

THE LOST PEACE

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A Personal Impression

by

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To
O. B.
the best of companions in travel as in life

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A book dealing with international affairs written in the midst of the present turmoil is like a stick thrown into a swirling flood. The swift torrent of events is relentlessly sweeping away old landmarks and familiar guides to thought. In a few months the judgements of to-day may seem incredibly wrong in the light of the facts of to-morrow. The historical limitations of this sketch will be seen from the date of its completion. It should be added that no unpublished official documents or other confidential information have been utilized in its composition.

9th August 1941

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Chapter 1

TRAVEL AND POLITICS

All places that the eye of heaven visits
Are to the wise man ports and happy havens,
Teach thy necessity to reason thus.

SHAKESPEARE

It seems odd to write of travel in 1940. Here we are tied up in our tight little island, living sparsely and strenuously in the dimness of a blacked-out world. Europe has become the dark continent brooding in the depths of the Nazi night. As for Asia and the Americas and South Africa, they belong to a distant sunlit planet as far away as Mars. When the mark of the blond beast is besmirching France and Luxemburg, Belgium and Norway, Prague and Cracow and Amsterdam, and many other fair cities, even Athens, the queen and mother of them all, it is good to remember them as they were before the nightmare of Germanity descended upon them. For the time being the German's dream of domination, which has lurked in his murky mind since Fichte, has been realized. More than a century ago Hegel, the philosopher of the Prussian system, foretold what we had to expect if Germandom ever achieved its perennial ambition. 'World history is not the soil of happiness. The periods of happiness are its blank pages.' For the German does not believe in happiness. As one of his poets said, he is 'spoiled right through to the marrow for the happiness that is bestowed by the holy Graces'.¹ Since 1848 he has hardly even hoped for it. Life has just been a preparation for one war after another, to which men sacrificed their short

¹ Hölderlin, *Hyperion*.

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span of worldly existence and women their natural longing for a peaceful family hearth. The German race are now writing the blackest page of their sombre ill-fated history, a series of unrelieved tragedies from the fratricidal massacres of the Thirty Years War, the stark struggle for power under Frederick and the collapse of Jena to the *débâcle* of William's Empire followed by the inflation, unemployment, and ruin of the early twenties and early thirties. And now Hitler, whom they fondly believed their saviour, is driving them madly towards some yet deeper abyss, offering them the grim consolation that if they plunge into it they will drag all Europe with them. Last summer they marched fanatically forward to the Siegfried and Walküre motifs. It looks as if the first shades of *Götterdämmerung* were now beginning to fall.

Now is the time then, while we are still under the spell of the baleful star of Teutonism, to recall what the real world was like and to wonder what it may again become. It was a good world for all its folly, misery, and evil, and will be so again—perhaps an even better world, cleansed of some of its uglier vices and meannesses.

As one travelled about it, one could not help realizing how much was being done to better it and how strong was the general desire for peace and orderly progress. And yet all the endeavours to organize it for peace and against war failed. All the hopes that civilization would now go steadily forward without another relapse into barbarism were frustrated. After a brief interlude of twenty years all these hopes and endeavours turned out to be nothing but the prelude to war on a vaster and more violent scale than had yet been seen. During that uneasy time of truce, however much one thrust it into the background of one's thoughts, the idea that the European settlement might again break down and another world conflagration ensue would crop up occasionally in the press or in

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conversation. The more one saw of Europe and of those who ruled it, the more one became aware of this latent anxiety. The hatreds, jealousies, and ambitions which had torn the Continent for centuries were only damped down; they had not been extinguished. The prides of national egotism were stronger than the desire for security bought at the price of some sacrifice of national *amour-propre*. Political aims nearly always took precedence of economic well-being, and countries which pursued an enlightened social policy did so at the risk of being outdistanced in the race for power. These things were always intruding themselves on the traveller, the more he journeyed about the world. Indeed, during those twenty years more even than in the past travel was the beginning of political education.

During that time I was lucky enough to see a good deal of four out of the five continents, not just as an ordinary globe-trotter, but as a traveller with a purpose. My work in Geneva was an attempt to make life a little happier and easier for the common man and woman everywhere. In twenty years the International Labour Office became something of a talisman. It was a beacon to which millions looked in the hope that, is not for them, at least for their children the struggle for existence might be less harsh, the daily toil lighter, and the reward in the shape of comfort and happiness less niggardly than providence had so far vouchsafed to the majority of mankind. In its short life the I.L.O. was anything but a failure. It may not have done much, though it did something, to improve the lot of the workers of western Europe and the United States, who were able to fight for themselves. Its slow conquest was beginning to move eastwards rather than westwards. To understand its mission and its power one had to witness the dawn of social progress in the Balkans, the first blush of reform in Egypt, the pathetic enthusiasm for the new message in India. There one was aware of a world in travail. After the torpor of centuries Asia and Africa were stirring. The example of Turkish emancipation from the deadening traditions of the past

