

***FRANK  
FRANKFORT  
MOORE***

***THE LIGHTER  
SIDE OF ENGLISH  
LIFE***

**Frank Frankfort Moore**

# **The Lighter Side of English Life**

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# CHAPTER ONE—THE VILLAGE

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**O**NE MORNING A FEW MONTHS AGO A foreigner under the influence of an aeroplane descended somewhat hurriedly in a broad and—as he ascertained—a soft meadow in Nethershire; and while he was picking up his matches preparatory to lighting his cigarette—he has always a cigarette in his waistcoat pocket, for a man with a Kodak may be lurking behind the nearest tree—an agricultural labourer on his way to his work looked over the hedge at him. The foreign person noticed him, and after trying him in vain with German, French, and Hungarian, fell back upon English, and in the few words of that language which he knew, inquired the name of the place. “Why, Bleybar Lane, to be sure,” replied the man, perceiving the trend of the question with the quick intelligence of the agricultural labourer; and when the stranger shook his head and lapsed into Russian, begging him to be more precise (for the aviator had not altogether recovered from the daze of his sudden arrival), the man repeated the words in a louder tone, “Bleybar Lane—everybody knows Bleybar Lane; and that's Thurswell that you can't see, beyond the windmill,” and then walked on. Happily our parson, who had watched the descent of the stranger and was hastening to try if he could be of any help to him, came up at that moment and explained that he was in England, where English was, up to that time at least, spoken in preference to German or, indeed, any other

language, and that breakfast would be ready at the Rectory in an hour.

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## I—THE ABORIGINES

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It was the Rector who told me the story, adding in regard to the labourer—— “Isn't that just like Thurswell—fancying that a Czech who had just crossed the Channel, and believed himself to be in Belgium, should know all about Thurswell and its Bleybar Lane?”

I thought that it was very like Thurswell indeed, and afterwards I made it still more like by talking to the agricultural labourer himself about the incident.

“Ay, he spoke gibberish with a foreign accent, and I told him plain enough, when he had swept his arms and cried 'Where?' or words to that effect, that he was by Bleybar Lane, and that the place he couldn't see for the windmill was Thurswell; but it were no use: foreigners be in the main woeful ignorant for Christian persons, and I could see that he had no knowledge even of Thurswell when he heard the name.”





G. Balch

“FOREIGNERS BE IN THE MAIN WOEFUL IGNORANT”



That is our village down to the ground. You could not persuade one of the aborigines that there is any place in England or outside it of greater importance than Thurswell, because there is no place of greater importance to the Thurswellian. An aged inhabitant was taken by his son to see the coronation procession, and when he was asked what it was like, replied, after a suitable pause, that it ran Thurswell's Day very hard—Thurswell's Day is the name given to the First Sunday after Trinity, when the Free Foresters and Ancient Shepherds march to church in sashes, with a band made up of a fife, three flutes, a drum, a concertina, and a melodion.

“Ay, neighbours, it ran Thurswell's Day hard,” he affirmed, and did not flinch from his statement in spite of the incredulous murmur that arose from the bench nearest the door, which was immediately suppressed by the landlord, who was apprehensive of a riot.

Thurswell is a village of antiquity. Its name occurs in *Domesday Book*, where you may look in vain for any mention of Brindlington, that mushroom town of 60.000 inhabitants, which is nine miles to the north, or even of Broadminster, the Cathedral town, which is seven miles to the west. “Broadminster is where the Dean lives,” I was told by the landlord of the Wheatsheaf at Thurswell when I was making inquiries about the district, “and Brindlington is where the brewery is; but my father got his ale at Pipstone, and I get mine there too, though it's a blow to Brindlington, for in harvest the best part of a cask goes within a week.”

