

More Memories of Henry Williamson

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As related in my earlier reminiscences (*The Henry Williamson Society Journal*, October 1983) Henry signed the deeds of purchase for the Norfolk farm in the field at Georgeham in August 1936. But it was not until the following May that the migration actually took place

I quote from *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*; chapter 15:

At 2.30p.m. on Friday the 21st May 1937 our column left for Norfolk. First went the Silver Eagle, drawing an old pattern caravan, fitted with two beds, wash-bowl, shelves, tables, oil-cooking stove, and cupboards. Loaded, it weighed about a ton. Behind its number plate and oil-tail lamp came Sam, driving the green lorry, to which was attached the trailer, on which lay the dinghy covered by a green cloth. The lorry also had a new green hood, supported by three ash hoops.

The journey took two and a half days. The lorry averaged for the first 60 miles, only 8 miles per hour and 8 miles per gallon. It was supposed to do 18 m.p.g., but the engine was stiff, the ignition control was broken, the whole outfit was overloaded and the hills were both steep and frequent.

We spend the first night near Swindon, with some friends, with whom we drank a bottle, one of two dozen bought years before...

Meanwhile, having completed my novel at my parent's home in Cambridge (the manuscript was subsequently rejected with regrets by two publishers) I found myself once more working at an uncongenial job in London. Apparently the literary world was not yet ready to acknowledge my genius and one had to earn a living. (Also, I was now engaged to be married, so gainful employment was essential). Henry had generously spoken to his publishers on my behalf, but I was still unpractised as a novelist and my semi-autobiographical romantic fiction was unconvincing. In rejecting the MS., one publisher wrote: "I found many promising features in your manuscript, but what you now tell me about your age is the most promising thing of all. If you can write about nature so well at the age of 26, there is no need to be discouraged."

With this in mind, I had decided to continue writing on a part-time basis. And so I had returned to commercial life in the metropolis, with daily thoughts of Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas. I also continued to enjoy intermittent communication with HW.

One morning a postcard arrived at my digs in the London suburb of Wembley Park, forwarded from Cambridge by my sister.

*Old Hall Farm, Stiffkey, Norfolk.
22 June 1937*

Why don't you put your London, or other address, on every communication? As a writer you should study your reader always. After remembering the first 987,43217 ½ addresses, a chap doesn't record further: except Buckingham Palace if he meets the King. Yes, do come over here one Sunday; and please give us 3-4 days warning so that we can be here to meet you. Camping here all summer except for 1 week in August.

Good wishes, HW

A week later a hastily-written, pencilled note arrived:

Stiffkey 29 June

Dear GP

I'm sorry you won't be able to come here until at least 1 August. Reason, Mumps, and 28 days quarantine for all concerned. I'm expecting to go down with it on Saturday. I'm very sorry. It's a great nuisance, & there's so much to be done & fixed up, and this cripples us. Please keep it to yourself.

Yrs, HW

This was followed a day or two later by a letter typed on the reverse of a Putnam letter to him, referring to galley proofs, presumably of *Goodbye West Country*, then being prepared for publication.

Stiffkey

1 July 1937

Dear GP

I am wondering if you could help me here on the farm. Can you keep books? Can you drive a tractor? I can't: but could. Are you a mechanic? Are you a hard worker? (I doubt this). I want someone who can turn his hand to anything, who will work and get up early and have plenty of guts and staying power and is good with men and who doesn't expect a nice intellectual middleton-murry-guest-work-house sort of existence simply because I am a writer who etc. actually I am sub-normal as a man among men in business because of what I have lost from myself from too hard mental exhaustion. I like your girl and think she has a head of her, and she would be a great help to you. I couldn't pay you much, about 35/- a week and a reconditioned (Gov. grant, I hope) small cottage with two wee bedrooms like old Skirr cottage. Are you mean with things, parsimonious? I need a manager, eventually who will be like that. Gentleman farming all rot as far as I am concerned. That means £95, if lucky, returned for every £100 spent.

