IN SEARCH OF ENGLAND

H. V. MORTON

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BY

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WITH EIGHTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS AND
ENDPAPER MAP

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To
T. C. T.

You will remember, lady, how the morn
Came slow above the Isle of Athelney,
And all the flat lands lying to the sky
Were shrouded sea-like in a veil of grey,
As, ſtanding on a little rounded hill,
We placed our hands upon the Holy Thorn.

Do you remember in what hopeful fear
We gazed behind us, thinking we might see
Arthur come ſtriding through the high, bright corn,
Or Alfred reſting on a Saxon ſpear?
And as the cold miſts melted from the fields
We seemed to hear the winding of a horn.

You will remember how we walked the Vale
Through Meare and Weſthay unto Godney End;
And how we said: 'Time is an endless lane
And Life a little mile without a bend. . . .
Behind us what? Before us, if we ran,
Might we not be in time to see the Grail?'

INTRODUCTION

THIS is the record of a motor-car journey round England.

Any virtue it may possess, and all its sins, spring from the fact that it was written without deliberation by the roadside, on farmyard walls, in cathedrals, in little churchyards, on the washstands of country inns, and in many another inconvenient place. I have gone round England like a magpie picking up any bright thing that pleased me. A glance at the route followed will prove that this is not a guide-book, and a glance at the contents will expose me to the scorn of local patriots who will see, with incredulous rage, that on many an occasion I passed silently through their favourite village. That is inevitable. It was a moody holiday, and I followed the roads; some of them led me aright and some astray. The first were the most useful; the others were the most interesting.

A writer on England to-day addresses himself to a wider and a more intelligent public than ever before. And the reason is, I think, that never before have so many people been searching for England. The remarkable system of motor-coach services which now penetrates every part of the country has thrown open to ordinary people regions which even after the coming of the railway were remote and inaccessible. The popularity of the cheap motor-car is also greatly responsible for this long-overdue interest in English history, antiquities, and topography. More people than in any previous generation are seeing the real country for the first time. Many hundreds of such explorers return home with a new enthusiasm.

The roads of England, eclipsed for a century by the railway, have come to life again; the King's highway is

once more a place for adventures and explorations; and I would venture to prophesy that within the next few years we shall see a decline in the popularity of the sea-side resort, unfortunate as this may be, and a revival of the country inn.

The danger of this, as every lover of England knows, is the vulgarization of the country-side. I have seen charabanc parties from the large manufacturing towns, providing a mournful text for an essay on Progress, playing cornets on village greens and behaving with a barbaric lack of manners which might have been outrageous had it not been unconscious, and therefore only pathetic. This, however, is exceptional. The average townsman of no matter what class feels a deep love for the country, and finds there the answer to an ancient instinct.

Against the vulgarization of the country we must place to the credit of this new phase in the history of popular travel in England the fact, already mentioned, that thousands of intelligent men and women are every year discovering the country-side for themselves. The greater the number of people with an understanding love for the villages and the country towns of England the better seems our chance of preserving and handing on to our children the monuments of the past, which is clearly a sacred duty. Time is already having its way with many a cathedral whose roots are in Norman England and with many a famous stronghold like Durham Castle, and, in parts, with Hadrian's Wall, which should at once be made an official 'ancient monument', and preserved from further decay by a top-dressing of concrete. When the public really feels that these signposts along the road which the English people have followed in the course of their development are not dead shells of the past but a living inspiration to the present, to the future, and, in addition, that they possess a personal interest to them as part of a common racial heritage, then we shall have advanced a long way and—perhaps the petrol engine will have atoned for a few of its sins!

There is another and a very interesting aspect to this question. Since James Watt invented a new world on Glasgow Green the town and the country have grown apart. They do not understand one other. Since the so-called Industrial 'Revolution'—evolution is surely a better word—English country life has declined, agriculture has fallen on bad times, and the village has been drained to a great extent of its social vitality.

It is difficult at first for the unaccustomed eyes of the townsman to understand that behind the beauty of the English country is an economic and a social cancer. An old order is being taxed out of existence; 'our greatest industry'—as the experts call it—employs fewer men than those on the dole, and, struggling along, is facing insuperable difficulties with a blundering but historic stolidity. While our cornland is going back to grass year after year, our annual bill to the foreigner for imported foodstuffs is four hundred million pounds. Everywhere is the same story: mortgages on farms; no fluid capital; the breaking up of famous estates when owners die; the impossibility of growing corn because of the expense of labour and the danger of foreign competition; the folly of keeping cattle when the Roast Beef of Old England comes so cheaply from the Argentine.

