

Over Marlboro'

Wilfred Ewart

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World War I novelist and essayist Wilfrid Herbert Gore Ewart (1892–1922) was born on 19 May 1892 and grew up in fashionable Belgravia. His father came from a military family and his mother was of aristocratic birth but she flew into rages that meant Wilfred and his sisters often stayed with their mother's cousin in Buckinghamshire and, by the age of nine, he went to boarding school. He was blind in one eye and had poor eyesight in the other but Ewart joined the army in the summer of 1914. He obtained a commission, serving as a captain in the Scots Guards. He was nervously distraught after Armistice. His book, *Way of Revelation* (1921), was a best-seller and told the story of two friends in London society before and during the war. He was killed accidentally by a stray bullet during New Year celebrations in Mexico City in 1922.

On the outskirts of the forest of Savernake a man stood in the burning heat of a summer's afternoon. He was a curious-looking man, attired in a cap, corduroys, and a homespun coat. He looked, at first glance, not unlike a good-class gamekeeper. The second glance, however, revealed a pale, almost ascetic type efface, bearded, with large brown dreaming eyes, grave, full of thought and even of sadness—it was seen to be the face of a dreamer. His body was thin, his limbs loose-jointed, and his gait the long-striding, easy, and somewhat untidy one of the individual whose thoughts are far from the immediate present.

He stood there with the dark green forest as his background and the pale green country stretching before him. How many travellers of how many conditions of how many generations must have paused on this last knoll of the western edge of Savernake Forest! Beautiful the forest looked with its fresh verdure above dim architraves and aisles, from which the man had just emerged. He knew every yard of it, every narrow twisting path, every fern-brake and thicket, every bracken-strewn depth; and he knew by heart the secret life that moved in there among the foxes, the squirrels, and the countless birds.

From his high vantage-point he gazed out upon a scene which he knew, perhaps, not less well. It was a scene little concerned with human life, but rather of the sky and air, the wind and sunlight, and of the world beyond this world. It contained strange and often melancholy effects of distance, of hills merging into hills, and these into other hills or the troughs of valleys; of high corn-lands, and of beech-clumps seen uncounted leagues away. All was green. There was no prevailing note of corn or culture. The valleys lost themselves in

their twisting, winding among the downs or, climbing upward, seemed to lead but into the sky.

Long, long in the burning sunshine and the strange rapture which expressed itself in his face, the wayfarer gazed out upon this familiar country. Then, ash-plant in hand, he made his way down the steep slope of the hill, beyond the last great oak and the last mighty shade-giving beech. He passed to the east of Marlboro', and so across a high, wide common, where the cows, donkeys, and geese belonging to the inhabitants of that famous township have, for many centuries, pastured at will. He came with rapid strides, gazing up at the hard blueness of the sky, yet never failing to notice anything about him, whether of flower, weed, bird, beast, or insect. He came to Ogbourne St Andrew, saffron-yellow, thatched and whitewashed, set about at many angles as many downland villages are. He crossed the plashing Ogbourne stream, and climbed thence by a narrow road up the steep hillside beyond.

There were at first no hedges, only the cornfields, the feathery barley, the pale green waving wheat. Reaching the summit, the road entered a mysterious irregular tract of thorn-brake and of briars. The world of free space was left behind. The road became a lane, more narrow, twisting, winding, tortuous, and flinty. And what a queer stillness! Like the stillness of a larch-wood, but there was no wind among the thorns, which seemed aridly to absorb the heat.

He was alone and happy there. He wandered into the dim recesses, the hidden places and the obscure glades, caring nothing for the thorn-pricks and the low boughs of the crab-apple and rowan so he found the hawfinch in her solitude, the goldfinch, and the shyer warblers. A yellow-hammer beat out his tune to the hard blue and copper-pink sky. A rabbit darted across the road. He found the place full of a secret, stealing, rustling life. Rabbits seemed to stir everywhere:—and it was the home of the magpie. Crickets and grasshoppers everywhere chirped; it seemed to be the anvil of the sun. . . . But he thought of the night there and—as he had known it—of the winter snow.

