

**ANGRY
YOUNG
MAN**

**LESLIE
PAUL**

Angry Young Man

by the same author



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LESLIE PAUL

ANGRY YOUNG MAN

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To
my brothers and sisters,
above all to the youngest,
JOAN and DOUGLAS

Contents

I. THE BOY ON THE BEACH	<i>page</i> 11
II. A YOUNG CHAP IN FLEET STREET	32
III. 'OH YOUNG MEN OH YOUNG COMRADES'	50
IV. THE COUNCIL OF ACTION	75
V. DEATH OF AN INFORMER	92
VI. THE DEDICATED LIFE	103
VII. DEATH OF A SPACE SELLER	127
VIII. EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES	139
IX. THE LENINIST CIRCUS	155
X. 'NOTHING IS INNOCENT'	178
XI. DECLINE OF THE YOUTH MOVEMENT	196
XII. DEATH OF A CHAR	207
XIII. RED POPLAR — GREY UNEMPLOYED	217
XIV. FESTIVAL AND TERROR	238
XV. THE NIGHT OF THE LAND-MINE	258
XVI. THE DAY OF THE SOLDIER	273
XVII. DIALOGUE OF THE HEART	284
XVIII. NOT MY DESERVING	297

CHAPTER ONE

The Boy on the Beach

In my youth Aldgate High Street had a character it has now almost lost. Despite the traffic roaring through it, all dazzle, fume and fury, which made it impossible to see it as one calm whole except on idle and drowsy Sunday afternoons, it was as though, early in the morning when the streets were still half-empty and the shadows long, one had walked out of the throbbing city and stumbled upon the High Street of a seaport or prosperous country town. A handpump still stood at the City end, where the High Street bifurcated, and Petticoat Lane, the most remarkable Sunday market in the world, at the other. Closing the street in the northern distance was the parish church of Whitechapel, now a shell, but then raising a graceless Victorian steeple above its own oasis of plane trees and poplars. The little old pub called Ye Hoop and Grapes, with its wrought-iron lamp bracket and coloured plaster mouldings of grapevines, and bright square windows, looked across paving stones to the toffee and fancy goods stalls standing in the gutter. Muscular carmen and porters stood in its tiny forecourt drinking great mugs of beer just as they must have done in the eighteenth century when the waggons from Poplar shipyards stopped outside its doors. And, towering above all, rose the handsome church of St. Botolph's at the corner of Houndsditch: there had been a church of St. Botolph on that corner since the twelfth century, perhaps even since the last of the Danish kings—in the days indeed when Houndsditch was no street of clothing warehouses, but a filthy open sewer. It was an eighteenth-century church, much restored, raising above the street a curiously fashioned spire, punched through

with rounded lanterns like great portholes. Green-painted tubs of geraniums stood in its square of grimy garden in brilliant contrast to the handsome blue doors set in porches of cream. Behind the church, in the cool waving shadow of plane and acacia trees, the poor clerks, like myself, came at midday to eat their sandwiches: in the afternoon and evening the unemployed crawled out of the sun to drowse in the shade.

Even the ornately tiled Metropolitan railway station, a few yards away, had a provincial look which has since disappeared, and the trams from Poplar and Bow, Stepney and East Ham, which had their noisy terminus at one end of the street, did not destroy its parish snugness, for, alighting from them, it was possible to imagine that one had arrived at the country rather than the city end of their journey. Yet in the course of time the small parish outside the old city gate had become the heart of a vast hinterland, of street upon street of unending slum, of grimy courtyards, of decaying merchants' houses where hob-nailed boots had splintered Adam doorways, and soot obscured lovely ceiling mouldings, and sweatshop candles guttered down Italianate marble mantel-pieces. There were alleys stinking of cats and piss and human vomit where Jack the Ripper had disembowelled his women victims, and uniform rows of uniformly dingy cottages facing streets down which soiled fish-and-chip papers sailed in the wind like gulls and children chalked their naïve confessions of love on fence and pavement—all this stretching for mile upon mile like those vertiginous lines of perspective which meet only in eternity; every main road vanished far, far away in some human swamp. Sometimes I penetrated to East Ham or Leytonstone, Barking or North Woolwich, riding with my friends in the front of swaying and groaning trams past incalculable miles of street lamps made starry by the blurring rain and unsteady by gusts of winter winds.

Aldgate High Street had become the city approach of one quarter of London, the East End, the funnel through which everything was driven to reach Lombard Street, Cornhill and Threadneedle Street in which all the power and wealth of the British Empire had crystallized into frowning and opulent facades of Aberdeen and Cornish granite, Bath or Portland stone. It had suffered, too, an invasion still more exotic, for it was the heart of a foreign quarter. The Jews were everywhere:

shy rabbis with chestnut beards and downcast glance slipped gently past: daring Jewish beauties with long raven tresses and melancholy eyes and jumpers of scarlet and gold, and swinging ear-rings, were always walking in twos and threes to and from the gown and shirt-making workshops. Squab, hairy Jewish merchants with gesturing hands like captive birds, picked gold teeth, which matched their gold watch chains, on the kerb outside Lyons' Tea Shop. They carried on their deals outside and played chess endlessly and emotionally inside. Along the east side of the street ranged the kosher slaughter-houses where early in the morning the priestly ceremonies of cattle slaughter which go back to the days of Abraham were performed, and rivulets of blood and water flowed across the paving stones into the High Street gutters. Chinamen with pigtailed tripped humbly along, hand in hand with rosy, bright-eyed half-caste children, and it was rare not to see a group of lascars walking down with wondering and catlike tread, their bodies frail and under-sized like the bodies of boys, their eyes sharp and clear, and their faces so gentle and effeminate that moustaches seemed out of place upon them. In the winter they looked blue, shrivelled and frightened, like lost monkeys. Sometimes they wore fezzes, or blue side caps, and argued in haunting flute-like tones, and with the movements of ballet dancers, outside the slop shops patronized by seamen. There were mad denizens of this human jungle, like the man I used to see striding blindly along with a lion's mane of crinkled tawny hair which had never been cut throughout his whole life and which he protected from rain with an umbrella; or 'Shouting Jack', the man whose progress citywards consisted of leaps and contortions and wild swipes at invisible enemies (rather like that madman Rilke describes with such compassion in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*) against whom he kept up a tirade of abuse which no one could understand for it was in the language of the Polynesian island from which he had sprung.

Aldgate was an important part of my education: I could not tear myself from its polyglot flow against the background of its ruined 18th-century beauty. I loved the sprawling and teeming as much as I hated the boring and ugly and meaningless suburbs. I swelled and choked with impotent rage on my daily passage through them, desperate always to escape. I used to clench my fists and mutter to myself, like some young Wellsian

hero, 'Why on earth do they put up with it? I'll not put up with it, you'll see.' But who the 'you' was, who was to be made to 'see' —unless it was God—I have no idea.

In my brief lunch-hours in the East End, when, with perhaps only eightpence or ninepence to spend I could not afford to buy a meal unless I went to a workman's eating house (which I was often too timid to do) I would walk round the streets with my pockets stuffed with broken biscuits or fruit and stare at the junk shops, brood over the Jewish beauties displaying their oriental charms in the photographers along the High Street, or browse through a vast, dusty book warehouse at the top of the Minories, dreaming of all the books I should like to possess, or one day to write. One day I should no longer be lonely, underfed and discouraged, and achieve something which would make the world accept me.

I could not afford a daily paper then, but at the week-ends I bought *John o' London's Weekly*, which talked knowledgeably about poets and authors, most of whom, to my shame, I had never heard of. English literature at school had ended with Tennyson—like 'history' one imagined it to be something past and done with—and the books I had read since leaving school had been accidental discoveries, or the recommendations of friends. It was therefore first in the pages of *John o' London's* that I glimpsed the existence of a contemporary hierarchy of writers.

One day I was excited to read in its pages a review of *The Story of My Heart* by Richard Jefferies. I had never heard of the author before and what filled me with a blaze of illumination was the discovery of yearnings in this writer which were the exact counterpart of my own. I had to have *The Story of My Heart*: borrowing it from the library, had that occurred to me in my agitation, would not have sufficed. The quotations printed in the review revealed so intimate a spirit that a grubby, defiled library copy would have been unbearable to handle.

The problem was how to afford it? I handed my weekly wage of 22s. 6d. to my parents and was paid back a shilling a day 'dinner money', much of which mysteriously disappeared before dinner came round. My parents had to clothe and feed me, buy my season ticket, and give me pocket-money out of what was left. Working as a junior clerk in the City of London was a highly unprofitable business all round and I used to ache with the intolerable sense of being too worthless to earn even my

modest keep in a house where every shilling counted. I walked through the city at lunch hour with the glowing sentences of Jefferies in my head, hardly able to endure the burning stones of the July pavements because of the longing to rush out to some country place and be quite alone while I turned over like a jewel in my hand the revelation that he promised. I came in the end to a little book shop in Leadenhall Street. Its window was often filled with remainders, and marked-down new books: there was a tray of secondhand books outside which I could never resist looking through. I was in anguish about the 3s. 6d., a week's pocket money, I clutched in my pocket: the consequences of spending it or not spending it seemed equally bitter. I felt sure that when I produced it my hot face and nervous manner would reveal that it was all the money I had. I developed the fever common to these occasions, counting my money over and over again in my pocket to make sure I had the right amount and would not have to retire in a confusion which exposed my poverty. Yet when, having screwed up my courage, I went in to ask for *The Story of My Heart* the bookseller scratched his head in perplexity and said he 'didn't happen to have it in stock' but if I knew who wrote it, and who the publisher was, he would order it. I was astonished that a book to which a page had just been devoted in *John o' London's* should be unknown to a bookseller, but I had to say, breathlessly, yes, please order it, for I entirely lacked the self-assurance to walk out of his shop and look for another. Yet having decided to spend my entire pocket money at one go, it was intolerable to be cheated of the pleasure, and to have to wait several days for the release of the tension which Jefferies' words had raised in me. I had to find something else to sink into, or I should have been incapable even of sitting still: I wandered shyly round the shop pulling books off the shelves. I lighted on a book about the Kaffirs by Dudley Kidd. This roused me immediately, for it was axiomatic in the youth movements which had up to then influenced me that the life of savages was far superior to that of civilized man. This had been the theme of Baden-Powell—I could then have quoted his very words on the abilities of native trackers. I had read Ernest Thompson Seton's lament over the decline and fall of the noble Red Indian, and shared his indignation at the perfidy of the white man towards him. Dudley Kidd's book was something into which I could plunge while the word of Richard

Jefferies was suspended over me like a sword. It was marked down to two shillings and I bought it impulsively, and carried it home without daring to look at it until I was safe in the privacy of my little room, still decorated with the pine boughs I had brought back from a memorable excursion up the Thames to Marlow. I stared first of all at the plates of the dignified black children, striving hard to understand their inscrutable lives, and then plunged confusedly and guiltily into details of obscure Kaffir birth ceremonies.

Because of my rashness I had to put up with a second week of pennilessness before I could call for the book I had ordered. Its slightness shocked me. Three shillings and sixpence was a lot to give for a slender little book which went with ease into my jacket pocket. I had inherited my mother's dread of being 'swindled', and felt the blood rush to my face as I handled it, but I was compensated as I walked back to the office with the book, snug in my pocket, gently falling and lifting against my thigh, by the superior feeling that I had bought a book few other people would ever think of buying. I could not resist showing it to Winnie Franklin, with whom I was working on the share ledgers. She had eyes as liquid-large and yearning-brown as a spaniel's, and one did not so much gaze at them as swim quite lost within their peaty waters. '“The Story of My Heart”?' she read, making roguish eyes at me. 'Naughty-naughty! I thought you were above that sort of thing!' I was so outraged at this that I would not talk to her for a long time. But when a lull came in the office work, and I could steal another look, I sat and inscribed my name in the book, and dated it: 28th July, 1922.

All that I learnt of Richard Jefferies saddened me. His genius went unappreciated during his lifetime; he was poor and overworked for most of his days and for years wrestled with the tuberculosis which eventually killed him in the face of the obstinate insistence of doctors that he was imagining it all. Everything that he did was marked with hopeless struggle, for his contemporary world rejected him. I did not know then that he had spent many boyhood days in a house at Sydenham, no more than twenty minutes from where I was living, and which still then looked across meadows to the spire of Christchurch, or I should have made many pilgrimages to the spot. But if his life was despair as mine too, already, seemed to be despair,

his spirit glowed the more for it, rich in that sensuous paganism I sought in youth movements.

'It is in myself that I desire increase, profit, and exaltation of body, mind and soul. The surroundings, the clothes, the dwelling, the social status, the circumstances are to me utterly indifferent. Let the floor of the room be bare, let the furniture be a plank table, the bed a mere pallet. Let the house be plain and simple, but in the midst of light and air. These are enough—a cave would be enough; in a warmed climate the open air would suffice. Let me be furnished with health, safety, strength, the perfection of physical existence; let my mind be furnished with the highest soul life. . . .'

What balm those words were for me! The insincerity of the 'simple-life' pose, now more apparent, did not occur to me then, for I was not old enough to understand that no writer can be content for long with a cave, or a bed in the open air, away from his books and writing materials, and all the assurance which he draws from the art, the writings and the lives of others. Even if the words were not true for Jefferies, even if he had been led by his own exaltation into rhetoric, they were exactly true for me. I spent every day which I could steal to myself away in the country, walking or camping. A tent, or even a sleeping-bag in the open air, was the longed-for goal to which I would hurry away at week-ends even in the dead of winter. In the country, the burden of city life would lift its iron blanket from me, and I would feel myself come alive once more. The demand for a simple life, the assertion of its superiority over all contemporary ways of living, was the core of the testament of the youth movements to which I belonged.

Richard Jefferies, by the sheer weight of his spiritual power, drove through the paganism of brown body and white sun, with which his own exalting experiences began, to a pantheism of a subtle and metaphysical character, very similar to that which was fast becoming my own refuge now that I had abandoned the Christian orthodoxy in which I had been brought up by my loving and deeply-religious mother. Again and again, Jefferies spoke of prayer: his book was one long prayer, and this comforted me greatly for prayer was a habit of the soul I had discovered it was most difficult to lose. But it was a new kind of prayer, and the sincerity of it could not for one moment be doubted. He flung himself on the grass, or he lay on his back

under an oak in the starlight and prayed with the utmost intensity of his being to the sun.

'The great sun burning with light; the strong earth, dear earth; the warm sky; the pure air; the thought of the ocean; the inexpressible beauty filled me with a rapture, an ecstasy, an inflatus. With this inflatus, too, I prayed. Next to myself I came and recalled myself, my bodily existence. I held out my hand, the sunlight gleamed on the skin and the iridescent nails; I recalled the mystery and beauty of the flesh. I thought of the mind with which I could see the ocean sixty miles distant, and gather to myself its glory. I thought of my inner existence, that consciousness which is called the soul. These, that is, myself—I threw into the balance to weigh the prayer the heavier. My strength of body, mind and soul, I flung into it; I put forth my strength; I wrestled and laboured, and toiled in might of prayer . . . I hid myself in the grass, I was wholly prostrated, I lost myself in the wrestle, I was rapt and carried away.'

With just such intoxicating stuff was I trying to fill my own diaries (which I always ended by burning), for just so, times without number, had I thrown myself to the earth, burying my face in the grass, and prayed, with the sense of wanting something beyond prayer, during lonely walks through the now vanished meadows beyond Whitefoot Lane where the peewits called over the ploughed land and corncrakes ran through the ripening wheat. At the same time Richard Jefferies pulled me up short. I found some of his arguments bewildering and shocking. I was still in the spring of my days when 'the sounding cataract haunted me like a passion' and

*The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.*

How could I accept his argument that nature was alien to man? Every cell of my body revolted. My one need then was to find in that which moved through all nature, including man, the Divinity I could not now believe in elsewhere. But if nature was alien to man, then that Divinity was alien too, and man was alone and abandoned. I was puzzled and hostile too when Jefferies spoke of the repulsive strangeness of the shapes and natures of animals. Coming from a nature-lover there was a

certain perversity in this view. No, I could not stomach these hard sayings, and many years were to pass before I could understand the honesty of spirit which led Jefferies to make them.

The truth was that for Richard Jefferies, by the time he had reached the end of *The Story of My Heart* a glory had past away from the earth, a glory which with all the strength of his soul he sought to hold in his grasp to the very last. But the very spiritual effort to encompass that physical glory, to saturate himself with the richness of all the stuff of nature, was his undoing. The more his soul yearned over nature, the less comprehensible and the more impenetrable it became for him, like the word we say over and over again in bed as children until it loses all sense. Every human experience began to seem unutterably strange to him, and every contact, except with his own soul, a source of frustration. What is time, he asked, and what is man?

'Time has never existed, and never will; it is a purely artificial arrangement. It is eternity, it always was eternity, and always will be . . . There is no separation—no past; eternity, the Now, is continuous. When all the stars have revolved they only produce Now again. 'The continuity of Now is for ever.' Perhaps there has never been in modern mysticism so intense an effort to lift the soul into the still world of eternal forms, and out of the flux of natural things. But because of the passion Jefferies displayed for the life of the immortal soul, it began to seem to him that matter was the strangest of all experiences. What is a clod of earth? What is the water in the brook? 'Matter is beyond understanding, mysterious, impenetrable.' And again, a thought which I could not bear, 'All nature in the universe, as far as we can see, is anti- or ultra-human, outside, and has no concern for man. These things are unnatural to him. By no course of reasoning, however tortuous, can nature and the universe be fitted to the mind.'

God, if God there be, this atheist wrote, is beyond nature. He has identity only with idea, or mind, or soul. But he was not content with the concept God. He wanted something stronger, and more meaningful, and so he spoke of Super-Deo, Super God, as Nietzsche spoke of super-man. I think he was under the influence of Nietzsche. Certainly it was the tremendous intellectual and spiritual effort which Jefferies made to come to grips with the meaning of nature which makes *The Story of My Heart*

such a revelation, particularly to the young. It is the life work of a thoughtful man who has gone right through the superficial, natural scene, with all its beauty and enchantment, and emerged on the other side, in the immortal country of the spirit.

I discovered in the Jefferies that I read then, a burning, almost anguished sense not just of the glory but of the transparency of the world. I would put the book down after reading a few pages to let my mind subside. The agitation certain passages roused in me was so great that I never dared read in company lest I had to cry out, in which case I was sure they would think me mad.

At the August Bank holiday shortly after this, two unexpected gifts made it possible for me to go away, on the impulse, for the week-end. It was impossible for me to arrange anything with my friend Roly: he was with my Scout troop, camping far away in Devonshire. And I did not want company. I was on fire to reach and swim again in the sea in solitariness, and could only dream nostalgically of the sands of Margate and Westgate where I had spent some magical childhood holidays. Jefferies' bronze pagan sun was burning in me and I felt stifled at the thought of mooning around alone at home, with nothing to do except take my little brother and sister out for walks. I entered on the most hurried explanations to my parents lest, if I became too detailed and matter-of-fact, they might stop me with wiser counsels. In Scout uniform, and with little more than a pound to spare after paying my train fare, my rucksack crammed with fruit and sandwiches and toilet things, I went off by train in the expectation of finding bed and breakfast at a cheap boarding house at the journey's end. The moment I began to walk the streets of Margate in the hot August sun during the busiest week-end of the year, I knew that it was not going to be as easy as I had hoped. But I was too delighted with my freedom to care: I had escaped from London, from adult criticism and questioning, and was alone by the sea, with money to jingle in my pocket. Nearly every place was booked up. Little placards 'No rooms' or 'No accommodation' faced me everywhere. Those which were not full looked a little sourly and hesitantly at a bare-kneed boy with only a haversack as luggage. The price of others sent me blushing away. Within an hour or two of arriving I decided that I would have to spend the two nights of my holiday sleeping on the beach, and the thought of this

exhilarated me. Contentedly, I swam in the evening sea and then drank a cup of tea at a booth while I ate some of the sandwiches and buns mother had packed for me. I listened to the pierrots and watched the girls emerging from bathing tents, and looked round everywhere for a corner in which I might hide and sleep, when the crowds went home, and I had the fretting sea to myself.

And after darkness, when the lights were being dowsed in the shooting galleries and cafés, and the hokey-pokey and Margate rock stalls were being trundled noisily away for the night, I noticed a boy whose aimless peering and wandering about the sands appeared to be inspired by the same homelessness as mine. The late-revelling gentlemen with faces like radishes, who breathed a warm smell of stout through moustaches which had the curve and sweep of cow-catchers, turned eventually for home. The girls who swept in small, breathless eye-darting packs along the front, with all the excitement of hounds on the scent, went too. Those who were still about were visible only as barely stirring scraps of pallor in alcoves and corners, and were to be remarked only when the boys with them drew squeals from them. They were up to no good. But the roaming boy remained, hanging like myself over the promenade railings, listening to the giggles and cries, and stirring and staring angrily and fiercely at the source of them. Our intention to spend the night on the beach was plain: it was that which made me speak to him.

He had come down from London, he said. He had been walking for several days. He thought he could get a seasonal job in Margate. He couldn't remember how long he'd been on the road, but he'd started in the Borough, where he lived. He told me his address there, which I carried in my head for some years, because of what transpired. He hadn't any money at all now. I do not recall him well, except that he had an uncut shock of greasy, tow-coloured hair, and was sullen and uncommunicative, studying the pavement shamefacedly as he talked. He had shabby long trousers which bagged as badly at the knees as Charlie Chaplin's, and a worn jacket from the sleeves of which his thin wrists poked. An unwashed smell came from him.

The place and the meeting let loose all my powers of fantasy. I imagined that he was a young criminal who had run away

from prison or reformatory. A succession of scenes played themselves out in my head in which I saved him from a life of unspecified crime and earned his lifelong devotion. At the same time I shrewdly suspected that if it were daylight and I saw him plain I should probably dislike him, and that we might look ridiculous together, the lanky youth in Boy Scout clothes, and the small boy in somebody else's cast off long trousers. Yet with a glow of moral satisfaction I bought two fish and chip suppers from a bar still open, and gave one to him. We sat on a bench overlooking the sea and ate them, and stayed together for company, looking about the beach for a warm and dry corner in which to sleep. We put two deck chairs side by side and tried to sleep in them as we had seen the elderly gentlemen do in the afternoon sun. But an attendant drove us from them and we were forced to walk and talk again. But beach attendants do not stay up all night, we discovered. They have homes and suppers waiting for them. We had only to wait long enough, and watch the disappearing back of the night constable on his beat along the front, to be certain of privacy once more in the strangely empty and chilly night.

This time we did not dare to expose ourselves by sitting in chairs in full view of the promenade. We laid two chairs flat next to the official pile of them to serve as mattresses, and over them caused others to lean like a tent. Though they kept off the dew and lessened the force of the breeze they could not extinguish the thrilling mass of stars so close above us that they looked like a blazing city seen across dark water, the milky way curving like the glowing main street through the heart of it. The uncommunicative boy fell asleep almost immediately, breathing steadily, like a relaxed and secure young animal. Above the smell of paper, and cigarette stubs, and orange peel and the sour and pissy smell of the soiled dry sand above the tide limit, came the odour of his clothes and sweat. It reminded me of a school classroom on a wet morning. Yet his presence was exciting and disturbing in a manner I could hardly put a name to, as though unexpectedly life promised illimitable and even shady human encounters, as though the unexpected was perhaps to be the most important element in my experience. Not everything was to be mapped out beforehand for me, after all. The powerful reformatory impulse which also worked in me—the censorious attitude I had inherited from Scouts and

Sunday School—made me anxious to begin as soon as possible the reformation of the scamp at my side. In the morning, I decided, I would make him come swimming with me.

It was hot under our curious tent. When the wind dropped a rank and greasy mist came out of the sea, obscuring everything. I felt the beads of it wet my face and hair. The meal had left a greasy aftermath in my mouth, and troubled my sleep. The sand was ubiquitous. It flowed like water, trickling from the canvas of the chair down my neck, gritting my lips and my hair. When I fell asleep it was into the nightmare about that terrifying passage in *Oliver Twist* where the innocent Oliver is pursued by the mob through the alleys and lanes of London. But this time I was one of the mob, thundering and shouting with the rest, and the trampling of the incoming tide became part of the swelling uproar.

When I woke the sun was just rising and trailing long brocades across the wavetops visible beyond my feet. The dirty beach had been cleaned and the sand was smooth and virginal. The stained, used-up night had been replaced by the most pure, unspotted morning. There was not a soul about: I undressed quickly, shivering in the delicious morning air, and put on my bathing costume. I looked down at my strange companion and thought of the business of his reformation, but now I did not want the morning spoiled by his company. And anyway, he was sleeping, his face buried in the crook of his elbow, his tousled hair lightly dusted with sand. One grimy pink hand, curled up like a baby's from the arm bent underneath him, held a little pool of silver grains. I folded my clothes and tiptoed out of the shelter and ran across the hard rippled sand, bruising my feet. The sea was still far out, and when I looked back I had difficulty in making out the tiny bivouac, for the sea front of the town had risen up transfigured in the morning sun, the hotels and boarding houses sparkling in the lavish light, and every eastward window molten with fire; the sun lit a tumult of cumulus above the town but the dead sand in the corner where we had slept was still in shadow. Yet I thought I saw a tow-thatched head peering across the sands at me in astonishment, and waved before I waded and swam as far out to sea as my strength would take me. The cold stung my thin body, but the sea heaved and flashed in the glitter of that immortal sun of which Jefferies wrote, and in this crystal world

I felt my life vindicated, at last it was as alone and as pure as I could make it.

When I ran back to the bivouac where my clothes were, the boy had gone. I scrambled round clumsily for my glasses, feeling blind and incapable without them in an emergency, and peered about, guessing that he had gone round the corner to the lavatory. I could not call out for him, because he had not told me his name. Then I remembered my dream and a certainty so frightening struck me that I felt like fainting. My clothes had been tumbled. I dropped on my hands and knees and felt in all my pockets. All my money had gone, with the exception of half a crown he had missed in my hip pocket along with my return ticket. My anger was almost too great physically to bear, it made me shake with so violent an ague that I could neither dry myself nor dress. An early morning passer-by, unshaven but rosy, a tradesman off to unlock his stall, saw me shivering in this woebegone fashion and called out, 'What, is it as cold as all that, kid?'

It was with difficulty I could speak, and in a cracked, unnatural voice I managed to ask him if he had seen a boy, because the boy had stolen all my money. 'Bleedin' 'ard luck,' he said. 'What sorta boy? I seed a nipper runnin' up the road jes now. I thought he was the paper boy. You'd better go to the station.' But as, holding back my tears of rage, I contrived somehow to dress, he whistled the first policeman who came down the front and I had to tell my story all over again. I felt a fool because I could not properly describe the thief. I had been too shy to peer closely at him in the dark, and in the light I had only seen him sleeping. I gave the police the address in the Borough which he had given me and about which, even the night before, I had had doubts. Several times that morning I told my story to various policemen. And as I came haltingly to a conclusion each one in turn seemed to stroke his moustache with the same gesture saying 'Ah, if you can't *describe* him,' as if this failure of mine relieved them of any further responsibility.

However, they took me up to a Boy Scout troop camping on the cliffs and explained my plight and the Scouts invited me to spend the rest of the week-end with them. I still had my return ticket and half a crown, so that I did not need to send home for money, and probably in the end I had a pleasanter

time than sleeping alone on the frowsty beach. But that happy issue did not lessen my rage. Instead now of fantasies of reformation, I indulged in fighting ones. I longed to meet the boy in the street and thrash him. How, in my imagination, he cried for mercy. This fantasy went on and on in my mind, churning it up with so much hatred, that I grew sick of my vile obsession and had to say to myself 'I must try to think of other things and enjoy what holiday I've got left'. But I did not succeed, and even when I returned to London I could not, for many months, pass through the street in the Borough, in which he told me he lived, without my heart beating rapidly, in the hope that I should at last meet him face to face. Indeed the thrashing fantasy only finally died when I realized suddenly, long afterwards, that I probably should not recognize him again.

While swimming with the hospitable London Scouts camped at Margate I was stung in the forearm by some sea creature and a hard lump, which it made me slightly sick to touch, came up on my arm and obstinately resisted treatment. This unpleasantness, and the shock of having my money stolen, made me unwell and I continued to grow more and more unwell after my return home. One evening, meeting some friends in the street, and wrestling with them I happened to bump my sore forearm and sick and fainting had to sit down abruptly on the pavement. My mother decided it was a boil, and began to poultice it. Roly and the Scout troop were due home on the Saturday after this incident, and I went to meet them, but all that day a sense of sickness oppressed me, and when finally I came home it was to crawl into bed, to begin immediately to vomit a black and acrid bile. My tiny room stank with it: the family who came to see me departed with alacrity. Mother was visiting relations, and it was grandmother who had to struggle upstairs on her gouty legs, and with creaking corsets, to bring me cups of tea I could not drink. Nothing would stay down. A terrible pain developed in the small of my back, as though an iron stake were thrust into it on which I was compelled to revolve at an ever-increasing speed. My temperature rose and I became quietly delirious and lost count of the days and where I was. For a long time I continued like this until it was realized that I was seriously ill, and the doctor was fetched. He could diagnose nothing but *gastralgia*.

I rose up as from a death bed and with the first solid food I ate suffered so swift a relapse that it was many weeks before I had recovered sufficiently to go back to work. My young, baby-faced boss, Stilwell, who always sat with a spoon and a prophylactic bottle of Angiers' emulsion on his desk, gave one look at me and said, 'Good God, boy, you look like a ghost! Are you sure you're well enough to come back?' I was far from sure, as a matter of fact, but hated staying at home with nothing to do, a prey to the fear that I might lose my job.

I had become so nervous that I jumped at traffic noises and train hooters, and was afraid even to cross the street. It was while still in this physical state that a man fell on me out of the sky. I was crossing London Bridge, after a late duty, in a black drizzle which made the roads and pavements greasy and the dusky evening murky, and sent the crowds hurrying faster than usual to their trains. I half saw the accident from the corner of my eye as I hurried along, insinuating my thin body through the cracks which appeared in the moving wall of people. The man was driving a beer dray from his regally high seat above the road when the wheels of his cart locked themselves with the wheels of another dray going in the opposite direction. With a jarring and slithering, the heavy drays ground to a standstill and the horses reared as in a circus, while the driver, with outstretched arms, sailed calmly down on me and sent me flying. I picked myself up, shocked but unhurt, and looked for him. Hardly visible in the dark and tumult he was crouching in the gutter, close to the flashing hooves, with his head between his hands. The old sack he was wearing round his shoulders to keep off the rain made him look like a bale which had dropped off a cart on to the sidewalk. The grey city host thrust past him as though he were invisible. If they saw him, they were pushed on by the impetus of the homing multitudes behind them, and were gone before they understood what they had seen. It developed into the kind of nightmare in which one gesticulates to people to whom you find you have become invisible. It was difficult to believe that there was a man lying in the gutter, perhaps dead, who had all but killed me too, and that people were rushing past him without even seeing him. I thrust the people aside in a panic, trying to shout something above the traffic's roar, and caught hold of the driver by his shoulders. 'Are you all right?' I cried.

'Can you get up?' I tried to pull him up by his shoulders, but he was a brewer's drayman, a member of a powerful race, and it was as much as I could do to hold his head out of the dung and slime. His face was bleeding and plastered with mud, and with half-shut eyes, the unconscious head rolled in my hands. I had to catch a man by the coat to make him understand that there had been an accident and that he ought to fetch a policeman. And I stood there helplessly, holding the man by his shoulders from the fouled gutter, and essaying to shove away with my shoulder the tremendous horses which came nudging me in the back, seeking to nuzzle their fallen master. The policeman helped to raise him and seat him on his cart, which now stood innocently against the kerb, the steaming horses quiet, while the dray with which it had collided had long since freed itself and vanished. And only when a second policeman came, and a crowd began to gather in earnest round the bloodied head, did I feel I could slip away and join the stream for the London Bridge trains. I arrived home trying hard to conceal the trembling which racked my whole frame.

Minor misfortunes continued. My Scoutmaster called to ask me if I could swim for the troop in a local gala. 'But,' I said, 'I've been ill, I'm still not fit—I get out of breath climbing stairs even.' My friend Roly beamed encouragement. 'That's just nerves, Les. You'll be as right as rain on the night.' And specious appeals were made to my sportsmanship, my duty to the troop, and to the importance of not letting the side down, to all of which I was very vulnerable. 'Besides, if you won't enter, there'll not be a single entry from the troop.' And so in the end I found myself lining up in the local swimming bath sick with excitement before the green, glittering water, for a three length race against boys of my own age and, what was worse, handicapped because of my past record. There was not one of them I could not have beaten two months before, but once in the water I knew I had no strength in me, and at the end of the second length, in a state of collapse, had to be pulled out of the bath.

The Scoutmaster and my friend Roly were bland and consoling. I'd been a sport to try, they said. But they did not meet my eye, and there was an offhand and amused scorn in their consolations, as though they'd found out finally what a poor thing my boasted swimming prowess amounted to. I was too

feeble to worry about this at first, but as my strength returned I grew furious at having allowed myself to be persuaded to swim. At the same time I was angry with Roly, who was my friend, and who did not defend me, and would not meet my eye. In silence we all went home. We stood by the pillar box outside my house. The lamp post rose above us into the bosom of the plane tree, and from the heart of the tree the light exploded in all directions. Now, with a movement of leaves in the wind, batwing patterns swung rapidly backwards and forwards across the little group. Roly's silence made me feel so betrayed and deserted that the tension was more than I could bear. 'Why the hell don't some of you damn fools swim if you're all that keen on prizes for the troop?' I blurted out. They did not try to excuse themselves, but kept silent, and Roly busied himself with his pipe. I could not see his face under the shadow of his scout hat, but only two sinister pin-points of light, like eyes, where the lamplight was reflected from his pince-nez. 'A scout doesn't use bad language,' said the Scoutmaster coldly. He was actually a draper's assistant, but I do not suppose that he saw how insulting I was trying to be when I exclaimed 'Oh God, oh Montreal,' and stamped off abruptly without saluting. Not even Roly lingered, or came to have a cup of cocoa by the kitchen fire. They all turned heavily and went slowly away. As I undressed for bed it occurred to me that Roly had probably been praising my swimming to everyone he could buttonhole for weeks past, and personally guaranteeing that I should win the race for the troop, and felt badly let down by my inability even to stay the course. About that too I began to feel ashamed, for in the high summer at every visit to the baths I had swum straight off at least twenty lengths.

It was not very long after this that Roly and I left the Scouts for good. The influence of a new youth organization, with a fantastic name—Kibbo Kift Kindred (Kibbo Kift was said to mean 'the strong', or 'proof of great strength')—was powerful on both of us. We debated whether we could in fact belong to both organizations. It was a problem which weighed heavily on our young consciences. The First World War was a receding wave behind us, but we could never for long forget that it might return and ask again for the useless valour of the young. For Roly it had a more grievous significance than for me, for

he had lost his elder brother at Ypres. It was necessary to declare, we agreed, as passionately as we knew how, that we were against war. If enough people had been of our mind in 1914, we told each other, there would have been no war. The conscientious objectors who had once been objects of scorn and hatred now became for us the standard bearers of our own idealism. We counted them heroes when we understood what moral courage it must have taken to stand out against war in the midst of the full tide of it, and to face persecution and obloquy. We began, through Kibbo Kift, to meet men who had been in prison for their convictions and admired them as persons. Roly, who was eighteen, had recently become a troop officer, and as such was entitled to go to meetings of local Scout officials: at one such meeting he spoke up courageously (but also, I don't doubt, with the smiling perverseness which characterized all his actions) about the peace problem, saying that Scouts ought to make an out-and-out declaration against war. This incident gave rise to the conviction that we were both 'rebels', and our Scoutmaster hinted that we ought to resign. And so we left together, to give all our attention to the Kibbo Kift. We were full of sorrow at leaving a movement which had claimed our affection and loyalty for eight or nine years of boyhood, yet we were elated to have made a moral stand together on so great an issue.

Roly must, nevertheless, have had some reservations about this, quite unknown to me. It had long been my custom to call on Roly every Sunday afternoon when we weren't hiking or camping and to have tea and supper with him and his family. We sang sentimental ballads like *Juanita* and *Friend o' Mine*, while his mother played the piano for us; or we argued interminably. Quite often we fell into heated argument with his parents, who were elderly, retired actors. His father was a slight, stooping, white-haired man, almost the double of the George Arliss of the role of Disraeli, while his mother was a larger and more round-faced version of Roly himself. She smiled just as persistently. Just because they were old troupers their interventions in an argument could be quite histrionic. Roly's father was full of the unconsidered trifles he had snapped-up in his stage career. And once, when war and peace were under discussion he put up his hand and cried, 'Stop! Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmation strong as proofs of

holy writ! I suspect treason! Nothing against the king! Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown!’ Roly had once told me that an actor ought always to hold his gesture long enough to allow the audience to grasp it, and I could never forget this when I listened to his father. I used to want to giggle when he lifted his hand as dramatically as a policeman stopping traffic and fixed me with a frozen stare only to have to interrupt, and then reset, his gesture, after propping up his tumbling pince-nez. But as Roly and his mother never giggled, but watched in admiration, I had to stifle my impulse by gnawing at my hand and turning my watering eyes away.

Unhappily, I was bidden at second-hand ‘never to darken his doors again’. *John o’ London’s* held an essay competition to which I sent in an entry on ‘Peace’ modelled on J. M. Barrie’s address to the students of St. Andrew’s on *Courage*, which I had read and admired. The essay won no prize, but a rebuke from Roly’s father when I read it before him. I spoke in it somewhere of ‘all the lives sacrificed for nothing in the Great War’, and Roly’s father could not bear this, and when next I met Roly he said, with an air of embarrassment, that I couldn’t come again, his father thought that what I had said about lives sacrificed for nothing was an insult to his son who had died fighting for his country. *His* life, his father had said, was certainly not sacrificed for nothing.

I was silent with bewilderment, for I had not expected that anything I’d written might be taken personally. I had supposed that in a general way Roly’s parents agreed with the things which Roly and I asserted about the futility of war. But where, in all this, did Roly stand? I was filled with resentment at being made a whipping boy for both of us. ‘But what about you?’ I asked hotly. ‘What did he say to you? Doesn’t your Dad know that we agree?’ Roly smiled his blandest and most apologetic smile which stretched the big mouth which he inherited from his grandmother round to his ears. He looked as inscrutable as a Cheshire cat. ‘Well, you know,’ he said, with a gesture of dissociation, ‘it doesn’t do to tell your parents everything.’ With that point of view in general I sympathized, but in this delicate business had he led his parents to assume that he shared *their* opinions? Perhaps in a way he did, perhaps from my crudity and arrogance he had long ago privately taken flight. I was beginning to understand how complex was

THE BOY ON THE BEACH

the character of one so openly and transparently my friend as Roly. In him, too, I began to suspect the presence of those deep wells of disapproval which had disconcerted me in teachers, scoutmasters and others set in authority over me.

CHAPTER TWO

A Young Chap in Fleet Street

I was becoming alarmed. My casually chosen job at the International Stores was beginning to look like life imprisonment. I had entered a long, boring tunnel, with no daylight visible at the other end. My job would lead to nothing except another job, a little more highly paid but hardly more responsible, and the thought of this filled me with an uncontrollable restlessness. At the end of ten years or so I might become the kind of unpromotable senior clerk of which the city was full, and remain in an obscure department, doing a dull job, until I was called to my fathers. Just for this destiny there seemed no point in being born.

The smallness of my weekly wage exasperated me. My eighteenth birthday was looming up and I was still earning no more than 25s. per week. Even by the standards of 1923 the prospect was a poor one. I decided therefore to apply for a rise, and to leave if it was refused. But where to go when I left?

My father's business attracted me, for it seemed to promise an entry to journalism. He was an advertising manager, or 'space seller', for a string of small provincial papers, with an office in Fleet Street. His business was beginning to grow again after the eclipse that it had suffered during the war and it seemed more worthwhile to join him, as he wished, than to try for employment elsewhere. When my application for a rise was refused, I handed in my notice, and was very moved when my three friendly and high-spirited office colleagues organized a tea with 'birthday' cake on the day of my departure, and presented me with a leather-bound volume of Leigh Hunt's

essays. I was the office junior, and they were not called upon so much as to notice my departure.

My father's Fleet Street office was a back room up three flights of noisy wooden stairs. It was piled high with racks and files of newspapers which collected a grey pall of dust. A gas-fire with broken elements which softly popped and wheezed warmed the room in which four of us had to work. On this fire at four in the afternoon the typist brewed some syrupy tea which was handed round in cracked cups. There was an effluvia of printer's ink, paper, tobacco smoke, orange peel and dust. The electric light made opal the perpetual tobacco haze. The one grimy window let in a grey travesty of daylight. It looked down on a court up and down which many times a day boys with baggy flannel trousers and worn cardboard cases passed to and from the printing school. The telephone rang continually, but it was not always possible to hear through it: my father's desk was so crowded that there was really no room for the telephone. It perched on the directories and was always falling on to the floor and getting smashed so badly that it died on us.

The real king of the office was my father's partner, Pantlin. Even when I first knew him he was white-haired and white-moustached like the Labour Leader, J. R. Clynes, even to the carefully-groomed quiff. He threw up his hands in horror when I told him so. From him came the odours of tobacco smoke and orange peel. He lit his pipe when he came in and it remained lit until he decided to eat the lunch he had brought with him in his attaché case. For this ritual he would spread the *Daily Express* across his desk, and peel his apples and oranges upon it and, as he took bites at his sandwiches, push his lunch from side to side to expose the columns he wanted to read. When he had exhausted page one he transferred his lunch and his eyes to page two. The journey through the paper over, the stained *Daily Express* was carefully folded and put in his case for his wife to read when he got home, and the litter of orange peel and apple cores swept with precision into the wastepaper basket, there to scent aromatically the exhausted air. He made indignant comments on life, sometimes difficult to understand because they had to be made through bites of apple and clattering plates of false teeth. 'Snowden! I'd hang him if I had the chance!' 'Everyone with any sense knows that strikers

always injure themselves more than they hurt their employers. I'd make it illegal to strike!' My socialist indignation was easily aroused. But what irritated me most was that some time during the afternoon he would advance the arguments of the newspaper's leading article, as if he'd just thought them up himself. I could never prevent myself saying rudely, 'You just got that out of the *Daily Express*!' But this did not move him: he could not see that it was a valid criticism. After all he read the *Daily Express* in order to get hold of opinions he thought sensible. And so he would lean enthusiastically across the table and say, 'Well, seriously Leslie, don't you agree with me? Every sensible man must.' I was baffled by this disarming simplicity.

My father was somewhat afraid of Pantlin. Newspaper space is not sold by sitting in offices. The representative must visit advertising agencies, ingratiate himself with the men responsible for handing out contracts, and build up the reputation of his paper by optimistic accounts of the wealth and importance of its readers. There was usually no exaggeration of circulation figures since these were the subject of audit by an independent bureau. When you got to know a space-buyer well enough, you took him out for a drink or a lunch and hoped that when national schemes were launched for products which were household names, the string of papers you represented would be included on the list. My father was naturally good at these personal contacts. He was handsome, with large, disarming brown eyes, modest and friendly, and by a sound instinct never overplayed his hand. So that he became 'Freddie' to everyone, liked just for himself, and seldom forgotten when orders which might come his way were handed out. The burden of bringing in the business rested on his shoulders.

It was to Pantlin, during the time that my father was out, that all the queries came. They mounted on scraps of paper and the backs of old envelopes, on my father's side of the desk. And when my father came in from his rounds to dictate the remainder of his daily letters, there was Pantlin querulous with an interminable list of queries.

Father hated making decisions: he was a moral coward who would postpone making them until the last moment. He hated saying 'no' to people, but often he hated saying 'yes' too. Pantlin never let the queries rest. 'Did you decide about **that**

solus position Saward Baker want?" he would ask. 'Ten shillings is a mighty low rate for something we've always asked twenty for.'

My father would give a nervous jump. 'Oh, *that*,' he would say, looking gloomily down his nose.

'I only ask because Swansea keep on asking,' Pantlin would say pointedly, frisking agitatedly the spears of his little white moustachios.

My father would fuss irritably with his papers, and sigh impatiently, and say 'I'll have to think about it,' clearly intending not to, and hoping the subject would be dropped. And Pantlin would shrug his shoulders irritably too; and into the guilty silence that followed my father would hopefully project any piece of good news that he had. The truth of the matter probably was that in a moment of weakness father had agreed to a cut rate of business and did not want to admit it. If pressed too hard about it he would edge gradually towards the door and escape into the lavatory. A day or two later the order from Saward Baker would come in with the rate column filled in '10s. per single column inch (as agreed with your representative).' Pantlin would ask petulantly, 'Why didn't you *say* you'd agreed it? Now what are we going to tell them?' But father knew quite well what to tell them. If it was a concession to an agent from whom we'd had a lot of business he would say in his daily letter to the paper: 'This agent has looked after us very well lately and I felt that we could afford this concession. I shall be very glad of your approval.' If, on the other hand, it was to an agent who had given us very little he would write: 'It has been difficult to get a footing with this agency, which always favours the opposition paper. I feel that a timely concession now will secure consideration for us in the future. I hope you will agree.' They always did agree, because the business continued to mount under my father's direction, and everyone was benefiting from this, especially Pantlin.

Like my father, I was out of the office most of the day. I called on agencies, pursued bad debts, took parcels to the railway stations to put them on trains, and walked every afternoon round the city agencies which handled all the financial issues. In this way I lived for many hours every day in the open, excitedly exploring the city and the West End, arranging my calls to take me through places it always refreshed me to visit—

Lincoln's Inn, Gough Court, Fountain Court in the Temple, the forecourt of the Guildhall, and windy sunset walks across Rennie's Waterloo Bridge on winter afternoons. I would waste time on city tours so that at sunset I should be walking down Ludgate Hill, under the gunmetal railway bridge, and climbing Fleet Street when westward the smoky London sky flared into an apocalypse of purple and scarlet flame behind the black lantern of St. Dunstons.

My abundant free time I spent in tea-shops drinking coffee and scribbling bad poems, and programmes for youth movements, with equal facility. My determination to be a writer was growing every day, and with the first commission I earned from my father I bought myself a typewriter. A London Scout paper of which I was a reader had just closed down. It had adopted a critical tone and it was because of this that it had ceased to exist: Imperial Headquarters had bought it up in order to suppress it. Certain bolder spirits who regretted its extinction had come together and launched a new paper, *The Open Road*, on a broader footing. I sent in an article to it upon some open air topic and to my surprise and delight it was printed. Indeed, the editor asked me to call and suggest other topics that I might like to write about, and I made very great haste to do so. No one mentioned any payment, but I was too flattered to dream of raising so delicate a subject. But I do recall that I was cunning enough to reply to the invitation to call on the notepaper of one of the newspapers my father represented. I felt that this gave me Fleet Street status.

When I arrived for my interview I found neither editor nor manager in *The Open Road* office but a pleasant young man of Jewish appearance who told me that he was a Scoutmaster, and owned a business in the Hampstead Road, and was one of the directors of the paper. The manager was ill and he had come in at that moment to try to get a renewal of certain advertising. He asked my advice. I looked at the contract he held out, and as it was from an agency across the street from my father's office I offered to call on my way back and have a word with them. As to the articles, he entreated me to go on writing—'the editor isn't full time and he'll be glad of anything you send.' This all seemed so easy that I went away happy and excited and called at the agency and secured, without trouble, a renewal of the contract. The young man, to whom printing

and publishing were quite a mystery, sounded, when I telephoned my success, quite awed by this proof of my influence.

When next I called, I found the young man that I had met, whose name turned out to be Boss, in conference with the editor, a thin, tall, weather-beaten man who tied himself into knots in his chair and looked huntedly at me and rubbed his chin, and looked away again. They were both rather dejected, but Boss received me with friendly smiles, and immediately began to sing my praises for my success with the advertising contract. He then went on to tell me that they had that morning been interviewing candidates for the post of manager: the old manager had resigned. 'A rotten lot,' said Boss. 'Hopeless.' I made polite remarks about their dilemma, remarking, with some diffidence, that I supposed it would be as well if anyone they appointed knew something about advertising as well as printing, because a small paper could not hope to carry on without it. It was the only thing I could think of to say.

'He's absolutely right, isn't he?' Boss asked the editor, who nervously hastened to agree. 'I suppose you wouldn't like the job, Paul? It probably wouldn't be worth your while.'

By an act of self-discipline worthy of a yogi I succeeded in looking calm, and even indifferent, and walked across and frowned at the noisy trams shrieking, as they switched the points in Vauxhall Bridge Road, like the damned in purgatory. 'Well,' I said, coldly, 'It rather depends on what you're paying.'

'I quite see,' said Boss in a depressed tone. 'But you're the chap we want. You know all about advertising.'

'Not quite all,' I had to say, in a manner which modestly intimated that what I did not know was not worth knowing, and with a look which implied that I was open to an offer, and as the three of us stared questioningly at each other it seemed that the matter was settled, though what I was going to tell my father when I got back to the office I did not know. I inherited an office in Denison House as large as a boardroom and my name was put on the door. My staff consisted of one ruddy-faced office boy, with a fist like a farmer's, who with an obsequiousness I found flattering, rushed to fetch up scuttles of coal when the fire went down, and who called me 'Sir.'

It was part of my duty to act as Secretary to the Company which ran the paper, and about this I knew more than I did about the managerial side, for I had only just left the Secretary's

office of the International Stores. I could hardly believe my luck, and though my father grew testy when elated and stammering I told him all about it, he gave other intimations that he was privately proud, and perhaps astonished. My friends were awed, and, with the badges of promotion thick upon me, I was schoolboy enough to wish to visit my old school and my old firm: it had better be soon, I decided, before my friend Boss discovered that I was not yet eighteen.

And now around me the London of Pimlico was spread for my dissection 'Like a patient etherised upon a table', so that I began with the nondescript and cosmopolitan area around Victoria Station, and prowled farther and farther riverwards, through streets shabby and furtive, or faded into poverty, where the mists from the river curled around corners, and the chrysanthemum maroons and yellows of the stucco peeled and powdered on endless façades, and where one might still see under the dripping sycamores of the old run-down squares

*at the corner of the street
A lonely cab horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps.*

It was possible to walk to the Tate in my lunch hour, passing the romantic shipbreakers who displayed, in the lee of Vauxhall Bridge, the figureheads of many an ancient ship of the line, or to explore westwards to Kings Road and the proud Wren palace of the Chelsea Pensioners looking down with dignity on the broadening river. And once again here, as before in Fleet Street and Aldgate, my friends and followers began to gather round and we would walk the streets in the evenings talking about our dreams and ambitions, and the girls we were going out with, or hoped to, and looking for cafés where, for the price of a coffee, we could argue for all the hours we chose to stay.

Soon the editor of my paper resigned, and I took over his duties, and hurriedly scouted around for textbooks on setting-up type and reading proofs. I tramped the agencies zealously in search of advertising. I brought in an artist to design a new cover, and with the spare time help of Boss and many of my friends launched a publicity campaign to bring in new readers. But I was not deceived: sooner or later *The Open Road* was going to die. Thousands of copies of the first issues had been circulated free to all the addresses which the directors had been able to get

together, and on its first issue the paper had claimed ten thousand circulation, but once the returns from later issues began to come in from the newsagents I could tell that we were not going to hold even a three thousand circulation. By the time the circulation had hit rock bottom, and even begun to climb again, the capital of the company had run out. Boss failed to find new capital, and I failed to sell the paper as a going concern (with myself, if possible, as editor), and in the late autumn of 1923 the company went into voluntary liquidation and I was out of work. I do not recall that I was perturbed. I had been prudent and saved about £.50 of my salary which I had put in the Post Office Savings Bank. With a little management, I thought, I could live on about two pounds a week and write: my savings would last me six months and in that time I should have earned more money. It was not possible to work in the bedroom I shared at home with my brother. The house was too full of noisy children, and it would have worried mother to see me around all day long, so I took an unfurnished room down the road for a weekly rent of five shillings. The room had neither lino on the floor nor curtains at the window. Indeed, one window pane was broken and let in a constant draught. I stopped it with a rag. I furnished the room with a table and some chairs bought for a song from the bankrupt *Open Road* and with a small Valor heater, to keep me from freezing, sat down to launch myself as a writer in a very passable imitation of the poet's garret. There was in the house, unfortunately, a terrier bitch who took an hysterical dislike to me. She lurked in the hallway to hurl herself fiendishly at my trouser legs the moment I appeared. Her unremitting attack quite often intimidated me and I would walk the streets rather than face it, or, when actually in my room would watch for an opportunity to escape while the bitch was grubbing in the miserable back garden, and fly down the stairs, and slip out and slam the front door, before she realized that I was on the move. I would hear her behind me rushing to the closed door, yelping her rage at my escape.

I wrote immediately, while the elation of freedom was upon me, a book of essays which sought to recreate that atmosphere of faded charm and wit which belongs especially to Elia. The book did not turn out like that at all, but proved to be an excursion into the pantheistic world of Richard Jefferies. *The Journal of a Sun Worshipper* might, had it survived, have

ranked as one of the literary curiosities of adolescence. At the same time I studied, as all the best books on 'How to Write' taught me, 'the literary market'. I went to the Public Library and noted down what things were being printed in the newspapers, and duly sent out my painful effusions modelled on them, together, of course, with a stamped and addressed envelope. They never failed to come back, unless I forgot to put in the envelope.

A free-lance's life was a lonely one. Who was there to care whether I worked or what I did with my time? I missed the friendships one made in offices and would have been miserable in my isolation but for a friendship I formed with a secondhand bookseller, Charles Watson, who ran his business as the hobby of his years of retirement. When the land upon which our house was built was 'developed' as a housing estate and straight streets of suburban houses bearing fancy names like Gleneagles, Balmoral, Windsor, Versailles and even—which was ours—Mafeking, spread under the wooded height of One Tree Hill, the builders decided that they would establish a fine new shopping centre so that we might enjoy the amenities of a town. They set up an imposing parade of shops, with a lamp-post every ten paces, to serve the local inhabitants who had moved out of Deptford, Camberwell and Bermondsey into 'poverty, pride and pianners.' But the parade was having a bad time in my childhood: more than half the shops were empty: when the air raids came they turned out most of the lamps and half of them were never relit. Some of the shops were boarded up and converted into villas. One empty shop we had used as our Boy Scout headquarters for the duration of the war, and it was in this very shop that Watson set up his business soon after the Armistice. Before the fireplace where we had roasted chestnuts, and potatoes filched from local allotments, and told ghost stories until our hair stood on end, he now sat repairing with thin and sensitive fingers the secondhand fiddles he made a hobby of collecting. I first met him when I was a schoolboy badly in need of help. My school had held an elocution contest for a prize presented by one of the governors. I had won it, despite nervousness which made me fluff some of my lines, by reciting Hamlet's speech to the players. The prize was ten shillings, and I was instructed by the head to go and buy whatever book I wanted and to bring it for the governor to inscribe.

But I arrived home that night to find the house in tumult and no one at all interested in my triumph, for my brother had collapsed in the city and been brought home very ill with pneumonia. My mother was herself in a fever of anxiety for him and worried, too, about money. 'When his temperature goes down he is to have chicken broth and calves foot jelly and all sorts of body-building things. However we're going to afford it, I don't know.' Impulsively I pushed the ten shilling note into her hand saying, 'Look mum, I won that, buy Ken something with it,' and told her the story of the elocution prize. I cannot recall what she bought, but in the end three shillings were left for me. But when the head asked me whether I had bought my book I was shaken by an acute attack of conscience. Could I buy anything for three shillings which would look worth ten? I dared not tell him how I had really spent the money: it would never have occurred to me that he might be sympathetic, for I did not imagine that teachers possessed any human feelings at all. So I scoured Watson's new shop anxiously trying to find a book, any old book, which would look like ten shillings and cost but three. He watched my agitated and bespectacled peering and probing, and then offered to help, and I poured out my story to him. Eventually we chose something large, opulent and worthless—*Heroes of the Empire*, or some such twaddle. Its value to me was that it was expensively bound in calf with a school crest on the cover and had once been the prize for a Victorian schoolboy: with a safety-razor Watson skilfully cut out the tell-tale page of inscriptions, and with rubber and breadcrumbs cleaned the whole thing up until it looked like a mint copy. My headmaster raised his eyebrows at the sight of it, so manifestly second-hand still, but asked no questions and duly had it inscribed for me. I breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, I never read the book.

From that time I took to calling on Watson. He was tall and lean, with a neat imperial and a patrician air, and a cocky knowledgeability about everything under the sun. I was awed to think it had been self-acquired. Like my own father, Watson had begun life as a half-timer. In his youth he had worked as an ostler in coach stables, and when horse-trams came on the road he was accepted as a driver. He read Hyndman, Morris, Kropotkin and Henry George by candlelight in poor East End lodgings: in this he was following the path laid down for all

superior working-men in those days, and he was recognized by his workmates as such. But he also read Plato, Herodotus, Xenophon—in translation—and 17th century mystics and platonists. So that his interests were rather wider than those of other intelligent class-conscious working-men. He attended, in his spirited way, the rise of trade unionism and the birth of the Labour Party. He became founder-secretary of one of the early Transport Unions, and by this path rose to a trade union post of security and relative affluence. Now he was retired, but his respect for learning had grown with the years, and he strove still to perfect it. John Burns, the self-taught man of the same stamp who had risen to cabinet rank, had once been his friend.

With the same zeal that he read, he taught himself to play the violin, and made a hobby of collecting old instruments. There were aristocratic and Renaissance tastes in this trade-unionist which must have astonished his workmates, and now here he was, my friend, an old pipe ever between his nicotine stained teeth, running the shop as the hobby of his declining years and hardly caring whether he got customers or not so long as he could do what he wished in his own place. As I passed down the street there was often the grasshopper stridency of a fiddle coming from the shop parlour, or else there he was in front, elegantly dusting the trays of twopennies with precise gestures, and ready with a cheery wave of his multi-coloured feather duster. I spent more hours browsing through his shelves, reading a bit here and there, than I spent pennies on the books he had to sell. But he did not appear to mind and would send me home with books to read so long as I promised not to keep them too long. In this way I came to read *Esther Waters*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* and many another masterpiece. Among them, *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* proved to be a confession as poignant and revealing as that made by Richard Jefferies in *The Story of My Heart*. But whereas *The Story of My Heart* glowed with beauty and hopefulness, *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* was almost unqualified gloom and surrender. It made my heart beat unbearably as I read the story of Mark Rutherford's unhappy and poverty-stricken path to the ministry of a poor dissenting chapel. I seemed to know the gloom and hypocrisy of it all too well already. I became quite stricken when I reached the chapter recording his meetings with the

atheistic compositor, Edward Gibbon Mardon, for I knew quite well that he was about to take the road that I had trodden (as I felt, *before* him) to unbelief. I wanted to warn him against this smooth and ready-tongued man, who would so soon reveal to him, in the friendliest possible manner, upon what slender foundations he had built his whole belief in man and God. How useless to pretend to feelings or intuitions in the face of such censorious questioning! Why, a 'feeling' would not suffice as proof of the existence of one's grandmother! What use was it to say that one had a *feeling* about God, or a sense of his Presence, or that without him one's spirit wilted? That would not do at all. Where was the material *proof*, where was the *necessity* for God, was it not all, even the life of Christ, a *myth*? And there, as my heart forebode, Mardon was presently saying to this shy young hypochondriac, this second Malte Laurids Brigge, whose apprehension of life was as delicate and as tender as a poet's, that 'the commonplaces which even the most free-thinking of Unitarians seem to consider as axiomatic, are to me far from certain, and even unthinkable. For example, they are always talking about the omnipotence of God. But power even of the supremest kind necessarily implies an object—that is to say, resistance. Without an object which resists it, it would be a blank, and what then is the meaning of omnipotence? It is not that it is merely inconceivable; it is nonsense, and so are all these abstract, illimitable, self-annihilative attributes of which God is made up.' Presently Rutherford was reeling under the sledge-hammer blows, 'stunned, bewildered, out of the sphere of my own thoughts, and pained at the roughness with which he treated what I had cherished'. His struggles, and even his labours in London offices, seemed to be so close to my own that for a long time I identified myself completely with him and was full of an almost suicidal grief at his unhappiness, and even now I cannot pick up this book without a renewal of my old sorrow, which is at least a tribute to the almost forgotten genius of Hale White. Another minor classic was *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* by Barbellion, the very title of which repelled me: I was quite unable to finish it, seeing sickness, death, poverty and failure waiting in ambush for the unhappy young diarist. I could not bear the thought that these were to be the only rewards for such unremitting labour and masterful ambition. Nor could I tolerate for one moment the presence of his

despairing creed in my own life. I rebelled against so much maudlin self-pity. One had to succeed at something: failure was a word one ought not even to use. It was not until my thirties that I could struggle through to the end of Barbellion's confessions.

Charlie Watson might have helped me with my intellectual and spiritual troubles, for he was a Swedenborgian, and that meant that he must have faced, and answered, the questions before which I was silent and helpless. But he did not: perhaps because I was not articulate enough about them. Of course, he *had* to be a Swedenborgian: it was an article of faith with him to be different from everyone else. However, the presence of so much Swedenborgiana on his shelves, with titles both dull and abstruse, must have repelled many a would-be customer prowling round for something that would not look too bad for a birthday present, or hoping for a cheap edition of *The History of the Rod*. He was always ready, without any provocation, to expound the principles of the New Jerusalem Church, but when he did so his character changed: he put on a chirpy, cockney accent and held his head on one side in a defiant, sparrow-like way, and my heart sank because I realized that he was on the defensive and not truly confident of himself. This look of his put him quite elsewhere—I could imagine him on the driving seat of an old horse bus, a leather apron across his knees, cracking his whip at his horses and shouting abuse at the traffic. He was never tired of recounting the story of the clairvoyance of Swedenborg, which silenced me by its strangeness. Swedenborg was at a dinner some two hundred miles from his home in Stockholm. Suddenly he rose from the table, in a state of agitation, declaring that there was a fire raging there. He remained troubled for an hour or two, and then his anxiety subsided and he explained to his friends, in answer to their questions, that the fire had been extinguished before it reached his home. These events were confirmed in a day or two. From what Watson told me Swedenborg began to appear to me to be a kind of Jeremy Bentham—that is to say a scientist and rationalist who made remarkable contributions to science, but unlike Bentham experienced in his middle years a call to serve God. He claimed to have spoken with God in his visions, visiting both heaven and hell, and listening to the conversations of angels. Armed with these Divine certainties he became a Christian evangelist of immense power. What Watson told me

was confused: to my too pressing questions he replied cheerily: "There it is, shelves full, read it yourself—you've got brains enough!" and went on tamping his tobacco in his pipe. But the immense volumes of close black print, the philosophical terms I could not understand, and the Latin tags I could not translate, prevented me from doing more than flip the pages. Besides I was repelled then, as always, by any suggestion of the occult.

Round Watson gathered a small circle of young men all struggling to carve out unusual careers. Roly, who occasionally came, was destined to become theatre manager and astrologer, Eric Greenhill, tall and thin, with wild Thespian locks, reached the West End stage only to succumb to tuberculosis, and Tommy Russell, who had been to school with my brother and me, became viola player in the London Philharmonic and eventually the secretary, then director, of the orchestra. He has several good books to his credit, including the classic *Philharmonic*, but in those days he was struggling desperately to complete his musical education, and earned money by taking pupils and playing the piano in the local cinema.

During the 1923 elections, while still striving to free-lance, I went across to Tottenham to work as a canvasser in Percy Alden's constituency. I was paid a nominal sum for this, I remember, and learnt the election routine of addressing envelopes and marking up registers and came to know well, and for the first time, the rugged, idealist type of working-man who, in those days formed the backbone of every constituency Labour Party. One met the man who had suffered imprisonment for his pacifism and who held in his face still the glow of martyrdom, the Christian who had become socialist in order to find a way of applying Christianity to society and who was a lay-preacher for the local chapel, the harsh and scornful materialist to whom everything was relentless struggle, with the toughest coming out on top, and for whom this was an excuse for a hatred derived from quite other sources, and the intellectual school teacher, victimized for his political opinions, whose devotion to 'the cause' did not exclude hope of a political career. Their experience was so much greater than mine, and they seemed so much firmer in outlook than the middle class leaders of the youth movements I knew, that I was much drawn to them. They appeared to be an élite, and thought of

themselves as such, as self-taught men among untaught men must always do.

