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978-1-108-00369-8 - The Bettesworth Book: Talks with a Surrey Peasant

George Sturt

Excerpt

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I

*INTRODUCTORY*

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WHEN I began, some years ago, to record the earlier conversations in this book, it was their quiet humour and their unconscious oddity that chiefly interested me. My acquaintance with Bettesworth was still young; and though I was beginning to value the man, I had not as yet seen in him much more than his garrulous and good-tempered quaintness. He was something of a comic character in my eyes.

Soon, however, came hints of a life far from comic under the odd exterior. Distressful poverty—that cynically grinning life-companion of the labouring people—insisted upon exhibiting itself in spite of Bettesworth's uncomplaining pride. It was betrayed pathetically, for instance, in his subdued but trembling

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delight over the gift of a strip of worn-out carpet, fit, I had thought, to cover his potatoes from frost, but more highly destined to occasion pride and enduring pleasure to the old man and his wife, who had never before possessed such a luxury. Instances such as this of the presence of sensitive feelings in the man made it particularly painful to see him in the cold weather stand shivering and hungry amongst the unemployed—for I have never been able to find him constant work. When to this poverty were added mishap and illness, from which he arose visibly aged, the comedy of Bettesworth's talk and its unconquerable good temper veiled so much silent suffering as to make me wonder and admire where before I might have laughed.

Meanwhile, admiration was already springing up on other grounds. The man's stoicism was a thing familiar enough and to spare amongst the poor ; but as talk followed talk, and I heard more and more about Bettesworth's life, I saw that his power of Endurance, however admirable, was as nothing in comparison with his power of effective Doing. I had read of adventures : this man had lived adventurously. While I

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had sat at the window looking out upon existence as at a lion in the street, Bettesworth had met it face to face every day; he had been at death-grips with it, and had come off victorious. I had not before talked so intimately with a man of this stamp; and for many months I thought of him as something exceptional—a *Mulvaney* in the army of workers.

But, as I know him better and know more about his neighbours, and as I consider the import of his conversations, I begin to perceive that it is not so much in the narratives themselves that there is anything unusual, as in the circumstance that I have been permitted to hear them. The relative positions of master and man are not generally conducive to friendly intercourse. As a rule, you will hear employers complaining that they cannot nowadays find a man who takes any interest in his work, or who can be trusted to do it faithfully. Economic influences have brought it about that this accusation is probably well founded; but fortunately those influences were absent between Bettesworth and myself. For one thing, I had no desire to make a profit out of his work; and moreover, a complete ignorance of its conditions

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compelled me to trust him. I could not, like an experienced farmer, swear that he knew nothing and cared less about what he was doing: I was obliged rather to take instruction from him and to be guided by his advice. And hence, instead of the false inequality that might have kept him from talking to me, there grew up between us a curious, and to me a most refreshing fellowship, in which social distinctions were forgotten, while I felt, as I gardened occasionally side by side with him, not like his employer, but rather as if I were an apprentice learning my trade from him. And if maturer knowledge leads me now to suspect that at first he acted up to the labourer's reputation as the farmers have it, on the other hand I know well that to-day his interest in my garden is more affectionate than my own; and while his success under these circumstances is a striking comment upon the indifference and ignorance commonly attributed to the country labourer, doubtless it has had its wholesome effect upon the man himself, and on his ease when talking with me.

And now, having realised that the circumstances are exceptional, it is becoming increasingly plain to me that Bettesworth is as

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other men, or—what is more to the purpose—that there are thousands of other men who are as Bettesworth is. He is a type of his class. His talk is full of anecdotes about neighbours as capable, as energetic, as resourceful as himself. This one is the best well-sinker in the neighbourhood; another excels in making ladders; a third has a supreme value as a carter; and so on. You see these men about the roads, living their lives unconcernedly and, so far as the book-learned know, obscurely, yet having an unsuspected fame amongst their own people. And the rank and file, who are not “the best,” but are serviceable enough—they, too, are taking life as Bettesworth has taken it. While I write this, there are thousands of them engaged upon the immemorial harvest tasks that he has loved so well. In another month they will have scattered again; up and down the country they will be actually doing all that Bettesworth has ever done: road-making, brick-burning, carting, well-sinking, building, tramping for work. Some of them not long ago I watched at Cambridge. While the “men” of the university appeared to be occupied in walking about the streets in tennis costume, gangs of

