HAND WRITTEN WEEK 4 (MIDLANDS)

TRAVELLING BRITAIN

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CHAPTER FOUR

TO COVENTRY, BIRMINGHAM AND THE BLACK COUNTRY

I

My plan was to go from the Cotswolds to the Black Country, but I decided not to go straight to Birmingham but to make a little detour and first visit Coventry, a city I did not know at all. The weather was all wrong. As I left the glorious pastures of the Cotswolds and turned my face towards the Black Country, the sky should have darkened. As it was, I had a brilliant morning for my little cross-country journey; and the nearer I drew to Coventry the better it became. When I actually arrived there, late in the morning, there was not a single shred of cloud in the sky, an exquisite luminous azure. Everything was crystal-clear. Not an outline anywhere had the faintest blur. The brick walls, full in the sun, might have been newly painted by Vermeer. Distant factories, rigidly defined in three dimensions, had a Canaletto quality. Things near at hand, a passing bus, a big yellow poster, dazzled and hurt the eyes. Coventry itself, ancient steeples and motor-car factories and all, was stated so emphatically against the green hollow and the silken sky that to see it gave one a sharp jolt of pleasure. There was the famous old city of the three steeples, and the equally famous new city of bicycles and motor cars and wireless sets, and all so clear that it might have been transported into Italy. This was all wrong. I had been prepared for a dull day and gloomy vistas and was ready to overhaul my stock of sombre adjectives. I felt I could not cope with this unexpected brightness. The bedroom they gave me at the hotel was true to form, being the usual inhuman little box lined with stained wallpaper, and containing no running water. The window looked out on to

a blank brick wall. But the brick wall was fiery-hued and the water-pipe running down it had just been painted a bright green, and so the effect was that of a bold picture by some modern. I had a mind then to dodge the town, to say not a word about having been there. Honesty won, however, though the victory will not prove a spectacular one.

Coventry is one of those towns that have often changed their trades and have had many vicissitudes, but, unlike nearly all the rest, it has managed to come out on top. In the thirteenth century, it was making cutlery: in the fourteenth, cloth; in the fifteenth, gloves; in the sixteenth, buttons; in the seventeenth, clocks; in the eighteenth, ribbons; in the nineteenth, sewing machines and bicycles; and now, in the twentieth, motor cars, electrical gadgets, machine tools, and wireless apparatus. You may judge how artfully it has backed its fancy by the following figures: in 1901 its population was 69,978; and its estimated population for this year is no less than 182,000; figures that suggest that the city has got lost in time and imagines that the Industrial Revolution is in full force. In the centre of the city, I found ample remains of the cutlery, cloth, button, clock and ribbon periods scattered about, now oddly mixed up with Lyons, cheap tailors, Ronald Colman, cut-price shops, berets, and loud speakers. It is genuinely old and picturesque: the cathedral of St Michael's, St Mary's Hall, Ford's and Bablake Hospitals, Butcher Row, and the old Palace Yard. You peep round a corner and see half-timbered and gabled houses that would do for the second act of the *Meistersinger*. In fact, you could stage the *Meistersinger* – or film it – in Coventry. I knew it was an old place – for wasn't there Lady Godiva? – but I was surprised to find how much of the past, in soaring stone and carved wood, still remained in the city. Though even here, in the centre, the two buildings that dominate the rest are new and enormous bank offices, very massive and Corinthian and designed to suggest that there is nothing wrong with our financial system. If you do not understand why

our banks give so little interest on our loans to them and demand so much more interest on their loans to us, or why they are encouraged, for private profit, to exchange mere credit for solid buildings and machinery and businesses at work, you should go and have a look at those colossal white stone pillars of theirs in Coventry. Perhaps they will reassure you; that is what they are there to do.

These picturesque remains of the old Coventry are besieged by an army of nuts, bolts, hammers, spanners, gauges, drills, and machine lathes, for in a thick ring round this ancient centre are the motor-car and cycle factories, the machine tool makers, the magneto manufacturers, and the electrical companies. Beyond them again are whole new quarters, where the mechanics and fitters and turners and furnace men live in neat brick rows, and drink their beer in gigantic new public houses and take their wives to gigantic new picture theatres. Tennyson, in his poem about Godiva that begins, so uncharacteristically, *I waited for a train at Coventry*, must have foreseen all this, for does he not mention there, 'New men that in the flying of a wheel, Cry down the past . . .' Here are the new men and the flying wheels. Coventry seems to have acquired the trick of keeping up with the times, a trick that many of our industrial cities find hard to learn. It made bicycles when everybody was cycling, cars when everybody wanted a motor, and now it is also busy with aeroplanes, wireless sets, and various electrical contrivances, including the apparatus used by the Talkies. There are still plenty of unemployed here, about twelve thousand, I believe. But as I write, the place has passed its worst period of depression and unless this country reels back into a bottomless pit of trade depression, Coventry should be all right. Factories that were working on short time a year or two ago, are now in some instances back on double shifts. I saw their lights and heard the deep roar of their machinery, late that night.

My own car, a Daimler, was made in this city, and so after

lunch I went out to see how they did it. I climbed a hill and there, just over the summit, were the Daimler works, like a young town of long brick sheds. I was given a guide, an intelligent young engineer who took me first to the laboratory where a number of young men were enjoying themselves testing the various samples of metal. I took a hand myself in testing the hardness of a small metal part with a diamond point, which was connected with an indicator showing the degree of resistance in exact figures. In other rooms there were bubbling test-tubes and enlarged microscopic slides of sections of metal. In the manufacturing of motor cars, the metal's the thing, and it seems they are very scientific about it now. I was then taken through various huge sheds in which hundreds and hundreds of mechanics were at work making and testing parts. (There are about four thousand men employed here.) All these sheds were the same: a long vista of blue electric-light shades, a misty perspective of fly-wheels above and brown overalled men below. They were all hard at it and most of them were having a smoke too, for they are allowed to smoke for three-quarters of an hour in the morning and in the afternoon: a wise rule. Every man in these departments was limited to one job, but there was a certain amount of variety inside the job. This was not strictly mass production: there was no endless moving chain; there were no men restricted to putting on a bolt there, a nut here; it was highly organized large-scale jobbing production. Its size, my guide told me, was in its favour, because parts were put through tests that would be impossible in a tiny workshop. A manufacturer in a small way could not afford to use the various machines necessary for these tests, such as the machine, one I watched with interest, which tested the exact balance of the flywheels and showed exactly where there was still a fraction too much metal on some segment. One had an impression of the most rigorous testing everywhere. The idea now is to cut down the preliminary trials of the finished car outside the factory, so the various parts – engine, gears, crankshafts, axles – are ferociously tried out before they are assembled. The modern motor car represents an astonishing feat of human ingenuity. Consider the number of them out on the roads and the extraordinarily few accidents due to any fault in the vehicle itself. If we were one half so clever in the matters that lie far outside machinery as we are about machinery itself, what people we should be and what a world we should leave our children! If life were only an internal combustion engine! The skill and the care that are lavished on these cylinders and pistons and gears! I have no doubt that boys and girls in Coventry are comparatively well looked after, but nobody has attended to them as their fathers are attending to the proud young Double-Six Daimlers.

There is a bus department in these works. I was allowed to see the giant steel entrails of these creatures. Two very fine specimens had just been completed, and my guide and I explored them, inside, top deck, and the driver's seat, where you suddenly feel very powerful. One of these grand new fellows, immensely powerful and roomy and ready to take you anywhere with its forty horses, costs between fifteen hundred and two thousand pounds. It would be a good idea, I said, to have one as a private car. It would be a better idea, I continued, to buy one and then rig it up as a caravan. As usual, I was not being original. The thing had already been done. An ingenious sportsman had commissioned a caravan bus, with sitting-room, two bedrooms, kitchen and bath. I envy him. I ought to have one for this journey, and then I could travel amusingly and comfortably and be free of these beastly hotels. The only trouble is, I imagine, that a great many roads must be closed to buses this size, which are at once very high and very heavy. But I have no doubt that you could travel fairly easily in one – at about nine miles to the gallon – with your family or some friends aboard, from Land's End to John o' Groats. I commend the notion to anybody who has a couple of thousand pounds to play with and thinks he could drive a bus. And the young man from the Daimler works, who had driven everything, assured

me that once you are familiar with the enormous length of a bus – and at first it must seem like turning a row of cottages round a corner – it is easier to drive than an ordinary car.