One unorthodox piece of electioneering stands in my mind still. Ellis and I were engaged on polling night on a wild chase round to push all our supporters to the poll. We burst into the cottage of one party member who had obviously been celebrating election day at the pub on the corner. He sat before his kitchen grate, in which no fire burned, stupidly endeavouring to focus its saucepans in his swimming eyes. A burly man, with beer-soaked moustaches, he reminded me of the drayman who had fallen on me out of the sky.

'Well, comrade? Voted yet?' barked Ellis, as peremptory as a drill sergeant. 'Only twenty minutes to close of poll!'

The man chuckled beerily and waved his arms like the flappers of a seal.

'Coursh, comrade,' he replied. 'Wooden led the Party down. Why, I got me ruddy rescheipt!' And he fumbled in his pockets and drew out his ballot paper to wave at us.

'Lord be with us,' said Ellis. 'Give me that here.'

He took the ballot paper, firmly marked a cross on it opposite the name Alden and thrust it into the hand of the drunken comrade, clapped his hat on his head and thrust him to the door.

'Wash all thish?' said the man. 'I tell you I voted, didden I?'

'Comrade, you're a bloody fool,' said Ellis, skilfully combining abuse of a drunk with respect for a party member. 'You haven't voted until that paper's in the ballot box. Get off with you.' And taking him by the shoulders he propelled him down the street. We watched him go, lurching happily, trying to sing 'The Red Flag', and waving his ballot paper at passers-by. The polling station was a school at the bottom of the road and we saw him reach it. But we did not stay any longer: it was best not to be in hailing distance when he made his explanations.

On the night before the poll our constituency and a neighbouring one held a joint rally in one of North London's historic music halls, a vast, shabby place, with tier on tier of dusty gilt plaster and rubbed red plush rising round the proscenium arch. Plump and airborne cherubs, gold beneath but grey above from the dust of ages, held aloft their flambeaux or emptied cornucopias upon us, a huge gilt and crystal

chandelier hung from the ceiling. We concealed a backdrop of Piccadilly flower-girls and dandies with rows of red flags, but with the safety curtain, which carried a patchwork of lozenges advertising bicycle dealers and greengrocers, were allowed to do nothing at all. In the centre of the stage stood the scarlet-covered table and the seats of speakers and supporters. I was a platform steward and ushered Harold Laski, the star turn, to his seat. At the sight of him the crowded theatre, its temper revivalist, rose in applause. It was the first time I had seen or heard him, though Ellis had told me that he was a rising power in the Party, the darling of the intellectuals, and a man whose books I ought to read. After a spate of emotional oratory in which the faithful were summoned to a last crusade against the heathen, Harold Laski got up to speak. He looked like a boy, the brainy boy of the class, small and frail and well-brushed, with a high-domed forehead and large, round horn-rimmed spectacles and a little Charlie Chaplin moustache. He leant against the table and put his hands in his pockets and without a single oratorical trick began to talk to us in a quiet persuasive way, which contrasted astonishingly with the tub-thumping which had preceded him. What he gave us was a masterly exposition of a century of social history in Britain, something quite unexpected by me. I saw two things which I had until then only dimly grasped: that there was an historical case for the socialism I had espoused, not simply a moral and emotional one, which could be compellingly stated; and secondly, which was to have an influence on my own intellectual development, that it was possible to organize one's knowledge in an orderly and rational manner, and present it logically and objectively, to people who neither expected it nor particularly wanted it, *and hold them*. How I longed to be able to do just what he had done that evening. Yet I drew back from the thought that first I must begin to study myself. I wanted to arrive at the scholarly end without all the boring preparation.

Remembering my intellectual excitement on that occasion I find myself seeking to understand how my mind worked then. In my first novel (*Fugitive Morning*), which was autobiographical, I wrote that the hero, whom I called Jim Penton, used to think, not in words or concepts, but in a series of pictures. Whatever he read or heard formed a cinematograph

film in his mind, and if it did not, he had no idea what it was about. This intense visual quality so swamped my mind that no abstraction could be comprehended unless it was attached to a group of pictures. But my mind had its gratuitous visions, too, conjured up by its own passions and fears. 'Pictures' is a feeble noun for the exalting or Dantesque visions which involuntarily spun themselves in my head. The visions were not simply sexual ones (the realism of which was shattering) but all which had to do with the misery and despair I now divined in the world—slums, slum children, suburban meanness, the pimps, the drabs and perverts, the berserk savagery of war, the grinding mills of industry, and the total futility of man's life in a planet in which the human race, like individual man, was doomed to extinction. How hard it was to overcome this anguish of futility. To wake to face it day after day, just to know that a senseless, sottish world went on, was agony, and I stretched, like a drunkard to his bottle, for anything which would lift me out of it. It was little enough that was needed—a line of a poem, a sight of the sky from the office window, the word or letter of a friend, or a song at a meeting. My upward rush of exaltation would make me dizzy with joy, but I was incapable of hanging on to it, and soon plunged again into the blackest anger against the world. In truth everything in the world so tormented me that I was constantly on fire, constantly pounded by a visual bombardment, and had to hold my head in my hands for fear of losing my sanity. If I write this now it is to try to explain to myself (for I still reproach myself for neglected opportunities) how such mental instability completely unfitted me for the systematic learning which I knew I would have to undertake one day.

Ellis had explained to me that Laski was a Jew: I had looked therefore for something Jewish about him to mark his membership of the strange and brilliant race of which so many exotic members were to be seen around Aldgate—the flashy gentlemen at shop doors, the eastern Jews in greasy high caps, caftans and side-curls, and the glowing oriental beauties: but there was nothing Jewish about him, as far as I could see, unless it was something compelling and even harsh in a voice which seemed astonishing in one so slight of stature.

The Labour Party won enough seats at this General Election

to become the largest party in the House: with Liberal support it formed the Government, to the fury of my father's partner Pantlin, who talked of emigrating. A victory reception was held, by the Trade Union Club, I think, to which Ellis took me as his guest. I remember little about it now except that, to my horror, the expensive tweed suit I had bought when I was employed by *The Open Road* was becoming as wide in mesh as a fishing net over my white knees. I had to be most careful not to sit down in public. I was introduced to that spectacular politician, James Ramsay MacDonald. Standing a little forward from the future members of his cabinet, at the head of some steps, he received the guests. The respectful inclination of his lieutenants to the organizer of victory—many of them owed their seats to his tremendous oratory—was most impressive. It was the kind of thing one saw on news-reels. MacDonald had a special word and handshake for Ellis, who had been at his side in the famous battle of Woolwich Common when Arsenal workers drove the supporters of 'Pacifist' MacDonald away with stones. It was Ellis who introduced me, and I moved forward to a gracious handshake. MacDonald glowed there, happy in victory, the most handsome man I had ever seen in my life, quite conscious of his own saintly beauty under his leonine, greying hair and ardent neuropathic brown eyes. Byzantine paintings always made important personages large and the lesser ones small. MacDonald's magnetism did this of itself: he dwarfed everyone else. Wherever he moved in the room he created this remarkable aura. No one was more conscious that night than he that with him a new era in British politics began. This magnetism explained his ascendancy over the Labour Party of those days: it needed a great man of its own as a counterpoise to the procession of illustrious figures produced by the Tory and Liberal Parties for over a century. MacDonald looked just that great man the party needed, standing unafraid under the lamps of destiny. The only other man in whom I had met this consciousness of greatness was John Hargrave. And he also was mistaken.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Oh Young Men . . . ’

The youth movements rejected the world which burnt us up with despair. At least, that is one way to explain their hold upon us. But, so long ago, it was more than rejection. It was the positive call to brotherhood we heard also, a summons to those astonishing freedoms we demanded in defiance of the tabus of another generation: a spirit almost universal in the 'twenties. Stephen Spender spoke for us—

*Oh comrades step beautifully from the solid wall
advance to rebuild, and sleep with friend on hill
advance to rebel . . .*

I lost my soul to movements when I was quite a tiny boy. It seemed a very fine thing to me to be one of a gang. At five years I boasted lyingly to my friends that I was the mascot of the Scouts and marched in front of their band every Sunday. And at eight or nine years I proudly walked the streets wearing my little green Wolf Cub hat, and a bright scarf round the neck of my grey jersey. I had waited with a grand impatience for the day. The roughness and the raw smell of the stiff new jersey, and the silky caress of the scarf round my neck remain unforgettable. I can recall my indignation that I was not, like my brother who was a Scout, permitted to wear a new leather belt, the colour of a ripe horse-chestnut and smelling wonderfully of tannin. The Cubs met in the loft over a stable, clambering up the hollow-sounding stairs to reach a romantic room lit only with storm lanterns where we sat on the floor and learnt to tie knots. There was about it the smell of hay and horse-dung, and harness leather, and from under the floor

came the champing and stamping of the bakers’ horses. Through the cracks between the floor boards we could feel their warm breath ascending, and look down and catch glimpses of polished coats and rolling eyes.

Every Sunday we formed up in military order in the cobbled stable yard behind our waving flags and led by a thrilling drum and bugle band marched off to church. The Boy Scout movement was so new in those days that we were fair game. Crowds would follow the marching troop: not always friendly ones, and often, to march out of the stable yard, we had to push through a mob of spitting and jeering youths from the nearby slum streets. They had a song about us which began

*‘Here come the Brussel Sprouts
The stinking, blinking louts’*

and we were often told to ‘Go ’ome and wash yer knees!’—for bare knees, rare among children in 1912 and 1913, constituted in their eyes almost an indecency. My brother was the first boy to display bare knees at our council school and took the mockery which followed with a stoical calm I much admired. Presently, of course, I yearned to play in the band, and as a Wolf Cub I stepped along whistling away at my fife, and later graduated, as a Boy Scout, to a side drum. Nothing I did elsewhere, in school or in church, ever brought me the same pride as my achievements in Scouting. It was the only social organization interested in taking me into the country, and through it I made long forays, running and walking, as part of a trek-cart team which ranged far and wide through Kentish lanes. We spent days by the Ravensbourne, cooking, learning to light fires, swimming and playing games: through the Scouts I expanded my own personality and discovered in myself natural powers of leadership over other boys.

I recall all this now as part of the effort I am constantly compelled to make to estimate the power and influence of youth movements in this century. It is curious what can be overlooked by historians and sociologists. Search through the library shelves and you will find endless volumes on the theory and practice of socialism, on trade unionism, and on every aspect of child welfare and education. But you will find almost nothing about youth movements, except the occasional volume of instruction or propaganda. Yet if we are thinking

of the real *social* revolution of our century, that is to say, not so much the rise and fall of standards of living, but the most significant changes in *behaviour*—clothing, sex relations, hobbies, sports and holidays—then we have to admit that the youth movements have been the most successful revolutionaries of the lot. But you will hunt high and low for an authoritative work which takes notice of this phenomenon. Because the apologetics of youth movements are callow, their arguments crude, and their practices puerile, they are dismissed or ignored by scholars. But one has only to turn to the history of German youth movements to see that these faults of adolescence in no way minimize their social and historical importance. In *Punch* of 1915 Frank Reynolds drew a cartoon of a Prussian household engaged in its morning hate of Britain. It is a memorable drawing, for it reveals with masterly lines the stuffiness of the household, the curtains concealing nine tenths of the windows, the drapes everywhere, the table cloth carried down to the floor to conceal the legs of the table, the family ridiculously overdressed from the tiny boy with long curls and a fauntleroy suit to the fat, bourgeois father. It was hardly a caricature, but the living truth about the overfed and overcushioned life of the German bourgeoisie of those days. G. R. Halkett describes in *The Dear Monster* how one day he, a child of a respectable and cloistered family in Weimar, walked into the woods, and stumbled upon a bunch of boys camping. They had bare knees. Their shirt collars were open and they wore no ties. They were playing guitars round a campfire. ‘It was far too fantastic to be true. It was violence to at least half a dozen basic “not dones”. I had never seen anything like it.’ These boys, despised and feared by bourgeois parents as a runaway, gipsy kind of youth, turned out to be more friendly, interesting and even more *moral* than the decadent schools he attended, where on the surface everything was as it should be, but underneath cruelty and evil were rife. But if one saw the German bourgeoisie *between the wars* it was to discover that they had adopted the codes of the once-despised Wandervögel. A whole nation had taken to hiking, sunbathing, the wearing of shorts and the search for a simple and unconventional life! The real revolution in standards of personal conduct was accomplished by the youth movement, and in our own country too. This search for a new form for life had in Germany

political consequences of the utmost importance for the whole world, for Adolf Hitler was 'one of them', and his movement the apotheosis of the revolt of German youth.

In Britain, though everything was much more sober and down to earth, when Sir Robert Baden-Powell began to publish serially his *Scouting for Boys* British youth by the thousands were electrified. With an astonishing perception they leapt at Scouting as at something for which they had long been waiting, divining that this was a movement which took the side of the natural, inquisitive, adventuring boy against the repressive schoolmaster, the moralizing parson and the coddling parent. Before the leaders knew what was happening groups were springing up spontaneously and everywhere bands of boys, with bare knees, and armed with broomsticks, began foraging through the countryside. But for that generalship of which Baden-Powell was a master, the Boy Scout movement might have led to the defiant experiments characteristic of German youth: as it was, under his leadership it became orderly, constitutional and imperialist and, as Gilbert Armitage wrote,

*'the roar heard in Mafeking
is muted to a pious wheeze
of sound advice on life and string
to little brats with naked knees.'*

In those days there were no cinemas, no radio, far too few playing-fields, and schools were still centres of tyrannical cane-lifting oppression. The Scout movement was the very breath of hope and love and encouragement to many a child. In the decade from 1908 to 1918 no other influence upon British boyhood came anywhere near it. In this decade I grew up, with the Scout movement as my real spiritual home, learning to despise the work of classrooms in favour of the open air pursuits the Scout movement glorified, and hopeful that I might build my whole life upon them. In the war years, when the determination of the boys themselves saved hundreds of Scout troops from collapse, a new voice emerged in the movement: it came from the author of many vividly-illustrated articles on camping, woodcraft and Red Indianism. The author called himself 'White Fox'; enchanted, I cut out the articles that he wrote in the weekly paper called *The Scout* and

pasted them in a scrapbook. ‘White Fox’ was John Hargrave, and even when I was only eleven or twelve he began to exercise an influence on my thinking. He was a typical Scout ‘hero’; a magical, charismatic aura surrounded him.

There was behind him, to begin with, a romantic war record as stretcher bearer and war artist at Gallipoli. His books and articles, with their bold line drawings, and intense, poetical preaching of an open air creed, had created in the Scout movement, which lacked little in imaginative appeal to begin with, an atmosphere of wild and contagious hope among the boldest spirits. He spoke especially to those millions of young men who, like myself, had grown up since earliest childhood in the Scout movement from which we had absorbed hopes and dreams about life our parents could not have understood. Hargrave’s postwar book, *The Great War Brings it Home*, carried the teaching of scouting to the stage we all unconsciously longed for: it promised to make the doctrines and way of life of the youth movements the basis of our entire existence. So completely, immediately after the war, was the Scout movement becoming stamped with the personality of John Hargrave, that we regarded him as the natural successor to Baden-Powell, a view the Scout movement seemed itself to acknowledge when it appointed him Headquarters Commissioner for Camping and Woodcraft.

This leader had a powerful personal magnetism. I recall him in those days as tall, with sharp, almost Roman features, an aquiline nose, and a mass of wavy black hair. We were none of us certain of ourselves: we were restless, dissatisfied and unhappy, and full of an aching longing for a more purposeful life, and Hargrave always spoke as though possessed of an absolute and even insolent certainty of where he was going and what he was doing. That carried immense reassurance with it. I was even a little fearful of his power over me when he fixed me with his dark, compelling, ironical eyes. I was not alone in this. Men far older and more experienced than I acknowledged his genius and treasured up his eloquent letters as if they were a new Holy Writ. Those associated with the birth of the new movement he was to found were people of the stamp of Henry Nevinston and the Pethick-Lawrences (at whose house in Lincoln’s Inn the new movement was born): to his side flocked many of the experimental

educationalists, those who, through the New Educational Fellowship, have since had so much influence on the new pedagogy.

In the Scout movement, with its millions of impressionable boys and young men, organized on a world-wide basis, Hargrave's future had seemed utterly assured. Yet he chose to break with it, on the two issues that troubled the conscience of all of us, war and democracy. There was, in the Scout movement in those days, no means by which the rank-and-file could influence the policy or change the leadership of the movement. And on the issue of *militarism*, the pre-war record of the Scout movement was not a very happy one. It was because Hargrave demanded reforms in these matters, including a more democratic constitution, that he was expelled. And when he launched his new movement, Kibbo Kift, or the 'Proof of Great Strength', its declaration of aims, called 'The Covenant of the Kibbo Kift', was like a new wind blowing through our young country. Under the influence of H. G. Wells, it spoke strongly for peace, world unity and world government: from Wells too came the conception of a New Samurai which inspired it. The Covenant asked for co-operative woodland communities and the revival of native arts and crafts, the restoration of rural industries and the renewal, through a new education on woodcraft lines, of the old folk life of the people, now buried under a machine-made civilization. Like Edward Carpenter, we looked upon civilization as a disease our new movement was to cure: if we visualized a new society it must have approximated to that which William Morris describes in *News from Nowhere*. The advocacy of Craft Guilds gave encouragement to the socialist elements in the new movement. The demand for land reservations and national parks breathed the hope of salvation from endless urbanization. And there was, above all, the direct and unforgettable command to members to seek pride of body, balance of mind and vital spiritual perception. In those days of hope we were carried away.

Hargrave brought his sense of form to bear upon the costume and practices of the Kibbo Kift. We dressed in cowled jerkins and wore shorts. Our leather belts were handmade, our badges hand-decorated and Hargrave's own excellent designs saved us from the inept and banal. We loaded our gear into handsome

rucsacs and tramped with rough ash staves in hand. The simple, archaic monkish costume seemed itself to witness to the rougher, more self-reliant, yet more brotherly life we were going to pursue with a religious devotion. The development of a campfire ritual of extraordinary splendour—the celebrants of this strange mass wore embroidered robes, and intoned a liturgy to the swinging of censers as they lighted the ceremonial fire—promised the birth of a new, pagan religion. We were certain that we were the new élite, and that by some mystical process we had been chosen to transform the world.

My exhilarating promotion to be chief of a paper devoted to ‘Rovering, camping and woodcraft’ gave me a professional interest in youth movements, as well as acquaintance with many youth leaders. The life of youth movements I conceived to be my true business, to which even my writing had to take second place, and all my spare time was spent at the camps and gatherings of the lodges. I had founded my own youth lodge, of which Roly, and Eric Greenhill, the actor, were the principal members. Gordon Ellis, who then lived in Deptford, put up the idea that we should bring together all the scattered members of John Hargrave’s movement in South East London and form them into a local association. The first meeting was held in the mayor’s parlour at Deptford Town Hall and among those present were John Wilmot, who had unsuccessfully contested East Lewisham as a Labour candidate and so fired the opening shots of his political career, Joseph Reeves, who was running Co-operative education locally, a man of intense energy and imagination, and many others prominent in South London socialism. To my surprise I was appointed leader, an honour I tried to refuse and hardly knew how to sustain. By a series of mischances this quite premature promotion of mine was to be the cause of a serious split in Kibbo Kift, which had the consequence of destroying it.

This election took place about the time that I took over *The Open Road*: it was about then, too, that I went with friends to visit John Hargrave in his little bungalow at Kings Langley. We pitched our one-man tents in the waste land behind his bungalow and came in, when summoned, to sit at his feet and listen to his omniscient talk.

The romantic gear of the artist was everywhere about: across the distempered walls light murals had been sketched. Hung on the walls were some paintings which made one want to see more of this aspect of his life and work. One, if my recollection serves me well, in blue and grey washes, showed a minute caravan of Neanderthal men and women, carrying their babes and all their worldly goods on their backs, crawling eternally on through a downpour of rains as unceasing as in the days of the Flood. It was entitled 'Hell'. There were little models which he had made—or perhaps collected—of the dogheaded God Anubis which Hargrave seemed to regard as a personal symbol—his name in the movement (where no one was ever Bill Smith or Jack Jones, but Red Eagle or Grey Beaver or some such absurdity) was 'White Fox'. They were fascinating but they made me uneasy. They reminded me that there was in the new movement a credulous wing ready to tinker with the occult. Perhaps it owed its presence to the many theosophists who were associated with its birth, but I felt then the absurdity of this servant girl stuff in a rugged, open air movement.

It was on this occasion, I think, that we played the night game. We trooped excitedly into a hanging wood of birch and oak, and divided into teams, and sought in the inky blackness to attack each other's bases. It was like the schoolboy game of 'Release' played at night with the aid of torches. We lay under bushes and held our breaths to listen for the movements of the enemy. Only the night wind was audible, groaning through the wood, and brushing the tree-tops through the stars. It was thrilling to lie silent with the damp cold earth beneath one, the smell of dew and rotting leaf mould in one's nostrils—invisible and inaudible one hoped, yet conscious of the urgent and noisy beating of one's heart. I recall the frightened sense of the primeval Hertfordshire forest of oaks and undergrowth where on any such night as this thousands of years ago the silence which first hurt the ear drums must have been followed by just such a crashing and crying of heavy beasts in the undergrowth. I turned over to spare myself what I might be about to imagine and stared up at the gibbet swaying of the trees, and felt myself tremble.

We gathered in a file, summoned by the imperious winking of a leader's torch and each man felt for the next man's ankle.

The leader had found a gully through the defences, he said, and we moved off, a blundering python, each one of us privately certain that we were audible for miles away. The night expresses of the Great Northern hooted above the owls, and we moved faster during their thundering. But the gully was a snare the defenders knew of old, and as we rested in it, listening to our own breathing, an ambush rose around us, and we leapt up with prickling scalps and skins to defend ourselves. It was each man for himself now and when my panic thrust had taken me through yielding jerseyed bodies I found myself quite alone, as still as a tree or a stone, with the shouting and calling dying away from me. The glimmering torches were flying still in all directions, in graceful curves, lighted and then obscured, like darting fireflies. And as the night wind blew fragrant from the spring meadows it was like Greece, I thought, with the torches of the priestly rabble scouring through a wood on the slopes of Mount Hymettus to a dawn ceremony. It is now, I thought, that they should sing one of Hargrave's litanies.

I pushed my way through bushes, my jersey drenched with their burden of dew, and came to the edge of a wood. Where was I? I crawled gingerly through barbed wire to the field beyond to see if there was a footpath. The field was ploughed and, too tired to cross it, I sat down on the grass bank and searched for my pipe, happy to find it unbroken. As I sat smoking contentedly the gibbous moon came up over a still more distant wood, throwing a pale glint on the roofs of Kings Langley village and picking out for me my road home. I walked back dreaming of the cosiness of my kapok sleeping bag: but sleep was not permitted yet, for my comrades had returned before me and someone had brewed coffee and we sat by the campfire, our faces ruddy and disembodied in its flicker, and boasted of our exploits.

It must have been at this first meeting that Hargrave learnt that I was not yet eighteen and looked slyly down at me and rubbed his nose. To join the movement at all as an adult one needed to be eighteen and I, by a subterfuge on the matter of age, had already two years' membership behind me! My election to leadership of the South London groups was therefore rather irregular. And even though it was the task of the movement to encourage youth and to condone rather

than oppose my precocity, Hargrave chose to make this a point on which to refuse to recognize the new South London association. He had other points, of little importance now. All this launched an acrimonious correspondence between Hargrave and me and stirred up a fierce debate between the leaders of South London groups and the stalwarts who stood around Hargrave. The issue, ultimately, became very much simplified. It was whether Hargrave had the power to override the decisions of a local association: Hargrave's belief that he had was exaggeratedly described by the rest of us as a wish for personal dictatorship. At the picturesque open air assembly, which was called *Althing*, organized in 1924, the South London groups moved a vote of censure against him. We sat in a circle in the open air while the debate droned on. It rained and we adjourned to a barn where the rats squealed in the bales of straw. We returned to the open air for the dramatic moment of the vote. By a small majority it went against us. The dissident groups were seated together like an opposition party in a Parliament, and when the figures were announced by the heralds, their real leader Gordon Ellis (for I was no more than a figurehead) announced their intention to resign from the movement, and one third of the circle of jerkin-clad youth rose together and ceremonially withdrew.

Hargrave was left triumphant in the midst of his loyalists. It must have been a barren victory for him. Movements do not easily survive the shock of breaking into two a few years after their foundation: the remnants always grow embittered. The groups which had resigned commanded the confidence of the Labour and Co-operative movements and they alone were capable of bringing the vast resources of working-class movements to the aid of Kibbo Kift. By the loss of them, Hargrave had forfeited for ever the chance of building his movement into a powerful and independent 'Left Scout Movement'. But perhaps this was what he dreaded most of all! Looking back I find it difficult to conceive that the dispute was about so trivial and dreary a matter as the election of a leader to a local association in the face of Hargrave's disapproval. The truth was that the two wings of the movement were inspired by different social philosophies. And to become the leader of an organization increasingly dominated by the aggressively-minded socialists may have been the last thing Hargrave

wanted. Romantic and individualist in temper, he turned, by an instinct which perhaps was more sound than we then thought it, from any demand for the creation of a mass movement. Yet he never found what he wanted, and after we left it, Kibbo Kift passed through many curious transformations, reaching in the end the role of a uniformed *avant-garde* of Social Credit by way of more than one phase of bucolic rusticity during which the Kin gathered annually for the ceremonial roasting of an ox over a campfire.

I find it difficult to criticize Hargrave now as I did in the days of my callowness. It would have been a good thing to have seen his movement develop without the fatal eruption of my personality into it. Having in my turn failed just as dismally to build a ‘Labour Scout Movement’ after years of effort just as intense, I cannot blame him for deciding in advance that it was not worth trying. One loss to both wings, Hargrave’s and the opposition, impossible now to estimate, is that certain of the more experienced and brilliant recruits which Kibbo Kift had made, who had seen in it the new wind of youth and candour which Europe wanted, ceased to have any more interest in the whole business. They passed on to other interests and responsibilities and left us to our impassioned puerilities.

I quite saw that nothing had been gained by our collective resignation if the dissident working-class groups were going to fall to pieces and disappear. What was needed was this ‘Labour Scout Movement’ which Hargrave had failed to launch. But the rebel groups had tasted anarchy: they wanted to be left alone to do as they pleased. Why should they be burdened with constitutions and subscriptions when all that was necessary was to sling your rucksack on your back on Saturday and, with the boys and girls who were your comrades, make tracks for the countryside? Besides, who would accept the burden of leading the new organization? The old leaders were too busy: their careers claimed them. And the talks we had in Peckham or Poplar came to nothing.

Roly went off and formed a group which met in the Walworth Road. He came to me to show me the elaborate educational programme he had worked out for it, of which the guiding principle was that you had to train the child so that it no longer felt inferior in face of the adult world. Roly had worked out the ‘recapitulation’ theory to its logical conclusions.

This was a theory which the youth movements of the day owed to the American, Stanley Hall, whose book *Adolescence* had had a great vogue. The recapitulation theory advanced in it justified the pursuit of the primitive which scouting and woodcraft movements displayed. The child, it was argued, passed through phases of activity in growing up which were a recapitulation of eras in the evolution of the race. When children light fires in the woods and make themselves bows and arrows, they are working through a hunting period of man's evolution. The mania for collecting, whether foreign stamps or birds' eggs, belongs to the beginning of the acquisitive civilizations. Hall even postulates, I think, a certain period in a boy's life when he wants to play at 'working in offices' and 'swapping' things which is said to correspond with the commercial phase of modern society. If, we believed, the child were not allowed this natural progress from primitive innocence to civilized sophistication, then he was liable to be 'arrested' in a primitive state.

Roly argued that we failed to use this theory properly if we left the boy still in the primitive stage at fourteen and fifteen: the most important thing was to bridge the gap between the boy-savage and civilized man, and this was only possible if the boy recapitulated *everything*. He had to get the thrill and danger of modern war by lying in wet trenches and throwing stones at opposing gangs: he had to be permitted to smoke and drink, and to acquire poise by learning to dance and getting to know girls in a social way. I replied that you could go too far, and that if the boy was going to be allowed to do everything that an adult did, then there would be nothing new for him to do when he did become adult. And in any case, I asked, where do you draw the line? There's sex, I mean, I said. Roly was rather huffed by my scepticism and went off to work out his elaborate scheme single-handed among the boys of the Walworth Road, one of whom, he was always fond of telling me, suffered from dementia praecox, and could be quite dangerous with an axe.

Yet though I scoffed at Roly's unpracticality, I shared the passion that moved him. We were both really legislating for ourselves. We felt we had been injured by the process of growing up, and that life had become disfigured for us because of its emotional, sexual and economic miseries. How easy it

was for others, too, to make a blind recoil from maturity because of them! We felt the burden of a duty to end this intolerable thing, and it was this which made us read and theorize about pedagogics. Somehow, somewhere it ought to be possible to find a way of growing up gracefully.

I came to the conclusion that no effort would be made to establish the new youth movement unless I made it myself. However, I was only nineteen, and I first had to demonstrate to myself that I was capable of doing what I wanted. There was a thoughtful and modest friend of mine, Sidney Shaw, who had been trained as an engineer but was then out of work. With him I planned a small experimental group of boys and girls in which, I said, we would test out afresh what all of us then called ‘tribal training’ theories of education. And if it did well, a new movement, released from the stale debate which had ruined Kibbo Kift, might spring from our efforts. We started early in 1925 in Lewisham, with four small boys: the small boys have long since grown up and married, but they live in the neighbourhood still, and I still hear of them: presently we added small girls so that the movement could be genuinely co-educational. It had long been one of our points of criticism of the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides that the sexes were too sharply separated: one could not have a movement, close in feeling to the family or the tribe, without freedom for both sexes within it.

The exhilarating business of building everything, from the ground up, gripped me from the moment of that beginning, and before long a small but genuine movement came into existence which called itself *The Woodcraft Folk*—it used the word folk in German sense of *volk* and not in the English ‘fairy’ or ‘art-and-crafty’ sense—which was able to rely upon co-operative societies for support and encouragement. Eventually my group and several others came together and drew up a dignified Charter which read:

‘We declare that it is our desire to develop in ourselves, for the service of the people, mental and physical health, and communal responsibility, by camping out and living in close contact with nature, by using the creative faculty both of our minds and our hands, and by sincerity in all our dealings with our neighbours: we declare that it is our desire to make ourselves familiar with the history of the world, and the

development of man in the slow march of evolution that we may understand and revere the Great Spirit which urges all things to perfect themselves.

‘We further declare that the welfare of the community can be assured only when the instruments of production are owned by the community, and all things necessary for the good of the race are produced by common service for the common use; when the production of all things that directly or indirectly destroy human life ceases to be; and when man shall turn his labour from private greed to social service to increase the happiness of mankind, and when nations shall cease to suckle tribal enmities and unite in common fellowship.’

Not long after this, in a pamphlet which drafted an educational programme for the new movement, I wrote this:

‘Our education is not a matter of little moral talks or stilted lectures, it is a system wherein the primal instincts of the child are moulded along a social path by the very things a child loves. In truth we let a child train itself and we see that it grows from within and is not coerced from without. Hand in hand we go with our children to explore and examine all that life holds out to us. So it comes about that our principles of training permeate the whole of our activities; every symbol, every totem, every song has its own peculiar value, and no action from acting a charade to boiling a billy of water is devoid of significance. We feel that it is necessary, if the race is to survive, to produce men and women who by their knowledge, their physical fitness and their mental independence shall bring quick, sure brains and boundless vitality to bear on man’s struggle for liberty. We are the revolution. With the health that is ours and with the intellect and physique that will be the heritage of those we train we are paving the way for that reorganization of the economic system which will mark the rebirth of the human race.’

I see now a clear contradiction, not obvious to me at the time, between the simple and indeed humble educational argument of the first part of that statement, and the extravagant assertion that we were the revolution. How genuine, however, was our belief that one had to ‘Learn by doing, teach by being’. Rousseau’s *Emile* had enormous influence on us, and when I read today such books as Herbert Read’s *Education for*

Peace I am transported nostalgically back to my own early theorizing: for we talked then as he talks now, of the need to wrench education away from 'abstractions' and to ground it in contact with 'real things'. In school much more than half we had learnt had been at secondhand. We learnt about the world, we saw little more than our own suburbs. We were told of the lives of writers: we read comics. Bored teachers, informed by textbooks written by tired hacks, made of things great and resplendent in their own right something weary and perfunctory. And so we, like Herbert Read, came with exhilaration to the dictum of Rousseau that the child must be kept dependent on things. For heaven's sake, we declared to each other, let's do *real* things, and for the leader who could talk well but could not light a fire or dig a latrine, we had no use. And there is just no doubt at all that this camping and open air life we promoted, which gave a child the opportunity to pit his energy and ingenuity against practical problems, worked wonders for undersized children from the slums, afflicted with a sense of their own inferiority, and lost in the greedy, competitive world.

How right, indeed, we were to condemn education in 'abstractions'. But how easily we fell into the opposite error, that because one ought to concern oneself with things, there are only things to be concerned with. The abstractions which belong to pedants and pedagogues have nothing to do with the spirit, whether the creative spirit of man or the Great Spirit of the Woodcraft Folk charter, but in the effort to hustle away abstractions and to come down to the experience of co-operative living, how easy it was to confuse the invisible spirit with the 'tedious abstraction' and kick both down the stairs.

Yet the truth was that the movement I founded did not base itself upon books or learning, or even upon its ferociously-worded demand for a social revolution. This was mostly window dressing, unconsciously indulged in to satisfy the prevailing 'left' climate of those years. We belonged to a blood brotherhood of the campfire. We pursued an ideal of toughness which made us contemptuous of ease and respectability and involved us in a hatred of the weak, the sick and, above all, the elderly. My great friend and disciple was a master plumber named Brown. He had a gift for composing tunes, strumming them on

the piano to build them round the 'new folk songs' I was writing—

*My love she is a woodcraft lass,
She doth all other maids surpass,
There never was a girl so fair
As this young thing with nutbrown hair.*

or

*You passed me many miles from town
(Sing charabanc, O charabanc)
I passed a motor and a ditch
I could not tell you which was which
(Sing charabanc, O charabanc)*

Brown was invaluable at camp, where upon problems of organization and sanitation his knowledge was expert. Despite his devotion to the primitive, he took our kit to camp on his motor-cycle combination and always brought his blow-lamp with him. If it rained abominably he would string a seven-pound sweet tin, full of water, to the tent-pole, and, cigarette in one hand and lighted blow-lamp in the other, brew up for tea as imperturbably as any British workman 'on the job'. I recall that one night we returned together from the Inn at Colgate, and stumbled along Lovers Lane in the dark to the tents we had left sprawled in a half circle in Dragon Valley. There, at the valley foot, rose a ring of sky-piercing pines round which circled the old ironmaster's stream in which the boys splashed naked every day: in the centre of that sombre and magnificent copse we lit the nightly campfire and smelled the pine incense and held our initiations. Now there was silence in the camp. The boys had been sent to bed before we left and the fire had died down to a smoulder. But when we arrived we found them all up still, separated into small, mutinous parties. No one greeted us. We went the round of the tents, making a roll-call. In one we found a half-dressed boy, crouching with his bottom in the air, frying his bacon over a candle. Questioned, he said he was hungry, and thought it was nearly breakfast time. In another a small, very wet boy, muttering with anger, sat on his ground-sheet in a puddle, refusing to do anything about it but stare mulishly at us from behind his spectacles.

'They threw me in, sir! They threw me in!' he shouted. 'They got me wet, let them get me dry!'

'We threw him in because he was going to sneak!' others shouted from their tent-doors.

'What were you going to tell?' I asked.

'If you tell, Foxy, we'll chuck you in again!'

'What were you going to tell?' I asked again, but before the boy had time to answer the others rudely interrupted.

'We don't have to tell in the Folk,' shouted a boy with fair, spiky hair. 'It's a free movement. We don't have leaders and obey orders like we do at school. This isn't the army. We can do what we like.'

'Was he the one who pushed you in?' I asked with interest. Foxy nodded stubbornly, his lips tight.

'Come out, both of you,' I said. The squelching Foxy did so, and the other boy leapt out in his pyjama trousers, squaring up pugilistically, his frail white torso flaring in the blackness.

'Yah,' someone else yelled, 'we don't fight either in the Folk.'

The pugilistic boy dropped his fists.

'What about pushing him in?' I asked Foxy. 'To make it even.'

'Come on,' jeered the other encouragingly, 'try it. What you scared of?' Little Foxy, dripping still, drooped his eyes to the ground. The other was full of rage at this timidity. 'Who cares about getting wet? If that's all that anyone wants to make it quits I'll push myself in!' And he gave a tremendous backward leap into the pool we had dug, just as he was, and yelled and thrashed about with savage glee. Foxy grinned with great satisfaction, and went contentedly to bed. Brown and I looked at each other grimly. The era of toughness had begun. On the morrow, I had two complaints to deal with: from the farmer that someone had been laying snares in his meadows for rabbits, and from a neighbouring landowner that in the dead of night a felon had chopped down a decaying pine tree and carted it away. I could not restrain raising my eyebrows at the marvellous pile of pine logs stacked neatly by the council fire, and at the sudden suspicious business of all my comrades. Finally, the boy with the fair spiky hair, who had led the rebellion, given a glass of home-made cider at the farmhouse was

comatose for the rest of the day. It was remembrance of incidents like these which made me write in later years: 'Some young men who founded a youth movement became so engrossed with their work as to forget the passage of time until presently they were reminded of it by the appearance of mere boys who demonstrated against the rule of baldheads and potbellies. Alas, these same boys, in the moment of victory, found behind them the children, who argued fiercely against the tyranny of the old men of eighteen.'

Every activity in town was nothing more than a dusty substitute for life in the open. The fire was the heart of every camp: the place where it stood was the council circle, and there we opened all our gatherings ceremonially. Round the burning heart of the movement we sang songs, told stories, made love, and argued far into the night. Tardily arriving, we strode down the hill towards the thrilling diapason of a hundred voices. We had heard this compelling note far away: it had excited us to hurry when the fire, in the distance, was no more than a single coal burning in the mist. Now to see, as one came near, the disembodied faces of one's friends and girls in that rosy gleam was to come longingly home at last into the fellowship one loved with all one's soul. Every kind of life but this was to be despised.

When the night grew late the young, self-conscious herald stood up. Last night he was a schoolboy in baggy grey flannels and worn blue blazer, a cap holding down his shock of chestnut hair. To-night his hair fell over his brow, a bronze mane the firelight made molten. To-night he wore a silk surcoat of blue and gold, surmounted by a crowing cock in red. He stepped into the circle and said, with uplifted hand, in a voice which made solemn the hieratic moment:

*Now doth the blackness of night encircle us
And the night wind whispers in the larches:
Now doth night enfold us like a cloak
And the earth is still, save for the owls and the beasts that hunt,
And we, the Woodcraft Folk, have assembled in festivity
Since the setting of the sun,
Now the flames flicker and die,
And the ashes grow grey upon the folkstead.*

‘OH YOUNG MEN OH YOUNG COMRADES’

To which the leader replied commandingly:

*To your tents, O woodcrafters,
And may stillness ride over the camp.
May you sleep and rise refreshed
When the light sparkles on the dew wet grass.
Peace!
Peace be to all men!*

And so, with a final song, a ‘Campfire Carol’ I had myself written, the circle would break, and the boys and girls, blanket-laden, rustle through the wet grass to their tents, set in a circle round the campfire, which presently the candles and torches transformed into a string of blowing Chinese lanterns, whose wet silk was luminous in the dark and fantastic with angular silhouettes. In the early morning a single Herald, or a group of boys and girls trained in verse-speaking, would stand by the dead campfire and recite:

*All ye who dwell within the camp
Awake! Arise!
For the earth has cast off the black cap of night
And is arrayed in the white garment of day.
All ye who dwell within the camp
Awake! Arise!*

And there is the heart of the thing, the longing to live a kind of poetry, which so fulfilled the deep emotional hungers of the young people who joined it that some of them would speak of it as a new religion. Despite the socialist dressing we gave to everything, and believed we believed in, every kind of future reform or revolution paled beside our concern for the content of the actual life we were living at that moment. We were conscious that our youth was slipping away, and that unless we lived now the life we ought to live, the chance would soon be gone forever. For this reason we were bitterly attacked by Communists and doctrinaire Socialists who wanted only immediate and unconditional sacrifice for a hypothetical future revolution. On our side we were ranged critically against the whole apparatus of contemporary society, condemning it all at heart, including the dreary working class movements with their endless committees and conferences meeting in dusty, smoke-laden halls, and lacking in colour, excitement and

grandeur. Even the revolutionaries we found drab, with their boring demands for protest or demonstration 'against the boss class'. It had become a mechanical formula even as long ago as that. Whatever was wrong it was always 'the boss class' which was to blame. One could only get rid of it. There was nothing one could do by oneself. How supine and ignoble a surrender of one's vitality this seemed to us! There was something repellent too in the mercenary working class concern with wages and conditions when what was wrong was civilization itself. We were socialists, that is to say, of the Edward Carpenter stamp, in love with a mystical vision of England suffering 'a sea change into something rich and strange'. And we were not without patriotism either, as this Kiplingesque song I wrote for the movement shows: it was a favourite for many years.

*England,
By the tracks the flintmen made,
By the men who cut the chalk,
By barrows and by grassy trails
Across the hills our young feet walk,
Our vows are green, our hearts are brave,
We pledge them thee by ashen stave.*

*By Saxon plow and Celtic sword
By the king who burnt the cake
By the rebel Hereward,
England, mother, for your sake
Make us strong, make us brave
England by the ashen stave.*

We made thrilling contact with continental youth movements making an identical protest against the adult world. They were nearly all, at first, to be found in Germany, and stemmed from the pre-war Wandervögel rather than Continental Social-Democracy. They too rejected urban and industrial civilization and bourgeois values in favour of the free brotherhood, tramping 'into the blue'. For them also the camp-fire was the heart of the movement: the initiation of their youth was to leap naked through its flames. We shared illimitable horizons with them and the contacts then made did not come to an end until Hitler came to power. On our side we regretted

the staidness and conventionality of our countrymen, for this compelled us to remain small and ineffectual while the membership of the German Buende ran into hundreds of thousands.

I trace now with the greatest of difficulty the pattern of the youth I was then, who began movement-building in his teens. I can hardly avoid reading a sophistication into my adolescent self which must have been completely absent. I was rude, naïve, opinionated and a prey to the most complex wishes and hopes. My ideas were few and not very original but they possessed me like demons and I had no option but to try and live by them. And what energy! I was up at six-thirty every morning to spend two hours writing the textbook I had planned for the Folk, then spent the day in Fleet Street, and rushed off at night to meetings and demonstrations. My week-ends were all taken up with hikes or camps. It quieted my despairs to find a full and active life in the service of something so hopeful. My energy was fed by an irrational fear that I might die quite soon. At the age of fifteen I had read somewhere that it was most important to do immediately the things you felt ought to be done, for no one should imagine he had the whole of a long life before him. One great man, the writer said, always worked with the feeling that in two or three years he would be dead. I became obsessed with the idea that I should die by the time I was twenty-one: it would be tragic to do so with absolutely nothing accomplished.

It would have been as well if, with a rather more personal canniness, I had made some preparations to meet my own future. One tenth of the hard work I put into the new movement would have got me into a university, had there been some means of supporting myself there. But this ambition did not, I confess, ever once occur to me. Boys and girls of my class did not go to universities: from the beginning to the end of my schooldays I never once heard schoolmaster, parent or friend mention a university as in any sense a possible or desirable goal for me or my contemporaries. I instinctively rejected, too, any counting-house calculations about my 'career': they were an affront to my idealism. One ought to do what one believed must be done, without thought of the cost. *Calculations* about the future were utterly opposed to the spirit of the youth-movement, and expectation of early death madethem useless anyway.

But if the way had been miraculously smoothed for me, would I have accepted the gift of fortune? I doubt it. I was deep in the dream flood of my generation, swimming only with its tide, powerless to climb on to the bank. I wanted nothing outside that flood, and would have felt it treasonable to desert my comrades for a life which had nothing to do with my own class. I was impatient of all sitting still, and had a deep distrust of learning for its own sake—after all it was a world stuffed with learning which had come to ruins about our ears—while to get learning for the sake of a career was contemptibly bourgeois: to study in order to change society alone was worth while.

The hostility to book learning had two sources—one was the longing for living experience in place of dead words, and the other was hatred for the older generation, with which I felt nothing in common. Civilization was about to die, and the future belonged only to us, the young, who were going to build a better one. It was, after all, a new paganism that we sought and a new barbarism we managed to achieve. Those of us who founded the movement had behind us Christian experience and education: we had been steeped in the patriotic history of our country and from boyhood had worshipped poets, heroes and kings. This background enriched our rebellion against society, and even in the act of throwing all away we were deep in its debt. But what of those who were *our* disciples? Why should they honour the spiritual heritage we threw contemptuously away? Of course, they could not. It was a hocus-pocus which we taught them was irrelevant or meaningless. And to the subsequent broods of converts, all that Christian past of Europe, and nearly all the background of European culture, was wrapped up and cast away with the stereotyped condemnation ‘the capitalist system’, with which no right-minded youth ought to have anything to do. From the first, I am afraid, the Woodcraft Folk, by the orientation I gave it, was set on the road of spiritual desiccation. It had less and less to offer with each decade, and understood less and less of what it rejected. This perhaps would be of slight importance, for the Woodcraft Folk has never been a very large or influential organization: but it remains an important symbol: the rejection of the past which it attempted was common to almost the whole of European youth. Denial of civilization became everywhere

a cult and an organization, and much European history turns on the mood which my youth movement then typified.

These were not the emotions which moved me when, with the success of the new groups founded locally beyond doubt, I called together friends of my own age to a meeting in the garden of our house. I was twenty and in an exalted mood, for the mantle was upon me. We sat under the flag-post I had erected as a boy at the bottom of the garden by the tall ash tree, where I had once flown the Union Jack at half-mast because of Kitchener's death. My elder brother was one of the group. We had lain side by side in bed many a night arguing about religion and socialism and he had at last abandoned his High Church convictions and come over to my side. He became the new movement's treasurer and brought to its wildcat schemes a solidity and commonsense in financial affairs which served it very well in its first decade: he and his wife both gave it devoted service and I was very glad to have their support. I talked of the need for an adult group to train leaders and to send out missionaries to found new groups. It was this solemn meeting of dedication rather than earlier efforts which started the Woodcraft Folk on its career, for it gave birth to a group of inspired young evangelists. I concluded by reading the new kindred a poem I had written. I had burnt in disgust all the things I had written since I was sixteen, and then started once again to write. The poem was called 'The Song of Creation' and it derived from Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter, the writers I had been thrilled to find were speaking the golden tongue we most longed to hear. 'The Song of Creation' spoke of the fiery movement of the cosmos and the burgeoning of life on the planet and made, with great élan, a mystical identification of our young movement with the life force. Yet there were other passages, of a realism which revealed my sickness and despair in the face of modern life, and more than anything else they illuminate for me now the genesis of the movement. It was certainly fitting that the movement which tried to live a poem should have been founded on one.

*The people pass and repass in the streets,
Torn posters flap from garish hoardings,
The trams rattle along, and messenger boys with perky faces
whistle music-hall ditties,*

‘OH YOUNG MEN OH YOUNG COMRADES’

*Mothers hurry past with bowed heads and weary eyes to do their shopping,
The unemployed shuffle along or lean against the walls and gaze into nothingness,
And I am frightened and made ill by their dazed and despairing faces.*

*A train rumbles over a bridge and its smoke wreathes down into the dusty street,
Cranes and derricks swing from factory walls and the workmen shout and sweat as they unload their drays,
The backing horses sweat and exert their knotted muscles and there is fear in their eyes and dilated nostrils,
But the carter only curses their stumbling and clattering
(But even here, can I, the Song, be heard.)*

*Washing flaps in dingy backyards, and dirty children gambol in the gutters,
From the mouths of babes and sucklings issues forth the accumulated lingual filth of civilization,
I peer into drab houses, with their ricketty stairs and faded wallpaper,
I peer into crowded rooms where men and women herd together, and grumble and grouse about work and one another,
And go out and buy an evening edition for the racing,
I peer into the huddled minds of little children and divine their fears and their agonies, and their minds steeped in the futility of the grown-up,
(I peer and am sorry)
I peer into backyards where the closet door swings open on broken hinges and the dustbin overflows with garbage and stench.
And lo! a rage fills me and I would cry destruction on the city and its evil ways,
Damning the teeming life within it to the abyss of the forgotten,
Fear and hatred scorch my soul and I recoil and lust to break the bonds that bind me:
For over beyond the smoke stack rises a vision of cloud shadows on the downs, and the sun on the golden wheat,
And I would shout and rage lest the town o'erpower me.*

‘OH YOUNG MEN OH YOUNG COMRADES’

*Then the hatred passes and I would weep for shattered lives and
empty days,
For the agony that created nothing but this,
And my song rises clear and goes whispering into the hearts of the
crushed,
And wistful glances are cast at the sky.*

CHAPTER FOUR

The Council of Action

Ever since the Great War revolution had brooded over England. When still a schoolboy, walking home with aching jaw from the school dentist at the bottom of Deptford High Street, I had seen the police and returned soldiers fighting outside the clubs and institutes formed for demobilized men, and, in my first years in the city, I watched the ragged grey crowds behind their sombrely burning red banners stream defiantly out of the East End while, concealed in the courts and alleys of Aldgate, the posses of mounted police waited. In 1921, the year of the great coal lock-out, and of an unending heat-wave, when under the urgent daily sun, pitiless on the pavements, the smokeless city had glowed as golden as a Canaletto townscape along the Thames, posters had appeared everywhere declaring a state of emergency, and asking for volunteers for a national reserve. The reserve was to fight the reds, and I wondered whether they would take me, young as I was, to help to guard the factories and pitheads. In the years since I had become one of the reds myself, devouring the papers for news of unrest and rebellion to satisfy my craving for a violent end to it all, and reading the *Daily Herald* ostentatiously at a time when to be seen with it in a railway carriage was to be met with curious or hostile stares. There was enough violence in the world for those hungry for it: the world was in tumult from the Ruhr to China. A new Germany was already growing up in an atmosphere of assassination, street brawls and marching private armies. It hardly seemed possible that, with all this ferment, the burning hopes and angers of the proletariat could fail to issue in the universal socialist commonwealth

which was our dream. Many times I began privately to fear that my youth movement had come too late—that the revolution would be over before we were ready to take a leading part in it.

In 1925, the struggle between miners and coal-owners dominated the national scene. It looked indeed as though in the summer of that year, when the Woodcraft Folk was holding its first summer camp, the miners would be locked out and a general strike called to support them. We talked much round our campfires of the mining dispute: we did not altogether understand it, certainly not that the mining industry was paying the price of the pioneering years of the 19th century. The haphazard and reckless exploitation of coalfields was beginning to exact a dividend in present disorder. The boom years of the war and post-war periods were over, and now, in the face of reparations coal and Polish coal, and an artificially dear pound, the foreign trade was slumping. Mines everywhere were working at a loss while the miner still enjoyed the good rates of pay he had won during the war. However, the economics of mining, even if we understood them, did not move us: it was the human situation which roused us, the drive against the living conditions of the miners, against the men whose work in the black and dripping pits was the most arduous of the whole working class. Our manhood was shamed by the thought. It was intolerable that the pressure to lower standards stemmed from men comfortably situated, to whom economics came before humanity.

The 1925 crisis was avoided because at the eleventh hour the Government awarded the industry a subsidy to meet its losses and to maintain wages, and appointed a Commission to study the industry. Neither side regarded this as anything more than a breathing space for manoeuvre in which they were to be allowed to lumber like tanks, hull down into the best shooting positions they could find. The Government began to make preparations to meet a stoppage which were directed principally against a General Strike, and all indications that it was going to get ready to resist provoked shrill, spinsterly cries from the left of 'governmental fascism!'

Looking back, one sees that the appointment of the Samuel Commission was a master stroke: it placed the miners in a false position, since they had accepted the Government subsidy

during the period of its deliberations and were therefore under an obligation to acknowledge and study the findings. The Report of the Commission was far from tender to the mine-owners: its proposals for reorganization of the industry went a considerable way towards meeting the criticisms of the miners and, carried into effect, might have proved a stepping stone to outright nationalization. Above all, the demonstration that 72 per cent of the coal was being mined at a loss, lent formidable weight to the proposal to reduce wages or lengthen hours as a temporary measure to save the industry. The Report was an honest and reasonable one: but no party to the dispute regarded it as anything but the opportunity for continued intransigencies. Miners demanded that the schemes for reform should precede discussion of wage reductions: mine-owners could only think of immediate wage reductions: the Government made ready to wash its hands of subsidy.

All winter through the noise of battle rolled: the debate grew more heated with the publication of the Report and the approaching end of the subsidy. The mine-owners gave notice of their intention to lock the men out: the T.U.C. maintained that it would fight the miners' case. It was not until the end of April, on my twenty-first birthday, that the crisis broke.

It was a sad coming-of-age for me, for though a splendid party had been planned in the local church hall, and most of the leaders of the new movement had been invited, almost on the eve of it my mother was taken ill and rushed off to Barts' Hospital to be operated on for appendicitis. I sat with my father in the cold waiting room miserable with longing. How flushed and ill she had been, bent double with pain, and how frightened! My misery was worse because I was conscience-stricken. I cared little, I knew, in the ordinary way, how she felt, or whether she were ill or well. I was too busy to bother now that I was pursuing my own life with such egotism and ambition. She toiled and slaved for us all, and I was not grateful, and I hated my ingratitude. I remembered the last time she had been seriously ill, and I, thinking she was dying, had sat on the hot flagstones in the backyard beating my head against the lavatory door so that I might not hear her cries. I felt again like that small boy, longing for consolation, for the sound of her voice, the most clear and musical that I knew, and the touch of her hand, so worn with work. After all,

there were still seven of us at home to cook, wash and clean for: we never realized how much we loved and needed her until she fell ill. Good news of her operation came in the end, but it was a long time coming. It was many days before she was off the danger list, and weeks before she was out of hospital, for complications set in.

A party under such a cloud was not to be thought of, and I went home and wrote cancellations to all my friends. When I visited mother, bringing books and flowers, she said sadly, 'Why don't people come to see me?' 'It's the General Strike, mother,' I said, eyes downcast with shame. 'There are no trains, buses or trams running.' 'It's terrible,' she said with a sigh. 'And so you cancelled the party. And all because of me! What a shame. How unlucky you are with things like that, Leslie. Kenneth had such a lovely party. We must have yours when I'm better.' But a 21st birthday party months after the event was a celebration I had the wisdom not to attempt.

I spent much of my birthday hanging round the Farringdon Road Memorial Hall, close by Ludgate Circus, where, behind the grim granite facade, the Trade Union delegates had gathered, under threat of the lockout notices handed to the miners, to debate the General Strike. Since I was a journalist I had no difficulty in worming my way into the lobby and wheedling information out of the delegates, who poured out now and then to smoke on the doorstep. I liked them instinctively, and not only because they were on our side. They were placid, pipe-smoking and genial: most wore tweeds and three-and-ninepenny cloth caps from 'the Co-op'. They beamed with red, open air faces and spoke with the accents of the smoky northern industrial towns. One felt that with very little change they could have become a Cup-tie crowd, and worn big rosettes and swung rattles in the Underground. Any revolution that was to come out of them could not help but be distinguished by commonsense and moderation. When the Trade Union great arrived the delegates respectfully cleared a space for them, as if they had been royalty. In the excitement of fishing for news, and smelling the atmosphere of history, I kept forgetting that the date was so portentous to me. When, with a start, I did remember, it was to acknowledge gloomily that so far I had done little or nothing of all the things I had planned. At little more than my age Pitt had been Prime

Minister! Though I had been spared the early death I had once believed myself marked down for, what had I done with the time I had saved? I looked with alarm on my entry into the third decade of my life, for it seemed in a sense to be the last, for I could not imagine that there was any life worth living after one was thirty.

The amiable, pipe-smoking delegates to the Conference which was to decide about the strike had lost some of the intransigence they had displayed a year earlier. The Samuel Report had done that: they were no longer so exhilarated about rebellion, they were more ready to count the cost. They were rather like schoolboy strikers who, in the first flush of the morning, had mounted in pyjamas to the roof of the school and crowned the flagpost with the customary chamber pot, and shouted defiance at the ushers in the yard below, but who, as the evening approached, and the cold wind began to whistle, regretted their impulsiveness, made painfully aware either that they must descend with tails between their legs to a frightful whipping or go on to some absolutely incalculable act of defiance, such as setting fire to the school. It was the 'incalculable act' which faced the T.U.C. after months of formal defiance. How could they retreat when, from midday on the First of May, most of the miners were already locked out? Yes, pithead gates were already shut, and black knots of wondering men already gathering at street corners in the mining valleys, shining their shoulders against walls, or sitting with feet in the gutter, discussing what this very gathering was going to do. But if they went on with defiance, could they control it? The T.U.C. were in fact imploring the Government for a lead. But the Government was like the headmaster who just would not promise the boys dancing on the roof a general amnesty.

W. J. Brown, *enfant terrible* of the Trade Union movement then not less than now, told the hesitating delegates: 'I contrast the atmosphere of this meeting with the atmosphere which existed nine months ago. There is not a man here who cannot feel that the atmosphere is chilly.' He went on to say of the continued but abortive negotiations on my birthday. 'We are asked to adjourn to-day on the night before what may be the last day of negotiations, without any conclusive demonstration of where the movement stands. It recalls to my mind the situation at the outbreak of the European war when our own

Prime Minister, rather than say where this country stood, preferred to do exactly what the General Council is doing here to-day—to stand aloof and to leave the attitude of the country in doubt right up to the last moment.' There were cries of 'No' from a few, but the mass of delegates stirred guiltily and uneasily.

It was burly Bevin, the dockers' man, who, with that massive patience of his which was very near to genius, assembled the situation intellectually in such a way that the delegates could face it with a sense of responsibility.

'You are moving into an extraordinary position. In twenty-four hours from now you may have ceased being separate Unions for this purpose. For this purpose you will become one union with no autonomy. The miners will have to throw their lot and cause into the common cause of the general movement, and the general movement will have to take the responsibility for seeing it through. But at the moment we feel that to begin wielding any sort of threat in connection with the negotiations, in the stage they are now in, would be to place a weapon in the hands of our opponents.

'We are asking you to stay in London. You are to be our Parliament, you are to be our Assembly, our constituent Assembly, an assembly where we will place the facts and figures and the proposals and problems that have to be submitted for calm judgment, and at the end take your instructions.

'The men ought not to be asked to make sacrifices until the other cards have been put upon the table, and until re-organized methods and their effect are put into operation. That is our view. That is where we stand. I beg of the Conference to record this fact, that the negotiating committee will go back to Mr. Baldwin strengthened by this decision, strengthened by this offer, strengthened by the willingness of the Conference to put force on one side and enthrone reason in trying to find a solution. But if the enthronement of reason is refused, let it be refused by our opponents and let them take the consequences.'

The mood of fright leaked out to those of us who waited in lobby or in street. 'My usual critics will say that Thomas was grovelling,' the railman's leader said. 'And all my colleagues will bear testimony to it, I never begged and pleaded like I begged and pleaded all day to-day, and I pleaded not alone

because I believed in the case of the miners, but because in my bones I believed that my duty to the country involved it.'

James Ramsay Macdonald protested, in a speech that reads now like a parody of every one that he ever made, that they had been accused of wanting war, 'In the name of everything I hold sacred, in the name of the most conscientious beliefs that I have got, I tell you, and I tell the British public, that I have never been associated with a body of men that have striven, that have fought, that have turned phrases and words and facts over more patiently, more religiously, with a more firm desire to make peace and to have peace, than the colleagues with whom I have been working during the last two or three days. At ten o'clock last night, I confess to you, I believed that we had got peace. . . .

'Ah, my friends, I am still, I confess, old-fashioned enough to believe in public opinion. More, I have another cardinal creed—I believe in the fair-mindedness of British public opinion, and I cannot help thinking, although the sands have almost emptied in the glass—at twenty minutes past two on Saturday, and the miners locked out—I cannot help feeling that there are men belonging to the Government who are ashamed of last night.'

But on what terms had they *nearly* got peace? The miners were afraid that the T.U.C. would sell them out. The miners were uneasy lest there should *not* be a fight. The delegates, like passengers on a sinking liner, sang 'Lead, Kindly Light'. Yet when it came to the vote they did what anybody looking at them in the lobby knew that they would do, they voted to stand by their word to the miners. The hands that were raised stood for three and a half million workers.

The strike was on, the whisper flashed about in the street. We burst into a ragged cheer. 'Every man behind the miners. Not a minute on the day, not a penny off the pay!' we chanted. Indeed the strike was on whether the T.U. leaders wanted it or not, for when the printers refused to set the leading article of Monday's *Daily Mail*, the door of 10 Downing Street shut in protest, and the forlorn T.U. negotiators learnt that the Prime Minister, cut to the quick by this act, or so he said, had gone to bed with orders not to be disturbed. To rouse a Prime Minister in the middle of the night, and bring him down in his pyjamas, candle in hand, to listen to protestations of

innocence from embarrassed T.U. officials was an act against decorum not to be thought of though the world fell.

There was another aspect of this struggle which went far to explain the misgivings of trade union and labour leaders, and that was the deadly war waged in the Labour movement itself between left and right. Far more bitter things were said and done in this war, than were said or done against the Government. The tragi-comedy of the Zinoviev letter in the autumn election of 1924, which threw out the Labour Government, showed how vulnerable the Labour Party was to the accusation that it sought, not Parliamentary democracy, but revolution on the Russian model. Angry debates inside the Party led to the decision of the Liverpool Conference of 1925 to make Communists ineligible for membership of the Labour Party. This was argued (by the left) to be a clear signal to the authorities that the Communists had been politically outlawed. And it certainly happened that the police swooped. I took part myself in demonstrations in Covent Garden against the arrest of Communist leaders, and managed to get a seat on the press benches at Bow Street when the proceedings began. I argued then, among my friends, that the case against the Communists logically demanded not the imprisonment of a few leaders, but the declaration that the Communist Party was illegal, since it conspired by violence against the crown. As the Government had *not* taken this step, it was difficult to resist the conclusion that it was simply trying to weaken the left-wing of the Labour Movement before the crucial struggle.

In my novel about those days, *Men in May*, I wrote:

‘Ah comrade, do you suppose the Government ain’t spoiling for a fight? Do you remember the angry deliberations at Liverpool, when Labour cut off the Communists? Then do you remember the Conservative Conference out for blood—red blood—and their leader promising they would hunt the red fox and all who cared might be blooded by its brush at the kill? Do you remember Bow Street, and the porters from Covent Garden and the scores of protesters from the East End, and the Red Flag going up and the scuffle when the police tried to snaffle it, and the line of cops driving up towards the Opera House, beating back the crowd, thrusting and cursing, jabbing their truncheons into soft bellies and smashing down with iron feet upon tender insteps? And the chase round the

market for that Red Flag, the thrown rotten apples, the thrown abuse, the slithering in a mess of cabbage leaves and fruit garbage? And the packed court, the packed proceedings, the delays, the legal visages, the case for Old Bailey, and the young line of them across the court, not looking as though they could hurt a fly?"

Many local constituency parties refused to throw out the Communists and, defying the Party executive, hung on to Party funds and property. This was the case in John Wilmot's constituency, East Lewisham, where I had established the first woodcraft groups. There the executive was left-wing and the Party trustees and candidate were right-wing. Quarrels between the two wings had even led to scuffles at Party meetings: the atmosphere seemed to me savage with hate and frustration, and I recoiled with grief from the discredit it cast on Socialism. It was a sad fact that in scores of other places a similar situation had been generated.

The Trades Union Congress itself was faced with serious opposition from the Minority Movement, led by Harry Pollitt, the boilermaker, which boasted a membership of 750,000. Even the unemployed had been organized by the Communists to fight the battle against the Labour leadership. A proliferating left-wing, ready at the least word of moderation to shrill out 'treachery', kept up a constant barrage against the official leadership of the Trade Union and Labour Movements. And this was the wing which, on the eve of the General Strike, put forward a series of demands that, if acceded to, would have carried the strike forward to revolution.

