, as they were in the founder's time.

At the feet of the trees are the flowers of the seasons in their order. Here and there the precious dark earth is visible, adding a charm to the pale green stems and leaves and the splendid or thoughtful hues of blossom. The flower borders and plots carve the turf into such a shape that it seems a great quiet monster at rest….

…On one side is the shrubbery, of all the hues of the kingdom of green. Underneath the shrubs the gloom is a presence. The interlacing branches are as the bars of its cage. You watch and watch – like children who have found the lion's cage, but the lion invisible – until gradually, pleased and still awed, you see that the caged thing is – nothingness, in all its shadowy pomp and immeasurable power. Seated there, you could swear that the darkness was moving about, treading the boundaries…

…To walk round about the garden twice could not occupy an hour of the most tranquil or gouty human life, even if you stayed to see the toadflaxes and ferns in the wall, to note the shape of the trees, and admire how the changing sun patronises space after space of the college buildings. Yet no maze or boundless moor could give a greater pleasure of seclusion and security. Not in vain has it served many academic generations as a sweet and melodious ante-chamber of the unseen. For, as an old book grows the richer to the wise reader, for the porings of its dead owners in past years, so these trees and this lawn have been enriched. Their roots are deep in more than earth…

Chapter 9
The Oxford Country

...There is a beautiful, sloping acre, not far from Oxford, which a number of great elms divide into aisles and nave, while at one end a curving hawthorn and maple hedge completes them with an apse. Towards Oxford, the space is almost shut in by remote elms. On one side I hear the soft and sibilant fall of soaking grass before the scythe. The rain and sun alternating are like two lovers in dialogue; the rain smiles from the hills when the sun shines, and the sun also while the rain is falling. When the rain is not over and the sun has interrupted, the nightingale sings, where the stitchwort is starry amidst long grass that bathes the sweeping branches of thorn and briar; and I am now stabbed, and now caressed, by its changing song. Through the elms on either side, hot, rank grasses rise, crowned with a vapour of parsley flowers. A white steam from the soil faintly mists the grass at intervals. The grass and elms seem to be suffering in the rain, suffering for their quietness and solitude, to be longing for something...

...In the lanes there seems to be another religion for the night. There is a fitful wind, and so slow that as we walk we can follow its path while it shakes the heavy leaves and dewy grass; and we feel as if we were trespassing on holy ground; the land seems to have changed masters, or rather to have One...

...One footpath I remember, that could be seen falling among woods and rising over hills, faint and winding, and disappearing at last,– like a vision of the perfect quiet life. We started once along it, over one of the many fair little Oxford bridges, one that cleared the stream in three graceful leaps of arching stone. The hills were cloudy with woods in the heat. On either hand, at long distances apart, lay little grey houses under scalloped capes of thatch...

...A sombre river, noiselessly sauntering seaward, far away dropped with a murmur, among leaves, into a pool. That sound alone made tremble the glassy dome of silence that extended miles on miles. All things were lightly powdered with gold, by a lustre that seemed to have been sifted through gauze. The hazy sky, striving to be blue, was reflected as purple in the waters. There, too, sunken and motionless, lay amber willow leaves; some floated down.

Between the sailing leaves, against the false sky, hung the willow shadows, – shadows of willows overhead, with waving foliage, like the train of a bird of paradise. Everywhere the languid perfumes of corruption. Brown leaves laid their fingers on the cheek as they fell; and here and there the hoary reverse of a willow leaf gleamed in the crannied bases of the trees. A plough, planted in mid-field, was curved like the wings of a bird alighting.

We could not walk as slowly as the river flowed; yet that seemed the true pace to move in life, and so reach the great grey sea. Hand in hand with the river wound the path, until twilight began to drive her dusky flocks across the west, and a light wind knitted the aspen branches against a silver sky with a crescent moon, as, troubled tenderly by autumnal maladies of soul, we came to our place of rest,– a grey, immemorial house with innumerable windows.

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Beautiful Wales
(Extracts)
A. & C. Black, 1905

Chapter 1
Preliminary Remarks on Men, Author, and Things in Wales

...first, let me ease my memory and pamper my eyes, and possibly make a reader's brain reverberate with the sound of them, by giving the names of some of the streams and lakes and villages I have known in Wales. And among the rivers, there are Ebbw and Usk, that cut across my childhood with silver bars, and cloud it with their apple flowers and their mountain-ash trees, and make it musical with the curlew's despair and the sound of the blackbird singing in Eden still; and Towy and Teivy and Cothi and Ystwyth; and, shyer streams, the old, deserted, perhaps deserted, pathways of the early gods, the Dulais and Marlais and Gwili and Aman and Cenen and Gwenlais and Gwendraeth Fawr and Sawdde and Sawdde Fechan and Twrch and Garw; and those nameless but not unremembered ones (and yet surely no river in Wales but has a name if one could only know it well enough) that crossed the road like welcomed lingerers from some happier day, flashing and snake-like, and ever about to vanish and never vanishing, and vocal all in reed or pebble or sedge, some deep enough for a sewin, others too shallow to wash the dust from the little pea-like toes of the barefooted child that learns from them how Nile and Ganges flow...

And of lakes, I have known Llyn-y-Fan Fach, the lonely, deep, gentle lake on the Caermarthen Fan [fan means summit], two thousand feet high, where, if the dawn would but last a few moments longer, or could one swim but just once more across, or sink but a little lower in its loving icy depths, one would have such dreams that the legend of the shepherd and the lady whom he loved and gained and lost upon the edge of it would fade away: [this referes to a legend about a shepherd who fell in love with and married a fairy woman who rose from the lake] and Llyn Llech Owen, and have wondered that only one legend should be remembered of those that have been born of all the gloom and the golden lilies and the plover that glories in its loneliness; for I stand in need of a legend when I come down to it through rolling heathery land, through bogs, among blanched and lichened crags, and the deep sea of heather, with a few flowers and many withered ones, of red and purple whin, of gorse and gorse-flower, and (amongst the gorse) a grey curling dead grass, which all together make the desolate colour of a "black mountain"; and when I see the water for ever waved except among the weeds in the centre,

and see the waterlily leaves lifted and resembling a flock of wild-fowl, I cannot always be content to see it so remote, so entirely inhuman, and like a thing a poet might make to show a fool what solitude was, and as it remains with its one poor legend of a man who watered his horse at a well, and forgot to cover it with the stone, and riding away, saw the water swelling over the land from the well, and galloped back to stop it, and saw the lake thus created and bounded by the track of his horse's hooves; and thus it is a thing from the beginning of the world that has never exchanged a word with men, and now never will, since we have forgotten the language, though on some days the lake seems not to have forgotten it…

…And there is Siloh [a hamlet and chapel near Llandovery], standing bravely, – at night, it often seems perilously, – at the end of a road, beyond which rise immense mountains and impassable, and, in my memory, always the night and a little, high, lonely moon, haunted for ever by a pale grey circle, looking like a frail creature which one of the peaks had made to sail for his pleasure across the terrible deeps of the sky. But Siloh stands firm, and ventures once a week to send up a thin music that avails nothing against the wind; although close to it, threatening it, laughing at it, able to overwhelm it, should the laugh become cruel, is a company of elder trees, which, seen at twilight, are sentinels embossed upon the sky – sentinels of the invisible, patient, unconquerable powers: or (if one is lighter-hearted) they seem the empty homes of what the mines and chapels think they have routed; and at midnight they are not empty, and they love the mountain rain, and at times they summon it and talk with it, while the preacher thunders and the windows of the chapel gleam.

Chapter 2
Entering Wales

[He describes a picture seen in his childhood]:

A picture hung in the room, and the last October sunlight used to fall upon it when the silence set in. The picture meant Wales.

In the foreground, a stream shone with ripples in the midst, and glowed with foam among the roots of alders at the edge. Branches with white berries overhung the stream; and there were hornbeams and writhen oaks; and beyond them, a sky with a shaggy and ancient storm in it, and wrestling with that, and rising into it, the ruins of an Early English chancel. The strength and anger and tenderness and majesty of it were one great thought. I still think that could deeds spring panoplied from thoughts, and could great thoughts of themselves do anything but flush the cheek, such a simply curving landscape as this would be at the bidding of one of those great thoughts that empty all the brain….

Under one of the columns by the chancel, the artist meant to have drawn vaguely a pile of masonry and a muscular ivy stem. And that was the point of the picture, because it seemed to be a kneeling knight, with one forearm on an oval shield and the other buried in his beard, and his head bent. I suppose that the thought that it was a knight, and that the knight was Launcelot, first came as I looked at the picture once, straight from a book where I had been reading:

"Then Sir Launcelot departed, and when he came to the Chapel Perilous, he alighted, and tied his horse to a little gate..."

And the picture was a picture of the Chapel Perilous; and thus out of a poor story-book and a dear picture and the dim poplars in the dim street, I made a Launcelot who was not merely an incredible mediæval knight of flesh and armour, but a strange immortal figure that lived and was desirable and friendly in the grey rain of a suburb in the nineteenth century.

This was the beginning of the creation of Wales. Or shall I say that it was the beginning of the discovery?

[He remembers walking through an "island of apple trees" in Wales]:

...As some women seem at first to be but rich eyes in a mist of complexion and sweet voice, so the orchard was but an invisible soul playing with scent and colour as symbols. Nor did this wonder vanish when I walked among the trees and looked up at the blossoms in the sky. For in that island of apple trees there was not one tree but was curved and jagged and twisted and splintered by great age, by the west wind, or by the weight of fruit in many autumns. In colour they were stony. They were scarred with knots like mouths. Some of their branches were bent sharply like lightning flashes. Some rose up like bony, sunburnt, imprecating arms of furious prophets. One stiff, gaunt bole that was half hid in flower might have been Ares' sword in the hands of the Cupids. [Ares is the Greek name for Mars, the Roman god of war, who was often painted with his lover Venus and one or more Cupids.] Others were like ribs of submerged ships, or the horns of an ox emerging from a skeleton deep in the sand of a lonely coast. And the blossom of them all was the same, so that they seemed to be Winter with the frail Spring in his arms. Nor was I surprised when the first cuckoo sang therein, since the blossom made it for its need. And when a curlew called from the mountain hopelessly, I laughed at it...

Chapter 3
A Farmhouse under a Mountain, a Fire, and some Firesiders

Having passed the ruined abbey and the orchard, I came to a long, low farmhouse kitchen, smelling of bacon and herbs and burning sycamore and ash. A gun, a blunderbuss, a pair of silver spurs, and a golden spray of last year's corn hung over the high mantelpiece and its many brass candlesticks; and beneath was an open fireplace and a perpetual red fire, and two teapots warming, for they had tea for breakfast, tea for dinner, tea for tea, tea for supper, and tea between. The floor was of sanded slate flags, and on them a long many-legged table, an oak settle, a table piano, and some Chippendale chairs. There were also two tall clocks; and they were the most human clocks I ever met, for they ticked with effort and uneasiness: they seemed to think and sorrow over time, as if they caused it...

...And outside, the noises of a west wind and a flooded stream, the whimper of an otter, and the long, slow laugh of an owl; and always silent, but never forgotten, the restless, towering outline of a mountain.

[He describes a wagon overturned during harvest]:

All day the waggon was now the children's own. They climbed and slid and made believe that they were sailors, on its thin, polished timbers. The grass had grown up to it, under its protection. Before it fell, the massive wheels and delicate curved sides had been so fair and strong that no one thought of its end. Now, the exposed decay raised a smile at its so recent death. No one gave it a thought, except, perhaps, as now, when the September evening began, and one saw it on this side of the serious, dark elms, when the flooded ruts were gleaming, and a cold light fell over it from a tempestuous sky, and the motionless air was full of the shining of moist quinces and yellow fallen apples in long herbage; and, far off, the cowman let a gate shut noisily; the late swallows and early bats mingled in flight; and, under an oak, a tramp was kindling his fire.

Suddenly in came the dog, one of those thievish, lean, swift demi-wolves, that appear so fearful of meeting a stranger, but when he has passed, turn and follow him. He shook himself, stepped into the hearth and out and in again. With him was one whose red face and shining eyes and crisped hair were the decoration with which the wind invests his true lovers. A north wind had risen and given the word, and he repeated it: let us have a fire.

So one brought hay and twigs, another branches and knotted logs, and another the bellows. We made an edifice worthy of fire and kneeled with the dog to watch light changing into heat, as the spirals of sparks arose. The pyre was not more beautiful which turned to roses round the innocent maiden for whom it was lit; nor that more wonderful round which, night after night in the west, the clouds are solemnly ranged, waiting for the command that will tell them whither they are bound in the dark blue night. We became as the logs, that now and then settled down (as if they wished to be comfortable) and sent out, as we did words, some bristling sparks of satisfaction. And hardly did we envy then the man who lit the first fire and saw his own stupendous shadow in cave or wood and called it a god…

And yet, if we are so unwise as to draw back the curtain from the window at night, the illusion of timelessness is broken for that evening, and in the flower-faced owl by the pane, in the great hill scarred with precipices, and ribbed with white and crying streams, with here and there a black tree disturbed and a very far-off light, I can see nothing but the past as a magnificent presence besieging the house. At such times the legends that I remember most are those of the buried and unforgotten lands. What I see becomes but a symbol of what is now invisible….

This fire, in my memory, gathers round it many books which I have read and many men that I have spoken with among the mountains – gathers them from coal-pits and tin-works and schools and chapels and farmhouses and hideous cottages, beside rivers, among woods; and I have drawn a thin line round their shadows and have called the forms that came of it men, and their “characters” follow.

Chapter 4
Two Ministers, a Bard, a Schoolmaster, and Innkeeper, and Others

[On a minister:]

When he ventures to speak of men, their very virtues and vices are all handled in such a way that they seem to be his own imaginations. Thus, his drunkard is as unreal and as terrible as a chimera. The words are those of a man who has conceived a drunkard in his own brain, and then, seeing the real thing, has preferred his own conception, and shunned the poor human imitation. Still, he speaks of religious things, of incidents in the life of David or Christ or the Maries, as if he had seen, for example, the Holy Family in some misty barn among his own hills. I have even heard him introduce a farmer whittling a flail of hazel sticks and binding it with willow thongs, in a picture of that scene…

[On a poacher:]

His very clothes were more the work of nature than the tailor, and matched the trees like a hawk or a November moth. His belief in the earth as a living thing was almost a superstition. I shall not forget how he took me to a hilltop one autumn day, when the quiet gave birth to sound after sound as we listened and let our silence grow. By a process of elimination he set aside the wind, the birds, the falling leaves, the water, and tried to capture for my sake the low hum which was the earth making music to itself. And what I heard I can no more describe than the magic of an excellent voice when once it is silent. "Depend upon it, that means something," he said. "And now—" there was a sharp report and a hare that I had not noticed bounded as if it had fallen from a great height, and lay dead...

[On a bard:]

...Of Llewelyn, the bard, I cannot decide whether he most loves man or men. He is for ever building castles in the air and filling them with splendid creatures, whom he calls men. Then he laments that he cannot find any like them on hill or in valley: when, straightway, he will meet some human being, old friend or passing stranger, on the road or in a shop, and away go the phantoms of his castles, and he is wild in adoration of the new thing he has found....

...His poetry, if it could be understood, might be counted great, and perhaps it is so in a world where trees and animals are reverenced in a way which is hardly dawning here. He is a kind of mad Blake. He sees the world from among the stars, and those who see it from an elevation of five or six feet, and think that they see it as it really is, are not satisfied. He would make human the stars and seasons; he would make starry the flowers and the grass....

[On Morgan Rhys, the descendant of a prince, a bard and a tin-plater]:

His abstraction from things to which he was indifferent was wonderful. He was delighted and fascinated by abstraction itself, and finding a thing uninteresting, he could at once withdraw into a sweet, vaporous, empty cave. Thus, he was praised at school for his calmness during punishment, which, he says, on many occasions he never felt at all.

...One evening he came into the farmhouse in deep excitement because (as he said) he had been part of the music of the spheres. He had walked through village after village, over the mountains and along the rivers, under great motionless white clouds. The air had been so clear that every straw of the thatch gleamed separately.

He had passed through the lonely places with a sense of passing through a crowd because the rich spring air had been so much a presence. The men labouring or idling in the fields had seemed to be seraphic and majestic beings; the women smiling or talking by the gates were solemn and splendid.

When at last he descended into this valley, he saw the wood smoke rising gently and blue from all the houses, as if they had been a peaceful company smoking pipes together. He had looked at the sky, the flushed mountain sheep, the little stony lanes that led steeply up to farmyard and farm, the jackdaw making suitable music high up in the cold bright air, the buzzard swirling amidst the young bracken, and he had approved, and had been approved, in ecstasy. And on that day the mazes of human activity had been woven into a rich pattern with the clouds and the hills and the waters for the pleasure of the gods, and were certainly for once fitted to the beauty and harmony of the universe...

On days like this, he stepped over the edge of the world and saw the gods leaning from the stars among the clouds, and perhaps the loneliness that followed appalled him... As will happen with men who love life too passionately, he was often in love with death. He found enjoyment in silence, in darkness, in refraining from deeds, and he longed even to embrace the absolute blank or death, if only he could be just conscious of it; and he envied the solitary tree on a bare plain high up among the hills, under a night sky in winter where the only touch of life and pleasure was the rain....

Chapter 5
Wales Month by Month

January
I

The road ran for ten miles between mountains on which the woods of oak and fir moaned, though there was little wind. A raven croaked with a fat voice. I could hear a score of streams. But the valley would not speak with me. The sole joy in it was that of walking fast and of seeing the summits of the hills continually writing a wild legend on the cloudy sky. The road curved and let in the poor sunlight from the south-west; and there were interminable oak woods ahead, – one moan and one dull cloud.

But, suddenly, a space of the south-west sky was silver white. The sun was almost visible, and, suddenly, a company of oak trees caught the light and shone, and became warm and glorious, but misty and impenetrable with light. They dreamed of summers to come and summers past. For one moment they were as fine and strange and chosen from all the rest, as things discovered by a lantern on a

country road at night. Not only were they impenetrable to the sight, but it was impossible to suppose oneself amongst them. They were holding festival, but not for me. They were populous, but not with men. They were warm and welcoming, and something was happy there. They were as a large, distant, and luminous house seen in a cold and windy night by some one hungry, poor, timid, and old, upon a lonely road, envying it with an insatiable envy that never dreams of satisfying itself.

But, in a moment, a mist arose from the grass between the oaks and me: the glory departed: and the little, draughty farmhouse was far more to be desired than they, where a soft-voiced motherly girl of twenty gave me cheese and bread and milk, and smiled gently at the folly of walking on such a day.

II

All day I wandered over an immense, bare, snowy mountain which had looked as round as a white summer cloud, but was truly so pitted and scarred and shattered by beds of streams and valleys full of rotten oak trees, that my course wound like a river's or like a mouse's in a dense hedge. The streams were small, and, partly frozen, partly covered up by snow, they made no noise. Nothing made any noise. There was a chimney-stack clearly visible ten miles away, and I wished that I could hear the factory hiss and groan. No wind stirred among the trees. Once a kite flew over among the clouds of the colour of young swan's plumage, but silently, silently. I passed the remains of twelve ancient oaks, like the litter of some uncouth, vast monster pasturing, but without a sound...

The farther I went, the more immense became the extent of hills ahead and around. Their whiteness made the sky gloomy, as if with coming night. The furthest were grey with distance. In the cold that overtook my swiftest walking I could not put by the imagination that I could see myself travelling over more endless white hills, lost, to my own knowledge, and yet beyond my own power to save. And, again, I thought of all the hills beyond those I saw, until even the immensity before me became more awful, because it suggested the whole, as the light of one candle by the organist suggests the whole cathedral at midnight.

And then, though I did not know it, a change began, and dimly, not hopefully, as when one thinks one hears the double click of a latch in a house which strangers inhabit now, I saw that the sun began to set, and it was red. I knew that red: it belonged to the old world: it was the colour of the oast houses in Kent. A window, two miles off, caught the light and blazed. A bell told the hour in a church, and shook some of the snow from the belfry in a mist. I warmed myself in the breath of a flock of sheep. I knew that I heard the voice of a stream which had been with me for a long way...

February

I

The village was new, and it stood on the edge of a strange new land. Having passed it, the road dipped among sublime black hills of refuse from furnace and pit. The streams were rich with yellow water, purple water. Here and there were dim, shining, poisonous heaps of green and blue, like precious stones. There were railway lines everywhere, and on them trucks, full of scraps of metal, like sheaves of scimitars and other cruel weapons – still cruel, but hacked, often rusty, and expressing something more horrible than mere sharpness and ferocity. There were furnaces, crimson and gold; and beyond all, a white-clouded sky which said that it was over the sea...

II

Next day I crossed the river. At first, the water seemed as calm and still as ice. The boats at anchor, and doubled by shadow, were as if by miracle suspended in the water. No ripple was to be seen, though now and then one emitted a sudden transitory flame, reflected from the sun, which dreamed half-way up the sky in a cocoon of cloud. No motion of the tide was visible, though the shadows of the bridge that cleared the river in three long leaps, trembled and were ever about to pass away. The end of the last leap was unseen, for the further shore was lost in mist, and a solitary gull spoke for the mist. A sombre, satanic family of what had yesterday been the chimneys of factories rose out of the mist,– belonging to a remote, unexplored, inaccessible country over there, which seemed to threaten the river-side where I stood. But the tide was rising, and the thin long wavering line of water grew up over the mud, and died, and grew up again, curved like the grain of a chestnut or mother-of-pearl, and fascinating, persuasive. And sometimes the line of water resembled a lip, quivering with speech, and yet silent, unheard. Two swans glimmered at the edge; and beneath them, in the water, and beside them, on the polished mud, their white reflections glimmered.

Suddenly the tantara of a trumpet stung me like an enormous invisible wasp, and I looked down and saw a grey, drowned dog at my feet...

March

I

Just before dawn, I came to a cleft high in the hills, so that I could only see a little copse of oak and hazel, and in the dying moonlight a thousand white islands of cloud and mountain...

...What I saw seemed but the fragments of something which night had built for its own delight, and as they became clearer and clearer they had more and more the appearance of being unbuilt and dissolved. But, gradually, the birds were let out and they sang. Their songs, on the wintry hill, which I had last visited in summer, broke upon the silence as in summer they never do, like the opening of the door of a room that is empty but has once been gay with fire and books and men...

...I went on, and on a lower slope the ploughman was beginning to plough in the shadow. Grim and worthless looked the work, until I looked round and saw the dawn that was being prepared. But I watched too carefully, for I saw it all. Ever, as it grew, statelier and richer, I said to myself, that in a little while it would be perfected: yet still I watched and I began to think of those who saw it, as I had seen it before, from windows of towns, as they rose for work, or as they doused the candles and put away cards or books, and paused for perhaps a minute, and gazed as they never gazed at human beauty, because, though they revered it, they feared it also, and though they feared it they were fascinated...

April

I

For half a day there was now a world of snow, a myriad flakes falling, a myriad rising, and nothing more save the sound of rivers; and now a world of green undulating hills that smiled in the lap of the grey mountains, over which moved large clouds, sometimes tumultuous and grey, sometimes white and slow, but always fringed with fire. When the snow came, the mountains dissolved and were not. When the mountains were born again out of the snow, the snow seemed but to have polished the grass, and put a sharper sweetness in the song of the thrush and the call of the curlew, and left the thinnest of cirrus clouds upon the bare field, where it clung only to the weeds.

So, in this dialogue of mountain and snow, nothing was easily remembered or even credible, until I came to the foot of a hill which hazels and oak trees crowned. The snow was disappearing and the light came precipitately through it and struck the hill. All the olive and silver and leaden stems of oak and hazel glowed together and made a warm haze and changed the hill into an early sunset cloud out of which came the cooing of wood-pigeons...

II

We had talked long into the night, and then as sleep came, out of this darkness peered the early timorous warble of a blackbird, and gradually all the birds in orchard, hedge, and wood made a thick mist or curtain of innumerable and indistinguishable notes through which still crept the bolder note of that same nearest blackbird.

As the night lost its heaviness, though not its stillness, the continuous mist of songs grew thicker and seemed to produce or to be one with the faint darkness which so soon was to be light. It seemed also to be making the landscape which I saw being made, when I looked out. There was the side of the hill; there the larches, the dark hedges, and the lingering snow and the orchard: they were what I had seen before, but changed and increased; and very subtle, plaintive, menacing, vast, was the work, though when the light had fully come, once more the larches, the hedges, and the orchard were as if they had never been sung to a new order of beauty by the mist of songs, and yet not the same, any more than a full coffin is the same as the lips and eyes and hands and hair, of which it contains all that we did not love. And still there were many songs; but you could tell who sung each of them, if you wished...

May

I

All the morning I had walked among the mountains, and snow had fallen; but gradually I descended, and found a hawthorn standing all white and alone; and, at first, the delicacy of the country had an air of unreality, as if it were but a fancy provoked by the grim, steep, cold heights. Nor, at first, were the small farmhouses quite so real as the crags I remembered. As I approached them, I seemed to be revisiting lands that belonged to a fictitious golden past; but as I came up to them, I was not undeceived, as I should have expected to be.

How sweet and grave were the young larches! The brooks were not running as I had heard them up among the hills, but as brooks would run if I read of them at home and at ease in the verses of some tender poet, or as they will when I remember them many years hence. The sound of the world was heard only as the laughter of youthful voices by the trout pools, or again as the pealing of bells that presently grew and swelled and bubbled until the valley in which they pealed overflowed with the sound, and the moment of their ceasing was not marked...

II

And it happened that the day then being born was perfect May. The east opened, and the close-packed, dwarfed hills were driven out of it like sheep, into the gradual light. From that moment until the day passed in a drift of purple and dim cloud, all things were marvellously clear. In the hedges, on the rough meadows, and in the steep wastes under the cliffs, there were hundreds of hawthorns flowering, and yet they were not hundreds, but one and one and one.... They were as a crowd of which we know all the faces, and therefore no crowd at all; and one by one these were to be saluted. Not only the white thorns, but the oaks in the large fields, and even the ashes and alders by the brooks were each distinct. If I had raised my head, I should have seen, indeed, that the mountains were in haze, and that what I had just passed was in haze. But I never saw, or wished to see, for more than a quarter of a mile, and within that distance all things were clear and separate, like books which oneself has handled and known, every one. Even the daffodils under a hazel hedge never became a patch...

June

I

Along my path there had been many oaks and doves among their leaves; and deep hedges that sent bragging stems of briars far out over the footpath, and hid delicate single coils of black bryony in their shadows; and little bridges of ferny stone, and beneath them quiet streams that held flower and tree and cloud in their depth, as if in memory; and great fields where there was nothing, or perhaps a merry, childlike, scampering stoat that pursued a staring, trotting rabbit. I had walked for ten miles and had not seen a man...

II

This mountain ahead is not only old, but with its uncovered rock and broken boulders and hoary streams and twisted trees, that look as if a child had gathered garlands and put them in play upon the ancient stems, it declares mightily, if vaguely, the immense past which it has seen. There are English hills which remind us that this land also was once in Arcady: they are of a golden age, – the age of Goldsmith, of Walton, of Chaucer if you like, or of Theocritus; but they speak of nothing since; they bear no wrinkles, no wounds, no trophies. But by this mountain you cannot be really at ease until in some way you have travelled through all history.

For it has not been as nothing to it that Persia, Carthage, Greece and Rome, and Spain have been great and are not. It has been worn by the footprints of time which have elsewhere but made the grass a little deeper or renewed the woods. It has sat motionless, looking on the world; it has grown wrinkled; it is all memory.

Were it and its fellows to depart, we should not know how old we were; for we should have only books. Therefore I love it. It offers no illusions. Its roads are winding and rough. The grass is thin; the shelter scarce; the valley crops moderate; the cheese and mutton good; the water pure; the people strong, kind, intelligent, and without newspapers; the fires warm and bright and large, and throwing light and shadow upon pewter and brass and oak and books. It offers no illusions...

July

I

For three days I walked and drove towards Llyn-y-Fan Fach. On the first day I passed through a country of furnaces and mines, and the country had been exquisitely made. The gently swirling lines of hill and valley spoke of the mountains far off, as the little waves and the foam coming up the shore like chain-mail speak of the breakers out in the bay. Every large field that was left unburdened by house or factory had a fair curve in it, and even the odd pieces of land were something more than building sites and suggested their context.

But as we passed through, only the highest points gave the curious eye any satisfaction, since the straight lines of houses, the pits and the heaps of refuse, and the enormous factories, obscured the true form of the land...

...The staring, mottled houses of various stone and brick, which had no character save what comes of perfect lack of character, might have been made by some neglected boy who had only played with penny trains and motor cars and steamers and bicycles. Phlox and foxglove, and sweet-william and snapdragon, and campanula and amber lilies could not make sweet the “rockeries” of hot-looking waste. The streets, named after factory magnates, had been made in long blocks and broken up by the boy, thoughtlessly. The factories themselves, noble as some of the furnaces were by day and night when sweating men moved to and fro before them, were of the same origin. They were mere cavities, and one marvelled that the smoke from their chimneys was permitted to waver and roll in the same way as clouds the most splendid and august. Many were already in places decayed. That they had been glazed only to have the windows pierced by the stones of happy children was all in their favour that could be seen. Their roofs had fallen in, and neither moss nor ivy had had time to grow thereon; the splintered wood was still new and white. Middle-aged men of fifteen and aged men of thirty were in keeping with their ludicrous senility...

III

I went on, and was over the edge of this country, "built to music and so not built at all," when the sun began to rise behind me. Before, a range of hills stood up against the cold sky with bold lines such as a happy child will draw who has much paper and a stout crayon, and looked so that I remembered the proverb which says, that if a man goes up Cader Idris at night, by dawn he is dead, or mad, or a poet. They were immense; they filled half the sky; yet in the soft light that felt its way glimmeringly, and as if fearfully, among their vast valleys and along their high crags, they looked like ruins of something far more mighty...

...It was not long possible to turn my back upon the rising sun, and when I looked round, I saw that the country I had left had been taken into the service of the dawn and was beautiful two miles away. Factory and chimney and street were bent in a rude circle round the sun, and were as the audience of some story-teller, telling a new tale – silent, solemn, and motionless, round a fire; and over them the blue clouds also were silent, solemn, and motionless, listening to the same tale, round the sun.

When I went on towards the hills, they by that time looked as if they had never known the night; and sweet it was to pass, now and then, a thatched, embowered cottage, with windows open to the scented air, and to envy the sleepers within, while I could see and recognise the things – the sky and earth and air, the skylarks singing among the fading stars, and the last cuckoo calling in the silent, vast and lonely summer land – which make dreamless sleep amidst them so divine, I had long not known why...

...But at length, when I was among the hills, the ferns whispered all along the stony hedges, and on a cold stream of wind came the scent of invisible hay, and a great drop of rain shook all the bells on a foxglove stalk, and the straight, busy rain came down, and the hills talked with the heavens while it thundered heavily. The doves and jays only left the hedge as I passed within reach of them. The crouching partridge did not stir even after her eye caught mine....

IV

On the next day I was near the lake, Llyn-y-Fan Fach, and high up among hills, which had in many places outgrown their grassy garments, and showed bare cliffs, senates of great boulders, and streams of sliding fragments of stone like burnt paper. The delicate mountain sheep were panting in the heat, or following the shifting oasis of a shadow that sometimes moved across the hill; a horse stood nervously still, envying the shadow which he cast upon the ground. The world, for hours, was a hot, long road, with myself at one end and the lake at the other, when gradually I descended into a gentle land again.

Far off, church bells were celebrating the peace and beauty of the morning as I turned into a lane of which more than twenty yards were seldom visible at one time; and I lost sight of everything else. Tall hedgerow elms and orchard trees held blue fragments of the sky among their leaves and hid the rest. Here and there was a cottage among the trees, and it seemed less the work of human hands than the cordon and espalier trees, apple and pear, and the fan-shaped cherry on the wall, with glowing bark. July, which had made the purple plum and the crimson bryony berry, had made it also, I thought...

... And even as I walked, the whole of time was but a quiet, sculptured corridor, without a voice, except when the tall grasses bowed and powdered the nettles with seed at my feet. For the time I could not admit the existence of strident or unhappy or unfortunate things. I exulted in the knowledge of how cheaply purchased are these pleasures, exulted and was yet humiliated to think how rare and lonely they are, nevertheless. The wave on which one is lifted clear of the foam and sound of things will never build itself again. And yet, at the lane's end, as I looked back at the long clear bramble curves, I will confess that there was a joy (though it put forth its hands to an unseen grief) in knowing that down that very lane I could never go again, and was thankful that it did not come rashly and suddenly upon the white highroad, and that there is no such thing known to the spirit as a beginning and an end. For not without cool shadow and fragrance was the white highroad...

August

II

The flowers by the road, wood-betony, sage, mallow, ragwort, were dry; the larches, that were fitted to the hillside like scales or breast feathers, were dry; but a mountain stream, which many stones tore to ribbons, was with me for miles, and to the left and to the right many paths over the hills ran with alluring courses for half a mile, like happy thoughts or lively fancies, and ended suddenly. The mountains increased in height as the sun sank, and their sides began to give a home to enormous, still shadows and to rich, inaccessible groves among the clefts. And in the end of the afternoon I came to a village I knew, which grew round an irregular lawn.

From the inn, I could see the whole village.

The limes before me were full of light; the green grass beyond was tending to be grey. There were not far fewer people than usual in the neighbourhood, yet the calm was great. It seemed to have something to announce and to call solemnly for silence...

September

Just within reach of the sunset light, on one side of the valley lay a farm, with ricks, outhouses, and two cottages, all thatched. In the corner of the field nearest to the house, the long-horned craggy cattle were beginning to lie down. Those cattle, always vast and fierce, seemed to have sprung from the earth – into which the lines of their recumbent bodies flowed – out of which their horns rose coldly and angrily. The buildings also had sprung from the earth, and only prejudice taught me that they were homes of men. They enmeshed the shadows and lights of sunset in their thatch, and were as some enormous lichen-covered things, half crag, half animal, which the cattle watched, together with five oaks.

There was not a sound, until a child ran to a pump, and sang a verse of some grave hymn lightheartedly, and filled a shining can with dark water, and disappeared.

Then I raised my eyes, so that they crept swiftly, though not without feeling the weariness of the distance, over hill after hill to the one upon which the last, mild, enormous, purple dragon of the sunset was pasturing; yet I saw nothing in earth or sky which did not belong to those things, half crag, half animal, in the small valley, in happiness and peace that consented to the voice of the child.

Then I passed the farm and saw a crimson fire casting innumerable arms about a room; I heard the rattle and click of the pump; and I knew that it was cold, that I had far to go, and that the desolation beyond the farm was illimitable....

October

I

The rain and the wind had ceased, and in the garden the Painted Lady butterflies were tremulously enjoying the blue Michaelmas daisies, and an old man was gathering seeds of hollyhock, evening primrose, and foxglove, and putting them into white cups on the garden paths. In the hedges the bryony coils were crimson and green among thorn and hazel; the sparrows were thick in the elms, whose branches had snatched straws from passing waggons; one bare ash tree was all in bud with singing linnets. Over all was a blue sky, with throbbing clouds of rooks; and beyond all, over leagues of rocky pastures and grim oaks, the mountains, – and upon one of them a white flower of cloud or snow, above which presently rose many clouds, and in the midst of them a narrow pane of sky full of misty golden light, and behind that a land where Troy is still defended...

II

The last village was far behind. The last happy chapel-goer had passed me long ago. A cock crowed once and said the last word on repose. The rain fell gently; the stems of the hazels in the thickets gleamed; and the acorns in the grassy roads, and under the groups of oaks, showed all their colours, and especially the rosy hues where they had but just before been covered by the cup.

One by one I saw the things which make the autumn hedges so glorious and strange at a little distance: the yellow ash trees, with some green leaves; the hoary and yellow willows; the hawthorns, purple and crimson and green; the briars, with most hips where there were fewest leaves; the green brambles with red fruit and black; tall, grey, and leafless thistles with a few small crimson flowers; the grey-green nettles with purple stems; the ragwort flowers; and on the long, green, wet grass the fallen leaves shining under red and yellow oaks; and through the olive lances of hazel the fields shining in patines of emerald.

Doves cooed in the oaks, pheasants gleamed below. The air was full of the sweetness of the taste of blackberries, and the scent of mushrooms and of crumbling, wild carrot-seeds, and the colour of yellow, evening grass. The birches up on the hills above the road were golden, and like flowers. Between me and them a smouldering fire once or twice sent up dancing crimson flames, and the colour and perfume of the fire added themselves to the power of the calm, vast, and windless evening, of which the things I saw were as a few shells and anemones at the edge of a great sea. The valley waited and waited...

