YESTERDAY'S PEOPLE

Mary Webb...



By Wilfred Byford-Jones



Stanton – upon – Hine – Heath, five miles from anywhere, if Wem is anywhere, is an odd place for me to begin. It is not the easiest place to get to from anywhere. The inhabitants like it that way; it guarantees their peace and quiet.

It is Stanton - upon - Hine - Heath which brings me closest to Mary Webb, the only woman with whom I became infatuated through what she wrote. Infatuated? Well, it was really love. It ran deep. I am still apt to drop into a deep well of silence and be overwhelmed by the sweet ambience of her words.

Mary was an idealist in a material world. She knew far more about stanzas and couplets than stocks and shares. She coupled a wild generosity, that sprang from a heart overflowing with pity and compassion, with a reckless improvidence that left her wretchedly poor and unprovided for.

Violets and gold

A child with violets for eyes and gold in her hair asked her for a piano for Christmas and Mary bought her one.

She was never rich, as people now count riches, but she was the most wealthy woman in the world in a way that really mattered.

As a child she expressed her great joy in simple things, covertly as she lay buried in the knee- deep meadow grass of Stanton- upon- Hine - Heath. She did not then know what the word "poetry" meant.

She became conscious here of the great power she possessed to express herself in a beautiful turn of phrase. She planned, and began to write, her first book in the village. *Appropriately she called it "The Spring of Joy."*

Mary Webb was just a name, like those of a score of other women writers, when I was shown some poems she had written in Stanton - upon - Hine Heath. She had lain in the meadow in which the parish church of St. Andrew's stood and she had watched daisies open at dawn and seen the little drops of dew mirror the first rays of the sun.

Sweet anguish

These poems, coined out of her sweet anguish and her feverish search for words that rhymed and lines that scanned, sent me off to find out all I could about Stanton- upon- Hine- Heath.

The gazetteer had been forgetful. I had expected to find something like this: "Village where Mary Webb lived until she was 21. She came here after six lonely years as an only child at The Grange, a Georgian house at Much Wenlock. She began to write in secret little gems that revealed an amazingly imaginative insight that was to make her world famous. She left Stanton- upon- Hine- Heath in 1902. She went to live at Meole Brace, a village one and a half miles from Shrewsbury, where she later married."

If a general had been born in Stanton - upon - Hine - Heath—despite whether like so many English generals, he had led his men into disastrous carnage—the village would have been given a paragraph. If some soulless industrialist had mined coal there and covered the lovely countryside with black, evil–smelling carbuncles, it would have been given half a column.

Since I had first read her poem I had bathed in the delight of her first book, "The Spring of Joy", and I had also read her first novel, "The Golden Arrow."

A heap of books

When I first went to Stanton- upon- Hine- Heath I had with me "Gone to Earth", which I was partly through. I was already hating foxhunting squires and feeling that the most beautiful animal on English earth was the

I wandered tip- toe so quietly that I could hear not only the sleepy chirp of sparrows in the guttering outside, but the flutter of birds' wings on the nests.

I saw everything I could. Even the small lancet windows with round heads in the yard- thick walls of the building.

I tarried so long in the aisle after I had seen everything twice that the verger asked me in a querulous whisper if I was looking for something. The fact is, and he will know now for the first time, I was wondering where Mary had sat. I had decided it would be at the back. She was shy and retiring. She would not be seen there by anyone but the bell ringers who always tarried at the bottom of the tower.

Outside the sun shone on St. Andrew's church tower about which Mary had written, the tower she could see from her home, The Woodlands.

It seemed to me the mightiest tower in the world. It was sturdy indeed and so old that like the farm labourer who ambled past with a stout ash stick, it had to be supported. Buttresses had been provided as long ago as 1666.

There are people in the countryside outside the village who re-

A SHY GIRL WITH THE SIMPLICITY OF GENIUS

"Author?"

I gave the old fellow a brief precis of the career of Mary Webb.

"Never heard of 'er," said the man with emphasis. I thought there was a boast, not shame in his voice. Some people are aggressive in their attitude to literature.

Cook's picture

Then suddenly: "How is Mary now?"

"She's dead."

As I watched the woman's face, verses of a poem by Mary Webb ran through my mind:

Beloved, once more I take the winter way,
Through solitude's dark mountains, purple and cold
As frozen ranges, towards my house of clay,
Where winds shall drink my tears, and shadows fold . . .

Farewell, beloved! Since you have grown too dear,
I must be gone. I take my pilgrimage
In haste — so much I love you, so much fear,
Wisdom may grow from tears, peace fall with age.

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," she said at last.

