

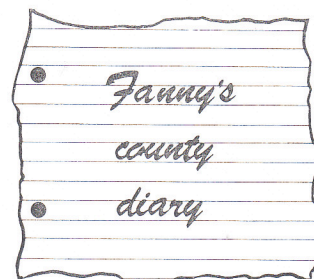
The Steps at Lemsford

BLACKBERRIES like jet sequins over the hedges. Gum-boots make dark footprints on the wet grass beneath the old tree, bent with the weight of maternal Bramleys ready to fall into cupped hands. The odour of ripe fruit mingles with the scent of mint crushed underfoot. Rose quartz Victorias and purple bloomed plums hide, semi-precious stones shaded in a cavern of leaves waiting to be mined. Espaliered branches spread widely on a wall beseeching to be harvested of drooping pears.

Through fields fragrant with cow-pats and smoke from a cottage garden bonfire to a

kissing-gate. No lovers. A gap in the hedge and in the distance a beckoning beacon, a sapling oak aflame in all the copper panoply of September glowing through the mist.

Five steep steps up, a precarious turn-around and down the other side out of the park. The river here once turned the miller's wheel but the mill has been silent many a year. It towers, honest, noble even, dwarfing every other building within sight and a thousand times more beautiful. It has been sold for offices and will hum with machinery once more, alive again. At its back, beneath the peeling paint and broken windows, a small rampant lion



set in the yellow brickwork holds a star, commemorating the mill's reconstruction in 1863.

Across the road a sun-face beams; a few yards away is its rival whose landlord used to hold a tankard of ale with a "short arm" out to the travellers in the stage-coach, not letting go till, with his "long-arm" the coins in payment were safely in his grasp. Behind the inn the mysterious butterfaced old wall, bowed and broken in places, bounds the park parallel with the motorway.

It is said the miller's daughter was a pretty maid called Nelly.

*There's an old mill by the stream,
Nelly Dean.*

Simple one-syllable words cling like burrs to the memory. The slate-roofed cottage alongside the mill is proud with new whitewash, the old flat window-frames replaced with gently-swelling bays, bull's eye panes a-glitter, shaming the shabby picket fence.

The nearby bank in spring is one of the few places where white wood violets are to be found. In summer it is a web of pink wild sweet pea. Now travellers joy traverses it.

Up the steps and down again. The sun has broken through the mist over the park and it is warm on the blackberry-picker's shoulders. The chip-basket is full and the grass a warm couch.

Awakening comes with melancholy music. Is it a dream? A kilted bagpiper marches across the meadow's horizon. No dream; he comes here to practice sometimes. The kissing-gate gently knocks behind the swinging pleats. The autumn afternoon slumbers on.

Wood knocks on wood again.

"Have you seen Mrs. Golightly since she came back from her holiday?"

Surprised glances from a family.

"Hello,"

"Hello,"

"Hello,"

"Hello."

Silence.

"What time is it?"

The sun is low. A blackbird's call is amplified in the valley's still air. A pearl-shadow of a moon ascends.

The Steps. Corridan Graddon. Exhibited in Royal Academy summer exhibition, 1977.

