Margery Allingham

The OAKEN HEART

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MARGERY ALLINGHAM

The Oaken Heart

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Preface, Explanation and Dedication

Auburn House,
Auburn,
England.

My dear Auburn,

You will want an explanation of this book and to hear how I came to write it about you.

Last November an American whom some of you know asked me to put it down so that he and his wife and his village in America could gather exactly what life has been like down here for us ordinary country people during the war.

It was a business request, and I have made an ultra-careful job of it, as you will see, because I believed that he and his friends are sufficiently (but by no means exactly) like us for it to be possible for me to convey to him much more of the actual truth than is usual on these occasions if I only approached the task without unnecessary reticence and with many explanations. Also the war is getting very close to them over there, and they may have to go through the same sort of experience themselves should the worst (for us) happen and our island fall. It is not a private attempt at propaganda, nor yet a disinterested gesture on my part. I have been employed as a professional writer by the American to tell him what he wants to know. However, I am convinced that it will be a good thing for us should a small portion of this other great people, so like us in the main and so unlike us in the particular, acquire through this history a little clearer picture of at least one minute corner of a country in the throes of the difficulties which ours is experiencing now. If I did not think this I would not have written the book, because I am loath to publicise our personal affairs.

I am telling you all this because I want to explain why I have put in anything whatever that I thought might possibly help to make the picture clearer. I have not given away any war secrets naturally, and I have disguised the names and positions of all places, but I have not disguised your nicknames nor those in my own family. I have quoted everybody as accurately as I could and I have done my utmost best, using whatever art I possess, to put down as vividly as possible what I myself believe on soul and conscience to be true.

Some of you may not agree with me in everything, of course, but I notice that we usually seem to think much the same things about affairs, and I lived down the road as a child and learnt first things from your relations and neighbours. Therefore I have set aside self-consciousness and have gone on writing, thinking of nothing but telling the American and his wife the truth as I see it here.

I hope you will approve of my behaviour in the matter and will not be embarrassed by a certain baldness, a sort of lack of covering of the heart, which you will notice in the letter—for the book is really no more and no less than a letter to the American and his family.

Lying, they say, is a new modern art of the enemy's, but telling the truth is not easy. In fact, telling the truth is the basis of all classic art, which has always been notoriously difficult. However, I have done the best I can. I have not dwelt on one thing more than another, and I have tried to put everything in.

With all my love, and God bless you and take care of you,

MARGERY CARTER
(*née* Allingham)

Auburn House,
Auburn,
England.

My dear T. and M., Here at last is the letter.

The first thing to remember about it is that it is local. *This may or may not be Britain—that I cannot tell you because I do not know—but it* is *Auburn, I think.*

You will see from my note to Auburn how I feel about that part of it and why I have had the thundering impudence to write it.

The reference to you two not being exactly like us you will understand even better than we do! You are warm people; we are cold people who have been warm and still have warmth in places. Our heart is old and hard and true still, in spite of surface rot. Yours is seven hundred years younger, more tender, and as true as you care to make it to the point of pure perfection. You will not mind my saying this, I know, because you probably feel it as much as I do.

My love and all good wishes always, whatever happens.

Yours ever,
MARGERY ALLINGHAM

1

THIS village of Auburn might be so complacently picturesque if it weren't for the shop which Albert and his father built of public washroom brick slap in the middle of the Square, that we owe the two of them a debt of gratitude if only for that alone.

The building brings the whole place down to earth, sobers it up and takes it out of fancy dress, so to speak.

Albert still maintains that it is a lovely shop. He and his father have always liked it; in fact they built it twice with their own hands. They had just got it up once in all its nakedness directly in front of one of the only two genuine maypoles in England when the Council came along and wanted the road wider, so Albert and his father pulled the shop down again, all two storeys of it, carefully, brick by brick, and set it up again once more fifteen feet or so further back, where it stands (at least at the time of writing) a visible sign that the village is not an old-fashioned musical comedy backcloth.

The maypole is not used as a maypole now, of course. There is nothing arty about the place, which is still agricultural. The pole, which is only a pole, has a weathercock on top of it, and at its foot, where one waits for the bus, grow two may-trees, one red and one white, which the Old Doctor and Mrs. Graves put there forty years ago when they were uncrowned kings of the village.

Behind the maypole there is Norry's forge, which has not been altered in the last hundred years at least and which looks like one of those very neat and restrained advertisement plates in big American magazines, the kind beneath which the copy begins "*In olden days fine craftsmen worked under difficulties* . . ." You never saw such ordered clutteredness, and when the fire is in full blast and he and his second eldest brother Jack (the Mycroft of the family) are at work there in their goatskin aprons, clinking and clanking on the largest anvil, which rings like a firebell all over the village, the effect, if they will forgive me for saying so, is quite extraordinarily reminiscent of the diamond mine scene in *Snow White*. This is especially true on a dark and windy autumn day, when the black clouds pile up over the low roof of red pantiles and there seems to be no horizon.

Reg’s grocer’s shop, the Auburn Stores, is in the Square too, and so is the Queen’s Head, which stands back in its own yard with a great sign swinging on a rather nice post which the brewers put up.

The Post Office is next door to the Queen’s, and it does look a little as if it had come off a toffee tin. It has bow windows with small panes, one of which has been taken out to let in a red tin letterbox, and at one time it must have been a very important shop. Auburn is perhaps a little like that; not degenerate or decaying, but “retired.” Most of the medium-sized houses used to be shops in the days when the ten miles to the town meant ten miles on foot or astride. Norry says that when he was “a little owd boy” the man who had Reg’s shop had five assistants, each with a clean white tablecloth apron every Monday morning, and it was “Forward One, please” and “Two, are you serving?” which sounds mightily impressive and, considering the size of the building, astonishing.

As well as the Queen’s there are two other pubs, which is plenty, since there are only six hundred odd of us counting the outlying farms, and a large percentage of the population is elderly and stays at home. One of these inns, the Thatcher’s, is kept by Norry’s brother Jack and their two sisters, Miss Vic and Miss Susie, and there they’ve got the ham in the glass case. This ham was cured for the christening of one of Norry’s uncles, but never cooked or eaten because of a word or two over Church or Chapel which delayed the ceremony indefinitely. The ham has been there for ninety years and has shrunken till it is no bigger than a brown leathery hand, which it resembles.

The Lion lies up at the other end of the village, on the way to the church. That’s a very popular house, and was even more so before Cis joined the W.A.A.F.’s. There used to be another house called the Wheatsheaf, but the village sold the licence a long while ago and invested the money, so that since then we have been one of the few parishes in England which possess a little capital of their own. In our case this is not a large sum. It represents three or four thousand pounds at the outside, but it means that we have our own row of council houses up past the school, and it also means that we’re not quite so beholden to the Rural District Council or even to the County Council as we might be. Parochially, we have money in our purse.

Our other public possessions include a railway, composed of one derailed coach (which quite recently contained a poster which enquired fatuously, “Why not winter in Prague?”) and a very small train indeed which goes there and back in the morning and there and back at night. This train, or rather the line upon which it runs, and which links us with the main track

five miles away in one direction and Flinthammock-on-Estuary one and a half in the other, was the subject of a tremendous battle in the ’eighties. Since then, what with the petrol engine and one thing and another, the Auburn Flyer has not been quite so important; but it still runs twice a day, a memorial to the public spirit, enterprise and unconquerable obstinacy of our grandparents in the wars of the council rooms.

It is a nice little train, with a high-pitched tootle and a fearsome tendency to rock like a boat in the high winds from over the saltings; but it is very useful indeed for freight too bulky for the Osborne family’s buses, which are our main means of transport.

At the other end of the village, on the main Auburn–Flinthammock road, is the school. It is my honest opinion (and certainly speaking for myself) that most of us were so busy fighting to keep the school open that we completely missed the first rumblings of the war. That is the worst of a Cause. The more parochial and intimate it is the more absorbing it becomes. I notice M. Maurois, in his heart-rending *What Happened to France*, accuses the English of thinking so much of their little green lawns that they did not see the danger until too late. That is terribly true, except that it was not our lawns but our little evergreen liberties which engrossed us then as ever. To be really free takes a lot of time and trouble.

I think probably the first occasion that most of us in Auburn ever seriously considered the possibility of another European war in our time was one night when Mr. Vernon Bartlett came out with a sudden note of alarm in that chatty voice of his on the radio. The wireless is odd like that. It seems to do the same thing to a voice as an overbright light does to a face. Anything genuine leaps out at one. Anything false grates on one’s nerves. I cannot remember the exact date of the talk, but it was when Germany left the League. The family was listening attentively because Charles Ulm was flying to Australia at the time, and he had been to see us, and so everyone was anxious to know if he was going to be all right. That broadcast on foreign affairs was the first of all the radio talks to turn our hearts over suddenly, although I don’t honestly think it was fear of fighting or even dying which gave us that sudden chill inside. It was rather the first of the misgivings, the first hint that this new world which we were knocking together so fast, and wherein time and distance were so happily vanishing, might not produce the universal brotherhood after all, or at least not overnight. There was even a sneaking presentiment, I remember, that to know all might not be to forgive anything, and to live in proximity to the other nations might not be to live in harmony.

Unfortunately that incident was only a flicker of an eyelid, only a turning over in our sleep. I seem to think there was some sort of fuss about that talk. Anyhow, there certainly was a general piping down on the subject of war altogether after that.

Meanwhile we in Auburn had our school to think about. I do not want to convey that the entire village became absorbed in the school to the exclusion of everything else. It did not. But the thing I can only call its public mind did become rather preoccupied with the subject for the best part of two years before the war.

In a very small village the public mind is apparent. What the village thinks is clear, definite, and usually highly important. In the ordinary way most of us do not think a great deal about national affairs, except as they concern us directly, but I have noticed over and over again that when a national question does at last begin to worry us to the point of provoking open speech about it, then Parliament settles the matter in double-quick time and in our way, as if it realised its job depended on it. This puzzled me for a long time, until it occurred to me that the explanation was obvious and was simply that we were not the unique group of individuals that we see ourselves but merely an echo, a reflection, of thousands of other little rural communities, all thinking and feeling the same thing, sometimes the wrong thing, with an instinctive unity which must be pretty impressive when seen from the middle.

Auburn felt strongly about the school. To be honest the school is not very big—in fact it's about as big as the train—and it lolls by the side of the road under enormous elms and is warm and sunny and just exactly as hygienic as the law demands, but no fancy-work. It was built by public subscription in Auburn, and generations of Auburn people have learnt to read and write and add there. Moreover, what is highly important, they have also had a little religious instruction there, since it is a Church School and not one of the new-fangled places who, in order to avoid interdenominational strife, have thrown away the baby with the bath water and done away with the Catechism and the Ten Commandments altogether.

In common with most of my generation I would blush to call myself deeply religious, but I do find it odd that as a nation we will fight and die for principles which we cannot find time to teach in our free schools. However, that is as may be, and, as I was saying, about the time when Hitler was thinking of taking over Austria there was a minority movement in Auburn which aimed to shut the school for ever. The senior children—that is, those over eleven—were already bundled off to the town every morning and

brought home at night in a special bus, and the argument was that since there were only twenty-odd babies left it seemed unnecessary to keep two schoolma'ams to look after them and that they might as well go into the town with their elders. The new arrangement was made somewhat perfunctorily, and the school was marked for closing.

Auburn's reaction was prompt and indignant. It was the same sort of reaction which you might get if you took a very old hat away from a dotard snoozing in the sun, with a brisk "You don't need that any more, do you, Grandpa? Here comes the salvage van."

It was in many ways a remarkable and even an epic struggle lasting the best part of two years. There was genuine bitterness in it, and real triumph; fear, exasperation, astounding endurance and tenacity of purpose, together with as much brains and leverage on both sides (as well as nearly as many distinguished people) as it takes to get a controversial bill through its second reading in Parliament.

Finally the closing order was rescinded at the eleventh hour and the school remains, if only to prove that the present generation of Auburn men is much the same as its predecessors. With the train the Church School is ours, small, obsolete, and remarkably if obscurely useful.

Yet all this time, according to even our kindliest critics, we ought to have been watching the Germans. But to be honest, I do not see what good that would have done. We hardly ever watch foreigners ourselves for the simple reason that, as old 'Anry said over in Suffolk, "we can't make head nor tail on 'em." Moreover, we have got our work cut out when it comes to watching, keeping an eye on Flinthammock in the east and Heath in the west. Flinthammock, in our possibly somewhat biased opinion, is "wuss nor *Paris*, if a b'y gets down there alone." They have a population of nearly two thousand people down there, and there, according to Auburn, everybody is fabulously rich and "nobody don't do no work, which is remarkably *strange*, so it is now." This rank libel has no foundation whatever in fact, but it goes to show that we have not by nature quite that broadminded imagination which would let us as individuals become citizens of the world without considerable mental and moral discipline.

Still, if we are very busy living our own lives and governing our own castles, we do keep an eye on our own politicians, noting carefully from their antics which way the wind blows. The relationship between the ordinary countryman and the politician is so seldom mentioned at home that it may be often misunderstood abroad. One sees frequent references to the

fickleness of the public towards its leaders and to the short memory of the common man.

From childhood these observations have seemed to me to be wildly misleading. To begin with, the one thing we have obviously not got is a short memory. Some of our memories are so long that they embrace our fathers' and grandfathers' as well, while that word "leader" is largely a politeness.

The ordinary English countryman, in Auburn at any rate, has a very clear idea of democratic government. I doubt if he thinks of it in the Greek, but to his eyes it seems fairly clear that the country is governed by the public in the end, call it by what name you like. We—me and thee and the parson and all the other lads of the village—constitute the public, and the politicians are our servants. They apply for the job (often rather obsequiously we notice with instant suspicion), we give it to them, we pay them in honours or cash, and we judge them solely by results. Sometimes we come to a bad patch when the men applying for this all-important work are not quite all we could have desired. There has been a patch like that these twenty years, and some of us cannot forget that lost generation in 1914-15. We lost too much good stuff there, stuff we could very well have done with now. Still, as we say so truly if inelegantly, "If you can't get fat bacon, you must do with bread and pull-it and take the best there is to give you."

The job of running the country is so important that only the best men at their best are safe to be left with it, and our anxiety about their capabilities before they get the appointment is boundless. Once they are on the job, however, it is a rule, born out of long experience and so firmly implanted that it has become a sort of instinct, that we stand back and let them get on with it unmolested until and unless things look really dangerous.

This does not mean that we lose interest, of course, or that we have no other hand in the matter. On the contrary, our part is often very arduous. In our experience, we have to watch for the little indications they give us to show us how they want us to play up. As many of these indications have to be invisible to the foreigner, our joint performance is not without merit.

Naturally I am not talking now about those politically minded folk who form themselves into groups and do good or bad work as the case may be, nor to the M.P. who will never be a statesman and who thinks of us and treats us as if we were always an election crowd, which is absurd. All this only applies to the ordinary person, the chap who only thinks of himself as British and East Anglian and as nothing else, whose social class doesn't

bother him either way, who votes sometimes for one party and sometimes for another, who plods along steadily towards what he hopes to God is peace, freedom and that glorious economic state which is always to have five bob to spare, and who corrects his mistakes and reforms his judgments as he goes. His ideal major-domo is the statesman who knows and loves his country and who never makes the mistake of underestimating his employer, either in intelligence or strength.

No one knows this arrangement better than the two bodies concerned, and the great statesmen always seem to have kept their place and their dignity, as good servants should. In fact the greater the statesman the deeper and closer is the understanding and co-operation between him and the countryman. Theirs is a man-and-master relationship which is packed with sentiment on both sides but which contains not one grain of sentimentality or false kindness. The master knows his very life depends on the job being done well, and the statesman knows that any mistake he makes may be forgiven but for dear safety's sake will never be forgotten, neither in his own lifetime nor in his son's.

I can only explain this collaboration by saying that it is a sort of horse-and-rider arrangement, but seen from the point of view of the horse.

In Auburn we feel we are very reasonable (as no doubt others do elsewhere) about these riders of ours. We realise that to help us to negotiate different obstacles we need the ingenuities of different men. Earl Baldwin, who made some of us eye him very anxiously when we saw him over in Ipswich carrying a pipe so large that it must have been a sample or a theatrical prop, certainly underestimated Hitler (as well as us on that occasion), and that mistake might well have sent us hurtling over the precipice with our hooves flying. This vital lapse of his has destroyed our faith in his reliability as a Prime Minister, but on the other hand our long memory—which is like an animal's memory, without fancy intellectual thoughts to mutilate it—does not let us belittle his behaviour when he handled a very private and intimate disaster of ours with complete understanding, and did not let us put a foot wrong at a time when every step was an agony to us.

I have met clever people since that time who have solemnly accused Mr. Baldwin of deposing a King of England alone when the country was not looking. These people have simply forgotten. Now, when the bombers come every night to scatter careless death over our big cities and our little fields, when everybody's life is at stake and there is no telling every morning who of our lifelong friends may have died in the darkness, I am open to bet that

not a tenth, not a twentieth of the tears are shed in any one week as were poured out all over the island on any day in that period of disillusion and bereavement in 1937.

Where the Government is concerned Auburn people have, I think, one other foible in common with many of their countrymen: they do not like to hear about dishonest politicians. In fact few things annoy them more than a tale of chicanery in Government circles, and they would far rather not know and put any shortcoming down to something else. In other countries, and among many of their compatriots, this peculiarity is often quite incomprehensible and usually passes for extreme stupidity or sentimentality. However, once one sees these men from our point of view—that is as grooms, so to speak, in charge of our most dignified and precious equine person—it is easy to realise the insult and the intolerable sense of shame which any perfidy on their part must produce in us. I do not say that most of us think this in so many words, but we feel it and react accordingly.

After the *Anschluss*, which startled us considerably, we cocked an anxious eye at the Government, but received no warning dig in the ribs from it. There was none of the time-honoured rumbling on the drums, no sudden and gratuitous reminder that the army was a man's life; nothing, only an insistence on social improvements at home, which as everybody knows, indicates an all-clear abroad.

The effect of this was to make us feel that, odd though it looked, there must be something in the inside story (which we never expect to know until afterwards) which made all the difference, and it was all right for us to go on putting the final touches to our recovery from the last war. What never occurred to us was the incredible fact that the men in charge at that time were mainly afraid of the *horse*.

The habit of confusing the strong urge towards a fairer chance for everybody with red revolution has been very common, but from a country point of view—which thinks in generations, or at least in decades—it still seems extraordinary that there should have been any real excitement anywhere about the country going anti-capitalist, when already we were the only state in Europe wherein by common consent money was taken regularly in cash from the rich and paid regularly in cash to the poor. We *are* anti-capitalist—in a Tory fashion—and have been so for some years.

I think had we realised then that the Government was nervous of us and was humouring us, as if we were an unbroken colt, while the road was growing wilder and wilder and the storm clouds were piling up like an

illustration in the family Bible, we might have panicked badly. As it was, it set us back on our heels when we did see it, but by that time we had immediate danger to steady us and one of the last real statesmen in the nation to gather up the reins and jerk the bit tight in our mouths.

Even as late as July 1938, although no one in Auburn could help realising that something was going to happen, the general impression was that it could hardly be war because none of the signs were right. No one analysed it naturally, but it was as if one looked up at a sky flecked with peculiar coloured clouds and decided that whatever else it was going to do it would not rain ordinary rain.

We were all talking one evening out in the yard. It was very peaceful and a little too good to be true, as Auburn often is, with the leaves thick and luxurious overhead and the smell of dry grass pleasant in the air. The preparations for the August cricket party were in full swing, and Sam, who is Auburn's captain and who also sees to our garden, had come up with P.Y.C. and Grog from a long and earnest inspection of the pitch. Albert had wandered in to have another look at the big shed we used as a garage, to see if we could do anything with it as a dining-room if our luck didn't hold out and it should rain for the Feed.

Norry was there too. He had stepped over from the forge and was mucking about in the stables, talking to Cooee and having a busman's holiday at what he charmingly calls "horse pleasure." This may mean anything from plucking a tail or drenching a beast with the tin bottle to, as on this occasion, speculating on the chances of an unborn colt becoming a champion show-jumper, a point-to-pointer, or even, in wilder moments, the winner of the Newmarket Town Plate. Cooee's mare, Struan, hung out of her box and looked introspective. Her foal was due in May.

The talk was completely idle. Sam thought the sand P.Y.C. had invested in and that Sam's Grandpa had thrown over the pitch earlier in the year had been a mistake, and the others were inclined to agree with him. The general feeling was that we should see the benefit in 1939 or 1940, and that meanwhile the important thing was to get the hay in from the outfield.

Then someone mentioned the shadow which lay in the back of all our minds and remarked that the wireless "was dull," which was a direct reference to the Sudeten trouble and typical of the national gift for understatement. No one made any comment, and there was one of those very long silences which punctuate, and sometimes take the place of, most Auburn summer conversations.

Of all of us there just then only Norry had been adult during the last war. He had been a vet’s smith in the army, and his martial reminiscences mainly concern food and mules. But we others were all in the early or mid-thirties, and our generation remembers the time when war was life, when there seemed to have been no beginning and to be no end to an intolerable condition of strain in which our elders struggled irritably and which we appeared to be on the point of inheriting.

Out in the yard that evening my own immediate reaction to the sudden thought of war was much the same, I suppose, as most of the others’. I was ten years old in 1914, and very vivid impressions received at that age never alter but come on one unexpectedly afterwards, bright and bald as they were at the time: War simply meant death to me; a soldier galloping up on a fat grey horse to kiss my tearful nurse goodbye over the wall under the chestnut trees, and then death.

It was not ordinary dying, either, nor even death in its more horrible forms, but death final, empty and away somewhere. I had a sudden recollection of women and old people all in black, as country people were in those days on a Sunday, standing about in the village street reading enormous casualty lists in a very small type which seemed to fill whole pages of the paper; a boy on a bike with not one telegram spelling tragedy but sometimes two or even three at a time; and long sad services in the small church which had been a barn and still smelt of hay.

It was a dreadful picture of annihilation, of ending off, of the hopeless destruction of practically all a whole human crop. I remembered names I had not thought of for twenty-five years: George Playle and a big cowman they used to call “Long ’un.” I remembered the food shortage at the boarding school I went to later, and the miserable darkness too; but the principal thing was the hundreds and hundreds of far away deaths.

Then, of course, there had been the cleaning up as one grew and the effect that had had on us all.

When we of our generation were just preparing to break the earth over our heads we found that practically the whole batch of youngsters immediately in front of us had disappeared, and naturally that meant that most of us had heavy responsibilities from the first. This in itself is not very extraordinary, but added to it there was our very odd upbringing.

Those of us who were in our ’teens when the war ended came out early, even in Auburn, into a disillusioned world wherein everything, including God, was highly suspect.

To most of our elders—and they were considerably our elders—this was a passing phase, a temporary lack of faith in humanity, a time of exhaustion after great trial; but to those of us who were green and rather frightened, as all people are at that age, there was nothing but broken planks wherever we trod. Nobody knew anything at all for certain. The most elementary morals were in considerable doubt. Every formula for behaviour whose use was not instantly apparent had been thrown overboard. Our parents, school teachers and clergy, sickened by a catastrophe which everybody said was the direct outcome of a world in which most of them had lived happily and innocently, turned from any thought of instructing us with weary self-disgust. Having lost their younger brothers and their elder sons, apparently through some unspecified fault of their own or their fathers', they had nothing they dared tell us. We were given doorkeys and the freedom of a shambles. The pseudo-scientists and the demolition merchants became the prophets of our more sophisticated contemporaries and their doctrines filtered through to us, showing us at least how we could get to work for the time being, if it was only shovelling away more of the debris.

Since then the whole generation has had to find out how to live by trial and error, with the main result that it has learnt what little it does know very thoroughly indeed. It has found out from bitter personal experience the consequences of most of the commoner sins and the value of many conventions. Above all things it has learnt to watch, to hesitate, and never to be surprised by the worst.

War reminiscences told on the sea-wall or on the benches outside the pubs, or published in books and coming round in the library vans, filled us with a horror of war which far outstripped any evangelical horror of hell, and twenty years of vigorous anti-war propaganda had given us an impressionist picture of modern warfare whose lack of detail could be augmented by the vilest nightmare each individual mind could conceive.

Moreover, from the beginning something had had to be done about our material fortunes, for very few of us were in the position in 1918 to go on with the programme for which we had been prepared in '11 and '12. My own father, for instance, gave up trying to keep up our big old house down the road in late '17, and we all went to London to live in a top flat in Bayswater, where we felt like pigeons in a sealed dovecot. It was close on fifteen years before we younger ones, by solid hard co-operative working, got back again to home ground, and by that time someone had let the house go to ruin and we had to come here, a little further down the road, to the Old Doctor's house in Auburn.

We were not alone in this sort of experience by any means, and it is an agonising business to be jerked out of one scheme into another when one is thirteen or so. Agony of that kind at that age generates power, and the present popular theory that it is a sin to be rich is due, I fancy, not only to the fundamental urge towards universal equality, but also to our passionate efforts at self-defence at that time when it was still a sin to be poor.

That evening in the yard the prospect of another war, of the generation after us going the same way as the one before us, was not only horrible but seemed hardly to be borne.

It was not as though we had made no progress. Looking round, it occurred to me that although none of us was rich we certainly had all recovered. We were all, after considerable effort, living something like the lives we wanted to live in the place we felt was our natural home.

Sam was the youngest of us, at thirty-one. He was born in Auburn, had never left it for long, and was married, with two remarkably fine children under five.

He was definitely not rich, but would have been very offended, and quite rightly, had anyone called him poor. As cricket captain, football secretary and collector for the Foresters he was a person of some small consequence, and as controller of a locally remarkable garden—the Old Doctor having made it a sort of legend in the district—he was well up in his profession and had done particularly well in the important annual flower shows.

He and I were still congratulating ourselves, not too privately, on our Finest Single Bloom award at the big town rose show, when a particularly lucky *President Hoover* had done the trick for us.

Sam had left the jam factory gardens at Heath some time before and had come to work in ours, where he was boss of his time, his acres, and incidentally his old grandfather, whom he refers to firmly as “my assistant.” There was, and is, nothing whatever to stop him becoming Chairman of the Parish Council or local representative on either of the other Central Councils in time, if he is so minded.

His weekly earnings were then at the current rate, which is to say that he received thirty-five shillings and sixpence plus insurance. He found them entirely satisfactory, and would have left us, albeit regretfully for we like each other, if he had not. To explain why these figures were possible—why, that is, we should be able to afford to have a garden, and he to undertake to

manage it—perhaps I should mention something of the economics of life in Auburn just before the present war.

The first and most important factor was, as always in England, public opinion.

In Auburn everybody makes a point of knowing all about everybody else. Most people are related, and those who have no kin here have most of them known their neighbours as long as and as well as most cousins, so that the family atmosphere, with all its good and bad qualities, is present all the time. If you do not see what this has to do with domestic economy, perhaps you will cross off from your own outgoings every penny you are forced to spend because the people you mix with do not know every turn and twist in your affairs. Then imagine a public opinion which criticised you far more bitterly for spending too much for the size of your income than for excessive thrift; a public opinion, in fact, which cannot see why you should want a new coat this year when the one you had last still looks as good as new.

Rents were, and are, very cheap. Three shillings to as high as seven and six a week will hire a very good cottage complete with garden.

As well as their gardens most Auburn men have allotments, or “little estates,” as Sam prefers to call them, and these not only provide their owners’ households but often send fruit and vegetables by the train to the city.

The various clubs take care of the extra insurance, and the Government provides the children’s education and sometimes their milk.

I do not suggest that there was any super-civilisation about this state of affairs, but it was by no means bad and, what was more, it was getting visibly better, save that there were still not enough children in the place to the older people’s minds, and the young ones were coming round to agreeing with them.

The class question was pretty well settled, at least among we middle and younger folk. Roughly it had boiled down to this: you could still touch your hat to Money or Blood; but, if so, Money must subsequently breed money in your pocket and Blood must give you service, or you were making an ass of yourself. This reversion to the very root and beginning of the whole business in a free England was typical of our trial and error age and was at least logical.

In Auburn at the moment a gentleman is treated as a gentleman only so long as he remains gentle, and a rich man as a rich man only so long as his

riches get around, so that it is what else either of them may be which really decides their friends (at least after the first year or two), which is as it should be.

Thus in twenty years the grass had begun to grow thick again, and yet now it had suddenly begun to look as if we might have made some terrible and mysterious mistake, as had our fathers before us, unless of course it could be that it was they who had done it again. Anyhow, the wireless certainly was dull about the Sudetenland.

Sam remarked that he couldn't seem to make much sense of that Herr Hitler, *he* couldn't, and we all echoed him privately. After all, it is only very recently that Charlie Chaplin has been said to resemble Hitler. In those days Hitler was said to resemble Charlie Chaplin. There was nothing whatever Napoleonic about him until he made Napoleonic strides.

Albert said that he didn't believe that the Germans wanted a war and made a reference to the ex-servicemen who had been over to our local town as guests of the Legion, who in turn had been royally entertained by them in Germany.

There was a lot in this, or so we thought at the time, and the reflection was comforting. Now, of course, most of us are convinced that those were mere spying expeditions on their part, and that if only our men had known the language better they would have been able to detect the fraud.

Grog observed that no sane person wanted a war ever and that the whole thing resolved into blasted greed, and meanwhile where was the bat oil?

This return to what honestly seemed then the more important, since more imminent, matters in life cheered everyone up, and the preparations for the party went forward earnestly.

NOTE.

It occurs to me that, whereas Americans as a rule like to find out who people are as a book goes on, British folk usually prefer formal introductions, so for the purposes of this English edition perhaps I ought to explain here our various relationships.

P.Y.C. and Grog met at school when they were twelve and ten respectively, and have kept together ever since, and are practically brothers. My family and P.Y.C.'s have known each other since my father and his uncle were friends at Cambridge in the eighties, and P.Y.C. and I married about fourteen years ago. Cooee was a

student friend of mine, and is the horse-lover of the group. She came to manage our house for me when I had to neglect it for my own work, and she introduced the animals into the establishment. Christine, whose family I have known since a child, is our housemaid. Margaret was cooking for us at this time. Albert is builder, plumber, and wireless expert to Auburn generally, and like everyone else mentioned is a neighbour and a friend.

2

THE AUGUST party was terrific that year. It reached a zenith, achieved a ripeness, which lifted it out of the class of "Good Times" and planted it in the front row of "Life Experiences."

For some years then this annual jollification had constituted our only family holiday and was our one yearly reunion with all our hosts of old friends. We saved up for it like children, not only in money but in those precious odds-and-ends which one comes by in the country—a remarkable pot of jam, a vast marrow, new clothes, a picture one has painted or a dog kennel one has built, or even a lovely new joke. Sam coaxed his begonias to be at their best for it; Margaret and Chrissie saved their prize bottles of fruit for it; Mr. Doe the butcher kept a special look-out for just the right baron of beef for the Feed, and down the road at Marshling the hams were picked out early for the same occasion. Every one of these little things was of extreme importance to us all, and I think rightly, for the genuine pleasures of life are elusive and seem to lie in the special occasions of commonplace amenities. They are the highlights, so to speak, of the ordinarily good.

The proceedings had a traditional routine and lasted for the best part of a week. This routine had grown steadily from small beginnings and had finally flowered into a series of parties, all following closely on each other's heels.

It began on the Friday before the first Monday in August, and the house filled with people we had either known at school or as students. The only similarity between us all was in age and in the subsequent slight sameness of outlook. Younger brothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts crept in as the years went by, but there never seemed to be any older folk in the house-party.

When I say the house filled I mean it strained its seams. It is a largish rambling old place possessing endless store and box rooms, which all came in very useful as spare bedrooms at these times.

Out of this gathering P.Y.C. could always collect a full cricket team, with certain augmentations from among the neighbours. There was never any dearth of men, and in fact they often had to play thirteen aside to get everybody in. Friday evening was always taken leisurely, and also with the various more important preparations which no one would have liked to miss.

Albert and Alec his assistant always appeared on Friday, making an awful mess when everything was tidy for the visitors. Every year he thought out something more ambitious and complicated in the way of garden lighting, and the execution of his new masterpiece was always well worth watching and assisting, for in the years he had acquired as remarkable a collection of cables, coloured bulbs and multi-way switches as ever delighted human amateur. The assortment took rather a long time to put up of course, and in the day-time the garden had a tendency to look like a main overhead telephone section after the storm, but, even allowing for fuses, by Monday night the effect was always impressive and original.

Saturday began quietly and moved on, gathering momentum, to the half-day match between P.Y.C.'s team and Auburn Village. Immediately following the convivial gathering after this match there was a scramble to dress up for the Saturday night party, to which came many neighbours whom we did not know quite so intimately as our house guests. This was always a set piece, the scheme of the masquerade being carefully laid down beforehand.

The explanation of this rather unexpectedly precious proceeding was prosaic. Even if childhood friends remain one's friends they do not grow up like each other, and, like the good people in the rhyme who had different opinions, "some like apples and some like inions." Not to beat about the bush, we had and have among our nearest and dearest those who would not feel happy out of a boiled shirt at an evening party and those who would not be seen dead in one, proclaiming their own variety of costume the only wear, so the natural thing to do was to arrange a function which everyone could attend in either or neither garment with complete propriety.

On that particular occasion Saturday night was to be Spy Night at the Embassy, and the effect aimed at a nice blend of Phillips Oppenheim and Limehouse Nights. Grog had been busy for days painting a brilliant collection of life-sized liveried flunkeys, unconventionally armed with revolvers and sub-machine-guns, which he pinned up about the house to give it the required tone. Our guests, arriving about nine, found us breathless but ready, and the noise and chatter, drinking and dancing and showing off went on until next morning.

Sunday usually passed in recuperation, for on Monday there was serious work to be done.

Among all the very good things there are in life I think I would put in the first flight the glorious bustle of the preparations for a country feast at which

very old friends are to predominate. This is entertaining without worry or pretension, and if something goes wrong it is only an added excitement all can share.

There was never any question of hiring extra help on these occasions. Help started arriving at six in the morning and the weather was the only uncertain assistant.

On that day our luck held. At half-past five the sky was grey with the mist which means heat to come, and when Norry arrived with the trestles borrowed from the village hall and the baskets of crockery which Vic was lending us he assured me we were in for a scorcher, and we agreed that in view of this an extra firkin of beer ought to be set aside "in case."

At eleven the Pontisbright team arrived, and with them came their wives and children, mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts and everybody else who remembered us—sixty-odd of them.

We had once lived in Pontisbright, fifteen miles from Auburn, and had always had relations there; while Chrissie is Pontisbright born, so that this was another reunion, as important as the previous one on the Friday. Len was there, of course. He is the sexton and their slow bowler, and I have known the time at Pontisbright when half the team was helping to dig like fury all the morning so that he might be free to uphold the honour of the village on the green in the afternoon.

With him came the Ashby brothers from the Mill, and nearly all the Quinneys (who can make up a complete cricket team of brothers if need be), and Stan the parson and Mrs. Stan, and Mrs. Len and Doreen, and Laurie Smith and all the others.

Len was captain that year. His elder sister, Cissie, had worked for us in the last war, and it was she who had fled with we three children to London on that terrifying day when a mistaken order had started a false evacuation of our little corner of the East Coast. However, that was a long while ago, and no one was thinking about war that Monday morning in '38, although there had been a great deal of worried speculation about it on the day before.

It was a staggering morning. The sky was dizzily blue, and the heat haze hung over the bright green meadow and burnt on the trees round its borders. Sam and Len tossed, and the match began, with the regular Auburn team reinforced with the best of P.Y.C.'s to meet such serious opposition.

It is almost impossible to describe village cricket at its superb best. Those people who confuse it either with a game or a religion have given it a

bad name in some quarters, but for those who enjoy its peculiar attributes there is no spectacle in the world to take its place. This kind of cricket is a country sport like fishing or making love. For those who do not know it well, perhaps I might venture to set down why I personally find it so good to watch.

Primarily, village cricket is a performance, and has something in common with the Lancers and much with the Harlequinade. It epitomises the very English secret of combining individualism with co-operative effort. Each player has his chance to shine alone, and yet his final success or failure is the team's. Best of all, the day is never lost until it is won. At any moment a thumping miracle may happen, and usually it does. In fact there is a lot of magic in it, and I do not use the word in any poetic sense. The whole business has something of the elements of a rustic charm, and on the right day, in the leafy privacy of the meadow and conducted by the right country people, a very potent sort of atmosphere indeed can be conjured up.

August Monday 1938 in Auburn was one of those occasions. The lunch, or Feed, at which as many as could find places sat down and the rest of us waited our turn after doing our share with the serving, took place as usual under the ilex-tree in the Lady Garden because no room in the house could hold us.

Then there was more cricket, and tea with everybody's name on the cake, and afterwards a finish to the game which was so close that the score had to be checked over before the winners were certain of their victory. Finally came a gathering for more old-and-mild refreshment in all the downstairs rooms at once, with last-minute bits of news and a tremendous concerted ragging of a distinguished guest (one of His Majesty's Recorders), who bore up magnificently under the strain; while yet another four-and-a-half had to be trundled down from the Thatcher's, bringing up the score to the full thirty-six.

The exuberant hour lasted full and good and without spoiling until the moon came up, and the bus drivers put their feet down and carried a sleepy, happy Pontisbright away to its deep green valley inland.

3

A FEW weeks later, when we were still clearing up and packing away things that might come in useful next year, the incredible descended upon us, and we were suddenly required to take instant precautions in case of an attack on our lives by poison gas.

In Auburn we don't care for drama very much. Certain of our good ladies have a flair for it, and generations of them presiding over illnesses and accidents have brought the whole thing into disrepute; so it happened that when real drama appeared it shocked and irritated us before it stimulated us.

The first thing that happened was the change in the wireless. It gave up being dull and became frankly hysterical, bursting into news bulletins every forty-five minutes or so, a phenomenon which reminded us of the death of the King and the Abdication. The painfully nervous light entertainment between the announcements was a change from the slow music of the other occasions, but if it was meant to be comfortingly normal it was a mistake, because we were inclined to be confused by it rather than soothed.

As I have said, few of us ordinary people in Auburn tended to be students of foreign affairs at that time, although most of us have done a little studying since; but, as Sam pointed out, we could at least read, and the bare facts, which we have a gift for seizing among the verbiage, suddenly resolved themselves into a path to disaster as clear as if we had suddenly seen it appearing across the marsh.

As far as we could find out—and this was not too easy, because the newspapers were very busy conjecturing—we were not pledged to help Czechoslovakia, but France was and we were pledged to help France. No one ever questioned that the Frenchies wanted a fight. In those days it was our convinced opinion that the Frenchies were always prepared to fight on any provocation, it being in their nature as it were, and at that time the only military operations in Europe which we could imagine were those in which we painfully consolidated brilliant but dangerous French advances.

It was all very alarming, but, perilous though the situation looked, we still could not believe that it was actually war. We were still blinded by the absence of any hint whatever sent direct to us from the Government. It was that which kept us thinking that there must be a catch in it somewhere. The notion that for twenty years our politicians might have been inefficient, to

put it mildly, and that our present man in an impossible position was backing his own theory without letting us in on it, never came into our heads for a moment.

One evening we in Auburn got our first definite hint. Mr. Moore came up from the schoolhouse, where his wife is Headmistress, to ask P.Y.C. to take the chair at an Air Raid Precautions meeting on the following Tuesday. It was important, he said, and they were speeding it up all over the district.

Air Raid Precautions. This was more like it. This sounded more like business. We had had air raids before. A Zeppelin had come down in a village not far away in the last war, and there was a great chunk of it in the garage still. Also we had heard about Spain and had seen horrifying newsreels from China, and we had no illusions whatever about the value of the aeroplane as an offensive weapon.

Yet at that moment the wireless was giving us to understand that the crisis was upon us. Events were obviously moving fast. If one could believe one's ears and use one's head, air raids might begin that night. What in the name of sanity was this tale of a meeting next Tuesday?

"It won't come to nothin'." "There's something behind it." "He's a-playing for something." "He's frightening on 'em."

That was the general opinion, and it was not all wishful thinking. No one wanted a war. To some of us war seemed then to mean quite literally a sentence of death on everyone and everything we most loved, but no one felt war was impossible, whatever it meant. In Auburn death comes, war comes, night comes. There is no question of stopping any of them by a refusal to co-operate. In a country like England democracy has been fought for so many times, and won by so many battles small and large, that it has long ceased to become an ideal and is an instinct.

On the Monday of the Munich crisis it was a windy, showery day, and Auburn, I remember, seemed very old. In the spring the cut squares round the trees in the orchard are carpeted with aconites, and all through the year the memory of those blazing golden cushions hangs about it. There is a legend that aconites only flourish where Roman blood has been spilt, and if this is true there must have been a battle up there at the end of the Old Doctor's garden. There is a heap of old cannonballs up there too, much later in date, and only a mile or so away are the plains where Boadicea was captured. Remembering all this and the bit of Zepp in the garage, war seemed almost as natural to Auburn as peace.

That evening P.Y.C. and I drove into the county town to put a week-end guest on the London train. As we came out of the station we were held up by a procession of self-conscious-looking youths in tweeds walking along in formation. That stopped us talking, and we drove back in silence. When we got in we found "Me," the local bobby, and the Flinthammock policeman waiting for us.

I cannot remember how "Me" got his name, but he is a great ally of ours and is popular in the village. He is a Londoner and he served all through the last war. He opened the proceedings characteristically, his red hair standing on end as usual and his sepulchral voice lowered to a confidential bellow.

" 'Ere, do you know anything about poison gas?" he said. "You might like to read it up. You'll soon know why."

He lent us his book on the subject, and we all had a drink on it. Grog came down from the studio, and there was a conference about it. We knew nothing at all about gas naturally, except that it was loathsome, and I had seen a man with a horribly scarred face who had suffered from it twenty years before.

"Me" said that Lewisite was the Awful Stuff. "Smells of geraniums," he said. "One whiff, and you're a gonner."

It all seemed quite impossible, or rather it seemed as though time had gone out of gear. When I had seen "Me" only a few days before we had discussed dog licences and a certain matter of whether or not Cooee could ride a horse on a footpath. It seemed a long way from that to his tale about the place being threatened by Lewisite.

When the policemen had gone we looked at the handbook. Ten minutes made it clear that there was a lot to be learnt, and that if any sort of protection was to be achieved everybody in the country had got to swot it up thoroughly. The effects of the different stuffs were varied and sensational. Phosgene filled your lungs with water and produced gangrene of the extremities. Mustard had scarcely any odour, but blinded you and ate your flesh away. It did seem mad. One of Grog's flunkeys still leered from the wall of the breakfast-room. We had grown used to him and had forgotten to take him down. The whole business was so wildly melodramatic that all one's instinctive common sense said it could not be quite true. On one side there was that chap Hitler looking like Charlie Chaplin and behaving as far as one could gather like Captain Hook, and yet on the other there was this neat little police handbook of old "Me's" reading like useful hints for those about to be handed over to the Spanish Inquisition.

Because he thought it would amuse us, our week-end guest had brought us a frankly “scare” book which had just come out, and which contained very bald facts and figures purporting to be of use to the young soldier. One extract, I remember, ran something like this:

> “Q. What do I do if an enemy infantryman thrusts a bayonet into my stomach?
>
> *A.* You ask him to withdraw it gently, turning it very slightly to the left.
>
> Q. What are my chances of survival?
>
> *A.* Very small. Providing you have instant attention from a skilled surgeon, your chance is 3•102 in the hundred.”

And so on and so on.

P.Y.C. wanted to take this book to bed with him, and the rest of us became very abusive and quite unreasonably angry, I remember. We hung round the wireless until after the midnight news, not even caring to go down the village and meet the neighbours, and finally we went to bed, the sickening suspicion growing upon us that something might have gone wrong with the Government’s calculations, and yet still feeling in our hearts that the God of simple people would not permit us to be caught quite so sound asleep.

However, at three o’clock the next morning (an unheard of, not respectable, secret hour in Auburn) P.Y.C. got a telegram by phone. The message was very much to the point and explained Me’s unnaturally official visit and the loan of the handbook.

It said “Collect seven hundred gas-masks for your area and fit,” and was signed “A.R.P., Fishling.”

P.Y.C. got up dutifully and fetched out the car. Fishling is eight miles from Auburn and, although we come in its rural area, it is not very much used by us since it is not so large or so modern as Bastion, ten miles in the other direction. Fishling was practically unknown to us, therefore, as far as the townsfolk were concerned.

The next we heard of P.Y.C. was at noon, when he phoned in great haste to tell us to send a lorry, book the hall, and get a wireless loudspeaker down there. In a larger place none of these demands would present much labour, but in Auburn, where there is only one lorry available for odd jobs, the

custodian of the hall is also the postman, and the only suitable wireless loudspeaker is owned by Albert, who may be absolutely anywhere doing any conceivable type of job for anybody, it represented a sort of minor mobilisation.

At last the difficulties were overcome, and Bill, who is an ex-serviceman and lives by the pond, cut his afternoon's work and went off to Fishling with his lorry.

Late in the afternoon, when the entire village was fortunately aware that something definite and personal was afoot, P.Y.C. returned from Fishling a little dazed. He had with him a few notes on the back of an envelope and a sample gas-mask, one of the seven hundred which Bill and Charlie the postman were unloading at the hall.

Now that we are all so used to gas-masks all their visual horror has gone, but that one which P.Y.C. brought in was something new in Auburn then. The obscene elephant-foetus effect of the thing burst on us for the first time, and its obvious efficiency brought home the reality of the situation with a jolt like the kick of a mule. We all tried it on immediately. Most of us had seen the anti-war propaganda drawings of little children wearing them, and they had been unpleasant enough; but the sight of Chrissie in one, her starched apron and blue frock looking like fancy-dress under it, and her eyes, which I have known so long, looking out truculently at me (for, from the first, the mere mention of war had the unexpected effect of making her furious), turned my stomach over more sickeningly than anything else in that whole unbelievable day.

P.Y.C.'s story was simple, and his problem rather startling. In Fishling, he said, the A.R.P. Office was performing miracles. Thousands of gas-masks were being assembled by volunteer labour which included Albert's father among others, who had been working all night. Other volunteers were driving the things out to the villages and distribution centres in the town. The amount of work was tremendous and the strain terrific. One of their executives had fallen dead at his post at two in the morning. P.Y.C. had hung about getting all the information he could and had managed to get a short intensive course in gas from the A.R.P.O.'s assistant, who had given him the information between incessant telephone calls.

We all went over the notes he had made. The salient facts were these: the masks were a complete protection to the face and lungs if properly put on, everybody ought to have one in the next twenty-four hours, the area of our operations was roughly five square miles, and there was nothing yet for

babies. P.Y.C. added that the thing they had impressed upon him most was that there was to be no panic.

At first the problem appeared to present great difficulties, and we all took a lesson in putting on the masks and adjusting the tapes. However, we were wrong. From the beginning the entire operation went with astonishing smoothness, and it was the first time I ever saw the unity of Auburn as a visible thing. It was almost as if the village was a big single gentle animal, rather startled and nervous but old and experienced and patient. I cannot describe this phenomenon, because it was apparent in such little things and was an impression which grew upon me very slowly. For instance, four hundred and fifty people out of six hundred of us turned up quietly to the village hall in the pouring rain at the appointed time, two hours after P.Y.C. came back, although the message was only passed round by word of mouth.

The hall, which is only a glorified army hut, has two main rooms, the smaller containing a billiard table. They put the masks on the table, and Albert's father and Charlie sorted them into the only two sizes we had—Large and Medium. Albert had got his big loudspeaker into position, and P.Y.C. and Sam, who had taken charge of the gathering, got everyone to listen to the Prime Minister's speech. Everyone was very quiet while the dry, harsh voice, which was so like a family solicitor's, put the situation to us so well and so honestly and with such courage. Even then, though, it did not sound like war. There was no trumpet, no inspiration to arms.

After it was over P.Y.C. began to explain the more personal aspect of the gathering. Certain English people become utterly unself-conscious and without any sense of the ridiculous at all when once their minds are fixed on a definite objective. He and Sam were on the stage together in the big room and were framed in an exceedingly dusty and shabby red curtain. Immediately behind them was a dilapidated forest glade with a tear in the sky and scraps of paint flecking off all over it, while a single electric light bulb with a prosaic green shade hung directly over their heads. Between them was a very shaky card table and one small creaking chair. Sam sat on the chair and put on the gas-mask, while P.Y.C. did the talking.

The line he took, I remember, was typical both of himself and of Auburn. He announced firmly, and as if he had had it personally from God, that the danger to us from poison gas in the village was not nearly so great as the one which every Londoner experienced every day from the perils of his city's traffic, but that we might as well take every precaution, as no doubt they did in their difficulty. The point about the absence of any protection whatever for babies gave him more trouble. It was obviously no

good skating over the subject, because to thrust a very young child into an adult's mask would certainly be to suffocate it, so he plumped for a gas-proof room.

None of us had any clear idea of the official method of proofing a room at that time, but it required only a very elementary intelligence to see that the main idea was to stop every conceivable draught. P.Y.C. pointed this out, and Auburn, who knows all there is to know about draughts when the wind skates over the marshes from the North Sea, grasped the situation instantly.

Meanwhile the rest of us were letting people into the inner room, fifteen at a time, and fitting their masks. As we were doing it, it occurred to me that if the main purpose of the distribution was really to allay panic, as P.Y.C. had told me he thought it must be, it might possibly be a highly mistaken policy.

You cannot attempt to frighten folk off war for twenty years without your efforts taking some effect upon them, and the sudden present of a gas-mask will hardly wipe out all that in ten minutes.

It is a curious fact that nearly everybody's eyes are nice, and when you see them, startled and helpless, looking at you through a small mica window the effect is apt to be overwhelming. I obtained a lot of undeserved credit as a prophet by insisting in a burst of wishful thinking that there was not going to be any war for a bit.

