

One Day on the Downs

BARBARA WILLARD

My father's people lived in Brighton; my mother's lived at the other end of that long, long sea front, in somewhat snobby Hove. This was all a long time ago. Both sets of grandparents were shopkeepers but the Hove Tebbs family obviously believed that a drapery shop was a better social bet than a small Brighton bakery — which was the best the Willards could boast. I loved my mother's people since, happily, I knew nothing until much later about such matters as snobbery. I did not like my father's mother at all. Not only did she expect me to 'sit still', but she suffered from asthma and inhaled from a strange little device, all that was available in those days, which smouldered pastilles to make a lung-relieving smoke. I can still smell it. I can remember her in floods of tears as one by one her sons were called up and went off to fight in the terrible trenches of the 1914 war . . .

My other grandmother was always laughing. She was very small. Her hair had gone white when she was no more than twenty years old and she wore it piled up on top of her head in little rolled curls. I liked to watch her doing it in the morning, wearing a lavender dressing-jacket trimmed with frills.

My mother's father, too, was a kind, cheerful man, though he had been badly let down by a business partner, refused to go bankrupt, paid all his debts, and greatly reduced his circumstances.

I have left my father's father to the end because, although I failed ever to feel much affection for him, I learnt from him two loves which have remained with me all my life: a love of Sussex and a love of Shakespeare. I asked him for a set of Shakespeare's plays for my twenty-first birthday present. He was so pleased — but since he was a somewhat stingy man he gave me, to my disgust, a cloth-bound edition when I had confidently expected leather.

As for Sussex, he loved its language as much as Shakespeare's and I am constantly referring to an ancient copy of *A Dictionary of Sussex Dialect* which he had bought when he was quite a young man. This rather secretive and slightly off-putting man — he had a bad stutter — would meet in his retirement two equally retired old cronies and walk with them a very long way over the downs. One summer, when my father, my mother and I were staying with these Brighton grand-

parents, the date for one of the walks came round and my father decided he would go too — and wouldn't it be a good idea if I went with them?

Fortunately I enjoyed long walks — I was about nine at the time. In those days the downs seemed much nearer to Brighton than they do now, for there were miles and miles still empty of the houses that fill them today. The downland roads were quite narrow and they were still dirt roads from which the dust blew in whirls on windy days. There were no fences or hedges for the turf was grazed by herds of sheep that were forever on the move with their shepherds. The cropped grass was full of low-growing wild flowers in summer and there were clouds of butterflies. I know this may sound a tall story, but it is a true one.

The sun shone all that day. We sat on the dry turf to eat our sandwiches, high above the villages of the Sussex weald, laid out with farms and cottages, as neat as a toy spread on a sitting-room carpet. My grandfather pointed out to me the long low humping line of the downs. 'They keep the sea out of Sussex,' he said — and went on to tell me the tale of the Devil's Dyke, which everybody knows, but it was new to me then. Next he pointed out the windmills — two called Jack and Jill on Clayton Hill, one over at Patcham, another on the way to the Dyke from the London Road, one away at Rottingdean which we could not see. The sea was away at our backs beyond and above the Brighton roofs as my grandfather pointed out the humps of the downs and named them like old friends. 'That's Ditchling Beacon — there's Wolstonbury — that's Chanctonbury Ring.' The names rolled out, checked a little by his stutter, as he turned and pointed to east or to west. 'Truleigh,' he told me; 'Dunton almost at the end. Then there's Firl and there's Caburn . . .' I tried to keep track of them all as he swung his stick from end to end of the long, looping line drawn against the blue summer sky . . .

We came down soon into a village that ran along an ancient road I know now was once a pilgrim's way. 'Look at that!' my father cried to me. 'I haven't seen that since I was your age.'

That was a stone drinking fountain, set against a tangled bank where the spring water rose to be tapped. The stone was rather ornately worked, and there was a tablet commemorating its founder, with some lines of rhyme engraved below the date.

'We used to walk along here,' my father said, 'five or six of us. One day, one of the boys choked on a sweet. It was frightening. We all thought he was going to die. We dragged him here to this place and

shoved his face in the water. It was a very cold sunny day. I suppose we might have finished him off — but he gave a great gasp and the sweet flew out of his mouth.’ He stood looking at the fountain, remembering. ‘It was a bullseye,’ he said. ‘I’ve forgotten the boy’s name.’

That evening, after the long lovely day, when I was on my way to bed, my father called up the stairs: ‘I’ve remembered his name. It was Harry.’

Who was Harry . . .? Oh, of course — the boy with the bullseye . . . But I was remembering the names of the downs, and one of those was Mount Harry — and next to him was Blackcap and next to that the other way was Balmer Down, then Plumpton Plain and goodness knows how many more. One day, I promised myself those years and years ago — one day I shall be able to name them all . . .