

writing an economic geography of this country. I am making a journey to see how my fellow-countrymen live and work and play. And the Potteries seem to me unique. They look like no other industrial region. They are unique in their remote, self-contained provincialism. And they are unique in their work, an industry that is still a craft, and one of the oldest in the world. We ought to keep that craft here, even if it means looking at the trade mark when we buy a cup and saucer and being ready to spend a little more on them. We must have our own 'throwers' and 'jollyers'. Why should we subsidize other people's fun? 'Throwing' and 'jollying' should begin at home. I shall never look at a piece of crockery with the same eyes that I used in my ignorant pre-Pottery days. I shall feel the reverberation of every fresh blow that strikes the industry, because I shall know that it means that a few more deft thumbs are robbed of their clay, that some will 'throw' and 'jigger' no more, and that some good folk who only ask to put their time-old skill at our service will go to join the unhappy idlers who hang about the dingy little streets in the dingy little towns that are still a city only on paper. May the orders pour in; may prodigious and unheard-of quantities of 'slop' be transformed into 'slip'; may cups and saucers and plates and teapots rush like magic out of the clay; may the ovens never grow cold; may Stoke-on-Trent, a real city, spacious and gay, fit for good craftsmen to live in, rise high and white; and may the blanket of smoke, the sooty dolls' houses, the blackened fields, soon be nothing but a memory, a tale of the old pioneers.

HARDY TRAVELLING BRITAIN WEEK 5  
(N.W.)  
J. B. PRIESTLEY

## TO LANCASHIRE

## I

THE next stage in my journey, clearly, was Lancashire, and I decided to begin with Liverpool. That city was not new to me. Less than a year before, I had produced a play there at the Repertory Theatre; though I doubt if this can count as a visit, for my days and nights were spent either trying to keep awake in the theatre or trying to go to sleep in the hotel, a pitiful state of mind and body well known to all dramatic folk. I have never been near Liverpool in spring, summer and early autumn. My visits have all been wintry. I find it impossible to imagine what the city looks like in clear bright sunshine. I think of it existing in a shortened year, only running from November to February, with all its citizens for ever wearing thick overcoats. Just before you reach Lime Street Station your train runs into a deep cutting and daylight promptly vanishes, never returning, I feel, until your other homeward train has left Lime Street and Liverpool well behind. It has, in my memory, more fog about than other cities, not excepting London. The centre is imposing, dignified and darkish, like a city in a rather gloomy Victorian novel. Does spring ever arrive in St John's Gardens? Do the birds ever twitter and flutter before the solemn façade of St George's Hall? Is there a Mersey, so much green flowing water, not simply a misty nothingness hooting dismally? I must go there in June, some time, to find out.

There was no deep dark railway cutting for me on this occasion, for I arrived by road, and in place of the cutting were streets that went on and on and on through dreary regions infested by corporation trams. The surface of these streets was a slippery abomination; though we were going very slowly, three

times we were nearly on top of pedestrians who started up not three yards from our radiator and slithered about as if bent on suicide. When I was able to think, I began to gather together what I knew already about Liverpool and remembered what I could of previous visits. Well, there was the Playhouse, and its director, my friend William Armstrong, who considers himself – probably with some truth – the busiest man in the city, for he is always watching one play, producing another, and making plans for the production of two more. His, I suppose, is the best repertory company in the kingdom; no other, except perhaps Birmingham in its heyday, has sent so many brilliant young actors and actresses to the West End; but I decided there was no room in this chronicle for William and the Playhouse. On two previous visits I had been given a dinner at the University Club. A very jolly little club it is too, where they know how to turn Liverpool winter into something like summer, at least for one evening: pleasant journalists, with Mr Macleay, of the *Liverpool Daily Post*, at the head of them; smiling professors and their ladies; young barristers and shipping men: all very good company and as hospitable as you please. Let me admit that their Liverpool exists, and does it admirably. But it was not the Liverpool I wanted now. The surgeons in Rodney Street (where Gladstone was born), with its fine late eighteenth-century fronts? The Cathedral, which remained in my memory as a vast dark-red bulk, immensely impressive but tantalizing because it just missed being a noble expression of our own age? The great buildings down by the river, such as the Dock Board Offices, the Cunard and Royal Liver palaces? Unusual for England – as if Liverpool had had so many peeps at New York's water-front that it felt it must do *something* – but not material for me. What else was there? Birkenhead, where the middle-class folk have comfortably established themselves in villas on the hill? I had had a lunch and tea or two over there, in solid Victorian comfort, but this time I wanted to see something quite different. The cotton brokers and the shipping

men? I had met both kinds, and no doubt they would have a lot to say to me – and what they would say would be well worth hearing – if I met some of them again. They were genuine Liverpool, I admitted to myself, but even they did not fit into this mysterious composition that so far was purely negative. I had very little time; the whole of Lancashire was waiting, and there was my new play to attend to in Manchester at the weekend, for it was opening there; so what was it I wanted? We had now arrived in the heart of the big city, and as usual it was almost a heart of darkness. But it looked like a big city, there was no denying that. Here, emphatically, was the English seaport second only to London. The very weight of stone emphasized that fact. And even if the sun never seems to rise properly over it, I like a big city to proclaim itself a big city at once. If it must have a thousand Corporation trams lumbering and screeching and groaning about the place, let it build up and up, as Liverpool has done, to dwarf the mournful beasts. We had cut and curved our way to the very entrance, the imposing entrance, of the Adelphi Hotel. I believe that the Adelphi was originally built for the first-class Atlantic passenger traffic, and unfortunately for Liverpool and its luxury hotel, that traffic was immediately afterwards diverted to Southampton; with the result that the Adelphi has been hot from mingled shame and vexation ever since, rather too hot for my comfort, even in the dead winter of Liverpool. But there I was, signing my name in the register, and as yet I had no programme of exploration. There was a Liverpool I wanted for this book, and I had still to decide which it was. But I know it was something quite unlike the interior of the Adelphi, which is an hotel that no producer of musical comedy would object to using for his big set in the Second Act. What was it then? Up in my bedroom I reminded myself that it was probably Liverpool the seaport that contained what I wanted. I had been to Southampton and Bristol; I was on my way to the Tyne and Hull; but there was something here that none of these ports could show me. The search

was narrowing. I began telephoning to one or two newspaper acquaintances in the city. I was on the trail.

