

THE
BEAUTIFUL
AND
INTERESTING ACCOUNT
OF THE
SHEPHERD
OF
Salisbury Plain.



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SHEPHERD

SALISBURY PLAIN.

MR JOHNSON, a very worthy charitable gentleman, was travelling some time ago across one of those vast plains which are known in Wiltshire. It was a fine summer's evening, and he rode slowly that he might have leisure to admire God in the works of his creation.

His attention was all of a sudden called off by the barking of a shepherd's dog, and, looking up, he spied one of those little huts, which are here and there to be seen on these great downs; and near it was the Shepherd himself, busily employed with his dog

in collecting together his vast stock of sheep. As he drew near, he perceived him to be a clean well-looking poor man, near fifty years of age. His coat, though at first it had probably been of one dark colour, had been in a long course of years so often patched in different sorts of cloth, that it was become hard to say which had been the original colour. But this, while it gave a plain proof of the Shepherd's poverty, equally proved the exceeding neatness, industry, and good management of his wife. His stockings no less proved her good housewifery, for they were entirely covered with darns of different coloured worsted, but had not a hole in them; and his shirt, though nearly as coarse as the sails of a ship, was white as the drifted snow, and neatly mended where time had either made a rent or worn it thin. And Mr Johnston was not more struck with the decency of his mean and frugal dress, than with his open honest countenance, which bore strong marks of health, cheerfulness and spirit.

Mr Johnson, who was on his journey, and somewhat fearful, from the appearance of the sky, that rain was at no great distance, accosted the Shepherd with asking what sort of weather he thought it would be on the morrow; "It will be such weather as pleases me," answered the Shepherd:

Though the answer was delivered in the mildest and civilest tone that could be imagined, the gentleman thought the words themselves rather rude and surly, and asked him how that could be; "because," replied the Shepherd, "it will be such weather as pleases God, and whatever pleases him pleases me."

He entered into conversation with the Shepherd in the following manner:—

Yours is a troublesome life, honest friend, said he; to be sure, Sir, replied the Shepherd, it is not a very lazy life; but it is not near so toilsome as that which my Great Master led for my sake, and he had every state and condition of life at his choice, and chose a hard

one, while I only submit to the lot that is appointed me. You are exposed to great cold and heat, said the gentleman.—

True, Sir, said the Shepherd; but then I am not exposed to great temptations; and so throwing one thing against another, God is pleased to contrive things more equal than we poor ignorant short-sighted creatures are apt to think. David was happier when he kept his father's sheep on such a plain as this, and singing some of his own psalms, perhaps, than ever he was when he became King of Israel and Judah. And I dare say, we should never have had some of the most beautiful texts in all those fine psalms, if he had not been a shepherd, which enabled him to make so many fine comparisons and similitudes, as one may say, from a country life, flocks of sheep, hills and vallies, and fountains of water.

Here the Shepherd stopped, for he began to feel he had made too free, and

talked too long. But Mr Johnson was so well pleased with what he said, and with the cheerful contented manner in which he said it, that he desired him to go on freely, for that it was a pleasure to him to meet with a plain man, who, without any kind of learning but what he had got from the Bible, was able to talk so well on a subject, in which all men, high and low, rich and poor, are equally concerned.

My honest friend, said the gentleman, I perceive you are well acquainted with Scripture. Yes, Sir, pretty well, blessed be God! through his mercy I learned to read, when I was a little boy; though reading was not so common when I was a child, as I am told, through the goodness of Providence, and the generosity of the rich, it is likely to become now a-days. I believe there is no day this last thirty years that I have not peeped into my Bible. If we cannot find time to read a chapter, I defy any man to say he cannot find time to read a verse, and

a single text, Sir, well followed and put in practice every day, would make no bad figure at the years end: three hundred and sixty five texts, without the loss of a moment's time, would make a pretty stock, a little golden treasury, as one may say, from new year's day to new year's day; and if their children were brought up to it, they would look for their texts as naturally as they do for their breakfast.

No labouring man; it is true, has so much leisure as a shepherd, for while my flock is feeding, I am obliged to be still, and at such times I can now and then tap a shoe for children or myself, which is a great saving to us; and while I am doing that, I repeat a bit of a chapter, which makes the time pass pleasantly in this wild solitary place. I can say the best part of my Bible by heart; I believe I should not say the best part, for every part is good, but I mean the greatest part. I have led but a lonely life, and have often had but little to eat; but my Bible has been

meat, drink, and company to me, as I may say; and when want and trouble have come upon me, I do not know what I should have done indeed Sir, if I had not the promises of this book for my stay, and support.

