

Buttercup-Night

by John Galsworthy, 1867-1933

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WHY is it that in some places there is such a feeling of life being all one; not merely a long picture-show for human eyes, but a single breathing, glowing, growing thing, of which we are no more important a part than the swallows and magpies, the foals and sheep in the meadows, the sycamores and ash trees and flowers in the fields, the rocks and little bright streams, or even the long fleecy clouds and their soft-shouting drivers, the winds?

True, we register these parts of being, and they—so far as we know—do not register us; yet it is impossible to feel, in such places as I speak of, the busy, dry, complacent sense of being all that matters, which in general we humans have so strongly.

In these rare spots, that are always in the remote country, untouched by the advantages of civilization, one is conscious of an enwrapping web or mist of spirit,

the glamorous and wistful wraith of all the vanished shapes which once dwelt there in such close comradeship.

It was Sunday of an early June when I first came on one such, far down in the West country. I had walked with my knapsack twenty miles; and, there being no room at the tiny inn of the very little village, they directed me to a wicket gate, through which by a path leading down a field I would come to a farmhouse where I might find lodging. The moment I got into that field I felt within me a peculiar contentment, and sat down on a rock to let the feeling grow. In an old holly tree rooted to the bank about fifty yards away, two magpies evidently had a nest, for they were coming and going, avoiding my view as much as possible, yet with a certain stealthy confidence which made one feel that they had long prescriptive right to that dwelling-place.

Around, as far as one could see, there was hardly a yard of level ground; all was hill and hollow, that long ago had been reclaimed from the moor; and against the distant folds of the hills the farmhouse and its thatched barns were just visible, embowered amongst beeches and some dark trees, with a soft bright crown of sunlight over the whole. A gentle wind brought a faint rustling up from those beeches, and from a large lime tree that stood by itself; on this wind some little snowy clouds, very high and fugitive in that blue heaven, were always moving over. But what struck me most were the buttercups. Never was field so lighted up by those tiny lamps, those little bright pieces of flower china out of the Great Pottery. They covered the whole ground, as if the sunlight had fallen bodily from the sky, in tens of millions of gold patines; and the fields below as well, down to what was evidently a stream, were just as thick with the extraordinary warmth and glory of them.

Leaving the rock at last, I went toward the house. It was long and low and rather sad, standing in a garden all mossy grass and buttercups, with a few rhododendrons and flowery shrubs, below a row of fine old Irish yews. On the stone verandah a gray sheep-dog and a very small golden-haired child were sitting close together, absorbed in each other. A pleasant woman came in answer to my knock, and told me, in a soft, slurring voice, that I might stay the night; and dropping my knapsack, I went out again.

Through an old gate under a stone arch I came on the farmyard, quite deserted save for a couple of ducks moving slowly down a gutter in the sunlight; and noticing the upper half of a stable-door open, I went across, in search of something living. There, in a rough loose-box, on thick straw, lay a long-tailed black mare with the skin and head of a thoroughbred. She was swathed in blankets, and her face, all cut about the cheeks and over the eyes, rested on an ordinary human's pillow, held by a bearded man in shirt-sleeves; while, leaning against the whitewashed walls, sat fully a dozen other men, perfectly silent, very gravely and intently gazing. The mare's eyes were half closed, and what could be seen of them dull and blueish, as though she had been through a long time of pain. Save for her rapid breathing, she lay quite still, but her neck and ears were streaked with sweat, and every now and then her hind-legs quivered spasmodically. Seeing me at the door, she raised her head, uttering a queer half-human noise, but the bearded man at once put his hand on her forehead, and with a „Woa, my dear—woa, my pretty!“ pressed it down again, while with the

other hand he plumped up the pillow for her cheek. And, as the mare obediently let fall her head, one of the men said in a low voice, „I never see anything so like a Christian!“ and the others echoed, in chorus, „Like a Christian—like a Christian!“

