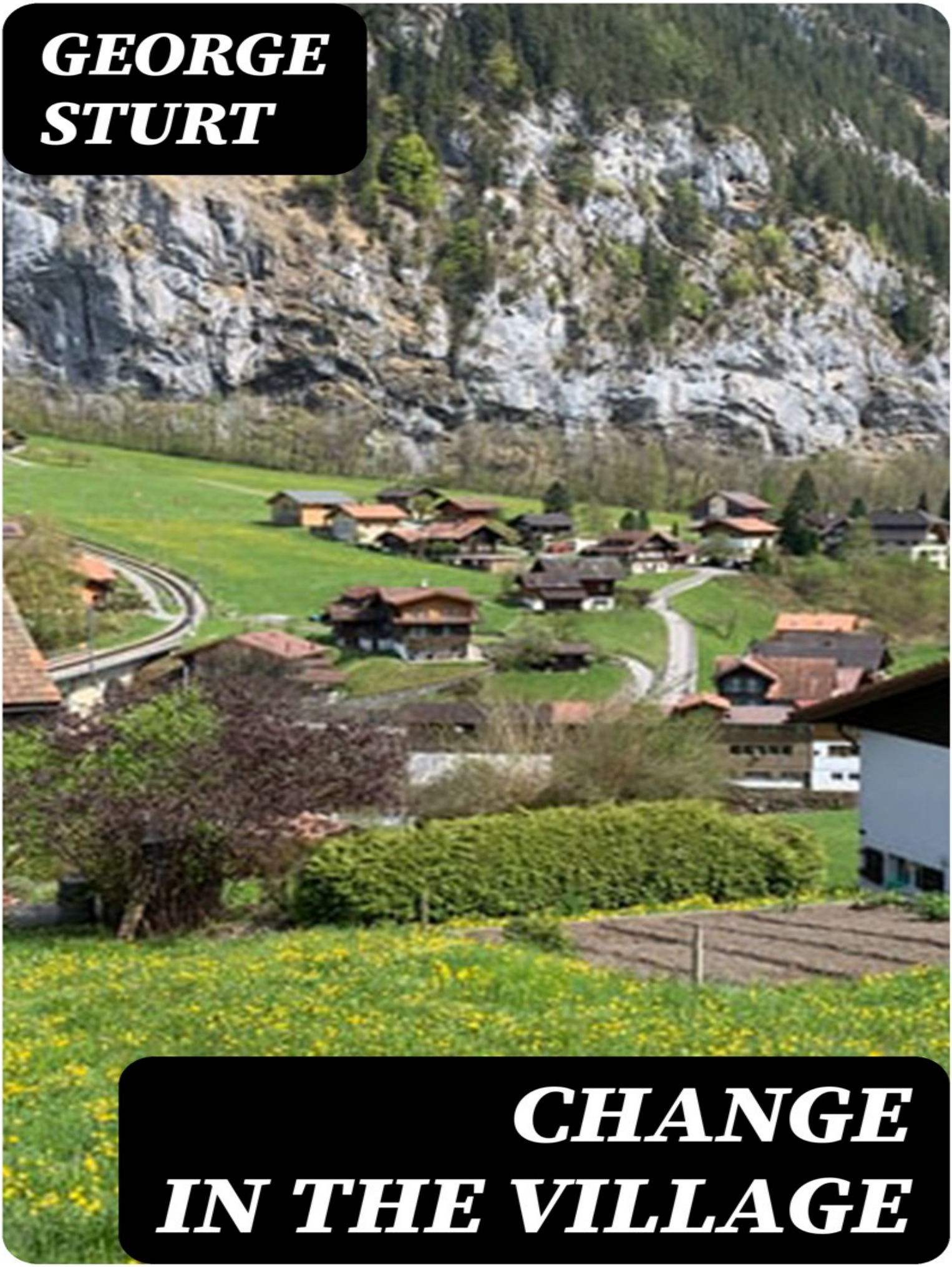
GEORGE STURT



CHANGE IN THE VILLAGE

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If one were to be very strict, I suppose it would be wrong to give the name of "village" to the parish dealt with in these chapters, because your true village should have a sort of corporate history of its own, and this one can boast nothing of the kind. It clusters round no central green; no squire ever lived in it; until some thirty years ago it was without a resident parson; its church is not half a century old. Nor are there here, in the shape of patriarchal fields, or shady lanes, or venerable homesteads, any of those features that testify to the immemorial antiquity of real

