

THE WORN DOORSTEP

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AUGUST 25, 1914. At last I have found the very place for our housekeeping; I have been searching for days: did you know it, dear? The quest that we began together I had to follow after you went to the front; and, through the crashes of tragic rumours that have rolled through England, I have gone on and on, not running away or trying to escape, but full of need to find the right corner, the right wall against which I could put my back and stand to face these great oncoming troubles. I have travelled by slow trains across quiet country which does not as yet know there is war; I have driven in an old-fashioned stage or post wagon, — you never told me that there were such things left in

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your country, — past yellow harvest fields in calm August weather; I have even walked for miles by green hedges, which wear here and there a belated blossom, searching for that village of our dreams where our home should be, quiet enough for the work of the scholar, green for two lovers of the country, and grey with the touch of time. I knew that now it could be almost anywhere; that it did not matter if it were not near Oxford, and it seemed to me that I should rather have it a bit — but not too far — away from the “dreaming spires.” So I went on and on, with just one thought in my mind, because I was determined to carry out our plan to the full, and because I did not dare stay still. There’s a great strange pain in my head when I am quiet, as if all the mountains of the earth were pressing down on it, and I have to go somewhere, slip out from under them before they crush me quite.

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Often, at a distance, I thought that I had found it; thatched roofs or red tiles, or a lovely old Norman church tower would make me sure that my search was done; but again and again I found myself mistaken, I can hardly tell you why. You know without telling, as you must know all I am writing before I make the letters, and yet it eases my mind to write. At no time did you seem very far as I searched hill country and level lands, watching haystacks and flocks of sheep, sometimes through sunny showers of English rain.

But now I have discovered our village, the very one that I dreamed in childhood, that you and I pictured together, and I know that at last I have come home. I knew it by the rooks, for I arrived late in the afternoon, and the rooks were flying homeward to the great elms by the church, — groups of them, here, there, and everywhere, black against the sunset. Such a

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chattering and gossiping, as they went to bed in the treetops! Such joy of home and bedtime! I knew it by the grey church tower in its shelter of green leaves, and the ancient little stone church on the top of the gentle hill among its old, old, lichen-covered tombstones.

The village homes, in a straggling row, looked half familiar; the grassy meadow that rolls to the village edge, still more so; and the quaint old Inn, where I spent the night and where I am writing — surely some of my ancestors, centuries ago, slept at that very Inn, for I half remember it all, — low ceilings, latticed windows, stone floor, and great, smothering feather bed. Everywhere, indoors and out, I am aware of forgotten chords of sympathy. Those small boys in short trousers, trudging home on tired legs and little bare feet — “did I pass that way a long time ago?” Did some one back of me in the march of life — my ancestors

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came from this East country — grow tired and rebel in a village like this and run away to America? In some way, by memory, by prophecy, all seems mine; the worn paths; the hollowed door-stones; the ruddy faces moving up and down the walled streets, and the quiet under the grass in the churchyard. And you are everywhere, interpreting, making me understand, with that insight compounded of silent humour and silent sympathy. I am too tired to do anything to-night but have my tea and bit of toast and egg, and warm my fingers at the open fire, for the evening is chill; but to-morrow I shall go searching for our house, and I know I shall find it, for I have a curious sense that this is not only the place for my home with you, but that some far, far back sense of home broods here.

The grey war-cloud drifts closer and grows darker. Namur has fallen into German hands; there are rumours — God

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grant that they are not true! — that the French and the English troops are retreating. In spite of the entire confidence of the people here in their island security, there is fear in my heart for England, this England which seems so remote from cruel struggle, as if created in some moment of Nature's relenting, when she was almost ready to take back her fell purpose, — it is so full of fragrances, of soft colours of flowers, of softer green of hedgerows and meadows. There is something in you, you Englishmen of finer type, shaped by this beauty, quiet and self-contained, of hill and dale and meadow. Surely in you too I know this quietness, this coolness, the still ways of the streams.

August 26. Past the grey church, and down the hill, at the edge of the great green meadow, and a bit apart from the village, I found our house, with its wooden shutters and its white front door closed, a

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quaint old brick cottage, waiting for life to come to it again. It has a brick front walk, and a brick wall stands about it, save at the back, where the stream that skirts the meadow flows at the very garden edge. Can you see it, the wistaria, the woodbine, the honeysuckle over the wee porch, the climbing, drooping, straggling vines that make the whole little house look oddly like a Skye terrier? It is all unkempt; grass grows in tufts between the bricks, and weeds in the neglected grass. The chimney needs repairing; some of the little diamond panes in the latticed windows are broken, alas! I did not venture inside the wrought-iron gate, for the encompassing veneration for property rights is strong upon me; not in the British Isles shall I be caught trespassing! Can you not imagine, as I can, how a dainty order, satisfying even your fastidious taste, could grow out of its present desolation, with a little weeding here, a little trimming

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there, a nail, a bit of board, a few bricks, — surely we could find a few old weathered ones to match. There must be touches of the new, but careful preservation of all the old, of all the eloquent worn edges that tell of the coming and going of past life.