It led me to the vicar of the queerest parish in England. (His own description, and I am not going to quarrel with it.) He was an elderly man and had been there a great many years, during which time, knowing so much about his people, he must have accumulated enough of the raw material of fiction for a batch of Balzacs. There was nothing of the mild faintly scholarly doderer about him. He was still a sturdy figure, and as downright as a bo'sun. We set out to explore this queer parish of his, which was in the very middle of Liverpool's more picturesque and exotic slums, populated by the human flotsam and jetsam of a great old seaport. We had not gone twenty yards when he pointed his stick at some figures mooching in the square. 'I call that the fo'c'sle walk,' he remarked. 'Old sailors. Just watch them. You see? A few short paces one way, then the same number back again. They do it all day. It's the result of spending years in ships. Yes, that's the fo'c'sle walk.' We passed near the men and he waved a greeting with his stick. The neighbouring streets and squares all belonged to one period, the Regency or a little earlier. Here, a hundred years ago, the comfortable Liverpool merchants lived, going in and out of these charming doorways and beneath these fine old fanlights, thinking about their cargoes of cotton and tobacco from New Orleans and of rum and sugar from Jamaica. You had only to half-close your eyes as you looked at these charming and dignified façades to feel that the past was reliving itself for you. Liverpool must have been a town worth loitering in then. All this area of it must have been as pretty as an old print. (And why is it that in 1833 you could still order a house from the nearest builder and it would be something fit to be seen, whereas, after a hundred years of astonishing progress, in 1933 the nearest builder would probably erect a monstrosity and you have to find a really good architect, who in turn has to find a really good contractor, before you can be sure of getting a decent house? And I write

not as a worshipper of the past, an antique snob, a connoisseur, but as an ordinary ignoramus who happens to use his eyes.) But one good look and that charming vision vanished. The fine lines and the carefully designed doorways remained; but they had suffered a sad sea change. The owners lived here no longer; the crew had taken possession. These were all slum tenements, like those Georgian streets in Dublin, where the country gentry once had their town houses. (You were, in fact, reminded at once of Dublin.) Every bit of woodwork was fast losing its last flakes of paint. The windows were broken, boarded, raggedly curtained. The open doorways gave out a reek of unwashed humanity. The buildings were rotting away, and some of the people were rotting with them. Faces that had shone for a season in brothels in Victoria's time now peered and mumbled at us. Port Said and Bombay, Zanzibar and Hongkong had called here. The babies told the tale plainly enough. They were of all shades, and Asia and Africa came peeping out of their eyes. 'That little chap there,' said the vicar, pointing with his stick at an ochreous baby lad who might have just been plucked out of a rice-field, 'he's one of four. All with different fathers. And his mother's a nice woman, a very good sort.'

We hurried off to the local school that all these half-caste children attended. By the time we got there the little ones were leaving, and my companion singled out several of them, who answered his smiling questions very softly and shyly. All the faces of mankind were there, wonderfully mixed. Imagine an infant class of half-castes, quadroons, octaroons, with all the latitudes and longitudes confused in them. I saw all their things, baby-size, neatly put away in cupboards; and they had done this themselves. They could have been pictured in the act, not as a Liverpool infants' class but as the human race, which is probably still a baby, trying to tidy up. On the floor above a class of older children had not yet been dismissed, and the vicar marched me in to look at and listen to them. There cannot be a queerer class anywhere in the world. The woolly curls of the

Negro, the smooth brown skin of the Malay, the diagonal eye of the Chinese, they were all there, crazily combined with features that had arrived in Lancashire by way of half a dozen different European countries, from Scandinavia to Italy. Nor did their appearance tell the whole tale; indeed, it could be oddly deceptive. A boy could look pure Liverpool and prove to be three parts Chinese. The Negro influence was the most obvious. One little girl looked ready to bud into another Florence Mills. A handsome sturdy lad, with a fine head, proudly carried, and big flashing eyes, was the grandson of an African chieftain. As the class finished their work for the day, the vicar, who knew all about every one of them, softly poured a stream of information into my ear. We spoke to several of the children when the class broke up. The boys rushed down to the tiny schoolyard at the back, and there, in the dusky half-light, had a glorious scuffle with a small ball. We could see them down there, like a miniature League of Nations assembly gone mad. Meanwhile the vicar went on telling me things. The children with Chinese strains in them interested him the most. Many of the boys, he said, would probably go to China within a few years. An uncle of one of them was now an important official in the Chinese Republican Government; and he too had once been a boy in Liverpool and was now bitterly opposed to Britain and British influence because of the life he had once been compelled to lead in the slums of Pitt Street, Liverpool. It was more than likely, he continued, that most of the little half-caste girls – those smiling exotic dolls – would, within a year or two of leaving school, become prostitutes, following the female family tradition of the quarter. I suggested that some of them, especially those with Negro blood in them, might prove to have theatrical talent, like the ‘high yallers’ of Harlem; but he replied that in his experience they had never shown any signs of possessing such talent. (But have they ever been given a chance? I doubt it.) A rosy little boy, who had been kept behind on some monitor’s job, came up, and we had a word or two with him. When

he had gone the vicar said: ‘Now that boy looks English enough, doesn’t he? But as a matter of fact, he’s half Chinese. Yes, and he’s *all* Chinese inside. He has dreams, that boy, and they’re all Oriental dreams. Queer, isn’t it?’ He went on to outline briefly a theory of his, born of long experience of these people of mixed blood. ‘The real nature of these half-castes,’ he said, ‘is always the opposite of their appearance. If they look European, then you can depend upon it that inside they’re almost entirely Chinese or Negro or whatever it is. If they’re born half and half, and look Chinese or Negro, then you’ll find that their nature is European. It’s very odd, and I don’t know why it should be so. But it is so. I’ve proved it over and over again.’ As things are, there is something very cruel about this relation between appearance and character, for clearly the unfortunate half-caste will be always most attracted to the very people whom his looks will alienate, and will always belong at heart to the particular society not prepared to welcome him.

