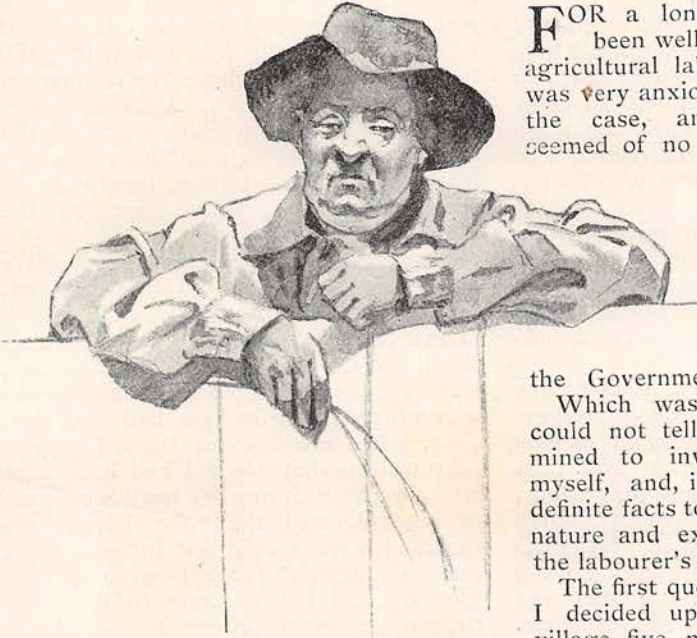


HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES.

THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURER.

By H. G. PEARCE.



FOR a long time my mind had been well exercised as to how the agricultural labourer really did live. I was very anxious to know the facts of the case, and newspaper accounts seemed of no use, one leading daily asserting that never had the labourer been so well off, while another contended that his condition was a truly deplorable one, and demanded the active interference of

the Government.

Which was the true assertion? I could not tell, and straightway determined to investigate the matter for myself, and, if possible, obtain a few definite facts to go upon concerning the nature and extent of the hardships of the labourer's life.

The first question was, where to go? I decided upon a remote Dorsetshire village five miles or more from the nearest railway station, standing in the

midst of wild moorland and common. Here I hoped to find the true Dorsetshire labourer as described by Professor Fawcett and others, and, by comparing his condition with that of his more favoured brother in the north, be able to draw my own conclusions.

Inspired with an ardent desire after truth, I managed to catch an early train at Waterloo and went off gaily on my tour of investigation. After some hours of travelling I reached my destination. It was pouring with rain and getting rather dark. The only person I could see on the little wayside platform was the station-master, and he seemed to be there quite by accident. He was gazing with a depressed air after the departing train and appeared quite unconscious of my presence, and quite unimpressed by my great mission. I walked up to him, and presented him with my ticket very much with the air of the "Dodo" in *Alice in Wonderland*, and asked where I could get some vehicle to carry me and my traps to the remote village.

He gazed at me for some little time without answering, and then asked me in broad Dorsetshire to repeat my question, which I did with some impatience.

"Nedmore, did you say?"

"Yes; Nedmore."

"Never heard of such a place, and I've lived here these six years. Nedmore, did you say?"

"Yes; Nedmore!" I shrieked again. "Never mind, I won't trouble you. I daresay I can find it." And I walked away very conscious of his suspicious gaze, and angry with myself for not making arrangements beforehand to be met at such an out-of-the-way place.

I had not gone very far when I heard a shout, and, looking back, I saw the station-master gesticulating. He told me there was a man with a trap who would very likely drive me anywhere for a consideration, if I didn't mind driving with a load. I cheerfully scout the idea and scramble up into a rather dilapidated trap, the back part of which is already occupied by a full-grown sheep, while a sack of corn is at our feet.

I tell my friend where I want to go, and to my joy I find he lives near, and will take me to a friend of his whose wife takes in lodgers during the summer—at least she always puts up the late Vicar's son when he wants to do a bit of quiet reading; he is about the only person who knows of such a lonely place.

After a long drive on a road running for five or six miles between the heath we stop at a gate leading into a potato patch, and my companion tells me I shall find a cottage at the far end, where his friends live.

I soon found the abode, a long, low cottage with a thatched roof and creepers trained over the rustic porch. I explain my errand, and am assured by Mrs. Cole that I can have a bedroom and the parlour, and she will do her best to give satisfaction if I can content myself with very plain fare, as the butcher only calls once a week, on Saturday, and she does not happen to have any meat left in the house.