villages as the homes of men; and this for a very simple reason. In the days when real villages were growing, our valley could not have supported a quite self-contained community: it was, in fact, nothing but a part of the wide rolling heath-country—the "common," or "waste," belonging to the town which lies northwards, in a more fertile valley of its own. Here, there was no fertility. Deep down in the hollow a stream, which runs dry every summer, had prepared a strip of soil just worth reclaiming as coarse meadow or tillage; but the strip was narrow—a man might throw a stone across it at some points—and on either side the heath and gorse and fern held their own on the dry sand. Such a place afforded no room for an English village of the true manorial kind; and I surmise that it lay all but uninhabited until perhaps the middle of the eighteenth century, by which time a few "squatters" from neighbouring parishes had probably settled here, to make what living they might beside the stream-bed. At no time, therefore, did the people form a group of genuinely agricultural rustics. Up to a period within living memory, they were an almost independent folk, leading a sort of "crofter," or (as I have preferred to call it) a "peasant" life; while to-day the majority of the men, no longer independent, go out to work as railway navvies, builders' labourers, drivers of vans and carts in the town; or are more casually employed at digging gravel, or road-mending, or harvesting and hay-making, or attending people's gardens, or laying sewers, or in fact at any job they can find. At a low estimate nine out of every ten of them get their living outside the parish boundaries; and this fact by

itself would rob the place of its title to be thought a village, in the strict sense.

In appearance, too, it is abnormal. As you look down upon the valley from its high sides, hardly anywhere are there to be seen three cottages in a row, but all about the steep slopes the little mean dwelling-places are scattered in disorder. So it extends east and west for perhaps a mile and a half—a surprisingly populous hollow now, wanting in restfulness to the eyes and much disfigured by shabby detail, as it winds away into homelier and softer country at either end. The high-road out of the town, stretching away for Hindhead and the South Coast, comes slanting down athwart the valley, cutting it into "Upper" and "Lower" halves or ends; and just in the bottom, where there is a bridge over the stream, the appearances might deceive a stranger into thinking that he had come to the nucleus of an old village, since a dilapidated farmstead and a number of cottages line the sides of the road at that point. The appearances, however, are deceptive. I doubt if the cottages are more than a century old; and even if any of them have a greater antiquity, still it is not as the last relics of an earlier village that they are to be regarded. On the contrary, they indicate the beginnings of the present village. Before them, their place was unoccupied, and they do but commemorate the first of that series of changes by which the valley has been turned from a desolate wrinkle in the heaths into the anomalous suburb it has become to-day.

Of the period and manner of that first change I have already given a hint, attributing it indefinitely to a slow immigration of squatters somewhere in the eighteenth

century. Neither the manner of it, however, nor the period is material here. Let it suffice that, a hundred years ago or so, the valley had become inhabited by people living in the "peasant" way presently to be described more fully. The subject of this book begins with the next change, which by and by overtook these same people, and dates from the enclosure of the common, no longer ago than 1861. The enclosure was effected in the usual fashion: a few adjacent landowners obtained the lion's share, while the cottagers came in for small allotments. These allotments, of little use to their owners, and in many cases soon sold for a few pounds apiece, became the sites of the first few cottages for a newer population, who slowly drifted in and settled down, as far as might be, to the habits and outlook of their predecessors. This second period continued until about 1900. And now, during the last ten years, a yet greater change has been going on. The valley has been "discovered" as a "residential centre." A water-company gave the signal for development. No sooner was a good water-supply available than speculating architects and builders began to buy up vacant plots of land, or even cottages—it mattered little which—and what never was strictly speaking a village is at last ceasing even to think itself one. The population of some five hundred twenty years ago has increased to over two thousand; the final shabby patches of the old heath are disappearing; on all hands glimpses of new building and raw new roads defy you to persuade yourself that you are in a country place. In fact, the place is a suburb of the town in the next valley, and the once quiet high-road is noisy with the motor-cars of the

richer residents and all the town traffic that waits upon the less wealthy.

