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TONO-BUNGAY

by H.G Wells

BOOK THE FIRST

THE DAYS BEFORE TONO-BUNGAY WAS INVENTED

CHAPTER THE FIRST

OF BLADESOVER HOUSE, AND MY MOTHER; AND THE CONSTITUTION OF SOCIETY

I

Most people in this world seem to live "in character"; they have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the three are congruous one with another and true to the rules of their type. You can speak of them as being of this sort of people or that. They are, as theatrical people say, no more (and no less) than "character actors." They have a class, they have a place, they know what is becoming in them and what is due to them, and their proper size of tombstone tells at last how properly they have played the part. But there is also another kind of life that is not so much living as a miscellaneous tasting of life. One gets hit by some unusual transverse force, one is jerked out of one's stratum and lives crosswise for the rest of the time, and, as it were, in a succession of samples. That has been my lot, and that is what has set me at last writing something in the nature of a novel. I have got an unusual series of impressions that I want very urgently to tell. I have seen life at very different levels, and

at all these levels I have seen it with a sort of intimacy and in good faith. I have been a native in many social countries. I have been the unwelcome guest of a working baker, my cousin, who has since died in the Chatham infirmary; I have eaten illegal snacks--the unjustifiable gifts of footmen--in pantries, and been despised for my want of style (and subsequently married and divorced) by the daughter of a gasworks clerk; and--to go to my other extreme--I was once--oh, glittering days!--an item in the house-party of a countess. She was, I admit, a countess with a financial aspect, but still, you know, a countess. I've seen these people at various angles. At the dinner-table I've met not simply the titled but the great. On one occasion--it is my brightest memory--I upset my champagne over the trousers of the greatest statesman in the empire--Heaven forbid I should be so invidious as to name him!--in the warmth of our mutual admiration.

And once (though it is the most incidental thing in my life) I murdered a man....

Yes, I've seen a curious variety of people and ways of living altogether. Odd people they all are great and small, very much alike at bottom and curiously different on their surfaces. I wish I had ranged just a little further both up and down, seeing I have ranged so far. Royalty must be worth knowing and very great fun. But my contacts with princes have been limited to quite public occasions, nor at the other end of the scale have I had what I should call an inside acquaintance with that dusty but attractive class of people who go about on the high-roads drunk but enfamille (so redeeming the minor lapse), in the summertime, with a perambulator, lavender to sell, sun-brown children, a smell, and ambiguous bundles that fire the imagination. Navvies, farm-labourers, sailormen and stokers, all such as sit in 1834

beer-houses, are beyond me also, and I suppose must remain so now for ever. My intercourse with the ducal rank too has been negligible; I once went shooting with a duke, and in an outburst of what was no doubt snobbishness, did my best to get him in the legs. But that failed.

I'm sorry I haven't done the whole lot though....

You will ask by what merit I achieved this remarkable social range, this extensive cross-section of the British social organism. It was the Accident of Birth. It always is in England.

Indeed, if I may make the remark so cosmic, everything is. But that is by the way. I was my uncle's nephew, and my uncle was no less a person than Edward Ponderevo, whose comet-like transit of the financial heavens happened--it is now ten years ago! Do you remember the days of Ponderevo, the great days, I mean, of Ponderevo? Perhaps you had a trifle in some world-shaking enterprise! Then you know him only too well. Astraddle on Tono-Bungay, he flashed athwart the empty heavens--like a comet--rather, like a stupendous rocket!--and overawed investors spoke of his star. At his zenith he burst into a cloud of the most magnificent promotions. What a time that was! The Napoleon of domestic conveniences!

I was his nephew, his peculiar and intimate nephew. I was hanging on to his coat-tails all the way through. I made pills with him in the chemist's shop at Wimbleshurst before he began. I was, you might say, the stick of his rocket; and after our tremendous soar, after he had played with millions, a golden rain in the sky, after my bird's-eye view of the modern world, I fell again, a little scarred and blistered perhaps, two and twenty years

older, with my youth gone, my manhood eaten in upon, but greatly edified, into this Thames-side yard, into these white heats and hammerings, amidst the fine realites of steel--to think it all over in my leisure and jot down the notes and inconsecutive observations that make this book. It was more, you know, than a figurative soar. The zenith of that career was surely our flight across the channel in the Lord Roberts B....