This is my first introduction to a Dorsetshire cottage, and I note everything with much interest.

The kitchen, which is used as the family dining and sitting room, is a good-sized room with a brick floor and large open grate. I could see the stars as I looked up the chimney. Two sides of bacon were drying here. The walls of the room were papered, and hung with gaily-coloured almanacs presented by baker and grocer, portraits of friends in various positions of startling ferocity, "death cards," with a lavish display of "weeping willow" and urn clasped by a distracted white-robed figure, framed in funeral black, and over the mantelpiece is a "sampler" worked by Mrs. Cole's grandmother as a specimen of her skill and diligence when eleven years old.

One corner of the room is occupied by a large eight-day clock with a brass face. A chest of drawers and a kitchen dresser (two pieces of furniture invariably found in a well-to-do Dorsetshire cottage) take up one side of the room, and are covered

with treasures of different kinds. The dresser, with its best china, glass, and rows of jugs, is a great feature of every cottage, and no bad indicator of the social position of its possessor.

The parlour into which I am presently shown is a small room about six feet eight in size, made stuffy by carpet, window-curtains, and a superabundance of furniture. The window, of course, is hopelessly blocked by flowering plants in a rather anæmic condition, and the round table is artistically laid out with gaily bound volumes, photograph albums, bibles and hymn books. A stuffed puppy and canary under a glass shade give a further air of unreality to the room. It is obviously a room to be used only on special occasions, and never by the family.

My bedroom is over the parlour. Here everything is beautifully clean and neat, with a faint smell of apples, because "it is the best room in the house to keep them, and the children don't dare venture in." I feel convinced I should have spent a comfortable night here had not Mrs. Cole, when wishing me "good night," informed me that the bed had been kept well aired by "Gramp" (a terrible old man of eighty), and that she hoped the thatched roof would not inconvenience me, a remark fraught with terrible meaning, as I was soon to discover; thatch apparently being the cherished home of earwigs and their kind, who gave me no rest, at any rate the first night I spent with them.

The next morning my zeal as a rural investigator had somewhat cooled, and my spirits did not rise when I discovered that I was to breakfast upon two large *slices* of fried bacon (it looked like salt pork) and some rather dubious-looking butter from the small village shop. I ask for a time-table to discover what chance of escape there is from the agricultural labourer, and my hostess, after much searching, produces one for January, 1890, with many of the leaves gone.

I then turn my attention to the breakfast table, and petition for some of the mushrooms I can see growing in the field outside, to be cooked with the bacon, and suggest that a fresh egg or two would also be a welcome addition to the meal.

When my humble wants are supplied I feel distinctly happier, and able to take a quite intelligent interest in Mrs. Cole's conversation and remarks. She tells me her husband is a carpenter and earns



AFTER A LONG DRIVE WE STOP AT A GATE LEADING INTO A POTATO PATCH.

very good money. Lately he has been employed in the restoration of a church near, and has been in steady work for some time. That it is not every one in the village who is so well off. Many of the labourers find it hard work to make both ends meet, and that last winter there was much distress.

