

**PENGUIN
BOOKS**

**TWENTY-
FIVE**

**BEVERLEY
NICHOLS**

THE BODLEY HEAD

THE BODLEY HEAD

COMPLETE

UNABRIDGED



TWENTY-FIVE

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Beverley Nichols



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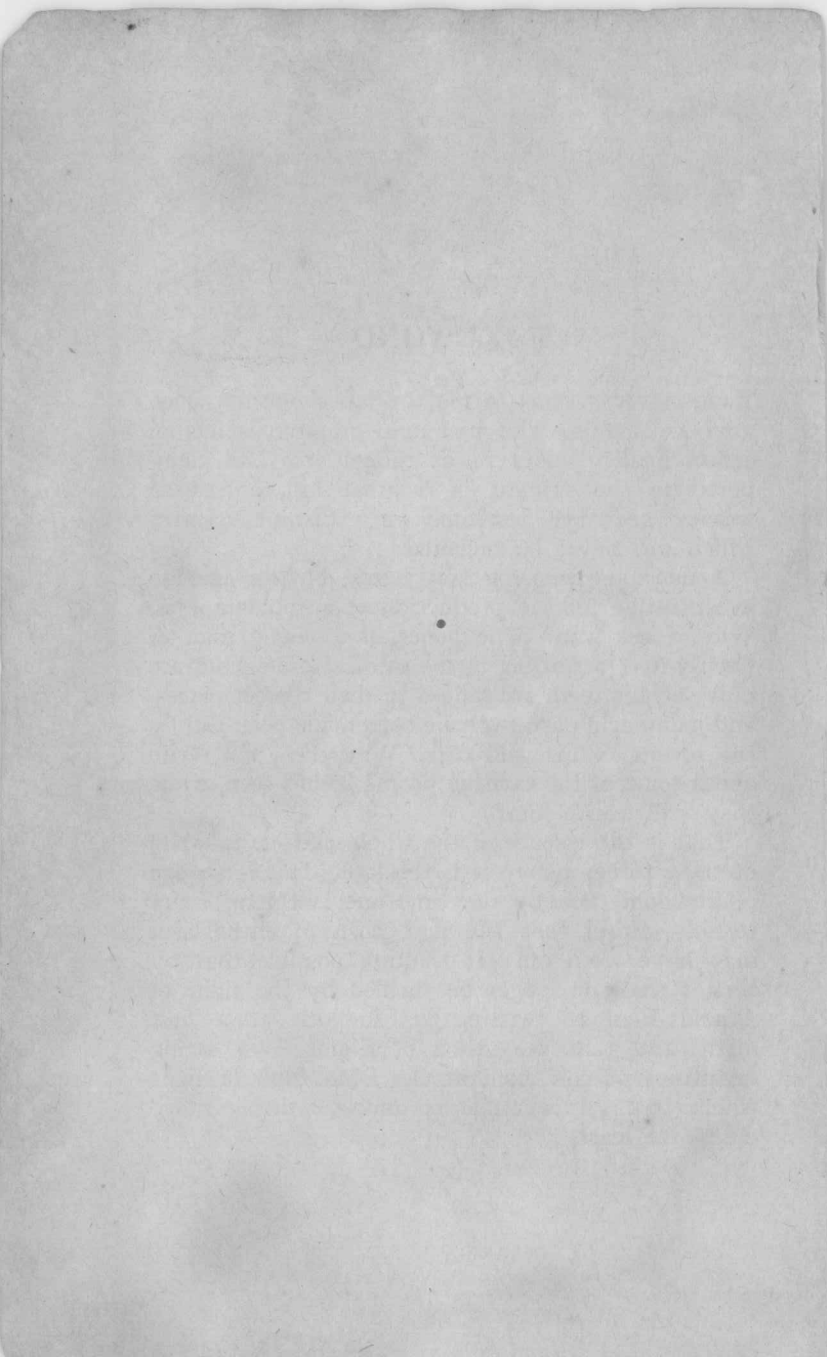
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TO
GEORGE AND BLANCHE

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FOREWORD

TWENTY-FIVE seems to me the latest age at which anybody should write an autobiography. It has an air of finality about it, as though one had clambered to the summit of a great hill, and were waving good-bye to some very distant country which can never be revisited.

