

THE UNREMAINING GLORY

Memories of Chipping Norton in the 1920s

BY

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*Our years are like the shadows
On sunny hills that lie,
Or grasses in the meadows that blossom but to die;
A sleep, a dream, a story,
By strangers quickly told,
Ah unremaining glory
Of things that soon are old.*

Edward Henry Bickersteth, 1860

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FOREWORD

Writing in the early years of this century, the author of that minor classic of local history, 'Three centuries in North Oxfordshire' remarks shortly before the coronation of King Edward VII, 'when the pageant is passed and the Earl Marshal shall have handed back Westminster Abbey to the guardians of a reformed religion, the visitor to these shores may reflect that some other-where the England of the poets may still have being. Such an one must turn from the mob of the city to find living men. If, perchance, he seek from Thames to Cotswold, seeking, he shall find, not indeed a pastoral paradise or an idyllic people, yet, beneath an un-blurred sky, a green, unblotted land.'

These evocative words were penned no more than a good afternoon's walk from where I write. The frontispiece of the book portrays the impressive entrance to Chastleton House and shows clearly the flight of steps where, seventy years later, my daughter and her husband stood for their wedding photograph. If, in truth, some subtle influence emanates from the material objects around us, these historic stones ought to ensure good fortune for any such union, for Chastleton is one of England's finest Elizabethan homes. It remains an eloquent witness to a period of domestic peace and stability, established in our island by the dynasty of the Tudors, whose rule made obsolete the sinister defence of moat and drawbridge, behind which the nobility earlier took refuge, to keep sullen and suspicious watch on the approaching stranger.

During the seven decades which separate these two photographs, no more than the allotted span of a single human life, an immensity of change has overtaken Britain. The green, unblotted land of the poet's imagination is increasingly difficult to find, even in these Cotswold uplands. New housing estates, new practices in agriculture, factories even, but above all the domination of the ubiquitous motor-car - 'an invention of Satan, disastrous to every form of civilised life' - as Llewelyn Powys called it, with its insatiable appetite for petrol stations and new roads, have transformed the countryside of north Oxfordshire as I recall it half a century and more ago.

Then, there were places of which Mary Sturge Henderson could say that their development had practically stopped with the Stuarts, and that the hand of time could be set back to the Middle Ages. When this was so, not everyone appreciated the pastoral serenity of the scene, like the youth fishing at Swinbrook, who, when an onlooker remarked upon the peace of the summer evening replied, 'D'yer think so? I 'ates ut. I'm agoin' to get out of ut'. He probably did, and in circumstances which he could hardly have anticipated, for the year was 1913. A time-bomb was being prepared in a remote place called Sarajevo, not only for a holocaust of human lives, but a whole way of life among those yet unborn. Did he, later perhaps, from the mud and misery of some Flanders trench, recall that scene by the river bank at Swinbrook, with a feeling of infinite regret for a world which was irrevocably lost?

When Mary Sturge Henderson's first book was being written, William Morris was selling his motor-cycles from a shop at 48, High St. Oxford, a building which faces the University's Examination Schools. He was nineteen years old when the other William Morris of Oxford and later, of Kelmscott Manor, died. Had they met some years afterwards, their conversation would undoubtedly have been interesting. Morris, the car manufacturer, and his American counterpart,

Henry Ford, between them brought about a traumatic transformation of the English countryside. The number of those who, remember the more leisurely way of life before the process of change had gathered its full momentum, must be rapidly dwindling.

The following pages make no pretence to be anything more than a simple record of some well-remembered scenes, personalities and events of that time, but which the transporting and liberating imagination of childhood illumined at unanticipated moments, with an ethereal, almost supernatural aura. Even in later life, its fading gleam is still capable, on occasion, of shedding across our fleeting days what the poet Wordsworth, with his unerring genius for capturing such moments of revelation, describes as 'the light that never was on sea or land'.

*Roy Worvill
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CHAPTER I THE DWELLING-PLACE SERENE

The old market town of Chipping Norton stands on a high, north-facing slope of the Cotswold Hills. Its recorded history dates back to no earlier than the Conqueror's Domesday Book, when the inhabitants numbered less than three hundred. Of those distant days there remains little trace beyond the grassy slopes of Castle Banks, a field near the Parish Church of St. Mary, where a castle, probably nothing more elaborate than a wooden structure, is believed to have existed in the twelfth century. The Church itself, which lies at the lower end of Church Street, dates mainly from the 14th century but underwent considerable restoration in the early 1800s. Other noteworthy buildings are the ancient Guildhall and the row of alms-houses built by Henry Cornish in 1640. At the entrance to these small but picturesque homes is a stone archway, admonishing the passer-by with the words 'Remember the Poor'.

The town's main feature is the wide expanse of the market-place, through which the main road from London to Worcester carries a ceaseless flow of traffic past the town-hall and down the hill. The great elm tree which once stood in the sloping market-square, beside the old butter-market, has long since disappeared and so has the tall, iron drinking-fountain which occupied a central position in the lower part of the square, with a shallow trough for dogs to drink, a larger one for horses, and heavy cups attached to the central pillar by chains for slaking the thirst of children, or others who, by inclination or necessity, were prevented from patronising one or other of the town's numerous inns. It was, in fact, nothing more than the large number of these taverns which caused my mother, a life-long teetotaler, to express the view, which she often did in a half amused way that Chippy was 'a wicked little place'. It is even possible that she thought the Almighty would one day call down upon the place of her birth the wrath of Sodom and Gomorrah in retribution for its intemperate ways.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that all the temperance advocates of that ,or, indeed any other time, were activated solely by a Puritanical desire to deprive the honest working man of the pleasure he found in his evening carousals. Many of those who walked in the Band of Hope processions behind an open-ended barrel, bearing the slogan "We Can See Through It", had known from first-hand experience the misery and deprivation which could be caused by an uncontrolled addiction to alcohol. Some, in fact had been brought up in public houses. Few lived more than a short walk from one and, though they may not have reached the depths of degradation of the old gin-shops of Hogarth's engravings, the slope, once embarked upon, could be slippery. To them the issue was not one where there were any 'grey areas'. They saw the choice in stark terms of black and white. Rather than countenance the risk, they opted for total abstinence as the only safe course. To my mother it was a matter of some sensitivity, however, for in the corner of her kitchen cupboard, behind the numerous jars of home-made jam, she kept a small bottle of brandy in case my grandmother 'got a bad turn'. Her attitude over this was not unlike that of my father towards the mantle-piece clock, which he liked to keep half-an-hour fast and - honest man that he was - he betrayed an injured resentment towards our accusation that the clock was 'telling a lie'.

Most towns have their High Street, but Chipping Norton's High Street really justifies its name. The buildings belong mainly to the eighteenth century and the upper Storeys of many still retain some of their original Georgian elegance. At street level there is more evidence of recent change. Most of the old family shops have gone, their places taken by the supermarket chains and multiple stores.. The stone archway through which the stage-coaches once clattered into the White Hart Hotel has been built in, but its neighbour, the Crown and Cushion, still has its wide, open entrance, as also does the King's Head in New Street, although it is the motor coaches from London to Worcester which now stop beside it.

From the vantage point of High Street, the visitor who is not concerned with the shop-window displays will find an expansive view across the valley to the north-west, where the next ridge of hills carries an old track past the ancient circle of the Rollright Stones. It used to be said that standing on the steps of the White Hart Hotel, the observer is at the same height as the top of the church tower at Stow on the Wold. I have never checked the accuracy, or otherwise, of this assertion but, as children, when we heard this said, we could hardly have been more impressed had we been told that standing on Chipping Norton High Street we were half-way to heaven. Indeed, on the doorstep of Miss Bird's sweet shop , which occupied a front room on the ground floor of the old Temperance Hotel, clutching our Saturday pennies, we already were. It seemed to me at the time that my favourite sweet shops and toy shops were invariably kept by benign, motherly old ladies, although I daresay that they were only in their thirties or forties. Some , at least, could hardly have been older, for they lived on to serve another generation, including my own children in their younger days.

The nearest shop to our home was not among those I liked best, but the lady who owned it had a skill which I envied. She made her own sweet packets from old newspaper with a few deft twists of her fingers. My admiration for this partially mitigated the taste of the printer's ink as I sucked, with lingering relish, my assortment of coloured pear-drops.

A little farther along the street, called the West End, was the little shop, which, had Greyfriars School ever come to the town, would assuredly have been Billy Bunter's dream world. Over the doorway was a board which read 'Mary Lane' and underneath, 'Licensed to Sell Tobacco'. An inner door of the shop opened always with a satisfying clang of the bell as it was pushed, a sharp, incisive note which owed nothing to electric wires or batteries which would keep up their fiendish noise if a door was not shut quickly. Inside the shop, which was no bigger than a modest living room, the shelves were a veritable Aladdin's cave, which catered not only for the sweet tooth of childhood but almost all the necessities of daily living and 'what maids lack from head to heel'.

One day while I was in the shop, engaged in the leisurely choice of sweets, another customer came in. He looked an old man, though he was probably only middle-aged. He had a dark beard and wore rough corduroy trousers, tied at the knee with a piece of string. He bought a loaf of bread and, as he left the shop with the unwrapped loaf, he brought it down smartly on my head, saying as he did so, 'They sez good bread dun'urt!' a remark the full significance of which I pondered over fruitlessly, but which I never forgot.

What enchanted hours of delight were encapsulated in that astonishing variety of confectionery. The toffees and chocolates were no more than the basic elements of the feast. Infinitely more satisfying to my roving eye were the most exotic creations of the sweet-maker's craft. Among

these were the long ,narrow toffee bars called everlasting strips, sherbet dabs and fountains, sweet cigarettes in packets labelled 'Wild Woodbines' and with a picture card just like the real ones. There were large round sweets like coloured golf-balls, scorning concessions to nicety under the name of 'gob-stoppers', the peculiar charm of which was only savoured by constantly taking them out of the mouth and putting them. back, as the coloured layers followed each other to the surface in a slow-moving kaleidoscope of sugary sweetness. For the more adventurous, who did not mind taking a little gamble with their penny, there were 'lucky' bags – or so the packet said. My own ventures into the game of chance seemed disappointing, but there was always a moment of pleasant anticipation before they were opened.

The shop contained one object which I coveted above everything else, but, alas, it was not for sale, at least not then. It was a small card board chest of drawers, fitted with brass ring handles and would have been the ideal container for my collection of birds' eggs. Each drawer, of which there must have been about six, was full to the brim with small knots of white tape and, although I did manage to extract a promise that the chest would be mine if it ever became empty, it seems that the market for tape was unaccountably lethargic. By the time it was empty, my interest in birds' eggs had cooled or moved on to other things. Not far from Mrs Lane's small shop was another of grander proportions. Its signboard announced, not the owner's name, but ' Bon Marché ' which was readily anglicized into 'Bon Marsh'. Such was our innocence of even the simplest word in a foreign language that some young customers addressed the proprietor, Mrs Burden, as 'Mrs Bonmarsh'. She was a kindly soul and no doubt, readily forgave them. It was, however, in autumn that the twin bay windows of the Bon Marché really came into their own. Almost before the blackberries had vanished from the hedgerows, Mrs Burden's display of Christmas toys appeared in tantalising array. Each was carefully labelled, though not, if I remember rightly, with the actual price. Of more immediate concern to most of her customers was the weekly payment over a period of twelve weeks, mostly a matter of a penny or two. If any of the children who went into the shop on Saturday mornings, bringing their pennies to be recorded on well-thumbed payment cards are still in happy possession of their china-faced dolls, brightly-painted tin cars or clockwork train sets, their investment of pocket money will be showing a handsome dividend, for many have now come into the familiar category of 'collectors items'.

The main shopping centre of the town, then, as now, was the High Street. At the end nearest to the town hall and the old Fox Hotel was the shop of the Co-operative Society - 'the Co-op', but the present, modern, self-service supermarket would scarcely be recognised by my father and the other men who worked with him, weighing sugar into bags of thick, blue paper, cutting butter and margarine from huge slabs on cold, marble counters and occasionally wrapping up a pennyworth of 'bits of bacon' for a passing tramp.

