

**OPEN
LETTER OF
AN OPTIMIST**

HUGH WALPOLE

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OPEN LETTER OF AN OPTIMIST

By

HUGH WALPOLE

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"We'll see a finer Britain after all this than there's ever been." That is the statement—challenging in its optimism—with which Sir Hugh Walpole starts his open letter to a friend. In it he discusses two Britains—the Britain we are fighting to

establish in security and the Britain which is already deservedly doomed, that insular Britain of old snobberies based on birth and wealth. It is, in little, the spiritual autobiography of a man driven by experience—in Liverpool slums and Russian Revolution—from the Ivory Tower to which his class and education might have condemned him. And because he is an artist he can look back with tolerance and even affection on that old world of country houses, of footmen carrying hot-water jugs, and feudal charity in baskets, where the Eighteenth Century still seemed to linger—"a wonderful world for a small number of persons"—and at the same time forward with hope to the new Britain, "truly educated, truly socialist, truly a country governed by the People for the good of the People".

FOR ALAN BOTT

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OPEN LETTER OF AN OPTIMIST

DEAR ALAN,

Two or three nights ago when, among the five or six of us, argument was becoming rather heated, I said: "We'll see a finer Britain after all this than there's ever been."

Now I'm known for an optimist who isn't very good at figures; anyway pessimists always have an easier argument—so I was challenged and then jeered at for my muddled romanticism.

Those jeers rather stuck in my throat. Not that I'm not used to them, and, in any case, after you've reached fifty you don't give a damn; you have learned that certain values are true values, for yourself, anyway. But the jeers stuck, I fancy, because the cause of them was so very important. I believed, and profoundly believed, that Britain would, after this war, be a finer, better place than the Britain before it. I believed—and believe—that this horrible foul war has really saved Britain—that it was necessary for her salvation. Why? What are my reasons? Can I marshal them, or some of them, and make them sound in any way convincing to hard-headed cynics like you? I have chosen you because you are one of my very best friends. And because for you facts are facts. Facts you must have if you are to be persuaded. But, most of all, I have chosen you because you know me really as I am.

You have often scoffed at my romanticism and optimism, but you have always insisted that I am not nearly as 'fluffy' as I like to make myself out to be, that I have in me a pleasant

strain of malice and can make a bargain with the best of them.

But my character doesn't matter here. I am really writing to you because you do know that I am sincere in three things: my love of Britain, my love of people, and a belief in God. All these three passions are at the root of my optimism. If you did not know me, with all my faults, contradictions and weaknesses, to be sincere in these three beliefs—my country, my fellow-beings, God—it would be of no use to write to you.

The Terrible Week

Every man's idea of the future comes out of his personal character and the interests that arise from that. I am, and have always been, whether for good or bad, an artist, and the arts—painting, music, literature—have been my great preoccupation in life. Politics and economics have always been beyond me. Too long, as I see now, the Ivory Tower has been my refuge. One night last May drove me out of it for ever, although I hope that I shall be allowed, from time to time, to return to it as a guest.

That night in May—it was really a week, May 17th to May 24th, 1940—was one of the turning-points of my life and will be behind everything that I write in this letter to you.

For a whole week I was in a panic, the terrible week during which the Germans swept across France. For a whole week I did not sleep (an astonishing thing for me!) and saw, not only France, not only Britain, but the whole world conquered by an evil, foul doctrine of cruelty, plunder, greed, savagery, a doctrine the most crude and evil since the Middle Ages. I saw, incidentally, myself beaten in a Concentration Camp, and I saw happening to Britain all the things that the authors of that admirable story, *Loss of Eden*, have since then so brilliantly described. Then came the Miracle of Dunkirk—an adventure that will prove, I think, to be one of the turning moments of history—and I knew panic no more.

But the fact is that, during that horrible week, I saw Britain as I had never seen her before, and loved her as I had never loved her before. I will admit—and this will in the end assist my argument—that it was the old pre-1914 Britain that I saw.

