

England Revisited

By John Cowper Powys

I SUPPOSE there are few human sensations more complicated than a return after a long absence to the land of one's fathers; and after my thirty-odd years in America I certainly have been in a position to appreciate this sensation to the full. It was not "all honey," as might have been expected; but even the most bitter elements in the experience were full of a rich bone-dust of interest for the psychological mill.

My black spaniel, placed, as appears to be the custom on board ship, in the care of the ship's butcher, found our tremendous move not less startling, not less of mingled elements of loss and gain than I did; but after a spray-washed voyage in a cage on a high deck, and after a six-months' quarantine of solitary confinement in a Southampton kennel he has come to find that my native land, whatever it may be for particular dogs, is a veritable paradise for dogs in general. He in his tenth year and I in my sixty-third have undergone together a psychological transformation, the effect of which is still unknown.

"Rats' Barn," or more euphoniously "Down Barn," a stone refuge for owls and sheep, was my first resting-place in the West-Country and here I would have been wonderfully at ease save that

A few months ago SCRIBNER's published "Farewell to America," by Mr. Powys. It attracted much attention by its unusual estimate of this country and its people. Now Mr. Powys writes of his native land as he sees it upon his return after an absence of thirty years, in a paper full of human interest and salient comment upon the English

I had too frequently to transport my own manure to an ancient lime-kiln in the direction of the dizzy sea-cliffs.

These tremendous cliffs were, I must confess, not pure pleasure to my shifty nature; for the feeling of height has always staggered me, and from Rats' Barn I could only reach the level sea-shore by a walk beyond my strength.

Thus seeking easier conditions I took refuge last October in one of the main streets of Dorchester, the old Roman Durnovaria, where I am now endeavoring to catch the lingering "aura" not only of the capital of the Durotriges, as the ancient Dorsetshire tribe was called, but of the much earlier and possibly more civilized Neolithic people who constructed the astounding earth-work here, known as Maiden Castle, which under the name Dunium an enterprising Greek explorer of the early years of our era hesitates not to describe as a "Polis" or city.

The first and most poignant sensation of the "returning native" caught me quite unawares before I reached Rats' Barn and long before I had the

remotest thought of settling among the Durotriges.

It was nothing less than hearing the cuckoo from the Hampshire shore when at dawn the ship paused in her advance at the mouth of the Southampton estuary.

After the cry of the cuckoo heard from the ship's deck I think that the bells of this town, especially those which are carried over the roofs to my high attic-flat from a considerable distance, have stirred me with the deepest memories.

The bells of Dorchester, like so many other phenomena in this old city, take hold of my mind with the thrilling arrest of a thousand years, and their sound carries much more than a reminder that the religion of my fathers has not lost all its votaries yet.

I wish I could convey to my American friends the full impact upon me of the past half-year in the capital of Dorset.

The way the people of this place live, and *have* lived for so long, though I have not yet, I suppose, caught all its implications, has made an impression on me that no future use-and-wont will ever quite obliterate.

How exquisitely, and yet how massively, their way of life has come to be adjusted!

Their sturdy "morale" is extraordinary, and they all, men and women alike, labor at their simple and yet highly specialized tasks with a diurnal industry that puts to shame the waywardness of a less phlegmatic temperament.

But they are all "out to enjoy themselves." Their continual pleasures, their intermittent but intensely appreciated relaxations, are what strike me daily. In comparison with the endless arrangements for simple enjoyment that these Dorchester people have inherited I feel as if your average American hardly knows what a margin of recreation in life means.

What a lot of holidays they have here, and how cunningly their holidays are interspersed!

"Early closing" on Thursday, for instance, rests them as beautifully after the lively business of the weekly Wednesday market as the absolute quiet—that descends on them and on us all—makes Sunday a delicious contrast to the yet busier and more crowded Saturday market.

On Thursday and Sunday afternoons all the world literally pours into the country. You would suppose that this mellow old place were a smoke-grimed factory-town from the haste with which the whole population rushes into their rural solitudes the second the shops are closed.

And how gay and neat and fresh their holiday clothes are! You should see them on Sunday afternoons as they stroll through the lanes and the field-paths. No difference is perceptible, in this cheerful Sunday attire, between those who are employed and those who are living on the Dole.