You have had great difficulties then? said Mr Johnson. Why, as for that, Sir, not more than neighbour's fare; I have but little cause to complain, and much to be thankful; but I have had some little struggles, as I will leave you to judge. I have a wife and eight children, whom I breed up in that little cottage you see under the hill, about half a mile off. What, that with the smoke coming out of the chimney, said the gentleman? O no, Sir, replied the Shepherd, smiling, we have seldom smoke in the evening, for we have little to cook, and firing is dear in these parts. It is that cottage which you see on the left hand of the church, near that little tuft of hawthorns. What, that hovel with only one room above and one below, with scarcely any chim-

ney; how is it possible you can live there with any family? O it is very possible and very certain too, cried the Shepherd. How many better men have been worse lodged, how many good Christians have perished in prisons and dungeons, in comparison of which my cottage is a palace. The house is very well, Sir, and if the rain did not sometimes beat down upon us, through the thatch, when we are in bed, I should not desire a better, for I have health, peace, and liberty, and no man maketh me afraid.

Are you in any distress at present? said Mr Johnson! No, Sir, thank God, replied the Shepherd. I get my shilling a day, and most of my children will be able to earn something; for we have only three under five years of age. Only? said the gentleman, that is a heavy burden. Not at all: God fits the back to it. Though my wife is not able to do any out-of-door work, yet she breeds up our children to such habits of industry, that our little maids, before

never afford to get them without a little contrivance. I must shew you how we manage about the shoes, when you condescend to call at our cottage, Sir; as to stockings, this is one way we take to get them: my young ones, who are too little to do much work, sometimes wander quite over the hills, for the chance of finding what little wool the sheep may drop when they rub themselves, as they are apt to do, in the bushes. These scattered bits of wool the children pick out of the brambles, which I see have tore sad holes in Molly's apron to day: they carry this wool home, and when they have got a pretty parcel together, their mother cards it; for she can sit and card in the chimney corner, when she is not able to wash or work about the house. The biggest girl then spins it; it does very well for us without dying, for poor people must not stand upon the colour of their stockings. After this, our little boys knit it for themselves, when they are employed in keeping

rows off the fields, and after they get home at night. As for the knitting the girls and their mother do, that is chiefly for sale, which helps to pay our rent.

Mr Johnson lifted up his eyes in silent astonishment at the shifts which honest poverty can make, rather than beg or steal; and was surprised to think how many ways of subsisting there are, which those who live at their ease little suspect. He secretly resolved to be more attentive to his petty expences than he had hitherto been: and to be more watchful that nothing was wasted in his family.

But to return to the Shepherd: Mr Johnson told him that as he must needs be at his friend's house, who lived many miles off, that night, on his return he would certainly visit the Shepherd's cottage.

One Sunday afternoon, my wife being very ill, as I was coming out of church, for I went one part of the day, and my eldest daughter the other, so

my poor wife was never left alone. As I was coming out of church, I saw Mr. Jenkins, the Minister, who called out to me, and asked me how my wife was, saying he had been kept from coming to see her by a deep fall of snow, and indeed from the parsonage house to my hovel, it was quite impassable. I gave him all the particulars he asked, and I am afraid a good many more, for my heart was quite full. He kindly gave me a shilling, and said he would certainly try to pick out his way and come and see her in a day or two.

While he was talking to me, a plain farming looking gentleman, in boots, was standing by, and listened to all he said, but seemed to take no notice. It was Mr. Jenkin's wife's father, who was come to pass the Christmas holidays at the parsonage-house. I had always heard him spoken of as a plain frugal man, who lived close to himself, but was remarked to give more away than any of his shew-away neighbours.

O Well; I went home with great spirits

at this seasonable and unexpected relief, and I do assure you, my wife was more thankful when I shewed her the shilling than I dare say some of your great people are when they get a hundred pounds.

Mr Johnson's heart smote him when he heard such a value set upon a shilling; surely, said he to himself, I will never waste another; but he said nothing to the Shepherd, who thus pursued his story.

Next morning, before I went out, I lent part of the money to buy a little ale, and brown sugar to put into the water gruel; which, you know, Sir, made it nice and nourishing. I went out to cleave wood in a farm yard, for there was no standing out on the plain after such a snow as had fallen in the night. When I came back at night, my wife fell a crying as soon as she saw me. This I own I thought but a good return for the blessings she had so lately received, and so I told her. O! said she, it is too much, we are too

rich. I am now frightened, not lest we should have no portion in this world, but for fear we should have our whole portion in it. Look here, John, so saying, she uncovered the bed whereon she lay, and shewed me two warm new thick blankets. I could not believe my own eyes, Sir, because when I went out in the morning, I had left her with no other covering than our little old blue rug. I was still more amazed when she put into my hand half a-crown, telling me she had a visit from Mr Jenkinson and Mr Jones, the latter of whom had bestowed all these good things upon her. Thus, Sir, have our lives been crowned with mercies. My wife has got about again, and I do believe, under Providence, it was owing to these comforts; for the rheumatism, Sir, without blankets by night and flannels by day, is but a baddish job, especially to people who have little or no fire. She will always be a weakly body; but, thank God, her soul prospers and is in good health. But I beg your pardon,

sir, for talking at this rate. Not at all, said Mr Johnson, I am much pleased with your story; you shall certainly see me in a few days; Good night: so saying, he slipped a crown into his hand, and rode off. Surely, said the Shepherd, goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life, as he gave the money to his wife when he got home at night.

