

CHAPTER XXXV

A NOTE ON MUNBY'S "DOROTHY"

THERE are several reasons why the poem entitled "Dorothy" should be made well known to you. First of all it represents in a very striking manner a new spirit of pastoral poetry in the latter part of the Victorian period. In the second place it is a poem which has been very widely read and admired both in England and America—in fact, wherever the English language is read. And in the third place it can give you some notions about the life of the peasant classes in England and about their relation to the upper classes, almost better than any other book can do. Finally I may add that it touches strongly and sensibly upon certain economic facts of life, opposing the sentimental laws forbidding women to do the work of men. You know that there are several sides to this question; it is not to be lightly decided, and I am not a teacher of ethics or economics, or of the relation between ethics and economics, so I shall not attempt to express any opinion on the subject at present. But you should certainly be interested in the view of the matter taken by the author of this book, who ought to be able to judge of such matters well, since he is an eminent lawyer, a good scholar, an official representing government interests in the country districts, and a farmer and a poet. Such a combination of knowledge and experience should entitle a man to express an opinion about the conditions of the peasantry.

When this book first appeared it was published anonymously. But now it is well known as the work of Arthur Joseph Munby, an English lawyer who occasionally visits London, but who has lived for the greater part of his life in the country, especially in Surrey. Munby was born in

Yorkshire, which district, by the way, possesses the finest peasantry in England. His birth was in 1828, so that he must now be quite an old man; but he published a volume of new poems only this year. It is rather a curious combination which he presents—farmer, country squire, and lawyer all in one, yet finding time to be a poet. University training developed his power to write poetry almost as easily as other men write prose; this partly may account for the phenomenon. I do not mean to say that it is great poetry; no man can be a great poet and exercise three other professions at the same time. But it is not bad poetry, it is actually better than the work of Arthur Hugh Clough, the friend of Matthew Arnold, who wrote very much the same kind of verse, and there is a merit in it besides that of poetry proper. As a romance in verse, the measure and construction of “Dorothy” do not greatly impress the reader; in fact you are sometimes surprised, and almost made angry, by the apparent indifference to poetical rules. But after you have read the work, the impression left upon the mind is very strong and very pleasing, and you will not forget it. The book has the power to charm; it has charmed tens of thousands of readers. The secret of the charm is not, as I have suggested, in the literary art, but in the feeling of the book, in the author’s grasp of the subject, in his knowledge of and sympathy with country life. From boyhood this man liked the peasants, saw their good qualities and admired them, learned their dialects and liked to talk to them. I may mention here also that he has written a good deal of poetry in peasant dialect, although a university scholar. And one day he conceived the idea of trying to interest the English upper classes in the humble life of these country folk whom they pretended to despise. But he had many prejudices to face in order to be able to do this well. He had to be prepared to meet every possible kind of sneer and jeer on the part of snobs and cads. He had to expect to be told that his peasants were dirty, smelled bad, had ugly hands, ugly faces, ugly feet, ugly manners,

and detestable stupidity into the bargain. And then he met these prejudices and affectations simply by drawing peasant life as he saw it. He described all the dirt and the smell and the vulgarity and the ignorance in his poems—even exaggerating them; and nevertheless he made people like them, admire them, almost love them when he had done. The fact is, nearly all class prejudices, based upon social conditions, are utter humbug; and they would scarcely exist if the upper classes were less ignorant than they are of what is noble and good and human in the lowest classes. Munby did not attempt to fight prejudices by denying their cause or denying their assertions, but by bringing the real human facts into the light, and making people look at them fairly and squarely. I think this is all I need say about the social side of the poem.

But I must tell you something about English peasant life, country life, labouring life, before I quote to you anything from "Dorothy." I do not think that much is known in Japan about English country life, though a good deal is now known about the life of the cities and of their industrial classes. Japanese travellers do not have either the time or the opportunity to go out into the country and study the peasant. And yet, not to study the peasantry of a country must be to remain with a very imperfect knowledge of the nation. For the body, the strength, the whole power of the race is there. In England, perhaps, the difficulty of studying the agricultural classes is especially great, for the extraordinary reason that the agricultural classes are gradually disappearing. The entire country is owned by a few thousand people; there is no future in store for the common worker, and the advent of the complicated machinery into field work dispenses with a great deal of human labour. Therefore the English peasantry emigrates whenever it can, and in the future its place will perhaps be taken by an inferior foreign class. But, as I have said, to know the English race one should know something about its peasants. The excellent French thinker Taine, who made

an admirable book of English travels, understood this perfectly well, and he based his studies of English character largely upon his observation of the agricultural and the working classes.

