

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## I

It is no use pretending that there is not a good fat slice of England between Norwich and old Highgate Village in the borough of St Pancras. A hundred miles of solid England lie between the two. There are several counties. There are towns, whichever route you try, plenty of towns, all ancient and of good report. At the beginning of this journey, if I had come this way, I would have looked at every one of them and made notes in a little black notebook. But this was the end and not the beginning; I did not even know where the little black notebook was; I had long ceased to consult my guide-book and my economic geography; and being a vain, idle and weak mortal (and if I hadn't been, I should not have been the man for this job), I said that though we were now in Norwich we must be in Highgate Village and home before the day was out. When you consider those hundred miles, those counties, those ancient towns through which we should have to rush, doing nothing but 'making time', as the chauffeurs say, you can see that I was not really completing the journey but suddenly abandoning it, giving it up as a bad job. In the original itinerary I sketched for myself - in that first idiotic flush, when you plan things for a self that is not you at all but somebody three times as strong, energetic, conscientious, determined - there were hopeful references to places like Newmarket, Cambridge, Bury St Edmunds, Ipswich, Colchester. No doubt I could have produced some pretty paragraphs on Newmarket, which is perhaps more like a place conjured out of an old sporting print than any other in England. Even I, who dislike racing and horsey people, have been enchanted by Newmarket before today; by the wide

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green ribbons of the gallops on the heath, the nodding glossy processions of racers, the old-fashioned monkey-like stable hands, and the equestrian clatter and breeziness of the town itself, which does not really belong to this century at all. A luxury town, if there ever was one. Then, Cambridge. I know Cambridge well enough, having spent three years there, and many an odd day or two since. A lovely old place, far lovelier now than Oxford. But either you are completely and happily at home there or are always faintly uncomfortable, longing to escape from King's parade and the Trumpington Road. I was always faintly uncomfortable, being compelled to feel - and quite rightly too - a bit of a lout and a bit of a mountebank. I am not pleased with myself about this discomfort of mine at Cambridge. Probably it is because they *know*, whereas I am always only guessing. But wistfully, as a self-condemned lout and mountebank, I wish Cambridge did not tend to take every advantage of the fact that it knows more than anybody else about seventeenth-century prose or electrons or the foreign policy of Choiseul or Vitamin E. I wish it were not so primly pleased with itself, as if it were a hard-working charitable spinster and the Absolute its delighted vicar. I wish that somebody, one day, would rise in the Senate and begin: 'Look here, we're a conceited parochial gang - ' It would not be true, but I cannot help feeling that the resulting shock would be of some benefit. No, it was too late to bring Cambridge into this book. As for returning the other way, and finding Bury St Edmunds, Ipswich, Colchester, all good bustling market towns that I had seen before and lunched and dined in, it was too late for that too. I would not set foot in Essex. Because Essex begins somewhere among back streets in London's eastern suburbs, some people think it has no mystery, but I know that Essex is a huge mysterious county, with God knows what going on in its remoter valleys. No Essex for me. I was going home, and by the shortest route. We would 'make time'. At this piece of news my driver's face lost that mixed look of distrust, contempt and irony which

it always wears when he is anywhere not within three miles of High Street, Camden Town. I have seen whole regions of well-advertised loveliness dwindle and blanch before that look. The further we are from High Street, Camden Town, the more sardonic it appears. I have never commanded its owner to drive me into Westmorland and Cumberland, out of sheer compassion for those counties. But now, it seemed, sense was returning to the world; we were to go no more a-roving and asking silly questions, but were to move steadily at fifty-odd miles an hour in the direction of Gamage's and the Holborn Empire, without another senseless halt, real travellers 'making time'. He declared, happily, that we should be home for early tea.

He was wrong. We did not make time. This was to be no journey worth talking about – except as an ordeal – where cars are washed and greased. Time, swiftly conspiring with the elements, showed us a thing or two. The first part of the journey was all right. We went rushing through an empty sunlit East Anglia, through Thetford, Newmarket and Royston. We reached Baldock and went roaring down the Great North Road. But then the sun went out. Then the surrounding country disappeared. Then the top of the road in front vanished. We had stopped rushing and roaring now. For some time we travelled on twenty yards of road, and it looked always the same twenty yards. After that the twenty yards were reduced to ten, then five. The cars coming in the opposite direction, from London, approached us very cautiously in a haze of orange light. There was, we were told, a fog in London. It seemed to me that there was also a fog where we were too, and by this time I did not know where we were. The five yards were further reduced to about two. The far side of the road soon went, and the near side was uncertain. Sometimes it was there, and sometimes we lost it altogether. Our view now was restricted to a large wobbling green rectangle, on which were painted some words on the subject of furniture removal to all parts of the country. But even

