

Chapter 5

Cotswold and Pusey Vale

March 1937

Written at the time by Peter



1937

We came down finally on Saturday evening. It had been a bad term, or at least the wrong end of a good one – fantastically quick and hurried and rushing into a positive frenzy in the last few days. Chain-smoking, rushing from meeting to meeting, wishing people to whom I felt utterly indifferent “a good vac”. Tails sometimes and then the comfort and relief of putting on really frowsty tweeds again. Guests to breakfast, a spate of inconsequential little parties and a consistent horror at the number of times one seemed to be undressing for bed in those last fumbled days. Then packing, aghast at the quantity of paper and print one can accumulate in eight short weeks. A tawdry dusty incoherent fag-end of time: thousands of people packed flat like kippers into a small oblong dance hall. And then, suddenly, into the cleanliness and empty beauty of the Cotswolds in snow.

Diana and I spent Saturday night in a basement flat outside Oxford. An old friend gave me a key and had a fire lit. When we got there the ceiling was jumping with deep light and the saggy divan filled the carpet space. There was a lonely note from John and we washed in the kitchen, our feet frozen on the tiles and our stupid silk pyjamas flapping dolefully against them. But Diana looked nice with her corn hair spread like a fan on the cushions, and we seemed soon to engender enough heat for our comfort.

We got up finally at some scandalous hour in the middle of the morning, and then more cold tiles on the soles of our feet, with a tired fire blowsy with ashes and the rain scampering on the railings outside. But the grey stones of the Cotswolds had been in our minds for weeks, so we decided to go on as soon as we had broken down certain “sensible” tendencies to return to London and walk later – knowing that it just never happens. You must take your bull by the horns when he appears, which – Lord knows – is seldom enough – even if he is wet.

So we hid the key carefully behind the books on the mantleshelf and packed our ridiculous little rucksacks; then, clearly – breakfast.

We were replete with sleep and love, but our bellies were void and desperate, and it was grand to know that a very good and cheap cyclists’ doss existed just over the road. There we had bacon and eggs and a comforting number of cups of coffee and shared about the stupidest Sunday paper we had ever seen. I had only the vaguest ideas about the Cotswolds and what we were to do there; but we had four pounds left of the sole proceeds of my first book of poems out of the five, and we were determined to spread it over the greatest possible number of days in Gloucestershire.

We waited an interminable time for a coach to Cheltenham in an untidy shack in the middle of Gloucester Green, which is distinguished by being the only square of its area in Oxford unfurnished with a single blade of grass. A pleasant little Welshman

was there and he told me of a free library he was building for Swansea University. He was short, with the blue serge suit and clean-lined face of the traditional Welsh miner. He got bored with us soon, and his sad and inscrutable eyes became fixed permanently and indifferently on the splashing rain outside. So Diana and I retired to a little rickety table and had a rather irritating conversation about the difference between sentiment and sentimentality and whether it was preferable for one's lover to have had a full and sensible past with another woman (man) or to have had a stupid and dilatory series of useless amours. The advantages of the first were mainly Practice and Experience in Amatory Intelligence, but the second meant that there was (in some senses at least) virgin soil for the right man (woman) when he (she) came along. The bus fortunately appeared in the middle of all this.

The unfortunate argument continued a little on the coach, but it was soon mutually dropped as incompatible. And as we were driven along from Oxford it was like casting another skin – all the piled up complexities and futilities of Oxford life were left behind and we were talking amicably and sensibly about friendly and sensible things. It rained gustily most of the way but froze up again when we got into Andoversford. We watched the driver's windscreen alternately freezing on the heights into fan-shaped patterns, and dribbling and weeping wherever the thaw had definitely set in.