All this time the rain was pouring down on the roof as if it had come from a hose, and there was the problem of how to take the things home through the lanes without getting them wet. People went hurrying away with them clasped to their bosoms like puppies under their coats. Everybody worked as fast as they could because of the shortage of time. There were a lot of us to help. Joan and Cynthia had come down from the Court, Mr. and Mrs. Carr Seabrook from beside the pond, and Chrissie, Margaret, Cooee, Olive and I helped Albert's father and Charlie, while Grog took down names and addresses.

We fitted four hundred and fifty before ten o'clock, when everyone went home.

The fact which seems so absurd now that we have experienced air attack, and yet was so painfully real then, was that we did expect air raids on a far more intense scale than any in the Spanish war, and we half expected them to begin without warning at almost any moment. No one in Auburn had been to the Spanish war, and we had therefore only written accounts to go by. One

is apt to forget that written accounts only deal with the highlights, and naturally we had a somewhat distorted view.

We expected London to be razed in a week, and I know my own private fear was the idiotic notion that a terrorised city population would spread out like rings in a puddle all over the Home Counties, bringing fear and quarrels and chaos with it.

What we had no real idea about at all was the blessed limits to the powers of high explosives. What would have actually been the effect of one enormous persistent gas and high-explosive attack on London in that week in ’38 I do not know. In two years we have all changed greatly, and I think for the better, but it was that threat which began the change. I do not suggest for a moment that at any time any single person whom I met ever hinted at surrender. They did not, and I do not think it was bravery, for nobody felt very brave at that time, nor was courage in fashion then (and fashion has much more say than most things); but the thought of surrender just never came up and never has since.

When we got home that night most of the helpers came with us, and presently Ronnie, our old friend the surgeon from Bastion, whom we have known since he was a student, with Mary his wife, and Jimmy, the young Irish doctor from Flinthammock, came in to see how we were going and what the verdict was. They too were our own age, responsible people all of them but no more experienced in war than we were. The dearth of folk ten to twenty years older had not seemed so apparent since we grew up.

Mary had sent my godchild and her sister away to Scotland, and Ronnie, so he said, had prepared for war by ordering two hams and thirty-six gallons of beer, not being able to think of anything more useful at the moment. It sounded very practical. Both he and Jimmy were naturally very full of the plans for emergency hospitals, and we remembered with a jolt from far back in our childhood that the wounded were coming through this village three days after the outbreak in 1914.

The Army was represented round the fire that night, too. The Captain and the Major from the Court had come in to collect their wives. They were both convinced that it was coming. In twenty-four hours, they said.

I woke the next morning to hear the talk in the street. Our house is right on the road just off the Square, and our high-pitched East Anglian voices carry a long way.

I could hear old Cliff, who has worked for Mr. Graves ever since he was ten, except for a brief period when he was Sir Edmund Ironside's batman in the last war. Bobby Graves used to be Vicar of Auburn until he retired a few years ago, and when he first came the village was still in smocks and gaiters and high silk hats on a Sunday. Cliff must have worked for him for close on forty years, and is Auburn born. He always shouts the local news to anyone he passes when he goes down for the paper, and if there is anything one wants to know about local affairs he can usually supply the information.

I lay listening to him with relief. Evidently we had not gone to war in the night, or he would have referred to it; but he was saying something which seemed almost more important at the moment. As far as I could hear, someone had not got his mask yet and was making a to-do about it. There were two hundred people who had not got their masks then, as I very well knew, and they all needed to be found.

Meanwhile, however, some of the family had to get to London; Grog to take care of his mother and P.Y.C. to attend to business, while Cooee was busy with the animals, who needed to eat even if the sky fell; so Albert's sister Olive and Mr. and Mrs. Carr S. and I went down to the hall and opened shop, as soon as we had sent word round that we were going there. Sending word round Auburn consisted of going into the shop where Albert's father was selling newspapers and cigarettes and telling everyone who happened to be talking there. There was quite a crowd that morning, and Albert's mother undertook to get the news about.

There were several disconcerting factors that morning. One of them was that the few ex-servicemen in the village seemed more apprehensive than anyone else. It was cold and sunny after the rain, but the sense of impending tragedy was suffocating. Now, when sensational and sometimes terrible things actually happen every day and no one takes any of them too seriously, the peculiar quality of the wretchedness of that morning is hard to recapture and define; but the whole thing is analogous with the way one feels when one first realises that someone one loves is going to die and the way one feels when they do.

It was Cooee, my oldest student friend, who lived with us, who raised the question of the animals, and that shook everyone in the place. Norry was appalled, I remember. We looked it up, but Me's handbook said nothing about animals.

Some English folk make too much fuss about their beasts, but there are degrees in these things, and the man who spends his whole life tending

animals is a funny sort of chap if he is not fond of them. Norry's old pony Kit was over thirty at the time and not exactly valuable, but the idea of her being suffocated or burned and no drench of his brewing being able to save her shook him badly, while Cooee was very nearly demoralised altogether. It was not only the pet animals but all the stock. The cows might escape in the meadows, but what about the pigs in the backyards?

Of course, at that time we knew nothing about gas at all, and the notion of a concentration strong enough to envelop half the county did not then seem absurd. Fogs and sea-wracks are a commonplace with us, and it was only natural to assume that something like one of these, but possessing all the "injurious properties" mentioned in Me's book, was not really unlikely.

Meanwhile Albert's father suddenly remembered the Tye and Shadow Hill and Abbot's Dyke. These are outlying hamlets in the parish of Auburn, but separated from it by several miles of winding muddy lanes. The folks up there would not have heard about the masks yet, save in a general way from the wireless. Fortunately he knew of some first-rate people in each community, who came along at once and collected their own and their neighbours' masks.

All the morning the "shopkeeping" at the hall went on. Some of the more frail elderly ladies who had not felt up to joining the scrum the night before came in with embroidered shopping bags and bent their sleek little grey heads meekly for the rubber monstrosities and asked very gently for a good recipe for getting mustard gas off the skin.

It did all seem such wicked lunacy.

They were followed by a contingent from the fields, who had only just heard of the crisis. These men had fine Norman-French or purely agricultural names, like Clover or Cornell, and about as much kinship with chemical warfare as had the iron cannonballs in the aconite orchard.

Round about noon came the rumour. To this day I do not quite see how it arose, and it remains one of the few genuine mysteries I have ever known. Someone—I fancy it was Olive—came into the hall and remarked that a strange gentleman had passed through the village in a car and had stopped at the only petrol pump. While he was there he had told someone he saw standing by that everything was going to be quite all right, and that Signor Mussolini was going to intervene. It was the usual rumour, completely without any chance of verification at any given point, but it arose at least an hour and a half before the midday news, and we are a great many miles from the city.

The grace-note, I remember, was the additional information that the stranger had taken a road which was a cul-de-sac and never came down it again. It was a good story, but not unnaturally no one took much heart from it.

Not long after this Olive, who had been going round on a bicycle visiting every bedridden or infirm person (there seemed to be a pretty large percentage of these), came back to suggest we went down to Old Lady Fell, who "couldn't make her gas-mask work." The name did not convey much to me, except that I knew by the local courtesy title that she must be over seventy.

Olive led me down her garden path and mentioned as we turned the corner to the back garden, "She's ninety-four, you know."

I had never seen a hale and vigorous person of ninety-four before, and Old Lady Fell impressed me enormously. She was so old that her skull had flattened and the cartilage of her nose had shrunk, but she had a bright colour and was doing a bit of wringing in the wash-house of the cottage where she lived alone. Also she was very tall.

She said, "*Another* war?"

It was the first and last time I ever experienced any feelings of war-guilt, and I said hastily it was only might-be. She said she hoped I was right and went on to give me her opinion of wars and warmongers from the Crimea onwards.

"They've been a nuisance all my life, they Proosians and Rooshians," she said. "We ought to have done with they."

Olive and I agreed with her, and then went into the matter of the gas-mask. We found the trouble quite unsurmountable. Like the babies, she had not sufficient strength in her lungs to draw the air through the filter. She was not interested. It was the food question which was worrying her.

"Wars mean flat stomachs," she said.

I reassured her with honest conviction. "We learnt that lesson last time," I said. "The Government will have taken care of that."

She gave me a devastatingly shrewd glance and her boot-button eyes were as bright as a squirrel's.

"Think so?"

"Why yes," I said. "They're not barmy."

She sniffed. “Let’s hope not,” she said. “It ’on’t be the first time if they are.”

I gave up being silly after that and turned to something I did know a little about. I could see that the mask was dangerous and I was so frightened that she might put it on and suffocate if there was a scare, yet I felt I ought not to take it away. I began to explain this as tactfully as possible when I saw that she was laughing at me.

“I ’on’t wear that, don’t you worry,” she said.

Finally we kissed and decided it wasn’t going to happen anyway, but that should any warning reach her she would shut her door and her window and take a nap until the trouble was past. It seemed the only thing to do. She was quite as “wide” as I was.

Olive and I went back to the hall. We had missed the news and the Premier’s decision to fly to Germany, but the story was all over the village. Even so the importance of the step did not quite register on us at once. Our country minds work slowly. But the grip on our vitals grew less and less intense and for the first time some of that secret invigoration, which we learnt so much about later, crept into the proceedings. It began to be possible to notice things with interest again and to appreciate the spontaneity of the service which came from all sides like a reflex action.

In the normal way, although we keep posted about everyone else’s affairs, we do it very discreetly and modestly and have a tendency to live very much alone, but now suddenly all the ceremony had gone and people spoke to each other as if they at last realised that they really had known each other for years. More than that, it was a larger-than-life occasion and people became startlingly more like themselves. Bobby Graves at eighty-two was driving round among his ex-parishioners preaching decency and damn-the-enemy and the whole place was awake again in a night.

When P.Y.C. came home in the evening he had much the same story of London. He said it had been like going to the funeral of everybody’s wife when he first arrived at Liverpool Street Station and that the streets and buses were silent as churches. Business had stopped and a pall of gloom which was almost a visible thing hung over the town. And then, just after lunch, he came out of an office building and saw someone laughing in the street. After that the good news spread before his eyes as he walked along, so that he knew something must have happened before he saw a placard.

For the more knowledgeable world I suppose that was the end of the crisis, although the second flight of Mr. Chamberlain was yet to come, but for the majority of us in Auburn, who think so much less fast and who I sometimes fancy scent so much more quickly, it was only a lull in the storm.

Before we had fully realised what was afoot we were being told the danger was over, but we were not deceived. We had had our batch of preliminary warnings and we were awake. What we had got into our heads at last was that, whatever Mr. Chamberlain might think, we had an enemy. What was more, it was an old enemy on his feet again and coming for us.

The full spate of the warnings was still to come, as it happened, for when someone presses a button in Whitehall the effects go rumbling on for days as the machinery makes a full revolution.

The following morning we were having a family row. I cannot remember what it was about at this distance, probably something infantile like P.Y.C. refusing to get up at a reasonable hour, but which must I think have been mainly weariness, for a mental, emotional and physical shake-up is very tiring. However, whatever it was, in the midst of it Mr. Doe stepped down from his butcher's shop (which is the only pretty butcher's shop I have ever seen, and looks as if it were composed, meat and all, of highly glazed china) and came in, bringing the latest bolt from the Government.

He said that the Sanitary Inspector had called upon him, dubbed him Billeting Officer, and told him eighteen thousand East Enders were due in the district. "Of course they won't all come here," he said.

We were all still standing in the studio discussing the ways and means of the project, sending round for Albert's father's advice and deciding that the somewhat ominous choice of a messenger presaged nothing more than that the scheme was being put over by the Ministry of Health, when the S.I. returned to say that one hundred and twenty children were arriving in Auburn the following day.

The effect of this news on the village as a whole was unexpected. Apart from certain qualms, because there are not very many houses in the place at all, the main reaction was excitement and a burst of remarkably practical energy.

This new mood was interesting because it lasted for such a very long time, was both spontaneous and efficient, and was rather as though everyone had slipped down into another gear. A committee came into being rather than was formed; that is to say certain people came and sat down at the

dining-room table with old Doey at the head, and I for one began to enjoy it all enormously.

The local authorities had provided a vast quantity of cards, one for every household in the place, and based on the last census, then hopelessly out of date. Each card was divided into three columns. One contained a space for the number of rooms, the second for the number of people in the household, and the third for the answer to a subtraction sum, which was the number of evacuees to be received. From the warrant the Sanitary Inspector had given Doey he appeared to have dictatorial powers, and I suppose on paper the scheme looked almost easy.

Albert’s father brought his morning newspaper lists from the shop and, with Olive and Clara, we went through them with the cards. Of course all sorts of things had happened since they had been prepared. People had moved, died and been born. Houses had been built, had fallen down or been split in two, and there were other snags.

“Poor Old Lady Rose,” said Doey, pouncing on a card. “Four rooms, one in family, so three children. What would she do with three children? The house is no more than a barn. She’s over eighty, practically bedridden, and Mrs. Rich next door goes in to look at her. Three children would kill her. Count her out. Someone else must take her lot. I wouldn’t mind some little old boys.”

Little old boys were in demand. The distribution of the children began to move with speed, with Doey as a sort of rubicund stork.

In the last twenty years an interest in children has too often been thought sentimental, but Auburn people are not particularly fashionable and the absence of young stock has got on many people’s nerves, so that the prospect of a hundred and twenty young things bursting the school again and filling the streets was not altogether an unpleasant idea, even if they belonged to somebody else.

The actual organisation had the simplicity of the obvious and the new unity which we had so suddenly achieved carried the arrangement through with the beautiful ease of a conjuring trick.

There are five roads leading out of Auburn, and somewhere along each road there turned out to be someone who appeared to be not only the best but the proper person to help. This element of properness is always cropping up in Auburn, and, since it is based on personalities rather than on any material consideration, it is a very valuable thing.

In the ordinary way the gathering in the dining-room might well have hesitated to ask so much of anybody, but on that day it simply sent young Ralph down on a bicycle to each of them and begged him or his wife to come at once for the love of Mike. Although it was just after midday and an awkward time, everybody came as naturally and as simply as they had been approached and no one thought that part of it at all odd. Doey and Albert's father took the cards out of alphabetical order and put them into a sensible geographical sequence, and as soon as each "proper" person arrived they gave him the pack of cards for his own road—miles long, some of them—and asked him to drop in at each house, explain the situation, and see what could be done.

That was all. When everybody came back we went through the cards again and marked them on the back with honest opinions based on all the current circumstances. Finally they were re-stacked into new groups, which are worth mentioning if only because of their magnificent optimism and as showing the way everyone felt about it just then.

The main divisions were Good, Bad and Indifferent, naturally, but these were sub-divided into "Very special indeed (for grizzly or frightened kids)," "Special for little kids," "Good for nice girls," "Good for tough boys," "Good home for anybody," "Just good," "Good at a pinch," "Would, but not keen," "Could, but wouldn't without a row," "Unsuitable," "Bad," "Impossible," and "Never on your life."

By eight in the evening there were two hundred homes waiting for children, all owned by people who really wanted them. It was all very pleasant and intimate and simple. There was a lot of bed borrowing and airing and messages about taking two sisters, or two brothers, so they could sleep together. Mrs. Golding sent up from the farm to say she could manage six tough little boys, it didn't matter how rough, and that did sound like a glorious offer for someone because hers is a farm as live and vigorous as any of fifty years ago.

In the midst of all this sentiment excitement, and rather complacent (on my part) pride in our astounding efficiency, which was after all an unsuspected attribute and quite as surprising as discovering that we all had a mutual gift for part-singing or juggling, we suddenly remembered the cause of it all—the war, the gas-masks, the aerial bombardment which was "absolutely certain" to bring fifty thousand casualties a week to London the instant hostilities began. All these things bounced up again from the back of our minds where they had been thrust by the practical job in hand.

I think most of us found that we felt much better for it. The danger of a gas attack seemed far less likely and war itself more remote. However, to this day I marvel that anyone could ever question the ability of British morale to stand up to any sort of threat when it had swallowed the distribution of those gas-masks at such a moment and with no warning at all.

The children did not come that year and many people were disappointed. Little Miss Drudge, who lives down at *High View*, was very sad. She was cooking a meal for the two little girls we had promised her so blithely when we had to tell her it was all over and there wasn't going to be a war after all for a time.

Everyone admired Mr. Chamberlain's final effort, but his arrangement with Hitler that the two countries should never go to war with each other again sounded far too good to be true, which it was, of course.

Doey tabulated his billeting addresses, Olive and Clara made out the gas-mask lists, and the village settled down to quiet, leisurely preparation of mind. There was a lot of speculation. The discovery that the men from Ipswich who had been carting lime on to the Tye fields had spent the crisis carting empty coffins to London (private precautions taken by the undertakers, no doubt) set us back a bit, and every scrap of terror-talk from Spain was carefully discussed. But we were getting the idea; and this was important, everyone knew instinctively, for the one thing we countryfolk—and I think it may be true of the nation as a whole—are most afraid of is of being frightened, and nothing real, however ghastly, is liable to frighten one so much as the utterly unknown.

As the months went on, therefore, and we found out first of all what a vital and important part of Czecho-Slovakia had been taken by the enemy (no one had realised that at the time: geography is not our strong point) we got into the frame of mind for war, partly in resignation and partly in honest apprehension.

In some country places, according to the newspapers, the evacuation scheme was met with howls of execration, but it was not like that at first in Auburn. In the beginning Auburn rather liked the idea of having children—nice little girls and tough little old boys. In a way I think it almost mitigated some of the cold dread of the casualty lists which must lie behind the mind of everyone who has to stay at home.

This was partly sentimental, partly the idea of young stock in the place at last, and partly something else which I hesitate to mention but which ought to be put in. This is a peculiarity of temperament which I have not been able

to help noticing in nearly all the ordinary unintellectual English people I have ever met, myself included.

In all nations the ordinary man likes to be thought something; that is to say he has to have an ideal, a picture of himself which he likes to present to his fellows with the idea, perhaps, of getting their admiration or interest. This is very human and natural and a truism, but whereas in some countries it is the national weakness to be thought smart, and in others worldly, or cynical, or whimsical, or even capricious, in England the very ordinary simple chap likes to be thought *good*.

That this is a mistaken idea if mere popularity is its aim is obvious, because virtue is not an instantly endearing quality in times of ease. Goodness, when it is assumed and not quite genuine, is an infuriating affectation and probably accounts for the exasperation which the English do arouse in so many foreign breasts. Yet most people fall short of their ideal. The smart folk are not always smart, but in their case the laughter at their expense has a kindly, forgiving quality, while the laughter provoked by the man who wants to be thought good, and muffs it, is not laughter at all.

I do not know how long the English have had this peculiar personal weakness, but as far as I can gather it is very old in us indeed, and the fact does remain that some of us achieve the ideal and are good in the classic rather than in the Christian sense; not charming, not even pleasant or entertaining, but just plain good, like a woollen vest or stout pair of shoes. In war, and other times of hardship, they come into their own with the virtues they pretend to or strive for or do actually achieve.

Taking care of a pack of other people’s children seemed to demand just that peculiarity and not much else, and so that was another factor which made the child evacuee problem in Auburn something almost to look forward to amid the rest of the upheaval which was obviously coming our way.

When I remember what did happen when the war proper began I cannot help laughing at us a little and I fancy most of Auburn joins me.

4

TOWN people often find the natural tenour of life in Auburn quite astoundingly slow, and so it is if one is not involved in getting something to grow, be it vegetable, animal, or a piece of private creative work. To be precise the pace of life here is exactly the same as the progress of the year, and is, like all questions of speed, purely relative, for it is difficult not to believe, if you watch her, that Nature herself is not under the impression that she is working at a breakneck lick. At any rate there never seems to be a hope of getting anything done in Auburn save at its proper season, so that in a way it was fortunate that the Munich crisis came when it did just after the harvest.

Late autumn is the time for change and preparations and beginnings, so it was natural that we should have settled down at once to get ready in our own way for whatever might be coming.

The attendance at the A.R.P. Officer's introductory lecture was good and serious. I have never forgotten that lecture myself because it was only then that I personally suddenly saw how war in Europe could ever possibly happen again. I *knew* how it could happen, of course; that is to say I knew what ingredients, if put together, would produce the explosion; but until that evening I could not see what on earth we in Auburn could ever be doing while the world was going up like a fire-balloon. Because of this inability the whole question had appeared unreal to me and about as difficult and profitless to consider as, say, the inside details of a fit of mania I might get at some future date.

The A.R.P.O. came over from Fishling to give the general lecture which had been so abruptly postponed by the gas-mask distribution. He turned out to be a retired Colonel with all the neatness and severity we expect in Colonels and we grew to like him. It was his proving to be a familiar and comprehendable figure in spite of his fantastic job (and teaching people how best to minimise the risk of being burned, maimed or clubbed in their own homes did seem a fairly fantastic sort of occupation to us in Auburn then) which began to put the whole thing on a credible basis. The entire proceedings that night were conducted in Auburn's most formal and normal manner and it dawned on me that this war to end civilisation, this annihilating stroke, or whatever it was that was coming to us, would probably be received, at the outset at any rate, in exactly the same way. It

was the first time I ever saw the real virtue of formality. One can even lose one's head for a minute or two behind it and no harm done.

The Colonel came to dinner with us and we all walked down to the hall together afterwards in the dark, carrying his somewhat surrealist paraphernalia. The audience was waiting in its usual formation, which is to say that the front row is always left practically empty and the room gets steadily more crowded towards the back. Even as late as twenty years ago that front row was reserved, even in church, for "the gentry," and now it always seems to be avoided by nearly everybody. This is not because there are no gentlefolk left but because very few of them want to associate themselves with any society which ever took it for granted that it should get the best view without paying more at the door. It is a long time since "*When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?*" was first sung in the lanes, but I don't think that as a countryside we have ever entirely forgotten its biting humour, and so, whenever there is a whiff of the old tune in the air, I rather think that front row gets quietly empty again. It must have happened several times in the long centuries since John Ball.

Everything was very solemn and very usual on this occasion. Even the little clatter as P.Y.C. fell up the shaky stairs on to the stage (with the forest glade still in position) and handed the A.R.P.O. his singular "props" was accepted without a smile, since it was a serious meeting and everyone knew the steps of old.

The Colonel earned general approval in a way which I suspect never occurred to him for his audience sat and listened to him in inscrutable silence.

This condition of blank receptiveness is common in Auburn and has been mistaken by the stranger for suspicion or even pride. In fact it is nothing so active, but is an outward expression of a complete reservation of judgment. I don't think any true East Coast man ever assumes a newcomer is either friendly or against him, or indeed that he is anything save an object of interest, until he has absolutely finished presenting himself and has been thinking of something else for some considerable time, say a day or so.

On this occasion the A.R.P.O., standing on the stage with the glade behind him, a bright new dustbin full of imaginary sand in front of him and a glistening zinc shovel on a pole in his hand, satisfied 99 per cent of the room at once by explaining that although this outfit was advised by the Government for those about to deal with incendiary bombs it was none of it necessary, and that any old pail of sand and any long-handled fork, rake or

spade would do equally well. Afterwards he went over the official methods of gas-proofing a room and advocated among other things a truss of hay up the chimney and thick wet curtains over the doors. It was all so alarmingly practical and simple, so obviously meant for use. The audience was still with interest, if as expressionless as so many Chinese.

Half-way through, when P.Y.C. (who was acting as a sort of lecturer's stooge) was being shown exactly how to make an air-lock entrance, and my mind was running over the suitability of various old curtains on the top shelf of the linen cupboard, I suddenly saw the abyss at our feet as vividly as if I had looked over the side of a house. To realise is one thing but to see is another and I saw that they were talking about a corrosive poison to be sprayed over one civilised people by what was presumed to be another. I wondered if we were all insane and so nearly squeaked aloud, as one does in nightmares sometimes, that I felt the blood rushing into my face with embarrassment. This put me out and I looked around me furtively to see if I had been noticed and saw all the well-known faces turned gravely towards the stage. There was Bill, who had been through the last war and knew something about it, and Charlotte, Albert's wife, with her fine shrewd face and wildish yellow hair, and everyone else, all intensely serious, as they certainly would not have been had they not seen the horror of the situation quite as vividly as I had. They had accepted the danger and were busy finding out what was best to be done about it and it seemed to me that the sooner I wrenched my mind out of its present super-sensitive gear and got it back on to curtains like a reasonable being the better. Clearly whatever was going to happen to Auburn would only be strange in fact. The lighting wasn't going to change much.

One interesting sidelight on that lecture came from Norry's brother Jack. I was in the forge the next day getting some staples and I asked him what he thought of it. He said that the Colonel had been wonderfully reasonable and not a bit sarcastic. I was surprised by the final word and I remarked that surely he would hardly be that at such a time. But Jack said that you never knew when that sort of man was going to be sarcastic and tell you to buy all sorts of material which he knew perfectly well that you couldn't afford, yet this fellow had been straightforward and reasonable and had mentioned a truss of hay up the chimney, which was fair enough because anyone could get a-hold of that.

The dreadful insinuation contained in this argument made me sit up and I went back across the road reflecting that Jack was giving some of the people who come to address us from time to time credit for far more brains,

if much less human decency, than I did, and I wondered then if the fine old country gentry who are nearly all dead and gone with their horses, their guinea tips, their grooms and their leather hat-boxes, were not a deal more ingenious than I had imagined if they bred a countryside always to expect intelligence from them if nothing else whatever, for it sometimes seems that it is only a respect for superior brains and the secret knowledge their possession entails which really makes men and masters. The Church, for instance, never showed any sign of losing her grip whatever abominable muddles she got herself into while the parsons were still the only people in the parishes who could read.

5

DURING that first part of the winter the elaborate machinery of Civil Defence began to take some sort of shape in our district. To be honest, it was not a very definite shape then or at any other time during the first year or two of its life, and even now, when it is working like a cheerful kitchen clock, one could hardly describe it in detail without driving any reader to mild confusional insanity. The fact of the matter is that every authority, Rural, Urban and County, seems to have a separate and jealous finger in its administerial pie. These include the Police of each district, the Rural District Council, the Urban District Council, the County Council, and their various sub-committees, the Parish Councils, the Emergency Medical Services—incorporating in the case of Fishling and district at least three separate Medical Officers of Health—and so on until the mind reels. Moreover (and it is this which adds so much to the excitement), scarcely any one department of these various authorities would appear to know or have any desire to know anything whatever of the functions and responsibilities of any of the others. This sounds like the original recipe for chaos, but oddly enough in practice it does not work out like that at all. As far as the ordinary outside person can gather, the entire government of the country is conducted in much the same way.

I know it is a serious belief among some people that all this kind of government consists of a March Hare bureaucracy secretly controlled by large-stomached evil-eyed dishonest old gentlemen profiteering in the background, but one has only got to take a closer look at it to find that theory as wild as many other honestly held beliefs. The point that emerges is that this bulkheading, this watertight-compartmenting is natural to the species. It is not a fashion, not even a custom. Its spring is in the blood. It *always* happens. Make a man a village scavenger with a couple of mates under him and those three will instantly form a secret non-co-operative society even if they do not like each other personally. They obey their own immediate boss in the background somewhere and their own rules and they do their work, but they do not know or want to know anything about the arrangements of any other service in the place.

The great (if not instantly apparent) virtue of this extraordinary principle lies in the fact that the non-co-operation does not arise as a rule from any of the negative causes, laziness, nepotism or dishonesty, but instead from a very positive jealous pride of which a portion may very likely spring from a

human desire to hold on to small powers but which is for the most part, I insist, a passionate determination to safeguard the minor freedoms of the office at all costs. There is nothing odd in it. A people who really will die for freedom, and have done so in vast numbers at intervals over a thousand years, must reasonably be supposed to struggle, quarrel, sulk and otherwise live for it also.

The advantage is, of course, that each authority is highly authoritative and never goes into a huddle with a colleague against the individual.

Time? Yes, it takes *time*, but, as Granny says her father kept saying so sententiously, "Time was made for slaves!" Considering the birth of local Civil Defence at a distance of two years or more, I think that what must have happened is best described by saying that everybody concerned, from the serious men at the Ministries in London down through the most astoundingly complicated channels to the if anything even more serious men gathered in council round our Auburn dining-room tables, envisaged the same dangers and privately decided irrevocably on slightly different ways of dealing with them. Sometimes the Ministry was right and sometimes, because it took no account of Auburn weather and Auburn temperament, it was abysmally wrong, but the result was the same. In time common-sense triumphed, or at least it came in sight of triumphing before the end of history.

The organisation has been achieved by the only perfectly safe method, which is trial and error. It has been handmade and cut to measure, and at tremendous speed too, for a couple of years is a very short time to create anything so big in such an incredibly thorough way. This insistence on the handmade, and each little corner being shaken to fit, infuriates our rational critics, who insist on seeing something sentimental and sweetly old-fashioned in it, but in Auburn we cannot follow that. In our opinion there's nothing sentimental in going to war in boots that fit.

However, to return to Air Raid Precautions, the amount of emotional upheaval, the *feeling*, which goes into the creation of an organisation like this is terrific and it is obviously this pain, this frustration and exasperation, this bitterness and angry endeavour, which gives it its life and which makes possible the remarkable fact that 90 per cent of the arduous and unpleasant work connected with it should be done entirely without reward, not even thanks, for until bombs began to fall these services were the source of much amusement, not all of it kind. However, a man will work himself like a slave without encouragement or reward out of cussedness quite as well as for any other reason, and if he has created a private scheme for saving his own and

his unenthusiastic neighbours' families from death and disaster he will go to all kinds of extremes and limits of endurance to carry it out, sometimes even in the face of the said neighbours' active opposition.

The crisis has been a tremendous source of this kind of inspiration in Auburn and for the first time we all began to get a whiff of that heady air of active self-defence which became our natural atmosphere afterwards. It is no good pretending that it is not invigorating and rejuvenating, although it seemed very wrong to admit it then when we felt it most.

In Auburn that winter there were still many different schools of thought about what exactly we had coming to us. Something sensational was on its way, that was obvious, but our peculiar reluctance to envisage the full-scale European war which must have been evident to anyone in possession of the published facts was due not so much to wishful thinking—the East Coast man is not by nature an optimist, exactly—as to the remarkable behaviour of the Frenchies.

The vast majority of us were convinced that France could not possibly have anything real to fear from Germany or she would certainly be making more noise about it.

Our countryside knowledge of France at that time was the knowledge of our ex-service men of the '14–'18 campaign, and that was of course bigoted, rural, intimate and twenty years out of date, but naturally no one realised that just then. Our convinced opinion of France was that she was not only capable of looking after herself but of seeing that we did our share to help her. Entirely wrongly, as it now appears, we saw ourselves on land in Europe as France's tough little brother. On land in Europe France was the boss. French generals, any French generals, were the best in the world, French soldiers the most heroic (not to say foolhardy, if you were the P.B.I. supporting them), and French men and women as incapable of parting with a square yard of their "La-Belle-France" save over their dead bodies as we were of relinquishing, say, Clacton beach on any but the same terms.

At that date France's martial honour was above suspicion. A lot of us think that is still true. In common with many of our more informed countrymen we are convinced that there was something "remarkably strange" going on at the top in France and that therefore any sort of judgment is impossible until "that all comes out." We also add (infuriatingly, to anyone who would argue with us) "likely that 'on't be in my lifetime nor yours."

Meanwhile the one thing everybody did agree about was that we could be certain of being attacked from the air and so we concentrated on getting ready for that.

It is very difficult to recapture and bottle the exact mood of those winter months. There were three main factors, all contradictory, which made it a time of mental and emotional confusion. In the first place nearly everyone in the village was obviously stimulated. Ideas for self-protection, a lot of them insane in retrospect but some of them sounder than we knew, occurred to everybody. People thought things out in bed at night, or while they were working, and talked them over in the three pubs or round the fires in the evening with more force and energy than had been thrust into any other subject since the last war.

Secondly, there was a strong but secret sense of shame at this invigoration, for war was known to be wholly evil. No good dared be seen in it. Courage and "honour" in the Elizabethan sense were still right out of fashion and yet it was realised that if danger was coming we must somehow get into condition where we could look it squarely in the face and not see it too clearly.

Finally there was the sick crunch in the stomach of good old-fashioned physical fear whenever the utter enormity of the prospect occurred to one unexpectedly.

There were one or two unforgettable moments, nothing sensational as we now know sensationalism, but sharper probably than anything since because the protective mental blankets that one draws round oneself as the thing goes on were not then very thick. Many of us were still wearing the chiffons of a steam-heated civilisation when these winds began to blow.

The A.R.P. Officer followed up his personal appearance by sending us a lecturer in poison gas. This was no amateur but a grand Orkney Scottish ex-army instructor who conducted twelve two-hourly sessions at one-week intervals, and who took us very slowly and painstakingly through every conceivable aspect of the whole staggering business. He made no attempt to frighten the facts into us, but treated us as he must have treated generations of recruits, as if we were young boys, not too bright and if anything liable to be foolhardy. His complete genuineness and strong utilitarian note made the incredible things it was his job to teach us so ordinary that he slowly and kindly led us into the new world which was so rapidly closing down over our own like a second lithographic stone over a first printing. He taught us practically all that can be learned about air raids by mere listening.

One night he seemed to me to sum up the whole answer to the touchy question of personal risk in one immortal statement.

The entire scene was not without merit. The class, consisting of almost every responsible person in the place who could be expected to get about at night, had split itself into two tight clumps in the big schoolroom, one on either side of the blazing cinder fire with the high nursery guard round it. Mrs. Moore had borrowed a number of chairs from the hall next door, but the people at the back sat on the little desks which had held them as children. There we sat, as fine a mixed bunch as Illingworth ever picked to illustrate a country tale. We were not exactly the flower and crown of modern civilisation, perhaps, but we were all decent twentieth-century folk complete with wrist watches and false teeth and petrol lighters, bicycles, buses and motor-cars outside, and running water, main drains and telephones at home, while all about us, cradling us in a network of safety rails, was the magnificent medical and hospital service and as fair and sound a legal system as any in the history of the world.

The instructor stood smiling benignly at us from one end of the aisle. He had the blackboard beside him and there were still traces of the last lesson of the afternoon upon it, but over this he had hung a scarifying medical chart which showed a portion of a great pink arm with a stomach-turning blister upon it. Above his head, on the wall behind him, hung the school's own decorations, a collection of old German oleographs including *The Light of the World*, *The Infant Samuel*, and that one where the little child in a chemise is hugging a doggy-looking lion while a very clean vacant-faced lamb sits at their feet. The whole thing as a sight taken objectively was quite frightful. However, that was not the time for detachment and philosophic contemplation. The lecturer was giving us the soundest and most useful information it was possible for us to receive.

"Lewisite is a most perneecious gahs," he announced, his eyes twinkling kindly. "As well as its orrdinary prroperties it contains arrsenic, a substance highly inchurious to the human system. But if you get a high-explosive pomb on the top of your heid that's chust cholly bad luck. Aparrt from this, ye'll all be astonished tae discover whit a quantity of pombs can fall w'out doing any apprreciable damage to ye whitevrr."

He was quite right. I think we all have been astonished. It is evidently not quite so easy to kill everybody as we had at first supposed.

The process of hardening up is imperceptible. After the first effort the mental and spiritual muscles get going on their own. The unbelievable

gradually becomes a commonplace. The gas-mask loses its nightmare shape and becomes no more ugly than an umbrella. But there is a loss in all this as well as a gain. It seemed such a mercy and yet such a pity at the time, I remember.

6

IT would not be true to say that the gigantic war of nerves which took up all the winter and spring, the great Hitler-Mussolini cross-talk act, Mr. Chamberlain’s disquieting speech comparing himself with the younger Pitt, who, as everyone could see, had not been very much like him, and the crisis which attended the rape of the rest of Czechoslovakia, passed over Auburn’s head. They did not. But on the other hand they did not stop its steady life any more than making tremendous noises round a tree stops its leaves developing, coarsening, dropping off and budding again. It may tremble occasionally but it goes on doing what it has to do to keep living.

The invasion of the second half of Czechoslovakia, once her defences had been seized by means of the oldest trick in the world, presented the enemy to everybody “in one” and immediately two things became obvious to every intelligence. One was that never in the future could honest men accuse Britain of starting the new war, and the other that she would have to start it verbally or go under; in other words the Jerry had done it again. This made everybody very angry.

The individual point of view, which had begun with a great many folk feeling and saying openly that they had done their bit in the last war and hardly felt they should be called upon to do much in this, gradually altered. The hopeless old gentleman who boasted (in the Queen’s I think) that he “didn’t care if the Germans did come, they couldn’t touch his pension,” was sat upon and enlightened, and one after another, privately and without discussion, we each made the important and heartbreaking discovery that our passionate resolution never to permit a European war to happen again, a cry which had seemed so rational and enlightened for twenty years, was only adolescent stuff, naïve and silly and on a par with the resolution never to develop pneumonia or grow a cancer. We discovered it was no good just resolving and that Peace, like Freedom, is not a thing you keep but a thing you have to go on making all the time. It is a fruit, a perishable reward.

Preparations for Armageddon, or the one mighty catastrophe which some of us thought might take the place of it (for people were still talking about Germany’s fifty thousand bombers due to arrive together instead of a declaration of war) went on steadily. Auburn put “Gas” and “First Aid” where it wanted them, tucked in between the whist drives and the Women’s Institute and other meetings.

P.Y.C. as Head Warden and Grog as his assistant distributed strange equipment to the ten villages between Auburn and Fishling and, with the Deputy Heads, enrolled Wardens and Messengers, filled in hundredweights of forms, arranged lectures and exercises, attended stormy meetings, and gave out among other things gaily coloured gas-masks for youngsters between one and two and a half, and large elaborate contraptions not unlike small oxygen tents for young babies. At the same time all the other local services were getting quietly into fighting form. The Observer Corps, nearly all ex-service men, was mobilising under Mr. Eve at The Hall. The Specials, still in existence from the last war, appeared again, and First Aid Points were set up in every village.

On the wireless and in the press all the drums rolled sombrely except the little drum. That wicked, gay little voice was not heard at all and its absence instilled a sneaking doubt in the mind. Why didn't we need men? What sort of a war was it going to be? How much of the whole thing was bluff? There were stories everywhere of Hitler's difficulties. Every visitor from London, every commercial traveller to Reg's store, every lorry-driver bringing steel to the forge, had some tale to tell of splits in the Nazi Party and a different date for the outbreak. March 20th was given authoritatively, and then mid-May, but only the Army was dead right so far as I heard. The Army always did say September. The people who were utterly wrong were the soothsayers, in fact popular soothsaying very nearly died outright on the outbreak. *Old Moore's Almanac*, a respected and beloved handbook in Auburn and one Miss Susie swore by, and all the newspaper seers, who had been right about Munich, came a complete cropper the second time.

The winds blew hot and the winds blew cold. Sometimes the wireless was "dull" again, sometimes positively Ophelia-ish, uttering astounding statements between little snatches of wayward song, and sometimes it was itself again with the cricket scores coming in and the lawn tennis commentaries and Music Hall for morons and play acting for highbrows and nothing much for us in between. All the time there was no little drum, no call for men in thousands, no slogans, no mention of His Majesty needing anybody. The right type of man was invited to join the Army if he felt like it and the reserves were mobilised and demobilised until they felt giddy, but there was no pressure on the common chap. It was confusing until we heard in Auburn about the Maginot Line. Then one of the big picture magazines did a section on the great fortress, and I remember there was a theory at the time that the new Albert Canal constituted a line very nearly as impregnable right across Belgium.

Meanwhile Auburn went on living in the same way that it has gone on living through everything that has happened since. It is not so much that it is stolid and imperturbable as that it is up to its neck in work just living. For the first time that odd phenomenon which became so very apparent in 1940 began to show. Public life became melodramatic and private life formal and ordinary instead of the other way round, which is normal. Living in Auburn was like following a quiet domestic film which had been accidentally photographed on the negative of a sensational thriller.

However, a man may only be as angry, as hurt and as frightened as his heart will let him and, since all these things have their place in ordinary life in Auburn, it was difficult to conjure them up for outside things which had not touched us and which seemed just a little far-fetched, so the sober domestic tale at first remained much brighter and more convincing than the posturing of the shadowy giants behind it.

The change came slowly as the situation deteriorated, until in the June of the following year the two sequences overlaid each other in equally hard outline, presenting as terrifying a mental and emotional mess as ever confronted anyone. But in 1939 it was just that the mind had shadows which did not fit the current realities of life.

Homely anxieties were heightened and dramatised by the unnatural light of the world outside. Struan's confinement, I am certain, would never have shaken our immediate circle as much as it did had it not been for the pathetic sense of futility which hung about it.

Norry was as worried as a grandfather and old Mr. Saye, whose services he had secured as a horse-midwife and who spent whole nights in the lonely box over the meadow talking to the heavy-eyed mare in the deepest and most musical murmur I have ever heard, had to turn him out into the darkness which was every now and again disturbed by searchlights far more brilliant than any we remembered long ago. Norry scowled at them. He said they were enough to frighten the mare out of her wits.

Finally, when she disgraced everybody by choosing the one ten minutes when she was let out for a sedate constitutional to produce her firstborn in the middle of the field in full view of the scandalised village, and young Beau, born as flat as a closed deck-chair, was assisted to unpack himself and helped to stagger to his shaky feet, it suddenly seemed one of the smaller tragedies of the world to see his pencil-fine black head rise up so hopefully out of the yellow buttercups dancing in the cool sunshine of such a glittering Spring.

All the same I don't think any of us realised actually how far things had really gone until the August cricket party. A familiar landmark in the year like that is an inexorable gauge. You see yourself and everyone else by the light of other years at those times. On this occasion it was a shock, I think, for most of us, like finding that a favourite old costume had mysteriously and unfairly become too young for one.

We had made the set-piece the Eve of Waterloo Ball, in that derisive spirit which is going to date our generation as surely as that dangerous adventuresome innocence which Ibsen crystallised and recorded has dated our mothers and fathers, and the sight of all the familiar folk in uniform, some of them borrowed and some of them faked, was suddenly not very funny any more. It was very easy to suspect oneself of hysteria and to be ashamed at wishing secretly that two Regular Army captains had not decided to come as the wounded cavalryman and his batman, and yet neither of them had returned from Dunkirk long before another August came.

The weather let us down for the first time in history. Albert and Charlotte and Alec gave up their lighting effects in despair. Even the great match was not up to standard with Pontisbright failing to score very heavily and Len knocking out Grog's front tooth in the middle of the first over of the fourth innings. It was still a great day, still an occasion, but the whole celebration was playing second fiddle for the first time in memory, and under the skin everybody felt another sort of party was due to come off at any moment and there was still rather a lot of preparation to be made for that.

Even so, there were still a number of us who did not, could not or would not see disaster coming, at any rate so soon, and I remember that there was a defiant mood in the air which made us insist over and over again on the permanence of this annual engagement. There were frequent references to "next year," suggestions that certain new impromptus should rank as full-blown customs along with the Frog Row and Jack Hargreaves' story of the Drag Hunt (a latter-day Grouse in the Gunroom); and an inscription appeared upon the new trophy containing the ashes of the Recorder's sun-hat from the year before declaring that the two villages of Auburn and Pontisbright should play on August Monday in Auburn meadow "Every Year for Ever." But it was no good: the peace had gone out of it all. It all seemed a little childish and there was hurry and trouble in the air. It was the same sort of sadness that one had on growing up, an indefinable sense of losing something for ever mixed with hoping to God it wasn't true. It was Cressie, as far as I remember, who kept saying "when this is over you'll all

be old," like some dreadful lackadaisical Cassandra about the place. It was an unpopular cry at the time.

Packing up after the party lost its ritual. More and more A.R.P. equipment was coming out from Fishling and P.Y.C. had made fast friends with his Wardens at Flinthammock. This village turned out from his account to be not at all the terrible Alsatia we had always supposed, but the home of people only a little more unreasonable, only just a trifle more independent, only just a shadow more cantankerous than we ourselves. Indeed he seemed to find them even more entertaining, which was thought pretty poor taste in him, for, as everyone knew, Flinthammock and Auburn were oil and water, and had been ever since the days in the middle of the last century when there was a pitched battle with sticks and fisticuffs between them in our cricket meadow every Fair day as regular as clockwork.

Our local field was widening and at the same time the neat little honeycomb compartments of life were being broken up again. Makeshifts which we of our generation had slowly learnt to abhor as we had painfully turned the corner from demolition and had begun on construction again were once more the vogue. We had to persuade Christine to give up her new pantry in which Albert had only just finished installing a sink and hot and cold, to be turned into a First Aid Point, and there was the vital question of whether to tape the living room windows against blast or not.

This question of personal preparedness (setting aside all the lecturing, newspaper conjecturing, threats and abuse from the dictators and "dullness" on the wireless), the question of how much exactly should we villagers really do about saving ourselves, turned out to be a highly controversial matter.

Public opinion was very divided indeed. In retrospect it seems painfully clear that each held the views he did for obvious personal reasons; so-and-so because he had had experience of bombing, so-and-so because she was pathetically anxious not to believe that any twentieth-century human being could be so insanely violent as to want to kill *her*, of all unlikely people, so-and-so because he hoped to call attention to himself, and so-and-so because he had a horror of doing that very thing; but at the time it was simply all very confusing.

On the matter of black-out arrangements we were all more or less united because we really had learnt that lesson in the last war and most of us could remember the one really vital point about it, which is that there is only one way to counter the zeal of the voluntary official and that is to disguise the

fact that one's house has any openings in it at all. Not only must the enemy airman several thousand feet up in a swiftly moving machine be unable to decide if you have gone to bed in the dark, but your neighbour, standing on his head in your flowerbed as he tries to get his eye on a dead level with your outside wall in an effort to peer upwards through a crack in the lintel, must be unable to decide the point also. For peace, safety and the ease of mind of one's friends the house must be inscrutable, as bland and as bald as an egg. This is not so easy to arrange, for light is as sly as water. There is simply no holding it in a makeshift.

Some Auburn people possess black-out arrangements left over from the last war and some from an even earlier day when brightly lit windows invited unwelcome guests. Those who had neither improvised hastily. Norry and Jack made thick sacking curtains and hung them outside the Thatchers, while Mr. Doe and some of the rest of us had big wooden shutters made and dumped them over the windows like a lid over a pan. All the Queen Anne houses, and there are quite a number in the village, have natural shutters hidden away in the delicate panels and flutings round the windows. Most of these had been unused for twenty years or more and many layers of paint had sealed their joints and buried their dainty hinges, but soon they came creaking out again, slender iron bars girdling their narrow folds, fastening in the light and out the flying glass.

However, if we were more or less agreed about the black-out, after that point we began to differ considerably. Indeed when Mr. Doe actually commissioned Albert and one or two others to make him a real dug-out there was quite a bit of talk. A stranger listening-in might have been misled into thinking we all had personal grievances about it.

"Madness!" somebody said, and that word in the local accent is slightly comic in its bleating gusto. "That's sheer madness, so that is now." And there were others who demanded in the clear forthright tones of the indignantly logical "Will—you—sit—in—that—chair—and—tell—me—honestly —what—wretched—German—is—going—to—waste—a—bomb —on—Auburn?" The answer, of course, was the dozens of lads who for some reason, private or otherwise, never reach a better target, but no one thought of that then.

Doey had the laugh on everyone too. I began to suspect that he might when he showed me the neat concrete-lined den in the patch of lawn behind the shop. It is a fine large affair and will certainly do admirably, as he pointed out, as a super-refrigerator after the war. I had not seen this sort of fortification before and it reminded me irresistibly of the inner chamber of a

barrow. Such prehistoric tombs are not uncommon in these ancient fields. Naturally I did not mention it at the time and I hope he will forgive me for saying it now, but it has got that same simple and determined aim towards permanence. He knew quite well what he was doing. He had experienced bombing with the Australians in the last war. Shells, he told me, were not so bad because you could work out roughly where they were going to fall, but bombing was all over the place.

All the same, very few people agreed with him a few months before the war and in a way it was fortunate because the making of underground shelters presents enormous difficulties in most places in Auburn, since water is liable to appear as soon as you've dug two or three feet down and that is the reason why so few houses here have cellars.

In the past, when the enemy was at least expected to stick to the ground, our ancestors evidently utilised this, for many of the farms are still moated.

Meanwhile things were quickening visibly. This was not the familiar working up to a crisis, for that had become rather tiresome in the past ten months. This time it was much more like the final rush round before the embarkation. Things were more or less ready. We knew or thought we knew what was going to happen once we cast away.

7

ONE thing Auburn had begun to notice was the change in the money situation. I do not want to suggest for a moment that there was any actual profiteering in our part of the world in the last war—that would be grossly untrue—but on the other hand, no one in his senses would deny that the entire agricultural population of Great Britain did good business in the years 1914-18. In the first year of that war money poured out over the countryside in a way it has certainly never done since. It was not only that all market prices rose beyond the dreams of the most ambitious, but everything else became so valuable. Scrap, for instance, fetched wild prices, while the Army of the day bought like maniacs. Nags, hay and straw brought in twenty times their normal value, and then the smart officer gentlemen were so excited that they made many mistakes and often the red tape was too difficult to disentangle, so that it did sometimes happen that a stack was sold twice over to the Army, it being no one's fault exactly and the money forced upon a man. These tales are hearsay, of course, and twenty-five years old at least, but I know that when I was eleven and at a prep. boarding school in Bastion my mother used to drive in once a month and take me out to tea in the town, and I remember very clearly the richness of those days of 1915. Everybody at all the farms round about us had grown very grand indeed and there was a great blossoming of furs and gaily coloured tweeds and motor-cars, which were thought of rather in the same breath as yachts in our part of the world at that time. The strain and anxiety was there under it all, of course, but on the top there was a veneer of tremendous gaiety and extravagance. The shops were full and very expensive and the restaurants were noisy and overcrowded all the time.