between us and this rectangle the fog was being pumped in all the time. Somebody might have been squeezing a gigantic tube of shaving cream at us. The woolly air was loud with the complaints of a long line of cars not allowed to make time. If the green rectangle went fuzzy and its words disappeared, we crawled after it. If it stopped, then we stopped. Sometimes figures miraculously appeared, even faces; mysterious beings who pointed and shouted before being pulled back into the mountainside of cotton wool. Then the green rectangle disappeared for ever, and we had to be content with a smaller greeny yellow horizon that had a large battered cabin trunk fastened to it with rope. We watched the cabin trunk: it was all we had. It seemed to be even less certain of itself than the green rectangle, for it stopped and hesitated far more. Once it took a turn and we followed it, only to stop again and find that a figure in brown overalls was outside our window, telling us that this was not the road at all but the entrance to a garage; and as there appeared to be hundreds of cars hooting behind, all the traffic of the Great North Road must have been diverted into his garage entrance for the next half-hour. Sometimes the fog thinned a trifle, and I remember seeing a vague pricking of red light that for one second resolved itself into the word *Service*. But service closed over us again. Up to now I had stared, until my eyes ached, either at the faint scribble of a kerb below or at the jelly-like cabin trunk in front. But I was doing no good. Whether we stopped or went groaning on into nothing out of nothing, no staring of mine could help; and so I lit a pipe and huddled down, dismissed this England that was only blinding vapour for the England that I had already seen on my journey.

Southampton to Newcastle, Newcastle to Norwich: memories rose like milk coming to the boil. I had seen England. I had

seen a lot of Englands. How many? At once, three disengaged themselves from the shifting mass. There was, first, Old England, the country of the cathedrals and minsters and manor houses and inns, of Parson and Squire; guide-book and quaint highways and byways England:

Visit ancient York with its 1,300-year-old Minster; and Durham where lies the Venerable Bede. Wander through the historic streets of Norwich, once the second city of England. Look down from the battlements of Conway Castle. Visit Lichfield Cathedral, renowned for its three beautiful spires, and put yourself back in the Middle Ages at Warwick. Every county of Great Britain speaks to you of your ancestors . . .

as our railway companies tell the readers of American magazines, most of whose ancestors never saw a county of Great Britain. But we all know this England, which at its best cannot be improved upon in this world. That is, as a country to lounge about in; for a tourist who can afford to pay a fairly stiff price for a poorish dinner, an inconvenient bedroom and lukewarm water in a small brass jug. It has few luxuries, but nevertheless it is a luxury country. It has long ceased to earn its own living. I am for scrupulously preserving the most enchanting bits of it, such as the cathedrals and the colleges and the Cotswolds, and for letting the rest take its chance. There are people who believe that in some mysterious way we can all return to this Old England; though nothing is said about killing off nine-tenths of our present population, which would have to be the first step. The same people might consider competing in a race at Brooklands with a horse and trap. The chances are about the same. And the right course of conduct, I reflected, was not, unless you happen to be a professional custodian, to go and brood and dream over these almost heart-breaking pieces of natural or architectural loveliness, doing it all at the expense of a lot of poor devils toiling in the muck, but to have an occasional peep at them, thus to steel your determination that sooner or later the rest of

English life, even where the muck is now, shall have as good a quality as those things.

Then, I decided, there is the nineteenth-century England, the industrial England of coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool, railways; of thousands of rows of little houses all alike, railway Gothic churches, square-faced chapels, Town Halls, Mechanics' Institutes, mills, foundries, warehouses, refined watering-places, Pier Pavilions, Family and Commercial Hotels, Literary and Philosophical Societies, back-to-back houses, detached villas with monkey-trees, Grill Rooms, railway stations, slag-heaps and 'tips', dock roads, Refreshment Rooms, doss-houses, Unionist or Liberal Clubs, cindery waste ground, mill chimneys, slums, fried-fish shops, public-houses with red blinds, Bethels in corrugated iron, good-class draper's and confectioners' shops, a cynically devastated countryside, sooty dismal little towns, and still sootier grim fortress-like cities. This England makes up the larger part of the Midlands and the North and exists everywhere; but it is not being added to and has no new life poured into it. To the more fortunate people it was not a bad England at all, very solid and comfortable. A great deal of very good literature has come out of it, though most of that literature never accepted it but looked either backward or forward. It provided a good parade ground for tough, enterprising men, who could build their factories in the knowledge that the world was waiting for their products, and who also knew that once they had accumulated a tidy fortune they could slip out of this mucky England of their making into the older, charming one, where their children, well schooled, groomed and finished, were almost indistinguishable, in their various uniforms, pink hunting coats to white ties and shiny pumps, from the old inhabitants, the land-owning aristocrats. But at first you had to be tough. I reminded myself how more than once I had thought that the Victorians like to weep over their novels and plays, not because they were more sensitive and softer than we are but because they were much tougher and

