

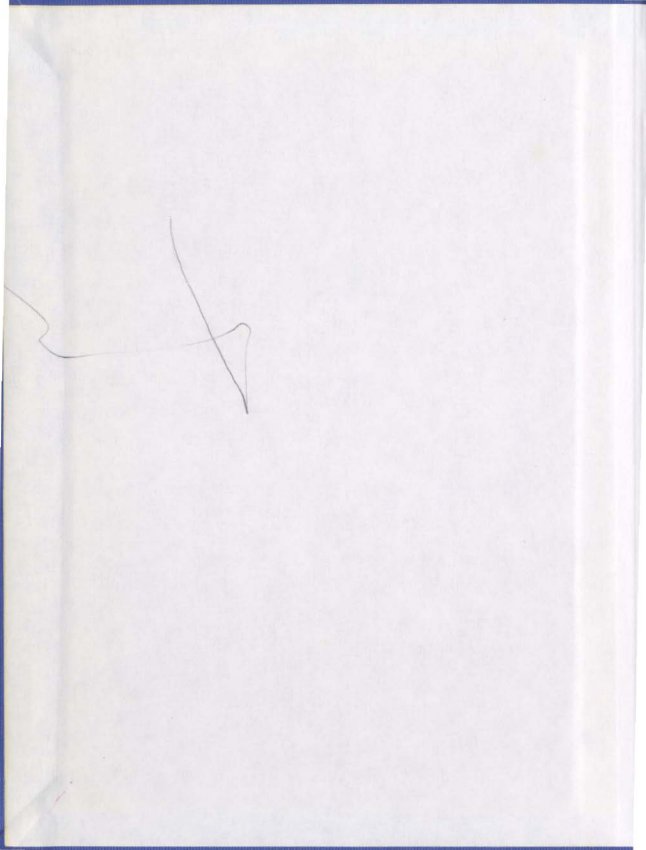
THE LIFE HISTORY OF A
DORSET FOLK HEALER: THE
INFLUENCE OF PERSONALITY
ON THE MODIFICATION OF A
TRADITIONAL ROLE

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THE LIFE HISTORY OF A DORSET FOLK HEALER: THE INFLUENCE OF
PERSONALITY ON THE MODIFICATION OF A TRADITIONAL ROLE

by



Martin John Lovelace, B.A., M.A.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Folklore
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ABSTRACT

This study presents the life history of Les Ollerton, an English farm worker, and focuses on his practice as a healer, through the magico-religious technique of "charming" of warts and ringworm in humans and animals. His biography is based on a series of anecdotes and memorates told by him during tape-recorded interviews and informal conversations. These narratives are analysed for their information on folklife, traditional verbal art, and for insight into his personality and modes of presenting himself to others.

The life history gives a partial view of family and community life in a Wiltshire village between 1913 and 1930 and the crafts of the cowman, hedger, and thatcher, are described in his account of his later years as a farm worker in Dorset. Rural biographies and autobiographies have been surveyed to provide comparative material. The attitudes of rural workers toward the acquisition, possession, and value of knowledge are discussed and especially as they compare with Les Ollerton's attitudes toward the secret knowledge of charming.

The traditional role, methods, and ethics of the charmer are described by reference to published sources and through his comments on his own approach to charming. The effectiveness of charming is found to depend, at least partially, on the establishment of an impressive persona and on narratives of successful healing which enhance the charmer's reputation and contribute to his patients' faith in the cure.

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His modification of the limited traditional role of the charmer to include, besides healing, advice in emotional or business problems, paramedicine, and informal social work, is compared with other traditional patterns of community service, from the counselling and divination performed by "white witches" or "cunning men" to the house-calls of family doctors and the pastoral visits of priests. Les's interpretation of his role as a folk-healer is shown, through the insights gained from his life history, to be the result of a combination of personal motivation and community need.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would show that I had learned little from Les Ollerton, the subject of this study, if I did not follow his good example by acknowledging my debt of gratitude to the "master-men" who have taught me and the many others who have helped me to complete this work.

I thank, first of all, my parents who introduced me to Les Ollerton, and without whose constant support, patient understanding, and practical assistance I would never have been able to begin. I am grateful to Memorial University for a University Fellowship and to the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive for the opportunity to work in the Archive over the past three years. The staff of the inter-library loans department of the Henrietta Harvey Library also deserve special recognition for their friendly and efficient service.

I am grateful to Miss Theo Brown who, as Recorder of Folklore for the Devonshire Association, has assembled a large collection of material on the practice of charming in south-west England. She was kind enough to make helpful comments on my work during a very pleasant visit to Exeter.

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My deepest thanks are due to Les Ollerton and the other members of the farming community of west Dorset that it has been my privilege to know. This work is dedicated to them.

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I INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to describe the life history of Les Ollerton of Chideock in the county of Dorset, England, who is a master of several rural crafts, a storyteller, and a charmer of warts and ringworm in humans and animals.

The presentation of his oral autobiography, which has been recorded during a series of interviews, and which draws on his repertory of stories about himself has been chosen as a method of gaining an insight into the development of his personality and especially into those traits of character and behaviour which caused his father-in-law to choose him to be the recipient of the knowledge of healing by means of charms. The discussion of his life history attempts to show the place which charming has taken in his life, his attitude toward it, and his motivation for accepting, continuing, and modifying the traditional role of the charmer which was taught him.

The verb "to charm," as it is used in this study in the context of healing, can only be defined ambivalently as meaning, in Les Ollerton's usage, a prayer or an act of will on his part, as a "charmer," which brings about the cure of a disease without the application of any other medicine or treatment. A broader definition describes its meaning as "An action, sentence, or material thing supposed to possess the power of curing disease or preserving from

evil."¹ Les, however, uses no ritual action or material object though he has explained that "there might be" words which he would say or which he might project as a thought. His practice is limited to curing disease in both humans and animals and does not include the warding off of harm. The metaphysical concept of charming eludes precise definition; charmers often vary in their opinions as to whether the healing power resides in themselves, or in the verbal formulas, or ritual gestures, or material objects which they use or whether their ability is, through their exercise of faith, to invoke the power of a supernatural agency which is usually identified with God or the saints.

Biographical Summary

Les Ollerton was born at Warminster in the county of Wiltshire on the fourth of March 1912 but spent his early life in the village of Alderton in north-west Wiltshire at the edge of the Cotswold hills. His parents were of differing social backgrounds; his father's family were prosperous brewers, and his father had received a college education, but his mother came from a family of rural craftsmen and labourers. Les was educated at village schools until he left school at the age of fourteen and, after spending eight months as a barber's apprentice, went to work as a labourer on a farm at Alderton where his uncle was a dairyman. He gained a knowledge of general farm work and particular experience in the treatment of cattle.

¹Joseph Wright, The English Dialect Dictionary (London, 1898), I, 565.

At the age of nineteen in 1931 he moved to the village of Chideock in west Dorset where he worked on a series of farms in the area as a carter and cowman. Four years after his marriage to a Chideock dairyman's daughter he was given the knowledge of charming warts and ringworm by his father-in-law. He has continued to practice as a charmer of these two diseases in humans and animals ever since.

In 1951 he left farm work and established his own business as a milk roundsman. He was successful and took advantage of the growing local tourist trade by operating a cafe and a general campers' supply shop at the nearby seaside hamlet of Seatown. A heart disease caused him to retire at the age of fifty-seven but he found himself unable to endure inactivity and became a practical nurse at a mental hospital where he worked for almost four years until the danger to his health forced him to retire again. He is presently engaged (1975) in voluntary work with mental patients in the west Dorset area to whom he is referred by social work agencies.

Physical Appearance

Two dominant characteristics of Les's temperament are immediately obvious in his physical appearance; the first is of his restless energy and the second is of a corresponding ability to control the same impulsive activity. He is short in stature, at about five feet six inches, and is somewhat overweight; however, his upright posture and his swift movements dissipate any impression of fatness. His walk is almost strutting and his chest is expanded as though in self-confidence. He makes gestures with his hands which

orchestrate the tempo of his stories but they are also often clasped across his chest in an expression which suggests self-satisfaction.

The greatest degree of expression is given in his face. His eyes are dark brown and give an impression of brightness which inevitably demands comparison with the attentive glance of a bird; his eyes move quickly to assess the reactions of his listeners and the slightly quizzical way in which he cocks his head also compares with a bird's watchful stance. There is no sense of anxiety or furtiveness in his eye movements, however, rather they reflect his expert surveillance of a conversational situation in which he recognises himself to be the principal speaker and entertainer. His eyes are also used dramatically; he rolls them in a motion that shows an arc of white above the eyeball in an expression that conveys wonder, surprise, or often, amusement, and this gesture may replace or precede a verbal comment. A further characteristic expression is a downward glance under half closed eyelids which denotes sham modesty; this is frequently shown at the end of a narrative while he enjoys his audience's laughter, or after he has made some boastful or comic statement about himself. His mouth is equally expressive; he smiles frequently and the corners of his mouth often twitch with suppressed laughter as he tries to control his narration of a humorous anecdote. Sometimes he is unable to restrain his own amusement and his composure dissolves in tears and laughter.

He is clean-shaven and partially bald; his remaining hair, which is dark grey at the sides and silver at the temples, is swept above his ears to an incipient duck's-tail at the back. He keeps his

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hair cut short and has not affected the sideburns which even relatively conservative men adopted during the earlier 1970's. His skin is tanned in winter and summer which is due to his many years of outdoor employment; it is also faintly pock-marked as the result of the severe acne from which he suffered as a youth.

The impression of control is reiterated by his clothes. He is always neatly and conservatively dressed; I have never seen him without a tie on even the warmest of days when he may have taken off his jacket and rolled up his shirt-sleeves. His ties are usually narrow and often show the transverse stripes and squared ends which were fashionable in the middle 1960's. The rest of his clothes echo the theme of tidiness and are similarly about ten years behind contemporary styles. He usually wears a sports coat in a light shade of brown and green with a small check pattern. His trousers are either of green or grey light flannel and are cut narrowly, and without turn-ups, at the bottoms. He keeps his shoes, which are elastic-gusseted brown slip-ons, well polished. A shining row of ball-point pens is clipped into the breast pocket of his jacket and in his lapel is the badge of the Loyal Order of Moose, which is a benevolent fraternal institution. His inner pockets bulge with photographs and letters; some of which are of sentimental value while others are matters of business.

He is very self-conscious about the neatness of his appearance. The adoption of the clothes of the businessman is a marked change to him after having been used to working in the old clothes or heavy

corduroys that are worn by farm workers. Agricultural workers in Dorset do not dress in the blue denim work clothes that are generally worn in North America but work in old jackets and trousers that were formerly their "best" clothes but which have grown too shabby for any other use. Thomas Hardy commented on this habit in an essay published in 1883 in which he noted that rural labourers had taken to wearing "mangy old cloth coats" and former "Sunday suits" instead of the smock frocks that had been commonly worn until twenty or thirty years before.²

The tidiness and comparative affluence of his appearance is an embarrassment to him when he visits farming people; he feels that he has to explain to them that his smart clothes and clean hands are a habit which has been forced on him, through his work as a shop-keeper and a nurse, and, as he has told me, he asks them to "ignore the clothes" for he is "the same man underneath."

His accent is that of north-west Wiltshire and Gloucestershire rather than of west Dorset and is not marked enough to be called "broad." His speech shows much evidence of the transition which he has accomplished between social classes and occupations; his vocabulary includes a large proportion of words which have been learned from the mass media and by contact with middle-class people and he is clearly interested in expanding his command of language. Equally, however, his normal language includes dialect terms and traditional phrasing, as in replacing his normal interjection, "you know,"

² Thomas Hardy, "The Dorsetshire Labourer," in Life and Art by Thomas Hardy: Essays, Notes and Letters Collected for the First Time, ed., Ernest Brennecke Jr. (Freeport, New York, 1925), pp. 29-30.

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with the older form, "[do]-st know," becomes apparent when he relaxes, having grown confident of his command of an audience, or, as I have observed, during his visits to farming people where he is anxious to prove that his altered social and financial position, since leaving farming, has not caused him to become affected in his speech or behaviour.

The Region

The main geographical area referred to in this study may be taken as lying within the radius of eight miles from Bridport, the former market town with a population of about eight thousand, which is the commercial centre of this part of west Dorset. This area is defined as a unit in this study by the inhabitants' sense of the limits of what they call "the Bridport area" rather than by an administrative division. This traditional sense of the dimensions of their locality has come about through various influences.

Geographically the region consists of the river valley of the Brit, which enters the sea at Bridport's harbour of West Bay, and of the tributaries of the Brit which are the Symene, Mangerton, and Asker. The terrain, particularly to the north-east of Bridport, is deeply folded and access to it is by winding sunken lanes which run between high earth banks and hedges. Many bridlepaths, which have never been surfaced, remain to indicate older routes of communication. An important element in forming a traditional conception of locality lies in the distances and directions in which men have habitually travelled to work. The development of factories in Bridport which formerly used locally grown hemp and flax in the

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making of nets and cordage, which has been the town's major industry since the thirteenth century, has also caused a gravitation of workers to Bridport; the practice of "outwork" in which netmakers living in surrounding villages were supplied with materials for netmaking from the Bridport factoris has also helped to create the sense of an area which had its center in the town.³

Until the late 1950's Bridport was also the site of a weekly livestock market; this was originally held in the broad main street of the town but was moved after 1945 to the outskirts. A public house, the "Royal Oak," in West Street, outside which dealers showed the paces of their horses, is still the regular meeting place of the older generation of the farming community who have retained the habit of visiting Bridport each Wednesday which was the old market day. Markets are now held at the larger towns of Yeovil and Dorchester which lie twenty and fifteen miles respectively to the north and east of Bridport.

The local newspaper, The Bridport News, which was established in 1855, has also helped to foster a sense of locality. News from the town of Lyme Regis, which is situated six miles to the

³For a description of the Bridport netmaking industry see Janice Pahl, "The Rope and Net Industry of Bridport: some aspects of its history and geography," Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, LXXXII (1961), 143-154. Outwork is discussed by Robert Douglas Brown in "Bridport Breeding," The Geographical Magazine, XXI (1948-1949), 441-447; see also John Eastwood, "A Dorset Cottage Industry," Country Life (September 19, 1952), p. 842, and Norman Wymer, "The Braiders of Dorset," in his Country Folk (London, 1953), pp. 76-83.

west, is printed on a separate page as though being peripheral to the interest of the majority of readers who live closer to Bridport. The amalgamation of local schools has also influenced the local definition of the area; many village schools have been closed and their pupils are brought to school in the town.

The district of Bridport is still predominantly an agricultural area which specialises in dairying although the exceptional fertility of the valley soils also produces a wide range of arable crops. A major change, however, has been the great decrease in the number of men employed on the land as farming has become more mechanised. Men from the Bridport area have shared in the general migration of workers from rural to urban areas. The netting industry in Bridport continues to employ a large proportion of the working population although "braiding" by outworkers in the village has declined. Modern transportation enables people to travel daily to Bournemouth, Yeovil, and Dorchester, for various types of engineering and administrative work. There has been a major growth in service occupations to cater to tourists during the summer months and to an increasing number of people who have come from elsewhere to retire.

The influx of newcomers has radically altered the character of many villages; the demand for picturesque cottages in which to retire has caused their prices to rise beyond the reach of young local people who are forced to live in Bridport or to move from the area altogether. A letter which was published in The Bridport News in 1974 analysed the problem with reference to the

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current population of West Milton which is a village situated four miles to the north-east of Bridport.⁴ Of thirty-six occupied houses the writer found that twenty-four were lived in by retired people; only four houses were held by local people. Eight of the local residents and four of the newcomers were employed. Six houses were kept as holiday cottages and were only occupied during the summer. In this village the church, chapel, school, post office, shop, and public house have all closed. This is a typical example of the kind of population change which has occurred in the area of Bridport within the last twenty years.

The effects of such change on the folk tradition of the area must be considered by the folklorist and the present study includes some consideration of Les Ollerton's response to change in his social environment. While, as a charmer, he is the practitioner of a highly tradition-bound activity he has also shown himself to be one of the most successful inhabitants of his village in adapting to and profiting by the new circumstances. Although he doubts that he will be able to find a suitable successor, in these altered times, to whom he can transmit his knowledge of charming, his contemporary practice as a charmer shows that there is a continuing need for this service which is not confined to the members of the old rural population. Unsightly warts on the hand

⁴ Mrs. Rhodina Mousseau, a letter, entitled "Frightening Change," to the editor of The Bridport News (June 28, 1974), p. 3.

are as much a crisis for a girl typist as for any milkmaid and Les's desire to counsel those with other problems is a response to a perennial human need.

The Role of the Charmer

The title of "charmer" implies the fulfillment of a certain "role." The term "role," as it is used in this study, should be understood to mean a constant pattern of behaviour adopted by an individual which is recognised by the community. The charmer's role is limited to the healing of a restricted range of complaints which are usually of a minor nature; the charmer conscientiously refuses to treat any condition which he does not recognise as lying within his power to cure. Charmers refuse payment for their work and often explain this as Les does by stating a belief that they will lose their ability if they use it for personal gain. They make no advertisement of their services and, in general, do not offer to treat a complaint unless they have received a definite request to do so.

The role of the charmer is clearly different from that of a witch or a white witch. A "witch" may be defined by his utilisation of supernatural power for malefic purposes; the charmer, however, can only heal and does not, in general, have the reputation for possessing any further powers. The "white witch" has an ambivalent reputation through being believed to be capable of working both good and harm. The role most commonly attributed to the white witch, however, is that of counteracting the malevolent actions of witches and this involves the use of the ability to work

physical harm on the witch through magic. The white witch is often a professional, meaning that he charges payment or accepts gifts in return for his service, and has a far wider range of activities than that of the charmer. White witches cure a wider range of complaints than is attempted by charmers and make more frequent use of pharmacological medicines as adjuncts to their cures whereas charmers normally rely solely on the effect of a charm. While the charmer's role is limited to the treatment of disease, the white witch also acts as a counsellor by advising those who consult him about their personal problems. His role includes divination in these matters and in discovering the identity of the enemies who are believed to be harming his clients' interests. He may also be able to find lost objects and, through his ability to name malefactors and arrange for their punishment by magic, he may act as an unofficial policeman and judge within his community.

These characteristic roles of white witches and charmers can be exemplified from the published records of folklore in Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon, and Dorset, which I have taken as my major comparative sources. There is no justification beyond that of practicality, in a brief survey such as this, for limiting the discussion of the tradition to these counties for it is widespread and apparently homogeneous over a much wider area. The white witch's ambivalent reputation as being able to do evil as well as good is shown in Olive Knott's account of the practice of Mother Herne of Milborne Down in north Dorset: Mother Herne charmed warts and toothache, visited sick people to take their herbal medicines, sheltered an unmarried

mother and her child, gave counter charms against ill-wishing, and told fortunes.⁵ Despite her benevolent activities, however, the owner of her cottage was afraid to charge her rent and she once cursed a doctor, who had warned her against interfering with his patients, with the result that he fell from his horse and suffered a concussion of the brain. Anecdotes told of Mother Herne also showed her in the role of a trickster in which she played painful or embarrassing tricks on those who doubted her ability; Knott describes one such trick as being known to her through personal experience in which Mather Herne punished the ill-manners of two clients who spoke of her, behind her back, as "the old bitch." Alfred Williams has related a similar anecdote of another white witch⁶ and J.C. Atkinson⁷ told of a white witch who magically compelled two young men who had intended to "have some sport" at his expense to remain seated before the fire where they were almost roasted. Another account has been recorded of a white witch who convinced a sceptic of his power by causing some acorns to grow instantly into trees which produced

⁵ Olive Knott, Down Dorset Way (Dorchester, 1954), pp. 67-70; Olive Knott, Witches of Dorset (Sherborne, 1974), pp. 33-39. For further examples of a white witch's ambivalent reputation see R.P.C., "To Render a Witch Powerless," Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association, LVIII (1925), 119-120.

⁶ Alfred Williams, Round About the Upper Thames (London, 1922), pp. 252-253.

⁷ Reverend J.C. Atkinson, Forty Years in a Moorland Parish (London, 1907), pp. 117-119.

acorns in turn and which were eaten by little black pigs before the entire illusion vanished as quickly as it had appeared.⁸

The most commonly recorded function of the white witch is to work counter magic and provide amulets for protection against witchcraft.⁹ Several narratives of the use of magic by white witches against those who have "ill-wished" or "overlooked" their clients have been given in two essays by Hermann Lea who collected legends of witchcraft in east Dorset at the turn of the century.¹⁰ Most of the counter charms imitate the effect which is desired to be created in the overlooker; thus a bullock's heart is stuck with pins, is roasted or boiled, or a waxen image is similarly "tortured."¹¹

The professional status of the white witch has also been frequently recorded. One of the most celebrated white witches in Dorset during the nineteenth century was "Dr. Buckland" who held what became known as "Toad Fair" at the change of the moon in May

⁸ C.H.Sp.P., "Witchcraft in Somerset," Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset, III (1892), 1-3.

For examples see: W.F. Rose, "Witchcraft. The Evil Eye," Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset, IV (1894), 76-77; Anon., "Witchcraft in Somerset," ibid., 157-158.

¹⁰ Hermann Lea, "Dorset Witches, Witchery, and Witchcraft," The Nineteenth Century and After, CIII (1903), 1010-1024. See also Hermann Lea, "Some Dorset Superstitions," in Thomas Perkins and Herbert Pentin, eds. Memorials of Old Dorset (London, 1907), pp. 292-305. The latter essay has been reprinted under the same title as No. 60 in the series of Monographs on the Life, Times and Works of Thomas Hardy, ed. J. Stevens Cox (Guernsey, C.I., 1969), pp. 349-356.

¹¹ For comparable examples see Barbara M.H. Carbonell and G.M. Conran, "White Witches," Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association, LIX (1927), 163-164.

which was attended by hundreds of people. There he sold bags containing the twitching legs of toads which were worn about their necks by his patients as a cure for scrofula. There are many published accounts of this healer who seems to have been active in a number of locations in mid-Dorset from 1830 until at least 1840.¹² A white witch sold charms and herbal remedies in the market at Okehampton in Devon until 1890¹³ and another seems to have succeeded him in the same practice until a more recent date.¹⁴

Of particular relevance to the present study are descriptions of the counselling role that white witches have sometimes fulfilled. Olive Knott has mentioned that "the wealthy" invited Mother Herne to their homes "to cure their ailments and give them advice when in trouble."¹⁵ Wilkinson Sherren has described the practice of "Grammer Sue," an old woman of Portland in Dorset who

¹² See: Charlotte Latham, "Some West Susex Superstitions lingering in 1868," Folk-Lore Record, I (1878), 45; Anon., "Dorset Superstitions," Folk-Lore Record, III (1881), 288-289; Lucy Baxter, The Life of William Barnes (London, 1887), p. 155; Wilkinson Sherren, The Wessex of Romance (London, 1908), p. 23; E.A. Rawlence, "Folk-Lore and Superstitions still obtaining in Dorset," Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club, XXXV (1914), 85; Florence Emily Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy (London, 1962), p. 112; Dorset Up Along and Down Along, ed. Marianne R. Dacombe (Gillingham, Dorset, 1936), p. 111; F.C. Cross, "Toad Fair," Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset, XXIII (1939), 78.

¹³ E.H. Young, "White Witches," Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association, LVII (1925), 115.

¹⁴ E.W. Martin, The Shearers and the Shorn: A Study of Life in a Devon Community (London, 1965), p. 72.

¹⁵ Knott, Witches of Dorset, p. 36.

was supposed to have occult powers: "Girls in love came to her for counsel, fishers unfortunate in their enterprises sought her advice, the friends of the halt and sick came to her cottage for healing herbs, and sometimes others called for antidotes against the evil eye."¹⁶

It is in his enlargement of the role of the charmer to include counselling that Les Ollerton's practice resembles one of the traditional functions of the white witch. I do not wish to suggest, however, that Les Ollerton is a white witch; such an imputation would be resented by him. My intention in drawing these comparisons is rather to show how, in response to the demand of the community, and as the result of traits in his character, he has broadened the charmer's healing role. He presents himself, as white witches have done, as a man who can resolve anxiety through being particularly knowledgeable about a variety of matters and he is consulted by members of his community in times of stress that are caused by illness, troubled personal relationships, and even business affairs. Family doctors and priests, however, have also played similar advisory and reassuring roles in rural communities and, as I shall suggest later, have also served as models for Les's interpretation of his role.

Some reports stress the use of psychiatry by white witches. E.A. Rawlence has given a convincing account of an interview between a white witch and his client, a dairyman who believed himself

¹⁶ Sherren, The Wessex of Romance, p. 103.

to be bewitched, who was asked to "tell all his troubles" in the quiet and secret surroundings of the hayloft of an inn. The dairyman was told that he was overlooking his stock himself by being so anxious to prosper that he was failing to follow the correct, orderly, procedures for their care or for the work of the dairy.¹⁷ A similar anecdote was recorded in his journal by Thomas Hardy in 1888 which showed the white witch as offering the same advice though perhaps making it seem more impressive by adding an element of belief concerning the evil eye of a fasting man:¹⁸

Heard a story of a farmer who was "over-looked" (malignly affected) by himself. He used to go and examine his stock every morning before breakfast with anxious scrutiny. The animals pined away. He went to a conjuror or white witch, who told him he had no enemy; that the evil was of his own causing; the eye of a fasting man being very blasting; that he should eat a "dew-bit" before going to survey any possession about which he had hopes.

Sound commonsense and, in a rural area, a good knowledge of livestock, were valuable to the white witch.

Among the impressive devices which white witches used to convince their clients of their wisdom and omniscience was their claim to foreknowledge of the reason for the client's visit. A good example of this element in the performance of a white witch is given in Thomas Hardy's novel The Mayor of Casterbridge in which Henchard, a corn merchant with a crucial investment that is dependent on the

¹⁷ E.A. Rawlence, "Sundry Folk-Lore Reminiscences relating to Man and Beast in Dorset and the Neighbouring Counties," Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club, XXXVII (1916), 57.

¹⁸ Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, pp. 204-205.

state of the coming crop, seeks a weather forecast for the harvest from a conjuror or white witch.¹⁹ When Henchard arrives at the conjuror's isolated cottage he is addressed by name, although he has muffled his face, and the conjuror shows him the extra supper plate which he had laid in expectation of his visit. S. Baring-Gould has described a case in which this foreknowledge was gained through the trickery of a sham wall of paper between a white witch's consulting room and an outer room in which a confederate drew out the details of the case from a visiting client; when the sufferer came into his presence the white witch was able to tell him the reason for his visit in an apparently magical way.²⁰ J.C. Atkinson has suggested that white Witches maintained a system of intelligence, through the agency of various informants, which brought them word of local events such as sicknesses, quarrels, and losses, which could cause members of their community to consult them.²¹ A large proportion of their surprising insight and apparent prior knowledge, however, undoubtedly came from an interest in human nature such as that which is shown by Les Ollerton who frequently says that he knows the cause of someone's trouble without them having to tell him.

¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge (London, 1886), chap. 26.

²⁰ S. Baring-Gould, Devonshire Characters and Strange Events (London, 1908), pp. 71-72.

²¹ Reverend J.C. Atkinson, Forty Years in a Mootland Parish, p. 117.

The same drive to be well informed on local affairs also helped the white witch to fulfill the rôle of amateur policeman and justice. Atkinson has again given the best documentation of this aspect of the rôle in which the white witch is able to tell a seeker where to find a lost or stolen object. Alfred Williams has also described a "wise man" in Wiltshire who advised farmers and told them where to recover lost property²² and Olive Knott has given a story of a white witch who stole property himself in order to receive the reward for causing it to be returned.²³ Despite cases of trickery it is likely that in a community in which a white witch's ambivalent reputation was current a thief would be likely to abandon or return the stolen property in fear of the white witch's magical proceedings against him.

Unlike white witches, who often seem to have enjoyed and fostered their ambivalent reputations, charmers are frequently reported as having disclaimed any connection between their ability and witchcraft. E.A. Rawlence has quoted the following reply of a female charmer of redwater, a disease of cattle, when asked about the nature of her charm: "'Lah! bless 'ee, I does nothin', only prays the Lord to cure 'em."²⁴ Charlotte Latham received a similar

²² Alfred Williams, Round About the Upper Thames (London, 1922), p. 249.

²³ Knott; Witches of Dorset, pp. 43-44.

²⁴ E.A. Rawlence, "Sundry Folk-Lore Reminiscences relating to Man and Beast in Dorset and the Neighbouring Counties," Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club, XXXVII (1916), 64.

comment from a charmer in west Sussex who assured her that there was no harm in using her charm for the cure of a burn "for it was only a blessing, and had nothing to do with witchcraft."²⁵ Les Ollerton has stated similarly that there is a "vast difference" between charming and witchcraft.

The opinion of some charmers that the charm is a prayer or a blessing is due to the way in which a charm often makes an allusion to an act of healing worked by Christ or a saint; the assumption underlying the charm's use is that the act of healing can be reenacted through the faith, and at the request, of the charmer. This is a well-known type of imitative magic. The form of such verbal charms may be seen in Alexander Carmichael's great collection of charms from Scotland or from the collections made in England by Sarah Hewett, William Crossing, and Charlotte Latham.²⁶ A typical example of a verbal charm is the following for the removal of a thorn from the flesh:

²⁵ Charlotte Latham, "Some West Sussex Superstitions Lingering in 1868," Folk-Lore Record, I (1878), 35.

²⁶ Alexander Carmichael, Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations With Illustrative Notes on Words, Rites, and Customs, Dying and Obsolete: Orally Collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and Translated into English, 5 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1928); Sarah Hewett, Nunmids and Crummits: Devonshire Customs, Characteristics and Folk-lore (London, 1900), pp. 63-83; William Crossing, Folk Rhymes of Devon: notices of the metrical sayings found in the lore of the people (Exeter, 1911), pp. 143-144; Charlotte Latham, "Some West Sussex Superstitions Lingering in 1868," Folk-Lore Record, I (1878), 35-50.

Our Saviour Christ was Prick with thorns, Never
 Rankled Never fustered, No more shant thine, Wm.
 P ---. Out of the Bone into the fleash, out of the
 fleash into the skin, out of the skin into the Earth,
 in the Name of the father, &c., &c. Amen.²⁷

A charm may also be a passage that is read from the Bible in the belief that it holds the virtue of healing; the second verse of the eighth Psalm has been read for the cure of "thrush" or "white-mouth":

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou
 ordained strength because of thine enemies, that
 thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.²⁸

The complaints which are commonly healed by charmers are normally those which have external symptoms such as warts, ringworm, festers, chilblains, and formerly, scrofula or King's Evil which is no longer widespread. Charms are also reported as being used for the removal of thorns, the staunching of blood, and the stopping of toothache. Any single charm is normally believed to be only effective for the cure of the specific illness to which it relates, and charmers limit their practices to the cure of the few diseases for which they know the charm.

The other major contrast between the practice of the white witch and that of the charmer is in the charmer's refusal of payment. This is of a piece with the charmer's self-effacing stance and his limited assumption of responsibility. The rule is normally enforced by the belief that to accept a reward of money in return for an act

²⁷ H.S. "Charm for thorn in flesh," Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association, XXVII (1895), 66.

²⁸ L.M. Francis, "Thrush," Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association, LX (1928), 123-124.

of charming would cause the charmer's ability to cease. Theo Brown, summarising the tradition of charming in Devon, finds that "No charmer will ever accept payment for his work. They all say that to take money would deprive them of their power. But a gift-in-kind, offered tactfully, is acceptable."²⁹ Thomas Sternberg, writing of the tradition of charming in Northamptonshire in the nineteenth century suggested that charmers found their motivation and reward in "the influence and position" within their community which charming brought them.³⁰ Sternberg's observation will be found pertinent to Les Ollerton's practice for Les clearly enjoys the respect and gratitude which his healing role provides.

The Methodology of the Life History

This study began by accident. I do not remember when I first learned that Les Ollerton was a charmer and the knowledge that he was can hardly have made much impression on me when I received it. It is certain that I learned of it through my parents or from their friends John and Ruth Newson, a married couple in their fifties, who lived in Chideock; Ruth has worked with Les on his milk round and he has charmed warts from her hands. I met Les at various occasions during my youth in Bridport such as at the plays performed by the Chideock Players, the amateur dramatic group to which Les,

²⁹Theo Brown, "Charming in Devon," Folklore, LXXXI (1970), 41.

³⁰Thomas Sternberg, The Dialect and Folk-Lore of Northamptonshire (London, 1851), p. 154.

the Newsons, and my parents, all belong. I met him also at small parties held in their homes by the Newsons or my parents and came to enjoy his talent as a raconteur of comic anecdotes. My education in English literature at the universities of Wales and Alberta took me away from the area for long periods, however, from 1969 onwards, so that I met him only infrequently during the next five years until the Christmas of 1973 when I returned to Bridport after having become a student of folklore at Memorial University.

Les seemed to me then to be a godsend in the form of a potential informant to whom I could easily be introduced. At the time I had despaired of making any progress in the discipline of folklore without first proving myself as a fieldworker; as I had no confidence in my ability as an interviewer, and had made only one feeble attempt at fieldwork in Newfoundland, I was in need of some small success as a collector. My shyness and basic doubt as to whether I was even interested in the study of folklore as I had come to view it made me diffident about beginning any kind of collecting. I approached Les, therefore, indirectly, through the good graces of my parents who arranged with him that I should interview him on the subject of his charming.

Accordingly our first interview took place on an afternoon in January 1974 at Les's house in Chideock. My father came with me which helped to make the event seem more like a social visit. The experience of being interviewed about charming was not new to him; he said that "two or three lots of people" had come to see him about it and he showed me an off-print of a brief article by J.B. Lang

which included two accounts of incidents of charming which he had given to that writer.³¹

I had not prepared any questions to ask him on the subject although I was familiar with the outlines of the tradition of magical healing, and I was content to allow my father to initiate much of the discussion. Fortunately the lack of insistence on getting an answer, which characterised my interviewing style and which was entirely due to shyness, was, as I discovered later, the only way to approach Les as an informant; he has never told me anything that he did not deliberately decide to and had I been more aggressive in my attitude he would probably have told me nothing.³²

The first interview passed off enjoyably for us all; Les was allowed to dominate the conversation as he expects to, and, though he may initially have intended to show me the off-print of Lang's article, as though it should have sufficed for my curiosity, he gave several other accounts of charming which did not figure in it. At my request that he should tell me a little about his occupations during his life he entered, without needing further encouragement, on a fluent and well-ordered oral autobiography from which I gained my first inkling of the breadth of his experience in traditional occupations related to farm work. This interview was

³¹ J.B. Lang, "Charming of Cattle," Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Proceedings for 1969, XCI (May, 1970), 222-223. * The accounts of charming which Lang collected from Les are numbered as 7, and 9, in her list of examples.

³² After meeting Les, and discovering his obdurate refusal to be led into topics which he did not choose to speak on, Dr. Halpert swore that he would never be able to work with Les as an informant.

tape recorded as was another, held a few days later, in which we covered more topics from his boyhood and farming life. Shortly thereafter I returned to Newfoundland.

At this time I had not decided to make his biography the subject of a thesis and it was not until some months later that I chose, after a consultation with Professor Halpert, to begin the present study. I returned to Dorset for six weeks during June and July of 1974 and for a further six weeks in the following December and January. During this period I recorded approximately thirty hours of interviews with Les, by using a tape recorder, and also met him on many other more informal social occasions after which I made notes.

Before proceeding to describe the relationship which developed between Les Ollerton and myself during the course of our interviews it is appropriate to define my own attitude by giving some account of the methodology that was used and by acknowledging the influence of certain writers in shaping my approach to this study.

The purposes and principles that should be followed in conducting what has become known in the discipline of anthropology as "the life history method"³³ have been well stated by Clyde Kluckhohn in "The Personal Document in Anthropological Science." Kluckhohn's general tenet is that a culture "becomes much clearer

³³ For a review of the use of this approach in the collection of anthropological information see L.L. Langness, The Life History in Anthropological Science (New York, 1965).

to the outsider when it is seen from the vantage point of an individual's life."³⁴ The basic difficulty in gaining this clear picture, he explains, is in deciding whether the behaviour and comments of the chosen informant are determined by the common cultural patterns which he shares with the other members of his society rather than being due to his idiosyncrasy as an individual. These two possible sources of an informant's attitudes and behaviour are not necessarily unrelated, however, for Kluckhohn considers that personality is both idiosyncratic and a creation of culture.³⁵

In the present study Les Ollerton is not presented as a "representative individual" and it is not my intention to describe his entire society except in so far as is necessary to provide the contextual background of his individual life: in fact, as the performer of the special role of charming, and in his own estimation, Les is an unusual person. Nevertheless, Les holds many attitudes in common with other men of similar work experience, and, as Kluckhohn advises, a comparison with others of the same society has been presented, at certain points, to establish the extent to which he exhibits deviation or innovation within the context of normally accepted opinions and roles. Kluckhohn has also stressed the need for a full recording by the researcher of his methods of working and

³⁴ Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Personal Document in Anthropological Science," in *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology*, eds. Louis Gottschalk, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Robert Angell (New York, 1945), p. 93.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96, p. 138.

subjective reactions to the informant.³⁶ My response to this study, and to Les Ollerton, will, it is hoped, be made clear in this introductory chapter.

While Kluckhohn has provided an admirable theoretical framework, which I have tried in general to follow, it is in the writings of George Bourne,³⁷ and in particular in The Bettesworth Book: Talks with a Surrey Peasant and Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer, that I have found a quality of absorbed and respectful interest in the life and opinions of a fellow man which has become an inspiration and a sustaining example to me.³⁸ More than any other writer of the English "rural tradition" Bourne impresses with his insight into the character of his subject, "Frederick Bettesworth," a rural labourer who worked for him as a gardener and whose conversations were recorded by Bourne in his journals.³⁹

This insight has been achieved through Bourne's care never to impose his own value judgements on Bettesworth's opinions; indeed he is constantly in doubt as to whether he has understood

³⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

³⁷ "George Bourne" is the pseudonym which was adopted by George Sturt. The most recent appraisal of his work, though viewing it primarily for its literary significance, is given by W.J. Keith in The Rural Tradition: A Study of the Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside (Toronto, 1974).

³⁸ George Bourne, The Bettesworth Book: Talks with a Surrey Peasant (London, 1901); Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer (London, 1907).

³⁹ See The Journals of George Sturt 1890-1927, ed. E.D. Mackerness, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1967).

him aright. His detachment and objectivity, however, do not preclude sympathy; his writing shows neither the apparent callousness of Richard Jefferies, in his description of the character of the rural labourer, nor the impression of cloying sweetness which mars H.J. Massingham's accounts of rural life. Bourne explores Bettesworth's consciousness with as few preconceptions as can fairly be expected and his technique is to faithfully present the content of Bettesworth's conversations without distorting them by subjecting them to his own, alien, criteria of interest or value. The result of his patience, and self abnegation in recording exactly what was said has been the creation of the most convincing account available of the opinions, values, and conversational style of a rural labourer in southern England at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is of fundamental value for its example of the author's humanity and as a record of folk tradition against which cultural change can be measured.

The theoretical discussions of the operation of magico-religious healing which have most influenced my thinking in this study have been those which have considered the role of the healer in his community. The interest which has been shown by folklorists in the social role of the healer has come about through their use of anthropological studies of the concepts of disease and its appropriate treatment which are held in primitive societies. The recognition that disease is a crisis which threatens the cohesion of a social group has led to an interest in the role of the healer within his community.

Arnold van Gennep developed the analysis of ritual behaviour which is intended to counter the socially disturbing effects of crises caused by transitions in the lives of individuals such as birth, death, childbirth, initiations, and marriage.⁴⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski has analysed the function of magic as providing "a definite mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation."⁴¹ Sickness is one such situation in which anxiety is alleviated through the ritual ministrations of the healer. The most succinct statement by a folklorist of the theory of disease as a crisis for the group and of the necessity for a re-establishment of confidence by the healer, who becomes a leader at such times, has been given by Lauri Honko in his essay "On the Effectivity of Folk-Medicine," where he argues that the primitive doctor is as good or better as a psychotherapeutic practitioner than the modern psychiatrist.

He is not content only to activate the faith of the patient, but also instills into the whole group a certain conviction of the success of his treatment, awakens the collective faith and promotes the integration of the group. The system of social values as a whole supports his activities, the myths, the religious dogmas, the group-feeling of solidarity and the patterns of role-behaviour.⁴²

⁴⁰ Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabriëlle L. Caffee (London and Chicago, 1960).

⁴¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays (New York, 1954), p. 90. The essay "Magic, Science and Religion" was first published in 1925.

⁴² Lauri Honko, "On the Effectivity of Folk-Medicine," in Papers on Folk-Medicine, ed. Carl-Herman Tillhagen, reprinted from ARV. Journal of Scandinavian Folklore, XVIII-XIX (1962-1963), 298-299.

Such an approach to the study of healing in folk societies inevitably demands a consideration of the influence of the healer's reputation within his community. Narratives which are told by him or by others concerning his powers of healing become important in fostering his reputation and in encouraging the initial hope of sufferers that a cure is possible. The narratives also prepare the patients to approach the healer in the traditional manner, using, for example, set procedures for asking his help, and they also help them to respond to his treatment; the narratives take the strangeness from the crisis caused by the disease and help to dispel the anxiety which impedes recovery through the provision of a model of established behaviour. The related value in healing of the kind of trust and understanding which is created between healer and patient through their being of the same educational, economic, and social level has been explored by Odd Nordland in "The Street of 'the Wise Women': a Contribution to the Sociology of Folk-medicine."⁴³

The operation of the healer's personality in his acts of healing has also been discussed in the few studies which have attempted to present the life histories of healers. Richard and Eva Blum's Health and Healing in Rural Greece gives good descriptions of five healers, all of whom exercise different degrees of power, and shows their attitudes toward their knowledge, their methods of practice, and their position in their communities through their

⁴³ Odd Nordland, "The Street of 'the Wise Women': a Contribution to the Sociology of Folk-medicine," Papers on Folk-Medicine, ed. Carl-Herman Tillhagen, reprinted from ARV. Journal of Scandinavian Folklore, XVIII-XIX (1962-1963), pp. 263-274.

personal histories.⁴⁴ In Why Faith Healing? Michael Owen Jones has studied the character of a healer in Newfoundland and has stressed the personal choice which led to the adoption of the healing role; Jones's work shows the personal gratification which the role brings for this healer besides discussing his function in the community. A personality profile which suggests the range of variation in motivation and behaviour which can occur between differing types of folk healer is also offered.⁴⁵

The best history of charming in England has been given by Keith Thomas in Religion and the Decline of Magic where he also discusses the effectiveness of psychotherapy in a society which holds a consistent body of magical and religious beliefs.⁴⁶ Comparative material on magico-religious healing is available in a number of studies of healing traditions in central Pennsylvania where similar agricultural conditions to those of south-west England have caused veterinary folk medicine to be of equal importance.⁴⁷ Don Yoder's

⁴⁴ Richard and Eva Blum, Health and Healing in Rural Greece: A Study of Three Communities (Stanford, 1965).

⁴⁵ Michael Owen Jones, Why Faith Healing? (Ottawa, 1972).

⁴⁶ Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (London, 1971).

⁴⁷ See Thomas R. Brandle and Claude W. Unger, "Witchcraft in Cow and Horse," Pennsylvania Folklife, VIII (1956), 28-31 and "Illness and Cure of Domestic Animals among the Pennsylvania Dutch," Pennsylvania Folklife, VIII (1957), 36-47. For discussion of other types of magico-religious healing in Pennsylvania see Carleton F. Brown's reprinting of a nineteenth century handbook of charms and popular magic, "The Long Hidden Friend," Journal of American Folklore, XVII (1904), 89-152; an account of the performance styles of fortune-tellers is given by George Peterson III in "Indian Readers and Healers by Prayer: A Field Report," Pennsylvania Folklife, XVI (1966), 2-7.

remark in his essay "Folk Medicine" that folk healers, through being recognised as having "God-given" powers of healing, "were a kind of folk-clergy" is a fundamental insight into the nature of the relationship between the charmer and his patient and has been applied in this study.⁴⁸

Les Ollerton's life as a rural worker may be compared with the accounts of the work, opinions, and values of men of similar experience which have been given in a number of published biographies, autobiographies, and studies of rural life. The following survey lists only those works which have been found to be particularly valuable to the present study, through their dealing with the geographical area or with the occupations in which Les was engaged, and is not meant as a review of the large body of life history material which is available. Other works which have had a more indirect influence on this study are included in my bibliography.

Foremost among these accounts for their quality of perception and objectivity are the writings of George Bourne which I have already cited as an inspirational example. Many other writers, however, have also provided valuable insights. Fred Kitchen, in Brother to the Ox, has given a detailed and convincing impression of his life as a farm worker in Nottinghamshire during the years between 1910 and 1940; most relevant to this study are his descriptions of the traditional method of learning by imitation, of the worker's

⁴⁸ Don Yoder, "Folk Medicine" in Folklore and Folklife, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago and London, 1972), p. 205. Other studies of folk medicine, including magico-religious healing, by Yoder include "Official Religion versus Folk Religion," Pennsylvania Folklife, XV, (1965-1966), 36-52 and "Twenty Questions on Powwowing," Pennsylvania Folklife, XV (1966), 38-40.

relationship with his employer, and of the pride which men took in their work and ability. His autobiography also contains valuable references to music, anecdotes, and folk drama.⁴⁹ Jack Lawley's Memories of a Herdsman is another autobiography which offers an even closer parallel to the conditions and experiences of Les Olierton's life since Lawley describes his work as a cowman on a dairy farm in the Blackmoor Vale in west Dorset during the 1920's. Lawley gives a good account of the social position of the farm worker and of the values of the farming community such as the insistence on tidiness and the abhorrence of waste. Of particular interest is his description of traditional veterinary practices although he makes no mention of charming.⁵⁰ Another autobiography of a farm worker is Early to Rise by Hugh Barrett who describes farm life in Suffolk during the 1930's. Barrett's work is especially valuable for his sensitive recording of the style and context of traditional storytelling by men on the farm in the course of their work.⁵¹

A lively account of a boyhood in a Cotswold village which was contemporary with that of Les Olierton, and which parallels it in many aspects, is given by Laurie Lee in his autobiographical novel Cider with Rosie.⁵² Lee's exuberant prose conveys a remembrance.

⁴⁹ Fred Kitchen, Brother to the Ox: The Autobiography of a Farm Labourer (London, 1940).

⁵⁰ Jack Lawley, Memories of a Herdsman (Ilfracombe, Devon, 1961).

⁵¹ Hugh Barrett, Early to Rise: A Suffolk Morning (London, 1967).

⁵² Laurie Lee, Cider with Rosie (London, 1959).

of childhood sensations through its power to evoke sounds, scents, and colours. Its record of children's games in the fields and of village entertainments offers useful comparisons and it is one of the few autobiographies which gives any attention to the effects of puberty. A recollection of childhood in north Wiltshire in the early years of this century has been given by Ida Gandy in A Wiltshire Childhood; as the daughter of a vicar, however, her reminiscences are not representative of the life of the majority of village children. Nevertheless, the work contains interesting descriptions of community life in its record of "rough music," fights between the youths of different villages, and the joking relationships between men and women which developed during work in the hayfields.⁵³

A Shepherd's Life by W.H. Hudson presents the biography of a Wiltshire shepherd of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Hudson, like Bourne, wrote on the basis of several years of acquaintanceship with his subject, "Caleb Bawcombe," and the book is the result of many conversations and much patient listening on Hudson's part. He succeeds in giving a sense of what interested Bawcombe and shows that his comments on any topic usually took the form of a story. Les Ollerton has presented his opinions in much the same way.

The village of Alderton in which Les spent his early life lies on the fringe of the country of the upper Thames which Alfred Williams has described in four studies of its folksongs, language,

⁵³ Ida Gandy, A Wiltshire Childhood (London, 1929).

⁵⁴ W.H. Hudson, A Shepherd's Life (London, 1910).

narratives, and culture.⁵⁵ Williams recorded what he heard, neither more nor less, and because of his social standing as a farm and railway worker was able to gain the confidence of his informants; the result, in Folk-Songs of the Upper Thames, is the fullest extant recording of the popular repertory of folksong in England at the turn of the century. A Wiltshire Village, Villages of the White Horse, and Round About the Upper Thames provide accounts of the folklore and folklife of the region which are particularly comprehensive since Williams, through not being a member of the contemporary academic establishment, was not troubled by contemporary views as to what was or was not worth recording. Consequently Williams has provided rich comparative material for the study of Les Ollerton's account of his Wiltshire boyhood.

Among biographical studies and descriptions of the life of a rural community Flora Thompson's autobiographical trilogy Lark Rise to Candleford and her later work Still Glides the Stream stand pre-eminent.⁵⁶ Thompson's outstanding quality is her ability to observe and record the smallest details of domestic life so that a complete context is provided in which descriptions of various genres of folk tradition gain added validity. As a record of change in popular taste and social values it is unsurpassed. A series

⁵⁵ Alfred Williams, A Wiltshire Village (London, 1912); Villages of the White Horse (London, 1913); Round About the Upper Thames (London, 1922); Folk-Songs of the Upper Thames (London, 1923).

⁵⁶ Flora Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford: A Trilogy (London, 1945); Still Glides the Stream (London, 1948).

of books by Fred Archer, which describe rural life in the Cotswolds where he grew up in the 1920's, draw their interest and humour from the kinds of anecdotes of local characters which constitute a large proportion of traditional story material and which are Les Ollerton's favourite type of narrative.⁵⁷

The rural writings of Richard Jefferies provide details of social and economic history which are drawn from his experience of life in Wiltshire during the latter half of the nineteenth century. His collection of essays The Toilers of the Field, which describes the condition of the rural labourers and the characteristics of their employers, offers an insight into the social history of farming which has helped to shape the attitudes toward farm work which have become traditional.⁵⁸

Among the many belle-lettrists whose inspiration has come from country life J. Arthur Gibbs and H.J. Massingham have both written of the Cotswold area in which Les Ollerton was born and Massingham's sentimental journeys have taken him to west Dorset and to one of the farms on which Les was working; both Gibbs and Massingham have contributed acute observations on popular taste in anecdotes and songs which can help to build a composite picture of

⁵⁷ Fred Archer, The Distant Scene (London, 1967); Under the Parish Lantern (London, 1969); Hawthorn Hedge Country (London, 1970); The Secrets of Bredon Hill (London, 1971); A Lad of Evesham Vale (London, 1972).

⁵⁸ Richard Jefferies, The Toilers of the Field (London, 1892).

rural social life.⁵⁹ Francis Brett Young's similarly literary description of a summer in an English village is also valuable for its appreciation of the social relationships between the middle and upper classes of the village, who form an element in rural society which has often been ignored by commentators; Young's description of the broad role of the country doctor as a counsellor and confidant as well as a healer also offers a comparison with Les Ollerton's conception of his responsibility to the members of his community.⁶⁰

Social and agricultural histories which have been found useful include William Marshall's Rural Economy of the West of England, William Stevenson's General View of the Agriculture of the County of Dorset, and Francis George Heath's Peasant Life in the West of England.⁶¹ Heath's work is particularly interesting for his employment of the technique of compiling a life history of a representative individual. The most recent study of the social and economic history of Dorset has been made by Barbara Kerr in Bound to

⁵⁹ J. Arthur Gibbs, A Cotswold Village: Or, Country Life and Pursuits in Gloucestershire (London, 1898); H.J. Massingham, Wold Without End (London, 1932).

⁶⁰ Francis Brett Young, Portrait of a Village (London, 1937).