This was a disaster, as it happened, because it altered the value of each farm and put everything out of gear. Round about our East Coast the farms are not the grand kind. Save for a few exceptions, they are the sort of holding which can provide a comfortable living for a man who will work very hard himself and whose wife and children will work also, sharing the labour of the farmhands, but in the last war nearly every farmer suddenly, overnight almost, became a big farmer; that is to say a gentleman-farmer without the slur of amateur status. This change was so universal that it altered the local view on farmers altogether. The farmer himself gave up working like a horse, hired a servant or two for his wife, took his children away from the village elementary school and sent them to good secondary

establishments where they learnt much to put them off working on a farm all their lives, and very few of those private, nostalgic, indefinable things which keep people on their own small native acres no matter what the rest of the world has to offer.

Some people insist that this was a pity in any case, even if prices had kept up, and others that it was a good thing to have happened, but however one looks at it there was no earthly reason why the farmer should not have done exactly what in nine cases out of ten he did do. He did not lose his head, you see, nor become *nouveau-riche*, nor did he do ridiculous things. (English farmers, from the great Dukes downward, seem to be much the same sort of chaps at heart; kindly, decent, pigheaded, over-pessimistic in speech, over-optimistic in inaction, and much more independent than anyone else on earth would ever dare to be in these protected days.) He remained a farmer but behaved as he would have done if his farm had spread to seven or eight times its size under him. After the war came dumping and the slump. This same farmer had to work like two horses instead of one if he had no savings, but, what was almost worse, if he had saved and could still live like a boss, he seemed always to be trading at a tremendous loss. Work which had seemed worth doing long ago when either he himself or his children had done it began to look uneconomical if he had to pay high wages to get it done, and that led to trouble all round for after all, it is the way in which one speaks the phrase “there is ten shillings in it” which really matters in this sort of trade. If the tone is contemptuous one is riding for a failure.

When the talk of war came up again no one was such a fool as to want to see it come simply for the sake of a very temporary spell of good business, but on the other hand there was a very distinct recollection of the phenomenon. Its reoccurrence was fully expected and was kept in the back of the mind as some slight mitigation of the abominable circumstances. However, early in 1939 it became apparent that in this new war money was going to be very tight all round this time and the economic frost was not just going to pick off the middle and well-to-do. Norry, who had been insisting not without a relish partly malignant and partly anticipatory that it was going to be another farmers’ war, was very surprised when the Government stepped in and controlled the price of scrap as early as June before the war. Indeed, that was one of the pointers which made both of us so certain the balloon was going up soon.

There was money enough for necessities, we were glad to see. The babies’ gas-masks, for instance, were elaborate affairs costing twenty-five shillings each wholesale to the Government and very carefully made, as you

expect in that kind of slightly medical appliance. One of these was lent free to every baby in the Kingdom. The Army, what you could see of it, seemed to be very well equipped too, but there was none of that erratic generosity, that idiot princeliness of 1914-16. The War Office was the same wilful unpredictable old party, but her family was not so rich.

As the final crisis came nearer and nearer, not with the rushing winds and thundering hooves of movie symbolism but rather with the slow tick of the dentist's waiting-room clock, we began to make final preparations. They were still reluctant. There was still a sneaking hope that Hitler might really only be bluffing and might back down considerably when he saw we would give way no longer, for there was a very large school of thought among us ordinary people which honestly believed that the man was *all* talk. It based its arguments most tragically on the simple theory that our Secret Service (so good at the end of the last war, which was the last time we thought of it) *must* have sent home the facts, and from the way our Government was behaving these evidently weren't as serious as some other people assumed.

So when war actually did come, it was one of that worst kind of surprises, the anti-climactic shock. It was as though the hero, in the very midst of the movie thriller, after swaying out over the rooftops again and again, had slowly bent forward as one had seen him so often before but had then quietly overbalanced and fallen to death in the crevice of the street below, while *Finis* scrawled across the screen. War came very slowly and smoothly and there was no shouting, no demonstrating, not even much talking, and no flags.

This was all on the Friday, the day the Germans marched on Poland.

Uncle Beastly (in those days the B.B.C. announcers were anonymous and had to have a convenient generic name in the family) made the statement in his "death's" voice and once again the button was pressed in Whitehall, and in Auburn I think most of us walked out in our gardens and saw them for the first time again in the blazing Lady of Shalott weather.

From that moment everything moved with a sort of slow, irrevocable violence. All disasters must come like that, I fancy, but in the normal way one is so excited that one does not notice it. This time everything had been thought over so much that there was not that muddle of ideas which is excitement's staple ingredient, and you could see your section of civilisation, the bit you had helped to build for better or for worse, cracking and splitting and crumbling as the shell hit it.

At that time, like the Guildhall fire a month or two ago, the damage looked as though it was going to be a good deal worse even than it turned out to be.

8

ON the Saturday morning, which was glorious, I dragged out about three hundredweight of depressing old books and made a wall of them half-way up across the breakfast room windows. Christine was furious with me.

“If you go on like that you’ll *make* it happen,” she said.

I was uncharacteristically incensed at this (half the difficulty of the ordinary person in this war has been to preserve a steady line of reasonable behaviour amid the shifting moods of a public opinion fluctuating daily between contempt for fearfulness and rage at foolhardiness). I said it *had* happened, and if she was anything but mentally defective she’d have known it when “they” marched on Poland. She flounced out on that but paused in the doorway to say her brother, the second eldest one, who was in the war last time, was very angry about the whole thing. He thought he’d seen to all that once, he said. A great many ex-servicemen shared his irritation at that time, certainly in Auburn and no doubt elsewhere.

As the day went on the tension was extraordinary inasmuch as it had this absence of excitement I keep mentioning. It was still a strain. All the breathlessness and the physical feeling of oppression was there but the novelty, and therefore the stimulus, was gone. The whole war has been like this. The actual thrust has come on an anti-climax every time. Doubtless it is intentional, one of those more complicated German weapons we start by ignoring, grow to admire, and end by thinking are rather silly and overdone.

Meanwhile the slow progress of the disruption of ordinary life was going on. The reserves were already called up and had gone to join their units. There was considerable activity round the searchlight camp on the hill. The Observer Corps was on duty, and P.Y.C. had got his Wardens’ Post going; two men on duty at each Post night and day and the First Aid workers waiting to be called out on a Red warning. He and Grog had commandeered the dining-room as their Post and they all, Herbert, Cliff, Sam, Reg, Driffy, Grog, P.Y.C., Johnny and two or three others took turn on the four-hour shifts.

P.Y.C. found a wall map of Europe which had belonged to the Old Doctor. It was enormous and we got it up with some difficulty. The date was

1804 and it is now almost correct again, but at that time most of the frontiers had to be re-drawn in pencil.

In the middle of the morning Norry and Jack arrived with the emergency lighting arrangements they were lending us. These were two old brass and black giglamps which they fixed up one each side of the map on great iron brackets Jack had hammered out in the forge. Norry had laid in a stock of the special thick candles some time before. The lamps looked very fine when they were up and had a rather fashionable outre air which added considerably to the cracking imbecility of the whole set-out, still astounding to me whenever I dared to consider it objectively.

What I have not cared to mention so far, but which ought to go in, was the emotional side of all this slow disintegration. There were a great many quiet tears, all ashamed naturally because there was nothing much yet to cry about, which proved that the weakness derived from emotional strain rather than from grief. Why it should be all right in Auburn to weep for grief but not for anything else I do not know, since so few of the genuinely grief-stricken ever do cry and tears appear to rise most naturally at something rather fine, which seems illogical. Still, there it was. There were a lot of private tears. It was all very difficult.

All through the day there was a tremendous amount of activity in the village although for the first time for weeks there were no planes in the sky. In our house, which tends to become a general headquarters whenever something is afoot because it is in the middle of the village, directly on the street, and used to belong to the old Doctor anyhow, there was a great deal going on. Cooee was off to help at a remount station and she and Norry had turned the animals out on to the Hall land where he could keep an eye on them. They were beset by a conviction that the Army would commandeer them (mares, foals, pensioners and all, in their more demented moments), and we had thought out all kinds of methods for saving the aged pets before we actually grasped the brutal fact that the cavalry really had turned over to petrol, and then, as far as I remember, we felt a trifle affronted.

Late in the afternoon my brother Phil turned up to make a brief call on his way down from the north. It must be ten years now since he went off and joined the fair people (as one member of our family always has done as far back as anyone can remember), and ever since then he has appeared unexpectedly every now and again, like a long-ago seafarer, full of fine stories about a strange and exciting world. His arrival is never heralded and is always an event. His car was laden like a caravan and he was in a tremendous hurry to get to London to pack up his affairs and join something.

He is a terrific talker, as full of gesture as a Latin, and he presented a suddenly vivid picture of all the fair folk in England, all the gipsies, all those strange wandering folk who manage to live apart in a country not much bigger than a pocket-handkerchief, packing up the lights and the bunting and surging back to join the real world again to find out what was going to happen and what had to be done next.

He was very sick about everything, as we all were. His colourful affairs had been booming and he had been on the eve of one of his larger schemes. His age was irritating him. He was thirty-four and about as tough as they come, but at Munich time he had tried to join the Air Force and had been told he was too old. It had startled him, I fancy, and had set Grog and P.Y.C. back a bit too. Being far too young to take part in the last war had set a sort of seal of youth upon us. All our lives we had been a little young for anything we had tackled. This being "too old" was something new.

He rushed off again into the evening sun, the shiny car glistening and glowing and all the brightly coloured things bundled in the back. He thought there would be a black-out that night and he wanted to make the city before it shut down on him.

Another overladen car arrived in the yard within fifteen minutes or so. It belonged to the Medical Officer of Health for the Rural District, who was saving time by distributing equipment himself. He was in fine smiling form, delightfully and comfortingly Scottish and unperturbed. P.Y.C. had been doing a little Pooh-Baahing and was Deputy First Aid Commandant as well as Head Warden, and we all helped him to pack the sealed dressings, bottles of Dettol and sal-volatile, bandages and packets of lint into little dumps, one for each village.

"It's not a great deal," said the M.O. apologetically in his gentle Highland voice, "but let's hope you won't need a great deal."

We were all very dubious if there would be enough, which seems madness now that we've seen modern high-explosives and we know not only what they can but what they don't do half the time. Then it was all a very unknown quantity and the spectacle of all this medical stuff presented to *us*, to the *ordinary public*, free by the local government, convinced us more than anything else could have done that the danger of death and injury was more than just likely. I remember looking at a new splint and wondering involuntarily which well-known arm that was for, then getting hot under the collar for being so theatrical, and then hoping suddenly that I *was* being theatrical.

While P.Y.C. went off in the car to re-distribute the stores I took a turn on duty by the telephone. It was still very warm and the gas-proof suits of oiled cloth which hung up just outside the door smelt of poultices. P.Y.C. had insisted on clearing the big sideboard cupboards for equipment and the one which held the seven pairs of new gumboots (of a very heavy quality and much approved by Auburn wardens, who are connoisseurs of the subject), cooked up an asphyxiating gas apparent whenever one opened the door. Grog was fixing up a temporary wireless set and Johnny, who lives with his mother down past the church, was the other warden on duty. Johnny is a builder and has a one-man business. He and Cliff are great friends and they run an abusive cross-talk act which might almost deceive one into thinking they disliked each other for the first half-dozen times. They caused quite a sensation in the village a year or two ago by going to Le Touquet for a holiday, which is about as grand as you can get, but they were not proud or uppish about it when they returned. Cliff had grown used to the place when billeted there in the last war and always considered it then, he says, an "ideal little place for an outing."

That evening, when we were waiting for war to be declared (it took much longer than most of us expected) or for the one great annihilating raid which so many thought would forestall any formal opening of hostilities, we were, poor people, fairly confident. Our argument was, as usual, quite simple, for there is nothing complex about our mental processes in Auburn. Our Government had had with the French a full year to prepare for war. This was twelve months better than 1914, when, in spite of the most miserable unreadiness, we had not done so badly, so it was reasonable to suppose that we had a king-wonder or two in the bag for this Herr Hitler and his Nazis, who were not even the whole of the German people and were not to be confused with them so far as we could hear.

We were talking about some of these king-wonders that late afternoon. There were some head-tales floating about. (In Auburn "head" and "king" both mean "the tops.") The secret ray which affects the ignition of any engine at any distance was the favourite. Nearly all of us had met someone who knew someone else whose car had cut out mysteriously on the Southend Road or somewhere else equally unlikely, and who had not been able to start up again until released by an unseen military personage lurking in a tent or behind a wall somewhere near by. It is not certain where these wilder notions have their birth, but they are very common with us and I think they are partially suggested by the popular scientific writers, not direct but through the "blood" writers of *The Wizard* and Sexton Blake's weekly, who reduce difficult ideas to the near-magic we find it most pleasant to read.

However, be this as it may, there were at that time many mysterious contraptions about the countryside, as there always are when troops get around, and these filled us all with the most hopeful anticipation. We expected we had something sensational in the way of defence since such horrors in the way of offence were promised us. By all present accounts we appear to have been greatly mistaken. If this is so, it was all part of our original mistake in believing Mr. Chamberlain trusted us as implicitly as we trusted him.

On that evening, when we waited for war to be declared or for the great air attack to develop, we assumed that as a large army had not been called up we did not need a large army. This argued that the German war machine was not at all what it used to be in the days when France had fought to her last man, America had had to come in to win, and we ourselves had lost a generation dead in our own footling long-abused little way. It may seem paradoxical to say that this very circumstance made the situation even more depressing that Saturday night, but the fact remains that there is a great difference between going into an all-in fight for your life and the right to go to heaven in your own private pigheaded way, and in going into a fight which will make a mess of you, teach someone else a lesson, rob you of the best years of your life—which are always the next five if you're healthy—and which you ought to win with one hand tied behind your back.

To everyone's relief Mr. Chamberlain, whose stock was still very high indeed, had definitely decided on a firm stand and was clearly determined that we should teach this Herr Hitler (an incomprehensible "bloody awful little man") the lesson of his life if he did not withdraw from Poland, which seemed unlikely, to say the least of it. Mr. Chamberlain was angry all right, but his anger was not the kind of anger that the common people of Auburn experience just before they begin to hit out. He seemed "sort of schoolmasterish angry" as Sam said, "not fighting riled."

It was very close in the dining-room that night with the shutters up. I had embarked on an ambitious list in a copy-book of every household in the village, showing water facilities, ladders, able-bodied men present and so on (the scheme which Grog was to do much better in a cross between a map and a chart some weeks later) and Johnny was supplying valuable information about wells and mains, while Grog was still fidgeting with the wireless, a disembowelled affair which spread like a vine and which had begun to show signs of strain as the crisis progressed. The same Uncle Beastly appeared to have been on duty for days on end and his death-voice had grown hoarse with exhaustion, while the records he played of the old

war songs struck a false, unpleasant, weary note. There was no bravura, no sudden quickening of the blood, no secret feeling of exultation and anticipation of the conflict. *Land of Hope and Glory* sung with feeling simply made one feel slightly sick. We seemed to me to be going to war as a duty, a people elderly in soul going in stolidly to kill or be killed because we felt it was the only wise course to take. It was insufferably depressing. I began to hope (feeling very glad nobody knew) that the air raid would begin at once and the worst happen quickly.

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P.Y.C. CAME in, and Driffy, who has a fruit farm, took Johnny's place as the hours dragged on. About nine at night, when we had put up the black-out very carefully, Doey arrived unexpectedly with a case full of books and forms. A man had just come out from Fishling with the news, he said. They were coming, ninety evacuee kids, eleven o'clock down at the school the next morning.

I was frankly delighted to have something to do. I had taken a look at my own work and decided it was beyond me, probably for ever. We had a moment of exasperation soon after we settled down at the breakfast-room table. We discovered that the local authorities had decided to ignore all the careful work done in the village during the year under the new "visiting and investigating" scheme, and, over-riding our scrupulously honest recommendations, had returned to the *five-rooms-three-in-family-two-billetees* formula. In fury I wrote "rubbish" in blue pencil over one form, and we had to spend nearly ten minutes trying to get it out. At the time, I remember, we felt I might get into frightful trouble for doing it, which shows, now I come to think of it, that we must have been getting rather nervy without realising it. I know Doey moved all the papers away from me, and I resented that secretly.

We got our ninety children fixed up very easily on paper, and Sam, who was still about in spite of the time, went round on a bicycle and informed the chosen householders that their promises of earlier in the year were going to be taken up. It was after midnight when we finished, and when we called in at the Wardens' Post (as P.Y.C. and Grog were then calling the dining-room) we all had the faint beginnings of that curious look that a day or so later everyone in the world seemed to have developed. It was that same look that actors have behind the scenes on a first night. We were unreasonably tired, not at all sleepy, and slightly hot round the eyes.

At eleven o'clock the next morning Mr. Chamberlain made his famous speech and, still like the family solicitor, so kindly and so very upset, told us it had come. We were at war.

Still there was no band, no cheering, no noise; only this breathless feeling of mingled relief and intolerable grief. Poor Mother Peace was dead at last after all her sufferings.

Grog and P.Y.C. were in the Post alone. They would not leave the phone. They were convinced that the great raids, with gas and everything else, would start on London and Paris the instant the German Government received the declaration, and that our raid on Berlin would begin the moment a Nazi plane crossed our coastline.

So I went down the garden alone, mainly because I felt emotionally unreliable, and also because I could see from the paddock across the cricket meadow to the school gates and I wanted to be present when the evacuees' bus arrived. There was no sign of it, and I went on round down the lime walk to the yard gate and stood for a minute looking out at the Square. It was a real Sunday morning, not a soul about and sunny. The forge was closed, and I could see from across the street the worn grey paint blistering round the mobilisation notices on the doors and the sale poster for the Gate Farm. Reg's shop door-blinds were down.

I went back into the garden, which is and always will be just a garden and could never conceivably be called "the grounds." No landscape artist designed it. The Old Doctor and Herbert Bullard's grandfather merely decided on it, and they were principally gardeners; which is why you find a fine row of delphiniums and a neat row of onions running parallel with a smart row of yellow lilies, a threadbare grass path lined with fan-shaped apple-trees, and a nice sound trench of celery—all equally beautiful to their way of thinking, and also, I admit, to mine.

I went down to the end and sat under the laburnum and the fancy red oaks. I could smell the sea, and I watched the sky over the rookery in the Vicarage elms, more than half expecting that I should suddenly see the warplanes coming like starlings in the spring, making the sky black. If the boys were right, they were just about due.

I thought: "Well, it's come; this is the terminus. This is the explanation of the extraordinary sense of apprehension, of the unaccountable nostalgic sadness of the last few years. This is where our philosophy led. This is what was in the bag for us after all. This is what has come of curbing our natural bossiness out of deference to the criticisms of the sophisticated cleversides of three continents. This is what comes of putting up with wrong 'uns. This is what comes of not interfering when you see something horrible happening, even if it isn't your business. This is where we've been going. This was our portion after all."

I spent much of my childhood alone in a garden, and I have never lost the habit of hanging about in one in times of stress, waiting for a comforting

thought. I do not mean anything fancified, of course; no visions or voices, naturally; but I do expect to get in that sanctuary a momentary clarity of mind which will give me a definite lead at least as to the next step in whatever I may be about.

On this occasion the thought which came into my mind arrived with the vehemence of a command. “Whatever happens, *whatever* happens, never go pretending that things were going well before the war. Never deceive yourself that you could not foresee a dead end.” I knew what I meant, although I had not been able to nail it down before. There *had* been a growing sense of dissatisfaction (none of it acute) in most of our generation for some time. Following the logical conclusions of our early disillusions, most of us were arriving at full maturity without a faith and without a hobby—two rather serious deficiencies in the adult. Some revolutionary change of popular interest had been indicated for some time. Now we certainly seemed to be going to get it, although it seemed criminally silly that we should have to find it in another war.

I took another look at the sky over the estuary. It was as empty as the future.

After a while I gave up idling and wandered over to the comfortable shabby little school, where I found Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Gager, the assistant mistress, with Miss Christie waiting with the teacups and boiling water. They had turned off the wireless, but the Prime Minister’s voice still seemed to hang about the room. Obviously they too had been emotionally shaken up as I had, but since it was both genuine and general none of us mentioned it except to say that he had been “very good.”

Doey was already installed in a little reception office in the middle room, the one Mrs. Moore has blacked out and where the children get down under the desks in a raid. He had all the billeting vouchers and the great loose-leafed book of accommodation, the one I had mutilated, one page for every house in the village. Mr. Moore was with him, and we went over our prepared list of addresses again. The visitors were very late, and we began to get mildly impatient.

I don’t know what sort of invasion we all had in mind apart from the initial nice little girls and tough little old boys, but we were not unduly optimistic. We had certainly been warned. From the beginning the evacuation scheme had come in for criticism. To read the country letters in the newspapers just after the Munich crisis you would have thought that everybody in the country thought that everybody in the towns was a vermin-

infested T.B. carrier; and naturally in the face of such a howl of fury the newspapers did what they always do when confronted by the really unpopular and shut down on the whole story like a clam. This was particularly unfortunate, because the scheme could have done with an airing, especially that part of it which affected adults.

As we sat there in the cool shadow of the room, looking out through the back window under the elms, across the Vicarage meadow to the church tower dancing in the heat haze, we were talking about it as we kept one ear open for the buses, and of course, in a sly half-disbelieving way, for possible enemy aircraft.

We agreed, I remember, that the bulk of the countryfolk were by no means dead set against the idea of taking in children, and that the money—ten-and-six for one child and eight-and-six each if you took several—was pretty good, or at least it was fair; but unhappily the people who did object so strongly were just the sort who could and would be able to write to a newspaper. Such an accomplishment is fairly rare in and around Auburn. I do not mean that we are illiterate, but it is no good pretending that ninety-five per cent of the population writes with pleasure. The kind of people who wrote and advanced good cases, although a very important minority in the country which they adorn, educate and improve in the main, were not *really* of any importance in the matter; that is to say, as far as bed space was concerned. There were not enough of them.

We all agreed there was no need to worry anyone who didn't want evacuees. I was particularly vehement about this, I remember, because I felt with a passion left over from my own childhood that the important thing was to put the youngster where someone wanted him first and worry about his living space afterwards. "Better a dinner of herbs . . ." in fact, every time. And there were in Auburn literally dozens of people who said yes yes, they thought they had room for another little old boy or a nice little girl.

Meanwhile the time went on and on. One by one we slipped home for lunch and raced back again, but still no one came. I was frankly fascinated by the evacuation scheme, and had been from the beginning because it seemed to me to be the most revolutionary of all the Government measures, not excluding conscription. After all, one's own fireside is the citadel of freedom, and it did seem extraordinarily dangerous if any local authority could legally invade it. However, since the art of being governed is to do the necessary voluntarily and in one's own way before anyone starts shoving, and since Britain has that art at her finger-tips, I did not anticipate any real trouble; but I did feel the whole scheme might have been better had it been

given the usual thorough shaking out in the high winds of Parliament and Press before it became law.

At that time no one knew much about it, for it had never been published out of Hansard as far as I could find out. All we knew then, and that mainly from hearsay, was that when an adult was billeted on you you got five shillings a week from the Post Office, and she was expected to buy her own food and cook it on your stove if you let her. It was made pretty clear that you were expected to let her do that, but no other details appeared to have been considered at all. Nothing about washing up, nothing about bedding, nothing about fuel, nothing about cooking utensils. It sounded like a fine source of trouble and quarrels all round to us, "worse than the war," and we congratulated ourselves on the ninety children. Whatever a child does you can't very well quarrel with it, and in our experience in Auburn half the trouble in a lifetime comes from quarrels.

Meanwhile it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, very hot and very dusty. We began to worry they would not get down in time for them to have their tea and get safely installed before the black-out. Mrs. Moore hoped they hadn't been travelling all day and wondered if they wouldn't be starving, and Doey said he'd been informed that they would all have rations.

Presently Mr. Moore shouted from the playground, and we all popped out; but it was only a big coloured van arriving. It swung down through the elm avenue and pulled up outside the school. The driver and his mate turned out of their seats like automatons, opened the doors, and began to drag out wooden food cases. They did not smile or speak or look at us. They brought the stuff straight in, dumped it in a corner and went back for more, moving quickly and as if they were working in their sleep. It was the first time war strain had come to Auburn, and it was odd and impressive, like the first puff of ack-ack fire in a blue sky. They looked as though they had been at work for seventy-two hours, as they probably had. There were red rims round their eyes, and their faces were grey and dirty. When someone asked them about the evacuees they snapped at us, and one man took off his coat, rolled it in a ball and threw it in a corner. Then he put his head on it and went to sleep.

Thinking it over, we were curiously unexcited by all this when one considers how interested we usually are when anything a little bit different arrives. We expected excitement, I suppose, and were saving it for the children. At any rate we took no notice of the sleeping man or his lorry, as far as I remember, apart from regarding them both stolidly. We examined the stores. There were quantities of it; bully beef, two sorts of tinned milk, and a

considerable number of tins of biscuits as well as several quires of brown paper shopping bags.

Doey said suspiciously, “There’s a lot there, isn’t there?” But at that moment a message came over from the Lion to say that eight buses were on their way. This delighted us all, and Mrs. Moore got the kettles boiling. We were fidgeting about making last-minute preparations, when Doey, who had been thinking over the message, suddenly said, “*Eight* buses?”

I said, “Oh, they’ll be those little old-fashioned charabanc things.” And he said, “Very likely.”

I was wrong. Mrs. Moore, who was by the big window which looks on to the road, saw them first. There they were, as foreign-looking as elephants. There were eight of them, big red double-decker London buses, the kind that carries thirty-two passengers on each floor, and as far as we could see they were crowded. They pulled up, a long line all down the road, with a London taxicab behind them. A small army of drivers and officials sprang out, shouting instructions to their passengers.

It was a difficult moment. We locals were all doing arithmetic. Twice thirty-two is sixty-four; eight times sixty-four is five hundred and twelve; and the entire population of Auburn is under six hundred and fifty. We hoped, we trusted, there had been some mistake.

It was at this point that Doey made the second discovery. *They weren’t children.* They were strange London-dressed ladies, all very tired and irritable, with babies in their arms.

We attempted to explain to the drivers, but all the time we were doing it it was slowly dawning upon us that we should never succeed. The drivers and the officials expected us to be hostile. They had read the newspapers. They were very tired, and moreover they were so nervy and exhausted, more with the emotional effort than anything else, that they were raw and spoiling for trouble. Doey and I, on the other hand, were just plain terrified. Finally we persuaded them to wait for just ten minutes while we found out if there had been a mistake, and we all went into the Lion to telephone authority at Fishling.

Authority at Fishling sounded a bit rattled also, and we gathered that our difficulties were as nothing beside the troubles of others, and that we’d kindly get on with what God and the German Chancellor had seen fit to send us. So we said “All right,” and went back. It was the beginning of the war for us in Auburn, the first real start of genuine trouble.

Fortunately there was plenty to do. As a reception committee we had hardly shone, and the immediate need seemed to be to remove any unfortunate first impressions.

To our intense relief the buses proved to be not quite full. There were just over three hundred souls altogether, many of them infants, but they looked like an army. They trooped into the school, spread over the rooms and the playground and sat down, all looking at us with tired, expectant eyes.

There appeared to be no one actually in charge of them now they had arrived. The bus drivers went away with the buses, and the two schoolmasters and one young schoolmistress who had come down with them were due to rush back as soon as possible to rejoin their own schools evacuated somewhere else in the east country.

The utter forlornness of the newcomers was quite theatrical. To our startled country eyes their inexpensive but very fashionable city clothes were grand if unsuitable, and with the myriads of babies in arms and the weeping toddlers hanging to their skirts they looked like everybody's long-lost erring daughter turned up to the old homes together in one vast paralysing emotional surprise.

They did not talk much, except to catch one's arm and say, "Get me off soon, please. I'm very done up," which was piteous in the circumstances. They had no luggage except brown paper carriers containing the babies' immediate necessities, which was fortunate, for they had had an air-raid warning or two on the way down and had been bundled into shelters and out again. Moreover, they were not the ordinary East End cockneys, with whom we have some kinship and whom we had expected. These girls came from the suburbs well our side of the city, and most of them were obviously better off in actual spending money than the majority of Auburn families. Somehow this made it more difficult.

What we did not understand at all at the time, and which would never have occurred to us if some of them hadn't told us about it afterwards, was that they were nearly all great cinema-goers and had been seeing newsreel pictures of refugees for months, so that when their turn came they dropped into the part more or less automatically. To us who did not know this, of course, their silent hopeless gloom, indicative of utter exhaustion, was terrifying and incomprehensible. After all, they had only come thirty-five miles, and that in a bus. In normal times they might easily have done the trip

for pleasure. We wondered what in God's name was happening up there in London.

Meanwhile, of course, our position (Doey's and mine) was rather delicate. It's one thing to arrange with a valued neighbour and client to receive two small girls, and another to send her instead two weeping young women and eight children under seven between them.

Also another problem had arisen. It was Anne who produced it. This was the first time I ever saw Anne. She came up, forcing her way through the crush and roaring with laughter. Her gaily painted face was quite different in its happiness from almost everyone else's, and she was hatless. She touched my arm, and I saw that she was wearing a wildly patterned green and purple silk dress, which, like the lady's in the ballad, was "narrow . . . that used to be sae wide." Tony, nearly two, clung to her neck and screamed with delight.

She said, "Here, I say, where's the clinic?"

The word rang a faint bell. As far as I could remember there was a welfare clinic at Flinthammock which was held every Thursday afternoon, or something like that. This did not sound as if it was going to be much use to Anne, however, for she said she was "due" in ten days or so, and that there were about twenty others like her. They 'had ought' to have had pink tickets, she said, but what with the rush and one thing and another they'd come along without.

Since it seemed to be our business, I assured her it would be quite all right. I had come to the conclusion that this was probably the end of the world, and that Dante was evidently going to have a hand in it, as I had always feared he might. I also felt wildly indignant that it should be Englishwomen who were being herded about in this abominable way. I do not defend this insular and prideful reaction, which shocked me out of the corner of my eye, so to speak, at the time; but I feel bound to mention it because it was so strong.

Meanwhile we were getting a move on as best we could. I sent as many people as I dared over to Margaret and Christine, and Doey sent some home to Mrs. Doe. Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Gager somehow got tea for everybody, and at the same time we sent out a general SOS. There was nothing formal or resounding about it, as far as I remember, but rather an agonised shout of "Somebody come!"

Miraculously Auburn responded. It turned up like the Navy or the Fire Brigade or one's parents, and, having taken one horrified, outraged look at

the scarifying sight in the big schoolroom, it took the situation in hand.

It was extraordinary. People who had no room, who loathed the idea of strangers, and who had declared in all honesty that while they were prepared if necessary to die for their country, they could not and would not stomach a child in their house for ten minutes, came up to the sunny playground with unwilling, conscience-driven steps, paused at the doorway of the big school aghast, and then went in and collected some weeping young mother and her infants and carried them home with tight lips and grim eyes.

The entire business became more and more unreal as it went on. We went back into a Bret Harte or Dickensian world in which stony hearts dissolved in acid tears and piteous rosy-faced babies smiled their way into private fortresses. It was a frightening experience, a sort of return to simplicity by way of an avalanche; or as though God, tiring at last of our blasted superiority, had taken us and banged our heads together.

The most elementary emotions, without any modern fancy-work about them by way of complexes or inhibitions, seized everybody and churned up the concrete like butter. I fancy everyone wept, except perhaps Anne and Tony, who sat and laughed on the gravel in the sun.

Even so, however, even with the entire village doing a little more than its utmost, a quart will not go into a pint pot. The time raced on towards black-out. The babies cried, and there still seemed to be dozens of strangers left unaccommodated in the schoolroom, which was gradually growing dark under the trees.

It was somewhere about this time that Jane and Mark arrived on the scene. They were newcomers themselves to Auburn and had been in Captain Brice’s old house for about a week, and so were still mysterious. Mark turned out to be a well-known author and Jane an economist afterwards, but at that time they were just thorough Londoners who, according to Albert, had a lot of books, and who seemed to be heaven-sent liaison officers between us and the new arrivals. Gradually certain facts began to emerge about our newest visitors. One of these concerned the size of the families. The amount of very young mothers with quite remarkable broods, say three babies under two, or an expectant mother with three children under four, seemed quite out of all proportion until we realised that of course the kind of family which would be forced to leave the city would be just those who like these would find it impossible to keep getting up and down into shelters.

Then there were the Steins. There were about eight of them, and they settled in a corner of the schoolroom in their good shiny black clothes and

their hats with quills and ornaments, bright-eyed, self-possessed, tolerant, and as completely Oriental and foreign to our northern green as so many exotic black parrots. They appeared to be the only people on the horizon who knew absolutely and exactly what they wanted. They were wonderfully polite and patient, and they wanted to know what was the best there was going. Jane and I explained, and they seemed doubtful for the first time. It transpired that they did not want to be parted and, while not actively averse to taking lodgings, would prefer a house to themselves. This seemed to be the only possible solution, since there were so many of them. Authority at Fishling had said that we might commandeer empty houses, but not those with furniture left in them. Auburn is not the sort of place where you find empty houses unless there is something a little bit wrong with them, say condemnation order; but Doey, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the district, knew of an empty three-roomed cottage in the Heron Hall row which was perfectly sound, and I promised glibly to find some furniture.

Mark offered to take the Steins down there and was apologising for the half-mile walk when, to everybody's astonishment, the taxi turned out to belong to them. It was owned and driven by a relative, who had followed the buses down. They set off, but unfortunately the trip was a failure. The cottage was not at all what they wanted. There was no running water, no electric light, and no gas. Mark said they poured out of the house and sat in the hedge, and wailed at him, "No gas! No gas!" as if he were personally to blame. In the end he persuaded two families on the Fishling road to take them in; but they left early next morning and went off in their taxicab, very disgruntled by all accounts. Whether they went back to London or dropped in on some other evacuation scheme in a village where the amenities were better we never knew.

While all this was going on, and the numbers in the school seemed even more now they were spread out a bit, I looked out of the window and saw another bus. It took me some seconds of panic-stricken gaping before I discovered that it was empty. Authority at Fishling had softened its heart and sent us a relief.

With the departure of a whole busload of the more impatient souls, who had begun to complain of arrangements which no one on earth could reasonably have called good, things began to look almost manageable. There were still groups of homeless strangers waiting about, but not so many nor so big. It occurred to me at this point that we were only one village out of hundreds, probably thousands, all suddenly confronted by this remarkable invasion, and that all over the country startled people must be opening their

doors like this to tired and sometimes angry strange girls and their heavy-eyed children. Somehow that reflection did not make our immediate problem seem any more simple.

Meanwhile Jane had discovered the Ring Farmers. They were not called that yet, of course; that came later. At this time they were just one vast loving family who did not want to be separated even for a night. There were nineteen of them: a matriarch who had been married twice and her younger children, two families of her married daughters, a daughter-in-law and at least one baby apiece. Most of the girls were remarkably pretty, Jessie Matthews types, and they were very smart if in a rather dressed-up way for Auburn. They all had soft voices and that delightful impudent direct intelligence which belongs to the city. Mama outshone them all, however. She was well over fifty, and looked like some fine Shakespearean actress playing the Queen of Denmark before the trouble started. Her expression was imperious and her carriage regal. She was wearing a black halo hat which suited her, and she drew me away from the others and said, "How about letting us stay here till the morning? You know what the girls are. We ought to get the kids to sleep. We'll be all right by ourselves. We don't *want* billets, my dear, not to-night. Just find us a few necessities, and we'll manage."

Well, of course they couldn't stay there because there was no black-out in the big room for one thing; but we did fit them up for the night in the schoolroom behind the chapel, and the big old-fashioned pew forms fitted together made cribs for the babies. Mr. Spooner, who looks after the chapel, worked like a slave to make them comfortable. Bill got out his lorry, and Albert and Charlotte, and Alan their eldest, loaded it with camp beds dug out from the junk cupboard and mended at speed. Everybody lent something, blankets or crocks or food, for the night.

Mama received everything with the gracious ease of a Duchess at a bazaar. She was never hurried, never hesitant, and always charmingly smooth and polite. If she needed anything we had forgotten, she indicated it rather than mentioned it. Someone said she couldn't have taken in things better if she'd been a sausage machine.

When the flow ceased she dismissed us gently with thanks and a Mona Lisa smile. There was no need for us to think of them for quite a time, she said. They'd manage.

As I came back I saw Albert and Charlotte in the Queen's yard, and we eyed each other very thoughtfully for a minute before we all burst out

laughing at the same thing. The old woman thought she was pretty smart. The joke was, of course, that we weren't being done; we were just being generous. I wondered if the old lady, with all her town intelligence, would ever get the exquisite subtlety of that one.

This slightly peculiar humour of ours, which is scarcely ever understood or even suspected by the townsfolk, may be a little hard to follow, because of course on the surface the townee always appears to come off best. On this occasion Mama had our crocks, our beds, our blankets and our food, and we had no means of knowing if we should ever see any of them again. However, the whole thing goes far deeper than that and is the outcome of a thousand years' experience of living next door to the same families. We had certainly risked a few odds-and-ends, but think of the position in which she had put herself. If she and her family were proposing to live amongst us for any length of time the definite information we should have in a few days' time about her innate honesty, her reliability as a borrower, her generosity and her cleanliness was practically beyond price.

They were putting up the black-out when I got into our yard, and when I opened the door I saw to my astonishment a replica of the schoolroom of earlier in the day, with Margaret grinning and Christine looking doubtful in the middle of it. The home situation appeared to be delicate too. All through the evening I had been sending round to Margaret anyone whose difficulties had appeared insoluble at the immediate moment. For instance, there beaming at me was Elsie with the four children, whom I had first met when she called to me in the schoolyard, "Hold the baby. I'm going to faint," and had put her youngest in my arms. There were five others besides these, and also there were those school teachers who couldn't leave before the morning and one or two neighbours who had come in to help.

However, all this influx was not the trouble. The thing that was occupying the house's attention was the formal inspection of the A.R.P. arrangements by the Chief Warden and his deputy, and a decree had gone out that no evacuees were to be billeted on an official Post, which sounded awkward. I sought out P.Y.C. to get his co-operation.

I found him with Grog and Driffy waiting for the inspection. The bomb map of the district, virgin and sinister, had just been hung up. I had forgotten the raids. In the excitement and upheaval at the school my mind had shied away with relief from the exhausting waiting which had gone on so long, and which the others had experienced in its most acute form all day. They were much more weary than I was. I had forgotten the war. I wanted to talk about the crowd at the school, but they were concentrating on the news and

the arrangements for fire-fighting, whether Bill's lorry would do as an auxiliary ambulance, the Flinthammock Stretcher Party, rotas, lights, methods of getting the news of incidents from outlying parts when there was no telephone, gas-proof clothing, discussion with P.C. Me on the registration of aliens, and so on in vast detail, for they had a wide and scattered area to serve.

Practically for the first time in our lives we three all had important and different interests at the same time. We were by no means the only centre of activities, either, even in the one village. The Observer Corps was going through the same sort of experience, the Specials were out on patrol and the tradesfolk had the Food Committees to think about, and all this in Auburn which itself is no bigger than a small Canadian field, no richer in population than a short London street, no more important or peculiar than any other pinpoint on the map of Europe and a good deal less than some.

All this was doubtless very good for one's sense of proportion, but it was alarming too when one considered the variety and strength of the emotional strain packed into those few hours in the school, a strain now diffused into every home in Auburn, and realised how little or how much it mattered.

It was about then that I began to realise one of the first elementary lessons of the war, which is that the whole world is bounded in your understanding, and that however large it may be, or however varied, it cannot exceed your conception of it or hurt or please you beyond your capacity. There is nothing new in this naturally, and I do not advance it as any sort of discovery; I merely mention it because it is one thing to know it and another and very comforting one to realise it. Coming out of the Post and going into the kitchen just then, you would have thought the entire universe hinged on Elsie's baby.

After a hasty consultation Christine and Margaret and I decided that concealment was out of the question, Chief Warden or no Chief Warden. It is not feasible to hide fifteen strangers in any ordinary-sized house, even in the heap of upended egg-boxes which ours is inclined to resemble at the back. I said very likely we'd have to alter things a bit in the morning. Margaret, who had taken to the children, pointed out that we couldn't be without evacuees. "Not when you've been putting them in other people's houses," said Christine, with that devastating directness which is all Pontisbright. I agreed with her fervently, and we decided to get the fifteen in somehow that night and to think again in the daylight.

"There'll be a lot of thinking twice to-morrow, I bet," she said darkly.

I thought she was probably right. I wasn't at all sure that the forms we had been giving out at such speed were all in order, for one thing. They certainly had nothing about adults on them anywhere, and mentioned ten-and-sixpence and eight-and-sixpence specifically. They were all we had of course, and if there was a mistake it was hardly ours; but still, long experience of the playfulness of fate did not let me be deceived into thinking that there might be any comfort in that.

There were other circumstances too which made me hope everything was better than it looked. The school teachers, who were charming and very kind, could not be altogether helpful, although they tried their best. Their job was schoolchildren. These mothers and babies had not appeared until the very last moment, they said. Some were properly registered, but some might not be. As for the mothers-to-be, no one liked to mention them very much. Two, whose adventure was fairly imminent, I knew were next door with Jessie, who used to be the Old Doctor's housekeeper, and who knows as much about medicine as makes no difference; but I had no idea where Anne's twenty-odd could possibly be, for it was not a matter anyone could have gone into at the time of the rush, and no one had shown me or Doey any pink card. Thinking it over, I fancied there might be quite a lot to do the next day.

When at last everyone had been fed and all the visitors had gone to bed, I went into the Wardens' Post to hear the midnight news, which told the same tale—no action on the Western Front. Driffy went home at midnight, and Cliff came on duty. He and Grog were going to share the small-hour watch. P.Y.C. was astounded at the absence of raids. He still clung to his theory of the one smashing attack on London or Paris.

"But they *must* do it," he said irritably. "It's their one chance before we're ready."

"Good God!" I said. "Aren't we ready?"

"Well——" P.Y.C. was getting embarrassed, as though it was his fault as political expert and head of the family, "we never are quite ready, are we? They say that if they come over now we'll bring down twenty per cent of them; but if they've got thirty thousand planes, you see . . ."

I inquired how many bombs they carried, and he said, as far as he knew, the Junkers carried five high-explosive bombs and five hundred incendiaries.

“They won’t bomb *us*,” he said. “Our danger here is only from planes coming down on us, or chaps unloading before they get to the sea. We’re practically safe. London will be in a mess, though.”

“What, to-night?” I demanded, for it was getting on for one.

He stuck to his opinion. He said he couldn’t see why they were waiting. France and ourselves were the big enemies. Once Hitler had put us out he could do what he liked.

I said I wasn’t frightened, and felt what a liar I was, and suspected too that he was also, and that three-quarters of the families in England were saying and thinking the same sort of thing at the same moment. As a rule it is rather irritating to become very conscious of oneself as just one of millions of others, all roughly similar, but on this occasion the notion had a comforting side. We were all in it together, anyway.

About an hour later, just after I fell asleep, Cliff came up and tapped on the door, and murmured much as he must announce his people’s morning tea:

“Air-Raid Warning Red, madam.”

All through this war there have been scattered moments of real drama, little half-hours when the thing for which one has been waiting too long suddenly does happen. Nearly always they have turned out to be anti-climaxes, but that has not prevented the first fifteen minutes or so from having certain merits. It never seems to come a second time. We must have had thousands of Red warnings since, but we never recaptured the frightened excitement and the ashamed but undeniable stimulus of that first alarm.

The Wardens did their stuff. P.Y.C. put the rest of the warnings through on the telephone, trying not to quaggle and even to sound reassuring to the equally excited hiccups on the other end of the line, and Cliff and Grog went out with whistles. You could hear the thin eerie noise echoing through the blackness and going further and further away.

Meanwhile I wondered what on earth I was going to do about the household. Like everybody else, we had a fairly clear idea of the general plan of family campaign when the raids should begin. Those of us who happened to be on duty at the time would be up and about anyway, and the rest of us were to stay in bed or get under the stairs as our fancy dictated (at that time, by the way, getting under the stairs and falling on one’s face were still considered a little childish and over-enthusiastic). However, that night

we were suddenly twenty-one in family. The stairs might have sheltered three people, but not more. The house is not really very big, we had no dug-out, and in view of the congestion when all the Wardens turned up and all the First Aid ladies arrived at their point it really seemed doubtful if the ground floor was any safer than anywhere else in the building. I went out to try if I could hear any planes, making up my mind that I'd get all the evacuees down as soon as I heard one. It was misty and only fairly dark on the lawn, and you could hear for miles. There were no searchlights and no engines. I heard the tramp and swish of rubber boots on the tarmac right over on the other side of the cricket field. It was deathly still.

Suddenly the White message came through; not even *Raiders Passed*, but *All Clear*. It was over. Done. The raiders had gone. We were astounded and almost annoyed.

It was absurd not to be profoundly grateful, of course. We realised that. But it did seem rather amazing that we'd not heard anything at all. The night was so still and the air so carrying.

We all discussed it in the Post, and most of us thought that something extraordinary must have happened. Had the fifty thousand planes been met in mid-Channel and defeated? That sounded doubtful, but the whole perishing business from start to finish could hardly be called likely. Had the ridiculous mystery ray by chance been a fact after all? Had the Luftwaffe funked it or gone humanitarian and refused to bomb? These Nazis were not like the old German Army. They were all war-babies, all rickety, nervy, hysterical types most of them. It was a proper mystery, so that was. Very strange and sinister. The threat must be real—it *was*, obviously—terrible and immediate, or we should hardly have had to house half our own population again at half an hour's notice. And yet what kind of an air raid was this?

As I went back to bed I heard Elsie's baby howling wrathfully. I wondered how many more of the new babies in Auburn had been wakened by the whistles. Poor Nurse, I recollected guiltily, had three brothers all under two, including twins of nine months and their mother, who was soon to have another child, in her house.

P.Y.C. and I stood on the landing, which had that chilly surprised look which well-known day places do have in the middle of the night. There we were, two among the millions, I thought suddenly, all getting cold, our familiar houses packed to the rafters with complete strangers, neighbours sitting up all night in the dining-rooms, careful preparations for the most scarifying casualties in the pantries, gas-proof suits and steel hats hanging

up in the back halls, sideboard cupboards bursting with gumboots and Civilian Defence Respirators, windows shrouded and sealed like jampots, and sudden death liable to drop on our heads at any moment; but otherwise everything remarkably and pleasantly as usual. No guns, no cheers, no flags, no glory, no anaesthetising panoply of battle.

I said to P.Y.C. that it wasn't much like a war at all.

"No," he said, with his perpetual interestedness. "No. More like an earthquake, or something *completely* new like the Day of Judgment. *I* thought that. Better get some sleep. More to-morrow."

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said.

10

THERE was another Red warning just after six the next morning and we remembered the great daylight attacks on Barcelona and especially on Guernica. Looking at the place, it seemed pretty impossible that any such thing should happen to Auburn, but then the terrific bustle and movement inside the house as the evacuees began to stir did not seem quite credible either. The Wardens appeared out in the square at once, looking a little self-conscious in their new tin hats as they stood about in the sharp mother-o'-pearl morning. Norry came trotting along ostensibly to let a horse out, but he too remained standing with everyone else at the meadow gate, waiting. Small companies of farm hands cycling down to the fields, each with his little cardboard gas-mask box (still ridiculous and shocking) on his hip, came by. They did not dismount but looked up every now and again as they rode. Still there was no sound of engines and the weathercock on the maypole was the only strange bird in the sky. No one talked much. And then suddenly, far out in the distance beyond the three elms, came the first ack-ack fire we had seen, little puffs of white smoke against a clear sky. We could hear the firing too, not quite synchronising with it. It was a tremendous moment. Grog went upstairs to collect the evacuees and I trotted in to prepare the others in the kitchen, who, in spite of my admonition, promptly came out to watch.

And then suddenly and almost disappointingly it was over. First the Green message came and then the White, and once more there was the now familiar sense of anti-climax.

As the Wardens came in it was noticeable that the sense of being mucked about was growing in Auburn. We had experienced it in the collective political sense far too long already, but now it was getting personal and intimate. The far more than half-forgotten dislike of the Jerry as a boor and a highhanded vulgarian of a type we sometimes breed ourselves, and therefore loathe with the hatred of experience, began to return. It was like seeing again the characteristics which one has resented before in a family which one has decided to like and live with at all costs in the interests of peace and quiet after the most frightful row of all time. It may sound illogical that some of us should have felt this then when a raid had *not* happened, but this leaping out of bed with one's heart racing, only to be left flat, differed from real attack, which at any rate has dignity, inasmuch as there was insult in this.

As the sun rose higher the back doors of Auburn began to open (we very seldom use the front) and out came all the visitors, dozens and dozens of them, young women, toddlers and infants in arms. They were in every conceivable emotional condition from reckless gaiety to hopeless tears. They swarmed over the village, filling the Square and the narrow main street with the four houses on one side and the eight on the other, and wandered in and out of Reg's shop and Albert's old shop (which was and is now kept by little Jose's father and mother, Albert's father having gone to live at Goldenhind, the next village along the Fishling road), and asked where the other stores were. Most of them were hatless, bare-legged and remarkably unself-conscious, utterly different from us and tremendously interesting.

Our familiar views of the village, the ivied wall of the Post Office, the big walnut tree behind the baker's, even the narrow roads themselves looked different and warmer as this new life poured and surged round them. It reminded those of us who were old enough of the village we had known as children, when the regular size of a labourer's family was "twelve with father and mother," and there were two or three hundred youngsters at every village school.

Mind you, the effect of this sudden burgeoning, this great unforeseen burst of fecundity and flower, was quite as overwhelming as it had been in the school on the day before, but it was by no means so piteous. Mrs. Bouttell, who lives in the Street, chuckled whenever she saw them and so did most of the older women. It was such an almighty set-out.

That morning the newcomers ceased to be a crowd and became individuals, living women, potential friends or enemies perhaps for a lifetime, for it is a peculiarity of ours in Auburn to expect things to last for ever. Naïve we may be, but it was a tremendous shock to most of us to find that on the whole these strange girls were not happy in our glorious village. The very superior ones, who looked like summer visitors, were the least satisfied and this was disconcerting to the native because Auburn was at its most expansive best. It was a dizzily sunny day. The sun shone, the wind danced, the fruit hung ripe and heavy in the trees, flowers blazed in everybody's garden, and the richness and prodigality of autumn was in full display. We had no illusions. If a person did not like Auburn on that day the chances were that he would loathe it on most of the others, for even the hedges round Auburn all bend one way as they crouch before the villainous wind which blows half the year from the estuary.

