BETTS

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ESSEX

I was born into an era of simple needs and simple possessions. There was no telephone service; the motor car was a dream; trams and buses, where they existed, were drawn by horses. For the rest, men, women and children walked. This was the year 1885.

My birth was signalised by the opening of the G.E. railway station at my home town.

A stage coach plied between the city and an important village once a week, on market day.

Do you, surrounded by every modern incitement to laziness, wonder how we could possibly exist in such primitive conditions? Are you surprised that we could be happy? My brothers and I extracted more enjoyment from a penny engine, operated by winding a string round a lead flywheel and pulling, than our great grandchildren get from their mechanically propelled trains, aeroplanes, walking dolls and ducks; more satisfaction from our family concerts, to which everybody, including visitors, contributed, than is felt by bored childred before the 'telly' demanding something new almost before the old is digested.

This clamorous dissatisfaction with gifts, toys, amusements, before the passage of time to enjoy them to the full, marks, perhaps more than anything else, the difference between the world's attitude to-day and that of a hundred years ago. Since discovery follows discovery with ever-increasing frequency, so is the almost new discarded in favour of its sequel. We used to sigh for the moon; now we are impatient because the next galaxy is still in the offing.

. . . .

Because time is an object, and novelty of paramount importance, much that is shoddy is foisted on a public only too ready to accept what is NEW. Indeed, the word has become of great importance in the pushing of a commodity. NEW detergent, NEW coffee, NEW face cream, NEW toothpaste, claim superiority by virtue of recent birth, without reference to improvements which they may, or may not, have acquired.

It is no part of my purpose to hold up "my" century as perfect; its evils are too well known. I shall try to sketch the kind of life we led

in those days, and suggest what has been lost in the scramble for improvement. which could, with advantage, have been retained.

When life was leisurely greater time and effort went to perfecting whatever task was being undertaken. A seven year apprenticeship. during which the master's critical eye turned on every stroke of the plane, every movement of the file, the mixing of every shovelful of mortar, induced in the young workman a striving after perfection, first, to escape his master's scorn or evoke his praise, and then, pride of performance as he compared his finished article with that of the junior apprentice, or of the journeyman, whose skill he envied and tried to emulate. surpass

This pride of workmanship permeated every occupation, every walk of life. At school I learned to write; every letter, perforce, was the same size; loops were drawn to a predetermined length, upstrokes, like downstrokes, had to be parallel. That perfection has long since deserted my script, but the legibility it ensured remains.

Back now to toys. Incomes were small, so every halfpenny had to do the work of twelve. The thought reminds me of a superstition regarding the last slice of bread and butter. The lucky girl who was offered this at tea was promised a handsome husband and £500 a year. Now this must curl the lips of to-day's labourer, who looks upon £750 annually as hugging the poverty line.

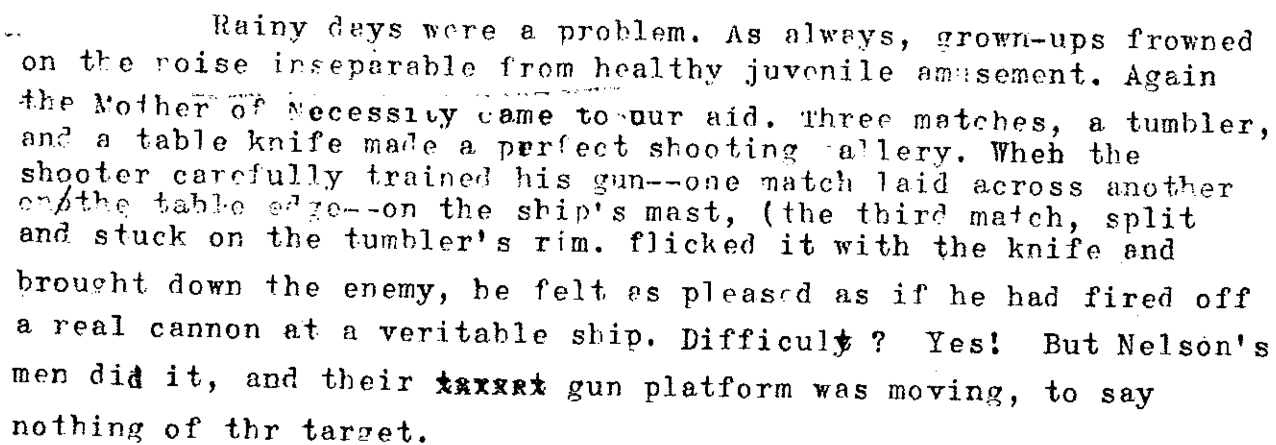
So we made our own toys. Not only did we get them at prices within range of our Saturday ha'penny, but we had all the fun of designing as well as making them. Weaknesses in construction quickly showed themselves, and turned our minds to the question of mechanical improvement, thus teaching as well as amusing us. Modern educationists, who many think allow the infant child to waste its time in aimless play, are just putting back what wealth has stolen from it. We spent our time in school learning the bases of education, and our recreation hours in using thoese facts creatively.

