

**THE HEART OF LIFE.
IN THREE
VOLUMES, VOL. I**

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The Heart of Life. In Three Volumes, Vol. I by W. H. Mallock

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BY
W. H. MALLOCK.

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THE HEART OF LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

ENGLAND, in spite of railways, still has a few districts which remain, for various reasons, almost as remote and primitive as they were a hundred or even two hundred years ago. Of such survivals there is no more complete example than that afforded by a part of Devon and Somerset, which consists mainly of bleak and mountainous moorland, and confronts for some thirty miles the waters of the Bristol Channel. It is true that here and there amongst its unvisited valleys lonely populations hide themselves in villages with surrounding hedgerows; and in some of the valleys also, streams, brown with peat, slide and pour and foam through cloisters of sequestered woodland. But of

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spots like these a stranger sees nothing ; and even here, in the green glades, or by the farm or by the village mill, there is a sense in the air of the open surrounding country—of rolling hills, bare to the wind and mist, where the tufted heather lifts itself, solitary as a wave at sea.

Geographically, however, civilization is not far off. On the western frontier of this region is the well-known watering-place, Lyncombe, its wooded crags and hillsides glittering with hotels and lodging-houses ; and on the eastern, a shed at the end of a straggling hamlet forms the terminus of a branch line of railway. But between these two points the progressive world of to-day shows its existence only in a modern road connecting them, and even this looks nearly as wild as the solitudes through which it passes. So at least it may well strike a stranger. The coast, from which it is rarely more than half a mile distant, is the loftiest in all Great Britain, reaching in many places a height of twelve hundred feet ; and the timid traveller, as he is driven over these elevations, is apt to feel dizzy at the sight of the monstrous precipices to which he constantly fancies that his wheels will approach

too near ; whilst inland his eyes meet nothing but a world of gorse and heather, bounded only by clouds brooding on the distant tors.

Along this road, during the summer, daily once each way, a tawdry coach rattles, generally top-heavy with tourists ; but these incongruous apparitions pass, leaving no trace behind them, except perhaps some fragments of drifting paper ; and by the time the dust raised by their transit has subsided all that stirs in the landscape is the fleece of some moving sheep. A stranger, indeed, might look about him during the whole journey and detect no sign of human occupation anywhere except some stretches of dry stone wall, which at certain places appear, skirting the road, and accentuate rather than relieve the solitary aspect of the scene.

Nowhere do these walls produce this forlorn effect upon the mind more strongly than at a point about eight miles out from Lyncombe, where the road, after a long and rugged climb from the sea-level, reaches at last a high and wind-swept down, which is bare of everything but boulders and stunted grass. What could be the need of any enclosure here is a question that well might baffle the passing curiosity of the traveller ;

for the land on one side would hardly attract a donkey ; and on the other, after fifty yards or so, it appears to tumble into the sea. But a still more perplexing feature is a gate in the seaward wall, carefully painted white, and giving access to a fragment of open road, which to all appearances leads only to the brink of an adjacent precipice. By this gate also, as if to enhance its mystery, a solitary figure used always to be seen standing every afternoon on which the coach passed from Lyncombe—the figure of a lad, roughly but not ill-dressed, who received daily a leather letter-bag from the driver, and disappeared with it over the brow of the cliff, as unaccountably as if he had been changed there into a sea-gull.

A stranger following him would eventually have encountered a sight almost as unexpected as he would have done had this miracle actually happened. For on gaining what, as viewed from the coach, appears to be a cliff's edge, he would have seen before him an amphitheatre of steep slopes, down which, by a feat of great engineering skill, the road was led in a long succession of zigzags till it reached in the depths below a belt of feathering pine woods. Descending

it thus far he would have found what was invisible from above—a pair of gate-posts surmounted by moss-grown griffins, a lodge with latticed windows almost hidden amongst the branches, and an iron gate guarding the entrance to a gravelled drive. Resuming his course within, the intruder would have been surprised to perceive that his way, which now lay in a green and sheltering twilight, and was bordered by slanting carpets of moss and of ground-ivy, still continued to descend, zigzagging much as heretofore; and the sea as it shimmered in occasional vignettes through the trees, would have shown him that still it was hundreds of feet under him. At length, however, after he had walked for a good half-hour, certain signs would have assured him that he was nearing the end of his explorations. His eyes would have been caught by a glimpse of slate roofs; and, the road dividing itself in a thicket of rhododendrons, he would have seen that one branch of it led to some stable buildings, whilst the other would have brought him to an open balustraded space, with the waves breaking a hundred feet below; and with a house on one side of it, whose stucco turrets and