Then the snow got deeper and thicker and whereas in the Witney fields it was lying in patches like pocket handkerchiefs drying on the grass in summer, past Burford most of the fields were dead white and there were huge pure drifts against the stone walls, in lovely contrast with the yellowy sludge at the edge where the cars had splashed and ridged it. But the landscape was dimmed by the falling snow, or, more often, great whirls of sleet and rain. And then – suddenly – Cheltenham, very wet and puddley, under a steely coloured sky.

We got out rather stiffly from the coach, I feeling rather self-conscious with my little knapsack and my stick in the middle of March. From a phone box I phoned up Day Lewis, the poet, who I had met recently at a poetry reading in Oxford, to ask him for a possible address where we might stay as it was obviously not walking weather. He came in a few minutes in his car and drove us to his home. A propitious start to our walking tour; it was four o'clock on our first day and we hadn't walked ten yards.

Cecil Day Lewis was very charming and yet aloof. The wrinkles round his eyes, as Diana pointed out acutely, assured us that he was a nice person. The pleasant cottage loomed red in the snow, black lane and bushes, but inside there was a rather luxurious atmosphere of green distemper, fabric curtains and square white painted bookshelves. We went upstairs to a pleasant orange-and-green study, with the snow very insistent beyond the curtain, and

talked “business” for a while round a gas fire – about addresses for his Peace Council, the sale of *Daily Workers* outside a local factory and a dirty scheme for a local militia and how to counter it – and his essay on Hopkins. Then we had tea in a pleasant warm room with Cecil’s wife who was tall and tweedy – black hair, pink cheeks and a hardish mouth, but very pleasant and cool. There must be hundreds such in the southern counties, wives of young professional men, writers or musicians – nearly all Oxford or Cambridge men. They run to type.

Diana played trains with two starry-eyed little boys with gorgeous complexions and fiendish larynxes, while I waffled away quietly on a tremendous Steinway, enjoying myself no end. I was startled to see that the sky outside was a vivid blue and the snow was a sort of strange cobalt on the roofs and the walls. It was very nearly dark. The pedals moved the keyboard slightly to the right – a thing which always delighted me – and the simple chords of the more *andante* of Chopin’s preludes swelled out joyously into the room.

Somehow we stayed to dinner, which was pigeon casserole and coffee ice and lots of sherry. Cecil phoned some people and fixed a place for us. And then we were rushing along the black ribbon of road, its edges defined by the counterpane margins of rounded snow. We reached Northleach and soon Cecil went back and we were left in a little guest-house, all very nicely gotten up and very, very slightly bogus. The outside, of course, was genuine seventeenth century – but inside there was more distemper and more green and grey curtains and chunky bookcases – pouffes and a great brick fireplace. Our hosts were charming: Mister was very tall indeed with a nice grey jowl and a high forehead, wispy dark hair and a rough-hewn face, with secret and dreamy eyes and very good teeth: inevitably a wine-red roll-top pullover, and many cigarettes in good, hairy hands. Missis was yet another black-and-pink tweedy woman, fine breasts and tremendous feet, with a pleasant healthy face and black eyes – disquietingly reminiscent of a tough and stupid fascist schoolfriend of mine – sportscar and porkpie hat and double whiskers. We had more talk about the militia and protest meetings – they were good but politically naïve – and listened to Bolero on the gramophone – Diana’s first time of hearing and she loved it – and soon we went to bed in a square room with a snowy vista through the deep set window, twin beds, grey fabric covers and scarlet blankets, a white lacquered wardrobe, rugs and stained boards, and pots of red earthenware and yellow glaze. The bathroom was beautiful – all green and chromium, and the doors were “original” with cross-beams and iron latches. Diana was restless and I suspected pigeons, and so was piggish myself.