But although in the exactest sense the parish was never a village, its inhabitants, as lately as twenty years ago (when I came to live here) had after all a great many of the old English country characteristics. Dependent on the town for their living the most of them may have been by that time; yet they had derived their outlook and their habits from the earlier half-squatting, half-yeoman people; so that I found myself amongst neighbours rustic enough to justify me in speaking of them as villagers. I have come across their like elsewhere, and I am not deceived. They had the country touch. They were a survival of the England that is dying out now; and I grieve that I did not realize it sooner. As it was, some years had passed by, and the movement by which I find myself living to-day in a "residential centre" was already faintly stirring before I began to discern properly that the earlier circumstances would repay closer attention.

They were not all agreeable circumstances; some of them, indeed, were so much the reverse of agreeable that I hardly see now how I could ever have found them even tolerable. The want of proper sanitation, for instance; the ever-recurring scarcity of water; the plentiful signs of squalid and disordered living—how unpleasant they all must have been! On the other hand, some of the circumstances were so acceptable that, to recover them, I could at times almost be willing to go back and endure the others. It were worth something to renew the old lost sense of quiet; worth something to be on such genial terms with one's neighbours; worth very much to become acquainted again

at first hand with the customs and modes of thought that prevailed in those days. Here at my door people were living, in many respects, by primitive codes which have now all but disappeared from England, and things must have been frequently happening such as, henceforth, will necessitate journeys into other countries if one would see them.

I remember yet how subtly the intimations of a primitive mode of living used to reach me before I had learnt to appreciate their meaning. Unawares an impression of antiquity would come stealing over the senses, on a November evening, say, when the blue wood-smoke mounted from a cottage chimney and went drifting slowly down the valley in level layers; or on still summer afternoons, when there came up from the hollow the sounds of hay-making—the scythe shearing through the grass, the clatter of the whetstone, the occasional country voices. The dialect, and the odd ideas expressed in it, worked their elusive magic over and over again. To hear a man commend the weather, rolling out his "Nice moarnin'" with the fat Surrey "R," or to be wished "Good-day, sir," in the high twanging voice of some cottage-woman or other, was to be reminded in one's senses, without thinking about it at all, that one was amongst people not of the town, and hardly of one's own era. The queer things, too, which one happened to hear of, the simple ideas which seemed so much at home in the valley, though they would have been so much to be deprecated in the town, all contributed to produce the same old-world impression. Where the moon's changes were discussed so solemnly, and people numbered the "mistis in March" in expectation of corresponding "frostis in May";

where, if a pig fell sick, public opinion counselled killing it betimes, lest it should die and be considered unfit for food; where the most time-honoured saying was counted the best wit, so that you raised a friendly smile by murmuring "Good for young ducks" when it rained; where the names of famous sorts of potatoes—red-nosed kidneys, *magnum bonums*, and so on—were better known than the names of politicians or of newspapers; where spades and reap-hooks of well-proved quality were treasured as friends by their owners and coveted by other connoisseurs—it was impossible that one should not be frequently visited by the feeling of something very old-fashioned in the human life surrounding one.

More pointed in their suggestion of a rustic tradition were the various customs and pursuits proper to given seasons. The customs, it is true, were preserved only by the children; but they had their acceptable effect. It might have been foolish and out-of-date, yet it was undeniably pleasant to know on May Day that the youngsters were making holiday from school, and to have them come to the door with their morning faces, bringing their buttercup garlands and droning out the appropriate folk ditty. At Christmastime, too, it was pleasant when they came singing carols after dark. This, indeed, they still do; but either I am harder to please or the performance has actually degenerated, for I can no longer discover in it the simple childish spirit that made it gratifying years ago.