November

The next twenty miles were the simplest and most pleasant in the world. For nearly the whole way there was a farm in every two miles. I had to call at each to ask my way. At one, the farmer asked me in and sat me by his peat fire to get dry, and gave me good milk and butter and bread, and a sack for my shoulders, and a sense of perfect peace which was only disturbed when he found that I could not help him in the verses he was writing for a coming wedding. At another, the farmer wrote out a full list of the farms and landmarks on my way, lest I should forget, and gave me bread and butter and milk.

At another, I had but to sit and get dry and watch an immeasurably ancient, still, and stately woman, her face bound with black silk which came under her chin like a stock, and moving only to give a smile of welcome and goodwill. At another, they added cheese to the usual meal, and made the peat one golden cone upon the hearth, and brewed a pale drink which is called tea. Sometimes the shrill-voiced women, with no English, their hair flying in the wind, came out and shrieked and waved directions.

In one of the houses I was privileged to go from the kitchen, with its dresser and innumerable jugs and four tea-services, to the drawing-room. It was a change that is probably more emphasised in Wales than elsewhere, since the kitchens are pleasanter, the drawing-rooms more mysterious, than in England, I think...

...At last, as I left landmarks behind in the rain, I reached a poor little house where a family of sixteen sat round the peat or went about their work, all preserving that easy dignity when their poverty is under the eyes of a stranger which I have ever found among the Welsh. Of his own accord, the farmer came with me over the worst part of my way – two apparently trackless miles – until I came to a road at last. He spoke no English; and yet I had, and think he had, a wonderful sense of satisfaction in our companionship of an hour, as he led me over undulating, boggy lands intersected by rivers,– which looked a little way off like an unpeopled continent in miniature, with lake and hill and stream,– and along the edges of steep crags that rose sheer from black brooks and grey foam, and above hollows inhabited by perfect, golden birches. It was a land which always comes back to me when the same cold rain, on the top of a London omnibus, beats the face and blurs the hurrying crowd and makes the ears tingle...

...Close to the village stands a wooded barrow and an ancient camp; and there are long, flat marches where sea-gulls waver and mew; and a cluster of oaks so wind-worn that when a west wind comes it seems to come from them as they wave their haggish arms; and a little desolate white church and white-walled graveyard, which on December evenings will shine and seem to be the only things at one with the foamy water and the dim sky, before the storm; and when the storm comes the church is gathered up into its breast and is a part of it, so that he who walks in the churchyard is certain that the gods – the gods that grow old and feeble and die – are there still, and with them all those phantoms following phantoms in a phantom land,– a gleam of spears, a murmur of arrows, a shout of victory, a fair face, a scream of torture, a song, the form of some conqueror and pursuer of English kings, – which make Welsh history, so that to read it is like walking in that place among December leaves that seem never to have lived and been emerald, and looking at the oaks in the mist, which are only hollows in the mist, while an ancient wind is ceaselessly remembering ancient things.

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The Heart of England
Extracts

Dutton, 1906

[Thomas does not tell his reader where in England he is writing of, although the references to oast-houses suggest Kent or Sussex: elsewhere he speaks of mountainous areas. Rather than describing a specific area, this book is a series of prose-poems about the countryside.]

Chapter 1
Leaving Town

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...

...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...

...I left London that night on foot... 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...

...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...

...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.

Chapter 2
Faunus

[Faunus was the Roman god of nature, equivalent to the Greek god Pan.]

How nobly the ploughman and the plough and three horses, two chestnuts and a white leader, glide over the broad swelling field in the early morning! Under the dewy, dark-green woodside they wheel, pause and go out into the strong light again, and they seem one and glorious, as if the all-breeding earth had just sent them up out of her womb – mighty, splendid and something grim, with darkness and primitive forces clinging about them, and the night in the horses' manes...

...Richard the ploughman is worthy of his plough and team. He moves heavily with long strides over the baked yellow field, swaying with the violent motion of the plough as it cuts the stubborn and knotty soil, and yet seeming to sway out of joy and not necessity.

He is a straight, small-featured, thin-lipped man, red-haired and with blue eyes of a fierce loneliness almost fanatical.

Hour after hour he crosses and recrosses the field, up to the ridge, whence he can see miles of hill and wood; down to the woodside where the rabbits hardly trouble to hide as he appears, or to the thick hedge with marigolds below and nearly all day the song of nightingales. The furrow is always straight; he could plough it so asleep, and sometimes perhaps he does. The larks sing invisible in the white May sky....

...And ah! to see him and his team all dark and large and heroic against the sky, ploughing in the winter or the summer morning, or to see him grooming the radiant horses in their dim stable on a calm, delaying evening, is to see one who is in league with sun and wind and rain to make odours fume richly from the ancient altar, to keep the earth going in beauty and fruitfulness for still more years.

Chapter 3
Not Here, Oh Apollo!

[The title is a quotation from a poem by Matthew Arnold, *Apollo Musagetes:*

"Not here, O Apollo! / Are haunts meet for thee."]

It was a clay country of small fields that rose and fell slightly, not in curves, but in stiff lines which ended abruptly in the low, dividing hedges. Here and there we passed small woods of oak, hardly more than overgrown hedges, where keepers shot the jays. There were few streams – and those polluted. North and south the land rose up in some pomp to steep hills planted with oak and beech and fir, and between these, broad meadows and hop gardens, which now and then caught the faint light on their dry brown or moist green and gleamed desirably. The wind was in the north; it had rained in the night, and yet the morning was dull and the sun white and small. There was some vice in the wind or in the foliage or in the grass that now began to be long – some vice that made the land sad and cold and unawakening, with the surliness of a man who cannot sleep and will not rise.

The woods became more dense as we walked; not far ahead the oaks closed in and expounded the contours of the land by their summits. But our path led away from them, and we were about to lose sight of them when, gently as the alighting of a bird, the sunlight dropped among the tops of the oaks, which were yellow and purple with young leaves, and blessed them. We turned. There was the sun held fast among the fresh leaves and green trunks, as if Apollo had changed into a woodland god, and forsaken the long lonely ways of heaven, and resolved no more to spend a half of his days in the under world...

Chapter 4
Walking with Good Company

The lightning grows upon the sky like a tumultuous thorn tree of fire. The thunder grumbles with interrupted cadences, and then, joyful as a poet, hits the long, grave, reverberating period at last, repeats it triumphantly, and muttering dies away. The pheasants in the woods have got over their alarm and have ceased to crow, and for a time the heavy perpendicular rain submerges the meadow and farmhouse and mid-field oak and the steep downs with their cloudy woods; the birds are still.

Then the rain wastes away. I can count the drops on the broad burdock leaves; and the evening sun comes through horizontally; and it is good to be afoot and making for something remote, I know not why. Each meadow shines amid its encircling hedges like a lake of infinitely deep emerald. On the dark red ploughland the flints glitter with constellated or solitary lights. In the sweet copses, where the willow wren sings again in the highest branches, the thorn foliage is so bright that the dark stems are invisible. The purple oak tops reach wonderfully into the sombre, bluish sky, and over them the wood pigeons turn rapidly from darkness to splendour – from splendour to darkness, as they wheel and clap their wings….

Chapter 5
No Man's Garden

For a mile, alongside a bright high-road, runs a twelve-foot strip of grass and clover and buttercups, with cinquefoil's golden embroidery in the turf at the edge. Little circular heaps of silver wood ash mark the cold fires of tramps, here and there. Here also they sleep in the sun, in summer and autumn, and in winter lean in the dense hedge that keeps the north wind away. The hedge is rich and high, of thorn overgrown by traveller's joy and bryony; and at its feet, stitchwort, campions, vetchlings and bird's-foot trefoil grow luxuriantly.

This is no man's garden. Every one who is nobody sits there with a special satisfaction, watching the swift, addle-faced motorist, the horseman, the farmer, the tradesman, the publican, go by; for here he is secure as in the grave, and even as there free – if he can – to laugh or scoff or wonder or weep at the world.

Chapter 6
March Doubts

A warm wind swept over the humid pastures and red sand-pits on the hills and they gleamed in a lightly muffled sun. Once more in the valleys the ruddy farmhouses and farm-buildings seemed new and fair again, and the oast-house cones stood up as prophets of spring, since the south wind had turned all their white vanes towards the north, and they felt the sea that lay – an easy journey on such a day – beyond the third or fourth wooded ridge in the south. The leaves of goose-grass, mustard, vetch, dog's mercury, were high above the dead leaves on hedge banks. Primrose and periwinkle were blossoming...

...But as I walked and the wind fell for the sunset, the path led me under high, stony beeches. The air was cool and still and moist and waterish dark, and no bird sang. A wood-pigeon spread out his barry tale as he ascended perpendicularly to a hidden place among the branches, and then there was no sound. The waterish half-light seemed to have lasted for ever and to have an eternity ahead. Through the trees a grassy, deeply rutted road wound downwards, and at the edge the ruts were broad and full of dark water. Still retaining some corruption of the light of the sky upon its surface, that shadowed water gave an immense melancholy to the wood. The reflections of the beeches across it were as the bars of a cage that imprisoned some child of light....

...Life and death seemed to contend there, and I recalled a dream which I had lately dreamed.

I dreamed that someone had cut the cables that anchored me to such tranquillity as had been mine, and that I was drifted out upon an immensity of desolation and solitude. I was without hope, without even the energy of despair that might in time have given birth to hope. But in that desolation I found one business: to search for a poison that should kill slowly, painlessly and unexpectedly.

In that search I lost sight of what had persuaded me to it; yet when at last I succeeded, I took a draught and went out into the road and began to walk. A calm fell upon me such as I had sometimes found in June thunderstorms on lonely hills, or in midnights when I stepped for a moment after long foolish labours to my door, and heard the nightingales singing out from the Pleiades that overhung the wood, and saw the flower-faced owl sitting on the gate.

I walked on, not hastening with a too great desire nor lingering with a too careful quietude. It was as yet early morning, and the wheat sheaves stood on the gentle hills like yellow-haired women kneeling to the sun that was about to rise.

Now and then I passed the corners of villages, and sometimes at windows and through doorways, I saw the faces of men and women I had known and seemed to forget, and they smiled and were glad, but not more glad than I. Labouring in the fields also were men whose faces I was happy to recognise and see smiling with recognition. And very sweet it was to go on thus, at ease, knowing neither trouble nor fatigue. I could have gone on, it seemed, for ever, and I wished to live so for ever...

Chapter Eight
Garland Day

The sun had not risen though it had long been proclaimed, when the old road led us into a moist wood that grew on the hillside, and here and there overhung a perpendicular chalk cliff. The soil was black and crisp with old beech mast, and out of it grew the clear, grave, green leaves of anemone and dog's mercury and spurge and hyacinth and primroses, in places so dense that the dim earth below them seemed to be some deep lake's water. All the anemones were bowed and rosy. The blue bells were plated with rain. The dark spurge leaves were crowned by pale green flowers. The primroses grew, twenty in a cluster, on long flushed stalks; each petal was perfect, and down their leaves the raindrops slid and glittered or gleamed duskily. Arching above these, the low briar branches carried sharp green young foliage. A shadowed pool in one of the hollows was hardly to be distinguished from the dark earth, except that it was covered with white crowfoot flowers as with five minutes' snow.

From among the flowers ascended straight stony rods of ash, their ancient stoles bossy and hollowed like skulls, and covered with moss; and from the purple encrusted ash-flowers wood-pigeons shook the rain down to the leaves beneath. Amongst the ash trees were hazels, new leaved, their olive stems gloomily shining.

Over all, the ancient beeches stood up with hard sculptured holes supporting storey after storey of branch and shade which were traversed at the top and at the fringes by fair fresh leaves. The rain had run down the main trunks for generations, and made paths of green and black that tried to gleam. Here and there, low down, the beeches extended long priestly branches clothed in leaf, still and curved, to call for silence in the cool, shadowy, crystal air...

...Just within hearing, in the hawthorn hedge of the wood, blackbirds were singing: they opened with the most high, arrogating notes that slowly rolled on to noble ends, when suddenly they laughed and ceased; again and again they began so, and again and again they laughed, as if they had grown too wise to believe utterly in noble things. As we went deeper into the wood they ceased, and those moist shades welcomed us as if they held what we desired.

The trees were very old; their leaves were fresh and wet as when beauty and joy shed a few tears. The soil was centuries deep in black beech mast; the herbage seemed to have been born from it in that very hour. The boulders had stood among the primroses so long that the thrushes had chiselled shallow cups in them as they fed there in the mornings; they were embossed with the most tender green and golden moss. The shadows were as solemn and imperturbable as to a child a cathedral, when he first steps into its solitude alone, and a god is created anew out of his marvelling; and yet the hems of their mantles, where they swept the ground, disclosed a flashing underside of crystals newly-born. And for ourselves – we seemed to be home from a long exile, and the pains of it, such as they were, turned like the shadows into crystal....

Chapter 9
An Old Wood

The chestnut blossom is raining steadily and noiselessly down upon a path whose naked pebbles receive mosaic of emerald light from the interlacing boughs. At intervals, once or twice an hour, the wings of a lonely swallow pass that way, when alone the shower stirs from its perpendicular fall. Cool and moist, the perfumed air flows, without lifting the most nervous leaf or letting fall a suspended bead of the night's rain from a honeysuckle bud. In an indefinite sky of grey, through which one ponderous cloud billows into sight and is lost again, no sun shines...

...It is a land that uses a soft compulsion upon the passer-by, a compulsion to meditation, which is necessary before he is attached to a scene rather featureless, to a land that hence owes much of its power to a mood of generous reverie which it bestows. And yet it is a land that gives much. Companionable it is, reassuring to the solitary; he soon has a feeling of ease and seclusion there. The cool-leaved wood!...

...But suddenly the rain has ceased. In an old, dense wood the last horizontal beams of the sun embrace the trunks of the trees and they glow red under their moist ceiling of green. A stile to be crossed at its edge, where a little stream, unseen, sways the stiff exuberant angelica that grows from it, gives the word to pause, and with a rush the silence and the solitude fill the brain. The wood is of uncounted age; the ground on which it stands is more ancient than the surrounding fields, for it rises and falls stormily, with huge boulders here and there; not a path intrudes upon it; the undergrowth is impenetrable to all but fox and bird and this cool red light about the trunks of the trees....

Druid and devilish deity and lean wild beast, harmless now, are revolving many memories with me under the strange, sudden red light in the old wood, and not more remote is the league-deep emerald sea-cave from the storm above than I am from the world.

Chapter 11
Meadowland

This is one of the tracts of country which are discovered by few except such as study the railway maps of England in order to know what to avoid. On those maps it is one of several large triangular sections which railways bound, but have not entered. All day long the engines scream along their boundaries, and at night wave fiery arms to the sky, as if to defend a forbidden place or a sanctuary. Within there is peace, and a long ancient lane explores it, with many windings and turnings back, as if it were a humble, diffident inquirer, fortunately creeping on, aiming at some kind of truth and not success, yet without knowing what truth is when he starts.
Here it hesitates by a little pool, haunted, as is clear from the scribbled footprints on the shore, only by moorhen and wagtail, and, in the spindle trees beside it, by a witty thrush...

...The ways of such a road – when the June grass is high and in the sun it is invisible except for its blueness and its buttercups, and the chaffinch, the corn-bunting and yellowhammer, the sleepiest voiced birds, are most persistent – easily persuade the mind that it alone is travelling, travelling through an ideal country, belonging to itself and beyond the power of the world to destroy. The few people whom we see, the mower, the man hoeing his onion-bed in a spare half-hour at mid-day, the children playing “Jar-jar-winkle” against a wall, the women hanging out clothes, – these the very loneliness of the road has prepared us for turning into creatures of dream; it costs an effort to pass the time of day with them...

...All through the long afternoon that land offers symbols of peace, security and everlastingness. Tall hedges half hidden in a rising tide of long, starry herbage, ponds where the probing carp make the lily leaves rise and flap, wide meadows where the cows wander half a mile an hour, vast green cumulus clouds with round summits here and there disclosing infinite receding glooms of blue – these with their continual presence store the mind, giving it not only the poignant joy in which half consciously we know that never again shall we be just here and thus, but the joy, too, of knowing that we take these things along with us to the end.

Chapter 12
An Old Farm

The sun rose two hours ago, but he is not to be found in the sky. Rather he seems to have disembodied himself and to be lazily concealed in the sweet mist that lies white and luminous over the half-mile of level meadows at the foot of this hill. Those meadows are brown with yet untouched grasses, grey and silken with the placid ruffled waves of yesterday's new swathes, and liquid emerald where the hay has already been carted; and now the brown, now the grey, now the emerald warms and becomes visible under the feet of the light that dwells in the mist. Beyond the level rises a low but sudden hill of large, round-topped, colourless, misty trees, known by their outline alone, and in the heart of them a moving gleam as of sudden surf now and then, for there also the sun is wandering and hiding himself but not his light. I turn my head and, looking again, the sun is once more in the sky, the mist has gone. The vast, hunched, hot, purring summer country is clearly enjoying the light and warmth...

The house, half a mile off, seems to have been restored by this fair and early light and the cooing of doves to the seeming happy age in which it was built. The long, tearing crow of the cock, the clink of dairy pans, the palpitating, groaning shout of the shepherd, Ho! ho! ho! ho! ho! now and then, even the whirr of the mowing machines, sound as if the distance that sweetens them were the distance of time and not only of space...

[On the farmer:]

Though nearly seventy, he is staunch and straight, and spending most of his day on horseback, with his calm, large-featured, sandstone face, filling easily and handsomely with clear-souled anger and delight, he suggests the thought of a Centaur, an impossible, noble dream of horse and man created by a god dissatisfied with man and beast. Thirty centuries ago such a man, so marvellously in harmony with the earth, would have gone down in men's memories as a demi-god or the best-loved of the fauns. His voice rings over the meadows or across the table at the inn as strong as a cow's, as deep and humming and sweet as a bee's in a chimney...

His house, dark with panelling and heavy furniture of every generation since it was built, would be gloomy were it not for his blithe sentiment about the past. He speaks of the long-dead generations not as if they were names, but so that they are known certainly to have lived and worked and enjoyed. That one planted the spreading oak, that globed green world of nightingale and willow-wren and dove; that added the knolled pasture and cut the deep, stony lane that leads to it through the brook; another built the fruit

wall and bought the copy of Tristram Shandy that stands with a hundred other books in the dining-room.

Chapter 14
August

I have found only two satisfying places in the world in August – the Bodleian Library and a little reedy, willowy pond, where you may enjoy the month perfectly, sitting and being friendly with moorhen and kingfisher and snake, except in the slowly recurring intervals when you catch a tench and cast only mildly envious eyes upon its cool, olive sides. Through the willows I see the hot air quiver in crystal ripples like the points of swords, and sometimes I see a crimson cyclist on a gate....

...Far off I see a forest-covered hill that says "Peace" with a great, quiet voice. From the pool and towards the hill runs a shining road, with some of its curves visible for miles, which I have not followed and dare not follow, because it seems to lead to the Happy Fields.

Between the pool and the road is a house built squarely of white stone. A tiled roof, where the light is always mellow as sunset in the various hues that sometimes mix and make old gold, slopes from the many-angled chimneys and juts out beyond and below the wall of the house. In that shadowy pocket of the eaves the martins build, and on a day of diamond air their shadows are as rivulets upon the white wall. Four large windows frame a cool and velvety and impenetrable gloom. Between them stand four still cypresses.

A footpath skirts the pool, and on one side tall grasses rise up, on the other thorns and still more grasses, heavy with flowers and the weight of birds. The grasses almost meet across the path, and a little way ahead mix in a mist through which the white-throat and the dragon fly climb or descend continually. The little green worlds below the meeting grasses are full of the music of bright insects and the glow of flowers. The long stems ascend in the most perfect grace; pale green, cool, and pleasant to the touch, stately and apparently full of strength, with a certain benignity of shape that is pleasant to the eye and mind. Branched, feathered, and tufted heads of flower top the tall grass, and in the clear air each filament divides itself from the rest as the locks of the river-moss divide on the water's flow. All bend in trembling curves with their own fulness, and the butterflies crown them from time to time. When wind plays with the perfectly level surface of the grasses their colours close in and part and knit arabesques in the path of the light sand martins. Sometimes the mailed insects creep along the pennons of the grass leaves to sun themselves, other insects visit the forget-me-nots in the pool. Every plant has its miniature dryad...

...The fish gleam deep in the pool. The dark ivy shines in the innermost parts of the wood.

But these are merely the things that I see beside the pool, and here, more than anywhere else, the things that are seen are the least important. For they are but the fragments of the things that are embroidered on the hem of a great garment, which gathers the clouds and mountains in its folds; and in the hair of the wearer hang the stars, braided and whorled in patterns too intricate for our eyes...

Chapter 15
Old-Fashioned Times

[An old labourer recalls earlier days]:

...He and two other men had mowed a seven-acre field of grass, all but a bit, – and a good crop, – in one long day, eating nothing but bread and cheese, and drinking two gallons of new ale apiece. They began at half-past two in the morning, one of them having cleared the edges the night before with an old scythe, because the ground was rough there with sticks and stones. They moved in échelon up the field, he as the strongest mower coming last in the row, so that he could always keep them up to their work; for they had to keep ahead of him lest his swathes should fall over their unmown grass.

At five they had the first meal, hardly sitting down to it, for fear of losing time; then again at nine they ate, and so on through the day. The rule for eating and drinking was never to wait until they were really hungry or thirsty, thus avoiding the necessity for a heavy meal and some rest. At first, he said, they talked all the time, especially when they were carrying back their scythes to begin a fresh swathe at the bottom of the field; but gradually their talk grew less and less, and they finished in silence at half-past nine.

Chapter 16
One Green Field

At the eastern and higher end the field becomes so narrow that it is like a lane, through which the hunt gloriously decants itself among the knolls. It is narrowed still more by a small pond, and round that a tall holly of solid shadow with glancing edges, an oak, an overhanging thicket of bramble and thorn and three old butts of ash, where the fairy gold of toadstools is scattered abundantly as if sown by one sweep of a generous hand. The pond is the home of one moorhen, which is always either swimming there or hastening to it from the field. It is but as large as a farmhouse kitchen, and yet the moorhen will not desert it, finding the eaves among the roots as pleasing as attics to a boy; content with her seeming security though the road passes just above, and rich in her share of sun and moon and stars...

... But November is its notable month. Its trees are all oaks and they have hardly lost a leaf; the leaves are falling continually from those smouldering sunset clouds of foliage, which, kingly rich, look as if they would never be poor. One skylark sings high over the field in the rainy sky. The blue rooks unsheathe themselves heavily from the branches and shine silverly and caw with genial voices. A pheasant explodes from a grass tussock underfoot. The air smells like the musky white wild rose; coming from the west it blows gently, laden with all the brown and golden savours of Wales and Devon and Wiltshire and Surrey which I know, and the scent lifts the upper lip so that you snuff deeply as a dog snuffs. A stoat goes with uplifted tail across the field.

But the field itself – was there a great house here once and is it dead and yet vocal? Are its undulations and rude edges all that remain of an old wood? Or was there a battle here, and is the turf alive with death? Certainly there is death somewhere speaking eloquently to mortal men. It is not alive, but it laments something, and where there is sorrow there is life.

For just one day in September the goldfinches come and twitter, and are happy among the thistles, and fly away.

Chapter 17
The Brook

The brook rises in a clear, grey, trembling basin at the foot of a chalk hill, among flowers of lotus and thyme and eyebright and rest-harrow. Here the stone curlew drinks, and above is the gently rounded encampment, ancient, and yet still young compared with the dusky spring which has something gnomish and earthy about it, though it takes the sun. It drops in thin, bright links over the chalk, and then for a time loses its way in playing with cresses and marsh marigolds, spreading out so finely that hardly will the ladybird drown that falls therein – falling at length in a cascade from one dead leaf to another down a hedge bank...

...The briars still overleap it in their long dreaming curves. The kingfisher sits over it and the small trout nestle in its bed. It enters many an ash copse and fills it with willow herb and meadowsweet and all juicy plants, figwort and iris and orchis and hyacinth and reed, with osiers and their mists of crimson and gold. Nymph-like the brook brightens and curves its crystal flesh and waves its emerald hair under the bridges at field corners, where the brambles dip their blossoms, and the nightingale sings and the sedgewarbler has its nest. For it the lonely willows in the flat fields shed their yellow leaves most pensively, like maidens casting their bridal garlands off...

...The heron comes to it at dawn, knowing from afar the dark pool where it curves under a steep bank and grim oak roots, and slopes down to it solemn and eager and alone in the winter morning. The sand-martin and wagtail often pause in their flight and hover above the placid water and the cool, reflected reeds and watermint. Where it is all of one depth, between straight banks of cowslip, the boys sit and let their feet waver in the flood and then roll or plunge in, with shouts and gurgling talk, while in the reeds, the dabchick waits with head just above water, trembling for her eggs or cheeping young...

...Through leagues of country the brook runs, passing high, silent woods and misty, hot, luxuriant, flowering thickets and wet, cloudy copses full at evening of confused birds' singing, which no one sees except the brook and the milk-white heifer who crowns herself in white roses in the shade as she stands in tall, moist, sumptuous angelica and watches her crowned image looking out of that fair sky in purest waters; then, suddenly emerging from this lowly country it falls into a river and is lost or seems to be lost in the turbid, serious flow that is soon to know the sea.

Chapter 18
An Autumn Garden

The cottage gardens are ceremonious and bright with phlox and sunflower and hollyhock; the orchards are yellow with apple, and of all sunburnt hues with plum; in the descending lane you wade in a world of ragwort, knapweed and Canterbury-bell, with your head in the world of honeysuckle; and, parting the hazel branches to seek their branching clusters, you see now and then in the valley a farmhouse on whose walls and roofs the hues of fruit and flower all meet harmoniously. They meet as the colours of many pictures meet in some ancient palette, or as Plato and Catullus and Sidney and Shelley meet in some grey schoolmaster.

...In the misty days, when no gleam falls from the warm sky on grass or water or fruit, you would say that the sun had stalled his horses for a season within the farmhouse walls; so much they glow; so glorious are they. I have seen the radiant cart-horses coming with grave nods through the farmyard at dawn as if they were to be yoked to the chariot of the sun; the red-haired carter was at least a Phaeton, a son of Apollo if not Apollo himself.

The garden borders are discreetly furnished, so that they are now as clouds in the neighbourhood of the sun, doing it honour by their liveries. They are populous with sun-flowers, hollyhocks (tall, solemn halberds at evening, guarding the outmost edge and held up mysteriously), red-hot pokers rising out of a lake of rose of Sharon and nasturtium, into which run promontories and peninsulas of snap-dragon, rocket, Shirley poppy, carnation and phlox.

Chapter 19
The Walnut Tree

The immense, solitary, half-veiled autumn land is hissing with the kisses of rain in elms and hedgerows and grass, and underfoot the tunnelled soil gurgles and croaks. Secret and content, as if enjoying a blessed interval of life, are the small reedy pools where the moorhens hoot and nod in the grey water; beautiful the hundred pewits rising in ordered flight as they bereave the grey field and, wheeling over the leagues that seem all their own, presently make another field all a-flower by their alighting; almost happy once more is the tall, weedy mill by the broken water-gates, dying because no man inhabits it, its smooth wooden wheels and shoots and pillars fair and clean still under the red roof, though the wall is half fallen.

And in the heart of this, set in the dense rain, is a farm-house far from any road; and round it the fields meet with many angles, and the hedges wind to make way, here, for a pond, deep underneath alders...

...The walnut tree among the ricks is dead. Against its craggy bole rest the shafts of a noble, blue waggon that seems coeval with it; long ladders are thrust up among its branches; deep in the brittle herbage underneath it lean or lie broken wheels, a rude wooden roller, the lovely timber of an antique plough, a knotted and rusted chain harrow, and the vast wooden wedge of the snow-plough that cleared the roads when winters were still grim. In the soft, straight rain these things are a buried world, the skeletons of a fair-seeming old life mingled with a sort of pleasant tranquillity as on the calm dim floor of a perilous main...

...Over all is the stillness of after harvest. Long ago the gleaners went home under the frosty moon, and the last wain left its memorial wisps in the elms. The rain possesses all, and a strange, funereal evocation calls up the bronzed corn again, and the heavy waggon and the grim, knitted chests of the bowing horses as they reach the bright-fruited walnut tree. The children laugh and run – who remember it in the workhouse now – and in a corner of the field the reaper slashes hatefully at the last standing rows. The harvest-queen sits on the topmost sheaves. They dance in the barn. Their voices are blithe and sweet; for the rain has washed away their flesh and quieted them now and recalls only golden hours, which linger in this idle autumn place and do not die but only hide themselves as sunlight hides itself in yellow apples, in red roses, in crystal water, in a woman's eyes.

Chapter 21
The Village

[It is possible that this chapter refers to the village of Wickhambreaux in Kent, which has a Rose Inn and an old mill (now flats) on opposite sides of the village green.]

I

The village stands round a triangular, flat green that has delicate sycamores here and there at one side; beneath them spotted cows, or horses, or a family of tramps; and among them the swallows waver. On two sides the houses are close together. The third, beyond the sycamores, is filled by a green hedge, and beyond it an apple orchard on a gentle hill, and in the midst of that a farmhouse and farm-buildings so happily arranged that they look like a tribe of quiet monsters that have crawled out of the sandy soil to sun themselves. There the green woodpecker leaps and laughs in flight...

...The chief inns stand opposite one another at one corner of the green, "The Windmill," and "The Rose," both of them rosy, half-timbered houses with sign boards; the one beneath a tall, rocky-based elm which a wood-pigeon loves, the other behind a row of straight, pollarded limes; and opposite them is a pond on the edge of the green. In these inns the wayfarer drinks under the dark seventeenth-century beams; the worn pewter rings almost like glass; moss and ivy and lichen, and flowers in the windows, and human beings with laughter and talk and sighs at parting, decorate the ancient walls.

The lime trees run in a line along the whole of one side of the green, and at their feet still creeps a stream whose minnows hover and dart, and the black and white wagtail runs. Behind the trees are half the cottages of the village, some isolated among their bean rows and sunflowers, some attached in fantastic unions. Most are of one storey, in brick, which the autumn creepers melt into, or in timber and tiles perilously bound together by old ivy; in one the Jacobean windows hint at the manor house of which other memory is gone; all are tiled. Their windows are white-curtained, with geranium or fuchsia or suspended campanula, or full of sweets, and onions, and rope, and tin tankards, and ham, and carrot-shaped tops, dimly seen behind leaded panes...

...Far back, among its lilac and humming maple foliage and flower, is the vicarage, a red, eighteenth-century house with long, cool, open windows, and a brightness of linen and silver within or the dark glimmer of furniture, and a seldom disturbed dream of lives therein leading "melodious days."

Of how many lives the house has voicelessly chronicled the days and nights! It is aware of birth, marriage, death; into the wall is kneaded a record more pleasing than brass. With what meanings the vesperal sunlight slips through the narrow staircase window in autumn, making the witness pause! The moon has an expression proper to the dwellers there alone, nested among the limes or heaving an ivory shoulder above the tower of the church...

II

We were twelve in the tap of "The Four Elms." [Possibly an inn at Edenbridge in Kent]. Five tramps were on one side; on the other, six pure-blooded labourers who had never seen London, and a seventh... The tramps leaned on a walnut table, as old as the house, polished so that it seemed to be coated with ice, here and there blackened with the heat transferred to it by a glass bottle standing in the sun. They looked at one another, changed their attitudes and their drinks, gesticulated, argued, swore and sang. They became silent only when one of their number hammered a tune out of the reluctant piano. They were of several ages and types, of three nationalities, and had different manners and accents...

...Half way through the evening the tramps were asleep. The labourers were as they were at the beginning. They sat a-row according to age, and nothing but age distinguished them. Their opinions were those of the year in which they were born; for they were of that great family which, at the prime of life or earlier, seems to begin growing backwards, to quote "grandfather," more often, and thus to give the observer a glimpse of the Dark Ages. Life to them was at once as plain and as inexplicable as the patterns on their willow cups or toby jugs...

...As the evening darkened and pipes went out and the scent of carnations came in with the wind, their speech became slower, with long intervals, as if they spoke only after ploughing a furrow. One by one they seemed to go out like the candles overhead, were silent, but never slept. The oldest, reddest and roundest of face, with white hair, looked like the sun at a mountain crest. The next seemed to be the spirit of beneficent rain, pale, vague, with moist eyes and tangled grey beard. The third was as the south wind, mild, cheerful, pink-faced, with a great rose in his button-hole. The fourth was the west wind, that lifts the hay from the level fields into the clouds at a breath, that robs the harebell of its dew and stores it with rain – a mighty man with head on breast, and small hands united, and flowing hair. And the youngest was the harvest moon, glowing, with close hair and elusive features, a presence as he sat there rather than a man. So they were in the twilight, like a frieze on the white wall...

IV

A dolmen rises out of the wheat in one field, like a quotation from an unknown language in the fair page of a book. The names of the places are in the same language, and yet how smoothly they issue from the lips. The little roads, so old, wind among the fields timidly as if they marked the path of one creeping with difficulty through forest coeval with the world. Another is disappearing; worn to the depth of some feet below the surrounding fields by the feet of adventurers, lovers, exiles, plain endurers of life, its end is to become a groove full of hazels and birds, the innermost kernel of the land, because nobody owns and nobody uses it....

Chapter 22
St. Martin's Summer

In November I returned for a day to a lonely cottage which I had known in the summer; and all its poppies were gone. Here and there, in the garden, could be found a violet, a primrose, a wood sorrel, flowering; the forget-me-nots and columbines had multiplied and their leaves were dense in the borders; the broad row of cabbages gleamed blue in a brief angry light after rain; the black currant leaves were of pure, translucent amber at the ends of the branches. In the little copses the oaks made golden islands in the lakes of leafless ash, and the world was very little in a lasting mist....

...It is a commonplace that each one of us is alone, that every piece of ground where a man stands is a desert island with footprints of unknown creatures all round its shore. Once or twice in a life we cry out that we know the footprints; we even see the boats of the strangers putting out from the shore; we detect a neighbouring island through the haze, and creatures of like bearing to ourselves moving there. On that night a high tide had washed every footprint away, and we were satisfied, raising not a languid telescope to the horizon, nor even studying the sands at our feet.

Not less strangely or sweetly than it creeps in among dreams, came in the whisper of the first swallows of the dawn among our books; and Cleopatra, the cat, slipped out through the window and left me...

Chapter 23
The Pride of the Morning

The sun has been up for an hour without impediment, but the meadows are rough silver under a mist after last night's frost. The greens in cottage gardens are of a bright, cold hue between blue and grey, which is fitter for the armour of heaven, or the landscape of some strong mystic, than for one who loathes to leave his bed.

The blackbirds are scattering the frost, and they live in glittering little hazes while they flutter in the grass.

But the sky is of an eager, luminous pale blue that speaks of health and impetuousness and success. Across it, low down, lie pure white clouds, preserving, though motionless, many torn and tumultuous forms; they have sharp edges against the blue and invade it with daggers of the same white; they are as vivid in their place in that eager sky as yews on a pale, bright lawn, or as lightning in blue night. If pure and hale intelligence could be visibly expressed, it would be like that. The eyes of the wayfarer at once either dilate in an effort for a moment at least to be equal in beauty with the white and blue, clear sky, or they grow dim with dejection at the impossibility. The brain also dilates and takes deep breaths of life, and casts out stale thought and coddled emotion. It scorns afterthought as the winds are flouting the penitent half moon.

A squadron of wild fowl races through the crystal air; the mind expands with their speed, and tries to share it, and believes that it succeeds. A heron goes over solemnly, high up, and as if upon some starry business in that profound, bright air; the mind at once attunes itself to that majesty and directness and simplicity...

Chapter 25
Earth Children

I

Their house is a small russet cave of three dim compartments – part of a farmhouse, the rest having fallen to ruin, and from human hands to the starlings, the sparrows, and the rats. No one will live in it again. Inside, it is held together by the solid poetry of their lives, by gay-coloured, cheerful, tradesmen's pictures of well-dressed children and blooming horsewomen, and the dogs of gentlemen, memorial cards of the dead, a few photographs, some picture post-cards pasted over flaws in the wall, and the worn furniture of several disconnected generations.

The old man's tools in the kitchen... remind others, and perhaps himself, that he was a farmer once. He had twenty or thirty acres and a few cows. The cows all died in one year and he became a labourer.

His wife remembers those days. She was a tall woman and stooped at the doorway thatch: now she cannot rise to it. For every day she went many times to the sweet brook, a quarter of a mile away, rather than take the grey liquor of the pond for her cows. That is how she came to be bent like an oak branch on which children swing, or like a thorn that knows the west wind on the hill or the shore. Now she cannot carry a pail...

...I have seen her picking up oak branches in May after the fall of the great trees, and she will go on after her arms are filled, adding to the pile from above, and at the same time losing others from the sides, until at last it is dark and she goes home. Even so she does in life, accumulating memories and affairs, and letting them fall, until the end. Yet it is a little hard that there should be no kindly god or goddess to deceive her and receive her prayers and sanctify her little unnecessary acts...

