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H. Rider Haggard
Excerpt
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A FARMER'S YEAR



BEDINGHAM, DITCHINGHAM

AND THE FARMS

IT IS WITH VERY REAL HUMILITY that I take up my pen to write of farming, following the excellent example of Thomas Tusser, who, more than three hundred years ago, as I do, tilled the land in Norfolk. The subject is so vast and the effort seems so pre-sumptuous. I propose, however, that this book shall be the journal of a farmer's year rather than a work about farming, setting forth with other incidental things the thoughts and reflections that occur to him, and what he sees day by day in field or wood or meadow, telling of the crops and those who grow them, of the game and the shooting of it, of the ways of wild creatures and the springing of flowers, and touching, perhaps, on some of the thousand trivial matters which catch the eye and occupy the attention of one who lives a good deal in the company of Nature, who loves it and tries to observe it as best he may.

I wrote 'of the trivial matters,' but at times I think that these natural phenomena : the passage of the seasons, the sweep of the winds and rain, the play of light upon the common, the swell and ebbing of the flood water, and all the familiar wonders which happen about us hour by hour, for those who take note of them have more true significance than the things we seek so eagerly in cities and in the rush of modern life. There is no education like that which we win from the fellowship of Nature ; nothing else teaches us such true lessons, or, if we choose to open our minds

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to its sweet influence, exercises so deep an effect upon our inner selves—an effect that is good to its last grain. I say 'if we choose,' for there are many in all classes of life who pass their days in the fields and yet never open their minds. Of the inner mystery and meaning of things they see nothing; they do not understand that to win her favours Nature is a mistress who must be worshipped with the spirit as well as admired with the eyes. Such folk miss much.

Let the reader of utilitarian mind have patience, however, for there will be a practical side to this book. I am a farmer, and engaged in a desperate endeavour to make my farming pay. Perhaps the chronicle of my struggles may have interest for others so situated; may at least—if one man's experience in agriculture or anything else is ever of any use to others—teach them what to avoid. To prove that I set out the exact truth, moreover, at the end of this chapter I shall print, amongst other things, a statement of the financial conditions under which my farming is carried on, and of its pecuniary results up to the present time.

One more word of warning. This is not to be the history of the working of a great farm run by some rich man regardless of expense, with model buildings, model machinery, and the rest.

On the contrary, here is but a modest place, modestly, if sufficiently, furnished with the necessary buildings, capital, instruments, and labour. Possibly for this very reason the details connected with it may prove of the more value to readers interested in the subject. After all, few people have to do with large and perfectly equipped farms, whereas many—to their sorrow—are weighted with small holdings thrown on their hands in wretched order. How often indeed has a reader been annoyed after purchasing a manual on some sport or amusement in which he is interested—let us say on shooting—to find that, to all appearance, it has been written by a millionaire for millionaires. Very few people can base their estimate of sport on five or eight thousand acres of the best game country in England, or look on 100 brace of driven partridge as a small day. Something humbler in scale

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would be more useful to them. Perhaps the same consideration applies to a book dealing with the land.

In all I am now farming 365 acres of land or thereabouts, of which 261 are situated in this parish of Ditchingham, and 104 in the parish of Bedingham, five miles away. Of the 261 acres at Ditchingham I hire about 110 acres, and am therefore, as regards this proportion of the land, a tenant farmer holding under three separate landlords. This may seem a large amount of land to hire, being considerably more than a third of the total acreage, but the explanation is twofold. First, these pieces of land cut into my own holding; and, secondly, as I find from experience that it is more economical to farm on a considerable scale than on a small one, it suited my purpose to take these acres as they came into the market, rather than to disturb old tenants on other land in my own possession in the parish.

This 110 acres is rented, some of it at a high price (for the times), and some moderately, the net total payable being 111*l.* 10*s.*, or about 1*l.* an acre. But on the turnover of a farm of this size even 111*l.* for rent makes no enormous figure. The wise people who are continually shouting into our ears that the real remedy for agricultural depression is a further reduction of rents are indeed very much mistaken. Let farming become once more a fairly remunerative business, and we farmers shall not grumble at a reasonable rent; but let it remain in the condition in which it has been for the last ten years, and, save in very exceptional instances, the abolition of rent altogether would not enable it to pay a living profit.

At Bedingham none of the land is hired, the farm, which belongs to this estate, having been thrown upon my hands four years ago. I might have relet it, but found out in time that the applicant's capital was small indeed. As, but a short while before, I had experienced the joys of such a tenant in another farm—at an expense to myself of a loss of several hundred pounds—I declined the offer, and took over the land. Perhaps it will be more convenient if I describe this place first.

