ENGLISH JOURNEY

J.B. PRIESTLEY

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BEING A RAMBLING BUT TRUTHFUL ACCOUNT OF WHAT ONE MAN SAW AND HEARD AND FELT AND THOUGHT DURING A JOURNEY THROUGH ENGLAND DURING THE AUTUMN OF THE YEAR 1933

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

TO SOUTHAMPTON

I

I WILL begin, I said, where a man might well first land, at Southampton. There was a motor coach going to Southampton—there seems to be a motor coach going anywhere in this island—and I caught it. I caught it with the minimum of clothes, a portable typewriter, the usual paraphernalia of pipes, note-books, rubbers, paper fasteners, razor blades, pencils, Muirhead's *Blue Guide to England*, Stamp and Beaver's *Geographic and Economic Survey*, and, for reading in bed, the tiny thin paper edition of the *Oxford Book of English Prose*. This was the first motor coach I had ever travelled in, and I was astonished at its speed and comfort. I never wish to go any faster. And as for comfort, I doubt if even the most expensive private motors—those gigantic, three-thousand-pound machines—are as determinedly and ruthlessly comfortable as these new motor coaches. They are voluptuous, sybaritic, of doubtful morality. This is how the ancient Persian monarchs would have travelled, had they known the trick of it. If I favoured violent revolution, the sudden overthrowing and destruction of a sneering favoured class, I should be bitterly opposed to the wide use of these vehicles. They offer luxury to all but the most poverty-stricken. They have annihilated the old distinction between rich and poor travellers. No longer can the wealthy go splashing past in their private conveyances, driving the humble pedestrian against the wall, leaving him to shake his fist and curse the proud pampered crew. The

children of these fist-shakers now go thundering by in their own huge coaches and loll in velvet as they go. Perhaps it is significant that you get the same sort of over-done comfort, the same sinking away into a deep sea of plush, in the vast new picture theatres. If the proletariat has money in its pocket now, it can lead the life of a satrap. And it does. It is the decaying landed county folk, with their rattling old cars, their draughty country houses, their antique bathrooms and cold tubs, who are the Spartans of our time. But who and where are our Athenians? Perhaps this journey will tell me.

After the familiar muddle of West London, the Great West Road looked very odd. Being new, it did not look English. We might have suddenly rolled into California. Or, for that matter, into one of the main avenues of the old exhibitions, like the Franco-British Exhibition of my boyhood. It was the line of new factories on each side that suggested the exhibition, for years of the West Riding have fixed for ever my idea of what a proper factory looks like; a grim blackened rectangle with a tall chimney at one corner. These decorative little buildings, all glass and concrete and chromium plate, seem to my barbaric mind to be merely playing at being factories. You could go up to any one of the charming little fellows, I feel, and safely order an ice-cream or select a few picture postcards. But as for industry, real industry with double entry and bills of lading, I cannot believe them capable of it. That is my private view. Actually, I know, they are tangible evidence, most cunningly arranged to take the eye, to prove that the new industries have moved south. They also prove that there are new enterprises to move south. You notice them decorating all the western borders of London. At night they look as exciting as Blackpool. But while these new industries look so much prettier than the old, which I remember only too well, they also look far less substantial. Potato crisps, scent, tooth pastes, bathing

costumes, fire extinguishers; those are the concerns behind these pleasing façades; and they seem to belong to an England of little luxury trades, the England of Shaw's *Apple Cart*. But if we could all get a living out of them, what a pleasanter country this would be, like a permanent exhibition ground, all glass and chromium plate and nice painted signs and coloured lights. I feel there's a catch in it somewhere. Perhaps I am on my way, at a good fifty miles an hour, to find that catch.

Just before we went through Camberley, I made an acquaintance in the coach. I was lighting my pipe when a man who had been seating on the seat across the gangway came over and begged for a light. Actually he had matches of his own in his pocket, for I noticed him using them afterwards; what he wanted was talk. He had kept silent all the way from London and could bear it no longer. He was a thinnish fellow, somewhere in his forties, and he had a sharp nose, a neat moustache, rimless eyeglasses, and one of those enormous foreheads, roomy enough for an Einstein, that so often do not seem to mean anything. The rimless eyeglasses gave him that very keen look which also often means nothing; and at first he suggested those men who are drawn or photographed for advertisements of American Insurance companies. He looked capable of rationalising huge muddled industries. It was a face with which you could have rescued the cotton trade in Lancashire. But, as so often happens, the man behind the face was quite different. He was neither strong nor silent, but a very ordinary human being, one of us, uncertain, weakish, garrulous, always vaguely hoping that a miracle would be worked for him. Like so many men in business, he was at heart a pure romantic. The type has always been with us, and more or less fantastic specimens of it have found their way into literature as Micawber or Mr. Polly. He was the kind of man who comes into a few

hundred pounds in his early twenties, begins to lose money steadily, but contrives to marry another few hundreds, then begins to lose them, but is rescued by the death of an aunt who leaves him another few hundreds. Throughout his career he is enthusiastic and energetic, seems knowledgeable and sensible, and yet he never makes anything pay but he watches his capital dwindle. Even in these days, there are still a few thousand like him up and down the country, especially in growing towns and new suburbs. At the end of one venture, they begin another passionate search "for an opening." This man was looking for an opening now.

