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Excerpt
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FRESH LEAVES AND GREEN PASTURES

CHAPTER I

WHAT DO THEY KNOW OF ENGLAND ?

It was only the other day that a man turning up the ground on a bare hill-side, whereon no digging had been done since the days of the Romans, came upon what appeared to be a coffin. A square end protruded from the dip which had been hollowed out to make a tennis lawn. Some one who knew happened to be on the spot; careful investigation of the ground was made, and finally a species of lid, sides and ends were uncovered and on the bare ground lay a few tiny bones, and the skull of a grown-up person who once, before history was written down, walked over the exquisite downs around his burial-place and took his part, no doubt, manfully, in the life that surged around him. Or, indeed, it might be the skull of a woman; albeit the length of the coffin denoted it had held a creature above the average height. Some

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one who sat and watched her hero sail away to battle with her country's foes; or who may even have trembled at the fight that hurtled up and down the valley beneath her; while on the heights she clasped her children to her, and wondered what the end of it all would be. No one knows, no one will ever know whose brain once beat in that empty bone; no one can reconstruct the life-story of the human being who was laid to rest before the Roman legions came to Britain, and civilisation began to leave its mark on the rude people of those early days. Only just a few miles from where the coffin turned up was once a church surrounded by dwellings: now and then the ploughman's share grinds on a specially stubborn stone. Curiosity causes him to dig; he may find an exquisitely carved capital belonging once to a Norman arch; he may find a burned flat stone that speaks to the initiated of where a house-place once stood and a hearth fire sparkled; or again farther away across the hills he may strike even a greater find, and turn up a beautiful pavement that shows where the Roman conqueror made his home, and no doubt lived and died too, far away from his own beloved sunny Italian skies.

There are those who from the skull just found, from the Norman capital, from the Roman villa, can bring before us the whole life and times when these things were part and parcel of the daily life that once meant England, to

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those who lived there at that special period and called it by the name that then was hers. Somehow or other, by careful digging, by surmise, by study, they have remade for themselves to a certain extent places and people as they were wont to be ; and if we have no certainty that such were their existence, their homes, themselves, yet we obtain glimpses into the past. Sometimes the curtain seems to lift entirely, and we realise that after all evolution has not done quite as much for humanity as the believers in that theory think, that even in some ways we have gone back, and we are not as artistic, as clever, as charming as the barbarians we have succeeded and whose lives, as far as we ourselves are personally concerned, need never have been. After all the world is round ; all is a circle ; words we cast into the air circle about, and unless caught by some Marconi receiver that may exist unseen and unknown to us, continue to circle until they reach, may be, the recording angel himself. Stones cast into the pond make circles, and it is only when they reach the edge that the circle ceases to widen out and breaks. Families live, too, in circles. Starting always from the dust, they reach their apogee and then begin the descent, ending once more in the dust from which their first known ancestor sprang. What would it have meant to us if beside the coffin and the skull we could have dug up the equivalent of a

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library or a daily paper, even that banal and feeble publication, the orthodox parish magazine ! After all the British Museum does not go back very far if we allude to printed matter only, and one is inclined to wonder if even these records will last, when the New Zealander spoken of by Macaulay sits on the broken bridge and surveys the blasted and shattered ruins of a city that once deemed herself mistress of the world. All the same, I do not think the New Zealander can come yet awhile, albeit folks have been heard to prophesy that the endless tunnelling beneath ground that goes on nowadays will hasten the catastrophe. Therefore it may be as well to put down on paper—for the time for the skull and coffin cannot be long—how people used to live, breathe and move in a distant country-place more years ago than one likes quite to confess to. For already people are beginning to forget: why should they remember in these days of rush and hurry and motor-cars? They tear through the beautiful lanes, rattle through the streets of what they call, and with some justice, their dead-alive towns and villages; and while they see the village mother rush out and angrily shake the child, who has escaped death by a bare inch, because her mere nervousness makes her sharp; and note the rather dowdily dressed girls and women and the badly arranged shop-windows; they may thank Providence for London and the big cities, but they do not recognise

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how the cities have starved the country and battered on the brave lads and lasses that once were content, happy and joyful members of the life that, alas ! alas ! has for ever ceased to be.

“What do they know of England that only England know?” asks the forceful poet of the latter part of the last century, but I go still farther and ask what does any one of the present generation know of England at all? What are her wide and spacious heaths, what her ever-rolling hills and downs, her rippling rivers and her delicious sea-coasts, what her darling birds and her tiny four-footed creatures? What, oh! what to them, are the wide silences of the moors and fields where never a reveller screams or a motor-horn toots? Nothing, surely, save places to flee from, unless for a “week-end” or a “shooting-party.” Soon, alack! they will not even have that, for the quiet places are doomed, and where the skull turned up the other day the circle has begun to revolve once more. It is two thousand or more years since a village was built on that cliff; now wooden houses are being put about for week-enders and life is again astir on the peaceful and solitary hill-side. Yet never again will the life I knew fifty years ago come back to the old town I knew and loved; the houses are there, but though the houses themselves are unaltered they are lived in by the tradesfolk, good and worthy people, no doubt, much, much better read and

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educated than were their predecessors, but they are not “gentry,” not in the least the people on whom the County called once or twice a year. Not expecting their call to be returned except perfunctorily and respectfully, but with an eye to asking the men to shoot and the women to an occasional “tea-party” on the lawn should a “Village *versus* Town” cricket-match be played. Or later on again the volunteer prizes to be given, or even an archery-meeting bring together two sides of the “County,” one to shoot against the other, before the enraptured eyes of the townspeople and their friends.