The welfare state seems to have led to the disappearance of these birds of passage, who were once a familiar sight in the town and in the country lanes. During the course of his work, serving at the counter of the 'provisions' shop, where the butter, bacon and cheese were sold, my father came to know many of these sturdy rogues well. One of them gave him an unusual brass whistle which he said he had picked up on Swindon football field. When they came to the back door of the house, as they frequently did, my mother would feel nervous of them with their

ragged clothes, their rough appearance and their tattered bundle of belongings. She would open the door a few inches in answer to their knock. Sometimes they would ask for money, but, more often, their request was for food and she would cut thick slices of bread from the cottage loaf taken from her red, earthenware bread crock and hand it to them with a wedge of cheese, or make tea in the battered tin can which was an indispensable item of the tramp's stock in trade. They seldom had much to say and my mother was always relieved to see them go, but my father sometimes talked to them about their strange life. Once he made enquiries of one tramp for news of another, for they were not invariably men of solitary habit and met others in the casual wards, as their communal lodging houses were called. The answer he received was that the second traveller had 'turned the corner', which was, presumably, the tramps' expression for dying. It seems as apt as the more conventional, 'passed away'. Beyond the Co-operative Society's group of shops were other, mainly small, family businesses. The ironmonger always had a display of goods on the pavement, brooms, garden stools and mops, with a row of metal buckets overhanging the two windows. There was something peculiarly reassuring about the ironmongers, where I would sometimes be dispatched from my father's shop counter to buy a wire for cutting up the large round cheeses. It has been said, though I am not sure with what measure of truth, that the hardware merchant is, by the nature of his trade, a man of integrity, supplying the solid essentials of domestic life whereas the florist is more like the whore-monger, who makes a profit from the commercial exploitation of beauty.

The great supermarket where housewives now jostle each other with wire baskets and wheeled trolleys, laden with the tinned and plastic packed products of the modern factory-farms, was, until a few years ago, the premises occupied by an old Quaker family of clock-makers. The family name was Simms and their trade in the town went back over six generations. The first of the clock-makers was John Simms, who is recorded in Dr. C.F. Beeson's authoritative work on the clock-makers of Oxfordshire as being in business around the year 1770. Some of the family's clocks are still to be found in the area. The old 'Grandfather' in my own living-room bears the name of Samuel Simms, a grandson of the original founder. It dates from about 1840 and is still in good working order. Its oak case, inlaid with a band of mahogany and with a floral motif inlaid in the door, has, during a life-time of almost a century and a half, acquired that smooth, shining 'patina', with polish, dusting and exposure to the air, which is the delight of the antiques connoisseur. Perhaps the shop which has, until recently, remained least changed during the past half century is that of the photographer, Mr Packer, whose father must have recorded every event of importance in the life of the town over a very long period. His pictures form, in themselves, a unique panorama of the community. To the older generation of the borough, Mr Frank Packer's slight, bespectacled figure was inseparable from public occasions. He worked with a stout, wooden tripod and a camera of red mahogany, bound with shining brass. Under his black cloth he saw the world upside-down and there he performed operations which, to many of his sitters, must have seemed pure magician-ship.

One of the traditional local crafts which fell into a sad decline between the wars was that of the saddler. The recent growth in the popularity of riding has, in some places, brought about a revival, but the demand for the elaborate, heavy harness used in the hey-day of the cart-horse, those magnificent Shires, Clydesdales and Percherons, inevitably began to disappear with the spread of the internal combustion engine. During the twenties, however,

there were still many working horses on the local farms delivering the bread, milk and other commodities. Today , whatever the harsh economic reasons, the country side is infinitely the poorer in spectacle for the loss of the plough team, their harness-brasses flashing brightly in the sun. When Thomas Hardy pondered over the same scene in his native Dorset and declared that this would go onward the same 'though dynasties pass', he could never have foreseen the new agricultural revolution destined to come with the tractor and the combine harvester.

The saddler's shop in West Street was kept by Mr Johnston. The sign board secured to the front wall of the shop read, 'Johnston, Saddler and Boot Maker'. If shops were to have been judged by the sense of smell, the West Street saddler's would doubtless have stood high on many people's list. Its interior had a distinctive, and, to me, infinitely appealing odour, compounded of new leather, saddle-soap, wax polish and possibly some other more subtle ingredients which at this distance in time I cannot confidently identify. Mr Johnston himself, was a tall, heavily-built man, bright-eyed and red-cheeked, well-suited, it seemed, to minister to the needs of his own big horses, Bob, Kit and Boxer, for he combined with saddlery and shoe-repairing the occupation of parcels delivery for the Great Western Railway goods depot, which stood in the valley beside the branch line from Banbury to Kingham, only a mile or two from the little station at Adlestrop made famous by the poet Edward Thomas.

In this respect, however, he could hardly have been said to match the versatile talent of his youngest son, Mr Reg Johnston, who after his father's death, continued to run the saddlery and shoe-repair business, but managed to combine it successfully, with a part-time career as a radio-broadcaster in that long-running and popular serial about country life, 'The Archers'. In this drama of the fictitious midlands village of Ambridge, Reg played the part of that disagreeable and turbulent character, Farmer Joe Grundy, whose malign influence constantly threatened disruption and trouble of some kind for the rest of the village. But, the fact is, that in real life, Reg's personality was always the exact antithesis of his fictional one, for it would be difficult to imagine anyone of a more genial temperament, though on matters which conflicted with the principles of his Methodist upbringing he would rarely be willing to compromise.

Apart from the casual exchange of pleasantries incidental to delivering or collecting a pair of shoes, my own acquaintance with him arose when I discovered an interest in horse-brasses, those shining amulets which I had seen decorating the harness of the horses in the annual Hospital Saturday carnival parade and, less often , on ordinary working occasions in the streets and fields. These horse-brasses, which were made in a great variety of shapes and designs , together with the bells, 'swingers' worn on the head, and the studs used to decorate the various straps came to have a great attraction for me. There are now many inferior copies of them sold in antique shops, but the ones I looked for were the old, used specimens, dating mostly from Victorian times or even a little later. When I found some, I would take them into Reg's shop and he would cast an expert, appraising eye over them, looking for signs of wear on the back, from years of rubbing against the leather of the 'martingale', the long strap down the horse's chest, He would test, with sensitive finger, the smoothness of the surface, patinated by the polishing of some long-forgotten carter, whose pride in his team took no stock of trade-union regulated hours of work.

Apart from a little glove-making, the town's two main industries were the manufacture of tweed

and beer. The brewery and the tweed mill lay at opposite ends of the borough. In addition to its more potent brews, which, I must confess that I never sampled, the firm of Hitchman & Company also made lemonade and ginger beer. The latter was sold in solid, stoneware bottles, but the fizzy lemonade of our delight we drank from what must surely be one of the most satisfying vessels ever devised for the storing of liquid refreshment. These were bottles of greenish-coloured glass, sealed by a glass marble stopper. Today the survivors may be found, extravagantly-priced, in curio shops but, in obscure corners, there must still be lying the splintered bodies of those we broke to extract from their throats the shining, glass marble.

Hitchman's brewery was hidden away in Albion Street, 'Back Lane' as the townspeople called it, removed from sight but not always remote from smell of the High Street shoppers. Few travellers passing through the market-place could have been aware that it was there at all. The tweed mill, founded and owned by the family of Bliss, was hardly likely to be overlooked. The great stone, building, with its clustered pinnacles and tall, cylindrical chimney which, at times, poured out clouds of thick, black smoke, completely dominated the valley on the western side of the town. From travellers along the main road to Worcester it evoked no small measure of curiosity. Often they stopped for a closer inspection of this hive of industry in so unexpected a setting. It replaced an earlier building which was destroyed by fire and is a remarkable example of the industrial architecture of the Victorian age, when the future of England seemed unshakeably secure and the world itself appeared to swing smoothly on well-balanced hinges

As a girl, after leaving school, my mother had worked in the mill, but, although I was familiar with every nook and cranny of its exterior, I never went inside. My own recollections of it are mainly those of summer evening rides which we furtively undertook on a wooden raft made of planks and barrels. This lay moored in the stream where it widened into a placid, reed-grown stretch of water known as 'the mill pond'. A lower extension of the building, erected in the early 1920s held the machinery for weaving the varied patterns of Bliss's famous tweed. In warm, summer weather the big doors were left open and the monotonous clanking of the machines could be clearly heard as we sat in the forked branches of a sycamore tree by the level crossing to watch the green-painted Great Western locomotives shunting the heavy goods wagons.

Sometimes, in response to our shrill, importunate cries of 'Give us a ride, please, mister!' heard through the hiss or escaping steam, we would be allowed to climb up to the foot-plate and enjoy the unique pleasure of traveling a short distance up and down the line as the trucks were slowly marshalled. Even today, I can sense, in retrospect, the sudden heat and roar of the flames, as the heavy door of the fire-box was opened and recall the oily smell the bundles of cotton waste with its tangled threads of many colours which the driver used to wipe the shining levers and dials in his cab. He and his fireman were to be envied above all other callings. The engine-driver was a king among men and it must have taken years for my mother's warning of dark, cold nights to be spent in dismal sheds, clearing ashes and greasing wheels, to make the smallest impression on my unreceptive ears. When that time came, I had already begun to wonder, albeit with some reluctance, whether the uniform of the station master, with its gold-braided cap and long, black coat with velvet collar, might not present some interesting, alternative possibilities.

CHAPTER 2

ON SUNNY HILLS

2

Many people who are fortunate in being able to look back on a happy childhood would probably agree that one of the most valuable things we can inherit is an attachment to a particular set of streets, lanes, fields, woods, streams and hedgerows. Families who, for one reason or another, are constantly being uprooted, may have their compensations in the variety of landscape and people, but, to my own mind, a long-term association with some special locality seems infinitely to be preferred.

There were two main routes down the hill to the valley where the railway line used to run and where the stream still does, but only one of them, New Street, leading to the main Worcester Road, could be described as busy. The other, lying on the town's south-western outskirts, is The Leys. Though much less used, its slope is a good deal steeper. On the lower part of the hill lay the row of eight, red-brick, terraced houses where we lived. They were built a few years before the first world war by the local branch of the Co-operative Society to provide homes for some of its employees. My parents, with my elder brother who was then about two years old, were the first to move into the new houses and soon afterwards, suggestions were invited for a suitable name for the terrace. My father, recalling the work of George Jacob Holyoake on behalf of the Co-operative movement, suggested that the houses should be named after him and, accordingly, they became known as 'Holyoake Terrace'. Since then it has sometimes occurred to me that my father might have been less enthusiastic for Holyoake's name to be used had he been more familiar with his outlook, for Holyoake's free-thinking, socialist views would have accorded ill with my father's strongly-held Baptist principles.

The house we occupied, and where I was born, was the one at the top end of the terrace. For a rent of five shillings weekly we had the use of three bedrooms, one of which was very small, two living rooms downstairs and a kitchen which was always called 'the scullery'. The name 'kitchen' was given to the main living room. The scullery contained the large boiler, 'the copper' for washing clothes, with a fireplace under it for heating the water. It also served in late autumn, for boiling the Christmas puddings, but, as I discovered later, lighting the fire was a trial of patience if not an actual hazard. My mother usually solved the problem by carrying a shovel of burning coals from the living-room fire rather than trust the fate of her weekly wash to the gamble of kindling the temperamental fire with paper and sticks. As a test of patience, however, even this could hardly be compared to the trials of an elderly neighbour, whose old habits were so deeply-entrenched that he used a tinder box, with flint and steel, to light his morning fire.

Above the sink was the only tap in the house. There was no fixed bath, nor, indeed was there much room for one. The nearest thing to it was to be found hanging on the outside wall in the back-yard where a row of three zinc tubs of varying sizes served for the Saturday night ritual of immersion in hot water, laced with carbolic soap, for the younger members of the family. At least we could afford a tablet of this harsh, red, dispeller of the week's dirt, unlike the neighbour who was the eldest of a family of ten children. In his childhood he had been sent to buy a penny bar of soap at the village shop at Over Norton. As the bathing was in progress, the cottage door burst open to reveal the irate figure of the shopkeeper, demanding the return of the soap. The

penny, he declared had been 'a bad one'.

Although we enjoyed few luxuries, like most of those around us, I doubt if we were conscious of any serious deprivation such as the families of unemployed men in the towns must have undergone. Our needs matched our resources and both were modest. 'That man is rich whose wants are few' was an adage frequently quoted by my father and, in that respect, as in others, he acted in accordance with his personal store of homespun wisdom.