Notwithstanding the great size of these works and the extraordinary variety of tasks performed in them, I noticed, as I had done before in such places, the strange absence of any obvious supervision. An elaborate plan of work was first laid down – they have a special planning department here – and then the thousand-and-one jobs were distributed and the huge machine of production was set in motion. After that, the works almost ran themselves. Everybody knew what to do; you took something over from Bill, did your own job on it, then passed it on to Jack over there; and thus motor cars seemed to flower out of cast iron, steel, aluminium, as naturally as dandelions flower in a field. Once the plan was put into action, the machinery set going, the very minimum of supervision was necessary. I said something to this effect to the young man who was showing me round, and he agreed, rather ruefully, that it was true. He was rueful because this method of production means that men of his kind, not mechanics but educated engineers, find fewer and fewer avenues of promotion open to them. He himself had learned the practical side of his trade as an apprentice and the theoretical side at a university – he was an Oxford graduate – but nevertheless, though he was now thirty years of age, he was still only earning about four pounds a week. He was not condemning the firm, for which he seemed to have almost an affection. It was simply that these new methods of production demanded fewer and fewer intermediaries between the two or three managers and their planning department, on the one side, and the thousands of artisans on the other side. The technical man with his university degree, unless he was lucky and found an opening or had one made for him, was worse off now than the workmen themselves. At this very moment there are probably thousands of parents preparing to make heavy sacrifices in order that their boys should be turned into square pegs, when

unfortunately industry itself is arranging that there shall be only more and more round holes.

The Daimler young man, who took me back to my hotel, was not a Coventry man and did not like the place. Here he was in entire agreement with the head porter of my hotel, also not a Coventry man – perhaps there are no Coventry men – who answered my questions about a possible evening's amusement with the most sardonic negatives. It was the wrong night (it always is) to see them enjoying themselves; and anyhow they didn't enjoy themselves much. 'You go into one of these pubs,' he said bitterly. 'All right. What do you hear? All about gears and magnetos and suchlike. Honest. That's right. They can't talk about anything else here. Got motor-cars on the brain, they have. I hardly ever go into a pub. I go home and have a read.' I went to an ugly café, full of bamboo and wet tables, and drank tea while a large gramophone thundered *Carmen* and *Tales of Hoffmann* at me. Then I returned to my little box of a bedroom, which was cold and had no fireplace, and there put sheets of paper, ripe for a masterpiece, into my portable typewriter and then, after depths of vexation, savagely tore them out again. When this had gone on long enough, I washed myself in the chipped basin, and went downstairs and had a gin and bitters in a small room off the bar, where a barmaid with an enormous bust and a wig was busy exchanging badinage with four friends, two Bass (male) and two Guinness (female): 'He did, didn't he, Joe?' ' 'S ri',' 'Cor, he didn't ever,' 'Well, you ask Florrie,' 'I don't mean what you mean,' ' 'S ri',' ' 'Ere, Joe, you tell 'er.' After that, I took myself and my evening paper to a grill room. There I had a poor meal but made a discovery that did something to comfort me. The reason why English cookery was allowed to lapse into barbarism was that gradually only one article of diet was taken seriously. That is Steak. This is venerated and idealized. When an ordinary English waiter mentions any other dish, he is a realist and his very tone of voice tells you what that dish really is – muck. But when he mentions Steak, his

voice is low, hushed, reverent. First, it is Steak impersonal, the great noble viand. Then, when you have been converted into giving an order, it is Steak personal, *your* Steak. How will you have your steak, sir? He's just doing your steak, now, sir. Here's your steak, sir. It is as if he were talking about your wife. Name any other item on the menu that is discussed in this fashion, that is even treated with the merest hint of respect. It cannot be done. We live in the empire of the steak. Centuries hence, Central Asian anthropologists will prove to one another that a bleeding steak had some religious significance in the life of this forgotten island people. Incidentally, the steak I had that night in Coventry was much too tough, and I ate far too many fried potatoes with it, so that afterwards I had to walk miles and miles into the night and at last came to a hill from which I had a good view of the old constellations remotely and mildly beaming, and the new Morris works, a tower of steel and glass, flashing above the city of gears and crankshafts.

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When I awoke next morning, I felt a tiny but distinct thrill of pleasurable anticipation. The routine of getting myself ready to face the world was, I knew, to be broken this morning. Then I remembered that having left my razor behind somewhere, the day before, I had bought a new and original safety razor and had been given with it a tube of new and entirely original shaving cream. Luxuriously I rose to play with these toys, but before using them I carefully read the makers' accounts of them on the outer wrappings. The razor, I learned, was destined to revolutionize the practice of shaving; it was designed on a new principle; and having given it the most superficial trial, I would never want to use any other. The shaving cream was also on a new principle; it made shaving a pleasure; its lather was so quick, so foaming and creamy, so soothing, that you were in danger of using this cream without the excuse of a shave. In-

spired by these rhapsodies, I began shaving at the earliest possible moment. The cream was wretched stuff; the lather it made was no better than that from ordinary soap; there was no sound reason for its existence. The razor did not give me a proper shave at all; it was not that I could not handle it well, but simply that it could not cut hair. I spent a good ten minutes scraping away with it, and even then I was only half shaved. I am still wondering what the lying manufacturers of these articles had in their minds when they made them. Are they merely depending upon a number of people, like me, allowing themselves to be caught once? Or do they honestly believe that they have turned out a good shaving cream and a good razor? And if so, why? They have had plenty of opportunities to test the articles for themselves. On the other hand, surely it is hardly worth while going to the trouble and expense of manufacturing, advertising and marketing things they do not believe in themselves. What is the history of this bad shaving cream, this useless razor?

Half-shaved, disillusioned once more, I caught the bus that runs between Coventry and Birmingham. It was very full and so very uncomfortable. The weather was still fine but colder than it had been, with a sharp nip in the wind. We trundled along at no great pace down pleasant roads, decorated here and there by the presence of huge new gaudy pubs. These pubs are a marked feature of this Midlands landscape. Some of them are admirably designed and built; others have been inspired by the idea of Merrie England, popular in the neighbourhood of Los Angeles. But whether comely or hideous, they must all have cost a pot of money, proving that the brewers – and they seemed to be all owned by brewers – still have great confidence in their products. At every place, however, I noticed that some attempt had been made to enlarge the usual attractions of the beer-house; some had bowling greens, some advertised their food, others their music. No doubt even more ambitious plans for amusement would have been put into force if there had been

no opposition from the teetotallers, those people who say they object to public-houses because you can do nothing in them but drink, but at the same time strenuously oppose the publicans who offer to give their customers anything but drink. The trick is – and long has been – to make or keep the beer-house dull or disreputable, and then to point out how dull or disreputable it is. It is rather as if the rest of us should compel teetotallers to wear their hair long and unwashed, and then should write pamphlets complaining of their dirty habits: 'Look at their hair,' we should cry.

In the midst of a russet solitude, we came upon a notice board saying, *This is the City of Birmingham*. There was nothing in sight but hedgerows, glittering fields and the mist of the autumn morning. For a moment I entertained a wild hope that this really was the City of Birmingham, that the town had been pulled down and carted away. Not that Birmingham had ever done anything to me. I had never been there; this was my first visit. I knew very little about it. The little I did know, however, was not in its favour. I had always thought of the place, vaguely, as perhaps the most typical product in civic life of nineteenth-century industrialism, as a city of big profits and narrow views, which sent missionaries out of one gate and brass idols and machine guns out of another. It made a great many articles, chiefly in metal, but so far in my life not one of these articles had gained any hold over my affections. I had never said, 'Good old Birmingham!' myself, and never heard anybody else say it. In my limited experience, *Made in Birmingham* had been a dubious hallmark. And the Chamberlain family had supplied no heroes of mine. Then there were jokes about a foolish Watch Committee there. On the other hand, any guide-book could offer a great many facts on the credit side. In the eighteenth century, Birmingham had a Lunar Society that met every month, and among its members were James Watt, Matthew Boulton, Joseph Priestley, Josiah Wedgwood, Erasmus Darwin, Sir William Herschel, and Samuel Parr: a good all-

round team of talents. The number of important inventions, from the steam engine to gas lighting and electro-plating, that either first saw the light or were first brought to perfection in this city, is very impressive. Its commercial success has not been merely a matter of geography and geology, the fact that it has been the centre of a district rich in coal, iron, wood and sand. History comes into play here. Not being a place of any importance in the Middle Ages, Birmingham was not controlled by the guilds and did not suffer from the various restrictions imposed upon the then larger towns. It was not a chartered borough and therefore Nonconformists were free to settle and work there, and as the industrial revolution was largely nonconformist, Birmingham was able to take full advantage of it. Thus, when you hear jokes about the Birmingham Watch Committee and chorus girls' stockings, you are really at the end of a very long chain of historical cause and effect. Having allied itself to the black slavery of industry, the city managed to strike one or two stout blows for liberty in other directions, for which it must be given credit. And now it is the second city in England. By the time I had considered these matters, the fields had gone and we were passing houses and shops and factories. Did all this look like the entrance into the second city in England? It did. It looked a dirty muddle.

