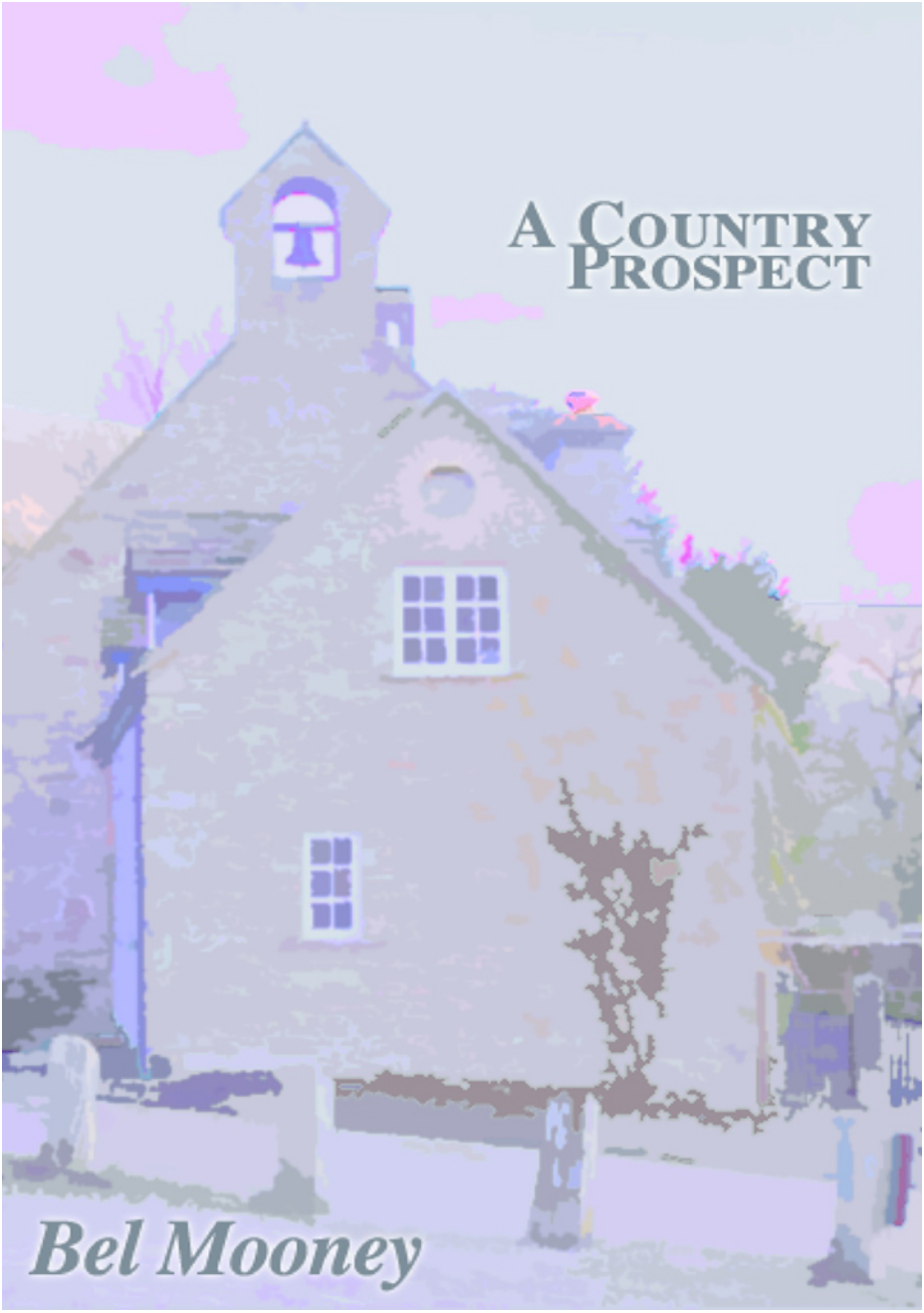
A Country Prospect
Bel Mooney

A COUNTRY PROSPECT

At first sight they knew they had to have Church Farmhouse. An ancient drystone wall bordered the low eighteenth century building. Cushioned with thyme, the uneven path wound obliquely through tangled plants to a green front door with iron hinges. All the hues of grey, brown, peach and ochre in the stone roof tiles were echoed in the mellow walls of the building, as well as the soft grey paint on window frames divided by stone mullions. To the right of the building a dusty, rutted lane was thick with cow parsley and dogrose. All around stretched fields dotted with cows and sheep, and along the main lane to the right, the squat Norman tower of

St Peter's was just visible above the spreading yews. Christine Anderson said it was impossible to imagine a more perfect spot. Tony breathed deeply and said it would do them a power of good to get out of the smoke.

