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F. E. Green

Excerpt

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THE TYRANNY OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

CHAPTER I

THE PROLOGUE

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER COUCH declared in *Public Opinion* that, in performing his duties as a County Councillor of Cornwall, he found, when passing from the town to the country, he passed from the homes of the free to the homes of the unfree. "Furthermore," he added, "I regret to have to put it brutally, but if you really want to know where, in my opinion, lies England's one chance of regaining her alleged pride in a bold peasantry, I answer, 'In the bold peasantry having the boldness to organise a strike.'"

Now, no one could accuse "Q" of being a syndicalist, and yet his assertion leads one to suppose that he regards Parliament as an instrument too slow in its action for bettering the conditions of the agricultural labourer;

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and the utterances in the article referred to, instead of being expressed by a distinguished novelist, might surely have been taken from a speech by Mr. Tom Mann !

Fortunately, or unfortunately, a general strike amongst labourers is little likely to take place, for though our peasantry is still our largest class, it is certainly the worst organised. It is a class which is not vocal. It is a class which has not a single representative in Parliament. The peasant does not organise ; he does not strike. If he can manage to escape unburdened by debt or family, he quietly knots his red handkerchief, and sullenly sets his face towards that lurid light in the sky, which at nightfall betokens the town with its compelling lure of a life of greater freedom.

If he be young and lusty, and has a few golden coins to jingle in his pocket, he may escape altogether from the Mother Country and renounce his nationality. If he be a youth who is walking out with his lass, he too is to be seen setting his face towards the town ; for as cottages tumble down or are compulsorily closed, he will have to seek a roof for himself and his future wife, where chimneys are closer together, and where even the jerry-builder is joyously hailed as a philanthropist. On his way out of the village

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he may pass the Village Institute, and in spite of its warm, friendly, red blinds, its bagatelle table, its library of sermons and sporting journals, its pictures of saints, of crowned heads and of politicians, he will probably shake the dust of his native village from his iron-shod boots without regret. He wants a cottage, and no landlord or public body will build it. He wants, too, better wages: 12s., 15s., or even 18s. a week is not good enough, he avers, to look forward to, nor a sum large enough on which to found and nourish an Imperial Race. Above all he wants greater freedom. He seeks a place where he can meet many others like himself on terms of comradeship, some place where the eye of his employer-landlord is not always upon him, during his leisure as well as his working hours.

If he be middle-aged and have a wife and five or six children living under a roof, let to him by his employer; if there be no money wherewith to pay his removal expenses, let alone squaring up with the village tradesmen, he must remain a crushed, disheartened, lifeless man, a thrall with nothing to look forward to but a dreary life of unremitting toil, unrelieved by festivals or Holy Days. So he stays and becomes the man whose portrait is seared for ever on our con-

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sciences in the burning words of Edwin Markham :

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.

Yet is it not possible that the agricultural labourer may strike? History has an odd trick of repeating herself. It may be that some day we shall awake to learn that the most patient, the most docile, and the most stubborn of all the workers who supply us with our daily bread has at last been stung into open revolt.

He broke into revolt in 1830, and the revolt with alarming rapidity spread over the Southern and Midland counties like a prairie fire, though these were the days before the telegraph wire, the steam engine, and the capable trade union organiser.

In 1795 his wife, unable to get food for her children, broke into a still more remarkable revolt. Simultaneously, in counties as far apart as Nottingham and Gloucester, labourers' wives commandeered millers' carts and butchers' shops, and even held up a ship about to set sail from Bristol, filled with grain reaped from the fields that they had gleaned.

To-day, a general strike amongst labourers

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should be easier to organise if the great industrial trade unions directed the revolt. But if it were ever brought about, it would become something more than a strike—the nation would be riven in two. And if perchance the peasant class were broken in pieces, we should have destroyed the greatest artery that nourishes the heart of our Empire. Should it drift, as a class, from the open fields into the fetid slums of our towns to seek the greater freedom to be found there, our unique place as a maritime Power would be doomed. Doctors tell us that, after three generations, born-and-bred cockneys become sterile. It is the despised yokel who rejuvenates our cities, who recruits our army, who mans our ships of war. There is a Russian saying that the peasant “must be boiled in the factory pot before a revolution can succeed.” Though the English village labourer enters no factory, his son does; and when once the Jolly Roger is hoisted the Red Ensign will dip to it.

That there is a social unrest in our fields as well as in our factories who can doubt? That it is reticent and does not flaunt itself, does not behave itself unseemly, is not easily provoked, but endureth all things—*that* does not prove that there is no unrest. Is it not written that the meek shall

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inherit the earth? It is true that no words of burning oratory spring from the lips of Members of Parliament about the life of the peasant; it is true that no single organ proclaims the wrongs of the village labourer; nevertheless the evidence lies startlingly revealed to all those who have eyes to see—in the empty and silent places of our countryside. Hodge works as an isolated unit in the midst of large and lonely fields, and it is only when an eviction takes place that the ordinary citizen awakens to the fact that he might be living in another Emerald Isle.

