

My Note-Book in the Weald

By M^énie Muriel Dowie

THE title of these sketches has reference to many wanderings, afoot, driving, but mainly on horseback, which I have enjoyed from time to time in the wealds of Surrey and Sussex. If you stand on Blackdown or on Witley Hill and look out over the folds and oak-forests spread below you to the very verge of the downs, you see the country where Stephen Yesser still carves the haunch of mutton—as I believe, inimitably : and the country where the landlord's wedding, at which I assisted, is still remembered as one of the merriest days in Puddingfold.

I—Stephen Yesser

TO see him standing by the sideboard in his loose-fitting dress-suit, his eye upon the table in the window no less than on the table by the fire and the table in the centre, his ear hanging upon the tinkle of the bell from the commercial room and the private sitting-room upstairs, where a party was dining, his mind upon the joint delicately furrowed by his unerring carver—to see him so, you might have mistaken him for an ordinary waiter. But even to call him a waiter of unusual ability would have been

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to show yourself obtuse. This large, fair fat man with the shaven face, double chin, even brick colour and eye of oyster blue, had a character, and it came out when I happened to be the only person in the coffee-room that evening.

"Nice little dog, Miss?" he began, insinuatively stroking my self-centred, unresponsive terrier—"I'm very fond of dogs myself; bulls, I mostly fancy, tho' I 'ave kep' all sorts one way an' another." His voice had the low, furtive quality that distinguishes the sporting class in the South country, the class, in fact, that "'as kep' all sorts." If his clothes had fitted more tightly upon his big frame, you would have suspected him of having been a prize fighter.

I made an encouraging reply.

"If you was once to 'ave one you'd never take to no other sort." There was a gentle defiance in his round, even voice, a voice that had the training of an ostler with a dash of a gentleman's servant in it. Sometimes his lips moved as though turning a straw about in his mouth; his face in repose had the eyebrows raised, the lines from nostril to lip-corner deeply marked, the mouth pulled down but with no effect of sneering in its sneer; rather the acrid cheerfulness of a man not too successful, but still nowise to be accounted a failure, a man acquainted with the compensations of life. "I shouldn't recommend the brindle myself; now a nice pure w'ite with a butterfly nose would be as neat a pet as any lady could wish to have. I've not long parted with my Snowdrop; won a rare lot o' prizes with 'er, till a gentleman—well, you might know him Miss, Captain Soames of the Cawbineers? 'E awffered me twenty-two pound for 'er an' I let 'er go." Melancholy triumphed in the waiter's broad face for a moment; his sad eye roved mechanically to my plate. "Cut you a little bit more off the 'aunch, Miss? One of 'er puppies took second at the Palace and would 'ave

'ave 'ad first, only the judge 'e 'ad a fancy for another pound or so of weight."

I threw in the appropriate remark.

"There's Mrs. Dempsey of Colmanhatch—you might 'ave noticed the 'ouse as you come along, Miss, stands back a bit from the road in a s'rubby—she wanted one of Snowdrop's puppies, an' wouldn't have stopped at money neither, but I promised the last to Mr. Hutton of the 'George.'"

I foresaw tears on the part of the waiter if we didn't speedily abandon the records of the Snowdrop family. I interposed with a red herring.

"Yes, Miss, I daresay they are, but for my part I'd sooner 'ave a nice sharp fox-terrier after game than any of them wiry-'aired ones. Now, one Sunday morning I was up early walkin' round by Burley Rough—in the summer I often takes a early turn that way just to see the rabbits. Well, this little fox-terrier I 'ad with me" (the waiter has an elusive narrative habit, and though with intelligence he can be followed, use is really of most assistance in gleaning his facts), "she started a rabbit in a bit of furze an' off after it before I could holler." I am not sure if Stephen really wished me to believe that he was at all likely to have hollered. "She run it well out of sight, I never see a dog more nimbler on her legs than what she was, an' me after her. All at wunst, I 'eard 'er sing out; that fetched me on the track, and if you'll believe, she was in the mouth of a burrer with her forefoot in a steel trap an' 'ad the rabbit in 'er mouth, 'an never left 'old of it. The rabbit bein' lighter like 'ad run clean over the trap an' she'd just come up in time to snap it from be'ine."