"That's no good," he told me, after a minute or two's talk about nothing.

"What isn't?"

"Tea rooms." And he pointed at one that we were passing. "I tried it once. The wife was keen. In Kent. Good position too, on a main road. We'd everything very nice, very nice indeed. We called it the Chaucer Pilgrims—you know, Chaucer. Old style—Tudor, you know—black beams and everything. Couldn't make it pay. I wouldn't have bothered, but the wife was keen. If you ask me what let us down, I'd say it was the slump in America. It was on the road to Canterbury, you see—Chaucer Pilgrims—but we weren't getting the American tourists. I wouldn't touch a tea room again, not if you gave me one."

Camberley came and went. He stared at it, no doubt looking for an inspiration.

"That's a wonderful business if you can get the right opening," he said wistfully. "Hairdressing. Ladies, of course. Nothing in men's. But a good ladies' hairdressing—with permanent waves, manicure, and everything—it's a gold mine. Even now it is, if you're in the right place—a gold mine. I could have picked one up two years ago, but I didn't know the business and thought I'd better not risk it."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose now that women have cut most of their hair off—to save time and trouble, as they say—they have to spend hours at the hairdressers every week."

"That's right. And they won't miss either, any of them. They've all got something to spend on their hair. I believe they're better spenders than men are these days. Are you going to Southampton?"

"Yes."

"So am I. Just to look round. I've heard of one or two possibilities there. Should be a good opening in Southampton. What do you think of electric light fittings?"

I told him that I knew nothing about them.

"Friend of mine swears by them. All this electricity they're putting in, d'you see? Villages, all over, they're getting electric light. And they've got to have fittings, haven't they? Good profit on them too, they tell me. I'm going to look into that. Run wireless too as a side-line."

"Do you understand wireless sets?"

"Oh yes. I was in the wireless trade one time, about six years ago, in Birmingham. But mind you, wireless then and wireless now—oh!" and he gave a short laugh—"different thing altogether. Look at the developments. Look at the way prices have come down and quality's gone up. Wonderful business now, in the right district. If I could find a good shop in a growing good-class neighbourhood, I wouldn't mind going back to the wireless trade to-morrow, with gramophones and records as a side-line. The wife's against it, but she doesn't understand how things have changed in that business. What do you think of this pipe?"

I had already noticed his pipe, which was of an odd and peculiarly hideous shape and gave off a reek of hot varnish. "Looks a bit unusual," I told him, cautiously.

"New patent," he announced, rather proudly. "Just on the market. As a matter of fact, it isn't really on the market

yet. Bowl's not made of wood at all. Made of a new composition, and it all takes to pieces, d'you see? Every time you've had a smoke, you change one of the pieces—they give you spares—and so it's always nice and clean and cool. Clever, isn't it?"

I admitted that it was ingenious. Actually, it looked and smelt horrible and dirty and hot; a loathsome little pipe.

"Clever, and very cheap. I could get a big agency for this to-morrow. I've only to say the word. But I thought I'd give it a good trial first. I started last night, and the wife said she didn't like the smell of it, but I told her it was new and would have to be broken in a bit. Know Newcastle at all?"

"I've not been in Newcastle since the war."

"Fine town, Newcastle, though it's not doing the business it did. I was up there three years ago. Cheap raincoats. Looked a wonderful opening. Last man had had a stroke and died quite suddenly. Good position and big stock. Had a bright idea there—you know how you get these ideas, come in a flash. At least mine do. I might be sitting at home, reading the evening paper, you know, or listening to the wireless, and suddenly I've got the idea. Like that—bang! The wife laughs at me. Well, I'd two good big windows up there in Newcastle, and I had one of 'em fitted up with a water-sprinkling device and put three dummies—father, mother and the kiddie—in the window all in raincoats and waterproof hats. Attracted a lot of attention. There was a bit about it in one of the local papers—making a joke of it, you know, but of course I didn't mind that. Well, for three months I did very well, never done better. Splendid turnover. Got rid of the old stock and was ordering a lot of new stuff—all cheap lines but value for money. And then suddenly it went like that—like *that*. Nobody in Newcastle seemed to want a raincoat. It wasn't very fine weather or anything. There hadn't been a sudden slump in the local

trade. No reason at all. But the business suddenly went as flat as a pancake. Nobody wanted a raincoat. How do you explain that?"