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further removed from emotion, so that they needed good strong doses of pathos to move them at all. The less fortunate classes were very unlucky indeed in that England. They had some sort of security, which is more than many of them have now, but it was a security of monstrously long hours of work, miserable wages, and surroundings in which they lived like black-beetles at the back of a disused kitchen stove. Many of their descendants are still living in those surroundings, but few people now have the impudence to tell them to be resigned and even thankful there, to toil in humble diligence before their Maker and for His chosen children, the debenture-holders. Whether they were better off in this England than in the one before, the pre-industrial one, is a question that I admitted I could not answer. They all rushed into the towns and the mills as soon as they could, as we know, which suggests that the dear old quaint England they were escaping from could not have been very satisfying. You do not hurry out of Arcadia to work in a factory twelve hours a day for about eighteen-pence. Moreover, why did the population increase so rapidly after the Industrial Revolution? What was it about Merrie England that kept the numbers down?

One thing, I told myself, I was certain of and it was this, that whether the people were better or worse off in this nineteenth-century England, it had done more harm than good to the real enduring England. It had found a green and pleasant land and had left a wilderness of dirty bricks. It had blackened fields, poisoned rivers, ravaged the earth, and sown filth and ugliness with a lavish hand. You cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs, and you cannot become rich by selling the world your coal and iron and cotton goods and chemicals without some dirt and disorder. So much is admitted. But there are far too many eggshells and too few omelettes about this nineteenth-century England. What you see looks like a debauchery of cynical greed. As I thought of some of the places I had seen, Wolverhampton and St Helens and Bolton and Gateshead and Jarrow and Shotton, I remembered a book I had just read, in which we

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are told to return as soon as possible to the sturdy Victorian individualism. But for my part I felt like calling back a few of these sturdy individualists simply to rub their noses in the nasty mess they had made. Who gave them leave to turn this island into their ashpit? They may or may not have left us their money, but they have certainly left us their muck. If every penny of that money had been spent on England herself, the balance would still be miles on the wrong side. It is as if the country had devoted a hundred years of its life to keeping gigantic sooty pigs. And the people who were choked by the reek of the sties did not get the bacon. The more I thought about it, the more this period of England's industrial supremacy began to look like a gigantic dirty trick. At one end of this commercial greatness were a lot of half-starved, bleary-eyed children crawling about among machinery and at the other end were the traders getting natives boozed up with bad gin. Cynical greed — *Damn you, I'm all right*: you can see as much written in black letters across half England. Had I not just spent days moving glumly in the shadow of their downstrokes?

The third England, I concluded, was the new post-war England, belonging far more to the age itself than to this particular island. America, I supposed, was its real birthplace. This is the England of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance-halls and cafés, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons. If the fog had lifted I knew that I should have seen this England all round me at that northern entrance to London, where the smooth wide road passes between miles of semi-detached bungalows, all with their little garages, their wireless sets, their periodicals about film stars, their swimming costumes and tennis rackets and dancing shoes. The fog did not lift for an instant, however; we crawled, stopped, crawled

again; and I had ample time to consider carefully this newest England, from my richly confused memory of it. Care is necessary too, for you can easily approve or disapprove of it too hastily. It is, of course, essentially democratic. After a social revolution there would, with any luck, be more and not less of it. You need money in this England, but you do not need much money. It is a large-scale, mass-production job, with cut prices. You could almost accept Woolworths as its symbol. Its cheapness is both its strength and its weakness. It is its strength because being cheap it is accessible; it nearly achieves the famous equality of opportunity. In this England, for the first time in history, Jack and Jill are nearly as good as their master and mistress; they may have always been as good in their own way, but now they are nearly as good in the *same way*. Jack, like his master, is rapidly transported to some place of rather mechanical amusement. Jill beautifies herself exactly as her mistress does. It is an England, at last, without privilege. Years and years ago the democratic and enterprising Blackpool, by declaring that you were all as good as one another so long as you had the necessary sixpence, began all this. Modern England is rapidly Blackpooling itself. Notice how the very modern things, like the films and wireless and sixpenny stores, are absolutely democratic, making no distinction whatever between their patrons: if you are in a position to accept what they give – and very few people are not in that position – then you get neither more nor less than what anybody else gets, just as in the popular restaurants there are no special helpings for favoured patrons but mathematical portions for everybody. There is almost every luxury in this world except the luxury of power or the luxury of privacy. (With the result that these are the only luxuries that modern autocrats insist upon claiming for themselves. They are far more austere than most of the old tyrants ever were, but they are all greedy for power and sticklers for privacy.) The young people of this new England do not play chorus in an opera in which their social superiors are the