...And so she goes through life, like a child in a many-windowed house, looking on sea and barren land, and full of corridors, resounding and silent by hours, with dim, enormous apartments, bolted doors, and here and there a picture, a skeleton, an old toy, a reminiscent voice....

Chapter 26
November Rain

The rain was so dense, and the light so restrained, and the drops hung so about my eyes, and the sound and the sweetness of it made my brain so well contented with all that umber country asleep, that what I saw was little compared with what reached me by touch and by darker channels still. I rarely see much in the country – a few herbs underfoot, the next field, the horizon woods, some brief light that shows only its departing hem; for, like others, I always carry out into the fields a vast baggage of prejudices from books and strong characters whom I have met. My going forth, although simple enough to the eye, is truly as pompous as that of a rajah who goes through the jungle on a tall and richly encrusted elephant, with a great retinue, and much ceremony and noise. As he frightens bird and beast, and tramples on herb and grass, so I scatter from my path many things which are lying in wait for a discoverer. There is no elephant more heavy-footed and no rifle more shattering than the egoism of an imitative brain. And thus the little thing I saw was an unusual discovery.

It was a triangular, six-acre wood below me, across a bare and soaking ploughland. The wood was mainly of ash and the myriad stems were a grey mist, only denser and a little clearer than the rain itself. Out of them rose half a hundred oaks which were exuberant in foliage of hues so vigorous and splendid in their purple that it was impossible to think of it as on the edge of death, but easy to think of it as in a deathless prime. One thrush sang heartily somewhere deep among the ash trees, and that was the only sound, for the sound of the rain was but a carpet on which that song walked forth, delicate footed, haughty and beautiful....

When I had walked another mile, the wood was out of sight, the thrush unheard. The wood is now purple immortally, for ever that song emerges from its heart, as free from change as one whom we remember vividly in the tip-toe of his exulting youth, and dying then has escaped huskiness, and a stoop, and foul breath, and a steady view of life.

Chapter 27
January Sunshine

A flock of linnets scatters and drops little notes like a rain of singing dew, and over all is a high blue sky, across which the west wind sets a fleet of bright white clouds to sail; into this blue sky the woods of the horizon drive their black teeth.

In the immense crystal spaces of fine windy air thus bounded by blue sky, black woods and green grass, the jackdaws play. They soar, they float, they dance, and they dive and carve sudden magnificent precipices in the air, crying all the time with sharp joyous cries that are in harmony with the great heights and dashing wind. The carter's boy raises his head from the furrow and shouts to them now and then, while the brass furnishings of his horses gleam, their shoulders grow proud and their black tails stream out above the blue furrow and the silver plough...

Chapter 28
The Barge

The world had been black and white for many days. The cygnet-coloured sky had been low from dawn to sunset; rarely a cloud dimly appeared in it, seen and lost and seen again, like a slow fish in rippling water. By night the iron firmament had been immense and remote.

Out of doors, as we walked, it was a source of faint satisfaction that we were clothed and fed; and it was easy to think of a less happy condition. We were in a primitive world. In those short days the world seemed to have grown larger; distance was more terrible. A friend living thirty miles off seemed inaccessible in the snow...

...A train crawling along the valley at a distance was very feeble in our eyes. The strength and purpose were concerted. It was like a thought which is without the implements for action – pathetic and impotent, it was absorbed easily by the vast white land. It shrieked and was lost in a tunnel.

There were only two real things – the cold and the thought of man. The cold expressed itself easily by the whiteness and the leaden shade, the great power of distance, the obliteration of colours, footpaths, landmarks, the silence. Thought was not equally vigorous. It could not sustain itself alone. Men had to walk hard, to talk and even then to change the subjects rapidly...

...Through the land went a dusky river, and in it a black barge with merrily painted prow. It was guided by a brown woman wearing a yellow scarf and she stood boldly up. In the midst of it a man played on a concertina and sang. The barge was light and high in the water; lonely and unnoticed, it threaded the long curves and still the concertina lamented and the tall woman stood boldly up. As it disappeared the dolorous air began to darken and I knew why that barge stood so high and light – because its cargo was merely all the flowers and the birds and the joys and pains of spring, the contentments of summer, the regrets of autumn, of all men and women who had lived through the now dying year; and no one claimed them, no one sought them, no one stood on the bank to salute them.

Chapter 32
Apple Blossom

The stream going helpless and fast between high banks is gloomy until it is turned to bright, airy foam and hanging crystal by the mill; over the restless pool below hangs a hawthorn all white and fragrant and murmurous with bloom...

...Below the mill, to the south, is a land of tall trees standing in conclaves of woods, in whispering groups, or solitary, each in its sovereignty of shade and shining grass; of apple orchards and farmhouses that lie, amidst their haystacks and ricks of straw, in gulfs among the trees; and here and there the yellow skeleton of an oak, encircled by its bark and twigs in piles, thrusts its sharp appealing lines through the neighbouring green...

...The leaning and interwoven apple trees make a white and wine-filled sky by their dense clots of bloom. The swallows embroider the air with their songs and their blue flight. A farmhouse walls are dusky red between the trunks. Overhead, the dim blue sky lets a white cloud roll out at intervals like lilies from a pool. And the blackbird perfects his song indolently; the thrush thinks clearly, sharply aloud, with nothing long drawn out; and the willow wren happily complains for ever – a voice that has wings and must revolve continually through the land to express for one or another the vague pains or pleasures of spring day.

The hedges and the orchard and the copse shut out everything except that, through the ash stems, there is the dim, white sea far off, gentle, like a fantastic tale of men and women that never were, in countries where no discoverer's keel has ever shrieked upon the beach, to which the eye wanders now and then, returning again to the apple blossom and the grass with an added security.

Over the green grass walks the farmer's daughter in a white dress, on her head a mushroom-shaped straw hat that reveals black hair curving like the wings of a dove over the half moon of her brow, and like smoke above her golden nape. She stands still like a straight birch in heavy snow... Her childhood has passed, her maturity has not come. She is a Lady May, careless, proud, at ease. On her lips, indeed, is a childish song; but she has become more strange and distant to children than older women are, for the moment – perhaps for to-day only, since to-morrow she may meet a man and stay late in the lanes. She is as strange as the silver water that gushes among green grass and marigold in the copse, or as the blue swallow slanting down the sunny red wall...

Chapter 34
Autumn Bells

From this beechen hill I can see into and across a long pastoral valley at my feet; its gentle sides running east and west are clothed in wood, and at the western end, where the valley leads straight out into the western sky, a stone city lies. Beyond this valley to the south are the misty, wooded ridges that hint at other valleys. The sunset light has made the landscape immense, but with the help of autumn it has made it simple too; and the sound of bells in the city seems to have created it, rounded and mellow in outline and hue. The little rounds of hedge-tops and knolls in the meadows and gorse in the higher slopes harmonise and run into the larger rounds of the single oaks in the middle distance, and the still larger rounds of the hills and their cloudy woods, and the clouds above them. A hawk in the air might seem to be carving the outlines of some perfect palm tree as he flies...

...The sound of the city bells continues to overflow in bubbles from the valley, up and up, to the round, golden clouds. As if filled with the sound, the city smoke ascends and takes on the colours of the sunset...

Chapter 36
The First Daffodils

And there still were the mountains ahead. Their painful distances of long, white, houseless steeps made the mind suffer the body's agony of toiling there, of being lost there in storm, of being there on a still, dark night. They bred – by means of natural, human sympathy with the difficulty of life among such heights, by the horror of the distance, the coldness, the whiteness – a languor out of which emerged infinite admiration and awe, a sense of beauty even, and unquestionably a kind of pride in the powers of the human spirit that can dwell upon the earth and be the equal of these things, sharing with them the sunlight and the darkness, enduring like them vicissitudes, decay, violent disaster, and like them disbelieving in the future and in death, except for others.

So when at nightfall the snowy hills made a semicircle round the head of an enormous grey estuary, and couched there ten and fifteen and twenty miles away as if the sweep of a puissant arm had made them in clearing a space for the water, they were purely beautiful, while over them a large, simple sunset threw a golden bridge between towering, white, still clouds...

...Then, at length, a hamlet on a hill; first, a farmyard on one side of the road and a farmhouse on the other; then four or five stone cottages; lastly an inn where I thought to sleep. Hardly had I sat down than a pedlar came in and sat beside me. He was a tall, grave man of a gritty, brown complexion and big, straight features; from his simple, heroic face, that seemed an animated piece of crag from his native hills, his blue eyes looked at me with that glance, fearless of any return, which the ordinary man gives to a dog or a labourer...

I asked him about his trade, and he said that he pursued it among these hills and valleys all the winter, setting it aside for work in the fields during the summer months. He was born in one of the cottages close by; so was his father before him and so were his children after him. They were happy there. Death alone disturbed them now and then; and death, he said, was incurable and to be expected. In the spring he spent less on candles and his orchard bloomed, and there was a marriage or two in the church and the ewes dropped their lambs. In the summer it was warm without fires, and they needed no candles, and he had what he desired – what that was he did not say.

Chapter 37
The Mirror

There are a hundred little landscapes on the walls by the roadside – of grey or silver or golden stone, embossed and fretted and chequered by green and gold-pointed mosses, frosty lichens, pale round penny-wort leaves and the orange foliage of cranesbill… Ash tree boles are heavily draped in a fur woven inextricably of dark green and fine-leaved ivy, pale green moss over which hover pendulous drops of gold, silver lichen, and ferns green and amber. Out of rock or wall gushes bright, crystal water, losing itself in moss and herbage below, or received into small stone tanks, and turned into a darkly gleaming, golden creature that throbs under the rain.

Between such walls the road winds into many valleys and over many fells towards the mountains. On either hand rise and fall many hollowed tawny meadows, with boulders embedded in heather and flowering gorse, and over them the pewits plunge and soar and modulate their crying by their speed. Here and there a family of oak or beech stands up in the midst of the fields. Between the meadows there are copses of hazel and oak, and snowdrops underneath, or a crisp, untrodden carpet of old leaves of many dying golds and browns and reds; or an arable field intervenes. The plough climbs the hill, turning the dry, grey soil to purple and brown that is dappled by rooks and gulls…

…The mountains are close ahead, and the billowy moorland prepares me for them, with hawks in all its hollows, and small ponds, the silent sport of winds that roar in crags and hiss in grasses, and then at length a long, blue pool, edged by yellow reeds and receiving the shadow of a steep oak wood. There the wind is lured into many metamorphoses among the ripples – at one moment a writhing, hundred-headed snake, at another the wraith perhaps of a swift skater who was once drowned in the water, and again a swarm of dark bees… There, in its depths, hang the mountain clouds and the immense spaces of sky, with something added by the reflecting water, as if it were some gloomy opiate personality that turned all things to its own tune. Even the joyous, golden fleece of the perfect summer morning are rendered by the pool with touches of wizardry and night, and when a little breeze erases them for a moment it is like a breath of delight sweeping over an immortal pain…

…Looking up, away from the pool, there still are the mountains and the sky, just as they were, still inscrutably holding out in one hand laughter and in one hand tears for us to choose from. I look down and the singing lark, against a white cloud, is singing high and wise things in some contemplative poet's verse. I look up and, behold! the new joy of the spring, unintelligible, and for the moment not asking to be understood, but to be shared…

Chapter 40
The Inn

In the parlour of the inn the singer stood up and sang of how a girl was walking alone in the meadows of spring when she saw a ship going out to sea and heard her true love crying on board; and he sailed to the wars and much he saw in strange countries, but never came back; and still she walks in the meadows and looks out to sea, though she is old, in the spring. He sang without stirring, without expression, except in so far as light and darkness from his own life emerged enmeshed among the deep notes. He might have been delivering an oracle of solemn but ambiguous things. And so in fact he was. By its simplicity and remoteness from life the song set going the potent logic of fancy which would lead many men to diverse conclusions. It excluded nothing of humanity except what baseness its melody might make impossible. The strangeness and looseness of its framework allowed each man to see himself therein...

Chapter 42
A March Haul

The soft, wheat-coloured sand is inscribed far from the water by the black scrawl of the overpast storm. But now the sea is broken by sliding ripples so small that they seem only the last, discontented efforts of the wind to make the surface one perfect floor of glass. The curving, foamy lines waver and swirl and are about to disappear and leave the desired level when others are born unnoticeably. The black hulls of the leaning ships gleam and darken the water...

...Sea and shore are at rest, all but one group of men who are welcoming a little ship that comes in upon the tide, fragrant and stately and a little weary, as with folded arms, solemn also as if she were invading, or perhaps bringing mysterious gifts for the ancient, wintry land.

And now they are hauling in the deeply-laden boat that seems on this fair morning to have brought the spring out of the sea; and that is why they strain grimly to have her safe on the storm-strewn shore. She is laden with flowers, with anemones and primroses for the woods, violets for the banks, marigolds for the brooks and the ungrazed, rushy corners of long fields, daffodils for the stone walls and the short turf at the edges of copses, stitchwort for the hedgerows, bittersweet may for the hawthorns, gold for the willows, white and rosy blossom for the old orchards among the hills, mezereon, jonquils, rockets, plume poppies and snapdragons and roses for the gardens; and the men heave and groan as if they feared lest the sea should still rob them of some...

...Very near now are the lizards of the drowsy nettle-beds, snakes to curl and uncurl upon the sunlit moss, and blue sylphs for the rivulets. All are coming in from this placid sea; and so the men heave, and the white houses begin to glitter, and the golden mist over the sea promises that days shall again be long, and men shall sit carelessly on gates and sleep under the hedge at noon and adventure and make plans in the pure mornings that are at hand.

Chapter 42
Fishing Boats

Against the eastern houses rise up the masses of seven fishing boats in a row, with only such movement as makes the shadow run into the brown and gold, or the gold and brown into the shadow of the sails slowly, like the unfolding of poppies: and under their sides the shadows are profound as if they trailed black velvet mantles that hid the water. For, away from the boats, the unrippled surface of the motionlessly gliding river is of that lugubrious silver that seems to be, not water, but some trick of light upon mere air, such as is seen above summer meadows in the heat. And over all is bent a pale, soft, empurpled sky, and in it a crescent moon.

Up the river came two fishing boats, sleeping, their motion the only proof of the tide...

...The two small, solemn boats still glide in sleep; the others dream at the quay.

Southward, the dark wood sends out the narcotic night as a gift over the land, sowing the seeds of it from the wings of the slow sea birds, from the two incoming boats, silently; and now they have fallen upon good soil in the seven boats on the quay, in the masses of houses, in the arches of the bridge and in the hearts of men, and all things drink oblivion. As I turn away there is a sound of shrill, passionless voices that may be the souls of the oblivious travelling to content somewhere in the rich purple night.

Chapter 43
Clouds over the Sea

The high, partridge-coloured heathland rolls southward, with small ridges as of a sea broken by cross winds, or as if the heather and the hard gorse cushions had grown over ruins which time had not yet smoothed into the right curves of perfect death. A gentle wind changes the grass from silver to green, from green to silver, by depressing or lifting up the blades...

...The sea makes no sound. It changes with the sky so often and so subtly that its variations are to be described, if at all, in terms not of colour but of thought. All such moods as pass through the mind of a lonely man, during long hours in a place where the outside world does not disturb him and he lives on memory and pure reflection, are symbolised by those changes on the surface of the sea. Now it is one thing and now another; the growth is imperceptible and those moods that have passed are as hard to reconstruct as the links of a long, fluctuating reverie. For the most part it is grey, a grey full of meditation and discontent.

The heathland changes with the sea. Both take their thoughts and fancies from the sky. For this is a world of clouds; earth and sea are made by them what they are. They make the sea, and they make the little pools, blue, silver or grey, among the gorse. The clouds are always there; inhabiting a dome that is about fifty miles from the horizon up and down to the opposite horizon; and yet they are never the same.

Chapter 46
The Castle of Carbonek

[Corbenic was the castle which held the Holy Grail in legends of King Arthur]

The castle stands high among vast, sharp-edged waves of sand at the edge of a cliff, and looks at the sea and a long, empty shore. At its feet a little river can be seen running in a narrow valley. A few miles off it rises in the red moorland, then it falls with many a cascade down ladders of crag, broadens among willows where long leaves are all horizontal in the wind, and here by the castle it has reached an elvish, merry old age already, as it moves clear over the brown stones and out among the rocks to the sea...

...The castle stands among pale sand and long plumy grasses. The sand is deep within the hollow and roofless circuit of the broken walls, through which, here and there, come glimpses of sea or sky disconnected from any fragment of the land, so that I seem to stand between the sea and sky. In the summer ivy-leaved toad-flax buds and harebells, most delicate flowers, whisper from the crevices. But nothing lives here now. The trunk of an old tree that once grew through the walls is now so much worn that what it was when it lived is not to be known. Not only is all human life gone from here, but even the signs of its decay are invisible...

...And when the moon is clear, and the tingling sea is vast and alone, this castle on the sand above the grim coast is Carbonek, meet for all adventures and all dreams.

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The South Country
(Extracts)

Dutton, 1906

Chapter 1
The South Country

In using the term [The South Country] I am thinking of all that country which is dominated by the Downs or by the English Channel, or by both; Cornwall and East Anglia have been admitted only for the sake of contrast. Roughly speaking, it is the country south of the Thames and Severn and east of Exmoor, and it includes, therefore, the counties of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, and part of Somerset. East and west across it go ranges of chalk hills, their sides smoothly hollowed by Nature and the marl-burner, or sharply scored by old roads. On their lower slopes they carry the chief woods of the south country, their coombes are often fully fledged with trees, and sometimes their high places are crowned with beech or fir; but they are most admirably themselves when they are bare of all but grass and a few bushes of gorse and juniper and some yew, and their ridges make flowing but infinitely variable clear lines against the sky...

...What I have sought is quiet and as complete a remoteness as possible from towns, whether of manufactures, of markets or of cathedrals. I have used a good many maps in my time, largely to avoid the towns; but I confess that I prefer to do without them and to go, if I have some days before me, guided by the hills or the sun or a stream – or, if I have one day only, in a rough circle, trusting, by taking a series of turnings to the left or a series to the right, to take much beauty by surprise and to return at last to my starting-point. On a dull day or cloudy night I have often no knowledge of the points of the compass. I never go out to see anything. The signboards thus often astonish me...

...I prefer any country church or chapel to Winchester or Chichester or Canterbury Cathedral, just as I prefer “All round my hat,” or “Somer is icumen in,” to Beethoven. Not that I dislike the cathedrals, or that I do not find many pleasures amongst them. But they are incomprehensible and not restful. I feel when I am within them that I know why a dog bays at the moon. They are much more difficult or, rather, I am more conscious in them of my lack of comprehension, than the hills or the sea; and I do not like the showmen, the smell and look of the museum,

the feeling that it is admiration or nothing, and all the well-dressed and flyblown people round about. I sometimes think that religious architecture is a dead language, majestic but dead, that it never was a popular language. Have some of these buildings lived too long, been too well preserved, so as to oppress our little days with too permanent an expression of the passing things?

The truth is that, though the past allures me, and to discover a cathedral for myself would be an immense pleasure, I have no historic sense and no curiosity. I mention these trivial things because they may be important to those who read what I am paid for writing. I have read a great deal of history – in fact, a university gave me a degree out of respect for my apparent knowledge of history – but I have forgotten it all, or it has got into my blood and is present in me in a form which defies evocation or analysis. But as far as I can tell I am pure of history. Consequently I prefer the old brick houses round the cathedral, and that avenue of archaic bossy limes to the cathedral itself with all its turbulent quiet and vague antiquity...

...Unlearned, incurious, but finding deepest ease and joy out of doors, I have gone about the South Country these twenty years and more on foot... the South is tender and will harbour any one; her quiet people resent intrusion quietly, so that many do not notice the resentment. These are the "home" counties. A man can hide away in them. The people are not hospitable, but the land is.

Yet there are days and places which send us in search of another kind of felicity than that which dwells under the Downs, when, for example, the dark wild of Ashdown or of Woolmer, some parcel of heathery land, with tufted pines and pale wandering roads, rises all dark and stormy out of the gentle vale, or on such an evening as when the sky is solemn blue save at the horizon where it is faint gold, and between the blue and the gold, across the north-west, lies an ashen waste of level cloud. This sky and its new moon and evening star below, is barred by the boles of beeches; through them the undulations of deserted ploughland are all but white with dewy grass and weed. Underfoot winds a disused path amid almost overlapping dog's mercury. The earth is like an exhausted cinder, cold, silent, dead...

...Westward, for men of this island, lies the sea; westward are the great hills. In a mere map the west of Britain is fascinating. The great features of that map, which make it something more than a picture to be imperfectly copied by laborious childish pens, are the great promontories of Caernarvon, of Pembroke, of Gower and of Cornwall, jutting out into the western sea, like the features of a grim large face, such a face as is carved on a ship's prow. These protruding features, even on a small-scale map, thrill the mind with a sense of purpose and spirit...

We look out towards them from the high camps at Battlesbury and Barbury: the lines of the Downs go trooping along to them at night. Even in the bosom of the South Country, when the tranquil bells are calling over the corn at twilight, the westward-going hills, where the sun has fallen, draw the heart away and fill us with a desire to go on and on for ever, that same way...

Chapter 2
The End of Winter

There are three sounds in the wood this morning – the sound of the waves that has not died away since the sea carried off church and cottage and cliff and the other half of what was once an inland wood; the sound of trees, a multitudinous frenzied sound, of rustling dead oak-leaves still on the bough, of others tripping along the path like mice, or winding up in sudden spirals and falling again, of dead boughs grating and grinding, of pliant young branches lashing, of finest twigs and fir needles sighing, of leaf and branch and trunk booming like one; and through these sounds, the song of a thrush.

Rain falls and, for a moment only, the dyked marshland below and beyond the wood is pale and luminous with its flooded pools, the sails of windmills climb and plunge, the pale sea is barred with swathes of foam, and on the whistling sands the tall white waves vaunt, lean forward, topple and lie quivering. But the rain increases: the sound and the mist of it make a wall about the world, except the world in the brain and except the thrush's song which, so bright and clear, has a kind of humanity in it by contrast with the huge bulk of the noises of sea and wood...

...Day breaks and sun and wind dance together in the clouds and trees, but without rain. Larks sing over the dark heavy cornland in which the watery furrows shine. The dead drab grasses wave at the feet of the hedgerows. Little pools at meadow corners bring down the sky to the dark earth. Horses nod before the plough. A slight haze exhales from the innumerable rich spongy clods, between the hedges of oak and ash. Now and then shapeless rags of white or snow-grey clouds wander up from the west and for a little while obscure the white mountains of cloud, the blue sky, the silver sun; or the sweet smoke from the fires of hedgers and ditchers rises up against the edge of a copse. The white linen flaps and glows in cottage gardens; the dung cars go by crunching the flints into the mud; and the boots and bells of pony traps make a music forgotten since last February...

...The children have begun to look for violets, and the youngest, being the nearest to them in stature and in nature, has found one. There she stands, four years old, with straight brown legs, her face clear and soft but brown as a new hazel nut, her hair almost of the same colour and paler where the sun has bleached it round her temples and falling over her cheeks and neck; and through it shine eyes of a deeper brown, the hue of the most exquisite flints. The eyes shine, the teeth shine through the ever parted long red lips, the chin shines, the brow shines most of all with a lustre that seems to come from the joyous brain behind.

She is beautiful and straight as the July corn, as the ash tree standing alone by the stream. She is fearless as fire, bold and restless as wind, clear-hearted, simple, bright and gay as a mountain water, in all her actions a daughter of the sun, the wind and the earth. She has loving looks for all. From her fair broad naked foot to her gleaming hair she is, to many, the dearest thing that lives.

Beside her plays a dog, with lifted ears, head on one side, rosy tongue bright against his yellow fur, waiting upon her fancies. His rest and his motion, like hers, are careless and beautiful, gifts of the sun, the wind and the earth....

Towards the end of March there are six nights of frost giving birth to still mornings of weak sunlight, of an opaque yet not definitely misty air. The sky is of a milky, uncertain pale blue without one cloud. Eastward the hooded sun is warming the slope fields and melting the sparkling frost. In many trees the woodpeckers laugh so often that their cry is a song. A grassy ancient orchard has taken possession of the visible sunbeams, and the green and gold of the mistletoe glows on the silvered and mossy branches of apple trees...

...At the lower margin of the wood the overhanging branches form blue caves, and out of these emerge the songs of many hidden birds. I know that there are bland melodious blackbirds of easy musing voices, robins whose earnest song, though full of passion, is but a fragment that has burst through a more passionate silence, hedgesparrows of liquid confiding monotone, brisk acid wrens, chaffinches and yellowhammers saying always the same thing (a dear but courtly praise of the coming season), larks building spires above spires into the sky, thrushes of infinite variety that talk and talk of a thousand things, never thinking, always talking of the moment, exclaiming, scolding, cheering, flattering, coaxing, challenging, with merry-hearted, bold voices that must have been the same in the morning of the world when the forest trees lay, or leaned, or hung, where they fell. Yet I can distinguish neither blackbird, nor robin, nor hedgesparrow, nor any one voice. All are blent into one seething stream of song. It is one song, not many. It is one spirit that sings...

...It is not spring yet. Spring is being dreamed, and the dream is more wonderful and more blessed than ever was spring. What the hour of waking will bring forth is not known. Catch at the dreams as they hover in the warm thick air. Up against the grey tiers of beech stems and the mist of the buds and fallen leaves rise two columns of blue smoke from two white cottages among trees; they rise perfectly straight and then expand into a balanced cloud, and thus make and unmake continually two trees of smoke. No sound comes from the cottages...

All the year round the coombes, dripping, green and still, are cauldrons for the making and unmaking of mists, mists that lie like solid level snow or float diaphanous and horizontal of airiest silk across the moon or the morning sun. The coombes breed whole families, long genealogical trees, of echoes which the child delights to call up from their light sleep; so, too, do fox and owl at night, and the cow on a calm evening...

...Emerging from the coombe, whose sides shut out half the heavens, you see that the west has wonderfully ordered and dressed itself with pale sky and precipitous, dark, modelled clouds and vague woods, and above them the new moon. The blackbirds sing, the dim Downs proceed, and the last shower's drops glitter on the black boughs and pallid primroses. Why should this ever change? At the time it seems that it can never change. A wide harmony of the brain and the earth and the sky has begun, when suddenly darker clouds are felt to have ascended out of the north-west and to have covered the world. The beeches roar with rain. Moon and Downs are lost. The road bubbles and glows underfoot. A distant blackbird still sings hidden in the bosom of the rain like an enchanter hidden by his spells....

...Every tender eve is the blackbird's. He sings out at the end of the long bare ash bough. Beneath him the gloomy crystal water stirs the bronze cresses, and on the banks the white anemones float above the dark misty earth and under the hazel leaves yet drooping in their infancy. The dark hollies catch the last light and shine like water. Behind all, the Downs are clear and so near that I feel as well as see the carving on their smooth and already green flanks. The blackbird gathers up all the low-lit beauty into one carol...

...One morning, very early, when the moon has not set and all the fields are cold and dewy and the woods are still massed and harbouring the night, though a few thorns stand out from their edge in affrighted virgin green, and dim starry thickets sigh a moment and are still, suddenly the silence of the chalky lane is riven and changed into a song. First, it is a fierce impetuous downfall of one clear note repeated rapidly and ending wilfully in mid-burst. Then it is a full-brimmed expectant silence passing into a long ascendant wail,

and almost without intervals another and another, which has hardly ceased when it is dashed out of the memory by the downpour of those rapidly repeated notes, their abrupt end and the succeeding silence.

The swift notes are each as rounded and as full of liquid sweetness as a grape, and they are clustered like the grape. But they are wild and pure as mountain water in the dawn. They are also like steel for coldness and penetration. And their onset is like nothing else: it is the nightingale's. The long wail is like a shooting star: even as that grows out of the darkness and draws a silver line and is no more, so this glides out of the silence and curves and is no more.

And yet it does not die, nor does that liquid onset. They and their ghosts people each hanging leaf in the hazel thicket so that the silence is closely stored…

…Presently the rain is only a glittering of needles in the sun. For the sky is all one pale grey cloud, darker at the lowest edge where it trails upon the downs and veils their summits, except in the south-east. There the edge is lifted up over a narrow pane of silver across which fleet the long slender fringes of the clouds.

Through this pane the sun sends a broad cascade of light, and up into this the fields and the Down beyond rise and are transfigured, the fields into a lake of emerald, the Down – here crowned by trees in a cluster – into a castle of pearl set upon the borders of the earth. Slowly this pane is broadened; the clouds are plumped into shape, are illumined, are distinguished from one another by blue vales of sky, until at length the land is all one gleam of river and pool and grass and leaf and polished bough, whether swollen into hills or folded into valleys or smoothed into plain…

…The snow falls again and the voices of the little summer birds are buried in the silence of the flakes that whirl this way and that aimlessly, rising and falling and crossing or darting horizontally, making the trees sway wearily and their light tops toss and their numbers roar continually in the legions of the wind that whine and moan and shriek their hearts out in the solitary house roofs and doors and round about. The silence of snow co-exists with this roar. One wren pierces it with a needle of song and is gone. The earth and sky are drowning in night and snow.

Chapter 3
Spring

In the garden the daffodils bend criss-cross under snow that cannot quite conceal the yellow flowers. But the snow has ceased. The sky is at first pale without a cloud and tender as from a long imprisonment; it deepens in hue as the sun climbs and gathers force.

The crooked paths up the Downs begin to glitter like streaks of lightning. The thrushes sing. From the straight dark beeches the snow cannot fall fast enough in great drops, in showers, in masses that release the boughs with a quiver and a gleam. The green leaves close to the ground creep out, and against them the snow is blue...

...Water drips and trickles and leaps and gushes and oozes everywhere, and extracts the fragrance of earth and green and flowers under the heat that hastens to undo the work of the snow.
The air is hot and wet. The snow is impatient to be water again. It still makes a cape over the briars and brambles, and there is a constant drip and steam and song of drops from the crossing branches in the cave below. Loud sounds the voice of leaf and branch and imprisoned water in the languor and joy of their escape. On every hand there is a drip and gush and ooze of water, a crackle and rustle and moan of plants and trees unfolding and unbending and greeting air and light; a close, humid, many-perfumed host; wet gloom and a multitudinous glitter; a movement of water and of the shadows like puffs of smoke that fleet over the white fields under the clouds.

And over and through it a cuckoo is crying and crying, first overhead, then afar, and gradually near and retreating again...

...Delicate snails climb the young stalks of grass and flower, and their houses, pearly, chocolate, tawny, pure or ringed or chequered, slide after them. The leaves, with their indescribable charm of infinitely varied division, of wild clematis, maple, briar, hawthorn, and many more, come forth into the rain which hangs on their drooping points and on the thorns. The lichen enjoys the enduring mist of the woods; the blackthorns are crusted and bearded with lichens of fleshy green-silver and ochre which grow even on the thorns themselves and round the new leaves and flowers. The birch is now an arrested shower of green, but not enough to hide the white limbs of the nymph in the midst of it...

...Even the motor road is pleasant now when the nightingales sing out of the bluebell thickets under oak and sweet chestnut and hornbeam and hazel. Presently it crosses a common, too small ever to draw a crowd, a rough up-and-down expanse of gorse and thorn, pierced by grassy paths and surrounded by turf that is rushy and mounded by old ant heaps; and here, too, there are nightingales singing alone, the sweeter for the contrast between their tangled silent bowers and the sharp, straight white road. The common is typical of the lesser commons of the south...

...Then the North Downs come in sight, above a church tower amid stateliest pale-foliaged beeches and vast undulations of meadow. They are suffused in late sunshine, their trees misty and massed, under a happy sky. Those beeches lie below the road, lining the edge of one long meadow.

The opposite sun pours almost horizontal beams down upon the perfectly new leaves so as to give each one a yellow-green glow and to some a silver shimmer about the shadowy boles. For the moment the trees lose their anchor in the solid earth. They are floating, wavering, shimmering, more aërial and pure and wild than birds or any visible things, than aught except music and the fantasies of the brain…

…Newly dressed in the crystal of the rain the landscape recalls the earlier spring; the flowers of white wood-sorrel, the pink and white anemone and cuckoo flower, the thick-clustered, long-stalked primroses and darker cowslips with their scentless sweetness pure as an infant's breath; the solitary wild cherry trees flowering among still leafless beech; the blackbirds of twilight and the flower-faced owls; the pewits wheeling after dusk; the jonquil and daffodil and arabis and leopard's bane of cottage gardens; the white clouds plunged in blue floating over the brown woods of the hills; the delicate thrushes with speckled breasts paler than their backs, motionless on dewy turf; and all the joys of life that come through the nostrils from the dark, not understood world which is unbolted for us by the delicate and savage fragrances of leaf and flower and grass and clod, of the plumage of birds and fur of animals and breath and hair of women and children.

How can our thoughts, the movements of our bodies, our human kindnesses, ever fit themselves with this blithe world?…

But at morning twilight I see the moon low in the west like a broken and dinted shield of silver hanging long forgotten outside the tent of a great knight in a wood, and inside are the knight's bones clean and white about his rusted sword…

Chapter 5
Sussex

It is only too easy for the pheasant lords to plant larch in parallelograms: to escape from them it is necessary to go in amongst them. Yet there are parts of the forest large and dark and primeval in look, with a few poor isolated houses and a thin file of telegraph posts crossing it among the high gloomy pines and down to the marshy hollows, to the strewn gold of dwarf willows, and up again to the deserted wooden windmill, the empty boarded cottage, the heather-thatched sheds at the southern edge of the moor. Looking at this tract of wild land the mind seems to shed many centuries of civilization and to taste something of the early man's alarm in the presence of the uncultured hills – an alarm which is in us tempered so as to aid an impression of the sublime…

…The long moist meadows flow among the woods up and down from farm to farm and spire to tower. Each farmhouse group is new – this one is roofed and walled with tiles; and opposite is a tangle of grass and gorse, with fowls and hen-coops amongst it, a sallowy pond, a pile of faggots, some crooked knees of oak, some fresh-peeled timber: old grey hop poles lean in a sheaf all round a great oak. The gates are of good unpainted oak, and some few are of a kind not often seen elsewhere, lower than a hurdle and composed of two stout parallel bars united by twenty uprights and by two pieces meeting to form a V across these. The gates deserve and would fill a book by themselves.

Green lucent calipers of flags shadow one another in little wayside ponds, white-railed; for this is the Weald, the land of small clay ponds. The hazels are the nightingale's. In many of the oak woods the timber carriages have carved a way through primroses and bluebells deep into the brown clay.

The larger views are of cloudy, oak woods, ridge behind ridge, and green corn or grass and grey ploughland between; and of the sun pouring a molten cataract out of dark machicolated clouds on to one green field that glows a moment and is insignificant again: the lesser are of little brambly precipitous sandpits by the road, of a white mill at a crossing, of carved yews before black-timbered inns, of a starling that has learned the curlew's call perched on a cottage roof, of abeles all rough silver with opening leaf shivering along the grass-bordered evening road, of two or three big oaks in a meadow corner and in their shadow unblemished parsley and grasses bowed as if rushing in the wind.

At an inn door stands a young labourer, tall and straight but loosely made, his nose even and small, his eyes blue and deep set, his lips like those of Antinous, his face ruddy and rough-grained, his hair short and brown and crisp upon his fair round head; his neck bound by a voluminous scarf (with alternate lozenges of crimson and deep green divided by white lines) that is gathered beneath his chin by a brass ring and thence flows down under his blue coat; his trousers of grey cord, dirty and patched with drab to a weathered stone colour, fitting almost tightly to his large thighs and calves and reaching not too near to his small but heavily-shod feet. A prince – a slave…

[Antinous was a young Greek man who was a favourite of the Roman Emperor Hadrian; after his mysterious early death he was worshipped by some, and was much portrayed in Roman sculpture.]

Chapter 6
A Return to Nature

[Thomas relates the tale of a man he met, a self-educated farm labourer]:

"The worst time of all was two or three years after my father's death. I spent most of my poor earnings on clothes; I took the trouble to talk and smoke and think as much as possible like the other nine young men in the railway carriage that took me into the city;

learnt their horrible, cowardly scorn for those who were poor or outlandish, and for all things that were not like those in their own houses or in those of the richer people of their acquaintance or envy. We were slaves, and we gilded our collars."...

"Sometimes on a Saturday or Sunday I broke away in a vague unrest, and walked alone to the pretty places where my father and mother had taken me as a little boy. Most of them I had not seen for five or six years. My visits were often formal. I walked out and was glad to be back to the lights of the street, the strong tea, the newspaper and the novel. But one day I went farther than usual to a wood where we used to go without interference and, after finding all the blackbirds' and thrushes' and robins' nests within reach, boil a kettle and have tea. I had never in that wood seen any man or woman except my father and mother; never heard a voice except theirs – my father perhaps reading Wordsworth aloud – and the singing birds' and the moorhens' in the pond at the edge; it used to shut out everything but what I had learned to love most, sunshine and wind and flowers and their love.