I couldn't explain it.

"It's always been a mystery to me," he continued ruefully. "But that's business all over. You can't force people to buy raincoats, can you? It's all right talking upon salesmanship —I believe in salesmanship—but if you can't get 'em inside the shop, what are you to do? Advertising won't do it. Window displays won't do it. Clearance sales won't do it Do you know anything about the cheap fur trade?"

I didn't, except that it was generally supposed to be in the hands of Jews.

"Friend of mine, who's in the wholesale winter coat trade, says there are some wonderful openings in the cheap fur business if you only know the ropes. But I don't know the ropes. It's the same with shoes. You'd think anybody could be in the shoe trade, wouldn't you? But they can't. It's tricky, very tricky."

We stared at the charred patches of heath we were passing. I began to think about my Kitchener's Army days, in 1914, when we used to advance and take cover, a very uncomfortable prickly cover it was too, on these very heaths. I don't know what my companion was thinking about; perhaps the trickiness of the shoe trade. But he was thinking hard about something, and he puffed away so vigorously at his foul patent pipe that he stank like a paint factory on fire. Together we rolled along over the pleasant empty countryside of Hampshire, which, once your eyes have left the road, has a timeless quality. The Saxons, wandering over their Wessex, must have seen much of what we saw that morning. The landscape might have been designed to impress upon returning travellers, on the boat train out of Southampton, that they were indeed back in

England again. I said as much to my acquaintance, who agreed and then added that he had often wondered if South Africa was any good.

"Not that I want to leave England, you know," he continued. "But you can't help noticing all these advertisements. We all know what trade's like here. There isn't the money about there was—and it's no good pretending there is—and it's chiefly the big concerns that are getting it nowadays. And I could tell you something about some of those big concerns. I've had experience of them. Cut you out—clean out—like *that*. No mercy, no mercy at all. I *know*. And I wouldn't work for one of 'em—I've had my chances too—and I don't care what they offered me. There's a lot to be said yet for a man running his own business in his own way. Personal service. It's simply a matter of finding the right opening, that's all."

I don't know what he saw in Winchester, what Pisgah sight revealed itself, but I do know that he suddenly decided to break his journey there and catch a later bus to Southampton. I never saw him in Southampton, and perhaps he never arrived there. (Perhaps he is still in Winchester, with the right opening, or back in London, or up in Newcastle with a fresh supply of raincoats, or trying the wireless trade again in Birmingham.) But wherever he is and whatever he is doing, I am sure he is looking keen, sensible and energetic, and steadily losing money, and beginning to think about another opening. Sooner or later, he will find himself in the bankruptcy court; and after that his wife, who will have managed to save a little from the wreck, will run a boarding house, where he will dream about openings over the boots in the back basement. I had left him there, a decayed but not hopeless figure of an optimist, before the coach had seen the last of Winchester, which, all along the High Street, had looked very busy and bright and more new than old. I

never pass through these smaller Cathedral cities, on a fine day, without imagining I could spend a few happy years there, and never find myself compelled to spend a morning and afternoon in one without wishing the day was over and I was moving on. We climbed again into country so empty and lovely, so apparently incapable of earning its exquisite living, that people ought to pay just to have a glimpse of it, as one of the few last luxuries in the world for the ranging eye. And now the road straightened itself and made inexorably for Southampton.

2

I had been to Southampton before, many times, but always to or from a ship. The last time I sailed for France during the war was from there, in 1918, when half a dozen of us found ourselves the only English officers in a tall crazy American ship bursting with doughboys, whose bands played ragtime on the top deck. Since then I had sailed for the Mediterranean and New York from Southampton, and had arrived there from Quebec. But it had no existence in my mind as a real town, where you could buy and sell and bring up children; it existed only as a muddle of railway sidings, level crossings, customs houses and dock sheds: something to have done with as soon as possible. The place I rolled into down the London Road was quite different, a real town. This is a fine approach, very gradual and artful in its progression from country to town. You are still staring at the pleasant Hampshire countryside when you notice that it is beginning to put itself into some order, and then the next minute you find that it is Southampton Common and that the townsfolk can be seen walking there; and, the minute after, the road is cutting between West Park and East Park,