At present I have a lorry and a pit and I'm working on it making up roads. Very hard work, digging and shovelling flints. I employ 2 men and they start at 7a.m. and Gipsy's brother is here to work with them. Only he don't see eye to eye with me; but I won't go into that. He sees no more in me than an irritable, exasperating, neurotic man who couldn't work with anyone. He is Uncle Suff's son; and just like Uncle Suff. He is going about September. A pity he sees nothing in me; but I feel he is heavy, conventional, old-fashioned (he is 34, and a virgin, and he deplores my treatment of his sister, etc...) and if I wrote, like say, i.e. if I was like any 4th rate conventional writer we'd have much more in common.

Well, there's the idea. I want someone who can stay and help me and take my place (deputy) and work with me through a similar type of mind, and with whom I'd share the profits (if any) of this farm. It's a grand life for a WORKER and a sticker and a chap who loves the life and who will work as a labourer some of the time and who is STRONG. I have an idea you are a bit languid and the literary-type, scholarly-type; I want a husky extrovert, with whom I can have a lot of happiness building up this place. I can build; I am a good business man; but know alone I topple and am no good, as I'm not consistent.

In time, with the right man, I'll be having a damned good farming business, with many more acres; but I need the damned good man. Do you know of anyone?

Curse this mumps; else you could come over and see things for yourself.

Yrs, HW

Sorry, I destroyed your card, so have lost address.

Reading this hurriedly before rushing to catch my train that morning, and re-reading it on the way to Baker Street, the idea of escaping once more into the country was most attractive. And to be working with Henry in a happy family farming community! – what a grand idea! Hopefully, I would still be able to write ‘on the side,’ and with HW’s help... all sorts of exciting possibilities were conjured up in my imagination. But there was also a small voice of caution and uncertainty. Firstly, I doubted whether I’d make a good farm worker. Like Richard Jefferies, my inclination was for literary rather than manual work. I was no lusty extrovert; as Henry well knew. My girlfriend – Eve – was a different proposition. This HW had instantly recognised, or so I guessed. Eve had grown up in the country, and was familiar with the rearing of poultry, together with gardening, cooking, and all matters domestic. She would be an immense asset in this new venture. Indeed, it was certain that she would prove to be the stronger member of our partnership.

Walking across Grantchester Meadows at the weekend, Eve and I discussed the situation in detail. Seated by the river, I had handed her the letter, which she read in silence while I watched swallows weaving their flight above the water. Then for a while neither of us spoke. At length she said: ‘It wouldn’t work, you know. You are no farm labourer: you haven’t the physique. And I could never work with Henry: he’d be always telling me the way to do things. I like him as a friend, but not all day, every day.’

She had noted with pleasure the compliment to her in the letter, but feared that if we were to fall in with Henry’s plan it would threaten our own relationship. We had already decided we would marry shortly, and the prospect of living with me as a farm labourer’s wife on 35/- a week did not attract her, even with a cottage provided.

On reflection I had to reluctantly agree that she was right. I would have to remain at my job in London, and we would there establish our life together. So I wrote to Henry, thanking him for his letter, but avoiding any commitment and saying we looked forward to seeing him soon. Early in July a postcard arrived.

7 July. Yes, come over after about a fortnight when I think things will be cleared. I shall want someone to run the dairy and the chickens and turkeys etc. All for profit-sharing basis. Trouble basically at present is absence of intellectual sympathy, i.e. minds no point of contact. No substitute for that fundamental schism. Let me know what Sunday and I’ll prepare. You’ll find me thin, querulous, worried to death.

I must have replied by return on a postcard, suggesting 18th July, but also making some private comment, not for prying eyes. Another postcard reached me.

Stiffkey. 9 July 1937

Don’t be too overt on a postcard: small village: all incoming mail scrutinised. Yes, do come over next Sunday 18 June with your girl. Please don’t count on any migration here yet awhile, if at all. It is only a possibility & will, in any event, need a test-to-destruction. (I brought Gipsy’s brother from Australia, he gave up 10 year job to come, and is now, if he departs, jobless, penniless). It’s a deal of responsibility.

