

## Glemsford in the Early Twentieth Century

### A child's view

Long before the days of the Internet, the writing of Spike Mays and his telling of life on the Suffolk Essex borders entranced many.

His first book, "Reuben's Corner", starts in Glemsford, on what is now Windmill Row, but was then just a cul-de-sac at the end of Churchgate.

"Reuben's Corner", by Spike Mays, was first published in 1969 by Eyre and Spottiswoode; it was published again in 1980 by Eyre Methuen, and by Mandarin Paperbacks in 1990. Beyond that publishing date, the trail to the copyright has gone cold.

### Kuldysack

"Hair, the hair of horses! Because I was three, perhaps less, when I first smelled it, I shall forever remember the smell of horsehair. Sometimes noisome, rank and offensive, sometimes fragrant, redolent and balmy, that smell stole into and sometimes galloped into my three year old nostrils. All through the day, even on Sundays, and all through the night on Sunday nights as well, that smell was my companion.

At the bottom of my father's garden, a longish garden which began at the back step of our bungalow home in Glemsford, Suffolk, there was a small factory. I used to sit there with the sun burning my head to sniff through the white-painted palings. Sniffing, I suppose, to get to the heart and soul of that smell. The palings separated me from the factory by about six feet; and when I put my head close to them and sniffed through them I could smell strong soap as well. I could also hear strange noises, busy noises; for in that factory were machines, big tubs of boiling water, soap, bubbles, clouds and clouds of white, wet steam, and little men who were so busy that they could not afford to take time off to speak to me; to tell me what they were doing in that steamy, noisy, smelly world.

But one day I did find out. My father told me. They were cleaning the dirty hair of old, dead, greasy-hocked horses to make mattresses, cushions and pillows. After my father told me what it was all about I didn't sniff through the palings much, but the smell was always there.

My father and mother used to sleep on a mattress made from horsehair and I found that out all by myself, without being told by anyone. I wouldn't have known about it if one of those little leather bits which are used to stitch the ticking together had not come off to leave a little hole where it had been. Through that hole I could see bits of hair and I spent one lovely afternoon pulling out the hairs. Some were grey, others were dark or light brown, but the best ones were reddish gold, bits of the coats of chestnut horses. My mother did not appreciate my investigations and slapped my backside.

I did not see much of [my father], but I loved him very much. He was not like the fathers of other boys in Glemsford, for he was the village postman. He wore a uniform and a smart, stiff shako and his scarlet piping and shiny brass on navy serge always filled me with awe and pride. My father worked for the king. After walking many miles round the scattered community pushing bills and debt-summonses into letterboxes, he would arrive home, snatch off his coal-scuttle hat and his beautiful jacket and gulp down a cup of strong tea and a hasty meal. He would smoke a pipe of

tobacco, blowing out fragrant clouds to my delight. Then he would change into his old corduroy trousers, cloth cap and hobnailed boots, kiss us all round and go off like a greyhound to work on a broken-down farm. Father had to have two jobs to get the five of us enough to eat. I did not like it one bit. I did not think it fair of the king to make my father work all through the daylight.

Sunday was always the best day at Glemsford, because my father would take me to his allotment. I used to sit there in the sun, sometimes with my pretty frock and sash on, because we dressed up on Sundays, and watch his feverish hoeings, diggings and plantings, to grow us food. He was very good at gardening and used to grow parsnips so sturdy and long that they won prizes at the Flower Show. People used to say, 'Owd John can't be beat a-growin parsnips, nor most vegetables, either.' ...

We were in the heart of Constable country, about three miles from Long Melford and about seven from Clare, but well off the main road. There was great poverty, malnutrition and neglect. Corn areas had declined, good stubbles had reverted to grass. Cottages and farm buildings were decayed, fences neglected and lean cattle strayed in search of food. Roads and byways were in disrepair and many an East Anglian homestead and smallholding had been abandoned. Worse, in that fertile region where grew such wonderful wheat, skilled farmhands had forsaken the land. In a once prosperous agrarian country the most inferior place was held by agriculture.

But there were still the fields. At the very doors of Kuldysack were worlds of interest, to be investigated, explored, understood; to be revealed to a hunter of three years of age. There were still the hedgerows, the woods, commons, ponds, waysides and wastes, the gardens and the farms; all brimming with life and vitality.

The life and vitality was of the birds, insects, bugs, beetles and small furry animals; of the plants, trees, grasses, fields and meadows: the vast living world of nature.

I was beginning to learn. I knew the difference between some weeds and some vegetables. Grass fascinated me. The thickness, greenness and softness was a comfort, and in its lushness there dwelt many creatures. Long, slimy worms that wriggled their way underneath to fill their bellies with dark ' rich earth before surfacing to make their casts. I ate several worm casts, because they looked like chocolate, before I was told by the baker-boy never to do it again.

'Drat it, bor ... Don't you eat that, now . . . It won't do you a mite o' good If you do, though, you'll go flat-footed an' deaf as a post.'

