

The Heart of The Country

Ford Madox Heuffer

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..... the "*Heart of the Country*" is a series of illustrations to country moods. The subject of the "Country" being so vast a one the limits of the attempt must be obvious. Every man, in fact, has a sort of ideal countryside—perhaps it is a Utopian vision that he conjures up at will within his own brain, perhaps it is no more than as it were a mental "composite photograph" of all the countrysides that he knows more or less well. It is this latter vision of his own, this survey of several countrysides that he knows more or less intimately, and of many countrysides that he has passed through or visited for longer or shorter periods—it is some such mental "composite photograph" that the author of such a book must attempt to render upon paper. In this book the writer has followed implicitly the rule laid down for himself in the former volume, and the rule that he has laid down for himself for the forthcoming volume of this trilogy ; that is to say, that though for many years he has read many works, returns, or pamphlets dealing with rural questions, and though these may have tinged his views and coloured his outlook, he has attempted here to do no more and no less than to depict—that is the exact word—his personal view of his personal countryside.

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The Country of The Townsman

IN the cigarette smoke, breathing the rich odours of ragouts that cloy the hunger, of verveine, of patchouli, beneath tall steely-blue mirrors, over crumpled napkins of an after-lunch in a French place of refection, an eloquent and persuasive friend with wide gestures was discoursing upon some plan that was to make for the rest of the company fame, fortune, rest, appetite, and the wherewithal to supply it—an engrossing plan that would render the Islands of the Blest territory habitable for them almost as soon as they could reach the "next street," which, in most of our minds is the Future. Their heads came close together across the table ; outside in the narrow street carts rattled ; all round them was that atmosphere of luxuries of a sort, with an orchestral accompaniment of knives thrown down, of orders shouted in French, in Italian, in Spanish ; words in broken English, words in tones of command, of anger, of cynical passion, of furtive enjoyment—a sort of surf-sound, continuous, rising and falling, but utterly beyond analysis. And, as if it were a compartment that shut them in from all the world, beneath the shelter of this Babel they discussed their Eldorado of the day after to-morrow—their dim Cyclades of the next street.

Those names, those myths shining so graciously down the ages, have still for humanity a great fascination. In one or the other of them each soul of us finds his account. Dim Cyclades, Eldorados, Insulæ Beataë, Happy Hunting Grounds, Lands flowing with Milk and Honey, Avalons, or mere Tom Tiddler's Grounds—somewhere, between the range of dim islands of a purple west, or that field where we shall pick up gold and silver—somewhere in that vast region is the spot that each of us hopes to reach, to which all our strivings tend, towards which all our roads lead. The more close and airless the chamber from which we set out the more glorious, no doubt, the mirage ; the longer the road, the more, no doubt, we shall prize the inn at the end—the inn that we shall never reach ; the inn that is our goal precisely because we never can reach it by any possible means. But in bands, in companies, in twos or

threes or singly—in labourers' cottages, in omnibuses, in tall offices, we discuss each plan that shall bring us one step nearer, or in the dark silences of our own hearts we cherish a passion so fierce and so solitary that no single soul else in all the universe has a hint of our madness, our presumption, our glorious ambition, or our baseness.

Thus in that dubious place of refection the one friend could well enough discourse to his companions upon their common Eldorado that should, the gods being good, give them fame—and rest. It held them, the idea, among all the clatter ; it made glorious with its glamour the foul atmosphere. It was, as the slang phrase has it, a master idea. Suddenly, pushing out from behind the door, came a long, grey, bronzed man.

Bewilderment at being torn from their train of thought, surprise, recognition, were the steps towards immense pleasure,

“ You !” slipped from all their lips at once. He dropped his great length into a small chair placed askew at the corner of the table, and began to talk about the country.