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was spreading throughout the Mohammedan world. The growth of nationalism in India was not merely the growth of national consciousness, a fragile plant in that vast medley of races and languages, but also the expression of a dim desire for a better and freer life, an uprising against the old fatalism, a craving for some new and milder dispensation. That was a creed which united Bengali and Tamil, Mahratta and Punjabi, in a common though obscure impulse. The same spirit was moving in the dusty ginning mills and dingy workshops of the Nile Delta. It was moving in the tin mines and factories of Malaya among the quick-witted Chinese, so different from the popular idea of the long-suffering apathetic Oriental, as they have shown in their valiant, stubborn struggle against Japan. And nearer home one had seen in fifteen years the first fruits of modern social ideas gathered in eastern Europe, better health, better food, a little better housing. There was a touch both of romance and of pathos in the gradual coming of light into dark places, which made travel on the business of the I.L.O. passionately interesting, however strenuous or wearisome it might be at times. One felt that progress was not an illusion when one saw it actually happening. To visit Bucharest or Belgrade or Warsaw after an interval of four or five years and to find that the seedling was already budding before one's eyes was an almost thrilling experience. And now the flowers have been ruthlessly destroyed and trampled in the dust under the German jackboot. With the aid of his Quislings and his Iron Guards Hitler is making the effort of a madman to throw back the masses of Europe into a serfdom more brutal and hopeless than they knew in the Middle Ages. When the time comes to overthrow this new tyranny, however, the roots of freedom and democracy, which had begun to blossom in strange places, will still be there. To revive them is the purpose and justification of the crusade which we are waging against the black ensign of the Swastika.

To travel with a political and social purpose in the pre-war

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world was then an education in the trends of the present and the promise of the future. But it was more than that. Contact with the political leaders of country after country was a unique education in human nature and methods of government. It was not always an exhilarating experience. The frailties and futilities, the egotism and the falsity of man as a political animal were usually more prominent than the virtues which Plato prescribes for his philosophic rulers. The latter are unhappily still rare in the twentieth century. The crooks and the self-seekers are at least as likely to get to the top as the straightforward and the single-minded. As Thucydides drily remarked a long time ago, 'the dishonest more easily gain credit for cleverness than the simple for goodness'. This is still more or less true of all political systems, but one can at least say that the stronger the democratic check, the harder the rise to power of the dishonest becomes. The fundamental vice of dictatorship is its irresponsibility. Unscrupulous yes-men attain high positions in which they are free to prey upon their victims, because no-one dare criticize or expose them. Bribery, peculation, and political blackmail flourish luxuriantly in every country where press and public opinion are stifled by authority. Not that these vile things are unknown in democracies. Far from it, but they lead a much more furtive underground existence. To realize the true value of freedom, one must, as a sad Italian once said to me, have breathed the fetid air of dictatorship. By moving indiscriminately in political circles of all shades from the tense, brooding atmosphere of Nazi Berlin to the lively, turbulent hurly-burly of Washington, through every intermediate gradation—semi-dictatorship, veiled dictatorship, sham democracy, rotten tottering democracy, new tentative democracy, old solid democracy—one quickly smells which way the wind is blowing. Politicians and political systems fall readily into easily recognized classes, and their outward symptoms become as quickly identifiable as the signs of measles or typhoid to a general practitioner.

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But as a rule the most interesting and characteristic products of a country are not its politicians. Those who imagine that they can know a people, its foibles and passions, strengths and weaknesses, by mingling only with its 'ruling classes' make a profound mistake—the sort of mistake that Ribbentrop apparently made in London and that many better diplomats have made before him. In the old days when the masses did not count, a diplomat may have been able to discover all that he needed to know by mixing with the aristocracy with an occasional condescending nod to the wealthy bankers and merchants. I doubt even that, for when it comes to matters of peace and war it is the temper and fibre of the common people that has always counted in the end. A shrewd remark of Monsieur Titulescu, then Rumanian Minister in London, a man who concealed considerable political acumen under extravagant outward appearances, has always stuck in my memory. He said half jestingly that what impressed him most in England was the fact that if you drove through the country at night, most of the lights were out by ten o'clock. He detected in that the sign of a sound and strong people, and he was right. However that may be, no modern diplomat is much use who sticks to political dinner-tables and diplomatic bridge-parties. To think that one can know anything about the United States by revolving in the Washington merry-go-round, or that the Parisian is the representative Frenchman, are of course elementary errors. But I have been astonished in my wanderings to find how many diplomats of all nationalities, including our own, were quite content to gather their information and form their personal judgement from contact with a small, political coterie in the capital. Many of them rarely travelled in the provinces and made no attempt to learn the language, if they did not know it already. As an eminent British Minister in a Balkan state once said to me, 'We get other people to talk the language for us.' No doubt some of them were lazy, and to acquire a new language in

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middle life is something of a grind, but inertia always seemed to me a far more respectable excuse than incomprehension. So many intelligent men did not realize that the world had changed since their youth, that the streams of national feeling had broadened and deepened, and that to know anything about a country one had to rub shoulders with all sorts and conditions of people. And they also did not realize that a wide and motley acquaintance with men and women of every kind is what makes life really fascinating. When the Habsburg empire had been reduced to a feeble but very democratic fragment, it was pathetic to find diplomats in Vienna clinging desperately to the decayed remnants of the Austrian aristocracy and only meeting the plebeian holders of political power in their offices or on formal occasions which could not decently be avoided. In Czechoslovakia it was smarter and more amusing to spend the week-end in the castle of a Schwarzenberg or a Hohenlohe, who were hankering in their hearts to restore the old feudal overlordship of the Germans over the Czechs, than to hobnob with the sober, middle-class statesmen who were building up the most democratic state in central Europe.

In other places where wealth without birth is a power in the land, its views count far more heavily than they deserve with diplomats who hold aloof from the real sources of public opinion. I spent a holiday motoring and fishing in New England a few months before the Presidential election of 1936, which Mr. Roosevelt won by the largest majority in American history. After talking to the ordinary men and women that one met in drug-stores and filling stations, in hotels and the backwoods, I had little doubt which way the most conservative part of the United States was going to vote—as it did. But when I got back to Washington, I found diplomatic circles wagging their heads sagely and cheerfully and saying that Mr. Landon was going to win. They had talked to the bankers and industrialists, who hated the President, and then had read the newspapers which they controlled,