

The Back of Beyond

By J. W. Allen

The milk and honey is beyond this wilderness.

WE started, that morning, from an unkempt little town and fared forth into a country that rose gradually about us and ahead. The pastures tilted more and more, and between the green hillocks we had glimpses of larger and greyer heights, blocking the horizon. Then, for a time, we went softly up and down between near slopes that shut out those distant hills. So we came to a bridge and a railway station and left the road and took a winding, stony track that led into the Black Mountains. It took us steadily upward and was almost too narrow and far too stony for two to ride comfortably abreast. Thorny and wind-smitten hedges closed us in and every twenty yards we turned a corner. Of the way before us we knew only that this track would take us across the hills. The hedges vanished, as though the wind of the heights had suddenly become too much for them, and we emerged upon a far-stretching desolation. Behind us, for a little while, we could still see the green and civilised lowlands. In front the track, broader now but stonier than ever, rose steadily across a lifting plain of coarse grass, hummocky and boggy, with never a tree. At some distance ahead it reached an anti-climax and dipped and very far off we saw it reappear, climbing towards a real climax on our horizon. Away in front there, on the left of the track, a huge, rounded mass, bare and rough, rose steeply. Far away across the rolling waste to our right another mountain ridge was lifted, showing what seemed a mile or more of precipice. A strong wind blew joyously in our faces.

Riding was rough work with that wind and the stony unevenness of the track. But over our heads was an enormous sky, under our wheels an earth hardly less large and all the rough grass was awash with wind and across the sunlit waste great cloud shadows drifted.

Never a sign of humanity but ourselves. There was a

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strangeness in a place so desolate, reached on our own wheels in a few days from London. The great, silent desert, the ambiguous, lonely heights, brought to my mind void spaces of the pampas, untrodden wastes of the Cordilleras. It seemed as empty as the desert of Gobi, as forlorn as the high glaciers. "Surely," I thought, "we are in the Beyond itself. This is that which lies behind the dust and noise of an ephemeral civilisation. This is that waste of nature, across which Humanity passes as these cloud shadows: that which was before the Romans, before the Stone Age and will be as it is when London is as Carthage."

We reached the side of the mountain we had seen ahead and entered a narrow gorge that led to the top of the pass. On our right the ground fell sharply into the narrowest of valleys and rose again abruptly in another mountain slope. In front, where our track vanished, the great slopes curved inwards and met. Down the gorge the wind streamed, as a river. All but beaten by it we took to walking, not loth to feel our feet and be at leisure in that wilderness.

Then I broke out, uplifted by the wind and sky and not knowing whether I talked sense or nonsense. "We have come," I said, "to the desert fringe on the frontier of man's kingdom. We have reached the tract beyond. This is the end of man's world, which is the beginning of the real world: the world that was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. The great vacuum of matter, the substratum of our world, the great void, this is the gate of it! These grasses are the last vestiges of the world of life at the portals of the void. They will soon pass and at the top there we shall enter the everlasting abyss."

But my friends mocked. "This," he said, "is just a piece of waste land, such as you may see in any London suburb, waiting the builder. All about here, under our feet, is coal. In a very little while, perhaps in our time, there will be chimneys all along here and works and men will be crowded in filthy little streets and grubbing underground. Progress, you know. We are conquering nature and there is no end to man's world. We hope to start mining in Mars some day."

"When," said she, "shall we get something to eat?"

At the top of the pass there was still no sign of humanity. The track plunged steeply downwards. In front a great rocky mountain seemed to have slipped from somewhere down into the valley and choked it with a vast heap of stones. About the sides of it were marble gleams. But a mile or so lower down there was a tiny group of houses and an inn which, though

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primitive, sufficed. The mountain ridge was now behind us and we rode gently downward, with even an occasional rise, towards a long, narrow valley that ran to the sea. But there were still mountains to right and left, stonier than those we had left behind, though not so high. One there was, very steep and bare, with a crown of rocks in what seemed concentric circles.

The apparition of a drunken man heralded our return to civilisation. Then came a larger group of houses and after that we entered the valley, definitively. A broad, quite civilised road ran high up above the narrow floor of it and steep, splendid slopes rose right and left of us. And suddenly we found ourselves in a dirty, crowded street.