My own earliest recollections relate to the time when my father was away from home, serving with what was then known as The Royal Naval Air Service, at a station in Scotland, a country he came to admire and which he always wanted to re-visit. This was towards the end of the war and during that time he and my mother exchanged frequent letters for, throughout her life, my mother was a tireless correspondent. One of the first mysteries which presented itself to my elder brother was about the sky, 'Is the sky here joined on to the sky at Oxford?' he asked. In my case the mystery lay in the interpretation of my mother's handwriting as it appeared to me when she was actually using her pen. What possible meaning I wondered, could possibly be attached to these strange, zig-zag lines which were forming with such rapidity under the point of her pen? A similar puzzle arose for me at a later stage over reading, for I was by then used to hearing my mother reading aloud. When my brother or sister were occupied with a book and I listened intently beside them, I could see no movement of their lips, nor hear so much as a whisper. How, I wondered could anyone read without saying a word?

In spite of the fact that her formal education ended early, as it did for all working-class girls of that time, my mother was a keen lover of books by the time she had left school. When, many years later, I became an admirer of John Cowper Powys's writing, I knew exactly what he meant in saying that with the exception of a swallow dipping into a stream, there was nothing in nature so harmonious as the sight of a woman lost in a book.

I cannot remember hearing anything about the books she read at school during those closing years of Queen Victoria's reign, but her earliest literary interest must have been nurtured on those she sometimes received as Sunday School prizes, 'Stepping Heavenward', 'Gentle Ways' and 'Alone in London'. Later, her taste in literature led from the little weekly papers of romantic fiction to the stories by Florence Barclay, 'The Rosary', being a particular favourite, but eventually, she became fond of the novels of Anthony Trollope and a fervent admirer of Jane Austen. My father rarely opened the pages of any book unless it was to seek information upon some point about gardening, especially the fruit trees which were his special pride. For many years we never had a daily paper but, when we did, the choice, inevitably, fell upon the old Liberal 'Daily News'. At his boyhood home, in the nearby hamlet of Over Norton, he had breathed Liberal politics with the very air, for his own mother, I once heard him say, kept a picture of Mr Gladstone in every room in the house. She evidently had no scruples about putting her independent principles into practice, for the village squire, Colonel Dawkins, who lived at the mansion in the great park, one day said to my father, with an air of sorrowful resignation, 'Dear me, Bernie, what a mother you've got! She's just ordered me out of my own house'. But my grandmother's instinct for independence was not simply, a readiness to stand up for her liberties when she felt they were under threat from any quarter. One piece of her advice my father always remembered gratefully. This, in her own words, was, 'Little man, you have a garden'. He

did just that, for he had few other possessions to the end of his life. It must have been a proud moment for him, when, shortly after his marriage in 1907, he went into the office of Mr Toy, the solicitor, with fifteen golden sovereigns jingling in his pocket, to complete the formalities for the purchase of the garden plot where my own house now stands, just across the road from his front door in Holyoake Terrace.

At the time when it came into his possession, the patch of ground was a dense jungle of weeds and briars. Clearing it must have been a wearisome task, single-handed, and kept a bonfire burning continuously for six weeks. But the hard labour, which consumed all his scanty hours of leisure - for working hours were long and Sundays were for rest brought its eventual recompense with the harvest of vegetables and fruit. Flowers he took little interest in, not, I think because he lacked an appreciation for the aesthetic side of gardening, but rather from sheer, economic necessity. In any event, the blossom on the apples, plums and pears which soon appeared, probably gave him as much pleasure as any formal flower-bed. So did the delicate bloom on the fruit of the immaculately-trained plum tree which grew on the front of the house. Here, at different times, on the sunny, south, wall, he grew peaches apricots and, for some years, a grape-vine, for he loved experimenting with the more exotic fruits and regarded them as a challenge to his horticultural skill. When grapes disappeared with other luxuries from the greengrocers' shops during the war, it gave him a particular satisfaction to provide a bunch of the dark-blue fruit for a neighbour who had always taken grapes to the church Harvest Festival.

As a gardener, apart from attendance at a few evening classes arranged by the Oxfordshire Education Committee, my father was largely self-educated and the basic principles of vegetable-growing were picked up by most country boys. Soon I became familiar with the special vocabulary of the fruit-grower, the budding and grafting techniques and the tree-shapes of almost geometrical symmetry, the espaliers, the single and double cordons, the bush, half-standard and standard. Even in winter the fruit trees, it seemed, were not without their charm, for after a cold afternoon's pruning or spraying, on early-closing day, my father would come in to the fireside tea-table and tell us that the fruit buds were 'shining like silver'. I doubt if he would willingly have exchanged them for a family crest on a silver salver.

Holidays, as they are understood today, were rare events. The word had a somewhat negative connotation - not going to school. I was about fourteen years old when I caught my first glimpse of the sea at Portsmouth Harbour. Before that, my closest acquaintance with it was a picture in a plush-covered, Victorian frame, with the caption 'Rough Sea at Brighton'. When I did, eventually, make my first visit to that particular stretch of Channel water, I was in the Royal Navy and thirty years old. By a curious quirk of chance I was living at the Roedean school for girls, though there were no girls in residence and it was re-christened, for naval purposes, in the name of H.M.S. Vernon (R).

The high point of the school summer holiday period was the day when we travelled by train to spend a few hours in Oxford or Cheltenham. At that time the single-track railway line which ran from Chipping Norton station to the junction with the main line at Kingham seemed to be the

most exciting thoroughfare in the world. The dusty smell of the booking office, the clatter of milk churns on the platform and the enamelled signs advertising Mazavatte tea , Stephens' Ink and Bovril, all seemed part of the adventure. As the familiar fields and the tall chimney of the tweed mill slipped behind us, I would turn my attention to the windows on the other side of the carriage where the telegraph wires ran. I could hardly take my eyes off them until the train slid smoothly into Kingham station ten minutes later and the porter's voice was heard calling 'All change! ' These mysterious wires, as they rushed past, moved up, until, just as I thought they would disappear, they were suddenly dragged down, as though by an unseen hand, when we passed the next pole. There were often interesting kinds of wild life to be seen from the carriage window. Sometimes an owl, fresh from the night's hunting, would move lazily from a fence post as we went past; a sudden flash of shining, blue feathers betrayed the darting flight of a kingfisher along the bank of the stream, or a heron would rise from its solitary vigil beside the water to climb slowly above the tree-tops with wide sweeping deliberate wing-beats and long legs trailing behind.

As Matthew Arnold's 'city of dreaming spires' drew near, I thought that I had never seen so many houses and buildings crowded together in one place. From Oxford station to the shopping centre was a fairly long walk and, when we arrived, what tedium I endured in what seemed like an endless succession of draper's shops! I would wander round the door of the shop with ill-concealed impatience, until my mother and grandmother had made their purchases and we moved along the street to what was my prime objective of the outing, the Penny Bazaar. I cannot remember where the exact situation of this shop was, but to me, it was an oasis in a desert of drapers. Nothing could match its appeal, not even climbing up the steps of Christchurch tower to see the works of the great clock and striking the bell, Great Tom, with a kind of padded drumstick.

Invariably, on these excursions, there was some sight which disturbed my equanimity and cast a shadow on my enjoyment. It might be the figure of an exceptionally ragged tramp, a blind man selling boxes of matches from a tray, or a wounded ex-serviceman wearing his medal ribbons as he sang in one of the streets. As we travelled home, with my treasures from the Penny Bazaar, it seemed as though I had been given an insight into a seamy, underside of life, the existence of which I had never previously suspected.

Among working men ,paid holidays, even for as little as a single week, were by no means universal. My father was allowed one week's holiday with pay and the option of a second week, unpaid. Even on the low weekly wage of about three pounds, the loss of the second week's pay was a prospect which few workers could contemplate with out and most felt constrained to settle for a single week. My father usually went, on his own, to spend a few days at Winchester visiting an elderly relative It was in this city that he had an unusual, chance encounter which he told us about when he returned home. The incident happened while he was sitting on a park bench and an old man sat down beside him. The story he had to tell my father proved to be one of extraordinary fascination. His very name was quite out of the ordinary It was Mark All. He was then in his nineties and more than twenty years earlier, had visited the office of one of the big London newspapers in search of work. He had been offered the sum of three thousand pounds to walk seven times round the world, but would have to make a number of additional journeys in order to compensate for the distance he travelled by sea. He claimed to have

met the rulers of many countries, including the Czar of Russia, and, not surprisingly, had encountered a variety of hazards from wild animals, including one narrow escape from a pack of wolves in the Russian forests. He showed my father the last entry in the diary of his journey which read: 'Since August 6th 1900 I have walked 356,000 miles. Finished in Exeter. Now I have to walk to London to get my reward'. This was written on his 95th birthday. He died shortly afterwards and I never heard whether he was able to claim the money. He undoubtedly earned it, but, whether he received it or not, an odd remark which my father heard him make might suggest that, by then, he did not really care. Perhaps the achievement was its own reward, for, as they sat on the bench, another onlooker who had heard part of the old man's story said, 'A rolling stone gathers no moss'. My father never forgot the old traveller's prompt rejoinder. 'No', he answered, 'no, but it gets highly polished'. My father too, had received his reward for the tramps 'bits of bacon' from the greatest tramp of all - Mark All. Salute to his memory!

Very few old people were able to enjoy any degree of financial independence at this time, although fear of being reduced to 'the workhouse' was less real than it had been some years earlier. The small pension, however, upon which most of them had to depend, was quite inadequate to keep them in a home of their own, particularly if it meant living alone. In addition to my grandmother, we had living with us, during the first six years of my life, an elderly aunt who was a sister of my grandmother. Her life, until then, had been spent in domestic service at one of the big houses in Kensington, where my grandmother had also gone to work when she was only eight years old. In these days of rigid equality of opportunity between the sexes in the matter of work, it is, perhaps, difficult to believe that, in the memory of many people still living, domestic service was almost the only career open to working-class girls in rural areas remote from manufacturing industry.

'Auntie Lizzie', as we knew her, occupied the downstairs, front room of the house. It had a wide bay window looking out on the small front garden over which, in late summer, the Dorothy Perkins standard rose-tree trained to a shape like an open umbrella, scattered a thick carpet of fading, pink petals. Around the bay window were her bird-cages, and the room would often be alive with the singing of her yellow-plumed canaries and the chirping of bullfinches and goldfinches when I went in to see her. White-haired and dressed in black, she would be sitting quietly in her favourite chair, made of wickerwork, like my mother's shopping basket, and I would gravely offer her apple pips for the birds, saying 'One for Joey, one for Bully, one for 'Yule' and one for Cripple'. The last two were a cross-bred mule and a canary which had once broken a leg, an injury from which it had only partly recovered by the application of two splints made of matchsticks. The four walls of this sunny room were the circumference of her world, but, in the company of her small, feathered companions, I think she found a peaceful retreat from the harsh, domestic routine of washing, scrubbing and cooking, 'below-stairs' which, for years on end, were the lot of many girls of her generation, far removed from the Cotswold villages of their birth.

There was, in general, an atmosphere of free and easy neighbourliness in the little redbrick homes of Holyoake Terrace. Their close proximity was not conducive to the self-contained reticence of the larger, detached houses and their occupants. Dropping into a neighbour's was an invariable part of the daily routine and the gossip over a cup of tea a pleasant relaxation when the children were at school. In times of difficulty there was usually a helping hand to be

relied upon, to recapture an escaped chicken or for the loan of a tool or ladder. Not all neighbourly assistance reached the same level of personal intimacy as that which my grandmother would provide, at intervals, for old Mrs Clark, our next-door neighbour. This entailed cutting the corns on her delicate feet, but, before calling upon my grandmother to perform this service, she would always consult her kitchen almanac to make sure it was the time of the waning moon.