I had two more courses to eat through and I perceived that the waiter was likely to draw heavily upon my appreciation. I economised with the caution and the dexterity that come only of long practice,

practice, at the same time I offered a perfectly adequate comment.

"They pay men eighteen shillings a week to keep the rabbits down and yet if you was to ketch one in a snare an' be found out you'd 'ave six weeks."

I tried to see myself, on the waiter's suggestion, in this predicament, and admitted in the full glow of sympathy that it did seem hard.

"An' it *is* 'ard," said the waiter with conviction. "You can't get a full-grown rabbit not under eighteenpence in the town, an' I'd sooner ketch one myself"—he dropped his voice to a note of rapture—"I think they eat sweeter."

It was impossible not to respond to the unquenchable human nature in the waiter's eye. After all, they weren't my rabbits. A venal warmth chequered the restraint of my smile. As the irrigator directs the waterflow by a slight turn of his foot, I directed, just so quietly, the conversation.

"Oh there is, Miss, a deal of poaching, to be sure. You see, in the winter-time, a man may be out of work and *he* knows where 'is two-and-nine is waitin' for him when 'e's wearin' 'is fur-lined overcoat, as the sayin' goes. Yes, Miss; two-an'-nine's what they give for a hare—so I've been told." Some day we may have an actor capable of this delicate manipulation of the pause—I know of none just now. "An' then there's them that does it for the love of sport."

I wanted some cheese, but I caught sight of the glow in the oyster-eyes and I prayed that nothing might divert the waiter to a sense of his duties at that moment. There is poetry in every soul, we know; by long study I have learned to detect sometimes the moment of the lighting of its fires. There was that in the waiter's kiln-brick face which a keen eye could recognise. So

looks

looks the man who tells you of the one "woman in the world," so looks the poet who describes his last sonnet, so look the faces of them that dream of heart's desire.

"You see there's a deal of preservin' done round here, and when a labourin' man has say six or seven of a family and takes 'is nine shillin' a weck, as some of 'em do in winter, an' 'as coal to find and boots to keep on the children, well, 'e 'as to git it somewhere, 'asn't he, Miss? You can't wonder that some of 'em steps out of a night an' nooses a brace of pheasants." I maintained a steady but an unexaggerated air of sympathy; there was no use in the waiter putting it off, we had heard the utilitarian side, what about "them as does it for the love o' sport?" But I was much too wary to ask! "An' you see, Miss, since this frozen meat come in, why eighteenpence 'll buy a man 'is leg of lamb at the stall. As for the poorer parts, they pretty near give it away of a Saturday night, an' for two shillin' he'll get what'll keep 'is family in meat for a week."

Very well, if I had to wait, I could wait.

"Every bit as good, Miss," in answer to my query. "Of course, it wants a knack in cookin', it don't want to be put in no fierce oven; you want to 'ang it in the kitchen and thor it out gradual, an' it'll make twice its size; then, if it's nicely basted, you won't want to eat no sweeter bit of meat."

"Then they never eat the pheasants themselves?" I remarked, with the air of one whose mind is on the central problem. "I don't wonder, for I think a pheasant is nothing to rave about. I'd as soon have a chicken."

"If you'd ever tried one stuffed with chopped celery, then closed up so the water don't get to it in a bit of nice paste, and boiled for about two hours, Miss," said the waiter, in tender remonstrance, "you'd never say that again." I was on the point

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of offering never to say it again, when the waiter's eyes again sought the furthest gas-burner at the end of the room, and an air of reverie and fervour again gleamed in his oyster-eye. "Wonderful silly birds pheasants are, Miss. You can go out with a line in your pocket, an' a fish 'ook on the end of it, an' bait it with a raisin, and 'ang it over the fence——"

"Do pheasants like raisins?" I was idiot enough to interject; but fortunately poetry and prudence may not burn in the same brain at the same time, and the waiter had abandoned himself to poetry.

"Oh, marvellous fond of raisins, pheasants are. Of course, it wants artful doin'; the line wants to be 'ung *just so*, and a raisin or two dropped where he's likely to run, an' ten to one 'e'll make a peck at it—an' the best of it is w'en 'e's got it the bird can't 'oller."