Such an eviction took place on January 21 of this year, and set everyone in Wiltshire thinking, when at Foxham, with snow upon the ground, several cottagers with their families were turned out of their homes on to the roadside. Also when, in the following month, a landlord in the adjoining county evicted tenants for complaining of the want of cottage accommodation. He was, though, merely following the example set by public bodies. If there were a housing problem, he must either let it settle itself—a plan much favoured by the Local Government Board—by waiting until the overcrowded denizens had drifted into towns, or adopt a method prevalent in the Middle

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Ages, and known as “decanting”—that is, to tell the people they were too thick upon the ground, rendering cottages insanitary, and that those who were not required to do service on the owner’s estate must seek fresh fields and pastures new.

It will now have been made clear, I think, that the tyranny I am about to describe is something deeper-rooted in peasant life than the tyranny of political intimidation over which Liberal orators wax eloquent at election time—especially if a Conservative happens to get elected. We hear very little about political intimidation when a Liberal candidate gets elected in a constituency where a Whig family is territorially strong. The tyranny I speak about is economic rather than political. Political tyranny is only possible because it has behind it the pressure of the economic screw. Political tyranny is sporadic ; quinquennial. It is the tyranny which endures long after the wave of political passion has passed that I shall attempt to describe.

If one of the governing classes is to be indicted rather than another, it is certainly the large farmer class.

For if rural England was once ruled by its magistracy, to-day it is ruled by the large farmers ; and it is this class more than any

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other which is bringing about its decay. Perhaps, though, it would be hard to say whether it is the large farmer, in his desire to add field to field and to prevent the agricultural labourer from getting land or living in cottages independent of him as landlord ; or the large landowner, in his insatiable lust to obtain huge pheasant-preserves, vast deer forests, and multitudinous rabbit-warrens, who has done the greater harm to our most virile class of workers, and through them struck a blow at the heart of our Empire.

The demon of political intimidation is always one difficult to scotch. It has often evaded both political parties in the Law Courts. It is as elusive, as intangible, as a ghost. Nevertheless, it is as real as a ghost to those who fear retribution from some unseen power. Most political magnates are clever enough to cast the shadow of fear over the mind of the labouring poor without showing the hand of flesh that throws the shadow. Few adopt the rude method of a village publican known to me who said to a labourer, " If you don't vote for so-and-so we'll make it hot for you in this village " ; and few are as stupid as a millionaire in a neighbouring parish, who stated in print that, if the Budget candidate were elected, he would have to reduce his staff of chauffeurs,

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gardeners, and footmen. The Budget was passed, however, and strange to say this millionaire has exactly the same number of servants as he had before !

Political intimidation cuts both ways. I have attended Liberal meetings in the country where I have seen Tory coachmen lustily singing Radical songs of freedom under the approving eye of their Liberal mistress who sat upon the platform.

Recently, I visited a little country town where there is practically only one employer of labour. He employs two thousand hands in his factory and he is a Liberal. I called upon one of his employees, who, I was told, was interested in small holdings. "Do you mind speaking to me outside," said this free Briton who flew the Liberal colours. "The Guvnor's all right, you know, but as he owns twenty-five farms and most of the cottages in the town, he does not approve of the Small Holdings Act, nor of the Housing Act, nor of the Insurance Act !"

Now you may tell Hodge that he is better off than his grandfather was. You may tell him that his great-grandfather lived in a time when he dared not leave his parish without permission from a magistrate ; when wages were practically fixed by these magistrates, who also administered the Poor

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Law ; when he stood the chance of being harnessed to the parish cart, and the Commons were being daily stolen from him by Acts of Parliament passed by landowners only ; when he might be imprisoned for collective bargaining, or transported for snaring a rabbit, or for being seen at night in a wood or park in search of the fuel of which he had been deprived by the Enclosure Acts. You may tell him that his grandfather had neither the vote nor free education ; that wages were 8s. a week, and bread 1s. the gallon loaf. Then, if you are a politician, you will wisely recount to Hodge how he has not only a vote, but also free education. You will tell him of the Rural Magna Charta of 1894, of the Housing and the Public Health Acts, of the Small Holdings Acts, and, above all, of the Old Age Pensions Act.

Then what will Hodge answer ? Probably nothing at all. He has grown tired of candidates for Parliament, and he may keep sullenly away from the Ballot Box, as the Liberal Party found to its cost and its amazement at the last General Election. If he were communicative he might answer something like this—for as one who works with him in the fields I may be allowed to express his feelings in something like his own language :

“ What you say may have been true enough