But as it is now, there is no true, easy liaison. I have a crank in my build which can lead upward; he has a crank, too, but it’s uneconomic, & I fear can only lead downward.

But when you come I'll tell you all the worst thinks about this venture. Le me know your time of arrival. HW

As we would be making the journey to Norfolk from Grantchester, where now I spent most weekends, it was decided we would make an early start on the Sunday morning, returning to Cambridge the same evening. I would then ride back to London early on Monday morning. I told Henry of my plans, and he sent me detailed instructions for finding the farm.

Stiffkey 15 July '37

Right, 9 a.m. Sunday, 18th July 1937, breakfast eggs & bacon and tea here, in Pine Tree Camp. Cambridge-Newmarket, Mildenhall, Swaffham, Fakenham, Little Walsingham & so to coast road to Stiffkey. turn right over bridge across river, and go up hill to Cockthorpe. First drive on left, with new-laid chalky-rubble leads to Pine Tree Camp. Drive to Pine Tree Camp is 900 yard sup Cockthorpe Road from river-bridge.. HW
(There was also a small sketch of the road from Stiffkey)

Henry was nothing if not thorough, as my grandmother would have said. At the time I was slightly irritated by the detailed instructions, and what this might be thought to imply. But Henry always tended to be over-detailed and absorbed by minutia: not always followed in his own actions.

My overhead camshaft Velocette motorcycle made light work of the journey to Norfolk. Helmetted and goggled, Eve on the pillion, we travelled swiftly down the long straight road through the Brecklands in the early sunlight – a glorious feeling of freedom and excitement, as T.E. Lawrence so frequently proclaimed.

Arriving at Stiffkey village, with its church and flint-walled cottages, we turned right over the stream and climbed the hill overlooking the marshes of the shallow coast. Presently we came to the newly-made chalk road – a rather unstable surface for my motorcycle – and following this, were relieved shortly to see the familiar camouflaged caravan near a clump of pine trees. The van, an early Eccles model, with rear entrance door based on the old gipsy-type of mobile home, now boasted a green canvas awning. Nearby was a small ridge tent. Beyond the encampment the ground sloped steeply down to a group of farm buildings. Overhead the sky was high and pale, with a distant haze over the sea, foretelling a hot day. East Anglia at its best. The time was shortly before nine o'clock.

As we approached, a young woman was cooking breakfast on a blue-flame oil stove, and I recognised 'Felicity' of *The Chronicle* whom I had last seen in the field in Devon.

Henry came forward to greet us and inspected my motorcycle, which immediately gained his admiration as a first-class piece of engineering (the Velocette was a thoroughbred from a T.T.-winning stable). HW had of course once owned a T.T. Special Norton, after the First World War, when most machines were belt-driven.

As we all sat down for the meal we were joined by a black-bearded stranger who emerged from the tent and to whom we were introduced. This was Robin Hibbert, 'Sam' of the *Norfolk Farm* book; Gipsy's brother from Australia. His manner was courteous, friendly, slightly reserved, and I noticed he avoided being drawn into any argument with Henry, whose presence tended to dominate the party. But far from being querulous and worried to death, as he had intimated, our host appeared to be in good spirits, jocularly informing us that the bacon we were eating, apparently home-cured, was not porker, but goat! I was wondering why it tasted a trifle odd!

After the meal, whilst Eve and Felicity tidied up, Henry asked if he might take a run

on my motorbike: to which I reluctantly agreed. As he rode it cautiously across the meadow and returned, Eve said I looked like a mother hen concerned for the safety of her chicks. I was certainly relieved when the machine was once more propped safely on its stand; and we all set off for a walk around the farm. – all except Robin, that is. He excused himself and went off to some other task.

It was Felicity, apparently, who had unwittingly brought mumps to the farm. She had contracted the disease whilst staying with her sister in Kent, but was now fully recovered, we were assured. Henry, as usual, tended to over-dramatise the situation, describing how he had personally nursed the patient, supplying meals to the unfortunate girl by means of a long pole to which a table-tennis bat was secured; and afterwards carefully washing everything in disinfectant. Now the danger had receded the whole affair was treated lightly.