It went to one's heart to watch her, and I moved off down the farm lane into an old orchard, where the apple trees were still in bloom, with bees—very small ones—busy on the blossoms, whose petals were dropping on the dock leaves and buttercups in the long grass. Climbing over the bank at the far end, I found myself in a meadow the like of which—so wild and yet so lush—I think I have never seen. Along one hedge of its meandering length was a mass of pink mayflower; and between two little running streams grew quantities of yellow water-iris—*daggers*, as they call them; the *print-frock* orchid, too, was everywhere in the grass, and always the buttercups. Great stones coated with yellowish moss were strewn among the ash trees and dark hollies; and through a grove of beeches on the far side, such as Corot might have painted, a girl was running, with a youth after her, who jumped down over the bank and vanished. Thrushes, blackbirds, yaffles, cuckoos, and one other very monotonous little bird were in full song; and this, with the sound of the streams and the wind, and the shapes of the rocks and trees, the colors of the flowers, and the warmth of the sun, gave one a feeling of being lost in a very wilderness of nature. Some ponies came slowly from the far end—tangled, gypsy-headed little creatures—stared, and went off again at speed. It was just one of those places where any day the Spirit of all Nature might start up in one of those white gaps that separate the trees and rocks. But though I sat a long time waiting—hoping—She did not come.

They were all gone from the stable when I went back up to the farm, except the bearded nurse and one tall fellow, who might have been the *Dying Gaul* as he crouched there in the straw; and the mare was sleeping—her head between her nurse's knees.

That night I woke at two o'clock to find it almost as bright as day, with moonlight coming in through the flimsy curtains. And, smitten with the feeling that comes to us creatures of routine so rarely—of what beauty and strangeness we let slip by without ever stretching out hand to grasp it—I got up, dressed, stole downstairs, and out.

Never was such a night of frozen beauty, never such dream-tranquillity. The wind had dropped, and the silence was such that one hardly liked to tread even on the grass. From the lawn and fields there seemed to be a mist rising—in truth, the moonlight caught on the dewy buttercups; and across this ghostly radiance the shadows of the yew trees fell in dense black bars.

Suddenly I bethought me of the mare. How was she faring, this marvelous night? Very softly opening the door into the yard, I tiptoed across. A light was burning in her box. And I could hear her making the same half-human noise she had made in the afternoon, as if wondering at her feelings; and instantly the voice of the bearded man talking to her as one might talk to a child: „Oover, my darlin; yu've a-been long enough o' that side. Wa-ay, my swate—yu let old Jack turn yu, then!“ Then came a scuffling in the straw, a thud, that half-human sigh, and his voice again: „Putt your 'ead to piller, that's my dandy gel. Old Jack wouldn' 'urt yu; no more'n if yu was the Queen!“ Then only her quick breathing could be heard, and his cough and mutter, as he settled down once more to his long vigil.

I crept very softly up to the window, but she heard me at once; and at the movement of her head the old fellow sat up, blinking his eyes out of the bush of his grizzled hair and beard. Opening the door, I said—

„May I come in?“

„Oo ay! Come in, zurr, if yu‘m a mind tu.“

I sat down beside him on a sack. And for some time we did not speak, taking each other in. One of his legs was lame, so that he had to keep it stretched out all the time; and awfully tired he looked, gray-tired.

„You‘re a great nurse!“ I said at last. „It must be tiring work, watching out here all night.“

His eyes twinkled; they were of that bright gray kind through which the soul looks out.

„Aw, no!“ he said. „Ah, don‘t grudge it vur a dumb animal. Poor things they can‘t ‘elp theirzelves. Many‘ s the naight ah‘ve zat up with ‘orses and beasts tu. ‘T es en me—can‘t bear to zee dumb creatures zuffer.“ And laying his hand on the mare‘ s ears, „They zay ‘orses ‘aven‘t no souls. ‘T es my belief they‘ve souls zame as us. Many‘ s the Christian ah‘ve seen ain‘t got the soul of an ‘orse. Same with the beasts—an‘ the ship; ‘t es only they‘m can‘t spake their minds.“

