

DUSTY PAGES

A STORY OF TWO FAMILIES
AND THEIR HOMES

CASTLE HILL
CLOVELLY
MOYLES COURT

By
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MONTACUTE
WOLFETON
HARTLAND



CASTLE HILL

Uncle John was the most beloved of all my uncles. He was an enchanting companion and had a vast store of information on every conceivable subject. When first I grew to know him well, he lived in rather spartan rooms in Brook Street. The walls in these rooms were hung with prints and engravings of the generals that he had spent his life writing about. I can picture him now, his lean, clever face, his eyes with the aid of his eyeglass never missing anything that was worth seeing.

I was proud when he confided to me that he wished to do petit point for relaxation, and asked me to help him as he knew I had been good with my needle for seven years—the time it takes, so he said, to be master of any trade.

It was always a happy time when he came to stay with us, when he taught my brother to shoot and cast a fly, always remembering to give me instruction too. He was very interested in what we thought and did. I remember his telling me that the more knowledge you have of any subject the more one finds there is to learn about it. How few people realise this!

He was a delicate, sensitive little boy, brought up in the hurly-burly of a large family, and blessed with a very vivid imagination. When at the age of six his mother died, he was made to walk round her coffin draped in black, and told by his nurse "When you died you are put into a box." This so impressed him that sixty years after, when he had a nightmare, it was this horror that still haunted his memory.

His early lessons included learning pages of Charles Wolfe. "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note." "I recollect" he said, "learning this by heart and not understanding a word of it. Lessons in French began almost as soon as those in English, and I never cease to be thankful for them." When over seventy years of age he had a serious operation in France, and he told me with pride that when he came to after the anaesthetic he remembered to speak to the doctor in French.

He must have been a pathetic little boy. He had four elder brothers all strong and healthy and good at all sport. John was at a great disadvantage as he could never quite keep pace with them. His eyesight was always poor, and being one of fourteen children no doubt his eyes were neglected. One can imagine what an inferiority complex it must have given him to miss pheasants, and scarcely to see a twisting snipe or woodcock.

He was educated, like his brothers, at Harrow, where he writes "When I reached the sixth form and passed under the personal instruction of Dr. Montague Butler, my education really began. If I know anything of my own tongue, I owe it all to him." After leaving Harrow he went to Trinity College, Cambridge. He was not very happy there, as he always disliked being in a crowd.

About this time his two elder brothers, Arthur and Lionel, received commissions in the Army. Poor John! His own ambition in life was to be a soldier, but owing to his poor eyesight and bad health this was impossible. Being debarred from the life of a soldier and having no inclination to enter the Church, there seemed no career open to him and very little to look forward to. Oddly enough he left Cambridge in his third year without taking a degree and with no regret.

In 1882 he went as Private Secretary to the Governor of the Windward Islands and after that to New Zealand as Private Secretary to the Governor. On returning to England the stepping-stone to his life's work came. Macmillan, the publisher, having read some articles he had written, asked him to write the History of the 17th Lancers. This work transported him to many obscure campaigns in strange lands. One day when talking to his friend Mr. Mowbray Morris, who was one of Macmillan's readers, he said "I do wish Macmillan would give me the History of the whole Army to write." A few months later Macmillan did ask him to write the History of the British Army. This work became his life, and in thirty-six years he wrote thirteen volumes. He was not blind to his own audacity as a civilian

Red Deer for his nephew, then a boy of nine. The Dedication is one of the most charming letters he ever wrote :

Honoured Sir,

When in the spring of this year you asked of me that I should write you a book, I was at the first not a little troubled; for of making many books there is no end, and of making of good books, but small beginnings; and albeit there be many heroes of our noble county of Devon, whose lives, if worthily written might exceed in value all other books (saving always those that are beyond price) that might be placed in the hands of the youth thereof for instruction and example, yet for such a task I deemed myself all too poorly. For if men would write books to be read of the young, they must write them, not for particular study, but from the fulness and the overflowing of their knowledge of such things as they have dwelt withal and felt and loved beyond others.