A delicious age, you may agree, but an age too irresponsible for the production of autobiographies. Why, I ask you? The bones of a young man of twenty-five (according to the medical profession) are duly set, his teeth are ranged in their correct places, and many arid pastures have been made beautiful by the sowing of his wild oats. Why then, not write about some of the exciting people he has seen, while they still excite him?

That is the essence of the whole matter, to write of these things before it is too late. This is an age of boredom, and by the time one is thirty, I am terribly afraid that the first flush of enthusiasm may have worn off. It is quite possible that by then I shall no longer be thrilled by the sight of Arnold Bennett twisting his forelock at a first night, and that the vision of Elinor Glyn eating quantities of cold ham at the Bath Club (a sight which, to-day, never fails to amuse) will not move me in the least.

FOREWORD—*continued*.

It is also possible that my indignations will have suffered a similar cooling, that I shall no longer feel faintly sick at the sight of the new Regent Street, and shall be able to view the idolization by the British people of Mr. George Robey, if not with approbation, at least with tolerance.

It is to be hoped that this will not be the case, but you must admit, from your own experience of young men who have grown up, that it is quite on the cards. They are faithless to their first hates, they have forgotten their first loves. They turn from the dreams of Oxford to the nightmares of the city, just because the dream is difficult, and the nightmare is so easy. In fact, they grow old.

That is why I have written this book. And from the decrepitude of thirty I shall write another on the same lines. It will be called "Making the Most of Twenty-Eight."

B.N.

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH SOME ENGLISH GENTLEMEN SET OUT ON A STRANGE JOURNEY

HAD one been a Prime Minister there would be every reason for talking of one's first tooth and devoting a chapter or two to its effect upon the history of our times. There would then follow, in succeeding volumes, sketches of the youthful genius from every aspect, with appropriate legends at the top of each page, such as "Backward at School," "A Daring Frolic," "Visit to the Tomb of William Pitt."

But since one has not been a Prime Minister, and since all first teeth greatly resemble one another, and since most small boys are very much alike (for if they aren't, they are horrid)—since, in fact, there is no excuse for being dull, we must begin by making things happen. And I can think of no better moment for ringing up the curtain than when, at the age of nineteen, two months before the Armistice, I was given leave to go to America as Secretary to the British Universities Mission to the United States.

It sounds deadly, but it was really exceedingly amusing, for this mission, before it finished its tour (which was largely for propaganda purposes), was to

come in touch with most of the leading men in America, from President Wilson downwards. Even in England, there were celebrities hanging round us, all telling us with various degrees of pomposity the sort of things which Americans expected Englishmen to do, and the best way not to do them.

Ian Hay was the first man who gave me any information about America that was worth having. I can see him now, standing against a window in the Ministry of Information, a tall, slim figure, in a rather shabby uniform, saying:

"Whatever else you do, don't refer to the Americans as 'children.' It's such a damned insult."

I demanded further suggestions.

"Dozens, if you want them. Don't leave your boots outside the hotel door. Don't get ruffled if a porter slaps you on the back and calls you 'boy.' Don't be surprised if they refer to their country as the peculiar property of the Almighty. For all you know they may be right. It's a marvellous country. And the people! Lovable isn't the word for them. They'll kill you with kindness."

All this I had heard before, but from Ian Hay it sounded different. It is not surprising that he was a success in the States. He is very like his own heroes, who, even when they are talking fourteen to the dozen, give one the impression of being strong and silent. Add to this quality a charming smile, the faintest possible flavour of a Scottish accent, and an air of modesty which is not usually associated with the Creators of best-sellers, and you will have the main ingredients of one of our most typical authors.

If Ian Hay had accompanied us on our Mission he would have had material for a comic masterpiece of English literature. There was the representative of Oxford, who was to lose his boots in every American hotel we were to frequent. There was dear old Sir Henry Jones, whose Scottish-Welsh accents, combined with a heavy beard, an almost complete lack of teeth, and a heavenly smile, were so to intrigue American audiences; Professor J—, the brilliant Irish scientist, who was our official pessimist, and foretold shipwreck, train-wreck, and motor-wreck with unfailing hope; Sir Henry Miers, from Manchester, cool, calm, and capable, who found the Oxford representative's boots for him and helped to interpret some of Sir Henry Jones's more obscure utterances; and last, but certainly not least, Sir Arthur Shipley, the urbane Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge, who never lost his boots, who spoke perfect English, who had always exactly the right word to say to exactly the right person, and without whom we should all probably have been arrested within twenty-four hours of our arrival as a band of undesirable mountebanks.

