

HARDY
TRAVELLING
RETAILS
WEEK 2
(SOUTH-WEST)
J. B.
PRIESTLEY

CHAPTER TWO

TO BRISTOL AND SWINDON

I

BRISTOL seemed a good place to visit after Southampton. There are two or three motor coaches that run between Southampton and Bristol; and I chose the earliest one. But I was before my proper time and the bus was very late, so I had a long hour to spend at the starting place, a large yard with waiting-rooms, booking offices, a refreshment bar and a newspaper kiosk in it. All this was new to me. I had never realized before how highly organized this road travel is, with its inspectors and inquiry offices and waiting-rooms and what not. Perhaps because it was so early - and also because it was still a damp morning with no sight of the sun - there were very few other passengers waiting, though the coaches were ready to take you anywhere between Plymouth, Birmingham and Brighton. We were a small and rather dismal company, as yet only half-alive. I ordered a cup of tea from what seemed the smallest and youngest waitress I had ever seen, for she looked eight years of age and about forty inches high. Possibly she was older and taller, but this is certain - she did not know how to make tea. This was the third lot of tea I had had that morning - for I had had some on waking and then some more at breakfast - and I told myself, as I waited for the brown speckled mess to cool, that the East had contrived a subtle revenge upon us, its chief plunderers, by turning us all into tea-tippers who do not even know a good leaf when we taste it. We English comfort ourselves with the sweepings of the East. Nowadays our national drink is bad tea. Beer is as far out of date as honest John Bull himself. The maids in our kitchen drink tea all day long, and the difficulty is to get them away from bread and butter and tea

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(Shelley's favourite diet, I believe) and make them tuck in to some solid food. Their men folk are as bad and no longer regard tea as womanish stuff. We are all floating somewhere on a full tide of tea, not the clear, almost sparkling infusion, but a murky stew, made with water that either never came quite to the boil or had been boiled out of all freshness and fun, in a teapot not allowed to recover from its last dark brew. God only knows where we are bound, but the tannin inside us does not encourage us to feel too hopeful.

The most conspicuous object in my neighbourhood, as I sat there, tea in hand, waiting, was a gigantic map poster in blue and green that said, 'You are now only 12 miles from the lovely Isle of Wight'; and so I spent some time thinking about the island, on which I had stayed for the first time that very summer. Certainly a lovely island, at least when you leave Cowes, Osborne, Ryde area, which has little charm. The rest of it is the English south country at its best in miniature - Lilliputian downs and all - with an island quality added, a lightening of the horizon in whichever direction you look. Tennyson is its poet, Victoria its queen. The little towns on the east coast still seem a little dazed by the passing of the Prince Consort. That Victoria herself should have died there is so right and proper that you could use the fact in a teleological argument. The island population - excluding the summer yachtsmen and all the deck hands and stewards and other men who have to play with yachtsmen - consists chiefly of an amiable and slow peasantry not to be hustled but said to be good in a crisis, and elderly gentlefolk tucked away in charming old manor houses or converted farms. These gentlefolk watch the decay of their incomes and keep open house for young male relatives on leave from the East. If you wish to study the English countryside of the more genteel novelists, you can have it neatly arranged and spread out for you on the Isle of Wight. There is not much bad poverty there, even now, and a good deal of homely enchantment: the Downs high above the Channel; the sub-tropical

the Labour Exchange and, outside it, as pitiful a little crowd of unemployed as ever I have seen. No building cathedrals for them, poor devils: they would think themselves lucky if they were given a job helping to build rabbit-hutches. We ran into the big square, into which coaches like ours were coming from all quarters, and anchored off Oatmeal Row.

Here we changed passengers, but I had no better luck, for the new lot consisted of five mousy women of various ages, of the kind who never speak but in whispers when travelling and always compress their lips and narrow their shoulders as if to make themselves as small as possible and so elude some imaginary pursuer. I now sat on the front seat and looked at the road through a window as big as the plate-glass front of most small shops. But the enchanted landscape had gone; here was ordinary countryside. We passed a brigade of artillery on the march, and I noticed once again that none but a few older officers and warrant officers had war medals, though it still seems only yesterday that I walked through the demobilization camp. How innocent the field guns looked, all polished and muzzled and in their best clothes! As we passed gun after gun, and dozens of foolish red young faces, I was asking myself when these things would next fire at an enemy and for what fantastic cause. At the next town we made a halt of quarter of an hour or so, 'for refreshments' the conductor told us, as he almost bundled us into the little coffee shop where we had stopped. The five mousy women crept in, whispering, and I followed them, and we were all served with coffee and biscuits by a young woman whose face was far too spotty. Another passenger joined us, a woman in black who looked as if she were busy hating somebody, and we started again. We nosed our way ponderously through Bradford-on-Avon, which is very different from the other Bradford where I was born and nurtured. Bradford-on-Avon is all quaint, whereas in the other Bradford there is nothing quaint, except perhaps the entire population. Then Bath spread herself before us, like a beautiful

dowager giving a reception. Bath, like Edinburgh, has the rare trick of surprising you all over again. You know very well it is like that, yet somehow your memory must have diminished the wonder of it, for there it is, taking your breath away again. There is a further mystery about Bath - which Edinburgh does not share - for I have never been able to imagine who lives in those rows and rows of houses really intended for Sheridan and Jane Austen characters. They all seem to be occupied; life is busy behind those perfect façades; but who are the people, where do they come from, what do they do? As our stay there, on this journey, only lasted for about two minutes, I did nothing to settle this question, though my mind played with it again as we rolled away from these Palladian heights. After that the road was a muddle until at last we came to a place where trams and coasting steamers seemed in danger of a collision and I realized that I had been deposited neatly in the very heart of Bristol.

