

Life in the Country

101
pages

Life in the Country

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Translated by J.G. Nichols



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Life in the Country

A Reverie

ONCE, WHEN THE TRAIN was passing near Aci Trezza, you went to the window of the carriage and exclaimed: "I'd like to spend a month down there!"

We went back, and we spent, not a month there, but forty-eight hours. The locals, who stared with wide-open eyes when they saw your huge amount of luggage, must have believed that we were going to stay there for a couple of years. On the morning of the third day, tired of seeing the same everlasting green and blue and of counting the carts that went along the road, you were on the station, fiddling with the chain of your scent bottle, and craning your neck to catch sight of the train which seemed as if it would never come. In those forty-eight hours we did everything which could be done in Aci Trezza. We walked along the dusty road, and we clambered on the rocks. Pretending to learn to row, you got blisters on your hands inside their gloves, which cried out to be kissed. We spent a very romantic night on the sea, casting the nets chiefly in order to do something which would look to the boatmen as though it was worth catching rheumatism for. And dawn surprised us on the height of the rocky stack, a pale unpretentious dawn, which I can still see now, streaked with broad violet reflections, on a dark green sea. It was curled like a caress around that little group of hovels which slept huddled on the shore. And, on the very top of the cliff, against the depths of a transparent sky, your tiny figure stood out clearly – the outline which you owed to your skilful dressmaker, and the fine and elegant profile which was yours alone. You wore a lovely grey dress which seemed designed to

match the colours of the dawn. A beautiful picture indeed! And one could guess that you thought that too, from the way in which you posed in your shawl, your large weary eyes smiling at that strange spectacle, and also at the strangeness of finding yourself present at it. What came into your dear mind while you were contemplating the rising sun? Were you perhaps asking him in what other hemisphere he would find you one month hence? But you merely said ingenuously: "I don't understand how anyone could live here all his life."

And yet, look, that is easier to do than it might seem. All that you need first of all is not to have an income of a hundred thousand lire. And then, in compensation, to suffer a few of all the hardships there are among those gigantic rocks, set in azure, which made you clap your hands in admiration. That is all it takes for those poor devils, who dozed while they waited for us in the boat, to find in their picturesque ramshackle hovels (which, seen from a distance, looked to you as though they too must be seasick) all that you try so hard to find in Paris, in Nice, in Naples.

It is a strange thing. But perhaps it is not a bad thing that it should be so – for you, and for all the others like you. That heap of hovels is inhabited by fishermen. "Seafolk" they call themselves, as someone else might say "gentlefolk". Their skin is harder than the bread they eat, when they do eat, since the sea is not always kind, as it was when it kissed your gloves... On its bad days, when it rumbles and snorts, there is nothing to be done but stand and look at it from the shore, or stretch out flat on the face, which is better for anyone who has not eaten. On those days the entrance to the inn is crowded, but few coins rattle on the tin counter, and the urchins who grow abundantly in the village (as if poverty were a good compost) scream and squabble as if they had the devil in them.

Every now and then typhoid, cholera, bad times, gales come and sweep away all that swarm who, you might imagine,

would like nothing better than to be swept away and disappear. And yet it always forms again in the same place. I cannot say how or why.

Have you ever happened to find yourself, after a shower of rain in the autumn, putting to rout an army of ants by idly tracing the name of your last dancing partner on the sand in the avenue? Some of those wretched little creatures will stay stuck to the ferrule of your parasol, twisting and writhing. But all the others, after five minutes of panic-stricken dashing about, will go back and cling desperately to their little brown mound. You would certainly never return there, and neither would I. But in order to comprehend such stubbornness, which is in some ways heroic, we too have to become tiny – we have to narrow the whole horizon to the space between two clods of earth, and look through a microscope at the little reasons why little hearts beat. Would you too like to put your eyes to that lens, you who look at life through the other end of the telescope? The spectacle will look strange to you, and for that reason will perhaps amuse you.

We have been very friendly. Do you remember? And you asked me to dedicate some pages to you. Why? *À quoi bon?* as you tend to say. What can be the value of anything I write to anyone who knows you? And what are you to anyone who does not know you? Nevertheless, I recalled that whim of yours one day when I saw again that poor woman to whom you used to give charity under the pretence of buying her oranges which were laid out in a row on a little bench outside her door. Now the bench is no longer there, they have cut down the medlar tree in the yard and the house has a new window.* Only the woman herself has not changed. She was rather more to one side, holding out her hand to the carters, and crouching on the little heap of stones which barricades the old national guard post. And I, as I strolled around with

a cigar in my mouth, thought that even she, poor as she is, had seen you pass by, pale and proud.