⁶¹ William Marshall, The Rural Economy of the West of England (London, 1796); William Stevenson, General View of the Agriculture of the County of Dorset (London, 1812); Francis George Heath, Peasant Life in the West of England (London, 1880).

the Soil which describes the particular occupations of specific areas in the county and shows their vital connection with geographical conditions.⁶²

The series of books on East Anglian folklife by George Ewart Evans serve as a model for the study of the oral history of occupations; his mode of presenting the comments of craftsmen on their work has been followed in this study where I have touched upon the skills and knowledge which were held by Dorset farm workers.⁶³

While the works of the authors mentioned above have helped to shape my sense of what a life history study should ideally contain the material which is presented here is also a reflection of my relationship with Les Ollerton; accordingly it is important to describe the context of the relationship within which the life history was recorded.

Although my personal introduction to him was easy, since he is a friend of my parents, the explanation of my reasons for wishing to interview him and to record his words was more difficult. I had been warned against mentioning the term "folklore" by Dr. Halpert and tried to avoid its use since Les understands it in its popular sense as meaning superstition and erroneous ideas

⁶² Barbara Kerr, Bound to the Soil: A Social History of Dorset 1750-1918 (London, 1968).

⁶³ George Ewart Evans, Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay (2nd ed.; London, 1962); The Horse in the Furrow (London, 1960); The Pattern under the Plough: Aspects of the Folk-Life of East Anglia (London, 1966); The Farm and the Village (London, 1969); Where Beards Wag All: The Relevance of the Oral Tradition (London, 1970).

which, together with examples of dialect speech, are sought out for the curiosity and amusement of educated people. Accordingly I stressed that I was interested in learning the traditional knowledge of rural occupations which had gone unrecorded and was in danger of being lost. In doing so I had, more by intuition than by design, followed Kluckhohn's advice to discover and then to cultivate the informant's motive for cooperation with the researcher.⁶⁴

Les shares with some other men of his age and work experience a pessimism concerning the course taken by modern farming. The traditional methods of diligent work by hand and with horses are spoken of by him as though, in their very hardness, they held a moral value. They have been replaced by what seem to him to be careless and rapacious practices which take too much of the goodness from the land without making it any return. His view of the older farming life is coloured by nostalgia, as he sometimes admits, but the old rural pattern functions in his contemporary conversation as an example of moral virtue, friendship, and contentment, and he finds general assent throughout his community when he speaks of these values. In talking of rural life with me, therefore, he was being given the chance to speak to a willing listener on a favourite and long considered theme.

The common difficulty, that has been noted by Kluckhohn, of convincing those who consider themselves to be "average people" that their personal histories are significant and interesting hardly

⁶⁴ Kluckhohn, "The Personal Document in Anthropological Science," p. 121.

applied in his case. His oral autobiography was structured to reflect what he feels has been a "very varied life" and he is proud of the unusual enterprise which he has shown in changing his occupations and social and economic status. Les considers himself to be an exceptionally knowledgeable and gifted man who has been eminently successful; he seems to have thought it quite natural, then, that a young man with a great deal of formal education, but no practical knowledge of either work or life, should turn to him for his expertise and advice. A large element in his motivation for co-operating with me, besides a desire to please my parents, was that it allowed him to adopt the role of the sage which is familiar and gratifying to him.

The emphasis on his experience in traditional rural occupations which I have given in this study is, to some extent, due to my own comparatively greater interest in this aspect of his life than in, for example, his years as a small businessman or as a nurse. His knowledge of rural crafts was more interesting to me as being of a kind which will disappear in the near future. His narrative repertory, however, includes many reminiscences of his hospital experience and his coups of salesmanship which are hardly represented here. Nevertheless, the present selection of the material which has been noted during our interviews does represent his sense of what should be recorded concerning the rural life of his past.

These interviews should be considered partly as unique communicational events which operated under their own rules and

created their own atmosphere. Les quickly developed his own sense of his expected role in the conversations which was to instruct me in matters in which he was an expert and I was ignorant. The major difference between this situation and a traditional teaching process in which a master-man would instruct his apprentice lay in his recognition that my interest was historical rather than practical; had we been at work together in some craft his teaching would have relied far more on letting me observe his way of working than on giving verbal instructions.

In order to prepare myself to question him on the skills in which he was an expert I consulted published descriptions to assemble lists of the tools, materials, and terms, which were used in the crafts. I also added questions which were designed to show his attitudes towards his work. Sean O'Sullivan's Handbook of Irish Folklore and, especially, J.S. Udal's Dorsetshire Folk-lore were used to provide a standard against which I could measure Les's knowledge of folk tradition.⁶⁵ Subject headings and word lists were noted on cards which I used as aids to my memory during interviews. Their prime value, however, lay in giving me confidence that I would not lack ideas should the conversation flag. Embarrassing silences were rare, however, thanks to Les's conversational skill and general enthusiasm.

⁶⁵ Sean O'Sullivan, A Handbook of Irish Folklore (Dublin, 1942); John Symonds Udal, Dorsetshire Folk-lore (Hertford, 1922).

The use of this questionnaire method, however, while successful in enabling a large body of information to be gathered quickly, was not suited to Les's temperament. He seemed to feel that he was being measured against some standard which he did not understand and he grew uncomfortable when he had to admit to not having heard of a certain weather rhyme or of the name of a particular tool. His reaction to sustained questioning was given to me obliquely when, before an interview, he observed wryly to my brother, and in my presence: "This is an inquisition." I realised, eventually, that my mode of questioning ran counter to the dominant feature of his personality which is his perception of himself as a knowledgeable man. By posing questions which he could not answer I was challenging his position and causing his resentment. Later I discovered the value of prompting him with references to topics that he had mentioned before in passing; thus by asking about the village green which had already figured in some of his anecdotes I steered him into giving a description of childhood games.

His treatment of knowledge as a personal possession is perhaps the most significant trait in his behaviour, which is referred to throughout this study, for it links his attitudes towards the secret knowledge held by the charmer and the practical knowledge used by the craftsman. I was aware from the first of his guarded attitude towards the knowledge of charming. This was a circumscribed area in which my questions took on for him the appearance of an attempt to pry into the secret knowledge which he was not prepared to give away.

CELESTINE

He had warned me of this at our first interview; I mightn't get answers to all my questions, he said, leaving me in no doubt that he was referring to questions about charming. Once, much later, he deftly parried a leading question that I had made about the way in which he had cured a certain ailment in a horse:

Well, Martin, I'll tell you the way to learn. You pick the brains of someone whose brains you can pick but there will be some that you'll never pick. Shall we leave it like that?

The remark had been intended as a rebuke for my sly attempt to exceed the limitations which had been tacitly agreed between us. His comment was made very deliberately but with an eye to its comic effect in putting me in my place; my father, who was one of the other four people present, laughed heartily and commended Les on his superior wit. I felt chastened by the snub but respected him the more for the strength of his belief that certain things are not to be shared indiscriminately.

The figure "to pick the brains" is particularly expressive of his sense that knowledge is a property which must normally be acquired by a process which is close to theft, since, in a traditional society, a man's economic and social worth may depend on his exclusive possession of certain abilities. He considered that my questioning of him showed the same desire to learn as that which he had shown as a boy and this helped to form a bond between us. He compared my coming to talk to him with the way in which he had listened to older men; it was unusual for him to find a young man who shared his respect for the teachings of elders:


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I think you're going the right way about it because you're coming to the chaps like me and you're listening to what I've got to tell you, and I've acquired a lot of my knowledge by, by, listening in the past to older men as well. If you want to learn anything in this world you go, like Jesus did, when he went into the temple, Jesus started the right idea, look. He went into the temple, didn't he, and what did he do? He sat amongst the learned men, didn't he. Picked their brains. Like it is in business, if you want to know how to get on in business, you don't go to the chap who's gone bankrupt. He can't teach you anything. You go to the fellow who's made a packet, look, and he's retired -- now he knows! -- because he's done it. So this is the chap you've got to go to to pick his brains.

I felt complimented when he approved of my methods in this way.

Although the context of our conversations was very different from the traditional learning situation in which a man and his apprentice might work together, the boy helping, observing, and listening, I felt that it pleased him to teach me by rehearsing some of his practical skills and inculcating the philosophy which goes with them. He saw me as a historian of his age and experience as a rural worker and he clearly wished to present this way of life in the best light. I was not regarded as a person who would make any practical use of his knowledge however.

Besides giving information on the traditional life of the farming community he also treated our interviews as opportunities to talk philosophically. He quoted sayings and gave me examples which, he said, I should remember all my life. He was constantly eager to prove the fairness and truth of his opinions so that many statements were prefaced by phrases such as "Now, you tell me if



I'm right"; this was not an invitation to debate the point, however, but a signal for me to grant assent. He employs the same forceful persuasion and unshakeable conviction in counselling those who seek his advice and in convincing patients of his ability to cure them.

I found these moral and spiritual digressions tedious at first. Later, however, after listening to the recorded tapes many times over, a broader sense of the structure of his conversation came to me and I found that his character could be read through it. I realised that by allowing him to speak without interruption, and by recording the entire flow of his discourse, I had gained more understanding of the values which give meaning to his skills and of the personality which has continued, developing but maintaining certain constant traits, from childhood through the transitions of his adult life.

Arrangement of the Material

It is necessary at this point to explain the editorial practices that I have followed in this study. First of all let it be said that "Les Ollerton" is a fictitious name which I have supplied in deference to my informant's request to remain incognito. I have also altered the names of most of the other people but have allowed the place names to stand. It would not be difficult to discover the real identities but I trust that no one will be so needlessly curious as to try.

My policy in reproducing Les's remarks has been to transcribe them as exactly as possible from the tape recordings;

where his words have been remembered with the aid of written notes this is stated. Any additions or omissions have been indicated by an explanation which is enclosed in square brackets although in a few cases the omission has been indicated by a row of three periods with alternating spaces; in these instances it was considered that an explanation of the omission would have been unjustifiably pedantic and confusing to the reader. Square brackets have also been used to enclose "stage directions" which suggest Les's gestures, facial expressions, and the responses of his audience.

Short interpolations by other speakers have been enclosed in square brackets and identified by names or initials; F.H.D., M.L.L., and M.J.L. refer to my father, mother, and myself respectively. The quoted passages are identified by reference to the recorded interview from which they are taken; dates and locations have been given with "Bridport" implying an interview at my parents' home and "Chidegck" an interview at Les's home. Where transcribed material has not been separately identified it should be understood that I continue to quote from the last cited interview.

In transcribing his language I have tried to reconcile the desirability of indicating his speech rhythms and emphases with the need to give some necessary punctuation. Heavily stressed words are shown by being underlined. Commas and periods have been added for comprehensibility, however, rather than to indicate intonation. His deviations from standard grammatical rules, such as his frequent use of "come" instead of "came," have been allowed to

stand but his generally unsounded "g" at a verb ending has usually been supplied. This compromise between fidelity to the aural record and the presentation of a written transcript has been dictated by my desire to avoid seeming patronising by exhibiting a written version in which the "errors" of informal speech would seem unduly apparent. At the same time, however, I wished to preserve the exuberance of his narration which might have been lost had I put it into the straitjacket of formal grammar.

The amount of material which has been quoted, and the length of the given extracts, have been decided by my wish to suggest his chosen divisions between subjects rather than to impose my own judgement of where they should occur. This has meant that, figuratively, I have not cut him off in the middle of a comment or a narrative but have allowed him to say his piece. In making these decisions I realised the difficulty which had been experienced by Bourne who berated himself for having failed to record the connections between Bettsworth's narratives and had to decide how much of the general flow of Bettsworth's conversation could be included without boring his readers.⁶⁶ Bourne was forced to compromise but gave an excellent summary of the kind of conversational material that he was leaving out:

And so the warp and woof of Bettsworth's conversation -- the soil in which his anecdotes flourish -- is an interminable repetition of technical observations forming a living tradition which on paper might have the appearance of dullest platitude. But to him it is not dull.

⁶⁶ Bourne, Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer, p. 18.

Bourne decided that:

I dare not set down anything like all that I can remember of this kind of thing as it has been said during the last few days. It must rather be imagined, as filling in the spaces between the following fragments, and explaining some of them.⁶⁷

A long transcript was then supplied which exemplified Bettsworth's joy in his gardening knowledge. Les shows the same pleasure in talking of the technicalities of his skills and what Bourne has called "the labourer's versatility of usefulness," and I have tried to provide enough material to reveal this characteristic, and traditional, conversational feature.

A further reason for the inclusion of so many narratives, some of which may seem irrelevant to the central theme of this study which is his role as a charmer, is that they help to illustrate the style of his narrative art and the breadth of his repertory. His life history is told partly through a series of self-chosen vignettes from his repertory of stories about himself. Many of them testify to his abilities and, sometimes, explore facets of his personality. In the final chapter, in which his narratives and their function in his healing role are considered, it is intended that the reader should be able to draw for comparison on the many examples that are given throughout the earlier chapters.

Thus the following chapter describes his boyhood and indicates the emerging traits of personality which may have disposed him to take up the practice of charming when his father-in-law

⁶⁷ Bourne, The Bettsworth Book, pp. 260-261.

later decided to entrust him with this secret knowledge. The transmission of the knowledge of charming, and the qualities of character which Les considers to be essential to the charmer, are discussed in the fourth chapter. Prior to this, however, the third chapter describes Les's acquisition of skills as a young farm worker since it is in the context of practical knowledge that charming has functioned for him and the moral qualities which he finds inherent in craftsmanship are also an element in his definition of fitness for the charmer's role. The fifth and final chapter shows how he has modified the role of the charmer and included it within a broad sense of pastoral care for the people of his community.

II

BOYHOOD

Les Ollerton's own summary of his life history is given at the start of this chapter as a preface to his biography and a general introduction to his life and personality. It is interesting, moreover, as a projective statement which can reveal something of his interpretation of the significance of certain events in his life; the priority which he assigns to certain relationships, for example, and the details which he considers inconsequential, help to characterise him. Its validity as an objective record is of only secondary importance, for few people can be candid in discussing themselves with friends or strangers. More important is the sense which is given of a man of a remarkable self-awareness who never ceases to perform in some way in whatever social context he finds himself and who is concerned to present himself in a way that he would have us see him.

This brief oral autobiography was elicited from him at the beginning of what became a series of interviews. I had only asked vaguely that he tell me a little about what he had done in his life; he responded readily and fluently:

Well, I can tell you. Can I tell you how my family's set up then? Give you a rough idea. Well my mother was one of a family of seven from a working class family. Now her father left school at the age of twelve and he went as what they called then, years ago, as a martar.

[mortar] boy under a bricklayer, or under a stonemason, 'cause you see very little bricks were used in those days especially in the Cotswolds. Now her father worked on the Neeld estate all his working life and he died, I think, when he was sixty-six, I think that's when he died. Now, he, like I say, he was born at Forde, her father, my mother's father, near [pause] what's the name of that pretty village? Castle Combe, that's right, a few miles from Castle Combe. He'd come from a family of stone masons and he was a very very clever man. He was a talented man in the use of his hands. Not only that, he had a lot of wisdom, but very little education. And that was, that was, my mother's father.

Now my mother married, ah, my father who was one of the Ollertons the Brewers of Bath [said in one breath as though repeating a trade slogan] so you had a complete, what can I say, difference in upbringing and environment and the marriage was never really hundred percent happy. I don't think so, because there was always a conflict between my father who had a college education and my mother who didn't. And so she was, he was, or she was always under the impression that she let him down. She couldn't rise to the occasion, ahm, if there was a party or anything like that. You see she didn't have the gift of the spoken word that he had. For the simple reason that he had the education. Well out of this combination there was -- I've got two brothers' sides myself -- and so we've got, I think, wishful thinking perhaps, a little bit of the best of both worlds.

I've got a little bit of my grandfather's side -- my mother's father's side -- who were clever with their hands, who had a marvellous outlook on life really, because, grateful for everything that they had and everything that came their way. And then the other side of the coin, of course, you've got the business acumen, that was my father's side, where -- but I don't think that I've got their crave for money though -- I wouldn't say I had that. 'Cause money to me is only a means to an end. So anyway, this is my family upbringing more or less.

But however, I went to an ordinary school, and passed the Scholarship, but in those days, you know, in 1928 and '9 we had a depression, so if you passed a scholarship to go to a grammar school you couldn't go anyway because one, you couldn't afford the bicycle and the books that was necessary so, and -- your family wanted the money -- so you had to leave school and go to work, and this was it, and I've never regretted that. Because I think that, ahm, well I shouldn't have met so many nice fellows as I've met in my time, by working on the land, I think I've met some of the nicest fellows

that ever one could ever meet, by working on the land. 'Cause these fellows are close to the soil and, ahm, they're, well in my opinion, Nature's: [gentlemen?]. I've never met any people yet to beat the old chaps that I met when I worked on the farm. Because you see, not only were they genuine sort of people but they were people that you could always turn to without feeling -- having a feeling -- of being under an obligation to them. You, can you follow what I mean? You know, if you go to people today look, say "Look, can you come along and help me?" you feel under an obligation to have to do something back, you know. Well in those, with those fellows you didn't. It come natural. [F.H.L.: So you went to work immediately on the land?]

Yeah, I, yes I went to work on the land. Well, actually, I done six months; well a little bit more than that, eight months, as a barber's apprentice. [F.H.L.: Oh did you?]

Yeah, I, I, I thought I would like this, you know. The chap's name was Stan Shepherd, this was a fellow up in Wiltshire. And I went there and, you know, first of all I used to put the lather on and put the cloth round the neck and all that. But however I kept my eyes open -- I've been hairdressing ever since. Which is fifty years.

Anyway I was there about eight to ten months then I had to go with my uncle then. Then my mother suddenly told me one night -- it was an ultimatum, you couldn't argue in those days -- she said "Well, your uncle Reg, uhm, can't afford to keep the chap that he's got working for him, so you'll have to leave the job and go and help him." So that was it. I had to. No "ifs" or "buts" about it. That meant five o'clock in the morning to any time at night. And I [we pause while Flora, his wife, enters the room and greets us].

Yes, well, like I was saying, you know, my uncle, you know had been by my mother and said "Well look, Margaret, I want Les to come on to work for me," and, you know, that was it. So it meant five o'clock in the morning like I said before, [to] anytime at night. But anyway, the thing was this, that I learned a lot under him. And, well of course, beggars couldn't be choosers then, you either had to work on the farm or else you were out of work. Well then my mother died, when she was very young, in nineteen, well she was thirty-nine, and that was in nineteen, uhm, thirty-six? And I left home. Because I just couldn't face life without her. And I come to Chideock and this is where I've been ever since.

I don't think I would live a different life even if I had the opportunity to do so.

[M.J.L.: So what did you do when you came to Chideock?]

Ahh, when I came to Chideock I went to work living-in for a chap called Tommy Acland. I was there only about six months. And then I went to Seatown to work for Mr. Ryall. And, ah, that's where I was married from. And then I, after I was married, I went out in the Marshwood Vale and stayed and worked for a friend out there for two years. And then I got a bit ambitious. And I went to manage a large dairy for, who is now, I should say, the biggest farmer in Dorset, W.N. Duck and Son. I was there four and a half years. The War had started. And then Harold Oxber, at Doghouse, he wanted me down there, so I left Wynford and came to Doghouse. And I was there ten and a half years. And I went in business on my own, in the milk retail trade, I retailed milk for fourteen years. And then I took a cafe on the beach. I had that, well, I had it the same time as I had the milk-round really. I had a cafe on the beach, then I took the shop on the caravan site, so that in the first year, of having the shop, I ran all three. I had the milk business, the shop, and the cafe. But anyway the cafe really didn't pay, uh, I was burgled two or three times, in the last years, so I gave it up. And you know it's now disappeared.

And then, uhm, I had a big operation. Four years ago -- no, rather more than that -- yes, four years ago. Ah, a little more than four years ago, four and a half years ago, and it was while I was in Dorset County Hospital, I felt that I had to put back in my life something that I'd taken out. And I could see the way of doing it was -- going into a hospital. So I, ah, didn't renew my lease on the shop at Seatown. Ah, everybody told me I was too old -- that I'd never get considered -- you know, as a nurse in hospital, but they were wrong. I, uhm, my lease ran out in October and I was in the hospital the following January. And I done three and three-quarter year, and had to retire because of angina. Other than that I should still be there, certainly.

So I've had a very varied life, very varied. And during my years on the land -- well, during my time at Doghouse in particular -- I entered thatching competitions in the Melplash Agricultural Show and I was never out of the first three in eight years. And I've got the cards, I think, in that drawer to show. And not only did I take prizes every year for thatching, but I took prizes for hedging as well. [M.J.L.: Really.] Yeah. And if anybody'd see me now, you know, and I'm dressed

up as a nurse, they'd never think that I'd thatched a rick and took prizes, or laid a hedge and won prizes for hedging, or ploughed acres of land with horses and a two furrow plough, would they? Or, could turn my hand to any agricultural job that was going. I'll tell you something which may be of interest to you, I've got here, I've got here a couple of references. -- I've never bothered to ask for references really, because I don't think they're worth the paper they're written on. -- [searches for references but fails to find them]. Anyway I had a couple of references here somewhere. One was from the farmer my uncle rented his dairy off of and the other one was from Mr. Ernie Ryall. I remember what Mr. Ernie Ryall said, that, uh, he could thoroughly recommend me as being capable of doing any work on the land whatsoever, and looking after any stock. He was quite right there. Quite right there. One thing is this, that I've studied animals all my life, and I don't want to blow my trumpet, I honestly think I can say that I know as much about the average animal more than the average person who isn't a vet. I wouldn't encroach on a veterinary, so far as the veterinary side of it, mind. But by and large if I see an animal I can tell near enough what's wrong with it and I can tell immediately if he isn't right. And this is why I think that was a great benefit to me when I went into nursing, because humans are very, very, much like animals, and so therefore what was peculiar to the animal was peculiar to the human. So it made my work in the hospital so much easier. I was able to grasp things quicker, and come to terms with things quicker, for the simple reason I'd already had the basic knowledge, yes.

Now is there anything else you want to know, Martin?¹

The most notable feature of this brief autobiographical statement is his organisation of its form to explore and reveal his own personality. Although he has used a chronological pattern he begins his life story not with the time and place of his own birth -- they are not mentioned -- but with a description of the two sides of his family and of the traits of character which he believes himself to have

¹Recorded interview, January 3, 1974; Chideock.

inherited from them. This structuring of the account reflects an interest in self analysis which is a part of his general interest in human character. It also suggests his impulse to be in control of any situation in which he finds himself; in the case of our interviews he perceived the situation as involving the evaluation of his personality and the worth of the kind of life which he has led; in such an event he could not have been content to merely supply information but also felt bound to direct my conclusions: "... and so we've got, I think, wishful thinking perhaps, a little bit of the best of both worlds." The desire to be in control, whether it be of a conversation or in the exercise of a skill, is a fundamental trait in his character and, through his ability to impress others with his competence and probity, is also an important element in his success as a charmer.

The fluency with which he sets up the contrast between the rural skills and wisdom of his maternal grandfather and the formal education, business acumen, and "gift of the spoken word," which his father possessed suggests that he has often considered these questions. The ease with which he can give a complex oral account of his life which evaluates the influence of people and events on the growth of his own character is a talent which may be the result of an upbringing in a predominantly oral culture where verbal skills were prized more highly than literary ability. The assurance with which he is able to make absolute statements of moral values may also stem from an early life which was spent in a hierarchical rural community in which moral principles were not open to questioning.

In this sense, therefore, autobiography is a familiar mode to him which he commands with grace and power. He frequently takes characters and events, which become what he terms "little stories" or "instances," from his personal history and makes them embody attitudes and philosophies which can illustrate his views. The homage to his grandfather which he has deliberately placed at the beginning of his life story is a mark of respect and an example of the way in which Les has taken certain people as exemplars of particular virtues and has modeled his own behaviour on theirs. His relationship with his father-in-law will later be shown to have repeated this pattern of admiration and emulation of an older and more knowledgeable man.

His account of his family is partly framed as an apology or explanation for his lack of formal education. Though he denies having regrets about leaving school and working on the land subsequent conversations have suggested that he sometimes feels that he has missed some opportunities; nevertheless, he falls back for reassurance on the more traditional values of the farming community in which experience was regarded as being of more worth than theoretical knowledge. Thus he suggests that he turned every situation to his advantage as with learning barbering as a boy and continuing to do it long after it ceased to be financially necessary; likewise, although he was given no choice but to work for his uncle he "learned a lot under him." This positive attitude and his stress on the variety of things which were to be learned in rural work is characteristic of him.

He feels a sense of detachment from the way of life that was led by his grandfather. The life of what he calls "the countryside" and that of "today" are separate in his view and he looks back on rural life with nostalgia. His ability to feel nostalgic at all is a measure of the distance he has travelled from his former way of life as a farm worker; he is in no sense to be regarded as an oblivious "survival" from some earlier period of cultural history who has been unaffected by contemporary trends of thought. It is, in fact, his experience of transition between cultural patterns as much as his knowledge of cultural tradition itself which makes his commentary of interest to the folklorist.

His economic success is a factor in his sense of the distance between himself in the present and his working class grandfather and the men with whom he worked on the land. His achievement of financial security, however, has been at the expense of his health; he considers that the strain of running three businesses at once caused the present weakness of his heart. The life of the countryside, in retrospect, seems to him to have been blessedly free of stress and worry. The "many nice fellows" that he met on the land were always ready to help, he recalls, without seeking money in return. He is right to remember them in this way, for there were many traditions of mutual aid in which no money ever changed hands, but his reflection also suggests his weariness with the pressure of modern business. Part of his motivation as a charmer is that it enables him to feel that he is again one of this "genuine

sort of people," the country workers, who help others out of kindness; as a charmer he is obligated to neither ask for nor to receive any payment for his help.

His first major illness seems to have been a spiritual crisis which caused him to turn his back on business. Elsewhere he has said that his years as a nurse, which followed, were the happiest of his life. There seems to have been a real similarity between his motivation as a charmer and his desire to be a nurse for in both he was able to minister to people and to receive their gratitude. His pride at having been accepted as a practical nurse, despite his advanced age and lack of formal qualifications, is typical of him; he tells many narratives of how he has surprised those who doubted his ability and such stories include some in which he convinces sceptics of the efficacy of charming.

The tone of self-confidence which is apparent throughout this passage, and which is especially marked in his claim that Farmer Ryall was "quite right" to describe him as being capable of any kind of farm work, is also characteristic. Subsequent conversations revealed the value of such confidence in both working life and charming.

In the composite account of Les Ollerton's life, which begins in this chapter with a description of his childhood and youth, these themes and aspects of his personality which seemed to dominate our interviews are explored in more detail. His autobiographical statement has served as a partial index to the topics which are of importance to him and I have tried to reflect his choice in what I have presented. Quotations have been given at length in order to

allow him to "speak for himself" in as far as is possible though bearing in mind the necessity of imposing a certain order on what would otherwise seem confused to the unprepared reader. Nevertheless, it is not pretended that this biography describes his life as he would depict it; rather it is a work of inference and interpretation drawn from what was said, what was left unsaid, and from the manner and tone of his conversation and our relationship.

The chronological sequence which I have given to his recollections is, therefore, an extraneous ordering which has had to be applied. As the emergence of significant traits in his personality is traced through his childhood and adolescence, however, I have felt free to move between the depiction of the boy to that of the adult for the purposes of comparison. His portrayal of himself as a child is as self-conscious as any other statement which he has made about himself and the contemporary function of these stories of himself, which are a part of his narrative repertory, is considered. The chapter continues, however, with a description of the village in which he spent his early life.

Alderton

The village of Alderton lies between Bristol and Malmesbury in north-west Wiltshire. This part of the county is a rural area of broad fields and parkland and is owned by several large estates. The principles of eighteenth century landscaping have been followed widely and many of the large flat fields are ornamented by groupings of tall elm, walnut, and oak trees. In 1827 the estate of

which Alderton formed a part was bought by Joseph Neeld of London who rebuilt the village and its church. His planning can be seen in the regularity with which the houses are positioned and in the uniformity of their design. They are two storeyed and built from rectangular blocks of hard Cotswold stone. Their roofs are of stone tiles which were also produced on the estate. The houses stand about twenty-five yards from the road on either side in their own large gardens. They have an appearance of severity which derives from their angular construction and from the way that mosses and lichens have never been allowed to grow on them. During Les's boyhood two men were employed solely to scrape vegetation from roofs and walls. The result is a "model village" with the appearance of trim propriety that was desired by "improving" Victorian landlords. Les says that it has not changed very much.²

The Anglican church of St. Giles at Alderton was also extensively restored and enlarged by Joseph Neeld in 1844. With some of the old church stonework he built a school house which was used until the early 1920's. After this the children went to school in Luckington, the next village, one and a half miles away. Alderton also possessed a vicarage, three farms, a general shop, and a village hall. It did not provide a public house or a non-conformist chapel. Those villagers who sought solace in either had to walk to Luckington.

² This description is the result of my visit to Alderton during January 1975. The historical details are taken from an information sheet available in the church.

The class structure of the village was apparent in the arrangement of its houses. Lea remarked on this point while describing Alderton. He has gained this insight through his adult experiences in Chideock, however, for he was hardly aware of it as a child:

Now if you start from the top of the village, look, uh, now, -- going back to a little class again, isn't it funny -- now if you start from the vicarage -- d'you know, I see my village now through different eyes now -- I see it more interesting now than I saw it when I was young. Because I see things now that I wouldn't have thought of in those days because as we get older we learn more, you see. Now I see the village, starting with the church. They've got a beautiful old vicarage, that's a lovely place, and you know, of course, there again, the vicar in those days was a wealthy man.³

The vicarage stands amid lawns and gravel walks almost hidden from the road by the churchyard yew trees. It is the grandest house in the village; Grittleton House, the seat of the Neeld family, is several miles away. The next most important resident, after the vicar, was the tenant of the largest farm. Below him, and further down the street, came the hierarchy of the estate workers. The two gamekeepers of the estate had fine detached houses to themselves. Below them came the semi-detached houses of the labourers. All the houses belonged to the estate and their tenants paid a nominal rent, Lesta grandfather paid a shilling a week, so that they could be legally liable to eviction.

³ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

There were about three hundred inhabitants during Les Ollerton's boyhood. Families were usually large; Grandfather Wiltshire had four sons and three daughters. Most of them remained in the village; the girls went into domestic service until they married and became housewives and the men worked on the estate or for its tenant farmers. A photograph of the Grittleton estate workers hung in Les's father's house; it showed a hundred people including woodmen, gamekeepers, gardeners, maids, and Les's grandfather the stone-mason.

Because almost everyone was employed in some way by the estate they were careful in what they said and did for fear that someone would inform on them. The system of authority extended downward from the squire and governed everyone in many aspects of their lives:

So next to the squire himself, and 'course, next to the butler, this was the most powerful bloke, I always thought, in the set-up, was the butler. He's the chap who was the most powerful. This is the one that the servants feared. Yeah, they feared him. Uh, I think the workers on the estate feared the estate agent, and, uh, most everybody around feared the gamekeeper.

Even the farmers were afraid to be caught shooting since their tenancy agreements forbade them to shoot any of the game animals including foxes.

The Church was also clearly on the side of authority. If a boy took pheasant and partridge eggs, as Les often did, he risked retribution from the keeper, the estate agent, and even the vicar:

Is the old keeper knowned that, my goodness gracious, you'd get turned out of your house, you would. Mind you, I tell you what, you'd get a strong letter from the estate agent. Which is a fellow called Pierson at that time. Yes, telling you what a wicked bloke, well, even the old vicar 'ould probably visit you and bring the wrath o' God on you.

Les felt, even as a child, that there was "something very powerful about the Church" because of its part in the "huge organisation" of the Church of England and its connection with the Lord of the Manor. Regular attendance was taken as a sign of steady character both by those in authority and by the other working villagers. Those who went to the Baptist chapel were dissenting from the social system as well as from the religious practices espoused by the Church of England:

I think the thing is this, why a few people from my village would walk a mile and a half to Luckington to go to the Baptist chapel was because they wanted freedom from what was the usual practice. If they went to the local church it meant that they were subservient, if this is the word, to [F.H.L.: to the Lord of the Manor.] the Lord of the Manor, then the Vicar, and then, we'll say, the principal inhabitants of the village.⁴

Fred Kitchen, in his autobiography, has also noted the sharp division in his village between "churchers" and "chapellers"; the vicar would not recognise those who went to chapel.⁵

In Les's sardonic account the vicar is the creature of the squire:

⁴ Recorded interview, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

⁵ Kitchen, Brother to the Ox, p. 29.

He was a very powerful fellow in the village many years ago, the vicar. Because he only had one bloke over him, well he had two blokes over him, and that was the Bishop and the Squire. And the Squire was, well, I was going to say almost as powerful as the Bishop. He always dictated the, what sort o' sermon the old pa'son should preach if 'twas, uhm, he could get near the voting time, you know. He almost, uhm, expounded his views, from the pulpit, see. Yes, oh yes, good old set-up it was.

And then what they'd do then, you see, to try to get straight, they'd invite all the kids, like I used to when I was a kid, go to Crittleton House to a party every Christmas and then give you a little present, you see, and this was a way of sort of, uh, evening things up a bit.

Jack Lawley has written that in the west Dorset parish in which he worked during the 1920's the Conservative candidate would arrive by car and go straight to the Rectory.⁶

Les's summary of the social order in the village as "a good old set-up" was given with ironical humour. As a believer in the value of individual enterprise and as a self-made man he has little regard for inherited privilege or affected superiority though at the same time he is no radical. He tells several stories of how, as a parish councillor in Chideock, he has stood up against pressure from the squire. He takes keen pleasure in being on equal terms with a figure of authority of whom he would once have gone in fear. His contemporary attitude to the Church shows the same delight in being a little disrespectful; he no longer believes in the infallible judgements of the local vicar. His perceptions of the

⁶ Lawley, Memories of a Herdsman, p. 20.

social structure of Alderton, with its interlocking levels of authority, are not those of his childhood. What remains to show the child's view, however, are the memories of squire, vicar, keeper, and policeman as frightening figures, ^{kill}joys, and people who had to be appeased.

The villagers were encouraged to be self-sufficient in food production. Most families kept chickens and fattened a pig. Each garden had a walnut tree which had been provided on a whim by the Squire, who had a particular fondness for the look of them, but which gave good crops of walnuts for pickling. There were usually apple, pear, and plum trees also; Les's grandfather, like others in the village, was good at grafting. The specialist gardener on the estate would guard his knowledge of such things as pollination but the ordinary village men co-operated with each other by exchanging seeds. Gardening was an activity in which money did not change hands and it was further distinguished from their daily work on the estate by the fact that they were working entirely for themselves. Gardening, therefore, was one of the activities which bound the working men of the village together and was a topic of common interest. This has been confirmed as a traditional preoccupation by George Bourne who noted with surprise that the "true interest" of Bettesworth and other villagers lay not in adventurous narratives but in their work "and especially in the management of their gardens."⁷

⁷ Bourne, The Bettesworth Book, p. 257.

Each man's pride in the appearance of his garden caused him to grow plenty of flowers as well as vegetables. The choice of flowers was traditional; the varieties chosen were easy to grow and seeds and cuttings were taken from them each year and exchanged with neighbours. Les remembers that his grandfather grew rambler roses, michaelmas daisies, phlox, tiger lilies, jasmine, hypericum and sweet williams. Even the situation of certain flowers in the garden followed an established pattern:

I don't know why but they used to grow hollyhocks just inside the garden gate. I think it was, uhm, in those days it was a bit of a competition who could grow the tallest one.⁸

S.J. Coleman has given a similar description of cottage gardens in Dorset: "The villagers keenly cherish their gardens, growing in season all the old-fashioned flowers, hollyhocks and pansies, sun-flowers and pot herbs, while nearly every cottage has a pear tree and a bush of pink may blossom."⁹ The rivalry in flower growing was but one expression of the general opinion that being a diligent gardener was part of a man's duty to his family and a sign of good character.

It was considered lazy to lag behind one's neighbours in digging and planting:

Living in a small community like that you only want one bloke to start. You only want one chap to start gardening and the fellow next door 'll get his spade out, you see? This is it, and they, they natter over the garden fence and all that sort of thing.

⁸ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

⁹ Stanley Jackson Coleman, Traditional Tales of Dorsetshire (Douglas, Isle of Man, 1954), p. 3.

If a man was unable to dig his own garden through ill health then his neighbours would help for they knew the importance of the garden's produce to the man's wife:

And you know it is that community spirit that, uh, we haven't got in our village [Chideock]. We haven't got it here. [F.H.L.: You did have it.] Oh we had it at one time. When I came to live at Chideock first d'you know if you had an old lady, and perhaps her husband was ill, or perhaps he was dead, gracious me, she didn't have to wait to ask someone to come and dig her garden but half a dozen blokes would turn up, and they'd dig her garden and plant it. But not now.

They were also reluctant to see ground go to waste; Les approves of the old practice of allowing men to plant their own vegetables in the corners of fields that could not be reached by machinery and were thus useless to the farmer.

Although a wide range of vegetables was grown, potatoes were the most important crop; it was traditional to plant them on Good Friday:

I think they used to do similar like they do now, I think Good Friday was the day when they had, I think they, this was one day when they didn't work because it was a very religious day, Good Friday, and I think that was a day when they all really went to town, you know, getting their potatoes in.

When a particular variety of potato "grew tired" of one man's soil an exchange of seed would be made:

They used to give one another, they didn't buy, you know, that sort of thing you didn't do, you bartered more than you bought, so if you, for instance, was growing "Epicure" and you grew them, we'll say, a couple or three years and you wanted a change someone would let you have some, say, "Kerr's Pink" or "Red Scott," you see, and then you'd have your seed. And they were very particular, you know, with seed in those days.

It was a necessity to produce an early crop; Les's grandfather had planted peas "in the winter more or less," and always said that "you should plant your late potatoes first and your early potatoes last." With a large family to feed on a small wage such knowledge was important:

You know you wanted them quicker because naturally, you know, the quicker you could get stuff from the garden, you know, the less you had to spend at the little shop, and when you only had twelve bob a week, dear, it certainly had to be elastic. You had to stretch it fairly well.

The Family

It was in the home of one of these estate workers that Les spent most of his early life for he was sent to be brought up by his grandparents in Alderton when his parents found that they could not look after him properly while they worked as stewards of a Conservative club at Warminster which was some twenty-five miles away. The consequence for Les was that his grandfather quickly and permanently replaced his father in his affections, although he always missed his mother. This relationship with his grandfather became one of the most important in his life with an influence on him which, he says, endures to the present. Through being brought up from some time after infancy until he was seven in his grandparents' home he was exposed to the folk tradition of an earlier generation which was more comprehensive and more profoundly held than that of his parents who at that time had no ties with village life; his mother had left Alderton to marry his father who came from a wealthy family in Bath

and was college educated. When Les was seven his parents returned to Alderton since his father had become a semi-invalid after being gassed in the Great War and had to live out his life on a pension. They moved into a house which was just across the street from that of his grandparents and Les continued to make himself at home in both households for he was able to find substitutes in his grandfather and uncles for his morose and debilitated father.

Some of his earliest memories from this time were stimulated by asking him to describe his grandfather's house. In recalling those physical details which caught his attention he went, in imagination, from room to room and so I have followed his arrangement in this description.

Entry to the house was by way of a small porch in which was an alcove where, as a boy, Les noticed that his grandfather kept his building tools in a wooden box. The kitchen was the most important room and the first that Les thought of in describing the house. The family ate and spent most of their time in the kitchen. It was sparsely furnished but was vigorously cleaned. Les remembered the deal table that had been "scrubbed white" so that the harder grain of its wooden top stood up like ribs where the softer wood had worn away. The cleanliness of the table symbolized the good house-keeping of the wife:

In those days you didn't put a table cloth on, only at weekends, if I remember correctly. Because, um, well the woman took a pride in her table looking clean. So if you walked in [He breaks off to tell us that he has remembered "a funny little story."

He told it after the following passage. It related to the theme of the cleanliness of village women since it described his shock and amusement in a house he visited to find a child sitting on a chamber-pot and supposedly hidden under the table by the table cloth. Ah, yes, the thing was, now, the average woman in the village in those days, knowing the neighbour could just walk in, like they used to, they say, "I'm comin' in Mrs.," or "Mary," or whatever it was. So, you see, they had to be clean because the neighbours walk in, you know, just like that. So, ahm, if you was untidy the news soon went round the village that "Mrs. So-and-so, she's a bit untidy, dirty." So you, I think you were brought up to be clean; and, uhm, the women, although they were poor, they were very very clean.¹⁰

In describing the custom of entering a neighbour's house without knocking he is aware that manners have now changed. He still enters without knocking among the old villagers at Chideock or at the farms where he is known in the Marshwood Vale. Among newcomers to Chideock, or at my parents' house, however, he feels obliged to knock. High standards of cleanliness are also still important to him and he regards any falling off from them as signs of failing mental or physical powers in the old people that he visits.

Besides the kitchen chairs there was also an ottoman. It had a roll cushion which his grandfather sometimes took to place under his feet while sitting in his high-backed wooden armchair. His head rested on a feather stuffed pillow which was tied to the back of the chair. This was his grandfather's own chair.

There were two particular types of chairs -- and nearly every family had these -- was a grandmother's chair and a grandfather's chair. And you found that

¹⁰ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

the grandmother's chair didn't have any arms on it because she was supposed to be working all the time and grand-dad had his so he had arms on it like that so he could stuff his pipe in his mouth, put his foot up like that [indicating the position of the crossed-legs] and he used to give me a ride on his foot.

His memory of playing with his grandfather suggests the warmth of their relationship.

It was from his grandfather that Les remembers receiving his toilet training. His grandmother would say, "I expect he needs to go," and his grandfather would take Les up the garden to the "closet." The privy was a two-seater with one large hole and one smaller. They would sit there by the light of a candle and his grandfather would say, "Have you done anything my son?" to which Les might reply, "No, can't do it." His grandfather then advised, "You get some paper, roll it up into a ball, and you grip it in your hands and go 'Uuurgh!'" Grandfather Wiltshire also made sure that the boy would not have to ask to go outside during the church service. After ringing the bells on Sunday morning and before going in to the service Grandfather and the boy would come out of the small belfry door and go round to the side of the church in the grassy yard to urinate; Les remembers his desire to "be like Gran'pa" in everything:

Grandfather did and so did I. Well, I had to keep sides with him; I was following him about and learning all the time.¹¹

Imitation was the prime learning method in Les's relationship with his grandfather and this traditional method of instruction is described in more detail later in the chapter.

¹¹ Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

His grandmother's work, while sitting down, was to knit, sew, or darn socks. Signs of her other labours were evident throughout the house. The range for cooking was meticulously cleaned and black-leaded. It consisted of ovens on either side of a fireplace. A hook came down to hang a pot over the heat. Even the flagstones in front of the fireplace were scrubbed and whitened each day. The boy knew that he daren't make a mark on that white surface; though he might be forgiven for almost anything else, and even his grandfather would have been afraid to knock out his pipe there. Nevertheless, the boy played with the fire:

Oh, the thing I remember best of all was the bellis (bellows). You know, "sch," like that. I used to push the nozzle in when my grandmother wasn't looking and get 'n red hot, you know, cor! golly! and you used to suck the flame up through into the thing, you know. And you suck 'em up, you see, like that, and you've seen the flame throwers haven't you, you know they swallow a drop of methylated spirits, get it back in their mouths, light it after like this. Well you get the old bellows, you "sch," suck in the old flame and blow it out and again if you done it pretty quick. If you kept it in there too long you burned the side of the bellows. Yeah, I remember using that thing many a time and being drilled on how to use it, you know. You had to blow steady, not "phw!" like this and blow the fire up the chimney.¹²

The fireplace was wide enough for a person to be able to stand inside and look up the chimney but less wide than is usual in Dorset cottages. Les found the Wiltshire houses more comfortable, being warmer, for this reason. Little coal was burned as wood was easily available in the area:

¹² Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

You had huge woodlands all around you. You had Cranham Wood, Grove Wood, Cream Copse, and goodness gracious me, a lot of plantations, and wood was there for the getting.

He commented on the fact that wood was cleaner to burn than coal since it did not leave a sticky deposit of soot:

Wobd, you know, is very fine, a fine ash, and a lot of the wood, like I said, up round there, would be elm, beech, uh, sycamore, well, which is very similar.

This made the task of sweeping chimneys easier; his grandfather had an extending brush but many villagers used a holly bush which was dragged down through the chimney by a rope. Such technical details as this, and of the choice of wood for burning, interest him. They represent a kind of knowledge which was once commonplace but is now becoming almost esoteric. George Bourne has recorded his admiration for the inventiveness shown in this technique of chimney sweeping which he cites as another evidence of the labourer's versatility of usefulness: "After all, who would know by the light of Nature how to go about sweeping a chimney, as they used to do it here, with rope and furze-bush dragged down?"¹³

There was no parlour; instead there was a "backhouse" which served as a store-room:

Owing to the fact that he had a big family -- strapping great fellows to feed -- the house that would have been the parlour was [M.L.L. suggests he means "room"] that's right, the room that would

¹³ Bourne, Change in the Village, p. 30.

have been a parlour was where he hang up his half a pig and he kept the barrel, you know half a, he'd a-cut a beer barrel in half, which he'd got down the local pub, and he kept his maize in there.

Apples and pears that had been grown in the garden were also stored there. Les's use of the word "house" as meaning "room" is a common dialectal usage in south-west England; I have heard the term used in the same way in Bridport.¹⁴

Les remembered the maize-barrel particularly because when he was a child he had got a grain of maize stuck in his nose. His mother had "cried like old boots" and took him to the doctor. The doctor failed to extricate it but later that night she succeeded in getting it out with a hairpin. The salted pig hanging from a hook in the ceiling also fascinated the boy; Les mentioned it several times during his description of the house.

The killing of the pig was an important household event since its feeding had been an investment of care and money and it was expected to provide a large part of the family's meat. The pig was slaughtered by a man who combined butchering with keeping the village shop and off-licence. He received half the pig in exchange for killing and salting it. The practice of "gnawing it out," or exchanging goods or services without a monetary transaction has been described by Walter Rose in his account of village life in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ It may be that the Alderton shop-keeper's share represented

¹⁴ See Wright, English Dialect Dictionary, III, 250.

¹⁵ Walter Rose, Good Neighbours: Some Recollections of an English Village and its People (Cambridge, 1942), pp. 54-57.

partial payment for merchandise; Les remembered that many villagers had "bad memories" when it came to paying bills at the shop.

It was usual for children to ask for the bladder of the pig and to use it in impromptu games:

And you know, they'd have her killed and [laughs] I've been down, you know, when they'd a-killed 'n after the bladder and, you know, we blow that one up and play football with it. Cor! lovely! done that before now! [laughs] lots of times, after they've - killed a pig.

He remembers its fatness; it was one of the few meats other than rabbit that were plentiful in that house and which could be eaten liberally:

I've seen my grandfather cut off rashers like this [holding his fingers an inch apart to suggest the thickness]. You know, kill a pig and the old butcher would have a half and he'd salt him the other half, and you just go out and cut a piece off! And you get half a pan full of fat, you know, because he probably had a couple of litters of pigs, you know, before they killed him, and they fatted the old girl up, and she'd be, I don't know, about [pausing to consider] twelve score, see.

The act of going into the backhouse with a knife to cut off a thick rasher is the central feature of this recollection; he used a similar description in an earlier account:

And you'd go out with a knife and cut off a strip and you'd have a, you know, the old rind on it, and it'd be, well, it would be about quarter of an inch of fat, beautiful stuff, really lovely.¹⁶

The half a pig now figures in his conversation as an example of a kind of abundance which is no longer seen: however, he qualifies this

¹⁶ Recorded interview, January 6, 1974, Chideock.

with the reminder that there was little variety to be had in food. His grandfather, like his father-in-law, never ate pudding after his Sunday dinner for he believed that "enough is as good as a feast."

Les also remembered that the backhouse walls were decorated with prints taken from calendars:

They would be mostly of country scenes, you know, [M.J.L.: Haymaking?] haymaking, that's right. Horses and cows, you know, flowers, very often flowers, people dressed up in long dresses, I remember.¹⁷

In another conversation he recalled the pictures that had hung in his father's house. They were similar in subject and sentiment to those in his grandfather's home; all seemed to express simple virtues and the satisfaction of a placid country life. Two pictures had shown what he described as "an old fashioned courting couple" sitting on a seat, the man standing behind. Another showed a man with a gun and two dogs standing under a tree. One picture, which had been cut out of a magazine, was of a little girl with a collie dog; it included a verse which ran:

Weary of frolic and tired of play
A golden head on the pillow lay.
[he forgot two intervening lines]
playtimes and romps o'er,¹⁸
The faithful dog upon the floor.

The pictures suggest a mood of stasis which may have been reflected in the taste and attitudes of the village at that time. Les has carried

¹⁷ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

¹⁸ Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

forward some of these ideal images of contentment in his own thinking so that, like the man under the tree, he has said that in his retirement he now wants nothing more from life than to walk about the fields with his old dog.¹⁹

Most homes in the village were decorated in the same way with similar prized possessions. He remembered that brass-warming pans were hung up in nearly every cottage; there had been two in his father's house. They were meant to be filled with coals or a hot brick to warm the beds but Les recalled with amusement that they were kept unused and brightly polished for show:

But what they'd do [laughs] they'd cheat, or they used to, my mother and a lot of them did, they wrap up the old brick when he wasn't, you know, when they thought he was hot enough, in some calico whatever it was, and send you to bed with that one! with a brick! And hang the warming pan up for show, right in front the door, so as you open the door there was the warming pan.²⁰

Popular taste in such furnishings seems to have been conservative. Richard Jefferies' excellent description of the household furnishings of Wiltshire farmers in the 1870's mentions that in a typical example of the "third [or lowest] class of farmstead [as distinct from labourer's cottage]... a great brazen warming-pan hangs near the door."²¹ Most people owned a grandfather clock. They kept perfect

¹⁹ Notes, June 5, 1974, Chideock.

²⁰ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

²¹ Jefferies, The Toilers of the Field, pp. 11-12.

time because there were always one or two men in the village who knew how to repair and regulate them. Jefferies also records that such clocks were always found in the homes of the lower class farmers and that they were often locally made.

Flowers were not usually brought into the house for decoration. However, his grandmother did gather a certain kind of dried grass, called "Shivery shakes," which she arranged in vases on the tallboy in her bedroom. His grandmother refused to have lilac in the house:

Now if you saw anything in the house at all it would be moon daisies and shivery shakes, but by golly, you couldn't take in lilac! [F.H.L.: I've heard that before. M.L.L.: No, that was unlucky.] By golly, d'you know if I took in lilac into my grandmother's house she'd nearly do her nut. She really would. You know, I'd have all the wicked spirits in the village after me.

Les may have been more deeply impressed as a child with his grandmother's fear than he now remembers.²² The belief still interests him for he went on to say that he has often wondered why churchyards are planted with poisonous trees such as yew and laburnum and often have lilacs nearby. Although his tone was flippant as he discussed the "wicked spirits" as being frightening figures which were often used by his grandmother to control him his interest in the concept

²²"Shivery shakes" and "moon daisies" are identified as *Briza media* and *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum* respectively by A.S. Macmillan in his Popular Names of Flowers, Fruits, &c, as used in the County of Somerset and the adjacent parts of Devon, Dorset and Wilts. (Yeovil, Somerset, 1922), p. 245, p. 195. The belief that it is unlucky to bring lilac into the house is general throughout England; see E. and M.A. Radford, Encyclopedia of Superstitions (New York, 1969), p. 163.

of evil is a sober one. His belief that evil is the polar opposite of the good which is represented in the power of charming will be discussed in a later chapter.