So at the last I bethought me that there was no book that I would more profitably write for you than the life of one of our own red deer, which as they be of the most beautiful of all creatures to the eye, so be also the most worthy of study by the mind, for their subtlety, their nobility and their wisdom. For though I would have you love the stories of great men and take delight in the reading of good books, yet I would have you take no less delight in the birds, and the beasts that share with you your home, and in the observance of their going out and their coming in, of their friends and of their enemies, of their prosperities and of their perils; whereby you will gain not only that which the great Mr. Milton (in his tract on Education) hath called the helpful experience of hunters, fowlers and fishermen, but such a love of God's creatures as will make the world the fuller of joys for you because the fuller of friends; and this not in one wise only, for I have ever noticed that they which be fondest of dumb creatures are given to be tenderest to their fellow men.

So here you have the life of a wild red deer, set down with such poor skill as I possess, even as the deer have told it to me in many a long ride and many a stirring chase, and as they have told it to all others that would listen, to such great hunters of old as the noble Count Gaston de Foix and the worthy Sieur Jacques du Fouilloux, and to many friends, of whom some indeed are passed away, but many yet remain, striving ever to hear more of the same story. And if my tale be short, yet blame me not for it, for yourself by your own learning of the deer may enlarge and enrich it; so that when your nine years are waxed to three score and nine, you may take down this small volume and write it out anew out of the treasures of a greater knowledge than mine own, for the generation that shall come after you, in this our ancient and well beloved home, and so not doubting of your kindly acceptance hereof, I bid you heartily farewell being always your very loving kinsman and faithful friend to serve you.

J.W.F.

Castle Hill, 28th Sept., 1897.

After the success of "The Red Deer" he wrote a little-known but enchanting story for children called "The Drummer's Coat", a story of Devon combined with military history. It describes the retreat at Corunna with Sir John Moore's army, and gives a vivid picture of the life lived by the wives of private soldiers, who followed their husbands through the Peninsular Campaign. Uncle John, like most men of letters, made very little money, and except for "The Story of a Red Deer" never wrote, or even thought of writing a best seller, and I am sure that when he wrote that, he never dreamed of the success it would have.

In 1905 good fortune came. King Edward VII appointed him Royal Librarian at Windsor Castle, work which was after his own heart. He could now work on his

tackling such a project. He explained, however, "England has waited long for a soldier to do the work. It is because we are a fighting people that we have risen to greatness, and it is as a fighting people that we stand or fall. Arms rule the world, and war, the supreme test of moral and physical greatness, remains eternally the touchstone of nations."

Before the 1914-18 war several volumes had been published, enough to show he was a field-marshal of letters and an expert on strategy. During the war he fumed because he saw politicians and commanders making the old familiar mistakes of the past. "Why do I waste my time writing the History of the Army? What is the use of sweating one's life out recording past blunders if no lesson is learnt from bitter experience?" He was, however, summoned several times by the War Office, and those in command, to give his opinion on various situations. On more than one occasion he actually went to G.H.Q. in France to give a first-hand opinion on strategic operations. When the Gallipoli campaign was first thought of, his advice was asked, but, I need scarcely say, not taken.

In 1916 after the publication of the 8th Volume of the History, great pressure was put on him to start writing an official history of the World War then in progress. He eventually agreed against his better judgment. It was agony to him to cast aside his life work, to tear himself away from the past and start to unravel the campaign then in progress. I remember seeing him soon after he started on this barely possible job and he told me what disheartening work he had taken on. In one battle he had lost trace of five battalions without knowing technically what had happened to them. Uncle John was the wrong man, or rather it was the wrong job for him to do. Not everybody relished his judgments. Too many wished to amend his narrative. Eminent soldiers were angry at his omissions, others were disturbed by his criticisms. Finally, after suffering a great deal of irritation and frustration, he was thankful when the History of the Kaiser War was given to someone else to write, and he returned to his self-imposed task of his own History. The income this great work brought him in was one penny a line, and financially he would have been better off as a private soldier whose exploits he so much admired.

