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Imagine a town the size of Colombo, the capital of an old British colony, and with a population of two hundred and fifty thousand souls, having no sort of theatre, either European or Sinhalese, but instead a wretched "public hall," which is totally unsuited to the requirements of the town. No wonder most touring companies out East give Ceylon the go-by !

Fancy living—out East, of all parts of the world—in a town where most of the residents retire to bed soon after 9 P.M., and whose servants consider themselves badly treated if asked to do duty after dinner at night. Anyone who judges the East by Colombo will be grievously disappointed in the Orient.

Therefore if you think of coming East, and wish to get the most out of life, go elsewhere than Colombo. If, on the other hand, you like narrow suburban life, and the petty scandal and foolishness of what is, according to the words of one of His Majesty's judges, the limited intellectual outlook of something familiarly known as "Upper Tooting," make your home in Colombo. In which case I wish you joy of it.





## CHAPTER XX

### *Impressions of England after Long Absence*

**T**O know and appreciate England fully it is necessary to have been abroad for a really lengthy period. Those people who have never experienced the joys of home-coming after exile can have little or no conception of what this return means—the first real holiday after long absence from your native land. You may be coming home on leave, or you may be returning permanently; it is all one for the first few weeks, but later on there is a vast difference.

First impressions are ever the most vivid, and as these quickly fade I am writing from notes I made during the first few weeks after I arrived in London.

Amid the dust-storms of Irak, with its high, dry temperature, and when drenched in the moist unpleasantness of the tropical heat of the Indian plains, the exile thinks longingly of England and all that England means to him. It stands, among other things, for health, renewed vigour of mind and body, pure water, and food of infinite variety.

Your first impulse on landing differs according to your sex: if you are a man you feel like falling down and kissing the very ground upon which you stand, while women have told me they had the insane desire to throw their arms round the neck of the first policeman they came across.

As a striking contrast to the dark-skinned crowds which throng Indian cities—olive in Bombay, brown in Calcutta, almost black in Madras—the sea of white faces in the London streets was very noticeable at first. And the city itself had changed in many ways: old landmarks had disappeared, streets had been widened, and many





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new buildings erected. After an absence of nine years I noticed many changes.

A new generation has arisen which knows not the War, and many of my generation who remember would fain forget. London is full of war memorials to the British dead, while live ex-Service men tramp the streets in their thousands, seeking employment with a dogged patience and endurance which is a tragic memorial to the living.

How soon we forget! London is once again overrun by the foreign element. You find them performing at music-halls and theatres, while clever British artists seek vainly for work. At one famous cabaret I found almost the entire programme filled by foreigners: French, American—any nationality but British. The accent of most of the waiters, too, would have been considered sufficient to cause their internment during the war. I wondered as I watched this particular show whether the management had any conception of what it feels like to an Englishman back from the tropics after many years to find London given over to the foreigner in this way. Poor Harry Fragson seems to have no successor willing or able to set to music this very real grievance of his fellow-artists, and thereby cause British audiences to consider carefully their placid acceptance of this unpalatable fare of foreign importation which is being served up to them night after night. It is expensive, and much of it is bad, stupid, unintelligent and unintelligible to the average Briton.

England in general, and London in particular, appears on the surface prosperous to a degree. It is certainly as fascinating as ever to the holidaymaker with money to spend: light and music are everywhere; many more people throng the streets and crowd the restaurants and places of entertainment. In the West End money appears to be plentiful, while the temptation to spend freely is dangled more cleverly than ever before your eyes.

The universality of the lunch, tea and dinner orchestra





is very noticeable, for nowadays no large store or restaurant seems complete without those artists who so successfully take the "rest" out of restaurant and put the "din" into dinner. Still, for all that, it is very jolly, and it is especially refreshing to find places where it is possible to enjoy a dance on Sunday afternoon or evening—an almost unheard-of thing in other days.

How good it was once again to have a cut from a joint of genuine roast beef, after living for years on scraggy mutton, emaciated cow-meat, or the everlasting curry-and-rice of the unchanging East. How good once again to see the top of an egg protruding boldly from the egg-cup, instead of having to dive down into the depths of the receptacle and chase the oval object with a spoon. It was good to have a plentiful supply of fresh and wholesome water, which needed no boiling or doctoring to make it fit for human consumption. And it was certainly comforting to be able once again to wear tweeds and a warm cap, after being condemned for nine-tenths of each of many past years to dress in cotton or silk suits, which soil or crumple into damp unpleasantness after a few hours' usage. My head was at last freed from the binding pressure of the *sola topi*; my rapidly thinning hair could grow thick once again.

