About the Author

A Time of Gifts is the sparkling account of Patrick Leigh Fermor's adventures as far as Hungary on his epic walk from London to Constantinople. He heads through the Lowlands to *Mitteleuropa*, the Teutonic and Slav heartlands, the Gothic north, the cockpit of the Roman Empire; up the Rhine, and down the Danube into the old Balkan and sub-Byzantine realms.

With a 'lifeline' allowance of a pound a week, he planned to live 'like a tramp, a pilgrim, or a wandering scholar', sleeping in workhouses, monasteries and barns. But a chance introduction in Bavaria led to a counterpointing of this rough existence with leisurely sojourns in castles.

In *Between the Woods and the Water,* the story continues as far as the Iron Gates that divide the Carpathian and Balkan mountains, and is concluded in *The Broken Road.*

In December 1933, at the age of eighteen, PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR (1915–2011) walked across Europe, reaching Constantinople in early 1935. He travelled on into Greece, where in Athens he met Balasha Cantacuzene, with whom he lived – mostly in Rumania – until the outbreak of war. Serving in occupied Crete, he led a successful operation to kidnap a German general, for which he won the DSO. After the war he began writing, and travelled extensively round Greece with Joan Eyres Monsell whom he later married. Towards the end of his life he wrote the first two books about his early trans-European odyssey, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*. He planned a third, unfinished at the time of his death in 2011, which has since been edited by Colin Thubron and Artemis Cooper and published as *The Broken Road.*

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Introduction

Envy is the writer's sin, as everyone knows, but there can be few writers in the English-speaking world who resent Patrick Leigh Fermor's pre-eminence as one of the great prose stylists of our time. He has no rivals, and so stands beyond envy.

His literary genre is difficult to define. He is generally classified as a travel writer, but he is really infinitely more than that. Certainly he describes the experiences of travel as providing a theme for his literature, but he is also a memoirist, a historian, a connoisseur of art and architecture, a poet, a humorist, a storyteller, a social chronicler, something of a mystic, and one of God's own adventurers. These varied gifts were first revealed in full glittering ensemble in *A Time of Gifts*, published in 1977 when he was sixty-two years old.

By then he had lived half an eventful lifetime, and had already published three much-admired books of travel. A born irregular, he had happily abandoned an expensive formal education in his seventeenth year, and joined the British Army at the start of World War II. From the ultra-formal Irish Guards (he is half Irish by descent) he gravitated naturally to guerrilla warfare, his obvious military metier, and in 1942 crowned his career as a licensed ruffian by organizing the abduction of a German general in occupied Crete, and whisking him away to Egypt in a motor launch.

Living in Cretan caves disguised as a shepherd probably came easily enough to Leigh Fermor, and *A Time of Gifts* tells us why. He was built that way. Nine years before Major Patrick Leigh Fermor, holed up in the Cretan mountains with his accomplices, was making final arrangements to kidnap General Kreipe, the strapping young Paddy Leigh Fermor, fresh from King's School, Canterbury, was stepping from a steamer at the Hook of Holland preparing to walk across Europe to Constantinople. He saw himself

as a Wandering Scholar. He was alone, and he was ready to sleep anywhere, talk to anybody, live on almost nothing, eat or drink anything, have a go at any language, make friends with strangers rich or poor, and brave the worst that heat and cold, mishap and blister, officialdom, prejudice and politics could do to him. What could be better preparation for subversive skullduggery in Crete?

There could be no better material, either, as it turned out long afterwards, for a retrospective book, looking back at pre-war Europe across a darkling plain of history and experience. The young Leigh Fermor had made his trek across the continent at a fateful moment of European history. The 1930s were a remembering time, and a waiting time too. Still alive in the public consciousness was the old Europe, the Europe of the princes and the peasants, of Franz Joseph and Kaiser William, of grand old cities still intact and ancient traditions honoured. But intermittently present in the public mind too, if generally suppressed, was the apprehension of catastrophe to come: 1933, the year Leigh Fermor set foot in Germany for the first time in his life, was the year Adolf Hitler came to power.

As Leigh Fermor says himself, at the time he didn't give a damn. It is one of the fascinations of *A Time of Gifts* that its journey is in effect evoked for us by two people: the carefree young dropout who experienced it, and stored it up in memory and in diary, and the immensely experienced author who, knowing more about history forty years later, turned it into art.

Being altogether *sui generis, A Time of Gifts* behaves just as it pleases. It follows no precedent, obeys no conventions. The nearest equivalents I can think of are the works of Ibn Batuta, written over a lifetime six centuries before, or John Ruskin's unclassifiable work of memoir, philosophy, and travel, *Praeterita*. More obvious predecessors – Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen* or Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* – are different in kind to my mind because they do not reflect, as this book does, at once the maturing of a mind and the condition of a continent. Besides, Leigh Fermor is Leigh Fermor, and neither Kinglake nor Byron kidnapped any generals ...

The Cretan adventure of 1942 pervades the narrative of 1933, because it obviously pervaded the mind of the author in 1977. His introductory essay to the book, addressed to his comrade-in-arms

Xan Fielding, hints at the wartime coup, and means that it pervades our own minds too. For this is by no means a simple memoir of travel: it is full of allusions, afterthoughts and cross references, backwards and forwards, in and out, and it is tantalizingly open-ended – it finishes halfway to Constantinople, and the reader is left waiting for a later volume to get there.

The form of the book is layered, too. Sometimes it is imaginatively exploited reminiscence, sometimes pure impressionism. Sometimes it contains suggestions of what is to happen later, all unknown to the young traveller. There are virtuoso displays of scholarship and insight beyond the powers of any nineteen-year-old, but there are also reported responses so evidently immediate, so engagingly openhearted, that they could only come from Paddy's own notebooks, scribbled in hayrick, drawing room, or hospitable pub en route. Leigh Fermor is not only remembering himself, he is looking at himself too, as in one of those Cubist paintings in which we see profile and front face at the same time.

Nor is there any rigidity to the book's construction. It is all fluid. At any moment we are whisked off into another train of thought, another pace, another mood. Just as we never know where we will spend the next night, in a barn, in a schloss, in a stranger's spare room or in a police cell, so we never know what sudden flight of learned fancy is going to engage us for the next few pages. Paddy's chosen route was not sacrosanct. He thought it at once rational and romantic to walk clear across Europe from the North Sea to the Bosphorus, up the Rhine valley, down the Danube, but when somebody remarked in Bratislava that he really ought to see Prague, instantly off he went for an unplanned detour of several hundred miles (and a complete chapter). And although he originally intended to rough it all the way, by the time he reaches Central Europe we find him, courtesy of hospitable friends or friends of friends, spending comfortable interludes in castles.