As we walked down the steep field – ‘Hilly Piece’ – Henry explained that although he was not due to take over the farm officially until Michaelmas Day, October 11, he was in the meantime trying to make good some of the ravages due to neglect of the previous tenant. Remaking farm roads was part of this. Even to my unpractised eye there were many signs that the place had been ‘let go’: broken gates, overgrown ditches, hedges run wild with brambles. In one place, beside the coast road, an unusually overgrown length of hedgerow was disposed of by Henry in a bravado demonstration, by setting fire to the undergrowth. In a few moments fifty yards of briar and bramble was a roaring inferno, which we all hastily tried to beat out while HW explained to a passing motorist that: ‘Some fool must have thrown away a lighted cigarette!’ Henry’s unguarded sense of mischief not infrequently landed him in a tight corner – both in fact, and in fiction.

Returning along the edge of the weed-filled stream, we detoured to explore an old red brick Elizabethan manor house, half-ruinous beside the road. This had originally formed part of the farm property, but had been sold as a separate unit. Once it had belonged to the Bacon family (Sir Francis of that ilk). Henry indicated the family coat armour carved on a stone panel in one wall.

Later that day, after a picnic lunch, we made a brief visit to the tide edge of the grey North Sea: never very inviting, as I recalled from Pembroke College choir camps at Sheringham and elsewhere ten years before. Certainly there was the charm of wild places and migrant waders among stretches of mudflats and creeks speckled with wildflowers under a pale sky. But could this every compare with the blue Atlantic and the wide golden sands of North Devon?

Back at the farm, the evening began to close in, and presently it was time for Eve and myself to leave. As I recall, the matter of our joining the farming venture was never discussed; or perhaps Eve had indicated that we had decided against it. In the light of what was to follow in reclamation of the run-down property, we were probably wise before the event.

When I got back to London I kept in touch with Henry, and one morning another postcard arrived:

Stiffkey, Norfolk

A navvy finds it hard to write after 9 hrs daily of quarrying & road-making: hence the delay in replay to your letter. ‘Take Literature and wring it’s neck’. No literature is literary. If you’ve got the stuff in you, & the will, you’ll succeed one day; after years of endurance & work, work. Then expect only a vacuum of your life when you’ve succeeded and capitalised it. I’ve been working on a story of a goose for 12 months: wrote & told

Peter Scott so, begging him to consider illustrating it: no reply after 14 days so far.

Here one is a slave: at least one forgets the mental slavery while sweating and aching.

Best wishes, HW

Eve and I were to be married on 2nd October, in the little church at Lydiard Tregoze, the Bolingbroke estate near Swindon. This was the parish church for Bynoll, her parents' home under the lee of the downs, just outside Wootton Bassett, a few miles to the westward. A day or so before that I received a letter from Henry.

Ham 30 Sept 1937

Dear GP

Best wishes for your marriage. Are you yet? I've lost touch with almost everything in the rush of the past few weeks. At last the Shallowford house is cleared of stuff – trying to do everything myself resulted in lots of experience, much exhaustions, & about 150% extra cost over that which a 1st class remover would have charged. No matter.

I'm sorry I can't lend you the hut – it isn't equipped for guests, & is full of my life and stuff; & only a minimum of firewood for future use. I've never let the hut before: it is a bolt-hole, my last refuge against things. The loft is a warehouse, now. If there'd been time or energy then I might have fixed it; but you'll know in the future what it is to be so pressed that every new detail... falls like a thunderbolt. Forgive this rushed letter – I've got to pay a visit to Filleigh, take up the last trailer-load, & clear off. The family remain in cottages, parked out – no home yet at Stiffkey. It's a hell of a muddle, as Robin is going shortly & I expect 'Felicity' will depart also – I'm too critical and beastly for others, you see.

I'll have to go along by myself and I'll do it too.