I had had an odd childhood and upbringing and this had given me a peculiar vision of my country. I was born in New Zealand, came home for two years at the age of five, lived in New York for three years, was sent home to school in England and was alone there, except for relations, until I was twelve.

The Eighteenth Century Lingered

I stayed, during those years, in many old English houses, some grand, some simple, but all soaked in the Victorian

middle to upper class atmosphere. Everyone around me believed in the difference of the classes. The Eighteenth Century still lingered in that world. In one house where I stayed as a small boy I would wake on an icy morning to see the two footmen enter, one carrying a large jug, the other a small one. These they would ceremoniously empty into a round tin bath, they would each draw a window-curtain and then, one following the other in military fashion, withdraw while I would gaze in misery from my four-poster at the little bath so far away and hesitate before the horrible plunge.

In this same house I would accompany an elder relation on her kindly visits to the villagers, literally helping with the blankets, the soup and the coal that figure so beneficently in Victorian novels. Yes, I have myself been part of this old, almost legendary Britain.

I went to three schools: at the first of them I was tortured, at the second I was happy, at the third I was miserable, being a day-boy. At none of them was I educated. But at all of them I learned the importance of the difference of the classes: at all of them I was encouraged to become the vilest of snobs, and, at the third of them where I was a day-boy, I felt the force on myself of some of that snobbery.

At Cambridge I would go on Sundays and help with a Mission. All that I remember about this is a small boy in the Sunday School being caught with a silver watch that he had stolen from the pocket of one of the undergraduates, his look of wide-eyed terror and his reiterated protest: "I wanted to give my mother a surprise."

The Liverpool Slums

After Cambridge I had an opportunity of learning that something was wrong with my England, for I joined, for a year, the Mission to Seamen in Liverpool. I did not, I fear, take that chance, but I did learn at least one thing—that the seamen in question were, in most respects, better men than I, having more wisdom, more courage and more honesty.

It was the Liverpool slums that should have stirred my discomfort. That same discomfort should already have been stirred by the streets of Lambeth in London—my father had been rector of Lambeth for some years. But nothing happened at all. I was preoccupied with my solemn intention to be a great novelist; what ought to have happened was a linking by my novelist's imagination of that childhood's picture of my elderly relative, the frost glittering on the lawns, the marble statues of Cæsar and Socrates, the footmen holding the cans with the hot soup, the horses pawing the frozen ground, my elderly relative proceeding, wrapped in furs, down the wide stone steps ... and the naked, drunken labourer in Liverpool, sitting on the edge of the filthy bed in that filthy room, nursing in his grey-white arms his little boy who had been hit in the face by the labourer's drunken friend.... Perhaps the contrasted pictures were too obvious, resembled too closely the old melodramas by Mary Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood. Only, in my experience they were facts, not fiction.

And so, dear Alan, until the war of 1914 I continued my exciting personal life of budding, prosperous novelist, seeing only the little limited world of my career.

In the Russian Revolution

Alas, throughout the war of 1914-1918 I learned no more about Britain, for I was away from it, in Russia, during nearly the whole of it. But I did, perhaps, learn something about Russia and became therein a little less provincial. I had one experience, in fact, about which I have already written and spoken, that taught me more than anything that had, until then, happened to me.

That was my sharing, for three days, in the joyful expectant glory of a suddenly liberated people. The glory faded, the people were not liberated, but it makes no matter. For three days we walked the streets of Petrograd, thousands and thousands of us, under the sun, singing, believing that not only ourselves but the whole world was liberated. I say that it was only an illusion, or seems now to be so. Nevertheless what was true for three days—that joy, that generosity, that trust—may be true one day for ever!

At least, as I have said, that Russian experience may have made me a little less provincial and, in Britain again, I think it may be true to say that from 1919 to 1940 I was never quite comfortable in my mind. Wasn't that true of all of us?

