THEY WALK IN THE CITY

THE LOVERS IN THE STONE FOREST

By

J. B. PRIESTLEY

"They walk in the city
That *we* have builded."

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THEY WALK IN THE CITY

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FICTION

FARAWAY
ANGEL PAVEMENT
THE GOOD COMPANIONS
WONDER HERO
BENIGHTED
ADAM IN MOONSHINE

PLAYS

BEES ON THE BOAT DECK
DUET IN FLOODLIGHT
CORNELIUS
EDEN END
DANGEROUS CORNER
LABURNUM GROVE
THE ROUNDABOUT

MISCELLANEOUS

ENGLISH JOURNEY
FOUR-IN-HAND
I FOR ONE
TALKING: AN ESSAY
OPEN HOUSE
APES AND ANGELS
SELF-SELECTED ESSAYS
THE BALCONINNY
THE ENGLISH COMIC CHARACTERS
MEREDITH (E.M.L.)
PEACOCK (E.M.L.)
THE ENGLISH NOVEL
HUMOUR (E. HERITAGE SERIES)
BRIEF DIVERSIONS

TO

H. G. WELLS

in ever-renewed
exasperation, admiration
and affection

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I

HALIFORD, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, is a textile town. A hundred years ago it was of no importance at all; merely a little market town, with a few small mills dotted about the hillsides. It grew steadily during the Fifties and Sixties; then came the Franco-Prussian War—a godsend—and Haliford made money, or rather, some people there made a lot of money and the others were able to buy an extra joint of meat now and again and perhaps risk an annual four days' holiday at the seaside; and after that, in spite of a slump or two towards the end of the century, the town grew and prospered, until at last there came the Great War—and what a godsend that was—and Haliford men still at home and with their wits about them began to make fortunes, and slaved away trying to get rid of their excess profits; and the town, though a little lacking in brisk young manhood, reached its peak. It started slipping and sliding down the other side, towards nobody knows what, early in the Nineteen Twenties. The world seemed to take a sudden dislike to Haliford and its undeniably excellent products. Now, most of the mills have begun to look old. Some of them—grim black stone boxes though they are—have even begun to look pathetic. You feel—as they say round there—that they are "past it." In the watery sunlight of the Pennines, their windows sometimes look like the eyes of a blind

beggar. The tall chimneys that are still smoking do it now in a leisurely fashion, like retired men making a morning pipe last as long as possible. Many of the chimneys have stopped smoking, not having known the heat of a furnace for years. The air above Haliford ought to be clear by this time, but somehow the old haze still lingers, perhaps out of kindness to the bewildered townsfolk below, who would feel naked without it.

There is only one big factory in the town that does not look old. It is at the top of Toothill Lane. You cannot miss it. There it shines and glitters, an almost brand-new, five-storey building, all glass, metal, bright paint. It belongs to the Keep-Yu-Kozee Underclothing Company, Limited, which owns four other and similar factories in this island, and, thanks to an ingenious system of mass production and clever advertising, does very well out of them. This Haliford branch is a fine up-to-date affair, very different from the grim barracks of the older textile companies. It looks more like a giant greenhouse than an honest mill. The elderly folk of the town do not know what to make of the place. It has no tall chimney, no paved yard, no battered hoist doors. Old mill hands, pondering over it, cannot believe that the thing represents a solid commercial enterprise; a parcel of women might have put it up. If they had found their way inside (and they never did, for no old mill hands were wanted there), they would have been still more surprised and possibly contemptuous. All the older working folk in Haliford talk at the top of their voices, even in their own tiny homes, because for most of their lives they have had to make themselves heard

above the noise of the machinery in the mills. Foremen and overlookers have the loudest voices of all; stentorian to a man. But inside this newfangled Keep-Yu-Kozee place there is no roar of machinery, no shouting, friendly or unfriendly. There are no foremen and overlookers. There are no huge machines. Every floor is filled with long rows of girls and women, attending to trumpery gadgets that merely hum or whine a little. It is nearly as quiet, and just as busy, as an ant-heap. Without any fuss, any obvious supervision, vast piles of underclothing, stockings, knitted jumpers and dresses, contrive to get themselves properly made and finished, labelled and packed in dozens in bright green cardboard boxes. Even the boxes are mysteriously coming into existence all the time on the fourth floor, and sticking labels on themselves, with only a few girls to see that they do it neatly. The only people there who seem to know exactly what is going on, how it all happens, are five or six youngish men, fellows with rimless eyeglasses who seem to alternate between a brisk business air and a vague scholarly one, who brood and chuckle over blue prints, elaborate charts and schedules, in a central office. The Keep-Yu-Kozee factory in Haliford is, in short, a successful example of the modern method of mass production. Even American manufacturers (there was one of them on the board of directors) would have approved it. Russians of the Party would have cried in ecstasy at the sight of its smooth, efficient working, its stupendous powers of production, and would have promptly organised meetings of thanks, processions and theatrical displays, in its honour. Haliford