Without exception, except for the professional tramp, and even he is often so well accoutered with sound boots, neat knapsack, and serviceable overcoat, that I have hesitated before presuming on an offer of alms, their holiday-attire is of unimpeachable respectability.

Custom and a paternal government have, moreover, so limited the hours of work, and so divided out the innumerable spheres of specialized work, that where people are employed at all there is no over-lapping in jobs and no encroachments on one another.

But how steadily they work when they are working, heedless of the

weather! It was a surprise to me at first to see the number of men hard at work who wear overcoats at their job: not *gloves*, however, like the workmen in America, and very rarely "over-alls." You see farm-laborers working in ordinary clothes and in their shirt-sleeves, as if they were so many preachers put to the plough, and you frequently see men, working on road-mending, who labor for their eight hours in pouring rain.

In America men cease work when it rains, but these leisurely English laborers just put on their overcoats and continue!

Never was a place where so many pleasures and recreations interperse the hours of labor! It is regarded as a disgrace if the "gentry" living in the vicinity of a little country town don't present the place with a town band. Dorchester has just been presented in this way with a most expensive set of new band instruments, and as for the Salvation Army Band, that passes my flat every Sunday at ten-thirty and six-thirty, Sousa's most trained artists could scarcely strike up more inspiring tunes.

My homecoming impressions must be understood as referring exclusively to the rural population of Dorsetshire, this people made of the obscure Durotriges, of Romans, of West-Saxons, of Celts, with doubtless a persistent underlying strain drawn from that earlier Neolithic Age whose megalithic stone-circles—Avebury, Stonehenge and so forth—and whose stupendous earth-works, like this one of ours here, called Maiden Castle, are still the grand battlefield of conflicting antiquarian theory.

Island life, and island life undisturbed by serious invasion since the Normans, necessarily implies contracted conditions, deep "diggings in" and high bankings up, thousands of delicate and yet inflexible adjustments, traditions that, while "slowly broadening-down," cannot in the nature of things "broaden" beyond a certain point without disturbing the whole delicately-balanced, historic system, precedent on precedent, custom on custom, habit on habit, palliative on palliative, compromise on compromise.

After so long having to assert my personal identity as an equal among equals it is an extraordinary experience—sometimes embarrassing, sometimes

comforting and assuaging—to find so many respectable persons of my own age, and in many cases much better dressed than I, touch their caps to me as with my dog I pace, before breakfast or before tea, the pleasant purlieus allotted to pedestrians between the water-meadows of the Frome.

Here indeed is an amazing case of the mysterious survival of ancient class-distinction.

I am a complete stranger to these honest folk, and to confess the truth many a Dorset tramp is more tidily and decently attired, for my old Sears Roebuck clothes are fast wearing out and I have to keep all the new clothes I can afford for occasional trips to London; and yet—and how *do* they discover it before I open my mouth?—"something," the way I hold my stick perhaps, or some butcher-bird attrition in the tilt of my scarecrow physiognomy, declares "the old gent" to *be* a gent, and not an ex-chimney sweep on the Dole.

And mark you, this goes on without any one, for more than half a year, knowing me as Mr. Powys the writer, or even as "the Mr. Powys who got into difficulties by libelling some one near Glastonbury."

What is happening to me here is happening to my anonymity, not to my name, happening to that mysterious "something" far below what the late Arnold Bennett called my "untidy" appearance, to that "something" that I can only suppose was the general "aura" of a Neolithic skull among Paleolithic skulls, or of a Saxon among the Durotriges, or of some Breton follower of the Norman Bastard among the oppressed Saxons.

One thing is certain: the respectful manner in which "the old gent from above Mr. D.'s shop" is treated by the loiterers on the bridge at the foot of his street if it has nothing to do with his "get-up" has still less to do with his literary or artistic reputation.

For here, approaching this main pivot in the psychology of my fellow-countrymen from the angle where illumination is always the most penetrating, namely from the fork of a small, "skin-for-skin" personal detail, I come to the profoundest of all secrets in our English character: our distrust of, and I might almost say our contempt for, all esthetic and philosophical superiorities.