I shared in the boom that followed 1919. I had some successful lecture-tours in America. My novels sold well, both there and here. I was prosperous. I enjoyed life. I travelled and saw the world. But I never felt, for a single moment, that the ground was solid beneath my feet.

I was aware, perhaps, dimly that the Britain of my childhood and youth was going, if not already gone. We had Labour Governments and I began to be aware that the two Nations, as Disraeli once called them, were in very active conflict.

I had, during those years, no doubt at all as to which nation I belonged. I didn't wish, I suppose, to return to the old pre-war world. I found the social life in London fearfully dull. I sold my house and lived, for the most part, in the country. I found that the men I came to know in the Cumbrian country where I now lived were the best men I had yet met anywhere. But I didn't *dream* of giving up anything that I had to help anyone who had less than I. Not in any real sense. I had my private charities, of course, like anyone else. It pleased me to be generous when I could be generous so easily.

As to the *real* Britain and the changes that were then coming to her, I never gave it an active thought: my private life was so full, happy and busied.

When the General Strike came I helped, in a small way, to defeat it and was triumphant at its defeat. I was right to be triumphant in so far as it was a proof of the energy, enterprise

and bravery of the real Englishman, just as the evacuation of Dunkirk was afterwards to be.

But as to why there had been a strike, whether there were not evidence here of a new Britain, whether there were not wrongs here that must, and one day would, be righted, to all this I never gave a thought.

Something Wrong

And yet I was increasingly uncomfortable and increasingly inactive about doing anything to heal my discomfort. My life in Cumberland brought me a little nearer to reality. I did realise that something was wrong with agriculture, something wrong with education, something wrong with finance, something wrong with religion. Something even was wrong with our Government because everything that happened in the House of Commons seemed to be farther and farther removed from reality.

I did, in fact, realise—although the realisation did not at all change my conduct of life—that the old Britain, the Britain of my childhood and youth, was gone for ever.

But, Alan, before I go any farther I do wish, very urgently, to argue something in favour of that old world. It had, I can assure you, its very absolute merits and virtues. The passing of time brings in strange revenges. When I was a young man in London the Victorian Fifties to Eighties were the mock

and derision of my generation. Now, thirty-five years later, with two world wars between, the Mid-Victorians are far enough back to shine with new nostalgic colours. Tennyson, Trollope, Peacock, Arnold are read with a fresh appreciation. Even the Pre-Raphaelites are beginning to be in demand again! But the Britain of 1890 to 1910 is now held by us to be revolting because of its money, its neglect of the poor, and above all its Imperialism. We detest that Britain because we were quite certain that the war of 1914-1918 would destroy it. And so, indeed, it did. Our mistake was that we were neither wise nor intelligent nor godly enough to set about creating any kind of noble world instead of it. America and France are equally to blame in this.

But before I go on, Alan, to demonstrate to you why I think that we are in better case this time than we were then for creating a nobler world, do let me strike one blow in favour of that old abused one.

That old England—yes, even until that blazing summer of 1914—was a wonderful world for a small number of persons. That fact is both its glory and its shame.

The Doomed Fortress

Perhaps the world will never know again so Paradisial a mode of living as the moneyed classes enjoyed in England from 1890 to 1910. There was leisure, there was kindly and good humour, there was much intelligent patronage of

literature, painting and music, there was good conversation, there was a code of morality that was both easy and, on the surface at least, decent, there was religion at least in form, there was, above all, an apparent security that allowed the citizens of this little world to preserve their brows unfurrowed with unseemly anxieties.

It appeared to be not only secure but universal; the best kind of life led by the best kind of people. We, with all our terrible experience behind us, see the citizens of this world as a beleaguered garrison in a doomed fortress, beleaguered but fancying themselves as free as air.

John Galsworthy's *Man of Property* revealed all this and because of the world events that so soon followed its publication that book will seem, to generations to come, a symbol and a portent.

Another work of imagination also was a portent, but a more terrible one, for the author of it, genius though he was, was, in that book at least, on the side of destruction. I mean Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* whose heroes—Stalky, MacTurk and Beetle—were infant Görings, Himmlers and Goebbels.