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At one period during the war I was stationed in South Devon and when I got week-end leave from there I usually travelled at night to save time, and so it happened that I frequently found myself changing trains at Temple Meads Station, Bristol, always in the middle of the night and always with a two or three hours' wait. Sometimes I hung about the station or wandered out into the dismal streets outside, and sometimes I went across to the hotel across the way and tipped the night porter so that I could have a nap in front of the dying fire in the smoke-room. And this is all I ever knew of Bristol: Temple Meads Station in the dark hours, Victoria Street, and the deserted smoke-room of the hotel there. The natural result was that I carried with me for years a vague impression that this was an unpleasant city, and until I made this journey I never troubled to go and see what it really was like. Now I know better, a great

deal better. Bristol is a fine city. They are right to be proud of it.

There is another reason why Bristol surprised me so pleasantly. I was brought up in a city that was largely the product of nineteenth-century industrialism, a place lacking age, traditions, history; and nearly every other town I saw in my youth was of the same kind: groups of factories and warehouses with quarters for working people, more comfortable quarters for cashiers and managers, a few big houses for the manufacturers and merchants themselves, and the usual sprinkling of shops and pubs, with a town hall and an art gallery in sham Gothic and wondering what on earth they were doing there. That was the sort of provincial city I knew as a child, with the result that it remains my idea of a provincial city. I was not surprised when I found that places like Oxford and Cambridge or York and Canterbury were quite different, because I expected them to be different, knowing that they were all famous museum pieces of township; but I was surprised – and still am surprised – when I find that a provincial city, comparable in size and wealth to the ones I used to know best, is not a dirty nineteenth-century hotch-potch, not merely an extended factory and warehouse, but a real city with a charm and dignity of its own. I never get over it. I stand gaping, like the barbarian I am. Bristol is not as big as Leeds, for example, but it looks ten times the place that Leeds looks. It is a genuine city, an ancient metropolis. And as you walk about in it, you can wonder and admire. The place has an air.

I knew about Bristol, of course. I knew that the Cabots had set sail from there to discover the mainland of America; that Hakluyt had been one of its deans and Burke one of its Members; that it has associations with all manner of literary folk, Chatterton, Savage, Hannah More, Coleridge and Southey. I knew it was a famous old port – or, if you like, a vintage port – and had its cathedral and its St Mary Redcliff

Church and its Merchant Venturers' Hall and other fine old buildings. I knew that for centuries it had been the great city of the West. I knew all this and a lot more guidebook stuff. Nevertheless, knowing too that Bristol is an English provincial city, somewhere in size between Leeds and Bradford, I had expected to see the usual vast dingy dormitory. What I did see, of course, was something that would not have astonished me at all in Germany, France or Italy, and ought not to have astonished me in England: I saw a real old city, an ancient capital in miniature.

What is especially admirable about Bristol is that it is both old and alive, and not one of your museum pieces, living on tourists and the sale of bogus antiques. It can show you all the crypts and gables and half-timberings you want to see; offers you fantastic little old thoroughfares like Mary-Le-Port Street and Narrow Wine Street; has a fine display of the antique, the historical, the picturesque; but yet has not gone 'quaint' but is a real lively bustling city, earning its living and spending its own money. The Merchant Venturers have vanished; the slave trade, on whose evil proceeds this city flourished once, is now only a reminder of man's cruelty to man; the port, depending on the shallow twisting Avon, is only a shadow of its old self; but Bristol lives on, indeed arrives at a new prosperity, by selling us Gold Flake and Fry's chocolate and soap and clothes and a hundred other things. And the smoke from a million gold flakes solidifies into a new Gothic Tower for the university; and the chocolate melts away only to leave behind it all the fine big shops down Park Street, the pleasant villas out at Clifton, and an occasional glass of Harvey's Bristol Milk for nearly everybody. The docks may not be what they were (though I believe you can still hop off a tram here and straightway board a ship for America), but then Bristol has now pushed itself out to sea at Avonmouth, where the bananas come pouring in from the West Indies. It was the original West Indian trade that made this city a great port, and even now its more important indus-

tries – such as the manufacture of tobacco and chocolate – have still a West Indian flavour.

