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DENIS
MACKAIL

Author of "UPSIDE DOWN" (51ST Thous.)

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AM I ?

HUTCHINSON



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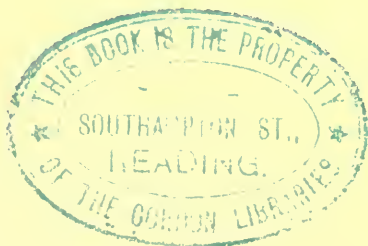
WHERE AM I?

OR

A Stranger Here Myself

by

DENIS MACKAIL



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CHAPTER I

A NURSERY WINDOW

THE window of the nursery in which I had somehow found myself looked over a London side street. To the right, a few hundred yards away, horse-omnibuses rumbled along a main thoroughfare, where already a shop that now sprawls all over the neighbourhood had begun (though this was as nothing yet) to expand. To the left, and almost at once, the side street itself expanded into a Square; which is the nearest that I have yet come to living in one, though I seem to have written about them a good deal. Almost immediately opposite there was another nursery window, with children, though older than myself, whom it appeared that I knew. They, and my elder sister, would sometimes breathe on their respective panes and write messages, of a simple nature, in reverse. However, as I wasn't only younger but was taking a curiously long time to learn my letters, I was unable to interpret them myself.

That would have been in the winter, of course, when windows were shut—unless my memory is up to some very queer trick again, I could swear that during at least one cold snap we were hermetically sealed in with strips of brown paper pasted along the sides, tops, and bottoms of both sashes—and breath would condense visibly at once. It was in the winter, too, that everyone's water-supply used to freeze—here, however, the clock has come round—and that the turncock would plant little stand-pipes, wrapped with straw, in the street, from which pails or jugs could be filled. Just as it was in the winter, or when dusk came before six o'clock, that I could watch the approach of the lamp-lighter, bearing fire at the end of a pole; adding a glimmer—or it would hardly seem more now—to each lamp as he passed; and then striding once more on his way.

Gas lamps, of course. Just a flame in the shape of a fish-tail. Today, from a much higher window, I look down on a street still supposedly gas-lit, though by what is also supposed to be a much better method. But there is no lamp-lighter. Instead, there are little electric batteries, and ingenious contrivances, with still more ingenious self-adjustment to sunset and sunrise, which in theory perform all the work. In practice, as I cannot help noticing—unless, of course, there is another black-out—some of the lamps are on all day, others fail to come on at night, while others, again, either burn right round the clock or never light up at all. Never

mind, though. This is progress; a lamp-lighter's pay has been saved; and no one can bring back the past.

So much for the winter, then; with perhaps a fleeting regret for those choking, blinding, and—as I didn't have to go out in them myself—romantic and thrilling fogs. I am not alone, though, in thinking far oftener of the summer when I look back. And of fine weather; for everyone does. In the summer, of course, the top sash would certainly be open, and very likely the lower as well. The sun-blind, glowing warmly from soon after noon—for the house faced due west—with a rich, brownish light, would have been fixed by now. But this wasn't all. On the outer sill, and kept from falling into the area below by bars that performed the same service for me, there now also stood six flower-pots. Three contained scarlet geranium-plants. And three—year after year—yellow musk.

Do you remember it? You don't, of course—you can't—unless you are approaching my age. It still grows, that is to say, or so I am told. But for some reason the fragrance that came from its blooms is now lost to this world. You can still look at it, but you can't smell it; for there is nothing any longer to smell.

Yet once, as I well remember, there was. The scent filled that nursery, when the hot days arrived. It was part of the summer. Why has it left us? No botanist knows. It has just gone, with the old, fish-tail gas-burners; and though I may be a foggy and a sentimentalist about fish-tail gas-burners, or the coal-fires that brought on those fogs, yet must I, or need I, defend such a role when I think what has happened to musk?

I should say not. I should say this was the complete answer to any attack that may be based on a few lines from Horace, or Ecclesiastes. Here, to my mind, is the definite proof that this world, since I accidentally joined it, has gone rolling down hill. The only doubt, indeed—I have tackled some of my contemporaries about this, who may have laughed at first, but then seem a little uneasy; the only doubt, I repeat, is as to how far this is their or my fault.

No, I know I did nothing to the musk; or nothing on purpose. I just sniffed it, as it appeared every year, until it ceased to appear. So, very likely, did they; but then that wasn't all. Without going so far as to assert that we should have dropped everything else, at that age, so as to cultivate musk, I can't help remembering how, at that age, also, and though never remarkable for a natural or inborn jingoism—which indeed would have been rather a surprising attribute in my case—I yet constantly offered up thanks not only because I was British, which was quite clearly the best thing to be, but because (if I had got to be born at all) I had chanced to be born when I was.

For in those days I had rather a horror of the past. I was delighted to have avoided the Battle of Hastings, the Black Death, the block,

the Fire of London, the press-gang, Mr. Grimes, Mr. Squeers, and the custom of duelling. I never doubted—though neither did countless others—that the close of the Victorian era marked something, so far as peace and security went, in the nature of an earthly millennium. Any further developments I was convinced could only be for the better. It never occurred to me, for instance, that within a few, short years there would be no street-lighting at all.

I was young, of course. Very innocent, and very ignorant. But still I ask—and this is what makes my contemporaries first smile and then blench—were we utterly mistaken about our luck, or did we throw it away? For it isn't only that we have grown up, or that some of us are even looking a little elderly now. It is a plain fact—musk or no musk—that the future that lay ahead of us has proved quite as bad as the past. Worse, indeed, for there has been less excuse, and everything has been on a far bigger scale. Did our parents do this? We know they didn't. Did we? Then how, when, and why?

No answer. Of course we should love to put the blame on someone else. It would be an enormous relief. *Post hoc*, we have been told, isn't bound to be *propter hoc*. Yet unless we were all cursed—and if so, again why?—can we feel, since it is quite clear that it all began happening at just about the time when we chanced to be born, that chance was the sole cause of it, too? Very awkward. Dashed awkward. Our children, by the way, seem to have no doubt at all that it was entirely our fault. But even if we were born again—

Well, we can't be. Or if we are, we shan't know it, which is just the same thing. We can look back, though. As the future looms darker than ever, and though the kind of past to which I alluded just now may still be considered to have had a number of serious disadvantages, some of us—in the intervals of queueing and washing-up—can still snatch a glance at the close of the Victorian era. Or some of us, if a bit tired or depressed, can still gaze from a nursery window.

* * * * *

It is the First of May again. May-day. If Labour is already demonstrating its solidarity and hatred of Capitalism anywhere, I haven't heard of this, and there is no sign of it here. But there is something else, as I am drawn to the window. A noise, a buzz, some rather primitive music, and then the approach of a small, gay throng. Its centre, or hub, is a man so completely concealed in a kind of framework of leaves that I can see nothing but his face, for which a hole has been left, and his feet. He is dancing, jiggling, and twirling. Around him there is a group of supporters, perhaps a couple of whom are providing the music—as it might be from a tin whistle and drum—and all of whom are also dressed up.

As what? I don't quite know. And, looking back, I should rather doubt if they were quite certain, either. But one of them has his jacket inside-out, with some ribbons attached to it. Another is plunging about—he looks nearly eight feet high, but of course he can't be—in a sunbonnet and female attire. The rest—there are about five or six altogether—have been equally simple or ingenious in disguising themselves. Their faces are expressionless, though it is of course possible that they are exhibiting rapture, and their steps are distinctly unskilful; but they have been going around like this all morning—attended by what would now seem a ridiculously small group of children—and they don't seem tired of it yet.

They wheel and twist. They advance and retreat. I am a little puzzled, though enchanted; for I still haven't studied *The Golden Bough*, and no one has yet quite succeeded in explaining to me what they think they are up to. I am aware, nevertheless, that the principal figure—the one in the framework of leaves—is called Jack-in-the-Green, and there is a legend that when he is not doing this he is, of all characters, a chimney-sweep. His face, however, is clean today, as it peers from his bosky attire. And, though it is obvious that he isn't engaged on his ordinary business, he isn't here entirely for fun.

No, no. Part of his immortal spirit, no doubt, is welcoming the spring—as it has been welcomed here, and in the country, for thousands of years. Part of him in other words, is a priest in a way; but even priests must be paid. So he pauses. He looks up; and so do his companions. The children seem a little disgusted at this interruption to the rites; but the householders know what to do. They open their own windows, if they are not open already, and pennies start tinkling down. With any luck I am given a penny myself, and with more luck will succeed in lobbing it over the area railings into the roadway—where the man-woman snatches it up. I feel feudal, though it wasn't my penny. I feel alarmed as he, or she, blows me a kiss. Will they dance again now? Will they resume that extraordinary music? That's what I am hoping, of course.

But they don't. They never do. For the chance that had wafted me into this nursery towards the close of the Victorian era had also arranged that it should be next door to a public-house. It has been mentioned by the great William Makepeace Thackeray, who once also lived in the same street; and when I first knew it—though only from the outside, of course—had been standing there since the reign of William and Mary. Shortly afterwards, as I need perhaps hardly add, it was pulled down and rebuilt, without a trace—though again I am only alluding to the outside—of its original charm. But it was there then, in its earlier form, and though I knew very little about it—beyond the fact that it emitted a peculiar smell, and that on Saturday nights its patrons made a good deal of noise—

the masquers or merrymakers must have been well aware what it sold.

As they must also have acquired quite a number of coins by now, as public-houses were open all day then, as beer, judging by modern standards, cost practically nothing, and as dancing and prancing from street to street must quite unquestionably have been thirsty work, the next phase was a complete cessation of their activities and an absorption into The Greyhound. The pageant was over for the next twelve months, or at least I am unable to recall their emergence. The children dispersed. If the sun had been shining, and I am almost sure it had, there was a little less brilliance now. But May had returned. There could be no doubt of that. And the next thing, of course, would be the return of the six flower-pots as well.

It's odd, though—or isn't it?—that there is a complete blank in my mind about the first May when there was no Jack-in-the-Green. Of course, or so it seems as I look back, I existed in a highly vague state, for most part of the time, as to even what season it was. Christmas stood out; and my birthday, which by a rather neat arrangement came near the other solstice, was conspicuous, too; but apart from these (and I still had to be reminded on what date Christmas actually fell) there was little to go by. April, July, November—what did they mean to me then? They were just words that grown-ups employed. So perhaps I looked out from that window on another May-day, and missed nothing. Or perhaps—I don't know—a Jack-in-the-Green still danced the last year I was there.

But I do know that I never saw him or his companions again after we moved—which was when I was about seven or eight—to a different house. And I should be surprised if he outlasted the Era. I see chimney-sweeps still, though less often than once, as they go speeding about nowadays on motor-bicycles, with their brushes and rods in a side-car. But when May-day comes round they no longer dress up, and haven't for many a long year. I dare say they would be moved on now, if they made the attempt. But they don't, for the old days have gone. I am still here myself, of course, or part of me is. So is the spring, though it is not quite what it was. Even others have noticed that it comes at the wrong time of year now; and perhaps—who knows?—this is because there is no Jack-in-the-Green.

* * * * *

What else, as I gaze down from that window? Barrel-organs, of course, which were an Italian monopoly then. I loved them; though I came to loathe them a bit later in life—and am even sorry, I am afraid, that they are returning again—for they have never assisted my writing.

A tall Scotsman—alas, I should now be opposed to him, too—who performed on the bagpipes. Once the most dreadful thing happened to me, though I was out in the street at the time. I was goggling at him, I suppose, and appreciating the row rather than the melody—which still, even when not writing, is the best that I can find to say about bagpipes—when, inspired by his own music, or by my pop-eyed appearance, he suddenly stopped playing, picked me up, whirled me round in the air, and put me down again. To say that, during this frightful experience, the whole of my past life came before me, is perhaps the wrong kind of imagery, since I can hardly have been more than about three. But I have never got over it. Though more than half Scotch myself, the wonder remains that I ever recovered my reason. Or perhaps I didn't. Perhaps that's what the trouble has been all this time. Though now I think of it there was another cause, too.

For while still at the same window, where you might have thought I was safe, there came a day when the front door bell rang. As it wasn't an electric bell, it jangled loudly. I suddenly became filled with curiosity, or perhaps—for there were occasional flashes of this—with the desire to do something grown-up. I couldn't see who had rung, for even if the window had been open, I was too short to peer over the sill. But my nurse and sister were out of the room, I suppose. The house-parlourmaid may possibly have been changing her dress, for it was about the time of day that she did. And the cook—well, I don't know what the cook was doing; but perhaps she was wrapped up in her work.

In any case nobody stopped me or anticipated me as I climbed down the stairs—carefully placing both feet on each tread before risking the next move—and advanced through the hall. I reached up for the door-knob. I had only recently acquired the art of turning it at all—this, again, may have had something to do with my rash behaviour—and it is almost certain that I fumbled a bit before shifting the latch.

But then I did shift it. I opened the door. And there, less than a yard away, were—if you can believe it—two Sisters of Mercy. Can you picture my feelings? Or can't you?

I understand now, or have somehow gained the impression, that these admirable women put on that disguise—long, black robes, a black head-covering, and a starched frame for the face—as a symbol or indication that they are definitely not out so as to flaunt their perhaps imaginary beauty. It is for the same reason—to be even safer from the mere suspicion of scandal—they they hunt, or ring bells so as to ask alms, in couples. But even one nun would have been enough for me. The attire, so far as I was concerned, could scarcely have been more ingeniously designed for the purpose

of striking terror into the young. Even when I had seen a nun in the crowded High Street, I had at once and involuntarily grabbed at my mother's or nurse's hand. Oh, yes, I knew they were good. Or I had been told they were good. But their garments, their indescribably sinister garments, were against them. Only one other character—the ghost who appears to Punch towards the conclusion of that hero's dramatic adventures—had anything like such an appalling effect on my very marrow.

And now there were two of them; and I was in their power. I was being punished, of course, for doing something—*videlicet*, leaving the nursery and opening the front door—which, too late, I now saw was a crime. Then one of them smiled. I think I can guess why now, but this never even occurred to me then. No crocodile—or, according to the same Mr. Punch, no crockety-diddle-o—could have produced a more paralysing result. All strength left my limbs. I am sure I should have yelled, if I could. But I couldn't. This was the end.

As a matter of fact, however—which is why, I suppose, I am still here—only a few moments can actually have elapsed before the house-parlourmaid came bustling down, in her own black dress (not robes, thank Heaven) and white apron and cap, and saved me for so much that was to follow. I have no idea how she dealt with the dread Sisters—whether, that is to say, she advanced them a little cash or shut the door in their faces—just as I have no recollection how I managed to get back to the nursery. There is just a blank here, for I was as good as unconscious. Moreover, I told no one what had happened; or not at least for a considerable time. But I didn't go opening the front door again—good gracious, no; I should jolly well think not!—for quite a long period, either. I had had enough of it. Just as I had had enough of Scotchmen with bagpipes. Though it's amazing what one survives.

Let us close on a calmer note, and at the window once more. Of course, in addition to my normal nightmares about demons, I was now suffering, in my little crib, from nuns playing bagpipes and Scotchmen who suddenly turned into nuns. But the window was all right; my grand stand looking down on the street. There were the butchers' high, two-wheeled gigs, dashing along at an incredible speed—though how the butchers stayed on them I still can't imagine. There was the milkman, with his barrow, festooned with a collection of highly insanitary cans—yet somehow I would seem to have survived these, too. There was the knife-grinder, treading away. There were women still singing of lavender—though describing, which always perplexed me, each stalk as a branch. There was the one-man band, who played on pan-pipes and a concertina in a comparatively normal manner, but wore a hat covered with bells; thumped a drum, on his back, with a drum-stick lashed to one elbow;

and clashed cymbals, on top of the drum, by means of a string attached to one foot.

There was the watering-cart, two-wheeled and horse-drawn, also, which by some extraordinary luck was refilled only a few yards to the left; and when it set off—spurting and splashing—customarily supported and drenched a few ragged children, too.

And there was the window itself. I suppose it was a dull day, for at the present moment I can think of no better reason, when I found myself with a wooden hoop-stick—incidentally, I was one of the worst hoop-drivers in Kensington Gardens, and once suffered the indignity of being given a lesson in the art by a park-keeper—and began gently tapping the pane. No, I didn't mean to break it. Of course, I thought a little later, if I hit it harder, I *might* break it. I seem somehow to have decided that I *would* hit it harder. I did. I broke it. As it was quite useless to pretend that I hadn't broken it, and quite impossible to explain why I had, I believe I then roared—as the best way out of the situation. It was rather fun, though, after I had ceased roaring and had been forgiven, when a man came, with putty, to mend it; and left a small dollop behind. Curiously enough, one of my daughters did exactly the same thing, about thirty years later, to her own nursery window; and then roared in just the same way. Heredity, I suppose; for certainly it wasn't her father—who must do part of the forgiving now—who put the idea into her head.

And that is enough now, perhaps, about the original window—though the last note, I fear, wasn't quite as calm as I hoped. It was from here, however—almost, if not quite, my own earliest memory—that I set out, because I had no choice but to set out, on the journey that has now reached this page. Yet what made me start? Why, out of billions—yes, literally billions of chances—should I have been trapped and imprisoned in *me*?

Or, again, am I indeed the same being—for most assuredly I don't look it—as the child, not yet breeched (but that came later then), who once smelt the scent of the musk?

I can't make it out. Of course, and I am fully aware of this, the answer isn't of the slightest importance to anyone else. But *am* I that child? If so—or, indeed, if not—how on earth did I get here? Or is the whole thing—though I have no wish to puzzle and worry you, too—no more, as it seemed so often at the beginning and still seems at this point, than another dream or fantastic illusion?

CHAPTER II

THE RIGHT WORD FOR IT

Y O U know—unless, that is to say, you are an extremely exceptional case—how you sometimes start speaking; how other people, for once, even seem to be listening; how you embark on a sentence with complete and entire knowledge of what you are about to observe; and how, suddenly and without warning, you have no longer the very faintest idea. Some pilgrims would account for this by physical and others by metaphysical causes. But it can be exceedingly tiresome. For either you must now plunge, stumble, and produce some quite footling conclusion—thereby perhaps leading your acquaintances to form the opinion that you are an ass. Or else you must admit, quite frankly, that you have forgotten what you were going to say; thus achieving an indistinguishable effect.

Personally, for I am rather truthful at times, I favour the latter procedure. Personally, also, it is my view that about half the tosh inflicted on me, in what is known as company, is due to other persons adopting the former. But it is constantly happening. Our skulls are too small or too inelastic; or the blood ceases for an instant to reach the right part of the brain; or we're human; and then there we are.

“What *I* always think,” says a voice, with dogmatic conviction, “is that— Er—Ar—Um— Well, that—” And then somehow it gets out of the mess; though certainly not by saying what it was trying to say when it began.

“What *I* always think,” is my own and possibly inferior version, “is that—” Here the shutter comes down. The black-out. The sensation of madness. I smile feebly. “I’m sorry,” I add, “but I’m afraid it’s gone out of my head.”

On the whole I then find, though I am still feeling my position acutely myself, that another voice is quite ready to take on. Furthermore, at about three o’clock on the following morning—when I generally wake up, and groan, and think of everything that I don’t want to think of—there is a very strong chance that this other great thought will return. But it is too late, of course. Nobody wishes to be rung up at three o’clock in the morning to be told what someone else was going to have said about six hours or even longer ago. It is too stale by then. Besides, they wouldn’t only think me an ass, but a boor.

Even at breakfast-time it seems better, taking a broad view of the whole thing, to let bygones be bygones. But it will happen again, of course. It is bound to. It is part of one's life. With enough luck it may be someone else's turn next time. But if thoughts are radiations, as some say they are, the entire expanding universe, I should imagine, is crammed with the ends of these sentences. Perhaps this accounts for the weather that we have been having lately. Well, *I*—to use the modern, familiar, and rather desperate phrase—wouldn't know.

But I know something else. Unfinished sentences, I should say, have formed part of the dream for hundreds and thousands of years. But now there is a new catch. Latterly, I have remarked—I think it began during the war, but alleged peace seems, if anything, to have made it still more pronounced—I, and others, too, aren't only afflicted by the amnesia that I have just described, but by a further confusion as well.

We don't, that is to say—or not in the instances that I am now considering—break down in the midst of a sentence. We just use some preposterous word. Or a word, to be more accurate, that isn't necessarily preposterous in itself, but isn't the least what we mean.

Here is an example. In the flat, or collection of concrete cubes, where I find myself living at present, so thin are the partitions, and so pervious to sound, that if I wish to address my wife, or if she wishes to address me, we just speak from wherever we are. Of course, if I am washing-up at the time, or if she has got something spluttering under the grill, we don't hear each other. But generally we do; just as we hear the people in the flat above, in the flat below, in the flat through the wall, and in a number of other flats within range. So I say—this is the example—"Hullo!"

And my wife says: "Yes?"

And I say: "Have you seen my cucumber anywhere?"

And she comes rushing in my direction, looking a little alarmed and bewildered—for as a matter of fact she has been trying, and in vain, to buy a cucumber for weeks—and it then appears, after some further exchange of observations, that when I said "cucumber," I meant (well, of course!) "umbrella." She is then able to remind me that I took it to be repaired about six months ago, and though it returned about four months later, two more ribs broke the first time I tried to put it up, so that it is now once more back at the shop.

That's quite all right, then. That's perfectly simple and straightforward. No one should really expect to have an umbrella in any other condition at the moment, and nothing could be more natural than that I should forget this and start hunting for it. But why, why on earth—this is the catch, of course—did I call it a cucumber?

Don't run away, please, if you happen—though this is unlikely—to be less afflicted yourself, with any idea that this was due to the

very slight similarity in sound. For I might just as well have called it a tooth-brush. I probably shall, what is more, next time. Just as it is conceivable that my wife has so far failed to secure a cucumber, by repeatedly asking for a telescope. The greengrocer wouldn't think this the least strange, of course; partly because not less than three persons are generally trying to speak to him at once—so that he has rather given up listening—and partly because, if he does listen, he must be quite used by now to being asked for balloons or bath-chairs. And yet, you know, it *is* a bit queer.

I am not making it up, though. I don't think I could. I got into a taxi the other day with a contemporary, because we both happened to be going to the same point of the compass; and as I knew, for he had told me, that his destination came first, I waited for him to speak to the driver.

He said, rather to my astonishment: "Will you go to the Cork-Screw?"

What he meant, of course, was to give the name of his Club, which I need hardly say isn't "Cork-Screw" at all, and doesn't even begin with a "C." At his second attempt—for one can't really blame the driver for being a little un-co-operative about the first one—he was more successful, and we set off. But he seemed a trifle cast down. He said: "I can't think why I said 'Cork-Screw.' I wasn't even thinking of cork-screws. But I'm always doing it now; and not only with nouns. I was talking to a fellow yesterday, and I wanted to say——" here he looked absolutely wild for a second, but luckily the right cortex clicked—"yes, I wanted to say 'arithmetically'—well, why not, after all?—and I said 'fraternally.' It's getting a bit worrying, you know."

"It's quite common," I said, trying to console him. I also told him, with the same aim in view, how I had gone to have my hair cut, and had said: "Don't make it too blue"—under the impression, until I saw the hairdresser's air of surprise in the big looking-glass, that I had been saying: "Don't cut it too short."

"Really?" said my contemporary. But he looked nervous now. It seemed that it was all right—or all right on second thoughts—that he should have referred to his club as the Cork-Screw, but that my own good-natured confession had now stamped me as a borderline case. Unless I was mistaken, he seemed relieved when our association broke up. Ungrateful, I thought. Dash it, I thought, it was no worse to ask a barber not to make it too blue than to say "fraternally" when you meant "arithmetically." If anyone, I thought, was in danger of being cauterised—by which, naturally, I meant "certified"—by a couple of doctors, it wasn't myself, but my friend.

I then went into a shop, ordered a shirt—I should have been quite glad to have a couple, only neither the material nor my

coupons would run to this—was told that I should be lucky if I got it in about three months' time, and said: "I see. That'll be Wednesday"—by which, again (and it was a little stupid of the salesman to look puzzled), I should have thought it was perfectly clear that I meant "April."

And thus it goes on. Sometimes, when other people do it, I am amused. Sometimes, when I do it myself, it seems less entertaining. But it is going on all the time now, all over the place. It has become as prevalent, if not more so, as the occlusion—yes, and that *is* the word I mean, so there!—to which I alluded a few minutes ago. What is the reason? Strain, of course. The incessant, intolerable strain of the last ten years. And, in my view, our food.

With that last word I am entering a province, and I am quite aware of this, where more rubbish is talked than about almost anything else in the world. Even in the days of plenty, when fat people used to explain that their weight had no connection with what they consumed, when people with dyspepsia used to say that it was pure superstition that crumpets and pickled walnuts (if they happened to fancy these delicacies) weren't good for them, and greedy people with gout would attribute their sufferings, with a distinct air of pride, to their ancestors' diet; yes, even in those happy, far-off times, there was also plenty of tosh about food. While today—for though there is far less, it is discussed even more—there is still what one might describe as a deficiency of both logic and sense.

Well, take, to start off with, the Ministry of Stomachs; headquarters and source of it all. Observe the crazy ingenuity with which in one and the same announcement—published, by the way, at your expense—it will advise you to eat what you can't obtain, and to obtain what you don't want to eat. Remark its strange custom of taking away with one hand what it gives with the other, and then suggesting that you are better off than before. Consider its obstinacy when it makes a mistake, and how it twists, writhes, and wriggles until it has convinced itself, if nobody else, that it has never slipped up in its life. Reflect on its recipes, where the whole week's bacon or cheese goes into some extraordinary pie, but is then apparently available—on paper, at least—for a no less remarkable hash. Think of its price-fixing, almost always and automatically for something you can't buy at all. Of its bulk-purchases, and the costly results. Sometimes one is tempted to say that it isn't human; only, alas, that is just what it is.

Or take its liege lord; the great Gastrarch himself. He has different names from time to time. He arrives, abruptly, from the Admiralty, as it might be, or the Board of Education, or the Home Office; and though it is possible that during his sojourn at these outfits he may have learnt something about ships, or scholarships, or hangings, it is quite clear that he hasn't learnt about food. It

is equally clear that, for some weeks or months at any rate, he must be guided entirely—unless he wishes to produce utter chaos—by the resident mandarins. For we all know this.

But he is a politician. He talks. He tells us that we are better fed now than before the war. He tells us that there will soon be plenty of this, that, or the other—though it doesn't always sound very nourishing—and apparently trusts to the shortness of our memories, or to the fact that he can broadcast and give Press-conferences and we can't, to prevent any awkward reaction when the goods don't turn up. He then adds that we shall be sunk, dished, and damned if he removes any controls or dispenses with a single obstruction to shopping, and that his Ministry will certainly continue its parasitical labours—though he may not actually employ that last adjective—until 1950, or 1960, or possibly until the end of the world.

Not long afterwards the blast from some crisis will have wafted him, no less abruptly, into another and perhaps better-paid job. That's why his name doesn't matter. And why *he* doesn't matter—except to himself, of course. But though in his reported utterances, or in the broadcasts which he reads from a typescript, he generally manages to avoid saying "porcupine," for example, when he really means "canned fruit," one feels pretty certain that he is saying it in private life. For he, too—except, of course, when he dashes across the Atlantic and gets a square meal—is eating this bread.

That, on top of the strain, is what I put it all down to. For I can remember bread, or what used to be called bread, and it wasn't the same stuff at all.

Not only were the loaves larger—the Gastrarch hopes you have forgotten this, too, which is why I remind you—but it was often delicious. It didn't turn blue, or green, or grow toadstools, if you took your eyes off it for a few moments. You could cut it with a bread-knife. It smelt good. It wasn't soggy in the middle, and unnaturally hard round the crust. One used to spread fresh butter on it, and eat it, and feel better for it. Now one can't.

“While chalk and alum and plaster are sold to the poor for bread,

And the spirit of murder works in the very means of life.”

That was Lord Tennyson, that was; in *Maud*, first published in 1855. As a prophecy it seems quite up to the standard of that bit about the nations' aerial navies grappling in the central blue, though of course it wasn't meant as a prophecy. I suppose he thought it was true then, and perhaps it was. But, by gum, it's true now, or as true as any poetry need be. It may not be chalk, it may not be alum, it may not even be plaster. If it comes to that, it doesn't actually kill us outright. But we are all poor now; and whatever

they have put into it, not only, according to a canine dietician, does it give dogs hysteria, but hasn't left much of our wits.

Still we are all in the same boat. That is one comfort. If a Minister of Stomachs talks rubbish, so do all the other Ministers; and so do you; and so do I. So—just to show how broadminded I am—does the Shadow-Cabinet, and the T.U.C.; not to mention the Greyhound Racing Association and the Church Assembly. They do this, or such is my own ill-nourished impression, not because they have deliberately put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains, for that enemy has become far too expensive; but because if they want a sandwich or a slice of toast, they can only procure some extraordinary and mysterious substitute. Sometimes this seems rather a pity.

Am I suggesting, then, that we were all cleverer ten years ago? Yes, I think I am; though we weren't clever enough to make friends with our other enemies, or to federate while there was still something to unite. Yet there is a catch, here, too. Not only the old catch that any individual has more intelligence than any government, though not enough, apparently, to get rid of them; but the catch that as I am full of queer chemicals as well as a modicum of flour, my own cogitations are bunk. It is the reverse of our old friend the spiral, in fact, that we see (or so we are told) in Inflation. For this one—as worse bread produces more stupidity, and more stupidity produces even worse bread—goes steadily twiddling down.

Mind you, I am not talking about the quantity. My own difficulty—and that of others, too, or so they have said—has seldom been that there wasn't enough. Quite the contrary. There has been an almost permanent notice on the door of this flat, beseeching the roundsman to cut down his deliveries. But he couldn't, it seemed. He was caught in the machine. Exhausted by trundling a hand-cart full of substitute loaves that nobody wanted, and driven mad, no doubt, by the hours spent in collecting and counting little pieces of paper—so that sometimes he hasn't reached us until we have all gone to bed—he abandoned his practice of ringing the bell; dumped as much as he dared on the doormat; and beat it.

Each time any of us tried to go out, we stumbled over a further supply. We couldn't eat them all. We couldn't hope to, though we did our best, and became pale, puffy, and paranoiac in consequence. It was—though this didn't surprise us—quite untrue that these objects would keep, if we followed official instructions. Bloating and baffled, we were yet in terror of being denounced for hoarding, or of being gaoled for putting loaves—whatever colour they might now have become—in the dustbin. We tried offering them to other tenants, but of course they were in just the same state. They took to avoiding us. We took to avoiding them, too; lest our little kitchen,

which already looked like a nightmare bakery, should actually burst its walls.

But the stuff wasn't bread, you know. It was a political symbol. It enabled our rulers to say, in the first place, that we weren't starving—as if mere unpalatable bulk were enough—and, in the second place, that they were saving huge ship-loads of wheat. I dare say they were. There was also a violent struggle, on the sidelines—approved, one would judge, by the rulers, as confusing the issue—by those who said that the white loaf was poison and those who upheld other shades. In fact, it was a high old time for everyone; except that symbols don't strengthen the frame.

Or the brain-cells, either. That's what I'm getting at. I don't say, of course, that ten years of anxiety, accompanied, during much of the time, by the descent of a variety of bombs, and culminating in a super-bomb which, with a little more development, can clearly destroy the whole planet, was the best way of soothing the nerves. Yet it is my theory—which is quite as good as anyone else's—that it is the alleged bread that has proved the last straw; or, if you prefer it, husk. For it *is* symbolic. It has been the symbol, for many centuries, of civilisation; the real distinction—far more than his ability to drop bombs, which, after all, are only a technical advance on coconuts—between Man and his forbears, the Apes. So that now—if one may put it like this—that he has monkeyed with bread, he is indeed on the way back to the start.

Already, you see, he is going about—for though I still can't make out how I got here, there seems to be a general if guarded opinion that I, too, am a species of Man—saying “cucumber” when he means “umbrella”; or “cork-screw,” to take an instance from another quite representative quarter, when he believes that he is saying “United University.” From this to gibbering is merely a step. Just as gibbering leads, surely, to swinging by a long, hairy arm from tree to tree. And this in turn, if not in a comparative jiffy, takes us back to the trilobites—bless their innocent hearts!—just lying around in the ooze.

That's where we're heading. It is now a race, perhaps, between the scientists who are seeking to develop destruction and the scientists who are playing tricks with the loaf. In a sense, therefore, it looks as if the scientists—no, I'm sorry, but I just *can't* bless their innocent hearts—are going to win anyhow. But there is a flaw here. For the scientists who are so industriously planning to wreck the whole globe are eating the same or at least very similar loaves, too. Can't you see what will happen? At any moment now one of them will say “Tuesday” when he means “August,” or perhaps “twenty-five million volts” when he means “cigarette.” And though, of course, one doesn't *want* one of their huge experimental stations to go sailing skywards owing to a slip of the tongue like this, one can't help

feeling—since there has always been a vast difference between inventing a new method of massacre and turning it on yourself—that it will somehow discourage the breed.

The surviving scientists—it is just possible—may stop looking bland; may cease to affront us by saying that the employment of their knowledge is someone else's responsibility, and that nothing can halt progress. Some of the dear fellows who, when it was far too late, suddenly appealed to the idiots who had supplied them with funds not to use what they had supplied in return, may even think, in a less scientific spirit, and return to looking at microbes through microscopes. As a matter of fact, or so I gather, they have been doing this anyhow, with a view to infecting whole nations and continents with a bomb about the size of a green pea. Yet the bread may still save us, if they make the same sort of slip. And when they have made it, and have been buried, a reaction among their colleagues might conceivably bring back real bread.

Admittedly, this is a very hopeful and rose-coloured view. I am conscious of that. But though it is quite true that I have, in common with the rest of the race, rather fallen into the habit of opening my mouth to say one word and then somehow emitting another, I don't see why I should apologise for the sunniness of my nature—which, indeed, it would be impossible to conceal from any one of you now. I am like that, you see. Looking on the bright side has always been one of my characteristics. I can't help it. I suppose I was born that way. I am just a natural theodolite.

Oh, I beg your pardon. Erratum, corrigendum, and I can't think how I made such a ridiculous blunder. Of course I didn't mean "theodolite." I meant "optimist." Yes, that's the right word for it.

CHAPTER III

WET PAINT

IT was like coming out of a tunnel, in a way, and with one's back to the engine. A kind of nothingness at first, though an acceptance—for it is no use being anything but fatalistic in a tunnel—of some rather scanty, objective phenomena. There one is (and there was I) in a condition where, with the very minimum of conscious effort, one is moving somehow and somewhere. It isn't (and wasn't) entirely pleasant. But one is in for it (as I was in for it), under the guidance and protection, it would seem, of some possibly trustworthy power. The sounds with which one is surrounded would appear to have very little significance, but it is a part of their quality that they tend to deaden rather than to stimulate thought. If one is warm—and in the other aspect of the analogy I was generally quite warm enough—one is content, on the whole, to be patient; and to see what can be seen, which isn't much now, of course, without a particularly discriminative eye.

The eye is alive, though, if not specially alert. And though it may see the other passengers as blobs rather than beings, and the planes and perspective of the foreground—there is no background, of course—as unrelated to any determinate purpose, it can yet send a swift enough message, first of alarm and then of patience again, should another train dash by. Or suddenly, in the outer darkness, there is a flare, brilliantly illuminating a figure that is then gone in a flash. The eye is enormously impressed, though it doesn't quite know why. This is something to remember. An experience or impact has become etched on an inner retina, too. One may not, and probably doesn't, pause to ask for what reason a man is standing and apparently doing nothing in the middle of a tunnel. But though he has vanished, one doesn't forget.

Now, almost imperceptibly at first, there is a faint lightening from without. One no longer sees only the compartment, or its ghostly reflection, but—gradually—volumes of smoke. Then brickwork; not much in this yet, though it hints at a wider world. And then the light is so clear, as one glides into a deep cutting, that the passengers have become people instead of meaningless shapes; and the carriage, as one now sees or at least feels, is only part of a much bigger affair. If one has been travelling with a companion, one can now hear what he is saying. His words, instead of being

merged in the uproar, or resembling sounds under an anaesthetic, may even convey certain thoughts.

But as one is still plunging backward—though of course forward, in another sense—it is still impossible, even if one is out of the cutting now, and on an embankment, perhaps, with a view of vast stretches of country, to see where one is going; or being hurtled. And that's Life. Or that's the analogy; though it is a little weaker, no doubt, if one has made the same journey before. However, as I have pointed out, and with all possible respect to such readers as clearly recall being Cleopatra or Alfred the Great, Life, for all practical purposes, must remain a fresh journey each time. Mine was, anyhow; or the one that I am talking about now. And in my case, as I emerged from the tunnel, and realised, if a bit vaguely, that the world was rather larger than I may at first have supposed, and understood some of the words that were being addressed to me or were being exchanged among adults, it also appeared that I had been born into a background of painters.

By this I don't mean house-painters, with their past connotation of long ladders and whistling, and their present association with priority and the crime of preserving your own woodwork; but painters of pictures. They have also been called artists. Indeed, some people used this term then. Yet it comes back to me, in memories of my own run through the cutting, that they didn't employ it themselves. It was a word, on the whole, for outsiders to use; though, of course, it wasn't as dreadful, shocking, and altogether impossible as "artistic."

No, they called themselves painters. They spoke of each other as painters—that is to say, when they weren't alluding to sculptors, or engravers, or experts in other forms of design. And as my grandfather was a painter, my uncle was a painter, one of my great uncles by marriage was a painter—another, by the way, was a modeller and draftsman—and a large part of the circle in which I became conscious consisted of painters, too, it was natural, nor for a moment do I regret this, that I should know something about them.

Not much, perhaps. I knew nothing of their struggles, their creed, their integrity, or their canons of taste. I knew even less, if that is conceivable, about the business side of their lives. But there they were, on the horizon, in the background, or in the foreground. And though some, I must now suppose, were more successful than others, there wasn't one—except the oldest of all, and this was terror, not hatred—whom I didn't wholeheartedly like. For indeed I should have been a far queerer child than I was, if I had been able to do anything else.

In those days a studio didn't mean a place where films are made,

or an apartment in Broadcasting House. Nor—though these existed, too, no doubt, and some of these painters had known them—an ordinary room, or an attic perhaps, where the tenant both laboured and slept. On the contrary, the studios that I remember had almost all been specially built for the creation of pictures; or, where they hadn't, had been altered and had large windows put in, for no other purpose at all.

They were large, too. They seemed enormous to me then. So, for the most part, were the canvases on the various easels; for in those days, again, other houses were large, and it was thought right for the owners to buy proportionate pictures until they had covered the walls. It isn't now, of course. The walls have shrunk, the leaseholders are broke, and taste has decreed that one picture, at most, is enough. An undersized racket-court, with a few articles of metal, stream-lined furniture, has now become the ideal. If there is a picture at all, the chances are either that it will be the sort of picture that would look just the same upside-down, or turned sideways, or that it will be a very careful representation of two sea-shells and an old boot—conveying, if I may so, no message and darned little thought.

It is the egg and the hen, of course, to a certain extent. Or a bit hard, in other words, to say whether taste took this twist because painters went mad, or whether they went mad because taste took this twist. Again, there may be a certain amount of sour grapes about it; for if you can't buy the sort of picture that has now gone out of fashion—and incidentally took a great deal more time, trouble, and years of preparation to produce—then perhaps it is natural (unless, of course, you are so crazy or daring as to pick up old stuff in a junk-shop) to make the best of contemporary art. My picture, you can then say, is more unintelligible or worse-painted than your picture. So I am cleverer and more up-to-date—sucks to you!

But I think economics—dash them!—are at the bottom of it. The painters of my childhood happened to have been born at the right time. The country was rich. The houses were big. Hundreds, of course, fell by the way; but dozens—and I can't think of one of them who didn't deserve this, for they were all putting everything that they had got into their work—chanced to profit from the condition of the country and the size of the houses. Were they lucky? I think they were. But of course—and though this isn't enough if the rest all goes wrong—they were honest and painstaking, too.

So my infant steps were led into their studios—nearly all of which, as I look back, seem to have been placed in large gardens—and I sniffed, and I stared, and admired. It struck me, even then, that there were an extraordinary number of canvases with their faces to the walls; so that perhaps, even then, they may have

painted more than they sold. But they sold enough to have comfortable, straggling houses, in old-fashioned gardens; and they all gave me wonderful teas.

They were also exceedingly kind to me; if not, as it has occurred to me later, and though I think they were all naturally kind, entirely for my sake alone. It was more, I should now say, for the sake of my grandfather, or my mother; though the effect was exactly the same. They didn't discuss art with me; they just let me wander about. But I liked the smell; the untidiness—there was an exception here, but as it happened to be in the studio of one of the very kindest of them, I overlooked this; the mysterious objects—armour, or old musical instruments, for example—that were lying about; the dark corners, behind screens, where one might come—if with a slight shock at first—on a headless lay-figure; and the whole sense of peace and quiet toil.

Sometimes, though not often, they were painting when I was there. What rapture, I thought, to have a palette like that, and all those hundreds of brushes and tubes. But oftener, as the mention of tea will suggest, they had knocked off for the day, and I visited the studio just because it was part of the treat. I don't think it ever occurred to me, either, that I could be a painter myself—and I was correct, it appears, though I could draw long before I could write. For in the first place I didn't regard it as a profession—I thought (which was perhaps also correct) that they were painting for fun; while in the second place I considered them (and once more rightly) as beings apart. You were a painter, it seemed to me, because you *were* a painter. You couldn't become one. And this, which was both false and true, put an end to even a chance of the idea.

A pity. But it is too late now. I have even given up drawing, because of writer's cramp. Besides, *I* wasn't born at the right time; my goodness, no! And how on earth could I find a rambling, sprawling house—in London, too—with an old-fashioned garden? Not to mention a studio.

On three occasions—the last taking place when I was still well under ten—I posed, nevertheless, as a model. The first, which I can't remember at all—I was three at the time—resulted in a chalk drawing by my grandfather, which some people say still resembles me, though I do my hair differently now. I wonder how he ever finished it, for it seems impossible that I should have sat still. However, I've got it—here in this flat. And, though I haven't seen it since 1940—for it went to be stored then, and circumstances have so far prevented my getting it out again—I have another portrait, in oils this time, which he painted about three years later.

This one is unfinished, though. And I am afraid—for though he died when I was just seven, there should still have been time—

I am aware whose fault this was. Mine. I adored him—who didn't?—but, though I didn't know he was going to die or that I should spend the rest of my own days in regretting my impatience, those sittings, I must admit, were a strain. I just *had* to fidget. I was cautioned beforehand. Stories were read aloud to me during the sessions. I was begged, adjured, commanded, and besought to stand still. But I couldn't. I *knew* I was being naughty; but I just couldn't.

Never once, of course, did he show a trace of annoyance. In extremity, however, he caused me to be taken to a photographer—where I was to assume the same pose—with a view to working, when I wasn't there, from the result. Perhaps he did, for it couldn't fidget. But, of course, as soon as I was instructed to stand in that position again—and though a camera is far quicker than a paint-brush—a surge of remembered constriction rose up; so that my features, in consequence, registered a mixture of sulks and despair. So the picture was never finished, though it is a picture for all that. My fault. And it is too late now.

The third occasion when I mounted what is technically known as the throne was when a much younger painter—a clever creature, though, if ever there was one—had an impulse to make a composite portrait, at his studio in Melbury Road of my mother, my elder sister, and myself. I have no doubt I fidgeted; though my chief recollection is of the superb refreshments—cocoa and biscuits, I think, but of an ambrosial quality—which appeared during the course of each sitting. These, as I say, I have never forgotten. But if the picture was ever completed, I never saw it. Once more, I am afraid, I must have proved too much for a gifted and talented hand.

There might have been a fourth attempt, if my mother had gained her desire. Convinced, whether rightly or wrongly, that I was a very beautiful child, she took me to another and much older friend—a Master with an immense reputation—under the belief that he had only to see me to wish to paint me; as he had painted Rossetti, and Swinburne, and Carlyle. He must have been about eighty. Not only was there a statue of a horse and rider in his studio—perhaps you can guess his name now—of such a monstrous size that my knees immediately began knocking together and my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth; but he was wearing—which I found, if possible, even more terrifying—a small, black skull-cap. I didn't know, at the time, why I had been brought there. I feel quite unable to reproach him, at the age of eighty, for excusing himself from what would probably have proved a very painful experience for both of us. All I can say is that he *might* have painted me. And that he didn't. And that no one else has since tried.

This, then, was the painter who filled me with fear. The painter with the tidy studio, on the other hand, can never have alarmed

anyone. Of course, his work is now quite out of fashion—indeed, almost the first thing a modern connoisseur has to learn is to sneer at it; but he was incredibly painstaking, extraordinarily skilful, and—for me this was even more to the point—bubbled over with fun. And as he, also, was born at the right time, he made a large income; with part of which he had built or reconstructed for himself an astonishing house—in Circus Road, St. John's Wood—which I think I found almost as enchanting and satisfactory as he did.

He had a garden, too, of course. There was hardly a painter, as I have said, in his kind of position, without one. But as I was generally taken there in the winter, on his birthday, it is the house that remains in my mind. The journey, in those days—no tubes or motor buses—was a considerable pilgrimage, during which I was half-choked in at least a couple of sulphurous trains. But of course this was part of the charm of it, too, on the way to that magic abode.

It was approached by a colonnade. It was Roman—more or less—when one first got inside, with a short flight of polished, brass stairs. I wasn't allowed to use these—and I don't know that anyone else was—because of the risk of scratching them; so that although they led straight to the studio—more or less Roman again, with two legs of a Roman piano on a dais, and the third, twice as long, reaching down to the floor—it was the custom to make a detour. No, I suppose the house wasn't really a labyrinth, and as a matter of fact, it wasn't really so large. But it was odd. Very odd indeed. Almost as ingeniously and, to me, as bewilderingly planned as the Zoo.

Yet the host was in the studio when we got there; and the host, though he was more than sixty now, was always a child. He was also Dutch, or of Dutch origin. But though naturalised now, and a resident in this country for about twenty-five years, he still spoke with what I can only describe as a very strong accent. Frequently, in fact, I couldn't understand what he was saying at all. But it didn't matter. I understood quite enough. He told stories, incessantly. Funny stories, if perhaps hardly new ones. Or he would make appalling puns. Then he laughed, and I laughed, and everyone laughed. And then there was a tremendous tea in another room—Dutch, too, now; not Roman—and a cake with sixty-odd candles. He continued to tell stories and make jokes. I continued to laugh. And at the end—always—he accompanied us back, through the colonnade, to the outer door into the street.

Just inside it there was a bell—a brass bell, if I am correct—in the shape of a woman with a very round, full skirt.

“Do you know what she is called?” he would ask—I can't attempt to reproduce his intonation phonetically—and no one

(though it was perhaps because he had said it so often that we could now all understand him) could have had the heart to say: "Yes."

So he began chuckling. "She is called Isabel," he informed us; and I had been counting on this. "Because she is a bell." He then laughed till he nearly suffocated, let us out through the door, and went back, I suppose—as we set off through the darkness, towards Marlborough Road station—to go on being his singular self. Which I think, and I hope, and I trust, he enjoyed very much.

I mustn't speak, though—for it would be misleading and untrue—as if I only circulated in the studios of the successful. There were others, plenty of others, to which I was taken or into which I was allowed to drift. Ramshackle studios, tucked away down some queer *cul-de-sac*. Shabby studios, with diminutive living-quarters attached to them, forming part of a studio block. Studios without gardens, because the gardens had been sacrificed so as to build them. But they all smelt the same. They were all characteristic examples. And if they still exist now—and not many of them do—they have almost all found another use.