Mr and Mrs Kendall, retired academics both, were reserved at first, but warmed to the would-be purchasers' enthusiasm for their home. The Andersons made it clear their minds were made up, even before they had inspected the warren of smallish rooms and the farmhouse kitchen with enormous built-in dresser, deep belfast sink and wooden draining boards bleached white by decades of scrubbing. The handsome oak staircase rose in the middle of the hall, with barley-twist balusters and a faded carpet caught in place with brass stair-rods. The farmhouse had the patina of of lives that had found contentment within those thick stone walls.

Mrs Kendall apologised for the state of some of the decoration, but Christine Anderson said she loved it all, 'just as it is'. She walked from room to room, exclaiming over ornate open fireplaces, 'quaint' old baths and basins, and - of course - the view, framed by thick, faded chintz. The prospect of green farmland from the upstairs rooms was the essence of all that foreigners admire about the English landscap.

The Kendalls were desperately sorry to sell; they did

not want to leave Little Bedcote, but felt it time to move near their married daughter and her children in Edinburgh. Church Farmhouse had become their home fifteen years ago, when the farmer, John Shipton, gained planning permisson for a new bungalow . It was everything they wanted, they said. The Andersons nodded.

'It's a very happy house', said Mr Kendall.

'Your loss is our gain!', said Tony Anderson.

'You have a beautiful home - quite perfect', Christine smiled. She looked past Mrs Kendall to admire her own reflection, elegant in turquoise linen, in the slighty foggy glass in the recess above the sitting room fireplace.

Everything was agreed over tea in the sunny rear garden: the asking price, plus a sum for curtains and carpets which would not fit the Kendalls' new home.

'Are you sure? Some of them are a bit worn', asked Mr Kendall, oblivious to his wife's reproachful look.

'Oh, but everything's so tasteful', breathed Christine, thinking dubiously of items of furniture in their town house, which had seemed chic at the time. 'And it all fits here, somehow. You know, as if it's grown - kind of thing.'

'We'll buy anything you want to sell', said Tony, rubbing his hands.

'Well, we are moving to a much smaller place, so there'll be furniture too', sighed Mrs Kendall.

‘You just make a list, name your price and we’ll do a deal!’, he replied.

Birds chirped in the beech and sunlight dappled the white cloth laid with floral china. They looked towards the bottom of the long garden, where a tall hedge lined the boundary, and cow parsley stood four feet high, like foam against a dark sea. ‘We love a wild garden’, Mr Kendall explained, ‘and especially as it hides the farm. Oh, by the way the farmer has the right of way down that little lane out there. It’s all in the deeds. No trouble at all. Shipton’s a good enough chap but it’s quite useful not to be able to see his house ‘cos, to be brutally frank, it’s not a thing of beauty. Made a tidy profit on this one, mind - though it’s a decision most people wouldn’t have taken. This place was in his family for three generations.’

‘Obviously a businessman too’, approved Tony Anderson, whose own fortune came from the mechanism for folding beds, which he exported all over the world from a factory twelve miles away. He was expanding Christon Ltd into cheaper foam ‘flop-down’ sofas and chairs as well. More and more single parent households and the rise in the divorce rate meant an increased demand for that kind of furniture, he explained to his wife, so the mail order business should do very well indeed. Tony prided himself on having an eye to the future. A house agent he’d known since

schooldays tipped him off about a rundown property at a good price, which a builder friend was converting into studio flats to double the investment. Now, at forty five, Tony Anderson wanted visible proof of his success. This rambling house - with its book-lined study, polished floors, collection of paintings and drawings, and atmosphere of faded gentility - would do very well.

