Title: Coming Up For Air
Author: George Orwell

'He's dead, but he won't lie down'

Popular song

PART I

1

The idea really came to me the day I got my new false
teeth.

I remember the morning well. At about a quarter to
eight I'd
nipped out of bed and got into the bathroom just in
time to shut
the kids out. It was a beastly January morning, with
a dirty
yellowish-grey sky. Down below, out of the little
square of
bathroom window, I could see the ten yards by five of
grass, with
a privet hedge round it and a bare patch in the
middle, that we call
the back garden. There's the same back garden, some
privets, and
same grass, behind every house in Ellesmere Road.
Only difference--

where there are no kids there's no bare patch in the middle.

I was trying to shave with a bluntish razor-blade while the water
ran into the bath. My face looked back at me out of the mirror,
and underneath, in a tumbler of water on the little shelf over the
washbasin, the teeth that belonged in the face. It was the
temporary set that Warner, my dentist, had given me to wear while
the new ones were being made. I haven't such a bad face, really.
It's one of those bricky-red faces that go with butter-coloured
hair and pale-blue eyes. I've never gone grey or bald, thank God,
and when I've got my teeth in I probably don't look my age, which
is forty-five.

Making a mental note to buy razor-blades, I got into the bath and
started soaping. I soaped my arms (I've got those kind of pudgy
arms that are freckled up to the elbow) and then took the back-
brush and soaped my shoulder-blades, which in the ordinary way I
can't reach. It's a nuisance, but there are several parts of my
body that I can't reach nowadays. The truth is that I'm inclined
to be a little bit on the fat side. I don't mean that I'm like
something in a sideshow at a fair. My weight isn't much over
fourteen stone, and last time I measured round my waist it was
either forty-eight or forty-nine, I forget which. And I'm not what

they call 'disgustingly' fat, I haven't got one of those bellies
that sag half-way down to the knees. It's merely that I'm a little
bit broad in the beam, with a tendency to be barrel-shaped. Do you
know the active, hearty kind of fat man, the athletic bouncing type
that's nicknamed Fatty or Tubby and is always the life and soul of
the party? I'm that type. 'Fatty' they mostly call me. Fatty
Bowling. George Bowling is my real name.

But at that moment I didn't feel like the life and soul of the
party. And it struck me that nowadays I nearly always do have a
morose kind of feeling in the early mornings, although I sleep well
and my digestion's good. I knew what it was, of course--it was
those bloody false teeth. The things were magnified by the water
in the tumbler, and they were grinning at me like the teeth in a
skull. It gives you a rotten feeling to have your gums meet, a
sort of pinched-up, withered feeling like when you've bitten into
a sour apple. Besides, say what you will, false teeth are a
landmark. When your last natural tooth goes, the time when you can
kid yourself that you're a Hollywood sheik, is definitely at an
end. And I was fat as well as forty-five. As I stood up to soap
my crutch I had a look at my figure. It's all rot about fat men
being unable to see their feet, but it's a fact that when I stand
upright I can only see the front halves of mine. No

woman, I
thought as I worked the soap round my belly, will
ever look twice
at me again, unless she's paid to. Not that at that
moment I
particularly wanted any woman to look twice at me.

But it struck me that this morning there were reasons
why I ought
to have been in a better mood. To begin with I
wasn't working
today. The old car, in which I 'cover' my district
(I ought to
tell you that I'm in the insurance business. The
Flying
Salamander. Life, fire, burglary, twins,
shipwreck--everything),
was temporarily in dock, and though I'd got to look
in at the
London office to drop some papers, I was really
taking the day off
to go and fetch my new false teeth. And besides,
there was another
business that had been in and out of my mind for some
time past.
This was that I had seventeen quid which nobody else
had heard
about--nobody in the family, that is. It had
happened this way.
A chap in our firm, Mellors by name, had got hold of
a book called
Astrology applied to Horse-racing which proved that
it's all a
question of influence of the planets on the colours
the jockey is
wearing. Well, in some race or other there was a
mare called
Corsair's Bride, a complete outsider, but her
jockey's colour was
green, which it seemed was just the colour for the
planets that
happened to be in the ascendant. Mellors, who was
deeply bitten

with this astrology business, was putting several
quid on the horse
and went down on his knees to me to do the same. In
the end,
chiefly to shut him up, I risked ten bob, though I
don't bet as a
general rule. Sure enough Corsair's Bride came home
in a walk. I
forget the exact odds, but my share worked out at
seventeen quid.
By a kind of instinct--rather queer, and probably
indicating
another landmark in my life--I just quietly put the
money in the
bank and said nothing to anybody. I'd never done
anything of this
kind before. A good husband and father would have
spent it on a
dress for Hilda (that's my wife) and boots for the
kids. But I'd
been a good husband and father for fifteen years and
I was
beginning to get fed up with it.

After I'd soaped myself all over I felt better and
lay down in the
bath to think about my seventeen quid and what to
spend it on. The
alternatives, it seemed to me, were either a week-end
with a woman
or dribbling it quietly away on odds and ends such as
cigars and
double whiskies. I'd just turned on some more hot
water and was
thinking about women and cigars when there was a
noise like a herd
of buffaloes coming down the two steps that lead to
the bathroom.
It was the kids, of course. Two kids in a house the
size of ours
is like a quart of beer in a pint mug. There was a
frantic
stamping outside and then a yell of agony.

'Dadda! I wanna come in!'

'Well, you can't. Clear out!'

'But dadda! I wanna go somewhere!'

'Go somewhere else, then. Hop it. I'm having my
bath.'

'Dad-DA! I wanna GO SOME--WHERE!'

No use! I knew the danger signal. The W.C. is in
the bathroom--it
would be, of course, in a house like ours. I hooked
the plug out
of the bath and got partially dry as quickly as I
could. As I
opened the door, little Billy--my youngest, aged
seven--shot past
me, dodging the smack which I aimed at his head. It
was only when
I was nearly dressed and looking for a tie that I
discovered that
my neck was still soapy.

It's a rotten thing to have a soapy neck. It gives
you a disgusting
sticky feeling, and the queer thing is that, however
carefully you
sponge it away, when you've once discovered that your
neck is soapy
you feel sticky for the rest of the day. I went
downstairs in a bad
temper and ready to make myself disagreeable.

Our dining-room, like the other dining-rooms in
Ellesmere Road, is
a poky little place, fourteen feet by twelve, or
maybe it's twelve
by ten, and the Japanese oak sideboard, with the two
empty
decanters and the silver egg-stand that Hilda's

mother gave us for
a wedding present, doesn't leave much room. Old
Hilda was glooming
behind the teapot, in her usual state of alarm and
dismay because
the News Chronicle had announced that the price of
butter was going
up, or something. She hadn't lighted the gas-fire,
and though the
windows were shut it was beastly cold. I bent down
and put a match
to the fire, breathing rather loudly through my nose
(bending
always makes me puff and blow) as a kind of hint to
Hilda. She
gave me the little sidelong glance that she always
gives me when
she thinks I'm doing something extravagant.

Hilda is thirty-nine, and when I first knew her she
looked just
like a hare. So she does still, but she's got very
thin and rather
wizened, with a perpetual brooding, worried look in
her eyes, and
when she's more upset than usual she's got a trick of
humping her
shoulders and folding her arms across her breast,
like an old gypsy
woman over her fire. She's one of those people who
get their main
kick in life out of foreseeing disasters. Only petty
disasters,
of course. As for wars, earthquakes, plagues,
famines, and
revolutions, she pays no attention to them. Butter
is going up,
and the gas-bill is enormous, and the kids' boots are
wearing out,
and there's another instalment due on the
radio--that's Hilda's
litany. She gets what I've finally decided is a
definite pleasure

out of rocking herself to and fro with her arms
across her breast,
and glooming at me, 'But, George, it's very SERIOUS!
I don't know
what we're going to DO! I don't know where the
money's coming
from! You don't seem to realize how serious it IS!'
and so on and
so forth. It's fixed firmly in her head that we
shall end up in
the workhouse. The funny thing is that if we ever do
get to the
workhouse Hilda won't mind it a quarter as much as I
shall, in fact
she'll probably rather enjoy the feeling of security.

The kids were downstairs already, having washed and
dressed at
lightning speed, as they always do when there's no
chance to keep
anyone else out of the bathroom. When I got to the
breakfast table
they were having an argument which went to the tune
of 'Yes, you
did!' 'No, I didn't!' 'Yes, you did!' 'No, I didn't!'
and looked
like going on for the rest of the morning, until I
told them to
cheese it. There are only the two of them, Billy,
aged seven, and
Lorna, aged eleven. It's a peculiar feeling that I
have towards
the kids. A great deal of the time I can hardly
stick the sight of
them. As for their conversation, it's just
unbearable. They're at
that dreary bread-and-butter age when a kid's mind
revolves round
things like rulers, pencil-boxes, and who got top
marks in French.
At other times, especially when they're asleep, I
have quite a
different feeling. Sometimes I've stood over their

cots, on summer
evenings when it's light, and watched them sleeping,
with their
round faces and their tow-coloured hair, several
shades lighter
than mine, and it's given me that feeling you read
about in the
Bible when it says your bowels yearn. At such times
I feel that
I'm just a kind of dried-up seed-pod that doesn't
matter twopence
and that my sole importance has been to bring these
creatures into
the world and feed them while they're growing. But
that's only at
moments. Most of the time my separate existence
looks pretty
important to me, I feel that there's life in the old
dog yet and
plenty of good times ahead, and the notion of myself
as a kind of
tame dairy-cow for a lot of women and kids to chase
up and down
doesn't appeal to me.

We didn't talk much at breakfast. Hilda was in her
'I don't know
what we're going to DO!' mood, partly owing to the
price of butter
and partly because the Christmas holidays were nearly
over and
there was still five pounds owing on the school fees
for last term.
I ate my boiled egg and spread a piece of bread with
Golden Crown

marmalade. Hilda will persist in buying the stuff.
It's
fivepence-halfpenny a pound, and the label tells you,
in the
smallest print the law allows, that it contains 'a
certain
proportion of neutral fruit-juice'. This started me

off, in the
rather irritating way I have sometimes, talking about
neutral
fruit-trees, wondering what they looked like and what
countries
they grew in, until finally Hilda got angry. It's
not that she
minds me chipping her, it's only that in some obscure
way she
thinks it's wicked to make jokes about anything you
save money on.

I had a look at the paper, but there wasn't much
news. Down in
Spain and over in China they were murdering one
another as usual,
a woman's legs had been found in a railway
waiting-room, and King
Zog's wedding was wavering in the balance. Finally,
at about ten
o'clock, rather earlier than I'd intended, I started
out for town.
The kids had gone off to play in the public gardens.
It was a
beastly raw morning. As I stepped out of the front
door a nasty
little gust of wind caught the soapy patch on my neck
and made me
suddenly feel that my clothes didn't fit and that I
was sticky all
over.

2

Do you know the road I live in--Ellesmere Road, West
Bletchley?
Even if you don't, you know fifty others exactly like
it.

You know how these streets fester all over the

inner-outer suburbs.
Always the same. Long, long rows of little
semi-detached houses--
the numbers in Ellesmere Road run to 212 and ours is
191--as much
alike as council houses and generally uglier. The
stucco front,
the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front
door. The
Laurels, the Myrtles, the Hawthorns, Mon Abri, Mon
Repos, Belle
Vue. At perhaps one house in fifty some anti-social
type who'll
probably end in the workhouse has painted his front
door blue
instead of green.

That sticky feeling round my neck had put me into a
demoralized
kind of mood. It's curious how it gets you down to
have a sticky
neck. It seems to take all the bounce out of you,
like when you
suddenly discover in a public place that the sole of
one of your
shoes is coming off. I had no illusions about myself
that morning.
It was almost as if I could stand at a distance and
watch myself
coming down the road, with my fat, red face and my
false teeth and
my vulgar clothes. A chap like me is incapable of
looking like a
gentleman. Even if you saw me at two hundred yards'
distance you'd
know immediately--not, perhaps, that I was in the
insurance
business, but that I was some kind of tout or
salesman. The
clothes I was wearing were practically the uniform of
the tribe.
Grey herring-bone suit, a bit the worse for wear,
blue overcoat

costing fifty shillings, bowler hat, and no gloves.
And I've got
the look that's peculiar to people who sell things on
commission, a
kind of coarse, brazen look. At my best moments,
when I've got a
new suit or when I'm smoking a cigar, I might pass
for a bookie or
a publican, and when things are very bad I might be
touting vacuum
cleaners, but at ordinary times you'd place me
correctly. 'Five to
ten quid a week', you'd say as soon as you saw me.
Economically
and socially I'm about at the average level of
Ellesmere Road.

I had the street pretty much to myself. The men had
bunked to
catch the 8.21 and the women were fiddling with the
gas-stoves.
When you've time to look about you, and when you
happen to be in
the right mood, it's a thing that makes you laugh
inside to walk
down these streets in the inner-outer suburbs and to
think of the
lives that go on there. Because, after all, what IS
a road like
Ellesmere Road? Just a prison with the cells all in
a row. A line
of semidetached torture-chambers where the poor
little five-to-ten-
pound-a-weekers quake and shiver, every one of them
with the boss
twisting his tail and his wife riding him like the
nightmare and
the kids sucking his blood like leeches. There's a
lot of rot
talked about the sufferings of the working class.
I'm not so sorry
for the proles myself. Did you ever know a navvy who
lay awake

thinking about the sack? The prole suffers
physically, but he's a
free man when he isn't working. But in every one of
those little
stucco boxes there's some poor bastard who's NEVER
free except when
he's fast asleep and dreaming that he's got the boss
down the
bottom of a well and is bunging lumps of coal at him.

Of course, the basic trouble with people like us, I
said to myself,
is that we all imagine we've got something to lose.
To begin with,
nine-tenths of the people in Ellesmere Road are under
the
impression that they own their houses. Ellesmere
Road, and the
whole quarter surrounding it, until you get to the
High Street, is
part of a huge racket called the Hesperides Estate,
the property of
the Cheerful Credit Building Society. Building
societies are
probably the cleverest racket of modern times. My
own line,
insurance, is a swindle, I admit, but it's an open
swindle with the
cards on the table. But the beauty of the building
society
swindles is that your victims think you're doing them
a kindness.
You wallop them, and they lick your hand. I
sometimes think I'd
like to have the Hesperides Estate surmounted by an
enormous statue
to the god of building societies. It would be a
queer sort of god.
Among other things it would be bisexual. The top
half would be a
managing director and the bottom half would be a wife
in the family
way. In one hand it would carry an enormous key--the

key of the
workhouse, of course--and in the other--what do they
call those
things like French horns with presents coming out of
them?--a
cornucopia, out of which would be pouring portable
radios, life-
insurance policies, false teeth, aspirins, French
letters, and
concrete garden rollers.

As a matter of fact, in Ellesmere Road we don't own
our houses,
even when we've finished paying for them. They're
not freehold,
only leasehold. They're priced at five-fifty,
payable over a
period of sixteen years, and they're a class of
house, which, if
you bought them for cash down, would cost round about
three-eighty.
That represents a profit of a hundred and seventy for
the Cheerful
Credit, but needless to say that Cheerful Credit
makes a lot more
out of it than that. Three-eighty includes the
builder's profit,
but the Cheerful Credit, under the name of Wilson &
Bloom, builds
the houses itself and scoops the builder's profit.
All it has to
pay for is the materials. But it also scoops the
profit on the
materials, because under the name of Brookes &
Scatterby it sells
itself the bricks, tiles, doors, window-frames, sand,
cement, and,
I think, glass. And it wouldn't altogether surprise
me to learn
that under yet another alias it sells itself the
timber to make the
doors and window-frames. Also--and this was
something which we

really might have foreseen, though it gave us all a knock when we
discovered it--the Cheerful Credit doesn't always keep to its end
of the bargain. When Ellesmere Road was built it gave on some open
fields--nothing very wonderful, but good for the kids to play in--
known as Platt's Meadows. There was nothing in black and white,
but it had always been understood that Platt's Meadows weren't to
be built on. However, West Bletchley was a growing suburb,
Rothwell's jam factory had opened in '28 and the Anglo-American
All-Steel Bicycle factory started in '33, and the population was
increasing and rents were going up. I've never seen Sir Herbert
Crum or any other of the big noises of the Cheerful Credit in the
flesh, but in my mind's eye I could see their mouths watering.
Suddenly the builders arrived and houses began to go up on Platt's
Meadows. There was a howl of agony from the Hesperides, and a
tenants' defence association was set up. No use! Crum's lawyers
had knocked the stuffing out of us in five minutes, and Platt's
Meadows were built over. But the really subtle swindle, the one
that makes me feel old Crum deserved his baronetcy, is the mental
one. Merely because of the illusion that we own our houses and
have what's called 'a stake in the country', we poor saps in the
Hesperides, and in all such places, are turned into Crum's devoted
slaves for ever. We're all respectable

householders--that's to say
Tories, yes-men, and bumsuckers. Daren't kill the
goose that lays
the gilded eggs! And the fact that actually we
aren't householders,
that we're all in the middle of paying for our houses
and eaten up
with the ghastly fear that something might happen
before we've made
the last payment, merely increases the effect. We're
all bought, and
what's more we're bought with our own money. Every
one of those poor
downtrodden bastards, sweating his guts out to pay
twice the proper
price for a brick doll's house that's called Belle
Vue because
there's no view and the bell doesn't ring--every one
of those poor
suckers would die on the field of battle to save his
country from
Bolshevism.

I turned down Walpole Road and got into the High
Street. There's a
train to London at 10.14. I was just passing the
Sixpenny Bazaar
when I remembered the mental note I'd made that
morning to buy a
packet of razor-blades. When I got to the soap
counter the floor-
manager, or whatever his proper title is, was cursing
the girl in
charge there. Generally there aren't many people in
the Sixpenny
at that hour of the morning. Sometimes if you go in
just after
opening-time you see all the girls lined up in a row
and given
their morning curse, just to get them into trim for
the day. They
say these big chain-stores have chaps with special
powers of

sarcasm and abuse who are sent from branch to branch to ginger the
girls up. The floor-manager was an ugly little devil, under-sized,
with very square shoulders and a spiky grey moustache. He'd just
pounced on her about something, some mistake in the change
evidently, and was going for her with a voice like a circular saw.

'Ho, no! Course you couldn't count it! COURSE you couldn't. Too
much trouble, that'd be. Ho, no!'

Before I could stop myself I'd caught the girl's eye. It wasn't
so nice for her to have a fat middle-aged bloke with a red face
looking on while she took her cursing. I turned away as quickly as
I could and pretended to be interested in some stuff at the next
counter, curtain rings or something. He was on to her again. He
was one of those people who turn away and then suddenly dart back
at you, like a dragon-fly.

'COURSE you couldn't count it! Doesn't matter to YOU if we're two
bob out. Doesn't matter at all. What's two bob to YOU? Couldn't
ask YOU to go to the trouble of counting it properly. Ho, no!
Nothing matters 'ere 'cept YOUR convenience. You don't think about
others, do you?'

This went on for about five minutes in a voice you could hear half
across the shop. He kept turning away to make her think he'd

finished with her and then darting back to have another go. As I
edged a bit farther off I had a glance at them. The girl was a kid
about eighteen, rather fat, with a sort of moony face, the kind
that would never get the change right anyway. She'd turned pale
pink and she was wriggling, actually wriggling with pain. It was
just the same as if he'd been cutting into her with a whip. The
girls at the other counters were pretending not to hear. He was an
ugly, stiff-built little devil, the sort of cock-sparrow type of
man that sticks his chest out and puts his hands under his
coattails--the type that'd be a sergeant-major only they aren't
tall enough. Do you notice how often they have under-sized men for
these bullying jobs? He was sticking his face, moustaches and all,
almost into hers so as to scream at her better. And the girl all
pink and wriggling.

Finally he decided that he'd said enough and strutted off like an
admiral on the quarter-deck, and I came up to the counter for my
razor-blades. He knew I'd heard every word, and so did she, and
both of them knew I knew they knew. But the worst of it was that
for my benefit she'd got to pretend that nothing had happened and
put on the standoffish keep-your-distance attitude that a shopgirl's
supposed to keep up with male customers. Had to act the grown-up
young lady half a minute after I'd seen her cursed

like a skivvy!
Her face was still pink and her hands were trembling. I asked her
for penny blades and she started fumbling in the threepenny tray.
Then the little devil of a floor-manager turned our way and for a
moment both of us thought he was coming back to begin again. The
girl flinched like a dog that sees the whip. But she was looking at
me out of the corner of her eye. I could see that because I'd seen
her cursed she hated me like the devil. Queer!

I cleared out with my razor-blades. Why do they stand it? I was
thinking. Pure funk, of course. One back-answer and you get the
sack. It's the same everywhere. I thought of the lad that
sometimes serves me at the chain-store grocery we deal at. A great
hefty lump of twenty, with cheeks like roses and enormous fore-
arms, ought to be working in a blacksmith's shop. And there he is
in his white jacket, bent double across the counter, rubbing his
hands together with his 'Yes, sir! Very true, sir! Pleasant
weather for the time of the year, sir! What can I have the
pleasure of getting you today, sir?' practically asking you to kick
his bum. Orders, of course. The customer is always right. The
thing you can see in his face is mortal dread that you might report
him for impertinence and get him sacked. Besides, how's he to know
you aren't one of the narks the company sends round? Fear! We

swim in it. It's our element. Everyone that isn't
scared stiff of
losing his job is scared stiff of war, or Fascism, or
Communism, or
something. Jews sweating when they think of Hitler.
It crossed my
mind that that little bastard with the spiky
moustache was probably
a damn sight more scared for his job than the girl
was. Probably
got a family to support. And perhaps, who knows, at
home he's meek
and mild, grows cucumbers in the back garden, lets
his wife sit on
him and the kids pull his moustache. And by the same
token you
never read about a Spanish Inquisitor or one of these
higher-ups in
the Russian Ogpu without being told that in private
life he was
such a good kind man, best of husbands and fathers,
devoted to his
tame canary, and so forth.

The girl at the soap counter was looking after me as
I went out of
the door. She'd have murdered me if she could. How
she hated me
because of what I'd seen! Much more than she hated
the floor-
manager.

3

There was a bombing plane flying low overhead. For a
minute or two
it seemed to be keeping pace with the train. Two
vulgar kind of
blokes in shabby overcoats, obviously commercials of
the lowest

type, newspaper canvassers probably, were sitting
opposite me. One
of them was reading the Mail and the other was
reading the Express.
I could see by their manner that they'd spotted me
for one of their
kind. Up at the other end of the carriage two
lawyers' clerks with
black bags were keeping up a conversation full of
legal baloney
that was meant to impress the rest of us and show
that they didn't
belong to the common herd.

I was watching the backs of the houses sliding past.
The line from
West Bletchley runs most of the way through slums,
but it's kind of
peaceful, the glimpses you get of little backyards
with bits of
flowers stuck in boxes and the flat roofs where the
women peg out
the washing and the bird-cage on the wall. The great
black bombing
plane swayed a little in the air and zoomed ahead so
that I
couldn't see it. I was sitting with my back to the
engine. One of
the commercials cocked his eye at it for just a
second. I knew
what he was thinking. For that matter it's what
everybody else is
thinking. You don't have to be a highbrow to think
such thoughts
nowadays. In two years' time, one year's time, what
shall we be
doing when we see one of those things? Making a dive
for the
cellar, wetting our bags with fright.

The commercial bloke put down his Daily Mail.

'Templegate's winner come in,' he said.

The lawyers' clerks were sprouting some learned rot
about fee-
simple and peppercorns. The other commercial felt in
his waistcoat
pocket and took out a bent Woodbine. He felt in the
other pocket
and then leaned across to me.

'Got a match, Tubby?'

I felt for my matches. 'Tubby', you notice. That's
interesting,
really. For about a couple of minutes I stopped
thinking about
bombs and began thinking about my figure as I'd
studied it in my
bath that morning.

It's quite true I'm tubby, in fact my upper half is
almost exactly
the shape of a tub. But what's interesting, I think,
is that
merely because you happen to be a little bit fat,
almost anyone,
even a total, stranger, will take it for granted to
give you a
nickname that's an insulting comment on your personal
appearance.
Suppose a chap was a hunchback or had a squint or a
hare-lip--would
you give him a nickname to remind him of it? But
every fat man's
labelled as a matter of course. I'm the type that
people
automatically slap on the back and punch in the ribs,
and nearly
all of them think I like it. I never go into the
saloon bar of the
Crown at Pudley (I pass that way once a week on
business) without
that ass Waters, who travels for the Seafoam Soap

people but who's
more or less a permanency in the saloon bar of the
Crown, prodding
me in the ribs and singing out 'Here a sheer hulk
lies poor Tom
Bowling!' which is a joke the bloody fools in the bar
never get
tired of. Waters has got a finger like a bar of
iron. They all
think a fat man doesn't have any feelings.

The commercial took another of my matches, to pick
his teeth with,
and chucked the box back. The train whizzed on to an
iron bridge.
Down below I got a glimpse of a baker's van and a
long string of
lorries loaded with cement. The queer thing, I was
thinking, is
that in a way they're right about fat men. It's a
fact that a fat
man, particularly a man who's been fat from
birth--from childhood,
that's to say--isn't quite like other men. He goes
through his
life on a different plane, a sort of light-comedy
plane, though in
the case of blokes in side-shows at fairs, or in fact
anyone over
twenty stone, it isn't so much light comedy as low
farce. I've
been both fat and thin in my life, and I know the
difference
fatness makes to your outlook. It kind of prevents
you from taking
things too hard. I doubt whether a man who's never
been anything
but fat, a man who's been called Fatty ever since he
could walk,
even knows of the existence of any really deep
emotions. How could
he? He's got no experience of such things. He can't
ever be

present at a tragic scene, because a scene where
there's a fat man
present isn't tragic, it's comic. Just imagine a fat
Hamlet, for
instance! Or Oliver Hardy acting Romeo. Funnily
enough I'd been
thinking something of the kind only a few days
earlier when I was
reading a novel I'd got out of Boots. Wasted
Passion, it was
called. The chap in the story finds out that his
girl has gone off
with another chap. He's one of these chaps you read
about in
novels, that have pale sensitive faces and dark hair
and a private
income. I remember more or less how the passage went:

David paced up and down the room, his hands pressed
to his
forehead. The news seemed to have stunned him. For
a long time
he could not believe it. Sheila untrue to him! It
could not be!
Suddenly realization rushed over him, and he saw the
fact in all
its stark horror. It was too much. He flung himself
down in a
paroxysm of weeping.

Anyway, it went something like that. And even at the
time it
started me thinking. There you have it, you see.
That's how
people--some people--are expected to behave. But how
about a chap
like me? Suppose Hilda went off for a week-end with
somebody else-
-not that I'd care a damn, in fact it would rather
please me to
find that she'd still got that much kick left in

her--but suppose I
did care, would I fling myself down in a paroxysm of
weeping?
Would anyone expect me to? You couldn't, with a
figure like mine.
It would be downright obscene.

The train was running along an embankment. A little
below us you
could see the roofs of the houses stretching on and
on, the little
red roofs where the bombs are going to drop, a bit
lighted up at
this moment because a ray of sunshine was catching
them. Funny how
we keep on thinking about bombs. Of course there's
no question
that it's coming soon. You can tell how close it is
by the cheer-
up stuff they're talking about it in the newspaper.
I was reading
a piece in the News Chronicle the other day where it
said that
bombing planes can't do any damage nowadays. The
anti-aircraft
guns have got so good that the bomber has to stay at
twenty
thousand feet. The chap thinks, you notice, that if
an aeroplane's
high enough the bombs don't reach the ground. Or
more likely what
he really meant was that they'll miss Woolwich
Arsenal and only hit
places like Ellesmere Road.

But taking it by and large, I thought, it's not so
bad to be fat.
One thing about a fat man is that he's always
popular. There's
really no kind of company, from bookies to bishops,
where a fat man
doesn't fit in and feel at home. As for women, fat
men have more

luck with them than people seem to think. It's all bunk to
imagine, as some people do, that a woman looks on a fat man as just
a joke. The truth is that a woman doesn't look on ANY man as a
joke if he can kid her that he's in love with her.

Mind you, I haven't always been fat. I've been fat for eight or
nine years, and I suppose I've developed most of the characteristics.
But it's also a fact that internally, mentally, I'm not altogether
fat. No! Don't mistake me. I'm not trying to put myself over as a
kind of tender flower, the aching heart behind the smiling face and
so forth. You couldn't get on in the insurance business if you were
anything like that. I'm vulgar, I'm insensitive, and I fit in with
my environment. So long as anywhere in the world things are being
sold on commission and livings are picked up by sheer brass and lack
of finer feelings, chaps like me will be doing it. In almost all
circumstances I'd manage to make a living--always a living and never
a fortune--and even in war, revolution, plague, and famine I'd back
myself to stay alive longer than most people. I'm that type. But
also I've got something else inside me, chiefly a hangover from the
past. I'll tell you about that later. I'm fat, but I'm thin
inside. Has it ever struck you that there's a thin man inside every
fat man, just as they say there's a statue inside every block of
stone?

The chap who'd borrowed my matches was having a good pick at his
teeth over the Express.

'Legs case don't seem to get much forrader,' he said.

'They'll never get 'im,' said the other. ''Ow could you identify a
pair of legs? They're all the bleeding same, aren't they?'

'Might trace 'im through the piece of paper 'e wrapped 'em up in,'
said the first.

Down below you could see the roofs of the houses stretching on and
on, twisting this way and that with the streets, but stretching on
and on, like an enormous plain that you could have ridden over.
Whichever way you cross London it's twenty miles of houses almost
without a break. Christ! how can the bombers miss us when they
come? We're just one great big bull's-eye. And no warning,
probably. Because who's going to be such a bloody fool as to
declare war nowadays? If I was Hitler I'd send my bombers across
in the middle of a disarmament conference. Some quiet morning,
when the clerks are streaming across London Bridge, and the
canary's singing, and the old woman's pegging the bloomers on the
line--zoom, whizz, plonk! Houses going up into the air, bloomers
soaked with blood, canary singing on above the corpses.

Seems a pity somehow, I thought. I looked at the great sea of
roofs stretching on and on. Miles and miles of streets, fried-fish
shops, tin chapels, picture houses, little printing-shops up back
alleys, factories, blocks of flats, whelk stalls, dairies, power
stations--on and on and on. Enormous! And the peacefulness of it!
Like a great wilderness with no wild beasts. No guns firing,
nobody chucking pineapples, nobody beating anybody else up with a
rubber truncheon. If you come to think of it, in the whole of
England at this moment there probably isn't a single bedroom window
from which anyone's firing a machine-gun.

But how about five years from now? Or two years? Or one year?

4

I'd dropped my papers at the office. Warner is one of these cheap
American dentists, and he has his consulting-room, or 'parlour' as
he likes to call it, halfway up a big block of offices, between a
photographer and a rubber-goods wholesaler. I was early for my
appointment, but it was time for a bit of grub. I don't know what
put it into my head to go into a milk-bar. They're places I
generally avoid. We five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers aren't well served
in the way of eating-places in London. If your idea

of the amount
to spend on a meal is one and threepence, it's either
Lyons, the
Express Dairy, or the A.B.C., or else it's the kind
of funeral
snack they serve you in the saloon bar, a pint of
bitter and a slab
of cold pie, so cold that it's colder than the beer.
Outside the
milk-bar the boys were yelling the first editions of
the evening
papers.

Behind the bright red counter a girl in a tall white
cap was
fiddling with an ice-box, and somewhere at the back a
radio was
playing, plonk-tiddle-tiddle-plonk, a kind of tinny
sound. Why the
hell am I coming here? I thought to myself as I went
in. There's a
kind of atmosphere about these places that gets me
down. Everything
slick and shiny and streamlined; mirrors, enamel, and
chromium plate
whichever direction you look in. Everything spent on
the decorations
and nothing on the food. No real food at all. Just
lists of stuff
with American names, sort of phantom stuff that you
can't taste and
can hardly believe in the existence of. Everything
comes out of a
carton or a tin, or it's hauled out of a refrigerator
or squirted
out of a tap or squeezed out of a tube. No comfort,
no privacy.
Tall stools to sit on, a kind of narrow ledge to eat
off, mirrors
all round you. A sort of propaganda floating round,
mixed up with
the noise of the radio, to the effect that food
doesn't matter,

comfort doesn't matter, nothing matters except slickness and
shininess and streamlining. Everything's streamlined nowadays, even
the bullet Hitler's keeping for you. I ordered a large coffee and a
couple of frankfurters. The girl in the white cap jerked them at me
with about as much interest as you'd throw ants' eggs to a goldfish.

Outside the door a newsboy yelled 'StarnoosstanNERD!' I saw the
poster flapping against his knees: LEGS. FRESH DISCOVERIES. Just
'legs', you notice. It had got down to that. Two days earlier
they'd found a woman's legs in a railway waiting-room, done up in a
brown-paper parcel, and what with successive editions of the
papers, the whole nation was supposed to be so passionately
interested in these blasted legs that they didn't need any further
introduction. They were the only legs that were news at the
moment. It's queer, I thought, as I ate a bit of roll, how dull
the murders are getting nowadays. All this cutting people up and
leaving bits of them about the countryside. Not a patch on the old
domestic poisoning dramas, Crippen, Seddon, Mrs Maybrick; the truth
being, I suppose, that you can't do a good murder unless you
believe you're going to roast in hell for it.

At this moment I bit into one of my frankfurters, and--Christ!

I can't honestly say that I'd expected the thing to

have a pleasant
taste. I'd expected it to taste of nothing, like the
roll. But
this--well, it was quite an experience. Let me try
and describe it
to you.

The frankfurter had a rubber skin, of course, and my
temporary
teeth weren't much of a fit. I had to do a kind of
sawing movement
before I could get my teeth through the skin. And
then suddenly--
pop! The thing burst in my mouth like a rotten pear.
A sort of
horrible soft stuff was oozing all over my tongue.
But the taste!
For a moment I just couldn't believe it. Then I
rolled my tongue
round it again and had another try. It was FISH! A
sausage, a
thing calling itself a frankfurter, filled with fish!
I got up and
walked straight out without touching my coffee. God
knows what
that might have tasted of.

Outside the newsboy shoved the Standard into my face
and yelled,
'Legs! 'Orrible revelations! All the winners!
Legs! Legs!' I
was still rolling the stuff round my tongue,
wondering where I
could spit it out. I remembered a bit I'd read in
the paper
somewhere about these food-factories in Germany where
everything's
made out of something else. Ersatz, they call it. I
remembered
reading that THEY were making sausages out of fish,
and fish, no
doubt, out of something different. It gave me the
feeling that I'd

bitten into the modern world and discovered what it
was really made
of. That's the way we're going nowadays. Everything
slick and
streamlined, everything made out of something else.
Celluloid,
rubber, chromium-steel everywhere, arc-lamps blazing
all night,
glass roofs over your head, radios all playing the
same tune, no
vegetation left, everything cemented over,
mock-turtles grazing
under the neutral fruit-trees. But when you come
down to brass
tacks and get your teeth into something solid, a
sausage for
instance, that's what you get. Rotten fish in a
rubber skin.
Bombs of filth bursting inside your mouth.

When I'd got the new teeth in I felt a lot better.
They sat nice
and smooth over the gums, and though very likely it
sounds absurd
to say that false teeth can make you feel younger,
it's a fact that
they did so. I tried a smile at myself in a shop
window. They
weren't half bad. Warner, though cheap, is a bit of
an artist and
doesn't aim at making you look like a toothpaste
advert. He's got
huge cabinets full of false teeth--he showed them to
me once--all
graded according to size and colour, and he picks
them out like a
jeweller choosing stones for a necklace. Nine people
out of ten
would have taken my teeth for natural.

I caught a full-length glimpse of myself in another
window I was
passing, and it struck me that really I wasn't such a

bad figure of
a man. A bit on the fat side, admittedly, but
nothing offensive,
only what the tailors call a 'full figure', and some
women like a
man to have a red face. There's life in the old dog
yet, I
thought. I remembered my seventeen quid, and
definitely made up my
mind that I'd spend it on a woman. There was time to
have a pint
before the pubs shut, just to baptize the teeth, and
feeling rich
because of my seventeen quid I stopped at a
tobacconist's and
bought myself a sixpenny cigar of a kind I'm rather
partial to.
They're eight inches long and guaranteed pure Havana
leaf all
through. I suppose cabbages grow in Havana the same
as anywhere
else.

When I came out of the pub I felt quite different.

I'd had a couple of pints, they'd warmed me up
inside, and the
cigar smoke oozing round my new teeth gave me a
fresh, clean,
peaceful sort of feeling. All of a sudden I felt
kind of
thoughtful and philosophic. It was partly because I
didn't have
any work to do. My mind went back to the thoughts of
war I'd been
having earlier that morning, when the bomber flew
over the train.
I felt in a kind of prophetic mood, the mood in which
you foresee
the end of the world and get a certain kick out of it.

I was walking westward up the Strand, and though it
was coldish I

went slowly to get the pleasure of my cigar. The usual crowd that
you can hardly fight your way through was streaming up the
pavement, all of them with that insane fixed expression on their
faces that people have in London streets, and there was the usual
jam of traffic with the great red buses nosing their way between
the cars, and the engines roaring and horns tooting. Enough noise
to waken the dead, but not to waken this lot, I thought. I felt as
if I was the only person awake in a city of sleep-walkers. That's
an illusion, of course. When you walk through a crowd of strangers
it's next door to impossible not to imagine that they're all
waxworks, but probably they're thinking just the same about you.
And this kind of prophetic feeling that keeps coming over me
nowadays, the feeling that war's just round the corner and that
war's the end of all things, isn't peculiar to me. We've all got
it, more or less. I suppose even among the people passing at that
moment there must have been chaps who were seeing mental pictures
of the shellbursts and the mud. Whatever thought you think there's
always a million people thinking it at the same moment. But that
was how I felt. We're all on the burning deck and nobody knows it
except me. I looked at the dumb-bell faces streaming past. Like
turkeys in November, I thought. Not a notion of what's coming to
them. It was as if I'd got X-rays in my eyes and

could see the
skeletons walking.

I looked forward a few years. I saw this street as
it'll be in
five years' time, say, or three years' time (1941
they say it's
booked for), after the fighting's started.

No, not all smashed to pieces. Only a little
altered, kind of
chipped and dirty-looking, the shop-windows almost
empty and so
dusty that you can't see into them. Down a side
street there's an
enormous bomb-crater and a block of buildings burnt
out so that it
looks like a hollow tooth. Thermite. It's all
curiously quiet,
and everyone's very thin. A platoon of soldiers
comes marching up
the street. They're all as thin as rakes and their
boots are
dragging. The sergeant's got corkscrew moustaches
and holds
himself like a ramrod, but he's thin too and he's got
a cough that
almost tears him open. Between his coughs he's
trying to bawl at
them in the old parade-ground style. 'Nah then,
Jones! Lift yer
'ed up! What yer keep starin' at the ground for?
All them fag-
ends was picked up years ago.' Suddenly a fit of
coughing catches
him. He tries to stop it, can't, doubles up like a
ruler, and
almost coughs his guts out. His face turns pink and
purple, his
moustache goes limp, and the water runs out of his
eyes.

I can hear the air-raid sirens blowing and the

loud-speakers
bellowing that our glorious troops have taken a
hundred thousand
prisoners. I see a top-floor-back in Birmingham and
a child of
five howling and howling for a bit of bread. And
suddenly the
mother can't stand it any longer, and she yells at
it, 'Shut your
trap, you little bastard!' and then she ups the
child's frock and
smacks its bottom hard, because there isn't any bread
and isn't
going to be any bread. I see it all. I see the
posters and the
food-queues, and the castor oil and the rubber
truncheons and the
machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows.

Is it going to happen? No knowing. Some days it's
impossible to
believe it. Some days I say to myself that it's just
a scare got
up by the newspapers. Some days I know in my bones
there's no
escaping it.

When I got down near Charing Cross the boys were
yelling a later
edition of the evening papers. There was some more
drivel about
the murder. LEGS. FAMOUS SURGEON'S STATEMENT. Then
another
poster caught my eye: KING ZOG'S WEDDING POSTPONED.
King Zog!
What a name! It's next door to impossible to believe
a chap with a
name like that isn't a jet-black Negro.

But just at that moment a queer thing happened. King
Zog's name--
but I suppose, as I'd already seen the name several
times that day,

it was mixed up with some sound in the traffic or the smell of
horse-dung or something--had started memories in me.

The past is a curious thing. It's with you all the time. I
suppose an hour never passes without your thinking of things that
happened ten or twenty years ago, and yet most of the time it's got
no reality, it's just a set of facts that you've learned, like a
lot of stuff in a history book. Then some chance sight or sound or
smell, especially smell, sets you going, and the past doesn't
merely come back to you, you're actually IN the past. It was like
that at this moment.

I was back in the parish church at Lower Binfield, and it was
thirty-eight years ago. To outward appearances, I suppose, I was
still walking down the Strand, fat and forty-five, with false teeth
and a bowler hat, but inside me I was Georgie Bowling, aged seven,
younger son of Samuel Bowling, corn and seed merchant, of 57 High
Street, Lower Binfield. And it was Sunday morning, and I could
smell the church. How I could smell it! You know the smell
churches have, a peculiar, dank, dusty, decaying, sweetish sort of
smell. There's a touch of candle-grease in it, and perhaps a whiff
of incense and a suspicion of mice, and on Sunday mornings it's a
bit overlaid by yellow soap and serge dresses, but predominantly
it's that sweet, dusty, musty smell that's like the

smell of death
and life mixed up together. It's powdered corpses,
really.

In those days I was about four feet high. I was
standing on the
hassock so as to see over the pew in front, and I
could feel
Mother's black serge dress under my hand. I could
also feel my
stockings pulled up over my knees--we used to wear
them like that
then--and the saw edge of the Eton collar they used
to buckle me
into on Sunday mornings. And I could hear the organ
wheezing and
two enormous voices bellowing out the psalm. In our
church there
were two men who led the singing, in fact they did so
much of the
singing that nobody else got much of a chance. One
was Shooter,
the fishmonger, and the other was old Wetherall, the
joiner and
undertaker. They used to sit opposite one another on
either side
of the nave, in the pews nearest the pulpit. Shooter
was a short
fat man with a very pink, smooth face, a big nose,
drooping
moustache, and a chin that kind of fell away beneath
his mouth.
Wetherall was quite different. He was a great,
gaunt, powerful old
devil of about sixty, with a face like a death's-head
and stiff
grey hair half an inch long all over his head. I've
never seen a
living man who looked so exactly like a skeleton.
You could see
every line of the skull in his face, his skin was
like parchment,
and his great lantern jaw full of yellow teeth worked

up and down
just like the jaw of a skeleton in an anatomical
museum. And yet
with all his leanness he looked as strong as iron, as
though he'd
live to be a hundred and make coffins for everyone in
that church
before he'd finished. Their voices were quite
different, too.
Shooter had a kind of desperate, agonized bellow, as
though someone
had a knife at his throat and he was just letting out
his last yell
for help. But Wetherall had a tremendous, churning,
rumbling noise
that happened deep down inside him, like enormous
barrels being
rolled to and fro underground. However much noise he
let out, you
always knew he'd got plenty more in reserve. The
kids nicknamed
him Rumbletummy.

They used to get up a kind of antiphonal effect,
especially in the
psalms. It was always Wetherall who had the last
word. I suppose
really they were friends in private life, but in my
kid's way I
used to imagine that they were deadly enemies and
trying to shout
one another down. Shooter would roar out 'The Lord
is my
shepherd', and then Wetherall would come in with
'Therefore can I
lack nothing', drowning him completely. You always
knew which of
the two was master. I used especially to look
forward to that
psalm that has the bit about Sihon king of the
Amorites and Og the
king of Bashan (this was what King Zog's name had
reminded me of).

Shooter would start off with 'Sihon king of the
Amorites', then
perhaps for half a second you could hear the rest of
the
congregation singing the 'and', and then Wetherall's
enormous bass
would come in like a tidal wave and swallow everybody
up with 'Og
the king of Bashan'. I wish I could make you hear
the tremendous,
rumbling, subterranean barrel-noise that he could get
into that
word 'Og'. He even used to clip off the end of the
'and', so that
when I was a very small kid I used to think it was
Dog the king of
Bashan. But later, when I got the names right, I
formed a picture
in my mind's eye of Sihon and Og. I saw them as a
couple of those
great Egyptian statues that I'd seen pictures of in
the penny
encyclopedia, enormous stone statues thirty feet
high, sitting on
their thrones opposite one another, with their hands
on their knees
and a faint mysterious smile on their faces.

How it came back to me! That peculiar feeling--it
was only a
feeling, you couldn't describe it as an
activity--that we used to
call 'Church'. The sweet corpsy smell, the rustle of
Sunday
dresses, the wheeze of the organ and the roaring
voices, the spot
of light from the hole in the window creeping slowly
up the nave.
In some way the grown-ups could put it across that
this extraordinary
performance was necessary. You took it for granted,
just as you
took the Bible, which you got in big doses in those

days. There
were texts on every wall and you knew whole chapters
of the O.T. by
heart. Even now my head's stuffed full of bits out
of the Bible.
And the children of Israel did evil again in the
sight of the Lord.
And Asher abode in his breeches. Followed them from
Dan until thou
come unto Beersheba. Smote him under the fifth rib,
so that he
died. You never understood it, you didn't try to or
want to, it was
just a kind of medicine, a queer-tasting stuff that
you had to
swallow and knew to be in some way necessary. An
extraordinary
rigmarole about people with names like Shimei and
Nebuchadnezzar and
Ahithophel and Hashbadada; people with long stiff
garments and
Assyrian beards, riding up and down on camels among
temples and
cedar trees and doing extraordinary things.
Sacrificing burnt
offerings, walking about in fiery furnaces, getting
nailed on
crosses, getting swallowed by whales. And all mixed
up with the
sweet graveyard smell and the serge dresses and the
wheeze of the
organ.

That was the world I went back to when I saw the
poster about King
Zog. For a moment I didn't merely remember it, I was
IN it. Of
course such impressions don't last more than a few
seconds. A
moment later it was as though I'd opened my eyes
again, and I was
forty-five and there was a traffic jam in the Strand.
But it had

left a kind of after-effect behind. Sometimes when
you come out of
a train of thought you feel as if you were coming up
from deep
water, but this time it was the other way about, it
was as though
it was back in 1900 that I'd been breathing real air.
Even now,
with my eyes open, so to speak, all those bloody
fools hustling to
and fro, and the posters and the petrol-stink and the
roar of the
engines, seemed to me less real than Sunday morning
in Lower
Binfield thirty-eight years ago.

I chucked away my cigar and walked on slowly. I
could smell the
corpse-smell. In a manner of speaking I can smell it
now. I'm
back in Lower Binfield, and the year's 1900. Beside
the horse-
trough in the market-place the carrier's horse is
having its nose-
bag. At the sweet-shop on the corner Mother Wheeler
is weighing
out a ha'porth of brandy balls. Lady Rampling's
carriage is
driving by, with the tiger sitting behind in his
pipeclayed
breeches with his arms folded. Uncle Ezekiel is
cursing Joe
Chamberlain. The recruiting-sergeant in his scarlet
jacket, tight
blue overalls, and pillbox hat, is strutting up and
down twisting
his moustache. The drunks are puking in the yard
behind the
George. Vicky's at Windsor, God's in heaven,
Christ's on the
cross, Jonah's in the whale, Shadrach, Meshach, and
Abednego are in
the fiery furnace, and Sihon king of the Amorites and

Og the king
of Bashan are sitting on their thrones looking at one
another--not
doing anything exactly, just existing, keeping their
appointed
place, like a couple of fire-dogs, or the Lion and
the Unicorn.