I wonder if all the English missions which tour the United States, which march in dignified processions through the streets, which blink up at the skyscrapers, which sneeze over the grape-juice and stagger back from the serried headlines of the newspapers . . . I wonder if they are all made up from such human and fallible men as was ours.

Take the case of Sir Henry Jones, one of the sweetest characters and the most generous men I have ever met. He had, in his head, a tooth. One tooth, and no more. The first memory I have of him was in the early morning, when we were

ploughing our way through a choppy sea, with the coast of Scotland misty to the starboard. He put his head through my porthole, and complained bitterly that there was no fresh water in his cabin. "What did he want fresh water for?" I asked, looking sleepily at his flowing beard. He waved his toothbrush through the window, and I gave him my carafe. I wish we were all such optimists. And I hope this story is not too impertinent. A very faint hope, I fear.

Again, Professor J—. It is with no lack of respect that I refer to the more humorous side of his character. Any scientist, from San Francisco to Petrograd, will tell you what the world of astronomy owes to his researches into the theory of the Martian canals. Anybody but a fool would pay homage to his intellect. None the less, for sheer pessimism I have never met his like.

"I took a bath this morning," he said to us, one day at breakfast, "and I did it at the peril of my life."

We wondered what made him think that a bath was so particularly perilous. He explained. In taking his bath it had been necessary for him to take off his patent waistcoat. It had also been necessary for him to take off his clothes. In view of the fact that we were at the moment, in a part of the ocean which was regarded with particular affection by German submarines, both actions had been highly inadvisable. The patent waistcoat for obvious reasons. The dangers of the state of nature, however, he described at greater length. "If a body enters the water," he said, "death takes place by chill just as often as by actual drowning. I have made researches into the matter

and I find that a body covered with clothes does not chill so fast as a body with nothing on. Hence the danger of baths in a situation such as this. Supposing a torpedo had hit us while I was in my bath!"

While we were on the water, a torpedo did actually hit a liner off the Coast of Ireland, though it was not our own vessel. As soon as the news came through, J— was convinced that one of his own relatives, an aged aunt, must have been on board. The fact that she had been bedridden for eight years, the fact that there was no conceivable reason why she should have got up at all, far less have ventured across the Atlantic, weighed with him not at all. He was born like that, and I think he even took a certain grim pleasure in it, realizing the futility of human existence.

When I add that there were in our Mission two ladies, Miss Spurgeon and Miss Sedgwick, the introductory passage to this book is complete.

Have you ever noticed—you who have crossed the Atlantic—the extraordinary effect that the Statue of Liberty has upon those who pass for the first time beneath its shadow? It brings out all sorts of hidden traits in even the most secretive of the passengers. Men who have spent the entire voyage in the bar, whom nobody would accuse of sentimentality, rush out and stand strictly to attention, chin well out, eyes fixed on that impressive brazen lady, much as a dog would fix its eyes on its mistress. Young and flapping ladies, who have lain on the decks in attitudes which they apparently consider seductive, stand with open mouths and unpowdered noses, trying to remember the date of

the American Declaration of Independence. Fathers bring out their children and regard the statue with an air of proprietorship as though they themselves had been largely responsible for its erection. And as for the poets . . .

We had on board one rather celebrated young poet who I am sure will never forget the Statue of Liberty—whether or no the statue will ever forget him is another question. His name was Robert Nichols, and he was being sent out by the English Government as the most accomplished of all our war poets. He had created rather a sensation at home by his volume, *Ardours and Endurances*, which contained, in the opinion of the critics, much the best war poetry which had been produced. During the voyage over I fear he had not been much in the mood for writing poetry, unless it were of the style of Rupert Brooke's dreadful "Channel Crossing," for he had been groaning with seasickness in his cabin. But the statue cured him of all that. As soon as he heard that we were about to pass under it, he emerged pale but determined and came up to me, where I was standing by the railings.

"I'm going to salute the statue," he said.

"Well, hadn't you better get your hat?" I asked. "You can't salute without a hat on."

"I don't care a damn about the hat," replied Robert, and without any more ado, swung his hand behind his ear, where it remained quivering like any guardsman's. Further conversation under these circumstances would, I realized, be sacrilege not only on the spirit of liberty but on the spirit of poetry as well, and so I held my peace. But it was a pity that Robert had somewhat miscalcu-