He had just come up from the Heart of the Country ! He was a man always very wonderful for them, as to most of us in our childhood the people are who have a command over beasts and birds, who live in the rustle of woodlands, and commune with ringdoves as with spiders. We credit them with powers not our own, with a subtle magic, a magnetism more delicate than that which gives power over crowds of men—with keener eyesight, quicker hearing, and a velvety touch that can caress small creatures. They have something faun-like, something primeval something that lets us think that, in touch with them, we are carried back into touch with an earlier world before cities were, and before the nations of men had boundaries. There are naturalists—but these men are not naturalists ; they come out of no studies ; in museums they shudder and are disquieted, just as gipsies are vaguely unrestful when you ask them to enter your house. In the towns these men will see things that we never see; they will note the fall of sparrows, or, sailing through the air a mile above the cross of St. Paul's, a sea-hawk will be visible to them. Into the towns they will bring a touch of sweetness and of magic—because they come from the Heart of the Country.

He was all in grey, so that against an old stone wall you would hardly have seen him, or on a downside no bird would startle at passing him. It happened that he mentioned the precise green valley that for one of those men was the Heart of the Country. It nestles beneath a steep, low cliff, in the heart of an upland plain as vast and as purple, as wavering and as shadeless as the sea itself. But the green valley runs along a bottom, a little winterbourne directing its snake's course ; trees fill it and overshadow old stone houses, and it is alive with birds driven to it for water from the plains above.

So that, green and sinuous, a mirage seemed to dazzle and hang in air in the middle of the cigarette smoke, making a pattern of its own, vivid and thirst-inspiring, across the steely-blue of the restaurant mirrors. It seemed to waver right above, and to extinguish the luminous idea—to extinguish the very light of their Eldorado. They talked of place after place, pursuing the valley along its course, of a great beacon here, a monolith there, of millponds and villages that run one into another, boasting each one a name more pleasant in the ear, or a tuft of elms higher and more umbrageous. For if each man have (and each of us has) his own Heart of the Country, to each assuredly that typical nook, that green mirage that now and then shines between him and his workaday world, will be his particular Island of the Blest, his island of perpetual youth, his closed garden, which as the years go on will more and more appear to contain the Fountain of Youth. And as time goes on, too, life will assume more and more an air of contest between the two strains of idealism in the man—a contest between the Tom Tiddler's Ground of the Town and Islands of the Blest that lie somewhere in the Heart of the Country.

These metaphors, this ideal of an island smoothness in Hyperborean seas, are not the less true because they are not part of our present vernacular. Our necessities, our modes of travel, our very speech, have changed ; the necessity for that ideal remains. Whilst, indeed, our speech was forming itself, they wrote books with titles like “ Joyful Newes from the West Over Seas,” and still in the tangible unknown West, they could hope to find Happy Valleys. Now with a mapped-out world we can no longer have that hope. We travel still with that ideal, but the hope has grown intangible.

On the one hand the world has become very small, since we may have it all in a book, in pink, in green, in yellow squares. We can reach any portion of it so easily, we may have so easily pictures of it all, that it is hardly worth the seeking. Intellectually, we have learned that there is no Island of the Blest ; in our inmost selves, automatically, we never acknowledge it. We have brought our island nearer home ; it lies beyond the horizon, but only just beyond. In a sense we may even hope to reach it by the most commonplace of methods. For the mere taking of a pill there may be ours health, which is the fountain of youth ; for the mere pulling the ropes of a machine, for just waving our arms in certain magical postures before dressing in the morning, there shall—so the advertisements say—be ours a day of vigorous and unclouded brain, a day that shall see us, unhandicapped by any bodily ill, descend to do our battles in the market-place—a day in the land of Eldorado. Thus do the clamant charlatans of the beyond in the pale columns of our journals attempt to play upon strings that three thousand or three hundred years ago were rendered sweet by the melodies of those other charlatans who were once living poets.

These things we only half believe in, even in this England, which for the rest of the world is the “ Land of Pills.” But observe the face of your interlocutor when you tell him that you are going into the country. Observe the half envy, half yearning, the mixture of reminiscence and of forecasting plans that will waver across his face, and mark all the shades of expression in his “ Lucky you !”

Round the flat, dark, toilsome town there is the vast green ring, the remembrance of which so many men carry nowadays in their hearts. Put it, if you will, that its attraction is simply that of the reverse of the medal, that it is a thing they love merely because it is not theirs.