Where the bus finally stopped, a Birmingham citizen asked me if he could carry my two bags to the hotel. He was a young man, this Birmingham citizen: he was dressed in a ragged brown coat and a pair of patched and torn flannel trousers and the wreck of a pair of boots; his face was swollen and it was so long since he had shaved that he was well on his way towards wearing a matted tow-coloured beard. On our way to the hotel, I asked him a good many questions, but many of his replies I cannot give you here because he spoke so badly that I could not catch them. But he was twenty-two, had been out of work since he was sixteen, was not receiving the dole, had a father but no mother, and his father was also out of work. It was a fair step to

the hotel, and one of my bags, I knew, was heavy; so I told him to put them down and rest the moment he was tired; but there must have been good blood and bone somewhere in that ruin of a young fellow, for he never stopped or even slowed up but moved on at a good pace until he came within a yard or two of the hotel porter, who looked at him and spoke to him in a fashion that most of us would hesitate to adopt in talking to a mongrel that was snapping at our heels. However, I gave him a florin, which was what he usually made, with luck, in a whole day, and he went off delighted. There was a sudden access of civic dignity in the place. Here in Colmore Row you could imagine yourself in the second city of England. There is a really fine view at the end, where the huge Council House turns into Victoria Square. You see Hill Street mistily falling away beneath the bridge that the Post Office has thrown high across the road. If there is any better view in Birmingham than this, I never saw it. For a moment, as you stand there, you believe that at last you have found an English provincial city that has the air and dignity that a great city should have, that at last you have escaped from the sad dingy muddle of factories and dormitories that have been allowed to pass for cities in this island, that at last a few citizens who have eyes to see and minds to plan have set to work to bring comeliness into the stony hotch-potch, that Birmingham has had the sense to design itself as well as its screws, steam cocks, and pressure gauges. This is an illusion, and the only way in which to keep it would be to hurry away from that corner in a closed vehicle and see no more of Birmingham.

I could not do that, but I did the next best thing: I entered the Corporation Art Gallery and Museum, of which I had heard a good deal. The Director of the Gallery assured me that Birmingham had always had its craftsmen too and proved it by showing me case after case of local silver ware, some of it of tasteless design but all of it admirably executed. He also showed me some drawings done by young students – one of

them only a boy of fifteen – at the local school of art; and these were surprisingly good. He assured me too that Birmingham could be very generous towards its Gallery and Museum. There were two cases of exquisite Chinese porcelain, and he told me that the necessary sum – I think it was between two and three thousand pounds – to buy these objects of art, which are quite useless and will never declare a dividend, had been raised in a few days. Oddly enough, two other cases of Chinese porcelain, equally exquisite, had been lent to the museum by a famous comedian, whose jests about Birmingham's prudery I still remember. The Picture Gallery is famous for its wealth of examples from two English schools, the old water-colourists and the Pre-Raphaelites. I did not spend much time with the Pre-Raphaelite collection, which is particularly rich in drawings, because I get very little pleasure these days from the work of Burne-Jones and his friends. I was fascinated, as I always am, by Ford Madox Brown, who was not really a Pre-Raphaelite, and whose best work always seems to me to have an odd magical quality of its own. Perhaps the secret lies in its queer mixture of realism and the fantastic. You stare at his emigrants and workmen until it all grows eerie and you begin to feel that somebody, probably Ford Madox Brown himself, is looking at you through the canvas. Actually, if he were, he would be better off than you in this gallery, which is spaciously contrived and well built but badly lit, with more honest daylight falling on the floor than ever reaches the walls. It is probably good and proper that Birmingham should accumulate Pre-Raphaelite works of art, which are so entirely different from itself that their very presence together is sufficient to prove the rich breadth of this world. But for my part, I like life and art to be neither Birmingham nor Burne-Jones, but to travel on the honest roads that march between the deacons in counting houses, on the one side, and the drooping maidens in hot-houses on the other. In fact I like life and art to have much more in common with that other school of painting so well represented here, that

of the good old English water-colourists, who, whatever their private lives may have been, always impress me as being about the happiest set of men who ever lived in this country. They wandered about while the countryside was still unspoilt; they saw everything worth seeing; and what they saw they turned into enchanting bits of drawing and water-colour painting. They are the equivalent in visual art of our lyric poets. God created them, while there was yet time, to catch the lovely old England in line and wash, to open some little windows on to it for ever. Their very names, Turner, Girtin, Cotman, Cox, Varley, Bonington, are like the names of villages and apples. They have more of Cox's water-colours here in Birmingham than you can find anywhere else; they are not all good, for nearly all these industrious fellows were very unequal; but the best of them would make a man shout for pleasure if he were not in a picture gallery, which I take to be a place where we never raise our voices. It is the great weakness of visual art that it must be largely sought for in these inhuman institutions, where you cannot lounge and smoke and argue, and where you unconsciously begin to tiptoe until very soon your feet and legs ache. I had the luck, however, to get into a part of the gallery temporarily closed to the general public, and there a friendly curator fished out some lovely specimens of Girtin and Cotman and De Wint. They have there a little *Harvest Scene* by De Wint – a tiny wagon or two, then a glorious melting distance of rolling country and sky – that I should dearly like somebody to steal for me. It lit up my morning. All the years between Peter De Wint and myself were annihilated in a flash; he pointed and I saw, he spoke and I heard; and his mood, felt on that autumn day long ago, was mine. Whatever cloud of gloom covers Birmingham in my memory, I have only to recollect that corner of its gallery, to recall that stipple and wash of paint on a bit of board, and my memory is touched with colour, warmth, vivid life. How many people have already felt that about one little picture there, and how many people have still to have the ex-

perience? And how many pounds were paid for that water-colour? There's a nice little sum waiting to be worked out by some ingenious person. The result, I think, would prove that Birmingham – or any other city with a decent art gallery – can disburse enchantment at less than a penny a head. At the entrance to this art gallery and museum, they put up the daily returns of visitors. The recent average was about eight hundred a day on weekdays, with a sudden leap into thousands on Sundays. This is not, I was told, because Birmingham has a passion for art on Sunday afternoon, but because then all the young people promenade up and down the galleries, not looking at pictures but at one another. Apollo has to serve Venus. But what of it? The boys and girls have to begin mating somewhere, and they could obviously begin their acquaintance in much worse places. And you never know. Venus may be a strict taskmistress, but no doubt Apollo is allowed a word now and then. A picture will occasionally catch an eye, then hold it; and so the old leaven of art will start working. There may be new masterpieces presented to this gallery in twenty years' time because a boy and girl were promenading and 'clicking' there last Sunday afternoon. The director, a wise man, is of the same opinion. No doubt there are protests in Birmingham as there are elsewhere; and probably from those people – who must hate the whole commerce of the sexes – who protest with equal vehemence against the youngsters going anywhere else on Sundays, and when they have finally driven them out into the streets, protest against their being there too. They forget, these protesters, that both cities and the Sabbath were made for man. If the social arrangements do not fit in with the time-old desires of ordinary decent human nature, it is the social arrangements that should be changed.

I had lunch in one of those buffets that are so popular now in the larger provincial towns. There is a chef in a tall white cap, whom everybody calls Joe or Fred, and a white-jacketed waiter or two; and you sit on tall stools and have a slice or two of cold

meat, a little salad, and perhaps some cheese. All very pleasant, and useful in preventing one from eating a larger lunch than one needs. But I take this opportunity of declaring that these places seem to me to charge a great deal more for their food than it is worth. After having a very light lunch, you find you have as much to pay as if you sat down and demolished three or four solid courses. Why?

So long as you keep within a very narrow limit in the centre, Colmore Row, New Street, Corporation Street, Birmingham has quite a metropolitan air, and on the fine afternoon I first explored them, these streets had quite metropolitan crowds in them too, looking at the windows of the big shops and hurrying in and out of cafés and picture theatres. The city has a passion for arcades, and I never remember seeing more. It also has a passion for bridging streets, usually by joining two tall buildings somewhere on the third or fourth storey. When you get to the end of New Street, you can cross into Paradise Street and then arrive in Easy Row. There you find the white Hall of Memory, built to commemorate the 14,000 Birmingham men who were killed in the great war, some of them possibly with bits of Birmingham metal. Behind this Hall of Memory is Baskerville Place, called after the great printer, John Baskerville; and I should like to think there was something symbolical and fateful in the conjunction of this war memorial and the famous printing press. Among the many statues in this part of the city there is one to Joseph Priestley, whose house was sacked and burned down by the mob not long before he himself was compelled to leave the country altogether. It is a pity that some of the charred remains of his library and laboratory were not kept to be exhibited by the side of the statue.

