Angel Pavement

BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

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ANGEL PAVEMENT

by

J. B. Priestley

BOOKS BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

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Fiction

ADAM IN MOONSHINE
THE OLD DARK HOUSE
FARTHING HALL (*with Hugh Walpole*)
THE GOOD COMPANIONS
THE TOWN MAJOR OF MIRAUCOURT

Essays, Etc.

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THE ENGLISH COMIC CHARACTERS
MEREDITH (*English Men of Letters*)
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THE ENGLISH NOVEL
HUMOUR (*English Heritage Series*)

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To

C. S. EVANS

because he is not only a good friend and a fine publisher,
but also because he is a London man and will know
what I am getting at in this London novel.

Angel Pavement

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Prologue

I. THEY ARRIVE—12

II. MR. SMEETH IS REASSURED—51

III. THE DERSINGHAMS AT HOME—87

IV. TURGIS SEES HER—128

V. MISS MATFIELD WONDERS—169

VI. MR. SMEETH GETS HIS RISE—219

VII. ARABIAN NIGHTS FOR TURGIS—264

VIII. MISS MATFIELD'S NEW YEAR—313

IX. MR. SMEETH IS WORRIED—356

X. THE LAST ARABIAN NIGHT—402

XI. THEY GO HOME—444

Epilogue

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ANGEL

PAVEMENT

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I-E

Prologue

She came gliding along London's broadest street, and then halted, swaying gently. She was a steamship of some 3,500 tons, flying the flag of one of the new Baltic states. The Tower Bridge cleared itself of midgets and toy vehicles and raised its two arms, and then she passed underneath, accompanied by cheerfully impudent tugs, and after some manœuvring and hooting and shouting, finally came to rest alongside Hay's Wharf. The fine autumn afternoon was losing its bright gold and turning into smoke and distant fading flame, so that it seemed for a moment as if all London bridges were burning down. Then the flare of the day died out, leaving behind a quiet light, untroubled as yet by the dusk. On the wharf, men in caps lent a hand with ropes and a gangway, contrived to spit ironically, as if they knew what all this fuss was worth, and then retired to group themselves in the background, like a shabby and faintly derisive chorus; and men in bowler hats arrived from nowhere, carrying dispatch cases, notebooks, bundles of papers, to exchange mysterious jokes with the ship's officers above; and two men in blue helmets, large and solid men, took their stand in the very middle of the scene and appeared to tell the ship, with a glance or two, that she could stay where she was for the time being because nothing against her was known so far to the police. The ship, for her part, began to think about discharging her mixed cargo.

This cargo was so mixed that it included the man who now emerged from the saloon, came yawning on to the deck, and looked down upon Hay's Wharf. This solitary passenger was a man of medium height but of a massive build, square and bulky about the shoulders, and thick-chested. He might have been forty-five; he might have been nearly fifty; it was difficult to tell his exact age. His face was

somewhat unusual, if only because it began by being almost bald at the top, then threw out two very bushy eyebrows, and finally achieved a tremendous moustache, drooping a little by reason of its very length and thickness; a moustache in a thousand, with something rhetorical, even theatrical, about it. He wore, carelessly, a suit of excellent grey cloth but of a foreign cut and none too well-fitting. This passenger had come with the ship from the Baltic state that owned her, but there was something about his appearance, in spite of his clothes, his moustache, that suggested he was really a native of this island. But that is perhaps all it did suggest. He was one of those men who are difficult to place. The sight of him did not call up any particular background, and you could not easily imagine him either at work or at home. He had come from the Baltic to the Thames, but it might just as well have been from any place to any other place. As he stood there, straddling at ease, a thick figure of a man but not slow and heavy, with his gleaming bald front and giant moustache, looking down at the wharf quite incuriously, he seemed a man who was neither coming home nor leaving it, and yet not a simple traveller, and this gave him a faint piratical air.

"Lon-don, eh?" cried a voice at his elbow. It came from the second mate, a small natty youngster not unlike a pale and well-brushed monkey. "Vairy nice, eh?"

"All right."

"You com' 'ere, Misdair Colsbee? You stay 'ere?" The second mate liked to air his English and had not had much opportunity of doing so during the voyage.

"Yes, I stay here," replied Mr. Golspie, for that was the name the second officer was trying to pronounce. "That is," he boomed, as an afterthought, "if there's anything doing."

"You leef 'ere, in Lon-don?" pursued the other, who had missed the force of the last remark.

"No, I don't. I don't live anywhere. That's me." And Mr. Golspie said this with a kind of grim relish, as if to suggest that he might

pop up anywhere, and that when he did, something or somebody had better look out. He might have been one of the quieter buccaneers sailing into harbour.