The right-wing leaders knew well the ambition of the left to dispossess them of office and power. Naturally they resisted, but not only on the basis of self-interest. A General Strike which led to violence, to an open clash with the armed forces, would benefit only the left. From such a clash the decent, non-violent mass of trade-unionists would certainly recoil. There was no anarcho-syndicalist tradition in Britain to carry the fight on to the streets. If the recoil issued in Trade Union defeat then the working-class organizations, which had taken more than a century to build, would be ruined. The workers would be left without protection. One can understand the misgivings of the Trades Union Congress, and the ease with which in the end they called the strike off.

Where did I stand? I carefully avoided labelling myself at this time because I passionately desired the unity of the Labour Movement and hoped to see come into existence an open-minded 'centre' group of socialists who would pull the two wings together. But most of my sympathies were with the theories, if not the deeds, of the left. They alone spoke for my impatience. They wanted to have done with talk and get down to action. They spoke out for the kind of political battle-plan necessary if action is to come out of talk. They had the boldness to say that democratic methods might prove ineffective in certain situations, and other means be forced upon us whether we wanted them or not. Even, they said, a great industrial strike has political implications, while a General Strike is inevitably a spear pointed at the heart of the capitalist government. It was dishonesty to pretend that this was not so, and that one was not challenging the very life of the system. This seemed to me to be indisputable ground, which, nevertheless, the right-wing brushed aside. And when, at the same time, it went to the Government whining and cap-in-hand, like a bunch of waiters or tipsters, my pride also revolted. However, I was never wholly carried away by the left. A fanatical independence of mind made me reject the efforts of the Communist Party to control the thinking of its members, and I did not respond therefore to overtures made to me to join. The everlasting hymn of hate made me uneasy. Angry as I was with society, the flushed faces of left-wing orators, the glazed eye, the denunciatory fingers, the rows of indignant comrades trembling on the words of the speakers often filled me with dismay. I was afraid of this mass hysteria, of a violence of feeling which did not seem to be 'given' in the initial circumstances of whatever case they were making. Even when I myself was speaking (and I had discovered in myself unsuspected powers of oratory) I would grow afraid of my ascendancy over an audience, and would sometimes try to lower the temperature by dropping into another, more casual and intimate key. Yet my ability to see the evils of demagoguery did not prevent me from being carried away time and time again.

A Trades Council conference in Lewisham, to which I was summoned by virtue of my authority over youth, decided to set up a Council of Action in the event of a strike. I was put on the Executive Committee, and Sidney Shaw and I decided to give

our whole time to its service. He was then still unemployed and I, on my part, decided that while the strike was on I would not go to my father's office. As a gesture this cost me nothing, for no newspapers were published during the nine days of the strike, and I was certain not to get the sack. But I did not intend it as a gesture: I simply did not wish to be left out in the cold when there was a revolution brewing. The sack would have meant nothing to me in my exaltation just then, for I did not think that there would be any newspapers except socialist ones when the strike was over.

On the morning of May 3rd, Shaw came to my house, lean and eager-faced, and smiling diffidently, but inwardly just as excited as I was. We walked across to the Labour Party offices, but they were empty. Not a soul was about. It was a dismal anti-climax to our expectations. We went to knock up the Trades Council Secretary, to find out what he proposed to do about this shameful inactivity. He was a little man who stood on the doorstep in shirt sleeves and carpet slippers, regarding us with large short-sighted eyes. Our presence disconcerted him. He kept peering at us as if he'd never seen us before, but was anxious nevertheless to oblige us by saying the right kind of thing, and he kept agitatedly feeling in his waistcoat pockets as if one of them might contain a booklet of instructions on what to do in the event of a General Strike. But nothing came out of them except the stub of a pencil and an old envelope, and he licked the stub and stared at the empty back of the envelope hopefully, as though fully prepared to take down the minutes of this doorstep meeting if instructed to do so. And his wife, from the interior of the house, called out what sounded like 'S-i-d-ne-e-y!' He grew fussed at that call, and looked down at his carpet slippers and said he'd be along first thing after dinner to set things going. 'Though, however, comrades, I don't quite know what we can do.' He stared at the privet hedge and scratched his head. I started to explain what I thought ought to be done, but Shaw pulled at my elbow. The man's wife was staring angrily along the passage at us. Her hair was in paper curlers, and I thought her shapeless white dress gathered into tucks at neck and wrists might actually be a night-dress. So we said, 'See you later, comrade,' and went off quickly not to embarrass him further. Perhaps, I said to Shaw, he'd been hoping to spend the whole strike sitting at home by

the wireless or feeding the chickens. Or in bed, said Shaw, with that! We broke into delighted laughter which restored our boyish sense of a glorious adventure hardly yet begun.

Early in the afternoon, kicking our heels at the Labour Party headquarters again, a tall man of middle years, wearing a battered trilby and a worn blue raincoat, came in. He had the lean, stringy face and the neck made of knotted old ropes which one finds so often in the docker or heavy industrial worker. One day, I could see, Shaw would look just like that. The man was an Arsenal fitter, and his name was James, and he was the Trades Council chairman. He looked at us with cold, small blue eyes and rubbed the sandy scrub of his chin. It made a sound like sandpaper against his horny hand.

'Well, what do you young bastards want?' he said.

'Bastard yourself, comrade,' I said under my breath.

'What did you say?'

'Well, if you want to know I said . . .' I began with rising voice. He cut me short.

'Oh, all right. I heard. I suppose you want to do something? What there is to do in this dead-and-alive hole, I don't know.'

I began to expatiate and he broke into a wide grin which revealed long, tobacco-stained fangs. The effect was diabolical.

'Steady mate,' he said. 'One — thing at a time.'

From that moment, really, our Council of Action was born, for we went upstairs to the office to concoct a bulletin which I sat and typed out on a wax stencil. We duplicated this and when Howard, the Secretary, arrived he set out on his bicycle to deliver a copy to each Trade Union branch secretary. The bulletin told what we had heard of the success of the strike call, asked the Lewisham workers for 'a hundred per cent response', and explained what it was hoped to do through the Council of Action. We pinned a copy of the bulletin on the notice board outside, with a copy of the T.U.C. General Strike Order, fully conscious that we were setting something huge in motion and that our world would be changed by it.

Within a few days, and with the most remarkable spontaneity, an organization leapt into existence. We worked like men inspired for it. Quite soon, and almost without thinking what we were doing, we would have created a machine, if things had gone our way, capable of administering the borough. The ground floor of the Headquarters was given over during

certain hours of the day to the branch secretaries of trade unions without local offices of their own, so that the men could attend and sign on, as their union rules required if they were going to draw strike pay. From the strikers who trooped in and out all day long we organized rosters of messengers who came and parked their cycles, motor-bikes and cars along the kerb-side, and waited for duties to be given to them. From the offices of the Executive upstairs we spread our net. In the hands of James were all Trade Union affairs: he organized mass picketing, rushing groups of men by bicycle or on foot to any factory in the vicinity where men were trickling back, or had not come out. At one Government plant, where there was some confusion over strike orders, the men came out and went back again three times in nine days. On the other hand, the T.U.C. had instructed building workers on housing sites to stay at work, and they hated this, and every now and then they would just cease work and troop off the building lots in protest. James, with the local builder's secretary, was always being called out to harangue them to go back to work, an errand which he, as a leftwinger, abominated. He did it very well, but only by getting furious first and stamping round the office swearing. A woman member was busy planning soup kitchens and relief parcels of food in case the strike lengthened until it brought general distress. There was a Finance Secretary making appeals everywhere to raise the funds to keep the Council of Action going. Howard kept records, organized the office, saw to the typing, duplicating and distribution of all the bulletins and circulars we sent out. After the local Fascists had driven by one night in a car without lights and thrown bricks at our windows, Shaw was deputed to take charge of the H.Q. Guard. I wanted to have it called a Workers' Defence Corps, and to give the members armlets as they were doing in other localities, but my proposal was squashed. Nevertheless, in my own field I was king, and that was propaganda and publicity. My department distributed the *British Worker*, produced a daily bulletin and ran about seven open-air meetings every night of the strike. The meetings were attended by large quiet crowds of working and middle class folk anxious to understand the issues. There was never a hostile voice at them save that of the occasional Communist shouting 'Watch aht Thomas and Co. don't sell aht on yer'. We took large collections and as

the days wore on began to draw more and more support from the middle class. It was gratifying to us when a well-to-do professional or business man stopped his car at our offices and came in shyly and said 'I think the miner's cause is just—is there anything I can do to help?' From them, mostly, we collected the cadre of owner-drivers ready to take strike leaders anywhere in the borough. The warnings which came through from the T.U.C. about police spies made us look thoughtfully at the feet of any stranger who offered himself: and more than one innocent sympathizer was embarrassed by our dubious gaze at his boots or, because of the size of them, sent empty away.

One day a comrade urged upon us the necessity to run meetings on a vacant lot near a new housing estate. I was asked to open it. On the evening I walked across to it I was followed all the way by three youths with Fascist emblems in their buttonholes. These Fascist lads, mostly in their teens, used to hang about at street corners near our Headquarters watching the comings and goings there, though what they hoped to gain by that I could not imagine. My hackles rose at the sensation of being shadowed, but when I got to the soapbox the secretary surprised me by saying, 'There's some Fascists have said they'll break up any labour meeting held here. I think they're waiting to heave a brick at the first chap to get up.' I looked about. The vacant lot was littered with half bricks. If there was going to be a fight both sides would find plenty of ammunition. 'In that case,' I said. 'I'll arm myself too,' and as I mounted the rostrum I picked up half a brick. 'Comrades,' I said, 'I was told that as soon as I got up someone was going to heave a brick at me. A Fascist. Well, here I am: in case there's a shortage of ammunition here's half a brick for whoever wants it.' I held up my weapon. There was a laugh, as much at my theatricalism as anything else, and sheepishly I dropped my half-brick and plunged hurriedly into a description of the troubles of the coal industry.

The strikers themselves had sometimes only a most confused notion of the aims of the strike, or of the proper behaviour of strikers. One had to be as much on guard for the man who regarded it as a holiday from his ordinary work so that he could take up paid employment of another kind for a few days, as against the man who thought of it as a schoolboy lark which licensed him to throw bricks at windows. A railway-man with a harelip, a long, lean, figure-S kind of man, lounged

into the office one day to report that blacklegs were working on the line. As if we didn't know! But he was curiously factual.

"Ow d'ye know all this?" asked James suspiciously.

The railwayman looked round at us with a bright uneasy smile and a moist eye. 'Oh, me and my mate, we took a dekkko.'

'What d'ye mean, took a dekkko?'

'We went and 'ad a look, see? We got fed up and walked down to London, just lookin' in at some of them strike 'eadquarters on the way, where our mates was. And when we got to London we was too bloody tired to walk back. So we went to London Bridge, and there we see a blackleg train waitin', and we come back on it. Talk about a bleedin' lark——'

James blew off the top.

'You dirty little squirt you,' he shouted. 'You're on strike—a railwayman—and you ride on a blackleg train? And you come and tell *me* all about it? Get out of these Headquarters before you're thrown out!'

The railwayman looked deeply hurt.

'Blimey, comrade. I'm on strike same as you. It ain't blacklegging to *ride* on a blackleg train, so's to see what's goin' on!'

'Not blacklegging? What would you think of me if I went ridin' around in a blackleg bus?'

'Well, if that's your attitude... ' The railwayman drew himself up as though he were a duchess who had just heard a coarse word. 'I think I'd better go.' With a show of hauteur he went to the door. But before he reached it, another member of the executive, a broad-built man with a flat enigmatic face, tight lips and thick black brows, whose name I have forgotten, slid his back against the door and closed it. I had never seen him so angry: the skin beneath his eyes was blanched with fury.

'Just a minute, comrade,' said this menacing figure. 'We're not done with you yet. Stand over there if you please. We want to know more about this blackleg business. *How* you know all about it.'

The railwayman went white, the fight gone out of him, and did as he was told. I felt myself exulting in our power over him. His harelip trembled, and little beads of sweat sprang up among the half-shaved hairs there. He rubbed the back of his cap across his face and shot us a terrified look. He thought we

were going to beat him up. I thought, too, that this was in the mind of his inquisitor.

'You ain't got no right . . .' he began to mumble, and then stopped before the threat of our silence. He darted furious little glances at the man by the door and started to gabble. 'Blimey, it wasn't nothing. Back in the station at 'Ither Green we nips round to the goods yard and 'as a squint to see if them waggons what we was unloadin' Satterday was still there, an 'ops over the fence. There was some blokes workin' on them what we didn't know. The posh type what don't know 'ow to 'old a shovel. We bombarded 'em with lumps of coal and then we 'ops over the fence again.'

'How do we know you've been telling the truth. How do we know you weren't blacklegging yourself?'

'Well, I tole you. And I didn't come 'ere to listen to no bleedin' inquisition neither.' He was recovering his nerve. 'Blinkin' likely I'd 'ave come 'ere if I 'ad.'

'Suppose you are telling the truth,' the other continued more quietly, but without moving from the door, 'what d'you think your story sounds like—riding in blackleg trains? Suppose you saw a mate of yourn coming out of the station—what would you think immediately?'

'We didn't come out of no station. We climbed over the fence.'

'But you went *into* a station,' shouted James. 'You got *into* a train!' Then losing his temper, he jumped up and pushed the man towards the door. 'Get out before I black your eyes and throw you down the stairs.' The railwayman made a half-hearted show of resistance and was hustled out.

'Well, I come 'ere to tell you and that's all the thanks I get,' he shouted, sheepish and defiant, as he went clumping down the stairs.

'What's your name,' shouted James down the stairs, and a defiant bellow no one could catch came back. 'Go after him, Paul, and get his name. We'll put in a report to his branch secretary.'

These were the kind of troubles with which James had to deal. There were more than a few refractory strikers who resented any effort on the part of the Council of Action to exert its authority. I saw with some irony that the more successful we were in our work the more we would arouse

THE COUNCIL OF ACTION

jealousy and spite among certain followers. There is one kind of working man who resents more than anything else the authority of another working man over him. I had trouble with a man called Johnstone who used to haunt labour meetings collecting subscriptions for the Unemployed Workers Committee Movement. He was the local secretary.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death of an Informer

Johnstone was a tall man with a limp and an unpleasant, half-truculent, half-wheedling manner. He had an asymmetrical face, as though one side of it had been pulled down by the drag of his limp, with pudgy red cheeks and nose, and wet pursy lips. In my memories of him I see him always dragging his crippled limb along in a half-run to catch up with somebody. I had subscribed to his unemployed association and for a long time had received badly duplicated circulars inviting me to speak at rallies and demonstrations of the unemployed. His association was rather arrogantly demanding a £4 a week minimum 'wage' for unemployed men and as this was rather more than I was earning myself I was not very sympathetic to the idea: nor, of course, were many working men whose income was no greater than mine. However, Johnstone regarded me as one of his men and came wheedling to me with some proposition whenever he met me.

He appeared in the crowd of men at the door of the Council's Headquarters early in the strike looking for me. He caught my arm. 'How's the strike doing, comrade,' he asked, his eyes glittering all over me. 'Oh fine,' I said. 'Are they all out?' 'Just about 100 per cent in the borough,' I replied proudly. 'Is there anything I can do in the office? I'm pretty good in an office. I'm secretary of the unemployed, you know. We ought to be in on it, comrade, in the interests of solidarity.' He was brimful of officiousness. 'I'll think about it,' I said, and, not liking him much, put him out of my mind, though several times after that I noticed him threading through the crowd of

strikers on someone or other's trail. Then one day I met him coming down the stairs from the office. He looked embarrassed. 'I bin lookin' for you. You promised me some work.' I could not remember what I had promised him and so I found him some pamphlets to take away and sell.

That night I walked home from a street-corner meeting with little 'Father Goodrich,' a socialist pioneer who was never tired of telling me of the days of John Burns and the docker's tanner, and the speeches and deeds of Hyndman and Tom Mann. 'Them were the days. Socialism was a religion then, comrade, not a dogfight. We'd have died any day for it.' Small, and dressed in black, with a white trembling goatee and a red tie he looked rather like a dissenting minister of the previous century. With age, he had grown garrulous and excitable, and all those weary meetings of the local Party, in which left and right had recently contended for mastery in envenomed debate, had left their mark on him. It was a wonder he had not died of a seizure at one of them: he had grown so incoherent with misery during them that in place of the words he was burning to say, a froth alone would splutter from his mouth and hang for a moment on his breath before falling in white flakes on his beard and tie. I would drop my eyes, unable to bear the exhibition of his distress. His home life was a sad one, for his heavy-boned wife was bed-ridden with dropsy, and this gnome of a man had to wait upon her, as my mother said, who knew them both, 'hand and foot'. I hardly listened to Goodrich's chatter, just tenderly regarded him as one might a child. But he said something about Johnstone—whom he insisted on calling John Stone—which stuck in my mind. 'Hey, I don't trust that man John Stone what's always cadging around. Him that walks with a little limp. He's too friendly with the coppers. I know all the coppers in the town for I've mended most of their boots in my time.' Father Goodrich had no personal malice in him and this was something I could not ignore. I mentioned it to James in the morning. He gave me an angry glare.

'What?' he said. 'He's one of your men isn't he? Don't you know your own men?'

I went white with fury.

'He isn't my man. He's secretary of the unemployed committee. He just volunteered and I let him sell papers.'

'Well, he's always rooting round up here saying he's looking for you. Shoot the — nark out.'

It made me angry to think that mere rumour seemed so readily accepted as fact, and judgment passed accordingly, but we had neither the time nor the means to make enquiries, and from that day we instituted passes and no one was allowed upstairs in the Council of Action committee rooms without one. Two of Shaw's guards stood at the foot of the stairs to check people in and out. Within a few hours Johnstone was grabbing me fiercely by the arm, his face working aggressively.

'What's the idea mate? They won't let me in the H.Q.'

'You have to have passes now. That's why.'

'Yus, but it ain't only that. He said it was acourse of me,' he said surlily.

I sighed, determined to be straight with him. 'To tell you the truth, Johnstone, somebody said you were too friendly with the coppers. You'd better get yourself cleared of that.' An indescribable look of misery and fright contorted his face. The real truth is he's mad, I thought, anxious only to escape him. He tried to grab me as I walked and began to bluster and swear. 'Who was the bastard, who was he? I'll break every bone in his body. Who was he?' His cries and curses pursued me down the street.

Later in the same day Johnstone was found on our floor of the building. No one knew how he had got past the guard. It was Howard who tackled him about his authority for being there.

'I've come 'ere to 'elp. I don't see what bloody business it is of yourn. You ask Paul. Paul promised me when the strike began. Looks as though you don't want no 'elp. Something fishy about this Council.' And, ugly in attitude, he stood there unmoving.

'I didn't promise you anything. In fact I told you the opposite this morning. We don't want you unless you can clear yourself.'

'Ain't nothin' to clear, Mr. Bleedin' Paul.'

'We can't help your grievances, comrade,' said Howard, politely, his spectacles glinting. 'Do you come to sign on?'

'Ain't nothing to sign on for, 'cept at the Labour Exchange!'

'Got a pass admitting you?'

'Don't see why I shouldn't 'ave, same as everybody else.'

'Out you go then. If you're not satisfied, write to the Council.'

'I've written, see, Mr. Smart. Written to Mr. Bloody James, and he don't care to answer letters. Some folks is too big for their shoes.' He glared at me. 'You fetch 'im. 'E ain't no better than the rest of us.'

'If I fetch him he'll have you thrown out.'

Johnstone flushed angrily and caught hold of the back of a chair with his big red hands as though he would fight for his right to stay. He looked at Howard and me. 'Bloody little upstarts!' We said nothing, but waited grimly. He limped to the door.

'Look 'ere, you ain't got no right to keep me out of 'ere!' he shouted back, his fist on the doorknob. And he scowled at our silence and dropped his eyes, and went down the stairs swearing and throwing himself angrily about to cover his humiliation. It was the last we were to see of him for some time, though he did not cease to haunt the Headquarters entirely.

The President of the local Painter's Union, a man called Lee, wrote to the Council offering his services as a speaker, and telling us, by the way, that he had spoken for the Deptford Council of Action at Deptford Broadway. His letter was discussed by the Executive and his services accepted. However there were opposition voices, on no grounds as far as I could see except that he was a stranger and therefore they distrusted him. There was this to be said in favour of caution about new speakers that at the end of the first week of the strike a ripple of violence had spread through South London. Vast crowds had gathered at New Cross tram depot to prevent the emergence of blackleg trams: a police charge had dispersed them, but the volunteer drivers had been so intimidated that they remained shut up in the depot under the protection of the police. At Deptford Broadway, where Lee claimed to have spoken, a recent meeting had ended in a riot between strikers and police: bottles had been thrown and mounted police unseated and mauled. Men had been injured on both sides and tempers made permanently ugly. The record of Lewisham was so far clean. The left-wing members of our Council were not averse to violence in theory, but they were Englishmen too, with a constitutional aversion to it in practice, and certainly to the casual and unpredictable kind which results in broken heads and smashed windows, and alienates public opinion

without furthering the cause. At heart, too, many of us were rather less revolutionary than we pretended to be and would have regarded arrest, no matter in what cause, as a disgrace which would cause the neighbours to talk. Lee, as I said, was accepted, but from that moment everything went wrong.

He spoke for the first and last time on the second Tuesday of the strike at our chief corner pitch in the heart of the borough, not far from the famous obelisk. It was a pitch very accessible to crowds from Deptford. I spoke for an hour and left an orderly and sympathetic meeting, to run up to Eccleston Square to fetch the Council's ration of *British Workers*. When I returned about midnight the Headquarters, usually silent by then, was ablaze with lights and an excited emergency meeting of the Executive was in full swing. There was a cry of relief when I appeared. 'Nobody knew where you were, mate,' someone cried. 'We thought you were pinched, or clubbed over the head.'

I pieced the story together. Lee, they said, had behaved most provocatively. He had hardly got on the rostrum before he began to abuse the police. He pulled a card out of his pocket. 'The police want to know who I am. I'll show them who I am. I'm a trade unionist. Here is my card and all paid up too.' He pointed at the policemen on the outskirts of the large crowd and said: 'They had a union once, and they could do with one now, then we'd all be together. Remember the police strike? What the police did once they could do again, and if any of you had any manhood you'd have those uniforms off and be with us again.' This roused the crowd, and especially that element which had taken part in the Deptford riots. 'Blacklegs!' some of them shouted at the police. 'Down with the police!' and others, remembering the Deptford Broadway fight, said 'Yus, if they'd come over to us we shouldn't have no horses chasing us.' Lee went on in a fine defiant style, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; and if anyone else claims it, they've pinched it from the Lord, and as the Lord meant the earth for everyone alike, that means they've pinched it from you and me.' As there were still some shouts at the police from the edge of the crowd, Lee shouted, 'Don't worry about them. They can't hurt you. I've addressed larger meetings than this in Hyde Park and they wouldn't arrest me, and they daren't arrest me tonight.'

This challenge was very swiftly taken up and within a few moments a squad of mounted men and a posse on foot appeared on the scene and with truncheons drawn charged at the meeting and dispersed it and arrested Lee. The crowd had run in all directions and everyone had been too much taken by surprise to organize any retaliation. By the time I reached the Headquarters rumour and exaggeration had done their work and inflated accounts of brutality and injury to women and children were accepted by everyone as authentic. However no real evidence ever emerged about this and there were no hospital reports about anyone that we knew.

We argued about the affair half the night. It seemed incredible to us that a quite new speaker, had with his first words incited the police against him. How was it, we asked ourselves, that the police had responded so quickly that within a minute or two of Lee's remarks squads had appeared on the scene and dispersed the meeting! This efficiency made us feel nervous. Had he really been provocative, or was it all an excuse to open a police drive against strikers' meetings irrespective of what was said by anyone?

Lee came up before the Greenwich Police Court on the next day. He was sincerely and profusely apologetic. He would not have said what he did, he confessed, if he had known that it was illegal to address the police in such a way. The magistrate took a lenient view and he was given the option of a £25 fine or one month. There was a row in the Council over whether we should pay or not. I can't remember that we ever did, and therefore it's probable that only the Painter's Union saved him from a month in prison. But the two events, the suspicion surrounding Johnstone, and the opening of violence against the strikers in our borough after Lee's speech at the Clocktower, filled me with the uneasy sense that ranged against us were not only the open forces of the state, as we expected, but something ugly and secret.

In time we should have come to know whether an offensive was being launched against us or not. Rumour was strong in our ranks that the government was going to break the strike by violence. Warrants, it was said, were out for the arrest of Pugh, Bevin, Thomas and other strike leaders. Father Goodrich, who claimed to know, said that the tickets of the Council of Action men were already written out. The arrest of the national

leaders was to be the signal for the netting of the local fry. But we were never to learn whether this attack was planned, for the strike ended on the day Lee was tried.

About midday rumours that the strike was to be called off caused crowds to gather outside the Headquarters. We were dismayed by them, but decided to deny them, and a notice was posted on the board outside which said 'Take no notice of rumours over the wireless or anywhere else. The strike is still on. Lewisham workers are, like the rest of the country, 100 per cent solid. Do not be deceived into going back. Keep in touch with your branch officials.' And after that we put up a list of the places where public meetings would be held that night. But even as I was posting this notice the B.B.C. was broadcasting the terms of surrender signed by Pugh and Citrine: 'In order to resume negotiations the General Council of the T.U.C. has to-day decided to terminate the General Strike and telegrams of instruction are being sent to the General Secretaries of affiliated unions. Members before acting must await the definite instructions of their own Executive Councils.' Later we received a telegram couched in much the same terms. We collapsed into wretchedness. It was too early to shout that we were betrayed but privately that was the only thing of which we were certain. That for which the strike had been called had not been achieved. The miners were not going back, or there would be no 'resuming of negotiations': nothing was said about the withdrawal of the lock-out notices posted by the owners. The General Council had nothing but some assurances from Sir Herbert Samuel which did not rule out wage reductions. We kept saying to each other, in an agitated way, 'We must keep calm' and we handed out this wonderful phrase to enquirers, and repeated it at all the public meetings. But what were we to do on the morrow? Go back to the boring daily round after this intoxicating taste of power?

The next day all was confusion. Strikers were trying to get from branch secretaries, who were trying to get from district secretaries, who were trying to get from executives the terms on which they should go back. More men than ever were out of work. Some transport workers took the broadcasts that the strike was off as a personal instruction and reported back to work, so that in our own borough we heard of strike-breakers and strikers jointly running vehicles. This so infuriated

the local busmen that they formed a procession to march on the local bus garage and demand the terms upon which work was to be resumed. They had not got halfway before police barred their way and when a tram came along and broke the police ranks a wild mêlée and chase developed through the streets. We began to think that things might go our way after all, and a soldiers' battle develop now that the generals had left the field to parley, and so we thought of strengthening rather than weakening the Council of Action. We did not know yet how thoroughly we were beaten.

The radio was the principal instrument in the defeat of the strike. It was the first time the working class movement had had to fight against such a weapon. We had no idea of its strength. It was heard at the fireside of the striker just as easily as at the hearth of his opponent. It says much for the reputation of the B.B.C. that its word was accepted as much by the striker as by everyone else. *The British Worker*, emasculated to the point of supineness, was too feeble an organ to reply even to the *British Gazette*, edited with a Churchillian gusto. It certainly had no answer to the radio. Nothing in the whole crisis was as effective as Baldwin's broadcast on the fifth day of the strike. Conciliatory in tone, but firm and good-humoured, it was a fireside chat which turned the course of history. Not even Judge Astbury's dictum that the strike was illegal had so much effect. The Trade Union leaders learnt from it that all negotiations were closed until the strike was over. The general public saw, perhaps for the first time, the issue as the Government understood it—that the life of the nation was being dislocated and the people threatened with starvation if they did not submit to the will of a body, not elected by the voters of the country, which had decreed, without consulting the rank and file trade unionist, 'that the railways shall not run, that transport shall not move, that the unloading of ships shall stop, and that no news shall reach the public'. A sovereign Parliament could not yield before threats.

How vulnerable we were upon strictly democratic principles! From the moment of that speech our cause began to lose ground at its very heart. The General Council knew that they had either to give in, or intensify the struggle. They had now, if they were to go on, to call out the builders, the dustmen, the electricians, the gasworkers, the telephone workers and the

distributive employees, and so produce a total state of siege which only martial law could break. The workers would, I think, have come out, but the consequences of such an act of defiance, certain to alienate the whole middle class, were enough to daunt leaders looking for means of retreat rather than an extension of the offensive.

Ernest Bevin, at an interview with the Prime Minister on the evening the strike ended, paid his tribute to Baldwin's broadcast. 'It helped us to rise to the occasion,' he said, like a boy thanking the vicar for a confirmation sermon. 'I thought personally—of course, it is so difficult when you have to do it without conversing—I really felt in the event of our taking the lead in assuring you we were going to play the game and put our people back, that it was going to be free and unfettered negotiations with the parties very speedily, because thousands of our people cannot go back if the colliers are still out, and if the colliers are still out it is going to make a smooth running of the machine extremely difficult.'

One is compelled to admit now—I would have died rather than admit it then—that the Government behaved generously. A few days after the end of the strike it offered terms of settlement which included no less than four bills to give effect to the Samuel Commission proposals, a further term of subsidy, and a reduction of wages only for a number of weeks to be specified by agreement. The miners would have lost less than they ultimately lost if they had accepted these terms: but their black anger, their anguished sense of betrayal and desertion, which leapt from every hysterical speech that their leader A. J. Cook delivered, made it impossible for the terms to get a moment's consideration.

In Lewisham the Council of Action melted away. Who was willing to work for it any more? The temporary unity of the local movement, a source of happiness and pride to Shaw and me, collapsed. The right-wing, for the most part silent during the struggle, feared the ascendancy which the militant days had given to such brutally outspoken left-wing socialists as Frank James, and were relieved to see the strike out of the way so that they might continue once again the parliamentary work in which, they believed, and history was to bear them out, the true future of the Labour Movement to lie. But they had ahead a bitter struggle which lasted all the summer of 1926.

The Lewisham Labour Party, with Frank James as its chairman, refused to operate the decision to expel communists. This brought down upon it the wrath of the Labour Party Executive, which made haste to expel it as rapidly as possible: a struggle began all over again for the soul of the socialists of Lewisham, and John Wilmot, to whom in truth the local Party owed its creation, left the outlawed body and began once again to build up his Party. The dis-affiliated body melted slowly away, a pawn for a few months in the hands of the local communists, who gleefully used it for wrecking tactics but abandoned it once its prestige was gone in the locality.

Johnstone, the man who had caused me so much trouble, continued to hang around the Labour Parties of Lewisham and to press his claim to represent the unemployed. But they too disowned him when the bad odour into which he had fallen, through that chance remark of Goodrich's, became generally known. Eventually he disappeared from the scene, only however to write for me the most mysterious of footnotes to the Strike.

In 1927 he left his wife and four children in their little council house and went off with another woman, to Southend. What transpired there in this runaway match of guilty lovers no one will ever know, but early one morning she too left him, creeping out of their lodgings shoes in hand. Johnstone awoke one summer's day to find that his world had come to an end. He wrote two letters which spoke of his desperation: to his wife he said, 'Retribution has followed swiftly. I am lonely, ever so lonely. Nobody loves me and I die among strangers.' To the woman he wrote with a simple eloquence and a genuine feeling a letter which threw quite another light upon him, 'Darling—— Though times out of number you loved me passionately, yet you left me while I was asleep without saying goodbye, and you left me with only a halfpenny in my pocket to run mad around Southend looking for you. You knew the only alternative for me but you left me to die amongst utter strangers. Sweetheart, how could you do it, but I die still loving you.' He took poison on Southend Beach and when they found his body in the morning these letters were in the pocket of his jacket. They were made public at the inquest.

Human nature is utterly strange and incalculable. The last thing one could have imagined is that the two women in the case could have come together afterwards, but seemingly they

did so, and the result of their collaboration was a storm which blew all the way up to Parliament. Mrs. Johnstone and the woman he ran away with signed sworn affidavits which asserted that Johnstone had been in the pay of Scotland Yard and was employed by them as a spy in the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement. The documents also stated that his distress and suicide—the ‘retribution that followed swiftly’—were the result not of a lovers’ tiff but of his exposure in the Labour Movement as a police spy, and the cutting off of his weekly wage from the secret service. No less a person than Sir Oswald Mosley, then a young Labour M.P. with every promise of a brilliant career in front of him, pressed this matter, to the great embarrassment of the Home Secretary. The Minister would give neither affirmation nor denial of the matter. A secret service, he said, was, he had always assumed, secret, or it was no service. And with this bland rejection of information the opposition had to rest content. We argued that he must have been an informer, or the Government would have made very great haste to deny it. When I came to write a novel of the General Strike, *Men in May*, I put many of the strike characters I had met into it, and built it round the story of Johnstone, whom I renamed Thorenson. This effort to found my fiction on truth a number of reviewers found ‘far-fetched’ or ‘unlikely’ which, if it tells us nothing else, confirms that the path of the social historian using fiction as his vehicle is a hard one.

CHAPTER SIX

The Dedicated Life

The wide, wet streets of Lewisham in that cold and windy May had often been as empty as City streets on a Sunday morning. A Sabbatical calm had descended on them: at our Headquarters and in the hearts of the strikers all might be agitation, but we were few, and the borough droned on in the kind of doze in which one waits for muffins and Sunday afternoon tea. On the main road out to Bromley many and many a day a vista of at least a mile had been barren of all traffic and its wet blank surface was turned up to the drizzle like the exposed soul of the bourgeoisie. The magnolias and the almond blossom in the gardens 'made their stiff signals of spring in vain'. The tramlines, even, had rusted over, and at one point I saw thin slivers of the greenest of grass shooting up between the wood blocks. I pictured, as Richard Jefferies did in *After London*, the Carthaginian ruin that might so easily overtake a great city. Now, with the end of the strike, as by a turn of the switch, all was changed. The impetuous tide of London rolled on again, the tawny trams groaning and clanging and re-polishing the steel rails, the buses, with red flanks and shining noses, purring everywhere. I knew how much I had missed the morris of the streets which our strike had checked. Within a few days the strike was obliterated. It made one wonder whether anything one could ever do would shake the self-assurance of this wealthy and placid country. I was back at work in Fleet Street, having missed the days when one could stroll arm-in-arm with one's friends down the centre of it without fear of the massacring traffic, and the presses were thundering again like horses on the home stretch.

Pantlin and my father made bitter but oblique remarks about ruin and red revolution and 'some people must count themselves very lucky' which I did my best to pretend were not directed at me. To my friends I spoke grandiosely about 'The Great Betrayal' and to the Woodcraft Folk that this confirmed the need for our kind of work. A new and better human material was needed: what could be done with the human wreckage which capitalism had left lying about? Parodying an aphorism of Lloyd George I said, and this became our slogan for a long time, 'You can't get A1 Socialism from C3 people'. And, thinking of Johnstone, I meant this in a moral as well as in a physical sense.

My bitterness about the strike was somewhat assuaged when Gordon Ellis gave me a more objective picture of it than I could then make myself. We had lunch together in the Devereux just opposite the Law Courts and Ellis stroked his long patrician nose as he lectured to me in his thin intellectual voice about the strike. 'The Labour Movement just had to get anarcho-syndicalism out of its system. This idea of One Big Union, and One Big Strike to end all strikes, has been fermenting ever since the days of the Chartists. It's the old syndicalist idea that one can by-pass the political institutions of a country, and that men organized in their economic status can determine the fate of the country through their economic organs. That speech of Bevin, about the Special Strike Conference acting as a constituent assembly, was pure syndicalism. A new Parliament, an industrial Parliament, was going to dictate terms to the old, political Parliament. It's all the fault of that man Sorel and his dream on one great romantic gesture which would bring the bourgeois world down in ruins. But at once, you see, Leslie, they came up against the political notion of sovereignty. It's in the political institutions, not the economic ones, whatever the Marxists say, that sovereignty is embodied. Could any government abdicate before the threat of the economic organs of one class? Could a Socialist government have abdicated before the threat of the Federation of British Industries? It doesn't make sense. The political method of change is slow, but it works. One only burns one's fingers with this wild stuff out of the textbooks of Bakunin.' I opened my eyes at all this heretical talk to which in my ignorance of Sorel and Bakunin I could think of no adequate reply. 'And

now the howl that the Trade Union movement is putting up against the Trade Disputes Bill announced by the Government is incredibly stupid, and all, really, because it is proposed to substitute the principle of 'contracting-in' for 'contracting-out': that is, in future, trade unionists will have to decide personally they want to support the Labour Party, and will sign a document saying so. In the past, a conference made the decision and the ordinary member had to go through a long rigmarole which exposed him to much moral pressure, and even persecution from the fanatics, if he wanted to 'contract-out'. But what, I ask you, is the *democratic* way? Why, the way of 'contracting-in': we ought to be offering up prayers of thanks to the Government for insisting on the democratic principle in our *own* movement! The other method of the mass vote means that you do not have to bother to go out and convert the individual trade-unionist. No, the money rolls in from a conveyor belt and bureaucrats fed with money take the place of a movement fed with conviction. If trade-unionists want to support the Labour Party, let them decide *individually* so, don't force them to wriggle out of a contract they never entered into. That's the really criminal thing, not the Government bill.' My eyes grew wider and wider at what I had been taught was reactionary propaganda. 'Compulsory support for a Party is no better than Mussolini's way. Heaven forbid that the Labour Party should ever have to depend on it.'

Most of us so hated our defeat that we struggled to push the strike out of mind. Quite soon it was as though this experiment had never been made. The whole Labour Movement conspired to forget it and of all the great events of the inter-war years this is the one which has had the least attention from historians and sociologists. I have often wondered why, for it was in some ways the most significant of European events of the 'twenties. That it could be made at all in peaceful, democratic Britain showed how masterly was the leadership and impressive the solidarity of the trade union movement. But that, at the very height of events, with perhaps four or five million men out of work and the country in the grip of a paralysis without parallel in its history, the leaders could quite calmly, and with the minimum of explanation, call the whole thing off, *and be obeyed*, pointed to the complete intellectual and moral ascendancy of the right-wing leaders over the whole movement.

For the strike confirmed Bevin, Thomas, Pugh, Purcell and the rest in their leadership. Its failure began the disintegration not of their organization, but of the Minority Movement promoted by the Communist Party. If the collapse of the strike had proclaimed the ascendancy of Parliament over the nation, it had no less confirmed the ascendancy of the trade union leadership over the revolutionary left-wing. The left-wing, which imagined the collapse proved their case for a change of policy and of leadership, made the usual wrong-headed analysis of the situation. It was the notion of revolutionary syndicalism which was dead, and Europe was plainly told that the British Labour Movement had abandoned forever whatever illusions it had harboured on this score.

Yet if we were done with the General Strike, we were not quite done with the miners. Betrayed and alone, as solid as a wall, and proud and obstinate as only miners can be, they refused to go back. The vast, unhappy lock-out, with its burden of hunger and want, dragged on through the summer to the final surrender when the funds of the Miners Federation were exhausted. Nothing was gained by it, except the demonstration of good faith. Shamed and angry on our side, we salved our consciences by entertaining miners' children in the homes of the Woodcraft Folk and by collections in our ranks for relief funds. We attended concerts and listened, unbearably moved, to the Welsh Miners' Choirs, and we organized rosters of volunteers to sell miniature lamps in the High Streets.

I served on a Committee, of which the principal figure was G. K. Chesterton, which set itself the task of drawing up a monster petition to the King pleading for the nationalization of mines. It was to be something as spectacular as the Chartist petitions of the previous century. We collected many hundreds of thousands of signatures, but they availed nothing against the social hatreds of the day. The most pleasurable memory of that work is of Chesterton's immense bulk, a black, cape-covered cloud, floating gently down and settling itself with a faint squeak, as from a deflating balloon, in the presidential chair. He spoke little, but listened a lot. He had so far modified his distributist theory as to favour the nationalization of certain natural monopolies. He smiled benignly upon us, and his genial temperament and highly-infectious chuckle got the committee through its most difficult stages. He 'doodled'

while we talked, on the pad in front of him, and at the end of our meetings I would make a dive for the scraps of paper he had covered with drawings (often unflattering profiles of Jews) and show them proudly to my friends.

It was about this time that I lost my friend Roly: he got married, and patronized me the more when we met, and smiled yet more blandly as though from the Olympian height of his new experience he could look down gently on my still boyish play. I was grieved by that airy withdrawal of his into a new life: one by one my school friends were becoming lost to me, absorbed in careers or marriage. Of Speke, who had been a constant companion when we were together at the International Tea Company's Stores, I had heard nothing for two years. When last I met him, he had seemed extinguished under a growing burden of sadness and dejection. He had been educated at a Catholic School, and it occurred to me sometimes that perhaps his sadness came from his inability to find a way back to his faith. Friends of childhood must, of course, grow apart: like brothers and sisters they know each other too well and cannot believe each other grown up. Behind the smile they see still the nursery vanity, and behind the look of courage the schoolroom tears. It was with consternation, therefore, that I thought of Roly as married: what so soon, he who was dedicated only to the reform of the world?

In a sense I was responsible for the marriage for I had brought them together. 'Poor kid, I think she needs someone like me to look after her,' Roly would say to me in his dreamy way, a glazed, inward-looking stare in his pale eyes, to which I always wanted to retort, 'Bosh! You're so young you need looking after yourself'—but this was a rather difficult thing to say to a friend a year or two one's senior. I must have dissembled my disapproval successfully, for there was no self-consciousness in their manner when they came hastening to me with joyful faces one day to say, 'Les, we've decided to get married. We've come to get your blessing!' I was to be best man too! Uncomfortable in the presence of this joy I could only stammer out lame congratulations to them both. The girl's name was Rosemary. 'Roly and Rosemary—how euphonious,' I said. 'We have to thank you,' said Rosemary, with a most refined sweetness of tone. 'An awful lot. If it hadn't been for you we should never have met. You're really responsible for *quite* a lot.'

They took me to see the rooms they had rented at the top of an old mansion. 'Of course,' said Roly, 'it's only a beginning, Les. We had to take any place to begin with. We'll do better when I get a rise.' Poor Roly had, perhaps, four pounds a week on which to start married life, and no savings. He had rented two rooms in the roof for twelve and sixpence a week. Tiny mansard windows looked out on to a parapet. One could, by stretching on tiptoe, just look over the parapet wall into the surprising arms of a mighty cedar of Lebanon which grazed its fists against the roof. The walls of the flatlet had recently been painted with that smeary green one sees in kitchens. The plaster underneath yielded to the touch—a little while, and it would flake off. The low-ceilinged garrets were airless.

'Our love nest,' they kept saying to me. 'Don't you like our love-nest? Aren't you jealous, Les?'

How hot it would be in the summer, under the slates! And where would Roly put his books or pursue his studies? Or had he given them up? I was too grieved to ask.

Roly showed no doubts about the future when he shooed me off his doorstep after I had brought them home from the Registry Office. I had been best man. 'You should get married, Les,' he said, slapping me with violent affection between the shoulder-blades. 'Nothing like it. You're only half a man until you're married.' His wife arched her eyebrows at Roly and simpered. 'We should soon know whether he was half a man or a whole one if he got married,' she said. I could think of no suitable reply to this beastly superiority and went off down the street, my back still tingling, full of rage.

I was never cast down long in those days, for the life of the Woodcraft Folk filled my days with an immemorial happiness. The problems of human nature and destiny which had so bothered my early adolescence were thrown aside by an act of will, rather than solved. One was unlikely to know what it was all about, I reasoned, and therefore the next best thing was to come to a working compromise with life. There was one in the very air we breathed in those days, of which H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley and a score of others were the preachers. They believed in an evolving universe. By a cosmic evolution the earth had been shaped and moulded until it was capable of bearing life: then, by chemical changes, life had been born on the seas of the young planet. This life had passed from the

simplest, unicellular forms to the most complex and advanced form in man himself, a biological evolution which had taken countless aeons of time. But evolution was not finished because man had appeared. Now it was at work on his social, political and cultural forms. The morals and societies of men were as much obedient to evolutionary laws as the body itself: thus progress was the law of the whole cosmos. It became possible to imagine the very principle of evolution in the universe (a principle we did not dare to describe as God, for that would have been old-fashioned) as working within us, individually and collectively, and pushing us on to some future when a new and more perfect race of men would come to be. This Hegelian pantheism (though we did not call it that either) had taken the place for most of us of the Christianity we had learnt in childhood. Even the disturbing doctrines of Marx and Freud had themselves an evolutionary justification and could be fitted into this new frame.

My interest was more than subjective: I was seeking a creed I might teach. I called the first educational programme I produced for the Woodcraft Folk, *The Child and the Race*, and wrote in it: 'On the basis of biology and evolution is built the philosophy that underlies both our educational methods and the charter of the youth movement. We believe that man must use himself consciously as a tool of evolution. That is, he must regard evolution as a process that touches him and his kind intimately, and that we are masters of our fate only when we assist our own becoming, and the evolution of the race . . .'

For three years or more I had been taking biology classes, mostly under Gordon Ellis, and had reached the stage of dissecting frogs and rabbits, and I was reading exhaustively about evolution: now I began to teach, too, taking classes of Woodcraft leaders, in several parts of London, in evolutionary studies, which I see by my notes included discussions of religious and social evolution, and eugenics. Science and evolutionary studies dominated the first educational programme: historical and socialist studies were almost absent. The title of the programme, *The Child and the Race*, suggests that we took our eugenic role more seriously than our social-revolutionary one.

What strikes me about all this to-day is its irrelevance. It is doubtful if man is physically evolving any longer, it is certain

that it is a dubious intellectual trick to apply the doctrines of physical evolution to human societies and cultures. Even if man is still evolving, no one can say with any certainty what acts of man will aid his evolution or hold it back (assuming it possible to do either). Science, by relieving man of certain physical responsibilities which machines and instruments can better shoulder for him may, for instance, be *anti*-evolutionary. Unless man gives up thinking and moralizing, and goes back to an animal state in which the pure law of survival can operate again (if it ever really operated as Darwin supposed*) then he must make decisions upon quite other grounds than 'evolutionary' ones. Evolutionary theory is irrelevant to the human situation, and only spurious philosophizers pretend otherwise.

Yet though this doctrine in those days provided us with an intellectual justification for our existence, the real consolations for our doubts, fears and disappointments we found, not in evolution, but in the warm life of movements. We were inveterate 'joiners' and drowned our individual despairs in the larger hope. Everywhere in Europe it was the same just then. Into socialist, communist and fascist parties, and youth movements by the score, men were projecting their personal hopes and fears, asking of them the miracles they had ceased to expect in their private lives.

As I look back those years of woodcraft activity, years that the locust ate, flow together and merge: one camp is very like another, and the camping years become one long camp. Only the sites changed, and what flawless ones we chose: their very names are immemorial England!—At Princes Risboro' under the enormous cross carved on the chalk hillside of Whyteleafe; by Magpie Bottom in the downs above Shoreham Valley; by the Hammer Ponds, near Horsham; close by Steyning, or underneath Chanctonbury Ring; within sight of Stonehenge; staring at the Long Man of Wilmington; on the banks of Coniston Water; a walk from the Swannery at Abbotsbury; under dreaming Christchurch Minster; at Timberscombe by Haslemere; at Hangman's Cove; in the meadows of the giant curve of the Wye, under the brow of Symons Yat; or in that tiny hamlet with the Norse name of Garth, high up in the Welsh Hills, not far from Llangollen,

*See *The Meaning of Human Existence*, 1949, Chap. 2.

looking across the rich Cheshire plain on which in the early mornings all the clouds of England lie pillowed.

So many things were ardently begun, and with such hope for their effect on the world, that only a dullard could have escaped exaltation, or the illusions of grandeur. Numbers grew slowly, yet we did not care, for there was that in the atmosphere of the movement which called forth a sacrificial activity. We were spurred on by the pride of being against the conventions, and so many of those against which we rebelled then have now been overthrown, that it is difficult to remember any longer what we were excited about. But sunbathing, co-education and vegetarianism (we collected many touches of crankiness) brought us under fire. So too did our eccentric leather-fringed jerkins and shorts. That there was something freakish about us in the eyes of others was to us a sign that we were ahead of our time. And in some things that was true. I find it odd now to remember that I had to attend meetings on many occasions to refute the allegation that it was immoral for boys and girls to camp together, or for boys to run about without their shirts on. I enjoyed the denunciation of detractors on those occasions, though I remember it with nausea now, for no one can be so priggish as the self-righteous reformer; to my followers my Machiavellian argument was that opposition was good for us, it drew us closer together, gave us something to fight for, and cut us off more sharply from the society we detested. We constituted a very self-conscious and intolerant élite.

I and the new movement were fortunate in my father's success in Fleet Street. He was doing well, after years of patient struggle, and I was doing well with him, writing for many provincial papers as well as earning commission on the advertising I brought them. I was able to buy a caravan which I planted in a paddock on the hills above Shoreham, close to a farm where many woodcraft camps were held, and so provided myself with a base for writing and country life whenever I could escape from town.

We moved into a new house which my mother prodded my father into buying by instalments. It stood close under the spire of Christchurch at Forest Hill. It was a matter of importance to me that from the window of my study-bedroom I could look up at the same tall spire of warm stone at which Richard Jefferies must often have gazed from the windows of

his uncle's house in Sydenham (though as a matter of fact Jefferies loathed church bells and steeples!) Round this spire, in the hot summer months, the wild swifts swirled. They would wake me early in the morning with their screaming, and I knew without opening my eyes whether the day was fine and sunny or dull and cloudy, for on sunny days they would rise in their superb flight until they were dots in the blue, and their screaming would come remotely down from the high, pure air in the hollow of the sky. But on dull days they scythed below the clouds, harvesting the insects round the eaves of the houses, and I could listen to the rush of their bodies through the garden. My heart beat with painful excitement when I first heard them in May, and when August came, if I was not away, I would begin to ache with the expectation of their departure, and watch despairingly for the day. Their mad diving and whirling, like mobs of screaming schoolgirls playing touch, mounted to a crescendo as that day approached. One morning I would fail to hear them. Perhaps I had slept through the stirring of their rabble at dawn. If it turned out that they had not yet gone, my lease on happiness was extended for a day.

The bay window of my study-bedroom looked down on a small garden like the corner of a wood. At the end of it grew an immense ash tree. On either side of it waved and shimmered the pollarded poplars and lindens. Close to the house was a mighty old pear tree reaching out blossom-laden limbs to the windows in spring. Always anxious to trace in the town pattern before me the lineaments of a vanished countryside, I fancied I could reconstruct, by the age and position of the scores of apples and pear trees in the gardens before me, the lines of the orchard I had been told our rows of houses had displaced. My mother loved the little garden, and still further thickened its bocage by planting apple trees, plum trees and currant bushes. By the time we came to leave the house the wood or orchard in the garden had so multiplied its branches that a thick wall of greenery spread itself below my study desk. The pear tree produced small sweet pears which tended to fall prematurely, so that when, in the hot days of August, the house windows and doors were open wide, one could hear through most of the rooms the soft *thud, thud* of the ripening pears falling on the lawn.

The pleasant old suburb where the house stood has nearly vanished now. The bombs have hastened the erosion of time, that's all, shattering the old villas, and uprooting the twisted thorns and gnarled old apple trees. The old brewery, clean and spacious like a *Brauhaus* in a sunny Bavarian town, and fragrant with hops, became first a milk depot, and then a fortified ARP headquarters which a landmine almost destroyed. Bombs shattered the station clock tower, which once looked down on the machinery of the hydraulic railway which hauled goods up from New Cross along a cutting once—*once!*—a canal. Now blocks of flats, as tall and as alien by night as the wall which shuts China away from the barbarian, run in wonderfully curving chains across the suburb: the regularly spaced lights of their echoing corridors and balconies shine like the illuminations of a sea front. To look down on them is rather like looking down on the *Gemeindebauten* of Vienna from Kahlenberg.

But when we moved there the roads immediately around us were unpaved, and grass grew along the verges under the chestnut and lime trees; a farmhouse still stood under a high wood of ash and poplar. Rain made muddy rivulets along the road edges and a sweet, earthy smell came up from the yellow soil. In the autumn, when I ran for my train, I would kick the spiked green chestnut husks fallen overnight: they opened like silk-lined jewel cases and scattered their polished gems across the roadside grass.

Where once Richard Jefferies lived and looked out on meadows, are now colonies of prefabricated houses as squat and grey and ugly as Tartar villages. It was close to these that I had offered me, once upon a time, a cottage, long since vanished, set in a paddock of its own lined by hawthorn hedges which bloomed as festally as those of Combray. I could have had it for five shillings a week, and turned up my nose because, though it had water, neither gas nor electricity were laid on. But what a cottage! I stared from its windows across the deep railway cutting to an unspoilt wood of oak and hornbeam which shut out all but the drifting chimney smoke of the villas beyond. Starling-haunted elms rose to the south. Indeed, there was not a sign of human habitation to be seen anywhere, except the tip of Christchurch spire, where the swifts and carrion crows wheeled. It was country still, this forgotten paddock where the baker grazed his horse, the lost labourer's

cottage standing on its edge, surrounded by neat little squares of potatoes and carrots, and rustling fences of hollyhocks. The unattainable wood opposite was the haunt of tawny owls; down the wooded sanctuary of the railway embankment the kestrels glided daily, taking the route the bombers were to follow: I might still see above, on days of miracle, a heron or a swan flying across to the distant Ravensbourne: the cuckoo never failed to come.

There were then heights on the Sydenham ridge where I would stand, in full summer, Crystal Palace behind me, and find it hard to see a house, so immense was the umbrageous sweep of black and billowing trees from ridge to horizon. Norwood had still some of the majesty of a forest, and as for the vales and meadows of Dulwich, with their high elms and solitary farmhouse, they constituted the handle of that green sickle which, by way of parkland, golf courses, still virgin cemeteries, deserted brickfields, allotments and the recreation grounds of the Ravensbourne, swept almost unbroken to Lewisham Obelisk. In pre-war days I watched this unique heritage being devoured, portion by portion, by owner-occupier villas. It is surprising how much has survived. Forest Hill is still a suburb of steep hills and footpaths, clambering past islands of trees, where rises the fume of rain-warm thickets. It is by their narrow ways that you can come suddenly to eminences the stranger would not suspect existed, which yield astonishing vistas over the brickdust haze of London to the heights of Hampstead and Highgate, vistas which at night reveal another Pacific breaking its glittering, phosphorescent waves against the dark, unknown archipelagos of houses.

Perhaps it is not astonishing that here in this wooded land, where I might see flocks of peewits, or watch tree-creepers and woodpeckers harvesting up and down the trunks of garden trees, that I dreamt even of nightingales. In my bedroom which looked down on the pear tree I woke from an early sleep to hear loud and pure in the garden below me the song of a nightingale as I had often heard it, waking in my caravan, at Shoreham. I hurriedly thrust on a dressing gown and, muzzy with sleep and astonishment, ran down under the pear tree to listen to this miraculous visitation. The song, alas, was coming from the loudspeaker of a house which stood at the end of the garden, and presently the voice of a cello joined it. The B.B.C.

had just discovered that the nightingale had entertainment value. It was just one of the odd things that do occur that I had in any case probably heard this same nightingale many times, for the B.B.C. had set up their recording van in the wood on the edge of which my caravan stood.

My happiness was greater, too, in these years, because my first books were published. A slender volume of poems, containing 'The Song of Creation,' was published at my father's expense, a belated, but generous twenty-first birthday present. He was wisely sceptical about the *point* of publishing this immature verse, but as proud as I was to see my name on a volume towards which the critics were charitable. The handbook for the Woodcraft Folk which I had been writing in the early morning was at last published, and continued for many years to bring me in small sums by way of royalty. The greatest discovery of those years, I suppose, was that it was both practicable and possible to write books and get them published, that this profession was not an esoteric mystery.

Since the burden of organizing the growing camps of the Woodcraft Folk often exhausted me, for some years in succession I took part of my holiday walking alone, in the spring, in the West Country. The village streets of Stowey and the hills around Alfoxden, where Coleridge, Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy had walked were objects of pious pilgrimage, and the 'Lorna Doone' country too, though I had long tired of that romance. But I sought a deeper layer of English life, something about which I knew very little, but thought very often, the England which belonged to the green roads which led to Stonehenge and Avebury, the primitive settlements of Glastonbury where I found the ruined monastery, and Joseph of Arimathea's thorn flowering close to the tower on Glastonbury Tor, and still farther west to Athelney (on the road to which a pint of rough Somerset cider once knocked me clean unconscious), as far in the end as Tintagel and the dolmens and standing stones, and the long and the round barrows of Cornish moors. My destination was often a tiny cottage in a walled orchard garden in South Devonshire. On my first visit, across the moors by compass and map, I lost my way when night overtook me miles from my destination. The twisting, sunken Devonshire lanes swallowed me up and took me deceptively here and there. Trees overhung the lanes, and

it was only by the stars that I could guess my direction. I walked for hours under a velvet May sky, hope abandoned of finding the place. Then, quite by accident, I came face to face with the cottage, recognizing it, even in the starlight, from the photographs I had been sent. I rattled the gate. The spaniels barked, and drowsy heads seemed to come out of all the windows at once. I called out my name, and they shouted that they had been expecting me and began a confused account of how they had put up a hammock for me under the apple trees. I found the hammock and unrolled my sleeping bag and crawled into it. The silence was itself a bed. Above me apple boughs waved stiff and white: I could smell the invisibly rioting garden, the wallflowers and the hawthorn, and rising up strangely with the whisper of its lapping and surging the peaty smell of the river, evoking the leats on the moors by which I had walked. Far above the apple boughs I could pick out of the May sky Cassiopeia and the Plough, soft in their lustre and tried to count the stars of the Pleiades as they glinted like the scales of a goldfish rising and falling in a dark pool. From the stars came a barely perceptible dew, and when I woke in the morning to the wet, winking light of sea and moor, my thick untidy mop of hair was soaked with dew, and the blanket was pearly with it. Later that morning I went to find the river I might have fallen in the previous night. It came down deep and fast between rocks from the moors, and no sun touched it. Never had a river looked so deadly and so cold; the current was almost too much to swim against, but I had a reputation to maintain, and with children shouting along the bank, and the spaniels making whining rushes across the otter-printed turf at the rat-smelling water, I battled with all my strength for a hundred yards upstream before I admitted defeat and turned on my back, and let the current take me, and bump me through peaty, rock-bound pools and thrust me on to pebbled shoals. There the spaniels, fretting and yelping, would dash to me, nipping hold of my hair or ears to pull me out, for they had a fixed obsession that I was drowning when I rolled about in the water and grew most unhappy if I did nothing to reassure them.

What extraordinary dogs they were, the first I had ever met with a real feeling for the uncanny. In a deep wood we passed through, lay a giant tree, stripped of its bark, crouching whitely

in the subaqueous green light like some monster of prehistoric times lifting its snout to sniff the leaves of its neighbours. The two spaniels hesitated long before the tree hove in sight, and had to be driven along: they displayed split minds and bodies: their forepaws scrabbled energetically at the ground as if they were about to rush along merrily at any moment, but they gazed at us with haggard eyes and their hindparts dragged in paralysis close to the ground. The sight of the naked tree itself was just too much for them. They turned tail and fled whimpering. Commanded to stop, they crouched shivering among the leaves, their backs to the terrible enemy. To pacify them one wrapped a coat round their heads and carried them past the tree, and once across they scampered away with joy and relief after one backward, furtive glance of apprehension lest they might be pursued. Their superstitious awe was not confined to this fallen tree, for which there was the excuse that it looked like a creature. They equally disliked giant sunflowers which drooped and nodded large baleful eyes at them over garden fences: a glance from one such eye was enough to send them yelping for home. At the side of the lanes lay many black tar barrels, on the ends of which were pasted white discs with a black circle in the centre. Two of these, side by side, looked at a distance like a pair of rolling nigger minstrel eyes. And so the spaniels concluded too, for they would only pass them if picked up and carried with their faces averted from the horror. I knew what their feeling was, for I myself was never able to pass Vixen Tor, on the moors, without a sense of being watched wherever I went, whatever I did. For me, indeed, the Tor was that 'rock on the heath fashioned by weather,' of which Pater wrote 'passing . . . which one exclaimed involuntarily, in consecrated phrase, Deity is in this Place! *Numen inest!*'

My friends were pacifists, and pacifism had an extraordinary affinity for vegetarianism, and so we lived on enormous wooden bowls of garlic-flavoured salad, and messes of lentils and roasted pine-kernels garnished with leeks. We thrived. Through them I met the most remarkable character of the neighbourhood, a rag-and-bone merchant called Joe. He was a rag-and-bone merchant less out of poverty, as far as I could see, than out of love for perfect freedom. What better than to rattle through Devonshire lanes for endless days in a pony and trap?

He was a Tolstoyan 'simple-lifer' and could quote from his master's ethical works with an astonishing fluency. He came in his trap to visit me, for I had been announced to him in advance as a fellow Tolstoyan: was I not a youth leader, poet, pacifist and even, a good deal of the time, a vegetarian? Almost the whole bag of crankiness in fact, enough to delight Joe's heart. And he stood there before me, browned by the sun, hatless, bearded, with deep-sunken eyes solemnly scrutinizing me, pumping my thin hand up and down with a massive paw grimed by his trade, and greeting me with a deep bass voice. His torn shirt blew open to his waist, his trousers gaped, and I was overwhelmed by the sight of a hairy mat stretching from his throat to his belly. So taut and curly were the hairs that I felt certain that if you fell against them you would bounce off as from a wire mattress.

His smile of delight changed to a look of stern reproach.

'I naaver 'spected thaat of thee, maaster,' he said, with a sorrowful shake of his head as he stared down at my feet. I stared, too, but could see nothing wrong with them except that they were much smaller than his. My eyebrows went up questioningly.

'*Leather!*' he whispered with horror. 'Tha'rt still partly clothed in the skins of wild beasts slaughtered for thee. Thee'm not yet weaned of thy cannibalism—thee must excuse me young maaster, but I do call that sort of thing *cannibalism*.'

'Well, damn it man!' I cried in exasperation, staring at his feet in turn. He silenced me by holding out his foot. He was wearing slippers of bast and canvas, like any Russian moujik. I was so infuriated by this impertinence that I cried out, 'Your horse, you old humbug, your horse. That's got leather harness!'

I might have cheated at chess, for the effect it had on him: his face darkened sullenly and he pouted like some over-sensitive child pained by a rough word: he was clearly aghast at my lack of tact or good sense.

'Let dog eat dog,' he said, obscurely, shaking his head and refusing to meet my eye. 'Thaat's all I have to say in answer to thaat. Let dog eat dog. We are men, thaats how I think, young maaster.'

Somehow a great hole had been punched in our conversation, and we both stood awkwardly regarding each other. Presently he brightened.

'In time I hope to teach thee, young maaster, that all life is sacred. Nothing must be slaughtered to feed or clothe thee.' He waved an expansive, grimy hand at Devonshire. 'Nature provides sustenance for all we in her bounteous plants and fruits, in her lush pastures and fertile vegetation. Do thee come one day and visit me that I might teach thee how to live.'

With that he left me, shaking his head sadly, and with yet another minatory glance at my sinful leather shoes, and mounting his tall trap went flying down the hill amid a jangle and crash of iron as loud as a naval bombardment, waving his whip and whooping to the children who went shrieking along with him.

I visited his home, which was really an encampment, and listened to a long dissertation on the necessity for man to find some means of eating grass. Look what it does to sheep and cattle, he said. It makes the very finest beef. And in England we have the finest grass; sun and rain conspire to make it so—God's gift to Englishmen. If we could find a way of digesting it and making it palatable then we could continue to live almost without work, for one garden lawn would keep a man in grass for a year. He had tried chopping it very fine, mincing it, boiling it both alone and with other vegetables, but so far the dream of his life had not produced anything edible, but only the most nauseating messes, resembling freshly laid cow-pats. But I listened to this eccentric dream only absent-mindedly for my eyes were popping out of my head at his home. Joe certainly lived as he pleased. I had never seen a crazier assembly in my life than that which he called his bungalow. It was fenced from the lane by a parade of bedstead ends, some brassy, some rusty, other of chipped white enamel, but no two alike. The gate consisted of the wire mattress of a child's cot slung between railway sleepers. Over it rose an arch of hoop iron upholding a square frame of rough wood on which the name 'Happy Days' had been worked in large, cheap blue beads.