Is it gone for ever? I'm not certain. But I tell
you it was a
good world to live in. I belong to it. So do you.

PART II

1

The world I momentarily remembered when I saw King
Zog's name on
the poster was so different from the world I live in
now that you
might have a bit of difficulty in believing I ever
belonged to it.

I suppose by this time you've got a kind of picture
of me in your
mind--a fat middle-aged bloke with false teeth and a
red face--and
subconsciously you've been imagining that I was just
the same even
when I was in my cradle. But forty-five years is a
long time, and
though some people don't change and develop, others
do. I've
changed a great deal, and I've had my ups and downs,
mostly ups.
It may seem queer, but my father would probably be
rather proud of

me if he could see me now. He'd think it a wonderful thing that a
son of his should own a motor-car and live in a house with a
bathroom. Even now I'm a little above my origin, and at other
times I've touched levels that we should never have dreamed of in
those old days before the war.

Before the war! How long shall we go on saying that, I wonder?
How long before the answer will be 'Which war?' In my case the
never-never land that people are thinking of when they say 'before
the war' might almost be before the Boer War. I was born in '93,
and I can actually remember the outbreak of the Boer War, because
of the first-class row that Father and Uncle Ezekiel had about it.
I've several other memories that would date from about a year
earlier than that.

The very first thing I remember is the smell of sainfoin chaff.
You went up the stone passage that led from the kitchen to the
shop, and the smell of sainfoin got stronger all the way. Mother
had fixed a wooden gate in the doorway to prevent Joe and myself
(Joe was my elder brother) from getting into the shop. I can still
remember standing there clutching the bars, and the smell of
sainfoin mixed up with the damp plastery smell that belonged to the
passage. It wasn't till years later that I somehow managed to
crash the gate and get into the shop when nobody was

there. A
mouse that had been having a go at one of the
meal-bins suddenly
plopped out and ran between my feet. It was quite
white with meal.
This must have happened when I was about six.

When you're very young you seem to suddenly become
conscious of
things that have been under your nose for a long time
past. The
things round about you swim into your mind one at a
time, rather as
they do when you're waking from sleep. For instance,
it was only
when I was nearly four that I suddenly realized that
we owned a
dog. Nailer, his name was, an old white English
terrier of the
breed that's gone out nowadays. I met him under the
kitchen table
and in some way seemed to grasp, having only learnt
it that moment,
that he belonged to us and that his name was Nailer.
In the same
way, a bit earlier, I'd discovered that beyond the
gate at the end
of the passage there was a place where the smell of
sainfoin came
from. And the shop itself, with the huge scales and
the wooden
measures and the tin shovel, and the white lettering
on the window,
and the bullfinch in its cage--which you couldn't see
very well
even from the pavement, because the window was always
dusty--all
these things dropped into place in my mind one by
one, like bits of
a jig-saw puzzle.

Time goes on, you get stronger on your legs, and by
degrees you

begin to get a grasp of geography. I suppose Lower
Binfield was
just like any other market town of about two thousand
inhabitants.
It was in Oxfordshire--I keep saying WAS, you notice,
though after
all the place still exists--about five miles from the
Thames. It
lay in a bit of a valley, with a low ripple of hills
between itself
and the Thames, and higher hills behind. On top of
the hills there
were woods in sort of dim blue masses among which you
could see a
great white house with a colonnade. This was
Binfield House ('The
Hall', everybody called it), and the top of the hill
was known as
Upper Binfield, though there was no village there and
hadn't been
for a hundred years or more. I must have been nearly
seven before
I noticed the existence of Binfield House. When
you're very small
you don't look into the distance. But by that time I
knew every
inch of the town, which was shaped roughly like a
cross with the
market-place in the middle. Our shop was in the High
Street a
little before you got to the market-place, and on the
corner there
was Mrs Wheeler's sweet-shop where you spent a
halfpenny when you
had one. Mother Wheeler was a dirty old witch and
people suspected
her of sucking the bull's-eyes and putting them back
in the bottle,
though this was never proved. Farther down there was
the barber's
shop with the advert for Abdulla cigarettes--the one
with the
Egyptian soldiers on it, and curiously enough they're

using the
same advert to this day--and the rich boozy smell of
bay rum and
latakia. Behind the houses you could see the
chimneys of the
brewery. In the middle of the market-place there was
the stone
horse-trough, and on top of the water there was
always a fine film
of dust and chaff.

Before the war, and especially before the Boer War,
it was summer
all the year round. I'm quite aware that that's a
delusion. I'm
merely trying to tell you how things come back to me.
If I shut my
eyes and think of Lower Binfield any time before I
was, say, eight,
it's always in summer weather that I remember it.
Either it's the
market-place at dinner-time, with a sort of sleepy
dusty hush over
everything and the carrier's horse with his nose dug
well into his
nose-bag, munching away, or it's a hot afternoon in
the great green
juicy meadows round the town, or it's about dusk in
the lane behind
the allotments, and there's a smell of pipe-tobacco
and night-
stocks floating through the hedge. But in a sense I
do remember
different seasons, because all my memories are bound
up with things
to eat, which varied at different times of the year.
Especially
the things you used to find in the hedges. In July
there were
dewberries--but they're very rare--and the
blackberries were
getting red enough to eat. In September there were
sloes and

hazel-nuts. The best hazelnuts were always out of reach. Later on
there were beech-nuts and crab-apples. Then there were the kind of
minor foods that you used to eat when there was nothing better
going. Haws--but they're not much good--and hips, which have a
nice sharp taste if you clean the hairs out of them. Angelica is
good in early summer, especially when you're thirsty, and so are
the stems of various grasses. Then there's sorrel, which is good
with bread and butter, and pig-nuts, and a kind of wood shamrock
which has a sour taste. Even plantain seeds are better than
nothing when you're a long way from home and very hungry.

Joe was two years older than myself. When we were very small
Mother used to pay Katie Simmons eighteen pence a week to take us
out for walks in the afternoons. Katie's father worked in the
brewery and had fourteen children, so that the family were always
on the lookout for odd jobs. She was only twelve when Joe was
seven and I was five, and her mental level wasn't very different
from ours. She used to drag me by the arm and call me 'Baby', and
she had just enough authority over us to prevent us from being run
over by dogcarts or chased by bulls, but so far as conversation
went we were almost on equal terms. We used to go for long,
trailing kind of walks--always, of course, picking and eating

things all the way--down the lane past the
allotments, across
Roper's Meadows, and down to the Mill Farm, where
there was a pool
with newts and tiny carp in it (Joe and I used to go
fishing there
when we were a bit older), and back by the Upper
Binfield Road so
as to pass the sweet-shop that stood on the edge of
the town. This
shop was in such a bad position that anyone who took
it went
bankrupt, and to my own knowledge it was three times
a sweet-shop,
once a grocer's, and once a bicycle-repair shop, but
it had a
peculiar fascination for children. Even when we had
no money, we'd
go that way so as to glue our noses against the
window. Katie
wasn't in the least above sharing a farthing's worth
of sweets and
quarrelling over her share. You could buy things
worth having for
a farthing in those days. Most sweets were four
ounces a penny,
and there was even some stuff called Paradise
Mixture, mostly
broken sweets from other bottles, which was six.
Then there were
Farthing Everlastings, which were a yard long and
couldn't be
finished inside half an hour. Sugar mice and sugar
pigs were eight
a penny, and so were liquorice pistols, popcorn was a
halfpenny for
a large bag, and a prize packet which contained
several different
kinds of sweets, a gold ring, and sometimes a
whistle, was a penny.
You don't see prize packets nowadays. A whole lot of
the kinds of
sweets we had in those days have gone out. There was

a kind of
flat white sweet with mottoes printed on them, and
also a kind of
sticky pink stuff in an oval matchwood box with a
tiny tin spoon to
eat it with, which cost a halfpenny. Both of those
have disappeared.
So have Caraway Comfits, and so have chocolate pipes
and sugar
matches, and even Hundreds and Thousands you hardly
ever see.
Hundreds and Thousands were a great standby when
you'd only a
farthing. And what about Penny Monsters? Does one
ever see a Penny
Monster nowadays? It was a huge bottle, holding more
than a quart
of fizzy lemonade, all for a penny. That's another
thing that the
war killed stone dead.

It always seems to be summer when I look back. I can
feel the
grass round me as tall as myself, and the heat coming
out of the
earth. And the dust in the lane, and the warm greeny
light coming
through the hazel boughs. I can see the three of us
trailing
along, eating stuff out of the hedge, with Katie
dragging at my arm
and saying 'Come on, Baby!' and sometimes yelling
ahead to Joe,
'Joe! You come back 'ere this minute! You'll catch
it!' Joe was
a hefty boy with a big, lumpy sort of head and
tremendous calves,
the kind of boy who's always doing something
dangerous. At seven
he'd already got into short trousers, with the thick
black
stockings drawn up over the knee and the great
clumping boots that

boys had to wear in those days. I was still in
frocks--a kind of
holland overall that Mother used to make for me.
Katie used to
wear a dreadful ragged parody of a grown-up dress
that descended
from sister to sister in her family. She had a
ridiculous great
hat with her pigtails hanging down behind it, and a
long, draggled
skirt which trailed on the ground, and button boots
with the heels
trodden down. She was a tiny thing, not much taller
than Joe, but
not bad at 'minding' children. In a family like that
a child is
'minding' other children about as soon as it's
weaned. At times
she'd try to be grown-up and ladylike, and she had a
way of cutting
you short with a proverb, which to her mind was
something
unanswerable. If you said 'Don't care', she'd answer
immediately:

'Don't care was made to care,
Don't care was hung,
Don't care was put in a pot
And boiled till he was done.'

Or if you called her names it would be 'Hard words
break no bones',
or, when you'd been boasting, 'Pride comes before a
fall'. This
came very true one day when I was strutting along
pretending to be
a soldier and fell into a cowpat. Her family lived
in a filthy
little rat-hole of a place in the slummy street
behind the brewery.
The place swarmed with children like a kind of

vermin. The whole
family had managed to dodge going to school, which
was fairly easy
to do in those days, and started running errands and
doing other
odd jobs as soon as they could walk. One of the
elder brothers got
a month for stealing turnips. She stopped taking us
out for walks
a year later when Joe was eight and getting too tough
for a girl to
handle. He'd discovered that in Katie's home they
slept five in a
bed, and used to tease the life out of her about it.

Poor Katie! She had her first baby when she was
fifteen. No one
knew who was the father, and probably Katie wasn't
too certain
herself. Most people believe it was one of her
brothers. The
workhouse people took the baby, and Katie went into
service in
Walton. Some time afterwards she married a tinker,
which even by
the standards of her family was a come-down. The
last time I saw
her was in 1913. I was biking through Walton, and I
passed some
dreadful wooden shacks beside the railway line, with
fences round
them made out of barrel-staves, where the gypsies
used to camp at
certain times of the year, when the police would let
them. A
wrinkled-up hag of a woman, with her hair coming down
and a smoky
face, looking at least fifty years old, came out of
one of the huts
and began shaking out a rag mat. It was Katie, who
must have been
twenty-seven.

Thursday was market day. Chaps with round red faces
like pumpkins
and dirty smocks and huge boots covered with dry
cow-dung, carrying
long hazel switches, used to drive their brutes into
the market-
place early in the morning. For hours there'd be a
terrific
hullabaloo: dogs barking, pigs squealing, chaps in
tradesmen's vans
who wanted to get through the crush cracking their
whips and
cursing, and everyone who had anything to do with the
cattle
shouting and throwing sticks. The big noise was
always when they
brought a bull to market. Even at that age it struck
me that most
of the bulls were harmless law-abiding brutes that
only wanted to
get to their stalls in peace, but a bull wouldn't
have been
regarded as a bull if half the town hadn't had to
turn out and
chase it. Sometimes some terrified brute, generally
a half-grown
heifer, used to break loose and charge down a side
street, and then
anyone who happened to be in the way would stand in
the middle of
the road and swing his arms backwards like the sails
of a windmill,
shouting, 'Woo! Woo!' This was supposed to have a
kind of hypnotic
effect on an animal and certainly it did frighten
them.

Half-way through the morning some of the farmers

would come into
the shop and run samples of seed through their
fingers. Actually
Father did very little business with the farmers,
because he had no
delivery van and couldn't afford to give long
credits. Mostly he
did a rather petty class of business, poultry food
and fodder for
the tradesmen's horses and so forth. Old Brewer, of
the Mill Farm,
who was a stingy old bastard with a grey chin-beard,
used to stand
there for half an hour, fingering samples of chicken
corn and
letting them drop into his pocket in an absent-minded
manner, after
which, of course, he finally used to make off without
buying
anything. In the evenings the pubs were full of
drunken men. In
those days beer cost twopence a pint, and unlike the
beer nowadays
it had some guts in it. All through the Boer War the
recruiting
sergeant used to be in the four-ale bar of the George
every
Thursday and Saturday night, dressed up to the nines
and very free
with his money. Sometimes next morning you'd see him
leading off
some great sheepish, red-faced lump of a farm lad
who'd taken the
shilling when he was too drunk to see and found in
the morning that
it would cost him twenty pounds to get out of it.
People used to
stand in their doorways and shake their heads when
they saw them go
past, almost as if it had been a funeral. 'Well now!
Listed for a
soldier! Just think of it! A fine young fellow like
that!' It

just shocked them. Listing for a soldier, in their eyes, was the
exact equivalent of a girl's going on the streets. Their attitude
to the war, and to the Army, was very curious. They had the good
old English notions that the red-coats are the scum of the earth
and anyone who joins the Army will die of drink and go straight to
hell, but at the same time they were good patriots, stuck Union
Jacks in their windows, and held it as an article of faith that the
English had never been beaten in battle and never could be. At
that time everyone, even the Nonconformists, used to sing
sentimental songs about the thin red line and the soldier boy who
died on the battlefield far away. These soldier boys always used
to die 'when the shot and shell were flying', I remember. It
puzzled me as a kid. Shot I could understand, but it produced a
queer picture in my mind to think of cockle-shells flying through
the air. When Mafeking was relieved the people nearly yelled the
roof off, and there were at any rate times when they believed the
tales about the Boers chucking babies into the air and skewering
them on their bayonets. Old Brewer got so fed up with the kids
yelling 'Krooger!' after him that towards the end of the war he
shaved his beard off. The people's attitude towards the Government
was really the same. They were all true-blue Englishmen and swore
that Vicky was the best queen that ever lived and

foreigners were
dirt, but at the same time nobody ever thought of
paying a tax, not
even a dog-licence, if there was any way of dodging
it.

Before and after the war Lower Binfield was a Liberal
constituency.
During the war there was a by-election which the
Conservatives won.
I was too young to grasp what it was all about, I
only knew that I
was a Conservative because I liked the blue streamers
better than
the red ones, and I chiefly remember it because of a
drunken man
who fell on his nose on the pavement outside the
George. In the
general excitement nobody took any notice of him, and
he lay there
for hours in the hot sun with his blood drying round
him, and when
it dried it was purple. By the time the 1906
election came along I
was old enough to understand it, more or less, and
this time I was
a Liberal because everybody else was. The people
chased the
Conservative candidate half a mile and threw him into
a pond full
of duckweed. People took politics seriously in those
days. They
used to begin storing up rotten eggs weeks before an
election.

Very early in life, when the Boer War broke out, I
remember the big
row between Father and Uncle Ezekiel. Uncle Ezekiel
had a little
boot-shop in one of the streets off the High Street,
and also did
some cobbling. It was a small business and tended to
get smaller,

which didn't matter greatly because Uncle Ezekiel
wasn't married.
He was only a half-brother and much older than
Father, twenty years
older at least, and for the fifteen years or so that
I knew him he
always looked exactly the same. He was a
fine-looking old chap,
rather tall, with white hair and the whitest whiskers
I ever saw--
white as thistledown. He had a way of slapping his
leather apron
and standing up very straight--a reaction from
bending over the
last, I suppose--after which he'd bark his opinions
straight in
your face, ending up with a sort of ghostly cackle.
He was a real
old nineteenth-century Liberal, the kind that not
only used to ask
you what Gladstone said in '78 but could tell you the
answer, and
one of the very few people in Lower Binfield who
stuck to the same
opinions all through the war. He was always
denouncing Joe
Chamberlain and some gang of people that he referred
to as 'the
Park Lane riff-raff'. I can hear him now, having one
of his
arguments with Father. 'Them and their far-flung
Empire! Can't
fling it too far for me. He-he-he!' And then
Father's voice, a
quiet, worried, conscientious kind of voice, coming
back at him
with the white man's burden and our dooty to the pore
blacks whom
these here Boars treated something shameful. For a
week or so
after Uncle Ezekiel gave it out that he was a
pro-Boer and a Little
Englander they were hardly on speaking terms. They

had another row
when the atrocity stories started. Father was very
worried by the
tales he'd heard, and he tackled Uncle Ezekiel about
it. Little
Englander or no, surely he couldn't think it right
for these here
Boars to throw babies in the air and catch them on
their bayonets,
even if they WERE only nigger babies? But Uncle
Ezekiel just
laughed in his face. Father had got it all wrong!
It wasn't the
Boars who threw babies in the air, it was the British
soldiers!
He kept grabbing hold of me--I must have been about
five--to
illustrate. 'Throw them in the air and skewer them
like frogs, I
tell you! Same as I might throw this youngster
here!' And then
he'd swing me up and almost let go of me, and I had a
vivid picture
of myself flying through the air and landing plonk on
the end of a
bayonet.

Father was quite different from Uncle Ezekiel. I
don't know much
about my grandparents, they were dead before I was
born, I only
know that my grandfather had been a cobbler and late
in life he
married the widow of a seedsman, which was how we
came to have the
shop. It was a job that didn't really suit Father,
though he knew
the business inside out and was everlastingly
working. Except on
Sunday and very occasionally on week-day evenings I
never remember
him without meal on the backs of his hands and in the
lines of his

face and in what was left of his hair. He'd married when he was in
his thirties and must have been nearly forty when I first remember
him. He was a small man, a sort of grey, quiet little man, always
in shirtsleeves and white apron and always dusty-looking because of
the meal. He had a round head, a blunt nose, a rather bushy
moustache, spectacles, and butter-coloured hair, the same colour
as mine, but he'd lost most of it and it was always mealy. My
grandfather had bettered himself a good deal by marrying the
seedsman's widow, and Father had been educated at Walton Grammar
School, where the farmers and the better-off tradesmen sent their
sons, whereas Uncle Ezekiel liked to boast that he'd never been to
school in his life and had taught himself to read by a tallow
candle after working hours. But he was a much quicker-witted man
than Father, he could argue with anybody, and he used to quote
Carlyle and Spencer by the yard. Father had a slow sort of mind,
he'd never taken to 'book-learning', as he called it, and his
English wasn't good. On Sunday afternoons, the only time when he
really took things easy, he'd settle down by the parlour fireplace
to have what he called a 'good read' at the Sunday paper. His
favourite paper was The People--Mother preferred the News of the
World, which she considered had more murders in it. I can see them
now. A Sunday afternoon--summer, of course, always

summer--a smell
of roast pork and greens still floating in the air,
and Mother on
one side of the fireplace, starting off to read the
latest murder
but gradually falling asleep with her mouth open, and
Father on the
other, in slippers and spectacles, working his way
slowly through
the yards of smudgy print. And the soft feeling of
summer all
round you, the geranium in the window, a starling
cooing somewhere,
and myself under the table with the B.O.P., making
believe that the
tablecloth is a tent. Afterwards, at tea, as he
chewed his way
through the radishes and spring onions, Father would
talk in a
ruminative kind of way about the stuff he'd been
reading, the fires
and shipwrecks and scandals in high society, and
these here new
flying machines and the chap (I notice that to this
day he turns up
in the Sunday papers about once in three years) who
was swallowed
by a whale in the Red Sea and taken out three days
later, alive but
bleached white by the whale's gastric juice. Father
was always a
bit sceptical of this story, and of the new flying
machines,
otherwise he believed everything he read. Until 1909
no one in
Lower Binfield believed that human beings would ever
learn to fly.
The official doctrine was that if God had meant us to
fly He'd have
given us wings. Uncle Ezekiel couldn't help
retorting that if God
had meant us to ride He'd have given us wheels, but
even he didn't

believe in the new flying machines.

It was only on Sunday afternoons, and perhaps on the one evening a
week when he looked in at the George for a half-pint, that Father
turned his mind to such things. At other times he was always more
or less overwhelmed by business. There wasn't really such a lot to
do, but he seemed to be always busy, either in the loft behind the
yard, struggling about with sacks and bales, or in the kind of
dusty little cubby-hole behind the counter in the shop, adding
figures up in a notebook with a stump of pencil. He was a very
honest man and a very obliging man, very anxious to provide good
stuff and swindle nobody, which even in those days wasn't the best
way to get on in business. He would have been just the man for
some small official job, a postmaster, for instance, or station-
master of a country station. But he hadn't either the cheek and
enterprise to borrow money and expand the business, or the
imagination to think of new selling-lines. It was characteristic
of him that the only streak of imagination he ever showed, the
invention of a new seed mixture for cage-birds (Bowling's Mixture
it was called, and it was famous over a radius of nearly five
miles) was really due to Uncle Ezekiel. Uncle Ezekiel was a bit of
a bird-fancier and had quantities of goldfinches in his dark little
shop. It was his theory that cage-birds lose their

colour because
of lack of variation in their diet. In the yard
behind the shop
Father had a tiny plot of ground in which he used to
grow about
twenty kinds of weed under wire-netting, and he used
to dry them
and mix their seeds with ordinary canary seed.
Jackie, the
bullfinch who hung in the shop-window, was supposed
to be an
advertisement for Bowling's Mixture. Certainly,
unlike most
bullfinches in cages, Jackie never turned black.

Mother was fat ever since I remember her. No doubt
it's from her
that I inherit my pituitary deficiency, or whatever
it is that
makes you get fat.

She was a largish woman, a bit taller than Father,
with hair a good
deal fairer than his and a tendency to wear black
dresses. But
except on Sundays I never remember her without an
apron. It would
be an exaggeration, but not a very big one, to say
that I never
remember her when she wasn't cooking. When you look
back over a
long period you seem to see human beings always fixed
in some
special place and some characteristic attitude. It
seems to you
that they were always doing exactly the same thing.
Well, just as
when I think of Father I remember him always behind
the counter,
with his hair all mealy, adding up figures with a
stump of pencil
which he moistens between his lips, and just as I
remember Uncle

Ezekiel, with his ghostly white whiskers, straightening himself out
and slapping his leather apron, so when I think of Mother I
remember her at the kitchen table, with her forearms covered with
flour, rolling out a lump of dough.

You know the kind of kitchen people had in those days. A huge
place, rather dark and low, with a great beam across the ceiling
and a stone floor and cellars underneath. Everything enormous, or
so it seemed to me when I was a kid. A vast stone sink which
didn't have a tap but an iron pump, a dresser covering one wall and
going right up to the ceiling, a gigantic range which burned half a
ton a month and took God knows how long to blacklead. Mother at
the table rolling out a huge flap of dough. And myself crawling
round, messing about with bundles of firewood and lumps of coal and
tin beetle-traps (we had them in all the dark corners and they used
to be baited with beer) and now and again coming up to the table to
try and cadge a bit of food. Mother 'didn't hold with' eating
between meals. You generally got the same answer: 'Get along with
you, now! I'm not going to have you spoiling your dinner. Your
eye's bigger than your belly.' Very occasionally, however, she'd
cut you off a thin strip of candied peel.

I used to like to watch Mother rolling pastry. There's always a
fascination in watching anybody do a job which he

really
understands. Watch a woman--a woman who really knows
how to cook,
I mean--rolling dough. She's got a peculiar, solemn,
indrawn air,
a satisfied kind of air, like a priestess celebrating
a sacred
rite. And in her own mind, of course, that's exactly
what she is.
Mother had thick, pink, strong forearms which were
generally
mottled with flour. When she was cooking, all her
movements were
wonderfully precise and firm. In her hands
egg-whisks and mincers
and rolling-pins did exactly what they were meant to
do. When you
saw her cooking you knew that she was in a world
where she
belonged, among things she really understood. Except
through the
Sunday papers and an occasional bit of gossip the
outside world
didn't really exist for her. Although she read more
easily than
Father, and unlike him used to read novelettes as
well as
newspapers, she was unbelievably ignorant. I
realized this even by
the time I was ten years old. She certainly couldn't
have told you
whether Ireland was east or west of England, and I
doubt whether
any time up to the outbreak of the Great War she
could have told
you who was Prime Minister. Moreover she hadn't the
smallest wish
to know such things. Later on when I read books
about Eastern
countries where they practise polygamy, and the
secret harems where
the women are locked up with black eunuchs mounting
guard over

them, I used to think how shocked Mother would have been if she'd
heard of it. I can almost hear her voice--'Well, now! Shutting
their wives up like that! The IDEA!' Not that she'd have known
what a eunuch was. But in reality she lived her life in a space
that must have been as small and almost as private as the average
zenana. Even in our own house there were parts where she never set
foot. She never went into the loft behind the yard and very seldom
into the shop. I don't think I ever remember her serving a
customer. She wouldn't have known where any of the things were
kept, and until they were milled into flour she probably didn't
know the difference between wheat and oats. Why should she? The
shop was Father's business, it was 'the man's work', and even about
the money side of it she hadn't very much curiosity. Her job, 'the
woman's work', was to look after the house and the meals and the
laundry and the children. She'd have had a fit if she'd seen
Father or anyone else of the male sex trying to sew on a button for
himself.

So far as the meals and so forth went, ours was one of those houses
where everything goes like clockwork. Or no, not like clockwork,
which suggests something mechanical. It was more like some kind of
natural process. You knew that breakfast would be on the table
tomorrow morning in much the same way as you knew the

sun would
rise. All through her life Mother went to bed at
nine and got up
at five, and she'd have thought it vaguely
wicked--sort of decadent
and foreign and aristocratic--to keep later hours.
Although she
didn't mind paying Katie Simmons to take Joe and me
out for walks,
she would never tolerate the idea of having a woman
in to help with
the housework. It was her firm belief that a hired
woman always
sweeps the dirt under the dresser. Our meals were
always ready on
the tick. Enormous meals--boiled beef and dumplings,
roast beef
and Yorkshire, boiled mutton and capers, pig's head,
apple pie,
spotted dog, and jam roly-poly--with grace before and
after. The
old ideas about bringing up children still held good,
though they
were going out fast. In theory children were still
thrashed and
put to bed on bread and water, and certainly you were
liable to be
sent away from table if you made too much noise
eating, or choked,
or refused something that was 'good for you', or
'answered back'.
In practice there wasn't much discipline in our
family, and of the
two Mother was the firmer. Father, though he was
always quoting
'Spare the rod and spoil the child', was really much
too weak with
us, especially with Joe, who was a hard case from the
start. He
was always 'going to' give Joe a good hiding, and he
used to tell
us stories, which I now believe were lies, about the
frightful

thrashings his own father used to give him with a
leather strap,
but nothing ever came of it. By the time Joe was
twelve he was too
strong for Mother to get him across her knee, and
after that there
was no doing anything with him.

At that time it was still thought proper for parents
to say 'don't'
to their children all day long. You'd often hear a
man boasting
that he'd 'thrash the life out of' his son if he
caught him
smoking, or stealing apples, or robbing a bird's
nest. In some
families these thrashings actually took place. Old
Lovegrove, the
saddler, caught his two sons, great lumps aged
sixteen and fifteen,
smoking in the garden shed and walloped them so that
you could hear
it all over the town. Lovegrove was a very heavy
smoker. The
thrashings never seemed to have any effect, all boys
stole apples,
robbed birds' nests, and learned to smoke sooner or
later, but the
idea was still knocking around that children should
be treated
rough. Practically everything worth doing was
forbidden, in theory
anyway. According to Mother, everything that a boy
ever wants to
do was 'dangerous'. Swimming was dangerous, climbing
trees was
dangerous, and so were sliding, snowballing, hanging
on behind
carts, using catapults and squailers, and even
fishing. All
animals were dangerous, except Nailer, the two cats,
and Jackie the
bullfinch. Every animal had its special recognized

methods of
attacking you. Horses bit, bats got into your hair,
earwigs got
into your ears, swans broke your leg with a blow of
their wings,
bulls tossed you, and snakes 'stung'. All snakes
stung, according
to Mother, and when I quoted the penny encyclopedia
to the effect
that they didn't sting but bit, she only told me not
to answer
back. Lizards, slow-worms, toads, frogs, and newts
also stung.
All insects stung, except flies and blackbeetles.
Practically all
kinds of food, except the food you had at meals, were
either
poisonous or 'bad for you'. Raw potatoes were deadly
poison, and
so were mushrooms unless you bought them at the
greengrocer's. Raw
gooseberries gave you colic and raw raspberries gave
you a skin-
rash. If you had a bath after a meal you died of
cramp, if you cut
yourself between the thumb and forefinger you got
lockjaw, and if
you washed your hands in the water eggs were boiled
in you got
warts. Nearly everything in the shop was poisonous,
which was why
Mother had put the gate in the doorway. Cowcake was
poisonous, and
so was chicken corn, and so were mustard seed and
Karswood poultry
spice. Sweets were bad for you and eating between
meals was bad
for you, though curiously enough there were certain
kinds of eating
between meals that Mother always allowed. When she
was making plum
jam she used to let us eat the syrupy stuff that was
skimmed off

the top, and we used to gorge ourselves with it till
we were sick.
Although nearly everything in the world was either
dangerous or
poisonous, there were certain things that had
mysterious virtues.
Raw onions were a cure for almost everything. A
stocking tied
round your neck was a cure for a sore throat.
Sulphur in a dog's
drinking water acted as a tonic, and old Nailer's
bowl behind the
back door always had a lump of sulphur in it which
stayed there
year after year, never dissolving.

We used to have tea at six. By four Mother had
generally finished
the housework, and between four and six she used to
have a quiet
cup of tea and 'read her paper', as she called it.
As a matter of
fact she didn't often read the newspaper except on
Sundays. The
week-day papers only had the day's news, and it was
only
occasionally that there was a murder. But the
editors of the
Sunday papers had grasped that people don't really
mind whether
their murders are up to date and when there was no
new murder on
hand they'd hash up an old one, sometimes going as
far back as Dr
Palmer and Mrs Manning. I think Mother thought of
the world
outside Lower Binfleld chiefly as a place where
murders were
committed. Murders had a terrible fascination for
her, because, as
she often said, she just didn't know how people could
BE so wicked.
Cutting their wives' throats, burying their fathers

under cement
floors, throwing babies down wells! How anyone could
DO such
things! The Jack the Ripper scare had happened about
the time when
Father and Mother were married, and the big wooden
shutters we used
to draw over the shop windows every night dated from
then.
Shutters for shop windows were going out, most of the
shops in the
High Street didn't have them, but Mother felt safe
behind them.
All along, she said, she'd had a dreadful feeling
that Jack the
Ripper was hiding in Lower Binfield. The Crippen
case--but that
was years later, when I was almost grown up--upset
her badly. I
can hear her voice now. 'Gutting his poor wife up
and burying her
in the coal cellar! The IDEA! What I'd do to that
man if I got
hold of him!' And curiously enough, when she thought
of the
dreadful wickedness of that little American doctor
who dismembered
his wife (and made a very neat job of it by taking
all the bones
out and chucking the head into the sea, if I remember
rightly) the
tears actually came into her eyes.

But what she mostly read on week-days was Hilda's
Home Companion.
In those days it was part of the regular furnishing
of any home
like ours, and as a matter of fact it still exists,
though it's
been a bit crowded out by the more streamlined
women's papers that
have come up since the war. I had a look at a copy
only the other

day. It's changed, but less than most things. There are still the
same enormous serial stories that go on for six months (and it all
comes right in the end with orange blossoms to follow), and the
same Household Hints, and the same ads for sewing-machines and
remedies for bad legs. It's chiefly the print and the illustrations
that have changed. In those days the heroine had to look like an
egg-timer and now she has to look like a cylinder. Mother was a slow
reader and believed in getting her threepennyworth out of Hilda's
Home Companion. Sitting in the old yellow armchair beside the
hearth, with her feet on the iron fender and the little pot of
strong tea stewing on the hob, she'd work her way steadily from
cover to cover, right through the serial, the two short stories,
the Household Hints, the ads for Zam-Buk, and the answers to
correspondents. Hilda's Home Companion generally lasted her the
week out, and some weeks she didn't even finish it. Sometimes the
heat of the fire, or the buzzing of the bluebottles on summer
afternoons, would send her off into a doze, and at about a quarter
to six she'd wake up with a tremendous start, glance at the clock on
the mantelpiece, and then get into a stew because tea was going to
be late. But tea was never late.

In those days--till 1909, to be exact--Father could still afford an
errand boy, and he used to leave the shop to him and

come in to tea
with the backs of his hands all mealy. Then Mother
would stop
cutting slices of bread for a moment and say, 'If
you'll give us
grace, Father', and Father, while we all bent our
heads on our
chests, would mumble reverently, 'Fwat we bout to
receive--Lord
make us truly thankful--Amen.' Later on, when Joe
was a bit older,
it would be 'YOU give us grace today, Joe', and Joe
would pipe it
out. Mother never said grace: it had to be someone
of the male
sex.

There were always bluebottles buzzing on summer
afternoons. Ours
wasn't a sanitary house, precious few houses in Lower
Binfield
were. I suppose the town must have contained five
hundred houses
and there certainly can't have been more than ten
with bathrooms or
fifty with what we should now describe as a W.C. In
summer our
backyard always smelt of dustbins. And all houses
had insects in
them. We had blackbeetles in the wainscoting and
crickets
somewhere behind the kitchen range, besides, of
course, the meal-
worms in the shop. In those days even a house-proud
woman like
Mother didn't see anything to object to in
blackbeetles. They were
as much a part of the kitchen as the dresser or the
rolling-pin.
But there were insects and insects. The houses in
the bad street
behind the brewery, where Katie Simmons lived, were
overrun by

bugs. Mother or any of the shopkeepers' wives would
have died of
shame if they'd had bugs in the house. In fact it
was considered
proper to say that you didn't even know a bug by
sight.

The great blue flies used to come sailing into the
larder and sit
longingly on the wire covers over the meat. 'Drat
the flies!'
people used to say, but the flies were an act of God
and apart from
meat-covers and fly-papers you couldn't do much about
them. I said
a little while back that the first thing I remember
is the smell of
sainfoin, but the smell of dustbins is also a pretty
early memory.
When I think of Mother's kitchen, with the stone
floor and the
beetle-traps and the steel fender and the blackleaded
range, I
always seem to hear the bluebottles buzzing and smell
the dustbin,
and also old Nailer, who carried a pretty powerful
smell of dog.
And God knows there are worse smells and sounds.
Which would you
sooner listen to, a bluebottle or a bombing plane?

3

Joe started going to Walton Grammar School two years
before I did.
Neither us went there till we were nine. It meant a
four-mile bike
ride morning and evening, and Mother was scared of
allowing us
among the traffic, which by that time included a very

few motor-
cars.

For several years we went to the dame-school kept by old Mrs
Howlett. Most of the shopkeepers' children went there, to save
them from the shame and come-down of going to the board school,
though everyone knew that Mother Howlett was an old imposter and
worse than useless as a teacher. She was over seventy, she was
very deaf, she could hardly see through her spectacles, and all she
owned in the way of equipment was a cane, a blackboard, a few dog-
eared grammar books, and a couple of dozen smelly slates. She
could just manage the girls, but the boys simply laughed at her and
played truant as often as they felt like it. Once there was a
frightful scandal cause a boy put his hand up a girl's dress, a
thing I didn't understand at the time. Mother Howlett succeeded in
hushing it up. When you did something particularly bad her formula
was 'I'll tell your father', and on very rare occasions she did so.
But we were quite sharp enough to see that she daren't do it too
often, and even when she let out at you with the cane she was so
old and clumsy that it was easy to dodge.

Joe was only eight when he got in with a tough gang of boys who
called themselves the Black Hand. The leader was Sid Lovegrove,
the saddler's younger son, who was about thirteen, and there were

two other shopkeepers' sons, an errand boy from the
brewery, and
two farm lads who sometimes managed to cut work and
go off with
the gang for a couple of hours. The farm lads were
great lumps
bursting out of corduroy breeches, with very broad
accents and
rather looked down on by the rest of the gang, but
they were
tolerated because they knew twice as much about
animals as any of
the others. One of them, nicknamed Ginger, would
even catch a
rabbit in his hands occasionally. If he saw one
lying in the grass
he used to fling himself on it like a spread-eagle.
There was a
big social distinction between the shopkeepers' sons
and the sons
of labourers and farm-hands, but the local boys
didn't usually pay
much attention to it till they were about sixteen.
The gang had a
secret password and an 'ordeal' which included
cutting your finger
and eating an earthworm, and they gave themselves out
to be
frightful desperadoes. Certainly they managed to
make a nuisance
of themselves, broke windows chased cows, tore the
knockers off
doors, and stole fruit by the hundredweight.
Sometimes in winter
they managed to borrow a couple of ferrets and go
ratting, when the
farmers would let them. They all had catapults and
squailers, and
they were always saving up to buy a saloon pistol,
which in those
days cost five shillings, but the savings never
amounted to more
than about threepence. In summer they used to go

fishing and bird-
nesting. When Joe was at Mrs Howlett's he used to
cut school at
least once a week, and even at the Grammar School he
managed it
about once a fortnight. There was a boy at the
Grammar School, an
auctioneer's son, who could copy any handwriting and
for a penny
he'd forge a letter from your mother saying you'd
been ill
yesterday. Of course I was wild to join the Black
Hand, but Joe
always choked me off and said they didn't want any
blasted kids
hanging round.

It was the thought of going fishing that really
appealed to me. At
eight years old I hadn't yet been fishing, except
with a penny net,
with which you can sometimes catch a stickleback.
Mother was
always terrified of letting us go anywhere near
water. She
'forbade' fishing, in the way in which parents in
those days
'forbade' almost everything, and I hadn't yet grasped
that grownups
can't see round corners. But the thought of fishing
sent me wild
with excitement. Many a time I'd been past the pool
at the Mill
Farm and watched the small carp basking on the
surface, and
sometimes under the willow tree at the corner a great
diamond-
shaped carp that to my eyes looked enormous--six
inches long, I
suppose--would suddenly rise to the surface, gulp
down a grub, and
sink again. I'd spent hours gluing my nose against
the window of

Wallace's in the High Street, where fishing tackle and guns and
bicycles were sold. I used to lie awake on summer mornings
thinking of the tales Joe had told me about fishing, how you mixed
bread paste, how your float gives a bob and plunges under and you
feel the rod bending and the fish tugging at the line. Is it any
use talking about it, I wonder--the sort of fairy light that fish
and fishing tackle have in a kid's eyes? Some kids feel the same
about guns and shooting, some feel it about motor-bikes or
aeroplanes or horses. It's not a thing that you can explain or
rationalize, it's merely magic. One morning--it was in June and I
must have been eight--I knew that Joe was going to cut school and
go out fishing, and I made up my mind to follow. In some way Joe
guessed what I was thinking about, and he started on me while we
were dressing.

'Now then, young George! Don't you get thinking you're coming with
the gang today. You stay back home.'

'No, I didn't. I didn't think nothing about it.'

'Yes, you did! You thought you were coming with the gang.'

'No, I didn't!'

'Yes, you did!'

'No, I didn't!'

'Yes, you did! You stay back home. We don't want any bloody kids
along.'

Joe had just learned the word 'bloody' and was always using it.
Father overheard him once and swore that he'd thrash the life out
of Joe, but as usual he didn't do so. After breakfast Joe started
off on his bike, with his satchel and his Grammar School cap, five
minutes early as he always did when he meant to cut school, and
when it was time for me to leave for Mother Howlett's I sneaked off
and hid in the lane behind the allotments. I knew the gang were
going to the pond at the Mill Farm, and I was going to follow them
if they murdered me for it. Probably they'd give me a hiding, and
probably I wouldn't get home to dinner, and then Mother would know
that I'd cut school and I'd get another hiding, but I didn't care.
I was just desperate to go fishing with the gang. I was cunning,
too. I allowed Joe plenty of time to make a circuit round and get
to the Mill Farm by road, and then I followed down the lane and
skirted round the meadows on the far side of the hedge, so as to
get almost to the pond before the gang saw me. It was a wonderful
June morning. The buttercups were up to my knees. There was a
breath of wind just stirring the tops of the elms, and the great
green clouds of leaves were sort of soft and rich like silk. And
it was nine in the morning and I was eight years old,

and all round
me it was early summer, with great tangled hedges
where the wild
roses were still in bloom, and bits of soft white
cloud drifting
overhead, and in the distance the low hills and the
dim blue masses
of the woods round Upper Binfield. And I didn't give
a damn for
any of it. All I was thinking of was the green pool
and the carp
and the gang with their hooks and lines and bread
paste. It was as
though they were in paradise and I'd got to join
them. Presently I
managed to sneak up on them--four of them, Joe and
Sid Lovegrove
and the errand boy and another shopkeeper's son,
Harry Barnes I
think his name was.

Joe turned and saw me. 'Christ!' he said. 'It's the
kid.' He
walked up to me like a tom-cat that's going to start
a fight. 'Now
then, you! What'd I tell you? You get back 'ome
double quick.'

Both Joe and I were inclined to drop our aitches if
we were at all
excited. I backed away from him.

'I'm not going back 'ome.'

'Yes you are.'

'Clip his ear, Joe,' said Sid. 'We don't want no
kids along.'

'ARE you going back 'ome?' said Joe.

'No.'

'Righto, my boy! Right-HO!'

Then he started on me. The next minute he was chasing me round,
catching me one clip after another. But I didn't run away from the
pool, I ran in circles. Presently he'd caught me and got me down,
and then he knelt on my upper arms and began screwing my ears,
which was his favourite torture and one I couldn't stand. I was
blubbing by this time, but still I wouldn't give in and promise to
go home. I wanted to stay and go fishing with the gang. And
suddenly the others swung round in my favour and told Joe to get up
off my chest and let me stay if I wanted to. So I stayed after
all.

The others had some hooks and lines and floats and a lump of bread
paste in a rag, and we all cut ourselves willow switches from the
tree at the corner of the pool. The farmhouse was only about two
hundred yards away, and you had to keep out of sight because old
Brewer was very down on fishing. Not that it made any difference
to him, he only used the pool for watering his cattle, but he hated
boys. The others were still jealous of me and kept telling me to
get out of the light and reminding me that I was only a kid and
knew nothing about fishing. They said that I was making such a
noise I'd scare all the fish away, though actually I was making
about half as much noise as anyone else there.

Finally they
wouldn't let me sit beside them and sent me to
another part of the
pool where the water was shallower and there wasn't
so much shade.
They said a kid like me was sure to keep splashing
the water and
frighten the fish away. It was a rotten part of the
pool, a part
where no fish would ordinarily come. I knew that. I
seemed to
know by a kind of instinct the places where a fish
would lie.
Still, I was fishing at last. I was sitting on the
grass bank with
the rod in my hands, with the flies buzzing round,
and the smell of
wild peppermint fit to knock you down, watching the
red float on
the green water, and I was happy as a tinker although
the tear-
marks mixed up with dirt were still all over my face.

Lord knows how long we sat there. The morning
stretched out and
out, and the sun got higher and higher, and nobody
had a bite. It
was a hot still day, too clear for fishing. The
floats lay on the
water with never a quiver. You could see deep down
into the water
as though you were looking into a kind of dark green
glass. Out in
the middle of the pool you could see the fish lying
just under the
surface, sunning themselves, and sometimes in the
weeds near the
side a newt would come gliding upwards and rest there
with his
fingers on the weeds and his nose just out of the
water. But the
fish weren't biting. The others kept shouting that
they'd got a

nibble, but it was always a lie. And the time
stretched out and
out and it got hotter and hotter, and the flies ate
you alive, and
the wild peppermint under the bank smelt like Mother
Wheeler's
sweet-shop. I was getting hungrier and hungrier, all
the more
because I didn't know for certain where my dinner was
coming from.
But I sat as still as a mouse and never took my eyes
off the float.
The others had given me a lump of bait about the size
of a marble,
telling me that would have to do for me, but for a
long time I
didn't even dare to re-bait my hook, because every
time I pulled my
line up they swore I was making enough noise to
frighten every fish
within five miles.

I suppose we must have been there about two hours
when suddenly my
float gave a quiver. I knew it was a fish. It must
have been a
fish that was just passing accidentally and saw my
bait. There's
no mistaking the movement your float gives when it's
a real bite.
It's quite different from the way it moves when you
twitch your
line accidentally. The next moment it gave a sharp
bob and almost
went under. I couldn't hold myself in any longer. I
yelled to the
others:

'I've got a bite!'

'Rats!' yelled Sid Lovegrove instantly.

But the next moment there wasn't any doubt about it.

The float
dived straight down, I could still see it under the
water, kind of
dim red, and I felt the rod tighten in my hand.
Christ, that
feeling! The line jerking and straining and a fish
on the other
end of it! The others saw my rod bending, and the
next moment
they'd all flung their rods down and rushed round to
me. I gave a
terrific haul and the fish--a great huge silvery
fish--came flying
up through the air. The same moment all of us gave a
yell of
agony. The fish had slipped off the hook and fallen
into the wild
peppermint under the bank. But he'd fallen into
shallow water
where he couldn't turn over, and for perhaps a second
he lay there
on his side helpless. Joe flung himself into the
water, splashing
us all over, and grabbed him in both hands. 'I got
'im!' he
yelled. The next moment he'd flung the fish on to
the grass and we
were all kneeling round it. How we gloated! The
poor dying brute
flapped up and down and his scales glistened all the
colours of the
rainbow. It was a huge carp, seven inches long at
least, and must
have weighed a quarter of a pound. How we shouted to
see him! But
the next moment it was as though a shadow had fallen
across us. We
looked up, and there was old Brewer standing over us,
with his tall
billycock hat--one of those hats they used to wear
that were a
cross between a top hat and a bowler--and his cowhide
gaiters and a

thick hazel stick in his hand.

We suddenly cowered like partridges when there's a
hawk overhead.
He looked from one to other of us. He had a wicked
old mouth with
no teeth in it, and since he'd shaved his beard off
his chin looked
like a nutcracker.

'What are you boys doing here?' he said.

There wasn't much doubt about what we were doing.
Nobody answered.

'I'll learn 'ee come fishing in my pool!' he suddenly
roared, and
the next moment he was on us, whacking out in all
directions.

The Black Hand broke and fled. We left all the rods
behind and
also the fish. Old Brewer chased us half across the
meadow. His
legs were stiff and he couldn't move fast, but he got
in some good
swipes before we were out of his reach. We left him
in the middle
of the field, yelling after us that he knew all our
names and was
going to tell our fathers. I'd been at the back and
most of the
wallops had landed on me. I had some nasty red weals
on the calves
of my legs when we got to the other side of the hedge.

