



CHAPTER SEVEN - CHARACTERS.

There is not much doubt that education in all its forms has changed our outlook and way of life so much that there does not seem to be the outstanding "characters" that there were in bygone days, and our village has had a fair share of them.

1910 saw the first working man ever on the Rural District Council, elected to the Council in a straight fight with a well known business man, and what a fight it was.

Charles Gore was already well known to all classes in the village as a hard working tenant farmer who still found time to take an active part in many things to do with the place. He played the double bass in the String Band, sang bass in the choir, lectured on temperance and was secretary of the Gardeners' Society, in which capacity a good story is told of him. The committee were making plans for the annual flower show and he suggested that at intervals music should be rendered by the String Band, to which Sam Standard cried out "Oh, dear no! Mr. Gore, I'd rather 'ave me stumick rubbed with a brick". Sam was a bit choosy about what music he listened to, if any.

Let us get back to the terrific election campaign, for this must have been a great time for him.

All elections of late years have been tame affairs compared with those of years ago. At this particular one both parties must have had a tremendous supply of bills and posters printed which were plastered around the village in the day time, and at night they were either pulled down or defaced, I know of one wall at the end of a row of houses which displayed bills for the Conservative candidate, where the stains of sloppy clay can still be seen, and it looks as if they will remain now.

On the day of the election there were a number of free fights amongst the younger generation and shouting to try and frighten the horses being used in a small way to take people to the poll. For

this purpose, Gore had hired a wagonette and there is no doubt that he and his supporters put much energy into the whole affair. In the evening a crowd waited outside the school to hear the result of the poll and when it became known that Gore had won, before the cheering had died down the horses were taken out of the wagonette and men pulled it with Charles Gore and his wife through the village headed by boys with torches and an improvised mouth-organ band. After this great start he soon made himself known as an active member of the Council and during his term of office he was the prime mover in two big advances for rural areas, the building of Council Houses and the collection of refuse. The meetings were held in town, which generally meant a five mile walk each way and at that time held in the late morning, a bad time for a working man, but he was rarely absent. On the day of his first meeting when passing through the village he met another character of whom I shall say more later, generally known as Lord John Ruffell. He wished Gore good luck in his new position and hoped that he would try and do something to get better cottages for the working class. Gore replied that he did not think that housing came within the council jurisdiction, but Lord John assured him that it did, and asked him to call at his cottage on his return journey when he would have an old law book ready for him to read. The outcome was that after two years hard fighting we had in our village eight of the very earliest Council houses which still bear the name of the farm where Gore lived.

What about the refuse collection? Here again he came up against strong opposition, for in the first place he proposed that the collection should be from house-holders with less than an acre of land, arguing that people with more than that amount of land, had plenty of room to get rid of their own rubbish, but you see, these folk were the biggest ratepayers, and also included most members of the Council. Arphow after a long struggle he got his way and the dust cart appeared. This was an open van, privately owned and hired by yearly contract which included one man to go with it. The second man was the roadman on whose beat the collection was taking place. Gore won his victory in this field by allowing the rubbish to be tipped in the ruts in the long muddy lane which led to his farm. By the time that this was filled up and levelled off the whole thing was generally accepted and put on the basis which is still working to-day.

Now about Lord John Ruffell, he was one of the few men of his type and time who could read and write, who eked out a living from a small piece of land which he worked as a market garden and nursery, and to help make ends meet, his wife took in washing. You would see them both with their handcart when they collected or delivered the laundry, the old lady in her shawl and bonnet, and John with the bushy beard and bowler hat.

One night a week, after a hard day's work John would walk to a neighbouring village four miles away to play his trombone in a brass band and then four miles back home on not too good a road with no street lights.

When the Old Age Pensions were first introduced it was only paid to people over 70 and was quite a small sum. John and his lady were both entitled to it and each week they would go arm in arm to get it. On the first occasion when they came out of the Post Office there were several people about who were surprised when old Lord John took off his hat and cried with a loud voice, "God bless Lloyd George!" What a great day that was for old people!

In the forge on the Lower Green, there were for a number of years two blacksmiths, Patsy who owned the business and Farmer who worked for him. They got on very well together, but they were real opposites in most things. Patsy was thin and slipped around quickly, Farmer was stout and steady. He also smoked and Patsy didn't. Farmer was jovial and everybody's friend, Patsy was quieter and treated by most folks somewhat with awe, for he was also the Sexton, Parish Clerk and Verger and because of this important position he nearly always wore black, whilst Farmer favoured very wide corduroy trousers and waistcoat and a broadcloth jacket, such as was quite a common country outfit in those days. The cords as they were called, had a peculiar smell and when walking the rub of the trousers set up a really audible whistle.