Talking about dress reminds me that in some ways we in the East do things better than people in a post-war England.

"Shall I dress?" appears to be a very necessary question to put when asked out to dinner in London nowadays, for few people seem to trouble about changing when going out for the evening. Many Londoners now take their pleasures clad in their office clothes—a mere postscript as it were to the writing of the last business letter of the day. Time was when they commenced another life when work was finished, but now day is merged in night, with no apparent break. This dressing for dinner seems to be of little account in England, where the slight trouble brings so much extra pleasure





and comfort; whereas in the East dressing for dinner is the invariable rule, although it is an uncomfortable and seemingly useless procedure in many cases.

Maybe people in England go out in the evening less than of yore; certainly the cost of laundry has increased. In fact one hostess of mine gave it as her considered opinion that men to-day grudge the eighteen-pence charged for the laundering of a boiled shirt. Greater London has much to answer for in this respect: many people now live so far outside London itself that there is literally no time in which to travel home and change between a business and pleasure engagement, and once a man has got inside his own door after a tiring day in the City he is loath to go out again. Still, whatever the reason may be, this change in the habits of Londoners seems regrettable.

I noticed more colour everywhere than was to be seen when I was in England before. Houses are no longer painted nearly all alike. Cheerful colour-schemes are to be seen; orange doors and bright curtains gladden the eye and show up gaily against the leaden sky. An air of joyous unconventionality has, to a large extent, taken the place of the monotonous sameness with which England used to be afflicted in other days. Particularly is the brilliance in colour noticeable in women's dress. Any crowded shopping centre, when viewed from the top of an omnibus, is a cheerful sight; the hats and dresses of the fair sex form a veritable kaleidoscope of gay colours. The umbrella manufacturers have at length discovered that an umbrella need not necessarily be black in order to be rainproof. The effect of all this colour is cheering to the soul, and compensates to a great extent for the too often cheerless weather.

Particularly striking was the amazing cleanliness of the streets, with their almost complete absence of dust or mud, especially in London; though even in the country nearly every main road is now tar-sprayed or otherwise rendered dustless. What a change from the old days,





when dust was laid on dust, well watered and pressed in, only to rise again the first dry day a heavy vehicle passed over the surface of the newly "mended" road. Motoring has indeed come into its own, and the horse as a draught animal is slowly but surely retiring from service. Indeed it is nothing short of cruelty to make horses use many of the new roads, which are polished like a mirror and as slippery as ice. It was a relief to see no straying cows and bullocks such as clutter the pavements of even the greatest Indian cities. I missed also the heaps of garbage, which, in the East, you find strewn everywhere and surrounded by clouds of flies; likewise those blood-red stains of the chewed betel-nut with which Indians stain everything within range.

There are some once familiar things in England which are there no longer, and for these I had no regrets. Gone is the man leading a captive bear; gone, too, is the organ-grinder with his half-starved and wholly frozen monkey. When one has been accustomed to seeing animals in their natural environment it is not good to see them being dragged through the streets in captive misery, their degraded charms and shorn strength exhibited for man's financial gain.

I was sorry to find that D.O.R.A is still alive and apparently good for many years to come. Her stupid regulations persist, though all need for them departed when peace was declared—or certainly very shortly afterwards. Englishmen home on leave will be surprised to find that while many small shops keep open late at night, only certain commodities may be sold from the stock in those shops. You may buy a candle, but you cannot buy a match after 8 P.M. with which to light it; and although you can buy sweets or cigarettes from an automatic machine outside the tobacconist's shop, the proprietor of both shop and machine may not sell you cigarettes over the counter. If you are in the vicinity of Piccadilly Circus and for old time's sake stroll into that cosmopolitan hotel known on every fighting front as "the subaltern's



paradise," you may get a whisky-and-soda in the lounge if you tell the waitress you are a resident. If, however, you admit you are not for the moment a resident, you must wait for your drink until 7 P.M. So I could go on multiplying instances of the puerile regulations which still hold England in their grip. You lovers of bridge keep tight hold on your packs of cards, for otherwise if you land in London after 8 P.M. you will not be able to purchase any, and must for once forgo your nightly "rubber."

The excuse that these regulations are kept going to protect shop assistants against long hours is ridiculous. It is the shopkeepers in the suburbs who feel the pinch. These little people are working long hours, not for fun but to make a bare living. The proprietor of the shop is the man behind the counter, and he relies very largely on the "catch trade" which comes his way of a night because of the large suburban population around him. Why should he be compelled to throw away the remainder of his stock of ice-cream because it has struck eight, and he is not allowed to sell it to the young couple who stroll in after their evening walk and want something cold? If the shopkeeper likes to work long hours in order that he may pay his rent regularly, who has the moral right to try to force him into bankruptcy? Nobody. Yet D.O.R.A. has a legal right, filched from the people of England under threat of a national crisis. The retention of this right many years after the emergency has ceased to be is a scandal at which every returned Englishman marvels.