The house had originally been the rectory, which explained why it was slightly grander in scale than a conventional farmhouse of the period. A Victorian rector with ten children had decided it was too small, and so a much bigger, three story house was erected at the top of the village in about 1867. Mr Kendall leaned forward in his chair, not noticing Tony's attention wander. 'Now, of course, the old rectory is a private house - it's owned by a man called Simpson who has a publishing company, 'Pegasus Press' - do you know it? The diocese must have made a fair sum from its sale, and they built a new bungalow next door for the rector - much smaller and cheaper to run, you see.'

'Change and change about', said Tony.

Cabbage whites rose in a cloud from the lavender, and drifted to settle on the waving buddliea. 'Will you do the garden yourselves?', asked Mrs Kendall, adding, 'It was our hobby'.

Christine shook her head, with a little giggle.'Well,

I'm dying to move out of town, and I'm certainly intending to throw myself into real country life, but I don't know much about gardening. Do you know a man who could come in and help?'

Mr Kendall gazed around at the herbaceous borders, fruit trees, lavender beds, and rose garden they had created, and looked stricken. Then he nodded slowly. 'Yes, I can give you the name of someone in the village. There's Peter Tressick - he does all kind of odd jobs, and he's very active in the church too. I'm sure he'd love some extra work.'

'What about a cleaner?', asked Christine, 'and maybe a little woman who'll come in and do dinner parties for me?' The Kendalls promised they would give them all the advice and contacts possible, before they moved out.

In the next month Christine made a couple of visits, notebook in hand. Mrs Kendall left her alone, once the lists had been agreed. Tony's generous cheque purchased the green velvet chaise longue, the huge carved wardrobe and matching dressing table, two chintz sofas, an Edwardian king and queen chair with carpet upholstery, a battered leather library chesterfield, two tapestry wing chairs, the early Victorian elm dresser and dining table, with a set of ladder back chairs, and an assortment of small tables and chests of drawers. At Tony's request, Christine asked if the Kendalls wanted to get rid of the books that stuffed the library

shelves, but their response had been a surprised (and to Christine, surprising) negative. ‘Oh dear, we’ll just have to buy books by the yard’, she laughed.

As the Kendalls packed up their possessions, the house looked sadder. Christine felt daunted by its empty spaces as well as anxious at the faintly musty smell in some of the upstairs rooms. She was horrified by spiders who scuttled out of cupboards, and the definite scatter of mouse droppings on the larder floor. When the pictures were taken down the walls looked dirty, and she decided there was something very unhygenic, after all, about the pitted flags of the kitchen floor, and its surfaces of old tiles and wood. One night she returned to their townhouse and burst into tears, sobbing that she could not cope.

‘But what with, darling?’, he asked, ‘Don’t say you’ve changed your mind!’

‘No - it’s not that’, Christine sniffed, ‘I know it’ll be nice - in the end. It’s just that so much needs doing and don’t know what to do...where to start’.

Tony thrust a gin and tonic into her hand with a flourish. His second wife was ten years younger - the secretary who had finally driven his first wife to demand a divorce, whereupon she decamped to the Costa del Sol with their twin daughters and his former business partner. Now Tony wanted another child, preferably a son this time, and

knew Christine was on the point of agreeing, even though she worried about her perfect figure. The house in the country was all part of his plan. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her.

'Say no more, Chrissie, I'll sort it out. We'll get an interior designer in, so you won't have to do a thing. Look love, we can afford it! We'll turn the old place into the smartest house in Little Bedcote - never mind how long it takes. And we'll stay here 'til it's all ready, OK? In the meantime, how do you fancy a cruise?' His wife wiped her eyes, sipped her drink, and beamed.

Amanda Santos was in demand ever since she appeared on a television programme called 'Star Sign Design', which changed the sitting rooms of two volunteers each week, when interviews and character analyses by a well-known astrologer were interpreted by guest interior designers of fashionable reputation. Amanda's 'client', a Pisces called Tracey Burdett, burst into tears when she saw the blue and green wave patterns on walls stencilled with orange fish, fishing net curtains hung with shells, driftwood sconces and coffee table, three piece suite swathed with an infantile fishy fabric and a floor painted shiny sea green where her

slippers used to snuggle into a fitted carpet of cream shagpile. Tracey's husband comforted her by pointing out how much worse it might have been had Ms Santos taken his own sign, Scorpio. Still, the Burdetts said they were exploited and threatened to sue, the story made all the popular papers, Amanda's striking blonde glamour and assertive personality was a gift to television - and her reputation for daring was secure.