There are several other villages within a mile or so of Thurswell, and the inhabitants of some are infatuated

enough to believe that they are on a social, as well as a commercial, level with the people of Thurswell. This singular hallucination caused a good deal of friction on all sides in years gone by, and *the rapprochement* that was eventually brought about between Thurswell and its neighbours by the thoughtfulness of a Rector, who preached a sermon on the vision of St. Peter and enjoined upon his hearers to remember that even though people have not been born in Thurswell they are still God's creatures, was a purely sentimental one, and did not last.

Some years ago an article appeared in the *Topographical Gazette* from the pen of an eminent archaeologist affirming that Thurswell must originally have been Thor's Well, so that the place dated back to the time of the worship of the Scandinavian god Thor; but while this evidence of its antiquity was received by some of us with enthusiasm—having been a resident in the village for a whole year I was naturally an ardent Thurswellian—it was, when reproduced in the *East Nethershire Weekly*, generally regarded as the invention of some one anxious to give the enemies of the village some ground for their animosity toward it. For the suggestion that it had a heathen origin was not one, it was felt, to which its people could tamely submit. There was some talk of a public meeting to protest against the conclusions come to by the archaeologist, and the Rector was considered in some quarters to be but a half-hearted champion of the Faith when he refused to lend the schoolhouse—sixty people could be crowded into it—for this purpose, his argument that the more heathen Thurswell had been in the past, the more marked should be its display of

the Christian virtue of charity in the present, being criticised as savouring of Jesuitry. For months the matter was the leading topic of the neighbourhood, and the Hearts of Oak Habitation of the Ancient Shepherds drew up a resolution protesting in this connection against “archaeology and every form of idolatry.” It was the misprint in the *Gazette* that changed “Hearts of Oak” into “Heads of Oak” in publishing the proceedings that quenched the violence of the discussion, and now it is considered bad taste to refer to it at all.

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## II.—THE CENTENARIANS

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**M**ore recently still another busybody endeavoured to deprive the village of the reputation which it had long enjoyed as the centre of English longevity. Now it would be impossible for any one to study the dates on the tombstones in the churchyard without noticing how great was the number of centenarians who died within the first fifty years of the nineteenth century in the parish of Thurswell. There were apparently eighteen men and fourteen women interred after passing their hundredth year; indeed, one woman was

recorded to have reached her hundred and twenty-seventh year, which is a good age for a woman. The people were naturally very proud of the constant references made in print to their longevity; but one day there came down to the village a member of the Statistical Society, and after busying himself among the musty parish registers for a month, he announced his discovery that in every case but one the date of the birth of the alleged centenarians was the date of the birth of their parents. The investigator had noticed that all the alleged centenarians had “departed this life” during the rectorship of the Rev. Thomas Ticehurst, and centenarianism had always been his fad. He had preached sermon after sermon on Methuselah and other distinguished multi-centenarians, and he spent his time travelling about the country in search of evidence in confirmation of the theory that Methuselah, though somewhat beyond the average in respect of age, might yet have been exceeded on his own ground by many people living in the country districts of England. Nothing was easier, the investigator tried to show, than for a clergyman in charge of the registers, who had such a hobby, to assume, when any very old man or woman died in his parish, that he or she actually was twenty years or so older; and as the Christian names were nearly always hereditary, in nine cases out of ten he accepted the registry of the birth of the father as that of the lately deceased man, and the date of the birth of the mother in regard to the aged woman, the result being a series of the most interesting inscriptions.

I must confess that I myself felt that I had a personal grievance against this busybody statistician. There is

nothing so comforting to the middle-aged as a stroll through a cemetery of centenarians; and I had the most uncharitable feelings against the person who could make such an attempt to deprive me of the pleasant hope of living another sixty or seventy years.

But while we were still talking about the danger of permitting strangers to have access to the registers, I was told one morning that a man who had once been the gardener at the place which I had just acquired would like to see me. Now, I had had already some traffic with the superannuated gardener of my predecessor, and so I was now surprised to find myself face to face with quite a different person.

“You were not the gardener here,” I said. “I saw him; his name is Craggs, and he still lives in the hollow.”