Almost against the gate was the dump of his trade: bedsteads predominated, but there were old cars, stripped of everything of value, hulks of carts, broken parts of engines, smashed tools, rotting buckets and baths, cast-iron grates, coils of barbed wire, petrol cans and swarms of worn rubber tyres which Joe used, Jack of all trades that he was, to sole the boots and shoes of the villagers.

The bungalow itself! One room was a dismantled baker's van in which it was impossible to stand upright, the second a contraption of old boards roofed over with felting. The living room looked as though it had once been a sports pavilion, for it had a veranda (on which we took herb tea) and a coat of arms adorned a shield above the porch. The four rooms enclosed an inner court paved with cement and containing a shower-bath contrived from a white enamel cistern and the rose of a watering can—one pulled the chain and hoped for the best. This cramped hole Joe labelled 'solarium' and there, for several hours a day, sun or no sun, he would disport himself naked.

This did not end the eccentricities. One room—a guest room, Joe insisted, which I could have for as long as I liked if I would help him with his researches on grass—was a furniture van standing away in the paddock. It contained a bed on runners, some shelves, a water jar and a cracked washing bowl. On the shelves were the works of Ruskin and Tolstoy, and the Bible. The van was screened at its opening by a canvas flap, which could be drawn-up during the day to serve as an awning. By the side of the bed on runners hung a plush bell rope, which one could imagine last used in the drawing room of some Victorian home when the lady languidly rang for tea. Now it served a most alarming purpose: one tug on it and the bed slid out into the sunshine. I was told it did this inadvertently sometimes, without any initial tug, so that one woke from a dream of falling asleep on a scenic railway to find it a fact. If, once in the open air, it rained (and in Devonshire it seldom stopped) one hauled on yet another rope, and, the theory was, one could draw oneself back to safety.

Lumpishly in the middle of the paddock stood the cabin of a dismantled army lorry, complete with leather cushions and steering wheel, looking for all the world as if the field itself had been provided with a control cabin and was driving furiously towards the tors. This was the summerhouse, and discreetly among the elderberry bushes, where the rabbits scraped, an old hansom cab housed the Elsan water closet. Crooked tin smoke stacks protruded from every room, daubs of paint of every shade adorned the walls, and even flowers were growing in pots which had once been ornate milk jugs or bedroom utensils. Its craziness was almost genius, and it was with childish glee that Joe told me how he had fought 'the council' when

they wanted to condemn his paradise. But for a simple-lifer it must have been the most complicated paradise one could have invented.

I laughed at Joe. Yet it was an uneasy laugh: he was only living the things so many of us *said*. Vegetarianism was in the progressive air in those days, like sunbathing and the necessity to eat salt with iodine in it. I attended the lectures of Dr. Saleeby where both were urged upon me. Joe reduced all these causes to absurdity by his anarchist extravagance about everything, but causes they remained, and much serious debate was given to them in the left circles in which I moved. New food shops catered for fantastic new-life tastes: there was even one where my brother and I drank a mixture of malted milk, hot water and olive oil, which was held to have the most beneficial effects on one's colon and nerves. Healthy life literature became a flourishing industry, and for all I know may still be. I used my authority to introduce vegetarian diet in the camps that I ran, and the last time I visited one such camp I was lectured (the wheel had turned full circle) on the dangers of eating common salt. Nature, I was told, provides all the salt that man's body needs in vegetables.

In those days many of us held the view that to take life at all, even animal life, was evil, and only the fact that so many causes already engaged my attention prevented me from giving my aid to anti-vivisectionism and anti-vaccinationism. Irony apart, what disturbed me, and what was never far from the fears of most intelligent young people then was the dread that war might come again. We were so angry with popular complacency that nothing would satisfy us but the grandest of moral gestures—total and immediate disarmament. Only in this way, I said (at first), was it possible to make a moral demonstration to the entire world of the futility of mass slaughter as a means of settling the disputes between nations.

It was in those years that I came imaginatively to understand the First World War. About it I was less ignorant than most fellows of my age, for I had given two unusual years of voluntary service in war hospitals, beginning when I was twelve years old.* In the medical hospitals I had seen the mentally and physically broken, the men with shell shock, trench feet, trench fever and war psychoses of every variety

*The story is told in *The Living Hedge*.

and had been so frightened that I abandoned these men, with whom I had no common language, for the soldiers in a surgical hospital. These were for me the real 'wounded Tommies' which the newspapers had made familiar. They limped, they had bandaged arms and heads, they smoked cigarettes all day long, and talked rationally. They did not, like the victims of war psychoses, roll their eyes and grimace at you, or throw fits on the kitchen floor, and curse God. There were men like Brunt, from a Cornish fishing village, who became my friend, and got up a collection for me when I lost a ten shilling note belonging to a soldier, and Eagle, the Staffordshire miner, who had lost one leg and propelled himself savagely and bitterly about the ward in an invalid chair, exactly as I was to see Charles Laughton do years later in *The Silver Tassie*. I ran messages and did all sorts of humble and menial services for them, happily, and as I see now free from any absurdly inflated feeling about it, but responsibly and keenly, arguing that since I was too young to fight, the least I could do was to help those who had fought for me. If I hero-worshipped them, and it is difficult to hero-worship a man in bed whose urgent natural wants must be attended to, it was not as individuals, but rather as symbols of England whom it was a good, wholesome boy's instinct to serve. It seemed to me that, just as I was glad to be 'doing my bit,' so they ought to have been proud to fight the Germans and to help England to win. I could not understand why they laughed at me. I could not understand why they were glad to be idle in bed, wounded no matter where, nor why they spoke in a defeatist fashion of the war, which most of them were convinced we had lost. It awed me to divine within them a dark world of catastrophe from which I was excluded by much more than the circumstance that I was simply a boy. The nurses, and the old sweats who did fatigues in the hospital, were just as shut out. I divined this closed world of experience in the wounded German soldiers who, with faces scored, white and thin like bunches of unscrubbed celery, crawled feebly out on to the balcony next to the wards I worked in. And I discovered it too in the absorbed, unhappy bearing of the exercising German officers, one of whom, a mad U-boat commander, who used to walk round in small circles with a Bible in his hands, escaped and committed suicide while I was there. These precocious experiences marked me indelibly with

the mystery and terror of war and, added to home experiences; the grievous separation from my father, the raids, the food shortages, the eternal poverty, they weighed me down while still a child with a spiritual burden which made my heart ache uncomprehendingly. Now I read all the war novels and autobiographies as they appeared, and learnt with shock and terror, what was that incommunicable life the soldiers I had served and loved had lived.

I read Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Graves' *Goodbye to All that*, Tomlinson's *All Our Yesterdays*, and Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress*, in some ways the best of his books. Yet it was Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* which was the real literary miracle of those days, perhaps the one war book destined to be immortal. It so excited me that I sat up all night to finish it: I recall the astonishment of discovering that, at the end of a day of blood and mire, Blunden remembered that he was, just that day, twenty-one. He was already a veteran. I was filled with anguish that he should have lived through this inferno at an age I had already passed by three years: I was even envious. How little my own life so far had to show! Yet there was that in *Undertones of War* which moved me as much as his personal history: it was a poet's book: he saw the war as a poet: 'the poetry was in the pity.' He rose spiritually above his experiences as Remarque, for example, was incapable of doing. There was no personal complaint, no bitterness, no hatred, no hysteria. How was it possible, I asked myself, for a young man to triumph so sublimely over so bloody a baptism that one never felt the presence of a forced sentence, a romanticized memory, or the aggressive intrusion of his egoism? The attitude of personal affront which characterized so many war memories was completely absent. His objectivity of vision—one must tell what one sees, Péguy wrote, above all one must *see* what one sees—was the more difficult for me to accept since I personally, who had suffered none of this, was as full of partizanship about war as a Suffragette about votes, and knew it. Blunden taught me that which I was as yet reluctant to learn—that one could accept even the worst that life had to offer without that sickening egotistical protest which I myself was always making about everything.

These were suspect reactions on the part of a militant

pacifist, for such I had become, but the war books, even when they did not feed my anger, fed my propaganda, and in my recoil from war's horrors I thrust the Woodcraft Folk into close contact with all the pacifist elements we could reach.

The No More War Movement and the Independent Labour Party in those days enshrined between them the pacifist tradition of the Labour Movement, and men and women like Fenner Brockway, Reginald Sorensen, Lucy Cox and Walter Ayles had much influence upon us.

I tried to turn the movement into a dedicated group of war-resisters, prepared to meet any personal suffering rather than break faith, and our magazine began the serialization of Reginald Stamp's 'A War Resister in Prison' through which we tried to teach the technique of war-resistance. Reginald Stamp wrote for the benefit of learners that, 'The first stages of war resistance are difficult. Officers and privates, doctors and chaplains, kind people and foul-mouthed men, strong personalities and physical bullies, each in their turn try and break one's spirit and determination by kindness or brutality. To the man who has no firm foundation for his faith, the trial is not easy. It is not difficult to be brave in crowds, but it is hard to be isolated and stand alone. Those of the Woodcraft Folk who are determined not to be soldiers (and I trust they are many), I would urge to rely upon themselves and the qualities within them, and not upon movements, for in the last analysis it is an individual quality.' How well I succeeded is shown by a copy of the Woodcraft Folk's Journal*, which reached me while this was being written, containing a bitter personal record of a member recently imprisoned as a conscientious objector.

Yet a pacifist crusade was hard to reconcile with our work for children and young people. My conscience told me that we ought not to try to commit them to acts of martyrdom they were too young to understand. I detested this exploitation of the generous loyalties of young people when I met it in other bodies, particularly left-wing movements, and had no wish to repeat it in my own. And there was, too, a very rapid slurring of our pacifism when it came up against the Russian Revolution. Admiration for this was universal amongst us. No one doubted then that the October Revolution had moved world history

* *The Helper* Jan. 1951.

forward. To our consciences, if to no one else, we privately admitted that revolutionary acts against capitalism might be justified where imperialist war was not, a thesis which the pure pacifist could not possibly accept, since the doctrine that evil means corrupts good ends is the very root of his philosophy. And because we could not decide that the Russian Revolution had been a mistake even though force had been used in attaining it, we could not easily remain pure pacifists. During the General Strike Sidney Shaw and I had been quite certain that if it went on to violence we could not stand aside: and if we did not dwell on the violent aspect of it, we certainly *wanted* it to go on to revolution. And so our effort to take a strong moral stand about war was hedged round with so many reservations that it was, to say the least of it, disingenuous.

We were often ashamed of our hesitations and contradictory views. The disaster of war was so horrifying that we felt we ought to be able to make up our minds to oppose it, and it alone, without qualification. Yet we could not. History would not let us. It cannot be said that we got clear guidance from the older men who had suffered for their pacifism in the First World War. When they elected to go to jail rather than fight there had been no Russian Revolution: they could unequivocally condemn *all* war. But since the end of the war they, too, had collected an ambivalence of attitude, privately feeling that revolutions and wars against foreign intervention were justified, where imperialist wars were not. Many pacifist journalists published long justifications both of social revolution and of pacifism.

My friend Joseph Reeves, to whom I owed so much, in those days the greatest moral support to the movement I had founded, was an enthusiastic admirer of what we all then called 'the Russian experiment' and one of the pioneers of Anglo-Soviet friendship through the agency of co-operative travel. If men like Johnstone filled one with dismay, and made one doubt the spiritual resources of the Labour Movement, the courage and honesty of Reeves restored one's confidence. He gave himself unstintingly. It would be true to say that socialism represented for him the secular Christianity for which so many of his generation were looking—the translation into the field of politics and social service of the moral precepts of Christianity unencumbered (as he many times asserted) by

dogma and superstition. All those for whom this was the situation, for whom that is the problem of faith had been jettisoned in favour of the act of service, had been transformed into a secular priesthood. They were marked by an ardent look, a firm step, a conviction of vocation. It became possible to pick them out in tram or bus by the look in their faces. Reeves was one of them: indeed he still is one of them: high-spirited, generous, eloquent and sentimental. An elementary schoolboy he had educated himself upon those giants of our day, the iconoclastic Shaw and the idealistic Wells. Shaw triumphed in him for the sake of conversation, but it was from Wells, whose lower-middle-class heroes he resembled, that he received his philosophy of life. It was nothing less than the sweeping belief in the powers of scientific man to remake the untidy world into something shining, bright and clean. He would often talk to me in Wellsian terms. 'Just fancy, Les, that scientific man can talk to anyone in any part of the globe. The world grows smaller and smaller, communication and travel easier, but the planet is still patterned into the raging little nation-states it acquired in the days of horse-traffic.' And, waving his hand at South London, at its mess, squalor and ugliness, 'We can make beautiful aeroplanes, and amazing dynamos and find out even what's in the atom, but we haven't done a single thing about *this*. But we could, if we wanted to—just look at it, just *look* at it.' And as the tram rattled through Greenwich and came to Deptford creek, I looked at it, as I had done many times before, with a sick and sorry heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death of a Space-Seller

Towards the end of the twenties many old-established independent provincial newspapers disappeared. They were bought up by chains, or amalgamated with their rivals. The newspaper industry, in the blessed word of those days, was being 'rationalized'. It involved an alteration in the status of the 'London Manager', such as my father was. The old, independent newspaper placed its London representation in the hands of some person like my father whom it could trust, and relied on his personal efforts to bring in advertisements. The representative was presented with noteheadings bearing his name, paid a retainer which varied with the standing of the paper, and drew ten per cent commission on the advertising he brought in. To secure a reasonable income he would probably have to represent quite a few papers. My father had twenty in his 'stable' at one time. If you walk down Fleet Street to-day you can still see, on many a street doorway, the long lists of papers represented by industrious and hopeful canvassers.

As a matter of course each representative circulated the advertising agencies with promotion material and made routine calls on them to press the interests of his papers. But that was not how the business was done. The real work lay in finding out what agencies were planning new campaigns for some popular product, or what old lists were about to be revised, and at that point to press the claims of the papers. When a provincial paper found its way on to one or two important campaign lists, other business would follow without canvassing, for the one list would serve as the basis of many campaigns. And this meant personal contacts, preferably in the

pub round the corner. There was no substitute for them. Even as a small boy I had waited for my father outside the King Lud or Peele's or Andertons while he finished his beer and his business, and steered him home if both had been too much for him.

It was a world of the most glorious freedom. So long as one kept the business managers of the provincial papers one represented contented by the flow of business, there was just no one in the world to ask you what you did or where you went. It was most easy to become a bar-leaner; to vanish into the world of cafes and pubs after one had read one's morning mail, and to emerge from it again to complete the evening mail at about half-past five. And then if the call of wife and home was not too powerful there were the lights of all the pubs for miles around to draw one to them, in the hope of picking up just this or that snippet which would yield new business. If one had no stomach for this convivial life, one's career as a representative was very much harder: if one was too fond, then it was all over by fifty. The entry of the newspaper combine into this Dickensian world meant new pressure for results. The combine, with its shining London offices, its batteries of secretaries, and its general staff of executives, injected into the field the brisk young go-getter who could not afford to spend much time leaning on bars, or to return to his office the worse for wear. He sought to get his results by an American quick-fire salesmanship based on circulation returns, sales analysis, market research and the new psychological palaver by which advertising was everywhere striving to raise itself to the status of a profession: and he was morally supported by the vague yet ominous power which always attaches itself to any combine.

I have no doubt that my father, given his temperament, was very much ill-at-ease in the face of such confident and knowledgeable young rivals. But his sense of inferiority must have been a personal one, based on his ignorance of the new jargon, and not a business one. It was still, whatever the authorities in the textbooks might say, most important of all to be known as Freddy and slapped on the back and taken into the saloon bar for a quick one. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* would have been his vade-mecum, if he had ever come to hear of it. In this individualist world he had no peer, but his intensely personal success had no place in the world of the combines when they fell on him and his papers.

Within two years my father lost both the provincial daily papers he represented. They were bought up and amalgamated with rivals whose advertising figures he had actually managed to beat. Therefore at the very height of the success for which he had struggled all his life, his work was dashed down, and he lost perhaps five-sixths of his income. In his easy-going way he had omitted to press for three-year contracts with his daily papers and so, when it came to it, he could be given about six months' notice. He was, when all this happened, offered a post in one of the combines at a very much smaller income, but he regarded this (I am sure) as such a demotion that, however financially necessary it was to grasp at it, psychologically he was incapable of doing so. His despair and bitterness were too great even to permit him to speak of it.

I look back now and search his gentle and kindly face and seek to understand him. He was in those years, when he was the age that I am now, a very successful man, earning far more then, when money was worth much more and taxes were light, than I have ever managed to earn with my pen. He was proud of his success. He believed that there was an essential justice in life which made sense of the world: success came from hard work, and that was all there was to it. When he discovered that disaster came from success—the advertising success for which my father was responsible was one reason why rival papers were anxious to buy up those he represented—and that life was both unjust and cruel, he could not go on living.

He had begun life as a half-timer in Leeds, a boy with almost no education, who acted first as a printer's devil, then as office boy in a newspaper, and who became in time a canvasser for advertisements, then a circulation manager, and filled every post with zeal and friendliness. Bad luck dogged him. His first really important promotion was to the post of London Manager of a newly-founded paper, *The Southern Daily Post*: this was in 1911 when he was still in his early thirties. To take up this position he left a job on the *Sheffield Independent* and brought us all to London. But in the very week in 1911 that the new paper was launched there was a railway strike, and distribution was so badly dislocated that the new paper was killed at its birth, and my father was left high and dry in London with no experience of the great city. We moved into the cheaper house in a poorer road in which

I was to spend all my boyhood. My father scoured Fleet Street and got some work on the *Scots Pictorial*. He began slowly to establish himself, though I doubt if in those years he was earning more than three pounds a week. And then the Great War came. This first thrust his business into a decline, and then caused him to enlist in the Army under the Derby scheme. For a long time the family of four which he left behind—shortly to be increased to six!—were living on a separation allowance of about two pounds a week, and keeping up that iron front of respectability characteristic of Yorkshire folk—clean clothes, bright shoes, washed faces and plenty of porridge. When the war was over my father had to begin where he had left off, but now he was approaching forty, and his responsibilities had grown, and the competition in the Street, to which so many soldiers had returned, was if anything keener than ever. Yet within seven years he had done it: he had got to the top of the only tree he could climb, had bought himself a new house, a car, and taken a trip to Madeira to ease off his blood pressure and his drinking.

One's parents are always enigmatical. Even long years after, the springs of their behaviour seem mysterious. Mine were not literary characters who left letters and diaries which minuted the heart's disorder. One has only memories to work on, and these do not reveal any estrangement between my mother and father. Not even the difficult times of their forties, when mother began an exhilarating and unexpected public life on political and hospital committees, and the children were escaping in every direction into private interests and careers, and father was more and more wrapped up in the night life of the Street, and home therefore much less like home than it had ever been, call to mind any breach. There must have been difficult times: the virtues of our youth are sometimes the vices of the middle years: now that these had come, the pride, zeal and conscientiousness in her home which mother had displayed in her youth, looked more like anxiety-neurosis.

The children were a disappointment to a father wedded to doctrines of success and hard work. My young sister, possessed of an independence equal only to my own, had gone off and contrived an unhappy marriage with an unemployed man, which haunted us all. I was estranged from my father by the

movements and causes of my generation which were all noisy, arrogant and incomprehensible to him. I was as full of theories as a dog of fleas. One of them concerned the parasitic nature of the advertising business. My prickly idealisms had caused me to believe that all work except that of the primary producer was parasitic. If one did not grow food or produce goods then one lived off someone who did: it was morally inexcusable—and still more so if one lived well while the primary producer lived badly. I brooded heavily over the parasitism of the writer and artist and doubted the morality and relevance of art while people went hungry. I understood theoretically that man did not live by bread alone, but my growing materialism made it difficult to admit that anything except the production of food, warmth and shelter could be accepted as primary activities. Advertising was obviously low down among the secondary pursuits: a charge of sometimes dubious propriety on the cost of goods. Where then did the space-seller come in?

I have no doubt that I was didactic at boring length about this, and in a way must have infuriated my father. But my lack of enthusiasm for advertising as a career was so manifest that morally my position was becoming untenable. If I did not like my father's business, the honest thing was to leave it and make my own way. I was moved to this too by being called a 'waster' by one of my father's secretaries because I so obviously hung on to my father's tail: this stung me into a desire to show what I could do unaided. It was just after the peak of his success, at the beginning of his downward run, that I went, and by one of those disastrous intuitions which do occur among people very close to each other, choosing for the time of my going the moment when he first received an intimation that he was likely to lose one of his papers. That I should abandon hope of succeeding him in the business at the very moment when its precariousness was revealed to him inflicted on him one of those psychological wounds which the young so carelessly visit on their elders. I wake at night still and grieve over it.

Yet my decision to leave had been based not only on a calculation about my future, but on a feeling of illness which I confessed to no one. I was torn between running a movement, trying to write, and the routine tasks of my father's business. I decided to abandon the least important so that I might do

two jobs well instead of three jobs badly, and it was typical of me that I abandoned the only one which brought me in any money. And though pleased at giving up a field of worry in order to write, I was not worldly-wise enough to see that I now became much more accessible to the movement I had started, and had elected myself unpaid national organizer. As it grew by my efforts it encroached still more and more on the time I ought to have set aside for earning my bread. The folly of this free-lancing was screened from me at first, for my mother and father were still providing me with a home: even if I did not earn much money, I knew I should not starve. My father just grunted and shifted uneasily in his chair when I told him I was going: he did not ask me to stay, and was impatient both of explanations and apologies. 'Writing makes a good stick but a bad crutch,' he said, with an air that meant he had decided I was past talking sense into. 'You've made your bed, and you must lie on it. But you'll learn, you'll learn!' And he sucked gloomily at his unlit pipe, troubled, shy, enigmatic, and testily unwilling to meet my eyes.

His prophecy of failure moved me less because by a stroke of good fortune I was, in my first flight into freedom, introduced to a Harley Street psychologist whose knowledge was far superior to his ability as a writer, and wrote for him some half-a-dozen popular talks on psychology for the radio, and then followed it by putting into shape for publication the vast, untidy wads of notes and case histories which he had gathered over several years. He was widely read in history and philosophy, and our many talks on the chapters of his book revived most powerfully in me the interest I had taken in my adolescence in problems of human destiny. I was now to begin to read more methodically under this stimulus, and tried to bring my reading into some relationship with Marxism. This work took me almost a year and so in one way or another I earned more money in my first year of free-lancing than I had earned in Fleet Street, and was privately very elated.

Yet all elation vanished in the face of my father's Freudian wish to die, that baffling decision of his to turn away from the world which had failed him. If only he had had some other interest—music, reading, or movements—he might have been saved, but his business was his life and to take it away was to deprive him of his will to live. In face of the misery of this

there were weeks when I could hardly work and my own sense of illness increased unbearably. My father moved in a vicious circle: he drank to excess to escape the misery of contemplating a future in which most of his income would have vanished: but the more he drank the less easy he found it to screw himself up to the task of beginning all over again: if that was impossible there was only one thing to do, to cease as soon as possible to be sober. We were grieved and shocked for my mother in this dilemma, but my own sorrow was even greater for my father, as I saw him reaching the situation when his own horror at himself made him reach out still more quickly for oblivion.

We were helpless: we never knew how or when he would come home. We fetched doctors to him and they barked gruffly and formally at him and told him of the consequences to his arteries, liver and brain. 'There's such a thing, you know, sir, as alcoholic poisoning.' We read warning articles from newspapers to him, sought his friends to intercede, and tried to persuade him to enter a home for a time. My married brother sent him little notes beseeching him to remember the family, but he pushed them aside unread in his wretchedness. At first there was something very strange to us about the onset of this savage drinking: all we could say to him was that he would ruin himself by it. He had kept secret even from Pantlin that he was already ruined, that within a year his business would be finished. The facts came to me at first by rumour and were confirmed by letters which fell out of his pocket when I found him lying on the front steps unconscious in a puddle of whisky and broken glass. Later I shook him conscious in his armchair and shouted through his stupor: 'You're trying to kill yourself, father. We love you, we love you, and you have to stop, for all our sakes.' How terrible it was to have to shout one's love! When my words penetrated there was a panic of enlightenment in his frightened wet brown eyes which told me that he knew better than I did to what he had come, and had gone over this thing a thousand times already waking sober in the small hours. I sat crying tears of pity and rage, watching the look die as he fell unconscious again. And after that when I met him out I could not help but notice what in a sense I had refused to believe in up till then, the growing decay in him, the bloodshot eyes, the mottled cheek,

the stubble on his scabby chin in the morning because he could not steady himself enough to shave. He looked like a tramp and walked with the funereal shuffle of an old man. Dear God, how I wanted to save him, but in my grief and shame I could not bear to stay at his side.

Mother read in a newspaper about a firm which produced a special mixture for the cure of alcoholics. They were most discreet. They corresponded with you under a plain envelope and promised confidence. We talked despairingly of this and I went to visit them and came home with a quantity of brown powder rather like snuff which we had to boil and then let stand till cold, by which time a clear golden liquid like cold tea had formed. This we had to strain off and bottle and administer, from time to time, in very small quantities to the food or drink of the patient. The liquor had a faintly nauseating odour, and I shuddered to imagine what it would taste like neat.

We started by adding imperceptible quantities to the tea and coffee my father drank, and even added some to the whisky bottle which was always in his pocket. Gradually the dose was increased. It happened to be one of my father's better weeks and he was more wise as to what was going on in the world. At first he thought it was the taste in his mouth, or bile, or an unclean saucepan, but then it began to dawn on him that this was not the case.

'Something's wrong with this,' he said one morning, deeply suspicious. 'It tastes funny.'

'Go on, you're dreaming,' mother replied, with altogether too light and amused an air. 'With all you drink it's a wonder you have any taste left.'

He could not very well deny that. It was not the sort of argument on which he could embark with profit, so he said nothing but watched us with morose and bilious countenance. He began to sniff at food before he ate it, and often left it untouched, and we dropped the drug off for a day or two and then returned to it again when we thought he had forgotten. He was puzzled to explain to himself these sudden onsets of bad taste. It was, in a sad way, funny.

'There's that taste again,' he said one morning at breakfast. It really was amazing that he could detect it so easily.

'Stop making a fuss about nothing,' said mother sharply, annoyed that he should be so acute about this while the rest

of his life was falling in ruins about him. 'If only you paid as much attention to everything else! Anybody would think you were being poisoned.' And as she gazed at him tears suddenly started in her eyes, and she turned her head to hide them.

But he was obstinate and irritable and refused to eat anything, and stumped off with bloodshot eyes in a pretence of injured dignity.

One Saturday night I found him on his knees looking under the sideboard. He had learnt that mother took the whisky bottles she found in his pockets when he came home at night and hid them in the most unlikely places. Locked up in a scullery cupboard were twenty or thirty of them. Dad was hoping that one or two might be found under the sideboard. He was deeply embarrassed at being found in this position, and even his smooth bald head began to flush. He murmured that he'd dropped something.

'Want a drink, dad?' I asked.

He nodded, but regarded me with suspicious surprise, for the family was always steering him away from it.

'No one minds you drinking. It's when you do too much,' I said with the bright insincerity one reserves for sick people.

I fetched the bottle of doctored whisky from the kitchen and poured him a dose, taking one myself for the sake of appearances. I sipped mine and privately thought that mother had overdone it. Father took his with eloquent eyes. He took a gulp and then with a roar spat into the fire.

'Poisoned!' he shouted.

He smelt the remainder of the drink and pushed it away with aversion.

'It's not poisoned,' I said wearily. 'It's doctored. Something to give you nausea for alcohol. Not a very bright idea, but you brought it on yourself. If you were sensible you'd take a course and cure yourself.'

Father glared at me from his chair.

'Poisoned,' he repeated.

He spat into the grate again. He struggled up to go for his coat in order to walk down the road and buy some more whisky. I knew what it would mean and put my back to the door.

'If you'll go to bed,' I pleaded, 'I'll make you some tea and bring it up, and you can sleep the week off. Look at you, you

need it, you're trembling where you stand. I'm not going to let you out.'

I tried to make my anxious face resolute, and stared angrily at the doormat rather than at the pathos of his defeat. The trouble was that I could not bring myself to be angry. If only, I thought, I could work up one of the terrific tempers of my boyhood and frighten him into what we talked of euphemistically as 'pulling-himself-together'. The little notes my brother sent him used to say 'Dear dad, For mother's sake you must pull yourself together'. But the very pity I had for him made me powerless. Putting my back to the door was pure bravado: had he insisted on going out I could not, for love of him, have struggled with him, and added one more indignity to those he was piling on himself. I hoped he did not know that I was trembling too. He looked at my resistance in guilty astonishment, and went shaking to his chair again, tears starting from his eyes.

'Prisoner,' he said, in a voice full of self-pity. 'Like a child.'

One morning in February he would not wake, and when it was manifest that this was something more than a heavy sleep we sent for the doctor. It was the expected stroke. 'It will be a mercy if he does not recover,' the doctor said. 'He will be completely paralysed. That's not something your mother wants to have to face.'

My brother and I watched at his bedside, sometimes alternately and sometimes together, listening to the rasping breathing for more than twenty-four hours. Outside, the wet and dreary February day with a sky which was neither cloud, nor air, nor water but only what H. G. Wells once called a 'chewed-up bit of fourth dimension', died slowly on us and the lamps were lit along the road, and the yellow light scribbled tendrils on the pavements and lit glittering caves in the privet hedges which the wind shook. Now that my father was dying and one would never again address another word to him, or hear him speak who hardly ever in his life had spoken harshly, all was mysteriously changed. In spirit he was gone from the world as he wanted to be, because at last he knew it for the cheat that it was. Yet moment by moment his ruined body conjured up the strength to continue its astonishing fight with the angel of death, and this too ennobled him. It seemed a last chivalrous gesture to put up a fight to hold that which he

so much wanted to surrender. I could not yet feel sorrow, indeed held taut as a string by his breathing I could not even think: my one emotion was relief that it was over for him, and the issue at last decided for all of us after months of suspense. One could not but be awed by this sudden devastating blow conjured out of nowhere, like the sword of God, as if someone had cried, enough! enough! a truce had better be called.

A glassy fatigue overcame me, listening to the hoarse breathing that was slipping slowly into a death rattle. Even resting for a while at the other end of the house I seemed to hear him still, and was screwed up with waiting. And when the end came, with what a great sigh he became silent.

My mother was shocked, not only by grief, but by her half-formed understanding that he had died because he wanted to. 'It was too easy,' she said through her tears. 'I did not expect him to go like that, not saying a word.' A marriage is a partnership, and theirs had run for nearly thirty years, and now the senior partner had bolted without a word, leaving all the responsibilities to her. My mother's over-conscientious nature was shocked by this: she would have conceived it impossible on *her* side to go off and die with a chaos left behind her. 'I would never have left *him*,' she said. 'But perhaps it was God's mercy in the end. He could not have gone on for long like that.'

When I saw father laid out on the white satin of his coffin I felt cheated too. He looked so calm in death, the signs of dissipation gone from his parchment blue skin. His face had resumed that solemn gentleness which youthful portraits of him show, and the lashes which rested on his cheek were far too long and curling for a man of fifty. At that moment no being in the world seemed so remote and incomprehensible as the man from whose loins I had sprung, and who had carried off with him the secret of his utter desperation.

To the funeral came scores and scores of his Fleet Street friends. A pile of wreaths were raised to 'Freddy'. I can see his friends still in my mind's eye running and even leaping across the gravestones to take a shortcut to the graveside as the cortege approached: as I watched them from the carriage their stealthy, absorbed, hatless rush reminded me of nothing so much as the respectful swoop of press photographers at the critical moment in some royal ceremony.

When all was over and I drank port with my brother and sisters and uncles and aunts in the dining room at home and talked of the future, I learnt the full truth of the situation. My father's life insurance just about covered the residue of the mortgage on the house. My mother would have, when all had been settled, hardly a couple of hundred pounds or so. I saw with a shock that new responsibilities were going to fall on my shoulders, and did not know how I was going to meet them. I made the decision to go back to Fleet Street and rebuild my father's business. There were still papers left capable of yielding three hundred pounds a year, I thought. But I was too late. Even on the day my father died agents anxious to take over what my father had left started to pull the wires, and set the telephone bells jingling. By the time that I arrived on the scene, the succession had been disposed of. There was no opening for me in that world any longer: and there was no escaping the fact that we were poor again. 'It was a pity he made all that money,' my mother said. 'We should have been better off if we'd remained as we were in the old days.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

European Perspectives

The effort to find a post in order that I might give more help to my mother and my brother and sister still at school brought home to me the full extent of my economic worthlessness. I was twenty-five, and trained for nothing. My only qualification of a saleable kind was that I could write, but even in this field my experience was freakish. I had not trodden the routine mill as reporter either on a provincial weekly or London daily. The books I had published were not of the kind to rouse much attention.

It so happened that the newspaper amalgamations exactly coincided with the opening of the world slump which was to rage with such fury as to change the history of great nations. The closing down of London and provincial papers threw out of work many experienced journalists who, like me, had to resort if they could to free-lancing. I had become one of these unemployed who were eligible for union but not for state benefit, tasting the bitter fruit of unwantedness and dying a little from it every day.

In face of the mounting unemployment figures in all branches of my profession I despaired of getting any kind of job within my range. Prospects abroad were no better and emigration was out of the question. Without the aid my mother received from the Freemasons, and I from the National Union of Journalists, it would have gone hard, when the bottom was falling out of everything, for all of us. In this situation mother decided to take in lodgers and for the next three years medical students provided her with her main source of income. Of course, I was not idle: I worked a great deal longer at my desk than

most employed men, and spent my evenings lecturing and speaking, often without pay. I was determined that my writing, which was all that I had got left to support me, should get me out of the mess I was in, if nothing else could. The practice of writing articles and stories on speculation and sending them round to one editor after another was a hopeless one. It was no use congratulating oneself on the occasionally accepted piece when, because of the pitiless bombardment of rejection slips brought by the rest, one was depressed to the point of suicide. I abandoned this futile game in favour of something more systematic. I tried to cultivate the journals which had asked me to write for them: I put up ideas, and only if they were accepted and an article commissioned went on to write it. This meant that, for earning purposes at any rate, I no longer tried to write for any highbrow publications and went instead for the bread-and-butter jobs. So it came about that I went to Ramsgate, where an elementary school was teaching cookery to boys, to write an article entitled 'Do Boys Make Good Cooks?' I travelled to Poole to watch schoolboy excavations of a Roman pottery. My article was probably entitled 'Schoolboys Dig Up History'. I went up to Liverpool to write about a Florence Nightingale of the slums, a woman teacher so aghast at the disorder of the lives of her pupils that she installed baths for them, and places where their mothers could wash their clothes. Interviews were the fashion in journalism just then. One interviewed famous clergymen on the prospects of English football, and English footballers were asked to tell the world why they believed in God. And this vein in the press I managed to exploit for a while. J. B. Priestley provided me with an interview in which he denounced the use of great works of literature merely as the raw material of grammar. A phrase of his to the effect that 'a poem was not like a suitcase which any schoolmaster could unpack at will, and make an inventory of the contents' must have been worth at least ten pounds to me. I went to talk to H. G. Wells in the flat he occupied not far from Baker Street Station. But it turned out that he talked to me. He stood with his back to a bookcase and piped away at me in his thin, squeaky little voice—absolutely wrong for a great man, but just right for a Kipps or a Polly—in what was really a lecture on history, of which the moral was that we should not personify nations.

'Russia is not a person,' Mr. Wells said. 'Russia is a huge country with a great diversity of climate, peoples, languages, methods of production and cultural traditions. Yet'—and here he wagged his finger chidingly at me—'people still persist either in regarding Russia as the wonderful, energetic prophet of a new order or as a wicked and malignant conspirator. Such a way of thinking is perfectly idiotic, and in the end is bound to lead to idiotic, monstrous and cruel proceedings such as boycotts, wars, blockade and the rest of the foolery that is the lifeblood of international politics.'

'Children are much more interested in the story of human adventure and discovery and human achievement. They are much more interested in the way of life and the hunting, pastoral and nomadic and agricultural stages of man's history, than in the elaborate, bloodstained twaddle of kings and wives and princes, campaigns, annexations and national prestige with which we try—despite their wholesome, instinctive resistance—to fill their minds to-day.'

The phrase 'elaborate bloodstained twaddle of kings' went winging round the world: it was especially popular in the United States (since failure to include republics in his condemnation mightily pleased them) and I am most grateful to H. G. Wells for letting it fly, especially when I recall that it kept me going for a month or two. The most pleasurable of those interviews was the one I had with G. M. Trevelyan in his Cambridge home: he was then Regius Professor of History. We spent the day talking history: I quite forgot that I was visiting him merely in the course of a journalistic assignment, and he never once mentioned it. In the excitement of arguing with him the theories of history I overlooked even the necessity of taking notes. And so when finally I left him, it was to find myself in the train, my head buzzing with ideas, but without a single note. All the way down to Liverpool Street I tried to put down exactly the sequence of our talk, and to leave out of it as much of my own share as I could. I typed it out the same night and sent it to him and received back so generous a letter of praise that I kept it many years.

Similar assignments took me to such places as the very modern school run by Bertrand and Dora Russell in Hampshire, where the front door was opened to me by a very naked little shrimp, and I now recall only one conversation with the

great master which was on the subject of religious instruction. They did not, he said, give any nor did they make any propaganda against religion. The children were free to believe what they liked. But they did point out that whether one was religious or not might easily be governed by the chemical constituents of the body. For instance the chemistry master had demonstrated that consumption of a certain quantity of a chemical (which he named, but what I cannot now remember), produced a profound religious melancholy followed by symptoms remarkably like religious conversion. I puzzled over the logic of this pedagogy for many years until I finally decided that it had none. Yet at the time, deep in my own atheism, it had seemed a most significant remark. The difficulty began when one applied it, so to speak, in reverse—were certain chemicals capable of increasing one's atheism, or of making one a poet?

In the summer of the year my father died, while brooding over a savage ant battle on the steps of the rockery, I decided that I would write a novel. A successful novel might get me out of my economic misery, even an unsuccessful one might bring me a reputation. Though the plot of a novel of invention was turning in my mind, I felt uncertain of my ability to create and believed that I had to deal with that which I had lived through myself. A novel about my own childhood and adolescence began to sketch itself before me. I was twenty-five, and only that year, perhaps because my father's death had cut off the carefree past so sharply, had it come upon me that, without any expectation of this thing, there lay behind me, crystal clear, yet mysterious and moving, my own early youth, something on which I could look back with tenderness and sorrow, yet also as upon a life lived by a stranger. It was rather like that thrilling moment in the dark room when the image on the negative begins both to form and to become permanently fixed under the salts of the developer. The discovery that I had outlived the youth from which only a year or two ago it was inconceivable I should ever escape was itself a new birth. Now the task of trying to understand the boy that once I was and exploring his forgotten being filled me with such intense excitement that I began next day, without any further preparation, to hammer out the first chapter on my typewriter. For nearly two years I worked at the novel,

which I called *Fugitive Morning*, until it took shape in a form which I felt a publisher would approve. This task was the real core of my life just then, around which revolved all those desperate efforts to earn money to pay my mother for my keep and to help to bring up my schoolboy brother and schoolgirl sister.

In those years, assisted by many colleagues, I was also busy trying to persuade the Co-operative Movement in Britain that the Woodcraft Folk, now growing in size and importance, was something worthy of practical support in the shape of finance. The circumstances of its foundation compelled this youth movement to grow up under the wing of the Co-operative Movement, and now the time had come for generous support to lift some of the burden from my own shoulders. But after many years of asking, the mighty Co-operative Union granted us the sum of £10. Then began years of struggle to get them to increase this paltry sum. They were almost entirely wasted years, and to-day I regret nothing more than the time I spent trying to evoke some generosity towards youth from the officials of the vast and unworkable co-operative bureaucracy. The really unforgivable thing to them was that Paul had gone and built up a movement without asking their permission first, and the hope that they lived for—which was the reason a senior official once gave me for withholding help—was that ‘Paul would get tired and give up,’ and they could then disclaim further moral responsibility. Knowledge of this made me fight harder to build up a movement which would survive if I left it: in this, at least, I succeeded. Alas, it goes on addressing appeals to Co-operative generosity identical with those I was making twenty years ago, and with about as much success. Its leaders might spare themselves the labour of shooting peas at an elephant, I think, after this long time.

Charity compels me to admit that it was a co-operative educational scholarship which enabled me to make a visit to Vienna during the year that my father died, and to listen to lectures in, of all places, the Consular Academy set up during the monarchy. I stayed for the first week at Hotel Union in Doblingerstrasse and so came to walk as in a dream the city of Franz-Josef, of Schubert and Beethoven, and to take the air along the Ringstrasse, under the lime and chestnut trees

where once the Imperial guards strode along in red tunics with gold facings, white leather trousers and jackboots of shining patent leather, and were crowned with those high helmets over which flowing horsetail plumes solemnly rose and fell with every step. Or once there came—I could still see the pictures of them in my childhood books—the Hungarian guards with panther-skins thrown over one shoulder and herons' feathers nodding above their kalpaks. Here was the beginning of the high road to Asia of which Metternich spoke, and the city was still that fabled city to which I had lost my heart as a boy. To walk the white crystal pavements under an electric sun, and with a light heart, was to hear again in one's heart Schubert's ninth Symphony, and to stride to its jaunty airs. For the streets were scrupulously clean and round every lamp post and from every electric standard which served the grinding little trams, which ran in twos and threes round the town, hung baskets of flowers. The gendarmes (of which it is strange to think that a friend of mine is now chief) had some haughty resemblance then to the magnificent military of imperial days, and strode about the streets as if they were aware of it. When a friend of mine jumped off a tram and screwed his ticket up and threw it in the gutter in the casual, untidy English way, a gendarme came up to him, held him by the shoulder and swivelled him round, whipped out very smartly a neat little notebook, wetted his thumb as though to a drill, and flipped its pages from beneath an immaculate rubber band—and proceeded to write him out a receipt for two schillings. This, understanding no German, and without a clue to his offence, he paid, because he was a stranger and the habits of the natives should be observed. But when he received with a bow, heel-clicks, and a salute, the receipt in due order, his annoyance was so great that he screwed it up and flung it in the gutter. The hand came on to his shoulder again and swivelled him round, and out came the notebook and, yes, once again, and this time blushing, he paid, double. I am told that the amount of this fine has now been reduced, in a proper Socialist spirit, 'in order that the masses may participate'.

Not that we went to see the old Vienna so much as to listen to the new, which was social-democratic and building everywhere the most vast complexes of peoples' homes. The International Co-operative Congress was being held that

summer and I went to watch, for the first time, the legendary Russian co-operators in action. They were a disappointment: they were small, dark, enigmatic little men of the Molotov stamp, and were concerned only to demonstrate as noisily as possible their adherence to the Party line. The Communist Party was then in the midst of its most fierce and intolerant anti-Social-Democratic hysteria. Every Social-Democratic leader was the lackey of the boss class, the Fascist beast or traitor, the puppet dangled by bloodsucking capitalists: the boring vocabulary of abuse was exhausted against him. The true duty of a Communist was to expose him and destroy his prestige before the working-class. And so, at this Congress, before the pained, silent and timid Co-operative bureaucrats of the world, the noisy and tireless pigmies never ceased to rise to their feet to protest about some imagined new indignity offered to them or to the world proletariat. They paid no attention to the purpose of the Congress, which was to secure certain measures of international co-operation on the trading and cultural levels, and defied standing orders to move lengthy political resolutions. These called on the Co-operative Movement to struggle against war, and against the capitalist encirclement of the U.S.S.R., and demanded the renunciation of all collaboration with the League of Nations, 'the instrument of world imperialisms'. They demanded also that co-operators should 'support all the measures taken by the revolutionary organizations in the mobilization of the proletariat against the war danger'! Was Zelensky, the leader of the Russian co-operators, there? I rather fancy he must have been one of the bustling mock-revolutionaries putting forward the Party line with tireless insincerity, and striving to bring about the world revolution by bureaucratic decree. If Zelensky was not there, then who was the short, dark, owlish man in spectacles, so full of a fussy determination to be the great Party man? There is, in the Russian Communist Party, a great tradition of hero-worship. Every subordinate tries to look like his leader. Those close to Stalin stand like him, talk like him and write like him. And by the same token every subordinate of Zelensky was a miniature Zelensky. They must have found it difficult in the end to pick out the right man to hang. I was to meet Zelensky the following year in Moscow, though I did not yet know that.

There was a Workers' Sports Congress going on at the same time, and Red Vienna decked itself out in scarlet streamers, and every tramcar rumbled along with a festival bunch of scarlet flags on its prow to welcome the proletarian athletes. The facades of the Gemeindebauten streamed with bunting and round and round the Ringstrasse moved the giant parades of welcome—postmen's bands, firemen's bands, railway workers' bands, children with drums and fifes from the Tyrolean hills, sports workers in white singlets and red piping, full bosomed girls with fair streaming hair and white thigh-pinching bloomers, who looked as if they had just slipped off dressing gowns and were about to bathe—all those rising and falling bosoms devoted only to jumping over high jumps seemed to me somewhat of a waste—and long columns of girls and boys in blue shirts and blue dresses and red ties, the Red Falcons started in Vienna after the Great War by a young schoolteacher called Anton Tesarek. His movement had spread over most of Europe and in Germany was said to be 250,000 strong. I thought of my own poor, struggling movement, and sighed. In Vienna the Red Falcons received many kinds of subventions—from the city for welfare work with children, from the Socialist Party funds for the party side of it, and from trade unions, too, out of general goodwill. And so they could afford to run illustrated papers, maintain permanent officials, and establish training centres and properly equipped camps. I was very envious of their success. At night a vast torchlight procession moved from the Town Hall to the Stadium, a tawny river of light and smoke, as if indeed the Turks had at last come in to burn the city. I had been told to seek out Tesarek and had a brief talk with him, meeting his blue-eyed wife and smiling, radiant little boy, in that wing of the Schönbrunn Palace which had been given over to youth organizations. Through him I addressed a mass rally of his organization from one of the pillars of the fantastic Karlskirche and I began a friendship with Anton and his family which has survived all the vicissitudes of war, politics and changes of philosophy. Such international contacts were most heartening: they showed me to begin with that the 'Labour scout movement' at which I had aimed in England had proved an enormous success on the continent, and therefore there still seemed hope for it at home. It was also a relief to meet men and women

who understood without a great deal of painful and laboured self-justification what I had been driving at. I had grown so tired of co-operative officials who imagined that an organization called 'The Woodcraft Folk' must be a branch of the Carpenters Union. The discovery that Scouting and Wandervögel principles could be put to the service of the social revolution was a discovery I was not alone in making, it seemed.

Yet I was forced by accident to play a disingenuous role. I dared not admit to my Socialist friends that I was lodged with a Fascist. In Vienna I was the guest of a family whose son had been received in England, just after the end of the Great War, as a starving Austrian child in need of help. That I should come and stay with them was regarded as a small repayment for what their beloved England had done for darling Josef. Darling Josef turned out to be a youth as tall as I was, who clicked his heels and bowed when he introduced himself, and then stood very upright again. He was thin still, with a serious and even solemn face, and instead of looking at me, he looked along his nose at the distance, focussing upon the horizon a prolonged and anxious half-smile. It must have hurt him to maintain it so continuously. He was dressed in Tyrolean style—a grey suit with green facings and grey long trousers and—oh, treachery!—the Starhemberg Heimwehr badge in his buttonhole. I was a foreigner, and out of politeness could say nothing about it, and after all he was most zealous for my welfare, paying exaggerated attention to my slightest wants, and never departing an inch from the excessive politeness in which his personality was fixed. Did he ever unbend, I wondered? He was a student at the University, and on vacation, and he took me about with him. We went to the Prater and rode on the Riesenrad which broke down when we reached the top, and so we had a full twenty minutes during which we could gaze out over Vienna while they effected repairs. Josef was delighted that we got what he called such 'a good helping' for the few groschen that we paid. We watched the Wall of Death show in the park, in which a motor-cyclist looped the loop in an iron cage, with a bored and even yawning lion riding pillion, and then went and drank *schlagobers* in the gardens of Schönbrunn where I was terrified that Tesarek might see me on terms of intimacy with a 'class-enemy'.

Josef and his parents lived in an ancient part of Vienna, not

far from the Urania, in a flat in a narrow street where the tall houses crowded together, their façades grey with antiquity, the paint peeling off the doors and window frames and a smell of cooking on the staircases. Yet it was not a slum: the rooms were large and well-furnished. From the back windows one had shining glimpses of the canal. In the hot summer days the narrow street was dark and cool with shade, and the dogs languished gratefully on its kerb. At night the steeply raked roofs, drunkenly leaning from age, with here and there a thin chimney pot sticking up, and everywhere two small lighted windows under the roof's hood where the students, and perhaps musicians too, worked as of old in Vienna's garrets, were like a huddle of witches grasping their broomsticks, whispering a black mass together, and looking down on the street with yellow eyes.

Josef's fat and jolly father was a pork-butcher and one day, perhaps, he said, I would like to visit the shop. I could not but say yes, for he had grown fond of me since he discovered that my father was in the Artillery during the war, as he had been. He showed me his medals and albums of photographs, and a thin young man who looked like Josef stared out of them in a convict-like uniform. 'Perhaps me and your father we shoot at each other—boom!' he said, and laughed a great deal at the thought. Josef said, with a thin smile which showed his teeth, 'we shall go to the shop on a day when we have a "killings"—it is "killings" you say, or "slaughtering"?' And so we went. Behind the clean tiled shop of Josef's father were the slaughter-houses. Even as I arrived, a pig was being killed, and screaming away into the air. Josef smiled at me. 'She does not want to die,' he said. Presently there were more 'slaughterings' I was invited to watch. I had to retreat, handkerchief to nose, overcome by the smell of blood. Not only the new blood, but the old corrupted blood of the walls and stones and drains of the whole place, that slaughterhouse smell which had reached out to my nostrils in my boyhood from the kosher abattoirs in Aldgate High Street. It punched at my brain and stomach and made my head ache. I thought the squealing would never stop and even outside the sheds the noise of the blood gushing over the stones into the trough followed me.

A lunch had been prepared for us in the apartment over the shop: beautifully fried Wiener schnitzel with sauté potatoes and

crisp lettuce, and a slice of lemon, and a bottle of wine from Grinzing where the heuriger had begun. It had been prepared so lovingly that I could not refuse to eat it, but the smell of blood was in the air here, too, and I could not go on. 'But you must eat,' said Josef, quite angry with me at last. 'It is prepared special for you.'

That day, for the first time, Josef failed me as cicerone. He left his latchkey in the flat and we could not get in because his parents had gone visiting. We had to walk the streets which was pleasant enough in the ordinary way but perhaps from the pig-killing, I had suddenly begun to run a temperature. The fever was making me tremble, and I had unwillingly to confess that I was ill. Josef began to work himself into a state of anxiety because of his own carelessness. 'I shall never forgive myself,' he said, 'never in my whole life that I forgot my schlüssel. Just think, I have never in my whole life forgotten it until the day that you are ill.' I found it difficult to talk without my jaw becoming uncontrollable, and my voice wobbly, and so could not console him. But I did manage to say, 'I can't walk about—we must find a beer garden.' In the beer garden I could think of nothing my stomach would take except vermouth, and when I had drunk half a bottle of this I began to feel better. Josef, too, did well, and his eyes began to sparkle and his smile grew broader and broader. 'If it was not that you are ill,' he gulped, 'I would say we should forget my schlüssel every night and come here. 'At last, rosy and reeking with aperitif we both went drunkenly home, to find his parents in. Josef and I were sharing a huge double bed. You fell deep into a feather bed, as into a foam bath, and pulled a feather mattress on top. Into this incubator I sank very dizzily: I could hear Josef giggling still like a little girl as he undressed. My fever returned, but the heat of the bed and the vermouth began to work on me: I ran with sweat. It poured from me, soaking into the mattress. I felt sure it must have dripped through to the floor. What effect it had on the uncomplaining Josef I cannot imagine, perhaps he also did not know, for the vermouth he had drunk soon made him beatifically unconscious of my state. In the morning I was cured, but too weak to get out of an armchair until Josef's mother revived me with a hot nog of sherry and eggs. Then while the family went bathing I sat and watched, from the window,

the pavements baking in the sun and the dogs de-fleaing themselves in the shade and read through the Tauchnitz edition of Sitwell's *Before the Bombardment*. Those long sentences, sweeping in, musical, intricate and poised, like the combers coming into a bay, were just what my somnolence needed.

The Austrian nobility was waiting in sorrow and silence, but the middle and working classes of Vienna were living an illusion in those days. The middle class illusion was that all was (almost) as it once had been: true, there was a Socialist administration in Vienna, but it was a temperate and cultured one: for the rest the shops were gay, food was plentiful, the opera was superb—as it had always been—and if Vienna had lost the vast empire of which it had been the crown, it was hardly to be noticed as one walked about. There were soldiers in the barracks again, and the police had all the Imperial splendour and swagger still. To walk along the shaded Ringstrasse, past the museums and art galleries, the opera, the vast Hofburg, with the spire of St. Stefan rising over all, or to go and watch the white arab steeds prancing majestically round the tan of the Spanish riding school was to dream that all was once more as it had been, or at least that what threatened it could never overcome this solid world of Christian culture and bourgeois comfort. Even what had changed seemed often a change for the better, for in the gardens now taken up by a Russian military cemetery, one could listen to the best orchestras in Vienna for the price of a cup of coffee, a very great consideration in a post-inflation world.

The working-class illusion was that with the courageous social experiments of the Government of Red Vienna, under the old burgermeister, Karl Seitz, whose biography my friend Tesarek was to write,* the age of freedom and justice was ushered in. Karl Marx Hof stood as the symbol of this new dawn. The children's baths, the crèches, the new schools and hospitals were the mark of its humanity and hope. Even the violence which had marked Austria since the end of the war might be forgotten now that in Vienna itself a victory had been won. The long columns of children in red and blue marching the Ringstrasse were a sign that the new world was here.

But as I came away from Vienna there was a new portent over the frontier. The insignificant and despised Nazis won an

**Unser Seitz*: Verlag Wiener Volksbuchhandlung, 1949.

astonishing victory in the September 1930 elections, increasing their representation in the Reichstag from 4 to 107. And when other visits followed the Vienna one—visits to Paris, to Germany, and meetings with other socialist leaders in my line of country, including especially Kurt Lowenstein, headmaster of the Karl Marx Schule in the Red Neukölln area of Berlin, and Germany's principal social-democratic pedagogue, I began to broaden my view and deepen my perspective of the European scene. In Hamburg I witnessed a meeting of the Communists under the gigantic Bismarck statue. It was quite unlike the meetings of Communists in Paris or London. Here was none of the disorder and irresponsibility, the shoving and cheering, or the slovenly proletarian clothing such as cloth caps, white chokers and shapeless trousers. In addition to the faithful standing round at this meeting, listening intently to the orators, and, as always in Germany, neatly dressed and wearing bright, clean-laundered shirts and shorts, and as well-washed as any of the bourgeoisie, the red guards were drawn up, members of the Communist private army called the Red Frontfighters League, some with red armbands, some with red shirts, all with polished jackboots. Under the statue I saw what was to me the opening of the European civil war for suddenly with screaming klaxons along stormed many lorry-loads of brownshirted, jackbooted ruffians, with armbands displaying the crooked cross, and a battle opened for possession of the speaking site. Then came the police too, and three armies raged up and down underneath the statue clubbing each other impartially. The police won, because they were better armed, but had there been fewer of them they would have been forced to shoot. I lingered staring at Nazi and Communist headquarters in Hamburg. They were just what I had imagined, from the war novels I had read, the busy base headquarters of active sectors of the front to look like. Arm-banded, uniformed dispatch riders roared in on smoking motorbikes. Guards stood four deep at the door and examined passes. Little files of troops stamped in and out every now and then. Grim, helmeted men stared down from conference rooms on the busy scene below. Posters, flags and banners lit up the street with apocalyptic warnings about the future. There was no difference between the headquarters save in the colour of uniforms and flags. One might have used each as a setting for a Ruritanian comic

opera, but one could not have used the characters. Anything less comic in intention than they were, it would have been hard to imagine. They were filled with a sense of destiny, and happy to be in uniform. The Germans, who have no sense of the personally ridiculous, found it all exciting rather than embarrassing. No one ever sniggered. In Germany it was in bad taste to laugh at a uniform, even a political uniform.

Something quite mighty was happening to Germany. An enigmatic quality had crept into the letters from our youth comrades who were not socialists. In our first contacts with such movements as the Kronacher Wandervögel and the Deutsche Freischar in the twenties we felt no doubt at all that we stood for the same things. We felt drawn to them much more than to our own British Trade Union and Labour Movements. We had the same independence, the same love of the open air, the same eagerness to discuss everything under the sun. But now they were saying such dubious things that I was driven to look instead to international socialist contacts: for we were losing our first and best friends.

'I must say now,' Wilhem Boehme wrote, 'that what struck me most was the emphatic Englishness of your people with regard to all international socialism . . . This kind of national socialism is so altogether different from the German international kind that it opens quite new points of view to me. Perhaps Germany is a riddle for the other countries, for they are under no necessity to *return* from internationalism to nationalism, while Germany has been dreaming for centuries of world-brotherhood.'

And from Otto Jordan, of the Kronacher Wandervögel, came this: 'With no other party has the Youth Movement so much kinship as with the Nazis. National Socialism demands that education and politics shall be based upon the inner and most fundamental qualities of man. It is against crippling laws, against laziness, against unearned income, against cultural forms imposed from without. So much I think we can all accept. There is much here that we miss in other parties. These human, natural and fertile characteristics are part of the conscious German inheritance, formed in past ages. Thus arises the philosophy of *Race* . . . One of the most mortal enemies of race purity is the Jew. It is he who, through capitalism, interest and freemasonry etc., through international

Marxism and materialism threatens the German national character. Instead of these there must be an economy and culture which corresponds to the old German customs, religion and legal systems (instead of the present Roman law). Everything is based on the fundamental blood kinship. Instead of parliamentarianism comes the idea of leadership, of the fully responsible leader. Everything un-German is eliminated . . . Then comes the thought. This over-emphasis of the Nazis that Marxists, Jews and others are betrayers, these sharp oppositions, are dangerous. In principle I am all for understanding between the peoples; but we have had such unfortunate experiences in this direction that it is more and more difficult to maintain . . . Sympathy for the culture of other nations is undoubtedly good, so long as it does not lead to neglect of one's own national qualities.'

We were dismayed by letters like this: the thinking in them confused us. At some point one could not exactly locate these German comrades slid away from us in those many campfire discussions we held together. How beautiful they were, the youths from the defeated land across the sea, playing their lutes and singing their songs at our campfires. The golden down of their long rosy limbs shone in the firelight, their fair hair fell in locks over their faces, and each one had a characteristic toss of the head, like a colt's defiance, by which he shook his eyes clear. We admired them, but it was their mystical Germany we did not understand, though we tried politely enough.

'The Germans are not like other people,' they often said. 'They need a strong discipline.' 'It is no good judging Germany by the rest of the world. The Germans were never under Rome: they have a different history. They do not belong to Latin Europe.' 'One must think with the blood, by intuition and longing—it is not what one knows that matters, but what one *feels*.' 'There is something in the German soil which makes us different—that is why we do not like the Jews who do not have this quality.' There was much sense in some of it, but it never came to the point where we really understood what they were driving at. The dark history of Germany was still in the future: nothing then had been decided, and not a hair of the head of a Jew had been harmed. And it did not seem to us, who were not Germans, that *any* nation could possibly in the

broad light of modern history, accept so menacing a crank as Hitler. I knew that Germany possessed the most powerful and best organized working class movement of the world: of course, it would fight rather than accept Hitler. To this movement belonged history, in my view and the Marxist view, and the marriage of National Socialism and Germany was not to be thought of. *We* saw Hitler in terms of a brutal political realism in fancy dress, but from friends in Germany we heard of him mostly in terms of a cloudy idealism which dressed him up as Siegfried. 'Germany,' they said, 'can only have its own kind of socialism. It must show the world its own way to brotherhood and unity. We have to make our politics in the spirit of the Buende—in a longing for the Absolute.' I was quite incapable of answering in words. What came back to me each time was the spectacle of the brownshirts and redshirts skirmishing bloodily and happily under the mighty Bismarck statue, and I would ask myself—don't they understand what is going on in their own land?

CHAPTER NINE

The Leninist Circus

I came through Hamburg, on the way to the Soviet Union, in 1931. Those were the peak years of the Intourist Traffic, and I, like everyone else, was a most hopeful traveller. The society we were leaving as we ploughed across the North Sea was one in which, week after week, the unemployment figures mounted: huge tracts across the North of England and the lowlands of Scotland had become derelict humanly and industrially, even agriculturally. To live in a world where the most dire want was being answered by the burning of coffee in locomotives, the ploughing of wheat into the soil, and the throwing of fish back into the sea, was like living on a lunatic planet. It was the depth of our despair, the intensity of our nausea which made the Soviet Union, with its optimistic economic expansion and resolute economic planning, stand out like a New Atlantis of reason and hope.

My visit had been made possible by the help of Joseph Reeves. He was aware of my own economic plight, and said it was possible for me to go at a reduced rate in the party his Co-operative Society was organizing if I was prepared to act as leader. As I never minded running anything, I said yes delightedly, and set about raising the necessary £20. I managed to do this in the end by selling the dominion rights of my interview with H. G. Wells for £10 and borrowing the rest from a girl friend. This small debt embarrassed me for years because, try as I would, I never seemed to have ten pounds in my bank account all at one time, except on the wrong side. I planned to write a series of articles on the Soviet Union to pay my expenses, and to help to keep me through the forthcoming

winter. But, alas, when I did return it was to an England in the throes of the worst political crisis in years. The MacDonald Labour Government had resigned, a new National Government led by him had been formed and the gold standard had been abandoned, while the opening shots of a general election were being fired. Russia was pushed off the front page, and I was able to sell only a tenth of what I had planned.

Well, there I was, in charge of what the Russians called a 'delegation', though we were appointed by nobody but ourselves, on the good old bourgeois principle that those who could afford to go, went. I was even promoted by the Russians to be 'Director' of the English 'Centrosjus' in the course of a series of banquets in which we ate too much and drank too much. It was as a Director of the 'British Wholesale Union' that my photo appeared in Russian papers, to the annoyance of those really important English co-operators, who were indeed directors of something or other, and thought me very small fry, guilty of an impudent imposture.

A foretaste of the Russian adventure came when, at Hamburg, a new Russian ship from Leningrad berthed alongside our own vessel. Those Communists of Hamburg, who had scrapped the year before with the Nazis, came in ceremonial fashion, accompanied by banners and bouquets of red roses and much Marxist rhetoric, to give the new ship an official reception: the Soviet consul and staff were there too and somehow when I looked at them it was like looking at the Russian delegation of busy pigmies in Vienna all over again. When the new motor ship, the *Ukrana*, drew alongside, its rails were thronged by drably clad Russian workers of both sexes, all visibly excited, and gazing at us with as much curiosity as we regarded them. We must have been, to their minds, the first bourgeois they had seen out of captivity for many years. Not that we felt bourgeois, but we were to discover that the most ordinary citizen of England, wearing holiday clothes, enjoyed an undeservedly prosperous air in the Soviet Union, where clothes were rationed, expensive, and poor. Indeed, I had brought with me only a sports jacket and flannel trousers, which in my penury were all the clothes I possessed just then. True, I had brought shorts to change into, because I expected the weather to be hot, but when I wore them in a Moscow street they drew excited

crowds. Workmen and women crowded round me to feel the material, which was corduroy, and to make rude remarks (I rather suspected) about my bony knees. They imagined, I fear, that I had forgotten to put on my trousers, and come out in corduroy underpants. 'Sport?' they cried, slapping me on the back. 'Sport?' 'Sport, da,da,da,da, sport!' I cried back lustily, for unless you were *sport* it was indecent, it seemed, to expose your knees in Russia in public. In one of the banqueting speeches I was always being called upon to make, I tried to tease the Russians about this, and told them that I knew of members of a certain Russian religious order who had asserted that the October Revolution of 1917 signalized the coming of the Kingdom of God, when man would once more be innocent, and walk naked before his fellow without a sense of sin. They had therefore come naked into the city to proclaim this new day, and gathered crowds round them just as my bare knees had done. To escape the crowds they boarded a tramcar where the conductor meanwhile holding up the traffic, engaged them in a dialectical discussion about the significance of nakedness in the proletarian revolution, and ended by persuading them that though, theoretically, they were right, until Moscow had been cleansed and made new by 'the revolutionary will of the toiling masses' they were liable to catch diseases from the degenerate agents of the capitalists, who still lurked in the streets. Graciously they acceded, on ground of hygiene only, to go home and dress. Then the traffic was able to move again. My Russian hosts did not laugh and I was quietly taken aside afterwards with an interpreter and told that I should not say things which slandered the toiling masses: bourgeois dilettante inventions such as mine only gave ammunition to the class enemies of the U.S.S.R.