It was mortifying to him that when his volumes came into print there was no-one capable of reviewing them authoritatively. All they could do was to commend his industry and admire his superb English. He was often scathing, especially about politicians, using such terms as "inability", "inefficiency" and so on. He held very definite views and never hesitated to express them. When, however, he praised, he praised generously. At his best he was magnificent. The last sentences of his History are some of his finest: "The builders of this empire were not worthy of such an army. Two centuries of persecution could not wear out its patience. Two centuries of thankless toil could not abate its ardour. Two centuries of conquest could not awake it to insolence. Dutiful to its master, merciful to its enemies, it clung steadfastly to its old simple ideals, Obedience, Service, Sacrifice". He carried the History to 1870, but who is there now to complete it?

Perhaps his knowledge of Military History was only equalled by his knowledge of Natural History. When a boy he did not excel, like his brothers, as a horseman. Instead of being at the top of the hunt he must have ridden miles alone, observing nature and the habits of the wild red deer and all animals that live in the West Country, especially those on Exmoor. Whenever Uncle John was able to take a rest from his work it was always to Castle Hill that he went. He was never happier than when walking after partridge, or fishing for trout in the little river Bray or the stream at Hartland. It was when in Devon that this man of letters would relapse into his native tongue, and no-one talked or wrote the sing-song Devon language better than he did. It was during three of such weeks that he wrote the Story of a

Military History in ideal conditions. He became a member of the Royal Household and was given apartments in the Round Tower, which contained an octagon-shaped writing room, dining room and bedroom, and a private way into the Library. It was here that he spent many happy years.

The Library was full of treasures, but it was in a lamentable state of chaos when he became librarian. I sometimes had the privilege of spending days there with him, helping him to turn out dusty drawers, full of beautiful drawings by the old masters, some of which could never have seen the light of day since they were executed. Amongst them was a wonderful collection of Holbeins, which he arranged to have quite beautifully reproduced. He spent months making the contents of the Library a fitting collection for the King to own. He was an expert on book-binding, and with the help of Bumpus had many valuable volumes rebound and repaired. It was his privilege to show his Royal Masters treasures which they had no idea they possessed.

When King George V and Queen Mary ascended the throne, they both took considerable interest in the Library at Windsor. As is well-known, Queen Mary was never so happy as when collecting objets d'art. I remember Uncle John telling me what trouble she took helping him to choose a suitable background to display Charles I's baby clothes which had been discovered at Windsor. The Queen spent many happy hours in the Library with Uncle John and took great interest in his work.

Marlborough House,
February 4th, 1908.

Dear Mr. Fortescue,

I enclose for you the extract from the book "Last of the Royal Stuarts" about the St. Andrew Cup and the ring left to the Prince Regent by Cardinal York. I have asked Mr. Bett of Garrards whether any mention is made of these things in the catalogue of the Crown Jewels, but he tells me he cannot find any record of them. He thinks that probably they may be amongst the cameos, badges, etc., which are in the King's Audience Room at Windsor and which we were looking at with you last week. As you are going through these things to find their histories, this note may perhaps be of use to you. It would indeed be most interesting to identify these articles.

Please put down on paper for me what you particularly wish me to see at the Record Office when I go there. I take this opportunity of thanking you very warmly for so kindly giving up so much of your valuable time to me when I was at the Castle. I assure you I much enjoyed my visits to the Library.

Believe me

Yours very sincerely,
Victoria Mary.

Marlborough House,
March 22nd, 1908.