did not know what to make of it, though it welcomed the regular money that the hundreds of girls brought out of the building each Friday. Among the older and graver citizens, who still attended service at the square, gloomy little chapels, there was a conviction, mysteriously arrived at, that work in the Keep-Yu-Kozee place somehow undermined a girl's morals, started her off on lipstick, bare arms and legs, riding behind dissipated motor-cyclists, cocktails in gaudy roadhouses. But that older, disapproving Haliford was rapidly vanishing, dying of malnutrition, cancer, senile decay. Probably Haliford itself was dying. But the Keep-Yu-Kozee establishment was not part of Haliford. It was merely camping there.

The men who made most money out of this factory did not even camp there. Mr. Welkinghurst, for example. He was managing director of the company, had to keep an eye on all its five factories, but he lived in London and spent most of his week-ends at a nice little manor house in Hampshire, where Mrs. Welkinghurst was busy pretending that she was a member of the landed classes, and even grumbled at the very conditions that enabled her to live down there at all. Mr. Welkinghurst, this summer afternoon, had just inspected the Haliford branch. He had walked briskly through every room, attended by some of the fellows with rimless eyeglasses, had remained some time in the central office, talking sharply, even angrily, and had then hurried away. He was not staying long enough in Haliford even for a cup of tea, but was going to spend the night in Harrogate, where he thought there might be something for his occasional twinges of rheu-

matism. So he popped into a long black Rolls-Royce, leaned back and yawned for a moment, then, remembering his position as a managing director and the awful state of the world, he opened a dispatch case, buried himself among its papers, tried to think about figures, succeeded in thinking about his twinges and about his son, now in his second year at Oxford and a most promising spin bowler; and did not think at all about Haliford or any of the people in it. Yet what he had just said, so sharply, in that central office, would have its effect on certain Haliford lives, and perhaps if he had not spoken so sharply we should have had no story to tell. We shall not see Mr. Welkinghurst again, nor know if Harrogate did him any good, if his son ever got his Blue, if his wife was secure with the "county"; he is merely a name attached to a wraith; but just as surely as he and his fellow-directors set going the organisation and machinery that turn wool, rayon silk, cotton, into underclothes, stockings, jumpers, at the top of Toothill Lane, so he has set going the action of this tale.

The men in the central office had been abashed and repentant before Mr. Welkinghurst; but now that he had gone it was their turn to be angry. They had been given a fright, and now, recovering from that fright, they were all noisily and not unhappily angry together. They were all afraid of losing their jobs, much more afraid than all but a few of their workpeople. They were the brains and nerves of the organisation; and, unlike the crowd of working girls and women, they knew what was happening in the place, knew how the bales of raw stuff came to be

turned into neatly labelled dozens of pants and vests; they enjoyed putting their charts and schedules into operation; they were not uncreative in their work, had to tackle new problems all the time, and so they were interested and worked with zest. Here they were more fortunate than the horde of routine workers. But they all had this terror of losing their jobs, and so were frightened of Mr. Welkinghurst, who could turn them out at a month's notice. And Mr. Welkinghurst had some reason to be annoyed, for the Keep-Yu-Kozee method of production depends upon an alert and foolproof routine, with nobody missing a single beat, and this afternoon—of all afternoons—there had been a hold-up in the cutting department, only of a minute or two, but long enough to throw the whole intricate organisation out of gear, to keep sewing, binding, trimming, labelling machines either congested or empty. We should not have noticed anything wrong, but Mr. Welkinghurst, who knew his business, spotted it at once. So did all the executives, of course. To them, it was like seeing a running blot on the exquisite page of a copy-book. They were bewildered and hurt then, and now they were angry.

"That cutting department," said Mr. Spencer, the oldest of them and the manager, "has been going like clockwork for months, right up to the tick, and now of course, just when Mr. Welkinghurst walks in, they go and get clogged up."

"It was just one damned girl that did it, wasn't it?"

All five were agreed on that. One damned girl. Which one? Well, Young Walker was finding that out.

"And he can send her in to my office," said Mr. Spencer. "I'll fire her this very afternoon." He was not an American, but when he was feeling brisk and rather brutal, he liked to use these American terms, which made him feel like one of those dominating rasping chaps you see on the films. "All right, you fellows."