Almost any part of *A Time of Gifts* will illustrate the richness of its technique. Take Chapter 6, which describes Paddy's approach to Vienna. It contains a discussion of European popular songs, a passage about Shakespearean stage directions, a lecture about tribal wanderings, a description of the death of Odoacer, two pages of conversation with a postmaster's widow, a lyrically towering

evocation of the Benedictine Abbey of Melk, academic chat about Richard the Lionheart, an anecdote concerning a remarkable echo, visits to an Irish monk and Austrian aristocrats, a gift of duck eggs, arrival in Vienna in the middle of an attempted *coup d'état*, and bed at last in a Salvation Army hostel. It all goes limpidly, easily, apparently just as it happened or had occurred to its author, and only when you are thumbing retrospectively through the pages of the book do you realize how exactly the Abbey of Melk, that archetypical masterpiece of the European idea, occurs at the central point of the narrative – high noon, in Leigh Fermor's own metaphor.

Occasionally all this requires of us (and most willingly gets) a suspension of disbelief. And it is most decidedly art concealing art. The erudition is obvious, and so are the powers of observation, but the beautiful shape of the book only gradually reveals itself. Whether it was design or serendipity that placed Melk at the centre of it, there Melk is, in all the seduction of Leigh Fermor's prose at its most voluptuous, and time and again one realizes how artfully crescendos are mounted or moments of calm disposed. This patterning is never blatant, though, never intrusive, and that is partly because the whole structure is centred upon the unassuming young Englishman at its core. It is a kaleidoscopic book, but it has a focus always in P. Leigh Fermor, Esquire, in his nineteenth year, trudging through the nations with his rucksack on his back.

He is Everyman, but in a particularly delightful kind. People of all sorts like him. He makes friends wherever he goes, is as polite to tramps as he is to barons, repays all his debts, shows just the right degree of diffidence to his seniors, merriment to his peers, flirts with girls who give him duck eggs, gets drunk, hates hurting people's feelings, and altogether behaves as a clever and gentlemanly young Englishman of the 1930s ought to behave. We are not in the least surprised to learn that when, ten years later, he found himself with General Heinrich Kreipe as his prisoner, the two of them exchanged Horatian odes as they looked out of their cave mouth towards Mount Ida.

It is the central attraction of this figure, so fresh and hopeful, set against the doomed majesty of an ancient continent, that makes *A*

Time of Gifts unique in English letters. It is learned, it is portentous, it is prodigiously gifted, but it is also innocent. What other work of the repertoire can make quite the same claims? When the book was first published in 1977, I was sent an advance copy by its publisher, the legendary John Murray VI, in case I would like to review it. He was perhaps biased, he said, 'but I really do think it is a work of genius'.

I agree with him, and so will posterity.

Jan Morris

Linque tuas sedes alienaque litora quaere,
o juvenis: major rerum tibi nascitur ordo.
Ne succumbe malis: te noverit ultimus Hister,
Te Boreas gelidus securaque regna Canopi,
quique renascentem Phoebum cernuntque cadentem
major in externas fit qui descendit harenas.

Titus Petronius Arbiter

I struck the board and cry'd 'No more;
I will abroad'.
What, shall I ever sigh and pine?
My life and lines are free; free as the road,
Loose as the wind.

George Herbert

For now the time of gifts is gone –
O boys that grow, O snows that melt,
O bathos that the years must fill –
Here is dull earth to build upon
Undecorated; we have reached
Twelfth Night or what you will ... you will.

Louis MacNeice[1]

Introductory Letter to Xan Fielding

Dear Xan,

As I have only just finished piecing these travels together, the times dealt with are very fresh in my mind and later events seem more recent still; so it is hard to believe that 1942 in Crete, when we first met – both of us black-turbaned, booted and sashed and appropriately silver-and-ivory daggered and cloaked in white goats' hair, and deep in grime – was more than three decades ago. Many meetings and adventures followed that first encounter on the slopes of Mt Kedros, and fortunately our kind of irregular warfare held long spells of inaction in the sheltering mountains: it was usually at eagle-height, with branches or constellations overhead, or dripping winter stalactites, that we lay among the rocks and talked of our lives before the war.

Indeed, indifference to the squalor of caves and speed at the approach of danger might have seemed the likeliest aptitudes for life in occupied Crete. But, unexpectedly in a modern war, it was the obsolete choice of Greek at school which had really deposited us on the limestone. With an insight once thought rare, the army had realized that the Ancient tongue, however imperfectly mastered, was a short-cut to the Modern: hence the sudden sprinkling of many strange figures among the mainland and island crags. Strange, because Greek had long ceased to be compulsory at the schools where it was still taught: it was merely the eager choice – unconsciously prompted, I suspect, by having listened to Kingsley's *Heroes* in childhood – of a perverse and eccentric minority: early hankerings which set a vague but agreeable stamp on all these improvised cave-dwellers.

As it chanced, neither of our school careers had run their course: yours had been cut short by a family mishap and mine by the sack and we had both set off on our own at an earlier age than most of our contemporaries. These first wanderings – impecunious, moss-repellant, frowned on by our respective elders, and utterly congenial – had pursued rather similar lines; and as we reconstructed our pre-war lives for each other's entertainment we soon agreed that the disasters which had set us on the move had not been disasters at all, but wild strokes of good luck.

This book is an attempt to complete and set in order, with as much detail as I can recapture, the earliest of those disjointedly recounted travels. The narrative, which should end at Constantinople, has turned out longer than I expected; I have split it in two, and this first volume breaks off in the middle of an important but arbitrary bridge spanning the Middle Danube. The rest will follow. From the start I wanted to dedicate it to you, which I now do with delight and some of the formality of a bull-fighter throwing his cap to a friend before a corrida. May I take advantage of the occasion by turning this letter into a kind of introduction? I want the narrative, when it begins, to jump in the deep end without too much explanatory delay. But it does need a brief outline of how these travels came about.

We must go back a bit.

In the second year of World War I, soon after I was born, my mother and sister sailed away to India (where my father was a servant of the Indian Government) and I was left behind so that one of us might survive if the ship were sunk by a submarine. I was to be taken out when the oceans were safer, and, failing this, remain in England until the war had reached its quick and victorious end. But the war was long and ships scarce; four years passed; and during the interim, on a temporary footing which perforce grew longer, I remained in the care of a very kind and very simple family. This period of separation was the opposite of the ordeal Kipling describes in *Baa Baa Black Sheep*. I was allowed to do as I chose in everything. There was no question of disobeying orders: none were given; still less was there ever a stern word or an admonitory smack. This new family, and a background of barns, ricks and teazles, clouded with spinneys and the undulation of ridge and furrow, were the first things I can remember setting eyes on; and I spent these important years, which are said to be such formative ones, more or less as a small farmer's child run wild: they have left a memory of complete and unalloyed bliss. But when my mother and sister got back at last, I rushed several fields away and fought off their advances in gruff Northamptonshire tones; and they understood that they had a small savage on their hands and not a friendly one; the joy of reunion was tempered by harrowing dismay. But I was secretly attracted to these beautiful strangers nevertheless: they were extravagantly beyond anything in my range of conjecture. I was fascinated by the crocodile pattern of the shoes in which one of them ended and by the sailor-suit of the other, who was four years my senior: the pleated skirt, the three white stripes on the blue collar, the black silk scarf with its white lanyard and whistle and the

ribanded cap with the still indecipherable gold letters that spelled out *H.M.S. Victory*. Between the two, a black pekinese with white feet resembling spats was floundering and leaping in the long grass and giving tongue like a lunatic.