With best wishes and apologies for haste

yrs HW

We spent our honeymoon in Georgeham, staying at Kennelfield guest house, with 'Albert Gammon's' daughters and son-in-law; enjoying the golden October days on an almost-deserted beach at Putsborough, and exploring the Burrows. In the evenings we drank 'scrumpy' cider and played table skittles in the Rock House; then retired to bed. At the end of a week, we motorcycled back to London to set up home in a tiny flat over a shop in Wimbledon. Here we settled down to our first winter together.

As winter ended and spring returned I wrote to Henry, enclosing some poems I had recently written. Presently there came a reply

(No heading: undated)

Dear GP

I've written 80,000 letters in my life & that's more than my share, & so I quit letter writing.

And book writing, if I can live by farming. If not some old hack work will come out under the name of H. Williamson.

Your poetry shows a more independent outlook. I think you're too happy and balanced to produce the sick man's burning line. I hope so. But that's no reason why poetry shouldn't be happy and a true mirror of one's happiness. I'm no critic.

One begins to see things in perspective – both back and forward – & that means things are beginning to take shape, I suppose. But I can't give you details. Can't even write them for D.Express on a cash basis! Much as one needs cash! I daren't add up my books to see what's been spent, & what remains! But is nice here, tho' each operation is a bit worrying until it starts. Bob is a grand bailiff. He did all the roots, threshing for the old tenant, etc, etc. We've plowed 80 acres. Now we sow in 2-3 weeks. I need only a Cambridge roller, rib-roll, and I'm alright, as I've got my seed and drill and tractor and horses. Next week I'll have 15 bullocks to tread my straw & eat my roots. Come and see us in the summer, & live in the caravan.

*With love to both of you
HW*

I visualized the worry and uncertainty he was enduring, under-capitalised, inexperienced, with the constant dread that the task was beyond his capacity. In the face of such vicissitudes, I was glad that Eve and I had decided against joining the venture. In spite of my preference for life in the country, my present job was at least providing a reasonable existence, and our daily problems were within our compass.

Then, about the middle of May, came another letter from Norfolk.

Stiffkey (undated)

Dear GP.

Can you fix your summer holidays, at this short notice, 4 June onwards? I shan't be here in Norfolk then, as I'm going away to the West. If you & Eve care to use the loft in the field, during that time, I'd be glad to have you there. We could have a proper walking holiday, using field as base. I think we'd better do our own cooking, or we could all muck in together: I'm sorry I can't pay for your food – things are a bit rough nowadays, & my income's shrunk much. Let me know. I'm afraid these dates are fixed. There'd be somebody with me & you two would be sort of chaperones.

I can see you at the Savage Club next Thursday between 6p.m. and 7p.m. – I broadcast 7.10, i.e. 19 May. Also 26 May, Thursday.

In haste. Yrs ever, HW

At first Eve was not too enthusiastic about the proposal. I think she feared a clash of temperaments, and that I might become too much under Henry's influence, to the detriment of our marriage. To me it was a grand idea, enabling us to have a holiday in Devon at minimum cost (money was a bit tight early in our marriage) with someone who I regarded as mentor and friend. I confirmed with my boss that I could have my holiday on the dates mentioned. Then I wrote to Henry with thanks, accepting his invitation and saying I would see him at the Savage Club on the evening of 19 May.

Shortly after 6p.m. on the appointed day, bowler-hatted and carrying an umbrella, I hurried down Lower Regent Street to the Duke of York's Steps and turned along Carlton House Terrace. Reaching the Corinthian portice of No. 1, I leaped up the stone steps two at a time, and enquired for Mr. Williamson at the porter's office. Following directions, I ascended a broad, carpeted staircase and entered a large room on the first floor. Here, standing at the bar across one end, a glass of beer before him, I found Henry. His dark eyes had already noted my entrance and time of arrival. Among other familiar faces in the room I recognised A.P. (later Sir Alan) Herbert, and A.G. Street,

who had recently achieved wide public recognition for his books on *Farming*. (Henry occasionally sought his advice, but I don't think they were ever close friends).

Henry ordered a beer for me, and over our drinks we briefly discussed the forthcoming trip. Then at his suggestion we walked together up Regent Street to the B.B.C. building in Langham Place.

