

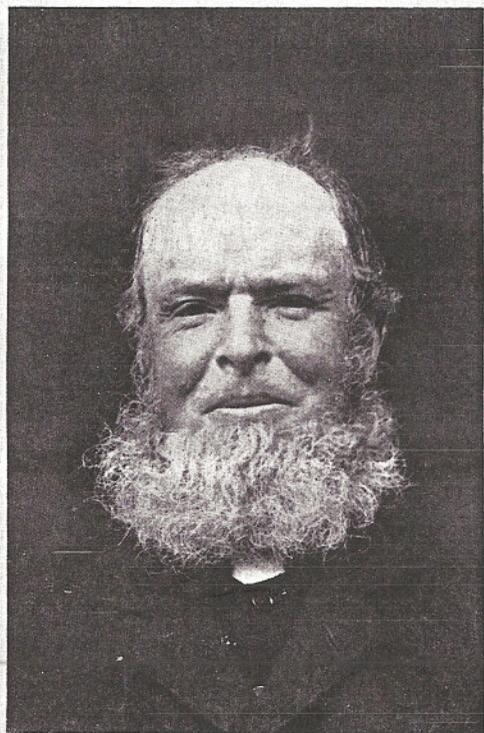
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OLD OAK

The Story of a Forest Village

BY THE LATE
REV. J. E. LINNELL

*Edited with a Memoir
of the Author by
his Sons
and illustrated
with four photographs
and a map.*



REV. J. E. LINNELL AT THE AGE OF ABOUT 63
FROM A SNAPSHOT

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MEMOIR

My father, the writer of these memoirs, was the vicar of Pavenham in Bedfordshire for thirty-seven years. When he died in March, 1919, at the age of seventy-six, I found among his papers two incomplete scripts describing life in his native village of Silverstone in the south of Northamptonshire during the latter half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. These he had intended to use as the basis of an anonymous book, but the coming of the Great War distracted his interest from all else, and its end found him broken with years. It has been left for me, therefore, to do my best to make a more or less coherent narrative by piecing together the two accounts. I have done this with as little alteration of the text as possible. Whenever these could be ascertained, the actual names of the characters have been substituted for the fictitious ones he used ;

and a few stories he loved to tell, and had for some reason or other omitted, with his accompanying comments, have been introduced in his own remembered words.

In his pages much of the author himself is revealed, but perhaps a little more may be fitly said about one who was at least as original a character as any he depicts. Short and sturdy of build—almost as broad, in fact, as he was tall—my father inherited to a marked degree many of the characteristics that he describes in such of his forbears as appear in his story. Immensely strong physically, a mighty walker, a fearer of God and of nothing else, without any sense of caste, a lover of all things appertaining to the country, fiercely independent and impatient of authority, a tramp by nature with a love for all other wanderers, ready to have the gloves on with all and sundry up to his seventieth year, the raciest of raconteurs, and a blazing patriot, he belonged to the true Borrow breed.

He was always very proud of his pure English descent on both sides of his family.

If, as is almost certain, he was a descendant of the Lunells of Farthingstone and Kislingbury, which lie only a few miles from Silverstone—the village of the memoirs—he belonged to one of the oldest families in Northamptonshire, for the name, spelt in various ways, has been common in the county for eight hundred years. His grandmother, Miss Elliott, of Luffield Abbey, a very considerable heiress, eloped with his grandfather, William Linnell of Silverstone; and his father, John Linnell, born in 1795, was one of her seventeen children. His grandmother's fortune, divided among many sons and daughters, only brought a few thousands to his father, and these the latter never added to; in fact they diminished steadily in his keeping, for, easy and generous, he was for ever lending money, with the unhappy fate of all lenders. Moreover, such was his love of all sports that he had little interest in anything connected with business. All the same, he was a fine old type of Englishman, essentially religious at heart, who never changed his habits—or his manner

of attire, for that matter; for he wore yellow nankeen breeches, white stockings, and low shoes till his death in the 'seventies. My father was his only surviving son, and was born in 1842. Precociously intelligent, he had read all eight volumes of Alison's *History of Europe* before he was twelve—and I verily believe that none of it did he ever forget to his life's end; so retentive was his memory. A ready writer and a facile versifier even at an early age, everything came easy to him—maybe too easy—and his father sent him in the first year of the Crimean War to Gawcott, a boarding-school in the neighbouring county of Buckingham, which had a passing vogue. There he remained for four years, imbibing a certain amount of Greek and Latin, devouring every book he could lay hands on, writing the essays of his companions according to their individual styles, and hating every moment of his enforced captivity.

* On leaving school he joined the firm of his cousin, William Whitlock, then one of

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the biggest English timber-merchants, and was soon being sent by them to different parts of the country in connection with their ventures. Before he left home, a contemporary of his, still alive, says of him that "theer warn't a bit o' devilry in the cownty as Jack Linnell warn't at the bottom of"; and it would seem that his verses and lampoons on the pompous and solemn of the district soon earned him considerable notoriety, not to say admiration, in certain quarters.

* At some time during the next part of his life he seems to have become an absolute agnostic and, in his wanderings for the Whitlocks, to have studied at first-hand the habits of gypsies, tinkers, tramps, and all sorts and conditions of men not usually recognised by the conventional. Gradually a change came over him—due, he always used to aver, to the prayers of his mother, who died when he was twelve—and after long soul-struggles, which he would compare with Bunyan's, he is found as an assistant master at the old Grammar School

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preceding paragraph.

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→ thought, a chance of cornering him and humiliating him before the company present.

"Who," he asked indignantly, "is more often found among the sick and dying than So-and-so?" (naming a well-known local chapeller).

"I don't know anybody," replied Tom.

"Well, I'm glad you acknowledge so much," said his opponent, somewhat soothed by the answer.

"But . . ." mused my irrepressible cousin, nursing his knee and smiling sweetly.

"But, what?" snapped the champion of Dissent.

"Only this," his opponent drawled. "You mustn't forget he's an undertaker!"

The cloud that settled on William's brow was a thing not soon to be forgotten. It remained, however, only for the space of a few minutes. No one could be angry with Tom for long. He began to laugh, and went on laughing, and, had the object of the gibe been present, he would have laughed no less heartily, for there was no

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one in the world he loved more than the irreverent jester.

Once at a political luncheon at Towcester he was called on to say grace. "For what we are about to receive," he began in the conventional way, as all stood in their places with bowed heads, "the Lord"—he paused—"the Lord give us good appetites!" he ended, amid a roar of delight. When the village schoolmaster was taken ill and he volunteered to take his place for a few weeks, the boys thought they were going to have the fun of their lives. The young urchins rightly guessed that many years had passed since he had opened a school-book, and conspired among themselves to expose his ignorance.

"Please, sir," asked one, "would you tell us where Labrador is?"

"Do you know your way to Blakesley?" was the counter-question that came like a flash.

"No, sir, I don't," replied the youngster, a little abashed.

"Then just you look here, my boy,"