Its real pull is felt, the rope is cast off, when, in his club, on his mantelpiece at home or at his suburban post-office, the townsman leaves directions for his letters to be forwarded. At that blessed moment he loses touch with the world, casts off his identity, heaves a sigh as if a great weight had fallen from his shoulders, or even moves his limbs purposelessly in order to realise to the fullest how a free man feels. He has shaken off his identity. For as long as the mood lasts he cannot be traced, he cannot be recalled to earth. And supposing he never went to the spot to which his letters are to be addressed—supposing that, instead of taking train to that fly-fisher’s inn, to that moorland farm, or to that friend’s manor house, he went afoot to the shore of a Devonshire sea, he might never be found again. He might shake off all responsibilities ; he might form ties lighter to bear than the lightest snaffle that ever horse submitted to. He might find a threshold over which, when he stepped in the morning, his feet would go lightly, his eyes glance confidently over fields, seas, and skies of a fabulous brightness.

He never does it—at least he has never done it since here the townsman is and here, in whatever particular town of life he has an abiding place—here he is likely to remain. Some no doubt break the chain. It has been asked, as we know well enough, “ What’s become of Waring since he gave us all the slip ?” But they never know, they who form the “ us all” of the line. Waring has disappeared—gone ; he no longer exists ; the Heart of the Country has swallowed him up. He was a weak man who broke ; those remaining are the strong, who shiver a little sometimes at the thought that they may do as Waring did.

The mood may last him for an hour or two ; it obsesses him a little as he leans back in his train—the fact is still there ; his letters are being forwarded to a place that he has not yet reached. For a little time he is still in the grey of the town ; its magazines, its papers, its advertisements hold his eyes immediately. Gradually through the glass that encages us he sees the green flicker through the grey of the outskirts, as through the ragged drab skirts of a child you may catch the flash of her knee when she runs. The cloak spread over the ground becomes a covering less and less efficient ; then it is all green, and amongst a geometrical whirl of corded posts turning slowly right away to the horizon he shall see the figures of women with blue handkerchiefs over their heads kneeling down and tying the hops.

But that is still all remote all shadowy. His lungs are quite literally filled with the air of his town. It is only when he steps out at his junction where he “ changes ” that he is conscious of some strange and subtle difference. On his forehead he feels a sudden coolness, his foot falls more lightly, he draws a deeper breath, It is because he is breathing the breath of a free wind.

So he crosses the platform, and in the gloaming gets into the smaller, dirtier, stuffier and darker, and how infinitely more romantic, boxes that will carry him through a fast darkening land into his particular Heart of the Country.

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Each man of us has his own particular Heart, even as each one has his own particular woman. And the allegiance that he pays to it is very similar. He has his time of passionate longing, of enjoyment, of palling perhaps, or of a continually growing passion that is a fervour of jealousy much such as a man may feel for his wife. He has his love of the past, or he has been whirled past places that later he will hope to make his ; he has, and always, his ideal.

This he will never attain to. Put him upon a great hill. Below him there will stretch plains almost infinite ; down into them the slopes on which he stands wave and modulate indefinitely. Above his head is the real blue infinity ; on his left hand the purple sea, with just a touch of the pink shore of another land that may carry the mind to distances yet more vast. At his back there are grey silences ; before his face, miles and miles away in the heart of the sunset, there are dim purplish hills, like a lion couchant, stretched out in a measureless ease. To this height he may have attained with great labour ; until he reached it it had represented his ideal. But after the first intaking of free air into the lungs he will see those dim and glamorous hills. And just beyond them once more his ideal will be hidden. A moment later, too, he will remember that in the valley that he crossed to reach this height there were an old mill with a great pond in which swallows dipped, an old wheel revolving in a dripping tracery of green weeds, a stream running down a valley all aflame with kingcups. This old mill that he passed nonchalantly enough may, he remembers when he stands upon the height, contain his ideal chamber ; or if he had followed the slow stream through the marsh marigolds that would brush against his knees he might find the particular Herb Oblivion that he seeks ; or, lying down within sound of that old wheels he might by its incessant plash be lulled into slumbers how easy !