Reassured by the fact that they had heard of her, Tony and Christine knew she was the person to transform Church Farmhouse. The day after the Kendalls shed their tears and left, Ms Santos strode around with the Andersons - who were secretly intimidated by this tall woman, dressed in loose-fitting black, who informed them that the chintzy country look was very dated now, the trademark of monthly magazines bought by city people, and what was needed was a bold, stylish approach. She stood in the hall, fingering the barley twist balusters with a disapproving sigh, and gestured around. 'The trouble is, I simply don't feel that all this expresses you two. When I meet new clients I trust my instincts, and for me this is all too dusty, if you understand my meaning.'

The Andersons looked around. The house was indeed dusty, with patches on the off-white walls and a general air of melancholy. Their voices echoed in empty rooms; the old

curtains hung sadly; there was a whiff of damp; dead flies littered the window sills. Tony folded his arms as if the decision were his own, and said, ‘Definitely time for a change of approach’..

‘It wants...brightening up, really’, Christine said nervously, relieved when Ms Santos nodded. ‘The thing is, Christine, I only have to look at you and see we need considerably more sophistication here’. Flattered, Christine glanced down at her white linen suit, with shiny black buttons matching the high, strappy sandals, and nodded. The designer clicked open her briefcase and pulled out swatches of fabric, paint cards and a notebook, and began to talk unintelligibly about colour keynotes and styling moods, while Christine daydreamed about her cruise wardrobe. She told Amanda she trusted her judgement totally, and would not interfere.

Meanwhile, saying that interiors were ’girls’ business’, Tony wanderered out to the garden and noticed with distaste the wild flowers lolling everywhere, and mallow and buddleia waving over paths so that he had to duck and weave. Like a jungle, he thought. As if on cue the doorbell rang. He had arranged for the oddjob man Peter Tressick to call and discuss work, and within minutes the man walked through the kitchen door.

Now in his fifties, Peter Tressick had lived in Little

Bedcote all his life. He built walls for people, laid paths, put up shelves, maintained gardens. In his own time, as dedicated churchwarden, he strimmed the verges and the churchyard, and had very strong views about the general appearance of the village. After twenty minutes it was clear he and Tony Anderson understood each other perfectly. The new employer undertook to buy a sit-on mower, strimmer and anything else needed, agreeing with Peter that the garden needed 'a good seeing-to.' Tony commissioned 'a bit of a patio' where he could sit in the evening with a drink. They agreed the hourly rate and the maximum hours in any week, shook hands, and felt pleased with their transaction.

By the time the Andersons returned from their Aegean cruise at the end of August, the transformation of Church Farmhouse was proceeding at a rate which shocked some of the neighbours. The exterior was repointed, and all the ivy had gone, since Amanda's builder said it was bad for the structure and encouraged damp. The window frames and front door were white with laquered brass fittings. All the old carpets and curtains Tony had bought from the Kendalls were thrown in to the skip; the fussy barley twist balusters and brass stair rods followed; the belfast sink was replaced

by a double round bowl in brushed stainless (with integral waste-disposal) to complement the custom-built light oak kitchen units, set off by peach rag-rolled walls. A cream Aga was installed, although Christine (unsure of the uncontrollable creature which squatted in every proper country kitchen) asserted herself for once and insisted on an ordinary gas cooker as well. The old sitting room and parlour had been knocked into one, and most of the early Victorian fitted shelves in the study ripped out to make way for larger radiators. The bathroms were refurbished with pale grey marble, and each bedroom colour-themed. If Christine thought some of the colours too bright - the mediterranean blue in the hall, for example - she did not feel confident enough to demur. It was all so much cleaner and smarter, they agreed, and Amanda Santos announced that she was as proud of this house as any she had done.