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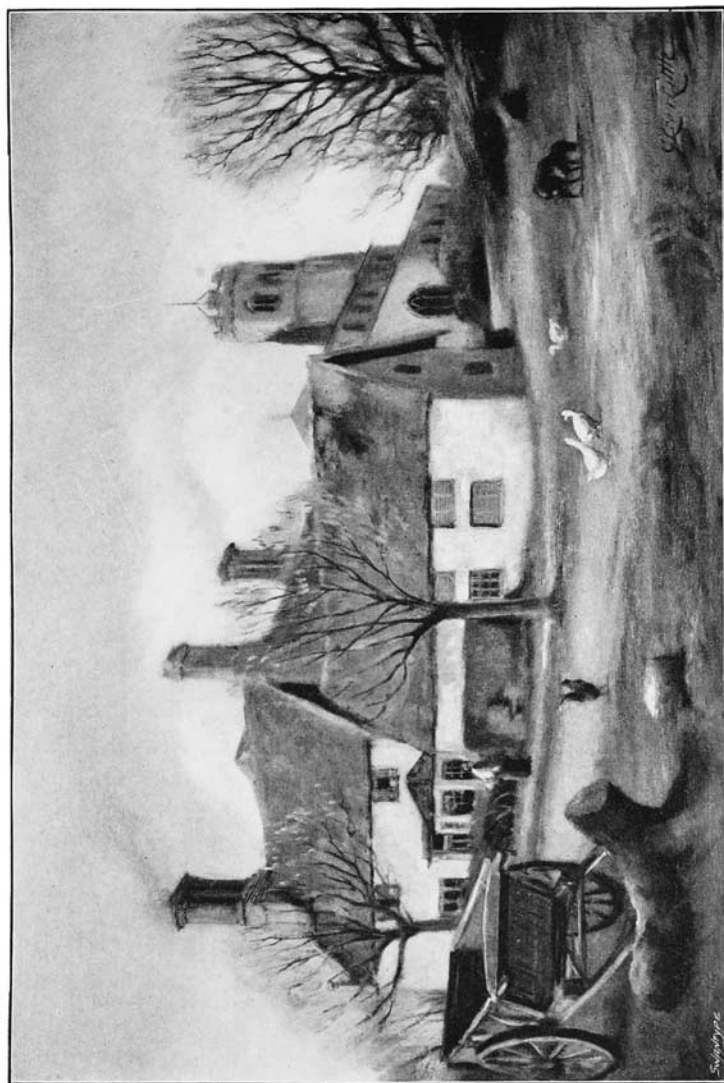
The name of it is the Moat Farm, but whether it is so called from a large pond in the meadow in front of the house, or because it was once a 'Mote' or meeting place, a gathering-ground perhaps of long-forgotten parish councils, is more than I can say. The origin of the name of the village itself—Bedingham—gives food for conjecture. Blomefield informs us that it is derived from a rivulet in Sussex called the Beding; but why a village in Norfolk should take its title from a streamlet in Sussex he does not explain. If he be right, the christening took place some time ago, for the 'town' seems to have been called Bedingham in the days of William the Conqueror, who owned the greater part of it, which was in the charge of his steward, one Godric. Quite close also, in the neighbouring village of Hedenham, the Romans had a brick kiln; there is one there still, so probably they were acquainted with Bedingham.

There are few things which give rise to reflections more melancholy—since the fate of those bygone worthies who owned it is the same that awaits us all—than the contemplation of any piece of ground to which we chance to be attached and to see and walk upon day by day. We may know its recent history, traditions may even survive of old So-and-so, and how he farmed 'sixty years gone'; but before that! How many generations of them have taken exactly the same interest in those identical fields? How many dead eyes week by week, as ours do, have dwelt upon the swell of yonder rise, or the dip of the little valley? How many dead hands have tilled that fallow, or mown that pasture?

Look at the long procession of them—savages herding cattle and hogs, scores of generations of these; slaves under the charge of a Roman overseer; Saxons, Danes, Normans, monks, English of all the dynasties, our immediate predecessors, and, last of all, ourselves.

And the land itself? Scarcely changed, as I believe. Any portion of it that chanced to be forest in his day excepted, the Saxon Thane, Hagan, who farmed it in the time of Edward the Confessor, would know it again at once, for every little rise and fall of it is the same as in his generation; the streamlet is the same, the

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PRIORY FARM AND BEDINGHAM CHURCH.