He has vivid memories of the wash-house. It contained a large iron mangle, a wooden washboard, a galvanized iron tub, for there was no sink or piped water, and a copper which was heated by a fire that was lit beneath it. He remembered his grandmother at work there:

She'd put her apron on and get wet through, because it wasn't waterproof. They'd put this coarse, sort of sacking apron on.

The smell of the soap and the washing was particularly attractive to him:

I used to always fancy, in those days, they used to use "Sunlight" soap. Can you remember it dear? [to M.L.L.] And it used to smell of Christmas puddings cooking. Used to be a beautiful smell.

The clothes were boiled in the copper and stirred about with a wooden "copper stick" which had grown shiny with use.

Baths were also taken in the wash-house in the iron tub using boiling water from the copper and buckets of cold water from the pump. Saturday night was the usual time for a bath:

Lots of times, you know, I remember, when I was a boy when my grandmother say, "Now you go and have a bath my son." Now, of course, it's only once a week you know, unless mind, you fell in the pond -- I've done that more than once! -- yeah, we always bathed Saturday night before we went to bed, because you had to be clean for Church. You couldn't sing in the choir if you smelled of the pond. You couldn't. I probably smelled of some old pond where I'd been getting moorhens' eggs.

His allusion to falling in the pond is typical of the kind of boyish mischief he likes to remember and talk about. The contrast he sets up between the solemnity of churchgoing and his weekday escapades is also typical of his taste for undermining anything which might seem pompous.

Les took a candle to light him upstairs to bed although oil lamps were used in the rooms below; he was not allowed to let it burn for long:

You immediately blew it out when you got into bed.
There was no such thing as reading in bed.

The beds were stuffed with flock, a cheap stuffing of tufts of wool and cotton, except for that of his grandparents which was a feather bed. Les used to pull and mould the flock mattress into a hollow which surrounded his body snugly. The bedrooms were very small as the houses had been built to accommodate the large numbers that had been usual in labouring families of the nineteenth century. The upstairs space, although equivalent to that downstairs, where Les had felt that there was plenty of room, was divided into four small bedrooms and a tiny boxroom. His grandparents' room, where he had often slept, was a little larger than the other three. Les remembers its small window that looked out on to the glebe land where he played football and cricket with the other village boys.

Beyond the household Les's behaviour as a young boy was controlled by a number of warnings and prohibitions many of which were of a religious nature. Both grandparents invoked threatening

figures, such as the Devil, as a means of instilling correct behaviour and of keeping him out of dangerous places.

The belfry of the church was intriguing to the boy but was dangerous since he might be struck by one of the heavily swinging bells if he explored too closely to them. Accordingly, his grandfather once took Les up the winding stone stairway in the bell tower to the belfry and showed him the dark hole where the ropes, hung down through the floorboards beneath the bells. "The Devil's down there," said his grandfather, and the boy, looking over curiously, glimpsed the vicar moving about below; "For years I thought he was the Devil," Les said.²³

The Devil became an ambivalent figure to the boy since he seemed to be both the antagonist and the agent of the vicar. The Devil appeared to enforce the admonitions of his grandparents and the vicar by administering punishment to those who were disobedient. Some of the other boys were not threatened with the Devil and Les thought it unfair that the Devil would take him but not them if he played cricket on Sunday. When he disobeyed once he ran into a wasps' nest and was badly stung. His grandfather declared that this was a just and diabolically executed punishment: "Never play cricket on a Sunday. My son, that's the work of the Devil," he said, extemporising a moral lesson on the basis of the accident.²⁴

²³ Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

²⁴ Notes, January 15, 1975, Bridport.

Les is now convinced that ghost stories in general are told to frighten and control children and quite vehemently denies having any belief in ghosts. The facetious manner in which he relates the threats suggests the comic function which these reminiscences have for him now. He remembers being warned against going to certain places and being out after dark:

I know when I was a boy the way my mother controlled me was that the churchyard contained spirits that was, uh, abounding, abounding at night, you know, chasing around the churchyard, so I didn't go anywhere near the churchyard, and this was because if you went near the churchyard you'd probably damage someone's grave, uh, so this was the ways and means of keeping you away. 25

His mother also told him that she had heard screams in a certain house at the end of the village when she had worked there as a girl. He feels that this story also had a further motive:

Now really and truthfully I think she was trying to frighten me home, you see. The thing was this, when I'd gone down to the next village, look, uhm, so's, uh, to be home before dark, see, I'd come on a bit quick because, you see, uh, I was likely to run into, you know, the ghost. So I think this is what her mother handed down to her, you see, and she to use the same, uh, method, handed it down to me. See, this was to stop you hanging around at night 'cause you was dead scared of a ghost.

He remembered that the other end of the village, where there was a quarry, was also believed to be haunted.

The same quasi-religious frightening figures were invoked to ensure that he behaved decorously while passing through the

churchyard on the way into church on Sunday.²⁶ He was told that "a spirit would pop up and have you" if he swore in the churchyard and the Devil would "get you" if he swore on Sunday.

The stories maintained their function in his family, however, for even as his personal scepticism grew he began to repeat the same stories to his younger brother who told them in turn to the youngest. The two elder boys slept together and Les would try to frighten Jim as they lay in bed:

I would try to tell him the most horrible tale I could so as to frighten the daylights out of him. Yeah, when you go to bed. Yes, I used to tell him about terrible things about the churchyard, you know, and, ah, people walking about in the churchyard at night, and [chuckles] my brother Bernard, who's in St. Swithin's [part of Bridport], he'd be dead stared to go past the churchyard for years. He'll tell you now. It's only because of the stories that I'd handed down to Jim and that Jim had told him, you see, of spirits walking around in the churchyard at night.

Les now tells at least one anecdote about the fear of ghosts in a graveyard. He has become humorously sceptical which is, in itself, a traditional attitude.

His lack of belief in this aspect of the supernatural world should, perhaps, be taken as an indication of his practical and almost prosaic approach to charming which, while he may consider it to be of a supernatural origin, is of a different order to the belief in ghosts which he would label as a childish superstition. The

²⁶ For a full discussion of the control of children by these means, see John Widdowson, "The Witch as a Frightening and Threatening Figure," in *The Witch Figure*, ed. Venetia Newall (London and Boston, 1973), pp. 200-220.

religious faith which underlies his belief in charming, however, has not been altered by his cynicism about ghosts and the Devil.

His mother and grandmother also read him bedtime stories from books which included what he considered the "usual" nursery rhymes such as "Mary had a little lamb." He did not choose to talk about these stories, feeling, perhaps, that they were too commonplace to add any interest to his account of his childhood. He remembered more vividly the way his mother had sung hymns to them as lullabies:

I can remember her favourite hymn was, and 'tis mine too,
uhm, "The day thou gavest Lord is ended."²⁷ I know that
one off by heart, almost verse by verse.

His sensibility has certainly been impressed by phrases from such religious verse and also from the Bible. Although he speaks of his mother as having been "very religious" and having had "great faith" it may also be true that she used hymns not solely out of religious feeling but also because they were a convenient form of literature which could be turned to secular purposes like putting children to sleep. Religion seems to have played a secular role in many areas of daily life, such as the control of children, from which it has now withdrawn to a considerable extent. His impression of the maternal side of his family is that they were extremely religious and yet he admits to some doubt as to whether his grandfather was really devout. His confusion probably stems from the difficulty of distinguishing the spiritual aspects of religious observances from their human functions, such as the comradeship

²⁷ Recorded interview, July 9, 1974, Chideock.

of the bellringers, the social intercourse of church-going, and the keeping of Sunday as a feast day, all of which were more important in social life during his youth.

The individual members of his family who figured in his childhood are all given distinctive characteristics in his recollections of them. His interest in describing them is a part of his broader desire to define and understand his own nature through the parallels to his own characteristics which he sees in the figures of his family history. This tendency to compare himself with his relatives has already been shown in his autobiographical statement at the beginning of this chapter. There he set up contrasts between the two sides of his family and commented on the particular traits of character which were shown by each of them.

These comparisons are an important element in his conversation and are valuable to him in several ways. They sometimes take the form of amusing narratives in which he figures as a mischievous boy attempting to avoid punishment and in this respect they are part of his repertory of stories about himself. They also have a didactic function; however, for they provide a framework within which he is able to articulate values; his parents, for example, are used to exemplify good and bad traits of character. Like a preacher he draws exempla concerning human behaviour from material which can easily be understood by his audience. His narratives of his childhood have, therefore, a contemporary function

for him which reaches beyond the pleasure of reminiscence and this aspect is stressed in his further recollections of his childhood and the members of his family.

His mother was younger than his father, was unsophisticated, and had never travelled far: "the Bath Road led to where? -- some unknown place," Les said, recalling her restricted life in the village. He presented her as something of a martyr to his father's morose depression; she had a box of dresses which she had sewn for herself but then rarely wore. The marriage was never completely happy because of her husband's snobbery and her own feelings of social inadequacy. Nevertheless, she was well liked in the village; Les is intensely proud that one of his contemporaries, not a relative, still tends her grave in the churchyard at Alderton and places flowers there. She made a practice of sitting up with the dying and Les remarked that he has followed her example and now does likewise.

He also learned her tactful and gentle way of approaching people:

I think your mother, whoever she may be, has got a great influence on you, regardless of what you might think. And I know that my mother had a infinite influence upon me was because, ah, it was the way she approached things. I can quite understand it, knowing my grandfather, and I know now it's from their example that I'm able to, ah, get over to a person who's nasty to me, I'm able to get them round very often, I don't seldom ever fail. I don't boast about this in any way, but I can by a carefully chosen word or a carefully chosen action, I can get someone who's going to be

nasty to me very often the opposite. And my mother would be like him [his grandfather] whereas my father would fail.²⁸

Les is particularly aware of the value of tact and many of his anecdotes show him using it to get out of trouble or to persuade someone to his opinion. It is a vital element in his persona as a folk healer and a lay pastor.

His mother was more tolerant with her sons than was their father. Les found that he could talk his way out of trouble with her and now regrets having told her so many lies. As an "instance" of her tolerant good humour he told one of his favourite stories of his own misbehaviour. He had come home after searching for moorhens' eggs during which he had waded naked into the pond and covered himself in black and stinking mud which he had tried to clean off with handfuls of grass. While sitting at tea his mother had found out where the vile smell was coming from and Les was ordered out to take a bath. He contrasted her subsequent reaction with that of his father:

And now my mother 'ould laugh over this, years after, but my father would never see the funny side of this, you see. He would be, he didn't have the humour, to see, uh, the funny part of it. Now my mother would; she'd no doubt go to town and give you a clout on the ear, uh, or lay down the law, but the next day she'd see the funny side and she'd probably laugh over it. But my father wouldn't do that; he'd think it was a disgusting thing to do, uh, to take your clothes off, you know, in the middle of a field, somebody 'd be looking, and all that sort of thing. And another thing too, walking in the mud,

²⁸ Recorded interview, January 22; 1975, Bridport.

behavin' like a pig, this is how he'd suggest it was. Whereas my mother country born and bred, you see, sees things through different eyes. Yes she could see the funny side of it.²⁹

His mother showed her affection but his father seems always to have held himself aloof; Les remembers how she used to cuddle him when he had an earache. This difference between his parents may have been due to their respective family traditions and, perhaps, to their difference in social class. The Wiltshires were physically demonstrative; his grandfather would play with Les by giving him "rides" on his foot. He has never mentioned his father as joining in any of these traditional games which are played by adults with children.

His father had no real friends in the village. He lived withdrawn from its life and did not even go to church which was unusual and suggests that he did not much care about his neighbours' opinion of him. Besides having been gassed in France during the Great War he suffered from valvular disease of the heart. Les remembers him as a sullen figure who sat slumped in an armchair staring into the fire.

His feelings of superiority rested on his college education and his wealthy family. His attitude was not liked in the village. He was "a typical Ollerton," Les said, "they thought they were a race apart." His criticisms probably echo those used in the

²⁹ Recorded interview, January 6, 1974, Chideock.

village. Les said that his father "carried a chip on his shoulder," meaning that he had a corrosive feeling of being "hard done by" which prevented him from co-operating with others because of pique or resentment. This attitude led to his ultimate loneliness when his wife died. He mellowed in his old age and found that he needed people to talk to but then had to bribe them to visit him by giving away small items like the old pictures which Les and his brothers missed bitterly when they returned to the house after his death.

His father usually appears as a stern disciplinarian in Les's anecdotes. Mr. Ollerton administered discipline according to a well-defined code which he took pains to ensure that Les understood:

Now, if you go back to my childhood, we knew what the consequences were. We knew and if we went out of our way, hok, to break the rules, we accepted the consequences. And when I look back over the years -- and I had one or two real bad tannings from my father -- not tannings [M.L.L.: That was a stick was it?] Yes with a stick. And it was not a tanning, it was a thrashing. And to bed without food as well, which was an added insult. But when I look back, I knowed jolly well that if I hadn't a-asked for it I wouldn't have received it. He warned me well in advance. He said "Look if you do this, if you tell me a lie, look, and I find you out, then I shall give you a beating. But look if you've done something wrong, you come and tell me the truth, I shall send you to bed without food, but I won't beat you."³⁰

In retrospect Les approves of this system of justice and considers that it should be followed in society as a whole. He considers that

³⁰ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

the retributive system of punishment is taught in the Bible and is a necessary "guideline" to help people control themselves:

How can you expect anyone look, to behave, in a, we'll say, I don't say a model of society because you're never going to have a model of society, in a man-made society then, unless you say: "Now look, if you don't behave then this is what's going to happen to you." You, you got to have a guideline. If you don't you get chaos.

His own conviction in the area of moral values probably stems from his disciplined upbringing in which right and wrong were sharply distinguished. The tone of certitude which this confidence lends to his moral pronouncements is an important element in his pastoral role. People who seek his advice perhaps expect him to be able to resolve complex issues for them since he never seems to be in doubt about what is right and what is wrong.

Les remembers particularly one occasion on which his father deliberately warned him against any misbehaviour which would bring shame on the family. The event has become enshrined in a narrative as having been a crucial event in his life which has shaped his subsequent behaviour. The anecdote, which I have heard him tell twice and which my parents had heard him tell on other occasions, is part of his normal repertory of stories about his youth and he seems to value it as a story which can be told dramatically and which also provides a theme for moral commentary.

At the age of about sixteen he had begun to go to dancing lessons at Luckington with Frank Handy, a boy of his own age, who was mistrusted by Les's mother as being likely to get her son into trouble:

"He used to swear a fair bit and he was a bit of a lag; he was always up to pranks and that sort of thing." Les came home late after the first lesson and his account of the consequence uses suspense to heighten the listener's attention until the climax of the story is reached in his father's reaction:

As I come up the road, then, having dropped my mate a little ways down the road, I noticed that the light was on in the kitchen, you see. And I didn't take any particular notice of this, I thought, "Well, it's my mother," you know -- and she was easy, very easy, I could always get round her easy -- I thought, "Well, she's waited up for me." Which was [a] little unusual really. I thought "Well, fair enough," you know, "it's mother." And funny thing too, she was soon to go into Bristol Royal Infirmary, I think, for an operation. I thought "Fair enough," you know, "it's mother." And I didn't take a lot of notice so I pushed the bike in the gate went round the back and, I, I, came into the kitchen, like, from the back, you see. And there was, I remember, two steps to come down into a passage and then into the kitchen. And as I walked into the kitchen, lo and behold, it was my father! [the last four words are spoken with an intake of breath to denote his shock and fear]. And he was standing with his back to the fire; he had a characteristic way of standing [gets up and demonstrates the stance with straddled legs and hands clasped behind the back], like this -- little short chap, very similar to old Ray Evans, fat -- and he'd stand like this, you know, with his legs apart.

So I walked in the kitchen and when I'm faced with any situation I always begin to think quick. I'm going to think how I'm going to face the situation, you, and I saw him standing there and immediately my brain begin to work; overtime, you know! Thinking how I was going to react. Because I expected [F.H.L. taps out his pipe] ahm, a pretty good outburst, because, you know, he had a, you know, a quick temper. I expected an outburst of probably temper, a clout under the ear and immediately being sent to bed. But no, I had a surprise of my life. And he said "You've come home then." And I said "Yes." And right behind me standing up against the wall was a grandfather's

clock, you know, "tick, tick," so I said, "Yes." He said, uh, "You know what the time is?" And 'course I looked over my shoulder at the clock and it says quarter to twelve, I think it was. And I said "Yes." He said, uhm, "You're late aren't you." And I said, "Well," I said, "got held up," you know. And he said, "Well," he said, "I think," he said, "it's about time you and I," he said, "understood one another." And he was so calm. Which was unusual. Very unusual. He said, uhm, "Now," he said, "I'm not never going to dictate to you what time you should come home, at any time," he said, "but I want you to clearly understand that if you bring any disgrace on this household, in any shape or form, police or otherwise, the door that you've just come through will be locked and you will not come through it again. Now," he said, "if I was you I'd go to bed, otherwise," he said, "you won't be up in the morning." And I went to bed. And those words I've remembered ever since.³¹

This memorate shows several typical features of his narrative style. Suspense is built up through the delaying of narrative progression by the insertion of items of circumstantial detail. An ironic contrast is created between his expectation that it is his mother who is waiting for him and the reality which is his potentially angry father. This denouement is signalled by the Biblical phrase "lo and behold" and the indrawn breath which gives a whispered tone to the words "it was my father!" His liking to act out parts of his stories is shown in his demonstration of his father's stance; as a perceptive observer of human behaviour he is very sensitive to those attitudes which are expressed non-verbally through posture and gesture. His imitation of the clock's ticking

³¹ Recorded interview, January 6, 1974, Chideock.

also heightens the tension of the scene. His most characteristic narrative device is shown in the reconstruction of a dramatic dialogue between his father and himself; the interjections "he said" and "I said" are used to punctuate a sentence and give emphasis to individual phrases. His claim to have remembered the words ever since may well be true; it certainly reflects his belief that there are crucial moments in life which are always remembered and which, for him, easily take narrative form.

Les went on to show how his father's threat was a repetition of family history and drew conclusions about its effect on his subsequent behaviour:

Those words he meant because they were a repetition of his own family. His eldest brother had been treated exactly the same and been turned out of house, and the old man, by thwarting his father's directions, he was given fifty pound and turned out. But he made a fortune. That was the bloke I told you, he died in Wales. But you see I knew what my father said to me was exactly right. If I had a-brought disgrace that would have been curtains for me. So every time that I was out I always had that in the back of my mind that I could go so far, but, no farther. You see. And I think, mind you, that this was a good thing. At the time I thought it was a little bit dictatorial and Edwardian, but as I got older, I think it was a steady influence. You see the thing is this, in those days, just as, well, just as bad now, whereas you can be quite a decent sort o' chap you can get led away with the mob. You see you go into a pub with another half a dozen blokes and they say "Come on, have another," uh, "Have this," and "Have that." But, you see, you got to have the strength to say "Sorry," uh, "I just can't have any more." Or otherwise you run into trouble. And I think, you know, when I look back, I think that also was, uhm, was good for me, in the long run. And I've never thought much of pubs since, really. No, I don't; well I have a drink when I'm home or when I'm

out, but I don't look to go to pub, like the average bloke does. I don't see anything in it. Because what you're doing you're looking for amusement and happiness, but if that's the way you want to find it I don't see why you shouldn't, if that's the way you find your happiness, but I find mine in different ways, you see.

His praise of steadiness is a part of his general ethic of hard work and careful saving. With regard to drinking it reflects particularly his desire to be always in control of the situation. This need is an aspect of his conversational style, where he seems uncomfortable unless the subject is one in which he can command the discussion, and may also be related to his need to feel confident of his ability when charming. Since his religious training has broadly implicated drink as an evil influence it is also likely that he would feel that the personal virtue necessary to the charmer would be compromised by over-indulgence in alcohol. His claim to find happiness in "different ways" than that of the "average bloke" expresses his sense of spiritual and intellectual distance from the majority of people. While he would not claim to be superior he likes to see himself as a "thinker," a term which he uses in praise of his grandfather, and consequently must avoid the "distractions" presented by drink and commercial entertainments.

The discipline imposed by his father has given him confidence in the resolution of moral questions which has helped in his development of a pastoral role in relation to people in his village. It has caused him to lead his own life in the sober,

dependable, manner which is necessary to lend probity to his words of advice in personal matters and to his words of assurance that he will cure a complaint.

Although his father was severe Les could also find warmth and reassurance in the care that was taken of him by what was, in effect, a large extended family. His grandparents, aunts, and uncles also took responsibility for his informal education; the uncles confided masculine knowledge like the arts of poaching and the aunts pounced on him to see if he had washed himself. His mature evaluation of this sense of belonging to a large family is that it brought a feeling of security:

Within that family life you found security, and this is what's lacking in the world today -- the feeling of security -- and d'you know, in this modern age there's more loneliness than ever was known, 'tis, more loneliness.³²

This note of insight into others' problems suggests the concern which he shows in his pastoral visits to old people in Chideock.

Family life at Alderton in the 1920's moved in a rhythmic weekly cycle in which each member had specific tasks and each day had distinct and regular characteristics; this also brought a sense of order and stability.

Of the days of the week Sunday was the most clearly different. It was prepared for by the Saturday night routine in which "you cleaned your shoes first, then you had your bath and you went

³² Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

to bed and you said your prayers, and you got up and you went to church." He went to church with his entire family, excepting his father, and remembers his happiness at being there, next to his grandfather, and surrounded by uncles and aunts. His grandfather sat next to the organ and sang with "a beautiful voice which went right down." Les sometimes pumped the organ.³³

Because it was a public occasion, however, the female members of the family paid special attention to the boy's appearance; his Auntie Agnes was "a terror":

She had a eye like a hawk, y' know, this woman did. And she'd be sitting in about the second row from the church door, y' know, and as I'd walk in she'd eye me up and down y' know. Yes she would. And then after church she'd tell me that I didn't either have my tie straight, or my collar was creased, or I didn't walk in properly, or, there wouldn't hardly be a Sunday that I'd conform to, uh, you know, her rules. That I'd either hurried in, spoke as I come through the door, uh, didn't keep myself up straight, uh, made a noise when I sat down, oh dear, dear.³⁴

Other public events, such as garden fetes, brought the same appraisal:

I remember one day [chuckles] she made me dreadfully embarrassed. I remember this. Gosh, I could 've kicked her really. I attended a fete on, uh, the village lawn at the next village, one beautiful Saturday afternoon. And I, as I walked through the gate, up on to the lawn, she said "Oome yer, let me have a look at you and see if your ears are clean. She wanted to have a look at me in the middle of a crowd to make sure that I had my ears clean. By God, I nearly fainted! Yes I did, really.

³³Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

³⁴Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

His uncles exemplified desirable patterns of male behaviour for the boy. Unlike his father they were tall and very strong; he remembers seeing his uncle Fred play football in his stockinged feet. They were popular in the community and were fully involved in its life. Uncle Vic was a bellringer as was Les's grandfather who took the tenor and leading bell. Vic also played the handbells; he could give every hymn in the hymn book on his set of twelve bells, which were struck with a baize-tipped hammer, and he played carols at Christmas. The ringers held their own celebration in the belfry each Christmas where they drank "jerkum" which was a kind of home-made plum wine that was popular in the Cotswolds.

They also had a manly capacity for beer. Les recalled his pleasure at hearing a Chideock man exclaim about the amount which had been drunk by a man he had known in Wiltshire; the man proved to have been one of Les's uncles. The uncles all earned their money in traditional occupations on the land, and sweated to get it, unlike his father who was fit only to sit by the fire in enforced retirement. To the boy the uncles were like gods whom he waylaid as they cycled home after work: "'Got a penny, Uncle Rhode?' 'Alright, you clean my bike for it.'" Perhaps the best comparable account of a boy's response to his uncles is contained in Laurie Lee's chapter on his own uncles; they were "hard-hitting, heavy-drinking heroes whom we loved and who were the kings of our youth."³⁵

³⁵ Lee, Cider with Rosie, p. 204.

Grandfather Wiltshire's main method of instructing his grandson was to encourage the boy to watch him closely as he worked. This was the traditional way of teaching. Fred Kitchen, in his autobiography, describes how the older men taught him:

There was nothing unusual about their method of teaching; they had been taught the selfsame way, and were only carrying on in the old tradition -- that the only way to learn is to find out. A lad was never shown how to do a thing; to show him how was to spoil him. The only way to learn either ploughing, thatching, stacking, or any other skilled work was to watch how other people did it, and then earn your skill by trial and error.³⁶

Les's memory of this part of his education is shown clearly in his accounts of learning to thatch:

Well, using my grandfather's words, he used to say, 'With your eyes you observe; and by observing you can do.'³⁷

Les repeated this maxim with emphasis and conviction; he feels that it still applies today. He remembers his pleasure at being allowed to go with his grandfather to watch him thatch:

When I was a little boy I used to go with my grandfather to, ah, see him thatch, help carry the thatch up on the rick for him, you see, and the principal reason I went was because he used to, uh, take on a couple of bottles of cider and I used to like to have a drop of his cider. See, this is the, one of the main reasons that I went. But however he was such a wonderful chap that, uh, I always wanted to be in his company, always. You know, I could never be in my grandfather's company too much, ever, you know.³⁸

³⁶ Kitchen, Brother to the Ox, p. 47.

³⁷ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

³⁸ Recorded interview, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

His grandfather never discouraged him if he saw that the boy was interested and wanted to try his hand:

I [would] say, "Gran'dad, can I do a little bit?" While he was having a piece of bread and cheese and a drink of cider he'd let you get up the ladder and try your hand at it. And then undo all that you'd done. But he wouldn't say not to do it. Ah, that, of course, was a great help. At the time it didn't seem hardly anything at all, and at the time when you saw your gran'dad get up on the ladder and take off what you'd done you felt a little bit disappointed and probably discouraged. But it was a little tiny step towards the first step in the ladder.³⁹

The imitation of his grandfather, which included being allowed to drink cider, made this kind of learning a form of initiation into the skills and habits of manhood. His conception of the learning of skills as being like ascending a ladder which signified progress and reward is typical of his belief in the benefits of personal initiative.

Les's grandfather considered it his duty to teach Les his skills; had Les not been his grandson he would probably have found him unwilling to communicate his knowledge. Most men were reluctant to teach their skills to those outside their own families except through a formal apprenticeship. They were protecting their livelihoods and their status as men who were "clever" in their particular trade. Les was persistent, however, in his attempts to learn what he wanted to. He found that there were few secrets that could not be discovered by observation and practice:

³⁹ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

And then, of course, you had the type who knew how to do it, and knew they were clever and didn't want to impart [it]. But I say this much, Anthony [he sometimes confuses my brother's name with mine], with all the clever things in the world, if you want to know hard enough, you'll find out how to do it. You see, really in a way, 'tis fairly easy to pick another person's brains, even if he don't want you to. 'Cause you've only got to watch him working, and if you're the intelligent type look, you learn then, therefrom, by trial and error; see.

This determined attitude is typical of all his enterprises from a boyhood ambition to learn to play the mouth organ to his resolution in being accepted as a practical nurse in his late fifties.

Les now recognises that there was a distinct difference between the kind of education that he received at school and the other kind which he picked up, almost without realising that he was being taught, by "going along with" the older men to watch them and practice what they did. School provided what he now terms "education." Daily life, however, drew on what he calls "intelligence." He regards the latter as a native quality which is developed by practice and experience. He is not sure what the difference is between these two kinds of knowledge and he likes to talk about it:

We weren't so educated; but then, you see, the thing is this, where do you draw the line between, ahm, intelligence and education? It didn't mean that a man, like my grandfather who left school when he was twelve wasn't every bit as intelligent as the best educated man today. [M.J.]: Yes, that's true.]⁴⁰

However, his musing aloud on the value of each type of knowledge is a rhetorical play. There is no doubt in his mind that "practical knowledge" gained through experience is far more useful to a man than any lesson learnt in school.

One of Les's favourite stories of his grandfather as his teacher embodies almost all of his foregoing ideas of education. It was told amidst remarks on the relationship between education and intelligence and was addressed to me as something that I should remember just as he has:

Now, I'd like to quote you a saying my grandfather used to say to me if you would like me to, [M.J.L.: Sure, I would.] which, you think of this, the rest of your life Martin. I'll tell you just a little story. I remember when I was just about ten, it might have been even younger, no, it would have been about then I think. We lived just over a road in a cottage opposite my grandfather, and my grandfather was in the garden hoeing the weeds between some cabbage plants. And I as a boy see, well you know, I was very fond of my grandfather, and I went over and I said, "Can I help you, Gran'dad?" And he immediately said, "Yes. You go up in the shed and get another hoe," he said, "but put it back when you've finished with it, see, like Gran'dad does." He was a very kindly and gentle man. So I went up and got this hoe and I was started on a row of cabbage plants and my mother come across the road. And she said, "Put that hoe back," she said, "you haven't got the sense," she said, "to do that," said, "put it back." But with the same she didn't insist on it, you know she didn't stay there to see that I did put it back and she went in her mother's, which is my grandfather's see. So he waited 'till she'd gone in and he said to me in a very quiet voice, [clock strikes] he said, "Ah," he said, "boy," he said, "there's two sorts o' sense," he said, "there's sense and common sense." And to use his expression in Wiltshire, he said, "And if thee'st got common sense you can do without the other."

Now then, that's absolutely true. Absolutely true. Because you see, Martin, you can have all the education in the world but if you can't put that into practice then it's no good to you is it? You see you could go to college and you could learn how to do -- you could learn farming -- and you could learn everything about the theory of farming and the practice of farming, but you come down to really put it into practice, to turn your teaching into reality, and it's a different thing altogether. This is then where common sense takes over from what you learnt, from the sense that you, that have been impounded in you, isn't it. This is it. This is it. So I say, uhm, I often wonder myself, what is the difference between education and intelligence? Very very difficult.

This memorate shows the boy being eager to help and emulate his grandfather. It also stressed the grandfather's tolerance and willingness to let the boy learn by trial and error even among his valuable cabbage plants. The moral which the grandfather draws from the situation seems to say that the boy's honest desire to help and to learn by experience is potentially of greater value than any superficial theoretical knowledge. The word is usually pronounced in Les's and in Dorset speech as two distinct words in which the major stress falls on the first syllable of "common." This seems to stress the meaning of a kind of sense which belongs to the "common" people. Common sense is a virtue which seems to be praised as an alternative to success in formal education. In my own experience I have often heard it used by working class men who had found that the trades by which they lived owed nothing to their school education. ⁴¹

⁴¹ When I was studying for the General Certificate of Education examinations at the age of fifteen or sixteen I worked part-time in a bakery. Whenever I was clumsy, or misunderstood an instruction, the men would say, "Ah, you G.C.E. buggers ain't got no common sense."

They saw school, consequently, as a waste of time or as leading to an affectation of social superiority. "Common sense," however, signified dexterity, neatness, and implied moral qualities like the determination to do a job correctly, to "make a proper job of it," as they would say, and the possession of a steady approach to life which amounted to a philosophy. Les considers that despite his grandfather's lack of "education" he was "a talented man in the use of his hands" and had "a lot of wisdom."

Les considers that modern education is unnecessarily varied. In his day they were "drilled in the three 'Rs" and this, he thinks, was sufficient to enable anyone to lead a full life. He explained the sufficiency of each subject; there was:

Writing, where you can express yourself; reading which enriches the mind; and arithmetic, which you learnt so that nobody could diddle you and helped you on in life, because without the knowledge of, [a] certain knowledge of figures, well, ah, you can't be sure that you're being treated fair.⁴²

The basic school lessons he found practical for these reasons but for other subjects he would substitute an earlier school-leaving and direct training at work. He is not against education, however, for he feels that it should be entirely free and available to anyone who might want to return to study at some later age.

A marked contrast can be seen in the very form of his recollections of school as compared with those of learning from the older men. His usual stories of his schooldays are in the form of

⁴² Recorded interview, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

comic anecdotes in which he tricks the teacher or "plays hookum." School was a form of imprisonment to him; he always recalls his feeling of being "free" as a bird" as, with the other children, he fled away across the grass after school each day. When he talks of what he learned from his grandfather and his uncles, however, his tone often becomes reverential. Unlike school, which proceeded in an impersonal drone of multiplication tables, and where each day was much like the last or next, his learning from his grandfather was always warm, intimate, and varied. He can remember specific moments in which he was told something and the special days on which he first proved that he had mastered a particular skill.

He has said little about his grandmother and she may have had less to do with his education. When he does speak of her it is almost always with regard to her superstitious character. He does not refer to anyone else in his family as having been superstitious so it may be that her behaviour was extreme enough to have been considered eccentric. Les felt the effects of her beliefs largely in the form of restrictions and warnings. He was not allowed to play cricket on Sunday and when there was thunder he was told by her that it was "God's wrath" at something that had occurred in the world or in the country. Les remembers that the whole household suffered from her abrupt changes of mood:

Her life was ruled by Old Moore's Almanac and, ah, the predictions, you know she'd read, well, from the cards, for instance. She would turn the cards over and if it came up ace of hearts, you know,

she was smiling. She was going to have a fortune left her next day or something. She was at peace with the world and everybody. But if she turned up the ace of spades and that corresponded with a bad prediction in the Old Modre's Almanac she went into a deep depression and [chuckles] everybody suffered accordingly. She was very strange, very strange. But of course, a fascinating woman. You see, see.⁴³

It is typical of his reluctance to appear to slight anyone that he finds something good to say of her, in the sense that she was "fascinating," even while deprecating her superstitious disposition.

During the summer his grandmother went out into the fields to gather herbs. Sometimes Les went with her. She knew "almost every herb in the field" but he has forgotten many of them.

I used to know a lot of them when I used to go around. Bennet, oh dear, Meadowsweet I know was a very valuable herb, and of course Burdock was, ah, Dandelion was, Betony, that was. Agrimony, you know, that was another, very valuable, Ground Ivy. Well I don't think there was very many things that grew that didn't have some sort of medicinal property of some sort or the other.

He does not recall many of the specific properties of the herbs that they gathered; Slippery Elm and Yarrow Tea were effective, he thinks, and he knows that digitalis was made from the Foxglove. A.S. Macmillan has mentioned that Agrimony was a usual ingredient in medicinal herb teas.⁴⁴

Some of the herbs might be collected at any time but others could only be taken after they had seeded. I asked whether

⁴³ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock..

⁴⁴ Macmillan, Popular Names of Flowers, Fruits, &c., p. 269.

the phase of the moon was a factor that she considered but he replied that she went to pick herbs at "any old time." She was the only woman in the village to make a business of collecting herbs. Sometimes she paid a couple of other women to help her. The gathering went on throughout the summer. The herbs had first to be dried:

[She would] put them on the flagstones in front of her house to dry, like hay, turning them over, she would, and then when they were all nice and dry she put them in a bag and tied them with a string, put a label on it to say what it was, whether 'twas Meadowsweet or Betony, you know, whatever it was. And I found that was very fascinating.

By the end of the summer she would have prepared several sacks of herbs for sale to a herbalist at a neighbouring village.

But his grandmother did not use the cures herself:

She pinned her faith on raw onions, yes, she used to eat raw onions you know. She used to reckon that was the finest cure there was. Yes, raw onions and beer. Yes she did. She used to drink beer and eat raw onions. If she had the tummy trouble she used to swear by raw onions; I think this is more psychological than anything.

He finds his grandmother's taste to be quaint and amusing but his appreciation of the value of having faith in a cure is serious and is related to his sense of the need for faith in the efficacy of charming. That he found the practice of herbing to be "fascinating" is like many other instances in which he presents his "enquiring mind" being stimulated by some article of rural knowledge. Nevertheless, since he does not profess any extensive knowledge of herbs he was less willing to talk about herbing than about other crafts in which he feels more competent.

Childhood Games

While the members of his family play an important part in his recollections his central character, and hero, is always himself. The development of his self-conscious and self-assertive temperament can be seen in the stories of childhood games which form a significant part of his narrative repertory. These recollections take two basic forms: the first are reflections on the extent of the freedom he enjoyed in childhood and are illustrated by generalised accounts of informal outdoor games; the second are narratives of his own escapades in which authority figures were successfully outwitted. As stories they are subtly or frankly boastful, like so many of his others, and give evidence of his ability to disarm adult criticism by ready answers and to outwit his contemporaries through the same quick thinking. Their real subject is less childhood and games than his own personality and his relationships with other people. The artful tact which he constantly singles out as a personal virtue, and which is an essential element in his persona as a charmer, is pointed out by him as having been developed in childhood.

Recollections of formal games play little or no part in his normal story repertory. When I asked him to describe some of the games that he played with other children he was reluctant to go into detail saying that they were much the same as children play today. It was not until my parents prompted him by mentioning the hoops, marbles, tops, and conkers they had played with that he became interested in the subject.

He seems to have participated fully in all the games played by children in the village but, because formal games offered less scope for the personal inventiveness that he likes to recount, they are inherently less satisfying to him than informal games as material for narratives. He played football and cricket with the other boys but has no stories of personal achievements. He described the game "ogglestick" with more detail and enthusiasm because he sensed that it was unknown to us.⁴⁵

Ogglestick was played between two teams one of which "batted" while the other "fielded." A post was set up on top of which was balanced a thick piece of wood of about eight inches in length. A bat, which he described as being like a hockey stick, was used to knock the piece of wood into the air. The opposing team had to catch it and whenever they failed to take the catch one of their number was eliminated and in this way the game was decided.

His real interest was shown in telling of the games of individual competition, such as marbles and conkers, which could become stories of his own ingenuity. Marbles were played with in the schoolyard. Some were made of baked clay and painted red, white and blue. There was also a larger marble, made of glass with an internal pattern, which was called a "bomber." Alderton boys played in the following manner:

⁴⁵ A search in the Oxford English Dictionary, the English Dialect Dictionary and Alice Bertha Gomme's The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland (London, 1894), has failed to reveal any description of this game.

We used to play, draw, one huge ring, and in the middle we had a little ring. And this was where the marbles was put first and you'd have the bomber and see how many you could knock outside the big ring and how many you knocked outside the big ring you kept, you see. So you could start with a few and end up with a lot if you was a good player, or vice versa.⁴⁶

This game with marbles has been noted by Katharine Briggs in her collection of folklore from the Cotswold region of which Alderton formed a part.⁴⁷

He went on to admit that he had once cheated at marbles. This is an unusual admission since he hates sharp practice of all kinds. However, in this case a pride in his own ingenuity seemed to encourage him to relate the anecdote:

And I remember, you know, I cheated once. Golly it was terrible; I wouldn't do it now mind. I remember I was out of marbles and no money so I went home and I melted some candles and, uh, made them into shape of a marble and painted them, you know. Took 'em to school and provided you had a marble nobody questioned you, and the only thing was that after he'd had a knock or two with the bomber he'd burst. So a boy 'ould win it, you see, pick it up and find it's made of candlegrease! But then you couldn't swear whose marble it was! You couldn't swear whose marble it was.

His satisfaction is not in having wilfully deceived someone but in having had the wit to devise a way to play when he would otherwise have been left out. It is a typical story of his enterprise.

⁴⁶ Recorded interview, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

⁴⁷ Katharine M. Briggs, The Folklore of the Cotswolds (London, 1974), pp. 50-51.

"Conkers" is played as a duelling game between two players each of whom holds a horse chestnut by a string which has been threaded through its centre so that it hangs at a distance of about eight inches from the hand. Players take turns at striking their opponent's conker with their own until victory is gained by the player who smashes the other's conker. Most boys "cheated" by using some means to harden their conker; Les partly baked his in the oven. A player's prestige rose with the number of victories that his conker had gained. This often led to disputes over exaggerated claims:

This is the reason why they used to cheat you see. They used to say, used to have terrific arguments, and fights, because, you see, a boy'd say "Mine's a four-er," and you say, "I know 'e idn' - you only had 'n yesterday." And then you'd argue and say "You come down one!"

The traditional methods of hardening conkers and of counting their number of victories are described by Iona and Peter Opie in Children's Games in Street and Playground.⁴⁸

Both "marbles" and "conkers" are competitions of individual skill in which a tangible profit or a gain in status is made. Les was a keen competitor in each of them.

Another popular game was the collecting, or "saving," of cigarette cards. A boy's status depended on the number and quality of cards that he could acquire; cards were bartered and

⁴⁸ Iona and Peter Opie, Children's Games in Street and Playground (Oxford, 1969), pp. 227-232.

exchanged between children. Les had several full sets of cards, which represented the highest success, and now wishes that he had kept them as they have grown valuable. Spinning tops of wood with hobnails as pivots were whipped with a stick and thong. This was a game of dexterity in which special tricks could be shown off:

You could make that top spin, you could do anything with it, marvellous.

Though they were simple to make children usually bought them as they were very cheap. Iron hoops were also popular and were bowled along by means of an iron rod with a crook at the end which controlled the hoop so that it could be made to weave in and out.

Les took a special interest in describing the hoop because the subject allowed him to recall his successful negotiations with the blacksmith who was always asked to mend hoops when they broke:

So you called in to poor old Wilcox, you say, "Can you mend my hoop please?" He'd say, "Can't be bothered now," or something like that, or "Leave it and I'll pick it up tomorrow," and you wanted to play with it that night and you say "Ah, Mr. Will, couldn't you do it now?" And he say "Alright, you blow my fire a bit." So you'd have to do a bit of work. You blow the old bellus [bellows] and keep the fire going while he finished shoeing a horse. So you mean to say you left school say at, uhm, ah, four o'clock or quarter-past four, whatever it was, and you didn't get home till seven because you had to wait while old Wilcox finished shoeing a horse, then he'd turn round and mend your hoop. See, then it'd be 'bout seven o'clock before you'd get home, see, y' know?

The story seems to appeal to him because it shows him "getting round" someone, that is to say, using his powers of tact and persuasion.

to wheedle the smith into compliance. He probably received a punishment for coming home late. The stress on the lateness of the hour at which he returned home suggests another fundamental interest of childhood narratives to him; parental authority, like that of teachers, farmers, the policeman and the vicar, is his antagonist throughout his stories of mischievous childhood games.

Being mischievous conferred status among boys. They dared each other to exploits and there was a code of honour among them under which any boy who "split" on a mischief maker was liable to retaliation:

In those days we'd duck 'n, mind. We'd have 'n⁴⁹ under the village pump and hold his head under.

Those who were most daring and inventive became leaders in staging practical jokes and in the traditional forms of minor theft such as stealing apples.⁵⁰ Such a boy would be known as "a mischief":

His name was Frank Handy, and he was aptly named mind, he really was, but by gosh, he was a, he was a real mischief.

Les admired this trait greatly and became something of a ringleader in mischief although he was never as bold as Frank Handy who was considered a bad influence by Les's mother.

⁴⁹ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

⁵⁰ Les did not use any of the usual boys' cant terms for apple stealing. Around Bridport in my boyhood the term was "scrumping". Not to have gone scrumping would have been regarded as cowardice by my peers. It was done more for its inherent thrill, due to the chance of being caught, than for the fruit; "scrumped" apples were often thrown away after a single bite had been taken.

⁵¹ Recorded interview, January 6, 1974, Chideock.

In several stories he mentions another friend, Horace Ewings, who was a year younger and more ingenuous than himself. He was "a good little boy" who hardly ever swore; Frank Handy and Les swore a great deal but Les was subsequently cured of the habit. Les and Horace did odd jobs together, such as gardening and driving stock, and Horace often bore the brunt of punishment for mischief that had been committed by them both.

Les remembers these incidents with real amusement; Horace was guileless in comparison with himself. In one story an angry shop-keeper slapped Horace on the ear and accused him of spitting on the shop window when he had only been looking at the cakes inside. Les almost cries with laughter at his recollection of Horace's bemused expression at receiving the blow. He laughs at him because he was a "sap" and thus Horace usually figures in these anecdotes as a foil to Les's superior wit.

Horace never learned Les's arts of circumspection and tact. Les described how, while employed by Farmer Garlic to do odd jobs in his garden they had tried to persuade him to let them pick his strawberries. Horace's persistence in asking, however, betrayed their eagerness for the chance to eat some while gathering them:

So one night we went down there, and he said to Horace, he said, 'cause he [Horace] keep on asking, see, and I used to say to Horace, "Look, don't keep on, see, you overdo it, see, boy." You know, "He'll jump to the conclusion that, you know, you

got some design on his bloomin' strawberries. See, you mustn't overdo it." But Horace couldn't see things like I could, and he blunder into things, you know, and he blundered into this well [i.e. completely].⁵²

Les's comment on his friend's simplicity is like many others in which he congratulates himself on his superior insight into human nature. He used it in his boyhood pranks and still uses it today to persuade people to comply with his wishes.

Horace was finally allowed to pick the strawberries, while Les was employed at another job, but then was tricked by Garlic who proved to be "a bit of a mischief" himself.

Now the little story goes like this, that after he'd finished the strawberries he said to Horace, "Well, my son, how've you got on?" "Well," he said, "I've picked all these sir." "And you haven't ate any at all." "No," he said, "I haven't." "Now you deserve a drink and you come on in." Now he gave him a drink and he gave me a drink. His drink made 'n sick and mine didn't. And how d'you account for that? And up come the strawberries.

Les enjoys the clever way in which the ~~father~~ taught the boy a lesson:

And 'course, when he sicked he shoved bits o' strawberries in there. And, uh, well, 'course, poor old Bowly [Garlic], yeah, being what he was, he thought, "Aah! Now that'll teach him a lesson." Now he didn't say "You naughty boy, I shall never let you pick my strawberries again." You see, that was a way of teaching him not to tell lies, you see. And Old Garlic was a bit of a mischief, anyway, himself. And I think he thought this was a wonderful thing. [M.L.L.: Clever.] Yeah, this was clever.

Anecdotes of 'the boys' attempts to steal from Farmer Garlic are a regular part of his story repertory. He first mentioned Farmer Garlic, or Bowly, during our second interview when he said: "I could tell you a lot of stories about this feller, wonderful character this chap was." On another occasion Les gave a comic account of stealing apples from him. An account of how Garlic received his nickname of "Bowly" or "Bowler" is given later in the chapter. As stories they exhibit patterns which have traditionally been found satisfying; the would-be tricksters are foiled by an even subtler opponent who then punishes them in a manner which fits their crime.

In his performance of this story, as in others, he acts the parts of the individual speakers and conveys aurally the latent menace that is masked in Garlic's "generous" invitations. He communicates the facial expressions and altering vocal tones of the boys as they cheekily assert their innocence or reluctantly admit their guilt. He seems to be able to imaginatively re-enter the experience at such moments and this ability, he says, is one of the pleasures of memory for him. Perhaps it is because he is physically small, and his body movements are characteristically quick, that he is so adept at conveying the impression of boyishness.

Though he admires successful trickery, and often shows himself as being clever at it in his stories, he also employs the affecting power which lies in the image of the boy who is caught and punished. This droll type of humour is a major element in his

self-portraits in childhood. He presents himself as the scamp or lovable rascal whose tricks are artful but essentially harmless. He attempts, and succeeds, to be appealing in his naughtiness. Thus after telling how Horace fell into Farmer Garlic's trap he told, in the second of the two linked stories, how Garlic also tricked him:

Now then, another time he taught us both a lesson. And believe you me, I suffered, uh, worse of the two. Hewas, one side [of his house], like I say, he had the [former] school-house and one set o' toilets he'd a-turned into, ahm, a shed to keep his cider in, and his coal and wood, and the other one, the other side, he kept as an apple storage room, I remember, and we raided one night. And we was working round the other side, where the apple store was, you see, uh, the toilet was still round where the cider was, you see, so every now and again -- and Mrs. Garlic was away, on vacation -- so it was wide open! Poor old Bowly was crippled and he traveled only about five knots, you know, and it gave us ample time to belt round to the toilet, instead of going to the toilet we laid on our back under the cider tap and turned the tap on and had a jolly good drink of lovely sweet Somerset cider, you see; and belt back again, you see. And then the other one 'ould go to the toilet.

And old Bowly cottoned on to this -- we overdone it you see -- cottoned on. So after we finish, you know, our gardening, he said "Well boys, he said, "I think you done very well," he said, "tonight." And he said "You deserve something," he said, "extra. Now," he said, "if you go round to the kitchen door," and there was always two steps to go down in the kitchen, from the back yard, I always remember this so well, two steps to go down and it's into the kitchen. He said, "You go round to the back," he said, "and go down into the kitchen and sit down at the table." He said, "I got a surprise for you." Turned out a lovely surprise it did. And while we was sat there he brought in two big, ah, dishfuls of, uh, custard. Beautiful custard. Now you know custard and cider curdles like 'ell. Right, I got this custard into me, see; now Horace don't

like custard see, so he had a little tiny bit and he didn't want any more and I, 'course being a bit covetous and greedy and in those days too mind, you know, you know, there's a Depression on mind you, and you know a free thing o' custard, 'by golly! And what with a bellyful o' cider and a basinful of custard, within about half an hour I got the extreme bellyache. And I can hardly walk up the road. And I go into home and I go up over stairs and go into bed and I'm rollin' in agony. And I frighten my mother to death. My mother said "Whatever's wrong?" and 'course she drags it out of me see; "What've you been eating?" and I told her what Mr. Garlic had done. She said "A wicked old devil!" she said, "but what did you have besides?" and I said, "Some cider." "Did he give you that?" "No. Well, I stole it, see." And then of course she had no sympathy for me at all, so I just rolled in agony till it passed off. But I've never had custard and cider together since.

But you see, this is how he done it. He done it by teach you a lesson in his way, and I thought that was marvellous really. And when I look back over the years I think "By golly, what a clever old stick. And how gullible we were. You see, we weren't clever. We thought we were. We overdone it see. Too many times to the toilet, you know, beautiful!"

This type of story is a part of the sentimental and nostalgic mode in which he presents his childhood; after telling it he went on to reflect that modern children will never have the amount of fun which his generation had. The droll behaviour represents a kind of deliberate self mockery which he considers to be typical of the kind of stories which are told in the country:

But you get them in the country more than you will anywhere, yes, and like I said, lots of them are told against themselves because they see the funny side of it, see. You know, I think it's nice too; because, when I was a lad for instance, you know, a boy 'ould, say, dress up and he'd wear something ridiculous and if he made you laugh he wouldn't care less -- and he'd think -- he got just as much out of it by making you laugh

at his, perhaps, quaint way, you know, he'd wear his hat on 'one side or something or another like that, you know. Whereas perhaps today it would be considered, you know, ridiculous. Yes.⁵³

These stories show his continuation in this vein by presenting his own "quaint way" for the entertainment of his audience. His precise meaning in his use of the word "quaint" is unclear. The idea of deliberately contriving to draw attention to oneself seems best fitted by the Oxford English Dictionary's obsolescent sense 6: "Of speech, language, modes of expression, etc.: Carefully or ingeniously elaborated; highly elegant or refined; clever; smart; full of fancies or conceits."⁵⁴

It seems possible that some of the older meanings of "quaint" have contributed to Les's ideas of what is humorous and how it may be expressed.

Many games were not formally structured and would not even have been called "games" by the children; they were simply things done outdoors like climbing trees, birdnesting, fishing, and swimming. Nevertheless, they were traditional activities. In the spring boys searched for moorhens' eggs in the many dewponds in the fields. The birds would lay between eight and ten eggs in nests built low among the reeds. The boys took the eggs home to eat for they were delicious if found at the right time. Les used a table spoon mounted at the end of a long pole to reach into the nests.

⁵³ Recorded interview, July 9, 1974, Chideock.

⁵⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, VIII, 13.

When this device failed he stripped and waded into the black and stinking mud up to his waist; the consequence of one of these expeditions has already been described. They also caught trout by using a net weighted at the bottom with stones which was stretched across the river and held by boys standing on each bank. A third boy would drive the fish downstream into the net. This was, of course, poaching, for which they risked a beating from the gamekeeper or their fathers; when they grew older they risked prosecution.