I warn you this book is going to be something of an agglomeration. I want to trace my social trajectory (and my uncle's) as the main line of my story, but as this is my first novel and almost certainly my last, I want to get in, too, all sorts of things that struck me, things that amused me and impressions I got--even although they don't minister directly to my narrative at all. I want to set out my own queer love experiences too, such as they are, for they troubled and distressed and swayed me hugely, and they still seem to me to contain all sorts of irrational and debatable elements that I shall be the clearer-headed for getting on paper. And possibly I may even flow into descriptions of people who are really no more than people seen in transit, just because it amuses me to recall what they said and did to us, and more particularly how they behaved in the brief but splendid glare of Tono-Bungay and its still more glaring offspring. It lit some of them up, I can assure you! Indeed, I want to get in all sorts of things. My ideas of a novel all through are comprehensive rather than austere....

Tono-Bungay still figures on the hoardings, it stands in rows in every chemist's storeroom, it still assuages the coughs of age and brightens the elderly eye and loosens the elderly tongue; but its social glory, its financial illumination, have faded from the world for ever. And I, sole scorched survivor from the blaze,

sit writing of it here in an air that is never still for the clang and thunder of machines, on a table littered with working drawings, and amid fragments of models and notes about velocities and air and water pressures and trajectories--of an altogether different sort from that of Tono-Bungay.

II

I write that much and look at it, and wonder whether, after all, this is any fair statement of what I am attempting in this book. I've given, I see, an impression that I want to make simply a hotch-potch of anecdotes and experiences with my uncle swimming in the middle as the largest lump of victual. I'll own that here, with the pen already started, I realise what a fermenting mass of things learnt and emotions experienced and theories formed I've got to deal with, and how, in a sense, hopeless my book must be from the very outset. I suppose what I'm really trying to render is nothing more nor less than Life--as one man has found it. I want to tell--MYSELF, and my impressions of the thing as a whole, to say things I have come to feel intensely of the laws, traditions, usages, and ideas we call society, and how we poor individuals get driven and lured and stranded among these windy, perplexing shoals and channels. I've got, I suppose, to a time of life when things begin to take on shapes that have an air of reality, and become no longer material for dreaming, but interesting in themselves. I've reached the criticising, novel-writing age, and here I am writing mine--my one novel--without having any of the discipline to refrain and omit that I suppose the regular novel-writer acquires.

I've read an average share of novels and made some starts before this beginning, and I've found the restraints and rules of the art (as I made them out) impossible for me. I like to write, I

am keenly interested in writing, but it is not my technique. I'm an engineer with a patent or two and a set of ideas; most of whatever artist there is in me has been given to turbine machines and boat building and the problem of flying, and do what I will I fail to see how I can be other than a lax, undisciplined story-teller. I must sprawl and flounder, comment and theorise, if I am to get the thing out I have in mind. And it isn't a constructed tale I have to tell, but unmanageable realities. My love-story--and if only I can keep up the spirit of truth-telling all through as strongly as I have now, you shall have it all--falls into no sort of neat scheme of telling. It involves three separate feminine persons. It's all mixed up with the other things....

But I've said enough, I hope, to excuse myself for the method or want of method in what follows, and I think I had better tell without further delay of my boyhood and my early impressions in the shadow of Bladesover House.

III

There came a time when I realised that Bladesover House was not all it seemed, but when I was a little boy I took the place with the entirest faith as a complete authentic microcosm. I believed that the Bladesover system was a little working-model--and not so very little either--of the whole world.

Let me try and give you the effect of it.

Bladesover lies up on the Kentish Downs, eight miles perhaps from Ashborough; and its old pavilion, a little wooden parody of the temple of Vesta at Tibur, upon the hill crest behind the house, commands in theory at least a view of either sea, of the Channel southward and the Thames to the northeast. The park is the

second largest in Kent, finely wooded with well-placed beeches, many elms and some sweet chestnuts, abounding in little valleys and hollows of bracken, with springs and a stream and three fine ponds and multitudes of fallow deer. The house was built in the eighteenth century, it is of pale red brick in the style of a French chateau, and save for one pass among the crests which opens to blue distances, to minute, remote, oast-set farm-houses and copses and wheat fields and the occasional gleam of water, its hundred and seventeen windows look on nothing but its own wide and handsome territories. A semi-circular screen of great beeches masks the church and village, which cluster picturesquely about the high road along the skirts of the great park. Northward, at the remotest corner of that enclosure, is a second dependent village, Ropedean, less fortunate in its greater distance and also on account of a rector. This divine was indeed rich, but he was vindictively economical because of some shrinkage of his tithes; and by reason of his use of the word Eucharist for the Lord's Supper he had become altogether estranged from the great ladies of Bladesover. So that Ropedean was in the shadows through all that youthful time.