I spent the rest of the day with the gang. They
hadn't made up
their mind whether I was really a member yet, but for
the time
being they tolerated me. The errand boy, who'd had
the morning off
on some lying pretext or other, had to go back to the

brewery. The
rest of us went for a long, meandering, scrounging
kind of walk,
the sort of walk that boys go for when they're away
from home all
day, and especially when they're away without
permission. It was
the first real boy's walk I'd had, quite different
from the walks
we used to go with Katie Simmons. We had our dinner
in a dry ditch
on the edge of the town, full of rusty cans and wild
fennel. The
others gave me bits of their dinner, and Sid
Lovegrove had a penny,
so someone fetched a Penny Monster which we had
between us. It was
very hot, and the fennel smelt very strong, and the
gas of the
Penny Monster made us belch. Afterwards we wandered
up the dusty
white road to Upper Binfield, the first time I'd been
that way, I
believe, and into the beech woods with the carpets of
dead leaves
and the great smooth trunks that soar up into the sky
so that the
birds in the upper branches look like dots. You
could go wherever
you liked in the woods in those days. Binfield
House, was shut up,
they didn't preserve the pheasants any longer, and at
the worst
you'd only meet a carter with a load of wood. There
was a tree
that had been sawn down, and the rings of the trunk
looked like a
target, and we had shots at it with stones. Then the
others had
shots at birds with their catapults, and Sid
Lovegrove swore he'd
hit a chaffinch and it had stuck in a fork in the
tree. Joe said

he was lying, and they argued and almost fought. Then we went down
into a chalk hollow full of beds of dead leaves and shouted to hear
the echo. Someone shouted a dirty word, and then we said over all
the dirty words we knew, and the others jeered at me because I only
knew three. Sid Lovegrove said he knew how babies were born and it
was just the same as rabbits except that the baby came out of the
woman's navel. Harry Barnes started to carve the word ---- on a
beech tree, but got fed up with it after the first two letters.
Then we went round by the lodge of Binfield House. There was a
rumour that somewhere in the grounds there was a pond with enormous
fish in it, but no one ever dared go inside because old Hodges, the
lodge-keeper who acted as a kind of caretaker, was 'down' on boys.
He was digging in his vegetable garden by the lodge when we passed.
We cheeked him over the fence until he chased us off, and then we
went down to the Walton Road and cheeked the carters, keeping on
the other side of the hedge so that they couldn't reach us with
their whips. Beside the Walton Road there was a place that had
been a quarry and then a rubbish dump, and finally had got
overgrown with blackberry bushes. There were great mounds of rusty
old tin cans and bicycle frames and saucepans with holes in them
and broken bottles with weeds growing all over them, and we spent
nearly an hour and got ourselves filthy from head to

foot routing
out iron fence posts, because Harry Barnes swore that
the
blacksmith in Lower Binfield would pay sixpence a
hundredweight for
old iron. Then Joe found a late thrush's nest with
half-fledged
chicks in it in a blackberry bush. After a lot of
argument about
what to do with them we took the chicks out, had
shots at them with
stones, and finally stamped on them. There were four
of them, and
we each had one to stamp on. It was getting on
towards tea-time
now. We knew that old Brewer would be as good as his
word and
there was a hiding ahead of us, but we were getting
too hungry to
stay out much longer. Finally we trailed home, with
one more row
on the way, because when we were passing the
allotments we saw a
rat and chased it with sticks, and old Bennet the
station-master,
who worked at his allotment every night and was very
proud of it,
came after us in a tearing rage because we'd trampled
on his onion-
bed.

I'd walked ten miles and I wasn't tired. All day I'd
trailed after
the gang and tried to do everything they did, and
they'd called me
'the kid' and snubbed me as much as they could, but
I'd more or
less kept my end up. I had a wonderful feeling
inside me, a
feeling you can't know about unless you've had
it--but if you're a
man you'll have had it some time. I knew that I
wasn't a kid any

longer, I was a boy at last. And it's a wonderful thing to be a
boy, to go roaming where grown-ups can't catch you, and to chase
rats and kill birds and shy stones and cheek carters and shout
dirty words. It's a kind of strong, rank feeling, a feeling of
knowing everything and fearing nothing, and it's all bound up with
breaking rules and killing things. The white dusty roads, the hot
sweaty feeling of one's clothes, the smell of fennel and wild
peppermint, the dirty words, the sour stink of the rubbish dump,
the taste of fizzy lemonade and the gas that made one belch, the
stamping on the young birds, the feel of the fish straining on the
line--it was all part of it. Thank God I'm a man, because no woman
ever has that feeling.

Sure enough, old Brewer had sent round and told everybody. Father
looked very glum, fetched a strap out of the shop, and said he was
going to 'thrash the life out of' Joe. But Joe struggled and
yelled and kicked, and in the end Father didn't get in more than a
couple of whacks at him. However, he got a caning from the
headmaster of the Grammar School next day. I tried to struggle
too, but I was small enough for Mother to get me across her knee,
and she gave me what-for with the strap. So I'd had three hidings
that day, one from Joe, one from old Brewer, and one from Mother.
Next day the gang decided that I wasn't really a

member yet and
that I'd got to go through the 'ordeal' (a word
they'd got out of
the Red Indian stories) after all. They were very
strict in
insisting that you had to bite the worm before you
swallowed it.
Moreover, because I was the youngest and they were
jealous of me
for being the only one to catch anything, they all
made out
afterwards that the fish I'd caught wasn't really a
big one. In a
general way the tendency of fish, when people talk
about them, is
to get bigger and bigger, but this one got smaller
and smaller,
until to hear the others talk you'd have thought it
was no bigger
than a minnow.

But it didn't matter. I'd been fishing. I'd seen
the float dive
under the water and felt the fish tugging at the
line, and however
many lies they told they couldn't take that away from
me.

4

For the next seven years, from when I was eight to
when I was
fifteen, what I chiefly remember is fishing.

Don't think that I did nothing else. It's only that
when you look
back over a long period of time, certain things seem
to swell up
till they overshadow everything else. I left Mother
Howlett's and

went to the Grammar School, with a leather satchel and a black cap
with yellow stripes, and got my first bicycle and a long time
afterwards my first long trousers. My first bike was a fixed-
wheel--free-wheel bikes were very expensive then. When you went
downhill you put your feet up on the front rests and let the pedals
go whizzing round. That was one of the characteristic sights of
the early nineteen-hundreds--a boy sailing downhill with his head
back and his feet up in the air. I went to the Grammar School in
fear and trembling, because of the frightful tales Joe had told me
about old Whiskers (his name was Wicksey) the headmaster, who was
certainly a dreadful-looking little man, with a face just like a
wolf, and at the end of the big schoolroom he had a glass case with
canes in it, which he'd sometimes take out and swish through the
air in a terrifying manner. But to my surprise I did rather well
at school. It had never occurred to me that I might be cleverer
than Joe, who was two years older than me and had bullied me ever
since he could walk. Actually Joe was an utter dunce, got the cane
about once a week, and stayed somewhere near the bottom of the
school till he was sixteen. My second term I took a prize in
arithmetic and another in some queer stuff that was mostly
concerned with pressed flowers and went by the name of Science, and
by the time I was fourteen Whiskers was talking about

scholarships
and Reading University. Father, who had ambitions
for Joe and me
in those days, was very anxious that I should go to
'college'.
There was an idea floating round that I was to be a
schoolteacher
and Joe was to be an auctioneer.

But I haven't many memories connected with school.
When I've mixed
with chaps from the upper classes, as I did during
the war, I've
been struck by the fact that they never really get
over that
frightful drilling they go through at public schools.
Either it
flattens them out into half-wits or they spend the
rest of their
lives kicking against it. It wasn't so with boys of
our class, the
sons of shopkeepers and farmers. You went to the
Grammar School
and you stayed there till you were sixteen, just to
show that you
weren't a prole, but school was chiefly a place that
you wanted to
get away from. You'd no sentiment of loyalty, no
goofy feeling
about the old grey stones (and they WERE old, right
enough, the
school had been founded by Cardinal Wolsey), and
there was no Old
Boy's tie and not even a school song. You had your
half-holidays
to yourself, because games weren't compulsory and as
often as not
you cut them. We played football in braces, and
though it was
considered proper to play cricket in a belt, you wore
your ordinary
shirt and trousers. The only game I really cared
about was the

stump cricket we used to play in the gravel yard during the break,
with a bat made out of a bit of packing case and a compo ball.

But I remember the smell of the big schoolroom, a smell of ink and
dust and boots, and the stone in the yard that had been a mounting
block and was used for sharpening knives on, and the little baker's
shop opposite where they sold a kind of Chelsea bun, twice the size
of the Chelsea buns you get nowadays, which were called Lardy
Busters and cost a halfpenny. I did all the things you do at
school. I carved my name on a desk and got the cane for it--you
were always caned for it if you were caught, but it was the
etiquette that you had to carve your name. And I got inky fingers
and bit my nails and made darts out of penholders and played
conkers and passed round dirty stories and learned to masturbate
and cheeked old Blowers, the English master, and bullied the life
out of little Willy Simeon, the undertaker's son, who was half-
witted and believed everything you told him. Our favourite trick
was to send him to shops to buy things that didn't exist. All the
old gags--the ha'porth of penny stamps, the rubber hammer, the
left-handed screwdriver, the pot of striped paint--poor Willy fell
for all of them. We had grand sport one afternoon, putting him in
a tub and telling him to lift himself up by the handles. He ended

up in an asylum, poor Willy. But it was in the
holidays that one
really lived.

There were good things to do in those days. In
winter we used to
borrow a couple of ferrets--Mother would never let
Joe and me keep
them at home, 'nasty smelly things' she called
them--and go round
the farms and ask leave to do a bit of ratting.
Sometimes they let
us, sometimes they told us to hook it and said we
were more trouble
than the rats. Later in winter we'd follow the
threshing machine
and help kill the rats when they threshed the stacks.
One winter,
1908 it must have been, the Thames flooded and then
froze and there
was skating for weeks on end, and Harry Barnes broke
his collar-
bone on the ice. In early spring we went after
squirrels with
squailers, and later on we went birdnesting. We had
a theory that
birds can't count and it's all right if you leave one
egg, but we
were cruel little beasts and sometimes we'd just
knock the nest
down and trample on the eggs or chicks. There was
another game we
had when the toads were spawning. We used to catch
toads, ram the
nozzle of a bicycle pump up their backsides, and blow
them up till
they burst. That's what boys are like, I don't know
why. In
summer we used to bike over the Burford Weir and
bathe. Wally
Lovegrove, Sid's young cousin, was drowned in 1906.
He got tangled
in the weeds at the bottom, and when the drag-hooks

brought his
body to the surface his face was jet black.

But fishing was the real thing. We went many a time
to old
Brewer's pool, and took tiny carp and tench out of
it, and once a
whopping eel, and there were other cow-ponds that had
fish in them
and were within walking distance on Saturday
afternoons. But after
we got bicycles we started fishing in the Thames
below Burford
Weir. It seemed more grown-up than fishing in
cow-ponds. There
were no farmers chasing you away, and there are
thumping fish in
the Thames--though, so far as I know, nobody's ever
been known to
catch one.

It's queer, the feeling I had for fishing--and still
have, really.
I can't call myself a fisherman. I've never in my
life caught a
fish two feet long, and it's thirty years now since
I've had a rod
in my hands. And yet when I look back the whole of
my boyhood from
eight to fifteen seems to have revolved round the
days when we went
fishing. Every detail has stuck clear in my memory.
I can
remember individual days and individual fish, there
isn't a cow-
pond or a backwater that I can't see a picture of if
I shut my eyes
and think. I could write a book on the technique of
fishing. When
we were kids we didn't have much in the way of
tackle, it cost too
much and most of our threepence a week (which was the
usual pocket-

money in those days) went on sweets and Lardy Busters. Very small
kids generally fish with a bent pin, which is too blunt to be much
use, but you can make a pretty good hook (though of course it's got
no barb) by bending a needle in a candle flame with a pair of
pliers. The farm lads knew how to plait horsehair so that it was
almost as good as gut, and you can take a small fish on a single
horsehair. Later we got to having two-shilling fishing-rods and
even reels of sorts. God, what hours I've spent gazing into
Wallace's window! Even the .410 guns and saloon pistols didn't
thrill me so much as the fishing tackle. And the copy of Gamage's
catalogue that I picked up somewhere, on a rubbish dump I think,
and studied as though it had been the Bible! Even now I could give
you all the details about gut-substitute and gimp and Limerick
hooks and priests and disgorgers and Nottingham reels and God knows
how many other technicalities.

Then there were the kinds of bait we used to use. In our shop
there were always plenty of mealworms, which were good but not very
good. Gentles were better. You had to beg them off old Gravitt,
the butcher, and the gang used to draw lots or do enamena-mina-mo
to decide who should go and ask, because Gravitt wasn't usually too
pleasant about it. He was a big, rough-faced old devil with a
voice like a mastiff, and when he barked, as he

generally did when
speaking to boys, all the knives and steels on his
blue apron would
give a jingle. You'd go in with an empty treacle-tin
in your hand,
hang round till any customers had disappeared and
then say very
humbly:

'Please, Mr Gravitt, y'got any gentles today?'

Generally he'd roar out: 'What! Gentles! Gentles
in my shop!
Ain't seen such a thing in years. Think I got
blow-flies in my
shop?'

He had, of course. They were everywhere. He used to
deal with
them with a strip of leather on the end of a stick,
with which he
could reach out to enormous distances and smack a fly
into paste.
Sometimes you had to go away without any gentles, but
as a rule
he'd shout after you just as you were going:

''Ere! Go round the backyard an' 'ave a look.
P'raps you might
find one or two if you looked careful.'

You used to find them in little clusters everywhere.
Gravitt's
backyard smelt like a battlefield. Butchers didn't
have
refrigerators in those days. Gentles live longer if
you keep them
in sawdust.

Wasp grubs are good, though it's hard to make them
stick on the
hook, unless you bake them first. When someone found
a wasps' nest

we'd go out at night and pour turpentine down it and plug up the
hole with mud. Next day the wasps would all be dead and you could
dig out the nest and take the grubs. Once something went wrong,
the turps missed the hole or something, and when we took the plug
out the wasps, which had been shut up all night, came out all
together with a zoom. We weren't very badly stung, but it was a
pity there was no one standing by with a stopwatch. Grasshoppers
are about the best bait there is, especially for chub. You stick
them on the hook without any shot and just flick them to and fro on
the surface--'dapping', they call it. But you can never get more
than two or three grasshoppers at a time. Greenbottle flies, which
are also damned difficult to catch, are the best bait for dace,
especially on clear days. You want to put them on the hook alive,
so that they wriggle. A chub will even take a wasp, but it's a
ticklish job to put a live wasp on the hook.

God knows how many other baits there were. Bread paste you make by
squeezing water through white bread in a rag. Then there are
cheese paste and honey paste and paste with aniseed in it. Boiled
wheat isn't bad for roach. Redworms are good for gudgeon. You
find them in very old manure heaps. And you also find another kind
of worm called a brandling, which is striped and smells like an
earwig, and which is very good bait for perch.

Ordinary earthworms
are good for perch. You have to put them in moss to
keep them
fresh and lively. If you try to keep them in earth
they die.
Those brown flies you find on cowdung are pretty good
for roach.
You can take a chub on a cherry, so they say, and
I've seen a roach
taken with a currant out of a bun.

In those days, from the sixteenth of June (when the
coarse-fishing
season starts) till midwinter I wasn't often without
a tin of worms
or gentles in my pocket. I had some fights with
Mother about it,
but in the end she gave in, fishing came off the list
of forbidden
things and Father even gave me a two-shilling
fishing-rod for
Christmas in 1903. Joe was barely fifteen when he
started going
after girls, and from then on he seldom came out
fishing, which he
said was a kid's game. But there were about half a
dozen others
who were as mad on fishing as I was. Christ, those
fishing days!
The hot sticky afternoons in the schoolroom when I've
sprawled
across my desk, with old Blowers's voice grating away
about
predicates and subjunctives and relative clauses, and
all that's in
my mind is the backwater near Burford Weir and the
green pool under
the willows with the dace gliding to and fro. And
then the
terrific rush on bicycles after tea, to Chamford Hill
and down to
the river to get in an hour's fishing before dark.
The still

summer evening, the faint splash of the weir, the
rings on the
water where the fish are rising, the midges eating
you alive, the
shoals of dace swarming round your hook and never
biting. And the
kind of passion with which you'd watch the black
backs of the fish
swarming round, hoping and praying (yes, literally
praying) that
one of them would change his mind and grab your bait
before it got
too dark. And then it was always 'Let's have five
minutes more',
and then 'Just five minutes more', until in the end
you had to walk
your bike into the town because Towler, the copper,
was prowling
round and you could be 'had up' for riding without a
light. And
the times in the summer holidays when we went out to
make a day of
it with boiled eggs and bread and butter and a bottle
of lemonade,
and fished and bathed and then fished again and did
occasionally
catch something. At night you'd come home with
filthy hands so
hungry that you'd eaten what was left of your bread
paste, with
three or four smelly dace wrapped up in your
handkerchief. Mother
always refused to cook the fish I brought home. She
would never
allow that river fish were edible, except trout and
salmon. 'Nasty
muddy things', she called them. The fish I remember
best of all
are the ones I didn't catch. Especially the
monstrous fish you
always used to see when you went for a walk along the
towpath on
Sunday afternoons and hadn't a rod with you. There

was no fishing
on Sundays, even the Thames Conservancy Board didn't
allow it. On
Sundays you had to go for what was called a 'nice
walk' in your
thick black suit and the Eton collar that sawed your
head off. It
was on a Sunday that I saw a pike a yard long asleep
in shallow
water by the bank and nearly got him with a stone.
And sometimes
in the green pools on the edge of the reeds you'd see
a huge Thames
trout go sailing past. The trout grow to vast sizes
in the Thames,
but they're practically never caught. They say that
one of the
real Thames fishermen, the old bottle-nosed blokes
that you see
muffled up in overcoats on camp-stools with
twenty-foot roach-poles
at all seasons of the year, will willingly give up a
year of his
life to catching a Thames trout. I don't blame them,
I see their
point entirely, and still better I saw it then.

Of course other things were happening. I grew three
inches in a
year, got my long trousers, won some prizes at
school, went to
Confirmation classes, told dirty stories, took to
reading, and had
crazes for white mice, fretwork, and postage stamps.
But it's
always fishing that I remember. Summer days, and the
flat water-
meadows and the blue hills in the distance, and the
willows up the
backwater and the pools underneath like a kind of
deep green glass.
Summer evenings, the fish breaking the water, the
nightjars hawking

round your head, the smell of nightstocks and latakia. Don't
mistake what I'm talking about. It's not that I'm trying to put
across any of that poetry of childhood stuff. I know that's all
baloney. Old Porteous (a friend of mine, a retired schoolmaster,
I'll tell you about him later) is great on the poetry of childhood.
Sometimes he reads me stuff about it out of books. Wordsworth.
Lucy Gray. There was a time when meadow, grove, and all that.
Needless to say he's got no kids of his own. The truth is that
kids aren't in any way poetic, they're merely savage little
animals, except that no animal is a quarter as selfish. A boy
isn't interested in meadows, groves, and so forth. He never looks
at a landscape, doesn't give a damn for flowers, and unless they
affect him in some way, such as being good to eat, he doesn't know
one plant from another. Killing things--that's about as near to
poetry as a boy gets. And yet all the while there's that peculiar
intensity, the power of longing for things as you can't long when
you're grown up, and the feeling that time stretches out and out in
front of you and that whatever you're doing you could go on for
ever.

I was rather an ugly little boy, with butter-coloured hair which
was always cropped short except for a quiff in front. I don't
idealize my childhood, and unlike many people I've no

wish to be
young again. Most of the things I used to care for
would leave me
something more than cold. I don't care if I never
see a cricket
ball again, and I wouldn't give you threepence for a
hundredweight
of sweets. But I've still got, I've always had, that
peculiar
feeling for fishing. You'll think it damned silly,
no doubt, but
I've actually half a wish to go fishing even now,
when I'm fat and
forty-five and got two kids and a house in the
suburbs. Why?
Because in a manner of speaking I AM sentimental
about my
childhood--not my own particular childhood, but the
civilization
which I grew up in and which is now, I suppose, just
about at its
last kick. And fishing is somehow typical of that
civilization.
As soon as you think of fishing you think of things
that don't
belong to the modern world. The very idea of sitting
all day under
a willow tree beside a quiet pool--and being able to
find a quiet
pool to sit beside--belongs to the time before the
war, before the
radio, before aeroplanes, before Hitler. There's a
kind of
peacefulness even in the names of English coarse
fish. Roach,
rudd, dace, bleak, barbel, bream, gudgeon, pike,
chub, carp, tench.
They're solid kind of names. The people who made
them up hadn't
heard of machine-guns, they didn't live in terror of
the sack or
spend their time eating aspirins, going to the
pictures, and

wondering how to keep out of the concentration camp.

Does anyone go fishing nowadays, I wonder? Anywhere within a
hundred miles of London there are no fish left to catch. A few
dismal fishing-clubs plant themselves in rows along the banks of
canals, and millionaires go trout-fishing in private waters round
Scotch hotels, a sort of snobbish game of catching hand-reared fish
with artificial flies. But who fishes in mill-streams or moats or
cow-ponds any longer? Where are the English coarse fish now? When
I was a kid every pond and stream had fish in it. Now all the
ponds are drained, and when the streams aren't poisoned with
chemicals from factories they're full of rusty tins and motor-bike
tyres.

My best fishing-memory is about some fish that I never caught.
That's usual enough, I suppose.

When I was about fourteen Father did a good turn of some kind to
old Hodges, the caretaker at Binfield House. I forget what it was--
gave him some medicine that cured his fowls of the worms, or
something. Hodges was a crabby old devil, but he didn't forget a
good turn. One day a little while afterwards when he'd been down
to the shop to buy chicken-corn he met me outside the door and
stopped me in his surly way. He had a face like something carved
out of a bit of root, and only two teeth, which were

dark brown and
very long.

'Hey, young 'un! Fisherman, ain't you?'

'Yes.'

'Thought you was. You listen, then. If so be you
wanted to, you
could bring your line and have a try in that they
pool up ahind the
Hall. There's plenty bream and jack in there. But
don't you tell
no one as I told you. And don't you go for to bring
any of them
other young whelps, or I'll beat the skin off their
backs.'

Having said this he hobbled off with his sack of corn
over his
shoulder, as though feeling that he'd said too much
already. The
next Saturday afternoon I biked up to Binfield House
with my
pockets full of worms and gentles, and looked for old
Hodges at the
lodge. At that time Binfield House had already been
empty for ten
or twenty years. Mr Farrel, the owner, couldn't
afford to live in
it and either couldn't or wouldn't let it. He lived
in London on
the rent of his farms and let the house and grounds
go to the
devil. All the fences were green and rotting, the
park was a mass
of nettles, the plantations were like a jungle, and
even the
gardens had gone back to meadow, with only a few old
gnarled rose-
bushes to show you where the beds had been. But it
was a very
beautiful house, especially from a distance. It was

a great white
place with colonnades and long-shaped windows, which
had been
built, I suppose, about Queen Anne's time by someone
who'd
travelled in Italy. If I went there now I'd probably
get a certain
kick out of wandering round the general desolation
and thinking
about the life that used to go on there, and the
people who built
such places because they imagined that the good days
would last for
ever. As a boy I didn't give either the house or the
grounds a
second look. I dug out old Hodges, who'd just
finished his dinner
and was a bit surly, and got him to show me the way
down to the
pool. It was several hundred yards behind the house
and completely
hidden in the beech woods, but it was a good-sized
pool, almost a
lake, about a hundred and fifty yards across. It was
astonishing,
and even at that age it astonished me, that there, a
dozen miles
from Reading and not fifty from London, you could
have such
solitude. You felt as much alone as if you'd been on
the banks of
the Amazon. The pool was ringed completely round by
the enormous
beech trees, which in one place came down to the edge
and were
reflected in the water. On the other side there was
a patch of
grass where there was a hollow with beds of wild
peppermint, and up
at one end of the pool an old wooden boathouse was
rotting among
the bulrushes.

The pool was swarming with bream, small ones, about four to six
inches long. Every now and again you'd see one of them turn half
over and gleam reddy brown under the water. There were pike there
too, and they must have been big ones. You never saw them, but
sometimes one that was basking among the weeds would turn over and
plunge with a splash that was like a brick being bunged into the
water. It was no use trying to catch them, though of course I
always tried every time I went there. I tried them with dace and
minnows I'd caught in the Thames and kept alive in a jam-jar, and
even with a spinner made out of a bit of tin. But they were gorged
with fish and wouldn't bite, and in any case they'd have broken any
tackle I possessed. I never came back from the pool without at
least a dozen small bream. Sometimes in the summer holidays I went
there for a whole day, with my fishing-rod and a copy of Chums or
the Union Jack or something, and a hunk of bread and cheese which
Mother had wrapped up for me. And I've fished for hours and then
lain in the grass hollow and read the Union Jack, and then the
smell of my bread paste and the plop of a fish jumping somewhere
would send me wild again, and I'd go back to the water and have
another go, and so on all through a summer's day. And the best of
all was to be alone, utterly alone, though the road wasn't a
quarter of a mile away. I was just old enough to

know that it's
good to be alone occasionally. With the trees all
round you it was
as though the pool belonged to you, and nothing ever
stirred except
the fish ringing the water and the pigeons passing
overhead. And
yet, in the two years or so that I went fishing
there, how many
times did I really go, I wonder? Not more than a
dozen. It was a
three-mile bike ride from home and took up a whole
afternoon at
least. And sometimes other things turned up, and
sometimes when
I'd meant to go it rained. You know the way things
happen.

One afternoon the fish weren't biting and I began to
explore at the
end of the pool farthest from Binfield House. There
was a bit of
an overflow of water and the ground was boggy, and
you had to fight
your way through a sort of jungle of blackberry
bushes and rotten
boughs that had fallen off the trees. I struggled
through it for
about fifty yards, and then suddenly there was a
clearing and I
came to another pool which I had never known existed.
It was a
small pool not more than twenty yards wide, and
rather dark because
of the boughs that overhung it. But it was very
clear water and
immensely deep. I could see ten or fifteen feet down
into it. I
hung about for a bit, enjoying the dampness and the
rotten boggy
smell, the way a boy does. And then I saw something
that almost
made me jump out of my skin.

It was an enormous fish. I don't exaggerate when I say it was
enormous. It was almost the length of my arm. It glided across
the pool, deep under water, and then became a shadow and
disappeared into the darker water on the other side. I felt as if
a sword had gone through me. It was far the biggest fish I'd ever
seen, dead or alive. I stood there without breathing, and in a
moment another huge thick shape glided through the water, and then
another and then two more close together. The pool was full of
them. They were carp, I suppose. Just possibly they were bream or
tench, but more probably carp. Bream or tench wouldn't grow so
huge. I knew what had happened. At some time this pool had been
connected with the other, and then the stream had dried up and the
woods had closed round the small pool and it had just been
forgotten. It's a thing that happens occasionally. A pool gets
forgotten somehow, nobody fishes in it for years and decades and
the fish grow to monstrous sizes. The brutes that I was watching
might be a hundred years old. And not a soul in the world knew
about them except me. Very likely it was twenty years since anyone
had so much as looked at the pool, and probably even old Hodges and
Mr Farrel's bailiff had forgotten its existence.

Well, you can imagine what I felt. After a bit I couldn't even

bear the tantalization of watching. I hurried back
to the other
pool and got my fishing things together. It was no
use trying for
those colossal brutes with the tackle I had. They'd
snap it as if
it had been a hair. And I couldn't go on fishing any
longer for
the tiny bream. The sight of the big carp had given
me a feeling
in my stomach almost as if I was going to be sick. I
got on to my
bike and whizzed down the hill and home. It was a
wonderful secret
for a boy to have. There was the dark pool hidden
away in the
woods and the monstrous fish sailing round it--fish
that had never
been fished for and would grab the first bait you
offered them. It
was only a question of getting hold of a line strong
enough to hold
them. Already I'd made all the arrangements. I'd
buy the tackle
that would hold them if I had to steal the money out
of the till.
Somehow, God knew how, I'd get hold of half a crown
and buy a
length of silk salmon line and some thick gut or gimp
and Number 5
hooks, and come back with cheese and gentles and
paste and
mealworms and brandlings and grasshoppers and every
mortal bait a
carp might look at. The very next Saturday afternoon
I'd come back
and try for them.

But as it happened I never went back. One never does
go back. I
never stole the money out of the till or bought the
bit of salmon
line or had a try for those carp. Almost immediately

afterwards
something turned up to prevent me, but if it hadn't
been that it
would have been something else. It's the way things
happen.

I know, of course, that you think I'm exaggerating
about the size
of those fish. You think, probably, that they were
just medium-
sized fish (a foot long, say) and that they've
swollen gradually in
my memory. But it isn't so. People tell lies about
the fish
they've caught and still more about the fish that are
hooked and
get away, but I never caught any of these or even
tried to catch
them, and I've no motive for lying. I tell you they
were enormous.

5

Fishing!

Here I'll make a confession, or rather two. The
first is that when
I look back through my life I can't honestly say that
anything I've
ever done has given me quite such a kick as fishing.
Everything
else has been a bit of a flop in comparison, even
women. I don't
set up to be one of those men that don't care about
women. I've
spent plenty of time chasing them, and I would even
now if I had
the chance. Still, if you gave me the choice of
having any woman
you care to name, but I mean ANY woman, or catching a

ten-pound
carp, the carp would win every time. And the other
confession is
that after I was sixteen I never fished again.

Why? Because that's how things happen. Because in
this life we
lead--I don't mean human life in general, I mean life
in this
particular age and this particular country--we don't
do the things
we want to do. It isn't because we're always
working. Even a
farm-hand or a Jew tailor isn't always working. It's
because
there's some devil in us that drives us to and fro on
everlasting
idiocies. There's time for everything except the
things worth
doing. Think of something you really care about.
Then add hour to
hour and calculate the fraction of your life that
you've actually
spent in doing it. And then calculate the time
you've spent on
things like shaving, riding to and fro on buses,
waiting in
railway, junctions, swapping dirty stories, and
reading the
newspapers.

After I was sixteen I didn't go fishing again. There
never seemed
to be time. I was at work, I was chasing girls, I
was wearing my
first button boots and my first high collars (and for
the collars
of 1909 you needed a neck like a giraffe), I was
doing correspondence
courses in salesmanship and accountancy and
'improving my mind'.
The great fish were gliding round in the pool behind
Binfield House.

Nobody knew about them except me. They were stored
away in my mind;
some day, some bank holiday perhaps, I'd go back and
catch them.
But I never went back. There was time for everything
except that.
Curiously enough, the only time between then and now
when I did very
nearly go fishing was during the war.

It was in the autumn of 1916, just before I was
wounded. We'd come
out of trenches to a village behind the line, and
though it was
only September we were covered with mud from head to
foot. As
usual we didn't know for certain how long we were
going to stay
there or where we were going afterwards. Luckily the
C.O. was a
bit off-colour, a touch of bronchitis or something,
and so didn't
bother about driving us through the usual parades,
kit-inspections,
football matches, and so forth which were supposed to
keep up the
spirits of the troops when they were out of the line.
We spent the
first day sprawling about on piles of chaff in the
barns where we
were billeted and scraping the mud off our putties,
and in the
evening some of the chaps started queueing up for a
couple of
wretched worn-out whores who were established in a
house at the end
of the village. In the morning, although it was
against orders to
leave the village, I managed to sneak off and wander
round the
ghastly desolation that had once been fields. It was
a damp,
wintry kind of morning. All round, of course, were

the awful muck
and litter of war, the sort of filthy sordid mess
that's actually
worse than a battlefield of corpses. Trees with
boughs torn off
them, old shell-holes that had partly filled up
again, tin cans,
turds, mud, weeds, clumps of rusty barbed wire with
weeds growing
through them. You know the feeling you had when you
came out of
the line. A stiffened feeling in all your joints,
and inside you
a kind of emptiness, a feeling that you'd never again
have any
interest in anything. It was partly fear and
exhaustion but mainly
boredom. At that time no one saw any reason why the
war shouldn't
go on for ever. Today or tomorrow or the day after
you were going
back to the line, and maybe next week a shell would
blow you to
potted meat, but that wasn't so bad as the ghastly
boredom of the
war stretching out for ever.

I was wandering up the side of a hedge when I ran
into a chap in
our company whose surname I don't remember but who
was nicknamed
Nobby. He was a dark, slouching, gypsy-looking chap,
a chap who
even in uniform always gave the impression that he
was carrying a
couple of stolen rabbits. By trade he was a coster
and he was a
real Cockney, but one of those Cockneys that make
part of their
living by hop-picking, bird-catching, poaching, and
fruit-stealing
in Kent and Essex. He was a great expert on dogs,
ferrets, cage-

birds, fighting-cocks, and that kind of thing. As
soon as he saw
me he beckoned to me with his head. He had a sly,
vicious way of
talking:

''Ere, George!' (The chaps still called me George--I
hadn't got
fat in those days.) 'George! Ja see that clump of
poplars acrost
the field?'

'Yes.'

'Well, there's a pool on t'other side of it, and it's
full of
bleeding great fish.'

'Fish? Garn!'

'I tell you it's bleeding full of 'em. Perch, they
are. As good
fish as ever I got my thumbs on. Com'n see
f'yerself, then.'

We trudged over the mud together. Sure enough, Nobby
was right.
On the other side of the poplars there was a
dirty-looking pool
with sandy banks. Obviously it had been a quarry and
had got
filled up with water. And it was swarming with
perch. You could
see their dark blue stripy backs gliding everywhere
just under
water, and some of them must have weighed a pound. I
suppose in
two years of war they hadn't been disturbed and had
had time to
multiply. Probably you can't imagine what the sight
of those perch
had done to me. It was as though they'd suddenly
brought me to

life. Of course there was only one thought in both
our minds--how
to get hold of a rod and line.

'Christ!' I said. 'We'll have some of those.'

'You bet we f-- well will. C'mon back to the village
and let's get
'old of some tackle.'

'O.K. You want to watch out, though. If the
sergeant gets to know
we'll cop it.'

'Oh, f-- the sergeant. They can 'ang, drore, and
quarter me if
they want to. I'm going to 'ave some of them
bleeding fish.'

You can't know how wild we were to catch those fish.
Or perhaps
you can, if you've ever been at war. You know the
frantic boredom
of war and the way you'll clutch at almost any kind
of amusement.
I've seen two chaps in a dugout fight like devils
over half a
threepenny magazine. But there was more to it than
that. It was
the thought of escaping, for perhaps a whole day,
right out of the
atmosphere of war. To be sitting under the poplar
trees, fishing
for perch, away from the Company, away from the noise
and the stink
and the uniforms and the officers and the saluting
and the
sergeant's voice! Fishing is the opposite of war.
But it wasn't
at all certain that we could bring it off. That was
the thought
that sent us into a kind of fever. If the sergeant
found out he'd

stop us as sure as fate, and so would any of the
officers, and the
worst of all was that there was no knowing how long
we were going
to stay at the village. We might stay there a week,
we might march
off in two hours. Meanwhile we'd no fishing tackle
of any kind,
not even a pin or a bit of string. We had to start
from scratch.
And the pool was swarming with fish! The first thing
was a rod.
A willow wand is best, but of course there wasn't a
willow tree
anywhere this side of the horizon. Nobby shinned up
one of the
poplars and cut off a small bough which wasn't
actually good but
was better than nothing. He trimmed it down with his
jack-knife
till it looked something like a fishing-rod, and then
we hid it in
the weeds near the bank and managed to sneak back
into the village
without being seen.

The next thing was a needle to make a hook. Nobody
had a needle.
One chap had some darning needles, but they were too
thick and had
blunt ends. We daren't let anyone know what we
wanted it for, for
fear the sergeant should hear about it. At last we
thought of the
whores at the end of the village. They were pretty
sure to have a
needle. When we got there--you had to go round to
the back door
through a mucky courtyard--the house was shut up and
the whores
were having a sleep which they'd no doubt earned. We
stamped and
yelled and banged on the door until after about ten

minutes a fat
ugly woman in a wrapper came down and screamed at us
in French.
Nobby shouted at her:

'Needle! Needle! You got a needle!'

Of course she didn't know what he was talking about.
Then Nobby
tried pidgin English, which he expected her as a
foreigner to
understand:

'Wantee needle! Sewee clothee! Likee thisee!'

He made gestures which were supposed to represent
sewing. The
whore misunderstood him and opened the door a bit
wider to let us
in. Finally we made her understand and got a needle
from her.
By this time it was dinner time.

After dinner the sergeant came round the barn where
we were
billeted looking for men for a fatigue. We managed
to dodge him
just in time by getting under a pile of chaff. When
he was gone we
got a candle alight, made the needle red-hot, and
managed to bend
it into a kind of hook. We didn't have any tools
except jack-
knives, and we burned our fingers badly. The next
thing was a
line. Nobody had any string except thick stuff, but
at last we
came across a fellow who had a reel of sewing thread.
He didn't
want to part with it and we had to give him a whole
packet of fags
for it. The thread was much too thin, but Nobby cut
it into three

lengths, tied them to a nail in the wall, and
carefully plaited
them. Meanwhile after searching all over the village
I'd managed
to find a cork, and I cut it in half and stuck a
match through it
to make afloat. By this time it was evening and
getting on towards
dark.

We'd got the essentials now, but we could do with
some gut. There
didn't seem much hope of getting any until we thought
of the
hospital orderly. Surgical gut wasn't part of his
equipment, but
it was just possible that he might have some. Sure
enough, when we
asked him, we found he'd a whole hank of medical gut
in his
haversack. It had taken his fancy in some hospital
or other and
he'd pinched it. We swapped another packet of fags
for ten lengths
of gut. It was rotten brittle stuff, in pieces about
six inches
long. After dark Nobby soaked them till they were
pliable and tied
them end to end. So now we'd got everything--hook,
rod, line,
float, and gut. We could dig up worms anywhere. And
the pool was
swarming with fish! Huge great stripy perch crying
out to be
caught! We lay down to kip in such a fever that we
didn't even
take our boots off. Tomorrow! If we could just have
tomorrow! If
the war would forget about us for just a day! We
made up our minds
that as soon as roll-call was over we'd hook it and
stay away all
day, even if they gave us Field Punishment No. 1 for

it when we
came back.

Well, I expect you can guess the rest. At roll-call
orders were to
pack all kits and be ready to march in twenty
minutes. We marched
nine miles down the road and then got on to lorries
and were off to
another part of the line. As for the pool under the
poplar trees,
I never saw or heard of it again. I expect it got
poisoned with
mustard gas later on.

Since then I've never fished. I never seemed to get
the chance.
There was the rest of the war, and then like everyone
else I was
fighting for a job, and then I'd got a job and the
job had got me.
I was a promising young fellow in an insurance
office--one of those
keen young businessmen with firm jaws and good
prospects that you
used to read about in the Clark's College
adverts--and then I was
the usual down-trodden five-to-ten-pounds-a-weeker in
a semidetached
villa in the inner-outer suburbs. Such people don't
go fishing, any
more than stockbrokers go out picking primroses. It
wouldn't be
suitable. Other recreations are provided for them.

Of course I have my fortnight's holiday every summer.
You know
the kind of holiday. Margate, Yarmouth, Eastbourne,
Hastings,
Bournemouth, Brighton. There's a slight variation
according to
whether or not we're flush that year. With a woman
like Hilda

along, the chief feature of a holiday is endless
mental arithmetic
to decide how much the boarding-house keeper is
swindling you.
That and telling the kids, No, they can't have a new
sandbucket.
A few years back we were at Bournemouth. One fine
afternoon we
loitered down the pier, which must be about half a
mile long, and
all the way along it chaps were fishing with stumpy
sea-rods with
little bells on the end and their lines stretching
fifty yards out
to sea. It's a dull kind of fishing, and they
weren't catching
anything. Still, they were fishing. The kids soon
got bored and
clamoured to go back to the beach, and Hilda saw a
chap sticking a
lobworm on his hook and said it made her feel sick,
but I kept
loitering up and down for a little while longer. And
suddenly
there was a tremendous ringing from a bell and a chap
was winding
in his line. Everyone stopped to watch. And sure
enough, in it
came, the wet line and the lump of lead and on the
end a great
flat-fish (a flounder, I think) dangling and
wriggling. The chap
dumped it on to the planks of the pier, and it
flapped up and down,
all wet and gleaming, with its grey warty back and
its white belly
and the fresh salty smell of the sea. And something
kind of moved
inside me.

As we moved off I said casually, just to test Hilda's
reaction:

'I've half a mind to do a bit of fishing myself while
we're here.'

'What! YOU go fishing, George? But you don't even
know how, do
you?'

'Oh, I used to be a great fisherman,' I told her.

She was vaguely against it, as usual, but didn't have
many ideas
one way or the other, except that if I went fishing
she wasn't
coming with me to watch me put those nasty squashy
things on the
hook. Then suddenly she got on to the fact that if I
was to go
fishing the set-out-that I'd need, rod and reel and
so forth, would
cost round about a quid. The rod alone would cost
ten bob.
Instantly she flew into a temper. You haven't seen
old Hilda when
there's talk of wasting ten bob. She burst out at me:

'The IDEA of wasting all that money on a thing like
that! Absurd!
And how they DARE charge ten shillings for one of
those silly
little fishing-rods! It's disgraceful. And fancy
you going
fishing at your age! A great big grown-up man like
you. Don't be
such a BABY, George.'

Then the kids got on to it. Lorna sidled up to me
and asked in
that silly pert way she has, 'Are you a baby, Daddy?'
and little
Billy, who at that time didn't speak quite plain,
announced to the
world in general, 'Farver's a baby.' Then suddenly
they were both

dancing round me, rattling their sandbuckets and chanting:

'Farver's a baby! Farver's a baby!'

Unnatural little bastards!

6

And besides fishing there was reading.

I've exaggerated if I've given the impression that fishing was the
ONLY thing I cared about. Fishing certainly came first, but
reading was a good second. I must have been either ten or eleven
when I started reading--reading voluntarily, I mean. At that age
it's like discovering a new world. I'm a considerable reader even
now, in fact there aren't many weeks in which I don't get through a
couple of novels. I'm what you might call the typical Boots
Library subscriber, I always fall for the best-seller of the moment
(The Good Companions, Bengal Lancer, Hatter's Castle--I fell for
every one of them), and I've been a member of the Left Book Club
for a year or more. And in 1918, when I was twenty-five, I had a
sort of debauch of reading that made a certain difference to my
outlook. But nothing is ever like those first years when you
suddenly discover that you can open a penny weekly paper and plunge
straight into thieves' kitchens and Chinese opium

dens and
Polynesian islands and the forests of Brazil.

It was from when I was eleven to when I was about
sixteen that I
got my biggest kick out of reading. At first it was
always the
boys' penny weeklies--little thin papers with vile
print and an
illustration in three colours on the cover--and a bit
later it was
books. Sherlock Holmes, Dr Nikola, The Iron Pirate,
Dracula,
Raffles. And Nat Gould and Ranger Gull and a chap
whose name I
forget who wrote boxing stories almost as rapidly as
Nat Gould
wrote racing ones. I suppose if my parents had been
a little
better educated I'd have had 'good' books shoved down
my throat,
Dickens and Thackeray and so forth, and in fact they
did drive us
through Quentin Durward at school and Uncle Ezekiel
sometimes tried
to incite me to read Ruskin and Carlyle. But there
were practically
no books in our house. Father had never read a book
in his life,
except the Bible and Smiles's Self Help, and I didn't
of my own
accord read a 'good' book till much later. I'm not
sorry it
happened that way. I read the things I wanted to
read, and I got
more out of them than I ever got out of the stuff
they taught me at
school.

The old penny dreadfuls were already going out when I
was a kid,
and I can barely remember them, but there was a
regular line of

boys' weeklies, some of which still exist. The
Buffalo Bill
stories have gone out, I think, and Nat Gould
probably isn't read
any longer, but Nick Carter and Sexton Blake seem to
be still the
same as ever. The Gem and the Magnet, if I'm
remembering rightly,
started about 1905. The B.O.P. was still rather pi
in those days,
but Chums, which I think must have started about
1903, was
splendid. Then there was an encyclopedia--I don't
remember its
exact name--which was issued in penny numbers. It
never seemed
quite worth buying, but a boy at school used to give
away back
numbers sometimes. If I now know the length of the
Mississippi or
the difference between an octopus and a cuttle-fish
or the exact
composition of bell-metal, that's where I learned it
from.

Joe never read. He was one of those boys who can go
through years
of schooling and at the end of it are unable to read
ten lines
consecutively. The sight of print made him feel
sick. I've seen
him pick up one of my numbers of Chums, read a
paragraph or two and
then turn away with just the same movement of disgust
as a horse
when it smells stale hay. He tried to kick me out of
reading, but
Mother and Father, who had decided that I was 'the
clever one',
backed me up. They were rather proud that I showed a
taste for
'book-learning', as they called it. But it was
typical of both of

them that they were vaguely upset by my reading
things like Chums
and the Union Jack, thought that I ought to read
something
'improving' but didn't know enough about books to be
sure which
books were 'improving'. Finally Mother got hold of a
second-hand
copy of Foxe's Book of Martyrs, which I didn't read,
though the
illustrations weren't half bad.

All through the winter of 1905 I spent a penny on
Chums every week.
I was following up their serial story, 'Donovan the
Dauntless'.
Donovan the Dauntless was an explorer who was
employed by an
American millionaire to fetch incredible things from
various
corners of the earth. Sometimes it was diamonds the
size of golf
balls from the craters of volcanoes in Africa,
sometimes it was
petrified mammoths' tusks from the frozen forests of
Siberia,
sometimes it was buried Inca treasures from the lost
cities of
Peru. Donovan went on a new journey every week, and
he always made
good. My favourite place for reading was the loft
behind the yard.
Except when Father was getting out fresh sacks of
grain it was the
quietest place in the house. There were huge piles
of sacks to lie
on, and a sort of plastery smell mixed up with the
smell of
sainfoin, and bunches of cobwebs in all the corners,
and just over
the place where I used to lie there was a hole in the
ceiling and a
lath sticking out of the plaster. I can feel the

feeling of it
now. A winter day, just warm enough to lie still.
I'm lying on my
belly with Chums open in front of me. A mouse runs
up the side of
a sack like a clockwork toy, then suddenly stops dead
and watches
me with his little eyes like tiny jet beads. I'm
twelve years old,
but I'm Donovan the Dauntless. Two thousand miles up
the Amazon
I've just pitched my tent, and the roots of the
mysterious orchid
that blooms once in a hundred years are safe in the
tin box under
my camp bed. In the forests all round Hopi-Hopi
Indians, who paint
their teeth scarlet and skin white men alive, are
beating their
war-drums. I'm watching the mouse and the mouse is
watching me,
and I can smell the dust and sainfoin and the cool
plastery smell,
and I'm up the Amazon, and it's bliss, pure bliss.

7

That's all, really.

I've tried to tell you something about the world
before the war,
the world I got a sniff of when I saw King Zog's name
on the
poster, and the chances are that I've told you
nothing. Either you
remember before the war and don't need to be told
about it, or you
don't remember, and it's no use telling you. So far
I've only
spoken about the things that happened to me before I

was sixteen.
Up to that time things had gone pretty well with the
family. It

was a bit before my sixteenth birthday that I began
to get glimpses
of what people call 'real life', meaning
unpleasantness.

About three days after I'd seen the big carp at
Binfield House,
Father came in to tea looking very worried and even
more grey and
mealy than usual. He ate his way solemnly through
his tea and
didn't talk much. In those days he had a rather
preoccupied way of
eating, and his moustache used to work up and down
with a sidelong
movement, because he hadn't many back teeth left. I
was just
getting up from table when he called me back.

'Wait a minute, George, my boy. I got suthing to say
to you. Sit
down jest a minute. Mother, you heard what I got to
say last
night.'