Whilst Henry gave his broadcast talk, I waited in the reception area. Then together we retraced our steps to Piccadilly. On the way he mentioned how earlier that afternoon he had chanced to meet a Mrs. Shelley, whom he identified as the original of Evelyn Fairfax in *The Flax of Dram*, and how they had recalled old times. I was fascinated by this disclosure, and dearly wished I could have been present on that occasion, to see for myself one of Henry's intriguing and romantic female characters. (Years later John Heygate was to comment to me that most of Henry's submissive fictional women were, in fact, hard as nails!).

We parted shortly afterwards: he to another appointment; me to catch my train from Victoria to Wimbledon.

Confirming our arrangements, I wrote to Henry at Stiffkey and invited him to stay the night with us at our flat when he came to London for his broadcast the following week. He replied on a G.B.S.-style postcard:

From Henry Williamson, Old Hall Farm, Stiffkey, Norfolk
Telephone: Binham 40 Station: Wells-next-the-Sea

Many thanks but I'll be staying at the Savage Club on night of 26/27 May.

I'm fixed to go to Devon across England, so shan't be able to collect anything in London. But I'll take 100 eggs, butter and a ham. Also your bedding (i.e. for you, supplied by me). I've got lots of tinned fruit etc so you need bring nothing but your personal things. I'll bring a bag for you if you need it, but if possible leave me unencumbered as I'm jammed up enough already with responsibility and details etc.

I've got a date after my broadcast on 26 May, & so I think it's not worth your while coming to the Savage Club for 5 minutes or so. I'll see you evening of 5th at Ox's Cross. Drive carefully!

The faithful Velocette duly carried us on the long ride across England to Georgeham, where we found the field gate unlocked and Henry there to greet us in the golden evening light; with him a girl companion. Frances was small, petite, a brunette in her early twenties. She had set up camp in a small tent in the north-west corner of the field; while Henry had taken up residence as usual in the hut 'maintaining a splendid isolation in the south-west corner'. Our quarters were in the loft over the garage, where a mattress and bedding had been laid out on the floor. Crates of eggs, a ham, several packs of butter, and some large loaves of home-baked, wholemeal bread were unpacked, together with tins of pineapple, peaches and pears.

After we had deposited our belongings, Eve prepared a meal, automatically assuming that responsibility, to which no one objected, and whilst we ate we exchanged details of our respective journeys. Apparently Henry and Frances had travelled most of the distance the previous day, but had spent the night in a tent near Countisbury on the coast above Lynmouth. It was formally agreed that Eve would take charge of the commissariat and that we would all eat together in the loft.

The next few days were mostly a happy time, the weather being dry and sunny, and our human dispositions in harmony. Largely relieved of responsibility, thanks to Eve's capable presence, Henry appeared to lose much of his moodiness and adopted an air of

almost schoolboyish gaiety – at least on occasion. (He was usually more depressed and melancholy in his correspondence than in person, I found). Now, with Frances' youthful presence and Eve's motherly care, he seemed to shed some of his natural reserve, as did I also.

We spent long days walking over the downs and through the wooded valleys; we visited Woolacombe and Morthoe, and drove along the coast in the Silver Eagle to Combe Martin, Blackmoor Gate and Hunter's Inn. Here we followed the little stream on foot down to Watersmeet, where it lost itself in the pebbly shore, scene of the last episode in *The Old Stag*. On the beach here we also chanced to meet a stranger whom I recognised as Oliver Bertram, the racing motorist who at one time held the outer-circuit lap record at Brookland track, driving a Napier Railton. He and Henry struck up a conversation whilst I and the girls threw pebbles into the sea.

On another occasion we drove over to West Buckland near Filleigh to see Windles who was at boarding school there. We all went out for a picnic on Exmoor; returning him to his headmaster in the early evening, before continuing our journey to Barnstaple. Here we stopped for a fish and chip supper and a visit to the local cinema. (Henry usually enjoyed a visit to the movies when the occasion offered, as when he visited Bristol for his broadcast talks).