Those marvellously lawless years, it seems, had unfitted me for the faintest shadow of constraint. With tact and charm and skill, backed by my swift treason and by London and *Peter Pan* and *Where the Rainbow Ends* and *Chu Chin Chow*, my mother succeeded in bringing about a complete shift of affection, and in taming me, more or less, for family purposes. But my early educational ventures, when the time came – at a kindergarten, then at a school of my sister's which also took small boys, and finally at a horrible preparatory school near Maidenhead named after a Celtic saint – ended in uniform catastrophe. Harmless in appearance, more presentable by now and of a refreshingly unconstricted address, I would earn excellent opinions at first. But as soon as early influences began to tell, those short-lived virtues must have seemed a cruel Fauntleroy veneer, cynically assumed to mask the Charles Addams fiend that lurked beneath: it coloured with an even darker tinct the sum of misdeeds which soon began heaping up. When I catch a glimpse of similar children today, I am transfixed with fellow-feelings, and with dread.

First bewilderment reigned, and then despair. After a particularly bad cropper when I was about ten, I was taken to see two psychiatrists. In a recent biography I read with excitement that the first of these and the most likeable had been consulted by Virginia Woolf; and I thought for a moment that I might have gazed at her across the waiting-room; alas, it was before I was born. The second, more severe in aspect, recommended a co-educational and very advanced school for difficult children near Bury St Edmunds.

Salsham Hall, at Salsham-le-Sallows, was an unclassifiable but engaging manor house with woods and a rough lake in a wide-skied and many-belfried expanse of Suffolk. It was run by a grey haired, wild-eyed man called Major Truthful and when I spotted two beards – then very rare – among the mixed and eccentric-looking staff, and the heavy bangles and the amber and the tassels and the homespun, and met my fellow-alumni – about thirty boys and girls from four-year-olds to nearly twenty, all in brown jerkins and sandals: the musical near-genius with occasional fits, the millionaire's nephew who chased motor-cars along country lanes with a stick, the admiral's pretty and slightly kleptomaniac daughter, the pursuivant's son with nightmares and an infectious inherited passion for heraldry, the backward, the somnambulists and the mythomaniacs (by which I mean those with an inventive output more pronounced than the

rest, which, as no one believed us, did no harm), and, finally, the small bad hats like me who were merely very naughty – I knew I was going to like it. The nature-worshipping eurythmics in a barn and the country-dances in which the Major led both staff and children, were a shade bewildering at first, because everybody was naked. Nimbly and gravely, keeping time to a cottage piano and a recorder, we sped through the figures of Gathering Peascods, Sellinger's Round, Picking-up Sticks and Old Mole.

It was midsummer. There were walled gardens close at hand, and giant red and gold gooseberries, and the nets over the loaded currant bushes foiled starlings but not us; and beyond them, the trees and the water descended in dim and beckoning perspectives. I understood the implications of the landscape at once: life under the greenwood tree. To choose a Maid Marion and a band, to get the girls to weave yards of Lincoln green on the therapeutic looms and then to slice and sew them into rough hoods with crenellated collars, cut bows and string them, carry off raspberry-canes for arrows and to take to the woods, was a matter of days. No-one stopped us: 'Fay ce que vouldras' was the whole of their law. English schools, the moment they depart from the conventional track, are oases of strangeness and comedy, and it is tempting to linger. But vaguely guessed-at improprieties among the staff or the older children, or both – things of which we knew little in our sylvan haunts – brought about the dissolution of the place and I was soon back 'for a second chance', a forest exile among the snake-belts and the bat-oil of the horrible preparatory school. But, predictably after this heady freedom, not for long.

My mother had to cope with these upheavals. I would turn up in mid-term: once, at our cottage at Dodford, a tiny thatched village under a steep holt full of foxgloves (and, indeed, full of foxes) with a brook for its one street, where she was simultaneously writing plays and, though hard up, learning to fly a Moth biplane at an aerodrome forty miles away; once, at Primrose Hill Studios near Regent's Park, within earshot of the lions in the Zoo at night, where she had persuaded Arthur Rackham, a neighbour in that cloister, to paint amazing scenes – navigable birdsnests in a gale-wind, hobgoblin transactions under extruding roots and mice drinking out of acorns – all over an inside door; and more than once at 213 Piccadilly, which we moved to later, where a breakneck stair climbed to a marvellous Aladdin's cave of a flat overlooking long chains of street-lamps and the acrobatic sky-signs of the Circus. I would be hangdog on the doormat, flanked by a master with a depressing tale to unfold. Though upset, my mother was gifted with too much imagination and humour to let gloom settle for long. Nevertheless, these reverses filled me for the time being with suicidal despair.

But this particular disaster happened to coincide with one of my father's rare leaves from directing the Geological Survey of India. He and my mother had parted by then, and since these furloughs only came round every three years, we scarcely knew each other. All at once, as though at the wave of a wand, I found myself high above Lake Maggiore and then Como, trying to keep up with his giant stride across the gentian-covered mountains. He was an out-and-out naturalist and rightly proud of being an F.R.S.; indeed, he had discovered an Indian mineral which was named after him and a worm with eight hairs on its back; and – brittle trove! – a formation of snowflake. (I wondered, much later on, when white specks whirled past in the Alps or the Andes or the Himalayas, whether any of them were his.) That enormously tall and thin frame, dressed in a pepper-and-salt Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, was festooned with accoutrements. Laden with his field glasses and his butterfly net, I would get my breath while he was tapping at the quartz and the hornblende on the foothills of Monte Rosa with his hammer and clicking open a pocket lens to inspect the fossils and insects of Monte della Croce. His voice at such moments was simultaneously cavernous and enthusiastic. He would carefully embed wild flowers for later classification in a moss-lined vasculum and sometimes halt for a sketch with his water-colours balanced on a rock. What a change, I thought, from those elephants and the jungles full of monkeys and tigers which I imagined, not wholly wrongly, to be his usual means of transport and habitat. At ground level I trailed behind him through half the picture galleries of northern Italy.

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Three peaceful years followed. Gilbert and Phyllis Scott-Malden, with three sons and half a dozen boys cramming for Common Entrance under their wing, lived in a large house with a rambling garden in Surrey. (I can't think of them, nor of Mrs Scott-Malden's sister Josephine Wilkinson, who had a strong and separate influence later on, without the utmost gratitude and affection.) He was an excellent classicist and a kind and patient all-round teacher, and she filled out his firm structure with a great love of literature and poetry and painting. I was still an intermittent pest, but calmer existence began and I shot ahead in the subjects I enjoyed: everything, that is, except mathematics, for which my ineptitude seemed akin to imbecility. We made up plays and acted Shakespeare scenes and lay about the grass under a holm-oak with a dish of plums and listened to Mr Scott-Malden reading Gilbert Murray's translation of *The Frogs*; he would switch to the original to explain and give point to the comic passages and the

onomatopoeia. We had built a hut in an enormous walnut tree, with rope-ladders climbing halfway, then hand over hand; and I was allowed to sleep in it all my last summer term. In spite of maths, I scraped through Common Entrance in the end and looked forward to Public School life with ill-founded confidence.

