

WHEN THE GOING
WAS GOOD

by
EVELYN WAUGH

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY • BOSTON • TORONTO

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To

BRYAN MOYNE, DIANA MOSLEY,
DIANA COOPER, PERRY AND
KITTY BROWNLOW;

*these were the friends in whose houses I wrote
the following pages, and to whom I dedicated
the books from which they are taken; to them,
and to the memory of*

HAZEL LAVERY

*I inscribe anew these surviving fragments,
with undiminished gratitude*

Preface

THE following pages comprise all that I wish to preserve of the four travel books I wrote between the years 1929 and 1935: *Labels*, *Remote People*, *Ninety-two Days* and (a title not of my own choosing) *Waugh in Abyssinia*. These books have now been out of print for some time and will not be reissued. The first three were published by Messrs Duckworth & Co., the fourth by Longmans, Green & Co. There was a fifth book, *Robbery under Law*, about Mexico, which I am content to leave in oblivion, for it dealt little with travel and much with political questions. 'To have travelled a lot,' I wrote in the Introduction to that book, 'to have spent, as I have done, the first twelve years of adult life on the move, is to this extent a disadvantage. At the age of thirty-five one needs to go to the moon, or some such place, to recapture the excitement with which one first landed at Calais. For many people Mexico has, in the past, had this lunar character. Lunar it still remains, but in no poetic sense. It is a waste land, part of a dead or, at any rate, a dying planet. Politics, everywhere destructive, have here dried up the place, frozen it, cracked it, and powdered it to dust. In the sixteenth century human life was disordered and talent stultified by the obsession of theology; today we are plague-stricken by politics. This is a political book.' So let it lie in its own dust. Here I seek the moon landscape.

From 1928 until 1937 I had no fixed home and no possessions which would not conveniently go on a porter's barrow. I travelled continuously, in England and abroad. These four books, here in fragments reprinted, were the record of certain journeys, chosen for no better reason than that I needed money at the time of their completion; they were pedestrian, day-to-day accounts of things seen and people met, interspersed with commonplace information and some rather callow comments. In cutting them to their present shape, I have sought to leave a purely personal narrative in the hope that there still lingers round it some trace of vernal scent.

Each book, I found on re-reading, had a distinct and slightly

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grimmer air, as, year by year, the shades of the prison-house closed. In *Labels* I looked only for pleasure. Not uncritically I examined the credentials of its varied sources and watched the loss and gain of other seekers. Baroque, the luxurious and surprising; cookery, wine, eccentric individuals, grottoes by day, the haunts of the underworld at night; these things I, like a thousand others, sought in the Mediterranean.

How much we left unvisited and untasted in those splendid places! 'Europe could wait. There would be a time for Europe,' I thought; 'all too soon the days would come when I needed a man at my side to put up my easel and carry my paints; when I could not venture more than an hour's journey from a good hotel; when I needed soft breezes and mellow sunshine all day long; then I would take my old eyes to Germany and Italy. Now, while I had the strength, I would go to the wild lands where man had deserted his post and the jungle was creeping back to its old strongholds.' Thus 'Charles Ryder'; thus myself. These were the years when Mr Peter Fleming went to the Gobi Desert, Mr Graham Greene to the Liberian hinterland; Robert Byron – vital today, as of old, in our memories; all his exuberant zest in the opportunities of our time now, alas! tragically and untimely quenched – to the ruins of Persia. We turned our backs on civilization. Had we known, we might have lingered with 'Palinurus'; had we known that all that seeming-solid, patiently built, gorgeously ornamented structure of Western life was to melt overnight like an ice-castle, leaving only a puddle of mud; had we known man was even then leaving his post. Instead, we set off on our various stern roads; I to the Tropics and the Arctic, with the belief that barbarism was a dodo to be stalked with a pinch of salt. The route of *Remote People* was easy going; the *Ninety-two Days* were more arduous. We have most of us marched and made camp since then, gone hungry and thirsty, lived where pistols are flourished and fired. At that time it seemed an ordeal, an initiation to manhood.