Les learned how to catch rabbits and how to walk constantly alert, along any lane where there was the chance of a pheasant. His Uncle Reg was his exemplar in the arts of poaching and the boy admired him for his ability. The instruction began casually while the young man and the boy sat in the privy. Reg would "bide there for an hour" reading the News of the World, smoking a Woodbine, and telling his nephew about rabbiting. After this Les always carried a rabbit net in his pocket. He was shown how to kill by holding the rabbit in the air by its hind legs and making a sharp chopping blow at the back of the neck. Uncle Reg always carried a net and stone in his pocket.⁵⁵ He was "like a pointer dog" in the way he would see a pheasant "quat" from the corner of his eye and would freeze:

He'd stand back four or five yards. If you see my Uncle Reg stop dead in his tracks and stop breathing -- he was a dead shot -- I often

⁵⁵ In recording the effects of the Depression on life in a Worcestershire village Fred Archer notes that "men carried stones or a hammer in their grey fustian working coat to throw at the rabbits on their way to and from work." A Lad of Evesham Vale, p. 95.

thought of him like a dog — he'd freeze, pull a stone out — and throw and kill the pheasant or rabbit. "That's how it's done, see boy. When you can do it like Uncle you'll be alright." But I couldn't do it like Uncle Reg.⁵⁶

The word "quat" is a dialect term which refers specifically to the action of a frightened animal as it flattens itself in the undergrowth.⁵⁷ The boy's awe of his uncle's skill was still apparent in Les's account for he imitated his round-eyed attentiveness and the hushed, measured deliberate tones of his uncle's instructions.

The knowledge of the habits of wild animals was taken for granted by Les and his contemporaries. Later, as adolescents with a need for money to buy beer and entertain girlfriends they turned their skills to the more serious poaching that is described later in the chapter. For boys, however, being adept in such knowledge conferred status for there was rivalry in being able to find nests and thereby to get the rarest eggs for their collections. It was considered clever to be able to imitate bird calls and they were used as signals between friends:

I knew then, and I forgotten some of them, I knew almost every bird of the field. I knew the habits of all the animals. I knew how to, uh, copy the fox's cry and the badger's grunt and all the rest of it. I could make all the familiar noises of the birds of the air, when I was a lad. And so could every other boy that I went to school with, more or less. If you wanted to, uh, attract attention we'll say, you know, with another chap, or even with a girl, you made a noise like the cuckoo.

⁵⁶ Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

⁵⁷ George Edward Dartnell and Rev. Edward Hungerford Goddard, *A Glossary of Words used in the County of Wiltshire* (London, 1893), p. 127.

And most of the lads, you know, when I was a boy, they could make a noise like a cuckoo which was absolutely dead on. You had a job to tell the difference. But now, today, you stop a boy and say, "Hey, son, could you make a noise like a cuckoo?" and he'd probably make a noise like a giraffe.⁵⁸

Les is wrong to conclude that modern children do not play these games. The tradition of imitating bird calls has persisted in Wessex. In my own boyhood in Bridport between 1955 and 1965 the cuckoo and the owl cry were most popular. The calls were used as a signal between two or more boys who thus incorporated themselves in an exclusive group.

Play was sometimes combined with work for the agricultural year involved the village children in many of its seasonal jobs. They found opportunities to play during some of the work but it was also a traditional way of preparing them for future life on the land. By the time Les was fourteen he could boast a "practical knowledge" of farm work:

When I went to work on the farm I was already an experienced worker 'fore I started. Because, you see, I'd been going as a boy to help with hay-making, harvest, milking cows, long before I left school.

All the children in Grandfather Wiltshire's family had been made to help in the dairy, for both men and women worked at milking. Les began milking six cows night and morning when he was twelve and was still at school.

⁵⁸ Recorded interview, January 6, 1974, Chideock.

Bird scaring was a common occupation for younger boys

in early spring where spring wheat had been planted. Les remembered dressing in a long overcoat and scarf and carrying a tin with stones in it which he was to rattle whenever a rook pitched on the field. Two flat boards were also clapped together as a noisemaker. He illustrated his experience through a story:

I distinctly remember once, you know, this was before I left school, long before. I was about ten, I expect it was, ten or eleven. The old farmer in that particular farm then was a man called Garlic; I could tell you a lot of stories about this feller, wonderful character this chap was. He'd had a dreadful accident in the hunting field in his younger days and he was a permanent cripple, you know? And he used to wear a bowler hat and they used to call him "Bowler," that was his nickname, Bowler, 'cause he always wore a bowler hat. And he asked me if I'd like to earn a shilling, see, by doing a bit of rook-scaring. Now this was a shilling a day, I'd do a whole day, take on my dinner, and I'd go as early as I could and, uh, I stay there until the rooks 'd gone home, you know, for a shilling a day. And 'course naturally, shillin' in those days [F.H.L.: They didn't go home very early did they.] No, they didn't! No. And I remember going up there in the field I distinctly remember, so well, yeah, I was about eleven I expect. And I took on a bucket, a galvanized big galvanized bucket, and a stick and I banged this galvanized bucket. And I sat back in the bank and it's a beautiful sunny afternoon it was. The morning was cold, it started off frosty and cold in the morning, and I beat my hands, huddled at the rooks, you know, anything to keep warm. And then, round about dinner time, you know, the sun was hot, and I sat back in the bank and I had, took on some bread and cheese and lemonade, I think it was, or sweet tea in a bottle and I sat back in the bank and I went to sleep, you know, in the afternoon. And the old man come strolling around you see, and he got the stick and banged the bucket! Gaw, I pretty nigh jumped

up the blinking hedge! [Chuckles] He said, "Hey!" he said, "You ain't paid to go to sleep," he said, "you're paid to keep the rooks off." And I was fast asleep in the sun. Yeah, I remember that.

It is characteristic of him that although he admitted to getting a "dressing down" at this time he went on to say that he got the better of Garlic afterwards by being careful never to fall completely asleep. For the boy, at least, birdscaring was something of a game in which the chief attraction lay in outwitting the farmer.

This attitude toward birdscaring was traditional; several writers have commented that it was looked on as an amusement by children. Francis Heath, quoting the findings of a Royal Commission on agriculture of 1842-1843 which described the employment of boys, said:

Until a boy begins to be employed in the regular work of a labourer his occupations are numerous, varying with the seasons. The principal occupations are keeping birds, watching cattle in the fields, getting in wood for the house, gathering turnips for cattle, driving horses or oxen at plough, harvest work, helping in the stable to get in hay, and potato and bean planting, &c.; going upon errands, and any occasional jobs for which his strength is sufficient; but there is no work which is at all labourious, although it may be irksome -- bird-keeping, perhaps, being the most so, from its monotony; but this occupation is not without its amusements.⁵⁹

Olive Knott's description of "bird starvin'," which she collected from "an old Dorset man" mentions that boys were free to play and

⁵⁹ Heath, Peasant Life in the West of England, pp. 48-49.

birdnest as long as they kept up a noise. They looked forward to this as "the happiest time of all the year."⁶⁰

The motif of the boy's falling asleep and being surprised by his master occurs in a "bird scarer's song" collected at Beaminster in west Dorset:

Gee hallo, hallo blackie cap,
Let us lie down and have a nap.
Suppose our master chance to come?
You must fly and I must run,
Gee hallo, hallo, hallo!
Gee hallo, hallo, hallo!⁶¹

George Ewart Evans has recorded a similar rhyme:

Here comes the farmer with his big gun
And you must fly and I must run.⁶²

The exploitation of child labour and the hardness of the task have also been reported, however; Dacombe cites the case of a boy of six at Affpuddle in Dorset who was taken to the fields at six in the morning and brought back in the evening; for this he received sixpence a week which was little enough even during the later nineteenth century.⁶³ Perhaps the best known account of the pleaker side of birdscaring occurs in Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure where the young Jude is beaten by the farmer for allowing the birds to feed on the newly planted seeds.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Knott, Down Dorset Way, pp. 58-60.

⁶¹ Dacombe, Dorset Up Along and Down Along, p. 38.

⁶² Evans, The Farm and the Village, p. 55.

⁶³ Dacombe, ibid., p. 37.

⁶⁴ Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (London, 1895), part 1, chap. 2.

Boys got an early training in handling stock by bringing the cows in for milking each night and by driving them to market or to be slaughtered. Les remembered that when he was twelve he commonly drove stock to market at Chipping Sodbury, which was seven miles from Alderton along the lanes; it was twelve miles to Butcher Love's at Chippenham. Les always hoped that the farmer wouldn't "buy anything," meaning an animal, at the market, for if he did Les would have to walk home with it instead of being able to ride back in the trap with the farmer. He was usually given sixpence or a shilling for these jobs.

He found these trips good fun, however, besides being a source of pocket money. Les usually went with another "young man," who was eleven, and the journey was enlivened for them by letting the cows wander into gardens where they snatched a few mouthfuls of cabbage and by shouting back at the indignant housewives who chased them out; "We were cheeky as buggery, we couldn't care less." Once at Chippenham they were free to spend the half crown given them by the butcher for their dinner on a mouth organ and buns. Les, by virtue of his age, took the lion's share of the money.

But the journey could also be difficult and it sometimes taught them hard lessons about managing their animals. He remembered driving a cow and calf home from market when the calf was "scoured," meaning that it had diarrhoea. When they got about half way it grew so weak from the travelling and its sickness that it fell into the ditch and the two boys were unable to pull it out. The other boy

sat on the bank and cried but soon they heard the sound of a pony and trap rattling up the lane at a fast pace. The drivers were a couple of hard-drinking men who "would put the whip across you as soon as look at you." The men stopped and pulled the calf out of the ditch without heeding the muck which they had to wipe from their clothes with tufts of grass. One of them tied a length of binder twine around the calf's neck and said "There, you young bugger, now keep him on the road."

His keenest memories of the pleasures of childhood games focus on the moment of the daily release from school. The delight he felt at being set free seems to have come to represent for him the whole joy of carefree and exuberant childhood. The recollection of it has crystallised into a formulaic narrative which he often repeats. The point he makes with it remains constant; he feels that the freedom to play in the fields which he enjoyed as a boy was part of the "full life" which modern children will never have:

You know when I compare my life with the life of the average youngster today, golly, I think they're missing a tremendous amount. They're never going to have, well, it may be nostalgia mind, if may be because, ah, my memory's playing tricks with me. I don't think that is quite right. Because when the school clock said quarter to four, and we had to have prayers, and it was mostly, or sing a hymn and it was "Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh," and I knew that I was soon going to be gone. And once we was out through the gate the thought of school then disappeared. It was down to the river, if it was in the summertime, hot, take your clothes off, get in, you know, marvellous, wipe yourself down with some grass or something or other. Or trying to catch trout, you know, in your hands. And the river was clean; in those days you could drink it.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

Three weeks earlier in another interview he had described the same moment in almost the same terms:

You see when I was a boy I went to school, I learned what I had to, ah, simply because the teacher insisted that I did, but immediately the whistle went I was free. I was as free as a bird in the air. I ran, we all ran out of the gate and we were free. We had no homework. I think it is, I think that is an abomination. I really do. You see, the thing is this -- mind you, I don't know whether you still want me to go on? [M.J.L.: No, carry on.] The thing is, Martin, I never can come to terms with this, when you're born are you going to live your life or are you going to exist? When I was a boy I lived. For the simple reason I went to school, I played hookum a bit, I used to play the teacher up, and I used to respect her all the same. But when I ran out through the school gate I -- like I said just now -- I was free. I was free to play football, cricket, climb trees, go birdsnesting, swim in the river, go fishing, see, there was no restrictions on me whatsoever.⁶⁶

Elsewhere he has spoken of the sheer pleasure that he finds in reliving his life through his intense memories. The sensuous quality of his recollection is particularly apparent in the first passage given above; the short phrases pour out in a "stream of consciousness" and each is instinct with some sensation of delight.

Les has invested this cluster of memories with particular significance. His childhood games in the fields are seen through an idealised view of nature as the source of all that is good in terms of health and happiness in mind and body. This reverence for nature owes something to many sources; the influence of the Bible can be felt in phrases like "the birds of the air" and

⁶⁶ Recorded interview, June 5, 1974, Chideock.

his attitude certainly includes a religious sense of wonder at the beauty and complexity of the natural world. Popular versions of the Romantic poets' veneration of nature were also to be seen everywhere in his childhood from sentimental verse to the prints of country scenes which hung in his home.

Above all these reflections are an affirmation of his enjoyment of life and are instigated primarily by his precarious state of health. He is in the process of coming to terms with the approach of his own death. The philosophy he is working out dismisses all self pity by stressing that by living and having lived a full life he can have no regrets. The phrase "to live your life" constantly recurs to him; it is the crux of the second passage and was the basic referent of the first passage quoted above. In a later conversation he again talked about living life to the full:

If you live a full life and when the end of time comes I don't think you regret, because if you've lived your life, well, surely you get satisfaction at the end of it. I think, where, when you come to the ultimate end, when you feel cheated, I think, perhaps, if that's the word, is simply it's your own fault, because you didn't take advantage of all the things that life, uh, offered you, uh, while you were able to take advantage of them. You just, like I said before, you just let your life slide by instead of making use of every moment. You should make use of every moment.⁶⁷

He went on to praise good books as a further source of that fullness of experience and knowledge which he values. At school

⁶⁷ Recorded interview, July 9, 1974, Chideock.

they read Wordsworth's poems which made a deep impression on him. He drew a tacit comparison between the poet and himself as being both sick men reduced to looking out at life through a window:

Good books is another thing, I think, you know. Because clever men put their thoughts down in words, you know, in books. And even when I was going to school, I used to love poetry as well, because, again, a man expresses himself, you know, through poetry, yes. [M.J.L.: It's concentrated when it's in poetry.] Yes, this is right, yes. I would say that one that Wordsworth wrote, what is it, "Daffodils." Now that's a most expressive poem. You see, I, you know, I suppose if you want, if you enjoy poetry, you know, fully, you got to be able to use your imagination, you know. And I can imagine what, uh, uh, Wordsworth had, you know, being an invalid when he wrote it, sitting in his chair looking out on the garden and seeing on the lawn and seeing the daffodils waving about in the wind. I can just imagine his feelings and what he was thinking.

Les has transposed the scene of the poem entirely to his own situation for when he sits in his own front room he can look out onto a lawn where there are rows of daffodils each spring. When he writes letters they often begin with a description of himself writing there and of the flowers and birds he sees through the window.

Les's belief that Wordsworth was an invalid when he wrote this poem, numbered Seven in his series "Moods of My Own Mind," seems to be a personal inference which is not borne out by any of the standard biographies of the poet. Les's opinion may be taken as an example of that power of imaginative sympathy through which he seeks to gain an understanding of other people's problems.

Whether influenced by Wordsworth or not Les habitually turns to examples from the natural world, like the finding of a rare

orchid or the behaviour of a bird, for sources of his most profound reflection. The faith which he employs in charming is also derived ultimately from his wonder at the order and beauty that he finds in the natural world.

His recollections of school are, as I have noted earlier, normally in the form of comic anecdotes of his own misbehaviour and punishment; as such they are a part of his presentation of himself in boyhood as a humorous trickster. He also developed personal attachments to his teachers, however, those he mentions being women, and says that they had a great influence on him. He remembers their names and speaks of them with affection. Nevertheless, he did not describe the nature of their influence, so that, to me, the tribute seemed a little pietistic. This is in contrast with his accounts of his mother's and grandfather's teaching where he relates the specific virtues which he learned by their example.

He claims now to regret having told so many lies to his teachers. He studied their personalities and, knowing how much mischief they would tolerate, "played them up" to the limits of their tolerance. This note of apology is delivered with tongue in cheek, however, for its mock solemnity seems intended to heighten our sense of the comic value of his mischief. He claims to feel the same remorse at having lied to his mother and yet revels in the recollection of his escapades. These apologies are, perhaps, a mixture of sentimental reflection and rhetorical play and the two elements in his discourse are hardly separable for him or his listeners.

He was always ready with an answer, which frequently stretched the truth, in order to get out of trouble. One day while taking a short cut to school with some other Alderton boys he was persuaded to try to vault across the river using a vaulting pole. This method had been introduced to them by a boy who had come from Somerset where there were dykes instead of walls and such poles were regularly used. Les's attempt at vaulting failed and he fell into the river. After wringing out his wet clothes and rubbing himself down with grass he ran to school to get warm. He got there before school started and stood by the school-room boiler to dry; this was a round coke-burning stove which grew "red-hot" and was surrounded by a wire guard. When the teacher arrived Les acted the part of the unfortunate victim of mischance:

She said, "Oh," she said, "Les, whatever, what have you done?" And I said, "I've stumbled in the river, Teacher." And I told her a pitiful tale. And she said, "Well, you stay there, dear, and get dry."

So while all the rest of the boys and girls was sitting at their seats, laughing like hell, I was standing in the middle of the bloody room steaming, like a, like a pudden, you know?⁶⁸

He seems to have played to the gallery in such situations. Once his teacher asked him to get his hands dirty, so that she could demonstrate to the class the proper way of washing them; he covered his hands with soot and made a complete mess of the soap and towel. He gained a reputation for smart answers; when the teacher asked what

⁶⁸ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

the world was like and another boy facetiously replied "All uphill, Miss," Les got the blame.

He seems to have worked best at those subjects in which he was allowed to use his imagination. He enjoyed poetry, was good at drawing, and was "devilish good at writing, especially fairy stories." The term "fairy stories," as he uses it, is a humorous way of referring to exaggerated untruths. He was never good at mathematics while at school though his subsequent interest in working for himself in various enterprises caused him to grow adept with figures.

Discipline was enforced by such punishments as being shut in the school-room during the dinner-hour. He once escaped from this detention by climbing out of the window and spent the rest of the day in the fields. On the following day he felt the sharper punishment of being caned on the hand in front of the class. He suffered this in silence, as he was expected to by his contemporaries; and knew that he would have received worse at home had his father known.

Besides being able to assess his teachers' personalities Les also seems to have given a lot of thought to his relationships with other children. It may be that this precocious understanding of human nature has been magnified by him in reflecting on his childhood; whether this is so or not it is characteristic of him to locate the beginnings of many of his adult abilities in his childhood. In narrating the following account of a fight at school, in which

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he was involved, his subject includes not only this childhood experience but also his contemporary personality and way of responding to similar situations.

As a new boy at Luckington school he had to face bullying which was, in effect, a form of initiation. He stressed that such fights were the means by which the boys established their own hierarchy, as distinct from that which was imposed by the teachers, and in which "you got to know your place":

Now I'll tell you a little story. When I was -- it was tough mind in those days going to school, tougher than what it is today -- I remember going to Luckington school for the first time, 'cause they shut our school at Alderton, and I went to Luckington when I was eleven, I think. Yeah, about eleven, yes I would be about eleven. And I'm a new boy, you see, there's two of us new boys. And what they used to do in those days, they used to have a piece of chalk, uh, draw a bally great ring in the playground and a boy would challenge you to a scrap, you see. [M.L.L.: Oh, yes, my mother used to say about my uncle and his fights.] This is right, this is what they used to do, challenge you to a scrap. So the biggest bully he'd either do it himself or he'd have one of his hirelings to do it. So you see in those days it was the survival of the fittest. And more so in those days too, because T.B. then was a killer, so again, survival of the fittest. If you build up an immunity against it by having it and getting better, well, you were one of the lucky ones. So again, it was the age of survival of the fittest. So like I said, when I went to school this was the fact and I won't over-emphasise it, I tell you as far as I can truthfully remember, and I'm eleven, and I'm got my brother Jim, at Hazelmere, he's come to school as well. And I'm his big brother protector and you know and all this. And he's four years younger than me, you see, so he's only seven. And I'm not to school many days before, you know, someone draws a great big ring in the playground and a chap called Hawkins, from our village, uh, Henry, he's the chap who was, well, boy now, who's picked up to give me a hiding, see.

And now I don't want to fight, I'm, I'm peace-loving sort of a chap and I don't believe in scrapping, never did. I'm not a fighter. But I'm no coward either. And after a lot of taunts and what-have-you I took off my jacket and before he could do anything I banged him one, bang in the eye, and another one I followed up in his stomach, and I had him on the ground, bang. And I'd acted so quick, and I -- this is, I've always been like this all my life, I've made quick decisions -- I made a quick decision then. Before he was ready I hit him. Bang. One in the eye and I followed up with one in the belly because I thought that was the two places that would hurt most, I'd a-thought this out before. My brain was working overtime, like it does now, if I'm going to have to face a certain problem, I do a lot of thinking quick. I think how I'm going to approach it, how I'm going to handle it, what I'm going to say. And now like I say I banged him twice, that was all, he was on the floor. And his brother then came to his [laughs] help, and that was Frank, and he was two days younger than me so I thought "I'll give that one a beating as well." So I gave them both. And mind you, I went up like that [extends his arm to indicate his gain in status], see, I'm, cor! dear dear!

Now the last one that I had to fight, and this is how it used to go, was a boy called Snell, and if my brother Jim, you ever see him, I'll ask him to recount what happened. I was having a hell of a fight with him and in the end he couldn't beat me but only by kicking me, and he kicked me in the mouth. There you are, my brother Jim will tell you, I had him beat, yes I did, and I would have been cock of the walk, and I wasn't very big, but he kicked me in the mouth, yes he did. But anyway, after this the Hawkinses of course, you know, we somehow or other, his like animals really, you got to know your place.

Although he had proved his ability as a fighter he did not become a bully himself; he feels that his forbearance brought him more respect.

He found other means to become the centre of attention, however, and to win the admiration of his contemporaries. He learned to play the mouth-organ at the age of twelve and this

coincided with the awakening of a desire to impress girls as well as boys. His interest in playing an instrument had begun while listening to his uncle play the tin-whistle:

I've laid on there, on that old sofa, many a time when my dear Uncle Reg who's dead and gone now used to play the old tin-whistle [whistles] like that, and [chuckles], you know, while away the time. What else do you do? You see, if he'd, you know, he'd been rabbiting during the morning, perhaps, Sunday morning you know, keeping his eye, weather-eye open for the keeper, and in the afternoon before he went milking, you see, he'd sit on the couch and play the tin-whistle. And I used to think that was lovely, you know, ⁶⁹ beautiful. Yeah, clever chap he used to be.

Reg was the youngest of his uncles and was probably in his late teens and unmarried at this time when Les was ten. A rivalry developed between them as Les grew older:

When Reg learned to whistle I learned the whistle; when Reg learned the mouth-organ, I learned the mouth-organ. ⁷⁰

Once he played his mouth-organ in the pub where Reg had been used to playing; Les was so much better than him that Reg never took his mouth-organ out again.

The mouth-organ was popular because it was cheap, portable, and easy to play; a "really good" Echo harmonica could be bought for half a crown during the 1930's. Laurie Lee remembers that children played them during his boyhood and Fred Kitchen has described a typical evening's entertainment for men and lads on the farm which

⁶⁹ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

⁷⁰ Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

included singing and the playing of melodeons and mouth-organs; some musical ability was expected from everyone: "He was considered a poor gawk who couldn't knock a tune out of a mouth-organ or give a song to pass away the evening."⁷¹

Les learned "all the latest tunes," such as "Tiptoe through the Tulips," although he began by learning "Abide with Me." He played at school and found that it brought unique advantages with the girls; he was "red hot at vamping" and they flocked round him:

I charm the girls, get in their cloakroom -- forbidden territory, see -- and play away and they love it.

His success with music brought the same result as his success in fighting: "My stock went up just like that."

He found that his workmate, Joe Neil, would offer to do part of Les's job in return for a tune. Joe would milk the last cow while Les played "Jealous of You"; a song which Joe associated with the maid he was courting at Sopworth House. When they brought in the hay for the animals Joe would offer to throw it up in the racks if Les would play: "I used to charm the bloody boots off 'im," Les said with amusement.

He enjoyed this admiration and continued to play throughout his adolescence seeking always to improve his instrument and performance. It was a competitive activity in which he joined

⁷¹ Lee, Cider with Rosie, p. 183; Kitchen, Brother to the Ox, p. 60.

energetically: "I had to have the best [mouth-organ]; I had to be the best," he said. To learn to play the mouth-organ was a challenge to his capability and hence to his manly reputation, like that presented by the learning of any other skill; he used the word "conquer" -- "I really conquer the old thing" -- to describe this act of learning by sustained effort and practice just as he also spoke of "conquering" the difficult arts of rabbit-catching.

An anecdote told how he both outplayed and outsmarted a rival performer at the village club. The other youth had a beautiful mouth-organ which Les coveted. He was playing "Nine o'clock in the morning," which was considered a difficult tune, and Les, after listening, said "I can play the mouth-organ." The other fellow said "Oh? Let's hear you." Les took out his own and, having "the feeling that something was going to come of this," he deliberately made several mistakes as he played. The other then bragged that he would give Les his mouth-organ if he could play "Nine o'clock in the morning" as well as he had. Les made sure that there were plenty of witnesses to the offer and then went home and "practiced like hell." Some days later he returned to the club and told his rival that he was ready to play. He asked to borrow his mouth-organ to play it on, "bird in the hand, see; in case the chap went back on his word," and went on to win the coveted instrument:

I get his mouth-organ and I vamps like blazes,
which he can't do.

His story shows his satisfaction at having cleverly arranged the contest and the way in which he treated music as an area for competition and the display of his talents.

Social Life

The "Men's Club" in Alderton was the focus of social life for the young men. Les began to go there at about fourteen and a half years of age, after he had begun to work on the farm for his uncle, and he continued to go to it until he left the village at the age of nineteen. There was no public house in Alderton, the nearest being the "Five Bells" at Luckington, and in any case, even those old enough to drink could not have afforded to spend many nights there in the week. The club was always crowded:

This is where the whole of the lads in the village went in the evening, and it would be full, it would be literally full.⁷²

There was a snooker table at which Les excelled so that he and his partner were known as Lindstrom and Davis after the champions of the day. The club also became the scene of quarrels and fights since, as it was the only place to go, enemies could not avoid each other. Two young men from the village were good musicians and played the piano and the ukelele-banjo on several nights in the week. They played the latest tunes in these years between 1926 and 1930 which they learned from sheet music:

We knew them all because soon as ever a new tune came out, if he was any good, Frank used to buy it, and I can tell you the publishers nearly always were Chappell and Son, and he would supply these and we were up to date with all the latest tunes.

⁷² Recorded interview, July 9, 1974, Chideock.

Sheet music was expensive and they were lucky, Les said, to have Frank Knapp, the pianist, who, as the son of the estate agent, could afford to buy it. Les is proud of the way that they kept up with the most recent trends in music, dances, and films.

Since the club was the main meeting place for the young men it also became the place in which a youth established his standing with his contemporaries. Les is very sensitive to such social pressures; he described the situation again, as tending to produce the "survival of the fittest":

In those days, like I said before, it was survival of the fittest; a little bit tough, but once, mind, you was accepted, in your position, well fair enough.

Les seems to have gained his place through his ability as a comic and musician; others achieved theirs by bullying and a boy like Frank Handy gained his notoriety as a ringleader in schemes of mischief.

Although the young men were rivals as individuals they joined, fairly unanimously, in disapproval of anyone who in his dress or manner seemed to be trying to raise himself into a higher social class. Their censure was shown on one occasion in the form of a practical joke which was played on the upstart. Wally Trotman was nicknamed "the Duke" for the way he had become a follower of the Duke of Beaufort's Hunt. He regularly stopped foxes' earths and for his services was once invited to the hunt ball which was regarded as a most prestigious social occasion. Other members of the club

were particularly annoyed by the way he imitated the manners and dress of the gentry even to the affectation of walking with a walking stick:

He had a air of superiority about him, which the average villager was going to take it out of him, you know, bring him down to earth a bit.

Frank Handy arranged a prank that would frighten Trotman by the appearance of a ghost:

I was in on this, to tell you the truth. While we was up the, uh, the Hut, one night, you see, they'd a-worked this one out. What they were going to do -- this Frank Handy was in lodgings with people called Olborough -- he was going to borrow a sheet, you see, and then they were going to hide in this wood and when he was halfway up across the first field he was going to walk out of the wood and, do this, you see, and frighten this Trotman to death, you see.

However the tricksters were disappointed. Les and the others waited in the wood while Frank Handy appeared before Trotman wearing a sheet and going "whoo-oo" but Trotman promptly struck the "ghost" on the head with his walking stick and went on his way. The attempted trick and its consequence are equally traditional: two motifs may be recognised: "K 1833. Disguise as ghost" and "K 1682. Disguised trickster beaten by man he is trying to frighten."⁷³

Les subsequently developed a respect for Wally Trotman. Although Trotman could have made the plotters look silly by telling the story at the club he never did so. Later, after receiving a

⁷³ Stith Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk Literature, (Rev. ed.; Bloomington and London, 1966), IV, p. 439, p. 419.

beating at the hands of the club bully, Trotman stayed away for a while and learned to box; when he returned he "almost executed" his tormentor. Les admired him for this also. Although Les was attracted by the liveliness of boys like Handy, and enjoyed being a member of the dominant group, his personal ambition and parental teaching caused him to appreciate Trotman's example in trying to be "different from the rest" and "a cut above the ordinary." In adult life Les has had to reconcile his desire to improve himself, socially and financially, with his opposing impulse to remain "a common man" like the contemporaries that he left behind in Wiltshire and who remained labourers all their lives.

Perhaps due to his strict upbringing Les remained on the periphery of adolescent illegal activities. He was enticed into poaching one night but took it as a lesson to himself that he was nearly caught:

Well, I tell you once, Martin, I was involved in a poaching, in a bit of a poaching one night, yeah, against my will, yes it was. You see how easy it was done. Now I tell you something -- I'm glad I brought this up -- cor, never no more though. I'm going down to the next village, you know, like I used to, you know, boys walk around seeing the girls and all that sort of thing, and this chap Handy and another bloke called Dawman is going to ferret, ahm, a bury, under a ash tree. Roughly about a hundred yards off the lane that goes to the next village, you see. So Frank said, "Why don't you come," he said, "Les," he said, "you know, catch a couple of rabbits." Now if you had a couple of rabbits then, see that'd be two bob, shillin' each, see. Mind you, this is a night out, mind, two bob then. In those days, you see, a pint o' beer fourpence, you see, golly, and, well, a bottle of pop, see, was only twopence, you see;

packet of c'garettes, five for twopence, no, ten for fourpence, "Robins" threepence, see. So, you know, if you had two bob you had a night out. So then he, uh, so instead of going to the village that night I went with them. I always remember it was a beautiful moonlight night it was, and they got to this old ash tree, you know, this bury under it, and put down the tile o' nets. Put the ferret in. This bloke Dawman he used to carry the ferret in his pocket in a big poacher's pocket, you know, that went round the back of his coat. Shove the ferret in, blow me down, before you know what have happened, you know, had four or five rabbits in no time, see. And they decided, you know, quick catch and go off. So I had a rabbit and I had it legged and hung down my trouser-leg, you know, hitched on my braces, yeah. And I had one and they had two each, I think, and if I remember right, caught five I think.

We got out in the road we hadn't a-walked up the road very far before we saw a light coming on a, you know, a bicycle see. And Dawman says, "I bet that's old Goddard" -- this is the policeman -- and sure as life it was. So he got opposite, see, he always was suspicious, you know the policeman in those days he had a suspicious mind, because there was always something going on, you see. And he stop and he said "What've you blokes been up to then?" And we said "Nothing at all," said we'd just come from Luckington, which we hadn't which was the biggest lie, we'd just come from a field, been poaching. Now if he'd a-come on, say, two minutes before, he, you know, he would have caught us red-handed, see. But of course he hadn't had a warrant to search us and there you are. We walked on and I was trembling in fear. And I never done it after that. No fear! Yee, there we are, the very first time, see, and purty nigh tripped up. Yeah. So I'd never go, I never went poaching any more, no. But they, they used to do it frequently, and a lot of the lads, a lot of the lads.

His account of the adventure shows the motives which a young man would have for poaching. Older men with families took rabbits and other game primarily for food; young unmarried men sold them to provide extra money for entertainment. For young men it was

also a challenge to their daring and skill. When Les says that "a lot of the lads" did it he is using the term "lads" in its usual affectionate sense which includes, in this case, a note of admiration for their reckless and spirited behaviour.

Les was still at school and twelve years old, or a little younger, when he first began to "take notice" of girls and make the first attempts at courtship:

I think uh, you had an eye for a pretty girl when you was going to school, actually. [M.J.L.: So what age?] I should think about twelve, you begin to take notice of, you know, you try to impress them. [F.R.L.: 'Fore then, wasn't it Les?] Oh, 'fore then, really, I used to be⁷⁴

At this age he was playing to the girls on his mouth-organ in their cloakroom. He did not begin "going" with girls seriously, however, until he was fourteen or fifteen.

Courtship was subject to restrictions from various quarters. There was a general feeling in the community against going with a girl with whom you had gone to school:

It didn't seem the thing to be, uh, to be done then, uh, to go with a girl you went to school with, for some reason or other.

He found the rule "silly" and had broken it, though only once, by the time he left the village. He suffered a great deal of parental control; he feels that there was too much in his day but that there is too little in the present. His mother warned him against associating

with Frank Handy, who introduced him to the pub, and she always inspected and remedied his appearance before he went out. He refused to wear an overcoat, however, on the coldest of nights, since its shabbiness would have detracted from the glory of his yellow pullover, "Oxford bags," and pointed "winkle-picker" shoes.

Since many of the local girls were employed as maids at the big houses in the area many of his experiences of courtship were gained in an atmosphere of furtive meetings out of sight of the butler. The girls had only a strictly limited number of hours off work. A favourite story of his courtship, which he has told on several occasions, relates how Les and two friends took three maids from Sopworth House to a dance at Badminton. In their return, in the early hours of the morning, they found that the young hall porter had locked them out for a prank. After trying vainly to get in the girls went to the village and got the parents of one of them to take them in for the night.

As Les told it the story became a humorous escapade in which various authority figures had to be overcome. He had been reminded of the story while enumerating some of the deterrents to wrongdoing in his youth; a girl's father and brothers warned her suitors against any form of misbehaviour:

And this of course was the fear like when you was courting, you see, you 'ad to be very careful how you treated your girlfriend because you brought the wrath of her father, and her brothers -- and which I experienced, one time! -- on top of you.

The story gave the father's angry reaction to finding his daughter out with three young men at three o'clock in the morning and also the resulting threat made to Les by her brother:

Now the next thing is that I hear, or I was told afterwards, that if I went over Sopworth on the following Sunday to see Ella that her brother was going to give me the biggest hiding ever I had. So I didn't go!

As in so many stories concerning his childhood and youth his basic theme is his involvement in comic misadventure.

The courtship stories present him in the same droll manner as do the stories of his mischievous boyhood. He is simultaneously clownish and quick-witted in these whimsical sketches of adolescent courtship. There is an element of deliberate posing in his behaviour, as he recounts it, in which he adopts the mannerisms which are generally held to typify the behaviour of an infatuated youth. In one case he compared himself with Tom Sawyer and his attempts to impress Becky Thatcher; after hearing of Ella's brother's threat his next attempt to see her was made cautiously:

I went the following Sunday but it was fruitless. I cycled past and I, while I was doing it I thought of the old book that I'd read so many times, Tom Sawyer, you know, when he was, uh, trying to impress Becky Thatcher. Now I go back and pass on my bicycle, ring the bell: "Ding, ding!" and cycle on always keeping my eye open and making sure he didn't come belting out. And then I come back again, ding the bell, nothing happened. I done this about three or four times and give it up as a bad job. So I cycled, so I'd gone fruitless, so I'd [chuckles] done five miles for nothing, and not counting the times I went backwards and forwards the house!

The way in which he sums up the episode as a "fruitless" waste of effort is an appeal to the audience to join him in indulgent laughter at his humorous folly.

The presentation of his romantic feelings for Ella is accomplished similarly through the use of conventional expressions of lovers' behaviour. He plays the role of the ardent youth and then, for comic effect, becomes the wronged and rejected suitor:

However, we get back to Sopworth House, you see, and, 'course we natter a little tiny bit, you know how it is, I think Ella's, you know, oh, she was a little thing, just about five foot, she only about five foot, oh, she's the sweetest little thing on earth I think -- I did then, I didn't after 'cause she married some stupid bloke called Marsh who led her a hell of a life, Richard Marsh his name was, dead loss, only ever thing he, good come out of him he lent me his bike once and I won a slow bicycle race at Sherston on his bike.

The final reference to the bicycle race introduces a non-sequitur as if to make light of the entire sequence of events and place them in the context of the inconsequential triumphs or sorrows of youth.

The phrase "you know how it is" indicates his method and intention in these stories. He has not attempted, or wanted, to reveal the serious feelings he had at the time described in his story; however, by using these conventional expressions he has (stimulated his audience's imaginative involvement in his own reminiscences by calling on them to draw on their own experience of similar, typical, situations. The use of such a phrase is like

a gesture which incorporates the audience with himself and implies that they are a group because they have shared these feelings.

This ability to draw his listeners into sympathy with himself, through humorous personal reminiscences, is an aspect of his social manner which, again, may increase the success of his pastoral and healing role.

There were alternatives, especially at the weekend, to staying in the village for the evening. Most young men and girls rode bicycles and motor bicycles were also becoming available. There was a bus which ran to Chippenham on Saturday night, where, at the Gaumont cinema, Les remembers seeing his first "talkie" which was Sonny Boy with Al Jolson. It was "the most fantastic thing" he had ever seen: "to see people walking about, talking and singing. It was all fairyland." On the way home the passengers from the bus would call at "The Bear" and "The Black Horse" for a drink. A little further on someone would say "Stop the bus, Arthur, and let's see if we can hear the nightingale," and the bus stopped, although it was midnight, and the passengers got out to breathe in the scent of the hayfields and probably to relieve themselves of the beer which they had drunk at "The Black Horse." Everyone sang on the way home and went late to bed not caring what they would have to be up at five the next morning for milking and church after that.

Dancing was very popular. At Luckington village hall a man and his wife played fiddle and piano for dances; two favourite tunes were "Shepherd of the hills, I hear you calling," and I'm

happy when I'm hiking." The dance steps included the Waltz, Foxtrot, Tango, Charleston, Boston Two-Step, and the Veleta. The dances held at the Memorial hall in Badminton were more sophisticated since it was a larger village:

You started dancing at eight and it went on till two and it cost you a shilling. And you had one, perhaps one of the best bands in, in an around there. You had the "Black Diamonds" from Chippenham or one from Chipping Sodbury; or what they used to call 'em the summat "Diamonds" from Malmesbury. All marvellous bands in those days they were; all trying to copy, uhm, Harry Roy, you know, and all the rest of it. By golly, it was really slick!

Les is relatively serious in his praise of these bands for dancing meant a lot to him. He was known as a good dancer and even gave lessons in Alderton during a short period when he was out of work. It annoys him now that his health prevents him from dancing; accordingly he takes a tablet for his heart and dances in spite of medical advice: "I go till I can't go any further," he said, in a remark which conveys some of his frustration at being unable to work or do the active things which he did before his illness.

He mentioned some travelling entertainments which came to Alderton. The magic-lantern show was considered a treat. Evangelists visited and showed films but they were not favourably received by the vicar and the squire, and although the people enjoyed the films they were left with a feeling of guilt at having gone to see them.

The vicar organised amateur performances of plays such as The Merchant of Venice which were considered to be of an "improving"

nature. Les implied that most people found these dull particularly in comparison with the more popular entertainments that were staged by another local man, Len Greenwood, who organised a troupe of players to perform in the area. Greenwood was a versatile and talented man who composed humorous sketches and sang comic songs. He presented them in variety shows which he called "pot-pourri" and "charades." Les performed on a make-believe saxophone in his "novelty band" and dressed in sailor's costume for a burlesque version of a sailor's hornpipe. He quoted a verse of one of Greenwood's best comic songs, "Don't have any more, Mrs. Moore," in which he acted the part of a tipsy Irish priest admonishing a parishioner to have no more of either gin or babies. The sketches depicted Chaplinesque situations in which, for example, a lady would edge away nervously from a tramp who had sat down on the same park bench. The players visited Chippenham Conservative Club, one of the great houses in the area, and most of the village halls.

Les considers that Len Greenwood was another of the people who had a great influence upon him. Les first saw his show at Badminton and felt at once that he would like to perform in it:

I thought, by golly! I wouldn't half like to have a go at that. You know. I always had the ability to make another person laugh, either by pulling a funny face or saying something, you know, it come to me just like that you. Gaw, I'd like to have a go at that.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Recorded interview, January 6, 1974, Chideock.

Les joined the cast and is proud of the way that Greenwood accepted him despite his being at this time "typical Wiltshire" with "broken English" and being "not particularly careful" of what he said. Greenwood seems to have made him more conscious of the value of his talent of being able to make people laugh. Les was deeply impressed by Greenwood's own ability:

He was so good, Harry, that he would, and could, reduce you to tears just by talking. Or he could make you laugh till you couldn't stand, just by talking. He had a, a, rubber face; he had, um, a most, what can I say, expressive countenance. And he was a very versatile bloke. And there wasn't any musical instrument that he couldn't play.

There is little doubt that Les subsequently imitated Greenwood's comic techniques. Les has been a prominent member of the Chideock Players ever since this amateur dramatic group was formed in 1947; he has always taken comic parts. When he was asked to sing at a concert in Chideock soon after he came to live there he sent to Len Greenwood for the texts of some comic songs. A sketch he has written, which consists of a dialogue between a tramp and a barrister, may also be based in part on Greenwood's style of comedy.

Greenwood also gave moral advice; he taught Les not to swear:

He, I think, as much as anybody, influenced by life in lots of ways. Not only was he a versatile man, he was a good man. He was a good living man. You know, if I swore, now which I sometimes did, he'd say, "Now Leslie, I wouldn't use that word if I was you, look. It doesn't do you any good, it doesn't impress me, I wouldn't use it." And if you know, in the end I'd, perhaps I'd cuss my bike because I

couldn't, something 'ould go wrong with it, but immediately I walked through his door, the very thing, the first thing that entered my mind was, "Mustn't swear in yer."

Greenwood's persuasive and conciliatory manner seems to have become a model for Les who uses the same soothing and reasonable tones as part of his "bedside manner" when counselling people and persuading them to his opinion. His persona, as a man who makes others laugh so that they can forget their troubles, has been at least partly developed through his use of the theatrical techniques and the air of moral concern which he learned from Len Greenwood.

Les's description of himself in childhood and youth shows that he was almost precociously aware of the impression that he made on people and of the techniques of persuasion which he could use in order to cause them to like him and to agree with him. In his later life he was to develop this ability even more until, at the present, his persuasive manner is used in his role as an unofficial pastor and counsellor to the people in his village. He also shows himself as having become an entertainer, being always ready to perform as a musician or a comedian, in order to win the same admiration and affection; this talent is used by him now to assure him of a welcome in the homes of the people he visits in Chideock and its surrounding area. He is naturally gregarious and these house visits are his favourite recreation besides allowing him to carry out his healing and counselling role.

The following chapter discusses his learning of the wide range of agricultural skills that were necessary to the rural worker.

This aspect of his life is important to an understanding of his work as a charmer since this traditional education bred attitudes toward knowledge and ethics which have had a bearing on his interpretation of the charmer's role:

Les's youth may be said to have come to an abrupt end with a series of deaths within his family which made him feel that "the end of an era" had come and that his life in Alderton could never be the same again. His mother, both grandparents, and an uncle, all died within the space of two years and on his mother's death in 1931 Les decided that he could not bear to live in Alderton without her:

The thing was this, I had to leave home, I had to make, I had to break fresh ground. So you see, out of adversity come a certain amount of good.

He answered an advertisement in the Western Gazette, a newspaper which covered the south-western counties, and was offered a job as a youth who would "live-in" and give general help on a small-holding near the village of Chideock in west Dorset. On the fourth of March 1931 at the age of nineteen he left home for the first time and travelled eighty miles to the south and his new job in Dorset.

III

THE FARMWORKER'S SKILLS

Les Ollerton was already an experienced farm worker when he arrived in Chideock. He had spent five years with his uncle who had kept the dairy on Mortimer's farm at Alderton and when Les was not working with the cows he had joined in all the other work on the farm. The move to west Dorset brought few major alterations in the type of work that he was expected to be able to do; he remained primarily a cowman. There were many minor changes however, in different names for implements, new breeds of animals, and soils which required special ways of working, so that the young man had to adapt to a new vocabulary and alter some of his original techniques.

As a stranger in an unfamiliar county with no relatives or friends to support him he may have felt the need to establish a reputation as a good workman even more keenly than the local young men. In the following discussion of his early manhood I have focused on his learning of skills since he has stressed that this was particularly important to him during these years. In doing so I have again tried to emphasise simultaneously four aspects in my approach to his biography.

His recollections stand, first of all, as a contribution to the record of traditional rural culture in a region where it has received little previous study. Secondly, his reminiscences are

analysed for what they show of the traits in his personality which seem to have figured in his development of his role as a charmer. Thirdly, his selection of significant anecdotes and memorates is studied for the way in which they give the account of himself that he wishes to present to his listeners; this quality of self-awareness is particularly important in his performance as a charmer. Fourthly, the verbal art and rhetorical patterning of his discourse is examined for what it shows of his arts of persuasion. The basic premise which underlies all of these considerations of the material of the interviews is that his practice as a charmer is related to most other aspects of his life and that it can not be properly understood without their description.

Before proceeding to a description of his specific skills, and ultimately to a consideration of the values which underlie them it seems desirable to give some account of the farming community in which he worked and in which his reputation for knowledge and ability had its value. This is prefaced by a brief chronology of his employment history during his farming years.

Les's first job at Chideock was as a general worker who "lived in" and helped with the milking and all the other jobs at Venn Dairy which was a smallholding situated about a mile and a half from the village of Chideock. He received twelve shillings a week and under the "living-in" arrangement had his own bedroom and took his meals with the family. He soon found that he was "too independent"

to enjoy living under this system. Because he was living in the farmer considered him to be available all the time and he was often made to work past the agreed finishing time of five-thirty in the evening. He began to argue with his employer especially when it was threatened that the door would be locked to prevent him from coming in late. After staying for seven months he answered another advertisement in the Western Gazette and was offered a job on a farm near Bournemouth.

One evening in the week before he was due to leave he was on his way to Seatown, the seaside hamlet which is a mile below Chideock, when he was stopped by Ernie Ryall who farmed there; "You don't want to go there," he said, as they stood in his barn, "I've got a job for you." Ryall's offer came as a welcome proof that he had begun to establish a local reputation as a good worker for Les's father had told him scornfully when he left home that he would be back, begging to be taken in again, and it was "with these words ringing in my ears" that he had decided to quit his first employer in Chideock and feared that he would have to return to Alderton as a failure.

Marsh suggested a graceful form in which Les could write to excuse himself from his commitment to the Bournemouth farmer and, accordingly, Les came to work as a ploughman, carter, and cowman, at Seatown Farm where he took lodgings, not with the farmer, but with the dairyman and his wife who were later to become his father and mother-in-law.

He courted and married their daughter, Flora, and, as there was no house for a married man at Seatown Farm, they moved to work for Jim Pope at Middle Brook Farm six miles away in the Marshwood Vale. Later, when the manager of a large farm at Wynford Eagle, seven miles to the east, advertised for a man to take charge of their dairy herd Les applied and was given the job despite being only twenty-five years old.

At some time during 1940 another Chideock farmer, Harold Oxber, asked him to return to Chideock and work for him at Doghouse Farm. Les's reasons for returning to Chideock and leaving a job which seemed to offer greater prospects of advancement are unknown to me. It may be that his wife wanted to be closer to her parents or that Les missed the social life of Chideock where he had been able to go to dances and to sing at concerts; Wynford Eagle was an isolated hamlet in the sparsely populated Dorset downland.

Les stayed at Doghouse Farm for ten and a half years being in charge of the stock. It was here that he began to win regularly in the competitions for thatching and hedging which were held by the Melpash Agricultural Society and which drew entries from farms throughout west Dorset.

Although Les still has many links with farming and with those he worked with he considers that the ending of his farming years made a distinct change in his life. To mark his own view of their distinctness his years on the land are presented here as a

self-contained episode while the history of his later employment is continued in the next chapter. His view of the unique value of his farming years is the result of his pride in his traditional knowledge and skills and his belief in the underlying philosophy concerning the right way to work which is apparent in them. The following brief description of traditional agriculture in west Dorset will suggest the nature of the work in which he was employed and the kind of community in which he became a member.

The varying types of the soil determine the style of cultivation, and hence the way of life, of any agricultural region; Barbara Kerr has given abundant evidence of this simple truth:

Until the present day topography and soil determined methods of farming and so shaped the pattern of living throughout the countryside. The soil held in bondage not only farmers and labourers, but the whole rural community.¹

Even in the area in which Les worked, which may be taken as lying within a radius of eight miles from Bidport, the soils vary considerably. The soils of the land around Bridport, which includes Chideock, have been praised by a number of agricultural commentators; Louis H. Ruegg called the soils "rich" and "genial" and William Marshall described the lower land as being suitable for many different arable crops:

[they are] mostly of a superior quality -- deep rich loams -- throwing out full crops of Wheat, Beans, Flax, and Hemp; and, in this part of the

¹ Kerr, Bound to the Soil, p. 1.

District, the sides and even the summits of the swells and hillocks are many of them well soiled; the best a limestone loam; others of a light sandy nature.²

Doghouse Farm at Chideock occupies some of the sloping land between the cliffs by the sea and the valley of the River Winniford; Harold Oxber, who farmed there, grew the best quality of grain for sale to the seed-merchants at Dorchester. The strong stems of his wheat were not wasted for they made the best "reed" for thatching. He also grew flax which has long been grown in the area of Bridport for use in the town's netting and cordage industry.

Les has praised Oxber's sound knowledge of the principles of crop rotation. Flax is a good preparative for wheat and thus served as a natural fertiliser as well as being a valuable crop in its own right; Les admires such astute farming. The best account of the growing of flax and hemp in the district, the cultivation of hemp having been an important cottage industry in the eighteenth century, has been given by Kerr.³ Flax and hemp for the town's industry are now imported from abroad but men in their fifties recall the beauty of fields that were full of the blue flowers of the flax during the 1930's.

Most farmers kept some cows and many specialised in dairying; Marshall defined the region in 1796 as having been "time

²Louis H. Ruegg, "Farming of Dorsetshire," The Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, XV (1854), 399; Marshall, Rural Economy of the West of England, II, 129.

³Kerr, Bound to the Soil, pp. 80-82.

immemorial, a Dairy District."⁴ The Marshwood Vale, however, in which Les worked as a cowman for two years, "rests upon a cold lias clay, distinguished above all the clays in the county for its stiffness," so that it tends to be devoted even more exclusively to grazing land for dairy cattle.⁵ The clay soil is known as "strong land" among the farmers of the Vale and it demands a breed of cow sturdy enough to survive winters in which the water-logged fields become churned into deep and clinging mud. Les and his contemporaries favoured Devon cattle a breed which was traditional in the area. G.E. Fussell records that "Devons" were the most popular breed in west Dorset during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶ When Les moved to the farm at Wynford, on the dry chalky soil of the Dorset Downs, he was able to work with Jersey cows whose lighter frames could not have withstood the muddy winters of the Vale.

The land was divided among many small farms; of late the tendency has been for smaller farms to be incorporated in larger units. Kerr has described this process in her history of the small dairy farmers of the Marshwood Vale parish of Whitechurch Canoniscom.⁷ All but one of Les's employers, however, were what he called "small men"

⁴ Marshall, Rural Economy of the West of England, II, 148.

⁵ Ruegg, "Farming of Dorsetshire," 420.

⁶ G.E. Fussell, The English Dairy Farmer 1500-1900 (London, 1966), p. 26.