Verily the people at home are the most patient in the world, and the most law-abiding. I wonder for how long this will be the case.

Fashions have changed very much since 1916. I like the short skirts of the women and girls of to-day, but I hate their short hair; and the shorter it is the more I hate it. Ten years ago women displayed more originality; now they all look alike, with their cropped heads and





pull-on hats. Woman has sacrificed her crowning glory for the sake of displaying her neck and ears, and in the process has lost much of that secret charm which previously made her attractive to man.

The ordinary man likes his fellows to be manly and women to be feminine, and nothing is so essentially feminine as beautiful long hair. Most men will agree with me, but few have the courage to express their opinion or stand up for their convictions in front of their "beheaded" wives and sisters.

Yes, I thought the women in England had lost charm. And they have had to pay for their independence. How otherwise can you explain that it is no longer unusual to see a man retain his seat when a woman enters his presence? Seats in trains, tubes and buses are securely held by their male occupants; women are allowed to stand up for their rights—in more senses than one. Such behaviour amongst white people in the East is quite unthinkable!

As a counterblast to the masculine woman there is growing up a race of feminine men. Thank goodness they are confined to the large towns at home, and it is to be hoped that public opinion will wither these delicate plants before they attain maturity.

You will find plenty of these long-haired young men, with high-pitched voices and feminine ways, in London. If you are lucky enough not to meet them personally you can hardly fail to see their imitators on the stage. The plays which were drawing the biggest crowds when I was at home were those which were known to illustrate all that was most degenerate and distasteful in modern "society" life. It took a good pair of opera-glasses, and plenty of imagination, for the occupants of the circle to be able successfully to sort out the men from the women on the stage before them.

However, let me come to dogs, for, as the great illusionist, Lafayette, used to say: "The more I see of fellow-man the more I love my dog."





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Even in the dog-world fashions have changed. I missed the bulldogs, the retrievers, and the massive St Bernards I used to meet when out walking. Gone, too, are the Dalmatian coach-hounds, the plum-pudding dogs of our childhood. No longer do their spotted bodies trot along beneath smart dog-carts. Of course there must be some of the old breeds of dogs left in England, but they are no longer fashionable ; you do not see them in the parks and streets as was the case a few years ago.

I saw plenty of new breeds, notably the Alsatian wolf-hound ; but he too closely resembles the wolf and jackal of the desert to have much claim on my conservative affections. These Alsatians have already proved costly pets to a great many people, and I think their popularity will be short-lived.

The standard of living in England has undoubtedly risen since the war ; mere observation alone shows that to be true. People are better dressed than they used to be, and this is the case with even the poorest. It is rarely that you now see children running about minus shoes and stockings. True, there is misery in plenty, but it is better clothed than of yore.

There is much less drunkenness. The previously all too-frequent sight of a drunken man or woman has practically vanished from the streets. It is good to realize that this has been made possible without the introduction of prohibition. The drunkard is no longer considered a fit subject for humour, but a menace and nuisance to temperate people—something decidedly out of fashion.

The amazing increase in street traffic cannot fail to impress the newly returned exile. It is almost as difficult to cross the street in London as it is in Paris.

The gyratory system of traffic speeding-up has been extended all over the West End, and the pedestrian must now run for his life or burrow underground like a rabbit. The stream of traffic seems endless, and with thousands of new motors coming on the streets every week no one can tell what ultimate solution of the





traffic problem will be found. There are now few of the old type of omnibus left. In their place are gigantic vehicles, broad and steady, with sensible covered-in tops, suitable for a climate which produces more rain than sunshine. Sliding glass windows provide ventilation, and these new buses are most comfortable and well-lit public conveyances. A great change for the better.

There is no better way of seeing England than by car, so I entered a post office in one of the London suburbs and asked politely for a driving licence. The young lady looked mildly surprised and directed me to Westminster. I was hopelessly out of date. In the old days one got a driving licence from any post office just as easily as one bought a stamp. Now all that is changed. So off I went to Westminster.

The uniformed attendant at the gate at once spotted me as a stranger. He was right; it was my first visit to the County Hall, Westminster. Passing beneath the archway I was making uncertainly for the first pair of swing doors in view, when his friendly hail, "Can I help you, sir?" caused me to pause.