There was something deeply impressive, almost moving, about the sight of these strange children, here in this slum corner of Lancashire. Although they had mostly been begotten, born and reared in the most pitifully sordid circumstances, nearly all of them were unusually attractive in appearance, like most people of oddly mixed blood. (A really first-rate film-producer could make a film of exceptional interest, probably of real beauty, out of these children.) Looking at them, you did not think of the riff-raff of the stokeholds and the slatterns of the slums who had served as their parents: they seemed like the charming exotic fruits, which indeed they were, of some profound anthropological experiment. (And that woman who had had four children all by different fathers, probably all of different race, surely deserves a subsidy from some anthropological research fund.) Perhaps we have been given a glimpse of the world of 2433, by which time the various root races, now all members of a great world state, may have largely inter-married and inter-bred. Knowing gentlemen from the tropics

or the East always tell us emphatically that the half-caste is no good, a poor specimen combining the vices but not the virtues of both his parent races. That is what they tell us, and most of us who listen, perhaps sceptically, cannot marshal enough examples to prove the contrary. We can only remind ourselves that while violent racial prejudices still exist, all the dice are loaded against the children of mixed blood, the very circumstances of whose parentage have probably been unfortunate. But Nature herself, whatever she may do to them in later life, displays no sharp animosity against these half-caste infants but takes care to work most cunningly and beautifully with their physical characteristics. And I wish it were possible to learn what happens to all these quaint children, where they go, what they do, what manner of men and women they turn into. Will some of them, after extraordinary adventures and vicissitudes, be found, years hence, negotiating with us in China and defying us in Africa, inspired by memories of England that do not extend beyond tenements and dark streets in a dock-side slum?

Liverpool's Chinatown is rapidly dwindling. There are only a few hundred Chinese left there. In the quarter we explored, now gathering mystery in the dusk of a November afternoon, there were still some signs of their occupation. You noticed a Chinese Republican Club and a Chinese Masonic Hall. There were a few Chinese shops, selling ivories and tea. We wanted some tea ourselves, so climbed the stairs of a Chinese eating-house. The room was deserted except for two Chinese, one of them, I think the proprietor, playing a card game in a corner. A shy girl, who appeared and disappeared like an Oriental ghost, brought us some good China tea, and over it we talked in whispers. I learned that there were two good reasons why this Chinatown was rapidly disappearing. The first was bad trade, for the Chinese go where there is money to be made, and there has not been much money to be made in Liverpool during these past few years. The second reason is that the Chinese find that they cannot live here as they would like to live, there is too

much interference with their customs. After all, I suppose if our countrymen who carry the white man's burden in the East suddenly found themselves prevented from indulging in sport, meeting in clubs, and drinking gin and whisky, they would not linger long in exile. The Chinese, I believe, are very fond of gambling, have a weakness for secret societies, and like to smoke opium; and no doubt this makes them liable to be brought before a magistrate, who himself, perhaps, has been known to have a flutter on the turf, is a Freemason, and is always irritable after dinner unless he smokes his usual *Lar-ranaga*. Not all the Chinese who used to live here have gone back to the East. A good many of them, I was told, have moved to Rotterdam. There used to be racial street fights here at one time, but there has not been one now for several years. Perhaps they are having them in Rotterdam. We did not stay long over our tea, but moved on through the narrow darkening streets. Many of the houses in these streets used to be brothels, and some are still. Women are being smuggled into Liverpool even yet, in spite of a determined local effort to stop the supply. It made me wonder where on earth such women came from, if they could allow themselves to be smuggled into these holes and could consider a life behind these yellowed lace curtains as a career.

We made for the docks. I had seen these docks before, but oddly enough, although I have sailed to or from Hull, Goole, Harwich, Tilbury, the Pool of London, Dover, Folkestone, Newhaven, Southampton, Plymouth and Avonmouth, I have never either arrived at or departed from this port of Liverpool. Nor am I sorry, for they have always seemed to me most gloomy docks. That romance of the sea, about which we have always heard and read so much, has to set its opening chapter in some very dismal quarters of this country. Trams going whining down long sad roads; a few stinking little shops; pubs with their red blinds down and an accumulation of greasy papers under their windows; black pools and mud and slippery cobbles-

stones; high blank walls; a suspicious policeman or two; that is usually the opening scene. You see it in London. You see it in Liverpool, miles of it. Docks and slums, docks and slums. We are an island people; even yet we owe nearly everything to the sea; our foodstuffs are brought in ships and our manufactures are taken away in ships; but when you visit most of our larger ports you see nothing but slums. 'Welcome!' we cry to the sailor, and immediately make him free of Wapping, London, and Wapping, Liverpool. If there is anything to choose between these two Wappings, the London one has it. I caught a glimpse of the other that afternoon. We reached the docks, put out our pipes and entered their precincts, where a vast amount of gloom and emptiness and decay was being carefully guarded. It was deep dusk. There were some last feeble gleams of sunset in the shadowy sky before us. Everything was shadowy now. The warehouses we passed seemed empty of everything but shadows. A few men - far too few - came straggling along, their day's work over. We arrived at the edge of the Mersey, and below us was a long mudbank. The water was a grey mystery, a mere vague thickening of space. Something hooted; to break a silence that immediately closed up afterwards to muffle the whole spectral scene. We walked slowly along the waterfront, from nothing, it seemed, into nothing; and darkness rose rather than fell; and with it came a twinkle of lights from Birkenhead that reached us not across the river but over a gulf that could not be measured. I have rarely seen anything more spectral and melancholy. It was hard to believe that by taking ship here you might eventually reach a place of sharp outlines, a place where colour burned and vibrated in the sunlight, that here was the gateway to the bronze ramparts of Arabia, to the temples and elephants of Ceylon, to flying fish and humming birds and hibiscus. With our hands thrust deep in our overcoat pockets, we trudged along and talked about Liverpool's trade, a fitting topic for the time and place.