And in the very heart of this thorn country, which, up hill and down dale, extends to the vicinity of Ramsbury, he found a small ancient manor-house of grey, time-worn stone, flinty, said to have been the hunting-box of John of Gaunt. It was the centre of a small hamlet, hard to find, but itself standing alone with its ghosts and its summer silence. How all shut in, how breathless and quiet, that thorny solitude! The man strode on—it may or may not be that he noticed all these things. Now he was out upon the open down and, skirting fields of clover shot with poppy-red, of half-grown wheat, pale, scintillating, and of barley, came to Liddington with the evening sun. Green and smooth, rounded in shape and scored by numerous reminders of a bygone civilisation, Liddington Hill rises above the rest of the neighbouring downs. Around its foot a white road winds. Upon its face many of the smaller down flowers grow, while from its height may be seen the full scope and distance of all that far-flung

country. Southward the Ogbourne valley winds back towards Marlboro', whence it came, east and west the hills rise to a moderate height, crowned on the one hand by Aldbourne Chase, on the other by beech-riven Barbury Hill. Northward the vale stretches into blue distances that cloud the Cotswold Hills; this remarkable soft blueness being the result of atmosphere, largely created by the great number of spinneys and trees which embellish the fields. North-eastward may be seen Highworth on a hill-top. Marston, Stanton Fitzwarren, Lydiard Millicent lie amid lanes and fields. It is all pastoral, quiet and green, save where, in the foreground, the tall chimneys, the smoke-stacks, the crowding roofs, the railway smoke of Swindon strike the increasingly modern note, that of the toiling, striving world of men.

Near at hand, indeed almost immediately beneath, his eye lit upon the gleaming water of the reservoir at Coate. Beyond, the great Burderop woods enfold a grassy park, while hither the meadows, richly studded with oak and elm, and wych-elm and ash standing in hedgerows, of hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel, end with the rising downs.

The lonely figure of this man, so strange and yet so commonplace, lingered a long time here, upon his face still writ the peculiar expression as between that of the ordinary countryman, the mystic, and the dreamer.

He then climbed a circular rampart, enclosing a little green meadow several acres in extent, these being part of an ancient British fortress, one of many in that part of the country. He found himself alone under the sky, the scent of the downland thyme and of the wild flowers which he loved being all about him, while ever present in his mind was the thought of the men who had dwelt and battled here untold centuries ago.

'I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth,' he wrote. 'Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth's firmness—I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. I thought of the wandering air—its pureness, which is its beauty; the air touched me and gave me something of itself. I spoke to the sea; though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean; I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory. Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race. I turned to the-blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness. The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart. By all these I prayed, I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a puny thing to it, and the word is a rude sign to the feeling, but I know no other.'

His mind travelled back and downwards too, for what the eye could not see in its fulness was the yellow-brick, square-built farmhouse, with multi-coloured

thatched roof, with pear-tree trailing up wall-side toward the gable, where this strange spirit first saw the light. A trim flower-garden was in front; behind, a walled garden, and the farm-buildings and the rick—the fields and downs. . . . To-day it is disappointing perhaps—a little modern, neat and orderly. A tablet facing the highway beside the garden-gate marks the house where Richard Jefferies saw the light. There the Idens ate their splendid meals; there Amaryllis loved, despaired; and, though the old ha-ha vanishes, from this wall above the road Amaryllis watched the passing of Pamment and of Duck, on a summer's morning, in the fulness of her youth. . . .

And there, through thirty years, he dwelt, whose long-gone spirit is the traveller in these lines. He grew there, joyed there, and less suffered than hereafter; from there roamed the many-featured country, the meadows, the downs, the valley, the thorn-brake, and the forest; from there passed out into the world which knew him not till he had died. Something in the grave landscape, something in the quality of the sunlight and the evening peace of the downs suggests that wherever his body lie, and through, or despite, perhaps, the restless tragedy of his life—his spirit reigns there now.