Mother, behind the huge brown teapot, folded her
hands in her lap
and looked solemn. Father went on, speaking very
seriously but
rather spoiling the effect by trying to deal with a
crumb that
lodged somewhere in what was left of his back teeth:

'George, my boy, I got suthing to say to you. I been
thinking it
over, and it's about time you left school. 'Fraid
you'll have to
get to work now and start earning a bit to bring home
to your

mother. I wrote to Mr Wicksey last night and told
him as I should
have to take you away.'

Of course this was quite according to precedent--his
writing to Mr
Wicksey before telling me, I mean. Parents in those
days, as a
matter of course, always arranged everything over
their children's
heads.

Father went on to make some rather mumbling and
worried explanations.
He'd 'had bad times lately', things had 'been a bit
difficult',
and the upshot was that Joe and I would have to start
earning
our living. At that time I didn't either know or
greatly
care whether the business was really in a bad way or
not. I hadn't
even enough commercial instinct to see the reason why
things were
'difficult'. The fact was that Father had been hit
by competition.
Sarazins', the big retail seedsmen who had branches
all over the
home counties, had stuck a tentacle into Lower
Binfield. Six
months earlier they'd taken the lease of a shop in
the market-place
and dolled it up until what with bright green paint,
gilt
lettering, gardening tools painted red and green, and
huge
advertisements for sweet peas, it hit you in the eye
at a hundred
yards' distance. Sarazins', besides selling flower
seeds,
described themselves as 'universal poultry and
livestock
providers', and apart from wheat and oats and so

forth they went in
for patent poultry mixtures, bird-seed done up in
fancy packets,
dog-biscuits of all shapes and colours, medicines,
embrocations,
and conditioning powders, and branched off into such
things as rat-
traps, dog-chains, incubators, sanitary eggs,
bird-nesting, bulbs,
weed-killer, insecticide, and even, in some branches,
into what
they called a 'livestock department', meaning rabbits
and day-old
chicks. Father, with his dusty old shop and his
refusal to stock
new lines, couldn't compete with that kind of thing
and didn't want
to. The tradesmen with their van-horses, and such of
the farmers
as dealt with the retail seedsmen, fought shy of
Sarazins', but
in six months they'd gathered in the petty gentry of
the
neighbourhood, who in those days had carriages or
dogcarts and
therefore horses. This meant a big loss of trade for
Father and
the other corn merchant, Winkle. I didn't grasp any
of this at the
time. I had a boy's attitude towards it all. I'd
never taken any
interest in the business. I'd never or hardly ever
served in the
shop, and when, as occasionally happened, Father
wanted me to run
an errand or give a hand with something, such as
hoisting sacks of
grain up to the loft or down again, I'd always dodged
it whenever
possible. Boys in our class aren't such complete
babies as public
schoolboys, they know that work is work and sixpence
is sixpence,

but it seems natural for a boy to regard his father's business as a
bore. Up till that time fishing-rods, bicycles, fizzy lemonade,
and so forth had seemed to me a good deal more real than anything
that happened in the grown-up world.

Father had already spoken to old Grimmett, the grocer, who wanted a
smart lad and was willing to take me into the shop immediately.
Meanwhile Father was going to get rid of the errand boy, and Joe
was to come home and help with the shop till he got a regular job.
Joe had left school some time back and had been more or less
loafing ever since. Father had sometimes talked of 'getting him
into' the accounts department at the brewery, and earlier had even
had thoughts of making him into an auctioneer. Both were
completely hopeless because Joe, at seventeen, wrote a hand like a
ploughboy and couldn't repeat the multiplication table. At present
he was supposed to be 'learning the trade' at a big bicycle shop on
the outskirts of Walton. Tinkering with bicycles suited Joe, who,
like most half-wits, had a slight mechanical turn, but he was quite
incapable of working steadily and spent all his time loafing about
in greasy overalls, smoking Woodbines, getting into fights,
drinking (he's started that already), getting 'talked of' with one
girl after another, and sticking Father for money. Father was
worried, puzzled, and vaguely resentful. I can see

him yet, with
the meal on his bald head, and the bit of grey hair
over his ears,
and his spectacles and his grey moustache. He
couldn't understand
what was happening to him. For years his profits had
gone up,
slowly and steadily, ten pounds this year, twenty
pounds that year,
and now suddenly they'd gone down with a bump. He
couldn't
understand it. He'd inherited the business from his
father, he'd
done an honest trade, worked hard, sold sound goods,
swindled
nobody--and his profits were going down. He said a
number of
times, between sucking at his teeth to get the crumb
out, that
times were very bad, trade seemed very slack, he
couldn't think
what had come over people, it wasn't as if the horses
didn't have
to eat. Perhaps it was these here motors, he decided
finally.
'Nasty smelly things!' Mother put in. She was a
little worried,
and knew that she ought to be more so. Once or twice
while Father
was talking there was a far-away look in her eyes and
I could see
her lips moving. She was trying to decide whether it
should be a
round of beef and carrots tomorrow or another leg of
mutton.
Except when there was something in her own line that
needed
foresight, such as buying linen or saucepans, she
wasn't really
capable of thinking beyond tomorrow's meals. The
shop was giving
trouble and Father was worried--that was about as far
as she saw

into it. None of us had any grasp of what was
happening. Father
had had a bad year and lost money, but was he really
frightened by
the future? I don't think so. This was 1909,
remember. He didn't
know what was happening to him, he wasn't capable of
foreseeing
that these Sarazin people would systematically
under-sell him, ruin
him, and eat him up. How could he? Things hadn't
happened like
that when he was a young man. All he knew was that
times were bad,
trade was very 'slack', very 'slow' (he kept
repeating these
phrases), but probably things would 'look up
presently'.

It would be nice if I could tell you that I was a
great help to my
father in his time of trouble, suddenly proved myself
a man, and
developed qualities which no one had suspected in
me--and so on and
so forth, like the stuff you used to read in the
uplift novels of
thirty years ago. Or alternatively I'd like to be
able to record
that I bitterly resented having to leave school, my
eager young
mind, yearning for knowledge and refinement, recoiled
from the
soulless mechanical job into which they were
thrusting me--and so
on and so forth, like the stuff you read in the
uplift novels
today. Both would be complete bunkum. The truth is
that I was
pleased and excited at the idea of going to work,
especially when I
grasped that Old Grimmett was going to pay me real
wages, twelve

shillings a week, of which I could keep four for myself. The big
carp at Binfield House, which had filled my mind for three days
past, faded right out of it. I'd no objection to leaving school a
few terms early. It generally happened the same way with boys at
our school. A boy was always 'going to' go to Reading University,
or study to be an engineer, or 'go into business' in London, or run
away to sea--and then suddenly, at two days' notice, he'd disappear
from school, and a fortnight later you'd meet him on a bicycle,
delivering vegetables. Within five minutes of Father telling me
that I should have to leave school I was wondering about the new
suit I should wear to go to work in. I instantly started demanding
a 'grown-up suit', with a kind of coat that was fashionable at that
time, a 'cutaway', I think it was called. Of course both Mother
and Father were scandalized and said they'd 'never heard of such a
thing'. For some reason that I've never fully fathomed, parents in
those days always tried to prevent their children wearing grown-up
clothes as long as possible. In every family there was a stand-up
fight before a boy had his first tall collars or a girl put her
hair up.

So the conversation veered away from Father's business troubles and
degenerated into a long, nagging kind of argument, with Father
gradually getting angry and repeating over and

over--dropping an
aitch now and again, as he was apt to do when he got
angry--'Well,
you can't 'ave it. Make up your mind to that--you
can't 'ave it.'
So I didn't have my 'cutaway', but went to work for
the first time
in a ready-made black suit and a broad collar in
which I looked an
overgrown lout. Any distress I felt over the whole
business really
arose from that. Joe was even more selfish about it.
He was
furious at having to leave the bicycle shop, and for
the short time
that he remained at home he merely loafed about, made
a nuisance of
himself and was no help to Father whatever.

I worked in old Grimmett's shop for nearly six years.
Grimmett was
a fine, upstanding, white-whiskered old chap, like a
rather stouter
version of Uncle Ezekiel, and like Uncle Ezekiel a
good Liberal.
But he was less of a firebrand and more respected in
the town.
He'd trimmed his sails during the Boer War, he was a
bitter enemy
of trade unions and once sacked an assistant for
possessing a
photograph of Keir Hardie, and he was 'chapel'--in
fact he was a
big noise, literally, in the Baptist Chapel, known
locally as the
Tin Tab--whereas my family were 'church' and Uncle
Ezekiel was an
infidel at that. Old Grimmett was a town councillor
and an
official at the local Liberal Party. With his white
whiskers, his
canting talk about liberty of conscience and the
Grand Old Man, his

thumping bank balance, and the extempore prayers you could
sometimes hear him letting loose when you passed the Tin Tab, he
was a little like a legendary Nonconformist grocer in the story--
you've heard it, I expect:

'James!'

'Yessir?'

'Have you sanded the sugar?'

'Yessir!'

'Have you watered the treacle?'

'Yessir!'

'Then come up to prayers.'

God knows how often I heard that story whispered in the shop. We
did actually start the day with a prayer before we put up the
shutters. Not that old Grimmett sanded the sugar. He knew that
that doesn't pay. But he was a sharp man in business, he did all
the high-class grocery trade of Lower Binfield and the country
round, and he had three assistants in the shop besides the errand
boy, the van-man, and his own daughter (he was a widower) who acted
as cashier. I was the errand boy for my first six months. Then
one of the assistants left to 'set up' in Reading and I moved into
the shop and wore my first white apron. I learned to tie a parcel,
pack a bag of currants, grind coffee, work the

bacon-slicer, carve
ham, put an edge on a knife, sweep the floor, dust
eggs without
breaking them, pass off an inferior article as a good
one, clean a
window, judge a pound of cheese by eye, open a
packing-case, whack
a slab of butter into shape, and--what was a good
deal the hardest--
remember where the stock was kept. I haven't such
detailed
memories of grocering as I have of fishing, but I
remember a good
deal. To this day I know the trick of snapping a bit
of string in
my fingers. If you put me in front of a bacon-slicer
I could work
it better than I can a typewriter. I could spin you
some pretty
fair technicalities about grades of China tea and
what margarine is
made of and the average weight of eggs and the price
of paper bags
per thousand.

Well, for more than five years that was me--an alert
young chap
with a round, pink, snubby kind of face and
butter-coloured hair
(no longer cut short but carefully greased and
slicked back in what
people used to call a 'smarm'), hustling about behind
the counter
in a white apron with a pencil behind my ear, tying
up bags of
coffee like lightning and jockeying the customer
along with 'Yes,
ma'am! Certainly, ma'am! AND the next order,
ma'am!' in a voice
with just a trace of a Cockney accent. Old Grimmett
worked us
pretty hard, it was an eleven-hour day except on
Thursdays and

Sundays, and Christmas week was a nightmare. Yet it's a good time
to look back on. Don't think that I had no ambitions. I knew I
wasn't going to remain a grocer's assistant for ever, I was merely
'learning the trade'. Some time, somehow or other, there'd be
enough money for me to 'set up' on my own. That was how people
felt in those days. This was before the war, remember, and before
the slumps and before the dole. The world was big enough for
everyone. Anyone could 'set up in trade', there was always room
for another shop. And time was slipping on. 1909, 1910, 1911.
King Edward died and the papers came out with a black border round
the edge. Two cinemas opened in Walton. The cars got commoner on
the roads and cross-country motor-buses began to run. An
aeroplane--a flimsy, rickety-looking thing with a chap sitting in
the middle on a kind of chair--flew over Lower Binfield and the
whole town rushed out of their houses to yell at it. People began
to say rather vaguely that this here German Emperor was getting too
big for his boots and 'it' (meaning war with Germany) was 'coming
some time'. My wages went gradually up, until finally, just before
the war, they were twenty-eight shillings a week. I paid Mother
ten shillings a week for my board, and later, when times got worse,
fifteen shillings, and even that left me feeling richer than I've
felt since. I grew another inch, my moustache began

to sprout, I
wore button boots and collars three inches high. In church on
Sundays, in my natty dark grey suit, with my bowler hat and black
dogskin gloves on the pew beside me, I looked the perfect gent, so
that Mother could hardly contain her pride in me. In between work
and 'walking out' on Thursdays, and thinking about clothes and
girls, I had fits of ambition and saw myself developing into a Big
Business Man like Lever or William Whiteley. Between sixteen and
eighteen I made serious efforts to 'improve my mind' and train
myself for a business career. I cured myself of dropping aitches
and got rid of most of my Cockney accent. (In the Thames Valley
the country accents were going out. Except for the farm lads,
nearly everyone who was born later than 1890 talked Cockney.) I
did a correspondence course with Littleburns' Commercial Academy,
learnt bookkeeping and business English, read solemnly through a
book of frightful blah called The Art of Salesmanship, and improved
my arithmetic and even my handwriting. When I was as old as
seventeen I've sat up late at night with my tongue hanging out of
my mouth, practising copperplate by the little oil-lamp on the
bedroom table. At times I read enormously, generally crime and
adventure stories, and sometimes paper-covered books which were
furtively passed round by the chaps at the shop and described as

'hot'. (They were translations of Maupassant and
Paul de Kock.)
But when I was eighteen I suddenly turned highbrow,
got a ticket
for the County Library, and began to stodge through
books by Marie
Corelli and Hall Caine and Anthony Hope. It was at
about that time
that I joined the Lower Binfield Reading Circle,
which was run by
the vicar and met one evening a week all through the
winter for
what was called 'literary discussion'. Under
pressure from the
vicar I read bits of Sesame and Lilies and even had a
go at
Browning.

And time was slipping away. 1910, 1911, 1912. And
Father's
business was going down--not slumping suddenly into
the gutter, but
it was going down. Neither Father nor Mother was
ever quite the
same after Joe ran away from home. This happened not
long after I
went to work at Grimmett's.

Joe, at eighteen, had grown into an ugly ruffian. He
was a hefty
chap, much bigger than the rest of the family, with
tremendous
shoulders, a big head, and a sulky, lowering kind of
face on which
he already had a respectable moustache. When he
wasn't in the tap-
room of the George he was loafing in the shop
doorway, with his
hands dug deep into his pockets, scowling at the
people who passed,
except when they happened to be girls, as though he'd
like to knock
them down. If anyone came into the shop he'd move

aside just
enough to let them pass, and, without taking his
hands out of his
pockets, yell over his shoulders 'Da-ad! Shop!'
This was as near
as he ever got to helping. Father and Mother said
despairingly
that they 'didn't know what to do with him', and he
was costing the
devil of a lot with his drinking and endless smoking.
Late one
night he walked out of the house and was never heard
of again.
He'd prised open the till and taken all the money
that was in it,
luckily not much, about eight pounds. That was
enough to get him a
steerage passage to America. He'd always wanted to
go to America,
and I think he probably did so, though we never knew
for certain.
It made a bit of a scandal in the town. The official
theory was
that Joe had bolted because he'd put a girl in the
family way.
There was a girl named Sally Chivers who lived in the
same street
as the Simmonses and was going to have a baby, and
Joe had
certainly been with her, but so had about a dozen
others, and
nobody knew whose baby it was. Mother and Father
accepted the baby
theory and even, in private, used it to excuse their
'poor boy' for
stealing the eight pounds and running away. They
weren't capable
of grasping that Joe had cleared out because he
couldn't stand a
decent respectable life in a little country town and
wanted a life
of loafing, fights, and women. We never heard of him
again.

Perhaps he went utterly to the bad, perhaps he was
killed in the
war, perhaps he merely didn't bother to write.
Luckily the baby
was born dead, so there were no complications. As
for the fact
that Joe had stolen the eight pounds, Mother and
Father managed to
keep it a secret till they died. In their eyes it
was a much worse
disgrace than Sally Chivers's baby.

The trouble over Joe aged Father a great deal. To
lose Joe was
merely to cut a loss, but it hurt him and made him
ashamed. From
that time forward his moustache was much greyer and
he seemed to
have grown a lot smaller. Perhaps my memory of him
as a little
grey man, with a round, lined, anxious face and dusty
spectacles,
really dates from that time. By slow degrees he was
getting more
and more involved in money worries and less and less
interested in
other things. He talked less about politics and the
Sunday papers,
and more about the badness of trade. Mother seemed
to have shrunk
a little, too. In my childhood I'd known her as
something vast and
overflowing, with her yellow hair and her beaming
face and her
enormous bosom, a sort of great opulent creature like
the figure-
head of a battleship. Now she'd got smaller and more
anxious and
older than her years. She was less lordly in the
kitchen, went in
more for neck of mutton, worried over the price of
coal, and began
to use margarine, a thing which in the old days she'd

never have
allowed into the house. After Joe had gone Father
had to hire an
errand boy again, but from then on he employed very
young boys whom
he only kept for a year or two and who couldn't lift
heavy weights.
I sometimes lent him a hand when I was at home. I
was too selfish
to do it regularly. I can still see him working his
way slowly
across the yard, bent double and almost hidden under
an enormous
sack, like a snail under its shell. The huge,
monstrous sack,
weighing a hundred and fifty pounds, I suppose,
pressing his neck
and shoulders almost to the ground, and the anxious,
spectacled
face looking up from underneath it. In 1911 he
ruptured himself
and had to spend weeks in hospital and hire a
temporary manager
for the shop, which ate another hole in his capital.
A small
shopkeeper going down the hill is a dreadful thing to
watch, but it
isn't sudden and obvious like the fate of a working
man who gets
the sack and promptly finds himself on the dole.
It's just a
gradual chipping away of trade, with little ups and
downs, a few
shillings to the bad here, a few sixpences to the
good there.
Somebody who's dealt with you for years suddenly
deserts and goes
to Sarazins'. Somebody else buys a dozen hens and
gives you a
weekly order for corn. You can still keep going.
You're still
'your own master', always a little more worried and a
little

shabbier, with your capital shrinking all the time.
You can go on
like that for years, for a lifetime if you're lucky.
Uncle Ezekiel
died in 1911, leaving 120 pounds which must have made
a lot of
difference to Father. It wasn't till 1913 that he
had to mortgage
his life-insurance policy. That I didn't hear about
at the time,
or I'd have understood what it meant. As it was I
don't think I
ever got further than realizing that Father 'wasn't
doing well',
trade was 'slack', there'd be a bit longer to wait
before I had the
money to 'set up'. Like Father himself, I looked on
the shop as
something permanent, and I was a bit inclined to be
angry with him
for not managing things better. I wasn't capable of
seeing, and
neither was he nor anyone else, that he was being
slowly ruined,
that his business would never pick up again and if he
lived to be
seventy he'd certainly end in the workhouse. Many a
time I've
passed Sarazins' shop in the market-place and merely
thought how
much I preferred their slick window-front to Father's
dusty old
shop, with the 'S. Bowling' which you could hardly
read, the
chipped white lettering, and the faded packets of
bird-seed. It
didn't occur to me that Sarazins' were tapeworms who
were eating
him alive. Sometimes I used to repeat to him some of
the stuff
I'd been reading in my correspondence-course
textbooks, about
salesmanship and modern methods. He never paid much

attention.
He'd inherited an old-established business, he'd
always worked
hard, done a fair trade, and supplied sound goods,
and things would
look up presently. It's a fact that very few
shopkeepers in those
days actually ended in the workhouse. With any luck
you died with
a few pounds still your own. It was a race between
death and
bankruptcy, and, thank God, death got Father first,
and Mother too.

1911, 1912, 1913. I tell you it was a good time to
be alive. It
was late in 1912, through the vicar's Reading Circle,
that I first
met Elsie Waters. Till then, although, like all the
rest of the
boys in the town, I'd gone out looking for girls and
occasionally
managed to connect up with this girl or that and
'walk out' a few
Sunday afternoons, I'd never really had a girl of my
own. It's a
queer business, that chasing of girls when you're
about sixteen.
At some recognized part of the town the boys stroll
up and down in
pairs, watching the girls, and the girls stroll up
and down in
pairs, pretending not to notice the boys, and
presently some kind
of contact is established and instead of twos they're
trailing
along in fours, all four utterly speechless. The
chief feature of
those walks--and it was worse the second time, when
you went out
with the girl alone--was the ghastly failure to make
any kind of
conversation. But Elsie Waters seemed different.

The truth was
that I was growing up.

I don't want to tell the story of myself and Elsie
Waters, even if
there was any story to tell. It's merely that she's
part of the
picture, part of 'before the war'. Before the war it
was always
summer--a delusion, as I've remarked before, but
that's how I
remember it. the white dusty road stretching out
between the
chestnut trees, the smell of night-stocks, the green
pools under
the willows, the splash of Burford Weir--that's what
I see when I
shut my eyes and think of 'before the war', and
towards the end
Elsie Waters is part of it.

I don't know whether Elsie would be considered pretty
now. She was
then. She was tall for a girl, about as tall as I
am, with pale
gold, heavy kind of hair which she wore somehow
plaited and coiled
round her head, and a delicate, curiously gentle
face. She was one
of those girls that always look their best in black,
especially the
very plain black dresses they made them wear in the
drapery--she
worked at Lilywhite's, the drapers, though she came
originally from
London. I suppose she would have been two years
older than I was.

I'm grateful to Elsie, because she was the first
person who taught
me to care about a woman. I don't mean women in
general, I mean an
individual woman. I'd met her at the Reading Circle

and hardly
noticed her, and then one day I went into Lilywhite's
during
working hours, a thing I wouldn't normally have been
able to do,
but as it happened we'd run out of butter muslin and
old Grimmett
sent me to buy some. You know the atmosphere of a
draper's shop.
It's something peculiarly feminine. There's a hushed
feeling, a
subdued light, a cool smell of cloth, and a faint
whirring from the
wooden balls of change rolling to and fro. Elsie was
leaning
against the counter, cutting off a length of cloth
with the big
scissors. There was something about her black dress
and the curve
of her breast against the counter--I can't describe
it, something
curiously soft, curiously feminine. As soon as you
saw her you
knew that you could take her in your arms and do what
you wanted
with her. She was really deeply feminine, very
gentle, very
submissive, the kind that would always do what a man
told her,
though she wasn't either small or weak. She wasn't
even stupid,
only rather silent and, at times, dreadfully refined.
But in those
days I was rather refined myself.

We were living together for about a year. Of course
in a town like
Lower Binfield you could only live together in a
figurative sense.
Officially we were 'walking out', which was a
recognized custom and
not quite the same as being engaged. There was a
road that

branched off from the road to Upper Binfield and ran along under
the edge of the hills. There was a long stretch of it, nearly a
mile, that was quite straight and fringed with enormous horse-
chestnut trees, and on the grass at the side there was a footpath
under the boughs that was known as Lovers' Lane. We used to go
there on the May evenings, when the chestnuts were in blossom.
Then the short nights came on, and it was light for hours after
we'd left the shop. You know the feeling of a June evening. The
kind of blue twilight that goes on and on, and the air brushing
against your face like silk. Sometimes on Sunday afternoons we
went over Chamford Hill and down to the water-meadows along the
Thames. 1913! My God! 1913! The stillness, the green water, the
rushing of the weir! It'll never come again. I don't mean that
1913 will never come again. I mean the feeling inside you, the
feeling of not being in a hurry and not being frightened, the
feeling you've either had and don't need to be told about, or
haven't had and won't ever have the chance to learn.

It wasn't till late summer that we began what's called living
together. I'd been too shy and clumsy to begin, and too ignorant
to realize that there'd been others before me. One Sunday
afternoon we went into the beech woods round Upper Binfield. Up
there you could always be alone. I wanted her very

badly, and I
knew quite well that she was only waiting for me to
begin.
Something, I don't know what, put it into my head to
go into the
grounds of Binfield House. Old Hodges, who was past
seventy and
getting very crusty, was capable of turning us out,
but he'd
probably be asleep on a Sunday afternoon. We slipped
through a gap
in the fence and down the footpath between the
beeches to the big
pool. It was four years or more since I'd been that
way. Nothing
had changed. Still the utter solitude, the hidden
feeling with the
great trees all round you, the old boat-house rotting
among the
bulrushes. We lay down in the little grass hollow
beside the wild
peppermint, and we were as much alone as if we'd been
in Central
Africa. I'd kissed her God knows how many times, and
then I'd got
up and was wandering about again. I wanted her very
badly, and
wanted to take the plunge, only I was
half-frightened. And
curiously enough there was another thought in my mind
at the same
time. It suddenly struck me that for years I'd meant
to come back
here and had never come. Now I was so near, it
seemed a pity not
to go down to the other pool and have a look at the
big carp. I
felt I'd kick myself afterwards if I missed the
chance, in fact I
couldn't think why I hadn't been back before. The
carp were stored
away in my mind, nobody knew about them except me, I
was going to

catch them some time. Practically they were MY carp.
I actually
started wandering along the bank in that direction,
and then when
I'd gone about ten yards I turned back. It meant
crashing your way
through a kind of jungle of brambles and rotten
brushwood, and I
was dressed up in my Sunday best. Dark-grey suit,
bowler hat,
button boots, and a collar that almost cut my ears
off. That was
how people dressed for Sunday afternoon walks in
those days. And I
wanted Elsie very badly. I went back and stood over
her for a
moment. She was lying on the grass with her arm over
her face, and
she didn't stir when she heard me come. In her black
dress she
looked--I don't know how, kind of soft, kind of
yielding, as though
her body was a kind of malleable stuff that you could
do what you
liked with. She was mine and I could have her, this
minute if I
wanted to. Suddenly I stopped being frightened, I
chucked my hat
on to the grass (it bounced, I remember), knelt down,
and took hold
of her. I can smell the wild peppermint yet. It was
my first
time, but it wasn't hers, and we didn't make such a
mess of it as
you might expect. So that was that. The big carp
faded out of my
mind again, and in fact for years afterwards I hardly
thought about
them.

1913. 1914. The spring of 1914. First the
blackthorn, then the
hawthorn, then the chestnuts in blossom. Sunday

afternoons along
the towpath, and the wind rippling the beds of rushes
so that they
swayed all together in great thick masses and looked
somehow like a
woman's hair. The endless June evenings, the path
under the
chestnut trees, an owl hooting somewhere and Elsie's
body against
me. It was a hot July that year. How we sweated in
the shop, and
how the cheese and the ground coffee smelt! And then
the cool of
the evening outside, the smell of night-stocks and
pipe-tobacco in
the lane behind the allotments, the soft dust
underfoot, and the
nightjars hawking after the cockchafers.

Christ! What's the use of saying that one oughtn't
to be sentimental
about 'before the war'? I AM sentimental about it.
So are you if
you remember it. It's quite true that if you look
back on any
special period of time you tend to remember the
pleasant bits.
That's true even of the war. But it's also true that
people then
had something that we haven't got now.

What? It was simply that they didn't think of the
future as
something to be terrified of. It isn't that life was
softer then
than now. Actually it was harsher. People on the
whole worked
harder, lived less comfortably, and died more
painfully. The farm
hands worked frightful hours for fourteen shillings a
week and
ended up as worn-out cripples with a five-shilling
old-age pension

and an occasional half-crown from the parish. And what was called
'respectable' poverty was even worse. When little Watson, a small
draper at the other end of the High Street, 'failed' after years of
struggling, his personal assets were L2 9s. 6d., and he died almost
immediately of what was called 'gastric trouble', but the doctor
let it out that it was starvation. Yet he'd clung to his frock
coat to the last. Old Crimp, the watchmaker's assistant, a skilled
workman who'd been at the job, man and boy, for fifty years, got
cataract and had to go into the workhouse. His grandchildren were
howling in the street when they took him away. His wife went out
charing, and by desperate efforts managed to send him a shilling a
week for pocket-money. You saw ghastly things happening sometimes.
Small businesses sliding down the hill, solid tradesmen turning
gradually into broken-down bankrupts, people dying by inches of
cancer and liver disease, drunken husbands signing the pledge every
Monday and breaking it every Saturday, girls ruined for life by an
illegitimate baby. The houses had no bathrooms, you broke the ice
in your basin on winter mornings, the back streets stank like the
devil in hot weather, and the churchyard was bang in the middle of
the town, so that you never went a day without remembering how
you'd got to end. And yet what was it that people had in those
days? A feeling of security, even when they weren't

secure. More
exactly, it was a feeling of continuity. All of them
knew they'd
got to die, and I suppose a few of them knew they
were going to go
bankrupt, but what they didn't know was that the
order of things
could change. Whatever might happen to themselves,
things would go
on as they'd known them. I don't believe it made
very much
difference that what's called religious belief was
still prevalent
in those days. It's true that nearly everyone went
to church, at
any rate in the country--Elsie and I still went to
church as a
matter of course, even when we were living in what
the vicar would
have called sin--and if you asked people whether they
believed in a
life after death they generally answered that they
did. But I've
never met anyone who gave me the impression of really
believing in
a future life. I think that, at most, people believe
in that kind
of thing in the same way as kids believe in Father
Christmas. But
it's precisely in a settled period, a period when
civilization
seems to stand on its four legs like an elephant,
that such things
as a future life don't matter. It's easy enough to
die if the
things you care about are going to survive. You've
had your life,
you're getting tired, it's time to go
underground--that's how
people used to see it. Individually they were
finished, but their
way of life would continue. Their good and evil
would remain good

and evil. They didn't feel the ground they stood on
shifting under
their feet.

Father was failing, and he didn't know it. It was
merely that
times were very bad, trade seemed to dwindle and
dwindle, his bills
were harder and harder to meet. Thank God, he never
even knew that
he was ruined, never actually went bankrupt, because
he died very
suddenly (it was influenza that turned into
pneumonia) at the
beginning of 1915. To the end he believed that with
thrift, hard
work, and fair dealing a man can't go wrong. There
must have been
plenty of small shopkeepers who carried that belief
not merely on
to bankrupt deathbeds but even into the workhouse.
Even Lovegrove
the saddler, with cars and motor-vans staring him in
the face,
didn't realize that he was as out of date as the
rhinoceros. And
Mother too--Mother never lived to know that the life
she'd been
brought up to, the life of a decent God-fearing
shopkeeper's
daughter and a decent God-fearing shopkeeper's wife
in the reign
of good Queen Vic, was finished for ever. Times were
difficult
and trade was bad, Father was worried and this and
that was
'aggravating', but you carried on much the same as
usual. The old
English order of life couldn't change. For ever and
ever decent
God-fearing women would cook Yorkshire pudding and
apple dumplings
on enormous coal ranges, wear woollen underclothes

and sleep on
feathers, make plum jam in July and pickles in
October, and read
Hilda's Home Companion in the afternoons, with the
flies buzzing
round, in a sort of cosy little underworld of stewed
tea, bad legs,
and happy endings. I don't say that either Father or
Mother was
quite the same to the end. They were a bit shaken,
and sometimes a
little dispirited. But at least they never lived to
know that
everything they'd believed in was just so much junk.
They lived at
the end of an epoch, when everything was dissolving
into a sort of
ghastly flux, and they didn't know it. They thought
it was
eternity. You couldn't blame them. That was what it
felt like.

Then came the end of July, and even Lower Binfield
grasped that
things were happening. For days there was tremendous
vague
excitement and endless leading articles in the
papers, which Father
actually brought in from the shop to read aloud to
Mother. And
then suddenly the posters everywhere:

GERMAN ULTIMATUM. FRANCE MOBILIZING

For several days (four days, wasn't it? I forget the
exact dates)
there was a strange stifled feeling, a kind of
waiting hush, like
the moment before a thunderstorm breaks, as though
the whole of
England was silent and listening. It was very hot, I

remember. In
the shop it was as though we couldn't work, though
already everyone
in the neighbourhood who had five bob to spare was
rushing in to
buy quantities of tinned stuff and flour and oatmeal.
It was as if
we were too feverish to work, we only sweated and
waited. In the
evenings people went down to the railway station and
fought like
devils over the evening papers which arrived on the
London train.
And then one afternoon a boy came rushing down the
High Street with
an armful of papers, and people were coming into
their doorways to
shout across the street. Everyone was shouting
'We've come in!
We've come in!' The boy grabbed a poster from his
bundle and stuck
it on the shop-front opposite:

ENGLAND DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY

We rushed out on to the pavement, all three
assistants, and
cheered. Everybody was cheering. Yes, cheering.
But old
Grimmett, though he'd already done pretty well out of
the war-
scare, still held on to a little of his Liberal
principles, 'didn't
hold' with the war, and said it would be a bad
business.

Two months later I was in the Army. Seven months
later I was in
France.

I wasn't wounded till late in 1916.

We'd just come out of the trenches and were marching over a bit of
road a mile or so back which was supposed to be safe, but which the
Germans must have got the range of some time earlier. Suddenly
they started putting a few shells over--it was heavy H.E. stuff,
and they were only firing about one a minute. There was the usual
zwee-e-e-e! and then BOOM! in a field somewhere over to the right.
I think it was the third shell that got me. I knew as soon as I
heard it coming that it had my name written on it. They say you
always know. It didn't say what an ordinary shell says. It said
'I'm after you, you b--, YOU, you b--, YOU!'--all this in the space
of about three seconds. And the last you was the explosion.

I felt as if an enormous hand made of air were sweeping me along.
And presently I came down with a sort of burst, shattered feeling
among a lot of old tin cans, splinters of wood, rusty barbed wire,
turds, empty cartridge cases, and other muck in the ditch at the
side of the road. When they'd hauled me out and cleaned some of
the dirt off me they found that I wasn't very badly hurt. It was
only a lot of small shell-splinters that had lodged in one side of

my bottom and down the backs of my legs. But luckily
I'd broken a
rib in falling, which made it just bad enough to get
me back to
England. I spent that winter in a hospital camp on
the downs near
Eastbourne.

Do you remember those war-time hospital camps? The
long rows of
wooden huts like chicken-houses stuck right on top of
those beastly
icy downs--the 'south coast', people used to call it,
which made me
wonder what the north coast could be like--where the
wind seems to
blow at you from all directions at once. And the
droves of blokes
in their pale-blue flannel suits and red ties,
wandering up and
down looking for a place out of the wind and never
finding one.
Sometimes the kids from the slap-up boys' schools in
Eastbourne
used to be led round in crocodiles to hand out fags
and peppermint
creams to the 'wounded Tommies', as they called us.
A pink-faced
kid of about eight would walk up to a knot of wounded
men sitting
on the grass, split open a packet of Woodbines and
solemnly hand
one fag to each man, just like feeding the monkeys at
the zoo.
Anyone who was strong enough used to wander for miles
over the
downs in hopes of meeting girls. There were never
enough girls to
go round. In the valley below the camp there was a
bit of a
spinney, and long before dusk you'd see a couple
glued against
every tree, and sometimes, if it happened to be a

thick tree, one
on each side of it. My chief memory of that time is
sitting
against a gorse-bush in the freezing wind, with my
fingers so cold
I couldn't bend them and the taste of a peppermint
cream in my
mouth. That's a typical soldier's memory. But I was
getting away
from a Tommy's life, all the same. The C.O. had sent
my name in
for a commission a little before I was wounded. By
this time they
were desperate for officers and anyone who wasn't
actually
illiterate could have a commission if he wanted one.
I went
straight from the hospital to an officers' training
camp near
Colchester.

It's very strange, the things the war did to people.
It was less
than three years since I'd been a spry young
shop-assistant,
bending over the counter in my white apron with 'Yes,
madam!
Certainly, madam! AND the next order, madam?' with a
grocer's life
ahead of me and about as much notion of becoming an
Army officer as
of getting a knighthood. And here I was already,
swaggering about
in a gorblimey hat and a yellow collar and more or
less keeping my
end up among a crowd of other temporary gents and
some who weren't
even temporary. And--this is really the point--not
feeling it in
any way strange. Nothing seemed strange in those
days.

It was like an enormous machine that had got hold of

you. You'd no
sense of acting of your own free will, and at the
same time no
notion of trying to resist. If people didn't have
some such
feeling as that, no war could last three months. The
armies would
just pack up and go home. Why had I joined the Army?
Or the
million other idiots who joined up before
conscription came in?
Partly for a lark and partly because of England my
England and
Britons never never and all that stuff. But how long
did that
last? Most of the chaps I knew had forgotten all
about it long
before they got as far as France. The men in the
trenches weren't
patriotic, didn't hate the Kaiser, didn't care a damn
about gallant
little Belgium and the Germans raping nuns on tables
(it was always
'on tables', as though that made it worse) in the
streets of
Brussels. On the other hand it didn't occur to them
to try and
escape. The machine had got hold of you and it could
do what it
liked with you. It lifted you up and dumped you down
among places
and things you'd never dreamed of, and if it had
dumped you down on
the surface of the moon it wouldn't have seemed
particularly
strange. The day I joined the Army the old life was
finished. It
was as though it didn't concern me any longer. I
wonder if you'd
believe that from that day forward I only once went
back to Lower
Binfield, and that was to Mother's funeral? It
sounds incredible

now, but it seemed natural enough at the time.
Partly, I admit, it
was on account of Elsie, whom, of course, I'd stopped
writing to
after two or three months. No doubt she'd picked up
with someone
else, but I didn't want to meet her. Otherwise,
perhaps, when I
got a bit of leave I'd have gone down and seen
Mother, who'd had
fits when I joined the Army but would have been proud
of a son in
uniform.

Father died in 1915. I was in France at the time. I
don't
exaggerate when I say that Father's death hurts me
more now than
it did then. At the time it was just a bit of bad
news which I
accepted almost without interest, in the sort of
empty-headed
apathetic way in which one accepted everything in the
trenches.
I remember crawling into the doorway of the dugout to
get enough
light to read the letter, and I remember Mother's
tear-stains on
the letter, and the aching feeling in my knees and
the smell of
mud. Father's life-insurance policy had been
mortgaged for most of
its value, but there was a little money in the bank
and Sarazins'
were going to buy up the stock and even pay some tiny
amount for
the good-will. Anyway, Mother had a bit over two
hundred pounds,
besides the furniture. She went for the time being
to lodge with
her cousin, the wife of a small-holder who was doing
pretty well
out of the war, near Doxley, a few miles the other

side of Walton.
It was only 'for the time being'. There was a temporary feeling
about everything. In the old days, which as a matter of fact were
barely a year old, the whole thing would have been an appalling
disaster. With Father dead, the shop sold and Mother with two
hundred pounds in the world, you'd have seen stretching out in
front of you a kind of fifteen-act tragedy, the last act being a
pauper's funeral. But now the war and the feeling of not being
one's own master overshadowed everything. People hardly thought in
terms of things like bankruptcy and the workhouse any longer. This
was the case even with Mother, who, God knows, had only very dim
notions about the war. Besides, she was already dying, though
neither of us knew it.

She came across to see me in the hospital at Eastbourne. It was
over two years since I'd seen her, and her appearance gave me a bit
of a shock. She seemed to have faded and somehow to have shrunken.
Partly it was because by this time I was grown-up, I'd travelled,
and everything looked smaller to me, but there was no question that
she'd got thinner, and also yellower. She talked in the old
rambling way about Aunt Martha (that was the cousin she was staying
with), and the changes in Lower Binfield since the war, and all the
boys who'd 'gone' (meaning joined the Army), and her indigestion

which was 'aggravating', and poor Father's tombstone and what a
lovely corpse he made. It was the old talk, the talk I'd listened
to for years, and yet somehow it was like a ghost talking. It
didn't concern me any longer. I'd known her as a great splendid
protecting kind of creature, a bit like a ship's figure-head and a
bit like a broody hen, and after all she was only a little old
woman in a black dress. Everything was changing and fading. That
was the last time I saw her alive. I got the wire saying she was
seriously ill when I was at the training school at Colchester, and
put in for a week's urgent leave immediately. But it was too late.
She was dead by the time I got to Doxley. What she and everyone
else had imagined to be indigestion was some kind of internal
growth, and a sudden chill on the stomach put the final touch.
The doctor tried to cheer me up by telling me that the growth was
'benevolent', which struck me as a queer thing to call it, seeing
that it had killed her.

Well, we buried her next to Father, and that was my last glimpse of
Lower Binfield. It had changed a lot, even in three years. Some
of the shops were shut, some had different names over them. Nearly
all the men I'd known as boys were gone, and some of them were
dead. Sid Lovegrove was dead, killed on the Somme. Ginger Watson,
the farm lad who'd belonged to the Black Hand years

ago, the one
who used to catch rabbits alive, was dead in Egypt.
One of the
chaps who'd worked with me at Grimmett's had lost
both legs. Old
Lovegrove had shut up his shop and was living in a
cottage near
Walton on a tiny annuity. Old Grimmett, on the other
hand, was
doing well out of the war and had turned patriotic
and was a member
of the local board which tried conscientious
objectors. The thing
which more than anything else gave the town an empty,
forlorn kind
of look was that there were practically no horses
left. Every
horse worth taking had been commandeered long ago.
The station fly
still existed, but the brute that pulled it wouldn't
have been able
to stand up if it hadn't been for the shafts. For
the hour or so
that I was there before the funeral I wandered round
the town,
saying how d'you do to people and showing off my
uniform. Luckily
I didn't run into Elsie. I saw all the changes, and
yet it was as
though I didn't see them. My mind was on other
things, chiefly the
pleasure of being seen in my second-loot's uniform,
with my black
armlet (a thing which looks rather smart on khaki)
and my new
whipcord breeches. I distinctly remember that I was
still thinking
about those whipcord breeches when we stood at the
graveside. And
then they chucked some earth on to the coffin and I
suddenly
realized what it means for your mother to be lying
with seven feet

of earth on top of her, and something kind of
twitched behind my
eyes and nose, but even then the whipcord breeches
weren't
altogether out of my mind.

Don't think I didn't feel for Mother's death. I did.
I wasn't in
the trenches any longer, I could feel sorry for a
death. But the
thing I didn't care a damn about, didn't even grasp
to be
happening, was the passing-away of the old life I'd
known. After
the funeral, Aunt Martha, who was rather proud of
having a 'real
officer' for a nephew and would have made a splash of
the funeral
if I'd let her, went back to Doxley on the bus and I
took the fly
down to the station, to get the train to London and
then to
Colchester. We drove past the shop. No one had
taken it since
Father died. It was shut up and the window-pane was
black with
dust, and they'd burned the 'S. Bowling' off the
signboard with a
plumber's blowflame. Well, there was the house where
I'd been a
child and a boy and a young man, where I'd crawled
about the
kitchen floor and smelt the sainfoin and read
'Donovan the
Dauntless', where I'd done my homework for the
Grammar School,
mixed bread paste, mended bicycle punctures, and
tried on my first
high collar. It had been as permanent to me as the
Pyramids, and
now it would be just an accident if I ever set foot
in it again.
Father, Mother, Joe, the errand boys, old Nailer the

terrier, Spot,
the one that came after Nailer, Jackie the bullfinch,
the cats, the
mice in the loft--all gone, nothing left but dust.
And I didn't
care a damn. I was sorry Mother was dead, I was even
sorry Father
was dead, but all the time my mind was on other
things. I was a
bit proud of being seen riding in a cab, a thing I
hadn't yet got
used to, and I was thinking of the sit of my new
whipcord breeches,
and my nice smooth officer's putties, so different
from the gritty
stuff the Tommies had to wear, and of the other chaps
at Colchester
and the sixty quid Mother had left and the beanos
we'd have with
it. Also I was thanking God that I hadn't happened
to run into
Elsie.

The war did extraordinary things to people. And what
was more
extraordinary than the way it killed people was the
way it
sometimes didn't kill them. It was like a great
flood rushing you
along to death, and suddenly it would shoot you up
some backwater
where you'd find yourself doing incredible and
pointless things and
drawing extra pay for them. There were labour
battalions making
roads across the desert that didn't lead anywhere,
there were chaps
marooned on oceanic islands to look out for German
cruisers which
had been sunk years earlier, there were Ministries of
this and that
with armies of clerks and typists which went on
existing years

after their function had ended, by a kind of inertia. People were
shoved into meaningless jobs and then forgotten by the authorities
for years on end. This was what happened to myself, or very likely
I wouldn't be here. The whole sequence of events is rather
interesting.

A little while after I was gazetted there was a call for officers
of the A.S.C. As soon as the O.C. of the training camp heard that
I knew something about the grocery trade (I didn't let on that I'd
actually been behind the counter) he told me to send my name in.
That went through all right, and I was just about to leave for
another training-school for A.S.C. officers somewhere in the
Midlands when there was a demand for a young officer, with
knowledge of the grocery trade, to act as some kind of secretary to
Sir Joseph Cheam, who was a big noise in the A.S.C. God knows why
they picked me out, but at any rate they did so. I've since
thought that they probably mixed my name up with somebody else's.
Three days later I was saluting in Sir Joseph's office. He was a
lean, upright, rather handsome old boy with grizzled hair and a
grave-looking nose which immediately impressed me. He looked the
perfect professional soldier, the K.C.M.G., D.S.O. with bar type,
and might have been twin brother to the chap in the De Reszke
advert, though in private life he was chairman of one

of the big
chain groceries and famous all over the world for
something called
the Cheam Wage-Cut System. He stopped writing as I
came in and
looked me over.

'You a gentleman?'

'No, sir.'

'Good. Then perhaps we'll get some work done.'

In about three minutes he'd wormed out of me that I
had no
secretarial experience, didn't know shorthand,
couldn't use a
typewriter, and had worked in a grocery at
twenty-eight shillings a
week. However, he said that I'd do, there were too
many gentlemen
in this damned Army and he'd been looking for
somebody who could
count beyond ten. I liked him and looked forward to
working for
him, but just at this moment the mysterious powers
that seemed to
be running the war drove us apart again. Something
called the West
Coast Defence Force was being formed, or rather was
being talked
about, and there was some vague idea of establishing
dumps of
rations and other stores at various points along the
coast. Sir
Joseph was supposed to be responsible for the dumps
in the south-
west corner of England. The day after I joined his
office he sent
me down to check over the stores at a place called
Twelve Mile
Dump, on the North Cornish Coast. Or rather my job
was to find out

whether any stores existed. Nobody seemed certain about this. I'd
just got there and discovered that the stores consisted of eleven
tins of bully beef when a wire arrived from the War Office telling
me to take charge of the stores at Twelve Mile Dump and remain
there till further notice. I wired back 'No stores at Twelve Mile
Dump.' Too late. Next day came the official letter informing me
that I was O.C. Twelve Mile Dump. And that's really the end of the
story. I remained O.C. Twelve Mile Dump for the rest of the war.

God knows what it was all about. It's no use asking me what the
West Coast Defence Force was or what it was supposed to do. Even
at that time nobody pretended to know. In any case it didn't
exist. It was just a scheme that had floated through somebody's
mind--following on some vague rumour of a German invasion via
Ireland, I suppose--and the food dumps which were supposed to exist
all along the coast were also imaginary. The whole thing had
existed for about three days, like a sort of bubble, and then had
been forgotten, and I'd been forgotten with it. My eleven tins of
bully beef had been left behind by some officers who had been there
earlier on some other mysterious mission. They'd also left behind
a very deaf old man called Private Lidgebird. What Lidgebird was
supposed to be doing there I never discovered. I wonder whether

you'll believe that I remained guarding those eleven tins of bully
beef from half-way through 1917 to the beginning of 1919? Probably
you won't, but it's the truth. And at the time even that didn't
seem particularly strange. By 1918 one had simply got out of the
habit of expecting things to happen in a reasonable manner.

Once a month they sent me an enormous official form calling upon me
to state the number and condition of pick-axes, entrenching tools,
coils of barbed wire, blankets, waterproof groundsheets, first-aid
outfits, sheets of corrugated iron, and tins of plum and apple jam
under my care. I just entered 'nil' against everything and sent
the form back. Nothing ever happened. Up in London someone was
quietly filing the forms, and sending out more forms, and filing
those, and so on. It was the way things were happening. The
mysterious higher-ups who were running the war had forgotten my
existence. I didn't jog their memory. I was up a backwater that
didn't lead anywhere, and after two years in France I wasn't so
burning with patriotism that I wanted to get out of it.