The Ukrana, which put this recollection into my head, was on its maiden voyage. It had been built in Leningrad shipyards for passenger and goods traffic in the Black Sea, and was on its way with 500 picked shock brigadiers or *udarniki* as freight. This was the reward for their services in the industrial reconstruction of the U.S.S.R. During our absence they were let loose on England for a day or so, to the astonishment of the daily press. There was no doubt that they were workers. Their faces, their hands, their dress betrayed it. Most of them had

not been outside their country since the revolution, and in what state they came now! We were certainly impressed. If this was the revolution there could be no doubt as to which class had come out on top. The well-built ship and its proletarian passenger list were an impressive introduction of the new Russia.

As our little boat slid gently along the Kronstadt canal, past the fortress where there had been the famous mutiny of sailors against the terrorism of the new regime, we crowded eagerly to the rails to watch the slender golden spire of the Peter-Paul Fortress, and the great handsome dome of St. Isaac rise out of the sea. We were at the gateway to the new land, and presently docked in the Neva close to the spot where the cruiser Aurora had stood when she shelled the Winter Palace in October 1917. But my first thought, when we were set down on the cobbled quays to await the shabby omnibuses which were to drive us down the Nevsky Prospekt to the Oktober Hotel, was of the unexpected beauty of this northern Venice. The gothic of Germany was left behind: here were long, graceful Palladian buildings, painted often enough in contrasting reds and pinks, blues and greys, and baroque churches and government offices, in vista after vista along wide, tree-lined boulevards which were intersected by gleaming canals: all was lucid, cool and clear in the brilliant July sun, and its spaciousness needed a Canaletto to do it justice. It was indeed as if we were moving into a new intellectual and spiritual climate. We soon discovered that Leningrad was not Russia, but rather Russia's idea of Europe, and it was perhaps not an accident that the revolution preferred to base itself on Byzantine Moscow: the abandonment of Leningrad was a preliminary to the abandonment of the whole of Western Europe.

At the customs office they had gone through my luggage and taken out a pamphlet by Trotsky on *The Mistakes of the Bolshevik Leadership* and flung it disdainfully into a corner. Why had I brought it? It was pure cussedness, I think, because I felt even before leaving England that the full symphony of propaganda would be let loose against me, indeed Reeves had warned me so, and I wanted something which would support my refusal to succumb. Yet when I saw the Customs official, a little ten-a-penny bureaucrat, throw contemptuously away the considered

arguments of one who had helped to create his world for him, I was shocked at the indifference it displayed to freedom of thought and one's debt to history.

We came by bus to the Oktober Hotel. As I was signing the hotel register my arm was tugged and I turned round and there by my side was a seedy little man, in a black overcoat, and two days' growth of beard. He was smoking a Russian cigarette with a cardboard holder and puffed aromatic smoke in my face. It was inconceivable that anyone would know me in Russia. 'You want me?' I asked, raising my eyebrows in a lordly way. He gave me a monstrous, conspiratorial wink. 'You English?' he asked in the hoarse voice of a man who sleeps at night on park benches. I nodded. 'English, good. You like nice Russian girl? Nice fat loving girl? White Russian girl good for Englishman.'

My face showed distaste and I tried to shake his hand off my sleeve. Was this Russia? I did not know what to say. 'With party,' I said, with a grimace intended to indicate that this was all too public.

'Good. Plenty of girls for party,' he replied in his hoarse, confidential whisper. 'Plenty, look.' He swivelled me round abruptly and there sitting on the settee opposite the reception desk, as placid as cows in a meadow and nearly as huge, sat six fat Russian girls all looking to me exactly alike. Dazed by the sight of this fleshy herd, I shook the pimp off and went angrily upstairs with my bags. Banging against my thigh as I walked, was the notebook in which I had begun to put down systematically what I was learning about the U.S.S.R. I had started my notes on the ship because lectures had been given there by the Communist fraction of the passengers. In one of them, on the social policy of the Bolsheviks, it had been asserted that there was no more prostitution in the U.S.S.R.: being purely an evil of capitalism it had been abolished with it, and ex-prostitutes now lived socially-useful lives in institutions set up for their reform.

I was soon to come across a second contradiction of this kind. In Leningrad we were shown the film, *The Road to Life*. It is a remarkable film which describes in terms of the most tender humanity how a young Russian teacher set out to win back the *besprizhorni*, the homeless young vagabonds by which Russia had been plagued since the Civil War, to lives of

decency and service to society. The film is instinct with truth, and when I watched it a warm rush of sympathy overcame me. If this was the spirit of Bolshevism, then, I privately admitted, my own criticisms and reservations were petit-bourgeois. We were told that almost no youths were homeless now, they had all been coaxed or rounded up into reformatory institutions. Thanks to education in 'the revolutionary role of the toiling masses,' the *besprizhorni* were a problem of the past. There seemed no reason to doubt it. Yet when I went to Moscow, in advance of the party to arrange its programme, I saw, slouching everywhere in the most hideous and indescribable rags, homeless youths of the type described in the film. I could never go out anywhere without seeing them, a scab upon the body of the city, and what troubled me most was that to the citizens of Moscow they must have been so long a familiar spectacle that no one noticed them any more. The good citizens did not raise their eyes at them as they did at us, but passed them with more indifference than the Londoner accorded to the street musician. Even a piteous youth I saw, with a tin in hand, begging from passers-by who averted themselves from his stink, was not moved on by the passing policeman. When now I think of Moscow in the August sun, it is these children I see again, like stray cats and dogs, slinking in corners, squatting mangily and sleepily in the sun and delousing themselves, and watching all the time, as persecuted animals do, for the slightest hostile move from the human beings who surrounded them. One such wreck lay stretched out asleep on a park bench, when I passed by with my interpreter. His body was burnt a coppery black, his long bleached hair was matted round his skull in the kind of mane which reminded me of descriptions of Indian wolf children. One outstretched hand still, in his sleep, gripped a tin. His clothes no longer resembled garments bought in a shop so much as leaves of rags secured to his body by string, which the wind blew about, exposing his lean brown nakedness. 'Come on,' I said. 'I don't understand why there are all these children like wild dogs around. Let's ask him why he doesn't go to the authorities.' The interpreter looked both frightened and uncomprehending, as if I'd made a social bloomer, and with expostulations of considerable reluctance came forward with me. But the sleeping boy had one bright animal eye open: at my resolute step

he leapt with a low moan from the bench, and ran like a hunted dog across the flower beds. I never succeeded in getting nearer one than that. The interpreter shrugged her shoulders and made explanations to the effect that these were not the real *besprizhorni* but the children of kulaks who had been against the regime and would not let the authorities help them. I did not believe her, but in a general way she was right. *The Road to Life* dealt with the *besprizhorni* problem as it existed at the end of the Civil War. Those children were dead, or had been rescued and brought back to society. But the visit to Russia we were making then coincided with the height of the war the Bolsheviks were waging against the peasantry under the title of *collectivization*. To us, then, collectivization appeared the kind of economic and social advance the Russians declared it was, and it is a mark of the efficiency of the Russian censorship that we travelled twice through the Ukraine without ever being aware of the frightful campaign against the peasants then going on. We knew there was famine in certain areas. 'Crop failures' was used to explain the shortage of food in Moscow, which effected even such privileged visitors as we were. These new *besprizhorni* were most probably the children of shot or transported peasants.*

It was astonishing what we saw and excused. The report† that I edited on my return makes it obvious that there were many things wrong. It speaks of queues, of 'a real shortage of perishable foodstuffs' (butter, milk, and vegetables!), of low hygienic standards in the shops, of food buried under battalions of flies, of originally good vegetables and fruit 'in a pulp state' before they reached the shops. 'The waste must be enormous,' the Report remarks.

We saw women working everywhere and a woman member of the delegation wrote: 'We saw young women acting as street-sweepers, tram conductors, tram drivers, pointswomen (sitting on an iron stool, or wooden box, by the points, an iron rod in their hands and protected from the sun by a large fixed umbrella), traffic signallers, also women on duty at railway level crossings. We noticed a woman guard on a train

*In *Retour de L'U.R.S.S.* André Gide gives a detailed picture of *besprizhorni* in Russia in 1936, five years later.

†Russia 1931: *Report of Two Groups of Co-operators*, Co-operative Union Ltd., 1932.

and policewomen, whilst attendants were generally women, and hefty young women were drilling young men in the Park of Rest and Culture, or standing on lorries with megaphones, making speeches, or calling people to meetings. They act as guides to tourists, interpreters at banquets, and march through the streets with young men in the shock-brigades. We saw them marching, shouldering rifles at the head of a young communist's funeral procession, also acting as coffin bearers at a private funeral.' Our miner delegate found women working in the candle-lit coalmines of the Donbas and I saw women at work in steel-rolling mills, on furnace tapping. I knew that women had always worked in heavy industry in Russia; the novels of Maxim Gorki told me no less; and that women's battalions had formed part of the Tzarist Army—one had even defended the Winter Palace against the Bolsheviks—so this employment of women everywhere did not shock me. But the Russians continually minimized it, and made haste to excuse the employment of women in heavy and dangerous work against their own industrial code, by saying that it was just 'temporary'. I longed for more frankness.

We saw pitiful things—free markets, of a poverty which made the Caledonian junk market appear like the Wembley Exhibition, where peasant or working women, nursing their babies, squatted on the ground holding up microscopic scraps of yellowed meat, or one tiny egg, or, most pitiful of all, a woman patiently holding up one worn satin-covered shoe. 'What on earth can she get for one shoe?' I asked derisively, then flushed with shame, for the other was still on her foot. She was selling the shoes off her feet to live.

I wrote a report on hotels, for *The Tourist* had asked me to do so, and said, 'Even in the first class hotels one may find bugs, or rats, and one is certain to find beetles and flies . . . the third class hotels are definitely bad as regards food, service and cleanliness, and since these are the only ones within the pocket of the bulk of the tourists, there will have to be wholesale reorganization.' I did not tell the story of how, in the best hotel in Rostov, every time I opened my bedroom door at night and switched on the light I was puzzled by a brown flash and rustle. This seemed to be an optical and aural illusion. One night I tried to track it to its source. I switched off the light again and waited, staring intently at the wall, then

switched it on again: the flash and rustle was the frantic effort of hordes of cockroaches to escape into darkness. In disgust and anger I began to turn out my bags and spilled hundreds of cockroaches from my clothes. Every morning my wrists were bleeding with the bites of bed bugs.

In this hotel we had been compelled to change our itinerary because we were waiting for an interview with the Communist chief of the town who was supposed to be arranging certain visits for us. Every day I was told that he was 'inaccessible', 'away', 'delayed', or 'ill' according to whomever I asked. Next door to my room was the hotel's best suite, facing on to the street. I was kept awake many nights by the crash of glasses, the guffaws of men, and the screams of girls. I remembered the seedy little pimp in the Oktober Hotel and wondered. An orgy of Maxim Gorki intensity was going on day and night. More curious than complaining I spoke to the manager. He looked startled. 'Sir, it is nothing that you hear,' he said earnestly. 'It is a conference.' 'Sounds a very Russian one to me,' I said. 'It is best not to joke,' he muttered. Then in a confidential undertone. 'It is the Communist leader himself. That is why you cannot see him. He is too busy at his work. It is best if your party does not stay.'

Since we had already waited three days for the man in the next room to me, I took the hint and the party travelled on to Kiev a night later.

In Rostov I had often seen two sleek priests, as alike as twins, driving together in a droshky. They had long, well-brushed chestnut beards, and curly chestnut hair which came down to their shoulders. No one molested them or remarked them, and though on the whole the priests of Europe are not among the cleanest members of the community, these two impressed me by just this quality amid the general squalor of the town. In Leningrad, however, a full-scale anti-God campaign was in progress and no priests were to be seen walking openly in the streets, let alone riding in droshkies. On the contrary one met, everywhere, the anti-God demonstrators, the processions of trade-unionists, communist youth and young pioneers, holding up to the sky for God to see their grotesque caricatures of Christ and the Virgin Mary, their evil banners of fat, concupiscent priests pawing money bags with hands like claws, or ripping the bodices off young girls. The

Cathedral of St. Isaac, magnificent outside, but tawdry within, was given over to secular purposes and housed, in fact, an anti-God exhibition which my conscientious atheism compelled me to visit. It was no more than a static procession, debased by the same coarse caricatures, and the same jokes from the anti-clerical armoury of the whole world, aimed at the disparity between priestly promise and performance. There was the same lustful gloating, at the level of lavatory *graffiti*, over the Holy Family and the mystery of virgin birth. 'Research' had made its contribution in the form of a number of glass cases containing bones or holy relics of which the allegedly fraudulent character was gleefully revealed. Religion was 'exposed' as part of the 'pathology' of capitalism and Lenin's and Marx's dicta on the subject were to be found everywhere. How nauseating and obscene it was to me, above all in this vast cathedral where despite the vulgarity, there was the whisper of the mystery beyond man's power to penetrate. An air of heavy-handed official instigation hung over the campaign for 'The Abolition of Relics of Superstition,' from beginning to end. One could almost see it in terms of an official calendar of celebrations on the desk of some overworked bureaucrat, an affair to be sandwiched expeditiously between the Komsomol Week and 'the Week for the Loan of the Toiling Masses for the Socialist Construction of the Fourth Year of the First Five Year Plan'. It contrasted so lamentably with the noble policy enunciated by Lunarcharsky, who said that the religious monuments and buildings of the whole of Russia were part of the immemorial heritage of the proletariat, and had to be preserved, or, where they had suffered from priestly greed or ignorance, restored. That was an attitude which necessitated a certain reverence for religion, even if one labelled it human error. But the Communists were proud of the number of churches which they could boast, in 1931, of having turned over to 'useful' purposes like schools, clubs, pigsties, granaries, stables and rifle ranges. They had posted up a list of these 'conversions' in the Cathedral of St. Isaac.

I am sorry to say that our official report drew a discreet veil over the whole thing.

The investigations of our party showed the utmost disparity in wages. The information collected by one member showed that the lowest wage of which he had record was 20 roubles a

month for young people employed by the Rostov Tobacco Factory: industrial workers generally received from 80 to 100 roubles per month. Managerial incomes began where these left off and rose to about 300 roubles a month, the wage of a director of the Moscow Dynamo. 'The director's wage,' the report said, 'is, of course, the Communist Party's maximum, i.e., the maximum that a member of the party may accept. Thus a member of the directing staff does not necessarily get more than the workers under him; a revolutionary position indeed!' In view of the high prices we did not see how a worker could live on 80 roubles a month. But I had learnt the Marxist lesson well, I now see. I wrote for the Report a casuistical justification which not only explained away the vast disparity between wages and conditions in the land of equality, but got rid of shortages too. Although I am now ashamed of this, I will quote the most important section: it is essential to-day to understand by what verbal tricks we deceived ourselves then.

I first explained that there were genuine shortages in the U.S.S.R. especially of perishable foodstuffs and consumers' goods, due to the overloading of the transport system, to its seasonal congestions, and to inexperienced management, 'but more than all these, at least as far as manufactured goods are concerned (shortage) is due to capital being directed into heavy industry and machine industry, and not, at the moment, into light industry: hence the country is industrializing itself at the expense of its standard of living and an abundance of cheap manufactured goods'.

All this was scrupulously honest, but then I began to peddle a dubious line of Marxist apologetics. The shortage, I decided, was to a large extent more apparent than real, for this reason: 'In England, or any other country for that matter, excepting the U.S.S.R., supply and demand determine the price of an article. If, say, we were short of boots the price of boots would rise until the supply adjusted itself to the demand. In other words, boots would be supplied not to those who had need of them, necessarily, but only to those who could make their demand effective in terms of money. This is the normal working of economic laws in capitalist countries, and the subject of countless textbooks. However, prices in the U.S.S.R. are rigidly controlled, they do not rise; if there is a shortage production proceeds until supply meets demand, though

prices do drop rapidly if supply overwhelms demand. Thus the regular wage earner has the best of both worlds.

‘Nor is that all that goes to create an apparent shortage. *Wages in the U.S.S.R. are continually being scaled upwards, while prices remain fixed or are scaled downwards . . .* So shortage is always real in capitalist countries but never apparent because production is cut and prices are raised to level up with (effective) demand, whilst in Russia shortage is always apparent, but never so real, because actual purchasing power is always outstripping productive power, and not, as in the bourgeois states, limping miles behind it.’ I then went on to announce that this situation caused the bourgeois critics much joy ‘but little consolation in the end, because falling prices and rising wages, while they result in a temporary state of affairs in which a man can only spend his wages by re-investing part of them back into industry, mean that the standard of living is rapidly on the upgrade.’

The italics were mine in the original text, which emphasizes the importance I attached to my casuistical argument. But as far as I can see I had no evidence at all either that wages were being continually scaled upwards, or that prices were following the reverse trend. Indeed, this was not happening. I was the fatuously willing victim of propaganda, and the doctrine of what ought to happen under socialism had become confused in my mind with what was actually taking place in Russia. About that my observations on the spot, carried on in co-operative stores of every grade, told me that goods were expensive and scarce. Most of the available goods were rationed, but upon a far from equal basis. The better paid workers enjoyed correspondingly better restaurants and had superior shopping facilities: it did not appear to me that the poorly paid workers (who were the bulk) enjoyed compensatory privileges, though in our shame about this inequality we hastened to gloss over their destitution. The capacity to live at all, even at subsistence level (for the rations to which one was entitled did not always arrive) depended on one’s power to buy in what we should call to-day the black market, but which Russia called the free market, which even the government entered, as trader, in order to scoop off purchasing power. In the free market prices might be anything from ten to a hundred times the prices of rationed goods. The worker’s

standard of living was governed by the cash he had left after he had paid his rent, dues, levies and the cost of the rationed goods he managed to claim. The eighty-rouble-a-month worker had no more than ten or so roubles to spare, enough for a little free market butter or skimmed milk, whereas the well-paid worker perhaps scraped together a hundred. To buy an overcoat, sheets, blankets or even a cooking pot might be as much the cause of a major financial crisis in a Russian workman's home as for an English unemployed family to embark on the purchase of a piano. A budget which looked hopeful on controlled prices became penurious once it had to face the purchase of some necessity, unobtainable in the co-operatives, at free market prices.

My first argument—that the Russian standard of living was being constantly scaled down to provide capital for heavy industry—was the true one: it could not be maintained, in logic or in truth, with the contrary one I also advanced. No country in Russia's impoverished situation could have carried out enormous capital investments in heavy industry in a period of rising wages and falling prices of consumer goods. The Russians were buying up the products of factories faster than they could be turned out not because their standard of living was high but because there was a famine of the simplest necessities, deliberately brought about when N.E.P. was ended, and planning introduced. It was difficult to reconcile this wretched, miserly austerity with the victory of the working class: had this class really possessed dictatorial power it would immediately have set about reversing the order of Russian economic priorities: consumer goods would have been produced in greater abundance whatever the cost to Russian heavy industry. Certainly in a time of food famine, the export of food would have been stopped. But though in 1931 hunger was acute, I returned to London on a boat the holds of which were loaded with barrels of fruit pulp and tubs of Siberian butter.

Why then, in the *Report*, did I and other contributors put such a good face on our experiences? Because there was another side to the whole picture and it was this which impressed us most. We contrasted the new Russia with the effete, enfeebled Tzarist regimes. The U.S.S.R. was in the midst of a gigantic reconstruction and most Russians we met

were glowing with pride about it. Whatever their private difficulties and disappointments, there before them concretely in new tenement, canal, factory, model city and railroad, the new socialist world was rising about them. We saw this plan being worked out. A builder in the party recorded that he 'did not remember a single factory which was not in process of enlargement, sometimes to double its size'. Factory complexes like Selmashstroy, near Rostov, where a plant had been erected on sandy waste for the manufacture of equipment on Ford lines, deeply impressed me. The bays were as broad and airy as aeroplane hangars, and production had started even in some that were only half-finished. Scores of times we stopped at places where new cities or works were rising with the speed of shanty towns. One felt around one the exhilarating sense of a nation which had taken off its coat and was seriously attacking its backwardness. If there was at times a note of hysteria in the official propaganda about it, and if, too, the sober British workmen of our party could see plenty of evidence of waste and mass spoilage, yet all seemed excused by the supreme effort Russia was making. Since it bore such a startling contrast to the growing misery and inertia at home, we were one and all anxious not to be carping or obscurantist in the face of the making of history. A proverb more fruitful of evil than any other I know was often repeated among us—'You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.'

As guests of honour we sat in the Tzar's box in the old Maryinsky theatre looking down on so many rows of soberly clad trade-unionists that the evening gathering resembled more a session of the Leningrad Soviet than a night of gaiety, and watched the old Imperial corps-de-ballet dance its way austere through the three acts of Delibes' *Sylvia* without one concession to the rough new world. Our hosts of the Leningrad Co-operative Society and Vera, our interpreter, told us with pride that everything was unchanged, not a traditional step had been disturbed by the Revolution: yet what I thought of most of the time was that it was upon these boards that Pavlova had learned to dance so incomparably.

It was not until I watched Mayakovsky's production of *Roar China*, Tretiakoff's bitter tract against British Imperialism,

in the Opera House at Kiev that I discovered the revolutionary theatre in all its vigour. In this play, the theatre had become purely the vehicle of Bolshevik propaganda. The production was severely stylized: a Cubist battleship dominated the stage, and choruses of coolies advanced upon it, and retreated from it, with a uniformity which would have done credit to the Brigade of Guards. There were no individuals in the play, only symbols of forces, as befitted a theatre which poured scorn on drama about persons. Tretiakoff's play resolved itself into a Greek drama, with protagonists and chorus, and the root of the dramatization became more obvious still when British officers appeared on the scene wearing the grotesque masks of *Pravda* caricatures—long faces, fang-like teeth, turned up noses and monocles. There was generic similarity between these monstrous figures and the cartoons of wicked priests and capitalists in St. Isaac's: the Soviet Union was busy creating its mythology of the capitalist underworld. Despite the gargantuan stylizations, the play was a stirring and brilliant spectacle: I did not understand more than one word in two hundred, and Vera grew tetchily impatient when I asked her to translate, but I no more needed to understand the speech than the peasants who might have been in the audience. For the grotesque mime told the story just as well as the words. *Roar China* turned out to be rather a dull play when I came to read its English translation, which I bought at the Bomb Shop in Charing Cross Road. The bitterness of the author against mythological capitalists smelled too rankly in it. It was played by some London left-wing theatre groups and hailed as the 'last word in the exposure of British Imperialism in China'. But the last word, as a matter of fact, rested with the Kremlin, which executed Tretiakoff in 1937 on the grounds that he had been a Japanese spy for twenty years.

No genuine proletarian would have gone to *Roar China* out of choice. Where then were the entertainments of the masses? I discovered them only when I visited what was called a circus, but was in fact a vaudeville show. The circus was housed in a shabby, flapping marquee on some waste ground on the outskirts of Kiev. The trodden earth around it exuded an odour of baked and trampled grass. Barefoot children, their naked torsoes burnt black by the hot steppe sun crowded round the entrance or, in defiance of the new proletarian

morality, sought to sneak inside by crawling under the tent brailing. Chewed rinds of melon and sunflower husk were scattered among the usual litter of the twisted cardboard holders of the state monopoly cigarettes (3,000 tons of woodpulp had been saved in one year, my notebook said, by cutting the length of the holder 1 centimetre). The propaganda of the circus was purely formal, and consisted of some slogans about the five year plan printed in white on red streamers, and a worn portrait of Stalin underneath a description of itself as 'The Leninist Circus'.

The atmosphere was pungent with Balkan tobacco, and the inescapable Russian odour of yesterday's cabbage soup. The show was so bad, for the most part, that it reminded me of the Penny Theatre I had once visited in a field near the centre of Princes Risborough, where the policeman, ostler, judge and jailer was also the heroine, and spoke in a surprising falsetto which he occasionally, out of an excess of zeal, applied to the wrong part. There was a one-act domestic drama with a Marxist moral of which I understood not a word except the moral, which was that the good Marxist workman gets the pretty girl as well as the shock-brigadier award, and then a dancing bear of the kind one saw in the streets of London in 1913 jiggling to the fiddle of a German musician. The poor thin tumblers and contortionists who displayed on trapezes looked like the starveling mountebanks of Picasso's blue period. A comedian with a red nose sang a nasal song and the wretched show went drivelling on, before the delighted audience, until three men came on pushing what purported to be a grand piano. At once the atmosphere became pure Grock. The first man was little and fat and dressed in clothes so much too big for him that he kept losing his hands and feet. Every time he wanted to do something with a hand he had to push it through yards of sleeving. When he wanted to run he had to hold his trousers up, and if he wanted to run with something in his hands, first he had to put the thing down and pull his trousers up, and then he had to let his trousers go in order to pick the thing up. In that way he made the kind of progress which somehow resembled Russia's economy under the Five Year Plan, if the truth be known. But he was not guying anything except himself, and in the grand clowning tradition to which the reeking tent immediately warmed.

The second chap was of middling size but dressed in clothes so much too short for him that yards of bilious sock showed below his turn-ups, and his shirt leaked out around his waist. The third on the other hand was tall and solemn with a sad face, he wore black tights and a black bowler and looked like an undertaker's mute. They were the piano-tuner's shock brigade. It took them a week to get the piano in position, despite the advice the audience shouted. They pushed it first this way, and then that, and then they came to one side and regarded it cheek on hand—all except the fat little man, and he could never make his cheek rest on his hand without it pushing him over.

At last it was ready and they all shook hands, and the mute sat down on the stool to play. The first note came out so flat that the audience shrieked. The mute raised one frozen eyebrow at us and we let out another howl. And so he started to look inside the piano, and immediately he got up from his seat a tune began to play somewhere on its own accord. All three of them walked thoughtfully round looking for the tune. The mute grew so worried that he rummaged in the piano and hauled out the things he found in its innards—a string of calico sausages, a frying pan and a chamber pot which he threw at the other two. To clear up the mess the middle-sized one gathered them all up and stuffed them down the fat man's trousers. They fell out of the bottom, of course, and the fat man let go of his trousers and picked them up, and then he put them down and picked up his trousers, and all the time the tune was still playing. The mute sat down again. The tune stopped. He stood up and it started again. The proletarians shouted at him. Surprised by what they said he looked at the seat. He turned it over. There was nothing. He lifted up the top of the seat and a pigeon flew out and flapped to the back of the stage where a hand shot out of Stalin's mouth and caught it surrealistically. The other two were hunting in each other's clothes where they found every suggestive kind of object except a tune. The maddening music-box went on playing: technically it was quite interesting to speculate where it might be. The audience shouted with delight and so the mute smashed the seat to pieces (but in the kind of way which meant they could put it together again for the next show) and still no tune, and the seat wasn't any good to sit on any more. So the mute sat on the

middle man's knees, and the middle man sat on the little man's knees and he gradually subsided until he lay on the floor holding his friends up by one finger supporting the middle-sized man's behind. He would forget what he was doing and whisk his finger away to scratch his nose, but just before the two quite collapsed his one stubby finger would lift them up again. Of course the tune stopped while the mute was playing on the cracked piano, but it started as soon as they broke up the balancing act.

The audience worked itself into a frenzy and shouted instructions which made the proletarian girls blush. Horrified at them the sad-faced mute raised himself up, pulled his clothes meaningly together and began to mince off with his nose in the air. The fat man pulled out a stethoscope and tried to find the tune by listening to the bums of the other two, and in other surprising places. Then they all began to crawl about under the piano. They exchanged hats, they got entangled in the fat man's trousers, they found a dead cat and threw it at the audience and had a wonderful time. But no tune. And so they got really angry. They pulled the piano to bits and threw the bits into the wings where invisible hands caught them. Nothing came out except the same pigeon. But to our relief the tune had gone with the piano. They smiled beatific smiles at each other, shook hands, raised hats and sat down on invisible chairs, crossing their legs, picking their noses and looking quite happy. When they stood up and turned around to go the tune started. The audience gave a roar. Each one had a musical box tied to his seat. How had they got there? We had certainly not seen them before. The three clowns pretended that they did not know what our noise was about. They looked uncomfortable, as though they'd holes in their trousers, or had left buttons undone. They pulled themselves about to see what was wrong, grew embarrassed, tried to bow, but fell on their noses. But they would not understand that we had rumbled where the tune was, and so bowing and scraping and falling over to our roaring, they went off. Of course, we did not actually know that any music came out of those little music boxes and nobody bothered to tell us, which made us mad. 'I think,' said Vera seriously, 'that they had a gramophone record and played it at the back. It was a cheat that they did not let us know where it came from.' And later: 'Perhaps it was

not good propaganda that Russian workmen should look so inefficient.'

No matter how the audience roared they did not come back and when the next turn started, and it was a row of poker faced Uzbekistanis shuffling through a national dance in what seemed to me a Red Indian kind of costume, we left. Even the audience which had paid for its seats grew restless, and looked about for cigarettes to buy, and began to chew sunflower seeds again and spit the husks on the duckboards and beaten mud floor, and chattered to neighbours.

Our interpreter was Vera: I have forgotten her unpronounceable second name. She lived in Leningrad and by the look in her face at times I could see that she regarded Rostov and Kiev as foreign cities in the same way that we did. She had a merry, weathered and impish face, always brown and often dirty, and impossible to beautify: indeed, when she did try, the result was disastrous, for cosmetics sat in an alien way upon her face, making her look like a street-walker. She wore a gay and shapeless felt hat which had once been fashionable—the gift of an English traveller in an earlier year, and a much wrinkled tartan blouse and tweed skirt from a similar source. She was in her early thirties but the struggles one divined in her past made her look older: about these I knew nothing, but somewhere she had managed to learn English well, and it was certain she came of a good family. She was married, and had one little boy, and had divorced her husband and was in a perpetual emotional tangle about marrying again. Every now and then, though far from home, she sighed deeply about her domestic situation. She welcomed us with squeals of delight, for she had come to love her English friends, whose arrival meant cosmetics, stockings, chocolate and photographs from past admirers in England. All this was most pleasant for her in this austere land, and, even better under a regime where the bare means of life were lacking to many, was the privilege of travelling 'soft' through the length and breadth of Russia and feeding on the best in the land. We, of course, never lacked for food. Once or twice in every town there was a banquet for us. The first, at a restaurant on the Finnish border, went on for four hours: it was two o'clock in the morning when, ripe with wine and food and intoxicated by fraternal speeches, we tumbled into our hotel bedrooms. There was, at that banquet,

six courses of hors d'oeuvres only three of which I could name. We thought this, in our inexperience, the banquet itself, and ate heartily. But we were wrong: only after that did the enormous main dishes come. It was the only occasion in my life when I have seen Englishmen going out to the urinal to be sick, and coming back to the banquet, like Romans, to begin again. If they had brought out a roast swan, as was once the custom of the Tzars, it would not have surprised me. Banquets were regarded as official and even necessary acts of gorging and it was certain that the Russians enjoyed the licence to eat and drink as much as they could, as their impromptu dances between courses demonstrated. One glance at the people in the Leningrad streets had shown me that there was poverty still in the U.S.S.R. and I was now and then ashamed of our communal gluttony: and certainly ashamed when coming out of the restaurant, a workman watching us rushed up to me and caught hold of the lapels of my coat and began what I first thought was a speech of welcome and then soon learnt was an angry denunciation of our bourgeois wantonness. The guards threw him angrily away into a ditch. 'But what did he say, Vera?' I asked earnestly. She turned crossly about, hitching one shoulder at me. 'Oh, he is mad, quite mad. He did not know you were foreign guests. We will not discuss it, please.'

What a bourgeois world it was into which Vera had free entry! She could take home the most wonderful presents for her little boy and the two lovers between whom she hesitated. But how precarious it was too. All relationships between Soviet citizens and foreigners were discouraged, and Vera's life was nothing else, and there would come a time, though this was official duty, when the Communist Party would decide that she was 'contaminated' and get rid of her. I thought about this even then, and wondered what would become of her. From Moscow onwards a pale, dark slothful young man was attached to our party and travelled everywhere we went. Russian trains do not have separate sleepers for men and women and so, automatically, he took over a bunk in Vera's otherwise empty compartment, and perhaps enjoyed other privileges there. At first she whispered to me 'He is from Intourist. He just goes with us as far as Rostov.' But then later, when she knew me better, and felt she could trust me, 'He is from the *Party*. We must watch our behaviour,' and she made a

monkey grimace with her prematurely wrinkled face. And there he was always, saying little, speaking almost no English, extremely contemptuous of us all, and trying (but not succeeding very well) to impress Vera. We detested him.

Vera was as inconsequential and as incalculable as all Russians. She informed us, when we left Rostov, that we should have to go by a special route to Kiev, which would take us two days longer than we had planned, and that there would be no restaurant car on the train. This was, of course, at the eleventh hour, and we scrambled round trying to buy provisions for the journey and all we succeeded in getting were biscuits, caviare, tea and fruit. Never in my life again do I want to feed for two whole days upon caviare thickly spread on soft sweet biscuits. What we lacked in food we made up for in tea. At every important station in Russia there is a kipyatok, a hot water tap from which the traveller fills up his old tin can in which he brews his tea, or keeps his hot water for washing and shaving. As the train drew into a station the travellers poised themselves hopefully on the running boards, with clanging cans in hand, to leap off as soon as we slowed down and dash to the kipyatok. I was young and lithe and could often beat them to it. But even if one arrived first, one's troubles were not over. The kipyatok might give an unexpected gurgle and die, and as one expostulated to the queue that it was not your fault, it would explode boiling water everywhere. In the midst of the clamour round the tap the bell on the engine would clang to indicate our impending departure, and those remote from the water would begin despairingly to scream and gesticulate: sometimes there would be no clang from the bell, but out of the corner of our eyes we would catch sight of the train silently sneaking out of the station and the queue would explode with a shriek and we would race, spilling water everywhere, to climb aboard. Vera had to make plausible speeches, at long stops, in order to get food out of co-operatives or from the peasants. And so I managed to buy at one station a small roasted chicken and a loaf of gritty black bread: I paid a fabulous sum for it and, in the absence of plate, knife and fork had to use my fingers only. But it was long since I had enjoyed a meal so much. I discovered later from Vera that we need not have travelled at all by this route, we could have gone the soft direct route on a train with a restaurant

car: but the way we went gave her a chance, once every year or so, to say a few words to her mother at a Ukraine station, and to exchange tearful hugs and kisses. It was nice to think that in a super-planned state we could be at the mercy of such an affectionate whim. But I should never have learnt anything about it if we had not become such good friends.

During the tour, despite the spy, Vera became more consciously one of us. Her clothes improved as dresses changed hands. She was given eau-de-cologne and lipstick and blossomed before our eyes. It was only as we approached Leningrad again that I saw trepidation clouding her bright eyes. What would her husbands—for it really seemed the case that she had two—think of this transformation in her? Would they like her for her beauty and chic, or would they despise her for behaviour not proletarian in character? This agitation began to ruin the effect she had planned. The sequel came after our return to the Oktober Hotel. Vera came running into my room the same evening. 'My husband is here,' she shrieked, in a flutter of hands and eyes. 'What shall I do? Quick, tell me, help me. He must not see me in these clothes, and with lipsticks.'

I stopped her firmly.

'Vera—look—you said you were divorced. If you are, it's nothing more to do with him what you do.'

Two little tears appeared in her eyes. 'He is in the Party. He is powerful and can tell me what to do.'

'He can't eat you. Look, take my arm and let's walk downstairs to dinner.'

She trembled with terror, and bit her lips, as she took my arm and walked down the grand staircase to the dining room. She gave a little moan when she saw her ex-husband glaring angrily from the foot of the stairs. He was a young man with a great mass of tumbled black hair and the pale face of a Does-toevsky hero. I was afraid that Vera would cry and her tears run down the make-up on her face, so that by the time she got to the bottom she would look like a wax doll whose face has been held to the fire. But she bowed her head and gripped my arm tightly and walked bravely with me. The ex-husband was not content to wait. He rushed upstairs, his face working, his black locks shaking like a warlock's, and seized hold of me. I had to listen to a fierce denunciation of myself in Russian and could only thrust him off and wait until Vera could translate.

Efficient even in an emotional crisis, Vera translated between sobs, 'He blames you. No Bolshevik girl uses make-up. It is your fault. He says you have made me—he says you have made me—no, I cannot say what he says!' and with a howl of misery Vera rushed away to her room. When I set out to rush after her, my Bolshevik friend held me fast, and pushed me firmly back and went after her himself.

I went unheroically down, with a sad shrug for it all, to the bar. There I was drinking when Vera came to me nearly half an hour later. Her make-up had gone: she had returned to her old clothes and, had it been the Bolshevik custom, would have stood before me in sackcloth and ashes. She stood there, in the misery of her little penance, finding it difficult to lift her eyes to me.

'He tells me to say he is sorry,' she said wretchedly. 'He sees now you are a spiritual man and would like to be friends.' And she began to cry and between sobs jerked her head towards the foot of the stairs where the ex-husband was standing, eyes to the floor, like some sulky, scolded white-faced child. Her misery was contagious and I squeezed her hands gently and kissed them, and went and fetched the pale young man to the bar.

Vera's situation was the more awkward because her ex-husband, who had just displayed so much jealousy, still shared her flat. Indeed, but for the formality of a divorce, her ex-husband was still her husband: it was the fiancé who was out in the cold. I became good friends even with Vera's ex-husband and went to dine with them in their tiny flat. We dined well on bortsch and roast sturgeon and bottles of good red wine. The little boy in a sailor suit was a merry miniature of Vera herself, and was proud to shake hands with an English friend. I made him a little cup of silver foil from a box of sweets I had brought, and he carried it repeatedly to the table to have it filled with wine: his chuckles grew more and more delighted with each repetition until more by force of suggestion than by quantity of wine drunk he had managed to make himself intoxicated and his mother carried him anxiously away and put him to bed: left so, Vera, her husband and I smoked, played chess, and swapped tales of the past until the early hours. The next morning, with Vera and her little boy in tears at the quayside, and not far from tears myself, I set sail for England once again. It was useless to imagine that I should ever see this gay and lovable woman again.

CHAPTER TEN

'Nothing is Innocent'

On the voyage out to Russia my party carried a tiny supernumary and through him I was vouchsafed a glimpse of a second Russian home. He came aboard at Hay's Wharf, face puffed and eyes sore with crying, and stood at the rail waving mournfully down at a weeping girl and a fat little Jew whose face was so creased with unhappiness that he looked as though he might at any moment join the children in their tears. I will call the child Alexei Balanov, for his history was a strange one, not to be guessed from the neat grey flannel suit which made him look like an English grammar school boy. As thin as a post, a trifle round-shouldered, and fair, perhaps his fierce blue eyes were the only Russian thing about him. He was going to join his mother in Russia: she was no longer Balanova, but Kirinova, and thereby hung a tale which began way back in the days of the Revolution. That tale I pieced together only slowly and over a long period of time, but here it is.

Alexei's father was the manager and owner of a leather factory in Petrograd when the revolution broke out. Though he was not interested in politics he was, as a capitalist, suspect from the beginning. However, for a year or two he was left alone because the Bolsheviks brought back as managers the men whose businesses they had taken over. And so life continued to be tolerable for a while. But the mounting frenzy of the Civil War promoted a terror against all bourgeois, and Balanov, finding his position growing more precarious, and the future dangerous, made preparations to leave secretly. He bribed the captain of a Finnish vessel to provide passages for himself, his wife, who was then carrying Alexei in her womb,

and his sister. He came aboard the boat with his wife, but his sister had failed to make the rendezvous. Against the entreaties of his wife he decided to go back and look for her, and, full of forebodings, left his wife in charge of the skipper. The skipper waited, fortunately unchallenged, for several hours, and then decided, despite the lamentations of Balanova, that he must move before dawn. Balanova never heard of her husband or sister-in-law again. Alone, pregnant, she made her way to England, where Alexei was born. One can imagine the life of the penniless exile—the round of charitable organizations, the lodgings in Charlotte Street and the Cromwell Road, the efforts to earn something by teaching and translating, the daily hope of news from Russia, the guarded letters which were never answered.

Then came better days. The honeymoon of the first Labour Government with the Soviets produced a Soviet Trade Delegation which gave birth to the powerful Arcos organization in the City of London. Typists who knew Russian were in demand. Balanova, against whom the Bolsheviks had nothing politically, made her peace with the Russian authorities in London, and joined the staff of the Trade Delegation. So, peacefully, while the child Alexei was growing, she earned a reasonable living. Of course, she fell in love, and with an earnest young Communist, fresh from Russia, on the staff of Arcos. Love and dialectics both persuaded her that in Russia things had become better, that the excesses of the revolution and civil war were over, and that the Soviet Government was offering the equivalent of an amnesty to all who came over to its side. Eventually, presuming her husband dead, she married the Arcos employee and they lived together in the Cromwell Road. Then eventually Kirin, the new husband, was recalled. He travelled hastily back, leaving his wife and stepson behind. Presently letters arrived entreating her to come to Moscow, but to leave Alexei behind for the present until arrangements could be made for him. This was not what they had planned, and Kirinova grew worried. When she re-read her husband's letters she began to feel with horror that there was a note in them which was not the appeal of a lover. Perhaps there was the unacknowledged pressure of the authorities: her return might be the test of his loyalty. And so, in heart-searching and fear, she decided to go back to the land which had certainly murdered her first

husband, and to leave behind the little boy for whom she had gone through so much. Alexei was left with London friends who were both co-operators and socialists. For some time his mother was able to write regularly and to send funds to pay for his board and lodgings. If there was a cloud over the young couple in Moscow, no one heard of it. Then came the slump. Russia suffered like the rest of the world and placed a ban on the export of funds. If Alexei could not be supported by friends in England, then there was only the choice between putting him in an institution, or returning him to his mother. The communists in charge of him could not understand why there should be any delay. They were only surprised that his mother had left him so long in England. The Soviet was the worker's fatherland, where there was no exploitation, no poverty and no unemployment—what better future could the boy want? So they took out a Russian passport for him and shipped him to Russia in the care of my party. The moment Alexei stepped on board he lost his right to return to England and became a Russian subject.

Alexei spent the first few days of the voyage gloomily sticking up his stamp collection or curled up on a settee in the saloon reading the *Champion* and the *Wizard*. Gradually his surliness thawed and he put words to his resentments. 'I don't see why I have to go to Moscow: she could have come to England.' 'I don't see why I have to call him father. My real father's dead.' These came out, quite unexpectedly, in the midst of conversations about other things, and he screwed his little face up and almost spat them at me. 'I don't tell anybody but you, but *I* know, and my mamma knows *they* killed him.' But when I asked him who was it that 'they' had killed, he looked frightened and refused to talk. But when I was sitting in a deck chair later in the day, he crept behind me, and whispered breathlessly, 'If you promise not to tell, I'll tell you, it was my real dad.' His brooding spirit lightened a little as we glided quietly across the still, hot Baltic, but unhappiness began to descend on him as we neared Leningrad. 'What shall I do if she isn't there?' he asked, panic in his eyes. 'I know she won't be there, I know. I know.' And indeed, she was not. Instead, a gloomy incommunicative young man had been sent to fetch him. He showed me a letter, written in Russian and intended really for the Russian authorities, of which I could not read a

word. I had to call in a Jew in our party who knew some Russian and had some knowledge of Alexei's circumstances, but he grew so nervous and frightened at the thought of admitting that he knew the language that I suspected that he was a Russian emigré himself, or had close connection with them. He obliged, sweating, ungracious and gabbling.

It was a moment of the utmost confusion. The customs officers were opening all our bags. A messenger from Intourist was asking for me, but as he had turned my name round, as most continentals do, and had made a mess of the word ‘Leslie’, no one knew what he was bleating so loudly about. All Alexei's trunks, packed with food and clothes sent by kind friends, had been locked and tightly bound by rope, and now that it came to a search, the keys could not be found. A hunt in the boy's attaché case and pockets yielded nothing. Alexei's face was the picture of anger. ‘No one told me. No one told me a thing about anything. Why do they need to open them? They said they could go all the way without being opened.’

Without ceremony the customs officers slashed the rope and smashed the locks while Alexei stared bleakly at them. The tins of corned beef and milk and packets of cornflakes were turned upside down. Rivulets of sugar trickled down among the neatly packed clothes. It was during this shouting and confusion that Alexei, whose eyes had never ceased from a darting, almost furtive search for a sight of his mother on the quay, discovered that he was to be handed over to a complete stranger. Now at last he broke down and flung his arms around my neck and locked them. It was deeply painful to pull the heartbroken child off by main force and to hand him over to the sullen, unknown youth. I sought to reassure him by promising that I would call on him in Moscow when I arrived, to see that he was safe and well. Clutching at this hope Alex went off, hardly more cheerful than when he boarded the boat, a grief-stricken little figure weighed down by his case as he struggled across the cobbles. The taciturn young man preceded him with disdain. Behind, on a handcart, shaking out a trail of sugar, came the ravaged trunks.

‘You know,’ said the Jew, officious and disapproving, ‘they don't like tourists paying private calls. It isn't very good for the people either.’

I felt deeply uneasy, yet did not think I should draw back from my promise because of what this frightened little man thought. I had to go: everything about the boy filled me with unhappiness. How had he managed to live day after day with the Communist who had looked after him, concealing his hatred and terror of the land to which he was now consigned? That spoke for a depth of experience and maturity quite strange in a boy of eleven years.

It was fortunate that I had to travel to Moscow in advance of the party. I had to go in order to fix up the itinerary of the party and to have a word, if possible, with Comrade Zelensky and other co-operative chiefs. I had no intention to write a travel book about Russia, but I thought I might attempt to write a short account of the consumers’ co-operative movement. The interviews were to be the beginning of this effort: from them I wanted to glean an idea of the ground I had to cover. Ultimately I succeeded in this, though it took me four years of research, which bore fruit in a modest little book which was nevertheless the first of its kind.*

I sent a card to Alexei’s mother, Kirinova, announcing my intention to call and the opportunity came after a morning spent at Centrosojus. At the hotel I was left quite unattended with the whole afternoon before me. After the dark warnings of the party, I decided to visit them as discreetly as possible. I scoured the map of Moscow until I found the street: it seemed feasible to walk there if I could memorize the route. I drew a little sketch map on an old envelope, stuffed it in my pocket, and set out. I found the street much more easily than I expected. The flat was up two storeys in a dingy old tenement which had seen better days. I knocked and Alexei opened the door and made saucer eyes at me. ‘How did *you* get here so soon?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t your mother get my card?’ I asked in reply. He shook his head. ‘I’ll tell granny.’ He disappeared and behind the half-closed door I heard furious colloquies. The door opened and a frightened and cross old woman stood there regarding me with a puzzled expression. When Alexei took hold of my hand, she said with a sorrowful dignity, ‘Will you be so pleased as to come in?’ in an English rusty from long disuse. Grunting, shuffling she led the way. She was fierce-eyed, bent, and oddly formidable. She just did not conform. She was

**Co-operation in the U.S.S.R.; A study of the Consumers’ Movement, 1934.*

not of the regime, but the survivor of another world, like her furniture. The small tenement room was crowded with massive mahogany pieces from a bourgeois past. I bumped myself on their sharp corners as I squeezed past beds and wardrobes to an armchair.

‘It is kind of you to call,’ she said with a politeness the coldness and fear in her eyes belied. ‘Have you been to Russia before?’

‘No. My first visit. I find it interesting.’

I made a mistake then for my eyes had strayed to her bookcase, and there set out in large blue, linen-bound volumes lettered in gold, like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, were the works of Lenin. I had learnt enough Russian on the boat to have no hesitation in recognizing the name printed on the spines of the volumes.

‘I see you’ve Lenin’s works,’ I said, trying to break the ice. Granny looked steadily at me with her burning speedwell blue eyes. I could see where Alexei’s sharp eyes came from.

‘But you know our Russian language?’

‘Oh just a few common words. We had lessons on the boat.’

‘How did you come to our flat?’

‘I just got a map and looked for the street, and walked here.’

I flushed under her polite incredulity.

‘It is not easy for a foreigner who does not know Russian, and has never been to Moscow before, to read our maps, and find his way about this city. I do not find it very wise.’

I grew hotter and hotter with discomfort. ‘I was worried about the boy. I thought I would see if he had arrived safely.’

Alexei fidgeted unhappily, watching us with wretched eyes during these hostilities.

‘Momma will be home soon and you can see her,’ he said in a whining way.

‘Excuse, please,’ said the grandmother. ‘I will make you some tea. Come with me, Alexei.’ Alexei made a moue at me as he was vigorously dragged away. They disappeared into a small room like a scullery beyond, and once again the rapid colloquy broke out. I was so moist with embarrassment by this time that I could only consider how quickly I might get away. Presently Alexei emerged sulkily and drifted around the room with his head down, as though unwilling to talk to me.

‘How d’you like Moscow?’ I asked.

'She's afraid of you,' he whispered, giving me a mysterious and meaningful look.

'For heaven's sake why?'

'She doesn't know who you are yet. She doesn't believe you. I mustn't talk to you.'

I made a nonplussed gesture.

'I hate her,' he said with his fierce look. 'She always jabbers in Russian and I can't understand.'

I tried to take his mind off it and to get him to talk about Moscow. But it was no good.

'She's always whispering. I don't want to stay here. I want to go back to England.'

I asked about his father and mother.

'He isn't my father. My real father's dead. I told you how. And I haven't seen my new father, but I'll show you a photo of him if you like.'

He went across to the bookshelf and then turned and whispered, 'That's funny. It isn't here. She shoved it down the back where I can't get it. I *thought* I saw her shove it down.'

He came and whispered confidentially.

'My new father's on a journey. I'm not to talk about it as he's in great danger.'

His grandmother, wild with anxiety and anger at Alexei's stage whispers, put her head through the door. She had, at that moment, the boy's contorted look exactly.

'Alexei,' she shouted. 'What are you whispering about. Don't you know that it's rude to whisper?'

'I was saying you always speak Russian to me and I don't understand it,' he lied. 'And everyone else whispers, so why shouldn't I?'

His grandmother flushed under his rudeness.

'I'm afraid he is a very naughty boy,' she said with a frightened and dubious glance at him, and she was so fussed and nervous she could hardly pour the tea. She did not leave the room now and so any more confidences from Alexei were impossible. I made small talk about Moscow and tried to drink my tea quickly so that I might escape, but Alexei's mother came in before I had finished.

Kirinova was tall. She wore a white shawl over her head, peasant fashion, but this was an affectation of beauty, for she was not a peasant. Like Alexei she stooped a little, and was

round-shouldered, and exhausted with fatigue. Her face was pale and her weary brown eyes above prominent cheek-bones, were large and luminous. Her sad delicate beauty made my heart beat pitifully fast, and sweat started on the palms of my hands. When she gazed at me with her tragic and brimming eyes I did not know where to look or what to do. Her scorching beauty consumed me, wits and all, and I felt as abashed and tongue-tied as a schoolboy before the first lovely woman he has met. Even Alexei changed and stood silent and adoring before his wonderful momma and came gently over to her, pressing himself against her, and stroked her hands and felt her cheek with curious fingertips to make sure that she was real. His love for her was a good thing to see.

Her presence was so calm and kindly that the tension immediately began to ease. All at once it seemed to be accepted that I was indeed the person who had brought Alexei over from England, and not some mysterious intruder, and when I left that night the rising friendliness of the little family made it possible to agree that on a half-holiday clearly marked on the itinerary, we should all go to the Park of Rest and Culture. On the way home I thought of the resemblance between Alexei and the grandmother. It was certain then that she was the mother of Kirinova's first husband, Alexei's father, and I pondered over her strange behaviour.

A day or two later, in the offices of Centrosojus, looking for information in its Research Department, a clerk spoke to me, in the most meticulous English. He was obviously a remarkable person for the Russia of those days, for he wore a well-tailored black jacket and pinstripe trousers, and a white collar and tie. all carefully preserved, I had no doubt, from the old regime. He had the old world manners of a country doctor. 'Are you the English gentleman who came over on the *Krassin*?' I said I was one of them, and my name was Paul. He bowed politely and held out his hand: 'Then we have friends in common. I am friendly with the Kirinov family, and I am to take you to them for the outing we have arranged.'

How little there is to tell after that encounter, yet how sad. My new friend called for me on the day appointed and we walked through the streets to the flat of Lydia Kirinova and the child Alexei. On the way we hardly spoke about them, but discussed the growth of the co-operative movement under the

Tzars, about which my friend was well informed. We made our excursion by crowded trams to the Moscow Park of Rest and Culture: myself, my cultured guide, the frightened grandmother, and the boy. Alexei sat on my knee in the crowded tram, jiggling with excitement. The clouds around him seemed to have lifted on this sunny little excursion. He was so gay and vital that all the fears which had been growing in me concerning his new life now appeared bourgeois hallucinations. I gave him a tender squeeze. What harm could possibly come to him?

‘You’re a plucky boy, I think,’ I whispered to him. ‘Keep your courage up and everything will be fine for you, I’m sure.’

A spasm of terror passed over his face, as if untimely reminded of things he had been happy to forget. He gripped my jacket lapels with his small brown fists and worried them, angry and frightened.

‘Don’t say that about me. Don’t. Don’t ever!’ he whispered fiercely and urgently. ‘You don’t know all. And I can’t tell you when *she’s* watching.’

‘She’ was his grandmother, who stared avidly and broodingly at him. I was silenced, and patted him to calm him. I stared out of the tram windows at Moscow’s endless architectural improvisations, and at the drab milling crowd in the street, full of forebodings. These were the last words Alexei and I were able to exchange about his troubles.

Lydia, the boy’s mother, met us at the gates with free tickets she had secured from the shock brigade of which she was, she told me, a chief. We saw a display by young pioneers which reminded me of Vienna days, and drank tea and ate tiny barley cakes in a café under the trees. We wandered, when evening came, in the woods which stretched endlessly beyond the park, by the banks of the Moskwa river, and went too far, for the park was closed when we returned to it and our only hope, if we were not to be stranded, was to cross the river by rowing boat. Immediately there rose up one of those heated, excited altercations in which the Russians excel: they flare up like a sudden prairie storm and then are gone again. We managed to hire a boat, but five of us in the poor little craft brought the river to within an inch of the gunwale. The grandmother’s cup was now full. She entreated me to tell her whether I could swim: there was no mistaking the fear of death by drowning in her eyes. I assured her I could, and if we fell in I would save

her. ‘It is not for myself, I think,’ she replied with dignity, ‘but for the boy. If we sink, promise me that you will save him. *Promise me!*’ She clutched my arm and demanded the promise. I promised, and smiled at little Alexei who sat, half asleep, dragging his wrist in the water. ‘If no one rocks the boat we shall be all right,’ I said. Gingerly I took the boat upstream to the bridge where there was a landing stage and so we came safely to the tram station again. The grandmother, who was now quite reconciled to me, clutched my hands in speechless thanks and kissed them: she was convinced I had saved them from a watery grave or from arrest for being found in the woods after dark. Alexei preened himself on the fact that his friend alone had been able to row. We returned to their flat and drank the bottle of wine I had taken as a present, and then, with their eyes all large and sad upon me because I could go as I chose and return to England when I wanted, I steeled myself to say goodbye to the suddenly desolate boy and to his mother whose melancholy beauty robbed me of all set speeches.

As we walked down the midnight street, almost deserted under the stars, past the twisted marzipan spires and domes of St. Basil, I mentioned that I had not seen the boy’s stepfather, and there seemed to be some mystery about him. My discreet companion looked stealthily about him as we crossed the empty Red Square. There seemed to be only one other occupant, the sentry outside Lenin’s tomb.

‘He is far away. He is in trouble. I beseech you not to ask more or even to say more.’

His heartfelt and fearful tones moved me deeply as I walked beside him. The high wall of the Kremlin seemed a symbol of the closed and secretive world into which I had strayed.

‘Lydia?’

‘Did you notice her cough?’ I had indeed: it was small and dry and irritating. ‘Poor child, she is ill. She does not know how ill.’

I kept silent, unable to ask, a new grief welling up in me.

‘I understand your silence. It is, of course, tuberculosis. She is quite doomed, poor child.’

‘What will become of the boy?’ I asked in a low voice.

‘The grandmother will fight fiercely for him. She is all he can depend on. It would have been better if he had stayed in England.’

I clasped his hands and left him near the hotel.

'Say nothing,' he pleaded fearfully. 'Swear to me! And nothing of where you have been, good friend.'

All the sadness of Russia was in our helpless parting, and I went wretchedly into my hotel, where Vera was waiting for me with a fiery anxiety. I saw her pacing the reception hall with angry steps as I went through the swing doors.

'Where have you been, Comrade Paul?' she asked me. 'It is not good to roam about Moscow at night when you don't know the language.'

I looked at her with irony.

'I'm not a child, Vera. Come on, get us both a drink.'

'But I'm *responsible* for you.'

'Why,' I said brightly, 'I've been to the Park of Rest and Culture and tried to walk back and lost my way. But the Kremlin is most beautiful under the starlight.'

But it was clear that she had very great doubts about my story and bit her nails furiously and would hardly speak to me as we drank together and thawed only slowly during the next day or two as it became clear that my absence was not to be officially visited upon her.

I mentioned on the train to Rostov a few days later a little about my visit to the Jew who knew so much about Alexei's past, but I kept silent about Kirinov's troubles or Lydia's disease or our sad excursion together.

'You fool,' he groaned, throwing himself about with the exaggerated emphasis of his race. 'Can't you see if it becomes known you may hurt them. It is absolutely forbidden in this crazy land to have foreign friends. When you appeared on the doorstep like that, unannounced, they must have thought you were from the OGPU—yes,' he went on, at my look of incredulity, 'planted on the ship to worm your way into the confidences of the family through the boy.'

I made a gesture of violent anger.

'But why, why! In heaven's name why?'

'Because the mother has been in England, so has the boy. So has the husband. Perhaps not always discreet letters. Anyone who does anything unusual like leaving Russia and coming back is suspect. *Anyone*. They even suspect their ambassadors. They don't trust them any more.'

'I don't believe it,' I cried, unbearably angry because I knew in a flash of bitter understanding that he was speaking the truth

and I was enraged by my own stupidity. ‘This is a socialist country, isn’t it? Not a prison camp? Isn’t anything innocent any more?’

‘Nothing is innocent here, absolutely *nothing*. They even imprison people just for being subjectively guilty.’ And then he moved off quite abruptly in order not to be compromised by talking to me, because he saw the lean young man who was the party spy coming up the train corridor. From that moment I was certain he had once lived in Russia and was frightened.

I went off in a gloomy rage to my bunk and lay there watching the scenery swirl by. There were birch woods and little grassy clearings with streams meandering through them. They slid past like a film. After them came half-ruined peasants’ huts and girls with bare feet, wearing shawls like Lydia’s, but that was all they possessed of her, driving cattle along muddy tracks. One shut one’s eyes and the scene faded out, then opened them again half an hour later, and still the same scene was travelling past. Sometimes a half-naked child instead of a girl had come to drive the cattle. Two hours later and still the same clearing, wood and village glided past. Two days later it was still the same. Then the woods became scarcer, and orchards more frequent and then at last we rolled on to the open steppes in a heat like fire reflected from brass and there one found just nothing. The plain was like the sea: it bounded one on all sides. No tree, no bush, no house, no river, no children driving cattle. Only the uncut corn, or the bare stubble, or the uncultivated waste. Presently, in the far distance, something lonely and immense swung and shimmered in the sky. It hung there for hours, growing apparently no larger and appearing to circle around us. After an age one decided it was growing bigger: it might even be a building—a palace, a temple, or a pillar into the sky. One’s eyes strained towards it, longing to identify this only other thing which human hands had made, which kept one company on the steppe. A skyscraper, we said, later on ‘a factory’, but finally the moment came when we could be sure that it was a grain silo, in discoloured concrete, standing up like a giant milestone, with a dingy huddle of prairie buildings round its knees. And when the train stopped beside it the silence and the intolerable heat came down with a swoop. So little stirred that we could

imagine that we heard the sizzle of the sun striking the bare and sandy soil.

The forsaken little family was left far behind. Why should they have to suffer so? Why? Why? It was impossible that anyone should care what one or two human beings did, or did not do, in the endless ennui of the Russian plain. What did it all matter? When I got to Rostov, I decided, I would take the first opportunity that came my way to get drunk. Alas for my intentions! The first, the second, and even the third bottle of Caucasian wine I ordered was full of shoals of flies. Even flies were liquidated in Russia.

It is proper here to write the postscript on my Russian experiences though it means anticipating my story by a few years. For a long time the visit remained the central experience of my life, and I was constantly trying to reconcile in my own mind the contradiction between the fervour and energy devoted to socialist construction, and the unhappiness to be divined wherever one scratched at the surface. I could not then see that they were both aspects of the same spiritual state, and seldom spoke about adventures so baffling and strange, except to friends by the fireside at night.

I maintained contacts with official organizations like Centrosojus because through them I gathered the materials for my economic study. The greatest difficulty lay in the collection of Russian statistics: I had not delved far before I realized that they were unreliable, and often made meaningless because the basis of accounting was constantly changing. Thus, for example, in such a matter as public catering, one annual report would say that in the year just ended the Co-operative Movement had exceeded the planned figure of X million *meals* by Y per cent. If then one turned to the records of the previous year to see what progress had been made one would find reported only that gross *turnover* of A million roubles had been exceeded by B per cent. It was even worse where such things as market gardens, potato acreage or treacle production were concerned for if one year the estimate was in poods, the next it would be in roubles, and the third in terms of the labour employed. At first I assumed that my difficulty in arriving at an exact picture was due to my own ignorance of sources. Somewhere, I thought, there will be a definitive body of published statistics through which I might reach the truth. But I sought in vain for such

tables. However, by reading reports and speeches, I made some ingenious conversions and laid hold of statistics not published in tables, and so compiled statistics of my own which met the case. When I showed them to Ginsberg, at the London end of Centrosojus, he congratulated me on them and said eagerly they were precisely what he himself had been wanting for a long time, and he was certain Moscow would be pleased with them too. I was reluctantly brought to wonder whether Moscow really knew the state of its own economy if my haphazard tables were going to illuminate them.

My study, when published, was not taken up by the State Publishing House in Moscow, as I had hoped it would be, because it was not lavish enough in its praises, or firm in its orthodoxy. Ginsberg coldly acknowledged receipt of a copy when I called on him, saying ‘It is necessary to get these things down to the masses. You must now write a pamphlet, and you *must* not spoil the picture of our achievements by speaking about some little failures. After all, they have mostly been cured by now. Your study is good, but the masses will not read it, and it is they who must be convinced.’ I looked down my nose at the thought of ‘puffing’ the Russian co-operative movement in a popular pamphlet, and suppressing criticism at the same time. In any case I could not afford to do any more work on the subject. My study had turned out to be another labour of love. Unless Moscow changed its mind and bought up the translation rights it was not going to earn me more than £25.

The letter I received from Moscow professors of the Research Department of Centrosojus was more courteous and friendly. It is true they started out by describing me as Mr. Pohl, which suggested that they had never seen the book, but I hoped that was only the error of a typist. Four pages of their brief were devoted to the correction of my Marxist errors over N.E.P., the role of the peasantry in the revolution, and the understanding of the tasks of the co-operative movement in the construction of socialism.

‘We think that the correction of these errors will increase the value of your book which is an objective and conscientious attempt to give a correct picture of the conditions of development of Co-operatives after the Revolution.

‘Now a few words about the description of the Co-operatives

themselves. Throughout your book you stress several times the weak points of the Co-operatives. In describing a number of defects—and these defects undoubtedly exist—we think however that you do not stress sufficiently the fact that the Co-operatives, even with all their defects are fulfilling a great historical task of creating a new socialized organ of distribution. Of course there have been, and to some extent now are (though in a lesser degree) in the Co-operatives, cases of embezzlement, thefts and so on, but the main point is that these defects must not be allowed to detract from the great achievements of the Soviet Co-operatives. Reading your book one gets the impression that the defects are the main factor in the work of the Co-operatives. . . .'