Do not be angry that I was reminded of you in such a way and in connection with such a subject. Apart from the happy memories you have left me with, I have a hundred others, vague, confused, disparate, collected here and there, I no longer know where. Some of them perhaps are memories of daydreams, and in the confusion which they brought about in my mind, while I was going down that little lane where so many sad and happy things have gone on, the cape of that poor shivering woman, as she crouched there, made me feel sad and made me think of you, gluttoned with everything, even with the adulation which the fashionable papers throw at your feet, often quoting you at the head of their column of society news – so gluttoned as to think up the whim of seeing your name in the pages of a book.

When I come to write the book, you may not be thinking of it any more. Nevertheless, the memories I send you – so distant to you in all senses of the word, to you intoxicated with feasts and flowers – will give you the sensation of a delicious breeze in the sultry nights of your everlasting carnival. On the day when you return down south, if indeed you do return, and we sit side by side once more, kicking the stones with our feet, and kicking fancies with our thoughts, we may perhaps talk about those other intoxications which life has elsewhere. You may even imagine that my mind dwells on that forgotten corner of the world either because you have set foot in it, or to distract my mind from the glitter which follows you everywhere – whether the glitter of jewels or of fever – or even because I have looked for you in vain in all those places which rejoice in being fashionable. You can see from this that you always take pride of place, whether here or in the theatre.

Do you remember also that old man who took the helm of our boat? You do owe him that debt of gratitude because

he so often kept you from soaking your lovely light-blue stockings. He is dead now, over in the city hospital, the poor devil, in a great white ward, between white sheets, chewing white bread, cared for by the white hands of the Sisters of Charity, whose only fault was that they could not understand the pitiful wailing of the poor man, mumbling in his semi-barbarous dialect.

But if he had been allowed to have any wishes, he would have wanted to die in that dark corner by the fire, where his palliase had lain for so many years, "under his own roof". He wanted this so much that when they carried him away he wept and whimpered as old people do. He had always lived within those four walls, facing that beautiful and treacherous sea, which he had to struggle with every day, both to get a living out of it and to avoid leaving his bones there. And yet in those moments when he was quietly enjoying his "bit of sunlight", crouching on the footrest of his boat, with his arms round his knees, he would not have turned his head to look at you, and you would have searched in vain in those dull eyes of his for any reflection of your beauty in its greatest pride. Not like those occasions when haughty heads bow low and line the way to let you pass between, in resplendent salons, and you are mirrored in the envious eyes of your best friends!

Life is rich, as you can see, and full of inexhaustible variety, and in your own way you can enjoy, without any qualms, that portion of wealth which has fallen to your lot. That girl, for instance, who was peeping out from behind the pots of basil when the rustle of your dress caused a commotion in the lane, if she caught sight of another well-known face at the window opposite, would smile just as though she too were dressed in silk. Who knows what poor joys she was dreaming of, leaning on her window sill, behind that sweet-scented basil, with her eyes fixed on that other house

covered with vine shoots? And the smile in her eyes would not have ended in bitter tears, up there, in the big city, far from the stones which had known her from her birth, if her grandfather had not died in hospital, and her father had not drowned, and her whole family had not been scattered by one gust of wind which blew on them – a fatal gust of wind which transported one of her brothers even into one of the prisons of Pantelleria, “in trouble”, as they say down there.

Theirs was a happier fate who died: one of them, the biggest, at Lissa, he who looked to you like a bronze David, standing upright with his harpoon in his fist, and lit up suddenly by the flames of the blazing ivy torch.* Big and strong as he was, even he flushed bright red if you fixed your ardent eyes upon his face. Nevertheless, he died like a good sailor, on the spar of the foremast, standing firm next to the shrouds, lifting his cap in the air and saluting the colours for the last time with his wild, manly islander’s shout. The other one – that man who on the islet did not dare touch your foot to free it from the rabbit snare in which you had got it entangled, scatterbrained as you are – he was lost on a dark winter night, among the billows, when, between his boat and the shore – where his people were waiting for him, running to and fro like madmen – there were seventy miles of darkness and storm. You could not have imagined what desperate and gloomy courage that man was capable of in his fight against death, he who had allowed himself to be intimidated by the masterwork of your shoemaker.