I cannot recall that we ever took a family holiday together. Those annual day trips to Oxford and Cheltenham were, the nearest I got to a holiday, but my mother sometimes spoke of a few days they spent at Weymouth, which must have been about 1913. When, eventually, I saw the sandy beach and wide sweep of Weymouth bay for myself, we were within a week or two of another world war. But in 1939 it was not merely as a pleasant holiday resort that I regarded Weymouth and the Dorset coast. By then it was the gateway to what I had come to think of as the Powys country and it was, indeed, on this very holiday, that I had what seemed like an undreamed-of opportunity to meet Theodore Powys whom I had come to admire as the author of that strange and alluring book, 'Mr Weston's Good Wine'. He lived in the little village of East Chaldon, or Chaldon Herring, as his younger brother, Llewelyn Powys, preferred to call it, in a detached, red-brick house called Beth Car - 'the House in the Pasture'. It lay beside the narrow road which winds towards the little village, past the foot of the huge, isolated hill, High Chaldon.

There were other members of the family living at no great distance and, on subsequent visits, when I was on leave from the Fleet Air Arm base at Lee on Solent, I made several visits to the lonely farmhouse in a fold of the downs above Chaldon, where Alyse. Gregory, the widow of Llewelyn Powys, and herself a writer of distinction lived. In another, adjoining cottage lived two other members of the family, the artist Gertrude Powys and her sister Philippa, a poet and author of a novel, 'The Blackthorn Winter'. It was on one of these visits that I had the memorable experience of listening to another Powys brother, Littleton, well-known to generations of Sherborne schoolboys, reading the Dorset dialect poems of William Barnes. I well understood, though I did not agree with, the remark of Dr. C. E. M. Joad that the Powys brothers had 'invested the inhabitants of Dorset with a spurious glamour, like the phosphorescent glow surrounding a decaying lobster'.

Another occasion in childhood which had important consequences for me was when my mother went to visit some friends in London. When she came home, she brought back a small book about birds' nests and eggs, in a series entitled 'Shown to the Children'. This was something in which I was already keenly interested but an even greater interest was to spring from it for on the cover of the book I saw that another title in the series dealt with the stars. Until then I had never realised that anyone knew enough about the stars to be able to write a book on them. Sometime later I was able to get this book, which I found even more appealing than the adventure stories of R. M. Ballantyne which I had been reading. It proved to be the first of many such books and for years afterwards, I would search every bookshop within reach, for any volume on the subject of astronomy and the night sky. More than once I cycled the twenty miles to Oxford on the same quest among the secondhand bookshops, those 'oases of Paradise, amid sand, wind, dust, ashes and lava' as John Cowper Powys once described them in a letter, after I told him about my hunt for some of his own books.

Only in one respect, I discovered, did he disagree with my 'bibliomania' and this was in my love of 'extra-special, extra-fine bindings'. In this, I found, he was supported by another friend, Helen Wordsworth, who was married to Andrew Wordsworth, a descendant of the poet. They lived in East Chaldon too, and knew the Powys family well. Helen Wordsworth was one of the few people who could drive a motor-car up the downland path to Llewelyn Powys's cottage without risk of incurring his severe displeasure. She was a book-reviewer for the literary weekly, 'Time & Tide' as well as the film critic for a Sunday newspaper. She liked books which she could read in the bath. There was evidently a strong dislike of expensively-bound books in some quite unexpected quarters. A number of Theodore Powys's books had been published in the twenties, in signed limited editions and special bindings, yet even he once counselled me against extravagance, writing, 'You must be spending a fortune on books. As Miss Matty said in 'Cranford', 'You should not hurt yourself in buying'. What would be his reaction, now, I wonder, when those same limited edition. are sold for forty and fifty pounds each?

This was the time - the year 1941, to be exact - when I had my most exciting contact with the eldest and best-known member of the Powys family, John Cowper. His second name came from that of the poet, William Cowper. Though not direct descendants, for Cowper had no children, the family had hereditary links with him and also with John Donne. He had moved, not long before, from a cottage in a hidden fold of the Dorset downs, a mile or so from the home of Llewelyn Powys. It was said that he had a dislike of the high cliffs, although North Wales, his new home, was certainly not lacking in precipitous heights. He had then just completed one of his enormously long novels, 'Owen Glendower' which must have involved a vast amount of detailed historical research as well as the labour of writing its thousand pages by hand. I knew several of his novels and philosophical works as well as some of his poetry, though much of the latter had only been published in America. Now, with a kindness and generosity which astonished me - and more than thirty years later, still does so - he enclosed, with a short letter explaining that his eyesight was troubling him, the following lines.

*'I'm a gossamer
Toss'd on the wind,
Over land and sea,
Until I find
A kindred mind;
And my psychic weather
Is never guessed,
Till you chance on a feather
From the same nest'*

To turn from one of the great novels to one of his short poems is like contemplating a miniature by Hilliard after looking at some vast canvas by Rubens or Breughel. But his genius did not end there. His eloquence held vast audiences enthralled on his lecture tours all over America. One eminent critic who heard him said that as a public orator he was unsurpassed, even by Sir Winston Churchill during the last war.

CHAPTER 3

THE JOY NO LANGUAGE MEASURES

In the nineteen-twenties the era of predominantly self-made entertainment was rapidly coming to an end, if, indeed, it had not already done so. No generation of elders, after the present one, will be able to say, with hand on heart, 'In my day, we had to make our own amusement'.

The television screen was a generation away and even radio was then only in its formative years, with the British Broadcasting Company, as it then was, striving to uphold the image of a big, happy family, despite the prevailing economic gloom, with the numerous 'Uncles' and 'Aunts' in its programmes for children. Back gardens spouted high, wooden poles from which the aerial wire would lead, more often than not in those days, to the small wooden box containing a crystal set. Frequently they were home-made, from parts which could be bought then for a few shillings. The crystal set required the use of a pair of head-phones, which probably cost more than the set itself and, in my own family, our first experience of 'listening-in' as it was called, was achieved with borrowed headphones. With these it was quite remarkable how otherwise insignificant, extraneous noises assumed enormous volume. The rustle of a newspaper was as disturbing as a roll of thunder.

The cinema, on the other hand, was well-established and was approaching the peak of its popularity. 'Going to the pictures' had for many people become an accepted part of the weekly, or even twice weekly, routine. At one stage, Chipping Norton provided employment for two cinemas but, eventually, the original establishment, the 'Picture Palace' succumbed to its rival which survived for some years before it, too, gave up the struggle against the little electronic screen in the living-room. In its day, however, the Picture Palace served the town well, although there were those in whose opinion it ranked second only to the dance-hall. and whist-drive as the primrose path to perdition.

Saturday afternoon was the time when the young generation came face to face with the stars of the screen, at a cost, for the front seats, of only two or three pence. We sat on plain wooden chairs, although there were a row or two of fixed seats at the back which were raised a few inches above the floor and were known as 'the boxes'. Here the management had tactfully provided some dual seats with no dividing arm-rests, for the courting couples anxious to get close to each other and away from families or the weather. These seats were patronised more often at the evening performances, especially the 'second house' on Saturdays. By that time the air was thick with tobacco smoke, but the germs must have had a harder time than the audience, for I never heard of any epidemic attributed to 'going to the pictures'.

The films, of course, were silent ones. The 'Talkies' had not arrived. A musical accompaniment was provided by a pianist. The essential qualification for his position, in addition to a minimum of piano technique, was the ability to be a fluent and quick-thinking improviser. Cowboy or comedy, war or witchcraft, he took in all in easy stride. The antics of Felix, the Cat, and Mickey Mouse, comedians like Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, wild west adventurers such as Tom Mix and the romantic entanglements of Rudolph Valentino or Hollywood's 'It' girl,

Clara Bow, all received sympathetic and skilful interpretation from his nimble fingers as they moved across the dimly-lit keyboard for two hours at a stretch.

At first the hall resounded to animated chatter and greeting of friends. Then came a few preliminary bars from the piano, followed by a volley of cheers as the lights went out. From here and there would come the flicker of a match and the lighting of a first; surreptitious cigarette, but more for the sake of bravado than any positive pleasure in the taste of nicotine. Our main outdoor playground was the common, though, in fact, the town has no less than three such areas within a short distance of each other, beside the main Worcester Road. These common lands were given to the town by the Earl of Arundel, a Lord of the Manor in medieval times. They formerly extended to some 500 acres, but the town's inhabitants were deprived of the greater part by a remarkable piece of sharp practice during the time of the Enclosure Acts in the late 18th century. It appears that when the act was drawn up to authorise the enclosure of the ancient fields, the copy made available for the townsfolk to inspect., omitted to show a large part of the common land which had been included in the document presented for approval to the House of Commons. When the enclosure was completed, of the original 500 acres, barely a quarter remained for the poorer inhabitants to graze their animals and gather their firewood. The rest passed into the hands of the larger land owners.

At the time of the enclosure, in the year 1769, there were around 300 households in the town and each had the right to graze two horses or cows on the common land. Some years later, the number of houses had grown and the area of land available following the enclosure was very much smaller. This necessitated some restrictions being placed upon the grazing rights. Only those house holders whose properties had been in existence at the time of the Enclosure act were entitled to retain these rights. Such rights, originally, were transferred only with the ownership of a house, but later, these 'stints', as they were called, were bought and sold independently, so that one man might come into the possession of several 'stints'.

The commons were not then fenced in by the present iron railings. A gate existed at the lower end of New Street and another was placed at the farther boundry which lies nearest to the village of Salford. Over this large area the cattle ranged freely during the six months from May, when the field was 'broken', to the accompaniment of noisy celebrations as they were driven in, until early November, when it was 'heynd' - the cattle then being removed and the grass left to grow. The stretches of common land remaining were finally fenced during the mid-19th century, when they took on the appearance which they still retain.

The Great Common, which lay between the Worcester Road, used by mainly horse-drawn traffic, and the railway line, with its passing trains, provided us with a large expanse of recreational space, though its slope and gently undulating banks were not well-suited to cricket and football. Where the old road formerly ran across it, the course of which is still visible, there were smoother patches which we used for these and other games in their seasons.

Though there are now many more houses within easy reach of the Mill Common, as we called it, this grass-grown, fertile acreage, remains relatively unvisited. I have known it in every season and all weathers, when the January snows lay deep in the hollows and on May mornings when it seemed that each grass-blade was submerged beneath a shimmering sea of yellow

buttercups, and my shoe-leather, as I climbed over the stile, would be thick with gold pollen dust. Today, the Sunday afternoon visitors park their cars beside the New Street common, with its swings and slides. Although the larger, Mill common was dug up in places during the last war to provide air-raid shelters for workers at the tweed factory, few traces of the excavation are left. The green pastures beside the still waters of the Mill pond are disturbed, even on sunny days, by little else than the transitory passage of birds and the quietly-grazing cattle. Now, as I write, it has taken on a new and altogether more depressing aspect, with the ground baked hard like concrete and the grass burned brown by the long, hot summer of the year 1976.

The American game of baseball, a more sophisticated and elaborate form of the old English rounders, is not one which has figured prominently in our national sporting calendar. Around Chipping Norton, however, half a century ago, it enjoyed considerable popularity. This was due almost entirely to the initiative of one man, Mr Fred Lewis, or 'Father Lewis' as he was often called, the father image in this instance arising from his original sponsorship of the then, unfamiliar game.

Mr Lewis was one of those rare, eccentric characters who seem to be less often met with in these days of conformity. He might have stepped straight from the pages of Shakespeare or Thomas Hardy, a Falstaff or Mayor of Casterbridge. Certainly, when I came to know him in his later years, I always felt that there was some Falstaffian quality in his eccentricities and bluff, good humour, though not in any alcoholic sense, for he was, if I am not mistaken, a total abstainer.

With his tall, stooping figure, large, cowboy-style hat with a Boy Scout badge in the lapel of his jacket, he might well have been an actor or a theatrical impresario. Instead, he was a builder and undertaker. He also operated a Punch and Judy show which delighted his child audiences, while his talk, racy and apt, would hold me spellbound, as, like some land-locked Ancient Mariner, he recounted one or other of his experiences. He and Mark All would have made an admirable pair of raconteurs. It seems singularly inappropriate that his memorial should be a road of neat, modern houses, all exactly alike. His personality was more akin to some isolated, crazy monolith, such as the prehistoric King Stone on Rollright ridge, which, like a great perching eagle, surveys with unseeing eye the village of long Compton below and the flat Warwickshire plain, stretching northwards to the Shakespeare country and the valley of the peaceful River Avon.