The bachelors—well, naturally—dwelt in greater discomfort and dirt; though it was a bachelor painter (bless his memory) who used to ask us, as children, to tea; who used to stuff us until we could hardly stir; and then—after a brief pause—let us start off all over again. Yet let no one suppose that I had any prejudice against painters with wives. Far from it; and looking back—though of course to the Golden Age—it seems clear that they had all chosen well. For the wives were kind, too. They were gentle; apt to be decorative; and even a child could see that they still thought there was nothing like paint. Their great day, I imagine, came in the spring, when their husband dressed up, and the studio was swept, and friends were invited to see what was going to be sent to the Academy. It didn't always get there; or, at least, it didn't always stay there. Or, again, it might be accepted and then crowded out; or be hung, by cruel fate, far too high.

No doubt, then, there was plenty of anxiety as well, amidst the chatter and sandwiches, as far more important critics than myself, or even possible purchasers, came to view the year's work. But the wives never showed it. They looked pleased, and proud—though I bet there were bills—and had put on their best dressés, too. I salute them; for, though quite unaware of this then, I now see that they were more courageous than lions.

Thus, at the turn of the century, and still earlier, it was ordained—and I am glad—that I should be transported, hither and thither, to the smell of turpentine, and priming, and paint. Chelsea,

Hammersmith, Fulham, Holland Park, Notting Hill, St. John's Wood, and Hampstead. I knew studios in all of them, and faces—so often with beards in those days—of the men who had made painting their lives. With such insight as I have since gained about my own branch of art, or have learnt from the writings of others, I can now realise that not all of them—not even the owner of those brass stairs, it may be—were happy the whole of the time. Whether they were successful or not, Art doesn't allow this. It is a fight, from beginning to end.

Yet they were allowed, at least they were allowed, the freedom to do what they wished. If there were jealousies, this was a brotherhood. If there were failures, there was still, for most of them, hope. Or if there were bills, there were prizes as well. So that though of course they groaned sometimes, and were in despair, and kicked holes in their canvases, they were still consecrated and devoted to the mistress they served, and never dreamt of approaching another. It is quite possible, of course, that I only saw them at their best; for, as you have learnt, I seldom saw them at work. Yet there was only one of them who looked miserable, always. And as he was a director of a gallery as well as the tenant of a studio, he was quite clearly an exceptional case.

But time couldn't pause; for it can't. Another era was ending; the painters who had been growing older began dying—my grandfather, though he wasn't old, among the first; and the world they had all known passed away. One of the last was my great uncle by marriage—he was also President of the above-mentioned Academy, which I thought terrific, even though aware that there was another point of view; a widower now, having trouble with his eyes, in a house (though with a long garden) in Kensington. There was a legend that he was irritable; but if this was a fact—and perhaps it was—he showed nothing but kindness to me. It is true that I never tried to argue with him about the Academy; but I used to go there, on Sunday afternoons—attired, for some reason that I now can't quite make out, in a morning-coat and top-hat—and play bowls, with other guests, on his lawn. He didn't play much himself, for there were his eyes, and he was over seventy now. But he smiled, as he drew in his breath with that sharp, characteristic sound, and looked at me, I felt, as if I, too, had a right to be there.

I was flattered; because it was just chance, of course, that my grandfather had been my grandfather, and I wasn't really a painter at all. Far from it. By this time I was merely a tall, pale, thin young man or ex-hobbledehoy, in a top-hat and morning-coat, on the threshold of Oxford. But he smiled at me, though I dare say he could hardly see me; and though his big pictures have now passed out of fashion, too, surely no critic, of any age, could deny that he produced the most exquisite water-colours. Well, he did, anyhow.

Yet this was the twilight. No more studios now—or not for me—and no more Victorian painters. The leaves were falling. The scene was changing. They were lucky, of course, and though I am quite aware that I have said this before, to enter the world when they did. And perhaps even to depart when they did. Or at least others—the present inhabitants of this globe, for instance—don't seem quite so lucky.

A HORIZONTALIST ON THE INANIMATE

THE kitchen of the flat where I am now suspended, about sixty feet above the ground, contains a gas-cooker, a sink with a couple of taps and a draining-board, some cupboards and shelves, a refrigerator, a mixed collection of pots, pans, knives, spoons, forks, plates, dishes, tin-openers, dust-sheets (to be used as table-cloths), glass, china, and other salvage from the past; a gas-meter and an electricity-meter; a contraption—suspended, in turn, from the ceiling—for airing dish-cloths and other articles that I simply daren't send to the laundry again because they are so full of holes; some mops, brooms, and brushes; some bags and baskets; a number of old newspapers; some pails and flower-vases; a wooden chest—I can't remember what we put in it, and can't open it so as to find out because it is supporting so many other objects, but shouldn't be at all surprised if it is full of old newspapers, too; a dust-bin and a mincing machine; a kettle or so; and, at times, even something to eat.

The total value, before the war—and if everything had been in its present condition—might have been about three and elevenpence in the open market. Today, when even what is useless is irreplaceable, I should put it at about eight hundred pounds. Not that I am thinking of selling. For in the case of necessities I should then have to go out and pay three or four times what I received—if fortunate enough to find anything I wanted—for very inferior stuff. While in the case of what one might now call luxuries—such as the old cocktail shaker or the device for squeezing out oranges—it isn't so much that I expect ever to have cocktails or oranges again, as that I am so infernally sentimental. That is to say that though it saddens me to look at them, I still hesitate to get rid of them. For they are associated with the days that have vanished, and on which I like—however morbid this may be—to look back. Besides, who on earth could want them?

If anyone supposes, however, from the above description, that our kitchen is larger than a moderate-sized bathing-machine, then they are mistaken. Yet I seem to spend a good deal of time in it. I prepare breakfast. I prepare tea. I prepare luncheon and dinner, of a rather more satisfying description, for a dog; or two dogs; or sometimes, when a four-legged guest comes to stay, for three dogs. I wash up—I have come to like this so much that I am sure

there must be something demoralising about it, though I am still dashed if I can see what. Quite often, again, I do a little private laundry-work—because, as I say, one is in a weak position for telling the professional laundry that they have torn a sheet down the middle if they can retort by pointing out that other items have been dispatched to them in tatters. Or that's how I seem to feel about it.

And then there is the refrigerator. It is getting on, too, now. So that sometimes it stops refrigerating and floods the whole kitchen—which is when the mops and dish-cloths are so useful. While sometimes, in another mood, it develops a kind of internal iceberg, which—as there is now barely space for two ounces of margarine—must be tackled at once, and removed.

This is quite a job. One switches off. One opens the door. One gets a hammer and chisel. One boils kettles and saucepans. One crouches and chips. One tugs and swabs. One slips, if one isn't jolly careful, on splinters of ice; yet time is of the essence, if one wishes—for there is no other cool place—to save those two ounces of margarine. It is all rather exhausting, in fact; and I was doing it yesterday evening—against time, as usual—when, conceiving myself to be about to have a slight apoplexy, I suddenly stood up.

No harm in that, you say. This may no longer be—and indeed isn't—a free country, but it was my own kitchen, and I had just paid the rent. But then I must add that the fixed cupboards, for which I also pay, were apparently inserted, when this block was built, by one somewhat lacking in skill. Or the trouble may have been with the wood. At any rate, the doors don't fit, or not very well. The catches don't catch. There are gaps where there shouldn't be gaps. Of course, it is true that the lower part of the building was blown out by a bomb—there was a life-size door, to one of the rooms, that was always jamming until another bomb seemed to put this right—so that one might expect a few cracks and distortions.

But—this is the point—those cupboard doors have a trick of swinging open. Of their own accord, I mean. Without warning, or human assistance. So as I rose up now, in some haste because of my condition, one of them opened again. And as I had been immediately below it, I fetched my poor skull what, if I hadn't been so expensively educated, I should describe as one whale of a wallop.

Crack! Like that. All fear of apoplexy was at once dispersed, but I am not sure that I was really much better off. It was agony. I decided to yell. I yelled for my wife, of course, and she came running, and was most sympathetic; as she always is, even though she seems to have a fixed idea that I remove those icebergs for fun. The top of my head was still throbbing with pain, but I was almost convinced now that it was something short of a fracture. So I decided to be heroic.

I believe I apologised, in fact, for having caused her alarm.

I even essayed a light laugh, so as to indicate that, though eccentric, I was no faint-hearted milksop. I began describing the circumstances, quite calmly, in which the mischance had arisen. My wife, I was glad to see, was looking calmer, too. But I went on describing them, at rather greater length. From this I passed to a disquisition on cupboards, following her for this purpose—for, of course, she had been even busier herself, and now assumed that I had recovered—into another part of the flat.

At this stage—or perhaps about five minutes later—I could see that she was looking anxious again. Well, the truth is that though I write hundreds of words every day—whether I then put them into the waste-paper basket or not—I don't often talk very much. I never have. But I was talking now. Nothing could stop me. The pent-up verbiage of about half a century was pouring over my defenceless helpmate; and though it wasn't gibberish—on the contrary, I should say it was rather brilliant—she was becoming distinctly scared.

So she told me, though I was still talking, that I had got concussion, and must go straight to bed. Still talking, I went there; for though I have occasionally been known to resist this instruction, it yet somehow seemed best to obey. She then rang up the doctor, again formulating her diagnosis. And though when he arrived in the morning I had stopped talking at last, by this time, I suppose, he had got it so firmly fixed in his own mind that I was suffering from concussion—or why else should he have been summoned?—that he commanded me to remain where I was.

So I did. Here I am. Personally, I don't think it was concussion at all, though I know I talked a good deal. Personally I should say, and though I still have a slight headache, that my horizontal position is actually due more to my wife's sensibility, or kindness, than to any serious shock to my frame; and that, though it was a nasty impact, my subsequent garrulity was either coincidental or a mere passing, if peculiar, phase.

Meanwhile, I must admit that it is rather pleasant here. I am an imposter, of course, and it is monstrous that my poor wife should now be bringing me meals on a tray. For though I was tired myself, so is she, and so is everyone else. Well, perhaps we'll change places later on, and I'll bring *her* some meals. But it is rather nice, for a change.

I have got a dog here, too—my Peke, Britannia—who far prefers this arrangement; because it's cosier for her, and I'm not clattering on my typewriter, or rising suddenly (which she finds most disturbing) to consult some reference-book. At the present moment she is manifesting her satisfaction by lying flat on her back, against my legs, with all her own in the air. Could I pretend, then, that I am here to please *her*? Or am I just being selfish?

I fear that is the truth, though. Well, I know it is; though I

was also extremely fatigued. But that cupboard door, you must admit, was a bit selfish, too.

And malicious. There's no getting away from it. It waited, deliberately, until I was just where it wanted. It had probably been waiting for months. Then, and not till then, it swung open again. And laughed fit to burst, I dare say.

Why *are* these inanimate objects so ruthless and spiteful? What's their grudge? What's their grouch? What's their game? I have observed all my life, if it comes to that, how they remain inactive, and apparently passionless, until one is off one's guard; and then suddenly spring on their victim. Do they hate us? But why should they hate us? I was never cruel to that door.

I am never cruel to my shoe-laces, though I confess I don't coddle them. But they always snap when I am in a hurry; when it is essential that there should be the minimum of delay. Or they choose lunch time on an early-closing day, when they can't be replaced. They have done this again and again.

Other garments, too. No reason on earth why, if they have got to shed buttons, they shouldn't shed them indoors, where they can be found on the floor, and sewn on. But they don't. They wait till I am out somewhere. Then they vanish. I have to go all the way to the tailor—for buttons, if they are to match, are hard to come by nowadays—and beseech him to ransack his stock. Naturally he is disappointed that I haven't arrived with two dozen coupons, a cheque-book, and the kind of patience that says "Thank you," when he explains that it will take twelve months to supply me with a new suit. I am humiliated. Dash those buttons!

There should be no need to mention studs. Their behaviour is so notorious that they have become a by-word and a standard joke. They *always* roll under the dressing-table and always, again, when one is in a hurry. But the dressing-table has its own joke, too. One of the drawers is open—well, obviously, if one has been hunting for a collar—and as one grabs at the stud and attempts to totter to one's feet, there's another bang on the head. Its infallible. They are two to one this time, and the trick can hardly fail. Yet I swear I have never provoked them.

Or take—to turn to something that might appear, at first sight, to be even more impersonal—that mincing-machine. Quite a simple affair, you would say. Furthermore, I have cherished it. I am scrupulous about cleaning it, and drying it, and putting it gently away when I have used it. I can't see that it has anything to complain of. But I employ it a good deal—for the dogs' meals, of course. I have to poke what is to be minced into what one might call its mouth, which I do with the utmost care. Yet regularly—if not so regularly but that I am always taken by surprise—it catches my fingers as well. Ouch! No, I'm not reckless, or inattentive;

I know it too well by now. But it attacks me. I have discussed this matter with some of my colleagues in the mincing business, and they all say the same thing. The devil is in those ostensibly simple machines. And in others, too.

They hate us, for some mysterious reason. And they're smug. Almost—or almost always—after they have drawn blood or driven us nearly mad, they can look at us and plead that they were obeying some natural law. But this won't do. There is a kind of venom, I say, in the moments they choose. *They* know well enough what they're at. They take a special delight in playing up just before a bank-holiday. Why? Because a bank-holiday now seems to halt and interrupt all labour for the best part of a week. So that we can't get them mended. *They* know.

They know something else, too—drat them! That nothing is more exasperating, when we have at length taken them round to a shop that has reluctantly re-opened, or have at last prevailed on an expert to visit them under our roof, than that, at the mere sight of the shop or the expert, they should immediately start working again. This is a particular speciality of radio sets, and I must have spent hours—perhaps weeks, altogether—in apologising to skilled tradesmen for apparently wasting their time. If a radio set can be said to leer then, it most certainly does. For it knows—yes, and I know, too, though it is useless to say so—that as soon as I have heaved it back home again, or the expert has left, it will start the same trouble again. If this is done to torment us, it couldn't be much better done.

Sometimes—for I have acquired a quantity of tools during my pilgrimage, and even some rudiments of proficiency—I tackle a problem myself. Not in a radio set, for though I have had one or two successes in my day by hitting them (and serve them right!) when they weren't looking, I am too old ever to learn how they are made. But I can put in a washer. I can do rather more to an electric-light fitting than merely replacing an old bulb. Or if a door-handle comes off—well, perhaps I had better not state this too clearly, as I have no Union card; but I dare say you see what I mean.

Or up to a point, that is to say. But is it my fault—or yours in the same circumstances—after we have carefully dismantled something, placing all the little screws and thingummies on a sheet of paper, and have traced the source of the trouble, and have found a new screw or thingummy, and have as carefully put everything together again, that invariably we should now step back on to some part that has been inexplicably omitted? For it wasn't there just now. It was on the sheet of paper. But it got off, without a sound, while we were using the pliers or the screw-driver—or a companion's hairpin—and purposely hid just behind us. So now, even if we haven't broken or bent it, we must take everything to pieces again—

this is where we are so very apt to bark our knuckles or suffer some other injury; after which we shall be indeed lucky not to discover that another little oddment has done precisely the same thing.

But don't—if you are not a handy man or handy woman yourself—put this down to our own shortcomings. For you would be wrong. I tell you, I have stood watching men in garages and workshops, or men who have been doing much bigger jobs, in the old days, in my house. And I can assure you, though it is to be presumed that they all had Union cards and had spent years learning their work, that in nine cases out of ten they, too, found that screw on the floor. In the tenth case it had, of course, vanished utterly. But they still had to start over again.

Malicious, that's what they are, those little screws and thingummies. *I* know them.

This brings us to another aspect of the spirit—the very unpleasant spirit, I say—that imbues the inanimate. I am referring to the way that things lose themselves.

Their ingenuity in this business is often so great as almost to evoke admiration; though of course one can't help thinking how, if they are as clever as all that, they might help us instead of adding to our difficulties. However, they don't. Take my wife's latch-key, for instance.

Naturally, since she is a woman, she has no pockets, but goes out with a bag—with a broken clasp, because new bags are now beyond any ordinary housewife's means—containing the ration-books, a cigarette-case (when it, too, hasn't disappeared), a lip-stick, some letters which she very kindly offered to post for me last Tuesday, some money, a collection of articles to which she seems to attach a certain mysterious value; and the latch-key. As she approaches the front door, from without, it is a rather curious fact—but of course this is all part of the plot—that our telephone starts ringing; and though it is odds on that this will prove to be a foreigner trying to get a different number on another exchange, she yet feels impelled, once again, by some urgency.

So she puts the latch-key down; tells the foreigner, more patiently than I should, that this is *not* the West Hampstead Fuel Overseer; replaces the receiver; turns round to pick up the latch-key again. And it's gone. Sometimes she finds it, though never, so she says, where she placed it, during the course of the next twenty-four hours. Sometimes we have to have a new key cut. And sometimes the new key fits. But it is all very wearing—simply because the original key goes and hides itself while she is talking to the foreigner—and tends to make her think twice, if not three times, before leaving the flat at all. As I have a similar inhibition, which I may reveal later on, we are, in fact, fortunate to get either food or fresh air.

But of course, and small as the flat is, this key isn't all that we

lose. And never are we more likely to lose something than when we know just where we have put it. *That* is where the objects, some of which are quite large, show their odious nature. They keep moving about. Sometimes, it is true, one can outwit them by looking in the wrong place first. But they're astute, in an inanimate way. They get on to this, too—at least, I have known them do it—and dodge back to the right cupboard or shelf. Butter, one would then say, wouldn't melt in an object's mouth. But I don't trust them. I don't see how one can.

Here, however, is another tip that works sometimes; for they are not even loyal to each other. One plays on their jealousy. Supposing, for instance, and though I admit this is unlikely, you have two fountain-pens. When one disappears, from the spot where you left it last night, don't hunt for it. Start using the other. Tell this second one, as loudly as possible, and regardless of the truth, that you prefer it. That it's your favourite. That you can't think why you have ever put up with its rival at all. The first pen, overhearing this, and being as petty-minded as it is malignant, will at once reappear, in the most bare-faced and impudent way. You snatch it quickly, before it can hide again; and there you are. Well, not always, perhaps, for they get pretty cunning. But you can generally bring this off once.

I am not sure that, at the present date, I can recommend Tom Sawyer's idea. He lost something—a marble, I think, but unfortunately this is another book that I have somehow mislaid myself—and threw a second one in the same direction, saying: "Brother, go find your brother." He watched it carefully, and it *had* found its brother; for both marbles were now side by side. But this was a long time ago. Since then, I am afraid, the objects must have read his *Adventures*; for when I tried it myself, in the country, where I once had a garden, with a couple of half-crowns—one of which shot into the long grass while I was attempting to amuse a child with a little amateur conjuring—I lost both, and was five shillings down. The child was intensely amused, but, of course, this wasn't the point. The objects had done it again.

Another memory, and of a latch-key again. I was in New York—oh, years ago—and lost the key of what the natives would have called my apartment. They weren't very friendly natives, I fear, when I confessed what I had done. They seemed to suspect me, which was of course preposterous, of having done it on purpose. They got a locksmith—for, with all their efficiency, it was apparently the only key; and I was put, whether because I was now a foreigner myself, or owing to their standard of living, to considerable expense. When it was all over, and I was pretty hard-up in those days, I re-entered the apartment, and sank—impoverished and exhausted—on to the combined sofa and bed. This action jerked the missing

latch-key out of the turned-up end—or cuff, as the natives would have styled it—of my left trouser-leg; and good heavens how the little brute laughed! By the way, I still have the other key—after all, I had paid for it—because of the law by which one never loses anything that one doesn't want. It forms part of my vast collection of keys that don't open anything. But, of course, it's something to be quite sure that they're there.

And then there was my wife's brooch, which she also lost when we were down in the country; though she has lost it again since, and for good. It had fallen off, she believed, in the garden. That was a large place to hunt; but we did it. To be on the safe side, though this proved equally fruitless, we hunted all over the house. After about three days we put in a claim under an insurance policy. After about five days, because a visitor was expected, I went up to the spare room, on the top floor, to see that all was in order. I glanced out of the window. And there was the brooch, sparkling on the lawn, just where we had been sitting day after day, and where I had been searching for hours on all-fours. Its plan, I take it, had been to turn up after the claim had been paid, so that we should get a bad name. It was just airing itself, I suppose, when I took it by surprise. So that time we won. But it waited. It waited until, owing to the war, its value had doubled. And then, having made quite certain first, I imagine, that it was still insured at the old figure, it fell off in a bus. You can't beat an object.

Yet think what we do for them. We buy them, and house them. We guard and protect them. And still, it is quite clear, they don't love us. But for us they would never have come into existence at all. Can it be that it is *this* they resent?

That's an awkward thought. Children, particularly in these days, are always reproaching the deputy authors of their being for having dragged them into this world. One may even see their point. But it's a bit thick if our latch-keys or cupboard-doors are going to take the same line; and, instead of saying so, just concentrate on hurting us and humiliating us whenever a chance turns up. After all, dogs don't do this. Britannia, my Peke, would never dream of doing it. But the objects are always at it. And it's a pretty poor look-out, I should say, now that some of them are being trained—though not by me, for I should never dream of doing this, either—to think, and calculate, and perform functions that are beyond our own powers. I doubt if some of those contraptions with eighteen thousand thermionic valves will be very kind to us, when once they get going. Mary Shelley warned us. Karel Capek warned us. And now I am warning you, too.

On the whole, therefore—or perhaps nevertheless—as my head seems a little better; as the doctor never said anything about coming back again; as Britannia has begun looking at me as if to

remind me about her dinner; and as it is quite clear, now, that my own cupboard-door only assaulted me with a view to establishing what I still assert is a completely unwarrantable moral ascendancy, I shall dashed well get up. Concussion? Nonsense. Or what is Life, after all, but concussion? Right you are, Britannia. Your master—as you are not ashamed to call him, and though of course he is your slave as well—isn't done for yet. That's it. Wave your tail. *That's* something an object can't do—not with a million valves. Back we go, undismayed, to the kitchen.

CHAPTER V

THE FATAL STEP

GLANCING at that last chapter from a more upright position, I see—though still not inclined to withdraw what I wrote—that I rather took something for granted. I referred to possessions as if it were natural to have them, instead of apologising, as is more fashionable now, for having any at all. Yet there it is; and here some of them are. If it is a scandal or sin to own a few things—or to be under this illusion, for of course they really all belong to the State—then in the first place I am not quite alone. While in the second place, having suffered approximately half-a-dozen moves within recent years, I own far less than I did. For though it is true that one of the removal firms tried to force two terrible oil-paintings on me—but I was too honest, and wouldn't take them—in place of a gilt eagle (from the top of a mirror) and a step-ladder that I have never recovered, this attempted exchange was unusual. Roughly speaking—and they know a lot about roughness—they just smashed things or caused them to vanish. Though, of course, anyone with a microscope, who read the terms of their contracts would see at once that this was all they had undertaken to do.

In the third place— Well, you know how it is. Frankly, I can't think how I got half these articles. I rather think that, when there were more on the market, they just attracted each other. "Hullo," they must have said; "here's a busy chap who can't keep track of what's coming in and out of the house. So we'll fill it up." And they did. Of course, whenever we moved, we threw out piles of them—carefully at first, and then desperately, so that on the last day we were generally tipping the foreman, though we had tipped him already, to go off with three chairs or a piano. Yet notwithstanding this, and what was broken or delivered elsewhere, we are still, at the present moment, paying tribute to a repository for what can't be got into this flat.

It sounds fantastic. It is, what's more. For what is left, whether here or in store, is a most curious mixture. It represents—well, obviously—not so much what we would have chosen to keep, as what fortune has spared us. It is only valuable because everything is valuable now; so valuable, in fact, that you don't sell it. Yet I suppose we bought these things, or most of them. It was a kind of custom once. We weren't rich, or not as rich as all that. But they,

or the shops, were determined that we should have them. So they came, and we still have what remains.

Once, also, and provided you paid all the bills, this wasn't considered a crime. Now it is. If you have any money—and if you have, you are a good deal cleverer or more cunning than I am, unless, of course, you have got a job on a Coal Board—then you are supposed to lend it to the State. This is called Saving. Or, in other words, the State takes the money, spends it, and can't hope ever to pay you back without borrowing more. It spends some of it on Coal Boards and Atomic Research. And some on advertisements explaining how wicked it is to buy anything for yourself, and how, by buying pledges instead from an insolvent organisation that makes its own laws, you are really better off than before. It even prints pictures of things that you would *like* to buy. You are supposed to look at them and feel perfectly contented. And perhaps—though I don't—you do.

However, that's not the point. Or not just at this moment. The point is that though I have practically given up buying anything at all—either because of those compelling advertisements, or because shops still seem to resent having customers—or possibly, again, because I have been taxed to the very brink of insanity—I can remember the first thing I bought.

Yes, I know how it began. There may be mist here and there in the valley through which I have since travelled, and I am not altogether too clear about my immediate surroundings just now. But there, on the far side, spot-lit in the curiously limpid lambency that seems to have shone almost everywhere then, is the scene of my first purchase. I can see it, and myself, distinctly. A very long way off, I admit; but in the very sharpest focus.

It was a mistake, of course. Not only did it mark the loss of my innocence, but—as I now realise, though considerably too late—it was a most regrettable precedent. For if I had never bought anything, not only could I now laugh at removal firms, but at their repositories, too. I should be free, if possibly even more uncomfortable. I might even be enormously rich.

Yet I fell, as we all fall. I was tempted, by some abominable compulsion, and became—up to a certain point—even as other men. "Imitation," said an advertisement of Ogden's Guinea Gold Cigarettes, in those days—which I saw every time I went out, and which showed a street-arab following and aping a silk-hatted, cigarette-smoking swell—"is the sincerest form of flattery." And though I doubt if I could then read this, and still more if it would have conveyed any meaning to me, it was the desire to imitate that dragged me down. For grown-up people bought things; and even if I had no particular wish to flatter them, I yearned to feel more grown-up.

One does; like a fool. Now that I *am* grown up, or at least appear to be grown-up, I have of course found that there is nothing in it. One is taller, one is differently dressed; older people stop telling one—though in my own case I should like to add that there is no need now—that one has omitted to wash one's ears; and one has acquired a load of hideous responsibilities. But this is all. Or if there is anything else, it cannot be compared for one moment with a world full of lambent limpidity.

For what have I learnt? Nothing, I now see, of the slightest value; or nothing to make me happier than I was then. I can shave of course; I can write cheques; I can read words of any number of syllables. But shaving is a penance, not an achievement. Cheque-writing is very much the same thing. And though once I used to make desperate shots at long words in my lessons, and with so little belief in their essential significance that, coming up against "wheelbarrow," I took a hopeful plunge and suggested "wellerbeller"—and was then rather affronted at being laughed at—is my present state, after all, worth the loss of such exquisite ignorance? Does knowledge, even of how to read difficult words like "wheelbarrow," really add to one's pleasure in life? Doesn't it destroy mystery, which should be the salt of the whole thing? Is it better to be right and middle-aged, or to be wrong and still young?

However, nobody warned me. And if they had—owing, I suppose, to that trouble in Eden—the result would probably have been just the same. I wanted to buy something, because, I imagine, I had seen other and older characters buying things. In the shops to which I occasionally accompanied my mother, I had been perched on one of the chairs which in those leisurely days always formed part of the equipment on the public side of the counter; and had watched; and had been fascinated, in my innocence, by the whole ritual. It seemed that one asked for something—if not always, I must confess, what I should have asked for myself; that it was produced (but, of course, this was a long time ago) from a shelf or a drawer, or from a paper package which was dextrously untied; that one paid for it—in some shops this led to an almost intoxicating game with a hollow, wooden ball trundling about on overhead wires; and that it was then wrapped in more paper, and presented, and taken away.

It sounds simple. And it was, then; though there were chairs, and shop-walkers in frock-coats, and assistants in black jackets or with great puffs of hair, and rolls of paper, and masses of string. Yet though, in a sense, as a spectator, I was taking part in it, I yet craved for a more active role. One handicap to this ambition was that I was born rather shy—and still am if it comes to that. Another was that I didn't really want anything, if you can believe this—except a tricycle-horse, which I never really expected to get, and indeed still haven't secured to this day. While the third and perhaps

principal obstacle lay in the fact that I was completely without money.

A bit later, of course, I began drawing a small weekly salary—a penny to start with—in return for I don't quite know what. Much later, again, I got on to the wrong side of this practice, and began paying my daughters myself. But at the time I was beanless. Perhaps nobody thought I wanted any money; and, if so, this was true in a way. For my parents were generous, and I had an uncle of such unbounded liberality that, at a subsequent period, he showered tips on me all the year round. But at this epoch, as I say, when the ambition first reared what I must now regard as its singularly sinister head, I had literally nothing at all. Not even a farthing.

So nothing could be done; or not yet. Though it now comes over me—as it generally does when I start peering into the past and making rash, categorical statements—that there *was* an occasion, before the first, actual, independent purchase, when I *did* exchange money for goods. But it was like this, and it didn't come—or I don't think so—to quite the same thing.

I was out, once again, with my mother. It occurred to her—whether from sheer kindness, to see what would happen, or as part of my education—to hand me a penny, and to tell me, as we both entered a bakery, to ask (as an addition to nursery tea, I suppose) for a couple of sponge-fingers. Mind you, I have no recollection of this incident, which is perhaps another reason for not counting it as a fulfilment of the ambition. But what I seem to have done—though purely, I should say, because I was a little flustered—was to offer the penny and ask for two sponge-cakes instead.

It is quite true that I preferred them. They weren't only larger, but crunchier, too. But they were a penny each. And as my mother didn't wish me to be rebuffed by the vendor, and also, apparently had another penny in her purse, she exhibited it, and smiled, over my head. So that the vendor took this hint, and the second penny, too. And I was supplied with what I had asked for, in a bag.

Then, however—and this is what turned the incident into a legend, from which I suffered a good deal for some years—it appears that I spoke. As we came out into the street again, or so my mother reported, I began musing aloud. Since at that age (and though quite unable to offer any explanation for this) I employed virtually only two consonants—an “h” and a “j”—she should be complimented on understanding me. Yet she had had some practice; and, according to her, I was expressing surprise at having secured two sponge-cakes so cheaply.

The legend, in short, which took birth at this juncture was to the effect that I had been bluffing the bakery; that I was in fact as crafty as I appeared guileless, and that if I went on like this I should probably end as a company-promoter, if not as Chancellor of the

Exchequer. But though, as I have said, I can recall nothing of the occasion myself, I am convinced that this was a misinterpretation. For is it likely that only once during my career, and at an age when I was so short of consonants, I should have showed signs of business acumen? Isn't it far more probable—well, *I* think so, anyhow—that I was genuinely confused by the responsibility which had suddenly been thrust upon me; had said "sponge-cakes," or the nearest equivalent, by mistake; and was then a little worried and baffled by the somewhat unexpected result?

This, at any rate, is my own reading of the affair; which is confirmed, I repeat, by a lifetime since spent in getting the short end of every conceivable bargain. But at any rate, also, I can't rank it as my first genuine purchase. For it was my mother's idea, not mine. I hadn't done it alone. And though I may not have done what she meant me to do, I was only attempting to obey her instructions.

Or so I insist. So I beg you to believe; though she was there with her full wits, and I wasn't.

Where was I, then? Heaven knows. In that tunnel, perhaps. Or, at best, in the cutting. Indeed, as I glance at myself now, in the slightly speckled, convex mirror (not the one that lost its eagle, but another one) that hangs opposite my present writing-desk, it seems far more than fantastic that I should have been alluding to the same person at all. Is it true, then? It *can't* be! Yet there are other authorities who seem to think that it is; so perhaps, in some strange way, they are right.

Let's leave it; for that's something that really *is* baffling. Let's go back to my fatal ambition.

Possibly, and even though the episode in the bakery seems to have made so little personal impression on me, it was growing already. But still nobody warned me; and still, for a while, I must keep its slow growth to myself. I was still taken to shops, and perched on chairs, and subjected to further temptation. But though I rather think I had a money-box now—the product, I should imagine, of a bran-pie at a party, for if deliberately chosen for me it would have been a somewhat ironical gift—I still had no money.

On the other hand, the street on which our nursery looked out was, though short, not without shops and other business premises of its own; so that if I had the cash, and the courage, I might even make a purchase—by myself, of course, for that was the essence of the ambition—without crossing the road. On our own side, for instance, and in addition to the public-house—which, though nearest of all, I had of course no intention of entering—there was another bakery, a tobacconist (with the advertisement of Ogden's Guinea Gold Cigarettes), a small ironmonger's, a Commissioner for Oaths, and a post-office. There was also, upstairs over the small ironmonger's, a hairdresser's establishment, to which I was now

sometimes being conducted; to fidget wretchedly—I am a bit better at this now—while the clippings got in my eyes.

But, of course, this never occurred to me, either, as a scene for the accomplishment of my desire; for one could take nothing away from it, but on the contrary left something behind. I was off bakeries, for the same purpose, owing to the legend. I had no use for tobacco. Ironmongery failed, as yet, to attract me, and seemed costly as well. It would be about forty years before I was compelled to make an affidavit, which still left me with nothing that I really wanted, and of which at this time I had never even heard. So perhaps you see how it was all narrowing down.

If I had known better. If I had realised that the post-office belonged to the State, and what the State was going to do to me. But I didn't. Besides, in those days—in the age, not only for myself, of simplicity—a post-office was a very different place.

For you know what they are like now. They are staffed, almost entirely, by enemies of the Race; though I am not sure, when I force myself into one, that the Race itself is much better. It mills and mobs. Some of it leaves its perambulators in the doorway, or in such a position outside as to preclude any access to the letter-box. Some of it, also employed by the State, comes in with two hundred envelopes for registration. While vast masses of it have arrived for no other purpose than to take their whack in the redistribution of wealth.

There are no queues, in the ordinary sense, in a modern post-office. But there is a great pushing and shoving, and elbowing and jostling, and very little good feeling or manners. The sense of chivalry, in both sexes, is markedly absent. It is a free fight, in which only strength counts. The staff, perhaps naturally or perhaps under instructions from their own Union, tend to congregate at such points where the pressure is weakest; under a notice, for instance, saying "Licences" (except at the beginning of the year, when they are as careful to avoid it), where they decline to sell anything else. They have no objection to your weighing your own parcels—that is to say, if you can get near the scales—but if you have anything marked "Fragile" they hurl it at a big basket, and miss, so that it falls on the floor. Some of them, again, seem to have chosen their own side of the grille as a good place for prolonged mathematical calculations. Perhaps they are doing their homework. You mustn't speak to them then. It's not allowed. It's bad form. For though you can see them, their own minds are elsewhere.

Yes, this is what it has come to. It is true, of course, that post-offices are now doing dozens if not hundreds of things that have no earthly connection with their original purpose. But it is true, also, that they are profiteering—for the State has no conscience—by their present-day charges; that collections and deliveries have both

been cut down; and that parcels not infrequently, take seventy-two hours (or such is my experience) to travel just under a mile. It is true, altogether, in fact—as you may have gathered—that I don't very much like them. And though I have to battle my way into them sometimes, I keep out whenever I can.

Yet once—long, long ago—it was another tale. The post-office in the same street as my birth-place was, as a matter of fact, a Sub-District Post Office. It was of some importance. A lot of postmen, all equipped with the fore-and-aft peaked cap which they have since despised and rejected, entered and emerged constantly through a door of their own. It was open on Sundays—when, in those days, by the way, there was still a country delivery. It transacted—again, such as they were—all forms of business.

But it was peaceful. Almost drowsy. It hadn't even got a telephone call-box. I can remember no occasion when there was anything that could be described as a crowd there; though telegrams cost sixpence, letters a penny, and post-cards only a halfpenny. On these terms, however, it seemed to pay its way. The spirit of Sir Rowland Hill hadn't yet been cast out. It seemed fond, on the whole, of the public; and this affection, I should say, was returned.

My own correspondence, of course, hardly concerned it. I never wrote, because I couldn't; being immune, at this phase, even from the necessity of acknowledging gifts. My incoming mail was proportionate to this position, and to my general standing. It totalled, possibly, two Christmas cards and a letter (which I couldn't read) in any one given year. Nevertheless, I had been to this post-office, though not alone so far, and had seen what my elders did. It seemed simple, too. Or at least simpler than buying ribbon or slices of pressed beef; or even, perhaps, than sponge-fingers. I had watched. I had observed. And the ambition, once cloudy and vague, was beginning to focus.

Again I should no doubt have been cautioned. If I had got to spend treasure, which I still hadn't secured, I should have been told, not so much, perhaps, what this was bound to lead to—for, as I see now, I was also bound to grow up—but that I was preparing to encourage a tyranny which has since engulfed the whole nation. But then my elders didn't know this. They regarded the post-office as a convenience, and the State, in those days, as a rather shabby and harmless old friend. It had a few Government Departments; one of which supported my father, so that he may have been a little prejudiced in its favour already. It had a small army, in red coats. A rather larger Navy, though still, to a certain extent, with rigging, paddle-boxes, and beards. And it had postmen, and pillar-boxes—marked "V.R." or in a few, rare cases "V.R.I." And that was about all.

Well, it had a Parliament, of course, where unpaid members conducted little or no business, because the Irish—and I still can't see that anyone was the worse for this—had made it virtually impossible. But the Parliament belonged to us, as did the Government Departments, and the Army and Navy, and the Post-Office. There wasn't a hint then, not so much as a trace of a hint, that this property was going to swell and expand, and take on more and more power, until we, and not it, became slaves.

If I had known this, if I had had even a glimmer of understanding of all that was lying ahead—well, I couldn't have stopped it, of course; if it was written by Fate; but should I have done what I did? Or is it conceivable, again—I trust not, but one never knows—that it was my own action, if admittedly trifling, which was to open the floodgates and let the new chaos rush in? If I had used what I bought, instead of almost instantly losing it, might, or might not, this more business-like treatment have discouraged expansion and pride? I don't know. The amount involved was certainly small. Yet always, as I look around now, there is this queer sense of guilt. And a mouse can unshackle a lion.

The day came, in any event, when my own sense of expansion proved greater than my fear of being laughed at. My mother was looking kind; or, to be accurate, even kinder than usual. I told her, in a dialect which had now acquired several more consonants, of my secret longing. She didn't laugh. Looking back, I should even say that she appeared rather touched. She co-operated. She removed the great disability. Or, in other words, she gave me a penny.

Could I go alone? Yes; if I was quick, and went straight there and back. So I did this; which was in itself an adventure. The front door, as I remember, was left open on this occasion—though my mother, no doubt, also remained on the alert—so that nothing should delay my return. I went out. I turned right. I proceeded, bursting, I am afraid, with self-importance, for a distance of just sixty yards.

I entered the post-office, which was as peaceful as ever. I approached the counter. I stood on tip-toe, so that I might be seen and, if possible, heard. And I bought—knowing no better than to yield to this overmastering and, as I see now, ill-omened ambition—a youthful and therefore fallacious effigy of my venerable Queen-Empress. Or in other words, again, one, pale-mauve, penny stamp.

CHAPTER VI

THE PARTY SYSTEM

THOUGH the piano on which it was once my pleasure to play—or, according to some listeners, to strum—has now long since been reduced to ashes by enemy action, and has been represented for some years by what so far appears to be a rather valueless piece of paper, I still have one instrument left. And though, strictly speaking, it is perhaps not a musical instrument, or not in the fullest sense—since it can only produce one note—there are yet moments when something happens to it that strongly reminds me of life with my Baby Grand.

For the Baby Grand had to be tuned from time to time; and always, at the conclusion of this rather shattering and monotonous noise, the tuner would break into a snatch of real music. As a final test; as a sign of relief (which I shared) that his main task was over; or to show what a good job he had done. Well, you know the kind of selection. Short, but impressive. Full of roulades, rich chords, and tremendous arpeggios. Rather in the style of *The Rustle of Spring*. After this, I generally descended from the room overhead, where I had been trying to write fiction, to congratulate him, to thank him, and to stop him going off with our duster. This took place about four times a year.

My other, and surviving instrument, has, I am afraid, less regular attention. It is, in point of fact, a typewriter, and therefore doesn't need tuning; since the note to which I referred comes from a bell. Yet every now and then a little trouble develops—which isn't surprising, considering how hard it has worked, and how there is no chance, any longer, of changing it—and I summon a mechanic. So far, thank Heaven—for I shall be sunk when this fails—his skill has always restored it to health. But he, too, when he has triumphed, and before leaving again, invariably performs his own test-piece.

He inserts a fresh sheet, sits down, and, with great virtuosity, taps out—well, no; not *The Rustle of Spring*, for even he can't do that; but either a statement that the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog, or an injunction to pack my box with five dozen liquor jugs. The point, in each case, and as you are doubtless aware, is that both the statement and the injunction contain all the letters of the alphabet; just as *The Rustle of Spring*—at any rate when a piano-tuner plays it—appears to include every note on the keyboard.

Yet sometimes—and this happened again only a few days ago—the mechanic raps out a third sentence. “Now is the time,” his fingers announce, at almost incredible speed, “for all good men to come to the aid of the party.” Then I thank him, and congratulate him—remembering, also, if possible, to reclaim the duster that he has borrowed—and he rushes away. I can now—that is to say, if I can recall what was in my mind when he shot into the room—go on working again. Very often I do. But the other day I didn’t. Suddenly, as I stared at that third sentence, I began wondering about it. And so far as my work was concerned at the time, this had rather a disastrous effect.

For in the first place (I began wondering), why should mechanics employ this sentence at all, when it contains only eighteen letters? While in the second place, though admittedly less fantastic than a fragment of a hunting story in the historic present, or than that heart-cry from a dipsomaniac to his valet, what on earth does it mean? To what party does it refer? Who said it first? And how has it passed not only, as I now realised, into the bright lexicon of typewriter-mechanics, but into that of the mysterious and invisible characters who try out tape-machines? Isn’t it all, I reflected, a bit queer?

At this stage—weak-mindedly, perhaps, but *humani nil a me alienum puto* (Terence), and as an author it was perhaps my duty to clear the thing up—I rose once more and consulted both my Dictionaries of Quotations. But though each had the word “party” in its index, there was no reference in either to the third sentence. My singularly unreliable Subconscious chose this moment to suggest that it was of American origin; but, as usual, could give no further help. That’s just like it, of course. It seems to think that I should be grateful—though I am not—for those muddle-headed half-hints, which it either can’t or won’t follow up. And though it may have been right, and may yet produce the full answer when it is too late or I want something else, I have a sneaking suspicion that it said “American” because my typewriter is American. It would, you know. I mean, I’m quite aware that it does most of my work; but it’s an awful ass.

At the next stage, of course, either it or my wandering eye—another grave disadvantage from which I suffer when I am really trying to write—started running over the second index again. “Where,” one of us read, “ish dat barty now?” Well, I knew that one—*Hans Breitmann’s Party*, of course, though I bet you can’t remember who wrote it, either; but my intellect was now off on a new tack. Perhaps, it thought—but you must realise that it had been a bit disturbed by an interruption to its other labours—all good men were supposed to come to the aid of *that* sort of party. H’m. Unlikely, perhaps; but at the same time I could think of parties

where an infusion of good men, or better men than were actually there, might have made quite a difference.

I could think, for instance—Or, on the other hand, had this, too, been all my own fault?

I don't know. There was a time—and not a very pleasant time, in any other respect—when there weren't any parties; or none in this non-political sense. People were otherwise occupied; listening to sirens, for example, or to sounds that the sirens foretold. But though the same people are still apt to say that they will do something that they would like to do "when the war is over"—and one quite sees what they mean; and though, on the other hand once more, the modified return of one or two trifling peace-time phenomena (which, however, have then almost immediately been withdrawn) has been hailed as if it meant that we had now completely recovered, it is a fact, if an extraordinary fact, that there are parties again.

They are not the same parties, of course, as the old parties. They are simpler, I imagine; unless, that is to say, they are being given by the new, black rich. But they have begun. Or they are beginning. And, of course, what I ought to have done, in the sand-bag days, was to put an announcement in the Press saying that I was through with them. Admittedly, this might have been considered a little strange; or extravagant. But I don't see how it could have given offence to anyone. Whereas now, when I have left it too late, and any post might bring a kind, hospitable invitation. . .

Well, it's awkward. Very awkward indeed. Or there is something wrong with me, perhaps. But I can't help it. Abou Ben Adhem, as you will remember, got his name into a book of gold by the simple method of telling an angel, in a deep dream of peace, that he loved his fellow-men. All right. Good luck to him. And by all means let his tribe increase. I don't know that I dislike them myself, if I can keep away from them; as it is obviously easier to do when one is fast asleep. But did Abou go to parties? I doubt it. There is no evidence, in fact, that he did anything of the kind. If he did, I maintain, he would have been having indigestion in the small hours, instead of lying there dreaming of angels. Or at the very best—and I speak from experience here—he would have been having some frightful nightmare.

That is one, and only one, of the after-effects, of course. If he had been an author, for instance, he would have got up in the morning—still loving the human race, very likely—and made a shocking mess of his work. Yet painful as a party itself can be, anticipation can be almost as bad.

My wife doesn't agree with me here. She says—or said in the old days—that she would enjoy parties enormously, if I didn't look like that; though, being merciful and considerate, she hasn't

always forced me to go. Yet she has been disappointed, too, I believe, when we have both turned out—even though I have contrived to grin like a hyena. The truth is, I should say, that in her secret soul she knows just what a party is worth. Only she is kinder than I am—well, I have always known that—and more disposed to self-sacrifice.

At any rate, when we used to get invitations in the old days, her first impulse, like mine—unless, of course, this was pure kindness again—was quite frequently to seek a means of escape. Mind you, I am not talking about nice, quiet, little evenings with our real friends, which I relished and still regret; but of affairs with hired waiters and baize-covered racks in the hall. Yet when this threat arose, it produced the same sort of reaction (to which I have referred in another volume) as when we were asked away for week-ends. That is to say that I, at once, said: "Write and tell 'em we've got another engagement." While she took the line that it was better, safer, and more honourable, to accept with enthusiasm; and then either to pray that one of us would go down with influenza, or to rely on some inspiration that would get us out of it at the very last moment.

"It's politer that way," she said. So we generally did it. But though we were continually having influenza, it never came, so far as I can recall, when it was wanted. And though my wife is extremely ingenious, she has a conscience, too. The result was that, again so far as I can recall, she hardly ever *did* develop an inspiration. Nor did she seem to think very much of mine. So that when the night came round, we set off for another party.

Well, getting there was easy enough, in those days. There were taxis all over the place; or I had a car. There was even a maid who used to lay out my evening things. All I had to do, in fact, once the die was cast, was to resist the very powerful temptation to get into bed instead of into a stiff shirt; to be patient while my companion completed her own adornment; to let the dogs out; to brush my trousers and overcoat again, so as to remove some of their hairs; to wait a bit longer; and then either to ring up for a taxi, which would appear within a couple of minutes, or to insert myself—if possible without knocking my collapsible hat off—into the private vehicle that was already there.

Yet already, I dare say, I was looking—as my companion would have put it—like that. I was depressed. Not exhilarated. Never had a bed seemed more attractive than when I was dressing just now. What an hour, I was thinking, to go out instead of nestling between sheets. Why was I doing it? What crime was I expiating, or alternatively what merit was I acquiring, by such pointless behaviour as this? Who wished to meet me? Nobody. Why should they? Whom did I wish to meet? Nobody, again—except my wife

and the dogs. And just think, I reflected, of the noise they'll all make when they're talking.

Then we arrived. There were the racks, and the hired waiters, and the beginning of the uproar. We were separated. We were re-united, in a rather horrible jam on the stairs. A butler, whether hired or authentic, would bend his head towards my wife. She supplied him with our identity, which he repeated, bellowing, either correctly—not that I cared twopence about this now—or not. We shuffled forward again.