It is better for them who have died and do not “eat the king’s bread”* (like that poor chap who has stayed on Pantelleria), or that other bread which his sister eats, and do not go about as the woman with her oranges does, living on what God sends, which in Aci Trezza is very little. The dead at least do not lack for anything! The landlady’s son said the same thing the last time he went to the hospital to ask after the old

man and to take him in secret some of those stuffed snails which are so nice to suck for anyone who has no teeth left. He found the bed empty, with the covers nice and straight, and he slunk into the courtyard and placed himself in front of a door covered with old scraps of paper, and peered through the keyhole at a great empty hall, cold and echoing even in summer, and saw the end of a long marble table, over which a sheet was thrown, heavy and stiff. And he said that the people in there at least did not lack for anything any more, and, to while away the time, he started to suck the snails one by one, since they were no longer any use. You, as you clasp your blue-fox muff to your chest, will be happy to recall that you once gave the poor old man a hundred lire.

Among those left behind are the urchins who escorted you like jackals and laid siege to the oranges. They are left behind to buzz round the beggar-woman, to fumble about in her skirts, as though she had some bread in them, to gather up cabbage stumps, orange peel and cigar ends, all those things which are dropped on the road but which must preserve some value since there are poor people who survive on them. In fact, the poor people live so well on them that those plump, hungry little ragamuffins will grow up in the mud and dust of the roadway, and will become big and strong like their fathers and their grandfathers, and they will populate *Acı Trezza* with more little ragamuffins, who will happily hang onto life by the skin of their teeth as long as they can, like the old grandfather, without wanting anything else. And if they do want to do anything different from what he did, that will be to close their eyes where they opened them, cared for by the village doctor who comes every day on his donkey, like Jesus Christ, to help the good people who are leaving this life.

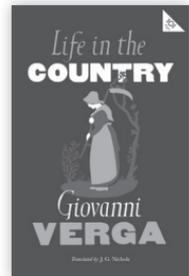
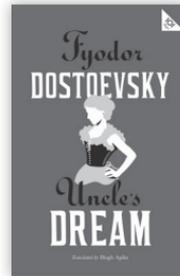
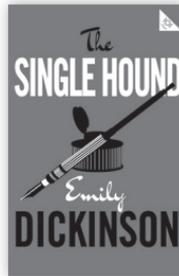
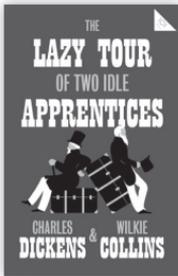
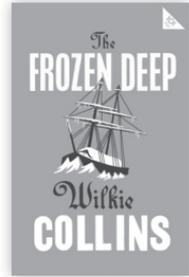
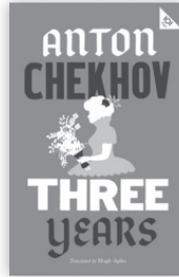
“In short, the oyster’s ideal way to live!” you will say.

Precisely, the oyster’s ideal way to live, and the only reason why we find it ridiculous is that we ourselves were not born

oysters. Besides, this tenacious attachment of these poor people to the rock onto which Fate has let them fall (while it was scattering princes and duchesses here and there), this brave resignation to a life of hardship, this religion of the family, which is reflected in their work, in their houses and in the stones which surround their houses, seems to me – for a quarter of an hour anyway – something which is very serious and worthy of great respect. It seems to me that a restless, wandering mind would fall asleep peacefully in the serenity of those mild, simple feelings which continue calm and unchanged from generation to generation. It even seems to me that I could watch you pass by – your horses trotting briskly, with their harness jingling cheerfully – and in all tranquillity salute you.

It is perhaps because I have tried too hard to see into the hustle and bustle which surrounds you and follows you that I now think that I can discern a fatal necessity in the tenacious affections of the weak, in the instinct which makes little people cling together to resist life's storms. And so I have tried to decipher the humble and obscure drama which must defeat the plebeian actors whom we both once knew. This is a drama which I shall perhaps recount to you sometimes, a drama whose core seems to me to consist in this: when one of those little creatures, either weaker, or less cautious, or more egoistic than the others, tries to detach himself from the group, enticed by the unknown, or driven by an urge to better himself, or out of sheer curiosity about the world – then the world, man-eating monster that it is, swallows him up, and his nearest relatives too. You can see that in this respect the drama is not without interest. For the oyster, the most interesting topic must be that which deals with the wiles of the lobster or of the diver's knife which detaches it from the rock.

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