„And where,“ I said, „do you think they go to when they die?“

He looked at me a little queerly, fancying perhaps that I was leading him into some trap; making sure, too, that I was a real stranger, without power over his body or soul—for humble folk must be careful in the country; then, reassured, and nodding in his beard, he answered knowingly—

„Ah don‘t think they goes so very far!“

„Why? Do you ever see their spirits?“

„Naw, naw; I never zeen none; but, for all they zay, ah don‘t think none of us goes such a brave way off. There‘ s room for all, dead or alive. An‘ there‘ s Christians ah‘ve zeen—well, ef they‘m not dead for gude, then neither aren‘t dumb animals, for sure.“

„And rabbits, squirrels, birds, even insects? How about them?“

He was silent, as if I had carried him a little beyond the confines of his philosophy; then shook his head.

„‘T es all a bit dimsy. But you watch dumb animals, even the laste littlest one, an‘ yu‘ll zee they knows a lot more‘n what we du; an‘ they du‘ s things tu that putts shame on a man‘ s often as not. They‘ve a got that in them as passes show.“ Not noticing my stare at that unconscious plagiarism, he went on, „Ah‘d zooner zet up of a naight with an ‘orse than with an ‘uman—they‘ve more zense, and patience.“ And stroking the mare‘ s forehead, he added, „Now, my dear, time for yu t‘ ‘ave yure bottle.“

I waited to see her take her draft, and lay her head down once more on the pillow. Then, hoping he would get a sleep, I rose to go.

„Aw, ‘t es nothin‘ much,“ he said, „this time o‘ year; not like in winter. ‘T will come day before yu know, these buttercup-nights.“

And twinkling up at me out of his kindly bearded face, he settled himself again into the straw.

I stole a look back at his rough figure propped against the sack, with the mare‘ s head down beside his knee, at her swathed black body, and the gold of the straw,

the white walls, and dusky nooks and shadows of that old stable illumined by the dimsy light of the old lantern. And with the sense of having seen something holy, I crept away up into the field where I had lingered the day before, and sat down on the same halfway rock.

Close on dawn it was, the moon still sailing wide over the moor, and the flowers of this „buttercup-night“ fast closed, not taken in at all by her cold glory! Most silent hour of all the twenty-four—when the soul slips half out of sheath, and hovers in the cool; when the spirit is most in tune with what, soon or late, happens to all spirits; hour when a man cares least whether or no he be alive, as we understand the word.

„None of us goes such a brave way off—there’s room for all, dead or alive.“ Though it was almost unbearably colorless, and quiet, there was warmth in thinking of those words of his; in the thought, too, of the millions of living things snugly asleep all round; warmth in realizing that unanimity of sleep. Insects and flowers, birds, men, beasts, the very leaves on the trees—away in slumberland.

Waiting for the first bird to chirrup, one had perhaps even a stronger feeling than in daytime of the unity and communion of all life, of the subtle brotherhood of living things that fall all together into oblivion, and, all together, wake. When dawn comes, while moonlight is still powdering the world’s face, quite a long time passes before one realizes how the quality of the light has changed; so it was day before I knew it. Then the sun came up above the hills; dew began to sparkle, and color to stain the sky. That first praise of the sun from every bird and leaf and blade of grass, the tremulous flush and chime of dawn! One has strayed so far from the heart of things, that it comes as something strange and wonderful! Indeed, I noticed that the beasts and birds gazed at me as if I simply could not be there, at this hour that so belonged to them. And to me, too, they seemed strange and new—with that in them „that passed show,“ and as of a world where man did not exist, or existed only as just another form of life, another sort of beast. It was one of those revealing moments when we see our proper place in the scheme; go past our truly irreligious thought: „Man, hub of the Universe!“ which has founded most religions. One of those moments when our supreme importance will not wash either in the bath of purest spiritual ecstasy, or in the clear fluid of scientific knowledge; and one sees clear, with the eyes of true religion, man playing his little, not unworthy, part in the great game of Perfection.

But just then began the crowning glory of that dawn—the opening and lighting of the buttercups. Not one did I actually see uncloset, yet, all of a sudden, they were awake, the fields once more a blaze of gold.