The first buttress of my optimistic argument is the narrowness, blindness and arrogance of that older Britain. It was a Britain built on the extraordinary successes of the preceding sixty years. That same Kipling who wrote *Stalky* also wrote *The Recessional*, for his genius allowed him a larger vision than his arrogant Imperialism was able to limit.

Let us confess it. We were, during those years 1890 to 1914, the best-hated people in the world. The Boer War showed us something of that hatred, but we learned nothing. It was our desperate island provincialism that was to blame. When we settled down permanently anywhere we displayed wisdom, tolerance, acumen. We are still the best colonists that the world has yet seen. That is because we are so oddly made that once our superiority is granted us we no longer feel superior. With the Germans exactly the opposite is true.

How often, though, before 1914 (yes, and after 1918 too) I was one of that great band of Englishmen, travelling about Europe, knowing no language properly but my own, demanding that my English habits and customs attend me wherever I might be, raising my voice that I might be better understood to that pitch of self-satisfied separateness, hiding my English shyness behind a haughty taciturnity, and, above all, displaying an ignorance astonishing in its complacency. But why not? None of my three Public Schools had taught me anything.

The Barrier of Class

All this provincialism of this older Britain, however, was unimportant beside the disaster that had occurred within Britain itself—which was, simply, that one-quarter of Englishmen (and that the governing quarter) had come to be totally unaware of the reality of the other three-quarters. The snobbery of which all other countries accused us was not

only actual but desperately destructive. It has needed two monstrous wars to destroy it.

How exactly did this snobbery work? It worked so that from the very beginning, from babyhood, you must, if you possessed a certain kind of accent, if you had not received a certain kind of education, if you did not acquire a certain kind of friend, stay where you were, from birth to death. You could not cross the barrier. Exceptions to this, of course, there have always been. Men like H.G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett and John Burns, and Mansbridge, many more, could not be kept down by any traditional system. They were the grand exceptions.

Not only could you not cross the barrier were your conditions of a certain kind, but a vast multitude of human beings had grown up, through our Industrial system, who *preferred* to remain on that side of the barrier, who had even a certain pride in keeping to their class, in touching their hats and performing, at any rate spiritual, curtsies.

It is true that Britain was filled with men of a magnificent independence. The fishermen of Cornwall among whom I lived for fifteen years, the farmers of Cumberland among whom I have lived for twenty, are among the finest and most independent people anywhere.

It has been the towns and cities, and more especially the whole system of education in Britain, that has made it so monstrously divided a country. Yes—this rotten, perverted, sterile, snobbish system of British education!

The Public Schools

Here I pause for a moment because I realise how remarkably unsuited I am to write with serious accuracy about education. First, as I have already said, I have never myself been educated; secondly, pamphlets appear with the regularity and brilliance of stars in a clear night sky, and they all seem to deal with Education! I will say, however, for the British Public School system that it has been both the saving and the ruining of modern Britain. That queer monastic, celibate, feudal, sexless system, altogether peculiar to our isolated, Spartan and Philistine spirit, has proved a training-ground for independent resource, for the strongest self-discipline, for the narrowest kind of patriotism and the stubbornest hostility to any kind of æsthetic that the world has known since Sparta.

Its queer angular strength has been derived from its celibacy, its athletics and its code of honour. Many of its sons have saved the British Empire and it is only now that we are at last, thanks to this present war, asking ourselves whether after all there may not be worthier ambitions. Not that I do not, dear Alan, believe in the British Empire. I believe in it as fervently as did ever the loathsome Stalky or the torturing MacTurk. But I believe in it as the scaffolding, after this war has been won, of a great and noble World State in which all men will be equal citizens with equal rights.