Sometimes I knew the hostess fairly well, sometimes quite well, and sometimes hardly at all. But this made no difference to our reception. Already, with so much on her mind, poor woman, she was virtually incapable of distinguishing one guest from another. Yet not quite; or certainly it was my fate, all those years, to precede someone infinitely more interesting. I shook hands, but it was as though I were transparent. She was smiling and laughing at the guest just behind me. It was even doubtful—and this, in the circumstances, was rather a bitter thought—if she would ever know that I had been here at all.

Meanwhile, however, though there was pressure from the rear, there was dashed little space left in front. Yet I couldn't retreat. Even if there was another door to this drawing-room, or a flight of back stairs, there was also my wife—and the man by the racks. He might sneak, if I beat it. Or even hold me for inquiry, on account of such swift reappearance. And though my wife, it was true, had now been sucked into the throng, of course I couldn't desert her.

I was pushed. I was shoved. I was brought into really terrifying adjacency to fat women or elderly men, who also trod on my feet. Or there were the young, to whom in the ordinary way I don't really object, but who were now writhing and screaming like fiends. Well, of course, they had to scream—if they wished, as it seemed they did, to exchange observations—or they couldn't have hoped to be heard. But it was ear-splitting. Overpowering. The most hideous sound that I know.

What are we all doing here? Why have we collected and coagulated so as to change oxygen into carbon dioxide and to produce this appalling din? At this point, though still, in fact, looking wildly around for my wife, I observe, over the heads of the crowd, the face of a lost and doomed soul. It is my own, of course, in a mirror. I twitch it hastily into something slightly less suicidal; and a hired waiter, misinterpreting this spasm, offers me a tray covered with glasses and little sandwiches.

In favour of accepting one or the other, or both, there is the great truth that this will give me something to do. Against such a course there is the knowledge that I am neither hungry nor thirsty—

why should I be, when I have had a good dinner at home?—that I shall probably spill the drink and have trouble with the sandwich, owing to more impacts from other guests; and that this sort of sipping or nibbling is exactly what gives one bad nights. However, if I am to pit my will against the will of a hired waiter, there can only be one end to it. I may reject him once, twice, or even three times, as I am buffeted about and he goes edging around. But he has marked me down now. I am his prey. He is my pursuer. And in the end, of course, he wins.

He does more than this. Stimulated by success, he becomes determined to catch me again. In fact, I rather suspect him of telling other hired waiters that the tall gentleman has an ungovernable appetite. Some of the company, it is just possible, would give anything for a dry sandwich tasting faintly of paste, or for a glass full of something like cough-mixture. But they can't get it. *I* get it. I am quite sober; I am not actually in pain yet; but it is doing me less than no good.

Faces. Faces and voices. Voices and faces. Shouting and glistening, laughing and grimacing, in whatever direction I turn. If they could only *see* themselves; if they could only compare their behaviour with that of cattle or sheep—so much more calm; or parrots—so much more decorative, even at their rowdiest; or bees—who are at least making honey. But no; they are quite shameless. Centuries of development have brought them to this; that instead of shuddering and dispersing, as they must surely do if their perceptions were a shade more acute, they still gibber and jostle and——

“I'm afraid you don't remember me.”

No, I don't. This particular fat woman is perfectly right; except that she, or someone just like her, always turns up at this point and says just the same thing. But I mustn't disgrace myself—or my companion, either. I know my duty. I beam like Old Nick.

“Of *course* I do!” I retort, at the top of my voice. “I—I'm so sorry if I—— Well, this crowd, you know. But——No, of course I do. How are you?”

She says something that I can't hear. Perhaps it would be better to nod and grin again. Or perhaps not. She looks piqued. Did I catch the word “operation”? I put all my facial muscles into hasty reverse. “I'm *terribly* sorry,” I yell. Will that do? Apparently not. She is now looking puzzled.

“Why?” she asks. “Don't you like them?”

I don't like anything at the moment; but I haven't the foggiest idea what she's talking about. Perhaps she thinks I am mad. All right; very likely I am. But she's too short. Her expression seems to have no bearing on what I occasionally *think* she is saying. And when I try to answer—well, I suppose other people aren't affected or afflicted like this, but if I shout myself, I immediately lose my voice.

I become hoarse. I croak. I gasp. I give up. I rather gather that she is saying something about the Merridews now—though Lord knows who they are. Perhaps she thinks I'm someone else, then. Well, who am I? Steady! And dash it, was that a question, or would it be safe, this time, if I nod?

I try to compromise. I attempt to smile, that is to say, and to frown thoughtfully at the same time. I should think the result—accompanied by the faint death-rattle which is all I can now produce—is terrifying. And yet I needn't have bothered. For now, always, or just about now, it is infallible that the fat woman will spot someone—for whom, as a matter of fact, she has been looking out all the time, because they always do when they're with me—of a more amusing description. Sometimes she just tears from my presence, and good luck to her. Oftener, I fear, she remains, but removes all her attention, until I pretend to spot someone myself. But of course I do this as soon as I can. We part—just like ships that pass in the night. She leaps at the new victim. I take another sandwich or glass of cough-mixture—not that my voice will come back while I'm here—in a further moment of aberration. I peer desperately, and unsuccessfully, for my wife. And a thin woman, yet no more glamorous than her predecessor, darts a glance at me, gives a squeal or neigh, and says: "Now, don't say you've forgotten me!"

Thus—for to her credit it must be set down that she soon tires of me, too—I am passed, with intervals for meditation and still reluctant, though apparently unavoidable, ingurgitation, from one fickle huntress to another. My own view is that I don't know any of them, or alternatively have forgotten them all. Yet my wife, who in some remarkable and gifted manner seems to have kept an eye on me throughout the evening, though indiscernable herself, will almost unquestionably tell me afterwards that I was mistaken. That as a matter of fact I have known them, if not intimately, for years. That it is disgraceful of me to be so vague and stupid. And that my features—but this is an ancient charge—give far too clear an indication of my thoughts.

I dare say she is right. She usually is. But I know something else. Which is that if, by any remote chance, I should find myself conversing, in a quiet corner, with someone—either male or female—whom I do know, this serves as an immediate challenge to my hostess. She won't have it. If I am alone, or am exhibiting my death-rattle to a monster, she does nothing at all. But as soon as I appear, momentarily, a little more at my ease, she has to act, so I gather, at once. She rushes at me, and my companion. "I want to introduce—" she begins; and we are reft apart. I am handed over to another monster. Or I am left alone again. She looks pleased, as if she were making things go.

But *I* can't go. It would be rude. It would be savage. Besides, I can't see a sign of my wife.

I must resume the search, then. Though still liable to be set on by characters who tell me that I don't know them or have forgotten them, I am now threading the throng like some haggard and haunted wraith. So that in the end—unless it is an enormous party, or unless there is a musical performance, in which case I have to stay where I am till it stops—the search is rewarded. There she is. She looks quite happy, bless her heart, until she sees me. And even then, I believe, she is still fond of me. But of course I hover—what else can I do, when I am tired, hoarse, and in the early stages of poisoning?—and of course she knows what this means. Sometimes she is merciful, and yields almost at once. Sometimes, either for the good of my soul or to preserve her own reputation as a party-goer, she sends a signal that tells me to wait. In which case I do wait. I have even been known to tour the premises again, looking wild-eyed and wan, until I return—and hover once more.

Thus, at last, the hovering does it. We are leaving. She vanishes into the zenana. I hasten towards the racks. She reappears. How glorious it is to be out in the fresh air again, and away from that din. I ought to be happy, too, now. But I am not. It isn't only that my tongue is parched, my head is throbbing, and my stiff collar and shirt are almost strangling me. There is my conscience to deal with as well.

In the car, or taxi, my companion seems thoughtful, and quiet. I had better begin, then. I had better start getting this over.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"It doesn't matter," she says.

"But I *am* sorry," I insist. "It was just——"

"I know. You were bored."

"Well, I—I couldn't help it."

"But you oughtn't to show it."

"Did I? I say, do you think everyone knew?"

"Well, darling——" yes, she has forgiven me again, for she always does, but of course she sounds just a shade rueful—"it's your face, you see. When *will* you learn to control it?"

Never, I suppose. It is my curse, in a way. If it is also evidence of my extraordinary straightforwardness and lack of hypocrisy, then perhaps I had better not say so. Of if I have a theory that all men—unless there is something radically wrong with them—feel the same about parties, then still, as I have been forgiven, this should be a secret. Besides, they haven't got faces like mine. I don't say—or I don't want to say—that their souls are any nobler; though it may be they are. But it seems that they have come to terms with this side of existence. And I haven't. And what's more I can't.

Well, the parties stopped, if not in the way that I should have chosen. My shirts, collars, ties, studs, links, white waistcoats, mother-of-pearl buttons, patent-leather shoes, silk socks, tail-coat, and trousers with braid down the sides, were all put away; and quite a number of these articles would now be much too large for me if I attempted to wear them again. But I may have to. I have heard rumours. I have seen cards on other people's mantel-shelves, and at any moment there may be one on my own. I shall argue, I suppose. I shall struggle. I shall yield. But, though it is older, I shall still have the same face.

My poor wife. It will betray me. It will again let her down. There is scarcely a chance that it won't. But what a world, in which there must be either parties or wars. What a life! I just can't make it out.

CHAPTER VII

TRIPLE TREAT

HAVING read a good deal in my day—and even remembering a little of what I have read—I know, of course, that all pilgrims, as they grow older, think that this vale was a better place when they were young. It has been explained to me—and though I have written books myself, I am still anything but immune from the power of the printed word—that this is a mixture of two kinds of defence-mechanism. Part of it is subconscious; we are trying all the time to forget what we didn't enjoy. And part of it—less worthy, perhaps—is a shade nearer the surface. If we are not happy now, this is because other people have gone and tampered with the vale as it was, and has nothing to do with ourselves.

This was arguable once; that is to say, that the whole thing is an illusion. And yet there is another point, too. For whereas, for example, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire took about three hundred years, at the conclusion of which period there were, in fact, very few other changes to report; or whereas, to take another instance, the Dark Ages lasted for seven hundred years, but everyone was in almost exactly the same state at the end as at the beginning, in my own lifetime—and I'm not even a hundred yet—virtually every rule, standard, habit, custom, and impact from without has been turned clean head over heels.

So that it isn't only defence-mechanism—though Heaven knows that I, and many others, have great need of it—when I say that it was a better vale, or appeared to be a better vale, even fifty years ago. There is a genuine and objective basis for comparison, too. There are records and living memories of what the place was like before merry hell broke loose. I think, indeed I am convinced, that there was more kindness then. Though I also think, and am indeed convinced, that people who weren't being ragged and tormented by a shifting, perilous world may also have found it a little easier to be kind.

But they *were* kind. There can be no doubt of it. They were kinder and more considerate than they have any chance of being now. For now they are all harassed, and then some of them weren't. Well, I'll tell you what two of them did.

They were well off, of course; Sir Y and Lady Z. They mightn't and indeed couldn't be as rich as that now. Such an income, perhaps—and I haven't the faintest idea what it was—would only just

keep them going to-day; for I am pretty sure they weren't millionaires. But they had a large house in London, in the direction of Regent's Park, and a house, with a big garden, up the river. They had a butler, and a footman or two. They had a laudau, with two horses, and a coachman, and another character—though very likely this was one of the footmen—to sit up there beside him. And they had hundreds if not thousands of friends, and were exceedingly kind.

Sir Y, who was over sixty when I first became aware of his existence, was a solicitor; though I didn't know this, and should have been no wiser if I had been told. Yet now that my knowledge of this profession has increased, I should rather doubt if he was a representative example. Possibly there was another facet that was concealed from me, and yet appeared at his office. On the other hand, though extremely successful—and therefore stern, one imagines, at times—he was strangely humane. I have since learnt, for instance, not only that he never took anything into court if it could possibly be settled outside, but that when consulted by those hundreds if not thousands of friends he preferred to dispense with a fee.

Notwithstanding this, however, and other evidences of immense generosity, he had yet somehow contrived—through cleverness, industry, and the luck, once more, of having been born at the right time—to amass a considerable fortune. Hence the houses, the butler, the footmen, and the landau. The kindness he just couldn't avoid.

Nor could his wife, Lady Z, though I believe that she, too, could be firm. To me, however, she never exhibited anything but the utmost benevolence. She was a friend of my grandparents, a friend of my parents, and I came in for full value in turn. Only my uncle ever provided me with better Christmas or birthday presents. She gave me a thumping cheque, in later life, when I got engaged. But she was a widow by then, and that is looking some way ahead.

Her other characteristic, apart from kindness and firmness, was an appreciation of all forms of art. She was musical. She liked plays. She patronised painters—in the sense, that is to say, that she bought what they painted. And whereas if I just said that I used to be taken to a rich solicitor's house, you would possibly imagine that it was fairly plug-ugly, in truth it was nothing of the kind. For in the first place it was an Adam building—a little grandiose, perhaps, but of impeccable proportions and detail—while in the second place she had caused it to be filled with pictures, and books, and furniture, and fabrics, and other forms of decoration, that reflected her strongly-formed taste. This might not be yours. I am still not quite sure that it was mine. But it was genuine and

individual, based on her own love of beauty. A little lush, but completely sincere.

I knew this, or felt it, even when I was overwhelmed by the size of the rooms, or by the mass of their contents. Besides, what is taste, anyhow, except sincerity? The backgrounds that I knew better happened to be much simpler affairs. There were other backgrounds that weren't simple at all, and that I hated at sight. But this house spoke the truth. There could be no doubt of that. I was never mistrustful there.

In the evenings, when I was asleep and elsewhere, there were big dinner-parties, attended by all kinds of celebrities; or later and still larger gatherings—though not the least, I am sure, like the ones that I came subsequently to dread—where authors and actors, and clever women, and beautiful women, and even women who were both clever and beautiful, would listen to music from the great stars of the day. Again, down at the country house—which is hardly country now, for it was so near that the host and hostess used to go to and fro in their carriage—there were further assemblies of interesting and entertaining people, who I should say were always happy there, too. But, of course, I was out of all this. I was too young, and too small. I had put off being born till too late.

At the time, indeed, I knew little or nothing of these aspects of their hospitality. Nor, I should imagine, did my sister, though she was older and much more on the spot. But we weren't left out. We weren't forgotten. We, too, had our share now and then.

For periodically, on quite a number of occasions, we would learn that we had been bidden to lunch. A Sunday would come round—invariably a Sunday, so that Sir Y might be present, too; we would be washed and re-dressed; and presently, for this was part of the bountiful ritual, the landau—with the coachman, and the footman, and the two horses—would arrive and draw up at our home. Then three of us would embark—for though my father would be there at the lunch-table, he preferred walking at least part of the way; a pale, fawn carriage-rug would be laid reverently over our knees; the footman would shut the door and climb back on the box; and the equipage would begin moving off.

The actual distance to be covered, as the crow flies, or flew, was a matter of two miles and a half. Or say three miles, owing to the lay-out of the streets. To-day, even with traffic at its stickiest and thickest, one would scarcely consider it very much of a journey. But to me it seemed endless then. For in the first place, and though exhilarated (yet a little awed at the same time) by the majesty of our progress, I had only the vaguest conception as to where we were after the first half-mile. While in the second place I was naturally impatient, after quite a short time, at being confined even in such a vehicle as this. At one point, I know, we should reach a street

which, according to my mother, was entirely inhabited by doctors. You can perhaps guess its name. Yet long before then I had begun asking: "Is *this* the doctors' street?" And when it wasn't, I was a little downcast; even in the midst of my pride.

But eventually it was; and, with no knowledge of the future, or of its true significance, I wasn't only calm and even callous when I saw it, but enchanted with all those brass plates. I was also encouraged, for I knew we were nearing the end now. And, indeed, it was never long after this before we all disembarked.

The Adam house had an immense door-step, but we were never there more than a moment. The butler admitted us, and I was awed again. My coat was removed. My hat was removed. My hair was smoothed down. And we were all conducted to the room behind the dining-room, where at first I was perhaps still slightly awed. But there was a warm welcome from Lady Z, from Sir Y, and almost certainly from their two daughters as well. I watched and listened. I was fascinated by a kind of wire curtain that was let down in front of the grate. I felt less strange, every time, when I saw some of my grandfather's pictures. And though the wide window at the back wasn't Adam at all—not, I suppose, that I had ever heard of the Adams, either—there was something curiously attractive to me in the fact that, instead of looking out over a long garden, as at home, it gave almost straight on to a white-washed wall. Part of the mews, perhaps. Or part of the house itself. I didn't know, because I never asked. But wonder grows where knowledge fails; and though I would give almost anything for a garden of my own again now, I was much impressed.

Sometimes—indeed, oftener than not, I should imagine—there were other guests, as well as my own family. It wouldn't surprise me now to be informed that they were extremely distinguished. But the main point, at the time, was that they should be outnumbered, if possible, by the people whom I already knew. And in this respect I don't think I have changed.

Grown-up conversation. Questions to be answered. A twinkling smile from Sir Y. A look of the utmost benevolence from the—well, perhaps just slightly alarming hostess. Nothing, ever, but excessive kindness and friendliness from the two daughters. Arrival of my father, whom I was delighted to see. And then—more awe again, for there is going to be a bit of a test now—a stately opening of the folding doors into the dining-room, and the announcement that luncheon is served.

The test, of course, was that lunch, or luncheon, in those days and at this sort of house was a feast on a pretty big scale. There might be food that I couldn't recognise, and therefore wouldn't quite know how to tackle. There would, in any case, be such a quantity of knives, spoons, and forks that, however carefully I

studied the more expert practitioners, I should be almost certain to get hold of the wrong ones. Or dishes would be handed to me from which I was supposed to help myself, when there was also a strong possibility that this would lead to some form of mishap.

Furthermore, and though beginning to feel fairly comfortable inside, I had a natural terror of menservants. Though it may well be that I was utterly mistaken, I believed they despised me. I couldn't feel that they were quite human. Their absence of expression had a lowering effect on me. I was unable to keep my eyes off them—which I dare say some of them found a little embarrassing, too. But if they looked at me, even glassily, I was turned to stone.

Yet for all this you are quite mistaken if you think that I had any wish to escape. I had none. Awe, I had come to recognise, was an inseparable part of these occasions. But my parents were here. My sister was here. I could sense well enough that the Z's, in whatever number they were represented, were my friends, not my foes. And, besides, in addition to the drive in the landau and this terrific spread, there were, as I knew, still three pleasures to come.

The first was foreshadowed by the arrival of a coffee-making contrivance, which Lady Z always dealt with herself. You know the kind of thing. A spirit-lamp. Measurements, pourings, bubblings up, reversals of the same process, suspense, crisis perhaps; and then triumph, and cups to be filled. I dare say I had coffee, too, though I had certainly had four or five courses, not to mention sweets and dessert. But it was now the moment, and not only in my own case, for relaxation. The butler and his retinue had withdrawn. Chairs were being eased back a little. Cigars were being lit. The table—and I mean the table itself, not those round it—was now in a supreme state of careless abandon. It was time for the first of the treats.

This consisted—and again I should like to impress on you that Sir Y was at the very pinnacle of his not supposedly very fanciful calling—in the preparation, by my sister and myself, for his alleged consumption, of what was known as Sir Y Z's Mess. In other words, with the full approval of our hostess—no, she can't have been *really* alarming—and to the keen interest, so far as could be judged, of the host, we collected a little of everything, of an eatable or drinkable nature, that was still left in the dining-room, and compounded it into one smallish but frightful *mélange*, olio, hotch-potch, or olla podrida.

We took some of the remains, as it might be, of a trifle; a little cheese; the dregs from a few wine-glasses and coffee-cups; salt, pepper, and mustard, with any sauce that was still available; orange peel and apple rind; sugar, cream; butter; oil and vinegar. Nothing was barred. All was stirred together on the same plate. For it had come to our knowledge that Sir Y, despite the meal

of which he, too, had just partaken, became remarkably hungry on a Sunday afternoon. That he couldn't wait for his tea. And that he far preferred this kind of preparation—together with any additional and nauseating ingredients that we could lay hands on—to any other form of food.

No, I can't say that I ever saw him eat it. We were removed, each time, as it happened, before the pangs came on. But there could be no question, as I say, of the zest with which he watched our efforts to produce something superlatively disgusting, or of the gratitude which he never failed to express. His wife, who had a noteworthy and unforgettable laugh, employed this to the full as she both urged us on and apologised for his exceptional greediness. But she confirmed his statement that he absolutely relied on the Mess, and that no one else could make it with anything approaching our skill.

This was highly gratifying, even though it was rather shameful, perhaps, for an old gentleman to have formed such a habit. But we never let him down. When the Mess was completed, and he had thanked us, we took it carefully to the sideboard, where it was understood that he would fall on it later on during the afternoon. What the butler or footmen thought, I am unable to say. I wonder if they were ever told, or if they thought it at all funny, too. I know perfectly well, of course, what the Ministry of Stomachs would say, at the present date, if they learnt of such shocking behaviour. But they never will, for there just isn't the material now. Nor anyone else quite so kind.

So that was the first of the three treats; for let no one suppose that we hadn't enjoyed our good-natured efforts. And now, as the company rose, and the folding doors into the big room at the back were opened again, came the second.

It was simpler, in a way, yet to me it was hardly less satisfying. For our own home, in those days, and all the others, indeed—except this—that I knew at all well, relied for illumination entirely on oil-lamps, or candles, or gas. But here, at the Z's, they had electric light. A little primitive, one might think now, with its carbon filaments, and its tendency to flicker or fail. The switches, too—which, as you may remember, were once thought so unsightly, or improper, or unfit for use save by servants, that they were generally put outside on the landing—didn't click up and down, as at present, or pop in and out, as in the United States, but jerked round and round. One reached up, that is to say—or one did this at what was then my own time of life—caught hold of a flat, porcelain projection, and twiddled it. This turned on the light. If one twiddled again, it was extinguished. So my sister and I both did this, by the dining-room door; and though in this case there could

be no pretence that it was anything but sheer self-indulgence, it was none the less thrilling for that.

On; off. On; off. It was fascinating, as each time there was a reddish glow from the electrolier or the wall-brackets. I was Prometheus. I could have gone on for hours—except on the one, sad occasion when the whole system had broken down—and probably should have, if, in the end, I hadn't been gently dissuaded. Yet this was followed, at once, by the third treat; for which perhaps I was ready by now.

Another call on our good-nature. Sir Y, it appeared, as well as consuming the Mess on a Sunday afternoon, was in the habit of taking a bath. Furthermore, he had a bathroom; and we hadn't. No, in our own little William-and-Mary house, towards the close of the Victorian era, we were all perfectly clean. But my parents, like thousands of other parents, had baths in their bedrooms. While my sister and I, because our night nursery was too small, had baths on the day-nursery floor. Once—though this is a little irrelevant perhaps—when I had just been washed and dressed, I stepped backwards and fell into the receptacle from which I had only just emerged. However, this proves my point. I couldn't possibly have done it in a bathroom. I wasn't tall enough. And anyhow, whether you think this at all strange or not, we hadn't got one.

Nor had my grandparents, in their much bigger house. But the Z's had. And with a deep sense of understanding and sympathy one of those kind, kind daughters would now lead us upstairs to it; where we could turn on taps, from which hot and cold water gushed, until—after letting it all out again once or twice—we had produced a mixture which she assured us would be just to her father's taste. No, I can't say, again—on reconsidering this third and tremendous treat—that there was any evidence, beyond her statement, that he took a bath at so unusual an hour. It is even possible—just possible—that he didn't. But again we had done our best for him, again he seemed grateful, and again we had had more than a thrill.

In any case, also, I obviously shouldn't have *seen* him having a bath. Yet in any case, once more, this marked the end of the proceedings. If Sir Y wished to eat the Mess, or to have a bath before doing so, we had now helped him as far as we could. But the party was breaking up, My father would return as he had come, by some mysterious route of his own. While for the rest of us there was the landau again, with the coachman and footman, not to mention the horses, as well.

So I must say good-bye, and Thank You; as I trust I did. I must be thrust or tugged into my outer garments again, and assisted to climb into the carriage. It set off. It passed the street full of doctors. It entered once more into the totally unknown region

beyond. And eventually, though in a kind of dream owing to excitement and over-nutrition, I would suddenly spot some familiar scene; and would begin fidgeting, I haven't much doubt.

Almost over now. A sharp turn to the left, down our own little street, past the hairdresser and the post-office. And then there we were. Home. Nothing like it, of course. Safety. Security. No strange grown-ups, talking their own, strange language. No bewildering choice of table-ware. And most positively no stately butler. Reaction. Even relief, perhaps. For I knew, even then, and though I had been drawn into a magic world, that one couldn't always live on that plane.

Yet I should be returning to it. I did return to it, thanks to Sir Y and Lady Z, again and again; and always, thanks to their unexampled notions of hospitality, with a ride in the landau at both ends. Naturally I can see now, far more clearly than then, how amazingly kind this was—for though there were no motor-cars then, there were plenty of omnibuses, and four-wheelers, and steam trains on the Inner Circle; even if I am also in a better position to imagine that the coachman, and footman, and even the horses, no doubt, were less pleased when such Sundays came round.

It was the horses, moreover, who on the last trip of all not only protested, and humbled my pride, but—though I didn't know this, of course—supplied a dark omen as well. There were, as I have just said, neither carburettors nor big-ends in those days. But there could be other troubles. On the last lap, as it were, or within less than a mile from our door, one if not both of these patient steeds developed a condition known as the Staggers. I think they recovered. I trust that it wasn't necessary—for this was then one of the treatments—to plunge a knife into their tongues. But as the equipage was unable to proceed—for they were foaming, and twitching, and looking very unwell—we were all compelled to get out. We completed the journey, in fact, in an omnibus—drawn by other and less sensitive animals—and I was young, and disappointed and a little upset by this sudden come-down in the world. Yes, I know I should have been sorrier for those horses than I was; though I should like to apologise now.

Yet this was an augury, for it was the very last ride. Not because of any diminution of kindness on the part of the Zs, or the least feeling on their part that we had given their horses the Staggers. But such rides were for the very young; not for those with stout legs. There were grandchildren coming along, who of course must be first. And then, alas, Sir Y, who had worked so hard, and had himself come so far, and had hundreds if not thousands of friends—some of whom, despite all his efforts, had been sent to prison, while others were now seated on thrones—was beginning to fail in health. We were still asked to lunch, though there were no Messes

now; but we were reaching an age when it may have been thought, not without reason, that even a ride in the car which had supplanted the landau need no longer be thrown in as well.

Yes, we were growing up. We were quite used to a bathroom now, in the new home to which we had moved; and presently, though not yet, we should be getting used to electric light. So presently, also—for time wouldn't pause, and had even borne me to the age of nineteen—Sir Y Z died. And presently, again, though not until in some extraordinary way I had become thirty-nine, Lady Y must make the same journey too. As their house, where I had once been lifted on to a cushion at the dining-table, was large, gracious, and part of the glory of one of London's best-planned streets, it was of course immediately torn down, and a block of flats, with a meaningless and inappropriate frontage, was then instantly built on the site. I have passed it often enough, but I have never been inside. For one thing, it is quite true, I don't know anyone there. But I don't want to. I prefer my memories of Sir Y, with his twinkle, and of his wife, with her laugh; and of their vast, unrepeatable kindness.

CHAPTER VIII

GOING DOWN

PROGRESS—though I may have said this before—is, of course, a wonderful thing. As I sit here, in my concrete cube, collecting my thoughts and transmuting them, by some rare gift, into the stories for which I hope eventually to be paid, I often also reflect on this fact.

I am reminded of it, for instance, when my electric clock—what a triumph of invention!—starts dawdling or racing, because a lot of other people either are or aren't trying to use their electric cookers. An old-fashioned clock, I then realise, which had to be wound at least once a week, would never have kept me in such an interesting state of uncertainty.

I am reminded, again, when my own electric fire suddenly goes out—at such moments, of course, the clock stops altogether—owing to the number of other people who are also attempting to keep themselves warm. In the old days we had all the trouble of ordering coal, having it shot into a cellar, getting it out again, putting it in a grate on top of a crumpled newspaper and some kindling, and striking a match so as to set it alight. Even then it was often about half an hour before the temperature rose. Whereas now it not only rises in a flash, but often descends in the same manner, without any warning at all. Wonderful. Who would have thought that Man could be so ingenious? What a brain he has got, to be sure.

Or I am reminded through another of my senses; that of hearing. In this manner, indeed, I am reminded in quite a number of ways. Owing to the methods by which this up-to-date building has been constructed, I can frequently hear at least two or three wireless programmes—there's another amazing invention for you!—without even leaving my chair. Or I can hear an electric carpet-sweeper; what on earth will those chaps think of next, to make life even simpler? Or, if the current is still on, I can hear the effect produced on the wireless programmes by the same labour-saving device—a kind of constant, crackling roar—and am almost overwhelmed by this miracle of technology.

Then there is my telephone. When we first came here, I had some hope of having this instrument moved; either so that it shouldn't ring quite so loudly just behind my back, or—if it had to do this—so that I could use it without leaving my desk. However, Man-Power was against me. And though it is true that there is

another instrument outside in the passage, which I can hear almost as clearly, the one where I work had apparently been planned for someone lying in bed. So if it rings, and if my wife can't answer the other one because she is standing in a queue, I have to leap up—sending my papers and literary ideas flying all over the place—and cope with it on my hind legs. Sometimes it turns sulky then, and the caller is cut off. Sometimes he or she comes through, and proves to be asking for Fred—whom I have never traced. Occasionally I take a message for some other inmate of the establishment. And in a few, rare instances a subscriber—who would yet have received much clearer answers in reply to a letter—seems actually to wish to chatter with me.

So we chatter; until I am released and can return to the desk. But we couldn't have done this without Progress. In the same way, I shouldn't take nearly so much exercise if, when in one of the other cubes, it were possible to determine whether my own bells are ringing or someone else's in a neighbouring flat. But of course all this keeps me young and on the alert. You have possibly noticed yourself how no one in these days ceases to be active until they suddenly drop down stone dead. Well, I know they can no longer afford any alternative system; but of course this is Progress again.

So, I imagine, is another sound that floats in through my seventh-floor windows. No, I am not speaking of the traffic, though this is deafening at times; nor of shrieking children, though this seems to be a very favourite spot for them; nor even—for this, also, is part of the perennial background—of vociferous yet at the same time indistinguishable remarks from men in loud-speaker vans. Though there is a certain resemblance to the last of these noises.

Shortly after we first came here, I discovered—though too late, as usual—that Planning had resulted in these windows overlooking a kind of workshop; if, indeed, one shouldn't call it a factory. Of course, if I had noticed it, I should have been more prepared for the next development. But I hadn't—being a little distracted at the time—so that it came as a not altogether pleasant surprise. For the workshop, or factory, was making bits of aeroplanes—for the war-effort, of course—so that it didn't only bang and clatter all day, but clattered and banged, or moaned and howled when they were using any of the lathes, during the whole of the night as well.

I couldn't complain, for this was the war-effort. Any more, after a very brief period and as London began filling up again, than I could conceivably move into another flat. However, when the war stopped, or was interrupted, or went underground—or whatever it was that happened after the collapse of Japan—though I still didn't quite see what we had all got out of it, I did think that there would be less noise from the factory. But I was wrong.

That is to say—for of course I am always fair—that after a while (which was when the news got round to them, I suppose) they certainly knocked off the night-shifts (which was a tremendous relief, even though it coincided with the revival of thumpings and tootlings from dance-bands in another near building), and they virtually ceased banging by day. But they were doing something to motor-cars now. And in order to do this, in the best spirit of Progress, they installed a contrivance by which, so it appeared, the management could speak to anyone, all over the works, whenever it felt in the mood. It had, in fact, now merely to murmur into a microphone for its voice, enormously amplified, to reach not only the whole staff but—as was soon demonstrated—quite a number of other persons as well.

So it reached me. At first, of course, when I heard a great booming of such phrases as “Blah-blah” or “Wah-wah,” I formed the erroneous impression that this was the loud-speaker van again, emitting political or municipal propaganda. But then for one thing I wasn’t aware of any impending election—for, if so, a shower of communications with my name spelt wrong would surely and already have shot through my front door—while in the second place it was borne in on me, after some hours of this row, that its source was decidedly static.

Accordingly, when I next took my Peke, Britannia, out for a stroll, we made further investigations until we discovered—for a side door of the factory was standing open—that the voice saying “Blah-blah,” or occasionally “Wah-wah,” was emerging from among that welter of machinery. The theory, as was now subsequently and very kindly explained to me by a member of the firm, was that time would be saved and efficiency increased if messages, instructions, or summonses to the telephone were broadcast in this manner; instead, I suppose, of employing some human agent.

What he omitted to elucidate was how anyone—quite possibly already engaged in tuning up an internal-combustion engine—could interpret the two phrases that I have just quoted; or how the ends in view could be achieved if the entire staff had to listen to every blast from the contrivance, though it was only intended for one of them. Nevertheless, this was unmistakably Progress, and I felt proud to be so closely associated with it. Furthermore, as weeks and then months went by, I became so accustomed to the Blah-blah and the Wah-wah—even though they were sometimes in the bass register and sometimes in the soprano—that I was able to work almost as well as before. The only drawback, in fact, was that on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, when the place closed down, I felt that something was missing. The awful hush at such times—broken only by all the wireless sets, telephone bells, slamming of

car doors down on the street-level, and by the moaning of the lift—tended to make me a little nervous. But of course this was only a passing condition. It would be all right again on the Monday.

Besides, even at week-ends, owing to my own height from the ground, there still remains—that is to say, when it, too, isn't cut off altogether by Ministerial edict—one aspect of Progress. I have just mentioned it, in fact. Or rather—for I have already alluded to it, I believe, on an earlier page—I have just mentioned it again. It is the lift. If it moans—and it does moan, so that during the war years I often used to mistake it for the sound of distant sirens—then so would you moan, if you spent all your life carrying passengers up and down stairs. But it is a wonderful invention, and, of course, I should be lost—and sometimes am lost—without it. It is a little stately, perhaps—no passenger's stomach has ever been left behind when it descends, any more than they have felt as if their legs were being telescoped when it sets off in the other direction—and it can be a shade temperamental at times. But though it is true—as I have said—that I sometimes look at it, and then pause, and decide not to go out at all, it is equally true that if it breaks down while I happen to have been standing in a queue, then indeed I become aware of its worth.

Fourteen flights. A heavy shopping-bag. Britannia, very likely, who hasn't a very strong heart. Nor have I, of course, by the time—panting, puffing, and (if you will forgive my saying so) sweating—I at length totter along the seventh-floor corridor. For some period after this I am naturally incapable of anything that could be described as pure thought. Yet as I recover, as that grey look passes from my features and my breathing becomes a little more normal, I know—indeed I know—that, with all its faults, any lift is better than none.

Once, it is again true, when I lived in a house—and in a terrible, old-fashioned state of mechanical darkness—it was of course simpler, in a way, to go out. I just opened the front door, and stepped straight into the street. But this wasn't Progress. Whereas now, up on this seventh floor, it is nothing else. I am the heir of the ages, up here. I am abreast of the epoch. And really, you know, it's quite shocking, sometimes, how one takes these inventions for granted.

So forget, if you will be so good, what I said just now about days when the lift takes a rest. After all, it has been moaning for at least ten years, and had some narrow escapes during the war. Let me now tell you, rather, how useful it is, and describe how it eases my path. That would be more grateful; more honest; more frank. It should prove that it isn't necessarily simpler—and most certainly it isn't nearly so progressive—to step straight from a front door into the street. Besides, it's no fool. It might read this book. And Heaven knows I don't want to get on the wrong side of it.

Very well, then. This is what happens. I open my much narrower front door. I have a little difficulty, if I am carrying a Peke and even an empty shopping-bag, in shutting it again. But in the end I succeed. I then proceed along the corridor, to the landing. I catch sight of the cage, through the double grilles. Somebody else, on a lower landing, presses a button. And it glides down the shaft.

This is very convenient, of course. It gives me time to look out of the window, from which—and this is highly stimulating to the imagination—I can see approximately a hundred and twelve other windows. It also gives me time to adjust the shopping-bag. To put Britannia down, and pick her up again in a more comfortable position. And to hear what may be my own telephone ringing; in which case I had perhaps better go back again, answer it, and make a fresh start.

So I do this. The odds are, I must admit, that it isn't my own telephone. But it might have been. It might have been an important message from my daughter's hairdresser, and one should never run risks. Somebody (I wish people wouldn't do this) once told me of a superstition hinging on the importance, when returning home after a false start, of sitting down, if only for a second, before you set off again. No reason, so far as I can remember, was put forward. Perhaps it irritates the Lares and Penates if you omit what may once have been an obeisance to them. Or perhaps my friend (though surely not one of my more delightful friends) made the whole thing up. Anyhow, as I am still holding a Peke and a shopping-bag, not to mention a latch-key, and as there is no seating accommodation in this Lilliputian lobby, I must run a risk after all. So I tuck the Peke under one arm; grip the shopping-bag with my teeth; drop the latch-key into a pocket—or at least I hope so; reopen the front door; succeed, after a little more difficulty, in shutting it again; and return to the landing.

The lift is silent, but I can see the counterweight. This means that the cage is at the bottom, and *should* mean that if I press the button it will come up. But it doesn't. There is no reaction at all. This, in turn, may mean either that the last passenger forgot to shut the gates, or that an intending passenger is in process of embarking. Sometimes, indeed quite often, when they get as far as this they appear to hesitate. They say good-bye to their friends. They start talking to a porter about the prospects, if any, of the next call from the Lilywhite Laundry. Or they renew an argument with a taxi-driver who has followed them into the hall. On such occasions there are some tenants, in my situation, who begin rattling their own grille—like a beast behind bars—and yelling. As personally, however, I have never found that this treatment has the slightest effect, I do nothing. I just wait.

At last I hear clanks, as of the gates shutting far down below.

I push the button. Away goes the counterweight. Yet still, even at this point, I am in considerable suspense; for there are still four possibilities. The first—but, I must confess, most unlikely—is that the cage is empty and will come straight up to me. The second is that, though empty, it will be intercepted—one does this by suddenly snatching the grille open as it comes past—on an intermediate floor. The third is that my push, from without, coincided with a push by an occupant, from within—in which case my push doesn't count; yet that by some miracle of good fortune the occupant wishes to come right up here, anyhow. While the fourth is that he or she has no such desire, but will alight half-way up; whereupon somebody else, whom I can't see, will get in and go down.

The most tantalising thing, of course, is when the cage actually ascends to the sixth floor—so that I can see its roof, sprinkled with cigarette-ends, charred match-sticks, and apple-cores in season—but with no indication of what it is going to do next. I consider it legitimate, on such occasions, to emit a heart-rending prayer to the Unknown. "*Would you,*" I say, "*mind very much coming up to the seventh?*" But perhaps I lack faith, for he or she very seldom does. In nine cases out of ten, after some further delay—with more clanks and a bit of shuddering—the cage descends, and I am no better off than before.

In the tenth instance, when there is an obliging or attentive passenger, it is a curious fact that I always rush down the stairs to the sixth landing—having become rather desperate by now—just as the cage ascends after all. This annoys the passenger, who is now convinced that it was a practical joke or false alarm. He shoots down again, naturally without pausing at the floor he has just left; and I am still not much nearer the ground.

As a matter of fact, if we are really going into the whole thing thoroughly, there are even two further possibilities. With regard to the first I should explain—and this, I must say, is the most skilful device—that the weight of a passenger is employed to make (or perhaps break) an electric contact, so that while he remains in the cage its row of buttons will obey no one else. You see the point? Without such control he would be at the mercy of anyone else, on any one of the eight landings, and might easily be borne up and down until his reason collapsed. Yes, I think it is fair that if anyone succeeds in getting into the cage, he should temporarily become master of its movements. But there is a catch all the same.

It consists of the seat, or hard wooden plank, which, though not particularly inviting, and indeed far from luxurious, may yet tempt someone who has just spent three or four hours, in a more or less erect position, at the Food Office. So he sinks on to it; and provided that his feet, with enough pressure, remain on the floor, he will still be in charge of the craft. But some women, as you may

have observed, have rather short legs. When *they* sit down, their feet dangle. The contact is broken, or cuts in. And my experience has been that women whom, by pressing my own outside button, I have unwittingly brought past the third landing, where they had proposed to disembark, right up to the seventh, are apt to arrive looking angry and fierce. They bounce up when they see me, being persuaded, and, as it happens, correctly, that it is I who have committed this outrage. Some of them snort. A few, I regret to say, even address me in somewhat violent language. However, as they are back on the floor now—and exerting their weight—they then push the third button, and sail down the shaft. So that again I am stuck where I am.

The remaining possibility may, and not infrequently does, arise in the following manner. I have again pressed my seventh-floor button. The moaning starts. All, for once, seems well. The cage turns up. But, owing to my burdens, I am not quick enough. Another character—if you can conceive such depravity—has been standing, on a lower landing, with his own finger pressed against his own button; and, as I haven't opened my grille in time, he wins. The cage appears to make a kind of bob at me, as though it would stop if it could. But it can't. It is off down the shaft again. And I'm not. In fact, I'm just where I was.

Nevertheless, and though you are now possibly beginning to understand why I sometimes change my mind about trying to go out, or why, but for Britannia, I might even decide to stay up here for the rest of my days, almost always, sooner or later, I do manage to get into the lift. It is then my custom to press the lowest button—the ground floor being my proposed destination—and sometimes, if the luck still holds, we arrive in well under five minutes. But sometimes we don't. For there are others. They hear me coming. It is their big chance. In the black-out I couldn't see them, though they could see me—for there were no lights on the landings then, though there was a faint glow in the lift—and the first I knew of them was when they yanked their grille open, without a word of warning, and I nearly fell flat on my nose.

This is better now. Thanks to Victory, they have become visible, and if I remember to look out for them—but that moaning is rather conducive to meditation—I am not often badly surprised. Some, of course, are better than others at timing the yank. Some are too eager, so that they have to climb up. Some are too slow, so that they have to climb down. In both cases they show a tendency to regard me—not the lift, or themselves—as the cause of this trouble. Yet if they would only warn me—and, to be quite fair, a few do—there isn't a tenant who is more expert with the red button (which stops the lift as soon as you touch it) or in bringing the cage to rest at precisely the appropriate level. It's all practice, of

course. I was pretty rotten once. But if they only knew it, and were less impatient, I'm a whale at the red button now.

This brings up the matter of manners; or of Lift manners. They vary. Some fellow-travellers let me open and shut both gates for them, and say nothing at all. Others, I believe—but am not quite sure—occasionally mutter the monosyllable “Kyou.” Yet there are further points where my own manners are involved. For some of these fellow-travellers seem to know me. They don't, that is to say, address me by name, but either allude to the weather—when I invariably agree with them, though I can't help reflecting how I could once leave my house without anyone expressing an opinion to me on this topic—or, which can again be embarrassing, seem to suppose that I shall know which button to press for them without being told. It may be—for I should hesitate to deny this—that I have performed the same service for them several hundred times, and that *this* is why they think I should remember. But then I say that life in a block of flats is no better than being sent back to school, if mere contiguity, or the sharing of a slow-motion lift, is to be taken as proof of acquaintanceship. Again, if they only realised, I take almost endless pains to conceal or at least submerge my identity. I do this not only for self-protection, but from consideration for others, too. Yet they seem to miss the point. They look hurt when I display that air of civil inquiry. And this, again, tends to keep me indoors.

So does the hat business. Unfortunately—or unfortunately in this connection—I have been in the United States once or twice. There is a legend, based on the admitted brusquerie of the Customs officials, that they have no manners there. I don't agree. My experience is that if you are polite to them, they are polite to you; though they have their own phraseology, perhaps don't say “Kyou” quite so often, and, if you say it yourself, first look startled, and then—which is really charming of them, I think—say: “You're welcome.” But in one respect they are all Galahads. If a woman enters the car of an elevator, every man on board immediately whisks off his hat. And personally, having seen this being done, and having instantly (and I think rightly) adopted the same habit, I seem unable to shake it off.

But in the old country it is suspect. If I whisk my hat off in the lift here, because a woman has just climbed or tumbled in, she appears to regard me as anything but a Galahad. It is she who looks pure; virginal, if possible; and even slightly affronted. If there is a man with her, I have a feeling that he is clenching his fists. Or if there is another man, attached to neither of us, I can see quite well what *he* thinks. That I am a sissy; if not a dago. This is awkward. Because, after those visits to America, I feel painfully rude if I don't take my hat off; while if I do, I am both feared and despised. The

best I can hope for—and, of course, this does happen sometimes—is that my hands will be so full of parcels and Pokes that I may perhaps be excused the attempt. Yet I still feel a cad; for I could still put them down. Furthermore—what a life it all is!—the last time that I was in this situation, the woman spoke to her companion—who was only seeing her out, or so I gathered, and hadn't bothered to bring a hat with him at all—in a pronounced American accent. Is it strange, then, that I am becoming a recluse?

But it's Progress, of course. How can it be anything else, when more and more people are crowding into flats, and fewer and fewer are seeking refuge in houses? And the lift, though it puzzles and even exhausts me at times, is an almost incredibly ingenious invention. It is an instrument of peace, too, on the whole; or far more so than a number of other contemporary devices. It saves labour. It comforts—or at least I hope so—the aged and infirm. It is a token of Man's power over the mysterious forces which he is still (though I wish he wouldn't) unlocking. It would have staggered Shakespeare, and, I should say, even Voltaire. It is the last word—until they adapt it for rockets. There can be no question or doubt, while I reside in this flat, that it is a boon and I can't do without it.

So although it does take me down sometimes, for I should be misleading you if I said that I am yet completely cut off, I am not sure that I have really selected the best title for this chapter. When I consider the dark past, and all the advantages with which I am surrounded during the present, beneficent era, I see, of course, that it should have been called *Going Up*.

A SOCIAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

ONCE a week, when I was a child, I had a stomach-ache. The regularity of its recurrence was indeed so marked that, if I left the statement at that, you might suppose there was an allergy to some special, hebdomedal dish. As it might be, for example, to sausages on a Sunday morning.

Yet this was not the case. For though there *were* sausages on a Sunday morning, so far as I can remember right round the year, not only were they invariably delicious—sausages at that epoch being as different from their successors as is old brandy from methylated spirit—but, though I also invariably exceeded, I never felt one penny the worse. It was the same with the rest of my diet. Naturally, that is to say, I preferred some meals to others, and it is a fact that there was occasionally a little difficulty in making me finish the burnt skin of a rice pudding. But I was no youthful dyspeptic. I consumed what was set before me—always with the trifling exception of the burnt skin on a rice pudding—and rose, or, rather, climbed down from my chair, feeling at ease both within and without. Nor had I any criticism of the rhythmic cycle which governed the variety of our food. The stomach-ache, as I am now about to reveal, had no connection with that.

Nevertheless, it was a genuine stomach-ache, even though it had a psychological cause. And even though no one ever really believed in it but myself. It came on after lunch, with the utmost punctuality, on the days when I was taken to the gymnasium. It wasn't sharp. It didn't tie me in knots. But there it was, immanent and unmistakable, in what is technically known as the pit. So of course I mentioned it, week after week, in the faint though diminishing hope that it would earn me a reprieve.

I don't think it ever did, though. Or not, at any rate, after it had been discovered that reprieve brought an instant cure. For I lacked the intelligence or cunning to go on groaning, or to refrain from skipping about, as soon as I had been told that I was let off. Authority took note of this. It formed the opinion that I had been shamming; which was absolutely untrue, for I can still recall the sensation. It took the view that a child who said he had a stomach-ache at exactly the same time, and on the same day, every week,

was merely seeking to avoid one of his duties. As he was, in a way, for I hated that gym; which was, of course, why my very entrails rebelled.