I suppressed a weak desire to say it was shockingly cruel. Mentally, I surveyed myself with cold dislike as I heard myself remark that it must be very exciting work.

"I should say it was, Miss. These old poachers 'as some fine stories to tell of it. Some likes a pea at the end of a few strands of horse-hair. 'Ow is it done? Oh, you want to dror it long from the horse's tail, an' then you twist it fine together an' runs it through the pea and makes a knot. Some prefers a 'ook in the pea. Then, you see, the bird just swallows it, and there he is. With either the raisin *hor* the pea it wants to be 'ung so's the bird, when he pecks an' takes it, 'as 'is feet *just awf* the ground. It's wonderful how quick they are to see it, too. Of course, it has to be a fine night, but I don't care for too much moon myself." The waiter was unaware of this change of pronoun. "But it's wonderfully taking sport. Well," with a deprecatory smile, which displayed an irreproachable set of false teeth, "I've 'ad as many as three in one evening."

My

My morality being once in abeyance I did not stick at a hearty encomium.

“Seen a bit of all sorts of life, I ’ave. Well, I was in Tom Hotchkiss’s racing stables till I got too heavy, but I’ve always been a great one for sports or anything of that. Fine sideboardful o’ cups I’ve got wot I’ve won running; I ’ad a butter cooler, silver-plated, only last year for the Married Men’s ’Undred Yard Race.” Melancholy again descended like a mist upon the waiter’s cheerful countenance.

I feared he might have been reflecting on his growing handicap, technical or physical, and I deployed a reflection upon the variety of his experiences. He smiled again, and spoke softly of his lost youth.

“Well, I began by bein’ apprentice’ to a butcher, an’ I stay’ at that eighteen months. Then one morning where I took the meat down, the gardener stop’ and ask me if I’d care to come *hindors*”—some inner light illuminated this phrase for me. It did not mean would he step into the kitchen; it meant would he take indoor service—“because ’is master wanted a page-boy, an’ I jumped at this. Oh, I thought it grand—that was with Mr. Beatup at the ‘Bull,’ and I’ve been mostly in hotel service ever since.” He paused; he smiled thoughtfully, evidently a new idea had struck him. “It seems funny to say it,” he began almost shamefacedly, “but there’s one thing I ’aven’t done, and that’s drove a fly!” His air of triumph was so naïf and so marked that I felt it to be a point worth elucidating. I hunted for the proper setting of the question; I was anxious not to make a blunder.

“What, have you ever had a chance to?” I said at last, and I thought—indeed, still think—this very neat.

“Should ’ave ’ad,” said the waiter, quite respectfully but enjoying

ing the joke none the less, "for my father was a cab-proprietor down in Weymouth, since ever I remember. 'Ad twenty-three or twenty-four lots going time he died, landaws and privek brooms and closed-and-opens. 'E was a very curious man my father, 'e 'ad a great belief in luck. Sometimes 'e would buy a horse for luck, other times 'e'd think one of 'is carriages brought him bad luck. He always used to go about with a carriage dog, one o' them spotted—well, Darmations some calls 'em; oh, she was a beautiful creature—an' knowin'! Well, there wasn't anything she wouldn't do. Why, she'd go up to one of the other horses on the rank, as it might be, what wasn't my father's, you see, Miss, an' she'd ackshly pull the clover out of 'is nose-bag and kerry it to one of my father's own 'orses." I blinked, but got it down. "Ho, wonderful knowin' she was! There was a lady there awffered my father eighteen sov'rins for her, but 'e wouldn't sell. 'No,' 'e said, 'if I sell my dog, I sell my luck,' 'e said, 'besides, she wouldn't stay with you, she'd always be back in the yard,' 'e said. Often enough she ask' 'im, but 'e always said the same about 'is luck. At last she came and said she was goin' away to live in Brighton, and she awffer' him £20," the waiter's figures always came out with a suspicious glibness—"so father 'e was beat, but 'e says 'so sure as my name's Stephen Yesser'—that was my father's name an' 'e give me the same—'my luck's sold,' 'e says! An' it wasn't a twelvemonth later that 'e was drivin' home one night with a horse he'd bought in London some time before, an' it bolted at the scroop of a tramway, turn' the corner short and come down pitchin' father out and his 'ead was all cut to pieces—killed 'im on the spot. He was took up in a bag. Seems he might have fell free if his coat hadn't 'ave caught in the lamp-iron." My mind had filled suddenly with a lurid picture of Mr. Yesser, senior,
being