On one more memorable day we walked to the Burrows from Georgeham, following the familiar road towards Croyde village, then turning off abruptly at a turn in the highway, and following a sunken way towards the horizon. This half-forgotten road or track was narrow with a rocky surface gorged by sled runners of an earlier century. This Henry called Sky Lane, and it led over the high down with marvellous views of the surrounding countryside and the tide flowing in long white breakers onto Saunton sands. (Willie Maddison had followed this route on that September day in *The Pathway*, which was to end in his tragic drowning in the estuary.)

Descending from the high ground, we crossed the coast road from Braunton near Saunton Court, (an old mansion which I always believed served as a model for the manor house of Wildernesse in the novel), and so reached the newly-opened hotel on the cliff-top. In the almost deserted bar we quenched our thirsts with welcome draughts of shandy, admiring the delightful view of the sun and the sands. Then we made our way down to the beach to walk barefoot along the tide edge.

After wandering off among the sandhills, with their marram grass and myriad wildflowers, their rabbit tracks and views of the wide sky above windblown crests, we came back once more to the shore near Aery Point. Here we decided to go for a swim, but Henry's tentative suggestion that we bathe starkers was not received with enthusiasm by the girls. Although there was no one about they demurred, so we changed into conventional bathing togs which we had fortunately brought with us.

We covered many miles on foot that day, picking mushrooms on the downs on the way home, and arriving back at the field very tired and hungry. On this occasion, as a special treat, Henry volunteered to light a wood fire in the writing hut and himself cook the supper there. Eve was slightly dismayed by this suggestion, fearing that the meal might be delayed in the preparation, involving a deterioration of our physical condition. But her offer to take over as usual was declined by Henry, insisting that he would prepare a wonderful meal of fried bacon and mushrooms; he forthwith proceeded to light a fire of sticks in the wide brick hearth.

This act was in itself almost a ritual, with the lighting of dried grass and twigs (no paper might be used) and the coaxing of the tiny flame to dispread among the larger sticks. Then, with the aid of an aged pair of bellows, we were given a practical demonstration of the correct way to gently coax the tiny florets into flame: contrasting

with the violent puffs which most people adopted, thus either disspreading the flames or extinguishing them.

When the fire was burning satisfactorily, a large cast iron frying pan was set to heat over the glowing logs. In this was presently placed a number of thick rashers of pure fat bacon, (purchased from Arty Brooking at the Georgeham village store for 6d per pound) ideal for frying, we were told.

While the bacon sizzled into molten fat, the mushrooms were peeled and sliced. These were then added to the pan, from which arose a faint blue haze and scent of hot fat. As Henry gently stirred the mixture with a fork, the mushrooms absorbing more and more of the fat, Eve ventured to suggest that the resulting dish would prove disastrous for our digestions. But Henry confidently asserted that 'the meal would be delicious'.

When presently we sat down round the table, Eve ate sparingly, and declined the mushrooms, while we three hungrily tucked into the rich food: after all, had it not been prepared by the Master Chef? An hour later our stomachs rebelled, and three bilious patients moaned their discomfort, much to Eve's amusement. Sheepishly, Henry admitted defeat, but saved the day by producing a bottle of champagne, the bubbly contents of which served to somewhat alleviate our distress. After this episode, Eve's position as O.C. Commissariat was never again in question.

One afternoon, on our way through the village, we called upon Gertrude Johnson, a formidable spinster of uncertain age, who ran a vegetarian guest house for summer visitors. She was an old friend of Henry and Gipsy, and during holidays in the field the children used to spend occasional afternoons in her care, playing in the garden or on the swings in a playground just across the road from her house. In appearance and manner, Gertrude was not unlike here Stein counterpart, friend of Ernest Hemingway. But she was a kindly person and rigid disciplinarian.

To assist in running the establishment, Gertrude each summer engaged a number of students from Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe, who were eager to learn English, and who were prepared to spend a working vacation in the West country for a minimum payment and their keep. These tall, blond Nordic or Germanic young ladies gave a touch of Bohemianism to the spartanly-furnished but spotless guest house, where the menu laid heavy emphasis on wheat germ and nut cutlets. (It was also rumoured in the village that occasionally 'naturist' pursuits were to be observed in Gertrude's enclosed but sunny back garden.)