Tired of walking round, I climbed to the top of a tram. I did not know where it was going, and when the conductor came for his fare, I said I would go as far as the tram went, and took a threepenny ticket. As if it knew what was about to happen, the sun immediately went out. This treachery did not leave us in a

kindly dusk – it was too early for that – but only in the middle of quite a different day, lowering and sullen. Then followed one of the most depressing little journeys I ever remember making. No doubt I was tired. And then again the electric tram offers the least exhilarating mode of progress possible. It is all very well for the Irish poet 'AE' to call them 'those high-built glittering galleons of the streets'; but no man inside a tram, no matter how he strains his fancy, really feels that he is inside a glittering galleon. The people show a sound instinct when they desert the tramway for any other and newer kind of conveyance. There is something depressing about the way in which a tram lumbers and groans and grinds along, like a sick elephant. Undoubtedly the tram helped. But it was Birmingham itself that did most of the mischief. In two minutes, its civic dignity, its metropolitan airs, had vanished; and all it offered me, mile after mile, was a parade of mean dinginess. I do not say that this was a worse tram-ride than one would have had in Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, any of our larger cities, or smaller ones either for that matter; I am not making comparisons between cities now. I only know that during the half-hour or so I sat staring through the top windows of that tram, I saw nothing, not one single tiny thing, that could possibly raise a man's spirits. Possibly what I was seeing was not Birmingham but our urban and industrial civilization. The fact remains that it was beastly. It was so many miles of ugliness, squalor, and the wrong kind of vulgarity, the decayed anaemic kind. It was not, you understand, a slum. That would not have been so bad; nobody likes slums; and the slum hits you in the eye and you have only to make an effort to get it pulled down. This was, I suppose, the common stuff out of which most of our big industrial towns are made. And those of us who have not to live or go shopping or amuse ourselves in such a thoroughfare as this probably do not notice it at ordinary times; we are on our way somewhere else, and we let it slip past us, outside the motor or the tram-car, without ever having a good look at it.

But I was there, on that tram, to have a look at it, and if I was tired and perhaps a little low-spirited when I began, I was still more tired and far lower-spirited before I had done. For there was nothing, I repeat, to light up a man's mind for one single instant. I loathed the whole long array of shops, with their nasty bits of meat, their cough mixtures, their *Racing Specials*, their sticky cheap furniture, their shoddy clothes, their fly-blown pastry, their coupons and sales and lies and dreariness and ugliness. I asked myself if this really represented the level reached by all those people down there on the pavements. I am too near them myself, not being one of the sensitive plants of contemporary authorship, to believe that it does represent their level. They have passed it. They have gone on and it is not catching up. Why were the newest and largest buildings all along this route either picture theatres or pubs? Because both of them offer an escape: they are bolt-holes and safety-valves. Probably not one person out of a thousand along that road would roundly declare, 'All this is a nasty mess, and I'm sick of it.' But it is my belief that at least six hundred of them out of that thousand entertain an unspoken conviction that is constantly troubling them inside and that calls for either the confectionery drama of the films or for a few quick drinks. I think I caught a glimpse then of what may seem to future historians one of the dreadful ironies of this time of ours, when there never were more men doing nothing and there never was before so much to be done.

The conductor announced the terminus. I had arrived. I got out, to find that we had climbed to the top of a hill and that a cold wind was blowing over it, bringing dust and grit and filthy bits of paper. On one side was a stretch of high brick wall, which some posters told me was a sports ground. On the other side were some patches of waste ground and some decayed allotments, where the last green rags of gardening were shivering. Further along was a yard filled with rusted parts of motors and scrap-iron. I walked to the end of the brick wall and saw

below and afar the vast smoky hollow of the city, with innumerable tall chimneys thrusting out of the murk. The wind dropped, and all along the edge of the pavement the filthy bits of paper settled for a moment before beginning to rustle uneasily again. A tram came making its ponderous moan, and I signalled it like a man on a raft seeing a sail. On the way down I looked at nothing, but some little things caught my eye. One of them was a notice outside a grimy tabernacle: *Get the Brotherhood Spirit.* What would happen, I wondered, if we did. Surely the result would startle those mild folk who put up that notice, for there would first be such a burning down and blowing up and wholesale destruction. Or so, in that depressed hour, it seemed to me.

Having some work to do, I stayed in my room and tried to collect my thoughts and some words for them. It was difficult because of the shattering noise. Are we breeding a race of beings who find it possible to think or rest or sleep in rooms vibrating with the roar of changing gears and accelerated engines, rooms that do not merely admit noise but that shake and ache with dreadful sounds? I stayed in this hotel bedroom several days, paying handsomely for the privilege, and the quantity and quality of rest and sleep I obtained in it were pitiful. Only the small hours were reasonably quiet and by that time one was often too tired and fretful to take proper advantage of the silence. If we are not breeding these new soundproof beings, then this idiocy cannot go on or the nervous system of the race will break down. If I were dictator, I would insist upon a series of noiseless inventions and sound-proof devices, and threaten with exile any ingenious but misguided fellow who invented anything that added to the din. Perhaps I ought to have said all this to the page-boy I sent out for cotton-wool, which still remains the best aid to quiet, better than clever little gadgets of rubber or plaster. It was late when I went down to dinner, and much later when I wandered out into Colmore Row for a breath of air before bed. It was not quite eleven o'clock,

however, and the look of these Birmingham main streets was very queer, for they were all blazing with light and yet almost empty. Victoria Square was like another Place de la Concorde. Never have I seen such brilliant illumination in a provincial city. But the old habits had prevailed; the theatres and picture palaces had closed; the crowd had gone home to bed; and central Birmingham emptily sparkled and shone as if it expected the arrival of a new and more nocturnal set of citizens. No doubt they are already on their way.

3

I spent the next day, which was fine and warm, at Bournville. There were several good reasons for doing this. To begin with, I was interested in the manufacture of chocolate, having bought and eaten in my time great quantities of the stuff, and having several times, when I was about ten, tried unsuccessfully to make it myself. Then I wanted to see another highly organized giant works, and Cadbury's was one of the biggest in the country. Again, Cadbury Bros were renowned as employers of the benevolent and paternal kind, and I wanted to see what it was they did. And then again, there was Bournville itself, the village. So out I went, through dignified Birmingham, messy Birmingham, to planned Birmingham, which had put on its autumnal colouring and was looking charming.

There are a good many things to be said about Bournville, the village. The first is that it has nothing whatever to do with the firm of Cadbury Bros Ltd. This came as a surprise to me – as I imagine it will to many people – for I had always thought that the firm built the village for its workpeople, on a sort of patriarchal employers' scheme. Nothing of the kind. Here are the facts as they are set out in one of the Bournville publications:

The Bournville Estate was founded by the late George Cadbury in 1895. In 1879, he and his brother Richard, who were partners

in business as Cocoa and Chocolate manufacturers, moved their works from the centre of industrial Birmingham to what was then an entirely rural area, four miles from the city. The removal gave George Cadbury an opportunity to put into practice ideas he had long in mind, the result of his contact with working men as a teacher in Early Morning Adult Schools, with which he was connected for over fifty years. He had been led to the conclusion that the root of most social evils lay in the bad housing conditions in which all too many had to live. He was himself fond of country life, and knew its material and spiritual advantages over life in crowded industrial areas, and when the factory was thoroughly established in its new environment he began to see ways and means of giving more and more people the opportunity to enjoy it. He did not, however, contemplate a scheme only for the benefit of his own workpeople; rather, his idea was to make what he called 'a small contribution to the solution of a great problem' – the problem of housing as affecting large industrial towns.

He bought land in the neighbourhood of the factory, and in 1895 began to build Bournville village. Five years later – in 1900 – the estate covered 330 acres, and 300 houses had been built. At that time, in order to secure the perpetuation of his ideas, he handed over the whole property to a body of Trustees – the Bournville Village Trust – on behalf of the nation. He thus gave up entirely his financial interest in it, and secured that all profits – for it was set up on a sound commercial basis – should never accrue to any private individual or body, but be devoted to the development of the Bournville Estate, and to the promotion of housing reform elsewhere.

These then are the facts. It is worth noticing that this Quaker manufacturer, fifty years ago, talked about something that the newspapers and the government are just beginning to talk about now, namely, bad housing. And he not only talked, but he did something. And what he did has proved very successful. His Trust Deed was really a housing plan that could be legally enforced. Thus, he laid down that each house was not to occupy more than a quarter of its own site, that factories were not to take up more than a fifteenth part of any developed area, and

that one-tenth of the land, in addition to roads and gardens, should be given up to parks and recreation grounds. Since then, the Trust has really acted like a local authority. It has leased land to Public Utility Housing Societies, which are on a co-partnership basis. These societies – and there are four of them – build houses and then rent or sell them to their members. Some experimental bungalows – each made of different material – have been built, as a test of costs and durability. There are some tiny bungalows, for single persons. There is also a residential club for business women. Some of the owners and tenants work for Cadbury Bros, others come from Birmingham, and are clerks, artisans, teachers, and so forth. The vital statistics in the booklet I have before me are of some importance. They are taken from an average of the seven years ending 1931. Death-rate per 1,000: England and Wales 12.1; Birmingham 11.6; Bournville 6.5. Infantile mortality per 1,000 live births: England and Wales 69; Birmingham 72; Bournville 56. Some years ago, the heights and weights, age for age, of Bournville children and children from one of the bad areas in Birmingham were compared, and the Bournville children were from two to four inches taller and between four and nine pounds heavier. And the Estate is flourishing.