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roads follow precisely the same winds and turns, taking the course dictated to them in the beginning by the occurrence of boggy land or the presence of groves of ancient oaks. The land is more generally enclosed, and the trees upon it would seem to have moved themselves into unfamiliar places—these would be the principal differences in his eyes. But when it came to the question of soil, probably he could tell us the nature of almost every acre. Yonder it would never do to plough after wet lest it should 'kill' the land. That piece is 'scaldy' because the gravel comes near to the top earth, and corn would not 'cast' on it in a dry season. And so forth. Doubtless his information would be correct to the letter, except where some swamps are concerned, for in this part of Norfolk they have all been drained. Things move slowly in our temperate clime, and more than a thousand years are needful to alter even the character of the soil of a field—or so I believe.

Well, Hagan the Thane has gone to his rest in the churchyard yonder, whither since his day, although the population of the hamlet is small, he must have been followed by over six thousand of the inhabitants of Bedingham. They are all forgotten, every man of them, but the names of the more recent generations are recorded in registers which few ever open, though about these I shall have a word or two to say. Yet some of them were people of importance in their day. For instance, there were the de Gournays in the time of Henry II. Nicholas de Stutvile, who married Gunnora, an heiress of the de Gournays, lost his lands in Bedingham for rebellion against King John. The wrath of that monarch was not very long-lived, however, for in 1206 he restored to Nicholas the son that which he had taken from Nicholas the father. Then there were Bigods and de Udedales, and Gostlings and Sheltons, one of whom, by the way, in the time of Henry VIII. conveyed an estate here to Thomas Hauchet, of Upp Hall, Braughing, Herts, now the property of the writer's friend, Mr. Charles Longman, the publisher of this book. The Stanhow family were here also for some two hundred and fifty years. Then came the Stones, one of whom married Catherine, the heiress of the Stanhows, who dwelt

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on at Bedingham Hall till within the memory of folk still alive. At last they died out, and the old Hall was pulled down, and with it departed such glory as Bedingham possessed, for now, with the exception of that of the clergyman (who is expected to exist on about 140*l.* a year), no gentle family lives in the parish.

Of all these faint and far-off ghosts that once were men and women (and owned or cultivated my farm) the one who interests me most is that member of the Bruce or Brews family who died 'beyond sea' and caused his heart to be sent back to Bedingham for burial. The heart still lies in the chancel, enclosed, so says tradition, in a casket of silver. Tradition tells us also that its owner fell in the Crusades, but I can find no confirmation of the report. Perhaps the story has become mixed with that of the heart of a more famous Bruce, and its adventures in the Crusades.

There was another Brews also, the merry Margery, who writes from Topcroft by Bedingham in February 1477 to her 'Voluntyn' (valentine), John Paston (*see* the Paston Letters). 'No more to yowe at this tyme, but the Holy Trinitie have yowe in kepyng. And I besech yowe that this bill be not seyn of none erthely creatur save only your selffe. And thys letter was indyte at Topcroft with full hevye herte, By your own Margery Brews.'

Poor dead Margery! she did not anticipate the art of printing or foreknow the eyes that would read her sweet love-laden valentine.

There was a priory at Bedingham, for Sir John de Udedale granted the manor to the Canons of Walsingham in 1318. So the priory must have existed for something more than two centuries when Henry VIII. seized it and gave it to one Thomas Gawdy. All that is left of the monks to-day is an ancient building, said to have been part of the monastery, which is now used as a farmhouse. It stands close to the church, a long and beautiful building, which used to be called the 'Mother' church of this district, probably built, or rebuilt, by the monks. If so, this is the only monument they have left behind them; but I often wonder what their life was like in the grey old priory, and, when they were not praying in the church, what they did with their time

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during their long peaceful day of more than two centuries. I am not aware that the commissioners reported their establishment for riotous or unseemly practices ; indeed it seems difficult to connect such fast doings with Bedingham or its inhabitants, clerical or lay, although this may be mere Arcadian prejudice. Therefore, as there is no fishing in the neighbourhood, I have come to the conclusion that the old monks must have been great farmers, and probably very good ones according to their lights and opportunities.