On the way back from the docks I was shown the David

Lewis Club and Hostel. The Club is largely maintained by the profit on the Hostel. It looked a good place. There is an amusing little theatre on the premises, with a room below filled with bits of scenery, half-painted canvas cloths, odd 'props'. There are reading, chess and card-rooms. I was told by one of the officials that the Club had a contract bridge team; this is the first time I have heard of working men playing contract bridge, to say nothing of playing in tournaments. There is a chess team too. If I lived in the district I do not suppose I should be able to win a place in either team, but it would not be for want of trying, for I should certainly spend a lot of my time in that Club. It is a rather old-fashioned building and needs some brighter decoration, but with its cosiness, recreations and companionship, it must seem like heaven after those long dark slummy Liverpool streets. The Hostel is next door, and an enormous establishment. A man can live there on one-and-ninepence a day, but he will not have to be very sensitive about his surroundings. It has a very grim institution look. The distempered walls and old-fashioned tiles cry at once: 'No nonsense here, my man.' That hundreds of men have been glad of its existence I have no doubt whatever; but I cannot imagine one of them, returning after an absence, breaking down in the hall and sobbing at the sight of the dear old Hostel. Nowadays it is only about half-full, because of the trade depression, which means that there are fewer casual labourers and the like drifting into the city. But though only half-full it smelt completely full. It was not exactly a dirty smell - for the place was clean enough and, I should imagine, well disinfected - but it was like that of the thick air that meets you when entering the Underground. The dining-room was very large and had a counter in one corner, where you bought your food. I saw a man buying a plate of stewed steak. This was sixpence and the dearest item on the menu; but you got a good plateful. The lodgers all have boxes in lockers, and keep tea things in them. I noticed several of them making their own tea. They can do their own washing too,

though I did not chance to see any of them doing it. Upstairs are floors and floors of cubicles, dreary little holes. Not much seems to have been done at any time to make the building cheerful and attractive. The men I saw in there were a fairly mixed lot, with elderly casual labourers in the majority. There were one or two intensely respectable-looking middle-aged men, spruce as bank managers; and they were all busy writing letters, probably the sort of begging letters I am always receiving, in which the writer is nearly always an elderly ailing woman with any number of sick children. Many of the men who lodge here are married, and sometimes their wives come looking for them and make trouble. There is very little trouble with the men themselves, few roaring drunks and mad fighting men. All quiet, tamed, broken in, nearly broken down. Walking round, not very hopefully, I asked myself how long I could stick it living here on my one-and-ninepence a day. I came to the conclusion that if I felt it was a purely temporary lodging, a half-way house in a journey between two homes, I could stand weeks, months of it. I should be living not in this Hostel but simply in hope and faith. I should sit near that stove in the dining-room, plotting like mad and probably turning out some pretty artful begging letters. I should dream dreams in my little cubicle. But if I was convinced that for the rest of my life it would be either this Hostel or something worse, I think I should leave it and for one night, one very long night, take a room somewhere with a gas fire. Such places as this seem peculiarly pitiful because they are so largely occupied by elderly men. Young men have always hopes of a better job; they can go out and lark about or fall in love; they can make light of the discomforts and indignities. After all, I lived under much worse conditions than these throughout most of the war. But elderly men have none of these compensations; they are on the wrong side of the hill, with darkness below them; they need comfortable little homes of their own, some dignity, and peace. Some day perhaps they may all have their chance of these

things, even the feeblest little shuffler and idler. Yes, why deny even that poor creature his fireside and his armchair at night? We can create a society big and generous enough to give away these pathetic little comforts and to be sorry for the pathetic fellow who receives them, because he is so weak and purposeless and is condemned to be among those who take but cannot give.

There is a very large Irish quarter in Liverpool. Two cheerful young journalists took me across the city to see it. Paddy's Market was about to finish business for the day. A few Lascars, like men cut out of brown paper, lurked in the entrance. All the seamen know this covered market, where they frequently come to replenish their wardrobes. Even those natives who have never seen England before and speak no English can ask for 'Paddee Markee', as if the place were our pride and joy, the diadem of the Empire. It is surrounded by slum streets, dirty little pubs, and the Irish. A great many speeches have been made and books written on the subject of what England has done to Ireland. I should be interested to hear a speech and read a book or two on the subject of what Ireland has done to England. If we do have an Irish Republic as our neighbour, and it is found possible to return her exiled citizens, what a grand clearance there will be in all the Western ports, from the Clyde to Cardiff, what a fine exit of ignorance and dirt and drunkenness and disease. The Irishman in Ireland may, as we are so often assured he is, be the best fellow in the world, only waiting to say good-bye to the hateful Empire so that, free and independent at last, he can astonish the world. But the Irishman in England too often cuts a very miserable figure. He has lost his peasant virtues, whatever they are, and has acquired no others. These Irish flocked over here to be navvies and dock hands and casual labourers, and God knows that the conditions of life for such folk are bad enough. But the English of this class generally make some attempt to live as decently as they can under these conditions: their existence has been turned into an obstacle