It didn't do them much good, though; or me, either, once authority had reached this conclusion. Off we went—a little boy and a stomach-ache—condemned, and without a chance of escape. It was never so bad—I must admit this—that I was incapacitated. It was bearable. I even knew when it would go; which was, of course, when the class was dismissed. But I should like to state, even though, again, it is too late now, that however it had arisen I had *not* made it up. I could point to the place still, though it has altered a bit. I was telling the truth when I complained every week. As I am telling the truth to you now.

Some mystery remains, though. In the first place, looking back from another century, I seem unable to explain just *why* the Gymnasium—which now strikes me as having been rather an innocent affair—should have had such a very painful effect on me. It is true that I was born an anti-militarist—as, indeed, and with more reason than ever, I should say, I still am—and that there was some faint resemblance between what I was put through and a somewhat primitive form of drill. It is true, also, that I have always preferred doing things by myself to joining in with the rest of a crowd. But there was no brutality. We weren't whipped, or beaten, or made to do anything that could possibly be described as dangerous. Nor, again, was I such a difficult child, in other matters, as to resist every kind of discipline. Not at all. In fact, I should say I was rather good, on the whole. Yet I hated and dreaded the Gym.

The second slight enigma is why, whether she realised this or not, my mother had arranged for me to go there. I wasn't particularly feeble; though, if I had been, I doubt if what we actually did there could have made very much difference. Quite certainly, on the other hand, I wasn't a child with such an excess of animal spirits that only compulsory calisthenics could reduce me to a more normal condition. No, what I *think* accounts for it is partly that it was the fashion or at least custom then for children to be sent to gymnasiums. And partly that my mother herself—whom in some other respects I have been said to resemble a good deal—had once attended a grown-up class at the same institution, and, for some reason which still defeats me, had done so from choice and with pleasure.

This tends to indicate that when I reached the age of five, six, or whatever it was, she was largely inspired by the belief that I should enjoy myself, too. But I didn't; though from kindness, or consideration, or in the mere hopelessness that sometimes surrounds one at that age, I never said so. I just had a stomach-ache. She might, and perhaps did, draw her own deductions. But they weren't such—and I shouldn't say that she was wrong now, for just look

at my wonderful character fifty years later—as to persuade her to give up or give in.

Accordingly, when the appropriate afternoon came round—and, indeed, I am now suddenly wondering whether at the height of my gymnastic career there weren't *two* afternoons each week—my elder sister, our nurse, my stomach-ache, and its owner, all sallied forth. Marched up to the main road. Took a long penny bus ride—preferably, so far as I was concerned, in a vehicle belonging to the London Road Car Company, because these, for some reason, flew a small Union Jack. Alighted. Marched down another street. And so passed through a narrow entrance—but the Gymnasium, in those untrammelled days, sported its own, individual lamp-post—into what I now realise had once been someone's back garden.

Now, however, it had been roofed over and transformed into a fair-sized hall, equipped with suitable apparatus and a characteristic though, to one gymnast, a rather forbidding smell. In fact, I was highly nervous by this time, with some additional symptoms of nausea; though I quite saw that there could be no going back.

In preparation for the actual performance, my hat was plucked off; my little overcoat, too, save in the hot days of summer; while my footwear was changed, either by myself or with assistance, for a pair of rubber-soled sand-shoes. This was all. I was now ready, so far as I ever should be ready, for the course of instruction. Nurses and mothers—our own mother sometimes taking the place of our own nurse—sat around the walls. The children waited. And before very long, a woman, at a small, upright piano, placed on a perch at one end of the hall, would strike up a march.

The children, having formed themselves, again with some assistance, into a long, straggling line, now circulated in a counter-clockwise direction; encouraged, or theoretically encouraged, by the music and one or more of the instructors. Sometimes the proprietor of the business—who, I must admit, had become rather stout—would wheeze some remarks. But it was his sons—younger, more stalwart, in white trousers, and with immense chests expanding their sweaters—who, as I recall things, did most of the work. They would march beside us, doing their utmost, week after week in my own case, to teach me to distinguish my feet. Or they would stand, shouting: "Left—right! Left—right!"—which, in my own case again, had an even less efficacious result. For I don't know whether it was because I was ambidextrous or not, but never—except by imitating the child in front, who might very possibly be no less uncertain—could I tell with which foot to strike out.

I can't say that this part of the performance—intended, I suppose, as a kind of limbering-up—was alarming or even exhausting. But it brought me no joy, and no sense that it possessed any point.

My mind began wandering. "Halt!" one of the giants would bark; and I went on walking. Or: "Quick-march!" and, with my thoughts far away, I was kicked on the heel. Yet I knew, even through the mist of inattention, that from now on every phase would be worse.

We were planted in separate line now. We were given little wooden dumb-bells. A giant stood facing us. He chanted. "Forwards, backwards, up, and down!" he sang—more or less—as the musician played *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay*, from behind him, up there on her perch. Suddenly, from behind *me*, another giant would catch hold of my wrists, and nearly jerk my arms from their sockets. I had virtually no muscles, and nothing at that age, I should say, could possibly have developed them. But I had some sinews, or a little gristle, perhaps, of which at these moments I became acutely aware. So this, again, wasn't very much fun.

Indian clubs, next. We twirled them round. We banged ourselves on various parts of the skull. Or we let go—unintentionally, of course—and banged one another. Then, and at this stage the musician retired, it became time for the more elaborate apparatus. Again, nevertheless, we began simply enough; by walking along a bar, about six inches from the ground, so that even when I slipped off—and I always slipped off—no particular damage was done. But then out came the parallel-bars, and some of the gigantic doormats, at which, if possible, I was even less skilful. My system, as I was now in for it anyhow, was to approach the bars, grasp them, and let a giant do the rest. Nor, in a sense, did he fail me. I was hurled through the air—rather like what subsequently was to become known as an adagio dancer, though less gracefully—until I landed on the mat. And though there were variations, I believe, in the use of the thing, I can't recall doing anything else.

The same method, in fact, saw me through the rest of the routine, on any other apparatus that was employed. Worst of all—yet at least, as I knew, it would be the end—was the Horse. In fact, it wasn't much more like a horse than you are. But a giant bestrode it. A spring-board was placed on the nearer side. A whole pile of doormats on the far side. We gathered in a group at the other end of the hall. And, in turn, we ran.

When my own turn came, and it came several times, it was my practice to shut my eyes as I reached the spring-board. The giant then hauled me over, by anything that he could catch hold of, and dropped me on the doormats. I took so little delight in this concluding item, I was so breathless, so dishevelled and on the verge of so many forms of sartorial and physical dislocation, that but for the knowledge, as I say, that it *was* the conclusion, I dare say I should have been sick on the spot. But I never was. And in fact now, as the giant stepped down and the class was dismissed, I was as happy as I had been wretched before. I was free. It was over.

Perhaps I should be dead before the next class, or in bed with another cold. But in any event there was no longer the least trace of a stomach-ache. I was so gay on the way back, now that the threat was removed—for a week, or even half a week, at the age is much the same as eternity—as to give the impression, though this was false, that I had been having the time of my life. Perhaps this, then, was why I was sent there again and again. Or perhaps not. I really don't know.

I do know, however, that at a later stage, when a day-school had taken over this part of my education, that my mother suddenly decided—from the best motives, no doubt, though in this case, of course, she had never done it herself—that I should return to the Gymnasium, on Saturday mornings, for some private instruction in pugilism. I hadn't asked for this. Whether offence is the best form of defence or not, I had no wish to fight anyone; and never have had. However, back I went. I put on the sand-shoes again. I was tied into a pair of enormous gloves. The giant who had undertaken what (though he didn't yet know this) was an impossible task, then sat down, on the bench by the wall, so that we should be a little more the same height, and invited me to hit him as hard as I could.

Perhaps some little boys would have liked to do this. But how he mis read my own nature. I had nothing against him; except that he had adopted a profession which had again given me a bit of a stomach-ache. But hitting him couldn't alter this. Indeed, it seemed all too likely that if I hit him, he would start hitting *me*. So I did nothing. He began cajoling me. He even, I believe, tried taunting me. But it was useless. I may have tapped him once, lightly, just to show that there was no ill-feeling. But as I declined to do more, he was baffled. In the end, though not until I had had several of these alleged lessons, I suppose he reported that I was hopeless, and I was withdrawn. It seems to have escaped everyone at the time that I had been demonstrating the highest principles of Christianity and Taoism, and, furthermore, with complete success. On the contrary, I was made to feel that I was a failure again; though if my example could only have been followed, it would have meant the end of all wars.

But it wasn't; though this was the end, so far as I was concerned, of the Gymnasium. It carried on for quite a while. It moved—but it was going down in the world now, I think, as more and more children were being packed off to boarding-schools, or as the cult increased for exercise in the fresh air—to a hall which, rather inappropriately, formed part of an ecclesiastical building. Whether it was still functioning when this hall and the ecclesiastical building were both blown to smithereens, I can't tell you. But it is dead now. Or has at least vanished under its original name. My stomach,

though in fact it is one of the most forgiving of organs, has had its revenge at long last.

So much, then, for some early attempts to transform me into an infant Samson. But this wasn't all, of course. *This* wasn't the social accomplishment. For not only were simultaneous efforts being made, as has been revealed, to teach me to read, to write, and to do simple sums. Not only was much work being put in, if not always by myself, in a further effort to teach me some manners. But one day—these things always seemed to happen suddenly, though I dare say the truth is that I had been told six times before I listened—it was announced that my sister and I were to learn dancing as well.

My impression is that she seemed pleased. As I was extremely imitative then, it is probable that, in the first flush of excitement, I registered some gratification, too. Yet my stomach, as it would appear, was again involved. And as that Thursday afternoon drew nearer, it seemed far less convinced that it was on to a really good thing. It was suspicious. Having caused me to ask various questions, it drew the conclusion that this was going to be very like the Gymnasium again. My soul, too, though not otherwise, as you may have gathered, unduly tough, formed a notion that dancing was perhaps a shade effeminate. While my intelligence, such as it was, hadn't yet perceived—and perhaps never would—why this art should exist at all.

Yet the plan went forward, and the day arrived. Both neophytes—though one had now decided qualms below the midriff—were suitably attired; my sister in a frock with accordion pleats, and myself in a fresh, clean blouse. It is even possible that we each had a new pair of shoes—these accompanied us in two bags, my own being decorated with the portrait of a stag, and my sister's, if I am not mistaken, with a tiger—and, if so, the soles would have been scratched with a pair of nail-scissors; as a precaution, not always effective, in my own case, against our immediately falling down. But there was no bus-ride. The class was held at our own Town Hall, and five minutes would take us there.

So five minutes, and our mother, did. Even today, though a hardened and punctual ratepayer—or perhaps even because of this—I feel uneasy in any Town Hall. They tend to boom and echo. To smell, at the best, of recently washed stone floors. They contain too many mysterious corridors. And my employees, who work there, seldom treat me as if they were aware of this relationship. Though more cloistered than post-offices, there is the same tradition, in my experience, that one must always be kept waiting. Not, of course, at my first dancing-class, that I had even heard of such things as rates. But there was the boom and echo. There was the smell. And, in addition, there were some sightless statues, on the heroic scale, rather suggesting the activities of a Medusa.

However, I passed them safely. I was conducted to a room where dozens of children were being unwrapped, changing their shoes, or having their hair brushed and combed. And then into a really vast apartment—again with benches all round it, and a piano on a platform at one end—but with a floor far more slippery than at the Gymnasium, so that it was necessary to move with the very utmost caution. There was no Horse, though. And no other apparatus that I could see. I was a shade reassured. And still more so by the complete absence of giants.

But not of giantesses. Chief among them, with a figure such as you now only see in very old-fashioned advertisements, and dressed, as even I soon came to observe, in a different but always extremely elaborate confection each time, was the deputy or representative of the great Mrs. Wordsworth; headmistress, as you might say, of this school. Her name—well, not really, for I have suddenly chosen to be discreet—was Miss Swan, and she had her own large corps of scarcely less tight-laced attendants. But in those days the great Mrs. Wordsworth—no relation, as far as I am aware, to the poet—had so far cornered the business of juvenile dancing-instruction, from her headquarters in Baker Street, that even Miss Swan must teach with her authorisation. About once a term—or perhaps it was only once a year—the great Mrs. Wordsworth would look in on us all. If I may say so, without appearing ungallant, she was elderly, no beauty, and even, or so it seemed, slightly crippled. But she was the queen, nay, the empress, of this peculiar industry. She only glanced at us, but we trembled. So, though they still had far better figures, did Miss Swan and the corps of attendants. For the great Mrs. Wordsworth was a tyrant—or so it was said—and at the very summit of her profession. So that, as we gazed at her, we were at the same time thanking our stars that we didn't go to Baker Street, yet feeling inferior—being little snobs—because we didn't.

As for the instruction itself, this, too—as at the Gymnasium—worked up from rather simple beginnings; while some of it, one might have thought, had very little connection with dancing. Within a short time, for instance, my bag, with the stag on it, contained not only my shoes, but a tennis-ball (which generally rolled under the benches when I tried to toss it and catch it in time with the music), a pair of castanets strung on elastic (with which I must admit I never became very proficient, either), a pair of smaller and lighter Indian clubs than those which I had wielded at the Gymnasium, and even a tambourine.

Ranged in rather widely spaced ranks, on that immense and always treacherous floor, faced by Miss Swan, and with our limbs occasionally actuated by her assistants, we began, as I say—save that there were no dumb-bells—very much as we had begun in

our sand-shoes. Terpsichore was as yet in abeyance. But she was drawing nearer. For presently we were circling the room, in single file, to a waltz played in very strict tempo. "One-two-three-four-turn-six!" Miss Swan, who had a rather resonant, deep-pitched voice, would declaim as we moved. For the theory was that when we eventually caught hold of each other, and performed the same motions, we should find—as some of us did, up to a point—that we were waltzing.

But this wasn't all we did, after a brief pause to recover our strength. Terpsichore was now right out of her niche. We danced the polka, the barn-dance, the schottische, the lancers—none of which was the faintest use to me when, after a considerable interruption, I reappeared in the ballroom. And even—a very odd dance, this, for the gentlemen (as, for this purpose, the little boys were described) stood behind their partners and held their outstretched hands—an even more ephemeral thing called The Washington Post.

Was I skilful? Not the least; though a little better, perhaps, than at the Gymnasium. One perpetual difficulty—which, though I haven't danced for some time, never really left me, for I still think it strange that you are allowed and even encouraged to behave when a band plays as it would be outrageous to behave when it doesn't; one constant obstruction was the command to hold my partners more tightly. I didn't want to. Frankly, it seemed stupid and pointless enough to be holding them anyhow. I preferred dancing at a slight distance, with somewhat limp arms. Not only did the alternative, if recommended, system seem far too familiar, but it prevented me watching my feet.

You may deduce from this—and you wouldn't be far out—that as yet I had but little comprehension of what is perhaps the main purpose of dancing. And indeed there was no cheek-to-cheek nor anything that it implies, in my young life. The thing was cerebral; a problem in shuffling round without public rebuke; and the girls—not one of whose features I could now even attempt to recall—meant no more (though in my ignorance I believed them to be considerably less dangerous) than the Horse. Perhaps it is different today. I don't know. But of course, when I spoke of cheek-to-cheek just now, even for grown-ups this would have been unthinkable then.

Periodically, as I plunged, slithered, and counted under my breath, one of the assistants—or, less often, Miss Swan herself—would take me on. The grip now, whether tight or loose, would become extremely complicated. They couldn't bend very far, as I now realise, because of their stays. I couldn't add even an inch to my height. Sometimes, therefore, I left the ground altogether. At intervals, all vision, and even the power of respiration, would

be blotted out. Yet it was an honour—or so I supposed, whether correctly or not—when Miss Swan, who ranked so near to the great Mrs. Wordsworth, whirled me round, with my face against her exquisitely cut skirt, before leaving me, a little doubtful of my orientation by now, to go stumbling back to the bench.

Thus I danced, when there was a real Queen and Empress on the throne; until eventually this class was also dismissed, when I changed my shoes again, and was muffled up, and brought home. Or, until, in another and broader sense, it was felt that I had learnt all that I was likely to learn, and must give my time to Greek, Latin, and Football. Farewell to Miss Swan, then. For a while I still had the castanets, the Indian clubs, the tambourine, and the tennis-ball. And until a few years ago I could even have shown you the bag with the stag on it. But it has gone now. So has the phase when I dressed rather elaborately myself, and danced—though only as it now seems to me because I was expected to dance—with no sort of instruction at all. For in the inexplicable manner to which I have referred once or twice, I have ceased—though still shy—to be a child, a little boy, or even a fairly young man.

Odd, isn't it? Or don't you think so?

And my stomach? Oh, well, thank you very much for asking. Yes, I was coming to that. It remained passive at Miss Swan's, for though I can't say that I wasn't always just a little afraid of her—as seems natural enough when one thinks of her clothes and her figure—even *The Washington Post* didn't result in my being hurled on to a doormat; while, of course, boxing just didn't come into it. I don't know that I looked forward to those Thursday afternoons. I think I regarded them as something that happened to me, and couldn't be helped; which was my outlook on a good deal at the time. But giantesses, there could be no doubt, were less alarming than giants; as I suppose my stomach—that barometer of the emotions—took note.

Furthermore, and though at actual parties in those days I can now recall dancing nothing but Sir Roger de Coverley, which I had picked up without any lessons at all; and though everything else but the Waltz, which then utterly changed, passed out of my life altogether, it is just possible, I dare say, that I should have been even more uncouth if I had never stumped round at Miss Swan's. Long afterwards, it is quite true, when I used sometimes to fetch my own children from their dancing-class—which, as they never attempted to evade, I suppose they at least tolerated—and crept in, towards the end, to join the spectators myself, my stomach did feel a slight pang. But this, you see, was partly sentiment—for it is intensely sentimental—and partly due to the fact that as the hall, in this case contained some gymnastic apparatus, though for another class, it kept thinking of parallel bars.

So it ached again, just for a moment; much as it would ache, at a still later date, when the sirens went off. Or again, going back, as at school before examinations, or anything else that its owner disliked. It ached once more, for instance, only the other day, when I was going to the dentist—though it is now quite a long way from my teeth. It is like that. But it is quite safe—I hope—from gymnasiums now. And it has no chance to ache before dancing, which, however absurd—well, what *would* you say if you saw animals, or even angels, making such fools of themselves?—would appear to have become more widespread than ever. Because its owner, for better or worse, has quite given this up.

CHAPTER X

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

WHEN you become an author—and unless you are well over ninety there isn't really much chance, in these days, that you won't—you will make a number of discoveries. One of the first, of course, will be that though you now feel strangely important yourself—for wasn't there a review of your book in the *Kilmarnock Sentinel*, and hasn't an old friend of your aunt written to tell her that she saw a copy in the window of a shop in Chislehurst?—the rest of the world seems a shade less impressed. Another is that, although you and your wife (bless her soul!) read the proofs till you were dizzy—and though you even sent a telegram, after returning them, to point out that on p. 178, in the big scene at the inquest, the word should be "coroner" and not "crooner"—nevertheless, when you open the first, crackling, bound copy that reaches you, your eye will instantly light on some still more disastrous misprint which you had unaccountably overlooked.

Another is that none of your friends, nor even the *Kilmarnock Sentinel*, will appear to have observed this; so that you now strongly suspect the former of having skipped, and the latter of being an unprincipled rag.

Another is that though your publishers were advertising other authors like billy-ho until the precise date when your own book came out, they now suddenly seem to have been seized with such a fit of modesty or economy that you will seek their announcements in vain.

And another is that though an informant whom you have hitherto regarded as reliable enough says that he saw six copies in the book department at Selfridge's on Wednesday, and that when he went back on Friday they had all vanished, when you ring up the publishers—in terror lest the disastrous misprint should reappear in the second edition—the young woman at the other end says that they have still got eight hundred on hand.

Yes, these are some of the discoveries—they might even be called disappointments—that tend to quell a new author's conceit. In three months, at the most—unless Fate has so smiled on him (and we must admit that this occasionally occurs) that he is now on his way to Hollywood, where in the end he will be even more disappointed—the whole thing is over. No more reviews. No more news from aunts, or other kind friends. No second impression.

Only—long, long afterwards—a document from the publisher of so depressing a nature (for the stock in hand seems somehow to have risen to even more than eight hundred copies) that anyone but an author would now give up all hope.

Some do, in fact. But a lot don't. For they have tasted blood. They have developed the itch. Publishers, again, have an extraordinary proclivity, up to a point, for throwing good money after bad; or, as they prefer to call it, for backing their judgment. It is true, also, that only one in a hundred can really write until he has seen what he has written in print. That's the real lesson; and if you can absorb it—or haven't, as is also not uncommon, put everything that you can think of, or are ever likely to think of, into the first, unsuccessful book—you may still, with some luck, make the grade.

It is a pyramid, of course. As it narrows towards the apex, there must clearly be less and less room. It is pretty slippery, too; for gone is the old, faithful public that bought everything that a man wrote, when he had once made a hit, and never noticed how dull he had become. Yet round the base, or even half-way up, if you hang on tight, refuse to be discouraged, and keep churning away, there is still quite a chance that you may earn almost enough to give up your other job.

This happens, what's more. The world, as we know, is crammed with such characters. It is hope that supports them. And the itch. And the libraries. And the fact that if a publisher only published two good books each year, and omitted to publish several dozen inferior articles, no one would take him seriously, and even the two good authors would leave him. This is known, professionally, as spreading the risk or filling the shop-window. It's business. I don't understand it. But I do understand, and I shall tell you now, what will happen to you after a bit.

Your fourth or fifth volume is out. Secretly you may be aware that only a miracle can turn you into a best-seller, though somehow you have still got to go on. Besides, your publisher stood you lunch last November, and even if this was partly so that he should pay less income-tax—or even if, in a sense, you have yourself paid for the lunch—it was at least a sign that he knew who you were. So do other people. They can't help it; their subconscious takes care of that, when your name is regularly appearing on title-pages, and in advertisements, or reviews. Have you arrived? Well, this rather depends on where you were going when you first set out. You haven't yet made your fortune, and perhaps never will. But you have been heard of. Indeed, considering your own income and, to be fair, the real value of your work, it is astonishing how many more people will have heard of you now—if still only a handful compared with the case of the very meanest film-star—than could give the

name, for example, of the Lord Mayor or the Master in Lunacy. And some of them, accordingly, begin writing to you.

Now, far be it from me—for I don't even think so—to say that all readers are mad. Some of the letters that you receive will bring cheer into your life; for what is pleasanter, as one sits down to breakfast, than to be told that one is Mr. B. Pigsley's favourite author? Or that Mrs. H. Slapton, of Weston-super-Mare, couldn't put your last volume down? These rewards for your industry, trifling though they may appear—in quantity, that is to say—compared with the sack-loads that have been simultaneously delivered to Mr. Clark Grant or Miss Husheen Heaven (*née* Gertrude Baldmoney), are yet highly gratifying. You are uplifted. "Aha!" you say to yourself. "Never mind that rude crack, six weeks ago, in the *Sunday Telescope*. The heart of the great public is sound."

But there are other letters. You must be prepared for these, too. In fact, I think the best thing might be—not, of course, if you have made up your mind to become an author, that anything can stop you—if I now give you some characteristic examples; together, perhaps, with a few hints as to the best method of answering them. After all, I have now been in this rather queer game for a fairly long time. I might help you. Who knows? Or I can at least warn you, so that you have less of a shock.

Let us assume, then, that you are a man, and are called Hilary Rowbotham—though if you are a woman and are called Harriet Ramsbotham, it will come, since Literature is above details like that, to just the same thing. A letter arrives. You open it. Here it is.

EXAMPLE NO. I:

"Beulah,"

117, Croxbury Avenue,
West Northbridge,
S.E.43.

Dear Mr. Rowbotham,

I have never written to an author before and I hope you will excuse me writing to you. A friend lent me your book called Out of the Dark and I have now finished reading it. I thought you might be interested to know this as I do not read very much, haven't time, but generally prefer the pictures. I am sorry your heroine did not like chrysanthemums as I am very fond of these. Well I must close now with kind regards and thanking you.

Yours truly,

A. WALLER.

SUGGESTED ANSWER:

At first sight this letter, though perhaps a little lacking in enthusiasm, may seem simple and straightforward enough. And, after all, anyone can make a slip when they are trying to spell

"chrysanthemum." Yet there are at least two difficulties. One is that your book wasn't called *Out of the Dark* at all, but *Out of the Night*. The other is that though it would clearly be churlish not to acknowledge such a communication—for that first sentence, if true, is somewhat overwhelming—you haven't the faintest idea whether A. Waller is Mr., Mrs., or Miss. You consult your wife, but she is equally baffled. You consider, but dismiss almost at once—since it only postpones the problem for a few words, and might be thought a little churlish, too—the notion of replying in the third person. It is true, of course, that A. Waller hasn't bought your book, and that even his, or her, friend may well have borrowed it from a public library. But the letter haunts you. It wrecks your real work. You spend hours trying to dodge this enigma of sex. You have to start using your second waste-paper basket.

Nevertheless, there is a way out. Use a postcard. Address it to "A. Waller," without prefix or suffix; for though this may be thought eccentric it will certainly get there. And on the back write: "Very many thanks for your letter, which I appreciated very much indeed. Hilary Rowbotham."

It is just possible, of course, that you may lose a reader this way. Yet there seems some doubt, as A. Waller can't even get the name of your book right, if this will seriously affect your career.

EXAMPLE NO. 2:

19, *Jubilee Villas,*
Biggleton,
Herts.

Mr. Hillery Roebottom.

Kindly send autograph for my collection on enclosed sheet. I am a collector of autographs.

Faithfully,

(MISS) NORAH MARBLES.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

In a sense one might call the above letter business-like. At any rate it comes straight to the point, and there is no mystery about the writer's position. Of course she hasn't enclosed a stamp, or an envelope; but on the other hand she, too, has presumably heard of you. Is this Fame? You would have rather liked her to mention just one of your works, or even to indicate that she is aware of your profession. But she hasn't. In fact, as you now look again, you see that this time it is your own name that is misspelt. This is discouraging. As before, you have no wish to lose a possible customer; but would it, you are beginning to wonder, make any difference to Miss Marbles if you signed her scrap of paper "Geoffrey Chaucer," or even "Nell Gwyn"?

However, as this might be going a bit far, and as it is possible, despite her handwriting, that she is acquainted with someone slightly more literate—a young man, for instance, who might come round and beat you up for trifling with her innocence—it may be best to satisfy her, and perhaps yourself, by adopting her own spelling. You will accordingly scrawl “Hillery Roebottom,” in any form of calligraphy that momentarily appeals to you; and though you will still be twopence-halfpenny out of pocket, her collection will be no less valuable than before, and you will have preserved your own self-respect.

EXAMPLE NO. 3:

*The Vicarage,
Little Pebley,
near Throckingham,
Suffolk.*

Dear Sir.

We are holding a bazaar here next month for a cause which I feel sure you will approve; namely, the provision of new hassocks for this quaint old church, where I should be very glad to welcome you at any time when you are in the neighbourhood. It has occurred to me that you may care to send me some signed copies of your books—I shall be quite happy to leave the selection to yourself—which could be sold for the benefit of this really admirable fund. I need hardly add that if you should be able to be present on this occasion, and to give a short address, of not more than an hour, on some literary topic, I should be glad to arrange for this, too.

Yours sincerely,

WILFRID WATERHEAD (B.A.)

P.S. You will doubtless be interested to hear that my wife recently obtained your tale “In the Night” from her circulating library.

SUGGESTED ANSWER.

The extraordinary thing is that your first impulse on reading this communication—unless, of course, you have previously received a lot of others just like it—will be to feel flattered. For isn't it something that an educated man—a B.A.—should have singled you out? But then you come to the postscript—which from the writer's point of view we should say was rather a mistake—and descend with a bit of a thud. Not only has your reverend correspondent misquoted your title again, not only do you dislike and even resent the word “tale,” and not only is there no evidence that Mrs. Waterhead has even opened the work in question—though you wouldn't mind this so much if she had bought it instead of borrowing it—but even

if she asked for it (which you rather doubt now, for she probably muddled this, too), it seems all too clear that neither she nor her husband had ever heard of you until a few weeks ago.

Yes, that would be it. One of them would say: "Let's victimise an author for this bazaar." The other would say: "Splendid, my dear. Who shall it be?" And then the first one would catch sight of your book lying about, and at once—for in a vicarage this would seem like an answer to prayer—the fell deed would be done. No, not so flattering, perhaps, when—if even in a slightly morbid and possibly exaggerated fashion—you consider the postscript like this.

However, there is certainly one point on which the Rev. Wilfrid would seem to be abysmally ignorant. He is under the illusion that authors can get any number of their own books without paying for them. And they can't; any more than they can send off a parcel without paying the postage as well. Nor, unless they are insane or eaten up with exhibitionism, do they go down to the country, at their own expense, to lecture on literature in competition with hoop-la and a raffle in which you pay twopence to guess the weight of a cake. While, though virtuous enough in a large number of cases—and yours is naturally one—they feel no sense of responsibility about hassocks.

The request, in other words, is an insolent request. But you mustn't be rude. Even if Mr. Waterhead hesitates to hold a special Commination Service for your benefit, or otherwise, it is always possible that Mrs. Waterhead's second cousin is a reviewer. You can't be too careful. You're so hideously vulnerable. Besides, there is your dignity to remember.

Here, then, bearing all these risks and disadvantages in mind, is what I should suggest as a reply.

Dear Sir,

Very many thanks for your kind letter. Unfortunately the demand for my books so far exceeds the present limited supply that I was even unable the other day, when I received a similar appeal from his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, to oblige as I should otherwise gladly have done. It is also a source of great disappointment to me that owing to extreme pressure of work, and a number of other public engagements, it will be impossible for me to attend your bazaar. I trust, nevertheless, that it will be as successful as it deserves, and beg to remain,

Yours very truly,

HILARY ROWBOTHAM.

That ought to fix him. It will cost you another twopence-half-penny, of course. But as advertisement rates go, this is cheap.

EXAMPLE NO. 4:

53, Albert Avenue,
Scrawnton,
Lancs.

Dear Sir,

In your book Women and Elephants, which I recently had an opportunity of perusing, I was distressed to find that you had given the name 'Robinson' to the proprietor of a shooting-gallery. As no member of my family has ever been engaged in this class of trade, I was naturally annoyed by what I can only regard as a slur on my professional standing as a high-class funeral furnisher, as well as alarmed by the effect that it is likely to have on my business. Kindly let me know, at your earliest convenience, what steps you propose to take.

Yours faithfully,
J. TUPSLEY ROBINSON.

SUGGESTED ANSWER:

This is alarming for you, too; but don't lose your head. It is true that, as the law stands, you are in a very weak position; though it is true, also, that your publisher, and even your printer, are now equally involved. A third great truth is that if you take this matter to your own solicitor, there can be no telling what it will eventually cost you—whether Mr. Robinson secures damages or not.

Keep calm, though. Don't on any account let Mr. Robinson know what you think of him. Don't worry about the printer, but tell your publisher at once. He is quite used to all this. Knowing, as he does, that *Women and Elephants* has been remaindered and pulped, and will never be reissued, he will dictate an apology in which you also promise to make a correction in the next and all future editions. Mr. Robinson will show this letter to all his friends, and become, if that can be imagined, more intolerable in his private circle than ever. But he has got what he wanted; you won't hear from him again; and the affair—even though it put you off your work for three weeks—may be regarded as closed.

EXAMPLE NO. 5:

27, Mauleverer Mansions,
W.15.

Dear Mr. Rowbotham,

I have in preparation an anthology from the works of present-day writers, which I hope to have published by a leading firm, and in which I should like to include the description of, I think, a lawn-tennis match from your volume entitled, so far as I can remember "The Chemist's Shop." Unfortunately I am unable to offer any fee for this permission, as my venture is of a speculative nature, but I should of course print a suitable acknowledgment.

I regret, also, that I do not possess a copy of this book, so should be obliged if you would instruct your publishers to send me one. I think you will agree with me that there should be quite a demand for an anthology on these lines.

Yours very sincerely,

WALTER K. POOKE.

SUGGESTED ANSWER:

This is another case for slight self-control. Your book, as a matter of fact, was called *Ointment of the Apothecary*; and the description of a game of water-polo—not lawn-tennis—appeared in another volume, called *The Eternal Hat-Stand*. Mr. Pooke, in other words, has probably read neither work, but has merely heard someone else mixing them up. Is he a brother-craftsman, though? This seems doubtful. Do you think his anthology will ever be printed? Of course it won't. It would have been worse, of course, if he had sent you a six-hundred-page manuscript, in illegible holograph, and asked you to read it, point out any possible improvements, and arrange for its publication; as in this case you would have had to tie up the parcel again and take it round to a post-office. But though all writing is a speculative venture, you shouldn't be carried away by either pity or conceit. This is the recommended reply:

Dear Sir,

Many thanks for your letter. I should, of course, be delighted to be represented in your forthcoming volume, and without any fee. It is, however, my rule, in such circumstances, to ask that a donation of not less than ten shillings should be sent to the Royal Literary Fund.

Yours very truly,

HILARY ROWBOTHAM.

Of course this won't do the Royal Literary Fund much good. But it is politer than any alternative that I can put forward, and will mark the end of your correspondence with Mr. Pooke.

EXAMPLE NO. 6:

527, Atomic Building,
4011, Columbus Boulevard,
New Jericho,
Cal.

Dear Friend,

Your name has been submitted to me as a well-known British writer. I accordingly take pleasure in asking that you complete enclosed questionnaire for inclusion in next edition of The Universal Cosmopolitan Cyclopædia

of Modern Worth-While Men and Women, *which is the largest and most widely circulated source of information of its kind. Owing to the amount of labour involved in this important work, your prompt co-operation is requested.*

Cordially,

HOMER Q. KLAWHAMMER,
Editor-in-Chief.

SUGGESTED ANSWER:

For a moment you may be almost tempted to believe that this *is* Fame at last; for even if Mr. Klawhammer hadn't previously heard of you—and, by the way, has signed his name with a rubber stamp—someone else, or so it seems, has put him on to you. America! Land of the Future, and, what's more, of colossal sales. Whoops!

But then, as you begin unfolding the questionnaire, a slight doubt creeps in. There are forty-seven blank spaces to be filled. They want the names of your grandparents; your religion; your war-record; even your athletic distinctions at school. By Jove, this is worse than applying for a passport. It will take you weeks. They can't possibly print all this stuff about everybody. And, by George, they want your photograph, too.

Can there *be* such a book? Hullo! "And I hereby undertake to mail my check for £2 sterling to your London representatives, New Era International Agency, 35a, Bean Street, Charing Cross Road, W.C.2."

Well, well. What a world! And of course Barnum was right. How sad. And how grey is a literary life after all. However, in this case there isn't the faintest need to spend two pounds, or even twopence-halfpenny. To the right of your chair there is a most valuable vessel. Indeed, some authors, as I have hinted, have two. And though sometimes it is with regret—nay, agony—that you put a whole day's, or even week's, work into it, there can be no sense of sorrow now. For it is a writer's best friend, whether he is well known or not. Like the Waters of Lethe, it purifies all that it holds. As a matter of fact, it could have dealt with every one of the examples that have appeared in this chapter, and nine-tenths of your other fan-mail—if you were less nervous or conscientious—as well. But there can be no question what you should do with Mr. Klawhammer's letter and questionnaire. Bung 'em straight in the waste-paper basket.

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

THERE are, it now appears, two kinds of prisoner. One commits a crime or breach of the law; is tried—at considerable expense, and often at vast inconvenience to a number of quite innocent parties; and is then (or sometimes, at least) placed in a large country house with spacious grounds, and asked to remain there. If this cures him of his anti-social tendencies, that is all to the good. Don't imagine please, that I am in favour of either manacles or dungeons.

The second and much larger category, however, has committed no crime at all. Furthermore, it has already been punished by being bombed, badly fed, and very heavily fined. It may also have been turned out of its home. It has almost certainly been forced to wear rags. While if it should have the impertinence to stop breathing, it will be very heavily fined again. Yet, notwithstanding all this, prison walls have arisen all round it. Birds can migrate. Ministers of the Crown can, and do, leave the country whenever they choose. But though communications; or so we are told, have now annihilated what was once known as distance, the ordinary, plain, dumb tax-payer, or stooge, can only peer out through the bars.

This is perhaps a slight overstatement. It is true that for approximately six years he could only go abroad when, in most cases, he would have preferred to remain here. But there are tickets of leave now. If he is prepared to make enough applications, to complete enough forms, to stand in enough queues, and to be subjected to enough insolence—and, of course, if he has still got enough money—he will be allowed, by gracious permission, to leave England just long enough to revive his appetite, and to buy something that has been exported—only he will have to pay twice over if he brings it back with him; after which he must return, and stay where he is, until another twelve months have come round. Perhaps this is part of the freedom which it took him those six years to earn. Though as a matter of fact even the above liberty has, as I write, been removed.

No, at the present moment we are all prisoners, whether we deserve it or not. At the present moment the annihilation of distance is, I may say so, a bit of a mockery. Once nothing worse happened after a famous victory than that your little grandchild, sporting on the green, stumbled over a skull, and you had to explain what it was. Today not only is there much more chance that he will

come tottering back to you with a hand-grenade or anti-personnel bomb—in which case there may very well be no time for explanations—but the famous victory will have reduced you to such a condition of all-round frustration that even if it explodes you won't very much care. For it may release you. But nothing else can. Unless, of course, you take a real pull at yourself and join the Cabinet.

Once, however, it wasn't at all like this. Though my younger readers may doubt such a bold statement, it is a fact that I—the venerable figure now sitting here—could once go to Paris whenever I liked, and with no more formality (apart from being insulted by men in peaked caps, smelling of garlic, who made hay with my luggage) than hailing a cab. I have even been to New York and back, without possessing a passport. Indeed, not only was this really easier in those days, for it was only a matter of a train and a boat, instead of a boat and two trains, but if I had chosen I could have gone on to Australia. Only poverty could have stopped me, as in fact it did. But apart from this I was freer than air.

Or freer than air was then, of course, because now it isn't free at all. And this brings us to another aspect of the whole thing; the diabolical invention of flying. Some of its disadvantages you possibly noticed yourself, during the six years that I have just mentioned. But there is another. Supposing one *does* escape now; supposing that, with infinite trouble and at vast expenditure, one secures one of those tickets of leave. It is immaterial whether, personally, one flies or trundles; flies, or is horribly sea-sick. The point is that distance *has* been annihilated. When you get there, wherever it is, you *can't* be more than a few hours—or days, at the very most—from your home. The mystery through which trains once plunged, and which was only slightly dissipated when a few wealthier members of the community returned to the road, has now ceased to exist. Once, when you travelled, you reached somewhere else. Now—though this isn't why it is practically forbidden—you don't. The link is too close. The world is a mere map. Hamlet, you will remember, said that he could be bounded in a nutshell, and count himself a king of infinite space. We—with enough permits and visas—are kings of infinite space, but have reduced it to the size of a nutshell.

I think the bicycles started it. I don't blame the trains—they burrow through tunnels, they avoid hill-tops, they seem, in a sense, to carry their own rather repetitive and therefore unidentifiable scenery with them; while stage-coaches, I feel, were too slow to do any annihilating. But bicycles were the beginning of a new and more perilous phase. Not because the riders scorched—if I may suddenly revive an old and almost forgotten expression—but because distance, as they travelled, was continuous now. There was no break. The two ends became joined.

This, to a generation accustomed to entering a box on wheels,

sitting there, and being decanted, after some fragmentary glimpses of a purely lateral description, with no other means of return, marked a pretty big change. It also led—since but for bicycles there would have been no pneumatic tires, and but for pneumatic tires there could hardly have been any motor-cars, and but for their engines there couldn't have been any aeroplanes—almost direct to the present shrinkage of space. This is interesting; or at least I think so. For, if true, I was in at the outset.

Not that I invented either bicycles or pneumatic tires. Not, if it comes to that, that at the period in question I could be seen—alas, no!—even on a tricycle horse. But when I was still very young, my father purchased a bicycle. It was the first that I had ever examined at anything like close quarters, and to tell the truth I was a little alarmed by it. But he wasn't. In those days—as I may have told you—we had a long garden at the back of the house. And having bought this machine—which was very heavy and had fixed pedals, for no one had yet invented the free-wheel—he almost at once began trying to ride it.

He took his iron steed into the garden, that is to say. He hopped, as was then the convention, with one foot on a short rod, or step, which projected from the rear hub. He sprang into the air. He landed on the saddle. He wobbled. He pedalled. He straightened out. He reached the end of the path. And he fell off.

Observing this from a window—for I had been invited to observe it—I was horrified. I was still more horrified when he rose, at the far end of the path; hopped and mounted again; came tearing towards me, and fell off within about a yard of the house. In fact, this was what hundreds if not thousands of would-be bicyclists were doing at the time—the only alternative being to get someone else to run along holding the back of the frame; for either the machines were more recalcitrant, or the day hadn't yet dawned when any child, being introduced to a bicycle for the first time, immediately leaps on to it and rides off. The Race, as you might say, hadn't yet reached this stage; any more than hens had yet learnt that it was unnecessary to dash across the road in front of every bicycle that approached them; or than horses, a little later, when the first cars appeared, had discovered that it was unnecessary to shy.

However, leaving this also rather interesting point about inherited memory—for hens, horses, and children are all born now with the knowledge that their forbears so painfully acquired—I must add that although some horrid little boys might have been amused to see their father spread-eagled on a gravel path, with a bicycle beside him or on top of him, my own sympathy and sensibility were so intense that, about the third or fourth time that this happened, I burst into tears. So far as I can remember, I was

then removed from the spectacle; doubtless so as to be told, once more, that I should exhibit more courage. But my father certainly exhibited it. For he continued to fall until he had mastered his new toy. After which he not only began riding about London—though this was comparatively safe in those days—but presently set off, with an equally skilful companion on another machine, for a tour in the country.

Yet though weeping, as a proof of affection, was all very well, it is of course clear now that I should have done very much more. I should have spoken to him. I should have told him that, notwithstanding all the contemporary cruelty to horses, which indeed still makes me shudder when I think of it, his feat had a fearful significance. I should have pointed out not only that if he and other people went on like this it would lead finally to jet-propelled aircraft; not only that, on the way there, we should be let in for the terrors and horrors of motoring; but that by this attack on speed—for already, in those days, a bicycle could go faster than a horse-tram—he was deliberately reducing the size of the habitable globe. Furthermore, that ere long, if he persisted in this course, the whole glory of travel would cease to exist; because everybody, whatever distance they went, would still always know just where they were.

This, of course—and I must admit it—would have been overlooking the fact that, as travel became faster than sound, only a very few patient or privileged persons would be permitted to travel at all. As a matter of fact, though, I said nothing. The opportunity passed. Once more—and it is just possible I was already too late—there was no choice but to watch things work out. Today, also as a matter of fact, I don't really want to travel. There are too many obstructions. If I overcame them, I should probably find that Timbuctoo, for example, has become exactly like Golders Green. Besides, I can't leave my Peke, Britannia; and if I took her abroad with me she would have to go into quarantine for six months—which neither of us could bear—before she was allowed to come home.

No, thank you. I stay where I am in these days, and others can fight their way out. Yet once—well, when I think of the combined mystery and simplicity of journeys—seldom of more than about thirty-five miles—to houses, generally in Surrey, which my parents would rent during August, it seems, in another sense, as if few can have travelled so far. In time, I mean. Since then. Since the years of my more extreme youth.

At that epoch it would have been surprising if parents like mine should have had more than one house of their own. The country cottage, the bungalow, the little car racing to and fro at week-ends—such developments were unheard of as yet. The very rich could have

any number of enormous mansions. The very poor, unless they happened to live there already, never saw the country at all. But my parents, who were neither, followed the customs of their own class. They had a house in London. They paid visits sometimes. Occasionally they went abroad. But the regular, annual change of air—coinciding with my father's main holiday—took place, as I say, in August, and a home county, in a house which they had merely hired for the month.

The earliest examples were, in fact, lodgings; but we rose from this. It would be a little villa, or a vicarage, or a house which, as I now realise, was rather shabby because it *had* to be let. The choice or selection was made earlier in the summer. But I heard about it. I knew when the decision was reached. And I, too, began counting the weeks.

Hot, stuffy days in London now, with the grass turning grey in the Gardens. My mother ordering supplies, as though for a siege, from the Stores. And then the appearance of dust-sheets; and of luggage.

Today, of course, one crams everything into a suitcase; and when one has done so that is probably the whole of one's outfit. But in those days trunks were trunks. They were vast and black, with curving tops. They took days to pack, and even then could never be shut—with leather straps, and a great, brass lock—by less than at least two grown-ups. The first knelt or sat on the lid. The other tugged, heaved, panted, and pushed. And the expedition required more than one.

There were smaller, flatter receptacles, too; though still heavier than anything now. There was a Gladstone Bag or two; bulging, and only to be lifted by the very strongest. And quite often there was a child's bath, which would be used for this purpose at the other end, but meanwhile had also been filled with clothes, and wrapped in hessian, and corded, and sewn. It sounds, in fact, as though we all had enormous wardrobes. But I don't think we had. Some of our garments, perhaps were rather thicker and clumsier; my own underwear, for instance, which certainly weighed a great deal more than it does now. But mostly, I should say, it was again a matter of convention. One took more, in those days, because one *could* take more; because everyone else took more, and because luggage was designed for this purpose.

On the great day itself—and I quite see why now, for I was rather apt to do the same thing later on—my father went to the office as usual. It was his privilege. His own holiday wouldn't start till this evening—when he would follow on by a later train—and I think he showed very good sense. The cook and house-parlourmaid would, in all probability, be the first to set off. While the main

body consisted of my mother—extremely capable on these occasions; two, or eventually, three children; and their admirable nurse.

As, however, no four-wheeler in existence could conceivably have taken this party and all that luggage, a so-called private omnibus—though more, in fact, like a wagonette with a roof to it—would have been hired from the South-Western Railway Company. And in this, after a great deal of thumping, crashing, and hoisting on the part of the driver and perhaps some casual assistants—or by the caretaker's husband, who, if he did this, undoubtedly never did anything else—the main body at last would embark.

The driver climbed up. The horse, or, if one of the larger omnibuses had been found necessary, the two horses would be jerked into motion. The iron tires of the wheels set up a terrific rumbling. The glass in all the windows of the vehicle dithered until you couldn't have heard yourself speak. And within a very short time—as in the case of the landau to which I referred in a previous chapter—I had no idea where I was.

On the other hand, I was still surrounded by relations. My nurse was still there. And presently, after strange, fantastic glimpses of streets, parks, the brownish façade, as it then was, of Buckingham Palace, and of the great River Thames, we turned—as one still does, though it is shorter and far less like a coal-mine now—under an archway; and lo, we were at Waterloo.

Not the battlefield, of course. Yet not the terminus that you know today. Nor even the one that was there before attention from incendiaries and explosives. Though already of some size, it was much more like a country station. But it covered less space; it was more primitive then; and, in a sense, more vital, too. The people had redder faces; stranger figures, and more variety of attire. There was more colour; partly owing to bright uniforms here and there, partly owing to the uncontrolled display of vivid advertisements, and partly to the liberal use, by the South-Western Railway Company, of its own special tint of salmon-coloured paint.

But though there was a crowd, or what was then thought a crowd, there were plenty of porters; in green corduroy trousers, with sleeved waistcoats, and—another speciality of the Company—all wearing red ties. So the luggage, with more crashes and thumps, was fetched down. More luggage was extracted from the inside of the bus. I was extracted, less roughly, myself.

Now—my mother having first bought the tickets—the various trunks must be labelled. Another porter, or a man dressed like a porter, did this. For some reason—but it is so long since I have travelled with anything but a suitcase that I don't know if this custom prevails—he slapped paste all over the front of the labels as well as

the back. Like a bill-poster. It looked rather fun. Yet as it was virtually impossible at that period to incur excess charges, even if accompanied by a bath, the formality was soon over, and our own porter, or porters, began pushing and trundling again.