Something — anything — to keep away the thoughts I refuse to harbour. I can not, I can not even yet, think of the misery of this war. It beats in my ears, like great hard waves; it clangs and clamours, strikes, comes in imagined horrible shrill whistles and great explosions. There is nothing in me that understands war; new tracks will have to be beaten out in my brain before I can grasp any of it. It is a vast, unmeasured pain beyond my own pain.

I have got to have a place of my own in which to face them both, for a little while, a little while, where I may stand and think, — perhaps even pray.

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No one was about, except a shaggy pony, grazing in the rich green meadow, with a rough lock of hair over his eyes. I find a little stone bridge across the stream and try to make his acquaintance. He lifts his head and looks at me through his forelock, seems to respond with cordiality to my overtures, whinnies, and even takes a step or two toward me as I draw near; then, when I can almost touch him, gives a queer little toss of his head, kicks up his heels, and dashes off to a rise of ground, where he stands with a triumphant air, his legs planted wide apart, seeming to say: "Such be forever the fate of those who try to catch and harness me!" Then he falls to grazing again, keeping one eye out to see whether I am coming near.

Presently came an old man with a rake, and I made some inquiries about the house, but the haymaker's dialect was as hard for me to understand as mine was

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for him. I learned only that the little 'ouse belonged to the 'All; that it had been occupied by one of the functionaries at the 'All; — it will be good for you, you Englishman, to live in a little house once inhabited by an unimportant person, good for you to forget caste and class and bend a bit, if need be, at your own front door! Like yourself, young Master went with the first adventurers to the war, the old man said, and the 'All was closed. And he added, with significant gestures with his rake, what he would do to “they Germans”, if he once got hold of them. I judged, by the red satisfaction in his face, that the wooden rake in a shaking old hand constituted for him a vision of “preparedness for war.”

So there it stands, on the edge of a great estate that sweeps out to eastward; low-lying lines of green in the west mean forest, and that soft look of sky and cloud in the east means the sea. It is absolutely

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the place for which we looked so long and will satisfy the home sense, so strong in both of us. I wonder at my good fortune in finding it, as I carried on the search alone, and I refuse to entertain the idea that I may not have it for my own. The roof droops low over the windows; there is a tall poplar by the wrought-iron gateway; the brick wall, vine-covered in places, will shut us away from all the world, belovèd. Within we shall plant our garden, and light our fire on the hearth, and live our life together, you and I, just you and I.

August 27. But can I get it? I am in a prolonged state of suspense. Nobody in the village seems to know anything, but everybody is of firm conviction that somebody higher up knows everything, and that all is well. I appealed to my landlady; she very pleasantly informed me with an air of great wisdom that it might

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be I could 'ave it, it might be I couldn't; nobody could say. No, she could not tell me to whom to apply, with the 'All closed, as it was, 'm, and the Squire away. Standing — there was barely standing-place — in her own over-furnished sitting room, filled to its low ceiling with bric-a-brac, whatnots with unshapely vases, tall glass cases with artificial flowers or alabaster vases under them, porcelain figures, — one a genuine purple cow, — she seemed, as many a more imposing person on this side of the water and the other seems, a victim of property.

“An' I do 'ave difficulty, Miss, in gettin' about,” she said, as her apron knocked a Dresden china shepherdess and a Spanish guitar player off an overcrowded table; “but I don't quite know what to do about it.”

“A broom!” I suggested.

“Broom? Oh, it's nicely swept, and everything dusted regularly once a week,

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'm," she assured me. Oh, for one German bomb!

Luncheon time, and no solution of my problem; a futile visit to the postmistress, who informed me that I should have to wait until the war was over, and Master came home to the Hall. I was meditating an inquiry at the vicarage, though that involved more audacity than I can easily summon, when my landlord came riding home on a big bony steed and had a conference with his wife in the kitchen. He, it seems, is temporarily agent for the property; he has the keys to the little red house and to my future destiny. I try hard to think what will be pleasing to so huge and so important a personage, as I walk down the village street at his side, two steps to his one. An unfortunate conjecture about the retreat of the British brings forth the emphatic statement that the British never retreat. With a train of thought of which I am, at the