

## THE FIELD

Opposite our cottage is a large field, separated from us by a little lane which takes the neighbouring local traffic through the village to town. It stands alone, bordered on two sides by old thatched cottages, but on the far side disappears down into the valley and ends at the old Water Mill and the mill stream. The field is clearly visible from our upstairs windows, and every morning with my first cup of tea, I never tire of looking out at the constantly changing light, colours, images and unfolding dramas that take place.

The field is a natural grassland where thistles and buttercups jostle for space, and in the early summer, where the land climbs from the valley stream up to the horizon, the woods shimmer with bluebells, then foxgloves.

This field belongs to the farmer next door, and is the only one he has so close to the farm. Most of the time his cows have to amble up the lanes after milking to graze much further away.

So this green space is an arena for every aspect of life; birth, death, renewal, love, jealousy, industriousness, it is a fascinating theatre of which I never tire. The farm machinery is stored there to be worked on by the stalwart sons, grown now from endearing little boys, to taciturn young men with children of their own. One son and wife, the uncle who is simple and his sister, all live in houses to the side of the field and so there is constant traffic to and from the farm.

Occasionally I find a bunch of sweet peas, or a punnet of raspberries, laid outside our front door. Grandchildren trek back and forth. One granddaughter has turned into a teenage princess, the lipstick and mascara and miniskirt somehow diminished by the large farm boots on her feet, and I remember how shocked I was to see a grandson, aged about 12, marching over the grass with a shotgun under his arm. This extended family all seem to exist on a small dairy herd in a rather ramshackle way, in a beautiful thatched Devon Long House in the middle of the old village, in a timeless time warp.

There goes Ivor, the simple brother, frayed cord holding his jacket together, climbing over the stile to get his two pints of milk for their breakfast. And there goes Daniel, oldest grandson, forceps birth and consequently brain damaged, disappearing down into the valley, lanky legs in floppy shorts, to round up the wandering cows and get them back up for milking.

And there go the house martins, swooping and skimming over the field to scoop up the flies attracted to the cow pats. Funniest are the 3 guinea fowl I suspect the farm is fattening up for Christmas. They wander everywhere, looking very exotic in this bucolic setting, jostling and squabbling over the juiciest titbits they find lurking under the leaves. They try to outrun each other as they explore.

The most wonderful time is to watch the birth of the calves, and to see their mothers instinctively cleaning them and nuzzling them until these slippery black and white heaps gradually twitch into being, and stagger upright to enter the world. The sad thing then is to realise that mother and calf are soon separated to conserve her milk, or dispatch the baby if it is a male, and for days you will hear her distressed cries as she looks for it. There is no compassion in farming. It is a business!

But death! That is shocking. The unexpectedness of it.

A cow went lame and was put into the field to recover. It didn't. It was able to stagger a few steps sometimes, to a shadier or greener area, but its back legs remained crippled. Ivor brought it hay every day. He has a kind nature. Perhaps because he struggles with his own difficulties, and gets shouted at a lot for his slowness. But there was no change. She ate well, appeared healthy but for being crippled. Then one morning a large vehicle parked in the lane, a small forklift truck behind it. Ominous. But it appeared the vet had finally been called, a robust young woman. The cow was unperturbed, and continued placidly chewing the cud in the sunshine. The woman knelt down beside it, something grasped in her hand, and the cow went limp, inert, unresponsive, and before I had even registered what had just happened, the forklift was towing it by its poor crippled legs, out of the field and out of sight. It seemed so - unbelievable. so sudden, so impossible, this ending of a life. One second an animate warm creature, the next a disposable, valueless nothing.

I still haven't quite come to terms with it. But life continues. The martins are still scooping up insects in the warm sunshine. Ivor is out there again, pruning his overgrown hedge, and a sharp shower has turned the blades of grass into shimmering mini spears.

The Field. For many people an empty expanse of green. For me, my stage and my classroom!

Jenny.