principals; they do not live vicariously, enjoy life at second-hand, by telling one another what a wonderful time the young earl is having or how beautiful Lady Mary looked in her court dress; they get on with their own lives. If they must have heroes and heroines, they choose them themselves, from the ranks of film stars and sportsmen and the like. This may not seem important, but nevertheless it is quite new in English life, where formerly, as we may see from memoirs and old novels, people lived in an elaborate network of relations up and down the social scale, despising or pitying their inferiors, admiring or hating their superiors. You see this still in the country and small towns, but not in this new England, which is as near to a classless society as we have got yet.

Unfortunately, it is a bit too cheap. That is, it is also cheap in the other sense of the term. Too much of it is simply a tawdry imitation of something not very good even in the original. There is about it a rather depressing monotony. Too much of this life is being stamped on from outside, probably by astute financial gentlemen, backed by the Press and their publicity services. You feel that too many of the people in this new England are doing not what they like but what they have been told they would like. (Here is the American influence at work.) When I was a boy in Yorkshire the men there who used to meet and sing part-songs in the upper rooms of taverns (they called themselves Glee Unions) were not being humbugged by any elaborate publicity scheme on the part of either music publishers or brewers, were not falling in with any general movement or fashion; they were singing glees over their beer because they liked to sing glees over their beer; it was their own idea of the way to spend an evening and they did not care tuppence whether it was anybody's else's idea or not; they drank and yarned and roared away happy in the spontaneous expression of themselves. I do not feel that any of the activities in this new England have that spontaneity. Even that push towards the open which we have now decided to call 'hiking' has something

regimented about it. Most of the work, as we have already seen, is rapidly becoming standardized in this new England, and its leisure is being handed over to standardization too. It is a cleaner, tidier, healthier, saner world than that of nineteenth-century industrialism. The difference between the two Englands is well expressed by the difference between a typical nineteenth-century factory, a huge dark brick box, and a modern factory, all glass and white tiles and chromium plate. If you remember the old factories at closing time, go and see the workpeople coming out of one of these new factories. The change is startling. Nevertheless, I cannot rid myself of a suspicion that the old brick boxes had more solid lumps of character inside them than the new places have. It is possible that being a literary man, I attach too much importance to 'character', preferring a dirty diseased eccentric to a clean healthy but rather dull citizen. Unconsciously I may see people as so much possible raw material for novels and plays. England of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a wonderfully rich country for a novelist because it was full of odd characters. (Like the old Russia. The new Russia, on the other hand, seems to be giving its novelists a lot of trouble.) I must guard against this, the bias of my trade. You cannot estimate the life of a people by the wealth of dramatic material it offers you. We all know that you can make a novel or a play out of an unhappy marriage, whereas a happy marriage is a tedious theme. Dickens protested violently against the bad conditions of his time, but if he had been born into a neat clean world, where little boys were never sent to work in blacking factories, where there were no overworked half-starved clerks crouching like gnomes in gloomy little offices, he would not have been the grandly fantastic Dickens we know. Probably we authors are busy cutting the ground from under our feet, a not ignoble occupation. After all, the world does not exist simply for creative writers who happen to like strong effects. It is better that people should be leading decent useful contented lives than that

they should be asking to be immortalized in their misery. But even after making all allowance for this professional bias, I cannot help feeling that this new England is lacking in character, in zest, gusto, flavour, bite, drive, originality, and that this is a serious weakness. Monotonous but easy work and a liberal supply of cheap luxuries might between them create a set of people entirely without ambition or any real desire to think and act for themselves, the perfect subjects for an iron autocracy. There is a danger of this occurring in the latest England. Unlike nineteenth-century England, it is not politically-minded. One of its most familiar jokes is the ironical demand to know what Mr Gladstone said in 1884. It is a joke that can be repeated too often. The people who enjoy it might suddenly find themselves in such a situation, bound and gagged, that they would be only too glad to know what Mr Gladstone said in 1884.