⁷ Kerr, Bound to the Soil, pp. 50-68.

which meant that they farmed areas of less than a hundred acres. They worked alongside their men for the most part and there was often little in education, speech, or appearance, to distinguish them from the men who worked for them.

Because on these small farms the farmer and his family took an active part in the work they rarely employed more than one or two men. The relationship between the farmer and his men was therefore inevitably a close one; Les speaks of the three small farmers who employed him as having become personal friends. The normal living arrangement in which the worker was given a "tied cottage" at a low rent which went with his job, and the custom of supplementing a small wage by allowances of food and fuel, also caused the relationship to develop an air of paternalism. Les's habitual tact enabled him to adapt to such a situation readily but some men found themselves in frequent arguments with their employers and moved from place to place until they found a farmer whose temperament and methods of working harmonised with their own.

Many of the precepts which Les advocates as being necessary in farming life seem to be designed to avoid conflict with employers or fellow workers, it seems likely, despite Les's specific interest in being able to persuade people to agree with him, that these precepts for the avoidance of conflict were generally followed in the farming community.

Competition between men was often vigorous because a man's reputation among his fellow workers and with his employer

depended on his capacity for work. As a young worker of about sixteen years of age Les competed with another young man who was equally keen to prove his ability and appetite for work:

He and I thatched all the ricks on that farm that year and we quarrelled who should thatch the last one. And we tossed up [to see] who should thatch the last one and it come down "Heads" and I thatched it. Now you see, in these days [i.e. in the present], look one: they wouldn't want to do any extra work and we fought almost who should do it. Because we wanted, I wanted, to thatch one more rick than him. I wanted to say, for my work on that farm to be a little bit better than his, and it was!⁸ You know, although I'm boasting saying so, it was.

This rivalry was held in check, however, by a marked disapproval of boastfulness:

You see the thing is this, you must never boast unless you can substantiate what you're boasting about, a lot of people do boast though, and don't know what they're boasting about.

As a concomitant to the disapproval of boasting the denigration of another man's ability was also avoided as a breach of courtesy; this rule of conduct became apparent in the care which Les took not to mention the name of a man whom he considered inferior to himself as a thatcher: "I mustn't mention any names here because it wouldn't be fair, because the man's still alive." Les is equally careful to give due credit to anyone who taught him a particular skill. The

⁸ Recorded interview, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

⁹ Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

most likely area for conflict between men and with their employers lay in each man's sensitivity to any slight directed at his knowledge or ability: "You must never question a countryman's knowledge," Les told me.

This phrase came up during conversation as a result of a visit that we had paid to one of Les's friends, a coppice worker and cider maker, in Marshwood Vale. Les had been surprised to hear him say that the rabbits in the Vale still suffered from myxomatosis but had not queried the statement. (Elsewhere in the area rabbits have returned in great numbers having become resistant to this artificially induced disease.) After we had left his friend Les turned to me and said "You must never question a countryman's knowledge. You must only suggest things and must be very careful not to seem to doubt him."¹⁰ I was careful to follow this good advice afterward in my interviews with Les.

My evidence for supposing that slights offered by farmers to their men's abilities became the most common causes of arguments between masters and men is based on interviews with only three retired farm workers in addition to Les Ollerton; nevertheless, it seems unlikely that three men chosen at random would show such a marked similarity in temperament, and in their manner of recalling arguments with employers as significant events, unless this attitude

¹⁰ Notes, January 24, 1975, Marshwood Vale.

toward the working relationship with a farmer was to some degree traditional within the farming community of the area. George Bourne has recorded Bettsworth's accounts of disputes with employers and these show the same independent spirit.¹¹

The question of hours and wages was an important element in the relationship and yet extremely poor rates of pay and long hours seem to have been endured as though they were an inevitable aspect of farming; it was, in some cases, only a farmer's thoughtless criticism of a man's knowledge or integrity, causing him to feel that his work was unappreciated, which resulted in some flaring up of temper and an assertion of independence. Sam Legg, a retired carter of Bradpole, described working for a Burton Bradstock farmer who sometimes made him wait a month for his wages; however, it was the farmer's refusal to allow him to feed the horses properly which caused him to quit.

He left another man who criticised his ploughing:

He said, "That's the wrong way to do that." "Oh," I said, "who [have] you been talking to?" "Oh," he said, "that isn't the way of it; you ought to have started under the hedge and followed the hedge right out across the field." Well the hedge was like a rainbow [i.e. it was curved]. What I'd done, you see, I'd marked out the [furrows] straight up across, so as to come, when you got out in the middle of the field it was straight up through, for the next crop to come up. "Oh," I said, "you think," I said, "I'm daft enough," I said, "to stay here," I said, "and strike out crooked potato-drills?" "Cause,"

¹¹ Bourne, The Bettsworth Book, pp. 245-246.

I said, "if you think I'm like that," I said, "you've got the wrong one." . . . I throwed down the reins, I said, "There you are, there's the horses, drive 'em."¹²

The violence with which such men responded to criticism of their methods of working suggests how deeply they held that their knowledge was a measure of their personal worth.

This knowledge was hard won. As a stranger from another county Les found that the task of establishing a creditable reputation for himself was made harder at first by his unfamiliarity with local terms and practices. He sometimes found simple orders incomprehensible through a farmer's use of a word which he did not know; the following anecdote illustrates his attempt to bluff in such a situation because of his feeling that to have admitted ignorance would have signified inexperience:

You're getting a man, we'll say, being employed in Dorset who've probably come from Wiltshire or, we'll say, even Somerset, and you see until he gets to know all the different, ah, sayings, and different names that the Dorset people give different things, well, he's at a loss for a little while. 'Cause I remember when I went down to Seaton with poor old Farmer Ernie Ryall many years ago the very first week I was there he said to me one morning, he said, "Yer," he said, "Leslie, you go out in Six Acres and bring in the whippetree that's out there." [Pause] Whippetree? Never heard of it. [Indicates bewilderment by raised eyebrows.] Now I can't say to a boss can I, "What's a whippetree?" He'll say, "Yah, you ignorant devil." You know? And I immediately go on out to Six Acres expecting to see something like

¹²Recorded interview, July 6, 1974, Bradpole.

a tree, you know, and uhm, couldn't find anything at all. And I went back in and I said, ahm, "I can't find it out there." I didn't say I didn't know what it was. He said "It's out there stuck 'ome in hedge," he said, "you can't miss it." He said, "As you come down from Seven Acres, look, through the gap or the gateway, it's there stuck in the hedge." So I went again and I see this thing stuck out in the hedge. Now we call it in Wiltshire, ah, not a weigh-bar, something like that." 13

A "whippetree," he later explained, was a wooden bar to which two horses were harnessed in order that they could draw abreast.

His reluctance to admit ignorance of a subject is one of his most characteristic traits; however, in this case his memorate illustrates the typical reaction of a man who feels that his competence is being tested. Had his incomprehension been discovered it would probably have been made the subject of a comic anecdote which would have been told to Les's embarrassment among his contemporaries.

Accounts of such happenings are probably traditional in farming communities; Fred Kitchen has given a similar anecdote of a worker who could not understand a farmer's orders because they were given in a strange dialect.¹⁴ In one of his literary sketches of rural life in a west Dorset village John Eastwood gives a further story of a misunderstood order as an example of the kind of anecdote in which the comic foibles of a member of the community are commemorated.

¹³ Recorded interview, February 2, 1975, Bridport.

¹⁴ Kitchen, Brother to the Ox, pp. 141-142.

and savoured by his fellows.¹⁵ The appreciation of such humour is widespread and is not limited to any social or occupational group. For stories of nonsensical errands on which apprentices are sent by old hands in a trade are typical of this popular genre of comic narratives. Now that Les has established himself in new occupations and new circumstances he can tell the story against himself without loss of face; as a young man, however, the incident had posed a serious challenge to his reputation.

The Cowman

The following description of the special skills which Les learned exemplifies his ambition and desire for expertise in many aspects of farm work; it must always be remembered, however, that his principal occupation during these years was as a cowman. Les learned the job of a cowman when he started to help his uncle who kept the dairy on Mortimer's Farm at Alderton. At the age of twelve he had milked six cows night and morning. He was taught to milk by hand using the "full hand" rather than the "stripping" method; the fingers and palm of the hand are closed round the cow's teat and are rhythmically squeezed together. This causes the cow to give down her milk more quickly than by "stripping" in which the fingers and thumb are pulled down the length of the teat while squeezing it. Les is proud of the fact that he milked "full handed" while many were content to use the slower and inferior "stripping" method.

¹⁵ John Eastwood, The Burton Bradstock Book (Burton Bradstock, Dorset, 1973), p. 18.

A hand milker was expected to milk between eight and ten cows an hour. Each milker usually had the same cows since, as creatures of habit, cows usually enter the milking shed in the same order. Although some people preferred that the cows be milked by various hands, in order to equalise the effects of good and bad milking, Les felt that they should be milked regularly by the same person. A heifer is more content when milked in the same way and at the same pace. The benefit of the milking machine is that it provides this desirable regularity.

The foundation of the belief that "a new hand" among the milkers will cause cows to give less milk was ascribed by him to the fact that cows dislike changes in their routine; the complementary idea that this could be cured by singing to them was also partially confirmed by him although he felt that it was the gentle behaviour rather than the singing which brought the effect. I had asked about this as I was reminded of the milking scene in Thomas Hardy's novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles, in which the arrival of Tess as a new hand is suspected to be the cause of the cows' failure to give down their usual amount of milk.¹⁶ J.S. Udall has summarised Hardy's observation of the milkers' sayings as follows:

In the dairy districts the presence of a newcomer amongst the milkers is generally believed to account for a cow "keeping back" her usual yield of milk. It is commonly said to have gone up into its horns; when the only cure is for the milkers to break out into a song by way of

¹⁶ Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d'Urbervilles (London, 1891), chap. XVII.

inducement to the animal to resume its normal career of usefulness.¹⁷

Les's familiarity with these ideas suggests that they were, as Udal implies, widespread in tradition. The old saying about a dry cow that its milk "had gone up into its horns" had always been a joke, rather than a belief, among dairy people, he said:

Certain cows, you see, will now and again refuse to give their milk down, refuse to release their milk, and I think this is an old saying, when you said, you know, when the old woman was milking with the old bucket and pail and the old cow wouldn't start giving her milk down you'd say "What's up then Missis?" She'd say "Oh, the damned old thing's got 'n up in his horn." And I think this was a saying.¹⁸

Les's comment suggests that this expression, which Udal has recorded in the same note as a belief, should rather be classified as a jocular dite.¹⁹

His policy of gentleness is in no sense sentimental; the milk yield, and hence the dairyman's profit, is increased by his method of quick milking and kind words:

If you want to [adversely] affect the milk yield of a cow you make a lot of noise, harsh word, and then of course the cow knows you're a stranger, and reacts accordingly. Cows, or animals, are more, more so than human beings, I think, react to a kind

¹⁷ Udal, Dorsetshire Folk-lore, p. 234.

¹⁸ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974.

¹⁹ The term "dite" was introduced by C.W. von Sydow to denote "what people have to say about one thing or another without characterising that which is said as true or false." See Laurits Bødker, International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore (Copenhagen, 1965), II, 70.

touch, a kind word, more than human beings do. And I think that if you, you could go into any herd, matter of fact to prove the opposite, when I used to do the milking for Charlie Everidge on Melplash Show day, many years ago, I could bet that I'd push his milk yield up three or four gallon, there you are. But that wasn't only because I was kind to them, it was because I milked them quicker, because I moved on a bit quick, and talked to them as they were being milked and that sort of thing, made a fuss of them, see? And you only want an extra pint here and an extra pint there and you got a few gallons.

His sensitivity to the behaviour of his animals and his manner, in effect, of coaxing them to give more milk is exactly paralleled in his tactful dealings with people. He often compares human and animal behaviour and finds them essentially the same. There may be a connection with charming here in that, as I shall later try to show, the reassuring manner of the charmer, at least in dealing with human patients, seems to promote the necessary condition of trust, or faith, in which healing can occur. It seems possible that animals react in the same way.

These questions are considered more fully in later chapters. For the present it may be sufficient to indicate that his solicitous kindness toward his animals is a practice which was uncommon enough in the area for him to have been able to increase the milk yield wherever he went and thus to have enhanced his reputation as a cowman.

The cowman was also responsible for ensuring that the milk was in good condition. Les commented on the lack of concern for hygiene that was shown during his time at his uncle's dairy; in his own career he has had to adopt many new methods to ensure the milk's

freedom from infection. Jack Lawley, in his autobiography, also considered the change in standards of cleanliness to be worth comment. He described the careless practices at the Blackmoor Vale dairy where he worked in the 1920's:

We never washed our hands until we had finished milking. We used sacks for aprons, and an old cap that was worn out on our heads. When they got very dirty, which they did, we threw them away. There was no such thing as taking the fore milk to see if it was all right. All that was unknown. All the bad went in together, but if milk had blood in it that was bad and kept out. I suppose that was because we could see it.²⁰

During the winter the milk was often left uncooled and was strained directly into the churn through a piece of butter muslin which had not always been boiled as it should have been.

Les probably received advice on dairy hygiene from his wife's family who had kept a dairy at Loders, near Bridport, during the 1920's and later at Seatown Farm in 1931. Flora described the care with which they kept their wooden utensils scalded and the dairy cool and washed down with water. When they weighed and rolled the pats of butter they first scalded their hands until they were red and then plunged them into cold water to cool them off before handling the butter. I asked whether the butter had ever failed to "come," having in mind though not mentioning the belief that butter may fail to appear through having been "stolen" by a witch, but both Les and Flora said that this could only be due to a failure to follow the proper method.

²⁰ Lawley, Memories of a Herdsman, p. 12.

Most cowmen, including Les, were adept at curing the minor ailments of their cattle. A cowman is always in regular daily contact with his herd through the constant necessity of milking. On the small farms of west Dorset, where herds usually number between twenty and thirty cows, disease is quickly apparent and can be halted by a cowman who knows his job. On a large farm the symptoms may not be noticed, especially when the cows are milked by men who are only "milkers" and are not responsible for the health of the cows as are "dairymen," or "cowmen." Les emphasised the fact that the cowman's knowledge saved his employer many veterinary fees:

I think the big man today with the big herd is spending enormous amounts of money on veterinary bills which the little farmer simply never spent. Simply because the man who milks his cows [i.e. the cows of the large farmer] is the milker and not a dairymen and not a cattleman and doesn't understand the cattle that he's milking. He only understands the way that he's going to extract the milk. [M.J.L.: He's not so close to them is he.] He isn't so close. No, he doesn't know, he doesn't. You see the average man who's looking after a big herd hasn't got the time anyway, and if, if he had an attack of the stomach staggers he wouldn't know what it was. He wouldn't know the very early signs of milk fever and to be able to treat it quickly before it got a hold. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they got to send for the vet because they haven't been able to recognise the symptoms early. And lots of little things, you see, for instance, get a cow with the bladder in the spring, ah, he wouldn't know what it was, by and large they wouldn't, they'd have to have the vet. So they're spending a lot of money on veterinary bills that the little farmer didn't because the little farmer had the chap who knew — or he knew a lot about animals himself — and, of course, there was always someone who was a bit

clever in those days, they're going, they're going,
Martin, they're going.²¹

His sorrow at the passing of this kind of knowledge from modern farming was eloquently expressed and very impressive. The replacement of the cowman's personal care for his herd by the perfunctory visits of the veterinary surgeon is an aspect of the mechanisation of farming which he deplores. The cowman is also devalued under the new system; to "have to have the vet" was once, as Les's remarks imply, a sign of a cowman's failure in his craft, but when the traditional methods of preventive medicine, which had been passed between generations of cowmen, are derided an interesting and prestigious part of his work is taken from him.

The Hedger

The second of Les's special skills to be described here is that of hedging. Les first learned to lay a hedge while working under John Mortimer at Alderton. The term refers to the construction of a hedge by cutting its saplings partly through and bending them down so that they lie along the top of the embankment on which the hedge is growing. New shoots spring up from the original stumps to form a hedge composed of vertical and horizontal branches.

The ditch and raised bank surmounted by a hedge first came into wide use at the time of the enclosure of the open fields around 1800 though as a technique it is much older; one of the best

²¹ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

descriptions of the process is given in The Book of Husbandry (1534) by Master Fitzherbert.²²

Hedging is winter work which may be given to men in their slack periods during the day but is also often contracted out to an expert hedger who is paid at piece-work rates. A hedger is normally paid by the chain, a measure of twenty-two yards; a good hedger can accomplish a chain in a day's work. The current rate (1975) is at least £10 per chain which suggests that a hedger who was granted fine weather could earn more in a week than would a general farm labourer.²³ Such men often work at a variety of seasonal jobs, such as shearing and harvesting, relying on their superior skill to provide a constant demand for their services and preferring the relative independence from an employer which this way of working gives them. Les learned "the expert way" of hedging through working beside one of these men:

Well I first learned to do hedging again under poor old man Mortimer, and this is again by, mostly by observation, and then perhaps later, uhm, I think when I learned the real way, the expert way of doing it was when I was at Maiden Newton in nineteen --

²² Master Fitzherbert, The Book of Husbandry, ed. Rev. Walter W. Skeat from the edition of 1534 (London, 1882), pp. 79-81. For further discussions and illustrations of hedging see: Herbert L. Edlin, Woodland Crafts in Britain (2nd ed.; Newton Abbot, Devon, 1973), pp. 59-62; James Arnold, The Shell Book of Country Crafts (London, John Baker, 1968), pp. 243-248; Thomas Hennell, Change in the Farm (2nd ed.; Cambridge, 1945), pp. 28-44; Thomas Hennell, The Countryman at Work (London, 1947), pp. 65-67.

²³ I owe my information on this point to one of my informants, Harry Crabbe of Uploders, Dorset, who showed me how to make a hedge during January 1975.

very late in life, well, when I say, not late in life, forgive me, I was about twenty-two -- it was when I went to Wynford and the chap that was working for me went down with scarlet fever and I had to stop looking after the cows for ten days and in those ten days I went to help a man called Fred [pause] Tompkins, who was an expert thatcher [hedger- is meant], he'd a-won many, many prizes in the Dorchester area, over many years. And I thought I knew how to do hedging till I went with him, and I think I learned more in that ten days of the finer arts of hedging than ever I would have known if I hadn't had the good fortune to have went with him. Yes he taught me lots of things that were so simple and yet so necessary you know.²⁴ And this helped me I think no end in later years.

His naming and praising the man who taught him is a traditional courtesy which he is careful to observe.

I found his correction of himself in the matter of whether twenty-two was "late in life" to be significant in showing the division between traditional and modern standards in his thinking. The correction may mark some confusion caused by an awareness that under the contemporary educational system the age of twenty-two is no longer late in life and yet, when compared with his own work history in which he left school at fourteen, it certainly was "late" and especially so in the basic matter of hedging.

Les went on to describe his own practice in hedging which, no doubt, closely follows the example set for him by Fred Tompkins. In learning hedging he was taught not only the method of working but also a set of attitudes toward the work. In a biography

²⁴ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

which is necessarily concerned with personality the question of the extent to which attitudes and values are individualistic or the common property of the cultural group must be considered. Individual character is likely to reveal itself in a man's work and yet the methods of work and even aesthetic considerations governing some parts of it may all be traditional. The following transcription of his account of what he called "the finer arts of hedging" reveals both traditional and idiosyncratic attitudes towards his work.

He began his account with an air of formality as though he was conscious of being the possessor of a scarce kind of knowledge; he was animated by the opportunity of playing to a new audience, in the shape of Heather and Jerry Pocius of Memorial University who were my guests at the time, and he turned his summary of the work of hedging into a deliberate performance:

Yes, well I thought there was one or two little points here, uh, Martin, would be interesting to you. I don't know whether we discussed why, uh, we do hedging in certain ways. [M.J.P.: No.] No we didn't do that. Well, first of all you only go hedging when the sap is down, and of course, when, uh, the bushes and trees are at rest. The reason being that if you, if you made a hedge when the sap is up, uh, the thing is that you would kill it. You would bleed it. So if you make a hedge when the sap is down, so that means to say the sap is left all the lateral branches and the main body of the tree, not all of it, because there's some still left there to keep it just alive, just ticking over, but the main sap is gone back down into the stowl, or back down into the roots or the body of the tree. And when you lay a hedge, and cut a plusher, which means to say you cut and bend, then you cut off that little piece that's [sticking up], you know. And you do two things; you cut and lay up the hill, and you also cut the piece that you cut into -- you got to cut that off -- and you cut that off up the

hill as well -- and that is done because when it, when it rains, the water runs down and drops off, into the bank, and not lie into the cut. If you lay it downhill, you see, Martin, when it rains the water will lie in the cut, will not drip away.²⁵

His description of hedging is full of technical terms and special usages, some of which suggest his feelings about this work, so that some comment on these points is necessary. The human analogy which he draws in speaking of the danger that the plant will "bleed" is typical of his sensitive attitude toward plants and animals. However, it is not necessarily idiosyncratic. When I watched Harry Crabbe, a seventy year old former shepherd, making a hedge I noticed that he often spoke to the branches that he was intending to cut and lay: "Let's see what we can do with you then," he might say, or, "He might hold -- well, he can please himself -- there's more to come on." While this is basically a mannerism of thinking aloud in a way that provides entertainment during a lonely job it also reflects a way of working that takes account of the natural tendencies of living things and sees how they can be encouraged to fall into the pattern desired by the workman. This is a matter of an attitude to working with living things which bears comparison with the way that Les never beat his cows but always coaxed them into doing what he wanted them to.

His term "stowl" is recorded as being used in north and south Wiltshire to refer to "the stump of a bush or tree, in hedge or copse, cut off low down so as to form a stock from which underwood

²⁵ Recorded interview, February 2, 1975, Bridport.

may spring,"²⁶ Les's pronunciation of the word varies between "stowl" and "stool"; the latter being the form used in Dorset according to Barnes.²⁷ The word "plusher" has been defined by Barnes through the following description: "FLESH, Plush, or Plagh. To cut the longer sticks (pleshers, plushers, or plashers) of a quickset hedge nearly but not quite off, and lay them down on the bank, so that the sap may come up over the cut, and they may throw out shoots." This term is also subject to regional variations in pronunciation and Les has also heard a plusher referred to as a "half cut," a "full plusher," and a "half plusher."

A great part of the skill of an expert hedger lies in the nicety with which he can cut into the stem at the best angle and to the right depth while using the minimum number of strokes:

... just one cut, then he bends it gently, like that. Now a lot depends on how far that cut went, and d'you know, the expert can do it exactly.

He begins by making a downward cut into the trunk which has been selected to form a plusher at a usual height of six to twelve inches from the ground. The cut must be a long and slanting one in order to leave a long "tongue" so that the plusher can be bent without snapping from the stowl. The thicker the tongue the longer will be the life of the plusher. An upward cut is then made in the stump of

²⁶ Dartnell and Goddard, Wiltshire Glossary, p. 159.

²⁷ William Barnes, A Glossary of the Dorset Dialect (Dorchester, London, 1886), p. 106, p. 87.

the branch which has been laid down and this removes the split or frayed wood which would otherwise have led water down into the stowl and caused rot. The expert hedger "rinds" or peels off the bark from the stowl, just below the cut, in order to cause the bark to grow back more quickly. The cut is quickly covered with new bark and "dieback" in the stowl is prevented. Since the new life of the hedge comes from the stowl, rather than from the plushers, care must be taken to preserve it. A plusher may be made to take root in a weak place in the hedge by cutting it as little as possible and then pegging it down; earth from the bank is used to cover this section of the plusher and to encourage its growth.

Hedgers sometimes vary in their explanations of the reasons for following certain rules of procedure but, despite these differences, seem to maintain a common technique. Although Les considers that the purpose of laying uphill is to prevent rainwater from rotting the stowl Harry Crabbe said that the plusher would die if laid downhill because it would not receive sap; "Sap d' always go t' hill," he said. His precept follows that of Fitzherbert who advised the hedger to "always se that the toppè lye hyer than the rote a good quantytie, for elles the sappe wyll not renne in-to the toppè kyndely, but in processe the toppè wyll dye."²⁸ Nevertheless, both Les and Harry would lay downhill rather than leave a gap in the hedge.

He emphasised the amount of skill and knowledge which went into the apparently simple work of making a hedge. The good

²⁸ Fitzherbert; The Book of Husbandry, p. 80.

hedger knows all the qualities of the plants he works with and takes pleasure in working with those which are most fit for hedging:

I think it's all fairly good, with the exception, uhm, ah, elder is a little difficult, because it splits, uhm, there is one or two, ash can run out, run up a bit [split], blackthorn is easy, maple's fairly easy, you don't very often lie oak, anyway, because, you know, you don't very often get much small oak, in the hedges. Ah, yes, blackthorn, whitethorn, I should say 'ould be a good one, and withy [willow] of course, that, uh, makes a beautiful hedge; withy, well, so do blackthorn and whitethorn, any of the thorns is, makes lovely hedges, lovely hedges, and, well, it's nice to work with.

The hedger's tools are simple and few. For work with thorn hedges a thick leather glove will be worn on the cutting hand; sometimes this has a harness which holds the billhook securely so that it cannot slip and cut its user. Some hedgers wear leather pads covering their shins and knees so that they can use their knees to force a plusher into place. The hedger may also use a saw and an axe for cutting the thicker branches and a spade for ditching and covering over any plushers that he wishes to take root.

Most important of all in his view is the hedger's ability to plan the finished appearance of his hedge; he has to be "thinking all the time" to make sure that he lays the right number of plushers from each stowl, so that the plusher is not weakened although it has given strength to the hedge, and leaves no thin place through which cattle might push their way:

... and a good hedger you see, uses his intelligence to say "Well now that's a very strong vigorous stowl, we can lay three from

that one; and this one isn't quite so strong so we'll lay two from that one." That's of course taking in the whole picture of the hedge, because you know, the whole picture's got to look right by the time he's finished. The hedge has got to look uniform, you know.

His use of the "picture" metaphor to describe the planning of the hedge shows how an aesthetically pleasing effect and sound practice go together in his thought. Aesthetic satisfaction is the ultimate test; if the hedge has not been properly made it will not "look right." The uniformity which he finds visually attractive also means that no holes have been left. The hedge is beautiful to him because it is fit for its purpose.

By removing the embanked hedges from their land modern farmers are also destroying the ditches which were carefully designed to carry off surplus water. Les is very serious in his dismay at these changes and often warns the farmers against them. To him they are scorning the foresight of the "old people" who dug the ditches and soak-aways and planted trees and hedges to give shelter from the prevailing winds. Marshall, reporting on the state of enclosure in west Dorset in 1796, found that the lower grounds were wholly enclosed by hedges and banks and was surprised to find that even the "higher more barren summits, in the neighbourhood of Bridport" showed signs of having been enclosed at one time; Les is right, therefore, in attributing a great age to the pattern of hedges and embankments.²⁹ His opinion of the value of well cleared

ditches in maintaining drainage is also confirmed by experts in land use.³⁰

He pointed out the saving in cattle food that a good hedge brought, since cows do not need to be fed so much if they are well sheltered. This knowledge seems to have become a proverbial saying which he quoted to me with heavy emphasis:

And this is where the old farmer used his intelligence years ago. A good hedge that gave shelter was as good as half a bellyful of grub. And this is right:

Harry Crabbe, while hedging, told me, in almost the same words, that "a good hedge was worth half a bellyful of grub."

The Thatcher

While hedging³⁰ was a craft that he learned after coming to Dorset he had begun to acquire his skill in thatching as a boy in Wiltshire. Next to his knowledge of animals and skill as a cowman Les is most proud of his ability as a thatcher of hay and corn ricks. He mentioned the prizes he had won for thatching in our first conversation about his life history and later he showed me his prize certificates from the local agricultural society, each of which was accompanied by a photograph of the winning ricks. Since he considers himself to be an expert thatcher he was very pleased to be able to explain its art to me. During our series of conversations he also told several memorates concerning his ability and the value which it had in enhancing his reputation as a good workman.

³⁰ See L. Dudley Stamp, The Land of Britain: Its Use and Misuse (London, 1962), p. 245.

In our first discussion of thatching I asked questions which were based on a list of the terms, methods, and tools used in thatching which I had assembled from various sources which included James Arnold's Shell Book of Country Crafts, J. Geraint Jenkins's Traditional Country Craftsmen, and Thomas Kennell's Change in the Farm. Perhaps because he is so confident in his knowledge of thatching the questionnaire method was especially successful here; he enjoyed being able to comment on all the points that I raised. I was able to ask a longer series of questions on the single subject of thatching than I was on any other before, as usual, he grew tired of technical exposition and went on to tell stories or draw philosophical conclusions. In subsequent conversations; when I had largely abandoned the method of direct questioning in favour of gleaning the grains of information that he let fall; he told narratives of the memorable "first times" in his experience as a rick thatcher. These stories of how he first learned to thatch or learned a new method seemed to come from his repertory of stories about himself and he enjoyed telling them more than he liked to respond to my questions; expository prose is not a normal conversational medium for him whereas anecdotes and reflections are. The stories also showed his attitudes toward knowledge and work and he seemed to want me to appreciate the values which underlie what seems to him to be "the proper way" of doing things.

Rick thatching is almost obsolete in the area now and, to him, the disuse of this traditional method of storing a hay or corn crop is one of several bad practices of modern farmers; the new

methods -- in which a polythene sheet is tied over a stack of hay bales and corn is dried mechanically instead of "naturally" in the rick -- seem, at best, makeshift to him, at worst, to be wasteful in an almost irreligious manner.

In the following account of thatching I have tried to combine his explanation of its technical procedures with my inferences about his individual character and the traditional attitudes and values which he shares with others. I have also sought to present this information within a chronological frame in order to show, as he would do, his ascent of "the ladder" of skill and reward. In a passage which I have already quoted he described the way in which he was first allowed to try his hand at thatching; although his grandfather may have replaced the pieces of thatch which the boy had put on the opportunity to try had been "a little tiny step towards the first step on the ladder."

Les's grandfather was a stonemason by day but also thatched ricks for local farmers in the evenings and on Saturday afternoons. Les learned the rudiments of thatching by going with his grandfather and watching and imitating the way he thatched. His thatching of the first rick that he was allowed to do by himself has become the theme of a well defined narrative which illustrates his eagerness, as a boy, to imitate his grandfather's example, to prove his ability, and to gain the respect of the farmer and his fellow workers:

I'm working partly my uncle, but mostly for a chap called Mortimer, who is long since dead and buried in Sherston cemetery, or Sherston churchyard and -- I want to thatch. I want to thatch. I

want to be able to do like my grandad did, you see. Now Mr. Mortimer, the farmer, you see, who I was working for at the time had been putting up some barbed wire, had cut his finger, and had a poisoned finger you see. And this particular year there was two ricks left, one by the side of the road, right beside the road, that went to Luckington, . . .

[refers to my recent visit to Alderton] . . . this one was right beside the road, was a big hayrick, and across a couple of fields [there was] a little clover rick. These two ricks hadn't a-been thatched. 'Course the, uh, fall was goin' on the winter was comin', and 'course, you know, you can soon ruin a rick if he isn't [thatched]. So I was driving the cows around the field one day and poor old man Mortimer was there pumping some water up over from a well into a trough for the cows to drink and I said to him, uh, -- always ready, to flannel a little tiny bit -- I said "Good morning, Sir." He said "Mornin'," he used to call me "Arthur" which was rather unusual, "Mornin' Arthur," I don't know why it is, this is how they do it in Wiltshire, they call you all sorts of things, and if it sticks, it sticks. That's right. And I said, "That rick, uh, by the side of the road is getting wet." "Yes," he said, "my son," he said, "I won't be able to thatch him for a bit." I said, "I can thatch that rick, if you'll give me, uh, chance to try." "Ah," he said, "you can't do that." I said, "Yes I can, sir, look I've helped you thatch the ricks lots times, carried the reed and the spars and that, I could do it. You just give me a chance. Give me a chance to try, to show what I can do." [M.L.L.: unintelligible] That's right. So he said, "Alright, look," he said, "it's all there round the rick, and you go back, my son, and have a go, and when I come up by-and-by I see how you're getting on." By golly! I'm up that road on my bicycle, caw, honestly, I couldn't get up there fast enough. I swing into the gateway, into Diffy, that's the name of the field, and I put the ladder up to the gable end, see, and I start. Can I use some wicked words on this programme? [M.L.L.: Mmm. You're not to worry about that!] Now I'm just got round the corner [of the rick] and one of the fellows in the village called George Dawman, buried in our old churchyard I think, working on a local farm, on a neighbour farm, neighbouring farm, he comes up the road on his bicycle, you see, and he says to me, "You want to do so-and-so!" You know, he was finding fault with

my work, you see. And I said, "You mind your bloody own business, I'm the chap who's thatching this one." [laughs] And he sort of smiled and away he went, you see. So, you know, by-and-by I heard the old man coming up the road, you know, walking. And he'd always whistle hymns, always did [whistles]. I thought "Blow me down, here he is," [spoken very softly as though to himself]. And d'you know, he just glanced up at the rick, like that, and walked on. Didn't say a dickybird. Well, I thatched that rick. Not only did I stay, uh, well, go on thatching till it was milking time, but as soon as ever the milking was finished [spoken excitedly to convey boyish enthusiasm] I was back out there again! And I couldn't stop up there long enough. I stopped out there till I couldn't see, [and] eventually, finished the job. That was my first effort as a thatcher. The old man was so pleased he let me thatch the little clover rick as well. And then, I went on from there then to help thatch his ricks in the yard after thrashing, he used to let me start with the liner ricks which didn't matter if you made a mistake because it was only bedding straw anyway, and then I progressed from there, uh, to hay ricks.³¹

Les's retort to Dawman's chaffing emphasises the way in which success in a craft was a matter of personal pride to him and marks his eagerness to have been recognised as being ready to do man's work.

He has told this story to me on two occasions; the first was on the afternoon in June 1974 when we first talked about thatching and the second was on an evening in January 1975 at my parents' home when he began to describe his progress as a thatcher. The version that I have quoted is that of the second occasion.

His delight in his own strategy in persuading the farmer to let him try to thatch the rick was more marked in the first version of this story where, in a digression, he explained the benefits

³¹Recorded interview, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

of tactfulness to me: "I'd already softened him up a bit you see; first of all by enquiring about his finger, you see, and secondly by reminding him that his rick would deteriorate, you see. And I've found this practice, or this approach, has always stood me in good stead over the years of my life -- is that the nicely chosen word, and the kindly approach, pays dividends -- tact they call it."

The ability to "flannel" through flattery and an appearance of concern is certainly evident in his social behaviour. It is a manner of presenting himself as a sympathetic, knowledgeable, individual who can be trusted, which he uses in his pastoral visits to old people and is also an aspect of his persona as a charmer.

This narrative is also a good example of the technique which he sometimes uses of understating the climax of a story; this technique was even more apparent in his first version of the story where he mentioned the bargain which he had struck with Mortimer that the farmer should stop him if he was not thatching properly when he walked by to inspect it. This understanding between them prepared for the climax in which Mortimer simply glanced up at the rick and showed his approval of Les's work by continuing to whistle as he walked by.

He went on to say that he improved his skill by thatching many more ricks in the area in the years before he left Wiltshire. The real test of his ability, however, came when he moved to Chideock and was forced by circumstance to adopt the Dorset style of thatching.

In the Wiltshire method that he had learned as a boy the bundles of straw which make up the thatched roof of a rick are held in place by string which is tied in a half-twist around the ends of wooden pegs or "spikes" or "spicks" which are driven into a roof. In the Dorset method of rick thatching, which he now learned through imitation of another man's work, the spikes are replaced by "spars" which are cut, as spikes are, from hazel or willow branches of about an inch in diameter. These branches, when cut, are called "gads" or "spar gads" and are split longitudinally into two or more sections of a little more than a yard in length. They are then bent double by being given a full or a double twist. Because of this twist they will hold the "wads" or bundles of thatch in place without the use of string. The straw used for thatching is called "reed" in Dorset when it has been prepared in the proper manner. This is not to be confused with the reeds gathered from ponds which are also used in the area for house thatching.

Les considers the Dorset method to be superior for three reasons which show a mixture of practical and aesthetic considerations: the spikes and string are "messy" or tangled when undone; a rick made with spikes and strings does not look so "neat"; and the straw used in Wiltshire is not so carefully prepared as it might be under the Dorset method of "reed" making.

The purpose of reed drawing is to preserve the stiffness and waterproof qualities of the wheat stems that are to be used as thatch. In order for the thatcher to be able to use them the wheat

straw, after it has been threshed, must be made into bundles in which the stems lie parallel and may be packed tightly together; the loose leaves which surround sections of the stalk must be combed away so that water may not lodge in them and seep through the thatch.

While at Seatown Farm in 1936 Les drew reed by hand through a comb made of six-inch nails, separated in a row at one inch intervals, which had been driven upward through a board. Bundles of straw were drawn between the nails thus removing the leaf and arranging the stalks. The straw was pulled gently through the comb until it felt slippery and slid between the fingers.

Reed drawing was a winter occupation, often done at piece-work rates, which employed both men and women. The women pulled off the leaf or wrapper by hand and the men bound the reed into bundles. Descriptions of reed drawing using bundles of unthreshed wheat held in a reed-press are given by Dacombe, who mentions it as a current occupation in Chideock during 1935, and, and also by Hennell who gives an illustration of reed drawing on a farm near Bridport. William Stevenson's account of agriculture in Dorset in 1812 mentions that this work was then performed by women and children. The best description of the process and of the attitudes of those employed at it has been given by Thomas Hardy in Tess of the d'Urbervilles where it figures as one of the ill-paid and laborious occupations which Tess endures on the "starve-acre" farm at "Flintcomb-Ash."³²

³² Dacombe, Dorset Up Along and Down Along, p. 53; Hennell, Change in the Farm, pp. 156-157, p. [206]; Stevenson, General View of the Agriculture of the County of Dorset, p. 220; Hardy, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, chap. XLIII.

Les presented his success in learning the Dorset style of thatching, through the following account, as a new step in his career. Once again a significant first attempt has been made the subject of a narrative. Its structure emphasises the problem set him and the resourcefulness with which he overcame it. Once more the motive of personal competition is strongly apparent:

How I started, you know, doing it the Dorset way, there was in the yard at Doghouse Farm -- sorry, at Seatown Farm in those days, 'course on Seatown Farm now there's no corn grown at all now, in those days there was a lot -- and they'd a-put a rick up with a very steep roof, the word we d' use in Dorset is stickle, very stickle roof -- something new for you, Martin, "stickle" means to the Dorset man "steep" -- so poor old Tuck he come to start thatching this rick. He'd a-thatched all the rest of the ricks in the yard with the exception of this one. And he started the top end and the ground fell away, you see, so when he got to the lower end it was very steep there. So he thatched about half of it and then he sent a note to say that he wasn't very well; he wouldn't be able to come to work for a bit. He really lost his nerve. He just couldn't help it -- he was getting old -- he was then, well, I should think nearly seventy. And he just had lost his nerve. So poor old farmer Ernie Ryall, you know, having his rick half-thatched, he didn't like it at all. He could see a lot of corn being wasted and he asked me, uhm, if I'd finish thatching it. He'd a-heard that I'd done a bit o' thatching.

Now, I've got to follow on behind a professional thatcher! So first of all what I got to do, I got to get up on the rick, I got to study how he's done it, I got to take some away, replace it, take it away, and replace it, and take it away and replace it, come down the ladder and have a look, go back again, do the same thing over and over, till I'm nearly certain I've got it, just about right. So I, it's trial and error, trial and error, I don't just start thatching and make a mess of things, I've got to do it as good as him. So I go up and I take some of his work apart and I put it together again and take it apart and put it together and I finish it. And Harry

[spoken to my father], poor old Ernie Ryall who's lying dead, lying in our cemetery in Chideock, said to me, "Leslie, if I didn't know I wouldn't a-known" -- Jim, Tuck [he suddenly remembers Tuck's forename which he had been unable to recall earlier] -- "I wouldn't a-known where Jim 'ad left off and you'd a-started."

The compulsion to be "as good as the next man" is typical of his forceful and egocentric personality; however, as I will try to show later in this chapter, this was also a trait that was commonly shared by farmers and their men.

Jim Tuck was one of a family of professional thatchers who practiced in Watton, Chideock, and Eype. Although the thatching of ricks was often done by men who normally did other types of farm work (local agricultural competitions had separate classes for "professional thatchers" and "men on the farm"), the more "particular" farmers employed professional thatchers to ensure the protection of their valuable corn ricks. Alfred Williams remarked, concerning thatching in Wiltshire in 1912, that "almost every farm has its rough thatcher, they are not capable of performing skilled work, such as covering cottages, and farmhouses and buildings."³³ His comment supports Les's view of the relative simplicity of the Wiltshire thatching style; the Dorset method uses superior materials and is closer to the manner of house thatching.

Les's narratives of his progress as a thatcher tend to stress the competitive aspect to the exclusion of details of technique.

³³ Alfred Williams, A Wiltshire Village, P. 207.

His direct remarks on the methods and purposes of thatching, however, to which we now turn, also offer an insight into his individual character and into the traditional values of the craft of thatching which he has learned from those he worked with.

In thatching ricks, as in many other farm crafts, Les considers neatness to be the criterion of beauty and utility:

The beauty of thatching is this, you see, what people could never understand, and what people can't understand, is how, when you go round this rick, look -- you're working this side so you can't see the depth of the other side -- so how [are] you going to come round this side and finish exact? [M.J.L.: Exactly] But you can, you see. This is, 'course, this is skill, absolute skill.

A thatched roof has a neat appearance to him when the layers of thatch have been applied tightly and evenly so as to leave no spaces through which water can seep to spoil the contents of the rick. Additional ornament could also be added; although he never did so some thatchers of his period fashioned peacocks and other birds out of straw and set them up on a stick midway along the ridge of the roof as a crowning flourish of virtuosity. The fundamental source of the craftsman's aesthetic satisfaction in his work, however, lay in his sound construction of a trim and watertight roof.

Les commended the perspicacity of a judge of a thatching competition who climbed up on a rick and pulled away spars and thatch to feel whether there was any dampness underneath. This practical test of the function of thatching seemed to him to be the right way to judge a thatcher's work.

It is not extravagant to speak of ricks as having an aesthetic value in the eyes of their makers. Les may be unusual in the extent to which he puts such sentiments into words but I feel that his sense that the well-made article is inherently beautiful is a traditional attitude. He agreed whole-heartedly with H.J. Massingham's judgement of the aesthetic value of a well-thatched rick; after giving a magniloquent description of the landscape at Doghouse Farm at Chideock Massingham wrote "It is to be noted that a good rick is never dwarfed by its natural surroundings, however grand."³⁴ When I showed Les the book, open at the page describing the ricks which he may well have thatched, Les seized upon this sentence and read it aloud. He added as his own comment that "A rick that's built by an expert and thatched by an expert will stick out a mile, because it's a work of art, it is a work of art."

He mentioned several points as being particularly important. Spar making was a craft in itself, he said, and he described the specific types of wood (hazel and willow) which are used and the time at which they must be cut. Spar gads are cut from coppices during the winter when the sap is down; they are split while still green and kept moist by being stacked in bundles in a ditch which is wet all year until they are needed in the summer. They must be kept supple enough to be twisted by the thatcher.

³⁴H.J. Massingham, Where Man Belongs (London, 1946),

The length to which the spars are cut is judged by the eye of the thatcher who knows the right length for the use of each spar. Short spars of about a foot in length can be used around the ridge while longer ones of eighteen inches are necessary in the lower layers. There is "an art," he said, in the twisting of the spar and its placement in the thatch:

And the art, of course, is in the twist, 'cause when you twist the spar you twist it, sort of double it, it's got a sort of a half twist and a double, where-by it fits in neatly, into the rick. And another thing too, uh, Martin, which is very particular, you should never use a badly shaped gad, if when it's made, uh, the points of the [pause] part that's drove into the rick points downward into the rick, because it would take the water [into the rick].³⁵

The spars must be placed at the proper angle, which is partly horizontal and partly sloping upward, and neither too few nor too many should be used.

Les's current attitude toward thatching is one of pride, in knowing something which few other men do, but is also one of regret that, at least in the case of ricks, thatching is a dying art. Thatched ricks can still be seen on two or three farms in the area but Les, though pleased to see them, does not consider their workmanship to be up to the older standard. He believes that thatched ricks have many advantages over modern methods of storing hay and corn. He is incensed by the waste of straw made by combine harvesting machines which preserve only the grain. The new method

³⁵ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

breaks the traditional pattern which he explained as being one in which there was no waste: the corn was cut and built into a rick where it matured naturally, through being able to "breathe" and gave a better "sample" than grain which is now treated in expensive heating processes; the rick was thatched with the reed made from last year's corn crop and the leaves or loose straw which had been combed away in its drawing and had been used as bedding for the animals. His objections to modern wastefulness are vehemently made and are of an almost religious quality and fervour:

I think it's sacrilege to see ⁴farmers today burn straw on the land. Because that's wicked. Because it didn't use to be years ago, for the simple reason, like I said, in those days there was no waste whatsoever.³⁶

As a proof that thatching was really an economical method of protecting a rick he explained that the best farmers in the area, during his time as a farm worker, made a supply of hand drawn reed serve for three years by using it in the first year on their most valuable ricks, which held corn, and then, when the rick had been threshed, saving the reed and the spars for use in the second year on hayricks and, in the third year, on the least valuable ricks which contained loose straw for the animals' bedding.

An advantage of the older method in which corn was threshed in the yard by a steam-powered threshing machine, rather than being threshed in the field by a combine harvester, was that

³⁶Recorded interview, January 6, 1974, Chideock.

the weed seeds, which were among the corn, could be kept in the place where the rick had been threshed and could be destroyed; the combine harvesting system has the unintentional effect of broadcasting them throughout the field since everything but the grain is ejected from the machine. Expensive weedkillers are then necessary to repair the damage. Once again, in regretting this, Les's objections take on religious overtones and, with their deliberate repetitions, even suggest the style of a sermon:

I'm a firm believer in putting back into the soil what you take out of the soil and nothing else. Everything comes from the soil,⁴ that's not man-made, and that should go back to the soil. And that's how it used to be, years ago. And you used to, now they're going to tell me that they're getting more milk per cow than they used to, they're getting more wheat per acre than they used to, and I can't argue against that, [clock strikes] but I argue "At what cost?" This is my argument. They can tell me they're getting ten tons to the acre of potatoes now where they only used to get six, and I say again, "At what cost? In the long run."³⁷

This reverence towards "the land," which is so frequently apostrophised in his speech, is a theme which unites his comments on the complementary skills and values of farming life.

It is typical of our conversations that he should want to close our discussion of the techniques of thatching with some serious reflection on the underlying philosophy which he finds in them. If I may paraphrase his remarks he seemed to be saying that the thatching of ricks is an art of functional beauty which is designed, as if by nature, to waste nothing and to bring the grain

³⁷ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

to perfection while protecting it from the weather. The aggressive modern methods of farming seem to him to be demanding too much from the land and he fears that they will ultimately be self-defeating. The basis of this belief appears to be moral and religious; waste, greed, and the presumption of trying to change what he considers to be the natural order, seem to him to be courting retribution. Thatching, for him, is an aspect of the traditional system of farming which harmonised with nature in conserving rather than exploiting the goodness of the soil.

The Values of the ⁴Farming Community

Knowledge was a form of personal property and a negotiable commodity which was held by the worker in terms of his relationship with the farmer who employed him. A man could improve his rate of pay by proving his ability and some workers received bonus payments for skill; a shepherd, for example, received a certain amount for each lamb he reared successfully. Prize money from agricultural competitions could add significantly to the income of an expert in a particular craft and a man's success also enhanced his reputation in the eyes of his employer who would value the prestige which it brought to the farm. While the financial reward was important, since farm workers have never been well paid, the worker may have taken another kind of satisfaction in the feeling that his particular knowledge placed him at an advantage over his employer in at least one respect. Many men were forthright in the advice they gave to their

employers and sometimes threatened to leave a farm if their methods were not followed. Knowledge gave the employed man a certain feeling of self-confidence which was the more precious to him under the paternalistic regimen imposed by some farmers. His daily and ceaseless responsibility, particularly in the case of men who worked with animals, also bred a proprietary attitude and a man sometimes felt that he had a greater interest in the aspect of the farm with which he was concerned than did the farmer himself.

Anecdotes in which Les shows a superior knowledge to that of his employer are common in his account of his farming years; the following, in which Harold Oxber is sold a "freemarten," which is the usually barren female calf of a twin, of which the other is a bull, by a shady dealer, is a typical example:

Years ago when I was down the Doghouse there used to be a dealer, from Axminster, called Eddie Wheaton. He used to buy the cattle from Doghouse till I found he was twisted, you know, and I caught him out. And then we used to send our cattle to Dorchester. Anyway, one day he talked my governor, that's poor old Harold Oxber, into buying a heifer and Harold bought this heifer and he delivered it. And when I come back from market he [the heifer] was out in Cowleaze field, and I thought this belonged to another farmer, you see, you know, this is a strange cow come in, so I went down and had a look at it and I took in, you know, all the details of 'im. And later when the old man come back from market, I said to him, "Yer," I said, "where did that heifer come from out there?" "Oh," he said, "I bought that one off of Eddie Wheaton," he said, "Bought it cheap." I said, "You didn't, you know. What d'you reckon you're going to do with it?" "Oh," he said, "we shall put it to bull, you know, and have a calf." I said, "You won't you know." I said, "You'll never breed from that one." He said, "Why?" "Because," I said, "it's a freemarten." Now he hadn't a clue what I meant by a "freemarten" but, you see, there is certain signs.

Although in this case he probably explained the signs to his employer by which this genetically caused barrenness may be recognised he kept his knowledge of curing animals secret.

The advantage which the possession of a special skill gave him was not lightly to be given away; he compared his attitude with that of the professional gardeners of his native village:

They used to guard their knowledge, they used to guard their knowledge. Like it was, you know, when I was at Doghouse, when I treated the horse down there, see, for malanders. I don't know whether you know what I mean by malanders? [M.L.L.: Whatever's that?] No, now malanders is a complaint that a horse gets in the bend^d of his leg there and, uh, it's a virus that eats into the tissue, so it's like the old -- I can't remember what the name of them, thing they used to use during the War, they used to shoot at a tank and the pressure used to go in -- now this virus, this thing, eats down into the tissue. So it starts on the surface and eats away the tissue, till eventually it eats away, uh, the sineus as well, and the horse 'll have a stiff leg. And, usually, useless; if you let the disease progress, uh, without trying to do something about it, and very difficult to get rid of, very difficult, unless you know how. See, 'tis knowing how, you see. And, you know, I [pause] cured this horse down there, many years ago, and I tell you who started treating it, was, uh, Mr. Ferris, now he's a good bloke with horses but he slipped up with that one . . . [he mentioned the veterinary surgeon's unsuccessful attempt to cure the horse and commented that they, like doctors, sometimes met diseases which they could not cure]. Anyway this one was cured and I remember Mr. Oxber said to me, "Leslie, what did you use?" And I said, "Mr Oxber, if I told you, you would be as clever as me."³⁸

This affliction of horses has been described by Fitzherbert:

A malander is an yl sorance, and may wel be cured for a tyme, but with yl keeping it wyl comme agayne,

³⁸ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

and appereth on the forther legges, in the bendynge of the knee behynde, and is lyke a scabbe or a skal: and some horses wyll haue two vpon a legge, with an inche together, and they wyl make a horse to stumble, and other whyle to fall."³⁹

It is possible that Les's cure involved the use of a charm in which case the rules governing a charmer's transmission of the secret knowledge would have prevented him from revealing the method. Whether this is so or not it is certain that he regarded this knowledge as his personal property and for him to have given it to the farmer would have diminished his own value as a "clever" man with animals.

