

## I

*The Hill*

I WAS born in 1893, the third child to my father and mother, at a boarding school for boys. The school stands on the crown of a small round hill rising in the middle of the Weald, and its playing fields and pastures and woodland all belonged to my grandfather, nearly fifty acres altogether of the homeliest sort of English country land, a kindly piece of England to be cradled in.

Three miles away a railway skirted our kingdom and led to London and so to all the world with which books were filled. Our very remoteness made us a world to ourselves: we were as self-supporting as civilization would allow; my father bought flour by the sack and coal by the fifty tons; but our gardens could keep us in potatoes; and we often had some of last year's apples still to eat in this year's May. As children we knew next to nothing of a reputed world; the kingdom of our wanderings was not ten miles across, and the kingdom of our eyes, from one horizon to the other, not more than twenty in the clearest weather; but these two circles encompassed enough to occupy all our faculties,

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until one by one we grew foolishly ambitious. Our neighbours were the original salt of the earth; and though meadows were our counties, and parishes our nations, our little world was quite large enough to get lost in. Ulysses could say no more.

From our nursery window you looked out above a laurel hedge which was all that separated the house from a road running north and south immediately below you. On the top of the orchard bank opposite grew elm trees, whose tops were so high that you had to stoop at the low window to see them against the sky. The morning sunlight came across the orchard, through the brushwood of the elms, and shone deep into the nursery till eleven or so, when it began to burn on the road. Looking down the hill to the right out of the window, you saw the long face of the school, from which a buzz of study came up; and lower down five graceful leaning ash trees, brothers, all worn smooth by many attempts to climb them. Past these playground trees the narrow road wound steeply down for half a mile, bordered with oak trees and a wood; and this was the way to Gowdhurst, the village where the church was. The name was on our letters, but the village was really a long way off, and it stood on a hill over against us to the south, but higher than our hill. There was a stile in the wall of the playground from which you

could look over the playing fields, past the edge of our hill and across the semicircular valley of Combourne to the Gowdhurst hill, which was the boundary of our sight that way. High on the top among its trees the church tower stood, and though it was more than two miles away the air was generally so clear and bright (or so I remember it) that sharp eyes could distinguish the flag-staff set on the tower there.

Hundreds and thousands of trees filled the valley and hung about the hillsides; the horizon was rough with their round shapes; and where little runlets made their ways down the hill to join Combourne stream, great dark folds of woods covered them in. From northwest, by south, and round to the east, our knoll was thus walled in by hills and trees: towards the east there was a great wood called Old Park Wood, which ran all along the hillside. It was possible to go into this wood by Gowdhurst and to come out at Hor-Den, walking on moss under cover of trees the whole way without crossing a road or passing a house, three miles or more. It is true that there were hop-gardens, pastures, cornfields and orchards also on the sides of these hills; but orchards and hop-gardens, in summer at least, have their bowers like the woods, and all the short smooth sweeps of pasture were shaded by their own trees too, isolated giants of a whispering army.

All this lay south of an imaginary line drawn through our nursery window from the place of sunrise to that of sunset.

Put a little heap of sand in the middle of a saucer, but not so high as the edges of the saucer, reduce yourself to insect size, and build a school and a dozen cottages upon the heap of sand, cover sand and the south slopes of your saucer with trees in scale—you can hardly plant too many—and there in little you have my world at five; the southern half of it exactly true. But not the northern: on that side, though you cannot see it from the window, the saucer must be broken.

Looking north from the window, you would look up the hill road. On the crest, which was only just beyond our front door, the narrow road was guarded by pointed fir trees and a giant oak that overlooked the cricket meadow. You could not see further than this, because the ground fell gently away beyond it; but the road, of course, went on over the brow. On the left of it, as you walked down, was the Hollow, and the corner of the wonderful wood which maps call the Mount (but we called it Our Wood). On the other side was the cricket meadow, with its dozen dark oak trees, some of them sheltering the whitewashed shed which custom allowed us to call the Pavilion. In less than five minutes by this road

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we are at the Chapel, and the meeting of three roads. The downward road leads to Marden and Maidstone, leagues away out of the world through the gap in the saucer. The upward road is home still.

If our hamlet were a village, and if the village had a street, this would be the street; for, although the cricket meadow and its trees are still on our right, all down the other side are houses: an alehouse with its own great cherry tree, a double cottage, then another double cottage where Dick Excell and his daughter live on one side and Groves and his daughter on the other—old Groves, himself like one of the figures of “Time” or the “Ancient of Days” in Blake’s engravings, at this moment drawing water in buckets at the dipping-board of the cricket field pond. A little higher up, but still opposite the pond, is Jimmy’s wood-working shed, whence came all the five-barred gates in fields and woods for miles around; then Jimmy’s house on our left, on still rising ground, and the stable and barn and oast of the Farm on the right. Here, by its great thatched threshing barn, the road divided again; and if you took that branch which swept round the Farm to the right, and followed a short winding lane between a bank of fir trees and a nut plantation, you presently found yourself brought out upon the north and south road again, just under

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the five ash trees at school. This was our shortest walk, and it was known as going round the Green.