race, with the most monstrous and gigantic obstacles, but you may see them straining and panting, still in the race. From such glimpses as I have had, however, the Irish appear in general never even to have tried; they have settled in the nearest poor quarter and turned it into a slum, or, finding a slum, have promptly settled down to out-slum it. And this, in spite of the fact that nowadays being an Irish Roman Catholic is more likely to find a man a job than to keep him out of one. There are a very large number of them in Liverpool, and though I suppose there was a time when the city encouraged them to settle in it, probably to supply cheap labour, I imagine Liverpool would be glad to be rid of them now. After the briefest exploration of its Irish slums, I began to think that Hercules himself will have to be brought back and appointed Minister of Health before they will be properly cleaned up, though a seductive call or two from de Valera, across the Irish Sea, might help. But he will never whistle back these bedraggled wild geese. He believes in *Sinn Fein* for Ireland not England.

The two journalists and two trams brought me back to the centre of the city, whose essential darkness made a good background for quite a metropolitan display of Neon lighting and flashing signs. Cinemas, theatres (though Liverpool could do with several more), dance-halls, grill-rooms, boxing matches, cocktail bars, all in full glittering swing. The Adelphi Hotel had dressed for the evening, was playing waltzes, and for the time being did not care a fig about the lost Atlantic traffic. In the restaurant there were little birthday parties, tender reunions, and commercial gentlemen entertaining foreign customers (I heard them) and exchanging slow little speeches in which the syllables were all spaced out as they are in children's reading primers. In here, as they might have said, it was all very plea-sant and com-fort-able and ev-en gay and lux-ur-ious. I had had a long day and was tired and rather depressed. I wished then I had had someone dining with me, if only as an excuse to do the pair of us proud, to order a lot of food and

drink, and chatter and laugh a good deal. I am not old enough yet (perhaps I never will be) to sit down solemnly and do myself proud, going through the full ritual of food and liquor. I still eat quickly, swallow one glass of something, and go on thinking all the time. And, that night, this was all wrong. I did not want to go on thinking. I wanted to eat and drink and have a party, chiefly because I could not get it out of my head that here I was, perched on a little lighted apex and that going down on every side were very long dark slopes. It was the beastliest pyramid you can imagine. I did not want to be at the top, but still less did I want to be further down, on any of those horrible slopes. I wanted to be off the thing altogether, and enjoying myself. Miserably I decided that somebody else must give a plain fair account of this great city: the task, in the time, was beyond me. So I bought myself a good cigar.

## 2

There was a man I knew at the hotel who also wanted to go to Manchester, so I gave him a lift. The new main road from Liverpool to Manchester is very broad, straight and uninteresting, the kind that chauffeurs love. Even if there had been much to see, it is doubtful if we could have seen it, for there was some fog about and it looked as if there would soon be a great deal more. The cold damp seemed to penetrate everything. The two of us, huddled inside our thick overcoats, sat at the back and talked all the way. This man's firm runs cafés and dance-halls in various London suburbs and provincial cities, so that you may say he makes his money out of the new frivolity of our age, which we so often hear condemned by people who do not happen to like cafés and dance-halls themselves and do not see why others should. He goes round visiting these places from time to time, had just inspected their Liverpool properties and now wanted to have a look at their big café in Manchester. He did not like Manchester. It seems that when his firm decided to



open the café on Sunday evenings, they asked the Manchester City Fathers if they could provide their patrons with music, a little orchestra and a singer or two. The City Fathers said: 'No, we can't allow that sort of thing in Manchester.' So they asked if the café could have gramophone music. The Fathers promptly replied: 'Certainly not, no gramophone in public on Sunday.' Could they then install a loud speaker in the café, and thus entertain their patrons with the programmes that Sir John Reith himself passed for public consumption on the Sabbath? Again Manchester refused permission. So now, he informed me dryly, the café is open on Sunday evenings, and generally full, but nothing happens in the way of entertainment and his firm is saved the expense of providing it. The people are only too willing, on winter Sunday nights, to go in and stare at one another. It is a change from the streets or a back bed-sitting-room up the Oldham Road. There was a time when Manchester was known as the 'home of living causes', but exactly what living causes are finding a home there now I do not know. It was also said that 'what Manchester thinks today England will think tomorrow'. But that was before our time, though we still see some of the results - let us be fair, the worse results - of what Manchester thought in what has been left us, to mourn over, by the vast, greedy, slovenly, dirty process of industrialization for quick profits - and damn the consequences. Still, when I was a boy, Manchester had the best newspaper and the best orchestra in the country, which is saying something: its citizens, who could read the *Manchester Guardian* in the morning and listen to the Hallé under Richter in the evening, were not badly off and could be said to be in touch with civilization. (They had too, at that time, the best repertory theatre in the kingdom, and their own considerable school of dramatists and dramatic critics. It is perhaps significant that the critics were better than the dramatists. Manchester, I suspect, has always been more critical than creative; but that, let us admit, is much better than being neither.) Both the news-

paper and the orchestra, like the cotton trade, are still there, but, also like the cotton trade, are not quite what they were; though both are much more like what they were than the cotton trade.