It may as well be admitted at once that Auburn came as near panic on that Monday morning as it has yet ventured. The fall of France and the first

bombs by the church both shook it up considerably, but by the time those things happened it was becoming innured. On this occasion it was still sensitive to shock.

Besides, the variety, the universality of the trouble those girls got into! Not one single one of them or us had a quiet time. Everything that one could possibly imagine happening, except death, did, and it happened at speed and with emotion, lifting us off our flat country feet, shaking our hearts up, kicking us in the wind and tweaking us by the nose until we had no idea if we were going or coming.

Much of this was due to the disproportionate numbers of the visitors, no doubt, but the rest, I fancy, came of the initial shock on the Sunday. That shock made each householder's experience a private and slightly emotional adventure.

There had been no billeting at all. Each host had been moved by sudden pity to take in a young mother and her babies and the subsequent disillusion was therefore a personal business.

There were some good moments. Mr. Eaton, the farmer who drives his milk cart round Auburn like a Roman emperor in a tweed pork-pie hat (singing sometimes when he feels like it), took Elsie and the children down to Mrs. Eaton on the farm. Their departure was fine. He stopped at the *Queen's* and bought Elsie some stout and the kids some sweets, and then, when she was grinning and the children were roaring with delight, he flourished his whip and away they went like an illustration to Dickens, a great floatful of noise and enthusiasm, the cans and bottles rattling, the pony snorting, the children bellowing with joy and the war as far away as Poland.

Elsie was one of the lucky ones. She was down at the farm for months. Phoebe was not so fortunate. Phoebe had been unlucky from birth, I am afraid, and her children looked as though they were going to inherit the trait.

It was Phoebe who started one particular ball rolling. She brought up the homely subject of "things in the head." It sounds hardly credible now, but in those days we had to seek out people in Auburn who knew what the creatures looked like and what their abominable habits were, and when at last we did discover an informant the chances were she asked us in and shut the door and whispered.

Since the evacuation a great deal of scorn has been poured on country people as a whole because of their attitude towards this subject, and it is quite true that in Auburn at any rate we did have a complex in the matter.

However, in Auburn there is always some very good and obvious reason for any complex, and the origin of this one can be traced directly to our first-class county medical authority (schools department), and doubtless the same sort of explanation applies to other places. In the last twenty years the country school medical authorities have made head lice a social error of real magnitude. While most of the genuine sins on the calendar have suffered a grand letting-up all round, and in years when the social code has permitted more and more laxity in almost every direction, hygiene alone has stood its ground as a disciplinarian. Hygiene, in the person of school doctors all over the country, has said definitely that things in the head are social death. We in the puritanical east country, home of Spurgeon, nursery of non-conformity, have never taken kindly to the relaxing of discipline of any kind. Each innovation has been forced on us most reluctantly and it almost looks as if we welcomed hygiene as some sort of substitute, if only a poor one, for our departed doctrinarians who once kept us living a life as rigid in code as many in Tibet.

Phoebe, on the other hand, had missed most disciplinarians, hygiene amongst them. When I first met her she had left the cottage where she had spent the night, had returned to the school, and was being interviewed by the Relieving Officer from Heath. He had appeared by magic and turned out to be a nice polite young man, but with a line in adroit professional questions which would have brought dawning respect into the eyes of a detective inspector.

Phoebe reduced him to tears.

I had missed her in the crush on the previous day and now she appeared as something quite new in Auburn's experience. Practically all the other evacuees were on the smart side but Phoebe and "her three" had never been in that category. As a group they had as obviously been designed by George Price of the *New Yorker* as if he had signed them. There was the same slightly leery gaiety and general waggliness of outline. Daisy, the eldest, a brilliant thirteen, was the one real brain in the outfit and she swung on her mother, prompting her occasionally with a sort of malicious caprice, as if she were the living materialisation of an evil impulse. Denis hung on the other side, snuffling and dripping, as did also Eveline, who was in arms. Phoebe smiled affably from toothless gums and gave herself and her family to us apparently for keeps.

No, she said, she hadn't registered in London for the scheme; didn't know you had to. Yes, she'd left her husband at home. He was out of work and a baker. How did she get here? Well, there was an air-raid siren (an all-

clear) and she'd seen a lot of people getting in a bus to get away from the bombs, and so she'd got on too. No, they had no luggage. Any money? Yes—proudly—eightpence. (This eightpence kept reappearing throughout the whole evacuation and I could never understand why it should be that exact sum until someone, I think it was P.C. Me, explained that fourpence constituted "means" and prevented you from getting taken up as a vagrant, and so by a rather charming mental convolution, two fourpences constituted if not affluence at least comfortable respectability.)

The delicate subject of vermin was touched on insouciantly, but Phoebe had no inhibitions there. She was devastatingly honest and confiding. She also mentioned she was going to have a baby.

The problem had enormous difficulties. Mrs. Moore and I, who were inexperienced social workers to put it mildly, could see that. The newspapers said that no householder could be forced to take in verminous folk (which seemed reasonable), and at that date, so far as we knew, no free money for food was available, since an adult evacuee was required to buy her own and her children's victuals. To date Phoebe and her three had been fed by the householder, whose entire home they had promptly reduced to bad stable conditions, so they still had their iron rations, but these would scarcely last for any length of time.

Public Institutions (looked upon with horror in Auburn) were reported to be cleared for casualties, and anyway Phoebe had come on our buses and the problem appeared to be the village's own.

She remained placid and smiling, as though she sympathised with us but only as an outsider, and Daisy, wildly expectant and dancing with avid delight, chattered something about what we were "forced to do" for them in triumphant glee. The R.O. said helplessly that by rights they ought to go back.

Phoebe looked at us all blankly and said in astonishment, "To the bombs?"

That was the end of the red tape, naturally. Phoebe's was not a very extraordinary case, but it made a tremendous impression on anyone who had anything to do with it. It marked a new step in the upheaval, although even at the time we saw that there was nothing unique about it.

(It was odd how one kept realising the universality of the breaking up and knew as if by sympathetic telepathy that at that moment startled countryfolk all over Britain were getting shot out of their normal social

machinery just as we were. It was like a very rapid visible retrogression into a less ordered past. Old ideas, old ways and means, presented themselves promptly like long-disused furniture in a junk shed coming in handy again after a fire at the house. It was a great relief to find it all there. It made one feel solid and still secure.)

Phoebe was fixed up without much difficulty. For a time she was accommodated in the kitchen wing of the Vicarage, which had a bathroom and happened to be empty since Auburn was "between Vicars." Since she had no host on the premises she was billeted on the owner of the living and he handed over the cash thus obtained (five shillings for Phoebe and three shillings for each child: fourteen shillings in all) to Mrs. Fenner, who lives opposite the Vicarage back gate. She bought and cooked enormous meals for the whole family with it until after a general clean up and a return to health Phoebe was able, with money from the Assistance Board, to take over, and afterwards I am afraid, with Daisy's sinister help, to get into the same sort of catastrophic muddle again. However, that process took months and in the initial stages, when the family was eating like horses and Mrs. Moore was assisting in the cleansing, everything was lovely and Phoebe's life problem appeared to be solved for the time. The fourteen shillings would never have fed them all later in the year when the bounty of harvest had vanished, but by that time the man with the bags of money from the Unemployment Assistance Board had made his somewhat sensational appearance.

No one knew about him at this early stage and his materialisation was one of the jollier surprises in store for everybody.

It was this element of perpetual surprise which made nearly all the real strain in the evacuation, at least so far as Auburn was concerned, and the blame for that, I honestly believe, must belong almost solely to those literate but unimaginative few in the country who raised such a howl in the beginning. To my mind these folk were at fault. They violated the one great principle of the immortal art of being governed. They did not find out if a thing was a vital necessity in the opinion of the rest of the nation (in other words if it was coming) before they objected to it, and also they did not take the trouble to find out that, astounding though it must have seemed to them, they were in a remarkably small minority. If they had only held their fire we might have found out something about what was going to happen to us and have been prepared for all the mitigating circumstances as well as the depressing ones. If the newspapers and the wireless had discussed the scheme in its entirety, as they certainly would have done, since it was news, without provoking a bellow of fury, the ordinary village Billeting Officer

would have known just how much had been thought out and prepared against. He might also have acquired some idea of his job, which was complex.

Many things had been worked out astonishingly well and one of these was the money. However, it is no good being all right for cash if you don't know it, and there was an anxious day or so all round when it became generally realised, both by the village and by its guests, that the Government grant would not cover food, and that most of the large and healthily hungry families had arrived with a couple of shillings only until their menfolk should send part of the next week's wages. As some of these fathers had been called up and had no addresses at the time the position was disturbing. As it was, into this situation the man with the bags of money arrived like Santa Claus at the orphan asylum, a lovely surprise from uncle at Westminster. But surprise is a heady wine and you can have much too much of it in a week.

There were other things too, services we should have known about, schemes we ought to have understood. There was no book of the words, no guide for the use of those about to be a Reception Area. In Auburn's startled view there seemed at first to have been a conspiracy to keep the country, even Authority at Fishling, in the dark. We knew it was not a real conspiracy, naturally, because as a nation we are not given to playing the goat in times of emergency, but it did seem to be one of those natural reticences hidden in the private mind of everyone concerned. The towns—and really who could blame them?—appeared to have it firmly fixed in their heads that the countryside was madly antagonistic to the scheme and must therefore be given the dose as one gives the dog's medicine, swiftly, unhesitatingly, and before he realises quite what he is getting.

It was a great pity because it made for a lot of emotional upset, a lot of muddle and no end of overlapping. Emergency schemes were improvised everywhere and then the real ones appeared, and all the time there was every now and again an irritating assumption that one was doing one's best to get out of doing one's duty and it was astonishing if one did do it, and that was ruffling and insulting to that countryman who, because he was prepared to take whatever came as a matter of course, had not troubled to write to anyone to say so.

Another very wretched aspect of the affair was the tendency of the Indignant Hearted to accredit the letters to one class only, which is of course absurd. In a country village there is very little "class"; only "sort." People go

by nature, not by blood or possessions. A man will share his fire or he won’t. It really makes very little difference what sort of hearth he has.

11

DURING the morning we borrowed the old farm paying-out office in the Street opposite the Thatchers and conveniently near Doey's shop. In the days when farming was a thriving trade, and not the emergency food supply service it seems to have become in this century, the farm hands used to line up here on a Saturday to get their money, but now it is never used.

Jane and Mark and Betty, a friend of theirs who was staying with them, installed typewriters and afterwards the first and last card index system ever to be seen in Auburn. There was no affectation about this; it was a necessity, we discovered. People swapped homes so fast there was no keeping track of them without it.

The office is a little house about as big as a toolshed and it stands sideways to the Street with a small creeper-hung yard, which is open to the road, running alongside it. Miss Gene (Norry's sister and named for the Empress) lent us some garden seats from the Cyclists' Rest, which she and her sister, Miss Beattie, kept opposite. (Miss Beattie, by the way, was once in service as a cook to a Duke in Scotland, and in his castle, as she loved to relate, she once sneaked up the back stairs to put on Queen Victoria's royal Inverness cape, which was lying in the hall, just to say she had done it. Whether it was due to this incident or not I don't know, but she certainly resembled the great Queen to a scarifying degree and would give you quite a turn if you looked in absently and saw her sitting there in black satin with a white tucker, white hair parted in the centre, and an air of indefatigability which would have stopped a tank.)

We put the garden seats in the yard and a notice which said briefly "*Enquire Here*" (it was assumed, naturally, that no one would want to enquire about anything but the evacuation) on the side of the house, and within ten minutes it began to look as if we were conducting a three-cornered election with highly controversial programmes on every side. This atmosphere lasted for about three weeks and gave those of us most nearly concerned a temporarily detached outlook on the rest of the war.

The main problem, far transcending the things in the head, the letters to the Army Paymasters, the quarrels, the babies who cried all night and kept labourers awake, the money, the children who had never been house-trained by mothers who could see no prospect of success even if they should bring

themselves to attempt an experimental elementary course, worse than all there was the dreadful business of persuading people to stay and not to scuttle back to their own homes, as yet perfectly safe and only thirty miles away.

The very nature of the scheme, which was compulsory for the villagers and voluntary for the evacuees, made this trouble inevitable, because in their passionate anxiety to prove that they too were acting voluntarily (compulsion has an intolerably bad taste in Auburn) many of the householders developed a positive horror of losing their visitors without having good sound discussable reasons for the change. Private discomfort is often much more bearable than public suspicion and Auburn on the whole is only deeply charitable in deed. In speech it is inclined to be a slightly malicious old party with a genius for attributing the lowest and most human of reasons to any action of anybody's (thereby often scoring a staggeringly acute bullseye), and this put the householder almost entirely at the mercy of the evacuee.

Fortunately by far the larger number of the guests had no idea of this. All they saw was that their billetor was desperately anxious not to lose them unless the fault was clearly and obviously and publicly their own, and that led to their depressing habit of slipping away without any explanation whatever, a proceeding made easy by the fact that they had no luggage. Several of the girls departed on the Monday but the same sort of thing went on all the time. Sometimes they would drop in at the shed to report that they were going without telling because they "did not want to hurt *her* feelings," meaning, of course, that they did not feel like being present when *her* feelings were hurt. It was this sort of misstatement which depressed Auburn, who, with its vast and ancient knowledge of every shade of human frailty, is very clear thinking in that sort of matter. Sometimes they just vanished after accepting a deal of kindness and left the whole household angry, wounded, and wretchedly suspicious that its best had not been thought good enough.

This propensity of theirs to fade quietly away worried us all so much, particularly since we had this awful libel of antagonism to live down, that we hunted out the explanation assiduously in nearly every case. Most of the excuses given were frankly unconvincing, but there was one stranger who, although less skilled on paper than most of the new arrivals, went out of her way to explain in writing. Mrs. Doe, in whose house she had stayed a couple of nights, had been very kind indeed to her and had touched her so deeply that the conflicting emotions moved her to write a letter which to my mind

practically achieves the expression of that which cannot be told. I have copied it down exactly, spelling and all.

> *Dear Madam,*
>
> *I wish to say From the Bottom of my Hart how I long to stop at This Place. But my hart is so sad as to wont to go Back to My Own People. I have been most Happy and* (the) *Lady I have been staying with has treated me kindly. She has done her Utmost to make me Happy. I connot say otherwise. I was made Happy. Sorry too, my Hart is in the Rong Place to stop here. So at my wish they Let me Go. Behind it all I shall be sorry for it will be all my own fault. Thanks one and all for Kindness to me. I remain closing with a sad Hart,*
>
> *from Mrs. B.*

I heard lots of tales breathed confidentially in my ear on Miss Gene's garden seat, awful tales about "she," and sad tales about "him mad for me to come home," wicked tales about mothers-in-law left behind "putting him against me" or women at "the house where he's lodged going after him," and depressing but dimly comprehensible tales about sweet, fascinating Auburn being dead and alive; but, packing them all together, I fancy Mrs. B. came as near the bottom of the holy well with "my Hart is in the Rong Place to stop here" as it is possible to penetrate.

Now that the bombs really have come most of the adult Londoners still stay in London. A small minority goes to a shelter at night. The great majority stays where its heart is, albeit in the basement. Logically this is madness, but the heart has never been a logical organ, and if your heart happens to rule your head, as the Didikye say, there is nothing very logical you can do with yourself. It has taken the war to teach some of the smartest of us that. Perhaps it is only to be expected that once you start realizing that there are things you really do love better than your life, your courage and/or foolhardiness must appear astonishing to anyone who does not share your passion and may very well startle you a bit too. Moreover, behind it all, as Mrs. B. pointed out, you "will be sorry, for it (all the idiot might of the Luftwaffe) will be your own fault." I am not at all sure that attitude is not half the secret of the British ability to put up with the Luftwaffe. Nothing is intolerable if you are honestly under the impression that you are bearing it voluntarily. It is this question of freedom again. In Britain it always seems to come back to that.

It is not easy to describe honestly those first few days of the war in Auburn without sounding slightly cranky. However, I suppose most of the soberest people have experienced at one time in their life the phenomena of what I can only call “things turning out all right.” The thing that made the Auburn occurrence so startling was the size and duration of the performance. It began to remind me of one of those glorious stories of my youth in which every mortal thing happened miraculously for the best. The Swiss Family Robinson were the playthings of a cruel fate compared with us those first few weeks. To need a thing was to find it. To discover a problem was to receive the answer. The reason, of course, now I come to consider it in cold blood, must have been that the original shock and the spontaneous emotion of genuine disinterested pity engendered by it set up a village-wide effort of co-operation. Public opinion was in a generous and exalted mood. It gave way to pressure in the end, of course, and died down, but while it lasted there was a fine old lying down of the lions with the lambs, miraculous emotional changes of heart in people one had known, and never known apparently, for years, and as each breaker of an impossible problem rolled up on top of the last it faded and dropped and melted into a wavelet as though before some fierce natural magic, which is just about what it was probably.

One of the most unexpected harmonies, to be honest, was Jane and myself. I venture to mention this because I am writing this book in the only spirit in which such a book dare be written, as though each word may possibly be my last. Jane and I met at the crisis, worked together about twenty hours a day for weeks, and grew first to respect and then to like each other enormously, but it is still astonishing to me, and I fancy to her too, that we did not kill each other in the first few days.

Jane was something quite new on my horizon. She turned out to be very Left Wing, brilliant, a little more informed about facts than about people, Indignant Hearted, and full of what to my mind was complete misinformation about the country upper classes. As soon as I persuaded her I was honest I began to suspect that I had lowered my social status. Meanwhile, to my astonishment (in Auburn, where we are all true blues first and independents afterwards, I seemed to have no politics at all), I turned out clearly to be a sort of female Blimp.

Jane and I had no political arguments. Life was too full, and the barnstormers’ melodrama was happening too quickly all round us for much talk to be possible, but as soon as we began to work together the two

different governing principles which controlled each of us became apparent at once.

Jane was obviously an idealist and was certainly one sort of realist as well. She seemed to be determined, right being right and all men being equal in value, that everyone should be kind, generous and honest towards each other, if necessary at the point of the gun. The inhumanity of man to man scandalised Jane. Not only that; it infuriated her, and she was quite right, of course. Even I could see that. It will probably startle her to say so, for she is Jewish and of Russian extraction, but she appeared to me to be bent on enforcing old-fashioned British Christianity with a mallet, while I, who am East Anglian and middle Church of England, was equally vehement that nobody must ever be forced into doing good and must only be forcibly restrained from doing evil if he is actively harming somebody else.

In our brief period of power I was frankly all for compromise (now I come to think of it "appeasement" is nearer the term), for bargaining, for coaxing, for bribing; for anything, in fact, so that the individual liberty of evacuee and billetor was never even questioned; while Jane was for frank honesty of purpose and, if necessary, the bang on the head. Her policy mattered to her enormously because she believed in it as she believed in right or wrong, but then my policy mattered desperately to me too because my world was infinitely smaller than hers and within its green hedges lived friends and neighbours with whom I trusted to spend the rest of my life. On paper there is no question whose was the nobler motive, but in self-defence I must say at once that I had no objection to living in a nobler Auburn. I was only against enforcing Christian principles by legislation in Auburn, or anywhere else, because I thought that if there had been the faintest hope of the plan not putting people off Christian principles in the long run someone would have done it already. Moreover, all fancy speculation apart, I knew for a fact without any thinking that one touch of the whip and my thoroughbred Auburn would drop on its haunches, pull back its ears, stick in its toes, and then God alone knew where we'd be. Sitting up thinking things over in Flinthammock, probably. Gone, anyway, would be all this growing constructive co-operation and we should beat in vain against a will which machine-guns alone might conquer.

Jane did not spare me. She pointed out my earthy motives and suspected me openly of much worse. To be honest, I was rather astonished to find my motives were so low, but since my very home life was at stake I stuck to my ground with the obstinacy of pure terror. Jane put the fear of God into me and I almost begin to sympathise with, if not to forgive, Mr. Chamberlain's

terror of what must have been much the same thing in a much larger way when I remember it.

However, curiously enough, this complete difference of outlook, this battlegrip in which we worked, seemed to improve our joint legislation enormously. It imposed such rigorous discipline on us both.

Although we became friends, and the odd thing is that we did, we never let up the fight and it went on all the time in a positively parliamentary style, she watching me like a lynx for favouritism and me watching her lest she should try to cure some case of scant generosity by wishing an unfortunate girl and her baby on it.

Where I found Jane miraculous was in her knowledge of the vast and complicated social welfare system of our blessed and astonishing country. Most of these schemes and grants and aids and reliefs had been fought for by people like Jane in the teeth of people like me, or so she said, and I would not be at all surprised, for people like me need people like Jane to prevent us from seeing some things so much more clearly than others. At any rate these improvements were certainly useful, not to say providential, at the time and I was more than relieved to take advantage of them.

At this distance, and thinking it all over, Doey and I would have made a muddle of the evacuation without Jane and Mark, but I still maintain, and I know that she will forgive me and not agree with me, that they would have had a bloody revolution without us. As it was, there were, amazingly, hardly any complaints and we became genuine friends.

Where the aids, grants, schemes and improvements were particularly useful was in the matter of Anne and her sisters.

Until this first full day of the war Auburn was perhaps a little old-fashioned about the expectant mother. The Victorian theory that any lady in such a condition is an indecent spectacle and must be hidden at all costs was dying down a little in most quarters, but we had by no means reached the Roman matron’s proud display stage. However, the sudden arrival of seventeen or so unembarrassed young women floating round the village like galleons in full sail, or as Mr. Spitty said rather better to P.Y.C., “like little old molehills,” delivered a blow to old-fashioned prejudices which was swift and annihilating. Auburn gasped, grinned and succumbed.

All the same, there were still reticences. We came up against a serious one in the beginning. The dreadful fact had to be faced that no one knew where all these girls were, exactly. Somewhere over the five-mile length and

three-mile breadth of Auburn they were sitting in someone's parlour, waiting to be notified about the clinic, or at least about the arrangements made for them, but where it was impossible to determine. There was no way of telling from the counterfoils in the (wrong) form-book if Mrs. So-and-so, mother of Lucy and Peter, was also expecting a Jim or a Mary in the near future. A house-to-house enquiry (Have you a lady here who is going to have a baby?) was thought to present certain difficulties and we fell back upon notices to be put up at strategic places throughout the village. The exact wording was another difficulty. War or no war, Auburn was quite capable of being disgusted and offended by any official bluntness.

In the end a somewhat remarkable sheet, which said, "Will any lady *specially interested in maternity* call on Mrs. Carter in the Street?" was stuck up on the school notice-board, on a telegraph post in the Flinthammock road, and at sundry other scattered points throughout the length of Auburn. In the meantime we had to find out what arrangements had been made for them and these were disturbing. Something like eight thousand expectant mothers had arrived in the county when round about two thousand had been expected we heard, and therefore it had been decided that the girls should remain in their country billets until the last moment and then be rushed into hospital in the county town twenty miles away by voluntary transport or A.R.P. ambulance. Auburn was against this from the start. Shy of the subject it might be, but it did know a little about it and about local transport. "That on't be good for a dog, that on't," was the general verdict. "No no, that's asking for trouble, so that is now."

The solution was one of those small miracles which was part and parcel of a miraculous and renascent period in Auburn's history. The Mama's House appeared. It was down at the end of Chapel Road, the local lovers' lane, and belonged to Cynthia's mother who lent it to us free. It happened to be getting empty and was the old coastguard house, a well-built little brick box with four rooms upstairs and three down, and from the windows you could see far over the ploughland to the silver estuary and hear the gulls scream as they flew inland. When Norry's father, the redoubtable Abraham (who must have looked, from his photograph, like Clark Gable in a pioneer film), was a boy, there were some terrific times round that house as the smugglers bundled the old coastguard out of the way on important nights, but this was a new chapter in its experience. From the moment the idea was born there was a ridiculous but classic race to beat the stork. The notion was simplicity itself. In Auburn's opinion the best place for a girl to have a baby is in her own home, if it's suitable, and it seemed to follow that if a suitable home was provided the problem would be solved. Oddly enough it was so.

The entire equipment of the Mama's House was lent. The Women's Institute had a meeting, subscribed eleven pounds on the spot for linen and medical supplies, and promised loans of furniture and bedding. Bill got out his lorry and went round collecting a chair here, a table there and a washstand somewhere else. The departing tenant even lent the bath. Albert colour-washed the entire place out and lent the lead pipes we had to instal for a new sort of bath-drainage system he and I thought out, and which was called by its inventors on several official forms "the Buried Soak-away." There was also a remarkable hot-water system whereby a rotary pump we found in the shed was fixed up over the bath upstairs to suck up the water from the copper in the kitchen below.

As a rule something sad happens when this sort of slightly fantastic local enterprise runs up against officialdom, but the Mama's House was conceived on a lucky night under a fortunate star. The County Medical Officer (whose personal appearance in the matter at all was one of those remarkable strokes of fortune which seemed to be the fashion at the time) turned out to be a man of imagination and enthusiasm, and with a genius and speed quite out of keeping with any municipal government ever heard of in England, entered gallantly into the great race against the stork, who was hovering dangerously over Anne. Even so, the entire project might have crashed had it not been for Bea and for Mrs. Foster. The one rule the medical authorities will not waive, if the skies fall, and for excellent reasons, is the one about a resident midwife always being on duty in any authorised nursing home. This looked as though it was going to be the end, for Nurse, although she lives in Auburn, is shared by two other villages and could not forsake her ordinary work, which is arduous enough in all conscience, to move down to the end of lovers' lane. However, at the crucial moment Bea, Driff's sister, a C.M.B., an ex-matron of a hospital in Africa, appeared to the rescue. She took the responsibility without a murmur and Anne, who had been waiting in our house, moved in.

In the course of the next five months five fine babies appeared at Mama's House, each one heralded by Auburn as a triumph and a remarkable thing, as indeed it was. In that time the continued safety of London and the gradual enlargement of the grander nursing homes nearer the town, depleted the numbers of our expectant mother evacuees until none were left, but the Mama's House served its purpose and was never regretted. None of the many dangers which beset the young at such a time ever even threatened the girls who stayed there, and the babies might have had Oberon's own blessing on them:

“Never mole, hairlip nor scar
Nor mark prodigious such as are
Despised in nativity
Shall upon their children be.”

One of the oddest things about the concern was its finance. It cost the County thirty shillings a week; the Government its billeting money (five shillings per adult, three shillings per child), and five shillings per week special lying-in grant paid to householders for the fortnight period of their confinement. The girls paid sixteen shillings a week for their food and joined the local Nursing Association, which cost them six shillings but entitled them to have the benefit of Nurse’s skilled attention at the baby’s birth and for a week after for one guinea. And that was all. Bea did the housekeeping and everybody who stayed there grew fat. I do not attempt to explain this, but no other money went into it. It was Bea’s miracle. She and Nurse did it between them.

I do not wish to suggest that Auburn went soft on this project. On the contrary, the criticism was quite as bitter as usual and there were many misgivings. The rosy view was not taken by everybody by any means, but the idea happened to be a right thing at the moment and it took root and flourished like a vine. There was no stopping it any more than one could have stopped the arrival of the younger Anne.

It was an extraordinary interlude altogether in the beginning of a great war and I for one found it remarkably satisfactory and hopeful and in some inexplicable way a sort of sign. This estuaryside country may be a trifle empty, grass-widowed by men who have left her for the cities, but there is nothing barren about her. There could, and please God will, be at some time a flowering here as luxuriant and prodigal as any ever seen anywhere in any age.

12

AMID all this good excitement there was a great deal of bad excitement too.

In Auburn and district there is always this penetrating distinction. Joey, who came to put our house in order once, observed that the Old Doctor, our predecessor, had made more “bad improvements in one house” than ever he’d laid eyes on in the whole of his plumbing career. For a start in those first few weeks of the war everybody began to drive their cars as if they were taking secret dispatches through no-man’s-land. Auburn, with its five blind corners, two bottle-necks and one S-bend, became more of a deathtrap than ever—and that when, for the first time for twenty years, the place was swarming with toddlers. The evacuees too were not the only unhappy people. The average Auburn householder developed a way of bearing everything in stoical silence until a final straw brought a light of panic in his eyes and relief from his intolerable burden (a rather helpless girl and four recklessly insanitary children can be a burden in a small cottage) became a matter of pressing urgency. This peculiar way of going on is very irritating to some people, especially officials, to whom it seems very unreasonable, but as one who possesses the weakness personally I can guarantee that it is natural and unconscious and you can’t cure yourself except by years of experience. What happens is, I think, that you almost enjoy the discomfort for a bit and you watch it piling up on you with a sort of detached interest to see how outrageous it can possibly get; and then one morning some trivial extra, *unforeseen* (that’s the touch powder) incident brings the whole thing home to you, and you realise that it is you, you mug, who is putting up with it all, and quite probably you get blindly and unreasonably angry. This happened quite a bit in Auburn, and we were always being dragged out before breakfast or during a meal to see to some balloon which had suddenly gone up.

However, not everyone was of this difficult persuasion. Some people started off right from the beginning without any misleading and silly detachment. George’s mother, up at the Council Houses, was one of these. Her evacuee was one of the lah-di-perishing-dah variety. “That’s quite a nice sideboard,” said she, with condescension. “I wonder you don’t keep your silver on it. I always keep my silver on my sideboard.” “Do ye?” said George’s mother. “That’s a wunnerful strange thing, my girl, but I don’t. I’ll

tell you where I keep my silver. In my purse, and that's where I'm goin' to keep it. Time you made your bed, ain't it?"

The food money was a problem, although it presented nothing like the difficulty I had thought it might, for to begin with nobody took any notice whatever of the instructions concerning the loan of cooking facilities. In only one instance out of all those which I had anything to do with did I hear of an evacuee buying her own food and proceeding to cook it. In every other case she joined in the household as a lodger and a reasonable being, for the houses were all small. The householder did the cooking, as she always had done. That was arranged independently and without any appeal to official opinion.

Money was more difficult. As far as I could gather the question of paying did not even come up for a day or two. Then there was an extraordinary amount of shyness, refusing to say, whispering and detective work generally about what "she" wanted on one side and what "she" *had* on the other. The girls used to crook their fingers at Mark and Jane and me on the street and take us into corners and whisper about it, and then confess that they were broke until "he" wrote. If there had not been so many of them it might not have been quite so alarming, but in any case by that time we had begun to hear rumours of the man from the U.A.B. He had been heard of in Flinthammock and seen in Bastion and Goldenhind was awaiting him too.

(The notion of all this wrestling, urgent excitement and upheaval going on all over the country was still comforting and consoling. It also made Auburn cautious. We did not want to show up worse than anywhere else—Flinthammock, for instance.)

In the meantime it seemed important to get at a reasonable general figure somehow, something as a basis of argument, anyway. Norry's brother Jack, as landlord of the Thatchers, Alf Goody and his wife (Alf worked on the roads and had taken in a family), Margaret as a housekeeper and Reg as storekeeper were consulted, and after a good deal of figuring out and adding up, and deducting ha'pence for the season and the numbers, it was generally decided that ten shillings for an adult, five shillings for a child over five, or two shillings for one under that age, when added to the billeting money, constituted an absolute minimum for board and lodging.

There was obviously no profiteering about this, and it only really applied to the majority of householders, who live very carefully. As soon as the farms came under review, where living was "high" as we say, the figure shot up; but there was plenty going there and room for an extra one or two. The

minimum only applied to Auburn. In Flinthammock, which is more of a town, fifteen shillings for the adult and five shillings for a child of any age proved nearer the figure, so we heard.

Having got a rough idea of the cost, the next thing was to get the cash, and one day the happy announcement "*Money gone into to-day*" went up on the side of the shed in the street. There was a very large crowd at once and a great air of expectancy. The man from the Government was due, and after a breathless wait he turned up with a secretary, two great bags of money and a couple of ex-prizefighters, or so they appeared.

I cannot hope to explain how remarkably foreign and astonishing this entourage appeared in Auburn. In Auburn no man is ever just an official. The stranger arrives complete with a temperament, bad and good habits, background, possible relatives, politics, laundry and taste in food. All these important attributes hover round him in spirit like so many interesting, unopened parcels. These four people on their unusual expedition were no exceptions, and they responded to Auburn's inquisitiveness charmingly.

As the weeks went by the bodyguard disappeared, and the official once brought his wife with him on his weekly visit and made it a proper friendly outing. However, that was later. Their first visit was an experience. They had had some rather disturbing adventures in some of the larger places and were all suffering, I fancy, from the same sense of shock which I had experienced in the school—a feeling of outrage that English folk should experience such an indignity.

Once again I apologise for this, which looks so revealing and shocking when written down.

Anyway, the pug-uglies were very shaken and upset. Terrible work it was, they said.

The head man was an ex-sailor, we found out, and a senior official. He was one of those pink-skinned, very blue-eyed people who convey confidence, and he certainly had the cash, quantities of it in silver.

I have had the U.A.B. emergency system explained to me and I have seen it in action, but I may as well make a clean breast of it at once and say that I never understood exactly how it worked, and I swear that none of the evacuees did either. What happened was this. Those girls who needed money waited outside on the garden seats and came in one at a time. They told the tale, gave their husband's name and address, and related the state of their present finances and the number of their children, and they received a

mysterious sum—seven-and-six, ten, twelve, fifteen, eighteen or more shillings—according to the problem worked out by the official on the back of an envelope. The really remarkable thing was that, although no mention of the current rules of board-lodgings was ever made, each woman always had just about enough to meet her requirements and scarcely any margin at all. I am aware that the whole story sounds miraculous, but I can only say that it looked like a miracle to me. In Auburn, where most women have to work very hard for a week for eighteen shillings, there was a certain amount of tacit interest to know whether this bounty by any chance came out of the rates; but, that point being satisfactorily cleared up, there was no more questioning and it was accepted as one of the Government's doings. One of *our* doings, in fact, and probably—no, obviously—a good thing. Certainly no one starved, and there was no real hardship.

To see Mama (now removed with her brood from the Chapel schoolroom to Ring Farm, a house which had been untenanted for some years) telling the tale was an experience. Jane, Mark and I, who were acting as referees (from opposing teams), used to stand by in respectful admiration. She was superb. Sweet reason lay in every word she used, and on her noble face beneath her Statue of Liberty hat there was always a patient, reserved and never complaining smile. She never lied, but she used to squeeze my hand before she went in to the interview as if she was going to sing an aria at Covent Garden. The ex-sailor understood her. He used to look at her under his light eyelashes and grin a little. She always got her fair share, but nothing extra as far as I could see.

While all this was going on outside in the village it was like going into another and grimmer world to step home and find the war and the wireless and *The Times* and the maps and the vigilant wardens sitting doggedly by their telephone. News from old friends scattered about the country brought fresh aspects of the situation. As far as we could hear, there was an inexplicable rush to change jobs. There had been a great deal of talk ever since the last war about conserving brains and how wrong it had been that intelligence should have been thrust into the front line, while inferior minds conducted things inefficiently behind. The determination not to let this happen again—laudable, God knows—seemed, however, to be producing even more of an upset than ever before. Businesses closed as their staffs rushed off either to get into some more useful business, into a Ministry, or into uniform. There was a wild milling scramble, as far as you could gather, not so much to get a good job as to get a different one. People were still not pretending that they wanted to dash out and die for their country, which as late as that seemed a useless thing to do, God forgive us; but there was a

great deal of altruism left, notwithstanding the sneers of the perpetual critics to whom mankind is such a poor thing you wonder they can bear themselves. People were throwing up their careers all over the place, at any rate, and in view of what has happened since one can afford to forget those who insisted that this was merely done in an ignoble effort to save their own skins.

War had come, and the whole country was leaping up to begin. But there was no fighting, no start. The two great machines were not pitting their real weight against one another. It almost looked as if we were waiting for the enemy to tidy up his second front. It was very mystifying, very cold and depressing.

Looking back, it is baldly and cruelly clear that the men in charge at that time and in the few years before had no conception whatever of the calibre of the cattle they were required to ride nor of the dangerous standard of the race about to be run. That was not their fault. No man on earth can help his size. It is no good grumbling at him. The root of that disaster must have lain where Auburn in its simplicity always dreaded it might—on the Somme, at Passchaendale and among the sedges of the Marne. It may well be that this is an observation which would come better from a man of forty-six or so, solid, established, experienced and in the height of his mental and moral powers, instead of from a youngish countrywoman; but such men are terrifyingly scarce, and so I venture to make it for some chap ten years older than I who died with thousands like him in France when I was eleven. It seems to me that we have mourned these men too long poetically as ever-glorious youths. It is the *use* of them which is our bitter practical loss; now their maturity, long after this their experienced age.

Probably the most alarming aspect from our point of view of these early days of this new half of the old war was the complete absence of any but medicated news. The censorship shut down like a lid on a box. In normal times, and even now when the country is well under way again and the new values are settling, there is all the while a continuous undercurrent of what I can only call public and private notions about affairs. I do not mean rumour. Rather it is almost a wordless communication, carried by looks and frames of mind, atmospheres, personal deductions from scattered clues. At the beginning of the war all this vanished. It shut off like a light. The Press boys were bewildered, without a single secret to keep quiet about between them, and there was not even any "I could an' if I would"-ing going around. Like most country people, we had certain contacts in town from whom we were in the habit of getting a general view of current affairs. It is extraordinary

how informed one can keep in peace-time by visiting the city once a week and having a circle of widely different acquaintances. In these days P.Y.C.'s weekly gossip hunts produced nothing. The city knew less than Auburn. Normally well-informed circles were startled by their own ignorance.

This silence was so complete, the harping on the necessity for secrecy so continuous, that most of us assumed that something considerable was being done very quietly indeed. At the same time it looked odd that the call-up was so slow and there was no great talk about munitions. Some of us were silly enough to think we must have got some put by.

Norry and Jack said "that seemed strange," but apart from a general worried frown Auburn showed no great sign of anxiety. Experience, and the instinct which derives from it, has taught the countryside in times of doubt to sit powerful tight.

13

THE one evidence of bustle which did reach us in Auburn was frankly dispiriting. One of our small nearby factories where two or three of the local boys worked was said to be making corpse-racks. The possible use of these was discussed with a certain amount of not unnatural interest, but no satisfactory explanation was forthcoming until Jane's evacuee's husband came down to see his wife. He was a builder working in London on what, as far as we could gather, was a chain of super-mortuaries, as you might have a chain of cinemas. Naturally we discredited three parts of what he said and believed the rest. We had had an idea that London expected casualties. Fifty thousand a week, some people said (without mentioning the number of weeks they thought it was going to continue). However, this looked like confirmation of some of it.

There was so much secrecy about all this, such complete quiet in the Press, that I fancy we were not the only folk to assume that, since such thorough arrangements were being made for the dead, equally sound arrangements had already been made for the living, and that all over London there must be hidden deep shelters. In this, as it turned out over a year later, we were mistaken. Such an astounding anomaly seems almost beyond belief, until one realises that under the peculiar and complex system of local government which manages these things a corpse and a casualty are both concrete public nuisances, directly the concern of the appropriate municipal body, but the living citizen is largely his own responsibility. In normal times this arrangement works out excellently. The public is informed of every possible angle of its probable needs in the near future through the Press and the wireless. Gradually it makes up its mind exactly what it wants to do about them, and then it grumbles until it gets what it wants. Unfortunately this silence, this censorship, this sudden cutting off of air and light, destroyed all that in an afternoon without anybody realising it. The pity was that not half of it seems to have been particularly necessary.

From the beginning there was an extraordinary anxiety in official circles not to alarm the public. Even now in 1941, when the same public has viewed with stoic calm time bombs in its front gardens and the whole centre of the city blazing like a page from the *Inferno*, one still sometimes hears the phrase.

Altogether it was a sad thing to see, for in the past this nation has been trained by giants and can take a giant's hand.

It was at that time that the tremendous importance of the wireless to us ordinary country people first became so very obvious. The news on the wireless, although not very full, is at least not muddled. It sounds like gospel, and the announcers do their best to be as impersonal as print. This has had one most interesting effect on us in Auburn. It has isolated news in our minds. To the ordinary Auburn man news now means one thing, and opinion means another. This is fresh. It has put the newspapers into the category of entertainments. Let me say at once that I do not believe myself that the B.B.C. is always entirely unbiased or that it never, never makes mistakes; but it sounds as though it is as near the limpid truth as maybe, and by its extreme caution and conservatism it does preserve this impression.

The newspapers, then, have developed a new status, for even though opinion is valued and very carefully considered in Auburn it is recognised for what it is, just opinion and not necessarily better than yours or mine. Everybody takes in a paper and most people read one, but not, I think, for the news. P.Y.C., who used always to take in two papers, used to read the *Express*, so he said, for Coop's cat, William Hickey and Beachcomber, and to see what was going to happen. He then read *The Times* to see if it ought to have happened, and he listened to the wireless to see if it really had happened. And there are others like him.

The rest of us—excluding a few who, like Norry, buy only the local papers in which there are a couple of columns headed "The War," and all the rest is about local sales and deaths and prosecutions and small paragraphs of gossip from each village—take in one of the popular dailies, but not necessarily for their letterpress. This is largely their own fault. According to Sam, they all copy each other, and are consequently all six of one and half a dozen of the other. He and his friends have taken in each of them in their time because of the presents. Before the war door-to-door travellers used to come round and try to persuade you to change your paper for the one which employed them. As a reward you could save up coupons and get a present. The idea was that by the time you had got a present or two, and had been taking the paper for three months or so, you would be so fond of it you wouldn't want to leave it. In effect, of course, when you'd got all you could from one paper you changed to its rival, which was very like it, and got a lot more presents. Sam has quite a library of cook books, gardening books, home doctors and children's painting books all obtained in this economical fashion. He also got some toys for Roy and Barry and a fountain-pen. It is

true that when war started and the whole circus came to an end for a time he was left with the *News Chronicle*, which does not suit his politics at all and frequently scandalises him, but he won't change until the "present" system returns and so may be a constant reader for the rest of his life. All the same he won't agree with it if he doesn't feel like it. In the matter of politics Sam would get on much better with *The Times* (he once reduced a socialist up at the factory to purple-faced impotence by insisting that "this fascism will goo right out of fashion. It'll die after it's failed, same as your Labour did when it come into power.") However, *The Times'* literary style defeats him, and it is a great pity from his point of view that that austere organ does not run a junior edition for its less erudite Blimps. Sam is quite as Tory and quite as austere politically as P.Y.C. or any other *Times* reader, but the paper's magazine content does not appeal to him. The Greek pun leaves him cold.

To return to the war and the wireless. If we did not get action in those early days, we did get talk. Addressing the nation became a mania like diabolo, or so it seemed to us who were addressed. We were addressed like billy-o and, knowing just how important we were and how unnecessary it was to convince us that we had anything to do but fight, we were often dismayed.

Once or twice the talk was impressive. The King's speech brought everyone to a sudden halt, because for the first time his voice was so uncannily like his father's. We were rather in need of the "old squire" at that time, and the same voice which had said so tremendously at the Christmas broadcast, "This is to the children. This is the *King* speaking" sent a shot of the old pride, the pride we most of us deride and hide and abuse and treasure privately, through everyone.

Unfortunately that was almost all of warmth. After that came the steady rain. There was Sir Samuel Hoare's speech, which had to be heard to be believed, and all the other depressed ministers, and the Archbishop of York, who spoke like a statesman rather than a churchman and who made the one good political speech of the first period.

In the midst of all this uninspired oratory—for, apart from the King, who alone touched the hungry spot in the waking countryside, the tendency was all to dwell on the disaster rather than on the heights to be scaled—there suddenly came the speeches from the Dominions representatives, and they were a revelation and an experience.

One of the wardens—I cannot remember who it was—summed up the surprise by saying, "Sounds like *us*, don't he?" This is not an easy thing to

explain, because to country ears very few people indeed talk like us. Most of the world, London included, is a bit on the foreign side. These Colonial accents, however, are country accents, and when the Australian came out with no measured commiseration, no yarn about us all being in trouble—which was after all a fact none of us was likely to forget—but made instead a fine vigorous offer to come in with us and take the enemy’s hide off him and enjoy it (as they have), it was the first word of the kind we had heard. It was indescribable. It was terrific. Here was the great draught of new blood we needed, not foreign blood either, not even Frenchy stuff which is a bit hot and sometimes a bit thin, but our own blood, good comprehensible stuff suitable for fighting. This, everybody knew instinctively, was the only thing we were a mite short of—the real old solid stuff, the stuff the Old Doctor was made of long ago, and George Playle and Long ’un and Bill’s brother who was “the best of the lot,” and all the other dozens of country chaps who had no time to get sons before they died. There was an old man in Suffolk once who told me about the last war when I was a girl.

“Ah, they cut down the seed, you see,” he said. “They cut down the seed.”

The South African chap too went down very well with us. His “we’re on your side because it suits us” line was recognisable as a home product all right. “Sounds honest anyhoo, don’t ’e?” said Auburn, with a dirty chuckle. While the Canadian, with his more urban but still virile talk, confirmed our conviction that once we only got started things would not be so bad. We beat ’em once, and we’d beat ’em again.

Alongside these voices from all over the world came the metallic affectations of Lord Haw-Haw, the German propagandist. Auburn listened to Haw-Haw with a deep and particular satisfaction extraordinary to anyone who did not know us very well. The explanation lies in a racial, or at least a tribal, foible of the district. In describing Auburn it may be that I have been so anxious to give our point of view that I have ignored those considerable eccentricities which do sometimes make us awkward people for the stranger to like and understand. The fact is—it has to be faced—that we have in some respects a cruel and perverted sense of humour, and few things strike us as being more funny than the liar who is unconscious that he is entirely disbelieved. I cannot hope to explain why this is so. I can only record that such a spectacle to most of us does rank with “man treading on rake” or “fat person sitting on absent chair.” I do not defend it, but I may as well admit that it makes me laugh too, although not for so long as some of us. Some of us can laugh at this joke for months continuously, or even years. There used

to be a summer visitor who fancied himself as a connoisseur of these parts, and one of the local sports, ranking almost with cricket or making wine, used to be to get hold of him and coax him into telling tall stories of his own and others' prowess on the water or with a shotgun. He would be kept talking for evenings on end, fed assiduously with hints and led on with vacant and bemazed expressions of wonderment; and all the time the whole tap-room would be in secret convulsions. He was never told. No one ever let on. They just enjoyed him. The wilder he grew the better he went down, because he was lying and they knew, and he didn't know that they knew. We'd laugh about him afterwards until we cried. This is a dreadful confession. On paper it looks like a betrayal. But there you are: that is the main reason for Lord Haw-Haw's success in Auburn. The night he said that Bastion was in ruins, and the bus had just come in and reported that not a plane had been seen there all day, was one of his greatest triumphs. If he told the truth, I don't think anyone would listen to him.

In the house we never heard him much, because P.Y.C. wouldn't have his voice in the place—mainly, I believe, because he thought him a trespassing Hun, whatever his parentage—but the rest of us once had a good evening listening to the sins of an English Secret Service which was entirely supported by voluntary contributions and door-to-door collections like a hospital, and which made a bit on the side in the white slave traffic.

It may be that German propaganda is so good and so subtle that the mere fact that Auburn listened at all poisoned its ears. Many people believe this. But I do not think Auburn has had its ears poisoned. It has never altered its opinion of the enemy from the day it discovered it was an enemy again, except to decide that it was stronger than it had been led to believe. The real propaganda against Germany and the Germans was put out by them twenty-five years ago. Since then they have merely brought it up to date. Bill, who was put in charge of three hundred of them in the great retreat of 1918 (and given an interpreter who he began to suspect was on their side), says they were extraordinary people when fighting. "They'd *gre-owl* at ye," he says.

Apart from the speeches there was little news on the wireless until the Russian descent on Poland, which startled everybody. It filled P.Y.C. with the darkest Tory foreboding and shook other people to their Left Wing hearts. Low's caricature "Idealism: the First Casualty" had a great vogue. Auburn noted the move, realised "we couldn't do nothing yit," and went on grappling with the evacuees.

When Warsaw and her heroic Mayor went down together in as fine a tale as any in the classics, our turn, it seemed, must come soon. The Wardens

clung to their telephone with renewed expectancy. The First Aiders sat up again, and one listened slyly for the scream of wings.

I went out in the garden for the first time for what seemed a year or two one morning about then with the idea of having a bit of a pause.

I avoided the top garden, because it was usually full of the visitors and we had made it the quarrelling place. The girls' husbands used to come down over the week-ends, and there had been a growing tendency for the marital fights which invariably ensued over going back or not going back to take place in the yard outside our official shed bang in the middle of the street. They had the sense not to fight in the billets, but they used to come up to us to do it, expecting us to be mugs enough to take sides. I had protested at this custom because I could see we were all getting a bad enough name already, what with the things in the head (which had been caught in the bus in some cases, given to the householders' families, and discovered simultaneously by both parties, each blaming the other), to say nothing of the insanitary children; and I did not know how long Auburn's saintly patience, none the less a virtue because it was a bit conscious, was going to hold out. Still, as everyone knows, if you want to quarrel with your husband it is your unquestionable right to do so, so the cricket-watching cartshed was put at their disposal. This was in the top garden and three hundred yards from a house. They used to go up there and say what they liked to each other as loudly as they liked, and no harm was done and nothing repeated afterwards.

Since I felt like being quiet that morning, I went round to the Lady Garden, wondering how long before the heavens would really fall. As I turned the corner I came on Albert and Alec. They were re-roofing the conservatory. It was a job we'd been considering for years. Every time P.Y.C. and I took Albert round to look at it Albert stuck his penknife into the woodwork, and great chunks of it came away like stale bread. All the same I was a bit startled to see the neat heaps of new timber and crates of fresh glass set out ready for the repairs. Albert regarded my expression with astonishment. He said it was then or never. The war might go on ten years. Alec was going to get into the Air Force, and God alone knew what price glass and timber would go up to. 'You don't want the whole thing coming down, do you?' he said.