Mr Johnson having passed some time with his friend, set out on his return to Salisbury, and on the Saturday evening reached a very small inn, a mile or two distant from the Shepherd's village; for he never travelled on a Sunday. He went next morning to the church nearest the house where he had passed the night, and after taking such refreshment as he could get at that house, he walked on to find out the Shepherd's cottage.

His reason for visiting him on a Sunday was, chiefly because he supposed to be the only day which the Shepherd's employment allowed him to pass

way of thinking, Molly, said the father, in whatever concerns bodily wants and bodily comforts, it is our duty to compare our own lot with the lot of those who are worse off, and this will keep us thankful; on the other hand, whenever we are tempted to set up our own wisdom or goodness, we must compare ourselves with those who are wiser and better, and that will keep us humble. Molly was now so hungry, and found the potatoes so good, that she had no time to make any more remarks, but was devouring her dinner very heartily, when the barking of the dog drew her attention from her trencher to the door, and spying the stranger, she cried out, look father, see here, if yonder is not the good gentleman. Mr Johnson finding himself discovered, immediately walked in, and was heartily welcomed by the honest Shepherd, who told his wife that was the gentleman to whom they were so much obliged.

After the first salutations were over, Mr Johnson said, if they would

to on quietly with their dinner, he could sit down. Though a good deal shamed, they thought it most respect to obey the gentleman, who having cast his eye on their slender provisions, gently rebuked the Shepherd for not having indulged himself, as it was Sunday, with a morsel of bacon to relish his potatoes. The Shepherd said nothing, but poor Mary coloured and hung down her head, saying, indeed Sir, it is not my fault, I did beg my husband to allow himself a bit of meat out of your honours bounty, but he was too good to do it, and it is all for my fare. The Shepherd seemed unwilling to come to an explanation, but Mr Johnson desired Mary to go on. So she continued: You must know, Sir, that both of us, next to sin, dread a debt, and indeed, in some cases, a debt is a sin; but with all our care and pains we have never been able to quite pay off the doctor's bill, for that bad fit of the rheumatism which I had last winter.

Here the grateful woman's tears ran down so fast that she could not go on. She wiped them with the corner of her apron, and humbly begged pardon for making so free.

Indeed Sir, said the Shepherd, though my wife is as unwilling to be in debt as myself, yet I could hardly prevail on her to consent to my paying the money just then, because she said it was hard I should not have a taste of the gentleman's bounty myself.

Are you not a little too cautious, my honest friend, said Mr Johnson. I humbly ask your pardon, Sir, replied the Shepherd, for I think that impossible. In my poor notion I no more understand how a man can be too cautious than how he can be too strong and healthy.

Just as they were in this part of the conversation, Mr Jenkins, the clergyman, came in. After the usual salutation, he said, Well, Shepherd, I wish you joy; I know you will be sorry to gain any advantage by the death of a

neighbour, but old Wilson, my clerk, was so infirm, and I trust so well prepared, that there is no reason to be sorry for his death. I have been to pray for him, and he died while I staid.

I have always intended, that you should succeed in his place; it is no great matter, but every little is something.

No great matter, Sir, cried the Shepherd, indeed it is a great thing to me; it will more than pay my rent. Blessed be God for all his goodness. Mary said nothing, but lifted up her eyes full of tears in silent gratitude.

O Sir, cried the Shepherd, how can I ever be thankful enough for such blessings? And will my poor Mary have a dry thatch over her head? and shall I be unable to send for the doctor when I am likely to lose her? Indeed my cup runs over with blessings. I hope God will give me humility. Here he and Mary looked at each other and burst into tears. The gentlemen saw their distress, and kindly walked out upon the little green before the door, that these

honest people might give vent to their feelings. As soon as they were alone, they crept into one corner of the room, where they thought they could not be seen, and fell on their knees devoutly blessing and praising God for his mercies. Never were heartier prayers presented than this grateful couple offered up for their benefactors.

Mr Johnson took his leave, promising to call on the worthy Minister and his new Clerk once a year, in his summer's journey over the plain, as long as it pleased God to spare his life.

We hope he will never fail to give us an account of these visits, which we shall be glad to lay before our readers if they should contain instruction or amusement.

FINIS.