Now the unavoidable suggestion of that wide park and that fair large house, dominating church, village and the country side, was that they represented the thing that mattered supremely in the world, and that all other things had significance only in relation to them. They represented the Gentry, the Quality, by and through and for whom the rest of the world, the farming folk and the labouring folk, the trades-people of Ashborough, and the upper servants and the lower servants and the servants of the estate, breathed and lived and were permitted. And the Quality did it so quietly and thoroughly, the great house mingled so solidly and effectually earth and sky, the contrast of its spacious hall and saloon and galleries, its airy housekeeper's

room and warren of offices with the meagre dignities of the vicar, and the pinched and stuffy rooms of even the post-office people and the grocer, so enforced these suggestions, that it was only when I was a boy of thirteen or fourteen and some queer inherited strain of scepticism had set me doubting whether Mr. Bartlett, the vicar, did really know with certainty all about God, that as a further and deeper step in doubting I began to question the final rightness of the gentlefolks, their primary necessity in the scheme of things. But once that scepticism had awakened it took me fast and far. By fourteen I had achieved terrible blasphemies and sacrilege; I had resolved to marry a viscount's daughter, and I had blacked the left eye--I think it was the left--of her half-brother, in open and declared rebellion.

But of that in its place.

The great house, the church, the village, and the labourers and the servants in their stations and degrees, seemed to me, I say, to be a closed and complete social system. About us were other villages and great estates, and from house to house, interlacing, correlated, the Gentry, the fine Olympians, came and went. The country towns seemed mere collections of shops, marketing places for the tenantry, centres for such education as they needed, as entirely dependent on the gentry as the village and scarcely less directly so. I thought this was the order of the whole world. I thought London was only a greater country town where the gentle-folk kept town-houses and did their greater shopping under the magnificent shadow of the greatest of all fine gentlewomen, the Queen. It seemed to be in the divine order. That all this fine appearance was already sapped, that there were forces at work that might presently carry all this elaborate social system in which my mother instructed me so carefully that I might

understand my "place," to Limbo, had scarcely dawned upon me even by the time that Tono-Bungay was fairly launched upon the world.

There are many people in England to-day upon whom it has not yet dawned. There are times when I doubt whether any but a very inconsiderable minority of English people realise how extensively this ostensible order has even now passed away. The great houses stand in the parks still, the cottages cluster respectfully on their borders, touching their eaves with their creepers, the English countryside--you can range through Kent from Bladesover northward and see persists obstinately in looking what it was. It is like an early day in a fine October. The hand of change rests on it all, unfelt, unseen; resting for awhile, as it were half reluctantly, before it grips and ends the thing for ever. One frost and the whole face of things will be bare, links snap, patience end, our fine foliage of pretences lie glowing in the mire.

For that we have still to wait a little while. The new order may have gone far towards shaping itself, but just as in that sort of lantern show that used to be known in the village as the "Dissolving Views," the scene that is going remains upon the mind, traceable and evident, and the newer picture is yet enigmatical long after the lines that are to replace those former ones have grown bright and strong, so that the new England of our children's children is still a riddle to me. The ideas of democracy, of equality, and above all of promiscuous fraternity have certainly never really entered into the English mind. But what IS coming into it? All this book, I hope, will bear a little on that. Our people never formulates; it keeps words for jests and ironies. In the meanwhile the old shapes, the old attitudes remain, subtly changed and changing still, sheltering strange tenants. Bladesover House is now let furnished to Sir

Reuben Lichtenstein, and has been since old Lady Drew died; it was my odd experience to visit there, in the house of which my mother had been housekeeper, when my uncle was at the climax of Tono-Bungay. It was curious to notice then the little differences that had come to things with this substitution. To borrow an image from my mineralogical days, these Jews were not so much a new British gentry as "pseudomorphous" after the gentry. They are a very clever people, the Jews, but not clever enough to suppress their cleverness. I wished I could have gone downstairs to savour the tone of the pantry. It would have been very different I know. Hawksnest, over beyond, I noted, had its pseudomorph too; a newspaper proprietor of the type that hustles along with stolen ideas from one loud sink-or-swim enterprise to another, had bought the place outright; Redgrave was in the hands of brewers.