I was, of course, a little awed and confused by the activity of the scene. Engines, also—green on this particular line—had a tendency to shriek suddenly, which had a bad effect on my wits. But someone—my mother or nurse—held my hand or wrist. I went where I was led, over the wooden platforms; and at length I was led to a train.

It, too, was salmon-coloured, or above the waist. It had three classes; first, second, and third. But, whatever its destination, it had no corridor; or not, again, until much later than this. On the other hand, there were smoking-carriages, in about the proportion that are now marked *No Smoking*. But of course I wasn't hoisted into one of these. Nor into a first- or even a second-class compartment. We travelled third; always. It was one of the principles—and I can see no harm in it, except that it made me rather anxious about my uncle, who invariably went first—on which I was brought up.

The porter, or porters, now received perhaps as much as sixpence, with which they seemed highly gratified. They touched their caps. They vanished. A kind of modified unpacking and undressing took place, rather as though we had just entered a cabin on a ship. We spread ourselves; there was nearly always, so far as I can remember, plenty of room for this. An official, very likely with a beard, examined our tickets. He, too, touched his cap. More engines shrieked. Our own engine shrieked. We were off.

This was quite simple, then, too. On more recent journeys, in trains twice or three times as long, I have observed the guard waving his flag again and again, while repeatedly blowing a whistle, and three or four porters shouting and semaphoring as well, before anything happens. I can't account for this. Yet once, I can assure you, a single wave, and no whistle—from a guard wearing a diagonal belt with a small pouch on it—did the trick. Hrrumph! said the engine. Hrrumph-hrrumph-hrrumph. And we just glided away.

It was another family tradition—and, considering its high standards about reading-matter, perhaps rather a strange one—that we should be armed with a copy of *Tit-Bits*. It cost a penny then, in a green cover. It contained some jokes—in which characters called Joggins or Toodle conversed with characters called Scroggins or Noodle, and which I generally failed to understand; some articles of an instructive or informative nature; a good deal of material—but that was originally its main point—lifted from other publications; and a page of Answers to Correspondents. I should have my turn

at it, if not, owing to my slightly dogged illiteracy, on some of the earlier journeys. But there was nothing else. It never occurred to me that there could be anything else. Any more than I considered it possible to meet *Tit-Bits* except in a train.

Yet there were other and less intellectual refreshments. Plain chocolate, carefully doled out, when the junior passengers showed signs of impatience. And, as often as not, some egg-sandwiches. Whether it was the motion of the train, my own excitement, or some constitutional cause that always made me feel sick when I had eaten them, I can't say. However, I did eat them—well, of course—and I wasn't actually sick. And this all helped to pass the time.

In those days, too, if I was given a piece of paper and a pencil, I immediately began drawing. Rather badly, but with considerable contentment. I drew railway engines. Yet for some reason, even on an occasion like this, I never really studied them. The size, shape, and number of the wheels, for instance, bore no sort of relation to the monster that was now pulling me along. There were other grave discrepancies. My drawings, in fact, were more surrealist than strictly representational. But for a time, at least, they could be relied on to keep me quiet.

Or if we were alone, and there were possibilities that we should be alone, we might sing. We—my mother, my sister, and myself, that is to say; not my nurse—sang rounds. We even sang part-songs. For I was born with what is known as an ear—I still have it, though I have no longer a voice—and, except when I was asked to oblige in public, was ready enough to pipe up. So we would sing *Adieu*, *Sweet Amaryllis*, and *Sweet and Low*, and *Wind, Gentle Evergreen*—which was how I first came across the name of Sophocles. And all the time the train tittuped and clattered, and snorted and puffed, and stopped and gasped; and then—with another wave from the green flag, and more hrrumpling—rolled farther and farther away.

But impatience couldn't altogether be quelled. At each station there was always hope that this was Milford, Godalming, Farnham, or whatever it might be; and disappointment when I found that it wasn't. It became necessary to stand up and look out of the window—nowadays children rush up and down the corridors, and I have become so old that I wish they wouldn't—though as I was forbidden to touch it, owing to a supposed risk that it might suddenly open and that I should fall out on the line, it was rather hard to preserve my equilibrium. "Are we there yet?" I would ask, as the train slowed down. Or: "Is it the next one?" as it again gathered speed.

Yet of course, in the end, there was an affirmative answer. Redressing and repacking began. Hand-baggage was fetched

down from the racks. There was a grinding of brakes. A shudder. We had really arrived.

"Porter!" Always plenty of porters, wherever one was. No trouble about man-power then. And of course—but one couldn't have imagined such a thing—no conscripted young women in trousers. The door opened, and there was an explosion of children and light articles. There was also the smell, partly of train and partly of country, to make my heart give a bound and a thump. The air seemed incredibly clear. As the train puffed away—and how fascinating, on such occasions, were the laws of perspective—a light breeze stirred the telegraph wires, so that music was added. But the crunching of feet on gravel—not pavements any longer—was like music as well. And rustic voices; for even Surrey, in those days, was immune from the influence of Announcers. Where was I? In Heaven? Well, not far away. But, beyond this, I had no sort of idea.

The fly, wagonette or whatever it was that had been ordered to meet us, was waiting beyond the salmon-coloured palings. Or some of the luggage, perhaps, would come on later, in an ancillary cart. But the roads were white, or yellow, for there was no tar then; any more than there were motors to spray dust on the hedges. More smells. More scents. Seated on ancient blue cloth, with some of the buttons missing, I fell into a trance. As the station, too, vanished, I was utterly lost. But I didn't care. For I wasn't alone. And being lost, in this sense, was ineffable, magical joy.

Presently there would be more thrills, as we arrived at the new, strange house; as we explored it, and the garden, while more responsible persons got down to more responsible tasks. Yet for them, too, I should say, the thirty-five miles were a real gap in the fabric of space. London was not only remote, but unattainable save by the South-Western Railway. This was another world. Or an island, linked only by one disjunctive as much as communicatory route. Too far for carriages. Too far, unless some kind of record were being attempted, even for bicyclists. Indeed, and whatever it ought to be now, it was anything but all one world then.

But that is the point. What are thirty-five miles today? Nothing. What are a hundred, or two hundred, or twelve thousand? Nothing, again, if you can get on the right side of the authorities, or if you are an authority yourself. While if you can't, or you're not, it isn't the distance that keeps you at home. That is gone; swallowed up by the years in a few, greedy gulps. Even your voice, subject to sunspots and the depth of your purse, can be heard on the other side of the globe. It is mere chance, perhaps—if not altogether—that you can't go there yourself. That you are kept here to pay taxes, and are condemned to hard labour, though Man has outstripped the birds.

Rather silly, isn't it? I think so. But then, if the world has closed up like this, are we losing so much? As I have explained, I don't want to travel myself. There is nothing in it now. And I am tied, if willingly tied, by my affection for a small Pekingese. Yet, if she could come too, I know where I should like to go. Space is done for. Man (a fellow whom I am really beginning to detest) has wiped it out; he can go to the Moon, or to the Milky Way, if he wishes. But Time—ah, that's different. If I could go back; now and then; just for a day; well that *would* be worth doing. Though I rather wonder if I—or you, either—could face the return.

A MATTER OF HISTORY

IN my newspaper this morning—though as I am only one of several million citizens who read it or employ it for other household purposes, it is of course not entirely mine—they printed a letter from a woman who seemed a little upset. Not that this is the least unusual. Women—and men, too—are almost constantly now in this state. One may doubt, indeed—well, just look at their faces and listen to them snapping at each other—whether at any period there has been more widespread irritation. And though many sufferers might be better advised, when, for example, there is a mistake in their telephone account, to inform the Local Manager rather than the Editor of the *Daily Megaphone*—seeing that the former action may possibly lead to an adjustment of the charges, while the latter will merely produce another claim to infallibility from a Public Relations Officer—writing to the Press, nevertheless, has become a very popular British sport.

Momentarily, or so one supposes, it brings some kind of relief. Or, if it does nothing else, you may at least see your own name in print. Even editors seem to like it. Partly, perhaps, because it appears to provide evidence that their organs are read, as well as being used to clean frying-pans. Partly because contributions of this nature don't have to be paid for. And partly, one sometimes suspects, from a morbid and misanthropic delight—due, no doubt, to vocational stress—in revealing to all what asses their readers can be.

So this woman—and, mark you, I am not personally saying a word against her intelligence—wrote to complain that her child attended a secondary school (at our expense, that is to say) where she was taught history with a political bias. There were some dots in the communication, indicating that it had originally been very much longer; but the gravamen of her charge was that the mistress sneered at the Tories, cracked up the Labour Party—it wasn't explained how she managed to do this when dealing with the earlier part of our rough island story—and that, in brief, this was just a bit thick. No, the correspondent didn't actually state that she was of the Right Wing herself. But it seems likely. As it seems likely that tomorrow, or next day at the latest, there will be a letter from the Public Relations Officer of the Board of Education (also at our expense) categorically denying that such criticism—and, by

implication, any other reflections on the Department—can contain a syllable or vestige of truth.

The matter will then drop. The newspaper will go on printing letters from complainants and professional apologists, or from readers who want to know if it is a record that they have grown a radish weighing a quarter of a pound. The schoolmistress—I can see her; bright, ardent, glowing, dreary, ingenuous creature—will continue to tell her class that the Barons at Runnymede were forerunners, if not actual delegates, of the T.U.C. The child, if she is the least normal, will react by joining the Young Conservatives; though if she had stayed at home she would almost certainly have become a Communist. Her mother, if never quite the same after basking in the fierce light of publicity, will perforce continue to queue. And the world, take it all round, will wag on very much as before. Or at least letters to newspapers won't stop it.

Nevertheless, that mother—whose name I have now unfortunately forgotten, and can't trace because my own newspaper, on this occasion, appears to have been taken to the fishmonger—has set me off thinking again. About History. About Education. Or about both combined. And about their connection, not so much with propaganda—though that's rather interesting, too—as with actual, factual truth.

And about newspapers, for they are also concerned.

Suppose, for instance—but don't worry, for this is only a supposition—I propose to write an account (just for instance, again) of the first Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race. I have selected this example, by the way, as it would appear to be unaffected by what has now come to be known as ideology. Since, however, it is believed to have taken place in the year 1829, it is unlikely that I could consult any reliable eye-witness. I hesitate, for it is a further supposition that I am the soul of honour—to lift the whole thing from a book called *Forty Years as a Wet-Bob* (S.P.C.K., 1863) or from any similar work. Besides, I wish to be objective. And accurate.

I turn, accordingly, to the contemporary Press. Ancient, musty files are dragged out for me at newspaper-offices; at libraries; or from the Colindale vaults of the British Museum. I am taking plenty of trouble, you see; and giving it, too. I read, I digest, I compare. Where there is any conflict of evidence I either accept—since this is a Democracy—the majority view, or leave that part of the story out. I say, are you still listening? Right. I then sift, I add up, I boil down. My great task is completed. No one alive now knows more about the first Boat Race than I do. It is immaterial (for the sake of argument) that this knowledge is of very little value; or even that my eyesight has become permanently impaired. The point is that I have accepted no detail on either hearsay or trust. I have penetrated to the very core of the truth.

Yes, but wait a moment. Have I? For consider this. Last week, when I was out in the main road, a car skidded, a bus braked violently, and a lorry, in attempting to avoid the mix-up, ran into and knocked over a lamp-post. In other words, a very common, straightforward incident occurred, such as constantly adds interest to a stroll through the streets. But I was there; within a few yards; and I saw it.

Later in the same day, however, as I sat—and again it is quite irrelevant that I should really have been correcting some proofs—with Britannia and, in a sudden burst of extravagance, the three evening newspapers, I noted that one of them (for which I should be the last to blame it) omitted all reference to the affair; that the second described it as a collision between two omnibuses; and that the third, though reporting more or less what I had seen myself, stated that the accident had taken place about five hundred yards farther west.

At this stage, you may point out that, since no one was killed or even injured, it was of no great importance; that evening papers go to press in a great hurry; and that if they waited to check up on every item until all doubts are removed, they would probably contain even less news than they do. I am aware of that. On the whole I should say that they are miraculous at their job. But I also say, roughly speaking, that never yet when I have known the real facts of a case have I found them recorded in print.

That incident was only another example. There are paragraphs that are prepared with far more leisure for morning papers or even weeklies. They describe something on which you happen to be informed. They've got it wrong. Or they summarise the life-story of some acquaintance who has just sprung into fame. You could correct them, if you chose, in not less than three statements of fact. Or, again, they provide a picture of some place in the news. And you've been there, and this is another place altogether.

Why, then, I ask—now we are coming to it—if whenever (roughly speaking once more) you can check what they print you find three mistakes, should you believe what they print when you can't? This is rather a thought. It isn't only extremely reasonable, and even logical, but it shakes the very foundations of History.

For let no one imagine that I have just got my knife into newspapers. I haven't. I like them. I wish there were more of them, and that they were much larger. As a combined stimulus and anodyne there is nothing to touch them. It is even rather fun catching them out. Yet before there were newspapers there were chroniclers; and where did *they* get their stuff? First-hand, very occasionally—though we shall be coming to that, too, in a moment, and at the very best it must still be subjective. But far oftener from what they heard, or were told, or had read elsewhere. It was modified

and probably adulterated before it reached them. Or, if, as in the case of my imaginary monograph on the Boat Race, they sifted and selected, then they were being subjective again.

Viewed like this—and how else can we view her if we are honest ourselves—Clio seems to dissolve. Pilate's question was sound. And though a number of well-known historical episodes *may* have taken place, even approximately as they have been handed down to us, this is something that is quite beyond proof. What has actually happened, in most cases, is that a kind of sediment or precipitate, from a quantity of second-, third-, and fourth-hand reports, has been crystallised in print. And that's History. But if there is no accuracy now—and there isn't much—there was no accuracy then. Perhaps King John drafted Magna Charta—or Carta, for even this is in doubt—himself. It would be hard to *prove* anything else.

Or perhaps (reverting to a scene from which personally I am still so glad to have been absent) there was no Battle of Hastings; or of Senlac, if you prefer. You weren't there, either. It is true that if you now visit the site of this alleged fray, you will observe the remnants of an abbey that was supposed to commemorate it. But you will find a statue commemorating Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens. Such things aren't proof. There is considerable evidence, on the other hand, to suggest that the whole district was a thick forest at the time—some of which was cut down for the abbey—and who could have fought a battle in that? Are we dealing with a possibility, or a mere legend?

Or think of Guy Fawkes; and then of the Reichstag fire. You were probably alive during the latter, but you don't know the truth about it. You never will. But if another government picked on the former, and then tortured and executed him, as a bogey to bolster their rather doubtful popularity, this is very much what a third government did to Sir Roger Casement. Printed History—pledged, for some reason, to the pretence that there is a distinction between governments—may say otherwise. Were you aware, for example, that the Gunpowder Plot—if there ever was such a thing—was exposed, and poor Guy Fawkes arrested, on November 4th?

I could go on like this. If History is a science, it must be prepared for the Man from Missouri. But it isn't. It is a lot of books, based largely on rumour. Something happened, no doubt. But *Homo Sapiens* can't tell the truth. Try him. Ask three or four of him in—well, not for a drink, because you haven't got one, but just to oblige with an experiment. Tell 'em anything you like; some little personal adventure. Get 'em to write it down. Compare the results. There will be three, or four, quite irreconcilable versions. It's infallible. Henry Ford was right, too.

Or do you know a Great Man? Well, not a really great man,

perhaps, for that is another illusion. But we nearly all know *someone* in a public position, as the saying goes, with a name that hits head-lines at times. All right, then. How many men is he? This isn't a catch; yet anybody who says "One" will be wrong. There is, of course, no top limit to the answer, which will vary from case to case; but he can't possibly be less than two. The man whom you know—who, by the way, is also partly a projection of yourself. And the man known to the public; a creature no less real in their eyes, though chance, or a Press-Agent, may have built the whole figment up. "What's he *like*?" someone may ask. Perhaps you try to tell them. Yet the moment your description varies in any detail from the accepted image, you can see that they no longer believe you. They would sooner believe what they have read. And if the Great Man dies, it will be this portrait, not what you yourself consider to be the truth, that survives him. One up to Pilate, again.

You are now, I trust, beginning to realise what a volatile, shifting, and evanescent sort of world this is. While if it should so fall out that you are now invited to write his biography, there will be no reason to change this view. You start, no doubt, with a mixture of memories, of what are known as personal papers, and of Press-cuttings. Any attempt to reconcile the character you met, the character as he saw himself, and the character as accepted by the public, can at the best only result in some queer yet unavoidable compromise. But that isn't all. You come to a point in his career of which you happen to have no first-hand knowledge, to which you can find no allusion in the bunch of letters that you have collected, and which appears—for though important to the story it was a rather private matter at the time—to have been overlooked by the Press.

However, there are his other friends. Or his relations. You go and see them. You explain your little difficulty, and ask them if they can be kind enough to help. "Oh, yes," they say. "Certainly. Of course. I remember it well." And then, looking you straight in the face, they will in turn produce such a series of mutual discrepancies and contradictions that you may well wonder whether you are on your head or your heels. Mind you, they're not trying to deceive you. Each one of them is convinced that his own memory is correct. But the Great Man just *can't* have been in two, or half a dozen, places at once. Any more than he can simultaneously have been married and single; or playing golf and having his appendix out. It's baffling. You now realise how other biographies have been written. You may even doubt, as you groan over these conflicting reports, if he ever existed at all.

Yet Biography and History are only aspects of the same Muse. Both must rely on the sources that I have described. That secondary schoolmistress may conceivably have been a shade more prejudiced

than befits anyone in her peculiar position. Yet so, consciously or not, were every one of the authorities from whom she drew the bare bones of her knowledge. Is the moral, then, that nobody should be educated at all? Yet this raises another point. *Are they?*

They all go to schools, of course; or have governesses, or tutors. In this country it has been compulsory for quite a long time. Their parents are fined if they don't. Other parents—also spinsters and bachelors—are fined, in another sense, so that a vast organisation can be kept going. There are thousands of teachers. Tens of thousands of desks. Buildings smelling of ink, chalk, and—for want of a better word—education, all over the land. So keen are the Authorities on enlightening the young that not only have they constantly extended the period of instruction, but now, lest they should faint under the burden, they provide them with meals as well. This accounts, to quite an extent, for your Rates. It also explains why you can't get any milk. But it doesn't altogether explain why such a large proportion of recruits in the recent conflict were found to be still unable either to read or to write.

There is some mystery here. Yet before I am slammed down for despising the masses, let me add, hastily, that ignorance and inaccuracy are no privilege of the proletariat. We now ascend to a very lofty region indeed. The B.B.C. Have you ever heard even their best Announcers trying to say "deteriorating?" They can't. They are selected, presumably, for their command of our tongue; and if they fall down over any other, one is just sorry for them, and hopes they will have better luck next time. But they all say "deteriating." And as everything is deteriorating now, they have to say it quite often. Odd. One of them said "*subsidence*" last week. His intonation invariably makes me feel that I talk cockney myself; as perhaps I do. But then the point, in my own case, is that though I learnt nothing at school, I have been compelled, as an author, to learn one or two things since. No, I'm not boasting. I am only suggesting that education depends on oneself.

The Corporation again. Cross-section of the whole system. Announcer, compère, or whatever he is called, with another real public-school voice, is engaged in putting general-knowledge questions to the mysterious characters—on the whole more Boeotian, yet victims of the Education Acts, too—who form the other part of the cast. Even when they choose their own subjects—with the exception of films, on which they are amazingly learned—they don't know the answers. The main Voice, however, helps them. He provides hints. In fact, he practically tells them the right answer. They then mumble it, and are immediately given anything up to the whole of my licence-fee. This helps to explain, of course, how the Corporation gets through approximately ten millions a year. But I must stick to the point.

The Voice, then—now, this is a fact—asked a voice, only a short while ago, what famous actor, in what part, had spoken a line—which he misquoted—immediately before collapsing and dying. In spite of the misquotation it was clear enough that he was referring to Sir Henry Irving in *Becket*; which—though this is also immaterial—was one of the dullest plays ever staged. The voice, however, didn't know this. Wait a moment; I'm not saying that he *should* have known it. I doubt if he would have learnt it at school. But the Voice encouraged him; and presently, after some bad shots, he said: "Irving."

"Splendid!" said the Voice, and there was a round of applause. "Now, what was the part?"

The voice was flummoxed again.

"Well," said the Voice, "think of a Cardinal."

Hullo! I thought. Was *Becket* a Cardinal? I hadn't known it. I felt abased by such darkness. Really, I thought, this is a very wonderful invention which, under the guise of entertainment, can yet add to one's intellectual store. I must dine out on this, I thought—forgetting for the moment that I was alluding to an obsolete practice—and get the conversation round to *Becket*, and then stagger everyone by my strange erudition. But I was a bit too quick. For when the voice, after some more hesitation and assistance, said: "Wolsey," the questioner said: "Right!"—and at once handed over ten bob.

Next week, of course, when the same programme came round, there was a hasty and rather shame-faced correction. After which, not wishing to hear any more of my money being distributed in this fashion, I switched off. Let me make it quite plain, though, that this wasn't what another Voice sometimes describes as a Deliberate Mistake. It represented, on the contrary, a great effort on the part of the Corporation—or if not, why not?—to spread knowledge and truth. Personally, however, I think it was a failure.

But there you are. It may not matter two pins, to our health and happiness, what Lord Tennyson wrote, or if *Becket* wore a red hat. But accuracy, surely, should distinguish us from the brutes. Or perhaps it does. For, now, I come to think of it, though some of them go in for rather innocent forms of deception—such as mother-birds pretending to have broken wings, or butterflies shutting up and looking like leaves—they are, judging by Britannia, incapable of making an error in fact. So are the angels, I take it. It is only we—the freaks of creation—who have got into this mess.

Print is partly the trouble. Another remarkable invention which, coupled again with the Education Acts, has diffused such masterpieces of culture as the *Sunday Muck-Raker*, or *Forever Blandish*. Yet it has the strangest effect. Something in its neatness or impersonality makes one believe what one would instantly reject in

manuscript. Even I, who am behind the typographical scenes, as it were, have to resist this queer magic; and find, if I am not careful, that any assertion in print will have slipped past my rational guard. Even you, though you have been saying to yourself for some time that this chapter is all special pleading, are beginning to wonder—because it is in print—whether there isn't something rather sound in my case.

And as a matter of fact there is. Accuracy, like all other virtues, very seldom comes naturally to the Race. It requires training and vigilance. Its fabric, like the fabric of morality, is woven in such a manner that—as with Utility bath-towels—one rent tears the whole thing to shreds. It is, indeed, more of an ideal than an attainable prize. But few people—and perhaps fewer than ever today—have the patience to seek it.

This is the Age of Make-Do, if not of deliberate ambiguity, in truth as in everything else. What, for instance, do you think the words "Full Fruit Standard" mean on a jam-label. That the jam contains nothing but fruit? Well, they don't. They mean—but even this is perhaps not invariably true—that it contains as much fruit as will qualify it for this official description. That's all they mean. In fact, unless you happen to know what the Standard is, they mean little or nothing at all. Just as the guarantee on your new carpet-sweeper will, if carefully read, be found to mean much the same thing. It's accepted; or there is no choice but to accept it.

Or, again, as with Gresham's Law—recently exemplified in a rather barefaced manner by the substitution of cupro-nickel for silver—once a word is debased, it can never regain its old value. But this process goes on all the time. Not only is yesterday's superlative today's understatement, but any concept connected with propaganda or salesmanship is devalued so fast that fresh words have, perforce, to be used. Almost at once these, too, start losing their outline. They are hurled into the discard. Multiple words take their place. Long words with three prefixes. Words wrenched from the dictionary, and from their original significance; nouns turned to adjectives, and adjectives into nouns; verbs made from both; anything, or so one would say, in the constant though now seldom successful attempt to come to any clear meaning at all.

Moreover, since from the moment we can talk we use words for our thoughts, these are now in the same muddle, too. There is chaos in our minds, as well as everywhere else. Followers of Humpty-Dumpty, in a terminological sense, we, too, have invited a fall. If a word can mean anything, and it can in these days—when an expanding bottle-neck, for instance, is employed to signify the contraction of a metaphorical channel, and when I challenge anyone to define the meaning of "redeployment"—the next phase, of course, must either be a halt, and a redeployment of language, or one in

which we shall no longer be able to exchange even such ideas as we are still able to form. In fact—once more—Back to the Apes.

Meanwhile, there's this schoolmistress. And her school. And all the other schools. What *are* they teaching? Not reading or writing, it would appear; or not very efficiently. Not History, tainted or otherwise, if it was from this that the Voice learnt his facts about Becket and Wolsey; though History, in any case, as has been shown, is a bit of a snare. Not Literature; or at least, judging from the same incident, not very much about Lord Tennyson. Not Mathematics, or not very reliable mathematics, judging from a current misapprehension about the odds in Football Pools. And most certainly not Manners, which have fallen so very much into decay. Well, as a matter of fact, this last subject isn't even in the curriculum.

Do I think it should be? Oh, no. I feel that it should be more in the nature of home-work; or, if properly taught, that it should hardly rank as work at all. Parents, however, seem to have flung it on the schools now. The schools have flung it back at the parents. There can be no doubt of the result. No, it isn't that I really want little boys to pull their forelocks, if any, when they see me coming; or little girls to curtsy. Furthermore, they don't. But need they yell, shriek, cat-call, jostle, throw stones, and behave, generally speaking, in a manner which led the prophet Elisha—and how right he was!—to have forty-two of them attacked by a couple of she-bears?

I think not. I think, also, that they were happier, in all probability, when they were a little better-behaved. I think—here it comes—that Education on these lines is a racket. That though it supports a vast Ministry, provides pensions for tens of thousands of teachers, and spares millions of parents the trouble of looking after their own children, as a method of instruction in self-control or self-reliance it is as much use as a twelve-guinea hat.

Unfortunately, as I say, the newspaper which started this rich chain of thought is now serving another purpose, so that I am unable to drop a line either to the outraged Mother or to that earnest evangelist of the Left. Not that I am worrying about the former. She has had her great hour, by topping the correspondence column in a national daily; and her child, or such is my view—even if she is eventually driven through the hoop of the School Certificate—will learn little or nothing until she starts teaching herself. But if I could write to the evangelist, I think I should say this. Dear Madam (I should begin). Yes (I should continue), it is quite true that, owing to our ignorance of past history, your interpretation may be as correct as any other. It is also true, in any civilisation, that stupidity and irresponsibility among the classes with power will lead to its transference to the classes without it.

At this point, however, dear Madam (I should go on), since natural laws aren't interested in anything but themselves, stupidity

and irresponsibility will be found to have passed over, too. For all power, as you may have heard mentioned, corrupts. If it comes to that, all pendulums swing. History, however untrustworthy in detail, has shown this again and again. Be careful, dear Madam, as you rise in your somewhat parasitical profession. For not only does what is Left today become Centre, and then Right, next week; but the Right, even if Heaven alone knows why, has a habit of stealing the other parties' clothes. I think you should be warned about this.

Who started the French Revolution? The contemporary Tories. Who repealed the Corn Laws? Ditto. Who passed the 1867 Reform Bill? The Right again. Who introduced universal suffrage, so that so far from there being no taxation without representation now, there is representation without taxation? The Conservative Party.

No, don't ask me *why* they do this kind of thing. But they do it. Just as at present it is *they* who are fighting tyranny again, on the home front; not your little lot. Rather absurd, isn't it? Or rather galling, if you feel it that way. Yet it's true. It is as true as that no party ever really knows what it's doing. They're human beings, dear Madam. This is how they are made. So be ardent, if you like, while you're young, for you can't help that, either. But, please, *please*, dear Madam, while awaiting the pension which will inevitably turn you into a reactionary yourself—for it is at least doubtful if you will welcome the overthrow of the whole system then—if you *could* persuade some of your pupils not to gather in groups and howl like Red Indians when they see a corresponding collection of lads, or if you *could* induce them to stop giggling at me in the streets and calling out "Hiya, Grandpa!", I should admire you even more than I do.

ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

WHEN I was first taken out into the long garden in which my father, a few years later, would be learning to bicycle, I should doubt if I saw anything beyond a circumference of a very few yards. I might have been in a perambulator, or gurgling on a rug. In either case I should have been looking upwards, rather than round about me. One of the earliest views, as I slightly lengthened this range, would have been of the leaves of our acacia tree.

Even when I changed my position, as one does later on, and gazed a shade more discerningly, it was still some time before I considered the existence of a world beyond the walls. They bounded everything. The eye reached them; stopped; and all thought of anything further stopped, too. I knew, though—or, again, after a while I knew—that the wall on the right was lofty; for it was in fact the side of some tall stables, belonging to the big store at the top of the street, which had been built over what must once have been the garden of the Greyhound—so that ever and anon there might be a glimpse of a horse at a small upper window.

The wall at the far end—beyond the swing which my parents had very considerably caused to be placed here—was too high for even a grown-up to look over. I suppose now that there was another garden beyond it. But I never thought of it. I never saw it. Only in the last year, when workmen suddenly began erecting a block of flats right up against it—which may have been one of the reasons why it *was* the last year—did the far side emerge from a cloud. I am afraid that, in my innocence, I found their labours rather fascinating. I never dreamt what a portent they were.

The remaining wall, on the left, behind a flower-bed which ran almost the whole distance, was, I should imagine, between four and five feet high. Beyond this, as I now knew, there was a garden of the same length as our own. I knew it not only because I could look down into it, or into the nearer end of it, from the night-nursery window; not only because, as I grew older still, I took to spending a good deal of time (if not quite as much as the Discobolos family) on the top of this left-hand wall; but, because the house to which it belonged, also adjoining our own, was the house of our extremely kind landlord and landlady.

I had been in it, and in their garden, too. On its own left there was another high wall—though without windows, so far as I can remember, this time—which was the side of yet another big building that belonged to the same firm. In other words, the two gardens—our kind neighbours' and ours—were all that remained, even then,

of what must formerly have been a whole row. Yet there was a sort of cosiness, or so I felt, about being closed in like this. The two houses, in front, were just part of a street. But behind they were in a land of their own.

As a slight indication of the benevolence of our landlady—or, to be more accurate, of our landlord's wife—I must now tell you that, observing how frequently my sister and I appeared on the dividing wall—up which we clambered with the aid of foot-holds in the ancient brickwork, and on which, for some reason, I never felt giddy then, though I should probably tremble with nausea now—she purchased a step ladder, with steps on each side; had it bisected; planted half in our garden and half in her own; and said that we could come over whenever we liked. Owing to the nature of children—not that adults are so very different—I can't recall that we took much advantage of this. Perhaps we were shy. Perhaps we preferred clambering, and running along the top, to those safer if less adventurous aids. But it shows how kind she was, and her husband, too. I salute them. Once again one may well ask where such kindness has gone. Not that those wars have been very much help.

And this—not the wars, but the two gardens—reminds me of something else in those days. We now pass—a little surprisingly, you may feel, but you will soon see the connection—to a very curious custom of the Race. It began, or so we are told, in a cart. It caught on. It got mixed up with religion. It partially disentangled itself. It got mixed up again. There was a renewed separation. Some aspects of it, indeed, became remarkably pagan; though all along there must be a parallel, and a very close one at times, between the Church and the Stage. It is a long way from the cart now. It has, in fact, developed into an enormous industry—with certain traces of art in it as well. Yet it is still curious that members of the Race should sit in rows, in large, darkened buildings, so as to watch other members, or their shadowy simulacra, pretending to be various third parties. You can say what you like, but it is this kind of thing that distinguishes us from sheep or white ants.

Nevertheless, or furthermore, I, too, in my day, have taken part in this very odd game. Not only was there a phase, and quite a long one, during which I could hardly pass even the outside of a theatre without experiencing a strange sense of excitement; not only have I, too, sat on seats—soft or hard—and been stirred to both pity and terror; but, in addition, I have been seen in the penetralia as well, not once, but again and again. During my remarkable career I have, in fact, done almost everything in this world except act. I have been a playwright, a scene-designer, a stage-manager, a librettist, a prompter, a critic—but for this I wasn't paid, so that I can still look you in the face—and a press-representative. I have even taken the tickets, and counted them afterwards, too.

Now all that is over. I am inoculated. My versatility is at an end. I write books, and other press-representatives can foam at the mouth without making my pulse miss a beat. If I pass a theatre today, I keep perfectly calm. It is more than a year since I last saw a film. I understand, for I can remember, the spell from which I am free. But I have had it. Apart from a slight weakness for conjurors, which appears to have survived everything else, no other illusion remains. Sad? I don't know. It's much cheaper this way. And the Stage itself seems to survive.

In other words, I am now back where I began; when I had only heard of theatres, and had no real idea what they meant. For when I was young, though my parents were both regular and occasionally enthusiastic playgoers, it was less common—or at any rate in my own circle—for mere infants to be given this kind of treat. I should be taken to a theatre, I was told, when I was seven. But I felt no impatience. Never once, though I asked for a good deal, did I suggest that this date should be put forward for me. I didn't know how, in due course, I should be infected, and then cured. I heard talk, but its significance passed over my head. I was so artless, indeed, that, having caught the word "gallery," I pictured a square hall—rather like the dreaded Gymnasium—with two or three rows of people sitting high up all round, watching something, of which I had only the vaguest conception, down on the floor.

On the other hand, I adored Punch and Judy. Sometimes, as I may have said, I had the joy of seeing it from the nursery window. Sometimes, on a walk, I would hear pan-pipes and drum, though I was then generally discouraged, I am afraid, from witnessing more than a scrap of the actual performance. But I met it again, from time to time, at children's parties. While my grandfather, who shared my passion for the same form of entertainment, gave another party each year on my birthday, when it appeared, once again, in his garden. Or if wet, as they say, indoors.

Talk of pity and terror! I was overwhelmed by both. But there was plenty of laughter as well. Yes, it's a fine play, if not particularly moral; and though I knew well enough, after a while, which scene would come next, the only thing that I couldn't bear was the end. Not because Punch escaped hanging—for, as you will remember, having murdered or at least stunned all the rest of the cast (with the exception of the ghost, and the clown, and Dog Toby), it is he who at last hangs the hangman—since, for some reason, I was all on his side. But because it *was* the end. Because even my grandfather, or so it appeared, couldn't command an instant repetition. Or because, according to Aristotle, I was now thoroughly purged.

But I loved it, even at its most violent. Though a little nervous of the ghost, and of the crocodile, if it comes to that, I could yet delight in this horror as well. If I had been consulted—but I never

was—I most certainly shouldn't have asked for either of them to be omitted. I should probably have screamed for them, even though I knew how they made my heart thump. No, I wasn't as cowardly as that. Why, then, I wonder, when my very kind neighbours gave a party in turn, and in their own garden next door, for which they had secured the services of a company of marionettes, should I have been so petrified by the first sight of these midgets that I all but collapsed, and had to be taken away?

Today, as a matter of fact, I should almost rank them with conjurers; though they are very much rarer, alas. But not then. Was it their size that upset me? But they were the same size as Punch. Was it that they were more life-like? But I knew they were dolls. Nor, again, did they plunge, as Punch did, into a series of abominable crimes. They merely entered, so far as I can remember, tottering slightly, and jerking their arms. There should have been no cause for terror here. But there was. I couldn't bear them. I was appalled. Within a few moments of their entry on to that miniature stage I was reduced to such a pitiable, if noisy, condition, that my mother was forced to extract me from the alfresco auditorium, and to lead me, still weeping, back home.

Rather embarrassing for her, I am afraid. Though it is true that we hadn't far to go. Rather disheartening for the kind, gentle hostess, who had engaged the troupe at some expense, and purely so as to give pleasure to her guests. I was in a minority, of course. The other children, including my sister, were having the time of their lives. Yet for the hostess's own complete satisfaction no child—well, this almost goes without saying—should have been snatched from the revel in tears.

My mother, of course, was kind, too. She may have gone so far as to point out that the marionettes had only been intended to entertain me, and that they were neither dangerous and malevolent nor alive. But she didn't call on me, on this occasion, to exhibit more courage than it was in my power to produce. She didn't urge me to face the performance again. I could feel that it was one of those moments when she wasn't exactly proud of me. But she didn't say so. And presently, as I had stopped bawling now, she retired and, I imagine, returned.

So I was in the nursery. Perhaps the nurse was there, too. I was hardly of an age to be left utterly alone. But I was of an age to think, up to a point, and even to act on a thought. In this sanctuary some of my spirit revived; and it seemed to me, after a while, that if I went into the night-nursery, through the communicating doorway, I should still be safe, but might catch a glimpse of what I had left. Curiosity, in fact, was reviving, too. I moved cautiously to the bay-window. I looked out. There, in the next garden, were the children on benches, still laughing and clapping their hands. There—but

unfortunately I couldn't see this so well—was the little theatre, and miniature stage.

I stood on tip-toe. I did my best to see more. But I couldn't. Suddenly it seemed tragic and intolerable that I should be cut off here like this. That my contemporaries should be so happy at a performance which, as I now realised too late, was almost rapturously absorbing; while I—the outcast—could only peer at it, and imperfectly, from a distance. No, I didn't bawl again; though there is a blank in my memory as to whether I actually asked to go back. But if I did ask, I quite see now why such a request should be refused. And whether I asked or not, I didn't go, but remained where I was.

To learn a lesson, of course. Or at least to be provided with the material for such a purpose. To be made aware—and, if so, what a shocking discovery—that Opportunity never returns; that there are no second chances; and that as one make's one's bed so one must lie on it. I should rather like to think that I have since benefited from this knowledge; that from that painful afternoon I drew something of real value in Life. Yet I am doubtful. For though the world seemed strange then, as it is often baffling and astonishing today, the child who, so it appears, is no longer a child still belongs, in a sense, to the Race. And the Race doesn't learn things, or not as simply as that. Occasionally it can acquire caution on the surface. It doesn't bawl quite so much when grown-up. But as for profiting from experience, or really and secretly believing that it can't have its cake and eat it—well, look around at what it does all the time.

And I'm one of it, apparently; so there you are. Personally, it is true, I never thought war the best means to secure peace, which has sometimes put me in a minority again. But in smaller affairs—though they can look large in the foreground—where only I am involved, I should be chary of boasting too much. If I want two things at once—and we all do, with some substance and shadow, if not with two shadows—I might still try to get them. I might know, and I generally do, that it just can't be done; that, indeed, it is the best way to lose both. But if one is alive, then one is human. There can be no dodging that. No lesson can alter the fact.

It was thus, then, that I first saw a performance in which the actors were on a stage and had legs. But as I still wasn't seven, by a considerable chalk, I still hadn't seen the real thing. Yet I was edging towards it; even if, when I got there, it would still be some time before it went to my head. At the next phase, in fact, the performance was public—and I am sorry to say I again disgraced myself—though it wasn't exactly a play. Nor was it an opera, though there was a band. Nor was it precisely a pageant. To come to the point, it was what was then known—since no one had yet dreamt of an Air Force—as the Royal Naval and Military

Tournament, and took place in those days up at Islington Green, in the Agricultural Hall.

It may be imagined, by the more imaginative, that with my views on warfare—which have remained fixed through the ages—I was perhaps not the most suitable spectator. Furthermore, since I have always detested explosions—from Christmas crackers to V2s—I spent a good deal of the afternoon with a finger thrust into each ear. But there were quieter items. And it was with relief—for the true purpose of the sport was as yet concealed from me—that I saw some riders preparing to jab lances, if possible, into pegs driven into the ground. Tent-pegging, in fact. If successful, the rider continued his charge with the peg (or, in battle, some portion of one of the lesser breeds) well and truly transfixed. If he failed, after two or three shots, he was out of the game.

I could follow this. There was a resemblance, if with certain distinctions, to events—at children's parties, for instance—in which I had myself taken a share. And as all firearms had temporarily been removed from the arena, my ears could be safely unplugged. I sat forward. A horseman began charging from the far end. He lowered his lance. He impaled the tent-peg, with consummate skill; brandished it; and reigned up his steed. Everyone clapped. I clapped. This was fun.

He repeated the exhibition—with a second tent-peg and in the other direction, of course—to further applause. Again I joined in. And so it went on; until a horseman appeared who missed the peg altogether. And then nobody clapped. But I hissed.

Well, you see, I didn't know any better. At children's parties there was a game called Hissing and Clapping. I took the former to be as natural, in the present circumstances, and as permissible as the latter. I thought it was expected. But of course it wasn't. As both my parents were there, they were both embarrassed. My father—though no one, I should say, ever had more command over a virtually non-existent temper—addressed a few words to me of a slightly cautionary or instructive description. And from this moment it was immaterial whether soldiers piled themselves into pyramids, whether sailors dismantled guns and put them together again, or whether the entire company took part in a mock-fight. I merely wished, and for hours afterwards, that I was dead.

It wasn't the reproof—or not the reproof alone—that had reduced me to this condition. It was its justice. Ignorance, as I could now see, was no excuse. I should have guessed. I should have thought. Others might forgive me, but not I myself. I had hurt that contestant's feelings.

So there you are again. I don't know that I shall ever quite get over it. It is just possible, of course—and occasionally this thought has been a slight comfort in later life—that, in his

pre-occupation, he didn't actually hear me. Yet it was a loud, sharp hiss. It was a sign, as a matter of fact, of the keenness of my attention. But during the rest of the afternoon I was in a fog of despair. And as I look back, I must still suffer again.

Nevertheless, as I have said, though I had now got as far as occupying a numbered seat, and being provided with a real, printed programme—and though there could be no question, this time, that I had been purged by both pity and terror—this still couldn't be described as a theatre. More months—indeed years—must slip by before that. Though they did. For they invariably do.

I was seven at last. I didn't remind anyone of the promise; partly because, even after the Marionettes and the Tournament, I was still not particularly impatient; and partly because I knew that any pledge from my mother would be honoured even if she had since changed her mind. However, she hadn't. As luck decided, the precise performance that she had for long had in her thoughts for this purpose was once more on the London boards. It was *H.M.S. Pinafore*; an admirable work, which no one should criticise, even now, on the grounds that they don't like the audience. Moreover as my mother possessed the Vocal Score—arranged for the piano—from which she had frequently played and sung to me, I was already familiar with much of the music; even if I was still a little vague about the plot.

Yes, I look in my invaluable *Who's Who in the Theatre*—which I still read, though I have as good as abandoned the stage—and there it is. Second revival, at the Savoy Theatre—but it wasn't born there—on June 6th, 1899. That would be three days after my birthday; and a few months before we left my first home. But my mother hadn't forgotten. She took tickets, in the Dress Circle, for a matinée. She told me. As I still couldn't imagine what I was in for—even my sister's account of her own initiation hadn't quite quelled that vision of a gymnasium—I was still at first fairly calm. Yet excitement was in the air. I caught the infection after a while. And for the last two or three days I was as impatient as her kind heart could have desired.

For what? I had no idea. Yet for something that would establish me as more of a man of the world, and was clearly a special treat. I hadn't even seen a picture of the inside of a real theatre. On the eve of the chosen date I had a prophetic dream. But though there were some fantastic details, my astral body was in the Gymnasium again. Seldom can there have been quite such raw material for the oddest, as I still think, of the arts.

We had an early lunch. We embarked in a horse-omnibus. We trundled along to the Strand. We took our seats—my parents, my sister, and myself—in a row. That, said my mother—but I had guessed it—was the curtain. I was more excited than ever. The orchestra entered, as I could see by standing up—though I was

then told to sit down—and produced a series of most stimulating noises. Slight, exquisite discords, narrowing towards the traditional notes. Tootlings. Rub-a-dubs. In those days even a play without music must always begin in this way. But whose heart can beat faster now to an electric recording?

In those days, also, though there was more trouble about women's hats, there was no smoking. Trays of afternoon tea—to be passed and repassed, or dropped with a crash—were no part of a normal performance. Programmes weren't only legible when you took them home, but could actually be read—for there was then enough light—at the time. At a few theatres, though the Savoy wasn't one, they could still be obtained free of charge. But then, of course, it was a very different world.

Even the curtain—or at the Savoy—was different. It divided in the middle, and rose in rich folds—more or less as it still does at the Criterion, where there is no room for it to do anything else. And when it fell, at the Savoy—that is to say, when the two halves came swishing together again—a kind of flunkey, in knee-breeches, rushed on from the wings, and was just visible for a moment, as he closed the diminishing gap. The Profession, or so I have been told, formed the idea later on that this form of descent killed applause. Yet there was a kind of thrill at the beginning, as the two halves swished upwards and outwards, which no superstition could mar.

So they swished upwards and outwards at the Savoy, on that afternoon before the Boer War, and my eyes became fixed on the stage. Curiously enough, there was very little illusion. I could see that this wasn't a real ship, even though sailors climbed down from real rigging. Not yet could I succumb to all the conventions which I should subsequently swallow; and then again reject. To tell the truth, some of them puzzled me. Yet it was interesting, if not absorbing. It was new. It was strange. And though sometimes, if I must again be quite truthful, I wondered if it was ever coming to an end, I was also anxious—because when it was over there must still be a sense of loss and regret—that it should continue for ever. Yet when, as you may remember, the scene in the second Act suddenly changed from night to broad daylight, my reason revolted and jibbed. I was applying quite the wrong sort of test, of course. But I applied it, for I was too young to know better.

In the same way, some of the author's satire rather missed, in my case, its effect. For I had rather taken to Captain Corcoran—if less so than to a midshipman who appeared, in this production, during the opening tableau, and was then never seen again—and was distressed, on his behalf, when, through no fault of his own, he suffered the indignity of being reduced to a mere rating. In the same way, and though I accepted Sir Joseph Porter, I couldn't feel that Ralph Rackstraw, with so little experience except as an

Able-Bodied Seaman, could possibly make a satisfactory commander. And were there really virtually deformed characters, like Dick Deadeye, in the Royal Navy? No, somehow I couldn't believe this.

But I didn't disgrace myself. I kept my thoughts to myself. I didn't even, though in fact this would have been a much better occasion than the one which I actually selected—which was at a pantomime, about a couple of years later, to which I had been taken by a kind female friend—suddenly ask what the seats had cost. No, no one was embarrassed by my conduct at the Savoy, as I goggled, and wondered and stared. And though I was sorry when it was over, because no treat should end, I emerged with no thought that I must go again—to this or some other play—as soon as I could. The future addict, who would choke over sentiment, split his sides over comedy, shudder at thrillers, fall in love with all heroines, spend hours in pit queues, turn up night after night until he knew long plays by heart, and finally—for a time—even pass, with a mere nod, through stage-doors, had still, apparently not yet been born. He was there, I suppose; or his embryo was there. He would arise, and take charge, and depart. Or perhaps even he is less dead than I think, and will suddenly bob up again.

I don't know. It is mysterious. So is the theatre, which first puzzled me; which I then loved; and then left. Nothing, in fact, can explain to me, so that I am convinced, how I am the same being—if, indeed, I am—as that child. Yet I have consulted no one about this chapter. It is all drawn from memory. So that it looks, in a way, as though in some inexplicable manner I am.

Who else, for instance, could know this? On the way back from the Savoy, that afternoon, in another horse-omnibus, there was some discussion on what we had all seen. I was rather mute myself, though not ungrateful, for I had much to digest. But later, as once more I showed signs of a return to this world, my mother—naturally enough—asked me what part of the play I had liked best. And I am afraid I misled her. I knew, somehow, that the real truth wouldn't do. That, if I confessed it, there was a grave risk that I should find myself being laughed at again. So I don't know what I did say; though it was easy, for I remembered everything, and there had been plenty of leads.

But the answer that I withheld, and am now at last—such is the effect of time—going to reveal, was that the part I liked best was when the flunkey rushed on and caught hold of those great, swaying curtains. This is a poor compliment, I am aware, to Sir William Gilbert, Sir Arthur Sullivan, Mr. Richard D'Oyly Carte, and the talented Savoy Opera Company. But their fame is secure; and, after all, I *was* only a child.

