THE LAST SUMMER

Henry Williamson

It was a golden summer. Ascot, Henley, Wimbledon and Cowes Week were celebrated in the ritual splendour of the English season. The pound was steady and Britain had the greatest navy in the world. The newspapers talked of suffragettes, the Irish question and the murder of an Austrian archduke. Suddenly it was over - an epoch in world history. In the August of 1914 the 20th century began in earnest. HENRY WILLIAMSON describes that last summer of peace as he remembered it fifty years later.

I was a dreaming youth who had said goodbye to freedom and happiness; soon I must leave school and be enclosed in a sunless office. My dream lay in the countryside of north-west Kent which began four miles from London Bridge. Here partridges were still to be seen on the Seven Fields of Shrofften. There were roach in the little cattle-drinking ponds, each inhabited by its pair of moorhens. Below the Seven Fields, which sloped to the grey Bromley road, there were trout in the watercress beds by Perry's Mill. Then came Southend pond. Thence towards London the River Ravensbourne was dying.

On warm spring evenings hordes of white-faced bicyclists left the poorer quarters of London, to return swiftly in the twilight with bunches of bluebells tied to handlebar and seat pillion. The woods of my Boy Scout days were soon to go under bricks and mortar. They belonged no more to Kent, but to that darkly shaded area on the map called the County of London.

My own woods, or preserves as I thought of them, were safe. They lay up to a dozen miles away. I was the fortunate holder of a card signed 'Constance Derby', giving me permission to study wild birds in Holwood Park at Keston. Squire Norman had also given me leave to roam his woods and coverts at The Rookery and Shooting Common. Likewise I was allowed to roam the estate called High Elms near Downe, owned by Lord Avebury. My farthest 'preserves' were at Dunstall Priory, near Sevenoaks, and Squerryes Park at Westerham. Not that I belonged to such grand places. I had written formal letters, as instructed in a book of etiquette studies in the public library, to the owners, and in every case had received a gracious reply.

During my last term in school at Blackheath I did no work. Instead, I thought of the chain of lakes at Squerryes where big trout splashed after mayflies, and the heron flew leisurely over the valley of the Darent. It was with joy that I free-wheeled down Biggin Hill, leaving a cloud of dust behind as the wheels hummed faster and faster, and the handlebars became rigid. My eyelashes were bent back by the wind as I approached the bottom of the steep place where there was a cross-lane. The speed was too great to brake, and sometimes I would hurtle off, scraping the skin of my hands and knees on the flints crushed to a powder

by the iron wheels of carts and wagons. The hedges were white with their dust.

Before I took up my post in a London office I went for a holiday in North Devon taking with me a greenheart fly rod which I bought in a pawnshop for eighteenpence. I carried a black leather bag which, my father told me, had belonged to his father when a young man. This bag had lain, ever since I could remember, in the loft of our house, which could only be reached through a trapdoor in the bathroom ceiling. In that cavernous place, in the light of my bullseye lantern, lay a strange assortment of japanned uniform cases, ice-skates, wooden boxes of butterflies, tennis racquets which bulged at one end, a heavy leather case holding a top hat, iron dumb-bells and Indian clubs.

I took the bag to be botched at the little snob's shop in what was still called the village by our charwoman. With bag and rod, and wearing a new pair of grey flannel trousers and Donegal tweed jacket costing 3s.6d. and 12s.6d. respectively, I bought a return excursion ticket at Waterloo for 9s.6d. This left a credit of 8s.3d. in my Post Office Savings Book.

Everything seen during the long journey to the West Country from my carriage window was fresh. That was the mighty Brooklands Racing Track; farther on, I saw a picket line under a row of pines beside the railway track where cavalry troopers in Khaki, service caps held on by chin-straps, were grooming horses. At Salisbury there was, my father had told me, a pair of peregrine falcons which had nested in the steeple-top of the Cathedral for centuries.

The train ran on, the sun burned down upon the grey slopes of the Great Plain where my father and his brother had worked during 'endless hours' when young men.

Rambler roses grew on all the platforms we stopped at, with beds of wallflower, sweet william and pansy. Porters wearing red ties, for emergency signalling, spoke in burring voices that made the words unintelligible. Faintly from afar came the cries of sheep, heard during long stops. Enormous glass globes bulged inside the frames of lamposts. I wanted the journey to continue for ever. Now we were thundering over iron bridges: below swirled greenish water. An angler with a two-handed salmon rod stood on one bank holding the butt well forward to keep pressure on the fish which leapt - a salmon! If only they would stop the train.

The valley widened under hills leafy with oaks. Seven buzzards were soaring, tier over tier, in the evening air. Seven! A bird seen hitherto only in photographs in the fortnightly parts of *British Birds*, by Richard and Cherry Kearton. If only I might find a nest, and take back a buzzard to be tamed, and then set free upon the Hill, where my father and other men flew large kites, in tiers of two and three, some of them almost of manlifting size and held on winches with steel wire. My buzzard would outsoar them all.