"When I saw it again I cried; I really could not help it. For a road had been made alongside of it, and the builder's workmen going to and fro had made a dozen gaps in the hedge and trodden the wood backward and forward and broken down the branches and made it noisome.

"Worse than all, the field, the golden field where I used to lie among the buttercups and be alone with the blue sky – where I first felt the largeness and dearness and nearness of the blue sky as a child of eight and put up my hand in my delight to draw it through the soft blue substance that seemed so near – the field was enclosed, a chapel built; it was a cemetery for all the unknown herd, strange to one another, strange to every one else, that filled the new houses spreading over the land. At first I was for running away at once. But the sight made me faint-hearted and my legs dragged, and it was all I could do to get home – I mean, to my lodgings.

"However, I was quite different after that. I was ashamed of my ways, and now spent all my spare time and money in going out into the country as far as possible, and reading the old books and the new ones that I could hear of in the same spirit. I lived for these things. It was now that I knew my slavery."...

..."Now again returns that old feeling of my childhood – I felt it when I had left my cousin – I have felt it suddenly not only in London, but on the top of the Downs and by the sea; the immense loneliness of the world, as if the next moment I might be outside of all visible things. You know how it is, on a still summer evening, so warm that the ploughman and his wife have not sent their children to bed, and they are playing, and their loud voices startle the thought of the woods; my feeling is like that, space and quiet and my own littleness stupendously exaggerated. I have wished I could lay down my thoughts and desires and noises and stirrings and cease to trouble that great peace..."

...I saw him again a few years later.

London was hot and dry, and would have been parched, cracked and shrivelled had it been alive instead of dead. The masonry was so dry that the eye wearied of it before the feet wearied of the pavement, and both desired the rain that makes the city at one with Nature. The plane-trees were like so many captives along the streets, shackled to the flagstones, pelted with dust, humiliated, all their rusticity ravished though not forgotten...

[Thomas sees a procession in a London street]:

In front marched a tall son of man, with white black-bearded face, long black hair, more like plumage than hair in its abundance and form, and he wore no hat. He walked straight as a soldier, but with long, slow steps, and his head hung so that his bare breast supported it, for he had no coat and his shirt was half open. He had knee-breeches, bare dark legs, and shoes on his feet. His hands were behind his back, as if he were handcuffed.

Two men walked beside him in other men's black clothes and black hats worn grey – two unnoticeable human beings, snub-nosed, with small, rough beards, dull eyes, shuffling gait. Two others followed them close, each carrying one of the poles of a small white banner inscribed with the words: "The Unemployed." These also were unnoticeable, thin, grey, bent, but young, their clothes, their faces, their hair, their hats almost the same dry colour as the road. It was impossible to say what their features were, because their heads hung down and their hats were drawn well on to their heads, and their eyes were unseen. They could not keep step, nor walk side by side, and their banner was always shaky and always awry.

Next, in no order, came three others of the same kind, shambling like the rest, of middle height, moderately ill-dressed, moderately thin, their hands in their pockets. In one of these I recognized the man who was born in Caermarthenshire...

[He does not speak to the man. On the train out of London he muses on the view]:

I like to think how easily Nature will absorb London as she absorbed the mastodon, setting her spiders to spin the winding-sheet and her worms to fill in the grave, and her grass to cover it pitifully up, adding flowers – as an unknown hand added them to the grave of Nero. I like to see the preliminaries of this toil where Nature tries her hand at mossing the factory roof, rusting the deserted railway metals, sowing grass over the deserted platforms and flowers of rose-bay on ruinous hearths and walls. It is a real satisfaction to see the long narrowing wedge of irises that runs alongside and between the rails of the South-Eastern and Chatham Railway almost into the heart of London....

...The ridges of trees high in the mist are very grim. The isolated trees stand cloaked in conspiracies here and there about the fields. The houses, even whole villages, are translated into terms of unreality as if they were carved in air and could not be touched; they are empty and mournful as skulls or churches. There is no life visible; for the ploughmen and the cattle are figures of light dream. All is soft and grey. The land has drunken the opiate mist and is passing slowly and unreluctantly into perpetual sleep. Trees and houses are drowsed beyond awakening or farewell. The mind also is infected, and gains a sort of ease from the thought that an eternal and universal rest is at hand without any cry or any pain...

...The turtle-doves have come and the oaks are budding bronze in the Weald. The steep roadside banks are cloaked in grass, violet, and primrose still, and robin-run-in-the-hedge and stitchwort and cuckoo flowers, and the white-throats talk in the hazel copses. A brooklet runs in a hollow that would almost hold the Thames, and crossing the road fills a rushy mill-pond deep below, and makes a field all golden and shining with marigold. Just beyond, a gnarled lime avenue leads to a grey many-windowed house of stone within a stately park. Opposite the gate an old woman sits on the grass, her feet in the dust at the edge of the road; motor-cars sprinkle her and turn her black to drab; she sits by the wayside eternally, expecting nothing...

Chapter 8
June

Now day by day, indoors and out of doors, the conquest of spring proceeds to the music of the conquerors. One evening the first chafer comes to the lamp, and his booming makes the ears tremble with dim apprehension. He climbs, six-legged and slow, up the curtain, supporting himself now and then by unfurling his wings, or if not he falls with a drunken moan, then begins to climb again, and at last blunders about the room like a ball that must strike something, the white ceiling, the white paper, the lamp, and when he falls he rests. In his painful climbing he looks human, as perhaps a man looks angelic to an angel; but there is nothing lovelier and more surprising than the unfurling of his pinions like a magic wind-blown cloak out of that hard mail...

...June puts bronze and crimson on many of her leaves. The maple-leaves and many of the leaves of thorn and bramble and dogwood are rosy; the hazel-leaves are rosy-brown; the herb-robert and parsley are rose-red; the leaves of ash and holly are dark lacquered. The copper beeches, opulently sombre under a faintly yellowed sky, seem to be the sacred trees of the thunder that broods above.

Presently the colour of the threat is changed to blue, which soiled white clouds pervade until the whole sky is woolly white and grey and moving north. There is no wind, but there is a roar as of a hurricane in the trees far off; soon it is louder, in the trees not so remote; and in a minute the rain has traversed half-a-mile of woods, and the distant combined roar is swallowed up by the nearer pattering on roof and pane and leaf, the dance of leaves, the sway of branches, the trembling of whole trees under the flood. The rain falls straight upon the hard road, and each drop seems to leap upward from it barbed. Great drops dive among the motionless, dusty nettles. The thunder unloads its ponderous burden upon the resonant floor of the sky; but the sounds of the myriad leaves and grass-blades drinking all but drowns the boom, the splitting roar, and the echo in the hills....

...I once saw a girl of seven or eight years walking alone down a long grassy path in an old garden. On one hand rose a peaceful long slope of down; on the other, beyond the filberts, a high hedge shut out all but the pale blue sky, with white clouds resting on its lower mist like water-lilies on a still pool. Turning her back to the gabled house and its attendant beeches, she walked upon the narrow level path of perfect grass. The late afternoon sun fell full upon her, upon her brown head and her blue tunic, and upon the flowers of the borders at either side, the lowly white arabis foaming wild, the pansy, the white narcissus, the yellow jonquil and daffodil, the darker smouldering wallflowers, the tall yellow leopard's-bane, the tufts of honesty among the still dewy leaves of larkspur and columbine.

But here and there, as she walked, the light was dimmed by the clusters of cool white humming cherry-blossom hanging out of the hot sky. In front of her the cherry-trees seemed to meet and make a corridor of dark stems on either hand, paved green and white and gold, and roofed by milky white clouds that embowered the clear, wild warble of black-caps. Farther on, the flowers ceased and the grass was shadowed by new-leaved beeches, and at length involved in an uncertain mist of trees and shadows of trees, and there the cuckoo cried. For the child there was no end to the path...

...Knowledge aids joy by discipline, by increasing the sphere of enjoyment, by showing us in animals, in plants, for example, what life is, how our own is related to theirs, showing us, in fact, our position, responsibilities and debts among the other inhabitants of the earth. Pursued out of doors where those creatures, moving and still, have their life and their beauty, knowledge is real. The senses are invited there to the subtlest and most delightful training, and have before them an immeasurable fresh field, not a field like that of books, full of old opinions, but one with which every eye and brain can have new vital intercourse. It is open to all to make discoveries as to the forms and habits of things, and care should be taken to preserve the child from the most verbose part of modern literature, that which repeats in multiplied ill-chosen words stale descriptions of birds and flowers...

Chapter 9
History and the Parish

There are many places which nobody can look upon without being consciously influenced by a sense of their history. It is a battlefield, and the earth shows the scars of its old wounds; or a castle or cathedral of distinct renown rises among the oaks; or a manor house or cottage, or tomb or woodland walk that speaks of a dead poet or soldier. Then, according to the extent or care of our reading and the clearness of our imagination, we can pour into the groves or on the turf tumultuous or silent armies, or solitary man or woman...

...In some places history has wrought like an earthquake, in others like an ant or mole; everywhere, permanently; so that if we but knew or cared, every swelling of the grass, every wavering line of hedge or path or road were an inscription, brief as an epitaph, in many languages and characters. But most of us know only a few of these unspoken languages of the past, and only a few words in each. Wars and parliaments are but dim, soundless, and formless happenings in the brain; toil and passion of generations produce only an enriching of the light within the glades, and a solemnizing of the shadows...

...But because we are imperfectly versed in history, we are not therefore blind to the past. The eye that sees the things of to-day, and the ear that hears, the mind that contemplates or dreams, is itself an instrument of an antiquity equal to whatever it is called upon to apprehend... of these many folds in our nature the face of the earth reminds us, and perhaps, even where there are no more marks visible upon the land than there were in Eden, we are aware of the passing of time in ways too difficult and strange for the explanation of historian and zoologist and philosopher...

...These are the elements – pure earth and wind and sunlight – out of which beauty and joy arise, original and ancient, for ever young. Their presence restores us not to the Middle Ages, not to the days of Mr. Doughty's heroic princes and princesses of Britain, not to any dim archæologist's world of reeking marsh and wood, of mammoth and brutish men, but to a region out of space and out of time in which life and thought and physical health are in harmony with sun and earth, fragrant as the flowers in the grass, blithe as the grasshopper, swift as the hares, divine...

[On Cornwall:]

All along the coast (and especially where it is lofty and houseless, and on the ledges of the crags the young grey gulls unable to fly bob their heads seaward and try to scream like their parents who wheel far and near with double yodeling cry), there are many rounded barrows looking out to sea. And there are some amidst the sandhills, bare and corrugated by the wind and heaved up like a feather-bed, their edges golden against the blue sky or mangily covered by drab marram grass that whistles wintrily; and near by the blue sea, slightly roughened as by a barrow, sleeps calm but foamy among cinder-coloured isles; donkeys graze on the brown turf, larks rise and fall and curlews go by; a cuckoo sings among the deserted mines.

But the barrows are most noble on the high heather and grass. The lonely turf is full of lilac scabious flowers and crimson knapweed among the solid mounds of gorse. The brown-green-grey of the dry summer grass reveals myriads of the flowers of thyme, of stonecrop yellow and white, of pearly eyebright, of golden lady's fingers, and the white or grey clover with its purest and earthiest of all fragrances. Here and there steep tracks descend slantwise among the thrift-grown crags to the sea, or promise to descend but end abruptly in precipices.

On the barrows themselves, which are either isolated or in a group of two or three, grow thistle and gorse. They command mile upon mile of cliff and sea. In their sight the great headlands run out to sea and sinking seem to rise again a few miles out in a sheer island, so that they resemble couchant beasts with backs under water but heads and haunches upreared...

...The small stone-hedged ploughlands amidst brake and gorse do but accentuate the wildness of the land from which they have been won. The deserted mines are frozen cries of despair as if they had perished in conflict with the waste; and in a few years their chimneys standing amidst rotted woodwork, the falling masonry, the engine rusty, huge and still (the abode of rabbits, and all overgrown with bedstraw, the stern thistle and wizard henbane) are in keeping with the miles of barren land, littered with rough silvered stones among heather and furze, whose many barrows are deep in fern and bramble and foxglove. The cotton grass raises its pure nodding white. The old roads dive among still more furze and bracken and bramble and foxglove, and on every side the land grows no such crop as that of grey stones. Even in the midst of occasional cornfield or weedless pasture a long grey upright stone speaks of the past...

...On every hand lie cromlech, camp, circle, hut and tumulus of the unwritten years. They are confused and mingled with the natural litter of a barren land. It is a silent Bedlam of history, a senseless cemetery or museum, amidst which we walk as animals must do when they see those valleys full of skeletons where their kind are said to go punctually to die. There are enough of the dead; they outnumber the living; and there those trite truths burst with life and drum upon the tympanum with ambiguous fatal voices.

At the end of this many-barrowed moor, yet not in it, there is a solitary circle of grey stones, where the cry of the past is less vociferous, less bewildering, than on the moor itself, but more intense. Nineteen tall, grey stones stand round a taller, pointed one that is heavily bowed, amidst long grass and bracken and furze. A track passes close by, but does not enter the circle; the grass is unbent except by the weight of its bloom. It bears a name that connects it with the assembling and rivalry of the bards of Britain. Here, under the sky, they met, leaning upon the stones, tall, fair men of peace, but half-warriors, whose songs could change ploughshare into sword. Here they met...

It is strange to pass from these monumental moors straight to the sea which records the moments, not the years or the centuries. In fine weather especially its colour – when, for example, it is faintly corrugated and of a blue that melts towards the horizon into such a hue that it is indistinguishable from the violet wall of dawn – is a perpetual astonishment on account of its unearthliness and evanescence. The mind does not at once accept the fact that here underneath our eyes is, as it were, another sky... But a calm sea is incomparable except to moods of the mind. It is then as remote from the earth and earthly things as the sky, and the remoteness is the more astonishing because it is almost within our grasp...

In Cornwall many of the women looked less English than the men. The noticeable men were fair-haired and, of fair complexion, blue-eyed and rather small-headed, upright and of good bearing. The noticeable women had black hair, pale, seldom swarthy, faces, very dark eyes. Perhaps the eyes were more foreign than anything else in them: they were singularly immobile and seldom changed in expression with their voices…

The eyes of most human beings are causes of bewilderment and dismay if curiously looked at; but the strangest I ever saw were in an old Cornish woman. They were black and round as a child's, with a cold brightness that made them seem not of the substance of other eyes, but like a stone. They were set in a narrow, bony face of parchment among grey hair crisp and disarrayed. I saw them only for a few minutes while I asked a few questions about the way, and it was as much as I could do to keep up the conversation, so much did those motionless eyes invite me to plunge into an abyss of human personality – such intense loneliness and strangeness did they create, since they proclaimed shrilly and clearly that beyond a desire to be fed and clothed we had nothing in common. Had they peered up at me out of a cromlech or hut at Bosporthennis I could not have been more puzzled and surprised…

Coming into a mining village one day and wanting tea, I asked a woman who was drawing water from a farmyard well if she could make me some, thinking she was the farmer's wife. She said she would, but took me to one of a small row of cottages over the way, where her husband was half-naked in the midst of his Saturday wash. Taking no notice of him she led me into the sitting-room and, with a huge loaf held like a violin, began buttering and cutting thin slices while she talked to me, to the little children and to her husband, from the adjacent kitchen. She was tall, straight as a pillar, black-haired, with clear untanned but slightly swarthy skin, black eyes, kindly gleaming cheeks and red lips smiling above her broad breast and hips. Her clothes were black but in rags that hardly clung to her shoulders and waist. She was barely five and twenty, but had six young children about her, one in a cradle by the hearth and another still crawling at her feet.

Her only embarrassment came when I asked to pay for my tea – she began adding up the cost, a pennyworth of bread and butter, a halfpennyworth of tea, etc.! The kitchen consisted simply of a large grate and baking oven, plain tables and chairs on a flagged floor. But the sitting-room was a museum – with photographs of a volunteer corps, of friends and relations on the wall over the fire; foxgloves in jam-pots surrounded by green crinkled paper in the fireplace; on the mantelpiece, cheap little vases and scraps of ore and more photographs…

Chapter 11
Hampshire

The brisk wind was thymy from the Downs. The ragwort was in its glory; it rose tall as a man in one straight leap of dark-foliaged stem, and then crowned itself in the boldest and most splendid yellows derived from a dark golden disc and almost lemon rays; it was as if Apollo had come down to keep the flocks of a farmer on these chalk hills and his pomp had followed him out of the sky...

...There was apparently comfort, abundance and quiet everywhere. They were seen in the rickyards where grand haystacks, newly thatched, stood around ancient walnut-trees... most unctuous of all in their expression of the ceremonious leisure of the day and the maturity of the season were the cart-horses. They leaned their large heads benignly over the rails or gates; their roan or chestnut flanks were firm and polished; manes, tails and fetlocks spotless; now and then they lifted up their feet and pressed their toes into the ground...

...In a bay of turf alongside the track, just large enough for a hut and thickly sheltered by an oak, though the south-west sun crept in, was a camp. Under the oak and at the edge of the tangled bramble and briar and bracken was a low purple light from those woodside flowers, self-heal and wood-betony. A perambulator with a cabbage in it stood at one corner; leaning against it was an ebony-handled umbrella and two or three umbrella-frames; underneath it an old postman's bag containing a hammer and other tools. Close by stood half a loaf on a newspaper, several bottles of bright water, a black pot of potatoes ready for boiling, a tin of water steaming against a small fire of hazel twigs. Out on the sunny grass two shirts were drying. In the midst was the proprietor, his name revealed in fresh chalk on the side of his perambulator: "John Clark, Hampshire."

He had spent his last pence on potatoes and had been given the cabbage. No one would give him work on a Sunday. He had no home, no relations. Being deaf, he did not look for company. So he stood up, to get dry and to think, think, think, his hands on his hips, while he puffed at an empty pipe. During his meditation a snail had crawled half-way up his trousers, and was now all but down again. He was of middle height and build, the crookedest of men, yet upright, like a branch of oak which comes straight with all its twistings...

Labourer, soldier, labourer, tinker, umbrella man, he had always wandered, and knew the South Country between Fordingbridge and Dover as a man knows his garden. Every village, almost every farmhouse, especially if there were hops on the land, he knew, and could see with his blue eyes as he remembered them and spoke their names. I never met a man who knew England as he did...

The outdoor life had brought him rheumatism, but a clear brain also and a wild purity, a physical cleanliness too, and it was like being with a well-kept horse to stand beside him; and this his house was full of the scent of the bracken growing under the oaks. Earth had not been a kind but a stern mother, like some brawny full-bosomed housewife with many children, who spends all her long days baking and washing, and making clothes, and tending the sick one, and cutting bread and pouring out tea, and cuffing one and cuddling another and listening to one's tale, and hushing their unanimous chatter with a shout or a bang of her enormous elbow on the table...

Chapter 12
Children of Earth – Hampshire and Sussex

The kestrel swayed and lunged in his flight. Branches gleamed, hard and nervously moving. Rain-pools glittered, and each brittle stem and flower of a dead plant, each grass-blade and brown lock of beech or oak-leaf, gave out its little noise to join the oceanic murmur of the earth. Now and then a dead leaf took flight, rose high and went out over the valley till it was invisible, never descending, in search of the moon.

Near the horizon a loose white drift went rapidly just over the summits of the highest woods; but in the upper air were the finest flowers of the wind – hard white flowers of cloud, flowers and mad tresses and heaven-wide drapery of gods, and some small and white like traveller's-joy, as if up there also they travelled and knew the houseless joy along the undulating highway of the deep wind. And the little house was as a watch-tower planted in the middle swirl of the current that was scouring valley and wood and sky and water and, as far as it could, the dull eyes and duller brains of men.

In summer I saw it at the end of one of those days of sun and wind and perfectly clear air when the earth appears immensely heavy and great and strong – so that for a moment it is possible to know the majesty of its course in space – and the sheep very light, like mere down, as they crawl in a flock over the grass. Swathes and wisps of white cloud were strewn over the high blue sky as if by haymakers.

But the lanes were deep, and for miles at a time nearly shut out the sky, and all the day the lanes were empty and wholly mine. Here the high banks were thickly grown with wild parsnip, and its umbels of small yellow-green flowers, fragrant and a little over-sweet, were alive and, as it were, boiling over with bees and the sunniest flies. There the hazel was laced with white bryony, whose leaves and pale tendrils went hovering and swimming and floating over the hedge. In one place an elder-tree stood out of the hedge, stiff, with few branches, and every leaf upon them red as a rose. Wherever there was a waste strip beside the road the tall yellow ragwort grew densely, each of the nearer flowers as hard and clear as brass,

the farther ones dimly glowing and half lost in the green mist of their leaves and the haze of the brightness of their multitudes.

Where the road changed into an unused lane the grass was tall, and under the hazels, yet fully seen, were the wild basil and marjoram and centaury and knapweed and wood-betony, and over them hung moths of green crimson-spotted silk. There, too, were the plants that smell most of the dry summer – the white parsleys and the white or rosy cow-parsnip, the bedstraws white and yellow, the yellow mugwort.

Now and then the hedges gave way and on either hand was open turf; sloping steep and rough on one side, grooved by ancient paths of men and cattle, dotted by thorns, with the freshly flowering traveller's-joy over them, ash-trees at the top; on the other side, level, skirted by cloudy wych-elms and having at one corner a white inn half shadowed by a walnut, and two sycamores and cattle below them; and at another, a stately autumnal house veiled by the cedars and straight yews on its darkly glowing lawn.

All these things I saw as if they had been my own, as if I were going again slowly through old treasures long hidden away, so that they were memoried and yet unexpected. Nothing was too small to be seen, and ascending the chalk hill among the beeches every white flint was clear on the sward, each in its different shape – many chipped as the most cunning chisel would be proud to chip them; one, for example, carved by the loss of, two exquisitely curved and balanced flakes into the likeness of a moth's expanded upper wings....

Chapter 13
August – Going West

Rain begins as I set out and mount under the beeches. The sky is dark as a ploughed field, but the leaves overhead are full of light like precious stones. The rain keeps the eyes down so that they see one by one the little things of the wayside, the strings of the grey-green and of the scarlet bryony berries, the stony bark of the young ash unveiled by the moving leaves, the million tall straight shoots which the strong nature of ash and hazel has soared into since the spring...

Just here are many grassy lanes between hazel and blackthorn hedges. An old farmhouse with ivied chimneys and ten blind windows in front stands bereaved with weedy garden, but for miles the air sounds with poultry and the building of bungalows in deal and iron for strangers. It is not a stranger that rides by. I think his fathers must have been in this land when Wolf Hanger was not a strange name for the beeches over the hill. He is a tall straight man with long narrow face, clear, not too irregular features, sallow complexion, black hair and black drooping moustache, and flashing eyes as dark as privet berries in autumn dews...

…The road is gay with red polished fruit and equally red soft leaves, with darkest purple and bronze and wine-red and green berries and leaves, and beam foliage still pure green and white.

So high now are the unkempt hedges that the land is hid and only the sky appears above the coloured trees: except at a meeting of ways when a triangular patch of turf is sacred to burdock, ragwort and thistle and – touching the dust of the road – the lowly silverweed; an oak overhangs, yet the little open space admits a vision of the elephantine Downs going west in the rain. In a moment the world is once again this narrow one of the high-hedged lane, where I see and touch with the eye and enjoy the shapes of each bole and branch in turn, their bone-like shapes, their many colours of the wood itself, wrinkled and grooved, or overlaid by pale green mould, silver lichen or dark green moss. Each bend in the road is different…

…And then the green way runs into a Roman road, and in the twilight and rain I can see many other narrow ancient tracks winding into the white road as straight as a sword, losing themselves in it like children in a dragon's mouth. The turf alongside is mounded by tumuli; and against the hedge a gypsy family pretend to shelter from the windy rain; the man stands moody, holding the pony, the women crouch with chins upon knees, the children laugh and will not be still. They belong to the little roads that are dying out: they hate the sword-like shelterless road, the booming cars that go straight to the city in the vale below. They are less at home there than the swallows that haunt the leeward sides of the sycamores…

…[The road] creeps in and out like an old cottage woman at a fair and sees everything. It sees all the farms and barns. It sees the portly brick house and its gardens bounded by high fruit walls and its walnut-trees in front, on the bank of a golden brook that sings under elms and sallows; the twenty-four long white windows, the decent white porch, the large lawns, the pond and its waterfowl sounding in the reeds, the oaks and acacias, the horse mowing the lawn lazily, the dogs barking behind the Elizabethan stables. It sees the broad grassy borders – for this is not a road cut by a skimping tailor – and the woods of oak and ash and hazel which the squirrel owns, chiding, clucking and angrily flirting his tail at those who would like to share his nuts.

At every crossing road these grassy borders, which are in places as broad as meadows so that cattle graze under their elms, spread out into a green; and round about are yellow thatched cottages with gardens full of scarlet bean flowers and yellow dahlias; and a pond reflects the blue and white sky, wagtails flutter at the edge and geese launch themselves as if for a voyage. The only sound upon the road is made by the baker's cart carrying a fragrant load.

… As the sun sets, dull crimson, at the foot of a muslin of grey and gold which his course has crimsoned, the low clouds on the horizon in the north become a deathly blue white belonging neither to day nor to night, while overhead the light-combed cloudlets are touched faintly with flame. Now the glory and the power of the colour in the west, and now the pallid north, fill the brain to overflowing with the mingling of distance, of sublime motion, and of hue, and intoxicate it and give it wings, until at last when the west is crossed by long sloping strata as of lava long cooled they seem the bars of a cage impassable.

But even they are at last worn away and the sky is as nothing compared with earth. For there, as I move, the infinite greys and yellows of the crops, the grass, the bare earth, the clumps of firs, the lines of beeches and oaks, play together in the twilight, and the hills meet and lose their lines and flow into one another and build up beautiful lines anew, the outward and visible signs of a great thought. Out of the darkness in which they are submerged starts a crying of pewits and partridges; and overhead and close together the wild duck fly west into the cold gilded blue…

Chapter 14
An Old House and a Book – Wiltshire

The country is deserted in the rain, and I have the world to myself, a world of frenzied rain among the elms of the lowland, an avenue of elms up to a great house, hidden sheep tinkling and bleating, shepherds muffled, huge slopes of grass and pearled clover above a coombe where a grey heron sails and clanks alone, a farm desolate among elder and ash at the highest part of the hills…

…Hanging from the wall in rags, too wet even to flap, are the remains of an auctioneer's announcement of a sale at the house behind. Mahogany – oak chests – certain ounces of silver – two thousand books – portraits and landscapes and pictures of horses and game – of all these and how much else has the red house been disembowelled? It is all shadowy within, behind the windows, like the eyes of a corpse, and without sound, or form, or light, and it is for no one that the creeper magnificently arrays itself in bediamonded crimson and gold that throbs and wavers in the downpour. The martins are still there, and their play up and down before the twenty windows is a senseless thing, like the play of children outside a chamber of agony or grief…

...The tall horse-chestnuts throw down their fruit out of the crisp, rusty foliage and it rolls darkly burnished out of the pods white as mushrooms in the rain, and where it falls it lies, and no child gathers it, and the harvest waggons have crushed a thousand under their wheels. The moss is beginning to encrust the gravel for the soft feet of the ghosts, of the old men and the mothers and the maids and the school-boys and tottering babes that have trodden it once. Now that they are all gone, every one, they seem always to have been ghosts, with loud, happy voices and wails of sorrow, with smiles, dark looks, passionate splendours, bright hair...

Chapter 16
The End of Summer

The road mounts the low Downs again. The boundless stubble is streaked by long bands of purple-brown, the work of seven ploughs to which the teams and their carters, riding or walking, are now slowly descending by different ways over the slopes and jingling in the rain. Above is a Druid moor bounded by beech-clumps, and crossed by old sunken ways and broad grassy tracks. It is a land of moles and sheep. At the end of a shattered line of firs a shepherd leans, bunched under his cape of sacking, to watch his black-faced flock dull-tinkling in the short furze and among the tumuli under the constant white rain. Those old roads, being over hilly and open land, are as they were before the making of modern roads, and little changed from what they were before the Roman...

...Hither and thither the drunken pewits cry over the furrows, and thousands of rocks and daws wheel over the stubble. As the day grows old it grows sweet and golden and the rain ceases, and the beauty of the Downs in the humid clearness does not long allow the eyes to wander away from them. At first, when the sun breaks through, all silver bright and acclaimed by miles of clouds in his own livery, the Downs below are violet, and have no form except where they carve the sky with their long arches. It is the woods northward that are chiefly glorified by the light and warmth, and the glades penetrating them and the shining stubble and the hedges, and the flying wood-pigeons and the cows of richest brown and milky white; the road also gleams blue and wet.

But as the sun descends the light falls on the Downs out of a bright cave in the gloomy forest of sky, and their flanks are olive and their outlines intensely clear. From one summit to another runs a string of trees like cavalry connecting one beech clump with another, so that they seem actually to be moving and adding themselves to the clumps. Above all is the abstract beauty of pure line – coupled with the beauty of the serene and the uninhabited and remote –

that holds the eye until at length the hills are humbled and dispread as part of the ceremony of sunset in a tranquil, ensanguined, quietly travelling sky...

...Pleasant it is now to see the white smoke from the oast house pouring solidly like curving plumes into the still rain, and to smell the smell, bitter and never to be too much sniffed and enjoyed, that travels wide over the fields. For the hop drier has lit his two fires of Welsh coal and brimstone and charcoal under the two cones of the oast house, and has spread his couch of straw on the floor where he can sleep his many little sleeps in the busy day and night.

The oast house consists of the pair of cones, white-vaned and tiled, upon their two circular chambers in which the fires are lit. Attached to these on one side is a brick building of two large rooms, one upon the ground, where the hop drier sleeps and tends his fires, lighted only by doors at either side and divided by the wooden pillars which support the floor of the upper room. This, the oast chamber, reached by a ladder, is a beautiful room, its oak boards polished by careful use and now stained faintly by the green-gold of hops, its roof raftered and high and dim. Light falls upon it on one side from two low windows, on the opposite side from a door through which the hops arrive from the garden.

The waggon waits below the door, full of the loose, stained hop-sacks which the carter and his boy lift up to the drier. From the floor two short ladders lead to the doors in the cones where the hops are suspended on canvas floors above the kilns. The inside of the cone is full of coiling fumes which have killed the young swallows in the nests under the cowl – the parents return again and again, but dare no longer alight on their old perches on the vanes.

When dried the hops are poured out on the floor of the vast chamber in a lisping scaly pile, and the drier is continually sweeping back those which are scattered. Through a hole in the floor he forces them down into a sack reaching to the floor of the room below. He is hard at work making these sacks or "pokes," which, when full and their necks stitched up, are as hard as wood. Before the drying is over the full sacks will take up half the room.

The children tired of picking come to admire and to visit all the corners of the room; of the granary alongside and its old sheepbells, its traps, a crossbow and the like; of the farmyard and barns, sacred except at this time. For a few minutes the sun is visible as a shapeless crimson thing above the mist and behind the elms. It is twilight; the wheels and hoofs of the last waggon approach and arrive and die away. And so day after day the fires glow with ruby and sapphire and emerald; the cone wears its plume of smoke; and everything is yellow-green – the very scent of the drying hops can hardly be otherwise described, in its mixture of sharpness and mellowness...

... All night – for a week – it rains, and at last there is a still morning of mist. A fire of weeds and hedge-clippings in a little flat field is smouldering. The ashes are crimson, and the bluish-white smoke flows in a divine cloudy garment round the boy who rakes over the ashes...Robins sing among the fallen apples, and the cooing of wood-pigeons is attuned to the soft light and the colours of the bowers. The yellow apples gleam. It is the gleam of melting frost. Under all the dulcet warmth of the face of things lurks the bitter spirit of the cold. Stand still for more than a few moments and the cold creeps with a warning and then a menace into the breast. That is the bitterness that makes this morning of all others in the year so mournful in its beauty. The colour and the grace invite to still contemplation and long draughts of dream; the frost compels to motion. The scent is that of wood-smoke, of fruit and of some fallen leaves. This is the beginning of the pageant of autumn, of that gradual pompous dying which has no parallel in human life yet draws us to it, with sure bonds...

...The end should come in heavy and lasting rain. At all times I love rain, the early momentous thunderdrops, the perpendicular cataract shining, or at night the little showers, the spongy mists, the tempestuous mountain rain. I like to see it possessing the whole earth at evening, smothering civilization, taking away from me myself everything except the power to walk under the dark trees and to enjoy as humbly as the hissing grass, while some twinkling house-light or song sung by a lonely man gives a foil to the immense dark force.

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The Icknield Way
Extracts

Constable, 1913

[The Icknield Way is an ancient trackway in southern England, running from Norfolk in the east to Wiltshire in the west.]

Chapter 1
On Roads and Footpaths

The earliest roads wandered like rivers through the land, having, like rivers, one necessity, to keep in motion. We still say that a road "goes" to London, as we "go" ourselves. We point out a white snake on a green hill-side, and tell a man: "That is going to Chichester." At our inn we think when recollecting the day: "That road must have gone to Strata Florida." We could not attribute more life to them if we had moving roads with platforms on the sidewalks....

...Why go straight? There is nothing at the end of any road better than may be found beside it, though there would be no travel did men believe it. The straight road, except over level and open country, can only be made by those in whom extreme haste and forethought have destroyed the power of joy, either at the end or at any part of its course. Why, then, go straight?...

...It is particularly easy to think of Southern England as several chains of islands, representing the Downs, the Chilterns and Gog Magogs, the Mendips, Cotswolds and Quantocks. I have more than once caught myself thinking of the broad elephantine back of Butser Hill heaving up, spotted with gorse but treeless, between Petersfield and Portsmouth, as Ararat, though my unfaithful eyes fail to imagine the ark....

Chapter 3
First Day – Thetford to Newmarket

[Describing Thetford:]

This was a most pleasant ancient town, built of flints, full of turns and corners and yards. It smelt of lime trees and of brewing. At the east edge was a green "Castle Hill" and a surrounding rampart without a castle, and between the ramparts, round about the hill, a level green where people rest or play in sunshine or under elm, ash, and sycamore.

Beside the steep artificial mound, so huge and uncouth, men mowing the grass looked smaller than ever, the children playing more beautiful, and both more transitory. The dark hill seemed a monster watching them at their play and work, as if some day it would swallow them up. It was like a personification of stupid enormous time. Yet this ponderous symbol did not spoil the pleasantness of the grass and trees and the green hill and the little town, but rather increased it; and I walked backwards and forwards lest I should forget that I had been to Thetford, a place sometimes burnt, sometimes fortified, by the Danes, and once a bishop's see. These things made the old brewery seem older, the lime trees sweeter, the high-walled lanes darker, as I walked about....

[On Newmarket:]

As I came into Newmarket before dark, but after the closing of shops, the long wide street and a strange breed of men standing or slowly walking about on its pavements made me feel that scarcely after a dozen reincarnations should I enter Newmarket and be at home.... Everyone was talking of horses except those who preferred lords and professional golfers...

I lay awake for some time listening to the motor-cars. Most of them rushed through the town; a few came there to rest and silence; others paused for a minute only with drumming suspense. I thought I should not easily tire of these signals from unknown travellers. Not that I spent much time on definite and persistent conjecture as to who they were, whence they had come, and whither and why they travelled. I was too sleepy, though at any time such a labour would have been irksome. No; I was more than content to let these noises compose a wordless music of mystery and adventure within my brain. The cars could bring together lovers or enemies or conspirators so swiftly that their midnight alarums suggest nothing else. It is hard to connect their subjugated frenzy with mere stupid haste. The little light steals through a darkness so vast that the difference between a star and a lantern is nothing to it. The thing is so suitable for a great adventure that straightway the mind conceives one....

It was easy to imagine myself the partner in magnificent risks quite outside my own experience, and to feel the glory and even the danger with no touch of pain, whilst I lay as careless as the friendly near neighbourhood of sleep could make me. The touch of arrogance in the voice of the motor is to its credit by night. In a measure it revives the romantic and accepted arrogance of horn and trumpet...

Chapter 4
Second Day: Newmarket to Odsey

The road was a straight and dusty one, accompanied by a great multitude of telegraph wires, on which corn buntings were singing their dreary song. On the right was the main stretch of Newmarket Heath, then a few gentle green slopes, with clusters of ricks and squares of corn, rising to a low wooded ridge far off. It was beginning to be hot, though it was windy and the deep blue of the sky was visible only through folds in the hood of grey clouds.