Then, nodding amiably, he stepped forward, looked up and down the wharf again, and returned to the saloon, where he took a cigar from the box the captain had bought at the entrance to the Kiel Canal, and helped himself to a drink from one of the many bottles that overflowed from the sideboard to the table. It had been a convivial voyage. Mr. Golspie and the captain were old acquaintances who had been able to do one another various good turns. The captain had promised to make Mr. Golspie very comfortable, and one way of making Mr. Golspie very comfortable was to lay in and then promptly bring out a sound stock of whisky, cognac, vodka, and other liquors. There had been nothing one-sided about this arrangement, for the captain had been able to keep pace with his guest, even though his progress had not had the same steady dignity. The captain, who had once served in the Russian Imperial Navy and had only resigned from it by escaping in his shirt and trousers over the side one night, was apt to turn fantastic in his drink. On two nights out of the three, during the voyage, he had insisted upon declaiming a long speech from Goethe's *Faust* in four different languages, to show that he was a man of culture. And on the night before they had entered the Thames Estuary, the previous night, in fact, he had gone further than that, for he had laughed a great deal, sung four songs that Mr. Golspie could not understand at all, told a long story apparently in Russian, cried a little, and shaken Mr. Golspie's hand so hard and so often that as he thought about it all now, over his cigar in the saloon that seemed so strangely still, Mr. Golspie could almost feel the ache again in his hand. Mr. Golspie himself did not perform any of these antics; he merely mellowed as the evening waned and the bottles were emptied; and he was mellowing now, early though it was, for he and the captain had sat a long time over lunch. Apparently, however,

Mr. Golspie did not consider that he was sufficiently mellow, for he now helped himself to another drink.

The men in bowler hats were by this time on board. Some of them were interviewing the captain. Others were interested in Mr. Golspie, for they had to decide whether he was fit to land in the island of his birth. His relations with these officials were quite amiable, but they did not prevent him from expressing his views.

"Regulations! Of course they're regulations!" he boomed through the great moustache, mellow but pugnacious. "But that doesn't mean they're not a lot o' damned nonsense. There's more palaver getting into England now than there was getting into Russia and Turkey before the blasted war. And we used to laugh at 'em. Backward countries we used to call 'em. Passports!" Here he laughed, then tapped the young man on the lapel of his blue serge coat. "Never kept a rogue out yet, never. Only wants a bit of cleverness. All they do is to make trouble for honest men—fellows like me, wanting to do a bit of good to trade. Isn't that right? You bet it is."

He then saw the customs officers, who dipped a hand here and there in his two steamer trunks and three battered suitcases.

"I expect you'd like to get away," said one of them, beginning to chalk up his approval of the luggage.

Mr. Golspie watched him with idle benevolence, looking quite unlike a man who has two hundred and fifty cigars cunningly stowed away in a steamer trunk. "Not this time. No hurry, for once. I'm staying aboard to pick a bit of dinner with the skipper here." He waved a hand, presumably to indicate the city that lay all round them. "It can wait."

"What can?" And the young man gave a final flourish of chalk.

"London can," replied Mr. Golspie. "All of it."

The young man laughed, not because he thought this last remark very witty, but because this passenger suddenly reminded him of a comedian he had once seen at the Finsbury Park Empire. "Well, I dare say it can. It's been waiting a long time."

Left to himself, with his cigars all safe, Mr. Golspie ruminated for a minute or two, then climbed to the upper deck, perhaps to decide what it was that had been waiting so long.

He found himself staring at the immense panorama of the Pool. Dusk was falling; the river rippled darkly; and the fleet of barges across the way was almost shapeless. There was, however, enough daylight lingering on the north bank, where the black piles and the whitewashed wharf edge above them still stood out sharply, to give shape and character to the waterfront. Over on the right, the grey stones of the Tower were faintly luminous, as if they had contrived to store away a little of their centuries of sunlight. The white pillars of the Custom House were as plain as peeled wands. Nearer still, two church spires thrust themselves above the blur of stone and smoke and vague flickering lights: one was as blanched and graceful as if it had been made of twisted paper, a salute to Heaven from the City; the other was abrupt and dark, a despairing appeal, the finger of a hand flung out to the sky. Mr. Golspie, after a brief glance, ignored the pair of them. They in their turn, however, were dominated by the severely rectangular building to the left, boldly fronting the river and looking over London Bridge with a hundred eyes, a grim Assyrian bulk of stone. It challenged Mr. Golspie's memory, so that he regarded it intently. It was there when he was last in London, but was new then. Adelaide House, that was it. But he still continued to look at it, and with respect, for the challenge remained, though not to the memory. Both the blind eyes and the lighted eyes of its innumerable windows seemed to answer his stare and to tell him that he did not amount to very much, not here in London. Then his gaze swept over the bridge to what could be seen beyond. The Cold Storage place, and then, cavernous, immense, the great black arch of Cannon Street Station, and high above, far beyond, not in the city but in the sky and still softly shining in the darkening air, a ball and a cross. It was the very top of St. Paul's, seen above the roof of Cannon Street Station. Mr. Golspie recognised it with pleasure, and even half sung, half hummed, the