But nothing I said about the Co-operatives in Russia, not even my assertion that absconding with the co-operative till had become a national industry, which I made at the 1935 Congress of Peace and Friendship with the U.S.S.R., equalled the astonishing admissions which Zelensky, Chairman of Centrosojus, was compelled to make at the trial of the 'Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites' in Moscow in 1938. Poor Zelensky, he did his very best for his accusers before he was shot. I can imagine that, at the trial, he must have been just as earnest and officious as he was in his Centrosojus office, where he was so very conscious that what was expected of him was that he should show himself to be a Selfridge, or rather Stalin, of trading operations. When one reads the official report of the trial it is clear that there was nothing against him except that the organization he was directing was too large, and overburdened with responsibilities, and served by a careless and overworked staff. This itself was a cause of national discontent since the co-operative shops served so much of the population, but it was an accusation one might have brought with fairness against every state trust. Zelensky was neither criminal nor conspirator, but the victim chosen to expiate the blunders of his commercial empire.

Most gravely he assured the President of the Court that 'out of 30,000 shops inspected by the co-operative trade sections of the Soviets and by trade inspectors, there was no salt in 3,700 shops in the first quarter of 1936. Out of 42,000 shops, 2,000 had no sugar on sale. In the third quarter of 1936, 1,600 shops out of 36,000 had no makhorka.' Again, 'I may mention that

of 135,000 shops inspected by the Co-operative Trade Inspectorate, cases of overcharging and defrauding were established in 13,000 shops.’

It was very thin gruel, nevertheless, and Vyshinsky knew it, for the Co-operative Inspection section had been admitting faults like this (even to me) for some time. A better line of business for the prosecution was to prove that as far back as 1911, Zelensky had been an agent of the Okhrana. Once again Zelensky gave the most cordial aid to help to get this thing proved, but it really was most difficult for all concerned. Not a single document or letter upheld the charge, and the vague references in Tzarist police correspondence to the whereabouts of one Zelensky during the time of his banishment to Siberia, could be construed entirely in his favour. And when, to save the collapsing case, Zelensky proceeded, amiably and conscientiously, to develop theories about the wicked Right conspiracies he was so markedly repeating parrot-fashion the analyses of the examining judges that the President of the Court cut him short, and told him to speak of himself and not of others.

Poor Zelensky was doing his best, but what was there to say except that he worked hard and didn’t succeed very well? Even now he could not get out of the habit of speaking of all these things as though he were drawing up a report for the Board of Centrosojus: he found it hard not to go on speaking of ‘we’, and Vyshinsky had to tell him repeatedly that he was *not* one of them—the communist bosses—any longer. Something had to be produced to save the situation for the prosecution, and what came out of the bag was co-operative butter. Zelensky was baffled by this new line of attack. He was even moved to protest because, as everyone in Russia knew, the co-operatives did not sell butter in the rural districts, the peasants made their own, and in 1936 there *were* no co-operatives outside the rural districts! The truth was that the co-operatives hardly sold any butter at all. Nevertheless Zelensky had to be shot about something.

Vyshinsky: I’m not asking you what you sell. You were above all selling the main thing—your country. I am speaking about the measures taken by your organization to disrupt trade and deprive the population of prime necessities. Apart from sugar and salt, do you know anything concerning butter?

Zelensky: I told you that the co-operatives do not sell butter in rural districts.

Vyshinsky: You are not a co-operator, you are a member of a conspiratorial organization. Do you know anything about butter?

Zelensky: No!

The confusion then grew worse. If a man's life had not been at stake one could have laughed at the perspiring efforts to bring Zelensky round *at last* to the point where the press of Russia, and the world, could crunch its teeth on glass. And though they hardly ever sold butter——

Vyshinsky: And was the butter which you sold always of good quality, or did you try to spoil its quality too?

Zelensky (ambiguously): Yes.

Vyshinsky: Were there cases when members of your organization connected with the butter business threw glass into the butter?

Zelensky: There were cases when glass was *found* in the butter.

Vyshinsky:—really he brings Zelensky round to this with all the casuistry which Brer Rabbit devoted to proving that Brer Possum stole the butter from the spring—Glass was not ‘found’ in the butter, but thrown into the butter. You understand the difference: *thrown* into the butter. Were there such cases or not?

Zelensky: There were cases when glass was *thrown* into the butter.

Vyshinsky: Were there cases when your accomplices, fellow participators in the criminal plot against Soviet Power and the Soviet people threw nails into the butter?

Zelensky: There were.

Vyshinsky: For what purpose? To make it ‘tastier’?

Zelensky (somewhere there is a man in him) : That is clear.

Vyshinsky: Well, *that* is organizing wrecking and diversive activities. Do you admit that you are guilty of this?

Zelensky: I do.

At last the point had been reached and Zelensky, who stupidly imagined that the whole thing turned on the high policies of the Kremlin discovered that he was to die because a carpenter had sneezed the nails out of his mouth when nailing down a box of butter.

What followed was anti-climax. Vyshinsky had nothing else to go on but these ridiculous admissions to support the accusation that a wrecking organization existed. Even the 54 carloads of eggs which went bad Zelensky only wrecked ‘by hearing about it afterwards from a subordinate’. Nothing else came out. Thus in the greatest ignominy the Chairman of the largest co-operative organization in the world stepped out to the firing squad. By 1938 I had long ceased to be a supporter of the Soviet Union, but when I read with scorn and rage the account of the ludicrous trial of Zelensky I became its opponent. Who would ever have imagined, I told myself, that the mighty Bolshevik Revolution would fall so far as to drag its leaders through a poorly-rehearsed drama which reminded one of nothing so much as a Sexton Blake thriller written when its author’s powers of invention were flagging. Perhaps Bernard Shaw was right and the earth was the lunatic asylum of the universe.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Decline of the Youth Movement

I n the year after my visit to Russia my first novel was published and at the same time I reached bottom in earning capacity—£60 for six months' work. It now seemed impossible, in so overwhelming a world slump, to find any kind of post anywhere. At one time as many as five hundred London journalists were out of work, including men with long experience on London dailies. Sir Robert Donald spoke of setting up a Press Agency for the Ramsay MacDonald group in the House of Commons—the National Labour Party—and I was sent to him as the man who might run it. I was willing to take the post, despite my political opinions—I was too desperate any longer to let them stand in the way—but I had no luck, for Sir Robert died suddenly and my entry to the post died with him. But there was plenty of unpaid work about, and I recall tramping about London, with leaky shoes I could not afford to have repaired, addressing meetings gathered to praise the Soviet Union. A moment came when, having travelled by coach to Southsea to see my mother and young brother and sister who were there on a short, cheap holiday I found, at the beginning of my return journey, that I had only one shilling and my ticket. The insoluble problem was—should I buy myself cigarettes to smoke en route (11½d. for 20 Players!) and get out of the coach at Kennington Church and walk home, or should I save my money and go smokeless for three hours? As things could hardly be worse I bought the cigarettes, putting the shilling in the slot machine. Out came the packet, but back came a shilling from the machine too. I had no hesitation in taking it: I counted it the sole piece of financial luck in a whole

year. I was distressed that I could not help my mother more, and grew thin with worry. James Maxton said, when I went to discuss with him and Fenner Brockway the possibility of closer co-operation between the Woodcraft Folk and the I.L.P., 'Heavens, mon, but I'm glad to meet you. For the first time in my life I can say I've met a chap thinner than I am.' But for me the meeting was of most value because he paid for my lunch.

I had been introduced, through a friend at Northcliffe House, to a young journalist who was leaving there to set up a new publishing house called Denis Archer. As I had a novel and he was looking for authors it seemed useful to bring us together. He read and liked *Fugitive Morning* and decided to publish it in his first list and to my very great pleasure we signed an agreement at once. I knew nothing about publishing novels, and it never dawned on me that an advance was customary: I did not ask for it and was not offered it. I was too gratified at the time to be spared the thankless task of hawking the novel from one publishing house to another even to think that I might have got better terms. And so it was that, in the beautifully produced volume of a new house which was determined to make its name, my novel appeared in the autumn of 1932.

I began to blush with pleasure when the reviews arrived. Gerald Gould wrote in *The Observer* that it was 'so good, so natural, so sincere and so courageous' that it ought to make me a name, and that its 'main claim to notice is that creative quality which turns moral sincerity into artistic integrity'. *The Times Literary Supplement* said, 'Mr. Paul really does know the boy mind, and he is wholly sincere in setting down his knowledge with honesty and frankness', *The Saturday Review* said the book had a sustained note of real beauty running through it, and the *Week-End Review* described it as a direct, human and vigorous narrative. There were a few voices raised in opposition, but they did not spoil the general chorus of praise, and when it came to the end of the year several critics spoke of me as 'a promising beginner', 'a writer with a future', or even, ambiguously, as 'a man to watch'. It seemed impossible to me that in the face of all this praise anyone at all should refuse to buy my book. A man even rang me up. 'Is that Mr. Paul?' he said. I said it was. 'Are you the author of *Fugitive Morning*?' I said I was. 'Well, sir, I'm really glad to be able to give you my sincere congratulations.' 'I'm so glad you

liked it Mr. —, Mr. — I'm afraid I didn't catch your name.' 'Oh, my name doesn't matter.' 'Well, I'm glad you enjoyed reading it.' 'Don't misunderstand me, Mr. Paul, I didn't say I'd *read* it. I saw the reviews and thought how proud you must be of them and thought I'd ring up to say—have you ever thought about life insurance? I'm the representative of the Sun Life Insurance Company. I'm sure you've heard of us.' 'Well, Mr. Sun,' I said, 'do you have policies printed in close black type on four large beautiful sheets?' 'Sure we do, that's us to a T.' 'Well, Mr. Sun, I've never read one of your policies, and you've never read one of my books, but if you'll read *Fugitive Morning*, I'll read one of your policies to make us quits.' He sounded quite offended and never came to see me.

When a month or so had gone by, during which my imagination saw the book worming its way into the heart of a grateful nation, I began to grow uneasy. Surely Denis Archer should have given me some information by now about its sales? I could not even work any longer because of the suspense. Almost every post still brought fresh cuttings of reviews from Romeike and Curtice. I used to make calculations on the backs of envelopes. What was, I asked myself, to begin with, say 10 per cent on 8,000 copies? At last I felt compelled to ring and enquire.

'Oh,' replied my friend, 'haven't there been some jolly fine reviews. You must be quite proud.'

'Aren't they good? I hope the sales are good.'

'Well,' he said, in a flat and careful tone. 'Slow, I should say.' I heard him shout across the room about the sales but I could not catch the reply. 'Funny that,' he said, 'Exactly 365 copies so far, one for each day of the year. But don't give up hope.'

I could not continue the conversation because I felt weak at the knees, I put the receiver down as my head began to spin and crawled up to my room and lay on my bed feeling quite ill. So great was my wretchedness that I was unable to come down to any meals that day, and had to pretend illness to my mother. Pretend? No, I was ill. I could have died with despair where I lay. I was going to receive less than £15 for a book it had taken me two years to write. Now I really did not know how I was going to live.

The consequence of this disappointment was that the feeling of illness I had been fighting off for years grew steadily upon

me. The strenuous life in the Woodcraft Folk—hiking with loaded rucksacks, digging, climbing, swimming and folk dancing—had brought on an enlarged heart. I did not know this. I thought of illness as a shameful admission of weakness, and my Yorkshire stubbornness kept me from going to doctors. When friends came to see me I received them stretched out on my bed for it was not always easy to hold up the weight of my head. I dreaded the fatigue that came on me when I was compelled to walk to a tram or a bus. Chain-smoking was not doing me any good, but it was most difficult to give it up when so few enjoyments were now within my means.

So it happened that in the summer of 1933 I broke down. Eating brought on so much pain that I decided it was better not to eat at all, if that was the way my stomach wanted it. Perhaps I had an ulcer. I did not care any longer and I went and stretched myself out on my bed one morning, and gave up eating, disclaiming any further responsibility for anything at all. The horse who tried to live without eating died just as he was getting used to it. I did not wait as long and after three days of hunger strike decided that it would be, perhaps, as well if I went to see a doctor. He said mildly that he thought it was at least necessary for me to begin eating, and put me on a milk diet which I began that very evening. He told me to stay in bed, but this I could not do for my restless despair was too great and I struggled into the garden every day with a deck chair.

It was not only with my body that I gave up, but with my will. The summer was the most glorious England had had since 1921, and my youth movement was running a Mass Camp in the Wye Valley under days of tropical sun. I had promised to be with them, but here I was idling day after day in the garden in the shade of the pear tree, listening to the overripe pears thump to the lawn, and watching the ants crawling about their vertiginous affairs on the rockery. I had to give up trying so hard, I decided. I had thrown down my gage before the whole world when I was eighteen or nineteen, and for ten years I had worn myself so thin with the effort of fighting it—and fighting myself—that it was painful to sit down for long on my unprotected bones. I was pretty far gone, I thought privately, when I could walk to the end of the street only by the aid of a couple of sticks, resting on the coping stones on the way. For ten

years I had done enough to exhaust half a dozen men—writing, arguing, organizing, presiding, speaking at street corners, pamphleteering, electioneering, travelling—all in order to tell people how to run the world. As if I knew! And here I was, at the very end of my tether, discovering how few and futile were the results and how barren my life had become. Then and there under the pear tree, watching the swifts quartering the sky, and listening to their screaming, I decided I had had enough. I was through. I had to begin all over again at the most necessary point, which was to earn a decent living. Without that, one was less than a man. I had to resign from the active leadership of the Woodcraft Folk for I was no longer an adolescent, and I had come to have a horror of the look of death that was in the faces of middle-aged Germans who had spent their lives in youth movements—oh those permanent adolescents with the faces of aged boys! One could not go on with this jolly camping and singing for ever. I had to curb all my unpaid and unrewarded work for Labour and Co-operative ‘causes’: it seemed now to be of the most doubtful utility: and find time instead to think and to look around, and to get to know myself: just then I had no idea how I might do so unless sitting still under the trees was the beginning of all wisdom.

A friend suggested I might get myself analysed and since, as he bluntly put it, I hadn’t a penny to bless myself with I might do so through a certain clinic which did it for nothing in deserving cases. I could not quite see what psychotherapy could do about my chief troubles—that I hadn’t a penny and my heart was enlarged and my digestion disordered—but thought anything worth a try. Like everyone else of my generation I had soaked myself in Freud and Jung and, though at first it had been an intellectual liberation to treat of sexual problems in the open, in the end the whole intellectual apparatus of the pathological schools of psychology had begun secretly to repel me: it seemed to me to be most tainted by that from which it believed itself to be most liberated. There was an intellectual dilemma here which I have seldom seen stated. It can be easily put by reference to Marxism: under Marxist influence the intellectuals of my generation took it as axiomatic that bourgeois thought, especially political thought, was influenced by the unconscious class influences and assumptions. It was not, therefore, valid in its own right and had to be

approached most circumspectly. It seemed to me that in the same sense the psycho-analytic liberation was only superficially a liberation: unacknowledged in all its elaborate theorizing was the morbid sexual origin of the theories themselves. In fact, I had begun to suspect that psycho-analysis was itself neurotic. I did not want to believe in the universality of sexuality: it took the pleasure out of sex as out of everything else: if everything was sex, nothing was sex. On quite a materialist plane it seemed to me that there were other energies in the human psyche, capacities for sheer intellectual pleasure such as the mathematician enjoys in his logical exercises in the abstract, and the composer in the solution of his problems of form, which were not solved by founding the libido in sexual energy.

However, in due course I presented my letter to the clinic and was asked the usual initial questions by a young doctor who sat at a desk and efficiently filled in forms. Towards the termination of the interview he asked me briskly, "Tell me—just to make it easier for us to decide whether there is a case here we can analyze—is your castration wish directed against your father or your mother?"

The question reminded me of the one we used to tell labour public speakers to use against the heckler who persistently demanded 'Yes or no' for his answer—"Tell me, have you stopped beating your wife? Yes or no?" It was clearly going to be decided by the clinic that I wanted to castrate either my father or my mother and the prospect of weeks of analysis in which a brisk, professional young man and I would pretend to discuss this absurdity impersonally was too appalling for words. This way, I felt sure, I should indeed end in an asylum. I could only struggle, after that, to bring the interview to an end as quickly as possible, and went away more deeply depressed than I had arrived. I never returned. If there was a battle to be fought for the health of my psyche, then I would do it in my solitude, a solitude daily more precious to me.

1933 was a year of crisis for me also because Hitler came to power in Germany. He has gone since, and we have grown used to the catastrophies of this century, and have forgotten the extent to which the year 1933 was a spiritual disaster for Europe. I had really only one trustworthy instrument of political analysis then, and that was Marxism, and in terms of Marxism the coming to power of Hitler did not make sense.

The sensible historical expectation (even on a liberal basis too) was that the two divided wings of the German labour movement would come together in time to defeat Hitler. Germany was almost the test of Marxist theory, for since the Great War she had passed through one revolutionary crisis after another. The full fury of the world crisis had broken over her—her banks were ruined, businesses bankrupt, and one third of her youth unemployed. Her government was impotent, and her working class powerful. One had faith that history was progress, and that the Marxist parties in this revolutionary situation would come to power and make the social revolution. It did not happen: and moreover because the Marxist parties did not want it to happen. The schism between Social-democrats and Communists went deeper than the schism between Communists and Nazis! One had to swallow painfully the fact that Communists and Nazis collaborated in the Berlin Transport Strike and voted together in the Reichstag, that Communists declared that it would be an advantage for them if the Nazis did come to power since that would destroy the Social-Democrats, and then the Communists 'would easily reckon with the Brownshirts'. This showed an irresponsibility verging on political lunacy, but it was seriously argued, and for a long time *after* the Nazis had come to power. The Communists had a little rhyme which enshrined their revolutionary defeatism—'First the S.D.P., then the N.S.D.A.P., and in the end the K.P.D.' We heard ugly rumours of a swing of membership between the Nazis and Communists—and I can remember the physical pain I felt when at last I had to admit myself that the stories were true, and that there were elements in the German revolution of which, up till then, I had been quite ignorant. Anyway, there the truth was—the greatest proletarian country had made a revolution against the proletariat. In one day the home of Marxism had turned Marxism upside down. There was not a single English socialist who did not feel bewilderment and fear.

Of course, we made a rationalization of the new German revolution. (It is still current!) We began to remember that Mussolini existed, and argued that fascism was the classic form of the capitalist counter-revolution, the politics of capitalism in decline, as liberalism was the politics of its expansion. It was an argument not without sense, and the most neat

expositions on this basis began to be solemnly argued in the pages of left reviews. I myself gave many lectures which argued that the existence of democratic institutions stood in the way of the restoration of the profitability of private enterprise, because through elected bodies and trade unions wage reductions could be resisted. To abolish free institutions was the first step in wage reductions, and therefore a fascist party was the principal hope of capitalism in decline. It was a nice theory, and we felt relieved when we had made it, as though we had put history straight again. If I had doubts then, it was about the behaviour of the proletariat which, in 1932 and 1933 in Germany, possessed two large armies formed precisely to resist such a brutal capitalist solution to the situation. And they did not resist the coming of Hitler by one shot! One wing, and that the most revolutionary, stood cynically aside and by that, in a sense, aided him! Perhaps the German nation really wanted Hitler! And say what one likes, the Nazis really behaved like revolutionaries in their own right. They sought fanatically to turn a whole nation upside down, they brought to power new classes of people, they introduced socialist measures, and threw themselves with violence against the whole current of European civilization, going much farther than the Russian communists in their bitter condemnation of the West. No wonder I began to ask whether Marxism was a reliable guide to history!

I received many emissaries from youth movements of the Wandervögel type. They wanted the Woodcraft Folk to support and explain the Nazi revolution to the English people. They told the story foreshadowed in the correspondence I have already quoted. They excused Hitler, idealized his Party, and shrugged away the persecutions of the Jews as journalistic inventions; they spoke of the new era as the day—*der Tag*—of German youth. National Socialism, they said, was a revolution of Germanness with which German youth was most in sympathy: the Woodcraft Folk, which believed in a folk quality in civilization, ought to sympathize too. They were the same bland, polite, fair-haired young men as of old, browned by the sun and wind, the very apotheosis of the open air type my own movement admired, yet with pockets in their minds one could not reach. We rejected their overtures angrily. These men were wretched turncoats, I argued, for it was impossible that all our comrades of past meetings had gone over to the enemy.

The first public address I gave in the autumn of 1933, when I had recovered sufficiently from my illness, was to a gathering of members of my own movement, to whom I explained what I understood of German National Socialism and said that I was certain it meant a second war, for which Germany already appeared to me to be preparing. This certainty plunged me into yet another dilemma. Up to 1933, with some confidence, I could say that I was a pacifist since the only kind of war in which I was likely to be asked to fight was an imperialist one. We in the Woodcraft Folk had passed a resolution, following the Oxford students, pledging ourselves not to fight for King and Country, an evasive declaration which left us free to fight for anything else. Now, however, with Hitler in power, murdering freedom, and hostile to all the things I held dear, could I be a pacifist any longer if war came?—and I was quite certain it would. Could I see Hitler victorious over England and do nothing about it? I remarked to myself the irony that once it became clear to me that there was going to be another war, and what kind of a war it would be, I was no longer a pacifist.

In the pages of Middleton Murry's *Adelphi* I tried to put down what I felt about the youth movements with which I had been associated so long. My illness and pending resignation from leadership of my own movement made me feel that I could look at this part of my life more objectively now. 'Never before,' I wrote, 'in history have the gaps between one generation and another been so great. Three hundred years ago a son could confidently expect that his path through life would be much the same as his father's. Even fifty years ago this remained true, except, we may add, that the son hoped to be better off.

. . . In the orderly sort of world in which this could happen, parental wisdom, the authority of the experienced, and the established air of things were inevitably accepted by the rising generation. . . . Nowadays the world changes its face in a decade; the society into which children grow up is not the society of their parents: its assumptions, admissions and values are different; technical progress has changed life's face and altered its material rewards, by which the authority of the passing generation is visibly weakened. Recapitulation of the experience of the previous generation provides no handle to the usurping generation to grasp the world they have to live in, and there comes the inevitable cry for freedom, for the right of

youth to its own experiences and values. Mixed with much romanticism and delight in purely physical experience this forms the basis upon which the Youth Movement was built.'

I was asking not only *why* did our generation seek its salvation in youth movements, but why it was that in Germany, in which they appeared in their most typical and mature forms, they should have succumbed to the jingoistic and nationalist monstrosity, the Hitlerjugend, and been absorbed by it. This seemed such an absolute defeat of the demand of the German Buende for freedom to fashion their lives in obedience to their consciences, that I had to make historical sense of it: I came to the conclusion that the victory of Hitler was a triumph for the forces the German youth movements of the left and the right had originally opposed.

This drew down on me a startling answer in *The Adelphi* from Rolf Gardiner whom I had first met in John Hargrave's movement. Gardiner's role during the twenties and early thirties had been to bring German and British youth closer together, and in this he had many extraordinary achievements to his credit, one of which was the bringing of German youth choirs to England to sing Bach cantatas in our cathedrals. He was a member of the Freischar youth, most famous of German youth movements, and his authority in Germany was even greater than his prestige in England. No man knew better the temper of German youth and I had to take notice when he said that I had made a typical mistake in overstressing the lyrical and romantic aspects of the Wandervögel and of 'underrating the epic continuity, classic consistency and essentially disciplined character of the Buende as they emerged and developed after 1918' and that I failed 'utterly to appreciate the intimate connections between the Youth Movement and National Socialism'.* He produced many justifications of the current German view that this *was* the revolution of the Youth Movement including the argument that 'quite an

*Later he retracted, of course, when the brutal nature of that regime became manifest to him. Too much indeed should not be made of his rather reckless defence of the Third Reich in its very early days: his attitude, like mine, was one of affronted idealism. He, optimistically, hoped that the Nazi regime did enshrine the aspirations of German youth: I, more pessimistic, believed it defeated them. When, in *Annihilation of Man* (1944), in the chapter entitled 'The Revolt of German Youth' I sought to trace a connection between the ideals of the German youth movement and National Socialism, he wrote me a long letter of rebuke. The position he had taken up in 1934 had become untenable: unbearably so since many of his comrades of Freischar had by then been murdered by the Nazis.

astonishing number of Hitler's adjutants were previously Wandervögel leaders'. It filled me with dismay to find an English youth leader defending the Hitler regime: if he was right that National Socialism represented not the defeat of the Youth Movement, but in a certain sense its triumph, then I had to make another reading of my own past. The experiences of young men like me in Scouts, Kibbo Kift, Woodcraft Folk and similar organizations were not so dissimilar from those of the Wandervögel. We shared with them the rejection of European civilization and the hope of a new, and in a sense more primitive one. Gardiner's judgment was a judgment upon us. Out of the fine and hopeful German youth movement, had come this evil thing National Socialism. It was not, perhaps, what German youth thought they wanted, but, given their standards, it was what they got. National Socialism was corrupt and perverse, but only in the same way that Russian Communism was. Both had roots in an idealism and a sincerity cynically exploited by ambitious leaders to produce something brutal and inhuman. Why should that be so, I asked myself continually? The more one looked at history, the more one found this perversion in it. There was a profound lesson to be learnt about the fatality which attends all human hopes, and that I was beginning to learn it was the mark of a new maturity.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Death of a Char

They were sorrowful years in other ways for the death of my father had been followed by the death of friends: nothing it seemed was to be spared me in the way of revelation of the human condition. The first friend I lost was Eric Greenhill. Eric, like myself, had been an elementary schoolboy who had left school even a little earlier than I to fight his way through the world. His mother was a widow, a prim and gentle soul, who had to struggle hard to bring up two boys in the days before social services eased that kind of burden. Both boys had only one passion, and that was the stage. Eric's brother's talents were more for management, and he came to run dance halls and cabarets, and achieved sudden fame by organizing the first pole-squatting competition in London, which attracted large crowds of sightseers and a police ban. At school Eric was always organizing concerts and plays and conducting school sing-songs. My first sight of him, as quite a small boy, was when with precocious professional aplomb he conducted the whole school in the singing of 'There was a little man and he had a little gun', with appropriate grimaces. In the sculpture of his face was to be read his destiny, for he had lank, dark Thespian locks, a large, important rubbery nose, and the most mobile skin imaginable. As he grew older, he grew more like Irving, and somewhat conscious of it. He was apprenticed to a jeweller when he left school and stayed long enough to learn the trade, when he left that, and fell out of employment, he went as an usher for a time to an approved school, but had no stomach for the harsh disciplinary code asked of him, and left that too. Like everyone else in those days he had his spells of

unemployment. Though he had been, from the very first, one of the supporters of my youth movement, his evenings were full of amateur dramatics and he took leading parts in one of the finest of South London Amateur Dramatic Societies, one run by the sister of Gordon Ellis. Like many another talented youngster from the same company, Eric graduated to the West-End stage and so it used to be one of my pleasures in those years to go and watch him play in 'The Constant Nymph,' 'See Naples and Die,' 'The Cherry Orchard' and ephemeral pieces of which I have since forgotten the names. An opportunity came to him, after a spell of resting, to join a small repertory company which toured schools, colleges and village institutes for about eight months of the year putting on such Shakespeare, Shaw and Chekhov as they could manage with a small cast. Eric was stage manager as well as male lead, and this work seemed to him in retrospect, he once told me, to consist entirely of loading and unloading scenery in the pouring rain. One or two night stands are no joke, and the small size of the company permitted no one any proper rest. During the summer that he fell ill Eric left it exhausted, and was grateful for a small part in a revival of 'See Naples and Die.' He was one of the café chess-players. On a wild impulse about that time he married a girl in the cast and took her away on a brief honeymoon: but the marriage did not even survive a week. Something went wrong and his wife left him, and he never saw or heard from her again in his life.

It was when he was full of the misery of this disaster that he came to see me and we walked the spring woods of Downe and Cudham where we had so often camped years before. And all the time we walked, with the scent of bluebell and hawthorn blowing freshly about the coombes—quite unspoilt then—he coughed. It was the tiny irritating cough I had noticed in Lydia Kirinova, and he did his best to suppress it. I had noticed it on the stage when he sat playing chess and thought at first that it was 'in the part.'

'Do you think I ought to do something about my cough?' he asked, stopping suddenly. He looked tired and worried.

'Sounds like a smoker's tickle,' I said. 'I shouldn't worry.'

'Perhaps I ought to go and see a doctor . . .' he said vaguely. 'I've had it ever since that time on tour I carried on with the 'flu.'

I remembered the cough when his mother telephoned me

one day to say that he was in Lewisham Hospital and they suspected T.B. and could I go to see him? I went, taking one of the presentation copies of *Fugitive Morning* for him, and back in a few days came a breathless criticism of it. He was a most shrewd judge of plays and books though incapable of writing (or even spelling) himself. In the T.B. Ward he looked well and rested, and was keeping the patients amused by the stories and jokes which he told with those rubbery grimaces for which he might one day have been famous. Alas, he had to interrupt his stories in order to cough. The rhythm of his life was now determined by the enemy encamped within him. Every time I went to see him, he was more gaunt and fevered still, until indeed it was no longer possible to persuade oneself that he would live. His desperate mother got him out of low-lying Lewisham to a sanatorium on the Kentish Hills, and there for a month, in the cold January, he seemed to recover. But he had a relapse, and came back to Lewisham Hospital to die, a skeleton now, with only a frail, blue taut skin over his bones and huge fevered, avid and longing eyes. I was not yet ill myself, but in a poor state of health, and the visits made me unbearably sad: it was difficult to be hearty and reassuring when, though his weakness was so great that he could hardly lift his transparent hand from the counterpane, he would talk, through the rasping cough that troubled him, of what he was going to do when he came out.

The death of Gordon Ellis was more sudden. In the very first years that I knew him he was still suffering penalties for his pacifist past: he was in and out of teaching and editorial jobs, and was often without money or hope. There were times, as I well knew, when his insecurity and sense of unwantedness depressed him to the point of suicide. Almost at the moment of deepest dejection his luck changed and he became the Education Secretary of the National Union of Teachers. I used to call on him in his office and we would find a café in Kings Cross or Bloomsbury, at which to talk and eat. He married and took a house at Highgate and I visited him there and met his wife and fine baby boy. At the foot of the stairs, in a suitable niche, stood the Victor Ludorum cup of his school-days. It was growing difficult to remember now that he had once been an athlete, for he was short of breath and puffed when we went up hills, and was putting on weight, and

smoked too much. But he seemed, at last, to have reached his destination and a quiet and fruitful life as a union official stretched before him.

Although I had been full of despair at the failure of my first novel, I had written a second, a much better one, I thought, which was not autobiographical. It was the story of a grocer's assistant living under the shadow of a gasworks who was fired one Saturday night, and left his wife and took to the open road. It was a theme to which I had been urged by my love of *The History of Mr. Polly*. I, too, wanted to write a picaresque novel of the open road with a comically unhappy little man as its hero. I wanted to put something into such a character of the spirit of my own father, who was just such an unhappy little man. Yet still it was to be a roaring, rumbustious affair: I was quite ready to slide into it the novelist's tricks learnt from *Gil Blas*, *Don Quixote* and *Meriton Latroon*. But it did not turn out like that at all. My Mr. Periwake was not larger than life, but a little man observed with sorrowing realism. When the book was published, to a chorus of praise almost as great as that by which the first had been received (and with sales no larger), Ellis rang me up. He had enjoyed it so much he said that he had written a long letter to me about it: then he had decided to tear it up, but he would be glad if I would come and have lunch with him and talk about it. I could not see him for a few days, and when I did arrive at his office there was a message to say that he had gone off to Brighton to spend the week-end with his wife and child, and would I come in on Monday?

I called as bidden but a man at the desk said brusquely, 'Oh you can't see him, he's dead'. I thought this such stupidity that I began to explain patiently who I was and what Ellis had asked me to do, and that Ellis was certainly not dead but only away for the week-end. The man persisted and, growing frightened, I went into his office and looked for his clerk. There I learnt that he was indeed dead. He had walked into the sea at Brighton and collapsed and died of heart failure. The clerk and I stared miserably and blankly at each other. 'Wait a minute,' he said. 'Before he went he put something on the dictaphone.' He turned it on and from it, in the hollow and tinny tones of this machine, as though from the tomb itself, emerged the voice of my friend talking in his reedy and nervous fashion about the need for the advancement

of the school-leaving age. I turned and fled from the building and walked desperately through the streets to Charing Cross Station. I owed him more than I could ever pay for his urbanity, independence of mind, and genuine friendship. I could bear nothing more: one could have so much grief and that was all. After that the mind refused to respond and one grew simply tired and sullen.

Throughout the weeks in which I lay in the garden wondering whether I might not travel the same road as Eric Greenhill (I had heard an indiscreet neighbour say of me 'He's not long for this world, poor chap') I was almost entirely alone. When the medical students had gone on vacation my mother went for a desperately needed holiday on my persuasion that I was not too ill to look after myself. For a few shillings a week a char, a woman in her late fifties, came in for an hour or so every day to make the beds and wash-up, and do my shopping for me. Somehow I must have raised the money to pay her. She was a nice old soul, brownfaced, with bright blue eyes, and lean and active for her years. She would make a pot of tea, and boil herself an egg, when she had finished 'doing' for me, and then go off on whatever affairs kept her busy during the rest of the day. They could not have been very considerable for she lived in one tiny room in a poor street for which she paid five shillings a week: it was filled with furniture her mother had left her. I talked to her when she brought me a cup of tea to my deck chair in the garden, and in a clipped and reserved way told me about herself. She was one of the genuine poor for whom Poor Law Relief had been created, yet she made no use of it. She did a little charring here and there and earned about a pound a week. She had been born, she said, in a house in M—— Road—did I know it? It had a sign outside 'Mangling Done'. I knew it well, remarking it in childhood with gleeful superiority, for all the 'Ns' were written backwards. Her mother, she said, had run that business and as a girl she had helped to turn the huge mangle in the shed out in the backyard. She had gone into service, and stayed in it most of her life. There was a history of quarrels in her family. When her mother died her brother took all her mother's furniture, she said (forgetting that she had told me that her room was full of it) and she had never spoken to him since.

'Where is your brother?' I asked.

'Not far away, sir,' she said. 'He's a builder, but I wouldn't speak to him again not if you crowned me.'

'Don't you think it would be a good idea to make it up? Wouldn't you be better off having a room at his house, if he's got one to spare?'

'Not if I live to be a hundred I wouldn't,' she replied with tightening mouth. 'I keep myself to myself.'

I made no inroads at all into this savage independence.

Some time towards the end of my illness she lost her room. I discovered it only by accident. She began to turn up at my house earlier and earlier in the morning, while I was still in bed. I had given her a key so that she could let herself in. The first time I heard a clattering in the kitchen early in the morning I thought that burglars were in the place, or the cat was chasing a bird among the crockery. I woke at the slightest sound, and my heart used to beat uncontrollably at unexpected noises, so to calm myself I shuffled downstairs in slippers and dressing gown to see what was amiss. When I softly opened the scullery door she was standing at the sink, her skirt hitched up round her waist, her shrunken yellow buttocks bare, washing her smalls in the scullery sink. She bowed her head, mantling, paralysed with shame, when she saw me there. I retreated hastily.

It was possible to live the whole day long under the pear tree, for the sun never ceased to shine, and there was always a windy glitter of heat and light in the poplar trees, ravishing me with its beauty. I took my letters and books out to the deck chair, and there presently she found me. She stood uncertainly a long way off from my chair, my glass of milk in her hand, her face averted.

'I didn't mean to take liberties,' she said to the rose trees. 'I'm not that kind. But I didn't think you'd mind.'

'Of course not,' I reassured her. 'It must be difficult doing any personal washing if you've only one room.'

Her face darkened and she said nothing.

'You're free to do any washing you want—I wouldn't have come down only I thought it was the cat.'

Morning after morning, after that, I heard her trip up the back passage and let herself in. I supposed she made herself a cup of tea and had a slice of bread and butter, for I would hear the kettle singing. It did not really seem necessary, even

to do a little washing, to come so early, and I was embarrassed that she stayed so long in the house, finding things to do, for I could not afford to pay her more than the minimum we had agreed: I was just about living on charity myself, if the truth be told. I said something of the sort to her once. A look of terror spread over her face.

'I'll be glad to come, sir, if it's all the same to you. It isn't the money, it's for something to do,' she made haste to tell me, and in the face of her distress I said nothing more. When in the garden I thought about her look of fright, it came to me that perhaps she no longer had a room.

'How is your room going,' I asked her later on. 'Are you happy there?'

She stood stock still, staring at the grass, incapable of answering.

'Have you still got your room?' I persisted.

A flush of dismay spread over her face. 'I wasn't going to tell you,' she said. 'You being so ill.'

'And haven't you got another?' I cried. She shook her head, and at the thought of all her pitiful contrivances to come here as early as possible, and stay as long as she could, and to wash herself and her underclothes in the kitchen sink so that she might remain respectable, tears started in my eyes.

'But how do you live? You must have a place to sleep!'

She would not look at me, but stared in misery at the grass.

'How do you live?'

'I manage, sir, not wishing to worry you, sir, and you ill.'

'Sleep in the kitchen,' I said. 'Anywhere. You can't roam the streets.'

For a few nights she slept in the kitchen, but she was so discreet about it, so unwilling to give trouble, that I could not have guessed that even a mouse had come into the house. I think she waited round the corner, where she could see the kitchen light, and did not venture to let herself in until I had gone to bed.

Her haunting plight made me so angry with life that it retarded my recovery.

'How can you live? Can you get a bed in a hostel?' I kept asking her. 'Go to the Relieving Officer and ask him to help you—tell him you've got work, and would he help you with a room?'

'They'll put me in the workhouse, sir. I'd rather die first.'

'Well, go to your brother—he must help you.'

She was as stubborn as a mule, and it was with a hard expressionless face that she said, 'I'd rather die first'.

The day was approaching when my mother would return, the lodgers would be back to roost, and my young brother and sister home from the camp in the Wye Valley. She would not be able to sleep in the kitchen, and when I hinted so, she said 'I'll manage, sir'. Her pride was such that from that day she ceased to sleep there.

When my mother came home it was the first thing we discussed. We tried to arrange something. I was too ill to walk about, but my indefatigable mother found the poor old body a room locally for five shillings a week, and together we paid this for her for a month in advance. We admonished her as carefully as we could without treading on that awful pride. 'Make yourself respectable and go and see the landlady and say when you're coming in. You can come and work here, and have your dinner here. At the end of the month, if you can't pay the rent yourself, we'll see the Relieving Officer with you.' Off she went, trying to hold back her tears. With her brother alive it did not seem exactly our responsibility but what could we do? Let her go on sleeping on park benches at night, and perhaps die?

What transpired at her lodgings I do not know. Perhaps one look at her made the landlady suspect that she was not too clean. We had a note saying that the room was not available now and returning the £1 deposit. So the woman was in the same position still, coming early to us, and living, God knows how. There were ways of getting through the day. One local cinema offered matinees with a cup of tea and two biscuits for sixpence. One could get a little nourishment and three or four hours' sleep this way. Then many women's meetings took place in the afternoons, and included in the agenda of most of them was a cup of tea and a piece of cake. It was the nights, sleeping under hedges or in doorways, one dreaded to think of, and the fear she must have had of being arrested.

'She'll get verminous, you'll see,' my mother said. 'I don't even know whether we ought to let her keep on coming. Not if she's going to bring things in the house. I've all you to think of: we'll see her wretch of a brother.'

The brother turned out to be hostile even to owning a sister, let alone helping her at all. He ran a private decorating business from his small house. He opened the door when we called on him, wiping the egg and tea hurriedly off his moustache, and smoothing his thin hair over his bald head at the sight of potential customers. He was in shirtsleeves, a soiled striped flannel shirt showing under his open greasy waistcoat. A baby with grey snot running from its nose hung on to his legs. He was annoyed to find that we were not customers and grew aggressive about his sister's plight.

'She's a bad lot. You don't know half. I won't do nothing and that's flat. Let her go to the R.O. same as everyone else 'as to.'

When I protested angrily that his sister was sleeping in doorways and would die of it, he retorted with that mulish look which was to be seen on her face also, 'You've no cause to tell me what I should do. You mind your business and I'll mind mine.'

Even then not all was hopeless. Through a Roman Catholic charity we secured a bed for her in a hostel, and felt that when this was accomplished we had done our best: henceforward she would be well looked after. Not a bit of it. Though she disappeared from our ken for the winter I met her again in the spring. She told me a rambling story about life in the hostel which, when summarized, came to this: There was a young girl sharing her cubicle who was not strong in the head. She had grown quite fond of her and when the girl had fits, and was made to stay in bed, she cared for her. But one day as they were coming back from a walk they saw the sick girl standing in her nightdress on the ledge of an upper storey, clasping the statue of the Virgin Mary and Child which stood in a niche. The women screamed, though the nuns tried to calm them lest they frightened the girl into falling, and a rush began for the upper storey windows so that they might save her. But it was too late. The girl fell and was killed. This the old lady said, had so upset her that she couldn't spend another night in the place. I pressed half a crown into her hand, too overwhelmed by the appalling misery of her life to know what to do or say.

I told my mother, 'Yes,' she said compressing her lips. 'I wasn't going to tell you, but she's been back at the women's

meetings again I'm told. And she smells now.' Her nose wrinkled and she shuddered, her fierce Yorkshire respectability outraged. 'I'm sure she's verminous. I *couldn't* have her back to work. She must go to the Relieving Officer. They don't keep able-bodied people in workhouses if they can get work outside and live.'

When next I saw the woman and pressed into her hand the only money I happened to have that day, she still stubbornly refused to apply for any relief. 'They'll put me away—in the workhouse. I'd die first.' Tears sprang into her eyes.

For days I would lose sight of her, then meet her again near the shops. Each time she looked more like a gypsy than ever, burnt black by living out in the open and sleeping on park benches in the sun. But her clothes were more bedraggled than ever, and into her eyes had crept that wild and frightened light one saw in the eyes of the *besprizhorni* in Russia. She shrank a little from human contact now, as if she had become more of an animal. I pleaded with her to let us take her to the Relieving Officer and even sent a note round to him, but I never learnt that anything came of it. For days again she vanished, then I met her wizened and wild with unkempt hair, one frosty morning. Her hands were frightfully swollen. 'It's the cold nights what done it, sir. It's all right in the summer, but it's not good in this weather.' It was hunger oedema, and sadly I thought that the end was near. I gave her some money. Ought I to tell the police so that they could get her to hospital? How would they find her? I sent a note to her brother telling him of her plight. One day I read in the local paper that a woman had been found in the streets ill with pneumonia and taken to hospital. Ill as she was she had tried to resist being put in the ambulance, protesting that she was a respectable woman and had never been to the workhouse in her life. She died the following day. We had no more been able to save her than to save my father.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Red Poplar—Grey Unemployed

On the railway station platform one morning I was hailed excitedly by an old friend, Clifford Troke. My first novel had not long been published, and he had bought and read a copy, circumstances enough to make him remarkable in my eyes. He praised it lavishly, too, and if I did not show much interest in this it was because I had not recovered from its shattering failure, and now could not hear its title mentioned without being overcome by a speechless misery. People invariably asked me how it was selling, especially those who had never got around to buying a copy, and as I hated admitting failure I usually snarled angrily, 'Oh, very well!' and changed the subject. It must have appeared to some of my friends that I regarded the book now as one of the less creditable episodes in my life.

But Clifford, with an impetuosity and eloquence typical of him, brushed through all my diffidence to discuss the novel seriously as a work of art, rather than a curiosity it was remarkable I had written at all, and my heart warmed to him and we talked until my train came in. I was then working on the second novel and was in despair, and about to burn it, and I offered to let him read it before it went out. He accepted with delight and thus became my literary adviser: I badly needed one—someone who was prepared out of a wider background of reading than my own to examine critically and appreciatively the books and poems I was writing. I needed a public, in fact, and leant much just then on his generous temperament.

Troke was himself writing rather precious poems under the influence of the French symbolists and selling magazine

stories to the Strand and Pearsons, and teaching English to the staff of Harrods. His charm and high spirits and his colossal memory, which seemed to need only the stimulus of a word or a name to bring forth the relevant quotation, made him the best of company. Quite often secretly chagrined by his loquacity and learning I used to mutter to myself, 'Good lord, is there anything he hasn't read?' We were the same age, and had first met when he was a slender youth and I was the organizer of a camp near Ashted Common: he came with a party of children which I took over the remains of a Roman villa there. He had read my volume of poems about then, but had not, I think, cared for their untutored nature. During my illness his friendship was a blessing, for he would come over to tea and talk me out of my leaden depression. Although his financial difficulties were then hardly much less than my own, he had managed to acquire a car, and at a time when hiking and camping were out of the question for me we were able to conduct our inquests on life and literature while he drove furiously through the lanes of Kent and Sussex. His enthusiasm for driving a car was hardly less than that for literature, and while talking of Proust or Flaubert, or regretting the attacks of prudes on Lawrence and Huxley, he swung us perilously past cows and cyclists, perambulators and parsons, determined not to let anyone pass him on the road and delighted to control both our destinies with a flick of his wrist. The recklessness in his driving added exhilaration to our talk: for Clifford life had an added richness if there was a chance of running slap into perdition with a phrase of Baudelaire or Mallarmé on one's lips.

He had a chastening effect on the excess of idealism with which I was burdened. When I told him of the dismal episode with the psycho-analyst, he was robust and brutal. 'I'm a great believer in the money cure,' he said. 'I'm sure there's nothing wrong with you that £500 a year wouldn't cure straightaway.' He did not leave the subject. 'What you need—what we both need—is a little financial success. It's necessary for a man's self-respect. One can't behave with a socialist purity in the midst of the howling wolf packs of capitalism. Old Shaw's right, poverty is a crime,' he said. A little later he set up in Fleet Street his own journalistic agency, the British American Newspaper Services, which was quite successful until he grew tired of it, and through it, as my literary agent,

he tried to organize some success for my third novel in England and America.

One of his enterprises then was to write the life stories of the famous and infamous for the Sunday newspapers. It was for this reason that I once found Harry Champion in his office. I fell on the dear old man as on a lost uncle, telling him the number of times I, a small boy eating Russian toffees, had sat at his feet in the Palladium stalls. My praise so delighted him that there and then, in a stentorian voice, and with his breathless jigging dance, he began to work through 'Any Old Iron'. In vain to try and stop him. His voice which had once filled Collins and the Coliseum had lost none of its power and now rattled the windows and shook the floor of Clifford's office. People stood on the stairs to listen and Harry grew so red in the face with his effort that I was afraid he would burst a blood vessel.

It was through Clifford that a new career began for me. He rang me up one day to say that a friend of his, Sam Myers, who was running a Men's Institute in Deptford, was trying to start classes for the unemployed in current affairs. He was going to give talks himself and perhaps I'd like to try too. At the invitation of Sam Myers I went to Greenwich and gave a lecture on 'My experiences in Russia' to a hard-bitten bunch of unemployed watermen and market porters sitting in the lovely bay room of the Trafalgar Inn (then an unemployed centre). The 18th Century bow window jutted out into the river, and I could hardly lecture for the majesty of the rivercraft riding the choppy tide under my nose in the windy October light. The men chewed tobacco and spat, or smoked shag and listened stolidly, barges and tugs surging behind them and the fog grew thick enough to choke me. The lecture was not a success, for I was still ill, and much too nervous, but other invitations followed fast on this. One was to run two classes in Poplar, one in the afternoon and the other in the evening, and when I signed the contract for this I landed myself with the first regular work for several years. By the autumn of 1934 I had built up a full weekly programme of classes and lectures and could bank on a regular income from teaching. It made immediately that change in my health which Clifford had predicted. I was back where I wanted to be, on my own feet again.

It had another consequence, which I did not understand at the time. I was at last compelled to read, study and take notes in a systematic way, especially for classes of students sitting for examinations. This meant an organized and sustained intellectual effort on my part: I read more carefully in politics and economics than ever I had done before, and prepared endless lesson notes. Chance threw in my way the opportunity to turn some of this into print by writing weekly articles on current affairs. In a curious and freakish way, the intellectual disciplines to which I should have submitted in my teens were now thrust upon me as the condition for earning a living at all. The whole of this work was, I now think, most abominably paid, but together then it made a total I could live on. It is almost impossible to explain what a miracle I felt this to be in my life and how it banished completely the depression my economic uselessness had made endemic.

Trinity Church in the East India Dock Road, lifting a classical face to Poplar slums, had been built in Poplar's shipbuilding days when, a century or more before, Poplar-built clippers raced from India with tea, and later from Australia with grain. In those days, when Poplar was a garden suburb which led nowhere save to the marshes of the Thames and the River Lea, the carriages of the shipbuilders and shipmasters drew up to the church porch in a dignified parade every Sunday morning. In the 1930's there was hardly a trace of that past. Poplar was the borough of the dockers, transport workers, lascars, and factory workers. Among them flourished the powerful radical tradition which had brought the workhouse boy Will Crooks, and the poor lad George Lansbury, to the top. The brave and humane fight of the Poplar Guardians at the end of the First World War for rates of poor relief which permitted the out-of-work to live had given birth to the title 'Red Poplar'. During the General Strike some fierce riots had taken place along the East India Dock Road, and the Government had even sent through an armoured convoy to bring the food out of the docks. The hall at Trinity where I came to lecture to the unemployed had been used by the Workers' Defence Corps or 'Red Guards' for their drill meetings, and as a first aid station during the strike.

The incumbent was a Clydesider, the Rev. William Dick, an emotional and eloquent preacher, full of anger at the

unemployment which scourged his congregation. Unemployment created for Poplar a special human scenery, like that of a mining village when men are out: at every street corner lounged men in black clothes, white chokers and cloth caps, rubbing their shoulder shiny and polishing the brick as they ate their hearts away in sullenness and hate. Dick was not the man to sit idle in face of this human suffering. He himself had been a poor Scots boy, with an unemployed father, who had worked his way into the ministry largely by his own efforts. But nothing of the church he made so great an institution in Poplar now survives. It was first damaged in the Great War when a bomb fell on a school next door, and massacred nearly a score of infants. A memorial to them stands in Poplar Recreation Ground. In the Second World War, on the eve of the church's centenary, a flying bomb slid up the nave and blew the church to pieces. Now "Lansbury," a showpiece of modern architecture, a part of the Festival of Britain of 1951, has risen on the ground where the church stood, and Trinity, in modern dress, is surrounded by the concrete world of Le Corbusier. Even the dingy streets which gave the neighbourhood its character, and which are mostly grass-grown rubble mounds at the moment of writing, will have gone, their very names erased. William Dick will not see it, for he died exhausted not many months after the church was destroyed.

I first heard of William Dick shortly after the General Strike when he brought over to a Lewisham church twenty Poplar reds who each made a five minute speech on 'Why I am a Communist.' That was typical of his courage and shock tactics. It was no use for Christians to hold up Pecksniffian hands in horror at the awful views of the proletariat: they had best meet them and find out, he said, what they had to say. A few of the men I was about to teach had taken part in this campaign of Dick's to open the eyes of the church to the passion for social justice among working men: others had drilled with the Red Guards, or fought the police with stones. Yet the firebrand character of the place was not in evidence when I went. Trinity was a vast charitable and social organization. It distributed parcels of food and clothing, and it organized scores of clubs and meetings for almost every social need among the people of the locality. Hundreds of people who never went to 'Services' regularly relied upon Trinity for

other human needs. There was even a night shelter, free of charge, and no questions asked. In the midst of seediest Poplar, Trinity fulfilled the hospitable and healing role of a medieval monastery. And William Dick, like a saintly prior, wore himself out with this unending work of human mercy. He was suffering dreadfully from rheumatoid arthritis all the days I knew him. It so crippled him that he was compelled to struggle about with two sticks, like a man born that way. He refused to allow this to destroy him, and only the kind of illness which put him on his back held up his laborious daily round of interviews with the needy, and errands of mercy among the sick and dying. He deserves a place among all those Christians who have fought for the redemption of the East End—Cardinal Manning, William Booth, Father Groser, Mary Hughes, the Kingsleys and the Toynbees. It was one of the pleasures and privileges of those days to enjoy this good priest's friendship and to discuss with him the people he knew so well.

Though in a sense parishioners of Trinity, my unemployed, or at least the most vocal of them, were under Marxist or Anarchist influence, and were inclined to announce their atheism boorishly in order to express their spiritual independence, for most of them were in receipt of Dick's charity, and it was bitter in their mouths. Few church halls can have heard so much outspoken hatred of Christianity. I never saw Dick perturbed by this, for he believed that it was part of the spiritual redemption of these men that they should be allowed to speak their minds, warped though they might be. This freedom was, for me, the best possible atmosphere. The Tuesday afternoon 'free-for-all' became for seven years a Poplar institution: in the end it drew visitors from all over the world.

On the day of my first appearance a young fellow in a cloth cap who stood by the door gave me a derisory look and said, 'You the new lecturer?' I said I was. 'You wait till Bell gets going on you,' he said with pity. 'He'll tear you limb from bleedin' limb, mate.'

Bell was a street corner speaker with a remarkable ascendancy over the men of Trinity. Someone tried to point him out to me before I began my lecture but among a couple of hundred men I failed to grasp who was the seedy individual whose wrath I had to fear so much. And Bell kept silent. But so

greatly did the others fear or admire him that many made reference to him, turning to the quarter of the hall in which he lay submerged like a whale getting ready to blow. 'I expect,' said one young man with a pedantic manner, 'Mr. Bell will have something to say about this lecture and so I'll keep my remarks short.' It all began to look like a carefully staged entry. Presently there was a stir and a craning of necks and the chairman nudged me. 'That's 'im,' he said, as a stumpy little figure, with a face as fiery and as crumpled as a shiny red cabbage, rose to speak. He fixed a baleful yellow eye upon me and began in the broadest Scotch, 'I have never in all my borrn days leestened to sech peetiful rhodomontade from a peed agent of the capitalist class.' There was a stir of pleasure, to which he warmed, though he misunderstood what the great shout of laughter meant every time he referred to me as a 'peed agent'. His Scots grew more broad as he gathered way, but I could not escape awareness that I was being denounced with all the fervour and wealth of imagery of a Scotsman brought up on the Bible. I was a whited sepulchre, it was in vain for me to gnash my teeth and rend my garments, my words were howlings in outer darkness, and the day would come when I would be delivered up to them in judgment, and this was apropos of a denunciation of all authority, including and especially mine, as a sin against the light. I had to smile at the irony of it all. How often I had sat where Bell was sitting, to spring to my feet to make a denunciation of capitalism, more tempered, but perhaps not so very different. Now I was on a platform dressed in the slender authority of one paid to go to talk to the unemployed on whatever subjects he chose. By that small promotion I had become, for Bell at least, the symbol of all the authority he detested. I could hardly explain, or point out on what small beer he was wasting his energy but refused to answer his tirade, on the grounds that personal abuse got us nowhere, he was no more forced to attend my lectures than I was forced to give them. If he didn't like me, he could stay away. At that with a bad tempered dignity he left the hall. But no one followed him, and after a decent interval he returned again, prepared to renew his attack. By that time I had won the friendship of the men.

My chairman for many years was a little man called Charlie Whistle, a stocky, ugly character whose fierce appearance

quite belied his gentle manners. Unlike many of the dockers who came to my meetings he was not tall, but as broad-shouldered and bow-legged as a miner. His lips were thick and huge, like a negro's, and his nose, flattened in some forgotten fight, emphasized this formidable look of his. His scalp, eyebrows, moustache, sprouted an aggressive white bristle: chin and throat were nearly always covered by a three day hoary growth. He was grubby, but by rule rather than laziness, for he had a theory that it was harmful to take baths, especially hot ones. 'When you boil an orange, matey,' he said, which as a matter of fact I never did, 'you ought to take a look at the oils that come out of the skin. The human skin's just the same, full of essential oils we spend our lives boiling out.' In winter therefore he bathed only under absolute compulsion, but in summer he went to the swimming baths, but as he also had theories about the chlorination of water, he preferred to go down to the Thames at Limehouse and swim with the street arabs from a sunken barge, or sit in the sun. He left me far behind in trying to live by theory. 'Always sit in the sun,' he said. And because of this, though he was my chairman, I would often lose sight of him, and look round to find that he had observed a sunbeam striking down to the floor from skylight or window, and had padded softly across to it in his plimsoles, taking his chair with him, and there he would sit absolutely immobile in it, his head sunk on his breast, his hoariness turned to stone, the dust motes dancing above him, Rodin's thinker grown old and set in a stage lime.

He was a legend with the men. They seriously believed that he had a private source of income and once a year dressed up as a toff and went up to the West End 'for a proper night-out'. And this legend was based, not on fact, but on the complete freedom from worldly ambition he displayed. He was unmarried, lived in a single room, and to talk with his friends was his whole ambition. He always waited courteously for me to give him a fag in the tea break after my lecture. If I forgot he would remind me obliquely. 'Funny how you like a fag at certain times. Sort of comes on you.' And he would pat his pockets for the cigarettes we both knew he couldn't afford to buy. But when he got to know me well he felt he could joke about it. 'The only reason I'm your chairman, you know, is because I get a fag at tea-break out of it.' And he went into

great cackles of laughter meant to hide his fear that I might seriously imagine him to be a cadger like the rest. It was because Whistle was not a cadger that the legend of his private wealth had grown up.

'Look at him,' he would say, in a stage aside, when a noisy red was holding the floor. 'Shooting off his mouth when everyone knows there's no bigger cadger than him. They're all a lot of cadgers. That's all they come for. If you didn't give them a cup of tea, they'd never come.' He would survey the sorry collection of down-and-outs before him and, seeing himself in them, work himself into a hate no capitalist of the *Daily Worker* cartoons could ever equal. 'All they're good for is to turn good food into manure. The only use they'll ever be is when they become human manure themselves.' Of one hulking man who was like a deflating balloon, with laps of soft, rubbery fat falling in creases over his face, who was his particular detestation, he would say to me. 'He's a pathological case. You should've seen him a few years ago, a hulking great man who could lift a house. Now look at him. He can hardly shamble about. He isn't ill, it's just his brain's going soft. Fiddles about with little girls. They're all pathological cases, the whole lot of them. Look at that fat lout too, the cissy. I'd kick his arse for him. But I'm no different: pathological too: human flotsam and jetsam.'

It was bad for him to be chairman: it detached him from the mountain of unemployed flesh before him, from their soured, soiled clothes and stale, hopeless minds. How they enraged him! Tears would start in his gentle eyes. 'What can we do, Mr. Paul?' he would ask me. 'What on earth can we do?' He himself strove continually against the hopelessness of his life. He spent hours in the public library, and the results of his reading sprouted in flowery quotations from Shakespeare or Tennyson carefully copied into an old notebook. He tried to read psychology, and got hopelessly tangled over the difference between the conscious and the unconscious. How on earth, he said, if the unconscious *was* unconscious could anybody be sure it was there? But the jargon of psycho-analysis was constantly on his tongue. 'Workers of the world unite,' he would grinningly proclaim to the men, 'you have nothing to lose but your inferiority complexes.'

The Pitts that Charlie Whistle delighted to abuse was (when

I first came) a young man, flabby from under-exercise but fresh-complexioned, who had been unemployed for three or four years. This extraordinary youth had an elaborate and ornate way of speaking, like a stage curate: he even stood beaming at us from over the tops of his spectacles and clasping his hands fondly across his belly. He maddened the men. They could not bear his prosy, repetitive way of talking, and his infuriating use of phrases like 'my good friends' and 'my dear sir'. If some one interrupted his constipated delivery with 'Put a sock in it' he was injured innocence in a moment. He would stop and peer at the offender, and turn in a ladylike huff to the chairman and say, 'Of course, Mr. Chairman, if I'm to be insulted—if, I say, when I'm only doing what is asked of us that we should do, calling the attention of the meeting to the consideration of some of the factors which in my humble opinion—and of course it is only my own humble opinion—I'm well aware I'm not as brainy and haven't had the education of some here—but that's neither here nor there—I was saying if I'm not allowed to draw attention to considerations which it devolves upon us to study if we are to make the most of what I must say was a profound, most comprehensive lecture . . . Well, Mr. Chairman and dear friends, as I was saying, it is only proper democratic procedure to ask you . . .' but what more he wanted to say would be drowned by the groans of the audience.

Once a year Pitts became conscious that time was slipping by, and he had no job, and his educational deficiencies were as enormous as his opportunities were great. Now if only, he argued to himself, I can map out for myself a plan of study and stick to it, then within a year or two I shall have equipped myself for the responsible post suited to me. He would button-hole me and implore me to work out for him an integrated course of study. And one or two of us would launch him on a series of classes in local evening institutes. But two months later his attendances would begin to flag. He had a cold. It was a bad night and he didn't feel like turning out. His mother was ill. He had a grievance against the tutor. Then, finally, with a burst of confidence he would admit that he was no good. 'Mr. Paul, you know what I've come to think,' he would say in his ingratiating way. 'Between you and me it's ridiculous to imagine that you can make good the loss of . . . er, er . . .

systematic instruction when you're young. The brain is soon bowed down with fatigue. Perhaps, Mr. Paul, you have found something of the same kind yourself?' He would bend forward, peer through his gold-rimmed spectacles, and smile diffidently and sadly at me for all the world himself like a down-at-heel professor.

Pitts fell in love. This transformed him. He went about with a heightened colour and flashing eyes, in a fury of determination to redeem himself. Languages, shorthand, euclid, were all attacked with zeal. He never stopped talking now. He washed his face, combed his hair, and appeared in pressed suits, like an adolescent in love for the first time finding the world flower with his own spirit. Nothing was impossible, even getting a job. But he was not going to waste his time on *any* kind of job. He would study first, perhaps take a degree, and get a really good job. 'For instance, Mr. Paul, I should very much like to do the kind of lecturing that you are doing. It seems an infinitely noble thing to have a hand in the uplift of humanity.' This love affair worked up in him such a state of cerebral excitement that I began to fear for his reason. One afternoon he came into my class while I was still speaking, looking as though he had had something to drink, though it was only love. He changed his position three times, each time with profuse and blushing apologies to the people around him, then went out, came back, went out again. Then he came in again when I had ended my lecture and began a speech full of rhapsody and rhetoric, which, though showing considerable mastery of words, made no sense at all. In full flow he broke off in confusion and fled from the room knocking over chairs in his escape. When the lecture was over he came to see me with tears in his eyes. 'Mr. Paul, I'm ashamed of myself. I must confess, and hope you won't laugh at me, that it's because I'm in love, and if you had ever been unemployed yourself and in love you would be able to see the full tragedy of that situation. If I had the courage, Mr. Paul, I would cut my throat.' I sighed deeply and took him out to tea at Lyons opposite the end of Blackwall Tunnel.

Week by week his excitement died down. He ceased to wash and shave so carefully, and his clothes lost their neatness. I ventured to ask him one day about his girl. He went very still and looked sideways at me. 'Oh,' he said, with an assumed casualness, watching carefully the effect of his words, 'that's

all over, Mr. Paul. I couldn't keep it up, the girl wanted me to change too much. I don't see why one should: if you love someone you should love them as they really are, not try to change them.'

Pitts was often at war with an old man called Withers who attended several of my classes. Withers had been a ships' carpenter who had travelled the seven seas. He was a dandy, with a neat white imperial, and dark suits always double breasted and faintly nautical in cut. Where Pitts was slow and methodical, he was quick and excitable. He walked on tiptoe with mincing little steps, as though about to break into a dance. He worked the lantern when I gave a show of slides, and while his excitability always caused him to do something wrong, his pleasure at doing it at all prevented him from noticing his mistakes. He was rather deaf too. 'You've got it in the wrong way up, you old b——,' his comrades would yell. It took some time for this to penetrate his deafness. 'Who're you calling an old b——,' he'd yell back, squaring up to fight the lot. Then, peering angrily at the screen, through the wreathing tobacco smoke, he'd say, 'Seems all right to me.' A shout would convince him, and thoroughly rattled he would burn his fingers and growl oaths into his imperial, and dance about in a rage. He had the most uncertain temper of any man I had ever met. He would lean against my desk and talk nineteen to the dozen about something my lectures had stirred up in his decaying mind—he was always inventing experiences in various parts of the world which corroborated what I had said, and he invented them to please me—and then in the middle of a sentence he would forget everything and walk away, out of the room, without a word of explanation or a backward look. Roused by an argument he would prance around, wave his arms and shout, ready to do violence to all comers. One day, the slowness of Pitts in argument so goaded him that he turned round and plastered him on the nose and went off, without waiting to be called to order, treading the hall like a guilty cat. Pitts behaved with the charity and understanding born of his quarrels with his father. 'Let him go, the poor old sod,' he said. 'Anyone can see he's crazy.'