But a war had broken out between the designer and the odd-job man. She thought he was heavy handed with herbicide, pesticide and strimmer alike; he decided she was a town-bred snob with terrible taste. Caught between them, Christine and Tony lost any remaining confidence in their own opinions, an anxiety expressed in assertions of approval all round. If Tony was shocked to arrive one weekend to see that the wild bottom part of the garden had been napalmed, he did not say so because he thought the countryman must

know best - and in any case, he had given carte blanche. With the undergrowth of cowparsley and wild hedgerow gone, the farm buildings and modern bungalow were clearly visible through what remained of the chopped hedge. But the new flagged patio pleased the owner of Church Farmhouse. Peter Tressick had constructed it along the length of the house, projecting four metres into the garden. The whole place looked much neater,Tony agreed. At a deep level he felt it belonged to him now, not those other people.

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The Andersons moved to Little Bedcote early in October, when woodsmoke drifted across the valley and golden leaves began to litter the lanes. By now Christine had forgotten what the farmhouse looked like before - impressed as she was by Amanda Santos's selection of tartan moire silk, purple and pink velvets, steel grey rouched drapes, and rainbow of heavy linen button-top curtains that adorned the old windows, keeping out the light. She had even grown used to the matt black paint on the old oak staircase in the astonishing blue hall. Alone in the day, she walked from room to room, realising what they needed: more pictures, books, objets. Amanda Santos promised she would find them, so each week a bulky parcel arrived and Christine unwrapped a

miscellany of purchases which she obediently carried to rooms specified by the absent designer.

There were Georgian candlesticks ('for the drawing room mantlepiece'), a Victorian washing set ('for the pink bedroom'), a set of pewter jugs ('for the dining room'), a collection of photograph frames in inlaid wood, matt black, and brushed silver studded with glass in various colours ('scatter where you want. We're trying to achieve contemporary notes...') , and two small sculptures of naked girls with pert buttocks which Tony thought very artistic. Mixed boxes of second hand books arrived, which Christine stuffed in the remaining study shelves. A shop called 'Illuminato' delivered an interesting selection of modern and reproduction lamps. And so it went on. Tony paid without protest, although the designer's bill made him sit down very quickly.

One day a young man in leather trousers arrived with ten expressionistic watercolours resembling weeping flowers, and a vast pink nude in oil, with purple nipples, eating grapes on a blue couch. 'Ms Santos thought this one would be perfect over the dining room fireplace - because it's all about food', he explained, with a flirtatious smile Christine found alluring. Thinking he was a delivery boy she gave him a ten pound note for all the trouble he took carrying in the works of art and giving advice on where they should hang.

She did not know he was Amanda's intimate friend - enduring the continuing stress of artist's block and glad of the opportunity to produce something easy for a very handsome fee.

The weather was mild, but Mrs Tressick, who arrived every day to clean, made sure her husband filled log baskets in the study, sitting room and dining room, and laid all the fires. One evening, as Christine waited for Tony to come back she decided, despite the central heating, that a fire would make the sitting room cosy - just as she had imagined it, during the months of waiting : the soothing crackle, the glow of orange light, the scent of burning wood awakening inexplicable nostalgia.

When Tony Anderson walked into the blue hall he smelt damp and smoke, then heard a sound of coughing and sobbing. He threw open the sitting room door to be enveloped by acrid billows which caught his throat, making him splutter. His wife came tottering out of the swirling semi-darkness, face and hands smudged, fine white ash like snow on her black sweater and in her hair. Tears streamed down her face.

'I can't light it...the smoke just pours out into the room...I opened the windows but it made it worse...Oh Tony, I hate thiiiiis!'

Tony led her to the kitchen and mixed a dry martini,

before telephoning Mr and Mrs Tressick who were on the doorstep within ten minutes, ready to help. Peter Tressick shook his head, cursing these old chimneys and the rooks that nested in them; Susan Tressick cleaned the room, grumbling that she had already done it once that day. 'It's all too much....', was her habitual comment on life's complexities, usually followed by long anecdotes about the wayward children, marital problems, slow illnesses, and sudden deaths of people Christine had never met yet knew she should be interested in, since that was part of village life. By the time the Tressicks knocked on the kitchen door to say they had finished, the Andersons had downed three dry martinis each, which still failed to cheer.

'You take a bit of advice', said Susan, 'You get yourselves a nice gas fire like we've got.'