"Didn't you know she's written some books which have become very famous?"

"Books? No, I didn't! Fancy!

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Mr Wilson's promise of "a prepared package" to deal with the economic situation sounded excellent. It won't be a scratching together of panic measures such as we have sometimes had in the past, he promised.

One would think that his predecessors have always acted like a lot of old hens grubbing about in the farmyard. Perhaps they have. It is all a matter of judgment in retrospect.

What will they say about the Wilson administration when economic situations of the future are under the microscope? The answer, perhaps, lies in that promised package.

He may be likened to the supermarket man whose maxim (and judging by the way some of those tills tinkle, it is quite a successful one) is that if you put enough on the shop shelves, wrap it attractively enough and put the most convincing price tags on, the public will bite and go home satisfied.

After that Budget which surprised everyone by its lack of venom when the situation seemed to demand immediate and hard–hitting attack, how much will Mr Wilson need to put in his bargain basket? How will he coat the bitter pill to sweeten the palate?

This is the question which obviously intrigues city and town alike.

Mr Wilson once told a Tory Chancellor that Britain was in danger of earning herself the gibe of the sick man of Europe.

It is to be hoped the adroit way he talked before his trip to Moscow over Vietnam by introducing his package deal for Britain's economy, that posterity does not ascribe to him the title of "The slick man of Europe".

* * * * *

Councillor Edgar Smart, chairman of Oakengates Accident Prevention Council, voiced the thought paramount in the minds of many motorists. It was frightening, he said, that parents could be stupid enough to allow their children out on roads on toys they could not properly control.

How many of us have seen that look of horror on the face of a child on a tricycle when confronted by a car on a busy road? How many of us have felt blood run cold with the realisation that the child is not in control of that tricycle he is riding?

Some of these children are mere toddlers not old enough to be at school let alone let loose on the open road.

It is not the child's fault. Nor should that child be denied the pleasures of a tricycle. It is always the parent to blame. Obviously a busy housewife cannot tie a child to her apron strings every minute of the day.

But parents can school a child to the dangers inherent in our roads; indeed it is their bounden duty to do so.

feeling that the most beautiful animal on English earth was the fox cub. I had the feeling of being rich. I had a heap of her books still to read, slowly and carefully so that they would last as all real pleasure should be made to last.

There were "The House in Dormer Forest" (1920), "Seven for a Secret" (1922), "Precious Bane" (1924), "Armour Wherein He Trusted" (1926).

Mary Webb, "Precious Bane", as her father, Henry Bertram Meredith, a Shropshire schoolmaster, used to call her as a child, died in 1927, long before her time. She was only 46.

I held vigil in St. Andrew's church where Mary worshipped, looking, as she did during the sermon, on the Trinity and the Annunciation glass in the north wall.

Harcourt Grange, Stanton-upon-Hine-Heath, where Mary used to live.



There are people in the countryside outside the village who remember Mary as a child, a teenager, and as a young woman proudly proclaiming her majority.

Some of them, but not many, had read her books; I could not find one such person, however, in the village itself on my first visit.

Opposite the New Inn, which but for its sign might then have been mistaken for the Vicarage, I saw an old man who could well have gone to church at the same time as Mary, sung the same hymns. He looked very wise. I imagined with what pride he would talk to me about the girl whose fame had girdled the earth . . . whose writings had given pleasure to millions.

"Excuse me," I said with the deference that rightly belongs to the aged, "do you remember when Mary Webb lived in the village—up at The Woodlands?

"Mary Webb?" said the old man puzzled.

"Mary Webb, the author."

Cook's picture

I asked several other people who must have known the Merediths, but no- one had heard of Mary Webb. One man had even read "Gone to Earth" without realising that the author of it had lived beside him in the village.

Fortunately, I had earlier, on my first visit to Stanton- upon-Hine- Heath, seen Mrs. Edwards, the former cook to the Merediths, and gained from her a first- hand picture of the family.

I had found old Mrs. Edwards in the front room of a pleasant little house in High Hatton, a nearby hamlet.

"Did you know Mary Webb, Mrs. Edwards?" I had asked her.

"No, I didn't, so far as I know."

"She was Mary Meredith before marriage."

"Oh, yes, of course, I knew Mary. I was at The Woodlands until they left for Shrewsbury, and she was a favourite of mine."

very famous?"

"Books? No, I didn't! Fancy! — she never seemed a girl like that."

And so, having brought news to Mrs. Edwards of a girl she had almost forgotten, although the outside world had for long discussed her and her works, I learned what I had been seeking — something about her life at Stanton.

NEXT: HER CONNECTIONS WITH SHREWSBURY

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