Indeed, all the older part of the city, that grand muddle not far from the docks, still has a West Indian flavour. Even the pubs down there have a suggestion of Spanish Main richness about them. There seems to be more colour than usual in the bottles stacked behind the bar; and here are counters on which guineas have gone ringing. This appears, on a first impression, to be a city after my own heart. True, it is having everything in its favour: the weather is glorious, very bright but not too warm; I believe I have just staved off a cold and so am ready to be pleased (a few sneezes and the whole place might look black); I am at the beginning of my journey, not tired yet, still sanguine. Possibly, for these reasons, I may be flattering the place. But, I repeat, so far it seems a city after my own heart. It is old but not living in the past; it is lively and picturesque and comparatively prosperous; the place has dignity, and the people, I imagine, high spirits. It has kept its civic pride. It rejoices in a spirit of independence, of which more later. It may be the fine weather or my own optimism, but my impression of the folk here – especially the working folk – is that the females are above the average in good looks and that the men are above the average in breadth of shoulder and stockiness. There is plenty of good old West Country blood about. You could pick a splendid revue chorus or a sound rugger side out of the nearest street. I feel that the working people here enjoy life. There is not that terrible dreariness which is probably the chief curse of our provincial towns. The people are hearty creatures who like to eat and drink well, and enjoy themselves. In all that old central part of the city, whose pavements seem to be crowded all day, there is a robust life. The pubs open early; the shops are doing a brisk trade; the wireless and gramophone establishments are grinding out tunes; food of the cheaper sort seems plentiful; and the crowded scene has a hearty eighteenth century quality, reminding you that this is Fielding's country. This

would be no place to pick a quarrel in; anybody who asked for trouble, I imagine, could soon have it from these red-faced, thick-set fellows. (But the only creature I saw in bad trouble was a rat in a cage, at the entrance to an alley in Old Market Street, where a small crowd gathered to see a big fat publican bring his terrier to chase the rat down the alley, which it did to everybody's satisfaction. I should not be surprised to learn that there was still cock-fighting somewhere at the end of one of these alleys.) In the old days, Bristol was notoriously tough, with a reputation not unlike that of Chicago in our time. And during the Reform riots of 1831, the Bristol crowd burned down the Mansion House, custom-house, the bishop's palace, and the gaol.

If I had stayed longer, I might have seen some trouble, for one night I attended a fascist meeting near the docks. Neither of the black-shirted young men, who looked as fierce as Mussolini himself, could make himself heard for more than half a minute at a time, because most of the audience consisted of communists, who stolidly sang their dreary hymn, the *International*. (I think it was that. I heard something about 'the rising of the masses'. And why it is always 'the masses'? I wouldn't raise a finger for 'the masses.' Men, women and children – but not masses.) And a fat little Italian kept lifting his yellow moon-face, to scream derisively. 'There are only four of us here tonight,' the black-shirt roared, white with anger, 'but you wait until Thursday. Just try it on Thursday, that's all.' And I am still wondering whether they did try it on Thursday. I do not imagine, however, that either of these parties will make many converts in Bristol.

There may be far less unemployed here than in the cities further north, but there are plenty of men out of work, and one morning I attended a meeting of them in a Labour Hall in Old Market Street. The room itself, a fair-sized one used for dancing, was almost full. The men were mostly sturdy, decent-looking fellows, who did more smoking than applauding and

cheering. The speaker was an oldish man with very short legs, a droll face and an enormous voice. He was obviously a practised orator and his only fault was a certain irritating trick he had of slowing up and over-emphasizing unimportant remarks, probably when he was giving himself time to think. At first his audience seemed apathetic, but then he roared, 'The class to which I belong - and you belong - *our* class - is nothing but a set of damnable silly donkeys.' Everybody laughed and cheered at this. The hall woke up. He then went on to describe some local and rather pettifogging attempts at welfare work, which included a scheme for giving out tiny strips of land and for breeding - to his great joy and ours, of all things - rabbits. He made very artful play with this. 'Radicalism,' he bellowed. 'Talk about radicalism. I remember it fifty years ago - yes, fifty years ago. And they were real Radicals then. Jesse Collins. He wanted three acres for every man - and a cow. Now they've cut the three acres down to inches, and instead of a cow - it's rabbits.' At which we all roared. 'Good old Jack,' some of them shouted. Evidently the speaker was known, respected and delighted in - as a character, and if there is one thing that the English people love it is a character, who, once he has thoroughly established himself as such, may abuse them as much as he pleases. And this the little man did, with all the power of his admirable lungs. Twenty-five thousand members of his class, here in the city, could attend a football match and pay their shilling each, but when collectors and collections were wanted for the Unemployed Fund, there were only a few helpers and shillings to hand. 'I've got no hope for the present generation of the working class,' the indomitable little old Radical shouted at us, 'no hope at all. They're a lot of silly mugs. We can only work now for the boys and girls who'll make the next generation. And I hope to God they'll have more sense than the fathers that begot 'em.' And he grinned at us sardonically through the smoke; then suddenly sat down. He was all right. The large Irishman who followed, and who spoke in a

soft whine, was such an anti-climax that half the meeting departed and I went out with it.