“Oh ay, Jonas Craggs—young Joe, we called him; I knew his father,” replied my visitor. “He was only here a matter of six-and-thirty years. I was superann'ated to make way for him. Young-Joe, we called him, and I was curious to see how things had come on in the garden of late.”

“You were superannuated thirty-six years ago,” said I. “What age are you now?”

“I'm ninety-eight, sir,” he replied with a smirk.



"I'M NINETY-EIGHT, SIR"

I showed him round the garden. He said he could see that the things he had planted had grown summut; and I walked through the churchyard the next Sunday with the greatest complacency.

When I told the Rector that my experience of this grand old gardener tended to make me take the side of Thurswell and the neighbourhood against scientific investigation in regard to longevity, he assured me that if I paid a visit to a certain elderly lady who lived with a middle-aged granddaughter in a cottage on the road to Cransdown I should find ample confirmation of the faith for which I had a leaning. The lady's name was, he said, Martha Trendall, and she really was, he thought, a genuine centenarian, for she had a vivid recollection of events which had happened quite ninety years ago; and, unlike most reputed centenarians, she remembered many details of the historical incidents that had taken place in her young days; she was a most intelligent person altogether, and had evidently been at one time a great reader, though latterly her eyesight had shown signs of failing.

I made up my mind to pay a visit to this Mrs. Trendall, and thought that perhaps I might get material for a letter to the *Times* that should not leave the scientific investigator a leg to stand on. A month, however, elapsed before I carried out my intention, though the Rector thought this was not a case for procrastination: when a lady is anything over a hundred her hold upon life shows a tendency to relax, he said, for even the most notorious centenarians cannot be expected to live for ever. But when I managed to make my



call I must confess that I was amply repaid for the time I spent in the company of Mrs. Trendall.

I found her sitting in her chair in what is called the chimney corner when it exists in its original condition in a cottage, but is termed the “ingle nook” in those red brick imitation cottages which are being flung about the country by those architects who concern themselves in the development of estates. I saw at once that such a figure would be out of place anywhere except in the chimney corner of a cottage kitchen, with immovable windows, but a “practicable” iron crane for the swinging of pots over the hearth fire. The atmosphere—thanks to the immobile casements—was also all that it should be: it was congenially centenarian, I perceived in a moment. It had a pleasant pungency of old bacon, but though I looked about for a genuine flitch maturing in the smoke, I failed to see one—still, the nail on which it should be hanging was there all right.

The old woman was quite alert. There was nothing of the wheezy gammer about her. Only one ear was slightly deaf, she told me when I had been introduced by her granddaughter—a woman certainly over fifty. She smiled referring to her one infirmity, and when she smiled the parchment of her face became like the surface of the most ancient palimpsest: it was seamed by a thousand of the finest lines, and made me feel that I was looking at an original etching by Rembrandt or Albert Dürer—a “trial proof,” not evenly bitten in places; and the cap she wore added to the illusion.

She was, I could see, what might be called a professional centenarian, and so might retain some of those prejudices which existed long ago against “talking shop” and therefore I refrained from referring in any way to her age: I felt sure that when the right moment came she would give me an opening, and I found that I had not misjudged her. I had scarcely told her how greatly we all liked our house before she gratified me by a reminiscence of the antepenultimate owner: he had died, I happen to know, thirty-eight years ago, and Mrs. Trendall remembered the morning he first rode his black horse to hounds—that was the year before he married, and his son was now a major-general. “A long time ago,” I remarked, and she smiled the patronising smile of the professional at the feeble effort of an incompetent amateur. “Long ago? Oh no; only a bit over sixty years—maybe seventy.” The difference between sixty and seventy years ago was in her eyes not worth taking any account of. Her treatment of this reminiscence gave me warning of what she could do when she had her second wind and got into her stride.

“You must have a great memory, Mrs. Trendall,” I remarked. “Was there much stir in this neighbourhood when Queen Victoria got married? I heard something about a big bonfire on Earl's Beacon.”