If you asked me what has been the deepest and most startling of all my impressions of coming home, I would say this: that people are valued for what they *are* in their blood, and not for what they can *do* with their brain.

And you must not regard this as mere snobbishness or even as what you might call "the romance of class," for it goes much further and deeper. It is the whole thing. It is the alpha and omega of our national character.

It could best, I think, be described as a tendency to put "being" higher than "becoming," and what you *are* in your static, instinctive, and integral self, above what you can do or know or create.

Your Britisher, so it has appeared to me in what is now nearly a whole year of my return home, is like your Chinaman, and I believe unlike all other races in the world, in the manner in which he puts personal happiness—an innocent, harmless, much-enduring kind of happiness, but still happiness—above everything else in life!

The aristocracy of England—and you must understand that of this class I have seen nothing, nor indeed have wished to see anything, since my return—is the least interested in art, philosophy, and literature of all the aristocracies that have ever existed in the world!

It is brave, it is athletic and strenuous, it is trained to endure hardship, it is honest and "sporting," it is simple and kind; and in addition to these virtues it has the pathetic British mania for happiness. But it cannot be called "intellectual."

This British "happiness," when you really come down to it, is almost entirely based upon our response to the beauties of Nature. But, no! I am putting it wrong; not to the "beauties" of Nature, so much as to the "magic" or *the life* of Nature.

It would be very interesting to write a history of the Nature Cult or the Simple-Life-Cult in this country. One asks oneself, when did it begin? Shakespeare refers somewhat dubiously to it now and again; but it seems in those days to have been rather the eccentricity of a few, queer, half-balanced people like the melancholy Jacques than the universal ideal of the whole race as I have found it to be since I came home.

But it is nothing short of amazing how this "cult of nature" has taken hold of the whole people. Every tradesman, every artisan, every laboring man I've talked to for the last nine months speaks "to the same tune and words." They want to live *quietly* and they want to live in the country and they want to have a garden to dig in and a dog to go walks with.

And different—as I said above—though the class groups are among us, *here*, in this cult for Nature and the Quiet Life, we are all the same! From royalty at Windsor to the poorest dole-receivers in Durnovaria we all *must* see primroses and hear the cuckoo in the spring, we all *must* pick blackberries and hear the curlew in the autumn.

Stalin told Mr. Wells that the English upper classes are most crafty of all upper classes, in the way they know where to give way and where to hold firm. The Communists regard religion as a drug to keep the workers contented and in an irreverent mood I catch myself dallying with the outrageous thought that our English "Religion of Nature" might belong to the same category! If the game-preserving squire can instill into his tenants a sufficient passion for the primroses in his hedges it is possible that they may be more inclined to respect the hares on his hills and the pheasants in his woods.

But in my less cynical mood I have a much nicer explanation of this mania for Nature which I note on all sides of me in the England of today.

I believe that we are instinctively Wordsworthian—for there isn't a man, woman, or child in Dorchester who wouldn't feel that they *ought*, at any rate, to be able to say with the poet:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky.
So was it when my life began,
So is it now I am a man,
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The child is father to the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

And it really does seem as if, with all their contempt for "art" and "philosophy," the masses of my fellow-countrymen are profoundly and naturally *poetic*. This then is the secret of the British character. It is essentially un-philosophical, essentially inartistic, but deeply and instinctively poetic. Poetry, unlike the other arts, is some-

thing rooted in the past. Nothing can be poetic till it has gathered about it the accumulative magic of the life of the generations.

Thus poetry as with the Chinese and with the ancient Greeks lends itself to the ways, customs, habits, folk-lore, mythology, that come down to us from our ancestors. Poetry is, in fact, one form of the worship of one's ancestors. It is the consecration of those universal overtones of human life that Time, in its long pilgrimage, has winnowed of the crudities and vulgarities of the passing hour.

It is easier for a deeply conservative race to respond to poetry than to respond to art or to philosophy. The pathetic thing today in England is that the new school of poetry has totally divorced itself from the race-feeling of the crowd. It has become purely intellectual. It has made startling concessions to the new sciences and to all the inventions of modern life. It looks shamelessly round at the present-day panorama. It looks forward. It deals in the squalid, the sordid, the cynical, the grotesque, the bizarre, the futile. It pitches its tent in the ashes of a metaphysical wasteland.