At last, nearly 12 hours after leaving Waterloo Station, we stopped at my destination, a village of thatched cottages and orchards; across the road ran a trout stream. I had been told by my aunt that a jingle would be waiting for me. This turned out to be a small tubby two-wheeled affair like a governess cart. A fat Exmoor pony seemed to be asleep in

the shafts. The driver had a big brown moustache and said he was Arty who had come for me. We went up a steep hill so slowly that I got out and walked to help the pony which then stopped. I pushed the jingle to keep it from running back, while I explained to the driver, who seemed half asleep, that I liked walking.

"Aye, some do do," he reflected. "Now would 'ee care for a drink o'scrumpy? Tes a 'ogs 'ead I tapped today, surenuff."

He held out an earthenware jar. Real Devon cider! It gurgled down my throat but later I had to go behind the hedge, feeling the alarm of dreuling mouth-water. Arty heard and laughed.

"Don't 'ee like scrumpy, don't 'ee surenuff," he said, nodding his head to himself.

"I'm really in training," I explained. "For a race," I added.

Fortunately the pony knew the way when Arty fell asleep.

The days were wide and shining, the sands bore only prints of gull and shore-rat and my own wandering tracks. Sky and sea were fused in a candent blue. I walked all day and every day and in the mystic night of dew on rising corn and the voice of the crake in the later milky mists of moonlight. The white owl floated over the hedge and down the lane. Heather was nearly in bell, and the paler blossoms of ling were appearing among the stunted furze bushes of the moor. Twelve, fifteen, once nearly thirty miles in one day, to Exmoor and back, my face dark brown, my bony limbs all sinew. I fished in the brook, using a dark hawthorn fly, and caught my first trout. And on the last day visited my near and familiar sands and headland and to all I said Goodbye, I shall return, speaking to tree, cliff, raven, stonechat, and the sky as though they were human like myself. And at last, the black bag packed, and the walk up and down hills until the last descent from Noman's Land, a waste plot where, of old, suicides were buried, with its views over sandhills to the estuary and far away from the blue risen humps of Dartmoor. It was over, but the magic remained as I sat still with nine others all through the night and into the dawn, and Waterloo at six in the morning which, to my relief, was as fresh as the mornings of Devon.

And now with umbrella, strawyard, black vicuna short jacket and striped trousers I was on my way to the Office. It wasn't so bad after all: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and my salary to be paid by cheque every half-quarter day. I cashed it at the Westminster Bank opposite in 'the Lane' for six gold sovereigns and one half sovereign; I was a man. And hearing that the Office encouraged the staff to join the Territorials by paying a grant of £4, and better still gave one an extra fortnight's leave for the annual camp, behold me one evening being sworn in and issued with a rifle. I was directed to the wooden blocks of the vast drill hall, where men were boxing, bayonet-fighting, and being drilled. I strolled up to a man in a red cap with a black peak and, still dragging my rifle, gave him a salute.

"You don't salute me, my lad, I'm not an officer. I'm Staff Sergeant Adams."

"I beg your pardon."

"Fall in lad, and don't drag your rifle."

"I'm most frightfully sorry."

Boxing. Stars and painful nose. Inability to hit anyone. Beer in the canteen afterwards. I would soon be by the sea again, at camp on the South Coast. Life wasn't bad. I had got two young kestrels from a hole in an elm tree from Squire Norman's park, and they were tame in twelve hours. They shrilled for food, were silent when I took them, one at a time, and opened the sharp notched falconbeak to push down some raw meat. Soon they were crying to me, to be fed. I had them in a box with a wire-net front. They sat on my shoulders when I went to the Hillies, our local sports-ground - tennis, cricket, a bandstand where music was played on Thursday nights in summer and thousands of poor children streamed up from their 'rookeries' on the marches of the Thames. Shrill screams, kestrel-like, thin ragged children, dirty and wild; paper strewn everywhere, keepers in brown uniforms and brown bowlers spiking it on steel 'sticks'.

As dusk fell the crowds moved to the southern slopes of the grassy Hillies and sat down to await the fireworks from the Crystal Palace - "Sydenham's lunar chrysalis" as my father once called it - which, flanked by towers, rose up glass-grey and sometimes flashed fire at sunset. Now, as the dusk settled, the crowd was expectant. Up went the first rocket - a moan of wonder and delight arose under the first star-points. Sprays of coloured light illumined the Ridge. (Within a few weeks I was to watch the lightballs of the Germans, and the feebler non-parachute 'flares' of our own Very lights illumining with green a watery No Man's Land and the flashes of German howitzers and field guns behind the Messines Ridge in Flanders.)