I said what about the air raids? We were taping up the windows round the other side of the house to prevent splintering.

He said that would be all right, for it would never get hit until the last nail was in, and he wouldn't quite finish it for that reason.

I said acidly that I betted he wouldn't for the usual reason, for there never was such a man for leaving one job to start another, and I'd known him conduct seven simultaneously in our house alone. All the same I said I didn't see much sense in mending anything, the way this man Hitler was going on.

Albert sat up on the spidery roof and pointed a trowel at me.

"You don't want to *give way to him*," he said. "He can't upset you if you don't let him."

After that I went back to the evacuees. The conservatory is still up and still intact. The eucalyptus and the passion flowers are in perfect health, and when even the nearest bombs fell later they did no more than shake a pane out and break the heavy flowers from our twenty-year-old begonia. The roof is still waiting for the bit of timber at the top over the fanlight, which Albert has not seen fit to finish, and it may be that it will still be standing to-morrow, or next year, or in fifty years' time.

14

THE first part of the war, the part which we called “funny,” and which in America they called “phoney” (both countries meaning very much the same thing, probably only America as usual saying it less ambiguously), was in Auburn dominated almost entirely by the evacuees. This was not really very odd, for, as everyone knows, people to stay—even relations—can revolutionise one’s outlook on life more thoroughly than anything else on earth save physical pain. All the same there were people who kept their sense of proportion. One of these was Martha Cracknell. She was very old, could neither read nor write, and was dying. She used to lie close to the open window in her cottage in the baker’s square, not to be confused with the real or Queen’s Head square, and nearly opposite our billeting shed, and she would often call out to her acquaintances as they passed along the Street.

“They’re a’coming on,” she shouted one morning, as I came by.

Since the whole place was swarming with little children, very pretty in the sun, I said Yes, and wasn’t it nice to see them?

She eyed me with cold amazement. “Oh, I don’t mean *they*,” she said, with terrific contempt. “I mean the French.”

There were many other activities too in the village at this time. Cynthia and Joan were running a working party at The Court, making Red Cross supplies. Pauline had another, knitting comforts for the men at the searchlights, and later for the Observers and the Wardens, and later still for the Home Guards, not forgetting the real sailors and soldiers from the village. However, even with the invasion of Finland and our impotence because we were not able to get there to help, and the wrangling in Parliament and the general impression that some terrific effort must be going on like fun under the blanket of secrecy, the actual urgent anxiety of each day usually turned out to be something to do with the visitors.

The trouble was they remained visitors. Nothing we householders could do would make them other than guests, if they stayed in billets. By giving some of them empty houses and lending them furniture and diverting the rest of the billeting money after the few shillings rent was paid as an allowance for heat and cooking facilities, we did get a few to make an effort to live here rather than to make a call; but their “Harts were in the wrong

place to Stop Here," and gradually as the days grew colder and colder and London seemed safer and safer, more and more of them went away.

Not all of these departures were entirely willing. Sometimes it was a husband who insisted. I remember Jenny particularly. She had been a Barnardo's girl, and was the gentlest and smallest person I ever met. She had a splendid baby half as big as she was, and there was a most pathetic scene in our kitchen one Sunday afternoon when her husband made her go home. They had come up to see me and Margaret because Jenny had been staying with Margaret's two old aunties in Pansy Cottage by the pond. (This picturesqueness is Auburn's, not mine. It is a most absent-mindedly picturesque place.) And they had advised him not to take her back. She did not want to go. She was still frightened of the bombs for the baby.

I was in a most difficult position, because I did not want her to go either, and we were under definite instructions to keep people here if we could; but I could not tell her husband, as she wanted me to, that he was not to take her away. I could not go forbidding a man to take his own wife and child home whatever the danger. It would have been different if the thing had been put to the country, and it had been decided by general consent that in view of the circumstances women and children would keep out of the city. In that case this husband would have been in on the decision. As it was, as I tried to tell Jenny, I couldn't and wouldn't interfere, and that no responsible person in Auburn would either, because to do so would have been against our principles, which by the enormous efforts of our ancestors constitute the law of the land.

In the past generations we've had enough fuss about that.

So I gave it the man as my honest opinion that I thought it was criminally silly as well as a wicked waste of money to take them back. I also said that if he got them home and something happened to them and not to him, he'd never forgive himself.

He was a little tiny young chap, no bigger than Jenny, not at all bright in mind but desperately sensitive to feeling. He got himself between me and her (she was crying and holding on to my apron as if I were Barnardo's itself), and he did a most disturbing thing. He spread his arms out so that he almost hid her.

"I'll save 'em," he said in his little sparrowy voice. "I'll save 'em from the bombs."

He meant it too, poor chap.

We all had some tea after that to get the tears out of the atmosphere (people who are contemptuous of tea cannot understand it. It is a very remarkable herb), and off they went on the bus.

When the bombs did come it was very difficult to forget those three.

The same sort of thing happened to Tiff and his missus. They took in a very nice young woman and her little girl, and Mrs. Tiff became devoted to the child, who was particularly charming. One Sunday afternoon the father of the baby came down, and the child clung to her hosts. There was a most unfortunate set-out, and home they went immediately, instantly, without pause, leaving Tiff and his wife, who is a darling, naturally very hurt and unenthusiastic about evacuees.

Sometimes it was the other way round. Joan and her husband had the most impressive quarrel I was ever privileged to witness, lasting for twenty-four hours without pause, because she wanted to take the children home, and he didn't think it a good idea. They brought the problem round to the billeting hut, where I was keeping shop alone, just when everybody was going to evening service. We are still reasonably sedate about the Sabbath in Auburn, and I persuaded them at least to go down the garden for the shouting. But they came back in what we call the evening time, which is the few minutes from sunset to sundown, and were still completely at war.

Finally Joan, who was beautiful in that tortured way which makes one think of snakes for hair, strode off down the road to London (on which the last bus had long gone), wheeling the pram with the baby in it and the other children snivelling at her side, while her young husband walked two or three yards behind her repeating his arguments. I thought very likely it would work itself out, as such quarrels have to in Auburn, where, bitter as the fight may be, there is no chance of going away without a tremendous upheaval of relations and luggage, in which the original cause of the trouble may well be lost. However, very early the next morning one of the Ring Farm sisters—Joan was a sister-in-law—came round with a tale of what sounded like serious trouble, and Mark and I went down there to find a Hogarthian scene. That term is often used too lightly. Real Hogarth has turned over plates on brick floors and dogs and bare-seated babies and children stealing food from the bowl of the woman who is feeding the infant at the breast. There was all this there that morning, and drama too. The room is one of those real farm kitchens with a nook by the fire, a low ceiling and not quite enough light. Joan sat in the ingle with a stony expression and a silent baby in her arms. She was stiff-backed and imperious, and she had remained like that, as far as we could gather, for about twelve hours. The rest of the family moved about

dramatically in various conditions of undress. They looked very pretty, most of them, for they were natural beauties, part Italian and all so very young. Mama was the exception. She stood like Hecuba, elf-locks streaming. In fact, Mama was more like Hecuba than Gertrude of Denmark now I consider the matter. There was the underlying and magnificent guile of the Greek in her. The husband, though Mama's son, was not the same stuff as his sisters. He sat and nattered.

Mark, who is probably the most sensitively polite person in the world, inquired if we could be of any use to them, and Joan burst into tears. This brought a dreadful cry of triumph from the rest of the family, who saw it as capitulation. I mumbled something about a nice new billet for Joan and leaving the family for a bit; but you might as well have tempted the Sphinx with an orange. Joan was going home. If she stayed she would stay with the family, but as it happened she was going home.

Home in the end she went.

This last experience was rare naturally, because there were not enough largish houses to take in very big families who wanted to stick together even to the breaking-point. The Ring Farmers were remarkable people anyway, more like the Didikye than anything else in our experience, but they had their place in the composite picture.

There were two things only that the majority of our evacuees had in absolute common, sex and age, for they were nearly all young; but, although I am almost incapable of seeing people as groups and not as individuals, even I began to notice other things about them as a whole.

One of the oddest of these was this lack of house-training among their children. All young things need house-training. It is one of the jolly reminders that civilisation, like peace, is a reward for effort and not a free gift for a lucky nation. The training of some youngsters takes more effort than others, especially if their general standard of physique is not so good, but these suburban children were uniformly first-class. The whole of Auburn remarked upon it. With very few exceptions the children were fine, fit, rosy and beaming with health, yet the habits of nearly all of them would have disgraced any two-months-old pup.

After a lot of listening to the main difference between Auburn's inconveniences and the luxuries of town life a dreadful suspicion came into my mind that it might be that to a certain temperament these new labour-saving devices with which urban homes are crowded might create a situation in which it would be much easier to clean a floor, do unlimited laundry and

wipe down the furniture than to train a baby; for it needs more than physical work to teach a child, or indeed any other little animal.

There were other evidences of the same sort of thing too. Herbert and his wife took in a gentle young mother who expected a child and had a toddler with her, and she was quite willing to help if she could. Mrs. Herbert gave her some beans to string, but she had no idea how to do them and could hardly believe that such a fatigue was necessary. Herbert thought it odd but not, I think, wrong. After all, there is no great virtue in stringing beans, and if one can afford a tin and town beans are unpalatable (as we firmly believe, although we send our best produce to London) to an ordinary country mind there does not seem any sin in opening one. What did bother some of us, though, was the paralysing discontent of a number of the young women. Being intensely inquisitive people (Auburn will deny this indignantly, but any Arctic explorer would recognise the fascinated penguin in our elaborately expressionless stares), we located, after a good deal of diffident detective work, some of the main reasons for this.

The fact had to be faced that for a certain section of the newcomers the bottom had been knocked clean out of life by their transplantation. These were those girls who, though of varying incomes, had been used to buying everything at Woolworth's, wearing it or using it until it got dirty or torn and then throwing it away and buying fresh. Without Woolworth's, not only their milliner, hosier, grocer, ironmonger and furnisher were gone, but their laundry and seamstress also, and, even more important still, half their occupation in life as well. Unfortunately, too, they relied on the cinema and their husband and friends for the rest of their reason for existence, and there again they were without.

Their children's remarkable health depending on the free milk, free baby food and free advice given by their local clinics was only partly a flower of their growing too, and so they were terrified when they found that, although we were able to get them a clinic in Auburn, it would not be open all day and every day.

Besides, in Auburn, where floors are very seldom covered with thick linoleum, where constant hot water is a great luxury, where laundry facilities are only on hand two or three days in the week and incomes do not always run to tins, the girls were as helpless as French aristocrats during the revolution. (This, of course, only referred to those girls who had modern homes often costing them as much as twenty-seven shillings a week against our seven shillings for a cottage. Some of our evacuees had houses as hard

to manage and as deficient in modern improvements as any on the coast. They found things easier, of course.)

There were Auburn people who were inclined to disapprove strongly of this new-fangled way of life which seemed to depend so vitally on things instead of on human character, but there were others who at least saw the idea and saw one aspect in which it could be considered advantageous. Albert was one of these last, and Christine, for one, did not agree with him. He said buy a thing not made to wear, buy it cheap, use it new, then chuck it away. Thus you made trade, you made work and you did away with drudgery, since there was not a lot of sense in mending or washing for their own sakes. Also you encouraged change and new ideas.

It was up to Christine to produce the snag we all had to recognise. It was the one point which could not be ignored. She said, in effect, that this lack of training in the children, the absence of constructive effort in the girls which made that lack of training possible, and the helplessness of the whole family if anything went wrong with the plumbing or the shops was plain wrong. It was, of course. It was also dangerous if upheavals like this were going to blow up; no one could deny that. You could see what had happened, how the lack of the little disciplines and drudgeries had made the young women soft; but what exactly to do about it seemed more difficult to suggest. Obviously they needed a discipline if they were going to be happy, and if you did not want them to have the physical discipline of well water and no Woolworth's you would have to provide something moral, the discipline of some snobbery, some code or some religion.

It is one of those things which will have to be gone into in the great exciting days of reconstruction to come. Meanwhile the whole question remains as one of the reasons why people on the wireless and in the newspapers—who talk grandiloquently of war aims and new social orders, but who are discovered, when we work out what they really *are* saying, to be thinking rather vaguely of bigger and better municipal housing schemes and co-operative, all-embracing Woolworth's—don't cut a lot of ice in Auburn.

If it did nothing else, the evacuation convinced a good many of us that man and woman don't live satisfactorily by bread alone, even for a week, and that those folk who say "Get the body right first, and we'll see to the rest later" are laying up a mighty lot of work for the time when they can get round to "the rest," as they call it, if they get on too far with the physical side before considering the other two.

Apart from this large general difficulty, there were plenty of others more simple and individual. There was the fire, for instance, that little four-year-old Derek must have lit, staggering out with a box of matches into the yard of the farm-house where he was billeted. He found a stack of loose straw and made a little hole under it on the windward side. There was a good stiff sea breeze blowing, and the surrounding countryside had been baked in a strong sun all the summer. Derek's simple idea was to see if he could make a fire. He could. They just got the animals out of the barn before the tar caught, and eventually, by hacking down the furthest of the buildings, saved the rest of the stacks. The wind by the grace of God was not blowing towards the house. Fortunately the farmer had insured, and also the soldiers up at the lights happened to see the first crackling sheet of flame and cut over the fields to the rescue.

The bright spot in the incident—for no wind is entirely ill in Auburn—was the practice it gave the new emergency fire brigades, who were several days on the job. The Flinthammock outfit excelled itself and gained much experience towards that far greater fire-fight on the banks of the Thames much later on, when it worked for forty-eight hours without rest and only paused when the engine broke down.

The delightful thing about the Flinthammock emergency fire brigade is that it is really the Flinthammock and district funeral parlour in a newer and gayer guise. The personnel is the same, and this chameleon changing from black to red, from snail's pace to glorious speed, has a most satisfying quality of poetic justice about it. We have seen them so often advancing sadly down the narrow Street; Dick Houlding in front, large and impressive in top hat, black gloves and long frock-coat, the little bier behind him covered with posies, the bearers walking on either side, and Mr. Maskell himself, plump, fatherly and firmly kind, in charge of all. And so to see them now, alternately so to speak, speeding round the Thatchers corner in a crimson box, their red steel helmets glowing in the sun, their leather belts and shining equipment glistening, their faces alive and confident and usually extremely jovial, is an odd but strangely inspiring experience. They won the shield for the district and were heroes in the blitz.

Derek's experiment gave everyone concerned a lot of anxiety, however, and did not do much to add to the popularity of evacuees generally. This popularity, which had never been exactly high after the first twelve hours, began to wane fast as the months dragged on, largely because they would not or could not settle, and gradually their ranks grew thinner and thinner as even the very few unaccompanied children began to be taken off home.

Meanwhile there were other things to think of. Gradually, as the position in France solidified, or seemed to, young folk from Auburn, which was already a thought over-old, began to go away.

15

APART from the Major up at The Court, Albert Clover was the only man in the Regular Army from Auburn when the war broke out; but his brother Sam was in the Reserve and he went off at once at the beginning of the war, and so did George Bouttell. The others went one by one, and the cricket team began to disappear fast. There was Joe, who after his medical was promptly put into the Guards and had some fine tales when he came back looking no longer a big but an enormous chap, although he showed Grog a photograph of himself with some of his mates in which he looked almost small. He had been on guard at Buckingham Palace and was fed and housed, so he said, like a lord. Fred Cockle went into the Air Force and injured his bowling hand almost at once; but when P.Y.C. and I met him in the bus some time later he said he reckoned it wouldn't put him right out in the future. The others went as their time came. Alec got into the R.A.F., and so did Stan Goody and Geoffrey Townsend; while Mr. Ford, the newcomer to old Mrs. Seabrook's house, had had two sons, one in the Fighter and one in the Bomber Command, since the very beginning. Later on more and more went; Fred Braddy from the cobbler's shop, Smiler from the store and his brother Tiddles, Alf Goody who was a Warden, and Frank Hart from the station, and the Spooner who used to be the baker, and Harold Curtis and Mrs. Chaplin's daughter's husband.

George went, but had to come out again because he was wanted on the land, which was shorthanded enough before the big agricultural drive. There were the sailors too; Johnny Burmby, and Mr. Todd on a submarine, and Tony, the brother of Francis and Brian. He came home on leave when we were having first-aid lectures, and he came up to one or two of them. His ship was unknown to most of us then, and it would have sounded a strange outlandish name without the blaze of glory which now surrounds it. The *Rawalpindi*; an odd name for a ship.

Flinthammock, of course, is a nursery of the Merchant Navy, and the finest yacht crews in the world are born down there. Every day you heard of another boy gone off to help keep the North Sea clear.

The girls went too. They seemed to go first. Cis from the Lion went into Air Force blue and Betty James, and so did Miss Smith from the Wick; while Cooee joined the A.T.S. as a transport driver.

P.Y.C.'s sudden decision to get into the Army was naturally the most important departure to me personally. The inactivity of the Wardens' Service exasperated him. Our A.R.P.O. had gone back to his old job in the R.A.S.C., and P.Y.C. made up his mind to join him if he could. It was not a fighting service, but it didn't seem to be out of the fighting, and was the only thing he could get into. Getting in wasn't so easy at that time, because rising thirty-seven was considered pretty old; and anyhow, there was a good deal of waiting about and interviewing and forms to be understood and signed, and it was not until much later that the whole thing went through.

Many very well-meaning people, when talking to me afterwards on P.Y.C.'s adventure, said, "Ah, they like to be *in it*," and I began to wonder if that really was true in his case, because ever since we were all in our 'teens together we have never worried much about being in anything but our own private world; and in that respect I think we are very much like a great many other British families, especially those in the country. It may seem an odd unfashionable thing to say, but I fancy P.Y.C. joined up because he honestly disliked the Germans to the point of wanting to do what he could to help in their destruction, and I think the reason he disliked them so was primarily because he saw them as the arch-trespassers of all time.

P.Y.C. has a bee in his bonnet about trespassers, and always did have. One of the most hospitable people on earth, a man with a horror of being alone and a good habit of bringing every stranger he meets home with him, he yet has a spot of blind loathing for the person who wanders into his own or anyone else's house, garden or meadow unannounced or uninvited. It used to happen quite a lot at one time that people who had heard of the Old Doctor's garden would come walking in through the side gate in that gentle, interested way which garden lovers have, and you would come across them, pink, sly-eyed and a thought defiant sniffing at a border or hesitating on the edge of the lawn. My reaction to them was, as usual, partly shy and partly unbearably inquisitive. Grog and Cooee were both blithely indifferent and would have suffered them to wander about for weeks or even years so long as they did not actively interfere. But P.Y.C. would always bound out upon them in icy fury, only too clearly controlling murderous instincts with the greatest difficulty. My impression was that the private personal quarrel which he and the hundreds of Englishmen like him (for the trait is by no means uncommon) have with the invading Hun lies largely there.

My father hated the Germans. Long after the last war it used to astound me that such an extraordinarily tolerant and logical man should grow so coldly savage whenever he spoke of them. "They have the gift of offence,"

he used to say, and I think it may be there is more in that than I realised. My father believed in Tolerance. It was his particular version of that Christian liking of mankind which is the simplest key to the comprehension of the universe, and in his case I think it was probably this which the 1914 Germans had attacked and all but destroyed, and he hated them for that.

Other men had other reasons obviously, but I mention these two, for they were the ones I knew about.

It was later on in the next year that we ordinary people really saw the new German experiment for what it manifestly is: the plainest and most elementary attempt to gain the world by laboriously and meticulously backing the downward drive in the universal equilibrium—at one time the most gigantic and most naïvely mistaken project since Lucifer got himself kicked out of heaven; an undertaking comparable in execution with the highest achievements in organisation civilisation has ever known, but in aim, inspiration and ultimate result simple blood brother to Derek's idea in the stackyard.

Before a menace like this hatred wanes. Private idiosyncrasies and dear ideals become personal foibles and the fight becomes clear, unhampered by doubt or intellectual argument, a simple battle for the continued existence of man as a civilised animal in the generation after next.

However, at that time—Christmas, 1939—the problem still appeared comparatively small and complicated, and there was room for private reasons for going off to war.

Christmas was the last of the feasts. There was talk about sacrifice and economy, but no real signs of it. The Wardens had given up waiting round for an attack that never came, and the Post had been transferred to the studio, although the sideboard was still full of boots. With the restoration of the dining-room much of normal home life returned, and in that, I think, our house was fairly typical of Auburn.

In the beginning a great many people had been in the habit of getting out their gas-masks and going downstairs on a raid warning; but now, as night after night went by with no interruptions, gradually things settled again and we were "lulled into a false security," as the papers said afterwards so angrily, as if we had lulled them and not they us. Most of the evacuees had gone from the village, but there were still a few for whom we had been able to find houses of their own, although even these were beginning to wilt before the weather. Christine had nearly given up grieving after Tony, who with one or two others had spent a long time with us while his sister was

being born. She had also given up pouncing on me with a toothcomb every morning, and she and Margaret had ceased the nightly precautionary hunt in the kitchen.

The time was almost normal save for the ever-present underlying sensation of waiting, and, to be honest, a new sociability and life which had not been so apparent in the village before the great upheaval. We had all come out from behind our lattices a little, and I for one had found the experience rejuvenating.

The war still absorbed practically all our spare attention, but because of the great lid of secrecy and silence, which still almost alone among all the emergency measures appeared to be absolutely efficacious from the outset, it was not at all easy to get any vivid picture of the position anywhere. To most of us blindfold in Auburn, going about in much our usual way now that the first shock appeared to have been a false alarm, the situation in France, with the two armies facing one another in consolidated positions and a no-man's patrol ground in between, suggested a sort of new-fangled Somme with a certain amount of modern comfort for the troops. Poland was a horrible tragedy, a murder and a rape which could only be avenged and repaid when we could get at her; and meanwhile the magnificent Finns were setting our imaginations on fire and carving an example for Greece and us to follow, and we were eagerly expecting a Scandinavian entry into the war and a French and British Norseland expedition.

At that time, and again now I should say, real secrecy in war-time on the part of the Government usually suggests one thing to the ordinary person who has helped to put the reigning party in power and who believes in the Prime Minister, and that is that some important move to frustrate the enemy is being planned and put into execution. All these generalisations of mine refer only to the rank and file of Auburn, and not to the students of the times or the folk who make a serious hobby of politics. Some of these people's ideas are even wilder and sometimes they are nearer the mark, but I can only hope to explain what it has all looked like from an ordinary point of view, like my own or, say, Sam's, or any other busy person's who has had his own urgent affairs to look after as well.

I thought the Government was working like a fiend to get ready for a smashing Spring offensive, probably in the north, and I thought we were incomparably better equipped, especially in the air, than we turned out to be. I thought that the reason I did not see any factories going up was because they were being built in safer places, and I thought workmen were not being

called up faster because they were not needed. It never occurred to me that we were in such extraordinary danger.

Remembering what other people said at the time, I don't think I was alone.

At Christmas, therefore, we were sanguine enough. We were being given time, we imagined, to build up a colossal war machine, the Jerry seemed to be in no mind to attack us from the air, and it felt as though it was going to be all right to have a few mild celebrations after all.

For us at home it turned out to be a curious, Jane Austenish Christmas, involving two separate but exactly similar midday parties in the same week for the two halves of a Searchlight unit with whom P.Y.C. had made friends in Mr. Spitty's pub, and who had been moved on to a bleak ploughed hillock close to our old house down the road to Bastion.

Cooee in khaki and Joyce, my young sister, on leave from the Wrens, were anachronisms, but the spirit and atmosphere were ridiculously alike. The Terriers were mainly young and decorous in mixed company, as the young are in England to-day in direct contrast to ourselves ten or fifteen years ago, and even more different from our immediate elders, the war survivors, who as a class have even now in full middle age a gift for playing the goat on festive occasions. They were both good parties, and there was a great deal of genuine jollity, a lot of eating and much martial thumping on the wood floors. The soldiers were living in uncomfortable and intolerably dull conditions, and yet with all the freedom and fun of being a gang of lads together. Their need was for formal civilisation instead of the reverse, as had hitherto been more common.

The weather, too, all that winter was old-fashioned and together with the petrol control, produced conditions which I had forgotten since I was a child. Probably it was this, the sudden return of distance, which was the first physical change after the brief return of the children which the war produced in Auburn. It gave me, at any rate, a most extraordinary sense of the untrustworthiness of time as anything but a convenient short-term gauge. When I was a child Bastion was a morning's journey away by buggy if the weather was good. Just before the war it was scarcely round the corner by car. Now it is a long slow bus journey, sometimes entailing a call in at Mudlarking out in the marsh. Time and distance have lost that constancy with which I used to credit them, and their falseness is found out. They depend on other things.

It was an unusual winter, though, for any age. Norry was roughing horses all day. The school bus had to turn back on the Fishling road several times. Birds froze on the trees, and the gulls, so lovely on the wing and so clumsy and out-of-drawing on their feet, came clamouring round the house for food.

In spite of the inconvenience, the frozen pumps and the burst pipes, the absence of papers and mail, there is a peculiar sense of safety and cosiness in this kind of crisis in a village like Auburn. I used to feel the same thing very acutely when I was small in the hard, paraffin-lit winters of my youth. We could be comfortably marooned for days, safe from the terrors of boarding school, the horrors of the dentist, and from the fear of Granny being called away or a governess coming down. If Mr. Whybrow, the carrier, could not get into Bastion on his weekly visits, we were cut off indeed and the situation approached the calamity stage which I always secretly enjoyed, being at that age and in private rather a one for calamities. However, I learnt then that to sit by a fire after battening down the house before a tearing blizzard off the sea and to listen to the frustrated howling of the elements is one of the great pleasures in life, one of the most precious fruits of a triumphant civilisation. In the past our Auburn ancestors must have listened to such fury much as we now listen to the Luftwaffe without this sense of safety and security. The time will come, no doubt, when that insensate growling will be heard with grim satisfaction. But that hour is not yet.

However, it certainly was a sensational winter which all but took Auburn's mind off its sorrows and anxieties.

The *Rawalpindi* had been our first real tragedy and our first great pride. To come from the same village as a man on the *Rawalpindi* is a fine thing, as good as having had a great-great-uncle on the *Victory*. Yet now there was silence for a little, and on land only the magnificent Finns still gave us that daily inspiration which had to come from somewhere.

Up at the Mama's House the last evacuee baby was born, and when her mother, bundling her in blankets, hustled her back over the icy roads to the city in spite of our protests the house was dismantled, the furniture returned to its various owners and the remainder of the equipment packed in an attic to await the next emergency. Albert took his lead pipes back, and new tenants moved into the house. Bea and Nurse had performed their miracle and seemed to think there was nothing very odd about it.

As the ice melted the pains returned. There was some very funny talk in the papers about supply, and the Government began to get restive. Nor was

any help for the Finns forthcoming, although everybody you met seemed to know for a fact that an expeditionary force was fitted out and waiting, and all the time there was this dampening secrecy, only lightened by the impression that a great move must be being made somewhere, although there was no actual sign of it.

Phil had been out in France entertaining the troops, and came back wildly enthusiastic about those members of the R.A.F. whom he had seen. He had met Cobber Kain and the group of youngsters round him, and was unexpectedly excited about them. I say "unexpectedly," for of a disillusioned generation he is perhaps of all of us the least impressed by most new things, having seen much in his time of human nature, most of it extraordinary. If Phil said a gang was exceptional, you knew that he had found something breath-taking. He was not so enthusiastic about anything else, but innocently we put that down to the fact that the Army would hardly appeal to him. He was very restless and exasperated by the cracking insanity of the whole thing. There was no fighting save in Finland, and we did not seem to be going there. Joining up was difficult, recruiting still being so controlled that there was a real doubt in most of our minds whether large numbers of men were actually needed unless they were of a certain type and age. Any special appeal was answered so promptly that the demand was over practically before the B.B.C. had finished making the announcement.

Meanwhile Auburn was getting on with the spring sowing. The unexpected winter had caught almost everybody napping. Very little autumn stuff had been planted, and there was therefore a great belated bustle going on everywhere. Feeding stuffs were going to be short too, as far as one could hear, and the meadowland was to be ploughed. Rationing, which had been very slight to begin with, had begun to tighten up, and at last it was more like war-time.

Fordie, as yet a stranger, was devoting his considerable energy to salvage, and there was an ecstatic moment when he unearthed Norry's private store of mild steel, the foundations of which had been laid down no doubt before the Boer War, and which he keeps under the grass behind the forge. Sam and I defended our pig-pen railings too, struggling with a natural desire not to appear unpatriotic before a newcomer but appalled at the prospect of losing an essential asset. To be sure the pig-pen storeroom had been used as a cricket pavilion for some time, but that had been only a concession to times of plenty. As far as we could hear, pig-pens might be coming in again.

In Auburn all sorts of curious iron contraptions are heirlooms of immense private value, but they are left standing around deceptively, and it is only when someone attempts to move one of them that the outraged owner appears, wild-eyed and indignant, to defend his property. There was a good deal of stray scrap about too, however, apart from the ploughshares lying temptingly along the verges which are reputed to have been too much for our enthusiast, who was not then a countryman, and a fine dump was soon collected, while the Women's Institute organised paper and tin hunts with the splendid folk from Poynter's as organisers-in-chief.

From Ring Farm, Mama went home quietly and with dignity. She said goodbye sadly and with great courage. On the staggering table amid the wreckage of smashed window glass, broken crockery and unspeakable bedding which she left behind there was a touching note of tribute to the people of Auburn, expressing gentle gratitude for all their inestimable kindness. It tickled Auburn and took some of the edge off its tongue.

Meanwhile Norry and Jack were busy in the forge. Norry did a brief but satisfactory trade in wheels. With the revival of agriculture, old farm carts had become scarce, and whereas everything else on a cart may be patched, a wheel is a wheel, ancient among the assistants of man and still almost impossible to manufacture in a hurry. So Norry, after waiting a decent interval, went round to the long grass behind his chicken-houses and out of a cache there produced a fine horde of the precious necessities, laid aside carefully in the prudent past long before the pre-war craze for using up and throwing away had taken hold. He and Jack shoed them as Tiff repaired them, and presently they trundled down the road again.

Shoeing wheels is one of the forge's specialities, and is a sight to contemplate. I was round there one sunny morning and, together with P.C. Me and a corporal from the Lights who was hanging over the cobbler's fence, watched the whole process.

It is a tiny yard out at the back there, and in the centre Norry has constructed a low circular wall of loosely arranged bricks. Within this circle is another wall of chunks of old iron, and in the gap between a trough of fire is built of green ash and sere oak, a combination which will give more heat for a short space than any of your special coals. In this fire are laid the iron tires, and the whole stove is then covered with old bits of corrugated iron. The heat in the cold windy sunshine is considerable, and the two smiths in their goatskins preside over the stove like priests, each armed with the kind of pincers the Devil carried in the Mystery plays. At the psychological moment, decided upon by Jack and assented to by Norry, off comes the

corrugated iron. A darkling tire is then pounced upon by the brothers and carried at enormous speed to the shed, where the wheel is already mounted on a flat platform of steel. The tire is clapped on to the wheel, the pincers are discarded for the long-handled hammers, and the iron knocked on into position amid a great smell of scorching wood. Cans of water stand ready and are then poured over the whole, while a steam like an inferno rises. Clang goes Jack's hammer, clang goes Norry's, alternately round the rim, and the long nails previously made are brought in for the final fixing, the whole performance being conducted in an atmosphere of tremendous excitement.

P.C. Me and I were properly impressed, and Norry said that in the *Daily Mail* a year or so ago there were some pictures of some lads doing the very same thing. The pictures were headed *In the Ancient Manner*, he told us, and he was mildly contemptuous.

"They don't know what they're a-talking about," he said. "Ignorant persons. That's not ancient. That's modern. *I* do it every week of my life."

Meanwhile at home the sense of waiting was becoming electric. The fall of Finland shocked us out of any complacency, although I think it wrong to call Auburn's almost vegetable determination to go on growing naturally in the intervals of being threatened, shaken, blasted, smothered and subjected to extremes of hot and cold, by that opprobrious name.

The sinking of the submarine *Thistle* and the tragic loss of Mr. Todd in her was another shock to the village, and in the next two or three weeks there was a renewed restlessness, a new anxiety to get down to the worst, whatever it was.

"Let that come," said Jack. "Let that come and be done with."

P.Y.C., who had almost given up hope, suddenly received a bundle of documents as big as a barrister's brief and went off to get a uniform. The A.R.P. season began, and there was a great spate of exercises with stormy inquests after them. Bill came along and harrowed the meadow, since a good hay crop seemed imperative, and Sam decided to go all out on potatoes.

Some of the strappings had warped off the windows, and Christine had to be persuaded not to scrape them all off. Sometimes you could see little feathers of practice ack-ack fire over the estuary and there was the booming of mines exploding at sea, but there was no real war on land in England yet and very little in France, and none in Norway, Denmark, Holland or the Flemish lowlands. In Auburn, in spite of the forebodings, in spite of the

continuous threats, the bad omens and the warnings, it was almost incredible that it should ever come.

That was early April. In late May the Scots Major took me down to look at the cricket meadow and the tents there and said shyly that it was the first time his troops had been in the front line. In the interval and immediately afterwards a very odd thing happened in Auburn, and obviously in the rest of England too.

Very lately Mr. Churchill, talking of Yugoslavia, said that nation had found its soul. That sounds a very flowery, high-falutin way of talking and not the thing he would have said of anyone who had not the decent covering of foreignness to protect him; but, like all nakedness, there is nothing embarrassing about it when it is completely stark and in one's own home. In those weeks in May and June I think ninety-nine per cent of English folk, country and town, found their souls, and whatever else it may have been it was a glorious and triumphant experience. If you have lived half your life's span without a passionate belief in anything, the bald discovery that you would honestly and in cold blood rather die when it came to it than be bossed about by a Nazi, and that freedom to follow your heart or not is literally, like air or water, an actual necessity in your life, and that you are not alone in it but that everyone around you, from the most obvious to the most unlikely person, is of the same mind—then that is something to have lived for.

I myself am a physical funk. I wince at violence, and the sight of blood makes me feel sick. But even I, most morally inferior and over-complicated beside most Auburn folk, who are not wavering and never have wavered, am profoundly glad I was born in these days when all the tragic grandeurs of the past fade into perspective and become small battles and local encounters, rehearsals, trial runs before this simple gigantic fight to the death between the up-pull and the down-pull, freedom and slavery, right and wrong.

It has just occurred to me why this is so. Until that experience I would have been afraid to admit such a thought had I had it. The chances of being misrepresented or misunderstood or of offending, which are so great, would have appalled me. Now the timidity is gone. With the rest of Auburn and the thousands of villages like us I have found something out, and there is a rock under my feet. Physical fear, recantations under torture, are weapons of the enemy. *They are not truths.* If we are not free to-morrow, we shall not be happy to-morrow. There will be no living in false content. That in all the world is certain. We have touched something solid and eternal after floundering for a generation in a sea of muddles and unsatisfying things.

Whatever comes after, we have got back something vital which had been lost. With it you live always; without it you die.

16

THE actual day-to-day history of those two months, April and May 1940, is now known to everybody who can read, and, completed from all the various sources, it makes a savage but coherent tale, one thing following ruthlessly and logically upon the next, but at the time in Auburn (who was like the child in the crowd at the barrier, not seeing any the better for being in the front row) nothing seemed at all logical.

We got to hear of things in a slightly different order from the true one. Some of them, the evacuation from Dunkirk for instance, we got wind of before many other people, but others, like the shakiness of France, we realised long after most, so our picture was not only over-vivid because of its nearness but often monstrous in its apparent irrelevancies.

Out of the chaotic muddle, when people "didn't know *what* to think, didn't really *like* to think," and instinctively kept their eyes in the boat and rowed on, a more or less coherent procession of events emerges.

Someone, I think it must have been Albert, said the German advance was like dry rot, as not only one board in the familiar structure of Europe gave way before a penknife thrust as brutal and enquiring as his own, but the shutters and wainscots too crunched and crumbled and came apart in one's hand in the short afternoons between one news bulletin and the next. Uncle Beastly's death-voice became his natural tone and the newspapers looked like theatrical props for a spy drama.

The first great shock was the most dangerous although it was less obvious than the others. This, in Auburn phrasing, boiled down to nothing more or less than the sudden and paralysing revelation by Mr. Chamberlain personally that he was "a wonderful vain old man who had nothing particular up his sleeve." As P.C. Me put it afterwards, "we thought he was getting on with it. Instead of that the old blighter was mucking about."

The effect of this discovery at that particular time was almost indescribable. It was like suddenly noticing that the man driving the charabanc in which you were careering down an S-bend mountain road, with a wall on one side and a chasm on the other, was slightly tight and not a brilliant driver at the best. This was a particular sort of horrible experience, far worse, to my mind, than anything physical that has come after. The

ordinary country chap is peculiarly loyal, however, and instinctively just. Even in that hour it was seen that the Prime Minister was well meant, honest, very astute in a business way, and that his greatest fault lay in his lack of size and consequently in his vision. However, most people saw that none of these virtues was of much use in the new situation.

The actual revelation came, I honestly believe, by one of those providential series of accidents which do seem to protect the simple faithful people of the earth, argue against it as you like.

It began with the wink. When Mr. Chamberlain said that Hitler had missed the bus ("Yes, but he caught the workman's," said P.C. Me), the Germans had not actually invaded Norway, and Denmark was still free, but everybody knew that vast concentrations of troops and transports were waiting on the Baltic coast. That fact was one of those half-mentioned, half-rumoured but entirely understood things, and it was the point uppermost in the mind of a public which has a gift for grasping essentials. The next factor was the theory (which generations of experience in being governed well has implanted in the ordinary country chap) that anything we know has been known very much longer by our Government who has already done something about it. We are only now just beginning to grasp that the change in the speed at which news travels has annihilated distance and that therefore this cannot be so true as it used to be. Another chance fortunate for the country in the long run was that the phrase caught the fancy of the Press and the wireless and was publicised freely everywhere for two or three days after it was first used, the B.B.C. announcers putting the colloquialism into inverted commas and often being a little arch about it. The result was inevitable. It was taken as a wink. The ordinary chap trusted Mr. Chamberlain to be a statesman, to know and love his country, and to recognise its intelligence, talking to it as to a less well-informed equal as adult as he was. The difference between the statesman and the politician, after all, is largely the difference between the man who goes to the pub and sees a lot of his fellow national intelligences and the man who does the same thing and sees a lot of common persons easily to be converted into a crowd. Britain has had a vast experience of the two in her time and has learnt to recognise the great by their ability to assess their superiority over the rest of us accurately and not to get some fantastic idea that they are a different species altogether. A giant is only half as tall again as his fellow men, past that he becomes a monster.

Therefore, at a time when the Government was being criticised, when alarming little scandals about Supply were still in the mind, and when all

eyes were fixed on the enemy concentrations, and Mr. Chamberlain winked at the country, when he gave it the little encouraging personal dig in the ribs for which it had been waiting so long and murmured the untranslatable "he's missed the bus," it was assumed by many simple people and with immense relief that there was a bag waiting for the tiger.

Some news is forgotten in a day but not a personal whisper from the Chief. Within the next few hours, or so it seemed—in fact there was a day or so between the utterance and the enemy's leap—Norway was captured and, with the fleet steaming away to Narvik, virtually the whole of the pricelessly valuable coastline from Denmark to the north was in the hands of the Nazi and an unprepared Norway was struggling like a sheep with a rogue dog.

In more sophisticated circles Norway's earlier mistaken efforts towards neutrality were bitterly criticised, but in Auburn not at all that I heard. Auburn is chary of criticising foreigners. It does not understand them, never has and knows it, and "judge not in a hurry" is graven on its seamy old heart. Besides, Auburn had something far more serious to worry about than even the loss of the Norseland coast. Auburn was worrying about the Prime Minister.

In this respect Auburn is perhaps typical of a people so old that self-preservative policies are instinctive, for at any rate it saw at once where the real danger lay, and the whole of the country seems to have done exactly the same thing at the same time.

> "*Naught shall make us rue, if England to itself do rest but true.*"

That is the basic rock, the ultimate secret belief of the instinctive Briton, the touchstone, the magic ring, the root of his pride, the cornerstone of his remembered history.

"Resting true" means what it says, too. It is not only resting honest, according to one's own or anyone else's lights. True means true. True as a line or a weight or a wheel is true, true like a ship's compass or a horseshoe or a gunsight or a heart. Steady and true, honest and true, true love, true sovereignty, true as all the things that have made the country great.

In the days that followed Auburn waited for news of even greater importance than military success or failure in Norway, of greater importance even than the safety of the B.E.F. What Auburn wanted to know was what had gone wrong with the tiger bag? Failure it could and had faced. If you have a sense of history like Auburn military failures mean very little unless

they are consistent and prove inherent weakness in an army or a fleet. Auburn wanted to hear the rights of a failure, what had gone wrong with the timing, who had muffed it, where the enemy had outwitted us.

The debate in the House was followed by everyone. The P.M.'s defence was scrutinised like a casualty list and slowly the dreadful truth emerged. There had been no tiger trap. The wink meant nothing. It was capricious, a handkerchief-rabbit to amuse a child.

That was a very terrifying moment. It was not as if Auburn had really been a child. It recognised the type of man at once. God knows the Government has been full of such men up and down the years.

For myself I have never been more abjectly frightened in all my life, but even the stout hearts, Albert and Charlotte, Sam and his missus, Norry and Jack, P.Y.C., Grog, Christine, Reg and Dorothy, Bill and Basil, the farmers, the ladies and all the other folk who pass up and down the square round the maypole, began to look drawn and anxious and pale round the eyes and to keep very non-committal.

Mr. Churchill saved the Government and saved the country and saved Auburn too. In a week it was over and all was safe and true again, whatever the outward danger.

Mr. Churchill's appointment as the new Prime Minister was never questioned in Auburn for an instant. It was unanimous. But neither was the importance of the choice underestimated.

It is believed by some less simple people that Mr. Churchill, after having been neglected for years, was suddenly remembered in the hour of stress. Auburn does not see it in that way at all, as far as I can gather. From Auburn's point of view, and the place is obviously not alone, Mr. Churchill has been perfectly recognised and liked and trusted to be true to himself and faithful to his country ever since he first appeared in Parliament. However, never until now has the country come into line, come into the true that is, with Mr. Churchill. He is not a man to rise to an hour. The hour has had to rise to him. His is a fixed compass. The Auburn kind has always enjoyed him and known him as they knew his father and mother before him, and his tremendous qualities and tremendous peculiarities are not only known but understood by the people whose hearts rule their heads as well as those who think first, and that is for a very good reason indeed.

Mr. Churchill is the unchanging bulldog, the epitome of British aggressiveness and the living incarnation of the true Briton in fighting, not

standing any damned nonsense, stoking the boilers with the grand piano and enjoying it mood. Also he never lets go. He is so designed that he cannot breathe if he does. At the end of the fight he will come crawling in, unrecognisable, covered with blood and delighted, with the enemy's heart between his teeth. Moreover, he always has been like this as far as anybody remembers, and his family before him. After half a century the country has got into the true with him, but it is its fighting not its normal angle.

In handing over his own precious bit and bridle to Mr. Churchill the British horse gave himself the master whom he knew to be far more ruthless in a British way than anything possible to be produced elsewhere in Europe. Mr. Churchill would ride his horse to the death and die with it as a matter of course, and be sublimely confident of its thanks as they trudged off to join the shades together, and, which is tremendously important, when Auburn and all Auburn kind were quietly depending on his appointment, they knew that as well as, and perhaps a good deal better than, anybody else in the world.

For the rest, of course, as a general, as a tactician, and above all as a technical rider, Mr. Churchill is superb. His hands are light and strong and his instructions intelligent, unhesitant and inspiring. There is no jagging, no uncertainty, no tricking, no coaxing. He demands a schooled warhorse without vice and with a great heart and he has one, obviously, between his knees.

Also, and this is still dangerous ground, with Mr. Churchill returned some of the sublime exhilaration hidden in the heart of good fighting. It seems that a race is either martial or it is not. There is no peculiar moral virtue in being a fighter, a badger rather than a rabbit, but no badger can pretend to himself to be a rabbit satisfactorily or vice versa. That results in a pansy badger and a ridiculous rabbit. The natural fighter has an extra gadget, that is all. The very existence of this gadget or asset in the British has been denied and explained away for twenty years and those who are rediscovering it in themselves are still feeling startled and a thought guilty about it, but it is a very real and ancient attribute and it contains its own compensation and generating power.

In the actual fighting there is a secret joy. It may not be "quite the article," as the Cockneys say, but it is there all right. Look at the faces of the people in the rescue gangs and on the troopships and on the fire lorries.

It has not been possible to put down all the little scraps of evidence which have made it so clear that the ordinary people knew all this about Mr.

Churchill, because country people in England so seldom speak unambiguously but rely on the most subtle combination of nods, winks and parables to convey their mind even if they want to, which is not often. I doubt if the ordinary chap cares two penn'orth of gin, as he says, if you know what he thinks or not. He is thinking it. He has got it right and you can work it out for yourself. However, the fact that from the beginning everybody chuckled when Mr. Churchill's name was mentioned, and does still, is one piece of evidence, and the conversation that Nerney heard in London between two charladies who had turned up to clean an office which had disappeared overnight was another. One of them was completely taken aback and temporarily demoralised. The whole mooring post of her existence had come out of the rock in her hand. The other one was telling her off.

"My dear ole gel," she was saying, "blubber away. But *you can take it from me*, while one bloody brick stands on another ole Churchill will never let us give in."

Mr. Churchill has made a lot of fine speeches but it takes more than words to convince the ordinary man and woman personally. For personal conviction one has to know the man, to recognise the mood he epitomises in oneself. When Mr. Churchill came into power Auburn said yes, well, now we're for it, and it said it with complete satisfaction.

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HOWEVER, while all this was taking place in the big theatre outside and in the deep heart inside, Auburn and district was still conducting its own comedy-drama at home. For example, on the Wednesday of the invasion of Norway, the blessed day when she decided to fight for it, there was an inquest in Fishling on an Air Raid Precautions exercise which had taken place in Flinthammock some time previously. You would think that in a country which really did realise its tremendous danger no sensible person could get wildly upset about the safety arrangements for a place the size of Flinthammock, which has a reputation for looking after itself anyway. Compared with the big issues at stake the whole thing was puerile, but then none of the men concerned could do anything at all about the big issues and they could do a great deal about Flinthammock.

P.Y.C., who had been stationed at Bastion by one of those freaks of luck which do seem to keep cropping up to help one along, had been lent by his Colonel to umpire that exercise and I went along with him to the inquest because I had inherited his Deputy First Aid Commandant job and my ambulance, stretcher party and First Aid Point had been involved in the performance. I have never attended any meeting at which feelings ran so high or at which more active brains or so many personally disinterested men were so deeply concerned. It was an extraordinary gathering because it was only the relative importance of the matters discussed which made it so trivial. It was like the battle for the school, just as difficult, just as hard and bitter a fight as if the safety of a continent and not a village on a mud flat was involved. The same sincerity and drive and complete recklessness of effort was there. No one was being paid for anything and no one was toadying and everyone was stirred to the utmost limit of his capabilities.

I could not help thinking that if only there had been half as much of the same all-essential life in the parliamentary committee meetings before and even after the war we might possibly have been a bit better equipped.

As we drove back over the narrow lanes, which were lit up like day by the searchlights, the enormity of the whole thing returned to us. You could almost feel the whole vast structure of the old world cracking and splitting and struggling in a mighty but very slow explosion, each fractional part a replica of the whole bust-up, until you got down at last to the essential basic

atoms which were the private and personal integrity and steadfastness of each ordinary chap.

The next period of Auburn's experience is very difficult to record because it was the time when the outside shadow-show of world events, against whose screen we had been living for so long, began to get so vivid and three-dimensional that it ceased to be part of our scenery and became part of our play. As our ordinary life is usually quite enough for us to manage, this intrusion made values very hard to assess (in my own case it was further complicated by the fact that I was trying desperately to fulfil my engagements by finishing a thriller, and so I was living in a third world as well for the best part of each day, and many people who are as absorbed in their work as I am had the same experience). It meant one had to take a very firm hold on to oneself and go very slow if one was to preserve any sense of proportion, but even so it was a very muddling time.

The Whitsun week-end, which began on Friday, the 10th of May, will perhaps serve as an example of what I mean. Auburn heard on the early morning wireless bulletin that the invasion of the Lowlands had begun and later on, during the day, the windows began to rattle faintly in their frames as they used to all the time when I was a child and there were big guns in Belgium before. The other things that happened during that day to us in the house (and the same sort of things were happening in every other house in the village) were these. Grog began to make careful preparations for the long delayed blitzkrieg. Then my young sister arrived on leave from the Wrens. She was just going to get her "Chief's" brass buttons and was at last a fully fledged wireless telegraphist, all set to do really useful work. This was a great delight to us even if the world was on fire. All army leave was cancelled and there were many disappointments in other homes besides ours, where we had been expecting P.Y.C. over. There was great excitement everywhere, naturally. Everybody came out into the street to talk. Invasion was in the wind and the advance air attack was expected every second.

I took the precaution of putting my only valuable, my manuscript (which represented, if nothing else, at least six solid months of my living time), in a biscuit tin, and Christine, who felt we ought to bury something, began to look about for some silver or some china we could hide. She gave this up in disgust in the end and was cool with me when I suggested we bought something for the purpose. I thought the sort of things which would be valuable if the worst happened were pails and blankets and tinned beans and soap, but none of these things seemed suitable for burying.