But all this means that in its cleverness, in its obscurity, in its tone of savage disillusionment, in its urge towards frantic experimentation, poetry with us is no longer the expression of the emotional well-being of a race with a "penchant" for simple happiness; it is the intellectual plaything of a minority of embittered esthetes and thinkers. It prides itself on the ferocious realism of its insight and upon the complicated intellectual wit of its "bons-mots." It takes Donne as its model. It takes T. S. Eliot as its standard-bearer. Its pioneer is that passionate and difficult experimenter in new rhythms, Gerald Manley Hopkins.

But what I have become aware of, during this first year of my return, as the second basic quality of my fellow-countrymen, thus betrayed and deserted by their bards, is their sense of humor.

And here again there is a widening gulf between the temperament of the race and those who feel called upon to express it.

Just as our modern English poetry conflicts with our national character by its increasing tendency to esthetic sub-

tlety and intellectualism, so our modern fiction has suddenly grown appallingly grave.

The relish for humorous characters, for humorous situations, the tendency to a certain humorous earthiness in our attitude to life which I am conscious of all round me here in this old West-Country town, is no longer, as far as I can see, reflected in our present-day fiction. The more serious novels now written by young men and young women are full of a somber philosophical earnestness and a portentous tendency, at once mystic and fantastic, to cope with all the new theories in psychology and all the new inventions in machinery.

The lively and humane realism of Arnold Bennett, for instance, seems to have no successors. In place of the humorous creation of massive idiosyncratic characters—*Every Man in His Humor*—we are confronted by fantastic situations, bizarre persiflage, flip-pant moralizing, airy-fairy whimsicalities, and above all by interminable accounts of childhood.

This last peculiarity of modern English fiction *does*, however, I cannot deny, fit in with one striking impression I have received.

England—at least this part of Wessex—is a paradise for old men and young children! Never have I seen so many wise, cheerful, courtly, kindly, amiable old men, and of all classes too, some pensioners, some with “private means,” as I have met strolling along these pleasant field-paths within a stone’s throw of our chestnut-walks and our fragment of Roman wall, but the number and the amiability of our old men is surpassed by the number and amiability of our Dorsetshire children. I see more perambulators in my own street here in five minutes than I could meet in New York City in a whole day!

This is especially so on the two market days of the week. The village wives coming “into town”—for it’s always as “town” that we speak of Dorchester—by the innumerable carrier’s vehicles, from East Chaldon, from Broadmayne, from Puddletown, from Tolpuddle, from Piddlehinton, from Piddletrenthide, from Bradford Peverell, from Winterbourne St. Martin, from Little Bredy, from Sydling St. Nicholas, from Toller Porcorum, always seem to bring their perambulators and their

infants with them and thus attended visit Woolworth’s, an emporium that here, as elsewhere, links the past with the present.

In the Americanized portion of my mind I have indeed come to note with a most curious interest how the real establisher of customs and maker of manners, the real upholder of our whole British “ethos,” is *the old family-nurse*, the never-forgotten “Nanny,” of the gentry of these Isles! She it is who creates the fundamental peculiarities of our aristocracy; those peculiarities—an everlasting infantile fixation, a passion for walking, a mania for wild-flowers, an instinctive sense of what you *may* say, and what you *may not* say, a reverence for old age, a stoical endurance of hardship, “Don’t be such a baby, master Johnny!” and finally a decorous respect for, but not an absorbing interest in, what Nietzsche calls “First and Last Things”—that, from prince to pauper, we all pathetically strive to make our own. It is our nurse—and it must be remembered that many of our humbler mothers began by being nurses of other people’s children—it is our faithful Pegotty, with or without her evasive Mr. Barkis, whose simple and eternally childlike conception of “the whole duty of man” has made us what we are.

England “expects” that we should not only do our “duty,” with a sublime underrating of “the ills that flesh is heir to,” but that we should do it in the “cheerio, carry-on” spirit of heroic boy and girl scouts.

Not for nothing was it an Englishman who invented the Scout movement. We would all of us—men and women alike—far sooner be praised as “good scouts” and “good sports,” than be praised as original artists or subtle thinkers.