But the people in the villages, so far as I could detect, saw no difference in their world. Two little girls bobbed and an old labourer touched his hat convulsively as I walked through the village. He still thought he knew his place--and mine. I did not know him, but I would have liked dearly to have asked him if he remembered my mother, if either my uncle or old Lichtenstein had been man enough to stand being given away like that.

In that English countryside of my boyhood every human being had a "place." It belonged to you from your birth like the colour of your eyes, it was inextricably your destiny. Above you were your betters, below you were your inferiors, and there were even an unstable questionable few, cases so disputable that you might for the rough purposes of every day at least, regard them as your equals. Head and centre of our system was Lady Drew, her "leddyship," shrivelled, garrulous, with a wonderful memory for genealogies and very, very old, and beside her and nearly as old,

Miss Somerville, her cousin and companion. These two old souls lived like dried-up kernels in the great shell of Bladesover House, the shell that had once been gaily full of fops, of fine ladies in powder and patches and courtly gentlemen with swords; and when there was no company they spent whole days in the corner parlour just over the housekeeper's room, between reading and slumber and caressing their two pet dogs. When I was a boy I used always to think of these two poor old creatures as superior beings living, like God, somewhere through the ceiling. Occasionally they bumped about a bit and one even heard them overhead, which gave them a greater effect of reality without mitigating their vertical predominance. Sometimes too I saw them. Of course if I came upon them in the park or in the shrubbery (where I was a trespasser) I hid or fled in pious horror, but I was upon due occasion taken into the Presence by request. I remember her "leddyship" then as a thing of black silks and a golden chain, a quavering injunction to me to be a good boy, a very shrunken loose-skinned face and neck, and a ropy hand that trembled a halfcrown into mine. Miss Somerville hovered behind, a paler thing of broken lavender and white and black, with screwed up, sandy-lashed eyes. Her hair was yellow and her colour bright, and when we sat in the housekeeper's room of a winter's night warming our toes and sipping elder wine, her maid would tell us the simple secrets of that belated flush.... After my fight with young Garvell I was of course banished, and I never saw those poor old painted goddesses again.

Then there came and went on these floors over our respectful heads, the Company; people I rarely saw, but whose tricks and manners were imitated and discussed by their maids and valets in the housekeeper's room and the steward's room--so that I had them through a medium at second hand. I gathered that none of the company were really Lady Drew's equals, they were greater and

lesser after the manner of all things in our world. Once I remember there was a Prince, with a real live gentleman in attendance, and that was a little above our customary levels and excited us all, and perhaps raised our expectations unduly. Afterwards, Rabbits, the butler, came into my mother's room downstairs, red with indignation and with tears in his eyes. "Look at that!" gasped Rabbits. My mother was speechless with horror. That was a sovereign, a mere sovereign, such as you might get from any commoner!

After Company, I remember, came anxious days, for the poor old women upstairs were left tired and cross and vindictive, and in a state of physical and emotional indigestion after their social efforts....

On the lowest fringe of these real Olympians hung the vicarage people, and next to them came those ambiguous beings who are neither quality nor subjects. The vicarage people certainly hold a place by themselves in the typical English scheme; nothing is more remarkable than the progress the Church has made--socially--in the last two hundred years. In the early eighteenth century the vicar was rather under than over the house-steward, and was deemed a fitting match for the housekeeper or any not too morally discredited discard. The eighteenth century literature is full of his complaints that he might not remain at table to share the pie. He rose above these indignities because of the abundance of younger sons. When I meet the large assumptions of the contemporary cleric, I am apt to think of these things. It is curious to note that to-day that down-trodden, organ-playing creature, the Church of England village Schoolmaster, holds much the same position as the seventeenth century parson. The doctor in Bladesover ranked below the vicar but above the "vet," artists and summer visitors

squeezed in above or below this point according to their appearance and expenditure, and then in a carefully arranged scale came the tenantry, the butler and housekeeper, the village shopkeeper, the head keeper, the cook, the publican, the second keeper, the blacksmith (whose status was complicated by his daughter keeping the post-office--and a fine hash she used to make of telegrams too!) the village shopkeeper's eldest son, the first footman, younger sons of the village shopkeeper, his first assistant, and so forth.