It was a lonely part of the coast where you never saw a soul except
a few yokels who'd barely heard there was a war on. A quarter of a
mile away, down a little hill, the sea boomed and surged over
enormous flats of sand. Nine months of the year it

rained, and the
other three a raging wind blew off the Atlantic.
There was nothing
there except Private Lidgebird, myself, two Army
huts--one of them
a decentish two-roomed hut which I inhabited--and the
eleven tins
of bully beef. Lidgebird was a surly old devil and I
could never
get much out of him except the fact that he'd been a
market
gardener before he joined the Army. It was
interesting to see how
rapidly he was reverting to type. Even before I got
to Twelve Mile
Dump he'd dug a patch round one of the huts and
started planting
spuds, in the autumn he dug another patch till he'd
got about half
an acre under cultivation, at the beginning of 1918
he started
keeping hens which had got to quite a number by the
end of the
summer, and towards the end of the year he suddenly
produced a pig
from God knows where. I don't think it crossed his
mind to wonder
what the devil we were doing there, or what the West
Coast Defence
Force was and whether it actually existed. It
wouldn't surprise me
to hear that he's there still, raising pigs and
potatoes on the
spot where Twelve Mile Dump used to be. I hope he
is. Good luck
to him.

Meanwhile I was doing something I'd never before had
the chance to
do as a full-time job--reading.

The officers who'd been there before had left a few
books behind,

mostly sevenpenny editions and nearly all of them the
kind of tripe
that people were reading in those days. Ian Hay and
Sapper and the
Craig Kennedy stories and so forth. But at some time
or other
somebody had been there who knew what books are worth
reading and
what are not. I myself, at the time, didn't know
anything of the
kind. The only books I'd ever voluntarily read were
detective
stories and once in a way a smutty sex book. God
knows I don't set
up to be a highbrow even now, but if you'd asked me
THEN for the
name of a 'good' book I'd have answered The Woman
Thou Gavest Me,
or (in memory of the vicar) Sesame and Lilies. In
any case a
'good' book was a book one didn't have any intention
of reading.
But there I was, in a job where there was less than
nothing to do,
with the sea booming on the beach and the rain
streaming down the
window-panes--and a whole row of books staring me in
the face on
the temporary shelf someone had rigged up against the
wall of the
hut. Naturally I started to read them from end to
end, with, at
the beginning, about as much attempt to discriminate
as a pig
working its way through a pail of garbage.

But in among them there were three or four books that
were
different from the others. No, you've got it wrong!
Don't run
away with the idea that I suddenly discovered Marcel
Proust or
Henry James or somebody. I wouldn't have read them

even if I had.
These books I'm speaking of weren't in the least
highbrow. But now
and again it so happens that you strike a book which
is exactly at
the mental level you've reached at the moment, so
much so that it
seems to have been written especially for you. One
of them was
H. G. Wells's The History of Mr Polly, in a cheap
shilling edition
which was falling to pieces. I wonder if you can
imagine the
effect it had upon me, to be brought up as I'd been
brought up, the
son of a shopkeeper in a country town, and then to
come across a
book like that? Another was Compton Mackenzie's
Sinister Street.
It had been the scandal of the season a few years
back, and I'd
even heard vague rumours of it in Lower Binfield.
Another was
Conrad's Victory, parts of which bored me. But books
like that
started you thinking. And there was a back number of
some magazine
with a blue cover which had a short story of D. H.
Lawrence's in
it. I don't remember the name of it. It was a story
about a
German conscript who shoves his sergeant-major over
the edge of a
fortification and then does a bunk and gets caught in
his girl's
bedroom. It puzzled me a lot. I couldn't make out
what it was all
about, and yet it left me with a vague feeling that
I'd like to
read some others like it.

Well, for several months I had an appetite for books
that was

almost like physical thirst. It was the first real go-in at
reading that I'd had since my Dick Donovan days. At the beginning
I had no idea how to set about getting hold of books. I thought
the only way was to buy them. That's interesting, I think. It
shows you the difference upbringing makes. I suppose the children
of the middle classes, the 500 pounds a year middle classes, know
all about Mudie's and the Times Book Club when they're in their
cradles. A bit later I learned of the existence of lending
libraries and took out a subscription at Mudie's and another at a
library in Bristol. And what I read during the next year or so!
Wells, Conrad, Kipling, Galsworthy, Barry Pain, W. W. Jacobs, Pett
Ridge, Oliver Onions, Compton Mackenzie, H. Seton Merriman, Maurice
Baring, Stephen McKenna, May Sinclair, Arnold Bennett, Anthony
Hope, Elinor Glyn, O. Henry, Stephen Leacock, and even Silas
Hocking and Jean Stratton Porter. How many of the names in that
list are known to you, I wonder? Half the books that people took
seriously in those days are forgotten now. But at the beginning I
swallowed them all down like a whale that's got in among a shoal of
shrimps. I just revelled in them. After a bit, of course, I grew
more highbrow and began to distinguish between tripe and not-tripe.
I got hold of Lawrence's Sons and Lovers and sort of half-enjoyed
it, and I got a lot of kick out of Oscar Wilde's

Dorian Gray and
Stevenson's New Arabian Nights. Wells was the author
who made the
biggest impression on me. I read George Moore's
Esther Waters and
liked it, and I tried several of Hardy's novels and
always got
stuck about half-way through. I even had a go at
Ibsen, who left
me with a vague impression that in Norway it's always
raining.

It was queer, really. Even at the time it struck me
as queer. I
was a second-loot with hardly any Cockney accent
left, I could
already distinguish between Arnold Bennett and Elinor
Glyn, and yet
it was only four years since I'd been slicing cheese
behind the
counter in my white apron and looking forward to the
days when I'd
be a master-grocer. If I tot up the account, I
suppose I must
admit that the war did me good as well as harm. At
any rate that
year of reading novels was the only real education,
in the sense of
book-learning, that I've ever had. It did certain
things to my
mind. It gave me an attitude, a kind of questioning
attitude,
which I probably wouldn't have had if I'd gone
through life in a
normal sensible way. But--I wonder if you can
understand this--the
thing that really changed me, really made an
impression on me,
wasn't so much the books I read as the rotten
meaninglessness of
the life I was leading.

It really was unspeakably meaningless, that time in

1918. Here I
was, sitting beside the stove in an Army hut, reading
novels, and a
few hundred miles away in France the guns were
roaring and droves
of wretched children, wetting their bags with fright,
were being
driven into the machine-gun barrage like you'd shoot
small coke
into a furnace. I was one of the lucky ones. The
higher-ups had
taken their eye off me, and here I was in a snug
little bolt-hole,
drawing pay for a job that didn't exist. At times I
got into a
panic and made sure they'd remember about me and dig
me out, but it
never happened. The official forms, on gritty grey
paper, came in
once a month, and I filled them up and sent them
back, and more
forms came in, and I filled them up and sent them
back, and so it
went on. The whole thing had about as much sense in
it as a
lunatic's dream. The effect of all this, plus the
books I was
reading, was to leave me with a feeling of disbelief
in everything.

I wasn't the only one. The war was full of loose
ends and
forgotten corners. By this time literally millions
of people were
stuck up backwaters of one kind and another. Whole
armies were
rotting away on fronts that people had forgotten the
names of.
There were huge Ministries with hordes of clerks and
typists all
drawing two pounds a week and upwards for piling up
mounds of
paper. Moreover they knew perfectly well that all

they were doing
was to pile up mounds of paper. Nobody believed the
atrocity
stories and the gallant little Belgium stuff any
longer. The
soldiers thought the Germans were good fellows and
hated the French
like poison. Every junior officer looked on the
General Staff as
mental defectives. A sort of wave of disbelief was
moving across
England, and it even got as far as Twelve Mile Dump.
It would be
an exaggeration to say that the war turned people
into highbrows,
but it did turn them into nihilists for the time
being. People who
in a normal way would have gone through life with
about as much
tendency to think for themselves as a suet pudding
were turned into
Bolshies just by the war. What should I be now if it
hadn't been
for the war? I don't know, but something different
from what I am.
If the war didn't happen to kill you it was bound to
start you
thinking. After that unspeakable idiotic mess you
couldn't go on
regarding society as something eternal and
unquestionable, like a
pyramid. You knew it was just a balls-up.

9

The war had jerked me out of the old life I'd known,
but in the
queer period that came afterwards I forgot it almost
completely.

I know that in a sense one never forgets anything.
You remember
that piece of orange-peel you saw in the gutter
thirteen years ago,
and that coloured poster of Torquay that you once got
a glimpse of
in a railway waiting-room. But I'm speaking of a
different kind of
memory. In a sense I remembered the old life in
Lower Binfield.
I remembered my fishing-rod and the smell of sainfoin
and Mother
behind the brown teapot and Jackie the bullfinch and
the horse-
trough in the market-place. But none of it was alive
in my mind
any longer. It was something far away, something
that I'd finished
with. It would never have occurred to me that some
day I might
want to go back to it.

It was a queer time, those years just after the war,
almost queerer
than the war itself, though people don't remember it
so vividly.
In a rather different form the sense of disbelieving
in everything
was stronger than ever. Millions of men had suddenly
been kicked
out of the Army to find that the country they'd
fought for didn't
want them, and Lloyd George and his pals were giving
the works to
any illusions that still existed. Bands of
ex-service men marched
up and down rattling collection boxes, masked women
were singing in
the streets, and chaps in officers' tunics were
grinding barrel-
organs. Everybody in England seemed to be scrambling
for jobs,
myself included. But I came off luckier than most.

I got a small
wound-gratuity, and what with that and the bit of
money I'd put
aside during the last year of war (not having had
much opportunity
to spend it), I came out of the Army with no less
than three
hundred and fifty quid. It's rather interesting, I
think, to
notice my reaction. Here I was, with quite enough
money to do the
thing I'd been brought up to do and the thing I'd
dreamed of for
years--that is, start a shop. I had plenty of
capital. If you
bide your time and keep your eyes open you can run
across quite
nice little businesses for three hundred and fifty
quid. And yet,
if you'll believe me, the idea never occurred to me.
I not only
didn't make any move towards starting a shop, but it
wasn't till
years later, about 1925 in fact, that it even crossed
my mind that
I might have done so. The fact was that I'd passed
right out of
the shopkeeping orbit. That was what the Army did to
you. It
turned you into an imitation gentleman and gave you a
fixed idea
that there'd always be a bit of money coming from
somewhere. If
you'd suggested to me then, in 1919, that I ought to
start a shop--
a tobacco and sweet shop, say, or a general store in
some god-
forsaken village--I'd just have laughed. I'd worn
pips on my
shoulder, and my social standards had risen. At the
same time I
didn't share the delusion, which was pretty common
among ex-

officers, that I could spend the rest of my life
drinking pink gin.
I knew I'd got to have a job. And the job, of
course, would be 'in
business'--just what kind of job I didn't know, but
something high-
up and important, something with a car and a
telephone and if
possible a secretary with a permanent wave. During
the last year
or so of war a lot of us had had visions like that.
The chap who'd
been a shop walker saw himself as a travelling
salesman, and the
chap who'd been a travelling salesman saw himself as
a managing
director. It was the effect of Army life, the effect
of wearing
pips and having a cheque-book and calling the evening
meal dinner.
All the while there'd been an idea floating
round--and this applied
to the men in the ranks as well as the officers--that
when we came
out of the Army there'd be jobs waiting for us that
would bring in
at least as much as our Army pay. Of course, if
ideas like that
didn't circulate, no war would ever be fought.

Well, I didn't get that job. It seemed that nobody
was anxious to
pay me 2,000 pounds a year for sitting among
streamlined office
furniture and dictating letters to a platinum blonde.
I was
discovering what three-quarters of the blokes who'd
been officers
were discovering--that from a financial point of view
we'd been
better off in the Army than we were ever likely to be
again. We'd
suddenly changed from gentlemen holding His Majesty's

commission
into miserable out-of-works whom nobody wanted. My
ideas soon sank
from two thousand a year to three or four pounds a
week. But even
jobs of the three or four pounds a week kind didn't
seem to exist.
Every mortal job was filled already, either by men
who'd been a few
years too old to fight, or by boys who'd been a few
months too
young. The poor bastards who'd happened to be born
between 1890
and 1900 were left out in the cold. And still it
never occurred to
me to go back to the grocering business. Probably I
could have got
a job as a grocer's assistant; old Grimmett, if he
was still alive
and in business (I wasn't in touch with Lower
Binfield and didn't
know), would have given me good refs. But I'd passed
into a
different orbit. Even if my social ideas hadn't
risen, I could
hardly have imagined, after what I'd seen and
learned, going back
to the old safe existence behind the counter. I
wanted to be
travelling about and pulling down the big dough.
Chiefly I wanted
to be a travelling salesman, which I knew would suit
me.

But there were no jobs for travelling
salesmen--that's to say, jobs
with a salary attached. What there were, however,
were on-
commission jobs. That racket was just beginning on a
big, scale.
It's a beautifully simple method of increasing your
sales and
advertising your stuff without taking any risks, and

it always
flourishes when times are bad. They keep you on a
string by
hinting that perhaps there'll be a salaried job going
in three
months' time, and when you get fed up there's always
some other
poor devil ready to take over. Naturally it wasn't
long before I
had an on-commission job, in fact I had quite a
number in rapid
succession. Thank God, I never came down to peddling
vacuum-
cleaners, or dictionaries. But I travelled in
cutlery, in soap-
powder, in a line of patent corkscrews, tin-openers,
and similar
gadgets, and finally in a line of office
accessories--paper-clips,
carbon paper, typewriter ribbons, and so forth. I
didn't do so
badly either. I'm the type that CAN sell things on
commission.
I've got the temperament and I've got the manner.
But I never came
anywhere near making a decent living. You can't, in
jobs like
that--and, of course, you aren't meant to.

I had about a year of it altogether. It was a queer
time. The
cross-country journeys, the godless places you
fetched up in,
suburbs of Midland towns that you'd never hear of in
a hundred
normal lifetimes. The ghastly bed-and-breakfast
houses where the
sheets always smell faintly of slops and the fried
egg at breakfast
has a yolk paler than a lemon. And the other poor
devils of
salesmen that you're always meeting, middle-aged
fathers of

families in moth-eaten overcoats and bowler hats, who honestly
believe that sooner or later trade will turn the corner and they'll
jack their earnings up to five quid a week. And the traipsing from
shop to shop, and the arguments with shopkeepers who don't want to
listen, and the standing back and making yourself small when a
customer comes in. Don't think that it worried me particularly.
To some chaps that kind of life is torture. There are chaps who
can't even walk into a shop and open their bag of samples without
screwing themselves up as though they were going over the top. But
I'm not like that. I'm tough, I can talk people into buying things
they don't want, and even if they slam the door in my face it
doesn't bother me. Selling things on commission is actually what I
like doing, provided I can see my way to making a bit of dough out
of it. I don't know whether I learned much in that year, but I
unlearned a good deal. It knocked the Army nonsense out of me, and
it drove into the back of my head the notions that I'd picked up
during the idle year when I was reading novels. I don't think I
read a single book, barring detective stories, all the time I was
on the road. I wasn't a highbrow any longer. I was down among the
realities of modern life. And what are the realities of modern
life? Well, the chief one is an everlasting, frantic struggle to
sell things. With most people it takes the form of

selling
themselves--that's to say, getting a job and keeping
it. I suppose
there hasn't been a single month since the war, in
any trade you
care to name, in which there weren't more men than
jobs. It's
brought a peculiar, ghastly feeling into life. It's
like on a
sinking ship when there are nineteen survivors and
fourteen
lifebelts. But is there anything particularly modern
in that, you
say? Has it anything to do with the war? Well, it
feels as if it
had. That feeling that you've got to be
everlastingly fighting and
hustling, that you'll never get anything unless you
grab it from
somebody else, that there's always somebody after
your job, the
next month or the month after they'll be reducing
staff and it's
you that'll get the bird--THAT, I swear, didn't exist
in the old
life before the war.

But meanwhile I wasn't badly off. I was earning a
bit and I'd
still got plenty of money in the bank, nearly two
hundred quid, and
I wasn't frightened for the future. I knew that
sooner or later
I'd get a regular job. And sure enough, after about
a year, by a
stroke of luck it happened. I say by a stroke of
luck, but the
fact is that I was bound to fall on my feet. I'm not
the type that
starves. I'm about as likely to end up in the
workhouse as to end
up in the House of Lords. I'm the middling type, the
type that

gravitates by a kind of natural law towards the
five-pound-a-week
level. So long as there are any jobs at all I'll
back myself to
get one.

It happened when I was peddling paper-clips and
typewriter ribbons.
I'd just dodged into a huge block of offices in Fleet
Street, a
building which canvassers weren't allowed into, as a
matter of
fact, but I'd managed to give the lift attendant the
impression
that my bag of samples was merely an attache case. I
was walking
along one of the corridors looking for the offices of
a small
toothpaste firm that I'd been recommended to try,
when I saw that
some very big bug was coming down the corridor in the
other
direction. I knew immediately that it was a big bug.
You know how
it is with these big business men, they seem to take
up more room
and walk more loudly than any ordinary person, and
they give off a
kind of wave of money that you can feel fifty yards
away. When he
got nearly up to me I saw that it was Sir Joseph
Cheam. He was in
civvies, of course, but I had no difficulty in
recognizing him. I
suppose he'd been there for some business conference
or other. A
couple of clerks, or secretaries, or something, were
following
after him, not actually holding up his train, because
he wasn't
wearing one, but you somehow felt that that was what
they were
doing. Of course I dodged aside instantly. But

curiously enough
he recognized me, though he hadn't seen me for years.
To my
surprise he stopped and spoke to me.

'Hullo, you! I've seen you somewhere before. What's
your name?
It's on the tip of my tongue.'

'Bowling, sir. Used to be in the A.S.C.'

'Of course. The boy that said he wasn't a gentleman.
What are you
doing here?'

I might have told him I was selling typewriter
ribbons, and there
perhaps the whole thing would have ended. But I had
one of those
sudden inspirations that you get occasionally--a
feeling that I
might make something out of this if I handled it
properly. I said
instead:

'Well, sir, as a matter of fact I'm looking for a
job.'

'A job, eh? Hm. Not so easy, nowadays.'

He looked me up and down for a second. The two
train-bearers had
kind of wafted themselves a little distance away. I
saw his rather
good-looking old face, with the heavy grey eyebrows
and the
intelligent nose, looking me over and realized that
he'd decided to
help me. It's queer, the power of these rich men.
He'd been
marching past me in his power and glory, with his
underlings after
him, and then on some whim or other he'd turned aside

like an
emperor suddenly chucking a coin to a beggar.

'So you want a job? What can you do?'

Again the inspiration. No use, with a bloke like
this, cracking up
your own merits. Stick to the truth. I said:
'Nothing, sir. But
I want a job as a travelling salesman.'

'Salesman? Hm. Not sure that I've got anything for
you at
present. Let's see.'

He pursed his lips up. For a moment, half a minute
perhaps, he
was thinking quite deeply. It was curious. Even at
the time I
realized that it was curious. This important old
bloke, who was
probably worth at least half a million, was actually
taking thought
on my behalf. I'd deflected him from his path and
wasted at least
three minutes of his time, all because of a chance
remark I'd
happened to make years earlier. I'd stuck in his
memory and
therefore he was willing to take the tiny bit of
trouble that was
needed to find me a job. I dare say the same day he
gave twenty
clerks the sack. Finally he said:

'How'd you like to go into an insurance firm? Always
fairly safe,
you know. People have got to have insurance, same as
they've got
to eat.'

Of course I jumped at the idea of going into an
insurance firm.

Sir Joseph was 'interested' in the Flying Salamander.
God knows
how many companies he was 'interested' in. One of
the underlings
wafted himself forward with a scribbling-pad, and
there and then,
with the gold stylo out of his waistcoat pocket, Sir
Joseph
scribbled me a note to some higher-up in the Flying
Salamander.
Then I thanked him, and he marched on, and I sneaked
off in the
other direction, and we never saw one another again.

Well, I got the job, and, as I said earlier, the job
got me. I've
been with the Flying Salamander close on eighteen
years. I started
off in the office, but now I'm what's known as an
Inspector,
or, when there's reason to sound particularly
impressive, a
Representative. A couple of days a week I'm working
in the
district office, and the rest of the time I'm
travelling around,
interviewing clients whose names have been sent in by
the local
agents, making assessments of shops and other
property, and now and
again snapping up a few orders on my own account. I
earn round
about seven quid a week. And properly speaking
that's the end of
my story.

When I look back I realize that my active life, if I
ever had one,
ended when I was sixteen. Everything that really
matters to me had
happened before that date. But in a manner of
speaking things were
still happening--the war, for instance--up to the

time when I got
the job with the Flying Salamander. After
that--well, they say
that happy people have no histories, and neither do
the blokes who
work in insurance offices. From that day forward
there was nothing
in my life that you could properly describe as an
event, except
that about two and a half years later, at the
beginning of '23, I
got married.

10

I was living in a boarding-house in Ealing. The
years were rolling
on, or crawling on. Lower Binfield had passed almost
out of my
memory. I was the usual young city worker who scoots
for the 8.15
and intrigues for the other fellow's job. I was
fairly well
thought of in the firm and pretty satisfied with
life. The post-
war success dope had caught me, more or less. You
remember the
line of talk. Pep, punch, grit, sand. Get on or get
out. There's
plenty of room at the top. You can't keep a good man
down. And
the ads in the magazines about the chap that the boss
clapped on
the shoulder, and the keen-jawed executive who's
pulling down the
big dough and attributes his success to so and so's
correspondence
course. It's funny how we all swallowed it, even
blokes like me to
whom it hadn't the smallest application. Because I'm

neither a go-
getter nor a down-and-out, and I'm by nature
incapable of being
either. But it was the spirit of the time. Get on!
Make good!
If you see a man down, jump on his guts before he
gets up again.
Of course this was in the early twenties, when some
of the effects
of the war had worn off and the slump hadn't yet
arrived to knock
the stuffing out of us.

I had an 'A' subscription at Boots and went to
half-crown dances
and belonged to a local tennis club. You know those
tennis clubs
in the genteel suburbs--little wooden pavilions and
high wire-
netting enclosures where young chaps in rather badly
cut white
flannels prance up and down, shouting 'Fifteen
forty!' and 'Vantage
all!' in voices which are a tolerable imitation of
the Upper Crust.
I'd learned to play tennis, didn't dance too badly,
and got on well
with the girls. At nearly thirty I wasn't a
bad-looking chap, with
my red face and butter-coloured hair, and in those
days it was
still a point in your favour to have fought in the
war. I never,
then or at any other time, succeeded in looking like
a gentleman,
but on the other hand you probably wouldn't have
taken me for the
son of a small shopkeeper in a country town. I could
keep my end
up in the rather mixed society of a place like
Ealing, where the
office-employee class overlaps with the
middling-professional

class. It was at the tennis club that I first met
Hilda.

At that time Hilda was twenty-four. She was a small,
slim, rather
timid girl, with dark hair, beautiful movements,
and--because of
having very large eyes--a distinct resemblance to a
hare. She was
one of those people who never say much, but remain on
the edge of
any conversation that's going on, and give the
impression that
they're listening. If she said anything at all, it
was usually
'Oh, yes, I think so too', agreeing with whoever had
spoken last.
At tennis she hopped about very gracefully, and
didn't play badly,
but somehow had a helpless, childish air. Her
surname was Vincent.

If you're married, there'll have been times when
you've said to
yourself 'Why the hell did I do it?' and God knows
I've said it
often enough about Hilda. And once again, looking at
it across
fifteen years, why DID I marry Hilda?

Partly, of course, because she was young and in a way
very pretty.
Beyond that I can only say that because she came of
totally
different origins from myself it was very difficult
for me to get
any grasp of what she was really like. I had to
marry her first
and find out about her afterwards, whereas if I'd
married say,
Elsie Waters, I'd have known what I was marrying.
Hilda belonged
to a class I only knew by hearsay, the

poverty-stricken officer
class. For generations past her family had been
soldiers, sailors,
clergymen, Anglo-Indian officials, and that kind of
thing. They'd
never had any money, but on the other hand none of
them had ever
done anything that I should recognize as work. Say
what you will,
there's a kind of snob-appeal in that, if you belong
as I do to the
God-fearing shopkeeper class, the low church, and
high-tea class.
It wouldn't make any impression on me now, but it did
then. Don't
mistake what I'm saying. I don't mean that I married
Hilda BECAUSE
she belonged to the class I'd once served across the
counter, with
some notion of jockeying myself up in the social
scale. It was
merely that I couldn't understand her and therefore
was capable of
being goofy about her. And one thing I certainly
didn't grasp was
that the girls in these penniless middle-class
families will marry
anything in trousers, just to get away from home.

It wasn't long before Hilda took me home to see her
family. I
hadn't known till then that there was a considerable
Anglo-Indian
colony in Ealing. Talk about discovering a new
world! It was
quite a revelation to me.

Do you know these Anglo-Indian families? It's almost
impossible,
when you get inside these people's houses, to
remember that out in
the street it's England and the twentieth century.
As soon as you

set foot inside the front door you're in India in the
eighties.
You know the kind of atmosphere. The carved teak
furniture, the
brass trays, the dusty tiger-skulls on the wall, the
Trichinopoly
cigars, the red-hot pickles, the yellow photographs
of chaps in
sun-helmets, the Hindustani words that you're
expected to know the
meaning of, the everlasting anecdotes about
tiger-shoots and what
Smith said to Jones in Poona in '87. It's a sort of
little world
of their own that they've created, like a kind of
cyst. To me, of
course, it was all quite new and in some ways rather
interesting.
Old Vincent, Hilda's father, had been not only in
India but also in
some even more outlandish place, Borneo or Sarawak, I
forget which.
He was the usual type, completely bald, almost
invisible behind his
moustache, and full of stories about cobras and
cummerbunds and
what the district collector said in '93. Hilda's
mother was so
colourless that she was just like one of the faded
photos on the
wall. There was also a son, Harold, who had some
official job in
Ceylon and was home on leave at the time when I first
met Hilda.
They had a little dark house in one of those buried
back-streets
that exist in Ealing. It smelt perpetually of
Trichinopoly cigars
and it was so full of spears, blow-pipes, brass
ornaments, and the
heads of wild animals that you could hardly move
about in it.

Old Vincent had retired in 1910, and since then he and his wife had
shown about as much activity, mental or physical, as a couple of
shellfish. But at the time I was vaguely impressed by a family
which had had majors, colonels, and once even an admiral in it.
My attitude towards the Vincents, and theirs towards me, is an
interesting illustration of what fools people can be when they get
outside their own line. Put me among business people--whether
they're company directors or commercial travellers--and I'm a
fairly good judge of character. But I had no experience whatever
of the officer-rentier-clergyman class, and I was inclined to kow-
tow to these decayed throw-outs. I looked on them as my social and
intellectual superiors, while they on the other hand mistook me for
a rising young businessman who before long would be pulling down
the big dough. To people of that kind, 'business', whether it's
marine insurance or selling peanuts, is just a dark mystery. All
they know is that it's something rather vulgar out of which you can
make money. Old Vincent used to talk impressively about my being
'in business'--once, I remember, he had a slip of the tongue and
said 'in trade'--and obviously didn't grasp the difference between
being in business as an employee and being there on your own
account. He had some vague notion that as I was 'in' the Flying
Salamander I should sooner or later rise to the top

of it, by a
process of promotion. I think it's possible that he
also had
pictures of himself touching me for fivers at some
future date.
Harold certainly had. I could see it in his eye. In
fact, even
with my income being what it is, I'd probably be
lending money to
Harold at this moment if he were alive. Luckily he
died a few
years after we were married, of enteric or something,
and both the
old Vincents are dead too.

Well, Hilda and I were married, and right from the
start it was a
flop. Why did you marry her? you say. But why did
you marry
yours? These things happen to us. I wonder whether
you'll believe
that during the first two or three years I had
serious thoughts of
killing Hilda. Of course in practice one never does
these things,
they're only a kind of fantasy that one enjoys
thinking about.
Besides, chaps who murder their wives always get
copped. However
cleverly you've faked the alibi, they know perfectly
well that it's
you who did it, and they'll pin it on to you somehow.
When a
woman's bumped off, her husband is always the first
suspect--which
gives you a little side-glimpse of what people really
think about
marriage.

One gets used to everything in time. After a year or
two I stopped
wanting to kill her and started wondering about her.
Just

wondering. For hours, sometimes, on Sunday
afternoons or in the
evening when I've come home from work, I've lain on
my bed with all
my clothes on except my shoes, wondering about women.
Why they're
like that, how they get like that, whether they're
doing it on
purpose. It seems to be a most frightful thing, the
suddenness
with which some women go to pieces after they're
married. It's as
if they were strung up to do just that one thing, and
the instant
they've done it they wither off like a flower that's
set its seed.
What really gets me down is the dreary attitude
towards life that
it implies. If marriage was just an open swindle--if
the woman
trapped you into it and then turned round and said,
'Now, you
bastard, I've caught you and you're going to work for
me while I
have a good time!'--I wouldn't mind so much. But not
a bit of it.
They don't want to have a good time, they merely want
to slump into
middle age as quickly as possible. After the
frightful battle of
getting her man to the altar, the woman kind of
relaxes, and all
her youth, looks, energy, and joy of life just vanish
overnight.
It was like that with Hilda. Here was this pretty,
delicate girl,
who'd seemed to me--and in fact when I first knew her
she WAS--a
finer type of animal than myself, and within only
about three years
she'd settled down into a depressed, lifeless,
middle-aged frump.
I'm not denying that I was part of the reason. But

whoever she'd
married it would have been much the same.

What Hilda lacks--I discovered this about a week
after we were
married--is any kind of joy in life, any kind of
interest in things
for their own sake. The idea of doing things because
you enjoy
them is something she can hardly understand. It was
through Hilda
that I first got a notion of what these decayed
middle-class
families are really like. The essential fact about
them is that
all their vitality has been drained away by lack of
money. In
families like that, which live on tiny pensions and
annuities--
that's to say on incomes which never get bigger and
generally get
smaller--there's more sense of poverty, more
crust-wiping, and
looking twice at sixpence, than you'd find in any
farm-labourer's
family, let alone a family like mine. Hilda's often
told me that
almost the first thing she can remember is a ghastly
feeling that
there was never enough money for anything. Of
course, in that kind
of family, the lack of money is always at its worst
when the kids
are at the school-age. Consequently they grow up,
especially the
girls, with a fixed idea not only that one always IS
hard-up but
that it's one's duty to be miserable about it.

At the beginning we lived in a poky little maisonette
and had a job
to get by on my wages. Later, when I was transferred
to the West

Bletchley branch, things were better, but Hilda's attitude didn't
change. Always that ghastly glooming about money! The milk bill!
The coal bill! The rent! The school fees! We've lived all our
life together to the tune of 'Next week we'll be in the workhouse.'
It's not that Hilda's mean, in the ordinary sense of the word, and
still less that she's selfish. Even when there happens to be a bit
of spare cash knocking about I can hardly persuade her to buy
herself any decent clothes. But she's got this feeling that you
OUGHT to be perpetually working yourself up into a stew about lack
of money. Just working up an atmosphere of misery from a sense of
duty. I'm not like that. I've got more the prole's attitude
towards money. Life's here to be lived, and if we're going to be
in the soup next week--well, next week is a long way off. What
really shocks her is the fact that I refuse to worry. She's always
going for me about it. 'But, George! You don't seem to REALIZE!
We've simply got no money at all! It's very SERIOUS!' She loves
getting into a panic because something or other is 'serious'. And
of late she's got that trick, when she's glooming about something,
of kind of hunching her shoulders and folding her arms across her
breast. If you made a list of Hilda's remarks throughout the day,
you'd find three bracketed together at the top--'We can't afford
it', 'It's a great saving', and 'I don't know where

the money's to
come from'. She does everything for negative
reasons. When she
makes a cake she's not thinking about the cake, only
about how to
save butter and eggs. When I'm in bed with her all
she thinks
about is how not to have a baby. If she goes to the
pictures she's
all the time writhing with indignation about the
price of the
seats. Her methods of housekeeping, with all the
emphasis on
'using things up' and 'making things do', would have
given Mother
convulsions. On the other hand, Hilda isn't in the
least a snob.
She's never looked down on me because I'm not a
gentleman. On the
contrary, from her point of view I'm much too lordly
in my habits.
We never have a meal in a tea-shop without a
frightful row in
whispers because I'm tipping the waitress too much.
And it's a
curious thing that in the last few years she's become
much more
definitely lower-middle-class, in outlook and even in
appearance,
than I am. Of course all this 'saving' business has
never led to
anything. It never does. We live just about as well
or as badly
as the other people in Ellesmere Road. But the
everlasting stew
about the gas bill and the milk bill and the awful
price of butter
and the kids' boots and school-fees goes on and on.
It's a kind of
game with Hilda.

We moved to West Bletchley in '29 and started buying
the house in

Ellesmere Road the next year, a little before Billy
was born.
After I was made an Inspector I was more away from
home and had
more opportunities with other women. Of course I was
unfaithful--
I won't say all the time, but as often as I got the
chance.
Curiously enough, Hilda was jealous. In a way,
considering how
little that kind of thing means to her, I wouldn't
have expected
her to mind. And like all jealous women she'll
sometimes show a
cunning you wouldn't think her capable of. Sometimes
the way she's
caught me out would have made me believe in
telepathy, if it wasn't
that she's often been equally suspicious when I
didn't happen to be
guilty. I'm more or less permanently under
suspicion, though, God
knows, in the last few years--the last five years,
anyway--I've
been innocent enough. You have to be, when you're as
fat as I am.

Taking it by and large, I suppose Hilda and I don't
get on worse
than about half the couples in Ellesmere Road.
There've been times
when I've thought of separation or divorce, but in
our walk of life
you don't do those things. You can't afford to. And
then time
goes on, and you kind of give up struggling. When
you've lived
with a woman for fifteen years, it's difficult to
imagine life
without her. She's part of the order of things. I
dare say you
might find things to object to in the sun and the
moon, but do you

really want to change them? Besides, there were the
kids. Kids
are a 'link', as they say. Or a 'tie'. Not to say a
ball and
fetter.

Of late years Hilda has made two great friends called
Mrs Wheeler
and Miss Minns. Mrs Wheeler is a widow, and I gather
she's got
very bitter ideas about the male sex. I can feel her
kind of
quivering with disapproval if I so much as come into
the room.
She's a faded little woman and gives you a curious
impression that
she's the same colour all over, a kind of greyish
dust-colour, but
she's full of energy. She's a bad influence on
Hilda, because
she's got the same passion for 'saving' and 'making
things do',
though in a slightly different form. With her it
takes the form
of thinking that you can have a good time without
paying for it.
She's for ever nosing out bargains and amusements
that don't cost
money. With people like that it doesn't matter a
damn whether they
want a thing or not, it's merely a question of
whether they can get
it on the cheap. When the big shops have their
remnant sales Mrs
Wheeler's always at the head of the queue, and it's
her greatest
pride, after a day's hard fighting round the counter,
to come out
without having bought anything. Miss Minns is quite
a different
sort. She's really a sad case, poor Miss Minns.
She's a tall thin
woman of about thirty-eight, with black

patent-leather hair and a
very GOOD, trusting kind of face. She lives on some
kind of tiny
fixed income, an annuity or something, and I fancy
she's a left-
over from the old society of West Bletchley, when it
was a little
country town, before the suburb grew up. It's
written all over her
that her father was a clergyman and sat on her pretty
heavily while
he lived. They're a special by-product of the middle
classes,
these women who turn into withered bags before they
even manage to
escape from home. Poor old Miss Minns, for all her
wrinkles, still
looks exactly like a child. It's still a tremendous
adventure to
her not to go to church. She's always burbling about
'modern
progress' and 'the woman's movement', and she's got a
vague
yearning to do something she calls 'developing her
mind', only she
doesn't quite know how to start. I think in the
beginning she
cottoned on to Hilda and Mrs Wheeler out of pure
loneliness, but
now they take her with them wherever they go.

And the times they've had together, those three!
Sometimes I've
almost envied them. Mrs Wheeler is the leading
spirit. You
couldn't name a kind of idiocy that she hasn't
dragged them into at
one time or another. Anything from theosophy to
cat's-cradle,
provided you can do it on the cheap. For months they
went in for
the food-crank business. Mrs Wheeler had picked up a
second-hand

copy of some book called Radiant Energy which proved
that you
should live on lettuces and other things that don't
cost money.
Of course this appealed to Hilda, who immediately
began starving
herself. She'd have tried it on me and the kids as
well, only I
put my foot down. Then they had a go at
faith-healing. Then they
thought of tackling Pelmanism, but after a lot of
correspondence
they found that they couldn't get the booklets free,
which had been
Mrs Wheeler's idea. Then it was hay-box cookery.
Then it was some
filthy stuff called bee wine, which was supposed to
cost nothing at
all because you made it out of water. They dropped
that after
they'd read an article in the paper saying that bee
wine gives you
cancer. Then they nearly joined one of those women's
clubs which
go for conducted tours round factories, but after a
lot of
arithmetic Mrs Wheeler decided that the free teas the
factories
gave you didn't quite equal the subscription. Then
Mrs Wheeler
scraped acquaintance with somebody who gave away free
tickets for
plays produced by some stage society or other. I've
known the
three of them sit for hours listening to some
highbrow play of
which they didn't even pretend to understand a
word--couldn't even
tell you the name of the play afterwards--but they
felt that they
were getting something for nothing. Once they even
took up
spiritualism. Mrs Wheeler had run across some

down-and-out medium
who was so desperate that he'd give seances for
eighteenpence, so
that the three of them could have a glimpse beyond
the veil for a
tanner a time. I saw him once when he came to give a
seance at our
house. He was a seedy-looking old devil and
obviously in mortal
terror of D.T.s. He was so shaky that when he was
taking his
overcoat off in the hall he had a sort of spasm and a
hank of
butter-muslin dropped out of his trouser-leg. I
managed to shove
it back to him before the women saw. Butter-muslin
is what they
make the ectoplasm with, so I'm told. I suppose he
was going on to
another seance afterwards. You don't get
manifestations for
eighteen pence. Mrs Wheeler's biggest find of the
last few years
is the Left Book Club. I think it was in '36 that
the news of the
Left Book Club got to West Bletchley. I joined it
soon afterwards,
and it's almost the only time I can remember spending
money without
Hilda protesting. She can see some sense in buying a
book when
you're getting it for a third of its proper price.
These women's
attitude is curious, really. Miss Minns certainly
had a try at
reading one or two of the books, but this wouldn't
even have
occurred to the other two. They've never had any
direct connexion
with the Left Book Club or any notion what it's all
about--in fact
I believe at the beginning Mrs Wheeler thought it had
something to

do with books which had been left in railway
carriages and were
being sold off cheap. But they do know that it means
seven and
sixpenny books for half a crown, and so they're
always saying that
it's 'such a good idea'. Now and again the local
Left Book Club
branch holds meetings and gets people down to speak,
and Mrs
Wheeler always takes the others along. She's a great
one for
public meetings of any kind, always provided that
it's indoors and
admission free. The three of them sit there like
lumps of pudding.
They don't know what the meeting's about and they
don't care, but
they've got a vague feeling, especially Miss Minns,
that they're
improving their minds, and it isn't costing them
anything.

Well, that's Hilda. You see what she's like. Take
it by and
large, I suppose she's no worse than I am. Sometimes
when we were
first married I felt I'd like to strangle her, but
later I got so
that I didn't care. And then I got fat and settled
down. It must
have been in 1930 that I got fat. It happened so
suddenly that it
was as if a cannon ball had hit me and got stuck
inside. You know
how it is. One night you go to bed, still feeling
more or less
young, with an eye for the girls and so forth, and
next morning you
wake up in the full consciousness that you're just a
poor old fatty
with nothing ahead of you this side the grave except
sweating your

guts out to buy boots for the kids.

And now it's '38, and in every shipyard in the world they're
riveting up the battleships for another war, and a name I chanced
to see on a poster had stirred up in me a whole lot of stuff which
ought to have been buried God knows how many years ago.

PART III

1

When I came home that evening I was still in doubt as to what I'd
spend my seventeen quid on.

Hilda said she was going to the Left Book Club meeting. It seemed
that there was a chap coming down from London to lecture, though
needless to say Hilda didn't know what the lecture was going to be
about. I told her I'd go with her. In a general way I'm not much
of a one for lectures, but the visions of war I'd had that morning,
starting with the bomber flying over the train, had put me into a
kind of thoughtful mood. After the usual argument we got the kids
to bed early and cleared off in time for the lecture, which was
billed for eight o'clock.

It was a misty kind of evening, and the hall was cold and not too
well lighted. It's a little wooden hall with a tin roof, the
property of some Nonconformist sect or other, and you can hire it
for ten bob. The usual crowd of fifteen or sixteen people had
rolled up. On the front of the platform there was a yellow placard
announcing that the lecture was on 'The Menace of Fascism'. This
didn't altogether surprise me. Mr Witchett, who acts as chairman
of these meetings and who in private life is something in an
architect's office, was taking the lecturer round, introducing him
to everyone as Mr So-and-so (I forget his name) 'the well-known
anti-Fascist', very much as you might call somebody 'the well-known
pianist'. The lecturer was a little chap of about forty, in a dark
suit, with a bald head which he'd tried rather unsuccessfully to
cover up with wisps of hair.

Meetings of this kind never start on time. There's always a period
of hanging about on the pretence that perhaps a few more people are
going to turn up. It was about twenty-five past eight when
Witchett tapped on the table and did his stuff. Witchett's a mild-
looking chap, with a pink, baby's bottom kind of face that's always
covered in smiles. I believe he's secretary of the local Liberal
Party, and he's also on the Parish Council and acts as M.C. at the
magic lantern lectures for the Mothers' Union. He's

what you might
call a born chairman. When he tells you how
delighted we all are
to have Mr So-and-so on the platform tonight, you can
see that he
believes it. I never look at him without thinking
that he's
probably a virgin. The little lecturer took out a
wad of notes,
chiefly newspaper cuttings, and pinned them down with
his glass of
water. Then he gave a quick lick at his lips and
began to shoot.

Do you ever go to lectures, public meetings, and
what-not?

When I go to one myself, there's always a moment
during the evening
when I find myself thinking the same thought: Why
the hell are we
doing this? Why is it that people will turn out on a
winter night
for this kind of thing? I looked round the hall. I
was sitting in
the back row. I don't ever remember going to any
kind of public
meeting when I didn't sit in the back row if I could
manage it.
Hilda and the others had planked themselves in front,
as usual.
It was rather a gloomy little hall. You know the
kind of place.
Pitch-pine walls, corrugated iron roof, and enough
draughts to make
you want to keep your overcoat on. The little knot
of us were
sitting in the light round the platform, with about
thirty rows of
empty chairs behind us. And the seats of all the
chairs were
dusty. On the platform behind the lecturer there was
a huge square

thing draped in dust-cloths which might have been an enormous
coffin under a pall. Actually it was a piano.

At the beginning I wasn't exactly listening. The lecturer was
rather a mean-looking little chap, but a good speaker. White face,
very mobile mouth, and the rather grating voice that they get from
constant speaking. Of course he was pitching into Hitler and the
Nazis. I wasn't particularly keen to hear what he was saying--get
the same stuff in the News Chronicle every morning--but his voice
came across to me as a kind of burr-burr-burr, with now and again a
phrase that struck out and caught my attention.

'Bestial atrocities. . . . Hideous outbursts of sadism. . . .
Rubber truncheons. . . . Concentration camps. . . . Iniquitous
persecution of the Jews. . . . Back to the Dark Ages. . . .
European civilization. . . . Act before it is too late. . . .
Indignation of all decent peoples. . . . Alliance of the
democratic nations. . . . Firm stand. . . . Defence of
democracy. . . . Democracy. . . . Fascism. . . . Democracy. . . .
Fascism. . . . Democracy. . . .'

You know the line of talk. These chaps can churn it out by the
hour. Just like a gramophone. Turn the handle, press the button,
and it starts. Democracy, Fascism, Democracy. But somehow it
interested me to watch him. A rather mean little

man, with a white
face and a bald head, standing on a platform,
shooting out slogans.
What's he doing? Quite deliberately, and quite
openly, he's
stirring up hatred. Doing his damnedest to make you
hate certain
foreigners called Fascists. It's a queer thing, I
thought, to be
known as 'Mr So-and-so, the well-known anti-Fascist'.
A queer
trade, anti-Fascism. This fellow, I suppose, makes
his living by
writing books against Hitler. But what did he do
before Hitler
came along? And what'll he do if Hitler ever
disappears? Same
question applies to doctors, detectives,
rat-catchers, and so
forth, of course. But the grating voice went on and
on, and
another thought struck me. He MEANS it. Not faking
at all--feels
every word he's saying. He's trying to work up
hatred in the
audience, but that's nothing to the hatred he feels
himself. Every
slogan's gospel truth to him. If you cut him open
all you'd find
inside would be Democracy-Fascism-Democracy.
Interesting to know a
chap like that in private life. But does he have a
private life?
Or does he only go round from platform to platform,
working up
hatred? Perhaps even his dreams are slogans.

As well as I could from the back row I had a look at
the audience.
I suppose, if you come to think of it, we people
who'll turn out on
winter nights to sit in draughty halls listening to
Left Book Club

lectures (and I consider that I'm entitled to the
'we', seeing that
I'd done it myself on this occasion) have a certain
significance.
We're the West Bletchley revolutionaries. Doesn't
look hopeful at
first sight. It struck me as I looked round the
audience that only
about half a dozen of them had really grasped what
the lecturer was
talking about, though by this time he'd been pitching
into Hitler
and the Nazis for over half an hour. It's always
like that with
meetings of this kind. Invariably half the people
come away
without a notion of what it's all about. In his
chair beside the
table Witchett was watching the lecturer with a
delighted smile,
and his face looked a little like a pink geranium.
You could hear
in advance the speech he'd make as soon as the
lecturer sat down--
same speech as he makes at the end of the magic
lantern lecture in
aid of trousers for the Melanesians: 'Express our
thanks--voicing
the opinion of all of us--most interesting--give us
all a lot to
think about--most stimulating evening!' In the front
row Miss
Minns was sitting very upright, with her head cocked
a little on
one side, like a bird. The lecturer had taken a
sheet of paper
from under the tumbler and was reading out statistics
about the
German suicide-rate. You could see by the look of
Miss Minns's
long thin neck that she wasn't feeling happy. Was
this improving
her mind, or wasn't it? If only she could make out

what it was all
about! The other two were sitting there like lumps
of pudding.
Next to them a little woman with red hair was
knitting a jumper.
One plain, two purl, drop one, and knit two together.
The lecturer
was describing how the Nazis chop people's heads off
for treason
and sometimes the executioner makes a bosh shot.
There was one
other woman in the audience, a girl with dark hair,
one of the
teachers at the Council School. Unlike the other she
was really
listening, sitting forward with her big round eyes
fixed on the
lecturer and her mouth a little bit open, drinking it
all in.