being "took up in a bag," but the waiter's point was not lost upon me for all that. "But it was a funny thing after what he'd said when 'e come to part with the Darmation, wasn't it, Miss?" he said. "Yes, I know, *I* know," this to a subordinate who appeared at the door, "it's the hupstairs parlour bell, so you'll excuse me, Miss; I don't mind to keep them waitin' a minute, they ain't none of our lot—business gentlemen from London."

II—The Landlord's Wedding

"CAN Mrs. Sollop have the landau this afternoon? She wishes to drive out to Cray's Wood; have you a horse disengaged about three?"

I recognised the old Rector's voice at once; he spoke his inquiry like a piece of ritual—or is it rubric?—in the tone reserved for celebrations. The reply was inaudible, but I was quite sure that Mrs. Sollop couldn't have the landau: I had been in the inn-yard that morning, and I knew that the landau had other fish to fry, so to speak. Words would fail to depict the ardour with which Tom and Frank, the two ostlers, had been assailing the old landau, leathers in hand and scarlet braces flying, from an early hour; they had got my wheel jack in use, and pail after pail of water went through the spokes. They did not apologise for borrowing the wheel jack, and I recognised with them that the occasion lifted us all above considerations of common formulæ. Within the stable could be seen the patient heads of "the Teamster" and "Bay Bob" (provisionally referred to as "the pair") dipping reflectively between the pillar-chains. Poor beasts, they knew something was going to happen, if it were only from the reek of "compo" on the harness. No hope of Mrs. Sollop

Sollop getting up to Cray's Wood—what a name, by the way, for a rector's wife? And for a Rector! The Rev. Richard Grace Sollop; and it is their name, too; it's certainly none of my making.

I had a sort of feeling that I would like to lend a carriage and "a pair," but at best I could only have proffered a scratch tandem, Black Nannie in the shafts and Nutcracker in front, and this would certainly have interrupted the ceremony.

There was an odd sense of stir about the Green. There was not exactly a crowd, but two or three more men than usual were listening to the blacksmith's famous story of his six beagle puppies; beagle I say, but in the interests of truth and dog-breeding I ought to call it "very-nearly beagle" puppies. The old man who carries telegrams and wears a grey surtout with a rakish air of Stock-Exchange failure about it, has picked up the puppy that favours a fox-terrier, and Mr. Remmitt from the grocer's shop is explaining why he thinks the "spannel bitch" is going to make the best beagle of the lot. Although the whole six are similarly spotted in liver and black upon white, they are all known by separate names—like the above, of a narrowly descriptive nature. They were born and bred in the centre of the Green, and every dog in the village has a sort of proprietary interest in them.

At this moment Mr. Hampshire passed from the telegraph office; he has his bluish-pink trousers on and wears a black coat and waistcoat, all new, a black tie, and a straw hat. He is a very shy man, and he has calculated to a second when he will change to a puce satin tie with white lozenges before he starts; whereas the topper that came by post is to be taken with him and assumed *en route*; I know this, for I saw Frank trying to get it inconspicuously stowed under the cloth flap of the box-seat. What will they

they do with the pasteboard box, I wonder? Throw it away in Ambledon Wood, no doubt, to be picked up by some hawker and used for a baby's cradle or to put a sitting hen in.

Ten o'clock, and he doesn't start till eleven, and yet the poor man cannot be seen outside his own inn without some joke being thrown at him, and a convulsive titter issuing from the knot of boys gathered on the corpse-bench below the lych-gate.

Bang! *Now I know* that that was a champagne cork exploding in the commercial room, and they don't explode of themselves—in an Inn!

Annie runs in to whisper:

"He's got the ring on his third finger, fear he'd forget."

"Well! She must have a large hand if *his* third finger and *hers* are the same size," I observe. "Oh, it can't be the ring."

Annie looks disheartened, but says she will ask Mrs. Groves.