Then I remembered younger folk here and there, all products of this newest England, and I saw that there is a section of people who have its strength but are untouched by its weakness. I met them all over the country, not many at a time, for there are not enough of them to make a crowd in any one place. There would have been a great many more if the finest members of my own generation had not been slaughtered in the war. Most of these people of course are younger. They are not prigs, though being young and earnest they are inclined at times to be a shade too solemn. They are not saving their souls or going about doing good. But they have a social consciousness; their imagination is not blunted; they know that we are interdependent and that bluffing and cheating are useless. There are several of them, without names, in this book. I usually found them doing a not very pleasant job of work for the benefit of people worse off than themselves. They are good citizens and as yet we have no city worthy of them. Perhaps they are building it themselves now. These people were very nice to me, but I did not always like meeting them. It is not

pleasant suddenly seeing yourself as impatient and weak, greedy and egoistical.

Here then were the three Englands I had seen, the Old, the Nineteenth Century and the New; and as I looked back on my journey I saw how these three were variously and most fascinatingly mingled in every part of the country I had visited. It would be possible, though not easy, to make a coloured map of them. There was one already in my mind, bewilderingly coloured and crowded with living people. It made me feel dizzy. I returned to the fog-bound car, which was now crawling and halting in a world of sepia vapour, in which lost cars, making no time at all, hooted their despair. There was nothing I could do.

## 3

My hands and feet were cold, and I thought longingly of the cup of tea that I ought to have been enjoying at home by this time, and would have been enjoying at home if the Thames valley and the London smoke had not been up to their old tricks. We were all very clever people nowadays, I said to myself, but we still allowed the fog to smother us and the 'flu to lay us out. We were brilliant, I decided, only in patches. Our civilization was rather like the stock comic figure of the professor who knows all about electrons but does not know how to boil an egg or tie his bootlaces. Our knowledge begins anywhere but at home. We would understand anything so long as it did not immediately concern us. Aldebaran or Betelgeuse, I told myself, stood a better chance with us than the North of England. That brought me, sharply, back to the England of the dole. This word dole has two meanings. It means a charitable distribution, especially a rather niggardly one. It also means, or did mean in its archaic use, a man's lot or destiny. We have contrived most artfully to combine these two meanings. As I looked back on it, the England of the dole did not seem to me a

pleasant place. We could not be proud of its creation. We could not really afford to be complacent about it, although we often are. It is a poor shuffling job, and one of our worst compromises. When I began to ask myself exactly what was wrong with it, faces and voices from that unhappy world returned to my memory. I saw again the old men who, though they knew they were idle and useless through no fault of their own, felt defeated and somewhat tainted. Their self-respect was shredding away. Their very manhood was going. Even in England, which is no South Sea Island, there are places where a man feels he can do nothing cheerfully, where gay idling is not impossible. But the ironist in charge of our affairs has seen to it that the maximum of unemployment shall be in those very districts that have a tradition of hard work and of very little else. Life on the dole in South Devon, let us say, may be bad enough, but life on the dole on the Tyneside is a great deal worse. I saw these older workless men as a series of personal tragedies. The young men, who have grown up in the shadow of the Labour Exchange, are not so much personal tragedies, I decided, as collectively a national tragedy. I do not believe that people are entirely at the mercy of their environment. Exceptional persons not only refuse to be moulded by their environment but actually set about changing environments themselves. But they have to be exceptional. Average people are largely products of a temporary set of conditions. The atmosphere in which these young unemployed men have grown up is poisoned. It is that of a workaday world that has no work, of a money-ridden world that has lost its money. They are playboys who cannot really play. Nobody says to them: 'Look here, you have arrived at manhood in a time so bewildering that we don't know where we are. The old rules aren't working. We haven't made any new ones yet. There's a dreadful lag between man the inventor and producer and man the organizer and distributor. We haven't caught up with the machines yet. It's all a transition. The world's going under a new management. The present muddle

has put you fellows out, and at the moment you can't settle down to work as your father and grandfather did at your age. Perhaps you never will. Probably we're going to change all our ideas about work. Meanwhile, get on with your lives. There's plenty to do. The town you live in is a disgrace to any civilized community. Clean up the miserable hole. And remember you're not waifs and strays and corner boys, you're citizens of a new world. Keep yourselves in good shape. Learn something worth knowing. This is your chance.' We do not say that, but if we do not mean that, then what do we mean? Are we really saying: 'Here, you nuisances, take this. It isn't much - just enough to keep you alive. A little more or a little less and you'd start kicking. With this you'll be alive but not kicking. And now get out, and let us forget about you.' I asked myself what this game was that we were playing. It cannot be every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. It cannot be that or we should not have unemployment and health insurance and old age pensions and the rest, on the one hand and, on the other hand, I should not be paying more than a third of my income away in taxes. These suggest a real corporate life. But it cannot be very real or we should all be showing, roughly, the same kind of face. I remembered then how, just after the Armistice, I had been sent to look after some German prisoners of war. They had a certain look, these prisoners of war, most of whom had been captured two or three years before. It was a strained, greyish, faintly decomposed look. I did not expect to see that kind of face again for a long time; but I was wrong. I had seen a lot of those faces on this journey. They belonged to unemployed men.