Just behind her two old blokes from the local Labour
Party were
sitting. One had grey hair cropped very short, the
other had a
bald head and a droopy moustache. Both wearing their
overcoats.
You know the type. Been in the Labour Party since
the year dot.
Lives given up to the movement. Twenty years of
being blacklisted
by employers, and another ten of badgering the
Council to do
something about the slums. Suddenly everything's
changed, the old
Labour Party stuff doesn't matter any longer. Find
themselves
pitchforked into foreign politics--Hitler, Stalin,
bombs, machine-
guns, rubber truncheons, Rome-Berlin axis, Popular
Front, anti-
Comintern pact. Can't make head or tail of it.
Immediately in
front of me the local Communist Party branch were

sitting. All
three of them very young. One of them's got money
and is something
in the Hesperides Estate Company, in fact I believe
he's old Crum's
nephew. Another's a clerk at one of the banks. He
cashes cheques
for me occasionally. A nice boy, with a round, very
young, eager
face, blue eyes like a baby, and hair so fair that
you'd think he
peroxided it. He only looks about seventeen, though
I suppose he's
twenty. He was wearing a cheap blue suit and a
bright blue tie
that went with his hair. Next to these three another
Communist was
sitting. But this one, it seems, is a different kind
of Communist
and not-quite, because he's what they call a
Trotskyist. The
others have got a down on him. He's even younger, a
very thin,
very dark, nervous-looking boy. Clever face. Jew,
of course.
These four were taking the lecture quite differently
from the
others. You knew they'd be on their feet the moment
question-time
started. You could see them kind of twitching
already. And the
little Trotskyist working himself from side to side
on his bum in
his anxiety to get in ahead of the others.

I'd stopped listening to the actual words of the
lecture. But
there are more ways than one of listening. I shut my
eyes for a
moment. The effect of that was curious. I seemed to
see the
fellow much better when I could only hear his voice.

It was a voice that sounded as if it could go on for
a fortnight
without stopping. It's a ghastly thing, really, to
have a sort of
human barrel-organ shooting propaganda at you by the
hour. The
same thing over and over again. Hate, hate, hate.
Let's all get
together and have a good hate. Over and over. It
gives you the
feeling that something has got inside your skull and
is hammering
down on your brain. But for a moment, with my eyes
shut, I managed
to turn the tables on him. I got inside HIS skull.
It was a
peculiar sensation. For about a second I was inside
him, you might
almost say I WAS him. At any rate, I felt what he
was feeling.

I saw the vision that he was seeing. And it wasn't
at all the kind
of vision that can be talked about. What he's SAYING
is merely
that Hitler's after us and we must all get together
and have a good
hate. Doesn't go into details. Leaves it all
respectable. But
what he's SEEING is something quite different. It's
a picture of
himself smashing people's faces in with a spanner.
Fascist faces,
of course. I KNOW that's what he was seeing. It was
what I saw
myself for the second or two that I was inside him.
Smash! Right
in the middle! The bones cave in like an eggshell
and what was a
face a minute ago is just a great big blob of
strawberry jam.
Smash! There goes another! That's what's in his
mind, waking and

sleeping, and the more he thinks of it the more he likes it. And
it's all O.K. because the smashed faces belong to Fascists. You
could hear all that in the tone of his voice.

But why? Likeliest explanation, because he's scared. Every
thinking person nowadays is stiff with fright. This is merely a
chap who's got sufficient foresight to be a little more frightened
than the others. Hitler's after us! Quick! Let's all grab a
spanner and get together, and perhaps if we smash in enough faces
they won't smash ours. Gang up, choose your Leader. Hitler's
black and Stalin's white. But it might just as well be the other
way about, because in the little chap's mind both Hitler and Stalin
are the same. Both mean spanners and smashed faces.

War! I started thinking about it again. It's coming soon, that's
certain. But who's afraid of war? That's to say, who's afraid of
the bombs and the machine-guns? 'You are', you say. Yes, I am,
and so's anybody who's ever seen them. But it isn't the war that
matters, it's the after-war. The world we're going down into, the
kind of hate-world, slogan-world. The coloured shirts, the barbed
wire, the rubber truncheons. The secret cells where the electric
light burns night and day, and the detectives watching you while
you sleep. And the processions and the posters with enormous
faces, and the crowds of a million people all

cheering for the
Leader till they deafen themselves into thinking that
they really
worship him, and all the time, underneath, they hate
him so that
they want to puke. It's all going to happen. Or
isn't it? Some
days I know it's impossible, other days I know it's
inevitable.
That night, at any rate, I knew it was going to
happen. It was all
in the sound of the little lecturer's voice.

So perhaps after all there IS a significance in this
mingy little
crowd that'll turn out on a winter night to listen to
a lecture of
this kind. Or at any rate in the five or six who can
grasp what
it's all about. They're simply the outposts of an
enormous army.
They're the long-sighted ones, the first rats to spot
that the ship
is sinking. Quick, quick! The Fascists are coming!
Spanners
ready, boys! Smash others or they'll smash you. So
terrified of
the future that we're jumping straight into it like a
rabbit diving
down a boa-constrictor's throat.

And what'll happen to chaps like me when we get
Fascism in England?
The truth is it probably won't make the slightest
difference. As
for the lecturer and those four Communists in the
audience, yes,
it'll make plenty of difference to them. They'll be
smashing
faces, or having their own smashed, according to
who's winning.
But the ordinary middling chaps like me will be
carrying on just as

usual. And yet it frightens me--I tell you it frightens me. I'd
just started to wonder why when the lecturer stopped and sat down.

There was the usual hollow little sound of clapping that you get
when there are only about fifteen people in the audience, and then
old Witchett said his piece, and before you could say Jack Robinson
the four Communists were on their feet together. They had a good
dog-fight that went on for about ten minutes, full of a lot of
stuff that nobody else understood, such as dialectical materialism
and the destiny of the proletariat and what Lenin said in 1918.
Then the lecturer, who'd had a drink of water, stood up and gave a
summing-up that made the Trotskyist wriggle about on his chair but
pleased the other three, and the dog-fight went on unofficially for
a bit longer. Nobody else did any talking. Hilda and the others
had cleared off the moment the lecture ended. Probably they were
afraid there was going to be a collection to pay for the hire of
the hall. The little woman with red hair was staying to finish her
row. You could hear her counting her stitches in a whisper while
the others argued. And Witchett sat and beamed at whoever happened
to be speaking, and you could see him thinking how interesting it
all was and making mental notes, and the girl with black hair
looked from one to the other with her mouth a little open, and the

old Labour man, looking rather like a seal with his
droopy
moustache and his overcoat up to his ears, sat
looking up at them,
wondering what the hell it was all about. And
finally I got up and
began to put on my overcoat.

The dog-fight had turned into a private row between
the little
Trotskyist and the boy with fair hair. They were
arguing about
whether you ought to join the Army if war broke out.
As I edged
my way along the row of chairs to get out, the
fair-haired one
appealed to me.

'Mr Bowling! Look here. If war broke out and we had
the chance to
smash Fascism once and for all, wouldn't you fight?
If you were
young, I mean.'

I suppose he thinks I'm about sixty.

'You bet I wouldn't,' I said. 'I had enough to go on
with last
time.'

'But to smash Fascism!'

'Oh, b-- Fascism! There's been enough smashing done
already, if
you ask me.'

The little Trotskyist chips in with social-patriotism
and betrayal
of the workers, but the others cut him short:

'But you're thinking of 1914. That was just an
ordinary imperialist
war. This time it's different. Look here. When you

hear about
what's going on in Germany, and the concentration
camps and the
Nazis beating people up with rubber truncheons and
making the Jews
spit in each other's faces--doesn't it make your
blood boil?'

They're always going on about your blood boiling.
Just the same
phrase during the war, I remember.

'I went off the boil in 1916,' I told him. 'And
so'll you when you
know what a trench smells like.'

And then all of a sudden I seemed to see him. It was
as if I
hadn't properly seen him till that moment.

A very young eager face, might have belonged to a
good-looking
schoolboy, with blue eyes and tow-coloured hair,
gazing into mine,
and for a moment actually he'd got tears in his eyes!
Felt as
strongly as all that about the German Jews! But as a
matter of
fact I knew just what he felt. He's a hefty lad,
probably plays
rugger for the bank. Got brains, too. And here he
is, a bank
clerk in a godless suburb, sitting behind the frosted
window,
entering figures in a ledger, counting piles of
notes, bumsucking
to the manager. Feels his life rotting away. And
all the while,
over in Europe, the big stuff's happening. Shells
bursting over
the trenches and waves of infantry charging through
the drifts of
smoke. Probably some of his pals are fighting in

Spain. Of course
he's spoiling for a war. How can you blame him? For
a moment I
had a peculiar feeling that he was my son, which in
point of years
he might have been. And I thought of that sweltering
hot day in
August when the newsboy stuck up the poster ENGLAND
DECLARES WAR ON
GERMANY, and we all rushed out on to the pavement in
our white
aprons and cheered.

'Listen son,' I said, 'you've got it all wrong. In
1914 WE thought
it was going to be a glorious business. Well, it
wasn't. It was
just a bloody mess. If it comes again, you keep out
of it. Why
should you get your body plugged full of lead? Keep
it for some
girl. You think war's all heroism and V.C. charges,
but I tell you
it isn't like that. You don't have bayonet-charges
nowadays, and
when you do it isn't like you imagine. You don't
feel like a hero.
All you know is that you've had no sleep for three
days, and stink
like a polecat, you're pissing your bags with fright,
and your
hands are so cold you can't hold your rifle. But
that doesn't
matter a damn, either. It's the things that happen
afterwards.'

Makes no impression of course. They just think
you're out of date.
Might as well stand at the door of a knocking-shop
handing out
tracts.

The people were beginning to clear off. Witchett was

taking the
lecturer home. The three Communists and the little
Jew went up the
road together, and they were going at it again with
proletarian
solidarity and dialectic of the dialectic and what
Trotsky said in
1917. They're all the same, really. It was a damp,
still, very
black night. The lamps seemed to hang in the
darkness like stars
and didn't light the road. In the distance you could
hear the
trains booming along the High Street. I wanted a
drink, but it was
nearly ten and the nearest pub was half a mile away.
Besides, I
wanted somebody to talk to, the way you can't talk in
a pub. It
was funny how my brain had been on the go all day.
Partly the
result of not working, of course, and partly of the
new false
teeth, which had kind of freshened me up. All day
I'd been
brooding on the future and the past. I wanted to
talk about the
bad time that's either coming or isn't coming, the
slogans and the
coloured shirts and the streamlined men from eastern
Europe who are
going to knock old England cock-eyed. Hopeless
trying to talk to
Hilda. Suddenly it occurred to me to go and look up
old Porteous,
who's a pal of mine and keeps late hours.

Porteous is a retired public-school master. He lives
in rooms,
which luckily are in the lower half of the house, in
the old part
of the town, near the church. He's a bachelor, of
course. You

can't imagine that kind married. Lives all alone
with his books
and his pipe and has a woman in to do for him. He's
a learned kind
of chap, with his Greek and Latin and poetry and all
that. I
suppose that if the local Left Book Club branch
represents
Progress, old Porteous stands for Culture. Neither
of them cuts
much ice in West Bletchley.

The light was burning in the little room where old
Porteous sits
reading till all hours of the night. As I tapped on
the front door
he came strolling out as usual, with his pipe between
his teeth and
his fingers in a book to keep the place. He's rather
a striking
looking chap, very tall, with curly grey hair and a
thin, dreamy
kind of face that's a bit discoloured but might
almost belong to a
boy, though he must be nearly sixty. It's funny how
some of these
public-school and university chaps manage to look
like boys till
their dying day. It's something in their movements.
Old Porteous
has got a way of strolling up and down, with that
handsome head of
his, with the grey curls, held a little back that
makes you feel
that all the while he's dreaming about some poem or
other and isn't
conscious of what's going on round him. You can't
look at him
without seeing the way he's lived written all over
him. Public
School, Oxford, and then back to his old school as a
master. Whole
life lived in an atmosphere of Latin, Greek, and

cricket. He's got
all the mannerisms. Always wears an old Harris tweed
jacket and
old grey flannel bags which he likes you to call
'disgraceful',
smokes a pipe and looks down on cigarettes, and
though he sits up
half the night I bet he has a cold bath every
morning. I suppose
from his point of view I'm a bit of a bounder. I
haven't been to a
public school, I don't know any Latin and don't even
want to. He
tells me sometimes that it's a pity I'm 'insensible
to beauty',
which I suppose is a polite way of saying that I've
got no
education. All the same I like him. He's very
hospitable in the
right kind of way, always ready to have you in and
talk at all
hours, and always got drinks handy. When you live in
a house like
ours, more or less infested by women and kids, it
does you good to
get out of it sometimes into a bachelor atmosphere, a
kind of book-
pipe-fire atmosphere. And the classy Oxford feeling
of nothing
mattering except books and poetry and Greek statues,
and nothing
worth mentioning having happened since the Goths
sacked Rome--
sometimes that's a comfort too.

He shoved me into the old leather armchair by the
fire and dished
out whisky and soda. I've never seen his
sitting-room when it
wasn't dim with pipe-smoke. The ceiling is almost
black. It's a
smallish room and, except for the door and the window
and the space

over the fireplace, the walls are covered with books from the floor
right up to the ceiling. On the mantelpiece there are all the
things you'd expect. A row of old briar pipes, all filthy, a few
Greek silver coins, a tobacco jar with the arms of old Porteous's
college on it, and a little earthenware lamp which he told me he
dug up on some mountain in Sicily. Over the mantelpiece there are
photos of Greek statues. There's a big one in the middle, of a
woman with wings and no head who looks as if she was stepping out
to catch a bus. I remember how shocked old Porteous was when the
first time I saw it, not knowing any better, I asked him why they
didn't stick a head on it.

Porteous started refilling his pipe from the jar on the
mantelpiece.

'That intolerable woman upstairs has purchased a wireless set,' he
said. 'I had been hoping to live the rest of my life out of the
sound of those things. I suppose there is nothing one can do? Do
you happen to know the legal position?'

I told him there was nothing one could do. I rather like the
Oxfordy way he says 'intolerable', and it tickles me, in 1938, to
find someone objecting to having a radio in the house. Porteous
was strolling up and down in his usual dreamy way, with his hands
in his coat pockets and his pipe between his teeth,

and almost
instantly he'd begun talking about some law against
musical
instruments that was passed in Athens in the time of
Pericles.
It's always that way with old Porteous. All his talk
is about
things that happened centuries ago. Whatever you
start off with it
always comes back to statues and poetry and the
Greeks and Romans.
If you mention the Queen Mary he'd start telling you
about
Phoenician triremes. He never reads a modern book,
refuses to know
their names, never looks at any newspaper except The
Times, and
takes a pride in telling you that he's never been to
the pictures.
Except for a few poets like Keats and Wordsworth he
thinks the
modern world--and from his point of view the modern
world is the
last two thousand years--just oughtn't to have
happened.

I'm part of the modern world myself, but I like to
hear him talk.
He'll stroll round the shelves and haul out first one
book and then
another, and now and again he'll read you a piece
between little
puffs of smoke, generally having to translate it from
the Latin or
something as he goes. It's all kind of peaceful,
kind of mellow.
All a little like a school-master, and yet it soothes
you, somehow.
While you listen you aren't in the same world as
trains and gas
bills and insurance companies. It's all temples and
olive trees,
and peacocks and elephants, and chaps in the arena

with their nets
and tridents, and winged lions and eunuchs and
galleys and
catapults, and generals in brass armour galloping
their horses over
the soldiers' shields. It's funny that he ever
cottoned on to a
chap like me. But it's one of the advantages of
being fat that you
can fit into almost any society. Besides we meet on
common ground
when it comes to dirty stories. They're the one
modern thing he
cares about, though, as he's always reminding me,
they aren't
modern. He's rather old-maidish about it, always
tells a story in
a veiled kind of way. Sometimes he'll pick out some
Latin poet and
translate a smutty rhyme, leaving a lot to your
imagination, or
he'll drop hints about the private lives of the Roman
emperors and
the things that went on in the temples of Ashtaroth.
They seem to
have been a bad lot, those Greeks and Romans. Old
Porteous has got
photographs of wall-paintings somewhere in Italy that
would make
your hair curl.

When I'm fed up with business and home life it's
often done me a
lot of good to go and have a talk with Porteous. But
tonight it
didn't seem to. My mind was still running on the
same lines as it
had been all day. Just as I'd done with the Left
Book Club
lecturer, I didn't exactly listen to what Porreous
was saying, only
to the sound of his voice. But whereas the
lecturer's voice had

got under my skin, old Porteous's didn't. It was too peaceful, too
Oxfordy. Finally, when he was in the middle of saying something, I
chipped in and said:

'Tell me, Porteous, what do you think of Hitler?'

Old Porteous was leaning in his lanky, graceful kind of way with
his elbows on the mantelpiece and a foot on the fender. He was so
surprised that he almost took his pipe out of his mouth.

'Hitler? This German person? My dear fellow! I DON'T think of
him.'

'But the trouble is he's going to bloody well make us think about
him before he's finished.'

Old Porteous shies a bit at the world 'bloody', which he doesn't
like, though of course it's part of his pose never to be shocked.
He begins walking up and down again, puffing out smoke.

'I see no reason for paying any attention to him. A mere
adventurer. These people come and go. Ephemeral, purely
ephemeral.'

I'm not certain what the word 'ephemeral' means, but I stick to my
point:

'I think you've got it wrong. Old Hitler's something different.
So's Joe Stalin. They aren't like these chaps in the

old days who
crucified people and chopped their heads off and so
forth, just for
the fun of it. They're after something quite
new--something that's
never been heard of before.'

'My dear fellow! There is nothing new under the sun.'

Of course that's a favourite saying of old
Porteous's. He won't
hear of the existence of anything new. As soon as
you tell him
about anything that's happening nowadays he says that
exactly the
same thing happened in the reign of King So-and-so.
Even if you
bring up things like aeroplanes he tells you that
they probably had
them in Crete, or Mycenae, or wherever it was. I
tried to explain
to him what I'd felt while the little bloke was
lecturing and the
kind of vision I'd had of the bad time that's coming,
but he
wouldn't listen. Merely repeated that there's
nothing new under
the sun. Finally he hauls a book out of the shelves
and reads me a
passage about some Greek tyrant back in the B.C.s who
certainly
might have been Hitler's twin brother.

The argument went on for a bit. All day I'd been
wanting to talk
to somebody about this business. It's funny. I'm
not a fool, but
I'm not a highbrow either, and God knows at normal
times I don't
have many interests that you wouldn't expect a
middle-aged seven-
pound-a-weeker with two kids to have. And yet I've
enough sense to

see that the old life we're used to is being sawn off
at the roots.
I can feel it happening. I can see the war that's
coming and I can
see the after-war, the food-queues and the secret
police and the
loudspeakers telling you what to think. And I'm not
even
exceptional in this. There are millions of others
like me.
Ordinary chaps that I meet everywhere, chaps I run
across in pubs,
bus drivers, and travelling salesmen for hardware
firms, have got a
feeling that the world's gone wrong. They can feel
things cracking
and collapsing under their feet. And yet here's this
learned chap,
who's lived all his life with books and soaked
himself in history
till it's running out of his pores, and he can't even
see that
things are changing. Doesn't think Hitler matters.
Refuses to
believe there's another war coming. In any case, as
he didn't
fight in the last war, it doesn't enter much into his
thoughts--he
thinks it was a poor show compared with the siege of
Troy. Doesn't
see why one should bother about the slogans and the
loudspeakers
and the coloured shirts. What intelligent person
would pay any
attention to such things? he always says. Hitler and
Stalin will
pass away, but something which old Porteous calls
'the eternal
verities' won't pass away. This, of course, is
simply another way
of saying that things will always go on exactly as
he's known them.
For ever and ever, cultivated Oxford blokes will

stroll up and down
studies full of books, quoting Latin tags and smoking
good tobacco
out of jars with coats of arms on them. Really it
was no use
talking to him. I'd have got more change out of the
lad with tow-
coloured hair. By degrees the conversation twisted
off, as it
always does, to things that happened B.C. Then it
worked round to
poetry. Finally old Porteous drags another book out
of the shelves
and begins reading Keat's 'Ode to a Nightingale' (or
maybe it was a
skylark--I forget).

So far as I'm concerned a little poetry goes a long
way. But it's
a curious fact that I rather like hearing old
Porteous reading it
aloud. There's no question that he reads well. He's
got the
habit, of course--used to reading to classes of boys.
He'll lean
up against something in his lounging way, with his
pipe between his
teeth and little jets of smoke coming out, and his
voice goes kind
of solemn and rises and falls with the line. You can
see that it
moves him in some way. I don't know what poetry is
or what it's
supposed to do. I imagine it has a kind of nervous
effect on some
people like music has on others. When he's reading I
don't
actually listen, that's to say I don't take in the
words, but
sometimes the sound of it brings a kind of peaceful
feeling into my
mind. On the whole I like it. But somehow tonight
it didn't work.

It was as if a cold draught had blown into the room.
I just felt
that this was all bunk. Poetry! What is it? Just a
voice, a bit
of an eddy in the air. And Gosh! what use would that
be against
machine-guns?

I watched him leaning up against the bookshelf.
Funny, these
public-school chaps. Schoolboys all their days.
Whole life
revolving round the old school and their bits of
Latin and Greek
and poetry. And suddenly I remembered that almost
the first time I
was here with Porteous he'd read me the very same
poem. Read it in
just the same way, and his voice quivered when he got
to the same
bit--the bit about magic casements, or something.
And a curious
thought struck me. HE'S DEAD. He's a ghost. All
people like that
are dead.

It struck me that perhaps a lot of the people you see
walking about
are dead. We say that a man's dead when his heart
stops and not
before. It seems a bit arbitrary. After all, parts
of your body
don't stop working--hair goes on growing for years,
for instance.
Perhaps a man really dies when his brain stops, when
he loses the
power to take in a new idea. Old Porteous is like
that.
Wonderfully learned, wonderfully good taste--but he's
not capable
of change. Just says the same things and thinks the
same thoughts
over and over again. There are a lot of people like

that. Dead
minds, stopped inside. Just keep moving backwards
and forwards on
the same little track, getting fainter all the time,
like ghosts.

Old Porteous's mind, I thought, probably stopped
working at about
the time of the Russo-Japanese War. And it's a
ghastly thing that
nearly all the decent people, the people who DON'T
want to go round
smashing faces in with spanners, are like that.
They're decent,
but their minds have stopped. They can't defend
themselves against
what's coming to them, because they can't see it,
even when it's
under their noses. They think that England will
never change and
that England's the whole world. Can't grasp that
it's just a left-
over, a tiny corner that the bombs happen to have
missed. But what
about the new kind of men from eastern Europe, the
streamlined men
who think in slogans and talk in bullets? They're on
our track.
Not long before they catch up with us. No Marquess
of Queensbury
rules for those boys. And all the decent people are
paralysed.
Dead men and live gorillas. Doesn't seem to be
anything between.

I cleared out about half an hour later, having
completely failed to
convince old Porteous that Hitler matters. I was
still thinking
the same thoughts as I walked home through the
shivery streets.
The trains had stopped running. The house was all
dark and Hilda

was asleep. I dropped my false teeth into the glass of water in
the bathroom, got into my pyjamas, and prised Hilda over to the
other side of the bed. She rolled over without waking, and the
kind of hump between her shoulders was towards me. It's funny, the
tremendous gloom that sometimes gets hold of you late at night. At
that moment the destiny of Europe seemed to me more important than
the rent and the kids' school-bills and the work I'd have to do
tomorrow. For anyone who has to earn his living such thoughts are
just plain foolishness. But they didn't move out of my mind.
Still the vision of the coloured shirts and the machine-guns
rattling. The last thing I remember wondering before I fell asleep
was why the hell a chap like me should care.

2

The primroses had started. I suppose it was some time in March.

I'd driven through Westerham and was making for Pudley. I'd got to
do an assessment of an ironmonger's shop, and then, if I could get
hold of him, to interview a life-insurance case who was wavering in
the balance. His name had been sent in by our local agent, but at
the last moment he'd taken fright and begun to doubt whether he
could afford it. I'm pretty good at talking people

round. It's
being fat that does it. It puts people in a cheery
kind of mood,
makes 'em feel that signing a cheque is almost a
pleasure. Of
course there are different ways of tackling different
people. With
some it's better to lay all the stress on the
bonuses, others you
can scare in a subtle way with hints about what'll
happen to their
wives if they die uninsured.

The old car switchbacked up and down the curly little
hills. And
by God, what a day! You know the kind of day that
generally comes
some time in March when winter suddenly seems to give
up fighting.
For days past we'd been having the kind of beastly
weather that
people call 'bright' weather, when the sky's a cold
hard blue and
the wind scrapes you like a blunt razor-blade. Then
suddenly the
wind had dropped and the sun got a chance. You know
the kind of
day. Pale yellow sunshine, not a leaf stirring, a
touch of mist in
the far distance where you could see the sheep
scattered over the
hillsides like lumps of chalk. And down in the
valleys fires were
burning, and the smoke twisted slowly upwards and
melted into the
mist. I'd got the road to myself. It was so warm
you could almost
have taken your clothes off.

I got to a spot where the grass beside the road was
smothered in
primroses. A patch of clayey soil, perhaps. Twenty
yards farther

on I slowed down and stopped. The weather was too good to miss. I
felt I'd got to get out and have a smell at the spring air, and
perhaps even pick a few primroses if there was nobody coming. I
even had some vague notion of picking a bunch of them to take home
to Hilda.

I switched the engine off and got out. I never like leaving the
old car running in neutral, I'm always half afraid she'll shake her
mudguards off or something. She's a 1927 model, and she's done a
biggish mileage. When you lift the bonnet and look at the engine
it reminds you of the old Austrian Empire, all tied together with
bits of string but somehow keeps plugging along. You wouldn't
believe any machine could vibrate in so many directions at once.
It's like the motion of the earth, which has twenty-two different
kinds of wobble, or so I remember reading. If you look at her from
behind when she's running in neutral it's for all the world like
watching one of those Hawaiian girls dancing the hula-hula.

There was a five-barred gate beside the road. I strolled over and
leaned across it. Not a soul in sight. I hitched my hat back a
bit to get the kind of balmy feeling of the air against my
forehead. The grass under the hedge was full of primroses. Just
inside the gate a tramp or somebody had left the remains of a fire.

A little pile of white embers and a wisp of smoke
still oozing out
of them. Farther along there was a little bit of a
pool, covered
over with duck-weed. The field was winter wheat. It
sloped up
sharply, and then there was a fall of chalk and a
little beech
spinney. A kind of mist of young leaves on the
trees. And utter
stillness everywhere. Not even enough wind to stir
the ashes of
the fire. A lark singing somewhere, otherwise not a
sound, not
even an aeroplane.

I stayed there for a bit, leaning over the gate. I
was alone,
quite alone. I was looking at the field, and the
field was looking
at me. I felt--I wonder whether you'll understand.

What I felt was something that's so unusual nowadays
that to say it
sounds like foolishness. I felt HAPPY. I felt that
though I
shan't live for ever, I'd be quite ready to. If you
like you can
say that that was merely because it was the first day
of spring.
Seasonal effect on the sex-glands, or something. But
there was
more to it than that. Curiously enough, the thing
that had
suddenly convinced me that life was worth living,
more than the
primroses or the young buds on the hedge, was that
bit of fire near
the gate. You know the look of a wood fire on a
still day. The
sticks that have gone all to white ash and still keep
the shape of
sticks, and under the ash the kind of vivid red that

you can see
into. It's curious that a red ember looks more
alive, gives you
more of a feeling of life than any living thing.
There's something
about it, a kind of intensity, a vibration--I can't
think of the
exact words. But it lets you know that you're alive
yourself.
It's the spot on the picture that makes you notice
everything else.

I bent down to pick a primrose. Couldn't reach
it--too much belly.
I squatted down on my haunches and picked a little
bunch of them.
Lucky there was no one to see me. The leaves were
kind of crinkly
and shaped like rabbits' ears. I stood up and put my
bunch of
primroses on the gatepost. Then on an impulse I slid
my false
teeth out of my mouth and had a look at them.

If I'd had a mirror I'd have looked at the whole of
myself, though,
as a matter of fact, I knew what I looked like
already. A fat man
of forty-five, in a grey herring-bone suit a bit the
worse for wear
and a bowler hat. Wife, two kids, and a house in the
suburbs
written all over me. Red face and boiled blue eyes.
I know, you
don't have to tell me. But the thing that struck me,
as I gave my
dental plate the once-over before slipping it back
into my mouth,
was that IT DOESN'T MATTER. Even false teeth don't
matter. I'm
fat--yes. I look like a bookie's unsuccessful
brother--yes. No
woman will ever go to bed with me again unless she's

paid to. I
know all that. But I tell you I don't care. I don't
want the
women, I don't even want to be young again. I only
want to be
alive. And I was alive that moment when I stood
looking at the
primroses and the red embers under the hedge. It's a
feeling
inside you, a kind of peaceful feeling, and yet it's
like a flame.

Farther down the hedge the pool was covered with
duck-weed, so like
a carpet that if you didn't know what duck-weed was
you might think
it was solid and step on it. I wondered why it is
that we're all
such bloody fools. Why don't people, instead of the
idiocies they
do spend their time on, just walk round LOOKING at
things? That
pool, for instance--all the stuff that's in it.
Newts, water-
snails, water-beetles, caddis-flies, leeches, and God
knows how
many other things that you can only see with a
microscope. The
mystery of their lives, down there under water. You
could spend a
lifetime watching them, ten lifetimes, and still you
wouldn't have
got to the end even of that one pool. And all the
while the sort
of feeling of wonder, the peculiar flame inside you.
It's the only
thing worth having, and we don't want it.

But I do want it. At least I thought so at that
moment. And don't
mistake what I'm saying. To begin with, unlike most
Cockneys, I'm
not soppy about 'the country'. I was brought up a

damn sight too
near to it for that. I don't want to stop people
living in towns,
or in suburbs for that matter. Let 'em live where
they like. And
I'm not suggesting that the whole of humanity could
spend the whole
of their lives wandering round picking primroses and
so forth.
I know perfectly well that we've got to work. It's
only because
chaps are coughing their lungs out in mines and girls
are hammering
at typewriters that anyone ever has time to pick a
flower.
Besides, if you hadn't a full belly and a warm house
you wouldn't
want to pick flowers. But that's not the point.
Here's this
feeling that I get inside me--not often, I admit, but
now and
again. I know it's a good feeling to have. What's
more, so does
everybody else, or nearly everybody. It's just round
the corner
all the time, and we all know it's there. Stop
firing that
machine-gun! Stop chasing whatever you're chasing!
Calm down, get
your breath back, let a bit of peace seep into your
bones. No use.
We don't do it. Just keep on with the same bloody
fooleries.

And the next war coming over the horizon, 1941, they
say. Three
more circles of the sun, and then we whizz straight
into it. The
bombs diving down on you like black cigars, and the
streamlined
bullets streaming from the Bren machine-guns. Not
that that
worries me particularly. I'm too old to fight.

There'll be air-
raids, of course, but they won't hit everybody.
Besides, even if
that kind of danger exists, it doesn't really enter
into one's
thoughts beforehand. As I've said several times
already, I'm not
frightened of the war, only the after-war. And even
that isn't
likely to affect me personally. Because who'd bother
about a chap
like me? I'm too fat to be a political suspect. No
one would bump
me off or cosh me with a rubber truncheon. I'm the
ordinary
middling kind that moves on when the policeman tells
him. As for
Hilda and the kids, they'd probably never notice the
difference.
And yet it frightens me. The barbed wire! The
slogans! The
enormous faces! The cork-lined cellars where the
executioner plugs
you from behind! For that matter it frightens other
chaps who are
intellectually a good deal dumber than I am. But
why! Because it
means good-bye to this thing I've been telling you
about, this
special feeling inside you. Call it peace, if you
like. But when
I say peace I don't mean absence of war, I mean
peace, a feeling in
your guts. And it's gone for ever if the rubber
truncheon boys get
hold of us.

I picked up my bunch of primroses and had a smell at
them. I was
thinking of Lower Binfield. It was funny how for two
months past
it had been in and out of my mind all the time, after
twenty years

during which I'd practically forgotten it. And just at this moment
there was the zoom of a car coming up the road.

It brought me up with a kind of jolt. I suddenly realized what I
was doing--wandering round picking primroses when I ought to have
been going through the inventory at that ironmonger's shop in
Pudley. What was more, it suddenly struck me what I'd look like if
those people in the car saw me. A fat man in a bowler hat holding
a bunch of primroses! It wouldn't look right at all. Fat men
mustn't pick primroses, at any rate in public. I just had time to
chuck them over the hedge before the car came in sight. It was a
good job I'd done so. The car was full of young fools of about
twenty. How they'd have sniggered if they'd seen me! They were
all looking at me--you know how people look at you when they're in
a car coming towards you--and the thought struck me that even now
they might somehow guess what I'd been doing. Better let 'em think
it was something else. Why should a chap get out of his car at the
side of a country road? Obvious! As the car went past I pretended
to be doing up a fly-button.

I cranked up the car (the self-starter doesn't work any longer) and
got in. Curiously enough, in the very moment when I was doing up
the fly-button, when my mind was about three-quarters full of those
young fools in the other car, a wonderful idea had

occurred to me.

I'd go back to Lower Binfield!

Why not? I thought as I jammed her into top gear.
Why shouldn't I?
What was to stop me? And why the hell hadn't I
thought of it
before? A quiet holiday in Lower Binfield--just the
thing I
wanted.

Don't imagine that I had any ideas of going back to
LIVE in Lower
Binfield. I wasn't planning to desert Hilda and the
kids and start
life under a different name. That kind of thing only
happens in
books. But what was to stop me slipping down to
Lower Binfield and
having a week there all by myself, on the Q.T.?

I seemed to have it all planned out in my mind
already. It was all
right as far as the money went. There was still
twelve quid left
in that secret pile of mine, and you can have a very
comfortable
week on twelve quid. I get a fortnight's holiday a
year, generally
in August or September. But if I made up some
suitable story--
relative dying of incurable disease, or something--I
could probably
get the firm to give me my holiday in two separate
halves. Then I
could have a week all to myself before Hilda knew
what was
happening. A week in Lower Binfield, with no Hilda,
no kids, no
Flying Salamander, no Ellesmere Road, no rumpus about
the hire-
purchase payments, no noise of traffic driving you

silly--just a
week of loafing round and listening to the quietness?

But why did I want to go back to Lower Binfield? you
say. Why
Lower Binfield in particular? What did I mean to do
when I got
there?

I didn't mean to do anything. That was part of the
point. I
wanted peace and quiet. Peace! We had it once, in
Lower Binfield.
I've told you something about our old life there,
before the war.
I'm not pretending it was perfect. I dare say it was
a dull,
sluggish, vegetable kind of life. You can say we
were like
turnips, if you like. But turnips don't live in
terror of the
boss, they don't lie awake at night thinking about
the next slump
and the next war. We had peace inside us. Of course
I knew that
even in Lower Binfield life would have changed. But
the place
itself wouldn't have. There'd still be the beech
woods round
Binfield House, and the towpath down by Burford Weir,
and the
horse-trough in the market-place. I wanted to get
back there, just
for a week, and let the feeling of it soak into me.
It was a bit
like one of these Eastern sages retiring into a
desert. And I
should think, the way things are going, there'll be a
good many
people retiring into the desert during the next few
years. It'll
be like the time in ancient Rome that old Porteous
was telling me

about, when there were so many hermits that there was a waiting
list for every cave.

But it wasn't that I wanted to watch my navel. I only wanted to
get my nerve back before the bad times begin. Because does anyone
who isn't dead from the neck up doubt that there's a bad time
coming? We don't even know what it'll be, and yet we know it's
coming. Perhaps a war, perhaps a slump--no knowing, except that
it'll be something bad. Wherever we're going, we're going
downwards. Into the grave, into the cesspool--no knowing. And you
can't face that kind of thing unless you've got the right feeling
inside you. There's something that's gone out of us in these
twenty years since the war. It's a kind of vital juice that we've
squirted away until there's nothing left. All this rushing to and
fro! Everlasting scramble for a bit of cash. Everlasting din of
buses, bombs, radios, telephone bells. Nerves worn all to bits,
empty places in our bones where the marrow ought to be.

I shoved my foot down on the accelerator. The very thought of
going back to Lower Binfield had done me good already. You know
the feeling I had. Coming up for air! Like the big sea-turtles
when they come paddling up to the surface, stick their noses out
and fill their lungs with a great gulp before they sink down again

among the seaweed and the octopuses. We're all stifling at the
bottom of a dustbin, but I'd found the way to the top. Back to
Lower Binfield! I kept my foot on the accelerator until the old
car worked up to her maximum speed of nearly forty miles an hour.
She was rattling like a tin tray full of crockery, and under cover
of the noise I nearly started singing.

Of course the fly in the milk-jug was Hilda. That thought pulled
me up a bit. I slowed down to about twenty to think it over.

There wasn't much doubt Hilda would find out sooner or later. As
to getting only a week's holiday in August, I might be able to pass
that off all right. I could tell her the firm were only giving me
a week this year. Probably she wouldn't ask too many questions
about that, because she'd jump at the chance of cutting down the
holiday expenses. The kids, in any case, always stay at the
seaside for a month. Where the difficulty came in was finding an
alibi for that week in May. I couldn't just clear off without
notice. Best thing, I thought, would be to tell her a good while
ahead that I was being sent on some special job to Nottingham, or
Derby, or Bristol, or some other place a good long way away. If
I told her about it two months ahead it would look as if I hadn't
anything to hide.

But of course she'd find out sooner or later. Trust Hilda! She'd
start off by pretending to believe it, and then, in that quiet,
obstinate way she has, she'd nose out the fact that I'd never been
to Nottingham or Derby or Bristol or wherever it might be. It's
astonishing how she does it. Such perseverance! She lies low
till she's found out all the weak points in your alibi, and then
suddenly, when you've put your foot in it by some careless remark,
she starts on you. Suddenly comes out with the whole dossier of
the case. 'Where did you spend Saturday night? That's a lie!
You've been off with a woman. Look at these hairs I found when
I was brushing your waistcoat. Look at them! Is my hair that
colour?' And then the fun begins. Lord knows how many times it's
happened. Sometimes she's been right about the woman and sometimes
she's been wrong, but the after-effects are always the same.
Nagging for weeks on end! Never a meal without a row--and the kids
can't make out what it's all about. The one completely hopeless
thing would be to tell her just where I'd spent that week, and why.
If I explained till the Day of Judgment she'd never believe that.

But, hell! I thought, why bother? It was a long way off. You
know how different these things seem before and after. I shoved my
foot down on the accelerator again. I'd had another idea, almost

bigger than the first. I wouldn't go in May. I'd go
in the second
half of June, when the coarse-fishing season had
started, and I'd
go fishing!

Why not, after all? I wanted peace, and fishing is
peace. And
then the biggest idea of all came into my head and
very nearly made
me swing the car off the road.

I'd go and catch those big carp in the pool at
Binfield House!

And once again, why not? Isn't it queer how we go
through life,
always thinking that the things we want to do are the
things that
can't be done? Why shouldn't I catch those carp?
And yet, as soon
as the idea's mentioned, doesn't it sound to you like
something
impossible, something that just couldn't happen? It
seemed so to
me, even at that moment. It seemed to me a kind of
dope-dream,
like the ones you have of sleeping with film stars or
winning the
heavyweight championship. And yet it wasn't in the
least
impossible, it wasn't even improbable. Fishing can
be rented.
Whoever owned Binfield House now would probably let
the pool if
they got enough for it. And Gosh! I'd be glad to
pay five pounds
for a day's fishing in that pool. For that matter it
was quite
likely that the house was still empty and nobody even
knew that the
pool existed.

I thought of it in the dark place among the trees,
waiting for me
all those years. And the huge black fish still
gliding round it.
Jesus! If they were that size thirty years ago, what
would they be
like now?

3

It was June the seventeenth, Friday, the second day
of the coarse-
fishing season.

I hadn't had any difficulty in fixing things with the
firm. As for
Hilda, I'd fitted her up with a story that was all
shipshape and
watertight. I'd fixed on Birmingham for my alibi,
and at the last
moment I'd even told her the name of the hotel I was
going to stay
at, Rowbottom's Family and Commercial. I happened to
know the
address because I'd stayed there some years earlier.
At the same
time I didn't want her writing to me at Birmingham,
which she might
do if I was away as long as a week. After thinking
it over I took
young Saunders, who travels for Glisso Floor Polish,
partly into my
confidence. He'd happened to mention that he'd be
passing through
Birmingham on the eighteenth of June, and I got him
to promise that
he'd stop on his way and post a letter from me to
Hilda, addressed
from Rowbottom's. This was to tell her that I might
be called away

and she'd better not write. Saunders understood, or thought he
did. He gave me a wink and said I was wonderful for my age. So
that settled Hilda. She hadn't asked any questions, and even if
she turned suspicious later, an alibi like that would take some
breaking.

I drove through Westerham. It was a wonderful June morning. A
faint breeze blowing, and the elm tops swaying in the sun, little
white clouds streaming across the sky like a flock of sheep, and
the shadows chasing each other across the fields. Outside
Westerham a Walls' Ice Cream lad, with cheeks like apples, came
tearing towards me on his bike, whistling so that it went through
your head. It suddenly reminded me of the time when I'd been an
errand boy myself (though in those days we didn't have free-wheel
bikes) and I very nearly stopped him and took one. They'd cut the
hay in places, but they hadn't got it in yet. It lay drying in
long shiny rows, and the smell of it drifted across the road and
got mixed up with the petrol.

I drove along at a gentle fifteen. The morning had a kind of
peaceful, dreamy feeling. The ducks floated about on the ponds as
if they felt too satisfied to eat. In Nettlefield, the village
beyond Westerham, a little man in a white apron, with grey hair and
a huge grey moustache, darted across the green,

planted himself in
the middle of the road and began doing physical jerks
to attract my
attention. My car's known all along this road, of
course. I
pulled up. It's only Mr Weaver, who keeps the
village general
shop. No, he doesn't want to insure his life, nor
his shop either.
He's merely run out of change and wants to know
whether I've got a
quid's worth of 'large silver'. They never have any
change in
Nettlefield, not even at the pub.

I drove on. The wheat would have been as tall as
your waist. It
went undulating up and down the hills like a great
green carpet,
with the wind rippling it a little, kind of thick and
silky-
looking. It's like a woman, I thought. It makes you
want to lie
on it. And a bit ahead of me I saw the sign-post
where the road
forks right for Pudley and left for Oxford.

I was still on my usual beat, inside the boundary of
my own
'district', as the firm calls it. The natural thing,
as I was
going westward, would have been to leave London along
the Uxbridge
Road. But by a kind of instinct I'd followed my
usual route. The
fact was I was feeling guilty about the whole
business. I wanted
to get well away before I headed for Oxfordshire.
And in spite of
the fact that I'd fixed things so neatly with Hilda
and the firm,
in spite of the twelve quid in my pocket-book and the
suitcase in

the back of the car, as I got nearer the crossroads I actually felt
a temptation--I knew I wasn't going to succumb to it, and yet it
was a temptation--to chuck the whole thing up. I had a sort of
feeling that so long as I was driving along my normal beat I was
still inside the law. It's not too late, I thought. There's still
time to do the respectable thing. I could run into Pudley, for
instance, see the manager of Barclay's Bank (he's our agent at
Pudley) and find out if any new business had come in. For that
matter I could even turn round, go back to Hilda, and make a clean
breast of the plot.

I slowed down as I got to the corner. Should I or shouldn't I?
For about a second I was really tempted. But no! I tooted the
klaxon and swung the car westward, on to the Oxford road.

Well, I'd done it. I was on the forbidden ground. It was true
that five miles farther on, if I wanted to, I could turn to the
left again and get back to Westerham. But for the moment I was
headed westward. Strictly speaking I was in flight. And what was
curious, I was no sooner on the Oxford road than I felt perfectly
certain that THEY knew all about it. When I say THEY I mean all
the people who wouldn't approve of a trip of this kind and who'd
have stopped me if they could--which, I suppose, would include

pretty well everybody.

What was more, I actually had a feeling that they were after me
already. The whole lot of them! All the people who couldn't
understand why a middle-aged man with false teeth should sneak away
for a quiet week in the place where he spent his boyhood. And all
the mean-minded bastards who COULD understand only too well, and
who'd raise heaven and earth to prevent it. They were all on my
track. It was as if a huge army were streaming up the road behind
me. I seemed to see them in my mind's eye. Hilda was in front, of
course, with the kids tagging after her, and Mrs Wheeler driving
her forward with a grim, vindictive expression, and Miss Minns
rushing along in the rear, with her pince-nez slipping down and a
look of distress on her face, like the hen that gets left behind
when the others have got hold of the bacon rind. And Sir Herbert
Crum and the higher-ups of the Flying Salamander in their Rolls-
Royces and Hispano-Suizas. And all the chaps at the office, and
all the poor down-trodden pen-pushers from Ellesmere Road and from
all such other roads, some of them wheeling prams and mowing-
machines and concrete garden-rollers, some of them chugging along
in little Austin Sevens. And all the soul-savers and Nosey
Parkers, the people whom you've never seen but who rule your
destiny all the same, the Home Secretary, Scotland

Yard, the
Temperance League, the Bank of England, Lord
Beaverbrook, Hitler
and Stalin on a tandem bicycle, the bench of Bishops,
Mussolini,
the Pope--they were all of them after me. I could
almost hear them
shouting:

'There's a chap who thinks he's going to escape!
There's a chap
who says he won't be streamlined! He's going back to
Lower
Binfield! After him! Stop him!'

It's queer. The impression was so strong that I
actually took a
peep through the little window at the back of the car
to make sure
I wasn't being followed. Guilty conscience, I
suppose. But there
was nobody. Only the dusty white road and the long
line of the
elms dwindling out behind me.

I trod on the gas and the old car rattled into the
thirties. A few
minutes later I was past the Westerham turning. So
that was that.
I'd burnt my boats. This was the idea which, in a
dim sort of way,
had begun to form itself in my mind the day I got my
new false
teeth.

PART IV

1

I came towards Lower Binfield over Chamford Hill.
There are four
roads into Lower Binfield, and it would have been
more direct to go
through Walton. But I'd wanted to come over Chamford
Hill, the way
we used to go when we biked home from fishing in the
Thames. When
you get just past the crown of the hill the trees
open out and you
can see Lower Binfield lying in the valley below you.

It's a queer experience to go over a bit of country
you haven't
seen in twenty years. You remember it in great
detail, and you
remember it all wrong. All the distances are
different, and the
landmarks seem to have moved about. You keep
feeling, surely this
hill used to be a lot steeper--surely that turning
was on the other
side of the road? And on the other hand you'll have
memories which
are perfectly accurate, but which only belong to one
particular
occasion. You'll remember, for instance, a corner of
a field, on a
wet day in winter, with the grass so green that it's
almost blue,
and a rotten gatepost covered with lichen and a cow
standing in the
grass and looking at you. And you'll go back after
twenty years
and be surprised because the cow isn't standing in
the same place
and looking at you with the same expression.

As I drove up Chamford Hill I realized that the
picture I'd had of
it in my mind was almost entirely imaginary. But it

was a fact
that certain things had changed. The road was
tarmac, whereas in
the old days it used to be macadam (I remember the
bumpy feeling of
it under the bike), and it seemed to have got a lot
wider. And
there were far less trees. In the old days there
used to be huge
beeches growing in the hedgerows, and in places their
boughs met
across the road and made a kind of arch. Now they
were all gone.
I'd nearly got to the top of the hill when I came on
something
which was certainly new. To the right of the road
there was a
whole lot of fake-picturesque houses, with
overhanging eaves and
rose pergolas and what-not. You know the kind of
houses that are
just a little too high-class to stand in a row, and
so they're
dotted about in a kind of colony, with private roads
leading up to
them. And at the entrance to one of the private
roads there was a
huge white board which said:

THE KENNELS

PEDIGREE SEALYHAM PUPS

DOGS BOARDED

Surely THAT usen't to be there?