All these conceptions and applications of a universal precedence and much else I drank in at Bladesover, as I listened to the talk of valets, ladies'-maids, Rabbits the butler and my mother in the much-cupboarded, white-painted, chintz-brightened housekeeper's room where the upper servants assembled, or of footmen and Rabbits and estate men of all sorts among the green baize and Windsor chairs of the pantry--where Rabbits, being above the law, sold beer without a license or any compunction--or of housemaids and still-room maids in the bleak, matting-carpeted still-room or of the cook and her kitchen maids and casual friends among the bright copper and hot glow of the kitchens.

Of course their own ranks and places came by implication to these people, and it was with the ranks and places of the Olympians that the talk mainly concerned itself. There was an old peerage and a Crockford together with the books of recipes, the Whitaker's Almanack, the Old Moore's Almanack, and the eighteenth century dictionary, on the little dresser that broke the cupboards on one side of my mother's room; there was another peerage, with the covers off, in the pantry; there was a new peerage in the billiard-room, and I seem to remember another in the anomalous apartment that held the upper servants' bagatelle board and in which, after the Hall dinner, they partook of the

luxury of sweets. And if you had asked any of those upper servants how such and such a Prince of Battenberg was related to, let us say, Mr. Cunninghame Graham or the Duke of Argyle, you would have been told upon the nail. As a boy, I heard a great deal of that sort of thing, and if to this day I am still a little vague about courtesy titles and the exact application of honorifics, it is, I can assure you, because I hardened my heart, and not from any lack of adequate opportunity of mastering these succulent particulars.

Dominating all these memories is the figure of my mother--my mother who did not love me because I grew liker my father every day--and who knew with inflexible decision her place and the place of every one in the world--except the place that concealed my father--and in some details mine. Subtle points were put to her. I can see and hear her saying now, "No, Miss Fison, peers of England go in before peers of the United Kingdom, and he is merely a peer of the United Kingdom." She had much exercise in placing people's servants about her tea-table, where the etiquette was very strict. I wonder sometimes if the etiquette of housekeepers' rooms is as strict to-day, and what my mother would have made of a chauffeur....

On the whole I am glad that I saw so much as I did of Bladesover--if for no other reason than because seeing it when I did, quite naively, believing in it thoroughly, and then coming to analyse it, has enabled me to understand much that would be absolutely incomprehensible in the structure of English society. Bladesover is, I am convinced, the clue to almost all that is distinctively British and perplexing to the foreign inquirer in England and the English-speaking peoples. Grasp firmly that England was all Bladesover two hundred years ago; that it has had Reform Acts indeed, and such--like changes of formula, but no

essential revolution since then; that all that is modern and different has come in as a thing intruded or as a gloss upon this predominant formula, either impertinently or apologetically; and you will perceive at once the reasonableness, the necessity, of that snobbishness which is the distinctive quality of English thought. Everybody who is not actually in the shadow of a Bladesover is as it were perpetually seeking after lost orientations. We have never broken with our tradition, never even symbolically hewed it to pieces, as the French did in quivering fact in the Terror. But all the organizing ideas have slackened, the old habitual bonds have relaxed or altogether come undone. And America too, is, as it were, a detached, outlying part of that estate which has expanded in queer ways. George Washington, Esquire, was of the gentlefolk, and he came near being a King. It was Plutarch, you know, and nothing intrinsically American that prevented George Washington being a King....

IV

I hated teatime in the housekeeper's room more than anything else at Bladesover. And more particularly I hated it when Mrs. Mackridge and Mrs. Booch and Mrs. Latude-Fernay were staying in the house. They were, all three of them, pensioned-off servants.

Old friends of Lady Drew's had rewarded them posthumously for a prolonged devotion to their minor comforts, and Mrs. Booch was also trustee for a favourite Skye terrier. Every year Lady Drew gave them an invitation--a reward and encouragement of virtue with especial reference to my mother and Miss Fison, the maid. They sat about in black and shiny and flouncey clothing adorned with gimp and beads, eating great quantities of cake, drinking much tea in a stately manner and reverberating remarks.