I saw the whole of the village; if it can still be called a village, for now it has the size and population of a small town. Its tree-lined roads, pleasant spaces, villas and gardens are not, of course, the eye-opener they must have been thirty years ago. Nevertheless, they are still infinitely superior to and more sensible than most of the huge new workmen's and artisans' quarters that have recently been built on the edge of many large towns in the Midlands. For example, in many of these estates, no provision whatever has been made for recreation, whereas in Bournville you see everywhere recreation grounds and halls. Model yachting is very popular in this district, and it was decided to make another small lake in one of the recently developed areas. A gang of unemployed was brought out from

Birmingham to do the digging and draining, and most of these men were not professional navvies at all. For the first day or two they worked with raw and bleeding hands; but they stuck it, and out of the whole fifty or sixty, only one dropped out. And now the little lake is there; I saw it myself, ready for whole fleets of model yachts. (I mention this for the benefit of those people – and there are still plenty of them – who think that most unemployed men are unemployable, or, if not that, at least not very willing to go very far out of their way to find work. I should like to set some of these people on a long digging job in heavy clay.) The village would look prettier if it did not consist almost entirely of detached and semi-detached small villas. I would prefer houses arranged in small courts and squares. I do not understand this passion for being detached or semi-detached, for you can have gardens just the same if the houses are built in little rows. The most charming houses in England, excluding manors and the like, are built in rows and not detached. (And so, of course, are the least charming, all the horrors.) There is something at once fussy and monotonous about a long road on which tiny villas have been sprinkled, as if out of a pepper-pot. I am sorry Bournville has not been able to experiment more with rows, courts, quadrangles; but I was assured by those who know that their tenants greatly prefer to be semi-detached. Within these limits, Bournville has done its work very well. If it has rather too many public halls of religion and too few frivolous meeting places for my taste, after all I am not one of its tenants. And its real importance is as an example of what can be done by some careful planning and an absence of the jerry-builder's motives. It is neither a great firm's private dormitory nor a rich man's toy, but a public enterprise that pays its way. It is one of the small outposts of civilization, still ringed round with barbarism.

This is the age, among other things, of chocolate. Think of the number of chocolate shops you see in a day's journey. A very large proportion of this chocolate is made in the Cadbury

factory at Bournville. I seemed to spend hours and hours being rushed from one part of this colossal works to another. It is really a small town engaged in the manufacture of cocoa and chocolate. I was shown a warehouse in which more than a hundred thousand bags of cocoa beans can be stored. These bags are mechanically hoisted to the top of a building, and then their contents pass from floor to floor, are shelled, winnowed, baked, crushed, refined, pressed, and finally pack themselves neatly into tins, which tins have been made by some busy little machines in a neighbouring room. Everywhere is the sickly sweet smell of cocoa and chocolate. I was told that an old foreman, who had spent fifty years in this atmosphere, still had his two cups of cocoa every night. The manufacture of chocolate is a much more elaborate process, and though I could make a shot at describing it, I see no reason why I should. But there were miles of it, and thousands of men and girls, very spruce in overalls, looking after the hundred-and-one machines that pounded and churned and cooled and weighed and packed the chocolate, that covered the various bits of confectionery with chocolate, that printed labels and wrappers and cut them up and stuck them on and then packed everything into boxes that some other machine had made. The most impressive room I have ever seen in a factory was that in which the cardboard boxes were made and the labels, in that shiny purple or crimson paper, were being printed: there is a kind of gangway running down the length of it, perhaps twenty feet from the floor, and from this you had a most astonishing view of hundreds of white-capped girls seeing that the greedy machines were properly fed with coloured paper and ink and cardboard. In some smaller rooms there was hardly any machinery. In one of them I saw a lot of girls neatly cutting up green and brown cakes of marzipan into pretty little pieces; and they all seemed to be enjoying themselves; though I was told that actually they preferred to do something monotonous with the machines. I know now the life history of an almond whirl. There is a little mech-

anical device that makes that whirl on the top, as deft as you please. I saw thousands of marshmallows hurrying on an endless moving band of silvered paper to the slow cascade of chocolate that swallowed them for a moment and then turned them out on the other side, to be cooled, as genuine chocolate marshmallows. It is part of the fantastic quality of our time that what seem trifling bits of frivolity to most of us are of terrific importance to some people. I saw departments where solemn specialists sit in conference over a bit of cocoanut dipped in chocolate or whatever the trifle may be. Men with learned degrees, men with charts, engineers from all quarters of the world, have to be called in to decide the fate of that bit of chocolaty stuff. When you buy a box of these things, you have also bought the services of a whole army of people. It is all very strange, rather frightening. You have to shut your imagination off or you might go mad. Even I will never feel quite the same now about a box of chocolates.

There was a girl whose duty it was, for forty-two hours a week, to watch those marshmallows hurrying towards their chocolate Niagara. 'Wouldn't that girl be furious,' I said to the director who was showing me round, 'if she found that her Christmas present was a box of chocolate marshmallows?' But he was not at all sure. 'We consider our staff among our best customers,' he told me. Other people there told me the same thing. Such is the passion now for chocolate that though you spend all your days helping to make it, though you smell and breathe it from morning until night, you must munch away like the rest of the world. This says a good deal for the purity of the processes, which seemed to me exemplary, but what it says for human nature, I cannot tell.

As it is human nature and not the manufacture of chocolate that really interests me, I will take leave now of Messrs Cadbury as ingenious organizers and consider them as employers. They have of course long been in the top class of the school of benevolent and paternal employers. Their workpeople are pro-

vided with magnificent recreation grounds and sports pavilions, with a large concert hall in the factory itself, where midday concerts are given, with dining-rooms, recreation rooms, and facilities for singing, acting, and I know not what, with continuation schools, with medical attention, with works councils, with pensions. The factory is almost as busy in the evenings as it is in the daytime. Games, music, drama, lectures, classes, hobbies, conferences, all keep the place in full swing. Once you have joined the staff of this firm, you need never wander out of its shadow. I saw a club-room, fitted up with billiards tables and draughts-boards and the like, where old employees who have been pensioned off come to spend their leisure, playing while their younger comrades are working all round them. The membership of the various clubs and societies is about seven thousand. No form of self-improvement, except those that have their base in some extreme form of economic revolution, is denied a person here. No pastime, except the ancient one of getting drunk, is impossible. Here, in a factory, run for private profit, are nearly all the facilities for leading a full and happy life. What progressive people all over the world are demanding for humanity, these workers have here. Those in charge insist that the firm uses no compulsion whatever and never moves to provide anything until it knows that a real demand exists. It simply offers facilities, they say. And here let me add my conviction that whether all this is right or wrong, the employers themselves have acted in good faith, and genuinely prefer spending a good part of their money on their factory and its employees instead of on racing stables and yachts and Monte Carlo.

Is it right or wrong? This is a very pretty problem. It is easy for some academic person, who has never spent an hour in a factory and does not really know how people live, to condemn it on philosophical grounds, but this may possibly be the result of turning off one's imaginative sympathy and not turning it on. We will assume now that our goal is other people's happiness,

that what we want is that the mass of people should have a chance of leading the sort of life we lead – or should like to lead – ourselves. Now there is no getting away from the fact that here, owing to this system of paternal employment, are factory workers who have better conditions, more security, and infinitely better chances of leading a decent and happy life, than nearly all such factory workers elsewhere. They have, at least in part, what we should like everybody to have. Thanks to good management and an ever-increasing public passion for chocolate, a goal of some sort has been reached. It is easy, when you are sitting in a pleasant study and you know that it is unlikely that you will ever have to apply for work in a factory, to say that all this will not do; but could you honestly say as much if you found yourself a factory hand, and a factory hand who worked in bad conditions, who had no security, and whose employers did not care a rap if their people did nothing but drink themselves silly in their leisure? If you strike a balance of ordinary human happiness, in a class that has had all too few chances of it, then here is a definite and enormous gain. The Russians, in their plans for a proletarian millennium, are only taking aim at such a goal as this. What has been promised in Russia – in such matters as hours of work, food, housing, education, amusement – has been actually performed here. No factory workers in Europe have ever been better off than these people. And I doubt if America, even during its very prosperous years, could show us workers of the same kind who had such opportunities for a full, active, healthy life. On any sensible short view, the experiment must be praised.