At the time when Munby wrote his poem, women in the English country district used to do extraordinary work, perhaps more than they do now. There were plenty of women blacksmiths, women colliers, women farmers—in fact, almost every department of heavy labour had places for women as well as for men. I believe that legislation subsequently changed a good many of these conditions, forbidding women, for example, to work in the coal mines dressed in men's clothes. But as a boy I remember seeing much heavy work done by women, and I do not know that the legislation was altogether wise. Only a very particular class of women could do the work against which the laws were passed, and that class of women were particularly well fitted by nature to do it. You could not have told, by the eye alone, whether those working women were men or women; their voices might betray them, but not their walk or their bulk. Among them were figures six feet high, with shoulders broad as a wrestler's, arms muscled like those of a man, and walking with the long swinging step of a man in great heavy shoes. The impression you received on seeing them work was that there was nothing womanly about them, for their roughness of appearance was equal to the roughness of men.

Among the peasant class proper—I mean among those who remain all their lives at farm work—this masculinity does not appear to the same degree in manners. The labouring woman in the country is often huge and strong but seldom unwomanly. Her manner remains gentle and kind. It is the contact with the life of the mines, with mechanical industries and manufactories, that seems to make the woman rough. They lose the moral tone of their sex—I do not mean by this that they become bad, but they cease to act and talk like women. It is not so in the country; it

is so only in the manufacturing and mining towns. Now it is of the country girl that Mr. Munby writes, and he takes for his type one of the lowest class of workers, a female farm servant.

I must tell you something about these female servants. A woman must be very strong indeed to be a servant in the country, not only in England but even in America. A woman employed as servant on a farm must do what would be considered in this country hard work for at least six persons. She must cook three times a day for the entire household, she must bake bread in addition to cooking, she must do all the washing of the family, and keep the house clean, and she must help with the work on the farm—milking and feeding the cow, taking care of the poultry, doing, in short, the work of both a man and a woman. One must be very strong indeed for such labour; and it is no wonder that women are gradually passing from the sphere of domestic employment, to be replaced by men.

Can we imagine any romance in so hard a life? Our English poet has proved to us that romance may be found in it quite as well as in any other walk of life—though of a different kind.

Let us take the plan of the story as he tells it to us, giving extracts here and there to show the attraction of his verse. It is good verse, all hexameters and pentameters alternating; and although this kind of verse cannot be made quite perfect in English by anybody, Mr. Munby's hexameters will certainly compare very well with either Longfellow's or Clough's. He first tells us about the birth of the girl on the farm—an illegitimate child, and therefore destined to hard work without any parental affection to soften the way for her, but honest, good, kind, and beautiful. Here is a little description, which includes the description of a farm girl in general:

Weakly her mistress was, and weakly the two little daughters;

But by her master's side Dorothy wrought like a son:

Wrought out of doors on the farm, and labour'd in dairy and kitchen,

Doing the work of two; help and support of them all.
 Rough were her broad brown hands, and within, ah me! they were horny:
 Rough were her thick ruddy arms, shapely and round as they were:
 Rough too her glowing cheeks; and her sunburnt face and forehead
 Brownier than cairngorm seem'd, set in her amber-bright hair.
 Yet 'twas a handsome face; the beautiful regular features
 Labour could never spoil, ignorance could not degrade:
 And in her clear blue eyes bright gleams of intelligence linger'd;
 And on her warm red mouth, Love might have 'lighted and lain.
 Never an unkind word nor a rude unseemly expression
 Came from that soft red mouth; nor in those sunny blue eyes
 Lived there a look that belied the frankness of innocent girlhood—
 Fearless, because it is pure; gracious, and gentle, and calm.
 Have you not seen such a face, among rural hard-working maidens
 Born but of peasant stock, free from our Dorothy's shame?
 Just such faces as hers—a countenance open and artless,
 Where no knowledge appears, culture, nor vision of grace;
 Yet which an open-air life and simple and strenuous labour
 Fills with a charm of its own—precious, and warm from the heart?