It was not so regarded by the men who governed our Public Schools forty—nay even twenty—years ago. I remember—although it is over forty years back—how we sat, six hundred strong, in the School Hall listening to an eloquent harangue from the headmaster of another Public School and how he exhorted us: "Never forget, boys, that the English are God's Chosen. I mean that in literal truth. God has chosen us, as being the best and the worthiest, to govern and guide the rest of mankind. You have a great responsibility before you."

I remember this with especial vividness, because several of the bigger boys, when the address was over, discovered a small Japanese whose parents had mistakenly sent him to live with us, and spent a merry half-hour proving on his slender shrinking person that we were indeed 'a race above the law'.

Adolf Hitler has, at least, done us this service—that he has shown us how imbecile and crudely fatuous such sentences may sound in the mouth of another!

"Who is Your Father?"

Nevertheless I fancy that the snobbery of the British public schools has done more harm to the British spirit than their local patriotism!

Do you remember, Alan, the cruel eagerness with which those questions were asked of any new boy in those good old days when the public school was at its lustiest? "Who is your father?" "What does he do?" "How much money has he got?" "What's your mother like?"

Do you remember the misery of any boy suspected of the slightest vulgarity of accent? Do you remember the obeisance paid to any kind of title, and the exultation in the newspapers because a member of the Royal Family was treated 'just like any other fellow'?

Do you remember, too, the hopeless mechanical methods of education, the insistence on Classics which were, except for the exceptional boy, altogether useless? I was no exceptional boy—I was, in fact, a duffer and at the bottom of any class I was in. But why was I never taught the beauty and romance of the classical languages? Why was I taught no single foreign language with any accuracy? (I remember that I was occupied in the translation of half of Daudet's *Tartarin* for two whole years!)

But enough of all this. I will only say that I attribute most of our doggedness, our refusal to be beaten, our humorous endurances, and all our slowness, official Bumbledom, inability to be cleverer than the other fellow, code of good-natured but catastrophic decency, the muddle and mess of this present war (so far as we are responsible for, and concerned in it) to our astounding, obsolete and, I hope, rapidly disappearing British system of education.

So much for our national provincialism, our social snobbery, our blindness to the miserable conditions of living for three-quarters of our fellow citizens, our education. I would say a very little about two other elements in our national life.

The Philistines

One is our Philistinism. Have we ever, as a whole people, had any æsthetic sense?

I am sure that the answer is in the negative. We fancy that the Elizabethans were gloriously æsthetic. They were not. Young men sang madrigals; one, our greatest genius, wrote plays and poems; there were some dramatists and poets. The English people in general went to the theatre for the crudest melodrama and the bawdiest farce. Did the people of England enjoy the sonnets of Sidney, the *Faerie Queene* of Spenser, the Essays of Bacon, the poems of John Donne? They were not, for the most part, aware of their existence.

The British have always, until now, been Philistines and have gloried that it was so. It is a comfort, perhaps, to remember that the world in general has always been Philistine. It is true that the Florentines carried the picture of Cimabue in triumph through the streets of Florence—but what is one little procession against so many held for less laudable purposes?

In Britain, at least, there has never been the slightest hypocrisy in the matter. The State has never aided the artist, the occasional patron has been half-ashamed of his patronage—even at this moment, as I write, there has been an attempt to lay a tax on literature at the very moment when literature is of burning importance to our cause. That the attempt has been frustrated is, I think, a very significant event.

Capital and Labour

Of the uneven distribution of wealth in our country—an unevenness that this war is quickly rectifying—I am unqualified to speak. I am, as you know, dear Alan, the most muddle-headed of economists! But here again, as with education, there are wise, cool-headed, balanced men, writing every day, like Maynard Keynes and Stamp and Norman Angell—so who am I to venture even a word on this vexed question?

I can look at it only as a man who has never understood the solution of this great problem: how, if every man in Britain shares out alike, is private enterprise to be kept alive? If Capital goes, who employs Labour? The answer is the State, but to myself the horrors of Totalitarianism with its crushing of the individual, its monstrous increase of a vast bureaucracy, its premium on the time-servers and sycophants, are clear enough for me to fight them while there is breath in my body. Where is the safe half-way house

between the social injustices of pre-war England and the cold monstrosities of the Nazi slavery?