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these other men were laying sewers in the streets. At dinner-time they sat nonchalantly in rows along the curb, talking easily together over their bread and cheese; and it seemed to me as if there was something of Bettesworth in each one of them. I could guess the sort of conversation they had: practical, technical, racy with anecdotes and grim fun. You may hear snatches of that kind of talk at any time if you care to listen to a gang of labourers chatting over their work. These fellows, having set Cambridge in more decent order, are probably dispersed now through the country; who can tell where, or what doing? Of this only one may be convinced, that they are carrying on the work begun by their ancestors a thousand years ago, making England's fields productive and her towns habitable.

And so, when I hearken to Bettesworth, I feel that it is not to an exceptional man, and still less to an oddity that I am listening; but that in his quiet voice I am privileged to hear the natural, fluent, unconscious talk, as it goes on over the face of the country, of the English Race, rugged, unresting, irresistible. The Race—not the aggregate of individuals, but the Stirp

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or Stock that puts forth Bettesworths by the million, and rejoices in its English soil and loves the hard knocks of adventure and necessity everywhere. The native orderliness, the self-reliance, the indomitable vigour of our English breed unimpaired as yet by culture—this is what Bettesworth's talk means to me.

### II

To depict the man, by way of giving some vividness of reality to his talk, would be a task for an accomplished artist. And were it done, the most picturesque description might be after all not wholly desirable here; for such a picture, dwelling on Bettesworth's personal peculiarities as he appears in everyday life, would necessarily deal with what are, in fact, merely the accidentals, the man's superficial differences from his neighbours: it would leave out of account the essentials, the typical race-characteristics which he shares with other men. Why trouble to tell of Bettesworth's soiled "slop," his much-patched corduroys, or his broad-brimmed hat, seeing that, apart from special creases and mendings, his clothes are such as



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all his class wear? These need not concern us, nor yet need his comely old physiognomy; for, although all labouring men have not the broad, tanned cheeks, the grizzled whiskers and stubbly chin of Bettesworth; although all eyes are not grey and twinkling, nor all mouths both determined and good-tempered; yet the thing that renders this one man's features valuable and venerable is the human worth manifest through them—the English instinct, in fact, that is active in them for the time being; and this is not Bettesworth's appropriated possession. Without this Essential making itself unconsciously apparent in them, I should hardly have learned to love the sight of the old man's strong bent shoulders, or of his legs, heavily plodding for the most part, but sometimes moving with an astonishing gaunt activity. But this one vital quality dignifies all, whether you look at his scratched, sunburnt arms and knotted hands, or listen to the easily-flowing voice, whose low tones are peaceful as the babble of a house-martin on a quiet afternoon. And for the same reason—because they contain something of the same essence—I have treasured up these talks of his; because in gossiping about his own life

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Bettesworth is unawares telling of the similar lives, as lived for ages, of a type of Englishmen that may perhaps be hard to meet with in time to come. For it seems as though destiny has decreed that this class of men, by centuries of incalculable struggle and valiant endurance, should prepare England's soil not for themselves, but for the reaping machine and the jerry-builder.

### III

This is not the place for entering into particulars about our most interesting locality. Only, for understanding several points that might otherwise be obscure in Bettesworth's talk, it should be known that we are on the borders of the shaggy waste-land of Surrey. Looking southwards from our garden we can see it rolling up in long hills, their distant ridges serrated by the multitudinous crests of fir-trees, their slopes brown with heath.

Little else will that waste-land bear, it might be supposed. Yet in truth our valley, green enough in its disordered way, has itself been reclaimed from the waste chiefly during the last half-century. Fifty years ago it was for the most part