"Indeed you can!" was my instant reply. "I want a driving licence."

The attendant piloted me into a kind of glorified sentry-box, arranged pen and ink before a printed form, and instructed me in the filling up thereof.

"Now, sir, go straight through those doors, turn sharp to the left and take the form to Room 94."

I thanked him gratefully for his courtesy and went on my way.

The man in uniform must have had a busy day. I found myself one of a hundred others lined up in a queue which was passing in an anti-clockwise direction round a large room. Our objective was a long counter, like that of a bank, with substantial-looking rails dividing us from the busy officials seated behind. These gentlemen seemed to have solved the problem of perpetual





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motion, for they worked without the slightest pause, and at great speed.

What a mixed and orderly crowd we were ! It reminded me of the crowd, on that hectic day on which commenced the General Strike, which lined up in the courtyard of the Foreign Office to register for service during the national emergency. There were young men and old men, little slips of girls and middle-aged matrons, while here and there a youth was to be seen holding himself especially erect, as though to prove his written pledge of being over seventeen. There were young men of fashion ; stout, red-nosed taxi-drivers, whose appearance recalled vividly the days of hansom and "growlers" ; smart drivers of the Royal Army Service Corps, complete with numerous army forms filled up in triplicate ; white-coated bus-drivers, their shiny, blank-peaked caps acock at the approved angle, all waiting and anxious to be attended to, but all equally good-tempered and considerate of the rest.

Thus we moved slowly round, without any pushing or flurry, taking our turn to obtain the right to drive and control an engine of pleasure or business, for a period of twelve months, upon the highways of Great Britain. And we were all certain to get our licences, quite irrespective of any special ability, or even competence, to drive motor-vehicles. The drivers of cars and buses plying for public hire had of course all passed their police tests, but the rest of us might, for all the authorities knew to the contrary, be blind, deaf, dumb or quite mentally unsound. No matter : five shillings and a simple form correctly filled in did the trick every time.

First we came one by one in front of the official I will call the scrutineer ; he saw that the form was correctly filled in. That which belonged to the little lady who immediately preceded me had to go back twice for revision. Her third name, Henrietta, she had coyly omitted to declare ; she had also forgotten to affirm that she was over seventeen. The scrutineer smilingly, but firmly





insisted on these necessary details. But he was very tender withal, though I was not surprised at his implied credulity as to the girl's age; she looked a mere child.

A hastily scrawled initial, the imprint of a rubber stamp, and I was safely over the first hurdle. Next on the list of obstacles to be negotiated came the fatherly and urbane cashier. He was very brief. "Five shillings, please," and he took my form and stamped it yet again, then tossed it into a handy wicker basket, whence it was retrieved by a young man bent low over a desk and rapidly qualifying for writer's cramp, to judge by the speed at which his pen travelled.

"Now pass right on, gentlemen, please; make room for the public," was the cashier's constantly repeated admonition; and we who could no longer consider ourselves merely of the public moved on accordingly, duly accredited and accepted drivers of motor-propelled vehicles, but yet waiting for the official card with which we could for the next twelve months satisfy the curiosity of any inquisitive policeman.

We now stood in a group, six or seven deep, before three industrious fellows, who were busily dealing with the little licence-books which came at them, thick and fast as bullets, from the aforesaid stooping youth. Each of the men had his own basket, into which a fair share of books fell, to be adequately and swiftly dealt with in strict rotation.

A name is called, and in response an arm is thrust from out the waiting crowd. A new or renewed licence changes hands, and the proud owner slips out of the room clothed with full authority to take his or her place at the steering-wheel of a car, or to drive a motor-cycle. And so the stream of motorists must go on all day and most of every day, Sundays and Saturday afternoons excepted. Motorists manufactured by mass production at the rate of five a minute. It was all most efficient and praiseworthy.

Thus it was that I obtained my motor-driving licence





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when on leave last time; and if the time expended was greater than was the case in pre-war days, the time I spent in the County Hall, Westminster, was vastly more interesting.

Having been accustomed so long to the erratic and nerveless control of traffic in the East, the excellent system of police control in London struck me with renewed admiration after absence. Despite the amazing volume of traffic, London is still a much safer place for both motorist and pedestrian than is either Bombay or Calcutta. The police have much to do with it, but I cannot omit to pay a tribute to both public and private drivers who have such admirable road sense—something which is almost entirely lacking in drivers of the East.