Then in 1935 came the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and I returned there, but no longer as a free traveller. As a war correspondent, lightly as I took my duties and the pretensions of my colleagues, I was in the livery of the new age. The ensuing book

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betrayed the change. I have omitted many pages of historical summary and political argument. Re-reading them, after the experience of recent years, I found little to retract. Hopes proved dupes; it is possible that present fears may be liars. This is not the place in which to attempt to disentangle the *post hoc* from the *propter hoc* of disaster.

My own travelling days are over, and I do not expect to see many travel books in the near future. When I was a reviewer, they used, I remember, to appear in batches of four or five a week, cram-full of charm and wit and enlarged Leica snapshots. There is no room for tourists in a world of 'displaced persons'. Never again, I suppose, shall we land on foreign soil with letter of credit and passport (itself the first faint shadow of the great cloud that envelops us) and feel the world wide open before us. That is as remote today as 'Yorick's' visit to Paris, when he had to be reminded by the landlord that their countries were at war. It will be more remote tomorrow. Some sort of reciprocal 'Strength-through-Joy', *dopo-lavoro* system may arise in selected areas; others, not I, gifted with the art of pleasing public authorities may get themselves despatched abroad to promote 'Cultural Relations'; the very young, perhaps, may set out like the *Wandervogels* of the Weimar period; lean, lawless, aimless couples with rucksacks, joining the great army of men and women without papers, without official existence, the refugees and deserters, who drift everywhere today between the barbed wire. I shall not, by my own wish, be among them.

Perhaps it is a good thing for English literature. In two generations the air will be fresher and we may again breed great travellers like Burton and Doughty. I never aspired to being a great traveller. I was simply a young man, typical of my age; we travelled as a matter of course. I rejoice that I went when the going was good.

E.W.

Stinchcombe
1945

WHEN THE GOING
WAS GOOD

CHAPTER ONE

A Pleasure Cruise in 1929

(From *Labels*)

IN February 1929 London was lifeless and numb, seeming to take its temper from Westminster, where the Government was dragging out the weeks of its last session. Talking films were just being introduced, and had set back by twenty years the one vital art of the century. There was not even a good murder case. And besides this it was intolerably cold. The best seller of the preceding months had been Mrs Woolf's *Orlando*, and it seemed as though Nature were setting out to win some celestial Hawthornden Prize by imitation of that celebrated description of the Great Frost. People shrank, in those days, from the icy contact of a cocktail glass, like the Duchess of Malfi from the dead hand, and crept stiff as automata from their draughty taxis into the nearest tube-railway station, where they stood, pressed together for warmth, coughing and sneezing among the evening papers.

So I packed up all my clothes and two or three solemn books, such as Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and a great many drawing materials, for two of the many quite unfulfilled resolutions which I made about this trip were that I was going to do some serious reading and drawing. Then I got into an aeroplane and went to Paris where I spent the night with some kind, generous, and wholly delightful Americans. They wanted to show me a place called 'Brick-Top's', which was then very popular. It was no good going to Brickey's, they said, until after twelve, so we went to Florence's first. We drank champagne because it is one of the peculiar modifications of French liberty that one can drink nothing else.

Then we went to an underground public house called the New York Bar. When we came in all the people beat on the tables with little wooden hammers, and a young Jew who was singing made a joke about the ermine coat which one of our party was wearing. We drank some more, much nastier, champagne and went to

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Brick-Top's, but when we got there, we found a notice on the door saying, 'Opening at four. Bricky', so we started again on our rounds.

We went to a café called *Le Fétiche*, where the waitresses wore dinner-jackets and asked the ladies in the party to dance. I was interested to see the fine, manly girl in charge of the cloakroom very deftly stealing a silk scarf from an elderly German.

We went to the Plantation, and to the Music Box, where it was so dark we could hardly see our glasses (which contained still nastier champagne), and to Shéhérazade, where they brought us five different organs of lamb spitted together between onions and bay leaves, all on fire at the end and very nice to eat.

We went to Kasbek which was just like Shéhérazade.