Thus along with him he will carry always those two small fardels, regret for neglected loves, longing for the unattainable. No doubt at times he will drop them. We differ much in these things. Some men will feel all burdens drop from them for a time when they buffet an immense wind ; others, again, are lulled into a pleasant doze in the immense heat and haze of sheep-downs at noon ; upon some an immense placidity is shed when in the late twilight they step across the threshold of their inn into the mistiness of a village street, when they hang over the stones of a bridge and see waving in the eddies of a trout-stream the reflection of rosy cottage windows.

These moods are rare enough ; yet they give for us the “ note” of the country, and certain of them stand out for us through all our lives. Thus I remember, years ago, running down through veiled moonlight, between hedges that were a shimmering blaze of cow-parsley, upon a bicycle that by some miracle of chance ran so smoothly that I was unconscious of it as of myself. And the gentle slope was five miles long. It was one of those sensations that are never forgotten ; it was one that may hardly be recaptured, unless, indeed, the hereafter be one long lying on the tides of the winds.

For many—perhaps, if one knew the secrets of all hearts, one would say for all humanity that is really tied to the towns—the “ note” of the country is one of pain. This not because the country herself is sad—she is only passionless—but because she is the confidante of so many sorrows. The townsmen tear themselves to pieces among the spines that abound where men dwell. Their friends, their vocations, their taxes, their rail service, their mistresses, their children, their homes, all the creaking doors and monotonous wall-papers—all these things grow wearisome, grow nauseous, grow at last terrible even, and so they take to the country for consolation. Sometimes they find it. Sometimes the country, like a jealous wife, will say, “ No, you bring yourself to me only in your worst moods. Find another consoler.” That, however, happens seldom, and, as a rule, we discover eventually that she has acted for the best in one way or another.

I know, for instance, a man whose Heart of the Country is a certain empty room in a labourer’s stone cottage in the backwater of a tiny inland village. He remembers it always as it was at night, with all the doors and windows open in a breathless June, and two candles burning motionlessly above white paper. The peculiar whimper of sheep bells comes always down the hill through the myriad little noises of the night. In the rare moments when the bells cease there comes the mournful and burdensome cry of the peewits on the uplands. If this too is silent there is the metallic little tinkle of a brook on pebbles, the flutter of night moths beating against the walls and ceiling of the lit room. The room itself contains nothing save a table, a chair, a shaving-glass and a razor, a pen and a little ink in an egg-cup ; and the black night, magical and gleaming, peers through the open windows and the open door. It was like, so my friend tells me, being hidden in a little lighted chamber of an immense cavern—a place deep down in the eternal blackness of the earth’s centre.

And, according to his view, no man in the world was ever more terribly burdened with griefs of a hundred kinds. The inflictions that Fate can bestow upon a man are ingenious and endless ; he may have, say, the temperament of a poet, a hopeless passion, a neglected genius, the disclosure of hidden basenesses in himself, the consciousness of personal failure, the ingratitude of friends ; or at given moments the whole circle of his life may seem to crumble away and leave him naked beneath the pitiless stars. Let us say that all these calamities had overwhelmed this particular Waring. In that solitude and blackness he fought, unavailingly enough, against these devils ; he tried to people that room with figures of his own imagination, so that still in remembrance he seems to see a whole galanty-show of kings and queens in mediæval garnitures passing dimly from door to door. At times the razor that lay on the shelf behind his back had the fascination of a lodestone, and on a hot, blazing moonlight night he would rush out from his room and wander, appalled and shaken, to the middle of the white silent village, with the thatches on the wall-tops silver, and the shadows vertical beneath the moon. And then from the little village bakery there came always the constant and unchanging thrill of a single cricket—a monotonous sound that seems to be shaken out upon the air as a powder may be shaken from a box with a pierced lid.

Thus that cave-like, cool room, those hot nights and that thrill of the cricket, those shadows and that fascination of an instrument that should bring a swift and utter change, the slumbrous cottage faces, the imagined and shadowy pageants, the creaking-cry of the peewits and the clamorous whimper of sheep-bells—all these things, fusing together and forming a little fold in space and time, go to make what remains for my friend his Heart of the Country,

He did not in that solitude find any alleviation, but, perhaps because his particular cross drew him away from the real contemplation of material objects, that spot remains to him something glamorous, something mysterious. Probably on account of those woeful associations he will never go back to that spot, and so it will remain for him to all time remote and wonderful.