Copious reading about the Dark and the Middle Ages had floridly coloured my views of the past and the King's School, Canterbury, touched off emotions which were sharply opposed to those of Somerset Maugham in the same surroundings; they were closer to Walter Pater's seventy years earlier, and probably identical, I liked to think, with those of Christopher Marlowe earlier still. I couldn't get over the fact that the school had been founded at the very beginning of Anglo-Saxon Christianity – before the sixth century was out, that is: fragments of Thor and Woden had hardly stopped smouldering in the Kentish woods: the oldest part of the buildings was modern by these standards, dating only from a few decades after the Normans landed. There was a wonderfully cobwebbed feeling about this dizzy and intoxicating antiquity – an ambience both haughty and obscure which turned famous seats of learning, founded eight hundred or a thousand years later, into gaudy mushrooms and seemed to invest these hoarier precincts, together with the wide green expanses beyond them, the huge elms, the Dark Entry, and the ruined arches and the cloisters – and, while I was about it, the booming and jackdaw-crowded pinnacles of the great Angevin cathedral itself, and the ghost of St Thomas à Becket and the Black Prince's bones – with an aura of nearly pre-historic myth.

Although it was a one-sided love in the end, for a time things went well. I liked nearly everybody, from the headmaster and my housemaster down, and prospered erratically at dead and living languages and at history and geography – at everything, once more, except mathematics. I found my mind wandering at games; loved boxing and was good at it; and in summer, having chosen rowing instead of cricket, lay peacefully beside the Stour, well upstream of the rhythmic creaking and the exhortation, reading *Lily Christine* and Gibbon and gossiping with kindred lotus-eaters under the willow-branches. Verse, imitative and bad but published in school magazines nevertheless, poured out like ectoplasm. I wrote and read with intensity, sang, debated, drew and painted; scored minor successes at acting, stage-managing and in painting and designing scenery; and made gifted and enterprising friends. One of these, a year older, was Alan Watts, a brilliant classical scholar who, most remarkably, wrote and published an

authoritative book on Zen Buddhism – years before the sect became fashionable – while he was still at school. Later, he became a respected authority on Eastern and Western religions. (In his autobiography *In My Own Way*, which came out shortly before his premature death a few years ago, he writes at some length of my troubles at school – and especially of their abrupt end – in the warm spirit of a champion; and if he didn't quite get the hang of it in one or two places, it was not his fault.)

What went wrong? I think I know now. A bookish attempt to coerce life into a closer resemblance to literature was abetted – it can only be – by a hangover from early anarchy: translating ideas as fast as I could into deeds overrode every thought of punishment or danger; as I seem to have been unusually active and restless, the result was chaos. It mystified me and puzzled others. 'You're mad!' prefects and monitors would exclaim, brows knit in glaring scrum-half bewilderment, as new misdeeds came to light. Many of my transgressions involved breaking bounds as well as rules – climbing out at night and the like, only half of which were found out. Frequent gatings joined the mileage of Latin hexameters copied out as impositions, and lesser troubles filled in the gaps between more serious bust-ups: absent-mindedness, forgetfulness and confusion about where I ought to be; and constant loss: 'forgetting my books under the arches' was a recurrent bane. There were some savage fights; also erratic behaviour which was construed, perhaps rightly, as showing off: 'anything for a laugh' was the usual term for this; and, even when I succeeded, 'trying to be funny'. Always that withering gerund! These strictures were often on monitors' lips. Aediles and rod-bearing lictors, they were the guardians of an inflexible code and all breaches were visited by swift and flexible sanctions which came whistling shoulder-high across panelled studies and struck with considerable force; but, however spectacular the results, they left the psyche unbruised, and, though they were disagreeable and, in this case, record-breaking in frequency, clinically and morally speaking, they didn't seem to take. If these meetings are carried off with enough studied nonchalance, a dark and baleful fame begins to surround the victim, and it makes him, in the end, an infliction past bearing. Everything was going badly and my housemaster's penultimate report, in my third year, had an ominous ring: '... some attempts at improvement' it went 'but more to avoid detection. He is a dangerous mixture of sophistication and recklessness which makes one anxious about his influence on other boys.'

Catastrophe was staved off for a few months. As I was thought to have done myself some damage skiing in the Berner Oberland just before I was sixteen, I skipped a term and a half, and, on my return, I was temporarily excused games: when everyone trooped off with oblong balls under their

arms, I could spin about Kent on a bicycle and look at the Norman churches at Patrixbourne and Barfrestone and explore the remoter parts of Canterbury. This windfall of leisure and freedom soon coincided with a time when all good impressions were wiped out by a last series of misdeeds. A more prophetic eye would have seen that patience on high had at last given out and that any further trouble would be hailed as a release long overdue.

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Intramural romances spring up and prosper in places of learning, but some exotic psychological fluke directed my glance beyond the walls and, once more, out of bounds. It was a time when one falls in love hard and often, and my aesthetic notions, entirely formed by Andrew Lang's Coloured Fairy Books, had settled years before on the long-necked, wide-eyed pre-Raphaelite girls in Henry Ford's illustrations, interchangeably kings' daughters, ice-maidens, goose-girls and water spirits, and my latest wanderings had led me, at the end of a green and sweet-smelling cave set dimly with flowers and multicoloured fruit and vegetation – a greengrocer's shop, that is, which she tended for her father – to the vision of just such a being. The effect was instantaneous. She was twenty-four, a ravishing and sonnet-begetting beauty and I can see her now and still hear that melting and deep Kent accent. This sudden incongruous worship may have been a bore but she was too good-natured to show it, and perhaps she was puzzled by the verse which came showering in. I knew that such an association in the town, however innocent, broke a number of taboos too deep-rooted and well-understood to need any explicit veto; nevertheless I headed for the shop beyond the Cattle Market the moment I could escape. But the black clothes we wore, those stiff wing-collars and the wide and speckled straw boaters with their blue and white silk ribands were as conspicuous as broad-arrows. My footsteps were discreetly dogged, my devices known and after a week, I was caught red-handed – holding Nellie's hand, that is to say, which is about as far as this suit was ever pressed; we were sitting in the back-shop on upturned apple-baskets – and my schooldays were over.

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Captain Grimes was right. A few months after this setback, the idea of an Army career, which had been floating mistily in the air for some time, began to take firmer shape; and the prospect of entering Sandhurst raised its distant hurdle. But what about the sack? When he was appealed to, my

ex-housemaster, a strange and brilliant man, composed and despatched the necessary letter of recommendation; and, like the Captain's, it was a corking good letter, too. (There were no bitter feelings; there had been disappointment on the side of the school authorities as well as relief; utter dejection on mine. But I felt thankful they had alighted on more avowable grounds for my eclipse than the charge of being an intolerable nuisance. The actual pretext could be made to sound dashing and romantic.)