Finally, at four, we went to Brick-Top's. Brick-Top came and sat at our table. She seemed the least bogus person in Paris. It was broad daylight when we left; then we drove to the Halles and ate fine, pungent onion soup at *Le Père Tranquille*, while one of the young ladies in our party bought a bundle of leeks and ate them raw. I asked my host if all his evenings were like this. He said, no, he made a point of staying at home at least one night a week to play poker.

It was during about the third halt in the pilgrimage I have just described that I began to recognize the same faces crossing and re-crossing our path. There seemed to be about a hundred or so people in Montmartre that night, all doing the same round as ourselves.

Only two incidents of this visit to Paris live vividly in my memory.

One of these was the spectacle of a man in the Place Beauveau, who had met with an accident which must, I think, be unique. He was a man of middle age and, to judge by his bowler hat and frock coat, of the official class, and his umbrella had caught alight. I do not know how this can have happened. I passed him in a taxi-cab, and saw him in the centre of a small crowd, grasping it still by the handle and holding it at arm's length so that the flames should not scorch him. It was a dry day and the umbrella burnt flamboyantly. I followed the scene as long as I could from the little window in

the back of the car, and saw him finally drop the handle and push it, with his foot, into the gutter. It lay there smoking, and the crowd peered at it curiously before moving off. A London crowd would have thought that the best possible joke, but none of the witnesses laughed, and no one to whom I have told this story in England has believed a word of it.

The other incident happened at a night club called *Le Grand Écart*. To those who relish the flavour of 'Period', there is a rich opportunity for reflection on the change that came over this phrase when the Paris of Toulouse-Lautrec gave place to the Paris of M. Cocteau. Originally it means the 'splits' – that very exacting figure in which the dancer slides her feet farther and farther apart until her body rests on the floor with her legs straight out on either side of her. It was thus that La Goulue and La Mélonite – 'the Maenad of the Decadence' – were accustomed to complete their *pas seul*, with a roguish revelation of thigh between black silk stocking and frilled petticoat. It is not so today. It is the name of a night club with little coloured electric bulbs, decorated with coils of rope and plate glass mirrors; on the tables are little illuminated tanks of water, with floating sheets of limp gelatine in imitation of ice. Shady young men in Charvet shirts sit round the bar repairing with powderpuff and lipstick the ravages of grenadine and *crème de cacao*. I was there one evening in a small party. A beautiful and splendidly dressed Englishwomen – who, as they say, shall be nameless – came to the next table. She was with a very nice-looking, enviable man who turned out later to be a Belgian baron. She knew someone in our party and there was an indistinct series of introductions. She said, 'What did you say that boy's name was?'

They said, 'Evelyn Waugh.'

She said, 'Who is he?'

None of my friends knew. One of them suggested that she thought I was an English writer.

She said, 'I knew it. He is the one person in the world I have been longing to meet.' (You must please bear with this part of the story: it all leads to my humiliation in the end.) 'Please move up so that I can come and sit next to him.'

Then she came and talked to me.

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She said, 'I should never have known from your photographs that you were a blond.'

I should not have known how to answer that, but fortunately there was no need as she went straight on. 'Only last week I was reading an article by you in the *Evening Standard*. It was so beautiful that I cut it out and sent it to my mother.'

I said, 'I got ten guineas for it.'

At this moment the Belgian baron asked her to dance. She said, 'No, no. I am drinking in the genius of this wonderful young man.' Then she said to me, 'You know, I am psychic. The moment I came into this room tonight I *knew* that there was a *great personality* here, and I knew that I should find him before the evening was over.'

I suppose that real novelists get used to this kind of thing. It was new to me and very nice. I had only written two very dim books and still regarded myself less as a writer than an out-of-work private schoolmaster.

She said, 'You know, there is only one other great genius in this age. Can you guess his name?'

I suggested Einstein? No . . . Charlie Chaplin? No . . . James Joyce? No . . . Who?

She said, 'Maurice Dekobra. I must give a little party at the Ritz for you to meet him. I should feel I had at least done something to justify my life if I had introduced you two great geniuses of the age. One must do something to justify one's life, don't you think, or don't you?'