There were trees and hedgerows round our bungalow and the trees seemed to touch the clouds some days, but were not tall enough to touch the blue sky on other days. I was puzzled by this and wondered why the sky was too high for the trees when it was blue, and too low when the skies were all fluffy and white and cloudy. But the trees were for birds and there were many kinds, all with different songs to sing and different plumage. My father taught me the songs and calls and the plumage. ...

We used to throw out food before my father started his questions and the minute they flocked down he would be at us ...

'What's that one, then? Come on, you ... whistle his call now!'...

We all had our favourites.

My mother liked the chaffinch best because of his song, which is far more musical than the 'pink pink' call-note, and he sings it from the low branches where I could watch him full of pride, joy and pomp, puffing up his chest to make himself look twice as big; switching his head from side to side in quick jerks to attract attention or to see if there is an audience worth singing to and off he goes ...

My father liked the yellow hammer. With his bright, canary-yellow head, which makes him look like a fireman in a brass helmet, he always sings from hedgerow tops, but looking a bit scared all the time ... 'A little bread-and-no-cheese.'

But my favourite was the greenfinch. He sings best when he is courting. First he does a little dance. Then, leaving his perch, he starts to sing like billy-o, fluttering about in small circles and beating his wings so slowly that he can hardly fly. His is a simple song of only four notes . . . 'Clip-clop-clump-and-sneeze', which he repeats many times in rapid succession.

Sometimes in the hedgerows we would find skulking a white-throat, but he is not an English bird and comes only in the summer. He is small and brown apart from his white throat and sings while dancing up and down from the hedgetop, jumping six to ten feet up, or more, straight into the air, then back to the hedge. I disliked him when my father said he was not English. But I got over that and did not dislike him any more when he said that all birds were God's birds, and equal.

I used to wonder why my father, who knew so much about birds, did not teach me to fly.

The lines in Father's brow deepened as the furrows appeared one spring in the wide Suffolk fields around us. Plainly life could not go on as it had been doing. We were existing but poorly from the fruits of the allotment and from the very occasional pig some neighbour killed which supplied our meat diet of a slice or two of pork or bacon once or twice a week. Somehow my mother contrived, through it all, to look the prettiest woman of all just as my father was the handsomest man. She had been born in Bartlow Hamlet, Cambridgeshire, and christened Elizabeth Amy Ford. For some years before her marriage she temporarily left her beloved East Anglia to cook for various rich families in London. She excelled at household and culinary pursuits when she had a chance to follow them. But in her God-given gifts courage and sweet goodness were her greatest.

My father had been a soldier, at heart, by instinct and through training. Born in the parish of Barnadiston, he tired of working on the land and had enlisted as a young man in 2nd Battalion, the Suffolk Regiment, and in an engagement of seven and three-quarter years served nearly all that time overseas. He had been mostly on attachment to the East India Company as a telegraphist and ended his engagement at Karachi on 10 October 1903.

We had little or no social life at Glemsford. Occasionally my Uncle Wag, my father's eldest brother and companion-in-arms in the Suffolks - also a village postman, at Great Thurlow, Suffolk - would pay a fleeting visit, but my mother was ill-equipped for entertaining and far too busy looking after her flock to go out and about.

In the winter of 1910 I became ill again. At night in the dark I could see no birds through the window and I was frightened where in summer I had been bold. Family gossip has it that I was a most delicate child, so frail that I was medically barred from school until I was seven years and a bit. Fat

and prosperous doctors prescribed for me full cream, Benger's Food and port wine ... but no mention was made how to buy them.

I was still very ill when my father left us in 1911. Distressed by poverty, encouraged by advertisements, he left for Canada determined to find us a new home. The first indications of impending change came in unusual tensions between my parents and secret whisperings in the parlour, which I apprehensively tried to overhear through the keyhole. There were impressive-looking forms on the chest of drawers and a general air of unease. One day a man in a smart suit, and a funny voice, visited father and explained to us all with false gaiety, so frightening to my barely comprehending ear, that father was emigrating to Canada where work and money abounded. Soon we would follow.

Such were the promises made to seduce honest men from East Anglia in those hard times. ...

Our poverty increased.

The neighbours had more than enough troubles of their own and there were few callers who could be told of our plight. One of these was Uncle Wag, who was a great strength to me in my illness. He had a stout heart and an understanding of my darkness, plus the capacity to speak words I could hold on to. He would gently squeeze my little hand and say, 'Don't yew get a-frettin', bor. They luvly owd birds'll be a-wingin' back, an' yewer owd father afore 'em. Yew jest sleep. They'll be back.' ...

I have no recollection of our leaving Kuldysack. But I cannot forget the privation we endured in our new village, Helions Bumpstead, about five miles south west of Clare. In her loneliness and misery my mother struggled on. Fewer envelopes from my father had money in them; fewer meals were served upon our table, but there were distressing additions to the lines in my mother's brow. Our diet was stale bread (one farthing cheaper per quartern loaf than fresh bread), skimmed milk and potatoes. As a great treat for Sunday's dinner and to last out the week as the meat dish for four she sometimes bought a tough buck rabbit for sevenpence. ... “