I had a kite. a whip and a top, a tip-cat and a hoop. not to mention my skipping rope, whose balled ends laid the foundation of a knowledge of knots and splices long before General Baden Powell brought such craft to the notice of schoolboys all over the world.

Then there were marbles. They cost a penny for twenty, and a penny was half a month's pocket money. However, below the surface of the soil was clay, from which "chalkers" could be made and baked in the oven or under the fire, and before long one could win, and carefully store, the coveted commercial

article, even a few "donies" (stoners), and an occasional "glass alley" falling to the hand. After the first season, being possessed of a good hand and eye, and a keen perception of which boys would "have a go" at my cokernut shy or my "bridge", I was never short of marbles from one year to the next.

There were other toys, too. which we could and did make, but these will show how little we were dependent on the factory for our pleasures.



Rainy days were a problem. As always, grown-ups frowned on the noise inseparable from healthy juvenile amusement. Again the Mother of Necessity came to our aid. Three matches, a tumbler, and a table knife made a perfect shooting gallery. When the shooter carefully trained his gun--one match laid across another on the table edge--on the ship's mast, (the third match, split and stuck on the tumbler's rim. flicked it with the knife and brought down the enemy, he felt as pleased as if he had fired off a real cannon at a veritable ship. Difficult ? Yes! But Nelson's men did it, and their gun platform was moving, to say nothing of thr target.

To-day we have so much done for us ; we take so much for granted, that moderns never cease to wonder how their great grandfathers managed. I have never tasted such bread as my mother baked in the little coal oven. Once a week she made a great batch of bread. After "spongeing" the dough all Friday night, she baked it on Saturday and stowed it in the storeroom. As a special treat we had the last of last week's bake dipped in a pail of water and re-baked, hot and soft, for Saturday tea. But even on Friday that bread was fresh and tasty.

Note the word "storeroom". Many people will remember the pre-refrigerator era, when the "pantry" was just large enough to take food for a day, or perhaps two. Our round-the-corner shopping habits call for nothing larger. Mother had one pound a week to feed eleven people, but she never bought less than a stone of flour. a sack of potatoes, seven pounds of sugar, or a pound of tea. This called for careful forethought and Bookkeeping. Mother had a very poor opinion of David Copperfield's first wife "the poor ninny", who wilted before an account book, and most women of her class would have agreed. When I included an

excellent account book among my wedding presents my bride was so outraged that she nearly went straight back home.

I have said that we walked. At the age of six I walked tso miles to school and two home, twice a day, as a matter of course. Walking was natural. My earliest adventure happened because walking was so natural. At the age of four I had been given a penny as a birthday present, and I walked a mile and a half to the market place to buy an ~~xxxxxx~~.orange. Not unnaturally I finished up in the police station, with tea and cakes to eke out the time until my father came to take me home. I do not remember feeling tired; I had merely lost my way when the policeman found me.

On another occasion--it was a Bank holiday--an elder brother had gone to Yarmouthfor the day. I was eleven then. My next younger brother and I, being at a loose end, decided to walk to the seaside and find him. IT WAS after all, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ only twenty-twom miles, So off we went. Half way there we asked the time, decided time was short, and turned back. A kindly lady gave us tea and cakes, but showed no real concern at our having still ten miles to go to our home. Well, we reached home before dark, and got into trouble, not for undertaking such an impossible journey, but ~~for having~~ not having brought home a four foot log we had found by the road side, and which had proved too heavy for me after a couple of miles. Later, when I was sixteen or so, I frequently took a shetch-book and paint box, and followed a twenty mile circular route, stopping here andthere to record views which appealednto me Walking is one of the healthiest of exercises; I believe many of the minor ailments from which people suffer to-day, and which often grow into more serious ilness, would ne avoided if people would only build themselves up by walking as a habit instead of as a painf painf ul necessity.