The truth is that with our “Nanny-created” upper-class ideal, copied, not artificially but passionately and instinctively, by *all* classes, our average Britisher really does—the Wessex portion of him anyway—achieve that instinctive, natural, spontaneous, irrational *virtu*, in all except “art,” which Nietzsche declares to have characterized the early Greeks before Socrates and Plato corrupted them with their analyzings and their rationalizings.

I certainly have been amazed during this last half-year at the simple “good-

ness” of these descendants of the Durotriges and at the universal craving they display to “get into the country,” at every possible opportunity. I myself seem to manage to “get into the country” in about three minutes; and indeed many portions of this old place would seem to a megalopolitan eye almost “country” already.

Where the Roman Governor of Durnovaria formerly lived stands now the County Gaol; but it is not the presence of this institution that makes the streets of Dorchester by night as by day as safe for the youngest girl to walk in as a convent-garden. Nor is it exactly the law-abidingness of rural England. It is the “Nanny” tradition. It is the good behavior of lively children when they are “out.”

And after all, though the famous hypocrisy of perfidious Albion is a somewhat equivocal compliment to our virtue, it *is* something to be harmless. It does not mean that visitors *like* you any better; for a crotchety harmless person is never so popular to a sight-seer as a picturesque bandit, but it gives them the blessing of feeling safe. Their host may be penurious and prejudiced, his humor may be provincial, as indeed both Shakespeare’s and Dickens’s actually was compared with Heine’s or Molière’s, but at any rate you *know* he won’t stick a knife in you, or beat you into insensibility, or hurry you off on a joy-ride to oblivion.

Yes, it has been an incredible comfort to me to be able to walk through the darkest streets, feeling as safe as if I were in my native vicarage-garden, and though the penuriousness of the Old World may get on your nerves, it is better to be mean as you haggle over your farthings than panic-stricken over the closing of your bank.

I find myself often wondering all the same what strain it is in our English blood—or our Dorsetshire blood, I had better say, for it may be quite different in the industrial North—that leads to what I might call *the neutral cult* of my fellow-subjects here in the West-Country.

In the older days our aristocracy used to set an example of gusto, of exuberance, of originality, of eccentric daring, of a certain rich aplomb and mellowness of character.

But now—down this way at any rate—the ideal of life seems curiously

negative, with no emotional expression allowed for, except a mild enthusiasm for growing roses or for watching sweet peas come up. Not to give yourself away, not to behave in an ungentlemanly manner, always to understate your case, never to get excited about intellectual problems, never to allow your feelings to carry you too far, always to be super-modest, always to put things on the lowest, the most colorless ground—such indeed seem to be the notes of the psychology of good breeding.

But when, after my fashion, I seek to dig down below the surface of my neighbor's modesty, below his understatements, below his dislike of publicity, below his "Nanny" cult for the simple life, below his distrust of modern improvements, below his suspicion of the artistic and the intellectual as almost indecent *exposures*, I do feel myself groping towards something that, in its own way, has a profound psychological significance.

Is it possible that by analyzing these neutral peculiarities in a spot, where below the bones of Roman Legionnaires you touch memorials of a pre-Celtic, pre-historic civilization, the real secret of our British character, the real meaning of this "reticence" and this "good-form" may be discovered? I have almost come to feel as if the secret lay in what might be called the psychic basis of that humorous detachment from the pressure of life's tragi-comedy that you get in Shakespeare and Dickens.

As we all soon discover, English humor is a totally different thing from American humor. At its worst it is a kind of malicious facetiousness and is a great evil; but at its best it is an enchanting film of poetic eccentricity thrust into the gap between personality and the "outward," emphasizing the unique quality of the former and the malleable nature of the latter.

To get down to the bed-rock secret of our national temper—at any rate here in the Southwest—it is necessary to remember the restricted scope of our crowded island-home. From our earliest childhood we grow used to *making the utmost of little things*. This has gone on for thousands of years.