On paper, in official returns, Manchester has a population of about three-quarters of a million. In actual fact, it is much larger than that. All manner of towns pretend to be independent, and produce separate population figures of their own, when for nearly all practical purposes they have been part of Manchester for years. The real city sprawls all over South Lancashire. It is an Amazonian jungle of blackened bricks. You could take trams in it for hours and hours, never losing it and arriving into broad daylight. The real population of Manchester must be getting on for two millions. You seem as long getting at the heart of the city as you are when driving into London itself. Unlike Liverpool, all this is Lancashire proper. Liverpool is simply Liverpool. Its people - or at least the uneducated among them - have an accent of their own; a thick, adenoid, cold-in-the-head accent, very unpleasant to hear. Once you touch Manchester or any of its satellite towns you are really in Lancashire. The people talk with a Lancashire accent, and if you are a Southerner you may imagine that you have landed among a million music-hall comedians. Why Lancashire should have become almost the official accent of music-hall humour is something of a mystery, for there are plenty of droll folk and music-halls elsewhere. But that rather flat but broad-vowelled speech - much less attractive, to my ear and mind, than the companion speech of Yorkshire - is admirable for comic effect, being able to suggest either shrewdness or simplicity, or, what is more likely than not, a humorous mixture of both. It lends itself, too, to ironical under-statements. It may add no charm or prettiness to a woman's talk, but it can give it flavour, body, character, as it does in the songs and patter of Miss Gracie Fields, who is not only the most popular and most dominating personality of the English variety stage but is also a

sort of essence of Lancastrian femininity. Listen to her for a quarter of an hour and you will learn more about Lancashire women and Lancashire than you would from a dozen books on these subjects. All the qualities are there: shrewdness, homely simplicity, irony, fierce independence, an impish delight in mocking whatever is thought to be affected and pretentious. That is Lancashire. The danger is, of course, that you may miss a lot by always being in terror of seeming affected or pretentious. The common denominator is a good sound one, but too many people may be reduced to it. There is a Lancashire standard – and no paltry one either – but it is apt to be applied too ruthlessly. Swaggering bad poets, for example, would have a wretched time of it in these parts, but so too would really good ones. The working folk of Lancashire have much in common, of course, with their Yorkshire neighbours; but in my time we in Yorkshire considered the Lancastrians as people worth considering as people, real folk (not like the vapouring creatures from the South Country), but inclined to be frivolous and spendthrifts, so that we shook our heads at the thought of their annual goings on in Blackpool. (The annual burst at the seaside, where you spent in one delirious week the savings of months, was a Lancashire and not a Yorkshire working-class custom.) We were quieter, less sociable and less given to pleasure, more self-sufficient and more conceited, I think, than the people at the other and softer side of the Pennines. That people from other parts of the country could – and still do – see little or no difference between the two sets of folk, could even confuse them, matters nothing, except as yet another proof of human stupidity and blindness: or so it seemed to us, and indeed still seems to us. The sad irony of it all now is that we should have disapproved of the Lancastrian because he had so much money to chuck about and *did* chuck it about, the sight of Blackpool's tower and great wheel goading him into a frenzy of spending. (There was more female labour, certainly more highly paid female labour, in the cotton than in the wool trade,

and in the old days the whole family in Lancashire would be working at the mill, and though their individual wages might not be very generous, the total family income was often considerable and so afforded chances of grand annual sprees.) Now the Yorkshire folk would be only too glad if their Lancashire neighbours still had the money to chuck about, had money enough for any kind of holiday. We still shake our heads over them, but now our heads have very different thoughts buzzing inside them. We think of the ruined trade, the empty mills.

We arrived in Manchester that afternoon just in time to see a fog descend upon the city and to escape its worst consequences. Manchester weather is a popular joke. And I do not care what the local meteorological statistics are, that joke has a solid basis. It is true that I have never visited Manchester in summer, but at every other season I have visited it the weather has been foul, combining in varying proportions rain and sleet and fog. The city always looks as if it had been built to withstand foul weather. There is a suggestion of the fortress about it. You always seem to be moving, a not too happy dwarf, between rows of huge square black warehouses. Even the public buildings – and there are plenty of them, big solid impressive fellows – look as if they are slowly transforming themselves into square black warehouses. Perhaps it is these warehouses – or the suggestion of them, the warehouse *motif* – that make the weather in Manchester seem worse than it is, turning the showers that fall into the dark gulfs of street between them into apparent downpours, thickening and yellowing and blackening mere patches of descending mist into blankets of fog. I know that during several visits I have often passed close to the City Art Gallery, which contains some good pictures, but have always postponed my inspection for lack of a reasonable amount of daylight. On that afternoon of my most recent arrival there daylight had vanished, and we crawled to the Midland Hotel through a turgid sooty gloom that was neither day nor night. The interior of that hotel was, as usual, almost trop-

ical, not merely in its colouring and the variety of its flora and fauna but also in its temperature, which suggested that of the climate in which cotton flourishes. As I have stayed there before and now made straight for it again, I cannot be accused of disliking this hotel (though I always spend half my time in it searching for my friends in its assortment of dining-rooms, cafés and bars), but I wish I understood clearly why it is stoked up to such a temperature. Is it in honour of the tropical cotton plant? Is it to offer the Manchester patron the sharpest possible contrast to the chill atmosphere of the city outside? Is it to flatter the American visitors, none of whom has ever made an appearance when I have been there? Is it to induce a thirst or to undermine the guest's system and his will, so that he will shrink from the rigours of a journey beyond the swing doors? Nobody has ever explained, yet everybody grumbles about the heat. Within an hour or two I had begun grumbling all over again, even if at first, after the chilled misery of the road and the fog, I was grateful enough to be immediately thawed out and then sent into a sweat.

Honesty is my policy while recording this journey. I will confess then that I was not here in Manchester entirely on your business, as readers of this book. I had other business of my own to attend to, and was at the old, difficult, never-turning-out-quite-satisfactorily trick of trying to kill two birds with one stone. The larger bird, at that hour, was a new little comedy of mine that was being 'tried out' in Manchester before opening in London. A great many pieces are performed for the first time in Manchester nowadays, and the reason given - in interviews to the local Press and grateful speeches from the stage - is that Manchester audiences are good judges of the drama and that what pleases Manchester is sure to please the easy idle set of playgoers in London. This is the reason given - and complacently accepted. For my part I like Manchester audiences, but I doubt if they are any better judges than audiences in most large cities, and they show exactly the same characteristics,

among which is a tendency to be very slow and cautious about attending the theatre when a fairly intelligent play is being presented, so that the seats only begin to go when the play is nearly ready to go too; and the companion tendency to book up in advance the entire theatre to see some piece of musical comedy nonsense that they probably do not enjoy, if only because it has been carefully assembled, to the last leg and dirty joke, to please an altogether different kind of audience. Probably the real reasons why Manchester is so frequently chosen now for these 'try outs' are that it has some fine big theatres that serve an enormous population, is easy to reach from London but is not too uncomfortably near (because of that doubtful Third Act, which may have to be rewritten), and happens to be at present the fashion, theatrical folk being creatures of fashion.