By now your sympathies will have been aroused for ~~the~~ our dreadful, monotonous life. But it was not so bad, really. At times our local concert hall would be visited by a gentleman bringing a

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Perhaps your first impression on stepping intp a nineteenth century house would be how dark it was. Lighting was by gas. I was fourteen before I saw a gas mantle, before which our best illumination was a naked fish-tail gas flame, giving a pale, flickering light. One needed to be moderately well-off to be brilliantly lighted. Gas found its way into my home about the same time as the gas mantle, till when a tall standard lamp stood on the sitting cum dining room table, and two or three candlesticks in the hall for use, at need, in the rest of the house. To save matches, we all took turns at twisting up paper spills to light them with, and the broad tray of the candle stick, as large as a tea plate, caught any grease we were careless enough to drop.

Oil lamps presented problems of their own, not the least of which was cleanliness. Users to-day of oil heaters who complain of their smell should have seen the care with which we trimmed the wick and cleaned the burner and grid of our lamp every day. At the slightest odour in use, someone was in trouble. The chimney too, had daily attention from a duster covered mop.

Don't think we were just being meticulous. The motor car, I have already said, was still a dream. Until it became a reality there was no use for petrol, which had to be extracted from the paraffin and got rid of. Disposal cost money, and too many refiners were willing to scamp the job. Result - "bad" paraffin, which flared up much too readily. The "grid" of an oil lamp was made of gauze such as one finds to-day over ventilators of food cupboards. The tiny holes were readly blocked by a very little carbon deposit and soon soaked in condensed fumes from the paraffin. Frequently a dirty lamp would catch alight, and immediately the whole caboosh was up in flames. You were lucky if it did not explode.

We had a lamp on the piano, fitted to a peg above the music desk, which was particularly prone to spontaneous combustion. I became quite expert at running backwards down the hall, with smoke and flame trailing a yard behind and above me, and tossing this lamp into the back garden as far as possible from the house, where it would burn out harmlessly in a flower bed. It was a good natured article, that lamp, entirely of metal, and after being boiled in soapy water and dried, was ready for further use - and excitement. I am happy to say that during the fifty years the family occupied that house we never once had to call on the Fire Brigade.

I have said that we walked. I started, indeed, at the age of three, when I
was sent to school in charge of an elder brother, after which I found my own
way there and back twice a day. There must have been four classes in the
infant school, with no dividing ~~partions~~ partitions, but I have no memory of any
clamour such as might distract our attention. We beginners stood round the
Head Mistress' desk to learn our letters, to read sample sentences of the
"cat sat on the mat" variety; to perform such prodigies of mathematics as
seven and four are eleven - or twelve, if you felt that way; and to sing the
"twice times" table. It remains to add that differences of opinion with
Mrs Court in the matter of correct calculations were not accepted cheerfully
by that majestic lady; even the most obtuse was glad to defer to her
in the end. Happily for me, I was able to satisfy her in both reading and
arithmetic in a few months, and I was rewarded, first with a seat in class.
and then, two years before my time, with expulsion (as it seemed to me then),
and admission to the "big boys' school". a slate and a slate pencil

But back to walking. Our city had a market place. On my fourth
birthday I had been given a penny - the first, I think, I had even owned -
I already knew what money was for, could count up to a shilling, and had
picked up from my mother and brothers the mechanics of spending. And in
the market place were stalls on which lay large juicy oranges. Christmas
was past: this was twelfth night, and all our Christmas oranges were eaten.

So off to the market place It was only a matter of two miles.
Just up the hill ~~xxxx~~ and round the corner. What was that ~~to~~ a child in
1889 ?

Anyhow, I bought my orange. At least I ~~bought~~ got my orange.
For the stall holder, seeing me alone, asked a few questions, and, putting my
penny carefully into my pocket, saw me across the road, and sent me away with
a caution to go straight home.

Alas ! I took a short cut, lost myself completely, and
eventually found myself in a little cottage which did duty in those days
as a sub police station.