and on either side the smaller children of absent pursers and chief stewards are running from sunlight to shadow, and there are pretty frocks glimmering among the trees; and now, in another minute, the town itself is all round you, offering you hats and hams and acrobats at the Palace Theatre. It would be impossible to say where Southampton itself really began, though I should like to believe that the true boundary is that corner of East Park where there is a memorial to the lost engineers of the *Titanic*, to prove that there are dangerous trades here too. Further down, the London Road changes into Above Bar Street; then the traffic swirls about the Bar Gate itself, which is very old but has so many newly-painted armorial decorations that it looks as gaudy as the proscenium of a toy theatre; and then once through or round Bar Gate, you are in High Street. Another quarter of a mile or so, at the bottom of High Street, you must go carefully; otherwise you may lose England altogether and find yourself looking at the Woolworth building or table mountain. One could write a story of a man who walked down this long straight street, on a dark winter's day, and kept on and on until at last he saw that he had walked into a panelled smoke room, where he settled down for a pipe, only to discover soon that Southampton had quietly moved away from him and that his smoke room was plunging about in the Channel. For, you see, you can catch the *Berengaria* or the *Empress of Britain* at the end of this High Street.

This one road, which begins as if it had been lately cut out of the New Forest and ends in the shadow of the great liners, is Southampton's main artery. You walk up and down it, shop in it, eat and drink and entertain yourself in it. We hear a good deal about Southampton's comparative prosperity; and this main street is the symbol of it. When I looked at it, the sun was shining and the day was as crisp as a

good biscuit. The pavement on each side was crowded with neat smiling people, mostly women, and the mile of shops seemed to be doing a brisk trade. Here at last was a town that had not fallen under the evil spell of our times. Its figures, I knew, were up, not down. It had recently opened the largest graving dock in the world, big enough for the monsters that have as yet only been planned and not built. The town was making money. At first I felt like a man who had walked into a fairy tale of commerce. The people who jostled me did not look as if they had just stepped out of an earthly paradise; there was no Utopian bloom upon them; but nevertheless they all seemed well-fed, decently clothed, cheerful, almost gay. The sun beamed upon them, and so did I. Their long street was very pleasant. I noticed that it shared the taste of Fleet Street and the Strand for wine bars. I went into one of these; and it had a surprising succession of Ye Olde panelled rooms, in one of which I drank a shilling glass of moderate sherry and listening to four citizens talking earnestly about German nudist papers, their supply having recently been cut off by Hitler. Their interest in these papers was genuine but not of a kind to commend itself to the leaders of the nudist movement. Though it was only the middle of the day, there were plenty of people drinking in these rooms, though few of them were taking wine. There was a fair sprinkling of respectable women, mostly having a glass with their men. I had lunch in another of these places, and it was full and the food reasonably good of its kind.

When you are nearing the end of this street, with Southampton water sparkling in the middle distance, you notice that the shops dwindle and become more nautical, until at last you can turn in at almost any doorway and buy a flag or two, charts, ropes and all the yachtsman's paraphernalia. I turned to the right at the bottom and followed the old town wall. There I saw the memorial marking the place from

which the Pilgrim Fathers first set sail, in a ship about as big as the cocktail bar in which some of their descendants now sail back to this shore. I saw the old West Gate, through which the troops marched when they were on their way to Crécy and Agincourt. In short, I saw historical Southampton whose population, that day, consisted of a few old men, sitting and spitting. I soon left it to return to the Town Quay. Here the present was dominating the past, just as these giant liners themselves were dominating not only the sheds and wharves that tried to enclose them but the very town itself. Against a porcelain sky of palest blue, their black-and-crimson and buff funnels were enormous, dazzling. It did one's heart good to see them. I longed to go aboard. They seemed to me, as indeed they have always seemed to me, these giant liners, to be things not only of formidable size and power but also of real beauty, genuine creations of man the artist. Let us have our laugh, as I have had mine both in and out of print, at the nonsense inside them, their *Louis Quinze* drawing-rooms and Tudor smoke-rooms, but let us also ask ourselves what we have built to compare with them in majesty since the medieval cathedrals. Their very names have an epic roll, suggesting an ample and noble life. (If another Gibbon describes our decline and fall, what play he will make with these names!) Unlike the cathedrals, these ships have not been built to glorify God; they are of this world; they were not even designed to glorify the commonwealth but only to earn dividends; but having arrived at a time when men have a passion—perhaps the purest of their passions—for machines, these ships are creations of power and beauty. I am glad to have lived in their age, to have seen them grow in strength and comeliness, these strange towns of painted steel that glide up to and away from this other town of motionless brick. They would not be here at all, nor would the High Street look so prosperous nor