I make no excuse for these remarks on the history of Bedingham, introduced into a description of a farm in the parish, since I believe that most readers will agree with me that there is something almost fascinating about such records and the speculations to which they give rise. The crown and charm of rural England is its antiquity. Our American relations may bring these villages to poverty by swamping the markets and thus destroying our agricultural prosperity, but in a certain sense we are avenged upon them. I wonder what they would give for a few hamlets with a pedigree like that of Bedingham. Here such places and their pasts are quite unnoticed ; yonder, where they have more taste and sympathy for what is bygone, they would be prized indeed. But so it is. If, like the present writer, a man has lived in new countries, and been more than satisfied with their unshaped crudity, he turns home again with a quickened appetite for things hoar with age, and with a gathered reverence towards that which has been hallowed by the custom of generations. Indeed the lives of us individuals are so short that we learn to take a kind of comfort in the contemplation of communities linked together from century to century by an unbroken bond of blood, and moulded to a fixed type of character by surroundings and daily occupations which have scarcely varied since the days of Harold.

The Moat Farm at Bedingham is a heavy-land farm, in fact it would be difficult to find a heavier. Walk over it in wet weather, and five minutes of hard work will scarcely clean your boots, so 'loving' is the country ; walk over it in dry before the frost has broken up the clods in winter, or rain has slaked them in summer,

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and you must be careful lest you twist your ankle. But heavy land, unless it be very 'thin in the skin,' does not necessarily mean bad land. Indeed, if I were given the choice, I would more lightly undertake a heavy-land farm in good order than one liable to 'scald,' which refuses to produce a crop of hay or roots unless deluged day by day with rain. Perhaps, however, this conviction owes something to the three years of drought which we have just experienced. The clay of Bedingham laughs at drought; as an old fellow there said to me, 'It didn't never take no harm from it since Adam,' and on it during these dry years I have grown some good barleys. For example, my Bedingham barley of 1896 fetched the highest price of any produced in this district that year.

Several causes have combined to give the stiff soils so bad a name, and to knock down the value of such land in East Anglia to about 10% the acre. First and foremost among these is the ruinous cheapness of corn. The heavy lands are corn-growing lands, and if it no longer pays to grow the corn they are supposed to be of no further value. I say 'supposed to be,' for reasons which I will give presently. Then they are expensive to stock and work properly; the farmer must have good horses and enough of them, the draining must be attended to in its proper rotation, and so forth. Lastly, when once they are thoroughly foul and neglected it is a long and costly business to bring them straight again. When a ditch has not been cleaned, or a pond 'fyed,' or a field drained, or a hedge cut on such a farm for years, as is often the case, it is no child's task to overtake the work; indeed, it cannot be done, without great expense for labour, under a period of time, probably two four-year shifts. This state of affairs means, moreover, that the land is foul with docks and other weeds, and to clean it is a labour of Hercules. Consequently, a heavy-land farm in this condition, or anything approaching to it, is practically valueless to a yearly tenant, as it would take him several years to 'right-side' it, during which time, unless he chanced to be a man of substance, probably he would starve.

Here is an instance of the extraordinary drop in the value of

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heavy land in this neighbourhood. Major John Margitson, my father-in-law, and predecessor in this property, about thirty-five years ago purchased a farm of 195 acres of heavy land for a sum of 6,000*l.*, or including certain necessary improvements 6,500*l.* In 1868 this farm was let for 252*l.*, the tenant paying the tithe of 35*l.* In 1881 the rent had fallen to 200*l.* Then came the bad seasons, indeed they had already begun with the fearful year of 1879, and the tenant, a worthy man of the old school who felt his age, had neither the energy nor the capital to stand up against them. He drifted into insolvency, and the farm was relet to another tenant at a greatly reduced rent. This gentleman, although it was not discovered at the time, was already practically insolvent. In the end he went bankrupt also, and the estate lost several hundred pounds. Now I was anxious to take the farm in hand, as at the time I chanced to be able to command the 2,000*l.* capital which would have been necessary to the venture. But my late friend and agent, Mr. William Simpson, the well-known and respected Norfolk auctioneer and valuer, dissuaded me from that course. By this time, like everybody else, he was thoroughly frightened at the outlook for farming, and assured me that I should certainly lose 1,000*l.* over the transaction. I bowed to his judgment and experience and the farm was relet, this time for 50*l.* a year—as he could only value the land at 8*l.* the acre I declined to go further and attempt to sell it. Out of this magnificent revenue I am expected to repair the house and extensive buildings, to bear the ordinary landlord's charges, to find the seed for laying down permanent pastures, and pay the tithe, which now, I believe, has declined to about 25*l.*, or half the gross rental. Also, I am called upon for subscriptions to local charities. By the way, can it ever have been contemplated that the system of tithe should work thus? When the farm let for 252*l.* the tithe seems to have been about 35*l.*; now, when the rent is 50*l.* the tithe is about 25*l.*, a large proportion—to the profits I was about to write, but, of course, there are none. To own that farm costs a considerable sum out of pocket annually.