I never knwe what happened to my orange, but a cake, a cup of tea,
and two teaspoonfuls of sugar tasted so good that i did not even care. I
just sat by the fire, gazing admiringly at the big bearded sergeant , until

One day my eldest brother brought a girl home. He had left home to go into lodgings when the increasing size of our family, in numbers and bulk, forced him to seek comfort away from the house. We had looked at each other in shocked wonder that anyone should dare run away from the fold, but bringing a girl into the house was the ultimate folly -- girls were severely frowned on. To crown all, we learned that she was a "factory girl ". Skivvies were bad enough, but at least they lived sheltered lives watched over by respectable Mistresses, who saw that they did not get into mischief on their day out and squander the two, or perhaps four shillings they earned by a week's work. This they should send home, or save until the milkman, the postman, or, if they were particularly ambitious, one of the tradesmen delivering goods at the door, and mixing with his other services a little secret courtship, should demand her hand in marriage, which, with the approval of her Mistress, she might accept, together with relief from her eighteen hours a day tasks, in exchange for one of twenty-four hours, and the dignity of being Mrs. But a factory girl! However, the shadow of the prison gradually dissipated, and we came to accept her as a human. Possibly there were exceptions even among the criminal classes.

Don't let me deceive you into thinking that we extolled skivvies. The cap and apron were still a badge of shame, The best of houses a prosin with Mistress for warder. The real working class aristocrat was a shop assistant. She only worked from eitht to seven, plus half an hour before and after to prepare, and clear up. and she had not only a weekly half day but all Sunday free.Furthermore, at mealtimes, in the common dining room with the shopwalker and the proprietress she could learn to use a knife and fork, and even to eat peas with a fork, or possibly a spoon. A common joke, one printed in ANSWERS about 1900 was of the cook who asked her mistress if she might order new table knives for the kitchen because"Peas is comin' in 'M, and the old ones is gettin' so thin, they cut the servants' mouths". I understood that joke: on Saturday I took my turn

on Saturday I took my turn at cleaning the knives on a board covered with brown cork lino, using a Bath Brick to provide a polishing medium. The abrasive powder from the brick produced a bright, shiny surface, but wore the knives until they would cut equally well back or front. "The servants' mouths,'M" stood little chance as they scooped up cooked peas and shovelled them into their mouths with their knives.

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Sometimes my uncle, who was a farm bailiffx Bailiff, would take me to market at North Walsham. If it rained, I would creep into the public house bar behind him, and hide among the crowd of farmers bargaining for pigs, sheep and cattle, or even an occasional horse. Uncle would slip me a glass of mild ale, and I would entertain myself by speculating who would get the best of the bargaining going on around me. When the sun shone I went round the pens looking wisely at the beasts awaiting auction, or, if I had a stick, poking at them in imitation of the drovers. Our horse had given my uncle his job by killing his predecessor. throwing him out of the cart on to a heap of road metal, and running away to smash the cart on another heap. Uncle always treated this animal with the greatest respect, only giveng it the lightest touch with the whip at need, and gathering the reinsfirmly at sight of a marl heap, a dust cloud, or a female garment, fluttering in a wash-day wind on the line. When he gave me the reins, he always held them himself beyond my hands, ready to resume comtrol if need be. We had a few scares, but Uncle lived longer than the horse.

Life on the farm gave me a love for horses and banished any fear I might have had of them; I was thus often able to earn a penny -- one glorious day even threepence, for "holding" a horse while its driver went into a house. I never told Father, but Mother, whose was a miller's daughter, had no qualms. I kept one eye on the horse and one on the wheel of the trap: runaway horses were not an uncommon sight, and sight of a man being knocked down and killed by a hansom cab was a vivid memory.

ONce, on the way back from a country market, we passed the workhouse. Every workhouse had a casual ward, to which homeless tramps went for a bed and a meal, for which they paid by doing such work as the xxxxxxxx Master decided. Usually, this was chopping forewood. I never found out who burnt all the firewood, but supposed that the bundles of sticks we bought at a penny for four came from such a source.

All along the road within half a mile of the workhouse tramps were waiting. Some were hiding money and ~~other~~ articles of value in the hedges, making a mark of some sort to enable them to find the cache next day, when they were turned loose upon the world again. I often looked for these hiding places when opportunity offered, but almost never found one: the penalty for carelessness in concealing his treasures was their loss, and hardship stimulated every man's cunning. He had to hide his goods, lest the workhouse confiscated them, or, if he was found to possess as much as fourpence, he would be refused admission.