Looking back to this time it is obvious that our games and recreations followed a very rigid, seasonal pattern. Few children had bicycles, garden swings, pedal cars, model aeroplanes or any other of the play accessories of the modern 'affluent society'. Indeed the very sight of an aircraft passing overhead created excitement and cries of 'Aeroplane!', while our swings, not then provided by the open hand of a beneficent town council, consisted of a length of cord suspended from the branch of a convenient tree and padded for comfort with an old sack or discarded cushion.

Hoops were a perennially favourite plaything for both boys and girls, but no self-respecting boy would be seen playing with one of the light-weight, wooden variety, which came in several sizes,

but the bigger, the better. The wooden hoop was only for the girls, who would follow its uncertain course at a sedate trot, unless it outran them down the hill and jumped a low wall into a neighbour's flower-bed. Boys had heavier, iron hoops, propelled by a metal hook which was known as a 'steel'. These gave more control of the hoop and since they were in constant contact with the rim, gave out a high-pitched, piercing scream as we ran at breakneck speed down the hill, or performed intricate manovers in loops and circles to the envy of the girls.

One day, for no apparent reason, the hoops would vanish, relegated to a shed or a nail on the wall of the backyard, where, for months, they would hang neglected gathering rust through endless rainy afternoons and nights. .Skipping ropes and whip-tops are said to have originated with the church's custom of Shrove Tuesday penances, associated with the beginning of Lent. If so, to us it was an enjoyable form of penance, like the pancakes which went with it, and we were no masochists. .

Tops rivalled hoops in popularity and they could be bought at the Bon Marché for a penny each. Most of them had a cylindrical lower part, tapered to a point with a metal spike. Above was a bun-shaped portion of somewhat larger diameter, which was often coloured with paint or chalk to produce fascinating pattern as it was spinning. Some others were large and shaped like the point of a rather fat bullet, but these 'turnips' were not much favoured, for they never kept their spinning momentum like the others.

With hard and concentrated use while 'top-time' lasted, the metal point became worn from friction on the rough road and the local shoe- repairers, of whom there were several in the town, would be interrupted by a young visitor, hardly tall enough to see over the counter, with a plaintive cry, 'Please mister, will you put a sprig in my top?'. It was a request seldom refused and the top would have its spinning-point renewed with a small nail taken from an old hob-nailed boot, such as many boys then wore. How I envied my friends these hob-nailed boots, in which they clattered home from school on dark, winter afternoons, striking sparks from the paving stones as they went. Meanwhile, disconsolately sparkless, I would walk home in my plain, leather-soled 'Little Gents', newly-bought from the Co-op shoe-shop and innocent of those delectable, fire-spitting hob-nails.

At other times the streets and playground were the scene of contests with marbles or 'fag-cards' as we called the delightful pictures from cigarette packets, and known, rather prosaically, to the tobacco trade as 'stiffeners'. These had a double attraction, for they could be collected and there was always keen bargaining for some rarity to complete a set or they could be used to flick against the wall, in a game in which the winner's card fell across one of the others on the ground.

Chipping Norton lies a long way from the coast. There was no river in the immediate neighbourhood and consequently, opportunities for any kind of aquatic sport or amusement were unavailable within easy reach. A mile or so away, in the fields towards the village of Cornwell, however, there was a stream running through the valley and across this where it widened into a natural kind of pool, we built a dam with stones and mud with one or two large tree-branches. 'Stanking it up' was the description we applied to the operation, though I never

discovered the origin or derivation of this expression. Here, when the water was deep enough, we splashed about contentedly, and even learned to swim a stroke or two after gaining some confidence as to the buoyancy of the human body in water.

From time to time we did hear talk of a proper swimming-pool being built, but it did not materialise for many years. There was, however, one simple and imaginative project undertaken by the Borough Council at the time which provided a substitute. The surprising thing is that it was ever seriously considered. Nowadays it would certainly be banned as dangerous, unhygienic or both. This was the simple expedient of following our own practice by damming the stream. In this case the solution was nearer home, on the Common brook.

It was, until a few years ago, still possible to make out the irregular course marked by the border of the 'lake' as we came to know it. A small copse nearby gave us cover for changing our clothes - an amenity which did not bother us at our other more private pool and swimming became a regular feature of our leisure hours during the summer. More than once, in winter, the lake froze over in a spell of cold weather and then it was surprising to find how many people in the town could skate. While these fortunate ones would hiss along the polished ice 'all shod with steel' like Wordsworth, in his more famous lake-land, we smaller fry made do with slides, or an impromptu game of ice-hockey with walking-sticks and a stone or small block of wood

The modern 'nature-trail' approach to the countryside, planned and sign-posted to the last detail, may be helpful to townsfolk undertaking a brief excursion to a rural area, directing their attention to particular points of interest. To the native countryman, however, it would have been unnecessary and probably unwelcome, he had an instinctive eye for nature and his observation had been trained, informally and unaware, from early childhood. He walked because there was rarely any other way to travel, and, while making a virtue out of necessity, he generally enjoyed the experience except in the worst of weather. An elderly neighbour once told me how his father had regularly walked the intervening twelve miles to Banbury in order to buy leather for shoe repairs and one wonders what he saved. The shepherd, cowman and groom would all be required to walk long distances with their animals before the days of cattle-trucks and horse-boxes.

There were, in the neighbourhood of Chipping Norton, a considerable number of field-paths and ancient rights of way. Many of them led to one or other of the surrounding villages. One led through a valley called the Cleeves, past the site of the old castle, to the hamlet of Over Norton although there was a perfectly good road which took the same direction. Another, leaving the main road some distance off, ran down to the village of Salford. A third went westwards through the fields to the little village of Cornwell and this was the walk I most liked. Some of these paths crossed each other, so that the walk did not have to be straight to the village, or part-way, and back by the same route. It was possible, in many cases, to take a circular route - the kind of path which I later became familiar with in the teaching of 'modern mathematics' as the Eulerian Chain or 'unicursal' path, out and back without covering the same length of track more than once.

When April brought 'daylight-saving' and the putting forward of clocks, my father would make an adjustment to his normal Sunday routine. He would set off to the Baptist Chapel for the morning service instead of the evening one, leaving that hour free for us to go on a long walk. Such walks were a popular way of passing Sunday evenings and, as we progressed through the Cleeves, round the Cot fields or down the path to Salford, we invariably met other family groups, in their Sunday best. The fathers, it appeared to me, were always carrying a walking-stick and either chewing a grass or smoking a clay pipe. On these walks and others with my old friend Charlie Morse I always kept a sharp lookout for wild-flowers and birds, though few of our elders had any wide knowledge of their various identities, apart from some old, country names like 'Yaffle' ,for the green Woodpecker,' black-bonnet' for the Reed-warbler, 'dish-washer' for the Pied Wagtail and 'church-owl' for the Barn-owl, whose ghostly shape we would sometimes disturb in an ivy-covered tree or farmyard, as we came home in the gathering dusk, to fly past us on noiseless, down-covered wings. It was on one of these evening walks that I found a moorhen's nest in a reed-bed beside a stream. Some young birds quickly disappeared from the nest but one egg remained. I found that the egg was cracked and, while it still rested on the nest, I carefully separated the two pieces of the shell. The moorhen chick eased itself from its confined space but, to my astonishment, instead of staying in the nest as I expected, it scrambled, a little unsteadily, to the edge, dropped into the water and with swift strokes of its feet, swam off in search of the others. Such instantaneous adaptation to a new and unknown element startled me. At one moment it had been in close confinement inside the egg-shell and the next made intimate contact with earth, air and water, with no shelter but the tall green reed-bed and, above that, the open sky.

Today the same fields and woods seem to be much poorer in their variety of bird-life. The corn-crake with its harsh, grating call, disappeared many years ago and, it has apparently been followed by a number of others. The sky-lark is less often seen or heard, and the same applies to the less common meadow-pipit' and the tree-pipit. The great gatherings of rooks at their evening roost is another sight no longer seen here in autumn and the cuckoo is seldom heard as frequently as in former springs. One of the few birds which has increased in recent years is the collared dove. but its presence, in large numbers, is little compensation for loss, of the others, especially the flight and song of the tree pipit I used to watch along the now-deserted track of the railway line to Kingham

The green woodpecker, too, has almost vanished from the line of tall willows along the stream which borders the track, where formerly its laughing call and tropical-looking plumage of red and green were seldom to be overlooked. Now, instead of the dawn chorus which used to awaken us it is the sound of lorries, travelling to London markets As the evenings grew darker, with the coming of autumn , it did not bring our outdoor games and amusements to an immediate end. There were street lights at intervals along most stretches of road and under one of them there was frequently a little group settling old scores with a game of 'conkers', which were provided in abundance by the many horse-chestnut trees growing around the border of the common and elsewhere. Soon, the ground beneath the light would be littered with broken pieces of the shining, brown nuts. The odd, long-surviving specimen would be cherished for its string of

victories - perhaps it had been hardened by baking in the oven, or dried out naturally, like seasoned timber from the year before. Generally, the loser shed few tears for a minute or two spent under one of the great trees would provide enough ammunition to keep the game going until Christmas and beyond.

Not all such nocturnal pastimes were as innocent as the game of 'conkers'. Even the friendliest of children are not immune to mischief, or a mild attack of sadism, when they meet in a group. Occasionally someone would suggest with a knowing wink that a game known as 'ticking spider' would be good fun. The equipment required was minimal, a reel of cotton, preferably black in colour, and a small button. The 'game' had a spice of danger about it because if they were identified the consequences could be painful if not exactly serious, a 'clip over the ear in the worst event. At some lighted window, which showed that there were occupants within, the button would be suspended from the pin stuck into the wooden window frame, by a short length of thread to which the end of the reel would be attached an inch or two below. This was the 'spider'. It was induced to 'tick' by the hidden operator pulling the long thread from some dark corner nearby. Meanwhile, the audience would also gather somewhere in the shadows, to watch the effect. It was silly, childish and unkind to the victim, who might be alone, feeling unwell or of nervous disposition, but, until we learned better, we were often thoughtless about these things.

Such games, however, were the exception, and I rarely remember any very serious damage or misdemeanours. The odd window-pane might come to grief from an idly-thrown ball, or excessive enthusiasm on the part of a boy hitting the short, pointed stick we used for the old game of 'tip-cat' but, otherwise, our worst threat to anyone else's life and limb came with the winter snow. Our road was long and straight, and its slope steep enough to make an ideal track for tobogganning - or, as we called it, 'sledging'. At the first hint of snow in the air, the sledges would be brought out of their hiding places in sheds and coal-houses for the year's rust to be smoothed away. Councils were not then so prompt in dispatching their snow-ploughs and sand-carts and in any case, motor-traffic was very light. We could look forward to at least a week of sport if the frost held. If it came during the Christmas, holidays, the road would be busy with sledges in a variety of shapes and sizes until long after darkness fell. and for an hour or more, after being called in home, I would stand in front of the dark curtain across the bay window listening to the swish and thud of the sledge-runners and watching the excited faces of the riders as they flashed the under the light of the street-lamp near the front-gate.

Between long hours at work, which around Christmas time, often went on until near midnight, and the time spent in gardening, my father had little opportunity for reading. It must have been my mother who influenced us towards a love of books and it was she who had read to us from our earliest years. Not all printed matter, however, met with her approval and when I came home with a borrowed copy of 'Funny Wonder's comic Cuts' or 'Chips', full of popular, comic-strip characters, she made it clear that she did not like that kind of reading. The publications edited by Arthur Mee were among those she strongly favoured. These included the monthly 'My Magazine' and the weekly 'Children's Newspaper'. It was the latter paper which helped to sustain my interest in astronomy, for it contained a regular column on the wonders of the night sky which never failed to fascinate me.