line of a song that came back to him, something about "St. Paul's with its grand old Dome." Good luck to St. Paul's! It did not challenge him: it was simply there, keeping an eye on everything but interfering with nobody. And somehow this glimpse of St. Paul's suddenly made him realise that this was the genuine old monster, London. He felt the whole mass of it, spouting and fuming and roaring away. He realised something else too, namely, the fact that he was still wearing his old brown slippers, the ones that Hortensia had given him. He had arrived, had crept right into the very heart of London, wearing his old brown slippers. He had slipped two hundred and fifty cigars past their noses, and had not even changed into his shoes. James Golspie was surveying London in his slippers, and London was not knowing, not caring—just yet. These thoughts gave him enormous pleasure, bringing with them a fine feeling of cunning and strength: he could have shaken hands with himself; if there had been a mirror handy he would probably have exchanged a wink with his reflection.

He walked round the deck. Lights were flickering on along the wharf, immediately giving the unlit entrances a sombre air of mystery. A few men down there were heaving and shouting, but there was little to see. Mr. Golspie continued his walk, then stopped to look across and over London Bridge at the near waterfront, the south bank. Such lighting as there was on this side was very gay. High up on the first building past the bridge, coloured lights revolved about an illuminated bottle, to the glory of Booth's Gin, and further along, a stabbing gleam of crimson finally spelt itself into Sandeman's Port. Mr. Golspie regarded both these writings on the wall with admiration and sympathy. The sight of London Bridge itself too, pleased him now, for all the buses had turned on their lights and were streaming across like a flood of molten gold. They brought another stream of pleasant images into Mr. Golspie's mind, a bright if broken pageant of convivial London: double whiskies in crimson-shaded bars; smoking hot steaks and chops and a white cloth on a little corner table; the glitter and velvet of the

music-halls; knowing gossip, the fine reek of Havanas, round a club fender and fat leather chairs; pretty girls, a bit stiff perhaps (though not as stiff as they used to be) but very pretty and not so deep as the foreign ones, coming out of shops and offices, with evenings to spend and not much else: he saw it all and he liked the look of it. There was a size, a richness, about London. You could find anything or anybody you wanted in it, and you could also hide in it. He had been a fool to stay away so long. But, anyhow, here he was. He took a long and wide and exultant look at the place.

Dinner that night was very good indeed, the best the boat had given him. Mr. Golspie and the captain shared it with the chief engineer, who came beaming and shining from the depths, and the first mate, usually a very wooden fellow, for ever brooding over some mysterious domestic tragedy in Riga, but now for once gigantically social and cheerful. The steward, the one with the cropped head and gold tooth, lavished his all upon them. Bottles that had not been emptied before were emptied now, together with some that were produced for the first time. The talk, so far as Mr. Golspie had any part in it, was conducted in a fantastic mixture of English, German, and the ship's own Baltic language, a mixture it would be impossible to reproduce here, but it went very well, smashing its way through the entanglements of irregular verbs and doubtful substantives, for nothing removes the curse of Babel like food, drink, and good-fellowship. All four grew expansive, bellowed confidences, roared through the fog of cigar smoke, threw back their heads to laugh, and were gods for an hour.

"Very soon we shall meet again," said the captain to Mr. Golspie, clinking glasses for the third time. "Is that not so, my friend?"

"Leave it to me, my boy," replied Mr. Golspie, very flushed, with tiny beads of perspiration on that massive bald front of his.

"You come back when you have finished your business here in London?"

"As to that, I can't say. If I can, I will."

"That is good," said the captain. Then he looked very deep, and

put a finger as big as a pork sausage to his forehead. "And now you will tell us what this business is, eh? In secret. We will not tell."

The chief engineer tugged at the ends of his moustache, which was nearly as large as Mr. Golspie's, and tried to look even deeper than the captain, like the repository of innumerable commercial secrets.

"I say this," cried the huge first mate, who was in no condition now to wait until his opinion had been asked. "I say this. It is good business. It is for the good of our country. I drink to you," he shouted, and promptly did so, with the result that he immediately remembered that disastrous affair at Riga, and sat silent, with the tears in his eyes, for the next twenty minutes.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Mr. Golspie, taking out his cigar and looking at it very knowingly, as if it was a fellow conspirator. "There's no need to make a mystery of it. D'you remember Mikorsky? Wait a minute. Not the little fellow with the office in Danzig, but the big fellow with the beard, in the timber trade. That's the one. Remember him?"