As we passed the line, the leaders began to move towards the entrance gate. Tradition had it that the bath--compulsory for all -- held the same water for every bayher, and that the last comers were made dirtier for their ablution. Be that as it may, fights for first in the line were not infrequent, until some hefty rascal had established his righ to be first in. So it was a little surprising to find one man making no effort to follow his companions. Uncle would rather he was safely inside than free to rob a neighbours hen roost or turnip field, but the man had other intentions. He told us that he wanted to be first on the road in the morning. The rest of the crowd would be choppoing wood until perhaps 11.0 a.m., while had the open countryside to himself. his would be the best pickings and the easiest odd-jobs; the others would be toiling while he skimmed the cream fromm the native generosity. He had fourpence -- enough to protect him from a charge of vagrancy; all the village policeman could do would be to wake him and move him on.

One more adventure awaited us. Over the horizon came a motor-car, trailing a cloud of smoke behind. I was ordered out of the trap, to run up the road and stop hip, while Uncle got down and led the horse -- the killer, you remember -- past the growling, snorting monstrosity, until had restarted and was out of earshot. Most drivers

would stop at sight of a horse, but with an animal like ours it was wise not to take any risk.

We had our own cattle market. Every Saturday, and often on another day as well, the big pens would fill with cattle, sheep and pigs; Farmers strolled round in the morning, assessing the value of animals which interested them, and making bargains where possible. what were unsold would be auctioned in the afternoon. Then in the evening, the last of the herds were driven away by drovers to their new homes, or to the slaughterhouse, and quiet reigned, after twelve hours of noisy turmoil, for a four o'clock the local pubs opened to serve "purl" which was rum and coffee or rum and milk, to farmers, drovers, and such thirsty citizens as felt that a drink out of hours was worth early rising.

Five days out os seven the market was empty, But not entirely inactive. From time to time somebody would appear on the broad way skirting the pens to show off the paces of a pony. Trotting races were always popular, and the driver, swaying dangerously on the little chair of his single-seater trotting-car, would send along the animal at its most furious pace, to the delight of small boys -- and large ones too -- hanging over the rail of the raised walk on that side of the way remote from the market. Occasionally two would appear, and then a real race would thrill and scare us at one and the same time. Alas! The motor-car has driven these pleasures away to more inaccessible parts.

Before the motor came our roads were peaceful. But about the turn of the century the man with the red flag disappeared, traction engines and steam rollers no longer had to keep to four miles an hour, Twelve m.p.h. was the rate at which the authorities thought it might not be too dangerous for "horseless carriages" to travel.

They were not popular. Long clouds of oily smoke, emitted from over oiled engines, fouled the air, choked passers-by, sent horses careering down the road, and raised the blood pressure of all animal lovers. The opposition thehorseless carriage had aroused early in the nineteenth century sprang to life again

and brought down on the luckless motorist's head the wrath which is again, at its$# end, bringing persecution on the car-owner.

Several attemp's were made to produce a less unpleasant vehicle. xxxxx Of these the most successful was the steam car. xxxxthexmost. One, the White, could easily do the twenty misles an

Several attempts to produce a less unpleasant vehicle were made. Of these the steam car was the most successful -- at least in one instance. The White steam motor car would easily do the twenty miles an hour permitted by the time it reached the English market from America, and it carried enough fuel to cover up to fifty miles, when paraffin and water could be obtained in the remotest village. Until improvements in steel gave better endurance to the petrol engine, the better steam cars held their own. As for the others, I frequently made an odd threepence (car owners being either richer or more generous that horse owners), by helping to push one of the lesser steam cars up a hill, at the foot of which it had "conked", while the driver gave the utmost assistance of which his tired engine was capable.

A principal reason for the breakdown of petrol engines was, as I have indicated, the poor quality of the steel of which valves and springs were made. Particularly toe valves, which required re-shaping after a few miles hammering had distorted them. A friend of mine who was the rare possessor of a lathe, made a good thing out of turning up the surfaces of valves and their seating after every breakdown. It certainly got the vehicle on the move, but was rather costly in valves and engines. When his customers learned to grind them in with a screwdriver and paste his gold mine was worked out.

Naturally, cyclists with ambitions towards the horseless vehicle were soon provided with mechanised bicycles. Early efforts were based on the assumed power of a horse to draw the bicycle, and half horse, threequarter horse, and one horse engines were tried. One of these was mounted on the handlebars of the machine, and drove with a long belt on a pulley on the front wheel. To quote a motor cycling paper of the time, "it zigzagged wildly along the highway at tem miles an hour, lay down in the road at sight of a spot of grease, and usually sent its rider flying over the the handlebars. Its life was short.

FRANK F. BETTS.

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