Because this war is helping us to find this half-way house is a further reason for my optimism about the future of Great Britain.

At this point, Alan, I have read through this letter so far written and I can hear you say: "All right. We all know that there have been, and are, many things wrong with Britain. When are the signs of a new and better Britain to come? And didn't we, after all, look for some kind of Utopia after the last war—and see what we got!"

As a matter of fact that conclusion is, I hope, too platitudinous for yourself, Alan, who are not given to platitudes. Everyone has been saying it again and again during the last year: "Look what the last war did to us! This one will be worse!"

But no. On the contrary, God, who gave us free-will as an honourable gift and therefore demands that we use it, may have hoped that the War of 1914-1918 would have taught us some wisdom. What that war did show us was that we were as materialistic and really Godless in our intentions as ever we had been. Had the British Empire, France and the United States of America stood together before the world as a united bloc caring for the welfare of all mankind, ready to make sacrifices to secure that welfare, eager to assist our late enemies back to economic life, but determined at the same time that those same peoples should not endanger world peace again, there would have been no world war of 1939.

We none of us rose above the dead level of our common human nature. It was natural that we should not, for we were all weary, impoverished and resentful.

Why, then, should the same be true once again at the end of *this* war?

A War Without Countries

Because this war, as it develops, is becoming a war different from any other ever fought on this planet before. It has become a commonplace to say that it is a *people's* war. It is much more than that. It is a war without boundaries, without countries. It is a war about an Idea, and all men and women, Germans, Italians, Russians, as well as Scandinavians, French, British, Americans, who believe in this Idea are on the same side. It is a war in which the individual human being is sacrificing all that he has that he and his children may remain for ever truly free.

This has been said again and again of late—I should be ashamed to repeat it did I not think that it could not be said too often—but has it been emphasised enough the effect that this world comradeship must have upon Britain?

I have said already that the great disease that has eaten into the heart of Britain during the last hundred years has been her provincialism. That may appear an odd assertion when it has been precisely during those last hundred years that

Britain has gone out into all the world to conquer and acquire. But from that success has come the failure. We have wanted the world made according to our pattern, and we have acclaimed that pattern as the best thing under God that the world has yet seen. The conquest of the air has meant that we have ceased to be an island, but, as this war is showing, in the air, as for so many hundred years on the sea, we are rapidly acquiring mastery. That same mastery might bring us to a more deadly spiritual state of arrogance and self-approval than ever! But, by a happy miracle, the people of Britain are taking this war in hand—yes, and the people of the Dominions.

This great multitude is already joining with the great multitudes of other countries. At the moment before France fell our Government offered the French Government a total amalgamation of our two peoples that would have seemed incredible to the France and Britain of 1918. Even as I write, America and Canada are uniting in a common defence and we are leasing our ports and air-bases to America for her own uses. At this same moment Japan is making treaties of confidence with Australia.

Never in Britain's history has her capital city, London, been so picturesquely quilted with the colours of the uniforms and orders of the leaders of every foreign country, coming here to co-ordinate their forces and direct them from this centre. What does all this mean to Britain?

It means that Britain will be a creative force in the making of a new world order. At the sight of these three terrible words, 'new world order', my courage fails me. Were it not

that you were my friend you would read no farther in this letter.

For nearly thirty years now we have been snowflaked with schemes for new world orders. They are, in fact, as old as Confucius, as modern as Pluto; Wells has been handing us patiently copies of his own world order for nearly half a century, hoping that we shall be intelligent enough, one or two of us, to read one at least of them through to the end.

But the trouble with Utopias has always been not that they are impossible to realise, but that we are too comfortable to move. It is the supreme merit of this war that it is shaking all of us into discomfort and something much harsher than that. It is leaving none of us out. New worlds are made not because of altruism but because of necessity. The last war was not sufficient for us in its brutality and uselessness. It seems possible that this one may be.