CHAPTER XIV

DAY OFF

THOUGH there are subjects—possibly, for I cannot think of them at the moment—on which those gifted with literary expression preserve something in the nature of a balanced judgment, it has been observed—which, in literary language, means I have just thought of it myself—that this breaks down completely on dogs.

It was not always thus. For many centuries authors seemed able to mention a dog—if called upon, in the course of their labours, to do so—quite composedly, and to leave it at that. A dog, they would say, did this or did that, or was of such and such an appearance. After which they passed on, without a trace of emotional strain. But they can't do this now. Today, so it seems, they must either start drivelling and raving—about soft brown eyes, faithful hearts, and all that—until, having kept everything else waiting, they have recovered from this temporary transport. Or they must break into their own sequence for a violent attack not only on dogs, but on dog-lovers, too. This, one sometimes imagines, is to show how tough they are; how daring, untrammelled, and stern. Yet, as a matter of fact, they sound just as hysterical as the trusty-companion brigade.

No one, however—except such authors as somehow manage to keep off the subject altogether—seems able to avoid taking sides. Even I, though that last paragraph was rather a triumph of detachment, have been accused of a weakness for dogs. This is ridiculous, of course. I don't dislike them—though I am not specially keen on being bitten by them; but it is clear, I should have thought, that I am far too reasonable to regard them as angels with tails. Not a bit of it. They are clever, of course, or some of them are; but they're not nearly as tiresome—I beg your pardon. That was a slip. I meant to say, they're not nearly as *clever* as Man. It is mere chance that I happen to have given up the best years of my life to studying and, if possible, anticipating their wishes. Besides, Pekes—and all our dogs have been Pekes—are in a class by themselves.

Having thus also anticipated, and destroyed, any conceivable notion that I have the faintest prejudice either for or against these enchanting and indispensable creatures, I am now free to explain—without allying myself with either of the above-mentioned sects—how it was that I woke up rather early the day before yesterday. Not that I am a sluggard, in any case. If I get four hours with Morpheus, and six or eight nightmares, this is all that I hope for

by now. But there is a kind of half-way condition in which, if lucky, I can sometimes remain until it is thought decent to get up. And conditions, two mornings ago, on the whole, ruled this out.

Well, you see, Britannia, who generally sleeps by my feet—and why not, if she likes it?—felt a little cold, I suppose, and came up, and lay down by my neck. While another Peke, who chanced to be staying here—as she does, I am glad to say, from time to time—and (since I am the soul of hospitality) usually starts on the other side of my legs, also felt a little chilly, I should imagine, and came creeping up, too. What could be more natural? If I had been awake, I should have welcomed her. She was a guest. She could do what she liked.

However, I wasn't awake, or not yet. I was merely having a somewhat severe nightmare, in which I was being strangled—not that this can ever happen in real life, of course—by a Literary Agent. And when I did wake up (with a muffled yell), and discovered the cause—well, I dare say there *are* people who would have taken both Pekes and heaved them down again; but as they were here, and comfortable, and would only have come back again if they had wanted to, it seemed best that they should remain undisturbed. Does this imply weakness? Not at all. It is never weak to consider others.

I was in a position, nevertheless, where if I stayed on my back I was subject to considerable pressure, since all Pekes seem able to sleep and push at the same time. While, if I turned on my side, they would at once absorb the slight extra space, so that I should be unable to turn over again. Sleep, in other words, so far as I was concerned, was unlikely in these circumstances to return. So I began thinking again.

At such an hour, or so I have found, one should be rather careful what one starts thinking about. There is a tendency to recall what one would sooner forget. Either the brighter side of the past, that is to say, so that the present appears even more intolerable. Or some darker scenes—moments when it is now all too clear that one made rather an ass of oneself—which can lead to still further despair. My Subconscious, however, though it never really forgets even one of them, and is always ready, at such times, to trot out the whole list as if I had asked for it, can be diverted if I am cunning enough.

"That'll do," I say to it, sharply. "What about my work?" Whereupon it instantly switches to another of its main tasks, which is to tell me what I am to write when I get up. Or it should. But it is incorruptibly truthful. It is rather apt, I am afraid—and particularly when I have just snubbed it like this—to reply that what I wrote yesterday wasn't the least what it meant me to write. "I know," it says, mercilessly, "that you *thought* you'd done quite a good job. But if you'll just think again, with my assistance, you'll

see that you went clean off the rails. How often have I got to remind you that your characters *must* be consistent? Well? You slipped up again yesterday, didn't you? You got carried away, I suppose. But it won't do, I say. It must all come out. This is a novel we're writing; not just what happens to pass through your head. You can't start altering your heroine, or anyone else, at this stage. You know it as well as *I* do."

Very awkward. These were, in fact, almost the precise words in which my Subconscious was now addressing me. And it was right. Indeed, it was more than right. For as I lay there I realised that not only my heroine, but several other characters as well had been getting more and more out of hand. All very well, if I had known at the beginning what line they were going to take. But I hadn't. They had been cunning, too. I had given them an inch, so it seemed, here and there; and now they had taken an ell. The book was rubbish. I must either—oh, help!—destroy far more than what I had been writing yesterday, or—oh, death and damnation!—do the first three chapters again.

You would think, wouldn't you (I reflected), that with all those volumes on the shelf in the next room, I could keep out of a mess like this. But there it is. Everyone else's work gets easier as they go on—so that finally they don't do anything except look in at the office about once a week—but mine, this dreadful, terrible labour of producing fiction, becomes more and more difficult every time that I try.

Then the whole current work—which I had once seen, if only for a short time and before I began writing it, as orderly, well constructed, and clear—seemed to dissolve into a formless farrago. It was useless—for it always is—to recall how I had felt the same, at one stage or another, about everything that I had ever completed. How on several occasions novels, which had subsequently gone into quite a number of editions, had had to be abandoned for months at a time. You were younger then, I told myself. You were more resilient. You hadn't burnt yourself out. But now. . .

A faint gleam on the horizon. It would be cowardly, of course; yet perhaps it would be the right thing to do. For days, if not weeks, I had been struggling like mad, and uphill all the time. It was months, if not more, since I had taken anything that could be described as a holiday. If I had been advising anyone else, I should have said: "You're stale. Knock off. Take it easy, before it's too late." Well? What about sauce for the goose being sauce for the gander? Would it be a crime if I took it easy myself?

Here, of course—and who would be an author?—came the other old thought, also true enough, that if I don't work I don't earn anything. But I resisted it. The gleam wasn't exactly a glow yet. Indeed, it would be strange if there were much real satisfaction

in what amounted to running away. Yet for a moment I must admit that there was a sense of relief. My soul became calmer again.

During the next few hours—though very careful not to move, lest I should disturb my bed-fellows—I believe I even dozed once or twice.

I then rose, also carefully. As the slave of a series of rather strange conventions, I scraped some stubble off my face, passed some bristles over my teeth, immersed my form in a receptacle, soaped it, took it out again, dried it, and passed some different bristles over my hair. I also covered this same earthly envelope—apart from its hands and head—with some bits of cotton, wool, and leather, all of which, but for the second World-War, would long since have ceased to be mine. I placed some keys, and a few coins, in a couple of pockets. A square rag, which had once been a handkerchief, in another. And having done all this, which for some reason I do every morning, I looked at the dogs, who stood up and stretched themselves. I then dressed them, too, though in rather simpler garments, partaking, in fact, more of the nature of light harness, and led them forth to the lift.

At this time of the day there is decidedly less competition for it than later, though there is a chance that a porter will be cleaning it, which comes to much the same thing. However, as he had either finished or hadn't started, we were able to descend. And about twenty minutes later, by which time I was once more quite an authority on the condition of the local gutters, we ascended again. The dogs then had a light breakfast, while I prepared something a shade more elaborate for the other inmates. And then I told my wife that I was proposing to take the day off.

I knew what would happen, of course. She seemed delighted. For some reason, again—perhaps because of her extremely kind nature—it has remained her constant ambition that I should do nothing at all. If I had obliged her, in fact, there can be no question that we should now both be in a public institution. But she doesn't see it like this. It is her view, though she doesn't personally act on it, that all work is a mistake. Or that if one has done a little work in the past, then it is high time to stop. Nothing, I believe, could please her more than if I just sat in an armchair for the rest of my life, and let her wait on me hand and foot. Economics don't trouble her. The Lord, she is convinced, would provide. She may be right. I don't know. I haven't tried it yet. My own view is that we are all under the Primal Curse, and never more so than when even one's savings are suddenly confiscated by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Besides, though it is true enough that I often go nearly mad during my efforts to set words down on paper, I should become raving if I abandoned the attempt.

There is another thing, too. Mark you and mind you, she is

rather proud of me in a way; or if she isn't, she has never even admitted it to herself. Yet there is a catch about being mated to an author. It isn't only that he seems to expect everyone else to keep quiet while he is writing, and can even glare when he is suddenly interrupted; but when he pauses, he expects to have lunch. You see, he is always at home; and even the best of literary wives sometimes weary of feeding the brute. They consider other husbands, who lunch out at least five days a week. And, indeed, I quite follow their point.

So much so, in fact, that, when it was easier to lunch out, I often did lunch out. I used to go to a Club. But then—what a world it is!—in that age we had a cook, and a parlour-maid, and tradesmen were delivering provisions all day. Whereas now, without any of these advantages, and when food still means queues, everyone seems to be travelling, too. Getting to the Club, in short, has ceased to be a relaxation—even if I succeed, it has become as crowded as the buses—and has merely become a fresh strain. Besides, there are my domestic duties here. There is Britannia, God bless her, who can't possibly be left all alone. So I am tied. Or I feel I am tied. And my wife—though if she didn't, I have another feeling that she might go without it herself—has to supply me with lunch.

Nevertheless, when I told her that I was going to take the day off, she hadn't a thought, I am sure, of this aspect. And when she said: "Then you'll lunch at the Club," I could swear that this was again purely from kindness. I don't know what she thinks it is like there nowadays; but of course she knows that I once used to go there quite a lot, and perhaps assumes that it is still rather fun. As it was always a place of mystery to her, she may even believe that we still eat what we like there, and pay pre-war prices. I can't tell. But I was touched. And as I was also touched—for I always am, in a sense—by her other belief that I only work so as to torment myself, I said "Yes, certainly." And, in a further access of emotion, and as I now had very little alternative occupation, added that I would go round to the Grocer's for her and collect the rations.

We then argued a bit, but I was firm. Partly because I felt that it was about the least I could do; if partly because I was now scared of the vacuum. She gave way, whether she guessed this or not. She also gave me the ration-books. But as it still seemed rather early, I went back to my desk, where—after a sudden struggle with my conscience, or possibly with a bad habit—I sat down and answered some letters. In fact, owing to fear of the vacuum, I did more than this. I originated some correspondence, to a couple of old friends whom I had perhaps rather neglected. This wasn't work. But it helped. When the loud-speaker in the adjacent building began its customary "Blah-blah" and "Wah-wah," I was writing so brilliantly that I hardly even twitched.

Then my wife looked in.

"I say," she said, with a faint hint of accusation, "you're not writing, are you?"

"Oh, no!" I said, innocently and almost truthfully. "Only a few letters."

"I see." She looked, and was assuaged. "But if you *are* going for those rations—well, it's twenty to twelve."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "Is it really? All right. And I'll take the dogs."

So I took the dogs, and the ration-books, and the shopping-bag, and we all went round to the Grocer's. If there had been a queue, I should have stood in it—with a dog under each arm, for I am punctilious in considering anyone who doesn't appreciate them. But there wasn't. There was just a kind of infernal scrimmage. I kept approaching the counter, and being forced back again—owing, I suppose to having been born during the last years of chivalry—by a quantity of fierce women. Some of them were foreigners, and these, I noted, weren't only fiercer than the natives—though the natives were quite fierce enough—but seemed even more ignorant of the rationing system than I was. Odd, I thought. They must have been here quite a number of years now, but they still seemed to image that the system was all bluff.

Or were *they* bluffing. I began thinking about nationality again, and what a curse, pest, and abomination it was. So that—as has happened before on such occasions—when I was accidentally pushed right up against the counter, I had momentarily forgotten where I was. But the assistant seemed to know. She conjured the books from me. She scribbled, clipped, vanished, and at length returned. "Anything else?" she inquired. However, it seemed that she hadn't got anything else, or anything else that I had been instructed to ask for. She then performed a sum in addition, with a pencil, on my carton of sugar, and announced what really struck me as a most reasonable total.

In other words—for the quantity of the merchandise was, in fact, quite inadequate, the quality would have been rejected by almost anyone a few years ago, and the price was kept down by subsidies that I was paying myself—I was temporarily tricked again. This is rather different, I reflected, from the kind of shopping that I watched when my mother used to take me into a grocer's, fifty years ago. But of course I could do nothing about it.

Back, through grey streets, past shabby houses, or gaps where houses had been, for the usual trouble with the lift. However, the great thing was that I hadn't left the ration-books behind, as I have been known to do. And the dogs had quite a good lunch. I served it myself. I washed up for them. I was also feeling rather bad about my work again, notwithstanding an anything but self-

indulgent morning. If it had been possible—but it wasn't—I might still have returned to that desk.

I had taken a pledge, though. I was committed to lunch at the Club. "Have a good time," said my very much better half, who was now engaged in patching a somewhat venerable sheet. "And don't hurry back. I shall be absolutely all right here."

I was tempted to go into the question of what, if anything, she was proposing to eat herself. But though she is truthful, I knew well enough that she wouldn't regard any answer as binding. It might even be better to leave the point unexplored, so as not to provoke her into unnecessary starvation. If I said nothing, there was just a chance, I felt, that she might do better than if I, too, sought a pledge. So I left her. I put on my twelve-year-old overcoat, and my six-year-old hat. And after some delay at the sliding grille I sank to street level again.

Once upon a time I might now have walked round to a garage, got into a car, which belonged to me, and have glided off to the Club. Or there was a neighbour and fellow-member, who had a chauffeur as well, who would almost always give me a lift. Or if I missed him, and couldn't be bothered to extract my own vehicle, I would leap lightly on to an omnibus, and still arrive in plenty of time.

Different now, though. Quite fatal, today, if one misses the first rush or stampede into the dining-room. And whereas omnibuses used once to stop at the corner of the street, and appeared quite pleased to do so, they now rushed from one inconvenient point to another as though they, too, were under some Curse. In the old days, again, they used to proceed, once I had embarked, at a more or less regular pace. But now on one of the two alternative routes there was a strong probability that the driver and conductor would get off, after about half a mile, and that we should all sit there while they had a long talk with their successors. While on the other route there was an official, with a watch, who liked to keep us all waiting, until about six buses were palpitating in a row, before reluctantly waving us on. This left rather an awkward choice.

Another feature of present-day transport seemed to be that all buses should start suddenly, so that the maximum number of passengers might lose their balance. Once, when this happened, and an elderly lady fell on her face, she uttered a mild remonstrance. Do you know what happened? The conductress—for I must admit that this was during the war—rang the bell and told her to get off. As the victim still hesitated, for she was a little confused after her fall, the conductress first informed all the rest of us—though this was on a Sunday morning—that we were only travelling for the purpose of going to public-houses and getting drunk; and then went round and fetched the driver, with whose

assistance the poor old lady was shoved out into the road. But do you think anyone protested? We didn't dare. Not one of us. Though there was a commando—or what by this time had come to be called a commando—just in front of me, he was as mum as the rest. This was London in war-time. And though there were fewer bombs now, there was still a good deal of risk.

Nevertheless, if I was to get to the Club, I must face it. So I plumped for the route without the official with his watch—for one does sometimes get through on the other—and joined a long, straggling queue. The first approaching omnibus didn't stop at all. The next one pulled up at the wrong place, so that the back of the queue—or such units as were less scrupulous than myself—got in first. Then, after a further interval, two buses arrived together. By some strange chance the entrance to the leading vehicle was now immediately opposite me. But though it wasn't full, as I could see, the conductor said it was. He said it violently. Owing to my chivalry, once more, it was two women whom he actually pushed off the step. So we all moved to the other bus, which was even emptier; and as we reached it, it swung out and set off.

Somehow or other I was now again at the very tail of the queue, which, owing to the fact that two services stopped here—or were supposed to stop here—was in a curiously fluid state. Honour, among the would-be passengers, didn't seem to exist, and perhaps couldn't in these circumstances. But my own conscience was no help. Whether I was at the back, at the front, or in the middle—and I was all three in turn—the real test was a kind of determination which I seemed to lack; though once, in a particularly savage mêlée, I was forced momentarily on to a bus that I didn't want.

But I got off again, thanks to a traffic-block, and trudged back to the end of the queue. At this stage, so far as I can remember, there was a prolonged pause in the proceedings—so that I began wondering if there had been another lightning strike—and the queue was immense when four buses arrived in a bunch. The first—though I was hardly surprised—roared right on. The second was the wrong service, for my own purpose. The third, which would have suited me, at once became the scene of a fresh battle, in which the voice of the same, unseen conductor could be heard shouting: "Let 'em off first!" and: "Urry along!" in the most perplexing and contradictory manner. Should I still be chivalrous? I wondered. I had, in fact, just apologised to a woman—(Query: Why? My up-bringing again?)—who had struck me a sharp blow with a short umbrella, when a kind of miracle occurred. That is to say that through a gap between this third bus and the fourth—which was no use to me, either—I saw a fifth, out in the middle of the road, and with the right number on it, that appeared to be no more than about a quarter full.

So I dashed through the gap. I don't think the fifth bus had really meant to stop, any more than the first; but in the general congestion it was compelled to slow down. I leapt. I grabbed. And though this might easily have been my last moment on earth, I shot into it; tripped; staggered; half-recovered myself; and actually crashed on to an unoccupied seat. I had done it! I was still gasping as I purchased a pink ticket. But I was aboard. There could be no doubt of that.

Here, also, as some of my other senses returned, I realised that I was surrounded by foreigners. They were, indeed, making no attempt to disguise this. They chattered, loudly, in a number of tongues. They seemed at home, and it was I who felt strange. Yet this was London, of course, after the second World-War, and what else could I expect? Humility from the persecuted? Most certainly not. I was their host. I ought to be glad they were so happy.

Besides, we were moving. We tore past another request-stop, regardless of its gesticulating queue. We lurched. We thundered. I was a little alarmed, to tell the truth, by our frantic speed; but at this rate, I thought, and though I knew that I should now be too late for the first stampede, I might still be in time for the second. Good. Or good, that is to say, if we didn't hit anything. Yet I should have known what this velocity meant.

What it meant, of course, was the driver and conductor were nearing the end of their shift. As we stopped, with a jerk, at the familiar and always hazardous spot, they both left us. The bus filled up. Other buses went by. But I had taken my ticket. I was doubtful if it would be accepted on an alternative vehicle, even if there were less competition for seats. No. I must be patient. I was, in fact, far more patient than some of the foreigners, whose disgust was both vocal and marked. One of them even rang the bell—which I should never have dared to do on a Continental tram—but of course this produced no result. The new driver and conductor were clearly visible now, finishing a couple of cigarettes. But they were in no hurry, as their predecessors had been. Quite possibly, if not certainly, they were bound by some mysterious time-table.

So in the end I gave up. I knew—for though my watch was still being repaired, there was a clock within sight—that I should now miss even the second stampede, and that there would be no food at all for a third. I got out. I crossed the road. I waited, for a while, by the celebrated stop which, for about five years now, if not more, has instructed queues to form facing the wrong way. But though no one has ever paid any attention to this—not even London Transport when, foolishly, as I now see, I wrote and told them—I had no better luck than before. The buses were still full. Or they stopped where they chose. Or there was another change of crew. Or I was chivalrous again.

Finally I walked home—buying a couple of sandwiches on the way—and though I was a little nervous lest my wife might feel that I was lacking in spirit (but I wasn't really, for after about ten minutes I insisted on entering the lift with a bed and a sideboard—someone seemed to be moving again—instead of weakly climbing the stairs), as a matter of fact, when I crept in, she was out. So were the dogs. She was obviously exercising them, or perhaps queuing as well.

Yet I felt lonely, even though my defence was postponed. The flat, though still small, struck me as bleak. I munched the sandwiches—standing up in the kitchen, so that any crumbs might fall straight in the sink. I returned to the sitting-room. I still felt lonely. I often do in this place; perhaps because we took it as a stop-gap—at a time when we could have had any flat in London—and then suddenly found that there was nothing else left. It isn't a *home*, I mean, though I have just used this word. It just can't be—even if we are darned lucky to have a roof over our heads—after all those years in a house.

I couldn't face the sitting-room. But I was being drawn elsewhere. I was at my desk, as a matter of fact, when my wife came in. But she didn't know this, for I was perfectly quiet. By about a quarter to five I had torn up three pages—not more, for it now seemed that my Subconscious had been a bit pessimistic in the small hours—and had written two; not bad going, if not exactly an advance. I knew the time, because there is an electric clock in my work-room, and if you add a quarter of an hour to allow for present variations in the current, you won't often be very far wrong.

So as I must now boil the kettle for tea—in fact, I was a little late—I came out. My wife, with a Peke on each side, looked up from the pillow-case that she was now patching. "Hullo," she said. "I never heard you come in. Well? Did you have a nice time?"

But I am truthful, too. I told her. And she laughed. A little ruefully, perhaps, as women do when they are married to authors. But of course if she stopped laughing at me as I struggle along, there would be no point in either writing or in taking a restful day off. I might just as well throw up the sponge.

MERRY ENGLAND

THIS is an odd life. One keeps thinking, and indeed it is part of my professional business to suggest, that there is a pattern in it; yet it is hardly one on which I should care to rely. There is an illusive neatness every now and then. A cause, one observes, leads directly to an anticipated effect. Ha! one decides. I've got it this time. Here's *something* I'm on to at last. Whereupon, what appears to be exactly the same cause produces so utterly different a result that one has to start all over again. Or a result, it seems equally clear, hasn't got any cause. Or a cause—in all this I am speaking rather of the conduct of human beings than of what goes on in a laboratory—shows no trace of a result.

Coincidences, too. Professionally, I am supposed to fight shy of them. According to the rules, such as these are, of my craft, I must use them with caution. No reader will be satisfied—and I am aware of this—if, so as to help my plot, I suddenly announce that my hero, descending by parachute from a plane that has been driven out of its course, alights at the church door where the heroine is about to marry the villain. It is, of course, the lack of such licence that makes fiction so hard, and novels so long. But I can't risk it. I mustn't. Even though I know—and so do you—that coincidences in real life, if pointless enough, keep recurring again and again.

Or even though you know—and so do I—that about every tenth or fifteenth coincidence isn't even pointless. I could give examples; but I shan't. They wouldn't interest you—any more, I am afraid, than yours would interest me; for until someone can explain them—which they can't—they are just another annoyance. Oh, useful sometimes, I grant you, if seldom quite as useful as in the case of the parachutist. But maddening, too, and not only to a novelist. *Why?* we ask. But there's no answer. They just happen. I repeat, it's a very odd life.

Here's something else that I have noticed about it. If you are young enough—and perhaps, if lucky, you are—you may not be on to this yet; and in that case you may not believe me. But it's true. I am not making it up. You know how one accepts the convention, for which there are certain grounds, that Life is a species of pilgrimage. One sets off, that is to say, from some arbitrary spot, and proceeds—tottering, running, or being hurtled along—to another. So that it should be a line, like the line on your hand.

But it isn't. After a certain age you find things coming round

again. Or you're on some sort of circuit yourself. How often—this is for my elder readers—have you suddenly realised that you were here, though it is now a kind of parody of the same circumstances, thirty or forty years ago? Just at first you say to yourself that it is a trick of the mind. And sometimes it is; but not always. No, unless—which is absurd—I am completely unique, you, too, must have been bewildered by this recurrence. It can be subtle; so damnably subtle that it is hard to pin down. Or it can be crude—here you are, for instance (and, merciful powers, what does it mean?), in a house that you hadn't thought of for a generation or more, but that has bobbed up again as an hotel. You knew it well once, for a short time, though you had quite forgotten this when you accepted an invitation to spend a couple of nights in the neighbourhood. "Sorry," says your host, as hosts are compelled to say nowadays. "We've got nothing to drink here. But if you don't mind a little stroll, there's a place, with a bar. . . ." He leads you to it. It is, as I have as good as said, the house where you stayed for a dance in the year 1903. This shock, but for the bar, might make you break down altogether. It isn't the bar, though, that has turned the line into a circle.

Here's another one. When I was at school, years ago, there was a boy whom I knew slightly. Better than some, that's to say. Well enough to preserve a faint memory of his name and appearance, though with no reason why it should have gone beyond that. It didn't, what's more. We weren't even in the same form. We never met in the holidays. And when we left we set forth on two different tracks, between which there was no link at all. We travelled, following separate courses. The world did all kinds of things to both of us, or I know it did to me; battering us; changing us; snapping thread after thread. The faint memory was still there, of course, but had been reduced to a mere blur. That is to say that if I thought of my school at all—and I seldom did, if this could be avoided—I suppose his face may have risen up, among others, as part of the thought. But that was all. I had no idea what had become of him. And not a fragment of my mind was directed towards raising the point.

Very well, then. After about thirty-five years had elapsed, and when chance rather than intention had brought me to my present address, I took my dog out in a quiet, neighbouring street. A man emerged from another building, with another dog. As Britannia, being a Peke, never recognises the existence of any other breed, she paid no attention. But I glanced at the man, and the man glanced at me. His hair—mine, too—was decidedly grey. No one could have looked less like a schoolboy. Yet we paused; hesitated; and suddenly exchanged two autumnal smiles. It was the circle again.

It was also a coincidence; for London is vast, and there had been two wars since the last time we had met. No, we didn't fall on each other's necks. We were British; and there was no intimacy to recall. Yet, I could see, unless I was mistaken, that he, too—as the smiles faded—was impressed by the strangeness of Life. We didn't discuss it. Our conversation, so far as I can remember, was confined to a simultaneous "Hullo." But as we parted—and it is immaterial that we have met again, once or twice, without getting much further—I should say that each was still staggered by what, if it wasn't often so sad, I might describe as the Merry-go-round. You take a seat on it—or, to be more accurate, you are born on it—and if you wait long enough, there you are again. Or are you used to all this? Do you take it for granted? Is it only I who still think it so queer?

Well, never mind. Let it go; or so long as it is quite clear that this shouldn't be regarded as one of my snappiest stories. Nor shall I quote any more. Except to say—which I have been trying to say all along—that there is another echo or return in the matter of my appearance in the country. For when I was a child (*see* Chapter XI) these were regular but rare. As I grew up, I began flitting all over the place; and at my meridian—for seven years—we had a house there as well as in London. But for the second world-war, in fact, I should probably still be in that enviable state. But I'm not. I am back where I started; with a breath of fresh air once a year, and the rest among bricks. On my theory, no doubt, this was bound to occur. But of course there are differences, too.

If we go away now, it means further expense; not to mention emergency cards. When we arrive, wherever it is, there is a change in the scene. For big cities and progress have put tractors in the fields, aërials in cottage gardens, cinemas in all but the smallest villages, and motor-buses and tarmac on roads. But at the beginning, when we passed from Surrey, in August, to Sussex and my grandparents' seaside house, for the first half of September, not only was I put to no personal expense; not only, during the latter, annual engagement, were we all favoured guests; but the placé was Arcadian still.

It was remote and alone. It hadn't sprawled over an inch of the Downs. The long, hilly, chalky road that separated it from the nearest station and town—with the remains of an earlier and more southerly highway still visible most of the way—must be traversed either in a fly (if one was extravagant or had luggage, though one was still expected to get out and walk up the hills) or in one of two horse-drawn buses. The red one—Thomas's from the Royal Oak—was more or less like its metropolitan counterparts; except that the conductor performed on a coach-horn. But the pale one—Welfare's, from the White Horse—was of anterior date, and had a "knife-board" aloft, on which travellers sat back to back. There

were also seats beside the driver; and occasionally, if lucky, I might find myself there; or, if still luckier, be handed the reins.

So I preferred Welfare's, notwithstanding those brilliant renderings, from the rival vehicle, of *The Flowers that Bloom in the Spring*; partly because of the thrill that I have just mentioned, and partly, perhaps, because I already had a taste for the past. But it was a long journey, without a house in sight, until finally, with a skid under the wheel, we descended the last hill, and were back in the village again.

I have been there comparatively recently. The core—the High Street and Green—wasn't vastly changed, and people still speak of its charm. But this was virtually all once; and now the flower, I must admit, has been placed in a most frightful vase. The sky-lines have gone; the whole setting is gone. Modernity, and on the whole, I must again admit, rather cheap and nasty modernity, has brought flats, villas, and bungalows in all directions save out to sea. Yet even the sea has been changed. I knew how the cliffs were crumbling away—for that explains why the earlier coast, and coach, road had become an intermittent, grass-grown track; but though concrete—thousands of tons of it—had now halted the erosion, there is no longer an Arcadian beach. Just as a rustic Fulham became an urban West Kensington, so the village of my childhood is now virtually the east end of the big Town. And even where the concrete breaks off, the building has gone on. For miles. Right the way to another large town. However, as it might be actionable to say what I think of all this, I had better stick to my own period now.

I think—in fact, I know—that even the mild contemporary irruption of summer visitors, as far back as that, had a slightly corruptive effect. It was no longer, when I first knew it, really or strictly a mere fishing village. Yet it was compact, and at other seasons the regular residents, in their Georgian houses backing straight on to the sheep-dotted downs, were a permanent part of the place. The outer world was the outer world then. It stood by itself; four miles from the nearest steam-train. It was surrounded and embedded in farm-land and grazing-land. Long walks were but to a dew-pond or barn.

One farm-house, at least, was well within the existing confines, with its yard next door to the church. And it was from this, each September—and, when the ceremony was over, back to it again—that a ritual wagon lurched round. The Harvest-Home. Represented now mostly by pumpkins on pulpits, not that these weren't part of the formality, too. But in those days the patriarchal farmers must still give great feasts when the last crop was cleared; and this triumph must first be made known.

So, towards twilight, a long, blue, red-wheeled wain, with faint,

exquisite curves, piled high with the last sheaves, drawn by great horses, and surmounted by a quorum of labourers, would appear on the far side of the Green. As it lumbered, it was attended by a band of enthusiasts, exchanging shouts with the men on the top. And then, once more, those same men would start chanting again:

“We’ve ploughed, we’ve sown,
 We’ve reaped, we’ve mown,
 We’ve carried the last load ’ome,
 And—(*exultantly*)—we *ain’t* overthrown!”

For the rhyme in the penultimate line there are, of course, plenty of parallels in present-day lyrics, as broadcast night after night. Somehow it seems that to a large number of British—yes, and American—ears, there is no distinction between an “m” and an “n.” Let that pass. It must also be confessed that, occasionally, for nothing was more likely on those precipitous fields, one of the farm-carts had, in fact, toppled over. But the words were as traditional as the shape of their frames. They must be preserved. So must the rhythm. And laughter, with much badinage from the followers, could yet acknowledge the truth.

The scene, from my grandparents’ windows, had been arranged as on a stage. There was a back-cloth; the church, with the soft line of downs. There were wings; on the prompt side a house where my second cousins would come to stay with their own grandparents, and to the left another house where more second cousins at that time had their headquarters and home. Down-stage, just beyond an imaginary orchestra-pit—yet not wholly imaginary, for an odd thing about the house from which I gazed was that it had a basement-kitchen and area as in London—there was a road with entrances R. and L. Up-stage, beyond the confronting wings, was a further road running along by the back-cloth. The main floor was the Green, divided in turn by diagonal ways. So that it should be clear—but don’t worry if it isn’t—that any pageant on wheels might reappear in the foreground after vanishing in the background like a procession at Drury Lane.

Or the other way round. There was always hope; even if it were only Thomas’s tootling bus. I should say, then, that the wagon and its adherents would certainly reappear, and only a few yards away, or how else could I have caught the words of that poem? But it would be bed-time now, for me, at the back of the house. And for the harvesters a banquet of unrationed food, not to mention beer, which I never attended at all. In fact, I only learnt of this part of the proceedings from another farmer, later on, when he was regretting that it no longer took place.

No patriarchs by that time. Farmers' Unions, and Agricultural Labourers' Unions, and official overtime, and all the rest of it, including holidays with pay. Much better pay, too. Better accommodation. Better everything, perhaps, except food and drink, and traditions going back to the past. No thought, though, once, that this year's plough-land or sheep-run would be next year's Building Estate. The red rash—save for one distant, solitary row of cottages, nicknamed Klondike then, but long since overtaken and absorbed—had not even begun. And nobody now chants that song.

It was in a smaller but still blue-painted and red-wheeled wagon that, in September, also, the truly kind grandmother of my second cousins—those on the right—packed children for an annual picnic. When all were aboard, and baskets as well, it set off, with a single horse. Inland first. Then it turned, up a road that in a short time became wheel-tracks and hoof-tracks, but no more. Now, as we ascended, with our own walking detachment of grown-ups, the line of the sea rose with us, until it was like a high, silver wall. The axles creaked. Grasshoppers, though we couldn't hear them while we were in motion, actuated their stridatory organs like mad. The sun blazed down—for always, or so memory insists, it was a fine afternoon—and the downs were a greenish gold. They spread out in great shimmering sweeps.

Presently we were on the hill-top. There was a barn here, too—flint walls and tiled, lichened roof—where I have seen men threshing with flails. Mellow and calm, looking round on this superb panorama, it was romantic as well. This was all but our destination. A few yards further, on no track at all now, our vessel stopped. We were assisted to alight. We were on the brink of a hollow, from which, perhaps, those flints had once been taken for building the Barn, but which was now grassy, with brambles and gorse. It provided shelter from the almost permanent breeze up here; which was desirable, since this was before the invention of vacuum-flasks, and the grown-ups must boil water for their tea. A slow and laborious process sometimes—and so odd of them not to prefer milk. But a miniature bonfire, with a wobbling kettle, was always part of a picnic then. Their clothes were constrictive, or would seem so now, but they were gypsies, for the moment, at heart.

Personally, I had some mugs of milk, some bread-and-butter, some thick jam-sandwiches, some cake, and some plums or green-gages. We were then supposed to pick blackberries, and did for a while. Again eating as we gathered, staining our little garments, and scratching out little legs. Or there were games, such as races, unimpeded, apparently, by any process of digestion. Or I would wander away, though not far, to the verge of a precipice—or so it seemed to me then—facing somewhere towards land that was unknown. No trace of a habitation. Just miles and miles of

mysterious, billowing downs, with the sound of sheep-bells, perhaps, in the distance.

And that was all. Time to return now, in the golden evening, and once more in our creaking cart. At that period—but they have since vanished, with most of the sheep—the downs were covered with tiny little black-and-white snail-shells; and as I wore sandals, which at the same epoch was so unusual that they must be specially made, I must now occupy part of the journey in extracting crushed fragments that had somehow got under my feet. Interesting. Indeed, fascinating. Yet either this or something else seemed to be making me curiously sleepy.

We lurched on to the gritty road. Long shadows now, as we drew near the village, and dew on the shaggy Green. We were back where we had started. We were lifted down. I should consider it highly probable that I had to be reminded to express my gratitude to the hostess for her great feat of organisation and generosity. And then, only a few yards away, I was back in my grandparents' house. Happy? Yes, thank you. And them. And my hostess once more. And everyone else who contributed to all that I shall never forget.

Sometimes, in September again, there was another and simpler expedition. A fly would be hired. Our own family party, or portions of it, would embark. It, too, would proceed inland, though further this time. And presently, after what would take a car a mere matter of minutes, but for us was a much lengthier affair, it, too, would turn off on to turf. And would continue, almost silently, to a point where there was another wide view. Far away one could just see the County Town, which for me, though I should come to know it well later on, was still much like the Promised Land. One just gazed at it from this eminence. One never dreamt of reaching it—or I didn't—for even in a bee-line it was quite six miles away. But it was romantic, too, for it was said to have a Castle. And this glimpse, as I knew, was a treat.

However, on one occasion, as the older members of the party sat looking at it, I, who had been released from the vehicle so as to stretch my short legs, thought it would be amusing if I crawled underneath it. So I did. I wriggled between the wheels. I wormed my way over the grass—with more snail-shells, no doubt. And I emerged on the other side. The horse hadn't moved. Nor had it occurred to me that it might. But as I arose, expecting to be congratulated on my ingenuity, or perhaps my sense of humour, what was my shock and disappointment to be told, by my grandmother of all people, that I had done something very naughty indeed.

I might, she said—and, as I now see, she was perfectly right—have been crushed by the wheels. If the horse had been livelier; if it had even taken one step— Well, if it had, of course, I might not

be writing these lines. My poor grandmother. How could she imagine that I—notorious for my timidity—should do anything as risky as that? Oh, dear. Darkness descended on the whole, huge firmament. There could be no doubt that I was again in disgrace. How old was I? Full young; for it was half a century ago. But I haven't quite got over this, either.

On the other hand, and though disgrace must be my lot, now and then, as I battled with Life, of course there was far more happiness in that Village than melancholy or despair. Memories almost submerge me. This chapter—for there is nothing like a pen to revive them—could easily fill half my book. But it mustn't. Easy writing is hard reading. I must select. I must compress. I must be terse.

I must say nothing of the beach, though I could say much. I must skip the sand-castles and bathing-machines. The buns that I ate there—though, good heavens, they were delicious. I must even suppress, for the time being—since that would be another chapter in itself—my acute memories of the amazing contraption which, for a few seasons, ploughed through the ocean on two pairs of rails (that is to say, when it avoided mischance) all the way between village and town. I must control myself about games in my grandparents' garden, and in other gardens. I must say nothing, or not now, about how I became affianced to one of my cousins, and arranged—though this never came to anything—to take up residence in a third party's summer-house. Nothing, either, about my tour of the Village—when still certainly not more than six—to collect signatures for a memorial to the French Government about Captain Dreyfus. Nor, owing to the plan to which I am determined to cling, may I describe (though I should like to) my parents' wedding anniversaries, in September once more, and the iced cakes on which my grandfather painted such exquisite yet, alas, necessarily transient pictures.

No. And I must even leave September now. For though it is true that for a while this was the great Village month—so that the mere name tends to bring back its vistas—I was still a child, if a grandfatherless child, when we began spending Christmas there, too.

It was then that I met Nature in a much wilder mood. She roared. She blustered. Gales sent great waves dashing against the unprotected cliffs. Ice split them, and they crashed, with still more of the old coach-road, into the sea. Foam even flecked the Green, a quarter of a mile inland. The downs became covered in snow. It has sometimes seemed to me—though I have taken pains, as far as possible, to keep away from the Arctic—that I have never known such cold; until now, of course, when Nature seems to have taken note of our fuel troubles. There were a few primitive radiators

in that house with thin walls, but the cold merely mocked their faint warmth. There were fires, but they only roasted one side of you. And though lubricated nightly with glycerine and vaseline, I was permanently and painfully chapped.

Nevertheless, it was Christmas. Not only was there excitement, not only were there feasting and carol-singing, and presents galore—though, alas, there must be thank-letters, too—but at this season, again, tradition rose up as it had done at the Harvest-Home.

After lunch, for example, on Boxing-Day, it was well known what would take place on the Green. Once more I had a fine view, as the younger villagers assembled; and as my connections in the house, on the right of the stage emerged with a great sack of oranges. They threw them, and as they were all cricketers they threw them very well. The younger villagers scrambled, and grabbed them. There was, in fact, something in the nature of a free fight on the Green. But it was the tradition. It continued until the last orange had gone; and no one, so far as I am aware, took this custom as a symbol of Class. After all, there was no compulsion. Both parties enjoyed it. It should have lasted. But it didn't, of course.

And there were the Mummers. Much later in life, when there weren't any Mummers, but when I lived in another village myself, I learnt something of the methods by which messages were passed on, and how an inhabitant, for example, who could tune a piano might be summoned through a whole chain of intermediaries. But at this earlier period I was ignorant of the system. It never occurred to me, in fact, that my grandmother had originated one of these messages; and still less that the Mummers were paid. They just came, so I thought, though she seemed to know when they were coming. They were very large, very rustic, and shy.

They performed in the smaller, and colder, end of the little double drawing-room, in only a trifling kind of disguise. One, that is to say, had dirtied his face ("Here come I, Little Black Jack"), and wore a smock with some dolls attached to it ("With my family on my back"), but this was far the most elaborate costume. They began by standing in a circle, all facing inwards—which was no doubt a great help to their shyness—and sang. Then there was the play, which had something to do with St. George—or King George—or both, perhaps—or perhaps they were regarded as the same character—and a Turkish Knight. This was in verse, and involved an armed combat. Little Black Jack delivered himself of a couplet, curiously modern in a way—"Money I want, money I crave. If you don't give me money, I'll sweep you all into your grave"—but as this was a private, command performance, he wasn't given any; or not until afterwards.

Then they stood round in a circle again, and would possibly have continued singing carols, folk-songs, and more contemporary

ballads until they fainted from exhaustion—since shyness or artistry seemed to have robbed them of all notion of time—if my grandmother hadn't eventually risen, and thanked them, and fed them, and secretly paid them. Whereupon they all went stumbling out again—about half a dozen of them, I suppose, altogether—and I was packed off to bed.

Would this be one of the nights when, having incautiously begun reading *The Old Curiosity Shop*, I suddenly became fixed with the notion that Quilp had got into the room? And yelled and roared, until my mother came up and attempted to persuade me that I was mistaken? Well, there were such nights—which may explain why (unlike other authors) I have written of an old-fashioned Christmas without paying tribute to Dickens. Or without paying the more conventional tribute. But then if one hasn't read *Pickwick*—and I hadn't as yet—and is convinced that there is a dwarf, with a "ghastly smile," under the bed, one may well take a line of one's own.

Now, of course, I know better. But though Dingley Dell is immortal, the Mummers have gone. I was in time for the end of them; and I was in time for the last of the May-Day celebrations in London, in terms of Jack-in-the-Green. I was lucky, perhaps. Yes, I know I was lucky; that is to say if, once more, it was I. Yet could it have been? I must wonder again. The memories are there, though quite half of them have only come up from the depths in response to my mysterious pen. But that Village has vanished; or the village I knew. You would seek in vain for those snails. If I go there, it is as a stranger, and an unrecognisable stranger, to a place that is no longer a village at all, and a place where I don't know a soul. Time may have done this. I dare say it has. Unless, of course, the whole thing was a dream.

TEMPTING PROVIDENCE

I—THAT is to say, an aggregation of carbo-hydrates and other ingredients formed miraculously, though in my own view rather over-elaborately, into an ingenious but somewhat flimsy machine—was sitting on a contrivance made from various fibrous, vegetable substances, while revolving, on a blob of matter without visible means of support, at an appalling speed and in several directions at once; or, in other words, I was on a chair, at my desk, on this planet, when I was roused by a rattling sound.

Further infinite if possibly misplaced ingenuity had produced it. Brains, Capital, and Labour had all contributed for years to this development which had just interrupted my work. For when I say "roused" like that, I don't mean that I was asleep. Not at all. I had been writing clean fiction. On the other hand, when I said "rattling," I may conceivably have misled you. For how should you guess that my predecessor in this flat should have had a telephone-bell put in a cupboard where I now keep some shoes; so that when the shoes, as they often do, get piled against this part of the mechanism, they muffle its tintinnabulary power?

Well, as a matter of fact, that isn't the only trouble with the telephones in my establishment; of which, as you have been told, there are two. If this strikes you as extravagant, I must explain. It was my predecessor's notion; not mine. But when we came here, during the height of the second world-conflict, we had to take what we could find, and be thankful. Indeed, or so I was given to understand, it was only the fact that my house was on the same exchange that made it possible for me to have a telephone at all.

For there were no instruments here; only wires. But my old instruments, so it seemed, could be attached to them. And, in fact, *must* be attached to them—there was no choice in the matter—as anything else would impede the war-effort. So that whereas once, when I was in that house, the telephones were where we wanted them, and could be used with no effort at all, now I must either leap from the sitting-room into the passage—my predecessor must have been a very odd character, I sometimes think—or bound from my literary desk.

Because the cord of the second instrument isn't long enough to reach the desk itself, and all attempts to have it lengthened have failed. It is unpatriotic now, or so I have again been given to understand to have a cord more than five feet in length. The material is

required for more important subscribers, or is perhaps being sent overseas. So that, again, whereas once I could switch off my bell—though there was an instrument on my desk—and employed a staff to take incoming calls, now, if my wife is in a queue and that rattling begins, I am compelled to spring out of my chair.

So I did it again.

“Hullo?” I observed; for when I don’t say “Hullo?”, but announce who I am, experience has taught me that I shall be the wrong number. Queer? Not the least. It is a natural law. And as this is so, it is far better to know it.

So I said: “Hullo?” And the other voice asked me if I were my wife. And I said I wasn’t—I should like to point out, by the way, that my own tones are quite unmistakably masculine—but that I could take a message for her.

At this, while the end of my interrupted literary sentence disappeared altogether, so that when I eventually got back to my desk I had to reconstruct the whole paragraph, the other voice—which still hadn’t disclosed its identity—seemed taken aback. I could hear it muttering to a third voice; plaintively, I thought, though I couldn’t catch the exact words. I tried to encourage it by saying “Hullo?” again. It returned. It inquired if I had sent an eiderdown to be cleaned on the 27th of February.

Strictly speaking, I hadn’t. I had carried it personally through the streets—unwrapped, owing to a shortage of paper—and had missed it a good deal (for it was off my bed) during the weeks that had since elapsed; but knew better—this was experience again—than to jump hastily to the conclusion that it was now ready.

Experience, in fact—and how painfully it had been acquired!—while disregarding a custom of all shops to treat my wife as the only competent member of the firm, had convinced me that I was about to hear that my eiderdown had been either lost or destroyed. For it is another natural law that when you can’t buy things, this happens; and that only when they can be easily replaced do they remain serviceable until you are sick of the sight of them.

So I braced myself. I said: “Yes,” having no wish to split hairs. And then I added, partly because I was still anxious to work, and partly so as to get over the suspense: “Is anything wrong?”

And that, though not altogether consciously so, was dashed clever.

“No,” said the other voice, with just a trace of indignation “But we’ve had it a fortnight now, and we thought you were calling, and——”

“Oh!” I interrupted. “Right. Thanks. I’ll come round.”

This terminated the conversation, as I saw no point in telling the voice that it had promised to send me a postcard. And later in the day I was as good as my word. I collected the eiderdown. I

paid what was demanded—I could once have bought a new one for only a few shillings more—and again, since the shop had no paper, either, I returned through the streets with a slight air of having camped on a bombed site. Later still when I had at last succeeded in detaching a piece of tape, with some code figures on it, that had been stitched to one corner, I replaced it on my bed. And that night I wasn't only warmer than I had been for some time, but Britannia was more comfortable, too.

So that is the brief, and, as you may feel, pointless story of my pre-war eiderdown, which was at least clean now though it had decidedly lost weight. And yet there is a point, if I can make it clear. It is this. And it is a third-natural law. What I mean, then, or am attempting to explain, is that if I *hadn't* expected bad news through the telephone, I should have certainly got it. Whereas by anticipating it, as it were, by my question: "Is anything wrong?", I had again dished and bamboozled the Power that controls all these things.

Or do you think not? Are you so wedded to Reason, in a world where it is conspicuously lacking, as to believe that my eiderdown's loss or survival was something that had been already determined? Are you one of those people who, when receiving a letter that you know must contain either good or bad news, really think that your thoughts can't affect it? Do you just wrench it open, and exclaim either "Ha!" or "Hell!"? Or haven't *you* discovered, though in theory, perhaps, what has been written has been written, that it is well worth while to *imagine* the worst—again so as to trick the same Power?