"A colliery village," my friend said. "We shall have it like this now, the rest of the ten miles down."

On each side was a row of houses of grey sandstone, of a dismal natural colour, begrimed and neglected. Broken windows, heaps of rubbish in filthy little yards, not a green thing growing, not a flower-pot. But for the number of people walking in the roadway and lounging in the yards, the houses might have been thought derelict. The people were as dirty as their dwellings. Clothes, hands and faces, no less than the houses, were begrimed with coal-dust. Singularly beautiful and extraordinarily dirty children played by dozens in the road. Now and again we caught a reek of smoke or of oil. And between the houses we had glimpses of scarred mountain-sides, blackened and desolate, heaped with coal-tips and dotted with smoking chimneys.

"You were about right," my friend remarked, as we picked our way, "when you said we should find the abyss down here. This is what you get to if you go a little below the shining surface. We are going down to the real thing—the basis of civilisation."

We passed through a succession of such places, all alike. There were miles of it. Now and again came a gap of a few hundred yards that unveiled completely the ruin which had come upon the valley. Always the road went downwards towards the sea.

We turned a corner and exclaimed at the vision that met our eyes. Automatically we dismounted and stood gazing. Below us, far away in front, the sun was setting behind a forest of tall chimneys. The whole mouth of the valley, where it widened out to the sea, was choked with them. A haze of smoke hung over them and through this the sun glared redly. Almost black they looked against that murky glow. The dim, confused mass of roofing out of which they rose did not even suggest the

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dwellings of men. Behind them was a whitish shining, that might have been the sea. "The theologians must be right, after all," I said. "This is the road to the pit and yonder is the thing itself."

"Merely one of our great furnaces," my friend answered "Copper-smelting, tinplates, chemicals and coal. Have you eaten any tinned meat lately? The tin stuff, very likely, was made down there. It is steel really, thinly tinned over. They roll out bars of steel, heat them and cool them and reheat them, pickle them in sulphuric acid and put them into patent tinning-pots. A lot goes to your tinned meat! And they send coal, of course, to the ends of the earth. It was coal brought from up here that took you, last year, across the Lake of Geneva."

"A witch's cauldron," I said. "And a fine hell-broth must be brewing!"

"But it is fine, all the same," she said.

"It's splendid!"

"The thing is a sort of gland," he remarked, "secreting, transforming, distributing."

"It looks to me," I said, "more like a malignant tumour."

She looked at me with a smile. "But think of the effort," she said. "Just think of the intellect behind all that."

We mounted again and he shot ahead a little. "I feel like Giant Coddles," I called after him. "What's it all for?" And he looked back and laughed.

So we came down on to the flat in the opening of the valley. Straight before us stretched a repulsive waste of street: a street, not of houses, but of engine-sheds and store-sheds, "works" and chimneys. The very air was grimy and thick with smoke and oil. Beating and clanging noises came from the sheds and dirty and ramshackle tramcars creaked and rattled down the roadway.

Abruptly I came out with a question. "Think of Humanity," I said, "as a single Being—an intelligent Being. Why does it make places like this to live in?"

"All we, like sheep, have gone astray," he suggested, with a laugh. "You go in for history. You ought to know."

"I don't know," I said. "After Assyria, Greece, Rome and the rest—this! Surely we might have done better."

"An adventurous Being, trying all ways," she said.

"The question is absurd," said he. "Humanity cannot be thought of as an intelligent Being."

"An adventurous Being," she repeated, "in an unknown world."

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It became a procession after that. Perhaps this ending to our journey across the free uplands depressed us all a little or we may have been all a little tired. We had to find our way, too, through a labyrinthine squalor. "How many more miles of these slums are we to have?" she asked at last, drawing up to me as we entered a clamorous, dirty street full of lighted shops. And I laughed and dismounted; for I had just caught sight of the notification: High Street.

Next morning my friends left me, by train for London; but I started afresh. It was a long pull uphill that took me out of the city of furnaces. Even before I was clear of it I had invigorating glimpses of sea and curving coast-line and rocky promontory. The houses thinned and scattered before my eager wheels and at last I found myself clear above the city and out on an expanse of heathery common.