Our bookcase, consisting of a set of old, wooden shop fixtures, standing on a chest of drawers in the living-room, must have presented a curiously uniform and unattractive picture to our occasional visitors for so deeply ingrained was my mother's veneration for any story between hard covers, that all were protected by a wrapping of brown paper, on the back of which she would write, in carefully-formed script, the title and author. From time to time new arrivals would swell the growing library, in the form of Christmas and birthday presents, or prizes won at the annual Sunday school scripture examination. It was, however, after following my brother and sister over the academic hurdle then referred to as 'the Scholarship', at the age of eleven, that I came by one of the books which was a source of lasting delight. It must have been as much good luck as any evidence of intellectual achievement which enabled me to pass the examination for my impression at the time was that I fared badly in the test, but some weeks later, I was called to Oxford for an interview and, in response to a question as to the kind of books I liked, I replied that I most enjoyed those about natural history and birds. This reply, evidently, did not pass unnoticed for as a prize from the generous Dr. Henderson of Exeter College, Oxford, who made an award every year to the successful pupils, I received a copy of 'Two Little Savages', surely a children's classic of the great outdoors, by the Canadian naturalist, Ernest Thompson Seton. It became a firm favourite of mine and even at meal-times, I would often sit with it propped against some convenient support as I ate. Reading at meals was not a habit which my mother readily approved of - it was 'unsociable', even 'rude', but often, if the circumstances were propitious, my silent absorption in the adventures of Yan Yeoman and Sam Raften in their Indian tepee would pass unchallenged. Later on, I managed to get other books by Ernest Thompson Seton, 'Rolf in the woods', 'The Book of Woodcraft' and some of his many stories about wild animals. He had a remarkably penetrating insight into the lives and habits of wild creatures, as well as of plant life. The only thing I found frustrating, sometimes, was the fact that many of the flowers, birds and animals he described so enthusiastically and vividly, were as foreign to the countryside of Oxfordshire as a lion or tiger. Where, alas, were the lynxes, skunks and chipmunks to be found, or the yellow cypripedium which the Indians called moccasin-plant ?

Ernest Thompson Seton's Woodcraft movement had not taken root in England. The nearest thing to it was the Boy Scout movement of Baden Powell. Soon I obtained a copy of the founder's well-known book, 'Scouting for Boys'. It contained a great deal to interest me but, to my disappointment, my father was not keen about me joining the local scout troop, of which some of my friends were already members. His reason seemed to be an objection to the uniform, for he had some mistaken idea that it carried a military connotation and having, not long before, discarded his own uniform of the Naval Air Service so great was his instinct for peace, that he did not want his sons to put another one on. That day was more than a decade away and when it came, it was the real thing.

CHAPTER 4

TEACH US ARIGHT

In the days before schools turned into vast, barrack-blocks, sheltering behind acres of plate-glass, insufferably hot in summer and wastefully expensive to heat in winter, they were generally pleasanter and friendlier places. Having experienced both kinds, as pupil and teacher, there is no doubt in my own mind as to which is preferable. The big school, with a staff of a hundred or more, has obvious advantages in the scope of the curriculum it can offer, but the small one, while lacking costly equipment like video - tape recorders and projection theatres, provides that more imponderable quality which comes from teachers and pupils all knowing each other.

Chipping Norton had two schools for boys and two for girls, as well as a Roman Catholic school. The two girls' schools also had infant departments which contained both boys and girls. The Church of England controlled one boy's school and one for the girls. My elder brother and I, together with most of my friends, went to the Boys' Council School, on the hill known as The Green, and it was one of the old elementary schools. The county scholarships scheme, operated by the Oxfordshire Education Committee, gave opportunities for a few pupils to get to one of the secondary schools in the neighbourhood, usually entailing a journey to Oxford or Banbury, though there was also an old-established grammar school in the little town of Burford, ten miles away. It was also possible to enter one of these schools upon payment of fees. Since they were not boarding schools, with the exception of Burford, the cost was not beyond reach of many working-class parents who were willing to make a small sacrifice to pay, and many were so willing. The transfer would take place normally at the age of eleven or twelve. Apart from those children who attended one or two very small private establishments, everyone attended one or other of the elementary schools for several years, and most remained until they left at fourteen.

The Boys' Council School was by no means one of those dingy, forbidding buildings which have often been produced as an indictment of the Victorian treatment of working-class education. It was solidly-built of Cotswold stone, with a reasonably-sized playground surrounding it. There were three classrooms, although the largest could be divided by a partition and this normally contained two classes. The staff consisted of three, or sometimes four, teachers for the hundred pupils, the latter figure varying somewhat from time to time. The headmaster during the early 1920s was Mr Ralph Oakes. Some teachers were in the unqualified, or uncertificated, grade. Some had obtained the certificated status but without going to a training college. Many had qualified after going through the normal, two-year training college course. Teachers with university degrees were rarely found in elementary schools since they could get appointments in secondary schools which were then paid on a separate, higher scale of salaries. Mr Oakes was a college-trained teacher, and, though not a university graduate, his learning seemed both wide and deep. He spent almost all of his time in school with the upper classes of boys, standards six and seven as they were called. Unlike the headmaster of a large, modern school, he was not solely, or even mainly, an administrator. He knew every pupil in the school and a great deal about the parents and home-background of

most of them. For some inexplicable reason it seems that many headmasters I have come across were very short in stature. Mr Oakes was the first of them. Bald-headed, with a military-style moustache, he was still an impressive and respected figure, but, such are the odd things which catch a child's eye, the first thing I noticed, when I saw him, were his buttoned boots. This helped to reconcile me to my own smaller but similar style of footwear, for I badly wanted lace-up boots with the metal hooks replacing the top two or three parts of lace-holes.

As a headmaster, Mr. Oakes was what would now be called an old-fashioned disciplinarian. His cane was never far out of reach and he would doubtless have had some very positive views upon the freedom which became fashionable among 'progressive' circles some years later. When he was called away to interview a visitor, or for any other reason, a babble of suppressed conversation broke out, but immediately his head became visible through the glass-panelled door, instant silence reigned.

From his room to the adjoining one there was a communicating sash window, through which he was in the habit of taking an occasional glance to ensure that nothing untoward was taking place. While this surveillance went on, anyone in the other room who misbehaved or neglected his work ran a grave risk, and many were saved from a sharp experience of Mr Oakes administration of justice by a timely whisper, which would go rapidly round the room - 'The boss is looking!'. Indeed, 'the boss' seldom missed anything which went on in the school or the playground. His blackboard and easel were strategically-placed beside a glass-fronted cupboard housing a set of 'Tom Brown's Schooldays', though his pupils were far removed from the world of Rugby or any other public school. But Thomas Hughes did perform a rather unexpected service for the headmaster of this particular school where 'the other half' were getting their education. Behind the cupboard door, the neglected pile of books turned the glass panel into a mirror, of sorts, sufficiently reflective to reveal the identity of anyone foolhardy enough to play about, or pop a sweet into his mouth, while 'the boss' was writing on the board. Many were caught like this until we understood that Mr Oakes was as canny as we were, after which, for a time, we became more wary. It was part of the unending battle of wits between teacher and pupil which I was destined to see again later, but then from the other side of the classroom.

It would be an understatement to say that the furnishing of the school classrooms was spartan. The rooms were heated by open coal fires which were lit every morning, in cold weather, by the lady caretaker and had to be kept burning through the day by frequent recourse to the coal bucket. When that was empty, a boy would be sent to refill it from the heap in the corner of the playground. We sat on long, heavy wooden forms with tip-up desk tops, but there was no back to lean against. Anyone caught leaning on the front of the row immediately behind him would be so told to 'sit up', and, knowing Mr Oakes' predilection for straight backs, he usually did so quickly.

The desks held six or eight pupils as a general rule, though there were occasions when we had to crowd together in rows of a dozen or more for some special occasion, when someone came to address, or more rarely, to entertain the whole school. We would file into the classroom after lining up outside the school door at the sound of the bell. Immediate silence would be the rule when Mr Oakes appeared to supervise our entry. At the command 'Sit', six or eight pairs of

hands would lower the seat into a horizontal position, for the seat, as well as the desk-top, was hinged. 'Desks down,' was the next word of command, and the same pairs of hands would lower the desk-tops. There were times when one long desk would be occupied by no more than a single boy, or perhaps two. The desk-tops were solid and heavy. The result may be imagined. The smooth and otherwise peaceful conduct of the manoeuvre would be disrupted by a resounding crash as the desk-top fell, with embarrassment, if nothing worse, for one boy, stifled amusement from the rest and an anguished reaction from 'the Boss', followed by a short sharp word of reprimand as to the desirability of handling County Council property with due care.

The desks had a shelf beneath for holding books but they were more often repositories for toffee papers, as all our books were kept in cupboards to be distributed and collected as needed. There were large slots in the desk tops and these did hold an item of equipment which would, nowadays, make any educational theorist blanch. This was a slate and it was in daily use for written work in English or arithmetic which would now go into a rough book or jotter of some kind. Its virtue, if such it can be called, was that it could be used continuously, with the small, pointed 'slate pencil' which we had to provide ourselves. Its obvious drawback was the necessity for frequent cleaning, particularly as the surface required moistening to do this effectively. Several expedients were possible. Pieces of rag, handkerchiefs, sleeves and the lower extremities of our woollen jerseys were, at various times, pressed into service but, in spite of all, it cannot be said that the slate was an ideal medium of education and there can have been few who mourned its passing.

The school curriculum, too, was not the kind which would readily commended itself to modern educational practice, though in recent years there have been those who have recommended a return to it, or something like it, for its bias was heavily directed towards the so-called 'three 'Rs'. Many pupils were well on the way to mastering the skill of reading by the time they left the infants' school, despite what would now be thought of as 'old-fashioned' methods of teaching. The 'look and say' method, by which children were encouraged to take in a whole word rather than interpret its totality as the sum of the individual letters, was not then in vogue and, in spite of the anomalies which bristle in our spelling I seem to remember few children who remained in the category of 'non-readers' for long. The virtue of the 'phonetic' reading method was that it enabled us to tackle new words ourselves as we met them. In general, I think it can be fairly said to have served my own generation well in our first halting steps on the road to literacy and opened the door to the vast field of English literature.

The teaching of English grammar now seems to be a thing of the past, but it flourished in the time of Mr Oakes. There were frequent sessions of sentence analysis and that recondite operation known as 'parsing' which did, at first, prove extremely difficult. It certainly concentrated our mind on the consideration of how a sentence is constructed and what the function of each component part was. Doubtless, our teachers would have argued that it was as profitless to undertake a piece of writing without understanding the nature of words and sentences as to start making a watch without any knowledge of the wheels, springs and levers. 'Free expression', in which a pupil is encouraged to write without regard to anything except an

overall meaning, had no part in our English lessons.

Much the same consideration applies to spelling, although it appears that more attention is now being paid to it after widespread complaints from employers of school-leavers. True, it may be, that English spelling and pronunciation are full of problems for the learner, but so are many the other activities which are well worth undertaking. The argument that 'spelling doesn't matter' and that only the whole message is important, would not have found favour in the Boys' Council School at Chipping Norton. Indeed, during my later years spent in teaching, I met more than one headmaster whose spelling would have provoked some caustic comments from Mr. Oakes, had it been presented to him by any pupil of his Standard Six or Seven. Even good spelling and grammar were not all that mattered. The work had to be neatly and legibly written with pen and ink. The modern ball-point is a handy writing instrument in many ways but its very cheapness seems, in some ways, a drawback. Has any great work of literature yet been written with it? Or is it just one of the symbols of the throwaway, plastic-wrapped civilisation of our time?

The teachers in most elementary schools were essentially general practitioners and in no sense specialists with the exception of these whose subject was handicrafts or, for the girls, cookery which would now be called Domestic Science or Home Economics and its scope somewhat widened. Our school had no facilities for any such specialisation, no equipment for science, art or music. There was not even a piano and the nearest approach to a musical instrument was a solitary tuning fork. With its aid the 'modulator', a sheet giving the tonic solfa scale, we did learn to sing a few folk songs and some others with a patriotic flavour. The choice of these was in no way parochial. 'The Yeomen of England' would be followed with equal enthusiasm by 'Men of Harlech' or 'Bonnie Dundee', though our rendering of them was probably not so tuneful as that of a well-trained school choir today – if indeed they still sing the songs which were the mainstay of our limited repertoire. Even so, there were times when the sweet sadness of songs like 'The Banks of Allan Water' would seem almost overwhelming, and I would become conscious of some strange, inexplicable dimension to life, far removed from the shuffling feet and chalk-dust around me, remote but yet in a mysterious way, close at hand.

.I cannot say that any such feeling overcame me during our drawing lessons.. Painting was an activity which we had to pursue in our own time, for jars of water and paint-boxes were likely to bring problems in our crowded classroom with its sloping desk-tops, Occasionally we had to bring a spray of leaves or a garden flower for the afternoon drawing period and there was sometimes a hasty scamper round the playground perimeter in search of an overhanging bush or tree to collect a specimen, by those who had been careless, or forgetful, of the morning's instruction to bring something to draw.