I had not yet sat for School Cert. – which, because of maths, I would certainly have failed – and as it was indispensable for would-be cadets, I soon found myself in London, seventeen by now, cramming for an exempting examination called the London Certificate. I spent most of the next two years in Lancaster Gate, then in Ladbroke Grove with rooms of my own overlooking tree-tops, under the tolerant and friendly aegis of Denys Prideaux. I did Maths, French, English and Geography with him, and Latin, Greek, English and History, often in deck chairs in Kensington Gardens, with Lawrence Goodman. (Unconventional and a poet, he took me to every Shakespeare play that appeared.) During the first year I led a fairly sensible life, had a number of friends, was asked away to stay in the country, followed rustic pursuits, and read more books than I have ever crammed into a similar stretch of time. I passed the London Cert. respectably in most papers, and even without disgrace in the subjects I dreaded.

But a long interregnum still stretched ahead.

One of the early chapters of this book touches at some retrospective length on the way things began to change; how I moved from the fairly predictable company of fellow army-candidates into older circles which were simultaneously more worldly, more bohemian and more raffish: the remainder, more or less, of the Bright Young People, but ten years and twenty thousand double whiskies after their heyday, and looking extremely well on the regime. This new and captivating world seemed brilliant and rather wicked; I enjoyed being the youngest present, especially during the dissipated nocturnal ramblings in which every evening finished: ('Where's that rather noisy boy got to? We may as well take him too'). I had reached a stage when one changes very fast: a single year contains a hundred avatars; and while these were flashing kaleidoscopically by, the idea of my unsuitability for peace-time soldiering had begun to impinge. More serious still, the acceptance of two poems and the publication of one of them – admittedly, only on foxhunting – had fired me with the idea of authorship.

In the late summer of 1933, with Mr Prideaux's permission, I rashly moved into a room in an old and slightly leaning house in Shepherd Market where several friends had already fixed their quarters. This little backwater of archways and small shops and Georgian and Victorian pubs had the charm, quite evaporated now, of a village marooned in the still-intact splendours of Mayfair. I had a vision of myself, as I moved in, settling down to writing with single-minded and almost Trollopian diligence. Instead, to my ultimate discomfiture but immediate delight, the house became the scene of wild and continuous parties. We paid almost nothing for our lodgings to Miss Beatrice Stewart, our kind-hearted landlady, and always late. She didn't mind this, but pleaded with us again and again in the small hours to make less noise. The friend and model of famous painters and sculptors in the past, she was accustomed to the more decorous Bohemia of earlier generations. She had sat for Sargent and Sickert and Shannon and Steer and Tonks and Augustus John and her walls were radiant with mementoes of those years; but the loss of a leg in a motor accident had cruelly slowed her up. Much later, a friend told me that she had been the model for Adrian Jones's bronze figure of Peace in the quadriga on Decimus Burton's Wellington Arch. Since then, I can never pass the top of Constitution Hill without thinking of her and gazing up at the winged and wreath-bearing goddess sailing across the sky. As the pigeon flies, it was under a minute from her window-sill.

My scheme was not working well. That improvident flight from the rooms and meals and all that went with them at my tutor's had reduced my funds to a pound a week and the way things were shaping, it looked as though opulence from writing might be delayed for a time. I managed somehow, but gloom and perplexity descended with the start of winter. Fitful streaks of promise and scrapes and upheavals had marked my progress so far; they still continued; but now I seemed to be floating towards disintegration in a tangle of submerged and ill-marked reefs. The outlook grew steadily darker and more overcast. About lamplighting time at the end of a wet November day, I was peering morosely at the dog-eared pages on my writing table and then through the panes at the streaming reflections of Shepherd Market, thinking, as *Night and Day* succeeded *Stormy Weather* on the gramophone in the room below, that *Lazybones* couldn't be far behind; when, almost with the abruptness of Herbert's lines at the beginning of these pages, inspiration came. A plan unfolded with the speed and the completeness of a Japanese paper flower in a tumbler.

To change scenery; abandon London and England and set out across Europe like a tramp – or, as I characteristically phrased it to myself, like a pilgrim or a palmer, an errant scholar, a broken knight or the hero of *The Cloister and the Hearth*! All of a sudden, this was not merely the obvious, but the only thing to do. I would travel on foot, sleep in hayricks in summer, shelter in barns when it was raining or snowing and only consort with peasants and tramps. If I lived on bread and cheese and apples, jogging along on fifty pounds a year like Lord Durham with a few noughts knocked off, there would even be some cash left over for paper and pencils and an occasional mug of beer. A new life! Freedom! Something to write about!

Even before I looked at a map, two great rivers had already plotted the itinerary in my mind's eye: the Rhine uncoiled across it, the Alps rose up and then the wolf-harbouring Carpathian watersheds and the cordilleras of the Balkans; and there, at the end of the windings of the Danube, the Black Sea was beginning to spread its mysterious and lopsided shape; and my chief destination was never in a moment's doubt. The levitating skyline of Constantinople pricked its sheaves of thin cylinders and its hemispheres out of the sea-mist; beyond it Mount Athos hovered; and the Greek archipelago was already scattering a paper-chase of islands across the Aegean. (These certainties sprang from reading the books of Robert Byron; dragon-green Byzantium loomed serpent-haunted and gong-tormented; I had even met the author for a moment in a blurred and saxophone-haunted night club as dark as Tartarus.)

I wondered during the first few days whether to enlist a companion; but I knew that the enterprise had to be solitary and the break complete. I wanted to think, write, stay or move on at my own speed and unencumbered, to gaze at things with a changed eye and listen to new tongues that were untainted by a single familiar word. With any luck the humble circumstances of the journey would offer no scope for English or French. Flights of unknown syllables would soon be rushing into purged and attentive ears.

The idea met obstruction at first: why not wait till spring? (London by now was shuddering under veils of December rain.) But when they understood that all was decided, most of the objectors became allies. Warming to the scheme after initial demur, Mr Prideaux undertook to write to India putting my démarche in a favourable light; I determined to announce the *fait accompli* by letter when I was safely on the way, perhaps from Cologne ... Then we planned the despatch of those weekly pounds – each time, if possible, after they had risen to a monthly total of four – by registered letter to suitably spaced-out *postes restantes*. (Munich would be the first; then I would write and suggest a second.) I next borrowed fifteen

pounds off the father of a school friend, partly to buy equipment and partly to have something in hand when I set out. I telephoned to my sister Vanessa, back from India again a few years before, and married and settled in Gloucestershire. My mother was filled with apprehension to begin with; we pored over the atlas, and, bit by bit as we pored, the comic possibilities began to unfold in absurd imaginary scenes until we were falling about with laughter; and by the time I caught the train to London next morning, she was infected with my excitement.