I reminded myself firmly that I was no economist, that I had not that sort of mind, moving easily among abstractions. My childlike literary mind always fastens upon concrete details. Thus, when the newspapers tell me that there is yet another financial crisis and that gold is being rushed from one country to another and I see photographs of excited City men jostling and scrambling and of bank porters and sailors carrying boxes

of bullion, I always feel that some idiotic game is going on and that it is as preposterous that the welfare of millions of real people should depend on the fortunes of this game as it would be if our happiness hung upon the result of the Stock Exchange golfing tournament. This spectacle of sailors carrying gold seems to me to belong to the pantomime of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*; and not to anything more serious. A fellow literary man, another simpleton, once told me an idea of his for a film, which would show men searching for gold in hellish deserts and among icy peaks, making feverish discoveries, then toiling away mining the precious stuff, until at last, after the most colossal sequences of adventure and slavery, you would see the bars of metal being carefully taken down into the vaults of banks, underground once more. That seemed to me, I remember, an excellent idea, in which I took a possibly childish delight. That is the kind of mind I have, not quite fully adult. On the rare occasions when really grown-up persons, such as economists and bankers and City men, condescend to mention their mysteries to me, I show a lack of comprehension and seriousness that brings a smile to these solemn faces. So I told myself, as I stared at the fog, that even in trying to think about these things, I was foolishly floundering out of my depth. But I risked it. Perhaps the enveloping fog gave me courage. I thought then how this City, which is always referred to with such tremendous respect, which is treated as if it were the very beating red heart of England, must have got its money from somewhere, that it could not have conjured gold out of Threadneedle Street, and that a great deal of this money must have poured into it at one time - and a good long time too - from that part of England which is much dearer to me than the City, namely, the industrial North. For generations, this blackened North toiled and moiled so that England should be rich and the City of London be a great power in the world. But now this North is half derelict, and its people, living on in the queer ugly places, are shabby, bewildered, unhappy. And I told myself



that I would prefer – if somebody must be miserable – to see the people in the City all shabby, bewildered, unhappy. I was prejudiced, of course; simply because I belong to the North myself, and perhaps too because I like people who make things better than I like people who only deal in money. And then again, I reflected, it is much pleasanter either working or idling in the City, a charming old place, than it is in Bolton or Jarrow or Middlesbrough; so that the people there could stand a little more worry. Perhaps I would not have dragged the City into this meditation at all if I had not always been told, every time the nation made an important move, went on the Gold Standard or went off it, that the City had so ordered it. The City then, I thought, must accept the responsibility. Either it is bossing us about or it isn't. If it is, then it must take the blame if there is any blame to be taken. And there seemed to me a great deal of blame to be taken. What had the City done for its old ally, the industrial North? It seemed to have done what the black-moustached glossy gentleman in the old melodramas always did to the innocent village maiden.

It was all very puzzling. Was Jarrow still in England or not? Had we exiled Lancashire and the North-east coast? Were we no longer on speaking terms with cotton weavers and miners and platers and riveters? Why had nothing been done about these decaying towns and their workless people? Was everybody waiting for a miracle to happen? I knew that doles had been given out, Means Tests applied, training places opened, socks and shirts and old books distributed by the Personal Service League and the like; but I was not thinking of feeble gestures of that kind, of the sort of charity you might extend to a drunken old ruffian begging at the back door. I meant something constructive and creative. If Germans had been threatening these towns instead of Want, Disease, Hopelessness, Misery, something would have been done quickly enough. Yet Jarrow and Hebburn looked much worse to me than some of the French towns I saw at the end of the war, towns that had been

occupied by the enemy for four years. Why has there been no plan for these areas, these people? The dole is part of no plan; it is a mere declaration of intellectual bankruptcy. You have only to spend a morning in the dole country to see that it is all wrong. Nobody is getting any substantial benefit, any reasonable satisfaction out of it. Nothing is encouraged by it except a shambling dull-eyed poor imitation of life. The Labour Exchanges stink of defeated humanity. The whole thing is unworthy of a great country that in its time has given the world some nobly creative ideas. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. Anybody who imagines that this is a time for self-congratulation has never poked his nose outside Westminster, the City and Fleet Street. And, I concluded, he has not used his eyes and ears much even in Westminster and Fleet Street.

