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A COTSWOLD DAY

by H. E. Bates

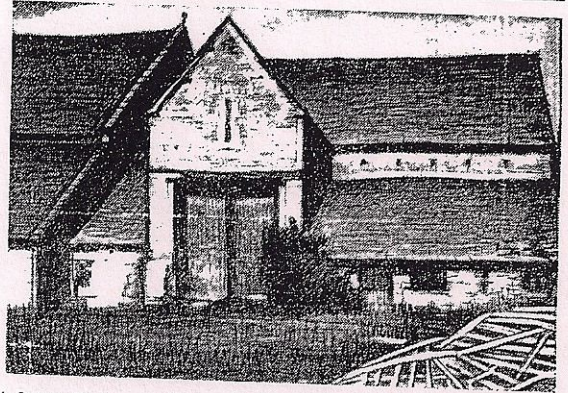
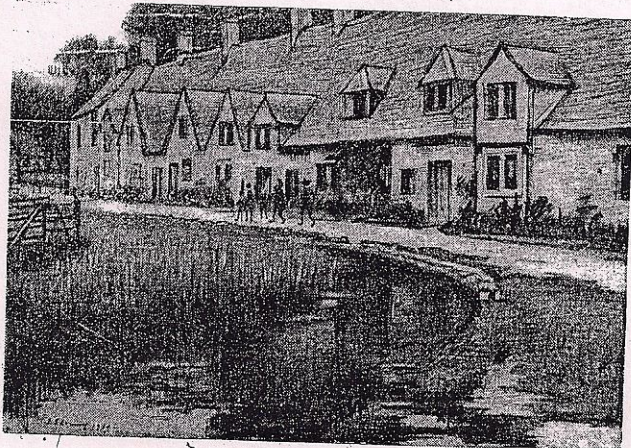
I HAD often heard of Cotswold as being the most interesting bit of England, the most primitive, the most individual, the most memorable, but I did not believe it. I remembered the desecration of Derbyshire and Devon by the charabanc, which is not merely an evil of itself, but which is responsible more than anything else for the cheap tea-shack, the ugly bed-and-breakfast bungalow, the garish fresh-farm-cream-and-fruit and pedigree-puppy advertisements which scar the face of our own country. Knowing this, and knowing that the disease of ugliness spreads with the machine, I could not hope that Cotswold had escaped.

Off the Track and On

Nevertheless it has escaped. Something has kept the motorist away from Cotswold. It is true that the coastal charabancs roar through Northleach, where the desolate and empty prison stands at one end of the main street as though ready to house their drivers again as soon as decent legislation enforces it, but Northleach is no longer true Cotswold, though the guide-books will tell you so and laud it loudly; it is a dim, characterless, pathetic place, the soul of which died when the hand-loom became finally silent.

Northleach, moreover, is on the main road, and beautiful towns cannot exist side by side with speed tracks. It is true that the map will tell you that Cirencester is on the main road to somewhere, but Cirencester is unique. It might conceivably survive a railway through its high street, a dog-racing track in its market place. Its houses are dreams in stone, and they have survived not merely in precious pairs or in odd corners, but in whole streets, as mellow and quiet and dignified as Oxford must have been a hundred years ago.

We determined to see Cotswold in a



A Cotswold barn. This and the sketch below of Arlington Row are from L. S. Lowry's illustrations in "A Cotswold Book."

way as ancient as itself, on foot, working from Cirencester northwards. We had been reading—or had been trying to read—*A Cotswold Village*, and from Cirencester we made for Abington, where Gibbs lived and shot and fished and wrote that extraordinary book of his, that remarkable bit of Victorian snobbery, with its sentimental eulogy of the River Coln and the village itself. But when we saw the place, Gibbs's house, the river, and a fat trout sleepily strike off under the bridge, we felt inclined to forgive him everything. Abington is a parable: an earthly village not only with a heavenly meaning but also a heavenly beauty. It must have drugged Gibbs's senses with that beauty.

Three Cotswold Books

- A COTSWOLD VILLAGE. By J. Arthur Gibbs. (Travellers' Library, 3/6).
 WOLD WITHOUT END. By H. J. Massingham. (Cobden-Sanderson, 10/6).
 A COTSWOLD BOOK. By H. W. Timperley. (Cape, 7/6).

At Bibury, before Abington, we met Cotswold folk, warm, friendly men, in "The Catherine Wheel." It was very hot and we drank silently until a lean, gaunt fellow came in, twisting in his hands what looked like two little claret-coloured drumsticks. The innkeeper, fatter than Mr. Pickwick, came forward to look at them.

"Know what they are?" the gaunt one asked him.

He shook his head, and the gaunt one went from pint-pot to pint-pot, twisting his two little stalks before the eyes of the drinkers.

"Know what they are?"

We sat silent. No one knew. And finally he came to me, looking at me with that gentle but slightly aloof pity that the true countryman has for the man who wears a town-shirt.

I stretched out my hand to take the stalks and he gave them to me dubiously. Like him, I twisted the stalks in my hand, making the red seed-heads revolve quickly, and looked up.

"Wild garlic," I said.

He looked at me swiftly with a half-astounded, half-incredulous look. It was just as though I had guessed an obscure secret. "Smell," he said.

I sniffed the strong onion smell of the seed-heads and gave them back to him.

The Folding Wolds

He had already warmed to me, and for half an hour we talked of the land. The innkeeper finished that discussion with a simple, profound statement, putting into words what I had often thought myself.

"Ain't nobody got no more enemies 'n the farmer—this old garlic an' wire-worm an' blight an' birds an' the weather all the time against him."

The gaunt one with his garlic said "Good-morning" and after him we departed too, making uphill all the time to higher wolds. The sun was scorching, but as a man in the inn had said, "There was a little air a-movin' high up." The wolds unfolded and folded and unfolded to a great distance, impressive and deserted, shadowless and harvest-coloured under the August sun. We began to understand the significance of the title of H. J. Massingham's book, which I reviewed here, *Wold Without End*. From Chedworth Woods, looking down over Withington and on towards Corpton Abdale, the hills did indeed seem endless, bosoming one against another for infinite miles.

And on for Ever

On the roadside by Chedworth Woods the hill had blossomed richly. The flowers of August are rich, brilliant, almost gaudy, but up there the willow-herb made masses of pink softer than early campion, and the only gaudy blossom was that tall yellow branching daisy whose name I do not know. The smaller flowers, which we had followed all day, were exquisite, tiny potentillas, golden rock-roses, thyme, slim yellow mulleins, campanulas, mauve scabious, purple knapweed, Harebells, which varied wonderfully in colour from deep purple to almost white, trembled delicately on those hills wherever we went, the loveliest contrast to the gaunt wolds themselves and the bare, everlasting field-walls of stones which go on and will go on, I hope, as long as hills and flowers endure.