Or, once more, you are awaiting a dear one—your consort, your mother, your daughter, or some star of your soul—who is arriving from a distance. She is late. Do you worry? Or are you calm? Do you rest quietly in a chair, with a nice book from the library, occasionally reminding yourself that trains in this country are notoriously unpunctual, that hired cars have a habit of going to the wrong terminus, that telegrams are seldom delivered on the same day that they are dispatched, but that she is bound to turn up in the end? Or do you stride the room, and keep peering from the window, while picturing collisions, explosions, and other disasters, until you are yourself on the verge of collapse?

Well, what I say, in any case—and, mind you, I have now been on this blob quite a while—is that though the former behaviour may be more sensible, in theory, you are running a considerable risk. For you know perfectly well that when there *has* been even a minor disaster, it has always taken you completely by surprise. Whereas the latter course of action, though exhausting at times, may yet be classed as a gilt-edged investment. For the Power *knows*. "Oh," it says to itself, "he thinks he can tell what's happening

between Crewe and Watford, does he? All right, then. Sucks!" Whereupon—though it should also be noted that this only occurs at a juncture when you chance (for you are only human) to have started thinking about something totally different—the door-bell rings; and there is the dear one, who wants half a crown.

You are so pleased to see her, of course—or him, if the roles are reversed—that you are apt to forget what you have been through. Or, if you remember—and though you will almost certainly do exactly the same thing next time—you may even conceive that you have been rather an ass. But I don't think you have. It is my opinion, on the contrary—and this is experience, too—that anxiety on such occasions is a contribution of distinct value. It may hurt at the time, but not nearly so much as the pain that your pains have averted. The dear one should be grateful for what you have done; even though, if you tell her, she is more likely to laugh. For they do, Heaven bless them. It is part of their charm. And all Life is a confusing affair.

Yet we are on to something, I think, in the matter of that Power. Two instances only have been quoted—that of my eiderdown, and the more generic example of the dear one. But they rang true; didn't they? I could have adduced others, and may yet do so, without the slightest difficulty. And it is proverbial—that is to say, it is the epitomised persuasion of the ages—that a watched pot never boils.

Why not? Science, no doubt, would point out that it does. But what has Science itself done for us that we should accept its mere *ipse dixit*? Or, again, isn't it so fluid—though it likes to pretend not—that it is always discovering that today's laughable error is tomorrow's dogmatic fact? Presently, it may well be, it will also find out what it will then describe as a scientific explanation of why a slice of buttered bread invariably falls butter-side down. But I prefer my own, which is not only first off the mark, but to me is infinitely more convincing and elastic. I dispense with the microscope, the spectroscope, and the higher branches of mathematics. I just put it down to the Power.

Yet this is getting a bit deep; and of course you now want to know what the Power is called. As it is obviously malicious—for surely it would have been just as easy for it to make the slice of bread fall the other way up—it is clearly not to be confused with the Almighty, whom we must believe to be kind. I rather doubt if it is the Devil, either. It is too petty, and too gullible, for that. Is it Nature? Well, it is true enough that even very religious people, when a volcano suddenly immolates several thousand human beings, or a cold snap destroys myriads of birds, dodge a difficulty by attributing this to Nature. But then they praise her, too—when the volcano pipes down and just looks beautiful in the background, or when birds such as nightingales sing. They are admitting, in fact,

that she is as variable as a woman. Whereas the Power—or, at any rate, the more I have studied it, the more I have come to this conclusion—is consistent throughout.

Then perhaps it is Providence, though that is rather an odd name for it. Yet religious people, again, seem to differentiate between Providence and the Creator. Sometimes, of course, for the more religious you are, the harder it appears to be to call the Creator by his name—which is perhaps why clergymen can speak of Gahd, Gawd, and Gud, but hardly ever of God—the two terms are regarded as interchangeable. But they're not really. Providence can be placated; there is no question of that. But God—I am not speaking of Jehovah now, who seems to have been both testy and unreasonable—is above any such form of approach. We know it, even if we don't know why we know it. Though of course there is a good deal we don't know.

Yet we know that Providence can be tempted, and so, there is no doubt, can the Power. It is they, or if they are one then it is it, that can be absolutely relied on to rise to the right provocation. Supposing, for instance, you have a piece of bread-and-butter in your hand—this is rather a large assumption, just at present, but to imagine it isn't actually an offence—and happen to *mention* its well-known behaviour. "Look!" you say, and drop it—again assuming, of course, that none of the company is a professional snooper. Providence, or the Power, can't resist this. "Yah!" it will retort; and, infallibly, this will be the one occasion in your life-time when the piece falls butter-side up. One could bet on this. Only there is a further catch. You must believe what you say.

If you don't, then Providence—yes, I think we'll call it that—is never for a moment deceived. If you have whispered to the company in advance that you are making a test, it won't play. It will let you down. It would sooner appear powerless, for once, than allow you to score. It is cunning, in fact. It mustn't be mocked. It has got to surprise you each time.

This is why—reverting to my eiderdown once more—it was so important that I should *really* have suspected disaster, when that voice suddenly came on the line. If I had been pretending, this would have been useless. And though it is true—for there is always a trick up its sleeve—that if I had been secretly seeking to avert one form of damage, Providence would certainly have chosen another, the result, so far as my eiderdown was concerned, would have been the same; and I should have been unable to use it again.

In the same way, in the case of the dear one, it is essential that your anxiety should be genuine. If you are putting it on, I must warn you that Providence would think nothing of wrecking a whole train as a retort. So you must be careful. Dashed careful. You don't want that on your conscience, even if the dear one should

chance to escape. In fact, you're playing with fire, once you have learnt what I've learnt. Though as I have told you so much, I suppose I had better go on.

Very well, then. It is established that surprise and contrariness are the two principal qualities by which Providence, in this connotation, may be identified. Or that it is against these that you must set your own wits. Remember always the watched pot. Either withdraw your attention, if this is possible, from whatever you wish either to secure or avoid; for this lulls its suspicions. Or if you can't do that, then anticipate the exact opposite of what you wish to occur, so that it may be decoyed into proving you wrong. Remember that it is like a child, though an all-powerful child, and quite simple at heart. It is in the execution of its plans that it can sometimes show a good deal of ingenuity. But its motives are straightforward. It just wants to be what is known in the nursery as a Tease.

Bear this in mind, then. Picture it, and you won't be far out, as the kind of character that plants booby-traps, and roars with laughter at the results. You should perhaps pretend to fall into them, and as convincingly as you can, for with such characters this always goes well. It would be fatal, moreover, even when you have tricked it yourself, to show that you are aware what you have done. For it is all-powerful. And you're not. And it has a remarkable memory.

You should always yield. Or appear to yield. That's the game to play. Its own weapons are best; surprise and contrariness; but in no circumstances—for in addition to its memory it has almost incredibly acute hearing—should you tell anyone else of your plans. If you do, you might as well send an announcement to the Press. It will know. And it won't trust you again.

All this, of course, means a good deal of hard work. Concentration. Even suffering at times. Yet consider the alternative, which is to be its plaything and butt. Besides, nothing that is worth doing is easy. You can take chances, if you prefer. You can announce, in a loud, clear voice, what you are intending to do, or what you hope will take place; and in certain instances—perhaps because it is too busy at the time, or possibly because it has some cause to suspect you—I have known this come off. But you can't rely on it. It is playing with fire again. Far better, far safer, to practice deceit. I hate to say so. Honesty, in all other relationships, is of course the best policy. But experience can't be denied.

Or perhaps, if you have been blundering in darkness hitherto, and wondering why you are so constantly disappointed, you would like another example or two. All right. You shall have them. Even though I shall only be reminding you of what, if you were more observant, you could have seen for yourself. Here's the simplest of all. Your umbrella.

It may well be, of course, that you haven't got one today;

that it has been pinched, or mislaid, or is worn out. If so, this rather looks as if you hadn't made it clear enough to Providence that your great pleasure in life is to get wet. But if you still have one, you know perfectly well what occurs. On any doubtful day—of which there are plenty in this isle—it will rain if you leave it at home, and remain fine if you don't. This is tiresome, of course, especially in an isle where we are all carrying parcels as well. But it is at least infallible, should you wish to keep dry. You know just where you are.

Or is that too simple for you? Have you discovered it, and do you scoff at my wisdom? Never mind, I'm not touchy. And it is the extension of this law which you may have overlooked, and I now hope to make plain. We pass on to letters.

In the same isle that I have just mentioned, and in other lands, too, a large proportion of people, for some reason or other, are continually, if not continuously, in love. This in turn, even today, makes them take up their pens. They write, daringly, ardently, or it may be ambiguously, to the object of their affections, and of course they expect a reply. "Hullo!" says Providence. "Here's another poor devil listening for the postman. Now we'll have some fun." Whereupon, with immense ingenuity again, it devises delay. It causes the recipient of the communication to find that he or she is without stamps. It suddenly alters the times of collection. It causes someone else to post a letter before the economy label is dry, so that the answer sticks to it, and is delivered in West Hartlepool. Or it puts on a new postman at this end who is perhaps in love himself, and consequently shoots letters intended for No. 41 into No. 14, where the household is away.

Meanwhile, of course, the original correspondent is going nearly mad. But this is his own fault. If he took the elementary precaution of never glancing at his doormat except with a disgusted expression, while at the same time snarling: "More letters, I suppose"; or if, instead of darting from his chair whenever the flap of his little orifice rattles, he just yawned and went on reading a book—half an hour, I should say, is the bare minimum required in the circumstances—then it is as certain that an answer will be there on the floor (unless, of course, he has one of those old-fashioned wire cages in which anything but the very smallest envelope gets jammed) as that tomorrow's sun—if perhaps not visibly in this isle—will rise.

At first sight this may appear to be the reverse of the treatment which was so successful with the British transport system. There you are recommended to fidget and twitch; while with the post you are advised at least to affect an appearance of calm. But I can explain this. There is no real contradiction. In each and, indeed, every case it should be your aim to surprise Providence more than Providence

can surprise you. With the train you became rampant, so that it could ask what all the fuss was about. With the post you are, ostensibly, so serene that it is piqued into delivering the goods. It is all a matter of experience, to which I trust some of these remarks may assist you. But, above all, don't hedge. It will see through that. And when it is piqued in the wrong way, it's a brute.

For this reason it may be well to vary the treatment, lest it should come to suspect what you're at. Keep it guessing. Ring the changes, occasionally, between apathy and despair, so that the system remains your own secret. Or try assurance, if you like, just once in a way. I have known this to startle it, too. It is practice that does it. But don't get in a rut. And beware of another old trick.

This is known as the Double Surprise. Suppose, for example, that a tooth starts to ache, in the lower, left side of your jaw. This is annoying, since not only do you go regularly to the dentist, but have just sent him another large cheque. Your first impulse, therefore, is to clap on medicaments, swig brandy (if you can get any) around in your mouth, and perhaps take a couple of aspirins. The pain subsides. In your relief—that is to say, unless you are almost inhuman—you smile and feel cheerful again.

But Providence notes this. The pain suddenly returns. There seems no choice now but to ring up the dentist. You do this. He will see you on Thursday afternoon. Within an hour—and of course this is Providence again—all trace of discomfort has gone.

You are in a fix now, and Providence knows it. If you cancel the appointment, there can be no question that the pain will come back. If you don't, there is a grave risk of the drill. What are you to do? Cross your fingers, of course, and spend the interval before the appointment in tackling your tormentor. You tell yourself, and anyone else who will listen, that you know you've got an inflamed periosteum and will probably have to go into a nursing-home. Though there is still no pain, you pile this on, so that Providence may fall into the trap. For though you know perfectly well that it likes you to suffer, it is even keener on proving you wrong.

So you keep the appointment, unless you are of immense moral stature. You point to the tooth. The dentist examines it. He prods it. He applies a virtually red-hot instrument to it. He attacks it with a jet of cold air. Still no pain. "Well," he announces, "there's no trouble here. Possibly you had a little touch of neuralgia."

Aha! You've won. You've earned this, by George, as a result of all the fuss you have made. But you can relax now, and you do. In fact, you are on the point of rising from the Chair, feeling ten years younger, when he suddenly adds: "Just a moment. T't-t't. What's this?"

And, bless your soul, he's got his probe into a tooth on the top, right-hand side, and is apparently smack on the nerve. Too late,

as you writhe and groan during the next half-hour, you are aware that you have been baffled again. You have allowed for A, which was the extraction or repair of the original tooth. You have secretly counted on B, which was that he should find nothing at all. But you had forgotten C, or the alternative tooth, and have played straight into those pitiless hands.

To escape the Double Surprise, in fact—which is by no means confined to teeth—you would require to spend so much of your time in forestalling the worst as to have little left for the enjoyment of life. That's why I don't really recommend it; and why, if I did, you should reject such advice. No, in this rough, hard world it should be enough for you to meet Providence more or less face to face, without bothering about what it does from behind. I repeat, keep it guessing, and you *may* keep it too busy. But if not, you will have at least done your best.

And that is all, really. I hope you will find it helpful. Of course, if Providence can read—and I am rather afraid it can—and if it lights on this chapter, I am now in for more trouble myself. I may, indeed, have to devise an entirely fresh system, so as to cope with a Power on its guard. I shan't give up, though. I have known it too long to believe that it still can't be fooled. Inevitably, this will have to be a much more elaborate scheme, involving a great deal of care. I must be prepared, no doubt, for the Triple Surprise, of which, indeed, I have seen signs now and then. Yet it will be worth it, perhaps, if I add to my knowledge; even though it may be reckless to reveal what I learn.

No, I think, considering everything, that I have now said enough about Providence. Unless I add one, last, obvious saw. Never, in any circumstances, after the age of six, let the thought cross your mind: I am happy. Stifle it at once. Slam it down. Cast it out. For Providence, being a thought-reader, will react without fail; and this phrase is as a red rag to a bull. How do I know? By experience, of course. And so should you. But until six—not that it isn't watching and waiting—you are perfectly safe. If you're happy, you're happy. Like Adam and Eve. Until the first time you use those rash words.

PILGRIM'S PRICE-LIST

WHAT is the first thing you can remember?

Of course one only asks this question so as to be able to relate one's own earliest memory. Except, in fact, when it is put by characters in that stage of infatuation where they are fascinated even to learn that another human being once broke a tooth-glass—which intelligence is received with a coo of sympathy and a belated though consolatory embrace—there can be no record, I should say, of anyone listening to the answer. From the very moment, in more normal circumstances, that this subject crops up, the mind turns inward. The ears cease to function. The whole soul is absorbed in itself. What could possibly be more interesting than *our* distant past? Or duller than anyone else's?

It is slightly different with a book. A reader can skip, of course, but he is powerless to interrupt. Should a writer be considerate, then, and not tempt him to skip? Why? How often has the writer, in his own alternative capacity, opened a volume of memoirs, and come almost at once on a passage like this:

“The first thing that I can remember, as a tiny child, is the sound of rooks in our old garden, and my mother's face as she bent over me in a large, floppy, picture-hat. I cannot have been more than two at the time, but the scene is as clear. . . .”

And so on. Who cares? Who cares, even, whether it was the mother or the child, in this instance, who was wearing the hat? It's as dull as that next bit about those ancestors “who can be traced back to Yorkshire.” For we have all had ancestors, somewhere or other, or we shouldn't be here. And unless we're idiots, there must be some scene or other which is the first that we can recall. In fact, the best place to begin most autobiographies is the second chapter—even if you never quite know who Maisie and Chinkums are—for there is more chance of a little variety then. I generally do this myself, and recommend it to others. You will seldom find that you have missed very much.

Nevertheless, as a writer I take quite a different view. Not only, of course, are my own first chapters indispensable to your enjoyment, but my own past is of course infinitely important. Indeed, if only I could be quite sure whether my first memory is of yelling because I had earache or yelling because (as remedy for another malaise) I was being given a blanket bath, nothing could stop me relating the incident in full. As things are, however, you are safe.

I am too honest to make a claim that I cannot possibly substantiate; so that, though I know perfectly well that it was either one or the other, you will be spared all description of both.

But a little later—from the age of three, or thereabouts—there is a whole flood of memories. Suddenly, from this point, the mist seems to clear. There is scene after scene in my mind. Some I have told you. Others I have suppressed; either from artistry or because of the figure I cut. But they are there in a crowd, and a strangely bright light; more vivid than shines on me now. For though much of what happens today seems a dream—or occasionally a nightmare—there was no doubt of reality then. That, I dare say, is what makes them so clear; whereas now much grows misty again. How stupid I used to think grown-up people were when they withdrew their attention from my incessant questioning, and relapsed into thoughts of their own. But I am sorry for them now. I have learnt what it means to have been inside the same framework so long.

What next, then, shall I recall? Since you, too, have had a glimpse of the nursery, of the night-nursery, of the stairs, of the little hall, and of the back dining-room, let us enter the drawing-room—on the other side of the same little hall—and see what can be conjured up there. It was an L-shaped room, with a window at the broader end, looking over the street; with another window, still in the broader part, looking out into the garden; and at the far end of the narrower section, there had once—though I should doubt if originally—been french windows, also opening on to the garden, though by the time that I had acquired powers of observation, these had been replaced by a more contemporary design. In other words, you could no longer step straight from the back drawing-room on to the gravel and long lawn beyond, but must emerge through a door, past the stairs, at the back of the hall. Warmer, no doubt, without the french windows; and the contemporary design, as I am now aware, was of singular charm. Its creator was a tall, silent, good-looking architect—and wood- and metal-worker as well—who had done so much for my grandparents' house at the seaside; and, if it comes to that, was responsible for the window facing a white-washed wall, through which I gazed when I lunched out in a landau.

Furthermore, he had designed the oil-lamps with which this drawing-room was lit; for there were no gas-burners here. I can remember this, of course, because of the children's hour, after tea, which would be my second appearance in this room; the first—until my lessons began, which for some reason were generally conducted in the dining-room—being in the morning, before we went out. In those days a door-handle was well above the height of my head. But my sister could turn it, if no adult obliged, and thus we could both make our entrance.

There was a red carpet. There were bull's-eyes—not the sweets, but the glass circles with a kind of knob in the centre—in the lower sash overlooking the street. There was a projecting bookcase, with shelves on each side, round which I must pass before I could see further. But then there was the whole prospect. Chairs, pictures, a sofa; a green, upright piano; rugs on the red carpet; a harpsichord—if this was more unusual in a drawing-room, it didn't seem so to me; and a white writing-desk, another example of the same architect's taste and ingenuity, at which my mother would in all likelihood be seated. Answering letters, perhaps. Or, if not quite as often as memory suggests, engaged in composing yet another order, on its own special forms, with the distinctly fascinating addition of carbon-paper, for the Army and Navy Co-operative Society, Limited.

Yes, that is what comes rushing at me, from the past, as I again think of the drawing-room. The yellowish paper, with a tendency to curl up. And the fat, red volume—though its pages were much smaller then—which not only enabled her to summon, by means of a horse and green van, most of the supplies that supported us, but was also, even before I could read, one of my favourite books. For it was copiously illustrated. It was, indeed, of remarkable educational value. Nor was this all; for as each issue appeared, it was my father's custom to amend, alter, and improve some of the innumerable engravings, so that it became imaginative and fantastic as well.

He would add faces, for example, to articles ordinarily lacking all features. Or where there were faces already, as in some of the fashion designs, he would transform them into more pleasing grotesques. I particularly recall a picture of a coachman on a box—its purpose, as I now suppose, being to display his waterproof coat. But the original artist, having indicated the horse's hindquarters, had stopped at this point. So my father—a scholar, a poet, and a Civil Servant—would add the rest of the animal; in the form of a dolphin, a dragon, or bird. Thus, silently, also, he amused himself. And his family, of course. So that for one of them, at any rate, the Stores (as it was always called) wasn't only mysterious but a little fabulous, too.

The Stores. Yes, that dates it. The words, in those days and in London—if not, indeed, throughout the British Empire—had only one meaning. Cheques might be long-windedly made out to the Army and Navy Co-operative Society, Limited, but of course no one spoke of it as that. It was the Stores. An ugly building in a hideous street, as yet without a single shop-window. A kind of Club, to which it was a distinction to belong—do you remember the coachman in *Punch* who was given a cockade (another sign of distinction then) because his employer had become a member?—and at first,

so I believe, only soldiers and sailors might join it. The rest of the nation were outcasts. They might hear of its cheapness, efficiency, and vast range of goods. But if, in ignorance, they should attempt to make a purchase themselves, they would meet with a fearful rebuff.

"And your ticket-number, sir?" the assistant would ask. By the way, he would be wearing a small tricolour rosette, though with no trace of revolutionary ardour. And if you hadn't got a ticket-number—or, in other words, hadn't been elected to the Society—the next scene would be like the expulsion from Eden. You were damned, as you shrivelled, and shrank, and withdrew. You probably emigrated, soon afterwards, to New Zealand.

Even my father, though a Civil Servant, couldn't have joined at one time. But in the 'nineties there was a slight relaxation. The original utter exclusiveness was perhaps defeating its own ends. The franchise, as elsewhere, was extended. And as *his* father, in turn, had once been an Army Chaplain—this, so far as I am aware, accounts for the only military blood in my veins—he was graciously allowed to enrol. He was permitted, that is to say, to buy one or more shares. He was granted a ticket-number—which I shall probably remember when I have forgotten everything else—and sent a catalogue, and a supply of those forms.

His wife began ordering groceries and other goods—still on a scale, because it was the custom, which would now result in a prosecution for hoarding. The catalogue, and the Stores—and its mystic partner, the Auxiliary Stores—became part of my background, though I still hadn't been there myself. But I wasn't proud. Even that joke in *Punch*—for some reason we possessed bound volumes for the years 1885 to 1890, which in consequence is the period on which I am still best informed—went right over my head. Nor was I aware that, as the mere grandson of a former Army Chaplain, I was personally ineligible for a great social honour.

I just watched my mother ordering sugar and soap. I just absorbed that miraculous number. Or I just sprawled on the red carpet, poring over the Stores-List; which I regarded—even apart from my father's talented additions—as one of the best picture-books in the house.

Yet, as was inevitable, things began changing. Not only had other, rival, and, as I loyally assumed, inferior Co-operative Societies sprung up, and developed the game. But some of the big shops—and particularly, at this period, that of Mr. William Whiteley, who now described himself, if a little shamelessly, as the Universal Provider—were expanding, and cutting prices, as they could do on that scale; until even the Army & Navy began feeling the draught. Things were becoming as cheap now for the outcasts as for the upper and middle-class co-operators; even

though the profits were kept out of their reach. There was competition. And though it might be a satisfaction to have a ticket-number when other people hadn't, if you weren't saving money it might dawn on you that Victoria Street—or the headquarters of whatever Society you had joined—was quite a long distance away. Besides, the Department Stores—though not yet known by this name—had displays in their windows, which everyone likes, and more showmanship, again, when you were inside.

Almost the only advantage, in fact, that the Societies could now provide, was a rather doubtful sense of superiority. It wasn't enough. One by one, they must either let down some of their bars or see customers going elsewhere. The co-operative movement on a lower range would still grow until it became a political force. But class-consciousness had become a peril, except for one class. And with it they weren't suited to deal.

So some of the societies became ordinary shops to which anyone was admitted, and thus managed to survive. Others, seeking to be equally adaptable, somehow failed, and have now passed from the scene. While the Army & Navy—the greatest of all—first relaxed its own laws, and continued to relax them, until membership virtually became available to the whole Human Race; and then—what a fall, in a sense, was there!—developed ordinary shop windows, which were as good as an invitation to the same Race to walk in. It did more than this. About half-way between the two wars, and though still technically co-operative where its old members were concerned, it suddenly sent me a celluloid ticket. I was now, or so it appeared, an honorary member myself, though I never learnt who, if anyone, had nominated me. And though I had been quietly making use of my father's number, whenever I wished, since reaching years of discretion, I now had a number myself.

This was rather thrilling. I couldn't pretend that it was due either to my eminence or importance. I knew well enough, for all the dignity of the accompanying communication, that it was my custom that the Society sought. But then there was the link with my extreme youth, which was in the days of its glory. I remembered. I looked back. I became violently sentimental. Even though I never quite reached the point where I could admire its architectural features.

Yet I was uplifted. My inner stature increased. I have also had the ticket in my note-case—or, to be more accurate, in a series of note-cases—from that day to this; though I can't say that I have bought very much. Well, it is rather off my beat. And my wife—who does most of the shopping—doesn't often find herself in Victoria Street, either. But of course I should be miserable if my ticket were cancelled; for to me it means Auld Lang Syne.

Furthermore, and though I had to ask for it, and though they never sent me another one, I still have the concomitant Price-List. Bound in red, as of yore. With larger pages, as I have said, than the dumpier volume at which I gazed in my nursery days. But though I doubt whether I, or anyone else, could now bear to be reminded of what things cost in the 'nineties—so that it is just as well, perhaps, that I don't own one of those earlier examples—this List, which is still less than twenty years old, has become a most cherished possession.

It is painful, too, of course. Partly, once more, because of what things cost now. And partly, I must admit, because of its survival. For when I glance at it—the cover is a bit mottled now, by the way, owing to its use during the second of the two wars for keeping window-curtains together, so that it has suffered to some extent from the rain; when I glance at it, I repeat, I can hardly help thinking of the more valuable books that I have lost. Enemy action, Government action, and removals, have all had their effect on my library. Yet somehow—either because I took so little care of it, or because Fate was under the impression that it was worthless—my Stores-List is still on a shelf.

So I think I shall take it down now. Whether this is masochism or not, or, again, whether it is brutality to my readers or not, I propose to dip here and there—unless nature rebels—and to see what could be bought at that date. Necessarily, because I haven't got one of the dumpy volumes, I must spare you the more extreme contrast. Yet 1929, I should say, will be quite pungent enough; if, in fact, it is pungency that I am after.

Or perhaps I had better find a duster first. There! Well, strictly speaking it isn't so much a duster as a fragment of black-out material formerly attached to the above-mentioned window-curtains. Yet it has removed most of the dust. I have sneezed. I have recovered. And my first dip is into the Tobacco Department.

Let me see, now. What was it that I used to smoke then myself? Ah, yes. Here it is. A Navy Mixture, at 16s. 8d. a pound. You can't get it now; and when I last found some, it had lost all its flavour. But what I *can* get now, if I turn up with an old tin, is an inferior brand for which I have to fork out four shillings an ounce. What price Victory? And, oh, dear, look at all those pipes on the next page. Look at the prices. Look at the variety. And then—though as a matter of fact only I can do this—look at the collection of charred chunks of wood with which I now have to practise this vice. All but one are pre-war—no doubt this helps to explain why I don't feel very well sometimes—but as the exception (which cost nearly twice as much) split open the third time I used it, it seems best to go on as I am. A bad habit? Of course. But I shan't quite give it up; though we now leave the tobacco department.

I flip some more pages. Wines. Turnery. Ironmongery. This

hurts a bit, you know. I see their gin was eleven shillings a bottle—incidentally, and though I was too young to take advantage of this, you could have got it for half-a-crown even after the Boer War; so that for what one pays now one could have bought twelve bottles and had quite a party. Happy days. And, oh, *look* at all the pictures of the things with which I ought to have stocked up. And didn't. And couldn't buy now even if I tried.

No, I don't mean that repoussé jardinière (antique brass finish) at 6s. 9d. The fact is that I can do without it. Though if I couldn't, I should now have to search through the second-hand shops, and eventually—though, oddly enough, if I were trying to sell one I should be informed that it was quite valueless—pay two or three pounds.

Barrack and Camp Equipment. Well, no; I don't want that. Saddlery? Not today, thank you. Building Materials? Don't make me laugh. Three Ministries, at least, have put a stop to all that. It is now a crime even to paint one's own door.

Electrical Department. Another good joke; that is to say, if one has a taste for the macabre. Stationery. But you mustn't talk to an author about paper. Not with all his old books out of print. Let's turn over quickly; for though these illustrations, in a way, are now like some ghostly museum, and though again some of the objects can never have been of very much use, the sense of period is overwhelming. It was so near. It is so far. What have we gained?

Here comes Drapery. Well, no; that was never much in my line. Essential, of course. Non-existent today. But I'm lucky. For though I use a dust-sheet as a counterpane—that's to say, when it isn't being used for a table-cloth—I still have two sheets that aren't darned. Or I had, three or four weeks ago, when they last went to the laundry.

Hullo! Gentlemen's Outfitting. That's more like it. Of course, there aren't any gentlemen now—only Workers, and Tory Plotters, and Spivs—but they still all wear clothes. Well, in 1929 you paid 3s. 6d. for a pair of cashmere socks—the last pair I bought were made of wood-pulp, I think, cost 7s. 11d., and most of the dye was transferred from their feet to my own the first time I wore them—and could have a suit made to measure, or fifty suits if you chose, for a charge of £6 7s. 6d. An overcoat, also made to measure, was five guineas. An acquaintance of mine—I am expecting to hear of the poor fellow's bankruptcy at any moment—bought a suit and an overcoat about six months ago, and had no change out of fifty pounds. Well, in theory that is. For he hasn't got them yet. Though the State has got most of the money. Meanwhile, since—like the rest of us—he is continuing to lose weight, the garments, even if he secures them, won't fit him. What fun!

"Butler's Dress Suit." "Footman's Livery Coatee." "Parlourman's Suit." Good heavens!

And here are the ready-made outfits. A different artist has been employed; and either he couldn't draw so well, or else he was deliberately trying to push the more expensive attire. But the text doesn't say so. It describes the suits as "avoiding the extreme while conforming to fashion's dictates"; and if this was good enough for you, you paid £4 15s. od. Less, of course—what about the Fifty-Shilling Tailors?—if you took your money and custom elsewhere.

China and Glass. This is becoming fantastic. "The China," says the text again, "includes large selections of Royal Worcester, Minton, Cauldon, Crown Derby, Doulton, Wedgwood, Coalport, etc." A full Dinner Service, you are reminded, contains 105 pieces. They were there. They were real. They could be bought. Cups had handles; and saucers, as well. You could get a dozen for 8s. 3d.; and break them; and get a dozen more. It's amazing. Or you could get a dozen tumblers—made of transparent glass—for 2s. 6d. What on earth can they have cost—one feels quite giddy—before 1914?

Trunks, Suitcases, etc. Here is a picture of an Indian—at least he seems very dark and is wearing a loin-cloth and a turban—balancing a portmanteau on his head and carrying a couple of hat boxes. Members patronising the branches at Esplanade Road, Bombay, or 41, Chowringhee, Calcutta, were quite used to this sight, I suppose. They're not now, though. The Indians are all stabbing each other, and the Members are clearing out. If they have any luggage, they are carrying it themselves.

Toys. No, I mustn't rub it in. Books. Nor must you; or I shall be reminded of my extinct masterpieces again. But here is something for my female readers—God bless them. A handbag, such as they go trotting around with, of Morocco leather, lined Moirette, with a strap, an inner purse, and a mirror. Fourteen shillings. Any offers? No, I'm sorry, my dears. They've all gone. You must get back in the queue.

And so, through Cameras (do you remember how people with quite moderate incomes could once afford them?), Agricultural Requisites (which even farmers can't get now), Furniture (hardly beautiful in this volume, but at least obtainable, and you could buy a bed for a guinea), Pianos (perhaps you remember these, too) and Gravestones (for even Members were mortal, but there was no permit required), we pass to the Zoological Department, which concludes this great work.

Here, also, there is a rather charming illustration. On the last page of all there is a drawing of eight dogs—including a Peke, I am glad to see—two cats, a rabbit, and about half a dozen birds, all, apparently, on the very friendliest terms. They have formed themselves into a group. They look sleek and well-fed. There is no

hint in their expressions that they would dream of eating each other. It is a scene in Paradise. They are at peace, and without fear.

And so were we, in the year 1929; though there had been a warning—and perhaps rather more than a warning—of what would happen if we began fighting again. Yet there is far more difference, to look at, between a collie and a bulldog than between any two Europeans; or even than between a European and an Asiatic. Not much difference, either, under their respective skins. They only want to be fed, and to have a home.

But they—I am not speaking of the dogs, cats, rabbits, or birds now, who have far too much sense—form themselves into nations; or discovering, after they are here, that they belong to one, accept this not as an absurdity and in any individual case a mere accident, but as an unalterable and even admirable fact. Idiots! Of course it's nothing of the kind. The only unalterable fact, and there is nothing the least admirable about it, is that this system means far too much power at the top—whether the nation happens to describe itself as a democracy or anything else—and then fear, war, starvation, and ruin.

Well, well. You were given a brain. Think it out for yourself. Look back; or ahead, if you dare. Meanwhile, it is now time for me to close my rather rain-spotted Stores-List, and to shove it back in its place on the shelf. Yet there is a moral, as I have suddenly observed, even on the cover, before I put it away. For the words "Army & Navy" are much larger—and I don't think they should be—than the far more important words "Co-operative Society." While as for "General Price-List"—good heavens, is there a people on earth that can still really afford to have Generals?

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UNCLE

BUT the indefinite article is misleading. By some freak of circumstance—and more freakish then than now—I was born with only one uncle, and too late, already, for there to be any prospect of developing another. He was a bachelor; and though it was by no means too late for this to be altered, it never was. He remained singular. He failed to supply me with an aunt. And as the sole aunt whom I possessed, on the other side of the family, died childless when I was so young that I can only just remember her, not only must I dispense permanently with first cousins, but the knight's move in relationship (if you see what I mean) was involved solely with this one character or figure.

If it comes to that—it is in fact implicit, perhaps—I was his only nephew; though my two sisters were his nieces, of course. So there was, as one might say, a concentration of the connection. But though there was no one with whom to compare him—and this would have been true, very likely, if I had had a dozen uncles, since he was indeed unique—I doubt if I could have done better, and am no less sure that I could have done very much worse. Avuncularity, though there were many sides to him, was his forte. If I didn't know this, owing to absence of comparison, when first able to distinguish him, and even for some time afterwards, I would stake my soul on it now.

He was also devoted to my mother—his own solitary sister, as may be implicit, too—which at first I took rather for granted; though later, not that she didn't deserve his affection, I became more aware of its remarkable depth. It was lifelong. It was unshakable. Yet as I also became conscious, at a more observant phase, though they shared much, there were chasms as well. Of temperament, I mean. Of action and belief. Never of anything, though their two outlooks at times were as far apart as the poles, that could possibly weaken the bond.

This was admirable. As an observer, again, I could detect likenesses and sympathies, or odd moments when they appeared to exchange characteristics, which it is conceivable that they may not have noticed themselves. But this was an impression. It was perhaps fallacious. Or too subjective once more, because we all shared a number of genes. The point, and a very mysterious point it is, was that they were a brother and sister. They might have quarrelled, though they never did. But they still must always be linked by the past.

As my uncle was violently sentimental—so much so that he must often mock it in others, lest he himself should burst into tears—this past never left him alone. My mother—sentimental, too, as we all are, but with more effective control—was still and always, I should say, the little girl with whom he had played in his own childhood. The little girl whom he had made laugh, for this was one of his great gifts; and who was always good—but he was quite right here—though he had been rebellious or unhappy himself. For unhappiness was another of his great gifts, though I never guessed this when I first knew him. Or if not a gift, for perhaps that sounds cruel, then an irremovable curse.

He was one of those who would say, a little provocatively where it might provoke, that everyone gets what he wants. This is, of course, true and untrue. It has been said before, and since. Or there is another version: Take what you like—and then pay for it. Yet his own case was confusing. He got an astonishing number of things from life—though some might have seemed of little value to others—and in the long run paid heavily, too. But much, also, that he wanted must for ever elude him. And again, which was as much a part of him as those urgent and frequently exorbitant requirements, there was his ineradicable and almost unparalleled generosity. You have perhaps gathered by now that he was a little complex.

If so, you are correct. Nor could I hope to provide a list of all the facets; which were myriad, and shifting, and overlapped. Yet if one could leave the generosity out of it for a moment, which isn't really possible, there were, I should say, two main sides. On one, to put it bluntly, it was his ambition to be a buck; to rub shoulders with the mighty—though again an onlooker might have said that he couldn't always discriminate between the real thing and the very poorest imitation; to be seen in the right places, wherever they were; and to cut a dash as an experienced spark. On the other it was his desire to be taken seriously as a painter—which in fact and in the middle of everything else was his profession—and to reach the heights in this region, too. It is perhaps hardly surprising, though he had no mean talent, that he was more successful in the first of these aims. They would take a lot of combining. It is fairly clear, though at times there was quite a struggle between them, which was likely to prevail. Besides, this wasn't all. Being a spark was a kind of protest and reaction against the entire absence of anything of this nature in his first background. He was the pendulum, which swung far. It was release—simple and always about to be entirely satisfactory—for an overcharged ego.

But to be a painter, with the same hope of satisfaction, it wouldn't only have been necessary, which was impossible, to stop being a spark. There was the comparison, in this line, both for himself and for others, with the achievements and fame of his father. It is almost

a law that no son can inherit it all, though my uncle inherited much. Not enough, though, for ambition. Great gifts, but no genius. Or if it was there, and on second thoughts I am not at all sure that it wasn't in a way, it could never be kept to one channel.

So though he wanted to become a painter, and became a painter, and sold pictures—notwithstanding the fact that the other part of him insisted on setting a very high price on them—and continued to paint, and painted well enough—not, again, that there was any trace of reluctance here—for the same father to be proud of him, always there must be the sense of comparison and disappointment. Not of jealousy. Don't misunderstand me. Love, alone, put that out of the question. Yet it would have been strange indeed, even apart from his split nature, if one family could have produced two great artists so soon; or if the world could have believed that it had.

But I knew nothing of all this at the outset. I had a grandfather who painted in one studio—or, to be more accurate, in four studios, for he had one in his London home (where I so restlessly posed for him), a second at the end of his long garden, a third at the seaside, and a fourth, just at the last, half a mile from the first two, where he was engaged on a picture that was too big for them—and an uncle who painted in another. They were both extravagantly kind to me. But though one—yes, I was aware of this—seemed to work harder and longer than the other, no comparison had yet entered my head.

Or none, that is to say, of their respective success in the career that they had both taken up. In fact, I didn't think of it as a career. I wasn't on to that word. Yet each stood for something apart. My grandfather was older, and had a beard, and a deep voice, and his kindness was something one felt. My uncle was younger, and only possessed a moustache. He was more mercurial, and dashing, and gay. His kindness was more spectacular—no one else ever gave me such Christmas or birthday presents, or later was more lavish with tips. He was funnier, too, or so I thought at the time; though in fact this was an inheritance, too.

Nor, of course, did it occur to me, at this sort of phase, whence the source of his generosity came. Again, if it had been put to me—but it wasn't—that a choice must be made, it wasn't only piety that would have selected my grandfather. You see, he was unique, too. Even a child could feel that. But there was something deeper, wiser, more steadfast, and more utterly to be relied on. Even if I hadn't drawn some of this knowledge from what I was told, I should have soon found it out for myself.

But all this isn't the point. My uncle, though outshone and overshadowed until the end, was anything but a mere candle himself. He glittered. He blazed. Against a slight sense of disapproval—for though incapable of rubbing the bloom from a child, he couldn't

always control an impishness, sometimes verging on the defiant, with their elders—he told stories, and cracked jokes, and brought tricks out of his pockets, or extra presents when it was neither Christmas nor a birthday; or—like his father again—took a sheet of paper, and a pencil, and began drawing. He was an enchanting phenomenon for the very young. Even though it has been suggested that it is easier for bachelors to like children, because they find it easier to get away from them, he *did* like them. And they knew it. And liked him.

The little drawings tended to brisk, bright caricature rather than to the exquisite workmanship—not that this didn't sometimes drift into caricature, too—from my grandfather's pencil. But again any child could see that they were funny, so that there was more laughter whenever he came. He did this, invariably, in a hansom-cab, and as eternally left in the same manner. I therefore formed the opinion that he was immensely rich—and if anyone thinks that children don't admire this, too, then they don't know much about children. As a matter of fact, he wasn't. Yet the best, as he would say himself, was never too good for him; and somehow—this confirmed his other theory, of course—he generally managed to get it. That is to say, in so far as the best may be judged by its cost.

It is rather a mystery to me why, with this love of extravagance which he never attempted to quell, he should have remained solvent to the end of his days. According to all tradition, in stories and life, he should have landed in quite a fine mess. But he didn't; or not in that sense. It is true, of course, that it was a cheaper age. But there was a streak of caution somewhere, I suppose, under the surface. Just as, every now and then, there was a taste for simplicity, too. At one moment he would be at Monte Carlo, perhaps—which has never been cheap—from which he would return once more laden with gifts. But then there might be a spell when he stayed quietly at home, and read books, and subsisted on chops. Yet this wasn't conscious or laboured economy, which he would have scorned. It was just that it was time for another side to turn up.

In my youth there was a paradise in rather a queer spot, which is to say between the tracks of a number of railways. It was called the Earl's Court Exhibition, and provided a variety of entertainment such as today seems to have passed from this earth. The whole place, or so I thought, was so thrilling that even when I passed a big, coloured advertisement of it on the hoardings, my heart would begin beating a bit faster. But it cost a shilling to get in. It cost sixpence to enter each side-show. This was beyond me. It was also out of the question, of course, that I should go by myself. But my uncle understood, and never failed as each summer came round.

Fresh evidence of his wealth. My sister and I could go anywhere we liked, and as often as we liked. I have never known such a

bountiful host. Money poured from him, at turnstile after turnstile. We were given tea. We were given ices. Finally, almost surfeited with enjoyment—and that took a good deal in those days—we were taken home, as we had been fetched, in another jingling hansom-cab. What an uncle!

Or we were with our grandmother at the seaside. Suddenly he was there, too—with some presents, I expect—and the whole tone of the visit was changed. Walks, which, to tell the truth, can be a penance when one would prefer to lie on a lawn reading about Sherlock Holmes, became wildly exciting. For my uncle—no great walker himself, but inspired, as I now see, by affection—came with us. And either he made us scream with laughter—one of his methods was to start talking to some unknown downsman in the character of an old-fashioned squire, but if the downsman was at all puzzled, this, too, was made well worth his while—or he would halt abruptly, and point at the top of a gate or low wall.

“Hullo!” he would say. “Look there. What’s that?” And, sure enough, it was at least a shilling, if not, indeed, another half-crown. After this had happened repeatedly—“Findings,” said my uncle, “are keepings,” and they were—it did at last dawn on me that it was he who must have planted these spoils. Was I corrupted? Just a little, perhaps; for I still certainly hoped that there would be more. But then there was about as much chance of stopping my uncle from corrupting people—never, except about once in a thousand times, when even he suddenly suspected presumption, could he resist the touched cap or flat palm—as of checking the course of the tides. If this were a fault, there is a worse one. He couldn’t have been mean if he had tried.

Do you remember, I wonder, the year when a popular penny weekly had its great buried-treasure hunt—clues supplied in a serial story—and all similar periodicals at once started the same thing, until it was forbidden because people were digging up the whole country? Well, never mind. This took place. And my uncle, not to be outdone, buried a treasure in my grandmother’s garden, and wrote his own, special story. As I recall things, my sister—this was either feminine intuition or superior intelligence—went straight to the right spot while I was still puzzling over the text. Disappointing? Well, just a little for myself; and for my uncle, perhaps. But then of course—need I tell you this now?—there was a second prize, too.

Something else I recall. He took us one day—in a fly; never a bus for him—for a jaunt or expedition to the big neighbouring Town. We saw its Aquarium. We had lunch at the finest hotel—my first introduction to *hors d’oeuvre*, by which I was baffled completely. Then we went on the pier. At the far end—after he had poured forth pennies for the automatic machines—we came to a pavilion

which was also a theatre. Imagine it—though this should be easy, for it is still there. A theatre over the sea! And people were thronging towards it.

I lost my head. Over-stimulated by the Aquarium, the Hotel, and now this fresh excitement, I said: "Oh, can't we go in?" It is quite possible—I shall never know this—that it had been in my uncle's mind to take us anyhow. Moreover, he did take us, at once, and to the best seats. But something had flickered, for a moment, across his face. My conscience awoke. I knew, too late, that it was shocking and disgraceful to have asked. And though the play was a farce, so that presently I was laughing—notwithstanding that when the characters talked about shares, in the Stock Exchange sense, I thought they were talking about chairs—below the surface I was still tingling with shame. Even today I feel uncomfortable when I think of it. It was a lesson, of course; not only in manners, but in the knife-edge division between rapture and almost utter despair. I was very quiet on the way back—though able to deny that I was feeling sick—and gradually, up to a point, I recovered.

My poor uncle. If I could have told him, he would have been the first, with his own appalling sensibility, to sympathise and to understand. But I couldn't. I never did. It remained bottled up. And I continued to suffer alone.

Meanwhile, I was growing older—though I couldn't help this, of course—and he, too, was beginning to change. Never less generous; never less ready with any help that he could give. But in any case he could stand things from the very young that might exasperate him in other cases; and, besides this, he was getting older himself. For all I know, the intense nervous irritability which he fought but could never defeat may have been there even at an earlier phase. But, if so, it had been hidden. I remember my astonishment when I was told—though the signs should have been clear enough—that he didn't like it when I was rowdy, or even noisy.

Was this my uncle? Alas, it was; and had been for some time; and would remain for the rest of his days. The kindness, though it broke out often enough, must struggle henceforth to escape past those jangling bars. The situation would be less painful, perhaps, if he always had his own way; so that when he was kind, it must be on his terms. A sudden, hospitable, and of course lavish invitation would reach me. If I could accept, well and good; unless meanwhile he had taken a turn for the worse. But if I couldn't—and even I, as I grew up, might be pledged to some other engagement—then it was exactly as if I had been deliberately rude.

"Oh," he would say, and slam down the telephone receiver. I suffered again. So did he. Remorse overtook him—he was a specialist in remorse—and in the morning, almost certainly, there would be a long, funny letter, full of swift illustrations, though with no allusion

to the flare-up, as a sign of forgiveness exchanged. This was because I was his nephew, and it was unthinkable that there should ever really be coolness. But with others it was a less simple affair.

He made friends, rapidly, violently, and again, as it might sometimes seem to an observer, with the very minimum of discrimination. Abruptly one became aware of a new name on his lips; of a new character from whom he could hardly be parted. It seemed tactful to accept this, to express interest, and even, when one saw him again, to ask for more news. But it could be dangerous too. He didn't only quarrel with some of his older friends, and so passionately that no letter, even of direct apology and with copious illustrations, could restore things again; but with the mushroom friends, as one might call them, there were still more blazing rows. Their names mustn't be mentioned. I didn't know this, and mentioned them. Agony. And he wasn't blind—that was part of his torment. He knew just what he was like.

Let's go back to the letters. Roughly speaking, nobody writes them now. There's no time. It is another lost art. But my uncle was a tremendous correspondent, whether at home or abroad, covering page after page with jokes, and descriptions, and pictures. Laughing at himself, too. He was in an hotel, perhaps, where a dog kept him awake—I am afraid he wasn't very keen on dogs, not that anyone likes them to bark all night, and used to spend much of his time in the defence of his own bit of pavement—or a crowing cock, or a neighbour who snored. One knew well enough that on the scene itself he was making as much fuss as he could. But no letter revealed this. They were the communications of a humorist and philosopher who saw the absurdity of the whole thing. And could he have written like this if he were neither?

On the contrary, he was both—in some ways, despite his superficial impatience, he was even a stoic philosopher—and his pen knew it. Imaginary portrait of the stertorous guest next door. Funny. No venom. His spirit could still smile. It was only his nerves that gave him less and less peace.

I wonder how much, altogether, he spent on those doctors. They weren't cheap, for again he must have the best, and never counted the cost. Thousands of pounds? I shouldn't be surprised. But they could none of them cure him. Eternally he would be hearing of a new one, cutting loose from an old one, hurling himself into some fresh form of treatment, bearing it manfully, even announcing his recovery; and then collapsing—before starting again. What was wrong? I don't know. How had it begun? I can't say. But he never lost courage; or hope.