There were dusty tracks for exercising horses on both sides of the road. I like to see fine horses running at full speed. To see this sight, or hounds running on a good scent, or children dancing, is to me the same as music, and therefore, I suppose, as full of mortality and beauty. I sat down for some time watching the horses....

...it was not long before I began to look out for a cart to carry me over the next six miles of the straight road. Such a road is tiring, because either the eye or the mind's eye sees long, taunting, or menacing lengths before it, and is brought into conflict with sheer distance, and the mind is continually trying to carry the body over this distance with her own celerity, and being again and again defeated and more and more conscious of defeat, becomes irritated, if not happily numbed, by the importunate monotony....

...I was looking out for a house which I had never seen or heard described. A wood-pigeon came sloping down from the far sky with fewer and fewer wing strokes and longer and longer glidings upon half-closed wings as it drew near its home tree. It disappeared; another flew in sight and slanted downward with the same "folding-in" motion; and then another. The air was silent and still, the road was empty. The birds coming home to the quiet earth seemed visitors from another world. They seemed to bring something out of the sky down to this world, and the house and garden where I stayed at last were full of this something. I heard rooks among the tall beeches of just such a house as I knew I ought to have been able to imagine, with the help of the long white road and the gentle hills, the tall trees, the rooks, and the evening. There were flowers and lawns, beeches and sycamores, belonging to three centuries, perhaps more, and stately but plain red brick of the same date, and likely to endure for a yet longer period, if not by its own soundness, then by its hold upon the fantasy of men who build nothing like it.

Chapter 5
Third Day: Odsey to Edlesborough

The air was now still and the earth growing dark and already very quiet. But the sky was light and its clouds of utmost whiteness were very wildly and even fiercely shaped, so that it seemed the playground of powerful and wanton spirits knowing nothing of earth. And this dark earth appeared a small though also a kingly and brave place in comparison with the infinite heavens now so joyous and so bright and out of reach. I was glad to be there, but I fell in with a philosopher who seemed to be equally moved yet could not decide whether his condition was to be described as happiness or melancholy.

He talked about himself. He was a lean, indefinite man; half his life lay behind him like a corpse, so he said, and half was before him like a ghost. He told me of just such another evening as this and just such another doubt as to whether it was to be put down to the account of happiness or melancholy. He said that he had been digging all day in a heavy soil, often jarring the fork against immovable flints, lifting more often than not a weight of clay only just short of the limit of his strength. He had thought and thought until his brain could do nothing but remain aware of dull misery and the violent shocks of the hard work.

But his eyes saw the sun go down with a brief pomp of crimson soon covered up by funereal drifts, and these in their turn give way to a soft blue, full of whitest stars and without one cloud. They saw the far hills once more take on their night look of serene and desolate vastness, and felt the meadows of the valley become dark and uncertain, the woods much duller but distinct. The woods immediately below him on the hill-side thickened and appeared more wild and impossible; the road winding up between them like a long curl of smoke was wholly concealed. Slowly the solid world was whittled away. The lights of the small town half-way across the valley, towards the hills, came out.

As an owl in the woods announced the triumph of night with one large, clear note, he straightened himself slowly and painfully among the clods. It would have been easier to continue his toil than to do this, but he did it, and then cleaned the prongs of his upright fork with the toe of his boot, prolonging the action as if he either hoped to arrive now at some significant conclusion with its help or feared the next step that had to be taken. When he could no longer clean the prongs he raised his head and looked out beyond the woods over the valley to the far hills. The quiet, the magnitude of space, the noble lines of the range a little strengthened his spirit. He remained still. The surface of his hands was dry to brittleness; he was stiff and yet unsatisfied with the result of his labour; he felt the dulness of his eyes; and no thing or person in the world or out of it came into his mind with any conscious delight or quickness;

yet he still looked along the ridges of the hills from one end to the other, from star to star, without a thought save the sleeping, underlying one that he was growing old....

... Suddenly he awakened and thrilled to the sound of a woman's voice singing alone somewhere away from where he stood. He forgot who and where he was. He was no longer weary and muddied by self-supporting thoughts. His imagination went out of him and grasped each note simply and boldly. Where there had been nothing, there the liquid voice mounted in its beautiful, unseen form amidst the darkness. The singer was among the dark trees, probably in the climbing road to one side of him; the curve of that ascent, always a thing of simplicity and nobleness, was now glorious, romantic as it soared out of the valley to the clear heights...

... Oh, for a horse to ride furiously, for a ship to sail, for the wings of an eagle, for the lance of a warrior or a standard streaming to conquest, for a man's strength to dare and endure, for a woman's beauty to surrender, for a singer's fountain of precious tones, for a poet's pen!

He trembled and listened. The silence was unbroken; not a footstep or whisper was to be extracted from it by his eager and praying ear. He shivered in the cold. The last dead leaves shook upon the beeches, but the silence out there in that world still remained. She was walking or she was in her lover's arms, for aught he knew. No sound came up to him where he stood eager and forlorn until he knew that she must be gone away for ever, like his lyric desires, and he went into his house and it was dark and still and inconceivably empty.

Chapter 6
Fourth Day: Edlesborough to Streatley

[While looking at houses, Thomas recalls a house he himself once lived in:]

The Red Brick House was a raw naked building in the county of Kent with a triple bay window to left and right of the front door, and, above these, two large windows and a small one in the middle...The house stood in a level, oblong piece of land cut out of a large field by posts and wire, and separated from the road by a cheap but rustic fence. There were two other buildings of the same species within two hundred yards, all looking across the same road between elm trees to a ploughed field, many hedges, a rise of orchard land, and some heavy wooded hills at the horizon. For the sake of the houses the elms on their side had been felled and taken away. Breaking-down, temporary fowl-houses were littered about two of the gardens, which someone had begun to dig once upon a time, and even to plant and sow; but there was not a living tree in either of them.

…All other houses that I have known, beautiful, plain, dear, hateful, or dull, have been somehow subdued and made spiritual houses in course of time and of memory. The Red Brick House is the only unconquerable one. To this day it remains a body, and dead. Its fires are black grates that burnt coal. Its walls are wall-paper in strips at a certain price. Its garden is still mere hard ground to be dug (and to grow chiefly the inexorable couch-grass).

I saw a beautiful spring come into the world from that house: spring passed down the elms on the opposite side of the road, led one morning by a wry-neck screaming loud in the tops of the trees. Pewits came to the ploughed field beyond, and tossed in the sunny wind, as I would have done in such days of March, had I been a bird. Beautiful autumn, beautiful spring, beautiful summer, triumphed round about that building. Many days can I remember from those seasons, a February day, for example – a pale morning after a night of lashing rain, a pale, still morning. The puddles, the ruts of the cartways, the smooth surface of the winding roads, glistened in the brown, ploughed world. The Downs were clear and dark and hard under a silver-clouded blue sky, and far beyond them were the upper ridges of small mountainous clouds of a yellowish and sunlit white.

Very sombre were the woods. Each thing was dark or bright; all was fresh and cold. Suddenly a bee twanged through the air to a snowdrop on the south side of the Red Brick House. Inside the house a subtle devil was refusing to let a soul enter into its walls – a subtle but a bodiless and soulless devil, negative and denying. During the nine years since it was built eight families had sojourned in the house, and had not given it a soul; nor had the several intervals of vacancy given it a ghost.

Sometimes death will give a soul to a house. I once saw the soul of a dead man given to a new little house with a verandah. The swifts were racing to and fro between the rows of new houses. They flew just above the level of men's hats, except when they turned with a rapier-like twist up into the air. While they raced they screamed continually shrill screams of a fierce hilarity. There were half a hundred of them all flying as upon the surface of an invisible stream surmounted by a few black, bobbing hats, or, very rarely, an upturned white face; and no part of the streets was for more than a second without a crescent black wing and a shriek. They had taken possession of the town. Under their rush and cry the people in the streets were silent, walking blankly and straight ahead, and all looking old in contrast with the tumultuous and violent youth of the birds. The thought came into my head as I was passing the last of the houses that even so must the birds have been racing and screaming when the Danes harried this way a thousand years ago, and thus went they over the head of Dante in the streets of Florence…

Chapter 9
Seventh Day: Streatley to Sparsholt

[On Lone Barn, whose impoverished occupant was imprisoned for neglect of his children]:

I knew the farm-house and had often wondered about the man who built it in that solitude somewhere in the eighteenth century. It had walls of unusual thickness, such as could not have been overthrown simply by time and weather. It must long have been empty and subject to the hostility of discontented spirits such as probably infest a house, as they do a man, left utterly alone. I had not suspected that anybody was living in the barn, but I remember a pale, shuffling man carrying a child who begged from me monotonously as I came down the hill in mist a little before dark. I had given him something without exactly realizing that he was a man, so frail, subdued, and weak-voiced had he been – a creation of the mist quite in harmony with the hour. This was probably Arthur Aubrey Bishopstone, who was now in prison...

...I went to Lone Barn again, the birthplace of Francis Albert Edward Bishopstone.

The black brook, full of the white reflections of its snowy banks and beginning to steam in the sun, was hourly growing and coiling all its long loops joyously through the land. The dabchick was laughing its long shrill titter under the alder roots. Faint, soft shadows fell on to the snow from the oaks, whose grey skeletons were outlined in snow against the clear deep blue of the now dazzling sky. Thrushes were beginning to sing, as if it had always been warm and bright. In hedge and thicket and tall wood, myriads of drops were falling and singing in the still air. Against the south the smooth downs were white under a diaphanous haze of grey, and upon them seemed to rest heavenly white mountains, very still, dream-like, and gently luminous. Lone Barn lay up in the haze invisible...

...The patched walls, originally of tarred timber laid in horizontal planks, were of every hue of green and yellow that moss, lichen, and mould can bestow, each strip of board being of a different date and a different shade. What gave them something in common with one another was the fresh black stains which ran from the melting eaves to the nettle-bed below. The porches, lofty enough to admit a waggon piled as high as possible with sheaves of corn, had slipped somewhat away: it was to them alone that the exterior of the building owed a faint suggestion of a church and, consequently, a pathetic, undermined dignity: without them it would have seemed wholly restored to nature, amiably and submissively ruinous, with a silence in which not the most perverse mind could have detected melancholy.

But within it was unexpectedly lofty, and the ponderous open timber-work, rough-hewn and naturally curved, was obviously performing too efficiently the task of supporting the roof: it at once inspired the thought that it should ere now have relaxed the strain of its crooked arms and acquiesced and slipped or collapsed. The oak floor was pierced in many places by wear and by drippings from the broken roof; grass and corn had grown up through the crevices and died. Some of the fallen thatch had been piled in a dry corner for a bed. In the centre of the floor was another sign of its late use – squares chalked by the children for the playing of a game. I walked to and fro. There were no ghosts, or so it seemed...

Chapter 11
Ninth Day: Streatley to East Hendred

As I had had as much rain as I wanted on my skin, I turned downhill under a long train of Lombardy poplars and very lanky ash trees into East Hendred for the night. It was a thatched village built on the slopes of a little valley, its houses standing snugly or in short rows high above either side of the steep streets. They stood high because the streets were very old and worn into deep hollows, and at the edges of these ran narrow, cobbled paths; but the cottages were still higher up, and four or five stone steps led up from the paths to their doors. At the bottom stood the towered church, telling the hours and the quarters, not with clock-face and hands, but with bells. Rain, however, drowned that sweet noise in a mightier sweetness, heavy and straight rain, and no wind except what itself created.

For half an hour everything – trees, mud walls, thatch, old weatherboards, pale-coloured, timbered cottages, the old chapel at a crossing railed off as a sign of private possession – everything was embedded in rain. Every sound was the rain...

...I lay awake listening to the rain, and at first it was as pleasant to my ear and my mind as it had long been desired; but before I fell asleep it had become a majestic and finally a terrible thing, instead of a sweet sound and symbol. It was accusing and trying me and passing judgment. Long I lay still under the sentence, listening to the rain, and then at last listening to words which seemed to be spoken by a ghostly double beside me. He was muttering:

The all-night rain puts out summer like a torch. In the heavy, black rain falling straight from invisible, dark sky to invisible, dark earth the heat of summer is annihilated, the splendour is dead, the summer is gone. The midnight rain buries it away where it has buried all sound but its own. I am alone in the dark still night, and my ear listens to the rain piping in the gutters and roaring softly in the trees of the world. Even so will the rain fall darkly upon the grass over the grave when my ears can hear it no more.

I have been glad of the sound of rain, and wildly sad of it in the past; but that is all over as if it had never been; my eye is dull and my heart beating evenly and quietly; I stir neither foot nor hand; I shall not be quieter when I lie under the wet grass and the rain falls, and I of less account than the grass. The summer is gone, and never can it return. There will never be any summer any more, and I am weary of everything. I stay because I am too weak to go. I crawl on because it is easier than to stop. I put my face to the window. There is nothing out there but the blackness and sound of rain. Neither when I shut my eyes can I see anything. I am alone...

...I will lie still and stretch out my body and close my eyes. My breath is all that has been spared by the rain, and that comes softly and at long intervals, as if it were trying to hide itself from the rain. I feel that I am so little I have crept away into a corner and been forgotten by the rain. All else has perished except me and the rain. There is no room for anything in the world but the rain. It alone is great and strong. It alone knows joy. It chants monotonous praise of the order of nature, which I have disobeyed or slipped out of. I have done evilly and weakly, and I have left undone. Fool! you never were alive. Lie still. Stretch out yourself like foam on a wave, and think no more of good or evil. There was no good and no evil. There was life and there was death, and you chose. Now there is neither life nor death, but only the rain...

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In Pursuit of Spring
Extracts

Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1914

Chapter 1
In Search of Spring

The wind blew from the north-west with such peace and energy together as to call up the image of a good giant striding along with superb gestures – like those of a sower sowing. The wind blew and the sun shone over London. A myriad roofs laughed together in the light. The smoke and the flags, yellow and blue and white, waved tumultuously, straining for joy to leave the chimneys and the flagstaffs, like hounds sighting their quarry. The ranges of cloud bathing their lower slopes in the brown mist of the horizon had the majesty of great hills, the coolness and sweetness and whiteness of the foam on the crests of the crystal fountains, and they were burning with light. The clouds did honour to the city, which they encircled as with heavenly ramparts. The stone towers and spires were soft, and luminous as old porcelain…

Of human things, only music – if human it can be called – was fit to match this joyousness and this stateliness. What, I thought, if the pomp of river and roof and cloudy mountain walls of the world be made ready, as so often they had been before, only for the joy of the invisible gods?… But in one moment the passing loveliness of spirit, or form, or gesture, sank and was drowned in the oceanic multitude…

…Next day the north-east wind began to prevail, making a noise as if the earth were hollow and rumbling all through the bright night, and all day a rhythmless and steady roar. The earth was being scoured like a pot. If snow fell, there was no more of it in the valleys than if a white bird had been plucked by a sparrow-hawk: on the hills it lasted longer, but as thin as rice the day after a wedding. The wind was eager enough to scour me…

…The night was wild, and on the morrow the earth lay sleeping a sweet, quiet sleep of recovery from the wind's rage. The robin could be heard as often as the missel-thrush. The sleep lasted through a morning of frost and haze into a clear day, gentle but bright, and another and another of cloudy brightness, brightened cloudiness, rounded off between half-past five and half-past six by blackbirds singing. The nights were strange children for such days, nights of frantic wind and rain, threatening to undo all the sweet work in a swift, howling revolution. Trees were thrown down, branches broken, but the buds remained.

The north wind made an invasion with horizontal arrows of pricking hail in the day, and twice in the night a blue lightning, that long stood brandished within the room until thunder fell, disembowelling the universe, with no rolling sound, but a single plunge and rebound as of an enormous weight...

Chapter 2
The Start: London to Guildford

So at ten I started, with maps and sufficient clothes to replace what my waterproof could not protect from rain... The suburban by-streets already looked rideable; but they were false prophets: the main roads were very different. For example, the surface between the west end of Nightingale Lane and the top of Burntwood Lane was fit only for fancy cycling – in and out among a thousand lakes a yard wide and three inches deep...

...I had left behind me most cyclists from London, but I was now continually amongst walkers. There were a few genial muscular Christians with their daughters, and equally genial muscular agnostics with no children; bands of scientifically-minded ramblers with knickerbockers, spectacles, and cameras; a trio of young chaps singing their way to a pub.; one or two solitaries going at five miles an hour with or without hats; several of a more sentimental school in pairs...

...Twice I crossed the Tillingbourne, and came to where it broadened into a pond. This water on either side of the road was bordered by plumed sedges and clubbed bulrushes. At the far side, under the wooded Downside crowned by St. Martha's, was a pale, shelterless mill of a ghostly bareness. The aspens were breaking into yellow-green leaves round about, especially one prone aspen on the left where a drain was belching furious, tawny water into the stream, and shaking the spears of the bulrushes.

As I went on towards Chilworth, gorse was blossoming on the banks of the road. Behind the blossom rose up the masses of hillside wood, now scarcely interrupted save by a few interspaces of lawn-like grass; and seated at the foot of all this oak and pine were the Chilworth powder mills. Two centuries have earned them nobody's love or reverence; for there is something inhuman, diabolical, in permitting the union which makes these unrelated elements more powerful than any beast, crueller than any man.

Crossing the little railway from the mills, I came in sight of the Hog's Back, by which I must go to Farnham. That even, straight ridge pointing westward, and commanding the country far away on either side, must have had a road along it since man went upright...

Chapter 3
Guildford to Dunbridge

The beautiful, still, pale morning was as yet clouded by the lightest of white silk streamers. The slates glimmered with yesterday's rain in the rising sun. It was too fine, too still, too sunny, but the castle jackdaws rejoiced in it, crying loudly in the sycamores, on the old walls, or high in air. By the time I was beginning to mount the Hog's Back, clouds not of silk were assembling... Both the level-seeming sweep on the north and the hills of the south, clear as they were in that anxious light, were subject to the majestic road on the Hog's Back... The ridge, in fact, has in some parts only just breadth enough to carry the road, and the land sinks away rapidly on both hands, giving the traveller the sensation of going on the crest of a stout wall, surveying his immense possessions northward and southward...

...A goat or two were feeding here. There was, and there nearly always is, an encampment of gypsies. The telegraph posts and the stout, three-sided, old, white milestones stand here. The telegraph posts, in one place, for some distance alternate with low, thick yew trees. I liked those telegraph posts, businesslike and mysterious, and their wires that are sufficient of themselves to create the pathetic fallacy. None the less, I liked the look of the gypsies camping under them. If they were not there, in fact, they would have to be invented. They are at home there. See them at nightfall, with their caravans drawn up facing the wind, and the men by the half-door at the back smoking, while the hobbled horses are grazing and the children playing near...

Chapter 4
From Dunbridge over Salisbury Plain

The lawns and trees were given over exclusively to the birds, especially those that are black, such as the rook and blackbird. Those that were not matrimonially engaged on the grass were cawing in the elms, beeches, and chestnuts of the cathedral. Missel-thrushes were singing across the close as if it had been empty. A lark from the fields without drifted singing over the city. The stockdoves cooed among the carved saints. There were more birds than men in Salisbury. Never had I seen the cathedral more beautiful. The simple form of the whole must have been struck out of glaucous rock at one divine stroke. It seemed to belong to the birds that flew about it and lodged so naturally in the high places. The men who crawled in at the doors, as into mines, could not be the masters of such a vision...

[On Salisbury Plain:]

As you travel across the Plain you come rarely to a spot where the chief thing for the eye is not an immense expanse of the colour of ploughed chalkland, or of corn, or of turf, varying according to season and weather, and always diversified by parallelograms of mustard yellow. Sometimes this expanse rolls but little before it touches the horizon; far more often, it heaves or billows up boldly into several long curving ridges that intersect or flow into one another. The highest of these may be crowned by dark beeches or carved by the ditch and rampart of an ancient camp....

...Next to the dead the most numerous things on the Plain are sheep, rooks, pewits, and larks. To-day they mingle their voices, but the lark is the most constant. Here, more than elsewhere, he rises up above an earth only less free than the heavens. The pewit is equally characteristic. His Winter and twilight cry expresses for most men both the sadness and the wildness of these solitudes.... But let the rain fall and the wind whirl it, or let the sun shine too mightily, the Plain assumes the character by which it is best known, that of a sublime, inhospitable wilderness. It makes us feel the age of the earth, the greatness of Time, Space, and Nature; the littleness of man even in an aeroplane, the fact that the earth does not belong to man, but man to the earth...

Chapter 6
The Avon, the Biss and the Frome

Not until I went out could I tell that it was softly and coldly raining. Everything more than two or three fields away was hidden.

Cycling is inferior to walking in this weather, because in cycling chiefly ample views are to be seen, and the mist conceals them. You travel too quickly to notice many small things; you see nothing save the troops of elms on the verge of invisibility. But walking I saw every small thing one by one; not only the handsome gateway chestnut just fully dressed, and the pale green larch plantation where another chiff-chaff was singing, and the tall elm tipped by a linnet pausing and musing a few notes, but every primrose and celandine and dandelion on the banks, every silvered green leaf of honeysuckle up in the hedge, every patch of brightest moss, every luminous drop on a thorn tip. The world seemed a small place: as I went between a row of elms and a row of beeches occupied by rooks, I had a feeling that the road, that the world itself, was private, all theirs; and the state of the road under their nests confirmed me...

...Our sun was fading over Challimead. The air grew cold as I went on, and the pewits cried as if it were winter. The rooks were now silent dots all over the elms of the Trowbridge rookery. A light mist was brushing over the fields, softening the brightness of Venus in the pale rosy west, and the scarlet flames that leapt suddenly from a thorn pile in a field. Probably there would be another frost to-night.... People were returning to the town in small and more scattered groups. At corners and crossways figures were standing talking, or bidding farewell. I rode on easily through the chill, friendly land. Clear hoofs hammering and men or girls talking in traps were but an added music to the quiet throughout the evening. I began to feel some confidence in the Spring...

...The road was visible most dimly, and was like a pale mist at an uncertain distance. When I reached the green all was still and silent. The cottages on the opposite side of the road all lay back, and they were merely blacker stains on the darkness. The pollard willows fringing the green, which in the sunlight resemble mops, were now very much like a procession of men, strange primæval beings, pausing to meditate in the darkness...

...I walked more slowly, and at a gateway stopped. While I leaned looking over it at nothing, there was a long silence that could be felt, so that a train whistling two miles away seemed as remote as the stars. The noise could not overleap the boundaries of that silence. And yet I presently moved away, back towards the village, with slow steps.

I was tasting the quiet and the safety without a thought. Night had no evil in it. Though a stranger, I believed that no one wished harm to me. The first man I saw, fitfully revealed by a swinging lantern as he crossed his garden, seemed to me to have the same feeling, to be utterly free of trouble or any care. A man slightly drunk deviated towards me, halted muttering, and deviated away again. I heard his gate shut, and he was absorbed.

Chapter 8
Shepton Mallet to Bridgwater

All the country on either hand was subject to my eyes. Before me the red disc of the sun was low, its nether half obliterated by a long, misty cloud. The levels on my right, and their dark, moss-like corrugations, were misted over, not so densely that a white river of train smoke could not be seen flowing through it; and Brent Knoll far off towered over it like an islet of crag, dark and distinct; nor was the prostrate mass of Brean Down invisible on the seaward side of Brent Knoll. Not a sound emerged from that side beyond the bleat of a few lambs. On the left was the misty country of Athelney, and a solitary dark tower raised well above the midst of the level...

...The most delicate scene of all my journey was nearer. The Poldens have on this side several foothills, and at the turning to Righton's Grave one of these confronted me; I had it in full view for a mile and could hardly look at anything else. This was Ball Hill. It is a smooth island lifted up out of an ever so faintly undulating land of hedged meadows and sparse elm trees. It rose very gradually, parallel to my road and about half a mile from it, so as to make a long, nascent curve, up to a comb of trees; and its flank was divided downwards and lengthwise amongst rosy ploughland and pale green corn in large hedgeless squares and oblongs, beautifully contrasted in size and colour... Though the lines of these hills and their decorated slopes are definitely beautiful, during the dusk on that silver road in the first Spring innocence they were a miraculous birth, to match the Spring innocence and the tranquillity of the dusk as I slid quietly on that road of silver.

Then came two shams. The first was a towered residence close to the road, with Gothic features. The second, black against the sky, three miles ahead, was a tower and many ruinous arches on top of the wooded hill at Knowle...

Chapter 9
Bridgwater to the Sea

...A ragged sky hung threatening over a sea that was placid but corrugated and of the colour of slate, having a margin of black at the horizon. The water was hardly distinguishable, save by its motion, from the broad beach of gray pools, blackened pebbles, and low rock edges. Only the most fleeting and narrow lights fell upon the expanse, now on a solitary sail, now on the pale lighthouse of Flat Holm far out...

The Kilve brook on my left was noisily twisting over the pebbles and the slanting, gray, mossy-weeded rock down to the sea, tossing up a light but unceasing spray; and pied wagtails flitted from the fresh water to the salt over the rocks. But what I was most glad to see was the meadow pipit. Feebly, like a minor lark, and silently, he launched himself twenty or thirty feet up from the wet, dark rock; then, with wings uplifted and body curved to a keel like a crescent, he descended slantwise, singing the most passionate and thrilling-sweet of all songs...

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Richard Jefferies; his life and work
Hutchinson & co. 1909

Extracts from chapter 19: Recapitulation

With little arrangement, but with the charm of exuberant freshness, he poured out his stores of country knowledge… No one English writer before had had such a wide knowledge of labourers, farmers, gamekeepers, poachers, of the fields, and woods, and waters, and the sky above them, by day and night; of their inhabitants that run and fly and creep, that are still and fragrant and many-coloured. No writer had been able to express this knowledge with such a pleasing element of personality in the style that mere ignorance was no bar to its enjoyment. When he wrote these books – 'The Amateur Poacher' and its companions – he had no rival, nor have they since been equalled in purity, abundance, and rusticity. The writer was clearly as much of the soil as the things which he described. In his books the things themselves were alive, were given a new life by an artist's words, a life more intense than they had had for any but the few before they were thus brought onto the printed page. Here was the life of man and animal, the crude and lavish beauty of English country-life in the 19th century, with glimpses of the older life remembered by the men and women who still ploughed or kept sheep in Wiltshire and Surrey…

When these books had been written his good health was at an end, and when, in 'Nature near London', he came to describe scenes which he had not known as a young man, there was a new subtlety in the observation, at once a more microscopic and a more sensuous eye, more tenderness, a greater love of making pictures and of dwelling upon colours and forms. There was no more of the rude rustic content to be out rabbiting and fishing. The tall countryman who knew and loved all weathers as they came was bending, and spring was now intensely spring to his reawakened senses…

In the early books… the sport, the poaching, the curious notes on wild things, the old customs and pieces of gossip – these stand out clear and unquestionable as in an old woodcut. It was a priceless gift, smelling of youth and the days before the steam-plough. But how different these later essays! Pain, anxiety, fatigue had put a sharp edge on life – a keen edge, easily worn out… Something was creeping into the style, staining it with more delicate dyes. The bloom in the atmosphere, the hues on an old barn-roof, were in part his own life-blood.

In the earlier work we think only of the author where he is explicitly autobiographical... In the later he was more and more a singular man, a discoverer of colours, of moods, of arrangements. This was the landscape of sensuous, troubled men; here were most rare, most delicate, most fleeting things. The result was at once portraiture and landscape. Perhaps the mystic element in Jefferies, unintentionally asserted, gave its new seriousness to this work. Except in the last words of 'The Poacher', there had been little sign of it; but now, in the fanciful narrative of 'Wood Magic' and the autobiographical story of 'Bevis', the mystic promise was clear in those passages where the child Bevis talked to the wind or felt with his spirit out to the stars and to the sea. For a long time Jefferies must have been imperfectly conscious of the meaning of his mystic communion with Nature. It was as a deep pool that slowly fills with an element so clear that it is unnoticed until it overflows. It overflowed, and Jefferies wrote 'The Story of My Heart' in a passion.

Here for the first time was the whole man, brain, heart, and soul, the body and the senses, all that thought and dreamed and enjoyed and aspired in him. At every entrance the universe came pouring in, by all the old ways and by ways untrodden before. The book is the pledge of the value of Jefferies' work. It reveals the cosmic consciousness that had become fully developed in him soon after he turned thirty... Having tasted of physical, mental, and spiritual life, and aware of the diverse life of the world, in man, in beast, in tree, in earth, and sky, and sea, and stars, he comes to us as from a holy feast, face flushed, head crowned...

His sadness came of his appetite for joy, which was in excess of the twenty-four hours day and the possible threescore years and ten. By this excess, resembling the excess of the oak scattering its doomed acorns and the sun parching what it has fostered, he is at one with Nature and the forces of life, and at the same time by his creative power he rescues something of what they are whirling down to oblivion and the open sea, and makes of it a rich garden, high-walled against them...

Few men have put themselves into words with such unconsidered variety. He expressed the whole range of a man's experience in the open air. This was not done without risks and some loss... His lonely, retiring, and yet emphatic egoism made a hundred mistakes, ill-considered, splenetic, fatuous. He was big enough to take these risks, and he made his impression by his sympathies, his creation, not by his antipathies. He drew nature and human life as he saw it, and he saw it with an unusual eye for detail and with unusual wealth of personality behind...

It is for his way of seeing, for his composition, his glowing colours, his ideas, for the passionate music wrought out of his life, that we must chiefly go to him. He is on the side of health, of beauty, of strength, of truth, of improvement in life to be wrought by increasing honesty, subtlety, tenderness, courage, and foresight. His own character, and the characters of his men and women, fortify us in our intention to live. Nature, as he thought of it, and as his books present it, is a great flood of physical and spiritual sanity, 'of pure ablution round earth's human shores', to which he bids us resort. Turning to England in particular, he makes us feel what a heritage are its hills and waters; he even went so far as to hint that some of it should be national...

He enjoyed, simply and passionately, his own life and the life of others, and in his books that enjoyment survives, and their sincerity and variety keep, and will keep, them alive; for akin to, and part of, his gift of love was his power of using words. Nothing is more mysterious than this power, along with the kindred powers of artist and musician. It is the supreme proof, above beauty, physical strength, intelligence, that a man or woman lives. Lighter than gossamer, words can entangle and hold fast all that is loveliest, strongest, and fleetest, and most enduring, in heaven and earth. They are for the moment, perhaps, excelled by the might of policy or beauty, but only for the moment, and then all has passed away; but the words remain, and though they also pass away under the smiling of the stars, they mark our utmost achievement in time.

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A Literary Pilgrim in England
Extracts

Methuen 1917

[Much of this book consists of lists of places the various writers lived at or travelled to, and which influenced their writing.]

William Blake

Certain it is that in Blake's view life should be a poem, a free and astonishing thing. The innocence of life he loved; everything done and said at liberty from the mere reason or from the self-conscious, "self-righteous" virtues, as he considered them, of pagans, deists, and agnostics.. His own life and work proclaim his own enjoyment in a great measure of this innocence.

He saw life whole. An unlearned man, who can only be understood completely by the very learned, he had made for himself out of the streets of London, the churches and shops, the fields of Dulwich, and out of ruminations among all sorts of books and pictures, a system of the world. The Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, the mystics, newspaper reports of the American War and the French Revolution, popular songs, Westminster Abbey, pictures and sculptures and engravings, London streets, provided the elements of this world...

His England, then, is just this: meadows and streets and cold churches, with children playing in twilight or weeping, lions and lambs mingled, birds singing, angels clustering in trees, venerable, seraphic old men pacing, harlots and soldiers plying, mighty figures descended from those in Westminster Abbey and the Italian churches and galleries, peopling the clouds and a misty mid-region of "Where?" and Blake himself, a sturdy, half-Quakerish revolutionary, with rapt forehead carrying home his pint of porter.

John Keats

The city, unless by provocation, gave him no impulse to writing. When he was just twenty he said, in the epistle to George Felton Mathew, that he was beckoned away by his work from poetry, and that, even if he could give all his time to the "coy muse,"

"with me she would not live
In this dark city, nor would condescend
'Mid contradictions her delights to lend."

Nevertheless, with poetry and his friends he was very happily alive. It was at his lodgings in the Borough, after a night with his friend Clarke at Clerkenwell, that he wrote the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Other poems and letters record his enjoyment of the talk, the reading, the music, the card-playing, that filled long nights with his friends... Verses were, in fact, his compliments to the pleasures of life. He stuffed them with what had just come to his eye or to his mind...

Dwelling so much in a country of small fields and many gardens, and among artistic town-dwellers like Leigh Hunt, who regarded the country as a picture-gallery and pleasure-resort, Keats began by rhyming pretty catalogues of the pretty things in Nature.

Seldom does he approach or aim at a picture... complete and proportioned...; a score or so of tiny details, each separate and self-sufficient, can do nothing to remind us of the actual scenery from whose myriad elements these were chosen. How little Keats cared so long as nothing ugly or mean entered the catalogue is shown by his picture of the "flowery spot" where he thinks the "coy muse" might condescend to him. He mingles Druid oaks, laburnum, and cassia, adding nightingales and "a ruin dark and gloomy." ...

George Meredith

In one sense Meredith is a Londoner's poet, for his country is the Londoner's par excellence – Hampshire, Surrey, Kent, Sussex – and in him the London rambler, exulting in the wind over a land of gorse and pine on a Saturday or Sunday, seems to reach godlike proportions. The beauty of his country has something almost hectic, violent, excessive, about it, caused, perhaps, by contrast with the city. Meredith was eminently a writer of books and a lover of such society as cannot be had often outside of London. What wonder, then, that in his poems we so often feel that we have come out of London into the fields...

Tramping or not, he did not cease to love the earth and the sea, the south-west wind and the rain. When he was sixty he was walking, bathing, getting drenched with rain, and learning some Welsh, in visits that extended from Tenby through Llanelly, Llandilo, and Llandrindod, to Brecon. When he was sixty-three he held the opinion that February with a south-west wind blowing is "as good as any spring," and looked forward to a south-westerly April and May....

And the joy of the limbs, the senses, and the brain, during country walks – in certain isolated days – are expressed by Meredith once and for all, with a kind of braced hedonistic Puritanism.

But though he loved what he saw and heard and touched, his poetry was never purely sensuous, and it became less and less so. Like Shelley, he felt the moral qualities of Nature…

Nature to him was not merely a cause of sensuous pleasure, nor, on the other hand, an inhuman enchantress; neither was she both together. When he spoke of Earth, he meant more than most mean who speak of God. He meant that power which in the open air, in poetry, in the company of noble men and women, prompted, strengthened, and could fulfil, the desire of a man to make himself, not a transitory member of a parochial species, but a citizen of the Earth. Thus, in his view, a man could smile after all things…

Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold's two best known poems, "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Thyrsis," have been accused of being too topographical, because they name so many places. But the accusation is needless. The mention of all those places at that time fameless has chiefly the effect of adding to the intimacy of the poems. In a way, it is a kind of artful naivete, expecting all the world either to know or to care what Eynsham or Sandford signifies. But, of course, it counts also to some extent, and safely, on the fact that this twelve-mile loop of the Thames, between the entrances of the Windrush and the Cherwell, and the hilly country enclosed by it, is exceptionally well known to a good sprinkling of Arnold's most likely readers. How Cambridge people or Newcastle people are reached by this "topography" I cannot say, but I doubt if it is at all necessary to be Oxonian to enjoy it. No doubt it touches Oxford men on a weak spot, and at times may have too much credit for doing so. The important thing, however, is that the intimacy implied by this naming goes well with the affection confessed in the poem, and helps the reader to take up the suggestions made by hills, trees, rivers and blossoms, and distant spires, and thus to compose a landscape which can exist without use of map or previous association. That is Arnold's country par excellence…

He observed detail beautifully, whether in wild or in cultivated country. Yet see how gentle he makes the wild in "Iseult of Brittany," all unconsciously, by introducing Iseult and her children there as if on a sea-side holiday, the three in fur mantles, the children with "feathered hats," the mother telling them a story. It might have been "Iseult in Kensington Gardens," for all that the details are obviously taken from somewhere else…

He is more effective when he uses a few strokes only, as in the beginning of "Rugby Chapel," where the field, the dank yellow drifts of leaves, the elms, the few shouts of boys playing, the lights coming out in the street, the chapel unlighted, suffice for any human being as such to call up something very like it, and for Rugbeians to call up Rugby.

William Morris

"News from Nowhere" is saved, if at all, by what comes straight from Morris's experience of the Thames and of Thames side houses at Kelmscott and Hammersmith. The water is real water, whereas the people and that decorated tobacco pipe are not real at all. The elms on the bank, the cuckoo's song, the blackbird's "sweet strong whistle," the corncrake's craking, the "waves of fragrance from the flowering clover amidst the ripe grass" – these also are real, and so is the outside of the house (he had too little skill, perhaps, in drawing people to do the inside)...