Thus that glamour and mystery are what he gained from that stay ; and that subtle witch, the Country, if she gave with one hand neither composure nor good health, those illusions that are our daily bread, gave with the other hand that other illusion, blessed in its way—the belief that the earth holds valleys filled with romance and mystery.

The powers of the country, its powers over our moods, are not illimitable. At times hills, great skies, bright hedgerows, or barns the thatch of which is a network of mosses and flowers—at times all these things are mockeries upon whose surface the very sunlight lies like a blight. But at times, again, she achieves the impossible, and serene twilights, the chorus of birds at dawn, the sound of children's voices from deep woods or the blue floors of coppices in May, some immensely vivid sight or some indefinitely complicated sound, some overwhelming odour or the feel of the wind on the forehead, some blessed touch from the material world will pierce through the cloud of gloom that besets poor humanity at its lower ebbs. And it is these things that are unforgettable, it is these things that keep us going.

Other men will remember having watched by a sick bed for several days and nights in succession, in a house full of sickness, waiting all the time for a temperature to fall. The drag of such nights and days becomes terrible towards four in the morning. A man sits in a twilight too dim to read by, he fears to move lest the tinkle of medicine bottles awaken the sleeper. He dare not sleep, he dare hardly think for fear that sleep will overcome him. He remembers, on the third or fourth of these nights, a feeling like breaking, a tightening of the screw until it seems that something must burst, so that without more deliberation it is a necessity to be out of doors for a second, for a minute, for however tiny a space of change.

Out of doors there is coolness, the merest shimmer of grey above the distant sea, the slow shaking out of rays from a lighthouse that seems to be lessening its pace out of weariness and because the dawn is at hand ; flowers and leaves appear indistinct and visionary, the air is absolutely motionless. And suddenly there comes a waft of light right across the sky ; a rook caws from the trees high overhead—then the voices of the whole colony, soothing and multitudinous ; a breeze stirs a spray of hops. The comer is turned, the night is over.

It does, perhaps, consecrate the memory that, going back to the close room, one may find that at last the temperature of the sufferer has fallen, but the unforgettable psychological relief comes with that stir of the dawn breeze, and that sudden motion of the hop tendrils is the acknowledgment that we are no longer alone in a dead world.

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All this is no doubt about “ the country,” in inverted commas—about the land from the outside. It is one of the anomalies of our present civilisation that the majority of self-conscious humanity—the majority, at least, of those who read books—should regard unbuilt-upon land from that outside. It is a fact physically more remarkable in its way than the earliest systems of cosmogonies. That the earth should contain the universe was thinkable enough. That the cities should contain “ the country” is one of those unthinkable things that have passed into the subconsciousness of a great section of mankind.

Hitherto, through the course of history the country has seemed to triumph inevitably. The image of the struggle has been not so much a moving of the pendulum between town and country, but a kind of Antæus-town giant has gained its strength only by touching the ground ; or, if you will, the image is that of a bird that may soar but must come back to earth.

The country has “ Had the pull” because in their origins all foods and all the necessities of life came from seeds of one kind or another, the chain going always through the carnivora and the cotton mills to end eventually in vegetation.

But modern scientific thinkers proclaim that this chain is broken. Foods exquisite and nourishing are to be made from mineral oils and acids ; raiment of glorious dye and skin-caressing texture is to be had from all sorts of coal-tar products. The necessity for the Nature of green fields is at an end, according to the New Millennialists, These scientists adopt towards that particular Mother Nature an angry and querulous tone ; they accuse her of producing a slow-witted race of men, of hindering social progress, of fostering an anti-human malady, the desire for solitude. And indeed to-day I read in an organ of advanced thought that “ the country stock, which some reformers have been demanding as an invigorating and necessary renewal of the city race, is likely to prove positively harmful, as adding an element not adjusted to city conditions.” The city, in fact, is said to have bred its own type.

And once outside the country habit of mind the townsman finds a considerable difficulty in getting back to a more psychological possession of a country life. He may buy land, he may even take to rearing stock, which is supposed to be the surest passport to some sort of social standing in the country ; his face may become bronzed, his raiment approximate to that of the half-golfer, half-horse-coper, which is nowadays the country’s undress livery ; but he will not, save thus externally, get very much nearer to being a countryman.