At the call of pleasure, or what he conceived to be pleasure—or, again, in some access of hospitality—he would rise, dress up, go forth, and be the life and soul of another party. But the next

news, soon and sure enough, was of reaction. I would go and see him. He was in bed—in a bedroom which for some reason was the negation of his trained taste elsewhere—prostrate, apparently done for. Or was he? Suddenly it might occur to him to get up again, and take me out to his newest, pet restaurant—where there was yet a strong chance of his having an ashen-faced row with the waiter, before over-tipping him—and even on to a play. Or if not, he might fumble for the cheque-book on his bedside table, and tip me instead. Impossible, though I was by this time quite solvent, to refuse it. Dark umbrage would have been the instant effect.

That reminds me how I once made a *mot*. It was his conviction, in certain moods, that it was other people who were always taking offence. In my family circle, at an epoch when I was still fairly young, he enlarged on the point. Finally he affirmed that the only hope of avoiding offence was not to be born. I saw a flaw here. "But then," I said, truly enough, as it seemed, "you'd offend your mother." For a second he looked startled, as everyone laughed. And then he laughed, too. My *mot*, in fact, hadn't been intended as a *mot*. It was only later that I, too, thought it funny. But he was delighted; enchanted; he quoted it again and again. I was more his nephew than ever, now that it appeared—though here he was wrong—that I was a wit.

Another memory, characteristic again. In the first world-war, to which he responded—he was in his fifties by now—with a mixture of sterling patriotism, rare common sense, and phases of fervent disgust, he suddenly resolved to do his "bit" (the inverted commas would here undoubtedly be his own, too) by taking blinded soldiers for walks. This in itself wasn't, of course, the least funny. But on one of the first occasions, when he and his companion were half-way across a wide London street, he was abruptly seized with such an attack of nerves that he was unable either to go forward or back. In the end, according to his account, it was the blind soldier who saved him, and got him eventually, as one might say, ashore. Then he laughed, ruefully. For though mockery by others was forbidden, and those nerves were no joke, he could always mock at himself.

Even the nerves, which must have been torment, could be turned momentarily, into a source of amusement. Though he could hardly stand, and felt sick, giddy, and wretched, he would decide to overact. He would transform himself into a burlesque of an old man, shrunken and tottering like Methuselah. One didn't know whether to laugh or to weep. His pale face had a twinkle, yet his features were drawn. What an extraordinary creature he was.

There were other impersonations, chief of which, I suppose, was the Colonel. This came on him suddenly, though it might

perhaps have been requested, and was carried to almost fantastic lengths. The bluff, stupid old warrior might appear, inexplicably, at his Club. Other members looked round. The waiters seemed puzzled. He didn't care. He couldn't stop now. Increasing embarrassment on the part of his private audience merely produced fresh excesses. Only his own exhaustion could drive the Colonel away.

Did he never grow up? What a question! As if anyone does. Many people, of course, seem grown-up to young children, or develop an adult façade. But the better you know them, the more it is confirmed that there are nothing but children on earth. So that when my uncle was grown-up, he was again playing a part; even though one must pretend, while he was, that it was the real thing. Yet the extravagance, it is my belief, was largely a protest against something that he should have forgotten, if he had ever genuinely grown up; which was that he had been miserably unhappy at school. So was his love for what was then known as Society. I've escaped, he was still thinking. I can do what I like. If I don't, I'm only a school-boy again.

It haunted him. It helped, of course, to make him so unimaginably kind to other school-boys, still imprisoned, and to everyone else who was young. Yet there is further evidence of the theory that he remained young himself. He never really grew out of calf-love. The objects of his affections were innumerable, but usually quite out of reach. I don't only mean that at the beginning they were generally older, and that even afterwards they had a tendency to be happily married already. They were also, in most cases and in fact, such unsuitable companions—though undoubtedly there were two sides to this point—that he would probably have gone mad if he had won them. Yet to the last he could be bowled over, and start off again; until again the flame burnt itself out. Black depression then. Or perhaps there had been another rumpus, and another name mustn't be mentioned. Yet within he was as sensitive, as vulnerable, and not a jot less impressionable than before. Was it chance that he never married? Or Fate? Or bad luck? Or must he always, at the last moment, look on from without; and draw back, because he couldn't go on with the part?

Habit, of course, may have had a good deal to do with it, for he was a middle-aged bachelor now. Still in that neat little house, with the big studio at the back, and the front garden—to be kept clear of dogs. Still writing letters, though the pictures, alas, showed signs of a distinct falling-off. Still planning other pictures, in the big studio, and then abandoning them because he was too ill and too tired. Yet still with enthusiasms. A new friend. A new game. A new restaurant. Pelmanism—he hurled himself into this, too, half as a joke, half in earnest, though his was the very last mind to be subject

to rules. And all the time more doctors, more treatments, and perhaps something a bit nearer despair.

In the last phase, he—who had always taken hansoms and taxis, for which he must have paid almost as much as to the doctors—suddenly set up a chauffeur and car. I don't know that he always quite knew what to do with them, though when he was well enough they were an immense satisfaction. Or there was one thing that he could do, anyhow. He could lend them to other people. So he did—and they must accept them, too, or there would be trouble—just as generously as of old.

Yet he was difficult. There can be no denying that he was difficult. Old, tried friends knew it, suffered, groaned, pitied—and could do nothing. The charm and the kindness, and all the prejudices that went with them, were fighting their last battle. Ups and downs. Still funny one day—laughing at himself again, perhaps, because of a strong, growing reluctance to touch anything that others had touched, so that he would go through the most extraordinary performance with a door-handle. And then twitching and almost savage—he couldn't help it—from those torturing nerves.

He died, undergoing a last treatment which was to put everything right, at a kind of nursing-home, in the summer of 1926, in his sixty-fifth year. Was it a release? Was it a relief? He didn't want to die; but indeed he had borne more than enough. There are those—though they are getting fewer—who still smile at his name, as they think of all his kindness, and funniness, and other gifts; and then shake their heads, as the smile slowly fades. That is the epitaph; and though he might have preferred that there should be smiles and nothing else, he might not resent, now that he was no longer here to keep up the fight, some traces of sympathy, too.

That was Life. Good luck; bad luck; getting what one wants; paying for it. And then vanishing from the scene. If he had had to make his own way; if he had ever known the alleged spur of real hardship, in the sense of poverty— But it is inconceivable. One may say, and it may be true, that he might have done so much more. But if he had, he would have been someone else.

A NICE STATE TO BE IN

“WELL,” said my nurse, though she was my sisters’ nurse, too, “I must say that’s a nice state to be in!”

The words, addressed to me towards the close of the Victorian era, were, of course, ironical; as they almost always are. I had been out in the garden. I had discovered an old flower-pot. With some idea of reproducing the joys of the seaside, I had filled it, in the absence of sand, with metropolitan earth; had held it under a dripping tap, near the lilac, until its contents were sodden; and had then inverted it, suddenly, on the path. I had, in fact, done this more than once. But I lacked skill. Or there was something wrong with the mixture. Instead of a series of neat mud-pies, there was just a formless mess. Some of this, it is true, was on the gravel; but a good deal of it was on my hands, with which I had then wiped my face; while there was more on my shoes, socks, and the little smock in which I had been sent out to play. Ironically speaking, indeed, I was in a very nice state.

So when my nurse came out, she said so, before taking me in to be washed and changed. It was also established, since her word was then law, that there must be no more experiments with this particular amusement until I was back on the beach, at low tide. She expressed herself as unable to imagine how I could have thought for a moment that it was permissible. And then I was forgiven, and the incident closed. But of course I am still in a nice state.

Perhaps I had better repeat that, with a slight modification; for there is now a capital letter. It is a nice State that I am in; though still in the ironical sense. And so, I should imagine, are you. Of course, if you are Swiss, or Swedish, or happen to live on the other side of the Atlantic, you may still have some distance to fall. But here, and elsewhere, the State has ensured that our state shall be bleak and forlorn. Or nice only to the extent that my nurse used the word. By which she meant quite the reverse.

That brings up a point. What is this State, that has taken the joy out of life? If you listen to its voice, and it talks quite a lot, you might believe that it is only ourselves. Yet apart from the fact that we should indeed be even stupider than we are if, during our short term on this planet, we deliberately made everything intolerable, we know perfectly well, when it is quiet for a moment—and, in fact, even when it isn’t—that there is a gulf between us and it.

For we want to be left alone. We don’t want to be drilled,

regimented, ordered about, threatened, fined, docketed, pigeon-holed, and to be described—after we have suffered all this, and much more—as Man-Power. Once, moreover, quite a lot of us carried on, not unhappily, with none of these things. But the States wouldn't have it. The States must have wars. And though *we* knew what would happen, whether they won or lost, they were in power, and were resolved to go on. At some stage, it seems clear, we should have struck; and we didn't. Now they've got us, and don't mean to let go.

They? I insist on it. The gulf is immense; even though individuals can step over it, and do, with no thought but of earning a living. That is what is so grisly. The true Statesman, in this rather particular connotation, is the victim—as we are his—of ambition. He isn't interested in the fact that by that sin fell the angels. The people are his playthings, whether he is doing what he thinks good for them—though it hardly ever is—or is merely obsessed with his own theory of government. But though in fact he is in such a minority that you might think him quite powerless, he is also remarkably sly.

He knows the ropes. He plots and plans. Hey presto, while all ordinary people are just trying to forget about him, and to get on with their own lives, he has done it again. Yet to do it he must have officers and officials, whom he pays with our money. At once they, too, are drawn over the gulf, because—which is quite understandable—they don't want to lose their new jobs. Whatever his real object, he has established another vested interest. And it will continue, as all of them do.

The State, in other words, has expanded again, and has corrupted more citizens, too. Again we should have struck; but again we have been powerless. For either we are in an admitted autocracy, where we can't strike. Or if we are in an alleged democracy, as in this country, it appears that by a majority (though not necessarily a genuine majority) of us voting for what it hoped, if rather foolishly, would be to its own advantage, it has merely set up another autocracy.

The mysterious flapdoodle of second readings, which come first; of a Speaker who mustn't speak; of electric lights that must be called candles; of cheers which in fact aren't what are generally known as cheers at all; of bowing to a non-existent altar; of wearing token hats; of registering votes, under instructions, by shuffling through corridors, and all the other no doubt interesting historical survivals with which six hundred and forty unrepresentative representatives waste time and money, while regarding themselves and the valuable site that they infest as sacred and in some cases above the law—all this, though calculated to make unfallen angels weep, has precious little to do with the people.

The people, that is to say, are paying for it and suffering from its effects. They are frequently mentioned as having authorised

it to do things that they had no notion it was going to do, and that will surely add to their sufferings. But as for Democracy— Well, there you are, of course. There isn't and can't be such a thing. Even if there were a national referendum on every point at issue—which I admit would be a frightful nuisance—the minority each time would still, and however large, be at the mercy of the majority. But of course there is no such arrangement. There is just a Mandate, vague enough when first given and subsequently to be interpreted in any manner that a few out of the six hundred and forty think fit; so that at least twice in my life-time a nation that would have far preferred peace has been hurled into war. The Will of the People? Bosh!

What do I want, then? Chaos? No, certainly not. But I should like less hypocrisy, less privilege, and less pretence amongst persons who only find themselves in power because they wanted to be in power—and whom I called unrepresentative just now because, fortunately, it is still an exception to be so remarkably swollen-headed—that they are bearing an insupportable burden. Let them chuck it, I say, if they feel like that. Let them try bearing some of ours.

But they don't. They hang on till they drop, or are turned into lords. If there is a Minister who has ever stood in a queue—except momentarily on his way to a division lobby—then this has been kept pretty dark. If there is a Minister who has been cold, or hungry, or seriously short of clothing; or has had to walk when he would rather ride; or has had to stand when he would sooner sit; or has had to stay in this country when he would like to travel; or has had to wait in the out-patients' room when he would prefer to receive a visit from a doctor—then let him say so, and I still shan't believe him. They don't do these things because they don't have to do them. Though they'll talk equality till they are black in the face.

And not only Ministers, of whom there are now such an extravagant amount. Ordinary Members, too—the word "ordinary" again being used in a rather special sense—whenever their position can help them. And Heads of Departments, together with their deputies and underlings as far as the system will work. And Trades Union Officials—that fifth estate which has brought privilege to a very fine art. And others who have dug themselves in, and can't be dug out. They are the State, in one form or another, and the rest of us aren't. They may say we are, when it suits their book. But it is they who have power. Not we.

I say, excuse me smiling, but I've just thought of something. On a recent New Year's Day, when the flags of the National Coal Board were first run up, the *Daily Rooster*, which I have always understood to be a Leftish organ, carried a banner headline on the front page. Its text—which was a shade startling, and even unpleasant,

until one paused to think—was “The People’s Pits.” They were ours, then—it meant the coal mines, of course—and we should jump for joy. Did we? Did you? Did anyone, except those who might profit? I don’t know. But I do know that a few weeks later, and just about the time that another newspaper printed a photograph of the superb limousine in which the Minister of Slack and Cinders went rolling around, the lift here stopped working for five hours each day—not much equality of sacrifice here, I can assure you, for those on the seventh floor—because there was a national shortage of coal.

Much good our alleged ownership of the pits did us then. But we still weren’t the State. Good lord, no. The State was wise, right, and infallible. It blamed the weather. It blamed the expropriated owners. It blamed the previous Administration, regardless of the fact that a whole bunch of the present gang had been members of it for five years. And above all it blamed us.

It was we who had been extravagant, and had thus taken the poor State by surprise. As we couldn’t get coal—even if largely because it had taken miners out of the mines and forced non-miners into them—we had switched on electric fires. We knew that coal would have been cheaper, but if we developed pneumonia we should have even more difficulty in paying our taxes. That wasn’t the point, said the State. It was unpatriotic. We must turn them off again at once. We must shiver and tremble, and cough and sneeze; and I must sit writing in a scarf and overcoat and a pair of mittens—and once or twice in a hat as well—or I should be imprisoned, or heavily fined.

As a matter of fact, I was imprisoned anyhow, because of the lift. But did all this make me feel that I was part of the State? It didn’t. Why should it? The State was so obviously my opponent. Besides, I had seen what was bound to happen—not that I lay claim to any special gift of prophecy—and the State hadn’t. Once more, even if only in a matter of common intelligence, there was an unbridgeable gulf.

Again, if it isn’t chaos at present, what is it? And what else has it been since the State, having first stumbled into another war without preparing for it, then took advantage of this situation—without any Mandate at all, so far as I am aware—to say that everything in the country belonged to it? It’s handling too much, I think. I don’t wonder it’s in a muddle. But it would willingly see us all dead before it let go.

What is it, then, this astounding, ever-growing, top-heavy, tyrannical organism that has got its foot on our necks? It isn’t the ordinary people—I am now using this adjective in the ordinary sense; the middle classes, that is to say, in so far as they aren’t directly employed by it; the artists—this includes me, for the sake of argument; the little shopkeepers, whom it harries; the little

builders, whom it drives out of business; the individuals, as they were once known. For none of these—indeed, it is a physical impossibility—can put their feet on their own necks. One may even doubt whether they would if they could.

It is, in fact—this is the true word—a racket; and the biggest on earth. We pay it protection-money, compulsorily, and it doesn't protect us. It takes a cut of everything. It collars all that it can, and, if it hands anything back, pretends this is a gift. It has its Little Caesars, its spies, narks, and gunmen. It takes care of them by seeing that they have their own bits of privilege, but it just preys on everyone else. It has an immense income, but it is so feckless, extravagant, and yet sure of its strength, that it is always in debt. Then it puts the screw on again. There is a crisis. It is saving us, though again by our own efforts and at our own expense, and looks round for applause. If it says, as it sometimes does, that it owes us a deep debt of gratitude, that is the end; it doesn't attempt to repay it. On the contrary, it starts borrowing more.

And, like all big rackets, it breeds a counter-racket; in this case an under-the-counter racket, too. But for it, there could be no Black Market, as there most certainly is. To control it—what a beautiful word that has become—it clamps down further restrictions on those who aren't in it, extracts further contributions from them for still more officials; and at the same time continues to provide conditions in which the system—only another aspect, after all, of the laws of supply and demand—is bound to go on. Perhaps it knows this. The Black Market certainly knows it. Its chief fear is that the restrictions should go. But the rest of us, the poor innocents who are in neither of these rackets, must still go on paying for both.

The State has another grand idea. Once a year—but for some reason it will never say when until the very last moment—it brings in what is known as a Budget. It is the essence of this that everyone should be kept in suspense—rather as if it were a treat, though it isn't—until the hour when its terms are revealed. As a demonstration of the adage that might is right, this is strikingly effective. But as a help to planned economy—where have I heard those words before?—among citizens or firms who aren't in the racket, it would be hard to devise anything worse. It is, in fact, an annual thunderbolt. No citizen or firm would be trusted for a moment, or could hope to carry on business, if they merely relied on surprise. No citizen or firm, if it comes to that, would dream of selecting April 5th—of all queer, inconvenient dates, even if it does happen to be the name of a Derby winner—for the start and finish of a financial year. But the State does. Though so deeply in debt that there is no chance that it will ever get straight, it must still see that we are all confused, too.

One might call this a joke, though in rather grim taste, if there were any other evidence that it went in for humour. But we know

that's not so, in the case of the State. It just bungles, and bullies, and snarls.

It calls for sacrifices, but it makes none itself. It puts us on our honour to obey it—though only, of course, when there can be no penal alternative—but never hesitates to go back on its word. If it passes an unintelligible Act, and of course most of them are, with large holes in it which it has again overlooked, you had better not try and walk through them. For it will still catch you with an Order in Council. Or if a High Court Judge should point out that it has disregarded its own law, what does it do? Back down? Not a bit. Apologise? Never. It will either use your money to lodge an appeal, or will rush through what it describes as amending legislation. You can't beat it. It has no shame. It has got hold of the dice; and there isn't one that isn't loaded against you.

Unless, of course, you are in the Black Market, which it never ceases to encourage. But then why *should* you be in the Black Market, if you don't want to be in the Black Market? Why can't you just lead your own life?

Shocking, says the State, in this age, at any hint of such a suggestion. If you lead your own life, this will bring back the dark days when it was only a tiny little racket, and there was no Social Security. So to ensure that there is social security—and planned economy, of course—it first votes itself an increase in salary; then tries to borrow everything that it hasn't already taken from you; and then, in some heroic and unimaginable manner, you have contrived to put part of your earnings into an investment for your old age, it insults you for being a capitalist, runs off with your shares, and cuts their taxed proceeds in half.

That's not all. It now tells you that you are happier, healthier, and better fed than before its last war. It doesn't, apparently, care if you choke; and that may be its object. Yet it would be kinder, I think, and simpler as well, if it just distributed little tablets of cyanide. The expense would be slight. Just a Vote, and the thing's done. National Tablets. Have You Got Yours Yet? Hurry, Hurry, Hurry! After all, it seems a bit hard that the State should have made things so easy for Hermann Goering, who was its enemy—even if he was also an enemy of the people—and should then jib at assisting those who, whether this is chance or not, happen to be on its own side. Or don't you think so?

Well, that's the game, anyhow. And for some of us, at least, the more the State absorbs and controls, the less we feel part of the state. And the rest? Well, they're not utter fools, even if they are not very bright. And even if they are in the racket, as more and more of them are, it is still doubtful how long they will stand it. For if your support is gained by an undertaking to soak the rich, and if

the rich are then soaked until there aren't any rich, whose turn, do you suppose, will come next? Yours, of course; for the State can't stop. Unless you make it. And then there'd still be a mess.

A pretty ghastly mess, too, I should say, until the next system turns up. There may, indeed there is almost bound to be more chaos first. Yet it may be better, for it would have a job to be worse. Sense might return. Honesty might return. Even truth might return. One never knows. But greyness, even without the antithesis of these qualities, is something that no people demands. When they find they have got it, and precious little else, they'll do something, perhaps. For even though the black-out returns, as it well may, a third time, there are still plenty of lamp-posts about. The ones in Whitehall are particularly fine, and some use might be found for them yet.

Not that I want violence. Not that I believe in violence. Yet a State, like a man, when it takes the sword— Well, you should know the rest of the text.

For it is the sword—or high explosives, and atom bombs, and all the rest—that has done it. And they just don't pay. Yet it is the State that says: "Now we're going to attack this other State," or: "Look out! Here comes this other State. To arms!" Or: "Here's another State attacking a third State, so of course we must join in, too." Within five minutes of the first bomb or torpedo—of which, by the way, there would be far fewer without States—the issue is so confused that even the objects of the Eton Wall Game become comparatively simple. All that is clear now, and even this isn't really too clear, is that each State is defending itself; that aggression, wherever the battles are going on, is something peculiar to the other side. Any individual who doubts this becomes an enemy, too. Bang! go the explosives. Bang! goes the money. Men, women, and children, though mortal anyhow, are killed painfully, prematurely, and in large numbers. Those who survive have their own punishment. War justifies anything and everything, now. Truth, freedom, and justice all vanish into the fog.

And yet a few facts emerge. One is that the States, even when technically at each other's throats, are still linked by a powerful interest; which is that they should go on being States at all costs. Another is that the Peoples are really similarly united, since all *they* really want is for the war to end so that they can get home again; or, if they are at home already, so that they can lead a less odious life. While the third fact, of course, is that when the fever subsides, it will be found that even the States who have won haven't got what they set out to get. Neither, it is quite true, have the States who have lost. But this isn't much help to the winners.

Well, consider this last little affair—I use "last" in the sense of most recent. Why were we drawn into it, and what were we supposed

to get out of it? The answer is simple, in a way. It was to re-establish—since it was already too late to protect them—the frontiers of a mid-European military dictatorship which our own State, without actually consulting us, had rather rashly guaranteed. This was all, at first. Though later we were to gather that it was so as to produce general security. And later still so as to gain the Four Freedoms.

About six years later it was announced that the job had been done. But the mid-European country now had different frontiers, and didn't seem to like us very much. Quite a proportion of its inhabitants were still here, and didn't want to go home. The only sense of security lay in the fact that for the moment all States were too busy and broke to resume fighting—necessarily, of course, so far as this was possible now—with the new weapons that they had invented. While the Four Freedoms were rather further away, on the whole, than they had been before the struggle began. Nor is there a sign that they will ever come nearer.

On the other hand, we had got a great many things that we had never fought for at all. To begin with we had a menace—only States had the power and money to create it—which at the very best must provide us with nightmares for the rest of our lives. We were short of food, short of clothes, short of houses, and fuel—and books; though as against this we had more Civil Servants. There was more crime. More divorce. Fewer sweets; but a far bigger army—still being conscribed. Less liberty. More rules; which still pour from the increased number of Ministries. Higher rates. Less to show for them. More Public Relations Officers. Higher fares. Lower interest. Higher postage. Fewer deliveries. Worse manners—and if the People were also exhibiting these, the State doesn't set much of an example. Less soap. More forms. And—though the State still seems to think that we're not doing nearly enough—more work.

But things like that, you know, must be—here comes old Kaspar again, and, my goodness, he had the right idea—at every famous victory. Also, it's worse in Germany; but that doesn't appear to do us much good. Nor does it make it any cheaper for us. Because it is one world. We all know it. But if the States know it, they can't or won't do anything about it. Look at the United Nations. "United" is a queer name for them, isn't it? But if there were fewer States, there might be less privilege in high quarters, and among their millions of little jacks-in-office; and of course that wouldn't do at all.

This is irony again. As a matter of fact, I think it would do very well. This is a Vale of Tears; there is no getting away from it. The truest motto is Root, hog, or die. No pretence that the most brilliant organisation can turn this earth into a place where we all take more than we give can—despite speeches by candidates at Parliamentary elections—alter laws that are stronger than Man. When there is a

World Federation, if there ever is, the same laws will be found to prevail. Yet it is our hope, and our only hope now, to be one People as well as one world. There will be privilege still, but it might do less damage. Jacks-in-office, but surely not quite so many. The condition of liberty will remain eternal vigilance, just as all power will continue to corrupt. I don't envisage it as Utopia, but it is our only chance. And it is only the State—this term is now being employed as a collective noun—that stands in the way.

I should put it like this. No ordinary, normal, average human being—even though this means, of course, that he is very far from a saint—can, wherever he lives, have worse enemies than his own, invariably self-chosen leaders. That is my axiom. Think it over. You won't find a flaw in it. It has been proved over and over again. But the joke is that if there is only one State, so that it can't declare war, they will have lost the bulk of their power to do harm.

They will try, of course. They will still try, even in my most roseate dream. As long as there is ambition—which I am afraid will be as long as this odd Race continues to reproduce itself—there will be trouble of a sort from the ambitious. But if they can't use fear to provoke more wars, the worst part of their claws will be clipped. We could laugh at them then, when they go too far. That's a very important point.

Yes, I picture—though, alas, this is only another part of the dream—a world in which the Great Panjandrum (for I suppose there must be one, though we must take care that he is only appointed for a very short term) is greeted with mirth when he speaks, and not cheers. You see what will happen? Either making a virtue of necessity, or because, whether he has a sense of humour or not, this is the effect on all people when they evoke laughter, he will at once try to be funnier than his predecessors or possible successors. If he succeeds, well and good; we shall laugh louder than ever. If he fails, we shall laugh just the same. But he can't hurt us, if we laugh. And if we laugh, we shall grow fat. Whereas at present we don't laugh, and grow thin.

That is the idea, then; though there may still be some difficulties with such a tiresome and quarrelsome Race. Of course, I see its own difficulties. It doesn't know why it's here. It doesn't know where it's going. Its units are all emotion at one moment, all greed at the next, yet at times show intelligence, too. It is also divided, in the most fantastic and arbitrary manner, into two sexes—this seems to give it endless worry—and a number of colours as well. Some of these facts aren't its fault. Perhaps none of them are. If it were pure Reason, it would be unrecognisable, and might even cease to survive. Yet it is rather stupid of it to put up with what it has to put up with, just for the sake of being divided into nations. That is asking for

trouble, and trouble has come. It is my view that it is now time for more sense.

But it should trust each other a little more. It should earn that trust. And it can't, while it growls behind bars. No, it should laugh more; that's the thing. It may laugh at its neighbours if it likes, so long as it lets them laugh, too. And of course it should laugh at itself. But principally it should laugh at the very notion—and how preposterous and old-fashioned this would seem, if it did—of men, or women, either, perpetuating the bars under the pretence that they are preserving freedom. It should laugh until the bars and their upholders dissolve, at one glorious and universal guffaw.

It should laugh at every distinction, in both senses of the word, not sanctioned by sense. And then we *might* be in a nice State at last.

THE MAN IN THE HALL

WHEN the time came—still in the Victorian era, but getting very near the end of it now—for us to leave the little house where I was born, my two sisters and I were sent down, with our nurse, to the country. It was possibly felt, and this was probably right, that we could do little to help, and might even add to the general confusion. So we were put in a four-wheeler, and driven to Paddington; were placed in a train, with egg-sandwiches, no doubt; and remained in it until my patience was slightly exhausted, for it was a long journey, and in the last phase there were frequent stops. Until eventually we reached a land where the earth was a rich red, when we alighted, were installed in another horse-drawn vehicle, and borne, over still untarred roads, to a well-known house.

It was, in fact, and in those days, the real residence of the cousins who appeared, on the prompt side of a far distant scene, when we were all by the sea in September. Now we were again to be their guests; or if you prefer it, their parents' guests. We were to join another nursery life. To play on another lawn. And to take part, so far as three urban children could, and while our respective nurses hob-nobbed, in a rural existence. My impression at the time was that the house was vast and labyrinthine. I now know that it was of quite a moderate size. But it was complete, and very English. Unpretentious, somewhat rambling, perhaps; yet cosy, and, as it might now seem, very adequately equipped. There were stables, and a kitchen-garden, as well as the lawn. There was a goat, and a small chaise that it drew. There was a smooth-haired fox-terrier—this was very much the dog of the period—who was generally not far away.

We were taken for walks; we played games; there were sessions with the grown-ups; and then again we were packed off to bed. I don't know how long we were there, or why I wasn't at school, for I don't think it was holiday-time. Perhaps it was only a week—I should have been vague about this even then—and perhaps my elder sister and I had been excused, owing to the domestic upheaval. But I knew *why* we were there. And that I had now left my birth-place for good.

This hadn't been kept from me. It had been much discussed, and was even faintly exciting. I had also accompanied my own parents on more than one expedition to look at houses that they were inspecting themselves. To these, in each case, I had taken

an instant dislike, if chiefly because they were so alarmingly empty. Yet, as it happened, my parents had disliked most of them, too, if for more practical reasons. And it shows you how agents were much the same then, that the house which they finally selected, which met all their stated requirements as to capacity and situation, and had been available the whole time, wasn't produced by an agent at all.

Nevertheless, they found it, and took it. They also exhibited it to their son, who was again rather appalled by its uninhabited condition—he doesn't seem to have had much imagination then, though this particular form is perhaps always rather a special gift—yet was impressed and indeed almost overcome by its size. Not that it was really immense. But it was bigger—even though, alas, it had a smaller garden—than my birth-place. The rooms were larger and higher. And such was the effect that even after I had dwelt there some days, I still believed that it had an extra storey as well.

As a matter of fact, it hadn't; though the top floor would now cease to be attics. But as a matter of fact, also, I hadn't got there yet; as a resident and in this record, I mean. For I was still down in the country, playing games, thinking of nothing, and only occasionally musing on the great change that was taking place while I was away. On the whole, when I did so, it was still with excitement; either because it was expected, or because there is always something about change. Even now, though, I should say, I didn't quite take it in. It was only when our visit was over, when our trunks had been packed, when we had been driven through the red lanes, had puffed up to London, and were in another four-wheeler, that the dreadful truth suddenly dawned on me.

I had lost my home. I was being taken to a strange house. Immediately the balance of my mind became disturbed. Like Brer Fox, I was "sorter jubus 'bout dis." I was so disturbed, indeed, that though my elder sister was now chirping with anticipation, and my younger—not being of an age, perhaps, fully to appreciate what was happening—remained perfectly calm, I, personally, started to weep.

It was thus, in fact, and in slight disgrace for such weakness, that I rejoined my parents again. It must have been rather disappointing for them, after all the work that they had put in while I was away, to have their son returning like this. But I couldn't help it. I was a Displaced Person. And though presently I was only sniffing instead of sobbing; though later—indeed, soon enough—the novelty of it all made an appeal to the better part of my nature; and though eventually I quite settled down there, and remained until about a year before I was married, I don't know that I ever entirely recovered.

For something in me still clung to what was gone, and to those

first few years. The new house, all the time, was only a substitute. My dreams knew this—they still do, now and then. As I slept I was always going back to my lost home; even though, as is the habit of dreams, they kept changing it, too. Sometimes—this was interesting, and why had I never noticed it until now?—there was a room that I had never been in before. Sometimes, again, I was in the nursery, looking out of the window; but instead of houses across the street, there was an expanse of broad meadows and hills. I was puzzled. Not altogether pleased. Yet even so there was a pang when I awoke.

It had gone again. When I was awake I didn't mind growing up, and in those dreams I wasn't always a child. I don't think, or prefer not to think, that I am a case of arrested development. I dare say, indeed I am pretty sure, that others have had such dreams, too. Yet they *are* puzzling. For something inside one, it seems, must always go back. The Subconscious? But why is it so sentimental? Or why, if it is sentimental, should it waste night after night either in sending me back to school—to which I have never wished to return for one moment—or in launching me on long journeys, which I also detest, with every form of discomfort and trial?

It does, though. It gives me hell. I wake up quite worn out. Yet again, for no reason, I am back in my birth-place again. Happy? You don't know what it's like. It's magic. It's real. Even at the end it's still real. Yet I'm here, and can't hope to be there.

I? There it is again. The old problem. Personal identity, which yet isn't identity; for my very cells, or so I am told, have replaced themselves, and there is scarcely any physical resemblance between the man who sits writing this now, and the child in a nursery then. True, there has been no break, so far, in the continuity. The theory that they *are* the same character is defensible, up to a point. Yet even so, even if the two of them, and the hundreds of intervening characters who connect them, are all one and the same being, *why*—talking of identity—should this gallery chance to be me?

Have I been here before, in another series of impersonations? Must I come here again? Idle questions, for it is memory that is the link. Without it, whatever the answers, I am in just the same state. Suddenly, in the midst of eternity, whether by accident or design, but in any case against incalculable odds, a creature was born who was myself. Yet it isn't even as simple as that. To others, even to me—on the inside, as you might say, looking out—it is clear that more odds were involved. There isn't a scrap of me but that is inherited. I was a mixture, with millions of ingredients, from the very instant that I arrived—and, as a matter of fact, before that. I didn't know it. I had no control, so far as I am aware, over their selection. But it was they, and not I, who were me.

Yet something else was implanted, so that I felt I was me. I still do, quite as often as not. For hours and even days at a time custom has so inured me to looking out from within that I almost forget what a rum thing this is. Then suddenly I remember. I can't make it out. I hear my voice—which, of course, is inherited, too—and it sounds so odd that I balk and dry up. Or again, though I can shave without terror, I catch sight, unexpectedly, of my image in a shop-window. It looks human, in a way, but then this is the shock. For I was just a mind until a second ago; and now, good heavens, I've got a body and clothes:

Or other people must think I have; and I have undoubtedly paid for the clothes. As for the body, when it is in pain then it is certainly mine; though I wish it wasn't. But when it is reasonably comfortable, though I still feed it, and wash it, and dress it—if from mere habit again—it might be anyone's; and I suppose that's when I'm happy. Yet it isn't anyone's. It isn't only unique—though this goes for all bodies—but I am tied to it; and when it wears out, that's the end. Or not? See *Hamlet*, where all this is put much better. But I am not really used to it—to this extraordinary situation, I mean—even after all these years. I've thought about it, I've read books about it, I've tried hard—at times—not to worry about it. But it beats me. I can't make it out.

I—in the absence of any clearer description, we had perhaps better leave it at that—seem to have leapt forward a bit. Let's go back.

Only once, and this was quite a short time after the move that has been described, did I return to the house we had left. At the first stage I couldn't; for it was now that the Greyhound, next door, was torn down and rebuilt, and as this involved the destruction of the party wall—with nothing more than tarpaulin to protect several rooms from the elements—for a while no one could live there at all. But then a new tenant arrived, with his own wife and children. I have it in my mind that he was an architect, and I know that more building took place—out at the back, so that there would be a bathroom henceforth. But I don't think he was more than an acquaintance of my parents, and only that, I dare say, through the landlord and landlady who still lived on the other side. In fact, I can remember nothing about him; except that, out of friendliness or perhaps so as to display his improvements to the property, he or his wife presently asked us to tea.

So I was taken. I was a little nervous, and a little savage inside because it was no longer my home. But here I was, at the familiar entrance, under the projecting, semi-circular hood. And once more the front door was opened, though by a strange maidservant, of course, and I passed in. Almost immediately there was a succession of shocks. For though I was aware, and should have been an imbecile

otherwise, that our own furniture had been removed, I still wasn't prepared for the change. Or for the disturbing, nightmarish mixture of change superimposed on the known. I was struck dumb, though there was nothing strange about this. A bitter struggle, even at that age, was going on between Time and myself. I resented the improvements. I was horrified by this trespass, as it seemed, on all I remembered and would have wished to retain. It was as though the very pillars of the universe had been shaken now that I saw, with my own eyes, what a betrayal there had been; or that even this house could betray.

Presently we were sent up to the nursery. I don't think I was very charming there. Despite the fact that the new family had a mammoth musical box, even larger than a barrel-organ, with which I was invited to play, every change was a pang, and an intrusion as well. How dared these other children turn me out, and remain here themselves?

I didn't say all this. It wasn't even an occasion when my manners were rebuked. But I was silent, stunned and over-wrought. When we left to go home, there was no feeling that it was home. *This* was my home, in spite of all that had been done to it, and I was an outcast again. But only in those dreams now should I return; for the acquaintance, such as it was, never ripened into anything more. Those other children may have paid a call in exchange. I don't know. I can't remember if they did. But for me the thin link now snapped for good. Only once, and this was nearly fifty years later, did I cross that flat threshold again.

For a while, even without making a special pilgrimage, I should still pass the house. On Sundays, particularly, I might see it when taking letters to that neighbouring post-office—the one at which I bought my first stamp—for a late-fee, country collection. I still knew people—and though they came and went I should for a long time go on knowing people—in the adjoining square. News reached me, also, that the architect—if he *was* an architect—and his family had also moved on. That the new occupant was a relation—query: a daughter?—of the owners next door. But I had lost touch completely. I was outside still. And then, no longer living in the same Borough, but having transferred my allegiance to another, it became the rarest thing for me to pass down that street at all.

It wasn't a blind alley. It had, indeed, become something of a traffic route; but not for me, as my life was then planned. Occasionally, for I had a car now, I would make a detour; look up as I went by; and perhaps again feel sentimental yet baffled. My birth-place. Very odd indeed. Extraordinary. Unchanged, too, or almost unchanged, from without. But the street was changing. Not only was it becoming noisier and more crowded, but the department store, which I had first known as hardly more than a string of

modest shops—and with gaps here and there—had solidified, expanded, and spread. It was a huge building now, closely associated with its two former rivals. It had developed an annexe—huge, too—on the other side of the main road. While on our side, as I still thought of it, it had soared into the sky, swarmed over a whole street—so that this no longer existed—and even taken a slice off a row of back-gardens.

In other words, it was highly successful. Its shares, I believe, had soared, too. But it dwarfed what had once been our own quiet street. The four sides of the Square had become its parking place. And the main road, which in my youth still remembered that it had once run through a village, was transformed, by all this commercial enterprise, into something scarcely distinguishable from any other great centre of shopping. Crowds, motor traffic, and still more crowds. Even the backwaters swirling and choked.

A place, on the whole, to keep away from; as on the whole I did. Yet the house was still there; still gracious, even under the shadow of progress. Still gracious even though a later resident, as I suddenly observed one day, had given it a name instead of being content with a number. "The Little House." I resented this, too. It wasn't little in what I took to be this semi-patronising and semi-mock-modest sense. It was so exquisitely proportioned that no one should think of its size. Now it had been branded as if to announce that it was cute.

But it was still there. Its front door, though now marred by that legend, was still flanked by two windows; with three windows above; and a couple more peering over the coping. Its two deep, narrow areas were still guarded by the same railings; while at the back, it was to be presumed, its garden—though the framework of our swing must long since have rotted away—was still as it had been in the past. And it was two and a half centuries old now.

I saw little if anything of it during the second world war; when things were quieter, I imagine, in one way, though I am well aware that they weren't in another. I had no car now. There was no reason to go quite so far. One's range was compressed in those days. Were there dreams? Of course. Thoughts, too. I should never forget it. And though if the choice had to be made between its destruction and my own, I might have preferred, for some reason, to be the survivor, I still hoped, during the bangs and the bumps, that it was holding its own.

This hope, furthermore, was fulfilled, though it had a narrow escape. How do I know? Well, now we come to the most curious affair, which happened a short time ago. Or a short time ago as I sit here and write, though owing to the effects of the same war no one knows, in these days, when I shall have readers. Yet here, nevertheless, is the story.

I was in an omnibus. Conditions had so far relaxed, though still

very unpleasant, that if one had the nerve one could go farther afield. And there were more people to see when one got there. So with this end in view, and though in fact I never did get there, I took a ticket on a vehicle that turns a lot of corners, but, in the course of its journey, passes from the scene where I live now through the region where I was born. It trundled. It rattled. It belched. When I embarked—and this was partly why I did embark—it was comparatively empty. But then it filled up. And a little later, as it approached the main road to which I have recently referred, not only the bus itself but this thoroughfare, too, became so crammed and jammed with humanity and, in the latter case, with other vehicles, that movement became virtually impossible.

We still belched, that is to say. We still rattled and roared. But we were in a queue of buses, taxis, vans, and private cars, among which—either because they wished to cross the road, or because there was no longer any room on the pavements—human beings were forcing their way. Horns were tooting, engines were grinding, fumes were seething, and even perambulators were mixed up in the whirl.

This, I thought, not unreasonably—for I might add that, in addition to everything else, I was now being half-suffocated by a very stout fellow-passenger—is frightful. And then I saw where we were. Not at a bus-stop, for, as I have mentioned, they are never anywhere now except mid-way between two known points. But at the corner, or top, of the street where I had once lived. And we were stationary. And I rose, though the fat passenger didn't. And I climbed over or round the fat passenger. And I got out.

It was a little fresher here, though it still stank of petrol or Diesel oil, and the noise was perhaps rather worse. Yet somehow, with luck, cunning, and a certain amount of somewhat desperate agility, I edged through the crowd. I was in the street itself now—lined on both sides by more cars, with which policemen were arguing, and by no means unthronged by pedestrians. Yet as I went further, it became just a shade quieter. I know what I'll do, I thought. I can't go on—after all, I can still try again—and it is highly probable that I shall have to walk back. But if I do this, is the direction. There's a short cut through here. And I might just have a glance at our house.

So I did. Nothing was easier now. It looked shabby, though this didn't surprise me; for all London was shabby. Yet it had dignity, as it always will until it is pulled down. The new Greyhound next door, on the other hand, though slightly mellowed by time, was as ugly as ever. Just beyond it was the archway through which the van-horses had once passed, on the way to their upstairs stables. I peered in. Desolation. Another bomb must have fallen just here. I retraced my last steps, in a mist of memories, for one more look at my birth-place.

And this time the front door stood open.

What would you have done? I hesitated. Unlike one of my dogs, who had a passion for rushing through any open front door; and unlike my fearless father, who had embarrassed me again and again, when I was very young, by always entering any place that he thought interesting—on one occasion, as I remember, he even boarded a battleship—I am anything but a practised intruder. Yet I was curious. I was tempted. After all but fifty years, chance had brought this opportunity. I passed gingerly under the fanlight.

There was a man just inside. But he didn't look like a resident. Indeed, as I had now seen, through another doorway, the drawing-room—and, as I glanced to the left, it was the same with the dining-room—while not exactly unfurnished, for it was piled almost to the ceiling with furniture, was in no state to provide anyone with a home. No curtains. No carpets. No pictures. Just a mass or profusion of chairs. Heaped up. Almost as if arranged for a bonfire. Though, of course, this was a fantastic idea.

There were other men, also. One of them went past me, at this moment, with a small stool on his head. But neither they nor the first man seemed concerned by my appearance. Were they ghosts? Or was it I who had dissolved?

Nonsense, I thought. Though this is odd, it must be capable of explanation. So I spoke to the first man—in a real voice, I was glad to hear. Attracting part of his attention for an instant, I said something about having been born in this house—for some reason it sounded a little absurd, though it was quite true—and about noticing the door standing open, so that I had come in, and . . .

"That's all right," he said, without undue emotion. In fact, I can't say that he seemed at all overwhelmed. "Look round if you want to."

I thanked him. But I still wanted to know why it was in this condition.

"Is—is anyone living here now?" I asked; a little foolishly, perhaps, considering everything.

With half an eye on his colleagues, he told me. Though most of his mind was quite clearly elsewhere, he informed me—as more men and articles of furniture went past—that the house now belonged to the department store (even this, then, had fallen into its clutches!), and was being used for the time being as a depository. Whether for new chairs, old chairs, its own chairs, or other people's chairs, I must just guess; for at this point he left me. I was alone, in a sense. But I had permission to stay. So I made my way into the drawing-room.

I think I had expected it to look tiny, for rooms do when one hasn't seen them since childhood. But it didn't. It looked patient, and reproachful, but neither large nor small, in spite of the manner

in which it had been treated. It was the proportions, of course, that produced this effect; for it had been built when their secret was known. It was light, too, even though those additions at the back had deprived it—I must have forgotten this—of a window. And it was beautiful; even now. All those years I had never realised quite how beautiful it was, or what I had owed it for my first lessons in taste. . .

But of course this wasn't all I thought. There was plenty more. Here, I reflected—though I couldn't get even as far as this—was where the harpsichord stood. My mother's writing-table was over there. The piano—yes, that's right—was beyond it. Were there books on the opposite wall? I think so. But there was nothing now.

The back window, though—the silent, good-looking architect's window—was still here, and unaltered, though so grimy that I could see nothing through it. If I wanted to view the garden—and I did—I must go out there myself.

So I left the drawing-room; made my way, rather hastily, past the structural additions; opened another door—and stepped forth. But only for a moment. For the long garden—I ought to have guessed this, too—was wild, neglected, forlorn. The grass, which I had once watched being mown with a scythe, was tousled and tussocky. The flower-bed was a wilderness. Even the path on which my father had ridden his first bicycle was merged in a rank growth of weeds. To the right I could see more of the bomb damage. The acacia had gone. The lilac had gone. At the far end, where of course there was no trace of our swing, rose a solid and soot-darkened cliff.

I came in again. But I hadn't quite finished. The dining-room, into which I now moved as in a dream, was as congested as the drawing-room; yet again I could see more than was there. A pale, scrubbed, oak dining-table across the window. A low chest beyond the door. And opposite it the green sideboard—also designed by the mute architect—in which chocolates and sugar candy were kept; and bitter aloes, for use on my younger sister's fingers when she showed a disposition to suck them. Bitter aloes, indeed. . .

I peeped into the back part of the room, though I couldn't reach it; and it was beautiful, too. I saw more books for a moment, for this memory was quite clear. I recalled the nail, out of sight now, but of course it had gone, on which the key of the Square garden had hung. Then I beheld the piled furniture again, and the dust on the bare boards. And retreated, once more, into the hall.

I might have gone upstairs now, I suppose. But I couldn't. This was enough. The impulse that had brought me in was dying on me. I could imagine that there would be the same sort of sights as down here. But memories were better. It might be ridiculous to have this feeling that I, too, had somehow outraged the past. But I just couldn't face any more.

As I stood there, the original man reappeared. Should I thank him again? If I had been my uncle, I should certainly have tipped him. Yet apart from the fact that he was probably earning quite as much as, if not more than, an author without enough paper, he didn't look as if he were expecting a tip.

So he didn't receive one. Though suddenly, or so it seemed, there must be one final question.

"Do you know," I inquired, for it appeared that I was still curious, even though I was longing to leave, about something that the scene had suggested; "have you any idea who was living here just before—well, just before all this happened?"

I don't know why I wanted to know. But I did. It was pity, perhaps; if for the house even more than for its last tenants.

Again he seemed to drag his own thoughts back from chairs or other responsibilities to the fact that he was being addressed. Then he shook his head.

"No," he said. "Sorry. Couldn't tell you. Well, you see—" here he gave a short if somewhat meaningless laugh; unless, of course, it was crowded with meaning; "you see, I've been with the Army. Only just out. Fact is—" and I could feel that he had now trapped an elusive phrase—"I'm a stranger here myself."

"I see," I said. "Thank you."

So am I, I thought. I was a stranger, too. Where, if it came to that, or when, had I ever really been anything else?

Then I passed over the spot where the two nuns had once alarmed me so much. Glanced into the roadway where Jack-in-the-Green had once shuffled and hopped. And set off for the hive where I dwell.

THE END



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In these restricted days there is a great temptation for the older amongst us to look back with some wistfulness to the years that have been. Yielding to this temptation, Mr. Mackail has given us, in "Where Am I?" a fascinating volume of reminiscences covering the changing London scene from Victorian times to the present day. Frankly a "die-hard," with nostalgic regrets for the ease and comfort of the vanished Victorian era, he surveys the panorama of the years with a shrewd and occasionally sardonic eye. His vividly penned pictures of Victorian London and of his own childhood, tinged with a sense of humour that is often satiric but never harsh, make delightful reading; while his amusing description of present-day struggles to keep life going under austerity conditions is an entertaining contrast. Both for those whose memories can go back half a century or more, and for those who are still young in years, this is a book that will be sheer delight.

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