The young man who surveyed me so contemptuously on my first arrival, telling me that Bell would tear me limb from limb, took a fatherly interest in me from that day forth. He could

not understand what a chap like me was doing down in Poplar when I might (as he innocently supposed) be earning the fabulous incomes which naturally came the way of contributors to the Sunday papers. If I'd been a parson he could have understood it, but I wasn't. I would often catch his puzzled and accusing stare when my sympathy and friendliness were most in evidence, or when I was simply enjoying myself among them. It was the resentful incomprehension of the small boy who finds his father, hitherto stern and remote, trying in the saloon bar, amid the laughter of his boon companions, to pick a matchbox off the floor with his nose. He would suck at his teeth, or pick them with a matchstick, and probe. 'Do they pay you a lot for this?' My shrug was eloquent. 'Beats me why you come. All this lousy lot ain't no good for you.'

He had a certain disdain of speaking in public, and one day came to me privately after the meeting and said, 'It's all very well for you to talk, but have you ever seen how we live in Poplar? You don't know 'alf, anyone can tell.'

'Well, why don't you show me? You can talk a lot yourself if it comes to that. What about taking me round?'

And with Searle—for that was his name—on many a Tuesday afternoon after my lectures, I probed into the festering tenements and houses of Poplar. In some tenements there was a communal tap next door to the water closet on every landing, and the stairs, the haunt of snot-nosed babies, stank with piss and were sometimes scrawled with filth. There we met the haggard women who were compelled to carry every drop of water they needed for washing, cleaning and cooking from the tap to the little stone lobby which passed for a kitchen. Each and every one of these women had the telltale gestures of harassed poverty—the quick effort to wipe her hands on her apron before shaking hands, and the mechanical motion of brushing hair from her face with the back of the hand.

'Keep yer 'at on,' Searle would say, 'or you'll be taking bugs home to roost.'

He felt the necessity to punish me.

'Yer,' he'd jeer, 'that makes yer sick, don't it? But what abaht us who have to live in it?' And truth be told, his own tenement dwelling where he lived with a pale-faced wife and one sickly little boy who used to come each time and press

himself to my leg, and hold the tighter when he thought I was going away, was little better than the worst. He was not to know that I had known Poplar in my boyhood, and that my uncle had been a dustman in the borough and had lived in a tiny terraced cottage, where the stink of cabbage was in the hallway, and the dark paper peeled like a fungus from the wall in the blue, supernatural light of the fishtail gas jet. The kitchen beyond, with its glowing range, and the bobbled plush curtain hanging from the mantelpiece, the pipe rack, the row of polished boots and shoes in one corner, was cosy and warm, but the dark smelly passage was a horror it took all my courage to negotiate and my spirits would drop noticeably as the moment for going home drew near, and I knew that I would have to stand in the passage kissing goodbye to my aunt and uncle, who stood there unaware of the wavering gloom and evil. My uncle mistook my reluctance to move from the kitchen for affection and would hug me close and say, 'You can stay if you like, Les. We could make you a bed in the parlour.' But I dared not stay.

The dingy and squalid streets of Poplar with the uniform rows of two storey cottages in grey brick, surmounted by a common parapet from which the paint was ever peeling, gave the borough its own sad and faded character. But now that I came to look around many of the cottages, I had to admit that they were not so bad as my childish memories had depicted them. They were possible dwellings so long as they were not divided between two families. The rooms were small and ceilings low: the parlour windows, which had to be well-curtained since they let upon the pavements—did not admit enough light. But they *were* homes, compact, united and private, and in many a well-scrubbed backyard the pigeon-fancier built his lofts, the dog-lover reared his whippets and greyhounds, the motor-cycle fanatic assembled and dissembled his machines, or the gardener, making the most of his space, arranged his boxes of tulips and wallflowers in ascending tiers and terraces around the party walls, while in their own corner the children scribbled on the stone flags and dreamed their fragmentary dreams. In high summer back and front doors would stand open, and the old people would bring out their chairs to sit on the pavements and catch the moving current of air, and if the sun struck hotly down upon them, cross the

street to sit by their neighbours and read the *Evening News* for the racing. The centre of the street was the heart of the community and down its centre wheeled and turned the saraband of shouting boys on bikes, children with home-made scooters painted with the war signs of their street gangs, girls with bright, swinging skirts and dancing eyes at hopscotch or skipping, watching out of the corner of their eyes for the frankly-appraising glances of the boys, and the disapproval of elders.

To visit the worst slums, where human families rotted in malodorous caves of rags in one great central bed, was penance enough to destroy my peace of mind for weeks: but to walk the streets was poetry in the autumn evenings when the driving rain made golden snakes writhe along the wet pavements, and the shawled and overcoated figures who ran along them to fish and chip saloons were drenched as much by the Niagaras of light from the East India Dock Road shop-windows as by the ubiquitous rain. There were evenings when the sunset piled itself in dusty orange masses over the streets, or when the fog came down from the river and the blinded vessels hooted 'morne et sombre' as they groped towards the docks of Millwall and Rotherhithe. Here and there, then, the street lamps picked out of the pearliness a doorway straight out of the 18th Century, a gate of handwrought iron, a wall-bracket or a cobbled entry to a passageway that took one back to the Poplar of the shipwrights.

In that lost land, now destroyed, of a London built in the time of Dickens, the strangest night was Guy Fawkes night. For weeks one knew of its coming, for the urchins paraded the main streets pushing soapbox barrows mounted with guys, they themselves togged up like oriental demons, with masked or blackened faces, artificial eyes which goggled evilly, and coloured costumes—the little boys in red or green skirts and old silk blouses, and their sisters in dad's cast-off pyjamas and grandmother's feathered hats—and they begged persistently and without shame for 'a penny for the guy', lifting bright painted lips like eastern paramours. A few days before November 5th police notices appeared informing the populace that it was against the law to light bonfires in the streets. But where were the fires to be lit? Poplar had then no waste places like bombsites. Its houses were fitted into its small space as tightly

as a bunioned foot into an old cracked shoe. So the bundles of broken fish boxes had to be assembled secretly in backyards and brought out into the street when the coast was reported clear by the scouts standing at street corners. Presently the blood-orange flames crackled about the white boxes and the smoke belched palpably up between the squat cottages like a gun puff. One bonfire was the sign for many. The smell of burning timber was everywhere in the streets. The houses, catching the fire on their windows, came alive in the November murk, and full of watchers. It was a grotesque medieval world that they saw, one fashioned for Pieter Brueghel to paint, made strange by the faces of the dancing children glowing in the flames, and the opaque mass of the shifting darkness of the street, which closed in with a chill every time the fire died down. Catherine wheels flared on window ledges, and crackers leapt along the gutters after the shrieking girls, and now and then, from an old beer bottle, the occasional rocket which penury afforded leapt with a hiss and a golden arc above the houses. If one stood on a roof or a tower, all Poplar was studded murkily with the bonfires of a night sacred to children.

Against them the law on bicycles impartially made war. It swooped down with furious whistles and cries, in dark blue clothes and cloaks, like batlike creatures from a Manichean underworld which fought against the light, scattering the children, and with kicks and oaths hurling the charred fragments about the street in explosions of sparks and smoke until the fire was out. Then mounted again, and pedalling with elderly determination, the law set course for the next beacon of light and smoke ascending above the roofs. So the divine battle between the Light and the Dark went on. Yet for every policeman, Poplar must have mustered a thousand children: it was a battle lost before it began.

In 1933 and 1934 the general mood of the unemployed in Poplar was Communist, four years later it had become Fascist. The psychology of this switch was quite simple. It was rooted in the bitter feeling that the Labour Party could offer them nothing, it was the party of the *employed* worker, and Russian Communism was not to be trusted because it had ended in the purge and massacre of its own leaders. Fascism alone offered an immediate course of action, and did not hide its lust for brutality behind a smokescreen of socialist piety and

idealism, like the Communists. Of course, the unemployed *formally* condemned Hitler, but they admired strength, and the merciless way he had taken and held power made them smile knowingly to themselves. And he had, too, got rid of unemployment. 'That's the way you want to do it,' Searle often said. 'You got to admit it.'

They did not care that the policy of the East End Fascists was an evil one. It was action, and it was the absence of action which had ground despair into the bones of the young unemployed. They had come to the conclusion that only some kind of stirring of the pot offered them a chance of picking out a bit of fat for themselves. They were ready for that stirring. They moved easily into the anti-semitic camp. Searle, in particular, lost no chance of turning every argument against the Jews. 'Honestly, mate, don't you think we'd be better without all them yids?' The Marxist arguments against the bourgeoisie could be levelled easily, in the East End of London, against the Jews, who owned many of the shops and businesses. The fact that they dressed more ostentatiously than their gentile trade rivals made them appear to be doing well even when they weren't. They clung together in a freemasonry of family groups, and worked at their private businesses all the hours they spent out of sleep. No wonder they thrived! These circumstances created in the East End a visible, and far from modest, commercial community which to the unemployed embodied the vices of the bourgeois about which they had learnt all that socialist propaganda could teach them.

I do not know when it was that the Mosley crowd discovered that the East End was ripe for anti-semitism, but from the moment Mosley opened his campaign he began to win its support. Had a Second World War not intervened, more than one East End seat would have gone over to the Fascists. My prophecies about this were unpalatable to my left-wing friends. They talked about the unemployed as others talked about a rise or a fall in Stock Exchange prices: they were a figure going up or down. But they did not *know* them. I had come to know them very well as bitter, hopeless and even degenerating individuals whose unwantedness had become the very core of their lives. I felt deep shame for the attitude of the left, which wanted to exploit them for political reasons, even for Russian reasons, and for the inertia of the right, which resisted the

help that might have been given to them lest national works on a grand scale interfere with profits or power.

The spokesman of the bitterness among my men was an agitator called Green who had once been a paid street-corner speaker for some right-wing body (a fact Green's comrades never allowed him to forget). But he alone stood up until the bitter end for the Socialist Revolution. He was an evil-looking customer who seemed compounded all of hate and vindictiveness. His cheeks pouched and sagged round a cruel, unshaven mouth. He had bulbous, angry eyes with huge perpetually watering bags beneath them. Yet he was tall and heavy, and in his prime must have been a confident and commanding man. His comrades were desperately afraid of his mordant tongue. He would sit wearing a cap and when he got up to speak hurriedly take it off and roll it in his palms.

'What does capitalism care about you? You're only so much cattle, or fodder for the guns, only you don't have the sense to realize it. And if you don't do what you're told, why, what d'you think they've got police and soldiers for? Why?' And here he brought his great beefy fist up and crashed it soundlessly into his cap. 'Smash! SMASH YER BRAINS IN! Don't talk to me,' he would go on furiously, his piggy eyes darting angrily all over the unemployed, 'don't talk to me about justice, democracy! Poppycock! There ain't no difference between it and Fascism. Fascism! FORCE! That's what it all is. Don't kid yourselves. They don't care a brass farden about you or democracy, no matter what Mr. Paul says. He's only paid to come 'ere to talk to you. You're only of use while they can make profit out of you. Marx told you that. But once they can't? What then? Look at me!' He would open his arms to demonstrate his rags and uselessness, like a ragged old crow about to take off, and shout, 'Look at all of you! SCRAP! SCRAPHEAP! THROW YOU AWAY LIKE A LEAKY KETTLE! BAH! YOU MAKE ME SICK!' And then he would sit down, pull his cap on, and continue to rumble indignantly while his comrades growled approval.

In those years I warned the Poplar unemployed of the approaching war, and told them not to rely upon Russia. Russia would pursue her national interests regardless of the West, I said, and in any case her own purges and persecutions told us that her morality was no better than Hitler's. Green

could not bear any criticism of Russia. The one force in a rotten world on which he still pinned hope was the Soviet Union: easier to deprive him of life itself than of that fantastic, stupendous expectation of miracles from the Soviet, which grew the more unassailable the more despairing he became, and the more pitiable the state of the world. So he would never permit me to criticize the Soviet Union, or to suggest that any war was possible between Germany and the West.

'Don't talk to me,' he'd shout. 'Capitalists will never again make war upon capitalists. They're as thick as thieves. Capitalism's international, and the war-scares are cooked up to make you put up with what you haven't got. Capitalism's not going to war: don't kid yourself. It knows too well that war gives the workers a chance to down 'em and rise up and establish a classless society. It's all my eye, this war-talk. While you're thinking of war you can't be thinking of other things near home—poverty, that's the real thing. And why fight against Fascism? What difference d'you think it'd make if it did come? Not an atom to you. You wouldn't be any worse off—YOU COULDN'T BE. BECAUSE WHAT'S THIS GOVERNMENT? WHY, FASCIST!'

He could not endure the truth about the developments of 1939 and 1940. The agreement between Germany and Russia and the war against Finland shocked the very soul of the man. He did his best to swallow the Communist Party line, and would say, 'You'll see, Mr. Paul, at the right moment they'll turn their guns together, Britain and Germany, on Russia. That's the game. You just see. This is all eyewash, this war.'

But as my criticisms of Russian policy grew more scathing, and, as once I had shared Green's illusions, more bitter, Green felt that the break had come. He burst out one day into a wild defence of Russia through which his stark despair showed all too plainly, and ended by saying, 'I've taken a lot from you, Mr. Paul, and I ain't going to take any more. That's flat. So I'll bid you good-day.' And he smoothed his few hairs and pulled his cap on and marched out of the hall to the ironical cheers of the delighted men, who loved a row. It was the last I saw of him. He was evacuated when the bombing started, and then came back, and yet once more went away when his house was blown to pieces around him.

I continued my work with the Poplar unemployed until a

week or two before my call-up in 1941. By then the meeting was a shadow of its former self: the young had been called-up, the middle-aged were in jobs, many of the elderly had been evacuated. The hall in which we met had been partially blitzed and we adjourned to a small vestry. It was large enough to take us for we were now hardly a dozen strong. To one of these meetings the irrepressible Charlie Whistler came, whiter and more cadaverous than ever, delighted to take the chair again for me. He was bubbling over with such happiness that I had to ask him the cause of it. He turned to me with shining eyes. 'Why,' he said. 'I ain't scared. I bin worrying myself sick about what I would do if a bomb hit our houses. I was scared I'd go mad, and more scared o' that than the bombing. And last night we 'ad it. Whoosh! We 'ad it. I bin sleepin' downstairs to keep an old man company and had to get him out of the house. And what with that, and 'elpin' to pull people out, and making cups o' tea, I didn't remember I was supposed to be scared. There now, what d'you think of that?' He wrinkled his old face into fantastic glee and I was the only one of the pair of us to remember that, three days before, neighbours had put a brick through his window because he would go around saying what a criminal thing war was.

'Eard about old Greeny?' he asked me.

'No.'

'Gorn blind, the poor old sod.'

Some of the others chipped in while I sat thinking of him, remembering his popping, threaded, bloodshot eyes.

'Yers. Carrying a white stick now. Course, you won't see 'im. He's at Ilkley. The doctor said the shock of them bombs had busted something be'ind the eye. There ain't no 'ope.'

We sat sorrowfully thinking of him, of his continual anger against the world. Another said sadly, 'Taint so good without 'im. He was always one for an argument. Lor, wasn't 'e. He would always work up a good discussion for you, Mr. Paul.'

They said things like that to excuse themselves and placate me. They were old and tired and exhausted by life before ever the war began, and they continued to come together for company, and because they liked me. For seven years we had been discussing the clash of the nations and the hatreds of the classes, and now all the furies which came from these things had broken loose and were raging through the world. We

could not even imagine what they were going to leave undestroyed, let alone discuss how they might be chained up again. Discussion seemed paltry and futile in terms of the battle of demons taking place round the humble Poplar houses night and day, and creating bonfires not to be put out by a kick from bicycling police. Yet they *felt* this only, and were quite incapable of saying much more than 'It don't seem much use talkin', do it?' They had a fixed notion I was most unhappy without 'a good discussion' and might decide to abandon them if I did not get it. It was with difficulty that I told them my call-up had come and I would soon be leaving them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Festival and Terror

How hard it is now to recall the overwhelming sense of defeat felt, from the year 1934 onwards, by all those on the left who had any independence of mind or character. Twenty years had passed since the beginning of the Great War, and during all that long period of unrest and upheaval the things for which the left stood—peace, economic planning, the classless society, world government—became more impossible of achievement. At home, the Labour Movement had not recovered from the betrayal and defeat of 1931. Abroad Germany, Italy and Spain were precursors of a new and more violent nationalism, and even more than Germany, the Soviet Union itself presently became the graveyard of socialism, drenching itself in the blood of its own heroes. It was against this background that many of us tried to move to a more profound reading of contemporary history.

One effect the situation had on me was to send me into the ranks of that exciting venture which owed its foundation to the genius of H. G. Wells and C. E. M. Joad—the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals, which began its work in 1934. H. G. Wells was asking in those days for a common front of left parties and intellectuals throughout the world. It was to be different from the Popular Front, which owed its existence to the sinister conspiratorial talent of the Communist Party. I was only a cynical supporter of the Popular Front because I did not believe that the Communist Party could co-operate genuinely with anybody, and knew that at any moment a switch of Kremlin policy would bring the whole structure down in ruins. The intention of the Popular Front

programme was co-operation with Catholics, Liberals and even Conservatives if they could be manœuvred into an anti-Fascist bloc. Of necessity it meant dropping a 'left' programme. But Wells sensibly wanted the agreement of all those who were united on a left programme. 'The aim to make the world anew and nearer the heart's desire of mankind is universal,' he wrote,* 'but the methods are generally local, sectarian, partisan, hysterical, and confused. The forces of protest and reconstruction are in the aggregate enormous, but they go largely to waste in a sort of civil war among themselves.'

This led him to write one of those manifestoes for which he had become famous. He called it 'The Common Objectives of Progressive World Effort,' and it began with nothing less than the omnibus demand for 'the scientific development of the actual and potential resources of the world and the distribution of the resulting wealth to provide the fullest and most vigorous life possible for the whole species'. Capitalism, despite its raging exploitation of the resources of the world, had clearly not gone far enough for him, and this imaginative, warmhearted but confused giant went on to ask for collective instead of private enterprise, a world system of money and credit, the organization of world government and the 'Progressive abrogation of national sovereignty', the modernization of education, and free speech, free publication and free movement throughout the world. In fact, his manifesto made almost exactly the same demands of a radical and liberal nature which were made in the Kibbo Kift Covenant fifteen years earlier and were echoed again in the Charter and Programme which I had drawn up for the Woodcraft Folk, and both of these documents owed just as much to the genius of H. G. Wells as the new Manifesto. It says much for his moral and intellectual stature that, in those years, he had become the spokesman and thinker of almost the entire non-Marxist left, and perhaps nothing is more revealing to-day than the subsequent collapse of H. G. Wells into a pessimism, or rather into a grief as deep as that of Job's. The title of the book published before his death *Mind at the End of its Tether* confessed his switch into despair:

* *Manifesto: The Book of the Federation of Progressive Societies*, Edited by C. E. M. Joad. 1934.

'A frightful queerness has come into life. Hitherto events have been held together by a certain logical consistency as the heavenly bodies have been held together by the golden cord of gravitation. Now it is as if the cord had vanished and everything is driven anyhow, anywhere at a steadily increasing velocity . . . The writer is convinced that there is no way out, or around, or through the impasse. It is the end.'

Nevertheless in 1934 H. G. Wells was still wearing before us a golden optimism about human possibilities, and he hoped much from his new effort. His *Manifesto* was followed by a 'Strategy' which involved a union of left forces. This it was left for Dr. Joad and his associates to work out; they sought to do so by founding the Federation mentioned, which in its turn published a solemn Manifesto demanding, in brief, regional and world planning, the reorganization of world finance, the setting up of world government, a universal and modernized system of education, law reform, town and country planning, civil and religious liberties and, in sex, 'the release of personal conduct from all taboos and restrictions except those imposed in the interest of the weak and the young'. It was the last point which gained, I always thought, the greatest number of recruits, for intellectual interest was in those days most powerfully oriented towards 'the sex problem'—partly as a reaction, I suppose, to the insolubility of economics.

The Woodcraft Folk adhered to the new 'strategy' and appointed me its representative. I became editor of a monthly review called *Plan* founded to propagate the views of the new Federation. *Plan* commanded a distinguished list of progressive contributors—H. G. Wells, C. E. M. Joad, Gerald Heard, Aldous and Julian Huxley, J. C. Flugel, Bertrand Russell, Dora Russell, A. S. Neill, John MacMurray, Janet Chance, Olaf Stapledon and others—and through them sought to create a common left forum: it also found space for the introduction of new writers and young poets—Savage, Treece, Mallalieu and others—some of whom were first published in its pages.

I found myself more interested in the new Federation than in my own youth movement (of which, in any case, I was no longer the active leader): the intellectual curiosities of the Folk were slender. Fast-fixed by now in a few tabloid beliefs, it pushed even discussion of these out of the way as quickly as

possible in order to make haste with the real business of youth, camping, hiking, singing and living the life of brotherhood and physical delight. How could I blame them, who had preached this life to the young? Yet it was a relief to turn to the conferences and summer schools of the F.P.S.I. where one found a level of serious debate it was difficult to find elsewhere at that time, and to which the yellowing pages of the old files of *Plan* bear witness. This capacity for argument transferred itself to the committees of the F.P.S.I., alas, which proved capable of arguing everything exhaustively, and of doing nothing resolutely. The dream of a new force uniting left-wing movements perished of the paralysis produced by endless debate about principles. Left intellectuals did not, I soon discovered, know how to act.

As the years went by I came seriously to doubt the whole basis of the new Federation. It had, in actual practice, only two driving principles, the first was the wish to have sexual freedom, as a matter of personal pleasure and of mental therapy, for following the analyses made by Freud and his disciples it attributed much spiritual sickness to sexual inhibition; the second was a generalized demand for world socialism (planning, collective ownership, world government). It did not appear to dawn on the Federation that it was asking for a morality in economics which it condemned in the sharpest terms in sex. In economics it repeated constantly its belief that the unregulated play of economic appetites was disastrous: they had to be curbed in the interests of society as a whole: the *laissez-faire* society led to slums, unemployment and class warfare. It made the same case against unregulated personal behaviour in relation to town and country planning, and the argument was that man's behaviour with his own property was not socially reliable. Society must step in and tell him what to do, or take certain rights from him. But in the field of sex this interference was regarded as intolerable. So the Federation which asked for the state control of industry agitated for the repeal of the Abortion Laws. In the matter of sex it demanded an individual freedom the exact counterpart of that Benthamism which in the sphere of economics had led to such shocking social consequences. And no one seemed conscious of the conflict of principle involved. I began to think that it was altogether illogical to ask that economic enterprises should be

subject to moral laws and sex released 'from all taboos and restrictions', and these reservations made it in the end inevitable that I should withdraw. However, the coming of the Second World War rather extinguished the whole enterprise, its love of a brave new world side by side with its rather crotchety pacifism.*

Marxism was the discipline to which I found myself compelled to return. It still seemed to me coherent, complete and revolutionary: but at the same time I had no love for it as an orthodoxy. Marxism, I argued, could not have it both ways, it could not be an orthodoxy *and* a science. The contemporary situation showed how terribly necessary it was for Marxism to pursue the truth about itself as relentlessly as it claimed to pursue the truth about capitalist society. If it was to be no more than an excuse for hatred and violence then it, too, would have to be abandoned. My young brother was growing up in those days, an earnest young student, and we had much in common, and around us gathered a group of young socialists, trotskysts, poets and students, and their girls, who began to form with me what was almost a new school of Marxism.

Our week-end discussions brought us face to face with an historical problem which criticism had overlooked and Marxist orthodoxy denied: it concerned the profound difference between the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions. Marxist orthodoxy went on repeating the old formula of inevitability, that one class lined itself up behind the others in the struggle for power: history was a knock-out competition. The ruling class sought to exploit and keep in check the oppressed class, which struggled to attain power itself by the revolutionary overthrow of existing society. The orthodox pointed to the French revolution as the classic example of the bourgeois revolution, and to the Russian revolution as the prototype of proletarian revolutions. The Russian proletariat was simply doing in 1917 what the French bourgeoisie had done before: the pattern of history was therefore unchanging.

Yet it turned out to be impossible to compare the proletariat and the bourgeois as classes. The unique thing about the bourgeoisie was that a bourgeois *society* came into existence *long before the bourgeois revolution took place*, a society so strong, (as in England,) as often to make a revolution unnecessary. To

*It survives as *The Progressive League*.

talk of the bourgeois as a class oppressed and exploited by the feudal aristocracy was, once that bourgeois society had really come into existence, flagrantly untrue. Even in medieval days, though merchants were sometimes pillaged, they were not exploited in the sense in which Marxism defines exploitation. Rather, the merchant class was to be discovered as a 'sport' of feudalism, a swarm which had hived off from the main community based on land. The economy of this swarm became based on money, by which it simply escaped feudalism which could only tax it and control it, in the degree that it, itself, surrendered to the new monetary economy. The only class exploited in a Marxist sense by the feudal aristocracy was the peasantry: the feudal aristocracy lived off its labour. And this was the one class which did *not* succeed in its revolution, though in historic logic it was the oppressed class which should have overthrown its masters. The peasants only achieved land and freedom when they were able to ally themselves with the bourgeoisie.

Century after century this merchant class grew stronger. Religion, art and literature bowed before it. Under puritan influence in protestant countries hardworking and thrifty classes of merchants and manufacturers arose, builders of their own conventicles, founders of schools, owners of newspapers. A well-knit, confident society with an ethic and philosophy of its own came into being which at last, and even reluctantly, challenged the feudal aristocracy's monopoly of political power. The bourgeois revolution was the political struggle between two mature and well-organized classes economically independent of each other.

The proletarian class presented no such parallel: it was much more like the peasantry under feudalism, a genuinely exploited class with few instruments of production of its own, and saturated with the values and standards of the class it sought to overthrow. No vast, self-sufficient proletarian society, we argued, supports the proletarian revolution. On the contrary the proletariat is as inescapably a part of the bourgeois order as the peasantry was of the feudal order. Left alone the proletariat expresses its preferences for the bourgeois life in no uncertain fashion—professional football, dog-racing, organized by wealthy corporations, are its first choice in amusements: it prefers the cinema to the live theatre and the *News of the World* to Maxim Gorki. The bourgeoisie

first created its society then made its revolution: the proletariat, on the other hand, must make its revolution before it can create a proletarian society. But bearing in mind that the exploited peasantry never succeeded in defeating the feudal aristocracy and creating a peasant society, but on the contrary surrendered with the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie, it was quite impossible to speak of an *inevitable* proletarian revolution. It was because of the *unconscious* recognition of this, that revolts against the bourgeois order took on the nihilism—the wish to destroy all society—which is to be found in peasant revolts too. I said that it was important to remember too that if a contemporary revolution did succeed then what would come to power would be another kind of bourgeoisie, not therefore another *class*. Point was given to this by the fact that the leaders of the Communists were nearly everywhere dissatisfied bourgeois intellectuals.

A second possibility we discussed was the coming disappearance of the proletariat. Statistics showed a decrease in the number of workers in basic industries and a rise of those employed in secondary industries and services. A middle class—of technicians, managers, experts, clerks, civil servants, teachers and others—was growing, while increasing mechanization destroyed the skilled craftsman as well as the unskilled labourer. We were impressed, in those days, by the rise of ‘technocrats,’ the people whom to-day, under the influence of Burnham’s writings, we should describe as ‘the managerial class.’

All these heretical arguments directed at the heart of Marxism were gradually tearing it to shreds. The process of clarification so showed up its fallacies and contradictions that it was inevitable that the group and I should abandon it. At the time, however, that was far from my intention. The young German Social Democrats who had not been compromised by the failure of their elderly leaders had come together in secret conclave and drafted a new programme—*Neu Beginnen* (New Beginning). I had read the English translation with passionate interest, for here at last was the thinking without illusions which the situation demanded. Social-Democratic and Communist orthodoxies were alike condemned: the socialist society was not inevitable, it was simply one of many choices open to humanity. From France too, especially in the writings

of the Marxist-Leninist Simone Weil, whose evolution from Marxism to Christianity was to be much the same as my own, were coming criticisms of the left ideologies just as pungent and stimulating. It was *Neu Beginnen* however which sent me across Europe to Prague in 1938 in the hope that I might meet some of its leaders in secret, and talk with them about their neo-Marxist analysis of contemporary history. I was going on to Vienna, too, to renew old contacts there. My aim was to establish in England study groups prepared to undertake missions of aid to the socialist underground in Germany and Austria. My many classes, all over London, on social questions had brought me in touch with scores of young socialists anxious to do this work, and hungry for contact with the men of their own stamp whom Hitler had driven underground.

Despite all that I had read I was unprepared for the Germany I saw as my train slid into Aachen Station. Uniforms were four or five deep on the platform—the Black of the SS, the Brown of the Stormtroopers, the Green of the Frontier Police, the Blue of the Airforce—Aachen under the floodlights of the midday sun looked like the stage of the Lyceum during the transformation scene of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. The civilians in barely tolerated little groups, appeared miserably conscious of their insignificance in the midst of the warrior array. What I had supposed to be merely the frontier display, however, turned out to be typical of the Third Reich: uniforms were everywhere, as though the whole nation had turned out for a tattoo. Not that the old, clean Germany of so many memories had gone: as the train slid into German towns and villages in the early mornings, the pure loveliness I dearly remembered from earlier years was unchanged. The dry, sparkling June air laved my head as I leant out of the carriage window. The tall, cream and fawn houses with their medieval gabled roofs rose out of the quiet, swept streets along which already the yawning little boys with brown bare legs, wearing satchels like military rucksacs, hopped with naked arched feet from stone to stone, and their little sisters with flaxen pigtails, in crisp blue and white dirndls walked soberly behind them, hand in hand, to school. The reflected light of the pale walls beat about them and made lemon the caves of shadow in the street, and lit the hollows under the eaves where the starlings and sparrows nested. The same hausfraus were about early

with their shopping baskets, and they had left pillows and bolsters in the open windows to air. Still to be seen in market towns were the storks nesting among the chimney pots and the kestrels wheeling round the church towers. So that all, in the transfiguring morning, had the quality of the fairy tales of infancy: for in our infant story books, these were the houses, the storks, the women with shopping bags, and the flaxen haired girls and merry boys that the artists had long ago shown to us. The heart-catching innocence of this beauty was even symbolic, for lying in wait for the golden-hearted children of Hans Andersen and Grimm were the dragons of the plains, the uncles who pretended affection the better to destroy them, or the fairies who bewitched them with spells till they acted contrary to their natures.

'A nation on the march' had always seemed a strained metaphor: now it appeared literally true. Everywhere I met the marching, singing bands—the files of 'pimpfjugend' with sweating brows and loaded rucksacs resolutely plodding forest paths, the youth of the *arbeitsdienst*, naked to the waist, with spades polished like bayonets, marching to songs which once meant much to me for I had translated them for English youth, young conscripts in rough, ill-fitting uniforms, and the black of the SS, men more satanically proud of their evil than any soldiery can ever have been before. It had a perverse glory, this will to war against the whole world. Was Germany really defeated in the Great War? When I remembered the degenerating Poplar unemployed it made me wonder. One admired reluctantly, though frightened of all it implied, the animal health and vigour with which this spiritual callousness was clothed, the magnificent sunburnt bodies, the shining eyes, and, behind thin red lips, the stallion teeth ready to tear and bite as Hitler's generation steamed and stamped about the country.

The prickly, adolescent resentment against the world was hard to bear. In the dining car the man opposite me, somewhat older than I was, wearing in his buttonhole the badge of a party official, leant rudely across to me and slapped his fist on the book I was reading. It was a Gollancz publication and bore the title *Tales of Horror and Imagination*.

'You read plenty of tales of horror about Germany in your English newspapers,' he said angrily. 'Is that not so?'

I replied coldly that unfortunately it was so. He subjected me to a hostile scrutiny for a moment, studying the configuration of my ears lest they should turn out to be Jewish.

'Everyone of them lies,' he said emphatically. 'Lies! Lies!'

I said I was glad to hear it, and hoped indeed that they were lies.

'Look at Germany,' he said angrily, screwing up his eyes at the sun-drenched countryside through which we were passing so swiftly and smoothly. 'Is it not a good land? You can see for yourself how untrue all the English tales of horror are.'

Indeed, the Germany of that June day possessed a beauty which made the heart ache. 'It's a pity such a lovely land has to feel the world is against her,' I replied in a conciliatory tone.

'But we do not feel the world against us, only the Jews. England and Germany would get along very well if you were not run by Jews.'

'Oh but we aren't,' I said, caught out by this pathological switch.

He smiled a secret smile which pitied me for allowing myself to be deceived. 'Simon is a Jew.'

'Scotch!'

'A Jewish name,' he replied, thumping the table with his fist. 'Rothermere—plainly Jewish. Beaverbrook too: and Chamberlain—Joseph and Austen Chamberlain—one can tell from their photographs. Hore Belisha—all, all, Jews.'

'Well, why shouldn't they be? They aren't, but why should it matter?'

He looked round with a start just in case anyone had heard my heresy which, though perhaps explicable in a foreigner, was not such as he cared to be heard listening to. He raised his voice so that his denials might be heard and began the tirades with which *Der Stuermer* and the rest of the pathological literature of Germany were soon to make me sickeningly familiar, and I was glad when the opportunity came to escape to the privacy of my sleeper.

This was only one of many incidents. Outside a cinema in Dresden when I asked a youth for a light for my cigarette he turned angrily with fist raised to strike me because I had omitted the customary 'Heil Hitler!' and desisted only when he saw that I was a foreigner. I did not get my light.

It was a relief to get to Prague which, though troubled deeply by the German menace, to which it had already once replied with mobilization, was at least free from hysteria and xenophobia. I had come first of all to visit the Sokol Congress at the Masaryk Stadium which stands above Prague. It was a spectacle which showed a discipline and resolution hardly to be matched even in a totalitarian country. The Sokol movement—Sokol means Falcon—had an ancient and honourable history. Founded in 1862 by two Bohemian patriots, Tyrš and Fugner, it was intended to renew Czech patriotism among the young by filling them with the comradely life of sport and gymnastics: it had in some strange way got mixed up with Garibaldi's redshirts and this accounted for a uniform of Italian cut—red shirts, (they had bought a job lot from Garibaldi), khaki knee breeches, pillbox hats, and jackets with elaborate facings. During Austro-Hungarian domination the Sokol movement had kept patriotism alive: since independence it had played the role of a national Boy Scout Movement—idealistic, to some extent pre-military in character, and intensely patriotic. And now that Czechoslovakia was threatened, the Sokol Congress, planned for purely internal propaganda, was converted into an act of defiance of Germany so unmistakable that the Nazis organized a rival show just across the frontier and nightly filled the radio air with the barbaric incantation 'Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!' to the rhythm of an African tomtom.

National though the Sokol demonstration was, it was hardly militarist. Even the speeches of Beneš lacked a Churchillian growl. Day after day the arena was the scene of the beautiful evolutions of countless thousands of Sokol members. The stadium was vast enough to hold as many as 30,000 drilling gymnasts. To watch, from the eminence of the press box, this vast concourse march on to the plain was like witnessing the unrolling of an immense sheet of cloth. It wound from beneath the flag-surmounted wall of the gladiators' entrance like a sheet emerging firm and crisply ironed from the rollers of a mangle, and so far distant that one could not make out the person of a single gymnast in the onflooding wave. The uniformity of the drill was ensured by the music of massed bands, but these played in a soundproof chamber and communicated their marches only through loudspeakers let like manhole covers into the floor of the parade ground. The effects were

memorable. When an arena full of girls in white singlets and navy blue bloomers touched their toes, the field which had been as white as a newly minted table-cloth became a landscape of drab, and a faint sigh came up to us. When sixty thousand sunburnt arms were flung to the sky then we saw and heard a field of corn in the wind. The performers bent to pick first a white ball, then a red ball. They tossed them alternately. As the balls rose and fell, the field was white, then red, and the flickering change reproduced to the eye that throb which the chequered wings of peewits will give to the whole sky. When the girls turned in ranks to each other and threw catches the travelling arcs of red and white became that pure form and motion after which the most abstract painters strive. Day after day the patriotic masses displayed before us, and when the boys, with naked brown torsoes and white shorts leapt in leapfrogging lines across the arena what one witnessed was the surge and white foaming, and the dull swish and roar, of the incoming tide. Ah, that all life could have this rhythm!

The last day was reserved for the military display and new fighters and bombers roared overhead. Across the field, army units gave the kind of display that the British Army does so very much better. When, in the march past, Yugoslav and Rumanian troops appeared, they were welcomed with a tremendous roar. Of course, they came from countries of the Little Entente and so were allies of Czechoslovakia, and on paper, but only on paper, might be counted on for help in the coming struggle for independence. The sad thing historically was that this Sokol unity was not itself enough to save the country, and we all knew it, even then. Or perhaps the really tragical thing was that the Czechs did not elect to put it to the test of events, as they might well have done, but rested their fate upon the word of the Great Powers. European history might have been far different had the Czechs determined instinctively on the kind of resistance which would have been spontaneous in Dutch or Swiss, *no matter what the consequences*. Heaven knows, I do not for one moment excuse the great betrayal of Munich, but the Czechs were lost the moment it began to appear that under pressure they would cede territory.

Prague was still to remain for a month or two the home of the emigré Social-Democratic groups of Germany. It was through meetings with them that I managed to arrange a talk

with one of the *Neu Beginnen* leaders. He had refused to meet me in Germany, lest I was the instrument of a trap. And even in Prague I was not allowed to know his name, and so spoke to him only as Hans. We came together in secret in a ruined mill just outside the town, in what was an E. Phillips Oppenheim atmosphere. The useless water from the sluice below rushed noisily away, causing the whole building to tremble. The dust of years made as soft and silent as velvet the floor under our feet, and the cobwebs wavered in veils from the roof. My friend and sponsor stayed discreetly at the door while Hans and I retired to a corner for our discussion on those neo-Marxist theses I have already presented. Hans was stocky, with broad strong hands, and faintly ginger hair. He wore green tweeds which had an English look. He had a furtive way of glancing quickly about him as he spoke and dropping his voice so that I could hardly hear him. 'It isn't necessary to do that, comrade,' I pointed out. 'No one can overhear us.' He apologized and said that it was a way one got into in Germany, and I would soon learn that when I left Czechoslovakia to stay in the Third Reich. However, my proposal to organize collaborating groups of young English did not go down very well. What he thought of were purely material needs like English passports, pounds sterling, and secret printing presses which I knew were out of the question to small groups of not very well-off English youth: nor could I imagine that these things would be forthcoming for an organization in Germany of which absolutely nothing was known. My conception of couriers going into Germany, and coming out again, in order to create a personal linkage and personal service was not approved: from the point of view of *Neu Beginnen* it was considered too risky. Said Hans, foreigners have to register and are watched. The Germans they visit become the objects of police surveillance. It would not work. But I came away with the feeling that even if it had been practicable, he himself would not have been in a position to help it forward. Beyond his immediate companions he knew little or nothing of the underground work of other socialist groups and, what was more, was sceptical of its extent. This was disheartening, but nevertheless tended to confirm my secret suspicion of the extent to which German socialists and communists had accepted Nazism, *faute de mieux*, and were in sympathy with

its ambition to destroy the 'Versailles Diktat,' or at least had retreated into a watchful neutrality until such time as they might return openly to their first love.

The atmosphere of European terror closed in on me in Vienna where I stayed in the tiny flat, in a Grinzing gemeindehof, of my old friends Anton and Reserl Tesarek. Under Anton's discreet and skilful hands an illegal socialist group of sorts had come to life. The Vienna socialists had gone through two bitter tests denied to their pusillanimous colleagues over the border. They had once, when attacked by Dollfuss, resorted to arms. It was true that the defiance was 'too late and too little', and had it been earlier it might even have succeeded. Yet it was a remarkable act of audacity all the same: with moving heroism the members of the Vienna Fire Brigade and the Republican Schutzbund had defended working class tenements against the field guns of the regular Austrian Army. That lost battle had bound the survivors in never-to-be-forgotten ties of blood and sacrifice. I was proudly shown, under oath of secrecy, the hiding places of the small arms used in that rebellion, which the socialists were holding against the day when they could settle accounts with Hitler. The second experience was of continued illegal activity. From 1934 until Hitler conquered Austria the Social-Democratic Party had remained the invisible yet acknowledged opposition. The Fatherland Front had quite failed to break it, as it had failed to destroy the National Socialists. This had given rise to an acid little story which described four men marching down the street in the uniform of the Fatherland Front. At the end of the street two turned left and two turned right. The two who turned right whispered to each other, 'Heil Hitler! It's a good job those other chaps don't know that we're Nazis.' The two who turned left gave each other a nudge and said 'Freundschaft! Those blighters would give a lot to know that we're Sozis.'

Schuschnigg had to reckon with the fact that the allegiance of the Viennese to the party of that redoubtable European humanist, the late Karl Renner, was unshaken. At the very end, the opposition Schuschnigg had declared illegal swarmed to the streets ready to join hands with him in armed resistance to the Nazis. Perhaps if he had not been surrounded by Cabinet traitors he would have been prepared for that alliance, for he was an honourable man. But it was all too late, and the

Austrian socialists disappeared underground again as quickly as they had risen. So it happened that during the years of illegality the Socialists learnt how to keep going small underground groups and to circulate forbidden propaganda. Their morale was high. The circulation of the flimsy *Arbeiter Zeitung* far exceeded that of the legal journals. It is true, however, that the Schuschnigg terror was not a very formidable one. It had its Ruritanian aspects. One evening Anton was due to take part, in a neighbour's flat, in a 'kaffee-abend' of socialists. He was late, and when he arrived the police were already there taking away his friends in plain vans. This filled him with the not surprising fear that, having failed to arrive, he might be suspected of having been the informer, and so intolerable was this that he exclaimed, in his agitation, to the policeman at the door, 'Look here, you must arrest me too. Ich bin auch ein' illegal Sozi. In fact I should have been at this meeting only I unluckily missed my tram.' The policeman gravely saluted and said, 'Go away, Herr Professor, please—can't you see that we're busy?' Having failed in his objective, Anton marched angrily to the police station and bearded the distraught Inspector. 'Look here, Inspector, I know you've taken all the people out of Schmidt's flat. You've got to arrest me, too. I should have been there anyway, and what will people think of me if I'm the only one not to go to jail?' The Inspector threw his hands and his papers in the air in a fine official fury. 'Get out, my dear sir, d'you think I haven't enough on my hands without putting every pedagogue behind bars who comes and asks me?'

But that sort of thing, in the spirit of Viennese light opera, was no longer possible under the Nazis. They were not running in old socialists just then, for they hoped to win them over to the support of the new regime, but they knew them, had them watched, and brought professional and other subtle pressures to bear on them. Indeed, they knew more than we suspected. My journeyings were known and viewed with disfavour, it seems. Hans of *Neu Beginnen* was certainly right when he told me that citizens of the Third Reich who had foreign friends were liable to rouse the attentions of the Gestapo, for when Anton was arrested as 'unreliable' at the outbreak of the war, and beaten up by the Gestapo, a large part of the inquisition to which he was subject concerned the activities of one 'Leslie

Paul' and Anton's connections with him. Anton had the perfect answer, for he was my official translator and my novel *Periwake* was contracted to be published by Vienna *Saturn-Verlag*, on September 3rd, 1939! Nevertheless, this did not save him from the Buchenwald death quarries. All this, however, was in the future: in the year of Munich, Anton and his friends hopefully persevered with their underground work of which the main purpose just then was to keep contact, and to spread information to counter the lying propaganda of the Nazis. We met in casual little groups in the Wienerwald where, spreading ourselves in the sun, with the pinetrees in blue masses on the hill-sides behind us, we talked of the politics of the world: or we took bus into Nieder-Osterreich to meet and discuss the new regime with old socialist leaders who had 'gone into retirement in the country'. We met in heuriger gardens and argued with the grasshopper noise of zithers to protect us. There was a bookseller, several teachers, a student or two, a joiner, and a member of the Fire Brigade, Joschi Holaubek, one of those who had helped to wash the revolting Nazis out of the radio station with his fire hoses. What we planned to do was that which appeared impossible to organize with the *Neu Beginnen* people in Germany—to send out English couriers from time to time. We would choose informed men, who would bring in an inconspicuous amount of literature, and would be able to talk intelligently of what was happening in the larger world. Each courier, at the same time, could bring out of Austria such documents and evidence as would help to keep people abroad posted on the internal policies of the Nazis and the underground. I was the first of these couriers, and took back with me the passports of several members on the run who were about to slip into Switzerland, and the personal possessions of some threatened Jews. I was also the last because the expectation of war, a few months later, made all such ventures suddenly appear useless.

The talk everywhere was, on the eve of Munich, what was Britain going to do? Did Britain realize, Anton asked, the extent of the German danger? German military power was growing every moment: one had only to look around. Nothing soon would stop it from overrunning the entire continent. Any day the Nazis would take over the Skoda works in Czechoslovakia and inherit all her powerful armaments. 'These crazy

fanatics are out to make Germany master of the world, and if England does not show the way to resistance we are lost in our hearts.'

My reply was clear rather than encouraging. I said that Britain would continue to temporize with Germany. After all, if she could avoid a war which might drag her down for ever, she was perhaps right, on grounds of self-preservation, to do so. But self-preservation was bound up with the need to prevent her neighbours from becoming too powerful, and the historic Balance of Power policy always operated in the end to range Britain against the would-be conqueror of the continent. Therefore in the long run Britain was *bound* to resist: if Nazi Germany imagined that she could buy off, or ward off, British intervention for ever, then she was as mistaken as the Kaiser had been. I also said that, at the moment, British pacifism went deep. The last war had left too many scars. Most people thought that Germany would do everything *short* of a major war—she could not be so crazy as to embark on a European war which would probably bring down all the regimes which began it. Therefore Britain would not thrust Germany into the situation in which Germany *had* to go to war, but would be conciliatory. However, I said, Hitler is certain to take that as a sign of weakness. If war does come, nothing, I said, will keep Russia and America out of it. When I made this analysis I began to feel less sure that war would come, for I could not imagine that Hitler would commit so colossal a folly as launching his country into a conflict of which no one could see the outcome. The pathological nature of his hysteria was then most difficult to grasp.

My arguments were received with a mixture of scepticism and impatience. It was an immediate demonstration in favour of European freedom that was demanded of Britain. I could not resist a final fling. 'Don't forget,' I said, 'that the ease with which Hitler has established power over Germany and Austria has made many people believe that *all* Germans and Austrians, no matter what their party labels, are behind him. If you would welcome a sign from us that we will resist, we should welcome proof that not all Germans are behind Hitler.'

It was only necessary to say something like this to plunge my Austrian comrades into an analysis of Marxist mistakes similar to that which *Neu Begonnen* had made over the frontier.

On July 25th, 1934, not very many months after Dollfuss had fought it out with the Socialists, the Nazis staged a rising against him with the connivance of members of Dollfuss' own cabinet. It was a short and bloody affair. A group of Nazis seized the Ravag building, in the Johannesgasse, which was the headquarters of the Austrian broadcasting company, and put out a message to the effect that Dollfuss had resigned and Hitler's creature Rintelen had formed a government. From this vantage point the Nazis were driven out before long by the carbines of the armed police and the hoses of the still-socialist Vienna Fire Brigade: my friend Holaubek had wielded one. At the Chancellery, Dollfuss had just dismissed a Cabinet meeting, and though the police, and even Major Fey, the Commissioner-General for Security, knew that something unusual was afoot, no alarm had been given, and no special precautions had been taken to protect Dollfuss and his colleagues. A few minutes before one o'clock on that day four lorry-loads of men in the uniforms of the Austrian Army drove into the Chancellery yard and closed the gates behind them. These were the Nazi conspirators the police had been warned to expect, but had made no preparations to meet. One group of rebels headed straight for the Chancellor's apartments. At their head was an ex-sergeant major, Otto Planetta. They broke into the Chancellor's room and Planetta immediately fired two shots at Dollfuss. He was not killed. For nearly three hours he was left lying on a divan, slowly bleeding to death from wounds in his neck, and refused both the services of a doctor and the last consolations of his Church. This evil murder, following so soon upon the civil war which had vanquished Socialist Vienna, was one more stroke of that mysterious doom which history had marked out for Austria ever since the murder at Sarajevo, in just such a summer, twenty years before.

It was the Nazi custom to canonize their gangsters and terrorists, and Planetta and his fellow-murderers were marked out for special honours on 25th July, 1938. A procession of Nazi storm-troop detachments and other bodies was to follow in the steps of the 'veterans of the 1934 rising' along the route they had taken in stolen uniforms and stolen lorries four years before. A boastful and arrogant propaganda heralded this demonstration of the 'liberation' of Austria from the tyranny

of self-government. Everywhere streamers and flags floated and Hitler's portrait, with its unruly adolescent lock of hair, its sullen face and anguished stare looked down upon this Caesarian operation upon his motherland. A public holiday had been declared, so that the citizens might line the streets. I went to the Ringstrasse to witness this glorification of assassination, but most of Vienna stayed away: a city which loved celebrations ignored this one. Those who were present were the pro-Nazis of the population who, with feverish eyes, raised hands, and shrill 'Sieg Heils' welcomed the conquerors. I watched (alone, for my friends would not come) with bitterness and anger: all the follies of contemporary Europe were symbolized for me by this display. No event in European history had less of glory in it than the murder of Dollfuss. Even the Nazis, who had failed to turn out into the streets on the radio signal, had behaved with abominable cowardice. All who had participated in that pseudo-revolution should have been thankful for the obscuring mercy of time: but no! this dreadful corpse was disinterred for the citizens to cheer, and the Nazis could not bear it that they stayed at home.

That night in their anger they began a pogrom of Vienna Jews, those at least who had so far escaped the lash. Gangs of Hitler youth went round chalking and painting 'Jud' on the doors of Jewish shops or scribbling, with appropriate drawings, 'ripe for the gallows'. Everywhere the shops hurriedly put up their shutters and people stayed indoors. A hush descended on the emptying streets broken only where the organized gangs looted shops and beat up shopkeepers. I managed to photograph the inscriptions over some shops, and even the eviction of a Jewish family. My companions on these excursions were Anton Tesarek and Joschi Holaubek. Joschi, the revolutionary lad who had fought Dollfuss in February, 1934, had been a joiner's apprentice, a poor boy who had educated himself into a position of trust in the Social-Democratic Party through the Red Falcon movement which Anton had founded. His surprising destiny was to become Police Chief of Vienna immediately after the Second World War. Joschi had a voice like a bull, and no discretion, and as we walked the streets he bellowed his contempt and hatred of the Nazis in a way that made my hair stand on end.

My journey home took place in face of the capitulation of

Munich. I did not know what to say to my Austrian and Czech friends. That perhaps a year's respite had been gained seemed a poor reply to the break-up of the last remaining democracy in Eastern Europe. Not only Czechoslovakia seemed to be 'receding into the darkness, mournful, broken, abandoned', but the whole of Europe appeared to be falling into decay, its democracy no less than its courage, its socialism no less than its Christianity. One could only remain silent and ashamed.

One last opportunity was vouchsafed me to go abroad before war finally began. It was in August, 1939, and I went with nearly a thousand Woodcraft Folk to a camp in the Ardennes above Liège. The Woodcraft Folk were then at the height of their power and success. At Wandres, together with Red Falcons and Socialist Scouts from all free Europe, they had organized a camp which was a demonstration of European youth for peace and against fascism (not yet understanding that they could have one policy or the other, but not both together). The shadow of war was over everything and our speeches and demonstrations began to sound very thin when news came through of the agreement between Ribbentrop and Molotov. One could no longer doubt then that Hitler had decided upon an autumn war. It was a relief that the waiting was soon to be over, and the dishonour done with. Yet it was a sinister place to camp on the eve of war, for through the Meuse gap below us, twenty-five years before, the grey horde had poured on their mission to ruin Europe, and came momentarily to a halt before the forts of Liège. That dread event was about to be repeated, and I caught myself listening for the guns which would announce it.

With English children I made solemn pilgrimages to the war cemeteries on the slopes of the ridge, to the tiny enclosures of stone paths and grass plots, like formal Italian gardens, with weeping willows and cypresses surrounding them and pools where the blackbirds came to bathe and sip. With sadness and wonder, as if their own destiny was prefigured there, the children stared at the names of those who had fallen in the very first days of August, 1914, long before they were born, and fallen, it now seemed, in vain. They knew that it was now their turn to be tried, like their fathers, in the furnaces of modern war. One had to turn one's eyes from their tenderness and beauty that one might not weep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Night of the Land-Mine

I was at Ilfracombe when the news of the shattering blitz on London docks filtered through, and was immediately seized with a tremendous restlessness: I wanted to go back to see for myself what was happening. At Ilfracombe my mother joined me, but in the care of my sister Joan whose husband was already away in the army, and the family arranged for them to stay there while the raids continued. My mother was now seriously ill from sclerosis of the brain, the saddest blow imaginable for a person of lively tongue and intelligence. Her speech had first begun to grow confused some years before. Mother began to perpetrate spoonerisms which made us all laugh. It became a family joke for a while that she had once said, 'Tell Mrs. Polish to Mellish the floors—no, of course, I mean tell Mrs. Mollish to Pelish the floors.' She had laughed with us about it, and her courage and energy hid from us for a time that these slips held another significance, and when it did dawn upon us that it was not fatigue or nerves, but an obstruction to communication so considerable that gesture was preferred, then we persuaded her to have medical advice. That was by no means an easy matter: like all of us she was most unwilling to confess to weakness or illness. The X-ray plates revealed the fatal desiccation which was spreading in her brain, but had left her strong body as yet hardly deprived of an ounce of its energy. If one looks at such plates of the skull then the sclerosis is to be observed by the whorls and drifts of a deposit strangely like the sand left drying by the retreating tide. Just so was it for mother: the tide of her life was going out and as it receded, there in that unceasingly active brain was

left the dusty deposit of the years, silently occluding what once had been a bright room and closing her in loneliness within it. It was shocking to be so aware, and so impotent, and to know in those years how careless and indifferent one had been to her need for love and comfort, and that never in the future, no matter what one did, could one make it up to her. Her life's work was done when the war began: her sons grown up, even her youngest, born in the fiercest days of raids in 1918, already in France in the Royal Artillery: her daughters married, and grandchildren already about her knees. When the war came, with the lightest of touches—poof!—all was scattered. The family, as if waiting for this word, dispersed, the home in Forest Hill was closed down, and mother evacuated. She was never to enter it again. I sat at a table in the first days of the war and made an inventory of her belongings, and wrote down her will, and we both knew that this was a kind of an end and that what had seemed, despite straitened circumstances, so firmly rooted would never be brought together again. I moved away into a small flat and began once again the hard struggle to build up the sources of livelihood precariously assembled through years of effort and now rudely shattered by the war. It took me a year to do so, and then the blitz on London destroyed them again. But the second time it hardly seemed to matter in the universal human disaster and, having registered for military service, I was waiting impatiently for my call-up to put an end to all my uncertainties.

In Ilfracombe there was a panic in September. For days rumours assailed us of German trial landings in Cornwall, and the hotel tea-tables were loud with the theory that Germany would try to seize and hold the peninsula of Devon and Cornwall, even should other invasion plans be abandoned, in order to close the Atlantic to British shipping. At the close of one hot September day, a sea-fog began to slip over the tors and fall like a wall of ectoplasm on the town. The fog bell at Bull Point began to ring monotonously, and two girls rushed in to say that they thought it was a smoke screen and they had heard that the invasion had already begun on Woolacombe Sands. How angry they were when I tried to tell them that it was a sea fog. For days these pretty little things, who played tennis so delightfully together, would not even speak to me.

The journey home through the fair western counties made nonsense of all one's fears. England was dreaming her lovely autumn days away in the sleep which had been hers when, as a boy, I had come tramping through the shires with loaded rucsac. It was not until we reached Woking that any sign of disorder appeared. The Waterloo train stopped and would go no farther. Clapham Junction and Waterloo were both out of action through bombs, they said. Only one electric train was running every hour from Woking to Wimbledon. It was expected at 5.36 and it came in at 6.40. By then the platform was jammed so thick with waiting passengers that half of us were left behind. Two minutes later a megaphone informed us that another train was leaving in three minutes from platform 3, and we swarmed across to it like refugees. After a wait of ten minutes a steam train drew in and moved by a common impulse we surged on board it, breaking even into the guard's van. Presently the infuriated guard stormed down the train shouting, 'You can't get on here, this isn't going any farther.' We dismounted sullenly. We had hardly settled ourselves on the platform again when a porter pushed among us shouting 'Get on. This train is going on. Surbiton and Wimbledon the only stops.' We did as we were told, and once again the guard harangued us, pleading with us to come out again. No one moved. He might have been invisible for all the attention we paid to him. The passengers had made up their minds that the train was going on, and go on it did. I finished my journey by tube, astonished and appalled to find tube stations filled with citizens camping on the platforms, their half-naked babies sprawling with dolls in their arms, the little children tucked sleeping into blankets on stone platforms. Over them I trod with infinite and grieving care to reach the exits.

As I came down the road, the alarm siren went, and across the lawns of the block of flats where I lived I saw my neighbours trooping with bedding, suitcases and household pets to the shelter which was only a garage with a reinforced roof and new blast walls. Not a single person had ever used it up to the moment of my going away, and now I found it full of deck chairs and campbeds at the side of which dogs on leash and cats in baskets eyed each other vigilantly. If I was to sleep in my flat, then I should be alone in the whole block, they told me, and so began a new existence in which one grew to know

one's neighbours as one did one's schoolmates through seeing them day after day in every human situation. The blitz disturbed us at all hours, but its span was greatest at night: it arched the dark hours. There were those who came to shelter only when the buildings shook and there were the more systematic shelterers who, after the evening meal, brought down their bedding and thermos flasks and sat gossiping and reading, on deck chairs, hair in nets or curlers, with the calm of those who for all their lives have done this kind of thing, and to whom a bomb was a nuisance principally because it caused them to drop a stitch.

My flat was on the top floor and I was, at first, alone. Into the ground floor flat beneath me moved a hysterical family which had fled the bombing elsewhere and hoped to find it safer in London. The man was of my age. He was out of work, and ill, and had a wife and two tiny children to support. The eldest, a boy of about five or six, used to play in the passage and I had to step carefully over his toy trains and soldiers when I went out to do my shopping. He played games on the lawn intended to irritate his father, for there was such tension between them that they walked round each other like bristling cats. I saw and heard much from my balcony. He would make a noise like an air-raid siren and his father would shout from the kitchen, 'What's that? What's that?' and come to the door to make certain he was being taken in by his son and shout fussily, 'Don't do that, David, don't do that. Your mother and me have about as much as we can stand already.' But if there were noises which David himself found inexplicable or ominous, distant mutters or factory noises, or a far-wailing siren he would rush to his father for reassurance. 'Daddy, is that a bomb? Daddy, is that the all clear? Did you hear that, daddy?' If his father failed to answer he would scream out, his voice mounting, 'Why don't you answer, daddy?' And daddy would put a lugubrious head out of the kitchen window and scream back, 'Why don't you stop trying to make us frightened?'

David would carry his toys up several flights of steps to spread them out on my carpet, and to interrupt my writing with his prattle. Sometimes his father would come too and I would get out my records and play something to amuse them both. I chose the gentlest and most soothing things I could find for father and son were both unstrung. This was good for

me too during endless days of strain and as I had just bought Pablo Casal's incomparable recording of the Beethoven Cello Sonata I had a good excuse for playing it over and over again. Indeed I have only to listen to it again to-day to evoke all the atmosphere of those days.

The unhappy father would sit in one of my easy chairs, hanging his thin wrists between his knees, and listen to the records and watch his son. He could not bear to see his son make any mistakes in the jig-saw puzzle he often brought along and fidgeted with it querulously, saying: 'Look, David, why don't you do that?' or 'I told you it wouldn't fit.' 'Leave it alone,' shouted David. 'I told you not to play with it. It's for Mr. Paul and me. You're not to touch it.' He dashed his father's hand from the board in a blaze of rage.

'What's wrong with you, David?' his father screamed back. 'I don't understand you, David. Why won't you let me play with you?'

'Because I don't want you to, that's all,' the boy said with a set and angry jaw. 'Get away. I don't want you near me.'

His eyes through his pebble spectacles drained of all colour, the father would turn to me and say, 'You see how he treats me. You see how he treats his own father. I should have died rather than treat my own father like that.'

The father looked desperately ill. He was emaciated and with a face the colour of putty, and his bloodless lips trembled. He would come to me for sympathy and tell me of worse raids than ours. 'You know, Mr. Paul, I never had my clothes off for three weeks. Those raids were unbelievable and that's why David's in this funny state now.' By a stroke of fate he had recently lost his own father, to whom he was devoted, and would tell me endless stories of deathbed scenes: his father had died of cancer of the throat and had been received into the Roman Catholic Church just before he died. I came to know every detail of these events before long. He had trouble with his wife. He could not understand her. She was a perfect stranger to him. 'You're lucky, Mr. Paul, to be a bachelor and not to know what that means.' And as for David—'You simply have no idea what it's like to live with him. The boy has a devil in him, but where he gets it from I can't imagine. Mind you, like me, he's frightfully sensitive: frightfully. And intelligent, too, but I tell you, Mr. Paul, he's so unkind to me he's driving me crazy.'

Their worst ordeal—*our* worst ordeal—was the night the land-mine fell along the road, blowing half of it away. I used to go down and sit with David's family out of sorrow and pity for them all. I was specially miserable about the mother: she was fine and healthy, with the bloom of a country girl on her cheeks, and clear, calm grey eyes which surveyed the world with placid friendliness: the rosy-cheeked baby in her arms was as quiet and uncomplaining as David was neurotic. I could see mount on her face a look of distressed incomprehension in the face of family hysteria. David was in such a state of nerves that his father could no longer calm him during raids but he would climb into my arms and go to sleep if I told him stories, and in sleep the dark blue rims of fatigue were clearly visible round his closed eyes, and he would start and tremble even in the deepest sleep at the sound of the barrage starting up.

We had escaped unscathed so far: or almost. An oil bomb and two high explosive bombs had fallen one noon, killing the milk roundsman and the boy delivering the laundry, and setting fire to the surface of the road, but, despite the toll of ruined villas growing every day around us, the flats still survived untouched. That night it was peaceful. The barrage and the bombs were far away, and the hour came round for my fire-watching duty. 'It's quiet,' snarled my friend belligerently. 'Why do you have to go? David won't be able to sleep without you.' But even without my fire-watching duty I should have gone. My legs had pins and needles. I needed a walk. And so, despite his bad-tempered remonstrances, I curled David up in the chair I was vacating and let myself gently out into the night. With a comrade from the shelter, I stood and smoked at the shelter door and watched the drifting clouds obscure the stars. Opposite the flats stood a small wood, clothed still in the ruin of autumn, and from it, on these wet nights, came a rank earth smell which set me hungering for scores of such nights spent around campfires or in a tent at a wood's edge. Just as my spell of duty was over the raiders began to drop flares. They fell like great candles, swaying gently from side to side, and laid so mathematically across the night that it was like gazing up at the lights laid along the dome of an immense railway station. The guns responded, barking and thumping and throwing themselves about like chained animals breaking out of a wooden cage. As I left this scene and went inside a

wave of restlessness moaned through the sleepers. I had just got into the blankets of my bed-chair when the shelter doors burst open with an ear-splitting blast and in roared a cloud of dust, in palpable shape, like the entry of Mephistopheles in Faust. I trembled at the crack, listening for the first time to the authentic voice of the cosmos, the voice of annihilation. The walls rocked and groaned and the waking sleepers shouted 'It's the Flats! The Flats!' and the fire-guards dashed out to see and returned with counter-cries of 'The Flats are all right! Keep calm! Keep calm!'