## 4

Having thus decided that any praise of ourselves at this time was not decent, I immediately changed my own tune, suddenly remembering many things. I had travelled almost the length of the country and had talked to scores of people. True, I had had no talk with the sort of dangerous lunatic who believes that he can bring the Golden Age nearer by derailing express trains and blowing up bridges. But I had listened to almost every other kind of political and social theorist. They had always talked quite freely. They never suddenly looked over their shoulders or suggested that we should whisper in a corner. I had heard people say in a loud cheerful tone that they thought Soviet Russia a much better country than England. I had heard Jews denounce Fascists, and Fascists denounce Jews. I was not met in any town by the local representatives of the secret police. Having told myself so much, I thought how some of my acquaintances would point out that this only proved that I had been travelling through a muddling irresponsible country. I decided not to deny the muddle or the irresponsibility. But the

idea of liberty remained. There is not as much liberty here as I should like, but there is a great deal more than there is in many countries now. All over the world the shutters are being closed, the blue pencils are being sharpened, the gags and chains and warrants for summary arrest are being brought out. There is some liberty yet in England. Milton could be living at this hour. Even Mr Bernard Shaw, who appears to favour iron autocracies, has continued his residence in a country where he can say what he likes to the next interviewer. A good many of my fellow-authors who are for ever sneering at liberal democracy have still sense enough to keep within its tolerant boundaries, and do not venture into those admired territories where they would soon find themselves kicked about by uniformed hooligans or shoved into a gaol that knew nothing of *Habeas Corpus*. I know that things happen in England, chiefly behind the scenes. No doubt letters are opened, persons are followed, 'pressure is brought to bear' here and there. I am not fool enough to think that a travelling novelist has seen it all. It is a pity that we spoil a fine record by allowing a few contemptible moves of this kind to be made. We are told – sometimes when one of these dirty little bits of business is being put through – that at all costs we must keep our England, but the England to keep is the England worth keeping, the country of the free and generous temper.

Even people who are supposed to know what intellectual liberty means seem to make a sad hash of applying its standards nowadays. What is protested against as a crushing tyranny in one country is tolerated as a necessity in another. Some of my friends rage against the absence of liberty in Italy and Germany but quite overlook its absence in Russia. We English frequently do not let our imaginations travel as far as India. The Americans who know all about India seem curiously ignorant about what happens in their own states. The Irish, who must have done more talking about freedom than any other people, are now busy putting themselves into prison. Milton

would not admire our post-war European statesmen-rulers, for they prefer what he could not praise, that 'fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race.' There is no race now, and secret police, storm troops and machine-guns are at the competitors' entrance, and the great man has the track to himself and is always busy declaring himself the winner. So far we have been free from this miserable nonsense in England. We can criticize the government without looking over our shoulders. There is no penalty as yet for using your reason. During the course of this journey, I reflected, I had seen a good many fellows standing on boxes at street corners, and nearly all of them were heartily damning the government. They were not always a pleasant spectacle, but I was glad to see them. It meant that England was still out of fashion. I think I should have been even better pleased if I had seen more people listening to them. We shall of course never work up the enormous excitement over comparatively small political issues that there was fifty years ago. I suspect that if there had been more popular amusements, those meetings in Free Trade Halls and the like would not have been so densely packed. Gladstone and Dizzy had not to face the competition of Laurel and Hardy and Clapham and Dwyer. A great proportion of the English electorate is probably becoming less and less politically-minded. (And if being politically-minded only meant taking a passionate interest in House of Commons intrigue, I should not blame them. I never meet members of that House without feeling that they simply belong to a rather amusing, rowdy club in Westminster. I have dined at the same table with prominent Tory and Labour politicians, and found that they had far, far more in common with one another than they had with me, being members of the same club. This is only natural *under the circumstances*. But they do not look very hopeful circumstances.) People are beginning to believe that government is a mysterious process with which they have no real concern. This is

the soil in which autocracies flourish and liberty dies. Alongside that apathetic majority there will soon be a minority that is tired of seeing nothing vital happen and that will adopt any cause that promises decisive action. There are signs of this about already. If that majority does not wake up, it may find, too late, that it has taken too many good things in English life for granted.