“‘Twere no more'n a lucifer match in compare with the flare up after Waterloo,” was her complacent reply; and I felt as if I had just had an audacious pawn taken by my opponent's Queen. “Ay, Thurswell lost three fine youngsters at Waterloo. There was Amos Scovell, him with the red hair.”

“The one they used to call Carrots?” I suggested.

She brightened up.

“The very same—Carrots they called him sure enough,” she said, nodding. “But you couldn't have knowed'un; you're no more'n a stripling as yet. Doan't you list to all that you hear from them that calls theirselves ancient old venerables; there's not a one of'un that's truthfully old—I'm the only one; take my word for it, sir.”

I gave her to understand (I hope) by my confidential smile and shake of the head that I was aware of the many fraudulent claims to longevity advanced by some of our friends about Thurswell.

“Age? Age is an empty thing without a memory,” I remarked. “But what a memory you have, Mrs. Trendall! I shouldn't wonder if you recollected the news of Nelson's victory at Trafalgar arriving in England—oh no: that was too long ago even for you.”

She bridled up in a moment.

“Too long ago for me?—too long, quotha! Don't I mind it as if it happened no earlier'n last week? It were before I married my first. It were my father that came a-bustling hasty like and wi' a face rosy wi' beer and hurry, and says he, 'Nelson has broke the Frenchies on us—broke them noble, and we may look for'un coming home any day now,' says he; and there wasn't a sober man in the five parishes that night—no, not a one. Ay, those was times!”

“Surely—surely,” I acquiesced. “But now that you can look back on them quite calmly in the afternoon of your life, would you really say that they were more lively times than when the Duke of Marlborough was doing his fighting for us? You've heard your mother speak of Marlborough, I'm sure.”

“My mother—speak! Why, I see'un for myself wi' these very eyes when he come home from the wars—a nice, well-set-up gentleman, if so be that I know what'tis to be a gentleman. It was when he come to pay his respex to Squire Longden at Old Deane—the squire that married thrice, as they said, the first for love, the second for lucre, and the third for—for—now was it for liquor or learning?—Well, 'twere one of the two. Ay, sir, those was the times—before there was any talk about Prince Albert and the Christian Palace in London.”

“I should rather think so. And if you are old enough to remember seeing the great Duke of Marlborough, I am sure that you may remember seeing Oliver Cromwell when he came through Thurswell with his army?”

“Oliver Cromwell? You've spoke the truth, sir. I see'un once—on'y once, to be exact. I mind'un well.'Twere in the mid o' hay harvest, and father come up to us in a mortal great haste, and says he, 'Martha lass, throw down that rake and I'll show you the greatest sight o' your life—Cromwell hisself on a mighty skewbald.' And, sure enough, there he was a-galloping at the head of a fine army o' men, with guns a-rumbling and the bugles blowing—grand as a circus—ay, Batty's Circus with all the fun about Jump Jim Crow and Billy Barlow and the rest. Oh, I saw'un sure.”

“And Queen Elizabeth—I wonder if you ever chanced to see her?”

“Never, sir—never! 'Twere always the sorrow o' my life that the day she passed through Ticebourne, where I was living with my grand-aunt Martha—her that I was named after—I had been sent with a basket o' three dozen eggs—

one dozen of'em turkeys—to the big house, and her ladyship not being at home I had to wait the best part of a whole hour, and by the time I got back the Queen had driven away, so I missed the chance o' my life; for being since my early years noteworthy for speaking the truth to a hairs-breadth, I couldn't bring myself to say that I had seen a royal person when I hadn't. But what I can say is that I on'y missed seeing of her by twenty minutes, more or less.”

I began to feel that I might be overwhelmed if I were borne much farther in the current of the pellucid stream of Mrs. Trendall's veracity; so I rose and thanked the good woman for her courtesy, and expressed the hope that the efforts she had made on my behalf to be rigidly accurate had not fatigued her.