It is in this direction, and in no other, that we must look for the psychological clue to the English temper. Our island life, with no possibilities of ex-

pansion, except abroad in colonies, dominions, mandates, and the like, means that all our traditional adjustments imply *intimate neighborhood*. This, combined with our terrific individualism, means that to keep "every Englishman's house as his castle," and every Englishman's tiny garden as his "castle pleasance," it is necessary for us not only to build endless walls, hedges, and railings, round our small flat, but to resign ourselves when we impinge on each other, as in our cantankerousness we so often do, to a terribly complicated system of law. Our endless law-suits, libel-actions, and otherwise, upon which our lawyers thrive, has been made inevitable by our passion for self-assertion combined with our restricted quarters.

And I have been particularly struck here in Dorchester by the curious way this same situation applies to the fauna and flora of the place—nay! even to the very birds and fishes.

Strolling into the water-meadows and the down-lands round this old Roman town I have become aware of the natural origin of all those fairy-tales and Mother Goose tales, wherein swans and ducks and geese and cows and horses and frogs and pigs and sheep and crows and blackbirds and larks and swallows, with all the old types of Mother Hubbards and Simple Simons and Little Red Riding Hoods, together with the moons and the winds and the showers and the dews that alternate as their common background, constitute the enchanted and yet homely miracle of life upon earth.

The pressure and the urge of an intense and varied vitality, under fatally-limited conditions—that is the whole secret! Wall-flowers, for instance, of an incredible loveliness appear in the spring on every fragment of the ancient masonry between these tiny "cottage-castles" and at the back of every shop in the town there is a miniature garden with an apple tree or pear tree in it, to mark the blossom season and the fruit season.

Every one keeps—not an automobile, for these are regarded as the luxuries of the rich and are taxed accordingly, but—a perambulator and a dog, and round this garden, and round this perambulator and this dog, the pleasure of life gathers, in a thousand little devices for "catching the joy as it flies."

The mass of the people have the

vote nowadays so the mass of the people must be considered and catered to; but those on the dole live in just the same way as those not on the dole, so that when people tell me that the war and the depression have *changed England* I find it hard to understand what they mean. There is certainly no change in essentials. The working-man by the possession of the vote and by his power of purchasing a newspaper is our *potential* ruler; but our upper class—those of them who have not been taxed out of existence—have such a weight of imponderable authority that you cannot say even yet that we are *actually* ruled by the laboring class on which we all live, and which, legally and constitutionally, *could* be our master.

How is it that with the strained circumstances in which most of us live we are so obstinately cheerful, if not happy?

England is an amazing country for flowers, with its temperate climate, none more so; and since I've returned I have seen many quite plain and homely faces—especially among women and children—that have the fresh rain-washed look of healthy plants; but I believe there is a deeper and more psychological explanation of this obstinate happiness. I believe it comes from our universal, and, I suppose, extremely unphilosophical determination—*not* to look facts in the face!

We may regard "art" as an affectation and systematic philosophizing as pedantic moonshine, but the truth is we are all the craftiest of born poets if not of born artists in our handling of life.

We all of us push reality *back* a little! Unlike Americans, who wreck their nerves in the effort to be objective, every Englishman lives in a subjective illusion of his own and is so wilful and so unphilosophical that he keeps it up to the end. He is forced to *use* reality of course—the terrible reality of the world—but he gives it, every one of us gives it, a poetic and humorous twist of his own. Englishmen, in fact, are able to be happy because they instinctively hold the world at a certain distance, *filling up the gap* between the heartbreaking reality and themselves by an imaginative and whimsical humor.

It is not only the upper class who do this. All classes habitually do it. Our

English language, in which in our own different ways, we are *all* artists, helps us in this subtle self-protection.

Where American humor is a cynical and laconic recognition of the basic human tragedy, English humor—like English slang—is an artful “protective-coloring.” Just as our flowers flourish under their cloak of rainy mists, so our own tough and self-centered egotisms flourish under the smoke-screen of our hobbies, our whimsies, our lavish poetic licence! The truth is we are a country of incorrigible amateurs.

There is no race in the world with so little respect for professional ability, no race in the world—not even Russia—where the “intelligentsia,” *per se*, have so little influence. We respect position, and, up to a certain point, wealth; but above all we respect blood and breeding.

Where we differ most from the other races of the world is the scant respect in which we hold “brains”—especially the “brains” of the professional expert.