When I was in England previously there was no broadcasting. In the East there is still very little compared with the highly efficient and highly organized British Broadcasting Corporation, which brings such joy and entertainment into thousands of lives which before were comparatively empty. No great enthusiasm for broadcasting can be expected in the East until the outside world can be picked up with ease and certainty, and until the problem of atmospherics is successfully solved once and for all time.

The programmes in the East are as yet mostly of an amateurish nature, and a certain monotony is inevitable in these early days.

To the newly returned exile, wireless at home is perhaps the greatest wonder of all; certainly it struck me as the change which was the most welcome. As I travelled up from Tilbury the many aerials, mounted on even the smallest houses, were an astonishing sight. Even if people cannot afford a first-class clothes-line they will manage to fit up a first-class aerial. I appreciated this point of view better after I had successfully installed a simple crystal set, got thoroughly bitten by the craze, and changed over to a three-valve loud-speaker set. It is the thing I miss most on my return to the East.





There appears to be a shortage of housing accommodation all over the world. I left it in the East and found the problem just as acute in the West. The difficulty of retaining sufficient servants to keep in order a big country house has caused many of these places to be virtually abandoned. Their owners have taken flats in London, so that now it is extremely difficult to secure reasonable accommodation in the residential portions of the city, or in the suburbs. Houses have been subdivided, and each tenant is expected to pay for his portion of the house more than the entire rent of the whole place. Basement cellars, often damp and comfortless, which in other days were used for storing empty trunks and rubbish, are now cleaned up and let at high rents as "self-contained flats." My search for a flat brought me into contact with many such places, and I secured one finally, which was far from suitable, only by buying the entire contents at the owner's valuation. Even so I was considered extremely lucky.

Nothing is more noticeable in England to-day than the grip which the cinema has throughout the country. The old suburban theatre has almost disappeared, throttled out of existence by its speechless competitor. So it is in the West End. The Tivoli is gone and in its place is a cinema; the Oxford music-hall has been pulled down, and the Empire itself is even now being converted into a picture palace. Only the Coliseum, the Alhambra, and the Holborn Empire remain to show the visitor to the West End what London can offer in the way of genuine variety entertainment.

Yet for all that there are in Greater London to-day 482 theatres, music-halls and cinemas (it is almost unnecessary to add that most of these are cinemas), there are 122 golf courses, 350 hard tennis courts, 65 centres of public dancing, 170 royal, ecclesiastical and other buildings open to the public, 827 restaurants to suit every purse, and thirty miles of shops.

Not such a bad list; and those who may think of





spending most of their leave in London might do far worse, as the old city can still offer an array of attractions unequalled in the world.

But post-war England, and especially London, as a place of permanent residence is a much less attractive proposition. You find many things which are unexpected and unwelcome. There is the present high cost of living—fully 80 per cent. higher than it was ten years ago—and very high taxation. You notice the absence of the half-penny daily and evening newspapers; the depreciated purchasing power of the nimble penny; the increased postal, telegraph and railway rates; also the unrest in the ranks of labour generally, with its attendant strikes, constantly occurring in this, that or the other industry. Business men who are apparently prosperous tell you that they are not making any money at all. They are living on their capital.

Worst of all is the appalling number of men and women willing, but unable, to find employment. The number is much greater than official figures indicate, and they are bad enough in all conscience, hovering as they do, month after month, around the  $1\frac{1}{4}$  million mark. These official figures represent only registered unemployed. And the number of men who are tramping the streets in search of work who yet do not come into this category must be very great indeed.

On the other hand you cannot help noticing the increased amount of spending which goes on, the greatly enlarged advertising space occupied in newspapers and magazines, the numberless gigantic advertisement hoardings, and the many electrical advertising devices which brighten the streets at night. Then there are those really astonishing figures from the Motor Show of 1926, where, despite an increased admission fee, Olympia was packed every day of the Show, and the number of cars sold easily broke all previous records.

It is all very perplexing to the Englishman newly returned from overseas.





Yet, social and political unrest notwithstanding, there still remains in the United Kingdom a solid background of unshakable tradition; the heart of the Empire is sound.

London is still the most fascinating of cities; it is good to feel you are at the hub of the universe once more. Its people are the most human, and the Cockney remains the most hardy and cheerful of men. Why, the very wax models in the shop windows seem in these days to be full of life!

The call of the East is forgotten in the glory of home-coming, but if you have been East of Suez sufficiently long you will hear the call again, sooner or later. Inevitably you will miss the sun in its full splendour, soon you will sicken of the almost endless rain and chilly cold. The constraint of an enforced suburban life will make you chafe your bonds, and at the call you will break away once more.

Thus in the end the East will get you, even as it has me.

THE END

KOB