I thought for a moment. Yes, I remembered! Where
those houses
stood there used to be a little oak plantation, and
the trees grew

too close together, so that they were very tall and
thin, and in
spring the ground underneath them used to be
smothered in anemones.
Certainly there were never any houses as far out of
the town as
this.

I got to the top of the hill. Another minute and
Lower Binfield
would be in sight. Lower Binfield! Why should I
pretend I wasn't
excited? At the very thought of seeing it again an
extraordinary
feeling that started in my guts crept upwards and did
something to
my heart. Five seconds more and I'd be seeing it.
Yes, here we
are! I declutched, trod on the foot-brake,
and--Jesus!

Oh, yes, I know you knew what was coming. But _I_
didn't. You can
say I was a bloody fool not to expect it, and so I
was. But it
hadn't even occurred to me.

The first question was, where WAS Lower Binfield?

I don't mean that it had been demolished. It had
merely been
swallowed. The thing I was looking down at was a
good-sized
manufacturing town. I remember--Gosh, how I
remember! and in this
case I don't think my memory is far out--what Lower
Binfield used
to look like from the top of Chamford Hill. I
suppose the High
Street was about a quarter of a mile long, and except
for a few
outlying houses the town was roughly the shape of a
cross. The

chief landmarks were the church tower and the chimney
of the
brewery. At this moment I couldn't distinguish
either of them.
All I could see was an enormous river of brand-new
houses which
flowed along the valley in both directions and
half-way up the
hills on either side. Over to the right there were
what looked
like several acres of bright red roofs all exactly
alike. A big
Council housing estate, by the look of it.

But where was Lower Binfield? Where was the town I
used to know?
It might have been anywhere. All I knew was that it
was buried
somewhere in the middle of that sea of bricks. Of
the five or six
factory chimneys that I could see, I couldn't even
make a guess at
which belonged to the brewery. Towards the eastern
end of the town
there were two enormous factories of glass and
concrete. That
accounts for the growth of the town, I thought, as I
began to take
it in. It occurred to me that the population of this
place (it
used to be about two thousand in the old days) must
be a good
twenty-five thousand. The only thing that hadn't
changed,
seemingly, was Binfield House. It wasn't much more
than a dot at
that distance, but you could see it on the hillside
opposite, with
the beech trees round it, and the town hadn't climbed
that high.
As I looked a fleet of black bombing planes came over
the hill and
zoomed across the town.

I shoved the clutch in and started slowly down the
hill. The
houses had climbed half-way up it. You know those
very cheap small
houses which run up a hillside in one continuous row,
with the
roofs rising one above the other like a flight of
steps, all
exactly the same. But a little before I got to the
houses I
stopped again. On the left of the road there was
something else
that was quite new. The cemetery. I stopped
opposite the lych-
gate to have a look at it.

It was enormous, twenty acres, I should think.
There's always a
kind of jumped-up unhomelike look about a new
cemetery, with its
raw gravel paths and its rough green sods, and the
machine-made
marble angels that look like something off a
wedding-cake. But
what chiefly struck me at the moment was that in the
old days this
place hadn't existed. There was no separate cemetery
then, only
the churchyard. I could vaguely remember the farmer
these fields
used to belong to--Blackett, his name was, and he was
a dairy-
farmer. And somehow the raw look of the place
brought it home to
me how things have changed. It wasn't only that the
town had grown
so vast that they needed twenty acres to dump their
corpses in. It
was their putting the cemetery out here, on the edge
of the town.
Have you noticed that they always do that nowadays?
Every new town

puts its cemetery on the outskirts. Shove it
away--keep it out of
sight! Can't bear to be reminded of death. Even the
tombstones
tell you the same story. They never say that the
chap underneath
them 'died', it's always 'passed away' or 'fell
asleep'. It wasn't
so in the old days. We had our churchyard plumb in
the middle of
the town, you passed it every day, you saw the spot
where your
grandfather was lying and where some day you were
going to lie
yourself. We didn't mind looking at the dead. In
hot weather, I
admit, we also had to smell them, because some of the
family vaults
weren't too well sealed.

I let the car run down the hill slowly. Queer! You
can't imagine
how queer! All the way down the hill I was seeing
ghosts, chiefly
the ghosts of hedges and trees and cows. It was as
if I was
looking at two worlds at once, a kind of thin bubble
of the thing
that used to be, with the thing that actually existed
shining
through it. There's the field where the bull chased
Ginger
Rodgers! And there's the place where the
horse-mushrooms used to
grow! But there weren't any fields or any bulls or
any mushrooms.
It was houses, houses everywhere, little raw red
houses with their
grubby window-curtains and their scraps of
back-garden that hadn't
anything in them except a patch of rank grass or a
few larkspurs
struggling among the weeds. And blokes walking up

and down, and
women shaking out mats, and snotty-nosed kids playing
along the
pavement. All strangers! They'd all come crowding
in while my
back was turned. And yet it was they who'd have
looked on me as a
stranger, they didn't know anything about the old
Lower Binfield,
they'd never heard of Shooter and Wetherall, or Mr
Grimmett and
Uncle Ezekiel, and cared less, you bet.

It's funny how quickly one adjusts. I suppose it was
five minutes
since I'd halted at the top of the hill, actually a
bit out of
breath at the thought of seeing Lower Binfield again.
And already
I'd got used to the idea that Lower Binfield had been
swallowed up
and buried like the lost cities of Peru. I braced up
and faced it.
After all, what else do you expect? Towns have got
to grow, people
have got to live somewhere. Besides, the old town
hadn't been
annihilated. Somewhere or other it still existed,
though it had
houses round it instead of fields. In a few minutes
I'd be seeing
it again, the church and the brewery chimney and
Father's shop-
window and the horse-trough in the market-place. I
got to the
bottom of the hill, and the road forked. I took the
left-hand
turning, and a minute later I was lost.

I could remember nothing. I couldn't even remember
whether it was
hereabouts that the town used to begin. All I knew
was that in the

old days this street hadn't existed. For hundreds of
yards I was
running along it--a rather mean, shabby kind of
street, with the
houses giving straight on the pavement and here and
there a corner
grocery or a dingy little pub--and wondering where
the hell it led
to. Finally I pulled up beside a woman in a dirty
apron and no hat
who was walking down the pavement. I stuck my head
out of the
window.

'Beg pardon--can you tell me the way to the
market-place?'

She 'couldn't tell'. Answered in an accent you could
cut with a
spade. Lancashire. There's lots of them in the
south of England
now. Overflow from the distressed areas. Then I saw
a bloke in
overalls with a bag of tools coming along and tried
again. This
time I got the answer in Cockney, but he had to think
for a moment.

'Market-place? Market-place? Lessee, now. Oh--you
mean the OLE
Market?'

I supposed I did mean the Old Market.

'Oh, well--you take the right 'and turning--'

It was a long way. Miles, it seemed to me, though
really it wasn't
a mile. Houses, shops, cinemas, chapels, football
grounds--new,
all new. Again I had that feeling of a kind of enemy
invasion
having happened behind my back. All these people

flooding in from
Lancashire and the London suburbs, planting
themselves down in this
beastly chaos, not even bothering to know the chief
landmarks of
the town by name. But I grasped presently why what
we used to call
the market-place was now known as the Old Market.
There was a big
square, though you couldn't properly call it a
square, because it
was no particular shape, in the middle of the new
town, with
traffic-lights and a huge bronze statue of a lion
worrying an
eagle--the war-memorial, I suppose. And the newness
of everything!
The raw, mean look! Do you know the look of these
new towns that
have suddenly swelled up like balloons in the last
few years,
Hayes, Slough, Dagenham, and so forth? The kind of
chilliness, the
bright red brick everywhere, the temporary-looking
shop-windows
full of cut-price chocolates and radio parts. It was
just like
that. But suddenly I swung into a street with older
houses. Gosh!
The High Street!

After all my memory hadn't played tricks on me. I
knew every inch
of it now. Another couple of hundred yards and I'd
be in the
market-place. The old shop was down the other end of
the High
Street. I'd go there after lunch--I was going to put
up at the
George. And every inch a memory! I knew all the
shops, though all
the names had changed, and the stuff they dealt in
had mostly

changed as well. There's Lovegrove's! And there's Todd's! And a
big dark shop with beams and dormer windows. Used to be Lilywhite's
the draper's, where Elsie used to work. And Grimmett's! Still a
grocer's apparently. Now for the horse-trough in the market-place.
There was another car ahead of me and I couldn't see.

It turned aside as we got into the market-place. The horse-trough
was gone.

There was an A.A. man on traffic-duty where it used to stand. He
gave a glance at the car, saw that it hadn't the A.A. sign, and
decided not to salute.

I turned the corner and ran down to the George. The horse-trough
being gone had thrown me out to such an extent that I hadn't even
looked to see whether the brewery chimney was still standing. The
George had altered too, all except the name. The front had been
dolled up till it looked like one of those riverside hotels, and
the sign was different. It was curious that although till that
moment I hadn't thought of it once in twenty years, I suddenly
found that I could remember every detail of the old sign, which had
swung there ever since I could remember. It was a crude kind of
picture, with St George on a very thin horse trampling on a very
fat dragon, and in the corner, though it was cracked and faded,
you could read the little signature, 'Wm. Sandford,

Painter &
Carpenter'. The new sign was kind of
artistic-looking. You could
see it had been painted by a real artist. St George
looked a
regular pansy. The cobbled yard, where the farmers'
traps used to
stand and the drunks used to puke on Saturday nights,
had been
enlarged to about three times its size and concreted
over, with
garages all round it. I backed the car into one of
the garages and
got out.

One thing I've noticed about the human mind is that
it goes in
jerks. There's no emotion that stays by you for any
length of
time. During the last quarter of an hour I'd had
what you could
fairly describe as a shock. I'd felt it almost like
a sock in the
guts when I stopped at the top of Chamford Hill and
suddenly
realized that Lower Binfield had vanished, and
there'd been another
little stab when I saw the horse-trough was gone.
I'd driven
through the streets with a gloomy, Ichabod kind of
feeling. But as
I stepped out of the car and hitched my trilby hat on
to my head I
suddenly felt that it didn't matter a damn. It was
such a lovely
sunny day, and the hotel yard had a kind of summery
look, with its
flowers in green tubs and what-not. Besides, I was
hungry and
looking forward to a spot of lunch.

I strolled into the hotel with a consequential kind
of air, with

the boots, who'd already nipped out to meet me, following with the
suitcase. I felt pretty prosperous, and probably I looked it. A
solid business man, you'd have said, at any rate if you hadn't seen
the car. I was glad I'd come in my new suit--blue flannel with a
thin white stripe, which suits my style. It has what the tailor
calls a 'reducing effect'. I believe that day I could have passed
for a stockbroker. And say what you like it's a very pleasant
thing, on a June day when the sun's shining on the pink geraniums
in the window-boxes, to walk into a nice country hotel with roast
lamb and mint sauce ahead of you. Not that it's any treat to me to
stay in hotels, Lord knows I see all too much of them--but ninety-
nine times out of a hundred it's those godless 'family and
commercial' hotels, like Rowbottom's, where I was supposed to be
staying at present, the kind of places where you pay five bob for
bed and breakfast, and the sheets are always damp and the bath taps
never work. The George had got so smart I wouldn't have known it.
In the old days it had hardly been a hotel, only a pub, though it
had a room or two to let and used to do a farmers' lunch (roast
beef and Yorkshire, suet dumpling and Stilton cheese) on market
days. It all seemed different except for the public bar, which I
got a glimpse of as I went past, and which looked the same as ever.
I went up a passage with a soft carpet, and hunting

prints and
copper warming-pans and such-like junk hanging on the walls. And
dimly I could remember the passage as it used to be, the hollowed-
out flags underfoot, and the smell of plaster mixed up with the
smell of beer. A smart-looking young woman, with frizzed hair and
a black dress, who I suppose was the clerk or something, took my
name at the office.

'You wish for a room, sir? Certainly, sir. What name shall I put
down, sir?'

I paused. After all, this was my big moment. She'd be pretty sure
to know the name. It isn't common, and there are a lot of us in
the churchyard. We were one of the old Lower Binfield families,
the Bowlings of Lower Binfield. And though in a way it's painful
to be recognized, I'd been rather looking forward to it.

'Bowling,' I said very distinctly. 'Mr George Bowling.'

'Bowling, sir. B-O-A--oh! B-O-W? Yes, sir. And you are coming
from London, sir?'

No response. Nothing registered. She'd never heard of me. Never
heard of George Bowling, son of Samuel Bowling--Samuel Bowling who,
damn it! had had his half-pint in this same pub every Saturday for
over thirty years.

The dining-room had changed, too.

I could remember the old room, though I'd never had a meal there,
with its brown mantelpiece and its bronzy-yellow wallpaper--I never
knew whether it was meant to be that colour, or had just got like
that from age and smoke--and the oil-painting, also by Wm.
Sandford, Painter & Carpenter, of the battle of Tel-el-Kebir.
Now they'd got the place up in a kind of medieval style. Brick
fireplace with inglenooks, a huge beam across the ceiling, oak
panelling on the walls, and every bit of it a fake that you could
have spotted fifty yards away. The beam was genuine oak, came out
of some old sailing-ship, probably, but it didn't hold anything up,
and I had my suspicions of the panels as soon as I set eyes on
them. As I sat down at my table, and the slick young waiter came
towards me fiddling with his napkin, I tapped the wall behind me.
Yes! Thought so! Not even wood. They fake it up with some kind
of composition and then paint it over.

But the lunch wasn't bad. I had my lamb and mint sauce, and I had
a bottle of some white wine or other with a French name which made
me belch a bit but made me feel happy. There was one other person

lunching there, a woman of about thirty with fair
hair, looked like
a widow. I wondered whether she was staying at the
George, and
made vague plans to get off with her. It's funny how
your feelings
get mixed up. Half the time I was seeing ghosts.
The past was
sticking out into the present, Market day, and the
great solid
farmers throwing their legs under the long table,
with their
hobnails grating on the stone floor, and working
their way through
a quantity of beef and dumpling you wouldn't believe
the human
frame could hold. And then the little tables with
their shiny
white cloths and wine-glasses and folded napkins, and
the faked-up
decorations and the general expensiveness would blot
it out again.
And I'd think, 'I've got twelve quid and a new suit.
I'm little
Georgie Bowling, and who'd have believed I'd ever
come back to
Lower Binfield in my own motorcar?' And then the
wine would send a
kind of warm feeling upwards from my stomach, and I'd
run an eye
over the woman with fair hair and mentally take her
clothes off.

It was the same in the afternoon as I lay about in
the lounge--
fake-medieval again, but it had streamlined leather
armchairs and
glass-topped tables--with some brandy and a cigar. I
was seeing
ghosts, but on the whole I was enjoying it. As a
matter of fact
I was a tiny bit boozed and hoping that the woman
with fair hair

would come in so that I could scrape acquaintance.
She never
showed up, however. It wasn't till nearly tea-time
that I went
out.

I strolled up to the market-place and turned to the
left. The
shop! It was funny. Twenty-one years ago, the day
of Mother's
funeral, I'd passed it in the station fly, and seen
it all shut up
and dusty, with the sign burnt off with a plumber's
blowflame, and
I hadn't cared a damn. And now, when I was so much
further away
from it, when there were actually details about the
inside of the
house that I couldn't remember, the thought of seeing
it again did
things to my heart and guts. I passed the barber's
shop. Still a
barber's, though the name was different. A warm,
soapy, almondy
smell came out of the door. Not quite so good as the
old smell of
bay rum and latakia. The shop--our shop--was twenty
yards farther
down. Ah!

An arty-looking sign--painted by the same chap as did
the one at
the George, I shouldn't wonder--hanging out over the
pavement:

WENDY'S TEASHOP

MORNING COFFEE

HOME-MADE CAKES

A tea-shop!

I suppose if it had been a butcher's or an
ironmonger's, or
anything else except a seedsman's, it would have
given me the same
kind of jolt. It's absurd that because you happen to
have been
born in a certain house you should feel that you've
got rights over
it for the rest of your life, but so you do. The
place lived up to
its name, all right. Blue curtains in the window,
and a cake or
two standing about, the kind of cake that's covered
with chocolate
and has just one walnut stuck somewhere on the top.
I went in.
I didn't really want any tea, but I had to see the
inside.

They'd evidently turned both the shop and what used
to be the
parlour into tea-rooms. As for the yard at the back
where the
dustbin used to stand and Father's little patch of
weeds used to
grow, they'd paved it all over and dolled it up with
rustic tables
and hydrangeas and things. I went through into the
parlour. More
ghosts! The piano and the texts on the wall, and the
two lumpy old
red armchairs where Father and Mother used to sit on
opposite sides
of the fireplace, reading the People and the News of
the World on
Sunday afternoons! They'd got the place up in an
even more antique
style than the George, with gateleg tables and a
hammered-iron
chandelier and pewter plates hanging on the wall and
what-not. Do

you notice how dark they always manage to make it in these arty
tea-rooms? It's part of the antiqueness, I suppose.
And instead
of an ordinary waitress there was a young woman in a kind of print
wrapper who met me with a sour expression. I asked her for tea,
and she was ten minutes getting it. You know the kind of tea--
China tea, so weak that you could think it's water till you put the
milk in. I was sitting almost exactly where Father's armchair used
to stand. I could almost hear his voice, reading out a 'piece', as
he used to call it, from the People, about the new flying machines,
or the chap who was swallowed by a whale, or something. It gave me
a most peculiar feeling that I was there on false pretences and
they could kick me out if they discovered who I was, and yet
simultaneously I had a kind of longing to tell somebody that I'd
been born here, that I belonged to this house, or rather (what I
really felt) that the house belonged to me. There was nobody else
having tea. The girl in the print wrapper was hanging about by the
window, and I could see that if I hadn't been there she'd have been
picking her teeth. I bit into one of the slices of cake she'd
brought me. Home-made cakes! You bet they were. Home-made with
margarine and egg-substitute. But in the end I had to speak.
I said:

'Have you been in Lower Binfield long?'

She started, looked surprised, and didn't answer. I
tried again:

'I used to live in Lower Binfleld myself, a good
while ago.'

Again no answer, or only something that I couldn't
hear. She gave
me a kind of frigid look and then gazed out of the
window again. I
saw how it was. Too much of a lady to go in for
back-chat with
customers. Besides, she probably thought I was
trying to get off
with her. What was the good of telling her I'd been
born in the
house? Even if she believed it, it wouldn't interest
her. She'd
never heard of Samuel Bowling, Corn & Seed Merchant.
I paid the
bill and cleared out.

I wandered up to the church. One thing that I'd been
half afraid
of, and half looking forward to, was being recognized
by people I
used to know. But I needn't have worried, there
wasn't a face I
knew anywhere in the streets. It seemed as if the
whole town had
got a new population.

When I got to the church I saw why they'd had to have
a new
cemetery. The churchyard was full to the brim, and
half the graves
had names on them that I didn't know. But the names
I did know
were easy enough to find. I wandered round among the
graves. The
sexton had just scythed the grass and there was a
smell of summer

even there. They were all alone, all the older folks
I'd known.
Gravitt the butcher, and Winkle the other seedsman,
and Trew, who
used to keep the George, and Mrs Wheeler from the
sweet-shop--they
were all lying there. Shooter and Wetherall were
opposite one
another on either side of the path, just as if they
were still
singing at each other across the aisle. So Wetherall
hadn't got
his hundred after all. Born in '43 and 'departed his
life' in
1928. But he'd beaten Shooter, as usual. Shooter
died in '26.
What a time old Wetherall must have had those last
two years when
there was nobody to sing against him! And old
Grimmett under a
huge marble thing shaped rather like a veal-and-ham
pie, with an
iron railing round it, and in the corner a whole
batch of Simmonses
under cheap little crosses. All gone to dust. Old
Hodges with his
tobacco-coloured teeth, and Lovegrove with his big
brown beard, and
Lady Rampling with the coachman and the tiger, and
Harry Barnes's
aunt who had a glass eye, and Brewer of the Mill Farm
with his
wicked old face like something carved out of a
nut--nothing left of
any of them except a slab of stone and God knows what
underneath.

I found Mother's grave, and Father's beside it. Both
of them in
pretty good repair. The sexton had kept the grass
clipped. Uncle
Ezekiel's was a little way away. They'd levelled a
lot of the

older graves, and the old wooden head-pieces, the ones that used to
look like the end of a bedstead, had all been cleared away. What
do you feel when you see your parents' graves after twenty years?
I don't know what you ought to feel, but I'll tell you what I did
feel, and that was nothing. Father and Mother have never faded out
of my mind. It's as if they existed somewhere or other in a kind
of eternity, Mother behind the brown teapot, Father with his bald
head a little mealy, and his spectacles and his grey moustache,
fixed for ever like people in a picture, and yet in some way alive.
Those boxes of bones lying in the ground there didn't seem to have
anything to do with them. Merely, as I stood there, I began to
wonder what you feel like when you're underground, whether you care
much and how soon you cease to care, when suddenly a heavy shadow
swept across me and gave me a bit of a start.

I looked over my shoulder. It was only a bombing plane which had
flown between me and the sun. The place seemed to be creeping with
them.

I strolled into the church. For almost the first time since I got
back to Lower Binfield I didn't have the ghostly feeling, or rather
I had it in a different form. Because nothing had changed.
Nothing, except that all the people were gone. Even the hassocks
looked the same. The same dusty, sweetish

corpse-smell. And by
God! the same hole in the window, though, as it was
evening and the
sun was round the other side, the spot of light
wasn't creeping up
the aisle. They'd still got pews--hadn't changed
over to chairs.
There was our pew, and there was the one in front
where Wetherall
used to bellow against Shooter. Sihon king of the
Amorites and Og
the king of Bashan! And the worn stones in the aisle
where you
could still half-read the epitaphs of the blokes who
lay beneath
them. I squatted down to have a look at the one
opposite our pew.
I still knew the readable bits of it by heart. Even
the pattern
they made seemed to have stuck in my memory. Lord
knows how often
I'd read them during the sermon.

Here.................fon,   Gent.,
of this parif h..........his juft &
  upright........................
....
To his.......manifold private bene
volences he added a diligent.......
....
.....................beloved wife
Amelia, by.............iffue feven
daughters........................

I remembered how the long S's used to puzzle me as a
kid. Used to
wonder whether in the old days they pronounced their
S's as F's,
and if so, why.

There was a step behind me. I looked up. A chap in

a cassock was
standing over me. It was the vicar.

But I mean THE vicar! It was old Betterton, who'd
been vicar in
the old days--not, as a matter of fact, ever since I
could
remember, but since 1904 or thereabouts. I
recognized him at once,
though his hair was quite white.

He didn't recognize me. I was only a fat tripper in
a blue suit
doing a bit of sightseeing. He said good evening and
promptly
started on the usual line of talk--was I interested
in architecture,
remarkable old building this, foundations go back to
Saxon times and
so on and so forth. And soon he was doddering round,
showing me the
sights, such as they were--Norman arch leading into
the vestry,
brass effigy of Sir Roderick Bone who was killed at
the Battle of
Newbury. And I followed him with the kind of
whipped-dog air that
middle-aged businessmen always have when they're
being shown round a
church or a picture-gallery. But did I tell him that
I knew it all
already? Did I tell him that I was Georgie Bowling,
son of Samuel
Bowling--he'd have remembered my father even if he
didn't remember
me--and that I'd not only listened to his sermons for
ten years and
gone to his Confirmation classes, but even belonged
to the Lower
Binfield Reading Circle and had a go at Sesame and
Lilies just to
please him? No, I didn't. I merely followed him
round, making the

kind of mumble that you make when somebody tells you that this or
that is five hundred years old and you can't think what the hell to
say except that it doesn't look it. From the moment that I set eyes
on him I'd decided to let him think I was a stranger. As soon as I
decently could I dropped sixpence in the Church Expenses box and
bunked.

But why? Why not make contact, now that at last I'd found somebody
I knew?

Because the change in his appearance after twenty years had
actually frightened me. I suppose you think I mean that he looked
older. But he didn't! He looked YOUNGER. And it suddenly taught
me something about the passage of time.

I suppose old Betterton would be about sixty-five now, so that when
I last saw him he'd have been about forty-five--my own present age.
His hair was white now, and the day he buried Mother it was a kind
of streaky grey, like a shaving-brush. And yet as soon as I saw
him the first thing that struck me was that he looked younger. I'd
thought of him as an old, old man, and after all he wasn't so very
old. As a boy, it occurred to me, all people over forty had seemed
to me just worn-out old wrecks, so old that there was hardly any
difference between them. A man of forty-five had seemed to me
older than this old dodderer of sixty-five seemed

now. And Christ!
I was forty-five myself. It frightened me.

So that's what I look like to chaps of twenty, I
thought as I made
off between the graves. Just a poor old hulk.
Finished. It was
curious. As a rule I don't care a damn about my age.
Why should
I? I'm fat, but I'm strong and healthy. I can do
everything I
want to do. A rose smells the same to me now as it
did when I was
twenty. Ah, but do I smell the same to the rose?
Like an answer a
girl, might have been eighteen, came up the
churchyard lane. She
had to pass within a yard or two of me. I saw the
look she gave
me, just a tiny momentary look. No, not frightened,
nor hostile.
Only kind of wild, remote, like a wild animal when
you catch its
eye. She'd been born and grown up in those twenty
years while I
was away from Lower Binfield. All my memories would
have been
meaningless to her. Living in a different world from
me, like an
animal.

I went back to the George. I wanted a drink, but the
bar didn't
open for another half-hour. I hung about for a bit,
reading a
Sporting and Dramatic of the year before, and
presently the fair-
haired dame, the one I thought might be a widow, came
in. I had a
sudden desperate yearning to get off with her.
Wanted to show
myself that there's life in the old dog yet, even if
the old dog

does have to wear false teeth. After all, I thought,
if she's
thirty and I'm forty-five, that's fair enough. I was
standing in
front of the empty fireplace, making believe to warm
my bum, the
way you do on a summer day. In my blue suit I didn't
look so bad.
A bit fat, no doubt, but distingue. A man of the
world. I could
pass for a stockbroker. I put on my toniest accent
and said
casually:

'Wonderful June weather we're having.'

It was a pretty harmless remark, wasn't it? Nor in
the same class
as 'Haven't I met you somewhere before?'

But it wasn't a success. She didn't answer, merely
lowered for
about half a second the paper she was reading and
gave me a look
that would have cracked a window. It was awful. She
had one of
those blue eyes that go into you like a bullet. In
that split
second I saw how hopelessly I'd got her wrong. She
wasn't the kind
of widow with dyed hair who likes being taken out to
dance-halls.
She was upper-middle-class, probably an admiral's
daughter, and
been to one of those good schools where they play
hockey. And I'd
got myself wrong too. New suit or no new suit, I
COULDN'T pass for
a stockbroker. Merely looked like a commercial
traveller who'd
happened to get hold of a bit of dough. I sneaked
off to the
private bar to have a pint or two before dinner.

The beer wasn't the same. I remember the old beer,
the good Thames
Valley beer that used to have a bit of taste in it
because it was
made out of chalky water. I asked the barmaid:

'Have Bessemers' still got the brewery?'

'Bessemers? Oo, NO, sir! They've gorn. Oo, years
ago--long
before we come 'ere.'

She was a friendly sort, what I call the elder-sister
type of
barmaid, thirty-fivish, with a mild kind of face and
the fat arms
they develop from working the beer-handle. She told
me the name of
the combine that had taken over the brewery. I could
have guessed
it from the taste, as a matter of fact. The
different bars ran
round in a circle with compartments in between.
Across in the
public bar two chaps were playing a game of darts,
and in the Jug
and Bottle there was a chap I couldn't see who
occasionally put in
a remark in a sepulchral kind of voice. The barmaid
leaned her fat
elbows on the bar and had a talk with me. I ran over
the names of
the people I used to know, and there wasn't a single
one of them
that she'd heard of. She said she'd only been in
Lower Binfield
five years. She hadn't even heard of old Trew, who
used to have
the George in the old days.

'I used to live in Lower Binfield myself,' I told
her. 'A good

while back, it was, before the war.'

'Before the war? Well, now! You don't look that
old.'

'See some changes, I dessay,' said the chap in the
Jug and Bottle.

'The town's grown,' I said. 'It's the factories, I
suppose.'

'Well, of course they mostly work at the factories.
There's the
gramophone works, and then there's Truefitt
Stockings. But of
course they're making bombs nowadays.'

I didn't altogether see why it was of course, but she
began telling
me about a young fellow who worked at Truefitt's
factory and
sometimes came to the George, and he'd told her that
they were
making bombs as well as stockings, the two, for some
reason I
didn't understand, being easy to combine. And then
she told me
about the big military aerodrome near Walton--that
accounted for
the bombing planes I kept seeing--and the next moment
we'd started
talking about the war, as usual. Funny. It was
exactly to escape
the thought of war that I'd come here. But how can
you, anyway?
It's in the air you breathe.

I said it was coming in 1941. The chap in the Jug
and Bottle said
he reckoned it was a bad job. The barmaid said it
gave her the
creeps. She said:

'It doesn't seem to do much good, does it, after all said and done?
And sometimes I lie awake at night and hear one of those great
things going overhead, and think to myself, "Well, now, suppose
that was to drop a bomb right down on top of me!"
And all this
A.R.P., and Miss Todgers, she's the Air Warden, telling you it'll
be all right if you keep your head and stuff the windows up with
newspaper, and they say they're going to dig a shelter under the
Town Hall. But the way I look at it is, how could you put a gas-
mask on a baby?'

The chap in the Jug and Bottle said he'd read in the paper that you
ought to get into a hot bath till it was all over. The chaps in
the public bar overheard this and there was a bit of a by-play on
the subject of how many people could get into the same bath, and
both of them asked the barmaid if they could share her bath with
her. She told them not to get saucy, and then she went up the
other end of the bar and hauled them out a couple more pints of old
and mild. I took a suck at my beer. It was poor stuff. Bitter,
they call it. And it was bitter, right enough, too bitter, a kind
of sulphurous taste. Chemicals. They say no English hops ever go
into beer nowadays, they're all made into chemicals. Chemicals, on
the other hand, are made into beer. I found myself thinking about
Uncle Ezekiel, what he'd have said to beer like this,

and what he'd
have said about A.R.P. and the buckets of sand you're
supposed to
put the thermite bombs out with. As the barmaid came
back to my
side of the bar I said:

'By the way, who's got the Hall nowadays?'

We always used to call it the Hall, though its name
was Binfield
House. For a moment she didn't seem to understand.

'The Hall, sir?'

''E means Binfield 'Ouse,' said the chap in the Jug
and Bottle.

'Oh, Binfield House! Oo, I thought you meant the
Memorial Hall.
It's Dr Merrall's got Binfield House now.'

'Dr Merrall?'

'Yes, sir. He's got more than sixty patients up
there, they say.'

'Patients? Have they turned it into a hospital, or
something?'

'Well--it's not what you'd call an ordinary hospital.
More of a
sanatorium. It's mental patients, reely. What they
call a Mental
Home.'

A loony-bin!

But after all, what else could you expect?

3

I crawled out of bed with a bad taste in my mouth and
my bones
creaking.

The fact was that, what with a bottle of wine at
lunch and another
at dinner, and several pints in between, besides a
brandy or two,
I'd had a bit too much to drink the day before. For
several
minutes I stood in the middle of the carpet, gazing
at nothing in
particular and too done-in to make a move. You know
that god-awful
feeling you get sometimes in the early morning. It's
a feeling
chiefly in your legs, but it says to you clearer than
any words
could do, 'Why the hell do you go on with it? Chuck
it up, old
chap! Stick your head in the gas oven!'

Then I shoved my teeth in and went to the window. A
lovely June
day, again, and the sun was just beginning to slant
over the roofs
and hit the house-fronts on the other side of the
street. The pink
geraniums in the window-boxes didn't look half bad.
Although it
was only about half past eight and this was only a
side-street off
the market-place there was quite a crowd of people
coming and
going. A stream of clerkly-looking chaps in dark
suits with
dispatch-cases were hurrying along, all in the same
direction, just
as if this had been a London suburb and they were
scooting for the
Tube, and the schoolkids were straggling up towards

the market-
place in twos and threes. I had the same feeling
that I'd had the
day before when I saw the jungle of red houses that
had swallowed
Chamford Hill. Bloody interlopers! Twenty thousand
gate-crashers
who didn't even know my name. And here was all this
new life
swarming to and fro, and here was I, a poor old fatty
with false
teeth, watching them from a window and mumbling stuff
that nobody
wanted to listen to about things that happened thirty
and forty
years ago. Christ! I thought, I was wrong to think
that I was
seeing ghosts. I'm the ghost myself. I'm dead and
they're alive.

But after breakfast--haddock, grilled kidneys, toast
and marmalade,
and a pot of coffee--I felt better. The frozen dame
wasn't
breakfasting in the dining-room, there was a nice
summery feeling
in the air, and I couldn't get rid of the feeling
that in that blue
flannel suit of mine I looked just a little bit
distingue. By God!
I thought, if I'm a ghost, I'll BE a ghost! I'll
walk. I'll haunt
the old places. And maybe I can work a bit of black
magic on some
of these bastards who've stolen my home town from me.

I started out, but I'd got no farther than the
market-place when I
was pulled up by something I hadn't expected to see.
A procession
of about fifty school-kids was marching down the
street in column
of fours--quite military, they looked--with a

grim-looking woman
marching alongside of them like a sergeant-major.
The leading four
were carrying a banner with a red, white, and blue
border and
BRITONS PREPARE on it in huge letters. The barber on
the corner
had come out on to his doorstep to have a look at
them. I spoke to
him. He was a chap with shiny black hair and a dull
kind of face.

'What are those kids doing?'

'It's this here air-raid practice,' he said vaguely.
'This here
A.R.P. Kind of practising, like. That's Miss
Todgers, that is.'

I might have guessed it was Miss Todgers. You could
see it in her
eye. You know the kind of tough old devil with grey
hair and a
kippered face that's always put in charge of Girl
Guide
detachments, Y.W.C.A. hostels, and whatnot. She had
on a coat and
skirt that somehow looked like a uniform and gave you
a strong
impression that she was wearing a Sam Browne belt,
though actually
she wasn't. I knew her type. Been in the W.A.A.C.s
in the war,
and never had a day's fun since. This A.R.P. was jam
to her. As
the kids swung past I heard her letting out at them
with the real
sergeant-major yell, 'Monica! Lift your feet up!'
and I saw that
the rear four had another banner with a red, white,
and blue
border, and in the middle

WE ARE READY. ARE YOU?

'What do they want to march them up and down for?' I said to the
barber.

'I dunno. I s'pose it's kind of propaganda, like.'

I knew, of course. Get the kids war-minded. Give us all the
feeling that there's no way out of it, the bombers are coming as
sure as Christmas, so down to the cellar you go and don't argue.
Two of the great black planes from Walton were zooming over the
eastern end of the town. Christ! I thought, when it starts it
won't surprise us any more than a shower of rain. Already we're
listening for the first bomb. The barber went on to tell me that
thanks to Miss Todgers's efforts the school-kids had been served
with their gas-masks already.

Well, I started to explore the town. Two days I spent just
wandering round the old landmarks, such of them as I could
identify. And all that time I never ran across a soul that knew
me. I was a ghost, and if I wasn't actually invisible, I felt like
it.

It was queer, queerer than I can tell you. Did you ever read a
story of H.G. Wells's about a chap who was in two places at once--
that's to say, he was really in his own home, but he

had a kind of
hallucination that he was at the bottom of the sea?
He'd been
walking round his room, but instead of the tables and
chairs he'd
see the wavy waterweed and the great crabs and
cuttlefish reaching
out to get him. Well, it was just like that. For
hours on end I'd
be walking through a world that wasn't there. I'd
count my paces
as I went down the pavement and think, 'Yes, here's
where so-and-
so's field begins. The hedge runs across the street
and slap
through that house. That petrol pump is really an
elm tree. And
here's the edge of the allotments. And this street
(it was a
dismal little row of semi-detached houses called
Cumberledge Road,
I remember) is the lane where we used to go with
Katie Simmons, and
the nut-bushes grew on both sides.' No doubt I got
the distances
wrong, but the general directions were right. I
don't believe
anyone who hadn't happened to be born here would have
believed that
these streets were fields as little as twenty years
ago. It was as
though the countryside had been buried by a kind of
volcanic
eruption from the outer suburbs. Nearly the whole of
what used to
be old Brewer's land had been swallowed up in the
Council housing
estate. The Mill Farm had vanished, the cow-pond
where I caught my
first fish had been drained and filled up and built
over, so that I
couldn't even say exactly where it used to stand. It
was all

houses, houses, little red cubes of houses all alike,
with privet
hedges and asphalt paths leading up to the front
door. Beyond the
Council Estate the town thinned out a bit, but the
jerry-builders
were doing their best. And there were little knots
of houses
dumped here and there, wherever anybody had been able
to buy a plot
of land, and the makeshift roads leading up to the
houses, and
empty lots with builders' boards, and bits of ruined
fields covered
with thistles and tin cans.

In the centre of the old town, on the other hand,
things hadn't
changed much, so far as buildings went. A lot of the
shops were
still doing the same line of trade, although the
names were
different. Lillywhite's was still a draper's, but it
didn't look
too prosperous. What used to be Gravitt's, the
butcher's, was now
a shop that sold radio parts. Mother Wheeler's
little window had
been bricked over. Grimmett's was still a grocer's,
but it had
been taken over by the International. It gives you
an idea of the
power of these big combines that they could even
swallow up a cute
old skinflint like Grimmett. But from what I know of
him--not to
mention that slap-up tombstone in the churchyard--I
bet he got out
while the going was good and had ten to fifteen
thousand quid to
take to heaven with him. The only shop that was
still in the same
hands was Sarazins', the people who'd ruined Father.

They'd
swollen to enormous dimensions, and they had another
huge branch in
the new part of the town. But they'd turned into a
kind of general
store and sold furniture, drugs, hardware, and
ironmongery as well
as the old garden stuff.

For the best part of two days I was wandering round,
not actually
groaning and rattling a chain, but sometimes feeling
that I'd like
to. Also I was drinking more than was good for me.
Almost as soon
as I got to Lower Binfield I'd started on the booze,
and after that
the pubs never seemed to open quite early enough. My
tongue was
always hanging out of my mouth for the last half-hour
before
opening time.

Mind you, I wasn't in the same mood all the time.
Sometimes it
seemed to me that it didn't matter a damn if Lower
Binfield had
been obliterated. After all, what had I come here
for, except to
get away from the family? There was no reason why I
shouldn't do
all the things I wanted to do, even go fishing if I
felt like it.
On the Saturday afternoon I even went to the
fishing-tackle shop in
the High Street and bought a split-cane rod (I'd
always pined for a
split-cane rod as a boy--it's a little bit dearer
than a green-
heart) and hooks and gut and so forth. The
atmosphere of the shop
cheered me up. Whatever else changes, fishing-tackle
doesn't--

because, of course, fish don't change either. And the shopman
didn't see anything funny in a fat middle-aged man buying a
fishing-rod. On the contrary, we had a little talk about the
fishing in the Thames and the big chub somebody had landed the year
before last on a paste made of brown bread, honey, and minced
boiled rabbit. I even--though I didn't tell him what I wanted them
for, and hardly even admitted it to myself--bought the strongest
salmon trace he'd got, and some No. 5 roach-hooks, with an eye to
those big carp at Binfield House, in case they still existed.

Most of Sunday morning I was kind of debating it in my mind--should
I go fishing, or shouldn't I? One moment I'd think, why the hell
not, and the next moment it would seem to me that it was just one
of those things that you dream about and don't ever do. But in the
afternoon I got the car out and drove down to Burford Weir. I
thought I'd just have a look at the river, and tomorrow, if the
weather was right, maybe I'd take my new fishing-rod and put on the
old coat and grey flannel bags I had in my suitcase, and have a
good day's fishing. Three or four days, if I felt like it.

I drove over Chamford Hill. Down at the bottom the road turns off
and runs parallel to the towpath. I got out of the car and walked.
Ah! A knot of little red and white bungalows had

sprung up beside
the road. Might have expected it, of course. And
there seemed to
be a lot of cars standing about. As I got nearer the
river I came
into the sound--yes, plonk-tiddle-tiddle-plonk!--yes,
the sound of
gramphones.

I rounded the bend and came in sight of the towpath.
Christ!
Another jolt. The place was black with people. And
where the
water-meadows used to be--tea-houses,
penny-in-the-slot machines,
sweet kiosks, and chaps selling Walls' Ice-Cream.
Might as well
have been at Margate. I remember the old towpath.
You could walk
along it for miles, and except for the chaps at the
lock gates, and
now and again a bargeman mooching along behind his
horse, you'd
meet never a soul. When we went fishing we always
had the place to
ourselves. Often I've sat there a whole afternoon,
and a heron
might be standing in the shallow water fifty yards up
the bank, and
for three or four hours on end there wouldn't be
anyone passing to
scare him away. But where had I got the idea that
grown-up men
don't go fishing? Up and down the bank, as far as I
could see in
both directions, there was a continuous chain of men
fishing, one
every five yards. I wondered how the hell they could
all have got
there until it struck me that they must be some
fishing-club or
other. And the river was crammed with
boats--rowing-boats, canoes,

punts, motor-launches, full of young fools with next
to nothing on,
all of them screaming and shouting and most of them
with a
gramphone aboard as well. The floats of the poor
devils who were
trying to fish rocked up and down on the wash of the
motor-boats.

I walked a little way. Dirty, choppy water, in spite
of the fine
day. Nobody was catching anything, not even minnows.
I wondered
whether they expected to. A crowd like that would be
enough to
scare every fish in creation. But actually, as I
watched the
floats rocking up and down among the ice-cream tubs
and the paper
bags, I doubted whether there were any fish to catch.
Are there
still fish in the Thames? I suppose there must be.
And yet I'll
swear the Thames water isn't the same as it used to
be. Its colour
is quite different. Of course you think that's
merely my
imagination, but I can tell you it isn't so. I know
the water has
changed. I remember the Thames water as it used to
be, a kind of
luminous green that you could see deep into, and the
shoals of dace
cruising round the reeds. You couldn't see three
inches into the
water now. It's all brown and dirty, with a film of
oil in it from
the motor-boats, not to mention the fag-ends and the
paper bags.

After a bit I turned back. Couldn't stand the noise
of the
gramophones any longer. Of course it's Sunday, I

thought.
Mightn't be so bad on a week-day. But after all, I
knew I'd never
come back. God rot them, let 'em keep their bloody
river.
Wherever I go fishing it won't be in the Thames.

The crowds swarmed past me. Crowds of bloody aliens,
and nearly
all of them young. Boys and girls larking along in
couples. A
troop of girls came past, wearing bell-bottomed
trousers and white
caps like the ones they wear in the American Navy,
with slogans
printed on them. One of them, seventeen she might
have been, had
PLEASE KISS ME. I wouldn't have minded. On an
impulse I suddenly
turned aside and weighed myself on one of the
penny-in-the-slot
machines. There was a clicking noise somewhere
inside it--you know
those machines that tell your fortune as well as your
weight--and a
typewritten card came sliding out.

'You are the possessor of exceptional gifts,' I read,
'but owing to
excessive modesty you have never received your
reward. Those about
you underrate your abilities. You are too fond of
standing aside
and allowing others to take the credit for what you
have done
yourself . You are sensitive, affectionate, and
always loyal to
your friends. You are deeply attractive to the
opposite sex. Your
worst fault is generosity. Persevere, for you will
rise high!

'Weight: 14 stone 11 pounds.'

I'd put on four pounds in the last three days, I
noticed. Must
have been the booze.

4

I drove back to the George, dumped the car in the
garage, and had a
late cup of tea. As it was Sunday the bar wouldn't
open for
another hour or two. In the cool of the evening I
went out and
strolled up in the direction of the church.

I was just crossing the market-place when I noticed a
woman walking
a little way ahead of me. As soon as I set eyes on
her I had a
most peculiar feeling that I'd seen her somewhere
before. You know
that feeling. I couldn't see her face, of course,
and so far as
her back view went there was nothing I could identify
and yet I
could have sworn I knew her.

She went up the High Street and turned down one of
the side-streets
to the right, the one where Uncle Ezekiel used to
have his shop. I
followed. I don't quite know why--partly curiosity,
perhaps, and
partly as a kind of precaution. My first thought had
been that
here at last was one of the people I'd known in the
old days in
Lower Binfield, but almost at the same moment it
struck me that it
was just as likely that she was someone from West

Bletchley. In
that case I'd have to watch my step, because if she
found out I was
here she'd probably split to Hilda. So I followed
cautiously,
keeping at a safe distance and examining her back
view as well as I
could. There was nothing striking about it. She was
a tallish,
fattish woman, might have been forty or fifty, in a
rather shabby
black dress. She'd no hat on, as though she'd just
slipped out of
her house for a moment, and the way she walked gave
you the
impression that her shoes were down at heel. All in
all, she
looked a bit of a slut. And yet there was nothing to
identify,
only that vague something which I knew I'd seen
before. It was
something in her movements, perhaps. Presently she
got to a little
sweet and paper shop, the kind of little shop that
always keeps
open on a Sunday. The woman who kept it was standing
in the
doorway, doing something to a stand of postcards. My
woman stopped
to pass the time of day.

I stopped too, as soon as I could find a shop window
which I could
pretend to be looking into. It was a plumber's and
decorator's,
full of samples of wallpaper and bathroom fittings
and things. By
this time I wasn't fifteen yards away from the other
two. I could
hear their voices cooing away in one of those
meaningless
conversations that women have when they're just
passing the time of

day. 'Yes, that's jest about it. That's jest where it is. I said
to him myself, I said, "Well, what else do you expect?" I said. It
don't seem right, do it? But what's the use, you might as well
talk to a stone. It's a shame!' and so on and so forth. I was
getting warmer. Obviously my woman was a small shopkeeper's wife,
like the other. I was just wondering whether she mightn't be one
of the people I'd known in Lower Binfield after all, when she
turned almost towards me and I saw three-quarters of her face.
And Jesus Christ! It was Elsie!

Yes, it was Elsie. No chance of mistake. Elsie!
That fat hag!

It gave me such a shock--not, mind you, seeing Elsie, but seeing
what she'd grown to be like--that for a moment things swam in front
of my eyes. The brass taps and ballstops and porcelain sinks and
things seemed to fade away into the distance, so that I both saw
them and didn't see them. Also for a moment I was in a deadly funk
that she might recognize me. But she'd looked bang in my face and
hadn't made any sign. A moment more, and she turned and went on.
Again I followed. It was dangerous, she might spot I was following
her, and that might start her wondering who I was, but I just had
to have another look at her. The fact was that she exercised a
kind of horrible fascination on me. In a manner of speaking I'd

been watching her before, but I watched her with quite different eyes now.

It was horrible, and yet I got a kind of scientific kick out of studying her back view. It's frightening, the things that twenty-four years can do to a woman. Only twenty-four years, and the girl I'd known, with her milky-white skin and red mouth and kind of dull-gold hair, had turned into this great round-shouldered hag, shambling along on twisted heels. It made me feel downright glad I'm a man. No man ever goes to pieces quite so completely as that. I'm fat, I grant you. I'm the wrong shape, if you like. But at least I'm A shape. Elsie wasn't even particularly fat, she was merely shapeless. Ghastly things had happened to her hips. As for her waist, it had vanished. She was just a kind of soft lumpy cylinder, like a bag of meal.