It is when one takes a longer view that doubts begin to creep in. Is it good for people to see the factory as the centre of their lives, even if that factory offers them so much, and so much that is genuinely significant? Does this system of paternal employment suggest (as Hilaire Belloc pointed out, years ago, in his *Servile State*) the decay of genuine democracy? I believe that this very firm, when it opened a branch factory in Aus-

tralia, tried to pursue the same policy there but met with a decided rebuff from the Australians, who, whatever their faults, are at least in practice the thorough-going democrats they pretend to be. 'No,' said these Australian employees, in effect, 'we don't want your recreation grounds and concert halls, for if you can afford to give us these things, you can afford to pay us higher wages, and we'll take the wages.' I do not say that this leaves the paternal employer without a retort, for he can reply: 'Very well, if you don't want my welfare schemes, you needn't have them. I will follow the example of other firms and not give you any recreation grounds or concert halls. But neither will I give you any higher wages. I'll put what I've saved in my pocket.' But though he may be worse off in other respects, it is clear that the Australian employee as a political being is occupying the sounder position. He is selling his labour, and nothing else. He is not acknowledging that his employer is a superior creature, whose benevolence may fall upon him like the rays of the life-giving sun. A workman whose whole life is centred in his factory has put all his eggs into one basket. He may enjoy many unusual luxuries, but there is obviously one luxury he cannot enjoy and that is – a spirit of independence. Moreover, he is in danger of believing what his employers are anxious for him to believe and what, in all sincerity, they may believe themselves, namely, that the particular work of that factory is the most urgent and the grandest of human activities, that cocoa is not made for man, but man for cocoa. Pensions and bonuses, works councils, factory publications, entertainments and dinners and garden parties and outings organized by the firm, these are all very well, but they can easily create an atmosphere that is injurious to the growth of men as intellectual and spiritual beings, for they can give what is, when all is said and done, a trading concern for private profit a falsely mystical aura, can drape its secular form with sacramental cloths, and completely wreck the proper scale of values. Very soon, when this atmosphere has been created, you begin to hear talk of

'loyalties' that soar high above the common and reasonable fidelity of a decent man trying to do the job for which he is paid. Business cant swells into business mysticism, as it did in the United States before the slump, when there was no end of rubbishy talk about 'service' and 'loyalty', the kind of talk we get here chiefly from advertising men in their windy conventions. And no institution is fit to dominate men's lives unless it is solemnly dedicated either to God or the commonwealth; and by the commonwealth I do not mean the State, which may be simply a number of elected persons or a dictator and his friends who happen to have collared the army and the police force. If one of these paternal factories were taken over by the State tomorrow, only one weakness of the system would disappear, the fact that the whole organization is there for private profit; all the other weaknesses and dangers would remain, for the individual workman would still be compelled to look only in one direction for all the benefits of his life, would run the same risk of losing his independence, could still believe that he was made for his factory and not his factory for him, could confuse and mislay all his values, even though the directors had now to report to a public ministry instead of to a body of shareholders. (Many people easily avoid the pitfalls of business worship or mystical commerce only to fall into the trap of the mystical State, which makes them imagine that a group of institutions and a rough-and-ready organization for political and economic purposes – let us say a combination of the British Museum, the Metropolitan Water Board, and New Scotland Yard – are somehow more important, of deeper significance to the wide universe, than the sum total of the human beings concerned. And I take this to be the most fashionable and potent illusion of our time; perhaps the father of those warring children, Communism and Fascism.) We must return, however, to the paternal factory system as it is working here and now.

I would say then, in a desperate attempt to conclude the

matter and continue my journey, that workers in such places as Bournville have so many solid benefits conferred on them, benefits that must inevitably raise their status, both physical and mental, that, in spite of the obvious dangers of the system, they are better placed, as citizens of today or tomorrow, than the ordinary factory worker, who is probably not so content either at work or play. (Though I cannot help wondering whether a girl or boy, put to some monotonous characterless task, then exercised, amused, and educated, will want to continue working at that monotonous characterless task. In short, the system may be sowing the seeds of its own destruction.) On the other hand, I for one would infinitely prefer to see workers combining to provide these benefits, or a reasonable proportion of them, for themselves, to see them forming associations far removed from the factory, to see them using their leisure, and demanding its increase, not as favoured employees but as citizens, free men and women.

And now, back in Birmingham in the dusk, I must offer a score of apologies to Messrs Cadbury and their busy ten thousand, good hosts all of them and benefactors of the sweet tooth, for using them all as pegs when they had used me as a man and a brother.

4

Here are two glimpses of Birmingham life. The first is of the public whist drive I attended on Saturday night. It is worth remembering that card games, like almost everything else in this land of social hierarchies, are not without their class distinctions. Whist was once the favourite card game of the upper classes. Now that those people play bridge, auction or contract, whist has found its devotees in a very different set of people, chiefly the small shop-keeping, artisan, and working classes. Why don't these people too play bridge, which is, after all, a much better game? We can only guess. Some of them think

bridge much too complicated for them. On the other hand many of them play a good game of solo whist, which demands considerable initiative and skill. (I have often thought that some of its devices – such as the *misère* call, the contract to lose tricks instead of making them – might have been profitably adapted to bridge.) Probably a second and weightier reason is that many of these people do not play bridge because they shrink from imitating the wealthier classes and do not want their friends and neighbours to think they are suddenly 'trying to be posh'. After all, there is more than one kind of snobbery. We hear a lot about the man who dresses for dinner in Central Africa; but that must not make us forget the existence of a much larger number of men who would die of shame if they were discovered by their acquaintances conveying soup to their mouths above a stiff white shirt. But whatever the reason may be, the fact remains that whist is still the favourite card game of the mass of the English people. The whist drive I attended, one of several advertised in the evening paper, was not a private social function, the equivalent of a bridge party, but a public affair, a combined entertainment and gamble, run by some astute person for profit. (And a very nice thing he must make out of it, too.) It seemed from the advertisement to be the largest and most swaggering. You paid two shillings to compete, but there were money prizes amounting to twenty-three pounds. I concluded, rightly as it turned out, that a man who promises to part with so much prize-money must be fairly certain of getting a great many patrons at two shillings a head. The whist drive, one of a tri-weekly series, was held in a certain public hall and began at eight-fifteen. So I raced through my dinner and hurried on to it.

The hall was large, austere in colouring and decoration, and lighted in the most uncompromising fashion by unshaded bulbs of high voltage. It had about as much intimate charm as the average big railway station. I guessed at once that we were in for a formidably business-like evening. Suspended from the

ceiling, about a third of the way down the room, was a large indicator, showing the four suits. The remaining two-thirds of the hall, beyond this indicator, were filled with very small chairs ranged round very small tables, most of them not proper card tables but mysterious objects covered with what seemed then, and afterwards, squares of rather dirty blanket material. When you paid your two shillings, you were given a scoring card, either black or red. (Mine was black.) On this card were the rules, the number of your first table, and then spaces for the numbers of your succeeding tables, the tricks you made, and your totals. There were several hundred people there, and most of them seemed to be regular patrons and to know one another. They were mostly middle-aged decent working folk, with only a sprinkling of younger men and women. Nearly all the men smoked, and a fair proportion of the women; but there were no ash-trays. I knocked my pipe out on my heel. What the cigarette smokers did, I do not know. After about ten minutes, a man shouted at us through a megaphone and we all went to our tables. The indicator told us what were trumps by lighting up a gigantic ace of clubs. We started. There followed what seemed to me one of the most strenuous hours I have ever spent. To begin with, the games were played at a tremendous speed, aces being banged on kings without a moment's hesitation. Then there was so much to do. You had to fill in your card and to initial the card on each table. If you were the losing man arriving at a new table – and I nearly always was – you had to shuffle the cards before the cut for deal. And three times out of four it seemed to be my fate to deal, and as the packs at each successive table appeared to be older and older and greasier and greasier, so that they were about four inches thick when they were stacked ready to be cut, dealing was an unpleasant business. Never in my life, not even in the trenches, have I ever seen dirtier and older packs of cards. It was not pleasant to hold them, even when they showed you a smudge of aces and kings; and it was a downright penance to be continually shuffling and

dealing them. So what with shuffling, cutting, dealing, playing, gathering tricks up on those bits of blanket, clerkly work with the table card and your own card, changing tables, pushing past enormous fat women, I was kept so busy that after about half an hour of it I was fairly perspiring. And there was never a minute to lose. The whistle blew, as a signal to change tables, the indicator lit up its new suit of trumps, and if you had not finished your game, there were people waiting and looking very cross about it. There was practically no time for conversation, hardly time to smile. What conversation there was about the game, if for once it finished before the whistle blew, I could not understand. Three times my various partners said to me, 'I'd a good back hand,' and I could only assent feebly, for I did not know then and do not know now what a good back hand is. As I have not played whist, which is a very different game from bridge, for twenty years, and as all these games were run off at such a colossal speed, I cannot tell you whether these people played well or badly. I suspect that most of it must have been very perfunctory play, with no nonsense about finessing in it. All my partners were either very big fat women, who bulged over their chairs and the tables, and sweated good-humouredly, or else little witch-like females with sharp noses, tucked-in mouths, and iron spectacles, who held their cards very close to the brooches they wore, hardly ever spoke, and looked very cross, though I do not actually think they were. There were two distinct types among the men: the solid hearty chaps who sat bolt upright, puffing out clouds of smoke and banged each card down, as if sheer force might win the trick; and the little thin cunning fellows who sank down and down and half-closed their eyes as they played, like so many Nibelungs. When the whistle blew after the twelfth game, everybody made a rush for the top end of the hall, and reappeared a few minutes afterwards, eating fruits, tarts and slabs of cake.