The idea that knowledge was a personal possession was deep rooted and was supported by traditional beliefs about the manner in which knowledge could be transmitted. Les quotes sayings which express the traditional method of passing on knowledge, as a cherished and often secret possession, in a close relationship between the master and the pupil. He remembered how a farmer had told him that he wished his new man could thatch as well as Les had done:

And Harold said to me, using an old Dorset saying, "Ah, Leslie, I think he should sleep with you for a night or two. Then he'd learn the way to do thatching, wouldn't he."

The farmer's observation was, as Les said, a traditional saying; Bettsworth used it in a piece of facetious advice to a man who boasted that he knew how to do everything except plumbing: Bettsworth said, "If I was you I should sleep with a plumber two or three nights."⁴⁰

³⁹ Fitzherbert, The Book of Husbandry, p. 68.

⁴⁰ Bourne, Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer, p. 132.

The saying is a hyperbolic expression of the need for a pupil to imitate his master in everything and also suggests the underlying belief that knowledge may be communicated physically in some contagious manner.

If the farmer valued his men according to their skill then they were equally ready to pass judgement on his ability as a farmer. The standards against which they compared him constituted the traditional values of the farming community and were endorsed equally by masters and men. The farmer's success with his crops and animals seems to have been the basic consideration; even if he had been mean, or a stern disciplinarian, he might still have been called a "good farmer" if he had shown a real care for his land. Many farm workers identified their own interest with that of the farmer and aspired to farm for themselves; the era of the yeoman farmer, who had struggled for an independent living on a tiny acreage, was less than a hundred years in the past especially in the Marshwood Vale, and some men were still successful in becoming smallholders. "Just because a man has never been a farmer," Les said, "doesn't mean he hasn't got infinite knowledge [of the way to farm]."

The appearance of the land itself was the evidence of the farmer's ability; the fields were expected to be "clean" meaning that they were free of weeds. Men of Les's generation complain of the modern reliance on chemical weedkillers as opposed to the older methods of controlling weeds by crop rotation, more frequent ploughing,

and the intensive use of labour as in hoeing. My informant Harry Crabbe gave the following test of whether a man was a good farmer:

Well, you only got to walk over his farm and see that. If he could grow some good crops, well, he was, he couldn't be a bad [farmer]. But I'm very much afraid that none of the farmers round here ain't like they used to be, nowhere near. They've spoiled it all since they brought in this mechanisation You wouldn't see no docks in the corn, then, they days⁴¹ You go round now, well, 'tis full o' damn rubbish.

Les shares this suspicion of the labour-saving methods of modern farming.

Their dislike of seeing weeds in a farmer's ground may be the result of their training in the older, labour-intensive, tradition. Les was taught to root out weeds as though it were a moral or religious duty; the Biblical imagery of tares in the wheat may not have been far from his thoughts:

When I was a boy, when I used to fetch the cows in, my uncle used to say to me, instead of carrying a stick -- never beat a cow with a stick, he used to say "If you beat a cow you're losing milk," this is dead right, cruelty gets you nowhere -- so, you know, you'd go out and he'd say, "Hey, where's your spit then?" So you'd take on the spit if you had to walk, we'll say, a mile to fetch the cows, well, you were expected to dig that thistle out, this one here, that dandelion -- well, not many dandelions you wouldn't see, not in a good grazing field -- but anything like that, uh, like a thistle or a stinging nettle, anything that you saw, mostly thistles it was, you just dig 'em out as you went. As you [were] driving the cows in, 'cause you come along nice and steady, so you had plenty of time to dig out a thistle, look, walking on a stretch of the cows, so you didn't have to walk a mile and not doing anything, you was working while you was going there and working on your way back. And you were taught never to be idle. And that's a good thing too.⁴²

⁴¹Recorded interview, June 13, 1974, Uploders.

⁴²Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

A spit was a small two-pronged fork, mounted on a wooden shaft, which could be carried in place of a walking stick. The flourishing weed was a symbol of idleness and a farmer who allowed it to grow was judged accordingly.

A sense of the responsibility for keeping the land productive and in good condition for future generations is also evident in his remarks:

The principal thing was, on the farm in those days, to keep the farm "in good heart."

He explained the meaning of this traditional epithet:

"In good heart" means proofy, that the soil was kept full of proof, another word would be then to make it simpler would be "goodness." It would be rich. "Proofy" means "rich."

This care was shown in the rotation of crops which was practised so that too much "goodness" was never taken out of the soil; this fertility was replenished by allowing sheep to graze on whatever remained in the field of a harvested crop, such as the "brocks" or lower roots of mangolds, or the stubble of wheat, thus cleaning and manuring the land. Among the virtues of the horse as opposed to the tractor, in the eyes of the older men, is that the food eaten by the horse is returned to replenish the soil so that there is no waste.

Les praised the foresight of a man who would plant a windbreak of beech trees in his eightieth year knowing that there was little hope that he would see them fully grown. He was reminded also of a proverbial tribute which had been used in praise of earlier generations:

If a farm has been well looked after the son would say, "Well, my father tread this soil before me."
 If you say, "Well, look, your farm looks nice,"
 this is what used to be a saying.

This proverb, like that maxim which states that "the best manure is the farmer's boots," emphasises that it is the duty of the farmer to be diligent in walking about his farm, thistle-spit in hand, ensuring that the work of the farm was being done properly; as Les said: "It meant to say he was never idle, he was walking about, doing his work."

The farmer's personal habits might also be criticised;
 and especially so if they conflicted with the sound management of the farm. One of Les's employers drank heavily and, although this weakness was celebrated in a number of good-humoured anecdotes, it was enough to prevent him from being called a good farmer. Another farmer had the habit of smoking his pipe while thatching and Les noted it as a sign of carelessness. A certain man "did not farm as well as he knew how to"; he led a wild life of irregular hours and illicit sexual relationships.

A dual standard in behaviour can be seen in these moral judgements applied to farmers by their men; a farm worker might be admired for his cider or beer drinking capacity and for his sexual adventures. He would be called a "character" and any tone of disapproval would be muted by laughter at his boldness and wit. For a farmer to do the same, however, would have been termed "unsteadiness" and he would have lost the respect of the community.

The first duty of the farmer lay in maintaining the good order of his farm and observance of the niceties of personal appearance or the keeping of social obligations were held to be less important. Les told a memorate which exemplified this sense of priorities; they were heartily concurred with by the Marshwood Vale farmers with whom he was reminiscing:

Well, [pause] when [breath] poor old Bill was buried this day, if you can mind, down to Whitchurch, I was lucky, I got there early and I was fortunate to get in the church. And I remember I was there, sittin' in the old pew, when one of his old mates, 's'know, come there, see, to the funeral and tha was covered all over in hay seeds, 's'know. Yes, a was. And I expect he'd've fed his heifers, 's'know, on the way to the funeral. You know. And d'you know, as I was sitting there, Bill, and I thought to myself, "Well," 's'know, "if old Bill, who's lying there, could only see 'e, he'd think what a wonderful bloke he was. [Bill Bere: Yes] Wouldn't 'er? [Bill Bere, Jack Bere: Yeah] He wouldn't criticise him, see. [Bill Bere: No!] Wouldn't say, "Fancy comin' to my funeral, you know, without. [Bill Bere: No! No!] Would 'er? Old Bill 'ould 'ave said, "Now look at ⁴³ that, 's'know, he's a bloke after me own heart," see.

The unaffected honesty of the man's appearance is also being praised here together with the primary meaning that the life of the farm must always be the farmer's first responsibility.

One of the major virtues which Les now speaks of as having characterised the old farming community is that of good faith in men's dealings with each other. The importance of a reputation for personal probity to the charmer is discussed in the following chapter; essentially Les believes that "a rogue" would not be successful

⁴³Recorded interview, January 12, 1975, Marshwood Vale.

as a charmer. Therefore it may be desirable here to describe the principles of honesty which were observed in the society in which his charming was practised and to show his personal sense of the meaning of good faith.

Dealing in livestock was the most common form of economic transaction between members of the farming community. Many farm workers kept a few chickens on their own land and often a sow from which they expected to get several litters which could be sold. The question of good faith between buyer and seller was thus of concern to everyone and not merely to the farmers. Fair dealing was essential in maintaining friendship among members of the relatively limited farming community; this principle is evident in the summary of the character of a neighbouring farmer made by a farmer in the Marshwood Vale:

In one sense old Jim did have his good points -- he was a straight feller to deal with You didn't cross 'n at all, wi' neighbours you mustn't cross 'em.

The comment was made by Bill Bere concerning Jim Pope the somewhat irascible farmer who employed Les for two years in the Marshwood Vale. Les, and Bill and Jack Bere were engaged in narrating a series of largely comic anecdotes of the character and behaviour of their long dead neighbour.

Les's account of his own dealings in livestock suggest that he, at least, preferred the maintenance of good relationships with those he dealt with above his personal profit. One anecdote concerned the sale of a litter of young pigs which Les had raised;

a man with a reputation for sharp dealing had failed to cheapen Les's price but Les was able to sell them to another man for the price he was asking and which he considered to be the fair one. The second man later told Les that he had taken them straight to market and had sold them at a considerable profit. Les did not consider that he had lost by this transaction; both he and the buyer had shown good faith and the buyer had reaped a fair reward. On another occasion he had said nothing about making a loss on some stock he had bought since it would have upset the seller to know that he had caused Les to take a loss.

4

It was an established rule of conduct among the older generation of farmers, he suggested, that a buyer could return an animal that "did not do," meaning that it did not thrive, to the seller, who would return his money. He improvised the following dialogue as being typical of farmers at market; the seller is content to take a fair price, without trying for more by allowing the animal to be bid for, and even allows the buyer to try the animal before paying him:

"Thee doesn't want to let him go into the ring, do 'ee? I'd like him. Well then, what do 'ee want to make of him?" "Twenty-five." "I'll give 'ee twenty-five." "Take him on home then." "Ha'n't got my cheque-book." "Never mind, take him on home and if he doesn't do send him back."⁴⁴

Les's view of the honesty of the older generation of farming people may be coloured to some extent by nostalgia. His

⁴⁴Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

experience in Chideock with the predominantly urban and middle-class newcomers to the village has convinced him that the level of honesty in contemporary life has declined from the standard set among the men he worked with on the land. When one of the new and well-off residents of Chideock broke an oral agreement he had made with Les to buy some property from him Les was surprised and hurt; he told the man that he was disappointed in him, he had thought him to be "a gentleman" but now had to warn him that in future relations between them would be strained.

There are many correspondences between Les's attitude toward charming and the values of the farming community within which he has lived and worked. The mutual trust which seems necessary between the charmer and his patients may be compared with that expectation of honesty in other transactions, such as dealing, which is characteristic, in Les's view, of farming life. The majority of his charming is carried on among people whom he knows and trusts through having worked and dealt with them during his years on the land. The farm worker's confidence in his own skill may also be compared to the supreme self-confidence which Les shows as a charmer. The link between these two types of knowledge is one of attitude; the same blunt assertion of his ability can convince a doubtful farmer that he can thatch a valuable rick and can persuade another of the effectiveness of charming. Underlying and supporting this confidence are the reverence for life and the religious sense of a duty to care for animals and

the land which are drawn directly from the values learned as a farm worker. These correspondences are traced in greater detail in the following chapter.

IV

THE KNOWLEDGE OF CHARMING

Les was given the knowledge which enabled him to charm by his father-in-law, Frank Stubbs, in 1941 shortly after his return from Wynford Eagle to work at Doghouse Farm, Chideock. Les was then twenty-eight years old and had been married for four years. The present chapter describes the relationship which developed between the two men and which gave Stubbs the assurance that his son-in-law was the right person to inherit his knowledge.

The following description of Frank Stubbs's character and opinions is important to this study since they contributed heavily to the formation of Les's own attitude towards charming. He had no other instruction in charming and no contact with any other charmer, with the exception of his mother-in-law who died without communicating her ability to charm, so that Stubbs's views concerning the source of the power of charming and the kind of behaviour demanded of a charmer became prescriptive for Les. When he gave Les the knowledge of charming Stubbs also communicated the principles of an ethical code which governs a charmer's practice and which Les has felt bound to obey because of a sense of personal obligation to his father-in-law, as his teacher, and out of reverence for, or fear of the consequences of abusing, the supernatural power of charming.

This chapter considers the principles of this code of practice and the qualities which Les and his father-in-law have

found necessary in the attitudes and behaviour of a charmer. The charmer must have a reputation for honesty; he must also possess a strong religious faith and a philosophical interest in human character and the natural world. His reverent and contemplative cast of mind will cause him to reject many materialistic pleasures so that his role may take on the character of a priestly vocation. The charmer must also have absolute faith, or confidence, in the efficacy of charming and in his own capacity to be the chosen agent through which its healing power may operate.

Finally, a contrast is drawn between Les's attitude toward the possession of the knowledge of charming as compared with the other types of special knowledge of which he is master and which have served to enhance his prestige. He considers that, unlike his secular skills, the sacred knowledge of charming may not be counted as a personal possession; rather he feels that he must be humble and grateful for having been chosen to be its instrument. The intention of the chapter as a whole is to describe Les's complex and not always consistent attitude towards what he considers to be the mystery of charming.

Frank Stubbs came to Dorset from Sidbury in east Devon and spent most of his working life as the dairyman at Upton Farm, Loders, before moving to Seatown Farm, about five miles to the west of Loders, and finally to Crepe Farm, Symondsbury, a mile and a half from Chideock. His wife and three daughters helped him in the dairy. When he retired, and following the death of his wife, he came to

live with Les and Flora who had bought a cottage on the main street of Chideock. He lived in retirement with them for over twenty years until he died in 1971 at the age of ninety-one.

I never met Frank Stubbs and so the following account of him rests upon the frequent references which Les has made to his character, behaviour, and opinions. A framed photograph of him hangs on the wall above the writing bureau in the sitting-room of Les's home. It shows Stubbs, at about eighty years of age, as a tall burly man, standing in a field with a spaniel at his feet; he wears the common dress of a countryman of his period: dark trousers, which may have been corduroy, and a white shirt rolled up at the sleeves and open at the neck worn beneath an unbuttoned waistcoat. He wears the type of flat peaked cap of tweed which is commonly worn by working men, and country gentlemen, in the district. His face is broad and its expression emphasises the confidence and self-assertion shown in his stance.

Frank Stubbs was a bluntly spoken man who was obstinately sure of his own strength and ability. His self-confidence seems to have been of a more intense quality than that which has been described in the previous chapter as being a normal result of a countryman's accumulation of skills and knowledge. These traits emerge clearly in two comic anecdotes which Les told concerning his behaviour; on one occasion Stubbs bragged that he would break in a horse which other men on Seatown Farm, including Les, were afraid to ride; Les imitated his swaggering manner:

So my father-in-law said, "Ah you," Frank, you know. clever old Frank, he'd do it. "Git the blighter in," he said, "git the saddle on 'n," said, "I'll ride 'n." Said, "I'll ride 'n up under Golden Cap," he said, "I'll soon take the stuffin' out of 'im."¹

But the horse got free before Stubbs had mounted and dragged him by one foot which had become lodged in a stirrup. Les told this as a humorous story; he considered it to be a salutary defeat for a braggart and a further comic value lay in the undignified nature of his injuries for a hole had been worn through the seat of his trousers and a deep wound made in his buttocks.

The second anecdote ¹also shows Stubbs's brash overconfidence in his ability to handle an animal. This was a folly which was heightened in this case by his advanced age; he declared that he would put a ring in the nose of Les's pig which had been spoiling trees in the orchard by rooting beneath them:

He said, "Yer," he said, "Sunday morning," he said, "thee and I," he said, "I'll go up there and put a ring or two in thic blinking pig," he said, "stop his blinking nonsense." Cor, and I look at 'im, you know, he's eighty-three or four, and old Betty's a damn great black sow, see, cor! and boy, he was wild too mind, you know, not very tame! By God! And I said, "No, you can't do that, Pop." "Who can't," he said. And I said, "Not you," I said, "don't you try it mind." "Get away with thy rubbish," he said, "I've rung hundreds," he said, "don't you tell I." And he used to have a saying, "Don't thee tell thy father how to make children," you know, this is how he used to say this. So this [chuckles] particular Sunday morning, Len, armed with a box of rings and the old man with the thing [a form of pinchers], you know, he's going to put 'em in, you know the ring fits in like that and he's

¹Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

going to squeeze 'n like that, you see, and I with a rope, and Pop, goes out in the orchard. Big things is going to happen! He's shut in, see, already shut in. And round the old hutch, still there now up in my orchard, down the bottom it is now, was the rail, went round see. You know, we put the rope through the pig's mouth, pull it tight, and this does two things: one is you restrain the pig, and the other is owing to the tightness of the rope being pulled, uh, he can't feel the rings go in -- well, that's the theory, I reckon he do feel the rings going in though! [said in a humorous undertone] -- so we got the rope round, anyhow, you see, and put 'n round a post, and he said "Hold on." So he, 'course, you know, to ring 'n proper, see, here's the rope here, he gets astride the rope and he got the pig's nose there, you know! [demonstrates the stance of straddling the pig] Cor, God, I, used to make I laugh this did! He went to give one squeeze, the next bloody thing was the rope broke and out come old Pop on the pig's back.

Les could hardly deliver the climactic line before breaking into laughter in which we all joined. He added that his father-in-law swore at the pig and vowed to make another attempt to ring it; he never did so, however, and Les noted that he did not remind him of his vow since to have done so would have seemed like a slight.

Such bull-headed assurance is a trait of character which Les shares with his father-in-law although he may not always recognise it in himself. The importance of such self-confidence to the charmer is discussed later in the chapter.

Frank Stubbs epitomises for Les the values of the old working-class community in Chideock of the period from the middle 1930's to the middle 1950's. Les speaks of the social life of these members of the old village with nostalgia which is, however, presented in a faintly patronising tone which suggests the extent to which he

has detached himself from the kind of life led by his father-in-law and his friends who were the farm workers and part-time fishermen of Chideock.

Drinking was one of the major social activities for the men of Stubbs's circle. Les, however, has never been a great drinker and although he is often pressed to drink with his many acquaintances he rarely takes more than a single glass of whisky or a half-pint of beer. His present ill-health gives him an excuse for not drinking which he may secretly welcome. Thus when he describes his father-in-law's drinking it is an amusing weakness to which he has proved himself superior and he can point to his own economic independence as the reward for never having allowed himself to be carried away by the excitement of strong drink and good company to spend more than he could afford.

Stubbs, however, had been drinking cider since the beginning of his working life at the age of twelve. It had been his habit, which Les observed with awe, while at Seatown Farm, to drink a cup of tea as soon as he got up in the morning and then to go out into the barn and draw himself a pint of cider which he drank even in the winter claiming that it "warmed him up." Stubbs's practice was not uncommon among men of the farming community and Les quoted a rhyme concerning it:

They say: "Cider on tea does agree, but tea on cider
ain't a very good rider."²

²Ethel M. Richardson has given a version from Wiltshire: "Cider 'pon beer is very good cheer / Beer 'pon cider is a dalled bad rider." Wiltshire Folk (London, 1934), p. 46.

My informant Sam Legg, who worked living-in for a farmer at Morcombelake, a mile west of Chideock, during the period 1912-1918, mentioned that he used to drink a quarter of a pint of cider each morning as soon as he got out of bed.

While Stubbs lived with his daughter and son-in-law he made his own cider as did many of the village men. Thomas Worthington's description of Chideock in 1880 mentioned that most of the houses had orchards at their rear and Les's cottage on the main street was no exception.³ The cider apples were crushed in a wooden press between layers of straw and the juice was fermented in large wooden barrels. In his retirement Stubbs was visited regularly by the "Chideock Cider Club" which was an informal group of working men who called into his cider house each evening after work to drink with him for an hour before going home; his daughter would scold the old man for coming in late for his meal.

He took a delight in making people drunk and especially so if they were strangers and unused to the potency of the cider. This was a trick that is still commonly played on newcomers and anecdotes concerning its success in embarrassing its victims, who may be figures of authority or religion, or socially superior newcomers to the village, are told by Les and others. Such narratives function, perhaps, to strengthen the original community's sense of identity

³Worthington, Chideock: Historical and Other Notes, p. 3.

and solidarity. Les used the dialect word "tole," which means to entice or decoy, in describing the way in which Stubbs persuaded people to drink with him.⁴

Among other social activities in which Stubbs joined during the middle 1930's was that of the part-time fishing crews on the beach at Seatown about three-quarters of a mile from Chideock. Stubbs was a member of a crew and spent many evenings fishing during the summer. Although the mackerel which they caught by seining were sometimes sold for a considerable profit the activity was also a social one; Les's accounts of it suggest that the men who went fishing were a group of close friends.

Stubbs was also eminent in the celebrations which occurred following sheep-shearing and during cider-making. Les noticed that, while the harvest festival was the major celebration of the agricultural year at Alderton, sheep-shearing was the greater festival in the farming year of Chideock. Stubbs was a friend of Charlie Wills, whose traditional songs have been recorded by Peter Kennedy, and who became a member of a sheep-shearing gang in his later years.⁵ Wills sang at the feasts which sometimes followed shearing and Stubbs played the concertina though not necessarily in accompaniment. A good deal of practical joking occurred and Les gave a humorous account of the way in which Jack Wills, Charlie's son, once clipped off most

⁴See Dartnell and Goddard, Wiltshire Glossary, p. 169.

⁵Some of Charlie Wills's songs can be heard on the record Charlie Wills, Leader LEA 4041 (Leader Sound, London, 1972).

of Stubbs's hair with his sheep-shears causing him to wear his cap continually for weeks afterward. These anecdotes suggest that Stubbs was well known and liked in the Chideock farming community.

Frank Stubbs's impression of Les as his son-in-law seems to have been favourable. Les showed himself to be a sober and industrious young man who had a real interest in learning the kinds of expert knowledge that would help him in his work as a cowman. Les went to church regularly in his first years at Chideock and this may have caused Stubbs to feel that he would have the necessary "faith" to become a charmer. He had given a positive proof of his belief in charming by persuading Jim Pope, his employer in the Marshwood Vale, to allow his mother-in-law, who had the ability to charm redwater in cattle, to charm one of his cows which was dying with the disease. Les's habit of learning from older men which he had developed through his close relationship with his grandfather, may have predisposed him to fall easily into the role of pupil to his father-in-law. He came to call him "Pop" and it may be that Stubbs took on the attributes of a father or grandfather to Les, who, being in his early twenties and in a strange county, appreciated the older man's advice. On one occasion, while discussing Stubbs with me, he referred to him as "my other grandfather" in a slip of the tongue and although when he deliberately compares the two men he always prefers his real grandfather it seems that he has also taken Stubbs as his exemplar in some things and particularly in the behaviour required of a charmer.

It was some four years after his marriage, and following his return from Wynford Eagle to work at Doghouse Farm at Chideock in 1941, that his father-in-law entrusted him with the knowledge of charming. Les was then twenty-eight years old. Prior to giving him this knowledge, however, Stubbs had already charmed two complaints in animals that were Les's responsibility at Doghouse Farm. The attitude shown by Stubbs, as recorded by Les, seems to have been entirely utilitarian; the use of a charm was, for him, the simplest and quickest way to cure the animals. Les's sense of the practicality of charming has a major effect on his practice and it almost certainly repeats his father-in-law's approach. This aspect of Les's attitude towards charming will thus receive first attention here.

The two memorates in which Les told of his first experience of the effectiveness of his father-in-law's ability to charm both stress the matter-of-fact way in which Stubbs substituted a purely magical cure for pharmacological treatments which Les was using. On one of these two occasions he told Les how to cure "loor." This is a kind of ulcer which develops in the cleft of a cow's hoof; it may also be known as "foul." Les described the way in which Stubbs helped him in his difficulty with the disease:

I was having the cattle in one day and one was limping with the loor, and the loor is, uh, caused by the same, uh, bug as, ahm, footrot in sheep. I think 'tis, uhm, uhm, the old staphylococcus, I think 'tis, I'm not sure, mind you, without having to look it up. I think it is. Now usually what I'd, uh, the treatment I used to follow was this, I used to keep them in, off the land, and, uhm, put their foot in a bucket, you know, with uhm, oh, sulphate of

copper, ah, 'bout, we'll say, a couple of tablespoons, say, to about a gallon of water. Soak them in that, get them nice and clean, and then, uhm, rub a mixture of Stockholm tar and, uh, sulphate of copper, that's right, and that used to cure 'em. But it was a bloomin' messy dangerous old job, you know. So anyway I was bringing them in one day and one was cripplin' pretty bad, and the old man said to me, "Well, you know," he said, "Les, you don't want to bother to go to all that par'phenalia," he said, "you know, Stockholm tar and that." He said, "Why don't you take your pocket knife out," he said, "and watch where he d' put his foot," he said. "Just cut the turf out," he said, "and put 'n up in a whitethorn bush," he said. "As the old turf d' wither," he said, "so the old footrot 'll go, uh, loor, 'll go." And so it did. So it did. Absolutely certain. You see?⁶

This cure has been widely reported in England and Wales.⁷ By contrast with his protracted and tedious treatment, which was equally traditional, Stubbs's method seemed both simple and elegant. Les was deeply impressed by it.

On another occasion in the same year Stubbs helped Les by charming an infection of ringworm that was troubling him. Once again Les records Stubbs's expression of scorn for the pharmacological treatment that he was using which seemed arduous and dangerous while

⁶Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

⁷See: Black, Folk-Medicine, p. 57; Udal, Dorsetshire Folk-Lore, p. 226; Evans, The Pattern Under the Plough, pp. 159-160. Edward Lisle's Observations in Husbandry (London, 1757), II, 136-137, describes the cure as "a common saying" and argues that its real value lies in preventing a harmful disturbance in the herd by the removal of the turf which contains the smell of blood from the sore. Its effectiveness is attested by a farmer who stated that, to his amazement, this "charm" had consistently been more effective than "severer applications" and that he intended to continue its use; see W. Youatt, Cattle; Their Breeds, Management, and Diseases (London, 1834), p. 567.

the cure offered by charming demanded no action at all on the part of the sufferer. As with his accounts of learning other skills Les seems to have commemorated the first time at which he was given a proof of the efficacy of charming by encapsulating the event in a narrative; in the same way he has told of "the first time" at which he learned "the proper way" to thatch a rick or to lay a hedge. In this case he alludes to his clear memory of Stubbs leaning over the gate and of the words that he said. This claim to recollection of such detail is a traditional rhetorical figure which is often used by him, and others, in the telling of memorates and it makes an implicit assertion of the truth of the events being described. This incident, together with that in which Stubbs cured the disease loor, is significant because it convinced Les that charming was effective and his show of belief probably decided Stubbs to impart the knowledge of charming to him; his account of it ran as follows:

I took on a pen of calves there that was absolutely covered [with ringworm]. Well I was using some stuff that was, uh, made up by my late veterinary surgeon, or the veterinary surgeon at Dorchester then, and I started treating them with this and I got twenty-two on my right arm [M.J.L.: Oh yeah.], through trying to treat them. And my father-in-law came to see me -- I tell you where he was working then, he was working for Sir Philip Colfox at Crepe, then -- and he come down to visit us of a Sunday morning, and d'you know I can remember him as if it was only yesterday, he looked over the gate and he said, "Goo," he said, "boy," he said, "you 'a'n't 'alf got a mess over there." And I said, "Yes," I said, "and I've got some on my arm as well." "Well," he said, "what've you been doing," he said, "trying to treat 'em?" And I said, "Yes." "Well," he said, "you don't want to treat those," he said. He said, "When I come again,"

he said, "it'll be about three weeks to a month,"
 he said, "that'll be gone." [Pause] Sure and
 behold they were. And mine as well. You see?
 And it was after then, just after then, that he
 told me what to do.⁸

Although Stubbs freely gave directions for the curing of loor he kept the method used in curing ringworm as a secret; the cure for loor, Les believes, can be accomplished by anyone who follows the directions, although he speculated that his own faith that it would work may have been necessary to its success. That Les would explain the method of curing loor to me, as he had previously to J.B. Lang, indicates that he does not consider this knowledge to be a part of the secret tradition of charming.⁹

It is not possible to describe the specific form taken by the body of knowledge concerning charming which was given to him; this remains his secret. The tenacity with which he kept it in the face of my direct and sidelong questioning is a tribute to the vitality of his belief. He has said nothing about the specific occasion on which the knowledge was passed to him. In response to a question as to whether the knowledge was given to him all at once or over several occasions he replied that it was all given at one time; he implied that it was neither complicated nor lengthy:

[The information was given] all at one go. Yeah,
 mmm. Because it's, ah, really, nothing to it,
 other than believing in what you can do, uhm, that's
 all it is, really.¹⁰

⁸ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

⁹ See J.B. Lang, "Charming of Cattle," Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, XCI (1970), 222.

¹⁰ Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

He was given the knowledge to cure a limited range of diseases which extends only to external disorders of the skin; warts and ringworm are those which he mentions frequently. Answers to further questions revealed that a verbal charm may be used by him at least in the curing of ringworm; however, he would not state this positively. I asked if, when a charmer transmitted a charm to a patient by telephone, he used a charm that was in the form of words; he replied:

It could be, and it needn't be. No, no, it could be transmitted thoughts, you see, so he would not use any words whatsoever. [M.J.L.: But there might be words?] Yes, that's right. There may be. There may be words that he would, yes, he would transmit, uh, we'll say, through his thoughts. Yes, this is right.¹¹

His verbal charm for the cure of ringworm may be one of the many that have been recorded from other charmers. Whether or not one or more verbal charms were told him by Frank Stubbs it is apparent that Les believes that the effective power of charming lies in the transmission of the charmer's thought. The strength of this transmission, he implies, is determined by the extent of the charmer's belief in "what . . . [he] can do." Les's concepts of the source and operation of the power of charming are discussed in further detail below but for the present it is necessary to consider the ethical code governing his activity as a charmer which was also communicated to him by Stubbs when he gave him the knowledge.

The principles which guide his practice as a charmer emerged gradually during our conversations on charming. He seemed

¹¹Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

eager to discuss them for they stress the virtues demanded of a charmer. Essentially they show the charmer's motive as being entirely benevolent and free from any financial consideration. The charmer's behaviour is controlled by rules of conduct which are kept as rigidly as a priest's vows or a doctor's oath. Les seems to be aware that such an implicit comparison could be made and was pleased to be able to speak of the seriousness with which he takes his responsibilities as a charmer. These rules are ideals, however, which he sometimes modifies in practice.

He expressed the rules succinctly as though he had often thought of them and pronounced them:

You see I never advertise myself; I never want, I never expect or receive payment; I never, ahm, offer my services, never; so, you see, if ever I charm anything at all it's because I've been asked to by someone over the telephone, or someone have come to see me, you see.¹²

These principles of conduct are entirely traditional and comparable examples may be cited from many sources. Four major rules may be defined in Les's practice; they are that he does not advertise his ability; he does not receive payment for using it; he does not attempt to treat any complaint which he does not recognise as lying within his capacity to cure; and he never refuses any genuine request for his help but will not treat those who are aggressively sceptical of the power of charming.

¹²Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

The following example shows the operation of the first of these rules in its social context; apparent also is the way Les habitually turns to the precedent set by his father-in-law to guide his own actions in the matter of charming:

You got to be like Pop. You look at Freddy Handsworth, for instance, whose hands was absolutely covered in warts. He'd been in my home dozens of times, years, before Pop attempted to cure him, for the simple reason, Freddy never asked, bothered to say to Pop, "Well, Mr. Stubbs, could you get rid of my warts?" No one had come to Pop and said, "Look, Freddy Handsworth's got a mess of warts on his hand, would you cure them for him?" He, he didn't come forward and push hisself and say, "Look, I can cure your warts." You don't do that sort of thing, you see.¹³

Although Les is completely confident of his ability he was taught by his father-in-law to reserve any statement of this until he has received a definite request for a cure from the sufferer or an intermediary.

When asked if he can charm Les is likely to make a guarded and modest reply. A friend asked him if he would charm some warts from a girl's hand. Les described this incident and, characteristically, reconstructed the dialogue which occurred between him and his friend; Les's responses were given in undertones as though to demonstrate his initially unassuming stance:

So he come on to work one day, he said: "Yer," he said, "Les. You charm warts don't you?" I said, "Well, you know, Yeah." "Well," he said, "there's a young girl," he said, "that comes to rehearsals," he said, "and she's got about six or seven huge warts on her hand, you know, makes her feel embarrassed with it." He said, "Could you do anything about it?" I said "Yeah, I can get rid of those alright."

¹³ Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

This example shows how grudging is his response until the request has been made; once asked, however, he expresses complete confidence.

The making of a request for help was shown similarly in another narrative; again Les reconstructed a version of the event which showed his circumspection as he waited until a definite request had been made before stating confidently that he could help:

I went in there you know [to the baker's shop], and little Celia, and she'd been showing the girl behind the counter, you see, these warts. I think it was Noreen Foot. And Noreen said, "Well, why don't you let Les charm them?" she said. And you know, while they were there discussing it, I walked in. So, ah, Noreen Foot, she says, "Here y'are Les," she said, "Celia got a load of warts on her hand." I had a look and I said, "Oh, ah, so you have dear." Now I don't say "Do you want me to charm them for you?" I don't say that. I don't; matter of fact I don't tell people I can do it unless I'm asked. And she said, "Could you get rid of them for me Les?" and I said "Yes, certainly dear."

The contrast in his manner before and after the request is striking. The sufferer has made the necessary gesture of faith and it is then up to the charmer to help, as his ethical code demands that he should. The request, and the charmer's verbal assurance that he will help, make up a formal procedure which must be followed. Eric Benfield has given an excellent account of a patient's visit to a charmer, in which he stresses the charmer's deliberate manner of exacting an expression of belief in her power from the patient before she will promise to cure him; Benfield also shows the patient's sense that the visit is a special occasion, governed by a certain etiquette, which he observes by wearing his best suit.¹⁴ The

¹⁴Eric Benfield, Southern English (London, 1942), pp. 18-20.

therapeutic value of formalising the initial stage of the healing procedure is discussed later in the chapter.

He observes the second principle of not accepting payment, with equal seriousness. Les considers that he would lose his ability to charm if he were to make a personal profit by it. His feeling is related to his sense of holding the ability to cure as a sacred trust from an unnamed but implicitly divine source:

You see the thing is this, that if you got the gift to do something that a lot of other people haven't got, well then of course you don't exploit it by, we'll say, well, you aha, you devalue it, you, what can I say, bring it into abuse I think, if you, you know, get paid for doing it. Oh no, I wouldn't dream of it, of charging anyone. I should feel if I did that I might fail. You see. Yes, I should have a feeling that if I did, I would have a feeling that it would be wrong, so wrong, that probably, you know, the next time I might fail, because, you know, I haven't abided by the rules.¹⁵

The belief that a charmer's power to cure is jeopardised by the acceptance of payment has been widely reported from other charmers. Les shares this belief but his complete financial disinterestedness in the matter of charming is the more striking because of the emphasis which he has placed on the economic value of his other skills.

A charmer may find it difficult, however, to refuse some form of payment in the face of a grateful sufferer's eagerness to reward him. In such cases the reward is often presented through indirect means and is given in kind. A farmer for whom Les has charmed regularly over the past five years gives him a large box of

¹⁵ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

chocolates each Christmas; the reward for charming is camouflaged by the general tradition of gift-giving at Christmas, and, for one year at least, the farmer did not even hand the gift to Les personally but sent his daughter to deliver it.

Frank Stubbs developed, or inherited, a stock reply with which to counter a farmer's protestations of a desire to make some payment which Les has adopted in his own practice:

If of course you're asked to receive something, well you say, "Well, of course, you know I didn't do it for you." You see. "I done it to cure your animals."

This pleasing fiction provides a ⁴ graceful way through which Les can decline the offer of a reward.

The third principle of Les's conduct as a charmer, which is again followed solicitously, is his deliberate limitation of the range of ailments he will attempt to treat. He expressed this with some gravity:

You see, the thing is this, I know what I can do and I only work within, the, well, within we'll say, the boundary of the knowledge that I've got.¹⁶

Later he cited an example of a man who had asked him if he could cure the man's wife of a bone disease; Les had refused since he knew that it was beyond his ability and he did not want to destroy the woman's faith by raising her hopes and then dashing them by his failure. This self-imposed restriction and concern to act responsibly toward patients has been noted as a general trait among charmers.

¹⁶ Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

The fourth rule of practice which Les observes is the refusal to attempt to treat anyone who seems hostile and openly sceptical of his ability to cure them. He applies this rule, however, more flexibly than any of the others for he finds that there are gradations in the levels of scepticism among potential patients and he seems to enjoy the personal challenge of being able to convince an unbeliever of the efficacy of charming. In the case of someone who adamantly refused to accept the possibility of charming, however, and whom he recognised as being "such an unbeliever" as to be not "helpful" in any way, he explained that he would politely withdraw from the situation by saying something like the following: "Well I'm so sorry, I just can't do anything for you." This restriction of practice to include only those who show some willingness to believe has also been shown by many charmers.

No genuine request is ever refused, however, and in this, as in the other complementary elements of the charmer's code, he follows the example set by his father-in-law:

He has done, exactly the same, well, that I've done. If I feel that I can help, and you ask, then I do it. If I can't I say so. He was exactly the same.

Stubbs's transmission of the knowledge of charming to his son-in-law created a personal bond between the two men which was of such strength and endurance that Les still considers himself to be under an obligation to his father-in-law to continue the practice of charming in exactly the same way as it was taught to him. There are several personal reasons for his conservatism in this respect; among

them is his habit of learning from his elders and carefully acknowledging the sources of his knowledge. This traditional courtesy trait has been seen in the chapters which described his childhood learning and his acquisition of skills in early manhood. The warmth of his affection for his grandfather, who was the most influential of his teachers, also prefigures the affection he came to feel for "Pop" Stubbs with whom Les again occupied the role of pupil in learning from the older man's experience and special knowledge.

The other major influence in the formation of this personal bond is the result of the manner in which Les was chosen to receive the knowledge of charming. There are many ways in which a person may gain recognition as a folk healer within his community. The healing ability may be believed to have been conferred through special circumstances of birth, as in the case of a child born after the death of his father, or as the seventh child in a family; or it may be considered to be the result of some ritual performed on the infant, such as being placed outside in the snow before being washed for the first time. Special circumstances of marriage may also be thought to confer the gift of healing; a woman who does not change her name in marriage, as the consequence of marrying a man of the same surname, is sometimes believed to possess healing ability. The fulfillment of many such community-recognised qualifications for exercising the healing role makes the choice of the healer a matter of accident or coincidence which is often regarded as being divinely inspired. In the case of the direct and deliberate transmission

of secret healing knowledge between two people, however, the practitioner must make his own choice of a successor.

This choice may be governed by traditional conditions or it may be left entirely to the discretion of the retiring healer. The tradition of charming which Stubbs had been given did not restrict him to passing it to a member of his own family, and did not lay any condition on the sex of the recipient, although such conditions have been frequently recorded. Les believes that Stubbs's own knowledge came from an old farmer in Devon who was not related to him. While some charmers consider that their power will cease as soon as they transmit the knowledge to another person Stubbs continued to practice as a charmer until the year before his death which was some thirty years after he had given the knowledge to Les. Les is fairly sure that he is the only person to whom Stubbs communicated the knowledge.

Les's sense of obligation to his father-in-law has therefore been deepened by his awareness of having been specially chosen. Stubbs impressed him with the importance of choosing "the right person" when Les, in turn, came to pass the knowledge on. Les doubts that he will be able to find anyone "in these days" with the requisite degree of belief and with the other qualities of character necessary in a successor to this knowledge:

In these days, you know, there's less faith about these days, you know, Martin. less people that you can look at and say, "Well, yes, now look, I can tell that

person something and I know that they're the right type." Well you can't do that you see.¹⁷

His father-in-law is a living presence to him when he considers his responsibility; he speaks of Stubbs as though he were still alive and concerned:

The thing is this that I'm sure, I'm very certain, that I shall never pass it on. Because [pause] I don't think I'm going to find a person like he wants me to find and that I know I've got to find, to be able to pass it on.¹⁸

Les sees the choice of a proper successor as a matter of trust in which he must keep faith with Stubbs; the responsibility is enough to "worry" him:

The thing is this that always worries me was when my father-in-law told me what to do he said, "Look son, when you pass it on, you be sure you do pick the right person."¹⁹

His concept of the qualities necessary in "the right person" are based on those which he has observed in the behaviour of his father-in-law.

The importance of Stubbs's example to Les in the matter of charming can hardly be over-stressed. Les does not seem to have been interested in learning about charming from any other source and although he is aware of the existence of other charmers in the district he has no contact with them. It is possible that this awareness is partly due to the publication of J.B. Lang's article,

¹⁷ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

¹⁸ Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

¹⁹ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

"Charming of Cattle," which mentions other charmers, and of which he was given a copy in recognition of the two anecdotes which he contributed. In showing the article to me and pointing out its description of the charming of "husk," a parasitic infection of the lung in cows which he is unable to charm, he said that he thought that the charming of this disease was "wonderful" and that he would love to see it done. His admiration seemed to be due to its being an internal complaint whereas his own range of ability is limited to curing external ailments; I had the impression that he considered an internal disease to be more difficult to charm. He did not, however, give any sign that he would like to learn how to charm it himself.

His lack of ambition to enlarge his repertory of magical methods of healing may be due to his retirement from farm work, where it would have had a more immediate value to him, but it seems more likely that it reflects a traditional sanction against mingling separate healing traditions. A charmer would be unlikely to receive healing knowledge from more than one donor and the effect of learning a plurality of methods might be to weaken belief in their effectiveness.

Les considers that his choice of a successor would be made subjectively although he would keep in mind certain principles. This intuitive knowledge of when the proper successor is at hand seems, for him, to be an aspect of the mystery of charming; he claims to have had an instinctive understanding of what his father-in-law meant by "the right person":

Well I know what he meant by that; he didn't have to emphasise what he meant by "getting the right person." I know that the chances are I don't think I shall find one -- not in my lifetime -- I don't think so. I think one knows instinctively when that right person is there, or not. You know. This is fantastic [unintelligible] really.

This trust to intuition in the transmission of the knowledge of charming seems to be traditional; it has been found that charmers are often reluctant to state definite conditions for the transfer of their knowledge.²⁰

Although Stubbs had known him for over four years before he entrusted him with the knowledge of charming Les considered that it would not take him that long to get to know a person; he explained his own methods of judging character:

Sometimes you don't need to know a person very long at all, Martin, you feel, you know. You see, for instance, now look, I went into the hospital -- I went back yesterday to take a boy out, you know, for a walk -- and immediately I get a new Staff [nurse] come in, or I got to work with another Staff, I react immediately. I know, and invariably I'm right -- I don't want to boast about this -- but invariably I'm right, I get a feeling that this person either want to be treated with a little bit of extra tact, or, I mustn't, what can I say, let them know too much because otherwise, they couldn't keep a secret anyway, they're a little tiny bit, what can I say, unreliable. I know all this in a matter of about a day. I put a few questions to them, get the answers, and by their manner and by the answers they give me to my questions I generally I got them summed up fairly well and it doesn't take very long after that to know whether a chap or a woman is a reliable person.

But I think as far as this [charming] is concerned, you want to know someone a reasonable length of time because you want to know a little bit about their

²⁰ Theo Brown, "Charming in Devon," Folklore, LXXXI (1970), 38.

character -- you'll want to know a little bit about how they'll react in certain circumstances -- whether they're going to blow their top and lose their hair for no apparent reason -- whether they're kind and considerate -- well, there's lots of things, but you really do want a bit of time; but basically, I think you seem to know, somehow; you seem to know, yeah.

Les is particularly proud of his insight into human nature and we have already noted his claims to have developed it at an early age. The qualities of confidentiality, reliability, even temper, and consideration, which he selects here as being necessary to the charmer, are shown clearly in his own practice which is discussed in detail in the following chapter.

4

Before describing Les's practice as a charmer, however, it is desirable to attempt to give a closer definition of the qualities of character and faith that he considers should be possessed by a charmer. These may be divided, though broadly and with much overlapping, into three main areas of conduct and belief. They are, in the order of their discussion, the establishment of a reputation for trustworthiness; the possession of a reverent attitude towards life, especially as expressed in the healing power; and the demonstration of complete belief in one's own ability to be the agent of the power of charming.

The establishment of a reputation for trustworthiness is vital because the charmer must be believed by his patient when he gives his pledge that their complaint will be cured within a certain length of time. The importance in the context of psychotherapy of this prediction of a cure is discussed in detail below in connection

with his narratives of successful charming. The probity of a charmer is probably judged within the farming community by the same standards as are applied to any other member of it; hence he must not incur the dislike which is traditional of those who boast of their ability without being able to prove it. Neither must he be seen to be a sharp dealer who is using trickery for his own profit. Les may have had such considerations in mind when he suggested that "a rogue" could not succeed as a charmer:

I don't think that a person that's a, a person that could be a rogue would be any good. Put it like that. No, I don't think it would. I think if you find, if you go out in the Marshwood Vale or anywhere where a person who is able to do, like for instance, uh, curing the husk, I uhm, well without the shadow of a doubt that would be a pretty reliable person as far as I'm concerned though I've never seen 'em, really. I don't see how you could come to terms to be able to do anything like that and be a person who wasn't any good, not really.²¹

Les seems to be implying here that the sense of religious awe and obligation felt by the charmer at being the instrument of the power of charming would naturally prevent him from entertaining selfish or vicious thoughts at the same time. Related to this sense of the need to deal with people fairly is his insistence that the charmer uses his power only for good.

Les has been deeply angered by what he considers to be imputations of witchcraft made by the Reverend Dr. Donald Omand, a former vicar of his parish, with reference to the practice of charming carried on by his father-in-law and himself.

²¹Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

Dr. Omand has stated, in a guidebook describing Chideock, that the parish, "like so many places in the West of England, is traditionally closely associated with magic, both White and Black. Witchcraft has always been practised in Dorset, and Chideock possessed an ancient coven, which may or may not have fallen into disuse."²² In a published account of his experiences as an exorcist he mentions that he found "witchcraft" and "magic" being "commonly practised" in the parish when he came to it in 1956 and gives several anecdotes concerning healing together with an account of a case of "overlooking" in which he was able to turn aside,⁴ by his own ministrations, the curse which a man had laid on a herd of cows.²³

In fairness to the Vicar, though he is noted for seeking personal publicity and tends to sensationalise his material, it must be said that he has drawn a careful distinction between black and white witchcraft in his writings. His description of the charmers' sense of vocation and their deliberate limitation of their practice agrees closely with Les's own account; Omand said:

The really good witches of my acquaintance are as conscious of possessing a vocation as could be any clergyman, nurse or physician. They exist to help others . . . the most common ones in the South West are known as charmers. By their spells they seem able to cure both people and animals (generally cattle) of specific ailments, but the scope in which they can operate is definitely limited.²⁴

²² Reverend Dr. W.D. Omand, Chideock: Its Church, its Saints, its Martyrs, and its Sinners (2nd ed., Gloucester, 1969), p. 11.

²³ Donald Omand, Experiences of a present day Exorcist (London, 1970), pp. 97-107.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

He seems to have been invariably complimentary to Frank Stubbs who is almost certainly referred to in Omand's statement that he would introduce a sufferer from warts to a white witch in his own parish without fear of the consequences.²⁵ In the address which he gave at Stubbs's funeral he spoke of him as having been his "old friend" and paid tribute to his character and powers. He compared Stubbs's ability with the healing power that was given to the apostles:

Many thought Frank Stubbs had supernatural powers. That may have been so but they were not the relics from the dark ages. It is quite wrong to confuse "charming" with magic. What Frank Stubbs practised was the last remaining vestige of the power which the apostles practised until the end of the second century, when, because of its establishment and consequent materialism, Christianity lost most of its original dynamic.²⁶

Despite the Vicar's apparent goodwill, however, his merely mentioning the term "witch" in connection with his father-in-law has been enough to prompt Les's indignation. When, during our first formal interview, my father mentioned that Stubbs had been known as "the white witch of Chideock," Les replied in the firmly measured tone with which he controls the expression of anger, that the term had only been applied to Stubbs by Dr. Omand; he said:

I've never heard Pa say he was a witch, I never heard him say he was a faith healer. He has done exactly the same as what I've done: if I feel that

²⁵ Ibid., p. 99.

²⁶ "W. Dorset mourns 'great charmer' at the age of 91," Bridport News and Dorset County Chronicle (July 16, 1971), p. 1.

I can help, and you ask, then I do it; if I can't then I say so. He was exactly the same. There's been a lot of things written, I think, and implied, as regards the old chap, that he wouldn't agree to anyway.²⁷

Dr. Omand has stated his belief that white witches could be tempted to do evil.²⁸ Les resents the implication and seems startled to find that anyone could consider that charming could be turned to malevolent ends:

Some people said to me once, well, matter of fact, I think it was Dr. Omand, mentioned this to me; he tried to suggest to me that what I done for good also I could do for evil. That's [pause] as it may be. The thing is this, that if I had the power to cause injury or suffering or bad luck to, we'll say, any other person, I think that would be a terrible thing. So I wouldn't even think of it, in that way, I wouldn't even think of it at all. What he was trying to do was to put words into my mouth, which I resisted. You see the thing is this, I know what I can do, and I only work within the boundary of the knowledge that I've got.

Now that the suggestion has been made, however, it may be that his sense of self-importance has been increased by the consideration that he is the custodian of an ability which must not be allowed to fall into what he calls "the wrong hands." For this reason it has also become less likely that he will pass his knowledge to a successor.

The foregoing discussion of Les's sense of responsibility as a charmer to restrict the exercise of his ability to benevolent purposes leads naturally to a consideration of the second major aspect

²⁷ Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

²⁸ Omand, Experiences of a present day Exorcist, p. 99.

of his complex attitude towards charming which is its association with "faith." What Les means by "faith" cannot be identified precisely with orthodox Christian belief as it is expounded by the Anglican church of which he is ostensibly a communicant. He no longer attends church although he did so regularly as a young man when he first came to Chideock and he looks back with fond nostalgia at church-going with his family at Alderton. He professes a cynical distrust of organised religion, particularly of Roman Catholicism, and points to the contemporary strife between what he explains as religious factions in Ulster to support his views. In Chideock he has had disputes with recent incumbents of the parish church over such matters as certain fees taken by the clergy, which he considers to be unjustified, and the size of gravestones, which he wishes to see standardised to avoid the perpetuation of social distinctions. He claims to base his own religious views solely on the teachings of Christ and quotes His teachings and parables as examples to be followed in social life. Les's quoting of Christ's words is not so frequent as to make him appear extraordinarily devout but it is marked enough to seem unusual in a broadly agnostic society.

The apparent core of his belief in charming lies in the phrase "Faith moves mountains." This proverbial saying is based on any of three Biblical passages in which Christ preaches on this theme.²⁹ In comparing charming with witchcraft he declared that

²⁹ See: Matthew, XVII, 20; Matthew, XXI, 21; Mark, XI, 22-33.

charming was only the "simple faith" taught in the Bible:

You see witchcraft is the power of, in my opinion, of one mind over another. That is witchcraft, good or bad. This [charming] is nothing but simple faith and this is all it is, and d'you know, it's like I said many, uh, times before, the Bible said, or Christ preached, that faith would move mountains. And faith does move mountains. Not in the literal sense of course, but, you know, there's no problem really, that, uh, you cannot solve, one way or another.

His comment that he has repeated the saying "many times before" can be borne out; he used the phrase as a commentary in conclusion of the memorate in which he described Stubbs's cure for loor and has repeated it at other times during our conversations. There can be little doubt that the example of Christ as a worker of healing miracles colours his view of charming and helps establish its character for him as a kind of lay ministry.