During the last days, my outfit assembled fast. Most of it came from Millet's army surplus store in The Strand: an old Army greatcoat, different layers of jersey, grey flannel shirts, a couple of white linen ones for best, a soft leather windbreaker, puttees, nailed boots, a sleeping bag (to be lost within a month and neither missed nor replaced); notebooks and drawing blocks, rubbers, an aluminium cylinder full of Venus and Golden Sovereign pencils; an old *Oxford Book of English Verse*. (Lost likewise, and, to my surprise – it had been a sort of Bible – not missed much more than the sleeping bag.) The other half of my very conventional travelling library was the Loeb *Horace*, Vol. I, which my mother, after asking what I wanted, had bought and posted in Guildford. (She had written the translation of a short poem by Petronius on the flyleaf, chanced on and copied out, she told me later, from another volume on the same shelf:[1] 'Leave thy home, O youth, and seek out alien shores ... Yield not to misfortune: the far-off Danube shall know thee, the cold North-wind and the untroubled kingdom of Canopus and the men who gaze on the new birth of Phoebus or upon his setting ...' She was an enormous reader, but Petronius was not in her usual line of country and he had only recently entered mine. I was impressed and touched.) Finally I bought a ticket on a small Dutch steamer sailing from Tower Bridge to the Hook of Holland. All this had taken a shark's bite out of my borrowed cash, but there was still a wad of notes left over.

At last, with a touch of headache from an eve-of-departure party, I got out of bed on the great day, put on my new kit and tramped south-west under a lowering sky. I felt preternaturally light, as though I were already away and floating like a djinn escaped from its flask through the dazzling middle air while Europe unfolded. But the grating hobnails took me no farther than Cliveden Place, where I picked up a rucksack left for me there by Mark Ogilvie-Grant. Inspecting my stuff, he had glanced with pity at the one I had bought. (His – a superior Bergen affair resting on a lumbar semicircle of metal and supported by a triangular frame, had accompanied

and turrets dimly assembled on one side; then, straight ahead, the pinnacles and the metal parabolas of Tower Bridge were looming. We halted on the bridge just short of the first barbican and the driver indicated the flight of stone steps that descended to Irongate Wharf. We were down them in a moment; and beyond the cobbles and the bollards, with the Dutch tricolour beating damply from her poop and a ragged fan of smoke streaming over the river, the *Stadthouder Willem* rode at anchor. At the end of lengthening fathoms of chain, the swirling tide had lifted her with a sigh almost level with the flagstones: gleaming in the rain, and with full steam-up for departure, she floated in a mewing circus of gulls. Haste and the weather cut short our farewells and our embraces and I sped down the gangway clutching my rucksack and my stick while the others dashed back to the steps – four sodden trouser-legs and two high heels skipping across the puddles – and up them to the waiting taxi; and half a minute later there they were, high overhead on the balustrade of the bridge, craning and waving from the cast-iron quatrefoils. To shield her hair from the rain, the high-heel-wearer had a mackintosh over her head like a coalheaver. I was signalling frantically back as the hawsers were cast loose and the gangplank shipped. Then they were gone. The anchor-chain clattered through the ports and the vessel turned into the current with a wail of her siren. How strange it seemed, as I took shelter in the little saloon – feeling, suddenly, forlorn; but only for a moment – to be setting off from the heart of London! No beetling cliffs, no Arnoldian crash of pebbles. I might have been leaving for Richmond, or for a supper of shrimps and whitebait at Gravesend, instead of Byzantium. Only the larger ships from the Netherlands berthed at Harwich, the steward said: smaller Dutch craft like the *Stadthouder* always dropped anchor hereabouts: boats from the Zuyder Zee had been unloading eels between London Bridge and the Tower since the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Miraculously, after the pitiless hours of deluge, the rain stopped. Above the drifts of smoke there was a quickly-fading glimpse of restless pigeons and a few domes and many steeples and some bone-white Palladian belfries flying rain-washed against a sky of gunmetal and silver and tarnished brass. The girders overhead framed the darkening shape of London Bridge; further up, the teeming water was crossed by the ghosts of Southwark and

Blackfriars. Meanwhile St Catherine's Wharf was sliding offstage and upstream, then Execution Dock and Wapping Old Stairs and The Prospect of Whitby and by the time these landmarks were astern of us, the sun was setting fast and the fissures among the western cloudbanks were fading from smoky crimson to violet.

In the gulfs spanned by catwalks between the warehouses, night was assembling too, and the tiers of loading-loopholes yawned like caverns. Slung with chains and cables weighted with shot, hoists jutted on hinges from precipices of warehouse wall and the giant white letters of the wharfingers' names, grimed by a century of soot, were growing less decipherable each second. There was a reek of mud, seaweed, slime, salt, smoke and clinkers and nameless jetsam, and the half-sunk barges and the waterlogged palisades unloosed a universal smell of rotting timber. Was there a whiff of spices? It was too late to say: the ship was drawing away from the shore and gathering speed and the details beyond the wider stretch of water and the convolutions of the gulls were growing blurred. Rotherhithe, Millwall, Limehouse Reach, the West India Docks, Deptford and the Isle of Dogs were rushing upstream in smears of darkness. Chimneys and cranes plumed the banks, but the belfries were thinning out. A chaplet of lights twinkled on a hill. It was Greenwich. The Observatory hung in the dark, and the *Stadthouder* was twanging her way inaudibly through the nought meridian.

The reflected shore lights dropped coils and zigzags into the flood which were thrown into disarray every now and then, by the silhouettes of passing vessels' luminous portholes, the funereal shapes of barges singled out by their port and starboard lights and cutters of the river police smacking from wave to wave as purposefully and as fast as pikes. Once we gave way to a liner that towered out of the water like a festive block of flats; from Hong Kong, said the steward, as she glided by; and the different notes of the sirens boomed up and downstream as though mastodons still haunted the Thames marshes.

A gong tinkled and the steward led me back into the saloon. I was the only passenger: 'We don't get many in December,' he said; 'It's very quiet just now.' When he had cleared away, I took a new and handsomely-bound journal out of my rucksack, opened it on the green baize under a pink-shaded lamp and wrote the first

entry while the cruets and the wine bottle rattled busily in their stands. Then I went on deck. The lights on either beam had become scarcer but one could pick out the faraway gleam of other vessels and estuary towns which the distance had shrunk to faint constellations. There was a scattering of buoys and the scanned flash of a light-house. Sealed away now beyond a score of watery loops, London had vanished and a lurid haze was the only hint of its whereabouts.

I wondered when I would be returning. Excitement ruled out the thought of sleep; it seemed too important a night. (And in many ways, so it proved. The ninth of December, 1933, was just ending and I didn't get back until January, 1937 – a whole lifetime later it seemed then – and I felt like Ulysses, 'plein d'usage et de raison', and, for better or for worse, utterly changed by my travels.)

But I must have dozed, in spite of these emotions, for when I woke the only glimmer in sight was our own reflection on the waves. The kingdom had slid away westwards and into the dark. A stiff wind was tearing through the rigging and the mainland of Europe was less than half the night away.

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It was still a couple of hours till dawn when we dropped anchor in the Hook of Holland. Snow covered everything and the flakes blew in a slant across the cones of the lamps and confused the glowing discs that spaced out the untrodden quay. I hadn't known that Rotterdam was a few miles inland. I was still the only passenger in the train and this solitary entry, under cover of night and hushed by snow, completed the illusion that I was slipping into Rotterdam, and into Europe, through a secret door.