The middle class here seems to model itself on the civic motto, Virtue and Industry. They are fortunately situated, for the city's prosperity never collapsed and its benefactors - particularly the Wills family - have never locked away their purses; they have Clifton to live in; and they have Clifton Down and the grand gorge of the Avon to play about on or in, with such places as Bath, Wells, Cheddar, Chepstow, only round the corner. No wonder they all live on in Bristol. If they were suddenly dumped into Newcastle or Manchester, life would immediately begin to look a much grimmer business. They are naturally a conservative lot, apt to frown upon an occasional bit of frankness in the local Little Theatre, which was relying upon *Mary Rose* when I visited it. Everybody told me that these Bristol people 'take a lot of knowing', though I seem to have heard as much said of all the people in every provincial city or rural district. But it may be truer here than elsewhere. What is certainly true - and admirable - is that these people are proud of their city, and do not see it, as some north-country people see their towns, as a place in which to make money and then to sneak out of, thinly disguised as English gentlemen. The Bristol merchant remains a Bristol merchant, and for this he may be forgiven a few stupidities and timidities.

Here is one example of the Bristol spirit in action. A few years ago the city had four newspapers, two morning and two evening papers, all owned and run by local people. This would not do. Bristol became one of the campaigning grounds of the warring national newspaper syndicates. After various manoeuvres and parleys and armistices, Bristol found that it had lost its chief morning paper and both its old local evening papers. But the Press magnates, who felt that everything had been satisfactorily arranged, forgot that the spirit of independence still exists in Bristol. The city saw no reason why it

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should be treated as if it were somebody else's back-garden. The citizens decided to start an evening paper of their own. Various prominent persons canvassed for promises of capital, formed a body of directors, and then appealed to the local public for necessary money. All manner of sums, from the workman's pound upwards, were immediately subscribed; the staff, chiefly composed of men who had been thrown out of work by the recent manoeuvres and parleys, was soon found; and a new evening paper was launched and at once reached to a circulation of seventy thousand. I understand that it has not yet touched its reserve capital and has already paid a dividend to its shareholders and a bonus to its staff. This is more than a piece of local history. It is really of national significance. It is good that the old and honoured city should defend itself so sturdily. It is good that Bristol should have its own paper, a genuine local enterprise, and not merely some mass publication thrown at it like a bone to a dog. It is good that there should be a real independent provincial Press. People ought to read national newspapers, but they also ought to read local newspapers too, for England, even now, is still the country of local government, local politics, strong local interests, and only the newspaper written and published in the immediate neighbourhood can deal adequately with such government, politics, and interests. It is important that people should read that Alderman Smith said this and Councillor Robinson did that. It is important that they should realize what is happening in their own district. Gossip and chatter from Fleet Street is a poor substitute for such information about and criticism of local affairs. Any decent provincial newspaper ought to be able to give its reader a much saner picture of the world than the popular national papers, with their hysteria and stunts and comic antics. Where an evening paper is concerned, publication must of course be always local, but nevertheless there is a wide difference between an evening paper published in the provinces by a Fleet Street combine and an evening paper produced by

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the people of the district. The citizens of Bristol had the sense to see this and the necessary enterprise to act for themselves. For this I honour them. The inhabitants of provincial towns, these days, are losing the habit of acting for themselves; they grumble but do nothing. They should go to Bristol.

Among the best examples of people actuated by this civic pride are the members of the Wills family, who might easily – following the example of most provincial magnates – have taken themselves and their gigantic fortunes out of the city. But they have chosen to remain in Bristol, the city that has made their fortunes for them, and they have spent enormous sums of money in the place, especially on the University. I spent an afternoon going round the largest of the Wills factories, which is not far from the centre of the city and is an immense building. The inspection was so thorough that I feel I know all about the manufacture of cigarettes and pipe tobacco now. What surprised me was the amount of work still done by hand. There were of course the most ingenious machines in almost every department. One of them has only to be fed regularly with cut tobacco, mile-long reels of paper, printing ink, and paste, to turn out cigarettes by the million. They can even make cigars, of the cheaper kind, by machinery, though it looks hard enough to put a cigar together using a pair of skilled hands. But the human element remains, and indeed dominates the work of the factory. Girls perform most of the tasks, whether feeding the machines or doing some completely manual act, such as stripping the leaf; and this great factory is a warren of girls, in green, pink, brown, blue overalls, every department having a different colour. Some of the tasks are desperately monotonous, requiring the ceaseless performance of one quick little action. But the girls on such work do not do it continuously: they change jobs every hour, sometimes even every half-hour. They begin work at half past seven and end at five, with twenty minutes for breakfast and an hour for dinner. There is a dining-room that will seat 2,400 persons, and the menu, which I exam-