He had brought up a large family and for years he hired a shed of the lean-to type, on the side of the Black Horse in which he could be found each week-day evening from six until eight, prepared to cut your hair for two-pence. He was too heavy handed to give anyone a shave, but there were a number of cut throat razors which he would sharpen, and a little saucepan full of water on an oil stove and for the sum of one penny you could shave yourself by the light of four oil lamps, one on each wall. The profit from this side-line just about paid for his beer and baccy. Patsy for his extras had to rely on weddings and funerals.

One of Patsy's lackeys was Abel, who I suppose could well be called the village idiot. In those days simple folk were not cared for as they are to-day. Usually they were alright all the time there was a parent alive to look after them, or perhaps a brother or sister. To live, they mostly had Parish Pay and a little from the Alms Fund of the Church while kind hearted people kept them in clothes. Now Abel lived with his widowed mother who always kept him clean and tidy and also saw that he was on time for various little jobs that came his way, the chief one of which was blowing the Church organ. He used to tell people that he was quite as clever as Mr. Willie, for Mr. Willie only took the tune out after he had put it in, Mr. Willie of course being the organist. He got in the cokes and wood for Patsy's boiler and helped him to wind the clock, which was

a very heavy job, and Abel was ever so strong. I doubt if he had any idea of his own strength.

The great worry of his life was, "them B....Choir boys". although he was artful enough to be friendly with them as soon as they earned any money. His greeting then would be, "Hallo George, I want another 'alf penny to get 'alf ounce of baccy". And he generally got it!

"Them" choir boys played all sorts of pranks on him on purpose to make him shout, stammer and swear, such as throwing little things at him, or running off with his straw hat. One Sunday evening several boys waited for him under some pine trees, and as he went by they threw cones at him, but to their surprise he stalked by without a word, after which they went leisurely on to the vestry where by the time they got inside they had forgotten about him. Now the vestry was parted off by a heavy curtain which slid along a high rail. It was mostly pushed back to the wall and everyone was so familiar with it that it was never given a thought. After some minutes when all were either half out of their jackets or half into their cassocks, the curtain unfolded and out came Abel with a thin stick, with which he hit both right and left, not troubling where. 'What a slaughter!' But he had some peace for several weeks.

The great days of his life were Sunday School and Choir outings. He went to them all, whether invited or not, and one unforgettable occasion was a Choir Festival at the Cathedral some twenty five miles away, an affair which meant a long day away from home.

On arriving at the town the first thing that Abel did was to buy a pipe and some strong tobacco for a present for his brother which he proudly showed to some of the lads, who persuaded him to try it during the afternoon. What with filling him with sweets, lemonade and another pipe of tobacco now and then, by the time the great service took place, poor Abel felt anything but well and so the boys left him lying on a seat in the park, promising to come back for him later. Inside the Cathedral all the chairs in the nave had been turned to face the centre so that everyone could see the conductor on the rostrum in the middle, and by turning their heads they could also see both ends of the mighty building, the pulpit one way and the beautiful west doorway the other. As it was a lovely summer evening the door was open. The service had reached the point when the Dean had nearly finished his sermon. Of course some of the congregation might have been listening, but they were also looking at the sunset through the open door when Abel, now feeling better, stood framed in the centre of the arch. 'What a picture!' wild-eyed, unbrushed hair, complete with straw boater on the back of his head, high winged stiff collar and a bright red tie, and there he stayed until the end of the service.

Next door to Abel lived Betsy. Poor Betsy said that Abel was queer and Abel said that she was. I don't know that she had ever done any work to earn a living, and with help from one and the other she

managed to live and keep a roof over her head. She went to Church regularly on Sunday, where she had her own seat and cushion, which remained there for a number of years after Betsy had passed on.

I don't suppose that she had ever owned five pounds at one time in her life, and much of her time was spent making kettle holders for little presents and chasing "them kids", who on the way to and from school would knock on her door and run.

Betsy had a brother, well known in the district as Cherry, coachman to a retired general, and later to the general's widow. As time went on the old lady's horse died, so Cherry then pushed her about the village and to Church on Sundays, in a bath-chair, still wearing his coachman's coat and top hat, complete with cockade and big gloves. He was a regular follower of the hounds, travelling for miles on a very ancient bicycle. For years, when he was able he rang the Church bell, and if you stopped and spoke to him, you rarely got away without some suitable quotation from the Bible. Indeed here was an example of a simple contented countryman.