Morris showed himself aware that troubling about arts and crafts might seem "petty and unheroic" to those who were brought face to face with "the reckless hideousness and squalor of a great manufacturing district." He cared for the arts and for the "shabby hell" of the city, and did not think or find the two cases incompatible, but rather that they were one, though his crowded life – busy, never hurried, and of no unusual length – was too small for his purpose...

For most of his life he was a somewhat dismayed countryman, but an imperfect Londoner. Probably he was one of those survivors who cannot accept the distinction and division between town and country which has been sharpening ever since

"London was a grey-walled town,
And slow the pack-horse made his way
Across the curlew-haunted down."...

Gilbert White [author of *The Natural History of Selborne*]

He had, in fact, made a book which had three extraordinary merits. It contained valuable and new observations; it overflowed with evidence of a new spirit – a spirit of minute and even loving inquiry into the life and personality of animals in their native surroundings – that was coming into natural history ; and, thirdly, it had style or whatever we like to call the breath of life in written words, and it was delightfully and easily full of the man himself and of the delicate eighteenth-century southern countryside which he knew.

But the observations are no longer new ; the new spirit has been renovated by the gunless naturalists from Thoreau to Mr. W. H. Hudson of our own day. The man himself is still fresh to succeeding generations, and thousands, who care not at all how many willow-wrens there be, delight to read these letters from a man so happy and remote from our time that he thought the dying fall of the true willow-wren “a joyous easy laughing note.”

We are always pleasantly conscious of the man in his style, which strikes us as the lines and motions of a person’s face strike us for good or for bad, and, even so, in a manner that defies analysis. His quack who ate a toad, his boys twisting the nests out of rabbit-holes with a forked stick, his love of the “shapely-figured aspect of the chalk hills” above that of the “abrupt and shapeless” mountains, his swallows feeding their young and treading on the wing, his friendly horse and fowl, his prodigious many-littered half-bred bantam sow that proved, “when fat, good bacon, juicy and tender,” his honey-loving idiot, his crickets (“a good Christmas fire is to them like the heats of the dog-days”) – these things have in his pages a value which can only be attributed to his literary genius, by which his book survives.

William Hazlitt

Hazlitt makes a very great deal, when he is writing about the country, out of books and out of himself seen far off in time and space, rather like a character in fiction. He does not describe much or distinguish nicely between places. Nor does he communicate a sense of happy travel or travel at all, but of a man looking back at it. He loved looking back…

It is a glorious idea of the earth rather than the earth itself, Wem, or Llangollen, or the Quantocks, or Salisbury Plain, that seems to inspire Hazlitt. The earth has perhaps passed into the face of his writing, but we cannot say how or where. And he certainly has no country to be associated with him for any other reason than that he lived in it, walked to and fro in it, and occasionally wrote about it with gusto…

His towns are more particularly described and suggested than his country. He understood what he was looking at in London, whereas in the country perhaps he saw chiefly landscape and the mysterious multiplication of mutton and turnips.

Thomas Hardy

Mr. Hardy himself has said, in smaller type than his topographers, nearly all that need be said about his country of Wessex...

The discovery of Mr. Hardy and of the real places behind the fictitious names has created a difficult problem. Apparently he has not tampered with geography, has not done anything but change a large proportion of the names...

You see that he is, as he says, exhibiting Wessex to us, giving the hills and rivers their true names and notably suggesting their appearances, but painting them with a brush dipped in the "earthquake and eclipse" of his own mind, and still more so the towns and villages and the people themselves. Everywhere he makes a double impression by the sound rusticity of many characters, and by his own solitary, brooding, strongly-coloured mind dominating men and landscape

On the whole, then, the mixture of ancient with invented or resuscitated or slightly perverted names very well symbolizes Mr. Hardy's mixed attitude and treatment. Only one wishes – I wish – that he had not conceded so much to the inevitable curiosity. What a pleasure for a man to discover for himself perhaps only a few of the originals! What a nuisance to have an edition of the novels and poems with a map of Wessex at the end of every single volume, showing the exact position of the places bearing fictitious names.

I prefer Mr. Hardy's poems to his novels, and there the place-names offer many pleasures and provoke several kinds of curiosity. Sometimes the place is given, it appears, out of pure fidelity to the fact. He writes no poetry that could suffer by names and dates.

Robert Herrick

In1627 he accompanied the expedition to the Isle of Rhe as chaplain, and in 1629 went into his Devonshire exile. He was then thirty-eight, and must have had some good reason for dropping himself into so remote and small a place.

To all appearances he must by that time have been a complete Londoner, one who was well used to the variety and convenience of the city, and to the safe civilized beauty of the suburban country...

Herrick was truly himself only on the subject of flowers, domestic things, and women... Perhaps he was short-sighted, for he seems to see very clearly little things which he could not have seen at all without special attention. His daffodils have not Wordsworth's wild moorland air. They are just flowers isolated, but they are as real as Wordsworth's.

No poet ever loved perfumes more, indoors and out of doors, the breaths of flowers, of spices, of women, of bees, of amber, of burning wood, of wine, of milk and cream, of baked pear.

W. H. Hudson [1841-1922: an Argentinian-born naturalist]

Once upon a time there was much talk about the supposed incompatibility of science with poetry. In a few years, if it was not already dead, the poetry was to die of eating from the tree of knowledge. One of the best rebukes to this talk was the case of Mr. W. H. Hudson, author of "Idle Days in Patagonia" ... He has also written some of the most romantic stories of this age, and a great body of books depicting English wild life with an exactness and enthusiasm both unrivalled and in combination unapproached. But although generation after generation of schoolboys know his "British Birds," and everyone remembers "Idle Days in Patagonia," because it seems an odd place to be idle in, Mr. Hudson has so far concealed himself from the public almost as successfully as he conceals himself from both birds and men out of doors...

When he had been twenty-six years in England, he could still see with his mind's eye two hundred birds of La Plata and Patagonia as distinctly as he could the thrush, the starling, and the robin, and could hear with his mind's ear the voices of a hundred and fifty. That was thirteen years ago. And he is still indignant at the loss of the great birds, especially the soaring birds, which he knew in South America, and can never see here. But forty years in England, and English blood on both sides – though on the mother's side it was Americanized – have not turned Mr. Hudson into the sort of Englishman that it is a pleasure to make a lion of. Himself has told us, and has oftener made us feel, that he is one of "a dying remnant of a vanished people," "strangers and captives" in a world whose language and customs and thoughts are not theirs...

He feels the strangeness where men with "pale civilized faces," eagerly talking about things that do not concern him, are crowded together, while he feels a kinship with "the dead, who were not as these; the long, long dead, the men who knew not life in towns, and felt no strangeness in sun and wind and rain." Jefferies also evoked these men from their graves upon the downs, but Mr. Hudson is perfectly original, and makes those prehistoric figures with "pale furious faces" more alive than Jefferies did...

In Mr. Hudson curiosity is a passion, or, rather, it is part of the greater passion of love. He loves what things are. That is to say, he loves life, not merely portions selected and detached by past generations of writers...

What he reverences and loves is the earth, and the earth he knows is, humanly speaking, everlasting. He is at home wherever grass grows, and he has hardly a trace of an amiable" weakness" for particular places.

Scattered over his rambling books are passages that give an intense, and even magical, but quite unfanciful, life to many of the towns and villages, as well as the rivers, woods, and hills, of England. They have the beauty of discoveries and the sufficingness of what is genuinely imagined. But whether he is a rambler or a sojourner, it is seldom as a traveller that he interests us. He lays little stress on his walking or cycling. They are means to an end, and his end is to be still, somewhere in the sun or under trees where birds are.

Primarily his search has been for birds. When, for example, he found himself at Chepstow, and was disappointed in his hope of seeing a rare species near by, he tells us that he had "to extract what pleasure he could" out of the castle, the Wye, and Tintern Abbey. These things had already been discovered, and he knew it. He does not positively refuse to like what others are well known to have liked; for example, he likes a vast range of English poets from Swinburne to Bloomfield; but he must always be discovering...

The scenes which he can best or most happily remember are those discovered by chance, which he had not heard of, or else had heard of and forgotten, or which he had not expected to see. His books now contain, fortunately, an almost countless number of these scenes, each one of them peopled, made alive, made (I should say) next to immortal, by the presence of some extraordinary or beautiful living thing, by a child, an adder, a vast ringing and echoing and re-echoing of bells, a cowman, a fox, a poet, a river, a memory, a legend, above all by birds, together with his own personality that withdraws itself, at times, far from vulgar error as from poetic illusion, but seldom far from profound humanity or natural magic, and, if it eludes our sympathy, never our wonder, curiosity, and admiration.

George Crabbe

That coast of his boyhood [in Suffolk] was, in fact, the only scenery which he could picture as large as life. When he drew upon the inland country of Glemham or Belvoir or Trowbridge, he painted fields or houses among trees gently enough, but they were not Aldeburgh, and they were not Crabbe, or, rather, they were that gentle boy revisiting the earth in happier circumstances.

Nevertheless, it is certain that the more he lived inland and in comfortable circumstances the more he saw calm beauty in the

country, and the less did he dwell upon mud and muddy water and people to match, like that “one poor dredger” in “The Borough”...

He was, of course, conscious of being a pioneer. He was writing of common life without intending to amuse. It was his fear that

“Cities and towns, the various haunts of men,
Require the pencil; they defy the pen.”...

Being a botanist, and an Aldeburgh man to boot, who had handled butter-tubs on Slaughden Quay, he was a little contemptuous of lily-fingered artists. At the time he was probably despairing of ever finding an artist who should see that “all that grows has grace,” and should love even the “grave flora” of the marshland, which “scarcely deigns to bloom.” In a note he added further particulars about the flora of fen and dike, concluding with these words: “Such is the vegetation of the fen when it is at a small distance from the ocean; and in this case there arise from it effluvia strong and peculiar, half saline, half putrid, which would be considered by most people as offensive, and by some as dangerous; but there are others to whom singularity of taste or association of ideas has rendered it agreeable and pleasant.”

There is no doubt as to whether he ranks himself with “most people” or “others.” If it were a taste that could be acquired easily Crabbe would be better liked, and it would be more commonly admitted that the dreadful and deeply- rutted track torn by his sternly-moulded prose in couplets did lead to Parnassus...

Just as he gave plants their proper names, instead of alluding to them poetically, so he described men and women as, in his opinion, they really were. As a matter of fact, he was very far from being impersonal. The man who liked that half-saline, half-putrid fen stink is a very powerful presence in his poems. The drab, monotonous verse is at times so dismal in effect as to approach a sort of sublimity, and, unfantastic though it is, it has a nightmare effect. This drab, monotonous verse, only not drab when it is fierce or rarelier soft, is a large part of Crabbe’s personality, and destroys his intention of photographing Aldeburgh, Rendham, Muston, Trowbridge. If anything, he predominates too much. He is large-hearted, he is just, but never dramatic. He pities; perhaps he sympathizes ; he wishes to understand; but he treats his characters like a schoolmaster or clergyman.

John Clare

...Though he liked to picture the outside of an old labourer's cottage, he was happiest in the fields. He had had time for childhood's pleasures. By Swordy Well he could both tend the cattle and play at "roly-poly" down the hill. He is the best of all poets at suggesting the nests and eggs of wild birds, and his "November" contains a truthful picture of a boy sheltering from a winter storm and

"Oft spying nests where he spring eggs had ta'en,
And wishing in his heart 'twas summer-time again."

It is hard to imagine a combination with more possibilities for wretchedness than that of poet and agricultural labourer. I mean a poet of any known breed. Of course, it is easy to invent a poet suddenly making poetry of all that dignity and beauty in the labourer's life which we are so ready to believe in. But such a one has not yet appeared. It is doubtful if he ever will, or if we ought to complain of the lack, since what we want to see in some perhaps impossible peasant poetry has always been an element in great poetry. If we knew their pedigrees, we should find more than one peasant among the ancestors of the poets. In fact, every man, poet or not, is a more or less harmonious combination of the peasant and the adventurer.

In no man have these two parts been more curiously combined than in John Clare, a real poet, however small, and actually an agricultural labourer out and out. He was far from being the kind of peasant poet who would be invented in an armchair. Mortal man could hardly be milder, more timid and drifting, than Clare...

The poet consumed the labourer in him, or left only the dregs of one, while the conditions of the labourer's life were as a millstone about his neck as poet...

Unlike Burns, he had practically no help from the poetry and music of his class. He was a peasant writing poetry, yet cannot be called a peasant poet, because he had behind him no tradition of peasant literature, but had to do what he could with the current forms of polite literature. The mastering of these forms absorbed much of his energy, so that for so singular a man he added little of his own, and the result was only thinly tinged with his personality, hardly at all with the general characteristics of his class.

His work is founded chiefly on literary models. Yet he lacked the intellect and power of study to live by the pen as he lacked the grit to live by hoe and pitch-fork. A small income was subscribed for him, but he failed to found even a moderately sound productive life on it. Never, except in fancy rhyme, had he the Plenty which he desired...

He possessed a similar fresh, sweet spirituality to that of Jefferies, a similar grasp and love of detail. Some of his plain descriptions anticipate and at least equal the "Nature article" of today. His was a pedestrian Muse

"who sits her down
Upon the molehill's little lap,
Who feels no fear to stain her gown,
And pauses by the hedgerow gap."

And he often wrote long formless pieces full of place-names and of field-lore charmingly expressed, songs uttering his love and his pathetic joy in retrospection, poems mingling the two elements. A thousand things which the ordinary country child, "tracking wild searches through the meadow grass," has to forget in order to live, Clare observed and noted...

No man ever came so near to putting the life of the farm, as it is lived, not as it is seen over a five-barred gate, into poetry. He gives no broad impressions – he saw the kite, but not the kite's landscape – yet his details accumulate in the end, so that a loving reader, and no one reads him but loves him, can grasp them, and see the lowlands of Northamptonshire as they were when the kite still soared over them.

George Borrow

The books ["Lavengro " and "The Romany Rye"], written over twenty years later, [i.e. after Borrow travelled through Britain] present us with a memory of inland England, refined by dream, modified by romance. It would be difficult for one describing a journey to give a less realistic account of the country, the roads, and the conditions of travel. Only the towns, London, Norwich, Edinburgh, Horncastle, and the other stopping-places, are more or less clearly drawn, and are mentioned by name. The old bee-keeper's garden is real enough, but it has no locality. The country which Borrow makes most impressive is the Irish bogland. Level, misty, uninhabited, it lends itself perfectly to the purposes of his mystery...

Now, that is Borrow's country, the country of his soul. It may be felt in his Spain, in his Wales, in his London, in his Salisbury Plain, but it is essentially an imaginative country, the product of his studies and of his temperament, with those early memories of Ireland as an airy groundwork. Perhaps it is Celtic...

He admired grandeur, which he described in “The Bible in Spain” and “Wild Wales”; for Byron also was among his prophets. But except when the grand was also mysterious, he produced no very remarkable effects. His business was not with forms, but with atmosphere. He knew no natural history. The outward eye was very little to him. He walked for the sun and the wind, for the joy and pride of his prowess in walking, and to get from one place to another. Therefore his country, save when he wrote as a descriptive tourist, is just English open country without motor-cars or even railways. It was what was essential to him, what had survived in his memory from childhood or youth on to middle age. It was as far as possible from poetic painting with the eye on the object...

Tennyson

...Though he was a note-taker and a curious observer and connoisseur of landscape, he had as a rule, like greater poets, in his mind’s eye a country, whether wild or cultivated, which was more than a mere composite of consciously collected elements. All that can be said, as a rule, is that this country was English. And it was modern English so that King Leodegran saw cultivated land,

“A slope of land that ever grew,
Field after field, up to a height, the peak
Haze-hidden,”

just as Tennyson did; while Enid had, like him, “a pool of golden carp ” near her old home, and that old home was a tufted ruin of the nineteenth century. If there is one element peculiar to Tennyson, apart from the eye-seen accuracy of “oilily bubbled up the mere,” it is that of the great house, its grove, park, and garden. The houses are clothed in vine or jasmine; they have honeysuckled porches; their gates are”griffin-guarded,” or

“A lion ramps at the top.
He is claspt by a passion-flower;”

Their groves are of lime or elm or acacia; their gardens are rich in laurel, rose, lily, and lavender...

Beyond the oaks of the park are wilder lands, mountains, wastes of gorse, cliffs and roaring seas ; but these are painted with a vividness and scrupulosity somewhere short of love. The poet is happiest of all where he mingles refined figures, knightly or gentle, with soft, sunny copses or gardens, as he does perhaps most perfectly in “The Lady of Shalott” or the fragment of “Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere.”

Swinburne

Swinburne was more in the South than in the North. His school was Eton, his University Oxford, his regular abode for about thirty years Putney. His Northern scenes are mostly impassioned idealized memories. “Winter in Northumberland” is not equal to “By the North Sea.” The moors, cliffs, and sea of the North enter again and again into his poems in the form of images, and the dialect Northumbrian pieces are exquisite exercises; but it was to the South that he turned when he took actual scenery for the subject of his poems, as he did after his youth was over.

His earlier poems, dramatic and lyric, had no place for any distinctive landscape. Their country is either poets’ country or a region somewhat “out of the eyes of worldly weather,” “out of the sun’s way, hidden apart”...

Where Swinburne is precise is in his coast scenes: at Tintagel with Tristram; in Sark, thrilled by the sea and the memory of Hugo’s visit, which he rendered into something more like music than painting; in Guernsey... His method is entirely his own, a potent alternation of bold and definite description with raptures and reveries kindled by the landscape and seascape described.

In “Evening on the Broads” perhaps there is too daring an attempt to make poetry of a piece of touring, but at its best this poetry is the legitimate union of an individual landscape with an individual mind, powerful enough to create for posterity a musical rather than a plastic impression inseparable from the original scene by any of Swinburne’s lovers...

Emily Bronte

She fits into the moorland – she is part of it – like the curlew and the heather, and she herself knew it. The moorland was a necessity to her, but it was also her chief pleasure and joy. Her poems always imply it, and often express it.

She asked for nothing, while she was on this earth and on the moor, save her own heart and liberty. Her poems and her life, in fact, reveal her as a wild spirit, as what Byron seemed in his poetry when he had a background of mountains and thunder. Her background is the everlasting wild itself and “Wuthering Heights.” She “rides on the whirlwind ” in the country described in the first chapter of that book...

Robert Burns

Burns was the Lowlands of Scotland. The poor, free peasantry culminated in him. Poetry does not sum up, but his poetry was the flower and the essence of that country and its peasantry. He was great because they were all at his back, their life and their literature. To speak of his country is merely to consider a few scatterings of the elements which he mixed into lasting songs…

His poetry shows us the delicate wild country at the edge of the ploughland or in the midst of it, which is the more delicate for the contrast, and perhaps for the fact that the poet had so long known the plough…

He loves the corn and the roses, the scent of beanfields and of wild foliage. He muses early in the summer morning by Nith side. The briers and woodbines budding, the partridges calling, "inspire his Muse"…

How much he loved the Highland, "where savage streams tumble over savage mountains, thinly over-spread with savage flocks, which sparingly support as savage inhabitants," is not quite plain. I think that he as an individual inclined to love the mountains, but that his ancestry mixed a kind of fear or hate with his love… To generation after generation of his ancestors the mountains must have been indifferent when not dangerous. If he loved them apart from passing associations, it was as symbols of the eternal and unconfined.

And so with winter and wild weather. Many of his poems show the ancient agricultural man's love of spring and fine weather. In the winter night he thinks of the silly sheep on the hills, and the helpless bird…

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Light and Twilight
(An anthology of short stories: Extracts)

Duckworth, 1911

The Flower Gatherer

[This short story opens with a luscious description of a summer's day.]

The children seemed to be trying to gather all the flowers. It was their way of striving to grasp the infinite. They were scattered over the hillside, where the pale sward was made an airy or liquid substance by the innumerable cowslips nodding upon its surface, as upon a lake, that held their small shadows each quite clear. All day they gathered flowers, and threw them away, and gathered more, and still there were no less. The earth continued to murmur with blissful ease, as if, like the wandering humble bee, it were drowsed with the warmth and the abundance.

One child separated herself from the rest, moving down instead of across or up the hill.

[The unnamed child, on her own, comes to a brook where she gathers more flowers]:

Now she had filled both hands, and each time she grasped a new stalk some of the old fell out. So presently she laid them down in the grass to rearrange them. But she now noticed the tall sedges of the brook and wanted some. She looked round to see if anyone could see her doing this forbidden thing, and then went to the edge and stretched out her hand: they were too far. The water was gliding under her, flashing like brandished steel, and yet as clear as air over the green stars of its bed. Everything had always been kind to her, and this water was one of the kindest, so playful and bright, so pure that sometimes they came far to fetch some of it in a pail for the house. She leaned out, and even moved one foot as if to step towards the green sedge. She lost her footing and fell…

[The child is unable to get out of the water:]

She rose up a little, and saw the sun, and the cuckoo on the branch through the waves, and heard the man calling to his horses in the next field. Then solitude: all pleasure gone, love, light, warmth, movement was nothing, was over there, was past, or never had been, would never be again. It was better now. Sleep, sleep.

But in the sleep, songs, visions of the house, forms and faces moving to and fro, and herself going in and out amongst them, far away, long ago, over there, in that other place. She was hurrying faster and faster, running too fast for her legs, carried away off them into the air, but swaying and rising easily and more easily now. She sighed as she seemed to float higher and lighter into soft darkness, into utter darkness, into nothing at all, where there was never anything or will be anything. The mud settled down. The stream flowed clear and sweet. The sun had not so much to do but that he could wilt the flowers lying on the bank. Life went on exuberant, joyous, august, looking neither to the right nor to the left. The cuckoo called. The birds' songs became so drowsy that they were not missed when they ceased, and only its own echo replied to the cuckoo. The child's white forehead was just above the water, and a fly perched on it and preened his diamond wings. A quarter of a mile away the dinner bell at home was swung merrily again and again by a strong arm that enjoyed the task.

A Group of Statuary

I had walked several miles through streets whose high, flat-fronted buildings made me feel as if I were at the bottom of a well, or in a deep, weedy river-bed with cliffy banks, from which it was impossible to climb out, though I could turn aside into many tributaries even more narrow and as deep. The sky was stagnant and dull; the fever and heat of the air came not so much from the sun as from underground, and from the walls on either side a volcanic fire out of the earth's depths and the hearts of men. The plaited streams of men and women were restless...

[In a space between the buildings the narrator sees a group of people:]

The dull, grey figures might have risen up out of the city soil, with some of it still clinging to them, rude and shaggy after the effort of birth, to sun themselves and look about. Their greyness was wintry, the rasping greyness of north-east wind that turns dry roads, asphalt, flagstone, plough-land, and meadow in the country, within the mind, to one grey, the colour of ashes. Nothing in them responded to the heat out of the sky. They were of the dark earth.

Before the discovery that they had faces with eyes and lips and hair, it might have been seen that they were men and women, and that for two reasons: first, they wore clothes which subtly suggested those of the people in the crowd, without in the least resembling them; second, they were miserable. I think that the clothes alone, the misfits and cast-offs of scarecrows, would have betrayed them, but I am not sure; I cannot separate the clothes from them, and not them or their clothes from misery...

…One man, it is true, lay half along a seat with his head and shoulders in the lap of a woman whose head had fallen forward so as to hide his face with her hair, and his trouser leg had rolled up and disclosed a yellow bone. But the chances of ordinary life do frequently bring to sight a man's bare arm, breast, or foot, though usually it is whitish and something more than bone. This was a yellow bone. Still, it might pass. There was nothing here to outrage those who were not only full-fed but rightly and confidently expecting to remain so….

…No one of them spoke, or wept, or sighed. The woman who was doing up her hair coughed now and then. The man with his head in a woman's lap turned over once to spit – he was wide awake. As he once more made his head comfortable the woman revealed her eyes. There was nothing else of her save rags, and the eyes seemed hardly to belong to her. They expressed no private grief or hope or fear, any more than do the eyes in the portraits of Christ….

…No one notices the statuary of London unless it is made for display or to divide the traffic, not to form a decoration appropriate to a particular site, as in the case of these figures under the planes. In all the city there was no group so perfectly in keeping with its greatness and aridity. I had seen equestrian figures, symbolic groups, nudes, semi-nudes, figures in frock coats, in stone or bronze; thousands of living creatures, joyous or beautiful or tragic in their capacity for joy, in harmony with the burning sun, yet having nothing to do with this city which was the work of the giants, the heaven-besieging giants, not the gods. But these thirteen or fourteen recumbent, leaning, seated, and bowed figures, in their dignified dismay, forming neither a circle nor a square, but a group as of a herd or flock, were in their place, thoroughly native, children of the city clay – fit lords of the scene, if they had but known – perfect citizens of no mean city. Why should it trouble to house Grecian marbles when it had these eternal ones wrought with its own hands?…

It was very still. The sun in the sky was the one thing that moved. I dreamed that this exodus had taken place. I was a traveller in a desert city whose sons had all been dead thousands of years, but were known still to the stranger by these mighty marbles among which the planes had taken root. The tradition of the dead race was so powerful that not a bird or beast or any wild thing cared to visit this memorial of it, except curious men. And I was a man…

Home

A little square sitting room, not very high, and hardly wider than it was high…

A very still, silent room; and in it, motionless as in amber, a man standing before the books, and a woman with raised eyebrows and stiff but unquiet hands, dovetailed together, staring into the black-crusted fire. The man, chin on one hand, elbow on the other, tall and upright and dark like a pinnacle of black rock, looking sternly out of kind eyes at the books as at children. The woman, trying to drowse herself through her eyes by the fire and through every pore of her body by the silentness, yet aware all the time of the husband between her and the windows, as though his shadow blackened her instead of half the books.

These two, separate and careful not to look at one another. Had they been utterly alone they would hardly have looked thus. They were not alone. In the stillness and silence, despite the walls and curtains, there was another presence, and a greater than they. It was London, a presence as mighty as winter, though as invisible. Its face was pressed up against the window; its spirit was within. And there was yet another, almost invisible, and as frail as the other was mighty – the spirit of the one who saw the room and felt the enchantment of London upon it. Neither the man nor the woman knew what was this second spirit in their room, yet the room was its home. It was the spirit of a young soldier dying in a far land. He was calm and easy now, without pain and without motion. Only his dark eyes told that he lived…

[The soldier recalls a long railway journey when he was a child, with his father to his father's country of origin:]

The fixed bright eyes in the bed saw these stations again in their dreariness, and saddened with the dream that he now was upon such a station, and the lighted train was rushing by and forgetting him, with its proud freight of living men looking ahead towards their country.

Nodding awake again, he saw the girl eating an orange, a wide water like a sea and the pale moon shrivelled beyond it, a farm and its cattle streaming out under a hill covered with crooked oaks, and the cattle were bowed under the weight of their long horns.

"It is near," whispered his father: he slept.

When he awoke he was upon his father's knee, and both with cheeks together were looking, over frosty meadows and blown trees, at sand hills and sea beyond, and on the other side at hills crimsoned with bracken, their summits invisible, so steep were they.

"This is it," said the father. "Yes," whispered the son, and both looked through and beyond the mountains and the sea to their country, the country of their souls, so that the child's first thought

that this was not what he had expected never appeared again, until now in the tent...

"Over there," said his father, pointing beyond the ships, "is the land we have come from." It was as faint and grey and incredible in the distance as his own land was clear and true; and he sighed with happiness and security, and also with anticipation of the further deeps that were to be revealed, the battlefield, the curlew's eggs, the castles, the harps, the harpers harping all the songs of his father...

"My country," muttered the dreamer lying still, and blinked his eyes as the tent flapped and he saw outside the sun of another country blazing and terrible as a lion above the tawny hills....

A grim, black-bearded face was bending over him, with smiles deeply entrenched all over it. He was lifted straight into a cart behind a chestnut pony with his father and the man.

The sun was hot. They climbed up high among the hedgeless and pathless mountain, always up. The larks sang. The mountain lambs skipped before the cart...

The father and son walked in a solitary wood upon the side of a steep hill, and at the foot of it was a green vale that wound with the windings of a broad stream running fast, and at the top of the hill, where it was a precipice, hung a castle with trees growing in its crevices, and its windows looked out through ivy thicker than its vast walls down at several miles of the green vale on either hand, at the sun-bathed gloom of the oakwoods of the opposite slope, at the other castles, bleached crags which could be recognised as the work of men only because they were even bolder and more gaunt than the natural crags round about.

Sometimes it rained, sometimes the sun shone, and the father and son were glad of both as they gathered blue violets and white sorrel in the dripping and glistening woods. Under the castle wall they sat down, and the father brought out a book and read:

"King Arthur was at Caerleon upon Usk..." and Johnny began to think of bowmen shooting through the ivy about the windows, of king and queen walking in the grassy courts within the walls, whose roof was the sky. His father told him that the book was written by his countrymen about the heroes of his country, and the child made over to those heroes the glories that had once been Aladdin's, and the Marsh King's, and King Solomon's...

The boy sat upon a rock while the two men went out of sight to the other side; his father to bathe, as he had done twenty years before when a young man. The wind hissed as through closed lips and jagged teeth. The mist wavered over the polished ripples of the lake that resembled a broad and level courtyard of glass among the rough hills.

The men were silent, and the sounds of their footsteps were caught up and carried away in the wind. The boy was thoughtless and motionless, with a pleasure that was astonished at itself. He could not have told how long he had been staring at nothing over the lake when, at his feet, his father's head was thrust up laughing out of the water, turned with a swirl, and disappeared again into the mist. He had not ceased to try to disentangle that head from the mist when once more he heard that wailing song that used to make his father so glad, and he himself sang back such words as, without knowing their meaning, he remembered; his brain full of the mists, the mountains, the rivers, the fire in the fern, the castles, the knights, the kings and queens, the mountain boys at cricket, the old man with the foxes, the inn dogs lying in the sun... the sun... the mist... his country... not the country he had fought for ... the country he was going to, up and up and over the mountains, now that he was dying ... now that he was dead.

Winter Music

The night had been frosty and still, and the dawn was yet more still. The sky was of a misty pale blue tending to violet, but fading to an ash-coloured haze low down that hid the hills five miles away on the horizon...

It was one of those days when what meets the eye is far less than what is apprehended, when a man may spend all the hours of light out of doors and see nothing and hear nothing and yet be profoundly blessed. The birds, the trees, the houses, the few flowers, may indeed be seen, and the songs heard from branch and sky, but all these little things are dwarfed, and, in the memory, sometimes quite shut out by the sense of the presence of earth itself, the huge, quiet, all-sustaining earth mutely communing with the sun. And so it was this day. When at last the sun had set with as little colour and stir as at dawn, and I sat down under a roof, I remembered little, thought of nothing, but I glowed and was at ease...

All sound had disappeared and was replaced by a beautiful soft silence, omnipresent and omnipotent. This was the perfect state. Never again could it be troubled. All wheels and feet had gone out long ago through the pale gateways of the west, where sun and wind had passed out, and they had gone for ever... The great tree against the sky was exalted. I had seen it many times but never thus. It seemed the source of the silence, and out of its caves flowed continually, as a river, the power that was taking possession of all the earth as the crepuscular light subsided.

This was that great silence, the first of things and the last, on which life has intruded for a little while, that great silence which is all about us, and over the edge of it we may step anywhere and at any time, perhaps never to return. Its empire is eternity.

Therefore it is very patient, very gentle, very grave, so that the bird or the trumpet knows not the unfathomable ocean into which the sound of its love or its insolence has fallen. As a rule, when we are aware of it, the frontier of it is elusive and moves with us ; now it is yonder, across the river, and again it is beyond that lift in the twilight road. But this evening it swept on majestically. The door, a few paces away, opened into the heart of it. The fire burnt low and stirless, because it was on every side. The nearest things, the flowers on the table at my side, the pictures on the wall, were already caught up in it and looked unlike themselves...

From out of the cedar, as it seemed, a strain of music crept interceding, and the wave did not fall but retired imperceptibly into the tide. The opening notes were slow and musing and delicate, and at any moment they might have ceased... The music was almost silent; the notes, the withered leaves, had touched the earth when they began to flutter, to trip, to whirl up; they muttered again, still soft and hesitating, but now not hesitating for fear of death, but because they were not yet sure of their destiny. The sounds were behind a veil like the fragrant coloured flower within the brown bud, or the painted bird in the egg. They paused, moved slowly forward, more softly, coiling now, writhing serpent-like, making for the light which they could not see...

Then a deep chord. The light. A glimmer seen underground through the veil, the sheath, the shell, but still a glimmer of light, and the music had seen it far away and was starting in pursuit, more loudly but gradually. It saw the light, but not what was beyond. It stole away as if in a few moments it would lose itself in what it sought and be gone. But now it was clear, advancing yet more loudly, even with pride, as of arching instep, and hair tossing, but smoothly as over velvet...

The music had gone back into the womb again. That was not the light but the dream of it in the sleep of one who had never seen the light. Again the coiling, the writhing, the little sounds that chipped at the shell in darkness.... The music continued, but now it seemed that another creature moved within it formless, vast, reluctant. The notes were bass and long and slow as of a monstrous bulk stirring in sleep and unwilling to awaken. Soon he slept, and the notes just heaved.

Then it was as if a little bird alighted above the monster, and sang so that he followed the song dreamily in his sleep with a moan of his own dark throat. Still, bird-like, the music swelled as with an innumerable choir, and the sleeper was all but forgotten. Sweet and wild and swift the birds sang melodies that were threshed by the wind, washed by the dew... The music trembled and swayed, delighted and fearless on the perilous edge as when a flower hangs down almost to the earth with dew...

Then once more the music expanded, leaped up mightily into the speed of the birds' song and the power of the bulk below, of a dragon, enormous, many coloured, glittering. The dragon shouldered himself out of the ground with a great earthquake, and stood for a moment sniffing the air of the mountains, and then bounded up and forward with lightnings on feet as of a stag, and uplifted wings as of eagles. The great plumes winnowed the air with azure and gold and uncounted green, that shone like stars, leaves, and waves, or glowed like flowers. His proud limbs bent under the flanks that were rippled like the sea; his hoofs lit fires in the rocks beneath. His breast of emerald mail took the sun like a broad hill facing the summer south... He planted his feet upon the crags, upon the tree-tops, upon the shining waters, upon the cross of the sword of Orion in the west. As mild as he was vast, his footprints soiled not a flower...

His motion was as that of a mountain river mounded and roaring in flood; or sometimes as of a stag running without fear; sometimes as of a birch tree waving. He fed upon the air of the summits and drank their starry springs. Though he went winding like water in a land of hills he went ever forward. The music rose and fell, galloped and thundered; it trotted quietly on rock that gave back a clamour as of many cuckoos to his feet; and it promised never to cease, as how should it do, linked as it was to this mild everlasting dragon? ...

Sometimes he paused or turned aside to gaze at thickets never yet trodden by men. Here the birds' songs were less but the flowers more than ever, nodding above the highest crests of the trees, descending from them in silent cascades to the floor of gold and purple and white upon green. Into one of these thickets he glided and lay down, letting his legs sink under him and his pinions fold under the flowers, until at last the only movement was of his breathing and of the dew which it unloosed from petal and leaf. The radiant and hardy mail, the soaring melodious plume, the limbs of speed, the breast of great power, were buried in a mound of leaves, hidden from the sun save here and there a glance of burnished azure or gold as of a flower...

"Ohoo-ohohee-hoo-oo-oo." It was... the cruel exultant call of a hunter's horn, not yet hungry and keen, but again and again repeated in careless joy to be mounted and afield under the sun.

Once more the dragon advanced on wings and feet together. He did not fly from an enemy, for he knew none; nor did he go up against an enemy. He felt fear, but it was for the first time, and he knew not that fear may have a cause without...

Never had his speed and the thunder and terror of it been so great as now; it must have borne down any foe in front no matter how bold. But the foe was behind. The horn ceased. So near were the hunters that the crying of their hounds was heard now in a torrent of joy.

The hunters were gathered together. They heard the quarry and their myriad trampling quickly supplanted the dragon's thunder. They foamed into his glades, over the flowers of his lair and along the edge of the river precipice. White and black horses, with solemn eager extended faces, men in scarlet flying mantles, in mail of silver and gold, bearing plumes of many colours and lances set, there was a horse and a man to every tree in the forest...

The music that had gloried in the dragon's birth now climbed yet more loftily in the anticipation of his doom. They rode and he soared and ran as creatures who had found the right way, and followed it with eyes closed to all that lay on this hand or that, bent only on the clattering track and the motion. Oh! joy to hunt, to be hunted, for ever. The chase was all, the end nothing. Regardless of the quarry, they dropped their lances one by one. The music was cruel no more. It was superbly sweet, with a titanic ease. Moor and sea and river and mountain and forest, and again forest and mountain and river and sea and moor. White clouds hunted with them over the blue glades of the majestic sky...