This was the interval and by this time I had had quite enough whist-driving, but it seemed to me that if one player

disappeared the whole elaborate organization would be flung into disorder. So I stayed on and played another twelve games, nearly always losing and so going from table to table and shuffling packs of cards greasier than any I had ever seen before, cards that ought to have been thrown into the dustbin months ago; and I found myself in a far corner where the tables were almost touching one another and enormous women were unable to extricate themselves, and it was sweatier and hotter and smokier than ever. My total score was one hundred and fifty-five, which was some thirty or forty below the best. But there was still a chance that I might win a prize for a 'mystery number', which was drawn by the promoter, after he had given the prizes for the winning scores. There was no excitement at the end, no cheering, no applause. It was all as brisk and business-like as the whole evening had been. When the last prize had been awarded, everybody cleared off, rather as if they were leaving a factory than making an end of a night's pleasure. I suppose they enjoyed it – which was more than I did – otherwise they would not regularly attend these functions, as they undoubtedly do, but anything superficially less like a night's pleasure I never did see. Considering that many of them must be engaged all day in work that must be at once bustling and boring, it is surprising that they should choose this method of passing the evening. I do not believe that it is card-playing that attracts them there, for nobody could enjoy playing cards at such a speed. The secret is the gamble, the chance of winning two or three pounds for your two shillings. The purely social side of the whist drive was negligible; or at least so it seemed to me, though of course I was a stranger and may have missed some quiet fun. At the end, two impressions remained with me. It is difficult to find words for them here without appearing unpleasantly patronizing; but I must take that risk. First, I was struck by the extraordinary ugliness of most of the people there. Nobody has ever called me handsome, and I do not ask for a very high standard of good looks in other people.

It is not that these people lacked regular features, fine figures, bright eyes, and so forth. They were, for the most part, downright ugly, really unpleasing to look at closely. The women were either much too fat or far too thin. The men looked like lopsided oafs, gnomes, hobgoblins. Nearly all looked as if life had knocked them into odd shapes, taken the bloom out of their faces, twisted their features and dulled their eyes. The few native races I have seen could have shown one far better-looking specimens of humanity than these. Possibly the people who go to whist drives are among the least handsome of their kind – this would obviously be true of young women – but even when that allowance has been made, that ugliness remains startling. In twenty years' time, I believe, it will have gone. But it does not say much for our way of living that it should be there now. The second impression that remained was of a very different character. These people might be ugly to look at but they were not ugly to be with; in other words, they were surprisingly good-mannered and good-humoured. I never saw one exhibition of bad temper all the evening. Some were obviously much better players than others, and there was money at stake, but nevertheless there was never an embarrassing moment. Even the witch-like, iron-spectacled little women were never actually rude to anybody. They were all patient, decent, good-tempered folk, and they compared extremely favourably, startlingly, with the well-nurtured people I have often seen giving a show of bad manners and egoism at bridge tables, not merely in private but also in functions such as this. The sharp contrast between appearance and manner was very curious. I could make a text of it but will refrain, if only because I want these two impressions to be free from any suspicions of being forced, when actually they were simply what remained to me after an arduous evening.

The second glimpse of Birmingham comes from the following morning, Sunday. I awakened in a strangely quiet hotel, quite unlike the weekday place. The spell of an English Sunday is terrifically potent; even the weather is different. The whole

city was blanketed in silence. The streets were wearing their Sunday look: few people in them, hardly any traffic, but a more than weekday allowance of mist hanging about, as if the country had been given permission to send a bit of its autumn weather into town. I ate my customary Sunday morning sausages in an almost empty dining-room, where the waiters were beginning to move like church wardens. You had a feeling, obviously shared by the head waiter, the reception clerk downstairs, the lift attendant, and the two yawning page-boys, that a slab of time like a vast suet pudding had been thrust into your hands, that before Monday dawned there would be time enough to write an epic poem on the Fall of Jerusalem or to work out successfully every different kind of patience. But I had not this embarrassing wealth of hours because I had decided to do something I had not done for many years, and that was to attend the morning service in a Nonconformist chapel. Birmingham has long been one of the chief strongholds of Nonconformity, and I felt that I could not pass a Sunday in it without visiting one of its places of worship. I found one about ten minutes' walk away. It did not belong to the particular denomination that had claimed me, willy-nilly, when I was a boy, but nevertheless my first discovery was that this service was almost exactly like the ones I remember from thirty years ago, and that the people taking part in it had not changed a great deal. The chief difference in the congregation was that there were fewer young people in it, and especially young men. I doubt if there were half a dozen men under thirty-five in the chapel. If there were any boys present, they escaped my eye. There were a few little girls, a sprinkling of older girls and young women, and all the rest of the congregation and the choir were middle-aged. But I suppose that in my chapel-going days, there would actually have been twice the number of people at this service. And though there was a certain amount of nodding and smiling before, and some hand-shaking after the service, I did not gather the impression that for most of these people this

chapel was the centre of their social life; though the notices read out by the minister still suggested that it was. Nevertheless, when one considers that we are generally supposed to have plunged or blundered into a new world since the war, that vast changes are taking place in every department of our lives, the likeness between this service and the ones I remember was astonishing. The organist looked the same and played the same stuff in the same old way. The choir, with its preponderance of rustling females, its one piercing tenor (I spotted him: eyeglasses and a grey moustache), its uncertain but hopeful basses, its trick of turning everything it sang, no matter how thunderous the music, how wildly oriental the words, into something neat and respectable, the rent garments of prophets converted into a pair of dark striped trousers, was the familiar choir of my boyhood. The deacons who carried round the collection plates were the immortal deacons of my memories: cashiers and shopkeepers, with pointed beards, gold-rimmed spectacles, morning coats, of a terrific respectability, whose very walk, as they returned the collection plates, obliterated the whole doctrine of original sin. Time had not withered them, though in truth they had always been a little withered. As I watched them, I knew that old as I am, a ratepayer and the father of children, I had only to go to the following Saturday's tea and concert and see these mysterious beings suddenly secular and waggish over ham sandwiches and lemon cheese tarts, to be as startled as I was in 1903. We sang as we had always sung. The minister prayed as he had always prayed, not perhaps quite at the same length but still as if he were sternly addressing some powerful but uncertain potentate from the East, who had to be talked to in this fashion before he knew his own mind. There was, as there always had been, a children's address, which began by the minister, as ever, suddenly putting on a smile so false and sickly that it was frightening, looking down at three little girls in the second row, and then beginning in an odd voice to talk of some determined whimsicality. When

I was a little boy I wriggled in embarrassment at these addresses, and I found myself wriggling all over again that morning in Birmingham. The sermon itself, which was not a bad one, had not changed much; there was the same trick in it of taking a tiny and apparently meaningless text – such as *Then Saul went up* or *These likewise cast lots* – and then finding an astonishing number of deeply significant meanings in it; a method that would soon turn any book, *History of Rutlandshire* or *Commercial Guide to Sweden*, into a work of the profoundest wisdom. The minister, who had the merit, common among Nonconformist clergymen, of being able to read and sermonize in a sensible manly fashion, had a long dark face and the arched and restless eyebrows of a comedian. Indeed, his whole face was that of a comic actor, probably French; and humour seemed continually to play over it like a breeze ruffling a pond; yet the man behind this face had not a glimmer of this comic spirit and was clearly a very solemn Nonconformist clergyman. Somehow, he had taken to wearing the wrong face, that was all. He fascinated me. Looking as if he were about to speak some terrific drollery out of a comedy by *Labiche*, he would announce the hymn and gravely recite its first four lines.

There was another contrast, however, queerer than that between the minister and his face. And I had not noticed this as a boy at these services. Then I had taken the general atmosphere of the service and the sect for granted. Now, returning to it after a long absence, I saw how odd it was that these mild Midland folk, spectacled ironmongers, little dressmakers, clerks, young women from stationers' shops, should come every Sunday morning through the quiet grey streets and assemble here to wallow in wild oriental imagery. They stood up in rows, meek-eyed and pink-cheeked, to sing modestly about the Blood of the Lamb. After a few little coughs, they announced that certain sacred names and symbols induced in them fits of incredible ecstasies. They sat with bent heads listening to accounts of ancient and terribly savage tribal warfare, of the lust

and pride of hook-nosed and raven-bearded chieftains, of sacrifice and butchery on the glaring deserts of the Near East. They chanted in unison their hope of an immortality to be spent in cities built of blazing jewels, with fountains of milk and cascades of honey, where kings played harps while maidens clashed the cymbals; and one could not help wondering what these people would do if they really did find themselves billeted for ever in this world of the Eastern religious poets. What, in short, had these sober Northern islanders to do with all this Oriental stuff? What did it, what could it really mean to them? Could anything be less aptly shaped and coloured to match their own lives? If this was the time when their thoughts turned to the creator of this universe, when they were asked to consider the deep truths of life, to face their consciences and search their hearts, why should they be dragged into this far-away fantastic world of goats and vines and deserts and smoking sacrifices and tribal kings? It was almost as if instead of the familiar black-coated minister there had appeared in the pulpit a whirling dervish. Must God, I asked myself, remain for ever in Asia? Are these people always to assume that He is still brooding over Babylon? What if He is now brooding over Birmingham?