That summer sun was burning out. The tennis courts on the Hill showed worn patches, the band played every week and the thousands of shrill sparrow-like children came up from the great ox-bend and eyot of the Thames, called the Isle of Dogs, where were once kennelled royal hounds. Now it was covered with rows and terraces of cottage-like dwellings with tiled roofs darkened by soot, their brick walls saturated by the odours which one smelled on going and returning in the train - leather, hops, sulphur, beer and glue. Beyond the dark low clusters, seen under their haze from the Hill, were the red and yellow funnels of ocean liners, the masts and yards of sailing ships, many of them tea clippers, which crossed the seas with their cargoes to the docks and basins of London river.

In the evening, in the moonlight
You can hear those darkies singing ...

Harmony floated through the warm summer twilights on the Hillies; laughing girls (the bold, bad ones which caused a slight thrill of fear) passed, arm in arm; shouts of laughter as youth wrestled and ragged in fun. Cries in the gloaming, the near double-warble of some sweet whistler, feeling grand in a new pair of peg-topped trousers, all the rage among the sort of chaps who warbled - not quite the thing really, still that sort of chap -

The July moon rose over the Thames estuary, casting long shadows as it topped Shooters' Hill to the east. Among the shadows I seemed to see the figure of an uncle of mine who had died of a dread, unmentionable

disease, who used to walk on the Hill with legs thrown out, while holding to the waist-strap of his man George Hemming ... once he had said to me and my friends, about the time of the death of King Edward, *Keep it going boys, your race is nearly run.*

When the moon shone down upon the Hill all fancies seemed possible. Ghosts did exist, and dreams could become truth. Night by night the moon rose later, to slant in gold upon the singing, the playing and the fun. *Keep it going, boys* -

And then, one day, I saw a board before the newsagents' stand by the station with the words in deep black, below *John Bull*:

TO HELL WITH SERVIA!

And took no notice of it. I would be going to camp! My uniform was in the canvas kitbag at home. I had not unpacked it. My rifle was in its numbered place in the rack in the Armoury. Could I take my kestrels to the South Coast with me? Or let them fly wild? They were now in full feather but bits of babydown still wavered on the lesser feathers of back and breast. They were a chestnut colour, with black vertical stripes. They followed me when I went on the Hill, and sat in the elms while blackbirds and thrushes screamed in alarm. They flew into the winds, and hung there, poised and watchful. Sometimes they slid down the wind to alight on my shoulders, each knowing its own pitch, crying to be fed. And when fed they jumped off and glided in circles above me, once hanging a couple of feet over my head and staring down with full brown liquid eyes upon my face.

By the Bank Holiday weekend the talk was all of Germany and Austria and the ultimatum following the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand at a place called Sarajevo. I was excited. I hoped war would come. I would be mobilised, and spend a few months on the East Coast, with luck to Christmas, for the war would be short and end in the smashing of the German Fleet by our Navy, and defeat on land at the hands of the French in the west and the Russians in the east. Yes, I hoped for the excitement of war, while being safe from the fighting, since I was a Territorial for Home Defence only; but behind this (as it seemed even then) untrue part of me was a deep dread of a long war and the world never again being the same place. I could not formulate this even to myself, much less dare I mention it to anyone else. It was deep inside me, from a fear I had felt one night as a child when my mother, unhappy after my father had been cross with her, came to my bedroom and told me sadly that she was going away, that Father did not want her. I had lain quite still, in a sort of shadow. And I became a wild and naughty boy, stealing and sometimes setting fire to a tract of dry grass in the wild field behind our garden. Once the Fire Brigade had come out, while I hid in terror.

And on the August Bank Holiday I was playing tennis on the Hill with my father. It was a rare occasion, for seldom did I want to be with him, rather I was evasive and living my own life away from home. But now the excitement made us friends. It was a windy blue and white day. I wore my 'whites' my father had on a strange pair of cream-coloured flannel trousers with vertical brown lines, worn with brown-and-white canvas shoes. He played with a lop-sided racquet, and he seemed to scoop up my returns and whizz them back with a top-spin on. People were watching us, I was proud of the way he could hit the ball. My kestrels flew down and hovered a few inches above my head, waiting to pitch on my shoulders while crying petulantly to be fed.

It was a strange day. I biked down to the High Street to buy a paper. RUSSIA ORDERS MOBILISATION. It was August 3. Next day everyone in the City was talking about Asquith's guarantee to Belgium. Life seemed suspended in the hot weather. That night I wandered with a cousin to the West End and we heard Big Ben strike the hour. The German Government had not replied. Wild cheers arose on every side. I heard them quietly, I was stilled within myself. I went home. My father said, "Well old man, we are at war." His eyes looked gentle and strange. The next day my orders came for mobilisation. My mother helped me to put on my khaki uniform, and after many attempts to roll my puttees, I set out across the Hill. My kestrels followed, wheeling and coming down to cry to me. They flew as far as the row of elms on the crest. There they perched and watched me going away. I heard their wistful cries as I went through the gates at the end of the Hill. I never saw them again. The last summer of my boyhood had come to its end.

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Both these items were drawn to our attention by Robert Pilgrim, who found them inserted in a copy of The Dark Lantern *which he had bought.*