Meanwhile, quite apart from such celebrations, the times and seasons observed by the people in following their work gave a flavour of folk manners which dignified the life of the

parish, by associating it with the doings of the countryside for many generations. In August, though one did not see, one heard about, the gangs of men trudging off at night for the Sussex harvest. In September the days went very silently in the valley, because the cottages were shut up and the people were all away at the hop-picking; and then, in the gathering dusk, one heard the buzz and rumour of manifold homecomings—tired children squalling, women talking and perhaps scolding, as the little chattering groups came near and passed out of earshot to their several cottages; while, down the hollows, hovering in the crisp night air, drifted a most appetizing smell of herrings being fried for a late meal. Earlier in the year there was hay-making in the valley itself. All the warm night was sometimes fragrant with the scent of the cut grass; and about this season, too, the pungent odour of shallots lying out in the gardens to ripen off would come in soft whiffs across the hedges. Always, at all times, the people were glad to gossip about their gardens, bringing vividly into one's thoughts the homely importance of the month, nay, the very week, that was passing. Now, around Good Friday, the talk would be of potato-planting; and again, in proper order, one heard of peas and runner-beans, and so through the summer fruits and plants, to the ripening of plums and apples, and the lifting of potatoes and carrots and parsnips.

In all these ways the parish, if not a true village, seemed quite a country place twenty years ago, and its people were country people. Yet there was another side to the picture. The charm of it was a generalized one—I think an impersonal one; for with the thought of individual persons

who might illustrate it there comes too often into my memory a touch of sordidness, if not in one connection then in another; so that I suspect myself, not for the first time, of sentimentality. Was the social atmosphere after all anything but a creation of my own dreams? Was the village life really idyllic?

Not for a moment can I pretend that it was. Patience and industry dignified it; a certain rough jollity, a large amount of good temper and natural kindness, kept it from being foul; but of the namby-pamby or soft-headed sentiment which many writers have persuaded us to attribute to old-English cottage life I think I have not in twenty years met with a single trace. In fact, there are no people so likely to make ridicule of that sort of thing as my labouring-class neighbours have always been. They do not, like the middle classes, enjoy it. It is a commodity for which they have no use, as may appear in the following pages.

To say this, however, is to say too little. I do not mean that the prevailing temper in the village was sordid, bitter, cruel, like that, say, of the Norman peasantry in De Maupassant's short stories. In by far the greater majority the people have usually seemed to me at the worst a little suspicious, a little callous, a little undemonstrative, and at the best generous and happy-go-lucky to a fault. Nevertheless, tales as repulsive as any that the French writer has told of his country-people could have been collected here by anyone with a taste for that sort of thing. Circumstantial narratives have reached me of savage, or, say, brutish, doings: of sons ill-treating their mothers, and husbands their wives of fights, and cruelties, and sometimes

—not often—of infamous vice. The likelihood of these tales, which there was no reason to doubt, was strengthened by what I saw and heard for myself. Drunkenness corrupted and disgraced the village life, so that good men went wrong and their families suffered miserably. I have helped more than one drunkard home at night, and seen a wretched woman or a frightened child come to the door to receive him. Even in the seclusion of my own garden I could not escape the evidences of mischief going on. For sounds echo up and down the valley as clearly as across the water of a lake; and sometimes a quiet evening would grow suddenly horrid with distracted noises of family quarrel in some distant cottage, when women shrilled and clamoured and men cursed, and all the dogs in the parish fell a-barking furiously. Even in bed one could not be secure. Once or twice some wild cry in the night—a woman's scream, a man's volley of oaths—has drawn me hurrying to my window in dread that outrage was afoot; and often the sounds of obscene singing from the road, where men were blundering homewards late from the public-houses in the town, have startled me out of my first sleep. Then, besides the distresses brought upon the people by their own folly, there were others thrust upon them by their economic condition. Of poverty, with its attendant sicknesses and neglects, there has never been any end to the tales, while the desolations due to accidents in the day's work, on the railway, or with horses, or upon scaffoldings of buildings, or in collapsing gravel-quarries, have become almost a commonplace. In short, there is no room for sentimentality about the village life. Could its annals be written they would

make no idyll; they would be too much stained by tragedy and vice and misery.