Young Walker arrived, looking rather despondent.

"Well, which damned fool was it?" he was asked.

"It was Rose Salter," Walker replied unhappily. "I can't understand it. She's a bright kid as a rule. You'll remember her. Good-looking."

"I don't care if she looks like Greta Garbo," cried Mr. Spencer angrily, "she goes. Putting us all in the cart like that! Is she there? Send her in."

Enter Rose Salter, wearing a green overall. Mr. Spencer, glaring away, remembered her at once. She was a young and very pretty girl, with fair and wavy hair and darkish brown eyes, an odd and attractive combination. The general effect was a dusky golden one, unusual, very nice. Mr. Spencer promptly condemned it to blazes. She ought to have been tearful, at least. Here was a girl, a brainless kid, one miserable unit in the grand design, who by not attending to her silly little job properly had slowed up the department, ruined the time they had worked out to a fraction of a minute, darkened Mr. Welkinghurst's afternoon, made him suspicious of the whole Haliford branch technical staff, and therefore menaced the well-being of Mr. Spencer, his wife, his family. She ought to have been crying her eyes right out. Instead of that, she was simply sulky. Pretty and sulky.

Even her good looks were annoying. He barked a few sharp questions at her.

"I began thinking about something," she said.

Could anything be more idiotic? "What's that got to do with it? The point is, you weren't looking after your machine, and so you went and threw the whole department out of gear. And do you know who that was who walked in just when you'd held everything up? Only Mr. Welkinghurst, that's all." The terrible irony of this lifted his voice almost into a scream. "Only the managing director of the whole company, that's all."

The girl looked at him with round, sad eyes. They were dark now, whereas a minute ago they had been quite light. "I'm sorry," she said, mumbling a little. "You see I saw something out of the window."

"You'd no business to be seeing something out of the window."

"It was nothing much," this in extenuation. "A bird—or something. And then I began thinking. And—and—I forgot for a minute."

"Well, you'll have something else to think about now. Another job. Because you've lost this one." And the thought that she had gone and lost it, so stupidly, wantonly, when men like himself fought day and night to hold on to theirs, made him angrier than ever. "Just thrown it clean away by your own damned stupidity and carelessness, d'you understand?"

Yes, she understood. There was a suggestion of tears now. Probably his raised voice, his reddening face and glaring eyes, had done it.

Recovering himself, Mr. Spencer glanced down importantly at a scribbling pad (though all it said to him was: "See abt Bridge markers—sherry—new magneto?"), and in a cold official tone: "Take your card to Mr. Dimsdale and ask him to pay you off."

"Yes, sir," said Rose Salter meekly. She lingered a moment. She was about to say something apologetic.

Mr. Spencer looked up. Suddenly, unaccountably, he thought how extremely pleasant it would be to take this girl in his arms and console her, and then was annoyed with himself for entertaining such a thought, was further annoyed with the whole troupe of enticing young girls who troubled a man during business hours, and said gruffly: "All right, all right. That's done with. I'm busy." And pretended to be.

In the cutting room some were indignant and said it was a shame, others were not a bit surprised at all because they had seen it coming; and Rose, a little dazed, still rather dreamy, as if that bird she had seen had not been quite of this world, said good-bye to both parties with the same abstracted air. Then, without the green overall, her card stamped, herself paid off and done with, she walked out of the Keep-Yu-Kozee factory for the last time. Toothill Lane was warm, rather close; the late afternoon sunlight lay heavy upon it. The girl walked slowly, not without grace, as if the air had more substance than usual and she were wading through it. Her face was quite calm; her eyes clear, untroubled. Like fish passing through the lighted section of an aquarium tank, little thoughts, of no importance, went in and out of her

mind, which was as easy and contented now as it had been when she was staring out of the window. She had not deliberately thrown away her job, for she was not that forceful or reckless kind of girl, but now that it had gone sliding away from her, she did not care, was even pleased, for she was tired of Haliford and the safe monotony of the Keep-Yu-Kozee. Her great friend of the moment, Alice Hargreaves, a dashing character, was always saying that the two of them ought to leave Haliford, find work—mysteriously adventurous sort of work—in Leeds, Manchester, or even London. Alice always said she was ready to throw up her job, at Whitley's the draper's, at any moment, and now, as it had turned out—and Rose put it to herself that it had merely "turned out"—Rose was the first to be free, out of work, ready for an adventure in one of the big towns. She thought of all this, idly, as she walked slowly down Toothill Lane, towards her home in Slater Street.