'No trouble at all', nodded Peter, 'There when you want it, and clean as anything'.

The log effect fires were installed within two weeks - so deceptive that visitors invariably threw spent matches or scraps of paper on to the flames which flickered realistically yet did not consume. But once these last improvements were made, and the last few objets chosen by Amanda Santos put

into their designated places, then Christine Anderson was like a child at the end of a party, wondering why it was over, and who would play with her now? Unsure of what to do with her hours she rearranged her extensive wardrobe (unsuitable as it was for the farmhouse), gazed out at the empty lane, and became neurotically aware of the din of country life. It drove her mad. At first light the Shiptons' cockerel rent the air. Dogs barked. Cows lowed. The flock set up the demanding din on the nearest hillside whenever it saw a human who might bring sheep nuts. Tractors and farm delivery lorries groaned past the house. All these noises, as well as the clang of church bells twice on Sunday were an ear-splitting reminder of rituals, rural and religious, that were alien.

When the November rain began in earnest, gusts of wind made the felt beneath the old roof flap like a sail, and sent one or two tiles spinning to shatter on the rough path, so slippery now. Christine tried to raise her spirits by planning a 'real' Christmas, with the help of magazines devoted to country living and interiors. She had imagined the village twinkling with lights, holly wreaths on doors, frosted trees, neighbours knocking with invitations, and carol singers - breath white clouds before their rosy faces, as their voices echoed shared faith and common memory, under the lantern glow.

But the rain did not stop, and she did not know the neighbours, nor - she realised - want to know them. The Rector had paid a visit - an enthusiastic young man who grasped her hand and said, 'Call me Dave'. His dumpy wife Jen trailed round the village in wellington boots, bent over the old black pram, with their three other children toddling behind like ducklings - occasionally stopping to dash the rain from her round glasses. Christine told the Rev. Dave, 'We're not churchy types, I'm afraid', and refused his wife's invitation to tea, knowing they would have nothing to talk about.

Brigadier Stevens and his wife Hilda lived in the Manor, and nodded to her at a distance, as if they had already decided that a further acquaintance would be pointless. The line of cottages called 'The Batch', was inhabited by a set of old ladies Christine could not distinguish from each other, while 'The Smithy' next door housed a women in her late forties with long red hair, whose purple, turquoise and green clothes and silver jewellery moved as she walked. Sally Tressick sniffed when she explained that Liz Woods was a potter, not married (this said darkly) but 'with weird friends'. Sometimes a group of them would walk past Church Farmhouse with their dogs, laughing and talking as they picked blackberries or collected wild flowers in baskets, while Christine peeped through the

window. She noticed that Liz Woods was friendly with Julius Simpson at the Old Rectory, whose wife Bea was a famous childrens' author, and whose brother Harry Simpson, an antique dealer, lived with his male partner next to the Manor in 'The Dower House'. (There was more pursing of lips when Mrs Tressick divulged this.) Intimidated, yet feigning distaste, Christine told Tony with some spirit that none of them looked her 'type'. He was disappointed.

Despite the unpleasant farm sounds, the Andersons had maintained a cordial, wave-at-a-distance relationship with the farmer, John Shipton and his wife Mary. Until the mud. One wet Friday evening Tony stopped his Jaguar on the rough parking verge outside their house, and stepped into mud - not the thin slick that was everywhere in this weather, but great gouts of it, thick with straw and manure. Cursing, unable to see in the pitch darkness of the lane, he attempted to wipe his shoes on the sodden grass, which made their state much worse. Walking quickly up the path he tripped on one of the uneven slabs, slipped, and almost fell. Feeling foolish, and all the more irritated, he pulled off his caked city shoes at the front door, to be met by a discontented wife who moaned that John Shipton had moved his cattle to their indoor quarters along the lane that was his right of way, driving her crazy with the noise and the smell, and spreading dung and dirt until she wanted to be sick.

‘They’re horrible great things’, she wailed, ‘And right at the back of us now!’.

‘Why did Shipton let them walk all over our parking space? The least he could do is clean up the bloody mess’, said Tony,

‘I wish....’ She stopped and sighed.

‘What?’

‘Oh, nothing’.