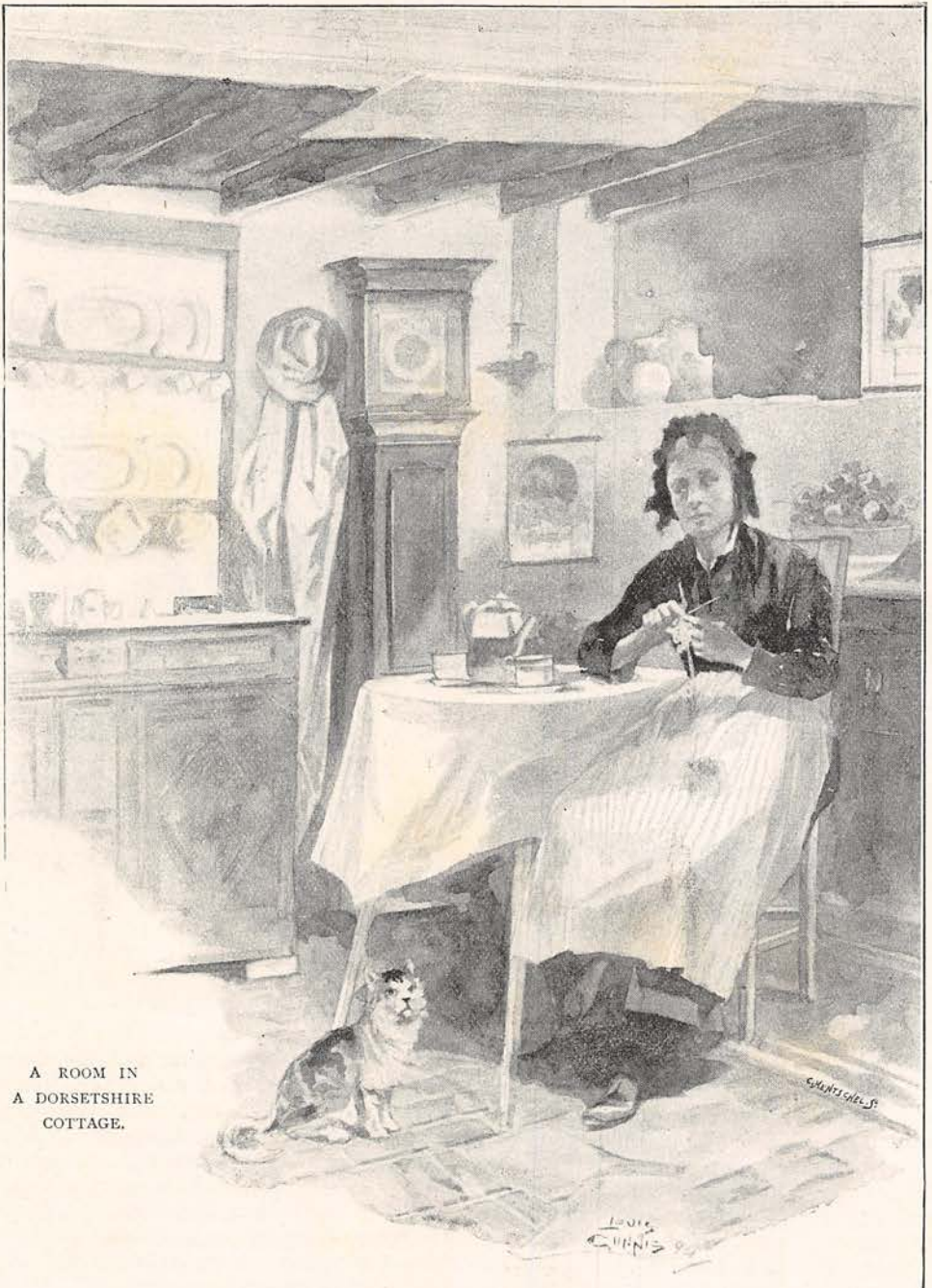
Most of the cottages in Nedmore belong to the lord of the manor, who is seldom at home, an agent living some miles away transacting all necessary business.

"You see, ma'am, that's bad for the village. There is no one, as you may say, to take an interest in nobody. The clergyman is no good beyond preaching his two sermons on Sunday (not but what the one before him was a good man and

did a lot for the people), and the Great House shut up, and no other gentry living anywhere near, why you can't wonder that the people takes to drinking and bad ways when there's nobody to care. It's very dull here, too, specially in the winter; when the snow lies thick on the ground, and there is nothing going on like, the young chaps gets spiteful like, and a lot of quarrelling goes on."

At this point I suddenly realised my responsibilities as investigator, and threw in a question as to the movement of the rural population into the towns.

"Oh, labour is plentiful enough here, ma'am. Very few of our young men have gone away. It's uncommon difficult for them to get to London, you see, unless they happen to have a relation living



A ROOM IN
A DORSETSHIRE
COTTAGE.

there or something of that sort ; it's so far away, and they would feel scared like with the noise and bustle after living on the heath here for so long, and W—— (the nearest market town) has no work to spare for any of our men. I sometimes think it would be a good job if some of them would clear out ; may be the fewer left would get a higher wage."

I intimated to my hostess that I should like to see the village, and, if possible, talk with some of the cottagers, and she was good enough to come with me just to show me the way.

The first cottage we stopped at stood in a good garden well stocked with fruit trees—a great help in making both ends meet. I was introduced to the wife as "a

young lady from London who don't know nothing about the country and its ways. I said as p'r'aps you could tell her something about it, Mrs. Webb, seeing you've lived in the country all your life."