'Why should the towns be expected to understand the complex problems of the country-side? We have our own troubles. The country-side must lick its own wounds!' That is the view of the town, and I submit that it is an ignorant and a short-sighted view. The towns should understand the problems of agriculture, because as the life of a country-side declines, as in England to-day, and the city life flourishes, the character and physique of a nation deteriorate. History proves to us that a nation cannot live by its towns alone: it tells us that the virile and progressive nation is that which can keep pace with the modern industrial world and at the same time support a contented and flourishing peasantry.

The 'Back to the Land' cry is a perfectly sound instinct of racial survival. When a man makes money he builds himself a country home. This is the history of our great families—town wave after town wave—since the earlier nobility committed suicide in the Wars of the Roses. And any man who wishes his family to survive has at some time to take it and plant it in the country. Where are the town families? Where are the Greshams of London? The Whittingtons, the Philipots?

'The Grenvilles are country squires,' wrote Langton Sandford in his *The Great Governing Families of England*, 'who for five hundred years vegetated on slowly increasing estates in Buckinghamshire.' For five hundred years! In half that time the average city family has disappeared into racial anaemia.

I have introduced this note in a book which is pitched in a much lighter key because I feel that help for the woes of our agricultural districts may, quite unexpectedly, come from the cities. Political power is to-day all on the side of cities. They have a four-fifths majority in the electorate, and the countryman has no legislative tradition. His vision is bounded, as it always has been, by the line of his own hedges. But granted that a healthy country-side is necessary to a nation, it is then surely the duty of every man to ponder these problems and to enter into them. If those men and women who, as my letter-bag so clearly proves, are starting out in their thousands to discover rural England will see it not merely as a pretty picture or as an old battle-field whose drama has long since departed, but as a living thing, as important to-day as it was when all men drew their bread from it, we may be a step nearer that ideal national life: on one hand the wealthy industrial cities; on the other a happy country-side, ready to give its new blood to the towns, guarding the traditions of the race, ready always to open its arms to that third generation from the city in need of resurrection.

We may not revive the English village of the old days, with its industry and its arts. The wireless, the newspaper, the railway, and the motor-car have broken down that perhaps wider world of intellectual solitude in which the rustic evolved his shrewd wisdom, saw fairies in the mushroom rings, and composed those songs which he now affects to have forgotten. Those days are gone. The village is now part of the country: it now realizes how small the world really is! But the village is still the unit of development from which we have advanced first to the position of a great European nation and then to that of the greatest world power since Rome.

That village, so often near a Roman road, is sometimes clearly a Saxon hamlet with its great house, its church, and its cottages. There is no question of its death: it is, in fact, a lesson in survival, and a streak of ancient wisdom warns us that it is our duty to keep an eye on the old thatch because we may have to go back there some day, if not for the sake of our bodies, perhaps for the sake of our souls.

NOTE TO THE NINTH (REVISED) EDITION

I HAVE been invited to add a few lines to another edition of this book. An author and the book which he wrote two years ago are incredible strangers. Their relationship is that of a man and a woman once desperately in love who meet quite calmly in later life in a mood of critical amusement. About the book I can say nothing, except that such portions of it that I have forced myself to read with considerable reluctance and misgiving affect me rather like an album of snapshots taken in sunlight, some bad and some quite good.

I have received letters about this book from every part of the world. I could pack an appendix with home-sickness. It is to those who will read this book in places far from home that I address this introduction. If you find in these pages the smell of English meadows, if they bring back to you the smooth movement of English rivers, the stately somnolence of cathedral cities, and the sound of bells among elm-trees on cool, summer mornings, I am happy because—well; the pain will not really hurt you. You may even enjoy it.

'But the Glory of the Garden lies in more than meets the eye.'

—Rudyard Kipling

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

* *From photographs by B. C. Clayton*
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CHAPTER ONE

I go in search of England. Describes how I leave the place where London ends, meet a bowl-turner, ſtand beneath a gallows on a hill, enter Wincheſter, accept the wanderer's dole at St. Croſs, and ends quite properly, with a maiden in diſtreſs

§ 1

I BELIEVED that I was dying in Paleſtine. There was no woman to convince me that the pain in my neck was not the firſt ſign of ſpinal meningitis, ſo that, growing rapidly worſe, I began to attend my own funeral every day. My appetite, however, remained excellent.

In the black depths of miſery, I climbed a hill overlooking Jeruſalem, unaffected by the fact that this has been conſidered the beſt of all places to die, and, turning as accurately as I could in the direction of England, I gave way to a wave of home-ſickneſs that almoſt ſhames me now when I recollect it. I find it impoſſible in cold blood, and at this diſtance, to put into words the longing that ſhook me. I have forgotten the pain in the neck, but never will I forget the pain in the heart.