The mountain forests were mossy and the crying of the eagles could be heard. The melodies of the hooves were poems and their deep immortal footprints would brim with tales... Not even the leader saw the dragon. Only now and then the sliding of stones in the great distance reached him from the valleys and the laugh of the woodpeckers when the eagles were gone...

The bold hunters were lying down to sleep beside their fires; the less bold leaned on their elbows or stood with backs to the fire; and sleeping or awake, they watched continually. At times the glow or a flicker lighted up a leaf, or a brilliant bird, or a wave of the river; and, awake or asleep, the watcher started. But he did not start, nor stir, nor breathe, nor shut nor open an eyelid, when the light showed not a leaf or a bird, but the mail of the dragon as he glided amongst them, and down to the river to drink under the precipice. Past the fires of the hunters he descended, careless of the sleepers and the dreamers who watched. Once more he peered into the thicket where he had slept, but his flowers were gone and the leaves lay on the earth instead of moving against the sky.

He mounted the knoll once more and looked round. He listened. The hoot of an owl wandered like a dream of the hunters among the mountains to the moon. The dragon slowly unfurled his wings and launched himself above the waves of the tree-tops and rising in tranquil circles vanished beyond the moon.

And as the music died away and the silence yet did not return, I saw that the lamps were lit, that the curtains were drawn to shut out the cedar tree, the stars, the silence and the gentle words of the owl that were as bubbles out of the silence.

The Attempt

Several seasons had passed since Morgan Traheron had so much as looked at his fishing tackle, and now he turned over, almost indifferently, the reels and lines and hooks and flies which had been carefully put away in an old tool box of his great-grand- father's... He was seeking, not any of the fishing tackle, but a revolver that lay amongst it, and a small green box containing only one ball cartridge. He had often thought of throwing the revolver away. His wife always looked wonderingly at him when he cleaned it once every year or so, but if she had urged him to throw it away he would have scoffed at the fear which he detected, all the more heartily because the sign of her concern inflated his vanity...

Morgan took out the revolver and the cartridge and shut the box. The lock was stiff and the chambers would not revolve without the use of both hands... It was a cheap, ugly, repulsive weapon; it impressed him with unsuitableness. He did not stay to oil it, but putting it in a pocket and the cartridge in another, he prepared to leave the house.

"Won't you take Mary with you, Morgan?" said his wife.

"Yes," said Mary, his little daughter...

"Oh no, you don't really want to come, you only say it to please me," said Traheron, mild but hard.

"Yes, I am sure she... Good-bye, then," said his wife.

"Good-bye," said he. The thought of kissing his daughter turned him back for a moment. But he did not; the act occurred to him more as a part of the ceremony of this fatal day than as a farewell, and he feared to betray his thought. She was the immediate cause of his decision. He had spoken resentfully to her for some fault which he noticed chiefly because it disturbed his melancholy repose; she had then burst out crying with long, clear wails that pierced him with self-hate, remorse, regret, and bitter memory.

Why should he live who had the power to draw such a cry from that sweet mouth? So he used to ask in the luxurious self-contempt which he practised. He would delay no more...

Death he had never feared or understood; he feared very much the pain and the fear that would awake with it. He had never in his life seen a dead human body or come in any way near death. Death was an idea tinged with poetry in his mind a kingly thing which was once only at any man's call. After it came annihilation. To escape from the difficulty of life, from the need of deliberating on it, from the hopeless search for something that would make it possible for him to go on living like anybody else without questioning, he was eager to hide himself away in annihilation...

There was also an element of vanity in his project; he was going to punish himself and in a manner so extreme that he was inclined to be exalted by the feeling that he was now about to convince the world he had suffered exceedingly. He had thus taken up the revolver, and blurred the moment of the report by thinking intently of the pure annihilation which he desired...

As he mounted the hill by a white path over the turf, he felt the revolver strike against his hip at each stride... When he was among some bushes that concealed him and yet still gave him a view of his house, he paused for breath. He half-longed for an invasion of sentiment at the sight of his home; but... the house was mere stones, nothing, dead. He half wished that Mary would run out into the garden and compel him to a passionate state. His will and power of action were ebbing yet lower in his lifeless mood. He moved his eyes from the house to the elder hedgerow round it, to the little woods on the undulations beyond, to the Downs, and, above them, the cloudy sun perched upon a tripod of pale beams. Nothing answered his heartless call for help. He needed some tenderness to be born, a transfigured last look to keep as a memory; perhaps he still hoped that this answer that was not given to him could save him from the enemy at his side and in his brain...

The sound of the discharge must not be heard in that house below. Almost with tenderness he dreamed of the very moment when his wife would hear the news and perhaps see his body at the same time... He did not like the thought that some stranger who knew him by sight, who had never spoken to him, should come across the body, what was left of him, his remains, and should suddenly become curious and interested, perhaps slightly vain of the remarkable discovery. If only he could fade away rapidly. Several strangers with whose faces he was familiar passed him in a lane, and he assumed a proud, hard look of confidence, as he hoped.

He quickened his steps and turned into a neglected footpath where he had never met anybody. He took out the revolver and again looked at it... He inserted the cartridge and with difficulty forced it into position; the brass was much tarnished. Now he revolved the chambers in order that the cartridge should be under the hammer, but by mistake he turned them too far; he had to try again, and, losing count of the chambers, was again defeated. Where the cartridge was he could not be sure...

Moving on, he now looked down upon a steep wood that sloped from his feet, and then rose as steeply up an opposite hill. They were beech woods with innumerable straight stems of bare branchwork that was purple in the mass. Yews stood as black islands in the woods, and they and the briers with scarlet hips close to his eye were laced with airy traveller's joy, plumy and grey.

Traheron now turned the muzzle to his temple, first letting the hammer down for fear of an accident. He had only one shot to fire, and he could not feel sure that this would enter his brain. His ear; his mouth – the thought was horrible, impossible. His skin ached with the touch of the steel which was very cold. Next he turned the weapon to his breast, and saw that he had better pull the trigger with his thumb. The hammer was now at full cock, the cartridge in place. The hideous engine looked absurdly powerful for his purpose. The noise, the wound, would be out of proportion to the little spark of life that was so willing, so eager, to be extinguished.

He lowered the weapon and took a last sight of the woods, praying no prayer, thinking no thought, perfectly at ease, though a little cold from inaction. Suddenly his eye was aware of someone moving above the opposite wood, half a mile away, and at the same moment this stranger raised a loud halloo as if he had sighted a fox... The cry rescued him; with shame at the thought that he might have been watched, he raised the revolver and turned it to his breast, shut his eyes and touched the trigger, but too lightly, and breathless, in the same moment, he averted the barrel and hurled it into the wood, where it struck a bough without exploding. For a moment he dreamed that he had succeeded...

Then, for he was cold, Traheron moved rapidly away, his mind empty of all thought except that he would go to a certain wood and then strike over the fields, following a route that would bring him home in the gentleness of evening.

He opened the door. The table was spread for tea. His wife, divining all, said:

"Shall I make tea?"

"Please," he replied, thinking himself impenetrably masked.

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The Childhood of Edward Thomas
A Fragment of Autobiography
Extracts
Faber, 1938

1
Infancy

When I penetrate backward into my childhood I come perhaps sooner than many people to impassable night. A sweet darkness enfolds with a faint blessing my life up to the age of about four. The task of attempting stubbornly to break up that darkness is one I have never proposed to myself, but I have many times gone up to the edge of it, peering, listening, stretching out my hands, and I have heard the voice of one singing as I sat or lay in her arms; and I have become again aware very dimly of being enclosed in rooms that were shadowy, whether by comparison with outer sunlight I know not. The songs, first of my mother, then of her younger sister, I can hear not only afar off behind the veil but on this side of it also...

I was at peace with life. Indoors, out of the sun, I seem never to have been troubled by heat or cold strong enough to be remembered. But out of doors, somewhere at the verge of the dark years, I can recall more simply and completely than any spent indoors at that time one day above others. I lay in the tall grass and buttercups of a narrow field at the edge of London and saw the sky and nothing but the sky...

I have only one clear early glimpse of my father – darting out of the house in his slippers and chasing and catching a big boy who had bullied me. He was eloquent, confident, black-haired, brown-eyed, all that my mother was not. By glimpses, I learnt with awe and astonishment that he had once been of my age...

My mother I can hardly see save as she is now while I am writing. I cannot see her but I can summon up her presence. She is plainest to me not quite dressed, in white bodice and petticoat, her arms and shoulders rounded and creamy smooth. My affection for her was leavened with lesser likings and with admiration. I liked the scent of her fresh warm skin and supposed it unique. Her straight nose and chin made a profile that for years formed my standard. No hair was so beautiful to me as hers was, light golden brown hair, long and rippling. Her singing at fall of night, especially if we were alone together, soothed and fascinated me, as though it had been divine, at once the mightiest and the softest sound in the world.

Usually perhaps there was a servant, but my mother did everything for us in the house, made many of our clothes and mended them, prepared and gave us food, tended us when sick, comforted us when cold, disappointed, or sorrowful. The one terrible thing I witnessed as a small child was my mother suddenly rising from the dining table with face tortured and crying, 'I am going to die.' My father took her on his knee and soothed her. I had and have no idea what was the matter…

Not long after I began to attend school I went away alone with my mother for a long holiday. We spent a week here and a week there in different friends' houses… At Newport also I saw the dark damp-looking oldish house on a hill, with trees and iron railings round it, where my mother as an orphan lived unhappily for many years with two maiden aunts.

Then I went to Caerleon upon Usk to see another and blameless great-aunt named Margaret. I see small houses and gardens on one side and the Usk on the other between steep banks. An idiot passes with boys following him. My aunt's house was the last, as if you could go no farther on account of a bend in the river. There were beautiful great rosy apples in the garden, and a well with a broad stone over it, and ivy and snails on the narrow paths. Then for the first time I thoroughly understood what wells, apples and snails were. Indoors there were more great apples: it was not always possible to finish what was so happily begun…

There also I first learned what a river was, having previously seen nothing better than the Thames, almost as broad as it was long at Westminster. The Usk was not too broad; it was winding; I heard the sound and felt the flood of it. Also I was told that a certain islet or peninsula or level meadow half encircled by the water was the site of King Arthur's Round Table. Either ideas suggested by 'King Arthur' and 'Round Table' even then vibrated in my brain or they remained there until, a very short time afterwards, they did so undoubtedly when united with the stories of love and battle in *The Adventures of King Arthur and his Round Table*.

One day, moreover, a porpoise came up the river, and men rowed a small boat hither-thither, and shouted and lifted up their oars and struck heavy blows on the water, not (I think) on the porpoise. And in memory I see all together the riverside street old and rustic and an idiot coming up it, the Usk and the men hunting the porpoise in the bend round King Arthur's Round Table. Away from the river rose a green hill and a stone farmyard wall athwart its slope and I saw black pigs hustling through the gateway at the end of the wall. My mother was with me.

Our house like three or four others parallel to it was in two halves, running straight up the opposite sides of a slight valley, along the bottom of which ran the principal street of mixed shops and private houses. Our house was low down in the half which ran up westwards to Bolingbroke Grove, the eastern boundary of Wandsworth Common. These little semi-detached one-storied pale brick houses in unbroken lines on both sides of the street had each, even then when they were new, something distinguishing them and preventing monotony. The people in them made them different…

Inside from the front door to the back of the house there was as long a passage as possible, the rooms opening out of it. The staircase ran up to a room with an opaque glass window in the door, a second room and two others connected by a door. The rooms downstairs I hardly remember at all. But in one of them my great-uncle James Jones lay asleep after dinner, a red handkerchief covering his face and trembling in the blast of his snoring which we called 'driving the pigs to market'. Through the open window of another, one Mayday, Jack-in-the-Green bounded in to beg a penny, showing white teeth, white eyes, black face, but the rest of him covered and rippling with green leaves. [This was a man covered in foliage, in a widespread tradition dating back to the eighteeth century and possibly beyond.]

The passage was a playground when it was too wet or too dark to be out of doors. Here, when I had at any rate one brother – probably three or four years old when I was five or six – who could run, we two raced up and down the passage to be pounced upon by the servant out of a doorway and swallowed up in her arms with laughter…

When I and a brother were recovering from scarlet fever we lay or sat up in our cots, while our father in the other room read aloud *The Cuckoo Clock* [a children's book of 1877 by Mrs. Molesworth]. Not a shred of the story is left to me, but I seem to see my father – though I could not see him at the time – sitting in an arm-chair bent over the book. He also read at least the opening chapters of *Great Expectations,* with such effect that, though I have never since looked at them, I have an indelible impression of a churchyard in cold and misty marshland and out among the stones a convict in clanking chains, and a tiny feeble boy with the absurd and as it were enfeebling name of Pip.

I do not know whether I read *Robinson Crusoe* or had it read aloud to me. I loved it entirely, and a faint spice of amusement was added to my love by the repetition of 'says I'. Two scenes most impressed me. The first was the picture of men tumbling savages over the sides of a ship by means of brushes like a sweep's dipped in tar. The second was where wolves are pursuing a doomed riderless horse over the snow.

2
First School Days

When I think of school I smell carbolic soap. I see the caretaker by the wall of one room ringing the bell. I deposit my weekly fourpence on the master's desk. I go round, as a privilege, filling the scores of inkpots from a tin with a long thin spout. I join in the one-verse hymn before and after lessons. I see large light bare rooms with a map or two, and boys in long parallel desks facing a master; for we were soon separated from the girls. We repeated aloud 'Witney on the Windrush manufactures Blankets'. We learned the names of the tributaries of the Thames for ever and ever. What I most enjoyed was doing maps of Great Britain and Ireland, inking in the coast lines with red, and marking the mountain ranges with thin parallel strokes arranged herringbone fashion. I never tired of the indentations of the western coasts, especially of Scotland. The line of the Hebrides I think I actually loved...

Sometimes things were tediously easy to me, sometimes I took a pleasure in overcoming what looked hard and of course in earning praise, reward, a superior position. I rather liked wearing the numbered ticket on examination days and took pride in having the numbers neatly printed in black ink...

School was not an affliction, but church or chapel or Sunday school was. At an early age I did not go regularly, nor I think did my parents. They were sober reverent people without a creed, though their disbelief in Hell and the Devil almost amounted to a creed. My father and I made merry over the Devil and the folly of believing in him as we supposed many did...

At first the Sunday-school was my particular allowance. I liked singing and liked the melodies of 'Jerusalem the Golden' and 'Fair waved the golden corn', and I liked going with all the rest for the annual treat somewhere in Surrey, where I could run about in a wood, become fond of another girl or two (I remember one with a very deep but I think also husky voice), eat bread and butter, watercress and slices of cake and drink tea...

Chapel and Sunday-school were to me cruel ceremonious punishments for the freedom of Monday to Saturday. I have still a profound quiet detestation of Sunday in whatever part of England or Wales it overtakes me, but most of all in London. I think I began learning to hate crowds and societies, and grown-up people, and black clothes, and silk hats and neatly folded umbrellas and shining walking-sticks, and everything that seemed a circling part of that deathly solemnity as I was not.

Nevertheless, I may have looked decidedly a part of it with my shy bored silence, my fear of disagreement or quarrel in public, and my thin long narrow face that always shrank and chilled and stiffened into solemnity under the gaze of grown-up people, strangers, and numbers. There was, however, always one good thing about Sunday and that was the biscuits, two large oval ones or one of these and two small round ones, which I found on a bedside chair upon awaking...

One Christmas morning I woke up and felt a long lean smooth straight cold thing with straps at my bedside. It had a handle, and pulling that with one hand I brought out what I discovered to be a sword, while in the other hand was a scabbard. The daylight came upon me still unsheathing and sheathing the sword, trying hard for the hundredth time to put it back the wrong way. As soon as I could I fastened the belt round my waist so that the sword hung on the right instead of the left side and went out alone.

The streets were empty. I was proud though without spectators. Once or twice the weapon caught between my legs. I marched up the street, crossed the road separating it from the Common and turned to the left between the elm-trees of Bolingbroke Grove, having the road upon my left, the Common upon my right. At the top of one of the streets parallel to ours, but at that time divided from it by that big private meadow with the pond and elm-trees, I stopped and looked down. For there lived Mabel Looms, a schoolfellow whom I adored. She had had a Christmas card from me that morning. The street was empty. I walked backwards and forwards along the Grove past the top of the street, waiting, sufficiently proud not to be overcome by long disappointment. How many times have I waited thus for somebody, with a dog's patience.

There began to be others in the streets. At last Mabel came up towards the Common, in the company of some elders. Without a sign I continued walking backwards and forwards. They turned to their left at the top, away from our street. I turned in the opposite direction homeward, pleased with my swinging sword and believing that the passers-by admired it. At home they knew well where I had been. My attachment to Mabel lasted for several years and more than once after it had been broken I attempted to renew it. She was a perfect loving friend. I thought her beautiful.

The common and the streets leading up to it were the scene of our principal game. It was played chiefly on Saturday, our whole holiday. We assembled, for example, at the top of the road in the well-trodden garden of a doctor who had a rowdy son; each bringing a weapon or several weapons, wooden swords and pikes, or daggers, shields, pistols, bows, arrows, and with horns and trumpets, and perhaps some bread and cheese and an apple or orange.

There sides were chosen. One side went out to seek a fort, in someone's garden or among the gorse bushes. Ten minutes later the other set forth, often in two divisions. Sometimes stealth was the rule of expedition; we advanced whispering and in some order. Sometimes everyone was shouting for his own plans and against another's. At other times the methods alternated: the stealth would become wearisome, we began to chatter and disagree; or the riot of anarchy would suddenly strike us as wrong, everyone said 'hush', and for some minutes we modelled ourselves on Sioux, Mohicans, or Hurons, crouching, pausing, trying to hush the sound of our breathing.

We forgot everything in this Indian ideal. Nevertheless, the enemy had to be found. Nor were they loth. Some one was sure to show himself and wave defiance, or to leap out on us, supposing we passed by. If seen at a distance they might change the stronghold and there would be a chase. If they were content to stand a storm, the second army would gather all its numbers together and, with yells and counter-yells, batter and push them out or be battered and pushed out itself. The struggle was one of character, not weapons. The side possessing the fiercest and most stubborn boys won. The winners would then in turn fortify themselves and sustain an attack; and so it went on, until a mealtime, or nightfall, or rain, or a serious quarrel finished the war...

The Common... offered many temptations to more irregular games and aimless rovings. For it was an uneven piece of never cultivated gravelly land. Several ponds of irregular shape and size, varying with the rainfall, had been hollowed out, perhaps by old gravel diggings. It was marshy in other places. Hawthorn and gorse clustered tall and dense in great and in little thickets. Tall elms and poplars stood about irregularly. And the level spaces suitable for cricket, football and tennis were not many.

With this variety the Common, even though the Railway ran through it parallel to Bolingbroke Grove and only two or three hundred yards away from it, was large enough to provide us with many surprises and discoveries for years. We could spend a day on it without thinking it small or having to retrace our steps. We wandered about it with or without our hoops. For any kind of hiding and hunting game the thickets were excellent. We played the other games in the open spaces. The ponds were for paddling in. One of them, a shallow irregular one, weedy and rushy-margined, lying then in some broken ground between the Three Island and the Railway, was full of effets [newts] and frogs. Bigger boys would torture the frogs, by cutting, skinning or crushing them alive...

I fished with a worm either tied on the cotton line or impaled on a bent pin, and put my stickleback or my rare lovely spotted gudgeon in a glass jam-jar. Once at least I did as I had seen others do, hauling a heavy fruit basket out into the pond and dragging it in full of weed

and mud and the little 'blood worms' that breed in mud, and sticklebacks, even a red-throated one, but never a gudgeon. The gudgeon was so attractive, partly for its looks, perhaps chiefly for its comparative size, that many times I willingly paid a halfpenny for one and let it be believed that I had caught it...

The streets were a playground almost equal to the Common. The labyrinth of them, all running at right angles and parallel to one another, with some *culs de sac*, could be mastered but indefinitely extended; every month or two I should think I added a street or two to my knowledge. Alone or with others I bowled my hoop up and down them either in purposeless pleasure or on some errand for my mother. Best of all errands was to the blacksmiths to have a broken hoop mended. The smithy was a primeval forest cave that broke a line of ordinary shops. The bellows snored, the sparks spouted up, and the pallid, gaunt, bare-armed man made the anvil ring its double or its single song...

When I was eight or nine, the boundaries of my domain were stretched by several miles all at once. I walked to Wimbledon Common. Of the first visit I have no recollection. But I can distinguish two later visits: one because I discovered the joy of throwing stones over into the unknown depths of a great garden and hearing the glass-house break; another because I limped all the way back with a low shoe gone wrong. I did not go alone, but as one of several hangers-on to older boys and girls. We fished here and there with hopes of better things than came out of the Wandsworth Common ponds. We met strange boys there who occasionally possessed or talked about enviable fish.

The three-mile walk was, however, good in itself, whether we went by Wandsworth, Earlsfield or Wimbledon. We recognised the old landmarks with pleasure and a kind of surprise. There would be a cage of pigeons or rabbits or guinea pigs to look at outside a cornchandler's, or an old man with some trait of surliness or quaintness which we hoped to see again, or a chestnut-tree where we had to stop to throw up at the 'conkers', or a shop where we had once bought a specially good halfpenny cake. The other shops and houses had an altogether indescribable charm. Then Allfarthing Lane was worth going down for its name's sake...

In Wandsworth there were two bridges, fishermen hanging over the less frequented one who were never seen catching anything but never exhausted our curiosity. But best of all was the middle way through Earlsfield, crossing the Wandel at the paper mills. The smell of the mills wafted over a mile and a half on certain still evenings gave me a quiet sort of poetic delight. Hereby the water ran over a steep artificial slant, swift, glittering, and sounding; and sometimes we stayed here and caught minnows instead of going on to Wimbledon.

It was the first place where I saw and realised the beauty of bright running water. We paddled with our stockings in our shoes and our shoes tied together and slung over our shoulders. We talked and laughed and shouted and splashed the water. I cannot remember cold or rain or any clouds there. Perhaps we went away for a part of each summer holiday. If we did I have forgotten. We went several times to stop with my father's mother at Swindon.

3
Holidays

Swindon was a thousand times better... The look of the town pleased me altogether. I could think no ill of houses built entirely of stone instead of brick, especially as they seemed to exist chiefly to serve as avenues by which I happily approached to my grandmother's. It was for me a blessed place. The stonework, the flowers in the gardens,the Wiltshire accent, the rain if it was raining, the sun if it was shining, the absence of school and school master and of most ordinary forms of compulsion – everything was paradisal.

No room ever was as cosy as my Grandmother's kitchen. Its open range was always bright. There was a pair of bellows frequently in use. A brass turnspit hung from under the mantelpiece. The radiant steel trivet was excellent in itself but often bore a load of girdle cakes or buttered toast or more substantial things. An old brown earthenware teapot stood eternally upon the hob. Tea-caddies, brass candlesticks, clay pipes and vases full of spills, stood on the mantelpiece...

My uncle got us chatting instantly. He seemed grown up, yet a boy, by the way he laughed, whistled and sang a bit of a gay tune. At supper, with our bread and cheese, or cold bacon or hot faggots, or chitterlings, and pickles, he would now and then give us a little tumbler, or 'tot' of ale.

My grandmother... marketed, cooked, cleaned, did everything. She made pies with pastry a full inch thick, and many different undulant fruit tarts on plates. Above all, she made doughy cakes, of dough, allspice and many raisins....

On the other hand, she was a Conservative and a churchwoman. Without her, these holidays would have been impossible, and she gave me countless pleasures. But if I loved her it was largely because of these things, not instinctively or because she loved me. She was marvellously kind and necessary but we were never close together; and, when there was any quarrel, contempt mingled with my hate of her inheritance from semi-rural Wales of George the Fourth's time.

She was bigoted, worldly, crafty, narrow-minded, and ungenerous, as I very early began to feel. She read her Bible and sang hymns to herself, sometimes in Welsh…

She first took me to church… I was introduced to other women and discussed. I was always being told how like my mother I was and how tall my age. My grandmother took me to several old Welshwomen, and they all said, 'He's a regular _____'. They used to remark how well my father was doing, my grandfather who had long been dead having only been a fitter. To hide something from me, they spoke in Welsh…

Between her and my uncle who kept the house going I saw much bickering. Spending most of his evenings out at club or public house, he neglected the garden and I dare say other things. I dimly knew that he was usually courting a farmer's daughter somewhere a few miles out, not always the same one. Sometimes when I was walking with him the girl appeared and joined us and at twilight I returned alone.

Along the canal were many narrow copses of oak with underwood of ash and willow, the resorts of lovers and gamblers. The pleasantest thing I ever did in them at that time was to peel rings off the bark of a willow stick, in imitation of a carter's brass-ringed whip. My uncle taught us. He could also fashion a whistle by slipping the bark whole off a section of willow, but I never could…

Perhaps it was a little later that I first went out fishing with my uncle. He had not the patience of a fisherman. But there was nothing he did not know: the very winch that he used was made in the factory surreptitiously. He caught roach, and before long I followed him. Even better than this was the sport of seeing him confound the water bailiff who asked for his licence. What with gay lies, chaff and threats, the man had to go. We feared nothing at my uncle's side.

These, however, were special weekend delights, for Saturday afternoons or Sundays. The rest of the week was spent mainly in the streets, on the canal-side adjacent, and in the nearer meadows. I liked seeing the thousands of men going by on pavement and roadway for ten minutes before work started and after it ended at the factory. The variety of staid men and jaunty men, old men and boys, tall and stocky men, the frowners and the smilers, fascinated me with endless indolent inarticulate half-conjectures; and suddenly out of the multitude my uncle – or for a moment once or twice a man extremely like him. Straight out of that mysterious pageant, the one positively and entirely living one, he used to come into the house, into the kitchen, into his chair and begin to eat.

The slower thinner weekly procession market was the other great sight. Curious wizened old men with old hats, enormously stout women with shawls and black bonnets, smiling rosy ones with feathers, drove by. Their little carts were laden with eggs, butter, fowls, rabbits, and vegetables, from Lydiard and Shaw and Parton and Wootton Bassett....

But my strongest and most often considered memory of this period was my second visit to Wales at the age of nine. It is associated with an incident which preceded and almost frustrated it. One evening after tea I went up on to Wandsworth Common with some bigger boys and sat on the seat by the Box Pond. A cigar was produced, lit and given to me to smoke. A few minutes afterwards I was crawling down the road by giddily clinging to the railings of garden after garden. I slunk into the house neglecting my mother's question 'What's the matter?' but soon answering it by deeds not words. My father said that I should not go to Wales. Nevertheless, I went.

I remember the names of the stations, 'Risca', 'Cross Keys'... I walked through a park among great trees that stood at stately distances from one another: there were long-horned shaggy cattle about. I saw the river Ebbw racing over stones, and mountain ash trees on rough rising ground. I saw chimneys and smoke and ruins and whitewashed walls.

I stopped at Abertillery with friends and met Welsh people who spoke no English. Above all I remember a house alone on a hill with a parrot and a dark girl named Rachel, pretty and dirty, who was down on her knees scrubbing the kitchen hearth. I made friends with the boy and the girl of the house in Abertillery and played with them among rolls of stuff in a dark shop. With my mother I drove out among trees and above running water to Pontypool. I went to Aberbeg...

That is all the stuff of an abiding memory. These things joined forces with the street in Caerleon, the river and the Round Table, and also with phrases and images from *The Adventures of the Knights of the Round Table,* and a curious illusion of a knight with a shield kneeling at the foot of a pillar in the photograph at home of Tintern Abbey...

I was now comparatively good at lessons, enjoyed excelling, only once played truant and did not enjoy it, was hardly ever caned, and earned a leather-bound gilt-edged New Testament as a prize. And at home I read many books of travel, natural history and fiction. As birthday or Christmas presents I received *The Compleat Angler, The Marvels of the Polar World*, about ice, snow, Eskimaux and seals, and other books containing picturesque descriptions of torrid or frozen lands; *Dick's Holidays and what he did with them*, an adult's chronicle of a boy's country holiday, with insidious information on every page; Hans Andersen, Grimm, Holme Leigh's *Fairy Tales*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *Westward Ho!* ...

Thus I grew to think of places where jaguars lay in wait for men upon overhanging branches, and of times when houses were made of barley sugar and witches cooked children and ate them....

Part of the pleasure of a book was still, I think, the strangeness of words as well as things. Thus I was arrested by the quaintness of Izaak Walton's spelling, as in 'pearch' for perch, of his archaic names, such as 'luce' for pike, of unfamiliar personal names like those of the travellers Speke and Grant...

...Several houses became associated with certain wonders out of books, either by accident or because at some point they resembled places in the books. The gravelly shore of the Long Pond on Wandsworth Common was confused in my mind with the sea sand where Robinson Crusoe saw the cannibals' footprints. In return, there were people and houses without associations possessing qualities in common with the people and houses in wonderful books, and I cannot decide whether my life owed more to my books or my books more to my life. I slipped from one world into the other as easily as from room to room. I do not know how much I may have dwelt on the story in later years, but Grimm's *Hansel and Grethel,* the children going out into the wood to be lost, dropping a trail of stones behind them and finding their way back, but failing to do so when they used breadcrumbs which the birds ate, came to be to my mind one of the great stories of the world.

4
Books and School Friends

For the most part I remember rather the joy of having and reading books than particular passages. I remember the eager walks over Wandsworth Common to borrow volume after volume of the Waverley novels [by Walter Scott], but of *Waverley, Heart of Midlothian, Peveril of the Peak* and *The Talisman* not a rack is left. Of *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pathfinder* rather more is left. They gave me an idea of a noble savage...

The only poems which I remember having read aloud to me at an early age were Longfellow's. My father used to read or recite *The Children's Hour* very often. The pathos, or his sense of it, touched me...

My books did not hamper my games, nor in any way alter them except that I could not wear sword and shield hereafter without Fitzjames [a knight in Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*] haunting and inspiring me. I played as much as ever and walked to Wimbledon more and more.

I could also enjoy kinds of fighting where it was impossible to think of poetry. For example, I had a long tussle with a rough after a quarrel during fishing, and was only beaten by the intervention of a third party armed with an old kettle. It was fun, too, to battle at a distance with stones, dodging and casting at the same instant. In one of these combats I got a deep scalp wound made ever memorable by my aunt fainting at the blood.

While we were at this house my mother presented me with four brothers at intervals of two years, but, as I have no recollection of them during that period beyond the fact that on certain dim occasions in our street or at Swindon one or other was present, I say nothing about them. Being thus seven in family we moved to a large house in one of the roads parallel to the old one…

On the first few days after the move I went several times most of the way down from school to the old house before realising my mistake. Whether I had regrets for it or not, it began almost at once to have a dreamy charm too faint to be describable. It was a visible piece of the past, a skeleton, a hollow shell that did without us.

Of course the new house had also a charm. Its size allowed an empty room for us to play in, and a box- room. Perhaps it was not until a little later that the box-room became attractive, because it was dark and because in it was a wooden box containing inexhaustible treasures. These were chiefly old books, old magazines, old photographs of unknown people. Many and many a time I took them all out, sometimes in search of something I had noticed among them before and then not troubled about, sometimes in more uncertainty but equal eagerness, at other times with no object save testing the inexhaustible surprises of the box…

Towards the end of these days I spent the greater part of a summer term in a Board-school in Swindon where the headmaster was a friend of my father's. I became a Wiltshire boy in accent. I made friends and sweethearts too, and at the Fete in August spent all the day and evening with a girl on each side of me – I do not think I had ever before or since so much pride and confidence. To one of the girls, a dark sturdy beauty named Laura, I was more or less faithful for several years. Though she knew and did nothing that I valued, to have a girl by me on a walk pleased me intensely…

I exchanged the Board-school when I was ten for a private school. Here there were fifty or sixty boys of from ten to seventeen years of age, perhaps half of them boarders. They were the sons of tradesmen, professional men, moderately well-to-do clerks, and men of small independent means…

The headmaster was of stone. He wore a black gown. So long as he was in the room no sound was to be heard beyond a dismal foot shuffling, a pen dropping, a boy asking a question, a master answering or explaining, the head dictating or clearing his throat. While he was out the hubbub was so general that the assistants could hardly single out a particular one to punish, for if it had a ringleader it was some spirited bright popular boy whom it would be unpleasant and ruinous to punish...

I cannot recall that boarders and day boys had any united or organised games except paper chases.

A paper chase made one of the Saturdays a great and notable day for me. For I then discovered a piece of country, as it seemed to me, exactly like the real country at Swindon and quite unlike the commonland at Wimbledon. Here were private but not inaccessible copses, hedges with oaks in them, and wandering paths, rough lanes, scant cottages. I got left behind and lost the rest of the school except one older boy. We had bread and cheese at the 'George Inn'. That day I ran, walked and crawled six or seven miles out and the same distance back. For a year it may be I left this piece of country unrevisited.

I made several friends among the day boys.... I had most to do with a boy only a year or two older than myself, named Jonathan, who introduced me to some of his father's workshops, and particularly the carpenter's shop. Adjoining this shop were roomy houses for pigeons of several kinds, Belgian hares, rabbits, guinea-pigs, and white rats. Fine afternoons, therefore, had now scarce any advantages over wet ones. Making additions to the cages, cleaning them out, feeding the birds and animals, handling them, selling or exchanging them, talking about them, set the hours rolling lazily, swiftly. In a day or two I had learnt all, alas! that I ever did about the use of saw, hammer, screwdriver, and brace. That is to say I was now a quick unscrupulous maker of cages of all sizes. I fitted doors to them, fronts of split wood and wire-netting, roofs of tarred felt laid upon laths. I spent all the shorter sections of my spare time in making, altering, and mending cages for pigeons, rabbits and white mice...

I must have begun keeping pets soon after entering the new school. Through them, or rather through the pigeons, I got to know other fanciers, men and boys, in the neighbourhood. For example, a pigeon house hung on the wall of a house in the street at right angles to ours and visible a hundred yards away from the back garden where I kept my pets. I used to see the owner, a much older boy called Henry, leaning out of the window to attend to his pigeons or to set them at liberty for a flight. They ascended half a mile high and remained circling for a great time, or if they did not and tried to perch they were driven up again with loud clappings.

The boy's whistle to his pigeons, a peculiar shrill anxious one, and a mild luring one, I acquired as soon as possible. Still I felt that the boy looked down on me. My birds never flew much higher than the topmost chimneypots, and they used to get lost or caught by cats. One day I was sure that a pigeon of mine had entered his cage and I went round to ask for it. Thus we became acquainted...

Often he had a bird to show me for admiration or for sale. I found it hard ever to refuse anything he praised to me. In my case to acquire a new pigeon was a delight... I possessed a dozen of different breeds – athletic homers, heavy wattled antique-looking dragons, dainty almond tumblers, feminine owls. For a few days I rejoiced in a pair of red-ruffed Jacobins sent me from Wales, delicate pretty birds; but they never flew beyond the roof and seldom higher than the fence, where a cat caught first one, then the other. This was one of the few sorrows of pigeonkeeping. The pleasures were innumerable. Chief of all was to set the birds free, watch them to the roof, clap till they flew round and round, draw them down by whistling and scattering seed...

My companions were now boys exclusively. I had no sisters; my girl cousins I saw but two or three times in all my childhood; none of my friends had sisters of their own age; my father and mother but a few close acquaintances, who rarely came to the house and hardly ever brought their children, boys or girls, with them....

Then there were the servants. Usually one general servant shared the work of the house with my mother, everything except the washing... The most exciting was a girl from Hampshire, a rather handsome, tall, bony, and pale girl, a farmer's daughter who had left home after some quarrel. I think she said her father was a gentleman farmer. She talked a lot about horses. At supper she did practically all the talking, and I remember my father did not much want to be amused when she was telling of the lovers who would get lost in her father's copses on fine evenings. She was a merry creature. She and a pretty friend who came to see her, an actress with soft dark hair and a romantic name, wanted to romp with us and be familiar. But I drew off, suspiciously, feeling that I did not understand them, wishing not to give myself away. I left them alone with my younger brothers...

The only woman I had anything to do with regularly was my mother, and except at meals and bed-times I did not see much even of my mother. Occasionally we played cards or draughts together in the evenings...

Of course I continued, more and more often, to accompany my parents to the Unitarian chapel on Sunday. For a time I was a regular attendant because I sang in the choir. The sound of 'How lovely are the messengers' was pleasant to me, but it was a curious sensation altogether remote from my games and walks and pigeon-keeping. It was an oasis, the mirage of an oasis, in the chapel desert....