He knew, but did not want it said. Moodily they gulped red wine and ate their chops in silence, the mournful sounds of restless cattle echoing over the gentle patter of drizzle, like foghorns at sea.

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Something was decided that night. Tony Anderson had not built up his business from scratch without developing a clarity of vision - not just of what he wanted in life, but more importantly, how he could set about obtaining it by any means. Like his idol, Margaret Thatcher, he was decisive and most definitely not for turning. An unhappy wife who sulked in bed, farmyard stink and mud everywhere was not how he had imagined his paradise. Therefore he would act.

On Saturday morning he telephoned John Shipton, whose reponse to the complaint was displeasing. ‘It’s my

right of way - remember? And if you move to the country you have to put up with a spot of mud', he said. Tony could hear laughter in his voice. Angered, he told the farmer that the filth on the road and along the side lane was dangerous and that he would be consulting his solicitor. At that Shipton had the effrontery to laugh out loud, whereupon Tony said something unpleasant about 'yokels'. Voices were raised, and receivers slammed down, but Christine felt an obscure sense of satisfaction that something was being done.

Next Tony summoned Peter Tressick, and instructed him to rip up the dangerously uneven and unnecessarily long route to the front door, and lay a straight new path in decent, regular flags, which would in turn mean moving the front gate, in the course of which the crumbling dry stone wall might as well be taken down and a new wall, properly built from clean yellow stone, erected in its place. The front garden would be put to lawn, which would look much smarter, they both agreed. The parking space outside would be raised and gravelled, with a ramp one side and and built-up border the other, which could be planted with heathers. All this would be done, weather permitting, over Christmas and New Year while the Andersons took a break in the Bahamas. For all this masculine decisiveness Tony was rewarded by much physical affection from his wife over the weekend.

On Monday morning he put through a call to the local council, located the correct official, and made an appointment for that afternoon. In the course of the meeting he discovered that over the years one or two people had requested street lighting and proper pavements along the lanes of Little Bedcote, but other residents said they did not want to lose the rural character of the village. 'I can imagine which ones they were', said Tony with contempt. He explained how he had fallen down in the darkness and hurt himself, that his wife was afraid to go out at night, that it was unacceptably dangerous not to have a pavement on which to escape the heavy farm traffic, that the lives of the old ladies in the village were at stake, that 'real' local people like the Tressicks were on his side and would canvas support - and finished deeply moved by his own litany of woe. He left with a strong sense of a kindred spirit within the council offices.

The Andersons returned from the Caribbean at the end of January, tanned and fit, to discover Peter Tressick halfway through the work on the path and wall. But a letter of protest from Julius and Bea Simpson lay on the hall table. 'Listen to this guff!' Tony laughed, 'They're on about "our heritage of drystone walls" and "the essential character of Little Bedcote". I'll do as I please to my own property, thankyou very much!'

Christine thought the clean new path a great improvement - much easier to walk on in decent shoes, and in any case the old wall would have fallen down soon, with no cement to hold it together. ‘People should mind their own business about other people’s improvements’, she said.

‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs’, Tony added wisely.

‘Got to move with the times,’ agreed Peter Tressick, pleased by their praise of his work, ‘Village like Little Bedcote’s got to look to the future, not be a museum.’

Also awaiting their arrival was a letter from the solicitor informing Tony Anderson that he did indeed have a case against the farmer, who had already been informed of the action. ‘He won’t want it to get as far as court’, he told his wife, ‘just in case he loses. Let’s face it love, it’s a question of resources in the end’.

The weeks passed, and the worst winter weather came and went, but Christine discovered an exclusive country club with a pool, health and beauty treatments, and excellent lunch menu, which filled her days most pleasantly. Tony’s new line of foam bedsit furniture did so well that Christon Ltd doubled its profits, and Tony celebrated by buying them both new cars - a black BMW for him, and scarlet Mazda convertible for her. As Easter approached he decided he would investigate the property market further, as

house prices looked set to rise especially in the south of England. And all the time he refused to forget his objectives for the village - writing letters, making phone calls, and making a point of not acknowledging his 'snooty' neighbours if he happened to roar past any of them on his way to work.