"By the way, how *is* Mrs. Groves this morning?" I had forgotten her till now: she is the housekeeper, only five years Mr. Hampshire's senior and a widow; one or two people had said, before the affair which finishes to-day was heard of

"Oh! she's wonderful down, and she gets a deal of chaff in the bar." In a whisper behind a corner of her apron, "Oh, she 'as been treated bad."

"Ah, she'll be glad when it's over. Is that the carriage? Good gracious, it's not eleven? How grand Tom looks on the box! and I would never have said Bob and Teamster stood so much of a height."

There is a wild flight of a figure across the sweep as with scarlet wings to it, and Frank, pouring with perspiration, slogs at the Teamster's mane with a water-brush, in a last agony of fervour.

"Well, it really does look smart!" I exclaim at intervals to
Annie,

Annie, behind the curtains of my parlour. "That man's hand will be shaken off if the bricklayer gets hold of it." There are at least two dozen workmen and neighbours crowding in the bar-passage, and all the pots in use are quarts.

"A quart bottle of champagne—between three of them," gasps Annie, who has been out for more gossip. "And it *isn't* the ring; he has that in his waistcoat pocket!"

"They're off!"

"What, has he got in?" The poor nervous little man had left the inn with the furtive scuttle of a rabbit breaking cover, and just his head and shoulders appeared in the deep well of the old landau. Mr. Brooker followed—he is to be best man—Frank relinquished the Teamster, much flattened, and Tom whipped the two to a heavy canter. A derisive cheer went up from the little boys upon the corpse-bench and a hearty shout from the work-people at the Inn door. Mr. Hampshire neither lifted his hat nor looked round, but the purple mounted slowly and surely to the back of his ears. It is a trying thing to be married from your own Inn.

III—Cakes and Ale

THE Brewer seemed to be stopping all day; the whole morning he had been rumbling barrels down the cellar-way below my parlour, and in the afternoon when I went out with a wooden trencher full of cut apples for our own beasts, I saw that his large, pale, *café-au-lait* coloured mare and the great white horse that goes beside her were still there. They sniffed at apples, and Black Nannie shot reproachful glances at me over her stall as much as to say:

"Why offer apples to them? Their palates are destroyed by
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the fermented liquors they are given ; they are fat and stupid with beer. They must be, or they wouldn't pull the loads they do !”

Like most brewers, Quarpitt is rather a fine-looking person, and I fell into conversation with him with some pleasure ; his great bass rolled and rumbled like his own waggon, and as he stood, he seemed to be trying to look as much like a vat as possible.

“ Oh, yes,” he said, “ don't come every day, b'long way ; an' there's fine doin's forward to-night. I'm 'ere to take four eighteens” (he pronounced it four-ray-teens), “ down to the cricket field to-night, to be give away by”—he waved a large freckled arm and hand towards the Inn door—“ the good gentleman as has now left us.”

“ Four eighteens !” I repeated with an air of amazement, not knowing in the least what that was, but judging that when the Brewer assumed the manner popular at his Harmony Club and fell unwittingly into the phrase of a funeral oration, something important must be toward.

I knew more later.

No sooner was my simple tea begun than the boys, who earlier on had adorned the lych-gate, came to lean upon the wood rail that surrounds the cellar opening before my window, to crack nuts thoughtfully upon the flags, and to keep up a tapping of a maddening intermittence upon the wooden cellar-flap. I gathered from their conversation that the band was expected.

Very soon a gentleman strolled up, the pocket of whose black coat bulged suggestive of a cornet and, indeed, when he turned, the nozzle of the instrument disclosed itself, nestling in the groove worn by a week-day foot-rule, which had disappeared with the rest of a joiner's trappings for the nonce.