But to see our northern boundaries it was necessary to bear to the left by the threshing barn, to swing up past Jimmy's house, past two cottages and "J. Baden, Universal Provider," a shop of all trades, and to pass even the cobbler's thatched hut, the last outpost of civilization, till you found yourself on a ten-foot road, with the edge of our hill—the hill of sand—close by the left-hand hedges.

Four miles ahead Staplehurst church stood up on the plain, and to the left the horizon hills were ten miles off, so that it was barely possible to distinguish houses or trees, because of their smallness. And at your feet, between these hills and you, lay a vast flat meadow-lightened plain, the Weald, capable of being silvered over in winter by long strips and stretches of flood.

On such a summer day as this the wide flats looked still and suffocating down there. Little winds came up among the honeysuckle and wild-rose hedges along the ridge of the hill; they stirred and sighed in the ten-acre cherry orchard behind you, where even now the noisy minder was beating tin pans and calling his bird-scaring halloo; but these winds missed the sunken flats of the Weald. There the sun burned down on green miles of hay and

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corn, and glittered hotly on the sleepy steamy woods, but nothing stirred there. Marden church with its pyramid-capped tower stood sultry and forsaken, only a thin streak of writhing smoke lay over the back of a toy train that threaded its way like a shuttle among poplars and willows four or five miles away, too far for a sound.

Far far away you could see the great gap in those hills where the Medway ran through at Yalding. Over the hills were Maidstone and the North Downs, visible on days of exceptionally clear atmosphere, and the mouth of the Thames, and London too; but these were all names on the lips of travellers, as far away from us as the Americas. Here was the gap in our great saucer where the strange and unimaginable world came flooding in over the Weald, over the Marden plains, and lapped at the foot of the hill on which we first touched earth. God might have run a gigantic finger softly round the rim of our credible world, starting west on the peak of Horseman-Den, brushing along all the soft horizon trees southwards to Brandfold and Gowdhurst, to the feather-edged Cranbrook woods, miles of them, from Hor-Den down to Staplehurst church, and then for more than a quarter of the circle above the tender blue shapes of hills unreal, never to be visited, and, passing over the place

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where London was reputed to lie, would suddenly return to the firm rim of experience at the peak of Horseman-Den.

Thus the nursery, the school and its established gardens, made the base from which our unremembering souls sent forth inquiring sense and thought like worker bees, to gather in our knowledge of the world. There we began: we budded out of nothing, or came there, if we came, by ways of which no trace or memory remained; and every day our eyes looked under trees to where the sun got up and mounted high and sank again; every day we touched some leaf not touched by us before, finding everything created, ready, with a look of everlastingness when compared with the only standard we were born with, ourselves so new and changeable.

Swiftly and dangerously we generalized everything: we saw our neighbours' children as members of a permanent order, a kind of being existing side by side with beings of other kinds—men, for instance, and women, and uncles, and schoolboys—all stationary creatures to which our attitude was fixed for us by what seemed like long habit. Though we would now and then talk of growing-up, it was really a pretty piece of imagination and nothing more, and did not influence our present conduct of life for more than an hour. This world upon which



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our consciousness dawned, we dimly knew, must have been there before us; we came upon it when it was a going concern, dropped into pace with it, and, supposing that things had always been as we first found them (for the changes they underwent were too slow for our quick eyes), easily fell into the faith that they would always remain so. The only change we noted was an increase in our own powers over these permanencies, increase of physical strength or of power of persuasion or circumvention; but this only served to make them appear more fixed than ever.

## 2

*The Wood*

THERE is all the difference in the world between an object upon which your consciousness grows and one which grows upon your consciousness, and country-born people will all remember, with me, the shock of pain and doubt which comes when some well-known feature of a well-known land is suddenly removed—when a pond is drained, a barn demolished, or a tree cut up.

It is a law of copses, those dark close woods of bush-hazel and sapling chestnuts, that they shall be cleared every twelve years. The clearing of them provides the owner with thousands of chestnut bats, about four inches through at the bole and fourteen feet long, besides faggots and pea-boughs for himself and his cottagers. The chestnut bats will go as hop poles, tree-stilts, spiles, cordwood, hurdles and charcoal. A wood is a rich store of material; but it takes twelve years for the timber to grow to size from the stumps of the last cutting, though a wood that has been cleared becomes a wood again, to a child, in four years or even less.

Our wood was shaped like a fat letter L. It was