

PROBLEMS OF VILLAGE LIFE

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PREFACE

IN the midst of the great industrial developments which followed the close of the Napoleonic wars the claims of the rural population were to a large extent overlooked. So amazing was the realized and prospective wealth of a "nation of shopkeepers" who had made good their claim to control the trade routes of the world that the eyes of the nation were turned almost exclusively upon the towns and seaports. In the present century again, amid the ever-increasing volume of England's trade and her abounding riches, accompanied at the same time by a social unrest of unprecedented force, the attention of our country and those who guide its destiny is chiefly centred upon urban interests and urban demands. Trade rivals have menaced or destroyed some of our monopolies, and our earlier claim to be the workshop of the world must nowadays necessarily submit to modification ; but we have not yet as a nation learnt the true value of our fertile fields and the men who cultivate them. Agriculture, indeed,

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shares with Sociology the character of being perhaps the most backward of the applied sciences. In many other directions the splendid inventiveness of man has made giant strides—

Πεντοπόρος· ἄπορος ἐπ' οὐδὲν ἔρχεται
Τὸ μέλλον. Ἄϊδα μόνον φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται.

We have mastered the principles of aerial flight and wireless telegraphy; our submarines navigate the depths of the sea; we can analyze and weigh the planets. But many of the problems of poverty are still unsolved, and agriculture, the earliest and most universal of the sciences, makes but slow progress. It even appears probable that many parts of the globe's surface are cultivated with far less success now than in earlier centuries. In our own country no land drainage on scientific lines appeared until 1835; and the formation of artificial soils by mixture, discussed by Columella and even earlier writers, is still in its infancy as far as England is concerned.

The complaint, so often heard in country districts, that the agricultural population "does not count" is not without foundation. Of the eleven chapters in Mr. Masterman's admirable book *The Condition of England*, only one deals with the sociology of the countryside. "Nobody," said a farmer to

Mr. Rider Haggard, "cares twopence how many quarters of wheat we produce." In a still greater degree does the existence of the poorer type of villager tend to be ignored. The valuable information contained in *Rural England* is derived almost entirely from squires, farmers and land agents: how seldom in these pages do we come across conversations with farm labourers. Mr. Wilson Fox's careful statistics of agricultural wages would have been even more reliable had they not been based so largely on returns made by employers. At "Fat Stock Dinners" and the like, the toast of "Agriculture" always has reference to the prosperity of landlords and farmers: and, in response, you will hear employers and landagents regretting the "good old days of agriculture," when wheat was 60/- a quarter and the labourers suffered cruelly from dear food and wretched wages. It is a significant fact that the only complete and scientific history of the English agricultural labourer has been written by a foreigner, Herr Hasbach. No apology, therefore, is needed by any writer who strives, in however humble a fashion, to focus the attention of his fellow-citizens on the problems of rural England.

Against one danger any author who deals

with our rural life must be on his guard. It is by no means easy to discuss the social conditions of the countryside without being drawn, perhaps almost insensibly, into the vortex of party politics. All existing accounts, in fact, of rural life and economy have been in a greater or lesser degree coloured by the convictions and sentiments of the writer. This is self-evident, for example, in the writings of Cobbett, Young, and Joseph Arch. Those who love the country and its neglected people are bound to feel strongly, and, in face of our heavy arrears of national duty to the village, tend to grow impatient with further delays, excuses and compromises. Nevertheless, the writer of this little book will do his best to prevent any personal sympathies from minimising or obscuring the beneficent efforts of political opponents working for a common end. No Liberal can write with fuller knowledge, a more heartfelt sympathy for the poor village labourer, or a more genuine desire to improve British agriculture than Mr. Christopher Turnor, a Conservative landlord, or Mr. Jesse Collings, to whose clear and interesting volume on "Land Reform" we owe so much.

My grateful acknowledgments are due to Mr. C. R. Buxton, who generously placed at

my disposal the manuscript of a book on country life compiled by him some years ago, but never published. I have not hesitated to insert here and there some considerable portions of this manuscript almost verbatim. I wish also to thank the Editors of the *Contemporary Review* and the *Nation* for their permission to reprint certain paragraphs from articles formerly contributed to these journals by myself.

These pages were already in the press when the *Report of the Land Enquiry Committee*, Vol. I., made its appearance ; I was therefore, to my great regret, unable to avail myself of the invaluable information presented by the Committee.

E. N. B.

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