The sea was invisible from here but I felt its presence. It was in front now and on both sides and the whole air was full of it. Wherever you go in this peninsula this abiding presence of the sea is with you. Inland, out of sight and hearing of it for a little while, you know that you have only to ascend the nearest rising ground to see it on one side or on two. All paths lead to it. You can never be far from its murmur and its gleam. It gives to the whole land some of its saltness and its freshness, something of its own primeval youth.

Further on, at the meeting-place of two long slopes, I came suddenly upon the ruins of an ancient castle. On my left, a long narrow creek ran inland from the sea and beside and above it grey fragments of walls and towers stood up to their knees in a huge heap of sand. Quite lonely and derelict it had stood so century after century, gradually overwhelmed and half buried by the sand-drift. My mind went back eight hundred years to the time when all this region was seized and settled by Norman and English adventurers. To this day the whole of this coast is studded with the ruins of their castles. And for eight hundred years the people of the peninsula have been a race apart. Smugglers and wreckers they were, almost within men's memory, until converted by Methodism into a God-fearing folk. The whole country is still full of tales of smuggling and wrecking, as its cliffs are full of caves that are hard to find. Go about among these people and you will soon learn to admire. You will admire the specklessness of their homes, with the old dressers and ancestral china that is not for sale. You will take pleasure in their old-world appliances, their cupboard-beds, their brass sugar-cutters, the pack-saddles that their grandfathers used.

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You will respect their independence, their plain simplicity, the excellence of their manners. You will see old men and women among them with blue eyes as lucid and clear as the eyes of a child. In time you may come to envy the laborious and frugal dignity of their lives.

It was as though I had entered a new world, an older world. The road narrowed as my wheels advanced. It became a rough lane between low hedges. On my left were swift visions of land-locked, rock-guarded bays, of rugged limestone cliffs, of cove within cove, of delicate, lonely, curved stretches of sand, of glittering, tumbled water. On my right a heathery saddle-back, green with bracken and grey with great stones. I began to think of those squalid streets and that forest of chimneys as of something already clean passed away from the earth.

Every half-mile deepened my sense of something primitive and undisturbed. I had entered a region as remote from the life of cities as the Happy Isles. I thought of Icelandic fiords. The scattered farm-houses had an air of aloofness and self-sufficiency. All of stone, whitewashed, heavily thatched and gabled, they had been renewed from generation to generation and had never become modern. Ancestral dwellings, they vied in antiquity with our historic mansions but were more perfect in dignity, untouched by the vulgarity of conscious wealth.

Narrower and yet more stony grew the road until I came to the village, twenty miles from a railway station, which was the end of my journey for the moment. It stands on the edge of the cliff, at the very extremity of this remoteness, a tiny group of houses with an ancient church. It looks over the sea towards twin, far-stretching coasts; and when night falls you see the warning lights on islands of rock far out. The cliff drops abruptly and stretches eastward, mile after mile, worked and worn into cove after cove, strange and lonely as on the first day, with here a strip of grass running steeply to the sea between fantastic walls of rock, there a precipice covered with golden lichen. And, coiling seaward in slow, serpentine windings, a fantastic monster of rock, with scaly tail, humped back and dully glistening sides, rears its dragon head a mile from shore.

Stay here for a while and you may get to the back of beyond. Already you are in the borderland. Explore the cliffs and rock terraces, where every corner brings a surprise—mix in the society of the herring-gulls, shags, sea-pies and sand-pipers who people the shore—wander inland over the heathery ridges, taking ever new surveys of the immanent sea—visit the ruined castles and all but

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prehistoric vestiges that lie scattered, marking the silence of the land—until all the tumult of the cities becomes a far-off vanity. The littleness and futility of your personal ambitions will become clear to you but you will not be depressed. You will be one with night and day. You will live with the sea-birds, whose life is akin to that of the native men and women. Life will no longer be a tale merely full of sound and fury. And if you have not yet reached the very back of beyond—if there be yet a further deep, an inner sanctuary—that also you may, perchance, find, as I did.