Norry came down to look at Beau, who was alone in the front meadow for the first time. This is always an anxious step in the upbringing of a young horse, in case he goes silly with loneliness and blunders out into the road and hurts himself. It seemed absurd to worry about him, or indeed about my manuscript, when the guns had begun and the Lowlands were fighting for their lives, but on the other hand we knew we might be very ridiculous if we did not attend to them. Mr. Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister came through on that day too and that was the most important thing of all, but one could do little except say "Thank God for that," realise fully what it meant, and then turn one's attention to the problem of the moment, which happened, I remember, to be the wretched dog Theobald, who had taken off the roof of a neighbour's toolshed in the exigencies of one of his appalling love affairs, and after that to return to the desk and the work of story-telling.

As the week-end went on the big drama obtruded more and more into our tight little lives. An order came through to Grog decreeing that all Wardens' Posts should be fully manned and that the men should patrol at dawn and dusk to keep a look out for parachute troops. Word was coming through from Holland that these were sometimes disguised as "nuns and other familiar figures." Now a nun is not a familiar figure in Auburn and the arrival of one by bus, much less by parachute, would have occasioned considerable interest, not to say suspicion, so the information had a touch of pure fantasy about it very hard to stomach at first. Moreover, the Wardens were and are completely unarmed, of course, and therefore the patrols sounded either mad if unnecessary or very unhealthy indeed if justified. However, all the Wardens went out dutifully in the grey times and scouted along the little green hedges as secretly as only the native can.

The rest of us in the house took turns at minding the telephone for raid warnings when they were out, and on my dawn watches I used to get on with my thriller and try not to see myself objectively for sanity's sake.

All through the days, which were green and luxuriant, Auburn looked and felt, save for the far-off mutter of the guns, just the same as usual in the Spring, and the familiar little jobs cropped up as usual. Tom, P.Y.C.'s old hunter, got into hot water once more for cribbing on the cricket-bat willows on the Hall land and tearing their barks off. Another collection of suicidal starlings nested deep in the hollow walls between the Queen Anne and Elizabethan parts of the house and had to be got out before the worst happened to them and we were let in again for the depressing dead rat hunt of previous years. An enquiry from my father's agents came in for an old

serial story of his, written in the last war, which was somewhere among all the others packed away in an attic. All these were little but important things which had to be considered and attended to if life was to go on. It seemed vital that it *should* go on as much as possible just the same as if nothing untoward was about to happen. How much of that was instinct and how much horse-sense I cannot tell, but everybody appeared to have it.

It was the new jobs which seemed so melodramatic and were yet somehow so reasonable. Grog turned the house upside down looking for our only firearm. This was not very impressive when he located it at last. It was a .22 Winchester dated about 1890 and we had no ammunition for it, which I for one was glad about because the whole contraption looked dangerous to me. Grog oiled it but without enthusiasm. I found an Arab sword, which William McFee had given us, in an umbrella stand. It was about five feet long, for use on camel back, and a bit rusty, and we discounted that also. I was feeling that this weapon hunt was probably only our personal exuberance when I discovered that we were by no means alone. Ordinary people were thinking extraordinary thoughts just then and were preparing for extraordinary deeds, all in the same private half-ashamed way.

I had a word on the telephone with each of the First Aid Point Leaders in the ten villages in my inherited area. Their complete confidence, coupled in many cases with downright belligerency of outlook, gave one a great sense of unity. The district is tiny but the people are not at all the same, and if *we* were all alike it seemed reasonable to suppose that most of the country was not very different. The odd scraps of gossip I heard were enlightening. Some of the tales might be thought ridiculous but all were gallant. There were anecdotes of staunch elderly ladies setting aside their shears and trowels and training their old gardeners as stretcher-bearers or arranging trench refuges for the children next door. There was no hint of panic: on the contrary, rather a sort of grim enjoyment. Evidently we were to have no streams of refugees in our lanes.

As far as I could hear each private castle was to be held to the last, each sacred doorstep to be a Thermopylae.

The sophisticated view, as I very well knew, was to regard all this sort of thing as pathetic, but the trouble with the sophisticated view is that it never decides where foolishness ends and staunchness begins. I began to wonder if the sophisticated view had not been taken by the Danes.

Doubtless any well-armed parachutist could have killed all these dear gallant people, but it was clear that he would not be able to do much else

with them, and it occurred to me that while he was killing old Miss Jane, for instance, there might be a very good chance for, say, Miss Ethel with her rook rifle or a basin of lighted kerosene from the top of the stairs. A man is only a man even if he has a tommy-gun. The gangster's weapon does not make him superhuman.

That was the mood of the countryside round about Auburn at the time, anyway. It was angry. Anger does alter people.

I had another telephone adventure during the day which was enlightening too. I had had a business cable from Paul Reynolds, Jr., in New York, concerning a story I had written called "Black Plumes" which had been sold to *Collier's Magazine*. The war had overtaken us all before publication and the cable contained a request for my consent to the story being altered to bring in a war background. It proved not to be possible, as it happened, but I cabled back, using the telephone. I said, "Plumes realise exceptional circumstances demand alteration plan. Trust Colliers not to ruin construction."

Within twenty minutes I received an urgent call and a suspicious voice demanded an instant explanation.

"Which colliers might ruin what construction, please?" What sabotage was this? I had a most difficult ten minutes explaining. *Collier's Magazine* could be checked but "construction" proved a difficult word. The technical side of story writing is a mystery to many people and it appeared to be an incomprehensible one to my questioner. I heard myself saying helplessly, "It's a tale. I made it up. It's fiction," and the voice at the other end said blankly, "Fiction? Do you mean it's a lie?"

In the end I cleared myself, but the incident made the solid world appear a little less so for the evening.

This sort of thing continued in a crescendo, and within a few hours, it seemed, we heard the first tragic account of the defeat of the Dutch Army. Of all the neutrals who went down fighting rather than side together I suppose the Dutch were probably the people we in Auburn respected most in our hearts. They, like us, are not primarily charming and entertaining like most foreigners. Moreover, they understand the same sea and beat us upon it once with a broom at their masthead. All along our Auburn and Flinthammock estuary coast there are Dutch names and Dutch blood. The DeWitts and the DeMussets of the island are family names of importance and much of the local severity, staunch independence, and hard bargaining powers come from the Lowlands.

We had hoped and expected that when it came to it they would hold out longer in their water fields, and the ruthless completeness of their conquest brought home to us for the first time the new Nazi septicaemia tactics by which they spread out and poison a land. The Queen of Holland spoke that night on the radio and showed us country people that she was a proper Queen who might easily have been a Queen of England speaking, to judge by her strength and royalty, and it was largely she, I think, who brought something else right home to many of us.

Courage was not going to be enough.

For the first time in probably all our history we were not going to get by, this time, with just courage and the improvisation it brings with it.

That is rather an alarming discovery when you have just unearthed courage, like Mac’s sword, and are busily engaged in whetting it.

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THE method of the German advance fascinated everybody. In the next few days it was discussed exhaustively by everyone who came in or whom we met in the square.

Gradually a very important and sobering fact emerged and crystallised. It was the same old growling Jerry, just as dirty in a fight, just as dogged, just as overbearing, and, God help us, just as strong if not stronger; but, and this was the new factor, so terrifying if one was in the mood to be terrified (which one was not, personal funk being out of fashion for the first time for a third of a lifetime), somehow or other in the twenty years' armistice Jerry had got himself some brains. They were just the kind of brains which suited him, a wonderfully sound machine but tricky and over-complicated; no wisdom, no saving grace or instinct to let him tie up with the eternal in the universe and save himself and his conquests in the long run, but a wicked short-term rat intelligence. He would "think of anything." It looked as though we were going to have our work cut out.

P.Y.C. came home the following evening and he and I walked down to Mr. Sayer, the saddler. P.Y.C. had a genuine Second Lieutenant's trouble. He had been issued with a very large revolver and a very small holster to put it in, and, as he said, apart from the danger to morale there was always the chance that the perishing thing would fall out and crush his feet. Mr. Sayer was sympathetic and set about cutting out another holster at once. He would get it done next day, he said, and P.Y.C. promised to come over and get it if possible. We came back up the road and went into the garden to do our best to make some sort of personal arrangements in case of serious trouble, as doubtless everybody else was doing at the time. The position was peculiar because P.Y.C. was due to go back further inland, and therefore if invasion did come, which seemed very probable, to-morrow or the next day or to-night, the chances were that we in Auburn would see the enemy first. We considered our geographical position and decided that the real odds were that no actual landing from the sea would take place within a considerable distance, as English distances go, from us, and that the probability was that the fighting would take place behind us, our danger arising when the enemy fell back through us. It was very difficult to realise that we were not both playing the goat and being unduly melodramatic, and that the danger was real. Norry, who had come up to have a look at the hay crop, gave us a wave from the meadow.

There was no active course to pursue because there were so many possibilities. After all, a landing on our actual coast might be possible, and in that case, if they were going to turn the area into a battleground, P.Y.C. said that he thought the chances were that most of us would be bundled out of the way, if it could be managed in the time, and if not we should have to go to ground and they'd have to fight over us. Anyhow, the one thing which did emerge was that speculation was silly. The only thing to do was to keep one's boots and spare cash at hand and do exactly as one was told.

I said if I was ordered to leave I would put a note to say where I thought we were going under the sundial, if it was still there, so that if by chance he came back at any time he would have some clue, but all this sort of thing seemed very foolish. The awkward part was that you felt you ought to make some sort of arrangements in case you regretted it afterwards. If you went around saying it couldn't happen, you were behaving exactly like the Dutch, a few miles across the water, and where were they that evening? Finally we agreed that Malcolm's office in America was the only safe address in the world. If we got irrevocably split up we would get in touch through that, somehow, if we had to swim the Atlantic or wait ten years.

When P.Y.C. went off he said he would come back the next day if he could and I pottered about in the garden. The situation made me feel self-conscious. I could not pick a few flowers for the house without wondering if it was a waste of time, or, worse, a gesture.

It is very difficult not to sound as if we were unbearably chilly and matter-of-fact, like English people in foreign plays, but the danger was so *close*, the appalling size of the smash-up so apparent, that the only thing to do was what everyone else was doing, keeping a steady eyes-front. Once you looked sideways, once you looked round, once you let your imagination out, you knew you might lose your head. Clearly the thing to do was to get yourself into a certain definite frame of mind and keep in it at all costs, even if it made you slightly stupid. Everyone I met in the village seemed to be doing this instinctively, but I have been trained to remark since I was seven and I must always be watching and noting and putting things into communicable form. It has become a second nature and is inescapable. The whole thing was a very peculiar experience, very distinctive, and I suddenly remembered that it had all happened to me before.

To explain this I suppose I had better touch on a delicate subject. This book seems to be full of delicate subjects but it is an attempt at a history of a delicate time and I do not see how I can avoid it if I am to tell the truth, which is my object. The basic root of the whole business lay in the answer to

a very personal question. It was the same great question which was getting such different answers all over Europe and it had now presented itself to the private minds of ordinary British people like us. Naturally no one discussed it openly (except on the wireless, in the newspapers, and among the very young, all of whom are rather remote and unreal compared with one's own thoughts in the dark), but I had it presented to me at this time and, from what practically everybody has said since, I was one of a crowd.

It is one of those bald and awful questions. Would you rather die, perhaps horribly, than be controlled by a force of which you do not approve? Would you rather lose your right or your left leg? Sentiment, cant and heroics aside, would you personally rather go out here and now, leave off living with all that entails or doesn't according to your private beliefs, leave your home and your friends and your family (and see *them* die) or settle down to make the best of a life in which your country's soil, your own soul and your children's children's souls are not yours or their own? You could cheat, couldn't you? You could think one thing and do another.

Whatever anyone likes to think afterwards, there is no immediate "of course" about that question, or at least certainly not for people like me. When it cropped up in my mind again any immediate attempt to answer it was sidetracked by a shock of surprise as I remembered that it had all happened before.

I must have been about ten or eleven and I remember sitting at my desk and looking out of the window at the green chestnut trees. It was one of those remarkably clear days we get hereabouts, well washed and not quite dry and cold in spite of the sun. The Old Doctor, who was an important person locally at that time and who was allowed to wear uniform and a brass hat occasionally (Heaven knows why, now I come to think of it, but he must have been on one of the many tribunals of those days), had called to see the grown-ups and there had been a hasty conference in my father's study. I had gone nosing round, sniffing excitement in the wind, and had gathered from the muttering in the kitchen that the threatened invasion, which had been talked about for months, was actually upon us, and that the "second warning," meaning "load up your farm waggons for the road," had been given. (This was all part of the false order I mentioned before.)

Every responsible person had duties at that time and I was very much in the way while they made up their minds what to do with us children, so I returned to my desk, where I was at work on one of my interminable poems, and was frightened stiff.

I was confronted by this same question: would *I* honestly rather die than give in? To be sure there did not appear to be much hope for me anyway at that time. In spite of Mrs. Molesworth and my beloved *Nuremburg Stove*, as far as I could gather the Germans gave Herod points. That was the period when the entire country was seething with tales of German atrocities in Belgium. We get the same tales from Poland to-day and they still sicken but no longer astonish us as they did in that gentle age when our governess's trunk was still full of sugar hearts from Vienna.

I had heard about the Belgian cruelties from the girl who had come to look after the pony when Arthur Fletcher went to war. My impression always has been that little pinky books about these horrors were given away at the Post Office, but on looking at this statement in cold blood I can hardly believe it. (Northcliffe was "propaganda" then, wasn't he? Would he? I don't know.) Anyhow, what gave rise to it I cannot remember, but I did have in my mind, or on paper, a very vivid picture of a baby stuck to a stable door with a bayonet. In my imagination, of course, it was our coachhouse door and our baby, my sister Joyce, born in 1913. I have kept it in my mind all these years because it explains why I have an otherwise insane dislike of coachhouse doors with harness pegs in them. However, Herod or no, there was a choice of sorts. At ten my problem resolved itself, I remember, into the simple question of whether I should sidle up to the first Hun who appeared and give him a meat patty which I had seen in the pantry, or whether I should get up into my secret hiding place, where the japonica and laburnum hung over the road, and drop a chunk of the broken stone pedestal from the Glebe garden on his head. The notion of doing nothing did not occur to me at that age. I cried miserably over my problem, mainly in terror, and partly no doubt at the piteous spectacle of a noble child deciding to be pinned to the coachhouse door, but after a bit, when I had sucked that mental orange and conquered my immediate funk, the question was still there and I knew then that with me it would be a question until circumstances forced the answer, and that then I should have to do something to my mind at the time or I should certainly go to pieces and choose the meat patty. I had no idea what to do. The responsibility of making the choice reduced me to a state of abject misery and when I heard that the grown-ups had decided to bundle us children off to London there and then with Cissie I was more relieved than ever in my life before or since. To be honest, I do not believe it was entirely because I was escaping from the actual danger, for my anxiety for my father and mother, not to mention my donkey, was almost unbearable, but at least I was escaping from that mental hardening up. That responsibility was gone, or at least postponed.

On this other evening twenty-five years later the problem was very much the same. I was still the same person and I still accepted that mental and moral slavery was worse than death, and, which is important, not only for me but for everybody. The chief addition to my personal make-up, however, was that now this conviction was not merely instinctive. When I was a child I just knew it. In the interim I had acquired information to back my beliefs. In a very happy if strenuous life I have had many moral and mental adventures and during them I have found out, no doubt with millions of others of my generation, that there is a way of living, entailing constant effort, which leads to growth, and another which leads to stagnation and then to rottenness, and finally to the death of one's powers of every kind. There is an up-pull and a down-pull, a building and a demolition, a fecundity and a sterility. That is true. That is fact. Among all the chaos our lot were heirs to we have found that. To be forced to leave the one and live in the other, not to be free to follow one's own private hunch or conscience, which is the only reliable flashlamp (far exceeding the intellect in efficiency) I know of to show one where on earth one's going, would clearly mean the end of growing and the beginning of rotting. Indeed, in the twenty years the problem had become blessedly matter-of-fact. It had resolved into the one which is put so often to individuals by their doctors in the most civilised of worlds: "Will you have a dangerous operation now, which may easily kill you but which may restore you, or will you just die by inches, slowly and painfully, in a few months or years?" I am not pretending this is a pleasant question, but it is an ordinary one and nobody thinks the patient particularly peculiar or noble if he chooses the operation. Rather the wretched man is considered a howling funk if he doesn't.

Having settled that point beyond question—and at the time I did not realise that it was the first point of its kind which ever had been settled beyond *question* in all my adult life—I had to return to face the old responsibility of long ago. That was exactly the same. I still saw that if it came to it I and everybody else would somehow have to screw our courage to the sticking place, that is we should have to get into a resisting frame of mind and then go deaf and blind and obstinate and think without future or past. I thought maybe we'd be able to do it if we kept together and accepted the compensating enjoyment in it without feeling that that was wrong.

When I saw the others and heard them talking in the next day or two I saw they had all come to roughly the same conclusions, either by the same sort of mental process or by that combination of instincts and adult ideals which is probably the safer way.

They said things like “Looks like we’ll have to stand up to ’em then,” or “We’ll have to get riddy of them, no mistake about it,” or merely and most firmly, “We can’t have *they* here, no no.”

It was not a thing one could ask about, naturally. I wouldn’t have thanked anybody to ask me. But as I came in from the garden I saw a familiar figure mucking about in our garage and I blurted out involuntarily, “Will you mind dying, Albert?”

He blushed, as if I had been indecent (as I had of course) and said, “Ain’t keen on it,” adding after a bit, “Har! we’ll get two or three on ’em first.”

“Har” is a sort of battlecry in Auburn and the surrounding district. It is deep-throated, two-syllabled, and not at all unlike the demon king’s, now I come to think of it, if you substitute tremendous satisfaction for the traditional malice. There is the same gusto, the same seriousness. “Har! now we’ll beat ye!” says Pontisbright, going in to bat after a disastrous first innings. “Har! you’ve *proved* yourself a liar and I’ll tell ye why,” says the man in the pub when you’ve all but defeated him. “Har! that’ll be a fine little old colt,” says Mr. Saye, advancing on the prostrate mare.

So when Albert said, “Har, we’ll get two or three on ’em first” I knew that since he was a practical man the chances were we might.

That evening seemed to have settled something definite. It was not until a long time afterwards that I realised just what a universal and tremendous thing it was. Independently and simultaneously, round about that time, Britain must have decided to back growth and must in fact have decided to live if it had to die to do it.

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THE next morning we were still not invaded. Still no German soldiers, with or without disguise, had dropped out of the sky, and I could not help hoping with Norry, who insisted "all this will pass," as if he were a stone or a tree, that it would never come. However, we knew it was criminal just to hope. Already the cry "wishful thinking" was being thrown at us bitterly as if we had originated the sin and we were inclined to resent it. (There is a tendency to take everything very personally in Auburn.) We had never been optimists about anything and had been called "defeatists" in our time.

Meanwhile the news was growing rapidly frightful. It was like a nightmare recollection of 1914, worse even than the reality of those terrible days. There was no sign of P.Y.C. and we wondered if his unit had been moved already. We were told not to use the telephone if we could help it and we felt cut off and very ignorant.

On Sunday morning I had to go over to Flinthammock to make up the First Aid equipment to full strength. The early morning bulletin had been more than merely bad. Uncle Beastly's death-voice had given out altogether and he had sounded human and shocked for once. The French were disturbingly quiet about Gamelin and the Maginot. However, with six million men under arms, it seemed to us that they must be able to hold Jerry somewhere while we backed up Belgium, which was known not to be very strong. Yet if we really had fallen back behind Brussels because of the break at Sedan it made one think twice. It made Mr. Parker think several times, so he said, as he and I sorted out the haversacks in the big back room behind Joyful's pub.

Mr. Parker is Flinthammock by adoption only. He comes from one of those parts of London which are as much villages as are Auburn and Pontisbright. It is one of the secret strengths of London, I fancy, that it is not a city at all but several thousand complete places, packed rather tight but each one as jealously insular as any other islet in this bursting nest of them. Mr. Parker's village is evidently a sporting place. He and his family have always been interested in the trotting horse and his old guv'nor had some champions. The family have always had shops, too, and when this Mr. Parker caught a packet in the last war he was recommended to go to a place

near the sea but not too much on it, so he chose Flinthammock and he and his wife have two shops there.

There is nothing remarkable in a man from a London village choosing to come and live out here. We have always had associations with the places "up the road," as Norry calls it. In the great days of horse traffic there were many races along the highroad and the produce marketmen of London, than whom there are no more complete and insular cockneys, have many pals and clients in this district.

Mr. Parker was and is the leader of the Flinthammock Stretcher Party. In the last war he became a King's Corporal, which means that on one occasion he must have been the senior private who took charge when every rank over him had been killed. Those stripes are permanent. No one but the King himself can take them away.

In his leisure he is a great student of the last war and had read practically every book upon it. Of all the writers he is inclined to give Robert Graves first place as being the most sound and the best workman, although he has a warm regard for Edmund Blunden. I told him P.Y.C. had said he was interested in strategy.

"Strategy?" he said. "Lord Almighty, I was very nearly court-martialled for it once!"

He was very interested in the military situation, naturally, and we began to talk about the Meuse, which he knew well. If they could get over there they'd learnt a thing or two, he said, unless there was something we didn't know about the French.

That was the first time I ever heard anyone in the country question the reliability of the French, although more informed circles in Town had been whispering about it uneasily for months. Mr. Parker said he only hoped that there was some sort of trap waiting somewhere, and that in the past we had permitted dangerous advances for that very purpose. Like the rest of us, he could not believe that we could have been at war for six months and not have had the main plan taped. It shook one's faith badly. Meanwhile, he said, it was a good thing the L.D.V.s had been formed and that Flinthammock was getting a fine crowd of them.

As I came back I realised that no one had said anything against Mr. Chamberlain. Mr. Churchill was safe in the saddle and so at any rate everything was all right now. There were going to be no more strategic withdrawals on the moral front. It was going to be "do it or bust," and no

playing the goat. We'd do the blaming round the fire later, when the books were written and we had the facts.

That Sunday evening Mr. Churchill made his most needed speech and only part of it was addressed to the nation. The rest was *for* the nation, and that high-pitched stallion trumpet, than which there is no more fearful sound, was far more martial than anything heard in Europe since Queen Elizabeth noised it for her country at Tilbury.

To the country he gave what it had been needing so badly since Munich time, trust. Incidentally, too, he gave it authority to do the things it had already decided to do. We could fight them on the beaches, on the roads, in the lanes and in the cities, could we? That was fine. That was grand. It was all right, then. The Miss Ethels and their brothers were not incited but they were sanctioned, and in Britain sanction makes a lot of difference. The speech was also inspiring, but no man on earth can inspire a country to make a stand like that. No rider whose horse is not straining at the bit can speak with such supreme defiance.

He *proved* his trust in the nation too, which was important at that time when there had been so much secrecy and going behind one's back. He gave everybody a broad but confidential hint, "If necessary for years, if necessary *alone*. . . ." Alone? Eh? Really? What's up with they little old Frenchies and their six million men? What did he find out when he went to Paris?

P.Y.C. came back for an hour or so the next day and we got the holster. There was an uneasy feeling in the air that the French war news was being broken gently. Weygand's appointment was very popular, however, for he was thought to be a stern hard man and that gave rise to the hope that there would be a great counter-offensive even if it was followed by hell's delight over here from the air.

It was my birthday and I was thirty-six. I noticed that I did not feel very brave but was oddly settled in my mind and relieved.

The muttering of the guns seemed nearer that day and only partly because of the clarity of the air. There were several "Yellow" or preliminary air-raid warnings, but nothing developed. The L.D.V.s were forming up fast under Mr. James and Doey and Mr. Hart at the station. Grog said rather bitterly that it was nice that someone was going to get a rifle and it was a great relief when they took over the patrols and let the Wardens go back to their own work.

In the next two or three days the weather was good and the atmosphere absurdly peaceful on the surface. Just below it was by no means so smooth. We were finding out things fast. It is all very well to summon your courage one day, but to keep it sword-bright for a week, or a month, or a year, if no sign of danger materialises is quite another matter.

There were other disturbing things also. For instance, it was odd not to be able to make any conceivable sort of arrangement for any day in the future; never to know if the letter you were writing would get to its destination before something happened, or if the things you were saying in it would matter in the least when it did. I did all the silly things one is liable to do, I observed. For instance I drew out eighty pounds and had the notes in a thick envelope. I had no idea where to hide these, for it seemed important that they should not be lying around in the bureau, and yet be fairly close at hand. Finally I put them down the side of the old granny chair I bought at old Mrs. Seabrook's sale, but they fell through among the springs and I had to undo the canvas under the seat to get them out. I felt like Pepys with his money in the garden at the Great Fire of London. I had always felt him a blithering old fool for that business but I began to sympathise with him heartily, poor chap. Since then we have decided not to keep any money around. It seems to be safer where it is.

Meanwhile there was always my thriller, which was desperately late anyway. It was impossible not to keep wondering if there was any point in going on with it, but a blessed instinct for self-preservation insisted I put in the usual hours. Everyone else appeared to have been bitten by the same urge. Sam worked like a black and so did everyone you saw, harder even than usual; indeed, it seemed to get more important every day that one should get on with one's normal routine. Things like doing the washing up and weeding the vegetables and making the beds and cleaning the house seemed vital. It appeared urgent that the meals should be to time and the clocks wound up and even the flowers kept fresh. I cannot explain quite how strong this feeling was except by saying that it was violent and involuntary, like remembering to hold your breath under water or turning up your big toe for the cramp. It was *the thing to do* for the emergency.

The instincts in the blood were very apparent just then. They gave you the comfortable feeling of being more rooted than you thought you were. For myself, I suddenly became very much aware of past heads of the family. I found this so astonishing and so salutary that I venture to mention it, especially as it seems to have been a fairly common experience at the time.

In my case all the old family sayings came back. There was Great-grandfather's cheerful boast, "Give me *time* and I'll pay the National Debt." He was born in 1800 and was left ten thousand pounds and the injunction that "no gentleman ever works." He devoted his considerable powers to laying out his money judiciously and lived like a rich man. We great-grandchildren have a double dose of him since our parents were cousins. There was Grandfather's sly "Be a bundle of sticks; one by one they'll break us, together we'll smash their thighs." The neutrals would have driven him crazy. And then Dad's own savagely confident "He'll break his teeth on England," first about the Kaiser and later, when it seemed a bit unnecessary, about Mussolini and the new German Chancellor. Odd things to come into one's head but all reassuring and all peculiarly and personally one's own inheritance, as if the old boys would have liked to have been in it, and what there was of them in oneself was handing out the family weapons to one eagerly. I am not given to this sort of fancy, preferring not to be beholden, and it was all the more impressive to me because I felt it was out of character in me to go and think such a thing.

On the Wednesday night the B.B.C. published a brief résumé of the Government's powers under the new Bill. They are impressive. A conquered country could not give up much more of its freedom. Those three old men (or three young men) would have had something to think about there, yet I don't think any of them would have been wholly appalled. Great-grandfather would have to have shaken off one great shackle and gone to work. From what I hear of him he would not have minded much. The annihilating bondage of never being able to work like anyone else of one's ability without losing something irreparable must have irked him as it would me. Never being able to do anything constructive is a monstrous sort of restriction. Grandpa would have been looking for a way round it. Dad would have laughed at the excitement of it, at the gigantic changing panorama, and would have banged me between the shoulders and said explosively, "So we go on!"

In Auburn I seemed to be one of the few people who noticed the bill at all. The folk who would fight for a Church School took the news without blinking. Few people even discussed it. I see a great foreigner said the other day that there is no democracy left in England. I can't help feeling that that is as dangerous as an assumption that every woman whose husband is not at her side is a widow. I doubt if democracy is not stronger here now than ever in the whole of our history.

Who made these temporary new laws for our protection? *We* did. That's why we did not even have to discuss them. If you are putting the grandfather clock in the furnace and are prepared to put everything else in, including your boots, to keep the turbines going, you don't discuss each item. Why should you? There isn't the time. All you've got to know is that it *is* you who are doing it. You've got to be in it: it's got to be your show. In fact you've got to be so absolutely certain of democracy that you can treat her like a trusted wife and not a goddess who may prove fickle and leave you any time. The unity of instinct and the universal belief in freedom for the individual which is the backbone of democracy is a very real thing in Britain to-day. We are not only fighting for it: it is our greatest weapon.

Most people thought that the powers under the new Bill were greater than they were, as it happened. For instance, in the matter of commandeering property. In actual fact there was only one man in each wide area who was the person appointed to commandeer, and everything ought to have been done through him, but so general was the belief that the military or Government could take all that many young Army officers commandeered all kinds of property in those few months and nobody questioned or protested, as far as I could hear. The main reason for this smoothness was that the habits of the human animal remained civilised. The social codes held. This may be a weakness in the matter of speed but its value in morale is beyond price.

Our own case was one in point. The following afternoon I was working as usual up in the studio when Sam came up in a high state of cheerful excitement and insisted that I came down at once. I went down the garden stairs and found P.C. Me on the lawn behind the house. He also was highly delighted. He had with him two exquisite young Scots officers, who looked very apologetic. P.C. Me said in apparent rapture, "They're going to commandeer the house."

"No, no," said the Major in a tone a doctor uses when he says, "I'm going to 'operate,' not 'cut open.' "

Being naturally slow to change my mind from one subject to another, my first thought was that I was only on chapter twenty and here was the invasion, and so I said cautiously, "Come and have a drink."

In the bar it emerged to my relief that there was no question of turning the family out and that all they wanted us to do was to put up five officers in the house and a couple of hundred men in the cricket meadow. That seemed quite simple to me. I took it I was wrong about the invasion and gradually an

entirely comic situation developed. Looking back, I see I was still worrying about getting my work done and was the complete mug, the real old lady out of *Punch*. As we talked I could not for the life of me understand what I took to be quite incomprehensible idiosyncrasies on their part. For instance, I insisted they slept on the spare beds in the spare bedroom and not on their palliasses on the floor. The Captain, who was a delightful person, more like the gallant Regular Army officer than I had thought possible, had quite an argument with me about it. We also gave them a bathroom, naturally, and their reluctance to accept it, while yet obviously being very pleased at the prospect, was very bewildering.

In the other part of the house Margaret seemed to be having the same sort of trouble with the batmen. They wanted to camp in the place, and she wanted them to have the big back hall and put up some beds there like Christians. She also told them to put their bayonets away in case they hurt each other.

My one anxiety, I remember, was the hay crop. If we were invaded, of course, we should lose it, but meanwhile until we were I had a hunch that hay was important and we had a good thick crop coming up. I saw the Major giving me a curious look as I was telling him all this, but I also saw that he was just an ordinary chap, probably younger than I was, and I remembered how P.Y.C. had gained in authority when he put on uniform. Also I wanted my hay.

He was charming about it, in spite of his faintly sad expression. The men would only have a strip of the meadow, he said, and they'd wire off the bit they wanted. I walked down to the paddock with him to see what he had in mind. They were a famous regiment and very splendid. I was impressed by their smartness and, wishing to say something complimentary and yet anxious not to say the wrong thing, which I suspected might be easy, I said that the village would be delighted that they were Scots since the Scotch were very popular. The Major was pleased. His men were wife and child to him and he became entirely human. He was so glad, he said shyly, because they'd naturally feel a bit strange as they were raw troops and this was the first time they'd ever been in the front line.

I had turned back before the last words sunk in and I stopped and looked at him.

I said, "What?"

"Well yes," he said nicely. "What do you think there is between you and the enemy?"

I thought “The Navy, I hope to God!” but it was not an aspect of the situation I had considered quite so baldly before, and when they’d gone off to complete their arrangements and I went back to my thriller I wondered if I really could be as ridiculous as I saw I was. Still, young men read thrillers when they’re flying out to bomb Kiel and so maybe it was all right for middle-aged ladies to write them at such a time. Besides, I did not see what else I could possibly do. First Aid arrangements were made and in Auburn we were as ready for anything as we could be. All the same, I saw the soldiers’ difficulty over the beds and the bath. They had come to fight and there was I insisting on treating them as if they’d come down for the cricket. It seemed to me that exactly the right deportment for the honest civilian, midway between nonchalance and gallantly concealed terror, was going to be very difficult to maintain.

We may have taken refuge in laughter, for another frankly comic situation developed when P.Y.C. raced over in an hour he had got off to say goodbye. His crowd were moving and he did not know where. As a mere subaltern, a non-army man, and anyway a member of the R.A.S.C., army etiquette decreed that he was barely permitted to breathe the same air as our visitors, who on the other hand were slightly younger men and all very much of the same Tory kind as himself. They were a little at sea too, being in his house, while he was astounded to see them, a genuinely awkward social situation, and yet all the time the whole thing was absurd because, as everybody knew, the Jerry might arrive in some form or other at any moment.

Grog and I, who were the only free agents in the entire party, were inclined to laugh, which was fatal because the one thing you must not do in the army is to laugh at it. It is not funny seen from inside.

I said, “Well, thank God he’s got a commission, anyway,” aside to one youngster in an effort to lighten a social situation which I saw was beyond me, and the fervency of his agreement set me back on my heels.

P.Y.C. and I went off presently and I told him he was like a shady terrier who had come back to his kennel to find it bursting with dozens of apologetic prize St. Bernards. He agreed absently.

“You look out,” he said. “That kind of chap suddenly decides to shoot the women.”

“Why?” I demanded, falling for it.

“To save ’em from being shot by a cad,” he said and laughed at me.

So we parted cheerful. Grog and I felt rather lonely when he went. Our own world had hardly solidified. However, our visitors were no trouble to us and we grew to like them and to respect them, although they kept us in a constant state of astonishment.

The village was delighted with their smartness and out in the kitchen the formal Caledonian politeness of the eighteen-and nineteen-year-olds was greatly admired.

As soon as they arrived things began to look like real business at last. Up went the barricades. Every road out of the village was blocked with old farm wagons (there was a big blue wain by the pond which was complete Constable), rolls of barbed wire, and bars of steel from Norry's store. We were fortified all right and I think every civilian looked himself out a weapon, if only a pitchfork, to defend himself when attacked. From the stories pouring through from Holland it was clear that to be a docile civilian was to be a shield for an enemy soldier. It appeared they held you in front of them and fired round you or through you, so there was no more point in appealing to their humanity than to the humanity of a railway engine. Jerry's father had not been very human, but he seemed, by all accounts, to have begotten a robot. One of the Scots officers was wild to get hold of a tommy-gun, and as we saw his great gaunt figure melting away into the landscape we could not help feeling what a pity and how infuriating it was that he should not have one. That was the first time we in Auburn realised what lack of equipment meant. It was heartbreaking. We could have done without cars and buses and hot-water systems these last ten years easily had we realised.

Meanwhile, round about this time, maybe a day or so later, odd news was beginning to creep in from Flinthammock and all along the coast. Unexpected people mentioned it, many of whom did not at first see its terrifying significance. The Government were collecting little boats and men to man them. What for? Things were as bad as that, were they? What a sporting chance, though! What a move! How like old Churchill! How tragically makeshift, but how traditional! How fine! Bad news, terrible news, but news with a lift to it. Tremendous times. Our turn next, most likely. Horrible, but we can't have *they* here, no no.

It was wonderfully good weather, King's weather, warm with a slight mist, a moon just past the full. Grog and I made discreet inspections of the fortifications and noticed that our house had evidently been selected not for its comfort, as we had innocently supposed, but for its strategic position in the dead centre of the four road blocks. That sobered us considerably. I took my biscuit tin to bed with me again and I put my money in it as well as the

manuscript. As far as I could see the entire village was as calm as a fish and I could not help wondering if I was the only funk. Auburn is very down on windiness, descrying it in the most unlikely people, and I was secretly very much afraid of disgracing myself. It was very difficult to imagine what the moment would be like when it came or to gauge at all how it would take you. Christine, Margaret, and young Ralph who helped them, simply would not bother their heads about the Germans. They had the British Army to look after. The officers were not eating with us, but the yard was a sort of troop's club and wash-house.

The four batmen, who were very young indeed, were disconcerting at first. They were so regimental that they trotted up and down our back stairs, which consist of a series of companionways just conceivable in a ship of the old Victory class, at the double and sometimes in pairs, a manœuvre only possible because of their extreme slenderness. They made a clatter like the end of the world and in times of stress carried rifles, sometimes with, we discovered with respect, "one up the spout."

It was very good for us. It broke us into the idea gradually and was also very comforting. There is something very nerve-racking about waiting for an attack in a night so still that you can hear a dog-fox bark two miles away.

The King made a speech on the air one night, a very fine, sincere and simple one which crystallised the moment. The whole tenour of life had altered and had become simpler and in a way much easier. There was more than a touch of the address before Agincourt in the air, a secret satisfaction that if it was coming we were to be the chosen, we few, we happy few, and all the other happy few round the coast of an impregnable island. All this looks childish written down but it was a direct, childish time, quite different but more entirely satisfying than any other piece of life which I at least have ever experienced. It was big enough and sound enough to fill you, and if it went to your head a bit the luckier you.

I had been asleep about two hours when the motor-bikes woke me. I had the shutters closed because of the black-out, but the windows were wide. There was a staggering din going on and my old four-poster was vibrating like a truck. Our front door has great iron latches on it and makes a noise like dungeons if you bang it. It banged several times and I could hear the rather high-pitched Scottish voices, then a noise as though an army was charging the stairs, and then the unmistakable chill noise of steel. I sat up in bed listening, my hair on end and feeling sick. Out of the rumble on the other side of the door came the Captain's voice, delightfully nonchalant. It said:

“Well, then, fetch me a couple of rifles.”

I slid out of bed, put on a dressing-gown, and, sneaking over to the door, opened it very cautiously, an insane thing to do which might well have got me shot. (When your own side is running around the house with loaded rifles the one thing to avoid is secretive movement.) There were several people on the landing when I looked out, including the Captain in an Indian full-dress pink silk coat by way of a dressing-gown. It made him look an astonishing but even more martial figure than usual. Standing stiffly with his back to me was a Scottie, his bayonet towering over our heads. I was within six inches of him and I said very softly in his ear, “What’s up?”

He shot in the air, poor chap, as well he might with me creeping about on the thick carpet, but controlled himself and gave me a severe stare.

“They’re heerr, Ma’am,” he said.

It always shocks me to find that I do by instinct just what any other old fool does in an emergency and that I respond to my training rather than to my mind. On this occasion I said, “Oh dear, I’d better make some tea, then,” a remark guaranteed to irritate any man facing invasion. However, he let me by and I went down to the kitchen quaking and yet very excited and made some farmer’s tea, a rather frightful beverage believed in Pontisbright to be just the thing for any sort of upheaval in the night. It is one part black tea, one part whisky, flavoured with milk and lots of sugar, and is drunk boiling. “That keeps out the cold and the ghosts,” they say.

I felt better for it and most people drank it without grumbling. There was some sort of conference going on round the phone with Grog, who had been on duty by it, and despatch riders were coming and going. I gathered that a parachute landing (a false alarm, as it transpired afterwards) had taken place several counties away and that others were expected, possibly near us.

I could not help wondering why none of the neighbours had come in. Somebody usually turns up when something is afoot and P.C. Me is invariably about. However, putting my head out in the yard, the first thing I saw was a Bren gun and it began to dawn on me that a quiet stroll through Auburn that night might not be too healthy for anyone.

I found Grog, who was secretly tickled by it all in spite of the gravity of the situation. As a family we have always laughed at the etiquette and formality of the Featherstones, as we privately dub the Regular Army, and to see them in the flesh doing and saying all the things we had said they did was an experience. However, for the first time we began to see the sense of

it. It made the whole thing possible. If there had not been this rigorous code of manner and thought everybody might have been dithering hopelessly, however brave he was, and although that might have been more natural it would not have been so sound by any means. The idea was to win not to be clever.

The Captain admired the enemy's efficiency from a purely professional point of view. You had to hand it to that feller Hitler, he said. He knew how to get a move on.

In a very short time all the necessary arrangements had been made according to the book of the words and the house settled down again. Those men who had a few hours' sleep due to them were instructed to take them. As civilians it was presumed that we had our own affairs to see to. Grog returned to his telephone. Christine was away at home at Pontisbright that week-end, which left Margaret and me with nothing to do. We went back to bed. I put my clothes ready, found my biscuit tin, which I had entirely forgotten, and then I got into bed. It was extraordinary how easy it was to sleep. I had no responsibility. I simply had to do what I was told. I was less frightened than I had been for months. My principal emotions, as I remember them, were fury and astonishment, the two things I knew it was quite illogical to feel. It was not until twenty-four hours later that we knew the island was still unviolated and by that time the news was so depressing that it seemed scarcely of interest.

20

AUBURN first heard the news of the abrupt and unheralded capitulation of the Belgian Army on the direct order of King Leopold on the midday wireless bulletin on the Tuesday after its own midnight adventure. Of all the blows in the wind, and there have been many, this I think was the most sudden and annihilating. The late King Albert of the Belgians must have had the King Edward the Seventh touch, for all over this district—and therefore no doubt over all other country districts, for we can hardly be peculiar in this respect—you come across men who speak of him as “a very nice gentleman” in that particular affectionate way which means that he had the squire’s gift for making the ordinary chap feel he has a grand friend who knows him as well as anybody else and who likes him for personal virtues, instantly descried, just as anyone else might, but who yet retains all his grandeur.

The desertion of his son, therefore—and at that time it did look like a desertion—was exquisitely and personally painful to an enormous amount of people. It got right under the skin. Leopold, the handsome and the tragic, had been one of the popular heroes for years. People thought of his children in the same breath almost as they thought of the little British Princesses.

The A.R.P. Sergeant from Fishling, who is a great friend and ally of ours and a pillar of strength in the area, came in that afternoon looking as if he had had a private disaster. It was not the danger to the island, not the situation. Like the rest of the country he expected a fight, had decided on it, was not above looking forward to it, and had given up worrying about it. The fight was settled. It was coming. That was all “laid on.” The blow had come from the young King, the son of a hero. He talked about King Albert all the afternoon, and you got a very vivid picture of the man. Our own picture in the bar did not help matters. It was a coloured reproduction of Sir Bernard Partridge’s famous *Punch* cartoon showing Albert and William the Second standing in a battlefield. The German is saying, “So, you see, you’ve lost everything,” and the Belgian is replying, “Not my soul.” The Old Doctor must have bought it in the last war, because we found it still unwrapped when we moved in, and we hung it in the bar as a suitable period piece. The bombast and high-falutin sentiment in the drawing, Albert so handsome and William so depraved, had struck us as delightfully overdone; but on that afternoon it did not look so funny. It upset the Sergeant badly, and it made me feel rather frightened, for I wondered if the young King had

ever seen it and had ever been faintly amused. Our generation has had a curious history of hot and cold, and it made one suddenly afraid of what the effect on the essential fibre of us all might have been. The danger now, obviously, was of swinging back to the same place and breeding the same disillusioned children; but the middle course is very hard to steer. Somehow or other it looked as though our lot had got to stick to its habit of testing and trying, and it seemed that weakness would have to be faced as squarely and curiously as strength, fear questioned as minutely and suspiciously as confidence. Belgium was a great personal disaster, though, very damaging at the time.

Hard on the heels of Belgium came the news of Dunkirk. I always suspected Auburn of being a little jealous of Flinthammock's part in Dunkirk, for Auburn has no boats.

Every man approached in Flinthammock went off without question in any old craft. "Di'nt get no further than Ramsgate. Old boats fell to pieces," said Auburn spitefully and libellously under my window one morning, and I did not recognise the voice.

Auburn had fine men there, however, and it lost the Major from the Court there, who went down gallantly beside his men.

Albert Clover came through unscathed, and his comment when invited by his family to give his impressions of one of the most gruelling experiences of all time was unusual even in a race with a partiality for understatement.

"Har, there were plenty to occupy your mind," he is reputed to have said. "That weren't *slow*."

The soldiers in the house had tremendous tales from their friends, all passed on in the same restrained colours. Old so-and-so had picked up a dinghy and rowed himself across. That was considered a "pretty fair effort." It made them very anxious to begin over here though, and they thought it must come soon. They almost apologised for the falseness of the first alarm. Any night now, they said.

The batmen in the kitchen kept their "wee swords," as they called their bayonets, very much in their minds and were clearly itching to fix them. To blunder into the back hall to find a smooth-faced fair-headed child sleeping sweetly on the camp bed Margaret had produced, his rifle clasped in his arms like a toy, was one of those things you could have wished not to have seen until you remembered how lucky it was for you that there were

children to do it, and that if you had had any sense there would be your children growing up to take their place.

In the village the reaction to the defeat was everywhere the same. It hardened everybody up at once. A lot has been written about this natural characteristic, but the only person who ever put it into words for me was the Old Doctor long ago. He was probably the most uncomplicated, uncompromisingly English man who ever lived, and he said that one of the great joys of bare-knuckle prizefighting (he went back to that) was the agony when you first felt the other fellow’s fist in your face, and every sinew and essence in your body tightened and boiled up in splendid rage as you plunged in to give him one better. I don’t know how many of us felt “the splendid rage,” but there was a general feeling that now, if ever, was the time to get a move on. There was never any hint or question of capitulation anywhere then or later. The possibility, I swear, did not occur to anybody that I saw, and when I got a letter from America suggesting sorrowfully that it might conceivably happen, I must say I was astounded. Like everybody else, I felt we had not started.

Men were joining up everywhere. Phil phoned me that he was sending me all his possessions, and that I was to fling them in the shed until he came back. He had volunteered as a driver and was away to camp.

Meanwhile there was ordinary life to attend to still. Preparations for invasion and death were all very well, but it was also important to continue the usual preparations for going on living. If these were strenuous, as they always are in Auburn, one’s mental stability needed watching if one was to survive.

On my part the completion of my thriller was a vital necessity; no question about that. My part in the family war effort was to keep the home going and pay the taxes, and there were times when I wished I had been ’prenticed to a different trade. My tale was about a man with amnesia and required a mental contortionist with uninterrupted leisure to write the blessed thing. I was putting in about seven hours a day on it, and it had got to be good. It was an odd life. I was always hoping that the end of one thriller would not overtake me before I had finished the other.

There were other aspects of living to be considered too. We still had one or two evacuees to attend to, although by this time we were a Defence Area, and meanwhile there was the question of war-time economy. Margaret and I decided that the rationing of food was being done remarkably well and quite differently to most Government measures, which are very often inclined to

be unimaginative. There were as yet no real hardships, and the prices of most things were being kept down. We had no big store cupboard. The early advice to housewives to lay in reserves had been followed by awful warnings against hoarding, which suggested that one must not overdo it. The happy mean was difficult to fix. We came to the conclusion that a supply sufficient to last the household for three weeks was probably about right, and we arranged for that. Soap we always had bought in bulk, and we got in the usual year's supply. The spring had been bad for the garden, but the vegetables were coming along fairly well and the hay was very promising, the soldiers keeping rigorously to their appointed strip of meadow.

Meanwhile, what with the growth of the Home Guard, as the L.D.V.s were now called, and the floods of amazing stories coming over the water with the troops, the whole place was becoming very military minded. Fifth Column excitement was mounting to fever pitch.

Whoever thought of the simple measure by which Fifth Column activity was stamped out in Britain was one of those elementary geniuses whose gift lay in knowing the country. It simply became generally known that any private suspicion whatever would be treated with great sympathy by the police. If you thought anything or anyone was a bit funny or a bit queer, you could go and talk about them to your heart's content to the local bobby, who would put the magnificent machinery of the C.I.D. in motion. Anything promising meant that M.I.5 would turn up, and even though you heard no more about it you could rest assured that all had been gone into. Well, what a chance! What an opportunity! What a picnic! Under a mask of indifference the average village Briton, be his home in the city or the country, is the elephant's child reborn. His insatiable curiosity is boundless. Also he never takes anybody on trust. In Mudlarking, down on the marsh, you are a stranger for fourteen years, and then at a public drinking party you are sworn in as a true Mudlarker. In Auburn there is no such ceremony, and I should think the period of probation was considerably longer. In fact, unless your life is an open book, you can be a mystery family for generations, exciting the curiosity of your neighbours by almost everything you do. So what happened here, and no doubt in other places, was, it is my private belief, that pretty nearly the entire population was considered discreetly at some time or other by the police.

To our secret regret we never got a single spy. "Soil di'nt suit 'em," as Sam said. But there were one or two good false alarms. A young woman in the Flinthammock bus sat behind two small boys, one of whom she recognised. The other, an eager child, was confiding in an undertone to his

friend that he had been playing in the yard of a certain farm near the sea wall and had stumbled, falling against a stack. He put out his hand, he said, and felt something hard. Investigation had shown that it was not a stack at all, but a “great pile o’ guns.”

The young woman went to the lady in whose house she worked and told her story. The lady had a son stationed at Bastion, and she telephoned to him. Within a few hours the Flinthammock P.C. was confronted by two personages. They sought out the known boy, who promptly sacrificed his friend in the country’s interest. Confronted by so much officialdom, the second child gave way. He was sorry, he said; he had read it all in his weekly comic paper.

However, this sort of adventure was evidently unfortunate, because the stories coming in from the troops, and especially those from Holland, showed that the weekly comic papers had nothing on the new Jerry in the matter of invention. Startled soldiers told you extraordinary tales of trickery, among them stories of fierce long-haired women in Belgian farms who turned out to be stalwart Nazis carrying disguise to the point of farce. It seemed to us that an entire mental readjustment was going to be necessary, and that was not easy. Of all the fixed things in the mind the point of the ridiculous is the most secure. When at last we had adjusted ourselves to the new one—and it took some time, because the tales were many and varied—it made us peculiarly angry and brought home to me at any rate, more quickly than anything else could have done, the real purport of the new fighting. Working at home here and listening to all the tales, it became clear that the Jerry was just being thorough as usual. In his backing of the down-pull and the certain road to chaos he was doing the thing properly. The lie or the double-lie was to be always best, the twist to be always better than the straight, the white flag must always hide a gun, the outstretched hand always wear the poisoned ring. Destruction was to be complete. Last time he cut down the fruit trees as he retreated: this time he was going to poison the minds of the children as well. Nothing which could stand true was to remain. No God and man-constructed foothold, mental or moral, was to be left unbroken.

