

**IDLEHURST; A
JOURNAL KEPT IN
THE COUNTRY**

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Idlehurst; a journal kept in the country by John Halsham

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JOHN HALSHAM

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BY

JOHN HALSHAM

"Haec tibi dictabam post fanum putre Vacunae"

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1898

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IDLEHURST :

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INTRODUCTORY.

MY DEAR PATERSON

That old question of ours, whether the world were larger to him who travelled far and wide, or to him who sat at home dreaming of the unknown lands, seems no nearer settlement after half a life of experiment than when it was first propounded in Blue Boar Lane sittings, or walks to Wheatley. Fixed here in the Sussex Weald, seldom moving out of the circle of the hills, often keeping within the village bounds for months together, I still maintain my unvisited world to be greater than all the seas and isles which you have profaned.

You will remember that when you had spent some ten years in Borneo, and it seemed probable that you

would end your days there, you so far failed from your old vagrant principles (or was it that the old country had now become the stranger land?) as to look back to England, and to ask me for some account of our country life at home. You were pleased with the idea of a little chronicle of our Arnington days which I proposed to make you, as the readiest way I could find of presenting our country and people. Before my summer's journal is well ended, here you are in England again! But since you are tied in London, where a man is merged and lost, for sure, as wholly as he can be in Sarawak—in London that seems farther from Arnington quietude than your eastern isles—I think you may still entertain my compilation. It may serve in some measure to bring before you in Hampstead the life of the Weald—a life, I am afraid, that is undistinguished, commonplace enough; and yet the length between that and the pattern-moulded world you look down upon from the Heath! Being so little a traveller, I owe my knowledge of considerable portions of rural England to modern novels; and I learn from this source that Titanic passions, salient immorality, and an unintelligible dialect distinguish, singly or in combination, the peasantry of various parts of the British Isles with which I happen to be

unacquainted. In Sussex we do not possess these *differentiæ*. An odd transitional state between the old rural economy and a pervading plutocracy has apparently produced a rather respectable and soulless population, protected in its morals by a singular *vis inertie*, and speaking almost universally that dreadful New English which flows from Thames about the world.

Under the attrition of London on the one side and Brighton on the other, we are taking upon us a general polish, and losing all individual character. With hardly an exception, the old great families of the county are extinct and their houses have passed into the hands of the bankers, the stockbrokers, the distillers. The names which abide are the common people's—the Bottings and Tomsetts that fill our registers of 1557. There live in Arnington to-day three generations of Thomas Pockets; and a Thomas Pock appears in the roll of the Sussex archers who were at Agincourt. But beyond the names, little abides. Uniformity of school-methods is wearing down any small excrescences of individual character; the very forces of heredity seem powerless beneath the flattening weight of the Standards. Almost every recent legislative change has helped to obliterate the ancient distinctions; with a certain class of our village politicians the effacing of the old

inscriptions seems almost a religion. Whatsoever the merits of the emerging Cosmos may be, monotony of the most tyrannous kind must follow the present course of development.

Under these conditions of change the chief interest lies in watching the collision between old and new ; in finding survivals and tracing links with a far off past ; in the refreshing worth and salt of the passing generation, which after a few more winters will be wholly gone. There are differences of standpoint between aged labourers in Arnington and their grandsons, greater perhaps than the same interval of generation could show in any part of the world's history. The railroad embankments, as Thackeray says, have shut off the old world that was behind them. The rare survivors of the pre-railroad age are almost as strange to us as a revived Jacobite or Fifth-Monarchy man could be among us to-day. And the interest of transition belongs, alas ! to the scene as well as to the characters.

Our Sussex landscape is naturally most beautiful ; a landscape of wide horizons and splendid distances, a mingling of heathy hills and valley meadows, woodland and tillage, that can compare with any champaign beneath the sun. But it is being steadily and in great part irrevocably defiled. Places of

wider fame, richer in historic interest are, to some extent, guarded by a special public opinion, or what passes for it ; but our incomparable Arcadia must be destroyed without a word of protest. The constant sap of brick and mortar, corrugated iron, and match-boarding advances ; speculative builders satisfy and foment the desire of the Cockney for a new red villa on a hill ; the villages year by year spread their fringe of abominable cottage and backyard ; the Government which looks after the art-instincts of our school children is engaged in blocking out some of the noblest of our landscapes with its black telephone-posts thirty feet high. All pleasure that is possible in watching Nature lies in survivals. The remnant is still amply sufficient to make us forget, in the more vivid moments, what is desecrated and lost ; but as year to year the mischief works, that " piteous lot " draws nearer " to flee from man, yet not rejoice in nature "—not of choice, but of miserable necessity.

With such aspects of the land and the people as these my journal deals : too little hopeful of the future perhaps ; inevitably puzzled by the present's marvellous tangle of good and ill ; tuned, no doubt, somewhat to that regretful regard of the past, which is so easy for the sliding forties. You will find

vignettes of the garden and the fields, sketches of the old people and the new, perspectives of our work and our play; my favourites presented, I hope, without excessive touches of rose-madder; my aversions etched without overmuch acid. You will not account impertinent a few private judgments here and there upon matters beyond our village horizon; dicta which are the product of the genuine Arcadian mind. Some one (Eduard Köhler, I think, in "Fantasiereisen") has an apologue of a Scythian tribe accustomed to turn out an anchorite into the desert for a term of years, and to receive on his return his strictures upon their manners and the constitution of their state with the consideration due to abstracted and unprejudiced criticism. Now I have been, for longer than I care to think, a rigid hermit in the wilderness; I am pure of the taint of Pall Mall; I am untouched by propagandist romances and the weightiest of reviews. You will allow these impressions of mine as the outcome of a seclusion at once fortunate and wilful; my fact and fancy both come out of that world you have barred yourself from, the *aprica rura* which I think still sometimes touch your heart, through the smoke cloud or the tropic sky, with the half-reproachful sweetness of first-love remembered after forty years.