This girl should not have been as wholesome, comely, even beautiful, as she was. The fact runs counter to all our accepted knowledge of what is good and bad for human beings. All the conditions of her twenty-year-old life had been monstrous. From earliest childhood she had been denied sunlight, good air, proper food and exercise. She ought to have been a premature hag, with a crooked spine, gummy eyes, rotting teeth. Yet somehow out of this dreadful mess of rubber teats, sinister teething powders, dirty linen, over-heated rooms, pastry, fish and chips, dubious laxatives, dreadful patent medicines, ignorance, swinishness, savagery, had emerged this

healthy and handsome young creature. Nature had found a way to circumvent the idiocy of half-civilised Man. Or perhaps this was a legacy from her ancestors, Salters who had been hard moorland shepherds or labourers on the great wheat farms in the plain of York, whose wholesome red blood still flowered—it might be for the last time—in this evil industrial soil. Feminine beauty ought to be the prerogative—as so many other things are—of the privileged and carefully nurtured classes, yet, as the records will show, it has an odd trick of springing from the nameless mob beneath, suddenly blossoming in perfection out of stinking ghettoes, bug-ridden tenements, dockside lodging houses. Rose was not one of these astonishing beauties, who now so often coin their straight little noses, the fine curve of their cheeks, into millions of dollars in distant Hollywood; nor was her home in Slater Street, a respectable dingy street, the Yorkshire equivalent of those ghettoes and tenements; but nevertheless she was a surprise, a stroke of luck, a happy chance we do not deserve.

It would be easy and impressive to show the girl, workless now in a community where work was hard to find, returning to a home of despair and slow death, a family of tight-lipped suffering proletarians. But it would not be true. The Salters were not like that. As a family they had a notable capacity for enjoying themselves. They belonged to that section of the workers which is the despair of the austere revolutionary, who can understand neither their hoggish blindness nor their ability, which he lacks, to come to easy terms with each passing day.

He sees them swallowing with evident enjoyment each new dose of capitalist dope. They seem to thrive on it. There is no persuading them that under these present conditions life is not worth living because obviously the fools are having a good time with it. Including Rose there were six Salters crowded into the little house—two rooms below, three above—in Slater Street: father, who was a warehouseman, a cunning bowls player, and a figure at the East Haliford Working-men's Club; mother, who was fat, jolly, and a very sketchy shopper and meal preparer; George, who was in a dyeworks by day and in the sporting life by night; Fred, who did a variety of jobs and just now had wangled something mysterious for himself at the Greyhound Racing Track; Nellie, in a toyshop in Market Lane, for ever getting herself engaged and then disengaged and telling you all about it with tears in her eyes and laughter on her lips; and Rose herself, the youngest, considered the quiet and rather deep one of the family, who had been known to sit with a book—not a picture or racing paper but a real book—for a whole hour together. Every meal at the Salters was a long-drawn-out noisy picnic. There was more shouting, more hustle in this little house than there is at most railway stations. Every member of the family had friends who continually popped in and out. The wireless set worked at full blast. The females were always making one another cups of tea; the males were always opening bottles of beer, or slipping out for a jug of old ale. Every week-end with them seemed like Christmas. One or other of them attended all football and boxing matches and other sporting events, the one

local music-hall, the more important films of the town, all public celebrations; and one or other of them tried a hand at all the competitions run by popular papers or commercial firms, so that the postman might bring a fortune at any hour. The family finances were so complicated, everyone borrowing from everybody else, that they could never be straightened out. Sometimes George and Fred were existing, in shirt-sleeves, with half-closed eyes over a cigarette and the sporting columns, on their mother's and sisters' bounty; and at other times they burst in like millionaires from the gold mines, slapping dirty pound notes and heaps of silver on the kitchen table and proposing to take everybody to Blackpool (their favourite resort) for the week-end. Rose did not set herself against all this; she was fond of her family; but there were times, and there had been more and more of them lately, when she found herself wanting something different, not quite so noisy, so Halifordish. She never protested, unless she wanted to be quiet and was not left alone, never sneered; but more and more, inspired by what she saw in picture papers or at the films, she entertained thoughts quite foreign to the other Salters.

She arrived home to find her mother, large, hot, dishevelled, doing some of her sketchy cooking. The fact that it was a warm day and would be a close evening had not deterred Mrs. Salter from attempting a very hot and heavy meal, for she took no notice of the weather but catered by immediate inspiration, so that in January she might offer you cold pork pie and tinned pineapple, in August fried steak and a suet pudding. This seemed