Otherwise, our subjects were nothing more inspiring than some large wooden models of various geometrical shapes such as cones, spheres, cubes, prisms and pyramids, varied perhaps by a bucket, vase or a watering-can. As with writing, there was little encouragement for free expression, or individual experiment, but we were not particularly aware of any lack of privilege over this. Many a boy derived a keen sense of satisfaction from an accurately drawn, carefully

shaded representation of the object.

It would, doubtless, be easy to ridicule this kind of drawing as a form of 'art' but it did encourage accurate observation and care with our pencils. Probably the best of our efforts were no less laudable than the slabs of bricks and contorted shapes of twisted metal which now pass, in some quarters, for expressions of artistic sensibility.

On Friday afternoons Mr Oakes had various administrative matters requiring his attention, such as attendance returns and a duplicate register which showed the number of absences, if any, for each pupil during the week. After school I would deliver these in a long envelope to the official then known as the School Attendance Officer, whose duty it was to make enquiries concerning any absences for which no satisfactory reason had been produced. One consequence of this paper work was that we were allowed to bring a book or magazine to read during the last hour or so, though the reading of some of the more lurid and popular comics was not encouraged. At other times, our literary choice was more circumscribed. There must be many men, now elderly., or in late middle age, who could, if necessary, dredge up from some deep recess of memory a few lines from Scott's 'Marmion' which we had to memorise by reciting in unison.

*'Ill. fared it, then
With Roderick Dhu
That on the field His target he threw
Those brazen studs
And tough bull-hide
Had death so often
Dashed aside'.*

There were lines from Macbeth, my first meeting with the Bard, which we also committed to memory. One of these was from the opening scene of the second Act, a conversation between Banquo and Fleance in the courtyard of Macbeth's castle at Inverness.

*'How goes the night boy?
The moon is down; I have not heard the clock
And she goes down at twelve.
I take't 'tis later sir.
Hold, take my sword, there's husbandry in heaven,
Their candles are all out'*

It is sometimes held that the compulsory study of authors in school has alienated many pupils from literature and specially the task of learning poetry by heart. This was never my own experience and I found that new light and understanding would dawn at unexpected times when a passage would come to mind long afterwards.

In 'scripture' lessons each morning there were chapters from the Bible to be read and some verses to be learned. Among them was St Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians with its resounding

lines, 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal'. David's lament for Saul and Jonathan - 'How are the mighty fallen', was another passage, as were the commandments, the beatitudes and some of the psalms. The new modern English translations were not then available. We took our Bible study straight from the Authorised Version of King James, an undiluted well of English prose in its greatest age. The Council schools were by no means the 'godless' places they were sometimes said to be by the stauncher advocates of denominational education.

How was it, I have often wondered, that many of my educational contacts were with the most unprepossessing people. The earliest of these was an inspector who sometimes came to the school. His mouth drooped at the corners and his sullen expression betrayed as much human warmth as a squeezed lemon. I never saw the slightest glimmer of a smile on his dyspeptic countenance, much less a laugh. Later, as a teacher, I met others who seemed to be cast in the same dismal mould. Perhaps I was just unfortunate in my encounters, but when I came across an essay on the old Oxford antiquary, Anthony á Wood, in a book entitled 'Earth Memories' I found that Llewelyn Powys had reacted in much the same manner to some of the dons of Merton College who were present at a celebration dinner to mark the Wood's tercentenary. He found them no better than 'breathing phantoms,' with 'pallid, idealistic faces looking up to heaven, utterly removed from any imaginative realisation of life', supercilious and grudging in their recognition of an old member or their college, who would have stood out among them like a curlew in a flock of backyard hens. In contrast, among writers, editors, publishers and newspaper reporters I met with unfailing courtesy and friendliness.

The classroom and lessons were not the whole of school. On the quiet roads, as we went, we played a kind of mobile game of football, or marbles. The playground games taught us much about human nature and our neighbours and, in spite of occasional quarrels, disagreements and even fisticuffs, it was a place where friendships were formed which have withstood the changes of time and fortune for half a century. But this was not something which could be assessed by any inspector. Indeed, we who experienced it came to understand only after the lapse of years.

CHAPTER 5

BAPTISTS AND BEEKEEPERS

During the half hour before the morning and evening services at St Mary's Parish Church we were never far from the sound of bells, but a long-standing family allegiance directed our steps to the Baptist Church, or Chapel, as it was then more frequently called. The two were easily accessible to each other through the old archway leading into a passage called Diston's Lane, though, at that period, relations between the denominations and their people were not always conspicuous for their warmth. The Baptist Church, a stone building in the Victorian Gothic style, with its wide porch flanked by slender, twin spires was erected in front of a smaller and older building, on a site used by the Presbyterians in the seventeenth century. The Rev. John Thorley, author of an early work on bee-keeping, was minister to the Presbyterian congregation for sixty years from 1699 to 1759 but, after his death, the Presbyterian cause lapsed and following an interval of a dozen years, the building was re-opened in the Baptist faith in 1773. During the twenties the Church's minister was the Rev. H. Ellis Roberts, who came to Chipping Norton from the neighbouring county of Northamptonshire at the end of the first world war.

No-one, outside the immediately family circle, influenced us more in early life than this incomparable Welshman. With his shock of silver hair and, even more, his silver tongue - for he had the eloquence of a Celtic bard - he probably looked, to the older members of his substantial congregation, like an ecclesiastical counterpart of David Lloyd George. In his long, black coat, he always appeared a figure of immense dignity as he mounted the pulpit stairs, though his sermons, at times, must have soared to levels of theology and philosophy beyond the comprehension of many who heard him and who were unfamiliar with the Celtic flair for oratory and theological disputation. Probably there were other times when the minister, leading his flock in the English version of his beloved 'Cwm Rhondda', or some similar Welsh tune, longed for the spirited and melodious voices of his native valleys.

The church had a choir, at that time, composed mainly of the younger men and women of the congregation, though there was a sprinkling of older members who might hardly have missed a choral occasion, or service, in fifty years. A new organ was erected as a war memorial to the men associated with the Church who had been killed between 1914 and 1918. Nothing brought home to me more vividly than the brass plate on the organ which recorded their names, how devastating had been the scale of destruction, even in a small community.

The organist, who also fulfilled the duties of choir-master and of Sunday School Superintendent, was a local builder, Mr Fred Burbidge. Was it the traditional nonconformist regard for the virtues of thrift and hard work, or some other more subtle influence, which turned Baptists into bee-keepers? Whatever the explanation, Mr Burbidge, like the Rev. John Thorley and his later successor, the Rev. Ellis Roberts, was a devoted and expert master of the apiary. In some ways he seemed ill at ease among bricks, stone, mortar and timber. his versatile mind, had it achieved full scope for development in a field of his own choosing, would probably have led him more readily towards music, gardening or the study of wild flowers and plants, about which he

was so knowledgeable and skilled.

Without material reward or civic honours, and almost certainly with no thought of them, Fred Burbidge was one of the people to whom the post-war generation of young men and women were indebted. Whatever service the Church required, he freely gave. He would auction the produce on 'the evening following the Harvest Festival for which the choir would prepare a special anthem. If some more basic action was needed, when the plumbing or the temperamental heating system developed a fault, he would be on hand to deal with it, and I often heard my mother, after a chilly half hour's sermon, saying resignedly, 'Mr Burbidge is the only one who understands that boiler!'. The great Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, is reported as saying that he could 'smoke a pipe of tobacco to the glory of God', and the poet, George Herbert, believed that sweeping a room could be an act of praise. If they were right, Fred Burbidge's simple faith found rich expression in ways which extended well beyond the confines of his organ loft. He was a man of inexhaustible tact and patience. How else could he, year after year, have taught a completely new repertoire of hymns for the anniversary services to a hundred or more pupils from seven to seventeen, almost single-handed? Though no Israelite, he was, in truth, one in whom there was no guile.

Between Mr Burbidge and my father there was, in connection with their gardening activities, the friendliest of rivalries. When my father, in faith rather than hope, planted his apricot tree against the house-wall of the front garden, it became plain from their conversation that Mr Burbidge thought the chances of success were slender. He had, however, under-estimated my father's powers of persuasion so far as fruit trees were concerned. When the fruit ripened on the warm, south-facing wall, my father took the keenest delight in setting off early for the evening service one Sunday and, placing two of this best apricots, nestling snugly in a small box of cotton wool, beside the organ keyboard. The sunshine, and the bees, had not let him down.

CHAPTER 6

THE OCEAN WITHOUT SHORE

The passing of time is a mystery which has baffled philosophers and scientists throughout the ages. We are conscious of something happening, yet know nothing of what it really is. The Psalmist declared that with God, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day, but we are still mystified. 'Time', said Longfellow, 'is the life of the soul. If not, tell me, what is time?' Thomas Edison valued it as the most precious thing in the world, for not even he, the great inventor, could make a single minute of it. The poet Wordsworth remarks upon an aspect of the illusion which has probably occurred to most people in adult life when they contemplate the past. In his poem 'To A Butterfly' - that most ephemeral of creatures, he speaks of

*'Sweet childish days
That were as long
As twenty days are now'.*

The calendar is a mere mechanical device for recording the passing year, each number marking a single rotation of our planet. The changing face of nature makes plain to us the succession of the seasons and, in response to them, come the feasts, anniversaries and celebrations scattered through the months, Now they come round ever more quickly, creeping up on us by stealth, but in early life the annual interval seems long and the anticipation is keener.

Charles Lamb may be right in saying that no-one ever regarded the first of January with indifference, but its arrival was never celebrated in England with the same enthusiasm as in the more northerly land's. There was probably a greater eagerness to welcome the first sign of the sun's return where the nights had been longer. It was said that by New Year's Day the daylight lengthened by the extent of a cock's stride, though this may go back to a time before 1752 when England adopted the Gregorian calendar, the date being advanced by eleven days to bring it in step with the continent of Europe. For long after this it became the custom to refer to January 6th as 'old Christmas Day' and the old New Year's Day would have been correspondingly later. At the beginning of the year, in harmony with the double-faced god Janus after whom the month of January was named, there would be a good deal of looking backward over the old year and speculation as to what the new one would hold, especially in the matter of the weather. A mild January was not a good augury and a wiseacre would sometimes warn, 'If you see grass in January, lock your grain in your granary', or again, 'In January, if sun appear, March and April pay full dear'.

The weeks after Christmas were a regular time for parties, and among the games played was that long-standing favourite 'Oranges and Lemons'. Few of us who danced around, singing the familiar words, ever thought of the sinister events attending the grisly ritual of a public execution

from which the game originated, the candles carried by the priest and the axe wielded by the executioner. The church of St Clements, celebrated in all innocence, lies near to the Thames along which the ships brought their cargoes of fruit, and the story may have originated from the dramatization of the story of a theft and its dread sequel. Another suggestion is that it arose from a brawl between parties of servants in the London streets, the oranges and lemons, symbolising the colours they wore.

The last day of January is the eve of St Bridget's festival but I never heard of its celebration in Oxfordshire, with the scattering of rushes on the floor to welcome the feet of the Saint whose presence would drive out evil spirits for the new year's course. Saint Bridget's day was also the Eve of Candlemas when fine weather was still suspect.

*'As long as the bird sings before Candlemas
So long will it greet, after it.'*

St. Scholastica no longer features in the Anglican Church's roll of saints but, on one of our visits to a relative who lived in Oxford, we found that there at least the lady was not forgotten. Her feast day was on February 10th and on that date in the year 1354, during the reign of King Edward III there was one of the street battles between 'town' and gown' which sometimes occurred in Oxford. During this fight some of the students were killed. As a result of this the townspeople were excommunicated 'en bloc' until a heavy fine had been paid, after which the chief citizens were compelled to make annual attendance at church and pay the sum of one penny, on every anniversary of the encounter. This custom is said to have been continued until the time of the Reformation.