Yet the knowledge of all this—and it was not possible to live here long without such knowledge—left the other impressions I have spoken of quite unimpaired. Disorders were the exception, after all. As a general rule the village character was genial, steadfast, self-respecting; one could not but recognize in it a great fund of strength, a great stability; nor could one help feeling that its main features—the limitations and the grimness, as well as the surprising virtues—were somehow closely related to that pleasant order of things suggested by the hay-making sounds, by the smell of the wood-smoke, by the children's May-day garlands. And, in fact, the relationship was essential. The temper and manners of the older people turned out to have been actually moulded by conditions of a true village kind, so that the same folk-quality that sounded in the little garland song reappeared more sternly in my neighbours' attitude towards their fate. Into this valley, it is true, much had never come that had flourished and been forgotten in English villages elsewhere. At no time had there been any of the more graceful folk arts here; at no time any comely social life, such as one reads of in Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* or Gray's *Elegy*; but, as I gradually learnt, the impoverished labouring people I talked to had been, in many cases, born in the more prosperous conditions of a self-supporting peasantry.

Bit by bit the truth come home to me, in the course of unconcerned gossip, when my informants had no idea of the significance of those stray scraps of information which they

let fall. I was not alive to it myself for a long time. But when I had heard of the village cows, which used to be turned out to graze on the heaths, and had been told how fir-timber fit for cottage roof-joists could be cut on the common, as well as heath good enough for thatching and turf excellent for firing; and when to this was added the talk of bread-ovens at half the old cottages, and of little corn-crops in the gardens, and of brewing and wine-making and bee-keeping; I understood at last that my elderly neighbours had seen with their own eyes what I should never see—namely, the old rustic economy of the English peasantry. In that light all sorts of things showed a new meaning. I looked with rather changed sentiments, for example, upon the noisome pigsties—for were they not a survival of a venerable thrift? I viewed the old tools—hoes and spades and scythes and fag-hooks—with quickened interest; and I speculated with more intelligence upon those aged people of the parish whose curious habits were described to me with so much respect. But of all the details that now gained significance, most to be noted were the hints of the comparative prosperity of that earlier time. For now some old woman, half starving on her parish pay, would indicate this or that little cottage, and remark that her grandfather had built it for her mother to go into when she married. Or now, a decrepit man would explain that in such and such a puzzling nook in the hillside had once stood his father's cow-stall. Here, at the edge of the arable strip, a building divided into two poor cottages proved to have been originally somebody's little hop-kiln; there, on a warm slope given over to the pleasure-garden of some "resident" like myself, a former villager used to grow

enough wheat to keep him in flour half the winter; and there again, down a narrow by-way gone ruinous from long neglect, Master So-and-so, whose children to-day go in fear of the workhouse, was wont to drive his little waggon and pair of horses.

Particulars like these, pointing to a lost state of well-being, accounted very well for the attraction which, in spite of individual faults, I had felt towards the village folk in general. The people stood for something more than merely themselves. In their odd ways and talk and character I was affected, albeit unawares, by a robust tradition of the English countryside, surviving here when the circumstances which would have explained it had already largely disappeared. After too many years of undiscernment that truth was apparent to me. And even so, it was but a gradual enlightenment; even now it is unlikely that I appreciate the facts in their deepest significance. For the "robust" tradition, as I have just called it, was something more than simply robust. It was older, by far, than this anomalous village. Imported into the valley—if my surmise is correct—by squatters two centuries ago, it was already old even then; it already had centuries of experience behind it; and though it very likely had lost much in that removal, still it was a genuine off-shoot of the home-made or "folk" civilization of the South of England. No wonder that its survivals had struck me as venerable and pleasant, when there was so much vigorous English life behind them, derived perhaps from so many fair English counties.

The perception came to me only just in time, for to-day the opportunities of further observation occur but rarely. The

old life is being swiftly obliterated. The valley is passing out of the hands of its former inhabitants. They are being crowded into corners, and are becoming as aliens in their own home; they are receding before newcomers with new ideas, and, greatest change of all, they are yielding to the dominion of new ideas themselves. At present, therefore, the cottagers are a most heterogeneous population, presenting all sorts of baffling problems to those who have to deal with them, as the schoolmaster and the sanitary officer and others find. In no two families—hardly in two members of the same family—do the old traditions survive in equal degree. A lath-and-plaster partition may separate people who are half a century asunder in civilization, and on the same bench at school may be found side by side two children who come from homes, the one worthy of King George III.'s time, the other not unworthy of King George V.'s. But the changes which will remove the greatest of these discrepancies are proceeding very fast; in another ten years' time there will be not much left of the traditional life whose crumbling away I have been witnessing during the twenty years that are gone.