Mrs. Webb looked doubtful but flattered, and invited me to take a seat. She would tell me anything she could. She didn't know much; there were no Board Schools when she was a girl.

"You have a nice kitchen, Mrs. Webb," I remarked in my character of investigator. "It seems a nice cottage on the whole?"

"Yes, ma'am, it's a very tidy one. There is this kitchen and a scullery and two bedrooms, and we pay 2s. 6d. a week rent; it has a good garden, too, you see. The worst of it is there is no water near except in that ditch outside, and that is often dried up in the summer. All our drinking water we have to fetch from the well in a neighbour's garden, a tidy step from here."

"When do you pay your rent? Could you not complain and get something done?"

"The agent has promised to see to it, ma'am. I daresay he will do something before long. We pay our rent to him every half year at the 'Flying Dutchman,' and he gives us a ticket back, which entitles us to have so much beer or spirits, whichever we prefer, for the good of the house, he says."

"And what happens to those tenants who chance to be teetotalers, Mrs. Webb?"



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"Oh, they goes without," replied Mrs. Webb simply.

"Are wages pretty good here?"

"My husband he works for that farmer who lives over there. He gets 11s. a week now, but it will drop to 10s., I expect, before very long; it generally does

in the winter. Of course he gets more pay at harvest time; we generally buys our pig then. Some of the masters here object to their men keeping pigs—says it leads to dishonesty, but they allow them a piece of ground in one of their fields to grow potatoes on. Then, you see, it gets manured along with the rest of the field. The potato crop lasts from May to September, the bit of land is then returned to the farmer."

"You must be a good manager, Mrs. Webb, to keep house on that money, and with a family, I suppose?"

"Yes, ma'am, six children. It will be better now Jim is getting old enough to earn, but it was a hard pinch sometimes when they were all little and Elsie always ailing. She was so ill once we had to have the doctor to her for three weeks or more, and every time he came my husband had to pay him 7s.—ah, and did it, too; he was that fearful of getting behindhand with the payments; but you can guess what it meant to us out of his pay, and I was too weak just then to earn much myself by washing, like some women can."

"How do you manage about food so far from any town?"

"Well, you see, we don't require much meat beyond bacon. The butcher he do come once a week of a Saturday night to his regular customers, but there is very little taken in this village. Rabbits are plentiful enough, and you can get one for Sunday's dinner at 4d. or so. Coal was 1s. 6d. a cwt. during the winter, it's 1s. 3d. now. Bread we pay 5d. a loaf. Flour 1s. 8d. a peck. Oddments and groceries we can get at the village shop, but things do seem dear there. You see there is no one to say them 'nay,' as you may say."

"And is your husband in any club, Mrs. Webb?"

"Well, yes, ma'am. He's in what they call a slate club. It's supported by the farmers round a goodish bit, and they sort of expect their men to put into it. But it's not what I call a sound one. The old club broke some years back; lots of

the old men were in that, and it came rather hard on them. After sixty a man looks to his club, you see. He so often ails at that age and can't do much more work. Then what can he do if his club fails him?"

"And what about amusements, Mrs. Webb?" I asked, feeling rather depressed.

"Oh, there's church and chapel for those who like them, ma'am, and there's a reading-room our member has just given us, and a cricket club, and a lot of talking and drinking goes on at the 'Flying Dutchman.' My husband, he's one for reading, is he, and he'll read the few books we've got over and over again. He's not one for being away much from home, so we gets on pretty comfortably. There ain't much going on for us women, in the way of amusement," added Mrs. Webb reflectively, "but then that always is the way. The men do get out in the fresh air every day to their work, and they see their mates and hear any news that may be going, but as for the women, we're so taken up with the children and the house, and getting the meals ready, why, when we *do* get a bit of time to sit down and enjoy it, we find we have got old somehow, and don't care about it any longer."

After this conversation with Mrs. Webb I often found my way to her cottage, and received much help from her in my investigation into the condition of the agricultural labourer. Before I left the village I had a much clearer view as to the precise difficulties and drawbacks of his lot, though at the same time I could heartily agree with the verdict of several of the oldest inhabitants of the village, which was "that though there was much a-wanting to be done in the villages and only waiting for some strong man to come forward to do it, yet things had wonderfully improved all round these last fifty years, and the man who had his regular place on a farm had not half as much to complain of as his father afore him had," and "that mayhap the coming generation would have still less."