But the next morning when we saw the sunny snow on the hills flanks, we really wanted to walk and see it all up close. So we bolted our breakfast which was very good but more earthenware

and wooden-handled knives – and then we were out in the High Street of Northleach, feeling proud of the wind on our faces and the glaring poster by the town hall saying “A Protest Against the Militia”. We decided to try to come back, if our money would last us, to see how the local peasantry approached a basic political issue. Then off on the right, and suddenly across a lovely wavy stretch of country draped in snow, with the grey-brown tower of Hampnett Church sat deliciously in the distance. We knelt by the side of the road and pressed our faces in the snow, leaving little inverted death-masks for some yokel to wonder at. After Hampnett, which was wet and low, we walked along a two-mile stretch of level cart track, through fields and fields of clean snow like a dairy or perhaps a medical ward. We were silent with joy.

Turkdean was a clean little village, the houses stupidly dropped in a hollow, as toy houses fell into a crumple of the eiderdown when I moved in bed on Christmas 1924. The farmers and hands were all pleasant, and after the surly manners of Oxfordshire it was grand to have an unsolicited “good morning”. We walked along the long clean ridge to Nutgrove which again was brown and undecorated houses on a white cloth. Here I tried to buy a pipe and tobacco, finding cigarettes expensive and tasteless in the cold: but the only village shop was a tiny cottage with peacocks made of yew as sentinels, and the tobacco drawer contained only a heap of wrapped ounces of the most loathly shag in living memory. So we bought two large oranges, and spat the pips onto the roadside ridge of snow. Diana and I exchanged a few sarcastic words when I dropped, inadvertently, a piece of orange peel on the road, and I was very bitter at the expense of the Tidy Fiends. But this blew over soon, and we saw a coal-tit and heard its ethereal little call, and later saw a little brown mouse of a nut-hatch chasing up a tree at top speed.

We visited Nutgrove station to find the way and a pleasant clerk took one of the cigarettes in our luxurious box of a hundred (there are at this moment exactly four left) and directed us all wrong to Roel Gate, but was corrected by a nice porter with a creased face and a cheerful eye who really knew his stuff. We stayed just long enough to have a delicious cigarette and for the backs of our knees to get stiff, reading the railway legislation and watching little drifts of new snow on the platform, scurrying down against the old, rusty tracks and settling on the old snow like starch on a dirty blanket. Then we got back onto the road and were silent for a while as we got back into our stride.

We went through a huge drift of snow in a ditch as we tried to collect larch-cones, and into a deeper one burying our faces again, and hurling one another waist-deep into the yielding strength of a positively Siberian corner, where the snow was four feet deep against the corner of a stone-walled field. The wind was heartily

slapping us in the face at each corner and across the exposed backbone of the Cotswolds; but the sun was bright and quite warm on our backs, and even when the clouds covered it for us it would pick out a field three miles away, and make it glister like Jack Frost in a Christmas window, between the toy trees on the next slope.

Hanbury was dull and cold when we finally reached it, though there was a strange and fatalistic Jolly Farmer on the way who talked pleasantly to us about “the bloody snow”. A red-faced dairymaid, who looked as though she had come out of a comic opera chorus, directed us nervously to Roel Gate, and we got there somehow. It was snowing again, lightly and pleasantly. But I think Hawling to Roel Gate was mainly spent in incoherent song.

We took a sort of cart-track up to Sudely hill – eighteen inches in snow but fouled and fretted with footprints and ruts. Then we walked along a great flat ridge for miles, with tremendous blue hills on the left which were much more like those mystic and lumpy hills in a Sunday painter’s watercolour of the Highlands than the real thing in the Cotswolds.

Diana was tramping behind me through the deep snow and I found myself singing with some bombast:

“ – Mark my footsteps, good my page;
Tread thou in them boldly – ”

We found a disused pig-stye. The roof stays had broken and the great timber roof sloped awkwardly to the ground. We sheltered to smoke again. Pig-smells a year or so old must be one of the most sensory experiences on earth.

Then we came to a snow drift a good three feet deep, though in places it had been cut away from the centre of the track in chunks like farmyard butter and thrown in pleasant heaps on the white undulations at the road edge. We went in up to our knees enjoying ourselves tremendously. I got a solid cake of snow between shoe and sock, but somehow it vanished without any intermediate wetness. Then a gang of men clearing snow came in sight and directed us to Winchcomb, the scheduled end of that day’s walk.