Spring was warm; they even sat out on their patio with drinks, despite the hostile presence of John Shipton just beyond the hedge, and the distasteful sounds and smells of his farm. Asked to let the hedge grow up a little, Peter Tressick had still cut down all the wildflowers in the garden and outside on the verges, even though Christine had dared to hazard the suggestion that he leave them alone. He assured her it would be better this way - 'Otherwise they seed all over the place'. Christine did not quite understand why that would be such a bad thing, but let the matter rest.

Then, at the beginning of June two things happened which confirmed Tony Anderson in his conviction that he was a fortunate man. In the first place, he came home from the office one night to find Christine dressed in something cream and clinging, a secretive, knowing smile on her face. Champagne chilled in the ice bucket on the coffee table; two cut-glass flutes stood ready. For a second Tony panicked, thinking he had forgotten a special anniversary; then he realised this could not be the case since his secretary was so efficient, and his wife would not be smiling.

‘Guess what?’, she murmured, reaching up to kiss his cheek. Something about her movement - holding herself in a new way, proud yet fragile, so that her breasts jutted even more sensually than usual. That glow on her face of excitement tinged with nervousness was adorable, and arousing too....There was only one possible answer to the mystery.

‘Do you think you’re too old to be a Daddy again, darling?’, she asked archly.

A couple of nights later, when they had just finished dinner, the telephone rang. When Tony put the receiver down he turned to Christine with a puzzled frown. ‘My God! That was Shipton. Did I tell you the case is about to come up? Well, he wants to come round and talk to me - what do you think about that?’

About ten minutes later the doorbell rang and the farmer was standing on the doorstep, dressed unusually in a sports jacket, and holding an offering of malt whisky To Christine’s irritation Tony ushered him through to the study, dispatched her for whisky glasses, then closed the door firmly. She wandered out into the mothy warmth of the garden, and glanced through the study window to see her husband handing the farmer a glass, with a questioning look on his face. Then she lay on the sofa, with the door wide open, turning the pages of a magazine and straining her

ears. Bottle clinked on glass again and again, as it grew later and later, and gradually the mens' conversation was punctuated by loud guffaws. She was dozing by the time they emerged, stumbling slightly and exchanging loud goodnights and congratulations as they pumped each others' hands in the hall.

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The months revolve, and season blends into season. All Tony Anderson's energies were devoted to his business, the new development and - most of all - to the new baby son, Anthony Anderson Junior, who lay in his dark blue pram in French babyclothes.

John Shipton and his wife had concluded that there was no future in farming, and it was time to fulfil their ambition of running a little pub somewhere. Over the months anger over the right of way had subsided as the farmer realised that there was money to be made from his truculent neighbour - a far more profitable venture than fighting a foolish court case about a spot of mud. It was then he decided to tell Tony Anderson that he had managed to obtain outline planning permission to build on his land five years before. He knew the right people, he said, so if Tony made him an offer he could not refuse....Well then, everybody

would be happy.

Of course, many people were not happy, but their petitions and letters over many months did not prevail. The Brigadier, the potter, the publisher, the writer, the antique dealer and the gaggle of old ladies who did not want change....all of them were dismissed by the council, and by the 'real' old village residents like the Tressicks and the Shiptons, as antideluvian in their attitudes.

Little Bedcote gained street lighting, and pavements too, making it a far more civilised place to live. And although the Andersons admitted that the building work on the fields that John Shipton had once farmed was rather noisy, it would soon be completed - when the new development of executive homes, most of them with double garages, would bring new blood into the area. Christine was sure she would find friends in the architect-designed dwellings, most of which had already been pre-sold.

Since no one else farmed in the village there was no more animal manure and mud on the lane, so that Christine's new four wheel drive (essential for baby paraphernalia) remained immaculate. When he came home from work, early one warm Spring evening, and found his wife at the gate holding

up little Anthony, Tony Anderson felt tears sting and wondered what he had done to deserve such happiness. Tenderly he kissed his wife and baby. Then, waving a hand to embrace Ms Santos's farmhouse surrounded by Mr Tressick's garden and handiwork, and then the extensive muddy wastes of the half-finished building site across on the hillside, he said softly, in a voice full of emotion, 'This is what I've always wanted, Chrissie - security for the future, a lovely place in the country, and a boy who's going to inherit the lot one day.'