

SLOW AND QUIET

Slow and quiet, more sure than the ticks on a jeweller's clock, God's sun rises from a dark lair behind the ancient river that flows in sullen rolls way below us, beyond the spread of streets, jugged concrete towers.

The village on a hill wakes early. And the sun creeps up the church's steeple. In the blue villas with their stucco walls, men and women are lying beneath high ceilings, they do not stir and they are yet to rinse the stale taste of sleep from their mouths; a prowling cat of the moonlight now arches her back on the stones of a passion-alley and pads warily into another day on the cobbled stones in front of the little sandstone terraces. Here, they still have iron bars for men to rub the mud from their shoes.

There's a chilling clatter of metal shutters rising up on the shops, around which village life will soon gather. The store-keeper has parked his big white van and is laying boxes of fruit and vegetables, of quirky shapes and sizes, on the stalls outside the entrance. Soon, they will arrive here - first comes the milkman, the battery-charged motor humming to a whine on his rattling float and then comes the bread man, a country apple of a fellow with a voice squeezed from the darkly suspicious wit of Lancashire. His rough skin coats a generous heart. The door opens, its bell rings. The store-keeper itches the back of his hand against his grizzled chin and walks towards the till. It is 7am.

A few yards away, up another slight rise, there is an orange glow from the bags on the shoulders on the boys and girls cycling away to deliver the morning papers.

Day has started in the village.

Before long, a straggle of men and women will be forming outside the post office, which also houses a labyrinthine bookshop, packed with more information than any one brain could hold. Outside, some of the men roll cigarettes with the precision of surgeons and the wary licks of auld rogues.

Pots of tea and toasted buns are being served in the café at the back of the delicatessen and the smell of eggs, bacon, sausages, black pudding, beans, mushrooms and hash-brownies drifts towards us in heavenly vapours from another café, near the newsagent's.

Pheasant, wild duck, teal and partridge hang on hooks outside one of the two butchers - the other, with the shoulders of an undertaker and the ruddy face of music-hall comic, chops a pig into plate-sized slices.

Nearly everyone is awake now. Children are being driven to school in high-riding cars.

And Spring is puffing slowly up the long, cold hill to our village, passing the stout church, against whose sandstone wall hooded youths chew gum and brood, in the style of gangsters, muttering curses at weaker strangers in the scraping cacophony of freshly broken voices. A wide-shouldered seagull swaggers towards a dropped chip and the bickering pigeons scatter before his advance, knowing their place in the natural order.

Once, many years ago, a pale boy walked towards this church. His picture comes to my mind's eye. He is only 10 and his chin is smooth, his face round, but there is a yearning in the dark of his eyes, a searching for something that is not yet seen, as he pushes open the great wooden door. Prayer-books are on the table. Silence holds the air and Wilfred Owen walks towards the altar of this, his parish church. We will always remember him.

In our own days, God paused near the top of this hill, gently, to wind the five clocks in the shop of the soft-spoken barber, so that they would tick in drowsy mood and never rush the man sitting in the leather chair.

Outside his curtained door the world swirls on, but inside clipped hair falls in patterns of grey to the unhurried rhythm of the barber's good hands. It is strange that there should be five clocks here, on the mantels and the walls - for this is a timeless place. Old boys can sit in a hush and read the daily paper or whisper their thoughts in chapel tones, as they await their turn on the chair - remembering, perhaps, the bookie's shop, then proudly called the turf accountancy, which stood across the road. Fingers stained by nicotine pressed stubby pencils to rub the names of winners on scraps of paper. But then the new businesses came.

A lady enters through the barber's ringing door; her husband, watery-eyed from the cold, hold her arm.

"How long will you be?" she asks.

"About an hour and a quarter," the barber replies.

The clocks didn't hear. But the barber hears everything there is to know about these parts.

Even higher on the hill, taking his place at the window table in the café, is the dome-headed humorist, who became a pop star, when our bones were young and he sang about Lily the Pink beside the dandy poet and the handsome joker. He begins writing notes on his pad. Couples walk by him smile, stare again, and then nod in deference.

"Yes, it is him, isn't it," they whisper, excitedly, one to the other, while his thoughts flow on to bring happiness to others.

Into the setting afternoon, two dogs, patient as saints, sit on the pavement outside the pub, leads reaching from the collars to the left hand of their masters, whose right hands grip cigarettes and faith. They are exchanging smoked philosophy, while their breath grows thicker and their nods ever closer and more sympathetic, until their blood-shot eyes are almost rubbing each other in passionate understanding. Yes, they are old friends.

And soon the moon will shine again on our village because we all love moonshine.ends

David Charters