I wandered about the silent lanes in exultation. The beetling storeys were nearly joining overhead; then the eaves drew away from each other and frozen canals threaded their way through a succession of hump-backed bridges. Snow was piling up on the shoulders of a statue of Erasmus. Trees and masts were dispersed in clumps and the polygonal tiers of an enormous and elaborate gothic belfry soared above the steep roofs. As I was gazing, it slowly tolled five.

The lanes opened on the Boomjes, a long quay lined with trees and capstans, and this in its turn gave on a wide arm of the Maas and an infinity of dim ships. Gulls mewed and wheeled overhead and dipped into the lamplight, scattering their small footprints on the muffled cobblestones and settled in the rigging of the anchored boats in little explosions of snow. The cafés and seamen's taverns which lay back from the quay were all closed except one which showed a promising line of light. A shutter went up and a stout man in clogs opened a glass door, deposited a tabby on the snow and, turning back, began lighting a stove inside. The cat went in again at once; I followed it and the ensuing fried eggs and coffee, ordered by signs, were the best I had ever eaten. I made a second long entry in my journal – it was becoming a passion – and while the landlord polished his glasses and cups and arranged them in glittering ranks, dawn broke, with the snow still coming down against the lightening sky. I put on my greatcoat, slung the rucksack, grasped my stick and headed for the door. The landlord asked where I was going: I said: 'Constantinople.' His brows went up and he signalled to me to wait: then he set out two small glasses and filled them with transparent liquid from a long stone bottle. We clinked them; he emptied his at one gulp and I did the same. With his wishes for godspeed in my ears and an internal bonfire of Bols and a hand smarting from his valedictory shake, I set off. It was the formal start of my journey.

I hadn't gone far before the open door of the *Groote Kirk* – the cathedral attached to the enormous belfry – beckoned me inside. Filled with dim early morning light, the concavity of grey masonry and whitewash joined in pointed arches high overhead and the floor diminished along the nave in a chessboard of black and white flagstones. So compellingly did the vision tally with a score of half-forgotten Dutch pictures that my mind's eye instantaneously furnished the void with those seventeenth-century groups which should have been sitting or strolling there: burghers with pointed corn-coloured beards – and impious spaniels that refused to stay outside – conferring gravely with their wives and their children, still as chessmen, in black broadcloth and identical honeycomb ruffs under the tremendous hatchmented pillars. Except for this church, the beautiful city was to be bombed to fragments a few years later. I would have lingered, had I known.

In less than an hour I was crunching steadily along the icy ruts of a dyke road and the outskirts of Rotterdam had already vanished in the falling snow. Lifted in the air and lined with willow-trees, the road ran dead straight as far as the eye could see, but not so far as it would have in clear weather, for the escorting willows soon became ghost-like in either direction until they dissolved in the surrounding pallor. A wooden-clogged bicyclist would materialize in a peaked cap with circular black ear pads against frostbite, and sometimes his cigar would leave a floating drift from Java or Sumatra on the air long after the smoker had evaporated. I was pleased by my equipment. The rucksack sat with an easy balance and the upturned collar of my second-hand greatcoat, fastened with a semi-detachable flap which I had just discovered, formed a snug tunnel; and with my old cord breeches, their strapping soft after long use and the grey puttees and the heavy clouted boots, I was impenetrably greaved and jambed and shod; no chink was left for the blast. I was soon thatched with snow and my ears began to tingle, but I was determined never to stoop to those terrible earpads.

When the snow stopped, the bright morning light laid bare a wonderful flat geometry of canals and polders and willows, and the sails of innumerable mills were turning in a wind that was also keeping all the clouds on the move – and not only clouds and mills; for soon the skaters on the canals, veiled hitherto by the snowfall, were suddenly scattered as a wind-borne portent came whirling out of the distance and tore through their midst like a winged dragon. It was an ice-yacht – a raft on four rubber-tyred wheels under a taut triangle of sail and manned by three reckless boys. It travelled literally with the speed of the wind while one of them hauled on the sail and another steered with a bar. The third flung all his weight on a brake like a shark's jawbone that sent showers of fragments flying. It screamed past with an uproar of shouts as the teeth bit the ice and a noise like the rending of a hundred calico shirts which multiplied to a thousand as the raft made a sharp right-angle turn into a branch-canal. A minute later, it was a faraway speck and the silent landscape, with its Brueghelish skaters circling as slowly as flies along the canals and the polders, seemed tamer after its passing. Snow had covered the landscape with a sparkling layer and the slatey hue of the ice was only

it was an amulet and an Open Sesame. In European tradition, the word suggested a youthful, needy, and earnest figure, spurred along the highways of the West by a thirst for learning – thus, notwithstanding high spirits and a proneness to dog-Latin drinking songs, a fit candidate for succour.

During these first three days I was never far from a towpath, but so many and confused are the waterways that unconsciously I changed rivers three times: the Noorwede was the first of them, the Merwede followed, then came the Waal; and at Gorinchem the Waal was joined by the Maas. In the morning I could see the great stream of the Maas winding across the plain towards this rendezvous; it had risen in France under the more famous name of Meuse and then flowed across the whole of Belgium; a river only less imposing than the Waal itself, to whose banks I clung for the remainder of my Dutch journey. The Waal is tremendous; no wonder, for it is really the Rhine. 'The Rijn', in Holland, Rembrandt's native stream, is a minor northern branch of the main flow, and it subdivides again and again, loses itself in the delta and finally enters the North Sea through a drainage-canal; while the Waal, gorged with Alpine snows and the waters of Lake Constance and the Black Forest and the tribute of a thousand Rhenish streams, rolls sea-ward in usurped and stately magnificence. Between this tangle of rivers, meanwhile – whose defections and reunions enclosed islands as big as English shires – the geometric despotism of canal and polder and windmill held firm; those turning sails were for drainage, not grinding corn.

All the country I had traversed so far was below sea-level and without this discipline, which everlastingly redressed the balance between solid and liquid, the whole region would have been wild sea, or a brackish waste of flood and fen. When one looked down from a dyke, the infinity of polders and canals and the meanderings of the many streams were plain to the eye; from a lower vantage-point, only the nearest waters were discernible. But, at ground-level, they all vanished. I was sitting and smoking on a millstone by a barn near the old town of Zaltbommel, when I was alerted by the wail of a siren. In the field a quarter of a mile away, between a church and some woods, serenely though invisibly afloat on the hidden Maas, a big white ship a-flutter with pennants

was apparently mooing its way across solid meadows under a cloud of gulls.

The Maas advanced and retreated all day long, and towards evening it vanished to the south. Once out of sight, its wide bed climbed the invisible gradients of Brabant and Limburg, bound for a faraway Carolingian hinterland beyond the Ardennes.