In those quieter days another familiar figure was Horace Franks, the father of a large family, who could turn his hand to almost any job. Even so he had difficulty making ends meet for there was no family allowance, and if you were out of work, well there was just nothing to be sure of. But Horace could catch almost anything that could move. In many cases he had permission to do so - rabbits, pigeons, fish and moles, all were useful. One night he was making his rounds in a field next to the Churchyard. It was very dark and not a sound to disturb the peace, until he reached a point near the oldest part of the burial ground and then he heard voices which were undoubtedly getting nearer. He lay down and looked around the skyline but could see nothing. He was getting quite scared for now they seemed to be going over top of him, and he could not understand what they were saying, although he was sure that there were two people right close to him.

Next day the mystery was solved, for the talk of the place was about the two Frenchmen who had landed in the dark at Yew Tree Farm in a balloon. Of course a balloon made no noise and this one was nearly down when it passed over Horace. 'What a thing to happen near a Churchyard!' Horace was a small man, clever with animals, but for the greater part, clever in their destruction.

At this period the village had its own veterinary surgeon, a great big Irishman, but in spite of his size he was most gentle, even with the smallest animal. In those days when horses were more numerous it was a common sight to see Pat with his two wheeled dogcart. Very often he would be right in the middle of the seat, with his small boy on one side of him and a smaller girl on the other, and you would wonder how they ever managed to stop on. He later had an open touring

car, and although it had a hood, I don't remember ever seeing it up, no matter what the weather, and as there was more room in this vehicle he not only had his own children, but often two or three others as well. Alas, here another familiar figure has gone and I am afraid gone for good, for as there are fewer calls for the vet. on the farms they have most of them now made their headquarters in town and on call over a larger area.

I cannot close this chapter without a word about Miss Fanny. I often wonder how much of the good work of our welfare state we owe to such people in the past as Miss Fanny. She lived at the Marx House with her widowed mother, who kept a staff of servants, a coachman and a gardener, but I don't think she spent much on herself. By many she was called an old busy body, which is true that she was, but it was nearly always for other people's benefit. She mostly wore a pair of steel framed spectacles, but she had a pair with gold frames for special occasions. Her hair was drawn back into a tight bun and I doubt if she ever had a tin of face powder, but she always wore a smile.

If she wanted to go out alone the horse and carriage took too long to get ready, and so she was usually seen on her old upright bicycle, tearing along for all she was worth. In bad weather she would ride with one hand and carry an umbrella in the other, and the basket on the handlebars was usually loaded to capacity.

With the gentry of those days she stood rather apart, for she had very little time for their parties and leisurely social events and where many of these people were quite willing to put their hands into their purses or pockets to pay someone else to look after the poor and needy, she got around and found them for herself.

For many years she was the superintendent of the Church Sunday School a job which took a bit of time and a lot of patience. She was a member of the Board of Guardians and Secretary of the Village Nurse's Association, a very different set-up from the wonderful national scheme of to-day. She herself kept several sets of baby clothes, which many poor mothers were glad to borrow when new arrivals were expected for there was just no help for this fairly frequent occurrence. The only condition on the loan was that the clothes should be returned clean, ready for the next baby.

Several families in the district boarded boys from various homes, who Miss Fanny made herself responsible for, and in after years some of these lads came back to see her. These were great days for her. I myself had quite a lot to do with her in the Boy Scouts of which she was Scout Mistress.

One day while cycling home from the neighbouring town she was overtaken by an errand boy who had the reputation of being a mischievous pickle, always in some trouble or other, and to her

surprise he raised his hat and spoke to her. They rode along together and in the course of their conversation the lad expressed a wish that there was a troop of Baden Powell Scouts that he could join. Later, after some thought Miss Fanny made some inquiries as to how a troop should be started and the result was that she was given a Scoutmaster's warrant and she began with just one patrol of eight boys, but this soon grew to three, and with the help of the three patrol leaders it became one of the best known troops in the district.

A day I shall never forget was Whit Monday of 1922, when a district Scout rally was held in the grounds of a well known Castle, some ten miles away. This was the last time that I had a ride in a four horse wagonette. What a ride! Two boys perched on the box with the coachman, each with a bigle on which they played a call at frequent intervals and squeezed in the back just at the top of the steps sat Miss Fanny, thoroughly enjoying herself.

To start the rally off the troops were set out in double lines, like the rays of the sun, in a great semi-circle, with each Scoutmaster at the head of his troop. The inspection was made by the County Commissioner and when he reached our line he just stopped and looked for some seconds, and then asked, "And who is the master of this smart troop?" for we had only the first Patrol Leader at our head. I can still see the expression on his face as a middle-aged plain Jane stepped out of the crowd with her warrant in her hand and instead of saluting her, he took off his hat and took her hand, for you see we could never persuade her to wear a uniform.

This great lady moved away after the death of her mother and she herself died at the ripe age of 91 and what little money she had, she left for Moral Welfare, and a Missionary Society.