Here I was then, no longer the inquiring traveller but a worried dramatist, with a new little comedy still untried, a company somewhere on a train and perhaps lost in the fog, a stage manager and a carpenter probably trying to find the set and 'props', a producer brooding over his lighting and that curtain to Act Two, and an enormous theatre now rapidly filling with that specially thick brand of fog that finds its way into Oxford Street, Manchester. There were more seats in the dress circle of that theatre than in the whole auditorium of the little playhouse where we were to appear in London, and for which the production was designed. It was a grand theatre, terrifically impressive - like the dim vast buildings in dreams - when you prowled about in its foggy interior on a Sunday afternoon and peered down at the stage across the mountainous slopes of the empty dress circle or the gallery. I have a weakness for these big old-fashioned theatres, which can seat twice as many people as the new theatres (and let them all hear too), and yet contrive to appear far cosier and more intimate and homely. Too many of the new theatres look like lecture halls, and their straight-fronted balconies, which do not go round at

each side to meet the proscenium, cut the audience off from the stage and produce a chilly effect. I admit that intimacy was the last quality that, at first sight, I would have associated with this Manchester theatre; but I realized afterwards that for its enormous size it created a surprisingly intimate feeling, once it was filled with people. At first, looking down from the gallery on that vast proscenium arch, I told myself that the fantastic spread of curtain there could reasonably be raised only to reveal a full set of a city square, in which fifty baritones in the uniforms of Ruritanian Hussars were welcoming the Crown Prince on his return from Paris. It was absurd to think that very soon it would go up to show, like something that had been casually dropped into the opening, my modest little set of a suburban dining-room. And there were problems of lighting to be solved. We shouted to one another, through the gathering fog, from various parts of the house, while Bert and Sid and the rest played about with the coloured lights. 'Give us a bit more pink, Bert,' we cried. 'Sid, take out your ambers.' And steadily there was mounting inside us that tide of excitement, sometimes foaming into hysteria, which inevitably rises when a play is being produced. You may have very little at stake in the venture, may even regard the whole thing as almost a spare-time hobby, but that does not matter. The theatre gets you. The play binds you, body and soul. There seems to be nothing else worth talking about. If the papers announced that half a continent had been blown into the ocean, you would not spend five minutes talking or thinking about it. You say the same things to one another over and over again. For two or three days you are like a child that has been allowed to stay up far too late; indeed, all the time you feel that it is three in the morning. Thoughts go round and round in your mind like mad circus horses. You eat and drink at odd hours, and though terribly in need of food and liquor, you consume them in a dream. Only the people connected with the show and the theatre are real: all the others, the citizens in the crowded streets, the

fellow-guests in the hotel, are mere shadows. Their lives are nothing to you; they seem like civilians, while you are troops opening a campaign. The whole life of the city, except in so far as it touches your theatre, is nothing. You and your colleagues might be members of a secret society, working feverishly to strike a sudden blow at authority. You have nothing to say to the mere population, the good bourgeois. When you are tired out and exasperated and screaming with nerves you pretend to envy these solid sensible folk – who, when the play is running, will become the famous 'they', the audience – but there is no real envy in your heart any more than there is when you see some cattle quietly grazing. The whole business is maddening, but for the time being it is all that matters and you would not be out of it, merely one of 'them', for a fortune. What they are worrying about does not concern you, even though local finances and the state of trade may make a great difference to the size of your audiences. The real questions are: 'Will Bert manage that five seconds fade out all right?' and 'Is Miss So-and-so going to get that move right at the end of Act Two?' Thus you soon understand why theatrical folk usually know so little about anything outside the theatre, why actors can visit a city time after time without ever acquiring ten solid facts about it, why at heart the players are still the rogues and vagabonds that society once held them to be. They may join committees or open bazaars, but they are still really living in a world in which there are no such things as committees and bazaars, vestrymen and shareholders, dividends and votes. Into this world of rapt attention and hysteria, of bohemians who will slave day and night at a crisis, this world where idle make-believe is desperate work and all other work seems no weightier than a distant game, I was, then, sharply plunged.

That meant – and this explains why the previous paragraph should have a place in this chronicle – that I was not really in Manchester at all. I was living in a private nightmare city, bounded in space by the Palace Theatre and the Midland

Hotel. I did contrive, however, to obtain a few glimpses of the real city. The day after my play had opened, when I was flapping about in the mid-air between the world of the theatre and the world of real walls and real hair and daylight, I was the guest of a lunch club, whose members were jovial business men, hearty unpretentious chaps, who met once a week in the upstairs room of a small pub. I had some difficulty finding this pub, which was in a rather old part of the city I had never been in before, not at all like the Manchester I have already described. There were no huge square black warehouses, but little old houses, narrow streets, and odd shops and stalls. The upstairs room was very small and the lunch-club members were there in force, so that we were all packed in close together and had to be merry or die. My hosts were commercial travellers, under-managers, and buyers, many of them from the Co-operative Wholesale Society, which has its headquarters in Manchester. We drank beer, and a great deal of it. The food was Lancastrian. The first course consisted of a notable local delicacy, namely, Bury Black Puddings, all made by one little shop that was famous for them and had been producing them for generations. I have never cared for black puddings before (in Yorkshire we used to say that they were made of blood and sawdust), but these were very good, once you had recovered from the sinister look of them. The next course was meat pie, another stout Lancastrian dish. After that there were cheese and biscuits, if you had any appetite left. And all the time an amber stream of beer flowed in to us. The club's speechmakers were all the same type: large robust men who stood up boldly, with wooden faces, and then humorously insulted the other speakers and the officials of the club and told funny stories, sometimes using a word or two that cannot be put down here. The wooden face that they could all achieve was obviously part of their performance as droll speakers, and I suspect that the grins and giggles of the London after-dinner speakers, who want you to realize at once that they do this sort of thing aw-