ined, is varied and cheap. There is not only a medical clinic in the factory but also a dental one. The welfare work is obviously excellent. Wages are comparatively good; and there are bonus and superannuation schemes. I have no affection for the tobacco combine, and I rarely smoke its products, but I must say that the Wills family have proved themselves admirable large-scale employers. They have made their millions, but not out of anybody's tears and blood. Their policy as employers has been humane and wise, with the result that their people work well and never wish to leave, even at times when other jobs are more plentiful than they are at present. There must be always something inhuman, terrifying, about mass production on a really gigantic scale to a person like myself, who only catches sight of it now and then and hardly understands what is happening among the strange machines (though I found myself having quite an affectionate regard for the busy little gadget that slipped two tiny playing cards into every packet of cigarettes: it always looked as if it were going to be too late, but it never was); but I must confess that the final impression that this giant factory left with me was not one of miserable slavery, not even of grim soulless industry. But perhaps the kindly influence of Nicotina herself was at work here. If we must have factories of this size – and it seems we must – then let them be run in this fashion, no matter whether it is the lucky Wills family or the State itself that does the running.

Not many travellers for pleasure find their way to Bristol, which is a pity, for there is much to be seen in the city and it makes an excellent centre for excursions. My hotel was filled, and almost full up, with commercial travellers of the more prosperous sort, and I spent my last evening there exchanging beer and whisky with three of them in the lounge. Through them I learned how things were progressing in the fancy goods, scent and fur-coat trades respectively. They were good fellows and when the hour was late and we had given and consumed several orders, they took leave of the more sordid views of

commerce, with which they had entertained me earlier, and developed the wide vision and the noble sentiments of typical commercial Englishmen who are drinking late. 'Trust,' said one of them, the one who preferred bottled beer. 'That's what you've got to have in our business. Trust. Must have trust. My people give me a certain territory, send me out to represent them, and they've got to trust me and I've got to trust them. The same with my customers.' The other two agreed at once. 'I don't want to unload stuff on them they can't sell,' he continued, a righteous man. 'I'm not like these fellows who go round once – and only once – and unload anything on 'em. No. Must have trust. They've got to trust me. Trust's everything in our business.' We told him he was quite right. 'But,' said another, the one who had had such a marvellous piece of ham for breakfast at Malvern the previous morning, 'that's not all. In my opinion, you've got to have sentiment too. Yes, sentiment. Business is nothing without sentiment. I don't like doing a piece of business unless there's sentiment in it.' Which was to me a new and somewhat mysterious view, though it was certainly expressed at the appropriate time. It is odd that though there must be excellent material in the lives of these commercial travellers – for why shouldn't I mention my own trade for once? – you rarely meet them in novels or plays or films. Yet they would make admirable subjects for all three, for there must be frequent drama in both their business and their personal lives; their minds must be always clouded with hope and fear; and like so many of the most satisfying figures of fiction, whether Ulysses or Don Quixote, Tom Jones or Mr Pickwick, they are for ever on the move. If ever I write another *picaresque* tale, I will fill it with commercial travellers. But my chambermaid at this hotel had no opinion of them. She got two pounds a month for looking after fifteen rooms, and did not average ten shillings a week in tips, and so regretted that she had ever left the seaside hydro and its invalids for commercial gentlemen in the city. But even she thought the city a fine place.

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And that, I conclude, is the note of Bristol; if you like, its signature tune. A civic pride, a vocal civic pride, so rare in these days as to be almost startling. Like most places with a mixed trade, it has been fortunate in avoiding the lower levels of depression. A sharper bout of insolvency and unemployment might possibly have changed its tune. As it is, it remains a city that was strong yesterday and still lively today, a city that is old, dignified, historic, and at the same time a bustling modern commercial centre. And its citizens, even if they pile up huge fortunes, do not desert it, and are prepared to stake something on its independence. I was glad to have seen it, if only because it helped to restore my faith in provincial England; and as my taxi gave me a last glimpse of pleasant College Green and that odd conglomeration of ships and trams near Broad Quay and Bristol Bridge, I hoped soon to renew the acquaintance.

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There was a train leaving Bristol at 9.40 a.m. and as that is a good time to leave a city and this train seemed to be going to any number of places, I caught it. After two or three stops, we arrived at Swindon, and there I got out. I had never been to Swindon before, and all I knew about it was that the Great Western Railway had its chief works there and that it made the best railway engines in the world. After all, a town that makes the best locomotives in the world is a place of some importance, I argued; we ought to be proud of it; Swindon and its engines should be one of the feathers in our cap. It was my duty to have a look at this feather, to report upon its shape and colouring.

The station I had arrived at was Swindon Junction, and it offered me a taxi of sorts. I told the driver to take me to an hotel, and he drove me some distance, through mean streets, finally climbing a hill and landing me at an hotel in what is called the Old Town. This is the Swindon that was there before the Great

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Western Railway came: a village of call, possibly a sketch of a market town. There was nothing remarkable in it, certainly not my hotel, which received me with complete lack of enthusiasm. I found the chambermaid busy trying to fasten the wallpaper in my room to the wall with drawing pins, and was in time to indicate a few spots where a pin would be valuable. If drawing pins could have restored paint-work, I would have sent out for another box. Then I washed myself among the chipped crockery in the corner, unpacked my bag and went out. The sun was still shining. I descended upon the New Town, the real Swindon.