I could think, and did, of many good things I had found in the course of this journey. For example, the natural kindness and courtesy of the ordinary English people. I have noticed more downright rudeness and selfishness in one night in the stalls of a West End theatre than I have observed for days in the streets of some dirty little manufacturing town, where you would have thought everybody would have been hopelessly brutalized. And how often did I hear some wretched unemployed man and his wife say, 'Ay, but there's lots worse off than us'. What a desperate battle these people fight, especially the brave and stubborn North-country women, to preserve all the little decencies of life! Sometimes I feel like opposing the dictatorship of the proletariat simply because the proletarians I know are too good to be dictators. But then I do not like dictators. I came to the conclusion, however, that I should like to be dictator myself long enough to sweep away once and for all the notion that for the people who do the hard monotonous physical work any dirty little hole is good enough. As I thought of what the nineteenth century has left us in every industrial area, I felt at once angry and ashamed. What right had we to go strutting about, talking of our greatness, when all the time we were living on the proceeds of these muck-heaps? If we lived on some God-forsaken prairie, dusty in summer, frozen in winter, it might not matter, but we have ravished for unjustly distributed profit the most enchanting countryside in the world, out of which lyrics and lovely water-colours have come flowering like the hawthorn. And I saw again, clean through the fog that was imprisoning me, the exquisite hazy green landscape. I

remembered the German in my hotel in Italy last year. He had lived and travelled all over the world; and I asked him which country he thought the most beautiful. He told me, England. Perhaps he did it to make me happy, but he sounded sincere enough. And now here I was, huddled in the fog, with memories reaching from West Bromwich to Blackburn, Jarrow to Middlesbrough, darkly crowding in on me.

I thought about patriotism. I wished I had been born early enough to have been called a Little Englander. It was a term of sneering abuse, but I should be delighted to accept it as a description of myself. That *little* sounds the right note of affection. It is little England I love. And I considered how much I disliked Big Englanders, whom I saw as red-faced, staring, loud-voiced fellows, wanting to go and boss everybody about all over the world, and being surprised and pained and saying, 'Bad show!' if some blighters refused to fag for them. They are patriots to a man. I wish their patriotism began at home, so that they would say – as I believe most of them would, if they only took the trouble to go and look – 'Bad show!' to Jarrow and Hebburn. After all, I thought, I am a bit of a patriot too. I shall never be one of those grand cosmopolitan authors who have to do three chapters in a special village in Southern Spain and then the next three in another special place in the neighbourhood of Vienna. Not until I am safely back in England do I ever feel that the world is quite sane. (Though I am not always sure even then.) Never once have I arrived in a foreign country and cried, 'This is the place for me.' I would rather spend a holiday in Tuscany than in the Black Country, but if I were compelled to choose between living in West Bromwich or Florence, I should make straight for West Bromwich. One of my small daughters, bewildered, once said to us: 'But French people aren't *true*, are they?' I knew exactly how she felt. It is incredible that all this foreign-ness should be true. I am probably bursting with blatant patriotism. It does not prevent me from behaving to foreigners as if they felt per-

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fectly real to themselves, as I suspect they do, just like us. And my patriotism, I assured myself, does begin at home. There is a lot of pride in it. Ours is a country that has given the world something more than millions of yards of calico and thousands of steam engines. If we are a nation of shopkeepers, then what a shop! There is Shakespeare in the window, to begin with; and the whole establishment is blazing with geniuses. Why, these little countries of ours have known so many great men and great ideas that one's mind is dazzled by their riches. We stagger beneath our inheritance. But let us burn every book, tear down every memorial, turn every cathedral and college into an engineering shop, rather than grow cold and petrify, rather than forget that inner glowing tradition of the English spirit. Make it, if you like, a matter of pride. Let us be too proud, my mind shouted, to refuse shelter to exiled foreigners, too proud to do dirty little tricks because other people can stoop to them, too proud to lose an inch of our freedom, too proud, even if it beggars us, to tolerate social injustice here, too proud to suffer anywhere in this country an ugly mean way of living. We have led the world, many a time before today, on good expeditions and bad ones, on piratical raids and on quests for the Hesperides. We can lead it again. We headed the procession when it took what we see now to be the wrong turning, down into the dark bog of greedy industrialism, where money and machines are of more importance than men and women. It is for us to find the way out again, into the sunlight. We may have to risk a great deal, perhaps our very existence. But rather than live on meanly and savagely, I concluded, it would be better to perish as the last of the civilized peoples.

Warned a little by my peroration, I noticed that a lamp was cutting the fog away from a charming white gate. Doors were opened. Even the very firelight was familiar. I was home.