Against this sort of thing mere Christianity seemed to me to be helpless. The occupied territory in which Christ lived was not ruled by men whose ideal of government was a mixture of carefully weighed lies knit together by considered acts of violence, and a system of proselytising all children by force to a religion which fanatically substitutes evil for good. This new-old notion of living of Jerry’s was considered obsolete and uncivilised long

before the time of Christ. Man had found it did not work centuries before that. It was this element of Nazism which was so difficult to comprehend. Few people can see God, and it seems it takes an even bolder mind to see the Devil. Active evil is more incomprehensible in this two-part-perfect world than active good, and so it ought to be, Heaven knows, after all the effort towards universal improvement which has been put in on it these two thousand years.

However, at that time, with the enemy showing his hand, it did for the first time seem elementarily obvious to ordinary people that the Nazi doctrine has no aim save slavery and methods which are lies and violence and broken promises, and yet, most terrible of all, a force which is fanatical and spiritual. For the first time in my life I felt exasperated with mental niceties, with all the Gothic tracery of little doubts and tolerancies. This was big and clear and as obvious as a hole in the road. This was plain elementary wrong. This was the worship of the other god.

Apart from the distant guns, the soldiers and the barricades, there were other active signs of imminent danger in Auburn. Two of them which were most apparent were the habit of the wireless announcers of mentioning their names before a bulletin (so that we should get to recognise their voices and not be taken in by false speakers) and the silence of the church bells. Little things, but very significant because they kept cropping up so constantly. Church bells are a great part of normal life in the country. When anyone dies from the village the passing bell is tolled for him. It is sometimes the first indication that death has occurred, and often a man would straighten in the fields and say, “She’s gone then, poor little old girl,” or, “Who’s that for?” The Sunday bells ring out from all the churches three times in the day, and it was very strange without them. The realisation that when they did sound again it would be to ring a clarion which would mark the beginning of the great fight was another thing which became very clearly embedded in the mind, and it was impossible not to think of them every now and again, imagining them jangling horribly in the night or in the clear air of the dawn.

When the French decided not to defend Paris there was no criticism on the wireless or in the Press, naturally. Officially, I think, we were deeply sympathetic with the decision of our great ally; but in a countryside like ours, ignorant at that time of the power of the enemy machine, the decision seemed to be terrible beyond thought. To our minds, on land France was still the boss. We thought we were to look after the seas and keep the channels of supply open. We also thought we should have to get hold of the money somehow because France never seems to have much, and we were prepared

to pour every man into the Continent when they were needed; but France was the boss of that. Now she had an army of six million men in the field, and she was not going to fight for Paris.

In a place like Auburn it is not easy to visualise great distances, and this story of the German advance seemed either incredible, or it made France seem far smaller than she is. We began to wonder if the shakiness at Sedan might not go all through the administration. Many of us had acquaintances in France, not very important people but ordinary folk like ourselves. There was Virginie in her pub in the Pas de Calais, who is so like Vic, Norry's sister. Paul, *très serieux*, who might be another Albert and who drove P.Y.C. and me all round the Alpes Maritimes. The nice people at St. Malo, who still always showed their youngsters with the old proud "another son for France." They were all all right. They would fight to the death, just as we expected we would; but there was something very funny about a High Command which would not defend Paris with six million men. Everybody mentioned it in the same half-astounded, half-frightened way.

It was about this time that the subject of America first cropped up in Auburn. Albert said something about that country when he came past one morning when I was having breakfast in the conservatory and was snuffling over *The Times*. We agreed that the war news was really "worse than dull," and he said, "What about the Americans?" and mentioned that the papers had said something about them. I asked him what he thought, and he shook his head. He said there was "something behind to be got over." Albert is often rather cryptic, and I had to get him to explain. He said he thought the Americans did not want to be caught twice, and that *The Past* was behind. I agreed with him, and we remained depressed.

During the war there had been a strong inclination not to think too much about America. Since that time, last summer (1940), Mr. Roosevelt, who has "wonderful long eyes" (as we say when we mean a man sees far), has mentioned the garden hose. Just then Albert and I were both thinking of the equivalent of the garden hose, and we both had the same misgivings. It seemed to us that we had borrowed America's garden hose once before and had done it in. Worse than that, regarding her as more or less of a relation, we had not got round to replacing it, and had consequently never heard the last of it. Now the perishing place was on fire again.

This feeling that America is a close relation is to my mind one of Auburn's biggest mistakes. You can see how it has arisen. Sons and brothers have gone to America from Auburn and have become Americans. When they come back on a visit they are still sons and brothers and still

Americans; but what Auburn does not and will not see is that exactly the same sort of process has taken place in every village in Europe too. Also there is the question of size. Auburn must know that America is bigger than England, but I very much doubt if it realises it. Then there are the language, the ideals and the movies (which last seem to be all about our better-looking summer visitors). Even Christine, who of all of us has actually been to the country and worked in Washington, says “Foreigners? Oh no, they’re just like English, only easier to get on with. You could not call them foreigners. Foreigners are funny.”

Some of the rest of us have even wilder ideas. When Malcolm came over I actually heard Norry enquire if he had seen a relation of the family who went to America twenty years ago wearing a brown suit and looking unmistakably like himself and Jack. It is not that we are daft, or even particularly ignorant. It is that we are insular. We cannot imagine an Auburn man becoming half Auburn and half something new, and his son being entirely new. We are wrong, and now at last we are beginning to understand that two men may have the same language, the same ideals, the same way of living and even the same great-grandparents, and yet owe different allegiances and have different axes to grind.

However, right up to last year we had not got that idea quite clear in our minds, and the “relation we had offended” was still the most popular picture. The simplicity with which we saw our offence was typical of Auburn. We had not paid the bill. The real reason, we suspected, was because America was a relation and would not sue us. That is a situation common enough in Auburn, and no one on earth understands the trouble it can brew better than we do.

As an example of what I mean by this feeling of close relationship, consider the children. At this time of peril, when Albert and I were talking in the greenhouse, there was a strong feeling everywhere that if we could only bundle every child in the island over the Atlantic to Canada or the U.S.A. we could clear the decks and get down to it and fight to a finish, and if not an English soul were left alive at the end of it, it would still not be defeat. To Canada or the United States: you see the feeling. Parents don’t just send their babies to a strong country. A nation does not want to put its entire living future in a box. Children are not bags of gold. You would not trust them to the vaults of a bank or to strangers, however admired. When it is a question of blood instinctively you think of blood, whatever the family row has been. I know when my mother sent us off to London on that famous occasion in the last war, she and my aunt, her sister, had been having a

period of distinct coolness and were not on speaking terms. Mother had lots of friends in London, but she sent us to Aunt. I am certain the same sort of feeling moved everybody this time. Had the position been fantastically reversed, I do not think the ordinary people would have been so eager to send their children to France, Belgium or Holland, whatever the danger from the West, and yet our admiration and affection for those countries is considerable.

We were wrong, of course. Not in sending the children, God knows, for that kindness in America has done as much to cement the friendship between the two countries as any other material help; but in thinking in terms of blood, for we who are as a rule so good and punctilious with foreigners (as we are in private life with friends) are often very bad indeed with wealthy relations. It is probably something to do with the laws of inheritance, which are so old that they have coloured our instincts. I firmly believe that if only America had seemed as foreign to us as France we would have paid the debt somehow, if it broke us and the world. The politicians and the economists may know better. They think they arrange these things. So they do, in a way; but it is we, the common people, ignorant and muddle-headed and governed by the heart and not the head, who are really responsible for everything in the long run, and we know it. If we disobey our principles, we get into difficulties at once, and always have done. That is why they *are* principles.

So there, as Albert and I saw it that morning, lay the trouble. We had been in the wrong. Old Lady America was riled, and we would most likely have to suffer for it. Meanwhile the fire was taking hold.

In the interim, naturally, a great change has occurred. The careful, kindly explanations on the wireless of Mr. Swing, who of all American commentators has the necessary patience to realise that he is not speaking in quite the same language his listeners use and will go on explaining until he is quite clear, has done much to get it into country minds that America is more foreign than, say, Lancashire, and more strong and more like Britain in ideals than France.

Meanwhile Mr. Roosevelt has emerged as a great statesman. It is that quality in him which has probably done more to impress the Auburn kind of person in Britain than even his great kindliness and sympathy towards us. The statesman touch on the reins is unmistakable, and we have come to see him as a great rider astride *another horse*. That is a tremendous step forward for us. That means, I think, that at last we are getting the right idea.

America, too, seems to have a great wealth of big men. When people like Mr. Willkie and Mr. Winant come over here they behave like big men with personalities and not like ordinary foreign diplomats, who very seldom emerge as real people save to those close to them.

21

THE capitulation of France was a blow on a numbed head. Fortunately Auburn (and it would seem the country) does not appear to go by the head. The reflex actions were still all right. At home it was the usual announcement on the wireless, the familiar crunch in the belly and the immediate instinct to get down to work again quick, but Christine produced the most vivid account of its effect on the countryside that I heard. She was out in the pea-fields. Christine is funny that way. She is close on my age, a way-up professional housemaid, has travelled all over America and seen good service in London. Her professional dignity is enormous, but on her holiday she likes to go home to Pontisbright and spend her time pea-picking. There is no freedom in the world like it, she says, and you are making money as well. She and her sister were up in the broad fields on the hill of Ney, the little village above the Pontisbright valley, and the picking was good. The Ney people, who are "old-fashioned," which means roughly that they are Puritanical and simple and a bit pessimistic, went home for every news and came back at last, pale and horrified. "Now we're alone. Now they'll be over here in no time," they said.

"We wondered," said Christine, "if it was worth while making any more money."

"Did you stop picking?" I asked.

"Oh no," she said. "We went on picking harder than ever. We had to get the peas in. We only wondered."

This, I believe, is basic. I know Fred, who used to work for us at Pontisbright, cleared off one morning and put in a day for the farmer next door. We protested about this to him and found he had accepted no money from the man. "It was the *hay*," he said patiently. "We had to get the hay in before that rained." It was not Fred's hay or our hay, but he could not see what that point had to do with it and discounted all our arguments, which he clearly thought immoral. "Must get the *hay* in," he said.

Norry is always doing the same sort of thing. If a mare is foaling she must be properly fed, whose ever animal she is and whose ever food. The allegiance is to the ground and the life upon it and the things that must be done.

I do not think this is purely country either. It is in the blood of a certain type of Briton. You find it in all the crafts and even in the kind of people who post forgotten mail for the office next door even though they do not like the folk who work there much. It is not even kindness of heart but loyalty to life, and largely accounts, I fancy, for our national reputation for being old busybodies.

One very general reaction to the fall of France, in Auburn especially, was the genuine satisfaction at getting the boys back in the country and taking the job on ourselves. There was, not unnaturally, a new mistrust of foreign generalship. Both our flanks had been uncovered. “Har, we’ll get on better alone,” said Norry. “Much better have the boys over here,” said the women. “We shan’t have anyone else to blame but ourselves now, anyway,” said the pessimists among us.

Gradually the value of the situation became apparent. To feel alone is only terrifying if you are naturally gregarious. If you are naturally insular it gives you an added strength. You feel untrammelled and safer. Besides, we had the Colonial boys, most of them in Bastion it seemed. They were a tough happy lot. They reduced every young woman in the place to a state of giggling excitement and every senior Regular Army officer to a turkeycock. However, whatever they got up to, they were never foreign. The day they swapped every baby in the pram park behind Woolworth’s they made the mothers wild, but there was no one in Auburn who did not laugh. It was a simple, very British sort of joke; not very funny to a foreigner.

We also began to realise that we had a lot of friends. You saw Poles and Belgians and Czechs and Free French and Dutch as soon as you set foot in a town. The island was very full and good and ready. In Auburn itself the various defensive organisations became so many that once or twice it looked as if they might tread on each others toes. The Home Guard were patrolling regularly and efficiently. David, from the farm, had an ecstatic story about himself and three other guards up on the church tower one night being mistaken by a newcomer to the village for parachutists who had come down. The idea of them all landing neatly together in the square box of the thirteenth-century tower tickled the locals’ sense of humour and there was a lot of chaffing all round.

Parachute nights continued in earnest for a long time and there was nothing fanciful any more in stealing out on to the flat roof in the grey dawn, to peer out over the leafy country and watch for any faint movement anywhere.

Our first Scots soldiers were moved on, to our regret, for we had grown to admire and like them, and a new contingent from an equally famous regiment took their place. The new Captain was a martinet, newly returned to soldiering from a spell of private life between wars. He had a row of ribbons, the M.M. and the Mons among them. His soldiers belonged to the new army and also to a very old one. They were rougher and not quite so smart as the first lot had been with their wee swords and parade ground manners, but they were tough enough and were itching to get at an enemy. There was three days' coolness between the village and the army and then it suddenly percolated that the newcomers were real country folk from a coast even wilder and more barren than our own. Fraternisation set in and a Border-East Anglian entente was set up. They had habits and etiquettes as settled and obstinate as our own, we discovered, and the two companies settled down together in that amicable near-silence which in Auburn is an indication that a complete understanding has been reached.

However, in the interim two days after the collapse of France, we had our first genuine air raid. It was a clear still night with a moon as big as the dining-room table and the whole place lit up as bright as day. Our fiery Captain was horror-stricken to find startled people scurrying up and down his well guarded territory "blawing wee whustles" and kicking up the devil of a noise generally.

The faithful Wardens, on the other hand, who had been keeping patient guard throughout close on ten months of silent nights, without encouragement or reward, in order to blow their whistles among other duties, and who felt pretty silly doing it anyway, were irritated by his contempt. Since they were all in the same house it might have been difficult, but there was a real raid and that took everyone's attention.

That was the period of what the Jerry called "armed reconnaissances." These were a series of raids directed mainly at searchlights and were also, in Auburn's opinion, an attempt to get his hand in by practising on us. It was the first time we heard the curious broken rumble of the bombers. Christine says they sound like lions growling and once that idea has been put in your head it is very difficult to get it out. There is the same hollow lamp-glass note in them.

All the Wardens appeared, Grog and Cliff and Reg and Sam and Johnny and Herbert, and for the first time we saw the searchlights, apparently helpless against the blazing moon, feeling about the sky like "an old 'ooman looking for fleas in a blanket."

Over the meadow, behind the elms, in the direction of the county town, there were odd lights in the sky, coloured fireworks dropping like one used to see them over Bastion on carnival nights. Once or twice the growling came very close but passed away overhead. And then, still between the elms and too far away to be anything but breath-takingly exciting, the rattle of a giant typewriter, sparks, and finally a great blaze much further away still. It flared in the sky, dropped to the ground and set up a flame like a heath fire. It was a plane, Grog insisted: first blood to us.

Later on in the night there was another chase and the bomber sped out over the house, above the lawn, and away to the sea with a fighter after him, the tracer bullets making new stars in the sky.

They got seven down that evening; one of the highest totals for some time to come, but we were not to know that then. It was not at all the kind of raiding we expected, either. We were right as it happened; that was an unusually good night, the sky so clear and the moon so strong, two days from midsummer.

There were no bombs that night. None of us had heard any then. Two nights later we had our first experience. I was out on the far lawn watching the searchlights crossing and recrossing each other and making the sky look like a shot-silk plaid skirt. There were planes everywhere, or it seemed like it. I saw the flash away over the meadows and like a complete fool had no idea what it signified, so that the noise ten seconds later frightened me out of my wits. There were twelve bombs, not very big but of the kind they call anti-personnel because the bits fly out so far and go through anything, almost. I only heard one noise and at the risk of being ridiculous I must say it reminded me of the night a burglar kicked a pile of washing-up bowls down the back stairs on to the stone floor underneath my bedroom when I was a child, a monstrous and awful noise.

However, Herbert, standing out with the others in the yard, had heard everything. He too knew nothing about bombs but he can hear a rabbit walking underground and can see a hawk’s prey at the other end of a field. He said definitely that there were twelve bangs, about two miles away, and that some of them had fallen in water, for he had heard the splashes and the widgeon getting up. He seemed astounded we had not heard them too. He was quite right. The bombs had come down in a sheep meadow and in the water adjoining it not so far from where a Zepp had grounded in the last war. Anti-personnel or no, they had certainly been bad for the sheep.

Our Captain was still exasperated by the “whustling,” and we had a job to convince him that it was not private enterprise on our part inspired by fright. He pointed out how ridiculous it was and privately we agreed, but, as Grog said, if you had said you would do a thing you had got to do it, and if people wanted to know when a raid was on and you were appointed to tell them you must carry out your obligations however much of a fool you look. The Captain still thought it was insane until we were inspired to put it to him in a military way. We suggested that his sentries must feel pretty foolish guarding an old farm cart in the middle of a road while everybody in the village went through the back gardens to avoid them, but they could hardly lay off because of that. Extraordinarily enough, once he saw that the order really did come from a higher authority, he had nothing but the greatest sympathy and consideration for us and we grew to like him very much. He had a lot to try him. Front line or no front line, Auburn was still under civil control, and one day a great lorry full of sandbags arrived and the two men with them built an enormous and obvious stockade round the maypole more suitable to the Zulu War than to anything in this century. I never did find out which exact authority was responsible for the erection, but the grass grew over it in time and it became a sort of club-room in the windy autumn. In the early days the Captain used to pass it bristling.

“Put a wee flag on it,” he used to say bitterly to anyone he thought might conceivably have something to do with it.

The Captain knew a great deal about fighting and, had the invasion come in his time in Auburn, the village would have been defended magnificently. The new tactics delighted and fascinated him and after a bit it occurred to me that his interest in the windows of our house might easily be professional. I had finished my thriller at last and, having given up work for a week or two, had more time for imagining, and I began to feel that some sort of retreat might be advisable if the house suddenly became a strong point. In this kind of war, in this kind of country, it is no use thinking of real safety. There is none and to think about it is to ask for trouble. But it is very natural to feel that you would like an alternative roof over your head if someone is going to have a battle in the house. I thought something of the sort would be a good idea, if only for our morale, for the one thing we really had learnt was that we had to keep off the roads at all costs. I also felt that in view of the tremendous enthusiasm of our own men one should if possible be able to get out of sight. Concrete was pretty well unobtainable at that time and anyhow Albert was busy, so on Sam’s advice I bought a couple of ton of baled straw and we filled in the quarrelling place, leaving a space in the middle. I have never regretted this because the straw has been so useful

this winter and I should never have got a stock in otherwise, but at the time it made a neat little summerhouse, not much of a target and anyway a hiding place. I came in for a lot of chaff.

P.Y.C., who came over one day to see us, was appalled by it and forbade me pointblank ever to go anywhere near it in an emergency, but I was obstinately and illogically glad of it, and I think there is a lot of that in this new world. If you feel happier in a third-grade tin hat, which would not keep off an acorn, there is no reason at all why you should not wear one. A real one is not guaranteed to save your life.

To my despair the Captain was attracted by the little house and I had an uncomfortable impression that his interest in it might be professional too. He was very obliging. He got a rifle and fired at it to see if the machine-pressed straw would keep out a bullet. It would not. The bullet went through the straw, a dustbin lid on the back of a chair, and in my opinion through a second bale, hitting a building half a mile away, but I have no proof of that. Anyhow the Captain lost interest and I retained my little shed, and we never found the bullet.

The greatest strain at this time, still, was this never being able to plan ahead with any degree of certainty. While I had been working very hard I had not noticed it so much, but now it became irksome for a while until, miraculously, we got used to it. We seem to get used to things very quickly in Auburn, much as plants do, and we go on much the same as usual now except for a mental *d.v.* when anything is planned.

There were many scares just then and many false alarms, and gradually we became more and more used to hearing the lions growling in the sky.

22

As I mentioned before, seen from Auburn's ringside position (just under the canvas) the war did not present itself in quite the same order as it came in actual fact. For instance, the Battle of Britain did not appear to us to coincide with the worst shock of the invasion threat. By the time the Battle of Britain was in full swing our Scottish soldiers had moved on to the next village, Auburn was defended by its own Home Guard like any other place and was prepared in mind and body for anything. This was an alarming but somehow a cosy time, full of tremendous mental adventure and a thing I can only call a doggy old gallantry, very good in spite of the worry and the not knowing from one minute to the next what was coming down the road or out of the sky. I think everybody privately wished they were a year or two younger (most of our young folks were away by this time), but the general health improved considerably and it was a rejuvenating time.

I had never wished my father alive again before this, since he had a most exasperating life, but at that time if I could have disturbed his eternal meditation and tweaked his sleeve and said, "Come on. England, Scotland and half Ireland are alone in Europe, *Churchill's* in charge and we're just going in. Do you want to miss it?" I think I would have done so.

We had constant daylight air-raid warnings and night bombing began as well for us at that time, which was not the case further inland. The ominous growling of the planes, which is very close and personal when there is no other sound in the world, became fairly constant and for some people nerve-racking. I found out one thing very early, which was that you could never tell how fright was going to take you and that I at any rate was not at all consistent in the matter. I was going to bed one night and listening to a plane overhead rather absently, having heard a great many by that time, and I was thinking idly, "Yes, my girl, one of these days you'll be pottering about like this and you'll hear '*whee-e-e*' and then what?"

At that precise moment I did hear the "*whee-e-e*," an horrific noise, quite different from anything else in the world, and then the curtains billowed in spite of the shutters and the house grunted as if it were alive and had been winded. I heard no crash at all, having been apparently rendered stone deaf by terror. However, I heard the next "*whee-e-e*" all right and it was much closer, and I shot under the four-poster like a rabbit, but there were so many

hat-boxes under it as well as a great cedar coffin which I had had made for some furs that I could not get in, and I felt the old ship's timbers of which our floors are made crunch together as I lay on the mat laughing. So I was hysterical, intermittently deaf, and craven on that occasion, and also peculiarly angry. The noise was so spiteful, so viciously against one, that it was infuriating in the way that a bang on the nose is enraging. Yet as soon as it was over I was delirious with pleasure to find I had not been hurt. It was the most purely animal reaction I ever remember having and when I got downstairs, which was almost immediately, I found that everybody else appeared to be in the same mood. No one could have called us expansive people, but had we gone about shouting, "Not dead! Not dead!" we could hardly have expressed our satisfaction more obviously. Thinking it over, most of us behaved like any other country creature startled out of its wits, first rigid and then ecstatic.

It did not last of course and we in the house were lucky because we had something definite to do. As the main body of Wardens came hurrying up, the real problem of very rural A.R.P. presented itself for the first time, and solving that absorbed everybody's attention. As soon as one put one's head outside the door this difficulty loomed up so large and obvious that it seemed incredible that we should not have seen it from the beginning. The Wardens were confronted by a black and silent night, miles and miles and miles of it. There were no searchlights because of the low cloud and at first I thought there was not a sound, not a breath. But soon, as one's ears got used to the quiet, I could hear all the animals and birds kicking and rustling and chirruping, not I think so much in anger as in relief. Now they get angry when they first hear the heavy planes, but at that time I think by the sound of them they were with us, delighted at a danger past. Beau was lumbering about in his box over in the meadow and I heard birds I did not recognise, and cows snorting and stamping a long way off. There was no way of telling where the things had come down. No one had actually seen the flashes and so the craters might be absolutely anywhere; just behind us or half a mile away.

Grog and the others went off to look for them and left me to mind the telephone. Margaret got some hot water ready and cast an eye over the First Aid Point. Gradually it seemed that half the village dropped in, all looking for information and all of us, as far as I could see, grinning with satisfaction at being still alive. There was a lot of talking, for us. Our local accent has a distinct quack in it and there was a deal of Donald Duck noise going on. P.C. Me had been in a ditch full of stinging nettles and was being teased and was laughing at himself, his familiar bellow echoing all over the house.

Finally Ernie Chaplin, Doey's assistant butcher, in Home Guard uniform, turned up with the necessary information and a rabbit. It was the only casualty and was earnestly examined for wounds on the kitchen table by candlelight, the crashing having fused our house current. It had none at all that I could see and must have died of astonishment.

Ernie had brought some bits of the grey-yellow bomb casing we got so used to afterwards and Norry pounced on some of it to take over to the forge and examine on the morrow. It was very good metal, he said the next day. Lovely metal. As good as any in his shop.

Grog kept impressing on him earnestly not to go putting *anything* that came down from the air slap into the forge fire and we thought he was being a bit over-explicit until we found out later what some people will do.

There are few things more irritating to the bombed than tales of other bombs which just missed somebody else, and within the first week of serious raiding the word "bomb-bore" was in constant use. However, vast numbers of various kinds of bombs did fall in and around Auburn all through this period and right up until Christmas, and P.Y.C.'s old bomb map, which had been so innocent-looking for so long, gradually became pitted all over with a plague of black flags. The same thing was true of all the other villages between us and Fishling, and in all that period, in all that area, there were no serious human casualties. It began to look miraculous, and some people think that it was (for, as Granny says so seriously, if not a sparrow falls without *Him* knowing, how much more so a bomb?) but, be that as it may, under Divine protection or not, even so it was not pleasant. The effect was to make one feel like the knife-thrower's assistant with a new, unskilled and insane employer; but some guardian angel did look after Auburn folk.

Johnny's mother and Auntie, who live up by the churchyard, had a stick of bombs fall beside their house on two separate occasions, the actual bomb-path being identical. The first incident occurred at night and that one blew all the windows in and took all the hinges off the doors, a startling experience for all concerned. Then, just when Johnny had finished putting it all straight, another great procession of craters appeared at about half-past ten one morning, with no plane in sight or earshot, the Jerry was flying so high. There were several astounding escapes on that occasion, chief among them Mr. Eve's. He was turning the churchyard corner in his car when a large crater opened just in front of him and another just behind him. They could not have been more than twenty-five yards apart and he was in the middle. His car was smothered with mud and gravel but that was all, although the wall of the moat round his house two hundred and fifty yards

away was considerably damaged and we heard pebbles and stuff coming down on us by the square.

Johnny’s aunt was in the kitchen on the corner and the windows blew all over her, but she clapped a washbowl over her face and was not hurt.

Both Norry and Mr. Eaton, who were in the group on the green triangle up there afterwards, were appalled by the nearness of the craters to the churchyard.

“All those little old dears might have been shaken out of their graves,” said Mr. Eaton and Norry reeled off a list of his relations who lay there to me and Cooee, who was home on leave from her lorry-driving. “That would not have been at all nice, them to be disturbed,” he said.

He was right. It would not and the fact that even worse things were happening, and were about to happen all round us, did not really make it any nicer, I thought. The material damage of this anti-morale air attack on a civil population is appalling but the damage to other less visible but equally vital things is enormous too. Our lives, relations and friends, houses and barns are desperately important to us, but so is light and the sanctuary of our own hedged fields and proper dignity and privacy and the respect of the hearth and our parents’ graves. Auburn tends to notice one lot of things quite as much as the other and I am inclined to feel that this is not so visionary even as it sounds when one is looking at material wreckage. It has taken us all a long time to get all these dear possessions, longer than it took this generation to grow, or yet to build the houses.

23

Auburn's amazing luck, or Divine protection, went on holding throughout the Autumn. Mr. Withers and his neighbours, just outside the parish, had an extraordinary experience. His is one of two or three bungalows set side by side, with about a house space between them. Their stick of bombs fell neatly between the bungalows, one bungalow one crater and so on. They were big bombs too. The lips of the craters touched the roofs on both sides.

In the actual spot where Mr. Withers's own bomb fell he had a shed containing a pony and trap, a cat, some budgerigars, a jackdaw and a ton of coal. They got the pony out from under the trap in the crater and held it up for a minute or two until, to everyone's amazement, it wandered off and began to eat. The cat ran away for nearly a fortnight. The budgerigars were none the worse. Most of the coal was retrieved, and the jackdaw died three days later more from rage than anything else, Mr. Withers said. No one in the houses was hurt, but it shocked them considerably and made a dreadful mess of their homes. Mr. Withers came down one morning soon after and, finding us all in the kitchen, where we have come to hold a general council about eleven o'clock, he had a cup of tea with us. He had got over his initial rage and was grimly cheerful.

"Three cups, one saucer and two plates left between the three of us, God save the King," he said.

The "God save the King," by the way, in that sense is not lese-majesty nor yet *Heil Führer*, but a sort of "God bless my soul, what a set-out! What a life! What a picnic! That's what being an Englishman does for you, and why the hell not? Why shouldn't it? I like it" remark, very difficult to justify or make logical, but which is very common.

"That's finished my gardening," he said, but he underestimated himself, for the crater is now in full cultivation.

Meanwhile, interlarded with these night excitements there were continuous battles and patrols going on overhead in the day. The wireless gave up being dull or even sober and became a blessed tale of triumph for a change. Twenty, thirty, forty German planes down by six o'clock. Fifty, sixty, eighty by nine, and the century up by midnight. The little old boys were getting them. But even then most of us did not quite realise how very

small our Air Force was. That was made plain later and the blazing heroism of those few was fully understood.

At that time the news was so good that at first some people doubted the wireless for the first time, but not for long. German planes began to strew the countryside. Lorry-loads of bits of them appeared on the roads and nearly everyone had seen someone baling out.

A rather silly little tale went round our district at this time about a startled elderly gentleman nearby who sat spellbound in his car watching a pilot descend by parachute. He did nothing whatever but sat looking at the boy, who came down on the verge within a few feet of him. The boy said nothing either but recovered himself very slowly, unharnessed, and stood up, pulling in his parachute. When he had got it in a bundle he looked full at the old man, who felt that he ought, he *must*, at all costs, say something, so he said explosively and in a great bellow, as one's voice does come sometimes in moments of stress:

"How far have you come down?"

The young man shook a sad head at him and said earnestly:

"A hell of a way."

The whole war at that time was a bit like that. From the ground you could only see the planes with great difficulty, for they flew very high. It was golden, glorious weather and the world hummed with planes all day like bees in a lime tree. The only way to see them was to do the thing you were warned not to and lie on your back in the grass and look up. Christine said they looked like little white lice, which was unpoetic but unpleasantly true. They had an impersonal, transparent appearance at that distance. To see a Spitfire attack a formation at that height was like watching tiny creatures in a pond, and it was only when suddenly a plane would come hurtling through the eddying blue, growing larger and larger and disappearing over one's immediate horizon that it came home to one with unbearable vividness that they were real machines with real men in them.

Auburn again was very lucky here. Very few bits came down over it, although there were times when Sam preferred to go out and collect his vegetables in a tin hat.

Goldenhind next door, on the other hand, was a place for planes. A burnt-out aeroplane on the ground has a very corpselike look. It is very much a dead big creature just as the men by it are dead little creatures, and there is something pathetic in the wrecked machine.

German planes, we discovered, had a curious and distinctive smell. It is very pungent and very clinging. One of the police sergeants dropped in to see Grog one evening fresh from an investigation of a crash down the road, and P.Y.C., who had seen several and who was home on leave and with me in another room, suddenly sat up, sniffing in incredulous astonishment.

"Jerry plane in the house," he said, his eyes popping.

On investigation it proved to be the sergeant's boots. It was a peculiar smell, rather like very rank white vinegar.

The most impressive war sight I have yet seen in the sky in daylight was just before the beginning of the big London blitz in September. It was about five in the evening, I think, and I was ironing on a big table out in the yard. The hum of planes, which by this time had become a commonplace, was in the air but I was not taking much notice of it until it grew and grew until I felt it rather than heard it beating on my eardrums. Then I looked up and saw in the mid-sky over the apple-store seventy-five Junkers bombers in formation. They came sailing along, low enough to see and apparently very slowly. It was an incredibly menacing sight. Christine came running out and Margaret, and I could hear Grog shouting from the lawn. There were a few high clouds in the sky and against their goose-breasts the planes looked black and enormous. I shouted to Cliff, who had paused by the gate on one of his trips up the village, and he said, "No, no, they're ours. Must be." I said, "I don't think we've got that many, have we?" for I had not done counting and was frightened and therefore irritated with him.

I saw two little planes darting in and out amongst them, moving up and down like a woman sewing, for quite a while, or it seemed a while, until they began to break formation, and then I realised who and what the little ones were. It did not look real, any of it. And then, over the house (everything in the sky seems either over the house or over the elms or over the church) the whole armada of them slowly swung round and sailed out to sea again. Grog said they'd seen the barrage, which was more than I had.

When it was all over and the last drone of the engines had died, Christine brought me a tin hat and made me wear it while I finished the ironing. It was very heavy and made me feel silly.

I am very much aware that I am not describing the emotional aspect of all this but it is not easy. Fear is a funny thing. Once you have got it into your head that you or anybody else may die to-morrow, or in half an hour (which is after all true in the best of times), fear of death and physical injury seems to become largely subject to health or what you happen to have been

thinking of last when the thing that frightened you happened or so it seems to me.

I was wakened by the first of a near stick one night when I had been sleeping very heavily. I lay cowering in my bed until they had all come down and then decided in an owlish fashion that they were miles away. I turned over and began to be aware of acute and frightful discomfort. It got worse and worse and I suddenly thought “My God, I’m gassed,” and I shot out of bed and took a deep and gasping breath, suicidal had I been right. This woke me completely and I found I was better and that I must have caught my breath on the first crash, which half woke me, and not had the sense to go on breathing again.

Other people say they noticed the same sort of phenomena, and the main thing we are all agreed on is that you can never be sure how it is going to take you.

Some people just go on sleeping upstairs, whatever happens. Some bring their mattresses under the stairs, some have a chair in a certain spot in which they feel safe, and many like to be together. The one dangerous state is when you begin to fidget and need to hustle round the house without settling. But I think most people have a deep self-preservative instinct that that is unwise.

The animals vary too. Sometimes they get angry and sometimes they sleep through far worse noises. Theobald, who is an old dog and very humanised through long association with us, behaves like a completely unself-conscious human. The first bomb of the night infuriates him and makes him bark, but a bad night of them merely makes him sulk and gives him a nervous hangover next day. Out of doors he takes cover like anyone else. Sam threw himself in a ditch one night when a scrap developed overhead while he was cycling round blowing the whistle, and he was almost winded by Theobald charging in on top of him to lie flat as well.

The fighting and stray countryside bombing went on so long without us having any local casualties that at one time there was almost a danger that we would get too used to it, but then one morning Mr. Eaton came in with the milk and the news that the crump we had heard on the night before (apart from that one the evening had been quiet) had been a bomb falling on the house of the Mayor of the county town, which had killed him and all the family. Everybody knew the Mayor and his wife and they were both liked and deeply respected. The aim could not have been deliberate as the house was one of many in a big residential district.

The complete finality and ruthless completeness of the tragedy brought most people to an abrupt halt. Life, wife, son, grandchildren, house, possessions, all gone as savagely as if a giant had trodden on them.

Mr. Eaton had had his own farm straddled twice and had been abed each time and had heard the crashes coming nearer and nearer and then mercifully go on the other side of him, so he could sympathise very vividly with the news he brought of an old friend.

24

SAM and Ralph and Mr. Jack Saye went to London after the first big night raid on the city without realising what had happened up there. They went on my behalf very early in the morning before the first news. With a characteristic gift for the inapt I had chosen that precise date to deposit a small lorry-load of furniture in a top-floor flat that we have next to the British Museum. P.Y.C. had been moved up north and we were hoping to have seven days in London on his next leave. We had heard and seen a great deal of activity during the night, but when one's horizon is as confined as Auburn's it is very difficult to guess at night where exactly in the misty world outside an attack is taking place. The difference, for instance, between the glare of a basketful of incendiaries two miles away and a thundering great fire forty miles away is very difficult to be sure about until you are experienced, especially when there is a good deal of banging and flashing going on locally. There is also, of course, an idiotic tendency to assume that any stream of planes going over your own head is the only one coming in over the island, which is ridiculous. At that time, too, there had not been any concentrated attack on any one target in our area.

The three from Auburn went to London by the best early morning route, which is straight through the East End. They were back by lunch time, having delivered their load and fled, as far as I could gather from Sam, whose powers of description had temporarily deserted him. Their horror was far more impressive to us at home than any mere recital on the wireless, or even the photographs in the newspapers. The unfortunate Ralph, who had never seen London at all before, went about looking petrified for days.

For some little time Auburn was rather like the child left outside the pub while the fight takes place inside. Occasionally the swing-doors burst open and missiles and casualties shot out, but for the most part there was just ominous sound, ominous sights, mystery, and no way of knowing how the rest of the family was faring.

At the same time there was plenty to occupy one's mind on one's own account. This was the first period of the heavy bombs, the oil bombs, the time bombs and all the other odd things that were coming down all round the coast.

Our own personal preoccupation, apart from the many gatherings and conferences on the mornings after local "incidents," was the arrival of

Granny, who had been persuaded at last to leave her home on a mud island in the Thames Estuary and come and stay with us. She is eighty-eight and fortunately extremely active, and her reactions to the upheaval are still Victorian, as are also, as far as I can see, those of the vast bulk of the older generation. Her refuge is in manners and in God. Whatever else the Victorian conventions were, they did impose an iron personal discipline, and a long history of iron personal discipline seems to be just about what one needs most to weather a storm like this. Some of her actual concrete and visible defences are exasperating because of the obviousness of the outmoded social machinery producing them, but even so they keep out the draught of fear and that is something. Better a shield covered with an antimacassar than no shield at all.

An example of this is her insistence that one should count one's blessings at all costs and in any circumstances. Two or three days after her arrival the now familiar evening raid seemed more localised even than usual. She had had considerable experience of bombing on her island and after every particularly loud crump, which had rocked her chair and drained the colour out of her face, she would say firmly: "Quite quarter of a mile away."

This had gone on intermittently for several hours and it was getting on my nerves (I found I had become twice as frightened since her arrival), when she smiled at the fire in the bright room with palpably false complacence and said quite seriously: "But for the *noise* you wouldn't know there was a war on, would you?"

Later on that night I could stand the stoic let's-pretend-it's-not-happening no longer. One cannot spend a lifetime, I found, in getting out of that way of mind and then suddenly be able to pop back into it as soon as one needs its protection. I put a mattress on the flat platform under our stairs and persuaded poor Granny to get into the cavity. Margaret had left us by this time to be night operator at the Post Office exchange, but Christine was about and I got her to join Granny. With them if not perfectly safe at least as safe as maybe, I felt almost lighthearted with relief and went out to join the others in the road outside. There is a great comfort to a person of my temperament in being able to see what is going on. I found the crashes were not so violent if you could see the flashes and count, and I decided the worst of the noise was made by our old house grunting and protesting and shivering in its shoes. Half an hour later, feeling very guilty, I went back and Granny scrambled out to meet me.

"If you're not so frightened now I'll go back upstairs to bed," she said.

“I’m not frightened,” I protested indignantly.

She said, “Well! You didn’t think *I* was, did you? I only came down to be with you and the girl if you were nervous.”

After that she kept to her bed at night whatever happened and only protested once when I for one imagined the end really had come at last. Even then, still sticking to the convention that the complaint must never be personal, she simply said: “This is very bad for the foundations.”

I discovered her main secret later and I was glad to know it because I could not believe that mere convention could produce such an extraordinary evenness of control.

About this time we began to get lingering planes. A wave of bombers would go over on its way to London, entailing at least an hour of steady roaring overhead, and when it had passed we would discover that one or two planes had been left behind. These would hang about, altering height, circling and coming back over the house again and again. Sometimes they seemed almost on top of one in the blackness (as the winter went on the raiders seemed to prefer thick nights) and the effect was very nerve-racking because almost invariably, after ten to twenty minutes, these strays would drop something and bolt away as if a pack of fighters were after them. Auburn had all sorts of theories about this. One of the most popular was that they were the frightened pilots who “had to make their *pedometers* tally with the rest.” Another school thought they were Italians who wanted to go home and say they had been over London, and others thought that they were “young’uns practising.” However, whoever they were, they got on people’s nerves at first, although they worried the folk indoors far more than those outside. I hated them myself and, since Granny would not come downstairs, I said: “Look, if you really do feel like this about it, wouldn’t you like to bung your ears up with cotton-wool and then you could go to sleep?” But she said no, she liked to hear them because when she judged that the plane was directly overhead she could put up a brief prayer to Almighty God to call His attention to the fact. “If He *means* me to go I shall go, of course,” she said, and in that much she was fatalistic. However, being human, she was evidently prepared to take certain precautions against Divine Inadvertence.

I think far more people in Britain than one is normally aware must share her particular kind of faith which is, as I have seen with my own eyes, the perfect answer to anti-morale measures directed against a civil population. Simply speaking, the idea of any kind of purely anti-morale measure against

a defenceless people is a spiritually destructive idea, so that it would seem obvious that the real protection from it should be a spiritually constructive one. They are neither of them intellectual affairs, but I can never see that the intellect is any more important than any other part of one's make-up. The myth about it being so is one of the more untrue theories upon which I was fed when I was young and it has taken me thirty years of noticing things to find it out a lie. The intellect is a vital thing, but it is not the only vital thing. Indeed, alone it is one of the most hopeless crutches on which to try to get through a three-dimensional world. Still, maybe it is just another of the half-gods who, as gods, are scuttling away so fast.

One or two people from London came down to Auburn for a rest but they did not stay. They hated the lingering planes even worse than we did, which was natural because they had seen worse damage. They did not like our absence of visible shelter, either. Auburn's shelter, which lies in its space, in the enormous chances against anything hitting the one minute spot on which we are standing, in our absence of anti-aircraft guns to drop shrapnel on us, in the fact that we are no sort of target and are not being directly attacked, is a different sort of shelter to their cellars. Ours is immeasurably safer, but you must either have all your wits about you to realise it or else have the country animal instinct which says, "Get down in the grass and the chances are you'll get by." Some folk came to stay with Sam and, after a night of comparative quiet on which they had been making the country cousins' hair stand on end with tales of the city, there was a very bad night in Auburn.

" 'Where do we git?' says he," said Sam, describing the conversation with his guest. " 'Har, we don't git,' says I. 'There's no place to git to. That's the difference.' "

There is a great deal more to it than that, though, as the tales of the casualties tell. Auburn has better chances than most.

With everybody else Auburn had its share of time-bombs. When you come to think of it the time-bomb is a refinement. It is in the second degree and it is important because it supplies the evidence that the mind behind it is working for the down-pull—which is only to say that it is just out of the normal "true" with decent human anger. There is nothing new in this, of course, but I venture to mention it because its modern clothes are very concealing. From an Auburn point of view the time-bomb is one of the many modern expressions of that ancient evil which, stirring in weary agony, says heavily, "Ah, but I cannot bear that you should *only* die. I *hate* you. Oh, oh, my hungry vitals! There is not enough to fill me in your simple dying."

Modern talking can clean this up and re-dress it until it appears reasonable and even wise. “Destruction of civilian morale.” “Nuisance value.” “Disorganisation of supply.” All these sound reasonable adjuncts of war, but nevertheless, beneath this civilised trousering the shiny boot has a funny and an ancient shape, and Auburn who, bless your heart, has seen that shape since the beginning of history, cannot be deceived.

“Har, they’re wonderful dirty,” says Auburn.

However, in this remarkable equilibrium of a world the down-pull sets up its own antidote, and behind Officialdom’s exquisitely simple announcement, “Time-bombs may be removed,” there is something fundamental and constructive belonging to the up-pull. That any man alive should walk up to a time-bomb and “remove it” voluntarily is another piece of evidence and *for the other case*.

Since the mind (or just my Auburn mind perhaps) is always suspicious, there is a temptation to wonder if lack of imagination, stupidity or even bravado might not explain or counteract this evidence in some cases, but every now and again something happens to correct that sort of thinking.

One day I had an occasion to direct a man who was going to remove a time-bomb. He was the sort of good-looking, lazy-eyed lad one would normally expect to find lying on his back under an old sports car. I told him where the thing was and that it was thought to be of considerable size. He thanked me kindly and I offered him a drink. He said he did not think he would at the moment, if I didn’t mind, because he’d like to be absolutely clearheaded for a bit. At that moment I suddenly realised quite clearly and in precise terms what he must have known all along and it was a vivid and awe-inspiring knowledge. I said involuntarily and idiotically, “Oh, be careful.” He laughed like a child at me and went off chuckling.

This Courage, which my generation is discovering in the world so late and which our elders threw away in disgust with the bath-water of Sir Bernard Partridge’s fine decorative but fundamentally unreal cartoon of Albert and William and the lie of the recruiting sergeant’s ribbons, is emerging naked and adult and shocking and very beautiful indeed. Also she is most gloriously alive. It is this last quality about her which is so comforting, for it proves that she really is immortal in a race. Twenty years underground has not weakened her, much less killed her. It has only taken away her clothes. Please God we shall not dress her up in fustian again, nor yet put her on such a false eminence that our children find her either untrue or inadequate and throw her away again. That is obviously what must have

happened last time. If we can keep Courage as it were a wife, an ordinary well-appreciated darling helpmeet, as she is to-day, we shall at least have got one great sound thing, but if we make either a remote all-powerful goddess of her or a false little strumpet of her to parade and grow sick of, we shall forsake her again. The lesson of the last war seems to have been the same as that of this war in that one respect. Against this enemy of ours, this short-sighted, thick-headed force for chaos, armed with all the heritage of mankind's inventions and all the vices (and all the virtues too save the one vital sense of direction, the one essential sense for construction, for going on and not under, up and not down, towards growth and not death), against him Courage, as the Greeks have shown us, is not by herself enough. She cannot stand alone. She is a part, not a whole, a wife, not a man and wife. Somehow or other we must make a full man of ourselves and get hold of the rest to support her and let her triumph. Our enemy has Courage, even if he makes a harridan and a slut of her.

Of course there were people who approached time-bombs in other ways than did my visitor, whose attitude towards them was so unassumingly and intelligently brave. There was the old man in the orchard at Goldenhind who went on picking his apples while one of the wickedest-looking holes in creation lay at his feet, for, as he said, he wanted the apples, and if death came he didn't know but that he hadn't been knocking around long enough.

And there were other people too, but their adventures and what they did or did not do in the leafy secrecy of Auburn is for telling after the war, when there should be a great deal of talk on the benches outside the pubs or on the sea-wall when the skies are clear again.

25

THE countryman’s tendency to wander around at night and see what is going on became very noticeable in Auburn during the early winter. There was always a dark figure or two in the club-room dug-out by the maypole and many fathers of families formed the habit of standing outside their homes, like bears before their caves, watching the sky and the blazing barrage over London. At any nearish flash they would shout reassurance or warming to the family within, their voices sounding a second or so before the crump. Sometimes, of course, they dived inside with an admonitory “Git down!”

The London barrage was a sight to see. P.Y.C. predicted that it would be the “end of fireworks in our time,” and I think he may be right. In Auburn we have seen fireworks now.

London took our imagination. These were the villages who could take it all right. The old villages in the East End took it first, but the central ones had it too, and the tale of the great buildings going in two’s and three’s continued week by week. We in Auburn could tell the size of the raid, or thought we could, by the degree of lateness of the letters and the papers, but they always came along during the day and our link with the main world was never broken even for twenty-four hours.

The spirit of the London villagers was epitomised for us at home by the family of the Corporal. The Corporal was frequently on duty at the telephone at the local searchlight post and, as his headquarters was as importunate as Grog’s at Fishling for the exact location of each crater in the twenty-five square miles of open country near us the moment the noise of the explosion had died away, we got in the habit of pooling our information whenever possible. He told us one night that he had never considered himself a disgraceful funk, but that one week’s leave at home in London had put the “wind-up him good and proper.” He said his mother had got really wild with him for falling on his face about the place whenever the furniture slid from the walls at one moment and back the next, and had finally told him that he’d better get back to the army in the country if he couldn’t behave himself.

“Come out from under the table, do,” she would say, he said. “A great boy like you in khaki.”

In fact his picture (which he fully appreciated, being a natural comedian) of the gallant young soldier son returning to the old home to find it suddenly inhabited by all the familiar characters startlingly transformed into iron frontline troops was one of the most remarkable, tragic and absurd aspects of a frightful yet magnificent situation.

His father, said the Corporal, gave him the creeps. The old man used to stand on the doorstep, Auburn fashion, his pipe going and his cap very flat on his head, and watch the raid. One night he called his son persistently and the youngster ventured out without great enthusiasm. “Searchlights, tracers, star-shells, lumme it was a how-d’ye-do!” he said. “It made me feel sick.”

The old man nodded to a flare slowly descending from the enemy circling above.

“*Now* you’re going to see something,” he said with satisfaction. “That’s the powder mill just over there.”

The corporal said Jerry missed it but that he was glad to get back to his field, which only had three craters in it so far. He also said that he was certain that at the end of the war it would take everybody a week, if not a month, to locate their relations.

“I went to see my auntie,” he said, “and I couldn’t find her bloody street.”

By the side of this sort of thing Auburn’s rural alarums seemed rather small beer. We had this brought home to us very forcibly one night when we called out the Flinthammock Fire Brigade—the funeral parlour one—to attend to a shower of incendiaries which spread out over our fields to the astonishing length of two miles. It was the first time we had heard them coming down and the noise on a still dark night is awe-inspiring. “Like a great flight of tin widgeon,” said Mr. Read and there is something in that but not enough. I know the entire village on this occasion appears to have crouched for a moment waiting for the greatest explosion of all time to follow, and then cautiously put its head out only to find, as someone put it so sweetly, “we was in fairyland.”

The whole countryside was lit up with a thousand thermite flares and a stack of baled straw (so much for Sam’s other theory about baled straw) was making a fountain of glory in the night. It was the fact of this stack-fire which called out the Fire Brigade: the fairy lamps are theoretically a job for ourselves.

The Fire Brigade was polite but unimpressed. It was fresh from a full-dress fight and this, as it said nicely but firmly, was scarcely worth worrying about.

The Fire Brigade became our knights errant. It was they who paused in a Sunday morning practice run and put Mr. Dice's bungalow roof on for him (as from one old friend to another), and before the proper authority could arrive with the official tarpaulins. This was when a continuation of the unexplained blitz on that remote corner of windswept heath and plough had blown most of it off.

No one quite understood that brutal attack on nothing, except Mr. Dice. There is a big empty field up there next to his lonely bungalow, called, for some equally strange reason, "Mexico." Mexico was always in trouble. The famous H.E.s fell up there too and so did one of the messy and destructive oil bombs.