Henry had some small matter to discuss with Gertrude, and during conversation it transpired that she still had several vacancies on the staff for the summer season. Whereupon, on impulse, Eve asked if she might come down and help, calculating that the extra earnings, though small, would enable us to buy some of the many things we wanted for the flat. So it was agreed that Eve would return at the beginning of July and work through the summer, while I reverted temporarily to my bachelor existence in London.

In Henry's company, I was always conscious of his superior knowledge and experience in many matters, and of my own inadequacy. So that when, on rare occasions, I was able to demonstrate a certain amount of skill or perception it gave my wilting self-confidence a tiny boost.

On the journey from Norfolk Henry had utilised a light trailer, towed behind the Alvis, to carry camping gear, and other excess baggage. One morning, whilst together we were carrying out a small adjustment to the towing hitch, I noticed that the nearside tyre of the trailer had partially perished, with cracks appearing in the walls. I pointed this out to Henry, and when we were next in Barnstaple we visited a junk yard and

purchased a good secondhand replacement tyre. To demonstrate my skill as a mechanic – having served four years as a fitter in the Auxiliary ‘Week-End’ Air Force – I volunteered to carry out the job, recalling that HW believed that friendships based on things done with hands were the most lasting, as opposed to literary affinities. So the replacement tyre was duly fitted, and the completed work inspected and approved.

At length the holiday came to an end. Eve and I packed our things and prepared to return to London. We were to spend a weekend in Wiltshire en route; then it would be back to ‘the smoke’. Henry and Frances stood in the lane and waved goodbye as we departed down the hill on the Velocette. They planned to set out the following day. Already the weather was closing in, the south-west wind bringing the inevitable moist air from the Atlantic.

Back in London, I wrote a letter of thanks to Henry, hoping they had had a good journey. Presently came a reply:

Stiffkey

Saturday 25 June 1938

Dear Guy

I've been thinking about you both, a lot; you'll forgive no letter. I loved being with you in Devon. I was a bit 'tisky' as Windles would say, being depressed inside all the time. Reason, 'Felicity' quitting and apparently terminating our friendship. I think she is wise to leave here, where it was poor for her, me always worried, sharp, snarly, critical, owing to having to do so much, and achieving little thereby... going downhill, temporarily. But all the same, any finality of people who have had so much together is sad; a kind of death's dark bourne entered by the living, the sunlight quenched.

It rained for us in the car quite a bit; but cleared about Slough. Trailer ran OK thanks to your good service over that excellent tyre. Thanks again, Guy. The old one would have burst and then o my god it would have been... I liked also your letter you wrote, you seem to have shed your old 'literary' style and be writing straightforward easy natural stuff. A writer has to learn to discard his pretensions before he becomes a journeyman anyway.

How are you? I go broadcasting on 4 occasions starting 22 August and every Monday following. We must meet. I must go. Children out to Morston. I'm going to Scolt Head with Coast. We heard Mosley speak at Holt on Thursday, at a small luncheon of about 100 folks. He was very moving, when he spoke of 500 young men who have been stabbed, slashed, etc, by East End Jews when they held their rallies. One man had hand nearly severed by razor. He swept people off their feet with his sort of Hitler-like frenzy.

I wish I were back in Devon. The responsibility here is pretty wearing; and now I'm side-stepping it, just doing nothing at all, nothing at all. My bullocks sold for about £2 less than I gave for them, except 4, which got £20, lost about £40 on the ten, I think.

Sunday

I must stop. This work goes one, and nothing really done. Two fields of barley have got yellow blight; all roots withering. May be drought; but looks like disease to me. Maybe not worth reaping? Some fields in district have barley 3ft. tall and already golden. Winter sown.

Well I must stop now. Come here in caravan for August bank holiday weekend if you like. I saw roseate tern yesterday. News story in DE soon about it. Love, Henry

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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