As I looked out over the inhoſpitable mountains I remembered home in a way which given any other frame of mind would have aſtoniſhed me. I ſolemnly curſed every moment I had ſpent wandering fooliſhly about the world, and I ſwore that if ever I ſaw Dover Cliffs again I would never leave them. I had by this time made myſelf too ill to realize that it is this rare ſtay-at-home ſanity which juſtifies travel. Perhaps in inſtinctive contraſt to the cold, unhappy mountains of Paleſtine there roſe up in my mind the picture of a village ſtreet at duſk with a ſmell of wood

smoke lying in the still air and, here and there, little red blinds shining in the dusk under the thatch. I remembered how the church bells ring at home, and how, at that time of year, the sun leaves a dull red bar low down in the west, and against it the elms grow blacker minute by minute. Then the bats start to flicker like little bits of burnt paper and you hear the slow jingle of a team coming home from fields. . . . When you think like this sitting alone in a foreign country I think you know all there is to learn about heartache.

But does it seem strange that a townsman should in his extremity see this picture? Would it not be more reasonable to expect him to see his own city? Why did I not think of St. Paul's Cathedral or Piccadilly? I have learnt since that this vision of mine is a common one to exiles all over the world: we think of home, we long for home, but we see something greater—*we see England.*

This village that symbolizes England sleeps in the subconsciousness of many a townsman. A little London factory hand whom I met during the war confessed to me when pressed, and after great mental difficulty, that he visualized the England he was fighting for—the England of the 'England wants YOU' poster—as not London, not his own street, but as Epping Forest, the green place where he had spent Bank Holidays. And I think most of us did. The village and the English country-side are the germs of all we are and all we have become: our manufacturing cities belong to the last century and a half; our villages stand with their roots in the Heptarchy.

I was humiliated, mourning there above Jerusalem, to realize how little I knew about England. I was shamed to think that I had wandered so far and so often over the world neglecting those lovely things near at home, feeling that England would always be there whenever I wanted to see her; and at that moment how far away she seemed, how unattainable! I took a vow that if my pain in the neck did

not end for ever on the windy hills of Paleſtine I would go home in search of England, I would go through the lanes of England and the little thatched villages of England, and I would lean over English bridges and lie on English grass, watching an English sky.

Quite surprisingly I recovered. It was the only religious moment I experienced in Jerusalem. I mention this because all journeys should have a soul.

I opened my window to an April night and, looking down into the London square, saw that new leaves were silver-white in the lamplight. Into my room came an earthy smell and the freshness of new grass. The top boughs of the trees were etched againſt the saffron ſtain of a London sky, but their boles descended into a pool of darkness, silent and remote as the primeval foreſt. The fretful traffic sped left and right againſt the railings, and beyond lay that patch of ſtealthy vitality older than London. What an amazing thing is the coming of spring to London. The very pavements seem ready to crack and lift under the denied earth; in the air is a consciousness of life which tells you that if traffic ſtopped for a fortnight grass would grow again in Piccadilly and corn would spring in pavement cracks where a horse had spilt his 'feed'. And the squares of London, so dingy and black since the firſt October gale, fill week by week with the rising tide of life, juſt as the sea, running up the creeks and pushing itself forward inch by inch towards the land, comes at laſt with its fresh water to each remote rock pool.

The squares of London, those sacred little patches of the country-side preserved perhaps by the Anglo-Saxon inſtinct for grass and trees, hold in their reſtricted glades some part of the magic of spring. I suppose many a man has ſtood at his window above a London square in April hearing a message from the lanes of England. The Georgians no doubt fancied that Aegipans and Centaurs kicked their hoofs in Berkeley

Square, and I, above my humbler square, dreamt a no less classic eclogue of hedges lit with hawthorn, of orchards ready for their brief wave of pink spray, of fields in which smoky-faced lambs pressed against their dams, of new furrows over which moved slowly the eternal figure bent above a plough.

This, then, is my adventure. Now I will go, with spring before me and the road calling me out into England. It does not matter where I go, for it is all England.

I will see what lies off the beaten track. I will, as the mood takes me, go into famous towns and unknown hamlets. I will shake up the dust of kings and abbots; I will bring the knights and the cavaliers back to the roads, and, once in a while, I will hear the thunder of old quarrels at earthwork and church door. If I become weary of dream and legend I will just sit and watch the ducks on the village pond, or take the horses to water. I will talk with lords and cottagers, tramps, gipsies, and dogs; I will, in fact, do anything that comes into my head as suddenly and light-heartedly as I will accept anything, and everything, that comes my way in rain or sun along the road.

§ 2

All good knights, pilgrims, sons in search of fortune, seekers after truth, and plain ordinary fools, turn towards the city they have left and take farewell according to their natures. This is a full moment in all journeying, the time when girths are tightened in preparation for the miles that lie ahead. Some cities, such as Durham, which stands on a hill, or Salisbury, which, if I remember it, lies in a snug hollow, lend themselves to apostrophy and appear to have been designed by man and nature to encourage the gentle art of valediction. But London is too big: by the time you reach the fringe of her there is no London to be seen; and you cannot waste sentiment on a suburban gasworks.