I followed her a long way, out of the old town and through a lot of mean little streets I didn't know. Finally she turned in at the doorway of another shop. By the way she went in, it was obviously her own. I stopped for a moment outside the window. 'G. Cookson, Confectioner and Tobacconist.' So Elsie was Mrs Cookson. It was a mangy little shop, much like the other one where she'd stopped before, but smaller and a lot more flyblown. Didn't seem to sell anything except tobacco and the cheapest kinds of

sweets. I
wondered what I could buy that would take a minute or
two. Then I
saw a rack of cheap pipes in the window, and I went
in. I had to
brace my nerve up a little before I did it, because
there'd need to
be some hard lying if by any chance she recognized me.

She'd disappeared into the room behind the shop, but
she came back
as I tapped on the counter. So we were face to face.
Ah! no sign.
Didn't recognize me. Just looked at me the way they
do. You know
the way small shopkeepers look at their
customers--utter lack of
interest.

It was the first time I'd seen her full face, and
though I half
expected what I saw, it gave me almost as big a shock
as that first
moment when I'd recognized her. I suppose when you
look at the
face of someone young, even of a child, you ought to
be able to
foresee what it'll look like when it's old. It's all
a question of
the shape of the bones. But if it had ever occurred
to me, when I
was twenty and she was twenty-two, to wonder what
Elsie would look
like at forty-seven, it wouldn't have crossed my mind
that she
could ever look like THAT. The whole face had kind
of sagged, as
if it had somehow been drawn downwards. Do you know
that type of
middle-aged woman that has a face just like a
bulldog? Great
underhung jaw, mouth turned down at the corners, eyes
sunken, with

pouches underneath. Exactly like a bulldog. And yet it was the
same face, I'd have known it in a million. Her hair wasn't
completely grey, it was a kind of dirty colour, and there was much
less of it than there used to be. She didn't know me from Adam.
I was just a customer, a stranger, an uninteresting fat man. It's
queer what an inch or two of fat can do. I wondered whether I'd
changed even more than she had, or whether it was merely that she
wasn't expecting to see me, or whether--what was the likeliest of
all--she's simply forgotten my existence.

'Devening,' she said, in that listless way they have.

'I want a pipe,' I said flatly. 'A briar pipe.'

'A pipe. Now jest lemme see. I know we gossome pipes somewhere.
Now where did I--ah! 'Ere we are.'

She took a cardboard box full of pipes from somewhere under the
counter. How bad her accent had got! Or maybe I was just
imagining that, because my own standards had changed? But no, she
used to be so 'superior', all the girls at Lilywhite's were so
'superior', and she'd been a member of the vicar's Reading Circle.
I swear she never used to drop her aitches. It's queer how these
women go to pieces once they're married. I fiddled among the pipes
for a moment and pretended to look them over. Finally I said I'd
like one with an amber mouthpiece.

'Amber? I don't know as we got any--' she turned towards the back
of the shop and called: 'Ge-orge!'

So the other bloke's name was George too. A noise that sounded
something like 'Ur!' came from the back of the shop.

'Ge-orge! Where ju put that other box of pipes?'

George came in. He was a small stoutish chap, in shirtsleeves,
with a bald head and a big gingery-coloured soupstrainer moustache.
His jaw was working in a ruminative kind of way. Obviously he'd
been interrupted in the middle of his tea. The two of them started
poking round in search of the other box of pipes. It was about
five minutes before they ran it to earth behind some bottles of
sweets. It's wonderful, the amount of litter they manage to
accumulate in these frowsy little shops where the whole stock is
worth about fifty quid.

I watched old Elsie poking about among the litter and mumbling to
herself. Do you know the kind of shuffling, round-shouldered
movements of an old woman who's lost something? No use trying to
describe to you what I felt. A kind of cold, deadly desolate
feeling. You can't conceive it unless you've had it. All I can
say is, if there was a girl you used to care about twenty-five
years ago, go and have a look at her now. Then perhaps you'll know

what I felt.

But as a matter of fact, the thought that was chiefly in my mind
was how differently things turn out from what you expect. The
times I'd had with Elsie! The July nights under the chestnut
trees! Wouldn't you think it would leave some kind of after-effect
behind? Who'd have thought the time would ever come when there
would be just no feeling whatever between us? Here was I and here
was she, our bodies might be a yard apart, and we were just as much
strangers as though we'd never met. As for her, she didn't even
recognize me. If I told her who I was, very likely she wouldn't
remember. And if she did remember, what would she feel? Just
nothing. Probably wouldn't even be angry because I'd done the
dirty on her. It was as if the whole thing had never happened.

And on the other hand, who'd ever have foreseen that Elsie would
end up like this? She'd seemed the kind of girl who's bound to go
to the devil. I know there'd been at least one other man before I
had met her, and it's safe to bet there were others between me and
the second George. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that she'd had
a dozen altogether. I treated her badly, there's no question about
that, and many a time it had given me a bad half-hour. She'll end
up on the streets, I used to think, or stick her head in the gas

oven. And sometimes I felt I'd been a bit of a
bastard, but other
times I reflected (what was true enough) that if it
hadn't been me
it would have been somebody else. But you see the
way things
happen, the kind of dull pointless way. How many
women really end
up on the streets? A damn sight more end up at the
mangle. She
hadn't gone to the bad, or to the good either. Just
ended up like
everybody else, a fat old woman muddling about a
frowsy little
shop, with a gingery-moustached George to call her
own. Probably
got a string of kids as well. Mrs George Cookson.
Lived respected
and died lamented--and might die this side of the
bankruptcy-court,
if she was lucky.

They'd found the box of pipes. Of course there
weren't any with
amber mouthpieces among them.

'I don't know as we got any amber ones just at
present, sir. Not
amber. We gossome nice vulcanite ones.'

'I wanted an amber one,' I said.

'We gossome nice pipes 'ere.' She held one out.
'That's a nice
pipe, now. 'Alf a crown, that one is.'

I took it. Our fingers touched. No kick, no
reaction. The body
doesn't remember. And I suppose you think I bought
the pipe, just
for old sake's sake, to put half a crown in Elsie's
pocket. But
not a bit of it. I didn't want the thing. I don't

smoke a pipe.
I'd merely been making a pretext to come into the
shop. I turned
it over in my fingers and then put it down on the
counter.

'Doesn't matter, I'll leave it,' I said. 'Give me a
small
Players'.'

Had to buy something, after all that fuss. George
the second, or
maybe the third or fourth, routed out a packet of
Players', still
munching away beneath his moustache. I could see he
was sulky
because I'd dragged him away from his tea for
nothing. But it
seemed too damn silly to waste half a crown. I
cleared out and
that was the last I ever saw of Elsie.

I went back to the George and had dinner. Afterwards
I went out
with some vague idea of going to the pictures, if
they were open,
but instead I landed up in one of the big noisy pubs
in the new
part of the town. There I ran into a couple of chaps
from
Staffordshire who were travelling in hardware, and we
got talking
about the state of trade, and playing darts and
drinking Guinness.
By closing time they were both so boozed that I had
to take them
home in a taxi, and I was a bit under the weather
myself, and the
next morning I woke up with a worse head than ever.

5

But I had to see the pool at Binfield House.

I felt really bad that morning. The fact was that
ever since I
struck Lower Binfield I'd been drinking almost
continuously from
every opening time to every closing time. The
reason, though it
hadn't occurred to me till this minute, was that
really there'd
been nothing else to do. That was all my trip had
amounted to so
far--three days on the booze.

The same as the other morning, I crawled over to the
window and
watched the bowler hats and school caps hustling to
and fro. My
enemies, I thought. The conquering army that's
sacked the town and
covered the ruins with fag-ends and paper bags. I
wondered why I
cared. You think, I dare say, that if it had given
me a jolt to
find Lower Binfield swollen into a kind of Dagenham,
it was merely
because I don't like to see the earth getting fuller
and country
turning into town. But it isn't that at all. I
don't mind towns
growing, so long as they do grow and don't merely
spread like gravy
over a tablecloth. I know that people have got to
have somewhere
to live, and that if a factory isn't in one place
it'll be in
another. As for the picturesqueness, the sham
countrified stuff,
the oak panels and pewter dishes and copper
warming-pans and what-
not, it merely gives me the sick. Whatever we were

in the old
days, we weren't picturesque. Mother would never
have seen any
sense in the antiques that Wendy had filled our house
with. She
didn't like gateleg tables--she said they 'caught
your legs'. As
for pewter, she wouldn't have it in the house.
'Nasty greasy
stuff', she called it. And yet, say what you like,
there was
something that we had in those days and haven't got
now, something
that you probably can't have in a streamlined
milk-bar with the
radio playing. I'd come back to look for it, and I
hadn't found
it. And yet somehow I half believe in it even now,
when I hadn't
yet got my teeth in and my belly was crying out for
an aspirin and
a cup of tea.

And that started me thinking again about the pool at
Binfield
House. After seeing what they'd done to the town,
I'd had a
feeling you could only describe as fear about going
to see whether
the pool still existed. And yet it might, there was
no knowing.
The town was smothered under red brick, our house was
full of Wendy
and her junk, the Thames was poisoned with motor-oil
and paper
bags. But maybe the pool was still there, with the
great black
fish still cruising round it. Maybe, even, it was
still hidden in
the woods and from that day to this no one had
discovered it
existed. It was quite possible. It was a very thick
bit of wood,

full of brambles and rotten brushwood (the beech
trees gave way to
oaks round about there, which made the undergrowth
thicker), the
kind of place most people don't care to penetrate.
Queerer things
have happened.

I didn't start out till late afternoon. It must have
been about
half past four when I took the car out and drove on
to the Upper
Binfield road. Half-way up the hill the houses
thinned out and
stopped and the beech trees began. The road forks
about there and
I took the right-hand fork, meaning to make a detour
round and come
back to Binfield House on the road. But presently I
stopped to
have a look at the copse I was driving through. The
beech trees
seemed just the same. Lord, how they were the same!
I backed the
car on to a bit of grass beside the road, under a
fall of chalk,
and got out and walked. Just the same. The same
stillness, the
same great beds of rustling leaves that seem to go on
from year to
year without rotting. Not a creature stirring except
the small
birds in the tree-tops which you couldn't see. It
wasn't easy to
believe that that great noisy mess of a town was
barely three miles
away. I began to make my way through the little
copse, in the
direction of Binfield House. I could vaguely
remember how the
paths went. And Lord! Yes! The same chalk hollow
where the Black
Hand went and had catapult shots, and Sid Lovegrove

told us how
babies were born, the day I caught my first fish,
pretty near forty
years ago!

As the trees thinned out again you could see the
other road and the
wall of Binfield House. The old rotting wooden fence
was gone, of
course, and they'd put up a high brick wall with
spikes on top,
such as you'd expect to see round a loony-bin. I'd
puzzled for
some time about how to get into Binfield House until
finally it had
struck me that I'd only to tell them my wife was mad
and I was
looking for somewhere to put her. After that they'd
be quite ready
to show me round the grounds. In my new suit I
probably looked
prosperous enough to have a wife in a private asylum.
It wasn't
till I was actually at the gate that it occurred to
me to wonder
whether the pool was still inside the grounds.

The old grounds of Binfield House had covered fifty
acres, I
suppose, and the grounds of the loony-bin weren't
likely to be more
than five or ten. They wouldn't want a great pool of
water for the
loonies to drown themselves in. The lodge, where old
Hodges used
to live, was the same as ever, but the yellow brick
wall and the
huge iron gates were new. From the glimpse I got
through the gates
I wouldn't have known the place. Gravel walks,
flower-beds, lawns,
and a few aimless-looking types wandering
about--loonies, I

suppose. I strolled up the road to the right. The
pool--the big
pool, the one where I used to fish--was a couple of
hundred yards
behind the house. It might have been a hundred yards
before I got
to the corner of the wall. So the pool was outside
the grounds.
The trees seemed to have got much thinner. I could
hear children's
voices. And Gosh! there was the pool.

I stood for a moment, wondering what had happened to
it. Then I
saw what it was--all the trees were gone from round
its edge. It
looked all bare and different, in fact it looked
extraordinarily
like the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. Kids were
playing all
round the edge, sailing boats and paddling, and a few
rather older
kids were rushing about in those little canoes which
you work by
turning a handle. Over to the left, where the old
rotting boat-
house used to stand among the reeds, there was a sort
of pavilion
and a sweet kiosk, and a huge white notice saying
UPPER BINFIELD
MODEL YACHT CLUB.

I looked over to the right. It was all houses,
houses, houses.
One might as well have been in the outer suburbs.
All the woods
that used to grow beyond the pool, and grew so thick
that they were
like a kind of tropical jungle, had been shaved flat.
Only a few
clumps of trees still standing round the houses.
There were arty-
looking houses, another of those sham-Tudor colonies

like the one
I'd seen the first day at the top of Chamford Hill,
only more so.
What a fool I'd been to imagine that these woods were
still the
same! I saw how it was. There was just the one tiny
bit of copse,
half a dozen acres perhaps, that hadn't been cut
down, and it was
pure chance that I'd walked through it on my way
here. Upper
Binfield, which had been merely a name in the old
days, had grown
into a decent-sized town. In fact it was merely an
outlying chunk
of Lower Binfield.

I wandered up to the edge of the pool. The kids were
splashing
about and making the devil of a noise. There seemed
to be swarms
of them. The water looked kind of dead. No fish in
it now. There
was a chap standing watching the kids. He was an
oldish chap with
a bald head and a few tufts of white hair, and
pince-nez and very
sunburnt face. There was something vaguely queer
about his
appearance. He was wearing shorts and sandals and
one of those
celanese shirts open at the neck, I noticed, but what
really struck
me was the look in his eye. He had very blue eyes
that kind of
twinkled at you from behind his spectacles. I could
see that he
was one of those old men who've never grown up.
They're always
either health-food cranks or else they have something
to do with
the Boy Scouts--in either case they're great ones for
Nature and

the open air. He was looking at me as if he'd like
to speak.

'Upper Binfield's grown a great deal,' I said.

He twinkled at me.

'Grown! My dear sir, we never allow Upper Binfield
to grow. We
pride ourselves on being rather exceptional people up
here, you
know. Just a little colony of us all by ourselves.
No
interlopers--te-hee!'

'I mean compared with before the war,' I said. 'I
used to live
here as a boy.'

'Oh-ah. No doubt. That was before my time, of
course. But the
Upper Binfield Estate is something rather special in
the way of
building estates, you know. Quite a little world of
its own. All
designed by young Edward Watkin, the architect.
You've heard of
him, of course. We live in the midst of Nature up
here. No
connexion with the town down there'--he waved a hand
in the
direction of Lower Binfield--'the dark satanic
mills--te-hee!'

He had a benevolent old chuckle, and a way of
wrinkling his face
up, like a rabbit. Immediately, as though I'd asked
him, he began
telling me all about the Upper Binfield Estate and
young Edward
Watkin, the architect, who had such a feeling for the
Tudor, and
was such a wonderful fellow at finding genuine

Elizabethan beams in
old farmhouses and buying them at ridiculous prices.
And such an
interesting young fellow, quite the life and soul of
the nudist
parties. He repeated a number of times that they
were very
exceptional people in Upper Binfield, quite different
from Lower
Binfield, they were determined to enrich the
countryside instead of
defiling it (I'm using his own phrase), and there
weren't any
public houses on the estate.

'They talk of their Garden Cities. But we call Upper
Binfield the
Woodland City--te-hee! Nature!' He waved a hand at
what was left
of the trees. 'The primeval forest brooding round
us. Our young
people grow up amid surroundings of natural beauty.
We are nearly
all of us enlightened people, of course. Would you
credit that
three-quarters of us up here are vegetarians? The
local butchers
don't like us at all--te-hee! And some quite eminent
people live
here. Miss Helena Thurloe, the novelist--you've
heard of her, of
course. And Professor Woad, the psychic research
worker. Such a
poetic character! He goes wandering out into the
woods and the
family can't find him at mealtimes. He says he's
walking among the
fairies. Do you believe in fairies? I
admit--te-hee!--I am just a
wee bit sceptical. But his photographs are most
convincing.'

I began to wonder whether he was someone who'd

escaped from
Binfield House. But no, he was sane enough, after a
fashion. I
knew the type. Vegetarianism, simple life, poetry,
nature-worship,
roll in the dew before breakfast. I'd met a few of
them years ago
in Ealing. He began to show me round the estate.
There was
nothing left of the woods. It was all houses,
houses--and what
houses! Do you know these faked-up Tudor houses with
the curly
roofs and the buttresses that don't buttress
anything, and the
rock-gardens with concrete bird-baths and those red
plaster elves
you can buy at the florists'? You could see in your
mind's eye the
awful gang of food-cranks and spook-hunters and
simple-lifers with
1,000 pounds a year that lived there. Even the
pavements were
crazy. I didn't let him take me far. Some of the
houses made me
wish I'd got a hand-grenade in my pocket. I tried to
damp him down
by asking whether people didn't object to living so
near the
lunatic asylum, but it didn't have much effect.
Finally I stopped
and said:

'There used to be another pool, besides the big one.
It can't be
far from here.'

'Another pool? Oh, surely not. I don't think there
was ever
another pool.'

'They may have drained it off,' I said. 'It was a
pretty deep

pool. It would leave a big pit behind.'

For the first time he looked a bit uneasy. He rubbed
his nose.

'Oh-ah. Of course, you must understand our life up
here is in some
ways primitive. The simple life, you know. We
prefer it so. But
being so far from the town has its inconveniences, of
course. Some
of our sanitary arrangements are not altogether
satisfactory. The
dust-cart only calls once a month, I believe.'

'You mean they've turned the pool into a
rubbish-dump?'

'Well, there IS something in the nature of a--' he
shied at the
word rubbish-dump. 'We have to dispose of tins and
so forth, of
course. Over there, behind that clump of trees.'

We went across there. They'd left a few trees to hid
it. But yes,
there it was. It was my pool, all right. They'd
drained the water
off. It made a great round hole, like an enormous
well, twenty or
thirty feet deep. Already it was half full of tin
cans.

I stood looking at the tin cans.

'It's a pity they drained it,' I said. 'There used
to be some big
fish in that pool.'

'Fish? Oh, I never heard anything about that. Of
course we could
hardly have a pool of water here among the houses.
The mosquitoes,

you know. But it was before my time.'

'I suppose these houses have been built a good long
time?' I said.

'Oh--ten or fifteen years, I think.'

'I used to know this place before the war,' I said.
'It was all
woods then. There weren't any houses except Binfield
House. But
that little bit of copse over there hasn't changed.
I walked
through it on my way here.'

'Ah, that! That is sacrosanct. We have decided
never to build in
it. It is sacred to the young people. Nature, you
know.' He
twinkled at me, a kind of roguish look, as if he was
letting me
into a little secret: 'We call it the Pixy Glen.'

The Pixy Glen. I got rid of him, went back to the
car and drove
down to Lower Binfield. The Pixy Glen. And they'd
filled my pool
up with tin cans. God rot them and bust them! Say
what you like--
call it silly, childish, anything--but doesn't it
make you puke
sometimes to see what they're doing to England, with
their bird-
baths and their plaster gnomes, and their pixies and
tin cans,
where the beech woods used to be?

Sentimental, you say? Anti-social? Oughtn't to
prefer trees to
men? I say it depends what trees and what men. Not
that there's
anything one can do about it, except to wish them the
pox in their

guts.

One thing, I thought as I drove down the hill, I'm finished with
this notion of getting back into the past. What's the good of
trying to revisit the scenes of your boyhood? They don't exist.
Coming up for air! But there isn't any air. The dustbin that
we're in reaches up to the stratosphere. All the same, I didn't
particularly care. After all, I thought, I've still got three days
left. I'd have a bit of peace and quiet, and stop bothering about
what they'd done to Lower Binfield. As for my idea of going
fishing--that was off, of course. Fishing, indeed! At my age!
Really, Hilda was right.

I dumped the car in the garage of the George and walked into the
lounge. It was six o'clock. Somebody had switched on the wireless
and the news-broadcast was beginning. I came through the door just
in time to hear the last few words of an S.O.S. And it gave me a
bit of a jolt, I admit. For the words I heard were:

'--where his wife, Hilda Bowling, is seriously ill.'

The next instant the plummy voice went on: 'Here is another S.O.S.
Will Percival Chute, who was last heard of--', but I didn't wait to
hear any more. I just walked straight on. What made me feel
rather proud, when I thought it over afterwards, was that when I
heard those words come out of the loudspeaker I never

turned an
eyelash. Not even a pause in my step to let anyone
know that I was
George Bowling, whose wife Hilda Bowling was
seriously ill. The
landlord's wife was in the lounge, and she knew my
name was
Bowling, at any rate she'd seen it in the register.
Otherwise
there was nobody there except a couple of chaps who
were staying at
the George and who didn't know me from Adam. But I
kept my head.
Not a sign to anyone. I merely walked on into the
private bar,
which had just opened, and ordered my pint as usual.

I had to think it over. By the time I'd drunk about
half the pint
I began to get the bearings of the situation. In the
first place,
Hilda WASN'T ill, seriously or otherwise. I knew
that. She'd been
perfectly well when I came away, and it wasn't the
time of the year
for 'flu or anything of that kind. She was shamming.
Why?

Obviously it was just another of her dodges. I saw
how it was.
She'd got wind somehow--trust Hilda!--that I wasn't
really at
Birmingham, and this was just her way of getting me
home. Couldn't
bear to think of me any longer with that other woman.
Because of
course she'd take it for granted that I was with a
woman. Can't
imagine any other motive. And naturally she assumed
that I'd come
rushing home as soon as I heard she was ill.

But that's just where you've got it wrong, I thought

to myself as
I finished off the pint. I'm too cute to be caught
that way. I
remembered the dodges she'd pulled before, and the
extraordinary
trouble she'll take to catch me out. I've even known
her, when I'd
been on some journey she was suspicious about, check
it all up with
a Bradshaw and a road-map, just to see whether I was
telling the
truth about my movements. And then there was that
time when she
followed me all the way to Colchester and suddenly
burst in on me
at the Temperance Hotel. And that time,
unfortunately, she
happened to be right--at least, she wasn't, but there
were
circumstances which made it look as if she was. I
hadn't the
slightest belief that she was ill. In fact, I knew
she wasn't,
although I couldn't say exactly how.

I had another pint and things looked better. Of
course there was
a row coming when I got home, but there'd have been a
row anyway.
I've got three good days ahead of me, I thought.
Curiously enough,
now that the things I'd come to look for had turned
out not to
exist, the idea of having a bit of holiday appealed
to me all the
more. Being away from home--that was the great
thing. Peace
perfect peace with loved ones far away, as the hymn
puts it. And
suddenly I decided that I WOULD have a woman if I
felt like it. It
would serve Hilda right for being so dirty-minded,
and besides,

where's the sense of being suspected if it isn't true?

But as the second pint worked inside me, the thing began to amuse
me. I hadn't fallen for it, but it was damned ingenious all the
same. I wondered how she'd managed about the S.O.S. I've no idea
what the procedure is. Do you have to have a doctor's certificate,
or do you just send your name in? I felt pretty sure it was the
Wheeler woman who'd put her up to it. It seemed to me to have the
Wheeler touch.

But all the same, the cheek of it! The lengths that women will go!
Sometimes you can't help kind of admiring them.

6

After breakfast I strolled out into the market-place. It was a
lovely morning, kind of cool and still, with a pale yellow light
like white wine playing over everything. The fresh smell of the
morning was mixed up with the smell of my cigar. But there was a
zooming noise from behind the houses, and suddenly a fleet of great
black bombers came whizzing over. I looked up at them. They
seemed to be bang overhead.

The next moment I heard something. And at the same moment, if
you'd happened to be there, you'd have seen an interesting instance

of what I believe is called conditioned reflex.
Because what I'd
heard--there wasn't any question of mistake--was the
whistle of a
bomb. I hadn't heard such a thing for twenty years,
but I didn't
need to be told what it was. And without taking any
kind of
thought I did the right thing. I flung myself on my
face.

After all I'm glad you didn't see me. I don't
suppose I looked
dignified. I was flattened out on the pavement like
a rat when it
squeezes under a door. Nobody else had been half as
prompt. I'd
acted so quickly that in the split second while the
bomb was
whistling down I even had time to be afraid that it
was all a
mistake and I'd made a fool of myself for nothing.

But the next moment--ah!

BOOM-BRRRRR!

A noise like the Day of Judgment, and then a noise
like a ton of
coal falling on to a sheet of tin. That was falling
bricks. I
seemed to kind of melt into the pavement. 'It's
started,' I
thought. 'I knew it! Old Hitler didn't wait. Just
sent his
bombers across without warning.'

And yet here's a peculiar thing. Even in the echo of
that awful,
deafening crash, which seemed to freeze me up from
top to toe, I
had time to think that there's something grand about
the bursting

of a big projectile. What does it sound like? It's
hard to say,
because what you hear is mixed up with what you're
frightened of.
Mainly it gives you a vision of bursting metal. You
seem to see
great sheets of iron bursting open. But the peculiar
thing is the
feeling it gives you of being suddenly shoved up
against reality.
It's like being woken up by somebody shying a bucket
of water over
you. You're suddenly dragged out of your dreams by a
clang of
bursting metal, and it's terrible, and it's real.

There was a sound of screams and yells, and also of
car brakes
being suddenly jammed on. The second bomb which I
was waiting for
didn't fall. I raised my head a little. On every
side people
seemed to be rushing round and screaming. A car was
skidding
diagonally across the road, I could hear a woman's
voice shrieking,
'The Germans! The Germans!' To the right I had a
vague impression
of a man's round white face, rather like a wrinkled
paper bag,
looking down at me. He was kind of dithering:

'What is it? What's happened? What are they doing?'

'It's started,' I said. 'That was a bomb. Lie down.'

But still the second bomb didn't fall. Another
quarter of a minute
or so, and I raised my head again. Some of the
people were still
rushing about, others were standing as if they'd been
glued to the
ground. From somewhere behind the houses a huge haze

of dust had
risen up, and through it a black jet of smoke was
streaming
upwards. And then I saw an extraordinary sight. At
the other end
of the market-place the High Street rises a little.
And down this
little hill a herd of pigs was galloping, a sort of
huge flood of
pig-faces. The next moment, of course, I saw what it
was. It
wasn't pigs at all, it was only the schoolchildren in
their gas-
masks. I suppose they were bolting for some cellar
where they'd
been told to take cover in case of air-raids. At the
back of them
I could even make out a taller pig who was probably
Miss Todgers.
But I tell you for a moment they looked exactly like
a herd of
pigs.

I picked myself up and walked across the
market-place. People were
calming down already, and quite a little crowd had
begun to flock
towards the place where the bomb had dropped.

Oh, yes, you're right, of course. It wasn't a German
aeroplane
after all. The war hadn't broken out. It was only
an accident.
The planes were flying over to do a bit of bombing
practice--at any
rate they were carrying bombs--and somebody had put
his hands on
the lever by mistake. I expect he got a good ticking
off for it.
By the time that the postmaster had rung up London to
ask whether
there was a war on, and been told that there wasn't,
everyone had

grasped that it was an accident. But there'd been a
space of time,
something between a minute and five minutes, when
several thousand
people believed we were at war. A good job it didn't
last any
longer. Another quarter of an hour and we'd have
been lynching our
first spy.

I followed the crowd. The bomb had dropped in a
little side-street
off the High Street, the one where Uncle Ezekiel used
to have his
shop. It wasn't fifty yards from where the shop used
to be. As I
came round the corner I could hear voices murmuring
'Oo-oo!'--a
kind of awed noise, as if they were frightened and
getting a big
kick out of it. Luckily I got there a few minutes
before the
ambulance and the fire-engine, and in spite of the
fifty people or
so that had already collected I saw everything.

At first sight it looked as if the sky had been
raining bricks and
vegetables. There were cabbage leaves everywhere.
The bomb had
blown a greengrocer's shop out of existence. The
house to the
right of it had part of its roof blown off, and the
roof beams were
on fire, and all the houses round had been more or
less damaged and
had their windows smashed. But what everyone was
looking at was
the house on the left. Its wall, the one that joined
the
greengrocer's shop, was ripped off as neatly as if
someone had done
it with a knife. And what was extraordinary was that

in the
upstairs rooms nothing had been touched. It was just
like looking
into a doll's house. Chests-of-drawers, bedroom
chairs, faded
wallpaper, a bed not yet made, and a jerry under the
bed--all
exactly as it had been lived in, except that one wall
was gone.
But the lower rooms had caught the force of the
explosion. There
was a frightful smashed-up mess of bricks, plaster,
chair-legs,
bits of a varnished dresser, rags of tablecloth,
piles of broken
plates, and chunks of a scullery sink. A jar of
marmalade had
rolled across the floor, leaving a long streak of
marmalade behind,
and running side by side with it there was a ribbon
of blood. But
in among the broken crockery there was lying a leg.
Just a leg,
with the trouser still on it and a black boot with a
Wood-Milne
rubber heel. This was what people were oo-ing and
ah-ing at.

I had a good look at it and took it in. The blood
was beginning to
get mixed up with the marmalade. When the
fire-engine arrived I
cleared off to the George to pack my bag.

This finishes me with Lower Binfield, I thought. I'm
going home.
But as a matter of fact I didn't shake the dust off
my shoes and
leave immediately. One never does. When anything
like that
happens, people always stand about and discuss it for
hours. There
wasn't much work done in the old part of Lower

Binfield that day,
everyone was too busy talking about the bomb, what it
sounded like
and what they thought when they heard it. The
barmaid at the
George said it fair gave her the shudders. She said
she'd never
sleep sound in her bed again, and what did you
expect, it just
showed that with these here bombs you never knew. A
woman had
bitten off part of her tongue owing to the jump the
explosion gave
her. It turned out that whereas at our end of the
town everyone
had imagined it was a German air-raid, everyone at
the other end
had taken it for granted that it was an explosion at
the stocking
factory. Afterwards (I got this out of the
newspaper) the Air
Ministry sent a chap to inspect the damage, and
issued a report
saying that the effects of the bomb were
'disappointing'. As a
matter of fact it only killed three people, the
greengrocer,
Perrott his name was, and an old couple who lived
next door. The
woman wasn't much smashed about, and they identified
the old man by
his boots, but they never found a trace of Perrott.
Not even a
trouser-button to read the burial service over.

In the afternoon I paid my bill and hooked it. I
didn't have much
more than three quid left after I'd paid the bill.
They know how
to cut it out of you these dolled-up country hotels,
and what with
drinks and other odds and ends I'd been shying money
about pretty

freely. I left my new rod and the rest of the
fishing tackle in my
bedroom. Let 'em keep it. No use to me. It was
merely a quid
that I'd chucked down the drain to teach myself a
lesson. And I'd
learnt the lesson all right. Fat men of forty-five
can't go
fishing. That kind of thing doesn't happen any
longer, it's just
a dream, there'll be no more fishing this side of the
grave.

It's funny how things sink into you by degrees. What
had I really
felt when the bomb exploded? At the actual moment,
of course, it
scared the wits out of me, and when I saw the
smashed-up house and
the old man's leg I'd had the kind of mild kick that
you get from
seeing a street-accident. Disgusting, of course.
Quite enough to
make me fed-up with this so-called holiday. But it
hadn't really
made much impression.

But as I got clear of the outskirts of Lower Binfield
and turned
the car eastward, it all came back to me. You know
how it is when
you're in a car alone. There's something either in
the hedges
flying past you, or in the throb of the engine, that
gets your
thoughts running in a certain rhythm. You have the
same feeling
sometimes when you're in the train. It's a feeling
of being able
to see things in better perspective than usual. All
kinds of
things that I'd been doubtful about I felt certain
about now. To

begin with, I'd come to Lower Binfield with a
question in my mind.
What's ahead of us? Is the game really up? Can we
get back to the
life we used to live, or is it gone for ever? Well,
I'd had my
answer. The old life's finished, and to go back to
Lower Binfield,
you can't put Jonah back into the whale. I KNEW,
though I don't
expect you to follow my train of thought. And it was
a queer thing
I'd done coming here. All those years Lower Binfield
had been
tucked away somewhere or other in my mind, a sort of
quiet corner
that I could step back into when I felt like it, and
finally I'd
stepped back into it and found that it didn't exist.
I'd chucked a
pineapple into my dreams, and lest there should be
any mistake the
Royal Air Force had followed up with five hundred
pounds of T.N.T.

War is coming. 1941, they say. And there'll be
plenty of broken
crockery, and little houses ripped open like
packing-cases, and the
guts of the chartered accountant's clerk plastered
over the piano
that he's buying on the never-never. But what does
that kind of
thing matter, anyway? I'll tell you what my stay in
Lower Binfield
had taught me, and it was this. IT'S ALL GOING TO
HAPPEN. All the
things you've got at the back of your mind, the
things you're
terrified of, the things that you tell yourself are
just a
nightmare or only happen in foreign countries. The
bombs, the

food-queues, the rubber truncheons, the barbed wire,
the coloured
shirts, the slogans, the enormous faces, the
machine-guns squirting
out of bedroom windows. It's all going to happen. I
know it--at
any rate, I knew it then. There's no escape. Fight
against it if
you like, or look the other way and pretend not to
notice, or grab
your spanner and rush out to do a bit of
face-smashing along with
the others. But there's no way out. It's just
something that's
got to happen.

I trod on the gas, and the old car whizzed up and
down the little
hills, and the cows and elm trees and fields of wheat
rushed past
till the engine was pretty nearly red-hot. I felt in
much the same
mood as I'd felt that day in January when I was
coming down the
Strand, the day I got my new false teeth. It was as
though the
power of prophecy had been given me. It seemed to me
that I could
see the whole of England, and all the people in it,
and all the
things that'll happen to all of them. Sometimes, of
course, even
then, I had a doubt or two. The world is very large,
that's a
thing you notice when you're driving about in a car,
and in a way
it's reassuring. Think of the enormous stretches of
land you pass
over when you cross a corner of a single English
county. It's like
Siberia. And the fields and beech spinneys and
farmhouses and
churches, and the villages with their little grocers'

shops and the
parish hall and the ducks walking across the green.
Surely it's
too big to be changed? Bound to remain more or less
the same. And
presently I struck into outer London and followed the
Uxbridge Road
as far as Southall. Miles and miles of ugly houses,
with people
living dull decent lives inside them. And beyond it
London
stretching on and on, streets, squares, back-alleys,
tenements,
blocks of flats, pubs, fried-fish shops,
picture-houses, on and on
for twenty miles, and all the eight million people
with their
little private lives which they don't want to have
altered. The
bombs aren't made that could smash it out of
existence. And the
chaos of it! The privateness of all those lives!
John Smith
cutting out the football coupons, Bill Williams
swapping stories in
the barber's. Mrs Jones coming home with the supper
beer. Eight
million of them! Surely they'll manage somehow,
bombs or no bombs,
to keep on with the life that they've been used to?

Illusion! Baloney! It doesn't matter how many of
them there are,
they're all for it. The bad times are coming, and
the streamlined
men are coming too. What's coming afterwards I don't
know, it
hardly even interests me. I only know that if
there's anything you
care a curse about, better say good-bye to it now,
because
everything you've ever known is going down, down,
into the muck,

with the machine-guns rattling all the time.

But when I got back to the suburb my mood suddenly
changed.

It suddenly struck me--and it hadn't even crossed my
mind till that
moment--that Hilda might really be ill after all.

That's the effect of environment, you see. In Lower
Binfield I'd
taken it absolutely for granted that she wasn't ill
and was merely
shamming in order to get me home. It had seemed
natural at the
time, I don't know why. But as I drove into West
Bletchley and the
Hesperides Estate closed round me like a kind of
red-brick prison,
which is what it is, the ordinary habits of thought
came back. I
had this kind of Monday morning feeling when
everything seems bleak
and sensible. I saw what bloody rot it was, this
business that I'd
wasted the last five days on. Sneaking off to Lower
Binfield to
try and recover the past, and then, in the car coming
home,
thinking a lot of prophetic baloney about the future.
The future!
What's the future got to do with chaps like you and
me? Holding
down our jobs--that's our future. As for Hilda, even
when the
bombs are dropping she'll be still thinking about the
price of
butter.

And suddenly I saw what a fool I'd been to think
she'd do a thing
like that. Of course the S.O.S. wasn't a fake! As
though she'd

have the imagination! It was just the plain cold truth. She
wasn't shamming at all, she was really ill. And Gosh! at this
moment she might be lying somewhere in ghastly pain, or even dead,
for all I knew. The thought sent a most horrible pang of fright
through me, a sort of dreadful cold feeling in my guts. I whizzed
down Ellesmere Road at nearly forty miles an hour, and instead of
taking the car to the lock-up garage as usual I stopped outside the
house and jumped out.

So I'm fond of Hilda after all, you say! I don't know exactly what
you mean by fond. Are you fond of your own face? Probably not,
but you can't imagine yourself without it. It's part of you.
Well, that's how I felt about Hilda. When things are going well I
can't stick the sight of her, but the thought that she might be
dead or even in pain sent the shivers through me.

I fumbled with the key, got the door open, and the familiar smell
of old mackintoshes hit me.

'Hilda!' I yelled. 'Hilda!'

No answer. For a moment I was yelling 'Hilda! Hilda!' into utter
silence, and some cold sweat started out on my backbone. Maybe
they carted her away to hospital already--maybe there was a corpse
lying upstairs in the empty house.

I started to dash up the stairs, but at the same

moment the two
kids, in their pyjamas, came out of their rooms on
either side of
the landing. It was eight or nine o'clock, I
suppose--at any rate
the light was just beginning to fail. Lorna hung
over the
banisters.

'Oo, Daddy! Oo, it's Daddy! Why have you come back
today? Mummy
said you weren't coming till Friday.'

'Where's your mother?' I said.

'Mummy's out. She went out with Mrs Wheeler. Why
have you come
home today, Daddy?'

'Then your mother hasn't been ill?'

'No. Who said she'd been ill? Daddy! Have you been
in Birmingham?'

'Yes. Get back to bed, now. You'll be catching
cold.'

'But where's our presents, Daddy?'

'What presents?'

'The presents you've bought us from Birmingham.'

'You'll see them in the morning,' I said.

'Oo, Daddy! Can't we see them tonight?'

'No. Dry up. Get back to bed or I'll wallop the
pair of you.'

So she wasn't ill after all. She HAD been shamming.
And really I
hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. I turned

back to the
front door, which I'd left open, and there, as large
as life, was
Hilda coming up the garden path.

I looked at her as she came towards me in the last of
the evening
light. It was queer to think that less than three
minutes earlier
I'd been in the devil of a stew, with actual cold
sweat on my
backbone, at the thought that she might be dead.
Well, she wasn't
dead, she was just as usual. Old Hilda with her thin
shoulders and
her anxious face, and the gas bill and the
school-fees, and the
mackintoshy smell and the office on Monday--all the
bedrock facts
that you invariably come back to, the eternal
verities as old
Porteous calls them. I could see that Hilda wasn't
in too good a
temper. She darted me a little quick look, like she
does sometimes
when she's got something on her mind, the kind of
look some little
thin animal, a weasel for instance, might give you.
She didn't
seem surprised to see me back, however.

'Oh, so you're back already, are you?' she said.

It seemed pretty obvious that I was back, and I
didn't answer. She
didn't make any move to kiss me.

'There's nothing for your supper,' she went on
promptly. That's
Hilda all over. Always manages to say something
depressing the
instant you set foot inside the house. 'I wasn't
expecting you.

You'll just have to have bread and cheese--but I
don't think we've
got any cheese.'

I followed her indoors, into the smell of
mackintoshes. We went
into the sitting-room. I shut the door and switched
on the light.
I meant to get my say in first, and I knew it would
make things
better if I took a strong line from the start.

'Now', I said, 'what the bloody hell do you mean by
playing that
trick on me?'

She'd just laid her bag down on top of the radio, and
for a moment
she looked genuinely surprised.

'What trick? What do you mean?'

'Sending out that S.O.S.!'

'What S.O.S.? What are you TALKING about, George?'

'Are you trying to tell me you didn't get them to
send out an
S.O.S. saying you were seriously ill?'

'Of course I didn't! How could I? I wasn't ill.
What would I do
a thing like that for?'

I began to explain, but almost before I began I saw
what had
happened. It was all a mistake. I'd only heard the
last few words
of the S.O.S. and obviously it was some other Hilda
Bowling. I
suppose there'd be scores of Hilda Bowlings if you
looked the name
up in the directory. It just was the kind of dull

stupid mistake
that's always happening. Hilda hadn't even showed
that little bit
of imagination I'd credited her with. The sole
interest in the
whole affair had been the five minutes or so when I
thought she was
dead, and found that I cared after all. But that was
over and done
with. While I explained she was watching me, and I
could see in
her eye that there was trouble of some kind coming.
And then she
began questioning me in what I call her third-degree
voice, which
isn't, as you might expect, angry and nagging, but
quiet and kind
of watchful.

'So you heard this S.O.S. in the hotel at Birmingham?'

'Yes. Last night, on the National Broadcast.'

'When did you leave Birmingham, then?'

'This morning, of course.' (I'd planned out the
journey in my
mind, just in case there should be any need to lie my
way out of
it. Left at ten, lunch at Coventry, tea at
Bedford--I'd got it all
mapped out.)

'So you thought last night I was seriously ill, and
you didn't even
leave till this morning?'

'But I tell you I didn't think you were ill. Haven't
I explained?
I thought it was just another of your tricks. It
sounded a damn
sight more likely.'

'Then I'm rather surprised you left at all!' she said with so much
vinegar in her voice that I knew there was something more coming.
But she went on more quietly: 'So you left this morning, did you?'

'Yes. I left about ten. I had lunch at Coventry--'

'Then how do you account for THIS?' she suddenly shot out at me,
and in the same instant she ripped her bag open, took out a piece
of paper, and held it out as if it had been a forged cheque, or
something.

I felt as if someone had hit me a sock in the wind. I might have
known it! She'd caught me after all. And there was the evidence,
the dossier of the case. I didn't even know what it was, except
that it was something that proved I'd been off with a woman. All
the stuffing went out of me. A moment earlier I'd been kind of
bullying her, making out to be angry because I'd been dragged back
from Birmingham for nothing, and now she'd suddenly turned the
tables on me. You don't have to tell me what I look like at that
moment. I know. Guilt written all over me in big letters--I know.
And I wasn't even guilty! But it's a matter of habit. I'm used to
being in the wrong. For a hundred quid I couldn't have kept the
guilt out of my voice as I answered:

'What do you mean? What's that thing you've got there?'

'You read it and you'll see what it is.'

I took it. It was a letter from what seemed to be a firm of
solicitors, and it was addressed from the same street as
Rowbottom's Hotel, I noticed.

'Dear Madam,' I read, 'With reference to your letter of the 18th
inst., we think there must be some mistake. Rowbottom's Hotel was
closed down two years ago and has been converted into a block of
offices. No one answering the description of your husband has been
here. Possibly--'

I didn't read any further. Of course I saw it all in a flash. I'd
been a little bit too clever and put my foot in it. There was just
one faint ray of hope--young Saunders might have forgotten to post
the letter I'd addressed from Rowbottom's, in which case it was
just possible I could brazen it out. But Hilda soon put the lid on
that idea.

'Well, George, you see what the letter says? The day you left here
I wrote to Rowbottom's Hotel--oh, just a little note, asking them
whether you'd arrived there. And you see the answer I got! There
isn't even any such place as Rowbottom's Hotel. And the same day,
the very same post, I got your letter saying you were at the hotel.
You got someone to post it for you, I suppose. THAT was your

business in Birmingham!'

'But look here, Hilda! You've got all this wrong.
It isn't what
you think at all. You don't understand.'

'Oh, yes, I do, George. I understand PERFECTLY.'

'But look here, Hilda--'

Wasn't any use, of course. It was a fair cop. I
couldn't even
meet her eye. I turned and tried to make for the
door.

'I'll have to take the car round to the garage,' I
said.

'Oh, no George! You don't get out of it like that.
You'll stay
here and listen to what I've got to say, please.'

'But, damn it! I've got to switch the lights on,
haven't I? It's
past lighting-up time. You don't want us to get
fined?'

At that she let me go, and I went out and switched
the car lights
on, but when I came back she was still standing there
like a figure
of doom, with the two letters, mine and the
solicitor's on the
table in front of her. I'd got a little of my nerve
back, and I
had another try:

'Listen, Hilda. You've got hold of the wrong end of
the stick
about this business. I can explain the whole thing.'

'I'm sure YOU could explain anything, George. The
question is

whether I'd believe you.'

'But you're just jumping to conclusions! What made
you write to
these hotel people, anyway?'

'It was Mrs Wheeler's idea. And a very good idea
too, as it turned
out.'

'Oh, Mrs Wheeler, was it? So you don't mind letting
that blasted
woman into our private affairs?'

'She didn't need any letting in. It was she who
warned me what you
were up to this week. Something seemed to tell her,
she said. And
she was right, you see. She knows all about you,
George. She used
to have a husband JUST like you.'

'But, Hilda--'

I looked at her. Her face had gone a kind of white
under the
surface, the way it does when she thinks of me with
another woman.
A woman. If only it had been true!

And Gosh! what I could see ahead of me! You know
what it's like.
The weeks on end of ghastly nagging and sulking, and
the catty
remarks after you think peace has been signed, and
the meals always
late, and the kids wanting to know what it's all
about. But what
really got me down was the kind of mental squalor,
the kind of
mental atmosphere in which the real reason why I'd
gone to Lower
Binfield wouldn't even be conceivable. That was what

chiefly
struck me at the moment. If I spent a week
explaining to Hilda WHY
I'd been to Lower Binfield, she'd never understand.
And who WOULD
understand, here in Ellesmere Road? Gosh! did I even
understand
myself? The whole thing seemed to be fading out of
my mind. Why
had I gone to Lower Binfield? HAD I gone there? In
this
atmosphere it just seemed meaningless. Nothing's
real in Ellesmere
Road except gas bills, school-fees, boiled cabbage,
and the office
on Monday.

One more try:

'But look here, Hilda! I know what you think. But
you're
absolutely wrong. I swear to you you're wrong.'

'Oh, no, George. If I was wrong why did you have to
tell all those
lies?'

No getting away from that, of course.

I took a pace or two up and down. The smell of old
mackintoshes
was very strong. Why had I run away like that? Why
had I bothered
about the future and the past, seeing that the future
and the past
don't matter? Whatever motives I might have had, I
could hardly
remember them now. The old life in Lower Binfield,
the war and the
after-war, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, machine-guns,
food-queues, rubber
truncheons--it was fading out, all fading out.
Nothing remained

except a vulgar low-down row in a smell of old
mackintoshes.

One last try:

'Hilda! Just listen to me a minute. Look here, you
don't know
where I've been all this week, do you?'

'I don't want to know where you've been. I know WHAT
you've been
doing. That's quite enough for me.'

'But dash it--'

Quite useless, of course. She'd found me guilty and
now she was
going to tell me what she thought of me. That might
take a couple
of hours. And after that there was further trouble
looming up,
because presently it would occur to her to wonder
where I'd got the
money for this trip, and then she'd discover that I'd
been holding
out on her about the seventeen quid. Really there
was no reason
why this row shouldn't go on till three in the
morning. No use
playing injured innocence any longer. All I wanted
was the line of
least resistance. And in my mind I ran over the
three possibilities,
which were:

A. To tell her what I'd really been doing and
somehow make her
believe me.

B. To pull the old gag about losing my memory.

C. To let her go on thinking it was a woman, and
take my medicine.

But, damn it! I knew which it would have to be.

THE END