The association of Christ and the saints with folk medicine in general, and with charming in particular, is traditional.³¹ The majority of the verbal charms recorded from other charmers consist of Biblical verses or popular misquotations of verses or phrases which are believed to be in the Bible. Others are apocryphal accounts of acts of healing performed by Christ and the saints; the theory underlying their use has been described as being that "mythical events could be a timeless source of supernatural power" as the

³⁰ Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

³¹ For a comprehensive survey of this topic see Black, Folk Medicine, chap. 5, "Our Lord and the Saints in Folk Medicine," pp. 75-94.

repetition of the original healing act could be invoked by naming and describing it.³² The use of the phrase "faith moves mountains," or some near equivalent, may also be traditional among charmers. A charmer of warts in Bryant's Cove, Conception Bay, Newfoundland, also seems to use it, as Les does, in explanation of the effectiveness of charming; to someone who doubted its power the charmer said: "You know this is no laughing matter. It is a faith cure. You know faith can move mountains."³³

"Faith" means a great deal more to Les than simply the state of belief in divinity as it is conventionally expressed through organised religious worship; "religion is man-made," he says, "faith isn't." For him it may be an earthly manifestation of supernatural power which can be channelled into acts of healing through the belief and direction of the charmer.

A further source of faith for Les is to be found in the wonderful evidences of divinity which he is able to find in the natural world. His view of what faith entails includes the willingness to commit oneself to the divine will, trusting that individual human lives, like the cycles of the seasons, are under benevolent divine guidance. He says that he believes that the duration of each man's life is preordained and that it is therefore fruitless to worry

³²Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, p. 179.

³³Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, 72-191/C 1230; I quote from my own transcription of a tape recorded interview between Dulcie Parsons, the informant, and Elizabeth Parsons, the collector.

about death since it is fixed and inevitable. His speculations on predestination, which are prompted by the sense that his own death may not be far distant, lead him naturally into a consideration of the evidences of divine providence in the natural world:

When you live in this world you know that you got to die. And whether it is going to be young, middle-aged, or old, is just a matter of, well, it's immaterial, really. See the thing is this, that you are, in my opinion, preordained to live a certain time, certain, uhm, period of time, and, uhm, I'm not going to say that you couldn't court disaster, but I begin to wonder whether that wasn't what you was supposed to do anyway. You see? I think that your stay on this earth is preordained. And, uhm, and I think that during your stay on this earth if you only take the trouble to, ahm, enquire, and to look around you, you'll see such wondrous things happening, uh, that well, however you cannot believe after you've seen it, well I just fail to understand how a person just cannot have faith.

His comments on the seasons and their effects on agriculture revealed the same attitude of optimistic compliance with the divine scheme. During a discussion of weather predictions he made a number of philosophical asides which emphasised his faith in God's benevolent direction of nature:

I always think myself that nature always replenishes itself. If you lose in the spring you will gain in the fall. You see, if you, if you're short of apples you'll have plenty of potatoes. You see, I think nature always balances itself, yeah.³⁴

His father-in-law was also a close observer of the natural world and Les sees this trait as an evidence of his faith:

³⁴ Recorded interview, June 5, 1974, Chideock.

He had a great faith in lots of things . . . You see, he, he was a firm believer in, we'll say, the stars, the power, you know, the power of the universe, and, for instance, he could tell the weather from the, the moon, and the stars, and all this sort of thing, you know, a thing that I don't know anything at all about.³⁵

While Les does not consider that his own weather knowledge matches that of Frank Stubbs it was shown to be quite extensive when it was elicited through the use of a questionnaire based on the items of weather belief noted by Udal.³⁶ Les's skill in the prediction of coming weather lies in his ability to interpret animal behaviour; this ability is a result of his long experience as a keeper of animals and is a part of traditional rural knowledge. Les has elevated the countryman's habit of the constant observation of the natural world into a philosophical attitude which is a basis of faith and which he therefore considers to be essential to the attitude of a charmer.

A concomitant of his view that the charmer should be someone whose "enquiring mind" leads him to an interest in the natural world and in human character is his sense that he should be "above" or should renounce materialistic pleasures. The effect is to compare the role of the charmer, implicitly, with that of a priest or sage who lives on a more contemplative level than that of most men who are obsessed with the cares of business or with unedifying pleasures.

³⁵ Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

³⁶ Udal, Dorsetshire Folk-lore, chap. 8, "Weather-lore," pp. 262-272.

Among the latter his prime dislike is of television which, in his opinion, not only creates public demand for unnecessary products, many of which damage the environment, but also saps the energy and initiative of those who watch it. In illustration of the compound of religious belief, interest in nature, and the desire to learn, which he considers essential in the charmer's attitude, he compared his wife's way of life with that of her father; I had asked why she had not been chosen to receive the knowledge of charming and he replied seriously:

Well then, I think this is very, very, simple. I know my wife's religious beliefs; she has got none, whatsoever, really. She isn't a thinker; mind she's going to live life, we'll say, fairly placidly, because she doesn't think about life like I do. She doesn't think about life like her father did. He, you know, he studied the stars and the moon and the wind but Flora hasn't studied very much at all. She's interested in the material things of life like television.³⁷

He drew back from what he realised was too harsh a picture of his wife's limitations; he mentioned her interest in the garden and I praised her skill with animals. He agreed with me and took up my suggestion:

She's very good with animals. Now she's certainly, we'll say, got what he had as regards animals. But she, like I said, she's interested in bingo, television, the material things of life more than what he was, or that I am. The question was answered, I think, just now, when I said that he had to be certain that when he passed it on to me that I was going to be like him not question the results -- whereas my wife I'm certain would have questioned it.

³⁷Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

His doubt that his wife could have exercised the necessary faith to be successful as a charmer emphasises the importance to him of this third major tenet of his belief concerning charming which is that the charmer must have confidence, or "faith," in his own ability to be the agent of the power of charming.

Les considers that a charm will not be successful if there is any doubt, or lack of faith, in the charmer's mind. He is less definite about the need for faith on the part of the patient. Frank Stubbs seems to have exemplified this utter selfconfidence, as the anecdotes of his dealings with animals quoted above may have shown, and this may have been allied with a simple religious faith. Les was deeply impressed by Stubbs's lack of any doubt:

Yes he was an amazing man, Martin, because, you see, it didn't occur to him to, uh, what can I, what is the word I want to use? It didn't occur to him to question his faith. You see, now, there are very few people in the world, I think, that doesn't question their faith, but he never, he never questioned it. It was a fait accompli if you will, if you would like to put it that way.

The charmer's act of faith seems to him to precipitate the healing effect.

It is not possible to say on the basis of my information whether Les's conception of the operation of a charm is that it resembles either a prayer or a spell; that is, whether it asks a higher power to create the desired effect or compels the result through its autonomous power. He seems to consider, however, that the healing process is at least initiated by the charmer's act of faith. He explained this

quality of absolute belief as being like "a grain of feeling" in excess of the level of belief which might be felt by one who was not convinced of the efficacy of the charm:

See the thing is this that if I, uh, was to tell you [how to charm], for instance, Martin, and you were faced with, ah, someone who was bothered with, uhm, [an] acute attack of ringworm, say, you wouldn't probably carry out what I would tell you without that little grain of feeling that you wouldn't succeed. [M.J.L.: Yeah.] You see. Now the thing is this [pause] to be able to find that person who will, who would have, we'll say, absolute faith without any feeling whatsoever of failure, without any [pause], what can I say, feeling inside that they were going to fail.

4

Again it is not possible to determine whether this failure would have been caused either by lack of faith in either the autonomous power of the charm or in some supernatural agency which can be invoked through the charmer's act of faith.

The foregoing exploration of Les's attitudes toward the ability to charm has shown that he considers his practice as a charmer to be governed by an ethical code and that this is enforced by both a sense of obligation to his father-in-law, as the donor of the knowledge, and also by his reverent awe of the power of charming. The ethical code forbids him to advertise his ability or to receive payment for exercising it; he also feels bound to help anyone who asks him to although he restricts his practice to the treatment of the limited range of complaints within which he is sure of his ability to cure. He believes that a charmer should take a more thoughtful and reverent attitude to life than that shown by the majority of men.

Although certain general rules of traditional social behaviour apply to the transmission of the knowledge of charming, so that, for example, Les feels obliged to give due credit to his father-in-law as being the source of his knowledge and also to follow the principles he has learned from him as he would in any other craft, it is evident that Les regards charming as an activity which is separate from the normal transactions of social life.

The clearest example of his view that charming has a special status as a sacred activity is contained in his denial that the ability to charm is the personal possession of the charmer.

4

Charming is not like any of the other rural skills in which a craftsman can take pride in his knowledge and use it to enhance his social or economic position. This denial is made implicitly in his statement that charming is not "clever" for this word has been used by him throughout his remarks on skill and knowledge as indicating the personal possession of wisdom, intelligence, experience, and capability; an apprentice became "a clever chap," in Les's opinion, when he had learned all that his master could teach him and it was "some very clever person" who had shown the foresight to plant a row of beech trees to make a windbreak that would shelter a future generation. With regard to charming, however, Les affects to claim none of the personal credit which "cleverness" normally brings:

You see, another thing too, I think, Martin, is you mustn't think, "Ah, I'm a clever bloke." That's the last thing in the world you must think. I think the thing is this, that the fact that you can do, say, the thing that I do, you've got to be more humble than what you would ordinary. You haven't got to say, "Ah, cor, that was clever." It wasn't clever.

It wasn't clever at all. No. You've got to be more humble, you've got to be grateful for the fact that you've got the knowledge to be able to do what you can do. So you should have no feeling of being very clever at all. You should be grateful that you can do it.

This disclaimer is the more striking when it is set against what we have already seen of Les's character as a man who is convinced of the value of knowledge and habitually regards it as a personal possession which enhances his prestige. He seems to consider that he should view himself as the agent rather than the independent possessor of the ability to charm. For this reason he dislikes using the term "power" to denote his ability, feeling perhaps that this might seem presumptuous, and will often use a circumlocution like "the thing that I do," as shown in the preceding quotation, in preference to a more active and definite expression of the fact that he can charm.

Such, in broad terms, is the philosophy which underlies his practice of charming. It is not an entirely consistent philosophy since charming remains largely a "mystery" to him. The principles which he claims to follow are stated by him as ideals but the forthcoming discussion of his practice as a charmer shows that some of these ideals tend to be mildly compromised in his practical interpretation of them. In his development of a persona as a charmer, which is considered in the following chapter, he can be seen to have both conserved and modified the tradition of charming which he inherited from his father-in-law.

THE MODIFICATION OF A TRADITIONAL ROLE

Les has said that he does not think that his father-in-law "had the personality to put it over," by which he meant that Stubbs did not show the same awareness that he does of the way that a patient's response to his personality affects the success of a cure by charming. Les was comparing his father-in-law's characteristic method of responding to requests that he charm a complaint, which seems to have been blunt and phlegmatic, with his own overtly sympathetic reaction. Both approaches, however, have been equally effective for one of the criteria for a charmer's success is that he should make a strong and convincing impression on his patient. He made this remark casually to Ruth Newson, who had asked him to charm a wart from her hand; I overheard his comment and noted it for it seemed to be one of the most significant statements that he has made of his own interpretation of the role of the charmer.

Les has created a much broader healing role than that which was practiced by his father-in-law in which he includes, besides magical curing, practical nursing, counselling in personal problems, and even advice and assistance in matters of business.

The models on which he has based his expansion of the charmer's role are apparently drawn from the traditional patterns of visiting the sick and sitting up with the dying, the pastoral visits

of priests or ministers, and, above all, the house-calls made by family doctors.

Clergymen and family doctors have traditionally been concerned with the general well-being of their parishioners and patients and not merely with their immediate problems of spiritual or physical health. Francis Brett Young's description of a doctor's function in a village suggests the range of responsibilities that he assumed:

He is its friend, its counsellor, its universal confidant. He is admitted to share the troubles that shadow men's minds as well as the most intimate ills that affect their bodies. He is their comrade, rock firm, in the major emergencies of birth and of death, and a source¹ of rich humanity as well as of practical wisdom.

While the doctor, in such cases, took on some of the duties of the priest it was also not uncommon, especially in rural areas without doctors, for a priest to treat illness; in the village of Broadwinsor in West Dorset, where there was no doctor during the 1850's, the vicar dispensed herbal medicines, wrote prescriptions, and kept a case notebook.²

Although the doctor and the clergyman acquire authority in the eyes of the community by virtue of their office Les has had to establish his reputation for himself as a man who can be turned to for help in times of trouble. His concern to be "the man who knows" has been seen throughout his repertory of stories about himself

¹Young, Portrait of a Village, p. 74.

²Taylor Milne, A History of Broadwinsor, Dorset (Dorchester, n.d.), p. 25.

whether he has been describing his skills in particular crafts or his special insights into human nature. This chapter considers the way in which he employs this reputation for probity and wisdom as the basis for his performance of a broadly defined healing role in his community.

The Later Years: Community Service

He developed his distinctive form of service to the community in his later years, from 1952 to the present, following his decision to leave farming, and it is necessary to begin by describing the course of his life⁴ in this period. Les worked at Doghouse Farm for ten and a half years until, at the age of thirty-nine, he had saved enough money to begin his own milk retailing business. His action in leaving the security of regular employment shows his characteristic spirit of enterprise; it also reflects, as he has suggested, the appearance of the entrepreneurial strain in his character which he considers himself to have inherited from his father's side of the family who were diligent and successful businessman although he found them sadly lacking in humanity. His uncle and father-in-law had also provided examples of the benefits of independence for, by renting dairies, they had followed the traditional path by which a labourer could raise himself to the status of a small businessman; Barbara Kerr has given a historical account of this practice in the area.³

³Kerr, Bound to the Soil, p. 57.

The idea of a milk-round was not new; my informant Sam Legg remembered riding on the horse-drawn float which carried two churns from which milk was dipped by measures into the jugs of Bridport housewives about the year 1910. Les, however, was quick to see the possibility of extra sales to the summer visitors who were coming to Chideock and Seatown in increasing numbers each year. He drove a van from which he delivered milk in bottles to houses throughout the parish of Chideock and to the camping ground at Seatown. To further capitalise on the tourist trade he set up a cafe on the cliff at Seatown and turned the front room of his cottage in Chideock into a milk bar. Later he ran a general shop on the caravan and camping site that had been developed at Seatown. His ventures prospered and he was able to buy about an acre of land behind his cottage on which he built two bungalows; he now lives in the larger one and lets the other.

His success in responding to the new circumstances in which the south-western counties of England, after having been largely dependent on farming and fishing, have become a holiday and retirement area, indicates his ability to modify his occupation and way of life. While most men of his age and experience in the traditional pattern of farm life would have been content, or would have resigned themselves, to stay on the farm, Les realised his ambition of becoming what he calls a "master-man"; he speaks with admiration of the knowledge and skill of George Young, the fisherman, who, as the professional among amateurs, was the "master-

man" on Seatown beach, and he desired the same independence for himself.

Although his new occupations bore no relation to the traditional crafts that he had learned he carried over many traditional attitudes concerning the way to work. He has said that on the farm "you didn't work with a clock round your neck," by which he meant that you were expected not to grumble at working overtime without extra payment. The girls who worked for him in his shop found this, to their cost, for he often kept the shop open long after its regular closing hour, if there was any extra trade to be got, and wheedled his assistants into staying late to help him. The value of observing a routine, which he had learnt while following the daily rhythms of feeding, cleaning, and milking, none of which could be omitted, was applied to his book-keeping which he did without fail at the end of each day no matter how late it was. He took the same pride in the accuracy of his accounts as he had taken in the neatness of his thatching, for both have a functional beauty in his eyes; he has kept all the neatly written account books from his milk-round which are a record of achievement to him like the prize cards from agricultural competitions which he keeps in the same cabinet.

He speaks of the small daily triumphs of his business life, such as making good deals, or persuading a tourist to buy something which she had no use for, with as much satisfaction as he talks of his boyhood escapades or his special skills. Such narratives are similar for they share the common theme of his own ingenuity in getting

his own way, overcoming an authority figure, or proving his ability to a doubtful critic; the interrelated themes and structures of his memorates are discussed in detail below. In summary it may be said that although he sometimes blames his over-exertion during his years in business for the present weakness of his heart, and claims to miss the good fellowship of farming life, his business success further increased his sense of having proved himself to be a remarkably talented person.

His illness with heart disease, which caused him to undergo a major operation in 1969, forced him to make another adaptation in his way of life by retiring at the early age of fifty-seven. After leaving hospital, however, he found that he was unable to accept inactivity, and, despite his age and inexperience, he applied to become a practical nurse at a mental hospital and was accepted. His decision to become a nurse, he said, was made as the result of his feeling that he should "put back into life something that I'd taken out." This idea may be compared with his belief that a farmer should be careful to replenish the goodness in the soil and thus pay back what he has taken from it in the form of crops.

He worked at the hospital for almost four years, often taking night duty, and drove the fifteen miles from Chideock to Axminster, where it was located, each day until the condition of his heart again forced him to be less active and he had to retire once more. While the salary that he earned as a nurse was not large, and although he already had an adequate income from his property and

investments, the habit of working and earning was strong in him and the job satisfied a personal need to feel productive and valued.

His duties at the hospital involved the general care of a ward of mentally disturbed men and boys; he had to wash and groom them, dispense medicines, and supervise every aspect of their daily lives. He has said that he found his years as a nurse to be the happiest and most satisfying of his life and he now wishes that he could continue and that he had started nursing earlier. He returns to the hospital about once a month to take patients out for walks; this is a purely voluntary action but it pleases him to know how eagerly his visits are awaited.

His adoption of nursing may be seen as the culmination of a trend in his behaviour toward community service which had begun with his willingness to stop and listen to the troubles of people on his milk-round and which expanded into a comprehensive sense of responsibility to care for the people of Chideock and his friends from his farming days throughout the district. Charming has a place in his creation of this sense of ministry. While Les would probably have developed his personal form of social service without being a charmer, and although charming is only one of many ways in which he helps people, his consciousness of his ability may serve him as a confirmation of his belief that, as an exceptional man, he has the power and responsibility to help others. The religious associations of charming seem to confirm him in his vocation; he feels that he is able to offer spiritual advice like a priest and to advise on medical

matters like a doctor. The gift of charming even allows him to outdo doctors since his cures can work more quickly and may succeed where theirs have failed.

Although Les marks the act of charming by a special type of speech and action it is essential that the entire context in which this special behaviour occurs should be described. It is not possible to distinguish moments in Les's social behaviour in which he ceases to perform in some way that is ultimately related to his desire to convince people of his wisdom, knowledge, and trustworthiness, all of which relate to the establishment of an image of complete probity which gives patients the necessary confidence, or faith, in his words when he predicts their cure. Therefore the following account of his social behaviour covers many more types of social relationship than that between charmer and patient because of the premise that his social behaviour is a consistent whole in which each activity is related to another.

The Pastoral Visit

The most salient feature of Les's social life is his establishment of a pattern of house-visiting in which he calls on his friends, accepts a cup of tea, and settles down to chat with them for an hour or perhaps a whole evening. The television set is turned off when he arrives in recognition that he is himself an entertainer. The conversation ranges over any topic of concern to his host or himself; he listens to their troubles and finds a similar therapeutic effect in talking of his own. His skill as a raconteur of memorates, jokes,

and anecdotes is used to direct the mood of the conversation so that he can be appropriately comic or serious. The community in which he visits is not confined to Chideock but includes the homes of all the friends that he has made during his years in west Dorset for he boasts never to forget a friend.

His habit of visiting people in their homes began in childhood and was reinforced through his employment in occupations which involved selling to people at their doors until it is now a regular part of his behaviour and is probably his greatest pleasure. As a boy at Alderton he had made himself as much at home in his grandfather's house as in his own even after his parents had returned to the village and he no longer had to board with his grandparents. He also visited "old man Olborough," a Baptist preacher, who had a rocking chair which fascinated Les as a boy, and who read the Bible to him on Sundays. In his teens Les became "a constant visitor" in the home of Len Greenwood, the amateur actor and musician. The blending of didacticism and entertainment in Les's social conversation may owe something to the influence of these men.

His job at Mortimer's farm in Alderton included accompanying the farmer to the surrounding villages and helping him to sell meat which had been butchered at the farm. Les's ability to "flannel," meaning to persuade through a mixture of flattery and audacious lying, was sharpened through having to sell meat that was often unfit for human consumption. His humorous account of one such visit showed how well he succeeded in ingratiating himself with the housewives;

the daughter of the house "had an eye for" Les and her mother called out "Here's Les-lie!" coquettishly, as soon as he arrived, and invited him in for tea. Les was able to sell the mother her usual "hinge" -- the liver and lights of a pig -- which she used to make faggots, in spite of the fact that the meat was "dark" as the pig had died of a chill; Les lied adroitly: "One of the healthiest pigs at Townsend Farm, he is," he said. There is a paradox here, of which he is probably unaware, in that while he wishes to present himself as being completely trustworthy, and stresses honesty as a principle of the farming community, he nevertheless delights in the personal triumph of being able to trick people. His persuasive manner has made him a successful salesman in all his business ventures.

It was on his milk-round, which he began in 1952 and continued for fourteen years until 1966, that he seems to have developed his sense of pastoral care for the residents of Chideock. His concern at finding that an elderly customer had not collected a previous delivery of milk from her doorstep always caused him to interrupt his round while he made sure that she was alright. He soon became aware that his visits with the milk were being looked forward to by many people who would otherwise have been lonely; they discussed their personal problems with him and he gave them his opinion and advice. I have already quoted his remark that "in this modern age there's more loneliness than ever was known."

His behaviour on the milk-round has been described for me by Ruth Newson who worked with him on the round for three years. She

recalled that he would turn to her before they went into a house and say, "Can you force yourself to take another cup of tea?" for they would have taken several already at previous houses, and they would go inside and listen to the person's troubles. Ruth was surprised at the extent to which people confided what she felt were intimate personal affairs -- "all their family history" -- with a lack of reserve such as she has never experienced before or since her work with Les on the milk-round. She found him to be "very perceptive"; he could always tell if something was troubling her.

Les continues to visit people in his capacity as a hair-dresser; he notes with satisfaction that he has made good use of the skill he learned during the eight months as a barber's apprentice with which he began his working life. With the elderly men this sometimes takes on the character of nursing for he cuts their toenails and ensures that they are keeping themselves clean besides shaving them and cutting their hair. Such visits also become occasions on which he can offer personal advice and the conversation, as Les speaks of it later, often turns on philosophical matters such as the acceptance of death. Les is not always the teacher in such exchanges, however, for he talks of the example that has been set for him by some of the old men that he has known. Their wise or humorous sayings often provide him with matter for conversation in subsequent visits to other people; his conversation thus becomes a channel through which conventional wisdom circulates within the community. He described one old man's tenacity in insisting on trying to shave himself although

he could hardly hold the razor; Les admired his courage in the face of his approaching death:

And he said to me, he said to me one night, "Ah, shan't bother thee much more, boy." And he didn't. See, he died as he lived, absolutely fearless. Yeah, I think it's wonderful.⁴

Together with the satisfaction that he takes in helping someone Les also enjoys the feeling of insight into human nature which such visits give him; such an interest in character, and the quality of being "kind and considerate," have already been noted among the traits which he considers to be necessary in the behaviour of a charmer. Although he receives payment for hairdressing⁴ his profit, considering the distance he may drive to some outlying farm, is negligible and plays no real part in his motivation.

His other parochial responsibilities, as a parish councillor, as local secretary of the National Union of Farm Workers, and as president of the Chideock Players, the amateur dramatic society, also cause him to make frequent visits to people in the village. Matters of business, however, are often only a pretext which he uses to gain an opportunity to talk to a person who, he thinks, may need his help.

There are some traditional precedents for his pattern of house-visiting as a healer and counsellor. Olive Knott's description of Mother Herne's practice of visiting the homes of the wealthy "to cure their ailments and give them advice when in trouble" has already

⁴ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

been cited in the introductory chapter. In most communities there were, and there sometimes remain, people who consider it their responsibility to visit the sick and sit up with the dying. Jack Lawley mentions that in the Blackmoor Vale in west Dorset during the 1920's "if anyone was ill or dying, the women of the village were always ready to sit up at night with anyone."⁵ The care of the sick and the dying has now been delegated to trained medical staff and the treatment of the corpse has been consigned to undertakers; consequently a feeling exists, which Les recognises, that for a lay person to want to assist at such times is somehow "morbid." Les disagrees; his mother often sat up with the dying and he is proud to be able to help in the same way.

It is probably the "bedside manner" of doctor and priest, however, that has provided the essential model on which he has patterned his behaviour during his visits to those who are ill or who need his advice. His first experience of the solicitous kindness which a good clergyman could give in a time of stress came with the sequence of deaths in his family in which his mother, grandparents, and one of his uncles died within the space of two years; Les speaks of the Reverend Perry at Alderton with admiration and affection. At about the same time, in his late teens, he was called on for the first time to console and cheer someone who was not a member of his family. The wife of Len Greenwood, the actor who became a friend and mentor to Les,

⁵ Lawley, Memories of a Herdsman, p. 21.

fell ill and had to be treated in hospital on three occasions; her husband was always afraid that she would not return. Mrs. Greenwood turned to Les for help; she told him that he had "marvellous faith," for he never doubted that she would recover, and she asked him to "console" Len who would be despondent after taking her to hospital.

In later life he gained further experience of the effects of a patient's faith in promoting recovery; he gave the following account of an old man's survival at a time when he had been expected to die:

And he had an attack where he was so weak that when I used to go up to shave him, you know, Martin, this is gospel, I used to hold him up like that in my arms. I have to put my hand under him, like that, holding him up, to shave him like that. Because he didn't have the strength to hold his head up. And old Dr. Stanfield was his doctor, and he had great faith in two people, and that was Dr. Stanfield and old Father Budd. And yet old Father Budd used to treat him dreadful, really.⁶

Les did not explain what he meant by Father Budd's ill-treatment of his parishioner; his implication, however, seems to be that he provided better care than did the priest. A further example of his criticism of the Roman Catholic faith for its relative unconcern for bodily as opposed to spiritual health is given later in the chapter. The old man was taken to hospital where, when it seemed that he would not live through the night, Les was sent for:

Georgie was lying in bed, he looked just like a bag of bones really. And he looked at me, he

⁶ Recorded interview, January 12, 1975, Bridport.

said, "Hello, Les, sure I know what you've come in for. You think I'm dying," he said, "but Georgie isn't doing to die," he said, "Father Budd said I'm not going to die," he said, "and Dr. Stanfield said I'm not going to die. So," he said, "Leslie, you'll be coming in a few weeks from now and you'll be taking Georgie home." And he was dead right.

Another proof of what he has come to define as "the power of the mind over the body" occurred when he watched his father-in-law's recovery from the paralysis caused by a stroke which he suffered at the age of eighty-four. Les's account of the part which the doctor played in assuring Stubbs that he would get better suggests that he has taken the doctor's example to heart and has adopted it in his own practice:

He was, ahm, what can I say, resigned to the fact that he'd had it, and his words were, "Throw me down there, boys, this is it." Now he'd given up hope, he'd lost the use of his legs, he couldn't walk at all, absolutely useless. But anyway, the next day, look, not to be beat, he come downstairs on his backside, and when he got to the bottom of the stairs he couldn't stand, but he slipped out of bed and he come downstairs in his bloomin' pyjamas, on his backside, what d'you think of that? Doctor Miller, you know, wonderful man, dead and gone now -- now we got him down the front room, got his bed downstairs, and got Dr. Miller to come -- and Dr. Miller said, "What's the matter with you then, my dear old friend?" You know how he was, Dr. Miller. "Oh," he said, "Doctor, I've had it." "No," he said, "you haven't," he said, "my old friend." He said, "I'll have you walking again, never fear."

Now the very fact, look, that he had a lot of faith in Dr. Miller, the very fact that Dr. Miller said, "I'll have you walking again," was good enough for Pop. And he had him walking again, and he lived for another seven years. Now, I say a person with a lot less faith than Pop would have died. It's a fact, although he was a tough old nut. He had a great faith in lots of things. [F.H.L.: But he needed that faith

implanted in him.] That's exactly, he wanted just someone to say: "This is what's going to happen to you look." This is it.⁷

Les's description of the doctor's hearty, reassuring, and familiar manner precisely matches his accounts of the tone which he adopts for himself when he visits sick people; examples of his bedside manner are given below. The doctor's role in inspiring confidence and resolving anxiety by saying "This is what's going to happen to you," corresponds with Les's behaviour in the act of charming where he makes a prediction of a cure. Both the doctor and the charmer take the weight of anxiety from the shoulders of their patient.

Les's projection of a deliberately created persona is apparent in the style of his visits to those he wishes to help. He is extremely self-aware at these times and very conscious of the effect that his personality is having on them. His knowledge of the villagers' individual histories and characters, which he has gained during his long residence in the village and particularly during his years as a milkman, enables him to treat each one in the way in which he knows that they like to be treated. He is aware of all the nuances of social class which cause him to be deferential with one neighbour and familiar with the next. Offers of help are made with extreme tact, which often means apparent casualness, for many of the older residents, of whatever social class, are of an independent temperament and resent any implication that they need assistance.

⁷Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

Because he is not a stranger, or an official, however, but can present himself as an equal among his fellow villagers, he is successful in persuading them to co-operate with their doctors or welfare workers. His approach is cheerful, witty, and playful as his following account of a visit to an old woman shows; it has been necessary to reconstruct his narrative from written notes since I do not wish to give the impression that I was taking a prying interest into the lives of the people he visits.⁸

Les opens the door and walks straight inside announcing himself as he enters, for among the older population of the village he is expected to continue in this older pattern of entry, and an old lady might call down the stairs: "What d' 'ee want?" Les would reply, in a bantering tone: "You're upstairs, rubbing up they five-pound notes." "Get on with thy rubbish," she would say as she came down, "thee be always saying something or other." After asking after her health, her family, and listening to anything which seemed to be troubling her, he would offer his help: "Any time of the day or night -- any weather -- ring my number." He would offer to take her to Bridport, three miles away, in his car, if she wanted to go shopping or to visit the doctor, but she might still decline: "I don't think I shall bother 'ee," and so he would not press her,

⁸ While he speaks no scandal and does not reveal confidences when he tells of these visits within my family I feel that he would be inhibited, and I would be embarrassed, were I to use a tape recorder to make a verbatim and unselective record of his comments about people.

knowing perhaps that she has a daughter who takes good care of her:

"'Er's a good maid," she would say.⁹

He contrasted his manner of handling such an interview with that of one of the members of the Chideock Care Committee which is a group of middle-class newcomers to the village who try to provide a similar kind of benevolent attention to the elderly. Recalling the old lady, Les said: "Now, if she said, 'What d' 'ee want?' to old MacDougall, he'd think she was being rude -- I don't." The newcomers, in his view, do not possess the necessary tact or understanding to deal with the people that they are trying to help. They are liable to seem patronising to the villagers of the lower class and presumptuous to those of the upper; Les, however, who can be all things to all men, has the confidence of the original villagers of all social classes.

He stresses his confidentiality to those he counsels and is often able to persuade them to tell him what may be secretly troubling them; he induced one old lady to tell him of her poor financial circumstances and he was then able to make an application for her to receive help from various welfare organisations. Les's help is acceptable where an official social worker's might not be.

Les's imitation of a doctor's manner has been refined as a result of his nursing experience. His style of taking the pulse and enquiring about the type of drugs that a patient is receiving,

⁹ Notes, February 4, 1975, Bridport.

from which he makes his own prognosis, is shown in his account of a visit to a woman who had recently suffered a heart attack; the narrative was told to illustrate his belief that there can be "humour even in sad things" since the point of the story lay in the comedy of her husband's blunt reaction to Les's advice that they employ a woman to help in the house. Les walked in, in the traditional manner without knocking, and gave his usual bantering greeting:

I went round the back, walked straight in, I said,
 "Where are you, then, dear? Chasing about anywhere?"
 You know. So I go in there, she's sitting in a chair
 and she's done. I said, "Hello, my dear, how are you?"¹⁰

He went on to tell her that she should never have tried to go to Mass as she had on a cold morning for this had caused her attack; he commented in an excursus on what he sees as the folly of Roman Catholics in believing it to be imperative that they attend Mass; the local priest "has a lot to learn," he said, implying perhaps, as I have previously suggested, that Les feels that he takes better care of the parishioners than the priest does. Les went on to flatter her about her appearance:

I said, "How old are you, then, love? Sixty-two?"
 -- I'm being kind to her, mind, very kind to her
 -- "Oh no," she said, "Les, I'm sixty-nine." "I
 thought you were sixty-two." I didn't want to hurt
 her feelings more than I can help, see dear. And
 I said, "D' you mind if I just take your pulse a
 minute?" She said, "Alright." [He acted out the
 motions of taking her pulse while his face took on an
 expression of comic dismay.] And I looked at her,
 you know, and smiled and I said, "D' you know your

¹⁰ Recorded interview, January 28, 1975.

pulse is normal?" She said, "That's what the doctor said." I said, "That's right, he's a truthful chap." But what I didn't tell her was that I heard "Bump, bump." [That] told me her heart's in a bad state.

His own act of diagnosis was followed by an enquiry into the range of medications which she was taking. His years as a nurse, and his own ill-health, have given him some familiarity with the properties of drugs and he prides himself on being able to tell the probable condition of the patient from this evidence; he recently bought a medical text on the subject of drugs. Although her medication showed him that her condition was grave he made light of it to her: "I said, 'Oh, yeah, they're good for you dear. Yeah, you'll be a different woman in a day or two.'"

He suggested that she have her bed moved downstairs and found that the doctor had already tried to persuade her to this but had given up trying when she seemed adamant against it; Les added his own persuasion which may have had more effect. She told him that she worried that the house would get dirty as she was unable to do her usual cleaning; again he flattered her on the neatness with which the house is always kept. Les then made his own suggestions which caused her previously-silent husband to speak out:

So I said, "Look dear, when you find that you want some help, why don't you let me know, love, and I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll see if I can't get in touch with the health and welfare people, get you a home-help. Get somebody [to] come in." And George spoke up, he said, "I don't want none other bloody woman in yer," he said, much as to say, "I shall do it myself."

George's words seemed significant and memorable to Les; his interest in telling of his visit in the form of a memorate shows the way he is fascinated by character and behaviour and encapsulates his observations in narratives which can then be used in his story repertory as examples of certain traits. The account of his visit also demonstrates his reassuring "bedside manner" and the way in which he has appointed himself as a paramedical worker in ensuring that the doctor's directions are being carried out. Likewise he acts as a social worker in offering to be the link between his parishioner and the official social welfare agencies.

He also counsels people who, while not being physically ill, may have some underlying anxiety which is distressing them. His advice is simple and stems directly from his own convictions as the following account shows:

I had a chap here this morning, Tom Green, works for Bradley [a building contractor] , now that bloke have worked for Bradley's ever since he left school, and a hell of a worker, that boy. And Tom said to me, "Well," he said, "Les, I don't know." He said, "I'm fifty now. D'you know there's times when," he said, "I wonder what I've got," he said, "after all these years," he said, "of working." "Well," I said, "Tom, I shall just ask you one simple question. You give me an honest answer. Have you enjoyed working?" "Oh yes," he said, "There you are," I said, "well, what else do you want?" You see? I think the worst possible thing, and, 'course, it applied in lots of cases years ago, and it do now I'm sure, not quite so much now, I think there's more choice now, the worst possible thing I think is for any man, or anyone, to be doing a job they hate. Because their life has been wasted. You should enjoy your work.¹¹

His counsel is designed to end doubt and anxiety at a stroke.

¹¹ Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

He is sure of his ability to tell if a person is troubled and he may be able to tell them the cause of their worry before they reveal it. "You're a troubled man," he will say, for he believes that "a man's face is the mirror of the heart within." He listens to whatever they have to say and encourages them to unburden themselves with him; "I'm a sponge, I soak up troubles," he says.¹²

His counselling role is not restricted to older villagers for he has also gained the confidence of some adolescents who have talked with him of their problems with school, love, and their general purpose and direction in life. While giving driving lessons to a teenaged girl he divined that her inattention was due to a quarrel with a boyfriend and his perceptiveness enabled her to relieve her preoccupation through discussing her problems with him. One of the nurses in the hospital frequently sought Les's advice:

And then she brings her boyfriend -- he visits her in the hospital -- and she said to me next day: "What d'you think of my boyfriend, Les?" [Pause] "No comment." "Come on, Les, you tell me honestly, right?" "He isn't going to be the right one for you, you know." "Why not?" "Well, so-and-so and so-and-so, you see." And¹³ in the end she say: "Well, Les, I've chucked him up."

His interest in helping young people may be partly due to his own childless marriage. Another cause lies in his aspiration to imitate his grandfather's wisdom and to follow in his role of the older man who is able to train a younger in practical skills and moral

¹²Notes, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

¹³Recorded interview, January 12, 1975, Bridport.

principles. He talks with affection of a number of boys who have worked for him, on the farm, on his milk-round, and around his own property, and he always shows his delight in having been able to teach them something.

He developed a close friendship with Rod Newson, a youth from Chideock who spent a lot of time helping Les with some building work on his land; at the time Rod was disaffected with school and chose not to be inducted into the middle-class routine of going to college or university but went to work as a labourer. Les seems to have acted as a conciliator between the boy and his parents; Rod's mother said that Les had assured her that Rod would "come out alright" at this time in his adolescence when she was very worried about him. Les had told her that "the Rods of this world need my help," and she is grateful for the advice which he gave to her son.

It is also of interest that Les has told her that Rod was the only person that he has ever thought of passing his knowledge of charming to. Rod, like Les, and Frank Stubbs, is capable of the same uncompromising dogmatism in asserting anything of which he is convinced. This indicates that he has the same quality of temperament which in Les's case is applied to faith in charming. Rod is also a believer in the existence of the supernatural and, like Les, is concerned when people "dabble" in what he considers to be dangerous matters; he will leave the room if anyone starts to play with a Ouija board. His mother feels that he has "a very real sense of a struggle in the world between good and evil."¹⁴

¹⁴Notes, January 11, 1975, Bridport.

Les also gives advice on business; those he advises are, typically, small tradesmen, such as his brother, who runs two dress shops, and local craftsmen. A mason's wife told me that Les and her husband had stayed up until past one o'clock one night in talking over the mason's business worries.

He gives warnings about the credit worthiness of potential customers of these craftsmen. A thatcher consults him regularly as to whether those who have asked him to thatch for them can be trusted to pay their bill. Les "drops a word here" and listens to the response as he sounds the opinion of others in the village concerning the reputation of the potential client; he advises against dealing with those that he mistrusts.

Les stakes his own prestige on these personal judgements and draws his sense of authority from a consciousness of his own good reputation. This can be seen in his report of the way in which he spoke his mind to a man who had broken a gentleman's agreement with him:

I did tell him this much, I said, "I tell you, Mr. Bristow, without fear of contradiction, I've been in this village longer than you. My personality and my standing in this village will outstay you any day. And," I said, "what you've done to me will boomerang back on you, eventually." And it will, and it will.¹⁵

He would advise anyone who asked him that this man was not trustworthy:

If anyone said to me, "Well, now look, I'm going to have some dealings with Mr. Bristow, Les, now

¹⁵Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

what do you think?" I would in all honesty say, "Well, [pause] most people think he's OK, but I don't. And that 'd be that. And this is principle.

A more dramatic example of his self-appointed status as a helper in practical matters occurred when a young farmer whom Les often visits hired a gang of itinerant workers to paint his barn. The men did a shoddy job and then threatened the farmer with violence if he refused to pay the price that they demanded. The farmer telephoned Les and asked for his advice; Les went to the farm on the following morning when the men were to return to collect their money, or, as they said, to beat it out of the farmer. Les alerted the police to be ready to come should violence occur and then strutted boldly up to the biggest of the painters and poked him in the chest with his index finger saying that the police were on their way and that they had better be satisfied with the farmer's terms. The men, he said, took him for a lawyer and abruptly capitulated and ran.

My account of this event is taken from Les's own version. He retold it several times in my presence, in some cases while warning other farmers to beware of these men, and its basic features remained constant; the strutting walk, which is natural to him, and the gestures, were probably exaggerated for comic effect as was the frightened and contrite response of the villains.

The Function of Storytelling

In remembering his boyhood ambition to join Len Greenwood's troupe of amateur entertainers Les has said that he had "always had the ability to make another person laugh, either by pulling a funny

face or saying something." His use of this ability is the primary characteristic of his house-visits and the examination of his public persona as a healer would be incomplete without a consideration of his performance as an entertainer. While he could have been successful as a charmer, as Frank Stubbs was, without being an actor and a storyteller Les has used his ability to make people forget their troubles through laughter and thus to induce a receptive mood for his advice and healing methods.

There are several vital links between his practice as a healer and as an entertainer. His reputation as an amusing storyteller makes him welcome in the houses that he visits; "you be always saying something," said an old lady, as mentioned above, in recognition and mock disapproval of his constant badinage. Without this ability to entertain he would probably be far less successful in gaining entry to so many homes and thus in being able to offer his philosophical and practical counsel. A converse also applies, which makes this a reciprocal relationship, for his "patients" are also his "audience" and it may be that without the satisfaction that he gains through being able to play to them, receiving the warmth and approval of their laughter, he would find much less reward in continuing in his role as a healer.

He makes conscious use of his talent for making people laugh as he considers that the alleviation of worry, over physical or spiritual ailments, can be achieved through laughter and that this will help to promote recovery. The content of his stories also tends to

affirm feelings of unity between himself and his audience as being members of a community who share beliefs and values; this, in itself, tends to have a reassuring effect on those who are disconcerted at having been removed by illness from their usual participation in community life. Those who are threatened by death face the prospect of the ultimate exclusion from their community and thus have an even stronger need of the affirmation of communion which is expressed in his stories.

Since he is the hero of so much of his narrative material it becomes a testimony to his personal ability; whether the stories describe his clever outwitting of some childhood authority figure, or his exercise of exceptional skill in some craft, their effect is to increase their listeners' respect for his personal competence, authority, and probity. He presents himself as "the man who knows" and who does not boast without being able to "back it up." The culmination of this style of storytelling, which can manipulate the emotions and responses of his audience, or patients, occurs in the effect of his stories of his success in charming.

These accounts of charming have become formalised through retelling and, perhaps, because they have been found to function well in their particular form. Their purpose is to convince potential patients of the effectiveness of charming and thus to induce in them a receptive attitude towards the ministrations that he will make. This, essentially, is his verbal assurance that he can and will cure their complaint. Not only do the stories prepare

an attitude of faith but they also inform the patient of the institutionalised procedure which he must follow, such as the need to make a definite request for the charmer's help and the prohibition of payment, and this establishment of a normal procedure helps the patient who follows it to feel that there is a means of dealing with the problem of his illness and that, by following the rules of the relationship with the charmer, he has regained control in an uncertain situation and can progress towards recovery.

With the exception of his accounts of charming, which are discussed separately below, Les's stories are almost exclusively humorous. This seems to be an indication of their function of providing therapeutic entertainment. Many of the narratives are memorates concerning his acts of comic mischief as a boy. Another large group consists of memorates and anecdotes of the sayings and behaviour of local characters. A third, and comparatively smaller, group of stories are humorous anecdotes of wide currency in folk tradition.

The butts of his humour remain the same throughout the different types of stories. The comic discomfiture of figures of authority, and those with pretensions to superiority, is their most common subject. Clergymen, "toffs," meaning the town and country gentry, and townsmen who are ignorant of the country are the usual targets. In many stories the apparently "simple," or stupid, countryman proves that he is more astute than he is thought to be and thus leads his antagonists to make fools of themselves through their

assumption of superiority. Les's memorates and anecdotes of local characters describe foolish behaviour while drunk, absurd ignorance and misunderstanding of orders, absent-mindedness, tricks and practical jokes, wise and foolish sayings, and eccentric behaviour. Notable by their absence from his repertory are jokes concerning sexual behaviour; this feature may be explained by the function of his narratives as entertainment material since they must be acceptable to a wide range of people. The central theme of knowledge and foolishness in these stories may be related to his preoccupation with maintaining a reputation for sapience.

Before turning to a closer description of the content and function of his narrative repertory, however, certain features of his style of performance are worth consideration since they remain relatively constant irrespective of the type of story that he is telling. His frequent interjection of the phrases "you know" and "you see" help to pace and punctuate his narration. They also reflect his assumption of a rhetorical stance in which, throughout the narration, he is asking his audience to agree with him; the phrases "you see" and "you know," on a level of covert meaning, imply either "do you understand?" or "we are in agreement," depending on their inflexion. The effect of their use is to incorporate the audience with him in his statement of the beliefs and values which he believes are held in common between them. This is also a part of a pose of reasonableness which he expresses through the phrase "what can I say?" which he uses while searching for a fair and apt

comparison or description. The air of measure and consideration which the phrase lends to his words helps to establish a claim to authority in his pronouncements.

Climaxes in his stories, whether they are memorates, legends, or jocular anecdotes, often take the form of a reconstructed dialogue in which a witty retort, an expression of praise, or a crushing argument is given by one of the speakers. This style of narration, in which significant clauses are punctuated and given point by the insertion of such phrases as "he said" and "I said" is extremely common but Les is a master in the art of delaying the climactic line until it can be delivered with its maximum effect.

The feeling of intimacy which he creates between himself and his listeners is also dependent on a number of non-verbal devices which he employs with equal facility; he may raise an eyebrow significantly after a phrase which was meant to be taken ironically or cock his head on one side to suggest his personal disbelief in something that he has just said. He acts the parts of the characters in his stories and this is most notable in his habit of sucking in his lower lip in an expression of sham bashfulness, or confusion, at times in a narrative when he describes himself as having been in an awkward situation in which he has had to scheme to get out. His facial expression is constantly animated. Although much of his narration is given while seated he sometimes stands to demonstrate some gesture. While sitting, however, he also makes expressive use of his hands to orchestrate the movement of his

narrative; he holds them partly outstretched before him for a few moments and then brings them together in a gesture like that of prayer, in which thumbs and fingers of each hand touch, at the climax of his story, before clasping them contentedly across his stomach as he enjoys the approval of his listeners which is usually expressed in laughter.

As a listener comes to know Les's characteristic story telling devices his response to the cues which Les provides, such as the audible intake of breath through his nose with which he signifies his own amusement at something which he is about to say, becomes sharper and the listener is prepared and eager to laugh at the comic line which he has been signalled to expect. The audience thus comes to participate with Les, encouraging him with expressions of assent and urging him to continue, so that story telling becomes a reciprocal activity in which the narrator and his audience fulfill complementary roles. A further analogy might be with a church service in which a priest and his congregation support each other in a series of calls and responses. In this way a sense of co-operation and communion is built up between Les and his audience, who may also be his patients, and the kind of trust which is necessary between a healer and his patients may be prepared for, to some extent, through the process of story telling in which the narrator and his audience learn to fulfill each other's expectations in a reciprocal relationship.

A large number of Les's traditional anecdotes concern clergymen or are in some way connected with church attendance. This

choice is almost certainly a response to the strictness with which Sunday was kept at his home village of Alderton and to his meeting, for the first time, when he moved to Chideock, with a large community of Roman Catholics; both circumstances have probably helped to make jokes about religion popular in his two villages. Stith Thompson has suggested causes for the general popularity of such stories:

In simple communities a clergyman is always a person of such outstanding respectability that if he is placed in an embarrassing position the very absurdity of the situation appeals to a sense of the ludicrous¹⁶ in every member of his or similar congregations.

Les was brought up to regard the vicar as a figure of great authority and so his enjoyment of the stories may be due to the pleasure of flouting a convention that was painfully observed in his childhood. Another personal reason for his taste may lie in his mildly hostile relationships with recent vicars of Chideock; one of them has angered him by comparing charming with witchcraft and the present incumbent, in Les's opinion, is charging undue burial fees to his parishioners. It seems possible that Les looks upon the vicar as a rival to his own assumption of a pastoral role in the community.

Making fun of the vicar, however, is essentially traditional; Les described the attitude of the people at Alderton: "Usually the old vicar in the village was always, ah, we'll say, someone to have a go at, yes." In illustration he told an anecdote of a vicar's attempt

¹⁶Stith Thompson, The Folktale (New York, 1946), p. 212.

to restore his dwindling congregation by working a sham miracle; a boy is hidden in the rafters above the pulpit with matches and paper which is to be lighted and thrown down when the vicar calls for fire to come down from Heaven. When the fire does not materialise after his three invocations the vicar calls again and is answered by the boy who replies: "'Sorry sir, the cat 'ave peed on the matches and they won't strike.'"

Other anecdotes characterise the vicar as being unworldly and unduly squeamish over profane language. His warnings of damnation as the consequence of swearing are not understood by those that he warns, who apply his words in other and ridiculous contexts; thus the tramp, who is reproved for swearing at the sole of his shoe, which he is trying to pull off because it has a protruding nail in it, misunderstands the vicar, who asks if he knows where his soul will go when he dies, and answers that it will go over the hedge when he can get it off. A similar story is that of the boy who, swearing at having dropped a coin into a drain, is warned by the vicar that "the Devil is down there," to which the boy replies: "'I know the bugger is, and he's got my shilling!'" In a further example of the literal application of the sermon a boy named Abraham reluctantly pulls a piece of bacon from his shirt when the parson declaims, "'Abraham, Abraham, take the unclean thing from thy bosom.'"¹⁷ An

¹⁷ See Ernest W. Baughman, Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America (The Hague, 1966), p. 372, under motif N 275.5.2*. for references to other versions of this traditional story. Appropriate general motifs for Les's other anecdotes concerning parsons are K 1970. Sham miracles, and X 435. The Boy applies the sermon, in Stith Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk Literature, III, 463, and V, 511.

anecdote that he tells against Roman Catholics describes St. Peter conducting a new arrival in heaven around its various rooms; St. Peter tells him to walk quietly past one room because "'that's where the Catholics are and they think they're the only ones up here.'"18

Another group of his traditional anecdotes are based on the popular stereotype of the rural worker as being slow-thinking and unsophisticated. The stories include traditional numskull traits such as the absurd ignorance of machinery displayed by the farm worker who, when told that he cannot take his donkey on the train with him, ties the animal to the last coach and then, as the train speeds along, complacently observes: "I'll lay old Neddy's stepping it out now." Other anecdotes mingle this simplicity with a certain kind of wit which Les defines as "craftiness" or "cunning"; hence the farm worker who has made his first trip to London and saw, at a theatre, a girl who was wearing nothing but a fig-leaf, says that he will go back to London in the fall of the year. A similar dry wit is shown by the farm worker who watches two city gentlemen fail to count a number of sheep; he tells them the number and when asked how he was able to count so quickly he replies that he counted their legs and divided by four. Les commented after telling this story that: "It goes to show, really, if you turn the story round the other way, that the countryman thought that they were dimwitted, you see. He was showing them, you know."

¹⁸ See Katharine M. Briggs and Ruth L. Tongue, Folktales of England (Chicago, 1965), p. 113, for another version of this story.