My way went first down a long straight road that was obviously one of the newer enterprises of the town. It was lined on each side by tiny semi-detached houses of red brick. There were a great many of them and they were all alike, except in their little front gardens. Some house-holders favoured dahlias and Michaelmas daisies, others preferred the bright geranium. All these gardens, though hardly bigger than a tablecloth, were flowering profusely. There is this to be said about the English people: give them even a foot or two of earth, and they will grow flowers in it; they do not willingly let go of the country – as the foreign people do – once they have settled in a town; they are all gardeners, perhaps country gentlemen, at heart. Abroad, the town, even though it is really only a small village, nearly always starts abruptly, brutally, at once cutting itself off from the country and putting on the dusty and flowerless look of a city. Here we take leave of the country reluctantly, and with infinite gradations, from the glory of rosebeds and the dull parade of hollyhocks to the last outposts, among grimy privet and grass where perhaps a sooty aster still lingers. Find a street without a flower, and you may be sure that there the English are in exile, still hoping and planning behind the lace curtain and the aspidistra for a time and place that will break into living blossom. There are flowers in their dream. When the Housing Society I know in North London installs the former

occupants of slum tenements in clean new flats, the windows of those flats are soon gay with flowers: a significant fact.

I thought about these things as I walked down this long straight road. There was something miniature and monotonous about these houses, but the road was not bad. A life could be lived in it. I soon found, however, that I had been looking at the newest and best of these railway streets. A turn brought me into the fifty-year-old region, the town proper. Here there were no gardens and the houses were built in immense unbroken rows. It was a town laid out for Victorian artisans, who no doubt considered themselves lucky to be there. I seemed to walk miles between these brick façades, for ever the same height. Each street seemed exactly like the last. Nowhere did I see one house bigger or older or newer or in any way better or worse than the others. Everywhere, the same squat rows. It was like wandering through a town for dingy dolls. There was nothing to break the monotony. If a number of bees and ants, cynically working in bricks and mortar, had been commissioned to build a human dormitory, they could not have worked with a more desolating uniformity. The people who planned these streets must have been thinking and dreaming hard about the next world, not this one: it is the only charitable conclusion. Probably I could not have been walking here more than half an hour at the most, but I felt as if I had had hours and hours of it. When at last I came to a blank-faced shop, labelled *Pang Bros. Chinese Laundry*, I was almost startled. What were the Pangs doing here, and what did they think of it? I ought to have stopped and inquired.

The very next shop I came to, for now I was coming closer to the centre of the town, was one of those hotch-potch second-hand establishments you find in these places. One large window was filled with strange musical instruments, not only ukelele-banjos and mandolines and flute hummers and the *Kentucky Trap Drum* outfits but also *Real Pigskin Tom-toms (Deep Tone)* and *Korean Temple Blocks and Beaters*; and for a

moment I had a wild vision of all the people in these streets, headed by the Pang brothers, beating and beating away at these pigskin tom-toms and Korean temple blocks. (One night they would not stop at eleven but go on beating, harder and harder, until the sun rose and found that all the miserable little streets had gone.) Among the tattered books in another window of this shop was one that I had not seen for many years, but I remembered it well, for it had been published by a man whose professional reader I had been, just after I first came to London, and this was one of the very first manuscripts I had recommended him to publish. Standing there, so many years and miles away, I could see myself writing my report on that book. And now here was a copy of it, dingy and torn, a waif in a back street in Swindon, but alive, still alive, only waiting for somebody to put down sixpence so that it could say all over again what it had said to me, in a neat typescript, long ago. The publisher himself was dead and gone; a bus or a bacillus might remove me at any moment; and that book, which had made no stir at all in the world, would outlive the whole condescending crew of us. The only other article offered for sale in that street that I noticed was a present for any good child called *Jolliboy II Quick-firing Machine Gun (See How Quickly Pellets Are Ejected)*, and as I walked away I hoped that the jolly boys who played with it would never find themselves caught in the barbed wire with a stream of hot lead disembowelling them. The people who sell that toy might be encouraged to give away with it a few photographs showing what its parent toy can do to a man's guts.

I came to the railway works themselves, at the bottom of the town, just as the men were coming out for dinner or at the end of a shift. A sturdy lot with blackened faces, much too sturdy and far too grimy for the dolls' houses they had to go to. I followed a crowd of them round a corner, where I found a dismal little beer house. But only two of them were inside, having a pint with their bread and meat. It was here that I met