I think the author insists too much in his poem upon the roughness and hardness of Dorothy's hands. As a matter of fact, no soft-handed woman could be a good worker, and it is the custom to look at a woman's hands before giving her work to do on a farm. If they are soft and white, they belong to a lazy woman. It is good to recognize the honesty of a hard working hand, to recognize that there is a certain nobility in labour, but I think that Munby insists too much on the ugliness of hard hands. Really hard hands are not any uglier than any other hands, except to fastidious persons; perhaps Mr. Munby was only desiring to anticipate fastidious criticism. He goes on to give a description of the girl on the farm in winter, spring, summer, and autumn. The description of the spring work is fine; the subject is ploughing. It is very hard to plough perfectly, unless you have been brought up to the work from a child. Prizes for straight ploughing used to be given in different parts of the country; perhaps they are still given, but the introduction of steam ploughing machinery from America is

very likely to do away with hand ploughing in the course of time. If that day comes, a description of ploughing like this will be remembered and read with a pleasure somewhat like that which we feel when we read in Virgil accounts of the work done upon old Roman farms:

Well can our Dorothy plough—as a girl, she learnt it and loved it;
 Leading the teams, at first, follow'd by Master himself;
 Then, when she grew to the height and the strength of a muscular woman,
 Grasping the stilts in her pride, driving the mighty machine.
 Ah, what a joy for her, at early morn, in the springtime,
 Driving from hedge to hedge furrows as straight as a line!
 Seeing the crisp brown earth, like waves at the bow of a vessel,
 Rise, curl over, and fall, under the thrust of the share;
 Orderly falling and still, its edges all creamy and crumbling,
 But, on the sloping side, polish'd and purple as steel;
 Till all the field, she thought, looked bright as the bars of that gridiron
 In the great window at church, over the gentlefolks' pew:
 And evermore, as she strode, she has cheerful companions behind her;
 Rooks and smaller birds, following after her plough;
 And, ere the ridges were done, there was gossamer woven above them,
 Gossamer dewy and white, shining like foam on the sea.

Of descriptions like these there are not many, for the subject of the poem is the description of character rather than of hills and fields, and descriptions of character are better given through the words and actions of a person than in any other way. So a large proportion of the poem is simply a narrative of acts, mingled with a record of colloquial speech. Still I may quote you a few lines about a sunset:

Well, there was something to see; for the sun was setting in glory,
 Glowing through marvellous clouds, molten, suffused, with his light;
 Clouds all rosy above, like the snows of an Alpine sunset,
 But in the heart of their snow thrill'd with a cavernous fire;
 Clouds that were couch'd superb in a blaze of opal and em'rald,
 Haunting the clear cool sky, lucid and lovely and blue.

The quotations will show the very considerable power of art which the poet possesses and can use at will. But

the art of showing the beauty and charm of a simple character is much more difficult than the painting of clouds, and this also the poet has done. He traces for us the life of the girl up to the time of her wedding, and the object of the whole work is certainly, in no small degree, the praise of honest labour that strengthens the body and keeps the mind pure. Why discourage women from labours in the fields, he asks, since such work is good both for the body and for the mind; and the women capable of such work become the mothers of the strong and steady men that make up the force of a country. It is not, he reminds us, the sickly and delicate girls working in factories or in shops, who are likely to be the mothers of the best men.

Probably this poem of Mr. Munby's had very little effect in checking the course of things, and probably the agricultural population of England must disappear. The whole country is becoming divided into nothing but manufacturing districts or ornamental estates. It does not pay to grow corn or wheat nor even to raise cattle and sheep in England. It is cheaper to buy such things from abroad. So the farming population is disappearing. The best men and women go to other countries—Canada, America, Australia; the weaker part of the peasant population drift into factory life. These things cannot be helped. But the poet has preserved for us a fine picture of this fine peasant life, which will be read when the peasant life itself has passed from England. The book suggests or ought to suggest a good deal to lovers of literature in other countries than England, especially the fact that peasant life is a subject for poetry; and that the poet able to perceive its relation to the moral and physical well-being of a nation has a great opportunity before him.