Dear Mr. Fortescue,

I am indeed glad to learn that you have traced the cup of St. Andrew and the ring and am most grateful to you for the information and also for that relating to the "Tuxon George" which is most interesting. The Duke of Wellington will not be pleased, but that cannot be helped. Perhaps I may have a copy of Sir R. P. Gathway's pamphlet when it appears. I am very sorry to hear you have been laid up with influenza. We hope to go to Frogmore for Easter

when I trust we may have the pleasure of seeing you.

Believe me,

Yours very sincerely,
Victoria Mary.

The King also took a great interest in the books he possessed, and he wrote the following letter to my uncle from Sandringham—

November 28th, 1909.

Dear Fortescue,

I am sorry to hear from your letter of 26th that after very careful examination with Dr. Warne you have both come to the conclusion that the binding of Henry VIII's book you showed us at Windsor is not genuine, and therefore you are not going to purchase it. It is lucky that you found it out now before you bought it.

Do you remember my asking you in chaff if you were certain that the arms had not been stuck on? Are you going to inform the dealer that it is a forgery or send it back and allow Pierpont Morgan to give some fabulous sum for it?

Both the Princess and I will always be ready to help you if you find something which ought to be in the Library and you are short of money.

Believe me,

Very sincerely yours,
GEORGE.

The royal children also seem to have been friends, as on August 18th, 1906, the Princess Royal wrote to him in a childish hand:

Frogmore House,
Windsor

Dear Mr. Fortescue,

I thank you very much for your book, "The Story of a Red Deer" which you kindly sent me. I am sure I shall enjoy reading it as David and Bertie like it so much.

Your little friend,
MARY.

When the Court was in residence at Windsor, my uncle being a member of the Household, constantly dined with the King and Queen. The social functions he often found uncongenial as he was not of a social temperament and I feel sure he found it a waste of time. But when the dinners were informal, he grew to know and greatly appreciate his Royal Master and Mistress, their interest in his work and their co-operation. Part of his work was to show the Library and its contents to foreign royalties and celebrities of all kinds. In consequence he met many people of interest and corresponded with them on many subjects.

Soon after King George succeeded, he was commanded by him to accompany himself and the Queen on the Royal Tour of India, and in consequence saw India in splendour and comfort. Never having been a very well-dressed man, his wardrobe caused him some concern. On seeking advice he was given instructions to take a large amount of underclothes. This he took seriously and bought such a quantity that it lasted him until his death. He always wore long black silk stockings, and as men's shops did not supply these, I was commissioned to buy these for him, in a large-size lady's.

Just before the Indian Tour he met his future wife. His meeting with her came about in a curious fashion. He had always been an admirer of Thomas Hardy, and wished to meet him. He therefore asked my aunt, Mrs. Bankes, who lived at Wolfeton, near Dorchester, if he might stay with her and arrange a meeting. My aunt took him to a garden party at the home of Thomas Hardy. During the afternoon

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my aunt introduced him to a lovely girl, Winifred Beech, who was staying in the neighbourhood. Uncle John fixed his eyeglass firmly in his eye and at once recognised her charm and good looks. Hating crowds, and I am sure disliking garden parties, probably never having been to one before, he removed his new acquaintance to a distant part of the garden for the rest of the afternoon, during which time they became mutually attracted to each other. Before they parted, the lady, much to her joy, received an invitation to visit the Library at Windsor. Winifred Beech fell in love at first sight, but Uncle John thought himself too old for her. It was some considerable time before he asked her to marry him.

The love of his early life was Christine Hamlyn, who though she was very fond of him, far preferred his brother Seymour. In any case neither brother had an income sufficient to support the Clovelly Estate, let alone a wife. Everyone thought that he had relinquished the idea of marriage, and it therefore came as a great shock to his family and friends, not to mention the King and Queen, when he married a girl twenty-five years his junior, and an actress! But how right he was. Never could a marriage have been happier.

Life at Windsor became rather complicated after his marriage, owing to the rule that no actress could be acknowledged at Court. Peggy had to dine alone in their room when he was in attendance. This caused many heart-burnings in one so young and beautiful.