She assured me that all she had said was nothing to what she could say if I had a mind to listen to her.

When I acknowledged to the Rector that the memory of Martha had surpassed my most sanguine hopes, he was greatly delighted. I thought it well, however, to neglect the opportunity he gave me of going into the details of her interesting recollections. Before we dropped the subject, he said what a pity it was that an historian of the nineteenth century could not avail himself of the services of Martha to keep him straight on some points that might be pronounced of a contentious nature.

Not many days after my interesting interview with Martha, the professional centenarian, the decease of an unobtrusive amateur was notified to me. It came about through the temporary disorganisation of our bread service, which I learned was due to the sudden death of the baker's

mother. Entering his shop a week or two later, I ventured to say a word of conventional condolence to him, and this was responded to by him with a mournful volubility that made me feel as if I had just attended a funeral oration, or an inefficient reading of "In Memoriam." It was a terrible blow to him, he said—a cruel blow; and he went on to suggest that it was such an apparently gratuitous stroke that it made even the most orthodox man doubt the existence of mercy in the Hand that had inflicted it.

"No doubt, no doubt," I acquiesced. "But, after all, we must all die some day, Martin, and your good mother could scarcely be said to have been cut off long before she had reached the allotted span. You know you can hardly call yourself a young man still, Martin."

He shook his head as if to hint that he had heard this sort of thing before. I think it very probable that he had: I know that I had, more than once. But I thought that there was no occasion for him to suggest so much, so I boldly asked him what age his mother had reached.

He shook his head, not laterally this time, but longitudinally, and distributing the flies more evenly over a plate of jam tarts with a mournful whisk of his feather duster, he replied—

"She was a hundred and four last February, sir."

I turned right about and left him alone with his irreparable grief.

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### III. THE POINT OF VIEW

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**O**n the subject of age, I may say that it has always seemed to me that it is the aim of most people to appear as young as possible—and perhaps even more so—for as long as possible—and perhaps even longer; but then it seems gradually to dawn upon them that there may be as much distinction attached to age as to youth, and those who have been trying to pass themselves off as much younger than they really are turn their attention in the other direction and endeavour to make themselves out to be much older than the number of their years. It is, of course, chiefly in the cottages that the real veterans are to be found—old men and women who take a proper pride in having reached a great if somewhat indefinite age, and in holding in contempt the efforts of a neighbour to rival them in this way. One of the peculiarities of these good folk is to become hilarious over the news of the death of some contemporary. I have seen ancient men chuckle at the notion of their having survived some neighbour who, they averred with great emphasis, was much their junior. The idea seems to strike them as being highly humorous. And so perhaps it may be, humour being so highly dependent upon the standpoint from which it is viewed.



In the cottages the conversation frequently turns upon the probability of an aged inmate being gathered unto his fathers before next harvest or, if in autumn, before the first snow, and the utmost frankness characterises the remarks made on this subject in the presence of the person who might be supposed to be the most interested in the discussion, though, as a matter of fact, he is as little interested in it as the Tichborne claimant acknowledged he was in his trial after it had passed its fortieth day. I was fortunate enough to reach the shelter of a farm cottage before a great storm a few years ago, and on a truckle bed in the warm side of the living room of the family there lay an old man, who nodded to me and quavered out a "good marn." I asked the woman, who was peeling potatoes sitting on a stool, if he was her father or her husband's father.

"He's Grandpaw Beck; but don't you take any heed o' him, sir, he's dying," she replied, with the utmost cheerfulness. "Doctor's bin here yestereve, and says he'll be laid out afore a week. But we've everything handylike and ready for'un."



“ HE'S GRANDPAW BECK ; BUT DON'T YOU TAKE ANY  
HEED O' HIM, SIR, HE'S DYING ”

She pointed to a chair on which some white garments were neatly laid. "I run the iron o'er'em afore settin' to the bit o' dinner," she explained.