a philosopher. He drifted in, a ghostly old scrap of humanity, wearing a black muffler, an overcoat too large for him, and a discharged soldier's badge, and he carried over his shoulders an odd-slung parcel bulging with bits of rope and thick twine. He ordered a mug of the cheapest beer, pointed to it, grinned toothlessly, and mumbled: 'I always get the cheapest, see. It's the best. They don't put chemicals in it. Can't afford to put chemicals in the cheapest, see. Only put 'em in the best. That's how it is nowadays.' I asked him what was in his peculiar parcel. 'That's for mending mats, see,' he said. 'That's what I do - mend mats. All over I go, mending mats. Clubs, see - clubs. I'm affiliated,' he added proudly. 'Yersh - I'm affiliated.' He never condescended to explain what he meant by being affiliated, but he brought out the word as if it were a word of power, and the sound of it on his lips made his face a little less spectral. You never saw such a poor wisp of an old chap, his bones seemed to shine through his greyish skin; but he talked of his travels - for he was constantly on the move, finding more mats to mend - with a great air. 'Go from 'ere to Newbury, then Reading, then 'Igh Wycombe, then London, see. Spend the winter munsh in London - Woolwich way. Good ol' Woolwich - that's where I spend winter munsh.' He was only a year away from his old-age pension. Not married? I asked. Yersh, he'd been married. Any children? I asked. 'I hadn't, but the wife had,' he told me, winking rapidly with his left eyelid. 'Leastways, the first might ha' been mine. The other two wasn't. Had my suspicions about the second kid - along of a pal o' mine who was always round, Franki Such-and-such. When the third come, he was the spit image of Frankie Such-and-such. 'Ere, I says to the wife, that kid's not mine. Oh, isn't it? she says. Well, who's is it then? It's Frankie Such-and-such's, I says. And the next thing you know, we're separated, and she's living with Frankie Such-and-such, up in Manchester.' He told me all this with the humorous detachment of the true philosophic mind. He blamed nobody.

This was the world we have to live in. Having then proved his complete independence, he took the interdependence of man for his theme. 'All depend on other people, don't we?' he concluded earnestly. 'That's ri'. An' I don't care who you are. Rockefeller's got a lot o' money, and I 'aven't, see. But Rockefeller's got to depend on other people, hasn't he? Course he has. Same as me. We all 'ave, see.' There spoke the affiliated man, and I left him with the price of several more pints as a small return for these sentiments. And if a little ghost of a man, wearing a brown overcoat much too big for him, offers to mend your mat, give him a job.

Now I went up the main street, which was a poor thing, chiefly filled with cheap shops and sixpenny bazaars. There were plenty of women going in and out of these shops, for the men of the town were in steady work, building their famous engines, but you felt that all the shoddiest stuff of Europe, America and Japan were being poured into this street. I had lunch in an eating-house there, noisy with gramophone music coming from the wireless, that is, music at third hand. The prime dish of the day was Roast Griskin Pork with two veg. - one and threepence. It was dear at the price. The pork was nearly all dubious fat, the Brussels sprouts were watery, and the baked potatoes might have been made of papier mâché. I ate what bits I could, refused any more, returned to the street, which looked much brighter after a visit to that eating-house, and walked up the hill to see the rest of the town, having heard rumours of a public park. I never reached the park, however, because very soon it was raining hard.

The other diners at the hotel, that evening, were commercial travellers of the more morose kind; but not far from me were a rather raffish-looking middle-aged man with his lady friend, and I never heard anything more dismal than their attempt at talk. He would slosh about in his food and drink, and she, after racking her brains for something to say, would venture at last on a question. 'Where's Mabel now?' she would ask, not really

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caring where Mabel was. 'At Brighton,' he would grunt. She would work hard with this, and finally say, 'I suppose she's staying at the So-and-so?' That was all they could manage between them, and it made silence and solitude seem comparatively cheerful. I left them still casting about for topics, and hoped as I went that the rest of their evening would be a little livelier. There was rain in the streets, but every moment there were fewer drops, so out I went, to see how the people who build the best locomotives in the world enjoy themselves on a damp night in early autumn. The dinner had been better than I had expected, and now I was quietly sinking into that mood of not unpleasant melancholy that comes to a man alone in a strange dark town. The main street was singularly quiet. Now and then a pair of lads would hail a passing pair of girls; that was all. The only lights shone from the three picture theatres of the town, from the pubs, which were poor places, and from a fish-and-chip shop here and there. These were not enough to take the murk out of the street, which had an unfriendly shuttered look. This, I said to myself as I wandered about in the dwindling rain, is one of the penalties inflicted upon you if you live in these smaller industrial towns, where you can work but cannot really play. A town in which men have worked hard all day at their giant engines ought to be glittering and gay at night, if only for an hour or two. This street should be ablaze with light. One ought to be able to look through great windows and see the triumphant engine-makers with their wives, sweethearts, children, eating and drinking and dancing and listening to music, beneath illuminations as brilliant as their furnaces. The street should be shaking happily with waltz tunes. Let those who are tired out, let the quiet and studious ones, sit at home, but those who want light, company, cheerful noise, gaiety, should have these things, for they have earned them. Think of the energy, the organization, the drive of purpose required to construct the *Cheltenham Flier* with its eighty-odd miles an hour; or even the energy, organization,

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drive of purpose required to cram these Woolworth stores with the mass products of Czechoslovakia and Japan; why, a minute fraction of these could fill this dark street with light, music, gaiety. So I told myself as I wandered about, after trying and rejecting a pub or two, mere little boxes of smoke and the smell of stale beer.

