

The Village Pump

The pump standing on a grassy patch at the side of the lane, never ceased to fascinate the child. Used as she had been all her six years of city dwelling to knowing water only through taps in kitchens and bathrooms, this pump was one of the many sources of wonder to her in the village. From the first time that she had stood, eye level to the wide spout, and felt the smooth cold iron of the handle in her hand, she always thought of it as The Pump with a capital 'P'! Of course, there were other sources of water in the village, two or three cottages had wells with wooden frames above them where the buckets were slung on chains down into the dark and slimy echoey depth, and all the cottages had wooden butts to catch the rainwater for washing or household use. But The Pump was special.

In summer, the water level in the butts and wells got low, and strange little creatures came up with the water, but the pump water stayed plentiful, ice cold and sweet. True, during long hot summer days the child often heard parents calling to their offspring sent to the pump to 'go easy on the water' but she knew that it would not fail and it never did. 'Going easy on the water' meant placing the bucket in exactly the right spot on the wet and shiny stones at the base of the Pump, so that when the great gushes of water came, none splashed over and was wasted. If the bucket was overfilled, it was spilt by trying to carry it home, and two causes for Mother's wrath resulted: wasted water and wet socks. The feel of water inside shoes was as familiar as it was uncomfortable.

Some of the village boys could drink from the well by pumping with one hand and putting their open mouth under the spout. This feat was greatly admired by the smaller children, but strongly discouraged by the adults who saw that also as a waste.

For most of the year, the only covering on the pump was a light brown wooden frame, with a hole cut for the spout and another for the handle, but as autumn turned to winter and the weather got colder, the Pump took on a new suit!

In one of the cottages lived an old shepherd. To the child he seemed the oldest man in the world with his white hair and beard and fierce eyebrows. He always wore an old sack across his shoulders in winter and tied his trousers beneath the knees with binder twine. He lived alone, and was avoided by the child who found him frightening and bad tempered, although she supposed he was just lonely. As the days got shorter, he would go to the Pump with great bundles of straw and make a covering for it tied on with twine. When the snow came, the straw-covered Pump wore a soft white cap, and when it rained the water ran in torrents down the stalks and onto the hands of anyone pumping the handle. The straw coat was not removed until the spring days warmed the air, and all fear of winter storms were past.

During the snowy weather, the well-used but invisible paths from each cottage to the Pump suddenly became visible. Shortcuts across neighbours grass could be seen, and the reason why bare patches never grew over became apparent! One year of very heavy snowfalls, deep channels were dug from each door to the Pump, and the white walls of these walkways were mystical to the child.

Except for the two cottages which had wells in the garden, each housewife carried every drop of water they needed from the Pump, two buckets often being carried to balance the weight. The slow walk and drooping shoulders of the women on washdays exuded weariness and patience, and was a familiar sight.

One bright spring day, the child walked along the lane, carefully placed her bucket on the wet stones, checked that it was standing firm, stood sideways to the Pump and grasped the iron handle in both hands. She raised it as high as she could above her head until she stood on tiptoe, lifted her face to the sky, shut her eyes tight, and then with all her strength swung the handle down. The great gush of water that followed reflected her joy on that day, and created an image in her to last a lifetime.

(written by Frances Piercy)