When I had my first glimpse of this life it was in the year 1858, and oh! how I loved my visits to the town I knew the best of all, albeit it was embittered to me by the fact that the servants would take us out at night and show us the great comet blazing away across the barn. How well I remember standing on the water butt, clutching the faithful Susan round the neck and looking at the fearful thing and pretending I did not mind; but I did, and thankful was I for the day, and the cloudy nights when we could not see it and when it ceased to appear at all as far as we were concerned. Fifty years ago! yet I can with one touch of the wand reconstruct the picture, albeit one has not much more than the skull and the few small bones left, as far as the human element is concerned, at any rate.

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Here is the house : a long, low house with a verandah, a circular drive in front of the windows, beyond that a fence, then a field, then the river and a deep red cliff where the sand-martins built and the reed-warblers' charming nests were found in the reeds by the river-bank. In the field itself grew scores and scores of mushrooms, and almost as soon as it was light the boys and I used to be off, returning home to heather-honey and new-laid eggs, and a dreadful scolding from Susan. Albeit we were soon forgiven when our stores were disclosed and an enormous stew turned up at dinner as a vast surprise for our elders and betters. The household was the typical one of the times, and as such deserves description. Only the other day I walked down the lane and seeing the old-time nursery window stirring to and fro in the wind unheeded, unnoticed, I could have wept ; the last child in that nursery is nearly fifty years of age and there has never been another one there since her day. I do not believe, look at it how one will, that the same spirit of open-handed hospitality exists now which one used to experience in the bygone days, neither do I see how such a thing could be possible. Quick transit brings distant friends even to remote spots for luncheon or tea, and takes one about even to dinners and balls ; while no one has time to stay in a place, even if there were a place to stay in, which I for one do not believe exists. But in

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the time I am now writing about, that house-door stood ever open and the guest-rooms were never empty. True there were but two, but I have known four girls packed into them or even more on an occasion, while the master's room was turned into a den for a lad, particularly in the shooting season when sport was to be had on the farm and on some land the master rented, where is now a big and charming house. The mistress was the real relation, by the way; the master was only made one by marriage; but he was one of the most hospitable of men. He was some years older than his wife, and she was his second wife, his first wife and family having died one after the other, but he simply worshipped her and into his wide heart he took all her sisters and brothers—these latter a thankless task enough—while in later years nieces were as welcome as brothers-in-law and we always spent some of the summer there at any rate, and were made to feel as if it were as much home as any other place in the wide world. I wish I could draw the sweet and charming mistress as I remember her first. I thought her quite old; I suppose she may have been thirty, but if so that is quite the outside, but to me she was venerable indeed. She wore her hair in curls on each side of her delightful face, and I can never recollect her saying or doing one hasty or bad-tempered action or word. I suppose her life would be thought very dull now-

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days, but she at any rate never found it so. She superintended all the domestic details of the house, and then when she had completed this work we used to go for a walk, I very impatient at the delays caused by meeting so many people she knew, or by the necessary shopping in the queer, small-paned, bow-windowed shops, where often enough we had to step down from the street into comparative darkness and were met by a mingled scent of new cheese, peppermint and dried cod, all of which smells are always connected in my mind with those very early days. Shopping in that town meant too a very great deal more than the mere ordinary buying and selling, looking at, comparing and pricing the goods. To begin with, all the week's news had to be discussed, the little happenings in the town, in the special house, and in the nurseries and school-rooms; the doctor, may be, had been seen to call, a black-edged letter was spoken of by the post-mistress as she placed it in the bag for the house. Inquiries for the absent sisters were made and indeed one was lucky if one only spent a quarter of an hour over the grocery counter, and about the same, nay, even more, in the very distasteful atmosphere of the butcher's shop. The butcher himself was then a great power, an abject tyrant, for he had no powerful rival in the shape of New Zealand meat or parcel-post; he killed just so many "beasts" during the week and woe betide the

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housewife who offended him or did not give her order in due time. In either case she had to go without, lucky indeed if she could fall back on her poultry yard, for if she could not there were no tinned stores or things preserved in glasses to be had in those days, and to housekeep in the country then was indeed a fine art, or a desperate deed, according to the manner in which it was done. I was fortunate in my housekeeping days to have found favour in the eyes of the butcher, and we were great friends. Once I had an embarrassing and sudden call on my resources and I rushed up to his shop. It was a Thursday, and the place was empty, swept and garnished, save for one superb saddle of mutton which I knew somehow was being tended and watched until quite ready for the Squire's table, but I threw myself on the mercy of my good friend; I had that saddle, and I fear the one the Squire was furnished with the following week was not quite up to the usual mark. Another time I sent up and word was brought back that what I required could not be had. In the afternoon I went to the shop myself and saw the joint staring me in the face. "Oh! you base deceiver!" I remarked, as I paid his book; "you have a leg of lamb after all!" He looked puzzled. "Was it you wanted it?" he asked. "There, I thought the message came from them 'Enries" (another branch of the family and one he could not bear); "of

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