I glanced at the old man. He nodded his approval of her good housekeeping. He clearly thought that procrastination should be discountenanced.

The flashes of lightning and the peals of thunder seemed to me to be by no means extravagant accompaniments to this grim scene (as it appeared in my eyes). I have certainly known far less impressive scenes on the stage thought worthy of the illumination of lightning and the punctuation of thunder claps.

This familiar treatment of the subject of the coming of the grim figure with the scythe prevails in every direction. A friend of mine had a like experience in a cottage in another part of the country. The man of the house—he was a farm labourer—was about to emigrate to Canada, and was anxious to get as good a price as possible for some pieces of old china in his possession, and my friend had called to see them by invitation. He was brought into a bedroom where the plates were to be seen on a dresser; and by way of making conversation on entering the room, he asked the man when he thought of leaving England.

"Oh, very shortly now," he replied. "Just as soon as feyther there dies" (jerking his head in the direction of a bed), "and he's far gone—he's dying fast—Doctor Jaffray gives us great hope that a week'll finish'un."

He then went on to talk about the china, explaining that three of the pieces had been brought by his grandmother

from the Manor House, where she had been still-room maid for twenty-six years.

“Twenty-eight years—twenty-eight years, Amos,” came a correcting falsetto from the bed.

“You know nowt o' the matter,” cried the son. “This is no business o' yours. We doan't want none o' your jaw. Go on wi' your dying.”



# CHAPTER TWO.—OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE

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## I.—THE GENERAL

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**O**N A VERY DIFFERENT PLANE OF INTEREST I regard my experience of two delightful old people whom I found living, the one a mile or two on the Brindlington side of Thurswell, the other on the Broadminster side, “where the Dean lives.” The former is an old general who once commanded a regiment of Sikhs and spent fifty years in India. He is now eighty-three years of age, and has two sons with the rank of colonel, a grandson who is a captain of Sappers, and two who are lieutenants in the navy. The old man has nothing of the bristling retired general about him—not even the liver. He is of a gentle, genial nature, not very anxious to hear the latest news, and not at all eager to make his visitors acquainted with his experiences in India or his views as to the exact degree of decadence reached by “the sarvice.” He speaks in a low and an almost apologetic tone, and is interested in old Oriental china and tortoiseshell tea-

caddies. One could never believe that this was the man whose sobriquet of Shire-i-Iran (Lion of Persia) was once a household word along the turbulent northwest frontier, or that he had been the most brilliant exponent of all the dash which one associates with the cavalry leader. His reputation on that long frontier was that of an Oriental equivalent of the Wild Huntsman of the German ballad. People had visions of him galloping by night at the head of his splendid Sikhs to cut off the latest fanatical insurrectionary from his supports, and then sweep him and his marauders off the face of the earth. Certainly no cavalry leader ever handled his men with that daring which he displayed—a daring that would have deserved to be called recklessness had it once failed.... And there he sat at dinner, talking in his low voice about the fluted rim of one of his tea-caddies, and explaining how it was quite possible to repair the silver stringing that beautified the top. Once I fancied I overheard him telling the person who sat by him at dinner about the native regiments—I felt sure that I heard the word “Sepoy,” and I became alert. Alas! the word that I had caught was only “tea-poy”—he was telling how he had got a finely cut glass for a deficient caddie out of an old nineteenth-century mahogany tea-poy. That was the nearest approach he made to the days of his greatness.

But I noticed with satisfaction that he partook of every dish that was offered to him—down to the marmalade pudding. At dessert he glanced down the table and said that he thought he would have an apple. “No, dear,” said his daughter, gently but firmly removing the dish beyond his reach. “You know that you are not allowed to touch apples.”

“Why, what harm will an apple do me—just one—only one apple?” he inquired, and there were tears in his voice—it had become a tremulous pipe, the tone of a child whose treat had been unjustly curtailed. “No, dear, not even one. It is for your own