5

From Birmingham I went to have a look at the Black Country, which lies to the north and west of the city. This notorious region was strange to me. Now I have seen it, but of course it is still strange to me. You have to live some time in these places to understand their peculiar qualities. All I can do is to offer a few sketches, probably not at all accurate nor free from a certain subjective colouring, for in retrospect it is difficult to disengage the scene from the mood. But perhaps that does not matter: the record of a journey of this kind may be more important if it chronicles a succession of moods than if it captures a succession of scenes. Here, I think, I ought to say a little more

about myself. It happens that during the last few years I have been away from industrial districts and have spent most of my time in far pleasanter places. But the first nineteen years of my life were passed in the industrial West Riding, in the shadow of the tall chimneys; and even yet I am not unduly fastidious about my surroundings. So you may take it that throughout this book I am not adopting some absurdly high standard that would make life in half of England impossible. I am not shocked because an iron foundry or a wool-combing mill has little in common with an author's drawing-room or study: I have long known what kind of places men have to labour in. My standard may be rough and ready and somewhat uncertain, but you can assume it is a reasonable one. If I declare that Coketown is a horrible hole, I do not merely mean that it cannot be fitted in to some private fairy-tale Merrie England of my own: I mean that it is a damned horrible hole. And I hope you will take my word for it.

I spent the better part of two days staring at this Black Country. The first day was fine and fairly bright. I went from Birmingham through Smethwick and Oldbury to Dudley, which seemed to me a fantastic place. You climb a hill, past innumerable grim works and unpleasant brick dwellings, and then suddenly a ridiculous terra-cotta music-hall comes into sight, perched on the steep roadside as if a giant had plucked it out of one of the neighbouring valleys and carelessly left it there; and above this music-hall (its attraction that week was *Parisian Follies*) were the ruins of Dudley Castle. I climbed a steep little hillside, and then smoked a pipe or two sitting by the remains of the Keep. The view from there is colossal. On the Dudley side, you look down and across at roofs and steeply mounting streets and pointing factory chimneys. It looked as if a great slab of Birmingham had been torn away and then tilted up there at an angle of about forty-five degrees. The view from the other side, roughly, I suppose, to the north-east, was even more impressive. There was the Black Country unrolled before you

like a smouldering carpet. You looked into an immense hollow of smoke and blurred buildings and factory chimneys. There seemed to be no end to it. In the vague middle, dominating everything, was an enormous round white tower, which I afterwards learned was a new gasometer. It looked bigger than anything else in sight, and as nothing had dimension that could be measured, it was any size you liked to imagine it. You could think of it, without unduly straining your fancy, as the temple of some horrible new religion. The only sounds that arrived from this misty immensity below came from the tangle of railway lines that gleamed in the foreground of the scene, and these noises were so clear that they might have been picked out and then amplified. There was the scream of a locomotive; there was the clanking of the bumped wagons; there was the long pu-u-ushing of a train gathering speed. I never remember hearing these railway sounds so clearly. Nothing else came from that enormous hollow. You could easily believe that there were no people down there, that a goods locomotive was probably the most playful inhabitant of the region. I was glad that I did not know the names of the towns down there in the smoke; I felt that I was not looking at this place and that, but at the metallic Midlands themselves, at a relief map of a heavy industry, at another and greater exhibition of the 'fifties. No doubt at all that the region had a sombre beauty of its own. I thought so then, and I thought so later, when I had seen far more of its iron face lit with hell fire. But it was a beauty you could appreciate chiefly because you were not condemned to live there. If I could do what I liked with the whole country, I would keep a good tract of this region as it is now, to be stared and wondered at; but I would find it difficult to ask any but a few curators to live in it.

I descended into the vast smoky hollow and watched it turn itself into so many workshops, grimy rows of houses, pubs and picture theatres, yards filled with rusted metal, and great patches of waste ground. There was a cynical abundance of

these patches of waste ground, which were as shocking as raw sores and open wounds. In my own West Riding, industry of the grimmest and most uncompromising kind has long been allowed to work its will on the countryside. There, however, the countryside itself is grim and uncompromising. Sometimes the mills, the rows of little houses, the cobbled streets, all seem like natural outcroppings of the Pennine rock. Huddersfield and Rochdale, Keighley and Nelson, may look grim, but the high lands that still separate them look even grimmer. But here in these Midlands, the countryside is mild and friendly. It is on the border of Arden itself. Industry has ravished it; drunken storm troops have passed this way; there are signs of atrocities everywhere; the earth has been left gaping and bleeding; and what were once bright fields have been rummaged and raped into these dreadful patches of waste ground. And nothing I saw there, not even the slums, impressed me more painfully.

The places I saw had names, but these names were merely so much alliteration: Wolverhampton, Wednesbury, Wednesfield, Willenhall and Walsall. You could call them all wilderness, and have done with it. I never knew where one ended and another began. I remember noticing in Wolverhampton, after half an hour of dingy higgledy-piggledy, the new building of the *Midland Counties Dairy*, white and trim and with immense windows, and thinking how alien it looked there, like the outpost of a new civilization. I remember arriving at the very end of the earth, where the land appeared to have been uprooted by a giant pig and where there were cottages so small and odd that they must have been built for gnomes, and this end of the earth was called Gornal, and there the women, returning home from the brickworks, wore caps and shawls. The shawls were like those that the weavers used to wear in my own town, but our women had worn their shawls over their heads. Here, however, they wore caps as well, and looked as outlandish as the place they lived in. Afterwards I ran right through the Black Country and came out at the other end, almost within sight of

the Potteries. On the way back, somewhere between Stafford and Rugeley, I came to a bit of heath country, glowing with autumn, that was as pleasant as you could wish. There the sun went down. It was dark long before I got back to Birmingham; the ravished waste ground, the miserable houses, the muddle of dirty brick, the whole battlefield of industry, sank down and disappeared, and in their places appeared mysterious red gleams of fire and a pretty tracery of lights, so that I was happier staring about me than I had been all day.

My second day there was a Sunday, and in foul weather. Sometimes the raw fog dripped; sometimes the cold rain steamed; but throughout it was thick and wet and chilled. I lunched in one of the smaller towns with a man in the metal trade. There were several Black Country business men there, large hearty fellows, sturdy eaters and drinkers. There had been a sudden flurry of business in the metal trade, and my friend was going back to his office and warehouse in West Bromwich after lunch. I went with him, and on the way was shown, among other things, the last dairy farm in the district. It stood there surrounded for miles by the grim paraphernalia of industrialism; I had only a glimpse of it, a solitary surviving farmhouse in the wet fog, with a few ghostly fields on either side. My friend's warehouse was in – shall we say? – 'Rusty Lane', West Bromwich. He keeps sheets of steel there, and no doubt any place is good enough to keep sheets of steel in; but I do not think I could let even a sheet of steel stay long in Rusty Lane. I have never seen such a picture of grimy desolation as that street offered me. If you put it, brick for brick, into a novel, people would not accept it, would condemn you as a caricaturist and talk about Dickens. The whole neighbourhood is mean and squalid, but this particular street seemed the worst of all. It would not matter very much – though it would matter – if only metal were kept there; but it happens that people live there, children are born there and grow up there. I saw some of them. I was being shown one of the warehouses, where steel plates

were stacked in the chill gloom, and we heard a bang and rattle on the roof. The boys, it seems, were throwing stones again. They were always throwing stones on that roof. We went out to find them, but only found three frightened little girls, who looked at us with round eyes in wet smudgy faces. No, they hadn't done it, the boys had done it, and the boys had just run away. Where they could run to, I cannot imagine. They need not have run away for me, because I could not blame them if they threw stones and stones and smashed every pane of glass for miles. Nobody can blame them if they grow up to smash everything that can be smashed. There ought to be no more of those lunches and dinners, at which political and financial and industrial gentlemen congratulate one another, until something is done about Rusty Lane and West Bromwich. While they still exist in their present foul shape, it is idle to congratulate ourselves about anything. They make the whole pomp of government here a miserable farce. The Crown, Lords and Commons are the Crown, Lords and Commons of Rusty Lane, West Bromwich. In the heart of the great empire on which the sun never sets, in the land of hope and glory, Mother of the Free, is Rusty Lane, West Bromwich. What do they know of England who only England know? The answer must be Rusty Lane, West Bromwich. And if there is another economic conference, let it meet there, in one of the warehouses, and be fed with bread and margarine and slabs of brawn. The delegates have seen one England, Mayfair in the season. Let them see another England next time, West Bromwich out of the season. Out of all seasons except the winter of our discontent.