Some grounds of hope—great hope, too—which begin at last to appear, and are treated of in the final chapter of this book, save the tale of Change in the Village from being quite a tragedy, yet still it is a melancholy tale. I have dealt with it in the two sections called respectively "The Altered Circumstances" and "The Resulting Needs." The earlier chapters, which immediately follow this one under the heading "The Present Time," are merely descriptive of the people and their conditions as I know them now, and aim at

nothing more than to pave the way for a clearer understanding of the main subject.

II

THE PRESENT TIME

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SELF-RELIANCE

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There is a chapter in Dickens's *Hard Times* which tells how it was discovered that somebody had fallen down a disused mine-shaft, and how the rescue was valiantly effected by a few men who had to be awakened for that end from their drunken Sunday afternoon sleep. Sobered by the dangers they foresaw, these men ran to the pit-mouth, pushed straight to the centre of the crowd there, and fell to work quietly with their ropes and winches. As you read, you seem to see them, spitting on their great hands while they knot the ropes, listening attentively to the doctor as to an equal, and speaking in undertones to one another, but regardless of the remarks of the bystanders. The best man amongst them, says Dickens—and you know it to be true: Dickens could have told you the men's names and life-history had he chosen—the best man amongst them was

the greatest drunkard of the lot; and when his heroic work was done, nobody seems to have taken any farther notice of him.

These were Northcountrymen; but there was a quality about them of which I have often been reminded, in watching or hearing tell of the men in this Surrey village. It is the thing that most impresses all who come into any sympathetic contact with my neighbours their readiness to make a start at the dangerous or disagreeable task when others would be still talking, and their apparent expectation that they will succeed. In this spirit they occasionally do things quite as well worthy of mention as the incident described by Dickens. I remember looking on myself at just such another piece of work, in the town a mile away from here, one winter day. The sluggish "river," as we call it, which flows amongst meadows on the south of the town, is usually fordable beside one of the bridges, and men with horses and carts as often as not drive through the ford, instead of going over the bridge. But on the day I am recalling floods had so swollen the stream that a horse and cart were swept down under the narrow bridge, and had got jammed there, the driver having escaped over the iron railings of the bridge as the cart went under. I don't know what became of him then—he was but a lad, I was told. When I came on the scene, a number of people were on the bridge, while many more were down on the river banks, whence they could see the horse and cart under the arch. A few were bawling out unheeded advice as to what should be done; in fact, a heated altercation had arisen between the two loudest—a chimney-sweep and a medical man—whose

theories disagreed; but it was plain to everybody that it would be a risky thing to venture under the bridge into that swirling stream. For ten minutes or more, while the horse remained invisible to us on the bridge, and likely to drown, the dispute snapped angrily from bank to bank, punctuated occasionally by excited cries, such as "He's gettin' lower!" "He's sinkin' down!" Then, unobserved, a bricklayer's labourer came running with a rope, which he hurriedly made into a noose and tightened under his armpits. None of the shouters, by the way, had suggested such a plan. The man was helped over the railings and swiftly lowered—Heaven knows who took a hand at that—and so he disappeared for five minutes. Then a shout: the horse came into view, staggering downstream with harness cut, and scrambled up into the meadow; and the man, drenched and deadly white, and too benumbed to help himself, was hauled up on to the bridge, and carried to the nearest inn. I never heard his name—people of his sort, as Dickens knew, are generally anonymous—but he was one of the labourers of the locality, and only last winter I saw him shivering at the street corners amongst other out-o'-works.