This explosion was a land-mine half a mile or more away, and as we were all shouting in the dust and confusion, the second one went off in the road a few score yards away. The doors burst open to a thunder which turned our heads into jangled iron. Fire-guards standing by them were hurled across the shelter to fall with others into a tangled heap on the floor. The cigarette of one of them described a burning parabola which caused a wave of panic when someone shouted 'Look out, an incendiary bomb!' When the choking dust had subsided we went outside, certain that the flats had perished. But they stood against the skyline unaltered, looking as quiet and as indestructible in the night as the cliffs of Dover. Across the lawns I could hear David's wail and the shouting of his father. Yet no grass could be discovered on the lawn: a detritus of glass crunched under foot, and one's toes kicked bricks and timbers thrown anyhow everywhere. I felt with my toes, half expecting to pitch into a crater. Yet there was none close at hand: indeed, except for windows and, one supposed, tiles, the flats appeared to have escaped, but northwards along the street the skyline had vanished. I called out to my terrified friends in the flats that all was well and I would return and, with another shelterer, walked to investigate.

A silhouette which reminded me of the pictures I used to see as a boy of ruined Ypres greeted me, lit by a wan, flickering flame from the burning gas main in the centre of an unfathomable cavity where the street had been. The desolation and silence were intolerable: even one human cry would have made them bearable. As we walked carefully forward over the crunching glass, the litter of disintegration, the scraps of clothing, the splintered wood, the rolling, clanking metal objects, the indescribable soft things which might be human,

the A.R.P. men came on the scene, dancing round the crater, like midgets in a surrealist ballet, trying to find means to put out the flame. Already the bombers were rolling round above looking at this flame, wondering whether to stoke it up. In God's name, one wanted to cry, can't you stop it with earth? A policeman, quite imperturbable, came up and halted us. We protested we only wanted to help. 'If you were found wandering about you might be suspected of looting.' We returned in silence, stumbling about the unfamiliar geography.

I felt guilty as I returned to the flats. As it happened, too, the bombers started to unload around us, to feed the fire. My desertion of David had been at an unlucky moment. There was a row going on. 'Why don't you do something? Why don't we go to a shelter?' he was screaming hysterically. 'We don't know if there's one standing,' his father was shouting. The lights had failed. The troubled father was scraping feebly about in his passage-way with a torch. 'I'm sure my head's bleeding,' the little boy wailed. 'There's sticky all over it.' 'I can't stand it,' his father was crying. 'I can't stand any more of it. I shall go crazy.'

The glass from the fanlight above the door had exploded over the frantic family. With my torch I helped pick it off the crying children. It crunched under my heel even here. David had a scratch on his forehead, but was otherwise unhurt. 'You shouldn't have left us, Mr. Paul,' his father said, in the tone which suggested that my desertion of them had conjured up the land-mine. 'Anyone would think you owned the poor man,' said his wife. 'No one can make him stay with us.' 'If you leave me I'll kill you,' said David, punching me with his fist. Nothing would content him but that he should sit on my knee and listen again to the story of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, exactly as I had told it before the land-mine changed the constellation of our world. And so he slept, and all of us, exhausted, slept, though the building continued to rock with the blast and tumult of the devil dance outside.

In the newly minted morning the road looked like the end of the world, the day on which God had decided to abandon his creation to its ruin. A row of shops, a chapel, a terrace of houses, and half a brewery were heaps of wreckage. In the whole street the only unwrecked buildings were the flats. They had been protected by the shops and houses close to them, but

even so the extent of their escape was remarkable. In my own flat on the skyline, which now had a direct view of the crater, only one diamond pane of glass was punched out, and over my goods was a powdering of dust and plaster.

'We thort you'd gorn,' said my daily treasure, when she arrived, still quivering from the agitation of the night, to clean my rooms. 'We 'eard everyfink down 'ere was destroyed.' I was shocked all over again when I went out to view the destruction in daylight. There was a ripple nearly two feet high in the macadam caused by ground concussion, even though the mine had exploded at house height. On a roof the mangled chassis of a car was perched. Hundreds of yards beyond the flats a four foot hole had been blasted in the side of a house by a boulder propelled like a shell from the crater. My friends in the flat below me had had enough: they packed suitcases and bags and fled north, where, in the fulness of time, the raiders caught up with them again.

I had no time to miss them for, shortly before the blitz that night, my bell rang lustily and there at the door, suitcase in hand, was the young poet Lillington, one of the group of Marxists I had hoped might be turned into couriers of the socialist underground in the far-off days when Europe was not at war (and not at peace either). He was tall and thin and stooped a little, his black hair wet with rain tumbled about like the snakes on Medusa's head, and he peered short-sightedly at me through his spectacles. He raised and flapped his arms like a large, melancholy crow.

'Blitzed!'

I brought him in. He sniffed the air, for I was boiling a hock in the soup saucepan. 'Soup!' he cried, 'bee-yoo-ti-full soup!' He peered around, restless and excited, at my pictures again, my china. He picked up and rapidly skimmed through some new books resting on my desk, he read what he could of the page still being typed in the roller of my typewriter. 'Blitz or no blitz, you do yourself well, Les. I'm going to enjoy being bombed out. That is if they don't try to do to what's left of your street what they did to the other half.' And he went around in happiness among my book shelves, conscious of the role cast on him by his poetry, and enjoying playing at being the eccentric young poet even more than writing poetry, and when I said that a meal was ready he misquoted for a

benediction some lines of Auden: 'Protect this house, this anxious house where days are counted, From thunderbolt protect, From gradual ruin spreading like a stain.'

Hardly had my guest taken up his dripping overcoat than the bell rang again, and there was my sister Marjorie standing suitcase in hand, in a man's raincoat and wearing a steel helmet. She put the suitcase down and lifted her arms in much the same gesture as Lillington's. 'Bombed out.' So henceforth my blitz nights were not alone: I had gay and amusing companions. We boiled immense cauldrons of soup with chunks of ham floating around in them, so that we could have hot meals at any moment if ever disaster came to us, provided only that it left the cauldron the right side up. My gramophone records were pulled out and we played them night after night, cheating the blitz each time of a portion of its stay. And in the morning, after all was over, Ken and I would walk the wooded hills around, to breathe the air, and to forget disaster. He, too, was waiting for his call-up papers. As it happened, they were blitzed, and they sent a policeman to fetch him in the end. And he went off with flapping protests of his long arms, his hair still snakier and in a mood which seemed to bode trouble for any sergeant, or come to that, general, who got in his way.

The blitz at first enforced idleness upon me and I watched anxiously my shrinking balance at the bank. I wrote my journal, read Ken's journal and discussed it, tinkered half-heartedly with my poems, or wrote long amusing letters when I could to my brother serving in the North of England and guarding, among other things, land-mines perched in trees. Fire-watching helped to pass the midnight hours, and then one gazed across the forests of chimney pots and saw the purple flames which Pepys and Evelyn had seen as a halo of destruction over London's heart. Yet my idleness did not last: the authorities decided that the policy of dispersal—no meetings, no lectures, no dances and no cinemas—was disastrous for morale. What were the unoccupied people in their masses in shelters beginning to think of the doom 'dark and deeper than any sea-dingle' in which their city was foundering! Once again adult education was called to the rescue—just as it had been during mass unemployment. There began for me yet another educational experience: lecturer on foreign affairs to tube

stations. I visited shelters which ranged from the crypt of St. Peter's, Eaton Square, to Bullivants' Wharf in the Isle of Dogs: I toured Fire Stations, Tube Stations and A.R.P. Posts. I borrowed a Gaumont-British 16 mm. sound projector from the London County Council and showed talkie films everywhere, dragging my bulky apparatus around through the shrapnel, looking for taxis to serve me, and very indignant that the London County Council would not issue me with a tin hat (I bought one eventually in a pub for three and six from an A.R.P. worker). The film, no matter on what subject, proved to be the only 'cultural activity' which interested children as well as adults. The children swarmed like lemmings everywhere, of course, and, in the midst of a lecture on the foreign policy of the U.S.S.R. were quite capable of starting a war of their own in one corner of the shelter as a protest against their insufferable boredom.

Lecturing at St. Peter's during a raid one January evening, and feeling very secure in the stout vaults of the church, I was irresistibly reminded that I had done all this before. The vicar was patriarchally and proprietorially in the chair. Women and fidgeting adolescent boys and girls sat around in deck chairs. A glass of water and a green baize whist table had been provided for me. A curate, lanky and diffident, wandered in and out: the word 'Chaplain' was painted on his tin helmet. He was like a figure out of the front line. Beyond the arches on one side ranged a canteen: on the other a darts match had been going on: it was stopped when I came in and all were gently herded forward to listen to me.

A warm carpet stretched across the floor, bunks ranged up to the ceiling. What was it like? Superficially, it was like being below decks in the steerage of an old-fashioned liner. But it was far different in atmosphere, and if all the wartime accretions were disregarded it was, of course, a church institute on club night! The knitting women, the amber lemonade in glasses, the hissing urn of tea, the genial vicar, the darts tournament, the young boys at a loose end rounded up to listen to the visiting lecturer! The air raid was an accident, the shelter merely a temporary break in the continuum of English parish life. The village hall had gone underground.

Returning dog-tired to my flat that night I could hear all the way up the stairs the telephone bell ringing stridently.

It was Will at the other end. I was almost too weary to talk to him. He was one of the members of the Marxist group I had so casually got together and he, now, was in the Army, and employed as a cook on the strength presumably of the many strange midnight meals he had prepared in billy-cans over campfires. He was running youth groups before he had been called up and I had a special love for him, for I was always tracing in him the lineaments of the eccentric and idealistic youth leader I had myself been ten years before—even to the taste for tweeds, cherry pipes and ash walking sticks.

He said he had been trying to get me for hours as it was rather important. He was just coming home on leave to get married and would I get his raincoat for him from Len as he wanted to get married in a raincoat. I was too tired to remember who Len was or how he had come to be possessed of Will's raincoat—for Will had been in the Army eight months—but I said 'yes' to these requests hoping that by morning my head would be clear once again.

In the morning I forgot all about it, but on the next day there was a hurried and almost illegible scrawl from Will saying that after all he was coming home on the 30th and that it did not matter about the raincoat. I could not work out from the letter whether he was getting married on the 30th, or coming home on the 30th to get married—a subtle difference—and so was compelled to wait for illumination.

He rang me up at midnight that very Friday to say that he was to be married on Sunday at a registry office, and would I come over and assist at the pantomime? Well, I said, I rather thought Sunday was *dies non* for registrars. His girl Barbara snatched the telephone from him and said, Oh no, it had all been arranged, and Reg said it was perfectly O.K.

As Reg was an M.P. I thought perhaps it must be all right and so I said, Well then, *where?*

Oh we can't say where just yet, but we'll ring you tomorrow and tell you where.

And what time, I reminded them.

Yes, the time too. That was important.

However, on Saturday night they rang me to say that they had unfortunately discovered that you could not get married on a Sunday so it would have to be a Monday.

Well, I said, I wasn't surprised.

Well they were, they said, because Reg had told them it would be O.K. After all why shouldn't you get married on a Sunday?

Perhaps the registrar likes to go to Church, I said.

Well, they said, they hadn't thought of that.

Well, where are you now?

Well, they said, we're at Shooter's Hill.

Well, why not come over and stay the week-end?

Well, we thought the traffic stopped in the blitz.

Oh no, I said, it keeps running.

Well, we'll come, they said.

Bring something to eat, I said, I haven't much.

All right, they said, we'll bring bread and marge and sugar.

Some *meat*, I said.

All right, some meat. We'll be over at six.

They arrived at eleven, beaming and happy and scattily in love.

Well, I said.

Sorry we're late, they said.

That's O.K., I said, I was just going to bed, but don't mind that—come in.

And they came in and talked and talked. Will decided to try out his cooking on the meat that he brought with him and went off to the kitchen to experiment, but as this interfered with the stories of a cook's life in an army camp he was trying to tell, he kept walking into my study, frying-pan in hand to relate the bits he would otherwise forget.

Will was a chap of the utmost absent-mindedness. In pre-war days he never called to see me without leaving something behind. A whole platoon of pipes assembled themselves on my mantelpiece and in my ashtrays. I accumulated in this fashion spare sports jackets and mackintoshes. So, too, the mysterious Len must have acquired Will's raincoat. Library books alien to me piled up on occasional tables. I would often get a ring. 'Is that you, Leslie? Did I leave the *Analects of Confucius* behind on Sunday?' 'You did,' I would reply. 'Dash it,' he'd sigh with relief. 'I knew I must have left it behind somewhere. I keep forgetting to take it back to the library.'

My friends were all of the opinion that Will would forget to turn up to the wedding. I said they were wrong, he would turn up all right, but it would be the wrong wedding. Certainly,

they said, he'll forget his wedding-ring. No, I replied, Will always surprises me. Ten to one he will remember the ring, then turn round, startled, in the middle of the ceremony and dash his hand to his brow exclaiming, 'Heavens, where's Barbara? I know I had her with me when I started out.' And then, I said, without any doubt, he will ring me.

Marriage was in the air. My young brother came down from Scotland and with no more than £6 in the bank married his girl Gena from my flat. It was perhaps appropriate that one who had been born after one of the worst air raids in 1918 and had spent his twenty-second birthday on the beaches of Dunkirk should drive to his wedding through the thunders and buffetings of a daylight raid, and be forced to raise his voice during the marriage vow to compete with the growlings and trumpeting of the blitz in the street outside. I was best man. I thought, with a sigh, that I was always best man. I had been best man to the worst kind of weddings. I was nineteen or twenty when I was best man to a friend who was making a runaway marriage with the girl he loved against her mother's will, and I had to hold the infuriated mother in conversation while my friend and his bride ran out of the registry office and bolted up the street for a bus. My hat was quite ruined by her umbrella and the worst of it was that the crowd which gathered took her side, thinking that since it was outside a registry office, and I was toggled up to the nines, I must have jilted her on the starting line, and I too had to run for a bus.

However, my brother's marriage, hurried and scrappy though it was, like the marriages of all desperate soldiers who had to pack a lifetime of happiness into ten days, was a good and happy one: the only thing which troubled me was that I was running a temperature which whisky would not quieten. I saw the young couple go off to Ilfracombe to join my mother and sister, and then came home to my flat, deserted now since Marjorie and Ken had left. But everything happens at once: there on the doormat were my calling-up papers. I had no more need to struggle against my destiny: it was out of my hands, and with a sigh of relief that the waiting was over I poured myself out a tumblerful of sherry and unmindful of the blitz went to the pictures. I knew that if I stayed at home I should pace excitedly up and down trying to peer too far into

THE NIGHT OF THE LAND-MINE

the future, of which I was once again afraid. It was a strange coincidence that by the same post there was a month old letter from Switzerland telling me that Anton Tesarek was in the dreaded Buchenwald concentration camp while his son Till, the merry and affectionate little boy who had so many times visited me, was now a lieutenant in the German Army.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Day of the Soldier

The army stripped one bare. It was an experience so difficult to communicate to the friends one had left behind that it raised a barrier not to be crossed again until one was out of uniform for good: this was specially so with many left-wing friends who, for all their hatred of Fascism, gazed at one's uniform with a mixture of pity and reproach. The bareness was, to begin with, the fewness of one's possessions. My flat was surrendered and books and furniture sent into store. The coarse army clothes which filled my kitbag and a few things in a tiny attache case under my pillow were the extent of my worth. My books were Livingstone's *Portrait of Socrates*, Jefferies' *Story of my Heart*, and Traherne's *Felicities*. They were joined presently by a copy of Woodrow Wyatt's *English Story* which contained a short story of mine. These lay unregarded for I had neither the light by night nor the leisure by day to read them and when, searching frantically for a square of two-by-two, or the pull-through of my rifle, I caught sight of them, they filled me with amazement. They were difficult to reconcile with the rough barrack-room and the two-tier bunks round which I hurriedly swept just before parade every morning.

In the Army one was forced back on to one's inward resources. In the past, even when things were bad, I had been fitted as a hand into a glove into the community of which I was part, and which marvellously supported me. I belonged to a large family: there was nearly always a room to myself: of many organizations I flattered myself I was a necessary member. I was a trade-unionist, co-operator, member of the Labour Party, President of a flourishing youth movement,

chairman of this or that. Or I was lecturer and author, treated with respect, asked to preside at meetings or to stand for Parliament. I never strayed far from this warm social herd, nor thought it possible to stray. But now, and in a few weeks, it had quite ceased to exist and even, I suspected, had lost interest in me. My youth movement made what I thought was indecent haste to remove me from the presidency. I was not so indispensable as I'd thought. But at least I needed to make no more decisions now as to what I would do for them, or for myself. I became for a time indifferent to politics and the course of the war. Somehow everything would sort itself out. It was a relief not to be compelled to go on producing tidy little opinions about every new event. I could live with a question, and even ignore it, and I began to understand the solace T. E. Lawrence had found in this stripped-down life. I had become 4926829 Pte. L. Paul, and subject ignominiously to the will of the merest lance-corporal, who handed me his webbing gaiters and belt to blanco whenever he felt like it. The inner iron of one's pride was the only remedy one had for the insults and objurgations hurled at the squad by boys with stripes, or sergeant-instructors of an earlier generation. Together they denied the squad parentage, manhood, hope of posterity, or present excuse for existence. In February sleet and chill we doubled round the barrack square, and bashed here and there in platoons on interminable foot and rifle drill, swinging day by day into a beautiful unison and a bodily resurrection. On Whittington Common we ran and doubled, like hares, in scouting games, crawled like snakes through wet bracken, learning concealment, surprise, flanking movements, and methods of judging distances. We dug ourselves foxholes and earth screens and discovered where most murderously to place rifle and bren gun. We took these lethal weapons to pieces and had 'naming of parts'—

*To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.*

THE DAY OF THE SOLDIER

*This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.**

And so we stepped back into the boyhood world of the hunting of quarry and the firing of rifles, and marched, singing songs of which we never knew more than the first verse, about the windy Midlands above Lichfield. George Fox had once come this way in his leather suit and looked down with disapproval on the spires of Lichfield where we looked with longing at the southward swinging expresses. The exercise freshened our eyes and rosied our faces and blistered our feet, and roused such enormous appetites that a hot supper at the NAAFI became the goal and dream of the day.

I was poor once more, and NAAFI suppers were often out of the question. Penury was by now so usual an experience that I could only greet its return with a shrug. But this was about the worst experience of the lot, I had ruefully to admit, for my daily pay at first was two shillings and sixpence, and I allowed my mother ten shillings every week. She was herself desperately in need and my contribution, added to those from the rest of the family, helped to keep her in decent circumstances in Ilfracombe. I was left with seven shillings and sixpence for cigarettes, Naafl meals, an occasional trip to the cinema, cleaning materials and leave! An odd guinea or two from an article or story came like a reprieve to a condemned man.

I was sometimes a little incredulous that this soldiering life, into which I entered with great gusto, was my destiny after all. I had longed most passionately for it in my boyhood in the First World War, and here I was where I had once wanted to be after all: but it was an odd joke which thrust me into uniform and handed me a rifle only after twenty years of agitation in the cause at first of pacifism and then of peace. And it was a tu quoque too that I was forced at last to discover the masses and to live with them after years of talking so glibly

*From Henry Reed's delightful 'Lessons of the War' in *A Map of Verona*, Jonathan Cape, 1946, with acknowledgements. I first read them in *The New Statesman and Nation*.

about them. With what facility words like the 'masses', 'the proletariat', 'the working classes' had not so long ago rolled off my tongue. What folly it had been on my part to imagine I knew all about them because I mixed with active trade-unionists or talked to a handful of unemployables! The members of the working class who attend meetings and accept office in labour movements are an élite: the real masses behind them can seldom be seen because of the dust their leaders kick up. But my barrack-room mates were the masses: patient, hard-working, grumbling about authority yet obeying it, avoiding (in civvy street) public meetings like the plague, and holding only the most elementary political views, their lives at home were bounded by desire for wives and sweethearts (and frustration of this in the Army brought them the most real suffering) and the tedium of their simple yet exacting jobs in farm and factory. And here I was caught up with them, in the most complete mass movement of our generation, which the masses loathed with all their hearts because it destroyed their personal lives, yet were no more capable of opposing than if it were an avalanche, which took them and drilled them and made them into ciphers in military machines co-extensive with the entire manhood of the nation. And yet, loathing it, they felt it was a necessary job, and were not in the least astonished that they were called upon to do it. They had not expected otherwise. One saw really what it means to live among the masses and not among those who simply talk about them and hope to boss them. It was the kind of revelation only possible in the army, and in the ranks, and if one had no money.

My buddy or mate during those training days was B——— a little man from the Elephant and Castle. He occupied the bunk below me and so we would sit side by side on his bed every evening during 'shining parade' and bone our boots and bayonet scabbards until they shone like black ivory and with Silvo put a flash into our bayonets which would not have disgraced a Turkish scimitar. The constant cleaning made the ends of my fingers sore and when B——— saw me more than usually inept he would grab hold of what I was doing and take it out of my hands. "Elpless as a bleedin' cockroach," he would grumble. 'Giss 'ere.' He had deft fingers, and was an indefatigable worker and took pleasure in helping me. Back at the Elephant he worked I seem to remember, 'for the Borough',

and as with many of the men around me, there was a history of unemployment he grudged talking about. He was quite the most comical man in an outfit more than usually blessed with them and certainly the most lovable. He had a large, Grock-like head, and bright blue eyes, and his fair hair fell in a quiff over his forehead. He always wore a cheerful, clown-like grin. His large head and small body to which were attached legs and arms even smaller made him look like a ventriloquist's doll. It was with very great difficulty he managed the stride of the drill-squad, and he was for ever huskily complaining that we were making him do the splits. On his own, his short, rapid steps gave him the appearance of trotting everywhere, head up, like an intelligent terrier. But he could stretch his legs rather more easily than his arms and during arms drill he was in torment. An hour before this parade, his face would be puckered with worry, for as he knew, once it began anything might happen. It was certain that the sergeant would bawl, 'Get that angle straight, B——!' and B—— would shoot up his forearm to tilt the rifle back over his shoulder only to have the same rasping and insulting voice tell him a moment or two later just how horizontal he should keep his forearm. If, later, in his zeal to bring his rifle across his body on to his shoulder at the order 'Slope arms' he tried to make good by energy for physical deficiencies, the rifle might miss his negligible shoulders and hurl itself across the squad to impale the man behind him. He was most happy when the parades and cleaning of the day were done and he could turn to me with his Grock-like grin, and say, in his deep hoarse voice, 'Comin' to the Naffy, matey?' And we would go across together, the long and the short of it, a most incongruous pair, and sit and drink mugs of tea and plough through 'meat pie and mashed'. 'What we oughter 'ave, matey, is some of them stooed eels from one of them Elephant cookshops. Blimey, they're a bit of what mother makes.' 'Get your wife to post you a carton of jellied eels,' I suggested. 'No bleedin' use, matey. There ain't no cookshops left since Jerry bombed 'em.' Then we would exchange reminiscences about the Elephant and its cookshops, which I knew almost as well as he did, for when as a boy I went to St. George's Eye Hospital, my mother, who was no snob about food, used to take me for stewed eels and mashed and huge custard pies in the clean, scrubbed eating houses which had

still in those days sanded floors, and polished brass spittoons, and ferns set out in green and cream flower pots along the tiled ledges of the shopwindows. At one, in Newington Butts, where one could get the best roast beef and Yorkshire pudding in London, I had been eating until it was destroyed in the blitz. Presently out would come B——'s wallet and he would pass over to me the well-thumbed portrait of his wife and little boy of nine. He talked of them because he was anxious about them: London was still being heavily bombed, if at longer intervals, and from the Elephant and Castle southwards stretched a great trail of destruction. He spoke of me as his 'matey'. If he came into the barrack room, and found me missing, he would say a little anxiously to the rest, 'Seen my matey around?' and when I had to rest on my bunk from the effects of inoculation he was for ever fetching me cups of tea and wads of cake from the Naafi.

He had the opinion also that I was a 'caution'. This dated from the time of arrival, a week later than the rest of the squad. After I had collected most of my kit Lance-Corporal Potts asked me if I'd got my biscuits. I said no, I hadn't—and thinking, I must admit, of the iron rations of the First World War I asked where you got them. 'From the bleeding cookhouse,' he said. 'Where d'you think?' And he told me what I could do with them when I got them. So I presented myself zealously at the cookhouse, still in civvy clothes, and told them I'd been sent down by Lance-Corporal Potts for some biscuits. This brought on the scene a group of cookhouse orderlies eager to take a look at the professional chap, who hiding behind hornrimmed spectacles, was guilty of this drollery. It took me some time to discover that 'biscuits' to the barrack room were mattresses in three parts. One put them together and slept on them. Each buttoned square of mattress did resemble in colour and shape a large dog biscuit, as a matter of fact. But no one could possibly believe that I had done this out of innocence. They were sure it was a kind of waggery on my part—'taking the mike out of Potts'. I did nothing to disabuse them of this all too flattering point of view, and my reputation increased with time.

It was the practice to call out the whole barracks to 'stand-to' whenever there was an air raid alarm at night. Nothing ever happened except that a few German planes roared over to

drop bombs on Birmingham or Coventry, and local ack-ack guns let fly at them. 'It's stupid,' I expostulated to the barrack room, 'to lose all that good sleep. The Army's crazy.' And so, after turning out on the first night of my arrival, I decided not to bother any more. After all, I said, at large, 'we never used to get up for anything as feeble as this in London'. 'Blinkin' caution, you are matey,' said B——. Three nights later, upon a general alarm, I turned over on to the other side to go to sleep again, while my angry comrades clattered in their boots all over the barrack room floor and down the stone stairs. Potts, I noticed, wasn't troubled either and snored from a far corner. Yet now, with a wonderful peace around me, I could not sleep: the emptiness of the room oppressed me. As ever, I grew curious. It was my besetting sin. What on earth were they *doing* down there in the dark? I felt conscience-stricken, snug in bed while they tripped around in the dark with fire-buckets. At last I got up, slipped on my greatcoat and painful army boots, and went downstairs just in time to add myself to a file of muttering soldiery bumping off somewhere in the stygian night. The file meandered around uncertainly and came to a flagstaff which I recollected was in North Staffs territory, and a corporal whose voice I did not recognize read out a list of unfamiliar names (of which mine was not one) to which the soldiers responded with that sycophancy of which only new recruits and prep-schoolboys are capable. And so we were all dismissed. Regretting my folly in leaving my bed, I groped my way back to my block, found my barrack-room, and went to bed. My platoon was still missing. When they did return, they found me fast asleep.

In the morning I was paraded with the defaulters and putting the best air possible on my misadventure told how I had turned out but got mixed up with a file of the North Staffs, and when I discovered my mistake and left them, was quite unable to find my own platoon, and returned to my barrack room. It turned out that my own squad had been taken on a night tour of water buckets and fire pumps, to their utter misery. My nerve in staying in bed was, they thought, capped by the brazen impudence of my story. Only a genius would have conceived a yarn like that and got away with something as mild as three days' C.B. and the job of scrubbing out the company office. Most eagerly now, they saw, my yarn about

the biscuits was waggery of the same sort, and they began to think it possible I might go far in the Army. My ascendancy in the squad made young Potts a little nervous, and he would come and consult me anxiously about talks he had to give on map-reading or judging distances, about which he knew nothing. He wanted to know 'how, sort of, you would phrase it', which meant that he wanted me to prepare his lesson for him. B—— began to grow anxious about me, too: if I was unaccountably absent somewhere he would put that down either to a new piece of waggery on my part, or to the possibility that, being a writer, I had forgotten what next I ought to do: and so he would come in search of me. When I explained to him how easy it was to slide off to the Church Army hut on the common during the hour everyone had to wear a gasmask, because no one could possibly recognize you then, and you could not hear any orders shouted at you from inside a mask, he grew quite nervous and lectured me most earnestly. I was spoiling my chances of becoming an officer. He had a special interest in promoting my career, for he had a theory that I should be able to apply for him one day to become my batman. By an odd coincidence when I did go to OCTU I found that he was one of the orderlies there, prepared to bat for me when his other labours were done.

Yet another simple fellow was a huge man S—— who possessed a chest like a barrel and a jutting jaw. When he wore his steel helmet he looked even more aggressive than Mussolini, and rather like him. Yet he was a Damon Runyon character, as tender-hearted as a child, and no matter what punishments the sergeants threatened him with, they could never work him up to an aggressive spirit when it came to poking his bayonet into the viscera of the sacks hanging on gibbets between the barrack buildings. We had to form in lines and two at a time with bayonets fixed, charge down on the sacks making blood-curdling noises. 'In, out, on guard!' we shouted as we stabbed the straw. It was one of the things best to do quickly, and without too much thought about its murderous implications. But no matter with what bloody a mien they persuaded the lumbering S—— to hurl himself along the concrete, when he came to the sack he gave it the most gentle and apologetic of pokes, and was even in a sweat about that. The sergeant would wrench the weapon from him and shout:

'Not like that, you so-and-so, like this!' and with professional savagery thrust and thrust and make the gibbet rock. Turning a piteous and bewildered eye on us for support, S—— would take back the weapon and, with less ferocity than the old ladies of my childhood displayed in poking a hatpin through a bonnet, prod the dangling man of straw. 'Oh, you make me tired!' the sergeant would say, and, with searing comments on his private life, send him back to the line where he drooped with the fear that in a moment or two he would have to do it all over again.

S—— could not read or write and every day or so he would humbly ask me to write a letter for him to his mother, and would bring me the replies to be read out. One day, in the greatest happiness, he came waving a telegram: with eyes shining with delight at such a thing he cried out, 'Look, someone sent me this. Never had one before. What does it say?' I was rushing up the stone stairs to change for P.T. parade and he followed me to my bunk. His noisy pleasure brought others round. But the telegram said that his mother had been seriously injured in an air raid and he was to come at once, or it might be too late, and one of the hardest tasks of my life was to summon the courage then and there to kill the childish glee in his eyes.

If my pennilessness was to be with me for at least a year in the Army, my obscurity did not, on the other hand, last for more than a few months. Before entering the forces I had been lecturing here and there to attentive audiences of soldiers, or to groups of officers lounging in easy chairs in the ante-rooms of their messes, and chiefly on the causes and progress of the war. One of my hosts had been Colonel Lloyd, commanding officer of the 22nd Medium and Heavy Training Regt. R.A. at Shoeburyness; a generous and outstanding soldier, he had proposed to me that I should let him know when I was actually called up and he would have me transferred to his command so that under him I might continue educational work for his troops of the kind I had already done. I ought to go, he thought, into the Army Educational Corps. 'Between you and me,' he said, 'you're too old for an infantry commission, and an artillery commission would mean specialization. You'd much better do the kind of thing you are doing.' I clutched at this hope, and wrote while in training at Lichfield, and Col. Lloyd kept his word, and at the end of my training I found

myself posted to Shoeburyness Garrison. It was not good to see my comrades march off to fill drafts, while I was left behind to await the date of my own dispatch. What a transformation there was among them: these tired men in their thirties stepped out briskly and bore themselves erect and soldierly behind the band which marched them to the station. Some of them eventually found themselves serving with the Chindits in Burma and others with the Desert Rats: the unfit were destined for garrison duty at home, like B——. I had no band to march me to the station. Indeed I had no transport at all, and was compelled to stagger along to Lichfield Station in the early morning, like an overburdened Christmas tree carrying kitbag, webbing equipment, blankets and rifle as if I were to be allowed to fight a campaign on the east coast all on my own. In London my plight was worse, for I arrived on the morning of May 12th 1941, after one of the worst fire-blitzes on London. No traffic at all was running through the city, not even the underground, and I could reach Fenchurch Street Station only by passing through burning streets, tangled with hoses and piled high with smoking rubble over which firemen and rescue workers still crawled. The journey would have been impossible but for a messenger boy with a barrow: with my kit piled high upon it we struggled through the smoke-wreathed city, the May sun brassy above us.

My life in Shoeburyness barracks was the private soldier's dream of heaven. I lived in a warm, clean Belisha barrack room with the daily comfort of hot baths and hot water to shave with. My superior was an Army schoolmaster, a regular soldier who had taught in Hong-Kong, Egypt and, of course, Aldershot. His name was Meacher and he signed it with the round, flowing school hand bred of much chalking on blackboards. He was a plump little man with a red nose who looked just like W. C. Fields: he possessed even his Micawberish dignity and, beaming and joking to his classes, something of his humour too. Because his rank was equivalent to that of Regimental Sergeant Major he enjoyed most of the privileges of an officer and much more freedom: indeed with a bungalow and batman he shared with the R.S.M. he was most comfortably situated. His only cause for complaint was that an incendiary bomb had recently fallen through his roof. Meacher treated me with the utmost consideration, protected me from the resentments of the

disciplinary side of the barracks, and allowed me to arrange my own programme. So there I was, a simple gunner, travelling around to gunsites between Canvey and Foulness Islands, talking to small groups of soldiers on contemporary affairs. In my abundant leisure I pursued my delight in geography and painted the schoolroom walls with vast world maps. My colleague in the schoolroom, a Lance-Bombardier, was a brilliant mathematician who played the flute, and under his encouragement I took up my boyhood love once again, and by practising several hours a day in the deserted schoolroom we both made considerable progress: indeed we began to play duets. By this happy accident new delights were opened up to me and the thready sweetness of our flutes became one of the familiar daily sounds of the busy barracks.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dialogue of the Heart

At last, removed from the blitz, from the cares of civilian life, with the pressure of the military machine temporarily lifted, and the opportunity once again to think, to read, and to stroll where I wished without being bawled at by NCO's I could come to grips with the problems which I had with despair put on one side about a year before. The greatest of them was—what now to believe?

On the outbreak of war I had discarded the remnants of my pacifism. Until that day I had always been able to delude myself with the consolation that, if I wanted to, I could refuse military service on the grounds of my record in peace or pacifist movements. But when the war actually came, I knew that this was self-deception. One could not be a pacifist if one longed with all the ardour of one's soul for the defeat of National Socialist Germany. One's pacifism would then have been a dishonest and contemptible decision to leave to others to secure by death and suffering the victory one refused to fight for oneself. I was uneasily conscious that, since exemption had become so easy, and involved no martyrdom of any kind, it was necessary to be quite sure that a desire to escape military service was not prompted subconsciously by something quite different from 'principles'. Of many of the pacifists I met I was suspicious. It often seemed to me that their 'pacifism' was a variant of nihilism, an aggressive refusal to accept *any* of the burdens and obligations of living in a society, and only too often the fruit of an unadmitted neurosis. Principles and personal honesty made it impossible for me to refuse service: the war became for me a test of my manhood which I could not

reject. But this decision widened the gap between me and the youth movement I had founded, and once led to a pacifist position: many of the active leaders rejected military service very self-righteously even though they had seen their comrades in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland go down under the Nazi terror.

In the spring of 1940, inwardly torn by many conflicting views on the course of history, I made an attempt to reconsider the war situation in Marxist terms. In a paper I wrote to read to my friends I rejected the Leninist thesis about the First World War, which was, of course, that the war was no concern of the proletariat whose only task was 'to turn the imperialist into the civil war' or in other words to turn its guns against its own bourgeoisie. This Leninist thesis was held in all its purity by the Trotskyists in the Second World War: it appeared, in 1940, to be held by the Stalinists too, but their Marxist analysis on these lines was quite a dishonest one. It could not be squared with a propaganda six years old which argued that Fascism was the first enemy of the working-class: this Moscow line might, I guessed, vanish any day with a turn in the war unfavourable to the national prospects of the U.S.S.R. I wrote that it was stupid and dangerous to imagine that the proletariat was morally indifferent to the victory of one side or the other. Even in terms of realism about human loyalties, it was a fantasy worthy of Dean Swift to ask German workers to fight for the victory of Britain, and British workers to fight for the victory of Germany! But even if the policy of 'revolutionary defeatism' *was* possible in certain historical circumstances, it was irrelevant to the ideological struggle of the Second World War. The most obvious thing about the war was that there *was* a difference in the moral weight of the protagonists. The western nations accepted certain basic assumptions about the rights of men, the maintenance of justice, the honouring of truth. Whatever the evils and follies of the bourgeois order of the West, it entered into the struggle with this basically civilized point of view: even a bourgeois order, I said, could be influenced by a moral imperative. This was not the case on the other side: it was not the case in Russia either, for her alliance with Germany was even more cynical than the Munich agreement.

Secondly, I argued, there was a difference between the

protagonists in their approach to the social question. The victory of the democracies meant the preservation of the right, precious to the working class, freely to organize and struggle for the attainment of power. On the other hand, the triumph of Fascism would mean the destruction of democracy and the physical massacre of the leadership of the trade union and labour movements. Mere commonsense dictated that we should work for the victory of the side which assured us the possibility of carrying on the struggle.

I read this thesis to my little Marxist group: it was the last time we met as a whole before war dispersed us utterly: three of its five or six male members were already in uniform: the girls they had married or were about to marry were there too: we talked with bottles of beer at our side and cigarette smoke thick as a fog in my study which looked across to the treetops of the miraculously preserved little wood. But we all felt acutely the unreality of this mechanical kind of thinking. The truth was that we had all made a decision to serve in the forces out of something much more profound in us than Marxism. There was something indecent about shoving our personal responsibilities on to the Marxist waggon, and making the materialist conception of history the excuse for a duty which sprang out of a moral anger against Fascism. These things were not said, for they would have sounded pompous and sententious: it simply happened that the Marxist discussion died on our hands, its threadbareness in face of the complex and dynamic events of history, apparent at last. These young men, having made what the postwar world would have called an existentialist choice, did not want it boringly elaborated in a memorandum. Death and catastrophe made our revolutionary apologetics sound silly. And we had ceased to be revolutionaries: in that last effort we ceased even to be Marxists. It was not very surprising. The most damning intellectual failure of Marxism which is, of course, very specifically an apparatus of historical *prediction*, was its inability to forecast the coming of Fascism, and its incapacity to analyse it when it came. Around us, for a very long time, the left-wing world had buzzed with the lies and humbug of the Communist Party and its fellow-travellers. Marxism had become what George Orwell called a 'smelly little orthodoxy' ready for any evil persecution. I, and my friends, came to look upon this with such scorn and

contempt that gradually the whole Marxist intellectual apparatus became suspect. I had come to believe that without a moral basis there could be no human advance. Péguy's aphorism—'La révolution sociale sera morale, ou elle ne sera pas,' was always on my lips. Many times in the weeks that followed the May discussion I turned over my memorandum, depression thick upon me: I was judging Marxism, I realized, by a moral code prior to it, and my judgment had so far disgusted me with the consequences of Marxism in Russia and elsewhere that I now began to believe that Marxism was as much the enemy of mankind as Fascism itself. What was I doing then, writing memoranda in its language? I tore up my thesis, but in what, in the future, I was to rest my view of human destiny I had no idea.

There was another aspect of the dilemma which I had often discussed with the young poet Lillington—the aesthetic one. There was a spiritual sickness over poetry, and it seemed, over music and painting too. The aridity, dehumanization, and fragmentation of contemporary art were inescapable phenomena. I had followed the movement which had begun with the publication of *New Signatures*, under the editorship of Michael Roberts, in 1932, with the utmost interest and excitement. Here, at last, seemed to be the authentic poetic voice of my own generation, bringing to literature a mood free from Georgian sentimentalities and an ability to sing about other things than nightingales and roses:—about pylons and railway trains, for example! But the poets who had exulted with Rex Warner in the early thirties

*Come then, companions. This is the spring of blood,
heart's hey-day, movement of masses, beginning of good.*

had fallen away from their revolutionary exultation. A strange malaise had crept into their work. And the new school had come in fact to an abrupt end with the departure of Auden and Isherwood to America just before the outbreak of war in 1939. This gesture was so clearly a rejection of the war for survival into which Britain was about to plunge that none could mistake its import. The poets had left the society about to die: those who, as artists, had most compellingly proclaimed the poet's engagement in society had rejected it. But I had become convinced also that they had long been rejecting poetry too.

DIALOGUE OF THE HEART

The poets of the *New Signatures* group—Auden, Spender, Day Lewis, John Lehmann, A. S. J. Tessimond and others—were hostile to a poetry of escape and sought to make English poetry again ‘popular, elegant and contemporary art’. They succeeded in producing a new manner, deeply influenced by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence, and almost a new aesthetic. But it was the new aesthetic, rather than the new manner, which was their doom. It was one thing to write in a fresh manner, because the old was worn out and had become an imitative poetising: but it was quite another to announce a new social basis for the aesthetics of poetry. The refusal to escape as the Georgian poets had done, demanded for its completion a decision to engage, and the most pressing problem these new poets felt faced with, as their essays and poems themselves bear witness, was how to take part fully as poets and as men in the struggle of the period. It is worth recalling what that period was. Over the whole world the blight of unemployment lay like an inexplicable palsy. The breakdown of the industrial system which prevented millions from working, condemning them to idleness, despair and self-loathing, produced a spiritual catastrophe not limited to the unemployed: it made the employed man feel socially guilty because of his privilege of employment: the comfortably situated middle class felt in the words of Auden, that

*The creepered wall stands up to hide
The gathering multitudes outside
Whose glances hunger worsens;
Concealing from their wretchedness
Our metaphysical distress,
Our kindness to ten persons.*

From the dilemma of unemployment, a rational escape seemed easy: all that was necessary in strict logic was to set the unemployed working to produce the things for lack of which men were dying. Yet such a remedy was beyond society: it predicated agreements within societies and between nations as to proper social ends, and no such agreements could even be contemplated—the tensions were too great. Never did a remedy seem simpler sense or more impossible of achievement. The intellectuals were in the hopeless situation of attempting to wean a drunkard from his tippie. War and revolution were the

only ways left, it seemed, and the young students and scholars, the poets and artists of the early thirties, inevitably felt the pull of the logic and fire of the Marxist ideology which said so. It was towards Marxism that they turned. The volume *New Country*, the sequel to *New Signatures*, published in 1933 is, intellectually, mostly devoted to arguing out the revolutionary case. 'A Communist to others', 'Letter to a Young Revolutionary', 'Poetry and Revolution' are the contributions of W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis and Stephen Spender respectively. If any collective decision stands out it is the argument of Michael Roberts who, in his Preface, asserts that 'there is only one way of life for us: to renounce that system now and live by fighting against it'.

Auden wrote, in the remarkable poem *Spain* which was to follow some years later, what was almost the poetic manifesto of the group:

*Yesterday the installation of dynamos and turbines,
The construction of railways in the colonial desert;
Yesterday the classic lecture
On the origin of Mankind. But to-day the struggle.*

*Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greece,
The fall of the curtain upon the death of a hero;
Yesterday the prayer to the sunset
And the adoration of madmen. But to-day the struggle.*

In the banishment of everything which did not directly further the revolution (or the struggle against Fascism, with which it had become deliberately identified) poetry was included:

*To-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,
The walks by the lake, the weeks of perfect communion;
To-morrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings. But to-day the
struggle.*

Yet the struggle could not bring the poets much comfort. It promised only increased disaster and insecurity, and certainly less freedom and safety in the foreseeable future, whichever side emerged victorious. The political hell of Germany in

DIALOGUE OF THE HEART

1932 and 1933 might very well prove to be, the young poets thought, the pattern of the future in which they would have to live, fight and die, anything but poets. But if they achieved instead the political heaven of the Soviet State, what consolation was there in that either?

Auden wrote in *Letters from Iceland* :

*Our prerogatives as men
Will be cancelled who knows when;
Still I drink your health before
The gun butt raps upon the door*

and poem after poem from almost any member of the group shows the same shrinking from violence, and loathing of the bloody world. They were strung in an unbearable tension between the wish to work resolutely in that world and the longing to reject its cruelty and hate. So Spender (*The Still Centre*):

*Oh let the violent time
Cut eyes into my limbs
As the sky is pierced with stars that look upon
The map of pain.*

But what could possibly be expected of such a spiritual tension except that

*My perceived rent world would fly
In an explosion of final judgment
To the ends of the sky.*

Many poets felt themselves dedicated, against their will, and against their longings as poets, to revolutionary action which would ruin the scholarly and freedom-loving society in which they were nurtured. Such a split mind could not, naturally, avoid injuring their poetic will. But worse was to come. For Marxism has always possessed its own aesthetic. It had in those days many able expositors who produced works of genuine scholarship like Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*. And this aesthetic faced the would-be Marxist poets with the logic of their own situation. To Caudwell poetry was to be regarded 'not as anything racial, national, genetic or specific in its essence, but as something economic'. He argued that an examination of the origins of poetry showed a parallel between the increasing complexity of the division of labour and

the poetical development *based upon it*. Culture, he argued, cannot be separated from economic production or poetry from social organization. There would come a time when a genuine popular art would be based upon the social and economic complex of the entire classless society: then you would have an art of a higher consciousness because based on the aspirations of the entire people and not upon those of a privileged group, the bourgeois. Art born of the social fission is only half art. 'The ravages apparent in modern consciousness show that man can hardly endure the pangs of this dismemberment (of society).' But the bourgeois artist cannot by an act of will turn himself into a proletarian or communist artist because he dislikes bourgeois society. Three roles only are possible for the bourgeois artist—opposition, alliance and assimilation. Assimilation, the most desirable of all goals, which meant ceasing to be a bourgeois artist and becoming a proletarian artist, was the most difficult for the young poets. For, according to the Marxist aesthetic, it meant surrendering bourgeois standards and ideas—leaving the past, and identifying oneself with the future. This for the poets meant the surrender of their critical and aesthetic background and the creative heritage of the poetry which had made them poets. How could they know that, ceasing to be bourgeois poets they could possibly become even proletarians, let alone proletarian *poets*. If their poetry was the consequence of their social condition, could they ever write any other kind than that which came to them spontaneously? If opposition was not to be thought of, there remained only alliance. But this was most of all to be condemned. To Caudwell, at least, the romantic young revolutionary imported a Trotsky-like element into the cause; he made conditions: he demanded certain freedoms: he would let the party touch everything except his poetry. 'It gives even the revolutionary element in their art a Fascist tinge' Caudwell said. So what more miserable plight could the young poets be in, who found that their effort to identify themselves with the cause of proletarian revolution only drew down upon them the accusation that they remained bourgeois still, shut out of the new world and even, if the truth be known, Fascist in temper.

Sadly the new poets had to admit to themselves that they were, after all, bourgeois. In any case, in the degree that it

was their vocation to write poetry it was not their vocation to starve in doss-houses or sweat in mines, but to write, to teach, to lecture from university platforms, or labour at editorial desks. What could they do to be saved *and keep their poetry?* They did not know: it did not seem that poetry was worth writing, even though they could not help writing it.

The root of the thing was that the revolutionary poets had capitulated ignobly before the ideologies. Marxism and Freudianism had convinced them that poetry had no validity in and for itself: it was sickness, delirium or propaganda. They returned, by way of communism, to that uncertainty of which Michael Roberts spoke in the introduction to *New Signatures*. He said that the effect of pure science had been to undermine our absolute beliefs and that, as we no longer possessed a moral hierarchy 'we are left with only an empirical knowledge that certain things make us uncomfortable'—though not even he, in those days, would have suspected that writing poetry was to become one of them.

In men nevertheless genuinely poets this spiritual defeat was a terrible thing to see. It was one more item of evidence about the plight of the contemporary world. It was a personal matter too, for the ideologies had laid a chill hand on my own poetry, which had never fulfilled the promise of 'The Song of Creation'. I was compelled to ask myself why powerful contemporary doctrines like Marxism and Freudianism had no use for the creative activities of man, and could only denigrate or deny them. It is easy to state now that it was because they did not *believe* in man, and therefore certainly could not explain those things which were most typical of man. But then I was only groping towards the realization that Marxism was pushing man out of the way altogether in favour of a 'process'. Marxism, it was clear from the Russian experiment, had far less interest in helping man than in saving 'history'. And for Freudianism civilized man was a neurotic; better it would be for him to be a beast untroubled by conscience, inhibition, fear and guilt. The full consequence of the banishment of the fully-grown, freely acting man from the world I had yet to grasp, but it was in those days that I began to struggle towards the theme of *The Annihilation of Man*, the book I wrote mostly, at night, and by hand, in an attic in Sprowston near Norwich, between Christmas and Easter 1943. But already it

seemed to me that the war itself sprang out of the hatred of the modern world for the spirit—and therefore for man—and that what might go down, no matter who was victorious, was civilization itself. It was in connection with these arguments with myself that I first began to ask—what was the *meaning* of the civilization against which I had so long turned my own fire? I had grown up with Jefferies, Edward Carpenter, and Walt Whitman, and read my Thoreau, and considered my youth work to be part of the cure of man from the disease of civilization. Now that this game, played by so many intellectuals and poets, was having some success, civilization appeared to be about to leave us any moment for a better world. When warring against civilization we had taken as read the values behind it—values of truth, justice, mercy, creativity—which would be the better for its passing. Now I began to think that those of us on the left had taken all too much for granted the moral and intellectual equipment of our times, and believed that we could not harm it by making war on society. The reckoning for this folly was descending on us like an avalanche.

I was troubled too about the meaning of the word *spirit*. Even Caudwell, stern materialist that he was, talked about saving the *spiritual* activities of man. But what was the spirit? Was it simply a word we gave to a kind of atmosphere generated by certain human activities, like the word 'excitement', therefore, or had it a meaning in its own right, standing as surely for some reality as *matter* stood for some reality? I wanted to get at the metaphysical problem standing behind the aesthetic one. When, seven years before, I had been so ill and had rested for weeks under the pear tree in the kindly house which German bombs had half destroyed since, I used to carry on to the lawn a portable wireless set. For the first time in my life I had the leisure to listen to music and so deep a hunger for it that I felt that without it I should never recover. The B.B.C. was passing through one of its Bach phases and cantatas and chorale preludes came often over the air, not all understood or appreciated by my untrained ear, but pregnant with something I had to try to understand.

The *meaning* of music baffled me. Speech has a certain concreteness which can be intellectually handled: to certain sounds precise objects or states can be attached—'dogs', 'cat', 'hunger'

and 'thirst'. Music lacks this: the effort to produce a synthetic concreteness results only in dull programme music. Yet music was not, because of this, un-intellectual or anti-intellectual. It was a statement above the level of intellect. If it was a communication of the most profound sort, not in strictly intellectual terms, then I had also to ask—to what part of me was it addressed? It was useless to reply—*the emotional*: for what was the *me* which loved, hated and feared? It was a problem that could only present itself to the materialist. On the materialist plane tickling one's ear with sounds ought to have the same importance that tickling one's foot with a feather had. 'Pushpin was as good as poetry,' that silly old man Jeremy Bentham had once said. But if, just for the sake of hypothesis, one admitted the existence of an entity called 'spirit' then one could admit immediately communications, such as music and poetry, of spirit to spirit. One could make sense of it all only by ceasing to be a materialist. But if one ceased to be a materialist, what then? Where intellectually was one's resting place? I had come gradually deeply to distrust those who went around proclaiming their materialism and their atheism, yet imported into their hard creed all sorts of ideas intolerable within it—as that there ought to be justice in the world, and freedom of speech and conscience, and self-development for every child. How could materialism contain a moral *ought*? How could it talk so loosely about 'the spirit' of man, of civilization, of mercy, or of anything else?

In music I had pursued spiritual realities to their source, time and time again, in the liturgies of Christianity. Music contained the most tremendous humanist and Christian statements. How my friends used to praise the *Mass in B Minor*! How often I heard it discussed, or read of it! There seemed to be a conspiracy to think of it as pure music, divorced from human or social reality. I felt like the Marxists about it, and often longed to say 'but surely the whole point about it is that it is an act of most devout worship?' But if I said so, no one seemed to regard it as significant: my remark was received in silence, as though it were a social faux pas. The art was valid: the faith on which it was based was dismissed as irrelevant. This made so little sense to me that I felt the exact opposite: if the art was valid, then surely in some sense the belief must be valid too? If one revered the flowering of the human spirit

through centuries of European history, could one so easily dismiss the soil of faith in which it all grew?

Yet when one stated this one faced a second contemporary conspiracy—to dismiss religion (except in an anthropological sense) as unworthy of the serious attention of modern man. One could discuss it in a hostile way, but not sympathetically. To admit the possibility of belief in it was rather like supposing that witches flew on broomsticks: it was primitive, dead, abandoned by modern man. Marx and Freud, the mentors of most of my contemporaries, dismissed religion out of hand. Marxism argued that it was a soporific, invented specially by the bourgeoisie, though the bourgeois order was the first in European history in which religion came seriously under attack. But there it was, the attack on religion was as important to Marxism as the attack on capitalism. The ineptitude of the Marxist analysis had become plain to me. To Freud it was a neurosis and therefore man stood just as much in need of a cure for a religious neurosis as if it were a fetishist disease like cutting off the pigtails of little girls. If Marx was inept, Freud was callow: so colossal a dismissal of man's everlasting longing for answers to his questions about his nature and destiny would better have come from a morose adolescent than a man of science and humanity.

I could extract nothing but disgust from the superficiality of contemporary attacks on religion. If I could not be a thorough-going materialist where was there a resting place for mind or spirit short of religion? Most of my contemporaries were not thorough-going materialists: they flinched from so merciless a creed. But they were not religious either. They imported into a vague religiosity a materialist content: or sprinkled over their materialism a holy water of idealism. Even the Marxists were idealist-materialists.

All my leftism was falling to pieces in my hands. I was trying to fit together a jigsaw of parts which crumbled as I picked them up. What dusty incoherence it looked now, this museum of 'isms—materialism, atheism, anti-clericalism, vegetarianism, free-sexism, pacifism, communism, syndicalism, socialism—each with its self-righteous patter, which made up what had been for me the inescapable pattern of left thinking and left action. Now where was the sense in it all? We had been so sure, and had laughed at the absurdities and

contradictions of bourgeois or Christian thought, but to our own we had never confessed. We had raged against the injustice of capitalism—but we believed that justice and injustice were economically determined, that all justice, in fact, was class justice: we argued that man under capitalism was a wage-slave—under socialism we were going to plan everything in the state down to the last shoe-lace: we preached freedom—but freedom, we were convinced, was a bourgeois illusion: we believed that under socialism man's spirit would flower—but we were materialists and did not give tuppence for the spirit: we waxed eloquent about the prostitution of art under capitalism—but as Marxists or Freudians we had no more belief in its independence than in the impartiality of justice: we said war was devilish, but we fomented class-war.

I acknowledged the original ethical impulse—the generous sympathy with the poor and oppressed—in which leftism was born, but recoiled in sorrow from the malice, envy and social hatreds which were the contemporary fruits of what had begun as a struggle to redeem man from just these things. Leftism now seemed to me to be some kind of disease itself, which I had caught when young, and never become cured of, a disease like that strange condition in which a man loses his sense of balance and crawls and swarms over the earth in the most nauseating contortions when what he most needs is to walk upright. I was sick of leftism, but the world was sick to death.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Not My Deserving

Now as I walked about Essex lanes, or took the paths across wide, unhedged fields bordered by ragged elms through which came the sea-blink and wave-glitter of the wide estuary, or drove through summer scents of hay and wild briar to my lecturing appointments at gunsites, I wondered what faith was now possible to me. Experiences such as art and poetry, and longings for love and for truth, which to materialism were residual, were now to me central to the human condition. They were the guarantee of man's humanity: without them, he would be less than a beast, for he lacked a beast's instinctual heritage. Man was a creature of the spirit, and witnessed to the spirit, and was nothing without spirit. Could one believe in spirit, and not believe in Spirit, too?

I had been reading a work of Michael Roberts called *The Modern Mind*. It was an effort, on the part of one who had played a part more prominent than mine in aesthetic 'leftism', to say 'good-bye to all that'. Though I do not now remember clearly any particular arguments in it, it did fall upon me like a thunderclap, as I read it, that the way in which my generation wrote and thought was local, peculiar to a certain time and place, even parochial. It was only our arrogance which had made us take it for granted that our way of thinking was the only possible way—the result, like the structure of our bodies, of many centuries of evolutionary struggle to get just where we had got. No such thing, Michael Roberts intimated: this flattering view had to be discarded. It is open to man to *choose* one of *many* valid intellectual positions. And what I saw most particularly was that man could be equipped with a different set of

values from those of my own age: another kind of spiritual geometry would present man with quite another vision of the world. Medieval thought was just such an alternative spiritual geometry, opening up to man's soul visions of heaven and hell closed to the blinkered modern mind. It was not that medievalism was right and modernism wrong: perhaps both were right and both were wrong. The important thing is that they were different *and* valid. It was possible, without illusion or self-deception (the modern view of medievalism) to think in quite a different way: 'think', however, is a poor cerebral word for the kind of total apprehension of reality I conceived.

One's total experience, in another climate of time, could add up to a vision, an embrace of reality foreign to that my contemporaries were making. Man could, like a searchlight beam, swivel himself at the universe. What was in his beam was strangely lit, and sharply true: but this did not mean that there was nothing outside the beam. I felt the beam of my own spirit turning among the stars in an arc which began to embrace the spiritual and personal universe and probe at the cloud behind which might be God.

None of my arguments here really explains the immense tide of hope stirring in me. I saw that I was moving fast to an unknown destination: the rush of my own spirit towards a new freedom was so rapid as to frighten me. I became dizzy at times with expectation of revelation. Walking one night, the thought of the boundless spiritual experience open to man broke suddenly upon me, and I slapped my thigh and said to myself, half-reproachfully, 'You'll be believing in God next!' At that moment I knew that I did, and was at once elated, and afraid of what new obligations this might place upon me. Grace, Peguy said, is insidious: it is full of surprises.

The struggle to unravel what I did believe moved Christianity from the periphery of my experience to the centre it had occupied in childhood. Christ, the mysterious, suffering figure at the heart of Christianity, the God done to death by man, as man constantly does to death his own spirit, now became, for all one's questions about Him, the most moving and frightening symbol in the whole of history. I could see that if it were all quite untrue, that if there had never been a Christ, mankind would spiritually be worse off than if it were historical fact—for that man should have *invented* it, would be the most devastating

revelation of the human condition possible, a parable born of the insight of a dark angel into the constant crucifixion of God in the world.

If the world was the scene of a spiritual struggle of which the war against the evil of the Nazi regime was only one aspect, then the decision to exhaust oneself for the victory of the spirit had its origin and resting place in God. With what longing, with what aching of the heart, I sought to come near to this God, and to hear His word if He existed and could speak it. But around me there was only silence: the enigma of the impenetrable, unspeaking material world, closing me in a kind of prison, and the enigma of the men by whom I was surrounded, men like myself, a prey to the same doubts and passions, but into whose inner being I could never hope to penetrate.

Much of this debate with my heart went on while I was lying on my bed in the warm barrack-room. But there, the wireless was usually at full blast: an intolerable onslaught on the nerves came from a highly popular programme called 'Penny on the Drum'. When it grew difficult to think I would drift morosely round the room to find someone to play chess with. There was a lance-corporal out of the regimental office who would sometimes play with me, and talk about his wife throughout the game. He would smile wistfully at me when he handled his queen and say, 'I wish it was Jenny. I always try and picture just what she's doing at every moment of the day'. If I had my despair, he had his, and he would live his dreams as he stretched on his bunk in the evening, his eyes filled with tears at the loneliness of his pretty little wife. He had been married only a few months and separation was bitter.

If the barrack-room was impossible I would walk, swinging over the ringing road to Great Wakering, to the Exhibition Inn, a vast dome of glittering stars above me, Orion striding high among them, as I had so often seen him above Christchurch spire at home, and the wind coming in from the sea. It was a strange, forgotten coast, reserved and self-communing like all lost lands. Parts of it, even towns along it, like Dunwich, had sunk beneath the waves. The wind perpetually combed it. When the wind was in the west, the grass of the flat, endless marshy islands tossed its manes, the estuary was whipped with

grey showers and white horses roamed it. When the wind was in the east the grass lay flat, the estuary was glassy as air, and an invisible, icy, North Sea flood poured everywhere, its blades of cold needling through one's thick, rough uniform. The receding tide left miles and miles of sand as it went out six, eight, twelve miles in some places. An Experimental station in the neighbourhood fired its trial shells from ballistic tabernacles along the coast, and measured the invisible flight with their occult instruments. The booming would shake the barrack rooms, and when the driving band of a shell came off it would kee and twang in the air around us like a pursuing spirit. From the tiny shelters on Shoeburyness Front, where the children came to play and talk with me*, I would often watch the thin lip of the tide recede until it vanished altogether. And across the barren grey and gold sand the broad-wheeled carts of the Experimental Station would follow the white rim of water, to dig out the fallen shells which buried themselves deep in the quaking mire, and the carts, too, would dwindle and dwindle until they vanished from sight, clean over the rim of the earth. Here the coast was entirely given up to the flat saltings where the sheep grazed behind ruined dykes, and stranded hulks showed black ribs like the skeletons of whales; the terns hunted prettily, and the peewits played checkers in the sky, and gulls showered down like confetti, while in a score of places the brilliant mallard slept, head under wing, on the shores of those fantastic, grass-crowned islets carved by the sea. No place bare enough to match my own solitude could I have found anywhere else.

One night of great agitation of soul I abandoned the rackets barrack room only to find the sea fog trampling over the garrison town. Often one could watch it slide in from the estuary, a palpable wall riding the tide, and smothering one in the harsh rankness of earth, water and frost. Where could I go? In the schoolroom a class was going on under the rosy gleam of Meacher, and so I could not sit there and play Schubert's songs on my flute. The Naafi? The Church Hut? I had little money: I had a wish, too, for quiet and darkness, for the roads in which I heard nothing but my own footsteps sounding frostily on the macadam or echoing from the walls of farm buildings across the black ploughland.

*I have told the story in *Heron Lake: A Norfolk Year*.

True, the fog was symbolic for me: it was the texture of my own dark turmoil, with its boiling and bubbling. But even a fog is not simply confusion: like a soul it obeys the laws of its being. It was uncanny how one could feel in its motion the turn of a quite invisible tide. In the hour of slack water it would swirl and drift backwards and forwards, an unsteady thing, but let the tide once move in the estuary and it caught the contagion of its motion, and in the inexorable swirl of its fumes past one's freezing ears was a sea rhythm, a measured tread of the waves far away from which it had birth. Sometimes it would flow right out with the retreating tide and leave the air clear and every leaf and twig hung with the crystals of its condensation.

By shutting me within myself the fog made the conception which was haunting me as acute as a vision. I wanted to pursue the vision as I walked, but blundering into dripping trees and wet iron gateposts was no joke. It was folly to be slipping blindly about in the narrow Shoebury streets, in fear of buses and army vehicles, while my spiritual pulse beat faster and faster. I groped my way into the little cinema and sat, for the very small sum, sixpence or so, which was all I had, on the benches among the leg-swinging, foot-scraping children at the front. The place was airless, with the stale smell of all those shuttered rooms where human beings constantly crowd together. The projector whirled and shot its silver beam through the tobacco smoke, and the vast, inhuman profiles on the screen brayed and bobbed at us. Mothers nursed peevish babies around me, and in the dull bits the boys stamped out to the lavatories. I cannot remember now the films which held the huddled, streaming mass of us silent for most of the time, but the gloaming reminded me of Plato's cave.

Let me show you, Plato said to Glaucon (in the Seventh Book of *The Republic*) how enlightened or unenlightened we really are. Imagine human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light: the creatures of the den have been kept there from childhood, so chained that they cannot turn their heads, but can look only in front of them. Behind them somewhere a fire is blazing and between the fire and the prisoners, files of men are passing and their shadows are projected on to a wall in front of the prisoners. The prisoners would know nothing but shadows and would

imagine that the shadows were real. And if they were suddenly released, Plato asked, and enabled to look at the light, or the sun, or upon real things, would they not be so distressed and dazed as to prefer the dark, and the shadows they understood, to the light which seemed to deceive them? Are we not, in truth, like these men?

The Transcendent Reality, now fluttering about my ears, to which I was almost superstitiously afraid to give the word God after all the barren years of denial of Him, must I thought, be rather like the cinema operator: it threw before us the absorbing spectacle of the changing material world. While we had our eyes on that thrilling spectacle it was difficult to doubt its reality, and one forgot to ask by what device it came there. Why ask that of something which was larger than life and somehow more real than one's own heart? But I was now convinced that the world was much like the film, superlatively convincing, and full of the most impressive reality, yet it was in truth secondary and contingent in the universe, it was the projection of the Will of whatever lay beyond it and at one throw of the switch it could be halted and fizzle, as would presently the picture on the screen, into nothingness.

I tried to stare through the screen, and the wall, and the foggy sky beyond, into the very eyes of a God, by whom I myself was seen, holding the universe in the grasp of His hands. What a long way I had gone, round and round the houses, only to come back to the most intense conviction, to the first and greatest love of my boyhood and youth.

