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Chapter I

THE SASSENACH

SOME years ago, in my native city of Belfast, I met a former schoolfellow whom I had not seen for a long time. During our conversation I told her that I was now living in England.

'And how do you like English people?' she asked.

I replied that, since I had got used to them, I like them very well.

'I can't stand them', said my friend, decidedly. 'They're so gushing.'

The remark left me thinking, with amusement, that nowhere else on earth would one be likely to meet with such a verdict, and that not so many years before I should certainly have endorsed it. The English seemed very queer fish in that singular and endearing world of Northern Ireland in which my childhood and early youth were spent. Like most places, it has changed considerably of late years; but I think its basic characteristics remain, and with them, probably, some of the same difficulties in dealing with the stranger from across the water. It was, as a whole, a hard-working community, simple and unpretentious in manners and habits, rather uncompromising in its views and rather blunt in the expression of them. We were sober in our speech and kept our superlatives so firmly in the background that very few occasions had the power to bring them forth.

A rooted distrust of easy confidences and easy enthusiasms, rather than the lack of either feeling or imagination, tended to make us shy of the arts, those sovereign betrayers of man's inner life. Our rare surrenders to any emotion were, perhaps for that very reason, sometimes the more complete.

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Yet the Ulsterman's reticence does not spoil either his appetite for a 'crack',[1] or his essential friendliness. These helped to give our community much of its democratic flavour. Differences of rank, of wealth, of education certainly existed, but people from different social strata could intermingle without servility on the one hand, or condescension on the other, or impertinence on either. Beneath all superficial trappings we tacitly recognized each other as kinsmen, answerable to the same God, descendants, at no great remove, from the same common rural stock.

'I came into Belfast forty years ago in a farm cart, and you came in on the step of the Portaferry bus', said one wrathful magnate to another, who had protested that a marriage between their children would be a misalliance.

Few of us, indeed, can look far into the past without catching sight of the farm cart, and the Portaferry bus lumbering up behind us, and, if we are wise, we give them a friendly greeting. They carried some good men. Moreover, they remind us of that close interdependence of town and country which a community forgets at its peril. In spite of our industrial development, most town-dwellers had still some connexion, direct or indirect, with the land. It might be little more than a tradition of the elders, but that in Ireland can be as potent as experience.

For, with or against one's will, to live there is to stand a little apart from the swift currents of history. Memories are longer there, changes more gradual. Our forebears had been separated from the parent stem in Great Britain and transplanted to Ulster in the seventeenth century, but something of their temper and outlook remained in their remote descendants.

There are probably few places on earth where one can still see so clearly the virtues and failings of Puritanism, a spirit, at its worst too rigid, too fierce, too negative; at its best possessing a daily beauty of its own. From that root have sprung some

[1] 'A crack'=gossip, chat.

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of the harsher elements in the Ulster character, its vein of fanaticism, its lapses into Philistinism and bad manners; but also its richest endowments: its fortitude, its sense of human dignity, its strange capacity for mingled devotion and independence. 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him; but I will maintain mine own ways before Him' is a paradox that might be illustrated on many planes of our experience, both as individuals and as a group. Our approach to life was fundamentally devout and serious. That the events of time had an eternal significance was so much taken for granted among us, that most of us would have been startled by a denial of it. So a struggle to which we stood pledged could take on the character of a crusade. Ian Hay's McOstrich, striding into the Battle of Loos with a psalm on his lips and falling in the foremost of the charge, is not a figure of fantasy.

So, too, at its best that spirit could be a hallowing of the commonplace, a sense that the plain texture of our days was shot with miracle. I do not claim, of course, that we all lived consistently by that vision; we were human, and as apt to fall as other people. But the fact that it was implicit in our ways of thought was not negligible; it forbade any idea that life is meaningless, and gave to living a quality at once less complex and more intense than it has commonly possessed in modern times.

Not that our own situation lacked complexity. Circumstances which had separated us from the wider world, had also set us rather apart from the rest of Ireland; yet in our three centuries we had drawn much that was indigenous from the soil and made it our own. The Ulster dialects, with their basis of Lowland Scots, their borrowings from the Gaelic, their echoes of Elizabethan English and their individual colour as of the fields that nurtured them, are an image of the mixed psychological factors, here in fusion, there in conflict, that make the Ulsterman by no means the simple block of stone that his enemies like to depict.