A New World

In any case the old world is gone for ever, and with it Britain's provincial isolation. She must now become part of a world order. Yes, but of what world order? She can become Fascist only by the triumph of Germany. Her whole character, individual and social, is against the order of the Totalitarian State although she may learn, by fighting it, certain wisdoms—the wisdom of discipline, the wisdom of learning to protect a thing if you value it, the wisdom of

caring for an Idea and being ready to sacrifice personal comfort for it.

On the other hand I have just been reading an article by an ardent young Trotskyite who is sure that the only possible future for Britain is Communistic. But, being an American, he sees the social condition of Britain far too simply. He seems to know nothing at all about the qualities and character of our Middle Class which includes now nine-tenths of our population and will, in another fifty years, include the whole of it. This same Middle Class is middle-brow in all its ideas, aspirations, proclivities. It is the salt of the British earth. It believes in a commonsense attitude to property—that is, every man must have his privacy, his square of garden, the possibility of educating his children, the right to speak his mind freely, to be free in his religion, his politics, the expression of his opinions generally.

The End of Class

Britain will, after this war, be a socialist state, but it will be her own kind of socialism. The old idiotic barriers of class will have broken down, nay, have broken down already. The evacuation of the children from the devastated areas into the country at the beginning of the war did more to shock this country into a shamed realisation of housing horrors than all the good work of hard-working philanthropists during the last hundred years.

There will, I hope, be no vast fortunes in Britain ever again after this war. On this question of ownership and property I must make a personal confession here. You know, Alan, how deeply all my life I have loved beautiful things. The money I have made during my life-time I have made by the pleasant sweat of my brow, and I have felt it no crime that I should collect rare books and beautiful pictures. But I saw very clearly during that May week of panic how infinitesimally unimportant any possessions were in comparison with work, health, friends and individual freedom. It is fortunate, perhaps, that I did see so clearly, for the tax-collector will certainly make future acquisitions impossible for me! A room of one's own, a small piece of ground of one's own—I believe that this will be possible for every man in Britain in the new Britain that is coming—and with that a new communal sense of living as well, for the old British snobberies are dead for ever.

But for this there must be a new kind of education. There must be no British school, whether Eton, Harrow, or Winchester, or any other that is not as easy of entrance for the son of a tramp as for the son of a Marquis. The public schools will survive only in so far as they are possible, financially as well as socially, for everyone. If some of the amenities and luxuries of these schools have to go they will be none the worse for it, and yet it would be possible to retain in them the beauties of tradition and history and ceremony that have given them for so long their especial character.

I love my own school, King's School, Canterbury, with a passion: I think it, because of its position and its history, one

of the three most beautiful places in England, but it can survive only by feeding its tradition and romance with the actual power of the new world that is now coming into being. I believe that the teaching of to-day is very different from the old stiff useless pedantry of my own day, but no master, young or old, is going to neglect the actuality of this new world save at the peril, not only of his own soul, but of his country's.

Art for A Penny!

And then, Alan—perhaps to myself the most important question of all—what place are the Arts to have in this New Britain, a Britain that is truly a member of a World Federation, truly educated, truly socialist, truly a country governed by the People for the good of the People?

I hope and believe a very great one. I have said already that ninety men out of a hundred are born Philistines, and throughout life passionately see to it that they remain Philistines. "Among these torrid rocks of hostilities the crystal waters of the Arts stealthily creep." (Lest you should think that mine, I must tell you that it is from a bad translation from Croce!)