Behaviour like this is so characteristic of labouring men that we others expect it of them as if it were especially their duty. Again and again I have noticed it. If a horse falls in the street, ten chances to one it is some obscure labouring fellow who gets him up again. Whether there is danger or no, in emergencies which demand readiness and disregard of comfort, the common unskilled labourer is always to the fore. One summer night I had strolled out to the top of the road here which slants down, over-arched by tall trees, past

the Vicarage. At some distance down, where there should have been such a depth of darkness under the trees, I was surprised to see a little core of light, where five or six people stood around a bright lamp, which one of them was holding. The scene looked so theatrical, glowing under the trees with the summer night all round it, that, of course, I had to go down the hill and investigate it. The group I joined was, it turned out, watching a bicyclist who lay unconscious in somebody's arms, while a doctor fingered at a streaming wound in the man's forehead, and washed it, and finally stitched it up. The bicycle—its front wheel buckled by collision with the Vicarage gatepost—stood against the gate, and two or three cushions lay in the hedge; for the Vicar had come out to the man's assistance, and had sent for the doctor, and it was the Vicar himself, old and grey, but steady, who now held his library lamp for the doctor's use. The rest of us stood looking on, one of us at least feeling rather sick at the sight, and all of us as useless as the night-moths which came out from the trees and fluttered round the lamp. At last, when all was done, and the injured man could be moved, there rose up a hitherto unnoticed fellow who had been supporting him, and I recognized one of our village labourers. He looked faint, and tottered to a chair which the Vicar had ready, and gulped at some brandy, for he, too, had been overcome by sight of the surgery. But it was to him that the task of sitting in the dusty road and being smeared with blood had fallen.

And this quiet acceptance of the situation, recognizing that he if anyone must suffer, and take the hard place which soils the clothes and shocks the feelings, gives the clue to

the average labourer's temper. It is really very curious to think of. Rarely can a labourer afford the luxury of a "change." Wet through though his clothes may be, or blood-stained, or smothered with mud or dust, he must wear them until he goes to bed, and must put them on again as he finds them in the morning; but this does not excuse him in our eyes from taking the disagreeable place. Still less does it excuse him in his own eyes. If you offer to help, men of this kind will probably dissuade you. "It'll make yer clothes all dirty," they say; "you'll get in such a mess." So they assume the burden, sometimes surly and swearing, oftener with a good-tempered jest.

To anything with a touch of humour in it they will leap forward like schoolboys. I am reminded of a funny incident one frosty morning, when patches of the highway were slippery as glass. Preceding me along the road was a horse and cart, driven by a boy who stood upright in the cart, and seemed not to notice how the horse's hoofs were skidding; and some distance ahead three railway navvies were approaching, just off their night's work, and carrying their picks and shovels. I had left the cart behind, and was near these three, when suddenly they burst into a laugh, exclaiming to one another, "Look at that old 'oss!" I turned. There sat the horse on his tail between the shafts, pawing with his forefeet at the road, but unable to get a grip at its slippery surface. It was impossible not to smile; he had such an absurd look. The navvies, however, did more than smile. They broke into a run; they saw immediately what to do. In thirty seconds they were shovelling earth out from the

hedgerow under the horse's feet, and in two minutes more he had scrambled up, unhurt.

In such behaviour, I say, we have a clue to the labouring-man's temper. The courage, the carelessness of discomfort, the swiftness to see what should be done, and to do it, are not inspired by any tradition of chivalry, any consciously elaborated cult. It is habitual with these men to be ready, and those fine actions which win our admiration are but chance disclosures in public of a self-reliance constantly practised by the people amongst themselves—by the women quite as much as by the men—under stress of necessity, one would say at first sight. Take another example of the same willing efficiency applied in rather a different way. In a cottage near to where I am writing a young labourer died last summer—a young unmarried man, whose mother was living with him, and had long depended on his support. Eighteen months earlier he had been disabled for a week or two by the kick of a horse, and a heart-disease of long standing was so aggravated by the accident that he was never again able to do much work. There came months of unemployment, and as a consequence he was in extreme poverty when he died. His mother was already reduced to parish relief; it was only by the help of his two sisters—young women out at service, who managed to pay for a coffin for him—that a pauper's funeral was avoided. A labourer's wife, the mother of four or five young children, took upon herself the duty of washing and laying out the corpse, but there remained still the funeral to be managed. An undertaker to conduct it could not be engaged; there was no money to pay him. Then,