Mr. Read had one of the most unpleasant experiences of all with an oil bomb. He was riding on a truck on the other side of Fishling when one oil bomb and one high-explosive fell together just beside it. The truck was blown in half and Mr. Read happened to be in the half which stayed on the road. His mate was not so lucky. He dislocated his neck. However, he was saved. A walk of three-quarters of a mile to the nearest house, which should have killed him, did much to ensure his cure (so Mr. Read says), and at any rate by all reports he is back at work again now. The experience was a harrowing one for Mr. Read, for he had to put out the fire bomb, which he did with the equipment they happened to be carrying in the back of the truck, and after that to persuade the folk barricaded in their lonely cottage nearly a mile down the road that he and his mate were locals and not parachute troops. Once they were sure of that, as he says, "*of course* they could not do too much."

Mr. Read did not volunteer this story. I heard of it first from young red-headed Basil, Bill's son, who remarked one night when we were all out watching the barrage that Mr. Read was "setting wonderfully quiet" since he had been bombed the day before.

Setting out to visit London at this period was an adventure comparable with the same journey when I was a child. The early morning bus, lit with ghostly blue because it was still dark, was full the first time I went up after the opening of the blitz. There were soldiers and sailors going back from leave, the regulars, strays like me, children, factory folk, a sack of shrimps and parcels of all descriptions for any destination along the road. Ken was

driving, conducting, and leading the conversation with an efficiency and a professional charm and ease of manner which would have made a fortune for him in peace time on a liner, had he preferred the life.

There is something very shiplike about all that family's buses. They are waterside folk and all the large family has the aristocratic independence allied to charm which salt water seems to breed so often.

Half-way there Ken said something which made me sit up. (He talks over his shoulder from the wheel, sounds his horn in greeting to every friend on the road, and remembers everybody's destination, family history, luggage and exact fare.) He was talking about the air-raid tragedies in the county town and about a friend of his who had been engaged on rescue work there. What had particularly impressed his pal, he said, was a child of about six who, on being dragged out of the wreckage of her home, had insisted that she was perfectly all right and would they please go and get Mummy out. When the mother had been released it was discovered that the child had a broken shoulder and was in agony.

"She was so young, you see," said Ken, "*so they knew it could not be bravado*."

Bravado. Ye gods! thought I; this is a Sparta we're coming into.

I had chosen a day on which there was one of the comparatively few daylight attacks on the city and there were aerial battles going on over the line as we travelled up. These dogfights high up in a blue sky are very beautiful; there is no other word for it; for the white trails which the aeroplanes leave behind them hang about like bridal veils in long graceful festoons. We had seen a great many on the coast and I did not join the excited gang in the corridor because I had so many odds and ends to carry that once I got settled I thought I would stay where I was.

When we steamed away from the fight the other occupants of the carriage came back and I recognised them at once. They were some of the business executives who live out some way since they need not get to their offices before ten-thirty or so in the morning. They are grey, middle-aged men most of them, well-to-do, fathers of families and owners of businesses in the city. I had not seen any of them for about a year, perhaps, and they did not recognise me, naturally, for I have never spoken to them, and whereas I travel to Town perhaps six times a year in peace time they go every day. However, I have seen most of them on this same train and nowhere else on and off for ten years or so. They had not changed much, I noticed, except

that they all looked a trifle older. They were apparently delighted at the fight and came in grinning and a trifle flushed.

They agreed among themselves that it was one of the best and I began to wish I had seen it, for it sounded as though they too had had experience. They took no notice of me, of course (a fact that always astonishes me for the first two or three hours I spend in urban life again after the family atmosphere of Auburn), but went on talking as freely and formally amongst themselves as train acquaintances of perhaps twenty years' standing do talk.

They still chatted in exactly the same peculiar train-journey way but about new things. In peace time they used to discuss cricket, mainly. A man in the corner would throw out an opinion on a score or an average coming through from Australia. One of the others would remark on it and then they would relapse into easy silence for a while until someone added a third comment. And so it would go on for an hour and a half. No one said anything much of value and the subjects were all completely public and impersonal, but there was great familiarity and understanding among the speakers, so that unless you knew a little about the subjects too it might easily have been one of those incomprehensible family conversations, all obscure words and cross-references.

Now they were talking about bombs and bombing and the black-out, but in exactly the same way.

"What time was the warning last night? Exactly seven o'clock, wasn't it? I thought I heard the sirens just as I got in my car."

"Was it? I didn't hear a thing last night. Too tired."

"Do you *want* to know the time of the warning?" This was a third man, putting down his paper. "I think I can tell you exactly. I've got it in my little book here somewhere." He took out a neat pocket-book, turned over the pages and nodded contentedly. "Yes, here you are. Nineteen-oh-seven hours. That's seven minutes past seven, isn't it? You must have been late getting in. Stopped to have one, I suppose."

"Nineteen-oh-what-oh? You a Warden?"

"Part-time only. Very part-time, I'm afraid. There's a lot to do one way and another. We have to duplicate everything now, you know."

And so on and so on. They discussed the night's noises, as we had done on the bus, but more impersonally. We had been interested in so-and-so's daughter's father-in-law's house, and so-and-so's field, but they were talking about "Wychwood way" or "over by Green's Heath." They did not talk

about the London damage at all, but as they got in closer they looked out of the window and commented, still impersonally but very grimly, on anything they thought might be new.

London has always shown the most draggled hem of her underskirts to us as we come upon her up the line and I was prepared for horrors, but at that period the view from the train at that distance, and at the pace we were travelling, was very like itself only much worse. The slums had never seemed more immense or more grimly indestructible. There was still washing on the lines, still flapping curtains and ragged wireless aerials, still a few children screaming and laughing and waving at the train, but every now and again there were whole areas where the ancient blackened pantiles on the shark's-mouth roofs had every one of them slipped, so that brick-red ribbons had appeared in the soot like awful red gums showing above blackened teeth.

The station was as I remembered it in childhood in the last war, dark and cold and blacked-out overhead. My first port of call was on the top floor of a big block of offices not far from St. Paul's, and I arrived with the sirens. Gillie and Mashie began to grumble and collect their work.

"If the roof-spotters whistle we have to go down," they said, and indicated a couple of tin-hatted men on the fire-escape. They whistled as I watched and Gillie began to curse mildly as she collected her bag, the proofs she was correcting, some lay-out sheets and a bundle of "stills." Then we clattered away on high heels to the marble stairs.

"Bad enough going down," they said. "Wait till we start trotting up."

I completed my business with their chief, who came and joined us almost at once in the neat air-raid shelter under the building. The firm is an old one which publishes many magazines. My entire family has done work for it over a period of forty years and I have known it since babyhood. It seemed absurd to nod to all the well-known editors and their staffs as they sat grouped round different tables set out in the low-roofed concrete catacomb. The period of self-consciousness, for I suppose there must have been such a period, had evidently passed. Now everybody was extraordinarily normal and affable but a little bit irritable under the surface. The atmosphere reminded me very much of something I had been in before and it worried me all day until I remembered that it was a rainstorm at a big garden party, when everybody had been annoyed but of course not with anybody in particular.

As I left the All-clear sounded and to my surprise I found a cab outside without any difficulty. London taxicab drivers are natural villagers and will talk like any other small-place men. The cabdriver told me he hadn’t had any glass in his house, or a roof over his bedroom, since the first night of the blitz. It was going to be “a bit parky” in the real winter, he remarked, and advised me to stay in the country and wrap myself up.

“There’s a bomb or two fell this morning somewhere about,” he said. “I don’t know what they think they’re up to, coming over here in the daylight.”

I was going to drop in at Madame Caporelli’s, who had a little shop opposite the flat where we all lived on the actual city borders when we were students. She used to specialise in a certain sort of Dutch toffee and I had promised to bring some back if I could, but I did not have time just then for I wanted to catch Nerney before lunch.

Once again I arrived with the sirens and I began to find this stormy-petrel role embarrassing. Nerney, ever hospitable—bless her—asked me if I’d like to see the cellar, but I was not anxious and we stayed up talking for a bit until the local guns began to bark. It was different from a daylight raid in Auburn. Down on the coast we have the wide sky to watch, the enemy fairly visible, and far fewer bricks to fall on our heads when a bomb does come down. On the other hand, of course, we have less between us and trouble.

The cellar, however, did frighten me. It was leased by a very good old firm of surgical boot and artificial limb manufacturers, and the walls were completely lined from floor to ceiling with such a scarifying collection of lasts that I dreamed about them for nights afterwards. I was afraid I was going to become utterly demoralised by them at the time, for a leather bunion nailed to a grotesque wooden foot with no heel has a visual horror which has to be seen to be appreciated, and I begged Nerney and Vi to come out and lunch with me without any further ado.

They came meekly, but the first place I suggested just down the road was no more, they said, and we walked on to the next possible restaurant. I had not seen much damage from my taxicab and was unprepared for the scene when we turned the corner out of Nerney’s street into the main thoroughfare.

Do you remember those old German films of the *Nibelungen* and *The Golem* and *Faust* which we used to admire long ago? There was a trick they had in those to denote the passage of a year, which was very Teutonic, and, now I have seen what I have seen, no longer very pretty as an idea. They would present a little apple-tree covered with blossom and leaves, with flowers at its foot, and then show it blown by a great wind which swept

away the blossom, withered and destroyed the leaves, scoured the twigs and made barren the earth around it. That is exactly what had happened to the corner I knew so well. I could see the very old church I was married at down the road much more plainly than I ever remembered seeing it before, and was trying to decide which little pub or shoeshop had gone when Nerney pulled me on out of the traffic among which I had paused to stare.

The restaurant we were making for was still, I was glad to see, exactly where it had been when the head waiter of the period lifted me into a specially high chair a very long time before, but it was peculiarly deserted. The dance floor, which is an innovation anyway and not usually uncovered at lunch time, was bare in the centre of the room. I found the table I have always eaten at on a visit to London (it is the same one at which I heard my uncle describing my grandfather’s funeral to my mother, at which we once had a falsely gay Christmas dinner in the last war, at which my father bought me an ice to celebrate my first printed work, at which P.Y.C. and Grog and I ate on our decision to return to the country to live; at which so many family things had been discussed and celebrated, in fact, that it might be in our own house). It was almost on the edge of the dance floor and I noticed the others were not drawn to it. However, I sat down and when we had settled ourselves the All-clear sounded and everyone brightened up and the orchestra climbed up into its box.

“Isn’t that nice?” said Vi, referring to the siren and looking up with unconscious relief.

I followed her glance and saw for the first time that we were sitting under one of the few very large ornamental glass domes in all London. Considering so few places in the entire world can be called safe in these days, it seems foolish that the discovery that that one might be very dangerous should have shaken me so. No one talked about it, though, and we chatted on about other things.

On my way back to the station late in the afternoon I remembered Madame Caporelli again and decided I had time to walk down the street to her.

I had been prepared for damage along the way but I had not envisaged anything so local or so complete. Here was no winter apple-tree. The whole plant had been tugged up by the roots and cut into firewood. Whole sections of the not very beautiful but very familiar façade were exactly as usual, and then, where there should have been a restaurant or a bookshop or a tailor’s or a sports outfitters, there was suddenly just a great clean-sided hole with

chaos in its mouth. The inside walls of these cavities were like those adjoining buildings demolished in any other way. There were few untidinesses, little of the jagged look I had imagined. Rather, complete smooth annihilation. The only oddities were ornaments left on mantel shelves, a towel rail still on the wall, pictures, and sometimes even a rag on a hook, but few wrenched-out beams, few holes and rents.

The craters themselves were another matter but here again there was not the sort of wreckage I had imagined, all scraps and pieces of familiar things, but rather a dreadful grey uniformity as the dust and fine-powdered plaster had made a decent pall over all.

I went on towards the shop and stopped on the pavement. Madame’s business had gone and with it the tobacconist’s beside it, and the chemist’s with the weighing machine outside. There was still a certain amount of activity about the wreckage and I gathered it was one of the morning’s incidents, the work of one of the two or three bombs which my taximan had said were somewhere about.

A policeman told me that and had no other information for me, so I never knew what had happened to Madame. Further on down the street London was miraculously as usual, just as dirty and just as busy.

“Cheer up. It’ll take ’em a ’ell of a time to knock it all down, dear,” said the old lady from whom I bought a paper, and she had been standing on her corner all day.

The train was on time and the bus waiting when I got off it, but someone in front of me was telling a friend how London was in utter ruins nearly all the way back to Auburn, which itself was still happy and intact.

26

One cold wet morning the King came to Auburn. To be exact he came through Auburn on his way to Flinthammock, but he did look in at the Auburn Observer Corps post (thereby terrifying the Corporal in the next field who was in the dirtiest of undress and thought he had developed hallucinations out there in the wilds), and he did look out at Auburn through the windows of his car. The arrival of two or three military policemen in the square half an hour earlier gave the village the first intimation that something highly unusual was afoot and then the rumour sped through the place like a bird. What happened in our house was probably fairly typical. Grog put his head in the room where I was working and said, "Oh, the King's coming." I said "What king?" and he said, "*The* King. The real King. Buck up and look out of the window if you want to see him."

I bustled out to tell Christine and then up to Granny and everybody looked out of the window at once except young Ralph, who ran out in the road and was caught and made to stand to attention by Mr. Eaton, who was outside the back gate beside his milk-float, waiting to uncover in the rain. There was not much cheering, only expansive smiles, not because the King was any less the King than the day on which he was crowned and the staidest old maiden lady I ever knew climbed up a lamp-post to wave her hat at him, but because there was a vague feeling that he might be going along in a semi-private capacity and would prefer not to be shouted at. Auburn has much natural grace in such matters and so for the most part it stood in the wet and beamed from ear to ear.

Charlie and Mr. Moore, who were on duty at the Observer Corps post, were spoken to by the King and they spoke back to him successfully, and there was a photograph of them in the evening paper some days later with the King between them which was such a satisfactory but unexpected thing to happen that hardly anybody in Auburn recognised them, although they were clear enough, until it was pointed out.

There was not as much talk about the King's visit as one might have supposed. Auburn was just pleased and I wondered if I could set down what it is that impresses me so strongly about the Auburn attitude towards the Crown, so oddly aristocratic and ancient and possessive and which goes so deep. The same thing is apparent in the London city-villages too and must

be the same, I think, in other places, especially the Colonies. The principal obvious thing about it is that it is entirely devoid of snobbery and almost solely idealistic, which explains much.

It seems to me that the King is different. As soon as he puts on the crown he becomes, by ancient custom very like ancient magic, the only human being to whom a decent British Auburnite can be really subservient without feeling he is sucking up and disgracing himself. There is something very old and peculiar in most of us ordinary British country-people which desires to have some human being like that in the world, someone who can have all the things not only that we would like to have, but that we would like to *want* to have, and who will always behave towards them as we would like to want to behave if we were the sort of people we feel we, or our children, might be if we could really get around to arranging it and breeding it. Once again time does not seem to be taken much into consideration.

I advanced this whole theory to a caller at the house one day and he said, “Don’t you simply mean that the King sets the standard of the English gentleman?” and I thought, “No, I don’t only mean that. I don’t believe it is a question of setting a standard so much as of maintaining a slowly rising one as our standard of living goes up.” I mean that the King is also the ideal English sport and the ideal English squire, that he has the ideal wife, the ideal children, the ideal houses, the ideal clothes, the ideal way of meeting people, of spending his holidays, of choosing his friends, the ideal memory, the ideal dogs. When his best house was bombed it was not an ideal thing to happen but it gave him the opportunity to behave in the ideal way, and in view of what was happening to all his neighbours the fact that his house was bombed too put him in an ideal position to sympathise. These are far more exacting requirements than could be asked of an ideal gentleman. These are the attributes of an unreal person altogether, a man who, though in no way strange or unnatural, is yet ideal in every particular. In simple elementary language, in character and in manner and in possessions, the best man of all, the King.

I suppose this need of a visible material King is a highly primitive instinct in those of us who possess it so deeply, but I also venture to think that those intellectuals among us (nearly all of them of foreign extraction) who find the idea so monstrous in us, are probably really only not quite intellectual enough. The intellect is not in itself better than instinctive idealism. It is only a machine for understanding it and other things and doing something about them if necessary. The flashlamp and the spade are not *better* than the path.

After the King's visit the nights grew longer as Christmas came slowly nearer, and it was a noisy bomb-filled winter. The enemy, who had never shown much discrimination in his bombing, now sailed high over the clouds and appeared to drop anything he thought he would through them whenever he judged he was somewhere over the island. The raids began about seven at night and ended round about eight or nine the next morning. Auburn settled in and "bopped down" and escaped with a shaking or two. The wild nights were probably the most disconcerting. A good stormy night can shake up our unprotected coast considerably without help, and the howling of the wind is eerie enough, but when the wailing drowned the noise of the plane engines at intervals and made it sound as though the pilot had suddenly cut out just overhead, it was very upsetting to the nerves.

The panels started shaking out of our heavy old door in the Wardens' Post and at times the assortment of noises was unbelievable.

Food became more of a problem but it was never really short in Auburn, even though Auburn folk cannot supplement their rations by eating out. Nor did the price of it become exorbitant. The worst that could be said about food at that time was that it was plain and dull and required more thought in preparation than before.

The animals' food was more difficult and I was very thankful that we had braved the Major's kindly smile and had preserved the hay crop. The straw fort came in very useful too, or the straw did, even if it was no protection from anything but the cold.

There were absurd little incidents, of course. Pauline and I each gave the other some Earl Grey China tea at Christmas. We had each saved up to surprise the other and the gifts passed on the road.

This was the time of the first main strain. The excitement and the stimulation were wearing off and the village, in common no doubt with the rest of the country, seemed to be settling down to the long pull. The war had ceased to be a series of shocks. We had seen the size and the depth of the enemy and knew what we were up against, and it was a real war again, siege and men going overseas. America was considering helping us. The question of the hose was being faced. And meanwhile there was work, night vigils, the cold, and in the cities tragedy and heroism.

Of the family, Phil had already gone overseas to the Middle East, P.Y.C. was due home on embarkation leave, Cooee was driving her lorry in all weathers, Joyce was stationed at Dover and wrote to say that news of the shelling sounded worse than it was, which was a relief to us. Our new

neighbour's Spitfire and bomber sons brought home great tales. Young Alec used to come in on his leaves and speak with an enthusiasm we had not realised was in him for the men he served as a member of the ground staff of a fighter station. News came in of other boys in the village, of Pontisbright boys, and news of old student friends in new uniforms. A great war, the greatest civil war of all time, was slowly rolling on to full tide and Auburn was in it all right, swimming strong but feeling it and taking the strain.

The enemy was still the Jerry, hated only at times and in the main treated as an evil thing like a plague or a volcano rather than as a person, a brilliantly organised force for death and mayhem rather than a reasonably warring nation.

The magnificent Greeks were the Finns all over again, and as they surpassed their own history they lifted the whole scale and standard of the war, giving the world again what they always have given it, it seems, a touch of the sublime.

The Italians were not to be thought about. It is very difficult to put this down, but I honestly believe that the ordinary chap rather likes the Eye-ties normally but is frankly embarrassed by and ashamed of them in war. ("They ought not to *go* to war," says Sam.) In peace they make us happy, and always have done so since the birth of the harlequinade; in war, nowadays at any rate, they make us blush whichever side they are on.

Of course in individual cases this is not true. We have all good cause to hate the Italians, but in the main, speaking in the broadest terms and about people who feel first and think second, I fancy that is not far out. The spectacle of a hokey-pokey car with a placard on it saying "*Entirely British*" made every other man who passed it burst out laughing, as I saw with my own eyes one day at the end of the summer.

With the re-election of President Roosevelt interest in America grew enormously, naturally, and it was noted with private satisfaction that the Old British Charity was not being mentioned so much and also that the American nation, never thought to be short-sighted, was taking a serious look round at all the other neutrals who had preferred to be broken one by one by the ever-growing Jerry. ("This Herr Hitler, he's an ambitious bloke," said one of the Wardens. "Doesn't mind taking things on, does he?")

Gradually America's generosity and growing interest began to dawn on Auburn, who is never quick on the uptake but who now started to look towards her hopefully as the planes actually began to arrive and American types of aircraft began to be seen in the sky actually over Auburn.

However, the thing which finally transformed the village's entire attitude towards the States, I think, was the tone of the American Press towards the heroism of the bombed Londoners. This was personal. This was the *people*. It was not a question of government. There was "nothing sarcastic" in it, nothing grudging, no sting, no fighting to the last Frenchman. This was honest praise of something both nations understood perfectly, luxuriant but honourable praise poured out in glorious buckets, and Auburn, who in my adult lifetime at any rate, has heard very little praise of anything British from any foreign commentator and not a lot from her own, lapped it up like a thirsty pup. For the first time that vitalising warmth which is America's peculiar and individual attribute came through to the public as well as to the man with a personal American friend. It arrived opportunely too because it was a grim, hard, cold time, lightened rather than darkened by the bomb alarums I have recorded.

Norry had relations at Coventry and others at Portsmouth, but they all came through in spite of some narrow shaves.

"The old 'uns took it better than the young 'uns," said Norry.

However, other friends were not so lucky with their families.

There were compensations but they were austere ones. At Christmas P.Y.C. came home on embarkation leave before going off to the Middle East. There were other men home on the same holiday and it was not much of a time for rejoicing.

The new values were becoming apparent everywhere. Money was so earmarked, so arranged for, that it was losing much of its old interest. There was going to be no spare money for anybody and as far as anyone could see there never would be ever any more. The odd thing was that that really seemed to settle it to a large extent. Ordinary people were more interested in other things, I thought, than I had ever known them before. It was almost as though they had been released from a lot of worry by facing death and real straitness of circumstances, and the effect had been to give them a sort of balance. It was not a general reaction which I had envisaged at all, so I do not think I can possibly have imagined it.

Everybody I met seemed to have got a little younger, more serious, and far more decided. That flaccid middle-aged spread of the mind, which had been so depressing just before the war, had largely disappeared. Also, which did seem amazing, nervous trouble seemed to have vanished. There was too, I noticed, a growing tendency towards a far stricter code. Sophisticated drivel was going out of fashion fast.

An odd example of this cropped up one day when P.Y.C. and I had gone into Bastion and were lunching at the local hotel. The entire place was filled with khaki and I was sitting in the lounge chatting to a charming army lady while our menfolk were joining the other boys at the bar. We scarcely knew each other and she was evidently searching round in her mind to keep the ball rolling and I was doing the same. She said suddenly:

"Oh, I must tell you the wildestly funny thing. A friend of mine just spent eighty pounds, far more than she could afford, getting a divorce from her husband and the idiot got himself killed next day. Wasn't it maddening?"

As soon as she had spoken the utter tastelessness of the story in our situation occurred to her so violently that she gaped at me in horror as I smiled politely, and I suddenly saw that not only did she not think the tale funny herself then but that never in her whole life could she ever have thought it really funny. It was only a formula to her and never had been anything else, and now not only would it not work but it had let her down badly.

That was the kind of thing which kept on happening to people. There were no sudden changes of heart, of course, no miracles, but most folk did seem to give up pretending they did not love their husbands or wives, or that their children were mentally defective nuisances. That phase appeared to have passed. *Making* trouble for yourself was out of fashion at last.

London was a little more knocked about, I found when we paid a flying visit on Christmas Eve. P.Y.C. himself was happily unchanged. I went to the tailor's with him and sat in a most pathetic dusty travesty of the usually so chaste little shop and heard him chattering away to the fitter in a further fastness.

"My dear chap, I *know* it's a battledress, but my belly is liable to retract with fear, not to expand seven or eight inches. I won't go into battle, or anywhere else, looking like a blasted kangaroo."

When we came away little Mr. Billum said sadly to me as he showed us to the door and out into the exclusive little street strewn with dust, its gutters full of powdered glass: "This is a depressed area now, you know."

None of the shops was crowded, but they were still doing business at a price. I never heard so much foreign language in the West End before. The turban-and-trouser fashion was still in vogue among the women and the whole place had a smart-woollen-pyjama-party-on-the-arctic-beach look, which was unexpected and not at all without gaiety. There were people

camping in the Tubes by tea time and it was the same sight as the one in our schoolroom at the beginning of the war, only much worse, but I don't think they represented a fifth of the population. In town, as in Auburn, folk, I discovered, had their own individual dislikes and preferences. Aunt moved into a hotel in Piccadilly Circus at the beginning of the war as soon as the black-out became complete.

"Better be bombed," she said, "than keep falling over getting home from the office."

Someone had a nice story about that hotel but I do not vouch for it. They say an incendiary bomb fell through the cupola over the crowded central lounge and lay burning on the marble, and that everybody drew their chairs away from it while a man in a tin hat rushed forward with a shovel and a bucket of sand and scooped it up and took it away "as if a dog had done it." That is probably an exaggeration, but I do know that when Aunt's windows were blown all over her room when she was downstairs one day, and no piece of glass larger than a sixpence was found anywhere in it, she moved into the one next door and is still there. Yet, as she has always insisted, she is not a brave woman. What else *can* one do? she says.

The next time I saw the city, however, there was a change. It was the day after the fire. P.Y.C.'s leave ended, as leaves do, and I went to town again at the end of the week to see him off on his adventures. We knew there had been a raid the night before, naturally, but thought it had been soon over. The papers had not arrived and we missed the early bulletins in the excitement of packing. The train was on time and we sat in a compartment with a grimly handsome Squadron Leader and two old gentlemen who did not know each other. Some way outside the city, the approach to which was beginning to look most pathetically like Marie Lloyd's famous song, the train stopped for two hours. We sat in complete silence for those hours, the notices behind our heads saying "Careless talk costs lives." Had we been all civilians I think we might have chatted, but, having had one awful experience in a railway carriage at the height of the anti-talk campaign, when I inadvertently remarked that the harvest was good and got myself vigorously ssh-ed by a young subaltern, I have become rather afraid of opening my mouth in public places and no doubt I am not alone, which is obviously a good thing. The Germans are the great disciplinarians, but I doubt if their organisations can compare with our public opinion, which in a matter like this transforms almost everyone instantly into a government agent.

Suddenly, at the end of the two hours, the Squadron Leader got up and said abruptly that he was going to walk and everybody else's patience became exhausted at the same moment. We had got the carriage door open when an old railway worker appeared on the line, waving at us to stay where we were. He was not very clear, but we gathered that there had been an unexploded something or other nearby which had now been removed. It simply seemed a good thing at the time, for the habit of looking dead ahead and not allowing the imagination to wander had become universal I think by this time.

The train moved and we arrived soon afterwards to find no light in the station and a very curious smell everywhere. I said to a porter, "It's a fire, isn't it?" and he gave me that pitying glance in which the Cockney excels and said, "Yes, dear, it's a fire." He found us a cab, though, which did not seem as extraordinary then as it does now, and the driver kept saying it would cost us seven-and-six. We still had no idea of the situation at all and said all right, if he felt like that. We just wanted to get across the city, that was all. He said he couldn't take us *across* the city—whatever did we expect? We were very preoccupied by P.Y.C.'s departure and were very slow-witted and inclined to be irritable, so we said, "Take us round it, then." Take us where he liked.

We sat in complete silence on that drive. I do not know where we went but I saw "*Sheba Street*" up once and it took us two hours' hard going to get to the British Museum. There were no crowds and few hold-ups. The roads were very wet and charred scraps of wood floated in little rivulets down them. The police looked tired and preoccupied and the first constable who held us up had a face like a stage butler. He said very pedantically and with exaggerated patience:

"Think what you like, but across 'ere you do not come."

Our taxidriver swung round on what felt like a swivel under the back axle and said over his shoulder to us:

"Perlite, isn't 'e? 'E's been up all night *and* he knows it *and* he's not the only one."

He drove us off at great speed and we attempted this road and that, leaping the hoses and skidding in the water, our driver chattering to policemen and every other cab driver he passed.

"So-and-so is closed now. Try So-and-so street. Cut through So-and-so and it'll take you into So-and-so."

He was wild with excitement like a child on an adventure.

I remember seeing auxiliary ambulances like ours at home, little fire wagons and mobile canteens, and whenever we came to a main thoroughfare the familiar traffic going on as usual, or nearly as usual. We went all round the mean streets, past rows of surface shelters, in and out alleys devastated by past raids, and across squares, moving all the time very fast and erratically as our driver guessed, felt and diagnosed his way. The place was not a ruin but it was ravaged and the residential parts seemed to have got it worst. There was miles and miles of it sound still, but amongst the solid bits were great areas of complete desolation. Half a church and a quarter of a garage, the front door of a pub, a shop—or had it been a cinema? There were hundreds of scenes like this.

There was not much more smoke than usual but the awful stink of fire was everywhere, very alarming to the country nose.

P.Y.C. would not let me go to the other station with him because of Noel Coward's *Cavalcade*. It made us laugh at ourselves, but there it was. It was our outlook and it could not be cured or ignored. I said a nice background of burning London was rather better, I thought. There was a sense of utter awfulness in the air just for a little while. Rome must have burned like this and all the other dear ancient sophistries last time the barbarians got really out of hand.

However, after P.Y.C. had gone and I had to find my way home again I walked for a bit, and it occurred to me that London in this dreadful visible trouble was yet not so terrifying as I had known her. I was alone in London throughout the General Strike, and that, as far as I was concerned at any rate, had been far more frightening. The atmosphere now was intensely friendly and busy and tired, almost the atmosphere of a moving day or a spring-cleaning, or at any rate of a big domestic upheaval which had not involved a row. It was "the day after we had a fire," in fact; very different from "the day Dad and his brother had a fight."

The General Strike was another great crisis and in some ways the two were alike. There was the same quiet stoicism and the same spontaneous gallantry, but in the strike there was menace and danger and, if I may say such an odd-sounding thing, evil in the air, hatred and anger, which I certainly did not feel at the fire. In fact this felt like unity and the other felt like a row.

All the same, as I went along and I saw the damage done by the water as well as the fire, I wondered if the Londoners really would be able to stand

months of it until we got enough planes to keep the Hun off.

I joined one or two groups and listened, as one is apt to, and wandered on, and, as I realised I'd have to hurry to get my train, it dawned on me that there was something very familiar in the expression of the majority of people I passed. It is a funny look and you can see it in the photographs which are being printed now of the crowds all over the country staring at badly bombed buildings they know. It is a grim but conserved sort of look and it reminded me of a rather absurd incident which may possibly explain what I think lies behind it better than any other description I could give.

It was years ago when we were all in our very early twenties. We got let in for a Christmas afternoon party composed entirely of relations. One of them, who was north country, who had better be called Aunt Halifax, was a relative by marriage to another relative by marriage and she was a bit tired of P.Y.C. and Phil and me. We were the little cleversides at that time. We were the smarties. We got our tales in the magazines and our pictures in the R.A. Everybody else thought we were pretty hot. Aunt Halifax thought we were "reet stook oop."

It was a difficult party and my father, who was a man who could be bored and for all his tolerance would not stand that, suddenly commanded us in sultanic fashion to perform for the entertainment of the gathering. It was either annoying him or complying, and, not having a recitation by us (as P.Y.C. said, unfortunately) we did a silly old trick we used to do as children. It is simplicity itself. One person goes outside and finds two broomsticks and a sheet. He puts his shoes on the broomsticks and holds them out in front of him, his head thrown back. His assistant then arranges the sheet over the broomsticks in such a way that all is hidden save the shoes and the performer's head.

Meanwhile the third member of the troupe acts as a barker and introduces "the human miracle. The greatest experiment in levitation the world has ever known" and so on, to taste. The door is then slowly opened and, feet foremost, the broomstick man floats into the room, the trailing sheet and the swinging door hiding, between them, his real body and legs. The whole beauty of the performance is, of course, that after the first shock it does not deceive anybody.

Everyone was amused on this occasion except Aunt Halifax, who sat grimly in the best position, near to the door and a little behind it. She looked at us very steadily when we all returned and said:

"You seem very pleased with yourselves."

She did not add that at any rate she was not impressed, but that was the idea that got around.

However, later on, when I was upstairs, she came into my bedroom and stood looking at me for a bit and then she said grudgingly:

"Thaat was quite interesting, maaking your yoong man flo-at in the air. How did you do it?—not that I want to know."

She left me helpless. I saw as far as she was concerned *we had performed a miracle* and still she had not been impressed.

The people I met in London that day reminded me vividly of Aunt Halifax when she said, "You seem very pleased with yourselves." They had her grim, withdrawn, conserved look. They were not going to be impressed. Jerry could do what he liked. He was not going to startle them or put one over on them.

I came home to Auburn feeling very proud to belong to the same race as they did, and it seemed to me too that although as a nation we were losing so much we were also getting something utterly indestructible back out of it. I got something that day, anyway, which will last as long as I do.

There is something very good in pride of race if you can be satisfied in your heart that it is absolutely genuine and is based on things you have seen and heard and felt rather than on those you have read.

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JOYCE was the next whom we got ready in the house to go to sea, as other families in Auburn and Flinthammock and all the other country places were doing for their younger ones. She was off to Singapore, to the naval station, and was dying to go. We got her kit together in Granny's bathroom, which is also a family sewing room, and as we read the official list, so like a boarding school list, and sorted out her clothes, Granny began on the subject of wars. She is close on eighty-nine now and has never been anything but what she calls "a muff." However, her experience of wars, from the personal and private point of view of the muff, that is of the ordinary uninformed, unimportant civilian, is comprehensive to say the least of it. Her father remembered the Battle of Waterloo without any difficulty, being very nearly old enough to have fought at it, and considered Napoleon a personal enemy who, he was happy to see, got his deserts, and the present map of Europe would not have surprised him as much as it does me.

Granny's first recollection of war was Austrian prisoners being brought into Godesberg when she was at school there. She did not bother to leave Germany and come home for that war. "Handsome fellows they were," she said. "Our servants were up praying all night." But whether this was for victory or the prisoners she is not able to determine at this distance. She remembers, however, that the Austrians wore white uniforms.

Joyce and I found her attitude towards great men educational.

"When Julia used to read *The Times* to Pa, that General MacMahon was all the go," she remarked. "Now *he* could have helped General Gamelin if he hadn't died long ago. He knew a great deal about that Sedan."

Other wars came nearer to her. "When dear Hattie came over from New York (she bought such a beautiful nightdress in Paris: it was all gophered and fitted at the back) she had her new husband with her. We never saw her first. He was killed, poor fellow, in that war they had over there."

"Independence," suggested Joyce, who was growing visionary.

"No, no, I think it was the Civil War. Very cruel."

Then she got on to the last war again when Uncle Wallie, her only son, was killed with the Canadians at Ypres, and then this war and the letter she was writing to Phil in Libya, and then Joyce.

“I shall cut out everything I read in the paper about Singapore for you to keep when you come home.”

We asked her what great-grandfather would have thought of the present show, which was a silly question and got the reply it deserved. She laughed at us.

“He’d keep us women reading *The Times* to him all day,” she said.

She is a great newspaper reader herself and the stories of the bombing infuriate her.

“Oh, isn’t it *wicked*!” she says, throwing down the paper. “Isn’t it *naughty*! You’d think almost . . .”

“What?” I say.

“Well, dear, I was going to say almost . . . you’d think *Gord* would do something.”

“Drop a brick on him?”

“Or smite him,” says Granny brightly. “All those poor nurses. Let me read you this bit about the hospital ship.”

Since that conversation many things have happened, and yet it is scarcely more than a couple of months ago. Greece has fallen and Thermopylae has been held and lost as gloriously as once it was. The Germans have recaptured Libya. Haile Selassie is back on his throne. London has been bombed and bombed again and the Parliament must sit in another room.

Auburn is as it always was, save that the fathers of the families still stand on the doorstep at night and food is not so easy to come by and will be shorter in spite of Mr. Ford’s pig club and the preparations in Mrs. Eve’s kitchen for the Women’s Institute to make the season’s fruit into jam. Eggs are twopence each, even at this time of year, and we are lucky to get them. Christine is putting them down in water-glass. Vic refused to take the money for a chicken she let us have, but accepted some tea I had saved in exchange. There are still a few sweets to be had every so often in Albert’s father’s old shop. Jose’s mother rations them roughly and sees no one gets an unfair share. Reg does the same with other luxuries. Three oranges arrived the other day as our portion and Christine promptly collared them and made a pound of orange curd.

Sam has got me to invest in two small rabbits at one shilling each and confidently expects several generations before the end of the summer. The

two geese we acquired last winter are still wandering round the front meadow like highbrows at a private view, honking at anything which displeases them. They have shown no disposition to become domestic, and my suggestion that they may be both ganders has begun to irritate Sam. Norry and I are quarrelling about Beau. Soon he must be broken, and I say he must go in a dogcart and earn his keep. Norry cannot bear it. "Wait," he says. "Wait. Those lovely pasterns. That narrow little old head." Poor Beau. No gentleman ever works. Poor Norry. I hope he never has to eat him.

There was the annual entertainment at the school not so very long ago. Granny and I went and there was a "Red" on, but nobody takes any notice of them in daylight, thanks to our neighbour's Spitfire son and his pals. The children were in form. Roy, Sam's eldest, was very much to the fore and so was young Jose with one tooth out in front, and all the other kids were magnificent too, of course. Marg, dressed up as a cross between Britannia and the Fairy Queen, stood in the middle as she was the tallest, and recited, "*Where are you going to, all you big steamers?*" with a stark brutality in her raucous young voice which made my blood run cold. "*And if anything hinders our coming . . . you'll starve!*" Oh, my God! Lay off, Marg! Have a heart.

Still, we're a long way off 1917 yet.

The Spring is late this year, which is all to the good. The planting is done and the flowers, left to themselves, look better than ever to my mind. The weathercock on the maypole shines gold against the blue, still the best bird in the sky, still very much cock of the roost.

The hay is late but the crowns are good and strong. The papers were late too after the big raid the other night, but they came all right by lunch time and reported some of it in the Stop Press. There are still plenty of advertisements in *The Times* for London flats. "Unique chance . . . well furnished . . . third floor . . . 5½ gns. p.w."

Mr. Parker came over with the others for a First Aid conference. His London village has got it very badly and his family have suffered. He says there's a new slogan up there which has taken everybody's fancy. It is uttered with a great bellow of that slightly fierce laughter which underlies all British primitive wit.

"*I wouldn't be dead for a pound!*"

That's London. It's getting angry. That's not so far away from the terrifying "*I know where he is, I know where he is. He's hanging on the old*

barbed wire."

Auburn is still Auburn. Cliff has just come in. He and Herbert are going to put our old pig court into commission once again for the club. Mr. Saye has some fine young ones nearly ready to leave the sow.

I have not mentioned our defences. There is a reason for that. Sufficient to say they are so much better than last year that Miss Ethel and the kerosene will not be needed, and if she is shot it will be as a non-combatant.

Our old .22 rifle from the fun-fair has been turned in. We are civilians, unless as the Cabinet Minister has told us, we are attacked in our homes, in which case we are at liberty to defend ourselves with anything that comes to hand, the breadknife or the Meissen vase.

A cable has arrived at last from P.Y.C. "*Sans origine. Am well. Good trip.*" A p.c. from Joyce from the Cape. "*As good as a cruise but nicer passengers.*" Letter two months old from Phil, now a corporal. "*We may go to* . . . (a word of six letters heavily blue-pencilled)." Grog says he will be in the Air Force in a few weeks now. Norry in the kitchen. They've heard from the nephew who went to Canada under the air training scheme. He's all right, having a good time. The London wires are clear for ordinary calls again, Nerney coming through brightly from the capital. "Yes, yes, all's well. Isn't it *grand*? No, not a scratch. No, thank you. Nothing to see from here."

Thank God for that. Thank God for rather a lot.

A line in a letter from a troopship. "*All my chaps write screeds which paraphrase 'Oh to be in England.' Fancy they must all be gardeners. Feel a bit like that myself.*" Letters from America. *"We look on in amazement. . . ." "We're on your side." "If the Atlantic is now in danger we must fight for it, however we feel about England. That note of self-interest, questionable under other circumstances, is really valuable now."*

All the other thoughts. Mine. Other peoples'. Things I've noticed.

What *are* your war aims, Mrs. Carter? To keep this soul I've got alive. To keep my spirit unenslaved. To say what I like and feel what I like . . . and the same for you, my neighbours, whether you like it or not. I believe with all my heart that we must *all* be free. There is only one stable thing in the whole world, the character of the steadfast individual, and he must be protected and allowed to grow.

Your peace aims, then? The same. The same, but translated into the little difficult ways of peace. The same for Auburn. Peace without suffocation.

Room to grow in, spiritually, mentally and physically. Something to grow towards and a fair start for everybody. None of us can possibly have much money or other possessions at the end of this conflagration although we shall have all our normal potential wealth between us, so that fair start ought to be possible to arrange if we keep our heads, keep our sense of values, feel the way as well as think it, and avoid all schemes which are based solely on theory. There seem to be too many pitfalls in pure theory. For instance, if only the farmers in the last war had been paid the subsidy on what they actually grew and delivered, quality being taken into account, instead of on the acreage they put under the plough, we would never have spoiled a good crop not only of grain but of men. That was an elementary mistake, so easy on paper but almost impossible to anyone who thinks in terms of human nature, I should have thought. Man is obviously the main crop and to grow him one needs great experience as well as good theory. If the Government only sticks to that main crop, as our great and great-great-grandfathers did, and does not leave it all to the parsons, as our fathers suddenly seem to have decided to, I think we shall get by and get the seed in for a better world.

Will Britain go Red? No.

Socialist then? Only inasmuch as she always has been socialist. It looks to me as if the unprofessional British sort of socialism is now, as it ever was, nothing more or less than an honest attempt at practical Christianity without bringing in Jesus, since religion was found to make for trouble in the Government. So far, after a lot of muddling about and backsliding and going on again, we have achieved democracy. This is bald, Auburn kind of talk, but plain thinking leads to plain talking and will perhaps be forgiven.

Why are you so certain of this? You are a free country person. No one in the world can force an opinion on you. How do you *know*? How dare you say this with such confidence? Because I am so free the answer must be careful, I see that. I must only speak from what I have seen personally.

Well, in my life I have heard a great many British people say to one another, in effect, "*I am as good as you are*," but I cannot think of more than two who have said in my hearing "*you're no better than I am*," and the two statements are not at all the same, are they? Besides, when a Briton "gets on," as they say, he hardly ever stays a rich member of the jolly proletariat, nor does he as a rule go in for Roman orgies or indulge in other excesses. On the contrary, he is much more likely to submit himself and his family at once, and instinctively almost, to all the discomforts and uniforms of a way of life which he thinks is better and grander than his old one. This is not mere snobbery. As an ordinary chap he is far more likely to make friends

with a “nob.” He does not want “nob” friendship; he wants to *be* a “nob.” He wants to be equal to what he thinks, rightly or wrongly, to be the best. Also he prefers “the nobs” not to be less nobbish but if possible more so than they are naturally, and is irritated with them if they let down his ideal. He expects them to keep the code of behaviour, possessions and manners *up*, so that his ascent may be the higher. His sacrifices for this climb are colossal, for he knows the journey may take a generation or two, and he evidently considers it worth it or why on earth does he keep on doing it? How many of our best families are very old? The misleading element I fancy, and with respect, lies in the brains of the country. Real brains allied to all the other virtues and a grasp of the essential up-pull can do the journey in a lifetime and raise the standard higher, as is shown every year or two. Brains without the rest cannot do this and it is they, it seems to me, who get so angry with the two-generation clause and who cry out for instant equality to be given them by a lowering of the standard instead of achieving it in the time-honoured way. They create a lot of confusion, but they do not prevent the slow natural process from taking place everywhere and all the time, and I do not think they ever will. In print there is a great deal of “down with the old school tie” and “blast the public schools,” but if, as I firmly believe will come (if somebody only has the sense to arrange it now when there is a chance), it is possible, or even compulsory, for every child to go to a public school, say, of the Christ’s Hospital type, with all its traditions, its magnificent discipline and its blessed swank, which gives a youngster a pride in belonging to something his own, something sound and fine and proud which can destroy in a great measure any social inferiority complex he may be cursed with, which will give him a fair chance in fact, I do not think many parents would stand in the way, especially not those in the country.

As for Red propaganda, we had an example of that in Auburn. A man came to the village some while ago and his method was the time-honoured one, as used on the Continent. He got into conversation with the various chaps privately and asked each outright how much he earned a week. On being told, whatever the figure, he expressed complete bewilderment and horror. “Thirty-five bob! You and a wife and child on thirty-five bob! This is criminal. This is frightful. Don’t you know what your employer gets? Why should you put up with it? He is no better than you, is he? Thirty-five bob!”

I only know what answers he got in two cases and both these stories were told me casually and as a bit of a laugh. Albert, who had given his earnings as a slightly larger sum, was intensely interested. “I thought,” he said, “that as he fancied three quid was nothing he must be pulling in five or

six, so I sent the bill in at once.” Sam was more loquacious. He was a bit embarrassed, he said, and did not know how to turn it off until he remembered a tale of a pal of his called Lefty, which he seems to have told at length and with gusto. “Lefty was *courting* a girl up at Heath. *Told* her he was earning *four pounds*. She *married* him. Come the Friday, he walks in and puts *twenty-three bob* on the kitchen *table*. She *stares* at it. Thought you was earning *four pounds*? says she. So I *am*, says Lefty. I’m a-*earning* four pounds but I only *gits* twenty-three bob.” There must be many men who have not the essential grasp on the cold facts of earning a livelihood which these two possess, but on the other hand they cannot be unique. One of Sam’s relations earning forty-five bob has to pay two shillings of this in income-tax now. Someone suggested he married to get out of it but he was appalled. “Har, I ’on’t saddle myself with a wife for the sake of two bob,” he said. “No, no, I’m not balmy.”

Can we stand ten years of this war? I think we could in Auburn.

Twenty? We’ll wait and see.

Suppose we fail? Suppose we don’t get the machines in time? Suppose our delays and the machinations of our enemies, who saw our soft spot of over-deliberation and went for it, have made us just too late? Suppose down the road and out of the sky the thick grey men come swarming on us? What then? *Give me time and I’ll pay the National Debt. Be a bundle of sticks. . . . He’ll break his teeth on England. Courage is vital but not enough. Work for the freedom which means life. Pray for it, fight for it, die for it if you have to, live for it if you can. It’s worth it.*

That’s my contribution to the little family store of conviction. After a lifetime of “*it’s all very difficult*” I can now say honestly, “*It’s worth it*” and “*I wouldn’t be dead for a pound.*”

The conviction is mine but the seed of it is Auburn’s. Auburn may die, but it will come up again all right, whatever happens, in the Spring, some Spring, when Spring comes.

Auburn is a right thing and will survive all wrong things. Whatever happens, what *ever* happens, at some future date, if life lasts on earth, Auburn will be here again as like itself as makes no real difference. I am as sure of that as I am that the sun will rise to-morrow.

Well, there it is. This picture is done. I have struggled to paint it very truthfully, yet it may be a little false inasmuch as the things I have left out

have been in the main the less interesting ones, the small jealousies, the smaller spites, the minute unkindnesses and the fleeting despondencies. However, in the past few years all these things have been put down very carefully by writers who began with the false premise which our disillusioned elders left to my generation, the theory that only the unpleasant can be realism, a belief so widely held in the last few years that the very phrase “village life” has come to suggest the casebook of a small mental hospital for less dangerous patients. It is because they have done all this, and that side of the simple life has been firmly impressed upon everybody’s mind, that I have not bothered my head trying to remember all the little odds and ends of things which have upset us here during the time under review. There have been less of them than usual because we have been so busy. Let me see. Somebody complained about the quality of the knitting of the comforts. Somebody else thought the pig club must be a twist. Somebody refused to take in evacuees. Somebody said we were cowards to retreat at Dunkirk and ought to have gone on and beaten up everybody. Somebody said they would rather let their fruit rot than let the Women’s Institute lay hands on it. And so on. Now I come to look at it, nobody *did* anything unco-operative. It was all talk and we are fighting to say what we like. Unimportant remarks all of them and the devil’s own job to remember after a month or two, as I can testify this very minute.

The main thing about Auburn, curled round the maypole, is that it is ordinary country, no better and no worse than anywhere else. So there you are. This, I really believe, is sweet Auburn. I love it as one does love one’s home, and if that has made me give it perhaps a very slightly prettier face than some would see at first glance (although I would not admit this), you must discount that much, please, but not more I beg you, for remember only the really lovable is beloved for long.

I hear the Wardens stumping about down the passage getting their coats. Soon the phone will ring and then there will be lions in the sky once more. If I die to-night, and I don’t see why I should, I shall have been sorry to have missed the finish, but I shall still count myself very lucky to have seen so much.

Later. I have been correcting this, and a white tin hat with a black stripe down it has just come round the door. The Wardens having missed the midnight news have been listening-in to one of our overseas broadcasts.

“I say, this is rather extraordinary. They’ve got Hess in Glasgow. He’s turned up alone in a Messerschmitt 110.”

Grog says it’s a trap. Keep him away from Churchill, Sam says, “Har, it’s the beginning of the great crack-up” coming, as he always said it would, suddenly. Doug, the Home Guard, frankly does not believe his own ears. George never heard such a tale in all his life. Nor have I . . . never.

Wait. Wait. We must be careful. “Judge not in a hurry.” Yet. . . . If one really chooses every friend, every employee, every under-leader for what is false in him, if one’s scheme of progress is based *literally* on what is worst in man, on Hess’s theory that one is God, on Petain’s tragic vanity, on Quisling’s self-importance, then why not? Why not a general rat? Why not a slow irrevocable procession of double-crossing rottenness and death? What true thing remains to stop it?

It will be a lark if we get the whole gang of Frankensteins over here in the end, one by one, each coming simply because Britain is the one safe spot in Europe for the individual. I wonder, what has anyone of that gang that he would die for willingly? What has death got to offer them? There is nothing in them *certain* to come up again.

What a period! What an age to have been alive in!

Oh, thank God I was born when I was.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this eBook.

[The end of *The Oaken Heart* by Margery Allingham]