Everything went very harmoniously for a time. Then she said something that made me a little suspicious, 'You know, I so love your books that I never travel without taking them all with me. I keep them in a row by my bed.'

'I suppose you aren't by any chance confusing me with my brother Alec? He has written many more books than I.'

'What did you say his name was?'

'Alec.'

'Yes, of course. What's your name, then?'

'Evelyn.'

'But . . . but they said you wrote.'

'Yes, I do a little. You see, I couldn't get any other sort of job.'

A PLEASURE CRUISE IN 1929

Her disappointment was as frank as her friendliness had been. 'Well,' she said, 'how very unfortunate.'

Then she went to dance with her Belgian, and when she sat down she went to her former table. When we parted she said vaguely, 'We're sure to run into one another again.'

I wonder. And I wonder whether she will add this book, and with it this anecdote, to her collection of my brother's works by the side of her bed.

My next move was to Monte Carlo, where I had arranged to join a ship called the *Stella Polaris*.

I had decided to get out at Monaco because, I was told, the hotels were cheaper, and it would be more convenient for boarding the ship.

The station at Monaco is very small and unpretending. The only porter I could find belonged to an hotel with a fairly reputable-sounding name. He took my suitcase and led me through the falling snow, down the hill to his hotel. It was a *pension* in a side street. There was a small lounge full of basket chairs in which elderly Englishwomen sat sewing. I asked the porter whether there was not a better hotel at Monaco. Why, yes, he said, all the hotels in Monaco were better than this one. So he picked up my suitcase again and we went out into the snow, pursued by a manageress, and soon reached a larger hotel facing the harbour.

After luncheon the snow stopped, and the afternoon turned out intensely cold but bright and clear. I took a tram up the hill to Monte Carlo. The sound of firing came from the bastion below the promenade where '*Tir aux Pigeons*' was advertised. Some kind of match was in progress; the competitors were for the most part South Americans with papal titles. They made very interesting gestures with their elbows as they waited for the little cages to collapse and release the game; they also had interesting gestures of vexation and apology when they missed. But this was rare. The standard of marksmanship was high, and while I was there only three birds, fluttering erratically with plucked tail and wings, escaped the guns, to fall to the little boys below, who wait for them on the beach or in rowing-boats and pull them to pieces with

their fingers. Often when the cages fell open the birds would sit dazed among the débris, until they were disturbed with a bowl; then they would rise clumsily and be brought down, usually by the first barrel, when they were about ten feet from the ground. On the balcony above the terrace sat one of the Casino pigeons, privileged and robust, watching the destruction without apparent emotion. The only convincing recommendation which I heard of this sport came from one of the visitors at the Bristol who remarked that it was not cricket.

There was a heavy fall of snow every night I was at Monaco, sometimes continuing nearly until midday, but always, within an hour of it stopping, every trace had disappeared. The moment that the last flake had fallen there appeared an army of busy little men in blue overalls armed with brooms and hoses and barrows; they sluiced and scraped the pavements and brushed up the lawns; they climbed up the trees with ladders and shook down the snow from the branches; the flower beds had been overlaid with wire frames, straw, and green baize counterpanes; these were whipped off, revealing brightly flowering plants which were replaced, the moment they withered in the frost, by fresh supplies warm from the hot-houses. Moreover, there was no nonsense about merely tidying the unseemly deposit out of the way; one did not come upon those dirty drifts and banks of snow which survive in odd corners of other places weeks after the thaw. The snow was put into barrows and packed into hampers and taken right away, across the frontier perhaps, or into the sea, but certainly well beyond the imperium of the Casino.

The arrival of the *Stella Polaris* caused excitement. She came in late in the evening, having encountered some very heavy weather on her way from Barcelona. I saw her lights across the harbour and heard her band faintly playing dance music, but it was not until next morning that I went to look more closely at her. She was certainly a very pretty ship, standing rather high in the water, with the tall, pointed prow of a sailing yacht, white all over except for her single yellow funnel.

Every Englishman abroad, until it is proved to the contrary, likes to consider himself a traveller and not a tourist. As I watched my luggage being lifted on to the *Stella* I knew that it was no use