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The native's wayward imagination, his sociability, his inconsequent humour, his argumentativeness, his wicked predilection for leg-pulling coloured our sobriety like the shifting play of Irish light, freaking the surface of the dark loughs. We shared with our Southern compatriots those formidable memories from which the past never fades. We clashed with them in the electric atmosphere of Irish politics, cruel as a family feud, intimate as a family joke. We could be fully as uncompromising as they. Our relative fluidity of intercourse between town and country, class and class, was counterbalanced by angry differences of party and creed from which few of those involved have emerged unstained. We of the North clung passionately to the British side of our inheritance; we cherished loyalties which the extremists at least among our opponents were only anxious to sweep away. Yet, it would be an error to suppose that we had no love for Ireland and no sense of kinship with the rest of its inhabitants. The country had laid hold on us, as it does on those who live there. Few of us have not felt, in absence, the devastating nostalgia of the Irish. Few of us have not been cheered by some chance meeting with a fellow Irishman in foreign parts. We may, of course, proceed to fight, but there is a certain freemasonry even in our hates. We are all alike the offspring of a community tragically at war with itself, for ever united and divided by the tyranny of the past.

When I was a child I always took great delight in that retort of Lady Tyrconnell's to the fleeing James the Second when he told her that her countrymen had run away at the Boyne: 'Then your Majesty has won the race.' The right people had won and all was well; but it was not for an outsider—and such an outsider—to comment on the domestic aspects of the struggle.

As I have remarked already, the English struck us as very queer fish. Still, my private misadventures with them were due more to bad luck than to provincialism. For a stay-at-home

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I had a reasonably cosmopolitan upbringing. I was born into a nursery watched over by a kindly German. Later, we had a French governess; and, later still, frequent lessons with another Frenchwoman, a delightful creature with a rampageous sense of humour. Both at home and at school we were encouraged to take an interest in foreign countries, and these few personal contacts with people of other nations predisposed me to be friendly. Early encounters with the English, however, were by no means so fortunate.

The earliest of all seemed to take place mostly at seaside hotels, where, during summer holidays, one made many short-lived and oddly assorted acquaintances. I can see in retrospect a whole bevy of ladies to whom my youthful mind attached the defamatory label 'very English' and whom I avoided as much as I could. They ranged in years from youth to old age, and must often have been in reality excellent people, but they had certain weaknesses in common that marked them out for my distaste. There clings about them in my memory an aura as of the less artistic forms of church embroidery, and of those sentimental ballads, all fading rosebuds and dying maidens, with which they too often enlivened our evenings. Their voices, high, shrill and supercilious beside our forthright tones, struck my unaccustomed ear with a ring of insincerity. Stiffer and more formal than most Irish people can ever contrive to be, they were yet undeniably prone to gush, particularly over children. They called one: 'such a sweet little girl' and exacted reluctant kisses; and I, who was chary of such demonstrations, even with my own aunts and uncles, would meet them with what was, I hope, fair outward politeness, but with inward and spiritual scowls. They couldn't possibly mean all that, and I wouldn't trust one of them—no, not an inch. Nor was I, at that stage, much luckier in my contemporaries. The English children I met tended on the whole to be well-behaved specimens of their race, who played, under their Nannie's eye, at

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the set amusements provided for them; games that were good enough in their way, but poor stuff beside the less regulated pastimes that I shared with my special boon companions at home.

Often active hostility would break out, when, through the distorting medium of different tribal customs, each would survey the other small barbarian. Anyone who lived in a place as ludicrously named as Wimbledon, need not think a word like Ballyhackamore peculiar. They might pour scorn on me for some odd pronunciation, or for looking on farthings as curiosities, but they were poor ignoramuses who had never tasted potato bread and didn't know what you meant by 'deuking' or 'spieling',[1] and had never heard of Home Rule. Many times have I fought bitter quarrels, been sent to Coventry, and sent others there, over points like these. After all, some international disputes have been fomented over very little more.

England itself was the latest known to me of the three kingdoms. It was only at the end of my school-days that I began to make its acquaintance. Then a time spent in a South Coast watering-place with an invalid sister, and a brief experience of a large girls' public school, bid fair to confirm me in my prejudices for life. Worried, lonely and desperately homesick, I was in no state to judge my new surroundings fairly. Much of the dislike of England and the English that then surged up in me was, no doubt, a quite irrational projection of my own state on to the place and people associated with it. Yet I doubt if the happiest outward circumstances could have made plain sailing of that entry into English life. Among these particular adolescents I should always have been the stranger and barbarian of the days of childish squabbles.

They were children, for the most part, from prosperous homes, whose lives from nursery to boarding school had fol-

[1] To 'deuk' is to dodge about, to 'spiel' is to climb, especially up a 'spieling rope'.