A turning at the bottom of this main street directed me to the Playhouse. It was not a bad building, and would make an excellent Little Theatre. A depressingly small audience, which could not muster more than a dozen in the best (two-shilling) seats, was watching a touring revue company. The scenes alternated regularly between song and dance affairs with the chorus and badly rehearsed comic scenes, played by a very old comedian, who kept forgetting the poor lines he had been given, a middle-aged dwarf who was for ever being pushed over, and a young man who had not yet learned how to be funny. The chorus were fit entertainers for all those rows of squat houses, for they looked to me to be all no more than four feet high, a troupe of energetic but ungraceful dolls. There was one, however, different from the rest, intent on something more than jiggling for a pittance; she sang and danced for dear life; she alone turned herself into a Mexican, a vaguely Oriental slave, a schoolgirl, a golliwog, a miniature bacchante, while the others so clumsily and pitifully pretended; her eyes were brighter, her feet nimbler; she entered eagerly and departed reluctantly; her whole small being leaped up to answer the challenge of the floats and the two spot-lights; and it was she - and she alone - who transformed that forlorn place into a theatre. She was really alive; she delighted in her work; she had gusto; and so she deserves a salute, this little chorus girl. I hope she will dance her way, growing up all the time, into whatever company, whatever theatre, she wants. There are not enough of her kind, whether they are pretending to be golliwogs on the stage or pretending to be real people in the street.

It was eleven o'clock and very dark and quiet when I re-

turned up the main street, on my way back to the hotel. What noise there was came from a fellow of no size in a raincoat, who was very drunk. He was baying spasmodically, 'O-old soldiers n-n-never die-ee,' and on his face, when I caught sight of it under a lamp, was a fixed look of faint surprise. He was reeling in a blazing world of self-esteem and colossal good-fellowship, a world assured of the immortality of old soldiers, and somehow – and here he was surprised and would soon be deeply pained – he was alone in this world, for the passers-by who hurried off into the dark on their way home obviously cared nothing for good-fellowship and the destiny of old soldiers. I saw him later, as I waited for the bus to take me up the hill, and he was still baying his one line of song, but now there was a note of protest in it. Nothing wonderful had happened; no friends, no fun. And soon he would be sick somewhere and it would be all over and he would be simply a poor devil who had taken on too great a load of beer.

The only man who was sitting up in the hotel smoke-room had probably had much more to drink, but he could carry it in a more artful fashion. He made me drink some whisky with him before going to bed. He was a very red-faced, spluttering, middle-aged bachelor, who had retired from some colonial merchandising business in the City to become that fantastic creature, the Racing Man. (There were some races in the neighbourhood.) He boasted to me, for he was in a very boastful humour, that he made a great deal of money out of betting, but I did not believe him. There he went, week after week, year in and year out, following the races, as hard at it as any bookie, and putting more time and energy into this elaborate idiocy, as he admitted, than he had ever done into his business. He complained of the endless hotel life, the crowded race-trains, the bleak days on the courses, the tips that came to nothing, the bookies that vanished, the horses he had backed that had won only to be disqualified; yet he was proud of himself, both as a sportsman leading a glorious life and as a mysteriously dutiful

citizen who was somehow contriving that all these worries and expenses and miseries should work for the common good. I, who admitted that I knew and cared nothing about racing, was to him a fellow who was merely crawling through life. Yet in all his talk – and there was plenty of it – he never dropped a phrase that lit up his ruling passion and showed it quivering in delight. A hawker, whose living demanded that he should drag himself on to every possible race-course, would have talked in the same strain as this sportsman, who was alone in the world and had money and so could have enjoyed himself in a thousand different ways. The only explanation of this daft way of life, I suppose, is that years ago, when he was a clerk in the City (and he had obviously started as one) who read the sporting papers and ventured a half-crown here and there, he had come to the conclusion that the racing men were the lords of life and so he had toiled and planned to turn himself into one. And now here he was, going the same old round, boasting and grumbling and fuddling himself with whisky, a full-blown sportsman – the ass.

The porter or boots or general factotum at this hotel was a sallow stripling with a snub nose and a lugubrious air, though quick and obliging enough. He did not come from these parts. I asked him about his wages and prospects. He told me that he received twelve shillings a week wages and averaged another ten shillings a week or so in tips. 'And out of that,' he added earnestly, 'I've got to pay my clubs and my endoe-ments – I've two or three of them.' I must have looked puzzled, for he went on: 'I think these endoe-ment policies the best way of saving your money.' And he had several endowment policies on hand! If they tell you that the youth of this country thinks only of today and is too free with its cash, remember this youth, who might have walked out of one of Dr Smiles' chapters. Perhaps in ten or fifteen years' time, when the mysterious 'endoe-ments' have matured, he may be running his own big hotel. But I am afraid it may not be a very cheerful place.