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George Sturt
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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

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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

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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

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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

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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 agree-

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able 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,

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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

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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 home-

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comings—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