It may appear paradoxical, but it is as a matter of fact a truism that country life is in all its branches a singularly complicated matter. In a month or so a man may get to know a town sufficiently for all practical purposes. Generalised, all bricks and mortar are much the same ; all town streets fall under wide headings, and town societies are easily classed within comfortable limits.

But your clever man of the world set down in the country is, as soon as he opens his eyes, confronted with an ignorance of his own that will at first render him infuriated with the ignorance that he meets all round him.

It will end, if his eyes remain open, in a modest disbelief in his own mental powers. He will discover the bewildering idiosyncrasies of each component factor of the social life of villages and small towns ; he will discover that it is possible to make Montague-Capulet quarrels out of grounds incredibly unimportant in his point of view ; he will discover that, broad-minded and aloof as he may be, he himself, if in any sense he “ lives” in the place, will become involved over head and ears in these small feuds ; and a little later he will discover himself—himself as an entity cast inward upon itself for intellectual support, for interest, for employment, and for life.

It is, perhaps, then only that he will discover that he knows nothing and probably never will know anything appreciable of what in the cant of the day is called Nature ; and to the measure of his humanity and of his thirst for knowledge he will be irritated or saddened by the amount of time that he will think he has lost in the cities. The amassing of his fortune such as it is will seem a small thing compared with the fact that in amassing it he has so spoilt his quickness of apprehension that he can never hope to distinguish the flight of a redshank from that of a sandpiper. And the longer he lives, or the longer his interest remains alive, the deeper will his thoughts penetrate. He will discover that he knows nothing about wild flowers, nothing about ploughed fields. He will be startled by such questions as, “ How many sheep will an acre of marsh-land carry all the year round ?” and that most bewildering of problems, “ In the profit and loss balance-sheet of a fatted bullock what should a farmer charge himself for the straw off” his own farm ; and what should he pay himself when in the form of manure that straw is put upon his own fields ?”

The farmer as an entity or as a problem will begin to exist for him, and the farm labourer as a “problem” perhaps still more than as an entity; and all the problems of the country—of game preserving, of wild bird protection, of the introduction of new crops, of the proper form for education, of small holdings, of the amenities of life and scenery, of the question of small houses, of the influence of surface drainage upon trout streams, and of the destinies of the country child—all these things will give to his broad green horizon hundreds of new-significances, so that it will teem with a life more complicated in its interworkings than any of which he had before conceived.

These things differ very much in different merit but as a broad general plan the induction of a man into a countryside runs upon these lines, and by these steps he seems to descend further and further into the bowels of the country. He views the country from a distance; coming into it he studies the means of communication, and makes nodding acquaintance with the men he meets between the hedgerows; next, crossing the fields by short cuts that he has discovered, passing through little lanes and coppices, or hopping laboriously from ridge to ridge of a ploughed-up footpath, he comes across wild birds, or watches yellow sheep gasping in the washing-troughs; he hears, pattering like a little shower or rain, the sound of the turnip-flea at its devastations; he penetrates next into the farms and cottages and makes acquaintance with all sorts of slow, browned creatures of his own species. Then he will begin, to the measure of the light vouchsafed him, to speculate upon how the lots of these men maybe ameliorated, and, after he has speculated as long as time is granted to him, after he has essayed his own seedings and garnered his own crops, he will die, and his “things” will be sold, another pressing to occupy his accustomed place. It is then, under these main headings, with a hope of attaining to such a gradual deepening of interest, that I have undertaken this projection of the rustic cosmogony as it presents itself to me.