And in some astonishing irrational way of her own Nature seems to support us in this obliquity! There is certainly an irrational toughness and resilience about us, even in our moments of least intelligence. And this extends to the sub-human world. *I have seen it in seedlings.* I have watched American seedlings grow with unhealthy rapidity, with terrifying speed, but when they were tall and lanky they had a fatal tendency to wither at the root! whereas the English seedlings presented to my contemplation now are comparatively slow in growth, short and squat, but, heavens, how strong and sturdy!

To return however to our contempt for art and philosophy. What, after all, are we aiming at? Certainly not at something that art and philosophy alone can give! I suppose we are aiming at a certain innocently sensuous enjoyment of life attainable by our own particular kind of individualistic self-expression. What we respect most in ourselves, and what we aim at most in our obstinate self-centeredness, is a certain stoical zest for the *little pleasures*. Existence itself we accept as inevitably hard, uncomfortable, and monotonous. But we sprinkle it with every sort of pleasurable side-issue!

To an American the physical discomforts that all classes, except the very highest, put up with over here, are astonishing. And many of these discomforts *could* be ameliorated if we cared enough about it. But we *don't* care enough. We have so much vitality, such an unconquerable zest for life that we positively enjoy these discomforts. They are the counterpart to the subjective humors and fancies into which we escape. They give us our *point d'appui* for these subjective excursions!

And why should we make a fuss about “art” and “philosophy”? We can enjoy life without either of these affectations! Thus it never has caused us much distress to learn that our great writers have been neglected. We intend to go on “neglecting” them! That Shakespeare or Milton never acquired any portentous contemporary success, seems perfectly natural to us and does not trouble us at all. If Shakespeare lived today, our general feeling would be that he must take his “pot-luck” and be content not to be regarded as anything so very wonderful, at any rate until his extreme old age when it might happen that a considerate Prince of Wales would come to pay him a visit.

Nor do I think that this disparaging attitude towards genius in England does our real geniuses any harm. Nor is it altogether a preference for gentility over talent. It is a preference for life over talent.

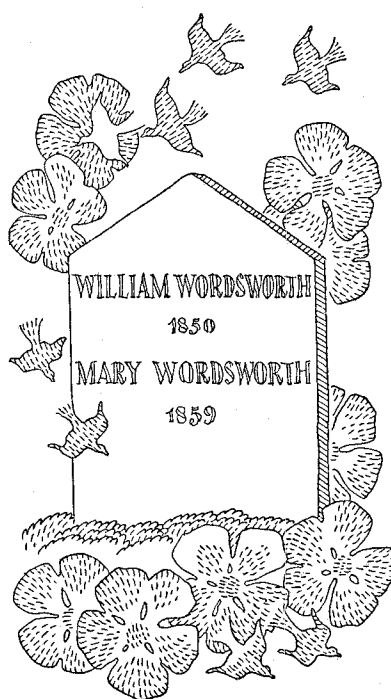
All this hat-touching, all this calling people with Norman noses “sir,” does not affect the abysmal individualism, the deep humorous egoism, of the very humblest among us.

It is this twisted, cross-grained, perverse, neurotic, *personal humor*, this humor that wrestles, in its absolute isolation, with the depths and heights of the cosmos, that has brought about our precious “good form” and our conventional good behavior. We are all such uncompromising volcanos of nervous prejudices that we are forced to make a cult of colorlessness and driven into a religion of compromise!

And of course the grand weapon of this “good form,” of this confounded gentility, is its bastardized “sense of humor.” Matthew Arnold says that the hall-mark of real art and real philosophy is “high seriousness.” Well, the one thing that our English upper class won't stand for is “high seriousness.” They love to bring it down! And this they achieve, not, it must be confessed, by any Voltairean wit but by a puerile facetiousness. And our working classes are extremely like our aristocracy in this. They too—though *their* facetiousness has a bit more bite in it—take all serious things humorously.

In fact I have had, as a serious-minded “Johannes Meister,” to search far and wide in Dorset for kindred spirits. The nearest approach to my own priggish way of taking life I found in an unemployed wayfarer from the North-Country. He certainly was as grave and idealistic as I am; and indeed he strongly reminded me of the peddler-hero of *The Excursion*, that loquacious bug-bear to people “with a sense of humor.”