Dark fell while I was trudging along a never-ending path beside the Waal. It was lined with skeleton trees; the frozen ice-puddles creaked under my hobnails; and, beyond the branches, the Great Bear and a retinue of winter constellations blazed in a clear cold sky. At last the distant lights of Tiel, poised on the first hill I had seen in Holland, twinkled into being on the other bank. An opportune bridge carried me over and I reached the market-place soon after ten, somnambulant with fatigue after traversing a vast stretch of country. I can't remember under what mountainous eiderdown or in what dank cell I slept the night.

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A change came over the country. For the first time, next day, the ground was higher than sea-level and with every step the equipoise of the elements tilted more decisively in favour of dry land. A gentle rolling landscape of water-meadow and ploughland and heath, with the snow melting here and there, stretched away northward through the province of Guelderland and south into Brabant. The roadside calvaries and the twinkle of sanctuary lamps in the churches indicated that I had crossed a religious as well as a cartographic contour-line. There were farm-buildings which elms and chestnut trees and birches snugly encompassed and Hobbema-like avenues of wintry trees which ended at the gates of seemly manor-houses – the abodes, I hoped, of mild jonkheers. They were gabled in semicircles and broken right-angles of weathered brick bordered with white stone. Pigeon-lofts saddled the scales of the roofs and the breeze kept the gilded weather-vanes spinning; and when the leaded windows kindled at lighting-up time, I explored the interiors in my imagination. A deft chiaroscuro illuminated the black and white flagstones; there were massive tables with bulbous legs and Turkey carpets flung over them; convex mirrors distorted the reflections; faded wall-charts hung on the walls; globes and

harpsichords and inlaid lutes were elegantly scattered; and Guelderland squires with pale whiskers – or their wives in tight bonnets and goffered ruffs – lifted needle-thin wine-glasses to judge the colour by the light of the branching and globular brass candelabra which were secured on chains to the beams and the coffered ceilings.

Imaginary interiors ... No wonder they took shape in painting terms! Ever since those first hours in Rotterdam a three-dimensional Holland had been springing up all round me and expanding into the distance in conformity with another Holland which was already in existence and in every detail complete. For, if there is a foreign landscape familiar to English eyes by proxy, it is this one; by the time they see the original, a hundred mornings and afternoons in museums and picture galleries and country houses have done their work. These confrontations and recognition-scenes filled the journey with excitement and delight. The nature of the landscape itself, the colour, the light, the sky, the openness, the expanse and the details of the towns and the villages are leagued together in the weaving of a miraculously consoling and healing spell. Melancholy is exorcized, chaos chased away and wellbeing, alacrity of spirit and a thoughtful calm take their place. In my case, the relationship between familiar landscape and reality led to a further train of thought.

A second kind of scenery – the Italian – is almost as well known in England as the Dutch, and for the same gallery-haunting reasons. How familiar, at one remove, are those piazzas and arcades! The towers and the ribbed cupolas give way to the bridged loops of a river, and the rivers coil into umbered distances between castled hills and walled cities; there are shepherds' hovels and caverns; the fleece of woods succeeds them and the panorama dies away in fluted mountains that are dim or gleaming under skies with no more clouds than a decorative wreath of white vapour. But this scenery is a backcloth, merely, for lily-bearing angels who flutter to earth or play violins and lutes at Nativities; martyrdoms are enacted in front of it, miracles take place, and mystic marriages, scenes of torture, crucifixions, funerals and resurrections; processions wend, rival armies close in a deadlock of striped lances, an ascetic greybeard strikes his breast with a stone or writes at a lectern while a lion slumbers at his feet; a sainted

stripling is riddled with crossbow bolts and gloved prelates collapse with upcast eyes and swords embedded across their tonsures. Now, all these transactions strike the eye with a monopolizing impact; for five centuries and more, in many thousands of frames, they have been stealing the scene; and when the strange deeds are absent, recognition is much slower than it is in the Low Countries, where the precedence is reversed. In Holland the landscape is the protagonist, and merely human events – even one so extraordinary as Icarus falling head first in the sea because the wax in his artificial wings has melted – are secondary details: next to Brueghel's ploughed field and trees and sailing ship and ploughman, the falling aeronaut is insignificant. So compelling is the identity of picture and reality that all along my path numberless dawdling afternoons in museums were being summoned back to life and set in motion. Every pace confirmed them. Each scene conjured up its echo. The masts and quays and gables of a river port, the backyard with a besom leaning against a brick wall, the chequer-board floors of churches – there they all were, the entire range of Dutch themes, ending in taverns where I expected to find boors carousing, and found them; and in every case, like magic, the painter's name would simultaneously impinge. The willows, the roofs and the bell-towers, the cows grazing self-consciously in the foreground meadows – there was no need to ask whose easels they were waiting for as they munched.

These vague broodings brought me – somewhere between Tiel and Nijmegen, it must have been – to the foot of one of those vertiginous belfries which are so transparent in the distance and so solid close to. I was inside it and up half-a-dozen ladders in a minute and gazing down through the cobwebbed louvres. The whole kingdom was revealed. The two great rivers loitered across it with their scatterings of ships and their barge-processions and their tributaries. There were the polders and the dykes and the long willow-bordered canals, the heath and arable and pasture dotted with stationary and expectant cattle, wind-mills and farms and answering belfries, bare rookeries with their wheeling specks just within earshot and a castle or two, half-concealed among a ruffle of woods. The snow had melted here, or fallen more lightly: blue and green and pewter and russet and silver composed the enormous vista of turf and flood and sky. There was a low line of

hills to the east, and everywhere the shine of intruding water and even a faint glimmer, faraway to the north, of the Zuyder Zee. Filled with strange light, the peaceful and harmonious land slid away to infinity under a rush of clouds.

In the bottom chamber, as I left, an octet of clogged bell-ringers was assembling and spitting on their palms before grasping the sallies, and the clangour of their scales and changes, muted to a soft melancholy by the distance, followed me for the next few miles of nightfall and sharpening chill.

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It was dark long before I reached the quays of Nijmegen. Then, for the first time for days, I found myself walking up a slant and down again. Lanes of steps climbed from the crowding ships along the waterfront; between the lamplight and the dark, tall towers and zig-zag façades impended. The quayside lamps strung themselves into the distance beside the dark flow of the Waal and upstream a great iron bridge sailed northwards and away for miles beyond the river. I had supper and after filling in my journal I searched the waterfront for a sailors' doss-house and ended up in a room over a blacksmith's.

I knew it was my last night in Holland and I was astonished how quickly I had crossed it. My heels might have been winged. I was astonished, too, at the impressive, clear beauty of the country and its variety, the amazing light and the sway of its healing and collusive charm. No wonder it had produced so many painters! And the Dutch themselves? Although we were reciprocally tongue-tied, the contact was not quite as slight as these pages must suggest. On foot, unlike other forms of travel, it is impossible to be out of touch; and our exchanges were enough, during this brief journey, to leave a deposit of liking and admiration which has lasted ever since.

Sleep fell so fast and empty of dreams that when I woke at six next morning the night seemed to have rushed by in a few minutes. It was the blacksmith's hammer just under the floor boards which had roused me. I lay as though in a trance, listening to the stop-gap bounces as they alternated with resonant horseshoe notes on the beak of the anvil and when the rhythmic