After he resigned from being Librarian at Windsor, he and his wife went to live in France, and bought a villa near Grasse. They both loved the climate and the people of Provence, who are very like Devonians, in one respect at least. In Devon, so often the gardener prefers being a groom, and in Provence you invariably find your gardener to be a much better butler, or vice versa. Uncle John loved his garden, but alas! he had several illnesses, during one of which I went out to nurse him. He was a wonderful patient, never grumbling, and had rare self-discipline. He died in France and was cremated. His ashes were brought to England and scattered on Exmoor, the place which above all others he had loved.

After Uncle John's death, Peggy Winifred Fortescue sold the house where they lived near Grasse and bought an old peasant's cottage at Opio which she turned into an attractive Provencal domain which she named Fort-escu. The view from it is one of the most enchanting that I know, looking across at the ancient village of Chateau Neuf, rising like a fortress above the olive groves below. Beyond as far as the eye can see stretch the Esterelles and the sea. To the north rise the snow-covered mountains behind Gordon. At sunset their beauty, pink with the reflection of the setting sun, takes one's breath away. Here she wrote her books. In "Perfume from Provence" and "Sunset House" she gives delightful descriptions of the people of Provence and their eccentricities that she understood and loved so well. How proud Uncle John would have been if he had lived to see the success she made of her books!

She was a generous demonstrative woman. Her actress instincts revelled in the comic situations that certainly occur in the villages of Provence more than in most places. She would listen to the peasants telling her dramatic tales by the hour, never forgetting to shake hands with them on arrival and departure. I remember her saying she shook hands with the man delivering coal five times in one morning, and felt she would never be clean again.

At the beginning of the 1939-45 war she worked hard for the soldiers of France, and when France fell, she was one of the last of the large English population to leave, complete with black spaniel dog. She started a fund in England for comforts for the Free French troops. She was a charming speaker, reducing her audiences alternately to tears or laughter.

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On the cessation of hostilities she returned to her home in Provence, where she found the house and contents intact, having been guarded by her *bonne* a *toujours* faire. Except that the garden was very overgrown the place was very much as she had left it. Here she worked, supplying food and clothing to the poor peasants for miles around, and earning for herself the name of "Maman Noël", and the love of the population.

Some years ago my husband bought a house at the bottom of her garden. A few days after we arrived I went on a shopping expedition to the village. En route, I met Peggy's *bonne*, clacking along in her wooden sabots, which she always wore being a native of Normandy. On seeing me, Therese dropped her two large marketing baskets, rushed to me and kissed me on both cheeks, and insisted that we should go to the butchers together, explaining that I must patronise the same one as she herself did. We walked along the rocky path with its borders of olive trees and the first mauve *cistus* coming into bloom. Therese conversed volubly on the all-important subject of food. On our arrival at the butcher, we entered the shop to find practically the entire village assembled there, and I had a vision of being there for the rest of the morning, which proved to be the case. Therese, after shaking hands with everyone, introduced me as the niece of Madame Fortescue, and said that they must understand that "La famille Fortescue est Anglaise. Mais cette famille est d'origine française. Madame comprends très bien les gens de Provence. Quand elle est à Opio Madame préfère qu'on la regarde comme une Française". The butcher asked "C'est longtemps que votre famille habite l'Angleterre, Madame?" Without thinking I replied "Depuis 1066", whereupon everyone in the shop looked upon me with obviously increased respect, and shook me heartily by the hand murmuring "La la! Quelle famille ancienne et noble!" Therese again kissed me on both cheeks and, my purchases in my hand, I left through an avenue of newly-found compat-riots, having paid a small fortune for my meat.

For many years Peggy had suffered from a skin complaint that disfigured her beautiful face, but never her expression, which was full of sympathy and understanding. Eventually the long illness affected her heart and she died a few weeks later. Such a gallant woman! Her bravery was worthy of the wife of the Historian of the British Army.

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My youngest uncle, Brigadier General Charles Fortescue, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.