Perhaps my weariness in chapel was mingled with something which specialists would label as religious. I only know that where people were sad and solemn I was overcome, half-suffocated by the sadness and solemnity. What was read and preached was to me airy nothing. I knew of no virtues except truthfulness, obedience, self-sacrifice, and total abstinence from alcoholic drinks. Because it was more comfortable than disobedience as a rule I was obedient. I habitually told the truth when I had nothing which I thought could easily be gained by lying. I stole biscuits and sweets from my mother's cupboard and was tearfully penitent when found out. I never wanted to drink ale except when my uncle poured it out for me in a tot. As for self-sacrifice it was mostly incredible. But I liked to please my mother and keep undisturbed the love that was between us. I sometimes did little unexpected kind things out of my tenderness for her... But with her as with everyone I was deceitful and had dread of being caught doing what I ought not to do. It was a great and frequent dread...

Not even yet can I record anything distinctly of my brothers beyond the fact of an inconstant feud with the eldest of them. Black-haired and dark eyed like my father, he was shorter for his age, more athletic and acrobatic than I, and shared none of my tastes or hobbies... Our hostility had very deep roots. A fright that I once unintentionally gave my brother by rising up unexpectedly draped in a green tablecloth may have had something to do with it, and I remember that when he awoke screaming and sweating at night sometimes nobody was less likely to quiet him than I; he screamed all the more at the sight of me. We saw little of each other except on Sundays and on holidays, since he and one or two of our younger brothers still went to the Board-school.

5
School Games and Early Reading

I was sent to a day school about two miles away in Battersea. This meant that I had my dinner at school, thus spending eight or nine hours a day at a stretch in greenless streets. The playground was asphalt; again there were no organised games, but a dozen groups playing leap frog, fly the garter, tops, or chasing one another, or simply messing about... We smaller boys climbed or tried to climb any upright or horizontal post and rails about the school, on the scaffolding, for example, during some repairs. Tops, chiefly peg tops, we played endlessly...

Cricket and football we had to organise between ourselves. Clapham Common was our ground.... I much preferred football.

Later on we joined a football club and played matches with some regularity. Sometimes when the sodden ball was like lead it was but a sad pleasure, and not that if in punting one kicked the ball full in one's own face; but as a rule the full game, or any sort of game or just kicking about till it was dark, was all I wanted.

In the classrooms history, geography, grammar, arithmetic, algebra, freehand drawing, handwriting, Latin, French, chemistry, or the avoiding of the same, took up about five hours a day for five days a week. The one charm of the place was the temporary youth, a different one each week, who came over from a neighbouring training college to help the permanent master of each class. These students we looked upon as prey. In a few minutes the corporate brain of the class knew their victim thoroughly in so far as he concerned them, knew whether he need be obeyed, whether he could be both disobeyed and cheeked, whether he could also be mocked for some peculiarity of manner or accent…

I could learn anything easily and was seldom lower than fourth in the class, more often than not first, and had usually on one side of me a silent good boy. I who was never good at languages, least of all Latin, sometimes knew more Latin than the master. The pleasure of being top, and nothing else, except the interest of my father, made me do such homework as I did in the evenings.

We learnt Byron's *Prisoner of Chillon*. But I was in a period of prose which the place encouraged. I rattled off the lines I had committed to memory. The task endowed me only with the idea that it was possible for a man's hair to grow white in a single night from sudden fear. I remember the electric battery, the smell of the acids in the chemistry room, and the treacly look of sulphur melted, and shame of my only caning. It was but one stroke, for I was a sort of 'good boy', being shy, restrained, secretive, and never a leader, and with an expression quite superficially and accidentally resembling that of the virtuous…

The pleasure of coming home with a new pigeon was irresistible. The purchase excited me. Sometimes I took a fancy to a particular bird. Perhaps more often I had to have some bird – almost any bird. The shilling was in my pocket. I could not possibly go home in this condition. Then it was a pleasure to hold the legs between the two forefingers, the thumb and shorter fingers meeting over the body. You might have thought the bird was a divinely beautiful, immortal, or miraculous bird, had you known how the acquiring and the first possessing it filled me through and made me forget weather, time, meals, father and mother and native land. Every step towards that boy's garden or the shop – a crowded fancier's or a corn-chandlers with a couple of cages only in the doorway – gave me again the pleasure of anticipation and the pains of delay together.

I had no love to give Byron's poetry, but in the intervals of pigeon-keeping, I read avidly. On wet days and dark winter evenings I bolted scores of books by Mayne Reid. Fenimore Cooper was now too dilatory. Henty was often beside the mark. Better even than Mayne Reid were some of the anonymous mixes of blood and thunder. I always retained at least an affectation of scorn for 'Deadwood Dick' stories in particular, but not for the class to which they belonged. I varied them, if it was a variation, with a never-ending serial entitled *Jack Harkaway's Schooldays* and more improving things of the same kidney in the *Boys' Own Paper*.

6
Play Fellows and Swindon Experiences

I made a few friends at this school... My other school friends lived farther away. I can scarcely recall more than their names and the streets they lived in. Two of them, brothers, reappear in my memory not at home but at Eastbourne, where it happened both our families were spending a summer holiday. Our lodgings were small and uncomfortable and indoors we were always squabbling or annoyed our father. Out of doors all was well. We loafed about listening to black minstrels who sang the songs of the day. We whistled the tunes till we sickened one another. We threw pebbles about. We ate as much nougat as we could afford...

How early I began to dislike the crowd and the conventions of the seaside it is impossible to say. Certain it is that the crowd on the beach and the constraint in our narrow lodgings had such an effect that I can recall practically no enjoyment in these earlier visits... Though I may have liked Eastbourne better than I think, I liked Swindon infinitely better than Eastbourne. Probably we were only two or three weeks by the sea, and then my next brother and I went to Swindon to finish out the holidays. For some good reason I preferred the sons of Swindon mechanics and labourers to the sons of Battersea tradesmen and clerks. I had forgotten the girls. With the boys I fished, played and rambled as before.

When I was thirteen or thereabouts I was first introduced to a slaughterhouse. It backed on to the canal and had a disused door at that side with a broken panel imperfectly covered from within by a piece of sacking. Through this we peered, often to no purpose beyond sniffing the smell of blood and staleness, more rarely to see a carcass being cut up or the floor being washed out, three or four times to see a cow killed, or a calf, still jerking from the beam overhead, being flayed. The novelty drew me, and overpowered the horror and uncertain expectation which made my heart beat furiously and my lips go dry... I always looked on with dread equal to my hope that there would be something to see...

The only physical pain I could myself inflict with pleasure was upon fish. My usual bait for jack was a small living roach…

But I never intentionally tortured an animal, though I did protract the drowning of a cat by putting it into a copper that had not been quite filled: as I sat on the lid I sang street tunes very loudly to hide the sounds within and to keep up my courage. I hated having to kill a wounded pigeon. Nevertheless I did it, with a beating heart. When I killed my first snake – it was in reality a blind-worm – I stabbed it so frenziedly that I was lucky not to hurt myself; the frenzy being due partly to suppressed fear, partly to the novelty. As to fish, I very soon began to pride myself on killing what I caught instead of throwing it into the hedge behind, as the factory men usually did, there to die slowly..

Fishing was now the chief pleasure; the chief glory to come home with roach even no more than six inches long strung through their gills on a thorn stick with a crook. Whatever fish I brought home I as often as not scaled, gutted and fried myself, unless they were big enough to be worth my grandmother's serious attention. So long as it was not cold only the necessity of being in to a meal brought me away from the canal-side…

And now, when I no longer needed his help at fishing, my uncle packed a box, had a man in to paint his name on it in large white letters, and when it had stood in the passage for a day or two, departed with it for South Africa. Home can have had little charm for him. He was tired of the same job, the nagging, one year after another; better pay and a new life lured him away. With a jaunty laugh deprecating my Grandmother's tears and blessings and my aunt's fierce distress, with a six penny bit each for my brother and me, off he went…

At home now my mother was nursing her sixth and last boy. I had known very well for some time that a baby was to come. I had been anxious for my mother, walking beside her with care lest she should trip at the kerbstone or over a skipping rope. She never said a word about what was approaching, though I dare say she knew that I knew. Then one night I heard a baby's crying… In a few days we were at Swindon out of the way…

Merton, at length rediscovered, was in some ways equal to Wiltshire. It was our very own. Henry, the pigeon-keeper, had a hand in the rediscovery. He used to talk about Cannon Hill, about an inn called the 'George', and so on, with more facts that convinced me this was the land I had slipped into on the day of the paper-chase.

So finding my way back again I began an exploration of a couple of square miles of country which had never been completed. I learned to know it so well that Henry used to put it down to me when he found a rare nest robbed there. When I say rare, I mean anything more important than a thrush's or blackbird's nest. I was flattered when he said to someone: 'Mr Bloody Thomas has been there.' This must have been later. I had only just become a collector...

As yet I had hardly taken my first bird's egg, and for a year or two yet the chief merit of winter was that it provided materials for skating, sliding and snowballing... Sledging suited me far better... This was glorious in the sun. But I think perhaps it was somehow better at night in the thick fog. People went about with lanterns and you could get lost, or if not you could pretend to, and stay out of late. It was good also to belong to a search party and, perhaps, in spite of a lantern, to be lost yourself or back at your starting place. Clapham Common on those foggy nights was in many ways like desert undiscovered country, yet perfectly harmless.

Even the way home from school held its adventures. There was, for instance, a fight with a schoolfellow who gave me once for all the felicity of holding him round the neck with one arm while I punched his face with the other. More memorable still was the solitary adventure of ringing, not for the first time, the bell of a big house and being run down by the coachman... He shut me up in a dark outhouse for two hours. I took my revenge. The place contained sacks of oats for the horses, and into these I put number of steel pens, having first broken them so as to make two sharp stiff points. These, I firmly hoped, would ultimately destroy the horses belonging to my tormentor's master. The hope gave me not only consolation, but a feeling of glory and power and evil as I at last hurried home to tea.

7
Another New School

When I was about twelve I entered my fourth school as free scholar... The boys at the new school resembled those at the private school. They were superficially more refined than those I had just parted from; their speech was better; the code of honour more strict; and there was an *esprit de corps* amongst them... The very fights were decorous. A ring was made: the enemies fought decently, silently, and to my judgement, with great skill...

The head master was a serious high-minded incapable martinet with the boys, a meek husband to a stout, possibly imperious wife. This mistress of the head master was continually bursting into the school assemblies or the class-rooms to complain or to ask for an explanation of some breach of manners...

The under-masters came and went, except one. He was a small clean-shaven, bluish-white-faced man, demurely grave in expression, whose breath had a sort of stale dryness that was not quite malodorous. He earned respect and obedience without fear from nearly all his class, by being a just, quiet, serious man, even of speech and kindly. Boys could not put him out or take him off his guard. His small exquisite legible handwriting must have been formed by annotating textbooks with a constant desire not to disgrace the printed page, and by admiration for Greek script. With slow wrinkling his stiff face relaxed now and then into a feminine tender smile. After a time I found myself frequently addressing him as 'Father', so naturally did he touch the gentle docile side of me. The one time I ever cried in school was when he blamed me with a severity that seemed to hurt him…

I became accustomed to the first book of the *Aeneid*, to Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Henry IV* and *V*. To me they remained prose rendered obscure and tedious, in the one case by foreign language, and in the other by archaisms, inversions and other unfamiliar and as yet impotent forms. Often they were worse than obscure… If I remember rightly the music of Virgil's hexameters never at that time fell on my ears, whether or not I was capable of knowing it for music. The snake attacking Laocoon and his children was the one vivid thing contributed by those months. Shakespeare meant rather more. He helped me to a faint apprehension of certain human heights and depths, as in Henry V's ardour and Richard II's dejection; the energy in 'Cry Havoc and let slip the dogs of war' wakened in me the elements of acting and adventure…

My father probably went over the plays with me when I was doing my homework, but his taste was for directly elevating philanthropic and progressive literature. Or was it only with a view to inspiring a love of virtue that he read 'Abou Ben Adhem' [a poem by Leigh Hunt] and how he 'loved his fellow men'? I learnt to recite it myself with a lofty histrionic thrill. Its real effect was equal to that of the gilt 'Faith', 'Hope' and 'Charity' in the Unitarian Chapel. These words and Shakespeare's plays and Leigh Hunt's poem did help me to feel that there was something for men besides eating and drinking and getting a living or having it got for you.

But at this period 'good', so far as it concerned the world and not me personally, meant chiefly if not solely Liberalism. Through my father's enthusiastic political talk I learnt that Mr. Gladstone was a glorious, great and good man…

I used to distribute handbills of political meetings in the cause, sang a Liberal parody of the 'Men of Harlech', and followed the elections as keenly as I did cricket scores. Conservatives I thought were an inferior race, partly because they were wicked, partly because they were stupid. There ought never to be any Conservatives; and as time went on they would become fewer and fewer and at last all

would be well. Until then Liberals had to fight to rescue the downtrodden in Ireland, in London slums and elsewhere…

Poetry was nothing to me compared with Home Rule [i.e. self-government for Ireland] Or rather Home Rule took the place of Poetry, and was really an equivalent in so far as it lifted me to vaguely magnificent ideas of good and evil. It was on the same level as the signing of Magna Charta, the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the beheading of Charles I and dethronement of James II, which to me were splendid Liberal events of the past… I was sufficiently stirred by the Home Rule election to declare myself Liberal at school in a form which I think was three-quarters Conservative. [In 1893 the Prime Minister, Gladstone, introduced the Second Home Rule Bill in Parliament; it passed the Commons but was defeated in the House of Lords.]

My enthusiasm pleased my father. It must have atoned for my peculiarities and for my bad language among my schoolfellows. This vice was reported to my mother by Henry, who had teased and tormented me one day on the Common and drawn from my lips every filthy word I could muster. I denied the fact passionately and when I saw that my mother did not believe me I gave way and passionately repented.

Home life was very largely grumbling, deceiving and repenting, driving my father to anger or sorrow and then being miserable consequently. I stayed out late, or I was unwilling go to chapel, or I told lies, or I talked nonsense at the Sunday dinner-table…

My father… wanted us to talk about the sermon. For I think very often he himself only went to the evening service. We had hated hearing the sermon and now had to improvise an essay on it. It was so loathsome that I could never seriously attempt the task, even to avert the Sunday dinner anger, which became almost a regular thing. Either I showed my loathing too openly or I caught one of my brothers' eyes and one or another and then both tittered. My father reprimanded us by calling us 'donkeys'. I made an effort, but his anger and my shame only made me duller than ever. Probably I broke down in the middle of a sentence with, 'Oh, I don't know.' Then came a lecture from my father, or just a few words of abuse, and then all remained silent for a time. Some days my father, relenting, would choose what he thought a lighter pleasanter subject; everyone would be absurdly eager to keep it going, and my father absurdly pleased with trifles.

Christmas was eagerly waited for, but the day itself meant chiefly watching for the postman, disappointment, chapel, a heavy dinner and crackers, some squabbling comparison of our presents, tea… supper… I think I had always an eager haste to unveil the mystery, always a fluttering look of wonder which always sank dead like an extinguished torch into disgust with the imperfect thing.

If it had only been something better or different. It mattered not how many or good were my presents; they fell below an indefinite imagined standard…

At the new school I made several friends… One of these named George lived a hundred yards away from us… In politics he was a thoroughgoing Conservative. Our intercourse was long, regular, always superficial. He was cold and hard and never came out into the country with me or kept pets…

I was far more intimate with a boy of something like my own nature. As a girl he would have been beautiful, with his plump dimpled cheeks, delicate rosy skin, Cupid lips, perfect features, fine light brown hair, soft grey eyes, smiling timorous expression, head slightly bent. But he had thin legs; he was easily frightened; he played games slackly and awkwardly… I admired his face as I did my mother's, and envied them both, intensely conscious of my appearance…

Another boy I can still see playing back with me in the football field. He was a sturdy energetic boy with a Roman nose in a freckled red laughing face. Probably he was a year or two older than I, and knew boys and young men older than himself, and the lore he had learned from them used to impress me. One story he told was of a Spanish girl who bit her lover's chest, one of a man being set upon among the Welsh hills by factory girls and shamefully handled. Others were of the same class. These things he spoke of, as it appeared to me, without indecency. I thought him chivalrous and frank and manly. In fact I had a great respect for him, and after I had left the school I used to wish we could meet again…

Another was a dark fattish boy whose time went to girls instead of games. His nickname… was Sally. According to rumour, founded chiefly on his own boastful shameless narratives, his conquests were many and complete. And for a time he stirred me to imitate him. I singled out the most notorious of his alleged paramours, a pale slender black-haired girl years several years older than myself, with small features and round dark eyes and a light name that seemed perfectly appropriate, and for some days or weeks pursued her.

By day I walked after her at a distance without ever catching her up; I managed to meet her face to face without daring to speak. By night I would say as much as good evening and silently walk alongside her and perhaps her tittering younger sister. My desire was to be with her, to be intimate with her in some unknown degree. In truth I think I wished to be loved by her. I should have liked to kiss her. I ceased to believe what I had heard Sally tell about her. For many nights I hung outside her house watching the blinds for her shadow and the door for herself, slipping away to a distance if she appeared and only showing myself reluctantly.

On this starvation diet of neither encouragement nor rude words my affection died utterly away. The girl herself was but a chance object, or chosen because I had begun by imagining she would meet me half-way.

I was not better than anyone else at running, jumping, or swimming. In the sports I entered only for the walking and the swimming race. As I never learnt to dive I had to jump in, and arrived last in the swimming race. But I fancied myself at walking; and John and George had spread reports about my performances and I started at scratch with a dozen boys in front of me. All of them were behind in a quarter of a mile or so, except one, and him I was just passing. His five yards' start had all along seemed to me unfair. However, he was done with; so was the boy who notoriously ran. But their footsteps and their panting sounded close behind. I had enjoyed catching up and walking through the others. Still more I hated being pursued.

Soon after, George began to run beside me, and when I was within a hundred yards of the tape, I began to believe that the running boy was gaining on me. I could not stand it. Turning off the track I threw myself down on the grass on the pretext that I had a stitch. A master came up and looked at me, saying they had expected me to win. I was wretched. The only worse thing possible was to have been beaten. But nobody else thought so. My father blamed me for cowardice, and for years after used to say to me at intervals on various occasions: 'Ah well, it's no use I suppose. It's just that mile race over again.' 'Half mile,' said I: it was the only answer. Secretly I was as well pleased with the tragic singularity as I could have been with victory. Moreover I always firmly believed that no boy could beat me in fair walking without a crowd.

8
Butterflies, moths and pigeons

I was soon all but indifferent to games. When I entered the school I was an entomologist who had specimens of the yellow underwing and the magpie and the common white butterfly. It may have been a year later that I met a boy who made me ashamed of this ignorance, and helped to set me on another path out of doors....

John was a handsome fair boy, delicate complexioned, dimpled at cheek and chin, of regular large features... His speech seemed to me more refined, his manner was freer and more generous than mine, his elder brother was at a great public school and wore a silk hat on Sundays, he had more money to spend, several of his relatives lived in great big houses.

Indoors and here and there in Surrey I rapidly learnt the names and seasons of most common moths and butterflies. I learnt to catch and kill and display them in the orthodox manner. To acquire all the tools of the trade I begged from my mother and father and bartered with everyone. The little round pill boxes made of thin wooden chips, of three or four different sizes one within the other, delighted me as a novelty: so did the neat cork-lined boxes that closed so softly and tightly – and everything else in turn. I was in a terrible hurry to be abreast with John. To spend and to get were the things. An ancient glass case of moths and decoratively mingled butterflies in a second hand shop seemed the most desirable thing in the world – till I had paid for it and opened it and saw that all the specimens were only so much coloured dust, and faded at that...

In the summer evenings we searched gardens and shrubberies for moths and caterpillars. On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons now we used to go to Wimbledon Common. Or if we had a whole holiday we took a train to Barnes station and walked through Richmond Park over Ham Common to One Tree or Teddington lock, to fish in the Thames. For I was very soon far from being a stern-spirited collector out of doors. I might go out with nothing in view except butterflies, but the moving to and fro among quiet places in the warm weather was the substantial part of the pleasure. Fishing after a time was more to my taste. The infinite possibilities of a river containing pike, barbel and trout fascinated me; I liked the silence; failure never bored me, but on the contrary the last minutes of fading light were intensely exciting...

The little rustic cottages at Ham Common beyond, and the very old man sitting outside one of them were always a welcome sight. The broad green-edged river and the swans were enough to fill my eyes for six or seven hours on end, with an interval for bread, cheese, apples and ginger beer. The men towing pleasure boats and brushing down the riverside grass and bushes with their ropes were the only nuisance. Going home we filled our creels and pockets, in the season, with horse chestnuts from wayside trees...

I did not... dream of throwing up the companions whom I did not want to introduce John to... So I used to enjoy going about with Henry to look at the pigeon shops in Wandsworth, Battersea and Clapham, occasionally to visit the back-garden lofts of working men in the same neighbourhoods. He had me in tow and I think I remained for the most part silent in the background unless I had a bird to buy. These long rambles among crowds of working people under the gaslight, in all sorts of weathers, were a great pleasure and were interrupted by a greater one when we stood and looked at pigeons in an atmosphere of shag smoke, grain and birds...

It was Henry, too, who introduced me to… a family with half a dozen boys who let him keep his main store of pigeons in their back garden…. The elder boys, who went neither to school nor to work, were always indoors or in the garden when they were not training for athletic sports. The younger boys were licensed truants, getting to bed or to breakfast at all hours. The father, an unemployed mysterious professional man with a long coat and a cigar, looked on dubiously cheerful, reigning rather than ruling, but treated with respectful familiarity. Mrs. Jones, sadly tolerant, was busy chiefly indoors. The chief attraction for me was the family collection of birds' eggs from the moorland and seashore of Wales. The curlew, the hen harrier, the buzzard, belonged to a past which to me was romantic… I was free to go in and out of the house and garden, a very humble follower and admirer of their free idle ways. One of them taught me to ride a bicycle…

But I was not intimate with any of the boys. In fact John was my one constant friend. We had become essential to run another. We quarrelled and differed, of course, but one quarrel only lasted in my memory and that because John sent me a note next morning at school, saying: 'I was a cad. Will you make it up?' I kept the paper for years afterwards.

I did not make friends easily, perhaps because I was exacting. I wanted someone who would be ever ready for an afternoon and evening of walking or talking, and I think I wanted to have the upper hand and to have it easily. With me, to think of a walk to Merton or a tour among the shops in Battersea meant to do it immediately, and I could usually get John to accompany me. So we were separated hardly at all accept in the holidays.

I remember the summer holiday when I was fourteen. My two next brothers and I spent two or three weeks with four boys and a girl whom my mother's sister was looking after during the parents' absence in India. We took the train journey alone, enjoying most the change at Templecombe and the wait which we spent in hunting butterflies near the station.

It was at Burnham in Somerset that we stayed. The eldest boy was entering Sandhurst… The boys' slang delighted and impressed me. But I made no friends among them. My next brother, a franker, more athletic boy, was the favourite, and was often mildly in league with them against me. The eldest boy despised me. He made me conscious of being shy, timid and sneaking; and if I was naturally that, I must have been far more so among people whom I could not be free with, partly at least because I was so anxious not to show my more awkward manners and all that they betokened.

Nevertheless I had many pleasures there. I began to learn to swim in the sea. I chased the clouded yellow butterflies which I now saw for the first time, among the sandhills. I fished with the others out in the mud flats, above all in a big pond inland…

When we quitted the pond at evening we had sport out of a big deserted house by throwing stones at the surviving window panes.

My next brother stayed on a week or so after I left these people for Swindon. There I was delighted to find the clouded yellow butterflies as plentiful as by the sea. I gave more time to butterflies in those weeks because I had now made friends with a Swindon boy who was very little of a fisherman. We chased the butterflies; we jumped the narrow brooks; we trespassed hither and thither with a St. Bernard puppy who drew after us all the cattle in the fields and provoked the farmer; we sat talking in the crown of a pollard willow. Fred was something of an athlete and we ran and jumped in friendly rivalry in the fields. I could beat him only at walking. I never met the boy anything like my own age whom I could not beat at walking. So I stamped the dust furiously from one milestone to another towards Wootton Bassett in the hope of some day covering the mile in less than seven minutes. Also as I now had an old bicycle with me, we raced on bicycles...

9
A Lasting Acquaintance: Richard Jefferies

When Fred was not free I had some very different company. One acquaintance I had made at Swindon was a stout course lad of fifteen or sixteen who had been in prison and had plenty of spare time. His name also was Fred. He would do almost anything to please me, from fishing with me all day, to killing a neighbour's cat for me to skin. Moreover, he always behaved to me with the utmost decency, faith and honesty...

But a more entertaining and lasting acquaintance was an old man whom I called Dad, in the Wiltshire style, almost from the first day. I remember him first as a stiff straight man, broad-shouldered and bushy bearded, holding his rod out and watching his float very intently... We used to sit and eat our dinner together. He being toothless had to chew prodigiously, his nose and his beard almost meeting at each bite, to get through his brown bread and watercress. The bread he brought with him, the watercress he gathered from the brooks. His eating grimace amused me, his gravity, the simplicity of the meal, and his thanks to God for it impressed me...

Very soon I sought him out and got him to walk with me when I was tired of fishing. I shared my doughy cake with him, or if we had a meal at a village shop I paid for the tea and bread and butter and egg and lardy cake. He knew the names of most birds and could imitate their cries: his imitations of the jackdaw calling his name and of the young rook crying and swallowing a worm at the same time, were wonderful. The flowers, too, he knew, both the common pretty flowers and those whose virtues he had read of in Culpeper's *Herbal*.

With dried and powdered dock root and with extracts of leaves, flowers or bark, he composed dark medicinal-looking drafts. His ointment made of lard scented with elder flower was delicious. Then he had a way with country people. He spoke to everyone. All the old men to him were 'Dad' and the old women 'Granny' and the younger men 'young man'...

Dad had done some poaching in his younger days. Odd-job man under a wood-ward, militiaman, and latterly outdoor assistant to grocers, he had not had time to become very respectable. So he was the first man old enough to be my grandfather with whom I was on thoroughly good easy terms. He did not hide anything or invent a moral code for my benefit... Dad's extraordinary freedom was equally amusing and alluring. At first I supposed him to be a wicked old man until I came to believe that all men were radically like him but most of them inferior in honesty... Nor did he ever use foul language. What is more, he spoke what he thought, whether his sons, or anyone else such as myself, were there, which was very new to me...

Whenever I was not bound to play in a football match I spent my half holidays with John, walking, to Merton or Wimbledon, or taking the train to South Croydon and exploring southwards and eastwards. We had no single definite object now that no eggs were to be found. Talking, and looking at the earth and the sky, we just walked about until it was dark... Some rare thrush or robin we might stop to listen to; we might watch a wren threading a bush or a tit on a birch-spray, or look at a mossy greenfinch's nest or climb up with some sort of unfounded hope to a big nest which had escaped us in spring; but for the most part we were moving and usually fast...

If the weather was bad and we were not together and no school work had to be done, I read books of travel, sport and natural history. I remember those of Waterton, Thomas Edward, Buckland, Wallace, Charles Kingsley, but above all Richard Jefferies. If I say little of Jefferies it is because not a year passed thereafter without many copious draughts of him and I cannot pretend to distinguish amongst them. But very soon afterwards I was writing out in each one of his books and elsewhere – as in a cousin's album – when I had the opportunity, those last words of *The Amateur Poacher*;

'Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients thought divine can be found and felt there still.' They were a gospel, an incantation. What I liked in the books was the free open-air life, the spice of illegality and daring, roguish characters – the opportunities so far exceeding my own, the gun, the great pond, the country home, the apparently endless leisure – the glorious moments that one could always recapture by opening the *Poacher* – and the tinge of sadness here and there...

I had begun to write accounts of my walks in an approach as near as possible to the style of Jefferies. They had grown out of the school essay on holidays which I was able to take some pains over, as, for example, in arrangement and in making a dignified conclusion, with a Latin quotation. After the last summer holiday I won a botany book as a prize at the Sunday school with one essay of this kind. The minister encouraged me in my outdoor tastes with much kindness and the best of his ability. He even persuaded the editor of a children's paper to print my descriptions of country walks. But like all other grown-up people he inspired me with discomfort, strangeness, a desire to escape. I could never answer him naturally...

No book read at school was to me ever anything like as delightful as *The Amateur Poacher*. Of schoolwork I did only what, in order to avoid much trouble with masters and parents, I had to do... If I made an effort it was with half my mind, without ambition. My father wanted me to go on to a Public School and I received special lessons in Latin verse and in Greek. But Greek grammar, Herodotus and Ovid were nuisances: I attended to them only because to ignore them altogether would have brought worse nuisances. I was thinking all the time about John and Jefferies and Merton and fishing and bird-nesting...

My father made efforts to stimulate interests. He set me learning botany from books and lectures: I learnt nothing but a few names which I could not forget. He used to talk to me of books and take me to lectures. At Kelmscott House I heard Grant Allen recommending State endowment of literary genius: I saw William Morris and I was pleased and awed. But nothing I ever heard at home attracted me to literature or the arts...

There were, however, several hundred books at home, and among them volumes of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Spenser, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Tennyson, and Browning... On Sunday when Jimmy and I walked out in our best clothes I took Tennyson with me... I am almost certain that the reading of poetry connected with my liking for a girl named Blanche. She was a tall thin freckled girl of about my own age with good rather large features, dark hair and grey eyes, and an austere expression...

I hardly imagined that I should ever kiss Blanche: to hear her deep voice, to receive her grave smiles, often would have been enough. And so concentrated was I upon her that I treated contemptuously a pretty lusty full-lipped red-cheeked girl who sometimes waylaid me and sometimes sent messages bu a young sister. I was more tempted by the prostitutes, coarse, middle-aged, ill-dressed, who addressed me as 'darling', and used to walk up and down out of darkness to the light of a lamp and back again, in the less frequented Common pathways. But I was too timid and too ignorant.

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Public School: First Impressions

[In the UK a Public School is a fee-charging school, public in the sense that it is open to anyone who can pay for it.]

With Blanche I never got beyond buying her roses and lilies of the valley, and once an expensive prayer-book. That was when I had already gone on to a Public School. I had failed to win a scholarship; only in English did I make any show at all: and I entered a form consisting of a few boys who had won or were going to compete for history scholarships at Oxford or Cambridge. All were older by two or three years than myself. I had never before met boys like them. They not only read many books and saw many plays, and held strong opinions about them, but they argued about persons and events and movements in English and foreign literature...

I continued to read chiefly Jefferies and the naturalists, whom these boys knew nothing of. 'What are you reading, Thomas?' asked one of the boys who already wore a scholar's gown. '*The Gamekeeper at Home*,' said I. 'The gamekeeper's place is in the woods,' said he. And I kept silence, not venturing to remark that the woods were his home.

The whole school impressed and alarmed me... I came alone in the morning, and in the afternoon I went home alone, often in a railway carriage containing three or four schoolfellows, but alone, in a state of discomfort which would I imagine have been multiplied if they had taken any notice of me, which they never once did, in spite of my morbid looking out for signs that they noticed my discomfort.

During the middle of the day I was alone: I stood alone watching Rugby football or practice for the sports. For most of the boys in my form went home to lunch; the rest also disappeared. If I had lunch at school I sat alone and was spoken to only once. Opposite me sat several much older boys whose serious faces and eager voices in argument fascinated me, so that I could not but stare, until one day one of them, a pale black-haired youth with strong lean scowling features, asked me why the devil I couldn't mind my own business. Perhaps it was to avoid this school meal that I took to having lunch out, or, rather, buying a few buns to eat in the classroom while I read Jefferies...

When I was not reading or watching games I walked along the far side of the river watching the gulls and swans, sometimes in such wretchedness that I wanted to drown myself. My form-master, seeing me reading when he came in long before afternoon school was to begin, asked me what I did with myself, did I ever skate or take any decent exercise. He was abrupt and looked contemptuous.

I muttered something about skating and country walks. My wrists and hands and arms were always decorated with scratches during the bird-nesting season, but of course he knew nothing of that. Nor had he seen the words which I had written, perhaps not quite without ostentation, in the worst possible Latin on the flyleaf of my algebra book: 'I love birds more than books.'...

I felt unimportant, isolated, out of place... However... I had now a faint ambition, both definite and indefinite, to do something in connection with learning or literature. My father wished me to try for a history scholarship and I occasionally read as hard as it was possible to do without any interest in history beyond the attempt to memorise facts. I suppose there never were duller books then Bright's *England*, Kitchin's *France*, Lodge's *Europe*, anybody's *Political Economy* (Marshall), and I had no idea of history beyond assimilating these... The other boys either had enormous appetites for books of many kinds, or they had native wit. I seemed to have nothing.

The one thing I may have had a native taste for was composition. I had feelings which I could not have explained as to forms of expression; I had at the back of my mind sometimes what seemed to me a right phrase and I groped for it. Writing was not a mere nuisance. Whether I had any ability I have no ground for saying.... With or without the help of English I began to be near the top of the form as soon as the two scholars had gone up to Oxford.

I was hardly doing more than acquiring unrelated information, and forming the habit of reading what did not interest me... Some books were less dull than others, but still everything at school was an aimless task performed to the letter only...

I made no close friends at the new school. The elder boys either took no notice of me or soon got tired of trying to get something out of me. They alarmed me, and since I did not want to give myself away, and words came darkly and with difficulty when I was disturbed, I said almost nothing: what I did say I often felt to be obscure or false, but for fear of worse I did not correct it... When we were left to ourselves for a time, two of them would begin saying their parts for amateur theatricals; three or four would chat; the one bookworm looked up something in a lexicon wherewith to convict the master; and I would look out of the window at the white clouds, the dark trees, the green grass and the black rooks canting on it, the pigeons flying up with sticks for their nests, and perhaps made a note of the alternation or mingling of snow, hail, rain and sunshine in late February...

On going to the Public School I had without thinking of it dropped all connection with my old school. I never went once again inside its gates.... The other boys I practically never again set eyes on: if I did I very carefully avoided meeting them, for fear of the discomfort of uselessly disturbing for a moment the sleeping past. I also feared the mere coming face to face with anyone who was not an intimate. People in shops, distant relatives, all older and assured men and women, alarmed me. If I had to speak to them I unconsciously assumed a slow stiff manner and speech that probably did sometimes conceal my intense uneasiness...

Occasionally I saw Jimmy, who had been with me at my last school but one, and lived only a few doors away. It was with him that I set out at daybreak for Ashstead on the first Good Friday after I went to Public School and soon after my sixteenth birthday. Easter was early, yet pushing through thorny copses we found thrushes' eggs in hedges and shrubberies not many miles along our road, and climbed amid clouds of wood powder to an empty pigeon's nest. Not for anything else did we stop, three times perhaps in the fourteen or fifteen miles before dinner. Ewell and Epsom could not stay us. The day was clear, bright, mild – not too mild. I think we spent the afternoon in the woods and returned by train. Jimmy soon gave up such things. He had begun to smoke and to work at a bank...

My whole holiday on Saturday I spent usually with John, and sometimes Sundays, for it was now increasingly painful to me to sit in Chapel, on account of my shyness and the waste of time. Out of doors we fished or walked... John was beautifully made all over, with clear ruddy skin, and could run, jump, climb, swim, and feared neither men nor tree-tops. I was tall for my age, large-footed, skinny everywhere, and as John had pointed out, pigeon chested. I could not jump high or far, or run better than the average boy. I was no climber...

That I had quick sight and hearing, and could walk fast and far, was nothing to boast of. How I should have liked physical prowess! How ashamed I was of my chest! What efforts I made to clear away any risk of being called knock-kneed. On the other hand my health was good... So that one feverish homecoming when I was thirteen was memorable, for as I lay on my bed in the broad daylight I had a not unpleasant half-dream, seeing myself going far up an infinitely long pillared corridor.

It may have been soon after this that I began to have a trivial but strange experience which has been repeated once or twice a year ever since. It happens mostly when I am lying down in bed waiting for sleep, and only on nights when I sleep well. I close my eyes and I find myself very dimly seeing expand before me a vague immense space enclosed with invisible boundaries. Yet it can hardly be called seeing.

All is grey, dull, formless, and I am aware chiefly by some other means than sight of vast unshapely towering masses of a colourless subject which I feel to be soft. Through these things and the space I grope slowly. They tend to fade away, but I can recover them by an effort perhaps half a dozen times, and do so because it is somehow pleasant or alluring. Then I usually sleep. During the experience I am well awake and am remembering that it is a repetition, wondering what it means and if anything new will occur, and taking care not to disturb the process.

[The *Fragment of Autobiography* ends at this point.]

Killed in action
by W.H. Davies

(Written on the death of Edward Thomas)

Happy the man whose home is still
In Nature's green and peaceful ways;
To wake and hear the birds so loud,
That scream for joy to see the sun
Is shouldering past a sullen cloud.

And we have known those days, when we
Would wait to hear the cuckoo first;
When you and I, with thoughtful mind,
Would help a bird to hide her nest,
For fear of other hands less kind.

But thou, my friend, art lying dead:
War, with its hell-born childishness,
Has claimed thy life, with many more:
The man that loved this England well,
And never left it once before.

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