So we went down a tremendous hill – then there were cottages and a pleasant lane with children coming from school and a little runnel of clear water in the ditch and suddenly we were in Winchcomb High Street – a strange experience after miles of empty country – a neat self-contained sloping High Street with a few shops and dozens of guest houses and one lovely and dignified Jacobean high-shouldered house set plump on the roadside – all quiet and reserved in the afternoon sun.

We had arranged to call on an Oxford student, Judy, whose home was the schoolhouse, very small under the shadow of the church tower whose clock said 4.30, and we congratulated ourselves on

timing a fifteen mile walk with such superb accuracy. Judy had only just arrived from Oxford carrying chocolates and a bunch of tulips and we gorged ourselves on bread and butter and I listened to the chatter issuing from her sweet and somehow stupid mouth and watching her eyes, which were accounted beautiful, but were exactly like two small and identical plums. Her mother was hovering round the room – full of fine superiority to the village petty-bourgeoisie and so transparently a part of them – modern and bright and broadminded and so dull and shallow – conducting an elaborate act of filial relations with her daughter for our benefit. But tea was welcome and Judy and her mother were quite nice in their stuffy way. Diana and I rushed out afterwards, very stiff in the legs, to book a room in a grubby little pub in a back street – and then, in desperation at the prospect of an evening hearing about Mrs J's theories on education and local government we took them to see a film which was amazingly vulgar and stupid.

We left Judy and her mother to go back to a late meal of cold lamb and cheese in a frigid and over-decorated bar parlour where we had a little row – Diana maintaining that I was unnecessarily amicable to Judy if I didn't like her. I concluded that this was due to the fug of the Winchcombe Cinema after the windiness of our walk and anyway it soon died away to nothing. Our bedroom was cold too, and more like Reading or Kensington than Winchcombe, but we slept magnificently.

Breakfast, as always, was bacon and eggs. The weather had set in to a steady uncompromising drizzle, iron grey skies and wet chimney pots, so we went back to Judy's – her mother was teaching little girls in the church school behind – and gossipped and played her piano and taught her some revolutionary marching songs. Lunch was nice and we had a vivid and entertaining discussion with Mrs Judy on "modern licence" about which she took a traditionalist point of view. The rain went on and on. Judy took us to visit a local pottery which was run by the third Wadham man we had met in three days. It was very exciting to see a cake of brown clay on the potter's wheel turn rapidly under his hands into a jug or vase, and we climbed a little staircase and examined piles of newly-glazed crocks in the kiln. The place smelt of cow cake, and there was a little dog made of black wool by the brazier and, framed by the window, the wet green piles of rough timber and a heap of broken pots. Soon we left and said goodbye to Judy, for whom I had a bashful affection seeing her in her native surroundings, with rain on her face instead of leering and wriggling in the hothouse atmosphere of Oxford.

And then Diana and I set off down the road, buffeted by the wind and feeling stiff and heroic. Fortunately we had only nine miles to walk to Broadway – but we had hardly gone nine yards before a

big Buick stopped and a pleasant rat-faced young commercial traveller swung us round corners and bumped us on his admirable springs to Broadway in twenty minutes. It was still raining hard in the High Street which was full of false antiquities and pastel paint.

Here Peter's account stops – but our walk went on. The next day was bright, warm and sunny – I can't remember where we walked – we saw a folly – I waited patiently while Peter looked for yellowhammers' nests in the bottom of hedges where the long grass is – but he didn't find one. It was probably too early, or too late. We walked out of a short shower into the sun half way down a hill – the edge between wet and dry clear on the road. Because we had received so much hospitality our money lasted a week and we *did* return down the hill to Northleach on the evening of the last day, the smoke from the chimneys of the cottages below vertical in the evening light.