I was buried in the unsatisfactory tannin of a second cup, when a sound so horrid and inexplicable that fear alone prevented

my choking to death, announced the heretofore unsuspected arrival of the big drum. The rest of the brass was not slow to follow, and about half-an-hour of preliminary pints intervened before the performers took up their position upon the triangle of grass below the sign of "The Merry Hedgehog." To their credit, be it said, they were not yet complete, the oboe lingered. (I gleamed this intelligence from the boy's continual references to "George;" there seemed even to be a question as to whether "George" *would* come.) At length there appeared a saturnine person who bore an oboe in a bag. He took no beer, he nodded sullenly to the circle, or rather, he threw a nod in front of him, and such of the circle as cared to, caught it. He was drawing out a small thumb-browned piece of written music when the drum, who had command of the performers, no doubt because he made most noise, looked inquiringly round and thundered out a prelude boom-boom-boom-boom, which had the effect of drawing certain hesitating cat-calls from the brass. I had heard the drum whisper "the new march," in a tone which was meant to reach his co-musicians, and not the crowd; the crowd was not intended to know that a new march had been sedulously studied in view of the present occasion. George had his eye upon his oboe, and after the boom he spat meditatively beside his shoulder and chirped to his instrument, which responded instantly with a florid growl, lasting about half a minute. The others were too interested in "getting away" and "getting a good place," to notice this observation on the part of George's oboe, but I noticed it, and a dreadful suspicion fell upon me.

Still, the hilarity of the occasion augmented from moment to moment. The church bells had rung out a complimentary peal or two, and only desisted because a woman was to be buried at five o'clock; the bellringers, all save the man who attended to
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the toll had come into the bar, had their beer (carefully paying for it), and formed up among the crowd near the blacksmith's to listen to the band. Outlying labourers who had left their work began to slouch up with that peculiar report which corduroys will make when the spare material flaps together in walking, the grocer's and baker's carts began to come in from their rounds, and the men hurried their tired horses into the stables, with a shake of hay and no wisp down, the sooner to join the crowd.

All this while "the new march," with an afflicting element of discord from the oboe, blared tunelessly below the sign. A cart had appeared mysteriously, the brewer, passing his mottled hand through his shock of beard and hair (all the colour of "four-ale"), was loading up certain barrels, with the assistance of Frank; then it dawned upon me what "four eighteens" might mean; four times eighteen gallons! . . . The third of my abstruse calculations brought this out at seventy-two gallons; seventy-two gallons of free beer up on the cricket-ground!

While the band sought among its leaflets for a light waltz, which all the village whistled carelessly in advance, and a boy tucked two black bottles labelled "Scottish Nectar" securely into his armpits, I observed a short colloquy to take place between George and the flute, who was old and bearded and of a neutral temper; it resulted in blacker scowls than ever from the oboe, and the bitter tapping of his finger upon a band-part. When, finally, they all formed into line in front of Mr. Brewer Quarpitt, the cart, and the four eighteens, for an adjournment to the cricket-ground, I saw the oboe step moodily into the bar. He had refused to play any more—musical people are notably touchy—owing to some quarrel between him and the drum: he had blown steadily through the Wedding March first of all—which the drum had reserved to take them up the village to the cricket-field.

Nobody

Nobody told me this, but when the Wedding March ultimately started, and the party and the four eighteens, and the crowd and a number of the beagle puppies got under weigh for the cricket-ground, George could be seen striding glumly homeward with the disconsolate and silent oboe in a bag.

At first an air of delicate reserve hung over the populace, and the large white jugs moved slowly above the glasses ; there was a tendency to dawdle in the neighbourhood of the "whelk and winkle barrow," which had taken up a promising corner, but kindly dusk hid many blushes, and with nightfall all tremors were dispersed, and, since it *was* there . . . they might as well . . . and so they did.

It was, I say it with pain, a very drunk village, and a very gay inn by eleven o'clock that night. But then a landlord is not married every day, and who knows how dull things may be when "The Merry Hedgehog" has a missis ?

There was but one clear head (I am excepting the Rev. and Mrs. Sollop, of course) and two sore hearts upon the green that night. Mine was the clear head. George's was one of the sore hearts (unless the oboe had one, and that would make a third) and Mrs. Groves, the housekeeper, who had to have a good deal of whisky and very little else, in a claret glass, at intervals during the evening—hers was the other.

"A twelvemonth ago there wasn't one but would have said it would be 'er," Mr. Brewer Quarpitt kept repeating a suspicious number of times as he slapped the big white horse confidently, till every link upon the waggon gave out a note of music. And then, "Never see such a mort o' beer put down so quick in *my* life," and he gathered up his reins and jangled gaily off upon his homeward way. And I shut down my window to avoid the hymeneal comments of the rustics below.