fully well, would have been frowned upon here. Some of the stories, told in broad Lancashire, were excellent; they had the right grimly ironical quality. Here is one that I happen to remember, of those that can be repeated for a mixed audience. A weaver up Blackburn way had just lost her husband. 'Where yer going to bury 'im?' a neighbour asked her. 'Ah'm not going to bury 'im,' she replied. 'Well, what *are* yer going to do wi' 'im?' she was asked. 'Ah'm going to 'ave 'im creamated,' she replied. The neighbour was impressed. 'But whatever will yer do wi' th'ashes?' she inquired. 'Ah'll tell yer what Ah'm going to do wi' th'ashes,' said the widow. 'Ah'm going to 'ave 'em put into an egg-timer. Th'owd devil wouldn't ever work when 'e wer alive, so 'e can start doing a bit now 'e's deead.' That still seems to me a very good story, even though I am no longer under the influence of beer and Bury Black Puddings. It is a fair sample of Lancashire's grimly ironic humour. The lunch itself was perhaps typical. There was at work in it a spirit at once realistic and grim and yet uproariously festive. That story, you notice, introduces death and cremation and ashes into its narrative. (Even the food – with its emphasis upon Bury and Black – has a graveyard look.) No dodging the hard facts of life here. Whatever has been happening to cotton, life for the common folk in Lancashire has never been easy. The men are tough, and the women are tougher still. (I suspect that it is really the women who keep Lancashire going.) But what is surprising about them, where they chiefly differ from working folk elsewhere in the North, is that with their grimly realistic outlook and brutal speech they combine a gaiety of their own, a zest for pleasure, sheer gusto. After a funeral – and they like a funeral – they all pack into a room crammed with food and drink and tell funny stories. But you must not look for this unique temper in Manchester itself, which is now too big and mixed and dignified. Lancashire is there all right, but no longer on parade. You must go outside, to that smudge of towns to the north and west. And that, clearly, was my next move, now that my play

had been safely brought into the world. Not the very next move, however, because what I needed now above everything was one good night's sleep. I knew that the strong air of Blackpool could stun me into about twelve hours' unconsciousness, so I left Manchester, the afternoon following that lunch, on the road to Blackpool.

## 3

We went through Bolton. Between Manchester and Bolton the ugliness is so complete that it is almost exhilarating. It challenges you to live there. That is probably the secret of the Lancashire working folk: they have accepted that challenge; they are on active service, and so, like the front-line troops, they make a lot of little jokes and sing comic songs. There used to be a grim Lancashire adage: 'Where there's muck, there's money.' But now when there is not much money, there is still a lot of muck. It must last longer. Between Bolton and Preston you leave the trams and fried-fish shops and dingy pubs; the land rises, and you catch glimpses of rough moorland. The sun was never visible that afternoon, which was misty and wettish, so that everything was rather vague, especially on the high ground. The moors might have been Arctic tundras. The feature of this route, once you were outside the larger towns, seemed to me to be what we call in the North the 'hen runs'. There were miles of them. The whole of Lancashire appeared to be keeping poultry. If the cotton trade should decline into a minor industry, it looks as if the trains that once carried calico will soon be loaded with eggs and chickens. It is, of course, the extension of what was once a mere hobby. Domestic fowls have always had a fascination for the North-country mill hands. It is not simply because they might be profitable; there is more than that in it. The hen herself, I suspect, made a deep subconscious appeal to these men newly let loose from the roaring machinery. At the sound of her innocent squawking, the buried

countryman in them began to stir and waken. By way of poultry he returned to the land, though the land he had may have been only a few square yards of cindery waste ground. Now, of course, a sheer necessity plays its part too. We were going through the country of the dole.

Beyond Preston, in a flat and characterless countryside, all the roads suddenly become very straight and wide and display large cheerfully vulgar advertisements. That is because they, like you, are going to Blackpool. Even if you did not intend to go to Blackpool, once you had got beyond Preston you would have to go there. These roads would suck you into Blackpool. That is what they are there for. There is no escape. Blackpool has a comparatively long season, but it does not include November. It starts at Easter and then goes through to October, reaching its height in July and August. For a week or so about Christmas the hotels and larger boarding houses are full and noisy again. But November is dead out of season. The great roaring spangled beast is hibernating. I came into the town near the South Shore, where the enormous amusement park, with its terrifying giant coasters and other fantastic idiocies, was submitting silently to the wind and the rain. As I intended to put up for the night at the other end of the town, I sent the car and my luggage along the length of promenade ahead of me and got out and walked. I realized then that no genuine fresh air had come my way for days. I had been living on stuff that had been used over and over again, thick warmed-up trash. Here there was air. It blew in great salty gusts. Within five minutes I felt half drunk. I was sober enough, however, to notice that Blackpool was deserted or asleep. Its bravery was very tawdry, after being neglected only a week or two in that Atlantic weather. They had all gone, the fiddlers, fortune-tellers, pierrots, cheap-jacks, waiters and sellers of peppermint and pineapple rock. Nobody was demonstrating, with voice, piano and saxophone, the *Season's Hot Successes*. Nobody was cooking or enjoying or touting for those *Nice Hot Dinners*. There was, in short,