But there it is! I have come home to find that Albion is the same as ever, incorrigibly irrational, incorrigibly “sporting,” incorrigibly humorous, incorrigibly touchy, incorrigibly sly, incorrigibly patient and enduring; fidgety and a little “funny” where God is concerned, sound where animals are concerned, a paradise for children and old men, suspicious of all art and of all philosophy, proud of her old-fashioned feeling for liberty, but hiding her mania for poetry in the marrow of her bones.



IN spite of everything I went to sleep, at last. And when the morning sunlight awoke me I saw that I had not been dreaming. With sorrow I saw my guardian sitting at the door of the tent and gazing at me vacuously. When he saw that I was awake he turned and called to some one outside.

Another man appeared. A tall saturnine man clad in sheepskins, skin cracked with sunburn, teeth white as a fish's belly. He too gazed at me with an empty curiosity and then came up to my side.

I tried to sit up. But I couldn't, the ropes were holding my arms, wrist against hard wrist. I could only roll over clumsily. I must have looked very sheepish, for the newcomer laughed like a child and then squatted smilingly at my side.

He looked at me carefully from head to foot. Then he said, quite amiably, "Money?"

My lips were swollen and bulbous where they had gagged me; "It's yours," I lisped. "You can have it all."

He looked questioningly toward the other one. The other one came up and mumbled something. Then he turned to me and said, "Speak to *me*. I speak English and Russian. . . . Then I tell *him*. You understand? He knows only that one word in English: money." He smiled.

"You can have all my money," I repeated. "Only," and I tried to speak as pleasantly as I could even though my lips were bloody and throbbing, "you must let me go, of course."

He stared at me. Then he smiled. He mumbled again to the tall saturnine man who was squatting at my side. The saturnine man nodded. Then they walked out of the tent together silently.

They freed my wrists and ankles and allowed me to sit beside the door. I could watch them shooting the dice under the dusty trees and the big-breasted women moving duskily inside the huts.

Mine was the only tent, and it grew nightmarishly hot under the black canvas as soon as the sun rose high over the hills.

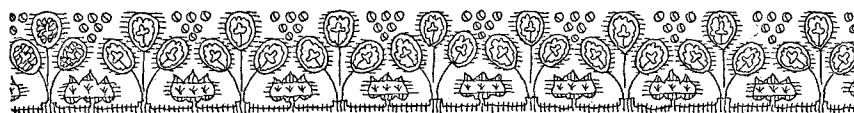
A dark-blue heaven, no single cloud. The sky was almost like a night sky, so dark against the blazing stones. The rays of the sun had an edge like a dull knife: I stretched my hand through the



The Bandit

A STORY

By Frederic Prokosch



doorway into the golden out-of-doors: it pierced, it stung. Only the grasshoppers and the locusts went leaping up and down the path. Every tiny sound was sharp and metal-perfect, like the sound of wires moving in the wind or the touch of sand against a copper kettle. And with things seen and smelled it was the same. Each sunny blade of grass a fine pin-prick, the tent smell sulphurous on the tongue and eyes and nerves.

I could feel the sweat trickling down my back and running from the armpits down to the hips. Drops hung from my lashes, I could scarcely see, and the whole glittering world swayed and quivered.

A skeleton of a man in a great white cape crept past my doorway. He was carrying a long club and a gourd shell full of water, dervish fashion. Every now and then he dipped his fingers into the gourd shell and tossed the drops upon his forehead. He leered at me

savagely as he passed. A penetrating yet unseeing gaze, as if he were looking through me as through glass down corridors scarcely human; the dangers of seeing too profoundly: his eyes were like the hollows in a skull, empty and desperate, no life left in that desert of a man except the quiver of heat across the dry sands.

Soon my guardian reappeared with a small red bowl balanced on the palm of his hand. "Soup for you," he said, and placed it politely on the ground beside me.

Then he squatted in the twilight beside the doorway and watched me.

But just as I was about to taste the oily mess the doorway flapped in a sudden gust of wind and a brisk tattooing sound flickered across the tent: all in a moment, and in another moment the air was filled with locusts, locusts swung idiotically against my face, fell on my lap, dripped nastily into the soup. The path outside was covered