But this 'stealthy creeping' is the thing! Look back a hundred years to the background of the Dickens novels, or to the Gaskell novels for that matter! Remember the screaming and vulgar abuse that Dickens publicly hurled at the young

Rossetti and the boy Millais! Come nearer to the novels of Gissing and Arthur Morrison, *Liza of Lambeth* and *No. 5 John Street*. Nearer again, to *Mr. Kipps* and *The Old Wives' Tale*. There is a Twopenny Library close to my flat and last year its windows were filled with the novels of Mr. C—— and Miss Delia B——. Yesterday I saw, all in a handsome row, Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, Priestley's *Angel Pavement*, Forester's *Captain Hornblower* and Leonard Strong's *Brothers*. The wireless in England might, some of us fancy, do more for literature than it does, but, in this way and that, it is helping to make the reading of books a common habit.

But books must be *cheap*. And how are they going to be cheap and yet afford the publisher, book-seller, writer a living wage?

Cheapness! Cheapness! Art for a penny, a penny-halfpenny, twopenny! That is the way that we must go. Open a West End theatre now with no seat more than half a crown, with a repertory not only of Shakespeare, Shaw, Congreve, Tchehov, but also of young Mr. Tompkins and younger Miss Smith, and you will be astonished at the results! Why has Sadler's Wells this dreadful and difficult summer had the most successful season of its career? Because it is both good *and* cheap!

Look at the National Gallery Concerts, Alan, to which I am for ever trying to inveigle you. Has there been a sudden rush to the English head of a passion for Chamber Music? Must London, who has been deaf for a thousand years, risk life and limb to hear *all* the Beethoven Trios and Duets? Not

at all. It simply happens that the Concerts are eagerly accessible, are dominated by a great personality, Myra Hess—but especially these Concerts are both good and cheap. Some bargain-counter element? Certainly. And why not? Only the goods *are* good!

From This Terror...

And painting? Is it an accidental chance that suddenly, in this very first year of war when, as Churchill said, misfortunes have descended 'like a cataract' upon us, young British painters like Graham Sutherland and John Piper and Rogers should have held exhibitions and sold all their pictures? Why does Ardizzone, who has genius in the true English line of Rowlandson and Keene, become suddenly famous although he has been painting for years? Why has the exhibition 'Since Whistler' at the National Gallery lasted for months and shown itself so generally popular that it is shortly to have a second edition?

I am not pretending that any miracles are about to occur. A miracle is simply another word for a natural sequence to an event that you have been too blind or too lazy to perceive. But there is in being a new interest in the world of beauty—an interest born of dismay, apprehension, frustration.

*"From this terror, Archimedes,
I have learnt the value of quiet:
And after the falling of the*

*battlements and the flight
of destructive spears
I will build up a new Palace
where will stand the statues
of the Heroes.
And new songs will be
made everywhere."*

The Most Important Matter of All

Lastly, I have said nothing about religion. I would say very little, although it is by far the most important matter of all. It is, indeed, at the root of all the rest.

Certainly the priests of religion, of whatever creeds, did little or nothing to help suffering humanity in the last war. How could they when the ideals of that war were false ideals? Nor did they help in the after-war settlement. How could they when they had no power? Would Clemenceau or Wilson or Lloyd George have listened to the Archbishop of Canterbury or paid careful attention to the words of the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster? And so, during the years that followed the last war, in England at least, religion, of all forms save the Roman Catholic, seemed empty and void.

Now, in this war, many activities are at work and they are all active towards a more general spiritual comradeship. I have seen this myself, in the lives of the Anglo-Catholic

Franciscans at Cerne Abbas where the reality of Christ's actual presence can be felt. Here again all the deep underlying current is sweeping towards a new simplicity and a new generosity of heart. No single one of the countries of the world has yet attempted to put into practice the actual teachings of Jesus Christ. Now it is certain that we are all passing into a new world of difficulty, poverty, material hardship. The religious sects of the world, in India, in Spain and many other countries, have been quarrelling so long and so fiercely that the need for some sort of comradeship that must follow this war may bring about a new realisation of Christ's law of love and toleration of our weaknesses one with another.

Here in Britain, at least, it is towards that toleration that we seem to be moving.

Affectionately,
HUGH WALPOLE.

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[The end of *Open Letter of an Optimist* by Hugh Walpole]