The best example from his repertory of a story that can be "turned the other way," to show the apparent fool as being clever in reality, is his version of the popular anecdote of the Wiltshire "Moonrakers":

These village lads, you see, was smuggling -- I think this happened near Portishead -- I'm not absolutely certain, anyway the story was this that, uhm, these Wiltshire lads was, they was smuggling whisky, they'd got a barrel of whisky. You see, stolen, 'cause 'twas smugglers you see. And on the way home with it they, uhm, were surprised by the police. And I think they used to call them [pause] there was another name for them, wasn't there? [M.J.L.: Preventives?] That's right, that's right. Yes, that's right. So they promptly threw it in the pond. And one had a rake, you see, and ahm, on the pond was a reflection of the moon, and they was all drunk you see, had a fair drop. And in their drunkenness, you see, they've still got this craftiness that the countryman always got. He's -- the countryman -- by nature, is cunning, because he's got to be, this is how he's had to be in the past. He's witty, and he's a little crafty. So they reacted very quickly. So I expect what happened was this: one said: "Yer, Garge, thee pretend to rake in the moon look." So he started reaching for the reflection of the moon on the pond, you see. So the old Excise man come up and he said, "What be thee doing here then?" "Garn," he said, "I be tryin' to get thic bliddy cheese out there." [M.J.L.: Laughs] And he was so-called raking in a cheese, you see, floating in the water. And the story was that the Excise man went on, seeing that they were three parts cut, thought they were daft, you know, and drunk, and didn't take any notice. And after they were gone they used the rake to pull the barrel of whisky out of the pond, small keg of whisky. That's the story to it. And it's a beautiful story. I think that's, and personally, knowing what I do about the countryside, not a bit far-fetched at all. [M.J.L.: Probably not.] Not a bit far-fetched.¹⁹

¹⁹ For literary versions of the story see: John Yonge Akerman, Wiltshire Tales (London, 1853), pp. 168-169, and Edward Slow, Wiltshire Rhymes (Salisbury and Wilton, n.d.), pp. 5-11.

His excursus, in the foregoing narrative, on the craftiness of the countryman, reflects his own interest in the rustic stereotype. The qualities of wit, cunning, craft, and quick reaction, are all exemplified in his own behaviour, as he likes to portray himself, in his comic memorates. He praises the countryman's ability to "poke fun at himself" but also preserves a sense of moderation which causes him to prefer to tell stories in which the countryman appears as a witty fool rather than as a mere dullard. An example of his taste occurred when his wife suggested that he tell me the story about "the old man who hid his money in the bank"; Les refused to tell this as he thought that it was "a little ridiculous." The story that was being referred to was probably one that has been recounted by Alfred Williams in which a man who is told to put his money in the bank scrapes a hole in a hedge bank and buries his money there.²⁰ Another of his criteria for stories, which would cause him to reject one as being "ridiculous," is that they should at least be probable or, preferably, be completely true. This preference is discussed in more detail below.

He noted that "the average Wiltshireman" is "pleased to hear you call him a 'Moonraker,'" and his comment helps to suggest the function of such stories in his repertory which seems to be the reinforcement of a sense of community between people of the older village population who feel unsettled by modern changes in the occupations and social structure of Chideock. The rustic stereotype is also a popular theme in anecdotes told by young people in the area; those who leave west Dorset for work or education in urban centres often become

²⁰Williams, A Wiltshire Village, p. 125.

active bearers of these anecdotes which are told to forestall their more hurtful use by strangers or to establish a sense of group-identity among people of their own background.

The seasonal influx of tourists and the retirement in the area of large numbers of "foreigners" from other parts of England who have "come from away" has changed patterns of social life in the villages and causes concern to the original residents. Les quoted, to two Marshwood Vale farmers, the complaints against the newcomers that had been made by one of the oldest inhabitants of Chideock:

He said to me one day, he said, "D' you know," he said, "Les. This village isn't like 'e was," he said, "boy." He said, "You do get these yer bloody foreigners come yer," he said, "and buy up these houses and twenty-thousand quid," he said. "You don't know the buggers," he said, "they might be bloody bank-robbers," he said, "for all we know." He said, "Thee dostn't know a thing about 'em." And how right he is. You don't, do 'ee?²¹

Although Les found the old man's criticism to be memorable for its amusing over-statement -- the newcomers are more often retired bank-managers than robbers -- he shares his opinion. The importance of "knowing" one's neighbours, in the sense of knowing their family history and their connections by marriage, by which their character and social standing is assessed, has been traditionally important and people are commonly defined as, for example, "her what married [spouse's name], lived over to [place name]." Udal quotes the following as a local proverb: "Better wed over the mixen than over the moor."²²

²¹Recorded interview, January 12, 1975, Marshwood Vale.

²²Udal, Dorsetshire Folk-lore, p. 296.

Les's own remarks show his resentment of attempts by newcomers to reorganise the village and, consequently, to dislodge him from his own position of authority as a parish councillor and prime mover in most of the village's activities:

You do get 'em come in and before you know what 've happened they want to be on the parish council, they want to be on every committee, they want to be yer there and everywhere. What the hell d' you know about them? You don't know nothing at all about them, do 'ee? [Assent from Bill and Jack Bere] See, and they don't know nothing about you, Bill. [Jack Bere: No, no, and they don't care.] No, they don't, Jack. But I tell you what, they d' get a hell of a shock 'st know, Jack, 'cause they d' come into a village, see, and they d' think we're daft, see, but they be the ones that's daft, 'st know, 'cause we put the skids under 'em many a day. Yeah, any day.

Les's repertory of traditional and local anecdotes of countrymen who have "led townsmen on" to think them stupid, but ultimately got the better of them, probably serve both to reinforce his own confidence in the face of challenges to his prominence in the village and also to amuse and console others who are equally worried by the physical and social changes which are occurring around them. Although this attempt to reassure the older inhabitants in the face of the radical alteration of their community is at the outer periphery of his role as a healer it is still an important indication of his sense of responsibility for them and of his desire to alleviate anxiety in whatever form it may appear.

Les is also fond of anecdotes which concern the unexpectedly wise sayings made by tramps and lunatics. These characters may be compared with his "countryman" figures as being generally derided by

the rest of society. In an anecdote of a lunatic which is broadly representative of this genre in his repertory a fox-hunting "toff" asks the "loony," who is looking over the asylum wall, whether he has seen the hounds go past:

He said, "I say, my man, have you seen the hounds go past here?" [imitates an upper-class accent] And the old Wiltshire bloke that's inside, you know, because he's a little bit dodgy up there, but he mightn't be, said, uh, "What's that thee said, sir?" "Have you seen the hounds go past here?" "Yer," he said, "thee dost'nt mean," he said, "all they horses," he said, "and all they men and women," he said, "and thic girt pack o' hounds," he said, "chasing thic one little fox, do 'ee?" "That's right, my man, that's right." "Yer," he said, "thee come on in yer along wi' I."²³

Elsewhere Les has said that he "marvels" at some of the wise and perceptive comments that he has heard from the patients at the mental hospital in which he worked; at the same time, however, he gives comic accounts of practical jokes which he and other nurses played on them so that his attitude seems to be a mixture of amusement and sympathy. Again, as with his pleasure at his trickery in selling bad meat, this paradoxical combination of attitudes does not seem incongruous to him, or to his audiences; Les, like anyone else, can enjoy occasional lapses from perfect virtue.

He holds a similar view of tramps: while they offend his principles of self-help and private enterprise through what he sees as their laziness he is also attracted by their impudence and apparently

²³ Recorded interview, February 2, 1975, Bridport.

untroubled life. He has written a short comic sketch entitled "The Barrister and the Tramp" in which an Irish tramp describes the tricks of his trade, such as wearing old clothes to incite compassion, and claiming to be too ill to work. The tramp describes such arts as being "tactful," which is Les's usual term for the blandishment which he practices himself, and, in another phrase which is reminiscent of Les's nostalgia for his childhood, the tramp says: "I like a free life, like the birds, go and come as I please." Les has remarked that there is a good deal of himself in the portrait of the tramp, though, in reality, he is far less free from worry.

Les took the part of the tramp when the sketch was performed by the Chideock Players and the role of the cheerful tramp, who visits the lonely barrister and cheers him with his stream of witty and philosophical reflections on the pleasure of a life that is carefree, seems to correspond with the style of his own visits to people in the village. The tramp observes, sagely, that some people worry because they have too little and others worry because they have too much. In reality, Les retains the habitual concern over personal wealth which he identifies as being a bad trait of his father's family; during the summer of 1974 he became physically ill through worrying over a business transaction. In counselling others to forget their troubles he is, therefore, applying the same therapy to himself and is trying to reconcile his concern for financial security with the more relaxed attitude which is necessary for his health.

Although he has a number of traditional stories in his repertory by far the greater number are original; he is constantly

noticing incidents, and remembering people's sayings, which can be elaborated into narratives. His talent for story making was shown even in boyhood; he remembers having gone on stage at a village entertainment in Alderton, to cover up some accidental halt in the show, and having given an impromptu comic story which was based on an adventure which he and another boy had fallen into while selling tickets for the show. He made the other boy the comic butt of the story, which later caused them to fight, but Les had never considered that the other might have been offended by it.

His observation and insight is usually subtle and he takes pride in being able to see significant, or humorous, aspects of situations which others, and especially "strangers" or those who are unfamiliar with what he sees as being the distinct world of "the countryside," would be unable to perceive. The following account typifies his method of creating a story of a commonplace incident:

But the little thing that I was going to say was . . . I overheard a conversation. It was three fellows in the barn right opposite my car. It was lovely you know really. One said, "Yer George, hast thee ever tried Sutton's Eight Weeks?" "No, I 'en't tried they," he said. "Well thee 'st want to try some. They be very good; my missus said that's the best tasting cabbage ever 'er 'ad." And t' other said, "Well what do 'st thee think about it. That's what matters." [chuckles] See, he meant to say his missus 'd tell him anything. And I, I read into this, you know, a wonderful story really. And they were just talking about cabbages. But to me that was something really good. He said, "Ah, but," he said, "it's all right for thy missus," he said, "but what do 'st thee think about it?" Much as to say, well, 'course his missus can tell 'n anything, see? say, "G'on eat 'em up they be beautiful; best I've tasted." So he wanted to know what he thought of it, see, and what his opinion [laughs]. I

thought that was great. Yeah. Some of these little things, you know, mean I think a terrific lot to us that would be so casual perhaps to a [stranger], mean nothing perhaps.

This imaginative grasp of the implications of a situation or of a chance remark is the result of his frequently-stated interest in character and behaviour. His imaginative ability may also suggest his possession of the kind of perceptive sympathy which makes him successful in diagnosing the problems of others and being able to discuss them. In the example given the humour is traditional, being based on the theme of the shrewish wife, so that the audience can readily laugh with him, but it is also the subtlety of the insight which is of value to him. He repeats the significant line to ensure that his audience has grasped the point and also to savour its humour. By telling stories of this type, in which the humour is understated, he is able to create a sense of unity between himself and his audience; they are incorporated with him by his confidential manner of speaking and are made to feel privileged by his sharing with them of the kinds of insight which, he says, outsiders would not understand.

To understand the function of his narratives it is necessary to describe the way in which he deploys them in the context of his conversation. Les normally monopolises the flow of conversation which he begins as soon as he enters the house and continues unabated until he leaves. He applies a definite structure to his discourse for each conversation revolves around a limited number of themes, perhaps two or three during the course of a visit, which are generally shaped by his reflections on some recent happening in his own life or in the village.

His themes are, therefore, varied by circumstance but many recur because of his constant interest in them; thus, in the course of a conversation, he may revert to his regret at the passing of an old person and the need for a resigned and cheerful attitude towards death, or he may return to the theme of money as being only "a means to an end" and to the advice that everyone should try, as he has done, to "live life to the full." His narratives may have some bearing on these themes and he employs them as "examples" which support his opinions: "Let me tell you a little story that will just prove my point," is a typical introduction.

The words "little story" provide a formulaic announcement to the audience of the beginning of a narrative. They are therefore signalled to pay particular attention, not to interrupt as they might during normal conversation, and, in general, to expect a story which will at least contain humorous aspects if it is not an outright jocular anecdote. The term "little story," however, does not indicate the length or the type of the narrative which is to be told; it is rather a term which he applies in a spirit of sham humility as though he were asking the audience for their indulgence in listening to his sketch of some incident.

Although the term, in his usage, makes no implication as to the truth or falsehood of what is to follow he may apply other validative devices or disclaimers either at the start or throughout the narrative. Since the same claims to truth are made by tellers of tall tales, who also seek initial credence, it is often difficult, in the

case of Les's humorous anecdotes, such as that of the lunatic and the huntsman mentioned above, to determine whether his assertions of the truth of the story are made in genuine belief or are a means of heightening the comic effect. In introducing this anecdote he called it:

. . . a lovely little story that is supposed to be so true, that happened in Wiltshire many years ago and, ah, the place where it took place was a place near Roundham [Roundway?] in Devizes where they've got a very big mental hospital, they call it now, but in those days they called it an asylum.

His statement of a precise location is usually an indication that he believes a narrative to be true and his less exact statement of the time of the event, "many years ago," may also be used of true stories and is used generally by him in talking of his childhood or of his life on the farm in early manhood. He often cites the names of others who witnessed, or who knew of, the true events which he describes and invites his listeners to seek their confirmation of his account; if a witness is dead he may offer the location of their burial place as though this could corroborate his story. In effect he is swearing to the truth of his story on the bones of the dead. This invocation of a witness occurs at the crucial moments in a story at which he demands the complete credence of his listeners; thus he substantiated farmer Ryall's praise of his thatching as follows;

And Harry, poor old Ernie Ryall who's lying dead,
lying in our cemetery at Chideock, said to me:
"Leslie, if I didn't know, I wouldn't have known
. . . where Jim had left off and you'd a-started."

Les is also careful to be correct in giving the names of the people who figure, even peripherally, in his true stories; he will often

delay the progress of his narrative to what may seem to his audience to be an unnecessary degree while he tries to remember a person's name. This seems to be a traditional feature of style in the telling of memorates and legends for George Bourne has recorded Bettsworth's similar preoccupation with getting a name right: "'Twas up there where that man lives -- what's his name, sir? Up there at top o' Long Heath Lane! Is it Morris or Morrison?"²⁴ A reputation for speaking the truth is particularly important to him in establishing his credibility as a charmer but his concern for literal accuracy is also a traditional attitude toward story telling.

Les has a definite preference for those narratives which relate true incidents involving people who were known to him personally or by local repute. This choice is related to the pleasure that he finds in sharing such reminiscences with others who remember either the story or the event itself; he pointed this out in response to a question as to whether he preferred those stories which he knew to be true or those which were not based on verifiable local happenings; he said:

Oh yes, I love the ones that's true best, because, you see, [pause] how difficult it would be to convince people in twenty years from now that that story was true. [He is referring to a story of how the local character, Jimmy Ewlins, had, in pretended simplicity, demanded a pair of boots in a shop owned by Boots, a well-known English firm of chemists, and had ultimately been served with them.] You see, if you doubted my word, Martin, I can take you back to Wiltshire now, because it's not too late, and I can take

²⁴Bourne, The Bettsworth Book, p. 72.

you into the old Plough Inn at Littleton Drew and I'll see old George Flint, and I'll say to George, "Here, d' you remember Jimmy Ewlins? D' you remember Jimmy Ewlins when the bloke from Bristol said he could tell him, uh, if he had a fowl's egg, whether it would be a cockerel or a hen?" [He tells this story in which Ewlins is tricked by being asked to hold an egg between his teeth, having been told that the sex of the embryo could be told by the reflection which the egg cast on the roof of his mouth. The trickster gives him a sharp blow under the chin which breaks the egg and causes its yolk to dribble down his chin and over his prized waistcoat.] And d' you know, when I was up there [in Wiltshire] in August, I mentioned this to poor old George Flint, [he] said, "I remember it," he said, "Les, when it happened." And that was forty-odd years ago.

The pleasure of a shared recollection of the foibles of particular individuals seems to be a major part of the enjoyment of such anecdotes by Les and those others who also know the protagonists.

This is a traditional feature of this kind of storytelling;

H.J. Massingham has noted that "the older men . . . tenaciously cherish the humours of their fellows until almost the stories assume the durability of folk-tales," and Hugh Barrett has recorded the experience of listening to five men tell the same story, one after the other, with each man contributing some fresh slant or detail.²⁶ The same manner of storytelling in a round, with each of the narrators giving his own account of the same event, occurred during a visit which Les and I paid to a Marshwood Vale farmer who has known Les ever since he worked for Jim Pope on the adjoining farm some thirty years ago. Six men arranged themselves standing in a rough circle around the

²⁵Recorded interview, January 28, 1975, Bridport.

²⁶Massingham, Wold Without End, p. 71; Barrett, Early to Rise, pp. 135-136.

room, the cider house, in which we were talking and drinking in turn from a glass of cider which was being passed round the room in the direction of the sun. Les and the two farmers, Bill and Jack Bere, told of the same occasion on which Jim Pope came to the farm to play cards, upon which the evening developed into a drinking contest from which Pope went home very drunk.

Les began the series of episodes by telling how Pope did not arrive for milking on the morning after the card-game. Pope's mother told Les that he had fallen in the river on the way home on the previous night. This detail caused the others to remember the sequence of events which Les was introducing and, when Les reached the point in his narrative when Pope stumbled into a garden on his way home, Bill Bere showed that he wished to take up the story and Les relinquished the narration to him; Bill had said: "I can come in there," and Les replied, "Yeah, go on Bill." Bill told of how Pope had come to their house and asked to join their game. As Bill said this his brother Jack interrupted to add the detail that Pope was already drunk when he arrived; "That was the story," he said, emphasising the word "story" in a way that suggested their common concern for accuracy in repeating the history of the event. The narrative line passed back and forth between the two brothers with each adding separate details of the progress of the card-game and Pope's intoxication. Les attempted to conclude the story in the momentary pause after a prolonged burst of laughter but withheld his contribution when he saw that Bill had more to say. When Bill mentioned Pope's lantern, which he was going to use

to light his way homeward, however, Les quickly interjected "I'll tell 'ee a bit about 'e in a minute," as though he were staking a claim to narrate that particular part of the story which was to come; Les became noticeably restive while the other narrators held the floor. Both Jack and Les confirmed Bill's account of how Pope had got entangled with the french beans in the garden and then first Bill and then Les gave separate but complementary versions of what Pope had said and done to his lantern; in Bill's account Pope had smashed it with a stick, saying, "You [won't] tell I any more bloody lies," and then Les gave his version: "He said, 'There, you silly bugger, if you can't show me the way home you ain't no bloody good.'" Assent and approval were enthusiastically given by Jack and Bill.

The initiative in narrating the story continued to be passed between them through several more incidents in which Pope fell in the river, went to bed without undressing, and thought that he had lost his false teeth until he was told that they were in his mouth. The cycle of episodes all illustrated some typical aspect of the character of Jim Pope and each one was savoured for its full humorous value; "that was Jim all over," repeated Bill, using a phrase which Les also uses, in showing his approval of some characterising detail which had been given by the narrator of the moment.

Although this communal sharing of recollections is now a less frequent form of storytelling for Les, who, in making visits to a wide range of people is not always able to rely on shared experience as the material for narratives, it was obvious that he greatly enjoyed

this occasion and that his exceptional animation was produced not by the cider, of which he drank moderately, but by the stimulus of this competitive style of narration and the sense of having re-established a communion with these friends of his early farming days.

Narratives of Charming

In the course of our conversations on charming, and during our visits to farmers in the Marshwood Vale, which Les suggested in order that I might meet witnesses to his ability, Les has told several memorates and legends of healing through the use of charms. These accounts of charming have a well-marked narrative form and it seems that they have become a part of his narrative repertory. The following description of them attempts to define their function in supporting his own confidence in his ability and in establishing the necessary atmosphere of belief in his powers among the members of his community. By discussing these accounts of healing as "stories" their relationship with other types of narrative in his repertory can be seen and a better sense of the unity between charming and other aspects of his life may be obtained.

Les's categorisation of such accounts as being "stories" can be seen in his recollection of hearing his father and mother-in-law talk of their own success in charming; he says that he "had heard the story" and "the tales" of their ability to charm before he had experienced the truth of their claims for himself. The term "story" in his usage here implies a narrative which is not altogether believed; "telling stories" is a traditional expression for "telling lies." A further

sense of the word "story," however, and one which Les uses with equal frequency, is that which means the inclusion and the proper ordering of all the events which have become recognised through the process of communal re-telling as belonging to a particular narrative. In the description of the story-telling situation given previously, in which the same story was told by three men in collaboration and competition, Jack Bere used the term "story" in this latter sense when he corrected a detail that had been given by another man, saying, "That was the story."

The correctness of "the story," in the sense of being a version that is generally accepted as being true and complete in its details, is of particular importance to Les in his accounts of charming. The narrative is valuable to him for several reasons; firstly, it provides a record, which can be attested to by others, of a spiritual or supernatural phenomenon which is always fascinating to him as a mystery that he can never understand; secondly, it reinforces his self-confidence by recounting a past success; and thirdly, he is aware of its value in stimulating the belief of potential patients in his ability to help them. The story, in performance, thus demands the maximum use of validative devices, such as giving the names of the protagonists and details of the time and place. The value of the story, to him, can be compromised by the omission of any of these details.

Les's concern with accuracy can be seen in the following account in which he describes how he was first convinced of his mother-in-law's power to cure the disease of redwater in cattle by

charming. Redwater is manifested by a discharge of blood in the cow's urine; Les believes that at the time, the late 1930's, there was no cure known to veterinary science and the disease was considered to be "a killer." He told the memorate during our aforementioned visit to Bill and Jack Bere of Bluntshay Farm in the Marshwood Vale which I was tape recording. It may be that it was told partly for my benefit since the audience could confirm its truth as oral history at least to the extent of knowing the protagonists. It is more likely, however, that its function as a good story outweighed other considerations for him at this point; Les appended it to the sequence of reminiscences concerning his former employer, Jim Pope, who had been the subject of the preceding competitive cyclical conversation in which each man had added his particular anecdote of Pope's character and behaviour. Les probably knew that his story would hold his audience and allow him to monopolise the floor since it was a new story concerning Pope that the others had not heard before. At the same time it is a typical example of one of his accounts of healing and the following transcription records, in the responses of his audience, the traditional manner in which legends and memorates of charming function in spreading the fame of the charmer within his community and in advertising that his ability is available:

Now I tell you a little thing. Now Bill I don't know if you mind this but my dear old mother-in-law used to charm redwater [Jack: Yes.] like I d' charm warts and ringworm, so if you get any bother with that you let me know, I've been doing it for poor old Frank Burns for years. [Jack: Frank told I about it when I been out there apple picking; "You want to get hold of Les," that's two or three year ago.] That's right. This is

it. Now then, I'm out there t' the Lodge House and poor old Hand then, old Hand had Middlebrook [Bill and Jack agree], and old Jim bought some keep [i.e. rented some grazing land] down there see, Jim Pope, and we had some heifers down there. And old George Wiley had been down there to value it, you see, or 'd been valuing some more land, and we were milking at night, there was only old Jim and I see. And I remember old George Wiley, you know, 'e was a little short bloke wasn't 'er, 'e come in the cow stall and 'e said, "Yer," 'e said, "Farmer," he said, "I got a bit o' bad news for you." [Bill: Or was that his son Ronald?] No, it was the old man, Bill. [Bill: George.] George, George, that's right, George. That's right, Jack, his name was George. [Jack: Always wear a bow tie.] That's right, he always wear a dicky bow tie. That's right, that's it Jack, ah. He said, "I got a bit o' bad news for you," he said, "Farmer, Farmer Jim." He said, "You got a heifer," he said, "down there," he said, "at Middlebrook," he said, "wi' redwater; 'er's got it bad." "Aah," Jim said, "we d' get 'em now and again," he said. "There ain't nothing you can do about it," he said, "but dig a 'ole and bury 'n." So I listened to this and after poor old George had gone on I said to Jim, "Yer," I said, "Jim, my mother-in-law," I said, "'ould cure thic there heifer for you." He laughed like the devil. Said, "Get away with thee rubbish! What thee talkin' about?" he said. "There ain't nar vet," he said, "breathing as can cure thic 'n." He said, "I tell 'ee what thee and I'll do, we'll go down there," he said, "in a couple of days time, dig a damn great hole and bury 'n." Now I'd never known my mother-in-law, I didn't know what she could do, but I'd heard, see, the tales of what she'd done, you know, years ago, at Loders and one way and another. So I implored 'n to let me go down. I had a motor bike at the time, a B.S.A. [Jack: I can mind thic B.S.A.] Can you remember that? "Well, look," he said, "if thee 'st think 'er can do anything, git on down there." Well, I'm, I think it was the next morning I went, yes it was, Monday morning, I always remember Monday morning. I got down there to Seatown and there was the dear old soul, dead and gone now, washing at the tub. Washing day, Monday, Monday morning. So she said, "Hello Les, what do you want then, my son?" And I said, "Hello," I said, "Mam. Farmer Jim Pope," I said, "got a heifer out there," I said, "with redwater," and I said, "he got it bad." I said, "Can you cure 'n?" She said, "Yes." She said, "What's 'is name?" I said, "I don't

know, he ha'n't got a name," I said, "'tis a heifer." "Well," she said, "what's his colour?" "Well," I said, "he's red." "Well," she said, "give him a name then." And I said, "Ruby." I always remember, "Ruby." "Alright," she said. "Well," she said, "you go back and tell the farmer not to worry about 'n. He'll be alright in three days." Didn't give me nothing see. And I don't mind telling you, Jack, I got on my motor bike and I had some doubts in my mind as I was coming on. But as I come on towards Whitechurch I beginning to get a little bit stronger faith. I think to myself, "I don't know, my mother-in-law have done it before, she'll do it again, I'm sure she will." So I get out there to Lodge House and he said, "Well, what did her gi' I to gi' 'n?" "Nothin'" I said, "she said I was to tell you that he'd be alright in three days from now." You know what, how he laughed when he [Bill: Oh Yes.], "Hahaa, I'll tell thee what I told thee yesterday: thee and I'll dig a damn gr't hole for 'e," he said. Well, the next day he didn't bother to go down to see 'n. He expected 'n, but he didn't die, he didn't go down to see 'n. The next day he went down, the day after that, and he come back and I was just having the cows in I always mind, and he come and he said to me, "Yer," he said, "Les, what d'ee think?" "Dammed," he said, "if something wonderful," he said, "'ent 'appened." He said, "D'you know, I stopped there," he said, "and I seen thic heifer make water, and," he says, "d'you know that water's nearly clear." He said, "It's marvellous." He said, "I'm thinking," he said, "'s' know, 'm's goin' to get better." And get better he did. Now, 'bout three weeks after that he had a yearling have it out in -- he had a little orchard, just before you get to the little house I used to live in, on the right hand side, didn't 'er -- had one in there. [Jack: That's one of old Marshwood churches.] That's right, where the old church, used to be ruins there didn't it, Jack. Well he had one there -- then mind 'tis different -- he said, "Yer," he said, "Les, get on thy motor bike," he said, "and get on down and tell mother," said, "I got another." [Bill chuckles] Went down, put 'e right. There we are. [Bill: Funny i'n' it.] So there's more things than what we d' understand.²⁷

²⁷ Recorded interview, January 12, 1975, Marshwood Vale.

It will have been noted that in the course of telling this story Les goes against the code of practice that was taught him by his father-in-law by making a direct, unsolicited, offer of his help as a charmer. Les has confirmed, on another occasion, that his reputation is spread by work of mouth among the members of the farming and village community: "They get to know about me from others, because, you see, I never advertise myself." One reason for Les's use of this narrative, therefore, may be that it concerns the ability of his mother-in-law, rather than himself, and so he is able to maintain at least the letter of his father-in-law's injunction against personal advertisement in telling it.

The story itself exhibits a structure which is typical of his legends and memorates of healing. These narratives share a number of features; these include the establishment of the characters, time, location, and the nature of the disease. Often the patient, or the owner of afflicted animals, is shown to be sceptical of the charmer's ability and has only turned to him in desperation. The charmer is asked to help and makes a prediction of cure which usually specifies the period of time within which it will occur. The complaint is cured, as the charmer had predicted, and the patient, or owner, acknowledges his belief in the charmer's ability and turns to him immediately for help on further occasions.

There is a marked syntactical pattern in these narratives which centres on the climax of the story which is the prediction of a cure and its successful result. His story of his father-in-law's

charming of loor shows this pattern well; its climax is indicated by both phrasing and intonation: "'As the old turf d' wither,' he said, 'so the old footrot'll go' uh, 'loor'll go.' And so it did. So it did. Absolutely certain." His testimony to the success of the charm is pointed and emphatic. He continues, in the same story, to wonder whether it was his own faith in Stubbs which caused the loor to disappear and then returns to the initial pattern made by a reiterated verb: "But again, I, I wonder, if I hadn't a-believed that it would go, would it have went? But you see, he told me that it would, I was absolutely certain that it would, and it did!" He concluded with an observation of broader significance which seemed to be intended as a moral: "So there you are. Ah, faith moves mountains."

His sense of the rhetorical value of verbal patterning can also be seen in his account of how Stubbs charmed ringworm where, once more, he stressed the verb tenses "would" and "went"; "When he said they would go, somehow or other I knew they would. And I immediately stopped treating them, ignored them like he told me to, and they went." The phrase "And they went" also occurs as the climax of his memorate of charming a girl's warts:

And she said, "Could you get rid of them for me, Les?" and I said, "Yes, certainly dear." She said, "How?" and I said, "Yours isn't to reason why, it's just to have a little faith and forget²⁸ that you've got them," you know. And they went.

²⁸Recorded interview, January 12, 1975, Bridport.

The consistency of this patterning is evidence for the assumption that these stories of charming are frequently told by him and have thus been given a relatively fixed form. The syntactical structure which is repeated at the climactic point of many of these stories is an impressive device which gives his listeners the sense that a principle of cause and effect is in operation: the charmer makes his prediction of a cure and the cure follows as though automatically. Any intervening events are telescoped so that the narrative moves directly from the action of the charmer to the effect.

The omission of any of the structural elements from "the story" seems to make it less valid for him. This was shown in his criticism of a version of the memorate quoted above, in which his mother-in-law cured Jim Pope's heifer of redwater, that had been included by J.B. Lang in her article "Charming of Cattle"; Les had told it to her and she had summarised what she had thought to be its most important features. During our first conversation on charming Les had begun to read to me from Lang's account but soon found that it did not satisfy him; he said: "She slipped up a little tiny bit here as regards the details, you see." After making this point he read the whole of Lang's account and then prepared to give the correct version, saying: "Now she has missed out a little bit here -- maybe a little bit of detail -- not detail of any consequence, but she hasn't got the story quite right. The story was this" A comparison of the two versions, which were later compared with two

further accounts of the same event which I recorded from him subsequently, has shown that the element that had been omitted by Lang was that of Mrs. Stubbs's prediction of a cure for the stricken heifer within a period of three days. In the version quoted above Les shows how, ironically, as a result of his scepticism, Pope complies with the charmer's desire that he should not disturb the animal by applying physical medication but should rely on the action of the charm. When Pope visits the heifer he finds that it is recovering and that the charmer's prediction of a cure within three days is going to be fulfilled.

The prediction of the cure is a vital element in the stories because of its importance in the act of charming. Another of his memorates of charming stresses the importance of this prediction and gives an interesting description of his performance with a patient; the numerous validative devices used in his narration may also be noted:

Well now, I'll tell you a little instance down there. There's a chap working in the hospital now, his name is Laurie Cox. Now this'd be about two years ago. He, ahm, belongs to Axminster Dramatic Society, and he was in a show down there, and there was a girl, her parents lived over Lloyds Bank, in Axminster, that's right by the, opposite the church. So he come on to work one day, he said, "Yer," he said, "Les. You charm ringworms don't you?" No, warts. I said "Well, you know, Yeah." "Well," he said, "There's a young girl," he said, "that comes to rehearsals," he said, "and she's got about six or seven huge warts on her hand, you know, makes her feel embarrassed with it." He said, "Could you do anything about it?" I said "Yeah, I can get rid of those alright." [Les's responses in this reconstructed dialogue are given in undertones as though to depict his modesty and desire

for secrecy.] "Well," he said, "look Les," he said, "Can I arrange for her to come up to the hospital?" "Well," I said, "You don't need to bother to do that," I said, "We could pop down there if you like." We went that very day, as he mentioned it, we went that very day in the dinner hour. And we was on from one to two. So we went about say half past one. Uh we knocked at the door, this is true, we knocked at the door, or he did, and the mother answered, and we went up over a flight of stairs, up into a room above the bank, and there she was. She was about seventeen. Very pretty girl. And I, I said to her, I said, "Hello." I said, "What's your trouble then dear," I said, "Got some warts?" She said, "Yes," she said, "there you are." So I said "You just count them. Make sure you, you know, have got them right." So I did them a second time, sure, seven in number. And I just took her hand, I said "Now look, my dear," I said, "Do you believe me when I tell you that all you've got to do is just forget you got them." And I said "They'll leave you. They'll leave you. Just like that." And they did! They did, you see, but I knew that girl had faith. I could tell by the look on her face.²⁹

The memorate shows the way in which Les tries to make the sufferer feel at ease by his friendly manner and makes a confident, and repeated, assurance that she will be healed.

A further account of his successful charming of a nurse's warts at the hospital where he worked emphasises the atmosphere of complete trust which he is able to induce. He began his memorate by describing the girl's frivolous nature and by noting his doubts as to the strength of her belief; this has the effect of making her testimony to his power to convince her the more striking:

I look at Christine, I think, "Now, Christine, how much faith have you got?" So when she showed me [the warts], you know, they're messed up all over

²⁹Recorded interview, January 3, 1974, Chideock.

you know. She said, "Oh, Les, look at this!" I said, "Christine, now you look at me straight in the face, honestly. If I was to tell you that you would lose all your warts, would you believe me?" She said, "Les, if you told me, I'd believe it." And I said, "I believe you would, Christine."

And I saw her, when, last Sunday, and I go into the Acute ward, and, you see, she's very, ah, what can I say, she demonstrates her actions a bit too much, so I walked into the ward and right in front of a bloke called Fred Vicars [she said]: "Oh, Les, you're a darling! Look, look, nothing! They've all gone." "What did you expect Christine? To still have 'em. Well, I should have been a failure, wouldn't I. You see."

So you see, like I said on that little thing [referring to a recording of an interview which we had made previously] there's more in life than what you can think. You really can't realise, y' know the power of the mind over the body is the most powerful thing in the world, 'tis. You can worry, you know, people used to say, years ago, you worry yourself into the grave, this is quite right. Yes, quite right, quite right. No, you see, your thinking is the most important thing. You got to think strong. Yeah.³⁰

His method in these two cases is probably typical of his practice for, if it is assumed that the healing effect is due to psychotherapy, the patient is relieved of the anxiety that is causing the symptoms or impeding a natural recovery. The surface of the skin is known to medical science as a particularly suggestible area which easily reveals psychosomatic symptoms.

The fundamental act in his treatment seems to be his persuasion of the sufferer not to think about their complaint. This is shown clearly in a letter which he wrote to a girl in London, who

³⁰ Recorded interview, January 12, 1975, Bridport.

had been told by her mother, who lived in Chideock, to contact Les so that he could cure the warts which she had on her hand. The girl traced the outline of her hand on a piece of paper and indicated the positions of the warts; Les was impressed by this method, which was new to him, and seems to have adopted it in some subsequent cases. His reply, he said, went as follows:

I wrote and told her that this was a deep, very deep-seated wart, they were very difficult to cure, but, they would go. And all I asked her to do was to have great faith in the fact that what I told her would be correct, that she would have to ignore the fact that she had them. She would have to go about her everyday life not being conscious of the fact that she had them and they would disappear, and if she hadn't lost them within six months would she please get in touch with me. [Pause] Never heard a thing from her after. Now I know this, if I'd a-been a failure I'd have heard. You always hear when you fail -- never heard another thing from her.

The girl's failure even to thank him may have been due to the general tradition that a charmer should not be thanked; Les does not seem to be aware of this prohibition of expressed gratitude except in so far as he does not like to feel that he is receiving payment for his help.

That his patients do "forget" that they have their warts has been confirmed for me by Ruth Newson and her expression of shock at realising their disappearance can be matched by statements from others of their experience with charmers:

It's funny, I would have thought that I would, when I look back on it, that I would look every day to see if they'd gone, but you don't. Well, you don't notice them and then you sort of think, "Oh! They're not there anymore." I think you know they're going to go and then you don't think any more about them.

Les responded to her testimony with complete approval: "This is, this is, of course, the atmosphere you create." Ruth continued, "I mean you've got very great faith when another one comes up," and Les completed her sentence: "That that one will go as well. That's exactly, this is exactly." This effect is achieved through his impressive, convincing, persona, which, it seems, can extend through a letter or a telephone call.

In the case of the healing of animals, however, the possibility of influencing them directly seems more remote. Les is unsure of how a charm is able to work on an animal. After likening the act of charming to the projection of the charmer's thoughts, in which he suggested that it might be linked with telepathy, he went on to express his doubt that animals could "receive" such a transmission:

Of course then one has got to ask the question, if you think that way, is animals capable of receiving? I don't think so. No, I think the thing is this, that the owner of the animal --³¹

At this point he broke off when he seemed to have been about to say that the charm worked on or through the animals' owner. An instance which tended to disprove this occurred to him, however, and he continued:

although, mind you, I've proved this without having the, without the owner ever knowing what happened. You see, I remember at Seatown some years ago I saw a bunch of heifers that belonged to a chap called

³¹Recorded interview, July 8, 1974, Bridport.

Gerald Brown, who's living at Upcot Farm now, and I used to pass the field every day, you know, when I was delivering the milk, and they looked dreadful, you know, in the field. And one day I charmed them, you know, and funny thing Gerald said to me one day -- I asked him how the heifers were -- I said, "You got a lot of ringworms." He said, "Yeah," he said, "Les, but they went." You see, and I felt, well, fair enough, and jolly good. Well, you see, he didn't have to ask me to do it. I done it for the simple reason that, well, they were right by the side of the road and they wanted getting rid of anyway, and this was it.

It will be noted that through charming the heifers without receiving a specific request that he should Les was breaking the code of practice that Stubbs had laid down. His decision to charm them, however, seems to have been almost a natural reflex which he carried out with as little consideration, and out of the same habit, as a farmer would uproot a thistle or some other weed during his walk around the farm.

In the majority of cases, however, owners of cattle contact him before he undertakes to charm for them; a memorate that is quoted below shows his feeling that he should wait until a doubtful farmer could be persuaded to speak to him, by telephone, on the matter before he could charm his cattle. It seems likely that, in the charming of animals, the assurance which is delivered to the owner, who is told to ignore them and not to try to treat them, causes the owner not to disrupt the animals' normal routine through anxious examination of their condition and allows their natural resistance to disease to work unimpeded. Accounts have been given in my introductory chapter of the advice given by white witches to farmers who "overlooked" their own stock through being too anxious

that they should thrive and, possibly, by communicating their own anxiety to their animals by disturbing their daily rhythms.

For Les, as a charmer, the prediction is a declaration of faith which mirrors the internal resolution, or act of faith, which he feels is necessary for the charm to operate. The prediction is a verbal guarantee that is given to the sufferer and which signifies that he has taken on the responsibility for helping them; he seeks to take the weight of anxiety from their shoulders. His prediction, or assurance, of a cure draws its authority from his entire reputation as a knowledgeable and trustworthy man. The prediction can thus be seen as an end to which his careful fostering of his reputation has tended, for the patient is, in effect, being asked to trust his word.

The Charmer's Reputation

The act of charming, for Les, is a commitment of his reputation to the test of his community's judgement. His concern with his good name has been stressed throughout this study but its importance to him can hardly be overstated; yet another evidence of this trait in his personality can be seen in his keeping of a file of letters from people who have written to thank him for healing their complaints through charming. He has not mentioned the letters to me but did show them to Ruth Newson when she worked on the milk-round with him; she felt that he was trying to convince her of his ability. His pride in such testimonies to his ability is paralleled in his keeping of letters of reference, from the farmers who employed

him, which describe him as being honest, thorough, truthful, willing, trustworthy, and capable of doing any kind of farm work. Les commented, after reading them to me, that he "treasures" these letters and then explained why:

You see, Martin, in my opinion, character and principle is the two most important things that any human being can have. It isn't a bit of good for you to profess to be anything other than what you are, because you can't be. You are what you are. You're either a good character or a bad. So if a fellow man testify to you, and to all the world, to what you are, I don't think that anyone should easily dismiss that sort of thing. [He read a second letter.] I attach great importance to that, because that's how my fellow men judge me and I judge my fellow men in the same way.³²

His interest in the judgement of himself that is made by his fellow men in purely practical and secular matters, such as farm work, is carried over into his need, as a charmer, for his assurances to be believed. The concern for reputation provides the common ground between these two areas in his life and its importance to him may be seen by comparing the following memorate, concerning the way in which he proved his ability to thatch before a stern critic, with the previously quoted account of his mother-in-law's success in curing redwater. The two narratives show a striking similarity in their basic theme and structure for, in each, a sceptical employer who doubts Les's assurances, is convinced by a display of ability and turns to him for help with complete confidence on further occasions.

³²Recorded interview, June 26, 1974, Chideock.

Les began the memorate by describing the farmer's agitation at the prospect of losing a valuable rick of corn through weather damage as a professional thatcher could not be found to thatch it. Although Les offered to do it himself the farmer doubted his competence and waited vainly for the professional thatcher to come. Finally, in a mood of desperation which may be compared with that condition in which, according to Les, a sufferer is usually driven to ask for his help as a charmer, the farmer asked him if he would try:

You know he was really troubled, and he said, "Well, Leslie, if you think you can do it, you go out and have a try." Well," I said, "Mr. Oxber I don't think, I know I can."³³

Les has quoted these words of assurance before in describing his confident reply to a prospective employer who had asked him whether he thought that the employer had "come to the right place" by offering him the job; Les had replied, "I don't think, I know you have," and was given the job on the strength of his confident attitude. Oxber's initial doubt of his competence may be compared with Jim Pope's scepticism of Les's claim that his mother-in-law could cure redwater.

The memorate was continued:

So I went out there, the reed was there all ready, you know, and, uh, the spars, and I started. Well, he didn't leave me so very very long before he come out to have a look to see how I was getting on because he was a little bit dubious, dubious, of my ability.

³³ Recorded interview, January 22, 1975, Bridport.

The progress of his narrative was halted slightly as he tried to remember the name of the field in which the rick had stood; this concern with a detail of location has already been cited as a valid-
ative device in any of his narratives which are meant to be believed.

Les resumed his story:

He came out, and he had one look, "Well," he said, "Leslie," he said, "you've done this before!" And I said, "Oh, yes, I have." And I thatched the rick, and he said to me, after I'd thatched it, he said, "Well," he said, "Leslie," he said, "that rick," he said, "I reckon would win a prize," he said. He said, "If Billy [the professional thatcher] don't mind," he said, "I'll let you thatch some ricks for me next year."

Oxber's new confidence in Les's ability may be compared with that shown by Jim Pope after seeing that his cow had been cured, and by others who, having been given a "proof" of the power of charming, have become "believers."

Les described the similar case of another farmer who had originally scoffed at the idea of charming:

But I find nine times out of ten, well, I'd say ninety-nine times out of a hundred, if once you've done something, and you've convinced a person, you've really convinced them. You see, like it was with Sid Tilley, you see, when he had his heifers, uh, when, Bob, uhm, Deer was working for him, see. Now I, I charmed seven heifers up under Nail Copse with ringworm after poor old Sid laughed and thought it was too funny for words. And it was only, see Bob had told him two or three times to ring me up and let me deal with them, see, it was only when I saw Mrs. Tilley and got Mrs. Tilley to get Sid to ring me that I convinced Sid. Now, you see, after that, look, Sid wouldn't hesitate, he'd get on the phone and say, "Look, Les," [He ended this narrative here having remembered a gift that he had received, in reward for charming, and which he showed me as a "proof" of what he had been saying.]

Of additional interest here is the example shown of Les's deliberate attempt to encourage someone to ask for his help. This is a further instance of his waiving of the rules of conduct that had been laid down by his father-in-law through his more active interpretation of the healer's role.

The main value of this comparison of two narratives concerning apparently unrelated subjects, charming and thatching, however, is to suggest a basic similarity in his attitude toward "practical knowledge" and that special knowledge which has been given to the charmer. His interpretation of the charmer's role has been shaped by the same drives that have caused him to excel in the crafts that he wished to learn and the role seems to gratify some of the same impulses to be respected as a knowledgeable man. The narratives in which sceptical farmers are convinced of his powers as a charmer are essentially the same as those memorates, discussed in the third chapter, in which farm workers recall having proved the superiority of their own knowledge to that of their masters. Les tells these memorates in the same spirit of personal vindication with which he would refute any other challenge to his workmanship or personal standing.

A summary of his attitudes to charming, as revealed in his narratives, however, must stress the complexity of his response to the role. While confidence and self-assertion is his chosen manner of instilling the necessary "faith" in his patients, and while a certain measure of pride in his achievements is probably necessary to encourage him to continue in the role in the face of scepticism, he has

retained, as ideals, the principle of self-effacement that was taught by his father-in-law and also Stubbs's sense of reverent gratitude for having been chosen as the instrument of what he considers to be a supernatural power of healing. Charming is not to be thought of as being "clever," he has said, and thus cannot be classed with those skills that he admires as personal possessions in secular life. Hence the expressions of wonder with which he often closes his accounts of healing, as though he were seeking to apply a moral from them -- "So there you are. Ah, faith moves mountains." or, "So there's more things than what we d' understand." -- mute the impression of self-assertion and suggest that a feeling of religious duty is a further part of his motivation as a charmer.

Les's modification of the charmer's social behaviour to stress the influence of the charmer's personality is primarily the result of his distinctive temperament; he has moulded the healing role to fit his own emotional needs and pattern of behaviour. Frank Stubbs had treated the practice of charming phlegmatically as being simply a useful ability; he followed the conditions which he believed to govern its use and thought little more about it. For Les, however, the ability to charm is a fulfillment of a temperamental need to see himself as an exceptional person and its practice satisfies his predisposition towards helping others and receiving in return their gratitude and esteem.

VI

CONCLUSION

In presenting the life history of Les Ollerton my intention throughout has been to show the relationships between his practice as a charmer and other aspects of his life. I wished to describe the context of charming as fully as possible and this seemed to demand not only an account of his function as a charmer in his community but also an assessment of the meaning of charming to him and his motivations in fulfilling this role. This approach was also the natural and inevitable way to record the fullness of Les's experience of folk tradition which was apparent in his repertory of stories about himself which have formed the basis of this biography. The method corresponded with his own interest in self analysis.

The description of his boyhood emphasised his early development of the technique of tactful persuasion which he was to use later in his paramedical and pastoral role in his present community. He also learned to be an entertainer and has continued to use the talent for making people laugh which he had discovered as a boy and which now makes him a welcome visitor and helps him to dispel any anxiety or depression among his neighbours. The discipline and security of his family life was shown to have provided the foundation on which he later based the simple philosophy which he now employs in counselling those who seek his advice. The traditional learning

process, on which he entered with his grandfather, in which knowledge was passed, as a cherished, secret, and personal possession, between a master and his pupil in a close relationship, was an important precedent which taught him to respond in the right way when his father-in-law decided to pass to him the secret knowledge of charming.

The theme of the traditional value of knowledge to the agricultural worker was taken up in greater detail in the chapter which followed through the description of the crafts of the cowman, the hedger, and the thatcher, in each of which Les was particularly proud of his expertise. The possession of special knowledge and skill was shown to have been considered, by Les and others, as the most important attribute a working man could have. To be called "a knowledgeable man" was the highest form of praise. Knowing the right way to go about things meant not only an exercise of intelligence and dexterity; it also drew on experience, involved moral qualities like patience and persistence, and included aesthetic criteria such as neatness and proportion in the finished work. The possession of this practical knowledge was a means used by men to measure their position among their fellows and with their employers. Although their knowledge always had an economic value to them it also had an existential function; the possession of knowledge was an assertion of personal worth. It went some way toward establishing an identity and a purpose in life.

The knowledge of charming, however, was of a separate kind which could not be gloried in as the personal property of a man

for he only held it in trust and had to be humble at having been chosen to exercise the ability and responsibility of divine healing; this was Les's conclusion as the result of his discussion of the ethical code which his father-in-law had laid down as governing the practice of charming when he passed the knowledge to Les. Les approves of his father-in-law's principles of not advertising his ability, not receiving payment, not charming without a request that he do so but never refusing one, and never attempting to charm a disease which he does not recognise as lying within his ability to cure. These principles are traditional and have been followed as a code of practice by other charmers.

Nevertheless, as the final chapter showed, Les has sometimes broken these rules by offering to charm and by charming without receiving any request. These departures from his father-in-law's practice stem from his earnest desire to help people and from his more active interpretation of the role which a charmer should play. Although the traditional ethics of charming are preserved as ideals, and are passed between generations, each charmer probably makes his own definition of his role and the manner in which he will perform it according to his individual temperament and the demands of the community in which he operates. Les has broadened the scope of what may be broadly defined as "healing" to include besides charming, paramedicine, counselling in personal problems, and advice in practical matters. In this his models seem to have been, together with the traditional patterns of mutual aid in times of sickness and

death, the behaviour of the doctor and priest who were often leaders within rural communities. He has adopted a style of pastoral visits to his fellow parishioners in which, by turns, he entertains them as a storyteller, discusses their problems, and keeps a watchful eye on their health. The visits help to counter the loneliness which he finds prevalent in modern life.

The vital connection between his concern to portray himself as a knowledgeable and trustworthy man and his practice as a charmer was shown in the style and function of his memorates of charming. The prediction of cure was defined as the most important feature of the stories and of his performance as a charmer. In making the prediction that the complaint will be cured Les relieves his patients of their anxiety and promotes the right conditions for their recovery. The "faith" of the patients in his ability to cure them, and hence the success of the cure, was shown to depend on the reputation for competence and probity in all matters which he has fostered throughout his life. In such ways the history of his earlier life, and the description of his opinions on a wide range of topics, have provided a large body of autobiographical material from which it has been possible to draw inferences that have helped to create a fuller understanding of his special development of his role as a charmer.

The need for charming continues. Farmers in the area regularly ask Les to charm outbreaks of ringworm in their cattle and the effectiveness of his cure is recognised by a local veterinary surgeon who has referred cases to him for treatment. Humans also continue

to be afflicted with warts and, less frequently, with ringworm, and these skin infections cause real distress and embarrassment; again, their cure by charming is safe, painless, and efficient. For these reasons alone it will be unfortunate if Les is unable to find a successor to whom he can communicate the knowledge of charming.

Les's modification of the charmer's practice to include a much broader healing and counselling role also meets a contemporary need. His pattern of house-visiting helps to assuage what he recognises as the loneliness and anxiety of many people. With the decline of church attendance, and hence the loss of a clergyman's pastoral visits, and with the overburdening of doctors so that they can no longer make house-calls, many people feel the lack of a familiar confidant. They place their confidence in Les as a trusted friend and he is able to mediate between them and the comparatively impersonal social services. He offers himself as someone who can be relied upon to help in a time of stress.

This study has been concerned only with an individual who, by his own statement, is very different from the charmer who preceded him, and yet it may be that some of the traits of personality which have been described here, such as the utter self-confidence which Les shared with his father-in-law, will eventually be found to be typical in the temperament of all charmers elsewhere.

Before such a generalisation can be made, however, there is need for a further review of the previously published descriptions of the practice of charming even though they have often varied

in the amount and carefulness of their documentation. Often the interest of students has been satisfied with the collection of the texts of charms and they have not recorded details of the charmers' personalities or performance in their roles. There is an even greater need for more studies of the life histories of individual charmers in order to provide comparative material on the kind of personality, life experience, and demand from the community, which may make an individual willing and able to become a charmer.

There may always have been people who have taken on the role of healer and sage within their community. In a few reports the "white witch," "cunning man," or "wise woman," has combined counselling in personal problems with the practice of healing, magic, and divination. The doctor and the priest have also answered the same demand for someone who is able to resolve perplexity and relieve anxiety. In his modification of the traditional role of the charmer to include, besides healing, the provision of counsel, entertainment, paramedicine, and simply a quality of broad neighbourly concern, Les has re-created a traditional form of community service which is also responsive to some contemporary social needs.

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