St. Valentine's Day is certainly one of the best-remembered of the saints' days but, in Chipping Norton, it had a form of celebration which was exceptional, if not unique. There is no authentic record of its origin but it was a custom which was kept alive until quite recent years. The children of the town went round the shops and possibly, some private houses in the market-place area, singing a ditty which consisted only of two lines:

*'I'll be your if you'll be mine,
Please to give us a Valentine'*

This would be repeated in a continuous sing-song, and the shop-keepers customarily responded by throwing out a handful of sweets or small coins. Traditionally the coins would be first made hot by holding them over a fire in a shovel. This, presumably, added excitement to the resulting scramble. After this the singers would move on. Probably the growing traffic noise and the delivery vans, not to mention the arrival of newcomers to the town who knew nothing of the old ritual, have all contributed to its disappearance, but the sound of the Valentine's Day singers has not yet disappeared from memory.

The rites associated with the arrival of spring were many and varied, mingling with those of Easter. On March 25th the church celebrates the The Angel Feast of the Annunciation associated with the Angel Gabriel's message to the Virgin Mary. The more elaborate ritual of Lady Day, disappeared from most places in Britain with the Reformation but an old game

played by children survived. This was a version of the popular 'Follow My Leader' in which the leader was said to represent the Angel Gabriel. The followers, who copied all the leader's actions, would march in line or stand in a circle around the leader and sing a song in which the words 'Gable Oary' are probably corruptions from 'Gabriel' and 'Holy'. The words usually went as follows:

*'Follow my gable oary man,
Follow my gable oary man,
I'll do all that ever I can
To follow my gable oary man.*

*I'll borrow a horse and steal a gig
And all the way round the world I'll jig,
Doing all that ever I can
To follow my gable oary man.*

*I'll sell my bat, I'll sell my ball
I'll sell my spinning wheel and all
And I'll do all that ever I can
To follow my gable oary man.'*

The last three days of March were sometimes referred to as 'the Borrowing days.' There were many superstitions associated with them, some saying that the origin went back to the Israelite exodus from Egypt when they 'borrowed' clothes and jewels from the Egyptians. During these three days the golden rule was to follow the advice of old Polonius, in 'Hamlet', 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be'. To do either was to court misfortune, perhaps of the kind which Shakespeare had in mind, loss of money and worse still loss of friends.

Many old customs are fairly restricted in practice, confined, perhaps to a single county or village, but April Fool's Day was much more widespread though its form might vary from one country to another. Its origin, too, seems to be shrouded in obscurity though one suggestion commonly prevalent in England was that it commemorated the first, fruitless flight of the dove sent by Noah from the Ark in search of dry land. Whatever the true explanation, the practice of making April Fools undoubtedly has a long history and it has still retained the same popularity which it enjoyed between the wars and earlier.

Though few girls would admit to dawn visits to fields in order to wash in the morning dew, May Day has enjoyed something of a revival in recent years, especially the Maypole dances. The game of 'Nuts in May' is perhaps less often played now, but it was a popular party game and by no means restricted to the month of May. Its origin is somewhat clearer than that of the April Fool's Day, beginning with the custom of men seizing their brides from a neighbouring tribe or locality. The 'nuts' were probably knots, or bunches of May-blossom, from the hawthorn and other flowers, while the part of the game which involves one person attempting to drag another across a line, is the part which was a survival from the old practice of marriage by capture. It

was similar to the odd marriage customs which are to be found in many other children's games including 'Here we go found the Mulberry Bush' and 'Poor Jenny Sits Weeping'.

Midsummers Day came with the feast of St. John the Baptist on June 24th and the wild flower named after him, St. John's wort, was believed to have great curative properties as medicine, for the healing of wounds and even for the purpose of divination. With the arrival of August the season of harvest was approaching and its earliest sign was the first day of the month, known as Lammas, the Feast of Bread. Its roots go back beyond the Christian era and the offering of the first sheaves of corn as an act of propitiation to pagan gods for a ripe and abundant harvest. In more recent times it has declined in favour of the later, Harvest Thanksgiving festivals, which remain one of the most popular occasions in churches of all denominations. But, before that, came St Bartholomew, on August 24th, which, presaged the coming of autumn, for ' Saint Bartholomew brings the cold dew'

The Zodiac star-group of Virgo, the Virgin, has an ancient association with harvest, both in the vineyard and cornfield. In England she was the 'kern-baby', fashioned from the last gleanings of the harvest field and carried before the creaking laden wagons as they slowly edged their way into the great, stone barns. A generation ago there were many people whose parents and grandparents had memories of the harvest fields where they would then go 'leazing', as my grandmother called it, collecting the stalks of wheat which had been missed by the reapers, and carrying them home in bundles to be ground by a hand-mill into flour. This must have been a valued privilege at a time when a labourer's wage would be spent almost entirely upon bread.

Harvest brought the end of the farming year and the time when many workers would be seeking new employment. This was often done at the old hiring fairs which were held in the early autumn. The fairs were known by different names, but in Chipping Norton it was 'the Mop' held on the Wednesday preceding October 11th. Domestic servants also made use of the occasion to find new employers and the usual engagement undertaken was for a year. If, however, the new appointment was not satisfactory for any reason, it was understood that the employee could leave within ten days. This provided a further opportunity for workers and employers to meet, another fair was held a fortnight later, and this was known as 'the runaway Mop'.

It was on the occasion of a fair at Chipping Norton in the year 1812 that Arthur Jones of Chastleton House found himself being hailed from the window of a carriage, which was held up by the crowd of visitors filling the market-place. 'You are Jones of Chastleton, I am sure' called the traveller. 'I am William Whitmore of Dudmaston; we are posting home from Teignmouth and have got entangled in this crowd!. With the help of Arthur Jones the carriage was freed from the milling throng and turned back along the Worcester Road, in the direction of Chastleton. The meeting seems to have been a fortunate one for the Whitmore family, since following their departure, an offer was received from Arthur Jones and his brother to transfer the ownership of the great house, in due course, to the son of their visitors, John Whitmore. Today the house still remains in the hands of the family whose ancestor had the good luck to choose the busiest day of the year for his journey through Chipping Norton market-place. In the tangle of motor traffic which now makes such delays an almost everyday occurrence, how many travellers could wish their passage through the town to be attended by similar good fortune?

For the present-day 'Mop' Fair, the market-place is closed to traffic and the descendants of the

shepherds, carters, ploughmen and domestic servants can for, three nights, enjoy the noisy pleasures of the modern fairground, untroubled by the anxieties attendant upon moving to new pastures and new employers,

October 28th is the Feast of St. Simon and St Jude, an occasion which was held favourable for divination by the use of an apple. The apple was carefully peeled in one long strip, which was then thrown over the left shoulder. Where it fell there would be an eager examination of the peel to see if it formed a letter. If so, it was believed that this was the initial of a destined marriage partner for the thrower. In the event of no discernible shape being formed, the ill-omen might be discounted by drinking a glass of water containing the pips of the apple. But neither this, nor Hallowe'en, received widespread recognition in Oxfordshire. More often, they were kept, with a variety of curious rituals, in the northern counties and in Scotland and Ireland. Long before the witching hours of All Hallows Eve, however, we turned our attention to the approach of Guy Fawkes' night and, in back-gardens and on patches of waste ground, the mounds of paper, boxes and broken tree-branches were piled high.

In fact, the Gunpowder Plot had an interesting local association. During the year 1622, before beginning the construction of Chastleton House, Walter Jones had bought the estate from Robert Catesby, one of its chief instigators, for the sum of four thousand pounds. It had been Catesby's intention to use the proceeds of the sale for raising a troop of soldiers to assist the King of Spain in his planned invasion of England, a scheme which fell into abeyance with the death of Elizabeth I. As a result, part of the money was used to buy gunpowder for the purpose of blowing up the Houses of Parliament.

Soon after dusk fell on November 5th, the sky, in every direction, would be aglow with flames, and the November gloom pierced by whirling sparklers, bursting rockets, Roman candles and silver fountains, while the customary silence of the gardens, under layers of wet, autumn leaves, would be shattered by the crackle of the 'jumping-jacks' and the exploding ha'penny banger.

In the course of an hour or two, the crescendo of noise and fire died away, leaving behind only the smell of drifting wood-smoke and to dead fireworks littering the wet grass, a pungent odour such as no other night of the year possessed. In those days the fireworks were being not always restricted to their legitimate use. It was not unknown for lighted 'bangers' or 'thunder-flashes' to find their way through letter-boxes, while to animals the whole affair brought no little terror. But, notwithstanding the occasional abuse, and the risk of accidents, which worried us not at all, Guy Fawkes November 5th was, undoubtedly, a night to remember.

Scarcely had the smoke and smell of Bonfire Night dispersed than we began to anticipate the arrival of Christmas. Carol singing by small groups of children is an activity which seems to have all but disappeared and, no doubt, the hypnotic appeal of the television screen has had much to do with it. In the twenties, however, it was an accepted part of the routine during the week or two before the great day. In some respects the solo performer had an advantage. Kindly householders felt more sympathetically disposed to the lone singer, and his performance was not likely to be upset by the presence of giggling companions. Apart from this, he had the indubitable advantage of keeping all the proceeds for his own indulgence. There were occasional, discouraging stories of buckets of water being poured from bedroom windows on an

unsuspecting group of singers at the back door but I never experienced this eventuality myself. After a verse or two of some well-known carols and perhaps encouraged by a recital of the old doggerel 'Christmas is a-coming, the geese are getting fat', the door would open and a penny or two drop into one of the outstretched hands.

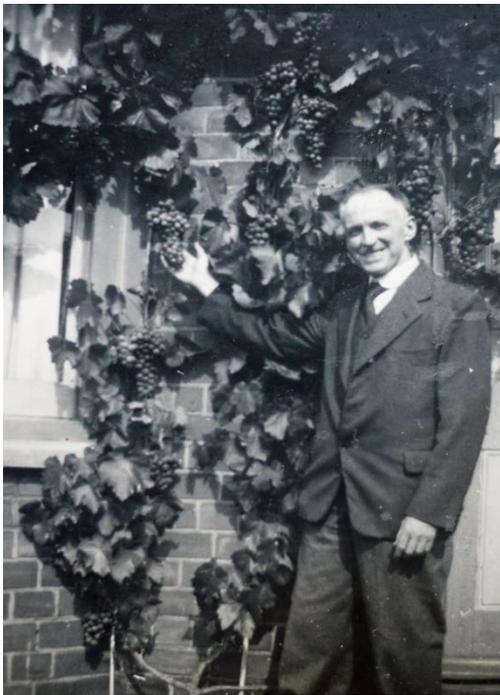
I can never read the opening chapters of Thomas Hardy's 'Under The Greenwood Tree' without recalling the carol party, from the Baptist Church, which toured the town under the skilled guidance of Mr. Fred Burbidge. The money which was collected provided food parcels for old or needy people of the district. Unlike the choir of Hardy's Mellstock, they sang their carols un - accompanied. When they came up the hill, to stand in a circle beneath the street lamp, with their hymn-books and Lanterns, I would leave the fireside to listen at the open, front door. They sang 'Silent Night', 'Sleep My Saviour, Sleep', 'When the Crimson Sun Had Set', as well as the more familiar carols.

Under the immemorial constellations of the winter sky, brilliant Orion and the twinkling Pleiades, as the voices rose and fell, with notes and words heavy with men's ancient and desperate yearnings, I would sense, in darkness and the frosty air, more of the true Christmas message of hope, peace and goodwill than in succeeding days of merrymaking around the candle-lit Christmas-tree, with the holly, mistletoe and tinsel, which the season inherited from the old, pagan festival of Yuletide. Within a few more days the midnight bells of St Mary's Church would be pealing out for a new year. Though it was a time of peace, in some distant places men would welcome the event with fingers tightly-clenched around rifle-barrels. Many more would hold brimming glasses, their heads dizzy with wine. A few, less readily absorbed in the illusion of the passing hour, might look up at the far-off, melancholy stars and call to mind some words of the old Puritan poet Andrew Marvell, which Theodore Powys once inscribed, for my enlightenment, in a book of his short stories.

*'But at my back I always hear
Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near,
And yonder, all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity'.*



Bernard Worvill aged 12 in the 1894 painting by Dawkins at Over Norton (held in the Museum of Rural Life at Reading)



Bernard Worvill with grape vine at home - No. 1 Holyoake Terrace, The Leys, Chipping Norton



Bernard Worvill with potato crop on his allotment at 40 The Leys



*Alice & Bernard Worvill at Holyoake Terrace , The Leys, Chipping Norton
Parents of Norman, Ivy & Roy Worvill*



The author in 1965 with his Newtonian telescope.