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lowed very much the same well-ordered, conventional lines. They spoke with the same accents, acknowledged the same small unwritten laws—some of them to me unheard of—and had picked up from their respective families very much the same opinions. In them I met again just that mixture of stiffness and effusiveness that had formerly dismayed me. At one moment icily punctilious over some point of etiquette, at the next they might be shrill with excessive enthusiasm, their '*Too* thrilling! *Simply* marvellous' sounding as superior as their contempt. What chiefly struck me in them was a kind of arrogance, the same quality that has sometimes made their fellow-countrymen not undeservedly unpopular abroad. They were so oblivious of modes of life and thought other than their own, so indolently cocksure of themselves and their surroundings. When they heard you were Irish, they looked at you as if you were lately escaped from the Zoo. Their assumption of superiority was so profound and unconscious that it never occurred to them that it might be offensive. Their manners and tastes were in some ways infinitely more sophisticated than anything I had met before; but their mental world seemed miserably narrow. My own, heaven knows, was chaotic and painful enough just then, but it was full of memories of good talk and varied interests, and of a life which, within its limits, touched many facets of reality. Let me say, in fairness, that there were some admirable teachers on the school staff, and that conscientious efforts were made to surround us with a cultured atmosphere. Many of the girls, no doubt, carried away much that was of value, though, if they did, they were at immense pains to keep it hidden. To take an interest in the workaday world was in doubtful taste; to show that one had any liking for intellectual pursuits outside the class-room was a dreadful solecism. The accepted topics of conversation among ourselves were the dresses one had worn and the dances one had been to in the holidays; school personalities; and, with weary insistency,

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games. Athleticism was not the avowed religion of the community, but it seemed to dominate its life more than any other single force. This was not, of course, a unique state of things. We have all heard a great deal about the exaggerated 'heartiness' of public schools. Where girls' schools are concerned—I would speak more charily of boys'—I believe the cult has largely been fostered to please a certain type of parent who sees in athletic proficiency, not so much a source of health or a kind of moral discipline, as a social asset within a limited society. 'I don't care whether Mary learns anything or not, so long as she is good at games', was the reason given by one mother for choosing a certain famous establishment.

It was certainly a new aspect of life to me, and one that filled me with blank amazement. At home, people played games because they enjoyed them or because their parents thought them good for their health. If you did not find them amusing and liked to take your exercise in other ways, it seemed fantastic to make a fuss. The whole point of a game was surely that it should not be taken too seriously. It took me some time to understand that one might be ignorant of religion, politics, literature, art, science, and even practical housewifery without losing caste; but that not to pretend, at least, that one wanted to be good at games was to place oneself immediately outside the Pale. So the English young, for the most part, disliked me cordially, nor do I blame them. As I moved among them, hiding a mind divided between raw misery and a savage thirst for learning, I must have seemed profoundly unattractive, plain, priggish, unathletic, by fits taciturn and caustic, slighting their creed, neglecting their ceremonies. As for me, I hated them. The very country they inhabited looked often so smug that I could have hit it. Not being, as yet, well versed in contemporary fiction, I did not suspect how many Cold Comfort Farms lurked among those broad and prosperous acres.

It might be supposed from all this that I came of strong Irish

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nationalist antecedents. The very reverse is the truth. I was born a little Unionist; bred royalist and loyalist from the start. My early memories are loud with the excitement of days when even the mildest of one's acquaintances was indulging in gun-running and unlawful assembly and making ready to fight not merely the Nationalists, but the British Army and Navy into the bargain, should these try to thrust us into the arms of a Dublin parliament. The stage appeared to be set for civil war when the major calamity of 1914 overwhelmed us. Our politics had a quality of religious enthusiasms, and, child as I was, they impressed me deeply. I remember vividly one adaptation of a well-known picture, in which Ulster figured as Ruth, and England as Naomi, Scotland, for some reason, being Orpah; and to this day, I cannot read that story without hearing in it the echo of those bygone struggles.[1]

My own dislike of England was a pure up-boiling of original sin, or such I felt it to be. That it should flare up, just when the loss of my home had made its traditions more precious, added heavily to my sense of guilt. Never before had I felt that I owed a duty towards any person or community for whom I could feel no trace of affection.

Public shortcomings in the object of loyalty seemed to chime only too well with my personal discoveries. Larger issues apart, those were the bad years, after the signing of the Irish Treaty, when many of the Southern loyalists were exiled and in want. It was often hard to raise funds for their bare needs; they were forgotten men to the country for which many of them had fought in the last war. Meanwhile favours were freely given to those who had lately been their persecutors. I had at that time the bitter thought, renewed at intervals between then and

[1] This is not the place for a discussion of the tangled rights and wrongs of the Irish question at that period and these remarks are not a pronouncement upon them. They seek only to suggest what was sincerely felt by many of our people and how this feeling affected a child in their midst.

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Munich, that it seemed more profitable to be England's enemy than to be her friend.

All the same, the conviction lingered with me that the destinies of the two countries could not really be disentangled. I had, too, a presentiment that my own life would have to be lived very largely in England, though the prospect was not a happy one to me just then. If I had been more capable of analysing my impressions, I might have said that here was a society which, compared with ours, seemed more serious in its conventions and less wholehearted in its beliefs, more superficially demonstrative and less spontaneously friendly. Yet this deplorable race had somehow, in the past, evolved the language that was such a continual delight, the literature that I read with passionate interest. Oxford, too, was the only University to which I had the faintest intention of going. This was not a very logical situation, but the human mind can work like that.

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