Speaking very broadly—and to a writer of generalisations a very great latitude of speech may be allowed—this “Country” in inverted commas, this peculiar Island of the Blest may be said to exist only for a more or less lettered, more or less educated, more or less easily circumstanced town class. Owing to the social convention of land-holding the most easily circumstanced of our body politic belong to the landed class, and such attractions as the green earth possesses for them is very much part of their daily life. They are born among green fields; they went bird’s-nesting, they rode their ponies over spring wheat, they were, however artificially, part of the landscape itself. For them, the associations of the country will be the associations of youth and of high spirits, accidental matters personal to themselves. The peculiar decorative line of a pollard-willow-tree will appeal to them in after-life, not because willow-trees were things of which their youth was starved, but because in the small hole of the pollard top of one particular willow-tree they used, say, to leave small packets of chocolates for a particular keeper’s daughter, or because in another hole of another tree they made, in company with a good-humoured red-haired boy, their first gunpowder mine. Thus in after years willow-trees will have romantic associations for them as they sit over the table full of correspondence of a room in the Foreign Office.

And the poorer town classes do not, as a rule, regard the country as a place in which they shall regain health, or as a place of glamorous associations; for, on the one hand, their purses, their whole arrangement of a yearly budget will not allow them to contemplate as part of the year’s programme a definite month in a farmhouse or beside the sea. And as a general rule, if the industrial or shop assistant townsman began life in the country, his particular beginning of life was neither romantic nor glamorous. He felt himself too near the earth, he was too conscious of the social obligation to touch his hat to people in more shining raiment, while he himself was ungraciously clad, as a rule insufficiently fed, and almost invariably miserably lacking in the more poignant interests of life.

For it is undoubtedly one of the great defects of life in the country that really contagious occupations for the leisure times of any one not a child are wanting, and the hobbledehoy

must pass his unoccupied moments in long, aching hours at the corners of village streets. Up to a certain age there are many pleasures to be had ; bird's-nesting, with its peering into cracks and crannies of old masonry and into the mysterious half-lights and distances of thorn bushes, offers at once a sport and a collector's hobby ; whilst to the ordinary seasonal games, to the marbles, tip-cat, hoop-driving and leg-wicket of the town child, the country child can add the slightly perilous delights of trout-tickling, tree-climbing, and the robbing of apple orchards.

Thus upon the whole the child of whatever degree does prefer a real country life to the life of the streets. He does not, of course, attach romantic values to natural objects, but he finds in them enough of interest to " keep him going," to tide him over the periods of terrible monotony that fall upon the lives of all children, I have questioned and closely observed a number of children who had the opportunities of an amphibious existence, who had practically only to ask to be allowed to go either from town to country or from country to town. Once the pleasures of gazing into shop windows had been exhausted for the year—and this passion is as natural in children as is that for marbles and bulls-eye lanterns—once this passion had been exhausted for the year, the children invariably preferred to be in the country ; they loved it for the freedom to be out-of-doors roughly dressed, for the roads that they can run across without being confined to the rigidly straight line of destination ; and they loved it above all for its profusion.

To the real slum child, the child brought up in a grey atmosphere, the sole window into any sort of delight is an infinitesimal copper coin ; without an unattainable number of half-pennies this child can never really handle any number of any kind of objects ; and only those who can remember their own childhood can realise what that means. For in stone-paved courts and asphalted streets there are not even little stones to be picked up ; there is nothing to be made believe with, and sharp-eyed rag-pickers seize upon even the old tins that with a bit of string, a child might turn into a representation of a railway train. So that almost the only things that the slum child sees in any numbers are trouser buttons that he gets from Heaven knows where, by Heaven knows what process of gambling. The only other profusion which he ever sees is sealed from him by glass windows or barred to him by the invisible barrier of Property that erects itself even before the greengrocer's stalls on the pavements.

So that, set down in front of the tremendous waste of plant life the ownerless blades of grass, the enormous spread of fields, the scampering profusion of wild rabbits, or the innumerable and uncontrolled sheep, the slum child, the poor town child is rendered absolutely breathless. He is for the time being like a lifelong prisoner to whom has been given the key of an unneeded street.

The heart of the country ; a survey of a modern land (1906)

Author : Ford, Ford Madox, 1873-1939

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In the Heart of the Country (1977) is an early novel by South African-born writer J. M. Coetzee. The book is one of Coetzee's more experimental novels and is narrated through 266 numbered paragraphs rather than chapters. The novel is narrated from the point of view of Magda, the white daughter of a widowed farmer in the Karoo semi-desert of the Western Cape. Much of the novel is narrated from within the claustrophobic confines of Magda's bedroom and throughout the narrative the unreliability of Magda