The captain did, and was evidently so pleased by this effort of memory that he appeared to conduct several bars of one of the stormier symphonies. The mate remembered, too, but only nodded, his tearful blue eyes being still fixed on that tragic interior in Riga. The chief engineer did not remember Mikorsky, and, in what seemed nothing less than mental anguish, repeated the name in twenty different tones, beginning very high and ending in a despairing bass.

"I've done one or two little jobs for him," Mr. Golspie continued, "during the time I had a bit of a pull. We'd a night or two together, too. I met him one day, not a month ago, and he said he was just going down into the country, to see his cousin, and I ought to go with him. So I did. I'd nothing better to do. Hot as hell it was down there, too, and I was bitten to death. This cousin of Mikorsky's was in the furniture end of the timber trade, and he'd invented a new process, machine, treatment, everything, for turning out veneers

and inlays. And labour costs next to nothing down there. I asked where all this stuff was going. Well, they'd got orders from Germany and Czecho-Slovakia and Austria and a chance of something in Paris. 'What's it going to cost in London?' I said, showing 'em one of their lines, and they told me. It sounded all right to me, but I didn't say anything. Not then. I went away and made a few enquiries. I found out what they were paying for this sort of stuff in Bethnal Green and Hoxton and those parts, in London, you know, where the furniture's made——"

"Bednal Green, yes," said the chief engineer proudly. "My uncle Stefan was there, yes, old Stefan in Bednal Green. Socialist," he added, as a melancholy afterthought.

"He was, was he?" Mr. Golspie boomed, with a certain brutal heartiness characteristic of him. "Well, good luck to him! I'll get on with the tale. They were paying half as much again for the same sort o' stuff, veneers and inlays, not a bit better, here in London. Couldn't get it where it was produced so cheap, y'see? Didn't look about 'em. They're getting slow here. There's something in this for me, I said to myself, and off I went down there again, to see this other Mikorsky, the cousin. I wanted to know how much of this stuff I could have every month, various lines, and the prices. They told me, and guaranteed it. We had a few drinks on it, and I walk out, with a contract in my pocket, so much of this, that, and the other, at so much, whenever I liked to take it up, and me the sole agent for Great Britain."

"Very good business," said the captain, with a grave judicial air, in spite of his rather goggly eyes. "And now, you sell it all, eh? You make big profit?"

"What I do is to find somebody who's in the way of selling it, somebody who's in this line o' business, and then go in with 'em." Mr. Golspie refreshed himself noisily. "And if I haven't laid my hand on somebody by this time the day after to-morrow, my name's not Jimmy Golspie."

"Make plenty of money, be rich, eh?"

"No, it's too honest. But I'll pick a bit up, to be going on with."

"Ah no, no!" cried the captain, reaching over and patting Mr. Golspie on the shoulder. "You make plenty, here in London. Ho-ho, yes! Plenty! Money here in London—oh!—" And he held out his hands as if he expected the Bank of England to be emptied into them.

"Not so much as you think," said Mr. Golspie, shaking his head very slowly. "Oh no, not at all. They may have it, but it's all tied up. It's not—er—shir—circulating. I tell you, they're slow here, they're slow."

"You think they sleep?"

"That's right. Half asleep, most of 'em."

"Ho-ho," roared the captain. "And you will put them awake?"

"One or two, p'rhaps, I might be able to shake up a bit. If not, I'm on the move again. And I'll have to be on the move now, boys. I told that steward's mate—the fellow that plays the concertina—to go and get me a taxi and take my traps ashore. It ought to be there, at the corner, any minute now. All right then. Just a last one for luck."

They were having this last one, with some formality, when the man returned to say that the taxi was waiting. Mr. Golspie led the way to the deck, and then stopped near the gangway to say good-bye.

"Now for it," he cried, more for his own benefit than for his listeners'. "Straight back into the old rabbit warren. God, what a place! Millions and millions, and most of 'em don't know they're born yet! Eyes and tails, that's all they are, diving in and out of their little holes. The good old rabbit warren. Look at it! Ah, well, it's no good looking at it here because you can't see it. But I've been looking at it. What a place! Well, Chief—well, Captain—this is where I go."

"And the beautiful daughter, the little Lena?" the captain inquired. "Is she here, waiting for you?"

"Not yet. She's still in Paris, with her aunt, but she'll be coming over as soon as I've settled down. Golspie and Daughter, that'll be